

Book Review

Maria A. Schenkeveld. *Dutch Literature in the Age of Rembrandt. Themes and Ideas*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1991. X, 216 pp., ill. ISBN 90 272 22142 (Eur.)/ISBN 1-55619-426-9 (US). Cloth. \$49.00.

Non-Dutch interest in the history and culture of the seventeenth-century Netherlands most often focusses on art, on politics, and (most recently through Simon Schama's *Embarrassment of Riches*) on the fabric of life in its "Golden Age." That literature is generally ignored has been explained by pointing to the problems inherent in writing in a language read by comparatively few, or by a rather critical analysis of the literary works themselves. Schenkeveld does not refute these explanations but justifies a book-length study in English by arguing that literature was an important aspect of seventeenth-century Dutch culture, that a true understanding of the period must necessarily include some knowledge of and appreciation for this literature, and that such knowledge would in fact enhance the study of other areas. Her book is intended to fill a lacuna in the material readily available in English, for though English-language literary histories do have chapters on the seventeenth century, there is no separate study.

In certain respects Schenkeveld's treatment of her topic is promising. The book is not organized in the chronological fashion usual to literary histories, but rather is structured thematically to promote understanding of the larger picture as well as convey knowledge of the pertinent facts. Chapter 2, for example, is devoted to "Poetry and Religion," and while one may quarrel with separating "Literature and Ideology" (Chapter Three) from it, the very fact that Dutch literature is best understood within its ideological/confessional contexts is in itself a peculiarity of Dutch history and culture. Each chapter treats one such broad theme: "Poets in society," "The poet and everyday life," "Moral landscapes," "Literature and the visual arts," and "Holland as a literary and cultural staple market." The subtopics within each chapter are highly thought-provoking, functioning almost like directives for further research (I mention only a few): "Christian discussion on and regarding the stage," "The country house poem," "Emblematics." The book's somewhat unusual structure

is complemented by 67 illustrations of excellent quality; they range from portraits and maps through frontispieces to excerpts from first editions, providing a tangible glimpse into the period. The book concludes with ten poems (original with English translation), and various appendices which will make the book all the more useful to the non-Dutch reader: a chronology, bibliographical notes for each major theme, three bibliographies (primary sources, secondary sources, and recent translations), a list of illustrations and an index.

Nevertheless, those who welcome efforts to make Dutch literature accessible to non-Dutch readers will be ambivalent about this study, for one cannot ignore certain problems which cause it to fall short of fulfilling its potential. One of these problems lies precisely in its promising structure: in its attempt to be both monograph and literary history it has difficulty in providing either an in-depth discussion of the period or a comprehensive overview of the facts. Greater attention to introductory and concluding discussions for each chapter, for example, would have better justified a given topic, provided a context for its subtopics, and anchored authors within them. So a theme as complex as "The poet and everyday life" (p. 77) is introduced by a brief paragraph speaking only of painting, while the transition to literature is made in an only slightly longer subsection entitled "Universal vs. particular." The entire book, in fact, would have benefitted from a prefatory and concluding discussion going beyond the promising statement that "the topics selected are those that might have some interest for general readers and scholars from other disciplines" (p. ix). Those who read the book as a monograph will be further annoyed by the factual repetitions engendered by the thematic structure. For example, Schama's book is called "recent" both times it is mentioned, Bredero's birth and death dates are given no less than four times (pp. 21, 78, 83, 187), and Vondel is described as a (newly-converted) Roman Catholic at least that often (pp. 5, 52, 53, 55, 62). On the other hand factual inaccuracies can be found in other areas. In his book *Cultural Literacy* E.D. Hirsch does not mention "precisely four names from the Netherlands" (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Rembrandt and Vermeer; p. vi) but possibly seven (Spinoza, mentioned by

Schenkeveld on the same page; the Mennonites who figure prominently in "Poetry and Religion"; perhaps Erasmus). Dierick P. Augustinus (p. 193) is really Augustinus P. Dierick. The decree by an Antwerp municipality of 1565, quoted on page 69-70, should have been footnoted (the source was probably J.G.C.A Briels' 1974 book on printers in the southern Netherlands from 1570 to 1630, p. 8, listed in the bibliography).

One other source of ambivalence will be the quality of the book's English. This is not a glib criticism, for one can only admire the linguistic dexterity of the Dutch and their ability to communicate well in many languages. Nevertheless, a book which intends to facilitate knowledge about and an understanding of Netherlandic culture for non-native speakers, here English speakers, should be written as well as possible, and this is not the case. Some of the rough spots may in themselves be minor, but there are so many of them that they hinder the flow of the discussion. So one does not usually speak of "pants-wearing housewives" (p. 16), "Latin-writing" poets (p. 23), or "group-linked religious poetry" (p. 45), nor does one insert clauses between an article and a noun: "the, as they saw it, worthless, sensational plays" (p. 16). More fundamental are the consistent problems with verb tenses and the agreement of pronouns with their antecedents. An example of the former can be found on p. 35, where, without any discernible reason, one paragraph is written in the present, the next in the past, and the last in a mixture of past and present. An example of the latter problem, which must stand for many, is the following ambiguous use of the pronoun "he": "Vondel's problem, *mutatis mutandis*, was the same as that of Revius. He, too, wanted to provide a Christian emulation of classical forms and ideas" (p. 53). Only after some careful sleuthing can the reader establish that "he" does not refer to Revius, the most immediate and logical antecedent, but rather to Vondel. And finally, since so much of the interest in Dutch literature in North America is centered in departments of Comparative Literature, and since there are a great many women (students and professors) among the comparatists, studies targeted for this group might be all the better received if an effort were made to use non-gendered language, for a reader of literature these days is more likely to be a "she" than a "he."

Despite the book's problems, however, Schenkeveld's love for her subject and knowledge of the field are evident throughout. This study will rightly be welcomed by the increasing number of English-speakers fascinated by seventeenth-century Netherlandic culture, and the book will serve its purpose of including literature in the on-going discussion.