

‘What is Truth? The Verse-Prose Debate in Medieval Dutch Literature’

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What is Truth?

*The Verse-Prose Debate in Medieval Dutch Literature**

Orlanda S.H. Lie

In 1318 an author living in the Brabant city of Antwerp, completed his Dutch translation of a thirteenth-century French encyclopedic treatise: *Livre de Sidrac* also known as *Livre de la fontaine de toutes sciences*.¹ According to the (rhymed!) prologue, the Dutch translator adopted the prose form of his French exemplar for his Middle Dutch rendition because he considered prose more suitable for a faithful translation than verse:²

Te Antwerpen daer ic wone
 Soe quam my een boec ter hant,
 Daer ic in bescreven vant
 Vele duechden ende wijsheden
 Ende leringe van goeden seden
 Ende hoe die mensce soude leven.
 Dit boec was in Walsche bescreven
 Sonder rime in slechte woert.
 Doen werd ic daer toe becoert,
 Dat ic dit boec woude maken
 Uten Walsche in Dietsche spraken,
 Sonder rime alsoe ic sach,
 Dat hy inden Walsce lach,
 Omme dat ic van dier edelre leren
 Een woert [niet] woude anders keren,
 Dant die edele wise clerck
 Selve dichte in sijn werck.
 Want rime, alsoe wijt vinden,
 Doet dicke die materie winden
 Anders danse die makere seide
 Ende ierstwerven int scrift leide.
 Die die materie sal leggen wale
 Van ere tale in een ander tale,

* I wish to thank Wim van Anrooij, Fons van Buuren, Wim Gerritsen, Erwin Mantingh and Dieuwke van der Poel for their critical remarks, and Paul Gabriner for his helpful suggestions.

1 The 'classic' study of the French *Sidrac* is still Ch.-V. Langlois, *La connaissance de la nature et du monde au Moyen Age*. Paris, 1911, pp. 180-264. According to the 1992-edition of the *Dictionnaire des Lettres Françaises*, ed. by R. Bossuat & L. Pichard & G. Raynaud de Lage (Paris, 1992) an edition (the first!) of the French *Sidrac* is in preparation (pp. 1385-1387).

2 Quoted from J.F.J. van Tol (ed.), *Het boek van Sidrac in de Nederlanden*. Amsterdam, 1936.

Die sal den text leggen dan
 Soe hy alre gelijcxt can.
 (ed. Van Tol, vv. 46-70)

[In Antwerp, where I live, I came upon a book in which many virtues, much wisdom, teachings of good morals and the way people should live, are described. The book was written in French, without rhyme, in straight language. I became interested in rendering this book from the French into the Dutch language, without rhyme, just like I saw it in French, because I did not want to deviate one word from the noble lessons which the virtuous and wise cleric wrote himself. For rhyme, as we know, often changes the matter into something different than was said by its maker when he first put it into writing. He, who wants to render the matter correctly from one language into another, should reproduce the text as faithfully as he can.]

By indicating that a prose translation was more accurate and truthful to its source than a verse translation, the Antwerp translator participated in an interesting discussion on vernacular medieval writing: the so-called verse-prose controversy. Modern scholars studying this phenomenon, have directed most of their attention to France, the cradle of vernacular prose writings, where the transition from verse to prose romances took place at the turn of the thirteenth century. A wide range of arguments has been proposed to explain the emergence of French prose romances. It has been suggested, for example, that the preference for prose was induced by the rise of a new religious mentality which favored the prose form of ascetic literature.³ Critics have also attributed the use of prose by romance-writers to the influence of prose chronicles and historiographical writings.⁴ According to Köhler, the transition from verse to prose is the result of a ‘Krisis des Bewußtseins’ triggered by political and social developments around 1200 (p. 217).⁵ The view that the pleasing qualities of verse obfuscated the truth gained acceptance and eventually led to the condemnation of verse as the medium of false, deceitful, meretricious and vapid tales, while the prose form became synonymous with truth, objectivity, clarity and meaningfulness. Social and cultural developments have also been stressed as decisive elements in the acceptance and popularity of prose, such as the shifting emphasis from an aristocratic audience (listening to romances) to a public of educated burghers who mastered the art of reading.⁶

3 R. Brummer, *Die erzählende Prosadichtung in den romanischen Literaturen des XIII. Jahrhunderts*. Berlin, 1948; H.G. Jantzen, *Untersuchungen zur Entstehung des altfranzösischen Prosaromans*. Diss. Heidelberg, 1966.

4 H. Tiemann, ‘Zur Geschichte des altfranzösischen Prosaromans’. In: *Romanische Forschungen* 63 (1951), pp. 306-328; W. Haug, *Literaturtheorie im deutschen Mittelalter. Von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des 13. Jahrhunderts*. Tübingen, 1985.

5 E. Köhler, ‘Zur Entstehung des altfranzösischen Prosaromans’. In: *Trobadoryrik und höfischer Roman*. Berlin, 1962. Neue Beiträge zur literaturwissenschaft, Bd. 15, pp. 213-223.

6 J.D. Bruce, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance. From the Beginnings Down to the Year 1300*. 2 vols. Göttingen, 1923; Tiemann (see n. 4); K. Ferkinghoff, *Vers und Prosa. Die Bedeutung der beginnenden Laienschriftlichkeit für die Entstehung der altfranzösischen Prosaliteratur*. Diss. Heidelberg, 1959; P.M. Schon, *Studien zum Stil der frühen französischen*

More recently, scholars of medieval German literature have also joined the verse-prose debate. Compared to the developments in France, the rise of German prose romances was relatively late: the genre did not flourish until the fifteenth

Prosa (Robert de Clari, Geoffroy de Villehardouin, Henri de Valenciennes). Frankfurt a.M., 1960.

century. In his article ‘Vers oder Prosa? Zur Kritik am Reimvers im Spätmittelalter’, W. Besch examines the rejection of the verse form by fourteenth- and fifteenth-century German authors. Textual evidence indicates that some authors preferred the prose form because it was more direct and straightforward and therefore easier to understand than verse. According to others, the verse form was inadequate for expressing objective truth; verse became associated with poetic fantasy and lies, while prose gained status as the medium for informative and truthful writings.⁷ Exploring the underlying motives for the denunciation of verse in late medieval German literature, Besch mentions the importance of Gutenberg's invention and the decisive role of printed books in the transformation from a listening public to a reading public.⁸ He also considers the restricted distribution of verse romances rhymed in regional dialects and the growing need for a more unifying communicative style as important factors in the acceptance of prose.⁹

In his article ‘Prosaauflösungen und Geschichtsschreibung im deutschen Spätmittelalter’, R. Schnell argues that the real reason for the rejection of verse in favor of prose was not - as has been maintained by critics like Köhler - caused by the belief that verse=false and prose=true, but rather by the rivalry between the vernacular oral tradition (=verse) and the written Latin culture (=prose).¹⁰ According to Schnell the affinity of German authors with the ‘short version’ of literary genres in Latin literature (legends, historiography and didactic literature) which were written in the prose form, played a decisive role in the development of prose writings in late medieval German literature.¹¹

An interesting contribution to the verse-prose discussion in German literature was made by W. Haug in his *Literaturtheorie im deutschen Mittelalter*. Not convinced by the socio-cultural arguments proposed by fellow-critics, Haug approaches the problem from a literary historical perspective. Interpreting the poetological statements of thirteenth-century French authors, he concludes that the objective and factual prose style of Latin chronicles was instrumental in showing French romance-writers the way to a new form of truth.¹²

Another essential element in the development of French prose Arthurian romances, according to Haug, was Robert de Boron's cycle of Grail romances composed in the traditional octosyllabic rhyming couplets between 1190 and 1200. In this Arthurian trilogy (*Joseph d'Arimathie*, *Merlin*, and *Didot-Perceval*), the Arthurian world was embedded in a framework of sacred history. This newly added historic-metaphysical dimension paved the way for the use of prose as the new

7 W. Besch, ‘Vers oder Prosa? Zur Kritik am Reimvers im Spätmittelalter’. In: *Festschrift für Hans Eggers zum 65. Geburtstag*. Tübingen, 1972, pp. 745-766; esp. 749-760.

8 Besch (see n. 7), pp. 762-763.

9 Besch (see n. 7), pp. 763-764.

10 R. Schnell, ‘Prosaauflösung und Geschichtsschreibung im deutschen Spätmittelalter. Zum Entstehen des frühneuhochdeutschen Prosaromans’. In: L. Grenzmann & K. Stackmann (eds.), *Literatur und Laienbildung im Spätmittelalter und in der Reformationszeit*. Symposium Wolfenbüttel 1981. Stuttgart, 1984, pp. 214-248; esp. pp. 215-219.

11 Schnell (see n. 10), pp. 224-225.

12 Haug (see n. 4), pp. 239-247.

medium of French Arthurian romance. The prose adaptation of Boron's cycle, two years after its completion, heralded the new era of prose romances in France.¹³

Observing that the historic-metaphysical type of Arthurian romances is absent in the German reception of French Arthurian matter, Haug concludes that the different development of prose romances in Germany was caused by this missing link in the transmission of the French Arthurian romances to Germany. In other words: while French romance writers, confronted with the 'verse=false; prose=true'-equation, reacted by adopting the prose style of Latin historiographical writings to raise the historicity and authenticity of their compositions, their thirteenth-century German colleagues searched for different ways to impart meaning and significance to their romances. As Haug sees it, poets like Hartmann, Wolfram and Gottfried adhered to the traditional verse form, because they were more interested in experimenting with the new structural concepts of romance introduced by Chrétien de Troyes, than in trying out a new medium:

Dieser prozeß der experimentierenden Verwandlung und Provokation des Chrétienischen Strukturkonzepts, der sich in Deutschland durch das ganze 13. Jahrhundert hin weiterzieht, setzte voraus, daß man an der den fiktionalen Typus prägenden Form, am Rheimvers, festhielt (p. 249).

It is now time to return to the fourteenth-century Middle Dutch translator who made a prose rendition of *Le livre de Sidrac*. The decision of the Antwerp translator to use prose instead of verse as the medium in which to render his source is the earliest explicit reference to the verse=false, prose=true-controversy in the history of Middle Dutch literature. One should bear in mind, however, that the verse-prose discussion in the *Sidrac*-prologue was concerned with choosing the right medium for a faithful translation and that it said nothing about the preferred medium for original vernacular compositions. Furthermore, the *Boec van Sidrac* belonged to the category of encyclopedic writings, and the preference of the Antwerp translator for the prose form need not, for example, be shared by translators or authors of narrative tales. On the other hand, the attitude of the *Sidrac*-translator in the verse-prose debate clearly raises questions which are pertinent to the appraisal of verse and prose in Middle Dutch literature. Why did the Antwerp translator use the verse form for his prologue while advocating the prose form as the medium of accuracy and truthfulness? What was the status of verse and prose in the Low Countries at that time?

The extant corpus of Middle Dutch literature shows its indebtedness to medieval French literature. A substantial number of Middle Dutch works are translations or adaptations of Old French texts. But unlike the literary developments in France, the verse form remained the traditional medium for both fictional and non-fictional Middle Dutch writings during the greater part of the medieval period. With the exception of three Low Rhenish translations of Old French originals preserved in

13 Haug (see n. 4), pp. 247-249.

a thirteenth-century codex known as the *Nederrijns moraalboek* [*Low Rhenish book of morals*],¹⁴ the mystical prose writings of Beatrijs van Nazareth (1200-1268)¹⁵ and Hadewijch (1st half 13th century),¹⁶ vernacular prose writings did not surface until the fourteenth century, while the acceptance of prose as an alternative medium for Dutch worldly narrative tales had to wait until the second half of the fifteenth century. Compared to the evolution of medieval French prose, the history of prose in Middle Dutch literature apparently followed its own course of development. The aim of this essay is to explore the verse-prose phenomenon by looking at auctorial statements regarding this subject matter in a selected number of Middle Dutch prologues and other relevant poetological passages. What is the status of verse and prose according to these medieval authors, and what is the cultural historical setting for the Dutch approach to these two forms of medium?

The Thirteenth Century

Around the middle of the thirteenth century, the Dominican scholar Thomas of Cantimpré wrote his *Vita Lutgardis*, a biography in three parts (books) of Lutgard of Tongeren (1182-1246), a devout Cistercian nun, whom he had known personally. This Latin prose hagiographical work was translated three times into Middle Dutch. The two rhymed translations date from the thirteenth century, while the third (prose) translation has survived in a fifteenth-century codex.¹⁷ The oldest and most famous of the three translations is the rhymed translation ascribed to Willem van Afflighem, which is kept at the Royal Library of Copenhagen.¹⁸ The Copenhagen manuscript has preserved a translation of the last two books of the *Vita Lutgardis*; the first book was lost. The original Middle Dutch prologue to the second book contains relevant information on the verse-prose discussion. In this prologue, the *Lutgard*-poet assures his audience that he has taken great pains in following the same course as dictated by his Latin source:

- 14 The *Nederrijns moraalboek* has been edited by M. Gysseling, *Corpus van Middelnederlandse teksten (tot en met het jaar 1300)*. Leiden, 1987. Reeks II, vol. 6, pp. 345-422, who dates the codex from ca. 1270-1290 on the basis of paleographical evidence (p. 348). See also T. Meder, 'Proza voor graaf Reinald I van Gelre'. In: *Gelders erfgoed* 6 (1992), pp. 1-3, for some introductory remarks on the contents of this prose manuscript and J. Goossens, 'Oude en vroegmiddelnederlandse letterkunde'. In: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde* 98 (1982), pp. 241-272, for a brief but lucid survey of the oldest vernacular writings in the Low Countries.
- 15 For an edition of her writings see H.W.J. Vekeman & J.J.Th.M. Tersteeg, *Van seuen manieren van heileger minnen*. Zutphen, 1971.
- 16 An inspiring study of Hadewijch is P. Mommaers, *Hadewijch, schrijfster, begijn, mystica*. Averbode-Kampen, 1989.
- 17 For an introductory article on the Middle Dutch *Lutgard*-tradition, see A.M.J. van Buuren, 'Lutgard van Tongeren'. In: R.E.V. Stuip & C. Vellekoop (eds.), *Andere structuren, andere heiligen. Het veranderende beeld van de heilige in de Middeleeuwen*. Utrecht, 1983, pp. 115-132 and 260-264; see also A. de Man, 'Het leven van Sinte Lutgard door Broeder Geraert: een verwaarloosde bewerking van Thomas Cantimpratensis "Vita Lutgardis"'. In: *Ons geestelijk erf* 60 (1986), pp. 125-147.
- 18 The text has been edited by F. van Veerdeghe, *Leven van Sinte Lutgard, tweede en derde boek*. Leiden, 1899. I am quoting the Copenhagen translation from this edition.

Nu hebbic u met waren warden
 En deel der viten van Lutgarden
 Verclart, gi heren ende vrouwen,
 Daer ic in mire goeder trowen
 Gepinet hebbe al sonder wanc
 Te houdene al den selven ganc
 In Didsche, ende in den selven wegen
 Te gane, die ic vant geslegen
 In din Latine vore mi.

(ed. Van Veerdeghem, vv.1-9)

[Now, lords and ladies, I have explained to you in truthful words part of the life of Lutgard; and I have strained myself in good faith to hold the same course in Dutch and follow the same road as I found that the Latin text in front of me has followed.]

Before proceeding with his account of Lutgard's life at the convent of Awirs, the *Lutgard*-poet expresses his dismay at the fact that there are people who gladly listen to old tales sung by minstrels, about battles and jousts. He cannot understand why these people are so gullible, and why they prefer these flagrant lies to truthful narratives, written in Dutch, French and Latin. The makers of these old tales ought to hold their tongues and keep silent, because they sell the public lies for truth (36-62). The *Lutgard*-poet then continues his tirade by scorning the makers of love-tales: how can they talk about love if they have never experienced what love is? The only true love is the love for God (63-88). He also scoffs at those story-tellers who deceive the wretches and the fools by adorning lies with beautiful stories. In their mendacious tales they let animals speak, they depict apes that are fighting with spears, they allow rams to say mass and they make donkeys dance and jump. We all know that none of this can happen in reality. Whoever is wasting his verses on these dumb animals, should be called an animal himself (89-146). Finally, the *Lutgard*-poet invites the people who remain unruffled by these fantastic tales to gather around him and to open their hearts and minds to a poem that is pious and truthful: the life story of Lutgard (147-154).

The *Lutgard*-prologue contains an interesting contribution to the verse-prose discussion. Minstrels, narrators of love-stories, and authors of animal tales are denounced as liars and impostors. These authors are untrustworthy, because they lure the public with fantastic stories based on lies. For true and meaningful stories one should turn to narratives with edifying and devotional themes, such as divine love and the exemplary life of pious or virtuous persons. In other words, the *Lutgard*-poet based his distinction between good and bad stories on subject matter (contents), and not on medium. In his eyes, producers of religious tales are truthful, and makers of worldly tales are false and fraudulent. But who are these immoral authors? What kind of stories did they compose or propagate? And why is the *Lutgard*-poet so critical of them?

The picture of twelfth-century vernacular literature in Dutch literary histories is necessarily blurred and incomplete. Only a small number of texts have survived and most of them are fragmentary. The oldest datable Middle Dutch texts were

composed in the last quarter of the twelfth century (Veldeke, *Leven van Sinte Servaes* [*Life of Saint Servaes*], ca. 1170). The thirteenth century, however, witnessed a growing production of vernacular writings in the Low Countries. A brief look at the extant corpus of Middle Dutch literature reveals the presence of different types of vernacular writings during this period. The genre of worldly romances is represented by *Roelandslied* [*Song of Roland*], *Renout van Montalbaen* [*Renout of Montalbaen*], *Karel ende Elegast* [*Charles and Elegast*], most of which are Middle Dutch translations of Old French *Chansons de geste*. The Troy romance of Segher Diengotgaf (*Die grote Strijt* [*The great battle*], *Tpaerlement van Troyen* [*The parliament of Troy*], and *Tprieel van Troyen* [*The bower of Troy*]) is an example of thirteenth-century Middle Dutch romances of Antiquity. The Arthurian tradition is reflected, for instance, in Penninc and Vostaert's *Roman van Walewein* [*Romance of Walewein (Gawain)*], *Ferguut* [*Fergus*] and *Lantsloot vander Haghedochte* [*Lancelot of the Cave*], while *Floris ende Blancefloer* [*Floris and Blancefloer*] and *Parthonopeus van Blois* [*Parthonopeu of Blois*] attest to the popularity of the so-called Oriental romances. Examples of animal tales are *Van den vos Reynaerde* [*Of Reynard the Fox*] and the fables of *Esopet*. Shortly after 1288, Jan van Heelu composed a rhymed historiographical account of the Battle of Woeringen in which he sang the praise of its hero, Jan I, Duke of Brabant. The extant corpus of thirteenth-century religious literature shows, for example, *De reis van Sint Brandaan* [*The voyage of Saint Brendan*], mystical writings by the already-mentioned Beatrijs van Nazareth and Hadewijch, a popularized version of the life of Jesus (*Van den levne ons Heren* [*Of the life of Our Lord*]), biblical history (Maerlant's *Rijmbijbel* [*Rhymed Bible*]), and hagiographies (*Lutgard*, Maerlant's *Sinte Franciscus leven* [*Life of St. Francis*]). In the field of *artes*-literature, non-Latinists were informed about medieval cosmography by the rhymed and prose version of *De natuurkunde van het geheelal* [*The science of the cosmos*]; the earliest examples of Middle Dutch prose writings in the previously-mentioned *Nederrijns moraalboek* are concerned with moral precepts, epigrams and a bestiary of love.¹⁹

An important part of thirteenth-century Middle Dutch literature flowed from the pen of one of the most prolific vernacular authors of the Middle Ages: Jacob van Maerlant. His literary oeuvre covers a wide range of topics. He is the author of *Alexanders geesten* [*Alexander's deeds*], a Middle Dutch adaptation of Gauthier de Chatillon's epic poem of Alexander the Great; his *Historie van Trojen* [*History of Troy*] is based on the *Roman de Troie* of the Old French poet Benoit de Sainte Maure and classical Latin sources; he translated several Arthurian romances (*Historie van den Grail* [*History of the Grail*], *Merlijn*, *Torec*). His renditions of authoritative Latin encyclopedias, such as Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale*; Peter Comestor's *Historia scolastica*; *De naturis rerum* of Thomas of Cantimpré; and the *Secreta secretorum* of Pseudo-Aristoteles, made this genre of informative and scien-

19 A collection of essays (in English) on different aspects of medieval Dutch literature is forthcoming: E. Kooper (ed.), *Medieval Dutch Literature in its European Context*. Cambridge, 1994.

tific literature available to a Middle Dutch public. In addition, he also composed didactic poetry (the so-called *Strofische Gedichten* [*Strophic Poems*] and hagiographical writings: *Sinte Franciscus leven* [*Life of St. Francis*] and *Leven van Sinte Clara* [*Life of St. Clare*, no longer extant]).

Maerlant's thorough knowledge of Latin literature and his outspoken preference for the use of Latin sources, characterize him as a learned poet, educated in the Latin school tradition. His poetical status and his invaluable contributions to medieval Dutch literature are hailed by the fourteenth-century Antwerp poet, Jan van Boendale, who refers to Maerlant as 'the father of all Dutch poets' ('Die vader der dietscher dichtren algader').²⁰ In studying the verse-prose phenomenon in Middle Dutch literature it is essential, therefore, to consider Maerlant's voice in this matter. Maerlant's use of the verse form as the medium for his writings suggests, however, that he did not share the view of contemporary French authors who maintained that verse texts were deceptive and prose texts truthful. This observation implies that we must approach the verse-prose question from a different angle, namely: what was Maerlant's attitude in the truth-versus-lie discussion?

In the prologue to his translation of Bonaventura's Latin biography (*Legenda maior*) of Francis of Assisi: *Sinte Franciscus leven*, Maerlant vents his bitterness at the decaying moral values of his time. Instead of caring for the welfare of their souls, people are only concerned with bodily comfort and material gain. Instead of searching for the truth, they prefer to listen to invented stories about Tristan, Lancelot, Perceval and Galahad, and absurd tales about love and battles.²¹ Like the *Lutgard*-poet, Maerlant is condemning the genre of profane stories as vain and futile, while making a plea for truthful and moral narratives.

More evidence is provided by Maerlant's prologue to the *Spiegel Historiae* [*Mirror of History*]. Here the Middle Dutch poet again shows his aversion for the category of spurious worldly tales when he exhorts the people who are tired of listening to sham stories about the Grail, the lies about Perceval, and the fantasies about Lanval, to pay attention to his book:²²

Dien dan die boerde vanden Grale,
Die loghene van Perchevale,
Ende andere vele valscher saghen
Vernoyen ende niet en behaghen,
Houde desen Spiegle Ystoriale
Over die truffen van Lenvale;
Want hier vintmen al besonder
Waerheit ende menech wonder,

20 M. de Vries (ed.), *Jan van Boendale, gezegd Jan de Clerc: Der leken spiegel, leerdicht van den jare 1330*. 3 vols. Leiden, 1844-1848, bk. III, ch. 15, vv. 119-120.

21 See P. Maximilianus, *Sinte Franciscus Leven van Jacob van Maerlant*. 2 vols. Zwolle, 1954, vv. 1-38.

22 See M. de Vries & E. Verwijs (eds.), *Jacob van Maerlant's Spiegel Historiae met de fragmenten der later toegevoegde gedeelten, bewerkt door Philip Utenbroeke en Lodewijk van Velthem*. 4 vols. Leiden, 1863-1879. Reprint: Utrecht, 1982.

Wijsheit ende scone leringhe
 Ende reine dachcortinghe.
 (ed. De. Vries/Verwijs, vv. 55-64)

[Those who tire of the prevarications about the Grail, the lies about Perceval and all those other false tales, let them choose this *Spiegel Historiae* above the ridiculous stories about Lanval; for here one finds truth and many a marvel, wisdom and good teachings and pure pastime.]

The best illustration of Maerlant's disparagement of these profane poets is his diatribe against the minstrels, worded in one of the chapters of his *Spiegel Historiae*: 'Tscelden jeghen den borderers' ('Diatribe against the liars'; IV, I, ch.29). At this point of the book, Maerlant interrupts his account of the reign of Charlemagne, to fulminate at those fake poets 'who kill truthful stories with their beautiful and sweet-sounding tales':

Hier moetic den borderers antworden,
 Die vraye ystorien vermorden
 Met sconen rime, met scoenre tale.
 Omdat die worde luden wale,
 Entie materie es scone ende claer,
 So doen sise verstaen vor waer.
 (vv. 1-6)

[Here I have to answer the liars, who kill truthful stories with beautiful rhymes and with beautiful tales. Because the words sound well and the material is nice and lucid, they present them as truthful stories.]

According to Maerlant, these so-called poets are fakes because they rely on the works of French poets who do violence to the truth about historical figures with their fantasies. None of what these fraudulent French sources tell about Charlemagne should be believed, because their fabrications do not agree with the facts described in reliable sources.²³

Maerlant's distrust of French sources is also evident in his prologue to *Der naturen bloeme*, a rhymed translation of Thomas van Cantimpré's Latin prose encyclopedia on natural history, *De naturis rerum*, where he criticizes an existing vernacular 'Book of beasts', namely the lost Middle Dutch bestiary of Willem Utenhove.²⁴ According to Maerlant, this bestiary is unreliable because the author used the wrong source for his translation. Instead of a trustworthy Latin exemplar, Willem relied on a French work which, in Maerlant's opinion, is the equivalent of untrust-worthiness.²⁵

23 See W.P. Gerritsen, 'De dichter en de leugenaars. De oudste poetica in het Nederlands'. In: *De nieuwe taalgids* 85 (1992), pp. 2-13 and H. van Dijk, 'Maerlant en de fantasten'. In: F.A.H. Berndsen, H. van Dijk & G.J. de Vries (eds.), *Poëtica-onderzoek in de praktijk*. Groningen, 1993, pp. 33-38.

24 See E. Verwijs (ed.), *Jacob van Maerlant's Naturen bloeme*. Leiden, 1878. Reprint: Arnhem, 1980.

25 See W.P. Gerritsen, 'Waar is "Die beestearis"?' In: W.P. Gerritsen, A. van Gijsen & O.S.H. Lie (eds.), *Een school spierinkjes. Kleine opstellen over Middelnederlandse artes-literatuur*. Hilversum, 1991, pp. 68-71, where it is suggested that this unreliable bestiary may well be the Middle Dutch translation of the famous *Bestiaire d'Amour* written by Richard de Fournival.

Ic hebbe beloeft, ende wilt ghelden
 Gewillike ende sonder schelden,
 Te dichtene enen Bestiaris;
 Nochtanne wetic wel dat waer is,
 Dat haer Willem Uten Hove,
 Een priester van goeden love
 Van Aerdenburch, enen heeft gemaect;
 Maer hi wasser in ontraect.
 Want hine uten Walschen dichte,
 So word hi ontleet te lichte,
 Ende heeft dat waer begheven.
 Maer daer ic dit uut hebbe bescreven,
 Hebbic van broeder Alebrechte
 Van Coelne, dien men wel mit rechte
 Heten mach Bloeme der clerghien:
 Op hem dar ic coenlike lien.
 (ed. Verwijs 1878, vv. 101-116)

[I have promised and shall willingly and without fulminating compose a bestiary. However, I know that one was made by Willen Utenhove, a priest of Aardenburg, (who is) of great repute. But he missed the mark (i.e., was unsuccessful in this process) because he composed it from the French. Because of this he was easily misled and failed to present the truth. But the exemplar that I have used, is from brother Albert of Cologne (i.e. Albertus Magnus, to whom the Latin text was wrongly ascribed), who is rightfully called (the) Flower of Science: on him I can truly rely.]

Maerlant's depreciation of French sources reveals the existence of a dichotomy in the truth-versus-lie controversy that (for obvious reasons!) was absent in the French discussion: Latin works are truthful; French (vernacular) works are false. In this frame of thinking, the opposition: verse is the medium of false tales - prose is the medium of truthful writings, is irrelevant. In the eyes of Maerlant, the underlying truth of a written work was clearly not a matter of stylistic form (verse or prose) but of using the right source. The question that now arises is: what caused Maerlant's distrust of French sources and why does he show such unwavering faith in Latin writings?

To understand Maerlant's anti-French sentiments, we must look at the historical context that inspired the development of vernacular literature in France. Before the rise of vernacular writings in the twelfth century, all written communications were in Latin. Literacy (in Latin) was the privilege of a small group: only those destined to become servants of the church (*clerici*) enjoyed schooling in all or some of the seven subjects of the *artes liberales*. These Latin scholars or *clerici* were the heirs and successors of the Roman literary tradition. The majority of the population, however, was illiterate (*illitterati* or *laici*). For this group, communication was exclusively in the vernacular tongue and by word of mouth.²⁶

For information on this Middle Dutch Bestiary of Love, see also Gysseling (n. 14) and Meder (see n. 14).

26 Cf. M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record. England 1066-1307*. London, 1979, pp. 175-201.

In the twelfth century, vast changes occurred which marked this period as a renaissance. Economic and political developments, for instance, increased the power

and influence of the courtly aristocracy and stimulated the emergence of vernacular writings. Because of this, Latin was no longer the only language used for written texts. Clerks schooled in Latin, were now sponsored by members of the aristocracy to use their poetic skills also for the composition of literary works in the vernacular language. Instead of writing for a select Latin-trained audience, they were now addressing a diverse courtly public. Pioneers in this new type of vernacular literature in France were Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes (second half of the twelfth century).

Marie de France is especially known as the author of twelve *Lais*, short stories, mostly based on motifs taken from Celtic tales. She probably wrote these *Lais* for Henry II Plantagenet, king of England (1154-1189). In her prologue to the *Lais*, Marie considered translating some good stories from Latin into French, but then decided against it because ‘that was not to bring me fame: too many others have done it’²⁷ Instead, she preferred to apply her skills to the preservation of adventures that she had heard and that she did not want to forget:²⁸

Des lais pensai k'oï aveie;
 Ne dutai pas, bien le saveie,
 Ke pur remembrance les firent
 Des aventures k'il oïrent
 Cil ki primes les comencierent
 E ki avant les enveierent.
 Plusurs en ai oï conter,
 Ne[s] voil laisser nē oblier;
 Rimez en ai e fait ditié,
 Soventes fiez en ai veillié.
 (ed. Ewert, Prologue, vv. 33-42)

[Then I thought of the lais I'd heard. I did not doubt, indeed I knew well, that those who first began them and sent them forth composed them in order to preserve adventures they had heard. I have heard many told; and I don't want to neglect or forget them. To put them into word and rhyme I've often stayed awake. (tr. Hanning/Ferrante, p. 29).]

Marie's attitude towards the tradition of orally transmitted tales is characteristic of a literate poet confronted with a seemingly shapeless and disorganized corpus of raw narrative material. Fearing that orally transmitted tales were in danger of being forgotten, she decided to save them from oblivion by committing them to paper. In other words, the emergence of vernacular writings inspired the assimilation and adaptation of narrative material that heretofore was only restricted to oral tradition.

In discussing the importance of Chrétien de Troyes for the development of vernacular romance, Walter Haug has argued convincingly that this Old French poet should be hailed as the founding father of vernacular fiction in writing. Faced with the amorphous narrative material used by the professional story-tellers of his time, Chrétien was the first to transform oral tales into structured literary compositions.

27 R. Hanning & J. Ferrante (tr.), *The Lais of Marie de France*. New York, 1978, p. 29.

28 Quoted from A. Ewert (ed.), *Marie de France. Lais*. Oxford, 1976.

As a Latin-schooled poet, he clearly felt superior to these wandering entertainers, whom he accused of spoiling and bungling the beautiful tale of Erec, son of Lac. While their versions will long be forgotten, Chrétien proudly announces that his story will be everlasting.

d'Erec, le fil Lac, est li contes,
 que devant rois et devant contes
 depecier et cooronpre suelent
 cil qui de conter vivre vuelent.
 Des or comancerai l'estoire
 qui toz jorz mes iert an mimoire
 tant con durra cretiantex;
 de ce s'est Chrestiens vantez.²⁹

[The tale, which the professional story-tellers habitually fragment and corrupt in the presence of kings and counts, is about Erec, son of Lac. Now I shall begin this story, which will henceforth always be remembered as long as Christendom endures. That is Chrétien's boast.]³⁰

Both Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes projected the literary principles of written culture upon oral tradition. Before them, the tradition of vernacular tales had always been the domain of story-tellers and not that of literate poets. With the new developments in vernacular writings, the literate poets of the twelfth century became the rivals of oral poets. To convince the public of the quality of their stories, they had to praise their own products and downgrade the repertoire of their opponents. One way of achieving this was to emphasize the fact that these illiterate entertainers were unreliable, because they based their stories on memory and hearsay, and not on written sources. Viewed from this perspective, it is not surprising that the difference between oral tradition and written culture was soon tantamount to the difference between untruthfulness and truthfulness. When one century after Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes, Maerlant is fulminating against fake French poets, he is in fact criticizing the category of vernacular poets who use oral sources (i.e. non-Latin [= unauthorized] sources) for their writings. This insight also explains why Maerlant is so disdainful of these worldly romances: they are all rooted in oral tradition.

When the *Lutgard*-prologue is placed in the context of this literary scene, the tongue-lashing of the *Lutgard*-poet likewise becomes understandable. The *Lutgard*-poet begins his verbal attack by deriding the minstrels, wandering entertainers who earn their living by telling stories about battles and jousts. It is clear that the *Lutgard*-poet is referring here to the category of oral poets, professional storytellers (*ioculatores*, *jongleurs*). Following the tradition of Chrétien, the *Lutgard*-poet denounced them as liars and authors of worthless tales.³¹ The genre that the

29 See Haug (n. 4), pp. 102-103.

30 The translation is from D.D.R. Owen, *Chrétien de Troyes. Arthurian Romances*. London, 1987, p.1.

31 This category of medieval entertainers (*joculatores*, *jongleurs*, *Spielleute*) occupied a low rank on the social ladder; they were generally considered as dishonorable and dishonest people (cf. Gerritsen (see n. 23), pp. 2-6; Van Dijk (see n. 23)).

Lutgard-poet is criticizing here, is possibly the category of Middle Dutch Charlemagne romances (such as *Van den bere Wisselau*, *Roelandslied*, *Karel ende Elegast*, etc.) and Arthurian romances.

Aside from the tales told by minstrels, the *Lutgard*-poet also faulted the narrators of worldly love-stories. These authors should be despised, because they are the defamers of true, divine love. When we look at the extant corpus of Middle Dutch courtly romances, it is more than likely that the *Lutgard*-poet was aiming his pejorative remarks at secular love stories such as *Floris ende Blancefloer*, *Parthonopeus van Blois*, *Ferguut*, *Lantsloot vander Hagedochte*, and *Roman van Walewein*.

The *Lutgard*-poet saved his most vitriolic attack for the authors of animal tales, who mock the laws of nature by assigning human tasks to animals. His allusions to spear-fighting apes, rams that celebrate mass, and dancing donkeys illustrate his familiarity with medieval animal tales, such as *Van den vos Reynaerde* and the fables of *Esopet*.³²

In the truth-versus-lie debate the *Lutgard*-poet apparently used the criterion of subject matter (contents), rather than medium. By choosing the right material for his tale, the author affirmed his credibility as a truthful and conscientious writer. According to the *Lutgard*-poet, authors writing about religious themes are intrinsically trustworthy, while writers of profane tales are beguilers. Considering the upsurge of worldly vernacular literature in this period, it would not be farfetched to assume that the *Lutgard*-poet was competing with the professional story-tellers and authors of worldly romances and vying for the attention of their public. By denouncing his rivals as liars and deceivers, he hoped to convince the public that his tale of *Lutgard* was definitely more worthwhile than those stupid tales, and that they could better listen to him than to the treacherous story-tellers!

The rivalry between authors of religious literature and propagators of profane literature observed in the *Lutgard*-prologue, is also implicit in the prologue of another thirteenth-century work, *Van den levne ons Heren*, a rhymed account of the life of Jesus.³³ Like the *Lutgard*-author, this anonymous Dutch poet distinguishes between his own book (which he likens to a small vessel that is filled with a great treasure, vv. 3-4) and the useless products of other poets. They have composed many verses that are of little benefit to the soul: they tell stories about battles and love, about Roland and Olivier, about Alexander and Ogier, about Walewein (how he fought against his enemies and endured many torments for the love of a beautiful lady), about Piramus (how he died for love). Only fools will waste their time on these trifles! (5-22). The prologue suggests that the genre of worldly tales posed a threat to God-fearing people because it was detrimental to the soul. The references to specific fictional characters indicate that the author of *Van den levne ons Heren* was addressing a public to whom these stories were well-known.

The analysis of these Middle Dutch prologues reveals that the antagonism ob-

32 Cf. P.W.M. Wackers, *De waarheid als leugen. Een interpretatie van Reynaerts historie*. Utrecht, 1986, pp. 24 ff.

33 I am referring to the text in W.H. Beuken (ed.), *Vanden levne Ons Heren*. 2 vols. Zwolle, 1968.

served between oral poets and literate poets had also left its mark on thirteenth-century Middle Dutch literature. Authors of non-fictional writings praise the veracity and edifying nature of their own works, while rejecting the products of their adversaries, the poets of fictional tales. According to the poets of religious narratives, the distinction between good (truthful) and bad (mendacious) literature corresponds with the difference between edifying subjects and profane tales, between truth and deception, damnation and redemption, sin and virtue. It is not surprising that most of the vilified tales turned out to be rooted in the oral tradition!

Importantly, however, neither the *Lutgard*-poet, nor the poet of *Van den levene ons Heren*, nor Jacob van Maerlant associated the medium in which they composed their works, with the truth versus lie-debate. All three Middle Dutch authors used the verse form for their writings, and all three claimed that their works were truthful and worthwhile. For Jacob van Maerlant, the truth was guaranteed by authoritative Latin sources; for the *Lutgard*-poet and the poet of *Van den levene ons Heren*, truthfulness was inherently present in the genre of religious literature. All these poets have in common that they were schooled in Latin and, as such, they belong to the category of learned authors. The correlation between prose and truth, verse and lie, played no role in the above sample of thirteenth-century Middle Dutch literature. The accepted medium for both fictional and non-fictional writing was clearly the verse form. Unlike the developments in France, the verse-prose controversy did not become an essential issue in the truth-versus-lie debate of thirteenth-century Dutch literature.

The Fourteenth Century

In the thirteenth century, Middle Dutch literature was undergoing the fertile process of assimilation and adaptation. At one end of the spectrum, poets/performers presented the public with vernacular tales based on the material and narrative techniques of oral tradition (for example, the poet/performer of the *Roelandslied* or *Renout van Montalbaen*). At the opposite end, literate poets schooled in Latin continued to mediate between the learned Latin tradition and the growing category of laymen and lay women, eager to be educated (Maerlant). Between these two extremes, a wide range of possibilities existed.

The majority of the extant corpus of thirteenth-century Middle Dutch literature was probably written for a courtly audience, listening to the text. The few prose vernacular texts of this period circulated in a different social milieu. The mystical prose treatise of Beatrijs van Nazareth was written for nuns, and Hadewijch addressed her prose letters to a selected group of religious women. The prose version of a cosmographical treatise, the *Proza-natuurkunde*, was probably meant for a public of lay brothers.³⁴ The prose texts of the *Nederrijns moraalboek* were proba-

34 See O.S.H. Lie, 'Van onmondig publiek tot zelfstandige lezer: het publiek van de Middelnederlandse artes-literatuur'. In: R.E.V. Stuip & C. Vellekoop (eds.), *Oraliteit en schriftcultuur*. Hilversum, 1994, pp. 189-203.

bly conceived as private reading for the Count and Countess of Guelders.³⁵

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the increasing rate of literacy and education among the lay population had important consequences for the form and contents of vernacular writings. While the tradition of worldly romances continued to be popular, the production of vernacular didactic literature, scientific treatises and religious writings increased significantly in this period. When attention is paid to the medium in which fourteenth-century Dutch authors wrote their texts, it is interesting to observe that, in general, secular literature continued to be composed in verse.³⁶ At the same time the use of prose as the medium for religious narratives, moralistic-didactic and other non-fictional Middle Dutch literature became increasingly popular. In the field of Middle Dutch technical writings or *artes-literature* (*Fachliteratur*), for example, various texts have survived, both in rhymed and in prose versions.³⁷ The same observation can be made for moralistic-didactic literature and religious writings.³⁸ Since the verse-prose controversy did not have much bearing on thirteenth-century Middle Dutch literature, the use of prose as a new medium in vernacular writing must have been a later development. What was the appraisal of verse and prose in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries?

A new element to the verse-prose debate was added by the previously-mentioned *Sidrac*-prologue of the Antwerp translator. The Brabant author begins his rhymed prologue with a reprimand. He rebukes the public for wasting its time on idle and worthless tales about battles and love. The people who choose this type of story above edifying narratives are like people who gather nettles and thorns in an orchard, instead of ripe and savory fruits. They are fools, for they waste precious time on matters that will not aid them in their quest for eternal salvation (1-45). He continues his prologue with a reference to his French source (46-51). Then follows his praise of prose as the medium for an accurate translation (52-79).

Compared to the truth-versus-lie debate in thirteenth-century Middle Dutch literature, the *Sidrac*-prologue also contains the traditional tirade against the genre of profane tales. Here, too, the author warns his public against the pernicious influence of worldly literature, such as the love-stories of Parthonopeus and Amadas,

35 See Meder (n. 14), p. 3.

36 A notable exception is the prose translation of the *Roman de Lancelot en prose* preserved in two fourteenth-century fragments, known as the Rotterdam Fragments; the two other extant translations are both in verse. Cf O.S.H. Lie, *The Middle Dutch Prose Lancelot. A study of the Rotterdam Fragments and their place in the French, German, and Dutch Lancelot en prose tradition*. Amsterdam, 1987, pp. 25-31; 175-178.

37 Cf. O.S.H. Lie, 'Middel nederlandse artes-teksten in verzen en in proza: een eerste verkenning'. In: A.M.J. van Buuren et al. (eds.), *Tussentijds. Bundel studies aangeboden aan W.P. Gerritsen ter gelegenheid van zijn vijftigste verjaardag*. Utrecht, 1985, pp. 157-173; 348-350. For an inventory of manuscripts and printed books that contain Middle Dutch artes-literature up to 1600, see R. Jansen-Sieben, *Repertorium van de Middel nederlandse Artes-literatuur*. Utrecht, 1989.

38 See O.S.H. Lie, 'Middel nederlandse didactische literatuur in verzen en in proza. Van mondelinge voordracht naar leescultuur?'. In: F.P. van Oostrom en F. Willaert (eds.), *De studie van de Middel nederlandse letterkunde: stand en toekomst*. Hilversum, 1989, pp. 201-221 and O.S.H. Lie, 'De Middel nederlandse vertalers van het "Purgatorium Sancti Patricii": hun medium en publiek'. In: Th. Mertens et al., *Boeken voor de eeuwigheid. Middel nederlandse geestelijk proza*. Amsterdam, 1993, pp. 124-140; 405-408.

the romances about Troy, the adventures of Fierabras (the hero of a Middle Dutch Charlemagne romance).³⁹ These books contain nothing but *vanitas mundi*:

Dicke hebbic die gene bescouden,
 Die hem ane die boeke houden,
 Daer sy clene profijt inne leren,
 Alsoe sijn geesten vanden heren,
 Van Pertelpeuse, van Amedase,
 Van Troyen ende van Fierenbrase
 Ende menich boec datmen mint
 Daer men luttel orboers in vint;
 Nochtan half logene es ende mere
 Ende anders en hebben engene lere,
 Dan vechten ende vrouwen te minnen
 Ende lant ende stede ende borge te winnen,
 Daer anders niet inne en leit
 Dan der werelt ydelheit.

(1-14)

[I have often scolded those who occupy themselves with books of which they derive small benefit. These are the stories of noblemen, of Partonopeu, of Amidase, of Troy and of Fierabras, and many a favored book in which one encounters little profit. This type of book consists for the half of lies and for the rest of it, it teaches nothing except how to fight and love women, and how to conquer cities and castles. It contains nothing but the vanity of the world.]

Instead of worthless tales, the Antwerp translator will offer his public a much better alternative: the wise and virtuous teachings of Sidrac, philosopher and descendant of Noah. Since the stylistic demands of a metrical rendition will inevitably lead to prolixity and inaccuracy, he will use the prose form as the medium in which to translate his source (46-70). His great example is Jerome (340-420), the famous translator of the Bible, who never added one single word to the original text (72-78). But why did the Antwerp translator formulate his preference for prose in a *rhymed* prologue, if he felt that this medium was inadequate and inferior to prose?

According to the prologue, the Antwerp translator wrote his work for a Dutch public that had no knowledge of French (81-87). This means that his intended public had no access to French sources, and that he considered it his duty to instruct this uneducated public in matters that were beneficial both to the body and the soul (92-94). In addition, he also left out some of the more difficult chapters, because these would be incomprehensible for laymen:

In dichte niet, dat weet wale,
 Dien boec ute altemale:
 Vanden cruden latic uut

39 Cf. J. te Winkel, *De ontwikkelingsgang der Nederlandsche Letterkunde*. 7 vols. Haarlem, 1922-1927. Reprint: Utrecht, 1973. Vol. 1, p. 333; D.E. van der Poel, *De Vlaamse Rose en Die Rose van Heinric. Onderzoekingen over twee Middelnederlandse bewerkingen van de Roman de la Rose*. Hilversum, 1989, pp. 216-222.

Ende vanden stenen die virtuit,
 Ende oec eenderhande sotterie,
 Die men sonder astronomie
 Niet toe gebringen en can;
 Het es te swaer elcken man.
 (125-132)

[I did not, take note of this, render the entire book: I left out the herbs, and the virtues of stones, and also some pranks (?) which one cannot accomplish without astrology: these things are too difficult for the average person.]

The (negative) attention of the author for the popular genre of profane tales at the beginning of the prologue (1-12), strongly suggests that the intended public of the Middle Dutch *Sidrac* must have at least included people who gladly listened to these exciting adventures. To persuade this public of the quality and superiority of his *Sidrac*-translation, the author had to communicate this message to them in the medium that they knew best, namely the metrical form. For this reason, he composed a rhymed prologue to promote his new product: a prose translation of a French bestseller. In the light of this hypothesis, the Middle Dutch *Sidrac* attests to the activities of a fourteenth-century Brabant author who wanted to introduce his lay public to the more serious genre of encyclopedic writings and its corresponding medium: prose. It is also conceivable that a prose rendition was considered less difficult than a metrical translation and that the rhymed prologue served as a proof of the translator's poetic skills.⁴⁰

Another element to the verse-prose controversy is added by the fourteenth-century translator of the *Visio Tnugdali*, a twelfth-century specimen of Latin visionary literature.⁴¹ In his prologue, the Dutch author explains why he decided to use the prose form for his translation. For one, a prose rendition of his Latin prose exemplar will be a more accurate reflection of the original text than a verse translation. Secondly, it is known that the verse form offers no other advantage to prose than its ability to please the ear. For this reason, the verse form is not the appropriate medium in which to compose religious literature, because it will only obfuscate its true meaning:

Maer men sal weten dat ic desen bouc niet en begheere te rimene, om dat icker no af no toe doen ne wille van den ghenen dat ic vand in lattine; ende ooc so en es men gheen helighe scriftuere sculdich te rimene, want in den rijm en es gheen ander voordeel dan dat den hooren gheeft soeten luut,

40 Cf. Te Winkel (see n. 40), vol. 2, pp. 159-160; H. Unger, 'Vorreden deutscher Sachliteratur des Mittelalters als Ausdruck literarischen Bewusstseins'. In: *Werk-Typ-Situation. Studien zur poetologischen Bedingungen in der älteren deutschen Literatur*. Tübingen, 1969, pp. 217-251, esp. 223 and 237.

41 A synoptic edition of the Middle Dutch translations of the *Visio Tnugdali* is provided by R. Verdeyen & J. Endepols, *Tondalus' Visioen en St. Patricius' Vagevuur*. 2 vols. Gent, 1914-1917, vol 2, pp. 1-177. Cf. also N.F. Palmer, 'Visio Tnugdali'. *The German and Dutch Translations and their Circulation in the Later Middle Ages*. München, 1982, pp. 10-15. I am quoting the *Tondalus*-text from A.T.W. Bellemans, *Tondalus' visioen. Naar het Gentsche handschrift met inleiding, aantekeningen en bibliographie*. Antwerpen, 1945.

ende metten rimene so wert alle helighe scriftuere gheconfondeert. (Ed. Bellemans, vv. 7-14)

[But one should know that I do not wish to render this book into verse, because I do not want

to add or detract from my Latin source; moreover, one should not render the Holy Scriptures into verse, because verse has no other advantage than that it produces a sweet sound, and because of the verse form all Holy Scriptures will be defiled.]

By declaring that the seductive and luring qualities of verse are incompatible with the nature of sacred writings, the *Tondalus*-author informed his public at the same time that his prose translation would be both accurate and truthful. While he concurred with the *Sidrac*-translator that the verse form is less accurate in its rendition of a prose text than the prose form, the *Tondalus*-author also dwelt on a second characteristic of the verse form which he considered irreconcilable with religious or sacred writings: its pleasing sound.

Unlike the *Lutgard*-poet, Maerlant and other thirteenth-century authors of rhymed religious narratives who were focussing their criticism on the idle contents of worldly tales, the *Tondalus*-translator rejected the ear-pleasing medium of profane tales as an unworthy stylistic instrument of sacred writings. This negative appraisal of the verse form, caused by its association with the genre of secular romances, represents a new element in the Dutch verse-prose controversy. By maintaining that the verse form, being the medium of profane tales, is considered inferior to prose, the medium of serious writings, the fourteenth-century *Tondalus*-translator in fact showed his affinity with the ‘verse=lies; prose=truth’-controversy, characteristic of thirteenth-century French literature.

The anonymous author of another fourteenth-century religious-didactic work, *Der sielen troest*, a Middle Dutch prose treatise on the Ten Commandments interspersed with moralistic tales, also expresses his contempt for romances and heroic tales. Unlike the *Sidrac*-translator or the *Tondalus*-author, however, he does not feel called to justify his use of the prose form:

Daer vele lude syn, die lesen wertlike boeke ende hoiren dair na: ende verliesen al oir arbeyt, want si nyet en vynden der syelen troist. Soemyge lude lesen boeke van Tristran, van heren Derick van den Berne ende van den alden hunen, die der werlde dyende ende nyet Gade. Ende in den boeken en is gheen nut, want men vindet dair in nyet der sielen troist. Dat en is nyet dan tijtverdrijf; ende vur alle die tijt die wy onnutliken toe bringen, moeten wy Gade rede van gheven. (Berlijn, Ms. germ. fol. 1027, fol. 1r.)

[There are many people who read worldly books and listen to them; they waste their efforts, because they will not find (in these books) comfort for the soul. Some people read books about Tristan, Dietrich of Bern and about the old Huns who serve the world instead of God. In these books there is nothing of use, for one shall not find in them comfort for the soul. That (type of book) is nothing but a waste of time and we must account to God for all the time that we squander.]⁴²

42 A similar complaint is launched by another fourteenth-century author, Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen in his *De libris teutonicalibus*. About the Middle Dutch translation of the Latin text, see C.G.N. de Vooy, ‘De Dietse tekst (...)’. In: *Ned. archief voor kerkgeschiedenis*. N.S. 4 (1907), pp. 113-134, esp. 122-123; A.M.J. van Buuren, ‘De

When we turn to the genre of *artes*-literature, it is interesting to observe that the pleasing quality of rhyme is praised as an effective teaching device. The anonymous fourteenth-century poet of a rhymed treatise on chiromancy informs the public in his prologue that his translation is for the benefit of laymen who have no knowledge of Latin. His rendition will be accurate: not a word will be added to the original text, except for the sake of rhyme. The result will be both instructive and pleasing:⁴³

Omdat die latijnsche tale
Niet en verstaen alle die lieden,
So willicet hu in dietsche bedieden,
Ende nieuwer hoec toeslaen een wort
Anders dan ten rime behoert;
Sallic tlatijn hier exponeren
Datter die goede an moghen leeren,
Want hets ghenoughelic ende bequame
(vv. 46-53).

[Because the Latin language is not understood by all people, I will render it for you into Dutch and never will I add a word to it other than what is appropriate to the rhyme. I shall explain the Latin in the hope that good people may learn from it, since it is pleasing and useful.]

It is evident that the author of the rhymed version did not regard the medium of verse as an impediment to the understanding of instructive writings. On the contrary, the use of rhyme was a mnemonic device *par excellence*, according to the author of a thirteenth-century rhymed treatise on cosmography:⁴⁴

Ic sal v segghen in vraeyen rimen,
Elc gheset op sine linien,
Om dat ghijt te bet onthouden sult
Ende niet daer in en sijt verdult.
(vv. 1-4)

[I will relate to you in pleasing rhymes, Each at its proper place, So that you will remember it better, And that you will not get confused in it.]

Although the above views on prose and verse represent only a small fraction of fourteenth-century Dutch literature, they already illustrate that the use of either verse

poetica in het Middelnederlands. N.a.v. de Dietse tekst van *De libris teutonicalibus*. In: S. Buitink et al. (eds.), *Rapiarijs. Een afscheidsbundel voor Hans van Dijk*. Utrecht, 1987, pp. 26-28, (Ruygh-Bewerp XVI) and V. Honemann, 'Zu Interpretation und Überlieferung des Traktats, "De libris teutonicalibus"'. In: E. Cockx-Indestege & F. Hendrickx (eds.), *Miscellanea Neerlandica*. Opstellen voor Dr. Jan Deschamps. Leuven, 1987, vol. 3, pp. 113-124. See also Honemann, 'Der Laie als Leser' (in: *Laienfrömmigkeit im späten Mittelalter. Formen, Funktionen, politisch-soziale Zusammenhänge*. Hrsg. von K. Schreiner unter Mitarbeit van E. Müller-Luckner. München, 1992, pp. 241-251) for an interesting analysis of the laity as the recipient of vernacular religious writings.

43 Quoted from N. de Pauw (ed.), 'Cyromanchie van den Pape van den Hamme'. In: *Middelnederlandsche Gedichten en Fragmenten 1*, Gent, 1893, pp. 272-289.

44 See R. Jansen-Sieben (ed.), *De natuurkunde van het geheelal. Een 13-de eeuwse middelnederlands leerdicht*. 2 vols. Brussel, 1968.

or prose was motivated by the interplay of different factors. The choice of each author for a particular medium appears to be inextricably linked to the genre, function and public of the text. The author of a vernacular love romance, composing for an uneducated lay audience, is more likely to prefer the traditional

verse form, than his colleague, the author of a religious-didactic work, writing for a religious community. Likewise, the author of a surgical handbook for students and colleagues will probably write his text in prose, while the writer of a medical compendium destined for a general public will have a strong preference for the use of verse.

Another interesting element in the Middle Dutch verse-prose discussion is the existence of rhymed as well as prose versions on the same subjects. A comparative survey of Middle Dutch artes-literature in verse and in prose has disclosed interesting structural differences which could lead to a better insight into the function and reception of the examined texts. Characteristic of the rhymed versions is the presence of a narrator who guides the public through the contents of the text. His role as a teacher/mediator suggests that these texts were intended for a lay public that still needed the authority and instruction of a learned narrator; the more impersonal and business-like approach of the prose versions seems to point at a relatively more advanced public.⁴⁵

Similar observations emerged from a subsequent survey on Middle Dutch moralistic-didactic writings in verse and in prose. Here, too, the rhymed versions present the material in a more elementary and popularized style, while the prose versions adopt a more objective method.⁴⁶ In a recent article, I have taken a closer look at two fourteenth-century Middle Dutch translations (one in verse and one in prose) of a popular Latin prose legend, the *Purgatorium Sancti Patricii*. The prose translation proves to be an accurate rendition of its Latin original. The verse translation, on the other hand, again features a first-person narrator who assumes the function of teacher/mediator by assisting the public in its understanding of the text.⁴⁷ Additional information on the function and reception of the prose translation is provided by the codicological background of both translations. Of the seven extant prose redactions (all dating from the fifteenth century), five can be traced back to nunneries or religious women communities.⁴⁸ In other words, the prose translation was probably intended for use in a convent or religious community. The codicological context of the verse translation suggests that it functioned in secular circles, consisting of aristocrats, patricians and affluent burghers.⁴⁹

Compared to thirteenth-century Middle Dutch literature, verse texts of the four-

45 Cf. Lie (see n. 38), pp. 159-173. In reply to this article, D. Hogenelst ('De receptie van berijmde artes-literatuur'. In: *Een school spierinkjes* (see n. 25), pp. 88-91) has pointed out that the use of the verse form need not be solely interpreted as a sign of auditive reception. As she sees it, Middle Dutch artes-literature in verse may very well have been written to accommodate the beginning reader.

46 Cf. Lie, 'Middelnederl. didactische lit.' (see n. 39), pp. 201-221.

47 Lie, 'De Middelnederlandse vertalers' (see n. 39), pp. 136-139.

48 Cf. Lie, 'De Middelnederl. vertalers' (see n. 39), pp. 138-139; see also V. Mertens, 'Verslegende und Prosalegendar. Zur Prosaauffassung von Legenderomanen in *Der Heiligen Leben*'. In: V. Honemann et al. (eds.), *Poesie und Gebrauchsliteratur im deutschen Mittelalter*. Tübingen, 1979, pp. 265-289.

49 Lie, 'De Middelnederl. vertalers' (see n. 39), pp. 137-138; cf. D. Kinable, 'De opdrachten in Boendales "Jans Teesteye" en "Lekenspiegel" als receptiegegeven'. In: *Ingenti spiritu. Hulde-album prof. dr. W.P.F. De Geest*. Brussel, 1989, pp. 131-163 and also his 'Geïntendeerde publieksgroepen in Boendales "Lekenspiegel" en "Jans Teesteye"'. In: H. Pleij et al., *Op belofte van profijt. Stadsliteratuur en burgermoraal in de Nederlandse letterkunde van de middeleeuwen*. Amsterdam, 1991, pp. 69-100; 361-362.

teenth century include a large category of moralistic-didactic writings. The Brabant city of Antwerp played a central role in the production of moralistic-didactic poems. During the first half of the fourteenth century at least five rhymed didactic works originated in Antwerp: two were composed by Jan van Boendale, namely, *Der leken spiegel* (1330) [*The Laymen's Mirror*] and *Jans teesteye* [*John's Testimony*]; *De dietsche doctrinale* [*Dutch moral teachings*] (1345), (a Middle Dutch adaptation of Albertanus of Brescia's *De amore et dilectione Dei et proximi et aliarum rerum et de forma vite*); *Mellibeus* (1350); and *Boec van der wraken* [*The Book of Vengeance*] (1350).

In the light of the truth-versus-lie controversy, special attention should be accorded to the poet Jan van Boendale, secretary of the aldermen of the city of Antwerp. In his encyclopedia for laymen, *Der leken spiegel*, Boendale included a chapter on the art of writing and the duties of writers ('Hoe dichters dichten sullen ende wat si hantieren sullen': 'How writers should write and what they should pay attention to'.⁵⁰ This treatise has recently been described as one of the oldest medieval vernacular *artes poeticae*.⁵¹ To qualify as a writer, Boendale prescribes that he should comply with three requirements: he must be schooled in the Latin tradition ('grammarijn'); he must tell the truth ('waerechtech'); and he must lead an honorable lifestyle ('eersam van levne'). The author stresses the utmost importance of truthful reporting in the field of religious writing and historiography. Like Maerlant, the Antwerp poet vents his spleen at poets of pseudo-historical tales (he denounces the story of *Karel ende Elegast!*) who assign acts and deeds to historical persons that are not confirmed by Latin sources. These poets should be prohibited to write! (vv. 119-177).

Boendale's attitude gives testimony, once more, to the tension between learned authors and vernacular poets who have no direct access to Latin sources of knowledge. It is no coincidence that the three conditions which Boendale considered essential to medieval authorship prove to be incompatible with the intellectual and social background of uneducated vernacular poets. Viewed from this perspective, this chapter of *Der leken spiegel* is not only a treatise on the art of writing, it is also (most of all) a diatribe against rival poets who follow different rules for the composition of their works.⁵²

While adamant in his rejection of untruthful vernacular tales, Boendale (unlike the *Lutgard*-poet) shows his tolerance for fictional genres, such as animal tales. The authors of animal tales find favor in his eyes, because he compares them with Christ, who made use of parables to sweeten his sermons (183-198). It is also note-worthy that Boendale, like the *Sidrac*-translator, praises the author of the *Vulgate* for his accuracy and truthfulness in translating the Hebrew scriptures into Latin (253-264). He admonishes future translators not to deviate from their source and not to digress (265-274). For obvious reasons, he does not adopt the stance of his

50 De Vries (ed.), see n. 20, bk 3, ch. 15.

51 See W.P. Gerritsen et al., 'A fourteenth-century vernacular poetics: Jan van Boendale's "How writers should write"'. In: Kooper (ed.), see n. 19.

52 Gerritsen (see n. 23) and Gerritsen et al. (n. 52).

colleague, the *Sidrac*-translator, and equate accuracy with the medium of prose! Continuing the tradition of thirteenth-century clerical poets like Maerlant, Boendale's criterion of truth was a matter of schooling. Vernacular poets who were educated in the Latin tradition were truthful; vernacular poets who had no access to Latin sources were liars. *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

A reaction to Boendale's poetical ideas came from Willem van Hildegasberch (second half of the fourteenth century), a wandering poet and popular performer at the court of Albrecht of Bavaria, count of Holland.⁵³ In *Van ghilden*, one of his didactic poems, Willem speaks of the fear which is always haunting the poet who has no access to written sources. Unlike the learned poet who can distill the truth from written texts, the uneducated poet needs much more time and effort to convey the truth to his public. For this reason, the unschooled poet is always overcome by fear.⁵⁴

Des heb ic Spieghele horen lyen,
 Die menighe wijsheit binnen heeft,
 Ende elken dichter leringhe gheeft
 Wat hem mit rechte toebehoert.
 Can hi der scrifturen woort
 Nader waerheit wel versinnen,
 Soe mach hi aert van dichten kinnen;
 Mar wye die scriften niet en can,
 Ende ymmer dichten wil nochtan,
 Als ic dickent hebbe ghedaen,
 Die is mit anxten zeer bevaen;
 Want hi ducht voer die scrifture,
 Maect hijs niet goet ende pure,
 Dattie scrifturen begripen sel:
 Dat is sijn anxt, dat wetic wel,
 Want ic hebs een deel ghesmaect,
 Wye sonder scrift een dichte maect,
 Dat hi moet mit anxte zwaer
 Dickent peynsen hier entaer;
 Want die cleergie is soe subtijl:
 Daer ic om peynse langhe wijl
 Dat vinden sy varinc inder scrift:
 Dit doet dat ic mit anxten dicht.
 Anxte die heeft my veel becoort,
 Als ic dichte off brenghe voort
 Enigherhande hoghe sake.

(ed. Bisschop/Verwijs, LXI, vv. 6-31)

53 See T. Meder, *Sprookspreker in Holland. Leven en werk van Willem van Hildegasberch (circa 1400)*. Amsterdam, 1991, esp. 160-167. The standard edition is W. Bisschop & E. Verwijs, *Gedichten van Willem van Hildegasberch*. 's-Gravenhage, 1870. Reprint: Utrecht, 1981.

54 Cf. Meder (see n. 54), pp. 69, 74-81; 483-484; cf. also F.P. van Oostrom, *Het woord van eer. Literatuur aan het Hollandse hof omstreeks 1400*. Amsterdam, 1987, pp. 46-85, esp. 54-65. For an English translation of *Het woord van eer* see A.J. Pomerans (tr.), *Court and Culture: Dutch Literature, 1350-1450*. Berkeley, 1992.

[This I have learned from the *Mirror* (= Boendale's *Laymen's Mirror*), a book containing much wisdom, and teaching a writer what he should pay attention to. He who can explain the meaning of the Scriptures (the written text), has insight into the essence of writing. But he who is unable to consult the written sources and who wishes to write nonetheless, just like I have often done, he is often beset by fear, because he is afraid that he will be misinterpreting the written text. That is his fear, I know that well, because I have experienced some of it. He who writes without (knowledge of) written sources, will have to think about everything thoroughly, since book knowledge is very profound. Matters about which I have to ponder at length, the clerks readily find in written sources. This is the reason why I write with fear. Fear has often overcome me when I am writing or propagating matters of importance.]

Willem's deliberations on the poetical demands formulated by his predecessor, Boendale, reflect the growing self-awareness of the emergent class of lay writers who had acquired enough status to compete with learned poets.⁵⁵ Compared to the twelfth and thirteenth century when the production of written vernacular literature was the privilege of Latin-schooled writers, Willem's reputation as a wandering poet (*sprookspreker* or *Spruchdichter*) - he was a welcome guest, not only at aristocratic courts but also at nunneries, monasteries and cities - illustrates the growing status and influence of un(Latin)schooled vernacular authors in the fourteenth century.⁵⁶

When we look at the reception of verse and prose writings, there are indications that prose writings were gaining access in different echelons of the lay population. The *Sidrac* arose in the cosmopolitan city of Antwerp, the prose *Patricius* functioned in nunneries, Jan Yperman's *Chirurgie*, a surgical treatise, was destined for his son and fellow-surgeons.⁵⁷ A growing number of late fourteenth-century religious literature in prose was written for devotional lay communities.⁵⁸ The reception of fourteenth-century moralistic-didactic literature (in verse and in prose) is to be located at courts and in the cities, where a cross section of medieval society resided.

A recapitulation of the verse-prose discussion in the fourteenth century based on but a limited number of texts, shows the following tendencies: In addressing the problem of literary truth, verse authors emphasize the importance of dependable sources and distinguish between learned and uneducated writers. Learned poets who have access to written (Latin) sources, produce truthful writings and are skilled in rendering an accurate translation of their source. The verse form is also recommended

55 Meder (see n.54), pp. 160-167.

56 Meder (see n. 54), pp. 58-70. About the growing status of heralds from the 13th century and onward and the rise of the 'heraut-literator' (= literary herald) in the 14th century, see W. van Anrooij, *Spiegel van ridderschap. Heraut Gelre en zijn ereredes*. Amsterdam, 1990, pp. 43-55.

57 See E.C. van Leersum (ed.), *De 'Chirurgie' van Meester Jan Yperman*. Leiden, [1912], p. 5; 12.

58 Cf. Te Winkel (see n. 40), vol. 2, pp. 159-227; J. van Mierlo, *De Middelnederlandsche letterkunde van omstreeks 1300 tot de Renaissance*. 2nd ed. 's-Hertogenbosch etc., 1950, pp. 50-94, 99-108; J. Deschamps, *Middelnederlandse handschriften uit Europese en Amerikaanse bibliotheken*. Leiden, 1972, pp. 141-274; G. Warnar, 'Biecht, gebod en zonde. Middelnederlandse moraaltheologie voor de wereldlijke leek'. In: Th. Mertens et al. (see n. 39), pp. 36-51 and 372-380.

as a pleasing and effective mnemonic device. Advocates of the prose form praise it as an accurate medium for the translation of Latin exemplars; prose is also propagated as the proper medium of sacred and serious writings. Prose writers

criticize the verse form for being a pleasing and, therefore, dangerously distracting medium; being the medium of worldly tales, it should not be used for the writing of religious texts. The opposition ‘verse equals deception and prose equals truth’ is, not so amazingly, only found in prose writings.

The Fifteenth Century

In the fifteenth century, an anonymous author retold the story of Christ's passion in Middle Dutch verse. This poem is known as *Van ons Heren Passie* [*Of the Passion of Our Lord*].⁵⁹ The prologue of this work has been described by a Dutch medievalist as ‘een zeldzaam Middelnederlands voorbeeld van directe poëtische polemiek’ (‘a rare example of direct poetical polemic in Middle Dutch’).⁶⁰ The poet begins by expressing the hope that his work will contribute to the edification of simple people and inspire them into leading virtuous and devotional lives (1-14). For the sake of brevity, he will omit all matters that have nothing to do with Christ's passion (15-22).

The author then comments upon the work of a predecessor on the same subject, *Van den levene Ons Heren*.⁶¹ He accuses his colleague of long-windedness, and supports his argument by quoting directly from the criticized text:

Al isset eens in rijm ghemaect,
 Ten is nochtan so niet gheraect;
 Dat ic daer mede bin te vreden.
 Ic sel iu scriven bi wat reden:
 Het dunct mi wesen veel te lanc,
 Dat ic bewijs in deerst inganc;
 ‘Doe god in Symons huse was
 End hi sijn jonghers preect end las’:
 Dit leste vers is slechts gheset,
 Om dattet rimen sel te bet.
 Voer die manier wil ic mi hoeden
 In dit ghedicht na mijn vermoeden.
 (ed. Verdam, vv. 23-34)

[Although it (i.e. the life of Jesus Christ) was already composed in verse before, it was not done to the effect that it earned my satisfaction. I shall write you the reasons for this: it was much too long in my opinion. I shall prove it to you with (verses from) the beginning (of the older Middle Dutch passion): ‘When God in Simon's house was residing/ and to his disciples was preaching and reading’. This last verse has only been placed for the sake of rhyme. Against this way (of rhyming), I will take heed, as best as I can.]

59 I thank Gerard Sonnemans for calling my attention to this prologue. The text has been edited by J. Verdam, ‘Het Tübingsche handschrift van *Ons Heren Passie*’. In: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde* 25 (1906), pp. 190-242.

60 See F.P. Van Oostrom, *Aanvaard dit werk. Over Middelnederlandse auteurs en hun publiek*. Amsterdam, 1992, p. 106.

61 See n. 34.

The second reason for his disapproval of *Van den leve Ons Heren* concerns the untruthfulness of its contents. The *Passie*-author blames his predecessor for inventing details that are not based on biblical facts. Mary Magdalene, whom the Bible describes as ‘a woman who leads a sinful life’, is rendered by the thirteenth-century poet into ‘the most sinful woman who ever existed’. It would have been far better if he reserved this qualification for shameless women like Jezebel and Herodias! The fifteenth-century author finds these lies unacceptable and resolves to avoid them in his work (35-52).

The author reiterates once more his purpose in writing this work. It is intended for people who do not know Latin and who are ignorant of the Gospel. He even has a word of advice for those who cannot read: they should memorize the text (as if it were a popular song) and carry the thoughts of Christ's suffering in their hearts (53-76). In other words, these verses provide information on the reception of the text: the poem was meant for simple people who may not even be able to read.

At the end of the prologue, the author anticipates the criticism of his adversaries:

Som menschen sijn die rimen laken
 End segghen dat si niet en raken
 Te recht den synne cort end fijn:
 Dien bid ic, dat si doch tLatijn
 Mit desen rime overlegghen,
 Ende sceelsi veel, dat sijt dan segghen.
 (77-82)

[Some people exist who criticize the verse form and say that it is incapable of conveying the essential meaning in a succinct and precise way. I invite these people to confront the Latin text with these verses and to speak their minds if they notice a great difference.]

This passage illustrates the awareness of the *Passie*-poet that the medium which he has chosen for his work was a risky enterprise. For this reason he felt called to justify his use of the verse form. In his eyes, the verse form would by no means detract from the original Latin text. There is no reason why verse could not convey the meaning of the text, or why verse would have to be wordy. He is so confident of his own rhyming skills that he even challenges his opponents to prove the contrary. Viewed in the light of the verse-prose controversy, the defensive attitude of the *Passie*-author implies that verse was beginning to lose its hold and that prose as the new medium of religious narrative literature was becoming more and more acceptable.

The extant corpus of Middle Dutch prose literature shows that the majority of prose writings in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries pertained to the genre of religious literature and religious-didactic treatises.⁶² As a reaction to the unstoppable advance of the prose form, the *Passie*-poet felt that he had to stress the merits of the verse form and emphasize its equality to the prose form.

The question that arises is: what motivated the *Passie*-poet to ignore this new stylistic trend and to uphold the verse form? The answer is suggested by the author

62 See note 59.

himself: his poem is meant for simple people who may not even know how to read (53-76). For this uneducated public, the verse form is an essential instrument in memorizing the story of Christ's suffering.

A similar attitude is also attested by the author of a fifteenth-century verse chronicle, a continuation of the *Brabantsche yeesten*. The traditional medium for Middle Dutch chronicles until the fifteenth century was the verse form. The earliest Middle Dutch prose chronicle (a translation of Beka's *Chronographia*) dates from 1393.⁶³ In general, the extant Middle Dutch verse chronicles disclose their affinity with the reign of two dynasties: the dukes of Brabant and the counts of Holland. Writing for Floris V († 1296), count of Holland, Melis Stoke wrote the first version of his *Rijmkroniek van Holland* [*Verse Chronicle of Holland*] between 1278 and 1282; Jacob van Maerlant incorporated a history of Holland in his *Spiegel historiael* based on this version of Stoke's *Rijmkroniek*.⁶⁴ The Brabant historiographical tradition begins with Jan van Heelu's so-called eyewitness account of the battle of Woeringen, which took place in 1288.⁶⁵ In the fourteenth century the tradition was continued by Boendale, who presented a history of Brabant and its rulers in his *Brabantsche yeesten*,⁶⁶ and the anonymous poet of the *Grimbergse oorlog*.⁶⁷ In 1415 Hennen van Merchtenen wrote his *Cornicke van Brabant* [*Chronicle of Brabant*].⁶⁸

Around the middle of the fifteenth century, an anonymous writer was commissioned to continue Boendale's historiography of Brabant.⁶⁹ The author of this *Continuation*, who chose to write his chronicle in verse, was aware that his predilection for this medium would raise a few eyebrows. In the following passage, he explicitly states that he will write his work in verse, even though the original text was written in French prose. He assures his public that he will adhere to the truth and produce a text that is as concise and as truthful as possible. Whoever finds fault with his work is invited to correct him.⁷⁰

- 63 See H. Bruch (ed.), *Johannes de Beke, Croniken van den Stichte van Utrecht ende van Holland*. 's-Gravenhage, 1982. Rijks geschiedkundige publicatiën, grote serie 180, XLIII.
- 64 See W. van Anrooij, 'De verhouding tussen Melis Stoke en Jacob van Maerlant'. In: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde* 108 (1992), pp. 156-167.
- 65 See also J. Goossens, 'De Limburgse successieoorlog in de middeleeuwse Nederlandse en Duitse letterkunde'. In: J. Goossens (ed.), *Woeringen en de oriëntatie van het Maasland*. Hasselt, 1988, pp. 11-23.
- 66 See J.G. Heymans (ed.), *Van den derden Eduwaert (...)*. Uitgeg. met inl. over de Brabantse historiografie tussen ca. 1270 en ca. 1350. Nijmegen, 1983, pp. 27-89.
- 67 See A.L.H. Hage, *Sonder favele, sonder lieghen. Onderzoek naar vorm en functie van de Middelnederlandse rijmkroniek als historiografisch genre*. Groningen, 1989, pp. 136-187.
- 68 See W. van Anrooij, 'Hennen van Merchtenen en de Lof op Brabancia'. In: *Spiegel der Letteren* 35 (1993), pp. 153-157.
- 69 See D.E.H. de Boer (ed.), *Nederlands verleden in vogelvlucht*. Delta 1. *De Middeleeuwen: 300 tot 1500*. Leiden-Antwerpen, 1992, p.229. I thank Robert Stein (Leiden University) for information on the verse-prose discussion in the *Continuation*. In his forthcoming dissertation (*Politiek en historiografie. Het ontstaansmilieu van Brabantse kronieken in de eerste helft van de vijftiende eeuw*) Stein mentions three reasons for the use of verse instead of prose: the wish to continue the tradition of Brabant rhyme chronicles; emulation of an aristocratic literary tradition; and the desire to meet the demands of a public that is used to the medium of verse.
- 70 Quoted from J.F. Willems & J.H. Bormans (eds.), *De Brabantsche yeesten of Rijmkronijk van Brabant*. 3 vols. Brussel, 1843-1869.

Al eest dat ic in rime sette
 Dese uitsprake, elc lette
 Daerop, dat si in walscher prose
 Uut was ghesproken, maer sonder glose
 Sal ic den text hier translateren
 Uut walsche in dietsche, ende mijn begeren
 Dat es der waerheit te volgen na,
 Soe verre als ics mi versta,
 Ende ic die waerheit van den dingen
 Ten cortsten in rime can volbringen,
 Ende ic ghedraeghs mi ten verclaren
 Ten brieven dier af besegelt waren,
 Ende ter correctien vort an
 Van iegenliken goeden man.
 Die een beter weet daertoe
 Ter waerheit, ic bidde hem dat hijt doe.
 (*Brabantsche yeesten*, Vol. 2, bk. VI, 1681-1696)

[Even though I rendered this arbitrament into verse, let everyone pay attention to the fact that it was pronounced in French prose. However, I will translate the text here from French into Dutch without commentary, and it is my wish to adhere to the truth as far as I understand it, and I will transmit the truth of matters as succinctly as possible in rhyme. And I refer to the charters for further explanations, and I implore every good person who knows the truth better (than I) to correct (my work)].

Before translating a treaty, the author again makes it quite clear that the use of verse will not stand in the way of a literal translation in which the meaning and the contents of the original will remain intact:

Die copie van den accorde
 Volght hier na, van worde te worde,
 [...]

Maer uut der prose, dat ghijt wet,
 Soe hebbict in rime gheset,
 Die selve supstancien ende den sin;
 Ende niet vele worde meer noch min,
 Hopic, en sal den rijm uut geven,
 Dan in de copie staet ghescreven,
 Dat tot der saken mocht ontrieven.
 Des ghedragic tot den brieven,
 Die men te Bruessel onder die wet
 Vinden soude, ende elder met.
 (bk. VI, 6643-6656)

[The original copy of the treaty will follow hereafter, word for word. [...] However, I want you to know that I rendered it from prose into verse. I hope the verse text will reflect the same substance and the same meaning, and not more words than is written in the original and that it will not harm the case. For this reason, I refer to the charters that are to be found in Brussels in the magistrate's archives, and at other places.]

And he even calls God as his witness to emphasize the veracity of his work. In his eyes, verse is as truthful as prose:

Alsoe die zaken sijn ghesiet
 Ende ict vernemen conde, dat wet,
 Hebbict in rime cort gheset,
 Des ic niet te gheenre stonde
 (Des nemic Gode ter oorconde)
 En hebbe [bi]ghedaen iet ocht niet;
 Maer soe die zaken sijn ghesiet.
 Ende ic vermete mi, hier op glose,
 Desen rijm warechtich als die prose.
 (Vol. 3, bk. VII, 18170-18178)

[Know that I rendered the events succinctly into verse, in accordance with what happened and with what I could know. I did not at any time (as God is my witness) interfere with the events as they actually occurred. And I dare to assert here, in this statement, [that] this verse (text) is as truthful as prose.]

These emphatic remarks concerning the merits of the verse form, characterize the author as a conscientious poet who took great pains at transforming his prose exemplar into a reputable verse chronicle. At the same time, his repeated acknowledgements of the veracity of his medium create the impression that he was safeguarding himself against eventual criticism. The prose form, introduced at the end of the fourteenth century, was beginning to gain acceptance as the new medium of Middle Dutch historiographical writings.⁷¹ In view of the growing popularity of the prose form, it is justified to assume that the verse form was no longer the preferred or expected medium in which to write a chronicle. The decision of this fifteenth-century chronicler to use the verse form must, therefore, have been inspired by specific reasons.

When we survey the extant corpus of fifteenth-century vernacular prose writings, a substantial increase in religious-didactic treatises is noticeable. In 1403, the Dominican scholar Dirc van Delft wrote his *Tafel van den kersten ghelove* [*Table of the Christian Faith*] for Albrecht of Bavaria, duke of Holland, who did not live to see the completion of the work. This impressive theological encyclopedia for laymen has been described as a ‘kathedraal-in-proza’ (‘cathedral-in-prose’).⁷²

Another Dutch author who served at the court of the duke of Holland was Dirc Potter († 1428). Aside from a Middle Dutch *ars amandi* in verse, *Der minnen loep* [*The course of love*], Potter is also known for two prose treatises. One is a treatise

71 Examples of the oldest Middle Dutch prose chronicles are: the Middle Dutch translation of Johannes de Beka's *Chronographia* (1393; see M. Carasso-Kok, *Repertorium van verhalende historische bronnen uit de middeleeuwen. Heiligenlevens, annalen, kronieken en andere in Nederland geschreven verhalende bronnen*. 's-Gravenhage, 1981, nr. 298); an adaptation of Beka's work by Claes Heynenzoon, herald Bavaria, in the beginning of the fifteenth century: *Die Hollantsche cronike* (Carasso-Kok nr. 201; the chronicle of an anonymous clerk: [Kroniek van Holland van de] *Clerc geboren uten lage landen bi der zee* (cf. J.M.C. Verbij-Schillings, ‘Heraut Beyerens en de Clerc uten Laghen Landen. Hollandse kroniekschrijvers ca. 1410.’ In: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde* 107 (1991), pp. 20-42; Carasso-Kok nr. 202).

72 Van Oostrom (see n. 61), p. 155.

on vices and virtues, the *Blome der doechden* [*Flowers of virtues*], a translation of the Italian *Fiore di virtu*. The second, *Van Mellibeo ende van sinre vrouwen Prudencia* [*About Mellibeus and his wife Prudencia*], is a translation of the French *Livre de Mellibée*. The French *Mellibée* in its turn is based on Albertanus of Brescia's *Liber consolationis et consilii*.⁷³

The fact that Potter uses both the verse and prose form for his oeuvre invites speculations. Why did he compose *Der minnen loep* in verse and his other two treatises in prose? Did he consider verse a more suitable medium for a handbook on worldly love which is interspersed with classical and biblical love stories? And did he, therefore, prefer the prose form for his *Blome der doechden* and *Mellibeus* because this medium was more in keeping with the religious-didactic nature of these works? Or is it more likely that Potter wrote his first work in verse in order to establish his credentials as a poet and that he then felt free to use prose, the medium that was gaining importance at the time? Was it the growing popularity of prose that rendered older rhymed texts obsolete? Was Potter's prose *Mellibeus* intended as a replacement for the outdated rhymed *Mellibeus* which originated in Antwerp around the middle of the fourteenth century? Can the same observation be extended to other fifteenth-century prose pendants of older rhymed versions, such as the *Proza-Spiegel der Sonden* [*Mirror of Sins*] and the *Proza-Elucidarius*?⁷⁴

The majority of fifteenth-century prose writings belongs to the category of catechetical literature. For example, *Des Coninx Summe* (a translation of the French *Somme le Roi*) deals with the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Seven Deadly Sins, *ars moriendi*, the Lord's Prayer, and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. The *Spiegel der Sonden* and the *Cancellierboeck* (*Chancellor's Book*), are manuals on sins and the rites of confession (penitentials). These treatises were written for laymen.

Balance

Having presented a bird's-eye view of the verse-prose phenomenon in medieval Dutch literature, we must now make up the balance. The choice between verse or prose as the medium for vernacular writings appeared to have been guided by the interplay of multiple factors. In the thirteenth century verse was clearly the accepted medium for both secular and religious literature. Chivalric romances, chronicles, technical writings, encyclopedic treatises, hagiographical literature and biblical narratives were all written in verse. Although the majority of these verse texts was probably written for a (predominantly aristocratic) non-specialist lay audience, there is also evidence that verse texts were used in nunneries and religious women communities. The two thirteenth-century verse translations of the

73 See A.M.J. van Buuren, '25 maart 1415: Dirc Potter krijgt bij grafelijk besluit een hofstede in leen - Didactische literatuur van een Haags hoveling'. In: M.A. Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen (ed.), *Nederlandse literatuur, een geschiedenis*. Groningen, 1993, pp. 92-96.

74 Cf. Lie, 'Middel Nederl. didactische lit.' (see n. 39), pp. 207-211.

Vita Lutgardis, for example, illustrate that the same medium could function in two different religious milieus: the rhymed translation of the Copenhagen manuscript ascribed to Willem van Affligem, was probably written for a semi-religious audience,⁷⁵ while the rhymed translation made by Brother Geraert was intended for Benedictine nuns.⁷⁶

Unlike the wide range of subjects treated by verse texts, the prose writings of this period appear to be mainly concerned with religious or technical subjects. The form and contents of these texts suggest that they were written for a relatively more advanced public, such as laybrothers, nuns, and beguines. Viewed in this light, the Middle Dutch prose translation of the *Vita Lutgardis* that has survived in fragmentary form in a fifteenth-century manuscript, may well have been intended for a monastic public.⁷⁷ These observations convey the impression that the difference between verse writings and prose writings in the thirteenth century was a question of subject matter, genre and the intended public. Differing from the developments in thirteenth-century French literature, the lie-versus-truth discussion was not linked to the verse-prose controversy in thirteenth-century Dutch texts. Instead, the rivalry between learned vernacular poets who had access to written (Latin) sources and unschooled poets who had to rely on vernacular or oral sources, was reflected in the distinction between true (good) and false (bad) literature.

Dutch literature of the fourteenth century shows an upsurge in moralistic-didactic treatises both in verse and in prose. The prose form became increasingly popular as the medium of religious and technical writings (*artes-literature*). When we look at the intended public of fourteenth-century vernacular texts, different social and intellectual categories of consumers can be detected. Worldly romances continued to be popular with a cross-section of the lay population; the same holds for moralistic-didactic writings in verse; a growing group of professionals stimulated the production of technical handbooks (*artes-literature*) in prose; the rise of religious communities (especially among women) led to a greater production of religious-didactic (catechetical) and devotional literature both in verse and in prose. The overall increase in literacy among the lay population in its turn, fostered the need for reliable, accurate translations of Latin works. The decision of the *Sidrac*-translator to use prose as the medium for his translation was very much in keeping with this development.

The introduction of prose as a truthful and precise medium (especially in the case of translations), marked the beginning of a new development in medieval Dutch literature, namely the use of prose as an alternative medium for the writing of vernacular literature. In 1992, E. van den Berg published an article in which he discussed the developments of Middle Dutch chivalric literature in the thirteenth

75 I owe this insight to Erwin Mantingh (Utrecht University), who has been studying the reception of the Copenhagen *Lutgard* in the context of his dissertation.

76 Cf. De Man (see n. 17), pp. 125-147.

77 See D.A. Stracke, 'Proza-Fragment van S. Lutgart's leven'. In: *Ons geestelijk erf* 11 (1937), pp. 281-299 and G. Hendrix, 'Het Middelnederlandse prozafragment van de *Vita Lutgardis*'. In: *Ons geestelijk erf* 53 (1979), pp. 421-428.

and fourteenth century.⁷⁸ Guided by his previous research on the versification and geographical distribution of Middle Dutch chivalric romances,⁷⁹ the Dutch medievalist reached the conclusion that Middle Dutch chivalric literature is marked by regional differences and that it should therefore be studied from the perspective of the three regions which produced Middle Dutch literature: Flanders, Holland and Brabant (411-412). Flanders was the producer of chivalric romances that were predominantly rooted in oral tradition (Charlemagne and Arthurian romances). Brabant showed a preference for the category of Antiquity romances (*Matière de Rome*) and verse chronicles that derived from the written literary tradition (406). Holland stood at the crossroads: it depended for its literary production on both Flanders and Brabant.

According to Van den Berg, the conservative versification of Flemish romances and their affinity with the tradition of oral epics are indications that the process of literarification (the gradual development from a society with a predominantly oral culture into a society with a written culture) took place at a slower pace in Flanders than in Brabant. The progressive versification of typical Brabant genres (Classical romances and verse chronicles) suggests that Brabant poets were quicker in assimilating the principles of written tradition than their Flemish colleagues (420).

The fact that the *Sidrac*-translation of the Antwerp writer is probably one of the earliest examples of secular Middle Dutch prose intended for a non-specialist lay public, provides additional support for Van Den Berg's observation about the progressive trend of Brabant authors. Viewed in this light, the Antwerp translator of the *Sidrac* may well have been one of the pioneers of Middle Dutch secular prose. Another plausible candidate for this category is the prose translator of the Old French *Lancelot en prose*. When we take into consideration that the two extant fragments belong to a fourteenth-century codex that has been dated between 1320 and 1350, and that the dialect of the translation is Brabantine,⁸⁰ it is tempting to conclude that the *Lancelot*-translator (if it can be assumed that he was active shortly before the proposed dates of the codex) was yet another progressive Brabant writer at the beginning of the fourteenth century who decided to try his hand at the new medium and produce a prose translation.⁸¹

From the fourteenth century onward, prose advocates began to criticize the verse form as a false and inaccurate medium, or as a purely entertaining stylistic device unfit for the propagation of serious subjects. Proponents of the verse form,

78 E. Van den Berg, 'Vorm en inhoud: ontwikkelingen binnen de ridderepiek ca.1200-ca.1350'. In: *De nieuwe taalgids* 85 (1992), pp. 405-421.

79 See Van den Berg, *Middel nederlandse versbouw en syntaxis. Ontwikkelingen in de versifikatie van verhalende poëzie ca.1200-ca.1400*. Utrecht, 1983; 'Genre en gewest: de geografische spreiding van de ridderepiek'. In: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde* 103 (1987), pp. 1-36.

80 Cf. Lie (see n. 37), pp. 175-181.

81 Of course there is always the possibility that the prose translation already came into existence in the thirteenth century. In that case, this *Lancelot*-translation should be characterized as an exceptionally early document of secular Middle Dutch prose, which, together with the prose texts of the *Nederrijns moraalboek*, constitutes an anomaly in the history of medieval Dutch secular prose.

on the other hand, continued to emphasize the mnemonic qualities of verse and its essential role in the learning process.

In the fifteenth century the contest between the verse and the prose form no longer left room for doubt about its winner. The victory of the prose form was only a matter of time. The use of prose as the medium for works commissioned by prestigious worldly rulers like Dirc van Delft's *Tafel van den kersten ghelove* [*Table of the christian faith*] undoubtedly contributed to the acceptance and popularity of prose as the new medium for vernacular literature. The balance had shifted in favor of prose writings and as verse was no longer the preferred medium, fifteenth-century authors writing in verse now felt called upon to justify their use of the verse form.

Samenvatting

Dit artikel onderzoekt de literair-historische ontwikkelingen die bepalend kunnen zijn geweest voor de vorm waarin Middelnederlandse teksten werden geschreven: in verzen of in proza. Nauw verweven met de vers-proza problematiek in de Middelnederlandse literatuur is de ontwikkeling van de prozaroman in Frankrijk omstreeks 1200. Het argument dat de versvorm inherent is aan een leugenachtige inhoud, terwijl de prozavorm het medium is van de waarheid (veelvuldig gepropageerd door dertiende-eeuwse Franse proza-auteurs) is echter opvallend afwezig in de onderzochte dertiende-eeuwse Middelnederlandse werken. Blijkbaar hanteerden de auteurs van deze werken andere criteria voor de begrippen 'waarheid' en 'leugen' dan hun Franse collega's. Aan de hand van een analyse van een (beperkt) aantal relevante poëtische passages uit Middelnederlandse werken van de dertiende, veertiende en vijftiende eeuw wordt het spoor van de vers-proza problematiek gevolgd tegen de achtergrond van het debat over waarheid en leugen.

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