

# Fate and Fortune in European Thought, ca. 1400–1650

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## Renaissance Iconology of Fate

*Damiano Acciarino*

In his *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (Fig. 8.1), Aby Warburg saw the concepts of Fortune and Fate during the Renaissance as indicative of a deep cultural conflict between an active and passive psychological approach to events (“Symbol eines aktiv-passiven Schicksalkämpfers gemacht”).<sup>1</sup> This conflict manifested itself in a battle between opposite visions of the world that developed a specific iconographical language to discuss how the human soul faced events. In a letter to Edwin Seligman dated 1927 Warburg explains this duality by quoting two excerpts of a fifteenth-century epistolary exchange between Francesco Rucellai and Marsilio Ficino that clearly pointed to this profound tension:<sup>2</sup>

“Have human reason and practical intelligence any power against the accidents of fate, against Fortune?” [...] he [Francesco Rucellai] solicited and received an expert opinion in the form of a long epistle from Marsilio Ficino. The response to his inquiry as to how man could counteract or prevent future events, especially so-called chance ones, [...] culminated in the following advice on the battle against Fortune: “It is good to do battle with Fortune, wielding the weapons of foresight, patience, and noble ambition. It is even better to withdraw, and to shun such a combat, from which so few emerge victorious – and then after intolerable labor and effort. It is better to make peace or a truce with Fortune, bending our wishes to her will and willingly going the way that she directs, to prevent her from resorting to force. All this we shall do, if we can combine within ourselves the might, the wisdom, and the will.”

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- 1 Giulio Bordignon, Monica Centanni, and Silvia Urbini, “Fortuna nel Rinascimento. Una lettura di Tavola 48 del *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*,” *Engramma*, 92, 8 (August 2011); Giulio Bordignon, Monica Centanni and Silvia Urbini, “Fortuna during the Renaissance. A Reading of Plate 48 of Aby Warburg’s *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*,” *Engramma*, 137, 8 (August 2016). See also Alfred Doren, “Fortuna im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance,” in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg. Vol. 2: Vorträge 1922–1923*, ed. Fritz Saxl (Leipzig; Berlin: Teubner, 1924), 71–144 and Klaus Reichert, *Fortuna oder die Beständigkeit des Wechsels* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985).
  - 2 The letter addressed to Seligman is at the Warburg Institute, WIA, GC/19326.





FIGURE 8.1 Aby Warburg, *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, table 48

Warburg also recalled the passage from Leon Battista Alberti's *Intercenales* dedicated to *Fatum et Fortuna*,<sup>3</sup> in which he emphasized the “relationship between cosmic order – *Fatum* – and human initiative – *Fortuna*,” figured respectively as a river and as a man attempting to sail upon it. Eventually, Warburg ended up focusing only on the iconography of fortune (“Fortune with Wheel”, “Fortune with Forelock” and “Fortune with Sail”), thereby avoiding a

3 On *fatum* and *fortuna* in Alberti, see Paolo Marolda, *L.B. Alberti e il problema della politica: il “Fatum” et “Fortuna” e i “Libri della famiglia”* (Florence: Sansoni, 1986).

more thorough investigation of how fate was shaped and featured, and how its imagery interacted with the coeval literary and philosophical production.

Three archetypal figurations of Fate can be identified for the period between the end of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth: “Fate as Death,” “Fate as Star,” and “Fate as Chain.” Each of these views mirrored the hermeneutical approach towards a force (Fate) that the Renaissance perceived as present and concrete in everyday life, but extremely difficult to circumscribe and define. Nevertheless, according to Marian Heitzam, two different approaches could be identified: a “deterministic” one and a “humanistic” one. The former investigated fate as the cause of all natural phenomena, of its impact on human lives and on its predictability; the second investigated the influence of fate on the ethical dimension, hence on free will and justice. Both the approaches implied relations with Providence, which stood in between the physical and metaphysical dimension, of which Man was witness.<sup>4</sup> In fact, to determine its action and function, the philosophical and theological dissertations of the time approached fate in relation to or in contrast with other similar or discordant concepts – such as fortune, chance, necessity, free will, and predestination – in the arduous attempt to find a precarious balance between causality and unpredictability.<sup>5</sup> However, admitting the existence of even one of these terms sometimes led to the exclusion of the other terms, thereby compromising the stability of Christian thought.<sup>6</sup>

During the Reformation, the entire question became a delicate and sometimes dangerous topic of discussion, often bordering on heresy. For example, if fate was identified with the notion of cosmic order (as happened after the Neoplatonic meditations carried out by Marsilio Ficino),<sup>7</sup> one still needed to determine whether fate was a synonym for divine providence or for nature and, in each case, the difference between these two terms needed to be specified in detail. On the one hand, if fate was equated with providence and considered a projection of God’s will on the world, this could imply that human beings lost their autonomy of action. On the other hand, if fate was considered to be the same as nature – which was created by God but constituted a

4 Marian Heitzam, “La libertà e il fato nella filosofia di Marsilio Ficino,” *Rivista di filosofia neoscolastica*, 28, 4–5 (1936), 351.

5 Coluccio Salutati, *De fato et fortuna*, ed. Concetta Bianca (Florence: Olschki, 1985); Rita Ramberti, *Il problema del libero arbitrio nel pensiero di Pietro Pomponazzi: la dottrina etica del De fato: spunti di critica filosofica e teologica nel Cinquecento* (Florence: Olschki, 2007).

6 At the beginning of the sixteenth century, these issues were widely debated and resulted in several influential treatises such as: Desiderius Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio diatribe sive collatio* (Venice: De Gregori, 1524); Martin Luther, *De servo arbitrio* (Wittemberg: Lufft, 1525); Juan Ginés de Sepulveda, *De fato et libero arbitrio libri tres* (Rome: Antonium Bladum, 1526).

7 Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 74–91.

separate entity – then its influence was limited only to creation, thereby granting humans the full exercise of free will. The repercussions of these two general statements could respectively increase the reliability of astrology and horoscopes, according to their capacity for reading the signs of an invisible but pre-determined plan in the world of phenomena.

In order to better understand the early modern view of fate and its representations, one might consider the lexicographical analysis of the various Greek terms associated with fate carried out by the Neapolitan scholar Simone Porzio in his *De fato* (ca. 1540).<sup>8</sup> A closer examination of his section on *De nomine fati*, in particular, can be relevant to our understanding of the question and offer additional information for a fuller examination of the Renaissance concept of fate. Porzio points out that:

In Aristotle's book *On the Universe*, we can find six names [for fate]: the first is *eimarmenē*, that is fate, from *eirein*, meaning to move on and to proceed without obstacles; the second is *peprōmenon*, that circumscribes everything, because all the things are determined according to specific boundaries; that no natural thing lasts forever is the third and is defined *moira*, or Parcae, because it is distributed all over the world and in the universe; *nemesis* is the fourth, because it takes part in all things and dispenses all the peculiarities according to nature; for some it appears more evident, for others it appears more obscure, due to the first of one hundred skies, this is the fifth, *adraftos*, because it is the immutable cause of all things; and *aisa*, the last one, because all things acquire their own specific status, both in life and in death.<sup>9</sup>

In light of such an uncertain and variable theoretical context, the several characterizations of fate found in early modern philosophical treatises and

8 Eva Del Soldato, "Il *De fato* di Simone Porzio," *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, 92 (2013), 543–84.

9 Del Soldato, "Il *De fato* di Simone Porzio," 554: "Apud Aristotelem in libro *De mundo*, sex nomina invenimus, primum *Himarmenon* [εἰμαρμένη], idest fatum ab *eirein* convertere, et procedere sine impedimento, *Pepromenen* [πεπρωμένον] circumscribi omnia, quoniam omnia sunt certis terminis finita, innatum nihil infinitum decurrit, dicitur *Moeram* [μοῖρα], idest parca quoniam partita est in omnem terrae tractum et in universo mundo, *Nemesis* [νέμεσις] dicitur etiam quoniam omnibus impartitur et distribuit secundum naturae conditionem, his quidem clarius, his quidem obscurius primo caeli 100, *Adrastian* [ἄδραστος], quia est causa immutabilis omnium, et *Aisa* [αἴσα], quoniam semper statum obtinet suum, nec modo est, modo occidit" (my translation). For the real etymology, see *Il trattato Sul cosmo per Alessandro attribuito ad Aristotele: monografia introduttiva, testo greco con traduzione a fronte, commentario, bibliografia ragionata e indici*, ed. Giovanni Reale and Abraham P. Bos (Milan: Vita & Pensiero, 1995), 186–89 and 275–76.

linguistic dissertations are not surprising. Nor is it surprising that one finds such diversity in contemporary figurative representations of fate. Each definition of fate provided by Porzio has its specific and distinctive representation in contemporary figurative descriptions, as we will now point out.

## 1 Fate as Death

The first humanistic source to provide a precise figurative description for the concept of fate is Giovanni Boccaccio's *Genealogiae deorum gentilium*,<sup>10</sup> which says that, according to Cicero and Seneca, the Latin word *fatum* was identified with the Parcae, the three sisters (Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos) who spin, measure, and cut the thread of life. Through these three allegorical figures, fate acquires the meaning of death. Referring back to the otherwise little-known mythographer Theodontius, Boccaccio sees the three Parcae as part of nature ("cum rerum natura creatas"),<sup>11</sup> because they are directly related to Pan, the personification of nature ("Parcarum officia, in quibus continuum nature presant obsequium").<sup>12</sup> Because of this, Boccaccio includes them as an active factor in the process of generation and destruction of the world. Boccaccio also indicated that their action was somehow assimilated to the action of time ("si potestatem earum ad eiusdem similitudinem temporis referas").<sup>13</sup>

Boccaccio quotes the famous proverb by Cleanthes, "the Fates lead the willing and drag the unwilling along"<sup>14</sup> ("ducunt volentem Fata, nolentem trahunt") and a line from Seneca's *Oedipus* (980–994) that "we are driven by Fate, believe Fate" ("Fatis agimur, credite Fatis"),<sup>15</sup> in order to prove that "the first day of human life already establishes the last one," that is in the birth of an individual it is possible to read his own death ("primusque dies dedit extremum"). Echoing Fulgentius, Boccaccio also connected the combination Fate/Parcae to Hades, god of the underworld.<sup>16</sup> In this light, Boccaccio was able to establish a link between fate and the afterlife. The same notion was expressed by a scholar

10 On the stratification of sources in Boccaccio's description of the Parcae, see Attilio Bettinzoli, "Boccaccio, le Parche, il Fato e l'acceptio personarum," *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 41 (2013), 1–17.

11 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, in *Tutte le opere* ed. Vittore Branca, vols. 7–8 (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), 96.

12 Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, 73.

13 Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, 81.

14 Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, 79.

15 Seneca, *Epistles*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917); see also Robert J. Sklenar, "Seneca, *Oedipus*, 980–994: How Stoic a Chorus?" *Classical Journal*, 103, 2 (2007–2008), 183–94.

16 Boccaccio, *Genealogiae deorum gentilium*, 80.

from Rovigo known as Caelius Rhodiginus (Lodovico Ricchieri, 1469–1525) in his *Antiquae Lectiones* (1516), where he stated that natural death could be identified with fate itself (“hanc vero moriendi naturam etiam fatum dicimus”).<sup>17</sup> As a result, Renaissance paintings representing the three Parcae, such as the ones by Marco Bigio<sup>18</sup> (ca. 1530–1540), Francesco Salviati (1550), Giorgio Ghisi (1558), and Vincenzo Cartari (1571) (Figs. 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, 8.5) should thus be interpreted in this light.

The link between fate and the three Parcae, which signified a general order that governed the manifestations of nature driven by a superior force, was expressed by Plato’s *Republic* (x, 617c–e). Here the Parcae were defined as “daughters of Necessity” (“θυγατέρας τῆς Ἀνάγκης”), and described in the act of



FIGURE 8.2 Marco Bigio, *Le tre Parche*, ca. 1530–1540

17 Caelius Rhodiginus, *Antiquarum Lectionum libri* (Venice: Manutius, 1516), 581.

18 Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica. Palazzo Barberini, *i dipinti. Catalogo sistematico*, ed. Lorenza Mochi Onori and Rossella Vodret Adamo (Rome: L'Erma, 2008), 95.





FIGURE 8.3 Francesco Salviati, *Le tre Parche*, 1550

singing the events of the past, of the present, and of the future. Furthermore, they were represented clothed in white garments, wearing crowns, and touching the spindle held by necessity: Clotho with her right hand, Atropos with her left hand and Lachesis with both hands. A Latin translation of this episode was carried out by Marsilio Ficino (1491, 1517, 1518, 1522) and later revised by the French scholar Simon Grynaeus (1532):



FIGURE 8.4 Giorgio Ghisi after Giulio Romano, *Le tre Parche*, 1558

Alias autem tres Necessitatis filias aequali invicem intervallo in throno sedere: Parcas vestibus albis capite coronato, Lachesim, Clotho, Atropon. Quae ad sirenem harmoniam canant. Lachesis quidem praeterita. Praesentia Clotho. Atropos vero futura. Et Clotho quidem cum matre simul intermissione quadam temporis, dextra manu tangentem fusi extimam circumferentiam circumagere. Et Clotho quidem cum matre simul intermissione quadam temporis, dectra manu tangentem fusi extimam circumferentiam circumagere. Atropon vero sinistra iterum interiores similiter. Lachesim denique vicissim utraque manu utrinque tangere.<sup>19</sup>

From this version, very likely, the accounts noted by the Ferrarese humanist Lilio Gregorio Giraldi (1479–1552) in his *De deis gentium* (1548), and by the Emilian mythographer Vincenzo Cartari (ca. 1502–1569) in his *Imagini degli dei degli antichi* (1550) became an additional sources for the iconographic of fate.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in light of the above, following an interpretation of an

19 Marsilio Ficino, *Omnia divini Platonis opera tralatione Marsilii Ficini, emendatione et ad Graecum codicem collatione Simonis Grynaei nunc recens summa diligentia repurgata* (Basel: Froben, 1532), 672.

20 Lilio Gregorio Giraldi, *De deis gentium* (Basel: Oporinus, 1548), 286–87; see also Natale Conti, *Mythologia* (Venice: Fontana, 1567), 63; Vincenzo Cartari, *Le imagini degli dei degli antichi* (Padua: Pasquato, 1608), 274–82.



FIGURE 8.5 Vincenzo Cartari, *Le tre Parche*, 1608



ancient bas-relief published by the German humanist Petrus Apianus (Peter Bennewitz, 1495–1552) in his *Inscriptiones sacrosanctae vetustatis* (1534), Cartari considered their relation with the phases of human life by arranging an allegorical composition in which each of the Parcae was represented by figures evoking the “three ages of life”: a child (Lachesis), an adult (Clotho), and a skeleton (Atropos) (Figs. 8.6, 8.7, 8.8).<sup>21</sup>

Giraldi also focused on the Parcae’s attributes as spinners and referred to them as *lanificae* (literally: those who spin wool), a term attested in an epigram by Martial in the syntagma *lanificae sorores*.<sup>22</sup> The humanist Pierio Valeriano (Giovanni Pietro Bolzani Dalle Fosse, 1477–1558) also focused on this aspect in his *Hieroglyphica* (1556) when he stated that the word “linen” was often substituted for fate in poetical compositions (“apud poëtas esse lina pro fato ponere”).<sup>23</sup> The alternation wool (*lana*) / linen (*linum*) could apparently be recognized as adiphoric. Valeriano explains this variant by recalling the interpretation of a verse of the ancient Greek poet Theocritus, where the linen plant was considered fruit of the earth (“terrae foetus est linum”) and, hence, related to a mortal dimension (“quemadmodum etiam mortales”), which allegorically meant that human beings should return to the earth (“significant hominem rursus ad terram redire”).<sup>24</sup> In this light, according to Natale Conti’s *Mythologiae* (1567), when fate was signified by the Greek word *πεπρωμένον*, it could be identified also with the goddess Lucina, sometimes seen to be the fourth sister of the Parcae, and also connected to the act of spinning wool (“Lucinam quasi Lanificam dixerim, unam esse putavit e Parcis, quae dicta est Prepomene”).<sup>25</sup> Lucina was the goddess of childbirth and was considered to be the protector of pregnant women and newborns. Thus, just as Lucina assisted birth, the Parcae brought death.<sup>26</sup>

The textile element represented by the thread, either wool or linen, is one of the Parcae’s fundamental features that strongly determined their imagery. In fact, according to Valeriano, spindle and distaff alone could, by a metonymic

21 Peter Apianus, *Inscriptiones sacrosanctae vetustatis* (Ingolstadt: Apian, 1534), 385.

22 Giraldi, *De deis*, 287.

23 Giovanni Pierio Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica* (Basel: Insengrin, 1556), 300.

24 Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica*, 300.

25 Conti, *Mythologia*, 64; Damiano Acciarino, “The Key in the Hand: Features of Birth in the Renaissance Imagery of Lucina,” in *Nascere R nascere Ricominciare. Immagini del nuovo inizio nella cultura italiana*, ed. Laura Benedetti and Gianluigi Simonetti (L’Aquila: L’Aquila University Press, 2017), 77–92.

26 Matteo Bandello, *Canti undici composti dal Bandello de le lodi de la s. Lucretia Gonzaga di Gazuolo* (1545); Antonio Fileremo Fregoso, *Opera nova* (Legnano: Bartolomeo da Crema, 1525), 33–38; Antonio Ricciardi, *Commentaria Symbolica* (Venice: De Franceschi, 1591), 266.



FIGURE 8.6 Vincenzo Cartari, *Le tre Parche e Necessità*, 1608





FIGURE 8.7 Vincenzo Cartari, *Le tre Parche*, 1608





FIGURE 8.8 Peter Apianus, *The Three Parcae*, 1534

## M O R S.

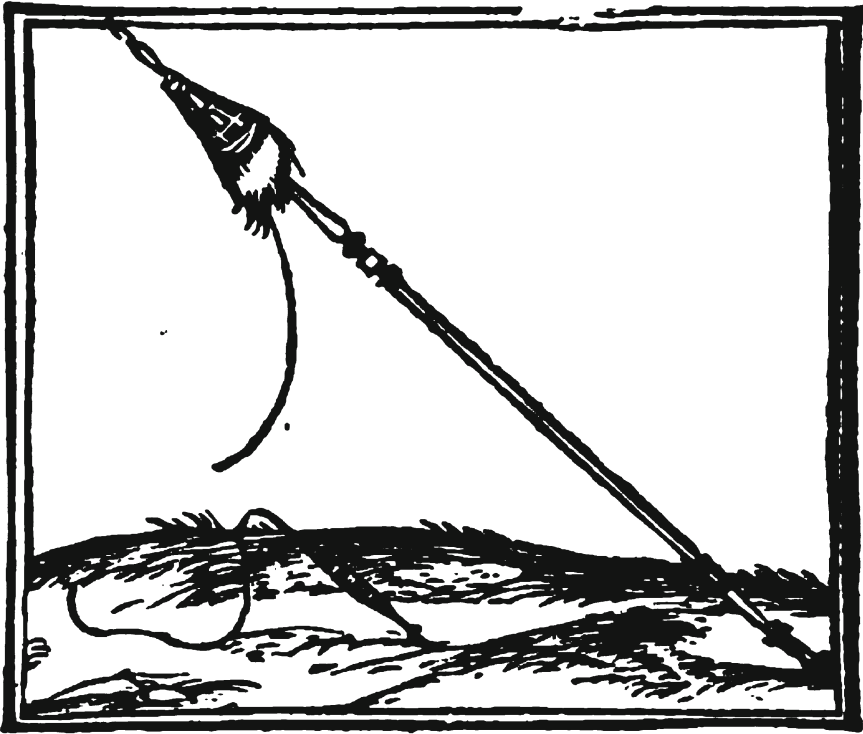


FIGURE 8.9 Giovanni Pierio Valeriano, *Spindle of Death*, 1556

process, signify fate even beyond the presence of the Parcae (“per colum autem et fusum significari fatum”) (Fig. 8.9).<sup>27</sup>

The exclusion of the three sisters from this allegory was positively received in Counter-Reformation environments. Both the Brescian mythographer Antonio Ricciardi (d. 1610) in his *Commentaria Symbolica* (1591) and the Perugian Cesare Ripa (ca. 1560–1622) in the *Iconologia* (1593) referenced spindle and thread as symbols of fate. However, while the former stuck to Valeriano’s reading, which postulated some kind of relation with the myth of the Parcae and an earthly dimension (“fusus iacet humi cum filo ab colu obtruncato, signif. mortem ob fabulam Parcarum”),<sup>28</sup> the latter invested these attributes with a substantial

<sup>27</sup> Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica*, 356.

<sup>28</sup> Ricciardi, *Commentaria*, 167.

different charge compared to the description given before. In fact, Ripa, though recalling Valeriano's reading ("come racconta il Pierio Valeriano"), affirms that the linen thread was a fruit of the moon rather than of the earth – contrary to what Valeriano had stated ("terrae foetus est linum"). Because of this, human life was subjugated to the laws of the heavens ("il lino è frutto et parto della Luna, così anco sono li mortali soggetti alle mutationi del Cielo") rather than of the earth, thereby dispelling any potential misunderstanding on the diffusion of the spirit.<sup>29</sup>

## 2 Fate as Star

The association with the heavens leads to the second archetypal figuration of fate: the star, intended as a symbolic element of the heavens themselves. The first Renaissance source to give a precise iconographic description for the concept of fate as a star is the *Hieroglyphica*, attributed to Horapollo,<sup>30</sup> discovered around 1419 and translated from Greek to Latin by Filippo Fasanini roughly one century later (1505). According to this hermetic text, the star could represent both God and Fate ("Deum totius orbis proferre volentes, aut fatum [...] stellam pingant"). However, the reasons behind each explanation contrasted with each other significantly: while the star "as God" signified the action of God over the universe ("dei providentia victoriam portendit qua parte stellarum totiusque mundi motus perficitur") and thus acquired an active nuance, the star "as Fate" represented how Fate was determined by the action of the stars ("Fatum vero quandoquidem illud ipsum ex stellarum dispensatione constituitur quinarium numerum") and thus acquired a passive nuance. Furthermore, Horapollo referred to a *quinarium numerum* ("number of five"), by which he meant the five planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn – excluding the Moon and the Sun) that, among the multitude of the fixed stars of the heavens governed all the actions of the world ("quoniam multitudine stellarum in caelo extante, quinque duntaxat ex illis mobiles totius mundi gubernationem perficiunt").

This point was investigated more deeply by Valeriano. In Book 44 of his *Hieroglyphica*, in the chapter entitled *De stella* ("On the Star"),<sup>31</sup> Valeriano

29 Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (Rome: Gigliotti, 1593), 76–77.

30 Horapollo, *Hieroglyphica hoc est De sacris Aegyptiorum literis libelli duo* (Bologna: Benedetti, 1517), 13.

31 Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica*, 330–31.

defined Fate as a “disposition coming from the stars” (“siderali dispositione”), adding that the movements of the heavens also affected the events on earth (“per motum enim stellarum negotia transiguntur”). In this light, Valeriano implied that Fate could be determined by astrological movements and consequently understood through interpretations of the zodiac. However, he also specified that these astrological movements, sometimes identified with predestination or necessity, were nothing but the natural specificities of each being on earth – actually redeeming human life from the constricting and predictable revolutions of the heavens (“nihil vi et potestate siderum hominibus evenire”), while simultaneously establishing the parameters within which each species and individual could express its own nature.

A visual example of this iconography can be found in an *impresa* that depicts a star beaming light, representing Fate, and surrounded by the ouroboros, the serpent eating its own tail, that was a symbol for the infinite (Figs. 8.10, 8.11). The accompanying motto came in two variants, FATO PRVDENTIA MAIOR and FATO PRVDENTIA MINOR,<sup>32</sup> meaning that the virtue of prudence could respectively exceed or succumb to Fate. Depending on the perspective that scholars wanted to confer to this imagery, its meaning could appear subverted; that is, whether human virtue was superior or not to external influences. Commentaries by the learned bishop Paolo Giovio (1483–1552) and by



FIGURE 8.10  
Lodovico Dolce, *Imprese*, 1566

32 These mottos were inspired by Virgil's verse *Ingenium aut rerum fato prudentia maior* (*Georg.*, I, 416). This verse was mentioned in a discussion on Fate and Fortune during the first public lecture held at the Accademia Fiorentina by Francesco Verino, see Anton Francesco Doni, *Lettoni d'Accademici fiorentini sopra Dante* (Florence: [n. a.], 1547), 15.





FIGURE 8.11  
Gabriel Rollenhagen, *Nucleus emblematum*, 1613

the erudite Lodovico Dolce (ca. 1508–1568) clearly explain this battle between will and natural inclination.<sup>33</sup>

The same idea forms the premise for another emblem, this time dedicated to Duke Cosimo de' Medici of Florence and published by the polygraph Girolamo Ruscelli (1518–1566) in his *Imprese illustri* (1566). Instead of a star, this emblem featured the zodiac sign of Capricorn, Cosimo's own birth sign and an image he often used as his personal emblem.<sup>34</sup> In fact, if the star had a metonymic relation with the heavens, the same mechanism could be represented by the constellation under which the addressee was born, as was the case with Cosimo I (Fig. 8.12). The motto *FATI VIRTUTEM SEQUAMUR* ("Let us follow the power of fate") offers an alternative approach to the question of fate: people must follow, and not oppose the destiny the stars have given them, especially when it is a glorious destiny.

A few decades later, Cesare Ripa developed the imagery of the star in a more complex way by conflating some of the features recognized in previous investigations. In his *Iconologia*,<sup>35</sup> Fate appeared as a man wearing a linen dress ("huomo, vestito di panno lino"), holding in his right hand a caduceus ("nella man destra il caduceo di Mercurio") and in his left the spindle and a thread cut in the middle, which recalled and replaced the action of the Parcae ("nella sinistra una conocchia co'l fuso, ma che il filo sia tronco nel mezzo"). A star on his head evoked the influence of the heavens on the earth ("haverà in capo una stella").

33 Paolo Giovio, *Dialogo dell'impresie militari et amorse* (Venice: Giolito, 1556), 83–84; Battista Pittoni and Lodovico Dolce, *Imprese di diversi principi, duchi, signori, e d'altri personaggi et huomini letterati et illustri* ([Venice]: [n. a.], 1562), 65.

34 Girolamo Ruscelli, *Imprese illustri* (Venice: Zenaro, 1566), 169–70.

35 Ripa, *Iconologia*, 76.



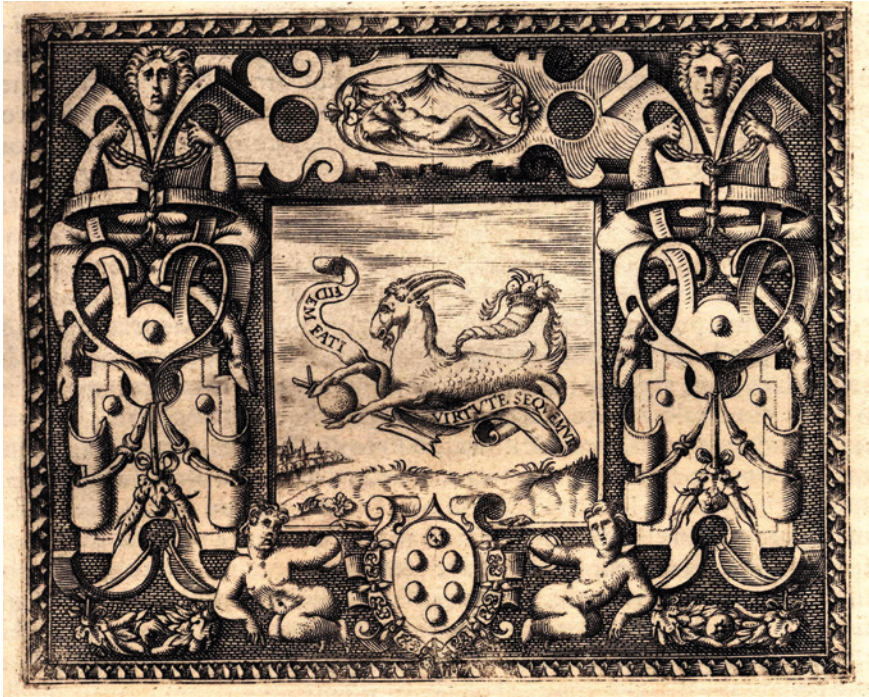


FIGURE 8.12 Girolamo Ruscelli, *Imprese illustri*, 1566

### 3 Fate as Chain

The relation between the celestial and earthly dimension expressed by Fate could be represented in yet another way: in the form of a chain descending from the heavens. The image was first used by Homer in the *Iliad* (VIII, 16–27), where a golden chain was described to express the ineluctable power with which Zeus was invested: “Hangs me a golden chain [σειρήν χρυσείην] from heaven”<sup>36</sup> (Fig. 8.13).

An explanation of this image is provided by the ancient Greek philosopher Chrysippus of Soli (3rd cent. BC) in the *De diis*, a treatise on the allegorical meanings of the pagan gods. In the part related to Zeus, who was viewed as a personification of Fate in the sense of *eimarmenē* (εἰμαρμένη), Chrysippus interpreted the dual etymology that this divinity possessed in the ancient Greek language: Ζεὺς – Ζήνα (*Zeus – Zēna*) and Διός – Δία (*Dios – Dia*). The former was derived from the noun ζῆν (*Zēna*) meaning “life,” the latter from the

36 Homer, *The Iliad and the Odyssey*, trans. Samuel Butler (Chicago: Benton, 1952).



FIGURE 8.13  
Anton Joseph Kirchweger, *Aurea Catena*, 1723

preposition  $\delta\iota\acute{\alpha}$  (*Dia*), expressing a cause for something. The overall sense was “cause of life.” Chrysippus then added a second etymological root, from the verb  $\delta\iota\omicron\upsilon\kappa\acute{\epsilon}\omega$  (*dioikeō*, i.e. “to govern”).<sup>37</sup> In this view, Zeus/Fate was considered the first cause of life as well as the sequence (or chain) of causes that materialized in life.

This image was well received in Renaissance thought and quickly became popular in the poetic and artistic imagery of the time. One of the clearest examples of its popularity can be seen in the *Accademia dei Catenati* (“Academy of the Chained”), founded in Macerata in 1574, which took its name from Homer’s verses.<sup>38</sup> The ideal purpose of the academy was to study the connections between the world of ideas and worldly phenomena so as to establish a syncretic combination of Platonic philosophy and Christian wisdom. The Catenati’s emblem featured a golden chain descending from the heavens and the Greek motto  $\phi\alpha\iota\delta\rho\omicron\iota$   $\epsilon\pi\acute{o}\nu\epsilon\mu\omicron\iota$  (*phaidroi eponemioi*, i.e. “happy disciples”), as it appears in 1579 on an engraving on the frontispiece of the Accademia’s first publication, Seneca’s tragedy *Athamante*,<sup>39</sup> and on a painting by Sforza Compagnoni at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Figs. 8.14, 8.15). The

37 Ilaria Ramelli and Giulio Lucchetta, *Allegoria. L’età classica* (Milan: Vita & Pensiero, 2004), 113–15.

38 Ramelli and Lucchetta, *Allegoria*, 62.

39 Girolamo Zoppio, *Athamante tragedia de gli Academici Catenati* (Macerata: Martellini, 1579).





FIGURE 8.14 Seneca, *Athamante*, 1579



FIGURE 8.15 Sforza Compagnoni, *Impresa Accademia Catenati*, ca. 1600



academicians themselves explain this iconography and the ideology behind the symbol:<sup>40</sup>

The body of the emblem is represented by a golden chain stretching from the heavens to the earth [...] The heavens signifies the place from which our beginning and end originate; the chain shows the steps for respectively ascending to and descending and from the heavens; the gold shows that it is impossible to reach the heavens without following a good and virtuous path made of noble actions, because only good things come to earth from the heavens. The earth represents us mortals. The body of this emblem, that is the golden chain, comes from Homer; the rest derives from Plato.<sup>41</sup>

A more articulated description of this feature is given by the Friulian philosopher Giulio “Delminio” Camillo (ca. 1480–1544) in his *L'idea del teatro* (1550), in which he contemplates the universe as if he were sitting in a theatre. Camillo pictured Zeus holding the golden chain mentioned by Homer, but adds Juno hanging onto this chain in an effort to counterbalance the elements of water and earth at the bottom of the chain. Camillo's addition suggests that the chain kept the elements together (“contenerà i quattro elementi in generale”).<sup>42</sup>

This causal chain that joins the heavens with events on earth was one of the metaphors used by Stoic philosophers to express the relationship between fate and free will.<sup>43</sup> However, an eternal concatenation of causes that depend one on the other would have neutralized the effectiveness of human capacity

40 Lucia Simi, *Gli stemmi degli Accademici Catenati* (Macerata: Istituzione Macerata Cultura, Biblioteca e Musei, 2008); *Atti dell'Accademia dei Catenati*, Biblioteca Comunale Mozzi-Borgetti di Macerata, MS 623, I 9; see also Panfilo Landi, *Impresa dell'Accademia Partenìa di Roma* (Rome: Zannetti, 1594).

41 Nazzareno Gaspari, *Il nome “catenati”* ([<http://www.accademiadecatenati.it/il-nome--catenati.html>]): “Il corpo dell'impresa sia una cathena d'oro distesa di cielo in terra [...] Il Cielo dimostra che in lui è il principio et il fin nostro, la Cathena mostra i gradi di ascendere et discendere dal Cielo et in Cielo: l'oro dimostra, che, siccome dal Cielo non discende in terra altro che bene, così ancora per altra strada che di beni di virtù e di fatiche nobili non si ascende al Cielo. La terra poi significherà noi Mortali. Il corpo dell'impresa, cioè la Cathena d'oro è da Homero; il restante è da Platone” (my translation).

42 Giulio Camillo, *L'idea del teatro* (Florence: Torrentino, 1550), 27–28.

43 On this, see *La catena delle cause: determinismo e antideterminismo nel pensiero antico e contemporaneo*, ed. Carlo Natali and Stefano Maso (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 2005); *Fate, Chance and Fortune in Ancient Thought*, ed. Stefano Maso and Francesca Guadalupe Masi (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 2013).

of choice. The doxographer Hippolytus of Rome (2nd–3rd century) provided a solution to this problem in his *Philosophumena*, also known as the *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, when he described the ineluctability of fate through the example of the dog dragged by the chariot to which it was tied: “when, for example, a dog is tied to a chariot, if he is willing to follow the chariot, he ends up following and at the same time being dragged along – actually doing that which is in his possibilities and converging with necessity; but if he does not want to follow the chariot, he will be forced to do it.”<sup>44</sup> Renaissance iconographers kept this sentence in mind. In fact, a dog tied to a cart could mean the influence of fate (“*canis alligatus currui sig. fatum*”), as the Paduan humanist Marco Mantova Benavides (1489–1582) wrote in the *Zographia* (1566) and the *Loculati opuscoli* (1582), two treatises explaining symbolic images and hieroglyphs.<sup>45</sup> So far, no counterpart of this emblem has been identified in visual art.<sup>46</sup> However, in Ruscelli’s *Imprese*, there is an emblem showing a dog tied with a chain to a column and the motto PER ELECTIONE PER DESTINO (“by choice and by destiny”) (Fig. 8.16)<sup>47</sup> – which paraphrased a verse of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* (247, 14) “non per electione ma per destino” (“not by choice but by destiny”). Ruscelli points out that in this case destiny should be taken as the meaning of fate (“Destino è quello a noi che i Latini dicevano *Fatum*”) and the chain represents one of its attributes (“[...] il cane con la catena [...] quasi dica, che i Cieli e i Fati l’inducono”).<sup>48</sup>

Chrysippus of Soli had already tried to solve the mismatch of free will and fate (intended as the chain of causes) in his *De providentia* by developing the idea of the so-called double chain of causes. In it, Chrysippus postulated the existence of a dual concatenation of events that distinguished between an external and an internal series of causes. The Roman author and grammarian Aulus Gellius (1st–2nd cent.) took up this concept in his *Noctes Atticae* (7.2) when he analyzed the implications of admitting established and fixed mechanisms on the

44 Hans Friedrich von Arnim, *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1967), 284: [...] ὅτι ὡσπερ ὀχλήματος ἕάν μὲν ἦ ἐξηρητημένους κύων, ἕάν μὲν βούληται ἔπεσθαι, καὶ ἔλκεται καὶ ἔπεται, ποιῶν καὶ τὸ αὐτεξούσιον μετὰ τῆς ἀνάγκης [οἶον τῆς εἰμαρμένης]” (my translation).

45 Marco Mantova Benavides, *Zographia* (Padua: Pasquato, 1566), 10; Marco Mantova Benavides, *Loculati Opuscoli* (Padua: Pasquato, 1580), 32; Ricciardi, *Commentaria*, 133.

46 A visual counterpart appears in János Zsámboki’s emblem depicting a dog pulling a cart with the motto *Canis queritur nimirum nocere* (1567), even if this very likely represents only a polygenetic occurrence; see Johannes Sambucus, *Emblemata et aliquot nummi antiqui operis* (Antwerp: Plantin, 1566), 182.

47 Ruscelli, *Imprese*, 540–44.

48 Giovanni Ferro, *Teatro d’Imprese* (Venice: Sarzina, 1623), 165.

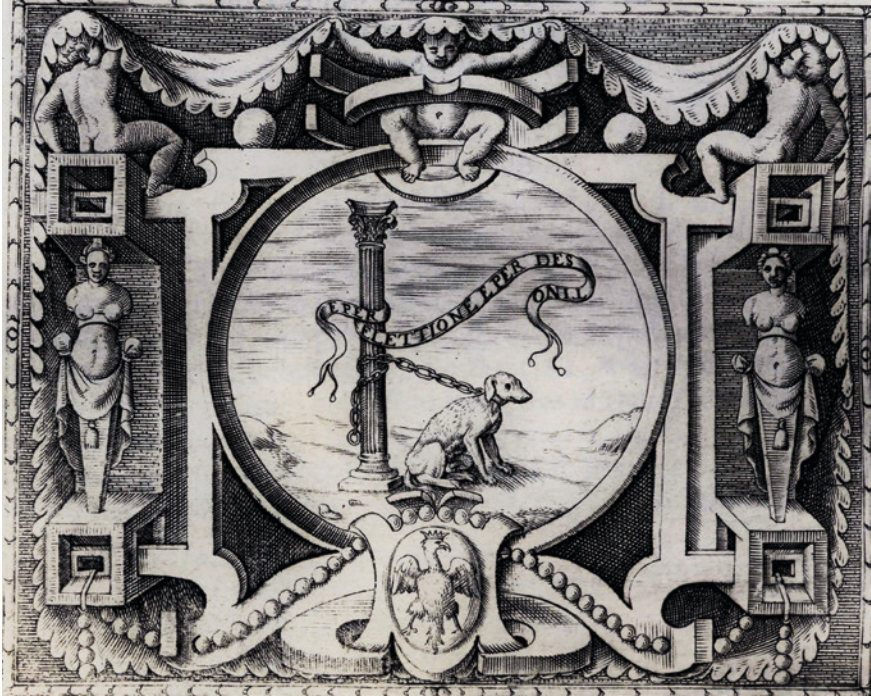


FIGURE 8.16 Girolamo Ruscelli, *Imprese illustri*, 1566

actions of humans. Gellius referred to Chrysippus's description of the chain as “an eternal and unalterable series of circumstances, and a chain rolling and entangling itself through an unbroken series of consequences, from which it is fashioned and made up,” and as “an orderly series, established by nature, of all events, following one another and joined together from eternity, and their unalterable interdependence.”<sup>49</sup> However, he also added that “just so the order, the law, and the inevitable quality of fate set in motion the various classes of things and the beginnings of causes, but the carrying out of our designs and thoughts, and even our actions, is regulated by each individual's own will and the characteristics of his mind.”<sup>50</sup> This description may have an iconographic equivalent in an emblem in Giovanni Ferro's *Teatro d'imprese* (1623) that

49 Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, trans. Carew Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), 97.

50 Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 101.

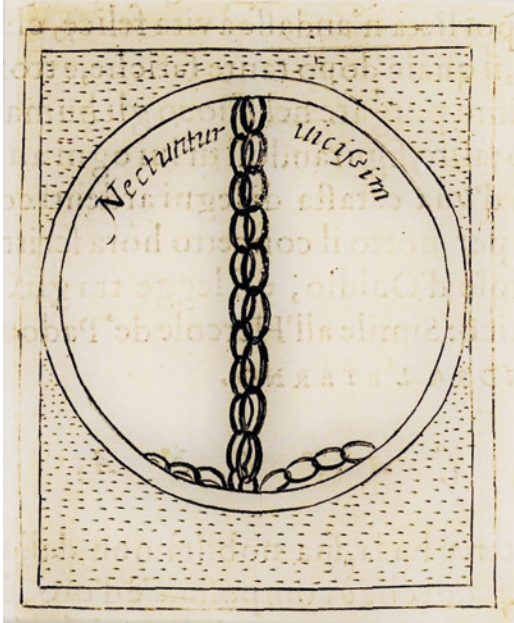


FIGURE 8.17  
Giovanni Ferro, *Aurea Catena*, 1627

features a double chain descending from the heavens and the motto either AD SYDERA SIC TRAHIMVR or NECTVNTVR VICISSIM (Fig. 8.17).<sup>51</sup>

The chain of fate also passed into Christian imagery. For example, the entry for *catena* in Ricciardi's *Commentaria Symbolica* refers to the interpretations of ancient literary and philosophical sources (Homer, Plato, Chrysippus and others), who all connected it to Fate as *connexionem causarum*. This concept was compatible with the hierarchical structure of the universe as developed in Neoplatonic and Christian thought, whereby God was identified with the first ring of the chain ("primus anulus catenae sig. essentiam Dei") from which the celestial spheres gained their movement, which again influenced the manifestations of nature, human life, animals, plants etc., to the point that all causes derived from the first one ("omnia primae causae certa quadam successione copuletur").<sup>52</sup>

This cosmic reading was recovered by Valeriano in his *Hieroglyphica*, where he proposed that the chain incarnated the spiritual power infused in all the creatures of the world ("Fatum esse potentiam spiritalem, certa quadam ratione universi consitutricem"), as if it were a law governing those things that

51 Ferro, *Teatro d'Imprese*, 195–96.

52 Ricciardi, *Commentaria*, 141.



were constituted by divine Providence (“Fatum est [...] mundi ratio: vel, lex eorum quae in mundo providentia consituuntur”).<sup>53</sup> In 1578, the Florentine scholar Baccio Baldini (d. post 1585), in his academic dissertation on fate entitled *Discorso dell'essenza del fato*, described this same system in a very detailed way that echoed Dante's verses “Questi organi del mondo così vanno, / come tu vedi omai, di grado in grado, / che di su prendono e di sotto fanno” (*Par.* 11, 121–23). Baldini wrote:

Let us therefore imagine a chain: the first ring of which is represented by God the best and the greatest, on whom the heavens and nature depend; the second ring is Intelligence, who moves the celestial bodies, having obtained power from God himself; the third ring is the Heavens, which, receiving its force from Intelligence, moves the Elements that represent the fourth ring, which take their power from the celestial bodies and move particular things, that is animals and plants, which represent the fifth ring. Thus, this order of efficient causes, where each cause receives energy from the one above and passes energy to the one below, can be called Fate in action, in that Fate means the operations of the abovementioned substances.<sup>54</sup>

A visual reflection of this scheme can be found in an engraving published in 1579 in the *Rhetorica christiana* by the Spanish Franciscan missionary Diego de Valadés (1533–1582).<sup>55</sup> In this image, the chain is held by God the Father, passes through the Intelligences (the Archangels) and the Celestial Bodies (the Angels), and then it influences all aspects of Creation: human, animal, and vegetable (Fig. 8.18).

53 Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica*, 331–32.

54 Baccio Baldini, *Discorso dell'essenza del fato* (Florence: Sermartelli, 1578), 13–14: “immaginiamoci adunque una catena, il primo anello della quale sia Iddio ottimo et grandissimo dal quale dipende il cielo et la natura, il secondo è l'intelligenza le quali avendo presa la virtù da Dio muovono i corpi celesti, il terzo anello sia il Cielo che presa la forza dalle intelligenze muove gli elementi che sono il quarto anello, il quale pigliando la virtù da i corpi celesti muovono queste cose particolari, come sono gli animali et le piante, le quali sono il quinto anello, questo ordine adunque di cagioni efficienti delle quali ciascheduna piglia la forza da quel di sopra et adopera in quel di sotto è il Fato in atto et in quanto egli significa le operazioni delle sostanze sopradette” (my translation). On Baldini, see Damiano Acciarino, “La Lettera intorno al Discorso del Fato di Vincenzio Borghini,” *Lettere Italiane*, 69, 2 (2017), 221–55, and Damiano Acciarino, “Il Discorso dell'essenza del fato di Baccio Baldini. Riflessioni a margine e testo,” *Ingramma*, 162 (January–February 2019).

55 Diego Valadés, *Rhetorica Christiana* (Perugia: Petrucci, 1579).



FIGURE 8.18 Diego Valadés, *Rhetorica Christiana*, 1579





FIGURE 8.19 Johann Ebermeier, *Neu Poetisch Hoffnungs-Gärtlein*, 1653

Traces of this iconography can also be found in a mid-seventeenth-century impresa accompanied by the motto *Spes, Fatum, & Augurium, sunt invicem opposita*, thought with a substantially different connotation.<sup>56</sup> The image shows a chain descending from the heavens and held by a woman with a sword that is about to cut it; as its accompanying motto explains, Hope can break the bonds of Fate (“*spes dissecat ense catenam / Fati*”) (Fig. 8.19).

#### 4 Further Variants

Beyond these three archetypal views of Fate evident in early modern literature and iconography, during the late Renaissance a small number of alternative or unusual elements were used to express other potential manifestations of the

<sup>56</sup> Johann Ebermeier, *Neu Poetisch Hoffnungs-Gärtlein* (Tübingen: Kerner, 1653), 384.

effects of Fate on human life and the world. They are all listed in Ricciardi's *Commentaria* and include fate as the Gordian knot (*Gordius*) and as the combination of scales (*bilances*) and yoke (*iugum*).<sup>57</sup>

The connection of Fate with the Gordian knot is straightforward: Ricciardi refers to the original interpretation provided by the Parisian humanist Pierre Coustau (fl. 1555) in his *Pegma* (1555). Coustau affirmed that fate could be represented by the Gordian knot ("Gordius nodus non recisus, sig., saepe virtuti fata obstaré") and referred to the episode of Alexander the Great cutting the Gordian knot immortalized in several ancient sources, including Curtius Rufus and Aelianus. In the impresa entitled *In nodum Gordium* ("On the Gordian Knot"), Coustau added the subtitle *Virtuti fata plerunque obstant*, meaning that in most cases fate is an obstacle to virtue, and then further added the explanation that often God's providence and the necessity of fate can interfere with the accomplishments of humans on earth ("Dei providentia et factorum necessitas prohibebant").<sup>58</sup>

The second example is more complex. It presents the scales as a symbol of fate. Ricciardi supports this interpretation by drawing on Zoroaster's precepts, which reported that what is received by fate cannot be increased ("fatum non augendum iuxta Zoroastrem"). This meant that people cannot push themselves beyond the limits [*vires*] (or better, natural energy) assigned to them by fate ("scilicet non audendum quicquam supra vires"). The scale was therefore the instrument through which these limits were dispensed. Directly connected to this function, was the symbol of the yoke ("nam in hoc symbolo includitur iugum") which, combined with the scale, signified the influence of the heavens ("etiam influxum coeli et virtutem cuiuscunque rei peragendae").<sup>59</sup>

The full explanation of this interplay of symbols is given by the Venetian Franciscan theologian Francesco Zorzi (1466–1540) in his *In Scripturam sacram problemata* (1536), a treatise on the kabbalistic interpretations of the Sacred Scriptures.<sup>60</sup> In the section dedicated to the interpretation of Orpheus, Pythagoras, and Zoroaster, Zorzi harmonized these two elements by stating that the laws established in the heavens were the bounds that distributed the qualities to each thing and individual on earth, according to a principle of justice ("nemo declinet ab eo quae iustum est"). We should therefore interpret the iconography of emblems depicting a yoke or a scale descending from the

57 Ricciardi, *Commentaria*, 264.

58 Pierre Coustau, *Pegma, cum narrationibus philosophicis* (Lyon: Bonhomme, 1555), 219–21.

59 Ricciardi, *Commentaria*, 114.

60 Francesco Zorzi, *In Scripturam Sacram problemata* (Venice: Vitali, 1536), 340.



FIGURE 8.20 Johann Lancelot, *Cents emblems Chretiennes*, 1602

heavens (Figs. 8.20, 8.21) in this light. The *impresa* with the motto *RECTVM IVDICIUM*, published by the French author Georgette de Montenay (1540–1581) in her *Emblems ou Devises Chretiennes* (1571)<sup>61</sup> features a yoke held in the heavens and a man flanked by a skeleton, thereby alluding to the attribute of fate as death. Similarly, in the *Nucleus emblematum selectissimorum* (1613) by the German poet and mythographer Gabriel Rollenhagen (1583–1619?), a scale in the heavens is accompanied by the motto *MANET INEXORABILE FATVM* to underline the inevitability of the laws of fate.<sup>62</sup>

61 Georgette de Montenay, *Emblems ou Devises Chretiennes* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1571), 4.

62 Gabriel Rollenhagen, *Nucleus emblematum selectissimorum* (Cologne: van de Passe, 1613), 83.





FIGURE 8.21 Gabriel Rollenhagen, *Nucleus emblematum*, 1613

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