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Studies in Emblematics
in Honor of Pedro F. Campa

Edited by John T. Cull and Peter M. Daly



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The Whore of Babylon: Tradition and Iconography of an Apocalyptic Motif in the Service of Modern Religious Polemics¹

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Abstract

The apocalyptic motif of the Great Whore of Babylon, an attractive allegorization of Roman pagan oppression directed at the first Christian communities, manifests a prolonged trajectory in western medieval iconography, dating back at least as far as the Carolingian period, and achieving its most extensive protagonism and diffusion during the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries, due to various interrelated cultural factors: the growing interest in the monstrous and prodigious as a premonitory sign of political events, the eschatological effervescence fomented by a millenary mentality that established 1500 as the year that would see the end of time, or the apocalyptic expectations of Martin Luther and the first Protestant circles, who identified the pope in Rome and the elite of the Catholic Church with the Anti-Christ. This study analyzes the recuperation and utilization of apocalyptic imagery, and in particular, the biblical icon of the Great Whore in the service of the new prophetic environment and of religious polemics, as well as its derivations in biblical illustration, emblem books or the moralizing literature of the Modern Age.

„[...] amicos nobis esse deligendos, qui nec temporum diuturnitate, nec locorum distantia, sed ne quidem post mortem amare desistant.” (Claude Minois’ annotation to Alciato’s emblem CLIX)

The Protestant Reform and the Exploitation of Prodigy

Many recent works have demonstrated the striking intensification of interest in the phenomenon of monstrous apparitions and prodigious events. Their dimension of foretelling both portentous omens as well as

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terrible calamities, can be detected in central Europe at the beginning of the 1500s.² With this vogue, which maintained its popularity for a good part of the century, a cultural practice that has its roots in the Hellenistic world was recuperated and reactivated. It is the paradoxography that describes remarkable or fantastic phenomena and which came to constitute its own autonomous literary genre (Gómez Espelosín). This practice managed to survive in the western world, spurred on by the transcendent perception of the physical world that impregnated the Middle Ages. Whether they were understood as a kind of hieroglyph or a visible sign of the divine will—which functions as a mechanism of warning, punishment or transcendent approbation that precedes events and foreshadows them—as an exhortation to man to reform his habits or, finally, as a worrisome symptom of the internal disorder that reigned in the material world (Céard, 8-10),³ portents are always signs with a hidden meaning that needs to be deciphered, generally a presage of coming events, which made them material that underwent continual interpretation and speculation (Kappler 1986, 269).⁴ Sebastián Brant, the humanist from Strasbourg and a passionate analyst of the events of his epoch, is considered to be the first author who allowed himself to be tempted to produce an allegorical-political interpretation of a series of natural phenomena of an exceptional nature—monstrous births or astral conjunctions—that took place in Alsace and Germany at the end of the fifteenth century, a reading that was never impartial and always favorable to the imperial cause of Maximilian II. These prognostications were published with great success between 1495 and 1496, in the form of illustrated leaflets (Kappler 1980, 100-110). Thus was born a custom that would very soon acquire an openly polemical character when the symbolic reading was tinged by impassioned religious and doctrinal hues.⁵ Martin Luther and the first Protestant circles would appropriate, in fact, identical procedures for ideological diffusion, which they utilized extensively in a tone that became increasingly direct and demagogic, after seeing their effectiveness as an instrument of criticism and a way to discredit the target of their diatribes: the elite of the Roman Church.⁶

2 I will cite passages from diverse representative texts of the growing interest in this phenomenon throughout this study.

3 The author terms the science of divinatory interpretation of these portentous signs *teratomancia*.

4 For the distinct focuses on which the different conceptions of nature were based during the sixteenth century, see Roso Díaz 2008, 199.

5 This consideration would be maintained in successive treatises and catalogs of monsters and prodigies throughout the century. See, on this topic, Wittkower, 99.

6 See, among other studies, Scribner 1981, 170-171; Edwards Jr.; or Martín Torés and Roso Díaz.

We find ourselves, therefore, faced with an actualization, amplification, and radicalization of the ideological exploitation of the prodigy; but these would not be the only variants that the use of such a device would experience in the hands of the reformers. If indeed Luther—in spite of a degree of reticence shown at certain moments (Saxl, 234)—came to admit the validity of the prophetic system of exegesis (or *praesensio*) that was proposed by Brant,⁷ which avails itself without shame of an examination of the singular physical constitution of the prodigy engendered in order to prognosticate, by means of simple deduction based on certain parallelisms among these anti-natural details and determined events or situations, the nature and scope of the changes that will affect, to a greater or lesser degree, the state of the world, he did not hesitate to echo, at the same time, a second interpretative method. This approach also takes as its point of departure a detailed description and interpretation of the most salient and deformed traits of the prodigy—validated by the oft-repeated apparatus of biblical quotations—as though it was a matter of the attributes of an allegorical figuration, but not in order to propose them as an indication of imminent events, but rather as a grotesque image of the principal vices and depraved habits with which to compose his ferocious criticism of the entire papal curia and even the very institution of the papacy. It was a matter of demonstrating, in the final analysis, the way in which humanity suffered in slavery at the hands of the supreme pontiffs in their exercise of both spiritual and temporal power. This method of exegesis provoked a phenomenon of *displacement* that stripped the monster of its gravity and transcendence as a foreboding sign of important events, and reduced it to the status of a simple parody, a burlesque caricature of the distinct ecclesiastical classes, of what has come to be called the „theriomorphic satire” of the hierarchy of Rome (Roso Díaz 2008, 202).

For this process of „satirizing”—and the consequent conceptual easing—of the image of the portent, they turned principally to monstrous births or fortuitous apparitions of human or animal congenital defects, more or less recent that were in the realm of public knowledge at the time. Of significance in this respect is the well-known illustrated pamphlet composed by Felipe Melancton and Luther himself, with the title *Explanation of Two Terrifying Figures, the Ass of the Pope in Rome and the Calf-Monk Found in Freiberg, in Saxony* (Saxl, 234-236),⁸ a model which would subsequently be applied to other „clerical” monsters of a similar condition. There is no

7 On the use of prophesies and signs by Luther, see Vega Ramos 2002, 61-105.

8 Although it is true that Luther and Melancton begin by warning that these beings portend grave events—“God always has indicated his Grace or wrath by means of many signs”, the latter reminds us—both will focus more insistently on the allegorical method of interpretation.

lack, nevertheless, of recourse to other registers, and most particularly, to the imagery of apocalyptic inspiration that was beginning to exert a certain degree of protagonism in the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century.⁹ As a consequence of the urgent eschatological drive of Luther and his co-religionists (Scribner 1987, 277-299; McGinn, 221-251),¹⁰ the reformers in the Wittenberg circle insisted on the identification of the institution of the papacy with the figure of the Anti-Christ both in their pamphlets as well as in their evangelical glosses (Guadalajara Medina, 93-121; Vega Ramos 1994, 97-107).¹¹ This accusation, which was frequently reduced to a mere polemical insult, is sustained, beyond denunciations of political or moral corruption, on the conviction of the proximity of the end of the world in view of the increasing decadence reigning in the system of values and in the certainty that the Latin Church had adopted a false plan of salvation of satanic inspiration, which would lead the faithful not to their redemption, but rather to hell. Such forceful considerations resulted in an aberrant and perverse iconography of the papacy, inspired directly on the biblical book of the *Apocalypse*, which resorted frequently to the most horrendous apocalyptic monsters, the diabolical opposite of what hides behind the apparent humanity of the Pope (Roso Díaz 2008, 199-203).

It is not strange, then, to find frightful demons who wear papal garments and carry papal attributes—a well-known example is the striking engraving *Ego sum Papa* by Eduard Fuchs (mid-sixteenth century), that depicts pontiff Julius III with a grotesque diabolical appearance—or with fierce dragons that wear the pontifical tiara on their heads, like the menacing *Beast* that confronts the two *Witnesses*, evangelical preachers from whose mouths flames spew in front of the *Measured Temple*—a depiction of the Wittenberg church and the pulpit from which Luther preached—in one of the woodcut illustrations devised for the 1534 edition of the *Wittenberg*

9 Denis Crouzet defines the period between 1480 and 1533 as one of „eschatological effervescence”, with a proliferation of prophesies, previously unpublished, that suddenly came out in print in the realms of France, Italy or the Germanic Empire, a symptom of a millenary mentality that at certain times became an authentic collective psychosis. See Crouzet.

10 As M^a José Vega Ramos has indicated in 1995, 239-240, the abnormal accumulation and frequency of the extraordinary events that transpired in those years was interpreted as an undeniable indication of a fundamental fact: the second coming of Christ, a certainty based on texts such as the eschatological discourses of the Gospels— *Mk* 13; *Matt* 24; *Lk* 21— or the books of the prophets, and especially that of *Joel* 2, 28-31, in which it is prophesized that the end of the world will be preceded by signs and portents in the sky and on the earth, and by monstrous births. The Protestants echoed in their pamphlets such an „incontrovertible” link between the superabundance of prophesies and the end of the world.

11 On the apocalyptic expectation of Protestant circles, and the cultural precedents of Luther’s accusations, with special attention to John Wyclif and Jan Hus. See Gow, 8.

Bible. The icon of the so-called *Whore* or *Prostitute of Babylon* is also quite striking, a suggestive vision originating in the New Testament *Apocalypse* of John, also called *The Book of Revelation*, and which, in its use in Protestant propaganda, enjoyed the culminating moment of its prolonged presence in western thought and imagery. I would like to offer in what follows a review, necessarily panoramic, of this allegory's trajectory, including its incorporation into the graphic repertory of the religious struggles of the sixteenth century.

The Whore of Babylon: Image and Symbol

Chapter seventeen of John's *Apocalypse* begins with the vigorous and hermetic description that I transcribe here:

And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying to me, Come here; I will show to you the judgment of the great whore that sits on many waters: With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication. So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit on a scarlet colored beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: And on her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.¹² And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration.¹³

The verses that follow this passage are dedicated to providing a very specific interpretation of the meaning of this horrifying image, in the enigmatic tone that is characteristic of biblical prophesies:

I wondered with great admiration. And the angel said to me, Why did you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast that

¹² The word „whore” or „prostitute” designates in prophetic style any idolatrous city. She bears her name on her forehead, then, according to the testimony of Seneca or Juvenal, while the prostitutes of Rome had their names written on a golden ribbon tied to their heads.

¹³ *Rev* 17, 1-6. The English translations provided here are from the American King James Version, transcribed from the online polyglot Bible search website: Biblos [<http://biblos.com/>].

carries her, which has the seven heads and ten horns. The beast that you saw was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is. And here is the mind which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sits.

And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he comes, he must continue a short space. And the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven, and goes into perdition. And the ten horns which you saw are ten kings, which have received no kingdom as yet; but receive power as kings one hour with the beast. These have one mind, and shall give their power and strength to the beast. These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful.

And he said to me, The waters which you saw, where the whore sits, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues. And the ten horns which you saw on the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire. For God has put in their hearts to fulfill his will, and to agree, and give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled. And the woman which you saw is that great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth.¹⁴

This vision gave rise to an allegory that was one of the most complex, suggestive, and as a consequence, the most far-reaching, of all the allegories found in biblical writings. The great whore, a vision whose attributes offer a perfect counterpoint to the celestial symbols of the „woman clothed with the sun” described in the same book,¹⁵ and a prefiguration of the apocalyptic Virgin, received her feigned name from Babylon, capital of the Chaldean empire, which the Hebrews called Babel. Jewish eschatological literature converted it into the legendary city that was the prototype of impiety and the persecutor of the people of God:¹⁶ it represents all pagan cultures, as well as the temptation of riches and material pleasures, in opposition to the life of the spirit which is defended by adherents to the Christian faith. The accusation of Babylon’s fornication with the „kings of the earth”, beyond its literal sense, points us towards the spiritual tradition of com-

14 *Rev* 17, 6-18.

15 In *Rev* 12, 1. See Grubb, 57.

16 The book of *Daniel* informs us of the sufferings of the Jews after their exile to this city following the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem by king Nebuchadnezzar II, in the sixth century BC. Cf. likewise *Isa* 21 and *Jer* 51.

munities that have abandoned monotheism in order to worship the idols of other cultures. Babylonia thus acquires a symbolism that is antithetical to the New Jerusalem, which the apocalyptic text proposes as an alternative comforter in the eschatological future. *Great Whore* is an appellation with a lengthy biblical tradition,¹⁷ and a designation that had previously been conferred on other cities that acquired meaning due to their idolatrous cult—Tyre,¹⁸ Nineveh,¹⁹ Samaria or Jerusalem²⁰—in an attempt to divert the chosen people from the road marked by Yahweh. In a generic sense, John's text echoes the oracles against the city of Babylon included in the Old Testament, such as the lament for the fall of the king of Tyre.²¹

But Babel, let us recall, is a symbolic denomination here: subsequent commentators of the *Apocalypse* insisted on assimilating this figuration with the city of Rome, the capital of the empire, that dominated the rest of the world at the time of the book's composition, whereas the historical Babylon had already lost all of its ancient splendor by that time. The seven heads of the beast—and the seven mountains on which the woman appears seated—are the famous seven hills of the *Urbs*,²² the seven emperors under which the empire has been ruled, or, according to some more edifying interpretations, the seven deadly sins; the ten pairs of horns are all the vassal kings of Rome, who second and carry out their plans of persecution against the Church.²³ The Roman empire, brimming with economic prosperity and resplendent in its military might, wielded a great fascination with the citizens of its provinces, in exchange for security and peace, like the wine that the woman offers in her gilded goblet in order to seduce nations. What is more, from the Christian point of view, Rome, the epitome of the exploitation and tyranny of the people of its empire, of the bloody persecution of the people of God, and of corruption by means of its idolatry and licentious habits, generalized the veneration or cult of power, just like the apocalyptic woman demands the absolute submission of her devotees, and the beast, which would become the portrait of the Anti-Christ in medieval culture, claims divinity for itself.

17 Bartina, 776-777.

18 *Isa* 23, 15-17.

19 *Nah* 3, 4-7.

20 *Ezk* 16, 15-63; 23; *Isa* 1, 21; *Jer* 2, 20; 3, 1-11.

21 *Ezk* 28, 11-19.

22 As early as the first century AD, Rome occasionally appears in texts with the denomination of „the city of seven hills“; see Pliny NH 3, 9.

23 The image of „horns-kings“ was not foreign to Old Testament tastes. See *Dan* 7, 20-24. They are satellites and vassals of imperial power who, in alliance with the kings of the earth, prepare two wars: the first against the prostitute, who they will conquer—the total destruction of Rome—and later against the Lamb, an image of Christ the Redeemer, at whose hands they will suffer a definitive defeat.

Likewise, meanings have been proposed for the distinct elements and attributes associated with this baneful lady.²⁴ The waters upon which the whore appears, for example, represent the peoples and nations over which Rome exerted its morally disturbing influence.²⁵ An indication of instability, for Christians these waters are an expression of the pernicious influence of moral imbalance and of the pantheistic cult that the city imposed upon the small vassal states and upon the whole known world, perversely fascinated by them, as though in a state of „morbid inebriation”. Concretely, the dark connotations attributed to the ornate goblet proceed from *Jeremiah* 51.7ff.: Babylon has been a golden cup in the LORD’s hand, that made all the earth drunken: the nations have drunken of her wine; therefore the nations are mad. That gilded vessel, from which nations are invited to drink—the antithesis of the Eucharistic chalice?—represents, then, the deceitful effects of idolatry, in accordance with the biblical *topos* that links prostitution and the cult of false images. The color red very probably correlates to the blood spilled during the persecutions and martyrdoms, and the blasphemous names²⁶ are the divine epithets bestowed on the Roman emperors, or the innumerable deities of their pantheon. The woman wears a dress of royal purple, a color reserved for emperors, and also, in accordance with meretricious custom, displays bold colors and an ostentatious array of jewelry, pearls, and precious stones, an allegory, of Semitic undercurrent perhaps, of the splendid construction materials and impressive monuments of the great metropolis.²⁷

In the shadow of all of these interpretations derived from Christian exegetical tradition, we find in the apocalyptic cycles of medieval manuscripts the first conserved depictions of this portentous apparition. Since the passage—as it occurs throughout the text of text of *Revelations*—lacks a narrative development, and adopts the sequential form of successive visions, the iconographical repertory winds up being rather limited as a consequence, reduced to a few mere „cuadros vivientes” [living pictures]: at times we see the whore seated atop the waters, which acquire the form of a promontory from which spring seven rivers, while she contemplates herself in a mirror and combs her hair under the attentive gaze of John and an angel; on other occasions, we find her intoxicated as she delights in the blood of martyrs, or

24 Sebastián Bartina 776 et passim offers a broad and exhaustive interpretative reading of this episode of the book, which I summarize here by means of some synthetic conclusions.

25 It is not unusual to find in the *Bible* the comparison of large nations to invading waters: *Isa* 8, 7; *Jer* 47, 2.

26 Cf. *Rev* 13, 1.

27 Alice K. Turner, in 59-60, has indicated that the model of this iconic personification derives from Jadi or Jeh, a creation of Zoroastrian mythology.

else being consumed amidst the flames—an image that recalls in certain details the primogenital Fall of Lucifer—as a symbol of the destruction of Babylon; at other times, finally, it figures in diverse episodes in the company of the „kings of the earth.” But its most reiterated typology, which was to become its prototype thanks to its recuperation and proliferation during the sixteenth century with the development of the printed image is the figure of the whore riding on the monstrous beast while she shows her admirers the ornate wine goblet in her raised hand (Wright).

If we turn our attention now to the most primitive manifestations of this icon that have come down to us—the illuminated Carolingian apocalypses of the beginning of the ninth century, such as the cycles of Trier or Valenciennes, or the Ottonian cycles, in the transition from the tenth to eleventh centuries, and especially the *Bamberg Apocalypse*—those first images, formally elementary and markedly naive, depict the whore with garments and a hairstyle appropriate to royal dignity; her pose, sitting, frontal and with her arms opened wide in a gesture of lamentation, seems to relate back to iconographical models of late Antiquity.²⁸ As for the beast, it shows some similarities with the sea-deity Triton, an aquatic creature with two feet and a fish tail, from whose principal head another six smaller ones spring, endowed with their corresponding horns. Also, in the extremely personal series of the *Beatus*, versions of the *Commentary on the Apocalypse* by Saint Beatus of Liébana, which basically cover the tenth through the thirteenth centuries, emphasis is placed on the royal and autocratic authority of the whore, although her vestments show a marked oriental aspect and deliberate Islamic details—let us not forget the Iberian origin of the author of these texts—possibly in order to evoke her malignant nature with greater eloquence; here the monster often experiences a formal simplification to such an extent that it acquired the appearance of an only slightly metamorphosed horse. The figuration became more complicated starting in the twelfth century, especially in moralized bibles and illustrated encyclopedias, by means of illuminations that, through a greater iconographical precision, attempt to remain faithful to the details of the biblical passage. However, they pay special attention to the visible attributes of secular power and the wealth of the lady; she rides on the beast, then, with an aristocratic air, and emanates both political and sexual authority, due to which she acquires at times some attractive traits, openly seductive, and even comes to be compared to the allegory of Lust in those moralizing texts that have an

²⁸ Critics have pointed out its close similarity to the artistic image of the constellation Cassiopeia, included in manuscripts of the *Phaenomena* by Aratus, like the one housed in the University Library of Leiden, MS Voss. Lat. Q. 79, fol. 28 v. It is likewise very possible that the first depictions of the beast proceed from the Cetus constellation, the whale. See, in the same manuscript, fol. 66 v. Wright, 183-184.

effect on the menace of idolatry. She is no longer alone, but rather finds herself surrounded ever more frequently by her unconditional admirers. The dragon, for its part, presents a multiform nature that is difficult to classify, with an aspect that becomes increasingly fantastic and consonant with the free imagination of artists, finding its maximum delirium at the end of the fifteenth century with its transference to the realm of the printed image.

Propaganda and Polemics in the Sixteenth Century

Without doubt the culminating moment in the iconic trajectory of the *Magna Meretrix* is the impressive xylograph that Albrecht Dürer dedicated to her in his celebrated graphic series of the *Apocalypse* (Fig. 1). Printed in Nuremberg in 1498, this work, which shows the density and meticulousness of detail characteristic of German printing at the time, also possesses a vigorous plastic use of line strokes and a tremendous dramatic strength in its contrasts of light and shadow. The Whore derives her seductive powers from the sumptuous apparel of a Venetian courtesan and on suggestive details such as her loose hair that cascades down across a shoulder that is audaciously uncovered. She presents the cup of Lust—a magnificent piece of Nuremberg silverware—to a compact group of fascinated adorers representing diverse social conditions. The scene is complicated by the depiction of the „heavenly army,” that descends from the ruffled clouds: one of the angels is about to hurl a millstone into the sea, a sign of the condemnation of Babylon, the sinful city that is being destroyed amidst purifying flames in the background of the scene. At the same time another angel spreads its arms open in order to establish a visual connection between the prostitute and the city in flames (Körte, 15). This print attained such extraordinary popularity and widespread diffusion that practically all subsequent depictions of this personification will reveal in one way or another its influence.

In the fall of 1522, Lucas Cranach the Elder, a friend of Martin Luther and artist who utilized all of his creative abilities in the service of the Protestant cause, executed a series of 21 engravings destined for the German translation for the Lutheran version of the *New Testament*, popularly known as the *Septembertestament*, a work in which the only illustrations correspond to the *Book of the Apocalypse*.²⁹ The image that depicts the vision

29 Wittenberg, 1522. André Chastel 140, figs. 47 and 48, who clarifies the content of the antipapal allusions that this graphical series bears, has observed, besides explicit evidence such as the presence of the papal tiara worn by diverse apocalyptic characters (the incarnation of corruption and the sin of ecclesiastical hierarchy), details such as the circumstance that plate XIV, which illustrates the destruction of the city of Babylon, is a direct transposition of the *Imago Romae*, which was used to illuminate the *Weltchronik* of

of the whore and the beast, which follows in its general lines the compositional and formal model of Dürer, although lacking the latter's secondary scenes, (Fig. 2), the lady appears with her head crowned with the triple tiara as a direct reference, no longer to a generic Anti-Christ, but rather to the Pope himself. At the same time, the garments worn by the adoring figures have become more personalized, which has allowed for diverse attempts at their identification.³⁰ The attack was so direct and explicit that the Duke of Saxony, impressed by such boldness, made sure that the detail of the triple crown disappeared in the following edition, in December of that same year. In 1523 Hans Holbein the Younger followed Cranach's example for another edition of the *New Testament*³¹—the print with the whore reiterates the disposition of its immediate model, even if her belly is exaggerated, her general appearance is more common, and the heads of the beasts, more simplified, lack the tremendous expressivity of their predecessors—and in the *Lutheran Bible* of the printer Hans Lufft, published in Wittenberg in 1534, the Great Whore is also crowned with a great tiara as a sign of infamy.³² With all of these visual and written testimonies—let us recall that one of the great Lutheran reformist texts published in 1520 was titled *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium* [*Prelude Concerning the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*]. It was becoming clear that for the Protestant anti-Papists, *die Hure Roma* was no longer the Rome of the Caesars, but rather of Alexander VI and Leo, who took the place of Nero and Domitian on the pillory. The great changes that would be wrought with their fall and that of the city of Babylon, which are foretold at the end of the *Apocalypse*, symbolize and announce at the same time the inevitable collapse of the Church of Rome.

The engravings and arguments of the Reformation would soon be echoed in the Netherlands, in spite of the fierce repression imposed by Charles V on new religious ideas, which quashed almost completely the free circulation of these diatribes, whose elaboration and manipulation, necessarily clandestine, wound up being tremendously compromised. Reformist testimonies in the first years are, therefore, extremely rare: one illustrative exception is a complex allegorical and satirical drawing about the abuse of power of the Catholic Church, dating from around 1526, and attributed to the Brussels workshop of Bernard van Orley (Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amster-

Hartmann Schedel (Nuremberg, 1493).

30 Among them have been attempts to see, in fact, Ferdinand I, George, Elector of Saxony, Charles V and Johann Tetzel, the Dominican preacher and seller of indulgences for the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. See Scribner 1981, 170-171.

31 Basilea, Thomas Wolff, 1523. See Chastel, 145, and Crouzet, 4.

32 In the iconography of the Babylonian Whore, see also Van der Meer, or Grubb, especially pp. 72-75.

dam). It is a copy of a painting now lost, with the title *De contemptu mundi*, which has survived and come down to us, logically, thanks to its having been hidden away or its restricted use by a private circle, in view of its clearly subversive nature. Among the numerous personifications and emblematic details that it contains, I want to focus here on the lower right corner of the composition, where we see a large, open entrance into Hell, configured as a porcine, with the Whore of Babylon resting atop the pig head, and wearing a papal tiara on her head (Fig. 3). It is not until the end of the 1550s that we find the first, anonymous, engraved version of this image: the extensive text added in the lower part of the print explains how, due to the work of the devil, the Catholic Church has distanced itself from Christ's original word, and led us to condemnation (Tanis and Horst, 5-8). Another extremely complex engraving, with the title *An Allegory of Spanish Tyranny* (1570), attributed to Joris Hoefnagel, was very probably inspired by the previous print. Among other motifs reutilized here, we find once again the Whore as popess „riding” in a very similar way atop the Mouth of Hell. With her triple-transomed cross she points the way to some flying demons that emerge from the nasal passages of Leviathan, ready to contribute to the devastating labor of the Duke of Alba in his severe governance of the Netherlands.

Without abandoning the spatial and temporal realm of the Dutch uprising against the Hispanic monarchy, a conflict that would lead to the Eighty Years' War, I would like to turn my attention now to one of the few contemporaneous engravings that show, in this case in an allegorical form, the iconoclastic fury of the groups of Calvinist inspiration that took place in August of 1566: the anonymous *Emblematic Engraving of Iconoclastia* (1566). The print depicts a group of soldiers sweeping the fragments of statues and sacred objects that have been removed from a church, just as we see in the upper plane of the image. The brooms and water are a specific allusion to the „cleansing” nature of the iconoclastic movement: the temples, previously contaminated by statues are now „purified.” To the left, a bishop, a cardinal, and other kneeling clerics pray to a papal idol configured like the Babylonian whore, imploring that their church may survive amidst so much destructive furor. A demon flies above, holding various objects that he has managed to rescue before they could be destroyed by the iconoclasts (Tanis and Horst, 38-39).

We find the Great Whore once again, this time associated with the controversial figure of Fernando Álvarez de Toledo, in a series of four anonymous engravings (*Alba's Mission in the Netherlands and the Effects of His Tyranny*), published in 1572, a crucial moment in the reign of terror of the „Iron Duke.” The first two prints of the series show the objectives of Alba's mission, while the last two denounce the results of the consequent politics of repression. In the third engraving (Fig. 4) the collapse of the

Dutch economy is in evidence—depicted by an idle sailor, a merchant and a pedlar—the result, according to the corresponding interpretation, of the politics of assassinations, conflagrations and robberies by the governor of the Hispanic monarchy. Meanwhile, an indifferent Alba embraces and kisses with clear lasciviousness the elegant Whore, dignified once again with the triple pontifical crown, and accompanied by the seven-headed beast in order to ensure its identification (Tanis and Horst, 66-67).

Further beyond her belligerent orientation, in which the apocalyptic whore joined the ranks of the Reformists unabashedly, her iconography survived in biblical illustrations and commentaries, especially in French and German, on the *Apocalypse*. In this context, under the specific influence of Cranach or the more generic impact of Dürer, the images would repeat very similar formal schemes, with the lady disassociated from any papal allusions or attributes. The same thing would occur in other manifestations of the plastic arts, such as tapestries³³ or luxurious serving sets.³⁴ The motif would also enjoy a fleeting, though interesting appearance in emblem literature, where it once again acquired an explicit and directed meaning, although its aspect was more exemplary than propagandistic.

The jurist Andrea Alciato, renowned for his reputation as the founder of the emblematic genre with *Emblematum liber*, devoted one of his symbols to the apocalyptic motif that concerns us. It was not included, however, in the earliest editions of the work: it appears in the Spanish translation by Daza Pinciano in Lyons, 1549, where, with the motto *Ficta religio* [Feigned religion] we see the whore on the beast, in her habitual pose, facing a group of people prostrate before her. The Latin epigram as translated by Daza reads thus:

Una ramera en un sillón sentada
 En señal de honra de grana vestida
 A todos da a beber de una labrada
 Y llena taza, y cabe ella tendida
 Está gran multitud emborrachada.
 Por esta Babilonia fue entendida
 Que las groseras gentes atraía
 Con gesto y religión que ella fingía.³⁵

33 Piece number 70 of the *Angers Apocalypse Tapestry* – XIVth century – shows the great whore on the beast of seven heads.

34 For example, the oval platter of enameled copper with a depiction of *The Whore on the Beast*, a work by Martial Courteys of Limoges, c. 1575, housed in the Widener Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

35 Daza Pinciano, II, 158. Cesare Ripa echoed Alciato's emblem by availing himself of the same image of a crowned woman adorned with jewelry riding on the back of the

[A whore seated on a throne,
 Wearing a robe of honorific purple,
 Pours wine for all from a carved
 And full cup, and reclining near her
 Is the great drunken multitude.
 She symbolized Babylon,
 For she lured the baser people
 With gestures and religion she feigned.]

Alciato's generic and ideologically uncommitted meaning, developed in his explication, was qualified by later commentators, such as the humanist Diego López. The Spaniard carried out, in the first place, an exhaustive symbolic reading of the figure in his „declaration” of Alciato's emblem, which does nothing more than reiterate the commonplaces of his traditional exegesis. To this end he writes:

Entiéndese esta Emblema de la falsa observación, y guarda de la Religión, y contraria a la verdadera piedad, porque el recogimiento de las cosas malas se llama Ramera, la cual menospreciando a Dios, autor verdadero de las cosas, con aderezo sucio, no lícito, y nuevo, que es con costumbre de falsa, y fingida religión se sienta en una bestia sucia, y temerosa. Tiene en la mano un vaso dorado, significando la hipocresía, con la cual disimulados los vicios, y con color de verdadera piedad engaña a muchos, los cuales tomados de una beodez, más que loca, y desatinada, despeñándose caen en vicios y pecados. Por esta bestia se puede entender el pueblo infiel [...], y la ciudad cruel, que son contrarios al pueblo fiel, y a la Ciudad de Dios. La imagen de esta bestia parece también una ficción de los hombres, que profesan la fe, y viven como infieles, fingiendo que son buenos Cristianos, no siendo así, y de aquí cuadra bien el título *Ficta Religio*.³⁶

hydra, on a golden seat of honour. She holds a gilded cup with a serpent inside it, and is surrounded by kneeling or dead men on the ground, already poisoned by her venom. See Ripa's personification of „False religion” in Ripa, II, 263.

36 López, fols. 27 v-28 r. A bit further on—fols. 28 v-29 r—he clarifies: „[...] en la cual [Emblema] pone esta mujer sentada sobre esta bestia, la cual significa el pueblo pecador, y las vestiduras coloradas, significan el pueblo de los hombres soberbios y crueles, lleno de todos los engaños de la verdad fingida. Y cuando dice que tiene el vaso de oro en la mano lleno de las abominaciones, y suciedad de la fornicación, nos da a entender los Cristianos hipócritas y fingidos, los cuales de fuera muestran que son justos, buenos, santos y limpios como oro, y por dentro están llenos de toda la inmundicia y suciedad, como esta mujer, que yendo con tanta autoridad, y demostración de virtud y bondad, da a beber por el vaso ponzoña, y por esto le cuadra bien el título *Ficta religio*. Las siete cabezas significan los siete pecados mortales. Y los cuernos, significan la fortaleza, con

[This emblem should be understood as false observation, and false observance of Religion, and contrary to true piety, because the assemblage of evil things is called Whore. she who, scorning God, the true author of things, with filthy adornment, illicit, and new, which is with the custom of false and feigned religion, sits on a filthy and fearsome beast. She holds in her hand a gilded cup, signifying hypocrisy, with which she deceives many, with vices dissimulated, and with the color of true piety, and they, under the influence of an intoxication that is beyond madness and foolishness, fall headlong into vices and sins. With this beast one should understand the unbelieving people (...), and the cruel city, who are the enemy of faithful believers, and of the City of God. The image of this beast also appears to be a fiction invented by men who profess the faith and live as infidels, pretending that they are good Christians, while not being so, and thus the title is very fitting: *Ficta Religio*.]

But he quickly moves beyond generalities to an interpretation of the apocalyptic figure as the incarnation of the Protestant tide that swept over Catholic Europe during the previous century, in a clear reply to the exploitation of the motif, as we have already seen, by the Wittenberg circle:

Esto ha sucedido en nuestros tiempos en algunas Provincias, y Reinos que algunos han engañado a muchos dándoles a beber doctrina errónea como de vaso dorado fingiendo santidad, y como embriagados han menospreciado la fuente de la sana y católica doctrina, y se han quedado postrados, y casi semejantes a esta gente, que aquí pinta Alciato arrodillada delante de esta bestia, y mujer, la cual aunque da a beber por vaso dorado, y tiene vestido honrado, y de autoridad es para encubrir mejor su malicia, y el daño, que hace, porque no hay peor vicio que aquel, que se cubre debajo de hábito honrado, porque así se engañara cualquiera.³⁷

que esta mujer engaña a todos, y la gloria que recibe de engañarlos dándoles a beber por el vaso dorado suciedades, e inmundicias? [in which [Emblem] he puts this woman seated on this beast, which signifies the sinful people, and her colorful garments signify those people who are proud and cruel men, full of all the deceits of deigned truth. And when he says that she has the golden cup in her hand, full of abominations and the filthiness of formation, he wants us to understand this as the hypocritical and false Christians, who on the outside have the appearance of being just, good, holy and pure, like gold, but inside, they are full of garbage and filth, like this woman, who, riding with such authority and external demonstration of virtue and goodness, offers drinks from her cup of poison, and therefore the title of *Ficta religio* is very fitting. The seven heads signify the seven deadly sins. And the horns signify the strength with which this woman deceives everyone, and the glory that she derives from deceiving them by having them drink filth and rubbish from the gilded cup].

³⁷López, fol. 29 v.

[This has happened in our times in some Provinces and Kingdoms, where a few have deceived many, giving them erroneous doctrine to drink, as though from a gilded cup, feigning holiness, and as though they were inebriated, they have scorned the fountain of healthy and Catholic doctrine, and they have remained prostate, and almost just like these people that Alciato depicts here, kneeling before this beast and woman, she who, although offering drink from a gilded cup and wearing honorable and authoritative clothing, does so in order to cover her malice better, and the harm that she causes, because there is no worse vice than that which lurks beneath an honorable exterior cloak, because anyone could be thus deceived.]

From the opposing side, the Flemish emblemist Jan van der Noot, a militant reformed Protestant, and with a possible Calvinist affiliation, included the motif in his *Het theatre oft Toon-neel* (Antwerp, 1568), in accordance with the habitual iconographical model described above men of differing conditions, among them a king and a soldier, prostrate themselves before the crowned lady who offers them the cup. Although in the sonnet that accompanies the image—this work does not include mottoes—we do not find explicit allusions,³⁸ the author's ideological orientation makes us understand that the references to blasphemy or pride, more than a generalized criticism of Dutch society of his time, are instead defining some of the vices attributed to Papists, and thus prefiguring, by means of the subsequent fall „great Babylonia” prophesied by an angel, their imminent destruction.

Brief Return to Moralizing Exemplarity

With the turn of the century, the icon of the Whore and her terrible beast was definitively stripped of its polemical overtones, and in emblematic and edifying literature of the seventeenth century it recuperated its connotations of exemplariness that had been acquired through medieval exegesis. An illustrative example is the emblematic *pictura* offered to us by Sebastián de Covarrubias, the canon from Cuenca, in his ample repertory (Fig. 5), with the motto *Qui bibit inde, furit* [Whoever drinks there, goes mad]. In this emblem, Covarrubias recuperates the already classical image of the whore, although with certain technical modifications in the icon: she is alone on the beast, without the habitual entourage of admirers, and wearing garments appropriate to a noble Spanish woman at the beginning of the seventeenth century, in harmony with her didactical lesson. In the epigram we read:

38 See on this topic Daly, 5 and 25, the source of these brief biographical data.

Queréis saber quién es esta señora,
 Que sobre un vario monstruo va sentada,
 Con un vaso en la mano, a quien adora
 La gente más válida, y más preciada:
 Es la Ambición perversa encantadora,
 Que os brinda con su taza emponzoñada
 No bebáis su licor, mucho ni poco,
 Si no queréis al punto quedar loco.³⁹

[You want to know who this lady is,
 Who rides seated on a motley monster,
 With a cup in her hand, and who is adored
 By the most powerful and esteemed people:
 It is perverse and bewitching Ambition,
 Who toasts you with her poisoned cup.
 Do not drink its liquor, neither much nor a little,
 If you do not want to go instantly mad.]

Covarrubias tries to avoid, as did Alciato, the most controversial aspects of the figure, which he proposes, quite simply, as an allegory of ambition:⁴⁰ „La figura de la ambición está representada en una doncella sobre una bestia con muchas cabezas, en razón de los diversos caminos que toma para su desvanecimiento, y el vaso con que embriaga el demasiado afecto con que lo procura”⁴¹ [The figure of ambition is depicted as a maiden riding a beast of many heads, owing to the diverse roads she takes to display her vanity, and the cup she uses to intoxicate the excessive affect with which she attempts it.]. With this author, the eschatological motif makes the definitive leap into Hispanic moral-didactic literature. Juan de Torres (XIII, II, 422) had already

39 Covarrubias, *Emblemas Morales* Centuria III, emblem 75, fol. 275.

40 In a drawing from a manuscript by Francisco de Holanda, *De aetatibus mundi imagines*, in Madrid's Biblioteca Nacional (1545-1573) -B[arcia] 6926-7073 (14-26), fol. 67 r, illust. 133, we find this personification, in one of the few depictions that does not follow in the wake of Dürer's iconographical model, decidedly carnal and shameless, as a symbol, according to the image's own caption *concupiscentia carnis, concupiscentia oculorum* and *superbia vitae*.

41 In another emblem of Covarrubias cent. I, emb. 74, *Tot sententiae* [So many opinions], the hydra or beast of seven heads is also used to symbolize civil discord. Another possible slight allusion to the apocalyptic woman may be the personification of Vanity in an emblem from the *Pia desideria* by Herman Hugo (Antwerp, 1676), II, emblema 5, *Averte oculos meos ne videant vanitatem*, in which we see a crowned woman ornately dressed who carries a fan of peacock feathers and a cup, from which soap bubbles emerge; this figure, in turn, appears to derive from an anonymous engraving of the *Lady of the World*, executed in the Netherlands (c. 1585).

warned youths a few years earlier that whoever drinks from the cup of the Great Sinner, and allows himself to be dragged along by the vice of sensuality, loses the virtue of temperance and is transformed into an irrational beast. The Jesuits would make the same use of that personification: Father Juan Eusebio Nieremberg (epist. XXIV, 10-25) alludes to it to denounce man's greed, and Francisco Garau (máxima XVII, 442-443) winds up calling the Great Whore the epitome of all vices, and anyone who gives in and drinks from her cup has debased himself to the condition of a slave, who becomes „ciego y abrasado” [blind and burning with shame]. Let us finish this rapid overview with a fragment from the *Criticón* by the Jesuit Baltasar Gracián (III, 3), in which he warns of the thirst for power and ambition he saw unleashed in his epoch, especially among courtiers and palace dwellers, in the passage that begins: „¡Oh monstruo cortesano! ¿Qué me buscas a mí? Anda, vete a tu Babilonia común, donde tantos y tontos pasan de ti y viven contigo, todo embuste, mentira, engaño, enredo, invenciones y quimeras” [Oh monstrous courtier! What do you seek in me? Go on, go away to your common Babylon, where so many fools exceed you and live with you, a total fraud, lie, deceit, intrigue, inventions and fantasies].

After these severe warnings, the iconic and literary trail of our baneful lady and multi-headed beast disappears. Once the period of maximum splendor has ended, both entities are plunged into a lengthy lethargy that for all practical purposes restricted their public presence to the conventional illustration of biblical texts, or popular devotional prints. But, like any other archetypal figuration, its resurgence did not take very long. With the new millenarianism that we experienced just a few years ago, and the spread of new imagery sustained by the possibilities of technological tools, our figure has experienced a new reactivation on the internet. By means of some hyper-real figurations halfway between photography and virtual recreation, endowed now with an unprecedented carnality and sensuality, that ancient motif manages to condense better than ever all the material temptations of our contemporary world. From a fatalistic point of view that reissues some eschatological evocations that we believed to have already been overcome, we view our current reality as one being dominated—in a cyclical return?—by a hedonism and perversion of customs easily attributable to the imposition by the great western economies of an uncontrolled and thoughtless consumerism, or, quite simply, to a new and deep crisis in the value system, which manifests itself in the absence of referents or clear ethical-moral models applicable to our daily lives. And it is at this point that we find once again those horrifying apocalyptic figures as an admonishing complaint. There is nothing like the old myths, deeply anchored in our collective subconscious, but always lying in wait, to once again clang the bell of our slumbering consciences.

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FIGURES



Figure 1 Albrecht Dürer, „Great Whore of Babylon Seated on the Seven Headed Beast Bestia Admired by the Ignorant” (woodcut), *Apocalipsis cum figuris*, Nuremberg, 1498, fig. 13.



Figure 2 Lucas Cranach, „The Whore” (woodcut), illustration for the *Septembertestament* of Martin Luther, Wittenberg, 1522.

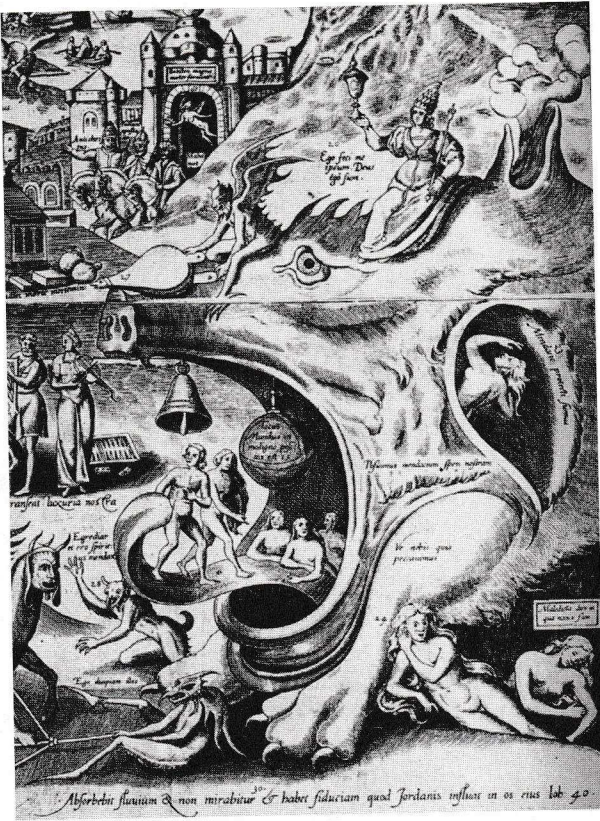


Figure 3 Anonymous Dutch, *De contemptu mundi* (copperplate engraving, c. 1550-1560), detail.



Figure 4 Anonymous Dutch, *Alba's Mission in the Netherlands and the Effects of His Tyranny* (copperplate engraving, 1572), print no. 3.

CENTVRIA III. 275



EMBLEMA 75.

Quereis saber quien es esta señora,
 q̄ sobre un vario mōstruo va sentada,
 Con un vaso en la mano, a quiẽ adora
 La gēte mas valida, y mas preciada:
 Es la Ambicion perversa encātadora,
 Que os brinda cō su taça empõçoñada
 No bevais su licor, mucho ni poco,
 Sino quereis al punto quedar loco.

Nn 3 ESTE

Figure 5 Sebastián de Covarrubias, *Emblemas morales*, Madrid: Luis Sánchez, 1610, Centuria III, emblem 75.

