

Disputatio and Dedication

Seventeenth-century thesis prints in the southern Low Countries

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Abstract

This article analyses the tradition of thesis prints in universities and Jesuit colleges of the Spanish Low Countries. It focuses on the origins and the iconography of these engraved broadsides in order to highlight their intellectual, artistic and socio-political dimensions. Being a direct source about teaching in Louvain and Douai, this visual material can provide insight into the learning practices in the Southern Netherlands, in particular the tradition of public defences and the significance of courtly patronage and dedications in an academic environment. The investigated examples are part of the aesthetics developed in Antwerp in the first half of the seventeenth century.

Keywords: thesis print, broadsheet, iconography, disputation, public defence, patronage, dedication

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Introduction

In early modern institutions of higher education, academic dissertations to be defended in public were published in the form of decorated broadsheets summarising the student's conclusions. The aim of these engraved posters was mainly to advertise the disputation and to introduce the theses in question. They also presented a visual programme of its unfolding, and could be collected as a souvenir after the ceremony. This practice was common mostly in Catholic countries: Italy, France, the Southern Netherlands, Germany and Austria. From the early seventeenth century onwards, thesis prints developed into abundantly illustrated documents accompanied by a dedication, and they were meant to affirm the laureates' position in society and to glorify their patrons. Artists created elaborate communicational devices to convey scientific as well as rhetorical messages to the spectators of the defence and to subsequent readers of the poster.

Several recent studies have been dedicated to the practice of thesis engravings. In France, the works of Véronique Meyer mainly focus on the thesis prints market, on specific iconographic themes and on the collaborations between French and Italian artists.¹ Louise Rice has among other things studied the role of such broadsheets within the academic defence, to be situated in the context of the Jesuit culture of spectacle.² Ketty Gottardo suggests that allegorical Italian thesis engravings could be interpreted within the tradition of the *Speculum principis*.³ Other publications, on Italian, German or Austrian theses, are exhibition catalogues concerning a specific artist or collection and discuss the origins, production and functions of this material.⁴ All the studies on

1 V. Meyer, *L'illustration des thèses à Paris dans la seconde moitié du XVII^e siècle. Peintres, graveurs, éditeurs*, Paris 2002.

2 L. Rice, 'Jesuit thesis prints and the festive academic defense at the Collegio Romano', in: J. O'Malley (ed.), *The Jesuits. Cultures, sciences, and the arts 1540-1773*, Toronto 1999, p. 148-169.

3 K. Gottardo, *The Barberini and their use of the printed image*, PhD dissertation, Courtauld Institute of Art, London 2012.

4 S. Appuhn-Radtke, *Das Thesenblatt im Hochbarock. Studien zu einer graphischen Gattung am Beispiel der Werke Bartholomäus Kilians*, Weissenhorn 1988; G.M. Lechner, *Das barocke Thesenblatt. Entstehung, Verbreitung, Wirkung*,

the subject have demonstrated the encomiastic nature of thesis prints, which focused much more on the dedicatee and less on the scientific content defended. In this international debate, my contribution intends to analyse thesis prints made in the Spanish Low Countries, which have not yet been studied thoroughly, in order to highlight their intellectual, artistic and socio-political dimensions. Thesis prints provide insight into the learning practices of university and Jesuit colleges in the Southern Netherlands, in particular the tradition of public defences validating the grant of a degree. Moreover, they reflect the significance of courtly patronage in an academic environment, through the dedications they contain, both verbal and visual. After a synthesis of the origins of thesis prints in the institutions of higher education, this article will focus on the allegorical language elaborated in these engravings, staging knowledge and social aspirations. The selected examples belong to the aesthetics developed in Antwerp in the first half of the seventeenth century.

Origins of thesis prints: the tradition of the disputatio

In his *Dictionnaire universel* published in 1690, Antoine Furetière distinguishes two meanings of the French word ‘thèse’:

Thèse. s[ubst.]. f. Terme dogmatique. Proposition générale qu’on allègue, et qu’on offre de défendre et de soutenir. Voilà la *thèse*, la doctrine que j’avance. Cette *thèse* est vraie dans le général, mais elle est fautive dans le particulier. Les conséquences de l’hypothèse à la *thèse* ne sont pas toujours vraies.

Thèse, en termes de collègue, se dit d’un placard affiché, où on a publié beaucoup de ces *thèses* et propositions. Il y a des *thèses* de théologie, de droit, de médecine, et de philosophie, qu’on doit soutenir contre tous venants à un certain jour assigné. On dédie des *thèses*; on invite d’aller à des *thèses*; on porte des *thèses* dans les maisons.⁵

The term ‘thesis’ denotes at the same time the defended Latin *conclusiones* (also called positions, *assertiones*, *concertationes*) and, by metonymy, their medium, the broadside on which they were written down. Initially, thesis defences were compulsory exercises that took place throughout the entire curriculum. They had their origins in the medieval tradition of the *disputatio*, which was one of the basic teaching methods of scholastic instruction at university level.⁶ It was a regulated verbal argumentation match in which, next to the master, an *opponens* and a *respondens* intervened. This discussion allowed the different players to put forward arguments

der Göttweiger Bestand, Gottweig 1985; M. Malni Pascoletti, *Ex universa philosophia. Stampe barocche con le tesi dei Gesuiti di Gorizia*, Monfalcone 1992; B. Schemmel and W. Seitz, *Die graphischen Thesen- und Promotionsblätter in Bamberg*, Wiesbaden 2001; W. Telesko, *Thesenblätter österreichischer Universitäten*, Salzburg 1996.

⁵ A. Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel, contenant généralement tous les mots françois tant vieux que modernes, et les termes de toutes les sciences et des arts*, The Hague 1690, vol. 3, p. 679.

⁶ O. Weijers, *In search of the truth. A history of disputation techniques from Antiquity to early modern times*, Turnhout 2013.

pro and con concerning a given subject. In doing so, students gained understanding of the content, learned to organise their thoughts and to express these orally through reasoning and persuasion. The medieval disputation was transmitted to the early modern universities, and still formed the foundation for the teaching, examination, publication, and ceremonies of academic life.⁷ However, it was no longer a medium for scholarship. The conclusions were rather a synthesis of the subject matters taught *ex cathedra* than they were innovative theories proposed by the laureates, which therefore makes their authorship ambiguous.⁸ The aim of the *disputatio* first and foremost lied in the art of arguing, which was central in the ‘age of eloquence’ described by French historian Marc Fumaroli in his book on the practice of rhetoric. In seventeenth-century Europe, eloquence was seen as a central pillar in the culture of the educated minority, and the definition of orator was closely related to the notion of a good man and a good citizen.⁹ When the defences were used as exams to conclude academic studies and to affirm the student’s graduation as bachelor, master or doctor, they became the occasion for the production of printed documents listing his positions.

Disputations took place in the two universities of the Spanish Netherlands: Louvain, created in 1425, and Douai, instituted in 1559.¹⁰ The study programmes of all faculties included discussions of problems outlined in class, which familiarised the students with dialectic, as well as public defences giving access to a degree. At the same time, the Society of Jesus integrated the exercise of the *disputatio* into its *Ratio Studiorum*, the document formally establishing their own educational system in 1599, and used it as an important tool for teaching. These rules were applicable to all schools run by the Jesuits and therefore guaranteed homogeneity in their didactic methodology and in their study programmes. The *Ratio* clarified the objectives and modalities of the daily, weekly or solemn thesis disputations in both the lower (humanities) and higher studies (philosophy and theology).¹¹ By the middle of the sixteenth century, the Jesuits organised philosophical and theological lessons shortly after they arrived

7 K. Chang, ‘From oral disputation to written text. The transformation of the dissertation in early modern Europe’, in: *History of Universities* 19.2 (2004), p. 170. However, the practice of disputation, associated with logic and the entire academic system, was criticised in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, because it was not deemed a proper method for spreading knowledge. Its decline began when the written dissertation progressively gained importance. See Weijers, *In search of the truth*, p. 224–225.

8 H. de Ridder-Symoens, ‘De praktijk van kennisoverdracht aan de Europese universiteiten voor 1800’, in: G. Vanpaemel, A. Smets and K. Smeyers (eds.), *Ex cathedra. Leuvense collegedictaten van de 16de tot de 18de eeuw*, Louvain 2012, p. 14–17.

9 M. Fumaroli, ‘L’Âge de l’éloquence. Rhétorique et “res literaria” de la Renaissance au seuil de l’époque classique’, reviewed by P. France, in: *The Modern Language Review* 77.1 (1982), p. 203–205.

10 The University of Douai was founded at the instigation of Philip II of Spain who wanted a French-speaking theological centre in the Spanish Netherlands. It was transferred to the jurisdiction of the French king in 1668.

11 Malni Pascoletti, *Ex universa philosophia* (n. 4), p. 12.

in the southern Low Countries.¹² It led to vivid quarrels with Louvain and Douai about degree-granting, as the universities wished to keep their monopoly in the field of higher education.¹³ In any case, the thesis broadsheets practice developed in both institutions and benefited from the competition between them: universities and Jesuit schools tried to surpass each other in luxury in the preparation of the solemn defences, especially for the doctoral degree. These were sheer ceremonial acts that marked the degree holder's admission as a faculty member, while *tentamina*, private disputations for graduate degrees, were real examinations made official by the vote of several professors.¹⁴ Interestingly, the Jesuit and university thesis posters used the same figurative language and aimed to convey similar messages with allegorical images.

Pro gradu disputations were of great significance within the academic system, and were subject to rigorous etiquette and important pageantry dictated by the educational establishments. Illustrious guests, chamber orchestras, processions through the town and banquets turned them into worldly occasions. The institutions organised the festivities, using all the pomp of the Baroque era in order to properly present themselves.¹⁵ The ritual of such ceremonies surrounding argumentative debates was strongly codified and was relatively homogeneous throughout the regions of Europe, which shows that they were conceived similarly.¹⁶ Public disputations were very expensive, because they included the printing of the thesis posters, the decoration and lighting of the college hall, the organisation of a dinner for the audience and customary gifts for the professors. Therefore, only wealthy men could afford them, while the others just took the regular exams.¹⁷ The candidates occupied lofty social positions in society, and were generally members of the aristocracy.¹⁸ They seized the opportunity of a public disputation to become a member of the social and intellectual elite. Also, thesis defences often had an international dimension, due to the circulation

12 A first community was present in Louvain from 1542, which became a college in 1562.

13 See T. Quaghebeur, 'L'écho européen entre les jésuites et l'Université de Louvain, 1586-1686', in: G.P. Brizzi and R. Greci, *Gesuiti e università in Europa (secoli XVI-XVIII)*, Bologna 2002, p. 145-150; J. Roegiers, 'Awkward neighbours. The Leuven faculty of theology and the Jesuit College (1542-1773)', in: R. Faesen and L. Kenis, *The Jesuits of the Low Countries. Identity and impact (1540-1773)*, Louvain 2012, p. 153-175.

14 Meyer, *L'illustration des thèses à Paris* (n. 1), p. 21.

15 W. Seitz, 'Die Graphischen Thesenblätter des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts. Ein Forschungsvorhaben über ein Spezialgebiet barocker Graphik', in: *Wolfenbütteler Barock Nachrichten* 11.3 (1984), p. 105-106.

16 V. Meyer, 'Les thèses, leur soutenance et leurs illustrations dans les universités françaises sous l'Ancien Régime', in: J. Verger, *Éléments pour une histoire de la thèse*, Paris 1993, p. 45.

17 Contemporaneous descriptions of the festivities organised for doctoral promotions at the old University of Louvain can be found in F. Claeys Bouuaert, *Contribution à l'histoire économique de l'ancienne Université de Louvain*, Louvain 1959, p. 46-47 and 65-68. The author states: 'Given the important expenses, most of the students in medicine, just graduating as licentiates, gave up the idea of seeking the doctoral degree. At the time, it was allowed to practice medicine only with the license title.'

18 But not exclusively. For instance, Philippe Leerse, defending a philosophical thesis in 1674 (Royal Library of Belgium, SH 40793), is recorded in the register of the University of Louvain in the category *Minorenes* (between the *Nobiles* and the *Pauperes*). A. Schillings, *Matricule de l'Université de Louvain*, vol. VI, Brussels 1963, p. 354.

of foreign young nobles visiting the universities of the Spanish Low Countries. Moreover, the Jesuits had to maintain the reputation of their educational institution, and so put forward only the most brilliant students for official oratorical contests. At the universities as well, the doctoral degree was reserved for exceptionally gifted graduates who intended to become teachers.¹⁹ These are the reasons why a limited number of students, after having successfully achieved their degree course, were admitted to take part in the public discussions.²⁰

In this festive context of the defence, the thesis posters exhibited in the academic hall were part of a broader multimedia programme. In parallel with the progressive loss of its conceptual and educational importance, the disputation turned into an experience combining visual arts, music, literature and poetry, with *apparati* put up for the occasion. It had more in common with a spectacle than with an academic exercise, following the predilection for pageantry and eloquence, and the *spectacularisation* of every event of social life that reached its peak in the Baroque period.²¹ Unfortunately, this dimension of rituality and decorum is not easy to delimit and to study, due to the lack of available sources regarding the southern Low Countries. The ephemeral material, such as music scores, booklets of poems and descriptive accounts of academic events, has mostly disappeared.

From text to image

At first, thesis positions were handwritten and used as an *aide-mémoire* for oral exercises. Then, with the number of students increasing, the necessity of distributing several copies of the arguments to many participants led to systematic printing, from the early sixteenth century onwards. A copy in fine writing had to be posted publicly the day before the discussion.²² Conclusions were put down in writing in *plano* size in the case of *pro gradu* disputations, and were formulated in a very summarised manner. They rather consisted of an invitation to attend the public meeting, stating the subject, date, hour, venue, and the name of the *respondens* and *praeses*. The subjects mostly fell within the domain of the faculty of Arts, comprising the teaching of philosophy and natural sciences, and less often the three higher faculties of Law, Medicine and Theology. Subsequently, *in quarto* booklets appeared, counting up to eight or twelve pages, with

19 'The *Visitatio* of 1617 prescribes that [the doctorate] be reserved for men of the elite who can honour the faculty and the State; for this purpose, it requires a rigorous selection of the candidates', in: V. Brants, *La faculté de droit de l'université de Louvain à travers cinq siècles*, Brussels 1917, p. 104; R. Aubert and A. d'Haenens et al., *L'université de Louvain 1425-1975*, Louvain-la-Neuve 1976, p. 99-100.

20 Statistics on the number of students by year and degree are lacking. This question would require a research in archives, which would inform us on the percentage of participation in solemn defences and on graduation rates at doctorate level.

21 A. Pezzo, *Le tesi a stampa a Siena nei secoli XVI e XVII. Catalogo degli opuscoli della Biblioteca comunale degli Intronati*, Milan 2011, p. 12-13.

22 *Ibidem*, p. 14-21.

a separate title page.²³ During the second half of the century, posters and libretti were increasingly adorned with coats of arms, vignettes, tailpieces and narrative scenes. The broadsheet of a thesis defended in Louvain in 1597 states the names of the professor of Law and the defendant, Melchior Moretus, and contains the dedication to the student's father, Jan Moretus, as well. The text is surrounded by an architectonic frame portraying personifications of *Justitia* and *Temperentia* and the armorial devices of his family, Brabant and Louvain (fig. 1).²⁴ After this, thesis illustrations fully developed in the Baroque period. Whereas in volumes the text maintained a pre-eminent position over the image, in broadsides a reversal of this situation became the custom. Written parts were reduced and inserted in the engraving, which became the central work exhibited.²⁵ This phenomenon lived on during the eighteenth century, yet the high costs of these solemn promotions stirred up numerous protests. Moreover, some professors denounced the waste of time and preferred their students spending it studying rather than conceiving broadsheets and organising the ceremony. Through a regulation, Empress Maria Theresa forbade celebrating festive disputations as of February 13, 1755, except for the doctorate, for which she codified the pomp thoroughly.²⁶ Gradually, thesis posters became more sober, and the illustrations were more and more reduced to vignettes above the title, or to ornamental garlands painted in gouache around the text, maybe by the *promovendi* themselves. Stefanie Beghein, while investigating the musical practices in Antwerp funerals, shows that sobriety in material culture was promoted from c. 1680 onwards, and that conspicuous consumption declined in popularity in the following century, among the upper-class as much as among other citizens.²⁷

The most important collections of thesis prints are largely preserved in the print rooms of European institutions, such as the Royal Library of Belgium, the Museum Plantin-Moretus, the Rijksmuseum, the British Museum, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana and the Istituto nazionale per la Grafica in Rome. Aside from those engraved documents, a much larger amount of thesis publications do not contain illustrations.²⁸ The extent of this practice should therefore be put in perspective. The corpus established so far includes 68 thesis broadsheets and 40

23 M. Ashmann, *Collegia en colleges. Juridisch onderwijs aan de Leidse Universiteit 1575-1630 in het bijzonder het disputeren*, Groningen 1990, p. 294-295.

24 See A. de Mets, 'Reliques de l'ancienne Université de Louvain au Musée Plantin-Moretus à Anvers. Les thèses à image', in: *Recueil des Mémoires couronnés et autres mémoires de l'Académie royale de Médecine de Belgique* 22.7 (1925), p. 24-25.

25 Malni Pascoletti, *Ex universa philosophia* (n. 4), p. 13-16, 'Nascita ed evoluzione dei *Thesenblätter*'.

26 'Règlement de l'Impératrice-Reine Marie-Thérèse du 13 février 1755, pour l'Université de Louvain', published in P.F.X. de Ram, *Les quatorze livres sur l'histoire de la ville de Louvain, du docteur et professeur en théologie Jean Molanus*, Brussels 1861, p. 991-1010, and particularly art. 13-24.

27 S. Beghein, 'Music and funeral practices in Antwerp, c. 1650-1750', in: S. Beghein, B. Blondé and E. Schreurs (eds.), *Music and the city. Musical cultures and urban societies in the Southern Netherlands and beyond, c. 1650-1800*, Louvain 2013, p. 82-83.

28 These are mostly preserved in archives, such as the National Archives in Brussels, the Kostbare werken department in the Royal Library, the archives of the universities of Louvain and Louvain-la-Neuve, the Jesuit archives of Nijmegen, the KADOC and the Rijksarchief in Louvain, the Erfgoedbibliotheek

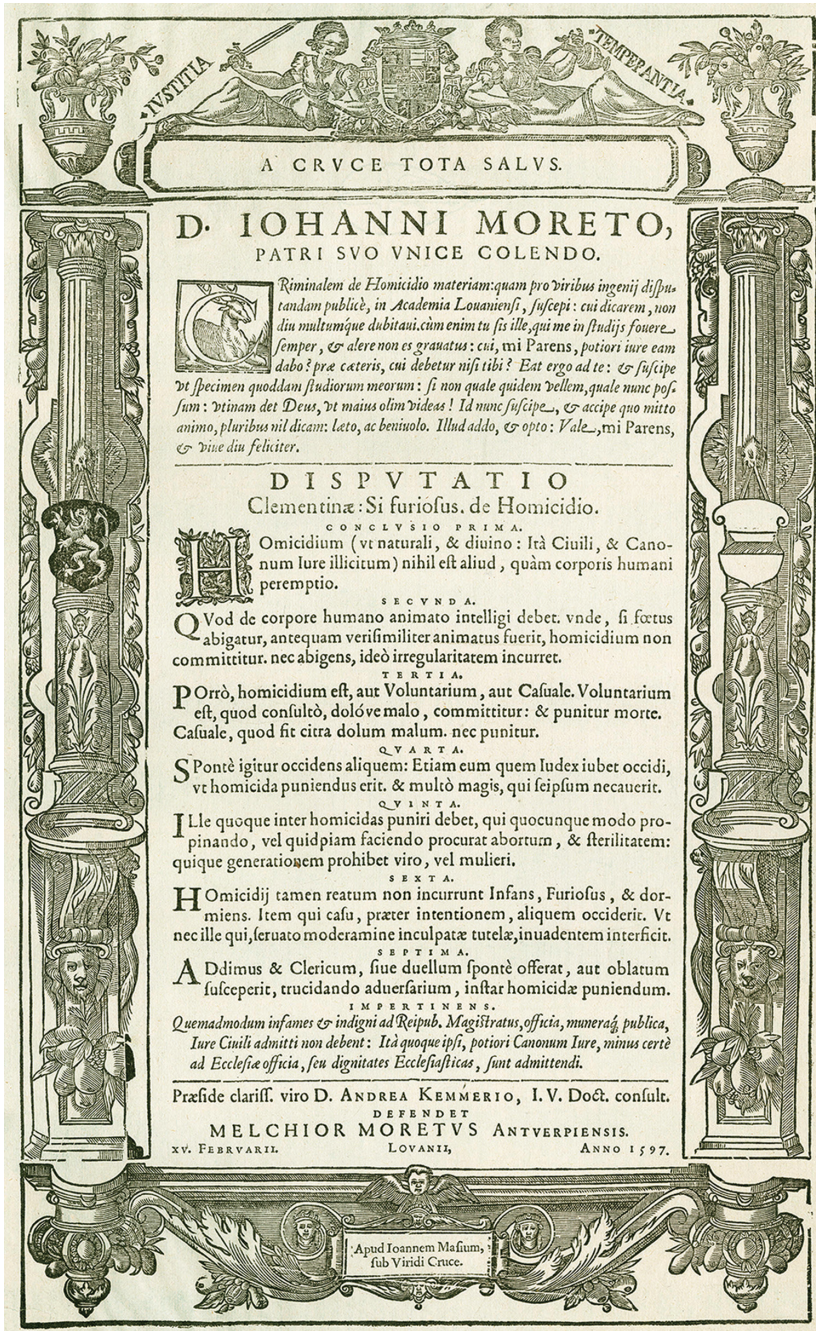


Fig. 1 Anonymous, Disputatio Clementinae: Si furiosus, de Homicidio, thesis of Melchior Moretus dedicated to Johannes Moretus, University of Louvain, 1597, Museum Plantin-Moretus/Prentenkabinet, Antwerp – UNESCO World heritage, inv. no. R 63.8.2.32.

frontispieces to dissertation booklets.²⁹ An indicative repartition of the subjects shows that few mythological (2) and religious scenes (6) were depicted in broadsides in comparison to allegorical compositions. The vast majority of thesis illustrations contain heraldic devices surrounded by personifications or by garlands of flowers (23); portraits of the dedicatee glorified by embodiments of virtues or sciences (26); or representations of the Virgin, the Eucharist or the Trinity, joined by religious personifications (11). The engravings are often a combination of several of these elements. The iconographic conception of the broadsheets was likely the work of the professors and artists, in collaboration with the students who were ordering them.³⁰ Many thesis broadsides produced in the Spanish Netherlands were designed by history painters in the immediate entourage of Peter Paul Rubens: Antoon Sallaert (Brussels 1580/1585-1650), Cornelis Schut (Antwerp 1597-1655), Abraham van Diepenbeeck (s-Hertogenbosch 1596-Antwerp 1675) and Erasmus Quellinus II (Antwerp 1607-1678).³¹ The first two may have been his pupils, and it has been attested that the other two worked in his studio. Rubens himself took on four thesis print projects, in collaboration with the engravers Lucas Vorsterman, Paul Pontius and Schelte a Bolswert, to whom he regularly assigned the task to execute plates after his painted works. Other artists to whom it was regularly requested to produce thesis prints were Michel Natalis, Jacob Neeffs, Philip Fruytiers, Cornelis Galle, Petrus Clouwet, Joannes Moerman and Martin Baes. Richard Van Orley and Jean-Baptiste Bertherham continued this tradition at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Large-dimension broadsides could sometimes be more than one metre high. Because of their size, these were generally engraved using two copperplates, and a vertical format was preferred. Usually, the upper part exhibited the main scene, and the conclusions to be defended were presented in several columns within an architectonic frame or on a decorative element in the lower part.³² A composition designed by van Diepenbeeck after Rubens shows this customary page setup (fig. 2). The mythological contest between Minerva and Neptune for the soil of Attica is displayed on a tapestry opened by angels. Below are engraved the twenty-eight positions in philosophy and the dedication to Pope Urban VIII, which explains the choice of the subject. The text praises the

Hendrik Conscience in Antwerp, the Archives départementales du Nord in Lille, the Biblioteca Casanatense in Rome, et cetera.

29 Those figures are provided for information purposes, given that my research does not aim to draw up an exhaustive catalogue of the thesis prints produced in the Low Countries.

30 It is likely that the students had their say in the conception of the programme, taking into account that they were the commissioners of the engravings, and that those broadsheets enabled them to display their command of symbolic language and *eloquentia*, in visual genres such as allegorical representations, emblems, et cetera.

31 A. Diels, 'Uit de schaduw van Rubens'. *Prentkunst naar Antwerpse historieschilders*, Brussels 2009, p. 45-60; R.J. Judson and C. Van de Velde, *Book illustrations and title-pages (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, XXI)*, London, Philadelphia 1978, p. 349-362; P. Ramade, M. De Beyer and H. Vlieghe et al., *Dans la lumière de Rubens. Peintres baroques des Pays-Bas du Sud*, Paris 2000.

32 Diels, 'Uit de schaduw van Rubens', p. 45-46.



Fig. 2 Paul Pontius after Peter Paul Rubens and Abraham van Diepenbeeck, *Positiones philosophicae*, thesis of Charles de la Vieuville dedicated to Pope Urban VIII, Douai, Jesuit college of Anchin, 1636, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-D-OB-103.425.

dedicatee for his efforts to maintain peace in Europe, and draws a parallel between his actions and the victory of the olive tree, Minerva's gift and the symbol of peace, over the horse offered by Neptune. Seven ornamental cartouches complete the lower part, illustrating more specifically the attempts of peace negotiations between the major European rulers. Every scene contains references to bees, an allusion to the Barberini family whose coat of arms is supported by two flying genii in the top centre of the composition. The iconography has no relation with the philosophical content of the candidate, but depicts the ideas conveyed in the dedication: the Pope's quest for peace in the Christendom (weakened by the conflicts between France and Spain) and the actions he undertakes to reach it.³³ Finally, an inscription below the positions gives us the practical information concerning the disputation: it was led by Charles II de la Vieuville on 29 December 1636 in the Jesuit college of Anchin in Douai.³⁴ In thesis broadsheets, the main figurative scenes are often completed by various discursive systems highlighting the text: cartouches and medallions, garlands and festoons, putti, feigned drapery, architectural frames, emblems, and sometimes even geometric patterns in the case of mathematical theses. This rich ornamental vocabulary, typical for Baroque aesthetics, contributes to *spectacularising* the broadside. Thesis prints were issued on paper, but more luxurious editions, which were meant to be given to the dedicatee, were sometimes printed on satin. It frequently happened that text and image were separated by collectors and scholars, which complicates their identification and study.

Iconography: epistemological and encomiastic functions

From 1620 onwards, conclusions are accompanied by dedications to rich or powerful patrons, usually academic, ecclesiastical or political personalities. In the Southern Netherlands, academic works were often dedicated to rulers and other members of the Habsburg family or to the Virgin and Child. More modest theses could be addressed to local clergymen, scholarly individuals and prominent citizens. The emphasis that was put on the dedicatee during the graduation ceremony, which manifests itself in the sumptuousness of the event and the recitation of verbal encomium in his honour, is reflected in the page setup of the posters. The written dedication takes the form of long extolling messages in Latin, and the eulogy is completed by allegorical engravings. This visual and verbal praising allowed for a public manifestation of esteem of a student towards an illustrious person, and was seldom declaimed without self-interest in mind. Firstly, it could be a way of thanking the sponsor when the latter had taken part in financing the promotion ceremony, or had offered a gift to the laureate as an

³³ Judson and Van de Velde, *Book illustrations and title-pages*, p. 356–360. A preparatory drawing worked out by van Diepenbeeck is preserved in the Stedelijk Prentenkabinet in Antwerp, and proof prints of the plates are kept in the Graphische Sammlung Albertina in Vienna.

³⁴ Charles II de la Vieuville (1616–1689) was abbot of the monastery St Mary of Savigny from 1629 to 1644.

expression of his satisfaction. Secondly, the candidate and his college hoped to reap benefits from the dedication in the future: attracting a patron's attention, obtaining support and protection, creating a network of contacts, sometimes even receiving a job offer.³⁵ This is why candidates focused on making their thesis report a real work of art by adding engravings, eulogies, coats of arms and other paratextual ornaments to their conclusions. Indeed, students aimed to build a lucrative career, and they brought into play fine documents depicting their erudition in order to flatter the sponsor and to promote themselves.³⁶ These academic exercises were above all a public recognition of the skills they had gained during their curriculum. This intellectual acknowledgement was staged in a festive and entertaining ceremony devised to delight the spectators and to create a sustainable impression in their minds.

Do those dedications to highly-placed officials reflect actual patronage relationships? For some students, they did. For example, Humbert Guillaume de Precipiano (1627–1711), who studied theology at the Jesuit school of Louvain, dedicated his thesis to Archduke Leopold William of Austria in 1648. He was later appointed head of the Cistercian Abbey of Belleaux (Bourgogne) by the governor himself.³⁷ Nicolas François of Lorraine (1609–1670), defending a thesis in theology in 1627, was created cardinal by Urban VIII in the previous year. His academic broadsheet, designed by van Diepenbeeck, was naturally defended in honour of the pope as a manner to thank him for the clerical appointment.³⁸ Other occurrences show an indirect link between the *promovendus* and the chosen dedicatee. The father of Charles II de la Vieuville, in exile in the Spanish Low Countries, represented Marie de' Medicis for routine proceedings in 1631, and had met Rubens in this context. A. Merle suggests connecting the thesis dedication to Urban VIII (fig. 2) with the mediation attempt of the pope in 1635 to bring closer Marie de' Medicis and Louis XIII.³⁹ Finally, dissertations were sometimes dedicated to relatives to emphasise the family ties with an important person. Melchior Moretus addressed his work to his father Jan (fig. 1). Antoon Allegambe (1631–1708) commissioned van Diepenbeeck to design a plate paying homage to his great-uncle Antoon Triest, Bishop of Ghent (c. 1652). By doing so, he could express his gratitude for the support and encouragement he had received from the prelate, and indicate that he wanted to follow his example.⁴⁰

Two visual devices, having a noetic as much as an encomiastic function, are particularly abundant in thesis iconography: personifications, mostly of Wisdom, the academic

35 Meyer, 'Les thèses, leur soutenance et leurs illustrations dans les universités françaises' (n. 16), p. 69–72.

36 J. Grieten, 'De thesisbladen van de oude universiteit', in: *Ex Officina* 27.1 (2014), p. 3.

37 A.-C. De Schrevel, *Biographie nationale de Belgique*, vol. 18, Brussels 1905, col. 204. Several copies of the engraving by Adrien Lommelin after Antoon Sallaert are preserved in the Royal Library of Belgium (SI 30539 to 45).

38 Copies of the broadside engraved by Schelte a Bolswert after Abraham van Diepenbeeck are preserved in the Rijksmuseum (RP-P-OB-67.559) and the Royal Library of Belgium (no inventory number).

39 A. Merle du Bourg and A. Mérot, *Peter Paul Rubens et la France*, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2004, p. 73.

40 Diels, 'Uit de schaduw van Rubens' (n. 31), p. 46–48. Royal Library of Belgium (SII 54378).

disciplines and Virtues, and reflexive images of their own donation.⁴¹ Firstly, thesis broadsides are frequently populated by embodiments of the academic fields: mainly Logic, Physics and Metaphysics, the major subject matters of Philosophy taught at the faculty of Arts, and less commonly Law, Medicine and Theology. In a plate designed by Abraham van Diepenbeeck and engraved by Adriaen Lommelin c. 1654, personifications of Logic and Physics surround the coat of arms of the sponsor, Antoon Triest (fig. 3). His motto, *Confidenter*, is inscribed in the central pedestal and is repeated on banderols emanating from horns held by angels. Physics, the natural science of matter in motion through space and time, is identified by a terrestrial globe and a statuette of Aristotle. The representation of Logic faithfully follows the description made by Cesare Ripa in his *Iconologia*. She holds a sword in her right hand ('to show the subtlety of her spirit with which she founds her arguments, helping us to discern the true from the false') and four nails in her left hand ('the four ways of reaching the truth through syllogisms, one of the favourite methods of logicians').⁴² Illustrating the defended subject in the form of personifications was a manner of stressing the laureate's erudition in these fields, and to associate his intellectual accomplishment with the dedicatee, who served as a model for the young student. In a frontispiece made by Petrus Clouwet after Abraham van Diepenbeeck, personifications of Peace (*Palladi Paciferae*) and War (*Palladi Martiali*) allude to the legal content of the thesis (fig. 4). The *De Iure Belli et Pacis Theses* were defended in Louvain by Jacob Le Roy, Lord of Brouchem, in 1654. The heraldic device and motto of his family ('to serve God is to reign') are shown in the lower part of the engraving. The title is inscribed on a pedestal flanked to the right by armoury and flags and to the left by scientific (caduceus, globe, compass) and musical instruments. Above the goddesses fly two putti with medallions mentioning the *Pax Augusta*, referring to long-lasting peace, and *Mars Ultor* (Mars the Avenger). The female figures are also an allusion to the dedicatee, Gaspar de Bracamonte y Guzman, Count of Peñaranda, whose crowned coat of arms lies in a cartouche in the centre of the print. The diplomat had headed the Spanish delegation at the negotiations leading to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, as a representative of Philip IV. He is indeed celebrated as 'founder of the German/Belgian peace' in the dedication, as well as 'Nestor' of Spain and chairman of the Consejo de Indias (qualified for the Spanish colonies in America).⁴³ Le Roy became the owner of the copperplate, which used to be a custom when official bodies ordered an engraving, and he re-used it to adorn his later publications, changing only

⁴¹ See my article 'Double meaning of Personification in early modern thesis prints of the southern Low Countries. Between noetic and encomiastic representations', in: W. Melion and B. Ramakers (eds.), *Personifications. Embodying meaning and emotion*, Leiden (to be published in 2016).

⁴² C. Ripa, *Iconologie où les principales choses qui peuvent tomber dans la pensée touchant les vices sont représentées*, Paris 1643, p. 102–103.

⁴³ J. Mertens, 'De zoon van een gezant', in: J. Mertens and F. Aumann (eds.), *Krijg en kunst. Leopold Willem (1614–1662), Habsburger, landvoogd en kunstverzamelaar*, Bilzen 2003, p. 177–178 (cat. II. 1.17). The names of both Pallas Athenes are inscribed in the copy of the Royal Library of Belgium.



Fig. 3 Adriaen Lommelin after Abraham van Diepenbeeck, *Confidenter*, top of a thesis with coat of arms of Bishop Antoon Triest and personifications of Logic and Physics, c. 1654–1657, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-OB-46.319.

the title printed on the plinth and the central heraldry.⁴⁴ The dedication and engraving were conceived with the intention to suggest the development of a future career in which the student hoped to be successful. He was proven right as he became member of the Finance Council of Brabant, was sent on a mission to Spain by Luis de Benavides (governor of the Habsburg Netherlands from 1659 to 1664), after which he dedicated himself to the writing of works in history and geography. Thesis illustrations such as this match the academic subject which is defended, in this case being international law (a reference is made to Hugo Grotius, who laid the foundation for this academic field in his book *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* published in 1625).⁴⁵ But they were also deeply rooted in the religious and political climate influenced by the Counter-Reformation and the numerous armed conflicts shaking the Southern Netherlands.

⁴⁴ J. Le Roy, *Topographia Historica Gallo-Brabantiae*, Amsterdam 1692, and *Prospectus castellorum et praetiorum procerum & nobilium Brabantiae*, Antwerp 1699.

⁴⁵ During the seventeenth century, the basic tenets of the Grotian school became the fundamental principles of the European political and legal system and were enshrined in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.



Fig. 4 Petrus Clouwet after Abraham van Diepenbeeck, *De Iure Belli et Pacis Theses*, thesis of Jacob Le Roy dedicated to Gaspard de Bracamonte, Count of Peñaranda, 1654, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-BI-5941.

Additionally, numerous personifications of Virtues, heroic characters and saints praise the dedicatee's qualities and power in thesis illustrations. An engraving by Lucas Vorsterman after Cornelis Schut depicts an allegorical scene staging Ferdinand III of Austria, the future Holy Roman Emperor (fig. 5). The propositions of *Philosophia Universa* were defended at the Jesuit college of Anchin in Douai in 1633, and are engraved in the lower part of the broadside.⁴⁶ The sovereign is surrounded by the personifications of Peace (caduceus), Fortune (anchor), Abundance (cornucopia) and

⁴⁶ C. Schuckman and D. De Hoop Scheffer (eds.), *Hollstein's Dutch & Flemish etchings, engravings and woodcuts 1450-1700*, vol. XLIII, *Lucas Vorsterman 1*, Amsterdam 1993, p. 108-109. The upper and lower plates are preserved together in the Graphische Sammlung Albertina in Vienna.



Fig. 5 Lucas Vorsterman after Cornelis Schut, *Philosophia Universa*, thesis dedicated to Ferdinand III, Holy Roman Emperor, Douai, Jesuit college of Anchin (top part), 1633, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-OB-70.345.

Good government (crown and sceptre). They are joined by a poliad divinity introducing the student and other allegorical figures coming to pay tribute to the ruler. At his feet, two angels carry the devices of the house of Habsburg and cartouches illustrate his own motto 'Pietate et Justitia'.⁴⁷ The common allusion to the throne of King Solomon (decorated with lions) draws a parallel between the young ruler and the biblical figure, supporting the idea that his wise rule benefits from his role of patron.⁴⁸ Numerous putti hold heraldic shields of the regions ruled by the king, among which Dalmatia, Styria, Croatia, Austria, Bohemia and Hungary. This last kingdom assumes a special place within the composition, reflecting the student's origins. In the sky appear three sanctified kings identified by banderoles (Saints Stephen, Emeric and Ladislaus of Hungary), and the text is framed by six medallions revealing the portraits of Magyar monarchs. The plates were indeed executed for a Hungarian aristocrat, George Aloysius Erdödy de Monyorokerek, who presumably wanted to highlight his native country in this praising image.

⁴⁷ 'Firmatum coelitus omen' and 'A E I O U'.

⁴⁸ A. Weaver, *Sacred music as public image for Holy Roman emperor Ferdinand III. Representing the Counter-Reformation monarch at the end of the Thirty Years' War*, Burlington 2012, p. 57-59.



Fig. 6 Paul Pontius after Peter Paul Rubens, *Austroseraphicum Coelum*, thesis print with St. Francis holding three globes (top part), design dated c. 1631–1632, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-OB-4298.

Austroseraphicum Coelum, a contemporary plate designed by Rubens and engraved by Paul Pontius (c. 1632), illustrates Saint Francis of Assisi as Seraphic Atlas (fig. 6). The kneeling saint supports on his shoulders three globes, on top of which stands the *Virgo Immaculata*. On the lower right, four Franciscan monks including John Duns Scotus fight against Heresy, who they cast into hell. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Order was indeed at the forefront of promoting the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Above them, the four cardinal Virtues are sitting in a float drawn by lions. On the left, another chariot pulled by eagles carries three Spanish kings (Charles v, Philip II and Philip III). Underneath, Philip IV of Spain is surrounded by the living members of his family (Cardinal-Infant Ferdinand, Don Balthasar and Don Carlos). The princes lead a procession of Franciscan monks, who for a long time enjoyed a powerful position in Spain. The scene not only involves religious implications, namely the celebration of the Virgin as queen of the Southern/Austrian (*auster*) and seraphic/Franciscan heaven. It also refers to the contemporary events of the Dutch revolt against the Spanish rule. The size and complex iconography of the engraving suggest that it was used as a thesis illustration, presumably for a dissertation on the concept of the Immaculate Conception, dedicated to Philip IV of Spain.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Judson and Van de Velde, *Book illustrations and title-pages* (n. 31), p. 349–355.

In these examples, the allegorical language is at the service of the princely representation and provides an additional way of highlighting the monarch. Ferdinand III and Philip IV are extolled by embodiments of Christian Virtues while their scope of authority is asserted by references to the areas they govern and the presence of their prestigious ancestors. This visual praise further allows the showcasing of the laureate, portrayed in a position of courtier. He places himself under the moral authority of the prince, and displays his university education. K. Gottardo has drawn a parallel between allegorical thesis prints and the literary tradition of the *Speculum principis* ('Mirrors for princes'), political treatises intended to serve as guides for the instruction of a good ruler. Therefore, such images could be considered allegories of education: patrons represented a mirror for the *promovendus*. They had the skills and virtuous behaviour that the student sought to gain and strengthen during his curriculum in order to enter high society and take part in public life.⁵⁰

A second device often used in Flemish thesis prints is the depiction of their own presentation by the student to his sponsor.⁵¹ A copperplate engraved by Michel Natalis around 1640 illustrates a simplified miniature version of itself, given by the student to Cardinal Barberini (fig. 7). The image has presumably been separated from the text added below, as it is suggested by the tiny copy depicted. Minerva as Wisdom acts as an intermediary by introducing the *promovendus* to his sponsor. The goddess is holding out the key of knowledge to the prelate, and is followed by putti displaying her traditional attributes: an armillary sphere, a book and a compass. Representing the virtue of the intellect, she guarantees the candidate's scholarly achievement. This picture constitutes a *mise en abyme* of the dedication and of the gift-giving of the thesis, the composition being replicated *ad infinitum* within itself. The reflexive process allows for a visual emphasis on the act of the donation of the thesis, understood as an intellectual work and as a work of art – the engraved poster. The device of inclusion is a pretext for portraying and promoting the dedicatee, by stressing his position of patron, and it improves the laureate's social status as well by associating his name and image to those of an important person. *Mises en abyme* enable the visualisation of the communication process that takes place during the academic exchange: sender, receiver, contact, code and context are shown on the fringe of the conveyed message, the theses. It is important to note that they are not faithful representations of the public defence, but are rather iconic constructions involving social stakes. Furthermore, the gesture of the dedication, although it is presented as a gift (material and symbolic), is rather to be understood as the instrument of an exchange between the candidate and his protector, as the former expected advantages in return from the latter.⁵²

50 Gottardo, *The Barberini and their use of the printed image* (n. 3), p. 214–216.

51 My corpus includes fourteen illustrations of the thesis donation to the patron and six depictions of its offering to the Virgin and Child.

52 R. Chartier, 'Patronage et dédicace', in: *Culture écrite et société. L'ordre des livres (XIV^e-XVIII^e siècles)*, Paris 1996, p. 101–102. See also S. Kettering, 'Gift-giving and patronage in early modern France', in: *French History* 2.2 (1988), p. 131–151.



Fig. 7 Michel Natalis after Erasmus Quellinus, Dedication of a thesis to Cardinal Barberini (?), c. 1639–1641, Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels, inv. no. SI 24903.

In a similar example, the applicant is shown offering his thesis to a statue of the Virgin Mary, at the top of a large fountain supported by three allegorical figures (fig. 8).⁵³ An enclosed garden in the foreground frames three-dimensional letters forming the words *Fons signatus*, an expression borrowed from the *Song of Songs* 4, 12 in the Vulgate: *Hortus conclusus soror mea, sponsa, hortus conclusus, fons signatus* ('You are a garden locked up, my sister, my spouse; you are a spring enclosed, a fountain sealed'). The complex composition was designed to adorn a booklet, and the miniature copy it contains is folded in half to fit onto the book format (fig. 9). The philosophical conclusions were defended in 1650, at the occasion of the jubilee of the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception.⁵⁴ This brotherhood was opened to students in Philosophy at the University of Louvain,

⁵³ They are probably referring to Philosophy (denoted by the book and torch), Metaphysics/Theology (wearing a star-studded dress), and Sight/Knowledge (with the staff topped with an eye and the eagle). Ann Diels suggests identifying them as Hope, the kingdom of heaven and the earthly power; Diels, 'Uit de schaduw van Rubens' (n. 31), p. 113. Similar personifications and attributes can be found in a thesis also defended in Louvain in 1650, by Johannes Ferdinand van Beughem. This engraving was made by Johannes Moerman and Jacob Neeffs (Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels, SI 30069).

⁵⁴ In the engraving from the Royal Library of Belgium, the inscription on the pedestal of the fountain seems to have been erased. A copy kept at the British Museum states: 'Defendet Nobilis adolescens Ioannes Helman Toparcha in Dussen, Muylkercke etc.'



Fig. 8 Wenceslaus Hollar after Abraham van Diepenbeeck, Fons signatus. Anno Iubilei Sodalitatis Philosophorum titulo Immaculatae Conceptionis Lovanii, thesis of Johannes Helman, University of Louvain, 1650, Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels, inv. no. SI 17785.

and consisted of up to 400 members, among which Justus Lipsius.⁵⁵ A second depiction of the Blessed Virgin is well-positioned on the building's front at the right side of the picture, while scenes of her life decorate a frieze on its lateral façade. The edifice housing a library represents the *Domus Sapientiae* (House of Wisdom), as show the captions written on the façades: 'to Eternal Wisdom, mother conceived without blemish'; 'You shall keep a feast to the Lord your God seven days'; 'On the first day shall be a holy convocation'; 'Wisdom has built her house. She has carved out her seven pillars'.⁵⁶ The seven columns mentioned in the inscription are illustrated on the ground floor, and take the form of caryatids representing the seven Liberal Arts. This plate was printed three years before the publication of the *Architectura Christiana* by M. Sandaeus, a Jesuit theologian active in Germany in the first half of the seventeenth century. He wrote a

⁵⁵ M. Schayes, 'Notice historique et descriptive sur l'ancien collège des Jésuites à Louvain', in: *Revue de Bruxelles* (1840), p. 78.

⁵⁶ *Aeterna Sapientiae Matri sine macula conceptae; Septem diebus festa celebratis* (Deut. 16, 15); *Dies primus vocabitur celeberrimus* (Lev. 23, 35); *Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum, excidit columnas septem* (Prov. 9, 1).



Fig. 9 Detail of fig. 8.

commentary of the Scriptures based on an architectural metaphor, so as to train the perfect Christian. The composition of the depicted building is partially in accordance with the plan of the *Domus Sapientiae* described by Sandaeus throughout his work.⁵⁷ According to him, Salomon (author of the Proverb on which he built his metaphor) would have understood the House of Wisdom as a temple, not in a material but in a human sense. It would be a place where people gather to listen to the teachings of the seven Liberal Arts (from right to left): grammar, 'instructing to speak correctly and adequately'; arithmetic, 'dedicated to numbers and proportions'; dialectic, 'teaching to tell the truth'; rhetoric, 'training to decorate language'; music, 'advising harmony of tones'; geometry, 'to be used for measuring'; and astronomy, 'teaching to contemplate the sky, and hence to look up towards heaven'.⁵⁸ The Blessed Virgin is therefore associated with Wisdom, comprising the knowledge of the Liberal Arts and of Philosophy. Captions on banderols flying above her head refer to the water of wisdom leading to salvation, and a cartouche embellishing the fountain makes an additional mention of crystal-clear

⁵⁷ I am very grateful to Dr Grégory Ems for bringing this source and related information to my attention.

⁵⁸ M. Sandaeus, *Architectura Christiana*, Cologne 1653, p. 135–137.

spring, quoting Ovid this time.⁵⁹ The student intended to position himself under her protection, which he shows in this staging of the thesis gift. The Department of Prints and Drawings of the British Museum has preserved four states of the engraving, which allows us to reconstruct the creation process. Already in the first stage, an unfinished proof with pure etching, the embedded poster was sketched. In a later impression, the portrait of the laureate, Johannes Helman, was executed, but it did not satisfy him, since he displays a new face in the final version! The third and fourth states of this plate mention the date and the artists' names, Abraham van Diepenbeeck and Wencelaus Hollar.⁶⁰

The year 1650 witnessed an important production of thesis prints in Louvain, made within the particular framework of the jubilee of the Marian congregation. It was common to combine defences with contemporary events related to the life of educational establishments (among which festivities celebrating the canonisation of Ignatius of Loyola in 1622, the centenary of the Jesuit order in 1640, or the founding of a confraternity), or to the life of the dedicatee, such as his military victories (e.g. Archduke Leopold William of Austria against the French army in 1651–1652). Students seized the opportunity of disputations to advertise or commemorate topical circumstances and used those as an additional source of inspiration for devising intricate imagery in their thesis posters. This ephemeral dimension of thesis broadsides is paradoxical since the poster, which was produced to be exhibited on a specific occasion, was at the same time an intellectual contribution and an expensive work of art executed by famous artists and becoming an object of collection. Michel de Marolles, in the *Catalogue* of his collection, mentions two volumes dedicated to Italian thesis prints, and three miscellanies of 'coats of arms and theses from France'.⁶¹ According to Meyer, those albums specially devoted to thesis engravings are an exception. Most of them were stored by artists and remained therefore isolated.⁶² For instance, an academic broadside entitled *Asserta Theologica*, engraved by Robert van Audenaerde after Carlo Maratta, is recorded in the print collection of Samuel Pepys, but is not identified as such.⁶³

Conclusion

Constituting at the same time a scientific report, a work of art and a propaganda tool, thesis prints shed light on the epistemological, artistic and socio-political dimensions of

⁵⁹ 'He who desires, let him take the water of life freely' (Rev. 22, 17); 'She shall give him the water of wholesome wisdom to drink' (Eccclus. 15, 3); 'There was a crystal-clear spring' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3, 407).

⁶⁰ F.W.H. Hollstein (ed.), *Hollstein's Dutch & Flemish etchings, engravings and woodcuts 1450–1700*, vol. 1X. *Heer-Kuyt*, Amsterdam 1953, p. 71.

⁶¹ M. de Marolles, *Catalogue de livres d'estampes et de figures en taille douce avec un dénombrement des pièces qui y sont contenues*, Paris 1666, p. 114–115, 119.

⁶² Meyer, *L'illustration des thèses à Paris* (n. 1), p. 279.

⁶³ A.W. Aspital, *Catalogue of the Pepys Library at Magdalene College Cambridge*, vol. 3, *Prints and drawings*, Cambridge 1980, p. 175, n. 887: 'Innocent XII. Allegory'.

pro gradu defences in seventeenth-century institutions of higher education. Originally a medium for conclusions to be orally defended during informal or official disputations, these documents developed into large-format broadsides. They were characterised by the elaboration of a specific language used to put knowledge into image within a political framework. Thesis broadsides were issued on the occasion of public defences, which provided laureates with an excellent opportunity for self-promotion. Graduation ceremonies allowed them to be introduced in society and to be acknowledged by powerful members of political, scholarly and religious circles for their erudition and eloquence. Prestigious sponsorship was therefore carefully chosen by candidates in the hope of ensuring positive repercussions on their career. This resulted in the practice of dedications to a patron and the creation of a complex iconography surrounding the conclusions, intended to intensify the written eulogy. Numerous figurative devices were set up in the page, and they gradually took up more space within the broadsheet, at the expense of the positions. The engravings offered predominantly allegorical subjects. They included personifications of taught fields or Virtues, which highlighted the intellectual accomplishment of the candidate and the virtuous behaviour of his protector. They also displayed *mises en abyme* that depicted the dedication of the broadside. This device visually staged and stressed the act of gift-giving itself, honouring the two actors of the communication process. Furthermore, it confirmed publicly the existence of (or desire for) a patronage relationship connecting a student to a member of the elite. In that way, thesis engravings witnessed the importance of the court culture and the patronage system that pervaded academic establishments in the early modern period.