

Attributes of Decorum. Square with the Sign of Mercury



by Cesare Ripa, Giovanni Zaratino Castellini

After Youth, Beauty and Lion's fur, god Mercury's symbol is the fourth attribute of Decorum we encounter when reading the entry compiled by Giovanni Zaratino Castellini for Cesare Ripa's Iconologia. The object, having for its base a square - today we would say a cube - is found in the right hand of the personification of Decorum, reproduced in the 1613 edition of the Iconologia and later editions. The ideogram of Mercury has a tripartite structure, which is the sum of the three symbols - the cup, the circle and the cross - relating to the Moon, the Sun and the Earth. It is thus the synthesis of the three essential archetypes contemplated in astrology: the feminine, the masculine and the material substratum. Also important is the role attributed to mercury in alchemy, where, together with sulphur, it is the primordial element present in every other metal. Among the various historical anecdotes that Castellini recalls drawing on his classical culture, there is one concerning fine arts, in which the Greek painter Zeuxis sarcastically apostrophizes Megabizus when the latter, inexperienced in painting, makes some incautious comment. See C. Ripa, Iconologia, Eredi di Matteo Florimi, Siena 1613, pp. 173-174.

The square with the sign of Mercury indicates gravity, stability and constancy in speaking according to decorum, which is why Mercury was called Tetragonos by the Greeks, i.e. firm, stable, prudent, because we must not be

imprudent, varied and changeable, overstepping the boundaries of decorum, nor must we attack and blame people, despising their feelings, because this is arrogance and debauchery, but we must show reverence towards all, as M. Tullius advises, speaking of decorum as moderation in deeds and words. *Adhibenda est igitur quadam reverentia adversus homines, et optimi cuiusq; reliquorum. Nam negligere, quid de se quisq; sentiat non solum arrogantis est sed etiam omnino dissoluti* [1]. Let us bear this in mind when we speak respectfully of others: for he who speaks well and respectfully is a sign that he is a benevolent and honourable man; he who speaks badly is a sign that he is an evil, malicious, envious and unhonourable man, like, according to Homer [2], Thersites with a forked tongue, fickle and always ready to slander and speak ill of his king; Ulysses, on the contrary, is taciturn and thinks before he speaks; when he speaks, he is calm and eloquent, and prudent, knowing, as a wise and prudent man, that for the decorum of the wise man, the tongue must not be quicker than the mind, for one must think well before he speaks. *Linguam preire animo non permittendam.* Chilon of Sparta [3] said, that one should think very carefully about it, because speaking is an indicator of the soul, according to how one speaks with decorum, & therefore the Greeks used the expression *Ἀνδρός χαρακτήρ Hominis character* [4]. Mark of man, as reported by Pierio Vittorio in *Varie lettioni* lib. 9. cap. 6., for as the race of animals may be recognised by the mark, so by the manner of speaking one may tell what nature, & condition men are [5]. Greek moral philosopher Epitectus said in the *Enchiridion*; *Præfige tibi certum modum, & characterem, quem observes, tum solus tecum, tum aliis conversans, operam da ne in colloquia plebeia descendas sed, siquidem fieri potest, orationem transfer ad aliquid decorum, sin minus, silentium age.* I.e. observe a behaviour or a character that is practicable in private, when conversing with others in public, do not fall into vulgar discourse, but as far as possible try to speak on subjects of decorum, otherwise keep silent. [6]. Let us respect decorum in speech, let us speak reasonably of others, and let us not speak ill of anyone, but rather praise him, and let us avoid blaming the work of other men, especially those who are not of our own trade or profession. For many are accustomed to pass judgement on all things, by which they betray their ignorance, and that with little decorum, as did the Prince Megabizus, who, in the house of Zeuxis, found fault with some figures, and reasoned with the pupils of Zeuxis about the art of painting, to which Zeuxis replied; When you held your peace, these boys admired you as a prince clothed in purple, but now they laugh at you, because you want to reason about an art that is not your own [7]; we shall be even more obedient to decorum in speech, if we reject ugly and deceitful words, and speak of honest and honourable things, which is especially fitting for young men of fair countenance, for to the beauty of the body belongs the beauty of manner. For this reason the philosopher Diogenes, seeing a handsome young man speaking without decorum, said to him: "Are you not ashamed that you draw a leaden knife from such a beautiful ivory scabbard?" Meaning by the scabbard, the beauty of the body;

and by the leaden knife, his unmannerly indecent speech, as lead among metals, see *Diogenes' Life* by Diogenes Laertius, where he says. *Videns decorum adolescentem indecore loquentem, non erubescis ait, ex eburnea vagina plumbeum educens gladium?* [8].

[1] «We should, therefore, in our dealings with people show what I may almost call reverence toward all men - not only toward the men who are the best, but toward others as well. For indifference to public opinion implies not merely self-sufficiency, but even total lack of principle». Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis*, liber I, 99 [ed.].

[2] According to Homer; Castellini refers to *Iliad* [ed.].

[3] *Linguae preire animo non permittendam*: 'The tongue must not take precedence over the mind'. Chilon of Sparta (c. 600-520 BC) is remembered as one of the Seven Sages of ancient Greece [ed.].

[4] Ανδρός χαρακτήρ *Hominis character*: 'The character of man', concept derived from the philosopher Theophrastus and the playwright Menander, exponents of the Greek-Hellenistic culture of the 4th-3rd century B.C. [ed.].

[5] Castellini refers to *Variae Lectiones* (1569) by the Florentine philologist and humanist Pietro Vettori (1499-1585) [ed.].

[6] Epictetus (c. 50-130 A.D.), Greek philosopher, author of the *Enchiridion*, from which Castellini draws the Latin quotation and subsequent translation [ed.].

[7] The anecdote of the meeting between Persian prince Megabizus and Greek painter Zeusi is reported in *Suda* (or *Suida*), a 10th century Byzantine encyclopaedia [ed.].

[8] Castellini quotes the *Life of Diogenes of Sinope* included in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, VI [ed.].

Homepage: "Decoro", graphic elaboration of the table illustrating Cesare Ripa's "Iconologia" in the edition published by Pers, Amsterdam 1644. Below: reproduction of pages 173-174 from Cesare Ripa's "Iconologia", *Eredi di Matteo Florimi, Siena 1613* (www.archive.org).

del campo s'arma contro loro, & mostra di sprezzarli, fin tanto, che trouando qualche macchia non veduto da niuno con veloce fuga s'alcode, & s'imboica alle volte, come discreto s'oculta non perche tema, ma per non mettere timore, e terrore ad altri, & in somma osserua il decoro da Principe, & Re in ogni parte; Et questo sia detto circa il decoro dell'operare: venghiamo hora al decoro del parlare.

Il quadrato col segno di Mercurio significa la gravità, stabilità, & costanza del parlare conforme al decoro, & per tal conto Mercurio fu da Greci cognominato Tetragonos, cioè quadrato sodo, stabile, prudente, perche non si deue essere imprudente, vario, e mutabile, nel parlare fuor de termini del decoro, ne si deue con leggerezza correre a mordere, e biasimare col parlare le persone, & dispregiare ciò che essi sentono essendo cosa da arrogante, & di solito ma si deue portare vna certa riueranza a ciascuno, come n' ammonisce M. Iulio parlando del decoro circa la moderatione de fatti, & detti. *Adhibenda est igitur quedam reuerentia aduersus homines, & optimi cuiusq; reliquorum. Nam negligere, quid de se quisq; sentiat non solum arrogantis est sed etiam omnino dissoluti.* Dimodo che deuesi essere considerato nel ragionare parlando honoratamente d'altri: perche chi parla bene, & honoratamente d'altri è segno, che è persona benigna, & honorata, chi parla male è segno, che è persona cattua, maligna, inuidiosa, & poco honorata, quale è appresso Homero Thersite di lingua serpentina, volubile, & pronta al chiacchiarare pessimamente, & dir mal del suo Re; per il contrario Ulisse, e taciturno, & pensoso prima che parli, nel parlar porre quadrato eloquente, e prudente, conoscendo egli, come saggio, & accorto, che per osseruar il decoro d'vn huomo sauo, la lingua non deue essere più veloce della mente, douendosi pensare molto bene, come si habbia a ragionare. *Linguam praire animo non permittendam.* Disse Chilone Lacedemoniese, & molto ben pensare ci si deue perch' il parlare è inditio dell'animo di ciascuno, secondo, come parla con decoro, & però da Greci fu chiamato il parlare *Αυδός χαρακτῆρ* *Hominis character.* Merco de l'huomo, come riferisce Pietro Vittorione ne le varie lettioni lib. 9. Cap. 6. perche si come le bestie si conoscono dal merco di qual razza siano, così le persone dal parlare si conoscono di qual natura, & conditione siano. Epitetto filosofo morale, come Greco disse nell'Enchiridio. *Præfige tibi certum modum, & characterem, quem obserues, tum solus tecum, tum alijs conuersans, operam dāne in colloquia plebeia descendas sed, si quidem fieri potest, orationem transfer ad aliquid decorum, sin minus, silentium age.* Cioè formati vn certo modo o carattere da osseruarlo reco stesso priuatamente, & in paese conuersando con gli altri, procura di non incorrere, in discorsi plebei, ma per quanto si può transferisci il parlare in qualche cosa ch' habbia del decoro, altrimenti sta più tosto cheto. Osseruerassi dunque il decoro nel parlare col ragionare discretamente, d'altri, col non vituperare alcuno, ma più tosto lodare, & col non tassar l'opere altrui massimamente in cose, che non sono della sua professione. Atteso che molti fanno de gl'vniuersali, & in ciascuna

