

Emblem Literature and Fantasy in Literature: Some Common Characteristics

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«Fantasy» will **have been** defined one hundred times before the end of this Conference*. Still, everyone of us feels obliged to define **again** the frame within which he wants or **likes** to act.

Fantasy, a word quite often **used** in our daily **life**, often lacks a **well** outlined frontier, **except perhaps** for a couple of features:

- fantasy is opposed to everyday reality in **some** way.
- fantasy **is** the result of the imaginary operation of our minds.

These are two salient **features** which **have** probably **been** never put into question by literary critics. However, the **analysis** of these two **features** **brings** us into a very complex world.

Fantasy opposes everyday reality, yet it is based on it. It is **difficult** to **think** of any fantastic monster with no resemblance whatsoever to real **animals**. They may fly in a most strange way, they may shoot flames through their mouths, be reptile-like or not, half human half fish; they may be giants or **elves**, they may **have** extraordinary powers or be immortal. In spite of **all** those **marvellous** qualities we simply assign **some features** peculiar to certain beings to others which lack them. Or **else** these **features** are the simple **addition** of unfulfilled human **desires** to a real «**substratum**», human or animal or a mixture of both, that appears or **claims** to be more than what it **really is** or is capable of being. This **is** clearly **seen in** the picture shown in fig. 1. An animal mounted by a naked virgin, half dragon, half **serpent**, winged and with **legs** like any **bird**. If creatures like these do not exist **in** our real world, then it is

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Pulchritudo fæminea.

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A VIRGIN naked, on a Dragon sits,
 One hand out-stretch'd, a christall glasse doth show:
 The other beares a dart, that deadly hits;
 Vpon her head, a garland white as snow,
 Of * print and Lillies. Beautie most desir'd,
 Were I her painter, should be thus attir'd.

* Alba ligustra
 cadunt ---

Her nakednes vs tells, shee needs no art:
 Her glasse, how we by sight are mou'd to loie,
 The woundes vnfelt, that's giuen by the Dart
 At first, (though deadly we it after prooue)
 The Dragon notes loues poifon: and the flowers,
 The frailtie (Ladies) of that pride of yours.

Cuinque aliquis dicet, fuit hæc formosa, dolebis;
 Et speculum incendax, esse querere tuum.

Ovid: 2. de Ar-
 te amandi.

Nec semper violæ, nec semper Lilia florent:
 Et riget amissa spina relicta rosa.

Idem.

K 1.

Nil

Fig. 1 (Peacham)

most probable that they belong to the world of fantasy, perhaps according to the **guidelines** of **well-established** literary conventions.

One thing is **clearly** non-real in fantastic literature: the inventions of our **creative** mind. It is our imagination that plays with reality, **making combinations** of its elements, projecting our hidden **desires** onto the **outside** world; in any case, we should always bear **in** mind the **limitations** already stated by **Aristotle** in this famous and **well-known** sentence: «**Nothing is in** our mind that was not previously in our **senses**». **Here lies** the reason for such an apparent contradiction («**fantasy** opposes reality, yet it **is** based on it»). It is our way of acquiring knowledge that **limits all** our production, of the sciences as **well** as the arts.

Curiously enough, therefore, fantasy and reality are not to be separated. They **cannot** be separated. And what **is** even more: fantasy depends on reality **and** can hardly be fully grasped **outside** its realm.

When we want to understand fantasy we face again another apparent contradiction: fantasy **is** «**an escape** from everyday **reality**». But how **could** it be **possible** that what **is** based on reality should at the same time «**escape**» from it?

We are **certainly** dealing **here** with two complementary facts: reality on its own and the product of our mind striving to get **rid** of, and **surpass, it; it is** man **himself** fully at work, revealing our dependency on nature and our **striving** for independence and liberation. Contradictions are only apparent, **pure** «**fantasy**» **after all, because** reality **would** destroy what **might** be **truly** contradictor~.

In a broad sense, **all** literature is fantastic, at **least** in so far as **it is** the literary recreation of the writer's mind through imaginary conventions. And so it appears to **have been** from *Gilgamesh*, for **example**, through *Don Quixote*, *Alice in Wonderland*, up till *Animal Farm* or **any** other fantastic novel. Manuel Villar's *Las Españas perdidas* would perhaps not be included **among** the **novels** termed fantastic. It is however, in my view, a **thorough** recreation of a character, the protagonist, an atmosphere, a situation peculiar to the novel, a **human** destiny which has **been** only **partially** suggested by historical data or travel experiences through the **desert**. **Could** it then be **termed** «**fantastic literature**»?

If we decide that it **is** not we are acknowledging that fantastic literature **does not apply** to what **is** the result of our imagination, but rather to only **specific areas** concerning the range of **possibilities** our imagination has **in** order to produce new worlds. It is not **my** aim to **discuss** this point. But **it is** relevant to raise the problem **here** **because in some way** it supports my attempt to **discover some features** which might be shared by fantastic and emblematic literature.

Since the frame within which fantastic literature moves **is** so **ample, it is** **also** necessary to keep **in** mind that the production of such literature admits a great **variety**.

Fantastic literature attempts a conventional 'escape' from everyday reality. And in so doing it tries to make **us** aware of the **outside** world; or it will try to fulfill hidden **desires**, dreams expressing wishes we cannot **realize**. For that reason fantastic literature **is** subject to the longings and **frustrations** of individuals and groups in each particular period of human history. **It is**, therefore, to be expected that FL in the modern world **is** not produced in the same way as in the Middle Ages, for example. On this assumption the title of this essay embraces not only significant differences, but more so significant similarities.

Let me point out to you now that FL will be considered **here** as:

(1) The revealing of a **parallel** world which **distorts** reality, through addition or defect. That is, adding something which **is** not real or **is** not present in the object, being, etc., actually existing (as burning flames are assigned to dragons); or detracting a characteristic from the object, person, or animal described (such as **mortality** absent in human beings).

Or as (2) a total recreation of another secondary world, as was more normal in the Middle Ages or in a contemporary novel like *The Lord of the Rings*.

In this second **instance** we must take into account the **predominance** of fantastic **animals**, to a great extent **derived** from older times, popular beliefs, magic and myths or **religion**. Monsters and dragons are as familiar to medieval minds as planes or space ships are for **us** nowadays.

Be **it** fantastic animals or distorted reality, such a **tradition** has persisted throughout human literary history. **If** we decide to compare **some** of **Blake's** designs to Tolkien's **strange** beings, we cannot but notice striking physical similarities. Those who **have** watched the film «*The Lord of the Rings*» **have** interesting data for such a comparison (see **fig. 2**).

If instead you compare **Blake** to *Alice in Wonderland* or Orwell's animals, we would stress differences rather than similarities **in** the way animals appear. Differences would increase in quantity and quality if we bring **in** for **comparison** García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, where fantasy lies in the setting and development of the plot rather than in the characters themselves. Colonel **Buendía**, like the rest of the characters in the novel, **is** a **normal** human being; no monsters are depicted or participate **in** the plot. Yet, the setting **suggested** by the novel **is** fantastic in so far as it **does** not fully match reality or in so far as it **distances us** from the world of our senses.



EMBLEM LITERATURE AND FANTASY IN LITERATURE



Fig. 2



Blake is a good illustration of my point. His designs participate to a great extent and in many instances in the emblematic tradition. Blake's vision was basically fantastic (see figs. 2 and 3):



Fig. 3



Alonso Lopez was upon the Side of Night
The sea lay on the Atlantic
The North was South
The South was North
The East was West
The West was East

Dragons, sea monsters, supernatural animals, unicorns and the like constitute an essential part of his drawings. We can also notice that the text accompanying some of these drawings is of a special kind: it might be termed fantastic at least in so far as it distorts reality or renders it enigmatic. Are these features to be considered within the genre of the «fantastic»? No doubt they are, though not necessarily in the most 'normal' or classical way.

This partial and restricted look at Blake's work may be an adequate motif to start with emblematic literature. Emblems, so popular in the XVI and XVII centuries all over Europe, have a direct relationship with bestianes, enigmatic figures, monsters of any kind, unicorns, dragons, etc. Emblematic designs are often fantastic animals or the reproduction of a fantastic setting (world ?) (see fig. 4).



Fig. 4 (Whitney)

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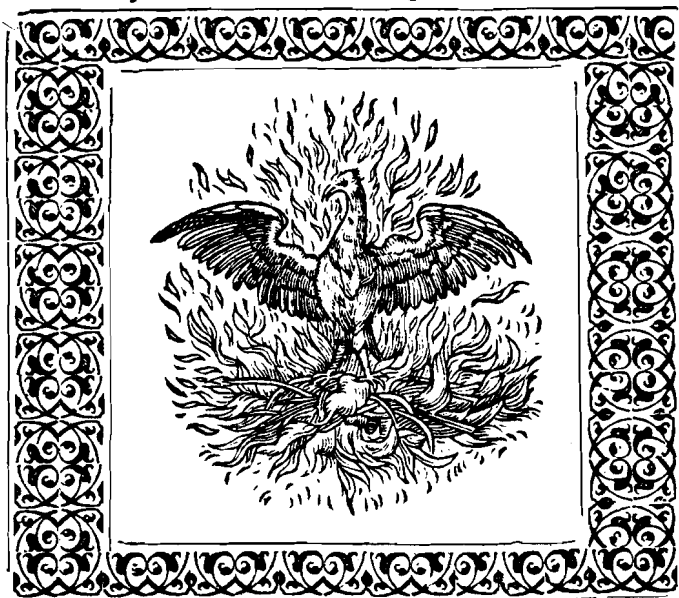
In diuitem, indoctum.*Unica semper avis.**To my countrymen of the Nampnvice in Cheshire.*

Fig. 4 (Witney)

Rex medicus patria.

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Fig. 4 (Peacham)

Ad illust. Maximil. duæm Mediol.
Emblema I.

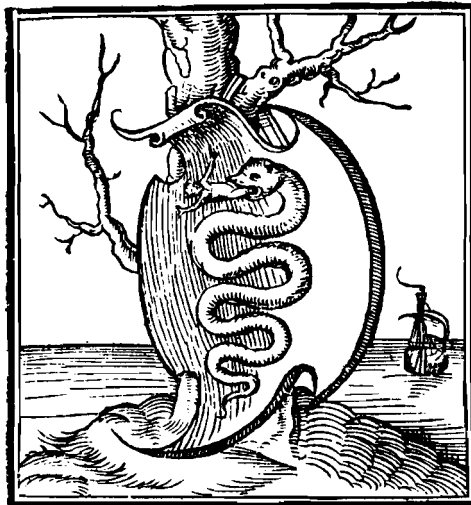


Fig. 4 (Alciato)

Ex arduis perpetuum nomen. **XXIII.**



*Prinæps subditorum incolunitatem
procurans.* **XXI.**

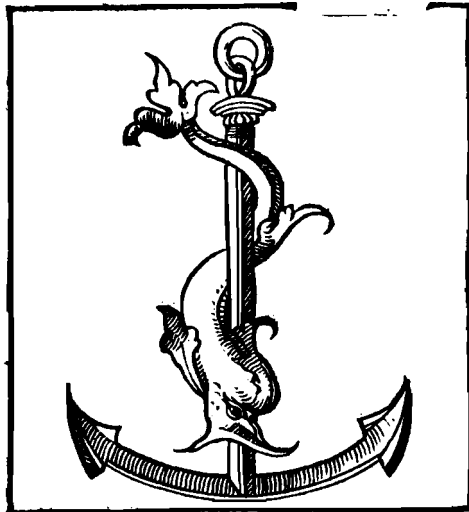


Fig. 4 (Alciato)



Fig. 4 (La Perrière)

EMBLEMA. XXXVII.

Ne nimis alta petas.



Fig. 4 (Holtzwardt)

*Bee Iust; for, neither Sea nor Land,
Shall hide thee from the Royall-hand.*

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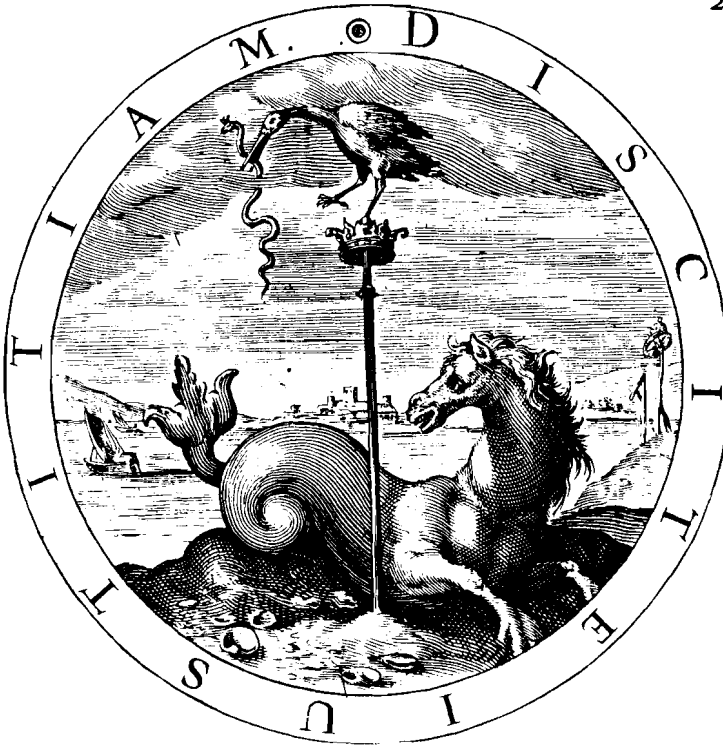


Fig. 4 (Wither)

*No passage can divert the Course,
Of Pegalus, the Muses Horse.*



Fig. 4 (Wither)

*Good Fortune will with him abide,
That hath true Vertue, for his guide.*

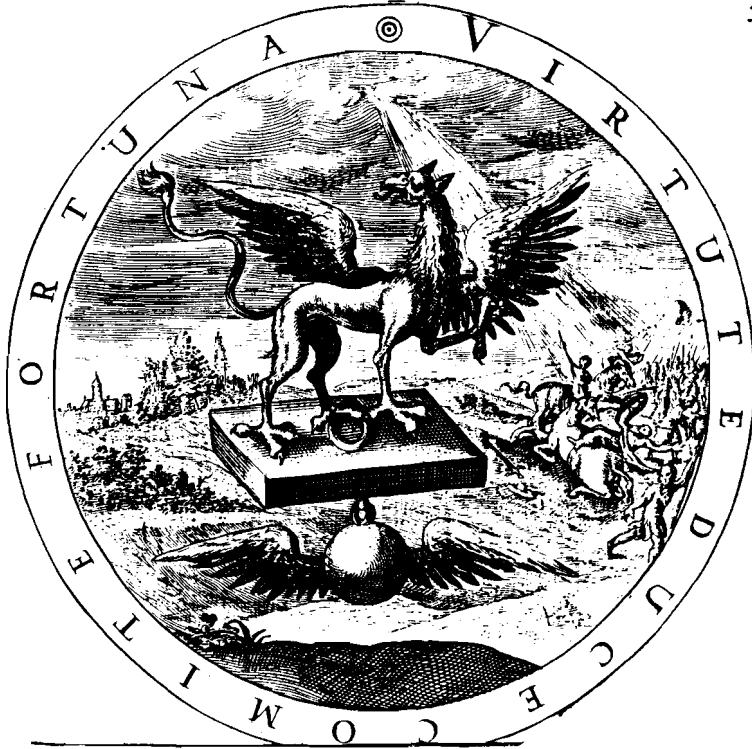


Fig. 4 (Wither)

*When great Attempts are undergone,
Ioyne Strength and Wisedome, both in one.*



Fig. 4 (Wither)

*No Heart can thinke, to what strange ends,
The Tongues unruly Motion tends.*



Fig. 4 (Wither)

Any reader of the motto or the accompanying text is transported to another layer of reality: the **unreal** world of the fantastic, strange animals **living** only through and in the imagination of the writer and the reader.

It doesn't matter now if the author aims at attracting the reader into his own **field** in order to teach him **some morals**. The fact is that the pictorial motif itself, the *speaking picture*, as they used to say, suggested a new, strange, wonderful **existence**. In that sense emblems take a good **deal** of their substance from the literature already existing in medieval and ancient epic, popular fantastic tales, popular marvellous beliefs and **current** ideas on what was considered extraordinary.

From this perspective emblems offer an escape into our imagination: an escape from what **is** usual and familiar, real and to be **seen** or tested, to this other world of **unfulfilled desire**, towards never experienced visual sensations, fantastic beings able to perform or achieve what humans **have** never **been** able to.

The emblem depicting a man flying on a bird; the eagle striving towards the sun (Whitney 177) **till** its feathers melt, even if related to mythological conventions (perhaps **because** of that) is nonetheless viewed as a fantastic possibility only achieved by gods or supermen, never by living men or animals. The fox **begging** (Peacham 58), the crab writing (Peacham 57); a man riding a dragon-like bird (Peacham 58) or the dragon bearing a scepter (Peacham 30), as well as man riding «a mouton» (Whitney 214). **All** these **examples** **reveal** essential fantastic **features** present in emblem literature.

Dragons are probably the most important pictorial **motif**: they appear **under** many different forms, shapes and attitudes: **serpent-like**, buming flames shooting out of their mouths, winged for flying, fighting, certainly reproducing **some** of the fantastic beliefs **and/or** literature on the subject at the time.

Is then emblem literature «fantastic»? It would certainly be shocking to **affirm** that **bluntly**; but not so much to **affirm** that emblem literature shares many traditional elements of fantastic literature.

As **I** **have** already noted, many **pictorial** motifs in emblem literature are **typically** fantastic. **I** will not insist on what is obvious at first sight. There are, however, other elements that allow for more **similarities** and parallelisms, as well as differences.

Fantasy **is** like a beautiful dress our mind adds to the real world or to real things to make them appear as we want to see them. The idea or image of a «**beautiful dress**» **applies** also to emblematic motifs: emblems are ornate dresses as **well**, enwrapping a product which is not the dress itself but **something else**, usually within **the** range of what might be **termed** «**didactic**» or «**moral**». Such an instrumental function **and/or** **value** of the dress **in** fantastic literature **is** also obvious if we consider the goals at which this kind of literature aims: the recreation of another world, the building of a reality which is **unreal** by nature. Fantasy is *an instrumental device* added to what is real and having another **purpose** in mind. At that **level** emblem and fantastic literature coin-

cide in their goals: both take advantage of a figurative world to reach specific results.

The existence of a purpose in both kinds of literature implies another feature worth mentioning, more clearly in emblems, not always so in fantastic literature: *didacticism*. One of the pillars on which emblems develop is the idea of teaching: to teach people how to act, to give advice, morals, or anything concerning human behaviour or attitudes towards god, religion, life. This is not only notorious but also of primary importance, even explicitly stated, in emblem literature (see fig. 1).

Regarding FL, more variety is certainly present in this respect. But I wouldn't hesitate to affirm that most often didacticism is also present, explicitly or implicitly. What is most varying in degree is precisely the explicitness of such a didactic purpose. Having in mind a «caveat»: explicitness does not imply that the author makes a direct reference to the morals involved in his work. This is what better distinguishes emblem from fantastic literature: the way in which the goals —hidden or confessed— of the written text are stated or acknowledged. Morals, didacticism may be there even if not openly confessed. To a certain extent this is subject to convention. Emblem writers, we know, do so because the structure within which they move includes such an explicit statement. Fantastic writers, on the contrary, are required to adopt a different convention, which excludes the open confession of the morals or didactic lessons involved; it is the reader who must deduce what is meant or implied in the convention. The writer must only take care of building the story conveniently and put the necessary ingredients in order to direct and delimit the conclusion on the part of the reader.

Orwell in his *Animal Farm*, for example, must and need not say that what he aims at is to make people aware of the corruption and dangers of dictatorship and power in human society. By composing the plot of a parallel conceptual world, that of animals on a farm, he gives the reader the elements necessary to draw his lesson and apply it to the real world in which we live. The writer can safely concentrate on the structure of the story and on the 'how he tells it'.

Didacticism, it is true, does not appear to be a salient element in fantastic literature. The reader concentrates on the pleasure of reading, unaware of what lies behind the story which unconsciously penetrates his thoughts or ideas. The didactic purpose is however present. Alice's world is a world designed for us to learn; reality is turned upside down precisely for that reason. Swift's recreation of his fantastic world of giants and nidgets points towards a world of unreality which becomes 'real' as soon as we discover in it the message of the whole fantastic reconstruction.

Didactic messages are not always evident or self-explaining, step by step, point by point. But this is so in the same way as not all elements are fantastic in a specific piece of writing. Didacticism might emerge out of a whole plot, out of the whole story, not necessarily out of every particular detail. This is a

central characteristic of both emblem and fantastic literature, a common ground in which they meet and fuse. We might object that man in our modern times does not need so much to be taught through literary works. That our forefathers were more illiterate and more credulous than we are nowadays. that 'their' animals were less real than ours. that religion, myth and credulity is not so much at the centre of our lives, that fantasy and didacticism, therefore, were easier for them. It may be true that fewer people nowadays believe in monstrous animals; still fantasy and didacticism may be disguised in many different ways, and what is true is the capacity and ability for men to reconstruct the kind of world we have not and we dream of.

FL creates a mythic world. Not any possible world, but a world which is considered by the reader as «logical, coherent, comprehensible». That is in fact what makes a fantastic novel so believable or easily understood. A world without order, abounding in facts not connected through the cause and effect principle would end nowhere, wouldn't be comprehensible for us and hence sterile and abandoned. There are essential features which cannot be left aside in the building of a new world, even in literary works. And the easier the logic and comprehensibility, the easier it is to understand. «Logic», by the way, need not be present in every detail; it is enough if it guides the plot or moves forward the action of the characters (compare *Animal Farm* to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, for example). This «logic» has an internal logic of its own: animals that talk, pigs that walk on two legs, dragons breathing out flames, rabbits that establish a durable friendship with men, etc. These instances do not follow the laws of nature. What matters, however, is that once the setting is established, the cause-and-effect principle applies. FL keeps faithfully to these guidelines. What about emblem literature? EL cannot be fully equated to FL from this viewpoint. For one reason which derives from the convention itself: emblems are short, isolated units, without enough substance to build a narrative world. Still, as a whole, an emblem book might be said to depict a more coherent allegorical world: the fantastic world of a set of actions by animals, men; facts of nature, myths, that altogether might have specific bearings upon human behaviour. An emblem book offers a consistent view, logical guidelines that the author manipulates in order to attain his goals. It is a world made out of isolated units as «tesselae» put together shaping an overall allegorical picture; but individual units alone would appear disconnected, even if each one of them retains an individual meaning. In that sense, emblems teach more individually than as a whole. Fantastic literature works in the opposite direction: it acquires a full meaning as an organic narrative, considering the novel in its entirety rather than the individual episodes it might contain. That being so, it remains true that emblems keep also, as FL does, a distinctive kind of logic, required by their respective literary genre.

I will not be so daring as to affirm that FL and EL should be considered in parallel. A detailed analysis of one novel might offer more similarities to EL

that of another. No doubt *The Lord of the Rings* reminds us of **EL** more than *Animal Farm*, for example. The kind of animals that appear in Tolkien's novel, the setting itself, recreate an atmosphere closer to what is more familiar to **EL**. *Animal Farm*, based on animals physically unchanged, being fantasy at the level of ideas and action, less physical in nature, keeps a marked distance from those features which in **EL** are tightly connected to medieval mythological animals.

I have tried to insist here only on those traits which I consider basic and essential and that are found as a substratum in both literary genres. All features discussed are central motifs to the inner workings of man's literary activity, be it emblematic or fantastic. Which proves once more the presence of fundamental, unifying and similar characteristics in any human work of art.