

r  
l  
nd  
le,  
is:  
94,  
ss,  
ty  
e,  
E  
r,  
r,  
-  
\*

## Journey through an unfamiliar literary landscape

«*Stemmen op schrift*» from the Perspective of English Studies

KEES DEKKER

It is much more likely that a scholar or student of medieval Dutch literature will know about *Beowulf* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, than that a scholar or student of medieval English literature will be familiar with the achievements of Henric van Veldeke or Jacob van Maerlant. However understandable this discrepancy may be – most students in the latter category are neither Dutch nor conversant in the language – its inherent injustice is demonstrated in a sublime way by Frits van Oostrom's *Stemmen op Schrift: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur vanaf het begin tot 1300*. In his 640-page book, Van Oostrom takes us through the first two centuries of vernacular literary activity in the Low Countries: a region – neither a country nor a nation – where a conglomerate of Low Franconian dialects were spoken, and which, in present-day terms, comprises the Netherlands, a part of Belgium and a small part of northern France. This region lies north of the Romance-Germanic speech boundary, and, through the centuries, it nudged its way northwards, at the expense of areas where, traditionally, other Germanic dialects such as Frisian and Low Saxon had been predominant. In his typically engaging manner, Van Oostrom takes the reader through time and place, while paying longer or shorter visits to certain places in the literary landscape – a guided tour, as it were, in which the reader is comfortably entertained in a useful and pleasant way. The audience's response to the information supplied depends, of course, on background and, potentially, nationality: the response of a Dutchman or Belgian is bound to be different from that of a Frenchman, German or Englishman, who would be naturally inclined to compare and contrast, rather than solely to absorb. The following pages respond to *Stemmen op schrift* from the point of view of English studies: the reaction is one of recognition as well as pleasant surprise.<sup>1</sup>

### I

Chapter I of *Stemmen op Schrift*, entitled *Wêreld in losse woorden*, 'The World in Individual Words', deals with the earliest period of written culture in the Low Countries, i.e. from the beginning until 1200. This period exceeds in length any dealt with in the other chapters; it is, however, characterised by a surprising as well as disappointing

1. Parenthesised numbers always refer to pages from *Stemmen op Schrift*. Quotations are my translations. In this paper I refer to titles from Old and Middle English texts. For an overview of Old English texts with references to standard editions, see Cameron 1973; for Middle English texts the same can be found in Burke Severs *et al.* 1967-2005.

sparsity of early vernacular (i.e. Old Dutch) texts. Van Oostrom begins his discussion of this period on a quantitative note, by stating that 'Dutch is less well off than the surrounding languages' (p. 26) because there are, broadly speaking, only some fifteen authentic sources. The question of why there is this difference in vernacular output during the early period will be found on the lips of many an English reader. Squeezed in between the heartland of Carolingian and Ottonian Germany, to the east, and Anglo-Saxon England, to the west (across the North Sea), the Low Countries were neighbours of, and were influenced by, two seminal regions of vernacular written culture. In Southern England a period of unrivalled vernacular output began with the reign of King Alfred the Great of Wessex (871-899), resulting in a variety of genres – epic, elegiac poetry, religious verse, wisdom poetry, homilies, hagiography, utilitarian treatises, etc. – partly in prose, but partly also in verse, i.e. the ancient Germanic alliterative metre. The English achievements were matched, in part, on the Continent by Old High German writings. The conversion of the Frisians and Saxons by Anglo-Saxon missionaries, from the seventh century onwards, created ecclesiastical and scholarly cross-ties which continued long after the Frankish conquest of these areas and resulted in a shared culture of glossography, in the context of monastic learning and church liturgy. In the Low Countries, however, the voice of the vernacular never rose beyond that of background music – to cite van Oostrom's metaphor (p. 19) – which begs the question as to what conditions could have caused this difference in prominence.

In his attempts to answer this question, Van Oostrom first sets out to present a picture of written culture as a whole – which automatically means literary writing in Latin. The linguistic situation in the Low Countries at the time was much like that in England, one of di- and later tri-glossia: Latin, the main medium of writing, was used beside the vernacular, with increasing competition from French, as time went on. A discussion of *latinitas* is fundamental to any literary history of a medieval vernacular, and it is deemed worthy of a separate chapter in the *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (1999), a work which, in dealing with the period between 1066 and 1547, can be regarded as an English parallel of *Stemmen op schrift* and the volume which will follow the latter. Van Oostrom gives the Latin background ample attention in this chapter 1, yet its integration in the chapter complicates, in my opinion, the reader's overview of this lengthy period. The decision to discuss *latinitas* (p. 27-46) according to writing centres (Egmond, Brugge, Gent and Saint-Omer) – later on (p. 56-57) we learn of yet more centres of book culture such as Utrecht, Antwerp and Maaseik – distracts attention from the chronological framework, while the highlights discussed, the Egmond Gospels, written c. 875 in northern France (not in the Low Countries) and the *Liber Floridus*, written 1100-1120 in Saint-Omer, epitomise very different scholarly periods and traditions. Chapter 1 rewards the persistent reader by providing a wealth of references to Latin texts and a concentration on highlights of Latin literature in the Low Countries, with splendid illustrations, but it does not allow easy comparison with Latin writings in England and Germany, with which the Low Countries shared many of its foundations of learning.

When it comes to Old Dutch Van Oostrom emphasises that during this early period the vernacular played only an ancillary role to Latin (p. 46), but he dispenses with

any linguistic characterisation of 'Oudnederlands' – his collective denominator for the Germanic dialect(s) spoken in the region (specified above) before 1200. 'Oudnederlands' is traditionally regarded as a Low Franconian dialect of Continental West Germanic – 'Franconian' being the language of the ancient Franks, and 'low' referring to its position with respect to Second Germanic Consonant Shift, which divides the more northern dialects of Continental West Germanic from the more southern ones. Depending on where we are in the Low Countries, this Low Franconian dialect might have been affected by North-Sea Germanic (Ingvaenic or Frisian) or by the higher German dialects of the Rhineland, and this has led some scholars to distinguish East Low Franconian and West Low Franconian.<sup>2</sup> The definition of what is 'Oudnederlands' and of its boundaries is therefore essential for deciding whether or not a text or a gloss is to be included in the history of Dutch (vernacular) literature – for example, in the ongoing discussion of the true linguistic nature of the *Hebban olla vogala* line, of which all but one of its thirteen words could as easily be late Old English as Dutch.<sup>3</sup>

This *Hebban olla vogala*, a late eleventh-century pen-trial written on the final folio of an Anglo-Saxon homiliary, is here labelled as the 'first completely literary text in the Dutch language' and the 'longest independent text in Old Dutch' (p. 93), and it ushers in the *grand finale* to the first chapter. For this early period, however, it is in most cases very difficult to prove the independence of a vernacular text from a Latin exemplar, especially of one that appears together with a version in Latin, and which should perhaps be connected to the teaching of Latin rhetoric in a monastic setting (p. 99). The distance between *Hebban olla vogala* and the Egmond vernacular translation of Abbot Williram of Ebersberg's paraphrase of the *Song of Songs* may therefore be less great than their respective places in Chapter I seems to imply. Anglo-Saxon genres such as riddles, narrative biblical verse and wisdom-poetry testify to the existence of vernacular literature in the context of monastic learning.

For readers accustomed to literary histories of Old English literature, the distribution of the Old Dutch texts in Chapter I of *Stemmen op schrift* differs from the chronological and generic classification of texts they are used to.<sup>4</sup> The tenth-century Wachtendonck Psalter Glosses feature, with illustrations, in the introduction (p. 12–16) and make a brief re-appearance (p. 55) to introduce the Malberg Glosses on the *Lex Salica* (p. 55–56), which may well date back to the sixth century. The Egmond Williram, characterised as 'the oldest book in the Dutch language' and written around 1100, features in the section entitled 'Latin Books' (p. 30–33). This is followed by (sometimes indirect) evidence of early written culture in the Low Countries – items such as the Westeremden (Frisian) runes, charms and magic, Old Frisian legal texts, onomastic evidence, proverbs, and even the Old Saxon *Heliand* – and all of this leads into the discussion of *Hebban olla vogala*. By proceeding in this way, Van Oostrom is able to pay much well-needed attention to the great variety of sources that can be tapped to ex-

2 See Van Bree 1987, 65, 68; and also Quak & Van der Horst 1997, 37–42.

3 As argued by De Grauwe 2004, 97.

4 See, for example, Fulk, Cain & Anderson 2003; Godden & Lapidge, 1991; Greenfield & Calder 1986.

tend our knowledge of this comparatively dark period, but an English reader has to be prepared to dispense with structural features that are the norm in literary histories of Anglo-Saxon. In exchange for this, the first chapter offers a colourful impression of what was and what might have been.

## II

The second chapter of *Stemmen op schrift*, describing the works of Heinric van Veldeke and the literary culture of the later twelfth century, marks a profound change in the course of Dutch literary history. Just as in the time of the Wachtendonck Psalter Glosses, it is in Limburg, and more precisely the *Maasland*, a triangle formed by the towns of Aachen, Liege, and Maastricht, where we see the first flowering of Dutch literature. This literature is European in its content and outlook, and courtly in its origin and subject matter (p. 118–119). Van Oostrom pays a great deal of attention to the artistic culture that flowered in the *Maasland*, in the twelfth century, and he reveals how a new sense of beauty coincided with a period of intellectual growth, financial prosperity and the presence of the imperial court (p. 121–134). The result of the mixing of these ingredients appears in the development of a style in book production, church building, and the production of literary texts.

The literary situation in the Low Countries in the twelfth century is diametrically opposed to that in England. Whereas in the period between 900 and 1100 a flowering of vernacular English prose and verse coincided with a wave of book production in Southern England, the century-and-half after the Norman Conquest (1066), during which the native English aristocracy and higher clergy were, for the greater part, replaced by speakers of (Norman-)French, is marked by a decline in the composition of English texts, especially that of original literary texts. While the production of manuscripts containing utilitarian prose, such as homilies and prayers, continued, the appreciation of Anglo-Saxon literature dwindled, and the written tradition which had produced *Beowulf*, *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Battle of Maldon* (to name but a few of the highlights) disappeared from sight.<sup>5</sup> The absence of an Anglophone aristocracy prevented both the continuation of the old vernacular tradition and, for a long time, the birth of a courtly tradition, such as one sees both in France and in the Low Countries. This does not mean, however, that the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are a barren age for England: as the language and tastes of court and aristocracy was French, so their literature was that written in French, complemented by Latin. At the same time, one witnesses a vernacular tradition emerging among the middle classes, one which produced poems in a new type of alliterative verse that was much less rigid than the versification of the Anglo-Saxon period. But it has to be said: England had no Heinric van Veldeke and no comparable flowering of early courtly literature in the vernacular.

5 See Swan & Treharne 2000.

Reading chapter II of *Stemmen op schrift* from an English background reveals how a similar situation of cultural and linguistic contact can work out very differently in different places, depending on whether circumstances are favourable (and perhaps on the presence of at least one enlightened spirit to profit from them). Both the Low Countries (particularly the southern part) and England were places where speakers of French and Germanic met and mingled, but where the prestige literary culture was Francophone. As Van Oostrom shows, the source material used by Veldeke and his contemporaries was often French, and in some cases Anglo-Norman: the dialect of French spoken by the rulers and aristocracy of England and Normandy, and used widely as a written language by their scribes. During the very period under discussion in Chapter II, the English kings Henry II (1154–1189) and Richard I (1189–1199) controlled half the kingdom of France, including Aquitaine, the birthplace of the literature of courtly love, and that during this period 'the courts of Henry II and his wife and sons sponsored an extraordinary volume and quality of writing'.<sup>6</sup> Van Oostrom mentions Benedeit's *Voyage of St Brendan* (c. 1106), Thomas d'Angleterre's *Tristan* (c. 1175), Veldeke's *Aeneas* and, perhaps, *Floris and Blancheflour* as possible Anglo-Norman influences on the Dutch versions from the late twelfth century (p. 191). Although the same stories, and many more, must have been circulating at the English court and in the houses of the Anglo-Norman aristocracy, only one, Lazamon's translation of Wace's *Roman de Brut*, was translated into English before 1200 – not, as it happens, in the modern rhyming verse used for courtly poetry, but in alliterative verse, an intentional reminder of the Anglo-Saxon past.

Language attitude seems to be a key factor here: whereas in the case of the Low Countries the cultural interface between French and Germanic led to a cross-fertilisation of traditions, in the case of England it all but barred the English language from courtly genres, a situation from which the language only really recovered in the fourteenth century. Veldeke was a polyglot, who knew High German, French, Latin, and his native tongue: the dialect of Limburg (p. 141). The importance of the region must have elevated this dialect to a local standard which Veldeke and his fellow authors deemed sufficiently important to use for poetry of the most exalted kind – even if this did not yet lead to a coherent literary tradition, but only to a 'series of stepping stones' (p. 197). Can it be that it was this positive attitude to the vernacular which the Low Countries had, until then, lacked?

### III

When *Stemmen op schrift* proceeds to the thirteenth century, it introduces a golden age of literary output in the Low Countries. Three chapters of roughly a hundred pages each divide the literature of this century into its main parts: Chapter III, entitled *Het grote verhaal*, 'The Great Story', deals with a genre, viz. that of romances; Chapter IV, entitled *Missie en mystiek*, 'Mission and Mysticism', deals with a category, viz. religious

6 Crane 1999, 41.

texts, while Chapter V, entitled *Willem and Jacob*, discuss the works of the author of *Vanden vos Reynaerde*, who calls himself 'Willem', and those of Jacob van Maerlant, author of an imposing corpus of scholarly literature. The subdivisions of each of the chapters delineate topics appropriate to each chapter, such as for example, 'Charlemagne', 'Arthur' and 'Lancelot' in Chapter III, and 'Bible epic and Saint's Lives', 'Bible Translations', 'The Road of Mysticism' and 'Writing Women' in Chapter IV. In these three chapters the organisation of *Stemmen op Schrijf* resembles – more than in Chapter I – that of other histories of medieval literature, though this is in no way to depreciate the unique merits of Van Oostrom's book.

To a scholar of medieval English literature, Chapter III will provide a lot of food for thought, because it deals with the rise and flowering of courtly romance – a genre that is well represented in both England and the Low Countries. Once again, it is the influence of French literature and the position of the vernacular in relation to French that seem to have created the conditions and perimeters bearing on literary output, although this time the centre of gravity lies in Flanders and Brabant rather than in Limburg. Interestingly, Van Oostrom starts by discussing the diglossia situation: 'Flanders and Brabant were, to a large extent, bilingual' (p. 218), and certainly the nobility preferred to participate in Francophone culture, rather than instigate the translation and adaptation of French works into Dutch. The principal example was the assignment given to Chrétien de Troyes by Philip, Count of Alsace, to write the *Perceval* (p. 218). The felt need for romances in Dutch ensued from the wealth of towns and the consequent rise of a resident elite consisting of both mercantile classes and the lower nobility (p. 232). This rise coincided with a dramatic increase in the use of Dutch as the language of administration, which is another indicator of a positive attitude towards a language and one of the reasons why so much Dutch writing from the thirteenth century has survived – in contrast to the twelfth century. Van Oostrom shows how bourgeois elements occasionally seep in via translations of courtly French romances, and how translation techniques generally imply a simplified and rhyming tetrameter metrics. The effect of the large-scale rendering of French courtly romances into Dutch is somewhat that of a pressure cooker, in which contrasts and nuances of taste are lost through the efforts to cook a fast meal for a less sophisticated audience (p. 232–233).

From a comparativist point of view, it is interesting to see that the cause-and-effect scenario outlined by Van Oostrom for thirteenth-century Flanders and Brabant seems partly to repeat itself in England, except that, on the whole, it takes place about a century later. Although English began to re-establish itself in the thirteenth century, and acquired prestige in a growing number of towns, the introduction of English in domains such as the law courts, schools, parliament and general correspondence is an affair of the fourteenth century. Of more than a hundred Middle English romances listed in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, only seven date from the period between 1225 and 1300, and of only two can it be established that they were definitely written before the end of the thirteenth century. Conversely, there are more than fifty that date from the fourteenth century.<sup>7</sup> All the romances from the thirteenth century

7 Newstead 1967, 11–16.

and many of those from the fourteenth are, like their Dutch counterparts, translations from Anglo-Norman and French exemplars; moreover, many have been drastically shortened and are less courtly – indicative of 'the rise of the country gentry and city merchants as a new public for the literature of entertainment'.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of genre, the romances in the Low Countries distinguish themselves from their insular neighbours, in that Charlemagne takes pride of place. In no other European country, with the exception of France, is there a similarly developed culture of Charlemagne romances. Furthermore, the Dutch specimens are not mere translations from their French exemplars, but often comprise adaptations which change the accent from the political and feudal character to that of action (p. 249). One may presume that the patriotic appeal of the Charlemagne stories was as strong in the Low Countries as in France, which is no surprise since Flanders and Brabant were part of the Frankish heartland; it is perhaps more surprising that in this context Germany lags somewhat behind. In Britain, there was no such identification with Charlemagne, and consequently only a handful of English Charlemagne romances were composed.

Romances dealing with the court circle of King Arthur make up the bulk of romance-writing in the Low Countries and therefore occupy much of Chapter III. Van Oostrom explains that the Dutch tradition boasts some of the most accomplished examples of Arthurian romance, of which the *Roman van Walewein* (known in the English tradition as Gawain), the *Ferguut* ('Romance of Fergus') and the monumental *Prose Lancelot* are the jewels in the crown. Especially the latter approximates in sophistication and length its famous French exemplar, the *Lancelot en prose*. Although Arthur is, originally, an English creation (p. 256–260), the Dutch Arthur tradition differs from the English one. The latter has at its centre the chronologically ordered life of Arthur and his exploits against the Emperor Lucius Hibernius; this formed the backbone of the accounts of Geoffrey of Monmouth, the Anglo-Norman *Roman de Brut* by Wace, Lazamon's *Brut* and, in the fourteenth century, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. The Middle Dutch tradition relies on the elaborations of Chrétien de Troyes and focuses on matters of love and chivalry (Walewein and Ysabele ['a girl as tough as nails'! 267], Ferguut and Galiene, and Arthur, Lancelot and Guenièvre) – themes which, in the English tradition, received comparably artistic treatment only in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

#### IV

Chapter IV, discussing writings of a religious nature, has two main parts: one on Biblical poetry and saints' lives (p. 334–379), and one on mysticism (p. 379–461), of which the latter rightly receives the greater prominence. With respect to the first part, the differences in tradition between England and the Low Countries could not be greater. The Anglo-Saxon tradition boasts an unprecedented corpus of vernacular religious writ-

<sup>8</sup> Field 1999, 168.

ings: a translation of the *Heptateuch*, the Gospels and apocryphal texts; poetic renderings of *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Daniel*, *Judith*; a great number of saints' lives and homilies; prayers; a martyrology; penitentials; and much else, of which especially the saint's lives and homilies continued to be read and copied in the centuries following the Norman Conquest. The results are apparent: the twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw the writing of the *Ormulum* (a gospel harmony with homiletic material, which may have numbered some 150,000 lines), homilies, verse renderings of *Genesis* and *Exodus*, and the *South English Legendary*, containing some ninety saints' lives in verse. Nothing like the Anglo-Saxon tradition existed in the Low Countries and it is as if this lack of a vernacular tradition affected the corpus of thirteenth-century Dutch texts: a life of Christ, some attempts at Bible translation and what Van Oostrom describes as a somewhat disappointing harvest of vernacular saints' lives (p. 357). The big exception is the *Luikse diatessaron*, a gospel harmony preserved in the Library at Liège, of which some scholars think that its text reaches back to *Vetus Latina* versions of the Gospels which antedate the Vulgate, and perhaps derives from oriental texts. Van Oostrom presents a lively description of the disputes concerning this enigmatic text, which was used by theologians in their study of the Bible, as glosses and traces in the manuscript show. It is fascinating to see how warnings against unlearned exegesis articulated in the prologue of the *Luikse diatessaron* echo similar cautionary advice from the Anglo-Saxon abbot Ælfric (c. 955–c. 1010) in his preface to his translation of *Genesis*.<sup>9</sup>

No such comparison between the Low Countries and England is possible when it comes to thirteenth-century mystical writers. The tradition of mysticism, was, as Van Oostrom shows, a European one, with its roots in the Church Fathers and its first growth in monasteries and intellectual circles. But its outgrowth into the private devotions of women such as St Lutgard, St Kerstinen (Christina), Beatrijs of Nazareth and Hadewijch is unprecedented. The latter, in particular, combines great controversiality with excellence and, as we learn in 'the case of H.', she is even linked with a case of unknown or mistaken identity (p. 445–448). The suggestion that the vernacular was chosen deliberately 'as medium of greater freedom' (p. 459), especially by women, and that through their efforts they developed and revalued the rhetorical strength of the language does not apply to their (much later) English counterparts such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, who wrote after the tradition of Middle English verse had been shaped by authors such as Chaucer, Gower and the Gawain poet. In the thirteenth century, female spirituality in England tended to be written about by men, such as the writers of the *Hali Meïdhad* and the *Ancren Wisse*, whose emphasis was on the preservation of virginity and the beneficiality of total seclusion in the cell of an anchoress. Even the first writer on female mysticism, Richard Rolle of Hampole (d. 1349), was a man – though his first hermit's robe had to be cut from the dress of his sister.

<sup>9</sup> Wilcox 1996.



## V

The last chapter of *Stemmen op schrift* presents the apotheosis of thirteenth-century Dutch literature in the form of a masterpiece and a mastermind: *Vanden vos Reynaerde* and Jacob van Maerlant. The first is a brilliant Flemish adaptation of the Old French beast epic, *Roman de Renart*, in which Reynard the fox acts as the main character in a study of medieval society and human character. Van Oostrom's discussion of *Vanden vos Reynaerde* is captivating and gives credit to the multi-layered nature of the text, visible in the history of its critical appraisal. The comparison of this story with Shakespeare's *Richard III*, in terms of 'fascination for the diabolic and the beauty of what is ugly' (p. 490), is apt; however, in the way that its author successfully plays with a genre both to confuse and teach his audience *Vanden vos Reynaerde* may also be said to be reminiscent of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer knew the French *Roman de Renart*, which he used for his *Nun's Priest's Tale*; without doubt he would have loved the version of *Meester Willem*.

While there is in Middle English a short beast fable entitled *The Fox and the Wolf*, which also takes inspiration from the *Roman de Renart*, it must be said with Van Oostrom that 'in these parts no Jacob van Maerlant manifested himself' (p. 524). Considering Van Maerlant's enormous achievements, Van Oostrom's discussion of his works of only forty-seven pages is surprisingly concise. However, to attempt to do credit to Van Maerlant's nine works, listed conveniently on p. 546 with their Latin and/or Old French sources and other European analogues (but without the number of lines for each work), would require a book in itself – and this was done by Van Oostrom in 1996.<sup>10</sup> If one were to explain Van Maerlant's achievements to an English reader – along the lines of Van Oostrom's criticism – one would suggest that Maerlant's talents as a versifier, his relentless devotion as a multi-disciplinary scholar and his skills as a translator rank him with giant figures such as Bede and Ælfric – perhaps in combination. Maerlant's role as a translator of the Bible brought him a mention in an English Lollard tract from around 1400 (p. 540–541); he is therefore probably the first author from the Low Countries to be mentioned in an English document – a reference missed by J.F. Bense in his *Anglo-Dutch Relations*.<sup>11</sup> One cannot help wondering whether the close relations between the counts of Holland and the court of King Edward I involved literary contacts. In 1281 Prince Alfons was betrothed to Margaret, the daughter of Floris V. Floris sent his son Jan to the court of the English king, where, in 1297, Jan married Edward I's daughter Elizabeth. Since negotiations involved visits of noblemen and heralds, would it not have been logical for an aspiring count of Holland to show his English guests what his authors, scribes and illuminators were capable of? And if not from Holland, then it might have been from Brabant. Jan te Winkel, one of Van Oostrom's predecessors, writes in his *Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche Letterkunde* (1887) that the Brabant chronicler Jan van Heelu (fl. 13c) dedicated his verse chronicle on the Battle at Woeringen to Margaret of York, fiancé of Count Jan II of Brabant

<sup>10</sup> Van Oostrom 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Bense 1925. See esp. p. 93–95 on literary relations.

and daughter of Edward I, with the wish that it might serve to teach her Dutch.<sup>12</sup> Since the marriage of Jan and Margaret lasted for more than twenty years, the lady presumably took Van Heelu's advice seriously.

### Conclusion

With Jacob van Maerlant, Van Oostrom concludes his guided tour of Dutch literature before the fourteenth century. For an English reader, or indeed for any reader who is unacquainted with the literary history of the Low Countries, the book provides a journey of discovery through an unfamiliar literary landscape. The reader's view is constantly focussed on the main text of the book; there are no footnote or endnote numbers in the text to distract him, and the notes at the end of the book are linked to titles of subsections, not to page numbers or specific lines. References to relevant literature are often general rather than specific or punctilious. *Stemmen op Schrift* is not a book intended for an audience trained to enjoy endless strings of footnotes on every page; instead, the author has, as he has claimed, provided a synthesis of Middle Dutch literature on the basis of his exceptional knowledge of the subject, his bibliographical knowledge and his profound erudition. This does not mean that the book is flawless in every tiny detail (an *impossibilium* for a book of this scope and a relief to other scholars). An anglist will object that Alcuin is not an Irishman (p. 13) but an Englishman, presumably from York, and he will point out that St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury was no 'Augustinian abbey', but a Benedictine house founded by Augustine, the papal missionary who came to Kent in 597 (p. 100). Incidental oversights such as these are the inevitable risks of an individual work of broad scholarship, but they do not diminish Van Oostrom's achievement. *Stemmen op schrift* is not an encyclopaedia of Middle Dutch literature, with an entry for each and every work, fragment, author and historical detail. Instead, we (the readers) have to follow the author's choices and preferences. For example, although the verse chronicles of the aforementioned Jan van Heelu and his much better known counterpart and contemporary Melis Stoke are mentioned several times, they remain undiscussed. As a reader coming to this book from the discipline of English studies, and being comparatively unacquainted with the ins and outs of the history of the Low Countries, I sometimes wished for more dates or schematic and/or chronological overviews, such as the one given for Van Maerlant's works. Fortunately in such matters the reader can fall back upon the helpful notes and bibliography.

Its author blessed with the gift of the pen, *Stemmen op schrift* is an exceptionally well-written book, which provides all readers with a fascinating, varied and colourful account of the first centuries of vernacular literature in the Low Countries. The strength of the book is that it manages to combine a wealth of scholarly information, both on Middle Dutch literature proper and on its reception through the centuries, with an engaging narrative style. Starting Van Oostrom's book makes one want to read

<sup>12</sup> Te Winkel 1887, 371; Te Winkel 1922 (repr. 1973), 504.

more; finishing it not only gives one the idea of knowing more about Middle Dutch literature, but Van Oostrom's contagious enthusiasm makes one want to go off and read the texts discussed. Although *Stemmen op schrift* is a history of Medieval Dutch literature and is primarily intended for Dutch readers, there is more than enough in it to interest and instruct an Anglophone audience. One may agree with the Oxford professor of Anglo-Saxon, Joseph Bosworth (1789-1876), that the interesting and valuable works of Middle Dutch literature 'would fully repay the trouble of learning that language' (p. 466), but nowadays the English-speaking world relies on translations rather than the learning of foreign languages. Much has been done in recent years to make the medieval literature of the Low Countries internationally accessible: to this enterprise David Johnson, Geert Claassens, Kim Vivian, Ludo Jongen and Richard Lawson have recently contributed by making parts of the Middle Dutch *Lancelot Compilation* and Veldeke's *Life of St Servatius* available to an international public.<sup>13</sup> An English translation of Van Oostrom's *Stemmen op schrift* would not only put these translations and future ones into a wider context, but it would also open up the study of Middle Dutch literature as a whole to a broad international audience. May the *Stemmen* speak in a multitude of tongues!

*Address of the author:*  
Rijksuniversiteit Groningen  
Opleiding Engels  
Postbus 716  
NL-9700 AS Groningen  
c.dekker@rug.nl

### Bibliography

- Bense, J.E., *Anglo-Dutch Relations from the Earliest Times to the Death of William the Third*. The Hague, 1925.
- Burke Severs, J., et al. (ed.), *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*. 11 volumes, New Haven, 1967-2005.
- Cameron, Angus, 'A List of Old English Texts', in: Roberta Frank & Angus Cameron (eds.), *A Plan for the Dictionary of Old English*. Toronto, 1973.
- Crane, Susan, 'Anglo-Norman Cultures in England', in: David Wallace (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*. Cambridge, 1999. The New Cambridge History of English Literature [I], 35-60.
- De Grauwe, Luc, 'Zijn «olla vogala» Vlaams, of zit de Nederlandse filologie met een koekoeksei in (haar) nest(en)?', in: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 120 (2004), 44-56.
- Field, Rosalind, 'Romance in England, 1066-1400', in: David Wallace (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*. Cambridge, 1999. The New Cambridge History of English Literature [I], 152-176.

13 In three volumes of *Dutch Romances* David E. Johnson & Geert H. M. Claassens have published dual-language editions of the *Roman van Walereu* (vol. 1), *Fergant* (vol. 2) and *Five Interpolated Romances From the Lancelot Compilation* (vol. 3), published in 1992, 2000 and 2003, respectively. See also Vivian, Jongen & Lawson 2006.

- Fulk, R.D., Christopher M. Cain & Rachel S. Anderson, *A History of Old English Literature*. Malden, 2003, Blackwell Histories of Literature.
- Godden, Malcolm, & Michael Lapidge (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*. Cambridge, 1991.
- Greenfield, Stanley B., & Daniel G. Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature*, with a survey of the Anglo-Latin background by Michael Lapidge. New York, 1986.
- Johnson, David F., & Geert H.M. Claassens (ed.), *Dutch Romances*, vol. 1 *Roman van Walewein*; vol. 2 *Fergunt*; vol. 3 *Five Interpolated Romances From the Lancelot Compilation*. Cambridge, 1992, 2000 and 2003, *Arthurian Archives* 6, 7, 10.
- Newstead, Helaine, 'Romances in General', in: J. Burke Severs et al. (ed.), *A Manual of the Writing in Middle English 1050-1500*. I. New Haven, Conn., 1967, 11-16.
- Quak, A., & J.M. van der Horst, 'Oudnederlands (tot 1200)', in: M.C. van den Toorn, W.J.J. Pijnenburg, J.A. van Leuvensteijn and J.M. van der Horst (eds.), *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Taal*. Amsterdam, 1997, 37-p68.
- Swan, Mary, & Elaine M. Treharne (eds.), *Rewriting Old English in the Twelfth Century*. Cambridge, 2000, *Cambridge studies in Anglo-Saxon England* 30.
- Te Winkel, J., *Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche Letterkunde*, Haarlem, 1887.
- Te Winkel, J., *Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche Letterkunde van Middeleeuwen en Rederijkerstijd*. Part I of *De Ontwikkelingsgang der Nederlandsche Letterkunde*, Haarlem, 1922, repr. Leeuwarden, 1973.
- Van Bree, Cor, *Historische Grammatika van het Nederlands*. Dordrecht, 1987.
- Van Oostrom, Frits, *Maerlants Wêreld*. Amsterdam, 1996.
- Van Oostrom, Frits, *Stemmen op Schrift. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur vanaf het begin tot 1300*. Amsterdam, 2006.
- Vivian, Kim, Ludo Jongen & Richard H. Lawson (eds.), *The Life of Saint Servatius. A Dual-Language Edition of the Middle Dutch Legend of Saint Servatius by Heinrich von Veldeke and the Anonymous Upper German Life of Saint Servatius*. Lewiston, N.Y., 2006.
- Wilcox, Jonathan (ed.), *Aelfric's Prefaces*. Durham, 1996.