

## 9 Cultural Nationalism and the Invention of Dutch Literary Icons

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### Abstract

A transnational approach shows that many works of the Dutch literary canon that have been characterized as typically Dutch have in fact foreign origins. This can be seen by examining several icons from Dutch literature: Jantje, created by Hieronymus van Alphen; Sara Burgerhart, invented by Elisabeth Wolff-Bekker and Agatha Deken; and Oene van Sneek, a fictional character from a poem by Hendrik Tollens. Although it is the literary scholar's task to remind readers that these authors did not express the Dutch nation's soul or spirit, it remains of vital importance that scholars keep stressing the need for an in-depth knowledge and the uniqueness of Dutch historical literature to policy advisors, board members of universities and the broader public.

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“Nothing is more international than nationalism.”<sup>1</sup> This quote, taken from an interview with the Dutch-Limburgish literary scholar Joep Leerssen, perfectly describes the paradoxical nature of any attempt to single out a nation's unique character. Demonstrating the exclusiveness of national traditions, cultural habits and iconic literary figures is inevitably part of a dynamic, international process: nations are always interdependent in successfully defining and redefining their cultural boundaries. In particular, neighbouring countries are indispensable points of reference. For example, what makes the Danes typically Danish can only be expressed by contrasting

1 Leerssen, “Niets internationaler dan nationalisme.”

them to the Swedes and Norwegians. As Leerssen puts it: there is no such thing as a “durable, objective entity called ‘Germany,’ but rather the set of changeable images of a hypothetical and historically variable Germany; in studying these images we must place them in their discursive environment.”<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the remnants of nineteenth-century political, cultural and Romantic nationalism remain omnipresent in our present-day society. We are surrounded by all sorts of manifestations of what Michael Billig calls “banal nationalism”: everyday practices, cultural symbols and habits of language, which ingrain nationality in people’s brains.<sup>3</sup> The persistence of these imaginative national patterns can be explained by the fact that from early childhood we learn to think in simple schemes, which draw clear boundaries between nations, peoples and languages. Up to the present day, these schemes are reproduced in our educational systems: literary education is, for example, still firmly rooted in the nineteenth-century construction of national literary canons, which emerged from a political desire to express the uniqueness of the nation’s soul. Studying Dutch literature, in particular in secondary schools, still means in practice: reading a selection of “original” Dutch works, which preferably represent something typically Dutch.

As Leerssen and many others have shown, transnational approaches may serve as an antidote against the use of simplified national schemes in traditional literary historiography. They can be applied to unravel the supranational dimensions of the cultural artefacts (which includes artistic production, knowledge production and critical reflection) as well as the international dissemination of those artefacts (the spread of cultural production through all sorts of media).<sup>4</sup> Writing literary history from the perspective of reading and translation brings forgotten literature – often the work of women authors – to the foreground. Mapping mobility patterns of cultural practitioners is also a way of broadening the horizon: authors did not work in isolation, but operated in international networks. Their epistolary networks make visible how trends and ideas spread across nations.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on influences from abroad on cultural production is revealing as well: many canonical works from Dutch literary history appear to have foreign origins. Let me illustrate this by discussing several writings of major Dutch

2 Leerssen, “Echoes and Images,” p. 129.

3 Billig, *Banal Nationalism*. Leerssen, *Nationalisme*, pp. 91–95, offers several examples of Dutch banal nationalism.

4 Leerssen, “Women Authors and Literary History,” pp. 256–57.

5 Leerssen, *Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, pp. 20–21.

authors from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century: Hieronymus van Alphen (1746–1803), the duo Elisabeth Wolff-Bekker (1738–1804, better known as Betje Wolff) and Agatha Deken (1741–1804), and Hendrik Tollens (1780–1856).

## Two “National” Icons of Dutch Literature: Jantje and Sara

Hieronymus van Alphen is known as the champion of Dutch children’s literature. His collection of children’s poetry, published as *Proeve van kleine gedigten voor kinderen* (Sample of Little Poems for Children, 1778), became an instant success: expanded versions and sequels were reprinted time and again. Translations appeared in English, French and German. The collection contains one of the most well-known poems of Dutch literature. The opening verses are still familiar to most Dutch people:

Jantje zag eens pruimen hangen	Johnny saw some fine plums hanging,
O! als eijeren zo groot.	Oh! like eggs, so very large,
't Scheen, dat Jantje wou gaan plukken,	Johnny seemed about to pluck them,
Schoon zijn vader 't hem verbood. <sup>6</sup>	Though against his father’s charge.

The poem, entitled “De pruimeboom” (The Plum Tree), is about the little boy Jantje. He is hesitating whether to disobey his father, who has forbidden him to pick plums. Jantje decides to listen to his father and is rewarded for his virtuous behaviour with a hat full of plums. Young readers could learn from this poetic tale that virtuous behaviour was most rewarding in the end.

Van Alphen became the Dutch icon of children’s literature, and was celebrated for having created such an appealing figure as the obedient Jantje. Literary scholar Piet Buijnsters has pointed out the huge influence of German authors on Van Alphen’s work.<sup>7</sup> Van Alphen was in particular inspired by Christian Felix Weisse’s *Lieder für Kinder* (*Moral Songs for Children*, 1767–69) and Gottlob Wilhelm Burmann’s *Lieder für kleine Mädchen und Jünglinge* (*Songs for Little Girls and Boys*, 1777). The similarities in form, style and even choice of words are, in fact, abundant. Some poems might be called free translations, others free adaptations. An example of the last category – not

6 Alphen, *Kleine gedigten voor kinderen*, pp. 56–57; Alphen, *Poetry for Children*, pp. 20–21, trans. Millard.

7 Buijnsters’ epilogue in Alphen, *Kleine gedigten voor kinderen*, pp. 181–82.

explicitly mentioned by Buijnsters – is the poem about prudent Jantje. Van Alphen took his inspiration from Weisse's verse about the young boy Hans, who finds an apple:

Als jüngst Hänschen in dem Gras	As young Hans picked himself
Sich ein Blumensträuschen las,	a bouquet of flowers in the grass
Fand er, welch Vergnügen!	He found, what joy!
Einen Apfel liegen.	An apple lying there.
Hänschen hüpfte froh daher;	Hans hopped happily along;
'Ey wie wunderschön ist er!'	Hey, how beautiful it is!
Sprach er; meinem Magen	He said, my stomach
Soll er wohl behagen. <sup>8</sup>	Will enjoy it.

Van Alphen clearly echoed this poem, but made his own version of it: Jantje and Hans are both tempted to eat a piece of fruit. The ending, however, is different. Hans cannot control himself, and finds a worm in his apple, while Jantje is the more prudent boy and is rewarded for that. Van Alphen borrowed from other poems by Weisse as well, and combined them into one story. Obedience is, for example, the main theme of the poem "Der Gehorsam," which contains the following verses: "Bestrafet mich mein Vater nun,/ Will ich seinen Willen thun,/ Darf ich es den, so übel nehmen?" (If my father punishes me now,/ If I want to do his will, need I take it so badly).<sup>9</sup> Van Alphen does not literally copy these verses, but also writes from the perspective of the inner voice of a little boy who is struggling with daily issues (Fig. 9.1).

Van Alphen's "plum tree" became immensely popular. Its continuing success is due not only to the many reprints of the poem, but also the many parodies and repackaging efforts, in songs, rap and television sketches. Today, there is even a child-friendly restaurant in the province of Limburg carrying the name *Jantje zag eens pruimen hangen*.

Sara Burgerhart, the protagonist in the epistolary novel *Historie van mejuffrouw Sara Burgerhart* (History of Miss Sara Burgerhart, 1782) can be seen as the female equivalent of Jantje. She was created by two female authors, Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken. Their novel became an instant classic of Dutch literature. In 2020 it attracted new attention because it was included in the *Canon of the Netherlands*, a list of fifty canonical Dutch works, topics

8 Weisse, *Kleine lyrische Gedichte*, p. 71; see also Honings and Jensen, *Romantici en revolutionairen*, pp. 120–21.

9 Weisse, *Kleine lyrische Gedichte*, p. 117.



Fig. 9.1 “Jantje zag eens pruimen hangen” (Johnny Saw Some Fine Plums Hanging). Hieronymus van Alphen, *Kleine gedigten voor kinderen* (Poetry for Children, 1783). Image: Wikimedia Commons.

or historical events.<sup>10</sup> Their novel tells the story of a nineteen-year-old orphan, Sara, who is seduced and kidnapped by the villain “R.” She manages to escape, repents her sins and then marries the wonderful Hendrik Edeling, with whom she has five children. Wolff and Deken created the first originally Dutch *Bildungsroman* for women readers: by making mistakes Sara learns to distinguish virtuous from vicious behaviour, and turns into an exemplary young woman.

There are all sorts of ingredients which have made critics and literary scholars label this novel typically Dutch. Firstly, the names of the characters sound very Dutch. Sara Burgerhart, Hendrik Edeling, Abraham Blankaart and Everard Redelyk: it is as if these characters breathe Dutch values, such as virtuous behaviour and reasonableness. Secondly, all characters use authentic language (filled with typically Dutch expressions) and proverbs. The novel consists of 175 letters, written by a total of 24 correspondents, each with unique linguistic habits. The conceited Wilhelmina van Kwastama

<sup>10</sup> The Canon of the Netherlands (*Canon van Nederland*), a list of fifty canonical Dutch works, topics or historical events, was launched in 2006, and revised in 2020. *Sara Burgerhart* is part of this revised canon. See Nederlands Openluchtmuseum, “Sarah Burgerhart.”

constantly sprinkles her sentences with learned French words, the maid uses simple and down-to-earth words, and the conceited young man Jacob Brunier excels in fabricating complicated sentences. Finally, themes such as homeliness, religious tolerance and practical moralism, which are key ingredients of *Sara Burgerhart*, were seen as prototypical of Dutch society at that time. The novel reinforced the ideal of the enlightened Dutch people, depicted as living in a harmonious society which celebrated family values.

However, there are many reasons to question the typically Dutch nature of all this. In fact, Wolff and Deken imitated their English, French and German predecessors. The celebration of family values was, for instance, just as much part of other European societies. The epistolary novel travelled across Europe, and owed its success to the works of Samuel Richardson, Madame de Genlis and Sophie von La Roche. Leerssen points out that the combination of bourgeois settings and psychological, everyday realism can be witnessed all over Europe: it was a literary trend which pervaded the entire continent's cultural production.<sup>11</sup> Copying daily life was also part of a broader literary trend, and not something invented by Wolff or Deken.

Although the characters of *Sara Burgerhart* seem very realistic (Sara could be the girl next door), there are many elements that undercut this grain of realism.<sup>12</sup> The characters' names, to begin with, point to the ideological message that the authors wanted to communicate: young female readers should behave just as prudently as the protagonist, using their common sense, following enlightened ideas and refraining from religious fanaticism. Sara Burgerhart ("civic heart") and Edeling ("nobleman") show exemplary behaviour, while the villain R is reduced to a consonant (just like "Mr. B" in Richardson's *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded*). On closer inspection, the characters do not behave or speak realistically at all. Abraham Blankaart, guardian of Sara Burgerhart and living in Paris, for instance, is constantly contrasting French aristocratic manners with Dutch civic virtues, such as sobriety and honesty. This is not so much typically Dutch behaviour, but it fits in a European literary trend. Leerssen convincingly argues that Blankaart is the Dutch version of the English John Bull figure.<sup>13</sup>

However, framing *Sara Burgerhart* as typically Dutch, both in the contemporary press and in literary histories, was key to the success of the novel. In the early nineteenth century, when the first Dutch literary histories emerged, patriotism and nationalism were used as criteria to judge the

11 Leerssen, "Tussen huiselijkheid en kosmopolitisme," p. 115.

12 See also Honings and Jensen, *Romantici en revolutionairen*, pp. 87–100.

13 Leerssen, "Tussen huiselijkheid en kosmopolitisme," p. 119.

value of literary works. The better they fitted the nationalistic paradigm, the greater their chances of being incorporated into the Dutch literary canon. This might explain why another epistolary novel, published in the same year as *Sara Burgerhart*, never reached the same canonical status: *De kleine Grandisson, of de gehoorzame zoon* (Little Grandisson, or The Obedient Child, 1782) by Margaretha de Cambon-van der Werken (1734–after 1796). This epistolary novel aimed at boys and girls from the ages of eight to fourteen years, and was a huge international success: it was translated into German, English, French, Swedish and other languages. However, the name of the protagonist, Karel Grandisson, sounded more English than Dutch and made people think it was an adaptation of *The History of Sir Charles Grandisson* (1753) by Richardson (which it was not). Moreover, the Dutch novel was set in London, which also made it less suited for patriotic ends. Remarkably enough, *De kleine Grandisson* has made a comeback in surveys of Dutch literature since the 1990s due to the growing attention to female authorship and transnational approaches.<sup>14</sup> But whether it will ever become part of collective memory, like Jantje and Sara, is doubtful.

### The True Dutch Poet Tollens

The last Dutch literary icon discussed here is Hendrik Tollens. He is considered one of the most nationalistic poets in Dutch literary history and therefore carries the nickname “poet of the fatherland.” His patriotic poems were immensely popular in the nineteenth century. His collected poems, published in 1820–21, circulated in an unprecedented edition of more than ten thousand copies.<sup>15</sup> Tollens combined national-historical themes with topics from everyday life (birth, marriage, grief), which appealed to a broad audience. He was also the author of the national anthem, “Wien Neerlands bloed” (Those in Whom Dutch Blood, 1817), and *Tafereel van de Overwintering der Hollanders op Nova Zembla in de jaren 1596 en 1597* (The Hollanders in Nova Zembla in the Winter of 1596–97: An Arctic Poem), an epic tale of the Dutch sea hero Willem Barentsz, which became a bestseller. In short, no other author seems more entitled to be called the true Dutch poet than Tollens.

Nevertheless, looking at his work from a transnational perspective leads to a more complex picture. During his lifetime he translated and adapted so

14 For example, Van Dijk, Van Gemert and Ottway, *Writing the History of Women's History*, pp. 120–21.

15 The following is based on Jensen, “Dichter des vaderlands?”

many foreign literary works that the qualification “typically Dutch” needs some correction. A quantification of Tollens’s work shows that almost half of his entire production consisted of translations and adaptations from German, English and French authors.<sup>16</sup> Take for instance one of his best-known poems “Op den eersten tand van mijn jongstgeboren zoontje” (On the First Tooth of my Youngest Son, 1812), a close reading of this text shows it was an adaptation of a poem by the German poet Matthias Claudius, of whom Tollens was a great fan. Tollens translated many of his poems, and often used Claudius’s verses as inspiration for his own work.

Bearing this in mind, one should be cautious in qualifying his work as typically Dutch, even if the title of a poem seems to suggest Dutch roots. The romance “Oene van Sneek,” published in 1839, is a telling example.<sup>17</sup> It tells the tragic love story of a young Frisian woman, Griete, who must marry Gijsbert, but is in love with somebody else, namely Oene van Sneek. Griete does not show up at her own wedding but flees with her lover, leaving Gijsbert broken-hearted. The reader is made to believe that Tollens told an old folk tale derived from local Frisian sources, but he in fact adapted a poem by Walter Scott, “Jock o’ Hazeldean.” Tollens copied the contents and literary form from Scott, but changed the names and environment to make it all sound very Dutch. This was not in the least an authentic Frisian tale.

The fact that the poem was recorded by several Dutch folk singers added to the myth that this was an original Dutch story. Not only did the Zangeres Zonder Naam (1919–1998), who was immensely popular in the 1980s, perform the song;<sup>18</sup> it was also part of a collection of school songs recorded by Duo Karst, a well-known folk duo. Few listeners will probably have realized that they were actually hearing a poem by Tollens, who largely copied Scott.

## Unique Selling Points of Dutch Literature

Although Jantje, Sara Burgerhart and Oene van Sneek are unmistakably less Dutch than their names suggest, they are framed as such in traditional literary historiography. On the one hand, it is a literary scholar’s task to remind readers of the fact that such characters did not express the nation’s soul or spirit but that they were the literary offspring of authors who found

16 Jensen, “Dichter des vaderlands?,” pp. 172–73.

17 I analyse this poem in Jensen, “Hoe vaderlands was de eerste dichter des vaderlands?”

18 De Zangeres Zonder Naam was the stage name of Maria (Mary) Servaes-Beij. She was known for her sentimental songs and protest songs.

their inspiration abroad. They were just as European as Dutch. On the other hand, there is something particularly Dutch about them as well, which is reflected in the use of typically Dutch expressions and the way these characters are embedded in a historical context that looked familiar to native speakers.

Besides, there are all sorts of institutional and strategic reasons for emphasizing the Dutchness of these literary characters, and teaching literary histories along national lines. Future generations do not have to worry whether Shakespeare will still be part of their curricula, but there is no guarantee that Vondel, Wolff and Deken, or Tollens will be endlessly taught at high schools or universities. With the decreasing number of students in Dutch language and literature, and the switch to English-taught bachelor's and master's programmes only, language-specific literary specializations are gradually vanishing from educational programmes.

For strategic purposes, it therefore remains of vital importance that scholars keep stressing the importance of in-depth knowledge and the uniqueness of Dutch historical literature to policy advisors, board members of universities and the broader public. Therefore, I fully support the literary historian Marita Mathijsen, who once claimed Tollens outclassed Victor Hugo in all respects, even though we know that Tollens took much of his inspiration from French, German and English authors.<sup>19</sup> Besides, nothing is more national than internationalism.

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