CONCLUSION

A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON ITINERANT NETWORKS

In both England and the Netherlands there was a strong relationship between the social position of the pedlar and the image that was created in legal, administrative, visual and literary sources. Regular official booksellers, aggravated by these unfair competitors, generated and prolonged a negative image of the pedlar, but at the same time needed pedlars for the distribution of printed wares that could not be sold in their shops. If pedlars were prosecuted for their activities on the streets, their potential economic force would be kept in check. Street vendors were the first to be impeached for illegal activities, albeit these activities were often facilitated and promoted by official booksellers.

The authorities faced a similar dilemma. They wanted to prevent the uncontrolled distribution of printed material, but also preferred street selling to begging and vagabondage, which probably explains the ubiquitous presence of pedlars on the city streets. Especially in the eighteenth century, it was almost impossible to know where the limits of the legal street trade lay. The English Licensing Act of 1697 created, however, a significant administrative and legal difference between the Netherlands and England in the eighteenth century. English pedlars and hawkers formed a distinct legal category within retail trade. Although this position limited their freedom of action, it gave them social status. In the Netherlands pedlars were not incorporated into the institutionalised book trade before the nineteenth century. When this step took place, the negative image of pedlars applied only to those who did not obey the rules, as was the case with French travelling bookseller Felip Andre Canongette.

Publishers as well as pedlars often deliberately created stereotypes of underground and street literature. This phenomenon was particularly evident in the Netherlands from the beginning of the eighteenth century. The strategy was applied to stress the distinctive features of the itinerant trade in a growing and complex market. More than in England, the pedlar in the Netherlands was needed as a commercial ambassador and intermediary in the transmission of popular culture. In England distribution was officially divided between itinerants and regular booksellers and as a result the distinctions between the two means of distribution were clearer for potential buyers and readers than in the Netherlands.
These examples indicate that the image created by official booksellers and political authorities was associated with the legal and social reality. More complex is the relation between depictions of pedlars in word and image, on one hand, and archival records, on the other. The results of this study indicate, however, that visual and literary sources lend support to the conclusion that there were many more types of sellers in the Netherlands than in England, where categories were more standardised.

In general, however, Dutch images were closer to the historical reality than English depictions. The English view of pedlars – often romantic or satirical, for example – differed markedly from the reality on the streets. The broad range of the representations of pedlars in the Netherlands is frequently more revealing of their social status. The visual and textual sources are particularly informative about itinerant trade in the countryside, telling, for instance, of the boxes pedlars carried on their backs. These visual sources also sustained stereotypes, however, like those of Jewish hawkers. Ballad singers at the end of the eighteenth century were often associated with political commentary in England, whereas in the Netherlands their portrayal was usually more neutral.

It is also striking that in England this visual material was aimed much more exclusively at the upper middle classes and higher, while in the Netherlands prints were accessible to everyone. In England this material strengthened class distinctions between upper and lower classes, whereas in the Netherlands these varied images were part of a collective cultural repertoire. Dutch pedlars could afford to buy the penny prints on which they themselves were portrayed.

This difference in the social and cultural position of the itinerant trade in the two countries is also evident from examination of the social-economic position of pedlars. It is important that I repeat that I have deliberately focussed on urban distribution networks, whereas Laurence Fontaine and Margaret Spufford both concentrated on rural networks. I have also sought a broader perspective on these urban activities than Paula McDowell, who concentrated on the market for political material in her book The Women of Grub Street.

The limited quantitative data I could find to establish the scale of the itinerant book trade in the Netherlands and England confirm Jan de Vries' conclusion in The Industrious Revolution that during the eighteenth century a new network of small retail outlets and a growing number of pedlars caused a much larger supply of goods than before.\(^1\) In the last

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