



**Bart Besamusca and Frank Brandsma, eds.** *The Arthur of the Low Countries: The Arthurian Legend in Dutch and Flemish Literature.* Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2021. 256 pp. ISBN 9781786836823. \$100.00 hardback.

This volume, edited by Bart Besamusca and Frank Brandsma, and dedicated to the Dutch literary historian Willem Pieter (Wim) Gerritsen, is the first full-length book to focus on the Arthurian legend in Dutch and Flemish literature. The scope of the volume also includes French, Low German, and other European Arthurian literature and examines the flow of literary influence in the post medieval Low Countries. In their introduction, Besamusca and Brandsma pay due homage to their predecessors, R.S. and L.H. Loomis, and Norris J. Lacy, in a clear and careful resumé. Explanations follow of the corpus and brief descriptions of the chapters and their rationales, and of special topics and tendencies in Arthurian texts originating or circulating in adaptations and translations. The discussion includes the possible meanings of Arthurian matters for early modern readers, the importance of the father motif, of Lanceloet and Walewein, of the pseudo-historical frameworks of the Lancelot and Merlin Cycles, and the tendency in Dutch scholarship to focus on one particular text or on the *Lancelot* Compilation (an early fourteenth-century collection of seven

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Middle Dutch Arthurian romances). Due deference is also paid to modern translations of Dutch Arthurian texts, such as those by Geert H.M. Claassens and David F. Johnson. The density of information in this book as a whole is astonishing but does not impair its clarity.

In Chapter 1, “The Cultural and Historical Context of the Low Countries,” Bram Caers and Mike Kestemont begin by discussing the *matière de Bretagne* and then successively pay attention to the geography and politics of the Low Countries, the “River Lands” of the Meuse and Rhine, the County of Flanders and those of Holland, Zeeland and Hainaut, and the Duchy of Brabant. In so doing, they usefully map the essential diversity of the region and its Arthurian literature and highlight potential areas of further research, focusing on establishing a framework for analyzing the Arthurian heyday and its afterlives.

In Chapter 2, “French Arthurian Literature in the Low Countries,” Keith Busby and Martine Meuwese analyze the influence of the French Arthurian tradition and the way the *matière de Bretagne* can be seen to emancipate itself in the Low Countries. Their essay signals the immense importance of material culture and its relationship to patronage, associated here with the Counts of Flanders, Marie de Champagne and her daughters, and the Court of Brabant. They emphasize the importance of the bilingual, indeed multi-lingual, (court) milieu which fostered literary production, and which resulted in numerous adaptations and translations as well as indigenous Middle Dutch Arthurian romances.

That there was an early and sophisticated readership is attested by evidence of ownership of French texts and by the enormous production of French Arthurian manuscripts in the Southern Netherlands. Clearly, Flanders was a center of activity, but the distribution of manuscripts over many libraries inside and outside its confines is astonishing, as is the diversity and quality of illuminations. As the authors suggest, written instructions to illuminators points at evidence of commercial book production and in this, as in so many respects, the Low Countries can be seen to have become a truly mercenary culture. The authors conclude that the popularity and prestige of Arthurian literature, in French and in Middle Dutch, begins in thirteenth-century Flanders and continues into the fifteenth century. Grail texts, and crusader sentiments, were very popular as were texts with “stories about the right to rule and questions of inheritance” (41). These were matters of vital interest to the Burgundian court and convenient vehicles for the promotion of political messages. As elsewhere,

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literature could play a role in “claiming or consolidating power and independence” (41). Helpfully, the blessings of technology are made manifest in a list of the digitized Arthurian manuscripts mentioned in the chapter. Every chapter is, as expected, accompanied by extensive notes but I cannot pass over Note 8 in this chapter which mentions that “The Grail is kept in Norway as part of Joseph of Arimathea’s evangelisation of that country” (!) and promises a future book about that by Keith Busby (43, see also General Bibliography).

In his very detailed and extensive description and analysis of the manuscript tradition, which comprises Chapter 3, Bart Besamusca mentions ruefully that “Our understanding of Middle Dutch Arthurian literature is seriously hindered by the fragmentary and relatively limited manuscript transmission” (45). However, bearing in mind Wim Gerritsen’s now hallowed metaphor in his characterization of our medieval literature as “wreckage on a beach after a great storm” it does become clear that this was the evidence of a great fleet with a diversity of ships.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter too, while concentrating on the Dutch tradition, is lavish in illustrating this in the context of a wide-ranging international production. And even if there are some sobering statistics (nineteen Middle Dutch romances and one printed *Historie van Merlijn* as compared to ninety French texts) which also show our Arthurian matter to number half the texts compared with that of the English, German, and Italian traditions and a much smaller number of manuscripts, we must not see this as negative: what surely matters is evidence of participation in an international Arthurian culture, and of an early multi-lingual society. Moreover, those texts that originate in the Low Countries and show an independence of both narrative material and interpretation, as do *Moriaen* and *Walewein*, attest once more to a sophisticated literary culture. Besamusca pays attention to dates, places, format, and the appearance of manuscripts and then traces the activities of two correctors, sadly not identified, to gauge the extent of, and the different approaches taken by, their interventions. Fascinating details emerge: the corrector of the *Ferguut* found c. 250 mistakes without even a copy of the *Ferguut* or the French *Fergus* and was particularly keen on correcting faulty rhyming couplets or missing lines. The second corrector seemed to have an aversion to Flemish idioms left in the text by Brabantine scribes and an eagle eye for scribal errors. His many stylistic interventions may have been made with a wish

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<sup>1</sup> See Willem Pieter Gerritsen, *Die Wrake van Ragisel. Onderzoekingen over de Middelnederlandse bewerkingen van de Vengeance Raguidel, gevolgd door een uitgave van de Wrake-teksten*, Vol. 1 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1963), p. 147.

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to modernize the text or with the goal of making the text suitable for oral performance. Curiously, the corrector's interventions cover only four of the ten romances included in the *Lancelot* Compilation, which raises questions concerning working practices. Did this come about because the compilation was produced in phases and the corrector was no longer active by the time the second part was produced, or did he get tired, infirm, old or run out of time, as might be inferred from the fact that one of the four he corrected quite heavily but in the other three he seems to slacken?

A discussion of two text collections concludes Besamusca's chapter: similar to the transmission of French Arthurian verse romances, the Middle Dutch narratives have survived in single-text and multi-text codices. Hindered again by the fragmentary survival of manuscripts, the fact that there are "four more or less complete multi-text manuscripts" (57) does nevertheless allow an insight into some telling elements: an appetite for romances and for the blending of "recreation and instruction" (58). An example of such a multi-text manuscript is that of Leiden, UB, 191 which contains codices of *Ferguut*, *Floris ende Blanchefloer*, a Middle Dutch verse rendition of Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, *Esopet*, a religious treatise, and one on ethics. The selection might have been put together by professional book producers, offering a tantalizing insight into the predilections of its potential readership. In this chapter, Besamusca disentangles the great web of Arthurian manuscripts and texts with patient and consummate skill. In his brief conclusion he cites *Lanceloet* as a good example of the manuscript transmission of Middle Dutch Arthurian romances: 37000 lines survive though very likely 57000 were lost. This represents a modest survival rate but nonetheless one very much better than Middle Dutch Charlemagne romances: clouds and silver linings come to mind. Again, very usefully, a list of manuscripts that can be found online and an overview of all known codices and fragments of Middle Dutch Arthurian romances in manuscript and print concludes the chapter.

In Chapter 4, "King Arthur in the Historiography of the Low Countries," Thea Summerfield traces the various figures and approaches that have shaped the reception of Arthur, starting with Jacob van Maerlant. Seemingly employed in modest circumstances, as a sexton and a town clerk, Maerlant nevertheless moved in elevated circles and may well have been an important "influencer". He may also have tutored two fatherless young scions of the nobility, Albrecht, Lord of Voorne and Viscount of Zeeland and the famous, and infamous, Count Floris of Holland and Zeeland; as a result, Maerlant's writings may well have been a mirror for princes, to instruct and

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entertain them. Initially, as Summerfield explains, Maerlant had high praise for Alexander and some disdain for Charlemagne and Arthur, severely criticizing the veracity of Arthurian stories and attributing the ills of the world to “boerden” and “favelen,” or farcical stories and fables! (See 64-5) But he did also translate a Grail story, including a version of a history of Merlin and a *Torec*. In his mirror of history, the *Spiegel Historiael* III, he sees a connection between “the Saxon invasions and the rise and reign of King Arthur” (65) and dwells on Merlin’s prophecies and his exploits such as the removal of the gigantic stones from Ireland to England. Here, there is praise for Arthur, characterized as “mild and loyal, a true Christian, powerful, benevolent and pious, a great conqueror” (65). As Summerfield observes, Maerlant fulsomely describes Arthur’s feasts, fights and conquests but also his defeat by Mordred, concluding that “no one surpassed Arthur in courage, generosity, piety or Christian virtue” (65). He may have used Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, though he does not name this explicitly. As is characteristic, Maerlant devotes much time to discussing his sources and is clear that only Latin ones can be trusted (a clear dig at the French...). His lifelong obsession with veracity and his fear that the popularity of the French romances will obscure the truth of the true stories, the “vraye ystorien,” show Maerlant to be an early voice preaching doom should the phenomenon of fake truth triumph.

One hopes that he did not live to see his fears becoming reality, as they did in the work of his successor in the translation of the *Spiegel Historiael*, Lodewijk van Velthem. The contrast with Van Maerlant could not be greater as Van Velthem weaves an intricate web of Arthurian history and romances with the contemporary, English, and Brabantine political situation. As Summerfield shows, there is no critical separation of fact and fiction here but possibly the intention to use the fascinating mix of adventure, heroic feats, hair-raising dangers, great triumphs, and miracles as another kind of “mirror for princes”; in this case not for fledgling young rulers but for seasoned statesmen, to mull over ideas about the ideal relationships between kings and their close associates, notably their knights, and in relation to contemporary political situations and the prospect of diplomatic room for maneuver.

As Summerfield shows in her discussion of Arthur’s place among the Nine Worthies, Arthur’s canonical status is once more confirmed by his appearance in two separate Middle Dutch poems, a short one in which he is pithily portrayed in eight verses as the pious, mild King of Britain who holds Our Lady in high regard and in a

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longer one (907 verses) where he takes pride of place (120 verses) equal to Julius Caesar; this may well have been composed by Van Maerlant or by someone who was very well acquainted with his work. The idea of ‘the once and future king’ is included here as well. What seems to recede in notions of an Arthurian “afterlife”, then, is the idea and the importance of the *primus inter pares*: Arthur’s knights and his round table are seldom mentioned and in the latest of the texts discussed by Summerfield, one vernacular and one Latin chronicle, this is also the case. The early-fifteenth century *Wereldkroniek*, a world chronicle, of the Herald Beyeren, aka Gelre, focuses on Arthur as “an English King” rich in Christian virtues and with a special devotion to the Virgin Mary, while the much shorter Latin *Goudse Kroniekje* (little chronicle from Gouda) also emphasizes Arthur as an ideal English king, foretelling of his return. A sign of the times is that, though written c. 1440, this text finds greater circulation when it is printed in Gouda in 1478. The historiography Summerfield traces thus suggests that Arthur was gradually rebranded, appearing in later Middle Dutch historiography where he is celebrated as an English, rather than a British, king and that his British origins and famous knights receded into a fog-shrouded past.

Chapter 5, “Translations and Adaptations of French Verse Romances: *Tristant, Wrake van Ragisel, Ferguut, Perchevael, Torec*,” written by Marjolein Hogenbirk and David F. Johnson serves as a good indication of how the web of connections between different types of Arthurian texts is truly a “wout sonder genade,” a Perilous Forest. This notion is prominent in this chapter and my reward is not so great as to tempt me to find my way safely through to the other side. However, what does become pleasingly clear is the originality and independent creativity with which Middle Dutch translators and adaptors regarded and used their French sources. Long gone of course are the days in which medieval Dutch literature was only validated if a French source could be identified. In the untangling of this web, the authors confirm and point out several striking aspects of the greatly varied Middle Dutch Arthurian tapestry. As they explain, an early oral tradition regarding Arthur and his knights existed at the beginning of the twelfth century and the earliest textual evidence, as witnessed by a *Tristan* story, appears in the Meuse-Rhine area: a place so fruitful and significant in many ways for the genesis and development of Dutch medieval literature. By the middle of the thirteenth century the center of gravity had shifted to the west, to Flanders, where the first translations and adaptations appear before 1250.

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Indeed, as Hogenbirk and Johnson suggest, the independence with which the romance authors worked is evident from the ways in which they dealt with their sources. The fragment surviving of *Tristant* is, tellingly, written in the Meuse region: the borderlands between the Low Countries, France, and Germany where so much of early medieval Dutch literature was born. What this particular work also reveals is that the author was familiar with a French *Tristan* source and that he took quite an independent stance in translating and retelling the story: a further demonstration of the multi-lingual, multi-cultural roots of Dutch medieval literature.

Here too, in the *Wrake van Ragisel*, a translation/adaptation of the *Vengeance Raguidel*, a late-twelfth/early-thirteenth-century Arthurian romance, we find abundant evidence of the confidence and creativity with which early medieval Dutch poets claimed their source material. An exhaustive analysis by W.P. Gerritsen showed this in great detail and traced the story's trajectory through Middle Dutch Arthurian literature and its embedding in the vast *Lancelot* Compilation. It also served as the beginning of a re-appraisal of Walewein in Middle Dutch Arthurian literature where he gradually overshadows Lancelot, both in sheer narrative volume and in moral superiority. Similarly, in relation to *Ferguut*, a 'coming of age' tale where ultimately physical prowess triumphs over the drawback of not having been born into a courtly milieu, and where love is a game with a very particular discourse and a set of manners and rules, the authors illuminate the independence of mind and the originality with which the medieval Dutch poets approach their source material. The intricate detail of the text would be too long in relating here but, as for all the texts in this section, Hogenbirk and Johnson have furnished us with detailed resumsés.

The translation/adaptation of *Perchevael*, dating from before 1250 is extant in fragments and can also be found in the *Lancelot* Compilation. The editors provide a wealth of detailed information about the transmission and the character of the various texts and pick up a few significant threads which seem to run through many of the adaptations and translations of French Arthurian sources as well as those of the Middle Dutch Arthurian texts. In the case of the latter, which seem to have come *ex nihilo*, the casts and the plots often have no direct sources but nevertheless create familiar, recognizable Arthurian landscapes and milieux. Clearly, the adaptors/translators remained largely faithful to their sources, although an important aspect of quite a few of these adaptations and creations is the re-appraisal and "re-invention" of Gauvain/Walewein in a more prominent role in Arthurian circles, one in

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which he shines brighter and overshadows Lancelot. Hogenbirk and Johnson thus signal a more emphatic realism in the stories, a faster pace, a stronger sense of humor and of irony. At the same time the translators and creators break a lance, forgive the pun, for chivalry and firmly bring to the fore the exemplary, even moral, qualities and implications of the tales. Johan Huizinga not only wrote *The Waning of the Middle Ages* but also *Homo Ludens* after all, and signaled the element of play and playfulness in cultures and societies. Much of that playfulness is apparent in the recreated world of the Middle Dutch Arthur, not least in *Ferguut* but also elsewhere.

In Chapter 6, “Indigenous Arthurian Romances: *Walewein, Moriaen, Ridder metter Mouwen, Walewein ende Keye, Lanceloet en het Hert met de Witte Voet*,” Simon Smith and Roel Zemel demonstrate how each and every one of these texts attests to the popularity of the Arthurian tales in the Low Countries, to the familiarity with this *matière*, and to an openness and willingness on the part of the audience to listen to and revel in stories: stories which often presented audiences with well-known situations and characters in which quite striking alterations, even shape-shiftings, and complex layering of the narrative material brought “new wines in old caskets”.

In *Walewein*, for example, perhaps the most complex of the new Arthurian creations, readers and audiences had to stay alert while in 11000 lines were unfolded the vicissitudes, through three interlinked *queestes* with plots and subplots, *excursi* and sidelines, fairy-tale occurrences and supernatural events, of the knight who became known as, and clearly thought worthy of, the epithet *der avonturen vader*, the father of adventures. *Walewein* himself moves from one persona to another, from the brave adventurer, the knight who risks all for the sake of his king and the compassionate knight who nevertheless acts at times with uncompromising violence, to the dedicated lover, the loyal friend, who manages to effect the resurrection of the fox Roges in breaking the spell cast on him and turning him back into his original shape: that of a handsome youth who nearly lost his life when he rejected his stepmother’s attempt to seduce him. *Walewein*’s ultimate success in setting the fox free, gaining his beloved Ysabele, and bringing his king the magic chessboard, all result in his own enhanced status, now not just one of Arthur’s brave knights but a legendary hero in his own right.

If *Ferguut* was the young outsider whose longing to form part of the glittering Arthurian court and to escape his father eventually educates him to true chivalry, *Moriaen* is the outsider, not only because of his skin colour, for he is black, but also



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because he is in search of his father whom he believes to be Perceval's brother Acglavael. It is clear that the author of the *Moriaen* is well versed in the *matière de Bretagne*: not only does he weave into his story various narrative lines from Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal* but he confidently changes its outcome: in his version Perceval's quest comes to nothing. *Moriaen* achieves his goal, finds his father, takes him back to Moriane to marry his mother and establishes himself as a truly chivalric hero. However, the author presents the individual quest as part of a journey through an Arthurian world in which Walewein and Lancelot pursue other goals, where Arthur himself needs to be rescued by his knights and where, in the midst of turmoil and upheaval, chivalric ideals are saved and triumph: the title given to this romance "van Moriane dat scone bediet," the beautiful story of *Moriaen*, is fully realized.

As was the case with the previous text, the *Ridder metter Mouwen* or the *Knight with the Sleeve* was also adapted to be interpolated into the *Lancelot* Compilation. A short fragment survives but its adaptation in the compilation runs to 4000 lines, neatly divided into chapters with transitional formulas, thus blending with the narrative technique of interlace which is so characteristic of the compilation as a whole. As was the case in *Moriaen*, the individual quest is embedded in and surrounded by multiple other narrative strands in which the well-known cast of other Arthurian adventures makes yet another appearance, providing more evidence of the familiarity with which Flemish authors journeyed through the Arthurian landscape of the Low Countries and that of other European countries. The sophistication of this particular writer shows in his knowledge of chivalric mores and courtly literary topics and he is not shy when it comes to giving his readers some instruction. More characteristic of this text, however, is its humor. It shows independence of mind too: unusual in Flemish Arthurian romances, his Walewein is quite unglamorous.

If the compiler of the *Lancelot* Compilation included a further text, *Walewein ende Keye*, to redress the balance in the portrayal of Walewein (who in the second core text of the collection, *The Quest of the Grail*, does not exactly shine as a paragon of chivalry either) he rather hit the jackpot. It may be that he himself embellished this text, of which the original Flemish source has not survived, to aid and abet the stature of the Father of Adventure. It neatly fits into one quire of the Compilation and features two trajectories: that of Walewein who, accused and ridiculed by the seneschal Key and his followers, leaves Arthur's court with the avowed intention of not returning unless he can prove his honor by chivalrous deeds; and that of Keye, jealous, boastful

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and without any self-knowledge, a man who fails utterly in his objective of shaming Walewein and gaining honour for himself, and who is ultimately chased away from Arthur's court. The adventures, victorious and failed, gallop through this relatively short text of 3664 lines. One wonders whether the original Flemish text had a more leisurely pace and whether the *Lancelot* compiler reduced the account of the adventure to fill this particular gap in his manuscript while stuffing in enough substance to rehabilitate Walewein convincingly. As often in the Flemish Arthurian texts, the poet's easy familiarity with the *matière de Bretagne* stands out but it has been pointed out that he knew his way round the *chansons de geste* as well: while Walewein is portrayed as an epic hero, the unfortunate Keye is the classic example of the traitor in epics of revolt. There is much that is didactic in this romance: young knights, and aspiring leaders, might well listen to or read this, as a guide to honorable behavior and as a warning against hubris and jealousy. For the sophisticated connoisseurs of the Arthurian world, there are plenty of *Aha-Erlebnisse*: many moments in which ingenious poetic skills and clever intertextual allusions could raise knowing smiles and much nodding of wise heads.

The title *Lanceloet en het Hert met de Witte Voet*, given to the final little narrative gem discussed in this chapter, is a nineteenth-century invention. Even though the Arthurian world is full of things that are not what they seem and in which the labyrinths, geographical, emotional, linguistic, through which the protagonists have to find their way are proverbially "perilous," many do not at all live up to expectations. Lanceloet, here, is far from heroic, and carefree when caution is called for. He sets out on a quest for which the prize, "marriage to a distressed queen" should send off warning flares for an avowed constant lover of Queen Guinevere, then runs into trouble, is severely wounded, and has to be rescued by Walewein, both from physical danger as well as from an undesired marriage. Walewein's status, restored in *Walewein ende Keye*, is further enhanced by his courage and diplomacy in this fairy tale of an Arthurian romance. Scholars have indeed pointed out the fairy tale motifs, including the hunt for an elusive stag, a *hortus conclusus*, no dragons but some very fierce lions; and comparisons have been made with French *lais*, especially that of *Tyolet*. Further parallels are found in a Spanish ballad in which "Lanzarote" is charged by a damsel to bring her a stag with a white foot and who seems to promise marriage as a prize. To add another strand to this magic mix, might this text have been written by the *Moriaen* author? There, Lancelot slays a dragon but is nearly finished off by an

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evil knight who steals one of the dragon's feet as a trophy. He is rescued by Walewein (!) who also deals conclusively with the impostor.

A description such as this leaves one unprepared for the charming, elegant, and intriguing narrative which has succeeded in seducing many modern readers; might contemporary readers and listeners, well acquainted with the intricate interweaving and wonders of Arthurian tales, have been equally charmed? In their conclusion, the authors deal briefly with the question for whom the Flemish poets created their Arthurian world, and give a wholly plausible answer: an audience of readers and listeners, well acquainted with the French Arthurian world and prepared to enjoy an indigenous Arthurian landscape, and which had the flexibility of mind to appreciate the imitations, the adaptations, and the deviations created for them by their own highly skilled weavers of magic.

Frank Brandsma's chapter, "Translations and Adaptations of French Prose Romances, including the *Lancelot* Compilation," returns to the great educator Jacob van Maerlant and discusses the Burgsteinfurt codex. This paper manuscript, from the first half of the fifteenth-century, contains Maerlant's *Merlijn* and his *Historie van den Grale*, as well as a list of the other books owed by Count Everwijn of Bentheim, showing that he owned three Lancelot texts, some biblical and legendary texts, and a book about chess. These may have been in Middle Dutch or Middle Low German. Brandsma examines the combination of *Merlin* and *Lancelot* texts and it is striking that they are translations/adaptations, in verse, of prose romances. As he comments, some questions remain, for instance concerning the characterization of the Lancelot texts as "old" or "new" (148): did that indicate that they were written in verse or in prose or did it refer to the material used? The codex is on paper though the other texts might have been on parchment.

Maerlant's verse translations, made c. 1262, are some of the earliest translations of French prose romances. The village where Maerlant worked was close to the castle of the Lords of Voorne and it is to a young member of this family that Maerlant dedicated his work. They were connected to the ruling family of Holland and it is thought that in particular Maerlant's *Historie vanden Grale* was aimed at the education of a group of young rulers-to-be, including the later Floris V. Apart from the *Grail* and *Merlin* texts, Maerlant had earlier translated a biography of Alexander the Great and adapted a mirror for princes, thus providing his pupils with worthy role models. Two of his sources were Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Arimathie* and *Merlin*.

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Maerlant's way of using his sources emphasizes even more that he was a seeker after truth, and not afraid to take issue with accounts he considered unreliable. He even possibly added a new story, that of the devil's advocate Masscheroen. Maerlant's *Grail* romance ends with a wistful promise that, if he were to find a bigger, better model text for the *Grail* he would translate it faithfully and truthfully in verse.

Maerlant's *Boec van Merline* comes after the *Masscheroen* in the manuscript. That provides a felicitous link with the tale of the origins of Merlin, who is conceived as part of a devilish plan to create an anti-Christ. However, the girl the devils select as his mother-to-be turns out to be truly virtuous and Merlin, far from becoming the anti-Christ, turns out to be a force for good, in particular of course as the mentor of the "once and future king" Arthur. Merlin's great strength is his striving after (divine) knowledge and this molds the young Arthur; Maerlant shapes that account into an exciting and cleverly didactic tale which might well have influenced his pupils, two of which, Floris of Holland and Albrecht of Voorne, were growing up without fathers/mentors.

As Brandsma's readings demonstrate, it is clear that Maerlant is a critical translator, checking his sources wherever he can, such as biblical tales against the Bible, and French sources more and more against Latin accounts. Moreover, he is an accomplished craftsman, turning prose texts into, if not poetry, then into competent verse. The rest of the chapter, set out with as much clarity as could possibly be achieved in this labyrinthine perilous forest of fragmented texts, collates the detective work done by scholars from the nineteenth century to the present day to disentangle and trace the connections between all these texts: it is a roll call of distinguished names as well as a tribute to the dogged pursuit of truth (worthy of Maerlant) and to the richness of the Arthurian heritage in Middle Dutch literature.

Brandsma's chapter also, curiously, shows how out of the welter of fragments arose a fairly homogeneous corpus of Middle Dutch Arthurian verse romances where in the same settings, some familiar (Arthur's court for instance), some unfamiliar (Lantsloot's *haghedochte*, in fact an illusory cave), many familiar characters (with some surprising new additions) journey through a spiritual, mental, and physical universe of which the geography also feels familiar. Many members of a contemporary audience must have recognized heroes and villains, landmarks and situations, conflicts and resolutions, and that is the case for modern readers too. We do not know many of the authors, though Maerlant's extensive oeuvre and extremely personal

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voice, and grumpiness, as well as style, are comfortably familiar. Scholars have unearthed characteristics which warrant the existence of an anonymous author who might be responsible for the similarities between *Lantsloot* and *Moriaen*; the latter shows intertextual references to *Walewein*, as the *Moriaen* has definite similarities with the Carolingian indigenous Middle Dutch romance *Karel ende Elegast*.

A tribute to the strong presence in the Middle Dutch literary landscape of the Arthurian romances, to their thirteenth-and fourteenth-century popularity, is that the *Lancelot* Compilation “looks like a coherent and consistent narrative of Arthur’s time” (176). It is also a glowing testimony to the dedication and persistence of modern Arthurian scholars who unraveled the intricate tapestry of texts and tales and continue publishing editions. Indeed, Frits van Oostrom’s characterization of the Compilation certainly rings true: it is “one of the most bizarre, yet exceptional products of European Arthurian romance” and “the most comprehensive Arthurian cycle in the world” (185).

As becomes apparent from this collection of essays as a whole, Van Velthem is a key figure in the shaping of the Dutch Arthurian landscape. Recent scholarship has significantly altered his earlier image, that of an author who, compared to Maerlant, was an “also run”. This changed appreciation of his quality as a writer has also brought a new understanding of his prominence and his skills as a compiler and as someone who was not afraid of taking an independent, sometimes polemic, stance with regard to the various texts and their principal characters. Perhaps his oeuvre is not quite as voluminous as Maerlant’s but he did compose a continuation to the *Spiegel historiael* as well as to his *Graal-Merlijn*, in the latter case using a French source different from that of Maerlant. He proves himself a faithful translator, adopting the interlacing technique familiar from the *Lancelot* Compilation. He keeps close to the main plot of his French source and so we are given a series of accounts in which the “slow consolidation of Arthur’s power in battles with the barons” (187) is depicted, finally concluding in a lasting peace. Merlin is said to be his close adviser but Velthem is convinced that the wisest men can be turned into fools by women. At the end of the text, Merlin falls in love with the Lady of the Lake, divulges all his magic secrets to her and ends up imprisoned for all time in a hawthorn bush. Here, Velthem is quite sweepingly determined that “there never was a man so wise who, if a woman set her heart to it, would not be put to shame by her in the end” (quoted on 188), offering a somewhat narrowly moralistic conclusion to the richly varied Arthurian world in which all human life can be seen embodied.

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That the Arthurian world had a long afterlife is evident, but in his concluding section Brandsma observes that although “Arthurian manuscripts and stories remained popular in the fifteenth century in the Rhineland,” they were “less so in the other parts of the Low Countries” (189). He discusses the one exception which did get published in a printed version in c. 1540 by the Antwerp printer Simon Cock: the *Historie van Merlijn*. This came to the Low Countries with a detour, as a translation of a printed English text, itself a variant of a Middle English verse text *Of Arthour and of Merlin*. But apart from that, the long line of Arthurian stories which from the thirteenth century onwards beguiled so many generations of storytellers and audiences, came to an end in the age of printing.

In Chapter 8, “Arthurian Literature of the Rhineland”, Jürgen Wolf begins by explaining that the Rhineland’s privileged geographical position as the “interference zone between the Romance and the German languages, a space situated amidst the great economic centres of the Middle Ages” (194) has long been recognized for the art and the literature engendered there. Recent scholars have turned their attention again to this area because of its intersectional position between French, Middle Dutch, and Middle High and Middle Low German Arthurian traditions, having abandoned the idea that the Low Countries functioned as a go-between between French and Middle High German Arthurian literature. Rather, Wolff poses three different routes of influence and transmission: “the direct translations of Old French texts,” “the reimportation of the Old French classics via the Middle Dutch and Middle High German adaptations,” and “the continuous tradition of scholarly Latin Arthurian texts found in monastic libraries” (195). This is illustrated by means of three texts and three “corresponding characters who figure centrally in the Arthurian tradition of the region: Merlin, Perceval and Lancelot” (195). Moreover, Wolf makes a case for the seminal role of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regem Britanniae* which in his view “underpins the entire Arthurian tradition of the Middle Ages” (195).

His line of argument is somewhat confusing, as he shows first how the Merlin figure gathered momentum from its inception in Geoffrey’s *Historia* and possibly his *Vita Merlini*, merging, amongst others, with a legendary tradition, that of St Lühild. In his second case study, that of *Parcheval*, Wolf argues that this is an adaptation of a Middle Dutch *Percheval*, itself a close translation of Chrétien’s *Perceval*. It therefore bypasses Wolfram von Eschenbach’s Middle High German *Parzival*, thus confirming “the somewhat isolated Arthurian tradition in the Rhineland” (197). In respect of

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Lancelot, Wolf seems again to point at a route from a Middle Dutch *Lancelot*, based on a French source and then translated into a local, Moselle Franconian, dialect. All this seems to undermine to some extent the idea that the Low Countries did not function as a go-between for the various Arthurian traditions. Wolf thus seems to be making a distinction between the Middle High German Arthurian tradition and that of the Middle Low German Arthurian presence in the Rhineland.

In the final chapter, “The Arthurian Legacy,” Geert van Iersel traces the afterlife of the Arthurian tradition in the Netherlands and Flanders in two stages, from the end of the Middle Ages until the Second World War and after the Second World War to the present. The chapter reveals how the Arthurian stories manifested in various genres: in comic strips, in drama, in film, television and radio and in music. It also shows a shift in audience, from an adult to a much younger audience.

The publication of the chapbook, the *Historie van Merlijn* in Antwerp in 1540, for example, was the last Arthurian text to appear in print until the editions of the late nineteenth century. Arthur was never wholly forgotten, but it was not until 1890 that the first modern edition of an Arthurian text, *Walewein*, was published. The *matière de Bretagne* was also retold, in various versions of the story of *Tristan and Isolde* and *Parcival*, and in several collections of stories specifically for children. No less an author than Louis Couperus used the narrative of *Walewein* in a novel serialized during the last years of the First World War, *Het zwevende schaakbord* (*The Floating Chess Board*), which voiced strong social and political commentary on contemporary situations.

Even during the Second World War retellings and adaptations appeared and that increased after 1945 with again a number of these intended for children. Van Iersel does not discuss modern scholarship but instead traces the Arthurian legacy through the new media such as the comic strip, some aimed at children, and some intended for adults and as vehicles for social criticism. Plays written both before and after the Second World War notably used Arthurian matters as entertaining vehicles to address contemporary concerns and preoccupations. Foreign films with Arthurian characters were distributed in the Netherlands and Flanders but no indigenous “Arthurian cinema” developed there. In television and radio, however, the Arthurian world continues to fascinate audiences even though its portrayal can be a far cry from the medieval tradition. In music, a small number of original renderings have appeared,

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combining music and poetry and there is even a rock opera about Merlin, *Merlin: Bard of the Unseen* (2003).

In its scope and nuance, then, this book is in itself as rich and varied as the Arthurian traditions themselves. It charts the developments in Arthurian scholarship and offers specialists and interested readers a wealth of information and many new insights. It will be of particular interest to readers of *The Spenser Review* owing to its comprehensive exploration of Arthur in Dutch and Flemish contexts: contexts with which few readers of Edmund Spenser's Arthurian epic romance are typically familiar and which the assembled authors collate with generosity.

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