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Visual Automathographies: The Portraits of Émilie du Châtelet

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Abstract

This paper offers the notion of a *visual automathography*—the self-construction of a scholarly persona in science and mathematics through portraiture—by analysing key representations of Émilie du Châtelet across her life course. While traditional portraiture offers a static image of its subject, a series of portraits provides an alternative approach to temporality, capturing the evolving negotiation of scholarly authority. Through a close reading of Du Châtelet’s portraits, the paper explores how visual markers such as books, mathematical instruments, and gestural cues encoded her identity as a mathematician, scientist and philosopher within the constraints of aristocratic femininity. Drawing on Peircean semiotics, the paper investigates how these portraits function as layered sign systems, where symbolic, indexical, and iconic elements reinforce her intellectual claims. Ultimately, this study argues that Du Châtelet’s *visual automathography* extended beyond individual portraits, forming a strategic and dynamic self-representation that continues to shape her legacy in the histories of mathematics, science and philosophy.

Key words: visual automathography, Émilie du Châtelet, portraiture, Peircian semiotics

Portraiture as Automathography: Narrating a Mathematical Life

My youngest is an odd creature destined to become the homeliest of women. Were it not for the low opinion I hold of several bishops, I would prepare her for a religious life and let her hide in a convent. She stands as tall as a girl twice her years, she has prodigious strength, like that of a



woodcutter, and is clumsy beyond belief. Her feet are huge, but one forgets them the moment one notices her enormous hands. Her skin, alas, is as rough as a nutmeg grater, and altogether she is as ugly as a Gascon peasant recruit in the regiment of royal footguards. (in Edwards 1970, 4)

Louis-Nicolas Le Tonnelier de Breteuil's cruel assessment of his daughter, Émilie Du Châtelet, has been repeatedly invoked in her biographical accounts, often as the opening act of a transformation narrative.¹ These accounts frame Du Châtelet's life as a reversal of fortune, likening her to an 'ugly duckling' who later emerged as a dazzling figure of the Enlightenment—admired as Voltaire's companion and muse—while downplaying her significance as a philosopher, scientist, and mathematician. If her father's words were particularly severe, other contemporaries were scarcely more generous. Madame du Deffand, a keen observer of salon society known for her sharp wit and acerbic commentary, described her as 'large and dry-looking', with a flushed complexion, thin face, pointed nose, small sea-green eyes, and discoloured teeth. She further criticized her narrow chest and outsized hands and feet reflecting her often merciless assessments of those around her. (Du Deffand 1866, liv-lv) Her cousin, Madame de Créquy, echoed these remarks, in her souvenirs, calling attention to Du Châtelet's 'terrible feet' and 'formidable hands' (Créquy 1873, 97), reinforcing the idea that Du Châtelet's physical presence fell short of conventional feminine ideals.

Yet, the surviving portraits of Du Châtelet tell a different story. Rather than the ungainly, rough-skinned figure conjured by these textual accounts, her painted likenesses present her as a woman of poise and intellect. In formal portraiture, she is elegantly attired, sometimes depicted with books or a compass in hand, asserting her scholarly identity. Most strikingly, several portraits incorporate tools and models associated with scientific inquiry—rulers for measurement, globes for geography and astronomy, orreries for celestial mechanics, and manuscripts with mathematical diagrams—deliberately aligning her with the domain of scholarly investigation.

These objects serve as more than decorative props; they assert her position in the world of mathematics and physics, aligning her visually with the traditions of male scientific portraiture, where such symbols were used to denote authority and expertise. The presence of these instruments complicates the biographical tendency to frame Du Châtelet's legacy through her social brilliance rather than her intellectual achievements. While textual accounts sought to fix her within the constraints of gendered aesthetic judgment, portraiture—particularly through its use of geometrical tools—offered an alternative. These images not only counteract the disparaging descriptions left by her contemporaries but also serve as acts of self-fashioning, positioning Du Châtelet as an active participant in the scientific discourse of her time. The divergence between verbal and visual portrayals underscores the competing ways in which her scholarly persona was constructed, both in her lifetime and after. While words attempted to fix her within the constraints of gendered aesthetic judgment, portraiture offered an alternative, allowing her to embody the dignity and refinement befitting a thinker of her stature. As Jennifer Palmer (2014, 245) has observed, elite women actively shaped their own representations, influencing artistic production in eighteenth century France. Being accustomed to portraiture from childhood, they understood how to use art to assert their social and cultural standing while conveying layered meanings.

The complexity of this gendered relationship with the representation of intellectual authority has deep roots in European history, a history that Du Châtelet navigated with both intellect and strategy. Recent scholarship on the construction of scholarly personae shows that women have historically struggled to



embody the prototypical image of a credible scholar—a struggle that persists both in the past and present. (see Vanacker and van Deinsen 2022) The scholarly image, with its recognizable features and authoritative presence, has long been associated with male intellectuals. For women like du Châtelet, meeting this ideal required not only intellectual competence but also the careful construction of a public image that could convey intellectual authority in the face of gendered constraints. Visual portraiture played a significant role in this self-fashioning process. Through commissioned portraits, du Châtelet not only asserted her intellectual standing but also crafted a representation that transcended the traditional, male-dominated image of the scholar.

This paper examines the visual representations of Émilie du Châtelet within the broader project of constructing a *feminist genealogy of automathographies*—a term denoting self-narratives of mathematical life that intertwine autobiographical inscription with reflections on mathematical thought (Halmos 1985; Tamboukou 2025). Building on my earlier work, where automathography is elaborated as a mode of tracing how mathematical subjectivities are narratively and materially composed across heterogeneous archives (Tamboukou 2025), I argue here that Du Châtelet’s portraits constitute a crucial visual dimension of this process. They offer not merely likenesses but a sustained visual record of her engagement with the intellectual world. By situating her within the broader context of early modern women scholars, it becomes possible to see how she navigated and reconfigured the gendered conditions of intellectual authority, mobilising portraiture as a strategic medium in the construction of her public persona as philosopher, scientist, and mathematician.

The discussion unfolds in four parts. Following this introduction, the first section explores portraits and portraiture through theoretical and philosophical lenses, engaging with visual analysis, semiotics, and representation. Particular attention is given to the ways in which women in eighteenth-century Europe were depicted as scholarly personae, negotiating the tensions between intellectual authority and gendered constraints. The second section focuses on the visual representations of Du Châtelet, analysed through the framework of Peircean semiotics, considering how her portraits function as signs that construct and mediate her intellectual identity. The concluding section synthesizes these insights, drawing connections between the various functions of Du Châtelet’s portraits in assembling what I conceptualize as her *visual automathography*—a self-fashioned, image-based narrative of her mathematical and philosophical persona.

Scholarly Portraits: Representation, Subjectivity, and Authority

Portraiture is a complex artistic practice that relies on representation and is directly tied to its subject—in this case, the woman mathematician. However, the way this subject is depicted varies according to historical period, artistic conventions, social and cultural expectations, the artist’s style and intent, and the sitter’s own expectations and agency. Portraits, therefore, have been interpreted and analysed from a variety of theoretical positions in philosophy and art history and there is a significant body of literature in this field.²

Joanna Woodall has (1997) influentially explored the complexities of portraiture as a genre, emphasizing its role in shaping and reflecting the relationship between the subject and the viewer. Central to her analysis is the concept of the subject—not merely as a physical likeness but as an individual embedded within broader social, cultural, and ideological frameworks. Woodall critiques the traditional understanding of portraiture as straightforward mimesis, arguing that portraits actively



produce subjectivity rather than simply reflecting it. Her work also incorporates feminist theory, particularly in how women have been historically represented in portraiture, often subjected to the male gaze and constructed in relation to idealized notions of femininity. Examining the evolving function of portraiture, Woodall refers to the eighteenth century as the ‘apogee of portraiture’ (1997, 4) in England and France. During this period, portraits of professionals, intellectuals, and scientists appeared alongside those of the nobility, alluding to progressive intellectual endeavours.

Shearer West (2004) and, more recently, Beatrijs Vanacker and Lieke van Deinsen (2022) further offer important perspectives on the role of portraiture in shaping intellectual identity, particularly for women scholars. Both emphasize that portraits are not mere representations but deeply constructed images that encode cultural values, negotiate authority, and stage identity. West situates portraiture within the classical tradition of *mimesis*—the idea that art imitates nature—while also highlighting its limitations. Portraits, she argues, do more than capture likeness; they embed meanings that reflect societal ideals and expectations (2004, 24). This aligns with Erwin Panofsky’s concept of ‘disguised symbolism,’ in which visual elements carry implicit messages about the sitter’s identity. (Panofsky 1953, cited in West 2004, 24) For women mathematicians and intellectuals, whose contributions have often been marginalized, portraiture becomes a means of negotiating gender, authority, and expertise. West also underscores the role of ‘the gaze’ (2004, 41) in reinforcing or challenging social hierarchies. Historically, women intellectuals contended with expectations of beauty and passivity, but their portraits worked to assert their professional presence, shifting the focus from aesthetics to intellectual labour. In this sense, West highlights the performative nature of portraiture: it does not simply reflect identity but actively constructs and stages it.

Vanacker and Van Deinsen (2022, 12) extend this discussion to the early modern period, emphasizing how portraiture became central to the scholarly persona. From the sixteenth century onward, humanists used self-portraits in letters and displayed them in libraries and study rooms to reinforce their intellectual presence. Engraved portraits circulated widely, further cementing an author’s authority through their gaze. However, as they note (2022, 12), this visual tradition posed distinct challenges for learned women. If speaking and writing already pushed the boundaries of female modesty, asserting intellectual authority through portraiture was even more radical. Women scholars had to navigate a visual culture that was not designed to accommodate them, finding ways to assert their presence within a male-dominated intellectual landscape.

Taken together, West’s theoretical framework and Vanacker and Van Deinsen’s historical analysis reveal the evolving role of portraiture as both a medium of intellectual assertion and a site of gendered negotiation. While West highlights how portraiture encodes power and stages identity, Vanacker and Van Deinsen demonstrate how these dynamics played out in the early modern scholarly world. Both perspectives underscore the importance of portraiture in shaping women’s intellectual visibility and legitimacy across time.

In this context, portraits of intellectual women like Émilie du Châtelet played a crucial role in challenging conventional representations of scholars. More than mere depictions, they actively reshaped the visual language of intellectual authority, asserting her place within an evolving cultural landscape. As I will further discuss in the next section, Du Châtelet’s commissioned portraits not only documented her engagement with the intellectual world but also strategically contested the stereotypical male image



of the scholar. By situating her within the broader context of early modern women scholars, we can better understand how she navigated and redefined gendered expectations of intellectual authority.

This perspective also has broader implications. Examining how women like Du Châtelet modelled new images of female intellectuals, how their portraits captured shifting ideas of female authority, and how these representations disrupted male-dominated scholarly traditions provides valuable insight into the evolving history of gender and intellectual representation. Such a historical lens enriches contemporary diversity debates, offering a long-term comparative view of how visual culture, gender, and intellectual authority intersect in shaping scholarly identity.

To deepen this analysis, I draw on Charles Peirce's (1991) semiotics, which illuminates the complexity of intellectual portraiture by emphasizing the dynamic processes through which meaning is constructed. Peirce's triadic model—comprising the *representamen* (the sign itself), the *object* (what it represents), and the *interpretant* (how it is understood)—underscores that meaning is not fixed but emerges through interpretation. In portraiture, the image of the sitter operates within a continuous cycle of signs, reframing and reinterpreting identity over time.

Peirce's classification of signs into *icons*, *indices*, and *symbols* further clarifies the layered meanings embedded in portraiture. As West (2004, 41) notes, a portrait embodies all three: it resembles the sitter (*icon*), points to the act of sitting and being represented (*index*), and employs culturally coded gestures, expressions, and props (*symbol*). The *indexical* qualities of portraiture are particularly significant in Du Châtelet's case, as they affirm her intellectual authority—not just through resemblance but through contextual cues that establish her scholarly status.

Analysing portraits of women mathematicians through Peirce's semiotics reveals their role in an ongoing process of signification—an infinite cycle of interpretation that continuously shapes and reshapes the sitter's intellectual identity. Rather than closing off meaning, these portraits invite continuous negotiation and reinterpretation, offering a crucial lens into how women like Du Châtelet used visual representation to assert authority and challenge gendered conventions in scholarly culture.

Constructing the Image of a *Femme Savante*

Émilie du Châtelet (1706–1749) occupies a singular position in the history of science and philosophy, not merely as a mathematician and scientist, but as a thinker who actively crafted her intellectual persona in a milieu that often sought to confine women to the margins of scholarly life. Studied through the lens of automathography (Halmos 1985), her engagement with mathematics, natural philosophy, and epistemology was not only a matter of scholarly pursuit but also an act of self-fashioning, a deliberate articulation of her place within the *Republic of Letters*. As defined by Dena Goodman (1994) the Republic of Letters was an intellectual and cultural network that transcended national and social boundaries, where Enlightenment thinkers—predominantly male philosophes—engaged in the exchange of ideas through correspondence, salons, and print culture. Goodman highlights its role as a self-regulating intellectual community grounded in reason, debate, and sociability, shaping the development of modern public discourse. For Du Châtelet, participation in this network required more than intellectual competence; it demanded a deliberate negotiation of gendered constraints, a process she undertook both in her writings and in the carefully cultivated representations of her scholarly identity.



From an early age, Du Châtelet pursued education with an intensity that challenged the gendered constraints of her time. Her father, recognizing her abilities, provided tutors in advanced subjects, but it was her own strategic engagement with learning that shaped her trajectory. She cultivated an identity that straddled aristocratic salon culture and the rigorous mathematical training necessary for engaging with Newtonian and Leibnizian physics. Her alliances—with figures such as Voltaire, Maupertuis, and later Clairaut—were not simply collaborative but also instrumental in establishing her authority as a scientific thinker. (see Zinsser 2006) Du Châtelet’s writings reveal a keen awareness of the performative dimensions of scholarly identity. Amongst her important contributions to philosophy, science and mathematics (see Hagengruber 2022) she reflected on the conditions necessary for women’s intellectual fulfilment, arguing for the pursuit of knowledge as a source of personal agency rather than mere social adornment. (Du Châtelet 2009) Her letters, prefaces, and even the strategic ways she navigated the French Académie des Sciences demonstrate a self-conscious construction of a woman mathematician-philosopher within a culture that largely refused to acknowledge such a figure.

Du Châtelet’s automathography unfolds across multiple, heterogeneous registers: her translations, commentaries, and scientific and philosophical treatises, but also the portraits she commissioned throughout her life as visual assertions of her scholarly persona. In what follows, I position visual automathography not as a discrete method alongside textual analysis, nor merely as a descriptive category, but as an interpretive lens within auto/biographical methodology—one that brings into focus the specifically visual and material forms through which a life in science and mathematics is narrated, staged, and temporally configured. Through this lens, portraiture is approached not as ancillary illustration but as constitutive of the auto/biographical field itself. Du Châtelet’s self-fashioned representations thus do more than inscribe her into the history of science: they participate in a sustained rearticulation of what it meant to inhabit that history as a woman. No longer cast as muse or intermediary, she figures herself, across media, as theorist, mathematician, and philosopher in her own right. Yet while her intellectual contributions have been increasingly recognised, the visual dimension of this self-fashioning has remained largely untheorized. Although individual portraits have been examined,³ they have not been read collectively as composing what I conceptualize here as a visual automathography.

This reconceptualization requires a more explicit engagement with narrative analysis, particularly with questions of narrative temporality. Among the functions of portraiture identified by West, the role of portraiture as biography is especially pertinent (2004, 50). As West notes, portraiture and biography have long been intertwined as representational forms, both oriented toward rendering a life and its intelligibility. Drawing on Jonathan Richardson, the eighteenth-century portraitist and theorist, West underscores how a portrait can function as a kind of ‘General History of the Life of the Person it represents’ (Richardson 1719, 45–46, cited in West 2004, 50). In this sense, portraits operate as condensed, symbolic narratives: they encode status, intellectual pursuits, and character through visual elements—books, instruments, gestures, inscriptions—which function as signifiers extending beyond the image itself. Such elements do not simply describe; they narrate, albeit in a non-linear and non-discursive form.

At the same time, as West emphasizes, portraiture and biography remain structurally distinct (2004, 50). A biography unfolds through narrative sequencing: it organises events, developments, and transformations across time, producing a temporal arc that renders a life intelligible retrospectively. A portrait, by contrast, is marked by what West terms its ‘occasionality’ (50): it fixes its subject within a



singular moment, relying on visual density rather than temporal extension to suggest meaning. From the perspective of narrative temporality, this distinction is crucial. Portraiture does not narrate through succession but through compression—through the layering of temporal indices within a single frame. Even when symbolic elements gesture toward duration or intellectual trajectory, the portrait cannot, in isolation, articulate processes such as development, hesitation, or transformation in the way that textual narrative can.

It is precisely this tension—between the momentary and the durational, between visual compression and narrative unfolding—that visual automathography, as an interpretive lens, seeks to address. Rather than treating each portrait as a self-contained image, this approach reads them serially, as a sequence whose meaning emerges through their relation across time. The problem of ‘occasionality’ is thus reconfigured: what appears as temporal limitation at the level of the individual portrait becomes, at the level of the series, a mode of narrative construction. The portraits Du Châtelet commissioned during her years of immersion in mathematics, science, and philosophy can therefore be understood as forming a non-linear visual narrative, in which shifts in pose, setting, iconography, and inscription register transformations in her intellectual self-positioning.

Through this sustained, relational reading, I argue that these portraits collectively constitute a visual automathography: not a static self-image, but an evolving, self-authored account of a life in knowledge. As an interpretive lens within auto/biographical methodology, visual automathography foregrounds how narrative temporality can be distributed across images rather than confined to textual form. The following sections examine how these portraits, taken together, produce a temporally inflected visual record of Du Châtelet’s scholarly trajectory, asserting her place not only within the Republic of Letters but within the broader, and still unevenly mapped, histories of mathematics, science and philosophy.

Youth, Elegance, Erudition and the Geometry of Thought

One of the earliest portraits of Émilie Du Châtelet is attributed to either Bernard-François Lépicié (1698–1755) or his son, Nicolas-Bernard Lépicié (1735–1844). While the attribution remains a subject of ongoing debate, the portrait stands as a significant visual representation of her.⁴ As her biographer Judith Zinsser has observed (2006, 61), this portrait was commissioned shortly after Du Châtelet’s decision to embark on the study of mathematics around 1733. Serving as a marker of a new intellectual chapter in her life, it is remarkable not only for its depiction of her aristocratic refinement but also for its fusion of intellectual rigour and the passion she had recently discovered for mathematics. The contrast between the soft, luxurious textures of her gown and the sharp intensity of her gaze eloquently captures the dual nature of her legacy—one that blends elegance with erudition, and beauty with intellectual prowess. The portrait thus stands as a visual testament to both her social standing and her profound contributions to the world of science, mathematics and philosophy, reflecting the sitter’s complex identity. Read through the interpretive lens of visual automathography, this image can be understood not simply as representation but as a constitutive moment within an unfolding auto/biographical narrative of intellectual becoming.

The painting creates a rich interplay of signs that can be examined through Peirce’s (1991) categories of icon, index, and symbol. The sitter, shown in a graceful white silk gown with panniers and a low-cut bodice adorned with sunflower-shaped ribbons, functions as an icon: she directly resembles the object



of representation—herself—while simultaneously symbolizing her social status and identity. Her unpowdered hair and the soft roundness of her face evoke youth, enhancing the sense of her vitality. The formal elegance of her attire, with the expansive panniers creating a voluminous silhouette of brocade, adds to her aristocratic portrayal. Ribbons, arranged with meticulous precision on the stiff bodice, reveal her décolletage, emphasizing her youth and femininity, while delicate lace edges the top of the bodice and falls from the long satin sleeves. A slender, dark fur boa, beginning at her waist and curving up her back and across her shoulders, traces the V-line of the bodice. As a symbolic marker of refinement and intellectual authority, this flowing fur boa emphasizes her elevated position within both the social and intellectual spheres.

Du Châtelet gazes to the right, beyond the painter, as if reacting to someone entering her view. Her head, slightly tilted to one side, and her serious expression, complemented by eyes that sparkle with liveliness and energy, function as a nuanced sign of intellectual depth. The tension between her serious posture and the liveliness of her gaze suggests a dynamic interplay between intellect and personality, where the indexical sign of her expression subtly conveys not just her intelligence, but also a certain wit and vibrancy that transcends the purely cerebral. Such visual cues do not merely describe character but participate in a condensed form of narrative signification, where temporality is implied rather than sequentially unfolded.

Her hands, clad in long mittens extending to her sleeves, serve as an index, drawing attention to the act of engaging with knowledge and intellectual work. In one hand, she holds a closed book, a symbol of scholarly pursuits and the boundaries of established knowledge. The other hand grasps a sheet of paper with mathematical diagrams, an indexical sign pointing directly to her active involvement in mathematical thought and practice. The mathematical diagrams, as symbols, evoke a culturally recognized system of knowledge and intellectual rigour that transcends the visual depiction, connecting the sitter to a broader academic tradition.

This early portrait of Émilie du Châtelet marks more than just a moment in time; it serves as the opening gesture in her broader visual automathography. Rather than a static depiction, the portrait participates in an ongoing process of self-construction, framing Du Châtelet's engagement with knowledge as both a personal and public endeavour. It signals the beginning of her mathematical pursuits, not merely as a biographical detail but as an integral part of her evolving intellectual identity. In this sense, the portrait can be read as inaugurating a temporally inflected sequence, where meaning accrues across subsequent images rather than residing fully within a single frame.

The interplay of aristocratic refinement and intellectual gravitas captured in this portrait anticipates later representations of Du Châtelet, which increasingly foreground her role as a philosopher, scientist, and mathematician. The careful negotiation between femininity and erudition—visible in the contrast between the softness of her attire and the precision of her gaze—becomes a recurring theme in her self-representation. Across her life course, successive portraits continue this negotiation, offering new layers of meaning and repositioning her within the intellectual landscape. It is through this seriality that a form of narrative temporality emerges, one that is non-linear and relational rather than strictly chronological.

Through Peirce's semiotic framework, the portrait's icon, index, and symbol work together to construct an identity in flux—one that invites the viewer to engage with Du Châtelet not as a static historical figure but as an active thinker shaping her own intellectual legacy. The closed book and the



mathematical diagrams are not just attributes; they initiate a visual dialogue with the viewer, reinforcing her claim to scholarly authority. Each element, from the gaze to the material textures, functions as a sign that extends beyond the portrait itself, linking her image to her writings, correspondence, and contributions to Enlightenment thought.

As an early piece in a series of representations, this portrait highlights the limitations of singular, fixed depictions of intellectual life. Read in relation to those that follow, however, it opens onto a more dynamic and layered understanding of Du Châtelet's self-fashioning. What comes into view is not a stable image but an evolving configuration, one that registers both shifts in her own self-representation and the broader cultural forces shaping her intellectual presence. Considered in this way, these images participate in the narrative construction of a life, where temporality is not confined to a single moment but unfolds across visual forms. The portrait thus emerges not merely as an artifact of its time, but as an active element within an ongoing process through which Du Châtelet's intellectual legacy is continuously interpreted, reimagined, and inscribed into the history of science, mathematics and philosophy.

Beauty, Knowledge, and the *Femme Savante*

Jean-Marc Nattier's 1743 portrait of Émilie Du Châtelet follows the established tradition of depicting the *femme savante* as both beautiful and learned.⁵ The painting, whose current location remains unknown, is reproduced in Elise Goodman's *The Portraits of Madame de Pompadour: Celebrating the Femme Savante* (2000, 102). Goodman observes that Nattier's signature style—characterized by an idealized elegance—shapes Du Châtelet into a luminous, almost poetic figure. Her flawless oval face and smooth décolletage conform to his aesthetic conventions, presenting her as a refined and timeless icon of intellect and grace. (2000, 99) Seen in relation to her broader practices of self-representation, the portrait exceeds mere aesthetic idealisation, participating in a wider articulation of intellectual identity in visual form.

One of the most significant elements in this portrait is the book Du Châtelet prominently displays: her own *Institutions de Physique*, first published anonymously in 1740 and revised in 1742. Unlike the conventional depiction of female intellectuals with untitled books—generalized symbols of learning—Nattier's choice to include this specific work underscores her role as an author and philosopher. It also aligns with a fascinating moment in Du Châtelet's self-representation: in 1742, she commissioned an austere, unsentimental engraving for the frontispiece of the revised edition of her *Institutions*, which was later reproduced in its German translation in 1743—the same year as Nattier's portrait. The contrast is striking: where Nattier's painting envelops her in soft textures and ethereal beauty, the *Institutions* frontispiece strips away conventional femininity, presenting her in an authoritative and almost androgynous manner.⁶ Read together, these images do not simply coexist but form a visual constellation in which different modalities of self-representation articulate distinct yet interconnected moments within an evolving intellectual narrative.

As an *icon*, the engraving maintains a direct resemblance to Du Châtelet, capturing her distinctive features with a clarity that reinforces her historical presence. Unlike the softened, almost dreamlike quality of Nattier's work, this image prioritizes precision, aligning her with the conventions of Enlightenment portraiture used for male scholars and philosophers. Du Châtelet's engagement with knowledge is actively foregrounded. The engraving also contains indexical elements that point directly



to Du Châtelet's scholarly pursuits. She is depicted in a composed, upright posture, exuding confidence and scholarly rigour. Unlike the Nattier portrait, which integrates intellect into an aristocratic aesthetic, this engraving shifts the focus: her hand gestures toward an open book, signalling engagement with complex ideas, while her gaze, directed outward but not confrontational, suggests deep contemplation. These visual elements operate not only descriptively but narratively, condensing within a single frame a sense of intellectual labour and positioning that, in textual biography, would unfold over time. On a symbolic level, the portrait draws upon established visual codes that signify erudition and philosophical authority. The presence of books and possibly scientific or mathematical instruments aligns her with Enlightenment ideals of reason and learning. Unlike allegorical depictions of female knowledge that often frame women as muses or passive conduits of wisdom (see Scheriff 2007), this engraving presents Du Châtelet as an active participant in intellectual discourse.

The overall aesthetic of the engraving, reminiscent of portraits of male philosophers and scientists from the period, reinforces her symbolic alignment with learned traditions. At the same time, the careful attention to her femininity—through her composed expression and elegant but understated dress—ensures that she is not abstracted from her social reality but rather depicted as a woman whose intellectual pursuits coexist with her aristocratic identity.

Taken together, these two images encapsulate the complexities of Du Châtelet's visual legacy. Nattier's portrait, while affirming her authorship, ultimately subordinates her intellectual identity to an aesthetic of idealized femininity. The frontispiece engraving, by contrast, asserts her scholarly authority, aligning her with male philosophers of her time. The coexistence of these representations reflects the broader tensions surrounding women's intellectual visibility in the 18th century: the need to navigate societal expectations of beauty and grace while striving for recognition in the male-dominated world of science and philosophy. Both portraits, in their distinct ways, contribute to shaping Du Châtelet's posthumous image—one as a celebrated *femme savante*, the other as a serious philosopher. Their significance lies not only in their individual meanings but in their relationality: it is through their juxtaposition that a non-linear narrative temporality emerges, distributed across images rather than contained within a single representation. The contrast between them reveals not only the strategies used to frame her intellect but also the broader visual politics of Enlightenment-era gender representation. (see Sheriff 2011)

Representation, Patronage, and Circulation

Marianne Loir's portrait of Émilie Du Châtelet, painted around 1745, has a complex history of attribution and circulation. Originally part of the royal collections, it was acquired by the Municipality of Bordeaux in 1803 and is now housed at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Bordeaux.⁷ Several engraved copies exist, including one by Pierre Gabriel Langlois the Elder (1786), now in the British Museum.⁸ The painting's origins remain debated, with some scholars proposing it is based on a lost Nattier painting, while others argue for Loir's originality (Hyde 2021, 75). The Institut Voltaire possesses a similar version, which they attribute 'very probably' to Nattier.⁹ However, stylistic comparisons between the known Nattier portrait and Loir's painting raise questions about whether Loir's work truly follows Nattier's approach. Despite the scarcity of signed works by Loir, Melissa Hyde notes that Loir's authorship is confirmed by eighteenth-century engravings bearing her name (2021, 91n.61). She further asserts that the portrait is 'the work of a fully mature, even brilliant, artist at the height of her abilities' (79). Considered through the lens of visual automathography, the portrait's complex history of



attribution and circulation becomes integral to its meaning, situating it within a broader auto/biographical field where images acquire narrative significance through their movement, reproduction, and reception over time.

Loir's portrait presents Du Châtelet as both an intellectual and an aristocratic woman, skilfully balancing the visual language of male scholars with distinctly feminine markers. Unlike Nattier's idealized 1743 portrait, Loir's depiction is more naturalistic, emphasizing her scholarly persona without erasing her aristocratic identity. She sits in an opulent chair, surrounded by books, papers, and an orrery—objects traditionally associated with learned men—while a string of crystal beads lies casually on the table, suggesting its lesser significance. Du Châtelet meets the viewer's gaze directly, her slight smile conveying confidence and intelligence. Her cheeks are heavily rouged, a fashionable cosmetic choice of the time. She wears a striking Prussian blue gown—a colour only recently made widely available as a pigment in the eighteenth century. The low-cut bodice, adorned with lace and trimmed in fur, underscores her aristocratic status, while its loose, flowing silhouette, described by Zinsser (2006, 206) as a *robe à l'anglaise*, symbolizes refinement and modernity. A small diamond brooch, the only jewellery ever depicted in her portraits, is fastened to the ribbon at her throat. While asserting Du Châtelet's intellectual authority, Loir's painting does not diminish her femininity. Unlike any of her other known portraits, this image fully integrates both her scholarly ambitions and her aristocratic identity. This integration can be read as a moment of narrative consolidation, where previously differentiated visual codes of femininity and intellect are brought into a more unified configuration.

The portrait negotiates competing signifiers of intellect and gender, with its symbols operating on multiple levels. The compass in her right hand, a symbol of mathematical precision, is juxtaposed with the carnation in her left, an emblem of love and passion. This duality—reason and emotion—suggests a deliberate construction of identity, where Du Châtelet asserts her intellectual authority while maintaining the conventions of aristocratic portraiture. As Zinsser observes, the compass's horizontal positioning, rather than pointing upward (abstraction) or downward (earthly measurement), implies a balance between theoretical and applied mathematics (2006, 206). The prominence of the flower over the subtly placed compass subtly privileges her femininity within this dual framework. By blending scholarly iconography with aristocratic femininity, Loir's portrait resists easy categorization. It embodies a complex interplay between reason and passion, intellectual ambition and social decorum, offering a striking visualization of Du Châtelet's self-fashioning as both a *femme savante* and a woman of her time. Such visual negotiations operate not only symbolically but narratively, condensing within the image tensions that, in textual form, would unfold across extended temporal sequences.

As Hyde notes, Du Châtelet's decision to commission Loir was likely shaped by practical, financial, ideological, and strategic factors (2021, 79). By the mid-1740s Nattier was one of France's most sought-after portraitists, renowned for his highly stylized depictions of aristocratic women. We have seen above, Du Châtelet had previously sat for Nattier in 1743, calling him 'the best for portraiture' in a letter to Johann II Bernoulli, dated 3 June, 1743 (Kølving and Brown 2018, 123). However, his high demand made him both expensive and less accessible. Loir, by contrast, was still establishing her reputation and would have been more available and affordable—important considerations for Du Châtelet, who often faced financial strain (see Hyde 2021, 95n.81).

Beyond convenience, Du Châtelet's choice of Loir may have reflected a broader ideological commitment to supporting women in the arts and sciences. In her writings, she championed women's



intellectual and professional development, asking in the Translator's Preface of Bernard Mandeville's *The Fables of the Bees* (1724): 'Let us reflect briefly on why for so many centuries, not one good tragedy, one good poem, one esteemed history, one beautiful painting, one good book of physics, has come from the hands of women' (Du Châtelet 2009, 48). This question may have influenced her decision to sit for Loir, a talented but relatively under-recognized female artist, rather than a more established male painter. At the time of the commission, Loir had completed only a few aristocratic portraits, and Du Châtelet's patronage likely helped elevate her career. The commission can be seen as an act of patronage, fostering a transgenerational network of women working in male-dominated fields—an ambition that resonated with Du Châtelet's own struggles for recognition in intellectual circles. As Hyde observes, Loir, like Du Châtelet, navigated a male-dominated field and often pursued her ambitions outside institutional structures, 'in the domain of the social and in "the Republic of Painting," rather than that of official art institutions or the open art market' (2021, 60). The portrait thus serves as both a personal statement and a broader engagement with gendered networks of artistic and intellectual labour in the eighteenth century. Its circulation and reproduction further extend this network, allowing the image to participate in an ongoing narrative of reception and reinterpretation beyond its initial moment of production.

Loir's artistic approach may also have appealed to Du Châtelet on an aesthetic and personal level. Unlike Nattier, whose highly polished, decorative portraits idealized his sitters, Loir employed a more naturalistic style. While Loir flattered Du Châtelet—making her appear slightly younger—she did not embellish her in the same way Nattier had. Instead, Loir's portrait presents Du Châtelet as both an intellectual and a fashionable woman, blending the iconography of male scholars with feminine refinement. This balance likely resonated with Du Châtelet's own sense of self-representation, allowing her to project both intellectual authority and adherence to aristocratic norms. As noted, Loir's portrait aligns Du Châtelet with the visual conventions of learned men rather than the more allegorical representations of women common at the time.

Du Châtelet's decision to commission Loir was thus both pragmatic and deeply symbolic. It was likely influenced by Loir's availability and affordability but also by a shared commitment to women's professional advancement. The portrait itself reflects Du Châtelet's nuanced self-fashioning—asserting her status as a scholar while maintaining the social codes of femininity. The widespread reproduction of this portrait in engravings further suggests that Du Châtelet actively sought to circulate this particular representation of herself, reinforcing the idea that Loir had succeeded in capturing an image she wished to promote. Through such acts of circulation, the portrait acquires an extended temporal life, contributing to a distributed narrative that exceeds the confines of a single visual moment.

Loir's portrait does not merely depict its sitter; it actively participates in her ongoing self-fashioning, marking a significant moment in her broader *visual automathography*. In contrast to earlier portraits that framed Du Châtelet within aristocratic conventions or presented her as an aspiring intellectual, Loir's rendering achieves a synthesis—integrating her scholarly ambitions with her social identity. This portrait, therefore, does not stand in isolation but must be understood within a continuum of representations that, taken together, construct and narrate her evolving intellectual presence. Through visual automathography, this continuum can be approached as a form of narrative organisation in which temporality is not linear, but takes shape through accumulation, circulation, and relations across images. In this sense, Loir's portrait, like Du Châtelet's texts, operates within an extended, evolving framework of self-representation. It resists the limitations of a singular, momentary image by contributing to a



broader *automathography*—one that unfolds across multiple visual and textual media, inscribing Du Châtelet’s intellectual presence into the cultural and historical record.

Embodying Thought and Privilege: Du Châtelet in Pastel

The much-reproduced pastel portrait of Émilie du Châtelet, by an unknown artist but long attributed to Maurice Quentin de La Tour, is now housed in the private collection of the Marquis de Breteuil at the Château de Breteuil.¹⁰ Likely painted in her last spring in Paris around 1749, it encapsulates the multiple dimensions of her life as a noblewoman, a scholar, and a scientist. She appears in elaborate dress, her coiffure and carefully coordinated ruffles reflecting the refined aesthetics of the elite circles in which she moved. Yet, counter to conventional portrayals of noblewomen, her contemplative pose—head resting on her hand—evokes allegorical representations of Study, a posture more commonly associated with male philosophers. She holds a compass again, while an open manuscript displays geometrical diagrams, referencing her rigorous engagement with physics and her ambitious translation and commentary on Newton’s *Principia*, a project she pursued with remarkable dedication, till her very last days. Her slight smile and direct gaze suggest confidence and determination, qualities that defined both her intellectual pursuits and her unorthodox choices in life. Viewed through the interpretive lens of visual automathography, this portrait can be read as a late and intensified moment in the auto/biographical articulation of her intellectual life, where visual representation condenses a trajectory approaching its culmination.

As a Peircian *icon* the painting visually resembles its subject, preserving her likeness while embedding cultural meaning. Its visible elements such as attire, pose, and objects complicate the established codes of elite portraiture by incorporating indexical signs of intellectual labour. Her contemplative pose, more commonly associated with male philosophers, further disrupts conventional representations of noblewomen. The interplay of these elements generates an interpretant—a reading shaped by cultural codes and historical context. Patricia Fara (2002, 40) notes that the painting captures Du Châtelet’s contradictions: a talented philosopher and mathematician who published *Institutions de Physique* at a time when such pursuits were largely reserved for men, yet also living the life of a wealthy aristocrat immersed in Parisian social pleasures. Mary Sheriff (2011, 176) suggests that such portraits enact a tension between societal constraints and personal ambition, a reading reinforced by the subtle invocation of allegory. Du Châtelet’s portrait visually aligns her with the muse of astronomy, Sheriff argues, emulating the seventeenth century astronomer Maria Cunitz, who placed her name alongside Urania’s on the title page of *Urania Propitia*. (176) The soft light enveloping her face and hands enhances this connection, elevating her beyond mere representation into an intellectual ideal. These visual strategies operate as a form of narrative condensation, where intellectual labour, social positioning, and allegorical alignment are brought together within a single, temporally dense image.

The portrait thus enacts a semiotic negotiation between societal constraints and personal ambition. It literalizes allegory by presenting a real woman as the embodiment of scientific inquiry, rather than relegating women to abstract symbols of knowledge. Kathleen Nicholson has argued that allegorical portraits allowed women to challenge their assigned social roles, infusing cultural depth beyond conventional ideals of beauty. (1997, 56) In this case, Du Châtelet asserts her intellectual authority within a visual language that both adheres to and subverts eighteenth-century expectations of gender and class. Read within the broader sequence of her portraits, this image does not stand alone but



contributes to a cumulative narrative, where earlier tensions between femininity and intellect are here reconfigured into a more assured visual synthesis.

The portrait also illustrates the influence of elite women in shaping their own representations, as noted earlier. As a patron of the arts, Du Châtelet likely played an active role in determining her depiction, using portraiture to assert her intellectual and social standing. Her choice of the pastelist La Tour for this portrait reinforces this, as he was a celebrated artist known for painting French royalty and aristocracy. La Tour's role as a teacher who mentored women artists further aligns with Du Châtelet's intellectual and artistic engagement (Harris and Nochlin 1976, 39). Additionally, Du Châtelet's potential connection to La Tour through Voltaire, who commissioned a portrait from the artist in 1735, underscores her involvement with the intellectual and artistic circles of her time. Such networks of patronage and artistic exchange further embed the portrait within an extended temporal field, where meaning is shaped not only at the moment of production but through ongoing relations and affiliations.

Finally, the portrait's continued misattributions and reproductions underscore the instability of meaning within the semiotic process. As Peirce (1991) contends, interpretation is an evolving process, shaped by historical context and reception. Whether displayed in an aristocratic château or circulating online with incorrect attributions,¹¹ the portrait remains a site of ongoing reinterpretation, reflecting both Du Châtelet's legacy and the shifting frameworks through which we understand women in science and art. Such afterlives are not incidental but constitutive: they extend the narrative temporality of the image beyond its original moment, allowing it to participate in a continually unfolding account of Du Châtelet's intellectual presence.

Beyond the Momentary Image: *Automathography* as a Living Portrait

The relationship between biography and portraiture is particularly complex in the case of Émilie du Châtelet, whose visual representation was a deliberate act of intellectual self-fashioning. While traditional portraits distil identity into a single image, they risk imposing fixity on figures whose intellectual trajectories were dynamic and evolving. Richardson's assertion that a portrait functions as a 'General History' of its subject (in West 2004, 50) is especially relevant here: Du Châtelet's best-known portraits do not merely capture her likeness but actively construct her dual positioning within aristocratic and intellectual spheres. Books, mathematical instruments, and writing materials, much like the *imprese* of sixteenth-century portraiture (West 2004, 51), reinforce her scholarly identity.

Yet a single portrait inevitably reduces intellectual life to a momentary image, offering a fixed identity that fails to register processes of development, revision, and transformation. Studying a series of portraits across Du Châtelet's life course offers an alternative approach to visualising temporality, countering the static nature of single-image representation. It is here that visual automathography has been more precisely situated: not as a self-standing method, but as an interpretive lens within auto/biographical methodologies, one that enables a reading of visual materials as participating in the narrative construction of a life. Through this lens, portraiture is no longer opposed to biography as static image to unfolding narrative; rather, it becomes a site where narrative temporality is differently organised—compressed, displaced, and distributed across a sequence of images.

By examining multiple visual representations in relation to her evolving body of work, we can trace how Du Châtelet actively shaped and reshaped her intellectual persona over time. Each portrait



contributes to a broader visual automathography, forming a composite self-narrative in which intellectual identity is not merely declared but continuously negotiated. From the perspective of narrative analysis, this composite does not unfold linearly but relationally: meaning emerges through shifts, repetitions, and reconfigurations across images. In this sense, visual automathography foregrounds a mode of non-linear narrative temporality, in which the ‘occasionality’ of individual portraits is reworked into a serial form of narration. Whereas a single painted portrait fixes identity in a moment, the series introduces duration, allowing us to apprehend change, continuity, and strategic repositioning. As the preceding analyses have shown, this temporality is not only sequential but also relational and accumulative, emerging through the interplay between images rather than residing in any single representation.

Even when considered together, however, portraits alone cannot fully encapsulate the breadth of Du Châtelet’s intellectual life or the ongoing process of its development. This is where the interplay between her visual self-representations and her scientific and philosophical writings becomes crucial. While her portraits signal her status as a philosopher and mathematician, her writings enact that identity—articulating, defending, and expanding her place within the scientific world. Her engagement with Newtonian and Leibnizian thought, her translation and commentary on the *Principia*, and her philosophical treatises are not merely records of achievement; they are sustained interventions in a male-dominated intellectual sphere. In this sense, her works may be understood as textual counterparts to visual self-representation, extending the narrative work performed in paint into the domain of argument, exposition, and conceptual innovation. Read together, these visual and textual materials further extend narrative temporality across media, distributing the work of self-narration beyond the confines of either image or text alone.

Taken together, Du Châtelet’s writings and visual representations can thus be read as portraits-in-motion, not simply in a metaphorical sense but as a methodological proposition. Through the interpretive lens of visual automathography, the boundaries between image and text, moment and duration, are reconfigured: narrative temporality is not confined to written biography but emerges across media, through their entanglements. This expanded auto/biographical field reveals how Du Châtelet extended the constraints of both visual and textual forms, crafting a self-narrative that is at once strategic and evolving. Moreover, as the circulation, reproduction, and ongoing reinterpretation of her portraits demonstrate, this narrative remains open-ended, continuing to unfold beyond its eighteenth-century contexts through shifting regimes of reception. Through paint and print alike, she produced not a fixed image of intellectual identity but a temporally inflected, continuously reworked account of her place within the Republic of Letters—one that both registers and actively shapes her enduring presence in the histories of science and philosophy.

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Notes

1. See Hamel 1910, Edwards 1970, Krauss 2006, Martini 2017.
2. See West (2004, 227-234), for an excellent annotated biography of this field.
3. See Fara 2002; Zinsser 2006, Sheriff 2007, 2011; Hyde 2021.
4. See the Lepicier portrait at: <https://rodama1789.blogspot.com/2015/02/madame-du-chatelet-portraits-of-femme.html> [Accessed 19 March 2025]
5. See the Nattier portrait at: <https://rodama1789.blogspot.com/2015/02/madame-du-chatelet-portraits-of-femme.html> [Accessed 19 March 2025]
6. See the *Institutions* frontispiece at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek digital copy <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/view/bsb10130895?page=8%2C9> [Accessed 6 April 2026]
7. See the Loir portrait at <https://musba-bordeaux.opacweb.fr/fr/notice/bx-e-19-portrait-de-gabrielle-emilie-le-tonnelier-de-breteuil-marquise-du-chatelet-8207fec1-8027-40ff-a3c8-82b10123ccbb> [Accessed 20 March 2025]
8. See it at https://projectvox.org/?attachment_id=3463 [Accessed 20 March 2025]
9. See the article ‘Clin d’oeil [Jean-Marc NATTIER], « Portrait de Mme du Châtelet » (détail)’ in *La Gazette des Délices*, Autumn 2005, https://collections.geneve.ch/gazette-delices/07/pdf_07/07_la_gazette_des_delices.pdf [Accessed 20 March 2025]
10. See it, at: https://projectvox.org/methods/attachment/du_chatelet_quentin_correct_chateau_breteuil/ [Accessed 21 March 2025]
11. As noted by the Project Vox editors of Du Châtelet’s digital publication, there are two versions of her portrait by Maurice Quentin de la Tour. One version, found on Wikipedia, is associated with the Du Châtelet family’s ancestral home, the Château de Breteuil. However, upon closer inspection, the painting at the Château differs from the one depicted on Wikipedia. See: <https://projectvox.org/methods/> [Accessed 21 March 2025]

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