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PENSIERO TECNICA CREATIVITÀ

Leonardo da Vinci e il Rinascimento

A cura di

Gianluca Cuozzo, Antonio Dall'Igna, Simone Ferrari,
Harald Schwaetzer

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GIUDITTA CIRNIGLIARO

FABLES, EMBLEMS, AND NATURAL FORMS IN LEONARDO'S MANUSCRIPTS

ABSTRACT: *This paper focuses on the interaction between scientific, literary, and artistic research in Leonardo da Vinci's manuscripts, which aim to examine and represent natural forms. Drawing upon his employment of fables and emblems in scientific contexts, I argue that Leonardo undertakes an aesthetic and philosophical project that uses empirical, diagrammatic, and pictorial strategies toward the investigation of nature. Through case studies on the fables and the emblems of the lily, the butterfly, and the mirror, I show that Leonardo's textual and visual forms are modeled on a recurrent binary structure. By means of this binary model, which is also echoed in his scientific diagrams, Leonardo illustrates the causes and the consequences of a natural phenomenon. Ultimately, thanks to the interaction of different fields of analysis – such as geometrical transformation of shapes, fables, and emblems – Leonardo is able to reach a truthful representation of Nature.*



KEYWORDS: *Emblems; Leonardo da Vinci; Natural Forms; Early Modern Word-and-Image.*

1. Fables and Emblems as Natural Pictures

In *Michelangelo: A Life on Paper*, Leonard Barkan suitably begins the analysis of the word-and-image relationship in Michelangelo's oeuvre by introducing the multifaceted genius of Leonardo. After giving an account of the several cases in which Leonardo purposefully interrelates images and text, Barkan states:

Indeed, it is this double presence, however variously it emerges on the page, that nearly always signals the opposite of the doodle – that is, an attempt to make the kind of definitive statement about nature, technology, or art that requires both the mimetic or diagrammatic qualities of the picture and the discursive or descriptive qualities of the text to nail down the truth.¹

1 L. Barkan, *Michelangelo: A Life on Paper*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 14.



Following Barkan's interpretation, I argue that Leonardo undertakes an aesthetic and philosophical project that uses empirical, diagrammatic, and pictorial strategies toward the investigation of nature. Through case studies on the fables and emblems of the lily, the butterfly, and the mirror, I show that Leonardo's textual and visual forms are modeled on a recurrent binary structure, which illustrates the causes and consequences of a natural phenomenon. Leonardo applies this binary model not only to his literary and artistic research, but also to his scientific diagrams and empirical observations, in order to reach a truthful representation of Nature².

Leonardo's fables are a collection of fragments written between 1490 and the beginning of the 1500s, and they can be found in his manuscripts H and L, the codices Forster III, Arundel, and Atlanticus³. These fragments – which are modeled on different traditions, such as the Aesopic fables, Pliny's encyclopedia, ancient bestiaries, and even Burchiello's sonnets – entail various modes of interaction between words and images. In a few cases – such as in the fables of the lily and the mirror – the fable appears among scientific diagrams and illustrations on similar topics, which evolve in emblematic representations found in different manuscripts. Other times, we find fables translated into the form of emblems, or into sequences of images showing different scenes of the fable on separate folios – as the fable of the butterfly clearly exemplifies. Finally, Leonardo's fables can be located in rigorous collections of literary writings, and they may be featured together with descriptive illustrations that appear to be preliminary sketches for emblems⁴.

2 By "truthful representation" I refer to Stephen Halliwell's discussion of the capacity of a work of art to deceive upon unity and harmony representing its "inner truth" (*innere wahrheit*) and the laws of its "self-contained world" (*eine kleine welt für sich*). Cf. S. Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 2.

3 On Leonardo's fables, see D. Marsh, *Renaissance Fables: Aesopic Prose by Leon Battista Alberti, Bartolomeo Scala, Leonardo da Vinci, Bernardino Baldi*, Tempe, Arizona, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004; C. Vecce, G. Cirmigliaro, *Leonardo: favole e facezie. Disegni di Leonardo dal Codice Atlantico*, Novara, De Agostini, 2013; G. Cirmigliaro, *Le Favole di Leonardo da Vinci. Struttura e temi*, in "Rivista di Letteratura Italiana", XXXI (2013), 2, pp. 23-43; Leonardo da Vinci, *Favole e profezie. Scritti letterari*, edited by G. Cirmigliaro and C. Vecce, Milano, Garzanti, 2019; A. Bisanti, *Violenza, frustrazione, vanità. La visione pessimistica di Leonardo nel Bestiario e nelle Favole*, in "Rivista di Letteratura Italiana", XXXVII (2019), 2, pp. 47-54; G. Cirmigliaro, *Gli 'Esopi' di Leonardo: l'ascia e il noce*, in *ivi*, pp. 57-67.

4 Cf. G. Cirmigliaro, *Leonardo e il libro illustrato. Immagini di Plinio ed Esopo nella biblioteca vinciana*, in "L'Illustrazione. Rivista del libro illustrato", III (2019), 3, pp. 73-89.

In many of his manuscripts, Leonardo devoted space to emblems or *imprese*, which are forms of hermetic language composed of an image (*figura*) and a caption (*motto*) that concurrently suggest a hidden meaning⁵. By the end of the fifteenth century, emblems were an important method of self-definition within Italy's early modern social networks, and represented a way for artists to establish their courtly recognition. Leonardo's emblems were certainly conceived to win the support of his patrons and, at the same time, they embodied a successful mode of investigation and representation of nature, which developed the fabular format by combining technical-scientific and creative skills⁶.

- 5 Cf. P. Giovio, *Dialogo dell'imprese militari et amorose di Monsignor Paolo Giovio vescovo di Nucera*, Roma, Antonio Barre, 1555, p. 6; G. Arbizzoni, *Imprese as Emblems: the European Reputation of an 'Italian' Genre*, in *The Italian Emblem: A Collection of Essays*, edited by D. Mansueto, Glasgow, Glasgow Emblem Studies, 2007, pp. 1-32; K. Lippincott, *The Genesis and Significance of the Fifteenth-Century Italian Impresa*, in *Chivalry in the Renaissance*, edited by S. Anglo, Woodbridge, Boydell, 1990, pp. 49-76; L. Bolzoni, S. Volterrani, *Con parola brieve e con figura: emblemi e imprese fra antico e moderno*, Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2008.
- 6 Cf. K. Pinkus, *Picturing Silence: Emblem, Language, Counter-Reformation Materiality*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996. On Leonardo's emblems and word-and-image combinations, see A. Marinoni, *I rebus di Leonardo da Vinci raccolti e interpretati: con un saggio su una virtù spirituale*, Firenze, Olshki, 1954; L. Reti, "Non si volta chi a stella è fisso": le imprese di Leonardo da Vinci, in "Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance", XXI (1959), 1, pp. 7-48; Idem, "Tal è 'l mal che non mi noce, quale il bene che non mi giova": interpretazione dell'impresa della lampada, in "Raccolta vinciana", XX (1964), pp. 325-330; A. Marinoni, *Leonardo da Vinci: rebus*, Milano, Silvana, 1983; C. Vecce, *Leonardo e il gioco, in Passare il tempo: la letteratura del gioco e dell'intrattenimento dal XII al XVI secolo. Atti del convegno di Pienza, 10-14 settembre 1991*, Roma, Salerno, 1993, pp. 280-286; Idem, *La parola e l'icona. Dai rebus di Leonardo ai 'fermagli' di Fabricio Luna*, in "Achademia Leonardi Vinci: Journal of Leonardo Studies and Bibliography Vinciana", VIII (1995), pp. 173-183; Idem, *Parola e immagine nei manoscritti di Leonardo da Vinci, in Percorsi tra parole e immagini (1400-1600)*, edited by A. Guidotti and M. Rossi, Lucca, Maria Pacini Fazzi, 2000, pp. 19-35; B. Schirg, *Decoding da Vinci's impresa: Leonardo's Gift to Cardinal Ippolito d'Este and Mario Equicola's De opportunitate (1507)*, in "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", LXXVIII (2015), pp. 135-155; *La sala delle Asse del Castello Sforzesco. Leonardo da Vinci all'ombra del Moro*, edited by C. Salsi and A. Alberti, Milano, Silvana, 2019; C. Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci Rediscovered*, 3 voll., New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2019, vol. I, pp. 117-126, 482-500, vol. III, pp. 110-123; M. Residori, *Appunti su Leonardo "morale": il tema dell'ingratitude fra parole e immagini*, in *Nodi, vincoli e groppi leonardeschi*, edited by F. Dubard de Guillaibois and O. Chiquet, Spartacus-idh, Paris, 2019, pp. 108-136; M. Versiero, *Leonardo in "chia-*

The fable of the lily clearly illustrates the intimate relationship between scientific knowledge, humanistic thought, and writing and visual performance in Leonardo's oeuvre⁷. This very brief fable occupies the bottom half of folio 44r on the Codex H, which is devoted to diagrams of mechanics (**Fig. 1**):

Il ligio si pose sopra la ripa di Tesino,
e la corrente tirò la ripa insieme col lilio.⁸

Both the fable and the diagrams reflect on a cause-effect relationship between small and greater forces: the lily goes against the river's stream just as the human arm opposes the weight. Curiously, the outcome of Leonardo's studies on mechanics, which illustrate a way of controlling nature (weight) through artifice (pulleys), is a fable that denounces the impossibility of overcoming nature. This moral parable celebrating the power of nature held such great interest for Leonardo, that he even created an emblem from it. As a result, he managed to summarize in both words and images the irrationality of fighting Nature.

The emblem is found on folio 12700v from the Royal Collection of Windsor (1508-1510), which is mainly occupied by geometrical studies (**Fig. 2**). On the left side, we see the drawing of a lily standing above the river's tide, accompanied by the motto "prima morte che stanchezza" (death rather than weariness). The drawing of the flower is inscribed in a cameo with a scroll in the manner of Renaissance *impres*e and represents the visual summary of the fable of the lily. In fact, the fable is composed of two coordinate clauses following the cause-effect model: the lily stands before the waves, and it is immediately overwhelmed. The emblem shows the same structure with the lily standing upright and then bowing down. Leonardo modifies the emblem motif twice by adding the motto "sine lassitudine" (without fatigue), and then he realizes eight different versions of it⁹.

roscuro". *Politica, profezia, allegoria, c. 1494-1504*, Mantova, Oligo, 2019, pp. 96-98, 119-156.

7 On the fable of the lily, see A. Bisanti, *Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo e il fior di giglio*, in "Interpres", XXII (2003), pp. 276-291; G. Cirnigliaro, *Le Favole di Leonardo*, cit., pp. 29-30.

8 Leonardo da Vinci, *Favole*, in Idem, *Favole e profezie*, cit., n. 41, p. 18.

9 Cf. G. Cirnigliaro, *La descrizione della natura nei manoscritti di Leonardo: dalla favola all'impresa*, in *Letteratura e Arti Visive, Atti delle Rencontres de l'Archet (Morgex, 10-15 settembre 2018)*, Morgex, Fondazione Centro di Studi storico-letterari Natalino Sapegno, 2019, pp. 88-100. See also, Eadem, *Early Modern Inventions, Fables and Emblems: Leonardo's Spider and his Word-and-Image Mechanisms*, in *Rare and Universal: Leonardo's Humanism across Time and*

The versions of the emblem of the lily on the Windsor folio are surrounded by various sketches and notes which can be connected with other projects for emblems. For instance, in the middle of the page an unidentified drawing – of what seems to be a burning insect – shows thematic and formal features that can be found both in later fifteenth-century emblem treatises and in Leonardo's collection of fables (**Fig. 3**).

2. Moths and Flames into Words and Images

A curious version of an emblem of a burning insect is recorded in Paolo Giovio's *Dialogo dell'imprese* (1555), where Hippolita Fioramonda, marchioness of Scaldasole in Pavia, is said to have worn a sky-blue satin dress embroidered with golden butterflies. This dress was aimed to advise Hippolita's lovers not to get too close to her fire, in the way butterflies usually do, because they would get burnt. Accordingly, the 1562 edition of the treatise shows an illustration of a moth that flies toward a candle as a way to represent excessive passion, or *amor soverchio* – as the scroll says “così vivo piacere conduce a morte”¹⁰ (such intense pleasure leads to death) (**Fig. 4**). The theme and composition of Giovio's emblem and its re-elaboration found in other emblem treatises, such as Camillo Camilli's *Imprese illustri* (1586), strikingly recall Leonardo's sketch of the burning insect from the Royal Collection of Windsor (**Fig. 5**)¹¹. Furthermore, Leonardo writes two fables focu-

Space, Florence University of the Arts – Stony Brook University Conference Proceedings (Florence, November 30–December 1, 2018), Firenze, Florence University of the Arts, 2019, pp. 17-28; Eadem, *The Digital Reconstruction of Leonardo's Library: Revealing Formal Patterns in Early Modern Thought*, in *Special Issue on “Digital Humanities for Academic and Curatorial Practice”*, “Studies in Digital Heritage”, III (2019), 2, pp.128-143; Eadem, *Da Alberti a Leonardo: araldica e imprese*, in *Araldica in periferia, stemmi di frontiera: luoghi, situazioni, contenuti*, in *II International Heraldic Conference Proceedings (Palazzo Pretorio, Buggiano Castello, October 5, 2019)* (forthcoming).

- 10 Cf. P. Giovio, *Dialogo dell'imprese*, cit., pp. 12-13; Idem, *Le sententiose imprese di monsignor Paolo Giovio, et del signor Gabriel Symeoni, ridotte in rima per il detto Symeoni*, Lione, Guglielmo Roviglio, 1562, p. 25. See also G. Ruscelli, *Le imprese illustri con espositioni, et discorsi del s.or Ieronimo Ruscelli*, Venezia, Francesco Rampazetto, 1566, pp. 494-496; S. Bargagli, *Dell'imprese*, Venezia, Francesco de' Franceschi, 1594, pp. 125-127; M. Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth Century Imagery*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1974, pp. 93-94; C. Vecce, *La parola e l'icona*, cit., p. 177; G. Arbizzoni, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
- 11 Cf. C. Camilli, *Imprese illustri di diversi, co' discorsi di Camillo Camilli, et con le figure intagliate in rame di Girolamo Porro padovano*, 3 voll., Venezia, Fran-

sing on the motif of the moth and the candle – which appears to be studied, such as in the case of the lily, by means of both literary and visual formats.

In fable 40 (Codex Atlanticus, c. 692r), Leonardo transforms his scientific observations on the flight of the moth into a brilliant literary description. This long and dialogic text shows the moth tracing various circles in the air and repeatedly flying toward the light up until it gets burnt:

Andando il dipinto parpaglione vagabundo, e discorrendo per la oscurata aria, li venne visto un lume, al quale subito si dirizzò, e, con vari circoli quello attorniano, forte si maravigliò di tanta splendida bellezza, e non istando contento solamente al vederlo, si mise innanzi per fare di quello come delli odoriferi fiori fare solia. E, dirizzato suo volo, con ardito animo passò per esso lume, el quale gli consumò li stremi delle alie e gambe e altri ornamenti. E caduto a' piè di quello, con ammirazione considerava esso caso donde intervenuto fussi, non li potendo entrare nell'animo che da sì bella cosa male o danno alcuno intervenire potessi. E restaurato alquanto le mancate forze, riprese un altro volo, e, passato attraverso del corpo d'esso lume, cadde subito bruciato nell'olio che esso lume notria, e restogli solamente tanta vita, che potè considerare la cagion del suo danno, dicendo a quello: "O maledetta luce, io mi credevo avere in te trovato la mia felicità; io piango indarno il mio matto desiderio, e con mio danno ho conosciuto la tua consumatrice e dannosa natura". Alla quale il lume rispose: "Così fo io a chi ben non mi sa usare". E immediate ito al fondo finì sua vita.

Detta per quelli i quali, veduti dinanzi a sé questi lascivi e mondani piaceri, a similitudine del parpaglione, a quelli corrano, senza considerare la natura di quelli; i quali, da essi omini, dopo lunga usanza, con loro vergogna e danno conosciuti sono.¹²

The moth is a colorful and idle wanderer who suddenly sees a lamp and is impressed by its splendid beauty. Therefore, it directs its course towards the light – note the repetition of words focusing on direction (*dirizzò; dirizzato*), which we also find in Leonardo's studies on the moth's flight (Manuscript G, cc. 64v-65r: *moto diritto; moto recto*). The insect badly (*con ardito animo*) flies three times into the light's beam even after its wings, legs, and ornaments get consumed. In the final dialogue, the moth's tragic death

cesco Ziletti, 1586, vol. III, pp. 27-29. An earlier version of the emblem of the moth and the candle can be found in Gilles Corrozet's *Hecatomgraphie*, Paris, Denis Janot, 1540, p. L2v.

12 Leonardo da Vinci, *Favole*, in Idem, *Favole e profezie*, cit., n. 40, p. 17. On Leonardo's fables on the moth, see also L. Fuccia, *Quando Leonardo dipinge le farfalle. Alcune note sulle qualità pittoriche delle favole di Leonardo*, in F. Dubard de Guillaud, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-103.

is motivated by its persistence in using the light inappropriately, and not considering the lamp's true nature.

The moth appears again in Leonardo's fable 25 (Codex Atlanticus, c. 187r), which differs from the previous one for its condensed format and evocative final monologue:

Non si contentando il vano e vagabondo parpaglione di potere comodamente volare per l'aria, vinto dalla dilettevole fiamma della candela, diliberò di volare in quella; e 'l suo giocondo movimento fu cagione di subita tristizia; imperò che 'n detto lume si consumarono le sottile ali, e 'l parpaglione misero, caduto tutto brusato a piè del candellieri, dopo molto pianto e pentimento, si rasciugò le lacrime dai bagnati occhi, e levato il viso in alto disse: "O falsa luce, quanti come me debbi tu avere, ne' passati tempi, avere miserabilmente ingannati. O si pure volevo vedere la luce, non dovev'io conoscere il sole dal falso lume dello spurco sevo?"¹³

The fable's incipit *non si contentando* (no longer content) immediately proclaims the moth's fault in not accepting its natural condition. The adjective *vagabondo* (vagrant), already used in the other version (*vagabundo*) is here accompanied by *vano* (vain), which substitutes the attribute *dipinto* (colorful) and better defines the insect's naïveté. Leonardo greatly simplifies the setting and focuses on the insect's characterization: in realizing its cruel fate, the moth's playful attitude is dispelled by a sudden sadness (*subita tristizia*) and tears stream down its face. The fable concludes with the moth's tragic monologue in front of a now silent and "false" light (instead of "cursed", as in fable 40)¹⁴.

The longer version of fable 40 seems more elaborate in style and structure – it uses dialogue and is followed by an explanatory moral, though it unfolds into details of scientific exactitude and literary repetitions that slow down the rhythm of the prose. However, in the short version of fable 25, the final description of the miserable moth in tears displays a particularly poignant dramatization. Here, the insect looks up into the sky like a tragic hero invoking the silent Gods – the true sun hidden in the false candlelight. In this way, the moth signifies the desire of dissolution that is part of every being. The moth's tragedy becomes the tragedy of human ignorance: light is made for contemplation, and not for possession.

13 Leonardo da Vinci, *Favole*, in Idem, *Favole e profezie*, cit., n. 25, p. 12.

14 Cf. D. Marsh, *op. cit.*, pp. 296-297, 308-309.

Intriguingly, in his magnificent writing on natural laws recorded on Codex Arundel (c. 156v), Leonardo juxtaposes the moth's desire to reach the light with the human aspiration to know the truth, as he does in fable 25:

Or vedi, la speranza e 'l desiderio del rimpatriarsi e ritornare nel primo caos fa a similitudine de la farfalla a' lume dell'uomo, che con continui desiderii sempre con festa aspetta la nuova primavera, sempre la nuova istate, sempre e nuovi mesi e nuovi anni, parendogli che le desiderate cose, venendo, sieno troppo tarde. E non s'avvede che desidera la sua disfazione. Ma questo desiderio è in quella quintessenza spirito degli elementi, che, trovandosi rinchiusa per anima dello umano corpo, desidera sempre ritornare al suo mandatario. E vo' che sappi che questo medesimo desiderio è 'n quella quinta essenza compagnia della natura, e l'uomo è modello del mondo.¹⁵

This human-animal desire to return to the “original chaos” represents, according to Leonardo, every creature's endeavor to go back to their origins, that is, their yearning to understand and reach the Nature that created them. Wishing to know the light means assimilating to Nature: this leads to dramatic outcomes because it implies going beyond natural limits¹⁶.

Leonardo seems to develop the image of the moth and the candle at the core of his fables 40 and 25 in order to gradually reduce its level of description and to complicate the possible layers of interpretation. His process of reasoning includes, once more, an emblematic representation. On a folio dated 1485 and preserved at the Royal Library of Turin (BT 15578v), Leonardo draws a seemingly blind figurine approaching a fire, and then getting burnt by it, apparently surrounded by several little moths (**Fig. 6**)¹⁷. Beside it, he writes:

La cieca ignoranza così ci conduce
e co' l'effetto de' lascivi sollazzi
per non conoscere la vera luce.
Per non conoscere qual sia la vera luce.
Ignoranza:
El vano splendor ci toglie l'essere.
Vedi che per lo splendor nel fuoco andiamo.
Cieca ignoranza in tal modo conduce

15 Leonardo da Vinci, *Scritti*, edited by C. Vecce, Milano, Mursia, 1992, p. 165.

16 Cf. A. Marinoni, *I rebus di Leonardo*, cit., p. 81; C. Vecce, *Leonardo e il 'paragone' della natura*, in *Leonardo da Vinci on Nature: Knowledge and Representation*, edited by F. Frosini and A. Nova, Venezia, Marsilio, 2013, pp. 183-205.

17 Cf. C. Pedretti, *I disegni di Leonardo da Vinci e della sua scuola nella Biblioteca Reale di Torino*, Firenze, Giunti, 1990.

e come cieca ignoranza ci conduce.
O miseri mortali, aprite li occhi.¹⁸

This allegorical notation seems to rework the themes of truth and falsehood that we find in fables 40 and 25. In the Turin allegory, the terms *lascivi sollazzi* (lascivious joys) reenact *lascivi piaceri* (lascivious pleasures) from fable 40, such as *vano splendor* (vain splendor) and *non conoscere la vera luce; non conoscere qual sia la vera luce* (not knowing the true light) reiterated and variate *vano parpaglione* (vain moth), *vedere la luce* (seeing the light), *conoscere il sole* (knowing the sun) and *falsa luce; falso lume* (false light) from fable 25. The allegorical fragment of words and images arguably shows Leonardo's climax in representing the dynamics of knowing the – ultimately unfathomable – laws of Nature¹⁹.

3. Mirror Emblems and Metamorphoses of Forms

The back of the Windsor sheet, where we found the emblems of the lily and the burning insect, also features a mirror in the form of an emblem, which curiously relates to the theme of the “false light.” Here, below a series of geometrical diagrams, Leonardo traces allegorical representations of truth and falsehood of the kind of the Turin allegory (Fig. 7). The cameos' main motif is that of a sinuous female figure, Truth (*verità*), holding the mask of Falsehood (*bugia*) against the sun²⁰. The motif is repeated eleven times; each time it undergoes a slight variation.

The sequence begins on the bottom right of the sheet, where we see a refined sketch of two women holding a mirror against the sun. Their robes fall symmetrically to occupy the two sides of the cameo in a scroll shape, and their bodies are entangled in the manner of the *Saint'Anne and the Virgin* cartoon from the National Gallery, similarly dated (1501-1505). In Leonardo's

18 Cf. C. Vecce, *Scritti*, cit., p. 157; L. Bertolini, *Leonardo poeta*, in *Leonardo da Vinci. Disegnare il futuro*, edited by E. Pagella, F.P. Di Teodoro and P. Salvi, Cinisello Balsamo, Silvana Editoriale, pp. 137-147. I refer to Vecce's transcription, which is revised according to Bertolini; the word *ignoranza* was crossed off by Leonardo.

19 Cf. M. Versiero, “*A similitudine de la farfalla a' lume*” *L'umanesimo scientifico di Leonardo da Vinci*, in *Le lettere. Umanesimo, Storia, Critica, Attualità*, 2016, available at: <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01380909> (accessed on October 16, 2019).

20 Cf. C. Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, New York, Yale University Press, p. 574; Eadem, *Leonardo da Vinci Rediscovered*, cit., pp. 115-118; M. Versiero, *Leonardo in “chiaroscuro”*, cit., pp. 96-98.

re-elaboration of the subject the figures multiply: following the artist's left-handed script from right to left we see groups of three, and then four women.

The first group of figures is accompanied by a passage on fire as the destroyer of falsehood and discoverer of truth:

Il foco è da esser messo per consumatore d'ogni sofisticico, e scopritore e dimostratore di verità, perché lui è luce, scacciatore delle tenebre occultatrici d'ogni essenza.²¹

Moving toward the left of the folio, a light sketch of flames formally similar to that of the Turin allegory surmounts a new cameo in which two faces are covered with a mask, looking toward the left. In the following cameo, Leonardo goes back to the previous composition, directed toward the right. The women spring from a single body, holding their mirror in the shape of a mask that melts when facing the sun. These images are framed by notations that re-elaborate the concepts expressed in the previous text and link falsehood to the image of a mask:

Verità: il sole.

Bugia: maschera.

Innocenzia,
malignità.

Il foco distrugge la bugia, cioè il sofisticico, e rende la verità scacciando le tenebre.

[...]

Verità.

Il foco distrugge ogni sofisticico, cioè lo inganno, e sol mantiene la verità, cioè l'oro.

La verità al fine non si cela, non val simulazione, simulazione è frustrata avanti a tanto giudice.²²

Leonardo studies the position of the women in the sketches scattered around the cameos; then, in the bottom left corner, he draws a mask burning into flames. Finally, we see a beautiful face of a girl that gradually turns into the mask of an ugly old woman, melted by the sun, with the motto: "nulla occulto sotto il sole"²³ (nothing is hidden under the sun).

21 C. Vecce, *Scritti*, cit., p. 156.

22 *Ibidem*.

23 The motto appears beside the following writing: "La bugia mette maschera. [...] Il foco è messo per la verità, perché distrugge ogni sofisticico e bugia, e la maschera per la falsità e bugia, occultatrice del vero" (*ibidem*).

The link between the Turin and the Windsor folios, based on Leonardo's reflection on truth and falsehood, is reinforced by visual correspondences among them – particularly, the sketch of flames on the *recto* of RL 12700 and what we identified as a burning insect on the *verso* of the same folio might both be considered as sketches for an emblem of the moth and the candle, which are derived from the aforementioned fables on the same theme (40 and 25).

The theme of the mask, the sun, and the mirror as representative of the relationship between falsehood and truth, artifice and beauty, is widely documented in emblem treatises and allegorical imagery. For instance, Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593) portrays Falsehood as a young ugly woman adorned with various masks – which denote both the Art of Deceit and Imitation²⁴. The sun, on the contrary, which represents Truth and Clarity, illuminates everything in the world, and, coupled with the mirror, is a symbol of Original Love²⁵. Closer to Leonardo are the emblems of the mirror and the sun documented in Bargagli's treatise, which are similarly associated to the theme of love and considered as the perfect composition of artificial and natural bodies²⁶. For instance, the first of Bargagli's *impresa* on the sun and the mirror depicts sun-rays beaming onto a concave mirror with the motto "splendor unius, alteri ardor"²⁷ (one's shining, the other's burning). This emblem shows that the virtue emanating from a beautiful woman illuminates her lovers' heart, just as the sun-rays reflected in the mirror light up the fire.

The theme of looking into the mirror is also found in one of Leonardo's fables, recorded on folio 44v from Codex Forster III:

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- 24 C. Ripa, *Iconologia*, Venezia, Cristoforo Tomasini, 1645, pp. 11, 40. The mask also appears to represent Loyalty, and Death (ivi, pp. 49, 53). Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* is an extremely successful allegorical dictionary of virtues, arts, and parts of the world that was first published in Rome in 1593. Cf. Rune Pettersson, *Renaissance Emblem Books*, in "Journal of Visual Literacy", XXXVI (2017), 2, pp. 77-89.
- 25 C. Ripa, *op. cit.*, pp. 13, 78, 54. The mirror is the tool of the ignorant to represent Satisfaction or Gratification, and that of *disegno* to signify artistic imagination; together with a square and a compass is used to illustrate Perfect Work; with an arrow, to symbolize Prudence; with a triangle, to denote Science (ivi, pp. 18, 24, 57, 63, 67).
- 26 S. Bargagli, *op. cit.*, pp. 342-344.
- 27 The second *impresa* shows a sun reflected into a mirror with the motto "receptum exhibit" (it displays a devotion), meaning that love rules the lover's actions because the effigy of his beloved is carved in his heart (ivi, 394-396).

Lo specchio si gloria forte tenendo dentro a sé specchiata la regina e, partita quella, lo specchio riman vile.²⁸

In the fable, the mirror claims ownership of the queen, which is revealed to be only a mere reflection – an illusion of beauty, just as the one depicted in the emblems.

According to Carlo Vecce, this is the same mirror mentioned by Leonardo in one of his later texts modelled on Ovid's *Metamorphosis*²⁹ (Codex Atlanticus, c. 195r):

Elena, quando si specchiava, vedendo le vizzate grinze del suo viso fatte per la vecchiezza, piagne e pensa seco perché fu rapita du' volte.³⁰

In a play of literary associations, the double kidnapping of Elena (by Theseus, when she was twelve, and then by Paris, at the outbreak of the Trojan war) might be connected to her disappearance in the fable. Furthermore, this text refers to the metamorphosis of the queen's physical traits – that is, the grotesque transformation of an angelic face into a caricature mask, due to the passing of time. Curiously, in Forster III, a few pages after the fable of the mirror (c. 72r), we find precisely a caricature of an ugly old woman, labelled with the Petrarchan verse: “cosa bella mortal passa e non dura” (beautiful mortal thing passes and does not last) (Fig. 8)³¹.

In the emblematic sketches from the Windsor drawing, we witness a transformation of the same kind: from the octagon to the circle, from the square to the pyramid, and from the queen to the mask. Leonardo might have drawn this transformational method directly from Ovid:

E la natura rinnovatrice delle cose rende dall'altre cose altre figure: e credetemi, che niuna cosa perisce nel mondo, ma isvariasi, e rinnova la faccia: e chiamasi nascere lo incominciare ad essere altro che quello che fu prima; e chiama-

28 Leonardo da Vinci, *Favole*, in Idem, *Favole e profezie*, cit., n. 6, p. 6.

29 Romano Nanni identified the Ovidian edition that Leonardo probably had at his disposal in Arrigo Semintendi's vernacular translation (ca. 1330). Cf. R. Nanni, *Ovidio Metamorfoseos*, in “Letteratura italiana antica”, III (2002), pp. 375-402; C. Vecce, *Leonardo e il 'paragone'*, cit., pp. 188-198.

30 Here is the original text by Semintendi: “Elena, quando ha vedute nello specchio le vizzate del suo volto, fatte per la vecchiezza, piagne, e pensa seco perch'ella fu presa due volte.” *Gli ultimi cinque libri delle Metamorfosi d'Ovidio volgarizzati da ser Arrigo Simintendi da Prato*, Prato, Ranieri Guasti, 1850, p. 217.

31 Cf. Petrarch, *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, CCXLVIII, v. 8.



si morire il finire d'essere quello che era prima; con ciò sia cosa che forse quelli elementi sieno tramutati qua, e questi colà; ma pure stanno fermi nel loro stato.³²

The geometrical diagrams on the Windsor folio are attempts at squaring the circle and calculating the height of the pyramid, which anticipate the allegorical drawings and recur in proximity to fables and emblems of various kinds³³. Ultimately, Leonardo's diagrams, fables, and emblems share recurrent textual and visual motifs which outline the beginning and the end of an event (or a form) and testify to Leonardo's cyclical attempt – scientific, literary, and artistic – to reach the “true” representation of Nature³⁴.

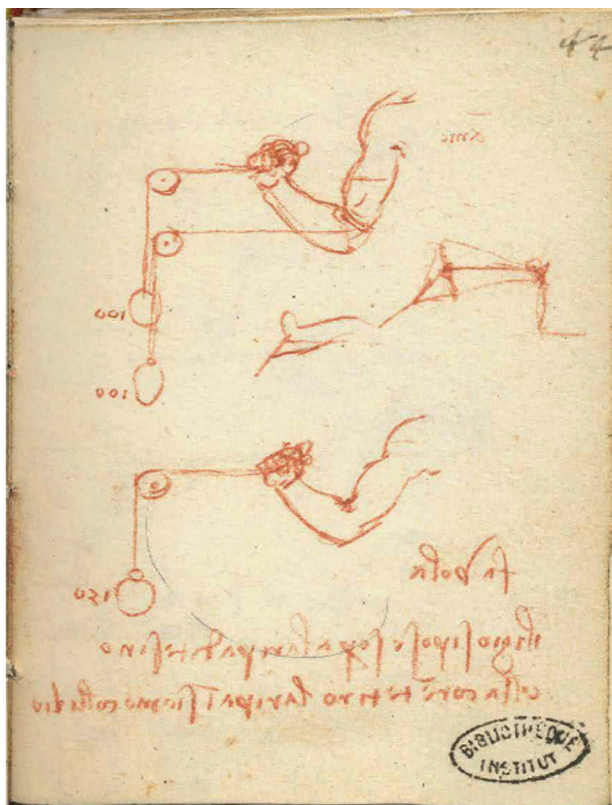


32 *Gli ultimi cinque libri*, cit., p. 217; Vecce, *Leonardo e il 'paragone'*, cit., p. 202.

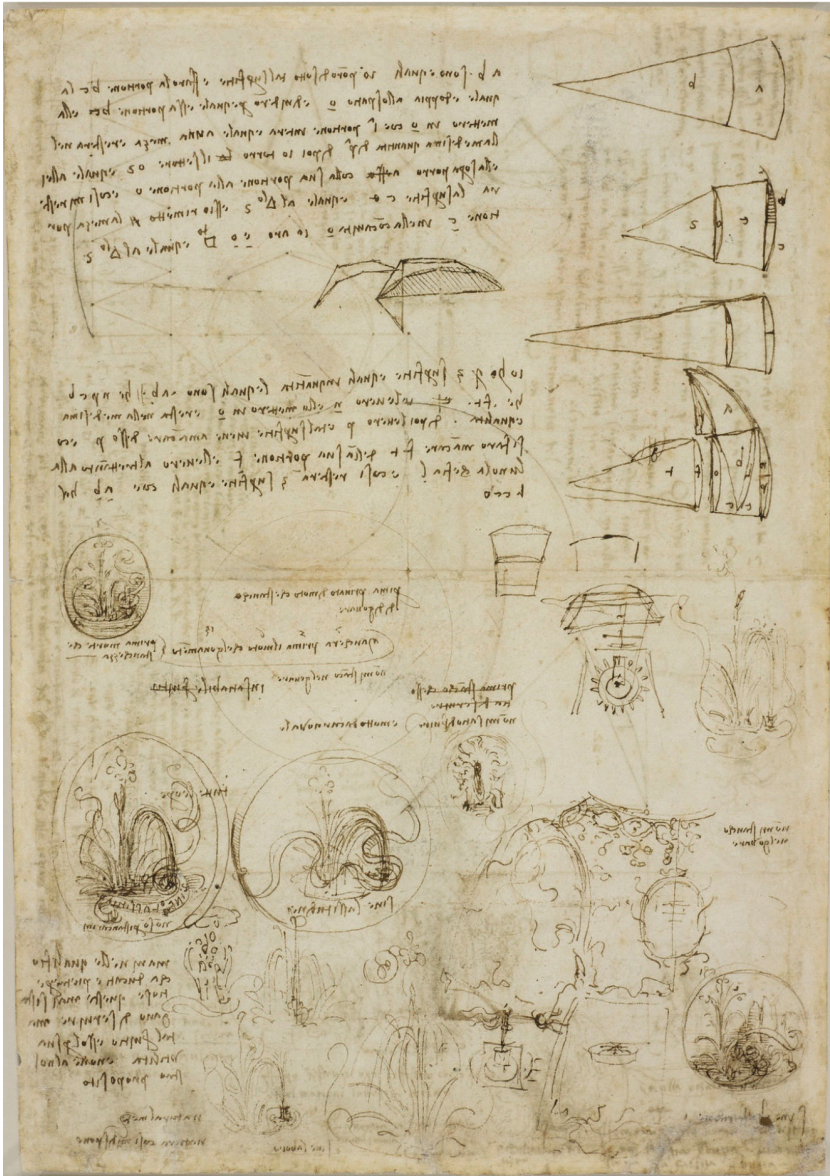
33 Cf. Bambach, *Leonardo da Vinci: Master Draftsman*, cit., p. 574.

34 See Halliwell, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-33.

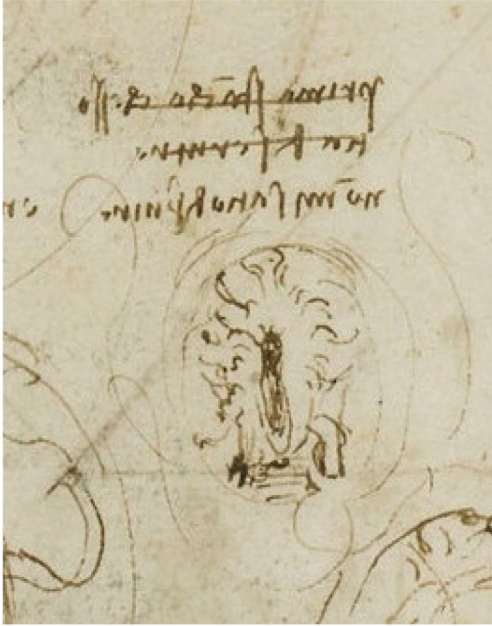




1. Leonardo da Vinci, *The fable of the lily*, Manuscript H, c. 44r. 1493-1494.
Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France.



2. Leonardo da Vinci, *The emblem of the lily*, RL 12,700v. 1508-1510. Windsor, Royal Collection Trust.



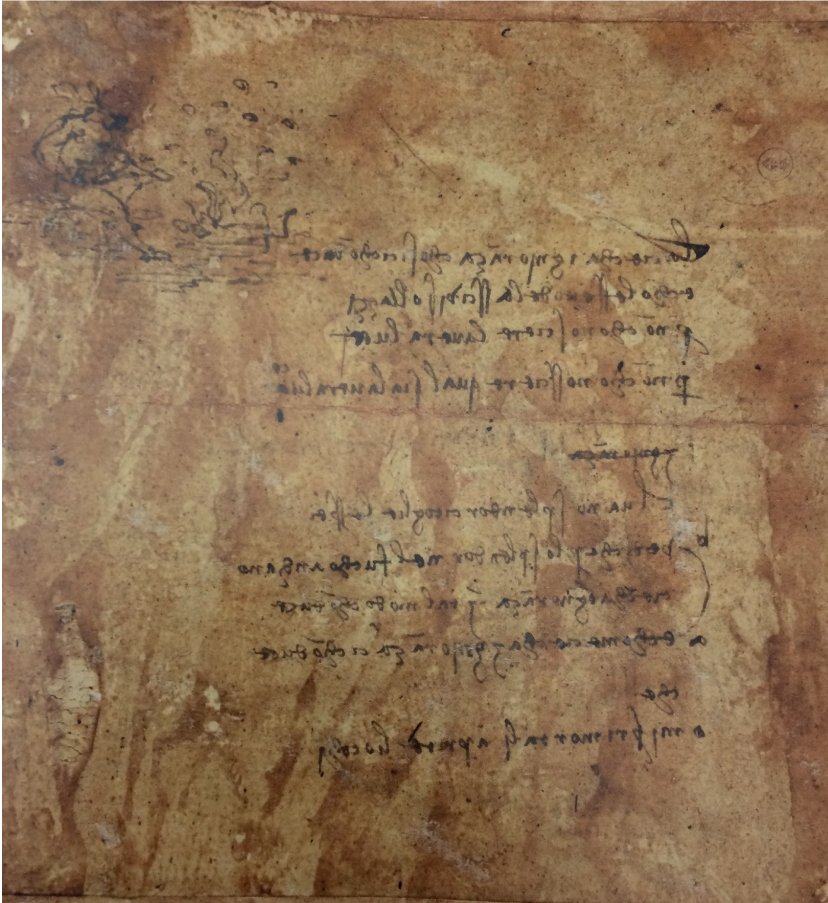
3. Leonardo da Vinci,
A burning insect, detail, RL
12,700v. 1508-1510. Windsor,
Royal Collection Trust.



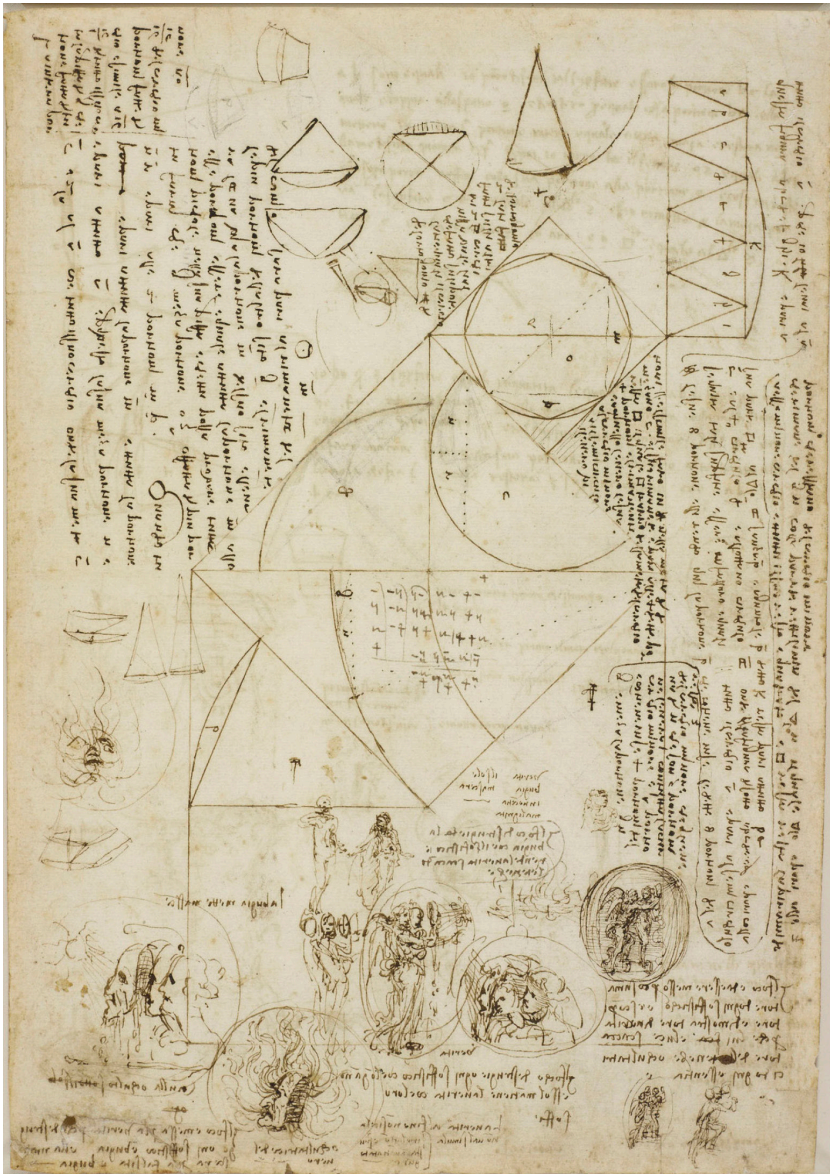
4. Paolo Giovio, *The emblem of the
moth and the candle*, *Dialogo
dell'imprese*, 1562. Paris, Bibliothèque
de l'Institut de France.



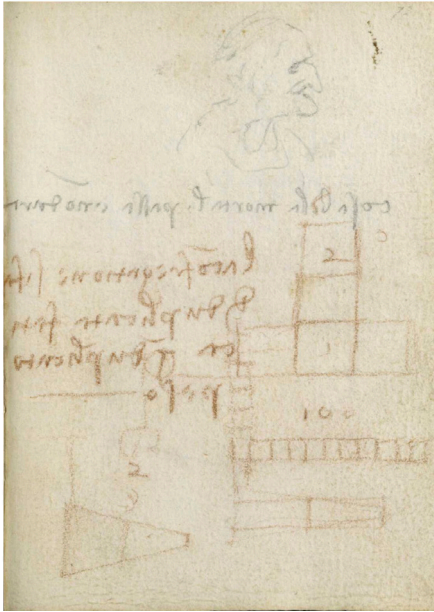
5. Camillo Camilli, *The emblem of the
moth and the candle*, *Imprese illustri*,
1586. London, Warburg Institute.



6. Leonardo da Vinci, *The allegory of the moth and the candle*, BT 15578v. ca 1485. Turin, Biblioteca Reale.



7. Leonardo da Vinci, *The emblem of the mirror*, RL 12,700v. 1508-1510. Windsor, Royal Collection Trust.



8. Leonardo da Vinci, *Caricature of an old woman*, Codex Forster III, c. 72r. 1487-1497. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.