ENGLISH BOOKS IN THE NETHERLANDS IN
THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY:
REPRINTS OR PIRACIES?

JOHN FEATHER

The title of this paper accurately and deliberately reflects the insularity of many book historians in Britain. In histories of printing, publishing and the book trade in Britain, including the present author’s, other countries tend to appear, if at all, in minor roles as customers, suppliers or pirates. In one sense, this approach can be justified. The English book trade (confining ourselves to England and not the other countries of the British Isles) was for much of its history a deeply insular trade. England was the only country in Europe other than Germany where printing was introduced by a native, and the only one in which the output of books in the vernacular outstripped printing in Latin almost from the start. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, when the long and persistent traditions of the British book trade were being established, England was a war-torn kingdom which occupied part of an offshore island still on the edge of the known and accessible world, whose inhabitants spoke a multi-dialect language which was almost unknown outside its own country. From its very beginning, the printing trade in England was concerned with the production of English books for an English market.

Britain’s re-entry onto the wider European stage, delayed by her civil wars in the seventeenth century, was confirmed when William III, Prince of Orange, became King of England in 1689 following what came to be called the Glorious Revolution. For the next century, the ties between the United Kingdom and the United Provinces were not only dynastically close. There was a mutual defence treaty, which neither partner was slow to invoke in times of national emergency.¹ Cooperation at that level concealed the greater rivalries of trade and

commerce not only in Europe but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the east, where the VOC and the British East India Company fought as surrogates for their respective governments. Yet the two countries did have much in common. They were trading nations. They were, however imperfectly, nations with representative forms of government. Their peoples were protestant, tolerant and reasonably well educated. It is the latter which is of greatest concern to us here, for it was the combination of tolerance and literacy which encouraged the development of flourishing book and publishing trades in both countries.

Despite the similarities, there were, of course, profound differences. The centralising tendencies of the English state, apparent since the late fifteenth century, had been emphasised by the traumas of the Reformation, the Civil War and the Revolution. During the same two centuries, the English book trade had developed for itself a system of internal regulation essentially intended to protect what was called in the seventeenth century "ownership of copies", or what we now call "copyright". Copy ownership was regulated, and infringements were punished, by bodies within the trade itself, although with the support of the state from the late sixteenth century onwards. In essence, state and trade worked together for their mutual benefit. The trade helped to administer the fairly liberal censorship of the press, and in return the state protected the copy owners from incursions on their literary property. It was a neat and cosy arrangement which came to an end in 1695, an incidental casualty of the Revolution. The link between copy ownership and the political control of the press was so close that when the latter was ended, the former vanished also. It was fifteen years before the leading London publishers could persuade parliament to pass an act, the Copyright Act of 1710, which confirmed the concept of copy ownership and provided penalties for breaches of the law.

The eighteenth-century British book trade derived its understanding of the idea of piracy from the 1710 Act, and it is to this concept that

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