

Review

Adrian Armstrong and Elsa Strietman (eds.), *The Multilingual Muse. Transcultural Poetics in the Burgundian Netherlands*, Cambridge, Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017, 204 pp. ISBN 978-1-781885-49-9.



The Multilingual Muse

*Transcultural Poetics in the
Burgundian Netherlands*

Edited by Adrian Armstrong and Elsa Strietman



Modern Humanities Research Association

Readers of this journal will already know of the welcome resurgence of scholarship about the early modern Low Countries, including work on the Dutch Republic, on Dutch language and letters, and on books printed and distributed from centers like Antwerp, Deventer, Louvain, and Zwolle. Elsa Strietman's and Adrian Armstrong's *The Multilingual Muse* makes a significant contribution to this growing body of work by exploring important aspects that much of this growing body of scholarship seems to have missed or bypassed. As one of the editors, Adrian Armstrong, notes in discussing the various kinds of transcultural contact and exchange that took place routinely in the region: 'Scholars in diverse disciplines have widely acknowledged these types of [political, economic, and cultural] interaction. Very few, however, have reflected on a hugely important form of exchange: between

the vernacular languages spoken in the region, and the cultural products realized in those languages' (1). In a way, the problem that this collection addresses – an insufficient attention to the region's multifaceted translingual and literary relationships – is a microcosm of the still-insufficient attention to the translingual and literary relationships that animated the entire European polylingual system.

In another way, this collection addresses still wider problems in the humanities that persist as the stubborn consequences of nineteenth-century antiquarianism, national canons, and even nation-based university curricula and disciplinary structures (not to mention a current, extra-European problem of the catastrophic monolingualism of most Americans, which continues to warp and stunt scholarship about every literary period).

Fortunately, *The Multilingual Muse* offers as an antidote its fine model of focused yet far-reaching inter-lingual inquiry, valuable well beyond its particular conclusions. This volume's questions and methods offer much to counteract the stubborn monolingual tendencies of our age; they reflect instead the polyglot reality of the early modern period. Few post-colloquium volumes, especially when so well-focused, can claim this kind of timely reach and contribution.

The volume gathers selected research from ten scholars from the UK, Ireland, France, and the Netherlands. The chronological range of the essays stretches well past the strict political limits of the most famous four Burgundian ducal reigns (1363-1477), with background awareness of Burgundy's ninth-century Capetian roots and subsequent Valois branches, and with significant treatment of the post-ducal situation in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The vernaculars in question are of course primarily French and Dutch, with a steady eye on Latin, but one of the insights here is how varied the literary culture of the Burgundian Netherlands was, involving speakers and readers of German, English, Spanish, and Italian. 'Binary distinctions between French and Dutch can only ever be a heuristic convenience' (3), as these essays demonstrate. The kinds of exchanges and linguistic contacts studied here also range widely to include translation, adaptation, performativity, and printing; lexical borrowing and several kinds of 'percolation' between and among languages; hybrid, macaronic, mixed-language texts, and code-switching; several fascinating socio-cultural sites of multilingual engagements, such as the *puys* and *rederijkskamers*, certain administrative offices, and even crossbow and archery competitions.

Malcolm Walsby's foundational essay ('Printing in French in the Low Countries in the Early Sixteenth Century') provides maps and charts that adjust several common assumptions about book production in the region. Walsby demonstrates the 'co-existence of a bilingual approach to publishing in the main centre of print in the Netherlands before the arrival of Plantin' (67) and tracks the changing Dutch-French-Latin picture over time. Residual French is here proven important even 'after the disappearance of the mainly francophone Burgundian court' (67), as it was steadily adapted to new conditions. This essay establishes – without ever loudly asserting it – that transcultural book production and distribution grounded, facilitated, and enhanced most other kinds of textual interlingualism.

Dirk Schoenaers wittily frames his essay ("Frenchified". A Contact-based Approach to Transculturation and Linguistic Change in Holland-Zeeland, 1428/33-c.1500) with a reminder that the term 'frenchified' has not always been pejorative. French lexical influence in politically based administrative discourses spread rhizome-like through literary discourses in Holland and Zeeland, both before and during the period in question. For example, the 'dashing literary style of Flemish epics [...] is marked by the use of French-sounding words, even when indigenous Dutch alternatives were available' (17). Fascinating details reveal certain lexical and geographic boundaries between Dutch and French, and equally reveal them as porous and mobile boundaries. Schoenaers concludes that 'Burgundian integration stimulated the emergence of a trans-regional discourse community' (33) that included English printing as well as Dutch chambers of rhetoric and French *puys*.

Catherine Emerson's essay ("Gescryfte met letteren na elcx's geval geGraueert en oic dyveerssche ymagyen". Uses of Code-switching in Dutch and French) takes up three flavours of multilingualism in the work of George Chastelain, a native Dutch speaker

working in French, Jean Molinet, a native francophone writer of French, and Dutch-only writer Anthonis de Roovere. Emerson's attentive readings of macaronics remind us that macaronic work itself was widespread across Europe (for England, the macaronic poems of Burgh/Caxton, Lydgate, and Bale come first to mind; for Italy, Teofilo Folengo's macaronic epic *Baldus*). Code-switching patterns, Emerson shows, often involve Latin, and code-switches rarely carry the same cultural weight or value across the Dutch-French boundary.

Several essays here delve variously into the 'collective culture of literary competition' (20) that Armstrong has elsewhere studied. Anne Laure Van Bruaene's 'Rhetorical Encounters' adds to the treatments of *puys* and chambers of rhetoric a consideration of the important urban literary culture in Burgundy and Northern France. Starting with the shooting festival in Tournai in 1455, she moves across the period, proving that an "'escole de rhétorique" of Tournai at least partly followed the model of the Dutch-language chambers of rhetoric' and that 'cultural translation [in the region] was never a one-way process' (80). Laura Crombie's essay, with its punning title 'Target Languages. Multilingual Communication in Poetic Descriptions of Crossbow Competitions', studies the crossbow guilds from 1394 onward. She concludes that the guilds 'shared a culture and values, building multilingual networks', not least in their bilingual invitations to, and poetic commemorations of, various events. Guild members 'communicate[d] and commemorate[d] both their distinctive local identities and their larger affinities [...] by performing their shared multilingual culture' (101).

Dirk Coigneau's essay 'Wrapped in Rhetoric' pursues a complex, elusive case of literary transculturation and transvaluation over time. Coigneau's conclusions are as subtle as the case itself: 'No clarion call or triumphal entry welcomed the Burgundian *Cent Nouvelles nouvelles* into fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Dutch literature. The collection was not translated in its entirety, and authors who made use of it made no reference to their source. The Multilingual Muse worked in silence here' (125). Coigneau takes up the genre shifts, verbal and formal sleights of hand, and a variety of adaptive moves the various author-translators made. Slightly more straightforward cases of interlingual literary work (we could expand pedestrian definitions of 'translation' with these cases) follow in Susie Speakman Sutch's 'Cross-Cultural Intersections in the Middle Dutch Translations of *Le Chevalier délibéré* by Olivier de la Marche' and in Rebecca Dixon's 'The Blind Leading the Blind? Choreographing the transcultural in Pierre Michault's *La Dance aux aveugles* and Gheraert Leeu's *Van den drie blinde danssen*'. Sutch demonstrates how two Dutch translators, Johannes Pertcheval and Pieter Willemsz, took different approaches to one work, resulting in the visible and audible presence of French in the texts, the one more overt, the other perhaps better integrated though not as lexically obvious. Sutch wisely takes up lexical clusters ('emprise', 'propos', 'vaillance', 'bataille', and related words) to expose specific differences in, if not exactly the translators' *skopos*, then their aims and results. Dixon returns to the competitive urban context of the *rederijkskamers* as a shaping force in translation and explores the formal changes in meter, lineation, rhyme, and stanza forms that attempt something like equivalence (or, as Armstrong points out (5), compensation) between versions. But the translator surpasses equivalence on several levels, as Dixon's nuanced readings show: 'ideological concerns', too, 'are woven into the text through both formal prestidigitation

and intertextual engagement across cultures. Far from being a case of “the blind leading the blind”, this French-Dutch translation pair reveals not only the translator-magician’s skill, but also the ‘complex choreography of transcultural translation’ (158).

So, too, does the entire collection, which largely refuses clichés and tired assumptions about translation and other interlingual-literary engagements, preferring instead to turn new ground for specific analyses of less obvious intertextual, interdiscursive, and intermedial contacts. Armstrong and Strietman have gathered a fine collection that puts on display the richly provocative multilingualism of the early modern Low Countries. Anyone interested in early modern literary culture will be delighted by the insights and methods of these fine essays.

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