

Literary Monuments and Editor's Jokes

Nationalism and Professionalisation in Editions of Lodewijk van Velthem's *Spiegel Historiae* (1727-1906)

Jan Rock

In September 1860 in the old city of Damme, near Bruges, a statue was unveiled of the thirteenth-century writer Jacob van Maerlant.¹ Three years later Matthias de Vries and Eelco Verwijs called “de zorgvuldige uitgave zijner beste geschriften” [“the meticulous edition of his best writings”], as undertaken by themselves and others, “een nog waardiger gedenkteeken” [“an even more worthy monument”].² That a work on paper was measured against a creation in stone could only happen at a time in which both performed the same function. The book and the statue were the proud instruments of a duty to monumentalise that bound the 19th century to all previous centuries. That duty, which made its appearance at the beginning of the century, was the result of a new historical consciousness. It developed throughout the century into an extensive historical culture, almost invariably defined in national terms. This culture spawned a host of monuments, of which statues and libraries are perhaps some of the most enduring.³

¹ I owe a debt of thanks to Karin Hoogeland, Lotte Jensen, Beyke Maas and Francien Petiet for their comments and to Jan Pauwels, who was most generous with his suggestions and interest.

² Matthias de Vries and Eelco Verwijs (eds.), *Jacob van Maerlant's Spiegel Historiae, met de fragmenten der later toegevoegde gedeelten, bewerkt door Philip Utenbroeke en Lodewijk van Velthem, van wege de Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde te Leiden uitgegeven*, 4 vols., vol. 1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1863), 1. In 1996 the medievalist Frits van Oostrom described their edition as “one of those monuments of academic philology, which it would appear only the 19th century was capable of producing”: Frits van Oostrom, *Maerlants wereld*, 8th ed. (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1998), 361.

³ A matrix of the inspirations and manifestations of this national historical culture can be found in Joep Leerssen, *The Cultivation of Culture: Towards a Definition of Romantic Nationalism in Europe, Working Papers European Studies Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Opleiding Culturele Studies, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2005), and <<http://cf.hum.uva.nl/natlern/>> [27 September 2006]. There is extensive literature on the different national historical cultures. A recent publication on statues, from a comparative perspective, is Helke Rausch, *Kultfigur und Nation. Öffentliche Denkmäler in Paris, Berlin und London 1848-1914, Pariser Historical Studien 70* (München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2005).

The historical culture in which editions and statues played a role was on the one hand characterised by a special relationship with the past, while it involved the forward-looking advancement of the nation on the other hand. Joep Leerssen has emphasised the key role that “literary historicism” played within that historical culture. This was the study of language and literature in the present day and in the past, by philologists who were at home in many disciplines — academic studies, literature and politics — and who were attempting to construct a modern nation state using debris of the past.⁴

This was also true in the Low Countries, although things seldom developed in a straightforward fashion. There, philologists found an area on the boundary between the French and German language families. And contrary to the pursuit of a single territory with a single nation and a single language, they noticed a discrepancy between these three in this area. Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the northern provinces had been independently united in the Seven Provinces, while the south remained part of the Habsburg Netherlands, which was first under Spanish rule and later under Austrian. Following the Napoleonic wars, French departments were established in the south and the Provinces were united in a Kingdom of Holland, with Bonaparte’s brother as its crowned head. After the Battle of Waterloo and the Congress of Vienna, the Low Countries were combined for fifteen years (1815-1830) in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, which fell apart, as the result of a liberal-bourgeois revolution in the south, into the kingdoms of Belgium in the south and the Netherlands in the north. These political entities never coincided

The link between a stone monument and written works had been made before the 19th century: over the course of time, the successive statues of Desiderius Erasmus in Rotterdam, erected from as early as 1549, suffered the hostile reactions to his political and religious work: see C.L. Heesakkers, “Svperet Qyae Saccvla Massa. Een massief dat de ceuwen kan trotseren. Rond het Rotterdamse standbeeld van Erasmus en de Leidse uitgave van zijn verzamelde werken,” *Mededelingen van de Stichting Jacob Campo Weyerman* 13 (1990), 33-52.

⁴ A conceptual approach is given by Joep Leerssen, “Literary Historicism: Romanticism, Philologists, and the Presence of the Past,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 65.2 (2004), 221-244. Variations on that theme from different European countries can be found in Menno Spiering, *Nation Building and Writing Literary History, Yearbook of European Studies - Annuaire d'études européennes* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999), containing contributions on the Netherlands by George Vis, “Literary Historiography in the Northern and Southern Netherlands between 1800 and 1830,” 57-69 and D. van der Horst, “Jan Frans Willems. A Literary History for a New Nation,” 71-93.