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Rhetoric of Images

Emblematic Structures and Craig Thompson's *Habibi*

Julia Ingold (Bamberg)

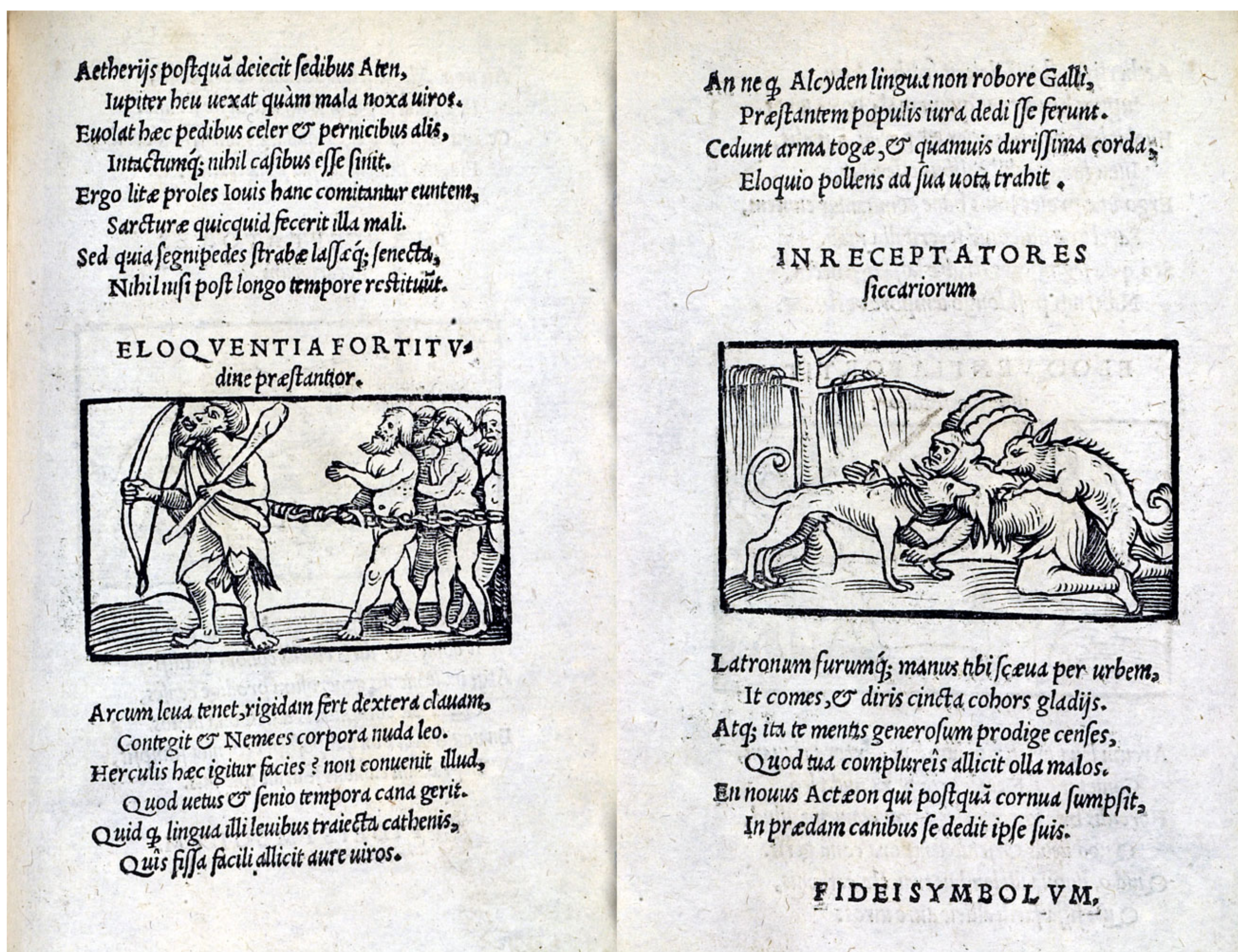
Comics and emblems consist in their prototypic emergences mainly of a combination of two different codes: simply put, pictures and words. During their respective eras, they have shared a history of broad distribution and popularity. The first and so far, only person to explore the similarities of comics and emblems in detail was Laurence Grove in 2005. In his monograph *Text/Image Mosaics in French Culture: Emblems and Comic Strips* he writes about ›*parallel mentalities*‹ in the ›two Emblematic Ages‹; the 16th and 20th centuries (Grove, xiii–xiv). He analyses how new technologies used to spread media have an influence on culture. What I want to explore are the parallel *strategies* in the rhetoric of the images and the figurative nature of text in emblems and comics. First, I will analyse some randomly chosen emblems – starting with Andrea Alciato's 1531 emblem book, continuing through to 1610 – to explore some specific emblematic strategies. I will discuss how they attempted to convey their messages through the most graphic use of text possible. I will follow this by introducing Craig Thompson's so-called ›graphic novel‹, *Habibi*, and show how it employs similar strategies in the formation of single panels or pages, but also throughout the book in its entirety, to tell its tale vividly. The comparison between the emblems and the graphic novel elucidates how representational pictures in both art forms work as meaningful signs.

Allegories, Metaphors and Symbols in Emblems

In the first edition of Alciatio's *Emblematum liber*, we find the (very funny) occurrence of pictures and words that do not really fit together. The *pictura* of the emblem entitled ›Eloquence, surpassing strength‹, for instance, shows Heracles holding other people prisoner with a strong chain (Fig. 1). The text says:

> His left hand holds a bow, his right hand a stout club, the lion of Nemea clothes his bare body. So this is a figure of Hercules. But he is old and his temples grizzled with age – that does not fit. What of the fact that his tongue has light chains passing through it, by which he draws men along with ready ears pierced? The reason is surely that the Gauls say that Alceus' descendant excelled in eloquence rather than might and gave laws to the nations. – Weapons yield to the arts of peace, and even the hardest of hearts the skilled speaker can lead where he will.[1]

Once one knows what *should* be depicted one can suppose that the hero's tongue is pierced. This explains his apparently oversized mouth. But the chain, which does not appear light at all, does not pierce or stick to the other men's ears. In any case, the illustration emphasizes the graphicness of the text. The *subscriptio* explains its own figurativeness. The strategy that Alciato employs here is deeply allegorical. He establishes a written ›picture‹ and offers its allegoresis at once. He wants to advise or to convey a truth through a parable. But the chain is not a metaphor for eloquent speech because he does not figuratively say that eloquent speech is *like* that chain. The chain *is* the visible eloquent speech because


Aetherijs postquā deiecit sedibus Aten,
Iupiter heu uexat quàm mala noxa uiros.
Euolat hæc pedibus celer & pernicibus alis,
Intactumq; nihil casibus esse sinit.
Ergo litæ proles Iouis hanc comitantur euntem,
Sarcturæ quicquid fecerit illa mali.
Sed quia segnipedes strabæ lassæq; senecta,
Nihil nisi post longo tempore restituūt.

ELOQVENTIA FORTITV-
dine præstantior.

Arcum leua tenet, rigidam fert dextera clauam,
Contegit & Nemees corpora nuda leo.
Herculis hæc igitur facies? non conuenit illud,
Quod uetus & senio tempora cana gerit.
Quid q, lingua illi leuibus traiecta cathenis,
Quis fissa facili allicit aure uiros.

An ne q, Alcyden lingua non robore Galli,
Præstantem populis iura dedisse ferunt.
Cedunt arma togæ, & quamuis durissima corda,
Eloquio pollens ad sua uota trahit.

IN RECEPTATORES
siccariorum

Latronum furumq; manus tibi sæua per urbem,
It comes, & diris cincta cohors gladijs.
Atq; ita te mentis generosum prodige censes,
Quod tua complureis allicit olla malos.
En nouus Actæon qui postquā cornua sumpsit,
In prædam canibus se dedit ipse suis.

FIDEI SYMBOLVM.

Fig. 1: Andrea Alciato: Eloquentia fortitvdine praestantior.

the whole woodcut is materialized written word. In such a case the difference between arbitrary and motivated sign dissolves. Usually, a picture is presumed to be motivated because of its similarity with the signified object while a word is considered to be arbitrary because it only works in cultural contexts and conventions. But here, in the text, the relation is inverted. The elements of the ›textual image‹ are composed syntactically to retrace the meaning of the *inscriptio*.

The next example is Gilles Corrozet's emblem ›The cruelty of love‹[2]. It shows a man who suffers from unfulfilled love (Fig. 2), as he himself explains in the *subscriptio*: »Because I feel the fire of lovesickness excruciating my heart and my body without a Lady to redeem me, my mind must wander to the shadows.«[3] The lover and his beloved are not images for something else; Corrozet wants to talk about lovers. But in the *pictura* the naked man in flames disturbs the realistic depiction. What is happening to him does not really take place in the diegetic world. The way he is depicted is a metaphor for his agonizing feelings because he feels *like* he is burning. Thereby the whole scene loses its physicality and illustrates what is going on in the realm of emotions. Meanwhile the flames themselves are an ancient symbol for love.

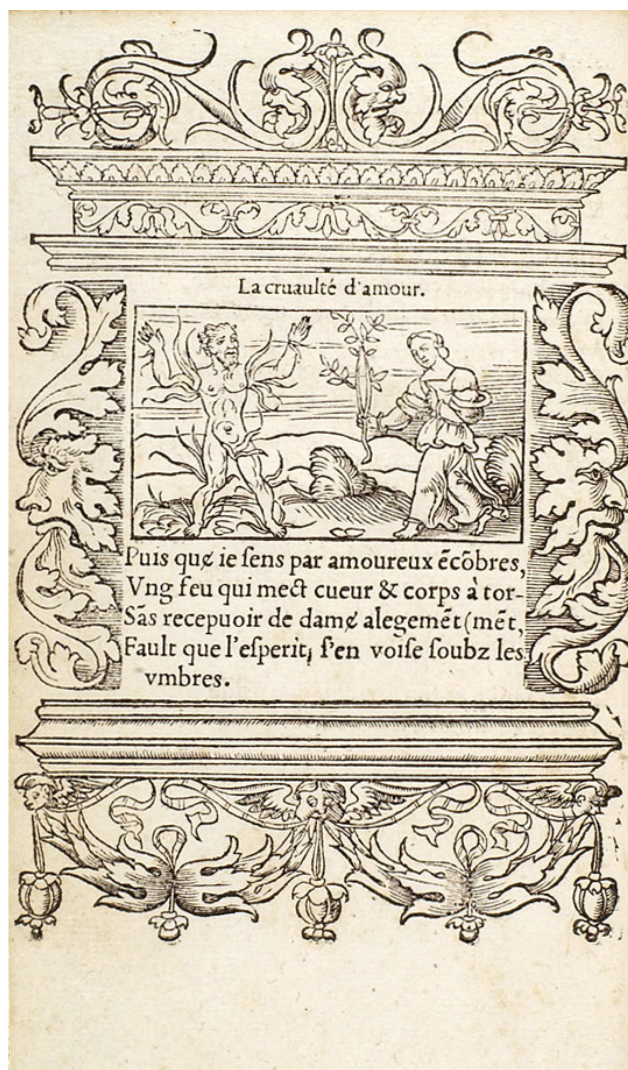


Fig. 2: Gilles Corrozet: La cruaulté d'amour.

The term ›symbol‹ itself is ambiguous. Today it is apparent that it has two antithetic meanings. In linguistics, the term is partially used for signs with an *arbitrary* relationship to what they signify, seemingly following Charles Sanders Peirce's terminology (Jeßing, 744). In philosophy and art criticism, ›symbol‹ usually means a conventional sign with a *motivated* relation to what is signified because its meaning has developed over the years or was established by a specific person or cultural artefact and took hold (ibid.). In fact, Peirce's definition of the symbol incorporates both: »A sign which is constituted a sign merely or mainly by the fact that it is used and understood as such, whether the habit is natural or conventional, and without regard to the motives which originally governed its selection.« (Peirce, 307) He calls

a symbol a sign whose understanding depends on an agreement between the different ›users‹ no matter how the sign came to be in that position. The difference between ›natural‹ and ›arbitrary‹ sign is not complementary but antonymous. Thus, a symbol is a *category* of signs, while a metaphor is a *way of using* one. A metaphor tries to explain an abstract or invisible thing through a comparison with a concrete and visible thing. Corrozet did not establish a whole parable to convey one abstract proposition but integrated a surrealist element in a ›natural‹ constellation to reveal its character. Since the metaphor of burning love is so well-established, one would probably not even recognize the graphic nature of the expression ›fire of lovesickness‹ without the woodcut. Again, and showing a parallel between Corrozet's and Alciato's emblems, the image is materialized written word.

In later editions of Alciato's emblems the *picturae* become more suitable for the text. They remain pure illustration, because the text still explains its own figurativeness. The *inscriptio* of emblem titled *PRVDENTIA* in the 1551 Lyon edition – »The Chimaera (those who are stronger and deceptive) to be overcome by judgment and courage« (Alciato 1551, 20)[4] – already contains commentarial information (Fig. 3). The *pictura* shows the Greek myth of Pegasus aiding the hero Bellerophon in defeating the monster Chimaera. The *subscriptio* contains a classic allegoresis of an antique myth: »Bellerophon, that bold horseman, was able to overcome the Chimaera and lay low the monsters of the Lycian land. You likewise, borne on wings of Pegasus, seek the high heavens and, by the counsel of reason, tame proud monsters.« (Ibid.)[5] In this allegory, the characters are personifications of wisdom and courage who overcome strength and deception. This might be the genuine emblematic strategy: a text trying to be figurative for didactic purposes.

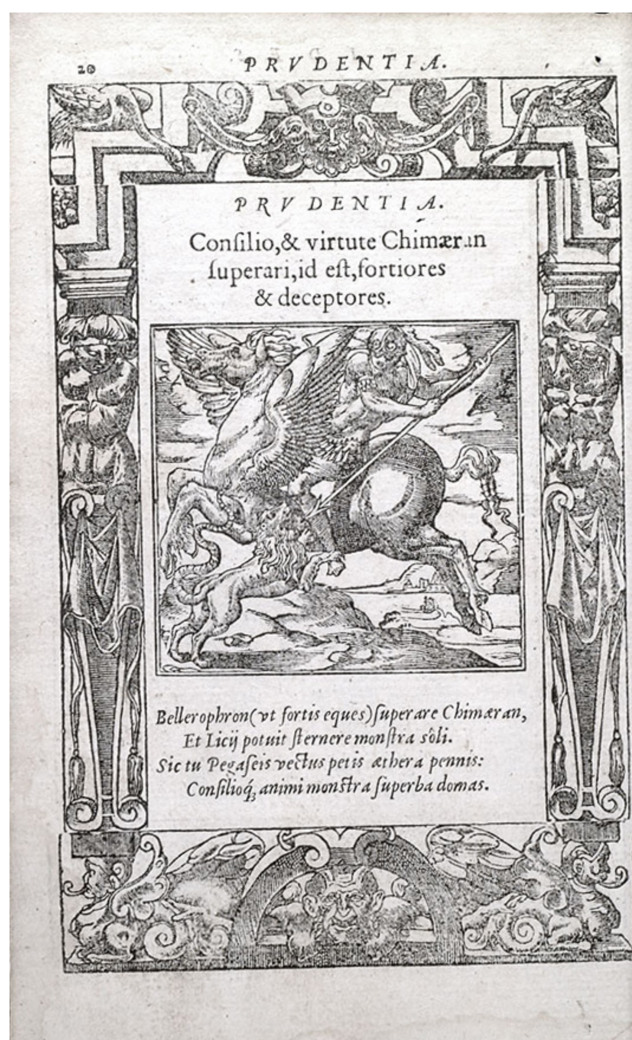


Fig. 3: Andrea Alciato: Prvdentia.

At this point, I briefly want to mention Gerhard Kurz' very helpful definition of metaphor and allegory. It precisely explains the difference between the aforementioned *pictura* with the burning man

and the later narrative one. Kurz writes, »While the metaphor is *metaphorically* unambiguous – the literal meaning is the medium, whereby the metaphoric meaning is conveyed –, allegory is ambiguous (*duplex sententia*), because its meaning lies on the verbal and on the allegorical level.« (Kurz 1979, 16) This is not the story of a burning man, the flames are not narrative or diegetic, they are only metaphorical. But the other *pictura* is narrative and tells the story of the hero Bellerophon. It has two meanings.

The last example was chosen because, surprisingly, it contains some motives that will be relevant for the pictorial language of Thompson's comic book. In *Ne pars syncera trahatvr*, Sebastián de Covarrubias Horozco eliminated every narrative or naturalism (Fig. 4). The *subscriptio* says: »You save the whole by losing a perished part. Because you have to reasonably remove it to keep the whole human alive: you have to chop off your own hand if it was bitten by a snake before its poison reaches your heart; if you hesitate too long, you are beyond help.« (Horozco) The *pictura* contains a surreal scene with arbitrary objects floating in the air. It demonstrates how one hand cuts off a finger from the other hand because a snake has it locked in its jaws. Emblematic images like this are pure pictorial scripture. One has to decipher every element of the syntactic structure to get the meaning. Still – as in the first example from Alciato – the written language tries to be figurative while the picture tries to be textual. The *inscriptio* »Lest the healthy part perishes« (Ibid.)[6] leads directly over to *Habibi* and its diegetic world, where the motif of ›cutting off the sick part‹ plays an important role.

CENTVRIA. I. 24

NE·PARS·SYNCERA·TRA HATVR.

EMBLEMA. 24.

Ganaſe el todo, con perder la parte,
Eſtando aquella parte corrompida,
Y en buena razon cabe que ſe aparte,
Por conſeruar el indiuiduo en vida:
La propia mano tienes de cortarte,
Quando fuere del Aſpide mordida,
Antes que llegue al coraçõ ſu flecha,
Que ſi mucho te tardas no aprouecha.

D 4 El

Fig. 4: Sebastián de Covarrubias Horozco: Ne pars syncera trahatvr.

Fig. 5: Craig Thompson: Habibi, panel on p. 179.

Emblematic Structures in Thompson's *Habibi*

Published in 2011, the 672-page comic tells the (love) story of two child slaves, Dodola and Zam. They escape together and grow up like mother and son or brother and sister on a boat in a desert until they are violently torn apart. Their separated lives take sorrowful courses, and upon their reunion they must escape once again. Eventually they discover their erotic love for one another. The setting is the fictional desert state ›Wanatolia‹, a fairy-tale world, appearing to be an orientalist industrialist dystopia between Postmodernism and the Middle Ages. Next to skyscrapers, naked girls in chains are sold as slaves; a shopkeeper in an ›Adidas‹ jacket offers paper and ink because printing has not yet been invented; and the sultan possesses hundreds of odalisques for his orgies and a colossal dam that deprives his people of clean potable water. Sexual exploitation and genital mutilation are the recurrent leitmotif. Consistently, Dodola tells myths of rape and mutilation. She has to prostitute herself to the passing caravans for her and Zam's survival on the deserted boat, until the sultan's henchmen kidnap her and shut her in his harem. Zam witnesses one of the caravan men raping her.

This trauma and Dodola's disappearance drive him to become a eunuch and live as female in a community of hijras. The trauma that follows the characters' experiences of sexual abuse and mutilation finds a metaphoric equivalent in the story world. In the reality of the diegesis, Dodola and Zam live on the boat in the desert. But Dodola, selling her body to the caravans, also *feels like* a desert inside. The boat, made for sailing, is completely misplaced. The landscape she is living in is her soul's landscape. Only in her shelter on the boat, where she tells Zam stories, she can cast out the drought inside of her. The leitmotif of dryness appears whenever the characters have to harm their own bodies for their physical survival.

In one key scene, Thompson combines written English, Arab calligraphy and mimetic drawings to form a very dense narrative language (Fig. 5). After accidentally witnessing Dodola's rape, Zam runs off to trade water from a secret spring to the villagers who are deprived of clean water because of the sultan's dam so that Dodola won't have to ›trade‹ her body for his food anymore (Thompson, 148–173), Dodola doesn't know what has happened to him and is sick with worry. When Zam returns to the boat they fight and then reconcile. The panel shows them standing on their shelter in the desert. The calligraphic rain is an excerpt from a poem called *Rain Song* by the Iraqi Poet Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab. At the end of the book, Thompson offers the English translation:

It is as if archways of mist drank the clouds
And drop by drop dissolved in the rain…
As if children snickered in the vineyard bowers,
The song of the rain…
Drip…
Drop… the rain

Evening yawned, from low clouds
Heavy tears are streaming still.
It is as if a child before sleep were rambling on
About his mother (a year ago he went to wake her, did not find her,
Then was told, for he kept on asking,
›After tomorrow, she'll come back again…‹)

That she must come back again,
Yet his playmates whisper that she is there
In the hillside, sleeping her death for ever,
Eating the earth around her, drinking the rain;
As if a forlorn fisherman gathering nets
Cursed the waters and fate

And scattered a song at moonset,
Drip, drop, the rain…
Drip, drop, the rain…

Do you know what sorrow the rain can inspire?
Do you know how gutters weep when it pours down?
Do you know how lost a solitary person feels in the rain?
Endless, like split blood, like hungry people, like love,
Like children, like the dead, endless the rain. (Thompson, 670)

Here we see calligraphy like rain, the poem talks about rain and it imitates rain onomatopoetically with the »Drip, drop«. There is no ›real‹ rain in the story world at that point. It is purely metaphoric. It represents how the two orphans can escape into stories. Often, they take refuge in sad stories, like the one the poem tells. But exactly this recounting of other figures' despair helps them to survive their own, time and again.

By comparing it with another panel of *Habibi* (Fig. 6), a lot can be learnt about metaphors and symbols in comics. The other panel shows Dodola carrying the Sultan's child. In the first panel, telling stories on the boat feels *like* rain in the desert for the characters. It is used metaphorically. That the pregnant Dodola feels like a shisha pipe smoked by her baby is a (very original) metaphor as well. The flames, the rain and the Dodola-shisha do not refer to ›real‹ phenomena in the diegetic worlds but show the realm of emotions. All three are metaphoric images because they compare abstract or invisible things to concrete and visible things.

But Dodola's frenzy does not feel *like* the Cheshire Cat. The Cheshire Cat is a *symbol* for frenzy that established itself in Western culture increasingly over the years. Its depiction describes Dodola's condition without being present in the diegetic world. There is certainly no Lewis Carroll or his Alice known in Wanatolia. This is a strategy

Fig. 6: Craig Thompson: Habibi, panel on p. 271.

particular to comic books or other forms of pictorial narration. The cat as symbol works like Pegasus in Alciato's emblem. To fully understand it, one needs to know that the winged horse is an old symbol for wisdom. Otherwise, one will be unable to understand why of all things, *this* myth is an allegory for wisdom and courage. Just as one will not understand why of all things there is a cat prowling around in the air, if one is unfamiliar with the illustrations from *Alice in Wonderland* and the history of its reception in Western culture. Thus, the symbol of the cat is directed at the readers by a form of illustrated narration which is independent from the characters, using symbols taken from the readers' world. In a usual prose novel, it is not possible to use a sign like this in a symbolic way. An author could write that their character sees the Cheshire Cat to indicate frenzy, but that would mean that the character had heard of it. There, the figure of the Cheshire Cat would have to be actually present in the story world; otherwise, it could ›only‹ be used as a metaphor. For example, J. R. R. Tolkien describes Gandalf's firework metaphorically, using an object which doesn't exist in his story world: ›The dragon passed like an express train, turned a somersault, and burst over Bywater with a deafening explosion.‹ (Tolkien, 36) There are no express trains in Middle Earth. It is not

Fig. 7: Craig Thompson: Habibi, panel on p. 155.

the characters who compare the dragon banger to it, but the narrator. He uses this ›written picture‹ in a metaphoric way. Kurz' thoughts on literary symbols only apply to written language: »The symbol is an immanent element of the story. A necessary contiguity exists between symbol and symbolised, both belong to the same context of events, to the same space and time.« (Kurz 1982, 75) Whereas in pictorial language, as Thompson's comic shows, the use of symbols is far more manifold.

The first example of the panel showing metaphoric rain in the desert only works because the author establishes and employs dryness and rain as symbols for loneliness and consolation throughout the book. Therefore, readers understand that the rain is positive and soothing. In another context rain could also be a metaphor for sadness. Thompson thus works with an essentially symbolist strategy – symbolist in terms of a work of art itself defining the meaning of its own symbols – as do all the emblems I discussed when they contain allegory and allegoresis together. When the man from the caravan rapes Dodola, she turns into a withered tree (Fig. 7). She does not really change her form; again, the dryness is a metaphor for her feelings. Her mind must *desert* her body to survive. In this case images work like written metaphors. In a novel, the storyteller would have said that ›Dodola felt like a withered tree‹ or even ›she felt deserted inside‹. Something that is traditionally written, becomes a mimetic drawing, just as in the *picturae* of the emblems. Throughout the book there are pages that do not only contain narrative panels but also forms of diagrammatic schemes that provide proleptic hints and contextualize the incidents and actions in the story with one another. One of them appears after Zam involuntarily observes Dodola being raped by the caravan men (Fig. 8). It shows the relations between the different

Fig. 8: Craig Thompson: Habibi, p. 156.

characters and later events. Zam feels ashamed and guilty of being a man because, as he gets older, he becomes confused by his desire after inadvertently seeing Dodola in the bath, and afterwards daydreaming of her while masturbating for the first time (Thompson, 131–132, 136–137). The branches falling from the withered tree, to which he is attached, refer to his later castration. Dodola drowning in water is this time not positive but rather negative if one understands the water here as the lust of the rapist.

Hereby the water turns into an ambiguous symbol which hints at the ambiguity of sexual desire. This becomes clearer when taking another symbol from the story world into consideration. It is a snake that leads Zam to a secret spring in the desert when he and Dodola are badly in need of drinking water (Thompson, 137–143). But it is also here, when Zam is alone in the desert, that he masturbates whilst imagining the naked Dodola. So, the snake is associated with the desire that Zam will become afraid of later, and with water that is essential for survival. When the hijras castrate Zam, the snake reappears (Fig. 9). There are some similarities to Horozco's emblem in this iconography. Horozco recommends cutting off the sick part to save the whole body from infection and therefore to save the person's life. This is what Zam does. He feels guilty and impure; by cutting off his genitals he hopes to become pure again and receive forgiveness. Both acts of cutting depicted do not happen like that in any diegetic world. In a surrealist scene the objects float in the air. The panels visualize the abstract hope of saving the whole body and eventually even the soul for eternity, by executing a more or less ›small‹ cut and suffering a more or less ›slight‹ pain instead of eternal perdition. Dryness as a metaphoric symbol appears whenever the characters have to harm their bodies for their physical survival. Here, without the castration, Zam would be expelled from the community of hijras that nourish him after Dodola was kidnapped by the sultan's soldiers. The snake connects the

Fig. 9: Craig Thompson: Habibi, panel on p. 336.

scenes and shows their causal interdependence. The snake is conventionally, as in Horozco's emblem, a symbol for sin or evil. In the comic book's immanent symbolism, it is associated with the secret spring and is thus positive. First the symbol is established as a real object in the story world, later it substitutes symbolically Zam's genitals. To replace the genitals with the snake thus means that Zam's mutilation has to be associated with dryness. Zam tries to overcome his sexual lust because he considers it as solely negative (Thompson, 360). But later he begins to recover it, once he and Dodola discover their erotic love for one another (Thompson, 634). He can then understand the ambiguity of desire and learns about its positive and creative power. Undoubtedly, they are an unusual couple. Since Dodola was abused by men throughout her entire life, she learned that conventional penetration »isn't the center of sex« (Thompson, 635). So, they find their own form of having sex and instead of conceiving they adopt a child who is orphaned and enslaved, as they once were (Thompson, 655–657). The snake, the withered trees and the rain are very nice examples of how *Habibi* explains its own ›pictorial scripture,‹ its own figurativeness. The comic book as a whole works like an emblem; its self-reflexivity reveals its own pictorial language. This symbolist emblematic strategy is not found in comic books in general, although possibly there are other examples. However, the use of visual symbols and metaphors in *Habibi* are a common strategy for this art form.

Conclusion

Two main strategies were found to be used by both emblems and comics, in particular *Habibi*, the first being that both explain their own figurativeness. This can be called a symbolist strategy. The second is that they use images like scripture in syntactic structures that must be deciphered. One could be tempted to see the main parallel between emblems and comic books as the hybridity of the art form, but I hope to have shown that the more significant parallel is that they *dissolve* hybridity. Obviously, the difference between words and pictures remains, but their *functions* are in question, both in emblems and comics. If the emblematic strategy succeeds and the symbols are established, one understands pictures as precisely as words and can ›read‹ the message. The explanatory *subscriptiones* become dispensable, as is the case with comics. One last simple example is the speech bubble as it is an arbitrary convention that the tail points at the speaker. Why not at the listener? The speech bubble is invisible sounds as materialized images. Thought bubbles in contrast look like little clouds and everyone knows that the words they contain are not audible. One can only read comic stories properly because of cultural agreements.

Finally, I will return to the concept of allegory that is so important for emblems. Emblems often use metaphors and symbols to create bigger allegorical entities that even contain their own allegoresis. The emblem wants to hand out *advice*. Probably one could read *Habibi*

altogether as an allegory. But the allegoresis is left to the readers or scholars. The comic uses metaphors and symbols to tell its *story* properly and vividly. I was struck by two definitions of the allegorical that I came across. Walter Benjamin writes that allegory »is not a playful picture puzzle, but expression, like language is expression, in fact like scripture« (Benjamin, 178). And Craig Owens, who uses Benjamin's theory of allegory as a starting point to explore postmodern art, states, »This blatant disregard for aesthetic categories is nowhere more apparent than in the reciprocity, which allegory proposes between the visual and the verbal: words are often treated as purely visual phenomena, while visual images are offered as script to be deciphered.« (Owens, 57) Exchanging the word ›allegory‹ for ›comic‹ would offer an adequate definition, and the same applies to emblems. Both art forms merge writtenness of image and figurativeness of text to form one new language; attempting to transform the invisible into visible images, images which then become rhetoric.

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1] »Arcum leua tenet, rigidam fert dextera clauam, / Contegit & Nemees corpora nuda leo. / Herculis hæc igitur facies? non conuenit illud, / Quod uetus & senio tempora cana gerit. / Quid q lingua illi leuibus traiecta cathenis, / Quîs fissa facili allicit aure uiros. / An ne q Alcyden lingua non robore Galli, / Præstantem populis iura dedisse ferunt. / Cedunt arma togæ, & quamvis durissima corda, / Eloquio pollens ad sua uota trahit.« Translation taken from the Glasgow University Emblem Website, <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=A31a092>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

2] Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

3] »Puis que ie sens par amoureux écôbres,/ Vng feu qui mect cueur & corps à tormét,/ Sás recepuoir de dame alegemét/ Fault que l'esperit, s'en voise soubz les vmbres.«

4] »Consilio, & virtute Chimaeran superari, id est, fortiores et deceptores.« Translation taken from the Glasgow University Emblem Website, <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=A51a014>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

5] »Bellerophron (vt fortis eques) superare Chimæran,/ Et Licij potuit sternere monstra sôli./ Sic tu Pegaseis vectus petis æthera pennis:/ Consilioq animi monstra superba domas.« Translation taken from the Glasgow University Emblem Website, <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=A51a014>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

6] »Ne pars syncera trahatvr.«