Emblems of Incarnation: The Hypostatic Union of Word and Image in Francis Quarles' Emblemes

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Emblems of Incarnation: The Hypostatic Union of Word 
and Image in Francis Quarles’

Emblemes

Amber Bird

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Emblems of Incarnation: The Hypostatic Union of Word and Image in Francis Quarles’ Emblems

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Although recent scholars have attempted to recuperate the cultural and literary value of Francis Quarles’ Emblemes, traditional emblematic interpretations categorize the images as merely illustrations of the poetic utterance. The investment of this paper shifts critical attention away from the content of Quarles’ text as the only source of meaning and argues that meaning is contingent on the interpretation of both word and image. In order for the images of the text to have full consideration, I have stepped away from the traditional emblem metaphor of body and soul in favor of an incarnational metaphor that joins image and word in a hypostatic union of interpretation.

Keywords: Francis Quarles, Incarnation, image, aesthetics, New Formalism, emblem book
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In his dedicatory note to Edward Benlowes, Francis Quarles writes, “You have put the
Therorboe into my hand, and I have played: You gave the Musician the first encouragement; the
Musick returneth to you for your Patronage” (Quarles, “Honor’d and Beloved” A2). While the
declarative sentiment of this sentence is fairly easily to understand, Quarles’ act of composition
is not musical; it is literary, he is the author of an emblem book. Quarles’ view of his
Emblemes—his adapted and reworked emblem book based on the Jesuit emblem tradition—as a
musical composition provides insight into the complicated aesthetic encounter Quarles imagines
his text to embody. Quarles writes, “Had it been a light Ayre, no doubt but it had taken the
most,” but he anticipates that his particular text will be too heavy for easy enjoyment (A2). By
describing his emblem book as an ayre, the prevailing seventeenth-century term for a song,
Quarles extends his musical metaphor to situate his text within the contemporary anxiety around
the combination of sacred text with aesthetic distraction.

More than merely complicating the semantic delivery, music during the seventeenth
century provoked a fear that meaning, specifically meaning derived from the written word,
would be lost to music’s enticing or pleasing distractions. In his recent monograph aiming to
broaden the theoretical connections between music and media and the potential unruliness
associated with aesthetic mediation, Scott Trudell asserts, “Reformist thinkers from John Wycliff
to John Milton raised concerns about song’s corrosive effect on devotional practice, especially
the threat that melismatic and polyphonic music posed to the audibility of sacred text” (12).
Melisma and polyphony, both aesthetic elements, complicate the liturgy by adding multiple
voices or notes. Because these aesthetic supplementations obscured the clarity of the liturgy by
means of artificial embellishment, Erasmus suspected music’s audible embroideries of “offering
empty pleasures” and leading believers away from true devotion (Annotations 508). By introducing his own devotional text with a musical metaphor, Quarles associates the aesthetic elements of his own text with the longstanding objections to the aestheticism of music. Writing within the logocentric mentality of the seventeenth century that values content over form, the distracting aestheticism of Quarles’ ayre is the side by side paring of word and image.

~ ~ ~

When scholars examine Francis Quarles’ Emblemes, their critical approaches typically separate image and poem. Those assessing the value of the images discuss Quarles’ quasi-plagiaristic adoption of previously published emblem books, the importance of medieval allegory as an interpretive foundation for emblems, and the translation of his text into other visual media forms. Scholars engaging with the poetry of the text commonly default to comparing Quarles’ verse with the works of other seventeenth-century poets, specifically following the devotional and metaphysical tradition. These comparisons have left scholars agreeing that the poetry of Emblemes doesn’t quite measure up to the metaphorical wit and literary charm of other poets. For instance, Mario Praz disparages Quarles’ text as “a cheap substitute for that metaphysical wit which authors like George Chapman and John Donne provided for a more refined audience” (163). Weighed down with literary critique, the poetry of Quarles’ Emblemes has faded from the limelight and, more often than not, is only referenced as part of a literary duty to acknowledge the emblem book presence in England during the seventeenth century (Gilman, “Word and Image” 385).

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1 This particular translation of Annotations is in Crisis of Music, Rob C. Wegman, 2005.
2 See Heffernan and Freeman. For the most recent scholarship considering the significant influence of emblematic elements on art see: Hugh Adlington, et al.
Despite the lack of contemporary literary attention, the emblem book proliferated through the English seventeenth century as one of its most popular literary forms (Bush 89). Within these texts, authors combined visual representations of the natural world with scripturally inspired mottos and verses creating an interpretative conversation combining both elements—image and poem. The popularity of emblem books during the seventeenth century bespeaks a general interest in both the material world and the interpretation of that world (Freeman 1). Rosemary Freeman captures the essence of an emblem book by alluding to Horace’s *Ars Poetica*:³ “While poetry was regarded as ‘a speaking picture’ and painting as ‘dumb poetry,’ the emblem convention, in which poem and picture were complementary to each other, could flourish” (5). Ernest Gilman reaffirms Freeman’s claim by asserting that the “image and the word…join to create a total effect richer than that of either component alone, that the two parts are commensurate and reinforcing” (“Word and Image” 387). As a genre that relied on both linguistic wit and visual representation in order to demonstrate that “nothing had a single meaning and nothing lacked significance,” the English emblem book proved to be a sensational and significant literary experience (Freeman 1).

The devotional poets of the seventeenth century are recognized for the production of some of the greatest devotional lyric poetry, and Praz categorizes emblems as part of the same interpretive investment. Praz writes, “Emblems and conceits are fruits of the same tree, and periods which were fond of conceits were also fond of emblems” (14). This fondness made Quarles’s text one of the most popular books at the time of its publication, second only to the prevalence of the Bible. Following *Emblemes*’ first publication in 1635, the text had two additional editions before Quarles’ death in 1644 and nine more editions before 1700 (Horden,

³Line 361-362; “ut pictura poesis: erit quae si propius stes / te capiat magis, et quaedam si longius abstes.” (Poetry is like painting: one painting will captivate you more if you stand closer and another if you stand further off.)
The multiple editions of *Emblemes* are “particularly remarkable when one realizes that no other English emblem book of the time attained even a second edition” (Haight, “Sources” 188). Alongside the Bible, Francis Quarles’ *Emblemes* represent a central part of personal devotion throughout the seventeenth century (Gilman, “Word and Image 385).

As recent scholars have attempted to recuperate the cultural and literary value of Quarles’ *Emblemes*, the many of the critical conversations utilize the “traditional descriptions of emblematic art [that] assume that the image and the word” can be separated and identified as “the body and soul of the emblem” (Gilman, “Word and Image 387). Through the years of literary criticism, the same Calvinist views that valued the human soul human over the human body elevated the emblematic soul of Quarles’ text above the emblematic body. The interpretive hierarchy that ensues when the body and soul metaphor is used for Quarles’ text has resulted in a critical separation of the emblem’s images from the meaning of the text. When scholars assume that “meaning” is found in the soul of a text and not in the body the default is to look more closely at *what the text says* rather than *how it says*. The practice of focusing on the content of the poems rather than the emblem book genre’s complex form suggests that the images only serve as visual representations of the content of the poems, mere illustrations. However, evidence from Quarles’ text points the reader not towards a separation of image and poem, but to a union—a union with specific interest in the hypostatic union of incarnation—that joins image and poem together in the process of creating meaning. If we return to Quarles’ text and refuse to assume that meaning is “merely a detachable kernel of sense embodied within the book’s binding—like a soul awaiting liberation from its somatic prison—but rather a nondetachable presence incarnate” within the poetry and images, then we must conclude that the separation of
poetry and image obstructs meaning rather than reveals it (Hamilton 7). More than simply a theological framework mapped onto Quarles’ text, the incarnate Christ sits as the focal point of Quarles’ visual and literary investments (“To the Reader” A3). In an effort to challenge the traditional body and soul interpretive model, the goal of this article is to be “alert to the hypostatic union of communicative registers” between image and poetry at work throughout Quarles’ *Emblemes* and to investigate how that union becomes incarnate in the text (Johnson 372). “Whereas metaphors of the body imply the separability of form and content, metaphors of the flesh suggest their inseparability—an inseparability that is exemplified by the Incarnation” (Hamilton 7).

II

The imperative to read Quarles’ text incarnationally—in two registers simultaneously—originates from Quarles’ own claim that “An emblem is but a Silent parable” (“To the Reader” A3). Parables, “stor[ies] or narrative[s] told to convey a moral or spiritual lesson,” rely on auditory mediation; parables are heard. In the case of Quarles’ parable, the auditory communicative register cannot convey meaning, because the parable is silent (*ODE* def 2.a). The silence of Quarles’ parable is redressed through the visual representation of images. Quarles’ claim not only reiterates Horace’s assertion that a poem is a speaking painting and a painting is a silent poem, but he also claims for images the didactic and hermeneutic qualities of the auditory scriptural parable. In the same way that scriptural parables are invested in conveying a moral, the auditory and visual communicative registers in Quarles’ emblem-parable come together to teach the devotional moral of the incarnate Christ (“To the Reader” A3). Together, seen and heard, image and poem, the elements of Quarles’ text follow the perceptual pattern of the incarnate God—a God that manifests two natures, human and divine, simultaneously.
Quarles’ introduction to his emblems insists that the poetic content and visual images both be *read*. The claim that an emblem is a silent parable asks for a type of reading that transforms both the materiality of letter and image into vehicles of meaning. If meaning is found in both word and image, then discovering meaning is only possible through the “means of *looking through* rather than *looking at* the visual information on the page. Looking through the text means that the fleshly aspects of the word must finally yield to an acknowledgment” that the ideation of meaning is both contributed to and contained within both image and word, distinctly and simultaneously (Hamilton 5-6). John Hamilton names giving deliberate attention to the formal elements of a text as a “*philology of the flesh,*” meaning that the materiality of the text does not become subservient to the content because it “effectively denies the separate[tion] of *logos* and [ ] physical form” (7 emphasis in original).

Hamilton’s devotion to the “material manifestation” of the word and a reconsideration of the aesthetic takes root in the theological investments of the incarnation. Within literary criticism, scholars recognize that the incarnation—the theological backbone for Quarles’ own emblem project as evidenced by multiple registers acting simultaneously— is “distinguished by [the] same dynamic interaction between referentiality and materiality” that also distinguishes poetry (Johnson 369). In order to more fully consider the interaction between referentiality and materiality, between form and content, many scholars have turned to the critical methodology of New Formalism. First mentioned as such in 1989 by Heather Dubrow, New Formalism is a critical studies movement that “demonstrates a renewed seriousness” of the “Enlightenment’s demand for scrupulous attention to the formal means that establish the conditions of possibility for experience—textual, aesthetic, and every other kind” (Levinson 562). While some critics question the *newness* of New Formalism when compared to New Criticism, Susan J. Wolfson
writes that “The radical claim of the [ ] ‘new’ formalist was that the writing and reading of literature not only could not avoid but compelled a recognition of its formal arrangements” (4). The New Formalist compulsion towards considering formal investments “suggests that a text’s formal features, its aesthetics, in close conjunction with cultural context, convey a politically and historically significant literary experience that is both intentional and affective” (Theila 17). The more that scholars make as space for form and content to play integral roles in the process of discerning “meaning” the greater influence the New Formalism movement has on literary and cultural studies.

Given the unique seventeenth-century interest in both the content and the aesthetic of the emblem book, a New Formalist approach offers a space to fully consider the cultural and literary elements that contribute to the overall meaning derived from these texts. Separation of form and content diminishes the cultural and historical value of the formal and aesthetic components while also disregarding the literary uniqueness of the emblem book genre. Because literary genres are categorized by particular form, style or purpose, the combination of poem and image is a necessary conditions for emblem books to be distinguished as such. The shared investments among New Formalism, incarnation, and emblem books demonstrate why New Formalism offers a particularly apt methodology for approaching Quarles’ text. In the same way that incarnation theology mandates a new perspective of the material world, New Formalism necessitates that the materiality of a literary text be fully considered as a vital part of meaning making. New Formalism purposely moves away from the inherited view that meaning is only found in the content and looks for ways that the form informs the overall meaning of a text, both religiously, politically, and socially. The theoretical investments of this project hinge on Heather Dubrow’s assertion that if it is assumed that form simply “serve[s] the needs of the host,” then the formal
elements of a text will always be relegated to a “secondary, supplementary role that potentially neglects the depth and range of [formal] contributions to style and meaning” (“Guess who’s Coming” 76). Dubrow’s assertion supports my interest in removing the body and soul metaphor ascribed to the images of Quarles’ text because when images are seen as the body of an emblem, they are constantly demoted to a supplemental position in regard to the poems.

In order to avoid neglecting the depth and range of Quarles’ text, I combine the careful aesthetic attention of New Formalism with Hamilton’s philology of the flesh, a philology that cannot ignore the theological presence of the Word made flesh. By asserting that the Word was made actual flesh, rather than the material world serving as a referent of God, incarnational theology conflates the sign and the signified of God into the fully divine and fully human being of Christ within a hypostatic union. The incarnate Christ is both the sign and the signified: “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14.6). Hamilton explains, “[Christ’s] truth is expressed both as the way and as the life, both as the referent and as reference, representation and revelation. Christ presents himself both as the vehicular sign of life—which precisely as a sign points beyond itself—and as the living principle in itself: simultaneously both path and destination” (8, emphasis in original).

As flesh, not only can the incarnate Christ live among mankind, but mankind can interact with God. This hypostatic union privileges the senses as the primary way of perceiving God. Moreover, the incarnation directly challenges the perceived corruption of the postlapsarian world; as Thomas Aquinas declares, “It is most fitting to manifest the unseen things of God through things that are seen” (3.1.1). Johnson writes, “The incarnation is effectually the means by which that which supersedes sensory apprehension is made accessible to human
perception…When the Word was made flesh, the divine became available to apprehension by the senses, the material world enlisted in the redemptive project of the Christian narrative” (371).

The incarnate Christ redresses the inaccessibility and transcendence of God. Couched within the biblical understanding of the “Word made flesh” (John 1:14), incarnational theology offers access to God by utilizing mankind’s fallen senses—seeing, smelling, touching, hearing, and even tasting through the Eucharist. Thomas Aquinas further explains that the material manifestation of God “is the purpose of the whole world, as the Apostle teaches, The invisible things of God are there for the mind to see in the things that he has made (3.1.1). As the most fitting manner to manifest God, perceptions of God in the natural world endow materiality with meaningfulness that cannot be separated from materiality itself. The senses facilitate this deeper interaction with God.

III

Despite an incarnational precedent that values sensible devotion, Quarles is aware that following the sweeping iconoclasm of the sixteenth century, “Few people are likely to have envisioned an image” let alone actually see “a representation of the Trinity, of Christ or his cross, or the Virgin or the saints—without at the same time, perhaps for a fleeting instant, [being] charged with [a sense of] horror” (Gilman, “At the Crossroads” 10-11) that follows upon years of skepticism about and hostility toward the image. In response to that potential horror Quarles writes:

Let not the tender Eye check, to see the allusion to our blessed SAVIOUR figured in these types. In holy Scripture he is sometimes called a Sower;

---

4 Aquinas’ quotes Paul as the “Apostle” from Romans 1:20
sometimes a Fisher; sometimes Physitian: And why not presented so as well to
the eye as to the ear? (“To the Reader” A3)

Quarles’ association of the images of his text with scripture not only demonstrates his awareness
of the elevated role that scripture played in religious devotion, but also authenticates his project
by having an incarnational investment with images and materiality. By yoking a book full of
potential idols with the “literary monument if the Reformation,” i.e. the English Bible, Quarles
seeks to overcome the cultural risk surrounding images by connecting his project with the
familiar doctrine of the Word made flesh (Gilman, “At the Crossroads” 7-8). Although Quarles
points out the hermeneutical similarities between parable found in scripture that those of his own
text, it is important to remind ourselves that Quarles’ parables are presented to the eye because
they are silent (A3). The silence of the parable and the employment of multiple interpretive
registers mandates that details matter differently because of the way image and word are joined
to create the emblem genre. Details mattering differently is supported by “A strong strain of
Christian thought [that] assert[s] that the incarnation of the logos as flesh in the form of Christ
transformed humanity’s relation to the material and phenomenal world.” James Kearney
additionally asserts, “If God takes on material form…then matter itself is transformed; if God
takes on a body and becomes an image walking among us, then the prohibitions against images
and icons expressed in the Old Testament can no longer pertain in the same way” (14). Using the
materiality of the incarnation, Quarles implies that if his readers reject the allusions figured in the
visual types of his text at the expense of the images being potential idols, then his readers should
also be off put by Christ’s own incarnation. Such a transformed materiality mandates that
Quarles’ readers approach the materiality of his text as part of an incarnational hypostatic union,
making a space for both image and poetry to contribute the overall meaning of the text.
As part of a hypostatic union, each element of the incarnation must be accounted for within Quarles’ text. Writing within a dominant Protestant culture, the matter of which literary elements are human and which are divine defaults to the accepted form of religious devotion: *sola scriptura*. More so that simply being the authoritative religious text, Kearney asserts that scripture was revered as an integral manifestation of the *Word made flesh*: “Almost from the beginning… the incarnation of Christ as flesh was understood in relation to the incarnation of the word as scripture” (14). The conventional association of the incarnate Christ and the incarnate Word sanctified the semantic materiality of the Bible, with a special attention paid to language. It is within this biblical linguistic focus that Kearney notes that “veneration accorded to scripture and quasi-scriptural texts could extend outward to encompass all writing as sacred…The incarnation of the *logos* means that all language—fragments of text, scraps of parchment—has been glorified” (15). As an inheritor of this linguistic assumption, the divinity of the Word works to also make Quarles’ words divine. The close relationship between emblem and parable demonstrates the divine authority Quarles’ invokes for the linguistical aspects of his work.

The incarnational difference between Quarles’ text and other *divine writings* is that the images and words of his emblem book join together to create “a total effect richer than that of either component alone” (Gilman, “Word and Image” 387). The union between image and word mirrors the hypostatic union of human and divine as found in the incarnate Christ. Because the word is considered divine, the visual image becomes representational of human nature. The theological implication of the incarnation is that without diminishing his divinity, Christ was both fully human and fully divine. In terms of the incarnation, that which is human is that which is accessible to the senses. In order for the incarnate Christ to be fully human then God must be accessible to the senses. The fleshy human nature of the incarnate Christ asserts that images “are
God-given instruments…insofar as they facilitate visualization of the things they record” (Melion 18) because Christ himself took on the human image. The incarnate Christ became a visual record of God, one that was made manifest in the material world. As a visual record of God, the incarnation activates an alternative communicative register that privileges other visual and material records of God. Quarles identifies this result of the incarnation when he writes,

Before the knowledge of letters, GOD was known by hieroglyphics. And indeed what are the Heavens, the earth, nay every creature, but Hieroglyphics and Emblems of his glory? (“To the Reader” A4)

Seventeenth-century conceptualizations of images and hieroglyphics typically emerge as part of a “widespread acceptance of the critical need to combat the fearful sin of idolatry” (Aston 17). However, Quarles’ assertion that God was first known by hieroglyphics redeems the image as a way to access God. Rather than transcendent or incompressible, the images of the text lodge within the material world, and it is within that material world that “the Heavens, the earth, [and] every creature” (“To the Reader” A4) manifest the presence and reality of God. In the same way that the scriptures serve as reference to the divine nature of God, the images of Quarles’ emblem book serve as references to the equally important human nature that is interpreted through the senses. The oldest etymological history for hieroglyphic breaks down into “sacred carving” (OED, etymology). Because Christ, the ultimate sacred carving of God, was made flesh, then other carvings or images also have the potential to be made holy. Walter Melion writes, “The incarnation of Christ… give[s] authority to the image as the only way for man to discern God. Construed as an act of divine image-making, the incarnation licenses the production of further sacred images ad imitationem Christi (4, emphasis in original). The images of Quarles’ emblems imitate the fleshly nature of Christ. When joined together with the already venerated word,
Quarles’ text represents a hypostatic union—human and divine, form and content—joined together in a way that mandates both elements be given separate and simultaneous perceptual attention.

IV

It is precisely the combination of form and content creating the hypostatic union between word and image that challenges a separation any belief that meaning is only to be derived from the poems. For both Quarles’ emblem book and the incarnate Christ, the prevailing element of

![Figure 1, Francis Quarles Emblemes "Invocation"](image)

incarnation is a reauthorization of the material: Christ’s material body and Quarles’ material form. In writing and depicting his Invocation (fig. 1) Quarles draws attention to the textual dependence on the incarnation by specifically directing his prayer towards the “Great
Quarles’ use of the word Theanthropos—θεάνθρωπος, the ecclesiastical Greek “title given to Jesus Christ as being both God and man” (OED, etymology)—reminds his readers of the dual natures that are unified in Christ. Christ’s dual nature, the union between the divine and the human, becomes the authoritative pattern that Quarles’ expects his readers to hold in their minds while reading his similarly dualistic text. Quarles does not reference Christ in this way to revive the theological debates surrounding Christology, but rather because of the way materiality gains value through the incarnation. By noting that God “giv’st and ground’st / [his] gifts in the dust” (34), Quarles connects the magnitude and greatness of God to the material human experience. In these lines the significance of dust does not merely point towards the minute particles of earth, but more so the dust that came together to first form Adam as recorded in Genesis 2. Dust serves as the origin of human corporeality. The reality of the incarnation is that the grace of God is given in human form and grounded in human form; Christ is a life and the life.

By asserting that God’s gift is also expressed in dust, in human materiality, Quarles simultaneously challenges the Gnostic and Nestorian theories that reject a fully material Christ while also promulgating the importance of material human experience. Writing during a time period that was experiencing significant shifts with conceptual understandings between the body and the soul, Quarles’ focus on the value of the materiality of the incarnation differs from the Protestant views that reject human materiality as weakness. As a result of a Calvinist reformation that focused on the total depravity of the human condition, the frailty of the human body evoked the original sin. The meaning or value of human life was to be found in the soul and not in the
body. Those who were successful in life were those who were able to move beyond their corporeal natures and overcome the desires of the body, instead focusing on growing and elevating their souls.

Christ’s Passion and resurrection wasn’t significant in spite of his human form, but because of God’s unwillingness to separate the human from the divine. In rejecting a metaphor of body and soul that separates form and content, Hamilton asserts, “The nondistinction of Christ’s divinity and humanity underscores…the nondistinction of form and content” when creating meaning (Hamilton 58). This nondistinction—this hypostatic union—removes the perceived hierarchy between form and content that encouraged readers to discredit and dismiss the images in the first place. As an element of incarnation, the visual elements of Quarles’ text are no longer arbitrary means to a literary end, nor does an incarnational reading suggest that the poems or images can replace one another. Reading Quarles’ text incarnationally allows for the form to work in tandem with the poetic content in both creating meaning and being endowed with meaning.

The misguided separation of body and soul is reflected in Rev. Alexander Grosart’s edition of Quarles’ complete works. While the three-volume work adequately represents the prose and verse attributed to Quarles, Grosart’s treatment of *Emblemes* demonstrates a lack of
understanding about the mutual dependence between the images and words of the text. Because Grosart inherited the emblematic tradition that assumes that meaning resides in the soul or the content of the text, Quarles’ original images carved by William Marshall and William Simpson (fig. 2) were overlooked and replaced by an alternative artist. Grosart’s introductory note to *Emblemes* announces, “It is our great privilege to furnish the very remarkable new designs for the ‘Emblemes’ by that rare genius, Charles H. Bennett” (Grosart, 42) (fig. 3).

Although Grosart may have been amiable in featuring the work of an emerging artist whose premature death prevented further recognition, the substituted images do not constitute the complete works of Quarles, given that they dispense with the relation of image and text in a hypostatic union. Ernest Gilman notes such alteration as “a dubious improvement” and the treatment of the images as arbitrary placeholders that can be exchanged or altered at will goes against Quarles’ account of his project in “To the reader” (“Word and Image” 388, see footnote 10). Further, in the Grosart edition, the images have been “placed together at the close of the printed text” (Grosart 42). This formal alteration not only makes it difficult for poem and image to be read together, but it also perpetuates the
message that meaning resides only in the content of the poem, rather than paired together with
the form of the text.

Reading *Emblemes* incarnationally requires close attention to the image—not because the
image serves as a gloss of the poetic content, but because the image contributes to the meaning in
total. Peter Daly argues that “any decorative image that is merely a *bildliche Einkleidung* is not
an emblem” (The Poetic Emblem” 381). By rejecting images that are *Bildliche Einkleidung*,
which is understood in German to be the figurative clothing of the poetry, Daly reinforces the
idea that the image should be an integral part of creating meaning, not merely an aesthetic
element that can be used to adorn the content. Because Quarles specifically asserts his text to be
an emblem book, the image and the text together require specific attention. But scholarly
attention paid to the images in the text has oftentimes failed to be sufficient because of the
inherited body and soul metaphor—creating a division between word and image instead of
unifying them. Without reading incarnationally, scholars like Eleanor James fall into the trap of
identifying the similarities between image and word to be “obvious” and “trifling” (44). James
asserts that Quarles “calls attention to each detail of the lively and lurid scene depicted in the
plate” (44) and therefore removing any sort of interpretive investment needed. Rather than the
images acting as an active participant in creating meaning, James’s approach to Quarles’ text
limits the communicative force of the image: the image can only mean whatever the poem says.

In the case of Book III emblem 9, James argues that the emblem’s motto distills its
meaning: “Psalm 28.5 The sorrows of hell compassed me about and the snares of death
prevented me” (Quarles 157). In contrast, when readers approach emblem III.9 aware of the
hypostatic union between word and image, and without the expectation that the image will
merely be the figurative clothing of the poem, the image operates in conjunction with the verse
to offer a new understanding of the snares and traps that are the thematic concern of this particular emblem. When prioritizing emblematic soul over body—as James reads the emblem—the reader looks to the words first (because the soul has more value than the body), and then to the images second, one becoming a commentary on the other. However, when the text is considered incarnationally, its meaning generated by the hypostatic union of words and image and not just the words alone. The first element demanding interpretative attention is the image on the verso side of the book—it is the image, not the poem that must be read first. The sensible nature of the image, the part that appeals to the human senses, is also the first nature of the incarnate God that those living during Christ’s lifetime had to account for. Christ’s human nature allows for divinity of God to be manifest. Although the injunction to read the image before reading the poem seems trivial, removing a body and soul metaphor and the assumption that meaning only resides in the written content of the text requires that both perceptual registers—seen and heard—receive distinct and simultaneous attention. Reading through the entire emblem requires that all parts of the text contribute to meaning. An incarnational reading requires that image and poem are hypostatically joined in the process of creating meaning—a union that, as flesh, appreciates the text in all its materiality, which, in its organization within the volume, namely the tradition of reading from left to right, prompts us to address the image before the word.

In James’ interpretive mapping from poem to image she points out that “Scrawny Death… is pulling the nets in which he has caught the worldling, who appears to be a courtesan. In the background Nimrod blows his infernal halloo and devils wielding scorpion whips pursue the soul through the flames of Hell” (James 44). By moving from word to image, the only elements of the image that stand out are the ones mentioned in the poem. But when reading the
image without the directive limits of the verse, the image is able to offer potential ambiguities that deepen the interpretive task of the emblem. The first textual element the image of emblem III.9 (fig. 4) is the stark contrast between light and dark. When one glances over the image diagonally, from the upper left-hand corner to the lower right-hand corner, the image gets continually more shaded. This shift from light to dark is aided by the diagonal angle created by the enclosing trap being pulled shut by a skeleton in the lower right-hand corner. This shift from light to dark draws the eye across the image and settles on the skeleton in the far-right corner.

![Figure 4, Francis Quarles, Emblemes Book 3 Emblem 9](image-url)

Following the *memento mori* tradition of the inevitability of death, the flesh-less skull, piercing scapula, and rigid vertebra figure death into the image. However, the main actor in the image
isn’t confronting the ossified figure, but rather the impending cage that is closing in around him. The material connection in the form of a rope connecting the nets and the skeleton conceptually connects the *memento mori* as a symbol of death and the temporal consequences that come from being in a trap: death limits progress. Although it is easy to assume that the interpretive conclusion is that death is a trap, the visual elements do not easily fold into that assumption.

When compared to the image of Book V emblem 8 (fig. 5), where the skeletal *memento mori* has become the actual bars of imprisonment, the simple interpretation that death is a trap is insufficient for this particular image.
In this instance, death is connected to the nets, and while “death” may be pulling the net around the main character, the nets are not “death.” The temporal distance between the nets and the skeleton make a space for another figure, also not part of the nets. Death is an actor who has ability to act up humankind, but those actions can be reversed or rectified by someone else. The scriptural motto below the image reads that the “snares of death have ouertaken me” (156). In following the etymological history of the word snare, the only actual “snare” present in the image is the spider’s web, spun between the branches of the tree in the upper right-hand corner. Snares trap by entanglement, not by limiting material space. The discrepancy between image and word once again requires the reader to seek for an alternative interpretive meaning.

The visual element that doesn’t draw James’ attention—because it isn’t part of the poem—is the most prominent element in the whole image. Standing in the center of the image, a
defiantly straight tree cuts through the scene. The location and blocking of this tree reminisce the location and blocking of another tree, first introduced to the reader at the beginning of the text. In Book I emblem 1, the first image depicts Eve (fig. 6), standing near/beside a serpent intricately wrapped around the trunk of a tree. An Edenic balance unifies the image: Eve’s unclothed body and open gestures with her arms and hands show no indication of the guilt and shame that would quickly follow the tranquility of this moment.

The tree in this image is full of leaves and branches, indicating to the reader the potentiality of life. In contrast, the tree of book III emblem 9 (fig. 4) is the darkest part of image, image, even darker than the *memento mori* of death. As the eye moves up the trunk of the tree it isn’t until the very top that a few sparse branches emerge. While it visually is the lesser of the two trees, the branches of the tree also prove to be abnormal. Towards the top of the trunk, just after the first branch forks away from the main body of the tree, the artist has included a branch that lays horizontally across the trunk of the tree. The impossibility of a branch to grow naturally in that manner is evident, both ends of the branch extending past the trunk of the tree. The visual result that is created is a cross—a symbol of the Passion of the incarnate God—standing in the middle of an image lamenting the ensnarements of death.

Discovering the image of a cross in the middle of this image changes the meaning of the emblem. Reading the cross out of the image provides the reader with a textual ambiguity that must be accounted for when the reader turns to the poem. The speaker of the poem cues this interpretive agency by first posing the question: “Is not this Type well cut?” (3.9.1). Rather than allowing this introductory line to function as an individual rhetorical question, the speaker of the poem begins candidly pointing out the features of the image. Hunters, hounds, sounds, and breaths, the fear of the entangled prey—each line forcing the reader to return to the image and
answer in the affirmative. “Beholder, say, / Is’t not well done? Seems not an em’lous strife / Betwixt the rare cut picture, and the life? (3.9.12-14). Without reading the image first, without assuming that both natures (image and text) contribute to the overall meaning, the importance of the cross—of Christ—in the middle of this image is lost. Because the cross was not included in the poem the beholder cannot affirm that this “type was well cut.”

Because of the textual ambiguities that the image adds to the poem, when the speaker of the poem calls out to the “Great God of Harts” (3.9.26) to save his soul from the “world of snares” (3.9.12), and he asks that his soule be blest / In thy safe Forrest, where I seeke for rest” the process of reconciling image and word deepens the concepts of snares, death, and rest (3.9.27-28, emphasis added). The speaker of the poem is captured by death, and he hopes to receive rest in “thy safe Forrest.” The possessive form of thou when asking rest in thy forest is a request to rest in the forest that belongs to God. When the image is read with this passage of text, the forest that belongs to God becomes the single-tree forest depicted in the image; God’s forest is the cross; to rest in God’s forest is to rest in the cross. When read together, the reader is forced to face the reality that any rest from the snares of the world must come at the cost of the incarnational God hanging on the cross. The only way to escape death’s traps is to return to Christ’s death. The devotional interpretation that comes from both elements not only points to Christ, but also creates and “immediate personal and psychological relationship between [the reader] and God” (James 43).

Not only does reading the image and the poem in a hypostatic union make Christ present in the text, but it also emphasizes the material nature of Christ. Turning to Book I emblem 1, the image of Eve’s temptation previously mentioned (fig.6), the devotional meaning gained by booking through the image, on its own terms, rather than looking at it, as directed by the poem,
points towards the inevitable redemptive role of Christ. If we read according to the typical emblem book approach, the poetic verse, written as a dialogue between the Serpent and Eve, denigrates the sensible weakness of Eve. The Serpent inquires:

Not eat? Not tast? Not touch? Nor cast an eye
Upon the Fruit of this faire Tree? And why?

See how the laden boughs make silent Suit
To be enjoyed; Look, how their bending Fruit
Meet thee halfe way; Observe but how they crouch
To kisse thy hand; Coy woman, Do but touch:
Mark what a pure Vermilian blush had dy’d
Their selling Cheeks, and how for shame, they hide
Their palsie heads, to see themselves stand by
Neglected: Woman, Do but cast an eye. (1.1.1-2, 9-16, emphasis added)

When Eve eventually succumbs “to do as to desire” and “pull and tast” (1.1.54, 55) it isn’t the “persuasive words impregned / With reason (to her seeming) and with truth” (Milton 9.737-738) found in Milton’s serpent that persuades her, but rather the continual debasement of her physical senses. The poem conveys the message that the fall was a result of the sensible nature of humans, that the senses are humankind’s ultimate weakness.

However, when the aesthetic material of the poem is read alongside rather than as a mere illustration of the verse’s content the repeated encouragement to “Cast an eye” simultaneously leads to downfall and redemption. When reading the poem in order to read the image, it is easy for the reader to get caught up in the visual relationship between Eve and the Serpent. However, reading the image once again draws attention to the central image; the coiled serpent around the trunk of the tree. This image, paired with the poetic injunction to “Look,” becomes a referent of another type of Christ, specifically a type associated with life, death, and redemption through the
senses. This type is recorded in the book of Numbers, following the affliction of venomous snakes, the Lord instructs Moses to “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; and anyone who is bitten can look at it and live” (Numbers 21.8). With the instruction from the Lord, the redemption of the Israelites in the wilderness becomes dependent upon the senses; without looking, they cannot live. Similarly, when Christ was lifted up on the cross, the sensible part of his nature served a vital role in redemption—the Gospel of John teaches, “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3.14-15). When Quarles’ text is read incarnationally, the senses are simultaneously condemned and restored through the type of Christ depicted in the image. Without the image’s significations, book I emblem 1 merely points towards the downfall of humankind; read incarnationally, redemption is present even at the moment of disgrace.

V

In following the logic of these analyses, some critics may be quick to object to the interpretation of images or symbols of Christ that are not directly included in the poetic text. While this is an element of literary criticism that I anticipate, Quarles anticipates for his own readers when he writes, “Let not the tender Eye checke, to see the allusion to our blessed SAVIOR figured in these Types” (A3). Quarles is aware that it’s the images, and not the poems, that will pose the greatest difficulty to his readers because images primarily serve a representational purpose. The distance between image and interpretation has the potential to be limited to one interpretation because textual images give off the impression that they are not encumbered with the same anti-absorptive features that mandate the interpretation of poetry, or indeed word texts generally (Poch 478). The images of Quarles’s text appear to coordinate with
the material world, and therefore are bound by the limitations of representation. Quarles’ emblem project intents to frustrate surface interpretations by asking his readers to be constantly looking for Christ—the concept of Christ, rather than merely Christ’s material representation—figured within the images and words of his text. Because Quarles’ images point towards a concept, the interpretive and representational divide between pictorial and semantic symbols become conflated. In this way, the images of Quarles’ emblems manifest both material and semantic representations of Christ. When read hypostatically, meaning is no longer a linear progression that starts with the poem and is reiterated by the image. Meaning becomes fluid, ambiguous and circular—each element contributing to an interpretation that manifests both the divinity and materiality of Christ. By telling his readers that they should be open to and aware of the allusions of the blessed Savior he is also implying that only those who are familiar with Christ is be aware of the indirect or passing reference, as such was the case with the Old Testament allusion in book I emblem 1 and the cross found in book III emblem 8. Quarles’s most important admonition as he introduces emblems that perform a hypostatic union between word and image is that the tender eye does not checke, stop short, step back, wince, or take offence at the manner in which Christ may be made manifest (OED def 5.a).

Returning to Emblemes with an openness to view divine and human, poem and image, form and content, as both equal parts in meaning-making creates a book of devotion, where every emblem points back to the incarnate Christ. As a longstanding staple of seventeenth-century religious devotion, Gilman posited that Emblemes embodies the “trembling paces between pain and comfort, [between] doubt and resolution” that documents the meanderings and sufferings of a believer (Gilman, “Word and Image” 394). Without the allusions to Christ added by a hypostatic union of word and image, the meandering and sufferings will be oblivious to the
aid offered by the incarnate Christ. The snares of death will only ever be snares. The fall of Eve will only ever be a fall. Reading for allusions to Christ in both the images and poems brings Christ into the difficulties, pains, and struggles of the material world. The intimate relationship between reader and emblem book becomes a catalyst for the intimate devotional relationship between reader and Christ. Reading incarnationally reads hope into the wonderings and struggles of the text.

This project started out as an effort to assert a new emblematic metaphor—incarnational, rather than body and soul separated from one another. While the majority of my efforts have focused on a textual hypostatic union, with text and image equally contributing to the interpretive meaning of the text, overall, the aesthetic elements of Quarles’ emblem book provides a space for the text to be made flesh: to be available to the senses. A text made flesh is a text made alive, open to interpretive challenges and ambiguities. A text made flesh, according to Hamilton, “Rest[s] on a capacity to remain open, to keep things in question, to maintain freedom, and not retreat into an ontotheological dogmatism wherein all things have already been decided, wherein all answers have already been determined” (59). In the case with Quarles’ text, the capacity to remain open depends on scholars refusing to renounce the images of Quarles’ Emblemes as mere illustrations. The ambiguities that result from two communicative registers elevate Quarles’ text from a simple ayre to, “Being a grave Strayn” (“To my much” A3). Framed by his aesthetic investment, Quarles writes, “My hopes are that it will please the best… [for] Toyish Ayres please trivial ears; they kisse the fancy, and betray it: They cry, Hail, first, and then after, Crucifie” (A3). The music of Quarles’ text is also the music of the incarnate Christ—a reconciliation of the material, of the aesthetic, due to the combining of two natures into one flesh. Without an understanding of the hypostatic union between human and divine, between
form and content, the aesthetic contribution is betrayed, is crucified, and dies—that is, the atheistic value fails to endure. But because of the hypostatic union, a union that authorizes materiality, the aesthetic value of Quarles’ text will rise again.
Works Cited


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