LOOKING FOR VULCANIUS: PLETHORA AND LACUNAE

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In 1910, as an introduction to Codices Vulcaniani, P.C. Molhuysen could summarize in one and half page what was known about Vulcanius: birth and death dates (1538–1614), family (the son of the Bruges humanist Petrus Vulcainius), studies (in Leuven and Ghent, then with Cassander in Germany), employment held (secretary to Francisco da Mendoza and his brother in Spain, preceptor in the Sudermanns’ house, editor and translator in Geneva, secretary to Marnix, professor in Leiden), and collections (manuscripts, essentially). From there, it is possible to gaze both at the plethora of information waiting to be studied; and, at the same time, at the insuperable lacunae, that seem to be inherent in the story of Bonaventura Vulcanius.

By the humanist himself, much had been passed on to the library or to common store of knowledge: books written, editions provided, commentaries published or ready for publication, classes taught and remembered, manuscripts collected, papers, and even two portraits. Moreover, he had been given the opportunity to write not only a poetic epitaph for himself but also to compose, or at least supervise, his own first biography. Though he left behind a considerable number of documents and testimonies, Bonaventura Vulcaniius also left a cloud of mystery around his name, his activities and his beliefs. In this case, too, much information, volunteered by various interested parties has maintained and even thickened the mysteries raised by his silences, his departures, or his allegiances.

One explanation for this paradox—information muddling the outlines of portraits and biographies—may well reside in the part played by Bonaventura Vulcainius himself in the composition of his legend. Another explanation may be found in the very nature of his scholarship and writing: devoting most of his life to editions and translations, Vulcainius is always defining his writing as an epigone, an inferior imitation. The position of second seems to please him, for that is precisely the position of the mediator, who passes on, reconciles, and transmits the legacy of the Ancients. His own poetry, Alexandrian in its inspiration, in its forms, and even in its languages, plays with echoes and
reminiscences. Furthermore, the collections of books and manuscripts, that are now part of the Leiden University Library,\(^1\) can be understood as yet another kind of mediation. The position of intermediary makes for an uncomfortable journey for posterity: middle men seem to lack glamour, and modesty is one of their major qualities. Studying the legacy, the works, and also the networks of Bonaventura Vulcanius amounts, then, to a series of group portraits, here assembled as in a gallery: the subject is seldom at the centre of the image, and, when he is, the portrait is seldom true.

As an attempt to give fair recognition to a complex figure, this volume does not pretend to give answers when questions are still in the asking. Moreover, it aims to restore the aura of discretion and silence in which Vulcanius wrapped his private life and opinions. In this perspective, we have gathered different perspectives, without excluding any of them, and propose various takes on the same question. The editor encouraged the inclusion and edition of much unedited material, with the hope that this very volume will, in turn, encourage new research and fruitful connections.

The organization of the papers follows the constitution of an imaginary biography, starting with the first testimonies left about Vulcanius: the early biographical accounts—for instance, the funeral oration delivered by Petrus Cunaeus—but also all the clues found in the papers and unedited works left by Vulcanius. The introduction, edition and English translation of Vulcanius’ eulogy by Chris Heesakkers and Wil Heesakkers-Kamerbeek provide a provisional biographical setting where to place the overview on a writing career given by Harm-Jan van Dam. The frame is thereby set, and so are the driving and problematic questions surrounding Bonaventura Vulcanius’ biography. The following papers examines the sets of elusive legacies, found in documents and testimonies provided by the portraits of Vulcanius and by book sales catalogues. Kasper van Ommen draws up the first inventory of Vulcanius’ portraits and, after replacing their production within the humanist context of author’s portraits, locates, describes and analyses them. Paul Smith emphasizes the necessary caution to be used when looking at an inventory where titles and owners of the books are not described in a standardized manner. Nonetheless, he derives from the

\(^1\) Leiden, UL, in this volume.