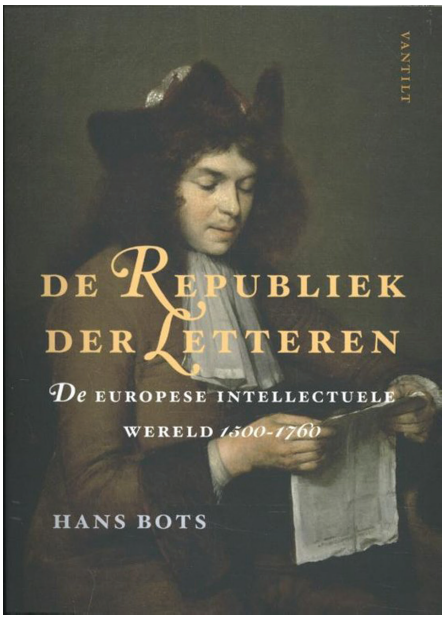
# Review

Hans Bots, *De republiek der letteren. De Europese intellectuele wereld, 1500-1760*, Nijmegen, Vantilt, 2018, 224 pp. ISBN 9-789-460-04372-7.




Hans Bots dedicated his career to the study of the Republic of Letters, initially by closely cooperating with his former supervisor Paul Dibon, who made the case for the Republic of Letters. Already in 1975, as Bots relates in the book under review (p. 112), Dibon argued for studying correspondence *networks*. Such a remark is characteristic of Bots' new book, which in many ways is not actually new, but takes stock of the results of two generations' research into the Republic of Letters. Since Bots guided to completion numerous dissertations about aspects of his favourite subject, a book in Dutch for a large audience about the remarkable phenomenon of the 'Republic of Letters' was long overdue.

The first part of the book condenses the contents of perhaps the only general introduction to the subject that has ever been published – the book that Bots authored with Françoise Waquet: *La République des Lettres* (1997) and that has only seen one translation (into Italian, 2005). The first long chapter gives a useful conceptual history of the actors' category *respublica literaria* and proceeds to a kind of anthropological description of the workings of a European scholarly network, in which the exchange of ideas, data, books, and stories about persons was facilitated by means of letters that could be delivered relatively easy due to an efficient postal system (p. 128). As is well known, in the Republic of Letters scholars and scientists were supposed to bridge differences in religion, politics, philosophy, and language. The numerous delightful anecdotes that Bots serves up, indicate that the ideal of sharing knowledge was often hampered by personal friction or rational calculation in the interconfessional traffic. Yet, if it is true that the seventeenth-century scholar Johann Graevius spent twenty

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percent of his income on postage (p. 129), we can understand why libraries across Europe still hold hundreds of thousands of early modern letters.

The second half of Bots' book zooms in on the Franco-Dutch intellectual relations, which were cemented by two waves of francophone Protestant migration (Walloons at the end of the sixteenth century and Huguenots at the end of the seventeenth). They made the Dutch Republic into the centre of the Reformed diaspora. Four chapters introduce the institutions that made the virtual Republic of Letters tangible: universities (and academies), the medium of the letter (and its sociology), the book trade (in particular the central role of printers based in the United Provinces), and the periodical press. Bots celebrates the relatively large freedom of the press, in particular in the chapter on the printing industry – which is focused on Dutch printers' dynasties and more detailed than the other chapters. Naturally, this story is closely connected to the rich chapter about journals. The chapter on correspondence provides a fine introduction to the practicalities of early modern scholarly epistolary culture.

I do have two concerns, however. The first pertains to geography. In Bots' view, the *République des Lettres* was dominated by the French Kingdom and the Dutch Republic, with Paris and the cities of western Holland (Amsterdam/Leiden/The Hague) as capitals. He does mention the role of London and Oxbridge and John Locke's productive stay in Amsterdam, but the Nordic and Italian provinces of the Republic of Letters are treated piecemeal, and the Eastern European and Iberian ones are neglected. We read in passing that Vienna, Berlin, Hamburg, Halle, Dresden, Breslau, and Cologne were centres of learning (p. 189), but we learn little to nothing about those places. Bots thus confirms a master narrative about the Dutch-Huguenot libertine character of the Republic of Letters, which he himself has helped to construct in the course of his career. Yet, contrary to what he says in the conclusion about the Republic of Letters stretching primarily over Western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I think the sixteenth-century centres of learning were located more in Central and Southern Europe. In ignoring Göttingen, Halle, the *historia literaria* tradition, and the *Buchmessen* for the later period, Bots basically allows the entire Lutheran Republic of Letters to disappear from the picture.

Partly, the image is skewed due to lack of study of other areas, but the focus on the Dutch Republic and its relations with France is also deliberate, since Bots' own research focused primarily on Franco-Dutch relations. Moreover, this book targets a Dutch audience, which is expected to be interested primarily in the Dutch aspect of the 'European intellectual world' from the subtitle. There would have a been a simple solution: a more focused subtitle could have easily prevented the charge of bias.

Secondly, a more explicit acknowledgement of the temporal and geographical limitations would also have supported Bots' choice to focus on the seventeenth century and largely ignore the Erasmian era. The chronology is not only skewed in a historical sense, but also in a historiographical one. Literature after 2005 is hardly taken into account. Some large correspondence editions of the past few decades are mentioned on p. 137, but major ones, some of which started already decades ago, are ignored (Beza, Lipsius, Scaliger). Taking more recent literature into account could have prevented off-guard remarks such as that the publication of the letters of Descartes in the seventeenth century helped

people to understand his philosophy. Surely, the publisher promised this, but readers were disappointed, since the most important letters were missing: these were the ones that Descartes exchanged with Elisabeth of Bohemia, who consciously prevented these letters from circulating (Pal 2012, pp. 256-257). Another consequence of the preponderance of twentieth-century historiography is that the 'digital' turn in the study of the Republic of Letters is ignored: the Oxford Cultures of Knowledge Project, the Early Modern Letters Online finding tool, the Stanford Mapping the Republic of Letters platform, the Italian Archilet project, the Dutch ePistolarium, and the international COST Action IS1310 'Reassembling the Republic of Letters – a Digital Framework for multi-lateral collaboration on Europe's intellectual history 1500-1800' are never mentioned. This is a missed opportunity, because Bots himself (in the theses added in a *separatum* to his 1971 dissertation) prophesized an 'electronic memory, including an annex research lab with sufficient financial means, to optimize the use of seventeenth-century historical sources, such as correspondences, and to yield more specific knowledge about the intellectual life in the seventeenth century' (thesis VIII). Thus, the map of Europe on p. 22 that shows the locations of Erasmus' correspondents appears bleak in comparison to the interactive geo-social visualization of Erasmus' epistolary network that Christoph Kudella has created.

The twentieth-century character of the book also transpires in the style (with references to the 'Spanish yoke' or the 'Aristotelian yoke'). Sometimes the prose sounds naively nostalgic (p. 111) or idealistic: the journalists living in 'Nederland' (*sic*) 'brought light to places where hitherto superstition and prejudice had led people to wander in darkness' (p. 179). Such a description jars with Bots' own observation that the 'independence' and 'critical attitude' of the journalists was curbed by their own 'strict auto-censorship' (p. 185). There are more phrases that sound antiquated: the reason for the (alleged) pragmatism and the 'modern scientific approach' of Dutch university teaching is sought in the 'Dutch people's character', which would have been shaped by the spirit of Erasmus (pp. 82-86). This explanation is difficult to square with Bots' own emphasis on the enormous influence of French scholars and professors on the Dutch curricula – including Descartes, who in Bots' account is almost repositioned as a practical philosopher.

For modern scholars, then, the book seems a little outdated, an impression that is reinforced by the fact that many recent American and German scholars, such as Alexander Bevilacqua, Dan Edelstein, Carol Pal, Karl Enenkel, Martin Mulsow, Herbert Jaumann, and Kaspar Risbjerg Eskildsen are not mentioned in the bibliography, which is overall limited when it comes to work published after 2005. To be sure, recent literature is not absent there, but I did not recognize their impact on the text (and since this is a popularizing book, the number of footnotes has obviously been kept to an absolute minimum). The bibliography, which is set up in a thematic way, is a guide to further reading intended for an interested general public, rather than an acknowledgement of literature actually perused.

We should take this book for what it is: a long-awaited and elegant introduction to a grand European phenomenon that has been lost in the fissures between national historiographies. Written in clear and accessible prose, and lavishly illustrated, it is a descriptive introduction rather than an analytical study based on new historiographical questions. Rich in detail, it vividly reinvokes a lost world that was created by a pan-European, bottom-up social network bent on the free exchange of knowledge and partly

succeeding in practicing the ideal of 'Open Science'. Bots' book does not only fill a gap; it also does justice to a cosmopolitan success-story that has been marginalized since historiography turned national in the nineteenth century, but that might appeal to the internationalism of modern academia and to a European Union in search of a truly 'European' cultural past.

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