

Literature

Not Just for Bookworms

A Literary History of the Low Countries

Anyone who doubts the relevance of literature not just to individuals but to society as a whole will certainly revise his thinking after reading *A Literary History of the Low Countries*, which leaves the reader in no doubt that literature is not only shaped by the political and social context in which it is produced but can also help to shape it. In the Middle Ages, for example, the huge popularity of stories like *Mary of Nemmegen*, about the devil leading innocent girls and women astray, helped propagate this superstition and fed into the witch-hunts, as Herman Pleij says in Chapter 2. Similarly, authors like Jan Frans Willems were key players in the Flemish movement.

All early literature was didactic and sought either to warn, as in *Reynard the Fox* in the thirteenth century, or quite simply to instruct burghers on daily life, like Cats' hugely successful didactic poem, *Images of Allegory and Love (Sinne- en minnebeelden)* in the seventeenth century. Much of it was also linked to religious teaching. Indeed until the end of the seventeenth century the most widely read book was still the Bible.

A Literary History of the Low Countries is a beautifully illustrated volume (albeit in black and white), edited by Theo Hermans, Professor of Dutch and Comparative Literature at University College London. Historically there have been few literary histories of the Low Countries and Hermans' intention was to offer an up-to-date replacement for R.P. Meijer's once wonderful and comprehensive but now outdated *Literature of the Low Countries* (1971). Seven chapters, written by 'the most prominent and experienced literary historiographers of their generation', span more than a thousand years of literature in the broadest sense. They take us on a journey from the early Middle Ages to the twenty-first century, discussing countless authors of oral and written literature and situating them in their historical and sociological contexts, as well as in the context of international literary history.

In the first chapter we meet the blind eighth-century Frisian singer, Bernlef, whose production was

purely oral, and then Hadewych, a beguine and the Low Countries' first known woman writer. Songs and legends are discussed as well as the activities of the chambers of rhetoric with their morality plays and processions, which culminated in the magnificent Antwerp Landjuweel in 1561. Up until this point literature was a collective experience.

With the development of the printing press, though, the Middle Ages were over and both the production and consumption of literature became a more solitary pursuit. There were now theatre buildings and a definite distinction between actors and audience. Cornelis Kiliaen of the Plantin Press compiled the first Dutch lexicon, an important step towards the emancipation of Dutch as a literary language, a movement in which Vondel also played a key role.

In his preface Hermans stresses the importance of treating the literature of the Low Countries as '*one multiform entity*' and discusses the terminological issues involved in the choice of a title. After all, while a Dutch vernacular was spoken across the whole area, until the mid-seventeenth century around a third of literary production was in Latin, the lingua franca of scholarly Europeans and more specifically of the Catholic Church. In Flanders and Brabant a rapid process of gallicization took place after the imposition, under French rule, of French as the official language. As Willem van den Berg says in Chapter 5, in what is now Belgium '*the term "Flemish literature", in the sense of literature from the Flemish regions, referred to both Dutch-language and French-language production*' from the mid-eighteenth until the early twentieth century. Indeed the only author from the Low Countries ever to win a Nobel Prize, in 1911, was the French-speaking Fleming, Maurice Maeterlinck. Van den Berg's account sheds light on a complicated linguistic issue that still forms a major stumbling block in Belgian politics.

As well as Dutch, Latin and French however, there is also a body of literature in Frisian, from Bernlef's Christian psalms and pagan epic poetry in the eighth century through the early seventeenth century poet Gysbert Japix to the present day (Albertina Soepboer, for example).



Cellar of the Letterenhuis in Antwerp.

Photo by Jonas Lampens.

Nonetheless, the Dutch language has always been a unifying force in the area. After the Dutch Revolt, however, religious differences left their mark on literary production in the north and south. In the Protestant north there was far more literary freedom than in the south, which remained very much in the grip of the Catholic Church. Protestant clergymen authors were active contributors to the sciences and art as well as producing religious and moralistic literature.

By the start of the twentieth century Flemish writers were at the forefront of the Flemish Movement, striving to emancipate Dutch-speaking Belgians. In 1900 August Vermeylen wrote an essay pleading for the right to a separate Flemish identity as part of Dutch and European culture, concluding: '*we want to be Flemings in order to become Europeans*'. But, says Anne Marie Musschoot in Chapter 6, they had also realised that socioeconomic reforms were necessary for the intellectual development that would lead to emancipation. In the Netherlands, too, the socialist movement profoundly influenced literature in the early twentieth century as no doubt it influenced that literature's readers.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century and into the first decade of the twenty-first, writ-

ers have continued to exercise a critical role in society. Tom Lanoye, for example, produced a trilogy, *The Divine Monster* (Het goddelijke monster), denouncing corruption in Belgium's social and political establishment.

Having brought us right up to date *A Literary History of the Low Countries* concludes with a list of English translations of literary works. Readers in the Low Countries have always been avid consumers of translations. Dutch literature on the other hand, because so few people outside the region can read it, has remained relatively unknown. These days, however, more is being translated than ever before. This excellent and extremely comprehensive literary history of the Low Countries will undoubtedly serve both to whet readers' appetites for it and to provide insight into the socio-historical and literary contexts in which that literature was produced. A must for anyone interested in Low Countries or comparative literature, or even the social history of the region.

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Theo Hermans (ed.), *A Literary History of the Low Countries*. Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2009.