CHAPTER FOUR

THE PUBLISHING TRADE IN THE LAST QUARTER OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

‘The paper. He can’t go a day without it.’ An Analysis of Booksellers’ Advertisements

The first thing that fifteen-year-old Adolph Blussé did in the morning—after rising at six, washing, saying his prayers, dressing and, before the clock struck seven, letting his discerning eye wander across the shelves in the bookshop—was to read the paper. That is, as long as he kept to the schedule drawn up for him on 8 October 1794 by his father, specifying exactly what was to be done every day and even every hour of the day to benefit his education in general and his training in the family firm of A. Blussé & Son in particular:

On Mondays, and successive days, let him observe closely everything connected with the shop and the trade. After the post has arrived let him read the newspapers, particularly the announcements of translations, new books and other offers; he should then draw up a list in which he records the prices, or whatever else may appear necessary in order to acquaint himself with all the old and new editions of works, including their prices. If he is unable to do this at that moment, the day should not speed by without his accomplishing this task.¹

For many years, the meticulous recording of book advertisements in the newspapers had been a priority for booksellers and publishers in the Dutch Republic. Since the first book advertisement appeared in a Dutch newspaper in 1624,² newspapers had developed into the major source of information for potential book buyers and booksellers alike.³ From this observation

¹ GAD, FA Blussé, inv. 29.
³ Around the middle of the eighteenth century a number of newspapers in the Dutch Republic were already being published in print runs of several thousand copies (J.D. Popkin,
post over the literary landscape, one could, after all, derive information about publications that might prove interesting to have in stock, and keep an eye on the activities of competitors as sources of both inspiration and instruction. Monitoring the advertisements was primarily important, though, because of a number of unwritten rules governing copyright.

The Dutch Republic did not enact a comprehensive copyright law until 1803, and before this it was customary for booksellers to claim translation rights by placing announcements in newspapers on a first come, first served basis. A publisher who embarked on a translation without first putting a notice in the papers risked finding himself at the centre of an unedifying wrangle—also fought out in the press. If another bookseller had already advertised his plans to bring out a translation of the same work the recriminations would fly, persisting even into the forewords of the works in question. In 1761 there was what has become a classic case of just such a bitter feud between the Amsterdam publishers Baalde and Van Tongerlo, who each claimed the rights to the translation of the Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph right up until Van Tongerlo’s death; they advanced their claims in newspapers, journals of literary criticism and prefaces. Less well known is the conflict that arose six years before this, in 1755, between Abraham Blussé and his partners Van Hoogstraten and De Koning on the one hand, and the Hague bookseller, Pieter van Cleef, on the other.

A few months after announcing his translation of De opregte hoveling (The Constant Courtier) in July 1751, Van Cleef was astonished to read an

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