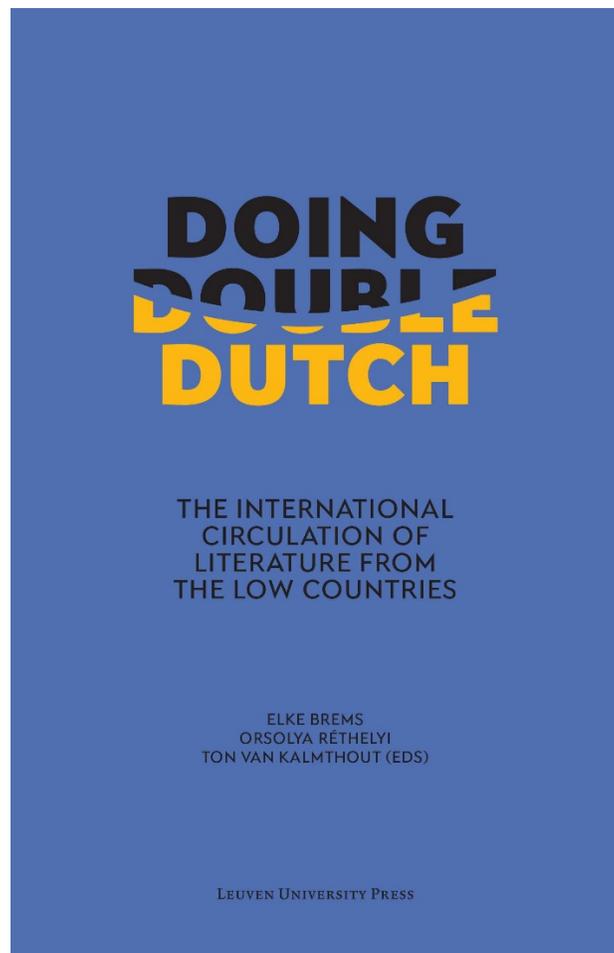


Review

**Elke Brems, Orsolya Réthelyi, & Ton van Kalmthout (eds):
*Doing Double Dutch. The international circulation
of literature from the Low Countries***

Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017. 336 p.
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Reviewed by Harry Van Dyke



There are few languages that have so much literary output yet are translated so little as Dutch, at least in comparison with French and German. Such has been my impression, but I may have to revise this hypothesis in light of the book under review. The editors of *Doing Double Dutch* quote a study (14) which estimates that since the beginning of the 21st century the production of translations from Dutch literature targeting a language spoken and read elsewhere in the world ranges around the astounding number of 600 titles a year. In any case, the book *Doing Double Dutch* acquaints us with a whole range of translations and adaptations of literary works in the Dutch language. (Adaptations are found in plays, movies, graphic novels, etc.) The work is the fruit of the research project “The circulation of Dutch literature,” which is financed by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (*NWO*), a form of government support that appears to be part of a wider policy in the Netherlands of stimulating interest in Dutch literature by means of publicly funded support for authors and translators.

The term literature is here restricted to the belles lettres. Thus, scholarly works by historians like Geyl and Romein and philosophers like Heymans and Dooyeweerd are out of purview. The focus is further limited to serious works; the frequently translated author Annie M. G. Schmidt is also out of the picture. Similarly, I looked in vain for observations on the world best-seller *Diary of Anne Frank*. I suppose her diary is not “literature.”

Be that as it may, the book’s second chapter examines no fewer than eight different points that require attention when studying the circulation of Dutch literature outside its language base. These points include cultural setting, embedded beliefs and worldviews, the tenacity of local perspectives, and so on. It is obvious that the complexity of this field cannot be taken lightly.

Another chapter that caught my eye bears the apt title “Breaching the dyke” (45-65). It will come as no surprise to readers when they learn that English dominates the global literary field and is relatively closed to foreign literature in a “minor” language such as Dutch. The flip side of this drawback is that “once the dyke is breached” – that is to say, once a Dutch work of merit makes it into English – millions more across the globe can read it and translations into other world languages are sure to follow.

All in all, the feast offered here is great. Chapters 6 to 17 are fascinating case studies that examine aspects of these transfer ventures from Hadewijch and the Elckerlijc to Willem Elsschot and Willem Frederik Hermans. The translation and reception of Vondel, Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken, Multatuli, Louis Couperus, Hendrik Conscience, and other members of the Dutch literary canon are the subject of specialist studies. The works in question have appeared in English, French and German, of course, but also in Spanish, Hungarian and the Scandinavian tongues. But none can trump Hermans’s novel *De donkere kamer*

van Damokles, which made it, besides these languages, into Chinese, Croatian, Czech, Greek, and Polish. “Kom daar eens om!” Can you beat that?

The case studies are preceded by a helpful introductory chapter and four chapters on various questions of methodology. The latter deal with issues like the translator as a (hopefully faithful) mediator, the distribution and reception of these translations across the globe, and the inevitable losses incurred as a result of the trans-lingual operation. Chapter 5 contains a brilliant discussion of possible gains when a Dutch original is transferred into another language by creative translators. These people, who usually remain unnoticed, take liberties verging on license, a no-no that they avoid by reminding themselves that they are in a sense the handmaids, if not the slaves, of the original author. It may go too far when a translator is compared to a surgeon doing an organ transplant (178), but the comparison does highlight the trained expertise and meticulous care required for producing not merely an acceptable, but superior end product. A literary work must remain a literary work in translation; absent that, it is stillborn before it rolls off the presses.

Globalization has spawned a new field of study called Cultural Transfer. The value of a focused research project like the present one is that it produces new scholarly insights and it also highlights new questions for further research. A symbol that is printed opposite the table of contents is one I was not familiar with: GPRC. It stands for “Guaranteed Peer-Reviewed Content.” That inspires confidence. Certainly, the three scholars who shepherded this volume through the press would appear to be well-suited for editing an impressive collection of studies in this very specialized field. Elke Brems is head of the research unit of Translation Studies at the Arts Faculty of the Catholic University of Leuven, while Orsolya Réthelyi is associate professor of Dutch Literature at the Eötvös Loránd University Budapest, and Ton van Kalmthout is senior researcher in literary history at the Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands in Amsterdam. They have seen fit to include an index (329-336), but of names only, perhaps warranted by the wide range of subjects touched on in the book.

The monograph comes in a hard cover, with pages that are not sewn, but glued and unfortunately coming apart easily. Other than that, it is a fine volume and is warmly recommended for lovers of Dutch, lay people and specialists alike.

About the reviewer

Harry Van Dyke (Arie J. van Dijk) came to Canada at the age of twelve. He holds an A.B. degree from Calvin College (Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.) and a D.Litt. degree from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) in the Netherlands. For more than a decade, he was research assistant for Theory and Philosophy of History at the VU

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