John Hackett’s dogged efforts to prosecute Richard Harman were not exhausted until early 1528. Investigations elsewhere place his diligence in a wider and comparative context. The previous year Nürnberg printer Johann Hergott had distributed an agrarian communist brochure critical of the Church and Albertine Saxony’s territorial bureaucracy. Duke Georg’s officers apprehended him. He was sentenced to death and beheaded at Leipzig in May. Also in the spring of 1527 someone previously expelled from Dordrecht for his dangerous opinions was back in town handing out leaflets that he had had printed in Antwerp. He was arrested by Dordrecht’s schout and jailed. In England investigations of Lollards that began in 1527 and extended well into 1528 led eventually to a clandestine network of book distributors stretching from the capital to East Anglia and Bristol. Several traffickers were detained. All were eventually released.1

By the end of 1528 a coterie of exiles abided in Antwerp, poised to follow up Tyndale’s New Testament with a stream of commentary, polemic, and anticlerical propaganda. To that point attempts at suppression had produced mixed results. Subversive English imprints had been bought up at Frankfurt, so few if any copies reached the lay reader. Yet the attempt to extradite a known trafficker from Antwerp failed completely. Diplomats and spies made no breakthroughs in detecting or subverting the agents. Names of suspects were forwarded from England, where tribunals exposed closely connected strands of smuggling and distribution. These investigations precipitated searches in Germany and the Low Countries, which soon would extend to Paris and Calais. In the Netherlands, meanwhile, there was no obvious need for large-scale cross-border smuggling. Although virtually all of the polemical works reprinted there originated in Germany, pirate editions quickly appeared once willing

printers got hold of potentially profitable texts. Records of prosecutions in both England and the Low Countries provide some insight into regional book distribution and the religiosity and doctrinal inclinations of the readership. Measures to suppress and punish also reflect the priorities of temporal and spiritual authorities, and the constraints and distractions they faced. Secular courts in the Low Countries were supposed to implement legislation that was not of their making and increasingly at odds with established juridical norms. Responsibility for spiritual conformity in England still rested with ecclesiastical officials, whose remedies were, by contrast, thoroughly traditional. At hand, then, was a critical test of both the means and will to stifle dissemination.

Contraband, Scholars, and Christian Brethren

Notwithstanding the “crafty delays” encountered by the Merchant Adventurers’ governor when he wanted to search Richard Harman’s house in Antwerp, the letters found there would not alone suggest that Harman was a key figure in the mass distribution of illegal literature. Presumably he could conceal some books occasionally with unaccompanied goods that were handled for him in England. Attempting to hide or disguise entire bales of contraband would require considerably more guile, to say nothing of the logistics of having someone take delivery. It was Hans Ruremund who came to London with several hundred at one time. Perhaps he was personally committed to spreading the printed Gospels, but he also needed to recoup printing costs. The Ruremunds are not known to have dealt in other merchandise. In these circumstances they risked bringing a big consignment of New Testaments to England’s busiest port, perhaps hidden amongst service books to be sold by agents at Paul’s Churchyard. Harman, by contrast, had a stake in the English trade at Antwerp. Acquiring imprints and sending them, a few at a time, to people he knew in the south of England was a sideline, a facet of distribution not driven by prospects of significant financial gain.

But as Wolsey already knew by the summer of 1528, Richard Harman

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