The export of books from the Republic to the Southern Netherlands. A quantitative indication based on the catalogue of the Roermond charterhouse library

INTRODUCTION

During the Ancien Régime the Republic functioned as the bookstore of Europe. This is a more than well-established picture by now. The subject of the publishers and booksellers who from cities such as Amsterdam and Leiden supplied foreign countries with printed works of all kinds, no longer needs any further explanation. However, within this theme quantitative judgements are often still lacking, especially because the source material is notoriously inadequate and the necessary calculations require huge efforts. Questions such as how large the market share held by the publishers and printers from the Republic was in, for instance, the French or English book trade, or how this market share was segmented by genre, format, language or price, can hardly be answered as yet.

The present article focuses on the volume of the book trade relations between the Republic and the Southern Spanish Netherlands, i.e. after 1713 the Austrian Netherlands. With one exception, this segment of the export trade has until now never been the subject of a contribution based on research of original source material. It is true that this trade flow is mentioned in well-known Dutch book-historical publications such as those by L.P. Leuven or I.H. van Eeghen, and the recent survey of W. Frijhoff and M. Spies in the ‘IJKpunten series’ devoted a few lines to this topic. The latest publication, and to my knowledge in any case the most recent study which deals exclusively with this subject, is the article by Th. Clemens in the well-known volume Le magasin de l’univers of 1992. However, the quantifications mentioned in this literature are rather divergent. Whereas the one author speaks of ‘probably […] hardly any volume’, the other refers to ‘a brisk barter trade’, while a third mentions the Southern Netherlands.
as ‘an important marketing area’ for the publishers and booksellers of the Northern Netherlands,6 and a fourth speaks of ‘practically no demand for Dutch books [. . .] in the South Netherlands’.7 However, on the level of specific instances occasional numerical data can be found which provide (in)direct indications of the share of the Republic in the South-Netherlandish book trade. P.J. Begheyn for example, who compiled a list of 48 Jesuit publications issued by the Elzeviers in the seventeenth century, is able to identify in this list 21 editions that were printed under a South-Netherlands imprint – and thus were presumably in part also intended for this market,6 and H. Meeus found in the Plantin-Moretus ledgers 688 titles that had been bought in the North during the period 1590-1610.9

In the present study the importance of the Northern Netherlands for the import of books into the South is calculated by an extrapolation of fairly accurate numerical data. We owe these data to a unique source which has been preserved thanks to a lucky coincidence and which so far has only been pointed out in the literature, but was not previously used. We are referring here to the catalogue of the Roermond Carthusian monastery Bethlehem, as compiled during the years 1740-2 by the monk Willem-Josef Peeters.10

In the following section the background of the Roermond charterhouse and the library catalogue is first briefly explained. When subsequently the broad intrinsic outlines in the corpus of all titles from the Republic that are listed in the catalogue have been presented, the results of the quantitative calculations will follow. The article rounds off with conclusions. The appendices comprise the list of titles, the tables and graphs and the necessary explanatory notes regarding the technique and method of the research.

---


10 Roermond, Gemeentearchief, section VI, Handschriften, no. 6.