

Reynaert abroad

Introduction

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We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

In his review of the first five volumes of the new *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur* (History of Dutch literature), Jeroen Dewulf, a professor of Dutch studies at UC Berkeley, criticizes the authors's assumption that readers of the work are familiar with Christian traditions, Dutch or Flemish customs and local cultural differences.¹ Dewulf wonders to what degree such a 'traditional cultural competence' can still be considered a realistic starting point from which to write a history of Dutch literature. Growing numbers of people who do not possess this competence read (about) Dutch literature. These include, on the one hand, members of the recent immigrant communities in Flanders and the Netherlands, and, on the other, people from outside Dutch-speaking regions who are interested in our culture and study Dutch literature at universities across the world. Academics like Dewulf, who teach Dutch at a non-Dutch-speaking institution, have always been confronted with problems of incompatibility of the Dutch literary canon and the international context in which they are working. The cultural background of foreign students of Dutch often differs considerably from that of 'traditional' Dutch-speaking readers. This can manifest itself in a divergent appreciation of texts. We may think, for example, of the greater interest in postcolonial or World War II literature *extra muros*. In recent decades, as Dutch studies *extra muros* is becoming more organized and articulate, professors and instructors of Dutch abroad are increasingly intervening in intramural debates on canon. Criticism comparable to Dewulf's, namely that the historiography and canonization process of Dutch literature is rooted too strongly in traditional Dutch and Flemish cultural competences, was, for example, also voiced when the *Histoire de la littérature néerlandaise* (1999) and *A Literary History of the Low Countries* (2009) were published.²

Although it is *apropos* of literary histories such as the *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur* that debates on the canon tend to break out most fiercely, they are not only relevant for this particular medium. Journals for literary studies are just as much – if not more – concerned. They form the pool from which literary historiographers

1 Jeroen Dewulf, 'Over vogels zonder nesten. *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur* en de internationale neerlandistiek', in: *Internationale Neerlandistiek* 48 (2010), 76–80.

2 Paris: Fayard, 1999; Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2009.

draw most of their data. Moreover, as periodic publications, they not only offer a more up-to-date reflection of a particular field of research, but can also be an active agent in developing new ideas and approaches. If a journal wants to do justice to the growing multi- and pluricultural reception of Dutch literature, it should continually question the meaning and relevance of its object of study within frameworks that transcend the traditional Netherlandish one. It should not only ask *if* but also *why* and *for whom* a particular text or approach is interesting.

This attitude is particularly pertinent to the present journal, both because of its object and intended audience. *Queeste* wants to honor the multilingual and multicultural character of literary life in the medieval Low Countries. A comprehensive understanding of this field of study requires not simply the contribution of scholars from different disciplines but also the willingness and skill to consider a literary text or phenomenon across disciplinary boundaries. Moreover, by not only accepting articles in Dutch, but also in English, French and German, *Queeste* strives to attain a readership outside of the Netherlands as well. For these readers, it is not just the Dutch language that is foreign but also the Dutch and Flemish cultural and intellectual frame of mind.

The recent publication by Amsterdam University Press of an English translation of André Bouwman's and Bart Besamusca's edition of the thirteenth-century beast epic *Van den vos Reynaerde* provided us as editors of *Queeste* with a unique opportunity to investigate the significance of one of the *monstres sacrés* in the Dutch literary canon for readers from a different linguistic and cultural background than the one in which the work has been canonized.³ *Of Reynaert the Fox* makes a Dutch literary text available to anyone who reads English. Moreover, the *Reynaert* is a local manifestation of two (related) broader medieval phenomena, that of the beast epic on the one hand and that of the *Renard*-tradition on the other. As such, it is easier to ascertain the value of the text within a broader linguistic and cultural context.

We asked four non-Dutch speaking medievalists to read *Of Reynaert the Fox* and to write an article in the language of their choice in which they reflect on ways in which this Middle Dutch text could provide them with new insights in their own research and/or on ways in which their research might shed new light on the study of *Van den vos Reynaerde*. The idea was that the authors approach the text from their own field of expertise. Knowledge of the philological tradition around *Van den vos Reynaerde* was therefore not required and not even desired.

The result of our initiative constitutes, we believe, a fascinating journey of a German, a Canadian and two English scholars, who travel through the fields and courts of thirteenth-century Flanders with a fox from the Low Countries for a guide; they, in turn, take the animal on a trip to the Germany of *Reinhart Fuchs* and *Reynke de vos*, the University of Paris, Fourth Lateran Council Rome, up to the North American Great Lakes region of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* and the twentieth-century Slovenia of Slavoj Žižek. Sabine Obermaier, a specialist in medieval German beast epic, compares *Of Reynaert the Fox* with a number of older transla-

3 On the 'transnational' significance of this translation, cf. Paul Wackers, 'De Nederlandse *Reynaert*-traditie in pre-nationaal, nationaal en transnationaal perspectief', in: *Internationale Neerlandistiek* 48 (2010), 29-31.

tions of the same Dutch text in German on the one hand and original German adaptations of the Renard material on the other. Serge Lusignan, a Canadian historian of the Middle Ages with a particular interest in sociolinguistics, investigates how the French story has been adapted to the context of the literate bourgeoisie of Flemish merchant towns. Adrian Tudor, a British specialist in medieval French literature, situates the *Reynaert* in relation to new Reynardian literature dating from the same period in French. Finally, James Simpson, also from Britain and working on French literature from the Middle Ages, explores how *Van den vos Reynaerde* uses images of animal cruelty and devouring as commentary on the process of translation and confronts the text with insights from contemporary cultural theory.

It shall not come as a surprise that the aforementioned scholars have found the Middle Dutch text fascinating, ‘a medieval work of genius’ even (Tudor). What is more interesting is what they admired in Willem’s beast epic. The different authors have turned out to appreciate *Van den vos Reynaerde* for highly divergent reasons. Obermaier, for example, is fascinated by the way in which the image of the fox slightly changes throughout different adaptations, but the Dutch beast tale has also provided her with new insights into the use of Middle Low German words; for Lusignan, the text is a source for our knowledge of the sociolinguistic history of Northern France and the Southern Low Countries; Tudor is impressed by what he calls the ‘multifunctionality’ of the text: ‘the fact that it could clearly appeal to – indeed be commissioned by – members of the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie’; finally, James Simpson is mainly interested in the beast epic’s intimate examination of constructions of individual, communal and cultural identity and its sensual mapping of the limits of the human from the outside of culture.

To conclude the special *dossier* on *Of Reynaert the Fox*, we asked André Bouwman and Bart Besamusca to write a reaction on the four preceding essays. In their article, the editors of the new edition of *Van den vos Reynaerde* point out how the view from the outside on this text provided by their foreign colleagues can open new doors for Netherlandists working on medieval literature.

The fact that the interest of Netherlandists in the famous medieval beast epic remains considerable is shown by two other texts in the present issue of *Queeste*. Although these contributions are not directly related to the English edition of the *Reynaert*, they deal with the same medieval Dutch beast epic material. They also demonstrate how the appeal of these medieval texts extends across all sorts of boundaries and cultures. Joost Robbe, a Belgian medievalist and Netherlandist working at the University of Münster in Germany investigates the meaning and origin of the name Akarijn in *Reynaerts historie*, while the Dutch historian Jan Burgers reviews *Van den Vos Reynaerde. De feiten*, a study written by former professor of nuclear physics Rudi Malfliet.

We hope that, placed back in its plush seat in the canon of Netherlandish literature, after all the translating, comparing, confronting and analyzing that takes place in this issue, *Van den vos Reynaerde* will not only have become a more famous, but, more importantly, a richer, more nuanced and more diversified masterpiece.

On behalf of the editors of *Queeste*