

## THE MONASTIC LIFE, OR ‘JUST SITTING AROUND’.

Alciato’s letter to his friend Bernard Mattius is better known for the author’s worries about its circulation than for its content. It also raises questions about its date and about the identity of the addressee. A fourth question, which is of course my principal concern here, is whether there is any relationship, in whole or in part, to any of the emblems.

While the only surviving manuscript is a posthumous copy bearing the date 7 June 1553,

[Illustration: ms.]

the letter itself was composed very probably in the second half of 1517 or early 1518.<sup>1</sup> It was not published until 1695 in an edition reprinted three times in the 18th century.<sup>2</sup>

[Illustration: 1695.]

The only modern edition is an appendix in Gian Luigi Barni’s edition of Alciato’s letters.<sup>3</sup>

The addressee, Bernard Mattius, is unknown apart from what we learn from this letter. He was forty years old or perhaps more at the time,<sup>4</sup> and

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- 1 Karl A.E. Enenkel, ‘Alciato’s Ideas on the Religious: the Letter to Bernardus Mattius,’ *Emblematica*, 9.2 (1995), 293-313. References to paragraph numbers are to my own edition (to appear at the University of Leuven Press).
  - 2 *Viri consultissimi quem Cultissimum vocat Gaspar Scioppius de stil. hist.* p. 124 *Andreae Alciati jurisconsulti Mediolanensis contra vitam monasticam ad collegam olim suum, qui transierat ad Franciscanos, Bernardum Mattium epistola. Accedit Sylloge epistolarum ... Primus omnia in lucem protulit, adjectis passim notis, Antonius Matthaëus, iuris in illustri academisa Lugd. Bat. Antecessor* (Lugd. Batav. Apud Fredericum Haaring, 1695.) Subsequent editions present the same text: Leyden, Henricus de Swart, 1708, and The Hague, Gerardus Block, 1740.
  - 3 Gian Luigi Barni, *Le Lettere di Andrea Alciato* (Florence, 1953 [hereafter Barni]), pp. 205-90. Barni claims to have used both the manuscript and the edition of Matthaëus, but gives no indication of which source he follows at any point. In fact he seems to have reproduced the latter almost without question; in almost all cases where Matthaëus omits something, Barni does so too - in two cases a whole sentence. His text seems to have been proof-read somewhat hastily and his literary and historical notes are decidedly inadequate.

therefore considerably older than Alciato, who was 25 in early 1518. He was a lawyer, and evidently a well-regarded member of the humanist circle around the French-controlled senate of Milan.<sup>5</sup> Apart from this we have only the hint that he was of French or English origin in the remark that a certain Franciscan called Richard - perhaps Richard of Middleton<sup>6</sup> or perhaps Richard of Conington<sup>7</sup> - was ‘your fellow countryman’ (*tibi conterraneum*).<sup>8</sup> The monastery he entered was that of San Giacomo alla Vernavola in Pavia.<sup>9</sup> Alciato criticises him for having left a mother and two younger brothers in straightened circumstances,<sup>10</sup> but does not say where they lived.

The question whether Alciato ever intended to publish the letter may be answered with some probability in the negative. As Karl Enenkel has said, it does not look at all like a private and inconsiderately written letter, and its form and length oblige us to see it as a rhetorical treatise, a *declamatio* or *oratio* as Alciato himself calls it. It displays humanist ideas and would have found a ready public in the humanist circles of Milan and in the wider humanist world. However it is also clear that it was a genuine personal appeal resorting to ideas and arguments shared privately. It purports to have been written in Milan and sent to Pavia,<sup>11</sup> and a later letter from Alciato himself to Boniface Amerbach<sup>12</sup> confirms that it was sent to Mattius. Moreover he asked his correspondent explicitly not to divulge his concerns:

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4 §37

5 §26

6 c. 1249–1302. Barni, l. 977. §42. *NCE*, 12, 481.

7 † 1330. He succeeded William of Ockham as provincial minister of the English Franciscans. §42. *NCE*, 12, 478.

8 There was apparently a well-established family of the name ‘Matty’ (various spellings) in Champagne.

9 §1n

10 §20

11 §1

12 Barni, no 65.

So warned myself by his example [that of Diagoras of Melos], I would scarcely dare to write these words - lest I stir up hornets, as they say<sup>13</sup> - if I did not know of your goodwill toward me and believed you would not, at least for friendship's sake, pass this letter of mine on to anyone.<sup>14</sup> (§6)

- and at the end of the next paragraph:

These thoughts, even if they have occurred to me on other occasions, I have never expressed to anyone, and I would have settled with them by eternal silence, if the laws of friendship did not impel me to write even what should be unsaid.<sup>15</sup> (§7)

Clearly, even at the time of writing, he was well aware of the dangers of his opinions, and had avoided discussing them in public. It remains a question whether this was due more to fear of the response of the Franciscans, or to the delicacy of his situation in Milan, where, though he enjoyed the patronage of the French-controlled government,<sup>16</sup> his religious beliefs and his local reputation as a lawyer would also matter. In the following years he remained extremely nervous about publication. In a letter dated 27 September 1520 he begs Francesco Calvo<sup>17</sup> to retrieve the work from the 'claws' of Erasmus, to whom

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13 *Adagia*, I i 60, 'To stir up hornets.'

14 §5

15 §7

16 The *Paradoxa*, first published by Alessandro Minuziano in 1518, were dedicated to the French chancellor of the duchy of Milan, Antoine du Prat. The *Dispunctiones*, in the same volume, were dedicated to Jean de Selve, president of the senate of Milan, whom Alciato mentions in this text as favouring the advancement of Mattius. The *Praetermissa* and the *Declamatio*, which also first appeared in this volume, are dedicated to the senator Jacques Minut (see L. Delaruelle, 'Un Président au Parlement de Toulouse: Jacques Minut,' *Annales du Midi*, XXXV -1923-24 - 137-53), described in the dedication of the *Praetermissa* as the pupil (in Greek) of Valterus Corbetes, who was also a member of the senate of Milan.

17 Francesco Giulio Calvo opened a bookshop in Pavia in 1516 and was for a time Alciato's preferred publisher. He moved to Rome in 1519, eventually becoming publisher to the Holy See. At about this time he changed his middle name to 'Minuzio' after his native town, Menaggio. He is not to be confused with the Alessandro Minuzzio, publisher of the volume mentioned above in note 9. See *Contemporaries of Erasmus* (University of Toronto Press, 2003 [hereafter *Contemporaries*]), I, 256-7.

Calvo had given it, because he fears endless battles with the Franciscans, ‘those worshippers of saints’ ashes’. In another of 10 December of the same year - with some humorous exaggeration no doubt, though it sounds sometimes more like panic - he describes again the attacks and the calumny he fears from the factions of the ‘hooded ones’, threatens Calvo, Erasmus and Froben (to whom Erasmus may have passed the document) with law suits, and, more seriously, accuses Calvo of abusing his confidence by taking writings containing incautiously expressed ideas ‘from his boxes’ - he had presumably kept a copy after sending one to Mattius. This letter concludes with a barely veiled threat to withdraw publishing business from Calvo if the latter does not ensure the destruction of ‘that premature and illegitimate oration’.<sup>18</sup> Soon after the time of writing, Alciato was seeking the position of count palatine, which was awarded to him by Leo X in February 1520, but he was still trying to get the work back from Erasmus through Amerbach in September of that year. In February 1522, he was able to thank Erasmus for a promise not to show the work to anyone, and in 1530 he remarks to Amerbach that Erasmus had re-assured him about that ‘inept declamation which, when a youth,<sup>19</sup> I had sent to Mattius’. After a second note of re-assurance to Amerbach in June of 1531, we hear no more of the work, which Alciato now evidently sought to portray as a youthful indiscretion, but still too incriminating for publication.<sup>20</sup>

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To answer the question about relationships to emblems and to show how much lies behind one emblem in particular, I need to relate something of the content of the letter. In the introductory passage Alciato warns of the power of religion to induce men to make bad decisions, such as to sacrifice even paternal

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18 Barni, no 4. See Appendix 1.

19 He calls himself *puer*, though he was 25.

20 Barni, nos 3, 4, 15, 20, 65, 69.

love.<sup>21</sup> Fearing that his friend, after brief contact with the monastery, is already infected by superstition, Alciato quotes the example of Lucretius' hero who was 'the first to scorn these scarecrows and rely on true reason.' These two passages are already clearly critical of extremism and superstition in religion and may well have been among those which, in addition to the attack on the Franciscans, the author felt were indiscrete.<sup>22</sup> The concluding passage of the introduction is in the same vein. It warns that, although Mattius may have found good men among those he frequented in monasteries on his recent journey to Rome, christianity - according to a story from Boccaccio, adduced without any attempt to balance its clear hostility at this point - is 'managed by some of the most worthless of men among the leaders'.

Alciato's criticisms of monasticism are carefully organised within the frame of a main argument, explicitly stoic, which is that the life of an active person in the secular world is more acceptable to God than the monk's life of withdrawal. He begins the main part of his appeal thus: 'Here is my argument: the life of those who live in a christian way, free of rituals, and who embrace that way of living such as you used to follow before, is much more acceptable to God'. And this is the argument with which he eventually concludes his appeal:

I know you could clearly understand that this Minorite way of life, even observed according to the letter, does not deserve unqualified praise, in that it requires us to do many things not in accordance with the gospel, and very many at variance with the most pious traditions of the fathers of

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21 He cites Abraham and Agamemnon.

22 Alciato's perhaps indiscrete daring in expressing his admiration for Lucretius is plainly visible in the lines which begin and end the passage he alludes to: 'When man's life lay for all to see foully grovelling upon the ground, crushed beneath the weight of Religion, which displayed her head in the regions of heaven, threatening mortals from on high with horrible aspect, a man of Greece was the first that dared to uplift mortal eyes against her ... [and after the story of Iphigenia] So potent was Religion in persuading to evil deeds.' However, he expresses loud disapproval of epicureanism later, mocking its recommendation to 'live in obscurity' and its alleged hedonism. (ll. 727-50)

the church. For this reason the way of life of others, whom you call laymen and who are not induced to swear an oath to any master, is not hindered by so many stumbling blocks. Indeed if we suppose a man untainted, unmoved by human allurements, such as you were formerly, it would be a far easier way amid these allurements to find salvation in heaven. Hence there is no reason for delay in changing your mind and returning to that free mode of life which is more acceptable to heaven than anything else. (§49)

In the context of the Greek epigraph which stands at the head of the letter and which reads ‘Considering in what follows things not rejected by the catholic church’, this becomes a criticism of the church and the way it has tolerated and supported the abuses of monasticism.

Within this frame Alciato introduces a series of more particular objections. First he asks whether monks practise the same way of living as the apostles and the primitive christians, leading a blameless life, setting up churches, spreading the word openly. The answer for Alciato is clearly that they do not. They do not undertake missionary work - and Alciato suggests it is not only through fear of endangering their own salvation, but also of sheer physical timidity. They do however derive huge monetary gain from pilgrims and tourists visiting their sanctuary in the empty tomb of Christ in Jerusalem.

The establishment of christianity in the empire by Constantine led to a desire for solitude by some, who were therefore called ‘monks’ (Latin *monachi*, Greek μοναχοί, ‘solitaries’). But these did not distinguish themselves by their dress from ordinary people or from each other. The Augustines were such as these originally, but ‘now they keep only the name and have changed their custom and their dress’. Benedict was the first to institute a way of life similar to present monks, but his withdrawal was a temporary move to escape the wars and disorders of his times, and he intended to return to his original way of life. Francis followed his example at the time of the Guelph and Gibelline wars. But

the followers of both failed to maintain their example and introduced rules contrary to simple gospel teaching, creating dissensions and divisions, and seeking wealth and power.

An example of good living which Alciato relates directly to the ideals of St Francis is that of the Jewish sect of the Essenes. He takes a lengthy description of their philosophy and way of life from Porphyry and emphasizes their simplicity, charity, and asceticism. He had concluded his remarks about St Francis with: ‘Although in this area [good and right living] many things were taken from the Jews, some were turned upside down [*inversa*], and I would not be bold enough to say publicly whether these were changed in the right way’. And he ends the account of the Essenes with: ‘These are the Essene doctrines, from which your founders took the largest part of their teachings, even if they changed some of them, though I do not see why they had to be changed and perverted [*pervertique*] so much’. The idea that the present practice of monastic orders represents a ‘perversion’ of praiseworthy Jewish practice frames this account. Alciato however was not on particularly dangerous ground in his approval of this Jewish sect, since he could point not only to the Christian historian Eusebius, through whom he took his account of Porphyry, but to Philo, Josephus and notably Jerome.<sup>23</sup>

The next section consists of a series of criticisms which Alciato attributes to a ‘quite overt neglect of real religion’. Religion should be a matter of active charity and responsibility. The Essenes lived by manual labour, and did not spend their time in ‘speculation about the heavens’. Their charity matched that recommended by the apostles, and contrasts starkly with the monks’ neglect of obligations to families and the poor. In a passage on the question of poverty - to which he will return later - Alciato is sarcastic about the reason for the Franciscans’ rule which prevent them giving anything without the rector’s

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23 Epistola 22.35.

permission: it gives them an excuse for refusing any request for help, and yet they live on alms given them by others. The question of responsibility also raises the question of marriage, which, unlike the Essenes and contrary to Pauline advice, monks have entirely rejected. On this point, although he would 'esteem Paul's authority more,' Alciato reveals incidentally his personal inclination, believing with Jerome that marriage is a mistake for any man and, significantly, stating his liking for a certain Greek epigram that warns against the likelihood of cuckoldry. This however is something of an aside, and he returns to the question of responsibility with a sharp attack on Mattius as an individual for his undutiful neglect of an ageing mother and two young brothers whom he has left, it seems, in destitution.

Alciato then makes two other points against the rules under which Mattius will live. The first attacks the ideal of solitude as a refusal of the responsibility to set an example of behaviour. Seclusion suggests concealment of fraud, and is even disapproved by civil law - as Mattius, a lawyer himself, should know.<sup>24</sup> Quoting the famous distinction by Plutarch of the three modes of life - contemplative, active and hedonistic - Alciato equates monastic seclusion to the contemplative life and condemns it as impractical and as absurd as the epicurean ideal of living unobtrusively. ('But the contemplative way, in which I believe you are counted, is, as Plutarch says, utterly useless.') It is moreover utterly selfish and unproductive. 'You sit there dully and, apart from the chatter with which you exercise tongue and voice, you do nothing. ... No one will ever persuade me that a man, not even the best, can devote a whole day to speculation about heaven.' The second point concerns the hypocrisy of wishing

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24 Alciato is being slightly disingenuous here. He quotes Valentinian's law requiring decurions, who had abandoned their office to live as hermits, to return to their duties, but in the *De verborum significatione* he allows that such laws, imposed for a situation occurring in ancient time, should not necessarily be enforceable for a different situation in modern times.



to appear different from ordinary people in petty distinctions of dress and, more seriously, in the pretence of fasting, to which the very appearance of most monks gives the lie. But even real fasting is not a virtue in itself; what really matters is the consequent sharpened intelligence, the avoidance of defilement and real abstinence from drunkenness and greed. Those who can achieve this without fasting do not need such constraints.

Alciato then returns to his main argument, which is what impels him to disapprove most of all of Mattius' intention: 'When anyone can live continently and honestly, free of these observances of yours, and move without stumbling through the thickets and thorns of this world, he acquires far greater grace with God than those associates of yours who stay shut up in cloisters'. An active, responsible life in the community, where temptations abound, is far more difficult and praiseworthy than seclusion where temptations are restricted. The Stoic nature of the philosophy Alciato proposes is clear: 'Reason drives us in such a way that it obliges us to hold constantly to better things. The best individual holds tenaciously to this standard and does not allow himself to be overcome by pleasures and desires.' Mattius has the prudence and discretion of Zeno's ideal; he has only to show, by living in the world, that he has the fortitude.

Alciato reserves for a particular attack the subject of poverty, which had been for several centuries a matter of controversy among the Franciscans, pitching strict Observants against more moderate Conventuals.<sup>25</sup> Alciato's view is based on the common-sense notion ('judgement ... supported by the best reason') that Christ and the apostles had ownership of certain things by natural

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25 §39. The early controversies were extremely complex. For a more detailed account than Alciato's remarks require, see the article 'Franciscans' in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. An excellent, concise account of the history in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries of these elements and their connection with Joachimite apocalypticism may be found in Leah DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), ch. 2.

justice. He cites the bull of Pope John XXII which declared ‘erroneous and heretical’ the doctrine that Christ and his apostles had no possessions whatever.<sup>26</sup> The Minorites however ‘do not conform to gospel doctrine in this either’ and are guilty of using their pretended poverty to refuse to give alms or any benefit to the poor, to abuse the weakness of widows, to persuade the dying to write codicils to their wills leaving everything to the order. This may not apply to Mattius personally, though he will certainly not be able to pursue the legal studies to which he was devoted, and the humanist ones which the early fathers also cultivated. He will, whatever his real taste, be obliged to lose himself in the disputations of the Franciscan scholastics. And he will not like the discrepancy between the pretence of abstinence and the wealth and comfort of the cloisters; he will not like the ‘silliness’ (*fatuitas*) of much of their observances, and the irrelevance of their preaching to practical morals.

Alciato summarizes with a re-statement of his main argument: ‘[the Minorite way of life] requires us to do many things not in accordance with the gospel, and very many at variance with the most pious traditions of the fathers of the church.’ In a final thrust, surprisingly harsh perhaps in a young man of 25 speaking to an elder of more than 40, but reflecting perhaps also his disappointment and even anger, he begs Mattius to accept his advice. There are three sorts of men. The most noble are those who can rely on their own judgement. Of the others, the wise are those who rely on good advice; but those who cannot even submit to advice are senseless and useless. ‘So since you, Mattius, whom I suspect may have become quite foolish (*μάταιος* [*mataios*] - a facile, but deliberate pun)<sup>27</sup> could not stay in the first group but have allowed yourself to be demoted from it, you should in consequence submit to a good man who has kind regard for you, and do not allow yourself to be thrown in with

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26 *Cum inter nonnullos*, promulgated on 12 November 1323.

27 One gets an impression, from this sort of passage and from the letter to Calvo, that Alciato was inclined to a somewhat brutal frankness.

the third rank, where you may be thought mad and utterly unfit. I pray God he may give you better sense.'

Alciato's criticism of the Minorites is broadened, quite explicitly, to a criticism of the church's tolerance of their practices both by the sentence in the conclusion quoted above ('many things not in accordance with the gospel, and very many at variance with the most pious traditions of the fathers of the church') and by the Greek epigraph which heads the whole letter: 'Considering in what follows things not disapproved by the catholic church.' Some at least of Alciato's nervousness about publication may be attributed to this broader criticism of the contemporary church, to a questioning of the present power of contemporary Rome, in which Peter 'did not have the same authority as his successors have now,' and which is 'managed by some of the most worthless of men among the leaders.' Perhaps just as dangerous too as his views on ritual, fasting, and Franciscan hypocrisy, were his opening remarks about religion, and his association of his ideas with Lucretius and epicurean materialism.

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There are allusions to no less than 30 proverbs in this work and to five or six images which will later appear in the emblems. Such allusions are of course to be expected in a formal declamation. None of them is explicitly described as an emblem and there is no indication that Alciato is thinking of his poems as he writes this letter, but one image is nevertheless constantly implied and is strongly reminiscent of Alciato's criticism of Mattius - the image of the emblem 'Desidia' ('Sitting idle').<sup>28</sup>

[Illustration 'DESIDIA']<sup>29</sup>

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28 The word *desidia* translated as 'Idleness' appears at l. 1071, but there is no indication that Alciato is thinking there of the emblematic image.

29 In the 1621 edition no 81. Only the 1546 edition illustrates the epigram more or less correctly, and even here there are no stars (though the expression 'speculatur et astra'

This emblem presents the idle person as sitting on a barrel, contemplating the stars, and hiding beneath him a lighted torch. It did not appear until the 1546 collection, and is quite distinct from ‘Desidiam abiiciendam’, which is grouped with it in Barthélemy Aneau’s arrangement but was present from 1531 (A7v). That emblem evokes the Pythagorean *symbolum* ‘Super choenicem non esse sedendum’ (‘Do not sit on a grain measure’), and teaches that one should not be content with satisfying today’s need but provide also for the morrow. It runs counter, as Alciato himself says in his *Parergon iuris*, to the biblical instruction and requires us to take thought for the morrow.<sup>30</sup> The emblem ‘Desidia’ on the other hand evokes the biblical precept ‘Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel’. *Modius* is the word used in Matthew 5:15 (‘neque accendunt lucernam et ponunt eam sub modio ...’). One English translation confuses *modius* and *choenix* - and consequently these two emblems - by rendering both as ‘bushel-box’,<sup>31</sup> but the *modius* was equivalent to 16 *sextarii* or eight litres (a *sextarius* was slightly less than ½ litre), and the *choenix*, depending on whether it is an Attic or an Italian measure, to two *sextarii* or four<sup>32</sup> (approximately one or two litres) A bushel is approximately 32 litres, and is not therefore a good translation for *modius*, being twice the size, and still less suitable for *choenix*. Let’s say simply the *modius* is a barrel, the *choenix* a jar.

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may be taken as figurative: ‘contemplates, speculates about, waits for heaven’). In other editions (where the emblem is not missing entirely as in the case of Sánchez de las Brozas, or is unillustrated, as in the case of Stockhamer) the figure is either not seated, there is no ‘bushel’ or torch, or he has no hood.

30 *Parergon iuris* I. 17. Matt. 6:34. ‘nolite ergo esse solliciti in crastinum’ (‘Take no thought for the morrow’) Cf. Erasmus *Adagia* I i 2 (CWE 31, pp. 33-5), who traces the instruction back to Homer, *Odyssey* 19.27-8: ‘Not idle shall I allow him to remain who has had a daily portion (χοίνικος) from me.’

31 Andrea Alciato, *Emblemata. Lyons, 1550* (Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1996), pp. 88-89. *The Emblematum Liber in Latin and English* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London, Macfarland, 2004) translates ‘in choenice figere sedem’ with ‘squatting on a food dish’ and seems to confuse this further with the emblem ‘Adversus naturam peccantes’ by adding ‘[to defecate]’.

32 See Alciato, *De ponderibus et mensuris*.

In ‘Desidia’ the subject hides his talent, makes no use of his intellectual abilities. Alciato had said to Mattius, ‘So it is right for you to continue in your practice, unless you want to be accused of some exceeding impiety ... in neglecting, almost despising the rarest blessings that God has bestowed on men.’<sup>33</sup> The idle man’s contemplation (literally of the stars, or figuratively of heaven) is an hypocrisy (‘Segnities specie recti’ - ‘Idleness making a show of virtue ...’), and he is of use neither to himself nor to others. ‘Hypocrisy’ and ‘uselessness’ are both words used of the life that Mattius is embracing.<sup>34</sup> Surprisingly, the idle man is referred to in the first line as an ‘Essene’. In the letter to Mattius, as we have seen, the sect was portrayed in a very favourable way. In the emblem it seems the term must be taken as ironical: a term of mockery for someone who thinks of himself as a contemplative and an ascetic. Indeed I am inclined to wonder if this reversal of the use of the figure reflects more than just mockery of the self-styled contemplative, and betrays perhaps Alciato’s personal disappointment at the action of his friend. There is no evidence that the letter caused Mattius to change his mind.

The reference to a hood makes it clearer that Alciato is thinking of monks. He had referred to the Franciscans in the letter of 1520 as ‘the hooded factions’ (‘cucullatorum factiones’). Claude Mignault is sure this is the real intention,<sup>35</sup> saying ‘although this could quite easily be turned against any who fail to make use of a gift for learning and intelligence ... unless I am mistaken, the subject here really seems to be certain monks who want to appear as some sort of

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33 ll. 934-7

34 l. 680 and l. 558.

35 *Omnia Andreae Alciati V.C. emblemata ...* (Antwerp, Plantin, 1577), pp. 235-8. His note on the term ‘Essene’ says only that they were Jews distinguished from others by their asceticism and their fasts. Oddly, although he comments at length on the phrase ‘accensam contegit igne facem’ - ‘hiding a lighted torch’, he does not cite Matthew 5:15 but only the next verse: ‘Let your light so shine before men’. Thuilius’ commentary on Essenes adds to Mignault’s only that Alciato probably meant hypocrites like the Pharisees.

contemplatives and spend a lifetime sitting around in idleness ...’ However he is clearly anxious to portray himself, and Alciato, as not wishing to attack the institution of monasticism and would confine the criticism to those who use their status as an excuse for idleness: ‘But I would want this to be taken fairly, for I would not ... wish to criticise ancient institutions introduced by the wisest of the fathers ... But, to say frankly what I think of this, it is not the institution of monks and their rule which is blamed here in any way by me, by Alciato, or even by other open-minded and honest people, but the laziness, idleness, and ignorance of many who, because of this, are of no use at all to themselves or to others ...’ He continues for nearly two pages of the 1577 edition in this vein, taking the emblem clearly as an opportunity to vent his personal feelings about some monks, but, interestingly for us, also defends Alciato against charges of general anti-monasticism.

I believe this emblem could well have been inspired by the case of Mattius. It was even perhaps composed at the earlier date, but did not appear until 1546 because Alciato held it back fearing it would draw attention to an episode he wished to remain concealed. Mignault of course did not know the letter to Mattius, but we might deduce from his commentary that Alciato succeeded in covering his tracks. On the other hand, when we know the background, we can see that the poem is more than a common-place satire of a prevalent abuse; it offers a glimpse of Alciato’s personal philosophical and religious positions and alludes, perhaps sadly, to a disappointed friendship.