CHAPTER FIVE

ARISTOCRATIC BOOK CONSUMPTION IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: AUSTRIAN ARISTOCRATIC BOOK COLLECTORS AND THE ROLE OF NOBLE NETWORKS IN THE CIRCULATION OF BOOKS FROM SPAIN TO AUSTRIA

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Introduction

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the number of private noble libraries increased everywhere in Europe. In his early eighteenth-century chronicle about the imperial court, the German writer Johann Basilius Küchelbecker commented on the growing number of public and private libraries in Vienna: “Since nowadays education (studia) has increased in significance, high ranking and noble persons realise that the sword alone no longer is sufficient in order to make ones fortune in the world and to serve ones Lord at court and in war. They therefore attach more importance to the belles lettres and studia, than they had done in previous epochs. And since they have recognised that Mars and Pallas match very well, they do not consider it a disgrace to assemble libraries.”

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the nobility had, for the most part, still some reservations towards the world of books and learning, but

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2 “Und weil zu diesen Zeiten, da die studia auf den höchsten Grad gestiegen, große Herren und vornehme Standes-Personen sehen, daß es heut zu Tage nicht allein mit dem Degen ausge richtet ist, wenn einer sein Glück in der Welt machen, und großen Herren so wohl bey Hofe als im Kriege dienen will, so appliciren sich dieselben anietzo mehr auf die belles lettres und studia, als vordiesen. Und weil Dieselben wohl erkennen, daß Mars und Pallas sich gar wohl zusammen schicken, so haben dieselben sich vor keine Schande gehalten, zu Dero Passe-terms eine Bibliothec anzulegen”. Johann Basilius Küchelbecker, Allerneuesten Nachricht vom Römisch-Kayserlichen Hofe, nebst einer ausführlichen Beschreibung der kayserlichen Residenz-Stadt Wien und der umliegenden Örter. Theils aus den Geschichten, theils aus eigener Erfahrung zusammen getragen und mit saubern Kupffern ans Licht gegeben (Hannover, 1730), 688.
this attitude changed significantly over the course of the century. As Küchelbecker observed, the growing interest in books was related to crucial changes in noble values and the new emerging ideal of the well-educated nobleman. A new type of noble had entered the stage: the cultured courtier and well-read aristocratic connoisseur. It was the golden age of the aristocratic collector when the foundation of the most outstanding private noble book collections was laid.

Certainly, already in the fifteenth century some noble families such as the Medici in Florence or the Dukes of Este had assembled remarkable libraries, yet in the following centuries collecting books reached a new dimension. The spread of printing but also the development of new communication systems such as the postal system and the professionalization of trade and commercial networks facilitated access to the world of books. By the end of the sixteenth century private noble libraries of some hundred volumes were not uncommon and the size of these libraries increased even more in the following century.³

This article focuses on the book collections of seventeenth-century Austrian aristocrats and it particularly draws attention to Spanish literature in these libraries. The works by Spanish writers like Cervantes, Lope de Vega, and Calderón, to mention only some of the most prominent literary figures of this epoch, were bestsellers not only in Spain but all over Europe. Travellers, scholars, poets, nobles, diplomats, translators and publishing houses contributed to the diffusion of Spanish literature beyond the sphere of the Spanish monarchy.⁴ This article studies the patterns of distribution of foreign literature in aristocratic circles and more precisely, to what extent ‘transnational’ networks contributed to its spread. At a time when a professional book trade in Vienna just had begun to develop, readers and book collectors still relied on agents and personal contacts abroad to satisfy their bibliophile interests.⁵ The book fairs in Frankfurt and Leipzig certainly played a central role in the spread of books. The aristocracy, however, didn’t belong to the regular customers of these fairs but rather used its own networks to enrich its libraries with all types of