

# Christophe Plantin's Correspondence



DIRK IMHOF

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*Perspectives on  
Life and Work as a Publisher  
in 16th-century Europe*



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## Foreword

Landlines, WhatsApp, emails, Twitter. Nowadays it's so easy to keep in touch with your nearest and dearest even when they're halfway around the globe; indeed, it's easy to keep abreast of events wherever they're happening on the planet. In the 16th century, letters were the only means of staying in touch. An impressive network of contacts translated into an equally impressive amount of correspondence.

Christophe Plantin was a networker *par excellence*. Through his letters, he was able to keep in touch with friend and foe alike, and with leading scholars, scientists and intellectuals spread throughout the whole of Europe and the Spanish Empire. Plantin's correspondence was written in French, Latin, Spanish and Italian. He kept a great many draft copies of his letters and these form part of the Plantin Press archive. This entire archive spanning the period 1555–1876 is preserved at the Museum Plantin-Moretus to this day and it provides a wealth of information when studying book printing and economic and intellectual life in 16th- and 17th-century Western Europe. The expansive family archives also paint a detailed portrait of how people lived from the 16th to the 19th century. It was precisely because of this that in 2001 UNESCO included the whole archive in its 'Memory of the World' register.

Over a century ago, Max Rooses, the celebrated expert on Rubens and also the first curator of the Museum Plantin-Moretus, already recognized the enormous value of Plantin's letters. He took upon himself the mammoth task of transcribing all 1,515 of Plantin's preserved letters and publishing them in a 6-volume book. The Bodleian Library has placed the entire publication online. Museum Plantin-Moretus is systematically digitizing the letters and is also making them available to view online in their original version.

What's more, there is now the release of this accessible publication. Do Plantin's letters shed any light on what he truly thought? Plantin's correspondence can be a somewhat dry affair; however, Dirk Imhof's vibrant text has not only brought the letters to life, but also the man who wrote them.

For that reason this publication is an anthology of letters giving us greater insight not only into Plantin the man, but also the spirit of the 16th century, including themes that remain burning issues even today, such as international trade, war, censorship, loss of reputation, father-daughter relationships, and more besides.

So, can we now curl up in an armchair to read Plantin's letters at our leisure? Most certainly we can! And may I wish you the very greatest enjoyment in doing just that.

Nabilla Ait Daoud  
Alderman for Culture, City of Antwerp







## Introduction

Why should the letters written by Christophe Plantin – a 16th-century book publisher and printer – be of interest to us today? In 1883, Max Rooses wrote that publication of Plantin’s letters was needed, as it was within this collection of his letters that we would discover information about the works printed by Plantin, the history of printing and the book trade, science and literature, and the politics and everyday lives of people during the 1500s. Indisputably, there is no better source for matters relating to the book trade of that time than Plantin’s correspondence. Moreover, it is within this collection of letters that we find the personal testimony of someone who was running a business during a period of insurrection and war, who was continually seeking out financial means to ensure the survival of his firm, and who, simultaneously, was also writing letters to his friends about his health, and to his daughters about his opinions concerning life. In other words, Plantin’s letters are quite different from the collections of letters written by monarchs and bishops or those written by scholars and humanists in which affairs of state and matters of intense debate come to the fore. These letters by Plantin bring us into the heart of life’s practicalities in difficult times. As we read them, it is as if we are peering over his shoulder, privy to a broad spectrum of the component parts of his life and work, which were never a bed of roses, but rather a continual struggle that met with great triumphs as well as deep disappointments.

Anyone reading about Christophe Plantin and his output is usually served up a vast quantity of superlatives: approximately 2,000 editions were published by him, renowned and acclaimed throughout the whole of Europe; his *Biblia Regia* was the greatest typographical feat achieved in the 16th century, etc. The number of his letters that have been preserved is also unusually great. His correspondence, published between 1883 and 1918 in nine volumes, consists of more than 1,500 entries. The immense scale of this resource has deterred not a few readers, fearing they would no longer be able to see the wood for the trees. What is more, the language in which the letters were written probably constitutes a still greater obstacle. This is because the letters are often written in less than accessible Latin or antique French, Spanish and Ital-

ian, which hinders easy comprehension. This is further aggravated by a context that necessitates background knowledge of the persons involved and the events under discussion. Consequently, only a few readers are able to pick up these tomes, sit back at their ease and pore through Plantin's letters. By way of remedying this and making Plantin's letters more easily accessible, this introduction is followed by a selection of some fifty of his letters (translated into modern English), each of which is accompanied by a commentary to clarify the context.

But first, I would like to provide some general background information about this collection of letters: how they were preserved, the languages in which they were written, the content of the letters and how they should be interpreted.

## The collection of Plantin's letters

Plantin's published correspondence amounts to more than 1,500 letters. This is a vast quantity, but Max Rooses and Jan Denucé (the publishers of these letters at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries) also included among their number several from members of Plantin's family, such as letters between Plantin's daughter Martine and her husband, Jan Moretus, or documents concerning the bookshop, such as the application for a privilege. Furthermore, they decided on additionally including in their publication letters dating from the months following Plantin's death on 1 July 1589. As a result of this, actual letters to and from Plantin are somewhat fewer in number.

Some correspondents stand out immediately owing to the large number of letters that Plantin addressed to them. At a total of 118 letters, the secretary to King Philip II of Spain, Gabriel de Çayas, is the correspondent with the greatest number of letters to his name. According to family tradition, Plantin had become acquainted with him early on during his first years in Antwerp. It was to De Çayas that Plantin is said to have brought a leather-tooled casket when he was stabbed in the shoulder. The first letter to remain preserved from Plantin to De Çayas is from as early as 1566 and their correspondence continued until Plantin's death. This secretary to the Spanish king was the intermediary between Plantin and the Spanish court. In terms of quantity – some ninety letters – the next in line after this was Benedictus Arias Montanus, a chaplain to Philip II. Montanus came to Antwerp in 1568 to help Plantin with

the publication of the *Biblia Regia*. He resided in Antwerp for several years, becoming fast friends with Plantin in that period. When he returned to Spain in 1575, both men maintained frequent correspondence. The third in this list of correspondents – numbering some fifty letters – is Cardinal Granvelle, Plantin's patron who performed invaluable services in Rome on Plantin's behalf.

The majority of these letters are ones written by Plantin. As with every good 16th-century merchant, Plantin also kept books in which he retained copies of his letters. To keep abreast of the agreements made and settlement of transactions between traders, it was important to be able to keep track of what had been written on which date and to whom. Such statements and draft versions by Plantin are contained in three bundles kept at the Plantin-Moretus Museum. A fourth, smaller bundle contains the drafts that his son-in-law Jan Moretus made for letters signed by Plantin. Most of the copies were written by Plantin himself. In 1567 and the years immediately afterwards, the copies were written by his daughter Martine; others were by the hand of another son-in-law, Franciscus Raphelengius, and increasingly in the latter years of Plantin's life they came to be written by Jan Moretus. Sometimes, in the case of letters considered important enough, several drafts or copies would be made.

In a limited number of cases, there is a Plantin copy kept at the archives of the Plantin-Moretus Museum, while the letter actually dispatched is held by another institution. Examples include Plantin's letter to Pope Gregory XIII and one to De Çayas, secretary to the King of Spain, which are kept respectively at the Vatican Apostolic Archive and the General Archive of Simancas, as well as at the Plantin-Moretus Museum. There are instances of letters by Plantin kept solely in one collection or another, but where no copy of them exists in Plantin's books. In other words, the copies of his letters are far from comprehensive. Just why they have disappeared is unknown. The volumes of collected letters were bundled together only later. Therefore, it is quite possible that some letters were left out and never incorporated in the volumes, subsequently becoming lost.

Less comprehensive still is the collection of letters written *to* Plantin. Although the twenty or so letter bundles, each one amounting to some 500 pages and dating from 1555 to 1641, would appear to be overwhelmingly comprehensive, closer examination shows that only a fraction of the letters received

was preserved. For example, only six letters from De Çayas to Plantin have been kept. Likewise, there are only three from Arias Montanus to Plantin and three to Jan Moretus. In the case of a great many correspondents not a single letter has been retained. The upshot of this is that interpreting the letters is made difficult at times because we lack those received letters. It is as if we were trying to follow a conversation between two people while catching only a few snatches of dialogue from one of them.

One significant gap in Plantin's collection of letters concerns those dating from his first years as a publisher. We know of none from the years before he settled in Antwerp, and we have barely a handful from the first fifteen years up until 1565. The oldest preserved letter written to him dates from 1550, followed next by one from 1558; the oldest preserved letter that he himself wrote is from 1561. This means that we have no letters at all for around the first forty years of Plantin's life. Therefore, those intriguing years when he settled in Antwerp and by mysterious means became Antwerp's greatest printer almost out of thin air are a vacuum in the correspondence. Also letters dating from 1583 to 1585, when he was in Leiden, were not taken with him to Antwerp and thus were not preserved.

I am convinced that new Plantin letters will turn up in the future. Owing to a more thorough inventory being made of letter collections in other institutions, it is highly likely that letters from Plantin will see the light of day again. I remain hopeful, too, that researchers will be granted access to the small bundle of Plantin letters in what is termed the De Renette collection. At the end of the 19th century the last owner of the Plantin house, Edward Moretus, was lent assistance by his son-in-law the Baron de Renette in putting all the documents and papers in order. The baron was allowed to pick out as remuneration some of the original letters by each of the members of the Plantin and Moretus family. After many peregrinations, part of this collection ended up in the Royal Library of Belgium and a part was repurchased by the Plantin-Moretus Museum. The folder containing Plantin's own letters did not form part of these acquisitions. It would be good to know where they are being kept.

## The languages in which Plantin's letters were written

The 1,157 letters in Plantin's name as preserved in the nine published volumes of correspondence can be categorized according to language as follows:

Latin: 556

French: 511

Spanish: 80

Italian: 7

Dutch: 3.

These last three letters in Dutch relate to three petitions to the City of Antwerp, probably compiled by Jan Moretus. It is interesting to see how the letters to De Çayas were written sometimes in Latin, sometimes in French and sometimes in Spanish. In three instances, Plantin began in Spanish, only to switch into Latin midway.

For the most part, letters addressed to Plantin were also written in Latin, French or Spanish, and only in exceptional cases in Italian or Dutch. Letters from the printer Jan Maes in Leuven are in Dutch. Did Plantin understand Dutch? Perhaps, after having spent years living in Antwerp, Plantin had learned enough Dutch to be able to follow the letters, but not enough to be able to write letters in Dutch as well.

## Interpreting Plantin's correspondence

It is fascinating to be able to read Plantin's letters and learn what he thought about the political situation, and how he dealt with authors and colleagues/competitors, etc. It is to our great advantage that we have a first-hand account of the information we seek in the very words of the key player. On the other hand, we also need to be wary of that information. At times, people like to appear better than is borne out by their actions in reality; at times, people can be economical with the facts in order to cast themselves in a better light. This is certainly true of Plantin, who would seem to have written his letters ever mindful of what he wanted to get out of his correspondent or what his correspondent expected of him, recalibrating some facts to suit the situation accordingly. Examples of this occur with regularity in the letters selected for this publication. The most telling of these are letters to members of the Span-



ish court and to Gabriel de Çayas in particular. The object of a large number of these letters is to secure the payment of outstanding invoices. It is no wonder that Plantin should have wanted in these letters to emphasize his loyalty to the Spanish regime so thoroughly, if not to say excessively. Whether these were also his genuine feelings is another matter.

Equally, in correspondence with authors we see how he does not always keep strictly to the truth when he must seek to excuse his delay in printing a book or when errors appear in the publication. This is why the preservation of the greater part of his accounts is such a real reason for rejoicing. We are thus able to compare what he writes with the information found in his books (journals, ledgers and cash books), payments to employees and other documents. Both sources continually complement each other. In other words, when writing a biography of Plantin, it is not merely a case of building on select quotations from his letters, but it is also important to understand the proper context of each letter and compare it with other information.

If Plantin does not always wear his heart on his sleeve in his letters and his manner is often moulded to suit the intended reader, are there then any letters in which he did write what he was sincerely thinking? His best friends were men from Antwerp to whom he had no need to write letters, because he could speak with them whenever he wished. I am doubtful whether a person such as Arias Montanus was so good a friend that Plantin wrote to him completely openly. Montanus was, after all, a representative of the Spanish court, and I think it certain Plantin would have taken that into account. His letters to someone like Alexander Grapheus are far more relaxed. Plantin had known him for a long time in Antwerp before Grapheus moved to Cologne and Hamburg. It is plausible that what he wrote to his daughters in the few letters to them that remain were written from the depths of his heart. His less than optimistic view of life concerning submission and hard labour does not appear to be a fabrication, but was rather an unshakeable conviction to which he clung. What is particularly remarkable for someone so frequently absent from home for long periods is that not a single letter survives either to or from his wife, Jeanne Rivière. Her perspective on matters would have been extremely interesting.

That both the correspondence and the accounts of a 16th-century publisher should have remained preserved is quite a stroke of fortune, and the exceptional nature of that fact cannot be overestimated. Other examples of corre-



spondence by publishers or printers in the 1500s are thin on the ground. There is the notable *Amerbachkorrespondenz* dating from the 15th and 16th centuries containing exchanges by the Basel printer Johannes Amerbach and his successors. Other collections are smaller in scale, such as that containing the letters of the Venetian book dealer Giovanni Bartolomeo Gabiano. However, the collection of Plantin's letters and documents stands head and shoulders above these, both in terms of the scale and diversity of the documents, as well as because Plantin as a publisher and tradesman was actively engaged in a great many European countries and his network was so widespread. Consequently, it is invaluable as a source of information on book history and the intellectual and cultural life of the 16th century: a precious resource that cannot be treasured enough.

Duplici nomine mihi percuranda fuerunt tuae litterae vix doctiss.  
tunc Eruditiss. Gius D. Franc. Fabricio

Quod mentis in sequentibus Diem dyabolus professionem vix doctiss.  
id profecto fuisse mihi fuisse omni meo potestate no dubito mihi enim  
invidiis tuis libris <sup>quibus aliquando</sup> potuisset <sup>magis</sup> <sup>transmissis</sup> <sup>illis</sup> <sup>publicariis</sup>  
Typos nostros ex paperis tibi paravi magis a vobis doctiss.  
tibi <sup>doctiss.</sup> commendatus fuisse fuit Deus opt magis ut vobis  
et ~~antiquis~~ ~~nostri~~ ~~opinionem~~ ~~de~~ ~~me~~ ~~ad~~ ~~debet~~ ~~repta~~ ~~respondere~~  
possum Ego in sumis et ~~renabitis~~ ~~meis~~ ~~omnes~~ ~~aliquando~~ ~~eston~~  
~~one~~ ~~possum~~ ~~erat~~ ~~Ego~~ ~~namque~~ ~~omnes~~ ~~meos~~ ~~opere~~ ~~et~~ ~~vobis~~ ~~pollentem~~ ~~me~~ ~~ga~~  
~~tum~~ ~~et~~ ~~mitte~~ ~~itaque~~ ~~omnia~~ ~~que~~ ~~volueris~~ ~~ego~~ ~~quatenus~~ ~~in~~ ~~me~~ ~~scitum~~  
~~aut~~ ~~renabere~~ ~~ut~~ ~~commendate~~ ~~prout~~ ~~exemplum~~ ~~id~~ ~~exemplum~~ ~~ad~~ ~~vobis~~ ~~ad~~ ~~debet~~  
~~exemplum~~ ~~noque~~ ~~longe~~ ~~ferre~~ ~~me~~ ~~ingentem~~ ~~me~~ ~~substanti~~ ~~substanti~~  
et Quando autem plurimum de adiutorio quibus mentionem  
fuisse esse auctorem ab alio nunc etiam vobis mitto ut etiam responde  
posset nunc et sic aliquid sciant deponere in ~~libro~~ ~~observari~~ ~~dignum~~  
quod tibi fuerit mitto statim ad nos exemplum tunc quod bene  
postea impressum ~~et~~ ~~transmissum~~ ~~pollentem~~ ~~et~~ ~~si~~ ~~quid~~ ~~quod~~  
~~Salvatus~~ ~~impunitum~~ ~~et~~ ~~in~~ ~~meo~~ ~~verum~~ ~~idemque~~ ~~per~~ ~~de~~ ~~tribus~~ ~~que~~  
ad nos ~~me~~ ~~debetis~~ ~~bona~~ ~~fide~~ ~~nos~~ ~~fortunatos~~ ~~pollentem~~ ~~et~~ ~~omnes~~  
perio ~~me~~ ~~granaturos~~ ~~pollentem~~ ~~Quia~~ ~~nona~~ ~~si~~ ~~mundis~~  
pud. ~~et~~ ~~se~~ ~~got~~ ~~sequenti~~ ~~catalogo~~ ~~arripo~~ ~~ex~~ ~~Valo~~ ~~vix~~  
Dorass. ~~Anturapio~~ ~~et~~ ~~iii~~ ~~Nonas~~ ~~Octobris~~ ~~(1661)~~

Eruditiss. Gius D. Stephano  
Vigilio Reverendiss. D. Cardinalis  
Oramellano a Secretis

Ecce postremum tandem folium tabulae tuae fastidiorum  
vix eruditiss. mitto perorare ut cum quo per me  
fidei <sup>poterit</sup> ~~commendata~~ ~~remittas~~ ~~deoque~~ ~~postea~~ ~~impresso~~  
~~cautem~~ ~~ad~~ ~~me~~ ~~Integras~~ ~~et~~ ~~ex~~ ~~empla~~ ~~ad~~ ~~te~~  
quot ~~de~~ ~~significanter~~ ~~mittam~~ ~~et~~ ~~si~~ ~~missis~~ ~~prout~~  
adornari in relectibus suis ad exemplum <sup>manuscripta</sup>  
fuerit ~~de~~ ~~pingi~~ ~~meo~~ ~~eademque~~ ~~opere~~ ~~et~~ ~~quod~~ ~~et~~ ~~quod~~  
me absente et inuito parte ~~sententia~~ ~~tua~~ ~~voluerit~~  
sunt ~~omnes~~ ~~et~~ ~~si~~ ~~quid~~ ~~aliud~~ ~~prout~~ ~~observare~~  
postremum ~~commendatione~~ ~~dignum~~ ~~omnes~~ ~~populique~~ ~~et~~ ~~omnes~~  
dantur Interea laborabam in ~~ordinandis~~ ~~munificentiis~~  
ad me ~~missis~~ ~~ita~~ ~~ut~~ ~~libro~~ ~~arripo~~ ~~spem~~ ~~illud~~ ~~nobis~~

# 1 Plantin to Franciscus Fabricius, 5 October [1561]

## The oldest known letter from Plantin: in search of authors.

Plantin-Moretus Museum, Arch. 7, *Copie de lettres de Christophe Plantin 1561–1572*, fol. 4r.  
Corr. Plantin no. 5, I, pp. 15–16.

### Translation

To the most learned Franciscus Fabricius,  
That the carrier delayed his departure to the following day is, learned sir, undoubtedly an auspicious omen for me. Nothing more pleasant could have reached me than your letter (which I would have missed had you not sent it), especially as it gives me to understand that our type and paper found favour with you and that I had been recommended to you by a learned man. God grant that I live up to the opinion you have formed of me. Send whatever you like. I shall do my best to ensure that the text is returned to you printed without errors (the copy allowing) and you will never take me for a thankless man. Since you bring up Plutarch's work on the raising of children, I hereby send you the same text in another's translation, so that you can compare to see if there is anything worth mentioning. If there is, send your copy to us directly and we shall return it to you printed not long after. Anything you give us, we promise in good faith to complete in the same way and not to burden the purchasers with a high price. The new works to appear for this Frankfurt fair, you can see in the enclosed catalogue. Farewell, learned sir, Antwerp, 5 October [1561].

## Commentary

This is the oldest letter from Christophe Plantin to be preserved. However, there are a few letters addressed *to* him that are older in date. Of these the oldest is from as early as 1548 or 1549. It was written in Caen on 16 June by a certain Jehan Leclerc and concerns the dispatch and sale of textiles. There is then a jump of almost ten years before we encounter a few further letters dating from 1558. These were written by the Parisian book dealer Martin Lejeune (Martinus Juvenis) and relate to book trading between him and Plantin.

The oldest letter from Plantin himself dates to as late as 1561. When he wrote this letter to Franciscus Fabricius, then the rector of the grammar school in Duisburg, Plantin had already been active as a printer and publisher for some years. His earliest known project is a book that he printed in 1555 for the Antwerp publisher Joannes Bellerus. It was a short work on the education of young girls of noble stock written in Italian and French by the Italian author Giovanni Michele Bruto (*La institutione di una fanciulla nata nobilmente. L'institution d'une fille de noble maison*). Frequently during that period he also printed editions for another publisher. For example, Antonius Meyerus's history of the counts of Flanders, the *Comites Flandriae*, was printed in 1556 for a different publisher in Antwerp, Joannes Steelsius. The editions that Plantin published during that period were often works that had been released only just before in Paris or Lyon. Owing to his perception that they were marketable properties, he was able simply to reprint them without incurring too much risk. For example, he published popular works and literature of the period that included the *Lettres amoureuses* (1556) by the Italian author Girolam Parabosque and *Les amours* (1557) by the French poet Pierre de Ronsard.

However, a publisher wishing to establish a good reputation cannot be restricted by printing on behalf of other publishers or by reprinting editions that had already been published elsewhere. Consequently, it is unsurprising that Plantin should have sought out authors wanting to have him publish their work. This letter to Franciscus Fabricius is one such example. The book that Plantin wanted to publish for Fabricius was his translation of a work on the education of children by the classical author Plutarch. In Plantin's letter, his reference to the "learned man", who had recommended him to Fabricius,