



PART 2

Practices of Reading and Writing



Novel Knowledge: Innovation in Dutch Literature and Society of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

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Old and New

Erasmus opens his 1522 dialogue about Johannes Reuchlin by having Pompilius ask Brassicanus whether he had brought news from Tübingen. His friend replied, tellingly: "Remarkable how all people long for news. To think that I heard at a sermon in Louvain . . . that everything new should be avoided." Pompilius immediately scoffed at this attitude. A man who avoided that which is new would never remove his old shoes or change his dirty underwear and would be condemned to eating unsavory eggs and drinking stale wine. Perhaps this was indeed a bit exaggerated, Brassicanus responded, since such a man would prefer fresh soup made that day to old soup prepared the day before. So then what was the news? persisted Pompilius. Unfortunately bad, replied Brassicanus, without managing to deter his friend. Nevertheless, bad news would automatically turn into good news over time: "Frankly, how could it be otherwise, if everything old is good, and everything new is bad, everything that is good now was once bad, and everything that is now bad will become good in the future."¹

In this humorous dialogue Erasmus gives voice to conflicting connotations of "old" and "new" that had been developing since at least the fifteenth century. It is difficult from a modern perspective to imagine a culture where new was bad and old was good: consider the remarkably pervasive modern adage "stagnation is decline." But this drive toward continuous change was by no means accepted in the late Middle Ages and early modern period. Anything old was familiar and according to plan, while new ideas were inevitably suspect. After all, they upset divine intentions and might come from the devil. That is why heretical movements were

labeled *Die Nieuwe* (the New Ones), a term that in the Middle Ages was virtually synonymous with undesirable conduct.

Inconstancy represented an earthly life of sheer pretence, an unobstructed target of the devil, a risky path to the "true life," in which destruction was replaced by immutable eternity. This Augustinian outlook equated all inconstancy with decline. Long after the Middle Ages, Western civilization remained permeated with this disassociation from anything earthly (and thus changeable), which remained the standard for civilized conduct among the elites that formed in the cities in the late Middle Ages.

Attitudes toward climate embodied this perspective. In the imagined utopia that was the land of Cockayne, as presented and performed in the literature and dramas of the late medieval cities of the Netherlands, the ideal climate was perfectly uniform. Stability was the ideal, while inconstancy boded downfall. A climate characterized by sharp contrasts was viewed in the Middle Ages as the scourge of humankind. In horror-struck terms, the famous fourteenth-century travel book of John of Mandeville, printed and reprinted well into the sixteenth century, describes such weather in the land of Tartary: "That land is seldom without great storms. And in summer there are great thunderstorms, which kill a lot of animals and people. The air temperature changes, too, very quickly—now great heat, then great cold—and so it is a bad place to live." Such an intemperate land could not be good, and its defects rubbed off on its inhabitants: "They are a very foul folk, cruel and full of ill will."²

Paradise, of course, was at the other end of the spectrum, where there were no seasons, no wind chasing the clouds, and likewise no burning sun and no wintry cold. Constancy was the Creator's original intent. Columbus, who never wavered during the course of three voyages from the opinion that he was frequenting the immediate vicinity of paradise, always described ideal weather conditions in terms of spring in Andalusia or elsewhere in Spain. For him, too, the most important things were balminess and constancy. Novelty and inconstancy were therefore suspect.³

After the Fall, humanity had become ill and infirm, as well as mortal, and unable to recognize and comprehend the elaboration and culmination of salvation. Life on earth should therefore be dedicated to a quest for God and his plan, aided by priests and the sacraments of the church and by the supreme being, his family, and the saints. This quest would yield insight into the plenitude and completeness of the divine plan and the role of humanity in it. Anything that seemed new along this journey of discovery could therefore never be more than a discovery or rediscovery of the long-standing. Change was presented only as a restoration of what had

once been better or even perfect. In fact, only one new thing was good and made all the old superfluous, namely, the New Man according to Paul the Apostle. In his letters, Paul explains how the old Adam was absorbed into the New Man, as personified by the Redeemer. This was meant to serve as a universal inspiration to embrace Christendom and abandon the old life forever. To people in the Middle Ages, this meant that everything in their lives was new in the Pauline sense, and nothing else could exist.⁴

In this context, the movement started by St. Francis of Assisi was described as a restoration—not as an innovation—of the New Man. Although his movement was identified as promulgating a new and previously unheard-of life plan ("new" and "unheard of" were the terms used by his biographer Thomas of Celano, d. 1260, and were unambiguously favorable), the movement was regarded as a restoration of something that had existed in the past but had unfortunately become invisible.⁵

Still, the terms "new" and "innovation" did appear in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. New manifestations of the eternal truths could be so described, as could the guides that led one to them: a *poëtria nova* or even a *retorica novissima*. Especially in the cities, with their different and constantly changing lifestyles, all kinds of things came to be designated as new, even by laypeople. The *Nieuwe doctrinael*, for example, was an instruction manual featuring new forms of etiquette prescribed by city life and written in the early fourteenth century by the local city physician from the Flanders town of Ieper, Jan de Weert.⁶ At the same time, there seems to have been, by the late Middle Ages, a reluctance to label changes as "new," a trend that is increasingly evident in both Latin and vernacular texts.⁷ The influential "Modern Devotion" movement (Geert Grote, Thomas van Kempen) reasserted St. Augustine's diatribe against *curiositas*, the pursuit of pointless knowledge purely for the sake of knowledge. This curious hunger for knowledge impeded true devotion, in which supreme humility, simplicity, and modesty should be unrestricted. This perspective was also advisable for reading the Bible to avoid being distracted by the "subtlety of the words." Were the *colores rhetorici*, those subdued verbal pigments, not favored tools of the devil for tempting mankind? The Sisters of the Common Life continued to be commemorated and praised in these terms. Virtually every sister was of noble mind and had never—or only as a child—succumbed to temptation by "curious things."⁸

Likewise, traditional literature cast suspicion on and ridiculed anything that pursued or even remotely hinted at originality. Theoretical treatises on drafting texts and speeches stressed, as the essence of "creative"

work, the importance of including and rearranging known material for a new public. This was also emphasized in music, seen as narrowly related to poetry. For example, Joannes de Garlandia pointed out in his *De musica mensurabili positio*, from the first half of the thirteenth century, that frequent repetition not only promoted the recognition of the melody but also strongly moved the listener.⁹

Reproduction was regarded as the noblest form of art, while originality was considered a vulgar amusement attributable solely to avarice. Moreover, making something up was considered far easier than elaborating known patterns. This appears to have held true into the sixteenth century, when the erudite humanist Macropedius included an explanation packaged as a *modestas* formula aimed at cultivating sympathy among the public in his Latin school comedy *Aluta* (1535). Written in four days during a hectic schedule, Macropedius's work falters in some places: "I would have liked to improve a few sections. Realizing that producing new material was easier than revising what was already there, I simply added a few lines here and there."¹⁰

The pressure to present each original idea as the restoration or rediscovery of an old one even led some authors to attribute their innovative views to fictitious or actual authorities of the distant past. Jan van Boendale, a fourteenth-century municipal secretary of Antwerp and author of an original manual with pragmatic directives for adjusting to city life, availed himself continuously of this option, denying in his writings any hint of the originality so manifestly present: "Do not think that I made these things up. I have searched everywhere for material in books once written by wise authors."¹¹ This respect appears to have become even more powerful in vernacular literature. Around 1500 the play *Van nyeuvont, loosheit ende practike* (Of Newfangled Things, Fraud and Wrongdoing) appeared in print for a reading audience, featuring an explanatory subtitle and a woodcut illustration that symbolically depicted deception and fraud. Personified as women who were driven by the "new findings" (devious tricks), these framing devices proclaimed Lady Lortse as a new saint and yet another embodiment of the deception that proved in the course of the play to consist primarily of the broadly condemned trade in relics by mendicant friars.¹²

In sixteenth-century drama, this vile "novelty" became the standard frame of reference and in many cases a designation for all possible forms of deception as well. Ever the embodiment of total irrationality on the stage, the fool so greatly cherished in drama was referred to as Nieuloop, a frivo-

lous hunter of idle rumors (remember St. Augustine's *curiositas*) frolicking with his hobbyhorse, Clappage (malicious gossip).¹³

This particularly conservative view of everything that even hinted at innovation seems to converge in the work of the Antwerp poetess Anna Bijns (1493–1575). In her lifetime she published three volumes of refrains (*refereynen*), which were all reprinted several times, praised extensively, and widely emulated. As an independent woman (she was a schoolteacher), she had her work published and reprinted with her name on the title page, thanks to the interventions of local Franciscan monks acting out of personal interest. At the time this was rarely the case for living authors and was in fact unique for a woman. Although Bijns lacked higher education, her deftness with language and themes such as the frenzied persecution of the new Lutheran heresy was unprecedented and unparalleled. Few dialects in verse have ever been more vivid than her vernacular ballads. The core of her proficiency in rhetoric lies in this lifelike quality. Bijns achieved this effect through creative but meticulous application of the lowly style known as the *sermo humilis*, which has convinced literary historians to this day that she listened to those around her and copied directly from the utterances of the common folk.

Despite the novelty of her language, however, Bijns used the adjective "new" and all compound words containing the term exclusively in negative contexts. This was entirely in keeping with the long-standing suspicion of change. "New" denoted every conceivable form of heresy. Bijns associated the term especially with the reform movements of her era, irrespective of whether the aim of these movements was to break with the Catholic Church. She ascribed all such contemporary heresies to Luther and his adherents. By referring to heresies that had been known for centuries as "new," their "news" became the rediscovery of something old, even though they feigned otherwise. In addition, they circulated "new lies." Luther was therefore a "new evangelist" who gave rise to "new teachers" who disseminated "new twaddle." Opposite them were the "old teachers," who had become objects of disdain. They were inspired by the old recluses, the desert patriarchs who laid an exemplary foundation for the church during the early centuries of Christianity.

The variations on this theme were endless. Luther's misled adherents had charted "new courses"—an expression that has exclusively favorable connotations nowadays—and were spewing "new poison." They sang "new songs" or indulged in a "new dance." And their "lust for news" had lured them into this trap. Elsewhere, Bijns wrote that "everybody longs for

news," since people listen with fascination to lapsed monks. They have followed Luther's cowardly example: "The people heed him in their yearning for something new." According to Bijns, Luther even led humble widows and virgins astray, as they too "felt earthly longings and became completely bound up in curiosities and lust for news."

Likewise, she portrayed the deceitful lovers who figured so prominently in her ballads as erratic drifters lured away from their true love by something new. Lack of resolve epitomized the deplorable state of humanity since the Fall; man was a fragile creature who constantly stumbled along his journey to the hereafter, tripped up by the devil. This unstable condition was manifested by the uncontrollable yearning for "news" and "novelty" that the devil used to advertise his world of make-believe. Those infected pursued earthly honor, power, and wealth. In their quest, they resorted to the most devious tricks and guile, characterized as "new findings, "false practices," and "new fabrications," as in the title of the play mentioned above.¹⁴

Rhetoricians' Chambers

Like these plays, Bijns's texts were known as rhetoricians' literature, which became the chief literary pursuit in the Low Countries during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These *rederijkers* (rhetoricians: urban, semiprofessional poets, playwrights, and actors) gave cohesive form to the new literary life of the city. They employed subtler forms and techniques than used previously and shaped their work with specific functions in mind. These functions were in the first place aimed at legitimizing and promoting the vested interests of the city in its competition with other cities. Such aims manifested themselves in richly attired processions, triumphal entries, and competitive events. On these occasions, plays were performed in theaters and on stationary or moving pageant wagons, *tableaux vivants* were enacted, and triumphal arches were erected, all decorated with allegorical figures. All these displays aimed to convey with their elaborate fixtures all that the city wished to project in terms of its self-image.¹⁵

Not unlike the religious fraternities or urban militia companies, the chambers of rhetoricians, at least the ones in the large cities, were founded from about 1400 onward by well-to-do citizens. In larger cities, membership in these societies was highly restricted. Not only were the financial obligations heavy, but one had to have some education in rhetoric. The most highly regarded *rederijkers* would have included in their ranks semi-professionals, one of whom was usually appointed head (*factor*) of the so-

ciety (*kamer*). Within the cities the chambers functioned as schools for the education of the rising patriciate, while outside the city, their work represented the city before the sovereign and other urban centers. As a consequence, their texts are rather obscure both in form (being filled with complex structures and neologisms) and in content (consisting of difficult allegories that presuppose a broad cultural background). The intentionally elitist character of this type of vernacular literature, which constitutes a new departure, represents an attempt by the bourgeoisie to distinguish itself both from the peasant culture of the countryside and from the other strata of urban society.¹⁶

The skills of the *rederijkers* also served as a weapon in the hands of established urban groups and others who wished to join their ranks. The *rederijkers* endeavored to provide answers, often in the form of consolation, to the everyday frustrations and ambitions of that social milieu. The issues most frequently addressed were the whims of fortune, the dangers of foolish love, and the constant lurking of death. At the same time chambers of rhetoricians were especially well suited to serve as educational institutions in the city. Their members' public appearances in processions and *tableaux vivants* illustrated the same lessons they sought to convey in their dramatic and poetic work: self-control, moderation, proper behavior, and refined conversation. The pleas for these values often took the rather heavy-handed form of an uncompromising offensive against everything that failed to meet the new standards.¹⁷

They were in fact the progenitors of a Dutch literary language, which differed from the daily vernacular. Although prohibited as a woman from joining any chamber of rhetoricians, Anna Bijns developed close ties with various rhetoricians locally and elsewhere, undoubtedly due in part to the tremendous respect for her poetic talents. Owing to the typically bourgeois quality of this new literary institute and the fact that most members were amateurs (except for the *factors*), *rederijker* work became known in later centuries (and especially since the nineteenth century) as contrived, traditional doggerel that invoked ideas that had already become stale by the late Middle Ages. The cited use of "new" in their texts would appear to confirm this assessment. In fact, however, it demonstrates once again the tremendous problem with quantification and selection in the humanities. Within this rigidly organized hierarchy, a web of literary and social innovations emerged. Their unmistakable originality did not need to be substantiated as the alleged restoration of something from the past.

The rhetoricians' unbridled curiosity was inspired and legitimized by local education—from simple schools for reading and writing to universi-

ties. The yearning for knowledge among students and scholars, pilgrims, explorers, as well as money-hungry merchants and entrepreneurs in and from the city, was unstoppable and, by 1500, not only socially acceptable but also commonplace. The printing press in particular functioned to satisfy the hunger for news and for "renewal," and, furthermore, it created and expanded needs of this kind.¹⁸ The thriving industry of the rhetoricians' chambers apparently became a driving force for innovation, keeping pace with the change occurring in the cities.

By the sixteenth century, fulminating against novelty and certainly the hubbub created by Anna Bijns on this subject had thus de facto become obsolete and was reduced to the nostalgic aftereffects of a massive legacy with deep theological roots that was not easily eroded by change. Such deliberate conservatism appears to have been rather widespread. Otherwise, why would somebody like Erasmus have derided it so extensively in the dialogue quoted at the opening of this essay? In this passage, Erasmus channeled his message through two erudite humanists to refute the old-fashioned views about old and new in the context of the Christian plan for salvation.

In the more official manifestations of the *rederijkers'* movement (especially the festive competitions), different views about "new" and "unprecedented" were in fact propagated early on. In addition to acquiring a more favorable connotation within their ranks, such terms even came to dominate the demands the *rederijkers* made on themselves and on others. The earliest report on this subject conveys the elite tenor of a new standard imposed by the civilizing institute par excellence—the chamber of rhetoricians—on all those aiming to excel in literature and art. This report concerns the rhetoricians' efforts on behalf of the splendid procession that the municipal authorities of Ghent held to honor Philip the Good in 1458. Such deeply solemn occasions required a fitting representation on the part of the city and were always arranged by the local rhetoricians. They had the expertise and artistic abilities to design suitable triumphal arches, tableaux vivants, pageants, eulogies, fireworks, and other ornamental displays. In addition, the entire municipal infrastructure was mobilized and subsidized to stage performances, preferably around or in front of their guildhalls and association premises and otherwise in competitions at a central site, generally the marketplace. Even there, the rhetoricians usually supervised. In 1458 all conceivable societies, from guilds to district associations, were invited to perform an *esbattement* (a short and usually comic play) at the city hall. The best would receive an award. The play was expected to be in pure (uninfected by foreign elements), new, and well-

written verse. "New" had become an audacious standard that conflicted with the long-standing tradition of demonstrating expertise with known material.¹⁹

Apparently, however, originality had in fact become the foundation for the innovative literary pursuits of the rhetoricians, which drifted away from the medieval literature in this respect as well. An invitation to a competition, written at the Transfiguratie chamber in Hulst in 1483, called for plays "newly written and not previously heard or seen." In 1496 the eminent Violieren chamber of rhetoricians in Antwerp invited their counterparts throughout the Low Countries to submit entries for a great drama festival featuring plays "newly composed, new in content, and never previously performed."²⁰

By around 1500, this criterion of a superior performance appears to have become so self-evident to the literary elite that it ceased to be stipulated in invitations issued after this date. This reflected the acceptance among these circles that *curiositas* was a foundation for knowledge, science, voyages of discovery, and apparently literary art as well. The eagerness to offer something new from the classical corpus proved useful for recommending literature and other printed texts. By contrast, few references to new or original aspects appear in the prologues to Middle Dutch literature from the manuscript period.²¹

This insistence on original material coincided with an inestimable innovation in literary endeavors: the invention of the printing press. Mechanistic replication of a text in considerable numbers yielded a product for the free market. Enticing an anonymous public with a printed text required fundamental adjustments, starting with the presentation. A title page featuring the title, explanatory subtitles, and a woodcut served to encourage potential buyers, as did laudatory remarks in a preface. Again, presenting the new and the unheard appears to have been used to boost sales; "novelty" served a commercial goal.²²

Something "new" even came to denote an entirely new type of text. The initial designation of the novella, which was later conveyed literally in Dutch as "novelty," consisted simply of adding "new" to "history" or "story." The adaptation of an Italian novella entitled *Teghen die strael van minnen* (Against the Sting of Love), printed around 1484, was described as "a new, entertaining history." Nonetheless, this work was far from a true innovation that replaced the old version. In fact, the novella was presented as an existing story in a new edition. Only in the course of the sixteenth century did authors have the courage (e.g., Cervantes) to boast that they had conceived their novellas themselves.²³

The extensively annotated Dutch adaptation of Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae* presented a remarkably favorable perspective on the new and different. Both the translation into the vernacular and the explanation, published in Ghent in 1485, are clearly the work of a humanist (who has unfortunately remained anonymous). His linguistic style and views reflect contemporary innovations among the rhetoricians. The certificate of establishment (1448) for the main chamber for Flanders in Ghent (De Fonteyne) indicated that rhetoricians had a duty to fight life-threatening melancholy. The translator of Boethius's work, for example, stated in his preface that literature was primarily supposed to be new and different and to have a curative effect. Did "every depressed soul not crave change or something new?" What had been initially and, according to Anna Bijns, still remained the domain of the devil had come to justify the primary struggle against him.²⁴

Praise for the new, different, and unprecedented thus became a permanent feature of sixteenth-century book production. On several occasions, however, explaining this style of advertisement proved necessary. The editor of the *Buevijn van Austoen*, published in Antwerp in 1504 as a prose adaptation of an old *chanson de geste* in verse, believed that his endeavor would be innovative only if the underlying demand was presented as timeless: "metaphorically, new things have improved mankind since time immemorial, as we note daily around us. . . . Everybody loves new things, after all, and I have traced new material to present something new as a pleasant diversion."²⁵ Calling such material new would be deceptive, however, as it had been disseminated widely from the thirteenth century onward and appeared initially in French. The printer was undoubtedly referring to material that already existed but had not yet been used in this manner and indicated that he had prepared it for a new, urban audience.

These formulations became generalized. In the collection of allegorical fables *Der dieren palley* (The Palace of Animals, 1520), which was as entertaining as it was informative, it was observed "that people [were] more inclined to take note of and welcome new things than old matters they had been hearing from time immemorial."²⁶ It became increasingly clear that printers capitalized on an interest in novelty, news, new things, and even change. The success of the Reformation in Germany and the Low Countries, the popularity of printed news reports, and the growing list of innovations in Dutch literature during the sixteenth century reflected and fostered this attitude as well.²⁷

The lust for knowledge and new information was insatiable according to the printers. The reissue of *Der vrouwen natuere ende complexie*, a

popular work (reprinted continuously since 1530) on the nature and physical constitution of women, had to be justified—considering the presumed audacity of the text and woodcuts—by noting the urgent questions from many people "longing to hear new and strange things and to know all about strange and new matters."²⁸ In 1531 a news report was presented in the same nearly apologetic terms. Apparently, the new and different still required proper justification: "wherever we go, we find everybody eager for news, whether they be sovereigns, aristocrats, merchants, farmers, laypeople, or members of the clergy."²⁹

More and more members of the rhetoricians' chambers attempted to match the Latin erudition of the humanists in all respects, especially Erasmus, whose work they diligently translated, edited, and read. The type founder, printer, publisher, linguist, and writer Joos Lambrecht, who was a schoolteacher by trade, shared this view. His receptiveness to new ideas led him to explore reforming views of God's creation, and he was prosecuted repeatedly. Notwithstanding (or perhaps because of) these experiences, he had a thriving press in Ghent during the period 1536–53. Lambrecht proved to be an all-round innovator and one of the first humanists to express his ideas in the vernacular, as was happening with increasing frequency in schools and among printers. His provocative motto on his printer brands read *Cessent solita, dum meliora*: "the traditional practices should cease, now that better ones are available."

Lambrecht felt most at ease with the rhetoricians. On 20 April 1539, he printed the refrains written by nineteen chambers from far and wide as a prelude to a drama competition between these same chambers six weeks later. These statements abounded with criticism of the Catholic Church, which now and then appeared to violate its self-discipline and appeals for restoration. The church, its institutions, and its sacraments were rotten to the core. The Tienen chamber submitted a refrain answering the competition question as to who was the most foolish in the world by mocking all monastic and convent orders. Monks were accused of being lunatics with shaved crowns, hypocrites, lechers, swindlers, drunkards, and gluttons. This went considerably beyond incidental reproaches for wrongdoings and was an attack on the institution as a whole.

Lambrecht sought legitimacy for such radical positions, and to this end, he employed Roman typeface, which was the standard medium for printing Latin texts; Gothic type was used for the vernacular. Now, however, the appearance of the vernacular was supposed to have the same standing as Latin. In his preface to readers, Lambrecht explained how deeply he regretted the widespread inability to read "Dutch, German, or Flemish"

printed in Roman typeface. These people mistook it for Latin or Greek. He provided corresponding alphabets in both typefaces at the end of his preface as a reference.³⁰

An initiative to disseminate the *Const van Rhetoriken* (Art of Rhetoric) by Matthijs de Castelein via the printing press in 1555 was similarly motivated. This book, which presents guidelines and samples for writing, reciting, and acting out texts by rhetoricians and which is based indirectly on rhetorical doctrine from antiquity, illustrates an intention to civilize the lay population. Ideas about education and the formation of the elite were similarly important, since the work was designed both for beginners and for the most experienced aficionados. The quest for improvement can be glimpsed in the woodcut at the beginning of this book, which depicts the "noble art of poetry" and features Lady Rhetorica surrounded by Quintilian, Demosthenes, Roscius, Gracchus, and Cicero. Nevertheless, the description of the author Castelein on the title page as an "excellent modern poet" indicates a break with the past. The last adjective was a new word and indicated that, in the view of the printer, this new type of poet was on a par with the greatest in contemporary and past Latinity.³¹

Rederijkers and the Printing Press

Cultural historians have maligned and scoffed at the printing press during its first century of operation. They blame the introduction of book printing for delaying cultural refinement. They allege that typography artificially extended the waning Middle Ages.³² These allegations are aimed in particular at the literary situation in the Low Countries because of the relatively long wait there for contemporary texts to appear in print. In the fifteenth century, virtually all the texts disseminated in the north of the Low Countries (primarily Holland) were from the past, while in the south (Flanders and Brabant) very few texts appeared in the vernacular. In the south the rhetoricians and the militias continued their literary endeavors, especially for public performances, to which they contributed oral renditions of texts. This continuation of literary activity in familiar formats made demand for the new opportunities for distributing texts provided by the printing press practically nonexistent.

Simultaneously, in the far less sophisticated north, however, the foundations were established within two decades for explosive literary innovations, which proliferated from Antwerp across the Low Countries. A substantial share of the vernacular literary legacy from the past four centuries soon emerged in print. One result was that now it was much easier

to compare these texts with one another. Other ongoing experiments during these early years concerned presentation techniques, costs, sales opportunities, and of course the more technical aspects of book production. Members of the clergy figured prominently in producing and purchasing these texts as part of the didactic techniques revived by adherents of the *devotio moderna* and the resulting longing to read among laypeople.

This typography-driven surge of literary activity in the north did not last long. The market was soon saturated with all those old informative texts in print. The clergy's bookshelves were full for the time being. Given this situation, it was understandable that the printers who survived the risky business in this early stage went off in search of different texts as well as markets for them. Gerard Leeu of Gouda in Holland (on whom more below) made this transition almost prematurely and moved to Antwerp in 1484. Around 1500 others followed. Antwerp soon became the epicenter of typography and book selling.

Although the old texts remained in circulation, their suppliers started to target a new public of city dwellers, whose general ambitions, expectations, and frustrations served to guide production of literature in print, including satisfactory adaptations in the vernacular. The clergy ceased to be a significant market. This meant that texts now took on the character of merchandise and as a result underwent some drastic changes, not only in form and content but also in the ways they were used by the consumer. Texts now had to attract customers in a free market, and one of the consequences of this was the development of the title page. The importance of such commercial tactics for the form and content of the text can hardly be overestimated. Rarely, however, have historians of literature devoted serious attention to this phenomenon. The fact that the object of their study, after just a few decades, always appeared with a title page—and one that usually boldly acclaimed the contents—is accepted as if it were an inevitable development. In the age of manuscripts, the prologues to texts usually included content descriptions of what was to follow. The title page, however, sharply focuses expectations, compelling the reader to approach the text in the light of what has been announced. And the titles are formulated with an eye to marketing the book to as broad a public as possible. One thing that stands out immediately is that titles of historical literature and fiction favored the names of ancient heroes.

Another radical change from manuscripts is the use of numerous laudatory formulas on title pages, in prologues, in prefaces, and even in epilogues and colophons. Other innovative features that deserve more attention are the woodcuts, chapter titles, and especially the adjustments of

content made to interest a new, broader public. A chivalric novel in verse that originated in courtly culture offered middle-class culture attractive possibilities for identification, provided that it was tailored to the demands of urban ambitions and ethics. In addition, the form had to be adapted to the new communicative possibilities brought about mainly by the printing press: reading to one's self or hearing works read aloud in a small circle of listeners.

This explains why a thirteenth-century verse romance like *Heinric en Margriete van Limborch* was altered on a few points of content and rewritten as prose for the printed version of 1516, which proved very successful with a middle-class public. An important scene portrays Heinric's elevation to knighthood. He must swear that he will uphold all the traditional knightly virtues such as loyalty to his lord and the protection of widows and orphans. But the prose version adds that he must, under all circumstances, be creditworthy: "Pay generously wherever you travel, whether by land or by sea, then people will speak honorably of you." The obligatory concept of honor is maintained in the text, but it is now linked to a value exclusively associated with urban ways of thinking: the knight should be equipped not only with a trusty sword but also with a well-filled pocketbook.

We repeatedly encounter small changes like this one, together with the strong tendency to present the annexed knightly world in the new dimension of contemporary sayings and adages. These, too, were inserted in order to clarify the text's relation to the middle-class world and, in general, to strengthen the contemporary grasp of the divine plan of salvation. This justified the assertions on the title page and in the prefaces that the text would present "something new," because the adaptations were supposed to create a totally new situation in which the old matter should and could still function.

What should also be studied is the technical side of the reception. The first printers went to great lengths to make clear that their texts could be used in every conceivable (and even barely conceivable) way: for listening, reading aloud, reading to others, reading silently, following the text as someone else reads aloud; for reading selectively, discursively, pensively; for rereading, leafing back and forth through the text, and simply looking at the pictures. The unprecedented variety of suggested modes of reception also contributed to changes in the interpretation of literature and fiction, as well as in their impact.

Gerard Leeu, who worked in the small town of Gouda, was the first printer in Holland to produce a varied series of Dutch literary texts. He

was fully aware of what he was doing. He had to find a wide audience in a population not accustomed to reading fiction in Dutch. People may have heard these texts—read aloud, acted by a passing troupe of entertainers, or recited from the pulpit in the form of examples—but always in a crowd, as a member of a group, aided by the performer, who emphasized, winked, accelerated, slowed down, explained when necessary, and was constantly aware of the attention of his audience. Leeu had an eye for the problems his untrained public might encounter. And that is why he provided his first editions with very practical instructions: how to read Dutch fiction in print on one's own. His interventions are all the clearer to us because he published older texts or texts known from elsewhere, and thus his adaptations and additions are immediately apparent. He was firmly convinced that he had to assist his audience to read Dutch by themselves, separated from the crowd.

Looking over Leeu's instructions today we feel somewhat embarrassed by the way he lectures us, as if we are unwilling, if not suspicious, children. But we have to put ourselves in the position of being confronted with a radically new and difficult situation for all concerned. Perhaps it may be compared with my own experiences concerning the introduction of the television set in the living room, to which I was first exposed as a schoolboy in the fifties. The room was jammed with relatives, some of whom I had never seen before. Earlier, I had been instructed to line up all the chairs we owned (and even some more from the neighbors) in five rows and to ensure that everyone was seated in complete darkness long before zero hour. No one knew exactly how to behave, and that applied to the television producers as well. They wrestled, for example, with the problem of how to start their programs, as they were no longer in the position to put out the lights themselves. And that is why the first television programs in the Netherlands started exactly at 8:00 p.m. with a loud bang on a gong, which was supposed to make every living creature within the surrounding area quiet. After that a female announcer constantly interrupted the broadcasts with motherly advice and directions concerning the regulation of the volume, the definition of the picture, and the need to take a break after one full hour of watching. Consequently, at least twice an evening the programming was interrupted for a five-minute break to give everyone an opportunity to exercise their bodily functions, which caused serious problems with the national water supply. Excitement rose to a fever pitch when the evening closed with a lady waving us goodbye; most of my relatives, including my parents, used to wave back! It is important to keep in mind that this was the behavior of adults, all middle-class and well

educated. It was not until the sixties that television watching in Holland found its own form.

In 1479 Gerard Leeu took grown-up people by the hand from the very first moment they decided to open a copy of one of the first literary texts in print: *Reynaert die vos* (Reynard the Fox). To start with, the subject matter was reassuring because well known: it is quite unthinkable that there was anyone, even in Gouda in the year 1479, who had never heard of the cunning tricks of the famous fox. Probably, Leeu recognized that familiarity was essential for success: introducing a new technique would be easier if there was at least some familiarity with the object a reader held in his hands. Moreover, Leeu knew that for more than three centuries this text had been a dependable success, so that in this respect his enterprise could not possibly fail.

Leeu immediately puts his audience at ease by assuring them that the booklet not only is particularly fit for their benefit and amusement but also is certainly not intended for the world of learning, as might be expected of a printed book. The subject matter deals with the tricks one can witness daily, if not suffer from, in all social circles, including the world of merchants and the common people. This applicability allows the entertaining animal story to benefit a wide audience, Leeu continues; one can, as it were, learn how to protect oneself. But there is still the problem of understanding. Leeu shows how well he appreciates our hesitations: "He who desires to understand this book completely has to read it several times over and to contemplate all the printed words with diligence, because the author has put these words together in an ingenious way, as you will notice when reading. Should it happen that after a single reading the exact meaning or import of the text remains unclear, read it many times over, until it is fully understood." So do not give up, but keep on trying, advises Leeu, for it is quite possible, even probable, that you will not understand it all on the first attempt. Start again from the beginning and at last you will grasp the full meaning. That is the way to read fiction in your own mother tongue. And provided you follow his advice carefully, you may feel flattered by the conclusion of his preface: "To conclude, it will be very amusing and also profitable to intelligent people." So, fortunately, the act of reading is pleasant too: one might have thought that this new form of mental exercise merely yielded simple utility and no fun.³³

Conclusion

Urban literature of the late Middle Ages and early modern period played an active role in forming, defending, and propagating urban values, which

revolved around the key concepts of practicality and utilitarianism. But this does not mean that the heroes of yesteryear were not still very useful to urban society. Virgil, represented as a sort of magician, and Reynard the Fox are given a fresh lease on life in the town.³⁴ Reynard the Fox represents an individual with practical ingenuity who can take on the whole world and take good care of himself under all circumstances. This hero holds all the traditional values, court mores, and every other kind of accepted behavior in disregard, yet embraces them with alacrity if that is to his advantage. Reynard knows the ceremonial of legal proceedings completely, and so he can faultlessly exploit the weaknesses in the system. He is courteous whenever that will yield results, for instance, toward King Noble and his wife, Gente. In this way he softens them up for his con games.

At the same time, aristocratic culture formed an attractive reference point for the creation and propagation of the citizens' own package of virtues and behavioral codes, thus giving the required luster to this new form of society. Until long after the Middle Ages, the world of the court was to remain a model for emerging elites, who arranged tournaments in the marketplaces of the towns, read or listened to prose stories based on chivalric literature from earlier centuries, organized themselves into "round tables," and, at festivals and parties, adopted the names of famous knights of the past. To this end, however, the antique, biblical, and medieval heroes had to be equipped with the right qualities: qualities in which the new urban elites could, and wished to, see themselves mirrored. This sometimes resulted in a pseudoknightly culture in literature, street theater, and visual arts that resembled modern operetta more than it provided a faithful reproduction of actual courtly entertainment.³⁵

It was in this way that a literature evolved in middle-class circles that, by means of annexation and adaptation, propagated a whole set of virtues considered essential for maintaining and extending the power that this group had acquired. The power was based on trade and industry and owed its momentum primarily to an increased striving for individualism, with its underlying assumption that one could take on the entire old world. The printing press also eagerly offered its services in the formation of this mentality by portraying countless rogues and rascals, each of whom manages to get the best of traditional wielders of power and their rigid codes by a playful use of words and wits. Dozens of *rederijker* texts present such shrewd go-it-aloners, who are mostly of simple appearance, behavior, and origin or even have physical defects: Aesop, Marcolphus, Jan Splinter, Heynken de Luyere, Aernout, Everaert, François Villon, Tijs Ulenpieghel, the Parson of Kalenberg.

These new values appeared unmistakably at this time among a "nouveau riche" nobility of ambitious merchants. In this fluid situation a more pragmatic approach to life was emerging, with eyes on the street and everyday reality. These new attitudes spread within and outside city walls through all the strata of society, whether nobility, clerical hierarchy, international merchants, or guild master craftsmen. A new power, based on personal skill and business acumen, soon openly competed with the traditional authority of the sovereign powers.³⁶

It is misleading to suppose that all was new in the city. The middle-class virtues mentioned previously were certainly not "invented" in the city. Individualism, hard work, and making a career were not exclusively traits of urban society, even though they often were paraded as new in the cities themselves. A substantial number of the qualities derived from classical antiquity, many of them could be found at court, and nearly the entire list was already present in the earliest monastic environments. In every case we are confronted with overlap, for the primary characteristic of this mentality is that it adapts to and combines with other attitudes. In brief, the classical authors presented the dictates of reason and control of the emotions as guidelines for earthly life, together with instructions for the careful running of a household (*oeconomia*). The monastic orders emphasized hard work, discipline, and the related need for efficiency in measuring time. Self-sufficiency could also be found in this milieu. Finally, the individual adventurer who goes out to challenge the world and vie with fate (Fortuna) was first portrayed in the chivalric literature of courtly culture.

What was unique about the late medieval and early modern city, however, is that a highly original set of virtues appeared, forged from the classical, biblical, and medieval traditions. Urban dwellers borrowed from vernacular, as well as elite, traditions, from old and new, and were continually in search of useful elements that could be adapted to reinforce, embody, and foster the city's own interests and ambitions. And this passion for annexation and adaptation was presented in terms of novel knowledge, novelty, and renewal, particularly in the literature produced in new institutions such as the *rederijkers'* chambers, which assembled, tested, and propagated this new collection of urban virtues.³⁷



CHAPTER SIX

Watches, Diary Writing, and the Search for Self-Knowledge in the Seventeenth Century

RUDOLF DEKKER

The word "revolution" is often used to describe the development of science in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This may be an adequate term, but this revolution did not take place in isolation. Like its political equivalents, the Scientific Revolution was embedded in a broader process of cultural change. In this essay, one essential aspect of the Scientific Revolution, the great improvement in techniques to measure time, is linked with an important cultural development, the invention of the modern diary. While the search for knowledge of the outer world intensified around 1600, there was also a growing need for knowledge of the inner world. Although by no means the work of great individuals alone, the Scientific Revolution is associated with famous thinkers like Galileo and Isaac Newton. Likewise, the growing interest in self-knowledge had a broad basis but is also linked to some famous authors, of whom the most important was Michel Montaigne. His essays set a new standard for self-analysis. The autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini and the diary of Samuel Pepys are among the most famous landmarks in the development of new literary tools for researching the self. Producing knowledge and producing self-knowledge clearly went hand in hand, and the two cannot easily be separated. In egodocuments like those by Cellini and Pepys, the authors not only tried to learn more about themselves but also described and analyzed their immediate environment. Like astronomers, they sought to describe and explain reality. There even was a direct link between both developments: the invention of new timekeeping devices directly influenced the development of the modern diary, in which the author kept track of his or her life.

Stuart Sherman has recently drawn attention to the connection between the birth of the modern diary and the invention of the first accurate