Analysing Shakespeare’s Emblem Language in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*

Erdal AYAN  
Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey

Shakespeare has been studied from many perspectives so far. However, his language style used in his literary works is still worth studying. First of all, this study explores changing sense of emblem and emblem language comparing Shakespeare’s era and today. Secondly, it puts stress on the effects of emblem traditions on Shakespeare. Lastly, this article aims to shed light on his emblematical language in his *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which is one of his most leading works in terms of having highly visible emblematical interpretations.

*Keywords:* Shakespeare, emblems, emblem language, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*

**Introduction**

Language is a particular communication system of speech and writing. Language is not only the representation of sounds, but also the act of transmitting meaningful expressions via words. And so it is the priority of literary language (prose or poem) to convey imitation of the facts in writing. In this regard, Addison (1712) notes that:

> Words, when well chosen, have so great force in them that a description often gives us more lively ideas than the sight of things themselves. The reader finds a scene drawn in stronger colours and painted more to life in his imagination by the help of words than by an actual survey of scene which they describe. In this case the poet seems to get the better of nature; he takes, indeed, the landscape after her but gives it more vigorous touches, heightens its beauty, and so enlivens the whole piece that the images which flow from objects themselves appear weak and faint in comparison of those that come from the expression. (as cited in Mitchell, 1984, pp. 514-515)

Shakespeare’s language in his *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is not different from Addison’s hypothesis since Shakespeare evidently chooses vocabularies referring to visual themes and subjects. Therefore, our mind and imagination are moved by means of metaphors, symbols and myths. All these are doubtlessly particularities of his figurative language. This style serves to a purpose in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, that is, it represents images, symbols and emblematic expressions or interpretations. In this sense, my paper will discuss that these particularities are not only the visual or verbal images, but also they serve as an emblematical language, referring to emblems, inscribed before and during his day, and represent stories belonging to mythology.

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Erdal Ayan, Master of Science Student, Department of Computer Education and Instructional Technology, Hacettepe University.
An emblem is not merely an image or a symbol; it includes both of them and, on the other hand, refers much more than these two. In this point a question arises; what is an emblem and what is an image? First of all, therefore, I will try to clarify the meaning of the term, emblem, by touching on the basic elements of it.

Emblems were broadly employed by Shakespeare’s contemporaries in 15th and 16th centuries. They were potentially influenced by the previous literary traditions. Besides, they were inevitably inspired by their contemporaries and so depicted different and similar particularities of the same facts while using emblematical interpretations in their works. So, secondly, Emblem traditions of Shakespeare’s age will be explored and this chapter will look for certain parallelisms between Shakespeare’s works and his contemporaries’ works.

Midsummer Night’s Dream is one of Shakespeare’s works, which included major interpretations in the value of emblem. These emblems are absolutely worth mentioning in terms of focusing on Shakespeare’s emblematical language. That enables easier understanding of his style for the readers. Lastly, I will mention about the emblematical expressions represented in Midsummer Night’s Dream.

Image and Emblem

An image is a representation of an object or an idea. Image is considered as a kind of language because every image conveys a meaning. Fabiny (1984), for instance, writes that “it is not only a mental picture, a description of visible objects and scenes but we can also speak of auditory and other sensory images and the term imager in general is used to signify figurative language, especially the vehicles of metaphors and similes” (p. 13). There are various images, used under different names both in literature and social sciences (see Figure 1). Mitchell (1984) has shown that these images belong to different areas; namely, mental imagery is part of psychology and epistemology, while optical imagery belongs to physics (p. 505). Graphical and verbal images are, on the other hand, related to the art, history and the literary critics.

Emblem is simply the representations of word and picture together. This fact referred different meanings from time to time. Today, it, of course, means a different fact. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, for example, writes that “[emblem is] a design or picture that represents a country or an organization” (p. 377), whereas it had a different significance in ancient times unlike the one used today. In Greek, for instance, emblem meant “insertion” and “grafting”, while amounted to “inlaid work” or “a mosaic” in Latin (Shapiro, 1990, p. 208).

Beyond its basic meaning, the approaches to the idea of emblem also changed within time. Thomson (1924) defined emblem as “a combination of motto, picture, and short poem, used collectively to expound some
moral or ethical truth” (as cited in Fabiny, 1984, p. 28) for instance, Jons (1966) added that “the emblem is the genre where representation and interpretation coincide involving both description and explanation” (as cited in Fabiny, 1984, p. 28). On the other hand, Lewalski (1979) thought that “Emblems—curious amalgams of picture, motto and poem—are minor literary kind which contributed significantly to the theories about, and particular formation of poetic language and symbolism in the 17th century religious lyric” (as cited in Fabiny, 1984, p. 28).

Today, researchers agree on that emblems compose of three parts; incriptio, pictura and subscriptio\(^1\) (Shapiro, 1990, p. 208). The incriptio refers to a “motto” which is introducing the emblem and placed above the pictura. The pictura is an object, person or event, pictured. Subscriptio is a prose or verse placed generally under the pictura (see Figure 2). The incriptio and subscriptio are, generally, named as scriptura. It is not necessary for the emblems to include all these cited elements together since “some of the earliest emblems were only verbal; the firstly printed editions of Andrea Alciati’s\(^2\) Emblemam Liber (1531) only had cuts added by the publisher to the author’s manuscript, and the influential Iconologia of Cesare Ripa\(^3\) (1593) appeared without illustrations”. However, picture or pictura was regarded as the most important component of this combination among Renaissance writers (Russell, 1975, p. 343).

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1 These notions belong to the historical-chronological method of Daly’s Emblem Theory.
2 Andrea Alciati is one of the best known emblem writers; he used the term emlemata, when he compiled his book of epigrams in 1531.
3 Cesare Ripa is the pioneer of iconology and his Iconologia, huge encyclopaedia of symbols and mythology, a great renaissance repository of allegorical information, was first published in Rome in 1593 and with illustrations in 1603.
Emblem and image have different functions despite the similarities between their characteristics. In 1489, Pico della Mirandolla, for example, illustrates that “the picture [image] is a form of revelation, an incarnation of the word [...] by serving as a kind of vision lures and thrusts the viewer to meditating on truths” (as cited in Fabiny, 1984, p. 17). Emblem, basically, functions in the same way; however, it addresses a different notion from a simple image or picture. In this regard, I agree with Philip Wheelwright (1968) drawing a line between these two notions and defining image as “creative” while naming emblem as “interpretive” (Fabiny, 1984, p. 16). Emblem is “interpretive” because it includes the morals and stories referring a certain event, but image is “creative” since it can make people think in various ways when they see it in different times; it is shortly open to discussion.

Emblem Tradition in Renaissance

It is considered that Renaissance⁴ is an emblem-book literature since the usages of the emblematical expressions were commonly used by literary people, who were well known as emblem writers today (Green, 1869, p. 30). They visually pictured an event, object or idea in an artistic way. They had certain “basic aesthetic principles” and used such common disciplines as “imitation of action”, “verisimilitude”, or “decorum” (Fabiny, 1984, p. 25). The statistics by Henry Green demonstrates that this traditional literature was as common as any other literary genres of the time (see Figure 3). In this sense, a question arises; what are the reasons for the authors to use these emblems in their work of art? Green (1869) argues that “In England […] there were eminent lovers of the emblem literature” (p. 122). However, this claim cannot illustrate this condition alone. Literary historians, on the other hand, agree that Renaissance poets and writers inherited mythological traditions. Therefore, “the literary culture and traditions of Middle Ages continued to serve throughout the sixteenth century literary figures” (Schmitt, 2003, p. 11; see also Fabiny, 1984, p. 25). Then it is highly probable that this inheritance became a crucial factor for continuation and transformation of the emblem tradition. Hence, we encounter many mythological figures Renaissance writers such as Christopher Marlowe. In his Hero and Leander, he (1593), for example, writes that:

> Whom young Apollo⁵ courted for the hair,
> And offered as a dower his burning throne,
> […]
> Where Venus⁶ in her naked glory strove,
> To please the careless and disdainfull eyes,
> Of proud Adonis⁷ that before her lies. (as cited in Bowers, 1981, p. 431)

As one can notice the mythological heroes and heroines are dominantly characterized in his work.

In addition to these two factors, Fabiny (1984) notes that “the Renaissance was permeated by an enthusiastic interest for ancient hieroglyphics” (p. 13). It is regarded that Cesare Ripa’s Iconologia played a notable role on this; in this concern, Biastocki expresses that “with the publication of Ripa’s work... the humanist system of allegorical iconography was established: classical gods and personifications, hieroglyphic

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⁴ For further information see Green, 1869, p. 30ff.
⁵ An Olympian god, son of Zeus and Leto and brother of Artemis.
⁶ A very ancient Latin divinity who had a shrine near Ardea which was established before the foundation of Rome. In the second century B.C. she was assimilated into the legend of the Greek Aphrodite.
⁷ A Greek hero of Syrian origin.
signs and emblems, connecting words and images: this was the material used by the artists of mannerism and the baroque” (as cited in Fabiny, 1984, p. 22).

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**Figure 3.** Emblem Writers and Emblem Books in Latin and in English in 16th and 17th centuries.  
Source: Adapted from Green, 1869, pp. 88-99.
All these factors predominantly affect Shakespeare and enable him to imitate similar particulars of emblem works of the writers. Green (1869) announces that:

Here and there in Shakespeare’s works, even from the way in which sayings and mottoes, in Spanish, as well as in French, and Latin, are employed, we have indications that he had seen and, it may be, had studied some of the Emblem writers of his day, and participated of their spirit. (p. 137)

To some extent, this hypothesis is absolutely correct because one can encounter the similarities which I will also cite in this paper. However, it lacks of a crucial point that is unique to Shakespeare’s way of thinking and imagination; Shakespeare combines his poetic language with the emblems instead of directly applying just one of them. In this regard, I agree with Fabiny (1984) suggesting that “when Shakespeare turns to the book of the emblem-writers he does not consider them as simple sources or repositories of his imagery but via the emblem he immerses himself in the same phase of the language: the ‘proto-language’ of poetry” (p. 33).

**Shakespeare and Emblem**

As cited before emblem is an art of combining word and picture in the same sphere, which refers to a message. Shakespeare uses just words to embody his characters and to display the scenes. Therefore, his figurative language is regarded emblematic, even though Shakespeare did not picture directly an emblem or any visual drawing in his work. It is considered that Shakespeare, actually, employs Horace’s dictum; *ut pictura poesis, “as is painting so is poetry”* or vice versa “as is poetry so is painting”; that is, he transforms metaphors and similes into forms of imaginary pictures (Fabiny, 1984, p. 17). In the light of this assumption, Shakespeare, in the following lines, unites two worlds and emblematizes them as male and female figures belonging to different worlds (see Figure 4):

**Theseus:**

Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name. (Act V., Scene I., p. 231)

![Figure 4. Opus Alchymicum. Source: Adapted from Fabiny, 1984, p. 391.](image-url)
Shakespeare is regarded as an emblem writer but, unlike real emblem writers, he exercises his own emblem language without *pictura* and *inscriptio*. A question arises in this point; how did he compile such kind of knowledge before or during writing his works? Green (1869) exclaims that “[…] Shakespeare knew very well what Emblems were. And surely he had seen, in some degree studied, various portions of the Emblem literature which was anterior to, or contemporary with himself” (p. 155). Green’s claim is logical, since there are similar emblematical descriptions and references to the similar mythological figures, for instance, between Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Both of them include such mythological and emblematical figures as *Theseus* and *Hippolyta*. Chaucer (1387-1392) writes:

```plaintext
I wolde have told yow fully the manere
How wonnen was the regne of Femenye
By Theseus and his chivalrye;
And of the grete bataille for the nones
Bitwixen Athenes and Amazones;
And how assed was Ypolyta. (Chaucer’s The Knight’s Tale, as cited in Burgess, 1990, p. 37)
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Shakespeare (1594-1597) also writes that:

*Theseus*:

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Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
Draws on apace; four happy days bring in
(Act I., Scene I., p. 131)
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Shakespeare exercises this emblematical language because “emblems reduce intellectual conceptions to sensible images, […] which is sensible more forcibly strikes the memory and is more easily imprinted on it […]” (Francis Bacon, 1623, as cited in Fabiny, 1984, p. 32). From this perspective, his style displays the characteristics of an emblematical language, since Shakespeare uses them as means. This language corroborates the hypothesis of “play in the play” which is attributed to the act of Pyramuss and Thisbe, as well. On the other hand, it is, of course, difficult to say that he knew all the literary properties of his own era in terms of emblematic usages but he was quite sure what he referred to, as Wheelwright notes “it is impossible to be sure how much of the archetypal [emblematic] meaning Shakespeare and the audience for whom he wrote were aware of, but I should think a good deal” (as cited in Fabiny, 1984, p. 16).

**Emblematical Expressions and Interpretations in *Midsummer Night’s Dream***

Shakespeare’s style has always been one of the common discussion points of the intellectuals. Heckster (1970), for instance, puts forward two theses about Shakespeare’s style:

(a) Shakespeare had a way of alluding to very real works of art in vaguely hinting references.
(b) Shakespeare described in minute detail works of art which existed in his imagination.”

(as cited in Fabiny, 1984, p. 27)

One can admit that the second choice is logical for Shakespeare; however, the parallelisms between the recorded works of his anteriors or contemporaries and his plays, mislead this choice. In this sense, Bradbrook (1951) records that “he [Shakespeare] learned and built on the work of his predecessors, yet the influence is generally so indirectly perceptible that we cannot often say with confidence ‘Here is a trace of Marlowe: here of Spenser: here of Kyd’” (as cited in Hussey, 1992, p. 38). Henry Green’s findings, to a certain extent, defend
the idea of Bradbrook, and confirm the first choice since Green’s (1869) emblem research illuminates that Shakespeare was inspired by the emblem writers of his day but it does not mean that he copied all these. Shakespeare makes much more than this, since his figurative language both visualizes and conveys all the stories behind these emblems, as well. This proves that Shakespeare was aware of both emblems and mythological background of this art.

In Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, emblem-like delineations and descriptions play an important role in his personifications and building relations between these interpretations and the mythological myths and figures. While referring to all these, I will cite some parts from the story and mythology; however, I will not go into details of the whole story and character analyses.

(a) Mythological Figures: *Theseus* and *Hippolyta*

In the very first scene of the play we encounter two mythological figures, *Theseus* and *Hippolyta*. In mythology, *Theseus*, the national hero of Athens, is son of Aegeus, king of Athens. He shows much heroism in his overseas adventures. In one of his most famous adventures, he fights against Amazons and captures the Queen of Amazons, *Hippolyta* or *Antiopa*. Amazons are warrior women nation who ruled in the north. They are reigned by the Queen, *Hippolyta*. It is also claimed that they were the allies of Trojans in Trojan War. Later, *Theseus* married her and *Hippolyta* gave him a son, *Hippolytus*. It is apparent that the play represents the parallel figures with the mythological heroes and heroines but beyond this, Shakespeare draws detailed descriptions of the stories of the characters in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The play begins with *Theseus’* addressing to *Hippolyta*:

> Go, Philostrate,  
> Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments.  
> Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth.  
> Turn melancholy forth to funerals-  
> The pale companion is not for our pomp.  
> […]  
> *Hippolyta*, I wooed thee with my sword,  
> And won thy love doing thee injuries.  
> But I will wed thee in another key-  
> With Pomp, with triumph, and with revelling. (Act I., Scene I., p. 133)

In these cited lines, *Theseus* is emblematized as an ideal ruler “with [his] sword” for both *Hippolyta* and his nation. The sword is one of the commonly used emblems in Renaissance; it might be attributed to the symbol of power and domination (see Figure 5).

(b) *Lysander* and *Hermia*

The second significant scene in terms of emblematic representation is mentioned after *Egeus’* complaints about his daughter to *Theseus* and his will of *Hermia’*s marriage to *Demetrius*. Upon this, *Lysander* and *Hermia* flee to wood. At night, *Hermia* suggests sleeping in separate places, and *Lysander* accepts:

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8 Further information see Miles, 1999, p. 49.
Hermia:

Nay, good Lysander, for my sake, my dear,
Lie further off yet, do not lie so near.
[…]

Lysander:

Amen, amen, to that fair prayer, say I;
And then end life when I end loyalty!
Here is my bed: sleep give thee all his rest!
He lies down apart. (Act II., Scene II., pp. 172-173)

Figure 5. Pegas. Source: Adapted from Green, 1869, p. 142.

In this scene, Lysander is reflected as the second mythological figure in Midsummer Night’s Dream. Historians agree that he was the son of Aristokleitus in mythology. He joins many wars and becomes a well-known figure with his “bravery” and “modesty” in mythology (Stewart, People, Places & Things: Lysander).
In the quoted lines, Lysander, Hermia’s lover, proves his “loyalty” to her as a parallel characteristic with Lysander who is a mythological figure. His “bravery”, on the other hand, is emblematized by Hermia’s cries. Hermia sees a snake or serpent in her dream and calls her lover:

Hermia:

> Help me, Lysander, help me! Do thy best To pluck this crowling serpent from my breast.
> Ay me, for pity. What a dream was here?
> Lysander, look how I do quake with fear. (Act II., Scene II., p. 177)

According to Henry Green this scene is also emblematized Freitag’s emblem of Countryman and the Viper (p. 197) (see Figure 6). Furthermore, Green informs that Nicolas Reusner (1581) has a similar one and its fable records a similar story with Hermia’s:

> A snake worn out with cold a rustic found,
> And cherished in his breast doth rashly warm;
> Thankless the snake inflicts a fatal wound,
> And life restored requites with deadly harm. (as cited in Green, 1869, p. 198)

Figure 6. Countryman and Viper. Source: Adapted from Green, 1869, p. 197.

Helena and Demetrius follow Lysander and Hermia; they also arrive in the wood. Helena loves Demetrius but Demetrius aims at getting his ex-lover, Hermia’s heart and, therefore, he wants Helena to give up coming after him. In this scene, Daphne’s story is embodied in Helena’s utter ances:
Helena:

The wildest hath not such a heart as you.
Run when you will, the story shall be changed:
Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase;
The dove pursues the griffin; the mild hind Makes speed to catch the tiger; bootless speed,
When cowardice pursues and valour flies. (Act II., Scene I., p. 167)

*Daphne* is a *Nymph* (her name means “laurel” in Greek) and *Apollo*, a well known Greek god, is in love with her. *Daphne* runs away to the mountains and she begs to be transformed in order to escape from *Apollo*, and she becomes a tree, “laurel” (Grimal, 1986, p. 119). Green (1869) claims that this event is represented in Aneaus’s (1549) emblem (p. 296) (see Figure 7). In its *subscriptio*, it is noted that:

He loves, she hates; she flees, but he pursues,
And while she flees, stopped suddenly, to laurel changed.
So loves Apollo, and in vain; nor enjoys his love.
So love has avenged the reproach of Apollo. (as cited in Green, 1869, p. 296)

While *Lysander* is sleeping, *Puck* drops the magical juice on *Lysander* eyelids. When *Lysander* wakes up, he sees *Helena* and falls in love with her at first sight. *Helena* gets shocked. After *Puck’s* tricks on *Lysander*, *Oberon* wants to take control of the events and he puts the same juice on *Demetrius’s* eyes, when he falls asleep. When *Demetrius* gets up, he sees *Helena*. He also falls in love with her. This causes a quarrel between them.

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9 A spirit of nature envisaged as a beautiful maiden.
and therefore, Lysander and Demetrius come up against each other, and another snake or serpent is emblematized in this scene:

Demetrius:

No, no; he’ll …
Seem to break loose; take on as you would follow,
But yet come not: you are a tame man, go!
Lysander:
Hang off, thou cat, thou burr! vile thing, let loose,
Or I will shake thee from me like a serpent! (Act III., Scene II., pp. 201-202)

For Green the emblem, spoken in this scene, was pictured in Paradin’s (1557) “Devises Heroiques” in 1562 (p. 342) (see Figure 8).

(c) From Light to Darkness, From Order to Disorder

As well as mythological heroes and heroines, the natural features of the scenes are emblematized in the play, as well. Firstly, for example, the distance from Athens to woods is emblematized as a “shift from light to darkness” (Olson, 1957, pp. 95-96). The darkness emphasizes the shift from disorder to the conflict between four lovers (see Figure 9):

Demetrius:

I love thee not, therefore pursue me not.
Where is Lysander, and Fair Hermia?
The one I’ll slay, the other slayeth me.
Thou told’st me they were stol’n unto this wood,
And here am I, and wood within this wood
Because I cannot meet my Hermia.
Hence, get thee gone, and follow me no more. (Act II., Scene I., p. 165)

Puck has also dropped some juice on Titania’s eyelids and she falls in love with Bottom, who is transformed into an ass by Puck. Secondly, the intimacy between Titania and Bottom is emblematized in the following scene. According to Green, Titania’s portraying of “ivy” and “elm” represents Alciati’s (1531) emblem, which emphasizes “enduring friendship” (p. 307) (see Figure 10).

Titania:

Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms.
Fairies, begone, and be all ways away. [Exeunt Fairies]
So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle Gently entwist; the female ivy so Enrings the barky fingers of the elm.
O, how I love thee! How I dote on thee! (Act., IV, Scene I., pp. 215-216)
(d) Astrological Emblems

In addition to the cited emblematic particulars, it seems that Shakespeare benefits from astrological emblems in his *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Moon, for example, gives us insight into this fact. Since the ancient times, the moon which is believed to have cosmic effects on human nature and life depicted in different ways and connected with worldly figures. Carroll (1999), for example, informs that in classical mythology, the moon is consistently represented as “Cynthia”, who is comprised of three aspects: “Phoebe” or “Luna”, the moon’s form in the heaven; “Diana” the moon’s form on earth; and “Hecate”, the moon’s form in the underworld. Luna is associated with moonlight, Diana with chastity (she was the virgin huntress) and Hecate with witchcraft (pp. 8-9). In *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the emblematic representation of moon as the union of contrasted characters, which can be connected with “Luna” and “Diana”, is visible (Perrault, 2005, p. 91) (see Figure 11).

_Theseus:_

Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in
Another moon—but O, methinks, how slow
this old moon wanes! She lingers my desires
Like to a stepdame or a dowager
Long withering out a young man’s revenue.

_Hippolyta:_

Four days will quickly steep themselves in night;
Four nights will quickly dream away the time;
And then the moon, like to a silver bow
New bent in heaven, shall behold the night
Of our solemnities. (Act I., Scene I., pp. 131-132)

As one can see, _Theseus’s_ description of moon obviously refers to “Diana” since it has already been noted that “Diana” is the representation of moon on earth and it symbolizes “virgin huntress” which are known as...
Amazons. Hippolyta’s description, on the other hand, is pure representation of moonlight like “a silver bow [,] new bent in heaven”.

**Conclusion**

Emblem is a crucial part of Shakespeare’s language. Shakespeare does not draw pictures but he depicts figurative elements; emblems. The basic meaning of emblem, as well as its functions, has changed within decades. However, as everybody understands, the cited approaches refer to three main parts of a real emblem; *inscriptio*, *pictura*, and *subscription*. The cultural inheritances from mythological times and the hieroglyphics deeply influenced the emblem tradition of Renaissance literature. Shakespeare might strongly be exposed to these distinctive parameters and in a harmony these might explicitly be unified in his work. On the one hand, these determining the common usages of the emblems in literature affected Shakespeare’s metaphorical language style. On the other hand, he mostly emblematized mythological, astronomical, natural figures and scenes by accordingly referring to the morals or stories behind these facts. This showed that Shakespeare’s approach and style was completely different from the notion of emblem alone. In this sense, this paper tried to demonstrate Shakespeare’s language style is not only imagery, but also an emblematic one.

**References**


