Literature and Multilingualism in the Low Countries (1100-1600)

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Introduction

Samuel Mareel & Dirk Schoenaers

> There are likewise in the city [of Antwerp], as there are in many other cities in these lands, various schools where the French language is taught, both to girls and to boys: so that, from learning [French] at school, then because of practice and because of so many conversations with foreigners, it develops and expands in such a way that in a short while it is generally spoken almost like a native tongue. And then there are also masters who teach the Italian language and Spanish [...].[1]

It amazed foreigners in the sixteenth century as it amazes foreigners today: people from the Low Countries master their languages. During the late medieval and early modern period, the literacy rate was not only exceptionally high among the inhabitants of the Low Countries, a considerable number of people also understood or used more than one language.

The Low Countries were situated at the virtual divide between the Southern, Romance dialects and the Germanic dialects spoken in the Empire. While in most northern regions (e.g. Holland, Flanders and Brabant) the dominant vernacular was a local variant of Dutch, the native languages of Artois, Hainault, Namur and Liège were dialects of French. By virtue of their specific location, the Low Countries thus functioned as a cultural valve between two seemingly distinct linguistic areas.[2] In order to broaden their social and intellectual horizons, the inhabitants of this contact zone were almost obliged to learn languages other than their own and multilingualism must have come naturally.

Additionally, French was widely accepted as a supra-regional vernacular in the Dutch-speaking part of the Low Countries and beyond, not only for cultural expression, but also in more pragmatic interactions, such as administration and commerce.[3] The vibrant economic activity in regional urban centres ensured the presence of foreign merchants. Many of these were native speakers of French, English, German, Spanish or Italian, among them Lodovico Guicciardini, the author quoted above, who hailed from Florence but was based in Antwerp.

The apparent need for language assistance could be alleviated in a broad range of ways. Conversation manuals (e.g. *Bouc vanden ambachten – Livre des mestiers*) were designed for use in specialized mercantile schools (*bijscholen* or *Franse scholen*; see also the

1 Sono medesimamente nella citta, si como sono anche in molte altre buone terre del paese diverse scuole, dove s'insegna la lingua Franzese, cosi alle femine come a maschi, talche fra l'impararla alla Scuola, & poi con l'uso & con tanta conversatione di forestieri si sparge, & allarga in guisa, che in brieve tempo ci si parlerà generalmente quasi, come la lingua materna. Et piu ci sono ancora maestri, che insegnano il linguaggio Italiano, & lo Spagnuolo [...]. Guicciardini 1567, 110.

2 Kestemont 2012.

3 Croenen 1999; Prevenier & de Hemptinne 2005; Lusignan 2012, 187-199. For an appreciation of Dutch in the French-speaking part of the region, see the contribution by Margriet Hoogvliet in this issue.

quote above) where, in addition to arithmetic, pupils could sit in on courses in Languages for Specific Purposes.[4] Other merchants housed their apprentices with francophone host families in order for them to be immersed in a foreign language milieu. For instance, on 13 May 1484, a certain Cornelis Oirtsz. from Reimerswaal in Zeeland arranged for his nephew, Oele Clausz., to be lodged with Nicolas Vassal, a merchant from Rouen, for the period of one year in order to *leeren de tale van den lande* ('to learn the region's language', i.e. French). In return for appropriate housing, food and drink, Vassal received the sum of two Flemish pounds. The remainder of the document suggests that the arrangement could be prolonged, possibly when it had proven to be satisfactory for both parties.[5]

In spite of the fact that the volatile power balance between the local vernaculars heavily depended on the ever-changing whims of political circumstance, French retained its importance as an administrative language in regional as well as municipal chanceries.[6] This may seem self-explanatory for the bilingual regions of Flanders and Brabant, but even as remote as in Holland, the municipal and regional accounts give ample evidence of documents being translated from French into Dutch (and vice versa) by clerks, secretaries, councilmen, registrars, public prosecutors, treasurers, bailiffs and notaries. At the turn of the fifteenth century, the municipal council of Middelburg annually awarded a certain Jan Adam the sum of 40 shillings to 'read all French correspondence addressed to the city, and to reply in French and to aid visiting merchants with their French and Latin business'.[7] In the following decades, when most of the principalities of the Low Countries were gradually subsumed into the Burgundian conglomerate, French established itself as the unique means of access to the highest echelons of power and bilingualism became a much sought after asset. In this view, a petition made by the indigenous accountant Gijsbrecht Pijn in 1448 is significant. Before being sent to the *Chambre de comptes* in The Hague, Pijn requested to stay on a while longer at Lille *pour tousiours mieulx apprendre la langaige François et le stile de compte* ('to further perfect the French language and the accounting style'), the appropriate linguistic register for accounting.[8] In this new political situation, the value of language skills for social mobility could hardly be overestimated.[9]

Likewise, French maintained its currency at local aristocratic courts. In Flanders, for instance, the count and his entourage were culturally oriented towards the French-speaking South as early as the final decades of the twelfth century and sponsored the *fine fleur* of the contemporary francophone literary scene.[10] Throughout the medieval period, local craftsmen answered to the needs of similarly affluent patrons by producing lavishly decorated manuscripts of best-sellers in French, including the Arthurian prose cycles and the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*.[11] In the second half of the

4 Van der Have 2002, 47-60.
5 Sneller & Unger 1930, 194-195.
6 Armstrong 1965; Van Oostrom 1992; Sleiderink 2010; Schoenaers 2012, 103-105.
7 Unger 1926, 240 (anno 1399), 265 (anno 1411); Sneller & Unger 1930, 36 (anno 1407-1408).
8 Damen 2000, 190.
9 Armstrong 1965; Damen 2000, 188-191; Boone 2009.
10 Stanger 1957; Van Hoecke 1987; Gaullier-Bougassas 2012.
11 An overview of the manuscripts on http://www.medievalfrancophone.ac.uk.

fifteenth century, Flemish artisans, mainly active in Ghent and Bruges, catered to the bibliophilic urges of the Burgundian circle of book-collecting aristocrats, and illustrated considerable amounts of luxuriously executed French-language manuscripts.[12]

Finally, notwithstanding that as of the later thirteenth century the local vernaculars became increasingly important as languages of learning and religion, Latin remained the *lingua franca* of science and the Church throughout the medieval and early modern period.[13]

While the multilingual situation of the late medieval and early modern Low Countries is generally acknowledged, its impact on the literary – and more generally textual – production is less so. This has a lot to do with the way the departments of literature and linguistics at our universities are organised, namely on the basis of language rather than place. Students specialize in a literature written in a certain language, rather than in literature written in a specific geographical area. At the moment he/she graduates, a student of Dutch language and literature in Flanders will probably have read several texts in Afrikaans; he/she might even be able to tell you a thing or two about Jacob Steendam, an early Dutch settler in seventeenth-century New Netherland who left a small body of verse. That same student, however, might very well never have heard of, say, Olivier de la Marche (1425-1502) or Georges Eekhoud (1854-1927), both of whom are internationally recognized authors, who lived in Flanders, but wrote in French.

Research tends to follow this monolingual pattern, as is shown most clearly in literary historiography. There are numerous histories of Dutch literature, but no histories of the literature of the Low Countries. While histories of Dutch literature generally acknowledge the interdependency of literatures in different languages, for example through translation, adaption and imitation, their main focus is always on texts written in Dutch. The present journal constitutes another telling example of this tendency. *Queeste* presents itself as a journal of medieval literature in the Low Countries, in whatever language, and explicitly (also) invites contributions on texts in French, German, English and Latin. Nonetheless, a quick survey of the scholarship presented to the journal in more recent years suggests that many authors and readers still seem to believe that *Queeste* is exclusively dedicated to literature written in Middle Dutch.

However, the one-sided, monolingual focus on literary scholarship and history is slowly shifting. The issue of multilingualism has been explored more generally in a set of recently published edited volumes, specifically dedicated to the francophone territories of Western Europe and the British Isles.[14] The turn towards multilingualism also persists in a number of recent literary historiographical publications focusing on place rather than language. One of the most ambitious of these is *Europe. A literary history, 1348-1418*, edited by David Wallace.[15] This 1500+ page volume recounts seventy years of European literary history starting from sequences of places that have meaningful

12 Wijsman 2010, 503-550.

13 On the interaction between Dutch literature and Latinitas, see an earlier thematic issue of *Queeste* on this subject (Desplenter & Wackers 2008).

14 Wogan-Browne 2009; Kleinhenz & Busby 2011; Tyler 2011; Jefferson & Putter 2013.

15 Wallace 2015.

links with one another. Its coverage also includes locations in the Low Countries such as Valenciennes, Brussels, The Hague and Zwolle/Deventer. Even more specifically, a relatively large body of current research projects have started to investigate the region's multilingual character from a textual perspective. It is these initiatives that are at the basis of the present special issue of *Queeste*.

Scholars involved in this issue are working/have worked on no less than four projects that have the topic of textual culture and multilingualism in the late medieval and early modern Low Countries at the core of their set of research questions: 'A Tale of Two Tongues: The Interplay of Dutch and French in the Literary Culture of the Low Countries' (Van de Haar); 'The Making of Transregional Catholicism. Print Culture in the Ecclesiastical Province of Cambrai (1559-1659)' (Soen, Soetaert and Verberckmoes); 'Medieval Francophone Literary Culture Outside France' (Schoenaers) and 'Transcultural Critical Editing: Vernacular Poetry in the Burgundian Netherlands, 1450-1530' (Armstrong and Mareel). The projects of two other contributors pay extensive attention to the theme: 'Cities of Readers: Religious Literacies in the Long Fifteenth Century' (Hoogvliet) and '*Vanden twaelf dogheden*. Een exemplarische studie naar de functies, verspreiding en doorwerking van Middelnederlandse mystieke geschriften' ('*About the Twelve Virtues.* A Case Study into the Function, Dissemination and Afterlife of Middle Dutch Mystical Texts', Kiekens). Tellingly in the light of our above remarks, only one of the seven authors that contributed to the essays is a specialist of Dutch literature in the narrow sense of the word. Three are historians and another three are specialists of French literature – albeit it none of them actually francophone. Moreover, two of the aforementioned projects are based in the UK, so outside the Low Countries.

The five essays in this special issue engage with the ways in which the three main languages of the region (Latin, French and Dutch) interact in literary texts in the broadest sense of the word. The purpose of this focus is to give a more diversified view of textual culture in the late medieval and early modern Low Countries, which traditionally has been studied from a mostly monolingual perspective. The selected contributions use the term 'multilingualism' to cover a rather broad and heterogeneous body of phenomena that share a form of contact or interplay between different languages. They also draw on a mixture of theoretical approaches and methodologies (new philology, translation studies, book history, stylistics, etc.). The texts, manuscripts and printed books under scrutiny were produced between the twelfth and seventeenth century in an area covering the present-day Netherlands, Belgium and France.

This variety of approaches, along with a wide-ranging temporal and geographical spread, result in a broad and complementary view of textual multilingualism in the Low Countries. For instance, the circulation of mystical texts in Latin, French and Dutch in Flanders, Brabant, Holland and Utrecht explored by Ine Kiekens resonates harmoniously with the late medieval ownership of religious books written in Dutch in the mainly francophone area north of Paris as discussed by Margriet Hoogvliet. However, there is a slight but interesting, not necessarily contradictory, divergence in the interpretation of the evidence. After having shown that the reception of mysticism in the Low Countries was trilingual, and not bilingual as has previously

been assumed, Kiekens notes that the same texts (i.c. Hugh of St.-Victor's *Soliloquium*) were read in different languages in distinct milieus. Hoogvliet, on the other hand, argues that, in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, translation of religious works connected with the North for francophone audiences points towards shared religious reading practices, rather than giving evidence of diverging cultural identities. This, in turn, links up with the view expressed by Adrian Armstrong in his investigation of the *Pas de la mort* and its Dutch translation by the Brussels rhetorician Collijn Cailleu. On the basis of stylistic amplifications in Cailleu's translation, Armstrong indicates that in the late fifteenth century, Dutch and French authors partook in a crosslinguistic culture of competition and added to a shared capital of poetic devices. In this view, the consideration of multilingual contexts may suggest that translation should not (exclusively) be understood as a tell-tale sign of cultural rift, but could (also) be seen to mark connections and homogeneity across languages.

The essay on printing activities in the bishopric of Cambrai during the second half of the sixteenth century by Violet Soen, Alexander Soetaert and Johan Verberckmoes highlights another interesting feature of translation. In their essay, the authors do not only show a moderate degree of multilingualism in the back catalogues of printers in Douai, Mons and Arras – in addition to Latin, religious works were also published in French, Dutch and English – they also expose a form of 'veiled multilingualism', hidden in the considerable amount of French editions that were translated from Latin, Italian and Spanish. In addition to reprints of materials first published elsewhere, Soen, Soetaert and Verberckmoes also point towards local productions – which implies the circulation of foreign language texts – and identify multilingual translators. Although not formulated as explicitly, the concept of 'hidden multilingualism' also carries within itself the same connection between translation and crosslinguistic collective identities (i.c. Catholic and also encompassing materials from Southern Europe) that was put forward by Hoogvliet and Armstrong. The final contribution by Alisa van de Haar takes us into the seventeenth century and focuses on the capacity of multilingual emblem books to inspire metalinguistic reflection and engagement with multiple types of codification in an age that has typically been associated with linguistic purism and standardization. In Van de Haar's interpretation, the multilingual emblem becomes a topic of debate among polyglot audiences with a heart for languages.

For the editors of *Queeste*, this thematic issue presents an exciting opportunity to renew our commitment to the varied and multilingual culture of the Low Countries. Therefore, we would like to take advantage of the momentum created by this collection of essays and encourage our readers to continue to take up the gauntlet and submit their research, also when it concerns texts in languages other than Middle Dutch.

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