In 1902, Edmund Gosse stated that ‘to write on the history of the literary dedication is to thread a trackless forest ... it is merely a collection of hundreds of thousands of instances.’ Many generations of scholars have nonetheless reflected on the act of offering a book to someone or something through means of a dedication. An early example is provided by the treatise Della dedicazione de libri (1590) of the Veronese nobleman Giovanni Fratta, followed by similar works written by Joannes Breu, Friedrich Peter Tacke, Henry B. Wheatley, and Maurice Rat. These general reflections were supplemented by anthologies of particularly interesting examples, and by surveys of the dedications written by a specific author or a particular group of people. Other studies focus on a particular period – especially the 16th century, as this era, for reasons which will become clear later in this short communication, is considered to be the heyday of the printed dedicatory epistle. In this ‘trackless forest’ of dedications, distinction should be made between what Gérard Genette called ‘dédicaces d’œuvre’ (dedications of the work) and ‘dédicaces d’exemplaire’ (inscriptions of a copy). The latter concerns the material reality of one specific copy (such as a handwritten dedication in a book presented as a gift on a special occasion), while the first is a public act

2 Respectively De Dedicationum Literariarum Moraliitate, Argentorati 1718; Commentatio historica et literaria de dedicationibus librorum, Guelpherbyti 1733; The Dedication of Books to Patron and Friend: a Chapter in Literary History, London 1887; and Dédicaces, Poitiers 1958.
6 G. Genette, Seuls, Paris 1987, 110–133. Genette also indicates that this distinction is clearer in the corresponding verbs ‘dédier’ (to dedicate a work) and ‘dédicacer’ (to inscribe a copy).
by which the book – not only as book, but also as a permanent work of art or scholarship – is dedicated to someone. A ‘dédicace d’œuvre’ thus targets a double audience: obviously, the recipient of the dedication, but also every possible reader, as the writer makes it clear to the dedicatee that ‘this dedication is for others to read: / These are private words addressed to you in public’.7 Dedicatory epistles, of which this intervention wants to provide a brief historical survey, are clearly ‘dédicaces d’œuvre’, as they are conceived to appear in all copies of the book and once and for all connect the publication with a dedicatee, who is identified in more or less detail in the (address of the) letter.

The origins of textual ‘dédicaces d’œuvre’ lie in Graeco-Roman Antiquity. The oldest known example is an elegy which Dionysius Chalcus (5th century BC) addressed to his friend Theodorus, requesting him to consider the poem as a gift.8 Harm-Jan van Dam recently distinguished three not mutually exclusive ways by which an author could dedicate his work to someone in Ancient times:9 by mentioning the name of the dedicatee at the beginning of the work; by sending him – or, very rarely, her10 – an accompanying letter, requesting corrections from the addressee (or by asking the same in a different sort of preliminary to the text); or by sending an accompanying letter offering the work as a gift to the addressee. The custom of attaching a letter to the manuscript while sending it to a family member, a friend or a possible patron, resulted in the birth of the separate dedicatory epistle. The earliest examples of such a distinct dedication letter are found in the work of Archimedes (287–212 BC),11 and the practice became well established by the 1st century BC. Formulaic elements started to develop, such as (honest or feigned) modesty towards one’s own work or talent, a request for corrections, an account of the relation between the author and the dedicatee and the relevance of the text for the latter, remarks about the structure and content of the work, or the indication that the author only decided to publish this work at the request of the dedicatee.12 There are thus already certain generic conventions during this period, although these remain much less inhibiting than in later times.13 In these early days, the practice also seems to be associated with a certain number of genres. The Greek philosopher Onasander mentions explicitly in the preface to his Strategicus (c. 59 AD) that

8 Delectus ex iambis et elegis Graecis, ed. M.L. West, Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis, Oxford 1980, 88 (Ath. 668e–9e). I disagree with Wolfgang Leiner, Der Widmungbrief in der französischen Literatur: 1580–1715, 20, that the fact that Hesiodus (8th century BC) mentions his brother Perses in Work & Days qualifies it as the earliest dedication, because the author had totally different things in mind than honouring his brother by addressing him.
10 Dedications to women are extremely uncommon in Antiquity. The best known example is the dedication of Varro’s De re rustica to his wife Fundania.
11 In these letters, we still find frequent indications that the author ‘is sending’ his book to the addressee (an expression which would become formulaic in later dedicatory epistles), which have to be taken at face value. See, for example, the dedication letter in Archimedes’ On Conoids and Spheroids (ἀποστέλλω τοι), On Spirals (ἐπιστέλλω τοι) and The Quadrature of the Parabola (ἀποστείλαι τοι).
'it is fitting to dedicate monographs about horsemanship, or hunting, or fishing, or farming, to men who are devoted to such pursuits'. In other words, Ancient didactic treatises are almost naturally addressed to a person or a group of people (who also act as the dedicatees), whereas narrative genres, such as theatre, only seldom bear a dedication (in whatever form). In collections of poetry, dedicatory epistles appear from the 1st century AD onwards. Thus five of the twelve books of epigrams written by Martial have a separate letter, whilst Statius starts each book of his Silvae with an epistle, each time addressing a different person. Especially Statius' letters show that dedications in this period have become more and more formulaic as a means of communication in an established system of literary patronage. Statius' use of the dedicatory epistle proved to be seminal because of the success of his Silvae in Late Antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages. Another, perhaps more important, reason was that literary works continued to be produced in a similar system of patronage. In effect, the tradition persisted without much change in either form or formulation: the uniformity even became so strict that it almost excluded a personal touch. Karl Julius Holzknecht observed that, as a result of this, 'nothing is more like a dedication than another dedication' during the Middle Ages. At the end of the 15th century, however, the unprecedented production and distribution of books due to the invention of the printing press occasioned not only an enormous increase in the number of dedications, but also a growing variety. Karl Schottenloher's research showed that the earliest incunabula, as a rule, did not contain a printed dedication, but that this soon would change once the humanists started to use the printing press to distribute their editions of classical texts and their own works. The dedicatory epistle quickly established itself as an essential part of the printed book during the 16th century, to the extent that contemporaries considered publications without a dedication as 'headless' or 'incomplete' objects. Authors and publishers alike were aware of the impact of dedications and other paratexts, which served a purpose similar to the so-called blurbs on the back covers or dust jackets of today's books. The fact that later authors even decided to publish separate volumes of their dedicatory epistles and prefaces is further proof of ancient dedication, it would be truer to say that we are dealing with a fund of loosely associated conventions than with a single convention.'

the importance that early modern readers attached to them. The name of a powerful patron could add considerable authority to a publication: authors frequently anticipated attacks against a controversial piece of work by dedicating it to a patron of unquestionable reputation. Famous examples include the dedication of Andreas Vesalius’ De humani corporis fabrica (1543) to Emperor Charles V and the accompanying Epitome (1543) to Charles’ son Philip, the later King of Spain; as well as the dedication of De revolutionibus orbium coelestium libri vi (1543) by Nicolaus Copernicus to Pope Paul III. Offering one’s literary or scholarly production to a potential patron by writing a dedication could furthermore prove to be lucrative. Hence the advice of Desiderius Erasmus (1469–1536): ‘If you do not manage to sell the work, offer it on your travels to persons of high rank; you will gain more than when you sell it for real.’

Renaissance authors frequently succeeded in bending the unwritten rules of dedication – which in theory confirms the donation of a book to a specific person or group – to their own advantage. It was, for instance, no exception to offer reprints to dedicatees different from the patrons of the first edition; or to dedicate – in the same manner of Statius’ Silvae – different parts of the same publication to different individuals. We even have knowledge of cases in which separate, but otherwise identical, dedicatory epistles were addressed to different people. Then again, as Judith Henderson observed, ‘Flattering three patrons with the same letter was much more acceptable in Renaissance England than trying to seduce two wives.’

As already noted at the outset of this communication, the end of the 16th century saw the emergence of theoretical reflection on the act of dedication. Since Fratta, entire monographs were dedicated to the history of dedications and their positive and negative qualities. Writers furthermore criticized excessive flattery to unworthy addressees, and lamented the loss of the spontaneity and honesty which they believed had characterized Classical dedications. On occasion, authors questioned the custom by writing an overstated dedicatory epistle or by choosing a completely inappropriate dedicatee. Antoine Furetière, for example, wrote a witty dedicatory epistle addressed to an executioner, whereas a certain Losrios published his Œuvres in 1789 with a dedication

20 Examples are Praefationum ad varios liber: Jan Steen, 1629 by Antonius Sanderus and Pompa prosphonetica sive praefationum syntagma quorum singulae singulis libris, hactenus editis deditis dedicatisque praefixae, Lovani: Everard de Witte, 1639 by Erycius Puteanus.

21 Another example is provided in D. Verbeke, ‘Condemned by some, read by all: The attempt to suppress the publications of the Louvain humanist Erycius Puteanus in 1608’, in Renaissance Studies, 24–3 (2010), 353–364, which shows that Puteanus chose a particular dedicatee in an effort to avoid a lawsuit against his publication.

22 Case-studies have proved that a dedication was regularly rewarded with a substantial sum of money. See, for example, J. Hoyoux, ‘Les moyens d’existence d’Erasme’, in Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance. Travaux et documents, 5 (1944), 7–59. L. Lalanne, Curiosités bibliographiques, Paris 1857, 257, even indicates that in certain milieux a fixed price for dedications was used, but also offers (258–259) several examples in which the dedication did not result in the remuneration hoped for.


to his horse, despite the fact that he most likely did not even possess one.30 Due to this ever growing criticism, the traditional dedicatory epistle grew increasingly obsolete during the 19th century. The practice also lost its relevance: literary patronage gave more and more way to the commercial reality of the book trade which now offered authors greater independence. One could therefore quote the following statement of Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) as the epitaph of the dedicatory epistle: ‘Madame, le temps des dédicaces n’est plus.’31

Despite the fact that the dedicatory epistle had lost most of its socio-economic value, the act of dedicating a book did not disappear completely. Other preliminaries, such as the preface, have absorbed some of the functions of the traditional letter, and the dedication stricto sensu has generally speaking shrunk to a short formula stating a primarily emotional connection between the author and the dedicatee(s). The variety of these modern dedications, which can be ‘dutiful and whimsical, sentimental and uxorious’, is well captured in a description by John Gross:

‘full-blown acts of intellectual homage, solemn commemorations, cryptic messages, battle cries, blatant exercises in name-dropping, facetious dedications to small children (“without whom this would have been finished much sooner”) and bank managers’.32 These modern dedications, however, largely serve another purpose than the traditional dedicatory epistle and deserve a study of their own.

26 See, for instance, Breu, De Dedicationum Literariarum Moralitate, 1–12 & 17–22, who contrasts the ‘virtutes dedicantium’ (namely ‘pietas’, ‘animi gratitudo’ and ‘animi veneratio’) with the ‘vitia dedicationum’ (including ‘vanae gloriae studium’ and ‘pecuniae aucupium’).
27 See for example the Erasmian adage ‘Ne bos quidem pereat’ (nr. 3401: LB II, 1049a–1054a and ASD II, 235–244), and Montaigne, Essais, I, 40.
28 E.g. Breu, De Dedicationum Literariarum Moralitate, 7, or Rudolfus Graefenhain, De more libros dedicandi apud scriptores Graecos et Romanos obvio, Marpurgi Cattorum 1892, 26.
30 Cf. Lalanne, Curiosités bibliographiques, 264, and Rat, Dédicaces, 8.
Deze notitie biedt een kort historisch overzicht van dedicatiebrieven waarmee een boekpublicatie op een publieke en permanente wijze aan een specifieke persoon of groep wordt opgedragen. De oorsprong wordt getraceerd tot in de Grieks-Romeinse Oudheid, waar we in het werk van Archimedes de eerste dedicatiebrieven vinden. Het gebruik werd in een vast stramien gegoten tijdens de Late Oudheid en bleef nagenoeg ongewijzigd bestaan tijdens de Middeleeuwen. Het hoogtepunt ligt in de zestiende eeuw, maar de gedrukte dedicatiebrief geraakte daarna geleidelijk in onmin, totdat de traditionele functies ervan werden overgenomen door andere parateksten (zoals voorwoorden).

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**Summary**

This communication offers a brief history of the dedicatory epistle, i.e. the public act by which a book is dedicated, openly and permanently, to a specific person or group. The origin is traced to Graeco-Roman Antiquity, where we find the first dedicatory epistles in the work of Archimedes. The practice became well established by Late Antiquity, and persisted without much change in either form or formulation during the Middle Ages. The heyday lies in the sixteenth century, but the practice slowly fell out of favour afterwards, until the traditional functions of the dedicatory epistle were absorbed by other preliminaries such as prefaces.