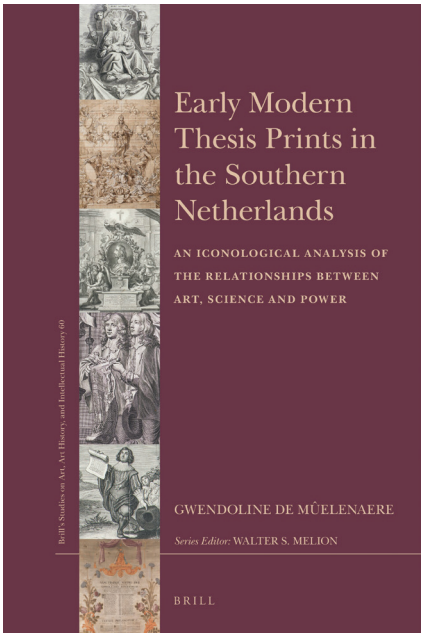
Review

Gwendoline de Mûelenaere, *Early Modern Thesis Prints in the Southern Netherlands. An Iconological Analysis of the Relationships between Art, Science and Power*, Leiden, Brill, 2022, 444 pp. ISBN 9789004444539.



In recent decades, the study of early modern print culture has expanded beyond the realm of canonical literary texts to include a broader spectrum of academic, institutional, and ephemeral genres. Gwendoline de Mûelenaere's *Early Modern Thesis Prints in the Southern Netherlands* contributes to this expansion of historical research by focusing on an especially rich yet still relatively overlooked genre: the thesis or disputation sheet produced in the context of early modern university education in the Habsburg Low Countries. In line with recent scholarship on the history of the book and the history of prints, this book considers these intricate artefacts as cultural objects at the intersection of printed visual culture, patronage, and civic identity, rather than merely as academic by-products.[1] The author presents thesis prints as carefully constructed objects that combine textual argumentation with visual rhetoric, and analyses 'the complementary relationship between iconic and verbal signs within the poster medium' (8). By doing so, the author situates thesis prints (with a focus on the broadsheets offered to Ferdinand III, his son Ferdinand IV, and Leopold Wilhelm of Austria) within the broader practices of representation in the Southern Netherlands, where print culture played a crucial role in shaping elite identity and institutional legitimacy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Chapter two, which is dedicated to the creation of thesis engravings, is essential for understanding the production process of this material. The Southern Netherlands, with its dense network of Jesuit colleges and universities such as Leuven and Douai, as well as its flourishing printing industry in cities such as Antwerp and Brussels, provides a particularly fertile and varied context for such a study. De Mûelenaere convincingly demonstrates that thesis prints were embedded in this dynamic environment and cannot be understood

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solely through the lens of academic history. Instead, they must be regarded as hybrid artefacts combining scholarly content with visual propaganda and social performance, using symbolic language and personification. This approach is especially evident in the third chapter, where the author presents the different figures utilised, from Justitia to the Virgin Mary.

In terms of historiographical context, the book engages with several important strands of scholarship. Building on earlier work on early modern academic rituals and the history of universities, it also draws on studies of print culture and emblematic visual traditions. Within this framework, the author's work is a valuable contribution in focusing on a corpus that is often treated as peripheral or merely illustrative, with few exceptions, see for example the 1993 article by Véronique Meyer on thesis prints at early modern French universities. The iconographic apparatus is carefully structured, and it contributes significantly to highlighting the material and visual nature of this corpus. One of the book's main strengths lies in its ability to bridge disciplines, demonstrating the hybrid nature of this intriguing material.

Methodologically, the book is grounded in a close analysis of surviving thesis prints, complemented by archival research and a contextual reading of institutional practices. De Mûelenaere pays careful attention to the iconography of these prints, the layout of text and image, and how they circulated and were used – especially in the context of court patronage (Chapter 4). This material approach is one of the book's strengths, as it enables the author to reconstruct the social and cultural functions of thesis prints beyond their textual content. The combination of visual analysis and historical contextualisation generally supports the author's central claims successfully. The catalogue at the end of the book is extremely useful and detailed, as are the two appendices, presenting lists of thesis prints organised by teaching institution and by location.

While the author's approach is solid, different questions on the subject remain unanswered. The close reading of selected examples is often persuasive; however, it is not always entirely clear how representative these case studies are of the broader corpus of thesis prints in the Southern Netherlands and beyond. At times, the reader wishes for a more systematic overview of the material base of the study, including clearer information about the selection criteria and potential regional or chronological variations in the iconographic subjects. Such an overview would have strengthened the argument by providing a clearer sense of scale and diversity. Furthermore, engaging more profoundly with frameworks from visual culture studies or the history of knowledge could have enhanced the interpretative ambition of the study. One final minor limitation concerns the balance between description and interpretation. Some parts of the author's discussion remain on a descriptive level, particularly when discussing visual elements. A more theoretical engagement with concepts such as visual rhetoric or institutional representation could have further deepened the interpretative framework.

1 Cristina Dondi (ed.), *Printing R-Evolution and Society 1450-1500. Fifty Years that Changed Europe* (Venice 2020); Barbara Tramelli, *Indexing the Early Modern Printed Image. A Digital Catalogue on the Illustrated Book in Lyon (1480-1600)* (Venice 2024); Elizabeth Savage (ed.), *Printing Things. Blocks, Plates, and Other Objects that Printed, 1400-1900* (forthcoming).

Nevertheless, the book's strengths clearly outweigh its weaknesses. One of its most significant contributions is demonstrating how thesis prints functioned as instruments of academic self-fashioning. They were active participants in the construction of academic authority, not passive records of scholarly achievement. By foregrounding this dimension, the author challenges more traditional, text-centred histories of scholarship and invites readers to reconsider the role of material culture in the production of knowledge. While the readership for the book is specialised, it is not narrowly so. It will be of interest to many historians of the early modern Low Countries, particularly those working on intellectual history, education, or religious institutions. At the same time, it will appeal to art and book historians more generally, particularly those interested in the relationship between text and image.

Early Modern Thesis Prints in the Southern Netherlands is therefore a well-researched and thought-provoking study that enriches our understanding of early modern academic culture and print practices. Although some aspects of the methodology could have been more systematically organised, and the theoretical framework more fully developed, the book succeeds in demonstrating the cultural and historical significance of a neglected genre. It will serve as a valuable reference point for future research into early modern universities, print culture, and the visualisation of knowledge.

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