TOPICAL MATTERS IN DEDICATORY LETTERS OF LATIN PLAYS IN THE EARLY MODERN NETHERLANDS

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Letters of dedication are a specific form of correspondence, added as a paratext to another text.¹ This affects the rhetoric and pragmatics of letter writing.² The dedication itself is very old. In Antiquity poets dedicated their works to their patrons: Vergil and Horace to Maecenas, whom we might consider Augustus’ minister of cultural affairs, Lucretius to Memmius, and Cicero to Brutus, to mention only a few authors and dedicatees.³ This dedication was incorporated in the texts proper. In late Antiquity the practice continued, but its character changed: the dedication became a separate letter apart from the text proper.

In the fifteenth century the dedication made a comeback in the shape that it had reached in late Antiquity: as a separate letter. Late medieval and early modern authors often added letters of dedication to the manuscripts they sent to their patrons, usually hoping for some financial reward or support in the future, or expressing gratitude for benefices granted to them.⁴ The introduction of movable type made it

³ See, e.g., T. Janson, Latin Prose Prefaces. Studies in Literary Conventions, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, Studia Latina Stockholmiensia 13 (Stockholm etc. 1964); J. Ruppert, Quaestiones ad dedicationes librorum pertinentes (Leipzig 1911).
possible to distribute books on a larger scale, consequently it became the more attractive to print a letter of dedication. The name of the person to whom the book was dedicated appeared in huge capitals immediately after the title page and the fame of the patron was disseminated through hundreds of copies. The conviction that the literary work had a value for eternity and that it would bring eternal fame to the persons connected with it, the author and the dedicatee, contributed to the spread of this phenomenon. Dignitaries, administrators, rulers, monarchs accepted these dedications willingly because it brought them some fame and a reputation as Maecenases. For the authors such a dedication was attractive for it could bring the immediate advantage of a very generous amount of money, and the illustrious name of the dedicatee would add to the prestige or in some cases guarantee the protection of the work and its author. In some instances the dedicatee was, so to speak, an indication for the political or religious position of the author and his work.

In all this the Northern Netherlands had a special position in the European context because in the Republic, with no monarch and the nobility playing little part as patrons of the arts and sciences, many works were dedicated to public bodies and their members: municipal magistrates, the States, colleges of curators, and so forth. In the Southern Netherlands a court culture did exist, but there the clerical hierarchy played an important role in literary life as well, and hence works were often dedicated to bishops, canons and the like.

Authors could dedicate their work for the sake of patronage, but also to seek or confirm friendship. The distinction between these two was made in contemporary literature—and also in the dedications themselves, as we will see—in which the dedication for friendship enjoyed a higher moral esteem. But in that case we have to bear in mind that friendship was not always as personal as it is regarded now, and that the aspect of benefit plays an important role.

The dedication was mostly written in prose, even when attached to a poem, and had many formal elements: the dedicatee was praised according to the rules of rhetoric, the dedication expatiated on his titles and his dignity, the author presented the quality of the work with due modesty, and he often apologised for his humble position or

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