

Learned Love

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The love emblem applied

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Introduction

What could be a more fitting environment for love emblems than the bedroom walls in a Renaissance family castle? A bedroom redecorated on the occasion of a wedding in the highest circles of French nobility? Where a series of emblems was rearranged to tell the story of a love, ending in an embrace that even death cannot undo?

This seems to be the case in the castle of Coulon, in Graçay (Cher) in central France. The Emblem Project Utrecht was recently contacted by the owner of the castle. On the EPU site she had found in Heinsius's emblems a possible source for the wall paintings that had been discovered behind the nineteenth-century wallpaper of her castle. The art historians she consulted since the discovery in 1994 had not been able to identify the subjects of the paintings.

If we place a short account of these wall paintings in the proceedings of the EPU conference 'Learned Love' (November 6-7, 2006), it is because it shows not only the wide influence of the Dutch love emblem in its day, but also the effects of emblem digitisation and the internet.¹ The discovery of the wall paintings was a nice present that almost coincided with the completion of the Emblem Project Utrecht's initial mission, the digitisation of 25 canonical works in the Dutch love emblem tradition.

To tell the truth, we do not know for sure whether the room that contains the emblematic wall paintings was a bedroom. We are not sure whether the wall paintings were commissioned because of a wedding. What we do know is this: in the north room on the main floor of the Chateau de Coulon, on the upper part of the walls, someone has painted frescoes that contain the pictures of eight love emblems. The scenes are apparently taken from the *picturae* of *Théâtre d'Amour*, an anonymous early seventeenth-century adaptation of Heinsius's collection *Quaeris quid sit amor*. I will elaborate on this in the next paragraph of this paper. The castle was declared a historic monument in 1994. Experts from the Administration des Monuments Historiques have estimated the wall paintings were executed somewhere between 1600 and 1610. At the time, the castle was owned by François de Bourbon, prince de Conti (1558-1614), who had inherited it from his first wife, Jeanne de Coeme (†1601). In 1605, the prince de Conti remarried. His second wife was Louise Marguerite de Lorraine-Guise (1574-1631). It is certainly tempting to speculate the prince ordered the wall paintings as a surprise for his new wife.

1 It is clear the EPU does not specialise in French emblems or French art history. We are happy to give a brief initial report, but welcome investigations by other researchers.

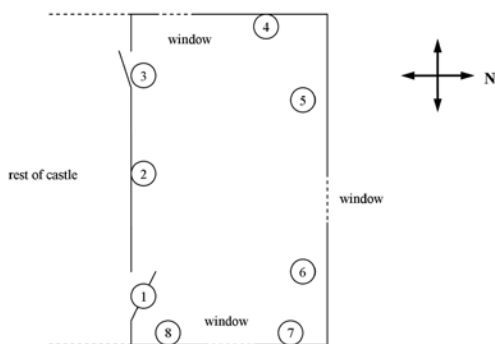


Fig. 1: Floor-plan of the north room and the location of the wall paintings

The arrangement and sources of the wall paintings

In the north room, the entire surface of walls and ceiling is painted. The upper sections of the walls contain the emblematic pictures and mottoes – from hereon I will refer to them simply as ‘emblems’. Grotesques fill the space between the emblems. The floor-plan (Fig. 1) shows the location of the emblems. We show the emblems in Figs. 2-9. Many of the paintings are badly damaged. A restoration in 1997 respected the present state of the paintings, but some apparently show traces of earlier and incompetent restoration.

The *Théâtre d'Amour* is undated and anonymous. It reproduces the pictures, mottoes and Latin distichs of *Quaeris*. It replaces, however, *Quaeris*’s Dutch epigrams by French epigrams unrelated to the French texts appearing in later *Quaeris* printings. See F.162 in the *Bibliography of French Emblem Books*, (Adams et al. 1999, 2002). Its year of appearance was estimated to be 1606 by Sayles (in Praz and Sayles 1974). There exists a modern facsimile of the *Théâtre*, bound in a larger collection (see Warncke and Steinbrecher 2004). The main reason to assume that the *Théâtre* provided the model for the Coulon wall paintings is the fact that in the castle the emblems’ right-left orientation has been reversed (with respect to *Quaeris*) in exactly the six cases where this is also the case in the *Théâtre*.

Table 1 lists the emblems, their state, and the main changes with respect to the *Théâtre*. All paintings are provided with a motto. The mottoes are text fragments taken, with some modifications, from the Latin distichs that frame the engravings. Table 2 lists the original *Quaeris*/*Théâtre* mottoes and those used on the castle walls. It also lists the fragments of the epigram that correspond with the castle’s motto. As is readily apparent, the text on the castle walls shows traces of corruption. This may be evidence of later restoration by people without knowledge of Latin.² In one case, however, the texts provide extra proof that the *Théâtre* is indeed the source for the wall paintings: in Heinsius’s emblem ‘Ni mesme la mort’

2 In a document attributed to a nineteenth-century owner of the castle, in possession of the present owner, the mottoes are given without the corruptions.



Fig. 2-9: The castle's emblems (See also colour plates 7-14)



Fig. 10 (See also colour plate 15) and 11: The castle's grotesques

the subscription contains the words 'nec tollet amorem nostrum' (neither will [death] take away our love'), which in the *Théâtre* have become 'nec tollit amorem nostrum' (present tense). The castle has: 'nec tollit amorem'.

The grotesques that fill the space between the emblems (Figs. 10 and 11) are usually symmetric: the panel to the right of the emblem mirrors the one to the left. The last emblem has asymmetric grotesques surrounding it. One emblem ('Ni spirat immota', 2) has no grotesques of its own. However, the grotesques surrounding the next emblem (Fig. 10) contains a clear reference to emblem 2: the grotesques depict a winged Cupid on a chariot, using a bellows to set a mill in motion.

Discussion

It is not immediately clear why these 8 emblems were selected out of the 24 emblems in the *Théâtre*. On the assumption that the room served as a conjugal bed-chamber, it would seem appropriate that the emblems show a positive attitude towards love. This indeed seems to be the case.³ One possible way of reading the series of emblems, starting with 1, in clockwise direction, would be: she is the most beautiful among her companions (1, 'Inter omnes'), and her beauty is what has set him in motion (2, 'Ni spirat immota'), even though he knows that love, once submitted to, is hard to escape (3, 'Serò detrectat onus qui subiit'). Love is indeed both bitter and sweet (4, 'De douceur amertume'), and it may feel like a fire from the outside (5, 'Au dedans je me consume'), but still, as the falcon to the falconer, he freely returns to his mistress (6, 'Je reviens de mon gré ...'), and cannot hide his love (7, 'je ne puis celer'), which is so strong as to last beyond death (8, 'ni même la mort').

This is a positive story indeed. Other emblems might have fitted in quite as well, such as 'Les deux sont un', with the grafting motif, or 'Omnia vincit amor', where Cupid bridles a lion. Others would not be suitable for a positive collection, such as 'Cosi de ben amar porto tormento', where the moths die in the candle's

³ Ranked on a subjective scale of 1 (negative towards love) to 5 (positive), the *Théâtre* emblems scored an average of 2.6, the castle emblems 3.2.

flame and the lover holds a dagger to his breast. Especially unsuitable would have been 'Noctua ut in tumultis, super utque cadavera bubo', warning as it does against marriages with a big age difference.

A look at the secondary motifs on the pictures may reinforce our reading: they include a man and a woman, keeping their distance, on 'Nec spirat immota' (2); a couple and a solitary lover, on 'De douceur amertume' (4), and a man that has taken off his hat and may be kneeling for a woman, on 'Je reviens de mon gré' (6). That is to say: from distance through doubt to surrender.

In the absence of more definitive information on the situation surrounding the creation of the paintings, much of this must remain speculation. We would want to know more, for instance, about the reason for using mottoes in Latin, rather than the original ones (most of which were in French). Were the Petrarchist conceits used in the emblems sufficiently well-known for the emblems to be understood?

Other questions suggest themselves. If this was indeed the bedroom of a married couple, should the use of the *Quaeris* emblems make us rethink the Petrarchist

Table 1 The emblems

Nr	Motto in Heinsius	State	Reversed	Changes in picture	Grotesques
1	Inter omnes	Serious damage	yes	No major changes visible	Symmetrical
2	Ni spirat, immota	Some damage	no	Woman no longer in profile but viewed from the front; Cupid uses bellows towards the mill rather than arrow towards people	(none)
3	Serò detrectat onus qui subijt	Some damage	yes	No major changes visible	Symmetrical
4	De douceur amertume	Some damage	yes	Couple no longer sitting and embracing but standing arm in arm; possibly a noble couple. Cupid pointing or throwing arrow rather than shooting with bow.	Symmetrical
5	Au dedans je me consume	Serious damage	no	No major changes visible	Symmetrical
6	Je reviens de mon gré aux doux lacqs qui me serrent	Some damage	yes	Couple's faces turned towards the public	Symmetrical
7	Je ne le puis celer	Almost nothing left	yes	No major changes visible	Symmetrical
8	Ni mesme la mort	Some damage	yes	Non-symmetrical	Non-symmetrical

Table 2 Mottoes in emblem book and on walls, plus the book's version of the text used as motto on the walls

Nr	Motto in Heinsius/Théâtre	Motto in castle	Corresponding text in Théâtre distich
1	Inter omnes	Pulcræ essent aliae tu nisi pulcra fores	Idem
2	Ni spirat, immota	Sic tua ni spiret gratia transus ero	Sic tua ni spiret gratia truncus ero
3	Serò detrectat onus qui subijt	Iam iugum detrectant quae subiere boves	Idem
4	De douceur amertume	Sic specie dulci torquet amarus amor	Sic specie dulci torquet amarus amor
5	Au dedans je me consume	Et mea cunsumit viscera caecus amor	Et mea cunsumit viscera caecus amor
6	Je reviens de mon gré aux doux lacqs qui me serrent	Sic mihi servitio blando	Sic mihi servitio blandior ipse meo
7	Je ne le puis celer	Extinguerit ignem	(quis enim) caelaverit ignem
8	Ni mesme la mort	Nec tollit amorem	Nec tollit amorem

attitude conventionally attributed to Heinsius? If this room was painted in 1605, that also suggests a very early dating for the *Théâtre*. Is it reasonable to assume that *Quaeris* should have been adapted for the French market, and have become sufficiently well-known for the engravings to inspire paintings in a provincial castle? Questions abound.

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Plate 7: Emblem 1: Pulcræ essent aliae... (See also Fig. 2 on page 145)



Plate 8: Emblem 2: Sic tua ni spiret... (See also Fig. 3 on page 145)



Plate 9: Emblem 3: Iam iugum detrectant... (See also Fig. 4 on page 145)



Plate 10: Emblem 4: Sic specie dulci... (See also Fig. 5 on page 145)



Plate 11: Emblem 5: Et mea consumit... (See also Fig. 6 on page 145)



Plate 12: Emblem 6: Sic mihi servitio... (See also Fig. 7 on page 145)



Plate 13: Emblem 7: Extinguerit ignem... (See also Fig. 8 on page 145)



Plate 14: Emblem 8: Nec tollit amorem... (See also Fig. 9 on page 145)



Plate 15: Grotesques between emblems 2 and 3. (See also Fig. 10 on page 146)