CHAPTER TWO

MIRROR OF LITERACY: READING AND WRITING IN THE DIARY (1624) OF DAVID BECK

Snow showers persisted throughout the day amid menacing skies on that first day of January 1624, but by nightfall it was raining and a thaw had set in. As the flakes whirled past his window, David Beck (1594–1634) sat inside, he wrote in his diary, where he had been ‘treated to cabbage, bacon and sausage by Breckerfelt, whom I told after supping (by the hearth) the story, from the beginning, of how the Netherlands, Spain, Naples and all first came into the hands of the House of Austria, and then the beginning, subsequent course and conclusion (up to Trèves) of the Dutch war.’ Although like his host Herman Breckerfelt, David Beck had not lived in Holland for very long, he was very well-informed about the recent history of the United Provinces. An uneasy peace had been concluded with Spain at Trèves in 1609. That was eight years before Beck moved from Cologne to The Hague.

Thanks to David Beck, we still know today what the two men discussed on that wintry day, since his diary for 1624 has been preserved and is now regarded as one of the oldest surviving early modern ego-documents. Yet it is not to this text but to his handwritten poetry that Beck owes his modest place in history. His diary was long neglected (once its existence became known) because the minuscule size of the handwriting and the document itself makes it extremely hard to read. Thanks to the efforts of Svend Veldhuijzen, an edition of the text was published in 1993. Since then, several historians have used this remarkable diary, some as a source for research on book history.

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1 1 January 1624. Quotations from the diary have been translated into English for this edition.
2 David Beck, Spiegel van mijn leven; een Haags dagboek uit 1624 edited by S.E. Veldhuijzen (Hilversum: Verloren, 1993).
3 See the introduction by Veldhuijzen to the edition of the diary, p. 21.
4 Keblusek, Boeken in de hofstad; idem, ‘Haags stilleven met boeken’, in T. Bijvoet et al. (eds.), Bladeren in andermans hoofd, pp. 81–95.
Beck devoted considerable attention to books in his diary. Certainly for this early period, the history of reading is largely shrouded in obscurity, given the paucity of sources. The book consumers of those times of whom we can build up the clearest picture are humanist scholars. For them, reading meant collecting, classifying, clarifying and comparing passages from classical texts. A salient feature of humanist reading culture was the use of commonplace books, notebooks divided into sections in which quotations were recorded. Since these commonplace books were encouraged at Latin school and later at university, this mode of processing texts was part of the intellectual baggage of the élite, who sought to improve their eloquence by studying the classics. But what about the book culture in the rest of society? Surviving probate inventories and auction catalogues from the seventeenth century are rare, which means that book ownership among the non-scholarly sections of the population is largely concealed from our sight. All that is clear is that books were important for religious obligations. David Beck’s diary tells us about the books that non-scholars read in the seventeenth century and describes their role in everyday life, bringing the seventeenth-century reader into sharper focus. We shall see what was read aside from humanist and religious literature.

Since Beck reports in detail on his daily activities, we can also explore one of the new avenues in research on reading history, looking at the use of books in the wider perspective of communication. Historians acknowledge that the culture of the seventeenth century was primarily oral in character, but point out that oral and literate cultures were not

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5 Anthony Grafton, ‘The Humanist as Reader’, in Cavallo and Chartier (eds.), History of Reading, pp. 179–212; esp. 196–203. See also Grafton’s other studies in the bibliography at the back of this book.

6 On this mode of reading, the roots of which are in the art of rhetoric, see Kintgen, Reading in Tudor England. In the course of the sixteenth century, pupils were not necessarily expected to build up their own commonplace books, but could use printed collections such as Erasmus’s Adagia. On this trend, see Anne Moss, Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). For one such élite reader, the Englishman William Drake, who kept a commonplace book, see Sharpe, Reading Revolutions. This study shows that in practice, reading did a good deal more than foster eloquence. Sharpe shows that books greatly influenced Drake’s view of the world.