



Introduction to "The author's image: Italian sixteenth-century printed portraits"

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Introduction

G. Thomas Tanselle

When Ruth Mortimer died in January 1994, she left behind a finished version of an unpublished work on sixteenth-century Italian printed portraits of authors. The present publication of this study will be greeted appreciatively by all students of the Renaissance, for her distinctive manner of treating the graphic and pictorial art of the time has been admired ever since she published, in 1964, her two-volume catalogue of French sixteenth-century books at Harvard (largely those from the benefaction of Philip Hofer). The anonymous review of that work in the *Times Literary Supplement* (actually by Arthur Rau) used words like “astonishing,” “colossal,” and “most impressive” and said that “her detailed discussion of authors, texts, translators, editions, printers, illustrations, binders and provenances could not be bettered.” This review (like the others, all of them enthusiastic) was in fact announcing the emergence of a major talent, one of the great bibliographical scholars of the century.

Ten years later, when she published in uniform style a catalogue of Harvard sixteenth-century Italian books, she was praised for maintaining, or even surpassing, the level of her previous achievement. Reviews contained words like “masterpiece” (Dennis E. Rhodes in *The Library*) and “indispensable” (Paul Oskar Kristeller in *Renaissance Quarterly*). J.B. Trapp (in the *Times Literary Supplement*) summed up what everyone thought in saying that “this is again far more than a catalogue. It is a first-rate overview of its subject.” *French 16th Century Books* and *Italian 16th Century Books* taken together form a classic work of bibliography—four majestic and handsomely produced volumes, in which 1,116 books are described in 1,472 double-column pages, incorporating some 2,400 illustrations, the

whole supplemented by 92 pages of indexes of artists, printers and publishers, and subjects, as well as a general and a chronological index. Her acute eye and sensitivity to design, amply displayed in her commentary, were applied to her own volumes as well, for she had a significant role in arranging the layouts in the French catalogue and did all of them in the Italian catalogue. The scholarship and its presentation thus reflect the same sensibility—an especially appropriate situation for scholarship that stresses the interrelationships between the verbal and the visual.

Those four volumes clearly constitute her major work and come from a period of intense concentration on the project, while she was Rare Book Cataloguer for Printing and Graphic Arts in the Houghton Library (1957-75). In the second half of her career, when she returned to her alma mater to become Curator of Rare Books in the Neilson Library of Smith College (1975-94), she had less time for such sustained work, given her demanding schedule of collection-building, teaching, preparing exhibitions, and supporting fine-printing and graphic-arts activities generally. (I have tried to give a sense of her many accomplishments in these areas in a memoir published in the *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* for September 1994 and republished in pamphlet form, with a photographic portrait frontispiece by John Lancaster; this pamphlet is now distributed by the Smith College Library’s Mortimer Rare Book Room, renamed in her honor.) But along with her many activities at Smith, she did produce a considerable number of exemplary essays, reviews, and lectures, generally building on the foundation of the great catalogues and focusing on the illustrations in Renaissance books. Although these writings were not on

the scale of the Harvard catalogues, some of them provided the opportunity for her to continue writing elegant commentaries on individual title pages and illustrations—the same kind of mini-essays that appeared throughout the Harvard catalogues and were the particular glory of those books, putting into perspective the new information she offered on the identity of illustrators, the migration of blocks, and the genealogy of designs.

Everyone who studies, or writes about, the sixteenth-century European book is indebted to her publications and must return to them regularly—and now there is another one. The present monograph, although an outgrowth of a lecture given during her Harvard years, is—in its expanded form—a product of her early years at Smith. It should be seen as the finale of a trilogy of remarkable works (all dating from 1979–81) based on her slide lectures. In 1979 she spoke on “The Dimensions of the Renaissance Title Page” at the annual conference of the American Printing History Association, and the lecture was published in the first of the 1981 numbers of *Printing History*. Then in 1980 she gave the first of the Hanes Lectures at the University of North Carolina; it was published later that year as a pamphlet with the title *A Portrait of the Author in Sixteenth-Century France*, which makes clear that it is a companion piece to the present study of Italian author-portraits. Her work on the Hanes Lecture may in fact have caused her to go back to her earlier lecture on Italian portraits, since the preface to the expanded version printed here is dated June 1981. These three works are all of a piece and deserve to be read together for the cumulative insights they offer into Renaissance culture, using title pages and author-portraits as the main windows opening on that view. She was fascinated by title pages because they were essentially new to the sixteenth-century book and were indicative of the century’s experimentation; but the subject that she truly made her own was the portrait of the author, which changed during the century to reflect changing concepts of authorship. As she said in the Hanes Lecture, we not only have the texts but “also have authorship illustrated, cut out of the woodblock or drawn into the copperplate—the visualization of ideas, in letter form and human form.”

In her lectures she was able to offer observations on the artistry and technique of the

illustrations that went beyond what she thought was appropriate for the catalogues and to trace themes and make connections that could not have been accommodated there. Her lectures were skillfully constructed so that each slide, when accompanied by her discussion, followed naturally from the one before and was illuminated by the sequence in which she placed it. Those who did not experience one of her lectures can gain some sense of what they were like by reading the printed and illustrated versions. Certainly the quality of the prose remains: with a few deceptively simple sentences she could elucidate the historical context, or the technique, or the content, of an illustration. Her direct, straightforward statements never seem superficial because they could not have been made without wide knowledge. She mastered the art of elegant, spare commentary that conveys deep learning with ease—often with eloquence as well, and always with sensitivity. Great scholarship requires more than accuracy of detail and breadth of learning; such other attributes as intelligence, judiciousness, and creativity in making use of accumulated knowledge are necessary also, and Ruth Mortimer’s commentaries, wherever one dips into them, display these characteristics in abundance.

A good example of her style of analysis, taken from her Hanes Lecture, is the following passage about a 1536 verse treatise on education by Nicolas Bourbon:

There is one book illustrated with two woodcuts that very neatly epitomize the two aspects of portraiture that converge in the sixteenth century. . . . The woodcut on the title-page is a medallion of a poet, somewhat heavily laden with attributes—laurel wreath, toga, pen, ink, book, and lute. Although it was cut in 1536, it belongs to that fifteenth-century custom that sanctioned the repetition of one woodblock of a city for any city mentioned in the text, one battle for any battle, one scholar for any scholar. This Poeta occurs again in 1537 in the text of another author by the same printer and in 1538 for still another author by another printer. In spite of its usefulness, it is not a very good woodcut, so that the contrast is even greater

between it and another woodcut at the end of this same book.

This is not Poeta but a true portrait of Nicolas Bourbon, a copy of a portrait drawing made by Hans Holbein the younger while Bourbon was in England in 1535. The woodcut version is also attributed to Holbein. This portrait is as precise as the Poeta is vague, with Bourbon's name, age, and coat of arms supplementing the skill of the artist in making the features distinctive. Few authors had the advantage of a Holbein portrait to advertise their books, but the entrance of a portrait artist such as Holbein into the French book forced the French printer to reconsider the effectiveness of the Poeta type of illustration.

This discussion characteristically combines detailed knowledge of the reappearances of specific illustrations with illuminating recognition of broad trends.

The particularization of the author-portrait, commented on in this passage, is the note on which the Italian study begins, for Mortimer sees her subject as "the emerging consciousness and self-consciousness of the author" and the way they "affect the book and the book trade of the sixteenth century." If one studies Figure 2 (page 9) below (from Bernardino Corio's *Patria historia*, 1503) with the help of her account of it, one can observe her mature skill in explicating the meaning of an illustration and in seeing its larger significance. She expertly picks out telling details that indicate how this portrait was individualized, and she concludes, "This block could be used in another book of Corio's but not in a book by another author. It has lost for the printer the mobility of the typical fifteenth-century woodblock, but it has gained for the author a new kind of status in the world of letters." Her discussion not only shows how to read the particular features of this portrait but also how to place them in historical context. She never loses sight of the literary contents of a book and the ambitions of its author, following her own admonition (in the third paragraph) that the "illustrated book should be seen as a unit, text and pictures working together, influencing each other and influenced by the act of publication." Time after time in the pages that follow, she leads the reader, as she did in

the Corio example, through the process of "seeing" a sixteenth-century book, until finally she has shown us how to see the century itself more effectively.

She ends with a passage that brings the work full circle, by referring to the portrait with which she began, and sums up her habitual way of linking artistic technique and historical meaning:

The Italian painted portrait is now more accessible than the printed, through museums, reproductions, and studies of the artists involved. The printed portrait belongs with its text, yet to reopen the 1493 Bellincioni and put it beside the 1586 della Porta is to see a dynamic transformation in the author's image during this century. Della Porta: enlarged, individualized, surrounded by the results of his peculiar observation and imagination. These are not just technical developments in the art of illustration but literary and philosophical progress in the art of self-expression.

Her deep understanding of the importance not only of placing books in their historical milieux but also of placing texts in their visual contexts—and seeing printed pages as the product of an artistic and technical process—underlies all her work; and it is the quintessential quality that makes her not only a great scholar of the European Renaissance but more specifically a great bibliographical scholar.

Ruth Mortimer continually emphasized the necessity for examining the originals. At the end of her Hanes Lecture, she said, "The authors and printers of the French renaissance would have enjoyed seeing themselves projected on a twentieth-century screen. But their true medium for self-expression—in which they struggled and in which they succeeded—was the printed book." And earlier in that lecture she had made the point more explicitly:

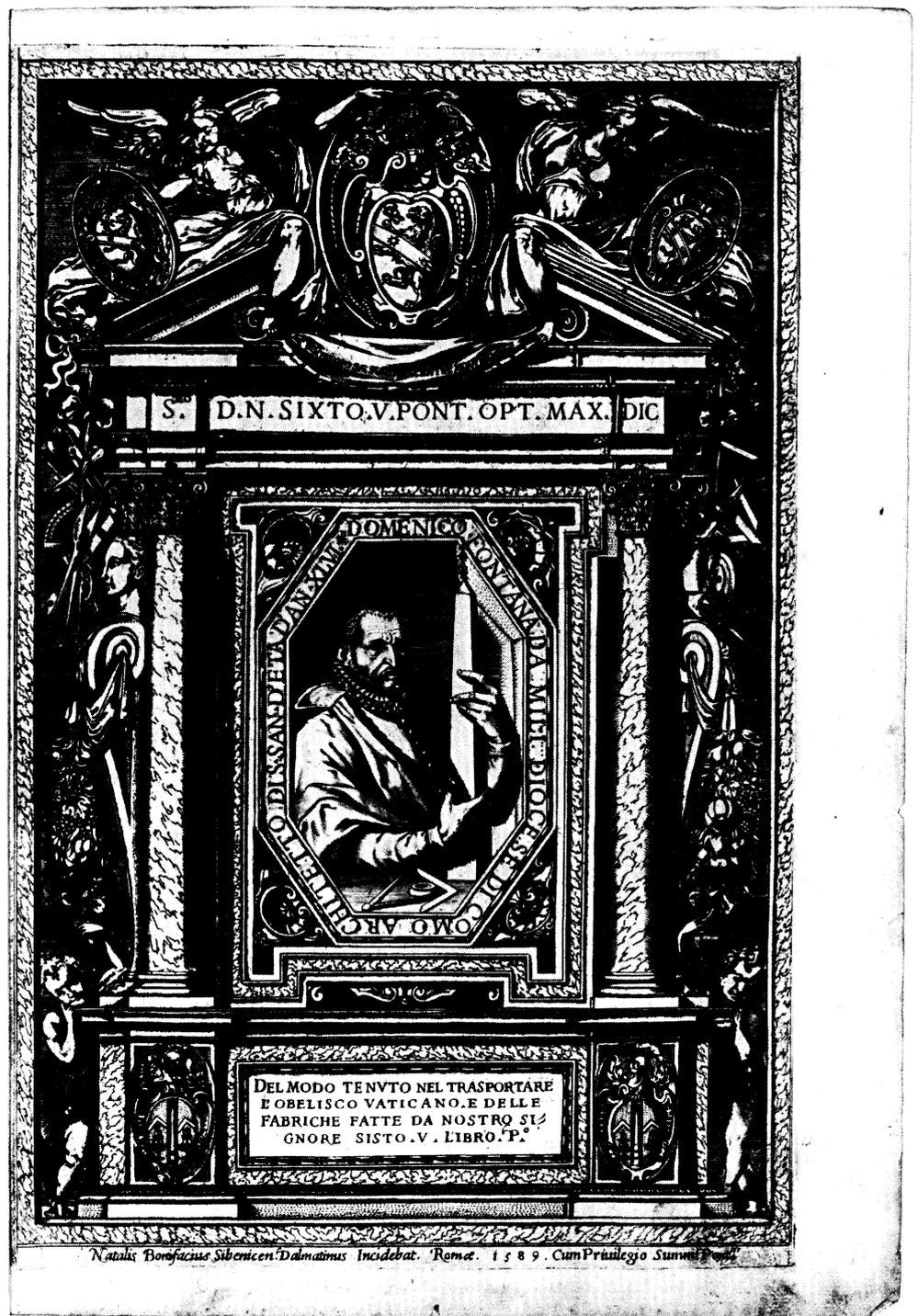
For a true sense of the heart of sixteenth-century France, renaissance France, it is insufficient to admire its illustration in reproduction and read its texts in modern reprint. It is essential to take notice of the illustration as it fits the text page and to see that page as the

result of block cutting and type casting, for multiple copies of multiple images, promoting the life of the mind.

This recognition of the artifactual basis for historical insight, which imbued the life of her mind, is what caused her activities as

scholar, teacher, librarian, and connoisseur to be so thoroughly interconnected and mutually supportive. And it is the lesson eloquently taught by this book.

New York, January 1997



Domenico Fontana. Della trasportatione dell' obelisco Vaticano. f°. Rome, Domenico Basa, 1590. Leaf A1'. By permission of the Houghton Library.