CHAPTER SIX

LITERACY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

When Lammetje Jansz. van Sittert wrote a poem in honour of her father’s birthday in 1689, she thanked and praised him, among other things, for an important decision he had made during her upbringing: ‘You did not scrimp and save, but allowed me to learn to read’. As a result, this Haarlem lady, about whom little else is known, possessed a skill that for her mother, for instance, had been unattainable. In Van Sittert’s words, her mother had ‘never felt the sweet comfort, in this woeful life, of reading the word of God’.¹ This story illustrates the spread of literacy in the United Provinces. While reading and writing were still an unknown territory for many in the early seventeenth century, in the early modern period these skills came within reach of more and more people, until by the end of the eighteenth century they were taken for granted by a large section of the population.

What did it mean to be able to read and write in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? How did people use these skills in their everyday lives? In this study, these questions have been answered by allowing four literate individuals to speak for themselves: three men and one woman who left a written record of their everyday lives and included copious notes about their reading. Literacy is examined here in the wider context of communication. Reading and writing are two important ways of processing and conveying information. How did they relate to other modes of communication? In the present book, the transfer of information through the spoken word was chosen as a means of comparison. From this study of four literate lives, a picture emerges of a diversified use of reading, writing and speech in everyday life.

A qualitative approach of this kind obviously has certain limitations. The four diarists in this study cannot be assumed to be representative of literate people in general in the early modern period. But neither

¹ Noord-Hollands Archief, Archief St. Elisabeths of Groote Gasthuis, inv. no. 579: notebook and book of poems of Lammetje Jansz. van Sittert. Her name is not listed in the index of patients of the hospital. There is no documentation of either Lammetje or her father or mother in Haarlem’s church of municipal registers.
are they wholly unique: numerous similarities are identified between the four diarists and other individuals. In any case, these four examples demonstrate the uses that people could make of their literacy in the early modern period and the possibilities afforded them by literate culture.

Speech, writing and reading

Literacy – reading and writing – has been contrasted in this study with speech as a mode of communication. The diaries provide an interesting slant on the writers’ everyday social lives; they show that quantitatively at least, the spoken word was a far more important information channel than written or printed texts. While it is obviously true that different subjects arose in conversations than in books, for instance, the analysis of everyday conversations (insofar as recorded in the diaries) reveals a considerable overlap with handwritten and printed texts. Especially where religious topics and the dissemination of news were concerned, there was a constant interplay between speech, reading and writing. Protestantism was not merely the religion of the printed word. Believers heard sermons, spoke to one another about matters of the faith and their religious feelings. Where information on local and national politics were concerned, the printed word was important, but at least as important was the fact that people related items of news and exchanged opinions on topical events in the street. So in many situations, speech, reading and writing were interrelated. Information from letters was passed on in conversation, for instance, just as letters were used to convey information acquired from a verbal source. Books prompted conversations, which helped to form opinions about the text concerned. So when studying early modern readers, we must bear in mind that their world consisted of more than books alone; information was acquired from many different sources.

But unlike conversations, the written information has been preserved. The four authors made the best possible use of this aspect of writing: they created a ‘paper memory’, a fine and perhaps central metaphor for this daily record. Writing enabled them to preserve the memory of their own lives. The detailed way in which Beck did so was fairly exceptional. Brief notes on one’s social life, such as those made by Teding van Berkhout, were more common. Jan de Boer adopted a different approach, inspired by the genre of the historical chronicle, while Jacoba van Thiel’s diary recalls the key significance of Pietism and related forms