

# Preface

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Pages vii–ix of

**Dutch Literature in the Age of Rembrandt: Themes and ideas**

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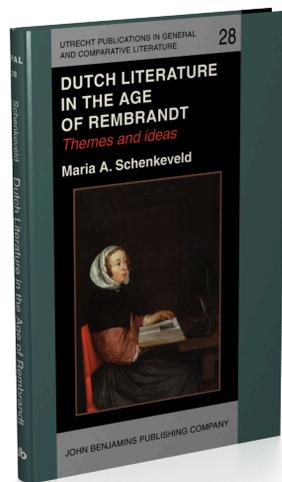
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Precisely four names from the Netherlands figure on the famous list appended to E.D. Hirsch Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy* (1987): Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Rembrandt and Vermeer. The two cities have significance for the present time. Rotterdam was undoubtedly included as the largest port in the world, Amsterdam as an important tourist center. The names of the two painters, on the other hand, refer to the past, more specifically to the Dutch Golden Age, the seventeenth century. Insofar as the culture of our country is known abroad, this is the outstanding period. Consequently, it has received ample attention by a number of non-Dutch scholars. It may suffice to call to mind the cultural historical studies by J.L. Price, *Culture and Society in the Dutch Republic during the 17th Century* (London 1974) and Simon Schama's recent *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York 1987).

It remains an amazing fact that a small country in a marshy delta was able to fight its way to freedom from under the oppression of the Spanish world power and to develop subsequently into a major economic and political power itself. This power was accompanied by an unprecedented cultural flourishing. The Dutch painters Rembrandt and Vermeer, but also Ruysdael and Frans Hals are world-famous. Equally renowned are Hugo Grotius, the jurist, Christiaan Huygens, the physicist and the philosopher Spinoza.

The men of letters have remained less known. The simplest explanation, of course, is that they wrote in Dutch, a language read by very few people outside the Netherlands and the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. However, this explanation does not suffice in Price's view, for instance. In his study he argues that the social difference between poets and painters also led to a difference in quality.

The poets, who did not need to live by their art, failed to free themselves from classical, conventional forms, while the painters, thinking commercially and aiming at a large market, broke away from the prevailing taste and opted for the famous Dutch realism.

It is certainly not my intention to test in full the value of the hypothesis on which Price's influential study is based. But I shall try to show that his view of Dutch literature as conventional and mainly based on classical models is markedly biased. Dutch literature in the Golden Age showed a strong social concern and was able to reach large sections of the population. Sometimes it was, indeed, oriented towards the classics, but what exactly does that mean? For one thing, imitating the scurrilous epigrams of Martial is not the same as following the Virgilian epic. Moreover, in other instances literature actually rejected the classics and defended "the book of use" — as the poet Bredero put it — as valuable reading. Sometimes literature aimed at an audience consisting of a schooled literary elite, at other times it tried to influence the masses.

Anyone interested in Dutch culture in the Golden Age, whether his emphasis is on painting, politics, religion or even economics ("the prince of poets" Vondel wrote a poem on the Amsterdam Bourse!), should therefore be concerned with literature as well. However, this happens all too rarely. A favorable exception is Deric Regin who was able to support his argument in his *Traders, Artists, Burghers. A Cultural History of Amsterdam in the 17th Century* (Assen 1976) with a fair number of quotations from poetry. In the large panorama painted by Schama literature received only a very minor place, however, although in it he might have found most interesting material connected with his theses.

Now it must be granted that it is rather difficult for a non-specialist to find his way into the literature of this period. There is, for instance, no separate general survey in English, although there are useful chapters on the period in two literary histories: Theodoor Weevers' *The Poetry of the Netherlands in its European Context 1170-1930* (London 1960) and Reinder P. Meijer's *Literature of the Low Countries; a Short History of Dutch Literature in the Netherlands and Belgium*, of which the second edition was published in 1978. Sizable sections of these books deal with the literature of the seventeenth century. But there are, of course, limits to the amount of material that can be discussed in a single chapter. Moreover, neither book offers illustrations or more than a very restricted number of references or directions for further study.

It is this lacuna that I have wished to fill. The present book is not a literary history. It does not give a chronological overview of the literature and does not discuss specific authors or genres. Besides, the book has a certain slant. More (though not exclusive) room is given to poets as functioning in their own daily lives and in that of their co-citizens, than to the high-flying authors of tragedy and

epos. I have placed the authors in their social and cultural context and tried to indicate the type of audience they wrote for as well as the political, religious and social aims they were pursuing. For this reason a structure has been chosen in which the material is not grouped around specific authors or genres but around important themes. The topics selected are those that might have some interest for general readers and scholars from other disciplines: politics, religion, nature and daily life. Because Golden Age painting has always attracted the widest interest I have devoted a special chapter to the intensive relations between painting and poetry in the period concerned. A concluding chapter intends to show something of the Republic's function as a kind of literary trading center in Europe with a brisk import and export business. The illustrations also serve to show how literature functioned in society.

Blood runs thicker than water. Although in this book I wanted to embed literature in the overall culture of the seventeenth century, I could not resist the temptation of using many examples, and therefore citing many texts. A small anthology, added as an appendix, offers additional material. Anyone interested in more should consult the list which gives a number of published translations.

Parts of chapter 5 earlier appeared in *Dutch Landscape; the early years*, catalogue of an exhibition at the National Gallery in London, 1986, edited by Christopher Brown; chapter 4 was partly offered as a lecture at a symposium on genre-painting at the Royal Academy (London) in 1985.

Friends and colleagues have offered help and advice: Svetlana Alpers, E.M. Beekman, Arie Jan Gelderblom, D.M. Schenkeveld, Marijke Spies, Willemien de Vries and the anonymous referee of N.W.O., the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, that gave a grant for the translation of the book. Once more, it was a pleasure to work together with Hans Luijten in finding the appropriate illustrations. He also was a devoted proofreader. Special thanks are due to August F. Harms who took care of the translation and especially gave his best in translating the many poems in such a way that the poetical form and flavor have survived. Myra Scholz has given invaluable editorial assistance, both as a native American speaker and as a scholar in the field of Dutch literature. The ABN-AMRO bank generously offered financial support, showing in this way its interest in a period when the political and economic prosperity of the Netherlands found also expression in a cultural and literary Golden Age.