CHAPTER ONE

THE MARKET FOR SCHOLARLY BOOKS AND CONCEPTIONS OF GENRE IN NORTHERN EUROPE, 1570–1630

It is traditional, if not commonplace, to look on the last decades of the sixteenth century and the early decades of the seventeenth as the 'autumn' of the Renaissance, a period marked at best by consolidation, at worst by decline.\(^1\) It is alleged that political crises and confessional strife disrupted intellectual life both directly and indirectly, giving rise to a mentality often described as 'baroque', in which the optimism of the high Renaissance was succeeded by scepticism or even pessimism, serenity by violence and instability, conviction by doubt.\(^2\) The *Respublica Literaria* was threatened by the gradual disintegration of the encyclopaedic aspirations of earlier generations of humanists, by increasing uncertainty as to whether learning and ethics, *studia* and *mores*, were as intimately linked as Erasmus claimed, by the manifest failure of scholars to agree on matters concerning religious truth.\(^3\) The antagonism between established centres of learning, still dominated by scholasticism or neo-Aristotelianism, and radical movements associated with neoplatonism, hermeticism, alchemy, and the observational and experimental sciences is reflected in the crisis faced by academic institutions, both long-established and of more recent foundation: a crisis exacerbated in German-speaking parts of Europe by the catastrophic events of the Thirty Years War.\(^4\) While it has been shown that humanistic enquiry

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continues to yield impressive scholarly results—the names of Joseph Scaliger, Denis Lambin, Marc-Antoine Muret, Justus Lipsius, Isaac Casaubon, Friedrich Sylburg spring to mind—this is often interpreted as yet another demonstration that the owl of Minerva flies at dusk.\(^5\)

Not all of these assertions are uncontroversial;\(^6\) but they find \textit{prima facie} confirmation in the statistics of the trade in scholarly books. Schwetschke’s figures for the Frankfurt Book Fair show a marked and lasting downturn in the number of Latin books advertised after 1630; and the most recent authoritative account of publishing in France talks also of a severe decline at the end of the sixteenth century, caused by the passing away of a generation of humanist printer-publishers and the saturation of available markets.\(^7\) It would seem therefore unwise to deny the existence of a crisis in Northern European humanism at this time; but it is possible to ask whether this particular configuration of historical events and conditions is a sufficient explanation of it. It is traditional to assume that ideas emanating from scholars are freely received and exchanged; but these ideas are communicated in the material form of books, by a process which involves money at all levels: printing, advertising and distribution. I wish to investigate the economic conditions which may have contributed to intellectual decline, and especially the reciprocal relationship which exists between producer and consumer not in terms of author and reader, as is traditional, but publisher and purchaser. I hope to show that the material and legal conditions governing publication promoted certain trends in the marketing and consumption

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