



Jan Bloemendal, Arjan van Dixhoorn, Elsa Strietman (eds.), ***Literary Cultures and Public Opinion in the Low Countries, 1450-1650*** (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 197; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011, x + 324 pages, ISBN 978 90 04 20616 8).

Jürgen Habermas' model of the development of a public sphere in the eighteenth century has become paradigmatic. In short, Habermas stated that only with the emergence of a periodical press and easily accessible meeting places, such as coffee houses, the creation of a critical public sphere was possible. Scholars have criticised various conceptual elements of this pioneering thesis on public opinion, such as its rationality and its bourgeois character, and have debated whether or not a public sphere existed prior to the eighteenth century. The present volume contributes to the on-going discussions on Habermas' thesis by studying the role of literature in the creation of early modern public opinion. This collection of essays is the result of three meetings held in the context of two collaborating research projects, one on public opinion in the Low Countries 1500-1700 and the other on Latin and vernacular theatre plays and public opinion 1510-1625. Eight case studies are accompanied by a substantial introductory essay and an epilogue both written by the editors Jan Bloemendal and Arjan van Dixhoorn. Each contribution analyses a literary text or texts, going from Dutch plays (Mareel, Groenland, Helmers, Moser), poems (Keßler), songs (Spaans) to Latin plays (Demoed, Groenland) and poems (Van Oosterhout), in order to study their role in the formation of an early modern public opinion. It is pity that for 'pragmatic reasons' (ix) the editors omitted literature in French, although they do acknowledge it to be omnipresent in the early modern Low Countries.

The introduction is very extensive and can be considered as the most important chapter in this volume. In this chapter, Bloemendal and Van Dixhoorn skilfully analyse the current research on early modern public opinion. Moreover, they also propose a new conceptual framework. According to the authors using theories from social sciences studies make it possible for historians to think beyond Habermas (19). Referring to the latest trends in communication theory, they criticise Habermas' theory in a stimulating manner. For example, the authors propose adopting an 'actor-oriented-approach' to the public sphere that studies the interaction between the speakers and audiences more closely. Bloemendal and Van Dixhoorn conclude their critique of Habermas by claiming that 'the early modern Low Countries had a *permanent supra-local public sphere* (my italics)' (14). They thus argue there existed a public sphere prior to the eighteenth century.

Despite thoroughly challenging many aspects of Habermas' thesis, the authors do not leave his paradigm. Therefore they miss an opportunity to really think beyond Habermas in spite of their claim to do so. They argue that the Low Countries had a public sphere 'as a result of the interaction of handwritten and printed works with the oral, performative and visual media of a face-to-face society, and that in this interaction literary works had an important part to play' (14). According to the authors, in this interaction literature played a key role. The authors opt to define literature rather broadly as 'works which contain a literary form which we now categorize as literary (letters, poems, dialogues, stage plays, songs, etc)' (9). Public opinion is understood in an equally broad sense. Public opinion is described: 'as a complex of beliefs about social, political, moral, religious or other public matters, one that can be found in larger or smaller segments of society and which originates and is expressed in a variety of ways' (5). Both definitions are too vague and raise a number of problems that are pointed out by some of the contributors. At the end of the introduction the authors discern seven functions of literature in the process of opinion-making and present this as a new model. However it is difficult to understand how this 'model' can function as an interpretative tool. Although the different contributions reveal the potential for research on literature and public opinion none of the contributors directly apply the new model. Instead, Juliette Groenland and Nelleke Moser do consider the relationship between literature and opinion.

Juliette Groenland studies the Latin play by Daniel Heinsius (1602) on the death of William of Orange and its Dutch 'translation' by Jacob Duym (1606). She pays close attention to the respective intended audiences of these authors, a humanistic scholarly public on the one hand and a broader public on the other. The two different social contexts required the use of different literary codes in the two plays. In her epilogue, Groenland directly discusses the ideas set out by Bloemendal en Van Dixhoorn and indicates three pitfalls in the study of the relationship between literature and public opinion. First, it is difficult to establish the differences between literature and opinion. Second, it is even more difficult to grasp the intended opinions present in a literary text due to its mimetic nature. Third, early modern literature should be studied alongside other sources in order to understand its function in the creation of a public opinion. This ideal of combing different sources is put in to practice by Nelleke Moser. She studies an incomplete handwritten description in Dutch of a theatrical performance that allegedly took place at the Spanish court in 1623 before the members of Spanish royal family and Charles, Prince of Wales. In 1623 Charles arrived unexpectedly in Spain to arrange his marriage to Maria, the sister of the Spanish king Philips IV. According to Moser the very detailed description of the play raises many questions and therefore she compares it to printed pamphlets and other surviving plays on the Spanish Match. Moser rightly hints at the importance of manuscripts and the need to study them in relationship to public opinion and early modern literature.

In their epilogue 'in the form of a discussion', Bloemendal en Van Dixhoorn critically analyse the arguments of the various contributions. It would have been

interesting if the editors had not only questioned the impact of different publics on literary codes but also whether different media – oral, written or printed – had different functions in the ‘literary cultures’ under study. The editors further acknowledge the possible pitfalls of this type of research: ‘the problem of research into historical opinion is that we will never know what most people believed’ (272). Despite these pitfalls, they have convincingly pointed out that early modern literary sources should be incorporated in further research on public opinion. The major merit of the volume is that it stimulates critical reflection on public opinion and on the relationship between public opinion and literature. However the volume does not offer a workable new conceptual model.

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