

Jan Bloemendal, Arjan van Dixhoorn, and Elsa Strietman, eds. *Literary Cultures and Public Opinion in the Low Countries, 1450–1650*.

Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 197. Leiden: Brill, 2011. x + 324 pp. \$136. ISBN: 978-90-04-20616-8.

This collection of ten essays on the early characteristics of the public sphere and its transformation into a public opinion proceeds from two research programs, the first on early modern public opinion in the Low Countries 1500–1700, the other on Latin and vernacular cultures, ca. 1510–1625. Indeed, as one of the most literate societies of Western Europe, the Low Countries were soon a paradise for all sorts of printed products, from broadsheets, plays, songs, and prints typical for the public sphere, to learned works in every subject matter of early modern scholarship. The editors, responsible for the two programs, expose their theme and define its terms, concepts, and limits in a substantial introduction. The Low Countries are understood as present-day Flanders and the Netherlands, and the period under review is that of a still largely shared literary market, before the cultural separation of North and South, but with a growing domination of Holland. Small wonder that

the specter of Habermas looms large on their argumentation and that his critics are eagerly discussed. The editors' main point, however, is that previous authors have largely neglected literary texts as the core material for public opinion building. The concept of a public sphere should not be treated as an abstract or preconceived category but be "closely connected to the public (or publics) in the sense of an audience or readership" (20), putting the early modern media at the center of public opinion building. Due to the literary culture performed by the chambers of rhetoric and other media on the intermediate level between oral and learned culture, the Low Countries are a case in point. In their conclusion, the editors recall some of the findings of the essays, such as the strong link between spaces and publics, the interplay between local, national and international publics, and the frequency of a fictitious representation of some form of 'public opinion' in the texts. For contemporary readers, public opinion was a reality with its own logic, and it had its recognized leaders, its formal texts, and its performance procedures. This confirms the editors' plea for the full inclusion of literary texts into the study of early modern public opinion, the Netherlands being again a high-rated example.

The eight essays by individual authors that underpin these conclusions are interesting though rather limited in scope. Loosely held together by a common thematic field, some pertain to the world of the rhetoricians, more middle-class, urban and local, and others to that of the scholars and magistrates. They include representations of gossip, news mongering, and public opinion in the plays of Bruges rhetorician Cornelis Everaert, ca. 1530 (Samuel Mareel); the gender argument in the refrains of the Antwerp poetess Anna Bijns (1493–1575) (Judith Kefler); the moral meanings of hypocrisy in the satirical play with the same title (1544, 1564) by the Reformation-minded playwright Gulielmus Gnapheus, an independent spirit born at The Hague but working in East Prussia (Verena Demoed); the topical use of Latin and vernacular in the history dramas of Daniel Heinsius (1602) and Jacob Duym (1606) (Juliette Groenland); English and Dutch readings of Hugo Grotius's 1609 Latin funeral poem for Jacobus Arminius (Moniek van Oosterhout); public opinion building after some Dutch manuscript sources on theatrical performances at Madrid concerning the Battle of the White Mountain, ca. 1623 (Nelleke Moser); support for the Stuart case in revenge tragedies performed in the Dutch Republic, 1649–60 (Helmer Helmers); and the question whether a popular song related to a village quarrel in 1686 can be considered an expression of public opinion (Joke Spaans).

It should be noted that the editors focus entirely on literary theory and communication science. They do not tackle, for instance, the notion of "discussion culture" for the public sphere in the Dutch Republic which Marijke Spies and I have developed and illustrated with literary examples in our *1650: Hard-won Unity* (2004). Since then, it has been amply discussed among historians. Apparently, however, the world of literature is floating away from that of history. Another shortage of this volume should be underlined. In their introduction, the editors refer to unspecified "pragmatic reasons" (ix) for justifying their omission of Low Countries literature in French, recognizing at the same time its richness and

omnipresence, and calling for new research. I am afraid that this facile argument doesn't do justice to the rich multilingualism of the early modern Low Countries and the complex interrelation of the three languages, especially in the period under review. Next to Dutch and Latin, French quite often acquired the status of an imported vernacular language, enjoying growing prestige as a language of public culture. It acted as a cultural intermediary — for example, in the world of songs — an example for moral or esthetical values, and a source of literary inspiration. Besides, if the subsidized authors of this book omit the inclusion of French in their approach, it will probably be a lost case for less endowed scholars. At present French is a menaced language in Flanders and the Netherlands: schools bar it from their teaching programs, it has virtually disappeared from students' reading lists, and the disastrous cultural policy of the Dutch government combined with the short-sightedness of university boards go so far as to suppress the departments of French in the most prestigious universities, including Leiden. Scholars should be wiser.

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