CHAPTER FOUR

THE MAKING OF THE COLLECTION OF VOYAGES

4.1. THE MAGNUM OPUS OF THE OFFICINA

In 1615 Johan Theodore de Bry made a self-portrait (ill. 4).¹ Fifty-two years old, he proudly depicted himself as a successful bookseller. The family motto “Nul sans soucy De Bry” and the burin, the copper engraver’s principal instrument are included. These elements were familiar, as they had also been represented in his father’s self-portrait of 1597. Johan Theodore, moreover, stressed his Reformed beliefs by quoting John 8:51—Verily, verily, I say unto you, if a man keep my saying, he shall never see death—as the answer to the rhetorical question posed in the print after Hendrick Goltzius titled “Who can evade death?”, and by including Psalm 139:21–22, which Calvin had used to underscore the importance of divine hatred as a legitimate theological enterprise.² Most significantly however, Johan Theodore had added two piles of printed and engraved sheets of paper representing the publication he was best known for and most proud of: the collection of voyages, consisting of the India Occidentalis- and India Orientalis-series. The title-pages to the first volumes of both parts of the compilation are clearly recognisable, and are as such a testimony to both the widespread familiarity of the books, and the importance of the publications for the prosperity and self-esteem of Johan Theodore, even halfway through a five-year period when no new volumes of the collection appeared.

This portrait is one of many sources underlining the essential value of the collection of voyages for the De Bry officina. The books were further allocated the most important place on the firm’s poster

¹ App. 1, nr. 158 [004v]. The engraver’s claim that he was fifty-four at the moment he conceived the portrait is almost certainly an error, since 1563 is confirmed as his year of birth in the Strasbourg archives.

² Psalm 139:21–22 (“Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? […] I hate them with a perfect hatred”) is discussed by Calvin in his Commentary on the Book of Psalms, see: M. Lieb, “‘Hate in heav’n’: Milton and the Odium Dei”, English Literary History 53–3 (1986) 525. My thanks go out to Ilja Veldman for drawing my attention to the significance of the Biblical passages.
catalogue, taking up almost half of the space of the original placard of 1609. Even in their private lives, the De Brys derived much of their identity from the monumental tomes on America, Asia, and Africa: one of Johan Theodore’s two houses in Frankfurt was renamed ‘At the Indian King’ when it came into his possession. Hence the officina and the collection became inextricably intertwined. This is also evident in testimonies of contemporaries. Carolus Clusius, in a letter written to Lipsius in 1594, described Theodore de Bry as “the Frankfurt publisher, who had produced some histories of America with illustrations”. In the preface to Volume I of Boissard’s Antiquitates Romanae (1597), the humanist Petrus Lepidus asserted that “there is nobody who has not read the Indian voyages of Hans Staden, Girolamo Benzoni, Jean de

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Ill. 4. Portrait of Johan Theodore de Bry (1615)