'Magnificent paper': the library of Constantijn Huygens'

In his poem Clujs-werck, written in 1681 when he was eighty-four, Constantijn Huygens tells of how he spends his days in his house on Het Plein in The Hague. There is eating and talking, there is music-making, there is enjoyment of drawings and paintings, and there is reading. Or, as the poet puts it:

Doo Luijden nu en dan, die uijt haer Graven spraken
(Haer' Boecken) quamen oock ons' hersenen vermaeken.
Wat vande levende veel tijd te voorschijn quam,
Verheugden ons veeltijds of maecksen ons wat gram,
Want, Kostelijck Papier, wat hebt gh'al niet te lijden! (ll. 53-8)\textsuperscript{2}

Huygens regards books as the graves from which dead writers speak. At the same time, he sympathizes with the paper that has so much to bear. While he often finds entertainment in modern writers, they often also make him angry. Following the departure of his son Constantijn to move into a home of his own, the elderly poet has now been left behind in his large house. But he feels anything but lonely, for:

gebreeckt mij spraeck van waerde
\'k Vind licht een wijser man, die levend veel vergaerde
En stervend achter liet; die doen ick mij een knecht
Voorlesen (ll. 213-17)

If he lacks for worthwhile conversation he can easily find a wiser man who gathered much in his lifetime and left it behind on his death; this he has read to him by a servant at table, for, as he says, that way he can partake of two joys at once, those of taste and hearing, and while looking after his body with what he eats he enriches his mind with what he reads:

\textsuperscript{1} This article was earlier published in Dutch in the collection Waardevol oud papier. Feestbandel bij het tienjarig bestaan van Bibb Kuyper Veilingen Boeken en Grafiek 1986-1996, ed. Nop Maas (Haarlem 1996), pp. 192-202. Since then, readers of the original piece have drawn my attention to other books with the handwritten ex-libris 'Constanter,' so that the total is now 69. I shall be happy to hear from anyone who can add further to the list.

\textsuperscript{2} Quoted from Constantijn Huygens, Clujs-werck. Published, introduced and with commentary by F.L. Zwaan (Jerusalem 1977).
Soo voel ick t’eener tijd twee vreugden in mij roeren,  
Van Smaeck en van Gehoor, soo koester ick mijn Vlees  
Met wat ter Maghe gaet, mijn Geest met wat ick lecs. (ll. 218-20)

This ‘eating reading’ is more agreeable to him than great feasts with crowds of people who become inebriated and can only produce drunken twaddle. In the evenings Huygens is to be found in his library, to which he devotes more attention than to his other rooms, which even on their best days are never dressed up in anything more than wool and cobwebs:

de sael daer ick het meeste werck of  
Van all’ mijn saelen maecck, die op haer’ schoonsten dagh  
Niet schoons en dragen als gewevcn woll en rach. (ll. 382-4)

Wool, of course, was a simple cloth; and cobwebs are not a sign of great wealth either. In fact, however, the owner of the great house on Het Plein in The Hague is making fun of his own riches: the wool and cobwebs of which he speaks are actually Gobelin tapestries and gossamer-weave curtains. Compared with his library, these riches are not much more than bourgeois simplicity. To him, in short, his books are rightly ‘kostelijk papier’: magnificent paper.

In his will Huygens left his library to his three sons, Constantijn, Christiaan and Lodewijk. His daughter, who was married to Philips Doublet, Lord of St. Annaland, received no part of it.³

THE AUCTION

Huygens’s library no longer exists, since almost immediately his sons decided to put it up for auction. Two copies of the sale catalogue have been preserved, one in Copenhagen and the other in The Hague (Museum of the Book/Meermanno-Westreenianum; illus. 1). This latter copy was reissued in a limited edition of 100 copies in 1903 by W.P. van Stockum.⁴ The catalogue comprises three parts, libri theologici, libri juridici and libri miscellanei. Within these sections, the books are arranged and described in order of size. At the end of the catalogue there are a further eighty entries for ‘music books’. The table below gives an impression of the size of the library as offered for sale.

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⁴ Thanks to the project Book sales catalogues of the Dutch Republic, 1500-1800 on microfiche (Leiden, IDC, 1990 -...), ed. B. van Selm and J.A. Gruys, a second copy of Huygens’s catalogue has been