On 14 May 1613 Thomas Erpenius (1584–1624) accepted his nomination as the first professor of Arabic at Leiden by pronouncing his inaugural address ‘On the Excellence and Dignity of the Arabic Language’ (Figure 1.1). In 2013 the fourth centenary of Arabic studies was celebrated with a great variety of activities. A tradition of 400 years in one single discipline is a long time by any standard, especially if one realizes that the University, founded in 1575, is not much older than that itself. Yet few people know that Arabic is the only language to have been taught almost continuously at Leiden apart from Latin, Greek and Biblical Hebrew. Dutch made its first appearance in the late eighteenth century; modern languages such as English, French and German only followed suit in the course of the nineteenth century. The Classics and Biblical Hebrew, however, were all extinct languages, even though Neo-Latin played an important role in scholarly communication. Moreover, Latin, Greek and Hebrew were traditionally regarded as the pillars of our own culture and religion. Arabic, on the other hand, was not only a living language, but also the vehicle of an alien culture which was very much alive, literally exotic and often


\[2\] Between September 2013 and March 2014 an exhibition on 400 years of Arabic studies in the Netherlands was held at the National Museum of Antiquities (Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, RMO), Leiden, mainly with materials from the special collections of Leiden University Libraries [<http://www.rmo.nl/english/exhibitions/archive/excellence-and-dignity>, accessed 21 Nov 2016]. Simultaneously, a book on the same subject was published: A. Vrolijk and R. van Leeuwen, *Voortreffelijk en Waardig: 400 jaar Arabische studies in Nederland*, Leiden 2012. An English translation by A. Hamilton was published under the title: A. Vrolijk and R. van Leeuwen, *Arabic Studies in the Netherlands: a Short History in Portraits, 1580–1950*, Leiden, 2014. Both the book and the publications were part of the HERA project ‘Encounters with the Orient in Early Modern European Scholarship’, coordinated by Professor Charles Burnett and Dr Jan Loop of the Warburg Institute, University of London. A supplementary grant was kindly awarded by Saudi Aramco, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Many other activities were undertaken by the Department of Middle East Studies of the University of Leiden.
Figure 1.1 Oration of Thomas Erpenius (1584–1624) on the ‘Excellence and Dignity of the Arabic language’, May 1613 (printed Leiden, 1615 or later), title page. [Leiden University Libraries, 1369 D 38]