

Obituary

Willem Pieter Gerritsen (1935–2019)

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Willem Pieter Gerritsen

On 24 October 2019, our friend, colleague and inspiring master Willem Pieter (Wim) Gerritsen died suddenly. In 1953, Wim began to study Dutch language and literature at Utrecht University, where he soon attended the lectures of Maartje Draak (1907–1995), the eminent specialist in Celtic studies who had witnessed the birth of the International Arthurian Society in 1946. She introduced him to medieval literature and roused his life-long passion for the literary traditions of Saint Brendan and the Arthurian hero, Lancelot. In Paris, where he studied for two years and met his future wife, Gisela Geywitz, in the reading room of the Bibliothèque nationale, the renowned Romanist and Arthurian scholar Jean Frappier (1900–1974) guided his quest for a deep knowledge of medieval literature. In 1963, supervised by Maartje Draak, Wim completed his PhD, devoted to the study and edition of the two Middle Dutch renditions of the Old French *Vengeance Raguidel*. This monograph in two volumes, *Die Wrake van Ragisel* (Assen: Van Gorcum), is still an indispensable point of departure for investigations into the Arthurian

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literature of the medieval Low Countries, in particular with regard to the medieval poetics of translation and adaptation.

In 1968, at the age of 33, Wim was appointed Professor of Middle Dutch literature at Utrecht University. Decades followed in which his many students admired him for being a devoted and inspiring academic teacher, and at the same time feared his critical remarks. Receiving no comments, however, was even worse, as that meant that he did not find someone's work worthy of his usual scrutiny. So many students were attracted by his teaching and scholarly work that over the years he supervised an amazing total of forty PhDs. The group of his PhD candidates gathered at Wim's home every six months to talk about their research and enjoy a pleasant dinner. Wim playfully announced these meetings under the title 'Foire du Lendit'. He organised them in the belief that Middle Dutch literature had to be studied as part of a much larger European tradition. This conviction likewise inspired him to set up a Medieval Studies programme. Such a co-operative teaching and research initiative was quite novel in the early 1980s. His initiative laid the foundation for the current Utrecht Centre for Medieval Studies.

A number of Wim's PhD students were working with Arthurian material. In 1987, he brought four of them along to the 15th Triennial Congress of the International Arthurian Society, which took place in Louvain. While he delivered a plenary lecture about *Lantsloot van der Hagedochte* (Lancelot of the Cave), a Middle Dutch adaptation of the French Prose *Lancelot*, his pupils made their international debut with section papers; they were mothered by Elspeth Kennedy (1921–2006) and nicknamed 'the Gerritsen gang' by congress participants. This was the beginning of a long-lasting period in which the Dutch branch of the International Arthurian Society flourished.

In 2000, Wim retired. In his farewell lecture, entitled *Wat doen de burens?* (What are the neighbours doing?), he stressed once again that if the study of Middle Dutch literature, for which he had previously coined the term 'medioneerlandistiek', wanted to be relevant for Medieval Studies in general, it had to be, by necessity, internationally oriented and take into account the innovative ideas and new approaches of literary scholars in French, German and English Studies. To this conviction, he added that Middle Dutch texts had much to offer to non-Dutch specialists, and that they had to be introduced to these texts by means of translations into other languages. This facet of Wim's appeal has taken shape in the form of, among others, bilingual editions in the series 'Arthurian Archives' (3 volumes, Cambridge: Brewer, 2000–2003) and the 'Bibliothek mittelniederländischer Literatur' (12 volumes, Münster: Agenda Verlag, 2005–2022).

Wim was frequently honoured for his academic involvement and scholarly work. The insightful observations and stylistic brilliance that characterise his publications were often praised. In 1978, he was elected a member of the Royal

Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences, for which he served as its vice-president between 1996 and 1999. He was a member of the London Institute of Germanic Studies, a Foreign Member of the Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften, and an Honorary Member of the Flemish Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal en Letteren. In 1997, the University of Antwerp granted him an honorary doctorate and, in 1999, the respectable Society of Dutch Literature bestowed the 'Prize for Mastery' on him for his whole *oeuvre*. From 2002 until 2007, he was appointed as Scaliger Professor, a position that aims to stimulate the use of the special collections of Leiden's University Library.

In addition to his *Wrake van Ragisel* study, Wim's important contributions to Arthurian Studies include a ground-breaking article on the so-called corrector of the *Lancelot* Compilation, published in *Neerlandica Manuscripta 3* (Amsterdam: Van Gendt) in 1976. The text collection is preserved in an early fourteenth-century manuscript, The Hague, RL, 129 A 10, in which the left-hand margins of the columns were used to add signs, like dots, and words, like conjunctions and interjections. Wim argued that the corrector was preparing the text for oral delivery. This performance hypothesis is still favoured by most Arthurian scholars, and was refined in a series of articles by Wim's student, Frank Brandsma.

In 1987, Wim published the *editio princeps* of *Lantsloot vander Hagedochte* (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij). This remarkable thirteenth-century free rendition of the French Prose *Lancelot* in Middle Dutch verses has come down to us in fragments of a fourteenth-century manuscript. Wim's critical edition of the 6073 extant lines is a milestone in the field. More than 500 pages were needed to contextualise the fragments, to comment on the manuscript transmission, to offer the reader guidance in understanding Middle Dutch words and phrases, and to provide access to the text by means of five indices.

The *Lantsloot vander Hagedochte* edition is the second volume in the series 'Middle Dutch Lancelot Romances'. Wim was the founder of the series, which aims at editing and studying the three extant Middle Dutch translations of the French Prose *Lancelot*. In 1978, he persuaded the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences to adopt the series and he enlisted no less than seven of his PhD students to prepare editions and studies. Even though the work has come a long way, the series remains unfinished. Wim's final contribution to the series dates from 2011, when he assisted Marjolein Hogenbirk in publishing the edition of *Walewein ende Keye* (Hilversum: Verloren), a thirteenth-century verse romance incorporated into the *Lancelot* Compilation.

Wim spent the last years of his life writing the intellectual biography of Maartje Draak. His work resulted in a splendid monograph entitled *Verhalen van de draken-dochter* (Stories of the Dragon's Daughter; Hilversum: Verloren). It is very fortunate that the book appeared in June 2019, just four months before Wim's unexpected

death. He was proud that he had been able to finish the biography, and was ready to devote his time to non-academic activities. Fortuna decided differently.

In 2021, *The Arthur of the Low Countries* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press) was published as part of the series 'Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages'. The volume is dedicated to the memory of Wim. It is appropriate to repeat the dedication here. Wim 'is the giant on whose shoulders Dutch and Flemish Arthurian scholars stand'.