

The Impresa of Ludovico Ariosto, Printers' Marks, Frontispieces of Books, Colophons, and Reverses of Medals: an Emblematic Imbroglia

Rubem Amaral Jr.

Investigador independiente

ramaraljr@netscape.net

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Resumen

La empresa del gran poeta italiano Ludovico Ariosto, mostrando abejas siendo expulsadas de la colmena por medio de humo, apareció en las primeras ediciones de su épico *Orlando Furioso* en 1516 y 1526, cercada por un marco con el mote PRO BONO MALVM con sus sílabas repartidas por las cuatro esquinas. En consecutivas impresiones de la obra, tal marco fue usado en los frontispicios de varias ediciones, y la *pictura*, desprovista del marco y del mote, fue reutilizada algunas veces en colofones. En ediciones de la versión definitiva del poema, a partir de 1532, una marca de impresor emblemática comenzó a figurar con el mote DILEXISTI MALITIAM SUPER BENIGNITATEM y la *pictura* de una mano con una tijera de podar cortándoles las lenguas a dos serpientes. El objetivo del presente texto es examinar la curiosa fusión establecida entre esos dos símbolos en libros y medallas dedicados a Ariosto.

Palabras clave

Ludovico Ariosto; *Orlando Furioso*; empresas; marca de impresor; frontispicio de libro; colofón; medallas

Título

La empresa de Ludovico Ariosto, marcas de impresores, frontispicios de libros, colofones y reversos de medallas: un embrollo emblemático

Abstract

The impresa of the great Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto, showing bees being expelled from the hive by means of smoke, appeared in the earliest editions of his epic *Orlando Furioso* in 1516 and 1526, encircled by a frame with the motto PRO BONO MALVM with its syllables distributed on the four corners. In successive prints of the work, such frame was used on the frontispieces of several editions, and the *pictura*, deprived of the frame and the motto, was sometimes used in colophons. In editions of the definitive version of the poem, starting from 1532, an emblematic printer's mark began to appear with the

motto *DILEXISTI MALITIAM SUPER BENIGNITATEM* and the *pictura* of a hand holding shears cutting the tongues of two serpents. The aim of this note is to examine the curious conflation established between these two emblems on books and medals associated to Ariosto.

Keywords

Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, imprese, printer's mark, frontispiece of book, colophon, medal



According to Paolo Giovio, the *impresa* of Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533), conceived by the poet himself, was the hive to which the ungrateful villager applies smoke and expells the bees in order to draw the honey and the wax, with the motto *Pro bono malvm* (Evil in return for good), perhaps wanting to make it understood how he had been mistreated by a patron, as it is inferred from his *Satire* (1978: 138-139) (fig. 1)¹. This is thought to refer to his first patron, cardinal Ippolito d'Este, who would have recompensed poorly for the poet's services. It is possible that it reflects a rather general feeling about human behaviour. In Alberto Casadei's words (1996: 2, my translation):

I don't think it necessary to recall how complex is the question of the interpretation relating to the final motto of the *Furioso*, even in the most recent exegetes who, although having furnished much and important information, both on the philologic-bibliographic and the historic aspects, have admitted that the literal sense of the phrase that appears in the Ariostesque *impresa* remains difficult.

Referring to the meaning of this *impresa*, Torquato Tasso states that poets are similar to bees, expelled by the ingratitude and the fume of someone else's ambition (1993: 166).

Hercole Tasso, however, criticizes this *impresa*, considering that its concept is moral and the motto finishes without any compassion towards the bees, besides showing that he is the one who gives evil in turn for good, whereas the *impresa* should be applied to him who bears it (1614: 49).

¹ Maria Luisa Doglio, in her edition of Giovio's *Dialogo dell'imprese militari e amorose*, lists the places of the poet's complaints, not only in the *Satire*, but also in the *Cinque canti* and the *Orlando Furioso* (Giovio, 1978: 139, note 256).



Fig. 1. Impresa of Ludovico Ariosto according to Paolo Giovio (Giovio: 1978, 138).

In lines 3-8 of *stanza* 46 of the last of his *Cinque canti*, Ariosto attaches this impresa to the knight Rinaldo (1545: 25v):

*de la schiera di mezo fu il maestro
Rinaldo, che quel di molto era adorno
d'un ricco drappo di color cilestro
sparso di pecchie d'or dentro e d'intorno,
che cacciate parean dal natio loco
dall'ingrato villan con fumo e foco.*

[of the middle rank was master
Rinaldo, who that day was very adorned
with a rich cloth in the colour sky-blue
scattered with gold bees within and around,
which appeared expelled from the native place
by the ungrateful villager with smoke and fire.]
(My translation)

The *editio princeps* of the *Orlando Furioso* (Venezia, Giovanni Mazzoco dal Bondeno, 1516) contains, on folio 2v., an engraving of this impresa with a different drawing from Giovio's version², within a broad frame showing, in its borders, repeated eight times all around, two crossed tools —maul and ax— with a serpent entwined between them, probably symbolizing

² In Ariosto's book, the bees are expelled out of a stump; in Giovio's, they flee from a hive over a stump, and the motto is inscribed on a ribbon above the *pictura* without a frame.

hard work and slander. In it, the syllables of the motto are distributed among the four corners of the plate (fig. 2). As the two parts later came to be used separately in several occasions, and the motto is included in the frame, it is not clear to me whether the *pictura* of the impresa was originally intended as composed by both, since Giovio refers only to the central piece. As it will be seen, the maul and ax, with the serpent and the motto, will also appear as a discrete symbol.

So, it looks like the engraving of 1516 contained either two imprese with the same *inscriptio* or one impresa with two *picturae*, that is to say one soul with two bodies of different meanings. The first case was not unusual for different imprese, as exemplified by Mason Tung in his *Impresa Index* (2006: XIII), although not in the same impresa. But this was four decades before Giovio published his rules for a perfect impresa (1978: 37-38).

About the impresa's supposed allusion to cardinal d'Este's ingratitude, it is interesting to notice that the book is dedicated to the cardinal and that Ariosto left his service only in 1518, when, with allegations of health and family problems, he declined to accompany the prelate in his displacement to Hungary. This refusal was not deemed acceptable by Ippolito, thus giving place to their estrangement.



Fig. 2. Impresa of Ariosto in the *Orlando Furioso*, Venezia, Giovanni Mazzocco, 1516. Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. ark:/121448/bpt6k1069706h.

Jane E. Everson, quoting Marco Dorigatti in the latter's Introduction to the edition of the *Orlando Furioso* according to the *princeps* of 1516, for whom

the image of the bees is “*di indubbia paternità ariostesca*” (“of undoubted Ariostesque paternity”), emphasises that “the inclusion of such an emblem with its punning or hidden meaning and its precise link to the author is perhaps the most original material aspect of the 1516 *Furioso*” (2016: 80-81).



Fig. 3. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, Milano, Angelo Scinsenzeler, 1526. OPAC SBN IT\ICCU\CNCE\002553

A similar plate appears in the frontispiece of the 1526 Milanese edition by Angelo Scinsenzeler (fig. 3). The same frame³, without the impresa, was used in the Ferrarese edition by Giovan Battista de la Pigna (1521) (fig. 4), in the Venetian editions by Nicolò Zoppino and Vincentio Compagni (1524), by Elisabetta Rusconi (1524), by Hieronimo Pentio da Lecho (1530), and by Sisto Libbraro al Libro (1526), only with the title of the poem and the author's name inside it; and in the 1530 and 1536 Venetian editions by Nicolò d'Aristotile detto Zoppino, with a portrait of the poet in place of the impresa's *pictura*, and the *pictura* in the colophon, without the frame (fig. 5)⁴. The Venetian editions by Alessandro Bindoni and Mapheo Pasini (1533, 1535, and 1540) bring as illustration the portrait

of Ariosto inside the frame, based on the frontispiece of the Zoppino 1530 edition (fig. 6).

³ It can be noticed that the cut for this frame, which probably passed from one printer to another, constituted a separate piece from its internal content, which was filled in with texts or images in accordance with each editor's choice. Consequently, the *inscriptio* on the corners became independent from the original central *pictura*, and the latter became independent from the *inscriptio*, as in the Zoppino 1530 edition. Another possibility is that some editions with the frame were printed by the same printer, the owner of the cut, at the editors' expense.

⁴ In the Catalog OPAC SBN it is qualified as mark.



Fig. 4. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, Ferrara, Giovanni Battista de la Pigna, 1521. Internet Archive, Google books.



Fig. 5. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, Venezia, Nicolò d'Aristotile detto Zoppino, 1530. OPAC SBN IT\ICCU\CFIE\001472.



Fig. 6. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, Colophon. Venezia, Alessandro Bindoni and Mapheo Pasini, 1533. OPAC SBN IT\ICCU\CNCE\002568.

A bronze medal for Ariosto by Pastorino di Giovan Michele de' Pastorini (?-c. 1591), of c. 1550, shows, on the reverse, the same impresa in a different form, the bees fleeing from a tall rectangular hive, with the motto in exergue (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Medal by Pastorino de'Pastorini, Siena, c. 1552-1555. By kind permission of the Collection of Joseph Marino.

The motto has its source in the *Bible*, either from Genesis 4:4 or Jeremiah 18:20 (Casadei, 3).

Like Everson, following Dorigatti's steps, "I do not intend to enter into a discussion of the interpretation of the woodcut emblem, on which much critical ink has been spilt" (2016: 80), but rather to examine a misunderstanding involving it and the mark of the printers of the Ferrarese 1532 edition by Francesco Rosso da Valenza, and the Venetian 1525, 1526, 1535, 1540, and 1542 editions by Francesco Bindoni and Mapheo Pasini: a hand holding shears, emerging from a cloud, having cut off the tongue of one of two ophidians, which is seen falling down, and preparing to cut off that of the other. In Rosso's edition, a band above contains the inscription *Dilexisti malitiam super benignitatem* (You preferred evil to goodness) from Psalms 51:14 (fig. 8). In the Bondini/Pasini editions, the same image is reversed, with the inscription divided outside, along both sides of a linear frame (fig. 9).

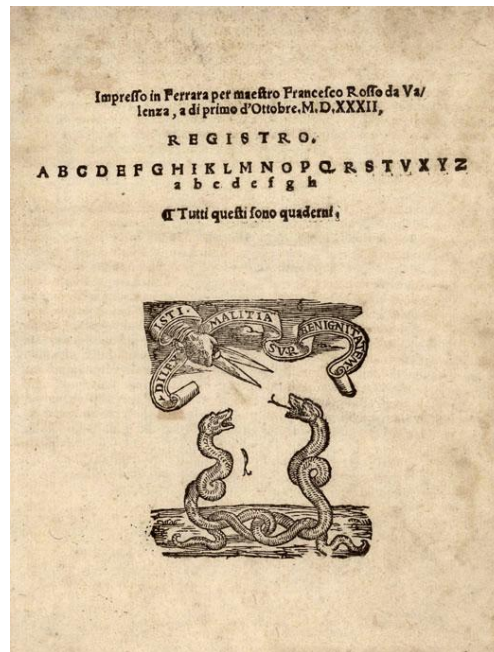


Fig. 8. Mark of the printer Francesco Rosso da Valenza in the colophon of the Ferrara 1532 edition of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. Les Bibliothèques Visuelles Humanistes.



Fig. 9. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, Venezia, Francesco Bindoni and Mapheo Pasini, 1535. OPAC SBN IT\ICCU\CFIE\001474-.

Bindoni and Pasini used this mark without the lemma on the frontispiece of the editions of 1535, 1537 (fig. 10), 1540, 1544, and 1550 of *Le Satire*, on the colophon of the edition of 1535 of *La Lena*, both of Ariosto, and on the frontispiece of Ludovico Dolce's *La Poetica d'Horatio* of 1535⁵.

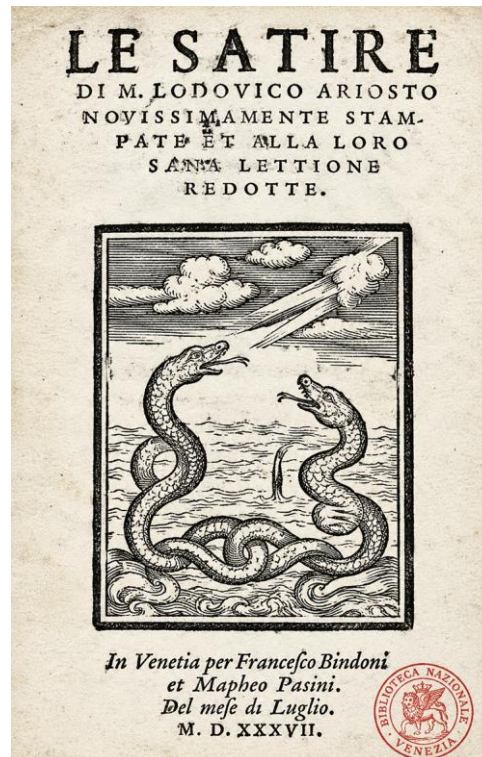


Fig. 10. Ludovico Ariosto, *Le Satire*, Venezia, Francesco Bindoni and Mapheo Pasini, 1537. OPAC SBN IT\ICCU\CNCE\002601.

Giuseppina Zappella comments that this mark was used by those two printers and also by Antonio Blado, the latter in Rome⁶ (1998: 2, figs. 1054 and 1055), and adds that, as the biblical motto confirms with reference to a perfidious and powerful tattler, the Idumaeen Doug, the printers have intended,

⁵ They used also, in most of their prints, including in the colophon of the 1532 edition of the *Orlando Furioso*, a mark with the Archangel Raphael and Tobias (Zappella, XII f, and figs. 90-99).

⁶ I have seen references to an edition of 1533 of the *Orlando Furioso* by Antonio Blado but could not find any copy of it. His 1543 Roman edition shows a quite different mark. See Zappella 1998: XVI n, and fig. 128.

with such mark, to stigmatize tattle and evil tongues, being not hazardous, in this case as in others marks with serpents, to discover a veiled reference to the tattles, accusations, and calumnies which poisoned the everyday life of typographers (1998: 1, CCXXIr).

Zappella doesn't make any link between Ariosto and this device. However, in the poet's time, probably because of association with the sense of the lemma *Pro bono malum*, people may have considered, with reason or not, that it related also to him⁷.

Ludovico Dolce, for example, in his *Dialogo dei colori*, published in 1565, declares (50-50v, my translation):

Thence Ariosto, having been bitten, in the first edition of his *Furioso*, by the envy of the detractors, and later in time, having the truth seemingly cut the tongue of those maligners, his poem having been acknowledged as rare and excellent, in the second edition took this impresa which he made to be printed at the end of the book: two serpents, to one of which the tongue was cut, and above the other, that vibrated it swollen with poison, it was shown a hand holding shears in the act of cutting it too, with a motto that declared: *Dilexisti malitiam super benignitatem*. Which was no less beautiful than that other that he put in its first edition, just in the first leaf: which was a hive, from which the bees were forced to flee with fire by the ungrateful villager, threatening to kill them, although they had produced the honey, putting in it the motto: *Pro bono malum*.

One clear demonstration of this conviction in a book is the *Orlando Furioso*'s frontispiece of the Venetian 1540 edition by Pietro di Nicolini da Sabbio, in which the mark of Francesco Rosso appears divided in two parts: the one on the top of the frame, with the lemma *Dilexisti malitiam super benignitatem* and the hand holding the shears; the other on the bottom with the two serpents (see the details in fig. 13); in the colophon, the *pictura* of the emblem of the bees (figs. 11 and 12).

⁷ Even as recently as the 20th century Nicola Zingarelli's editions of the *Orlando Furioso* (Milano, Ulrico Hoepli) reproduce, after the poem, the *pictura* of the mark of the 1532 edition, calling it ambiguously "*impresa allegorica*" ("allegorical impresa"), with no connection to the printer. A similar print dated 1898 is currently offered for sale by gettyimages as Ariosto's device, without indication of the source.

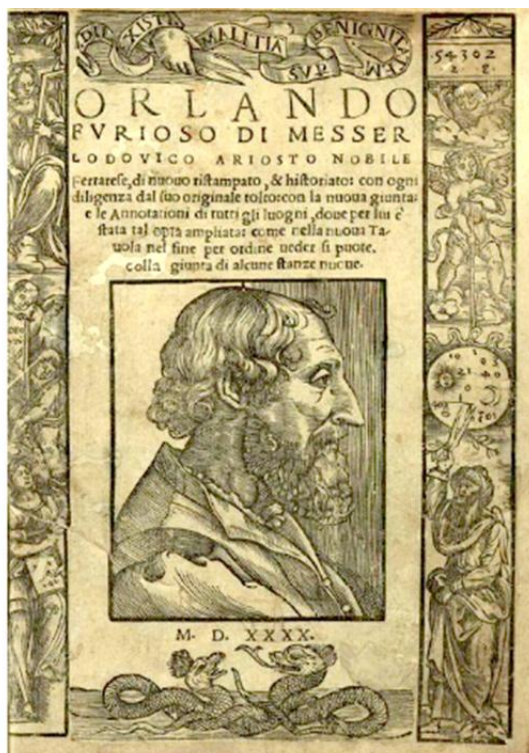


Fig. 11. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, Frontispiece. Venezia, Pietro di Nicolini da Sabbio, 1540. OPAC SBN IT\ICCU\CNCE\002615.



Fig. 12. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, Colophon. Venezia, Pietro di Nicolini da Sabbio, 1540. OPAC SBN IT\ICCU\CNCE\002615.



Fig. 13. Details of the top and the bottom of the frontispiece in fig. 11.

Also on the Venetian editions by Girolamo Porro of 1566, by Vincenzo Valgrisi and heirs, of 1556, 1558, 1560, 1562, 1565, 1568, 1570, 1572, 1573, and 1580, and by Felice Valgrisi of 1577, 1587, and 1603, on the socles of the caryatides supporting the entablature with Ariosto's effigy, on the left side the lemma *Pro bono malum* appears with the crossed tools and the serpent, thus forming an autonomous impresa, and, on the right side, the lemma *Dilexisti malitiam super benignitatem*, with the usual *pictura* (fig. 14). See the detail of the socles in fig. 15.

In both cases, being not the printers' marks, these images look like obvious allusions to the author of the poem.

Another such example in a different medium is the image on the obverse of a bronze medal of Ariosto struck by Domenico Poggini (1520-1590) showing a conflation of the motto of the poet's impresa *Pro bono malum* in exergue, with the *pictura* of the printers' mark showing only one serpent (fig. 16).

Charles Francis Keary observes (1881: No. 202) that the motto upon this medal is the same as that on the medal of Ariosto by Pastorino described above, but the meaning of the reverse design is very different. For Keary, both, it is probable, refer to the quarrel between Ariosto and the elder cardinal d'Este—to whom, I recall, the *Orlando Furioso* had been dedicated—but one takes the side of the poet who is symbolized by the bees, expelled from their home as an ungrateful return for the honey which they have given, while the other

medal, taking the side of the cardinal, symbolizes Ariosto as a serpent who stings those that have nurtured him.

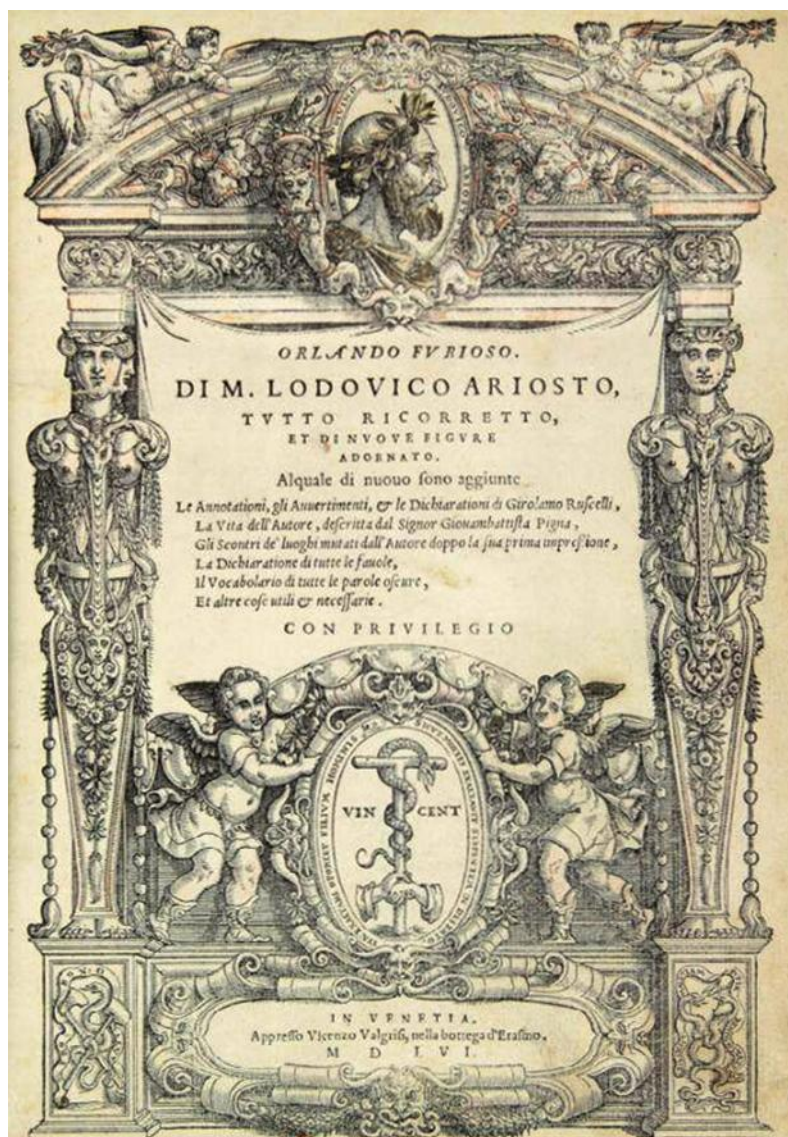


Fig. 14. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, Venezia, Vincenzo Valgrisi, 1556. OPAC SBN IT\ICCU\VAIE\011366.

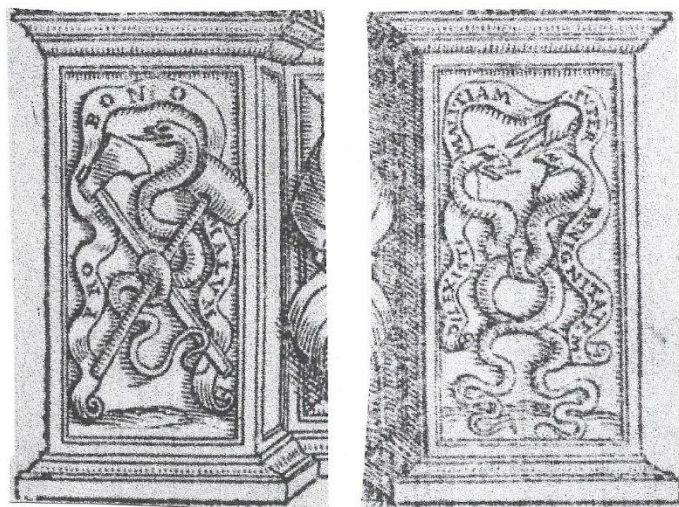


Fig. 15. Details of the socles in fig. 14.



Fig. 16. Medal by Domenico Porgini, Ferrara. By kind permission of Cambi casa d'aste archives.

According to the Musei Comune di Ferrara, it has been hypothesized that Poggini's medal was cast on the occasion of the wedding between Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, and Lucrezia de' Medici in April 1558, and that the depiction proposed on the reverse, together with the legend *Pro bono malvm*, may be an allusion to the rumors that pointed to Lucrezia as "guerza and ugly", that Anna, Alfonso's sister, had spread in the French court. In this sense, the act

of cutting off the serpent's tongue would represent the silencing of slander against the duchess of Ferrara⁸. If this interpretation is true, the medal would represent a criticism rather than a celebration of the poet. I ignore what may have been the relation of these rumors with Ariosto, but it is certain that he passed from the service of cardinal d'Este to that of Alfonso.

To conclude with the conflation of the person of Ariosto with the mark of the printers of the *Orlando Furioso*, the magnificent Venetian edition of 1772-1733 by Antonio Zetta illustrates the frontispieces of its four volumes with the image of a medal with the bust of the poet on the obverse and, on the reverse, the motto *Dilexisti malitiam super benignitatem* and the *pictura* clearly reminiscent of that of the Poggini medal, but with two serpents side by side instead of only one (fig. 17). Besides, at the end of the "*Vita di Msr. Lodovico Ariosto*" ("Life of Mr. Ludovico Ariosto"), p. XXXIII, it presents another medal with the bust of the poet on the obverse and the *pictura* of the emblem of the bees on the reverse, with the motto *Pro bono malum*, evidently imitating the medal of Pastorino, but with the images turned to the right on both sides (fig. 18).

In the "*Avviso dello stampatore*" ("Printer's warning") at the beginning of the first volume of his edition, and in notes *gg* and *kk* of the "*Vita*", Zetta refers to the medal of the vipers ("*delle Viperi*") of the frontispiece, and to the medal of the bees ("*dell' Api*") after the "*Vita*", but gives no information about the reason for the changes introduced in the images of the models. They were never stricken. However, due to their presentation with the faces linked by a bar, seem to have been copied from a catalogue of medals, in which the author noticed and corrected Poggini's conflation.

⁸ <https://www.museiferrara.it/en/capolavori/domenico-poggini-medal/> [Consulted on 05.09.2026]

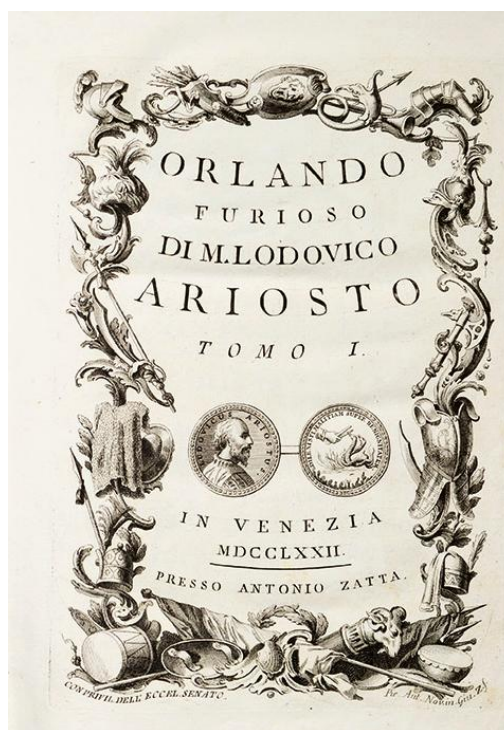


Fig. 17. Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Venezia, Francesco Antonio Zatta, 1772. Google.



Fig. 18. Medals of Ludovico Ariosto in Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, Venezia, Francesco Antonio Zatta, 1772, frontispiece and p. XXXIII respectively.

CONCLUSIONS

In the time of the appearance of the earliest editions of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, and apparently even many years later, there was not possibly a precise idea of the difference between, on the one hand, his own impresa, showing the *inscriptio Pro bono malum*, with the *pictura* of the bees being expelled from the hive by means of smoke, and, on the other hand, the mark of the printers showing the motto *Dilexisti malitiam super benignitatem* with the *pictura* of the shears cutting off the tongues of two serpents. Evidence of this is the fact that medals, real or fictitious, with the bust of the poet on the obverse, make a conflation between his person on the obverse and the printers' mark on the reverse. Perhaps the complaintive nature of both devices, combined with rumors of the poet as author or victim of court slanders, have contributed to such uncertainty. Besides, as this mark is almost exclusive of editions of Ariosto's books, I don't discard the possibility that it might have been

conceived by him especially for them, alluding to his personal circumstances at the time, as expressed by Ludovico Dolce, having been appropriated by the printers for their work, since its symbolism applied also to their plight, as suggested by Giuseppina Zappella. I suspect that Filippo Ermini, the curator of the edition of the *Furioso* for the Società Filologica Romana, believed that both symbols belonged to Ariosto, although he interprets wrongly the second one as *due bisce che si mordono* (two serpents that bite each other) (Ariosto, 1913: III, X).



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