

Displaying Gift-Giving: Thesis Prints in the Spanish Netherlands

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In the 17th and 18th centuries, *pro gradu* disputations led to the publication of engraved broadsheets or booklets summarizing thesis conclusions.¹ The *disputatio*, an oral exercise aimed at developing skills in eloquence and argumentation, was an important learning practice at institutions of higher education and a form of examination that concluded bachelors, masters and doctors degrees in Philosophy, Law, Medicine and Theology.² The broadsides produced for these occasions were used to announce the public disputation, to provide a visual program to the spectators during the event, and afterwards constituted a *souvenir* of the ceremony. Thesis prints were initially decorated with coats of arms and dedications to academic, ecclesiastical or political figures. From the early 17th century, however, they evolved progressively into large-sized and abundantly illustrated frontispieces, intended to glorify the applicant's patrons.³

This essay focuses on the circulation of thesis prints produced in the Southern Low Countries (mainly the universities of Louvain and Douai and the Jesuit schools established in those cities) and explores how this circulation

- 1 See Gwendoline de Mûelenaere, *Early Modern Thesis Prints in the Southern Netherlands: An Iconological Analysis of the Relationships between Art, Science and Power*, Brill's Studies on Art, Art History, and Intellectual History 60 (Leiden/Boston: 2022); Maddalena Malni Pascoletti, *Ex universa philosophia: Stampe barocche con le tesi dei Gesuiti di Gorizia*, exhibition catalogue (Monfalcone: 1992); Véronique Meyer, *L'illustration des thèses à Paris dans la seconde moitié du XVII^e siècle: Peintres, graveurs, éditeurs*, Commission des travaux historiques de la ville de Paris (Paris: 2002); Louise Rice, "Jesuit Thesis Prints and the Festive Academic Defence at the Collegio Romano", in *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540[–]1773*, ed. John W. O'Malley (Toronto: 1999), 148[–]69.
- 2 On the *disputatio*, see Olga Weijers, *In Search of the Truth: A History of Disputation Techniques from Antiquity to Early Modern Times* (Turnhout: 2013).
- 3 Originally meaning the main façade of a building, the word "frontispiece" came to denote the opening image of a book, containing its title and other bibliographical indications. The term was sometimes used to refer to large-format thesis broadsides, even if they were autonomous plates.

influenced their iconography.⁴ Such broadsides were not intended for the open print-market; they were mainly designed and issued to be given to members of the social and intellectual elite. The act of gift-giving is expressed in the written dedication to the patron printed alongside the scientific conclusions on the thesis print. It is also visually staged through a *mise en abyme*, a device in which the broadside depicts its own presentation to the student's sponsor. These visual and textual constructions aid our understanding of the functioning and intentions of thesis engravings in the sociopolitical context of courtly patronage permeating teaching institutions during the 17th century.

1 Displaying Gift-Giving: the Device of *Mise en Abyme*

At first, thesis prints did not enter commercial channels. They were intended to be posted in college halls, distributed to an audience during the defense, or sent to relatives and friends. In addition, more luxurious editions printed on satin were meant to be given personally to a dedicatee. From the beginning, the conclusions were accompanied by dedications to rich or powerful patrons. This practice of dedication epitomizes the relationship of patronage (existing or wanted) between a student and his sponsor, which governed the production and circulation of these works in the early modern period.⁵

The dedication is part of a gift-and-return-gift-system in which connections of power can be made and strengthened.⁶ This gesture, although it is presented as a material and symbolic gift, should be understood as an instrument of exchange between student and protector, in which the former expected advantages from the latter in return for the dedication.⁷ The value of these prints as works of art explains why so many of them survived after the *disputatio*, which was by nature an ephemeral event. Large thesis broadsheets of wealthy candidates were often commissioned from famous painters, such as Peter

4 The Old University of Louvain was founded in 1425 and closed in 1797. The University of Douai, established by Paul IV's papal bull in 1559 and opened in 1562, was transferred to the jurisdiction of the King of France in 1668, following the conquest of the territory by Louis XIV.

5 Roger Chartier, "Patronage et dédicace", *Culture écrite et société: L'ordre des livres* (Paris: 1996), 81[–]106.

6 Isabelle Diu, "Enjeux de pouvoir dans la République des Lettres. Préfaces et dédicaces d'Erasmus pour ses éditions et traductions d'œuvres classiques et patristiques," in *Le pouvoir des livres à la Renaissance*, ed. Dominique de Courcelles (Paris: 1998), 65[–]76. For further discussion on the subject, see the seminal works of Marcel Mauss, in particular: *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (London: 1966).

7 Roger Chartier, "Patronage et dédicace," 101[–]102; Sharon Kettering, "Gift-Giving and Patronage in Early Modern France," *French History* vol. 2, no. 2 (1988): 131[–]151.

Paul Rubens (1577[–]1640) and his followers Antoon Sallaert (1580/85[–]1650), Cornelis Schut (1597[–]1655), Abraham van Diepenbeeck (1596[–]1675), and Erasmus Quellinus (1607[–]1678).⁸ These expensive engravings were later sought by collectors for their high quality, aesthetic originality, and rarity. The prints could also be exchanged among scholars who wanted to establish or strengthen relationships and to encourage scientific discussions.⁹

Numerous figurative scenes surround the scientific conclusions in thesis prints. Among them, a device frequently displayed in Flemish thesis engravings is the depiction of the gift-giving of the broadsheet itself.¹⁰ The applicant is featured presenting to his patron a miniature copy of his thesis broadside or booklet. It is sometimes repeated a second time within itself, and the process can continue toward the infinitesimally small: even if an engraver stopped after one or two repetitions, it is enough to suggest the possibility of endless, diminishing recurrences.¹¹ Such staging of the offering replicates the composition *ad infinitum* and functions as a pictorial *mise en abyme* of the dedication.¹² This reflexive process proposes a visualization of the academic

8 On one of Rubens's thesis prints, the Austroseraphic Heavens, see "Chapter 5: The Transatlantic Thesis Disputation" in Aaron M. Hyman, *Rubens in Repeat: The Logic of the Copy in Colonial Latin America* (Los Angeles: 2021), 217[–]256.

9 It is for instance the case of a thesis print designed by Abraham Van Diepenbeeck for Théodore d'Immerseel (1633[–]1654) in 1652. The painter Daniel Seghers (1590[–]1661), coadjutor brother of the Society of Jesus, wanted to put André Tacquet (1612[–]1660), the professor who presided over the dispute, in contact with Christiaan Huygens (1629[–]1695). Seghers sent three copies of the thesis program to the Dutch scientist, who received them on 28 October 1652. Huygens replied to Seghers on November 4, 1652, and then began a regular correspondence with Tacquet over mathematical topics. See Henri Bosmans, "Tacquet (André)," in *Biographie nationale de Belgique*, t. 24 (Brussels: 1929), col. 443.

10 The practice of gift-giving is also represented in thesis frontispieces of French, Italian and German production. For examples see: Sibylle Appuhn-Radtke, *Das Thesenblatt im Hochbarock* (Weissenhorn: 1988), cat. no. 46; Bénédicte Gady, *L'ascension de Charles Le Brun: Liens sociaux et production artistique* (Paris: 2010), fig. 136; Géza Galavics, "Thesenblätter ungarischer Studenten in Wien im 17. Jahrhundert: Künstlerische und pädagogische Strategien," in *Die Jesuiten in Wien. Zur Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte der österreichischen Ordensprovinz der "Gesellschaft Jesu" im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Herbert Karner and Werner Telesko, Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Kunstgeschichte 5 (Vienna: 2003), cat. no. 3[–]4; Annalisa Pezzo, *Le tesi a stampa a Siena nei secoli XVI e XVII: Catalogo degli opuscoli della Biblioteca comunale degli Intronati*, Biblioteca di Redos 1 (Milan: 2011), cat. no. 69; Bernhard Schemmel and Wolfgang Seitz, *Die graphischen Thesen- und Promotionsblätter in Bamberg* (Wiesbaden: 2001), cat. no. 96.

11 John J. White, "The Semiotics of the *Mise-en-Abyme*", *The Motivated Sign*, edited by Olga Fischer and Max Nänny, Iconicity in Language and Literature 2 (Amsterdam: 2001), 36[–]38.

12 Lucien Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire. Essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris: 1977), 62.



FIGURE 8.1 Richard Collin after Abraham van Diepenbeeck, *Young Man Offering his Thesis*, c.1675, engraving

exchange inside the thesis and emphasizes the act of gift-giving expressed in the dedication. It is therefore an eloquent example of the praiseful function assigned to thesis broadsheets.

The device of *mise en abyme ad infinitum* can be observed in a print designed by Abraham van Diepenbeeck and engraved by Richard Collin (1626[–]c.1697) (Fig. 8.1). The miniature scene occupies the upper part of the thesis page presented by the candidate while the textual summary is depicted by lines and dots below. It can be deduced from the representation that the image was initially joined by a scientific text but was separated from it later.¹³ The dedicatee is joined by Minerva and Prudence. Terrestrial and celestial globes and books on the ground further indicate the erudite nature of the event.

¹³ David Steadman nevertheless suggests that the page containing the conclusions was never produced, for economic reasons (David W. Steadman, *Abraham van Diepenbeeck: Seventeenth-Century Flemish Painter*, Studies in Baroque Art History 5 (Ann Arbor: 1982), 37[–]38). There is no material evidence that the print of the Rijksmuseum has been cut down, which would confirm Steadman's hypothesis.

These prints-within-prints could take the form of a frontispiece, opening the written section of the booklet with the detailed conclusions; of a rectangular figurative frame surrounding the scientific text sketched in the broadside; or of a *velum* or large panel bringing together the entire composition. The candidate's representation usually followed a more or less standard pattern; his face can show individualized features, but their general attitude is subject to *decorum*. The young man is often shown walking towards his benefactor, bending down or kneeling as a mark of respect, while he holds out a *velum* or an open leaflet. By contrast, the dedicatee's image is more elaborate; he is represented wearing contemporary or classical clothes, in a head-and-shoulder portrait medallion or as a full-length or equestrian figure, and his identity is often used as a source of inspiration for the general iconography of the engraving.¹⁴ Devices including stages, staircases, steps or a mound of soil tend to be used to emphasize the distance separating the dedicatee from the candidate. The spatial left-right disposition is respected, observing the traditional precedence of the dextral over the sinistral that prevailed in Western art.¹⁵

Another broadside designed by Abraham van Diepenbeeck (possibly after Rubens) and engraved by Schelte A. Bolswert (1586[–]1659) reproduces in a schematic way its own page setup, generating an image-within-the-image (Fig. 8.2).¹⁶ The philosophical conclusions, defended in Douai on the 22nd of August 1628 by the Polish Jesuit Gabriel Kilian de Bobrek Ligeza, are inscribed in the lower part of the poster. The discussed subjects are preceded by a cartouche

14 Ann Diels, "Uit de schaduw van Rubens" (Brussels: 2009), 45[–]46.

15 Christine Dubois, "L'image 'abymée'", *Images Re-vues*, 2, no. 8 (2006), [<http://images.revues.revues.org/304>] (accessed December 21, 2014): § 8[–]9. See also Hugo Van der Velden, "Diptych Altarpiece and the Principle of Dextrality," in *Essays in Context. Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*, edited by John Oliver Hand and Ron Spronk (Cambridge: 2006), 124[–]155.

16 At least four copies of this broadside are known. The copy held at the British Museum (inv. 1858,0417.1259) contains in the lower corners of the top part the inscriptions: "S. Bolswert fc." and "P. P. Rub. inv.". The others only bear the signature "S. Bolswert fc." (Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium, inv. SI 28107; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. RP-P-OB-67.556; Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, inv. PDP, 23.K.4-202). However, this engraving is not mentioned in the volume of the *Corpus Rubenianum* dedicated to Rubens's frontispieces (J. Richard Judson and Carl Van de Velde, *Book Illustrations and Title-Pages, Corpus Rubenianum* Ludwig Burchard, vol. 21, London: 1978). According to Max Rooses, "One of these theses bear the name of Abraham van Diepenbeeck as designer [...]. None of them can justify an attribution to Rubens" (*L'oeuvre de P. P. Rubens. Histoire et description de ses tableaux et dessins*, vol. 5 (Antwerp: 1892), 39[–]40). It is possible that van Diepenbeeck conceived the composition after an invention by Rubens, as is the case for a broadsheet of 1636, *Neptune and Minerva* (Judson and Van de Velde, *Book Illustrations and Title-Pages*, vol. 1, no. 86).



FIGURE 8.2 Schelte a Bolswert after Abraham van Diepenbeeck (and Peter Paul Rubens?), *Thesis Dedicated to Sigismund III Vasa, King of Poland, 1628*, engraving

naming the patron, Sigismund III King of Poland and Sweden (1566[–]1632), and by a Latin address in his honor. The engraved frame is made of eight figurative scenes depicting the history of Poland, as well as a portrait of Gabriel Kilian de Bobrek Ligeza. The student, joined by embodiments of Science and War, gives his thesis print to his monarch portrayed in the top section of the print.¹⁷ Sigismund III sits on a throne bearing the motto *More Maiorum* (“after the custom of our ancestors”). He is surrounded by allegorical figures holding coats of arms, who can be identified as the personifications of Russia holding a crown; Poland as Minerva, Sweden (crowned), and an Ottoman woman, who offers a laurel branch while pointing to her broken weapons.

The Polish candidate, studying in Douai within the framework of a *peregrinatio academica*, took advantage of his public defense to glorify Sigismund III.¹⁸ The iconography presents the latter as a worthy heir of the Jagellonian dynasty, a strong advocate for the Catholic faith, and a sovereign successful in his military conquests (although the reality was significantly different).¹⁹ The intended function of praising is visually conveyed through the embedded image showing the gift-giving, as well as the allegorical, heraldic, and emblematic language. Among these different languages of a symbolic nature, the emblems occasionally inserted in thesis broadsides or thesis booklets can be compared to the *mise en abyme* method. Jesuit emblematics, codified within the pedagogical program of the *Ratio studiorum* (1599), often focuses on the forms and functions of the pictorial *imago*—the visual image.²⁰ Construed by the order's members of produced for the order, such emblems were used as a signifying instrument reflecting on the status of the *imago*. A similar deferral of meaning is involved in embedded images in Jesuit and university thesis prints.

In the example cited above, the work of art takes itself as a subject and is therefore reflexive. It combines the dimension of reflexivity with an embedding relation, resulting in an engraving-within-the-engraving. According to Bernard Vouilloux, this structure is typically a process of sampling and exemplification,

17 The figure of Sigismund III is copied from a painting dated c.1626, now attributed to Pieter Soutman (formerly Rubens), in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich (inv. 948).

18 About the *peregrinatio academica*, see Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel, *Les universités européennes du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle. Histoire sociale des populations étudiantes*, vol. 2, *France* (Paris: 1986[–]1998), 33[–]105.

19 Sigismund's eviction from the Swedish throne started the Polish-Swedish war (1626[–]29), which rekindled the ancient rivalry with Muscovy. This conflict is closely related to the campaigns the ruler led against the Turks and the Tatars. Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, vol. 1, *The Origins to 1795* (Oxford: 1985), 447.

20 Walter S. Melion, “Introduction: The Jesuit Engagement with the Status and Functions of the Visual Image”, in *Jesuit Image Theory*, ed. Wietse de Boer, Karl A. E. Enenkel, and Walter S. Melion, *Intersections* 45 (Leiden: 2016), 6[–]8.

since it draws the viewer's attention to the embedded image, identical to the one that surrounds it.²¹ The phenomenon of reduplication (i.e. the evocation of the work in the work itself), which is at play in thesis prints, is one of the numerous forms of *mises en abyme* that flourished particularly in 17th-century art, along with extensions of the representation using embedded mirrors or references to prior works (in *Kunstkammers*, gallery paintings, or the painter in his studio).²²

2 Narrativizing the Reception: the Tradition of Dedication Images

It is helpful here to consider the expression of *mise en abyme* and the theories it has produced. The phrase was first used by the French author André Gide in 1893 to outline self-reflexive embeddings in artistic fields.²³ It is adapted from a technical term in heraldry, the *abîme*, which is the heart of the coat of arms. This concept was gradually applied by scholars to various realms: graphic arts, literature, theater, film, advertising, and has developed multiple meanings in modern criticism, art-historical and semiotic discourses. Lucien Dällenbach (*Le récit spéculaire*, 1977) describes this structure as “any enclave keeping up a relation of similarity with the work that contains it”; it appears as a mode of *reflection*, a method for the work to return to itself, having the faculty of conjuring up its formal structure, and hence of informing the reader about the meaning of the whole.²⁴

Dällenbach distinguishes *mises en abyme ad infinitum* from “simple” or “specular” reflections. The latter consists of a reduplication of the narrative or the representation within itself by means of mirrors. In pictorial works of art, the process compensates for the limitation of the viewer's look and reveals details that would otherwise be excluded from his field of vision. The well-known examples quoted by Gide are *The Arnolfini portrait* (1434) by Jan Van Eyck (c.1390[–]1441), *The diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhoven* (1487) by Hans Memling (c.1430[–]1494) and *The Moneylender and his wife* (1514) by Quentin Metsys (1466[–]1530), as well as *Las Meninas* (1656) by Diego Velázquez (1599[–]1660).²⁵

21 Bernard Vouilloux, *L'œuvre en souffrance: Entre poétique et esthétique*, L'extrême contemporain (Paris: 2004), 160.

22 André Chastel, *Le tableau dans le tableau, suivi de La figure dans l'encadrement de la porte chez Velasquez*, Champs arts (Paris: 2012), 13 and 35; Dubois, “L'image ‘abymée’,” 1.

23 André Gide, *Journal 1889[–]1939*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 54 (Paris: 1948), 41.

24 Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire*, 15[–]18, and pictorial examples: 19[–]22.

25 Ibid., 19[–]20 and 34[–]38.

Mises en abyme ad infinitum, for their part, presuppose a faithful repetition of the subject endlessly, at least theoretically, each iteration reducing the image's size. This visual experience is also known as the "Droste effect", named after the design on the boxes of the Dutch brand Droste cocoa powder, introduced in 1904. The advert shows a nurse carrying a tray with a box displaying a smaller picture of her holding the same object, which in turn bears a reduced picture of her carrying the same tray, and so on (Fig. 8.3).²⁶ This clever compositional formula strategy proved very popular in advertising at the beginning of the 20th century. The device can also be described as an optical feedback, a potential infinite regression, an unending loop, a recursive sequence, and as a self-similar object. The relation between the "reflected" and the "reflecting" is of a literal nature when the embedded image is identical (or rather almost identical) to all or part of the embedding image, as is the case for self-portraits of painters in action, which juxtapose the "original" (the painter while painting) and its painted representation (his depicted portrait).²⁷

The *mise en abyme* is a "privileged image", as André Chastel describes, "because it defines itself in relation to the form or origin of the very work in which it appears".²⁸ This technique of showing a small-scale model of its own structure would be an occurrence of absolute iconic replication (except for size). The device also explains the production scenario of the work of art, and here the act of reception, by stimulating the imagination of the audience. The *mise en abyme* leads to confusion in the articulation of levels, normally separated, of the narrative and of the narrated events, and "because of the complexities of the multi-layered process of *semiosis* involved, it demands substantial interpretive creativity on the viewer's part".²⁹ But, in exchange, the device provides a reflection, formal and intellectual, on the materiality of the work of art and on its process of creating.³⁰

The reflexivity implied by the phenomenon of images-within-images attests to the increasing artistic self-awareness in the medieval and early modern periods, which first developed in Italy around 1300. From the 14th century in Europe, an increasing number of paintings on panel, frescoes, sculpted

26 Corine Schleif, "Kneeling on the Threshold: Donors Negotiating Realms Betwixt and Between," in *Thresholds of Medieval Visual Culture: Liminal Spaces*, ed. Elina Gertsman and Jill Stevenson (Woodbridge: 2012), 209[–]211.

27 Vouilloux, *L'œuvre en souffrance*, 138. The embedding process can also be metaphorized, such as *mises en abyme* in which the embedding function is assumed, metaphorically, in the representational space, by the depiction of doors, windows and niches. See: Victor Stoichita, *L'instauration du tableau: Métapeinture à l'aube des temps modernes* (Geneva: 1999), 53[–]99.

28 Chastel, *Le tableau dans le tableau*, 12.

29 White, "The Semiotics of the *Mise-en-Abyme*", 37, 45 and 50.

30 Dubois, "L'image 'abymée'", 1.



FIGURE 8.3 *Advertisement for Droste Cocoa Powder, after 1904*

capitals, mosaics, stained-glass windows and manuscript illuminations included embedded images, themselves belonging to various mediums.³¹ The compositional device continued to grow in early modern paintings, appearing predominantly in the theme of Saint Luke portraying the Virgin Mary, in self-portraits of artists, and in studio compositions. Victor Stoichita has demonstrated, in his book *The Self-Aware Image* (1997), that metapainting (paintings that visually reflect on the nature of paintings), was a key factor in establishing the modern condition of art. Lorenzo Pericolo includes within this “epiphenomenon of the self-assertion of the early modern painting” “the whole gamut of pictorial devices through which painting stages its fictiveness. Incorporating a painting—or an image with an equivalent status—as an object of representation is a means to achieve this goal.”³²

Self-representation highlights the status of the image and *artificium* of the work and affirms its artistic value. It plays a “corporate intention”, an advertising role in favor of its own style.³³ To this end, the formula provides the opportunity to visualize the account of some key events in the life of the object, among which are its own creation and donation. In the first case, the emphasis is put on the pictorial gesture. In the second case, self-references are used to strengthen the symbolism of gift-giving by visually stressing the act of donation of the work.³⁴ According to Stuart Whatling, “to depict upon an object a scene showing the origin and the purpose of its own existence reifies its foundation-myth in a manner that makes it inseparable from the object itself”.³⁵ It leaves a stronger mark on people’s minds than traditional inscriptions would do.

Scenes of artistic donations spread widely in medieval art, in particular in byzantine iconography.³⁶ Many examples of self-referential offerings can be found in varied artistic mediums, and from the 9th century onwards, dedication

31 Peter Bokody, *Images-within-Images in Italian Painting (1250–1350)* (Farnham: 2015), 3[–]5.

32 Lorenzo Pericolo, “What is Metapainting? *The Self-Aware Image* Twenty Years Later”, in *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Metapainting*, edited by Victor Stoichita (London: 2015), 11[–]13. This book was first published in 1993 under the title *L’instauration du tableau* (see note 27).

33 Chastel, *Le tableau dans le tableau*, 39; Victor Stoichita, “L’effet Don Quichotte. Le problème de la frontière esthétique dans l’œuvre de Murillo,” in *Cadre, seuil, limite. La question de la frontière dans la théorie de l’art*, ed. Thierry Lenain and Rudy Steinmetz, Essais (Brussels: 2010), 89.

34 Stuart Whatling, “Putting Mise-En-Abyme in its (Medieval) Place”, lecture at the workshop *Medieval Mise-En-Abyme: The Object Depicted within Itself*, online articles of the Courtauld Institute, February 2009, accessed March 17, 2014, 1[–]10 [<http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/researchforum/projects/medievalarttheory/documents/Mise-en-abyme.pdf>].

35 Ibid., 2.

36 On this practice in medieval art, see Schleif, “Kneeling on the Threshold,” 195[–]216.

images were increasingly produced in *scriptoria*.³⁷ For instance, manuscript illuminations often show representations of the codex in which they are contained, following a relatively standard iconographic repertoire. The genre continued beyond the 13th century, but it progressively lost its spiritual dimension, becoming less an affirmation of piety than a tool serving personal ambitions. This is the case in the presentation miniature decorating the frontispiece of the *Chroniques de Hainaut* (c.1447[–]1448), attributed to Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400[–]1464) (Fig. 8.4). In this miniature, Simon Nockart, who sponsored the French translation of this history of the county, is depicted while giving the volume to Philip the Good (1396[–]1467).³⁸



FIGURE 8.4 Attributed to Rogier Van der Weyden, Frontispiece to the *Chroniques de Hainaut* dedicated to Philip the Good, 1447[–]1448, presentation miniature

37 Noémi Colin, *Le pouvoir en images: l'acte de dédicace dans l'iconographie occidentale du VI^e au début du XIII^e siècle*, doctoral dissertation (Université de Paris X-Nanterre: 2007), 11.

38 The translation project of the *Chroniques de Hainaut* was under the patronage of Simon Nockart, high official of Hainaut and advisor to Philip the Good (Pascal Schandel, "Les images de dédicace à la cour des ducs de Bourgogne. Ressources et enjeux d'un genre", in *Miniatures flamandes, 1404–1482*, edited by Bernard Bousmanne and Thierry Delcourt, exhibition catalogue (Paris: 2011), 75[–]77).



FIGURE 8.5
Giotto di Bondone
and workshop,
*The Stefaneschi
Altarpiece (verso)*,
c.1320, tempera
on pane

Even though the phenomenon of self-reference, whether alluding to a gifting scene or not, is common in Western art, the identical depiction of an image within itself is much rarer. The abyssal form of self-representation is not a mere representation-within-the-representation showing a generic work of art, but it gains an additional degree of significance since it indicates that specific picture.³⁹ A unique instance of *mise en abyme ad infinitum* in medieval painting is the *Stefaneschi triptych*, commissioned by Cardinal Giacomo Gaetani Stefaneschi (c.1260[–]1343) as an altarpiece for one of the altars in St. Peters, Rome, and executed by Giotto di Bondone (1266/1267[–]1337) around 1320 (Fig. 8.5).⁴⁰ The patron is portrayed in the central panel donating the altarpiece to Saint Peter. The miniature copy of the altarpiece shows an even smaller version of the composition, represented by a simple golden mark (Fig. 8.6). Giotto used the device of infinite regression to include the patron twice within the altarpiece and emphasize his role as donor.⁴¹

The more unusual *mise en abyme* of the presentation scene occurs in a very similar fashion in the iconography of 17th-century thesis broadsides. In a thesis poster dedicated to Leopold I (1640[–]1705), the reduplication has the same intention of strengthening the artistic value of the composition, and thus functions as an advertisement in favor of the engraved work (Fig. 8.7). This thesis print was executed in 1663 by two artists from Liège, Bertholet Flémalle

39 Bénédicte Gady, "La gravure dans la gravure: Exercices visuels et sémantiques", in *L'estampe au Grand siècle: Études offertes à Maxime Préaud*, ed. Peter Fuhring, Barbara Brejon de Lavergnée and Marianne Grivel, *Matériaux pour l'histoire 9* (Paris: 2010), 452.

40 The altarpiece is now housed in the Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome.

41 Bokody, *Images-within-Images in Italian Painting*, 14[–]15.



FIGURE 8.6
Giotto di Bondone and
workshop, *The Stefaneschi
Altarpiece* (detail)



FIGURE 8.7 Michel Natalis after Bertholet Flémalle, *Thesis of Henri Hatzfeldt, Count of
Gleichen*, 1663, engraving

(1614[–]1675) and Michel Natalis (1611[–]1668) to celebrate the disputation in *Jurisprudentia* argued by Count Heinrich von Hatzfeldt (d. 1683), a German nobleman studying at the University of Louvain, under the supervision of Henri Loyens (1607[–]1686).⁴² The homage paid to the Emperor, written on the stone pedestal in the lower part of the composition, is visually repeated through the representation of the broadside gift and reads “To the most powerful and invincible Caesar Leopold, most august Emperor” (*Potentissimo invictissimoque Leopoldo Caesari. Augustissime imperator*); “Here I am thrown down at [your] sacred feet and with me the entire family of Hatzfeldt” (*Ecce me sacros advolutum ad pedes et Mecum totam Hatzfeldiorum familiam*). The image and the dedication explicitly refer to the war between the Holy Roman Empire and the Ottoman Empire from 1663 to August 1664: “Vanquisher of the Turks and defender of the Church of God” (*Turcorum debellator, defensorque Ecclesiae Dei*).

The small central panel, which reproduces the scene, underlines what is already visible: it stresses the political and religious stakes of the representation by repeating the motif of angels fighting the Turkish army and other dissidents, with the help of a cross, a lantern, a sword and lightning. The candidate positions his defense under the auspices of Leopold I and reiterates his tribute at the end of the Latin text.⁴³

Such representations pertain to a conscious strategy of narrativizing gift-giving and its acceptance by the benefactor (implying the acceptance of commitment towards the giver in return). Through the device of self-reference, the act of donation is permanently recorded within the engraving. It claims the merit due to the work and its recipient, and calls to mind the generosity of the donor.⁴⁴ Those images not only affirm the student’s status of authorship, but they also emphasize the dedicatee’s role as a patron.⁴⁵ In this way, they create a reciprocal praise: the young candidate benefits from the moral authority and political power of the protector, while the student’s knowledge has a positive impact on the dedicatee’s reputation. The mediation between the two communication actors is achieved by the poster depicted within the print.

42 Pierre-Yves Kairis, *Bertholet Flémal (1614[–]1675): Le “Raphaël des Pays-Bas” au carrefour de Liège et de Paris* (Paris: 2015), 200[–]201, cat. no. G20.

43 “And I dedicate my theses of Universal Law very modestly [...] and I refer entirely to you [...]” (*Et meas Universi Iuris theses cum voto submississime [...] et ego me totum refero ad te [...]*).

44 Whatling, *Putting Mise-en-Abyeme in its (Medieval) Place*, 2.

45 Although the student was presented as the author of the dissertation in thesis prints, he was not necessarily its actual producer. The thesis conclusions were not innovative theories written by the candidate, but they provided above all an occasion for the candidate to display his rhetoric skills. A thesis could also be a means for a professor to spread his ideas among patrons or other scholars through a laureate.

3 Showing the Communication Exchange: Socio-Political Stakes

Although it occupies a minimal place in thesis compositions, the visual and semantic device of the *mise en abyme* plays a central narrative role since it repeats, in the pictorial representation, the written dedication.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the *mise en abyme* serves as metanarration in the sense that it shows to the audience the context of the broadside's reception.

Through the insertion of its miniature version, the conveyed message and the image of its oral communication coexist within a unique medium, enabling an optical journey between them. This visual experience is synchronic: during the defense, the message orally discussed by the candidate was at the same time heard, seen and read by the audience, by means of the poster. Therefore, the image-within-the-image reinforces the link between the viewer and the conclusions of the thesis, merging the contemplation of the figurative scene with the decoding of the text. Its self-referential nature introduces us into the communicational exchange, which has directed the conception of these documents.⁴⁷ Sender, receiver, context, contact, and code are depicted on the fringe of the message, showing the *modus operandi* of the reception situation to the reader. The conveyed information includes the academic positions to be argued, as well as the textual eulogy. The message has thus scientific and rhetorical implications as well as social and political stakes.

Two *atlantico* broadsides bear witness to this double form of donation, in words and in image, through an elaborate iconographic program.⁴⁸ The first one was engraved by Michel Natalis (1611[–]1668) after Cornelis Schut for a doctoral thesis in Law defended by two Austrian brothers in 1643 at the University of Louvain (Fig. 8.8). George Nicolaus (1623[–]1695) and Wolfgang Andreas (1626[–]1693), Barons of Rosenberg, are portrayed presenting an abridged version of the thesis poster to the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand III (1608[–]1657). The *velum* held shows the entire scene with remarkable accuracy, including a reduced copy of itself (Fig. 8.9). Conclusions are engraved on seven medallions presented by flying cherubs, while the written encomium (“they give, they declare, they dedicate”, *dant, dicant, consecrant*) echoes the gesture of donation.

In the thesis print of the Barons of Rosenberg, the Holy Roman Emperor sits on a throne under a monumental canopy on the left half of the composition in front of a column topped with a Habsburg eagle. At the base of the column are

46 Gady, “La gravure dans la gravure”, 452.

47 See Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, *Précis de sémiotique générale*, Culture et communication (Brussels: 1996), 33[–]44.

48 In bibliography, the term *atlantico* means a sheet or book of large dimensions.



FIGURE 8.8 Michel Natalis after Cornelis Schut, *Thesis Defended by George Nicolaus and Wolfgang Andreas, Barons of Rosenberg*, 1643, engraving

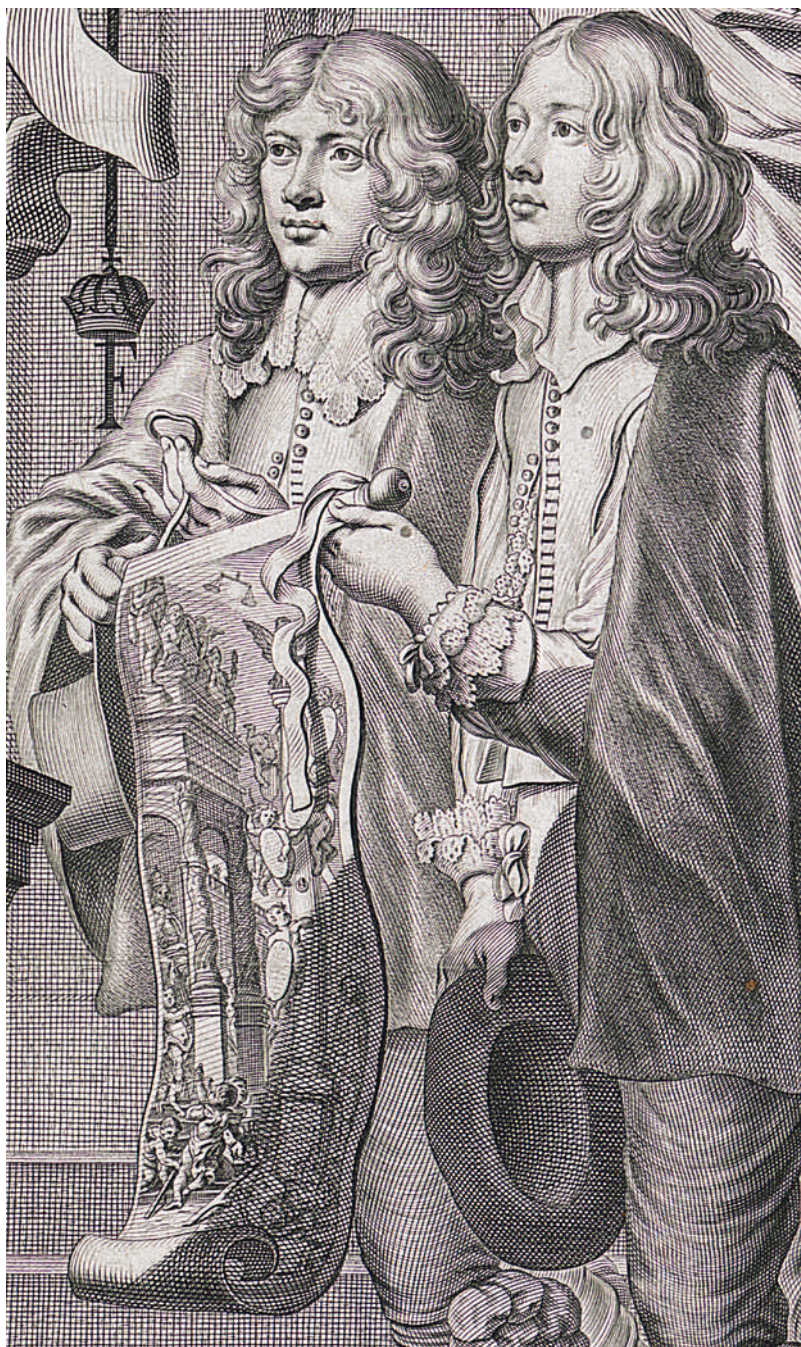


FIGURE 8.9 Michel Natalis after Cornelis Schut, *Thesis Defended by George Nicolaus and Wolfgang Andreas, Barons of Rosenberg* (detail)

three chained figures, symbolizing the sinners defeated by the Catholic faith, while a snake-haired woman, embodying discord or heresy, is shown falling from the steps of the throne. On their left are putti depicted with scales, an olive branch, a sword, a compass and rule, a lead weight, and an open book, attributes referring to Peace, Justice, and the Liberal Arts. The laudatory iconographical program of the print follows the tradition of court culture and sponsorship pervading academic institutions at this time.

Two years later, in 1645, Claudius Count of Collalto (1627[–]1661) obtained his Law degree from the University of Louvain and dedicated his thesis to Archduke Ferdinand of Austria (1633[–]1654), the Emperor's eldest son.⁴⁹ The donation is depicted in the poster designed by Abraham van Diepenbeeck and produced by Paul Pontius for this specific event (Fig. 8.10).⁵⁰ The candidate, accompanied by the personifications of Justice and Faith, is shown holding ostentatiously a panel containing the *mise en abyme* of the broadside. Once again, the visualization of the dedicatory offering is added to the verbal eulogy, written in a large cartouche.⁵¹ The repetition, in a smaller space, of all the elements of the representation attracts the viewer's curiosity and encourages him to enter the image in order to examine each of its components. The *mise en abyme* in the thesis prints of the Count of Collalto and the Barons of Rosenberg do not leave any doubt as to the laudatory nature of these two engravings.

One can discern at least three levels of embeddings in the *mise en abyme* device: first the defense, that includes the actual moment of dedication, which occurred in real life; then the broadsheet that depicts allegorically the act of thesis-giving in the printed composition; finally, the graphic representation of the broadside in miniature in this very image surrounding the scriptural area. This process pertains to the paradox of the frame that frames itself: the eye is

49 Claudius of Collalto was the son of Ramboldo of Collalto (1575[–]1630), an Italian commander at the service of the Holy Roman Empire during the Thirty Years' War and the War of the Mantuan Succession. After his studies, Claudius of Collalto pursued a career in diplomacy and the army.

50 Marc De Beyer, Patrick Ramade and Hans Vlieghe, *Dans la lumière de Rubens: Peintres baroques des Pays-Bas du Sud*, trans. Joke Muller and Milou Boon, exhibition catalogue (Paris: 2000), 64, 71; Friedrich W. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, ca 1450–1700*, vol. 17, *Pauli-Rem* (Amsterdam: 1976), 163, no. 49; Steadman, *Abraham van Diepenbeeck*, 80.

51 "Count Claudius of Collalto and San Salvatore has accomplished his vow toward [by dedicating his work to] the "august Prince Ferdinand of Austria as 4th of the three Ferdinand emperors, great-great-grandson of the first, grandson of the second and son of the third" (*"Augusto principi Ferdinando Austriaco Trium Ferdinandorum Caesarum primi secundi tertii abnepoti nepoti filio pro quarto votum posuit Claudius Comes de Collalto et S. Salvat^o*).



FIGURE 8.10 Paul Pontius after Abraham van Diepenbeeck, *Thesis of Claudius, Count of Collalto*, 1645, engraving

caught by the engraved composition encouraging the viewer to imagine the image of the broadside multiplying over and over again to the infinitesimal.⁵²

The optical route induced by the *mise en abyme* can also be made in the opposite direction, allowing the viewer to enter virtually the presentational space of the work of art at the time of the disputation. His imagination, stimulated by the model in the model, has an idealized vision of the student giving their broadside to their protector. So at each level of the self-referential structure, the graphic elements are both framed and framing representations. As figures, they structure the page area, and as borders, they involve a temporal dimension. In any case, the paradoxical mechanism of the engraving-within-the-engraving causes a disturbing experience as it questions the relations between illusion and reality.⁵³

The spatial organization and the juxtaposition of visual and textual signs on one sheet are not exclusively typical of thesis broadsides. Other ephemeral prints such as almanacs and political handbills combine the power of images and texts in similar layouts. Those posters, pinned or plastered on walls, could also present *mises en abyme* that clarify their own context of distribution, like street vendors. This method is illustrated in an almanac for the year 1653 held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Fig. 8.11).⁵⁴ The calendar, surrounded by two intaglio-printed pillars, occupies the lower part of the broadsheet. The upper part is populated by a crowd of individuals identifiable by their trade: musician, pastry chef, baker, seller of roast meat, painter, book seller, and solicitor. In the middle of the assembly, a man is facing the spectator and indicates the almanac itself, with the difference that the lower part includes the signature (*avec Privilege / Pierre Saincto(n) / excudit*) instead of the calendar. This staging shows that almanacs were sold by street vendors, like chapbooks or popular prints. The *mise en abyme* therefore fulfills the same mission in this engraved broadsheet as that intended in the thesis print, namely to shed light on its own circulation.

In the context of thesis prints, beyond a mere playful representation, the *mise en abyme ad infinitum* offers a metanarrative discourse by mentioning the context of existence of the work of art within itself. The visualization of the gift-giving clarifies the intentions of the laureate, stresses the role of patron of the dedicatee, and introduces a dimension of curiosity in order to attract the viewer's attention.

52 Louis Marin, "Le cadre de la représentation et quelques-unes de ses figures", *Les cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, vol. 24 (1988): 77[–]78.

53 Chastel, *Le tableau dans le tableau*, 32, 60.

54 Maxime Préaud, "'Nous allons à l'an pire': à propos d'un almanach mural pour 1653 et de sa mise en abyme," *Nouvelles de l'estampe*, 245 (2013): 4[–]14.



FIGURE 8.11 Jean Frosne, *Nous Allons à l'An Pire*, 1653, engraving

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