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# Representations of Love in the Books of Emblems: The Reception of *The Greek Anthology* in Alciato and van Veen

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## Abstract

During the Renaissance, emblem books, a collection of allegorical illustrations accompanied by an explanatory text, became very popular. They were intended to teach a moral truth in an intuitive way, using an image to apprehend a concept. And for this reason, they were called ‘emblems’, meaning a ‘mosaic work’.

There is a strong connection between the authors of these books and the Alexandrian poets, as it happens with Alciato. He doesn’t only create his emblems based on authors as Athenæus, Aulus Gellius, Ælian, Stobæus, Pliny or Pausanias, but uses several epigrams from *The Greek Anthology*, which he translates into Latin adding a picture to it.

On the other hand, we have Otto van Veen (Vænius). Though he does not translate the epigrams in the anthology, yet he is inspired by them, namely those describing Eros and his power.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the emblems representing the god of love, in order to understand how this deity was seen by the authors of emblem books and how far was this a legacy of the Hellenistic period.

**Keywords:** Love; Emblems; Hellenistic Poetry; Image; Concept

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## Representations of Love in the Books of Emblems: The Reception of *The Greek Anthology* in Alciato and van Veen

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In the 16<sup>th</sup> century a specific kind of book – a collection of allegorical illustrations with an explanatory text – became popular and known as the Books of Emblems. Andrea Alciato (1492-1550) and Otto van Veen (1556-1629), also known as Vænius, are some of the best known authors of those books. Alciato is the author of the first Book of Emblems – *Emblematum Liber*, which *editio princeps* dates from 1531. Vænius is the author of *Amorum Emblemata* (1608) and *Amoris Diuini Emblemata* (1615). Both authors have in common their interest on love, referred to either as the Greco-Roman god of love, or as the Christian love. This article will focus solely on the first one, trying to perceive how the god of love was portrayed by these two authors. Alison Saunders states that “The ‘love emblem’ is normally associated with Dutch tradition, beginning with the well-known and delightful collections of *emblemata amatoria* by Heinsius and Vænius, dating from the early seventeenth century, featuring in witty and often whimsical manner the exploits of winged Cupid”<sup>1</sup>. We will be able to see that before Vænius already Alciato represented Love in his Emblems and the differences between both authors.

Before turning to the main subject of this article, a few words should be said on these authors and their works, beginning with the notion of book of emblems and how it started. According to Karl-Ludwig Selig, “By the first third of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the wisdom of the ancients can be found codified and crystalized in an extensive literature of maxims and proverbs, of which Erasmus’ *Adagia* is the best known”<sup>2</sup>. Even if Erasmus’ work is different from the Books of Emblems, the intent of publishing a book where ancient wisdom is presented in a simpler way, easier to be perceived by 16<sup>th</sup> century readers, already shows an opening to what emblem books will become. These books were intended to teach moral truths in an intuitive way, using an image as a way for apprehending a concept: “Alciato brought about the union of *picture* and *poesis*”<sup>3</sup>. Uniting an image to its translation of 50 epigrams from *The Greek Anthology*, under a specific motto, knowledge was acquired easily without the effort of reading several classical authors. After Alciato, the Books of Emblems met a huge growth in Europe and wide and varied classes of these books can be

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<sup>1</sup> Saunders 2007, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Selig 1990, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Selig 1990, 5.

found: moral, religious, military, historical, heroic, among others. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century authors as Jacobus Bruck (*Emblemata politica*), Justus Reifenberg (*Emblemata politica*) or even the Spanish Saavedra Fajardo, Solórzano Pereira, or Andrés Mendo, as well as the Jesuits, used the emblems for propaganda, or instruction, as it happened in some treatises on the education of a prince.<sup>4</sup>

Vænius published his books of emblems with an educational concern. In 1607, he published, together with H. Verdussen, the *Emblemata Horatiana*, dedicated to Albert VII, archduke of Austria. The epigrams, written in Latin, French, Dutch, Italian and Spanish, reveal a philosophical concern which seems inspired in Stoicism. According to Karel Portman, this publication was “in many senses an innovation in emblem genre. Vænius was the first to present text by a single classical author emblematically.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, when he published his *Amorum Emblemata*, the texts, or maxims, chosen to illustrate his pictures were not all from Ovid, even if most of them are. Also, *Amorum Emblemata* “was published simultaneously in three different polyglot versions. The first contained Latin, French and Dutch texts (A), the second Latin, Italian and French (B), and the third Latin, English and Italian (C).”<sup>6</sup> A close look to this book of emblems allows us to perceive an educational concern in Otto van Veen, as there was in the *Emblemata Horatiana*: he intends to prove that, no matter how strong and irresistible Love can be, “it is also a manageable emotion, which must be subject to social control, civilized and adapted to the aristocratic way of life”<sup>7</sup>.

There are several studies on the Books of Emblems. P. Daly is responsible, among other studies, for a *Companion to Emblem Studies* (2008) and for *The Emblem in Modern Europe: Contributions to the Theory of the Emblem* (2016). Together with K. Enenkel's *The Invention of the Emblem Book and the Transmission of Knowledge, ca. 1510-1610* (2019) he contributed to develop our knowledge on the Books of Emblems in Renaissance, even if the last author is more concerned with the educational point of view. Other works focused on the representation of love in the Books of Emblems, as it is the case of Gabriella Zarri's “Eyes and Heart, Eros and Agape. Forms of Love in the Renaissance” (2015). They are hugely concerned with the existence, or not, of a relationship between love and marriage, comparing the chaste love with the sensual one. Examples in art and literature often show that, though chaste love was considered the most suitable for marriage, it was accepted that the relevance of sensual love was growing, not just in the sense that the wife should please her husband's needs, but also understanding that she had needs herself that the husband should consider. Yet, this is not what we intend to do here, as our concern is not directly connected with Christian love, but with the representations of the god of Love – Eros or Cupid – both in *The Greek Anthology* and in the Books of Emblems or, in a better

<sup>4</sup> See Seelig 1990, 6. This is confirmed in Appendix 1, where the author mentions that both Saavedra Fajardo and Solórzano Pereira “used emblems as a vehicle to present their philosophy and ideas on political theory” (Seelig 1990, 129). Also, Núñez de Cepeda imitated Saavedra Fajardo's *Idea de un príncipe político-cristiano* (1640).

<sup>5</sup> Vænius 1996, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Vænius 1996, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Vænius 1996, 14.

way, how the books of emblems perceived the representation of the Ancient Greek god of Love. Though there are several works on the influence of *The Greek Anthology* in the Renaissance and in the Books of Emblems<sup>8</sup>, their focus is not necessarily ours. Nevertheless, some of these works are of great relevance, as is the case of *Learned Love. Proceedings of the Emblem Project Utrecht Conference on Dutch Love Emblems and the Internet (November 2006)*, being EPU an important project on Dutch Emblems. We cannot finish this brief introduction without mentioning Maria Helena de Ureña Prieto. Though her studies on the Books of Emblems are a bit distant from our goal, on her contribution to *O Humanismo Português (1500-1600)*, entitled “A emblemática de Alciato em Portugal no século XVI”, referring to Stochamer’s relevance on the dissemination of Alciato’s emblems in Portugal in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, she is astonished with his complete silence on *The Greek Anthology*. Ureña Prieto points out how important it was for Alciato, who even translated some of its epigrams, particularly those where Eros assumes the leading role.<sup>9</sup>

*The Greek Anthology* is a collection of epigrams from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B. C. to the time of Julian, constituted by the *Palatine Anthology*, found at the Palatine Library (Heidelberg) in 1606, and the *Anthology of Planudes*, compiled by Maximus Planudes in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Its nucleus seems to have been a collection by Meleager of Gadara, entitled *Stephanos* (The Garland), around the 1<sup>st</sup> century B. C. This collection had several editions during the centuries, as the one of Constantine Cephalas, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. *The Greek Anthology* is constituted by 16 books, organised by themes: Christian epigrams, Christodorus’ descriptions of certain statues, collections of Meleager, Philipus and Agathias, love epigrams, votive inscriptions, funerary epigrams, epigrams of Gregory of Nazianzus, rhetorical and illustrative epigrams, ethical epigrams, humorous and convivial epigrams, Strato’s *Musa puerilis*, metrical curiosities, puzzles, enigmas and oracles, miscellanies and the *Anthology of Planudes*.

Though it has epigrams on several subjects, we are mainly interested in those on love, both heterosexual and homosexual, as they are the ones with more descriptions of the god of love.

Eros is one of the most well-known gods in Classical Antiquity since he was first mentioned by Hesiod. He has been represented in several ways, until in the Hellenistic Age he became mostly a winged boy, with a bow and arrows. Apollonius of Rhodes gives a description of the god (*The Argonautica*, III. 114-145) playing with golden dice with Ganymede and cheating the other child; in order to get him to fulfil her request, Cypris had to promise him a marvellous golden ball, that once belonged to Zeus, when he was a child; finally, when he shot Medea, he “laughed aloud”, amused with the suffering his arrow produced in the girl (*The Argonautica*, III. 275-290). *The Greek Anthology* gives us the same representation of this god: a powerful child, hurting everybody with his arrows, inspiring an unrequited love and thus feared by all. Roman art and literature represented Cupid in the same way,

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Temple 2018; or Saunders 1982; or Bing 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Ureña Prieto 1988, 447.

therefore it is not surprising that the image has been kept by European art, being common in the Books of Emblems.

Vænius opens his book with a representation of Love holding an arrow in his right hand and the bow in the left one; besides this, just the Latin motto by Seneca: *Amor æternus*. Both the arms and the wings symbolise the power of the god, as expressed in ancient Greek and Roman literature: even Jove fears him, sometimes qualified as a terrible monster (e.g., Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, IV. 33. 1-2). Alciato is aware of this; thus, in Emblem 108 he describes Love with Jove's broken thunderbolt:

The winged god has broken the winged thunderbolt, showing that there is a fire more powerful than fire – and that is Love.<sup>10</sup>

This is a translation of *APL*. 250:

See how winged Love is breaking the winged thunderbolt, showing that there is a fire stronger than fire.

The thunderbolt, in Greek mythology, belongs to Zeus, which means that Eros' power surpasses the king of the gods. At the same time, it connects this god with the power of love, which tradition often associates with fire. It symbolises both the power of love and the suffering it provokes. Yet, Love's power is bigger than that, as it is shown in Emblem 107, where Love holds a fish in his left hand and some flowers in the right one, accompanied by a text saying:

Do you see how Love, all naked, smiles, do you see his gentle glance? He has no torches, nor a bow to bend, but in one of his hands he holds flowers, in the other a fish, to impose his rule, of course, on land and sea.<sup>11</sup>

This has a direct correspondence with *APL*. 207:

Love is unarmed; therefore, he smiles and is gentle, for he has not his bow and fiery arrows. And it is not without reason that he holds in his hands a dolphin and a flower, for in one he holds the earth, in the other the sea.

He is not just the god of Love, but a deity with an infinite power over the whole world. A god who vanquishes all the Olympian gods, as it can be seen either in Vænius (page 21) or

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<sup>10</sup> Alciato 1996, 117.

<sup>11</sup> Alciato 1996, 116.

in the *Anthology of Planudes* 214 and 215. Seneca's motto – *Vicit et Superos Amor* – is clearly connected with both epigrams, which show how Eros together with the Erotes took over the attributes of several Olympian gods: Zeus' thunderbolt, Dionysus' thyrsus, Ares' shield, Apollo's quiver, or Poseidon's trident. This connection is reinforced by Ovid's quotation:<sup>12</sup>

Love subdueth all  
When Cupid drew his bow bright Phebus brest to wound,  
Althog quoth drew hee to him, thow Python down haest broght  
As beasts farre lesse then Gods in all esteem are thought,  
So thy force lesse then mine know that it shal bee found.

The power of Eros is also shown by comparison with other animals, as it can be seen in Marcus Argentarius epigram (*AP. IX. 221*):

I see upon the signet-ring Love, whom none can escape, driving a chariot drawn by mighty lions. One hand menaces their necks with the whip, the other guides the reins; about him is shed abundant bloom of grace. I shudder as I look on the destroyer of men, for he who can tame wild beasts will not show the least mercy to mortals.

This power also falls over Zeus. Moschus epigram (*APL. 200*), describes the child god menacing the king of all gods, while ploughing the fields:

Curly-haired Love, laying aside his torch and bow, took an ox-driver's rod and wore a bag on his shoulders; coupling the patient necks of the oxen under the yoke, he began to sow the wheat-bearing furrow of Demeter. Looking up he said to Zeus himself. 'Fill the cornfield, lest I put thee, Europa's bull, to the plough'.

Vænius described this epigram in his emblem of page 27, where Eros, a small, winged child, subdued a bull. Under the motto *Pedetentim* (By litle and litle), Vænius describes the image as follows:<sup>13</sup>

The ox will not at first endure to beare the yoke,  
But trayned is in tyme to bee therewith enured,  
So hee likewise that will to loue not be allured,

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<sup>12</sup> Vænius 1996, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Vænius 1996, 26.

Must bee content in tyme that loue shall beare the stroke.

Both texts present a powerful child dominating a strong animal against its will. This is the child we see in several epigrams in *The Greek Anthology* helping shepherds, while they have some rest. Yet, the god is mostly described as a fearful being, as it is expressed in *APL*. 195, describing a statue of a bound Eros, and in *AP*. V. 178, an epigram on the cruelty of the god. Vænius used both in a different way. In page 29, under the motto *Frustra fugam* he presents a man, an arrow in his heart, running away from Love, who goes on his persecution. The text accompanying it shows the uselessness of such a flight. As to the epigram (*APL*. 195), Satyrus puts it this way:

Who fettered thee, the winged boy, who bound swift fire with chains? Who laid his hand on Love's burning quiver and made fast behind his back those hands swift to shoot, tying them to a sturdy pillar? Such things are but chill consolation for men. Did not, perchance, this prisoner himself enchain once the mind of the artist?

To both Satyrus and Vænius Love is a powerful god, whom nobody can escape. Meleager (*AP*. V. 178) points out other traces of the god:

Sell it, though it is still sleeping on its mother's lap; sell it! Why should I bring up the rascal? It was born with a sneer and stubby wings; it scratches lightly with its nails, and even in the midst of crying it often laughs. And besides, it resists feeding; it is always chattering, with a piercing glance, savage, not tame even for its very own mother – a complete monster. In short, it will be sold. If any merchant about to set sail wants to buy a slave boy, let him step forward.

Under the Seneca's motto *Precibus haud uinci potest*, Vænius has an emblem showing two winged boys<sup>14</sup>. One goes ahead, holding bow and quiver, insensitive to the prayers of the following one, unarmed, joining his hands as a supplicant. The text accompanying it goes as follows:

As Mars with humayn blood & spoyles and ouerthrowes,  
Is not to pittie mou'd, when hee in rage is heated,  
So Cupid by no plaints nor teares will bee intreated,  
The more that hee is praye the lesse he pittie shewes.

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<sup>14</sup> Vænius 1996, 162-163.

In a shortest way, Vænius keeps Meleager's idea, enhancing it by the comparison with Mars. Besides these influences of ancient Greek epigrams in the books of emblems, other relations can be found, this time establishing a connection with Christian virtue. Alciato's emblem 110 (*Anteros, id est amor uirtutis*) pictures Anteros seated under a tree with four garlands:

Tell me, where are your arching bows, where your arrows, Cupid, the shafts which you use to pierce the tender hearts of the young? Where is your hurtful torch, where your wings? Why does your hand hold three garlands? Why do your temples wear a fourth? – Stranger, I have nothing to do with common Venus, nor did any pleasurable shape bring me forth. I light the fires of learning in the pure minds of men and draw their thoughts to the stars on high. I weave four garlands out of virtue's self and the chief of these, the garland of Wisdom, wreathes my temples.<sup>15</sup>

Virtues and wisdom, while Christian values, are praised through a figure who looks like Eros, though it is not Eros, but his opposite. Alciato does the same in Emblem 111 (*Anteros, amor uirtutis, alium Cupidinem superans*), picturing two winged figures – Eros and Anteros, the love of virtue; he carries the same symbols characteristic of Eros, yet he uses them in a different way. In this picture, Anteros overcomes the god of love, binding him to a tree and taking his arms away from him. The text accompanying it goes like this:

Nemesis has fashioned a form with wings, a foe to Love with his wings, subduing bow with bow and flames with flame, so that Love may suffer what he has done to others. But this boy, once so bold when he was carrying his arrows, now weeps in misery and has spat three times low on his breast. A wondrous thing – fire is being burned with fire, Love is loathing the frenzies of Love.<sup>16</sup>

This emblem follows closely an epigram of *The Greek Anthology* (APl. 251):

Who fashioned a winged Love and set him opposite winged Love? Nemesis, taking vengeance on the bow with the bow, that he may suffer what he did; and he, the bold boy never daunted before, is crying as he tastes the bitter arrows, and thrice he spits in the deep folds of his bosom! Oh, most marvellous! One shall burn fire with fire, Love has touched Love to the quick.

Both in Alciato and in the Greek epigram Nemesis punishes Eros using Anteros, another Love she created. They have the same attributes, but they seem to use them in a different

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<sup>15</sup> Alciato 1996, 119.

<sup>16</sup> Alciato 1996, 120.

way. Yet, even if both poems seem alike, they are indeed different, as Alciato uses the same image with a religious meaning. As was mentioned before, emblems serve an educational purpose, which is clear in these two examples from Alciato. This concern with an educational message is also in Vænius' emblems, as we can see in these two. One of them represents Eros as a blind child<sup>17</sup>, trying to find his way, leaving aside wisdom and reason. As Seneca's motto says, not even a god can have both love and wisdom. The other one<sup>18</sup> represents the god grabbing Occasion's hair. Plutarch's motto stating how important is for the lover to adjust to the situation. These emblems have no counterpart in *The Greek Anthology*, besides the representation of Love. Vænius, as Alciato before him, used ancient texts and images for a totally different message closer to the values of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries rather than the original ones.

It is impossible to talk about Eros without mentioning an epigram, attributed to Theocritus ('The Honey Stealer'), depicting Eros bitten by a bee, while he was stealing honey from the hive:

When the thievish Love one day was stealing honeycomb from the hive, a wicked bee stung him, and made all his finger-tips to smart. In pain and grief he blew on his hand and stamped and leapt upon the ground, and went and showed his hurt to Aphrodite, and made complaint that so little a beast as a bee could make so great a wound. Whereat his mother laughing, 'What?' cries she, 'art not a match for a bee, and thou so little and yet able to make wounds so great?'

Alciato's Emblem 113 reproduces it, with a few slight differences:<sup>19</sup>

While he was taking honey from the hives, a vicious bee stung thieving Amor, and left its sting in the end of his finger. The boy in distress cried out as his finger-end swelled up. He ran about, stamping his foot, showed his hurt to Venus, and complained bitterly that a little bee, that tiny creature, could inflict such grievous wounds. Venus smiled at him and said, 'You are like this creature, my son; small as you are you deal many a grievous wound.'

In both authors it is not the god we see, but the hurt child, wanting to be cuddled by his mother. Despite the god's cruelty, the image we perceive from Hellenistic authors, that remained in Alciato and Vænius, is the one of a child, who can be mischievous, having fun harming the others; but who can also be helpful, and certainly is a powerful one.

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<sup>17</sup> Vænius 1996, 60-61.

<sup>18</sup> Vænius 1996, 174-175.

<sup>19</sup> Alciato 1996, 122.

It is not surprising that Alciato and Vænius preserved the same representation of Eros that we have in *The Greek Anthology*. Alciato couldn't know the *Palatine Anthology*, but he probably knew the *Anthology of Planudes*. As to Vænius, he could have had contact with both. One of the things we can notice is that Alciato is more faithful to the Greek epigrams than Vænius. Very often the text accompanying the image is nearly a translation from the Greek, while Vænius prefers to adjust it to his educational purpose. Nevertheless, sometimes Alciato uses his emblems and the Hellenistic representation of the love as a way to illustrate and pass on Christian values.

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