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# Ornaments and Narratives: The Dialogue of Engraved Motifs

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CHAPTER FIVE

ORNAMENTS AND NARRATIVES:  
THE DIALOGUE OF ENGRAVED MOTIFS

MARIE-CLAIRE PLANCHE

(TRANSLATED BY SHELAGH COONEY)

The illustrated book is certainly not a novelty that came out of the eighteenth century, for technical innovations in the art of engraving as well as the widespread use of copperplates had in fact contributed during the previous century to changing the status of the book. The work of burin and aquatint engravers had conferred a new dimension to illustration in general: the delicacy of strokes and the flexibility of lines affected the artistic portrayal of characters and contributed to the rendering of appealing backgrounds. This technical renewal redefined the material conditions of book production, introducing new presses that were reserved for copperplate engraving and differentiating the printing of characters from that of illustrations. In the seventeenth century, illustration had shown relative restraint, title frontispieces or vignettes being normally complemented by a few typographical ornaments. In the following century, however, motifs spread out abundantly on the pages of the book, as engraved florets, headpieces and tailpieces add a sense of profusion to the material presentation of each edition. Nonetheless, the evolution of the illustrated book, particularly during the reign of Louis XV, was tied more to aesthetic choices than to technical changes that affected the printing of books.

But what exactly inspired such ornamental profusion? Why leave such little space on the printed page? The reasons are undoubtedly numerous, aligning narrative and decorative intentions. Surely, the refinement of rocaille motifs and the charm of children treated in the *putti* style, for example, could not be more pleasing to the eye. However, the ornate decoration exhibited in the arts, principally during the reign of Louis XV,

was the subject of passionate criticism is the years 1740-1760, a period when archaeological discoveries motivated a return to historical painting. This criticism was also directed towards the artists and artisans of the decorative arts: rocaille woodwork and vases, for instance, were at the centre of the attack, as attested by various contemporary critiques.<sup>1</sup> French art critic La Font de Saint-Yenne evoked the decadence of painting, which according to him was set off at the end of Louis XIV's reign, attributing it to the forsaking of great historical subjects in favour of frivolous ones.<sup>2</sup> The book printed during Louis XV's time, which agrees to and even invites the display of the rocaille style, was relatively sheltered from this criticism. This book in its material presentation does, however, bear the mark of an evolution, seeing that, to an abundance of ornament conceived entirely of curves succeed increasing restraint and motifs dominated by classical lines.

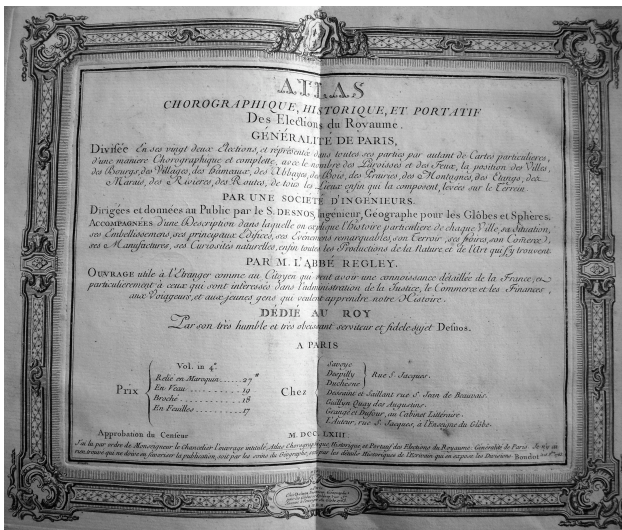


Figure 5.1

After Jacques De Sève, title page of Abbé Regley's *Atlas chorographique* (1763). Private collection.

<sup>1</sup> See Christian Michel, "Le goût contre le caprice: les enjeux des débats sur l'ornement au milieu du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle", in *Histoires d'ornement*, ed. Patrice Ceccarini and Jean-Loup Charvet (Paris: Klincksieck, 2000), 203-14.

<sup>2</sup> Étienne La Font de Saint-Yenne, *Réflexions sur quelques causes de l'état présent de la peinture en France* (The Hague: Jean Neaulme, 1747).

The framing around the title page of the Abbé Regley's *Atlas* is evidence of this consequential change (Fig. 5.1).<sup>3</sup> Published in 1763, the volume reflects the rocaille taste in the design of its cartouches and volutes, the curves of which are toned down by more rectilinear friezes: as such, an evolution of the shapes towards a neoclassical aesthetic is clearly visible.

Consequently, by fusing text and image, the book engages in the dialogue between the arts.<sup>4</sup> The principles that underline the relations between the visual arts and literature have been at the heart of theoretical debate since antiquity and are well defined in contemporary scholarship. In this chapter, I intend to analyse, with the support of examples drawn from scientific and literary publications, the role and functioning of book illustration in the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The encyclopedic spirit of the Enlightenment favoured the publication of works whose plates served a didactic purpose and became the necessary, indispensable component of the text. The care lavished on the visual component of these works demonstrates not only an intention to spread knowledge but also a desire to please the eye. The quality of the finished product, with its carefully

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<sup>3</sup> Abbé Regley, *Atlas chorographique, historique, et portatif des élections du royaume* (Paris: Dessaint and Saillant, 1763), in-4. Like the subsequent plate representing the Place Royale where the statue of Louis XV had been erected (currently the Place de la Concorde), this title page has a border recalling sculpted wooden framework.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the subject, see Marie-Claire Planche, *De l'iconographie racinienne, dessiner et peindre les passions* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010). See also my article entitled "De l'usage de la lettre dans la gravure d'illustration", *Textimage* 1 (April 2007), 1-5; it is also available online at: [http://www.revue-textimage.com/01\\_en\\_marge/place-touron1.htm](http://www.revue-textimage.com/01_en_marge/place-touron1.htm), accessed April 2010.

<sup>5</sup> The examples chosen are related mainly to the work of Jacques De Sève, a French draughtsman active between 1742 and 1789. I am currently preparing the catalogue of the works by this illustrator who was also a painter. Ever present during the second half of the century, his work remains largely undiscovered by scholars, an unawareness that can be attributed primarily to a lack of biographical details concerning the artist. De Sève participated in the illustration of over fifty works, his most significant undertaking being the Comte de Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*. He illustrated scientific, legal and historical works, as well as a number of plays by Hamilton and Hénault. In regard to commissions for illustrations of seventeenth-century texts, he is responsible for designs for Scarron, La Fontaine, Perrault and La Bruyère. See my article "Orner le livre au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Jacques De Sève, un dessinateur méconnu", in *L'esthétique du livre: approche croisée*, ed. Ségolène Le Men, Alain Milon and Marc Perelman (Nanterre: Presses Universitaires Paris X, 2010), forthcoming.

crafted layout and acute lisibility, combined aesthetics and knowledge. It is a truism that the illustrations of scientific works and those of literary texts share common characteristics and functions as the same time as they highlight the importance of the book in society. The engravings that are physically accompanying the texts for which they were initially designed can also be looked at and admired independently; the reader's ability to leaf through the pages becomes then of utmost importance. Skimming through a book while paying particular attention to iconography, be it of a narrative or decorative nature, becomes an exercise that has an immediate effect on the reader's status. Because he is drawn to the visual and is thus invited to alter his usual reading process, he undergoes a transformation, becoming a reader/viewer who contemplates images composed to satisfy his senses. The autonomy of iconography does not diminish the importance of the links established between the image and the text, rather it confirms that the art of engraving represents its own separate form of expression. As treasured artefacts, sold in the form of separate sheets or as part of a series, prints have always been a collector's item. The recognition of the engraver's skill is just one example of tangible proof to the importance and autonomy of this artform. Allow us now to open the pages of a few books in order to communicate the importance and complexity of eighteenth-century book illustration.

The pre-eminence of engraving in the eighteenth century led engraver and publisher Charles-Antoine Jombert to attempt to clarify contemporary print terminology in his *Avis aux marchands d'estampes*, a document inserted in the *Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre de Sébastien Leclerc*. Jombert composed this text so that any confusion in the identification of different types of engravings may be avoided in the future. These definitions, most valuable for us today, show the importance given to eighteenth-century illustration and the vitality of the print trade:

*Le frontispice* est une estampe qui se place à la tête d'un livre, vis-à-vis le titre, et qui est au moins de la grandeur d'une des pages du volume. [...] *La vignette* est une petite estampe, entourée d'une légère bordure d'ornement, ou d'un double trait, qui se tire sur le haut de la page, au commencement du discours d'un volume, ou d'une partie, à la tête d'une épître dédicatoire. [...] *Le fleuron* diffère du cul-de-lampe en ce que le premier se met sur le titre d'un livre, dans l'espace qui reste entre le nom de l'auteur, et le nom et l'adresse du libraire : au lieu que le cul-de-lampe est proprement l'ornement qui termine un ouvrage, et qui se met à la fin d'un volume, d'une partie, d'un livre, d'un chapitre. [...] Un *fleuron* n'est assujetti à aucune forme régulière, par conséquent il ne doit être renfermé par aucun cadre ni bordure. [...] L'origine du *cul-de-lampe* dans les livres est aussi ancienne que celle de l'imprimerie. [...] Il ne consistoit alors qu'en une

certaine disposition des dernières lignes du livre, ou du chapitre, que l'on faisoit aller toujours en diminuant, depuis la ligne entière où cet arrangement commençoit, jusqu'à la dernière et la plus courte ligne [...] On a abandonné ensuite cette disposition de lignes qui alloient en diminuant, pour leur substituer des ornemens en fonte, arrangés de la même manière. [...] Enfin le goût s'étant épuré de plus en plus, on a eu recours à la gravure en cuivre pour exécuter les mêmes choses. [...] Toutes les estampes que l'on voit dans les livres et qui ne peuvent se ranger dans les classes précédentes, se nomment simplement *estampes*.<sup>6</sup>

Due to changes over time in how this terminology has been applied, the technical terms referring to engravings that are used in this chapter should be clarified. When citing the terms *floret* and *tailpiece*, I am referring to the engravings described above. On the other hand, diachronic usage of the terms *frontispiece* and *vignette* has, to some extent, modified their original meaning. The *frontispiece* still refers to the engraving that opens the book and faces the title page, but it also refers to the image that opens a part of a volume. In regard to the term *vignette*, it most often pertains to a page-size engraving; this includes all plates with the exception of the title frontispiece. When referring to an engraving delineated by a border and positioned at the top of a page, the term *headpiece* is appropriate.

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<sup>6</sup> Charles-Antoine Jombert, *Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre de Sébastien Leclerc* (Paris: Jombert, 1774), XXVII-XXXI. Unless otherwise stated, all translations into English are by Shelagh Cooney and remain deliberately literal to preserve meaning. "The *frontispiece* is an engraving placed at the beginning of a book, facing the title page, and is at the least the size of the page of the volume. [...] The *vignette* is a small engraving framed by a thin ornamental border or a double line cut, which is placed at the top of a page, at the beginning of a volume's text or of a section, before a dedicatory epistle. The *floret* is different from the tailpiece in that it is placed on the title page, in the space left between the author's name and the publisher's name and address. The tailpiece, however, is precisely the ornament that closes a work and is placed at the end of a volume, a part, a book, a chapter. [...] The *floret* is not subject to any regular shape; therefore it should not be enclosed by any frame or border. [...] The origin of *tailpieces* in books dates as far back as the beginning of printing. [...] It consisted then in a certain arrangement of the last lines of the book, or the chapter, that decreased in size starting at the full line where the arrangement began, and ending at the last and shortest line. [...] This decreasing arrangement was subsequently abandoned in favour of cast iron ornaments, arranged in the same manner. [...] Finally, as this trend became more and more refined, copperplate engraving was used to carry out the same things. [...] Any engraving seen in a book that cannot be classified in the previous categories is simply called an *engraving*."

These clarifications seem necessary to allow us not only to steer clear of any confusing suggestions but also to provide a link between modern sources and contemporary commentaries.

Several years before the publication of Jombert's text, Pierre-Simon Fournier published a work essential to typography, in which his main interests were the technical aspects of the art of printing.<sup>7</sup> A fundamental treatise still to this day, it underlines the fact that engraved motifs are not the only book ornaments. Fournier explains and comments on the basic techniques of book production and devotes a few pages to typographical ornaments:

Les petits ornements mobiles, qu'on nomme Vignettes, sont une partie de l'art qui a été négligée par nos anciens graveurs: ce qu'ils en ont fait mérite peu de considération, tant pour le nombre que pour la figure. Ce n'est que depuis une trentaine d'années que l'Imprimerie s'est enrichie dans cette partie, premièrement par les graveurs de l'Imprimerie royale, secondement par ce que j'ai fait en ce genre pour les autres imprimeries du royaume. [...] La taille des vignettes demande des précautions, si l'on veut qu'elles puissent servir, par leur combinaison, à la composition de quelques légers dessins. Pour cela, il faut qu'elles remplissent le corps sur lequel on les destine, et qu'elles soient faites sur des largeurs déterminées et correspondantes à d'autres corps.<sup>8</sup>

Fournier takes great interest in the printer's art and trade by describing the typographical ornaments inherited from the previous century. These motifs, which can be assembled together in order to form friezes, are in

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<sup>7</sup> Pierre-Simon Fournier, *Manuel typographique utile aux gens de lettres* (Paris: Barbou, 1764), in-8. The work contains two illustrations: one designed by Hubert-François Gravelot and the other by Jacques De Sève. Aptly combining the allegorical and the concrete, these engravings illustrate the different tasks associated with the typographical arts.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. "The little moveable ornaments called *flowers* constitute a branch of the art which was neglected by our former masters of letter-cutting: their work of this kind is considerable both in quantity and in point of design. It is only during the past thirty years that printing has been enriched in this particular area, firstly by the punchcutters of the Royal Printing-House, and secondly by what I have accomplished in this field for the other presses of the kingdom. [...] Cutting flowers demands care if the units are to serve in combination to build up a few small designs. For this purpose it is essential that they should charge the body on which they are to be cast and that they should be given particular widths related to other bodies." (Pierre-Simon Fournier, *Fournier on Typefounding: The Text of the "Manuel Typographique"*, trans. Harry Graham Carter [New York: Burt Franklin, 1973], 45.)

their appearance distinguishable from headpieces or tailpieces produced by means of copperplate engraving. They also convey the influence of emblems and are characteristically similar to print letters not only because their motifs are in relief but also because they are composed in similar ways. Indeed, these compositions can consist of one motif or a number of them, which are then juxtaposed as in arrangements of different letters that ultimately form words. Thanks to the development of copper engraving, they were replaced by motifs engraved on copper plates that belonged to the realm of the engraver.<sup>9</sup> The renewal of these elements constituted a significant expenditure and typographical embellishments certainly did not disappear from eighteenth-century books. They were used in different areas and as a complement to engraved compositions. As in the previous century, their narrative role was not recognised; it was more a matter of filling the blanks of the page.

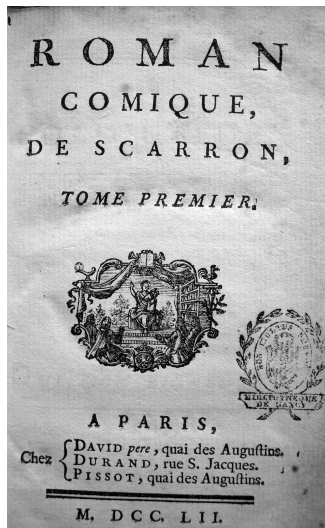


Figure 5.2

Jean-Michel Papillon, floret for the title page of Paul Scarron's *Roman comique* (1752). Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy.

<sup>9</sup> These ornaments were produced by the technical means of the *taille d'épargne*, a process by which certain parts are cut away and filled with enamel, leaving the design *in relief*, spared or left uncut; in contrast, the ornaments produced through copperplate engraving are *en creux*, in intaglio.





Figure 5.3

Jean-Charles Baquoy after Jacques De Sève, headpiece for Scarron's *Roman comique* (1752). Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy.

The 1752 edition of Paul Scarron's *Roman comique* (1651-1657) shows the coexistence of several different motifs.<sup>10</sup> On the title page is a typographical ornament (Fig. 5.2) executed by Jean-Michel Papillon, which finds itself in a number of compositions, whereas at the beginning of each chapter we notice an engraved headpiece whose subject is related to the text (Fig. 5.3, above). If the first ornament bears no real relation to the content of the work, three headpieces display for their part a narrative intention. In addition, these are signed by both the designer and the engraver: De Sève and Baquoy.<sup>11</sup> The headpiece at the top of the second part illustrates the particular episode in which the comedy revolves once again around the character of Ragotin:

On ouït dans la chambre haute des hurlements non guère différents de ceux que fait un pourceau qu'on égorge; et celui qui les faisait n'était autre que le petit Ragotin. Le curé, les comédiens et plusieurs autres coururent à lui et le trouvèrent tout le corps, à la réserve de la tête, enfoncé dans un grand coffre de bois qui servait à serrer le linge de l'hôtellerie; et, ce qui était le

<sup>10</sup> Paul Scarron, *Roman comique* (Paris: David, Durand, and Pissot, 1752), in-8.

<sup>11</sup> The name of Papillon inscribed on the motif of the title page illustrates the fame of the artist. However, most of these typographical ornaments were never signed.

plus fâcheux pour le pauvre encoffré, le dessus du coffre, fort pesant et massif, était tombé sur ses jambes et les pressait d'une manière fort douloureuse à voir. Une puissante servante qui n'était pas loin du coffre quand ils entrèrent, et qui leur paraissait fort émue, fut soupçonnée d'avoir si mal placé Ragotin. Il était vrai, et elle en était toute fière, si bien que, s'occupant à faire un des lits de la chambre, elle ne daigna pas regarder de quelle façon on tirait Ragotin du coffre, ni même répondre à ceux qui lui demandèrent d'où venait le bruit qu'on avait entendu. Cependant le demi-homme fut tiré de sa chausse-trape et ne fut pas plutôt sur ses pieds qu'il courut à une épée. On l'empêcha de la prendre.<sup>12</sup>

The designer placed the characters and objects mentioned above in the room in question. The viewer discovers the moment when Ragotin comes out of the rustic chest. Turned towards the handmaid who is busy "making one of the beds", he glares at her meaningfully, while the sword he seeks lays to his right. By placing it up high on the wall, De Sève informs us that Rogotin, in accordance with the written text, will not be able to reach it. The handmaid conspicuously has her back turned to this scene, carrying on her good work. The diversity of the costumes allows the all the characters to be connected to their respective occupation or social status. The designer used the means of expression afforded by the medium of illustration in order to give his composition a certain temporality: the series of events is effectively put on view and the image serves the text by arranging its narrative components.

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Scarron, *Le roman comique*, ed. Yves Giraud (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1981), second part, ch. VII, 245-6. "But wild discord, with her hissing snakes instead of hair, had not yet completed the mischief she designed to do in that house, for now there was heard in the upper room such roaring as little differs from that of a hog when he is going to be stuck, and yet he that roared at this rate was no other than Ragotin. The curate, the strollers, and several others ran up to him, and found him sunk up to his ears in a great wooden chest, where the hostess kept her linen; and what was yet more grievous to the poor entrapped Ragotin, the lid of the trunk, which was thick and heavy, had fallen upon his legs, and squeezed them so that it grieved one's heart to see it. A lusty chambermaid, who stood by when they entered the room, and looked very much concerned, was suspected of having put the little man into so ill a place. This was the truth of the business; and she was so proud of what she had done that whilst she was making one of the beds she did not vouchsafe to mind how they could get Ragotin out of the trunk, nor so much as answer those who asked her the occasion of the noise they heard. In the meantime the little man was got out of the trap, and had no sooner the use of his feet but he ran to his sword. They hindered him from laying hold on cold iron." (Paul Scarron, *The Comical Romance*, trans. Tom Brown [London: Benjamin Blom, 1968], 219.)

These observations concerning typographical and engraved motifs should not give out the false impression that only the former embellishments were reused throughout different works. In fact, it appears as though a simple ornamental status was acquired by engraved florets as soon as they started to be reused or repeated. The use of children in illustrations reinforces this idea. The predilection for *putti*, cupids and other children is unashamedly displayed by eighteenth-century artists; today we hesitate on the appropriate terms to use when referring to these figures. They frequently adorn the top portion of wood trim or the upper part of doorways and are often the subject for headpieces and tailpieces. Although their size does allow them to adjust well to these decorative areas, the real reason behind such a marked penchant for these motifs remains unexplained. Jacques De Sève himself often chose to represent these child figures playing certain roles. For this reason, Nicolas Lenglet du Fresnoy's *Recueil de romans historiques* (1747) is embellished solely with winged or wingless *putti* grouped together to form florets, headpieces or tailpieces that were charming but of trivial interest.<sup>13</sup> For a work whose content is rather light, the ensemble of these engraved motifs remains a true pleasure for the reader. Much more than mere illustrations, these florets represent nonetheless simple decorative elements devoid of any narrative intentions. The many examples provided by eighteenth-century works show that engravings assume various forms and serve different functions throughout the period: the same work can therefore welcome at once this iconographical diversity.

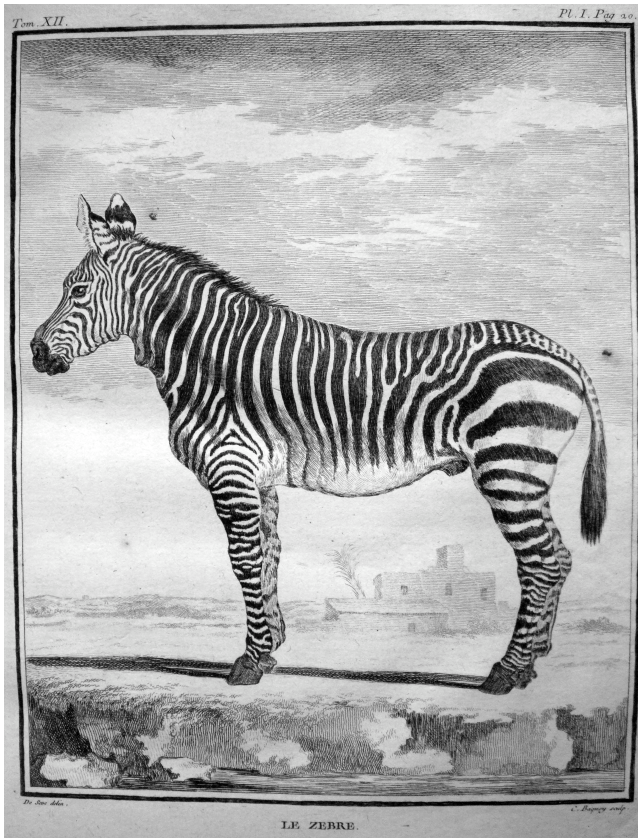
The Comte de Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* attests to this. It is in this scientific publication, the engravings of which represent living animals as well as their skeletons or cross-sections of dissections, that we find charming headpieces adorning each volume. Jacques De Sève drew these compositions as well as the majority of the plates.<sup>14</sup> The illustration of this monumental work was a laborious endeavour, and the designer put his talent for ornamentation and close observation at the service of Buffon. In his headpieces, he counterbalanced the studious and fixed nature of the

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<sup>13</sup> Nicolas Lenglet du Fresnoy, *Recueil de romans historiques* (London: n.p., 1747), in-8. Two of these motifs were reused in the Duc de La Vallière's work entitled *Bibliothèque du théâtre françois depuis son origine, contenant un extrait de tous les ouvrages composés pour ce théâtre depuis les mystères jusqu'aux pièces de Corneille* (Dresda: Michel Groell/ Paris: Bauche, 1768), in-8.

<sup>14</sup> See Marie-Claire Planche, "Le décor dans l'*Histoire naturelle* de Buffon", in *L'héritage de Buffon*, ed. Marie-Odile Bernez (Dijon: EUD, 2009), 111-25.

plates. Volume twelve, for example, opens with an image of a zebra.<sup>15</sup> Following the pre-established plan for the illustration of this work published in a series of volumes, the explanatory text is accompanied by engraved plates displaying a close proximity to the printed words.

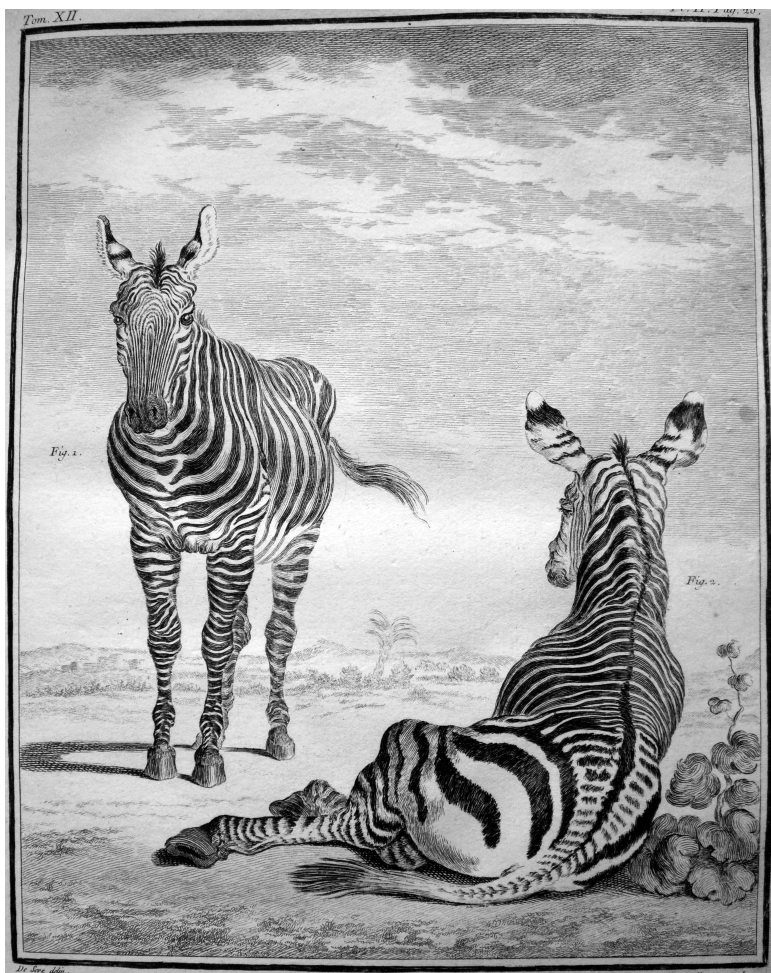


**Figure 5.4**

Jean-Charles Baquoy after Jacques De Sève, *Le Zèbre*, plate I for volume 12 of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* (1764). Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy.

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<sup>15</sup> Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1749-1788).



**Figure 5.5**

Jean-Charles Baquoy after Jacques De Sève, *Le Zèbre*, plate II for volume 12 of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* (1764). Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy.

In the case of the zebra, whereas most of the remarks refer to the animal's beauty and the unusual character of its physical appearance, the two plates do not insist on the scientific study of this quadruped. The zebra is described in the following terms:

Le zèbre est peut-être de tous les animaux quadrupèdes le mieux fait et le plus élégamment vêtu: il a les graces du Cheval, la légèreté du Cerf, et la robe rayée de rubans noirs et blancs, disposés alternativement avec tant de régularité et de symétrie, qu'il semble que la Nature ait employé la règle et le compas pour la peindre: ces bandes alternatives de noir et de blanc sont d'autant plus singulières qu'elles sont étroites, parallèles et très-exactement séparées, comme dans une étoffe rayée; que d'ailleurs elles s'étendent non-seulement sur le corps, mais sur la tête, sur les cuisses et les jambes, et jusque sur les oreilles et la queue; en sorte que de loin cet animal paroît comme s'il étoit environné par-tout de bandelettes qu'on auroit pris plaisir et employé beaucoup d'art à disposer régulièrement sur toutes les parties de son corps.<sup>16</sup>

The two engravings show the animal in three separate poses. The first plate (Fig. 5.4, preceding) displays its profile in the rather conventional manner that is recurrent throughout the volumes. The equine is soberly placed on a natural promontory, set in a decor whose palm tree evokes an exotic land. As for the second plate (Fig. 5.5), a new decor allows the animal to be shown in two different postures that clearly reflect the scientific aim of the work. Therefore, its objective is to showcase the geometry of the stripes, to demonstrate the extent to which these are adapted to the animal's anatomy. In addition, this second engraving establishes a link with the headpiece found at the beginning of the volume—all the volumes are adorned with headpieces outlined by frames with varying contours (Fig. 5.6). These headpieces, which serve a clearly defined ornamental purpose, act as a visual summary of a number of articles introducing animals in each volume.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., XII:1. "The zebra is perhaps the handsomest and the most elegant of all quadrupeds. He has the figure and gracefulness of the horse, with the swiftness of the stag. His striped robe of black and white ribbands, is alternately disposed with so much regularity and symmetry, that it seems as if nature had made use of the rule and compass. These alternate bands of black and white, are the most singular, as they are strait, parallel, and as exactly divided, as those of a striped stuff; besides they extend not only over the body, but over the head, thighs, legs, and even the ears and tail; so that, at a distance, this animal appears as if he was adorned with ribbands, disposed in a regular and elegant manner, over every part of the body." (Georges-Louis Leclerc, Count of Buffon, *Barr's Buffon. Buffon's Natural History, Containing a Theory of the Earth, a General History of Man, of the Brute Creation, and of Vegetables, Minerals, etc.*, 10 vols., trans. J. S. Barr [London: J. S. Barr, 1792], VIII:86-7.)



**Figure 5.6**

Louis Le Grand after Jacques De Sève, headpiece for volume 12 of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* (1764). Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy.

It is worth calling attention to the posture of the zebra in this headpiece, which mirrors that of the same animal in the plate with a scientific intention. Shown from the back, the animal displays a sort of nonchalance that suits the organisation of the headpieces since the animals are placed in different positions to avoid monotony or systemisation. Although the nature of the headpiece is informative, the role of the image is principally decorative: it must captivate the reader/viewer in a context that gives the book the status of a material object and underlines its proximity to the decorative arts. The written celebration of the beauty that defines the zebra's exterior is reflected in the visual representation of the animal. By choosing to draw the animal in the same posture, and then reversing the composition through the process of engraving, the artists show a thorough understanding of how images can symbiotically complement one another. This complementarity is mirrored by the passive cohabitation of the animals placed in the company of innocent young children who observe and interact with them. A distinction between scientific and ornamental engravings is thus rendered visible not only by the shape and format of the images, but also by the presence of the children. The only function of the children in the headpieces is to represent the human presence. As an era that spread its ideas and knowledge through

numerous publications, the Enlightenment certainly understood the necessity of also pleasing the eye.

But how does the iconographical and formal diversity underlined here come into play in literary works? The vitality of book publishing allowed for an impressive number of novels and plays to be published throughout the century. The books that were illustrated were either contemporary texts or classics from the previous century. Illustrators worked alone or as a team on a particular edition. La Fontaine's *Fables*, previously brought to life with vignettes in a 1668 edition illustrated by the renowned designer and engraver François Chauveau, benefited towards the mid eighteenth century from an illustrated edition based on Jean-Baptiste Oudry's compositions.<sup>17</sup> It is one of the most celebrated accomplishments of the century and confirms the passion for illustration that seized the eighteenth century. With its wide scope, this costly enterprise shows the interest invested in iconography and its close ties with literary texts. The presentation of this edition that was published between 1755 and 1759 showcases the close links between painting, drawing and illustrative engraving. Jean-Louis Regnard de Montenault, who had acquired Oudry's drawings, explains what a visual transposition can bring to such an "already well-known" text. His drawings, which remain unpublished to this day, were conceived and executed in an editorial context that saw potential in the publication of texts from the previous century:

Ce n'est point, à proprement parler, le texte de La Fontaine, déjà si connu sous tous les formats, qu'on publie; mais des gravûres [*sic*], des estampes, des desseins qui donnent une nouvelle vie à ce texte célèbre et qui, tout ensemble, forment un livre nouveau et tout particulier. En sorte que la partie typographique de cet ouvrage, n'est absolument qu'accessoire à l'objet principal qui demandoit des travaux et des connoissances d'un genre tout different.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jean de la Fontaine, *Fables choisies* (Paris: Barbin, 1668), in-4. Between 1729 and 1733, Oudry created seventy-five sketches for the *Fables*. Jean de la Fontaine, *Fables choisies* (Paris: Desaint and Saillant, 1755-1759), 4 vols., folio. Unfortunately, we were not able to reproduce any of these illustrations. They are available online on the Gallica website (<http://gallica.bnf.fr/>).

<sup>18</sup> BnF, mss, N.a.f. 3345, f. 403. Cited in the catalogue of the 1995-1996 Paris exhibition *Jean de La Fontaine*, ed. Claire Lesage (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1995), 165. "Strictly speaking, we are not publishing La Fontaine's text, which is already well known for it has appeared in its many different formats, but the engravings, prints, designs that breathe a breath of fresh air into this renowned text and which, together, create a new and very special book. In this way the



This perspective shines an interesting light on the motivations behind the republication of the *Fables* in the eighteenth century. In the case of a classic such as the *Fables*, the novelty of the iconography has become a requirement. Montenuault emphasises the work carried out in the course of this artistic venture, and his comments are not exaggerated since Oudry's sketches had been entrusted to Charles-Nicolas Cochin to serve to translate the painter's expressive lines: it was thus a question of obtaining a lead pencil drawing in accordance with engraving transposition standards. The reader is not forgotten in this project that takes into account his familiarity with La Fontaine. Therefore, Montenuault explains that pleasing the eye goes hand in hand with literary knowledge.<sup>19</sup> As shown by Claire Lesage, the interest in the iconography of the *Fables* was significant, and La Fontaine swiftly escaped the visual space allocated to his works in books to adorn even house interiors in which the presence of his animals silently accompanied the daily routine of a family.<sup>20</sup> There

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typographical component of this book is only an accessory to the main object which required a very different type of work and knowledge." Malesherbes, who had received a copy of the edition, lauded the value of its iconography: "Un ouvrage fait avec autant de somptuosité et dans lequel les frais de la gravure surpassent de beaucoup ceux de l'impression, est moins une édition des fables qu'un monument érigé à la gloire de l'illustre auteur." ("This work, executed with such magnificence and in which engraving costs greatly surpassed those of the printing, is much less an edition of the fables than a monument erected to the glory of the renowned author.") Cited by Claire Lesage, "La Fortune des *Fables* au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle", in *Jean de La Fontaine*, 165.

<sup>19</sup> It is worth mentioning that La Fontaine's *Contes* would also benefit from an exceptional edition two years after, known as the one commissioned by the Fermiers Généraux (Jean de la Fontaine, *Contes et Nouvelles* [Paris: Barbou, 1762], 2 vols., in-8). These volumes were illustrated by Charles-Dominique-Joseph Eisen and Pierre-Philippe Choffard with vignettes and tailpieces. This illustrated edition follows the 1743 edition illustrated by Charles-Nicolas Cochin. A collection of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's drawings illustrating the *Contes*, dating from 1765-1770, is preserved in the Museum of the Petit Palais in Paris. See the catalogue for the 1992-1993 Paris exhibition: *Galerie Nationale du Petit Palais, Fragonard et le dessin français au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle dans les collections du Petit Palais* (Paris: Éditions Paris-Musées, 1992), 191-274.

<sup>20</sup> Guy de Maupassant recalls this practice in his novel *Une Vie* (1883), in which he describes the furnishings in the living room as such: "Tout le meuble, en tapisserie au petit point, n'était que l'illustration des *Fables* de La Fontaine; et Jeanne eut un tressaillement de plaisir en retrouvant une chaise qu'elle avait aimée, étant tout enfant, et qui représentait l'histoire du Renard et de la Cigogne." (Guy de Maupassant, *Une Vie* [Paris: Compagnie générale du livre, 1983], 12.) In translation: "The entire piece of furniture, which was covered in petit point

most certainly was a certain grace or charm to showcasing these figures that could exist alone or in reference to *La Fontaine*: animal couples such as the wolf and the lamb, the frog and the ox, or the crow and the fox carried their established meaning and interpretation.

Nonetheless, it should not be presumed that *La Fontaine* eclipsed the other authors of the seventeenth century who also benefited from illustrated editions: the eighteenth century was most favourable to the literature of the *Grand Siècle*. Pierre Corneille, Paul Scarron, Jean de La Bruyère and Jean Racine were published in editions of a superior quality throughout the century.<sup>21</sup> In this fashion, editions of Racine's plays grew in number and reached a peak with Didot's 1801 edition that marked the end of an era.<sup>22</sup> Following the example of other famous editors, Pierre Didot's ambitions aimed to celebrate and pay homage to the classics, but they could not be completely satisfied, given the exorbitant cost of some of his projects. However, the designs he commissioned show just how impossible it would be to separate the fame of an author from the illustration of his work. Nonetheless, eighteenth-century editions of Racine's works raise certain questions: did the illustrators revitalise his iconography or did they keep with traditional iconography? Although the eighteenth century inherited the previous century's appreciation for vignettes, certain characteristics defined the Enlightenment and influenced the way in which the illustrated book evolved not only in terms of its style but also in the page layout and presentation of its iconography. From distinctive rocaille curves to the more rectilinear contours of the neoclassical style, the illustrated book of the period bears the mark of an evolution in art. The history of the illustrated book during the Enlightenment is guided by the work of painters: they were the first ones to give it momentum, and after giving way to professional illustrators, became again the forefront for editions in which the term *tableau* was used to designate a vignette. Throughout the century, books took part in the evolution of artistic movements, and as a result, they played an important role not only as collector's objects but also as products of the decorative arts.

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tapestry, represented *La Fontaine's Fables*; Jeanne quivered with delight when she was reunited with the chair she had once loved as a child and that represented the story of the Fox and the Stork."

<sup>21</sup> Plays by Corneille and Racine were illustrated by Hubert-François Gravelot in 1764 and 1768.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Racine, *Œuvres*, 3 vols. (Paris: Pierre Didot l'aîné, 1801), folio. The first volume opens with a plate illustrating Racine's apotheosis.

Painter and designer Jacques De Sève, who was well served by his engravers, proposed two illustrated editions of Racine's *Œuvres* that were most innovative in both vivacity and presentation. The first edition he illustrated was published in 1750 by the widow Gandouin in three duodecimo volumes.<sup>23</sup> The text is not illustrated with vignettes but with florets on the title pages and with three headpieces. The engraved headpieces represent episodes from *La Thébàide*, *Britannicus* and *Iphigénie*: they focus on scenes that would be illustrated again in the vignettes of the subsequent edition. The headpiece commissioned for the second volume illustrates the scene of the banquet from *Britannicus* (Fig. 5.7): it unfolds in width over a framing that is simply marked by a border. Nero, who is showing his surprise, is at a good distance from Britannicus and is leaning back on his *lit de banquet*. The different planes formed by the banquet bed and table underline the horizontal format of the composition. The scene is lively, the attitudes and expressions are varied, but this illustration does not yet have the qualities of the plates executed for the 1760 edition. This is the reason for which the 1750 edition seems like an outline of Le Breton's large and beautiful 1760 quarto publication.<sup>24</sup> Its three volumes were praised by the Baron Portalis in the following words:

Les grandes figures y sont traitées dans le goût, un peu théâtral, des de Troy et des Boucher, mais avec beaucoup d'aisance et tout à fait en peintre. La figure de Britannicus est très dramatique, et celle des Plaideurs

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<sup>23</sup> This rather rare edition had many versions. A. J. Pons reports that in the same year David l'Aîné published a version with *Esther* and not *Iphigénie* as the subject in the third volume. The entire work was also presented by David le Jeune in 1755. A catalogue of the editor Georg mentions another edition by Robustel in 1760. See: *Catalogue de très beaux livres du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et du début du XIX<sup>e</sup>* (Paris: S. A. Georg, 1931). Under number 131 we find: "Le tome III renferme le dessin original de De Sève qui a servi pour la vignette [bandeau] d'Esther" ("Volume III contains De Sève's original drawing used for the vignette [headpiece] for Esther"). Today, this drawing is nowhere to be found.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Racine, *Œuvres*, 3 vols. (Paris: Le Breton, 1760), in-4. The volumes contain the plays and the *Œuvres diverses* (the latter are adorned with tailpieces). The vignettes were scaled down for an edition of Racine's *Œuvres* published by the Compagnie des libraries in 1767, 3 vols., in-12. Three headpieces whose subjects were either originals or taken from the 1760 edition were added to the twelve plates. Finally, the collected works under the same title, *Œuvres*, were published once more by the same editor in 1779.

heureusement composée. Les vignettes et les fleurons sont pleins d'invention et de mouvement.<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 5.7**

Dominique Sornique after Jacques De Sève, headpiece for Racine's *Britannicus* (1750). Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy.

In breaking with previous editions of Racine's works, this edition is full of verve: the characters are always animated and alive, and their body language reflects their dialogue and interactions with each other. It truly belongs to the ornamental movement that seized the arts and led to the refinement of the illustrated book in the eighteenth century, which with the involvement of painters, became a precious collector's item. Before Didot's magnificent 1801 edition, which contained one engraved plate per act, the 1760 edition offered something similar to a narrative sequence. Through a variation of the iconographical vocabulary, several instalments of the same play could be depicted. The addition of other engraved vignettes throughout the pages, which are not simply ornamental, gives the ensemble a certain iconographical rhythm while bringing diversity to the

<sup>25</sup> Roger Portalis, *Les dessinateurs d'illustrations au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Morgand and Fatout, 1877), II:619-22. "The large figures are treated in a style, somewhat theatrical, similar to that of de Troy and the Bouchers, but with much ease and as a painter would have done. *Britannicus*' figure is very dramatic, and those of the *Plaideurs* are composed with joy. The vignettes and the florets are innovative and full of movement.")

artistic depiction of subjects and themes.<sup>26</sup> De Sève offered unique variety to the treatment of Racine's corpus and was the first to introduce motifs of children.<sup>27</sup> Each volume opens with a floret at the title, which is both pleasing to the eye and invested with meaning. The floret used in the second volume (Fig. 5.8) skilfully combines figures symbolising different tragedies which are celebrated by a child holding a crown and a trumpet. The monster that killed Hippolyte lies on a cloud surrounding *Iphigénie's* altar; the helmet and the goblet refer to *Mithridate*, and the knife recalls *Phèdre* and *Iphigénie*.<sup>28</sup>



**Figure 5.8**

<sup>26</sup> Editions of Racine's collective plays succeeded each other, and the eighteenth century counts no fewer than seven of them. The 1760 edition was the only one to use allegory; until then it was solely devoted to title frontispieces.

<sup>27</sup> Charles-Nicolas Cochin's touch produced florets with allegorical children close together. See: R. P. Brumoy, *Le théâtre des Grecs* (Paris: Rollin, 1749). Jacques De Sève's work can also be compared with François Boucher's compositions for the illustration of Molière's *Œuvres* in 1734.

<sup>28</sup> Several interpretations are possible. The goblet alludes to *Britannicus*, which is not included in this volume, and the sceptre refers in general to all of those in power. The floret for the title page of the first volume represents Melpomène.

After Jacques De Sève, floret for the title page of volume 2 of Racine's *Œuvres* (1760). Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy.



Figure 5.9

After Jacques De Sève, floret for the title page of volume 3 of Racine's *Œuvres* (1760). Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy.

Whereas the florets in the first two volumes allegorise the theatre as dramatic art, the one from the third volume containing the *Œuvres diverses* highlights the different literary genres (Fig. 5.9). The editor's explanation underlines the richness of the iconographical vocabulary and shows the extent to which each motif surpasses its ornamental scope:

Le Fleuron représente plusieurs Enfans qui tiennent les symboles des différens genres de Poësie qui composent les Œuvres diverses. La Tragédie figurée par la Trompette, la Couronne et le Poignard; la Poësie sacrée par la Harpe; l'Histoire par la Plume & l'Enfant ailé; l'Epigramme par l'Enfant à tête de Satyre qui tient des traits aigus; une lyre antique inspire ces Génies.<sup>29</sup>

These florets play a significant role in the history of the ornamented title page and indicate an evolution of the engraved title page since the sixteenth century. The eighteenth century abandons perspectives and porticos forming architectural frames for many printed titles. Often figuring unclothed children bearing resemblance to the *putti*, the more discreet floret revitalises iconographical and formal vocabulary. However, variety is not always the dominating factor because florets can also be anecdotal, unrelated to the content of the work. This is reinforced by the reuse of copperplates, which gives the florets a merely ornamental value. The presence of engraved motifs on the title page reveals two distinct purposes: on the one hand, it finds itself invested with meaning, and on the other, its function is purely ornamental.

To illustrate each play, De Sève created an illustrative vignette, to which he added a headpiece at the beginning and a tailpiece at the end of the majority of acts. The unclothed children take on the role and personality of the characters, as reinforced by the allegorical figures. The illustration is abundant yet contained: headpieces are delineated by rocaille-style frames while tailpieces of various sizes and shapes are perfectly defined. The same action can be first illustrated in a vignette and

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<sup>29</sup> "The Floret represents several children holding symbols of the different genres of Poetry that make up the *Œuvres diverses*. Tragedy is represented by the Trumpet, the Crown and the Dagger; sacred Poetry by the Harp; History by the feather pen and the winged child; the Epigram by the Child with the head of a Satyr with piercing features; an antique lyre inspires these Mythical creatures."

then represented differently in a headpiece or tailpiece. This is the case with Britannicus' death, which is treated in a conventional way in the full-sized plate but appears as an allegory in the headpiece.



**Figure 5.10**

Dominique Sornique after Jacques De Sève, frontispice for *Britannicus* (1760). Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy.



This frontispiece (Fig. 5.10) effectively showcases the fatal banquet as related by Burrhus to Agrippinna: Nero's feigned innocence corresponds to Narcissus' air of false surprise.

À peine l'empereur a vu venir son frère,  
 Il se lève, il l'embrasse, on se tait, et soudain  
 César prend le premier une coupe à la main:  
 "Pour achever ce jour sous de meilleurs auspices,  
 Ma main de cette coupe épanche les prémices,  
 Dit-il; dieux, que j'appelle à cette effusion,  
 Venez favoriser notre réunion."  
 Par les mêmes serments Britannicus se lie.  
 La coupe dans ses mains par Narcisse est remplie,  
 Mais ses lèvres à peine en ont touché les bords...  
 Le fer ne produit point de si puissants efforts,  
 Madame: la lumière à ses yeux est ravie,  
 Il tombe sur son lit sans chaleur et sans vie.  
 Jugez combien ce coup frappe tous les esprits:  
 La moitié s'épouvante et sort avec des cris,  
 Mais ceux qui de la cour ont un plus long usage  
 Sur les yeux de César composent leur visage.  
 Cependant sur son lit il demeure penché;  
 D'aucun étonnement il ne paraît touché:  
 [...]  
 Narcisse veut en vain affecter quelque ennui,  
 Et sa perfide joie éclate malgré lui.<sup>30</sup>

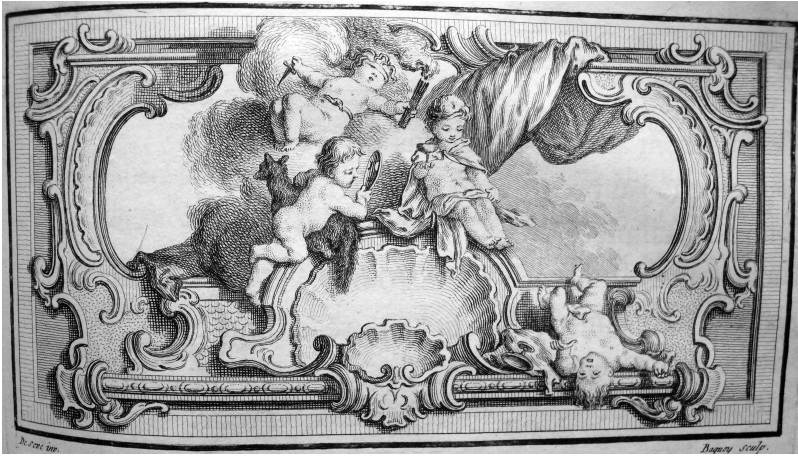
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<sup>30</sup> Jean Racine, *Britannicus*, V, 5, v. 1609-1632. Edition cited: *Théâtre complet*, ed. Jacques Morel and Alain Viala (Paris: Garnier, 1980), 312. In English: "The emperor had hardly seen his brother arrive;/ He rose, embraced him, there was silence; suddenly/ Caesar first took a cup in his own hand:/ 'To end this day with better auspices,/ My hand pours the first-fruits from this cup,/' He said; 'You gods, whom I thus invoke,/ Come and look favourably on our reunion.?' Britannicus bound himself by the same vows;/ The cup in his hand was filled by Narcissus;/ His lips, however, had hardly touched the rim,/ A sword could not have worked more suddenly;/ Madam: the light was snatched from his eyes;/ He fell upon his couch lifeless and cold;/ Imagine how this shock stuck everyone:/ Half of those present, stunned, cried out and left;/ But those who knew the court better, stayed/ And, watching Caesar's face, mended their looks./ Meanwhile, he remained bending over the couch;/ He showed no trace of astonishment: [...]/ Narcissus tried in vain to look troubled;/ The traitor could not help showing his joy." (Jean Racine, *Britannicus*, *Phaedra*, *Athaliah*, trans. Charles Hubert Sisson [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; "Oxford World's Classics"], 66-7.)

This illustration of Burrhus' story shows the work completed by the designer after the 1750 edition. The format of the volumes allows for more room to be allocated to iconography and the vertical height enables the artist to avoid the linear planes that prevailed in the headpiece (see Fig. 5.7 above). The proximity of the *lit de banquet* underlines Nero's declared intent to reconcile, whereas the untouched dishes and the liquid coming out of the goblet indicate the suddenness of the demise.<sup>31</sup> De Sève's composition offers a setting effectively designed to serve the narration. Furthermore, the refined decor highlights an attention to detail and a desire to define the historical era while aiming to be aesthetically pleasing.

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<sup>31</sup> De Sève represents the preparation of the poison in the tailpiece of Act IV. "Le poison est tout prêt. La fameuse Locuste/A redoublé pour moi ses soins officieux./ Elle a fait expirer un esclave à mes yeux;/ Et le fer est moins prompt pour trancher une vie/ Que le nouveau poison que sa main me confie." (*Britannicus*, IV, 4, lines 1381-1386, edition cited above, 304.) "The poison is ready./ The famous Locusta has excelled herself./ She made a slave die before my eyes;/ And steel is less quick to cut off a life/ Than the new poison she has entrusted to me." (Translation quoted in footnote 30, 57.) Tacite had described this episode as such: "Un premier poison lui fut donné par ses précepteurs mêmes, mais il ne fit que traverser ses entrailles, qui s'en délivrèrent, soit que le poison fût trop faible, ou qu'on l'eût mitigé, pour qu'il n'agît pas sur-le-champ. [...] Ils lui promirent alors une mort aussi rapide qu'avec le fer, et c'est auprès de la chambre du prince que l'on distille un breuvage composé de poisons d'une violence éprouvée et foudroyant. [...] Une boisson encore inoffensive et goûtée par l'esclave, mais très chaude, est présentée à Britannicus; puis, comme il la repoussait parce que brûlante, on y verse, mêlé à de l'eau froide, le poison, qui circula si rapidement dans tous ses membres qu'il lui enleva à la fois la parole et la vie." (Tacite, *Annales*, ed. Henri de Bornecques [Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1991], XIII, XV-XVI, 346-7.) "The young prince received the first dose of poison at the hands of his tutors, but a motion of the bowels rendered it ineffective, or perhaps it had been watered down to prevent immediate action. [...] They promised the preparation of a poison that would act as swiftly as a sword stroke. Their laboratory was next to the Emperor's bedroom: the poisons in the mixture had been tested for potency and quick action. [...] A cup of mulled wine, previously tasted, and so far without poison, was handed to Britannicus. But it was too hot to drink, and he refused it. The poison was then put in with some cold water. Its action was so immediate on his whole system that he at once lost the power to speak or breathe." (Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals of Tacitus*, trans. Donald Reynolds Dudley [New York: The New American Library of World Literature, 1966], 277.)



**Figure 5.11**

Jean-Charles Baquoy after Jacques De Sève, headpiece for Racine's *Britannicus* (1760). Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy.

As for the 1760 headpiece (Fig. 5.11), attention is therein given to the elements of vice: Nero is holding the goblet of reconciliation, the fox and the mask incarnate Deceit and Guile which define the character, whereas Fury is the dominating element of the scene. In the end, the Emperor's true nature is unveiled, and Britannicus violently crashes to the ground, dropping the goblet of poison. In both editions, the banquet scene was chosen as the source of inspiration, but the difference in its treatment, the recourse to another language, attests to the illustrators' desire to renew and diversify iconography. Knowledge regarding the use of allegories had been widely spread through Cesare Ripa's *Iconologie*, and the eighteenth century fully embraced it. Works such as the *Almanach iconologique* (1774), with figures commissioned from Gravelot and engraved by Cochin, as well as Lacombe de Prézel's *Dictionnaire iconologique* (1752) bear witness to it.<sup>32</sup> But what can be said about the fatality marking the scene? It is most certainly attenuated by the images of children; however, the scenes are not devoid of feeling or spirit. Even though these allegorical

<sup>32</sup> Charles-Nicolas Cochin, *Almanach iconologique* (Paris: n.p., 1774); and Honoré Lacombe de Prézel, *Dictionnaire iconologique* (Paris: Théodore de Hansy, 1752). De Sève drew the headpiece opening the last volume. Another example is Jean-Baptiste Boudard, *Iconologie tirée des divers auteurs* (Parma/Paris: Tilliard, 1759)

subjects could have been imposed on the artist by the editor, De Sève employed his style, which followed in the footsteps of Cochin, who during the same period made frequent use of allegories. It is even possible that the two artists had met personally and were able to look at each other's drawings since their signatures appear together in many works for which they shared the illustration. De Sève conformed to the models provided by iconographical dictionaries; following an established tradition, he assembled these symbols in a way that exposed the meaning invested in them.



Figure 5.12

Jean-Jacques Flipart after Jacques De Sève, tailpiece for Racine's *Esther* (1760). Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy.

These allegories incarnate or are associated to the characters. For example, the tailpiece in the second act of *Iphigénie* shows Ériphile holding out a torch wrapped around by a snake directed towards the united hearts presented by Cupid. The composition reveals the attributes of the Discord that we hear sowing. As for the tailpiece designed for *Esther*'s third act, the scene of the Queen fainting is brilliantly depicted (Fig. 5.12). The ornamental motifs, the *atlante* holding up the canopy, the brazier and the cone-shaped hat evoke the Orient and form a composition that is both harmonious and refined. King Assuérus, represented with Cupid's features and Eros, with a bow in hand and quiver slung over his shoulder, makes a gesture towards a faltering Esther. As for the hare with cocked ears at the Queen's feet, it is the allegorical representation of Fear, which makes her legs give way.<sup>33</sup>



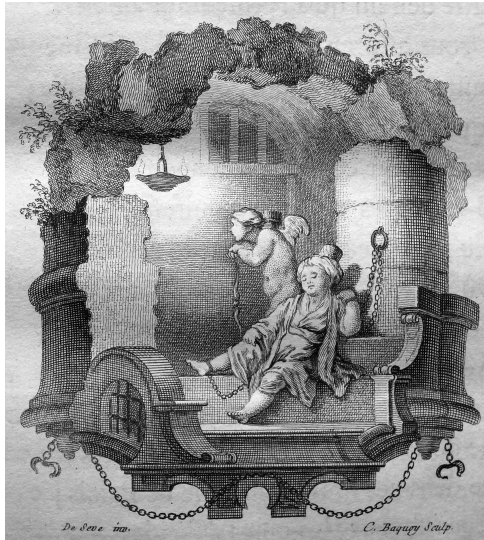
Figure 5.13

Jean-Charles Baquoy after Jacques De Sève, headpiece for Racine's *Bajazet* (1760). Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy.

*Bajazet* in prison is the subject of both the headpiece (Fig. 5.13) and the tailpiece of the first act. The two compositions are rendered in the style

<sup>33</sup> Another fainting episode is represented in the tailpiece for Act IV of *Bajazet*; this time Atalide is the one to faint. The vignette of *Esther* shows Aman at the Queen's feet.

characteristic of nocturnal interiors illuminated by oil lamps.<sup>34</sup> In the headpiece, Roxane's Cupid grants Bajazet the choice to reign or to die. The fetters restraining him and the cellar window are integrated into the decor that supports the scene. These motifs are also found in the tailpiece (Fig. 5.14) where the prison is drawn in the style of ruins; watched over by a protective Cupid, Bajazet is sleeping in chains. The subtle and soft shadows in combination with the halo of flames were skilfully transposed by the engraver Charles Baquoy.<sup>35</sup> As such, these illustrations offer many levels of interpretation to the reader: at first, these motifs are only perceived as ornamental; in the second stage, the link with the tragedies is established; and in the third and final stage, deciphering the allegories allows for an understanding of the iconography as a whole.



**Figure 5.14**

Jean-Charles Baquoy after Jacques De Sève, tailpiece for Racine's *Bajazet*

<sup>34</sup> When considering Racinian iconography as a whole, it appears that nocturnal scenes are rare. When the artists opted for this subject matter, they knew how to design a good picture.

<sup>35</sup> Jacques De Sève's drawings, preserved in a folder at Bibliothèque nationale de France, show the artist's precise and sensible approach. His compositions were executed with lead pencil or with ink, in some instances with highlight wash.

(1760). Bibliothèque municipale de Nancy.

To move forward from stage to stage, the reader/viewer is helped by summary explanations given by the editor at the beginning of each volume. It must be considered that undoubtedly these comments underline how impossible it would be for the diverse engravings in this edition to be seen as mere ornaments for the eye to see and to enjoy. Forming a tableau designed with the utmost dedication, these graphic elements must surely appeal to the reader. As true companions to some of the new aspects introduced by the artist in the subjects chosen for the plates, they pair well with the artistic taste of that period. Furthermore, since it is perfectly organised and because its iconography is not exclusively concerned with detail, this edition truly constitutes a single and coherent entity and not a series of illustrated texts that would exist independently.

Illustrations attract the reader in more ways than one and the power of images has long since been confirmed. Art theory has established the principles of visual representation and underlined its ties to the written text. The Abbé Du Bos, for example, believed that a painting could be accompanied by inscriptions, thus recalling its archaic use by Gothic artists:

Je me suis étonné plusieurs fois que les peintres, qui ont un si grand intérêt à nous faire reconnaître les personnages dont ils veulent se servir pour nous toucher, et qui doivent rencontrer tant de difficultés à les faire reconnaître à l'aide seule du pinceau, n'accompagnassent pas toujours leurs tableaux d'histoire d'une courte inscription. Les trois quarts des spectateurs, qui sont d'ailleurs très capables de rendre justice à l'ouvrage, ne sont point assez lettrés pour deviner le sujet du tableau. [...] Le sens des peintres gothiques, tout grossier qu'il était, leur a fait connaître l'utilité des inscriptions pour l'intelligence du sujet des tableaux. [...] Coypel a placé de même des bouts de vers de Virgile dans la galerie du Palais-Royal pour aider à l'intelligence de ses sujets qu'il avait tirés de l'*Énéide*. Déjà les peintres dont on grave les ouvrages, commencent à sentir l'utilité de ces inscriptions et ils en mettent en bas des estampes qui se font d'après leurs tableaux.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Abbé Du Bos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, ed. Dominique Désirat (Paris: Énsba, 1993), 28-9. This text was originally published in 1719. "I have oftentimes wondered why painters, who have so great an interest in making those personages known, by whose figures they intend to move us, and who find it so vastly difficult to distinguish them sufficiently by the sole aid of the pencil, why, I say, they do not accompany always their historical pieces with a short inscription. The greatest part of the spectators, who are in other respects capable of doing justice to the work, are not learned enough to guess at the subject of the picture. [...] The Gothic painters, rude and coarse as they were, had sense

His comments are of particular interest not only because they refer to a creative and historical context but also because he takes a stand on artistic practices. Furthermore, the link that he establishes between painting and interpretative engraving speaks for itself: he highlights the different uses depending on the media of expression, which undoubtedly correspond to various methods of distribution. Moreover, the technical proximity of printed text and engraving has most certainly contributed to the evolution of lettered engraving. The written word does not readily find its place in a painting; this is a way to highlight the autonomy of genres or methods of expression. If book illustration does not infringe the rules of the visual arts, it must nevertheless be studied while taking into account its specificity given that it is physically joined to the text.<sup>37</sup> In art history as well as in book history, the illustrated book is in no way anecdotal or exclusively concerned with detail. This is not only explained by the number of illustrated works but also by the complex means of producing these editions. The eighteenth century is an important period for the decorative arts and book illustration contributed to establishing links between different modes of expression. The abundance of vignettes, florets, headpieces and tailpieces that invades books in a certain part of the century can attest the vitality of the book trade and the contribution of copperplate engraving. The precious nature of illustrations is reflected in a desire to praise and pay homage to authors of the past through commissions of illustrated editions. Reediting the texts, however, is not enough; one must propose a novel product through the inclusion of images. Engravings therefore take on an important status and clearly prove to be the vital complement of the written text. Numerous editions demonstrate the capacity of the visual arts to narrate stories and introduce subjects invested with meaning. On the other side, when editions are

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enough to know the utility of inscriptions in order to render the subject of their pictures more intelligible. [...] Coypel has inscribed even several scraps of verses from Virgil, in the gallery of *Palace Royal*, in order to render those subjects more intelligible, which he had borrowed of the *Aeneid*. Painters, whose works are engraved, begin to grow sensible of the utility of these inscriptions; wherefore they put them at the bottom of such Prints, as are copied from their drawings.” (Abbé du Bos, *Critical Reflections of Poetry, Painting and Music*, trans. Thomas Nugent [London: John Nourse, 1748], I:74-5.)

<sup>37</sup> This material solidarity is essential. In fact, when the books are dismembered so that engravings are detached and sold independently, in the form of separate sheets, these iconographical documents necessarily lose some of their significance. That is to say that it can be difficult to identify the section of the novel or the scene that is treated allegorically in the absence of the accompanying text.



singled out for their disappointing illustrations, engraving can be considered as bearing less importance. These illustrations, which alternately act as ornaments and narratives, require a perfect knowledge of the texts they accompany and it is as though the study of these compositions is far from being finished. If at first glance they display a certain charm, it is to invite the reader to discover the semantic richness of a literary and scientific production that is quite diversified. The dialogue between the arts is organised in a space that, if shared, becomes perfectly defined. In this manner, illustrated books offer both text and image a place to peacefully coexist without the possibility of subservience for either one of them.