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► **To cite this version:**

Renaud Adam, Chiara Lastraioli. Bibliopol@: The Book Market in the Renaissance between France and the Low Countries. 2018, pp.42-46. 10.34846/le-studium.165.05.fr.10-2018 . hal-03218204

HAL Id: hal-03218204

<https://hal.science/hal-03218204>

Submitted on 5 May 2021

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Bibliopol@: The Book Market in the Renaissance between France and the Low Countries

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REPORT INFO

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Period of residence in region Centre-Val de Loire: 10/01/2017 – 09/30/2018

Keywords :

Book History – Renaissance – Cultural transferts – Book trade

ABSTRACT

The aim of our project was to investigate on the book trade during the Renaissance. It had focused on the relations between France and the Low Countries which have never been the subject of systematic analysis. The study of the book market is not only a chapter of economic history; it is also an accurate point of view to think about the most fundamental cultural trajectories. As a consequence, the ambition of this project was to renew our knowledge of cultural exchanges between France and the Low Countries through the study of the circulation of books between these two territories.

1- Introduction

The invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in the mid-fifteenth century is one of the most important technical advances in history. It had a profound impact on European civilization and gave birth to the first great “media revolution”. The immediate effect was to multiply the amount of books in circulation and to reduce their cost. The Gutenberg revolution carried the European book market to a new level. Booksellers had to deal with multiple hundreds of copies, not rather than in single copies as at the manuscript age. The name of Gutenberg would not have been associated with the invention of western modernity without the action of these bookmen.

Until now, researches on the early history of printed books have been mainly focused on the world of printers, the production of books and on lectors and their reading practices. The intermediate level of the book industry has

remained more or less neglected. However, some recent works have highlighted the fact that the engine and the frame of the Gutenberg revolution lied precisely in the structures and the evolution of book diffusion.

The aim of the project was to investigate this very aspect of the first media revolution. It focused on the trade relations between France and the Low Countries which have never been the subject of systematic analysis. The study of the book market is not only a chapter of economic history; it is also an accurate point of view to think about the most fundamental cultural trajectories. As a consequence, the ambition of this project was to renew our knowledge of cultural exchanges between France and the Low Countries through the study of the circulation of books between these two territories.

2- Experimental details

Our project started from the fact that if we are now in position – thanks to valuable works (FB, NB, USTC) – to evaluate with any degree of confidence the number of books published in France and in the Low Countries in the Renaissance, where and when, we are still not yet able to say which books – with the same degree of confidence – were really bought from a country to another and read there; leading *de facto* to an incomplete and partial assessment of the cultural substratum of these two countries.

To narrow the field of research, which could otherwise result unmanageable, the best solution is to focus on the transnational book trade. This is surely one of the most efficient ways to understand how and which books were in movement, how they travelled across borders and, by extension, the nature of cultural exchanges between France and the Low Countries in early modern period.

The book trade is made of two principal components: men and books. This is why we focused our attention on the circulation of books and the men behind it. The project “Bibliopol@: The Book Market in the Renaissance between France and the Low Countries” relied on a dual and complementary corpus: inventories of bookshops and archives materials involved in this business. It covered the second half of the 16th century, a period of intense economic activities between the two countries interrupted by the difficult context of the War of Religions in the 1580s (Braudel, Labrosse 1977). Our choice of this chronological framework was rooted in our desire to study the evolution and decline of the book market and the forms of cultural exchanges between the two countries in a long-term period, about fifty years.

3- Results and discussion

To study the circulation of books between France and the Low Countries, we worked on a documentary corpus, until now under-exploited for this kind of question. We concentrated our research on an archival survey devoted to bookshop inventories: the unedited archives

written by inquisitors in the wake of the visits carried out, at the request of the Governor of the Low Countries in 1569, within the bookshops of this territory (now kept in [State Archives in Brussels](#)). We chose to work on the archives related to the County of Hainaut; the more relevant for our project because the descriptions of the *ca* 2.000 books found there are extremely high (name of authors, title, place and date of printing). This territory was also chosen because it is far from great printing towns and great intellectual centres – the best way to assess the real circulation of books – and because this area is a French-speaking market, the common langue to the two countries we’ll study. These lists provide an innovative snapshot of books in circulation within the cities of this county. Due to the outstanding value of this document – unparalleled for this period – we realized an [electronic edition](#), in open access, available on the web site of the leading program ‘[Bibliothèques Virtuelles Humanistes](#)’ of the CESR (launched in 2002), which main goal is to develop a digital library of original documents of the Renaissance period, delivering two types of reliable representations, facsimile and text, closely linked together (Uetani & Porte 2016) [see also point 5].

To renew our knowledge of cultural exchanges between France and the Low Countries, we used the results obtained by research developed in the previous paragraph. We wanted to assess the respective influence of the printing production of each country in its neighbouring market and, by extension, the role of each other in the spread of culture and knowledge in its neighbour. We focused our study on several fields of investigation, especially vernacular literature (1), humanistic literature and censorship (2), medical books (3) [see also the list of publications below in point 6]. These topics have been chosen because they are key topics to understand the forms took by the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern society, the core period of our project.

(1) We worked on the problematic of the distribution and the production of medieval vernacular texts printed in the 16th century in France and in the Low Countries. The analysis of the archive made in 1569 offered a unique

opportunity to reconstruct some printers' catalogue and to explore the problematic of lost vernacular print in early modern Europe. We also observed that, in the 1560's, medieval vernacular texts were still highly appreciated. The caesura of the 1530-1540s, often viewed as representing a break with the medieval literary tradition, was not so abrupt as some have thought, at least not in Hainaut. Paradoxically, even if all editions of the printers of that time are not preserved, the content of the texts reproduced by them are known to us thanks to the numerous reissues. This finding makes us less pessimistic in our understanding of the transmission of medieval vernacular literature.

(2) Visits to the shops of the booksellers settled in Mons in the spring of 1569 revealed that Erasmus deserved to be among the most read authors at that time, at least in Hainaut, where his pedagogical and literary writings are still widely appreciated. On the side of religious texts, his New Testament edition and some writings of piety always seem to meet the spiritual expectations of his readership. The 1550s correspond to the decline of the influence of Christian humanism advocated by Erasmus, a spiritual current that had so galvanized the young generation of humanists and equally alarmed the most conservative theologians. That situation would change in the following years, as the works of Erasmus were eradicated by agents of the Counter-Reformation after he was banned by the Church. Although censorship and expurgation work have been difficult to implement, for obvious material and human reasons, Erasmian heritage has gradually eroded over the years before beginning a long, sometimes hidden, sleep on conventional library shelves.

(3) We analyzed the dissemination of medical books in Hainaut, with a focus on Galen for an exhibition held in the '[Musée royal de Mariemont](#)' (Belgium) from 05/26/2018 to 12/02/2018. Our investigations allowed us to say that, in the 16th century, medicine is still largely impregnated by galenism and ancient tradition, even if one could also find a more modern medicine, based on observation and experimentation. The documentation studied thus offers us a first-rate insight into the

Adam, R.; Lastraioli, C. Bibliopol@: The Book Market in the Renaissance between France and the Low Countries, *LE STUDIUM Multidisciplinary Journal*, 2018, 2, 42-46
<https://doi.org/10.34846/le-studium.165.05.fr.10-2018>

circulation of medical knowledge in the former Low Countries, which is largely dependent on French authors and printers and, to a lesser extent, on the local market. It is also interesting to note that Italy no longer seems to enjoy the prestige it had in the 15th century in the dissemination of medical knowledge.

4- Conclusion

Our fellowship was conceived as a sort of laboratory to test our hypotheses and to improve our methods in order to tweak them and to apply them to a wider area. The firsts results gathered and presented in the previous point convinced us of the appropriateness of our method and the possibility of applying it to other geographical and temporal areas. The best conclusion for this fellowship goes to Marie Curie herself: 'One never notices what has been done; one can only see what remains to be done'.

5- Perspectives of future collaborations with the host laboratory

The CESR was chosen as the host laboratory because it is unquestionably the best research institute to run our project successfully. It has great experience in the fields of research explored in our project (early modern book history, cultural trade, Renaissance culture...) and developed leading projects within these topics.

We worked closely with the team of the program 'Bibliothèques Virtuelles Humanistes' (BVH) conceived in 2002 in partnership with the "Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes" (IRHT, Paris), an independent institute within the CNRS. It is one of the main components of the research program on ancient documents established by the CESR. Its aims are to promote, in open access, the dissemination of Renaissance patrimonial funds and to pursue research at the crossroads of human sciences and digital humanities. Since 2008, it hosts different types of digital material: digital reproduction of early modern books kept in the Centre region and in partner institutions; a textual database, named Epistemon,

reproducing in XML-TEI code major texts from Renaissance (actually focusing on Rabelais and Montaigne); transcriptions or abstracts of notarial documents and manuscripts.

It was an opportunity for us to meet top scholars and PhD fellows in our own fields of research and in others at many conferences, workshops, and study days which were regularly organized in Tours. This was a way to test and to improve our methodology and to discover new ones or new research tools.

In Tours, we developed a digital tool, named '[Bibliopol@: matériaux pour servir à l'histoire du commerce des livres à la Renaissance](#)'. This project aims to offer online digital editions of documents and an information management tool related to the book trade in the Renaissance. In this way, it wishes to contribute to improving our knowledge of the structures of book dissemination, which are the real engine of the Gutenberg revolution, and their evolution. We have already edited the main archive on which we worked. The next step is its conversion in XML-TEI code. For the future, we are looking at feeding this tool with other digital editions.

6- Articles published in the framework of the fellowship

- « La contrefaçon dans les anciens Pays-Bas (XV^e-XVII^e siècles) », in *Histoire et civilisation du livre. Revue internationale*, 13 (2017), p. 17-37.
- « La circulation du livre médical dans les anciens Pays-Bas au second tiers du XVI^e siècle », in *Histoire des Sciences Médicales*, 51 (2017), p. 47-59.
- « The Profession of Printer in the Southern Netherlands before the Reformation. Considerations on Professional, Religious and State Legislations », in W. François, V. Soen, D. Vanysacker (dir.), *Censorship and Catholic Reform in the Early Modern Low Countries*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2017, p. 13-25.
- « Living and Printing in Antwerp in the Late Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries : a Social Enquiry », in E. M. Kavalier, A.-L. Van Bruaene (dir.), *Urban Perspectives on*

Sixteenth-Century Netherlandish Art & Culture, Turnhout, Brepols, 2017, p. 83-98.

- « Printing Books and Bruges during the Fifteenth Century », in E. Hauwaerts *et alii* (éds), *Colard Mansion. Innovating Text and Image in Medieval Bruges*, Gand, Snoeck Editions, 2018, p. 53-57.
- « La réception imprimée de Galien dans les anciens Pays-Bas au XVI^e siècle », in A. Verbanck-Pierard (ed.) *Au temps de Galien. Un médecin grec dans l'empire romain*, Paris, Somogy, édition d'art, 2018, p. 272-278.
- « Spanish Books in Michiel van Hamont's Bookshop (1569): a Case Study of the Distribution of Spanish Books in Sixteenth-Century Brussels », in *Quaerendo: A Journal Devoted to Manuscripts and Printed Books*, 48 (2018), p. 300-316.
- *Vivre et imprimer dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux (des origines à la Réforme)*, 2. vols., Turnhout, Brepols, 2018.
- *Incunabula Namurcensia. Catalogue des incunables conservés à la Bibliothèque universitaire Moretus Plantin de l'Université de Namur et à la Bibliothèque du Centre de Documentation et de Recherche Religieuses (Namur)*, Namur, Presses universitaires de Namur, 2018.
- With C. Sorgeloos (ed.), *Bruxelles et le livre : regard sur cinq siècles d'histoire (XVI^e-XX^e siècle)*, Geneva, Droz, 2018 (*Histoire et civilisation du livre : revue internationale*, t. 14).
- « Tracing Lost Editions of Parisian Printers in the Sixteenth Century: The Case of Jean Bonfons and his Widow », in *The Library: The Transactions of the Bibliographical Society*, 2019 (forthcoming).
- « 'Men and books under watch': the Brussels' book market in the mid-sixteenth century through the inquisitorial archives », in S. Graheli (ed.), *Buying and Selling: The Early Book Trade and the International Marketplace*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2019 (forthcoming)
- With C. Lastraioli (ed.), *Itinéraires du livre italien à la Renaissance : regards sur la Suisse romande, les anciens Pays-Bas et la*

Principauté de Liège, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2019 (forthcoming)

Maine et Antoine du Verdier (CESR-Biblissima, novembre 2015-avril 2016)
(<https://bvh.hypotheses.org/2294>).

7- Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Le Studium, Loire Valley Institute for Advanced Studies, Orleans & Tours, France under Marie Skłodowska-Curie grand agreement no. 665790, European Commission.

We would like to thank in the first place all the STUDIUM team for their welcome and for all the facilities granted: Sophie Gabillet, Aurélien Montagu, Oriane Mousset, Marie-Frédérique Pellerin, Djamila Rachidi and Maurine Villiers. In less than a month, we realized that we become a member of the STUDIUM family. We also think of all the fellows we have had the opportunity to cross and thank them for the quality and level of intellectual exchange. We have a special thought for Prof. Graeme Boone (Ohio State University) and Dr. Jens-Christian Moesgard (Denmark) for our many discussions. This fellowship could not have produced such stimulating results without the help and support of the CESR teams and, in particular, the BVH program. We must express our thanks to the director of the CESR, Prof. Benoist Pierre, our host scientist, Prof. Chiara Lastraioli and all the team of the BVH program: Pierre Aquilon, Sandrine Brueil, Mathieu Duboc, Rémi Jimenes and Toshinori Uetani.

USTC = *Universal Short Title Catalogue*
(<http://ustc.ac.uk>).

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Uetani & Porte 2016 = T. Uetani, G. Porte, *Les « Bibliothèques françaises » de La Croix du Adam*, R.; Lastraioli, C. Bibliopol@: The Book Market in the Renaissance between France and the Low Countries, *LE STUDIUM Multidisciplinary Journal*, 2018, 2, 42-46
<https://doi.org/10.34846/le-studium.165.05.fr.10-2018>