Without Fame: The Anonymous Writers of the Eighteenth Century

Ton Jongenelen
Utrecht, the Netherlands

Abstract
The author argues that in the eighteenth century the professional writer preferred to remain anonymous for three main reasons. In the first place there was no financial reward due to the lack of copyright protection. Writers did not reap the benefits of a reprint. In the second place the Republic was not a safe haven for nonconformist writers. In many cases it was a wise precaution not to put your name on the title page. In the third place the whole concept of the writer as an opinion-leader was incompatible with the constitution of the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic. It was in the democratic learning process that started with the downfall of the Ancien Régime that the wider acceptance of individual subjectivity as a positive quality emerged.

Keywords
anonymity, authorship, eighteenth century, hack-writers

On Thursday 4 July 1782, after a prolonged illness, Willem Ockers passed away. That same day an Amsterdam notary made an inventory of his possessions. Apart from the usual furniture (6 cupboards, 6 tables, 9 chairs) and the rather unusual 'astronomical pocket watch', there were more than 1,600 books, valued at an estimated total value of 200 guilders. Regrettably, the notary omitted to mention their titles, because 1,400 of those 1,600 books were of a small format, octavo or less, and the average value was just 10½ cents. As a result the inventory gives us no clue as to who the late Willem Ockers had been, but it is a fair guess that at least 20% of those titles had been written by himself: Ockers was an Amsterdam hack writer who was born in 1741, started...
to publish in 1762 and lived by his pen till his death in 1782. He caught my eye more than ten years ago and today I ascribe about 300 titles to him. His œuvre comprises both prose and poetry, and broadsheets as well as pamphlets and weeklies – the largest one, De Koopman [The Merchant], running for ten years with a total volume of more than 2,800 pages. Many of his publications were quite satirical, some were a little more serious – he often discussed religion and the economy – and when he was at his best, satire and audacious political statements went hand in hand.

One very remarkable aspect of his œuvre is that all these publications were anonymous, with the exception of a small collection of humorous articles that appeared posthumously. That persistent choice for literary anonymity raises two questions. In the first place: why did Ockers not publish under his own name? He might well not have succeeded, but at least he could have tried to become a literary icon, a kind of Dutch Voltaire, and exploit his fame as modern writers are supposed to do. In the second place: does his case fit into a general pattern? And if so, what can we deduce from the choices he made? In other words, I will approach ‘the exploitation of fame’ the other way round, not from the new possibilities that developed in the nineteenth century, but from the eighteenth-century impediments. First I will argue that there was no carrot to seduce Ockers, or his colleagues, then I will identify the whip that restrained them, and I will finish with a look at the general cultural setting that made it undesirable for writers like Ockers to publish under their own names.

The Missing Carrot

To start with the carrot: there was no financial reward whatsoever in coming out in the open with your name on the title page. In Holland in the eighteenth century the author’s copyright was not protected. The general rule was that the bookseller paid the writer when he handed over the manuscript and that the bookseller owned the copyright from then on.

This lack of copyright protection was not typical of Holland, but in the Republic authors who wanted to have their slice of the cake had to wield considerable political leverage against the vested interests of the almighty, well organized Dutch booksellers. So, usually, their attempts were unsuccessful: in 1707 a cleric of the official, Presbyterian church, the reverend Johannes d’Outreyn of Dordrecht, backed by his local magistrate, tried his luck and applied for a copyright on his writings. His request was refused due to opposition