



Review

A Reference Book, but also a ‘Good Read’. Frits van Oostrom, *Stemmen op Schrift: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur vanaf het begin tot 1300* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2006)

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Frits van Oostrom is one of the most renowned experts in the field of Middle Dutch literature. He has been a professor at the University of Utrecht since 2002 and prior to that he spent almost two decades at the University of Leiden. In 1999 he spent a year as a visiting professor at Harvard University. Yet he is also well known in the Netherlands as a bestselling author in the field of medieval studies, which he has opened up to a large readership.

In 1996 he was awarded one of the most important Dutch literature prizes, the AKO-Literatuurprijs (now ECI-Literatuurprijs) for his study *Maerlants Werelt*, which deals with the life and times of the thirteenth-century Flemish poet Jacob van Maerlant. Although non-fiction books are hardly ever awarded this prize, Van Oostrom succeeded once more in being nominated for it in 2006 with his literary history *Stemmen of Schrift: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur vanaf het begin tot 1300* (Voices on Paper: The History of Dutch Literature from the Beginning until 1300). This book is the first of two volumes about medieval Dutch literature, the second of which, also authored by Van Oostrom, is devoted to the fourteenth century.¹

Upon publication *Stemmen op Schrift* received many enthusiastic reviews in national and regional Dutch newspapers, and was critically received by experts in the field. *Queeste*, one of the leading international journals of Dutch medieval literature, published a special issue on the occasion of the release of *Stemmen op Schrift*.² Since then the book has seen many reprints, both in hard- and paperback.

In Germany, this kind of public interest in a specialised field such as medieval literature is virtually non-existent. This absence, I argue, can be attributed to the fact that the field of German medieval literature lacks a work like Van Oostrom's. No doubt, excellent literary histories of the Middle Ages exist in Germany too, such as the *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von den Anfängen bis zum Beginn der Neuzeit* (1984), edited by Joachim Heinzle.³ This study, which is

¹ Frits van Oostrom, *Wereld in woorden: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1300-1400*. (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2013).

² *Queeste: Tijdschrift over middeleeuwse letterkunde in de Nederlanden*, 13 (1) (2006). Available at http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/que002200601_01/que002200601_01_0004.php [accessed 20 September 2016].

³ *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von den Anfängen bis zum Beginn der Neuzeit*, ed. by Joachim Heinzle (Königstein: Athenäum, 1984).

comparable to Van Oostrom's monographs in terms of topic and structure, aims, however, to inform students, rather than a lay audience. Academic readership is, in other words, its main goal.

The target audience of the respective literary histories determines the difference between the work of Heinzle and Van Oostrom. As German philologist Bernd Bastert already pointed out, there is a notable difference in the presentation of both books. While the Dutch history is appealingly illustrated with many colour images of manuscript pages, documents, etc., the German history contains only a few black and white images on a separate printing sheet.⁴ The biggest difference between both histories, however, lies in their different styles and perspectives of narration. While Heinzle's history is in essence an excellent reference book with many entries by different authors, Van Oostrom's goal is to produce a book of stories (23). In his chapter on bible translations he points out the clear and – even today – accessible style of the medieval Gospel-harmony translator, thereby referring to Hawthorne's famous dictum: 'Easy reading is damn hard writing' (377). It is probably Van Oostrom's own experience and ambition as a writer of history that made him use this quote. On the author's website (www.fritsvanoostrom.nl), which is maintained by the publishing house, the reader finds an insight into the ten-year-long writing process of *Stemmen op schrift*. All these elements hint at how the book seeks to appeal to a larger audience while functioning as an expert standard work for the decades to come.

In line with current literary historiography, Van Oostrom interprets the creation and meaning of the earliest written documents within a complex interplay of cultural innovation and functional needs. In this sense, *Stemmen op Schrift* is also a cultural history. The 650-page-long work describes how, since the beginning of the tenth century, the vernacular 'voices' (Dutch: 'stemmen') of the oral culture were put into writing on parchment ('op schrift'). Initially these early voices existed only far and few between and always within the dominant context of Latin literature, for example as translation aids (glosses), like in the lost *Wachtendonckse psalmen*, which is discussed in the book's first chapter. The process of Middle Dutch becoming an autonomous written language (independent from Latin) was very slow and, according to Van Oostrom, was not completed around 1300, which he discusses at the end of his study.

Stemmen op Schrift is structured along chronological and thematic lines. It consists of five chapters, which all centre on the most important writers and dominant literary genres until 1300. This type of structure (which is also used in Heinzle's literary history) is especially useful for the earliest literary writings in that it allows for an account of the slow development of the different literary genres and their formal aspects, such as the use of verse and prose. Moreover, this structure allows Van Oostrom to illustrate the strong connection between the different genres and the social geographic spaces of their emergence, which often go beyond today's national borders. Chapter 2 carries the German (!) title 'Veldekes Umwelt' in order to draw attention to the most productive author of all within what is today called the 'border triangle' between Maastricht (Netherlands), Aachen (Germany) and Liège (Belgium): Hendrik van Veldeke. His works of early courtly literature (e.g. love poems) are characterised by the beginnings of the literary history of Middle Dutch as well as Middle High-German. Long gone are the times that

⁴ See Bernd Bastert, 'Deutsch-niederländische Anregungen: Ein Plädoyer für eine simultane Berücksichtigung der mittelalterlichen deutschen und niederländischen Literaturtraditionen', *Queeste. Tijdschrift over middeleeuwse letterkunde in de Nederlanden*, 13.1 (2006), 22-35 (p. 22). Available at: http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/que002200601_01/que002200601_01_0004.php [Accessed 20 September 2016].

this poet was considered either as the German Heinrich or as the Dutch Hendrik, for Van Oostrom emphasises his European roots (118). In chapter 3, the author focuses on Flanders and Brabant, where, influenced by the French, the Middle Dutch 'Karls- and Artusepik' is born. Chapter 4 discusses bible translations and mystical texts of the second half of the thirteenth century, which emerged primarily within the monastic environment of cities. In chapter 5 he discusses two writers and their works of the late thirteenth century. First, Van Oostrom focuses on the large and diverse oeuvre of Jacob van Maerlant – mainly known for his didactic works (e.g. *Der naturen bloeme*) and for his role as a translator/composer of romances like *Alexanders Geesten*. Second, he elaborates on an author about whom we know not much more than his name, Willem, but who is famous for the Dutch version of a story transmitted in many languages: 'Van den vos Reynaerde' or 'Reynard the Fox'. Time and again Van Oostrom looks beyond the regional borders and situates Dutch literature within a European context. As a result, this book becomes highly appealing to specialists of medieval studies in other national literatures.

Yet, and here I return to the beginning, what makes this work very special is *how* Van Oostrom narrates history. As a scholar in the field of German studies, I was struck by his efforts not to sound too scientific and his use of a personal style that hints at his own experiences and interests throughout his narrative. This is partly why I consider this book such a *good read*. It uses the 'we'-perspective, rather unusual in academic writing, leading his audience along his journey in a highly comprehensible narration. He also adds – often between brackets – 'associative' thoughts and ideas, for example when he explains that in writing, Dutch terms were initially often Latinised, as Latin was the more prestigious language. In addition, he points out that the Vatican nowadays also seems to have a special office that invents Latin terms for modern words, like *placenta compressa* for pizza (50). The book is replete with such additions, varying in depth and content. The analogy to modern Vatican practices makes the reader reflect on the fact that customs from around the year 1000 were not always very different from those in the year 2000. In other cases, such as the remark that one of Van Oostrom's colleagues made his living by smoking eels in later life (274), the digressions are distracting and irrelevant. Yet, looking at the narrative function of those asides, they give the audience a break from the very dense and informative literary history.

Especially in those sections of the book that tend to be highly scholarly, Van Oostrom manages to keep the tone informal, bringing the diverging research opinions together via the technique of dialogue. One of his stylistic manners is to turn uncertainties into questions as, for example, in his discussion of the unexplained discrepancy between the enormous quantity of manuscripts (more than 1000) with vernacular glosses from the Old High German language area that have been transmitted, and the small amount from the Dutch language area (only a handful). This phenomenon is also important for Low German studies, which is marked by a similar lack of written tradition. In an almost parlendo style, Van Oostrom addresses this issue via a series of questions, narrowing down possibilities and displaying the different angles from which researchers have looked at this matter. One could summarise it as follows: will more Dutch glossed manuscripts be discovered in the future? Unlikely. Have (many) more of those manuscripts ever existed but are they lost now? Probably not. Was Dutch not the language the learned elite spoke? Did the elite understand Latin better? etc. At the same time Van Oostrom steps forward and shows what he thinks by almost playfully remarking that there are indeed quite a few Latin manuscripts from the Dutch area without glosses... (55).

What also contributes to the book's accessibility is that Van Oostrom not only treats medieval texts as witnesses of times long past, but he also links them with countless citations from modern literature and culture – links that are often witty and humorous. He opens every chapter with a twentieth-century Dutch poem, but additionally his texts and titles also contain numerous intertextual references as in 'Liefde in tijden van Barbarossa' (referring to Gabriel Garcia Márquez' novel 'Love in the Time of Cholera' in which the protagonist suffers, very mediievally, from lovesickness).

Van Oostrom does not hesitate to compare Arthur's nephew, knight Walein (English: Gawain), first to Great Gatsby, Rudolf Valentino and Rambo, and to sum up that from the cinematic point of view, concludes that he actually resembles most of all James Bond (267). This kind of reference would never be found in German historiography of medieval literature, probably because they would be considered too populist. That is a pity because overview books in general appeal to a large audience who benefit from such accessibility if it does not hinder the clarity of argument and the exposition of knowledge. *Stemmen op schrift*, published ten years ago already, shows that this combination is very well possible. For this reason, German medievalists should take it as a model for how their knowledge and expertise could be communicated to a large audience in ways that are informative, inspiring and intriguing.