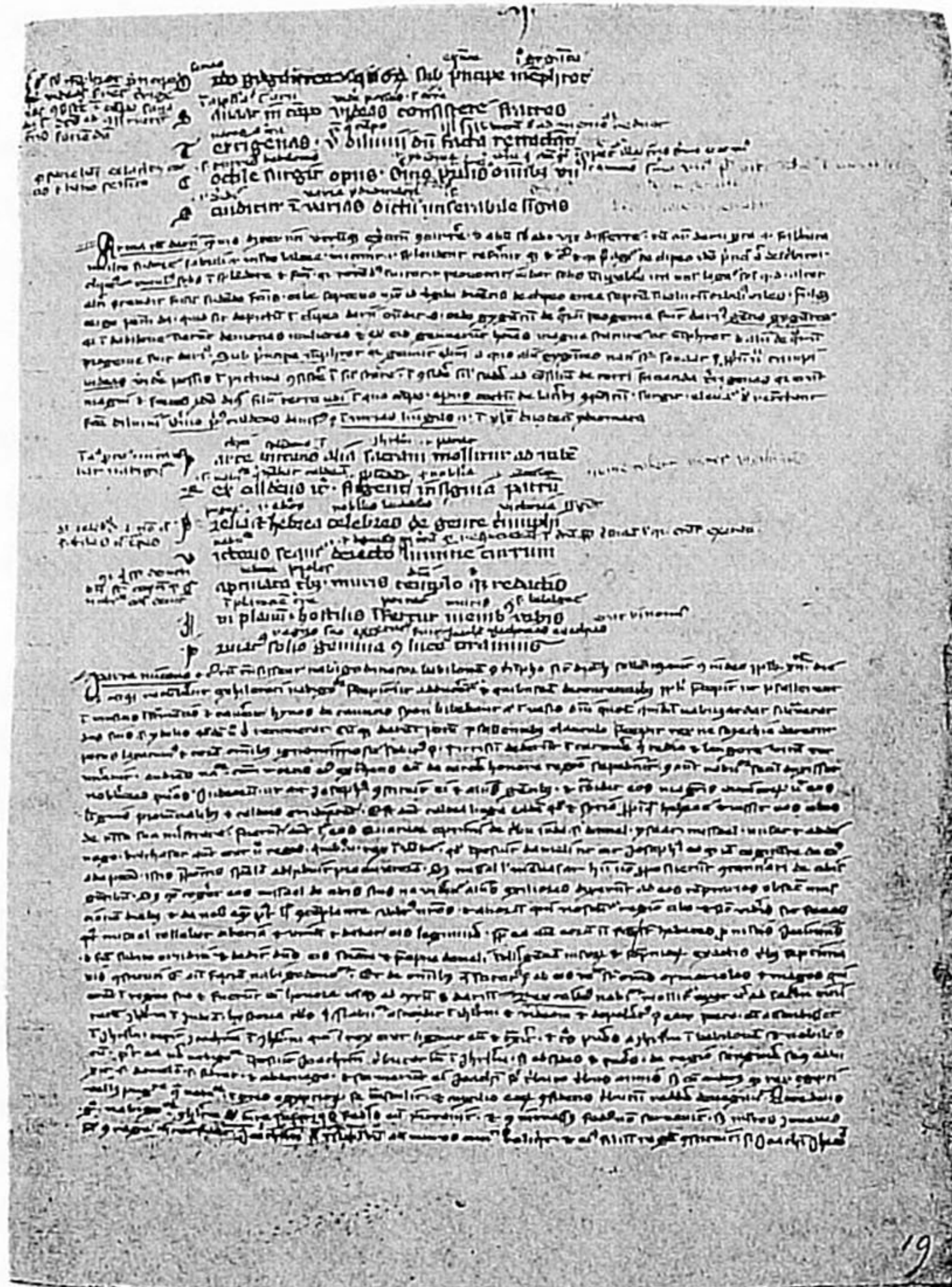


Middle

Dutch Literature as a Mirror of European Culture



The twelfth-century Latin source of Maerlant's *The Heroic Deeds of Alexander: the Alexandreis*. The fact that the Latin verses in this manuscript are surrounded by an abundance of glosses and comments is typical of a medieval school text.

The literature of the Middle Ages is a truly European literature, probably much more so than the literature of today. Paradoxically, the main reason for this was the omnipresence of a language and a literature which were not a natural environment for *anyone* in Medieval Europe. A situation the Esperanto movement could not even dream of – when was the last serious plea made for the implementation of their ideal in Europe? – actually existed in the Middle Ages. Common schooling in a language which was foreign to everyone, Latin, and the fact that this language was the universal medium of intellectual communication, gave medieval culture a far-reaching unity.

Dutch medieval literature, like its counterparts elsewhere, provides ample evidence of this fundamental medieval cultural unity. The number of Middle Dutch literary works not connected, either directly or indirectly,

with the Latin of the Church, the arts and sciences, can be counted on the fingers of one hand. And even when Middle Dutch literature distances itself somewhat from this Latin well-spring and follows its own course – as in the romances of chivalry, for instance – this does not mean that it becomes detached; it is still part of the mainstream of European vernacular literatures.

One striking example of this is Jacob van Maerlant's *The Heroic Deeds of Alexander* (*Alexanders geesten*, c.1260). The source of Maerlant's work is the twelfth-century *Alexandreis*, one of the central texts of the Latin school tradition. This was written by the scholastic Gautier de Châtillon as a creative imitation of Virgil's *Aeneid* – only this time with Alexander the Great as its protagonist instead of Aeneas – and had quickly established itself as a *pièce de résistance* in the teaching of Latin grammar. It was probably at school, in these same Latin classes, that Maerlant himself became acquainted with the *Alexandreis*, increasing and refining his knowledge of Latin and the classics as he tried to interpret it. In doing so he must certainly have become familiar with the heroes to whom Alexander is repeatedly compared by Gautier: the main characters from the grand epics by Virgil, Statius and Lucan, with whom the *Alexandreis* is continuously and deliberately made to reverberate.

Of course, when Jacob van Maerlant decided to translate the *Alexandreis* into Middle Dutch, probably not long after finishing his education, he could not use such comparisons. Although he himself was quite at home in the world of the ancient epics, it was a closed book to the uneducated lay audience for whom *The Heroic Deeds of Alexander* was intended. But, as he did so often, Maerlant found a clever way out; where appropriate, the characters in *The Heroic Deeds of Alexander* are compared with Gawain, Charlemagne, Tristan, Partholopeus, Perceval, and a host of other heroes from the vernacular romances of chivalry.

What makes Maerlant's comparisons even more interesting is the fact that only a small number of these works have come down to us in Middle Dutch versions. Of course, it is possible, and even likely, that some of them have been lost; but, for reasons I will not go into here because they would lead us too far from our main subject, there is at least as strong a case for saying that Jacob van Maerlant was able to refer just as easily to Middle Dutch, Old French and/or Middle High German romances – because the audience he was aiming at was familiar with works in all three languages. Maerlant moves from one literature to the other without commenting on the fact, which illustrates very clearly that to him and his audience Dutch literature (or French or German literature, for that matter) was not a distinct entity at all. Rather, it was part of the wideranging body of literary texts in the vernacular that the European aristocracy had had written for them by educated clerks from the twelfth century onward – a literature, therefore, which was tied up with a particular social class, rather than with a particular language or state.

It is all too easy to assume that Middle Dutch literature played only a minor part in this European concert of elite vernacular literatures. After all, Dutchmen are very fond of quoting Heine's apocryphal remark that he would go to Holland when the Apocalypse took place, since there everything happened fifty years later than in the rest of the world. But, without resorting to the opposite form of chauvinism, I would like to stress that the

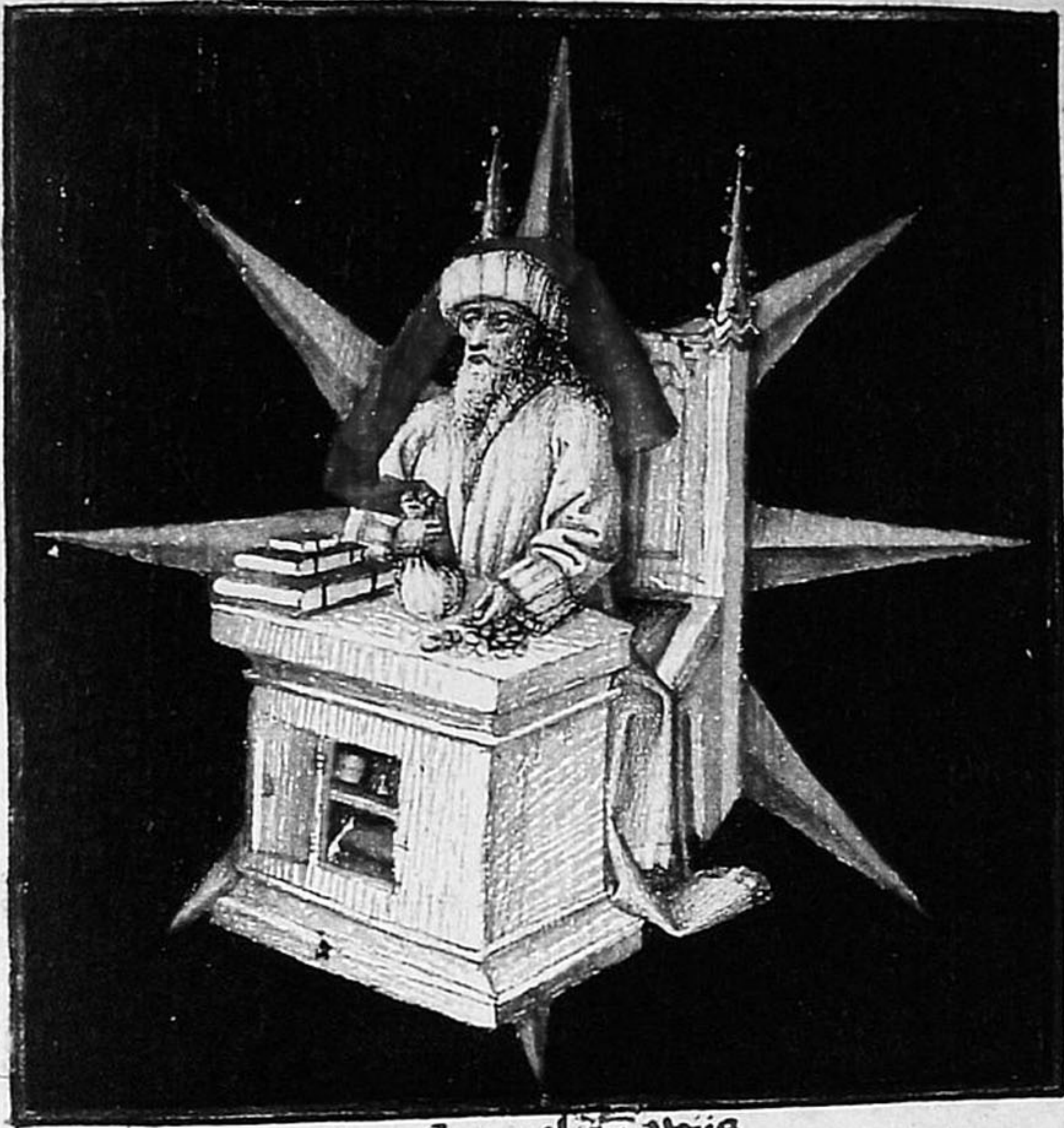
assumption that Middle Dutch literature merely played a supporting role on the European stage is true only up to a point.

There is one thing of which, on occasion, the Dutch really are prepared to be a little proud; and that is the fact that they are open to anything of quality from abroad – and it is true: more Penguin books are sold every year in the Netherlands than in Scotland and Wales together. This openness to foreign influences was already manifest in the Middle Ages. The eagerness with which certain European literary masterpieces were translated in the Low Countries speaks volumes; the fact that there were at least two Dutch translations of the enormous *Roman de la Rose*, and at least three of the even larger *Lancelot en prose* (both thirteenth century) indicates the intensity with which European literature was taken up in the Low Countries. In addition, works in foreign languages penetrated the Dutch language-area much more quickly than the pseudo-Heine factor might suggest. Often there was not more than a generation between a Latin or Old French original and its Middle Dutch translation; and as we approach the heyday of Middle Dutch literature, the decades shortly after 1250, the gap becomes even smaller.

European literary developments, then, were followed very closely in these parts; but there are also several important genres in which the Dutch language-area led the way. This is especially true for the field in which the Dutch feel particularly at home until this very day: moralising. Nowhere did the stream of moralistic literature, and especially that of an urban, bourgeois kind, rise as early as in the Low Countries. Another genre where the earliest vernacular representatives are found in the Low Countries is that of the *artes*, those writings on theoretical and practical knowledge which are so much valued by present-day researchers into the cultural history of the Middle Ages. Then there are the so-called *abele spelen* (noble or beautiful

Jan van Ruusbroec in the Zoniënwood (Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Brussels)





Mercurius simpel en Wijs

Dan die mane ten goedstey en
 Charung en ten naeste des
 at ay en achte duzentich
 En v. Dan toe loch
 En polij mlen mede
 Charung en dan t. meester stode

Charung et tempore q' phisicis beniuoly
 et libet comitatur dispoferoz illy planee
 en gudpt sine bono sine malo motu et sicut
 motu set r' p' et h' h' b' d' omnes facit d' s' p' p' d'
 luce motu no magni corpus flui color

plays), which are the earliest examples of serious secular drama in any European vernacular. Finally, there is the magnificent mystical literature produced, especially in Brabant, from the thirteenth century on: the mystics Ruusbroec, Beatrijs van Nazareth and Hadewijch are regarded as the *crème de la crème*, also from an international perspective.

In fact this international recognition of the Middle Dutch mystics continues a tradition of interest from abroad in Middle Dutch literature which already existed in the Middle Ages. Hadewijch's work was known in southern Germany possibly in the thirteenth century, and certainly in the fourteenth – an area hundreds of miles from the region in which it originated and originally functioned. Work by the most prominent fourteenth-century representative of the great Middle Dutch mystical tradition, Jan van Ruusbroec, was translated into Latin several times, and around 1350, during his own lifetime, his *The Adornment of the Spiritual Wedding* (*Die chierheit der gheesteliker brulocht*) was read as far away as Strasbourg; two generations later compilations of his work even appeared in English. Similarly, the lyrics of Duke John I of Brabant were recorded in a sumptuous manuscript made in Zürich around 1310, some ten years after his death.

A spectacular Middle Dutch *artes* manuscript: *Description of the Universe* (*Natuurkunde van het geheelal*) (Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel)



Duke John I of Brabant in the Manesse Codex (c.1310) (Universitätsbibliothek, Heidelberg).

In this famous Manesse Codex (often depicted on stamps and place-mats), the Brabantine duke-cum-singer takes his place among the international elite of medieval courtly lyricists: the *troubadours* from the Provence, the *trouvères* from northern France, and great poets from the German Empire such as Gottfried von Strassburg and Wolfram von Eschenbach. And the duke's lyrics were not, as one might suppose, translated from the Brabantine dialect into German especially for the occasion (which would be remarkable enough in itself); rather, all the indications are that John I actually composed and wrote his songs in the literary language of the Rhineland, precisely to bring about this cultural interplay on the European stage.

This illustrates once again how foolish it really is to adhere to modern language boundaries in the study of, for example, Middle Dutch lyrics – which in fact, means wrenching these lyrics from their European and historical context and forcing them into a completely anachronistic and, whether intentionally or not, a nationalistic framework. All in all, Middle Dutch literature is a European literature in the fullest sense.

Dutch literary history?

So far we have been discussing the European character of Middle Dutch literature in rather grand terms; but if one takes this view, what would be left of the concept of a Dutch literary history of the Middle Ages? Does this not become a foolish illusion, highly dubious from a scholarly point of view, and also a form of needless self-torture, considering the problems involved

in writing such a history? To me this seems a perfectly fair question; which does not mean that the answer is equally self-evident. For all the international and European character of Middle Dutch literature, I think there is scope for discussing Middle Dutch literature as a phenomenon in itself, and there are several good reasons for doing so. The arguments for this are of two kinds. The first relates to the subject itself, and is therefore probably the weaker of the two. The better argument, to be quite honest, is primarily ideological, and reflects the way in which literary history and how it is taught are determined by culture and politics.

Before going into this, however, I would first like to approach the matter from the perspective of what may be called non-normative research. This shows that, while we ought to consider Middle Dutch literature in its European context, this does not mean that the concept of Middle Dutch literature is in itself a useless one. The fact that around 1330 Jan van Boendale describes Jacob van Maerlant as the 'vader der Dietse dichtren algader' (the father of all Dutch poets) at any rate suggests an awareness of some linguistic and literary community; and Middle Dutch literary practice provides sufficient evidence in support of Boendale's words to allow us to speak of a separate Middle Dutch literature. The influence of the patriarch Maerlant himself, for instance, is to be found everywhere in Middle Dutch literature, even in the romances of chivalry which he criticised so severely. Compared to the truly immeasurable influence of Maerlant on Middle Dutch literature, on the epic, moralistic literature, historiography and the *artes*, his influence 'abroad' is quite modest, even if we are willing to accept, on the authority of Maerlant's apocryphal epitaph, that his fame reached across the Alps. It is true that occasional striking traces have been found of the reception of Maerlant's work abroad, but these are not much more than flying sparks from a fire that reached virtually every Middle Dutch author, whether they found its heat pleasant or scorching.

Of course there is nothing unexpected about this, if only because in the Middle Ages Dutch was no more a world language than it is today; and because of this simple fact it had to rely primarily on the small area where it was spoken. Its main natural opening to Europe was to the east, where there was no significant linguistic frontier. This led to innumerable examples of interaction between German and Dutch across the present border between the Netherlands and Germany. Also, of course, the southern part of the Dutch language-area had direct access to a great European literature, the French. It appears, though, that this cultural exchange was mainly a matter of French literature being imported, for however many small indications have been found for the multilingualism of prominent French literary circles like that of Gruuthuse, the counts of Flanders and of Guines, we have yet to discover any really significant evidence of an upstream movement, that is, from Middle Dutch into French.

Cultural and especially linguistic differences meant that Middle Dutch literary life had to rely mainly, and sometimes even exclusively, on its own resources. In this light, it is actually not so silly to describe Middle Dutch literature as a separate literary province, as long as one remains alert to its interaction with other linguistic and cultural systems. There are no scholarly reasons that should prevent anyone from writing a new literary history of Middle Dutch literature.

Statue of Jacob van Maerlant at Damme (Photo by Martine Meuwese).

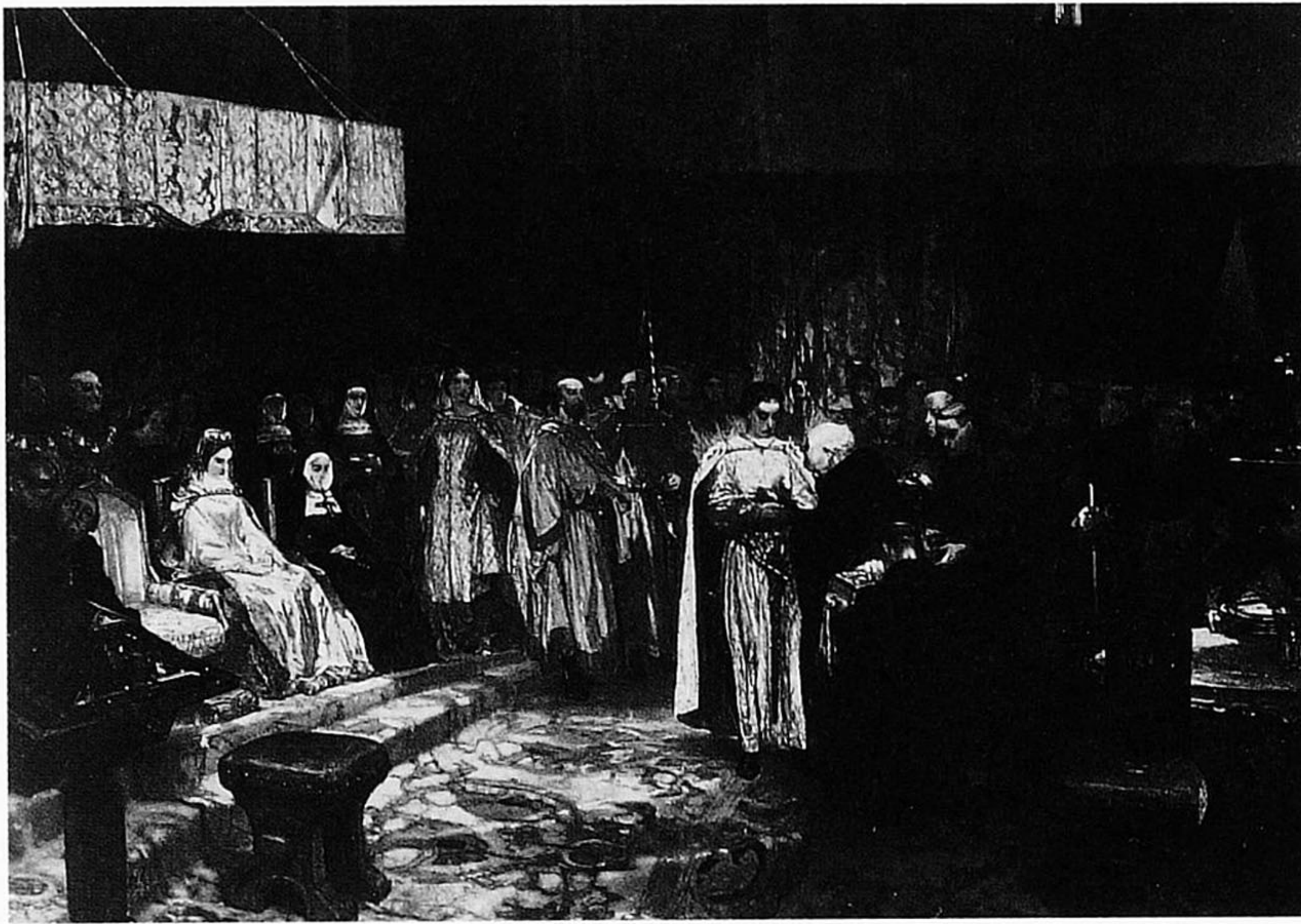


Historical values

But while these may be sufficient reasons for studying Dutch literary history as a separate entity, they are not the only ones. Even if there were no scholarly justification for it, I would go so far as to say that we should find it very hard indeed to forswear such a subject or concept as 'Dutch literary history'. The fact of the matter is that notions such as this one go far beyond purely rational consideration; they are, so to speak (and I know it is a dangerous expression to use in this context), in our blood. In considering the culture of the past, we cannot fully rid ourselves of the way we have been shaped by our own culture and history, however hard we may seek for historical accuracy. Nowadays this cultural and historical influence implies a special bond with the Dutch nation – and I suspect this will continue to be the case even now, when since 1 January 1993 tomatoes and dentists seem to be freely traversing Europe.

One does not have to be a nationalist, nor a chauvinist, to be affected by that bond – as a result of the educational system, the legal system, the form of government and countless other factors that for more than a century have united the nation of the Netherlands in a way which, from a historical point of view, may be extremely relative and even somewhat coincidental, but which still provides a tie stronger than virtually any other, inside or outside its borders. Many of us will remember the lists we made as schoolchildren for cosmic self-aggrandisement, when we had nothing else to do: Frits van Oostrom – 25 Anna van Saksenstraat – Oranjewijk – Leiderdorp – South Holland – The Netherlands – Benelux – Europe – Earth – and then things turned into a shambles: The Solar System, The Milky Way, The Universe, and, for some, God. But whatever the exact content of the lists may have been, it was as clear as day that, then as now, the strongest supra-individual tie was with the nation of the Netherlands, not with one's neighbourhood or village, let alone with the somewhat tragicomic Benelux; and if ever such a national tie was in danger of slackening, then the Queen's Birthday would be just around the corner. Even on the moon it was America versus Russia; and while I am not a good judge of such things, I know of few multi-billion projects that look as chauvinistic as the European space programme. Thinking in terms of a national framework is a deep-rooted practice, among intellectuals, as well as other peoples, and especially among literary historians: after all, they owe most of their subject and their *raison d'être* as scholars to it. As we all know, the foundations of this way of thinking were laid in the nineteenth century; the same conviction with which we are now building our united Europe then stoked the fires of nationalism. As always when an attempt is made to legitimise political innovation, this could only be done by referring to the past: and therefore all over Europe national frameworks were projected into bygone days, and historiography was mobilised to reconstruct a development which would lead almost inevitably to the nineteenth-century situation. Belief in a national identity and national character – long before such notions became tainted by the horrors of our own century – played a major part in this, and literature in particular was a splendid medium for identifying them, for here national identity, or whatever passed for national identity, was spelt out in so many words.

As far as Dutch literary history was concerned, these beliefs led to a roll



of honour in which the baton of national awareness passed, in reverse chronological order, from E.J. Potgieter (1808-1875) to Willem Bilderdijk (1756-1831), and then to Betje Wolff (1738-1804) and Aagje Deken (1741-1804), to Justus van Effen (1684-1735) and Pieter Langendijk (1683-1756), and above all to our literary giants from the Golden Age: first and foremost, Bredero and Vondel, the pillars of Amsterdam Golden Age culture, but also the aristocrat P.C. Hooft, who had, after all, published the *Dutch History* (*Neederlandsche Historien*) in 1642, and Constantijn Huygens, who was presented as the ideal and typical son of the people of the Netherlands. In the Middle Ages, too, there were authors to be cherished by patriotic hearts: Jacob van Maerlant, of course, perhaps not a great artist, but a selfconfident burgher – and, it was also said, especially in Flanders, one with a healthy dislike of the French language and character –, Geert Grote and Thomas à Kempis, and, last but not least, the lively city girl Mariken van Nieumeghen, heroine of the Low Countries version of the Faust story. All these authors and characters make up the literary waxwork gallery of a nation which saw itself, as it still does, mainly in bourgeois terms – and that includes the brilliant gadfly Multatuli, who wiped the floor with the Dutch mercantile mentality in the nineteenth century, and even Queen Beatrix, who is esteemed above all in the Netherlands for being such a hard worker.

As we have already said, the foundations of this nationalist view of Dutch literature and culture were solidly laid in the nineteenth century; and the very terms I have just used to represent it show how far we are now moderating our faith in this kind of construction. Without doubt, these stereotypes have very often resulted in distorted views, especially when facts were forced to fit this self-image where they would not do so naturally. Many things that conflicted with this self-constructed image of people and nation were tucked away on the shelves of history, or even excluded altogether.

This meant, for instance, that the importance of the nobility to Dutch culture in the Golden Age and the Middle Ages was largely ignored, for the nobility was, after all, associated with the French. Purism also gained ground

Stylising the Dutch past: a historical painting by Ch. Rochussen (1864), depicting the presentation of the *Rhymed Chronicle of Holland* (*Rijmkroniek van Holland*) by Melis Stoke to Count William III.

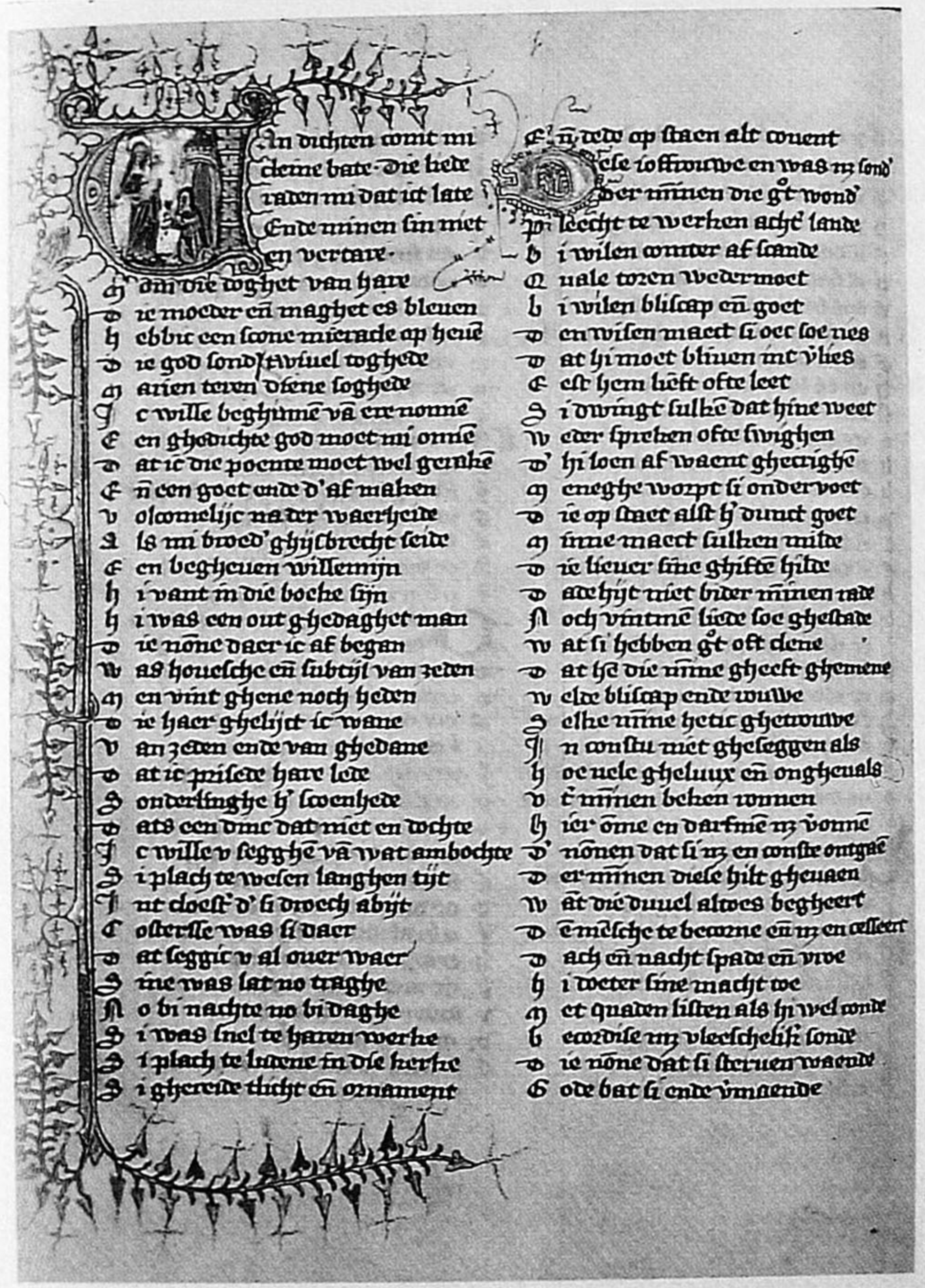


Hendrik van Veldeke in the Manesse Codex (c.1310) (Universitätsbibliothek, Heidelberg).

in the field of philology: the lyrics of Duke John I were ‘retranslated’ into what was supposed to be the pure Brabant dialect in which one might have expected Brabant’s founding father to express his inmost feelings, instead of the Rhineland gibberish in which his songs have come down to us. It was thought that the Rhineland (now German territory), as a border region, could not possibly be more than a hybrid backwater; only fairly recently have the Dutch begun to realise that this projection of present-day national borders has clouded their view, and that the Rhineland does indeed form part of their literary history. Especially where great literary figures were concerned, competition between the two or even three countries involved assumed grotesque proportions; the quarrel between the Netherlands and Belgium over Jacob van Maerlant still simmers even today, and the twelfth-century poet Hendrik van Veldeke, claimed by the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, has often been dragged across the border from one country to the other in a positively embarrassing fashion.

All these are examples of how an anachronistic concept of nationhood has clouded our view of Middle Dutch literature; and the same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for the other literary histories of Europe, where similar processes took place. Ultimately, this way of thinking in terms of pure and hybrid culture, of indigenous and exogenous, of national character, and of nativeness and foreignness, may well have helped sow the seeds of the excesses that our century has had to suffer.

In this context, we should pay heed to Ernst Robert Curtius’ *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948). As his passionate preface to the American translation makes quite plain, this great book was written



The beginning of the *Beatrijs* (fourteenth century) (Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague).



Ernst Robert Curtius (1886-1956).

precisely in order to stem the tide of nationalism and of barbarism to which Curtius, who so greatly loved and valued the culture of the Occident, had seen Europe fall victim in the period around the Second World War. To this end, he stressed the far-reaching homogeneity of that culture; in other words, he used tradition as an antidote. (By the way, this shows very clearly that great scholarship need not necessarily seek to avoid value judgements; they can go together.) However impressive and influential his masterpiece may have proved to be, and however inescapable his thesis that European literature in essence formed a unity, what Curtius would most have liked to banish altogether, that is, the concept of literary histories based on one language and/or territory, has continued to exist. Since 1948 at least a hundred must have been written, and all by authors who knew Curtius' work well. The reasons why they, as well as the public whose needs they apparently cater for, are not prepared to face the ultimate consequences of his views, must be, firstly, that it is – to say the least – not totally meaningless to concentrate on the literary history of a particular language-area, and secondly, more importantly, that notions of language and nation are too deeply ingrained to be easily abandoned.

All the more reason then, I would say, to consider the medieval situation, and to confront ourselves and our young people with what is in my opinion

the chief purpose of teaching history: the dialogue with what is different – a dialogue, in this case, with a cultural phase during which Dutch literature, for all its local fragmentation, probably had a stronger European character than it does now; and with a period, especially, in which translating, borrowing and adapting work written in another language was not regarded as a job on the side that a writer did in addition to his really creative work, or as an escape route for lesser writers, but, on the contrary, as an integral part of being a great artist. The Middle Dutch masterpieces *Reynard the Fox* (Van den Vos Reinaerde, twelfth / thirteenth century) and *Charlemagne and Elegast* (Karel ende Elegast, c. 1300) were adapted from the French; there is not a single text by Maerlant which did not make use of sources in other languages; the *Beatrijs* poet (fourteenth century) based his text on a Latin exemplum; and Hadewijch draws on the treasure-house of French and Latin literature, and even on church music, to write poetry in Dutch which is still remarkably impressive. None of these would have been of any significance, none of them would have existed at all, without the European soil in which they were rooted; and, seen in this light, Middle Dutch literature is indeed an exemplary mirror of European culture.

FRITS VAN OOSTROM

Translated by Inge van Eijk and Frank van Meurs.

FURTHER READING

CURTIUS, ERNST ROBERT, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. New York, 1953.
OOSTROM, FRITS VAN, *Court and Culture: Dutch literature, 1350-1450*. Berkeley / Oxford, 1992.