The Emblem and its Variations

The Emblem and its Variations

Edited by

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and Jean-Jacques Chardin

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INTRODUCTION

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This book is a companion volume to *L'Image pensive*, published by L'Harmattan in 2023, a collection of papers devoted to early modern emblematics (plus an introduction on the manufacture of emblems in the twenty-first century). The present volume takes a similar approach to the culture of the emblem and its influences and adaptations in various art forms from the late sixteenth century to the 1930s.

Emblems appeared in Europe in the mid-sixteenth century and soon became part of the episteme of early modern culture. The most common emblem format, *emblema triplex*, combining an image and two (sometimes more) text layers, can be dated to 1531, when the Augsburg printer Heinrich Steiner decided to add illustrations to a collection of classical maxims glossed by the Milanese jurisconsult Andrea Alciato. This particular layout, in which the image is inserted between texts (*motto, pictura, subscription //* title, image, epigram), corresponds to the Greek etymology of the word "emblem," which refers to the technique of inserting several disparate elements into a single composition, like a mosaic or the art of *intarsia*. This is precisely what Geffrey Whitney explains in the address to the reader of *A Choice of Emblemes* (1586), the first book of emblems ever printed in English:

> It resteth now to shewe breeflie what this worde Embleme signifieth and whereof it commeth, which thoughe it be borrowed of others, and not proper in the Englishe tonge, yet that which it signifieth: Is, and hathe bin alwaies in use amongst us, which worde is as much to say in Englishe as to set in or to put in.

Before the appearance of the tripartite emblem, there were many proto-emblematic forms, such as church windows with their scrolls, coats of arms and heraldic insignia, images painted on shields, not forgetting the *Biblia pauperum*, which put the stories of the sacred text into images to make them accessible to people with low literacy skills. Like these earlier forms, emblems belong to the *ars symbolica* tradition.

The combination of images and texts first served a moralizing purpose, and emblems were used primarily to teach ethical lessons in an indirect and pleasant way. This gave rise to the idea that emblems were witty, enigmatic constructions of visual and literary signs. Emblem writers heavily relied on classical and humanist *topoi* to teach about honesty, good faith, courage, steadfastness and other such like virtues. However, when a deep interest in meditation emerged at the turn of the seventeenth century, emblems became vehicles of devotion and spiritual emblems were produced across Europe, in Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist countries. The image was used as a first step in a meditative process not unlike Jesuit spiritual exercises. In this respect, it is worth remembering that Hermann Hugo's *Pia desideria* (1624), the prototype of Jesuit emblematics considered to be one of the most popular religious books of the early modern period, was widely translated into foreign languages for over two centuries. The underlying principle of religious emblems was that the world was a marvellous, albeit enigmatic, mosaic of signs reflecting divine Providence, as proclaimed by Francis Quarles in his address to the reader of his *Emblemes* (1635):

> An embleme is but a silent parable. Let not the tender eye checke, to see the allusion to our blessed SAVIOUR figured in these Types. In holy Scripture, He is sometimes called a Sower; sometimes, a Fisher; sometimes, a Physitian: And why not presented so, as well to the eye, as to the eare? Before the knowledge of letters, GOD was knowne by *Hierogliphicks*; And indeed, what are the Heavens, the Earth, nay every Creature, but *Hierogliphicks* and *Emblemes* of His Glory?

Quarles uses "Hierogliphicks" and "Emblemes" indiscriminately to refer to signs (including those in the book) testifying to the presence of God. In an age still steeped in Platonic allegory, and deeply rooted in Christian speculation, the book of emblems appeared as a miniature of the great Book

of Nature whose intricacies it helped to decipher. To read the book was to gain access to the mysteries of Creation.

Whether moral or devotional, emblem culture impressed itself upon early modern poets who made extensive use of the immense treasure trove they found in books of emblems. Milton's depiction of Adam "in naked majesty" (*PL*, iv, 290-297) contemplating the motions of the stars and describing to Eve the delightful abundance of the garden of Eden is directly inspired by Ripa's allegory of the "Vita contemplativa" as a naked figure with an open hand pointing skywards, in the 1593 edition of *Iconologia*. Playwrights, too, drew a lot upon the rich sources of emblems: Shakespeare's *Pericles* owes a great deal to the emblems of Whitney and Paradin, and the image of the crushed torch in *The Rape of Lucrece* (673), symbolising the extinction of desire, is a reworking of Whitney's emblem "Qui me aliit me extinguit."

Of course, playwrights recontextualised their sources, often in order to distance themselves from the overtly moral message of the emblems upon which they drew. Shakespeare is a good example. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Titania declares her ludicrous love to Bottom and his ass-head using the conventional image of plants twisting around each other:

> So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle
> Gently entwist; the female ivy so
> Enrings the barky fingers of the elm.
> O how I love thee, how I dote on thee. (*AMND*, 4,1,41-44)

The comparison plagiarises Alciat's and Whitney's emblems on friendship "Amicitia etiam post mortem durans." However, the original meaning of the subtexts (friendship lasts longer than death) is subverted into an expression of the insatiable force of erotic desire hardly appropriate for a character as ethereal as the Fairy Queen. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's indebtedness to English and continental books of emblems is clearly attested.

The juxtaposition of texts and images often poses a problem of semantic coherence and the emblem's cryptic message(s) is (are) made even more complex by the density of the epigram that generally consists of only a few stanzas. Sometimes other semantic layers are added to this somewhat disparate composition, such as marginal notes whose relationship to the rest

of the emblem is sometimes difficult to grasp. The reader's gaze thus moves back and forth from texts to images in some sort of a hide-and-seek game of semantic construction. The emblem is a puzzle that needs to be deciphered for the message to appear.

The puzzling nature of the emblem is partly due to the combination and interrelation of two different semiotic codes. The view that the enigmatic relationship between the image and the motto is resolved by the emblem's epigram has long been contested. Other approaches have shown that the image can be conceived as a "discourse" of its own calling back classical myths and stories, with a form of narrativity that does not necessarily reflect that of the accompanying texts. Frequently, the different components of an emblem respond to each other in a partially open manner, so that the reader is faced with a composite object lending itself to more than one codified interpretation. Somewhat provocatively, emblems could be defined as proto post-structuralist artefacts based on a questioning of fixed, ultimate meanings and a refusal of semantic closure. Emblems hardly ever promise semantic consistency and some of them even playfully destabilize meaning: for instance, Henry Peacham's *Minerva Britanna* (1612) can be read as participating in the circulation of the dominant ideologies shaping the early modern period, and engaging in a strategic contestation of the discourses that produced them. Peacham's emblems are to be approached with the anamorphic gaze of one who sees with parted eyes. In our age that is so replete with images, whether in advertisements, comic strips, the internet or social media, emblems still teach us that all discourses are slippery, and that univocal meaning is a fallacy.

Because it belongs to an age in which the need to take a fresh look at the world and to decipher all its perplexities was expressed probably more strongly than ever before, the emblem was not restricted to the narrow confines of an *in-octavo* or an *in-quarto* on which it was frequently printed. It invaded all fields of artistic production, from the decorative arts to architecture, painting, sculpture and even music. The title page of the 1593 edition of Ripa's *Iconologia* already suggested the diverse applications of

emblematic art that is "useful and necessary for poets, painters and sculptors to represent the virtues, vices, affections and passions of man."[1]

The spread of emblem culture is the subject of this book which is the result of a symposium held at the University of Nancy (France) and presents numerous examples of the use of emblems in fields as varied as ceramics, painting, sculpture, pastry moulds and decorative eggs. Of course, it also looks in a more traditional way at the production of emblem books, the symbolism of certain recurring motifs in emblem collections, and printed emblems as objects of religious devotion. In other words, it attempts to approach emblem culture from as broad a perspective as possible.

The prevalence of images is what links the turn of the seventeenth century to our own time, and learning to decipher the complexities of pictures and the underlying messages they contain is as venturous an undertaking today as it was in the early modern period. We hope that this book and its companion volume will demonstrate the vitality of research on emblems and its applications in the twenty-first century.

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[1] Translation ours

PART 1

EMBLEMS, CONTEXTS, CO-TEXTS, CONTENTS

WHY WAS THE CREATION OF EMBLEM LITERATURE LARGELY BYPASSED BY MAINLINE FRENCH POETS IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY?

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Abstract

After the publication in Paris in 1534 of a Latin edition of Alciato's emblem book, followed in 1536 by a French translation, emblem books rapidly became popular in France, being published primarily in Paris and in Lyon by printers who already had a specialist interest in producing illustrated literature. Given the expense of producing illustrated literature, it is understandable that the number of printers doing so was small. Less understandable is the fact that the number of French poets involved in writing them was also small - La Perrière, Corrozet, Aneau, Guéroult, Coustau – and, with the possible exception of Corrozet, none were mainline poets.

Why then, given the evident popularity of the form, did not more contemporary French writers compose emblems? Mainline ones such as Marot, Saint Gelais, Héroet, Scève? Or indeed less mainline ones such as Chappuys, Salel, Beaulieu, Carle, Sagon?

This phenomenon is particularly striking when set against another poetic form, also exploiting the combination of word and image, whose appearance in France in 1536/37 coincided virtually exactly with that of vernacular emblems, in some cases indeed being published by the same printers as those publishing emblem books. Writing from exile in Italy, the leading French poet of the period, Clément Marot, launched the fashion for anatomical blasons by composing an epigram in praise of the beauty of his

mistress's breast and urged his fellow French poets to produce similar anatomical epigrams. This they quickly did, in large numbers. Put together in anthologies, these anatomical verses were each accompanied, like emblems, by a complementary woodcut figure. But in the case of the blasons, unlike emblems, the form attracted the participation of both major and minor poets alike in France – all those cited above, and many others. Scève, indeed, composed five blasons. Yet despite the similarities of form between blason and emblem, among the many poets, major and minor, who were attracted to composing blasons, the only one who came near to composing emblems also was Scève, whose Délie can in some ways be argued to be emblematic.

This paper makes various suggestions as to why of the many French poets who flocked to compose anatomical blasons, some of whom, at least, were familiar, not just with the cognate collections of emblems being published at the same time, but with their writers also – virtually none were tempted to compose emblems also.

As is well known, emblem books became extremely popular in France from the mid 1530s onwards, with large numbers of editions of Alciato in Latin being produced from 1534 and of Alciato translated into French from 1536.[1] And these were quickly followed up by a series of native French emblem books in French, or in Latin, or in French *and* Latin, from 1540,[2] which

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[1] The bulk of these were all published by Chrestien Wechel, Jean de Tournes, and Macé Bonhomme and Guillaume Roville working in partnership. Wechel in Paris produced Latin-only editions in 1534; 1535; 1536; 1540; 1542; 1545, and French-Latin editions, with the French translation supplied by Jean Lefevre, in 1536; 1539; 1540; 1542; 1545; 1549. In Lyon De Tournes continued the tradition, producing Latin-only editions from 1547 and French-only editions from 1548, while the Roville/Bonhomme partnership produced Latin-only editions from 1548 and French-only editions (in a new translation by Barthélemy Aneau) from 1549. For details of these and other subsequent editions see Adams, Rawles, Saunders 1999, 1-117.

[2] Guillaume de la Perrière's *Theatre des bons engins* and Corrozet's *Hecatomgraphie*, which both ran through several editions from 1540, were followed in 1543 by Corrozet's *Emblemes* appended to his translation of the *Tableau de Cebes de Thebes*; by Guillaume Guéroult's *Premier livre des emblemes* in 1550; by La Perrière's Latin-French *Morosophie* from 1553; and by Pierre Coustau's Latin *Pegma* in 1555,

were almost all similarly popular and went through several editions over the
next two decades or more. But an interesting characteristic of these early
French emblem books is the fact that despite the significant number of them,
and the large number of editions which they ran through, they were actually
produced by a very small number of people. And by "people" must be
understood both those responsible for creating the text - that is to say the
writers of emblem books - and those responsible for publishing them - the
printers and booksellers. And this is an intriguing question: Why were the
publishers who were responsible for so many editions of emblem books so
few in number themselves? And also - perhaps more interestingly - given
the large number of people actively composing verse in France at this
period, why did so few of them try their hand at producing emblems? And
it is this latter question which will be discussed primarily here.

But first let us look briefly at the question of the small number of printers
involved in producing emblem books, relative to the very large numbers of
printers who were active in France at this time, particularly in Paris and
Lyon, since the two questions of writers and of printers are, of course,
related. After Alciato had requested Chrestien Wechel to produce in Paris a
more accurate and appropriate edition of his emblem book than the earliest
very crude and inaccurate edition of the work produced in Augsburg by
Heinrich Steyner in 1531, which first edition he, Wechel, followed up by
many others thereafter, with only one or two odd exceptions like Jacques
Moderne and Antoine de Harsy, both in Lyon, who do not really fit into the
overall pattern, the emblem books which were produced in France in the
period of the 1530s-1550s were virtually all the work of no more than 4 or
5 publishers: Denis Janot in Paris, who was responsible for La Perrière's
Theatre and Corrozet's *Hecatomgraphie* in 1540, and Corrozet's *Emblemes*
in 1543; Macé Bonhomme in Lyon, working either on his own or in
partnership with the bookseller Guillaume Roville, who was responsible for
Aneau's *Picta poesis/Imagination poetique* in 1552, La Perrière's
Morosophie in 1553, and Coustau's *Pegma/Pegme* in 1555; and Jean de
Tournes in Lyon, who was responsible not only for numerous editions of

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and its translation into French by Lanteaume de Romieu in 1555 and 1560. For
details of all editions of these works see entries under their authors' individual names
in Adams, Rawles, Saunders 1999 and 2002.

Latin and French versions of Alciato from 1547/8, but also for editions of La Perrière's *Theatre* from 1545 (1545, 1546, 1547, 1549). Less prolific in his production of emblem books proper was Balthasar Arnoullet in Lyon, who published only one emblem book (Guéroult's *Premier livre des emblemes* in 1550), but he also published several cognate works, including notably Aneau's *Decades de la description des animaux* in 1549 and Guéroult's *Second livre de la description des animaux contenant le blason des oyseaux* in 1550.

Fig. 1-1. Gilles Corrozet, *Contre les Astrologues*

Fig. 1-2. Petrarch, *Les Triumphes Petrarcque*

What characterises all these publishers is the fact that they were all already specialist printers of illustrated literature, so turning their hand to producing emblem books was a logical progression for them since these fitted so neatly into their existing portfolio of illustrated publications. Over much the same period that they were producing illustrated collections of emblems, they were also producing other cognate illustrated works arranged in emblematic

verse form - simplified versions of Aesop, Ovid, tales from the Old
Testament, and the New Testament, bestiaries, volucraries and so on.[3] So
what inspired and united this small group of printers in their interest in
publishing such works was almost certainly their already existent strong
commitment to the publication of illustrated literature.
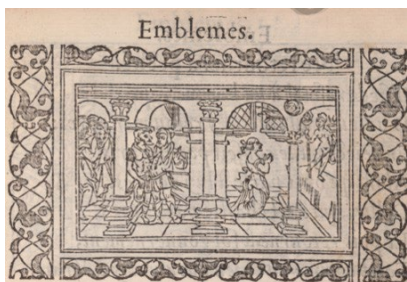
Fig. 1-3. Gilles Corrozet,   Fig. 1-4. Petrarch,
La paix en mariage   *Les Triumphes Petrarcque*

Emblem books enabled them to put to good commercial re-use woodblocks
from existing stock which they had already used in earlier illustrated works
that they had produced. This is very apparent, for example, in Corrozet's
Hecatomgraphie, in which many of the woodcut figures had already been
used by Janot in earlier works which he had published, and even more in his
subsequent collection of *Emblemes* appended to the *Tableau de Cebes* in
1543, in which every woodcut figure bar one can be identified as having
been already used previously by Janot in earlier publications (see Figs 1-1,
1-2, 1-3, 1-4).[4]

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[3] See, for example, Corrozet's *Fables du tresancien Esope* published by Janot
(Corrozet 1542); Claude Paradin's *Quadrins historiques de la Bible* (Paradin 1553)
and Charles Fontaine's *Figures du Nouveau Testament* (Fontaine 1554), both
published by De Tournes; *La Metamorphose d'Ovide figurée* (Ovid 1557) also
published by De Tournes; Aneau's *Decades de la description des animaux* (Aneau
1549) and Guéroult's *Second livre de la description des oyseaux* (Guéroult, *Second
livre* 1550) both published by Balthasar Arnoullet. For discussion of such works as
these see Saunders 1988, 44-58.
[4] For discussion of Corrozet's heavy reutilisation of woodcut blocks from
Hecatomgraphie to *Emblemes* see Saunders 1980; Rawles 1988; and Corrozet 1997.

And likewise Bonhomme's editions of Aneau's *Picta poesis* and *Imagination poetique* in 1552 reutilised large numbers of woodblocks originally designed for his 1550 and 1551 editions of Clément Marot's translation of the first two books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[5] Such reutilisation of existing stock was obviously desirable since it reduced hugely the cost of producing an illustrated book (paper and woodblocks being the two most expensive elements in book production at this period). But the initial outlay for procuring the woodblocks was nevertheless very expensive, and it is thus understandable that for economic reasons the field of emblem production came to be dominated by a small cohort of specialist printers who already possessed a significant nucleus of potentially relevant woodblocks which could be used to provide the visual element of the emblem.[6]

Although this is a very marked overall pattern of publishers producing emblem books in France in the 1530s-1550s, there are inevitably odd exceptions to this pattern. Jacques Moderne, for example, a Lyonnese specialist in music printing, rather than in illustrated printing, surprisingly published editions of Alciato in both Latin and French in 1544 and 1545, using as his model Wechel's earlier editions, and copying Wechel's woodcut figures (and indeed even retaining Wechel's own name and the date of Wechel's edition (1534) at the end of the preface to his own 1544 Latin edition).[7] Even more oddly the Lyonnese Denis de Harsy, who *did* have a strong interest in illustrated printing and who had already built up a significant holding of woodblocks which could be used from book to book, very similar in style to those of his Paris contemporary, Denis Janot, nevertheless produced around 1540 a trio of unillustrated editions of Lefèvre's French translation of Alciato and of the first two native French emblem books, La Perrière's *Theatre* and Corrozet's *Hecatomgraphie*.[8] But these are only exceptions, and the overall picture shows that despite these

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[5] For detailed discussion of this see Saunders 1977.
[6] For a detailed bibliographical analysis of all Janot's publications identifying every woodblock in Janot's possession and all the publications in which he used each one, see Rawles 2018.
[7] "Christianus Wechelus, Lutetiae ex nostra typographica, Anno M.D.XXXIIII" (Alciat 1544).
[8] Alciat nd (post-1540); La Perrière nd (post-1540); Corrozet nd (post-1540).

odd exceptions although a very large number of emblem books were published in France in the 1530s to 1550s they were all in fact the work of a very small cohort of specialist printers, and the fact that their number is so small is entirely explicable by purely economic factors.

But what of the *writers* of emblem books? Why were there also so few of them – just five of them in the 1530s-1550s: Guillaume de la Perrière, Gilles Corrozet, Barthélemy Aneau, Guillaume Guéroult, and Pierre Coustau (none of whom could really be considered to be mainline French writers)? Unlike printers, writers were not constrained in what they chose to write by any particular technical or economic considerations, so why did not more of them, and in particular more *mainline* French writers, try their hand at this newly fashionable form?

France had a very large number of practising poets in the 1530s to 1550s, ranging from 'professional' poets like Clément Marot, dependent on his skill as a poet for his livelihood (by means of patronage and royal sinecures) or his contemporary established court poet, Mellin de Saint Gelais, to purely amateur practitioners, such as, for example, François 1er himself, or his sister, Marguerite de Navarre, who was, like her brother, a notable patron of poets as well as being a distinguished poet in her own right. But between these two extremes were large numbers of semi-amateur poets whose day job was something quite different – as, for example, one of Marguerite's protégés, Antoine Héroet, who was to become Bishop of Digne, or Claude Chappuys, whose day job was that of royal Librarian, just to name a couple.

Verse was, at this period in France, the main vehicle of literary expression, and the ability to produce a witty or sophisticated epigram was a necessary part of any educated gentleman's social graces. Many of the most eminent poets of the period, like Marot or Saint Gelais, were based in Paris (or at the Court) or in Lyon, the second most important cultural city in France after Paris, like Maurice Scève. But many less distinguished poets (whom we might rather call "versifiers," echoing the dismissive words of Du Bellay in his *Deffence, et illustration de la langue francoyse*[9]) were also to be found

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[9] "Et vous autres si mal equipez, dont l'ignorance a donné le ridicule nom de *rymeurs* à nostre Langue, comme les Latins appellent leurs mauvais poëtes *versificateurs*" (Du Bellay 1948, 173).

in more provincial cities - such as Rouen (for example Jacques Le Lieur or François Sagon), or Toulouse (for example Gratien du Pont). Among this large and diverse cohort of poets and would-be poets, some are deservedly much better known than others, but regardless of the variable aesthetic quality of their output, it does serve to reflect the various poetic fashions that came and went during the period in which they were writing. Why, then, does that output not include emblems?

We would like to attempt to answer this question by looking at the fashion for emblems against another - on the face of it very cognate - poetic fashion, which was happening in France at almost exactly the same time, also
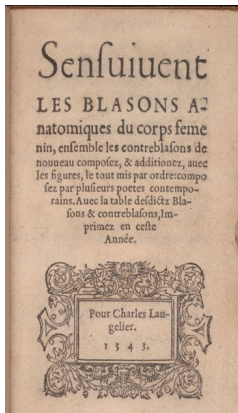

Fig. 1-5. *Sensuivent les blasons anatomiques du corps femenin*

involving the creation of collections of epigrammatic verses, each accompanied by an illustrative woodcut figure. This is the fashion for composing anatomical *blasons*, the earliest collected editions of which were published in Paris and Lyon in 1536, and thereafter in a number of subsequent editions over the next three decades.[10] What is particularly interesting about the *blasons* phenomenon in relation to the emblem phenomenon is that despite the evident structural similarities between the two poetic forms, and despite the fact that collections of illustrated emblems and illustrated *blasons* were being produced almost simultaneously, and in some cases even by the same printers, notably Denis Janot in Paris, and his Lyon counterparts, François Juste and Denis de Harsy, whereas very few French poets turned their hands to composing emblems, this was absolutely *not* the case as far as the collections of anatomical *blasons* were concerned. Large numbers of poets - including all the main names of the period - responded eagerly to Clément

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[10] Several editions cited by bibliographers are now lost or may never have existed, but the following editions are still extant: *Hecatomphile* 1536; *Hecatomphile* 1537; *Hecatomphile* 1538; *Hecatomphile* 1539; *Blasons anatomiques* 1543; *Blasons anatomiques* 1550; *Blasons anatomiques* 1554; *Blasons anatomiques* nd (1568-72).

Marot's invitation to them to compose anatomical *blasons* in imitation of his *Beau tetin* (see Figs 1-5, 1-6, 1-7).

During his period of voluntary exile in Ferrara in 1535, as a refugee from the persecution of Lutherans taking place in France after the 1534 *Affaire des Placards*, Marot was inspired, probably by certain works of the Italian Olimpo de Sassoferrato (Sassoferrato 1538-39), to compose a love epigram focussing specifically on praise of the beauty of his mistress's breast. Having done so he immediately sent a challenge to his fellow French poets to follow his example and compose equivalent love epigrams on other parts of the female anatomy, which many of them very promptly did, and the resultant collection, when first published in 1536/37, comprised over 30 *blasons* contributed by over 20 different poets from across France. It is not possible to know if Marot himself actually intended the individual *blasons*
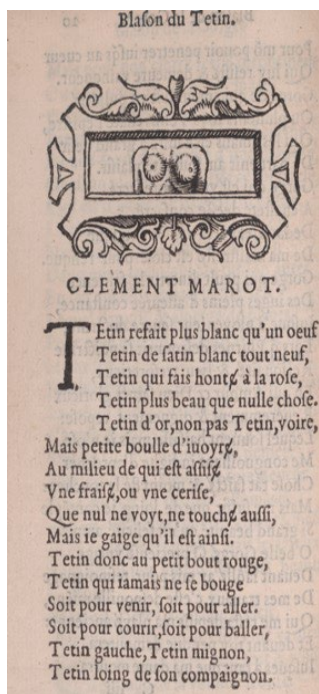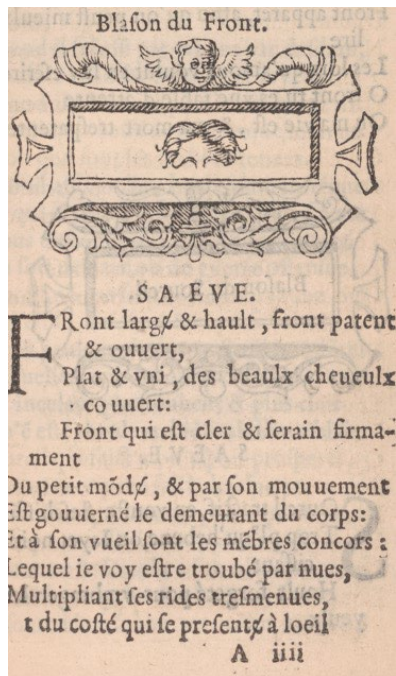

Fig. 1-6. *Sensuivent les blasons…, Blason du tetin.*

Fig. 1-7. *Sensuivent les blasons…, Blason du front.*