

A Medieval Encyclopedist

The Life and Work of Jacob van Maerlant

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A commemorative plaque set in the wall of the former seaman's mission in Brielle, on the island of Voorne-Putten in South Holland, is a reminder that for about ten years in the thirteenth century Jacob van Maerlant was the sacristan of the little church of St Peter. There are more reminders of him in Damme, a small Flemish town near Bruges: a statue of him in the market square; a street and, until recently when it was put up for sale, a restaurant named after him; an exhibition on his life and work in the Huyze De Grote Sterre museum. Damme also happens to be the starting and finishing point of a 52-kilometre cycle ride through the Flemish countryside – just follow the signs for the *Maerlant Route*.

A prolific writer

There are still many reminders of Jacob van Maerlant (c. 1230 – post-1291) in the regions where he spent his life. His birthplace was almost certainly in West Flanders, in the Lordship of Bruges. Maerlant refers to it warmly in one of his works: *there is nowhere as good as the Bruxambacht*. The year of his birth is less certain, but bearing in mind that his first work, *The Heroic Deeds of Alexander* (Alexanders Geesten), can be dated to shortly before 1260, there is much to be said for placing it somewhere between 1230 and 1235. The dating of his death is based on his extremely shocked reaction to the fall of Acre (18 May 1291) – the last bulwark of Christendom in the east and the Crusaders' port of access to the Holy Land – in his strophic poem *Of the land across the sea* (Van den lande van oversee). This poem is generally thought to be Maerlant's last work.

Much more than nowadays, the work of medieval writers, including Jacob van Maerlant, has to be seen in the context of their patrons and protectors. It was these, after all, who supplied the working environment and access to the sources, and provided the financial support which writers needed to buy writing materials and to support themselves in general. So to understand how and why a poet such as Maerlant came to produce his particular oeuvre, one must take account of his career and his patrons as well as, of course, his early life and education. What follows is a brief summary of what we know of Maerlant's background.

Statue of Jacob van Maerlant
on the Damme marketplace.
Photo by Dick Hooijkaas.



He received a good education, very probably at the chapter school of the castle church of the Counts of Flanders, St Donas in Bruges. That is apparent from his thorough knowledge of precisely those books used in education at the time, knowledge which included a perfect command of both Latin and French. In addition, he will have acquired much of his learning in the libraries of the nearby Cistercian monasteries of Ter Duinen (Koksijde) and Ter Doest (Lissewege), institutions with which the school of St Donas had close links. He almost certainly did not receive a university education at, for instance, the University of Paris.

From about 1257 to about 1266 Maerlant was in the service of the Lords of Voorne, as sacristan of St Peter's Church in the (then) hamlet of Maerlant, and as tutor to the young Count Floris V of Holland. (The two functions were often combined.) During those ten years he wrote, successively *The Heroic Deeds of Alexander*, a biography of Alexander the Great, *History of the Grail* (*Historie van den Grale*, about the young King Arthur and his magician Merlin), *Torec* (a chivalric romance), *History of Troy* (*Historie van Troyen*) and *Secret of Secrets* (*Heimelijkheid der Heimelijkheden*, a Mirror for Princes, for Floris V). In total, these works (all of which are translations and/or reworkings of Latin and French texts) amount to over 70,000 lines of poetry, almost a third of his total surviving oeuvre.

Count Floris V (1254-1296).



The work that immediately followed the *Secret of Secrets* (c. 1266), an encyclopedia of natural history entitled *The Best of Nature* (Der Naturen Bloeme) contains a single suggestion that Jacob (who continues to refer to himself as 'van Maerlant') had meanwhile returned to his birthplace. But he continued to maintain his links with his northern patrons, in so far as they are known. *The Best of Nature* was dedicated to Nicolaas van Cats, Lord of Noord-Beveland, a nobleman from the immediate circle of Count Floris, while it was to the Count that Maerlant dedicated the *Mirror of History* (Spiegel historiael, c. 1285), his comprehensive world history of over 90,000 lines.

His own stamp

With the exception of the strophic poems, all Maerlant's works are translations of authoritative standard works from French (in three cases) or Latin. Yet

they are much more than slavish translations: constantly and in various ways, Maerlant managed to add his own emphases and so put his own stamp on these works. He omits parts of the original and adds material from other sources or of his own composition (or from other as yet unidentified sources). He repeated, emphasised, improved and reworked with obvious relish. He moralised, took sides and regularly rode his many hobby horses. In all of this he constantly kept his readers in mind - yet more evidence of his own wide reading and craftsmanship. By carefully studying Maerlant's techniques of translation and adaptation, by looking, as it were, over his shoulder, a number of recurrent themes become apparent.

The first striking feature, which indeed runs throughout his entire *oeuvre*, is Maerlant's veneration of the Virgin Mary: many individual works both begin and end with a prayer to her. In the *Mirror of History* at the point where he begins his account of her life, he interrupts the rigid scheme of rhyming couplets with a eulogy, *a Prologue to Our Lady*, in fourteen lines of verse which share a single rhyme. In the *Verse Bible* (Rijmbijbel), which he actually completed on 25 August 1271, the feast of the Assumption, there are a large number of Old Testament references that are meant to be taken to prefigure Mary. The *Extract from the Bible* (Clausule van der Bible) and *Of the Five Joys* (Van den vijf vrouwen), the two strophic poems dedicated to Mary, are of high poetic quality. But there are also themes of a more earthly nature. To mention only a few: Jacob van Maerlant was clearly fascinated by kingship and this is manifest throughout his oeuvre, from his early biography of Alexander up to the *Mirror of History* which he describes as the history of *all the kings who ever existed* and in which he reserved places of honour for King Arthur and Charlemagne. Furthermore, Maerlant dedicated this work to *Floris, King William's son*, with reference to Floris's father Count William II of Holland, who from 1247, when he was 19 years old, until his ignominious death in 1256 (about 30 years before the *Mirror* appeared) claimed the title of King of the Romans, making him the highest ruler in the German (Holy Roman) Empire. In Maerlant's eyes, Floris was and remained the son of a King!

Another theme in Maerlant's work is his compassion for the plight of the poor, the oppressed and the less fortunate in society. On a number of occasions he breaks away from his source and stands up for them; for instance, in *Secret of Secrets* after his appeal to Floris V to found schools which the children in his territories should attend: *'If they are poor, fill their hands'*; in *The Best of Nature* he compared rich misers, tormentors of the poor, to screeching gulls circling above drowned corpses ready to peck out their eyes; and when translating the life of St Francis of Assisi he inserted the story of the widow's mite which Jesus valued more highly than the ostentatious offerings of the rich.

There are many more examples throughout Maerlant's work, especially in his *Life of St Francis* and *The Best of Nature*, that bear witness to his concern for the poor. Incidentally, he was very often critical of the clergy. He continually denounced their greed and love of luxury: *'I do not believe that anyone ever saw people so greedy for profit'* he wrote in *The Church's Complaint* (Der Kerken Claghe). He also censured the decline of morals, and the unchaste disregard of celibacy among the priesthood: *'Few priests there were who maintained their purity'* (*Mirror of History*).

In the language of the people

Jacob van Maerlant's work brought him great importance and wide-spread influence. He was the first to write in the vernacular on numerous fields of knowledge and so make them accessible to a lay public, to people who did not read Latin. Scholars are still unable to identify all of the scientific sources that he used, but there were certainly many dozens of them. His work touched on virtually every field of knowledge: classical history (Alexander the Great, Troy),

Siege of Jerusalem (70 A.D.).
Miniature in a 'Verse Bible'
manuscript (The Hague,
Museum Meermanno/Huis
van het boek,
10 B 21, Fol.152ff.).



geography (Alexander again), bible history (*Verse Bible*), world history (*Mirror of History*) and knowledge of nature (*The Best of Nature*, in which, as in the *Secret of Secrets*, he also displayed considerable medical knowledge and information on nutrition).

In a few cases we do not know who commissioned a particular work, but the patrons whose names *are* known mainly came from the nobility. Nevertheless, Maerlant's work, especially that of the later period, very soon built up a following among the urban population. The number of surviving (fragments of) manuscripts indicate that his writings must have been copied many times. And from their appearance, some of them extremely plain - and hence affordable!-, we may conclude that his readers were spread widely across different social groups. Sometimes extracts were made (for instance, among the extant manuscripts of the *Secret of Secrets* there are some that deal only with the nutritional information referred to above), and sometimes his work was continued by later writers. The Flemish priest Lodewijk van Velthem wrote a sequel to the history of the Grail and also composed a lengthy continuation of the *Mirror of History*, from the First Crusade, where Maerlant had broken off, to his own time, and including a detailed account of the Battle of the Golden Spurs (1302).

The admiration of later poets also reflects the popularity of Maerlant's work. The best-known tribute came from the pen of the Antwerp town clerk Jan van Boendale. In about 1330 he described Jacob van Maerlant as *the father of all Dutch poets*, and in his own work he frequently referred to his illustrious predecessor. Later chronicle writers copied large parts of Maerlant's historical works; the 14th-century Jan de Weert based his *Woe, Roger* (Wapene Rogier) only too obviously on Maerlant's strophic poem *Woe, Martin* (Wapene Martijn).

He made knowledge accessible to a lay public and attracted admiration, continuation and imitation. But apart from its scope and versatility, there is one other simple feature that gives Maerlant's work a unique place in Dutch literary history, and that is its sheer volume. His surviving oeuvre amounts to 240,000 lines of poetry. And to that must be added works that we know he wrote but that have not survived: a life of St Clara of Assisi, a text on the magical properties of gemstones, and a book about dreams and their meaning (yet another field of knowledge unlocked by Maerlant!). If we add together the number of lines in his three major works: the *Verse Bible*, *Best of Nature* and *Mirror of History*, that number alone exceeds the total output of any other medieval vernacular poet of his time.

A European pioneer

Maerlant's productivity far exceeded that of his contemporaries. And he was exceptional in another area also: when we compare his translations and reworkings of Latin and Old French scientific or narrative sources with similar work in other vernaculars, time and again we are struck by just how *early* he was. In some cases, it seems that the ink was scarcely dry on the original source when Maerlant's translation appeared. This is very clearly the case with his *Life of St Francis* (c. 1275), a translation of the Latin *Legenda Maior* (1261) by Bonaventura. In German-speaking lands the first life of St Francis did not appear until the 15th century; in other languages we know of nothing as early as that. Thomas van Cantimpré's *De Natura Rerum* (c. 1250) had to wait a little longer for Maerlant's



The Best of Nature (c. 1270). Again we only know of a German translation, and that did not appear until 1350; in other vernaculars there was nothing.

The source for Maerlant's *Mirror of History* (c. 1284) was the *Speculum Historiale* (1256) by Vincent van Beauvais. Less than 30 years after its appearance, and while working on a great many other books, Maerlant translated and adapted this massive Latin handbook of moral theology. The Dominican Vincent had had a large staff of editors and assistants to help him produce the original. The next translation of the *Speculum*, into French, only appeared in 1333; no German or English version was ever made.

And then there are the Latin and French texts that did appear in a number of other vernaculars, among which Maerlant's Dutch contribution was invariably early:

- the *Alexandreis* (c. 1180), source for *The Heroic Deeds of Alexander* (c. 1260), was also translated into Spanish and Icelandic (both mid-13th century), German (c. 1280) and Czech (c. 1300);
- the *Roman de Troie* (c. 1160), source for the *History of Troy* (c. 1264), was also translated into German (c. 1200 - 1287), Italian (14th century), Portuguese (pre-1350), Spanish (1350) and English (2nd half 15th century);
- the *Secretum Secretorum* (1227), source for the *Secret of Secrets* (c. 1266), was also translated into French (c. 1267), German (1282), English (1400), Italian and Czech;
- the *Historia Scolastica* (1173), source for the *Verse Bible* (1271), was also translated into German (2nd half 13th century), French (1294), Norwegian and Spanish. It is worth noting that the German, French, Norwegian and Spanish translations

Wondrous peoples in a
'Best of Nature' manuscript
(Detmold, Lippische Landes-
bibliothek 70, fol. 12r.).



were all left unfinished, whereas Maerlant added to the 27,000 lines of his *Verse Bible* a further 8,000 lines, *Jerusalem's Vengeance* (Wrake van Jerusalem), continuing the story of the Jewish people to the year 73 A.D.

'Then they will always ring above me' Jacob van Maerlant is supposed to have said on his deathbed when he expressed the wish to be buried at the foot of Damme's church tower. He was alluding to the bells of the Church of Our Lady, which he hoped would always ring for him. These words are engraved on a commemorative plaque in the porch of the church, but there is no evidence that the story is true because Maerlant's grave has never been found. The same plaque also says: 'He wrote for justice and truth in the language of his people'; and that, along with his place as a European pioneer, was indeed the great contribution of this 13th-century Fleming: he made available in the vernacular countless fields of knowledge which, before his time, had only been accessible to those with a knowledge of Latin. ■

Translated by Chris Emery

FURTHER READING

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