“HOW GREAT THE ENTERPRISE, HOW GLORIOUS THE DEED”: SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY DUTCH CIRCUMNAVIGATIONS AS USEFUL MYTHS

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When Ceres started up with rich ripe ears becrowned,
And threshing-floors groaned loud ’neath many a golden mound;
When Autumn still was stained with wealth of Bacchus’ sap.
And dropped the luscious grape into each joyful lap;
Equipped was then the fleet to ride the billows blue,
To sail around the earth and cut the ocean through:
How great the enterprise, how glorious the deed!

So begins the “ode” to glorify Joris van Spilbergen’s 1614–1617 circumnavigation of the world. As the poem progresses, the author leads the reader through the highlights of the voyage; it sets the heroic tone for the travel account that it precedes. Indeed, this poem, like the many others that attempted to glorify voyages of discovery and the Dutch navigators who undertook them, provided the reader of a travel account with heroic imagery before even turning to the first page of the book. Considering the importance of seafaring for the seventeenth-century Dutch, the printed exploits of their circumnavigators provided a language for community building – for the creation of a distinctly Dutch consciousness – that was essential as the Dutch Republic defined itself and its values. In this essay, I explore the heroic “myths” that early seventeenth-century Dutch print culture created around several

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circumnavigators and the “myths” that the accounts of their exploits shattered. I suggest that Dutch publishers used these accounts to provide readers with a representation of Dutch success against their enemies, and against the unknown world that confronted them. While these accounts played an important role in the rhetoric of the Dutch Revolt, a later generation of Dutch men and women also made use of these travel accounts as they strove to develop their own national identities.

European readers had an almost unquenchable thirst for travel and discovery literature, and the Dutch in particular loved stories about the sea. The early seventeenth-century Dutch circumnavigators were well aware of this. Olivier van Noort, whose voyage around the world occurred between 1598 and 1601, and Joris van Spilbergen, who set out in 1614 and returned to the Netherlands in 1617, both published popular accounts about their exploits. Olivier van Noort’s brief account of his circumnavigation appeared shortly after he completed his voyage in 1601 followed by a fuller account within the year. By 1605 Spilbergen had already published the account of his voyage to Ceylon and Bantam as well as an account of his adventures against the Spanish in the naval fleet of Jacob van Heemskerck. The accounts of the voyages of circumnavigation by van Noort and Spilbergen, along with those of Schouten and Le Maire, whose circumnavigation coincided with Spilbergen’s, were not unique, but they fit very neatly into the vast travel and discovery literature so common to seventeenth-century readers. Produced in the opening decades of the seventeenth century, they were merely the latest contributions to an ever growing body of literature dating back at least to the early fourteenth century with Marco Polo’s account of his travels to the court of the Great Khan.

The spread of knowledge about the world outside of Europe increased rapidly after the introduction of moveable type in the mid-fifteenth century. In addition to religious texts, travel accounts made up the most popular works of the fifteenth century. The well-known example of the Travels of Sir John Mandeville comes most quickly to mind as a book that presented readers with a rich mixture of fact and fiction supposedly dealing with a knight’s travels all over the world. For literate

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2 Olivier van Noort, Extract oft Kort Verhael wt het groote Journal (Rotterdam, 1601); Joris van Spilbergen, ’t Historiael Journael van tghene ghepasseert is van weghen drie schepen … (Delft, 1605) and Copye van een Brief geschreven door Joris van Spelbergh … (n.p., 1606).