

## Contrasts and interaction

*Neighbours of nascent Dutch writing: the English, Normans and Flemish  
(c. 1000-c. 1200)*

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Frits van Oostrom's *Stemmen op Schrift* is an impressive and erudite work, written with verve by a scholar of international repute. As a survey of early Dutch literature it is a real achievement, as an analytical synthesis of cultural history a true gem. Tucked away next to a warm fire, in the depths of Wales, I read it in one go with rising admiration and immense pleasure. What I liked best was the recurring sensation that what Van Oostrom signalled as new and interesting could be linked immediately with what went on in 'my' bit of Europe, England and western France. Inevitably, there were moments where I would have liked to see a greater articulation of parallels with northern France south of Flanders, i.e. Normandy and further westwards with developments in England. That such moments were frequent is not to be taken as criticism of the author of *Stemmen op Schrift*, but more as a sign of his creativity in eliciting such reaction from fellow medievalists.

The first aspect that hits an Anglo-Norman scholar concerns the relative lateness of the rise of Dutch/German vernacular in writing compared with Old French/Anglo-Norman. Their first manifestations can be found around 1100, and in large numbers of substantial length and breath from 1130 onwards, a full three decades before Heinric van Veldeke produced his master pieces. About the precocity of Anglo-Norman, the vernacular French language written in Normandy and England in the twelfth century much has been written.<sup>1</sup> The pioneering literary interpretations by Ian Short and the historical explorations by John Gillingham, to name but a few, situate the rise of the vernacular squarely in multi ethnic communities of post-conquest England.<sup>2</sup> Anglo-Saxon England knew a flourishing literary vernacular culture from the time of King Alfred (871-899) onwards, when government documents, estate surveys, and literary texts were composed in Old English alongside production in Latin. The clergy and secular aristocracy both knew enough to cope with both languages. The arrival of French as spoken and written language after 1066 created an unique, if artificial environment, so Short and Gillingham argue, for a new vernacular language to challenge Latin and compete with it in a similar way as Old English had done. That in the cultural centres of the church many a monk or clergyman became trilingual (Latin, Old English and Anglo-Norman) is no surprise. Englishmen had to preserve their culture and kept Old English going as late as the late twelfth century.<sup>3</sup> Documents that were to be made available for the exploitation of England's wealth were composed in Latin.

1 For overviews, see Legge 1963; Daman-Grnt 1999; Short 2003.

2 Short 1995; Short 1991; Gillingham 2000, 113-144.

3 Swan & Treharne 2000; Swan 2006; Treharne 2006.

The most famous one is Domesday Book, a record of England's agricultural and fiscal resources, in 1086.<sup>4</sup> Latin, not French, became the dominant language of government. The crucial moment came after a period of about five years when Old English charters and writs were routinely issued. In 1070 Lanfranc, abbot of Saint-Etienne at Caen, became archbishop of Canterbury, and from that moment onwards Old English only occurred as parallel text to Latin and otherwise was used more sporadically only for internal use in monasteries and churches.<sup>5</sup> Saints' lives were still written as late as the 1090s, for example Coleman's *Life of Wulfstan*, as well as secular biographies such as Leofric's *Life of Hereward*, the Anglo-Saxon resistance fighter.<sup>6</sup> Neither of these lives survives in their original but only in a Latin translation.<sup>7</sup> For literary creations, it was French that took over the baton from Old English. Historical writing, in particular, so well known from the vernacular Old English *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (originating from King Alfred's court), saw the first rise of vernacular writing by clerks like Gaimar (c. 1136) and Wace (c. 1150). They wrote for patrons, men and women of the second and third generation of conquerors, who wished to be informed about the past of England in their own language. This audience preferred French to Latin or Old English.<sup>8</sup> Thus a specific political event the Norman conquest and its subsequent massive change in English life generated the creative impulses for a new vernacular language, Anglo-Norman, on a scale far more extensive a full generation of thirty years earlier than its rival languages of German/Dutch or indeed the Old French written elsewhere in France. In literary and linguistic terms the Norman Conquest thus had a temporary cataclysmic effect on the survival of Old English. Ultimately, as is well known, it survived after its transformation into Middle English. The language remained Germanic but absorbed a large French vocabulary due to the rise and life of Anglo-Norman, the language that was spoken and written for three centuries after 1066.

Apart from the question of the precocity of Anglo-Norman, what strikes me in response to Van Oostrom's magisterial work is the extent to which time and time again Anglo-Flemish relations pop up in the early history of written Dutch. Interestingly Van Oostrom signals their importance as the background for his frontier argument, namely that Dutch in Flanders developed on the fringe of two cultural areas (the Meuse-Rhine and Brabant), both of which acted themselves as frontier areas of the German and French lands (p. 18). In fact, significantly, he starts his exploration of the history of written Dutch by situating the written word (in Latin) in late tenth- and eleventh-century Flanders at Gent and its offshoot Egmond in Holland (p. 26-46). Van Oostrom is absolutely right to take the Egmond gospel book as a cultural symbol for the genesis of Holland's literary life 'ented' on that of Flanders. As part of the frontier theory he also brings in, rightly, the Dutch glosses in the Orosius manuscript of Saint-Bertin at Saint-Omer written, probably, by an English monk in Flanders as well as the Heliand scribe in the Cotton manuscript (second half of the tenth century) who is

4 Farley 1783.

5 Bates 1998, 50.

6 Winterbottom & Thomson 2002, xv-xvii, 1-136; Hardy & Martin 1888, II, 339-404.

7 For lost Old English texts see Wilson 1970.

8 Van Houts 2003a; Blacker 1994; Damiani-Grint 1999.

being identified as a Flemish person writing in England (p. 80: 98). Yet more could be said here, so I would like to take the opportunity elaborate a bit further. Anglo-Flemish contacts were strong in economical, political, literary and cultural terms.<sup>9</sup> What we should not forget is that in the eleventh century in particular both areas shared the Germanic language albeit in different offshoots. It is my contention that an English person in 1066 might have found it easier to converse with a Flemish Dutch speaker than with a French person. We should not underestimate mutual comprehensibility based on shared linguistic roots. Consider for example Hereward, the Anglo-Saxon exile, whose vernacular biography I mentioned earlier. Just before the Norman Conquest he left England and sought a military career in Flanders, where in the summer of 1067 he took charge of Robert the Frisian's military expedition against rebellious Walcheren.<sup>10</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, his knowledge of fighting in the waterlogged meadows of southern Lincolnshire might have been decisive for the Flemish count to hire him for a maritime expedition. A linguistic affinity between Old English and Old Dutch, however, may additionally have assisted Hereward in controlling local Flemish soldiers under his command.

If this argument holds any truth for an Englishman in Flanders, the converse would also be true and might explain why in the eleventh century so many Flemish monks found work in England. Van Oostrom briefly alludes to the most famous of them, Goscelin of Saint-Bertin (died after 1107), the prolific author of saints' lives (p. 98). His hagiographical career spanned the second half of the century and benefited from the aftermath of the Norman Conquest when across England indigenous monks and nuns were desperate to have the history of their religious houses recorded. Although all of Goscelin's works is in Latin, there is no doubt about his fluency in Old English, and indeed in his native Dutch tongue, knowledge which he was keen to display.<sup>11</sup> In this context it is interesting to be able to add to one of Van Oostrom's observations. He signals the first occurrence of some birds' names, including that of the goose, in written Dutch in toponyms (p. 51). Goscelin, in fact, gives *gances* ('geese') in Old Dutch in what is probably his earliest work the *Life of Amalberga* written c. 1050.<sup>12</sup> Goscelin's colleague from Saint-Bertin, Folcard (died after 1085) may have preceded him in the early 1050s to England, where after the Conquest he ended up as abbot of Thorney Abbey (c. 1068–1085). He too wrote various saints' lives though nothing on the scale of Goscelin's output. Either of them may have been the author of the *Life of King Edward* [the Confessor (1041–1066)] commissioned by his widow Queen Edith.<sup>13</sup> This Latin biography was in itself the successor to the famous *Encomium Emmae reginae* written by an earlier monk of saint-Bertin in c. 1040 for the English queen Emma who had been in exile in Bruges.<sup>14</sup> Finally there is Drogo of Sint-Winoksbergen

9 Grierson 1941, Ortenberg 1992, Nip 1998.

10 Van Houts 1999.

11 For what follows, see Van Houts 2006.

12 *Vita s. Amalbergae*, 98. For Goscelin, see Sharpe 1997, no. 355, 151–153 and Barlow 1992, xlvi–lv.

13 Sharpe 1997, no. 300, 116–117 and Barlow 1992, 111–113.

14 Keynes 1998, xix–xxiii for the author as either a monk or canon of Saint-Omer, and entirely convincingly [xxxix–xli] for the conclusion that he was a monk at Saint-Bertin at Saint-Omer. For Queen Emma as patron, see Stafford 1997, 28–40.

(d. between 1084 and 1098), who perhaps received his education at Saint-Bertin, who almost certainly travelled to England though never stayed there very long as far as can be ascertained.<sup>15</sup> There is no doubt that English wealth in cash and patronage lured these men to England, but their qualities in terms of Latin expertise and familiarity with Old English, after all a Germanic language, necessary to conduct their research into the history of local saints in written and oral forms, raised them above contemporaries from other European areas. Against this background it is surely noteworthy that none of the many Lotharingian clergy, who in the middle of the eleventh century found employment in England as clerks and bishops, picked up their pens in the same way as the monks of Saint-Bertin did. My hunch is that linguistic reasons may be partly to blame, namely that those from the area of Old Dutch/Flemish speaking province were more attuned to Old English than those from French speaking Lotharingia. If true my observation could support the fault line between east and west in the Low Countries as signalled on many occasions by Van Oostrom.

The Flemish hagiographers are also important as potential links with England in the range of explanations offered for the occurrence of the first Old Dutch lyrics *Hebban olla vogala nestla haggunnan, /hinase hic enda thu. /Wat unbidan we nu*. They occur in Oxford BL Bodley 340 fol. 169v, a manuscript of Aelfric's sermons written at Rochester between the beginning and middle of the eleventh century. The pen probes were written in the second half of the eleventh century, though most probably more towards the middle of the century, by a scribe who was also responsible for a Latin parallel text.<sup>16</sup> Van Oostrom rightly points to the many Anglo-Flemish connections and in this context mentions briefly Goscelin of Saint-Bertin (p. 98). He also intriguingly hints that the love song may have been written out of nostalgia by a monk reminiscing his youth spent on the Flemish coast (p. 102). In his discussion of the verses Van Oostrom seemingly echoes Peter Dronke's conclusions, comparing the lines with the parallel Latin verses, which in turn are discussed in relation to the *Carmina Cantabrigiensis* as well as vernacular Occitan and Arabic poems.<sup>17</sup> Van Oostrom, too, follows Dronke in pleading strongly in favour of female authorship. Following a suggestion by Michael Lapidge, Dronke speculates that nuns, perhaps from Mallin near Rochester, may have been behind the authorship of the penprobes.<sup>18</sup> He draws attention to the fact that many monastic houses, male and female, saw an upsurge in continental inmates from Normandy and elsewhere in northern France, an immigration that would have included Flemish women.

The explorations by Dronke and Van Oostrom raise the intriguing possibility, not explicitly noted by either, of a lay context. It is well known that love lyrics have survived in monastic collections even though a monastic environment was not the exclusive preserve of such poetry. On the contrary a secular lay context should not be excluded despite the monastic transmission. So what do we know of Flemish men and

15 Huyghebaert 1971.

16 A facsimile in Van Oostrom 2006, 94-95.

17 Van Oostrom 2006, 93-106; Dronke 2005.

18 Dronke 2005, 408, n. 26.

women in England in the mid eleventh century, which for the sake of argument I define as from c. 1040 to c. 1080?<sup>19</sup> Lay Flemish men and women crossed the sea to take up work or life in England already before the Norman Conquest. We only need to think of the enigmatic information that links men like Gilbert of Gent to Northumbria, perhaps as part of Earl Tostig's expedition there in early 1066.<sup>20</sup> And there is Frederick of Oosterzele-Scheldewindeke (d. c. 1070) who held lands on the southern banks of the Thames in Eastwell near Lewisham, as recorded in Domesday Book.<sup>21</sup> The geographical significance lies in the fact that Lewisham since the tenth century had been in the possession of St Peter's Gent with a substantial annual revenue of £16.<sup>22</sup> It is conceivable, therefore, that already before the Conquest Flemish aristocrats were rewarded by King Edward with land in return for services to the great Flemish monastic houses. It is equally conceivable that such men brought women with them. The most famous post Conquest Flemish woman in England was Matilda (d. 1083), daughter of Count Baldwin v of Flanders, wife and queen consort of William the Conqueror. She had been preceded, however by others. Her aunt Judith (d. c. 1090), daughter of Count Baldwin iv of Flanders, married Earl Tostig in c. 1050. They lived in England until Tostig's exile to Saint-Omer in 1065.<sup>23</sup> Other less known women are Gundrada, Frederick's sister, who shortly after the Conquest married the Norman William I of Warenne (d. 1088).<sup>24</sup> As advocate of Saint-Bertin at Saint-Omer the father of Frederick and Gundrada had allowed them familiarity with the city. It was also at Saint-Omer where according to his *Life* Hereward's Flemish wife Turfrida came from. Whether she married Hereward before or after the Conquest is unknown. There are hints of literacy for all four women. Countess Judith was almost certainly well educated judging by her book collection, which included several Latin and Old English manuscripts. When she left England as a result of her husband's exile in 1065 she took them with her, first to her homeland Flanders and then after Tostig's death, in c. 1070 to Bavaria where she remarried. On her death she bequeathed them to the abbey of Weingarten.<sup>25</sup> Gundrada was literate enough to write an (exceptional) autograph signature under a charter issued by herself and her husband for the abbey of Cluny.<sup>26</sup> Turfrida ranks amongst the most obvious persons to have commissioned Hereward's Old English *Life* written by their priest Leofric, but now lost.<sup>27</sup> This is tentative evidence for high status women, originating from Flanders, who had some degree of schooling and literacy, which perhaps is no surprising given, as Walter Simons has argued, that the province was advanced in terms of schooling for the laity in the late eleventh and twelfth century.<sup>28</sup>

19 Lewis 1994, 123-144 discusses various categories of pre-conquest landholders with continental names.

20 Van Houts 1999, 215-217. Gilbert of Gent became one of the wealthiest tenants-in-chief in post-conquest England, see Sherman 1978; Verberckmoes 1988 and Keats-Rohan 1999, 210-211.

21 Farley 1783, Domesday Book i, 13r: ... quod (sc. m. merium) tenuit Fredenc de rege E.

22 Keynes 1990, 177-181 and 201 and Van Houts 1999, 216-217.

23 For Matilda and Judith, see Van Houts 2004a and 2004b.

24 Van Houts 2003b, 107-110.

25 McGurk & Rosenthal 1995.

26 Bates 1998, no. 101, 377.

27 Van Houts 1999, 223.

28 Simons 2003, 6.

There is room, therefore, to speculate that Flemish lay women may have uttered these famous words of love to their partners in England, rather than in Flanders, and that the words filtered through to monks not necessarily daydreaming about their own past but contemplating wishful thoughts.<sup>29</sup> If Dronke is right in suggesting that the love lyrics are the written by a woman, we have here an early example of bilingual composition from the time of the Norman Conquest. In a country where the literate laity and clergy were experienced bi-lingually, in Old English and Latin, it is perhaps not surprising that any vernacular lyric was automatically coupled with its Latin twin. The absence of an Old English version remains regrettable.

At this point I should like to return to Van Oostrom's persuasive suggestions with regard to aspects of written Dutch and frontier cultures. The occurrence of Old Dutch lyrics copied by scribes in England, all scholars agree, betrays some knowledge of the language on the part of the scribes. Perhaps the coupling of Dutch and Latin was the result of someone automatically scribbling lines in two languages, something many clerks and monks in England were wont to do given the commonness of being versed, literally, in two languages. Bi-lingual expertise was common place, across literary genres, before and after the Norman Conquest as we have seen. The force of the fringe argument as expounded by Van Oostrom is that Dutch as a young written language was challenged, squeezed and battered from two sides by French speakers and by German speakers. There remains room, it seems to me, to see whether the Flemish literati in England (or the English in Flanders) allowed a more equal cross fertilisation of ideas and literary expression in the vernacular. Any man or woman acquainted with Old English and Dutch (and of course Latin) might have felt under less pressure to choose sides, as perhaps they felt they had to in a French or German speaking context, due to the greater acceptance in England of some sort of parity between Latin and the vernacular. Van Oostrom's fringe argument, persuasive in itself, could be expanded in order to encompass the Northsea area as a whole, including the shores on both sides, instead of focussing only the continental coastal areas of Holland and Flanders. Flanders's bilingualism is usually discussed in the context of Old French. One of the most important results of Van Oostrom's research as presented in *Stemmen of Schrift*, is the implication it has for a cross maritime culture in the eleventh century in which vernacular expressions in various Germanic languages could flourish.<sup>30</sup>

In this context, there is another observation to be made concerning the work of the Flemish hagiographers who emigrated to England. One of the reasons for their popularity with the English queens and monastic houses, so I have argued, may have been their sense of humour and use of burlesque style. Elsewhere I have suggested that the many lively vignettes in the saints' lives concern little scenes with which the hagiographers filled in the saint's narrative, embroidering bare facts very much, as I put it, in

29 Where in this context the other pen probe *keysere* ('emperor') fits in is difficult to say. Was the scribe thinking of *burdens*, the term used regularly by King Edward the Confessor? Or perhaps the emperor was the Holy Roman emperor, Henry III or Henry IV as overlord of eastern Flanders, who in 1049-1050 was at odds with King Edward. Or was it a reminder of the Byzantine emperor busy recruiting western Varangians?

30 This would explain the Heland copy preserved in England.

the 'realistic' painting tradition of the Flemish primitive oils or the superb manuscript illuminations of the Burgundian period. In fact, William of Malmesbury's praise of Goscelin's style singles out his eye for almost photographic detail, though not of course in these words. According to him 'He [Goscelin] also polished up the story of St Augustine's translation so vividly that he seemed to point a finger at every detail for his contemporaries and make future ages see it with their own eyes'.<sup>31</sup> It is this type of lively narrative style that Van Oostrom highlights for Goscelin's younger contemporary, the historian Galbert of Bruges who wrote famously the history of the murder of count Charles the Good in 1128 (p. 34). By characterising Galbert as the first passionate author of Flanders, Van Oostrom overlooks the most important generation of Latinists Flanders produced and then exported to England, where its protagonists directly influenced the early twelfth-century generation of historians, of whom William of Malmesbury, as we have seen, explicitly singled out Goscelin as his role model.

But Goscelin and his compatriots did more than with a twinkle in their eyes writing realistic and humorist stories as part of their hagiographical work. They also revealed themselves as emphatic exiles who could identify with women.<sup>32</sup> It seems to me no accident that the monks, single men, far away from home, knocking on English doors for sympathy and work, received it from fellow monastics and women. There is no doubt in my mind that the sympathy expressed by the Flemish monks for the predicament of queens like Emma (foreigner herself, two husbands, two sets of children, living as courts riven by political strife) or Edith (of Anglo-Scandinavian origin, childless, lost her husband and three of her brothers in 1066, then lost her mother and sister-in-law due to exile). These high status women were in dire need of a sympathetic ear that would report their version of events in the two biographies they commissioned. Moreover, as Dronke also pointed out, Goscelin wrote the passionate plea to the nun Edith, his friend who left England to settle as recluse in Angers.<sup>33</sup> And then there was Drogo of Sint-Winoksbergen whose astoundingly sympathetic narration of Godelieve's life still brings tears to the eyes of his readers, not only for the empathy he brings to the story but through the realistic touches he included. He tells us how Godelieve's mother-in-law mocked her foreign accent (she came from Boulogne in the south just across the language frontier) and the blackness of her hair. The cross channel cultural environment that produced narratives like these is not an unlikely setting for the writing of Dutch love lyrics.

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<sup>31</sup> *Huius quoque translationis scitum nra expohuit ut cum presentibus monstrasse digito futurorumque indicatur subiecisse oculis* (Mynors, Thomson & Winterbottom 1998, 392–393).

<sup>32</sup> Van Houts 2006, 122–125.

<sup>33</sup> Dronke 2005, 403, n. 13.

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