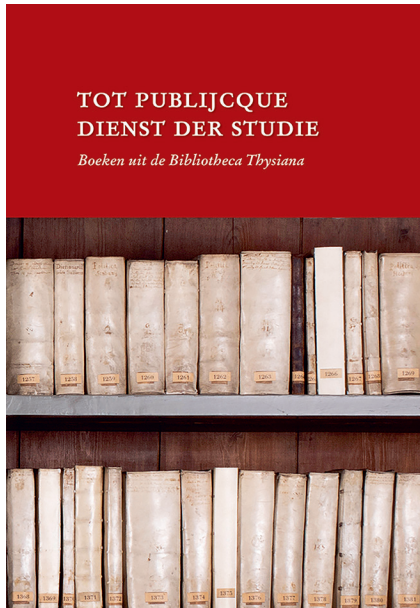


Review

Wim van Anrooij and Paul Hoftijzer (eds.), *Tot publijcque dienst der studie. Boeken uit de Bibliotheca Thysiana*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2023, 247 pp. ISBN 9789464550030.



Dutch library history has gained a book. This volume discusses some ninety books from the *Bibliotheca Thysiana*, which is a still integrally and in situ preserved library in Leiden, and puts a strong emphasis on the diversity of the collection. On the corner of Rapenburg and Groenhazengracht, it has been a public library since 1657. Not the type that emerged in the United States and Europe from the nineteenth century onwards, with a low-threshold reading offer in an atmosphere of instruction and rational recreation, financed with tax money, but an academic library, founded with private funds, to support Leiden students and professors in their work. Complementary to the Leiden University library, in other words, to which some of these readers did not have easy access. And, crucially, a library that would also support the reputation of its founder, Joannes Thysius (1622-1653).

Thysius was born in Amsterdam into a very wealthy merchant family. His grandparents had emigrated to the Dutch Republic from Antwerp after 1585. From 1630 the young Johannes lived in Leiden, where he attended Latin school and later studied law at university. The early inherited family capital enabled him, among other things, to put together an extensive book collection – an activity that came to an end with his death at the age of thirty-one. In his will, he had stipulated that his collection should be kept intact, in a building to be erected for that purpose. There, the books would serve ‘to the public service of study’. In 1657, the library was indeed opened to the public.

By seventeenth-century standards, Thysius’s library was very large: it comprised some four thousand titles, and in addition sixteen thousand pamphlets. His intention to make the books available to a wider public was probably inspired by the great English and French examples of his time: Thysius had visited both the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris, two institutions that embodied the seventeenth-century

Bibliotheca Publica idea. In his will, the founder had also decided that curators would be appointed for the library until eternity, who would ensure the spending of an annual acquisition budget. The latter explains why the shelves of the *Bibliotheca Thysiana* include books dating from long after Thysius's death. The last acquisitions took place in the eighteenth century; more recent additions came through donations from various sources.

The first catalogue of the collection appeared around 1668 – only one copy has survived – but the most representative is the one compiled in 1879 by Pieter Anton Tiele, at that time the special collections librarian at Leiden University Library. The list of content headings in Tiele's catalogue shows how versatile the collection was. Today the collection is still on display in the house on Rapenburg; it is fully accessible on-line in the public catalogue of Leiden University Library, where the individual items can also be consulted.

According to the seventeenth-century French library theorist Gabriel Naudé, author of the well-known *Advis pour dresser une bibliothèque* (1627) and later librarian of the Mazarine, content versatility was the ultimate quality criterion for a publicly accessible library: 'A library set up for public use should be universal.' Today, that broad content spectrum seems to be both the Thysiana library's strength and its weakness. On the one hand, many fields of science are represented in it, mainly with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century publications from all corners of Europe. But on the other hand, one can hardly point to a subject area for which this library can be considered an indispensable core collection, except for the history of mysticism, as the building at Rapenburg houses a sizeable subcollection on the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), acquired by donation.

This lack of a clear focus, or to put it more positively: this diversity of content, is also evident in the volume under discussion here, in which ninety books from the collection are presented by as many specialists in the various fields. Most are connected to Leiden University. Like just about any self-respecting heritage library, the Thysiana now has a prestigious publication that presents a wide selection of all the fine works in the collection. The conventions of the genre are familiar: diverse authors choose a work and discuss it from different perspectives, and on the facing page the book is reproduced with care.

Works like this one are difficult to discuss systematically and critically: the diversity of content, form, geography, and chronology is simply too great. In this selection, some focal points can be discerned: not surprisingly, the emphasis is on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century publications in Latin and Dutch, and these works were mainly published in the Dutch Republic. Yet it seems very much as if the compilers of the book mainly wanted to play off the broad versatility as an asset, without adding a complete synthetic overview of the collection. Thus, the reader has to make do without information about the mutual relationship between the content sections, without an overview of the places and years of publication, the languages represented, the dominant bibliographical formats, the most represented authors, the names of booksellers or previous owners – in short, without additional information that would enable the reader to situate each individual book discussed in the profile of the entire collection.

This probably relates to the fact that this volume is not the first publication that has recently been dedicated to the *Bibliotheca Thysiana*. In 2016, Esther Mourits obtained her doctorate with a historical study of the library, which was very elegantly published by Van Tilt Publishers the same year. She dissected the book collection as a whole, discussing in

particular the categories of law, medicine, and history in depth. In 2017, Van Anrooij and Hoftijzer, the editors of the volume under discussion, also published a conference volume on new research opportunities in the archives of the Bibliotheca Thysiana. The sample discussed here is therefore complementary to two other publications, and is also presented as such: ‘The editors believe that with this publication a trilogy has been completed’, the preface reads. Anyone studying the three publications will confirm that the Bibliotheca Thysiana is rightly recommended as a direct insight ‘into the heart of intellectual and cultural life in Leiden and the Dutch Republic around the mid-seventeenth century’ (31).

Still, the reader is left with the feeling that the work is unfinished. What about, for instance, a thorough analysis of the pamphlets and other ephemera in the collection? Naudé’s *Advis* – a book not in Thysius’s library but which Esther Mourits says he must certainly have read – contained the recommendation ‘not to neglect anything that might be relevant and have some use, such as libels’. Although the pamphlets of the Thysiana have been described in a four-volume catalogue published between 1882 and 1934, they too deserve thorough examination now more than ever, given the enormous attention for ephemera within book historical research. Time for a new volume?

This book achieves its presumed main objective with brilliance (and that is to be taken literally, as the book is printed on glossy paper): it shows how rich and diverse Johannes Thysius’s collection really is and for what research topics it can provide material. Furthermore, like all other books in this genre, it is a nice stepping stone for those who want to delve into the rich history of the book in Europe.

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