

Ut Pictura Poesis: Word and Image in Georg Stiernhielm's *Hercules*

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Horace's winged words, "ut pictura poesis" ('as is painting, so is poetry') constitute a phrase that taps into millennia of discussions about parallels between the arts, and the topic certainly interested the writers of the Baroque. Georg Stiernhielm (1598-1672) is no exception. Stiernhielm has been hailed as the father of Swedish poetry, so it is little wonder that his masterpiece, *Hercules* (1658), has been the subject of considerable scholarly scrutiny. The purpose of this study will be to sum up some salient features of this scholarship and then take another look at the interplay between word and image in Stiernhielm's poem.

Stiernhielm as Language Theorist

Baroque language theory tended to be related to issues of national dominance and theology. As the European nation states began to consolidate their power, they often focused on consolidating a national language, as well as its prestige in cultural history. One symptom of this is the founding of the French Academy in 1634. One of Stiernhielm's students, Bengt Skytte, believed that linguistic difference was the root of all wars and conflicts in the world. The debacle at the Tower of Babel was the point in mankind's history when people began to distance themselves from God and his path. If one could recreate an original or universal language, then differences could be reconciled and peace attained.<sup>1</sup>

It should perhaps surprise no one that Swedish language theorists felt that Swedish was closest to this original language. Olof Rudbeck asserted that Sweden was the lost Atlantis in his treatise *Atlantica* (1679). Before that, Stiernhielm asserted that Sweden was the fabled isle of the Hyperboreans, where Apollo's mother was born and a cult of Apollo had managed to preserve the pure and unspoiled original language through the millennia.<sup>2</sup> In this original language, words and the things they represented were connected, as suggested in *Cratylus*, one of Plato's dialogues. In other words, there was an intimate connection between the signifier and the signified, quite contrary to what Ferdinand de Saussure told us in the Twentieth Century.

A number of Stiernhielm scholars have followed this thread through *Hercules*, noting, for example, that the root Mo (Mu) means aging and darkness, thus "Döden molmar i mull, allt vad här glimmar och glänser" (Line 67).<sup>3</sup> The vowel "i", since it falls in the middle of the vowel series, represents the meridian, a high point for the sun as well as the vowel series. "I" represents something penetrating, especially after "p", so the word "pil" (arrow), the attribute of Astrild, is the perfect example of a word clearly

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<sup>1</sup> Selberg, 'Stiernhielms världsbild', 2000, p. 152.

<sup>2</sup> Lindroth, *Svensk lärdomshistoria*, 1975, pp. 268-270.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

mirroring the thing to which it refers.<sup>4</sup> The “i” in the word’s center becomes the point of the arrow.

### Figure Poetry

The Baroque passion for connecting words with the things they represent also manifested itself in figure poems. Anyone glancing through a literary history of the Baroque is likely to stumble upon an illustration of a figure poem, such as, a funeral poem that takes the shape of the grim reaper or a wedding poem in the shape of a goblet. Drawing pictures with words is a means of uniting form and content.<sup>5</sup> In the Twentieth Century, concrete poets resorted to similar measures, as they sought to make word and thing unite. A good example is the following poem by Eugene Gomringer from 1954:

silencio silencio silencio  
silencio silencio silencio  
silencio silencio silencio  
silencio silencio silencio  
silencio silencio silencio

Curiously, the feature of the poem that best represents silence is the space in the middle. Every utterance of “silencio” breaks the silence.

Stiernhielm may have been way ahead of Gomringer. *Hercules* is comprised of 521 lines of dactylic hexameter, or, more accurately, 520. After the famous Death sermon, a partial line occurs:

Hwar blifwr all vår Lust? När Krop och Siäl äre skilde.  
I thet mörke ewiga Tysta! (Lines 77, 78)

This line caused Bernt Olsson to exclaim: ”Här har diktaren inte ens formått att göra versen fullständig?”<sup>6</sup> In the context of the poem, however, this incomplete line creates a silence, a space following the word “Tysta” (silence) that illustrates its meaning. Moreover the abruptly cut off line, can be read in analogy to the life that is suddenly cut off by death.

The final line of “*Hercules*” has been a source of discord among scholars: “Döden är yttersta målet, i dy vij samkas, och ändas” (Line 521). Sten Lindroth and Sven Delblanc have cordially disputed whether or not the poem *Hercules* supports pagan or Christian sentiments.<sup>7</sup> “Death is the end” is almost a cliché, but can be taken to mean that there is no life after death, although there are other references to an afterlife elsewhere in the poem. What if, however, Stiernhielm simply wanted to end his poem with the word “ändas” ([We] are ended)? Once again, the word and the thing itself would coincide.

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<sup>4</sup> Ståhle, ‘Språkteori och ordval i Stiernhielms författarskap’, 1951, 76

<sup>5</sup> Mödersheim, ‘Text als Bild’, 2002, 73.

<sup>6</sup> Olsson, *Den svenska skaldekonstens fader och andra Stiernhielmsstudier*, 1973, p. 136.

<sup>7</sup> Delblanc, ‘*Hercules magnanimus*’, 1961, and Lindroth, ‘*Hercules*’, 1967, p. 356.

Another example of Stiernhielm making his words mesh with the thing described is in the passage where the dress of Flättia is described:

Hon war klädd vppå Fransk där-å alt var brokot och krokot;  
Ringat och slingat i kors; med Franssar i Lyckior, och nyckior,  
Pappat och knappat i längd, och i bredd; med spistar och litsor.  
Rundt omkring, och i ring, ala-mode, beflittrat, och splittrat. (Lines 34-37)

The sudden increase in internal rhyme, repetition, and verbal ornament replicates the ornateness of Flättia's dress. Stiernhielm achieves poetically what Flättia's dressmaker does with lace, needle and thread. Although Hercules is certainly not a figure poem that paints an obvious picture like a goblet, these examples display a similar dynamic inherent in the genre. The words that describe a thing emulate the thing itself.

### Emblems

Emblems were enormously popular during the Baroque and provided yet another opportunity for the interplay of word and image. The classic emblem consists of three parts: *inscriptio*, *pictura*, and *subscriptio*. The inscription consists of a motto, which is then illustrated by an allegorical picture. The subscript explains the correct connection between the motto and the picture to the viewer. Often these emblems have a moral lesson to impart, and involving the viewer in the decoding of the image was deemed pedagogically effective. In 1663, J.G. Schottelius claimed that the picture in an emblem was equal to the body, and the words with the soul.<sup>8</sup> In Protestant countries, words were given priority over pictures.<sup>9</sup> The author of an emblem was the one who wrote the words to accompany the picture.<sup>10</sup> The artists who created the pictures were considered so inconsequential that their names were not often preserved. Stiernhielm did not feel the need to employ an artist, considering his words sufficient to paint the picture.

Axel Friberg has done a study of the emblems in *Hercules*. Lines 354 to 365 describe the Ox-to-the-slaughter emblem (Figure 1) found in Jacob Cats' hugely popular collection, *Sinne- en minnesbeelden* (1627).<sup>11</sup> Fru Dygd first paints the picture verbally, describing the ox fattened and bedecked with flowers, lead in a festive procession. Then the explication ensues, the ox must pay for its pleasures with a terrible death, just as the youth engaged in drunkenness and social pleasures will pay the same price. Lines 255 to 259 describe a spider web emblem (Figure 2) which Friberg traces to Joachim Camerarii, although this emblem is also in the same Cats collection as the previous emblem.<sup>12</sup> This time Fru Lusta verbally paints the picture of a spider web in which mosquitoes become ensnared, but wasps escape. Fru Lusta supplies the explanation that the spider web is like the law; the poor and unfortunate are caught, but the powerful go free. Because this explanation is given by Fru Lusta, the reader needs to question the value of a moral

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<sup>8</sup> Mödersheim, 'Emblem, Emblematik', 1994, 1104-5.

<sup>9</sup> Schuster, 'Abstraktion, Agitation und Einfüllung', 1983, p. 116.

<sup>10</sup> Mödersheim, 'Domini Doctrina Coronat': *Die geistliche Emblematik Daniel Cramers (1568-1637)*, 1994, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Friberg, *Den svenske Hercules*, 1945, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

lesson coming from such a source. Such things may indeed happen in the world, but that does not mean they are right. Lusta is urging Hercules to take advantage of his social standing and do what he wants, because the law will not punish him. This is a temptation our hero needs to reject.

Friberg seems to have overlooked another emblem, strangely, since it also comes from the Cats collection. This emblem (Figure 3) occurs at the end of *Hercules*, Lines 496 to 520. Fru Dygd describes a house in an advanced state of decay, overgrown and abandoned, and then follows the explanation: “Sådan är Menniskio kropp: när åldren kommer, och åhren. (Line 507)” Fru Dygd goes on to describe the decay of the flesh, as one becomes bent, bald, toothless, deaf, blind and senile. The original emblem in question juxtaposes a derelict house with an aging man lying in what seems to be a grave. Bernt Olsson traces the source of these images in Stiernhielm to Ecclesiastes 12,<sup>13</sup> the original source of the winged words: “Vanity of vanities [...] All is vanity!” (12:9) The Vanitas theme was much beloved by the baroque and a suitable note upon which to end the poem.

Invoking these familiar emblems serves several purposes in terms of Baroque aesthetics. First, Stiernhielm can engage in the approved and admired practice of imitation. Petrarch suggested that the poet should resemble a bee that drinks nectar from as many flowers as possible, and hence, the more references to other sources the better. Secondly, Stiernhielm can engage his audience in the familiar practice of extracting moral lessons from art. Thirdly, he can draw on multiple art forms. The Baroque thrived on combining art forms, the acme of which became the opera and ballet. Lastly, Stiernhielm is able to draw with words, attempt to bring the word and image closer together.

### The Appearance of Vice and Virtue

The inspiration of Stiernhielm’s poem is the story of Hercules at the crossroads, which can be traced back to Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*. Hercules is approached by the incarnations of Vice and Virtue and asked to choose which path he should follow. This theme has lived a long and happy life in art history as evidenced in Erwin Panofsky’s weighty tome on the topic.<sup>14</sup> The Baroque, in particular, seemed to love the theme because of its fondness for binary oppositions (vice/virtue, war/peace, strength/wisdom, etc.) and the opportunity for moral education. Stiernhielm is, at the same time, respectfully imitative of the literary and artistic tradition he allies himself with, and distinctly independent with his own lesson to teach. The physical appearance of both Vice and Virtue speaks volumes about what they represent.

Virtue is often depicted as a lovely goddess, but Stiernhielm’s Fru Dygd is “Brun vnder ögon’, och bränd av Sool-skijn, mager af hulde;” (Line 279) She is dressed cleanly and “på dät ährlige gamble maneret” (Line 281). Olsson has found a model for Virtue as an old-fashioned Germanic matron in Moscherosch’s *Wundersame Geschichte Philanders von Sittewald* (1640-3), in which sensible Germanic virtues are set against frivolous *à la mode* influences from France.<sup>15</sup> For Moscherosh, Vice is French, and

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<sup>13</sup> Olsson, *Den svenska skaldekonstens fader och andra Stiernhielmsstudier*, 1973, p. 136.

<sup>14</sup> Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege und andere antike Bildstoffe in her neueren Kunst*, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Olsson, *Den svenska skaldekonstens fader och andra Stiernhielmsstudier*, 1973, p. 77.

Virtue is a matron in old-fashioned German dress, tanned by the sun. Like Moscherosch, Stiernhielm was deeply concerned about foreign influences, particularly French. Stiernhielm clearly has something quite similar to Moscherosch's German/French conflict in mind when he pits Fru Dygd against Fru Lusta. In his defense of the Swedish language, *Gambla Swea- och Götha-Måles fatebur* (1643), Stiernhielm depicts the Swedish language as a Germanic matron who dresses in ill-sitting *à la mode* dress. The image was meant to protest the use of foreign loan words in Swedish; the foreign clothing, like the foreign words, only mar the dignity of the pure, noble language. Opitz in *Aristarchus* (1617) had depicted the German language as a maiden, so the idea was, like so much in the Baroque, not new. However, the image of Fru Dygd as a respectable matron combines the allegory of Hercules at the crossroads with Stiernhielm's own interest in preserving the Swedish language from foreign influence.

There is a long tradition stretching all the way back to Xenophon of depicting Vice hardly wearing anything at all, but a thin veil. Lusta's daughter, Kättia, sports this look in Stiernhielm's poem: "Klädd war hon i fijnt Skijr; at hon synt hward klädd, eller oklädd (Line 25)".<sup>16</sup> Fru Lusta is dressed in foreign luxury, decked in multi-colored clothes with pearls, gold, and jewels. She presents her case to Hercules with the skills of a classic rhetorician,<sup>17</sup> tempting him with a myriad of foreign influences. She provides a lengthy book list of light reading, including Rabelais. The reading list is followed by a list of card games with names like "La-bete." Fru Lusta urges Hercules to practice dancing instead of practicing arms, and if he must wage war, he should do so in a bar accompanied by friends like "Sauf-du-Rein-aus Hans" while drinking German wine and beer, "och Fransk Wijn i nödfall" (Line 214). Tobacco from Virginia is another vice he might try.

It is worthy of note that Fru Lusta's speech is, of necessity, riddled with loan words. Her speech itself is as strewn with foreign jewels, as her person. Quite the opposite is true of Fru Dygd. Obvious loan words are banished once she begins to speak. Sven Delblanc spends a good part of his essay on *Hercules* restoring the Latin names to the virtues that Fru Dygd enumerates.<sup>18</sup> It is significant that Fru Dygd does not resort to Latin. These virtues are presented as solid Swedish virtues, so, of course, they must be expressed in Swedish. Fru Lusta and Fru Dygd are simultaneously representatives of Vice and Virtue, *à la mode* frivolity and Swedish sense, as well as incarnations of foreign loan words versus purity of speech.

Another remarkable feature of Fru Lusta's appearance is her blond hair, which literary tradition gives as brown. Hjalmar Lindroth helpfully suggested that this is simply the renaissance ideal of feminine beauty.<sup>19</sup> It may be possible, however, to be more specific about which renaissance beauty inspired Fru Lusta's hairstyle. When Prague fell to the Swedes in 1648, Veronese's "Allegory of Virtue and Vice (The Choice of Hercules)" came to the court of Queen Christina as the spoils of war (Figure 4).<sup>20</sup> At about this time, Stiernhielm was actively engaged in the artistic life of the court, having penned texts for the Queen's ballets, *Den fångne Cupido* (1649) and *Freds-afl* (1649).

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<sup>16</sup> Olsson, *Den svenska skaldekonstens fader och andra Stiernhielmsstudier*, 1973, p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> Hansson, *Från Hercules till Swea. Den litterära textens förändringar*, 2000, pp. 16-19.

<sup>18</sup> Delblanc, 'Hercules magnanimus,' 1961, pp. 52-58.

<sup>19</sup> Lindroth, *Stiernhielms Hercules. En diktmonografi*, 1913, p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> *The Frick Collection: An Illustrated Catalogue*, 1968, p. 280.

Veronese's Fru Lusta is most certainly blond, and, according to Panofsky, influenced many subsequent illustrators of the Hercules-at-the-crossroads motif.<sup>21</sup> A different version of the same theme by Veronese, "A Boy from the Sanuto Family Between Virtue and Vice", is clearly the inspiration for the illustration of Fru Lusta that appeared with the first published edition of Stiernhielm's poem, possibly via the imitations of Paulus Potter and Jan Victors. Lusta's hair is described in the poem as: "Gull-gåhl-blänkandes Håår, bekrönt medh Roser i Pärlor"(Line 11)" In the painting that came to Christina's court, Vice's face is not visible, only blond hair adorned with a circlet of white roses.

Another feature that Stiernhielm's poem has in common with Veronese's painting is the fact that Hercules is depicted as a young nobleman, without the signature lion skin and club. In artistic renderings of the Hercules motif, it is fairly common to depict Hercules in the likeness of a nobleman or emperor, but usually still a carrying club and lion skin. Stiernhielm has omitted these details with striking deliberation. Virtually every other character in the poem is dressed in heavy symbolism, and their appearance is painstakingly described. Stiernhielm's Hercules is, by comparison, a blank page. All we know is that he is a young nobleman. Perhaps this makes it easier for young noblemen in the audience to read themselves into the role of Hercules. Whether or not this decision was inspired by Veronese or Stiernhielm's intention all along is impossible to ascertain from earlier drafts of the poem. The parallel is nonetheless striking.

### Ballet

In *Hercules*, after Fru Lusta has been introduced, her four children step forward in turn, carrying allegorical attributes that clearly indicate their true natures. Lättia (Sloth) is carrying a pillow under one arm and a deck of cards. Her clothing is soiled and her hair is decorated with soporific herbs, such as poppies. These attributes clearly mark her as laziness, who either sleeps too much or kills time playing cards. Her sister Kättia (Lust) is scantily clad and carries the tools for building a fire...the flames of passion, no doubt. Flättia (Frivolity) both laughs and cries, dances, wears *à la mode* dress, and carries a sailboat without a rudder, the perfect emblem of the directionless. Finally Ruus (Intoxication) steps forward, fat, breathless, and rosy-cheeked with grapes and hops in his hair, a glass in hand, and a pipe stuck in his wreath.

A number of critics have noted that this chorus line of children seems taken directly from the allegorical ballets of the ilk produced in Christina's court.<sup>22</sup> Such ballets were essentially like moving emblems. The plot of the ballet was enacted (Minerva vanquishing Mars, for example), and the characters usually possessed allegorical attributes that could identify them and their functions. Viewers generally had a program that would explain the allegory in verses written in several languages, functioning essentially like the subscript of the traditional emblem. Stiernhielm contributed such program texts for both *Den fångne Cupido* (1649) and *Freds-afl* (1649). A philological detail that would tend to support the assumption that Stiernhielm's work on these ballets influenced his portrayals of Lusta's children is the fact that the early version of *Hercules* written down by Johan Ekeblad does not contain a description of the

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<sup>21</sup> Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege*, 1997, pp. 122-23.

<sup>22</sup> Dahlberg, 'Danss' är een ädele konst. Om Stiernhielm och hovbaletten', 2000, p. 41; Beijer, 'Den teaterhistoriska bakgrunden till *Spelet om Herculis Wägawal*', 1955, p. 95.

children. Exact dating of Ekeblad's version has proven quite the challenge, but a likely chronology would place it before Stiernhielm's involvement in Christina's ballets. Therefore, the idea of the allegorical children came to him after watching the ballets.

Samuel Columbus, in any event, noted the likeness between Stiernhielm's Hercules and public performance. He later adapted the poem into Spel om Hercules Wägewal (1687), for which he added some lines for Hercules, allegorical figures to accompany Fru Dygd, and a number of songs. The addition of music to the drama turns the play into the universal art form that the Baroque so admired, incorporating literature, music, painting, and dance.

### Conclusion

Stiernhielm's Hercules is in many ways the epitome of Baroque aesthetic taste in Swedish literature. Stiernhielm overwhelms and astonishes his reader, like the Italian Marinists would have it, with his poetic virtuosity, his catalogues, his emblems, attributes, and images. He is the busy bee of Petrarch drawing from Xenophon as well as numerous other sources, both textual and visual, thus deliberately blending art forms. The antithesis he presents is multi-layered: Vice versus Virtue, French influence versus Swedish sense, and loan words versus a pure Swedish. He morally educates his audience, urging them, like Hercules to choose virtue over vice. In the mood of Baroque nationalism, he seeks to demonstrate by uniting word and image that Swedish is, truly, the original language that says what it means.

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Illustration captions:

Figure 1: From Jacob Cats, *Sinne- en minnebild* (1627). Emblem Project Utrecht, 2002.

Figure 2: From Jacob Cats, *Sinne- en minnebild* (1627). Emblem Project Utrecht, 2002.

Figure 3: From Jacob Cats, *Sinne- en minnebild* (1627). Emblem Project Utrecht, 2002.

Figure 4: Veronese's *Allegory of Virtue and Vice (The Choice of Hercules)*. Copyright The Frick Collection, New York.