CHAPTER 5

Plantin and the French Book Market

Malcolm Walsby

The events that occurred in the Low Countries during Christophe Plantin’s lifetime have naturally led scholars to concentrate on the relationship he entertained both with local potentates and with the Spanish world.¹ The politics of printing in a city that was subjected alternately to the rule of Philip II and the Estates General naturally dominated Plantin’s correspondence and his everyday life. In the business world, the printer-publisher’s interests at the Frankfurt fairs have attracted much scholarship. Twice a year, in spring and in autumn, preparations for the fairs loomed large in Plantin’s activities. They imposed a set of deadlines that had to be met in order to maximise sales over the short duration of the fairs. But important though the fairs were, they were far from being Plantin’s only business concern.

Plantin’s commercial ventures are, overall, well documented. We know much about his exchanges with other booksellers in the Low Countries and about his difficulties with the local authorities. Similarly, his exports to Spain and the British Isles have been the subject of careful studies.² In contrast, surprising little has been written about Plantin’s relationship with the book world of his homeland, France. Scholars have been more interested in unearthing more information about the printer’s early life than about understanding the complex and sometimes antagonistic rapport between Plantin and his fellow countrymen. The most comprehensive work on his business is Leon Voet’s magisterial study on printing and bookselling activities of the Golden Compass, but he devoted only a few pages to France. The information he does provide is mainly discussed in the context of the wider sales of the workshop.³

³ Leon Voet, Golden Compasses II, pp. 397–399.
Yet, a lively trade between Antwerp and neighbouring France had developed during the sixteenth century. Booksellers and printers tried to make the most of the opportunities this afforded and Antwerp imprints were available for purchase in the shops of Parisian booksellers. Plantin took great care in developing the commercial exchanges between Antwerp and his homeland, but he was not alone in appreciating the importance of the French market. We know from provenance marks that Willem Silvius’s Latin edition of one of Janus Dousa’s works was, for instance, bought by a Parisian translator in the very year that it was printed. Indeed, Gilles Beys warned Plantin of Silvius’s ambitions with regard to the Parisian market. But in truth Silvius did not represent a real threat: Plantin enjoyed an excellent reputation in France that other Antwerp printers would never rival.

Plantin’s books were prized in sixteenth-century France. The quality of the volumes published by the officina Plantiniana was widely accepted. In a book printed at the end of the century, the Breton author Regnault Dorleans noted that printing, which he calls the science of immortality, found in France its best workers. This, he wrote, can be easily checked by comparing French imprints with those imported from Germany, Italy or Spain. But there was one exception to this rule: the workshop of Plantin in Antwerp. The sixteenth-century bibliographer and author Antoine du Verdier also recognised the outstanding quality of Plantin’s production. In the chapter that he devoted to the art of printing in his French version of Pedro Mexia’s Lessons, he listed Plantin in the select group that had, in his view, excelled as printers.

A more private, and sincere, appreciation of the publisher’s value can be found in the book inventories that were such a feature of the Renaissance book world. Plantin was one of a small handful of printers who were sufficiently esteemed to be mentioned by name in entries which included only the most basic bibliographical data. The quality of Plantin’s work was equally respected

---

6 Regnault Dorleans, Les observations de diverses choses remarquées sur l’estat, couronne et peuple de France, tant ancien que moderne (Vannes, Jean Bourrelier, 1597), pp. 220–222.
8 See, for instance, the catalogue of Bertrand d’Argentré’s collection in my ‘The library of the Breton jurist and historian Bertrand d’Argentré in 1582’ in Malcolm Walsby and Natasha