

Preface and Acknowledgments

THE HISTORY OF LITERARY WRITING IN THE LOW COUNTRIES spans at least a thousand years. It presents a rich and diverse picture, very much part of the European patchwork but with unique features resulting from the area's particular complexion and development, from the splendor of its medieval court culture and the bustle of its early modern cities to the seaborne power of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and the nineteenth-century Flemish cultural revival. There is much to be discovered here. While the visual artists of the Low Countries gained international fame and Bosch, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Van Gogh are now household names, the written culture that sustained their work has remained beyond the reach of those unfamiliar with the language. This is changing, as more literature written in Dutch is being translated than ever before. The present volume offers a historical narrative of that literature.

An account of the literary history of the Dutch-language area has to contend with a terminological issue. To speak of "Dutch literature" would be unsatisfactory: by no means all the literature in question is in Dutch, and in an international context "Dutch" tends to refer to the Netherlands only and thus to exclude Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Terms like "Netherlandish" or "Netherlandic" do not help. The former, little used except among art historians, is normally restricted to the early modern period; the latter reeks of academic neologism. "Literature of the Dutch-language area" does not trip off the tongue, and has history against it, as some areas that were once Dutch-speaking have since adopted other tongues. "Literature of the Netherlands and Flanders" is a mouthful, and too closely tied to the contemporary meanings of these terms. Although speaking of the "Low Countries" is not entirely accurate either, comprising as it does the whole of the modern Netherlands and Belgium and more, and thus extending beyond the area where Dutch is the main language while still excluding several overseas territories where Dutch plays a significant part, it seems the least objectionable, and has historical resonance in English.

English-language histories of the literature of the Low Countries are few and far between. The first attempts date from the nineteenth century. The internationalist par excellence Sir John Bowring led the way with his 130-page *Sketch of the Language and Literature of Holland* (1829), which was first published in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* and then appeared in book form in Amsterdam. The Belgian Octave Delepierre's *Sketch of the History of Flemish Literature and Its Celebrated Authors from the Twelfth*

Century Down to the Present Time (1860) was published in London and, notwithstanding the apparent restriction to Flanders in its title, covered the entire Dutch-speaking area. In more recent times the only comprehensive history available in English was Reinder P. Meijer's *Literature of the Low Countries* (1971, revised edition 1978), an authoritative and wonderfully personal survey, but now out of date. The present volume replaces Meijer's account. It incorporates the findings of scholarship and research since the 1970s, and recognizes that literary history today is, more often than not, a collective endeavor.

The approach to literary history in the following pages both pays attention to aspects and developments that are specific to literature as a distinct form of communication and adopts a contextualizing outlook that sees literature as interacting with and constitutive of its cultural and social environment. It is a twin-track approach that has gained a large measure of acceptance among contemporary literary historians.

Another key principle underpinning the volume as a whole is the idea that the literature of the Low Countries is best treated as one multiform entity. Politically the area was united for only short periods in its history, and for the last 170 or so years it has hosted two nation-states, the Netherlands and Belgium. In matters of verbal culture, however, language is a powerful unifying factor. Today a broad consensus regards Dutch-language literature, especially when viewed from an international vantage point, as one. To argue differently would be to indulge the narcissism of small differences.

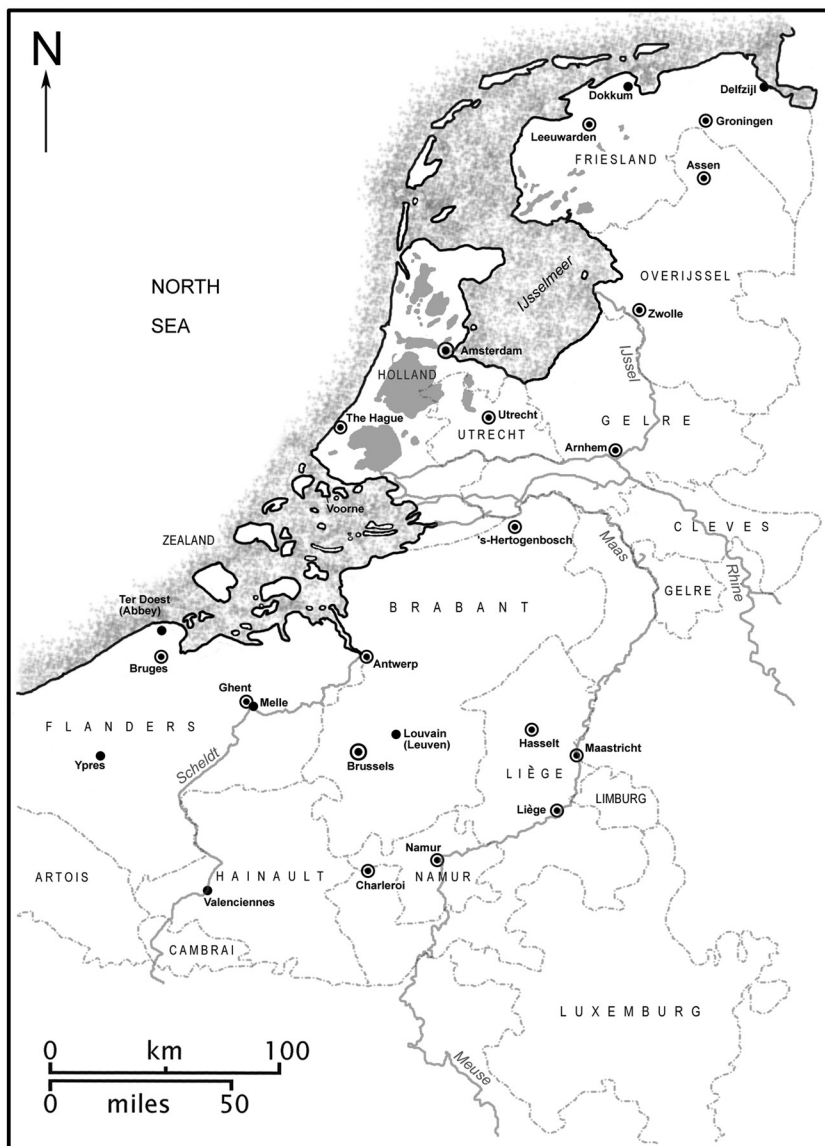
The language of the literature of the Low Countries is mostly but not exclusively Dutch. At least three other languages play a part: Latin, Frisian, and French. Latin had a presence throughout the medieval and early modern periods, and Neo-Latin writers — Erasmus, Lipsius, Heinsius, and Grotius among them — were often the international face of the learned culture of the Low Countries. Frisian, used currently by a little under half a million people in the province of Friesland in the north of the Netherlands, has continued to this day to produce its own literature. French was a significant language, especially in the southern Low Countries, virtually throughout their history; indeed, the only Low Countries writer ever to win a Nobel Prize, Maurice Maeterlinck, was a francophone Fleming. In all these cases the contacts between authors writing in Dutch and those using other languages warrant their inclusion in the literary history of this territory. It may be worth adding, for clarity's sake, that Flemish is not a separate language but the name sometimes given — nowadays only colloquially — to the forms of Dutch used in Flanders; the official name of the language of Flanders, as decreed by law, is Dutch.

Beyond these general parameters the contributors to this history organized their chapters as they saw fit. They are the most prominent and experienced literary historiographers of their generation. Frits van Oostrom, whose work as a medievalist has received international acclaim, was professor of

Dutch literature at the University of Leiden until he moved to the University of Utrecht in 2002. Herman Pleij, professor of Dutch literature at the University of Amsterdam until he retired in 2008, has written extensively and with relish on late-medieval literary culture. E. K. Grootes, professor of Dutch literature at the University of Amsterdam until his retirement in 1997, has been seminal in shaping research in seventeenth-century studies. M. A. Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen was professor of Dutch literature at the University of Utrecht until her retirement in 2002; a specialist on the seventeenth century, she compiled a groundbreaking study and anthology of women's writing from early modern times to the middle of the nineteenth century. Marleen de Vries taught at the University of Amsterdam and the Free University in Berlin, and is now an independent writer and researcher who has done much to revive scholarly interest in the eighteenth century. The eminent specialist of nineteenth-century Dutch literature, Willem van den Berg was professor at the University of Amsterdam until his retirement in 1999. Ton Anbeek, who was professor of modern Dutch literature at the University of Leiden until his retirement in 2005, has written mostly about the late nineteenth and the twentieth century. Jaap Goedegebuure, whose specialism is the period between the two world wars, taught at the University of Brabant in Tilburg until he moved to Leiden as Ton Anbeek's successor in 2005. Anne Marie Musschoot was professor of modern Dutch literature at the University of Ghent until she retired in 2007; she is currently co-editing the most extensive history of Dutch literature in over half a century, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2006–).

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The Low Countries in the 13th & 14th Centuries