

Cornelis van der Haven, Jan Bloemendal, Youri Desplenter and James A. Parente, Jr. (eds.), *Literature without Frontiers: Transnational Perspectives on Premodern Literature in the Low Countries, 1200-1800* (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 346, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2023, 228 pp., ISBN 9789004544864).

The transnational approach to literary history aligns with a newer, and thankfully growing, perspective. This approach emphasises hybridity, multilingualism, cultural exchanges, *histoire croisée*, cultural mediation, and border zones, all of which serve as essential correctives to 'traditional' literary histories which generally framed literary production as intrinsically national and as the expression of a monolingual community and culture. This traditional type of literary history is increasingly recognised as problematic, as it has often led to missteps such as anachronisms and teleology. This is especially relevant in the study of early modern literature, a field dealing with times and societies in which modern national boundaries did not yet exist, making these anachronisms more glaring. The Low Countries still lack a comprehensive literary history along the lines of the new transnational or multilingual approach. While the editors of this volume stop short of providing such a history, they aim to offer examples of premodern transnationalism that could serve as starting points and foundational elements for future work. Through ten case studies they outline key structures of transnational exchange, specifically focusing on mediators, genres, and locations that defined these cross-cultural interactions.

Mediators are the figures who embody border-crossing in this context. Naturally, special attention is given to translators, who serve as quintessential intermediaries, enabling texts to traverse national and linguistic boundaries. Recent research underscores the complexity of this role, revealing that translation involves more than simple 'import' or straightforward adaptation to new cultural contexts. A compelling example is the chapter by Lia van Gemert and Lucas van der Deijl, who examine the five Dutch translations of *Argenis* (1621) by John Barclay. This romance, which carries an ideological message of Catholicism and support for absolute monarchy, makes its Dutch translations particularly intriguing, as these values seem at odds with the Dutch setting. The authors reveal 'the complex negotiation between Barclay's text, its French adaptations, and Dutch translations and publishers' (34), referring to the impact of commercial interests, varied translation techniques, and the diversity of intended audiences and contexts. This type of dynamic exchange is also explored in Feike Dietz's chapter, which examines the fascinating case of *De kleine Grandisson* (1782), a children's novel by Margareta

Geertruid de Cambon-van der Werken. The story follows a Dutch boy raised in England who writes letters back to the Netherlands, showcasing ‘its appeal for both Dutch and English readers, as it tapped into several international literary trends and presented an Anglo-Dutch narrative line’ (73). This novel was translated into English, providing Dietz with an opportunity ‘to reconsider the classical hierarchical relationship between English as a more central, dominant language and Dutch as a peripheral one’ (60).

The contributions under the section ‘Genres’ illustrate how examining literary genres through a transnational lens can significantly enrich the analysis, focusing on connections with and influences from foreign examples rather than isolating the genre’s development within a single national literature. The genres explored here include the medieval animal epic, Neo-Latin theatre, and ‘mirrors-for-magistrates’, didactic texts on city governance prevalent in medieval Europe. Paul Wackers, for instance, studies the spread of the *Van den vos Reynaerde* story, particularly in the area between Paris and Ghent across several centuries, with notable prominence in the latter half of the thirteenth century. The story is written in both Dutch and French, with occasional versions in German and Italian outside this region, thus representing ‘a multilingual boom in fox stories production’ (87). David Napolitano examines mirrors-for-magistrates, particularly in the Southern Low Countries, the Rhineland, and Northern Italy. Although these works have been studied as individual pieces or within regional frameworks, he advocates for analysing them across linguistic and national boundaries. Jan Bloemendal explores Neo-Latin drama in the Low Countries, describing it as ‘a transnational genre by definition’ (112). Neo-Latin plays circulated across borders due to their performance-driven nature, the need for diverse repertoire, and the inherently international character of Latin. Bloemendal presents several examples, including *Acolastus* (1529) by Guilielmus Gnapheus (or Willem de Volder), which was printed 54 times between 1529 and 1585 in cities such as Antwerp, Leipzig, Basel, Cologne, and Paris, and was translated into German, French, and English. Finally, James A. Parente identifies a thoroughly transnational quality in a single work: *Batavische Arcadia* (1637) by Johan van Heemskerck. This book functions as both a pastoral romance and an encyclopaedic history, encompassing topics such as topography, anthropology, navigation, and criminal law. It is ‘balanced between history and fiction, the indigenous and the foreign, and the local and the global’ (172), reflecting Heemskerck’s unique perspective as a ‘boundary crosser’, his life and studies having taken him to Amsterdam, Leiden, The Hague, Bayonne, Bourges, Paris, Oxford, Switzerland, Savoy, and Italy.

In the third section of this volume, ‘Places’, texts are examined within ‘cultural spaces’ that do not align with (modern) nation-states or national boundaries. The focus is twofold: on urban centres as ‘multilingual “hubs” in the transnational dynamics of medieval and early modern literature’ (26), and on historical regions that once existed as distinct entities but no longer do.

Frank Willaert, for instance, highlights the unique identity of Lotharingia, especially in its musical traditions. Throughout the Middle Ages, Lotharingia was ‘well-known as a fertile ground for light dance songs’ (185) in both France and Germany. Willaert suggests that studying medieval lyrical poetry could ‘gain much’ from treating Lotharingia as a cohesive, multilingual space (185-186). Youri Desplenter explores the Brabant-Rhineland network in mystical literature, rooted in the idea of a fourteenth-century Brabant-Rhinelandish ‘textual community’ (220), with figures such as Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, Heinrich Seuse, Jan van Ruusbroec, and Jan van Leeuwen.

The urban ‘hubs’ discussed are Bruges and Amsterdam. Bart Besamusca examines Jacob van Maerlant’s *Martijn* poems and their translations into Latin and French, attributing those to the inherently multilingual nature of medieval literary culture in Bruges. Frans R.E. Blom, focusing on the Amsterdam municipal theatre and the example of Calderón’s *La vida es sueño*, highlights the international character of Dutch theatre. In this theatre, two-thirds of the plays performed were adaptations of English, Spanish, and French works, and the Netherlands served as a conduit, transmitting Spanish repertoire to Germany and Scandinavia.

After reading this volume (which includes a substantial introduction but no general conclusion) the overall takeaways remain somewhat unclear, and – indeed – it does not provide an immediate, alternative cohesive picture of the Low Countries literary landscape, nor does it fully define the specificity of the transnational character of this literary space. Still, the studies gathered here effectively underscore that the concepts of ‘nations’ and national borders are problematic in the study of (early modern) literature, revealing that cultural exchange within and across these spaces is far more complex than even the term ‘transnational’ implies. By doing so, they convincingly illustrate the richness and importance of this approach, affirming that it is worthwhile and necessary to pursue these recent directions in literary-historical research – and leave the nations for what they are.

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