

# DISCOVERIES

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## Practical Reason and Action: The Teaching of Prudence Through Renaissance Emblem Books

Lynnette C. Black  
University of Memphis

Composed of a picture plus a motto and often an epigram, emblem books provide insight into the definition of the virtuous life during the early modern period. For example, in the emblem "La femme prudente," from Guillaume Gueroult's *Premier livre des emblemes* (Fig. 1), a woman rests her foot on a tortoise, indicating that, like the tortoise, she stays inside her house. The epigram explains, "Femme qui est sage ne court ça, ne la / La folle et volage n'ayme que cela" [The woman who is wise does not run about hither and thither; the foolish and flighty woman likes only that.]<sup>1</sup> The emblemist uses the medieval opposition of Prudence and Folly to show that a woman who asserts herself beyond her household represents the opposite of prudence.

Gueroult's presentation offers a glimpse into the rich range of allusions to Prudence in emblem books spanning the sixteenth and early to middle seventeenth centuries. Here an astonishing array of icons portrays Prudence: the serpent, the stag, the bifrons or three-headed figure, the mirror, the book, the eye, the sieve, the centaur, the owl, the crane, and the fox. Emblems conflating her with wisdom, time, occasion, eloquence, reason, or maturity, or associating her with Mercury, Pallas, or Minerva, suggest her ubiquitous quality.<sup>2</sup>

This study describes prudence as a common thread among emblem books of varying national traditions to show the underlying relationship of the genre to its

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### *La femme prudente.*



Femme qui est sage  
Ne court ça, ne la,  
La folle & volage:  
N'ayme que cela.

Fig. 1. Guillaume Gueroult: *Premier livre des emblemes*, 1550.

rhetorical and humanistic context. The persuasive character of the emblem book extends beyond the overtly didactic. The prominence of prudence suggests a surprising subtlety in the persuasive method of the emblem books, as they teach virtue indirectly through the act of reading.

The priority of prudence, which iconographic variety suggests, appears in emblemists' statements concerning the four virtues. Barthelemy Aneau in his commentary to Alciati's emblem on Anteros, which he entitles "Contre Amour ou amour de vertu," explains that Prudence is the intellectual force behind the actions expressing the other virtues: "... Vertues, qui sont en general quatre Cardinales desquelles la première est Prudence, par contemplation residente au chef: les autres trois, Justice, Force, & Temperance, gisent en action et pource sont aux mains et autres parties du corps [...]. virtues, which in general number

## An Invisible Notation: On the Invention of German Lute Tablature

By Hiroyuki Minamino  
Mission Viejo, California

"[The lutenists] were quite drunk at that time when they invented their tablature." This comment made by Martin Agricola in 1529 is incorrect. It was not some intoxicated lutenists but a blind organist who invented German lute tablature.<sup>1</sup>

After its invention in the late thirteenth century in Spain, the lute became one of the most popular musical instruments of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Poets praised it, artists painted it, professional and amateur musicians played it. At first, it was played with a plectrum or quill, thus being capable of producing only a single line of music, but in the mid-fifteenth century, the method of plucking the strings with the fingers was invented and widely cultivated. This technical change enabled the lutenist to pluck non-adjacent strings simultaneously, giving him a means to cope with several polyphonic voices simultaneously on a single instrument. The lutenist arranged the polyphonic voices before he attempted to perform them – but this new lute style required a special kind of notation: lute tablature.

There are three kinds of lute tablature used in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: Italian, French, and German, the last one being the oldest. The question is: who invented German lute tablature?

"I hear that there was a blind man born in Nuremberg and buried in Munich, named Meister Conrad from Nuremberg, who in his time was famous and praised above other instrumentalists. He directed that the entire alphabet be written [crosswise] on the five courses and on the seven frets of the neck [of the lute]. And when it had been used once, he started again from the beginning of the alphabet and doubled all these letters for the second alphabet." Thus wrote the German music theorist Sebastian Virdung in his treatise on musical instruments, entitled *Musica getutscht*, published in Basel in 1511.<sup>2</sup> His comments, however, caused immediate skepticism from one of his fellow music theorists. Martin Agricola, whose music treatise of 1529 borrows heavily from Virdung's, regarded the story as untenable.<sup>3</sup> As can be seen from the comment quoted at the beginning of this essay, Agricola disliked everything about German lute tablature. He questioned how a blind person could have been capable of inventing a lute tablature or indeed how he could have understood any form of musical notation. Although Agricola's opinion was biased (since he needed a justification for the proposal of his own tablature system to replace the German system), he still had a point. But the peculiar system in German lute tablature that distinguishes it from other tablature systems speaks strongly against Agricola's condemnation.

All the systems of lute tablature (except the German one) are graphic presentations of the fingerboard. The six horizontal lines represent the six courses of the lute. Arabic numerals or letters of the alphabet decide the vertical divisions of strings in semitone interval. Therefore, a specific

5	c	k	p	v	g	e	k
4	d	i	o	t	f	d	i
3	c	b	n	s	z	c	h
2	b	g	m	r	y	b	g
1	a	f	l	q	x	a	f

Figure 1. German lute tablature (five-course version).

note is determined by an axis between a horizontal line and a numeral or an alphabet letter. For instance, if the lutenist sees the letter "b" on the highest line in French lute tablature, he places his left-hand finger on the first fret of the highest string of the lute (the letter "a" is reserved for open strings) and then plucks this string.

German lute tablature, however, is not made up of lines and fret divisions. Indeed, there are no lines. Individual tablature characters denote each string and each fret. The lute had five strings when German lute tablature was invented. The numerals denote these open five strings: the numeral 1 for the lowest string, 2 for the second lowest string, and so on. Letters of the alphabet are applied across the strings, but not for the division of strings. Each fret is denoted by an individual character; the letter "a," for example, signifies the first fret of the fifth string, the letter "b" denotes the first fret of the fourth string, and so on. (See Figure 1.)

In other tablature systems, successive tablature characters indicate neighboring tones of the chromatic scale. In German lute tablature, they look like a random succession of numerals and letters. Thus, whoever invented German lute tablature was very little concerned about the visual appearance of music that could be achieved by notation. This brings us back to Virdung's allegation that a blind instrumentalist invented the tablature.

"Meister Conrad" is no doubt identical with Conrad Paumann, who was the most famous organist and composer

(See *Minamino: Lute Tablature*, page 13)

<sup>23</sup> Eugene Garver, *Machiavelli and the History of Prudence* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1987); see esp. pp. 28, 50, 89.

<sup>24</sup> (London, 1612), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Russell, *The Emblem and Device in France*, French Forum Monographs 59, eds. R. C. La Charite and V. A. La Charite (Lexington: French Forum, 1985), 175-76.

<sup>26</sup> (Lyon: Mace Bonhomme, 1552).

<sup>27</sup> *Pegme* (London, 1612), 110. Emblem 32, the title of which is "La sainte ecriture est un couteau tranchant de deux cotes" [Holy Scripture is a blade with two cutting edges].

<sup>28</sup> *Les Emblemes* (Anvers, 1675), 35. The title of the emblem is "Mesme fontaine de salut & de mort" [Same fountain of salvation and death].

<sup>29</sup> P. 215. The title of the emblem is "De guerre Paix" in

Aneau's translation, but most of the poem is spent on the two meanings of the helmet.

<sup>30</sup> *Premier livre des emblemes*, Emblem 16 "Fortune favorise sans labour" (44), and Emblem 23 "Bien se doit acquerir par labour" (58).

<sup>31</sup> Pp. 45, 46, and 47, respectively.

<sup>32</sup> "Introduction," *Theater of Fine Devices*, by Thomas Combe, ed. Mary V. Silcox (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1990), 17.

<sup>33</sup> *Iconologia* (Paris, 1677), 180.

<sup>34</sup> Cartari, *Les Images des Dieux des Anciens*, trans. Antoine du Verdier (Lyon: Barthelemy Honorat, 1571), 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Iconologie* (Paris, 1677). ↗

### Minamino: Lute Tablature (from page 3)

in fifteenth-century Germany. Why did an organist need lute tablature? I have argued elsewhere that Paumann is identical with "Orbus ille germanus" whom Johannes Tinctoris, a Flemish theorist and composer, praised as a virtuoso in the polyphonic manner of lute playing.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, German lute tablature resembles the so-called old German organ tablature that was used in the fifteenth century. In the former system, letters of the alphabet represent the frets, while in the latter these symbols denote keys.

Why did Paumann need to invent such a notation system? In German lute tablature, each individual fret was named with a separate symbol. This facilitated the method of notation for blind lutenists, who must have relied on dictation to an amanuensis. If a lutenist wanted to notate a C-major scale in French tablature, he would say, "a on the fifth string, c on the fifth string, e on the fifth string, a on the fourth string, c on the fourth string, a on the third string, c on the third string, and d on the third string." This is tedious and time-consuming. In

German tablature, on the other hand, he would simply say, "1, f, q, 2, g, 3, h, and n." (See Figure 2.)

Now we go back to Agricola's question: How can a blind person understand any form of notation? Indeed, if German lute tablature derived from German organ tablature, there appears to be a problem concerning its inventor. How could Paumann, who was born blind, have adapted a notation which he had never seen? Even that can be solved by suggesting that someone could have explained to him how organ tablature was constructed. Of course, it could be argued that whoever helped him adapt it may be the actual inventor. The system certainly benefited Paumann, even if he did not actually innovate it. Perhaps it was merely his advocacy of the system that led to his being called its inventor. ↗

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> On lute tablature, see Johannes Wolf, *Handbuch der Notationskunde* (Leipzig, 1919; Wiesbaden, 1963), vol. 2, 35-157; and Willi Apel, *The Notation of Polyphonic Music 900-1600* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953), 54-81.

<sup>2</sup> Sebastian Virdung, *Musica getuscht* (Basel, 1511), f. K3v. A quasi-facsimile edition is available: Robert Eitner, ed., *Publikationen älterer praktischer und theoretischer Musikwerke*, Bd. 11 (Berlin, 1882). My translation is taken from Beth Bullard, ed. and trans., *Musica getuscht: A Treatise on Musical Instruments (1511) by Sebastian Virdung* (Cambridge, 1993), 156.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Agricola, *Musica instrumentalis deutsch* (Wittenberg, 1529), ff. 29-30. See the quasi-facsimile edition in Robert Eitner, ed., *Publikationen älterer praktischer und theoretischer Musikwerke*, Bd. 20 (Leipzig, 1896). The translation is taken from William E. Hettrick, ed. and trans., *The 'Musica instrumentalis deutsch' of Martin Agricola: A Treatise on Musical Instruments, 1529 and 1545* (Cambridge, 1994), 30.

<sup>4</sup> See Hiroyuki Minamino, "Conrad Paumann and the Evolution of Solo Lute Practice in the Fifteenth Century," *Journal of Musicological Research* 6 (1986): 291-310. ↗

C-Major Scale:

C-Major Scale in German Lute Tablature:  
1 f q 2 g 3 h n

C-Major Scale in French Lute Tablature:

Fig. 2. C-Major Scale in Nominal G-Tuning.