Two things to begin with. When I was preparing this speech, I never intended to make puns about “glasses” [“bril” in Dutch]. But my glasses thought otherwise. The left arm broke half an hour ago. Don’t be overly alarmed if they look a bit crooked.

In my speech, I’ll often say “the Royal” when I really mean “Brill Publishers.” Which seems fairly fitting given today’s celebration. For this once, you must not associate it with [Royal Shell] oil.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Eight years ago, there was a meeting just like this one, not in Leiden, but in Tokyo, and similar to this afternoon, celebrating a royal birthday. It was also a Royal Majesty’s birthday; jointly celebrating the fourth centennial of relations between the Netherlands and Japan. There were many speakers before the reception got under way, and fairly long-winded ones at that. This caused quite a delay which was so noticeable that even the most disciplined of the Japanese guests were getting increasingly agitated, hopping from foot to foot, and murmuring.

Last in the line of speakers was the Dutch crown prince. The listeners took a deep breath and looked uneasily at the wad of papers in the prince’s hand. And what did the prince say? “Ladies and Gentlemen, one of the most pleasing of the Japanese contributions to world literature is the haiku.” This was followed by the Japanese translation. The Japanese guests smiled. “The most noticeable characteristic of the haiku is its potential to say everything in a few words.” The faces of the listeners brightened considerably. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you wholeheartedly for your attention to the birthday of my mother, and wish
you a pleasant evening.” Thunderous applause. Great relief. General admiration for Willem-Alexander. The celebration could begin.

This afternoon, I shall not earn such an ovation from you. Because, just as the prince could be brief, I cannot. But, I will restrain myself.

To begin with, I shall not speak about the 325-year history of the Royal Brill, formerly called Luchtmans. Indeed, a beautiful book on that very topic will be presented this afternoon. I’ve already had a look at it and heartily recommend it. In any case, you can figure that 325 years have gone by rather smoothly. But, it was not always a sure thing that we would be here this afternoon, celebrating.

In that book, I discovered an entry for 1855 that the Brill published “The Lord’s Prayer in Fourteen Languages.” Think of languages, such as Sanskrit, Hebrew, Coptic, and Arabic. This edition was certainly published less for pious considerations than for business considerations. The publisher could easily demonstrate how well he could produce foreign languages and various writing systems. With such an example and others like it, I should use this opportunity here, in the Hoogland Church, to explain my own academic discipline, Bible science. But, I won’t. Not even to make a suitable quotation, such as Ecclesiastes, “of making many books there is no end.”

I will also hardly mention book sales. That’s not my field. Nor mention book buying, or at least its pathology. When I was a high school student in Groningen, and, for the very first time, went to buy an antique book at the Central Book Repository [“CCC Boekhuis”] using the proceeds of my paper route, something happened that I will never forget. The book dealer was talking to his assistant
about the purchases of a client who was just leaving the premises. “Will you take this box over there and set it down under the stairs? He can’t take it home. If he does, he’ll get in trouble.” I looked in that direction and saw about ten Blue Band boxes of books. Bought, but still in quarantine. Apparently, it can be risky to bring books home with you.

This afternoon, I will also keep quiet about book prices; fixed prices and high prices, I will not talk about either. And this also counts for Pierre Vinken, the Elsevier effect, and the Brill jewels (or, brilliants, as my New York professor, Morton Smith, called the dazzling editions published by the Royal in 1972). As I said earlier, this afternoon you will not hear about such things.

What then? You are wondering. Well, Ladies and Gentlemen, I will talk to you about a subject that is rarely spoken about in public. Nevertheless, you will soon join me in concluding that this hidden theme conceals a remarkable driving force for a publisher, and even more so for a scientific publisher.

But, first, something else, before I tackle the intentionally hushed up subject. For personal reasons, I want to get something off my chest about this history. For me, as a Groninger in Amsterdam, the Brill Publisher was located in Leiden, and that meant - maybe not correctly, maybe not consciously - aristocratic and aloof. But, suddenly, that changed. Twenty years ago, a school buddy, who was on student committees with me during the sixties, was named director of the Brill Publisher. And, if there was someone who was not aristocratic, not aloof, it was Frans Pruijt. I conclude from this history book that, in retrospect, the directorship was extremely important for the continuity of the company. His sudden death fifteen years ago, on the evening of Sinterklaas, was an abrupt end to a promising future. On the day of this anniversary, I honor his name.
Ladies and gentlemen, publishers of scientific publications are indispensable. As a university administrator, I can state this without reservation. Because, the practitioners of science require publication, they must publish. That is part and parcel of science. This is how colleagues communicate the results of their scientific research to peers around the world, and, if it is valid, if it can pass the test of criticism, those analyses, insights and proposals will become part of the world’s body of knowledge. And thus does the world’s body of scientific knowledge continue to grow. That’s how science works. In general.

Publishers fulfill an essential service: they choose how articles and books are formatted and offered, organize the selection process of manuscripts, and manufacture and sell the end product, digital or paper. This role as mediator within the areas that the Royal embraces is especially important. Her value to science is tremendous.

There are also important personal motives at play here. You write altruistically to satisfy scientific ideals for your colleagues and students, to further the field, and you want to do so in the most fitting, the best, and, preferably, in the most well known journal and series, to promote yourself higher in the ranks of your field. The field of science dictates: publish, or perish. Keep working in your field, do not fall out of sight of your colleagues, and hold your own amongst your competition.

The academic world practices a combination of what Abram de Swaan very appropriately once called the bonding virtues and the rejuvenating virtues. On the one hand, you have an open, friendly, collegial and sporting co-operation, a readiness to share and support your colleagues, and on the other hand, the drive to excel over, to be the first, and trump, your colleagues. The drive to win,
and, a penchant to participate. The soul of the scientist strives for first place. We want that rare advancement, and when we get it, we strive for an even higher career at the university. Whoever gets that far, wants to become a professor. And whoever reaches that level, wants to be the best professor, a member of the Royal academy, guest lecturer at the most prestigious universities in the world. Ladies and Gentlemen, little do you know, the many ambitions that academics nourish, and inevitably – the sun does not shine generously on everyone – how many of these ambitions are painfully crushed in the dirt. If you have an academic as neighbor or cousin, then you know what I’m talking about.

I bring this up this afternoon to make a point. Specifically, it is scientific publishers that organize these competitions in the field of science. Take the Royal Brill. This peaceful, centuries-old company, which commands respect through its age and wise ability to responsibly keep with the times, this company trades in competitions, boxing matches, and scientific bullfights. Whether biologists devoting every waking moment to their work, or classics scholars, working day and night on Greek magical spells or Latin erotic poetry, they could all tell you the rank of their colleagues, and under hypnosis or groggy with booze, they could tell you exactly where they themselves stood in that ranking. And how are they so well informed? On the basis of the publications of their colleagues, or the lack thereof. And all this, thanks to Royal Brill and her sister publishers.

Do you now think that I speak about an unnecessary evil, that a speedy end must be put to this academic bloodbath? On the contrary, the competitive
mentality of scientists is one of the secrets of the success of a university. We cannot do without it, we must embrace it.

As an outsider occasionally reading a scientific article, you will not detect the drive to conquer. Statements and arguments are put forward. Abram de Swaan said it very appropriately, yesterday at the presentation of the National Prize for literature: “Science is, at heart, impersonal. The premise for all scientific reasoning is that everyone gets the same results in the same situation. Which is why there is a noticeable lack of the first and second person in academic articles. (....) For the same reason, personal experiences, convictions, or peculiarities of the author remain unreported and, all such frippery is coldly expunged.” It is just like modern architecture. Sober and boring is the ideal.

But, Ladies and Gentlemen, do not be taken in; behind the formal sentences in every scientific book and article, where you never or rarely see a writer use “I,” there lies beneath the ambitious “I” of each author. And these are high ambitions. Scientists write not only to succeed, they write foremostly to stay alive. It is their dream that their book will remain in existence long after they themselves are gone. A book is a tombstone, and a university library, a mausoleum, a hall of fame. Here, you immediately see the special value of the classic publisher who produces hardcovers. This is how the true scientific author survives the years and stands the test of time. His knowledge is not thrown like ash out on the anonymous World Wide Web, but encased and buried with an appropriate headstone.

The desire to be published, to be published as a scientist of name and rank, that desire runs deep. I am very aware that scientists do not stand alone in this goal. Publishers of fiction... I find this American separation of fiction and non-
fiction most curious in the book business, in particular since several years ago when the new translation of the bible remained for some time at the top of the non-fiction bestseller list. Be that as it may, publishers of fiction will gleefully tell you about the bulging envelopes stashed in their mailboxes: manuscripts where a newcomer puts forward their deep life wisdom, usually served up in the form of an elaborate life story. It seems to exist in us all, this drive to be validated by a book.

And yet, I am convinced that this drive is nowhere so powerful as in our academic circle. Even if one has to use one’s own money. A leaking roof is better than not being published.

I hardly need to relate to you, on a Friday afternoon, toward the end of the event, the pleasant conclusion of this state of affairs. Is there anything more pleasing for a publisher than highly credentialed authors standing in a line offering their scientific work for all or nothing, or even paying for the privilege? The only objection might be that there is “too much” or it is “not good enough.” It is the problem of the full mailbox of our novel-writing colleagues. But, in our case, it is not a problem. Scientists gladly take on the task of sifting the wheat from the chaff. Taking part in judging a colleague, the so-called peer review, is a task considered to an honor in academic circles, for which many are delighted to be recruited.

We can augment the joy of the celebration of this Anniversary of the Royal by drawing some pleasant conclusions. From the perspective of the academic author, the scientific article and book are far from waning in popularity. Even though the computer is becoming increasingly popular and American college students may boast “I don’t do print”, the market for scientific production of
articles and books continues to expand. And, its measure – the quantity, relative impact, and number of citations – increase in importance year by year. It is to be expected – and to be hoped for – that the measures will become more accurate and complete – in particular, in humanities and the social sciences. And that they also count the book properly, and not just register what is written in English and cited in that language. And, let us not pretend that the bell curve for natural sciences and engineering – after two years many articles are no longer relevant – also applies to other work. This will only feed the drive to be published. After all, it will reinforce the competitive element.

Ladies and Gentlemen, so long as science blossoms and grows, it will go well with the publishers of scientific articles and books. On two conditions. It would have been three, if I had been permitted to speak about money this afternoon.

The first condition concerns the continuing close cooperation between scientists and publishers. Whoever examines Brill’s production over the centuries – even if only superficially – will see the history of the development of science. New fields, new combinations of fields, new methods – they are reflected in new journals and new monograph series. It is an essential relationship. An intensive interaction with science - established as well as new - allows the scientists to submit their brainchildren to the publishers. And, thus, what the publisher publishes, meets a need. In fact, you only have to remain loyal to your printer’s mark. “Tuta sub aegide Pallas” splendidly puts into words that you are better off relying on the protection of the university. Incidentally, I read in the remarkable series by Willem Otterspeer on the history of Leiden University that the predecessor of the first Luchtmans, publisher Pieter van der Aa, used a much more businesslike printer’s mark: tempore et industria. Little
wonder that he didn’t last very long. Now that we’re on the subject of Van der Aa... Otterspeer provides an incisive portrait of the man. He “was no darling – “ce fripon” (that rogue) as he was once called by an Amsterdam colleague – but he was a more impressive entrepreneur than the previous Elsevier. He made a distinguished career for himself through marriage, patronage, and salesmanship. (....) one called him a wonder, the other [I still cite Otterspeer] a charlatan, another an innovator, and on another occasion that he “was constantly about to mislead [here, citing Otterspeer’s source] “by spoiling editions with a lack of veracity.....”.

I stray. I had mentioned that there were two conditions. Well then, the second condition concerns the personal drives of learned authors, who want success and desire to be placed in bookcases for perpetuity. I earnestly advise publishers in the strongest fashion to respect the ambitions of our learned authors. You are better off pretending that the urge to publish is purely a question of academic idealism. You are better off pretending that you did not hear what I have said this afternoon.

Congratulations to the Royal Brill and all of her friends, on behalf of universities at home and abroad, and thank you so much, Ladies and Gentlemen, for your attention.