

THERESE DECKER, MORAVIAN COLLEGE  
AND  
PETER G. BEIDLER, LEHIGH UNIVERSITY

### Introduction to Special Issue on *Nu noch*

#### 1. Overview of the Scholarly Background on *Nu noch* by Therese Decker

When my friend Peter G. Beidler, professor of English at Lehigh University, decided to make the Middle Dutch farce *Nu noch* the subject of study in his graduate seminar on "The Medieval Origins of British Drama" in the spring of 1994, he could not have received much encouragement from the two respected scholars who had translated the little play into English. Indeed, E. Colledge observes that the play has "no subtlety whatever" and "is the coarse, broad comedy of a society still close to the soil" (p. 11). When Peter and his students first read the play, this dismissive evaluation of the literary merits of *Nu noch* seemed wholly justified, as he confesses in his part of this introduction. Yet he must have sensed something of quality in the little farce which P. Leendertz, the first editor, had also noted when he observed about *Nu noch*:

De clute van *Nu noch* is ook weer zoo levendig gesteld, dat wij ze, niettegenstaande den zeer eenvoudigen inhoud, toch met genoeg lezen. Bij flot spelen zal zij niet nalaten de toehoorders in eene vroolijke stemming de brengen. (p. clxviii)

[The farce *Nu noch* is also constructed in such a way that we read it with pleasure, in spite of its very simple construction. If played in a brisk manner, it cannot fail to put the audience in a happy mood.]

Indeed, long before Leendertz published the play in 1907, H. E. Moltzer took note of the existence of the little farce in his 1862 history of the secular drama in the Netherlands (pp. 144-45), and W. J. A. Jonckbloet, writing in 1889, noted some of the positive qualities of the comedy. Jonckbloet, however, felt that he must apologize for the somewhat crude language of the play (vol. 2, pp. 380-81). Neither scholar submitted the farce to any detailed analysis.

In 1887 Jan te Winkel, in his *Geschiedenis der nederlandsche letterkunde*, furnished a more detailed overview of the plot of *Nu noch*, but finally criticized the anonymous author for not having ended the play at the point where the husband won his battle against his wife (p. 528). In 1897 Jan ten Brink suggested that many medieval farces had not been published because scholars were afraid of offending the public with the coarse language of these plays. Jan ten Brink himself was not discouraged by such views, and he published a short description of the plot of *Nu noch* (p. 237). In 1904, just three years before Leendertz published his monumental work on medieval drama in the Netherlands, J. A. Worp asserted that, while in general Middle Dutch farces depict women as horrible shrews, men as weak wretches, and the clergy as less than saintly, these comedies have artistic value because they accurately depict lower class life in medieval times (vol. 1, pp. 98-99). And in 1907, G. Kalff gave a detailed description of the plot (pp. 359-61), and then commented:

Welk een frischheid en welk een afwisseling zien wij hier, hoe weten deze stukjes [i.e., *Nu noch* and another farce called *Klucht van Playerwater*] ons te boeien, hoe goed zijn zij gebouwd, hoe aardig uitgewerkt, welk eene komiek van goed allooi! In beide zijn alleraardigste tooneeltjes; in *Nu noch* b.v. de duivelbezwering, het eten van den pannekoek waarbij "nu nog" een nieuwe beteekenis krijgt, de overvalling der beide mannen door de gefopte vrouw (pp. 360-61).

[What freshness and variation we see here, how these little pieces are able to captivate us, how well they are constructed, how nicely worked out, what an excellent quality of comedy. In both {comedies} we have the most charming scenes; in *Nu noch*, for example, the exorcism of the devil, the eating of the pancake whereby "nu nog"

acquires a new meaning, the surprise attack on the two men by the tricked woman.]

Clearly, our little farce has undergone a relatively rapid reversal of evaluation, from barely worth mentioning, to warranting brief mention as clever but too risqué for an audience of delicate tastes, to a resounding endorsement by one of the most respected critics of Middle Dutch dramatic literature. In fact, G. P. M. Knuvelde, in the latest edition of his standard *Handboek tot de Geschiedenis der Nederlandse Letterkunde*, vol. 1, not only agrees with Kalff about the literary merits of *Nu noch*, but places it even higher than the comedies of the late medieval writer Cornelis Everaert (1485-1566), who wrote most of his work between 1509 and 1538 (p. 512).

Nevertheless, as far as we can determine, *Nu noch* has never been the subject of a detailed scholarly study. In fact, since 1907, when Leendertz dated the writing of the play to the late fifteenth century, and the manuscript itself to the early part of the sixteenth century, no one seems to have looked at the manuscript - presently located in the University Library of Ghent (p. cxxxv). Leendertz is also the only person to point to the French farce *Maistre Pierre Pathelin* (dated around 1464) as a possible source for *Nu noch* (p. clxviii). *Maistre Pierre Pathelin*, we recall, is a lawyer who advises his client to respond with "bée" ("baa") to everything that he is being asked in court. The client is judged to be crazy and is set free. When Pathelin asks his now-freed client to pay him for his services, however, the clever client again responds only with "bée."

Given the general scholarly neglect of *Nu noch*, I was delighted when Peter told me of his students' plans to perform the play and to write scholarly analyses of it. I was also delighted when I saw the play on the classroom stage and heard the five student papers. I would not have suspected that the little farce, only 235 lines long, could yield such varied and sophisticated interpretations. I can only agree with Peter that this edition, translation, and the five ground-breaking essays that follow will mark the start of a long overdue scholarly attention to this comedy. Who can tell what other golden literary nuggets are hidden in *Nu noch*, waiting to be unearthed and presented to the public?

## 2. A University Seminar on Medieval Drama by Peter G. Beidler

I had several purposes in offering a new graduate

seminar in the English Department at Lehigh University in the spring of 1994. I entitled the seminar "The Medieval Origins of British Drama" because I wanted to help my students discover that British secular drama started not with Shakespeare, but well before the Renaissance, and that it started not insularly in England, but also on the continent. I especially wanted them to know something about the secular plays such as the *abele spelen* and *sotterniën* of the amazing Hulthem manuscript, as well as other secular dramas from the Low Countries. There were close political and economic connections between England and the Low Countries in medieval times, and I wanted my students to understand that there were almost certainly literary and artistic connections as well.

I also wanted to introduce my students to the mysteries and joys of literary scholarship. I wanted them not only to attend a medieval conference, but also to present papers at that conference. I had taken graduate students in other years to the Medieval Forum at Plymouth State College in Plymouth, New Hampshire, and knew it to be a small, friendly, but serious gathering of professional medievalists. The organizers of the Medieval Forum carefully considered my proposal that I preside over two sessions at their April 1994 forum. The participants, I said, would all be my graduate students, whom I would coach about how to write and present a good conference paper. I suggested that one session would probably be on Chaucer's awareness of the theater of his own time as reflected in the *Miller's Tale*, while the other would probably be on a Middle Dutch play - perhaps one from the famous Hulthem MS. The organizers of the Medieval Forum, Manuel Marquez-Sterling and Ursula Allen, eagerly agreed to my proposal.

When the time came to select a Middle Dutch play for the conference session, I suggested that we try not one of the Hulthem plays, but the farce *Nu noch*. It was short, was available in a translation by Professor E. Colledge, and portrayed a domestic situation that I thought my students would enjoy analyzing: a man who tries to make his henpecked life easier by answering "Now again" to everything his wife says to him. The fact that it seemed never to have been discussed in print by serious literary scholars left the scholarly field wide open for critical work by my students.

At our first reading of *Nu noch* it seemed clear enough to my students why previous literary scholars

have had so little to say about the play: there was almost nothing to it. What could be said about a brief play about a henpecked husband who, with the help of a neighbor, gains a temporary triumph over his shrewish wife? The play seemed to have so little substance as literature that my students were not sure it would sustain serious critical analysis. A second reading, however, and especially discussions about how to stage the play led to questions of motivation and other issues that made the students begin to think differently. What about the use of language in the play? What about that wife and the antifeminism that seemed to provide the basic dramatic situation of the play? What about that silly priest - was the author poking fun at corrupt churchmen? What were we to make of that meddling neighbor? What about... One question seemed to elicit three more. We decided that these kinds of questions needed to be addressed, so we moved forward with *Nu noch*.

Immediately another problem surfaced, however: nobody in our audience would ever have heard of this play, let alone seen it performed. Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* was familiar to everyone who claimed to be interested in matters medieval, but we could assume no such knowledge of *Nu noch*, even among the professional medievalists who would be at Plymouth. We could, of course, begin our session with an extended plot summary of *Nu noch*. Or, since *Nu noch* was so short, we could preface our session with a quick reading of the play. The students elected to do the full reading. It would be a different kind of session, but they decided to give it a try. My eleven students in that seminar were all women, so in casting a play that had three male characters and one female character, I knew that some of them were going to have to cross-dress. Still, if Renaissance men played women's roles, why couldn't modern women play men's roles?

I gave my eleven students a choice of whether they wanted to work on the anonymous *Nu noch* or on Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*. Five opted for the play. I asked Julianne Roe to act as director. Sandra Guy agreed to be Jack, the henpecked husband; Nicole Matson, his browbeating wife; Sheila Bauer, the meddling neighbor; and Nancy Rodgers, the ineffective priest. They soon agreed among themselves that they would not do a mere reading of *Nu noch*, but would actually act the play - memorize their lines, block the play out, wear simple costumes,

use props.

I decided that it was time to enlist the help of my friend Therese Decker, who teaches German across the river at Moravian College. It was she, after all, who had first introduced me to the wonderful plays in the Hulthem manuscript, and she and I had collaborated on an article on the possible relationships between *Lippijn*, one of the short Hulthem plays, and Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*. I asked her whether she knew the Colledge and Barnouw translation of *Nu noch*. She did. I asked her whether it was a decent translation. She said it was not. Even the Colledge and Barnouw translation of the key phrase in the play, "nu noch," was wrong. It did not mean "say that again," Therese told me, but something more like "now still" or "now again" - though even those were problematical translations. Therese agreed to correct some of the most glaringly incorrect translations by Colledge and Barnouw, and to supply us with translations of several lines that they had silently and without explanation omitted from their version. It was that slightly-corrected version that my students performed.

As the students practiced the play they also developed ideas for their papers. I offered advice on their early drafts, of course, and tried to prevent repetition by ensuring that the students covered at least slightly different aspects of *Nu noch*, but the papers are very much the students' own work. They were not quite, perhaps, what I would have written, but there is no reason why they should have been, and by the end the students knew the play far better than I did. Sister Elaine Marie Glanz, another of my students, devised a poster announcing the session. The students got their costumes and props together, and off we headed for the eight-hour drive northeast to Plymouth.

The session at the Plymouth conference on 22 April 1994 was a delight. I briefly introduced the session and then stepped out of the way. The *Nu noch* session was scheduled, as were all of the other sessions, in a classroom in Rounds Hall, the main academic building on the campus at Plymouth State College. The "stage" was up against the blackboard, with the teacher's desk front and center. It was not exactly an authentic staging of *Nu noch*, which would perhaps have been performed on a scaffold in an open marketplace in medieval times, but both medieval and

modern actors must be adaptable, and my students' performance was charming. We had an enthusiastic audience, one of whom told us afterwards that we should take this thing on the road. "We *are* on the road," I replied.

Another told us that we should publish the papers. Publish them? Well, of course. But how does one publish material based on a flawed translation of an unknown play? Again, I enlisted the help of my friend Therese. Together we decided that the scholarly world might profit from a new edition of *Nu noch*, a new prose translation of it, and the five groundbreaking papers - slightly revised - that my students had presented at the Plymouth Medieval Forum. The rest is history - I mean, *her*story. Therese convinced the *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* to devote a full issue to *Nu noch*.

Therese has been generally responsible for the edition and the translation of *Nu noch*, and I have been generally responsible for pulling together the five essays that follow it. We have read and responded to each other's sections, however, and most of the materials in this issue are fully collaborative.

In the first essay below, Julianne Roe takes on Professor Colledge, one of the few scholars to have bothered to comment on the literary qualities of *Nu noch*. She particularly attacks his ill-considered comment that the play is without subtlety. By a careful analysis of the language of the play, Roe shows that the play is constructed as a linguistic game rigged in such a way that no one wins.

Nancy Rodgers shows us that beneath the humor of the play is a serious indictment of the anti-Christian behavior of the priest - a man who seems to have so little faith in his own religion that he invokes not God but pagan personages, not faith but food, to help cure the husband of his supposed ailment. In portraying this anticlericalism, of course, the author of *Nu noch* is closely allied with some of the finest British writers of the time - Chaucer, Gower, and Langland, to name only a few.

Sheila Bauer looks closely at the "language of power" in the play, at the way the various characters attempt to use language to gain power over others. She notes that while the wife in this play seems to have temporarily lost and then quickly regained the

power over her husband, *Nu noch* is finally an antifeminist play because the wife's use of language and the power she gains through it cast her in the role of unsympathetic shrew. While we may respect her power, we cannot admire her.

Nicole Matson, drawing on medieval beliefs about the nature of woman and about the nature of madness, and drawing on her own portrayal of the wife in the stage version, defends her belief that the wife becomes mad when she substitutes one concept of self for another. When she allows her natural Eve-self to be replaced - actually dispossessed - by the unnatural Magdalene-self forced on her by her husband, she loses her grounding in reality and acts mad. Matson sees *Nu noch*, then, as the work of an antifeminist playwright who both fears and loathes women.

In the final paper below, Sandra Guy takes the focus off the wife and places it on the neighbor. The manipulative neighbor, she suggests, in a sense "possesses" the other three characters and pushes them around, controlling virtually all of the action in each of the four scenes. If there is a culprit in *Nu noch*, Guy suggests, it is the neighbor. Without the neighbor pushing and pulling the others, there would be no action in the play. Only by "exorcising" this neighbor can the others regain a measure of sanity.

Five concerns run through most of the papers below. First, despite its obvious humor and its slapstick qualities, the play contains subtleties that raise it far above the level of a clever anecdote. Second, the four dramatic characters, however broadly they are drawn and however brief their time on the stage, have a depth that is obvious enough to anyone who will take the trouble to study the play, or act one of its roles. Third, *Nu noch* is about human relationships and the subtle means people use to manipulate and even possess one another. Fourth, this is a play about power - the power people have over each other, and the power of possession-madness. Fifth, and most important, *Nu noch* is really about language. The play these young women performed was a play of action, yes, a play of character, yes, but more important, it was a play of words, a play *about* words.

To make their words as accessible as possible to readers who may not know Middle Dutch, the writers of these papers quote from Therese Decker's

translation of *Nu noch* as it appears in this journal. The line numbers, given in parentheses after the quotations, will give readers direct access to the original language of the play in the lines facing the Decker translation.

### 3. About this edition and translation

For the Middle Dutch text we have followed as faithfully as possible P. Leendertz's 1907 *Middelnederlandsche dramatische poëzie*. Though we have indicated with ellipses lines he believed to be missing, we have not accepted his suggested emendations.

Like all translators, we encountered problems of usage and finding modern equivalents. In lines 64-65, for example, the all-too-helpful neighbor mutters to himself:

ic warpe u eenen schoelap naer  
Dat ghij wel herden moed in dezen.

It would have been singularly unhelpful if we had translated this literally and quite accurately as,

I would throw a shoe sole after you  
if that would make you stick to this.

Instead, we have rendered the passage more colloquially and less ambiguously, as

I'd let you feel my boot  
if it made you stick to our plan.

Perhaps the most important problem we faced was how to translate the oft-repeated phrase, "nu noch." The phrase makes little sense as a stand-alone phrase, though it might appear in a sentence such as, "Nederlands wordt *nu noch* op Aruba gesproken." Adriaan J. Barnouw and E. Colledge, in their translation of the farce dated 1967, seemed to feel justified in translating this enigmatic phrase as "say that again," though they do not explain their somewhat puzzling choice to the reader. Indeed, "nu noch" might be rendered in many different ways, such as "more than ever," as in "Now that I am on a diet, I want that piece of chocolate cake *more than ever*." Or it could mean "now still," "still," or "even now," as in "We *still* enjoy a good joke" or "*Even now* French is spoken in Haiti." The Middle Dutch phrase,

like these possible English equivalents, make sense in the context of a sentence, by themselves they are just what the author intended them to be, nonsense. The whole point of the phrase is that Jack's use of it proves that he is crazy. To make it into a complete sentence, like "say that again," is to destroy the effect of the nonsense-phrase. After considerable discussion, we decided against the more common usages, such as "still" or "now still," partly because "still" can have many meanings, such as "quiet" (as in, "the waters are still" or "the still of the night"), or "to make quiet" (as in, "please still the child," not to mention "distillery" (as in "he was arrested for having a still in his back yard"). Hearing or reading "now still" might have tempted audiences to grope for levels of meaning where none was probably intended. In the end, we went with the translation "now again" as the one that to us best conveyed the nonsense of the original. We caution readers, however, that the translation is inexact, and invite other scholars to suggest more accurate translations.

In an effort to keep our translation as accurate as possible, we have given a prose translation rather than a verse one. In a sense a verse translation would have been more faithful to the original, but our attempts to provide one required us to distort the meaning so much that it would have been misleading. We opted, instead, for a prose translation that would follow the meaning of the original as faithfully as possible, and leave it to others to provide a versified translation that might better capture the sounds of the original. Although it might have been helpful to readers interested in putting on a production of *Nu noch* if we had supplied more elaborate stage directions and scene divisions, in the end we decided not to do so. Such directions would have interrupted the flow of the dialogue, and would in any case have been our own intrusive interpretations. Only where we felt it was really necessary to avoid confusion did we indicate within square brackets where a character speaks in an aside. As for the scene divisions, any careful reading of *Nu noch* will reveal that there are four "scenes," perhaps acted on slightly different corners of whatever kind of stage the actors might have had access to. For us to have indicated or localized those, however, would have been stepping beyond our roles as translators.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baur, R., et al. *Geschiedenis van de letterkunde der Nederlanden*. 9 vols. 's-Hertogenbosch: Teulings's Uitgeversmaatschappij, and L. C. G. Malmberg, Brussels: Standaard Boekhandel, 1939-51.
- ten Brink, Jan. *Geschiedenis der nederlandsche letterkunde*. Amsterdam: Uitgevers-Maatschappij Elsevier, 1897.
- Colledge, E., ed., and Adriaan J. Barnouw, trans. *Reynard the Fox and Other Mediaeval Netherlands Secular Literature*. Leyden, London, New York: Seijthoff, Heinemann, and Maxwell, 1967.
- Jonckbloet, W. J. A. *Geschiedenis der nederlandsche letterkunde*. Vol. 2. Vierde druk, herzien en tot den tegenwoordigen tijd bijgewerkt, door C. Honigh. Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1889.
- Kalff, G. *Geschiedenis der nederlandsche letterkunde*. Vol. 2. Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1907.
- Knuvelde, G. P. *Handboek tot de geschiedenis der nederlandse letterkunde*. Vol. 1. 's-Hertogenbosch, L. C. G. Malmberg, 1948(6th/7th ed, 1976-78).
- Leendertz, Pieter. *Middelnederlandsche dramatische poëzie*. Bibliotheek van middelnederlandsche letterkunde. 2 vols. Leiden: A. W. Sijthoff, 1907.
- van Mierlo, J. *Geschiedenis van de oud- en middelnederlandsche letterkunde*. Antwerpen, Brussels, Leuven: N. V. Standaard Boekhandel, 1928.
- Moltzer, H. E. *Geschiedenis van het wereldlijk tooneel in Nederland gedurende de middeleeuwen*. Diss. Leiden. Leiden: Gebroeders van der Hoek, 1862.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *De middelnederlandsche dramatisch poëzie*. Bibliotheek van middelnederlandsche letterkunde. Vol. 1. Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1875.
- van der Riet, Frank G. *Le théâtre profane sérieux en langue flamande au moyen âge*. La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1936.
- te Winkel, J. *Geschiedenis der nederlandsche letterkunde*. Vol. 1 (no additional vols. were published). Haarlem: de Erven F. Bohn, 1887.
- Worp, J. A. *Geschiedenis van het drama en van het tooneel in Nederland*. 2 vols. Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1904-08.

*The Middle Dutch Play -*

*Nu Noch "Now again"*

*Costumed Performance and Literary*

*Moderator - Peter Beidler*

*Analysis*

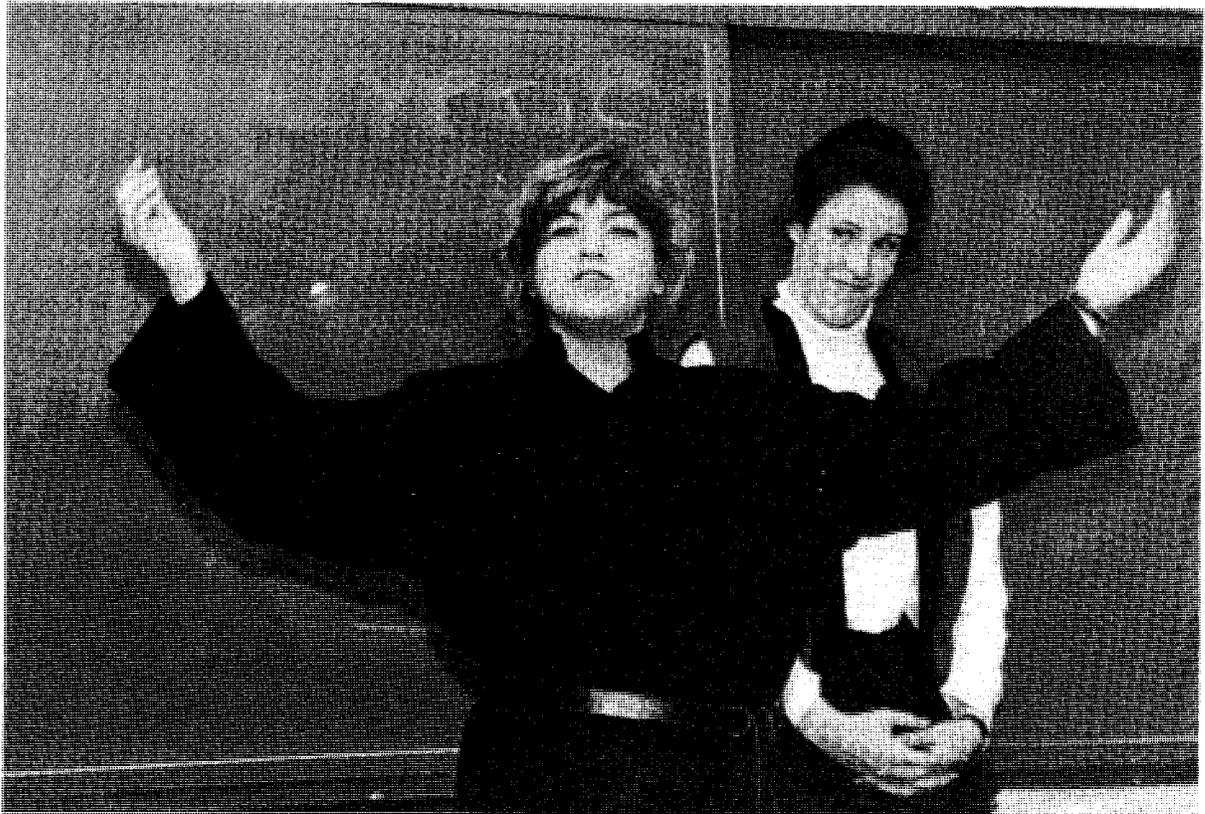


**NOW AGAIN**



*Friday 1:30 pm*  
*April 22, 1994*  
*Plymouth State College*  
*Room 203*

A reproduction of the poster made by Sister Elaine Marie Glanz, a graduate student at Lehigh University, advertising the production of *Nu noch* given on April 22, 1994, at Plymouth State College in Plymouth, New Hampshire.



The priest (played by Nancy Rodgers) tries to exorcise the demon that has driven Jack out of his mind, while the neighbor (played by Sheila Bauer) looks on. - Brian Ricker photo.



The priest and the neighbor look on as Jack enjoys the delicious food prepared for him by his newly submissive wife.  
- Brian Ricker photo.



The wife, having discovered the plot against her, takes her revenge on the neighbor. - Brian Ricker photo.