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Een kamer gevuld met de mooiste boeken : de bibliotheek van Johannes Thysius (1622-1653)

Mourits, E.V.M.

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Author: Mourits, Esther

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Summary

Along the Rapenburg, the main canal in the town of Leiden, stands the Bibliotheca Thysiana. Founded in 1655, it is the only purpose-built seventeenth-century library in the Netherlands. The building was designed by the architect Arend van 's Gravesande, and contains several thousands of books, most of them collected by the jurist Joannes Thysius. In his testament, drawn up only a few days before he died at the age of 31, Thysius declared that his books should be placed in a public library in order to be used by scholars. He left detailed instructions to the executor of his testament, his cousin Marcus du Tour, about the location, maintenance and management of the library, and dedicated a large part of his fortune to the execution of his plans. This was a unique decision for a private book collector in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century. What makes it even more special, is that the Bibliotheca Thysiana has been preserved until the present day, almost in its original state.

It was not uncommon for wealthy academics in seventeenth-century Leiden to own a considerable collection of books. A university had been established in the town in 1574, so the number of residents that needed books professionally or for the purpose of study was relatively large. This ensured a lively trade in both new and used books. But not every scholar could afford to purchase books, and the necessary reading materials were not always available at the university library. This meant the Bibliotheca Thysiana filled a need, and although sources to confirm this are hard to find, the library must have flourished in the first fifty years of its existence.

Still, Thysius' decision to appoint family members and their offspring as curators proved a mistake: the love for books, as well as the skills and knowledge to manage a library evidently did not run in the family. Over the following centuries, the library would slowly turn from a valuable institution into a nearly forgotten museum. The university took over its management when family members eventually refused to do the work, but years of financial misconduct and disputes over money left the Bibliotheca Thysiana nearly broke. Nevertheless, the books, papers and building left by Joannes Thysius have been preserved. Today they provide a rare insight into the creation of a seventeenth-century collection.

The specific character of Thysius' library, a private collection which had been opened to the public, makes it difficult to choose a method of approach. Previous research into private libraries has tried to establish the relationship between the life and work of the collector and his books. By contrast, the study of public libraries focuses on the needs of the school, the city or the organisation to which the library belongs. Whether the Bibliotheca Thysiana should be viewed as a private or a public library depends on the intentions of its founder Joannes Thysius. The question is whether he made choices based on personal preferences and interests, or with the future users of the library in mind. Although Thysius left hundreds of personal papers, there is no written statement in any form which can clarify his motives. It is only by looking into his personal life, the way the library came into existence and the books which form part of it, that an answer to this question can be found.

Joannes Thysius was born in 1622 as the son of a wealthy merchant from Amsterdam, into a family that had originally come as religious refugees from Antwerp. Both his parents died while Thysius was still young. Consequently, he had to move to Leiden to live with his aunt and his uncle Constantin L'Empereur, a professor of Oriental languages at the university. L'Empereur and Thysius' great uncle Antonius Thysius, a professor of theology, acted as his guardians. They encouraged Thysius to study, presented him with books as gifts, and possibly envisaged a future as a scholar for him. When Thysius was entitled to an inheritance from another great uncle, who had been librarian of the Landgrave of Hesse, his guardians decided to use the inherited sum to buy books for their ward from the library of the deceased. This meant that at the age of thirteen, Thysius was the proud owner of more than three hundred, mostly very heavy scholarly books. Although he was still too young to understand most of their contents, it sparked his enthusiasm. As soon as he was of age and free to spend his own capital, Thysius began collecting books in earnest.

As was customary for rich young men, Thysius attended the Latin School, and studied law at the University of Leiden. He did not manage to graduate before he became of age in 1647. The year before, Thysius had been sent on a *Grand tour* through Europe, marking the end of his education. The general purpose of this long journey was to enable young men to study at foreign universities, see more of the world and establish valuable new contacts. With the help of introduction letters provided by friends of his uncles, Thysius met with members of the international Republic of Letters. During a stay of two days in Angers he obtained a law degree at the local university, although eventually he would also conclude his studies in Leiden with a doctorate in 1652. Thysius' travel companion was Job Ludolf, a brilliant student of Constantin L'Empereur. They became friends, and when diverging careers made them go their separate ways, they began exchanging letters.

At the end of the *Grand tour* Thysius returned to Leiden, without ever again undertaking a long journey abroad. Ludolf, however, travelled extensively throughout Europe, and became famous in the international Republic of Letters with his studies of Oriental Languages. The contrast between the lives of Thysius and Ludolf could hardly be greater. Thysius did not pursue a career as an academic, a lawyer or any other profession. Taking care of his family and his finances were his only mandatory activities. He lived from the income provided by his inheritance, in the house of his uncle and aunt, even after their death, and remained unmarried. This seems to contradict his lifestyle, which was rather flamboyant: he loved horses and expensive clothes, and enjoyed the status provided by his wealth. Although Thysius cannot be characterized as a typical scholar, he was a scholar nonetheless, be it an idiosyncratic one, spending most of his time collecting books.

Thysius bought most of his books in the period between May 1648, on return from his travels, and his death in October 1653. He regularly visited book auctions, where a large quantity of books was on offer, usually the contents of a private library of a deceased owner. An auction was a lucrative enterprise for a bookseller, but also a great opportunity for collectors to expand their collection with older, often less readily available books at attractive prices. Thysius financial records show that most of his collection was acquired at auctions. He also bought from booksellers in Leiden, especially at the shop of Wolter de Haes around the corner from his house, but also in Amsterdam and The Hague. Furthermore, he asked travelling friends to look out for specific titles, and sometimes received books as gifts.

At the end of his life, Thysius was the owner of a library consisting of more than 3,000 books, of which about 2,600 were placed in the *Bibliotheca Thysiana*. The collection includes equal numbers of copies in the formats folio, quarto and octavo, and notably less copies in smaller formats. The majority is written in Latin, French comes in second place, and the share of Dutch-language books is relatively small. Nearly half of the books are published before 1600, which means they were over fifty years old when purchased by Thysius. Less than a fifth is printed in Netherlands: most books originate from other European countries, particularly Germany and France. Thysius owned books on all kinds of subjects, including classical literature, theology, philosophy, law, history, science, mathematics, astronomy, medicine and botany, hardly any subject has been left out. Only contemporary literature is mostly absent, suggesting that the library was above all intended for study.

Although the accumulation of books can be reconstructed in detail from Thysius' financial records, the reason for his decisions remains unclear. Why he added certain titles to his collection or chose not to acquire others has not been documented. Thysius left no marks in his books and never made notes that indicate what interested him. He only wrote letters when strictly necessary, usually for practical purposes, which means books are only mentioned very rarely and mostly in general terms. A detailed look at the contents of the library is the only way to determine what kind of collection Thysius put together, and what his motives might have been.

Two factors are of special interest in the attempt to characterize the collection. The

first factor is the history of the fields of study represented by books in the library, in particular in relation to the scientific developments that have taken place. The books in Thysius' collection were published in a period of more than 150 years, in which new discoveries were made, new methods of research were introduced and alternative philosophies tested. Whether Thysius shows a preference for either the old or the new, could be significant. The second factor is the relation between his library and those of his contemporaries. Statements about this specific library are meaningless without context. In order to determine if Thysius made very personal choices or very common ones, a comparison between his library and those of others is a prerequisite. In order to limit this task to workable proportions, a comparison with the contents of other libraries has been made for only two parts of the collection. The legal books owned by Thysius are compared with the ones which were owned by four professionals in the field of law, according to the auction catalogues of their libraries. The same was done with the medical books owned by Thysius and professionals in the field of medicine. A third part of his collection, containing the historical books has been analysed in relation to contemporary theoretical and practical directions for the study of the past, and conceptions about what the role of history should be.

The library of Joannes Thysius easily stands comparison with the libraries of other serious collectors: only rarely does his collection prove less well-stocked than those of others, and nearly every important book is present. Shortcomings can be blamed on Thysius' lack of knowledge, but also on his early death. If he had lived to be twice as old, the result of his efforts would undoubtedly be even more impressive. On the other hand, this comparison has not brought to light any specific preferences held by Thysius. Also, it has not revealed a special interest in a particular subject or method of study. The conclusion can only be that it must have been Thysius's objective to build a library that was as varied and widely assorted as possible.

This objective is in agreement with the definition of the ideal library, formulated in 1627 in the work *Advis pour dresser une bibliotheque* by the French librarian Gabriel Naudé, and repeated in the publications of many other booklovers in the following decades. Although composed as an advice to inspire collectors, it was in fact a plea for the conservation and availability of knowledge. According to Naudé, in an ideal library scholars would find every book that they could possibly need, and more importantly, this library should be open to the public. Naudé promised his patron to which he dedicated his work, that he would gain immortality by making his books accessible to all scholars. Sixteen years later Naudé was employed by Cardinal Mazarin, who asked him to turn this ideal into reality. He created an enormous and beautiful library, which Thysius visited when his *Grand tour* brought him to Paris. A few months later, Thysius travelled to Oxford where he saw another example of a public library, again the result of the efforts of a single book collector, in this case Thomas Bodley.

Thysius must have been inspired. It is impossible to prove that he has read Naudé's famous work, but the resemblance between the words in the *Advis* and the creation of the Bibliotheca Thysiana are too striking to ignore. Thysius might have been sensitive to the picture of immortality painted by Naudé as a reward for all the hard work. But he must have discovered that collecting books was a scholarly activity in which he could excel, unlike any regular academic discipline. It brought him the status of a worthy member of the Republic of Letters, which he could not reach the way L'Empereur or Ludolf had done. If this is true, Thysius motive for collecting books was a very personal one. On the other hand, it is clear that he couldn't have bought these books solely for himself. His wish was for his treasured books to be used by scholars. Though it seems unlikely that Thysius had originally intended to found the Bibliotheca Thysiana posthumously, it is evident that it was his early death that ultimately ensured its survival.