# FROM DRAWING TO PRINTMAKING AND BOOK ILLUSTRATION IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ROME: NATALE BONIFACIO'S *ALLUSIONI* FOR POPE GREGORY XIII, 1579–1588

RHODA EITEL-PORTER

**The research proposal**

The following serves as background information – intended also for the non-art historians among our group – for my upcoming presentation on the genesis of a book of sonnets written by Principio Fabrizi, illustrated by the engraver Natale Bonifacio, and published by Bartolomeo Grassi in Rome in 1588. It is titled *Delle allusioni, imprese, et emblemi del sig. Principio Fabricii da Teramo sopra la vita, opere, et attioni di Gregorio XIII. Pontefice Massimo libri 6* (Six books of allusions, imprese and emblems by Principio Fabrizi of Teramo on the life, works, and actions of Pope Gregory XIII), hereafter referred to as *Allusioni* (Figs. 1 and 2). Fabrizi, a priest from Teramo, was one of several authors at the time who followed a call from the papal court of Gregory XIII to write about the heraldic animal of the Boncompagni family, a dragon, in a positive way. He devised an astonishing 231 emblems around the image of the dragon as hero, protector and helper. We see the dragon usurping the role of Apollo seated among the muses on Mount Parnassus, or, in one of eighteen full-page illustrations, as a close associate of the Archangel Gabriel in the *Annunciation to the Virgin* (Fig. 3). Most of the full-page illustrations however show female personifications, consisting of the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance), the three theological virtues (faith, hope and charity), in addition to ones representing other positive qualities or concepts such as vigilance, peace, wisdom, religion, life and eternity. The result is an 'extraordinarily long, obscurely erudite and pedantically complex literary and pictorial tribute' to Gregory XIII intended to eradicate any negative associations of the dragon in the Boncompagni coat of arms (Aksamija 2011, p. 133).

The *Allusioni* has been well studied in recent years. Foremost by Marco Ruffini in his monograph, *Le imprese del drago. Politica, emblematica e scienze naturali alla corte die Gregorio XIII (1572–1585)* of 2005. Although Ruffini takes into consideration all dragon imagery from the time of Gregory XIII, the *Allusioni* is a key part of his excellent study. This followed on from a conference held in Rome in 2004 on Gregory XIII from which two different sets of conference papers emerged. One, *Art and Science in the Rome of Gregory XIII Boncompagni (1572–1585),* published by the American Academy in Rome in 2010, the other, *Unità e frammenti di modernità. Arte e scienza nella Roma di Gregorio XIII Boncompagni (1572–1585),* published in 2012. Both contain revised versions of chapter four from

Ruffini's 2005 book. In addition, the Italian publication contains Alessandro De Lillo's essay 'L'emblematica gregoriana nelle *Allusioni* di Principio Fabrizi'. In 2011 Nadja Aksamija produced a study of the landscape imagery in the *Allusioni* and in 2018 Yvan Loskoutoff published another, lengthier study on papal imagery under Gregory XIII, *Un art de la Réforme catholique – Tome 2, La symbolique du pape Grégoire XIII (1572–1585) et des Boncompagni*. My personal interest lies in the genesis of the book and in questions relating to the circumstances of its creation, with consideration given to changes in imagery, use of visual sources, adjustments made for the engraving techniques and evolving political circumstances.

**Terminology**

My study builds on an understanding of the relationship between drawings, printmaking and book illustration during the second half of the Cinquecento and uses terminology related to all three. A few definitions may therefore come in useful. The relationship between drawings and prints has always been close, and historically in Italian the same word, 'disegno', could refer to both a drawing or a print. For the present purposes, a drawing is defined as having been created directly by the artist with implements such as pen and ink, or brush and ink, black chalk, pencil or charcoal to make marks on a surface, typically paper. A print on the other hand involves the process of transfer. It is typically made by preparing a matrix, such as a sheet made of metal, usually copper (copperplate), or a woodblock, with the desired image in reverse, inking that matrix, and then transferring the image onto paper through the application of pressure. The result is an engraving when a copperplate is used, or a woodcut when a woodblock is used. Drawings are unique works created directly by the artist's hand, while most prints are designed for reproduction and exist in multiple copies, called impressions. Illustrated printed books in the sixteenth century usually contained engraved images or woodcuts.

In general, drawing, which has long been considered the foundation of any artistic education, is more exploratory, private and local. It was typically created by a single individual, who might use it to design a fresco, painting, sculpture or print, or simply for their own pleasure. A painter might run a workshop and employ apprentices and assistants but could also work alone, whereas printmaking is by its very nature collaborative. It involved the artist responsible for the design, the engraver or blockcutter who transferred it to a copperplate or woodblock, the printer who ran it through a press, and a publisher responsible for sales and distribution and often for the ultimate success of the business venture. Printers needed a workshop with costly equipment including tools, copperplates, ink, paper, and a printing press (Fig. 4).

These were all specialized professionals, even if the print designer and printmaker/engraver might be one and the same person, just as a single person often united the roles of printer and publisher.

**The publisher**

By the mid-sixteenth century, printmaking had become firmly established in Rome and, together with Venice, was its leading publishing centre. As demand grew, rapid expansion followed across networks in Europe with increased professionalization involving numerous foreign-born artists and publishers. In Rome, individual entrepreneurs and publishing firms began selling directly to pilgrims and tourists from their own premises. Antonio Lafreri (c. 1512–1577), probably the most influential Roman print publisher of his time, issued the first known stock list, the *Indice*, in around 1573–1575, detailing the prints he offered for sale. After his death, Roman printmaking was characterized by numerous smaller publishers who worked on direct commissions from the Church and nobility, while also themselves commissioning designers and engravers.

*Allusioni* was published by Bartolomeo Grassi, a printer and bookseller active in Rome during the last two decades of the sixteenth century who, from 1582, also became a publisher of books and prints. He lived with his wife, three sons and two daughters on the via del Pellegrino, the same street where he operated his shop *al segno della stella*. He worked alongside his brother Paolo, employing six *garzoni* (assistants) in his shop, as well as a literary agent. Grassi catered to a growing market for illustrated books featuring engravings and religious print series, a genre that emerged in Rome in the 1580s and 1590s. Unlike many single sheet prints intended to be collected in albums, a trend initiated by Lafreri's *Speculum romanae magnificentiae* around the middle of the century, these print series were produced as instruments of instruction or propaganda. Under Jesuit patronage and inspired by Counter-Reformation proselytizing efforts, Grassi published at least three series with strongly didactic engravings by Giovanni Battista Cavalieri. Three of these series reproduced frescoes by Niccolò Circignani in Roman churches affiliated with Jesuit missionaries, with the print series becoming at least as important as the frescoes. The first series, *Ecclesiae anglicanae trophaea,* was published in 1584 and depicted frescoes from San Tommaso di Canterbury, the church of the English College in Rome. This was followed by the *Ecclesiae militantis triumphi* in 1585, a set of prints after frescoes in Santo Stefano Rotondo. The final series, *Beati apollinaris ... res gestae,* from 1586, featured engravings after lost frescoes from the church of Sant'Apollinare, which belonged to the German-Hungarian College.

With few exceptions – where authors or patrons funded the illustrations or printing, such as the 1544 Dante commentary by Alessandro Vellutello – it was the publisher or printer who commissioned the

engravings and covered the publication costs of a book. In his letter to readers included in the *Allusioni*, Grassi states that he produced the book at great expense (*con molta mia spesa*). Although such claims were common among sixteenth-century publishers, the cost was often indeed so high that publishers needed to form associations to share expenses: 'the Roman printers are so poor that no one is able to print a book alone' (*gli stampatori romani sono tanto poveretti, che nessuno puo stampare per conto suo pur un libro*) in the words of a contemporary. Between 1584 and 1591, Grassi frequently collaborated with the printer Giacomo Ruffinelli, who printed *Allusioni*. Its publication was a lengthy and complex endeavour, in which Grassi was reportedly involved as early as 1579 – in his October 1582 dedication to Giacomo Boncompagni, Fabrizi mentions Grassi's three-year commitment by that time. In 1585 Pope Sixtus V granted Grassi a printing privilege for several books, including *Allusioni*. The expense of producing more than 250 engravings would have been substantial and by the time the book was published, Grassi was heavily in debt.

**Books with engravings**

Both Grassi, in his letter to the reader, and Fabrizi, in his lengthy remarks at the end of the book, provide detailed accounts of *Allusioni*'s challenging genesis and the issues surrounding its illustrations. Fabrizi partially attributes the delays to the engravers, who, despite diligent oversight by Grassi, worked so slowly that he had to forego six large images and roundels with virtues. He explains, 'this is solely due to the engravers, who took so long with their engraving that, before seeing the project completed, I was forced to leave some parts unfinished' (*questo sol per difetto d'intagliatori; li quali portano tanto in lungo le loro opere in rame, che prima, chese ne vegga il fine, è forza lasciar qualche cosa imperfetta, com'ho fatto io*). The printers too receive some of the blame ('imperfection and error are in the work; there will be many due to the fault of the printers and engravers'; *imperfettione, e errore è nell'opera, ve ne saranno molti per colpa de stampatori e degli intagliatori*.) Fabrizi highlights the complexity of producing a book with engravings, which required two distinct phases: letterpress (relief printing, where the printed surface is raised) for the text and copper engraving (an intaglio process, where the image is incised) for the illustrations. According to Fabrizi, these processes took place at different times and locations (*stampandosi in due volte, cioè le lettere e i rami separamente, e in diversi tempi & tal'hora in diversi luoghi*).

Printing books with engravings did indeed present significant challenges. In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, books were often illustrated with woodcuts; however, engraving, as the more modern technique, gradually came to dominate. Engraving allowed for finer, more precise lines even in small images, faster working times and easier correction. However, special roller presses were needed for

printing copperplates, whereas previously text and images had been printed together on the same press. Consequently, rather than leaving space for images, it became common practice to separate images from the typographic page and place them on their own pages. This approach, however, would not have been suitable for *Allusioni*, as most of its images were meant to accompany sonnets.

An early example illustrates the problems that could arise with engraved rather than woodcut illustrations. The first illustrated edition of Dante's *Comedia,* featuring a learned commentary by the humanist Cristoforo Landino, was printed in Florence in 1481 by Niccolò di Lorenzo della Magna. The 1480 contract between the printer della Magna, the author Landino and Bernardo Alberti who financed the project promised an astonishing print run of 1,125 copies. The publication looks a mess, as also noted by Giorgio Vasari in his *Vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori,* where he criticized the prints' 'bad manner, for the engraving was poorly done' (*cattiva maniera perché l'intaglio era malfatto*). For instance, the typesetter seemingly forgot to leave space for the illustration of the first image, *Inferno I*, so it was placed beneath the text, where it was later cut off by the bookbinder. What is more, in a copy of the book now held in Berlin, the engraving for *Inferno II* was accidentally printed a second time where the illustration of *Inferno III* should have appeared, and some engravings were even printed upside down. Most copies of the 1481 *Comedia* contain only two or three illustrations for the first two canti of the poem. Only about twenty copies containing a total of nineteen engravings, all for *Inferno*, are known, with most of these images pasted in rather than printed directly onto the text pages. Some of these issues may have stemmed from haste, as the designer of the images, believed to be Botticelli, is known to have left Florence for Rome around this time. But the number of errors and omissions is surely also indicative of a trade that was still in its infancy and was never easy to master. Even years later, the combination of letterpress and copperplate printing continued to present technical difficulties.

**The engraver or engravers**

It is unclear when Bonifacio became involved in the project or began working with Grassi, for whom he produced other prints, such as *The Vatican Obelisk with a Portrait of Sixtus V and his Coat of Arms*, dated 1586. Although Grassi mentions several engravers, the inscription *intagliati da Natal Bonifatio da Sib.* on the title-page of the *Allusioni* clearly identifies only Bonifacio as the engraver responsible for the illustrations. Active in Rome from 1575 to 1591, Bonifacio emerged during a period when printmaking had established itself as a professional trade, with many skilled craftsmen, including several foreigners, working in the city.

Bonifacio was born in Šibenik, Dalmatia (modern-day Croatia), on or around 23 December 1537, according to the inscription on his tombstone in the church of St Francis in Šibenik. Milan Pelc astutely notes that the date likely was the reason he was christened 'Natale'. Much of what we know about Bonifacio, including familial circumstances, is gleaned from this tombstone, which states that his father was from Capua, near Naples, and died in 1568. His mother was from a Croatian family named Tresunič, and Bonifacio had a twin brother, Francesco, a surgeon, who like Natale, spent most of his life in Rome. There are no archival documents pertaining to Bonifacio before his time in Rome. Presumably both brothers left Šibenik in search of better employment opportunities.

By the 1570s, Bonifacio, by then likely established in his profession, had travelled to Venice, where he engraved various prints around 1570, including maps and views of the three most prominent towns under Venetian rule: Zadar, Šibenik and Split. At that time, much of the Dalmatian coast was under Venetian control, and migration to Venice was common. For example, in 1516 the gifted manuscript illuminator Giulio Clovio (1498–1578), born in the village of Grizane in Croatia, had moved to Italy and entered the household of Marino Grimani, later a cardinal, in Venice. Another artist, Andrea Medulić, born in Šibenik in 1522, worked in Venice and Florence and may or may not have been identical to the better known Andrea Meldolla called Schiavone. Martin Rota (c. 1540–1583), also from in Šibenik, created some of his earliest engravings in Venice around 1565 before leaving for Vienna in late 1572, where he became a court artist. In contrast, Bonifacio moved from Venice to Rome around 1574, probably in anticipation of the Holy Year of 1575 and the work that it might bring. He seems to have settled and integrated quickly in Rome. In 1574 he was proposed for membership in the Accademia dei Virtuosi al Pantheon, an association of artists established in 1543 that effectively abolished the restrictions of traditional guilds, allowing all artists, including foreigners, to join. From 1579 he was also a member of another religious brotherhood, the Confraternity of San Girolamo degli Illirici, which primarily served individuals from Venetian Dalmatia. Bonifacio was quite active in this confraternity, which likely helped him to establish a network of Italian colleagues and cultivate new patrons. He remained in Rome until the year before his death in 1592, when he died in Šibenik at the age of 54 while visiting his sick mother. One wonders if he may have succumbed to the plague or another epidemic.

We know nothing about Bonifacio's workshop, but the fact that his wife Madalena was also proposed for membership in the Accademia dei Virtuosi al Pantheon raises the possibility that she too may have worked as an engraver. Her proposal occurred on the same day as that of the engraver Diana Scultori, called Mantovana (1536–1588), daughter of the engraver Giovanni Battista Scultori and sister of engraver Adamo Scultori (ca. 1530–1587). When considering the social context, it seems that more women were

involved as printmakers or print dealers than in other professional artistic pursuits such as painting or sculpture. This was probably because female engravers could work within family settings, with husbands, fathers or brothers in a home-based or family-run print workshop or dealership. While prints signed by women were rare, Diana Mantovana is a notable exception. Madalena's close association with the *Allusioni* might explain why multiple engravers were said to have been involved, yet only one is named on the title-page. This may also help to explain how a single engraver could produce several hundred prints in just a few years.

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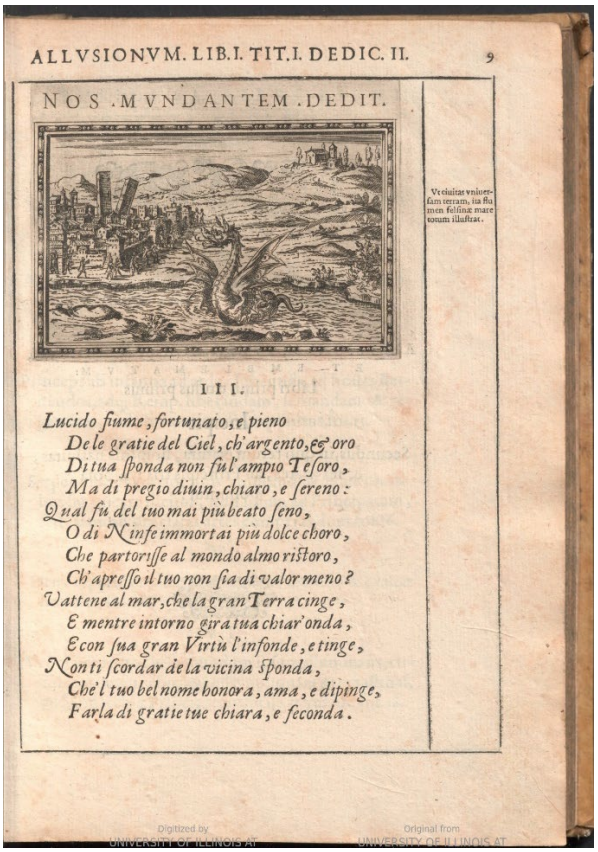
| People | Things | Vocab |
|---|---|---|
| • Principio Fabrizi, author<br>• Pope Gregory XIII (r. 1572–1585), dedicatee<br>• Pope Sixtus V (r. 1585–1590)<br>• Bartolomeo Grassi, publisher<br>• Natale Bonifacio (1537–1592), engraver | • Vatican Manuscript, 1579<br>• Harvard Manuscript, 1582<br>• Published book, 1588 | • printed book vs handwritten manuscript<br>• drawing<br>• print, engraving<br>• matrix: woodblock, copperplate<br>• impression<br>• intaglio vs relief prints |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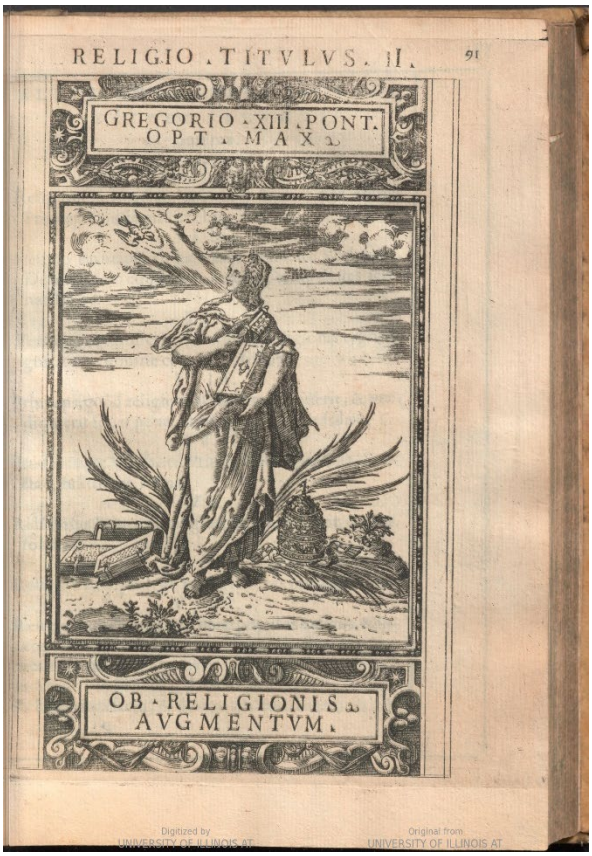
III.

*Lucido fiume, fortunato, e pieno*
*De le gratie del Ciel, ch'argento, & oro*
*Di tua ſponda non fu l'ampio Teſoro,*
*Ma di pregio diuin, chiaro, e ſereno:*
*Qual fu del tuo mai più beato ſeno,*
*O di Ninfe immortai più dolce choro,*
*Che partoriſſe al mondo almo riſtoro,*
*Ch'apreſſo il tuo non ſia di valor meno?*
*Vattene al mar, che la gran Terra cinge,*
*E mentre intorno gira tua chiar'onda,*
*E con ſua gran Virtù l'infonde, e tinge,*
*Non ti ſcordar de la vicina ſponda,*
*Che'l tuo bel nome honora, ama, e dipinge,*
*Farla di gratie tue chiara, e feconda.*

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Figs. 1 and 2 Two pages from *Delle allusioni, imprese, et emblem* (Rome: Bartolomeo Grassi, 1588).

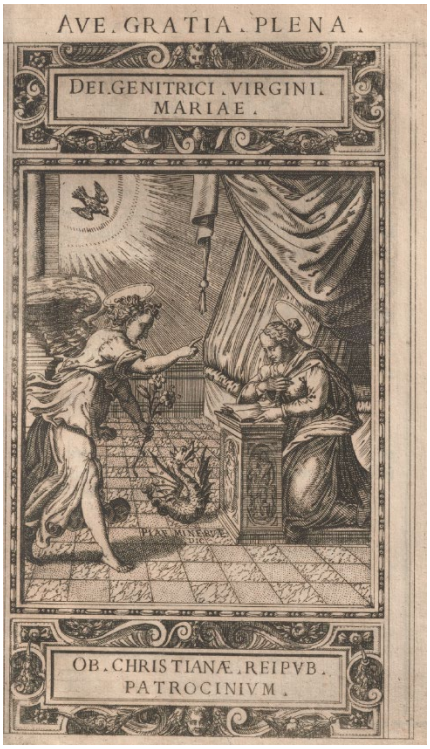


Fig. 3 Page with *Annunciation to the Virgin*, from *Delle allusioni, imprese, et emblem* (Rome: Bartolomeo Grassi, 1588).

Fig. 4 Attributed to Hans Collaert, after Stradanus, *The Printmaker's Workshop*, engraving (Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibiothek).