

Alisa van de Haar, *The Golden Mean of Languages: Forging Dutch and French in the Early Modern Low Countries (1540-1620)*. Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 305 (Leiden: Brill, 2019, 425 pp., ISBN 978 90 04 40859 3).

Alisa van de Haar's *The Golden Mean of Languages: Forging Dutch and French in the Early Modern Low Countries (1540-1620)* makes a valuable contribution to scholarship that seeks to place early modern Dutch literature, canonical and non-canonical, in its broader multilingual context. The subtitle, 'Dutch and French', specifies the second language with which the author is mainly concerned, but the canvas of this book is much wider. The writers explored in this book were interested in the relationship between Dutch and a range of other languages, including Latin, Hebrew, Greek, English, German (from which Dutch started to be distinguished in this period) and others. Of course, this interest was not born in the Renaissance, but the benefit of studying this period is that many more relevant sources exist, including introductions to printed dictionaries, translations, teaching manuals, philological treatises, and so on. Van de Haar mines these and other sources for information about what early modern intellectuals and their audiences thought about the place of their own language(s) in relation to others.

The author's argumentation is sometimes rather plodding, especially in the Introduction and the Conclusion where Van de Haar has a tendency to couch straightforward points in overabstract and convoluted language. For example, the eminently sensible decision to explore the observations made by Dutch writers and foreigners about the Dutch language and to consider debates about the status of Dutch vis-a-vis other languages is justified in a methodological section on 'debate' (11-13), which begins:

Instead of using the notion of language progress as a framework for this study, it is the notion of debate that will be applied as a heuristic key to understand the sixteenth-century field of language reflection [...]. Applying the notion of debate, moreover, is consistent with the observation of a culture of discussion in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Low Countries, where discussion was fundamental to society.

A long footnote citing various scholars is meant to lend force to the vague assertion that 'discussion' mattered in this period.

Since there is so much material available from the period 1540-1620, organisation and selection are key. The author has picked four settings in which metalinguistic discussions and debates took place: the printing houses,

French schools, Calvinist churches, and chambers of rhetoric. This choice of settings is well justified in this book by the richness of the materials they provide, and again it did not need a methodological section on *lieux* (27-31). According to the author, the concept of *lieu* facilitates a 'spatial approach' that avoids the pitfalls of monolingual assumptions.

As far as the printing houses are concerned, their relevance to the topic is twofold. Firstly, their personnel – publishers, printers, typesetters, and distributors – were international and mobile. Secondly, many of the texts they produced were also multilingual. The metalinguistic awareness shown in the books produced by the early printing presses, such as Dutch-French dictionaries, parallel-text editions, and the like, is fascinating, and it was sharpened, as Van de Haar shows, by the search for a language that was transregional and could be understood by readers further afield. According to some writers, Dutch was itself the 'golden mean of languages'. Compared with all other languages, so the physician Johannes Becanus argued, Dutch occupied the centre ground. For this reason, he said, Dutch speakers found it easier than others to learn second languages. The texts associated with the schools in which Dutch speakers learned French provide another goldmine of information about attitudes towards languages. School texts naturally fostered debates about spelling, and schoolmasters and printers experimented with spelling in an attempt to find a closer fit between orthography and pronunciation. Existing scholarship on these questions is copiously, if sometimes rather indiscriminately, referenced in footnotes.

The most rewarding chapter is 'Calvinist Churches', which shows the metalinguistic interest of Dutch translations of the Psalms. Because the first Calvinist texts that became available in the Low Countries were written in French or Latin, and because congregations were used to singing French Psalms to particular tunes, translating the Psalms into Dutch brought with it particular challenges: if the Dutch was to fit the French tune, the question of the syllable count became crucial. This issue weighed with the Dutch Church in London which adopted the Psalm translation by the theologian Petrus Datheen because they were set to the same tunes as the French ones. The fact that Datheen was known to the migrant Dutch community, for he had been a religious exile in London and had worked there as a typesetter, must have helped his cause. Philips van Marnix van Sint Aldegonde's Psalm translations are also discussed. According to Van de Haar, it is because of French that Marnix and poets associated with the chambers of rhetoric invented iambic metre, that is, verse characterised by the regular alternation of an unstressed syllable with a stressed one. It should be said that there was iambic poetry in Middle Dutch – take for example 'Egidius, waer bestu bleven? / Mi lanct na di, gheselle mijn' – but there is a good case to be made that vigilance over the syllable count was conditioned by a linguistic environment in which Dutch interacted and at times competed with French.

The rhetorician De Castelein plays the leading part in the last chapter on the Rhetoricians: his remarks on what is and is not possible in Flemish poetry, as compared with French verse, are of special interest. Each language, he thought, had its own spirit ('*enargië*'), and formal features that were worked in one language might not work in another. For instance, while in French verse the regular alternation of masculine rhymes (ending on a stressed syllable) and feminine rhymes (ending on an unstressed one) was common, De Casteleine noted that Flemish writers did not observe this rule.

In conclusion, this book can be recommended to anyone interested in Dutch language and literature and the place of Dutch in the multilingual ecosystem of the long sixteenth century. The weaknesses of the book – a tendency to use footnotes as dumping grounds for citations of recent scholarship and an unnecessary amount of methodological and theoretical scaffolding – betray the origins of the study as a doctoral dissertation. However, these weaknesses are more than offset by the interest of the topics that the author discusses and by the usefulness of the primary and secondary sources that have been brought together.

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