

## *Silent Parables*

# English Emblem Books and Renaissance Court Culture

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Renaissance emblem books, with their relation of image to text and of picture to idea have generated endless debates regarding the genre to which they belong. The various kinds of illustrated literature that preceded emblem books and were assimilated by them in varying degrees contributed in large measure to their richness and variety. These included illustrated broad sheets, *biblia pauperum*, fables, commonplace books, heraldry, *impresa*, coins, commemorative medals, medieval bestiaries and Greek epigrams. Alastair Fowler grapples with the generic classification of the emblem, finally concluding that it is a literary genre. Drawing a distinction between "impresa" (which appeared singly outside literature) and "emblem" (which usually came in printed collections), Fowler argues that the tripartite format of emblem books, consisting of an allusive motto (*inscriptio*), a picture (*pictura*) and an epigram (*subscriptio*) was so bound up with typographic culture that it has to be seen as a literary genre and not merely as a form of decorative art (Fowler 14). The enigmatic relationship between motto and picture is resolved by the epigram and thus an emblem's *raison d'être* lay in its ideas and wit rather than in independent picturing. Despite Fowler's persuasive argument however, it is imperative to note that emblem books had extra-literary associations and it is important to comprehend what Rosemary Freeman calls the "literary nature of contemporary decoration and the decorative nature of contemporary literature."