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Review van Dirk van Miert, Illuster Onderwijs. Het Amsterdamse Athenaem in de Gouden Eeuw, 1632-1704 = Illustrious education: The Amsterdam Athenaeum in the Golden Age, 1632-1704

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Dirk van Miert. *Illuster Onderwijs: Het Amsterdamse Athenaeum in de Gouden Eeuw, 1632–1704*.

Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2005. 431 pp. index. append. illus. tpls. chron. bibl. €37.50. ISBN: 90-351-2808-7.

“The great Revolt” against Habsburg power which led to the institution of the Dutch Republic, writes Jonathan Israel in his *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477–1806* (Oxford, 1995, 170), “was triggered by the Sea-Beggars” on 1 April 1572, when they seized the small town of Brill in Holland. From there the revolt spread and by 1575 it had become clear to Alva, Governor-General of the Netherlands for Philip II of Spain, that the Spanish hold on the North could no longer be sustained. In effect, it was in these three crucial years that the revolt survived, as a paragraph heading in Israel’s book has it. The revolt was also an uprising for intellectual and cultural independence. Before 1575 students from the Northern Low Countries had sought higher education elsewhere at institutions in Louvain, Cologne, or Rostock and further afield in France, Scotland, Italy, or Spain. The new Dutch authorities did not hesitate: William of Orange (“Le Taciturne”) himself founded the (Protestant) university at Leiden in 1575 as one of the ways to ensure intellectual and cultural separation from the (Catholic) Habsburg lands. Other cities and provinces of the republic expeditiously followed suit — Franeker in 1585, Groningen, already planning in 1595, Harderwijk established an Illustrious School in 1600, Deventer set up an Athenaeum in 1630 and Amsterdam one in 1632, and Utrecht had a university in 1636 — and there were also many abortive attempts.

Dirk van Miert’s thorough and engagingly written study treats the first century of the Amsterdam Athenaeum, which he understands in continuity with the University of Amsterdam, officially founded in 1877. He considers the leitmotif of the intellectual tradition of more than 350 years at Amsterdam to be the theme of “the wise merchant.” Two famous late humanists gave orations at the solemn inaugural of the new Athenaeum: Gerardus Johannes Vossius (1577–1649) on the use of history and Caspar Barlaeus (1584–1648) — also the author of the famed *Rerum per octennium in Brasilia* (*History of Eight Years in Brazil*), closely connected to the mercantile exploits of the West-Indian Company — appositely entitled his oration *Mercator sapiens* (*The Wise Merchant*). This thematic, mercantile approach to learning is still a hallmark of the University of Amsterdam. Van Miert points out the various usages of that metaphor in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and he bases his idea of the intellectual cohesion of the history of the Amsterdam school on it.

On pages 21 and 22 Van Miert outlines his *status quaestionis*: his book — originally a PhD dissertation at Amsterdam in 2004 — attempts to answer questions which are still relevant for higher education today: what has priority, teaching or research? Was the educational program “general,” “specialist,” or “practical”? Was knowledge considered as autonomous or rather auxilliary to social, political, and mercantile concerns? How did the level of the courses at the Athenaeum

compare to similar ones at the universities? What format did the teaching have? Was the Athenaeum regarded as an intermediary school between Latin grammar schools and the universities? Finally, he is concerned with the issue of religious tolerance: was there more room for “new science and scholarship” at Amsterdam than elsewhere? Here Van Miert focuses especially on the reception of what is called the “pure rationalism” of Descartes vis-à-vis Aristotle’s notion that “knowledge lies in the senses.”

Illuster Onderwijs has four main parts: part 1 treats the history of the foundation of the Athenaeum, part 2 the organization and teaching forms employed, part 3 the contents of the curriculum (dividing it into five parts, namely, rhetoric, philosophy, law, medicine, and theology), and part 4 is a conclusion in which the Athenaeum is treated successively as a traditional institute of education, a municipal undertaking, and a player in the academic community of the seventeenth century. Van Miert usefully ends each main section of his study with conclusions, so that if one is not interested in the specifics of one theme, it is easy to understand how it fits into his general survey. In the course of this study, the author treats all the main — and often secondary — scholars attached in some way or other to the Athenaeum, and he usefully gives the most important bibliographical information on them. Important, too, is his listing of the disputations at the Athenaeum in the seventeenth century, basing himself on the famed card register of them untiringly compiled by Sape van der Woude, who was also the editor (in 1967) of Barlaeus’s *Mercator sapiens*.

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