



## Review

### **A Celebration of Words. Herman Pleij, *Het geveugelde woord: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur, 1400-1560* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2007)**

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In 2016 two milestones were reached in the writing of European literary history. In February the last installment of the planned nine-volume history of Netherlandic literature (*Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur*; hereafter GNL) was published, bringing to a magnificent conclusion the twenty-year old project to create a much-needed revision of Dutch literary history.<sup>1</sup> A few months later in May, a new literary history of the late Middle Ages, *Europe: A Literary History, 1348-1418*, under the general editorship of David Wallace, appeared that challenged the very foundations upon which a national literary history such as the GNL was based.<sup>2</sup> Once nearly forgotten by scholars during the theoretical battles of the 1980s and the ensuing canon wars, literary history is again on the rise but in a substantially revised format that expands the diversity of literary writing, and includes the manner in which literature is produced, circulated, and consumed. For the 'new literary histories' that started to appear in 1989, collaborative teams of scholars have produced episodic narratives of key literary moments, histories of neglected regions, spatial narratives focused on cities or regions, or most expansively of all, a comprehensive recasting of an entire literary tradition from its origins to the present.<sup>3</sup> In many cases, these literary histories focus on an individual nation or nations with a shared common

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<sup>1</sup> Arie-Jan Gelderblom and Anne Marie Musschoot (eds.), *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur*, 10 vols. (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2006-2017). Each volume appeared with a separate title. The tenth volume, *Ongeziene blikken*, which served as an afterword, was written by the chief editors of the project (Gelderblom and Musschoot) and published in January 2017.

<sup>2</sup> David Wallace (ed.), *Europe: A Literary History, 1348-1418*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Denis Hollier (ed.), *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); M. A. Schenkeveld-van der Dussen, *Nederlandse literatuur: een geschiedenis* (Groningen: M. Nijhoff, 1993); David E. Wellbery, Judith Ryan, and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (eds.), *A New History of German Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); María Rosa Menocal and Raymond P. Scheindlin (eds.), *The Literature of Al-Andalus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (eds.), *History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 2004-07); Christie McDonald and Susan Suleiman (eds.), *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); S. Luzzatto and G. Pedullà (eds.), *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, 3 vols. (Torino: Einaudi, 2010-12); Anne-Marie Mai, *Hvor litteraturen finder sted: en bidrag til dansk litteraturs historie*. 3 vols. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2010-11).

language; in others, the perspective shifts to the interaction between writing in several different languages within an established regional or national space. Projects such as the GNL have their methodological origins in the nineteenth century when such works chronicled and glorified the cultural achievements of a singular nation. In contrast, scholars such as Wallace argue that in the present globalized world, such national triumphalism is no longer viable—he was writing before the unexpected political resurgence of populism in Europe and the United States—and a new paradigm for literary history is needed that corresponds to contemporary practices of near constant transnational exchange. The GNL looks back to the past with its emphasis on the nexus between language, literature, and geographic boundaries; Wallace’s history looks optimistically toward an increasingly borderless future to reimagine literary production as a dynamic process of transmission and collaboration among diverse linguistic and cultural centers.

It would be injudicious to regard the near simultaneous appearance of the last volume of the GNL and Wallace’s history as a transitional moment in literary-historical writing between the national and the transnational, or between a traditional approach and a progressive new method. Such a simplistic juxtaposition would leave unacknowledged the extraordinary creativity that many of the GNL authors brought to their daunting assignments and the innovative way in which they dealt with their most vexing challenges, such as the vastly different cultures during the eighteenth century in the North and the South, or the almost insurmountable quantity of texts to consider post-1945. Such a comparison would also pass over the weaknesses of Wallace’s approach. The success of his method rests on the expertise of the 81 scholars who participated in his project. Despite his programmatic claims to overcome the subliminal nationalism of past literary histories, some of the contributors either did not understand his vision, or chose not to fashion their chapter to reflect his pan-European orientation. What at first seems new and cutting-edge appears in places surprisingly traditional and uninspired. Despite its unevenness, Wallace’s challenge to a nationally focused literary history remains, and because of its temporal overlap with Pleij’s volume, it is no longer possible to read Pleij without remaining mindful of Wallace’s reservations.

Pleij’s book first appeared in 2007, the third volume of the GND to be published. It had been preceded in 2006 by Frits van Oostrom’s first volume that covered Dutch literary history from its inception until 1300, and the last volume by Hugo Brems on the post-World War II period, both of which were received with great fanfare in the public media.<sup>4</sup> The additional installments framing Pleij’s treatment of the late Middle Ages and the first half of the sixteenth century appeared somewhat later: Karel Porteman and Mieke Smit-Veldt’s presentation of the ‘long’ seventeenth century (1561-1710) in 2008, and Frits van Oostrom’s study of the challenging fourteenth century in 2013.<sup>5</sup> Given that each installment would be published at different times, the chief editors of the GNL, Arie-Jan Gelderblom and Anne Marie Musschoot, did a magnificent job ensuring a tight articulation between all four of the premodern volumes though there are small differences. Van Oostrom’s treatment of the fourteenth century contains a chronological

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<sup>4</sup> Frits van Oostrom, *Stemmen op schrift: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur vanaf het begin tot 1300* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2006); Hugo Brems, *Altijd weer vogels die nesten beginnen: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur, 1945-2005* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2006); Gelderblom and Musschoot, *Ongeziene blikken*, pp. 61-2.

<sup>5</sup> Karel Porteman and Mieke Smits-Veldt, *Een nieuw vaderland voor de muzen: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur, 1560-1700* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008); Frits van Oostrom, *Wereld in woorden: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur, 1300-1400* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2013).

table charting historical and literary events, some major, others intriguing, to inform his readers and pique their interest. The fifteenth century is just as complex as its predecessor, and Pleij's volume would have benefited from a similar contextual guide. Van Oostrom also frequently draws connections to medieval European literature and even modern culture with an eye to attracting readers with little familiarity with his subject. In contrast, despite occasional references beyond the Dutch-speaking world, Pleij remains focused on that linguistic space.

At the conclusion of the project, Gelderblom and Musschoot published an informative volume (*Ongeziene blikken; Unseen Views*) as an afterword to the entire series which provides essential information about the evolution of the GNL and their shared understanding of what was meant by 'history', 'Dutch', and 'literature' – a refreshing change from the silence of previous literary historians on these central topics.<sup>6</sup> They also addressed the scope of the undertaking, the series' presumed audience, background information on project logistics and financing, and the reception of the volumes within the Dutch-language zone and abroad. Some of this information may have been known to initial reviewers of the GNL volumes when they first appeared, but certainly not in as comprehensive a way as now. In examining Pleij's contribution anew, it is fitting that his achievement be evaluated within the framework of the entire project.

A new history of Dutch literature was long overdue. For students trained before the mid-1980s (this reviewer included), the four-volume history of Gerard Knuvelde was the standard introduction to the field – the essential vademecum in preparing for examinations – even though its utility was limited despite many later revisions.<sup>7</sup> Knuvelde retained many traces of its immediate post-war origins. Each section commenced with introductions about key periods from the Middle Ages through the Modern Period that placed Dutch writing in a broader historical context – a poignant reminder of the cosmopolitan culture that had so lately been assailed by nationalist fascists. His literary world was produced in large measure by social elites with few representatives of the lower classes; it paid little attention to the multilingualism of many premodern writers, and it primarily concerned the literature of the northern Netherlands, chiefly of Holland, with little reference to regional writers or to Dutch writing in the South. By the late 1980s such limitations were painfully in need of updating, and among the historical epochs that recent scholarship had changed, the premodern era was the most significant. Knuvelde's view of the Dutch Middle Ages and Renaissance in the late 1940s had not shifted much from the philological studies of the early twentieth century, but the work of Pleij and van Oostrom in the 1980s followed by that of their students markedly transformed the period. Knuvelde's first volume, which covers Dutch literature from its beginnings (ca. 1100) until 1567, was only 520 pages; the first three volumes of the GNL recounting the same era, amount to 1,865 pages without annotations and bibliography.

The GNL had not been the first attempt to reassess Dutch literary history after Knuvelde. Inspired by Denis Hollier's *A New History of French Literature* (1989), which replaced the traditional narrative with key dates in the literary culture of the Francophone world, M. A. Schenkeveld-van der Dussen and her collaborative team of 109 contributors produced *Nederlandse literatuur, een geschiedenis* (1993) whose very title intimated the tentativeness of writing literary history at all. This was not to be an authoritative history, 'de geschiedenis', but

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<sup>6</sup> Gelderblom and Musschoot, *Ongeziene blikken*, pp. 11-38.

<sup>7</sup> G. P. M. Knuvelde, *Handboek tot de geschiedenis der Nederlandse letterkunde*, 4 vols. ('s-Hertogenbosch: Malmberg, 1948-1953). Eight printings through 1982; last revised version was the fifth printing of 1970.

merely ‘*een geschiedenis*’, one of many possible approaches, highlighting just one of many possible canons for a particular period.<sup>8</sup> Schenkeveld-van der Dussen adopted a non-hierarchical method in keeping with postmodernist skepticism about the nature of literature, canons, and literary history. Literary history can no longer be written by a single author weaving an elaborate unified narrative, for the subject has become too vast and complex. Her history plays down the singularity of great authors by not presenting them in a unified way. Rather, references to individual writers are scattered throughout the volume since their works often resonate across the centuries. She eschews any claim to comprehensiveness, freely admitting that some known authors and works were not included so that other aspects of literary culture, such as the social institutions that supported literary production (cloisters, cities, and learned societies) could be discussed. She was also the first Dutch literary historian to devote a prominent place to women writers.

The GNL could not have been conceived in its final form without Schenkeveld’s project. Many of her contributors were subsequently chosen to write or co-author some of the GNL volumes, and though sequential narratives were reintroduced, the manner in which many of those stories were to be told echoed Schenkeveld’s inclusiveness of social institutions, social levels of literary production, writers from both genders, and her preference for decentering the representation of the best-known writers. The GNL project also profited from the *Histoire de la littérature néerlandais* (1999), coedited by three members of the Schenkeveld team, Johanna Stouten, Jaap Goedegebuure, and Frits van Oostrom, and its conceptualization of literary history as a repository of basic information within a broad socio-political frame.<sup>9</sup> This combination of practicality and context is reflected further in the GNL editors’ expressed purpose to produce a work of readable scholarship that would appeal to professionals in the field as well as to the general public.<sup>10</sup> Writing for a mixed audience of scholars and educated readers is an admirable undertaking, but very difficult for most academic researchers to achieve especially since the work must appeal simultaneously to both audiences. Beginners need to be informed and wooed to read further; scholars read for the underlying interpretive frame and the discovery of new connections between mostly familiar texts. The perils of oversteering towards neophytes, results in a basic handbook, almost an *abrégé*, with little sense of the intellectual excitement generated by particular literary works. The *Niederländische Literaturgeschichte* (2006) suffers from this encyclopedic tendency, a characteristic of many German-language literary histories, and its intended student readership would be better advised to turn to the GNL volumes for a more informative presentation.<sup>11</sup> But the GNL poses challenges of its own for the educated reader or the beginning student. The formidable length of most of the volumes – not to mention their physical weight even in oversized paperback versions – speaks against such texts as everyday reading. The volumes are far too heavy and large for reading while commuting or on holiday, and the sheer length of many of them, would discourage all but the most ambitious student. With their enchanting rainbow-colored spines, they may be destined more to be admired as a decorative accessory for the home

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<sup>8</sup> Hollier, see note 3. Schenkeveld, *Nederlandse literatuur*, p. vi.

<sup>9</sup> Johanna Stouten, Jaap Goedegebuure, and Frits van Oostrom (eds.), *Histoire de la littérature néerlandaise: Pays-Bas et Flandre* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Gelderblom and Musschoot, *Ongeziene blikken*, p. 46-7.

<sup>11</sup> Ralf Grüttemeier and Maria-Theresia Leuker (eds.), *Niederländische Literaturgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006).

rather than read. Although they have been sensibly priced for a broad readership, their format befits the scholarly library where they could rest comfortably on a reading stand. What is sorely needed now that the multi-volume project has been completed, is a handy two-volume abridgement in print that can be placed into students' hands, and an e-reader version of the abridgment and of each GNL volume that students and general readers can access on their tablets. The GNL was designed as a public celebration of Dutch-language writing in the Low Countries, and the series needs to be made available for its intended audience in a contemporary user-friendly medium. When the project was conceived in the mid-1990s, no one knew about e-readers, iPhones, or digitized books, but the popularity of the lengthy volumes may wane without funding for their digitization in the near future.

The GNL volumes on Dutch-language literature before 1560 were penned by two exceptional writers, Frits van Oostrom and Herman Pleij. Both came of age under the shadow of Johan Huizinga and were influenced by his engaging historical style even though they may sharply disagree with his conclusions about the late medieval period in his 1919 study *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (*The Autumn of the Middle Ages*). In describing the last decades of an overwrought world beholden to beauty and fading chivalric ideals, Huizinga knew how to pace his narrative so that his readers, both general and scholarly, remained transfixed by his panoply of images, texts, and rituals. Pleij, who built his academic career on an extensive command of late medieval Dutch literature and culture, challenges Huizinga's twilight representation of the fifteenth century even while he, like Huizinga, celebrates the vivaciousness of late medieval urban life.<sup>12</sup> Van Oostrom, too, has learned from Huizinga about the best way to move history from the archive to the public sphere, and his skills as a masterful narrator of complex scholarly tales has been recognized with major literary awards.<sup>13</sup> Van Oostrom revels in creating a page-turning story in the tradition of an absorbing nineteenth-century novel. His books betray a Dickensian attention to detail that captures his readers with artfully fashioned opening chapters, leading them deeper into a previously unknown world that envelopes them completely. He is a historian with a historical novelist's sense of landscape, design, and narrative pacing. In contrast, Pleij writes history as a cultural anthropologist like his near-contemporary Peter Burke, and his narratives cluster around a set of themes, social practices, religious beliefs and rituals in which literature is performed and consumed. He prefers the cacophonous noise, processions, sermons, and street plays of urbanized Flanders, Brabant, and Holland, replete with obscene and scatological antics, murmurs of social unrest, printers on the make, and unscrupulous merchants alongside the quiet, inward self-discipline of the sisters and brothers of the Modern Devotion. He employs a Heliodian narrative tossing his readers directly *in medias res*, into the chaotic festivities and jealous rivalries of fifteenth-century urban life, instead of following a straight chronological line, revealing different aspects of literary writing and social practice as his story unfolds. His thematic narrative often repeats itself—not an unwelcome trait in a reference work that will rarely be read straight through – as he explores the various ways in which literature represents and promotes social and religious change while offering consolation to audiences troubled by the vicissitudes of daily life and the seductive allure of worldly pleasure.

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<sup>12</sup> Herman Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur, 1400-1560* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2007), p. 762.

<sup>13</sup> Van Oostrom was awarded the prestigious AKO Literatuurprijs for *Maerlants wereld* (1996); his *Stemmen op schrift* (2006) was nominated for the same prize.

Pleij focuses his volume on the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century city, and he has superbly characterized that environment according to his vision of a population that uses words and texts to shape its personal and civic identity at a time of economic growth and emerging self-interest. ‘Literatuur is overal’ (‘Literature is everywhere’), he states at the outset, and he threads this theme throughout the volume.<sup>14</sup> Much of what Pleij presents has already been covered in his numerous books and articles on the late medieval world since his first major cultural-historical contributions in the early 1980s,<sup>15</sup> and readers who have been following his career will admire the clever way in which he has synthesized his earlier writings with the more recent work of scholars such as B. Besamusca, H. Brinkman, A.-L. van Bruaene, D. Coigneau, J. Oosterman, B. Ramakers, and J. Reynaert. The literary history allows him to present texts, rituals, and practices that he had investigated separately in a broader contextual frame: There are detailed chapters on urban celebrations, Rederijker festivals, professional and amateur dramatic performances, the varieties of oral and visual entertainment, and the reading habits of an increasingly literate public. Considerable space is devoted to the revolutionary effect of printing on shaping the reading practices and market demand, and to the ways in which entrepreneurial printers such as William Caxton and Thomas van der Noot participated in the Europeanization of classical and medieval texts by adapting them for urban readers. Much of Pleij’s volume also includes many valuable observations about the history and transmission of medieval manuscripts, the manner in which many key works were embedded in compendia, and the relationship between the manuscript images and the texts in which they appeared. His presentation of the Modern Devotion is admirably contextualized in his description of the growing emphasis on introspection and meditation among the religious, and the consequent need for books rather than sermons to facilitate private devotion.

Pleij’s volume generally refrains from investigating individual authors in depth though there are sections devoted to selected works of several religious writers (Suster Bertken; Thomas á Kempis), Rederijkers (Anthonis de Roovere, Eduard de Dene, Cornelis Everaert), Anna Bijns, and Erasmus but the details about their lives are limited. He approaches literature through the works themselves, many of which were anonymously produced, and the various genres (*refreinen*, *kluchten*, *esbattements*) to which they belong. Prescriptive instructions for the writing of the Rederijker chambers, or for humanist-inspired vernacular writings, is considered alongside productions of the street – puppet shows, tableaux vivants – and the works of the popular press: prose romances, trickster narratives (Ulenspieghel), travelogues, joke books, medical texts, and animal fables among others. Pleij connects the public’s tastes to the emerging proto-capitalist society in the urban centers. He argues that literary writing is designed to ward off the dangers of idleness and melancholia that can weaken moral resolve or enervate citizens from leading productive lives, both in an economic and spiritual sense. The pursuit of economic self-interest requires self-discipline and emotional control, techniques elucidated by Seneca and popularized in print that enable the acquisition and preservation of wealth and urban stability.

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<sup>14</sup> Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord*, pp. 16; 757-63.

<sup>15</sup> Pleij’s major works before 2007 on the late medieval period include: *Het Gilde van de Blauwe Schuit: Literatuur, volksfeest en burgermoraal in de late middeleeuwen*. 2<sup>nd</sup> revised and expanded edition (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1983); *De sneeuwpoppen van 1511: Literatuur en stadscultuur tussen middeleeuwen en moderne tijd* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1988); *Dromen van Cocagne: Middeleeuwse fantasieën over het volmaakte leven* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1997).

The emerging taste among merchant families for prose narratives based on courtly romances was stoked by the parallels between a knight's perilous adventures abroad and those of the long-distant trader. The family was regarded as the foundation for social and economic growth for the burghers, and threats to harmonious family life such as sexual promiscuity, shrewish women, and adulterous wives were regarded with disdain by the many writers who represented such topsy-turvy relations in their farces (*kluchten*) or short narratives (*sprookjes*). The worldliness of the *burgher* ca. 1500 was conjoined with the recognition of the mutability of the social, political, and economic order, and the inevitability of death. The renowned *Elckerlijc* play, in its many Latin and vernacular versions of the early 1500s, reminded audiences of their physical limitations and the need to prepare wisely for the hereafter. At the same time, Pleij ably demonstrates that the late medieval fascination with death was less an attempt to prepare humankind to escape from the miseries of the world as it was an exhortation to enjoy with gusto the secular pleasure and joy that hard work and self-discipline enabled.

Such *joie de vivre* is clear evidence for Pleij's conclusion that the late medieval Low Countries did not experience Huizinga's 'herfsttij' ('autumn'), for there was simply too much enthusiasm for reworking past traditions and present concerns into new modes of literary expression, characterized by experimentation with form, and innovative, ornate language of beauty and sophistication.<sup>16</sup> Instead of a marked decline, the new elites participated in, and contributed to, the growing secularization of society, an appreciation of the pagan, Greco-Roman past, and the evolution of a culture of self-sufficiency free from the restraining influences of the local prince – or of the Holy Roman Emperor – and the Roman Church. This is the world of the *kermis* and of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* with only a distant reminiscence of his many evocations of sterner judgments beyond the grave. The cover of the paperback version of Pleij's volume features a portion of Gilles Mostaert's painting *Ecce homo* (ca. 1561) – reproduced in full within – a portrait that especially suits Pleij's concept of the early sixteenth-century city. The painting is at once a celebration of the town, with the old Antwerp city hall looming in the background, a thronging crowd of colorful, brightly lit people in both local and foreign dress revealing Antwerp as a global *entrepôt*, and an apparent scene from a street performance of Christ's Passion in which Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd.<sup>17</sup> Despite its seeming religiosity, the painting is a celebration of urban power and wealth in which piety has been reduced to an aside. It is still very much a Christian world, and as many plays and stories attest, a world whose inhabitants are in need of moral and spiritual guidance, but it is also an environment in which material possessions and pleasure are playing an increasingly alluring role. The city regulates, teaches, and controls, but it can also enervate, seduce, and bankrupt its residents both morally and spiritually.

The paradox that Pleij detects in urban life also informs his examination of the spiritual writings of late medieval writers. The communities that arose in the late fourteenth century by the members of what would become the Modern Devotion are presented as spiritual analogues to urban societies. Whereas earlier mystics such as Hadewijch and Jan van Ruusbroec had sought individual paths to the Divine outside established orders, the Modern Devotion was dedicated to the individual's self-fashioning of her or his relationship to God as a communal pursuit assisted

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<sup>16</sup> Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord*, p. 762.

<sup>17</sup> For an overview of this painting which has been generally attributed to Gilles Mostaert, see Jean F. Buyck, 'Gilles Mostaert—Christus door Pilatus aan het volk getoond', available at <http://www.tento.be/OKV-artikel/gillis-mostaert-christus-door-pilatus-aan-het-volk-getoond>

by the clergy. In many communities there was a strong sense of evil and misery in the world, and the need to withdraw from it into a contemplative life of prayer, but at the same time there was an accompanying optimism that the world could be saved and improved, and its inhabitants brought to Christ through education. Members of the Modern Devotion were early adherents of printing religious and secular texts, especially those from classical antiquity that they deemed essential to the moral education of the coming generation of young persons. The same self-discipline necessary for managing one's spiritual path through a world fraught with sin was also essential for confronting the temptations in the city that could impede a talented individual's economic success.

Pleij is more expansive about the late Middle Ages than about humanism or the Reformation, and his presentation of the sixteenth century is strongest when covering the afterlife of medieval literary practices. His treatment of the Antwerp *landjuweel* of 1561 is an excellent account of the transition between the medieval and early modern period, and it also sets the stage for a discussion of the same event at the beginning of the following GNL volume of Porteman and Smits-Veldt. For Pleij, the 1561 *landjuweel* connotes the beginning of a new era of regulation and social and political control under Margaret of Parma. Evoking the nostalgia of Huizinga, Pleij regrets the loss of an urban collective in the production and reception of literature, the increasing elitism among the Rederijker chambers, the restriction of debate, and the transformation of the audience for literary work from active participants into passive consumers. The celebratory urban festivals of the late Middle Ages that broadly engaged and delighted people across all social strata, he argues, are gradually receding into private interior spaces accessible only to those with the wealth to promote, and the learning to savor, the refined pleasures and heightened didacticism of the texts.

Pleij maintains a healthy skepticism about literary periodization, for he is well aware that writers and works characterized as 'medieval', 'Renaissance', or 'Reformation' can appear outside their arbitrarily assigned periods. Boundaries between periods are almost inevitably artificial, but there is a lack of clarity in this volume about the Renaissance and its relationship to humanism. Students and general readers often associate humanism with an empathetic expression of humanity rather than with the Renaissance humanists' enthusiasm for the Greco-Roman past, and Pleij does not explain these terms nor the relationship between them. His presentation of humanism and Renaissance reverts to an older argument, advanced by Knuvelde but not unique to him, that humanism antedates the arrival of the Renaissance in the Low Countries. Although humanist-trained vernacular writers were able to incorporate their enthusiasm for the historical and philosophical ideas of classical antiquity into their Rederijker compositions, Pleij defines actual Renaissance writing by literary genres informed by classical models (comedy, tragedy), and new vernacular forms (sonnet) derived from Italian and French literature. The fact that many Dutch writers were already experimenting with neo-classical genres in their Latin writings prior to the appearance of Dutch-language Renaissance literature is barely noticed.

This reticence has less to do with Pleij's preferences than with the overarching guidelines of the GNL editors. Gelderblom and Musschoot make plain in their afterward that the GNL was to be first and foremost a history of Dutch-language literature. To be sure, they are well aware of the multilingual world in which much premodern writing was produced in the Low Countries – chiefly Latin, French, and German in addition to Dutch – and some writers were bi- or trilingual. From the late fifteenth century into the seventeenth century, there was an especially vibrant Neo-

Latin literary culture in the Low Countries that was disseminated across almost all of Europe, but glimpses of this tradition between 1450 and 1560 are held here to a minimum.

Humanism in the Low Countries primarily concerned both Neo-Latin and Dutch texts, and Pleij devotes the greatest space to vernacular works with traces of humanist ideas such as the writings of Matthijs de Castelein. Erasmus is mentioned but chiefly in reference to his critiques of immoral ecclesiastical practices in the *Laus stultitiae* (*Praise of Folly*) and the *Colloquia*, and their reappearance in Rederijker verse and drama. The rich corpus of Neo-Latin drama, arguably the most accomplished in northern Europe, is represented by Macropedius, Gulielmus Gnapheus, and surprisingly for this time period the late sixteenth-century playwright Cornelius Schonaeus, but mostly in regard to the reworking of medieval topics such as *Elckerlijc* or of popular *kluchten*. The most accomplished Dutch Neo-Latin poet of the sixteenth century, Janus Secundus (1511-1536), the subject of several recent studies, whose erotic verses inspired Latin and vernacular writing across the continent, is mentioned only in passing since his writings had little impact in the Netherlands until much later.<sup>18</sup> But the segregation of Neo-Latin from the literary history of the Low Countries, except in those instances of close contact with Dutch, regrettably perpetuates a shortcoming of past literary-historical practice and disregards the large corpus of scholarship since the 1970s, most of it led by Belgian and Dutch scholars, that firmly established Neo-Latin writing as an integral component of a national literary tradition.<sup>19</sup> Gelderblom and Musschoot's assertion that Neo-Latin writing could be excluded from the GNL because of its own specific literary-history and separate scholarly tradition is an unfortunate decision that undermines their attempt to update Dutch literary history for the twenty-first century.

The limited role ascribed to Neo-Latin writers in Pleij's volume unfortunately allows for misrepresentations about the contributions they made to Dutch literary history. His presentation of the Hague humanist and reformer Gulielmus Gnapheus (1493-1568), the author of *Acolastus* (1529), the best known Neo-Latin play in central and northern Europe, does not capture fully the bilingual complexity of his career.<sup>20</sup> Readers learn about this entertaining Prodigal Son play and its many printings (more than 50 before 1585 alone) as well as the work's appeal both to Catholic and Protestant audiences, but little about Gnapheus and his shifting religious beliefs. Gnapheus played a major role in proselytizing for religious change: He was imprisoned twice in Holland for his heterodox ideas and while incarcerated he befriended Jan de Bakker (Johannes Pistorius), who would become one of the earliest Protestant martyrs in the Low Countries in 1525. Gnapheus wrote a biography of Pistorius in Dutch and recorded conversations with him before his martyrdom; he also penned three dialogues in Dutch criticizing clerical abuses and Catholic doctrines similar to the ecclesiastical critiques of Erasmus and the Rederijkers. Exiled for his

<sup>18</sup> Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord*, p. 705. Recent work on Janus Secundus includes: J. P. Guépin and P. Tuynman (eds. & trans.), *De kunst van Janus Secundus: de 'Kussen' en andere gedichten* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1991); David Price, *Janus Secundus* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> The late Jozef Ijsewijn (KU Leuven) laid the foundation for contemporary Neo-Latin studies in his seminal writings from the 1970s and 1980s culminating in his *Companion to Neo-Latin Studies, Part I: History and Diffusion of Neo-Latin Literature* (Louvain: Louvain University Press, 1990). For an overview of scholarship since the 1980s on the relationship between Neo-Latin and the vernacular, see the essays by Tom Deneire and Nikolaus Thurn in: Philip Ford, Jan Bloemendal, and Charles Fantazzi (eds.), *Brill's Encyclopedia of the Neo-Latin World*. (Leiden/ Boston: Brill, 2014), pp. 275-85; 287-99.

<sup>20</sup> Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord*, pp. 703-4.

Protestant sympathies in 1528 (not 1523 as Pleij states) Gnapheus hardly led the nomadic life Pleij ascribes to him, but was active in religious debates in East Prussia where he continued to write school plays with allegorical figures reminiscent of Rederijker *sinneken*, and expanded on the virtues of the humanities and rhetoric. Gnapheus spent his final days in the Dutch exile communities of Emden and Norden (East Frisia) revising his Dutch and Latin writings for republication. His works were deeply connected to his background in Erasmian humanism, his familiarity with Rederijker drama, his early heretical activities in Holland, and his shifting religious ideas between Lutheranism, Sacramentarianism, and later Anabaptism. As this case makes plain, the GNL division between Dutch and Neo-Latin writing produced by bilingual authors diminishes the complexity of sixteenth-century literature, its many ties to both Latin and the vernacular as well as to humanism and the Reformation, and continues an outmoded way of thinking.

Despite the marginalization of Neo-Latin writing, Pleij's volume remains a masterful interpretation of Dutch literature and late medieval and early sixteenth-century Dutch society that ably informs and inspires. This is cultural history with an agenda: in its representation of urban culture and its myriad literary forms, in its celebration of the communal participatory spirit that infused late medieval urban celebrations and rituals, and in its unease about the rising competitive proto-capitalist mentality that disrupted the collaborative ethos of the past. It also promotes an optimism and life-affirming spirit in an era of renewed spirituality. This confidence is reflected in the title of the volume *Het gevleugelde woord* (*Winged Words*), which in the context of the GNL works on two levels. First, it builds on the titles of van Oostrom's preceding volumes with their emphasis on language and the movement from oral to written culture: *Stemmen op schrift* (*Voices in Writing*); *Wereld in Woorden* (*A World in Words*). Pleij continues the emphasis on textuality – 'literatuur is overal' ('literature is everywhere') – but he adds a new twist to the original Homeric Greek expression of 'winged words'. For Homer such words were generally believed to underscore importance, and their wings indicated the speed with which they flew into the ears. The expression itself gave rise to its more commonplace meaning as a memorable saying or aphorism. For Pleij, however, the 'winged words' are a call to action: words and texts are lifeless until they sprout wings, that is, until they come to life when they are spoken.<sup>21</sup> His winged words arise from the people, are of everyday use, and hearken back to the noise of the medieval urban community and its literary productions. They are the sounds of increasing economic self-reliance, of growing political independence, of debate and disruption, of consolation, and of the power of literature to educate, delight, and shape identity. In his panoramic overview of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century writing, Pleij has provided an indispensable contribution to Dutch studies that celebrates his distinguished career and sets the stage for further exploration of the emerging new paradigm of European literary history without borders.

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<sup>21</sup> Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord*, p. 761.