



A Curator's Perspective: Communities in Communication, July-December 2014

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A Curator's Perspective: *Communities in Communication*, July-December 2014

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As with any exhibition, intellectual and practical concerns combined to shape *Communities in Communication: Languages and Cultures in the Low Countries, 1450-1530*. In practical terms, I was keen to showcase the substantial holdings of the John Rylands Library from and about this dynamic culture. The corpus has been built up over more than a century: one manuscript, French MS 144, was acquired as recently as 1997.¹ Yet libraries and users worldwide can easily underestimate how much material relates to the Low Countries. Catalogues invariably classify documents by language and/or medium; a practice exemplified by the very shelfmark of French MS 144, and which obscures the connections between the cultural products of a region where books were produced in Dutch, French, English, and Latin, and in both manuscript and print.² *Communities in Communication* was conceived partly to counter this tendency towards fragmentation.

A similar tendency is apparent in most research on the vernacular literature of the late medieval Low Countries, often referred to as the Burgundian Netherlands because the region was mostly ruled by the Dukes of Burgundy and their Hapsburg successors in the late Middle Ages. Modern scholars have largely considered work by French-speaking authors in isolation from work by Dutch-speaking authors, and vice versa. It was in response to this exclusivity that the intellectual impulse for the exhibition developed. Various researchers have recently suggested that in the literary field – which includes historiography and theatre as well as poetry and narrative, and scribes and printers as well as authors and translators – the interactions between French- and Dutch-speakers were more diverse and important than have previously been supposed.³ Building on these studies, I was eager to show how interactions of this kind are attested in books: in translations, adaptations, commissions, cross-cultural publishing ventures, and so forth. The aim was to present a fuller picture of cultural diversity in the region, by revealing how speakers of different languages drew on each other's cultures in ways that not only enriched their own culture but also encouraged respect for the other.

The exhibition was part of a larger enterprise to develop understanding of transcultural exchange in the Burgundian Netherlands, specifically in the region's poetry; to elucidate how far this poetry shapes and is shaped by the interplay between different languages, cultures, and communities. A collective research project under my direction, 'Transcultural Critical Editing: Vernacular Poetry in the Burgundian Netherlands, 1450-1530', was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) between 2012 and 2015 [grant number AH/J001481/1]. The project was primarily dedicated to producing new scholarly editions of poetry written in or about the region, with an apparatus (commentaries, glossaries, etc.) that paid particular attention to transcultural features such as linguistic borrowing or stylistic influence.⁴ *Communities in Communication* sought to disseminate the project's work beyond the academic realm, providing a wider audience with insights into the history of cultural diversity.

Between the original proposal for the exhibition and its opening in the Christie Gallery in summer 2014, almost four years passed. In that time I was able to develop interpretative perspectives on the materials selected for display, partly thanks to the ongoing progress of the wider 'Transcultural Critical Editing' project. A number of papers presented at a conference organized by the project team (Murray Edwards College, Cambridge, 12-14 September 2013) greatly advanced understanding of either individual items or wider issues. It was revealed, for instance, that changes in verse form in a Dutch translation of Pierre Michault's moral allegory *La Dance aux Aveugles* were prompted by systemic differences between French and Dutch verse; that when a printer illustrated a Dutch edition of Olivier de La Marche's allegorical quest *Le Chevalier délibéré* with woodcuts from an earlier French edition, he appended a glossary so that Dutch-speaking readers could make sense of the French labels that formed part of the cuts; and that municipal crossbow competitions could blur distinctions between courtly and urban cultures.⁵ At the same time, my initial 'wish list' of exhibits evolved into a thematically organized selection. Some themes were suggested by obvious affinities between items: hence three early printed phrase books and vocabularies, published in the region or adapted from texts originally produced

there, formed a clear group under the heading ‘Talking to the Neighbours’. Others reflected significant topics in wider research on the literature of the Low Countries, such as the complex relationship between the region’s courtly aristocracy and its cities. The theme ‘Court and City’ brought together the work of two near-contemporary authors whose careers encompassed both – the Dutch-speaking Anthonis de Roovere and the French-speaking Jean Molinet – as well as that of the twentieth-century Belgian historian Henri Pirenne, the most influential proponent of the somewhat oversimplified view that the nobility and the cities were inevitably in conflict.

While it took thematic shape, the selection of exhibits was also progressively narrowed down. Considerations of conservation ruled out a number of items that had been high on my list of desiderata, most notably Dutch MS 13, an anthology of prayers that includes an important devotional poem by De Roovere, and French MS 144, which contains historical writing in verse including pieces by Jean Molinet and Nicaise Ladam. Subsequently, the space available in display cases compelled further exclusions from some of the themed groupings. In these instances I aimed to retain manuscript items at the expense of printed books – since relevant Library holdings were predominantly in print – and vernacular books, balancing the representation of French and Dutch where possible, at the expense of Latin ones. Items of particular visual, material, or historical interest were retained so as to ensure the most exciting possible experience for visitors. The Library copy of Caxton’s *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* was therefore preferred to the *Cronycles of the londe of Englund* printed by Gheraert Leeu, which, though a fascinating example of Antwerp publishing for the English market, lacks the sheer ‘wow factor’ of the first book printed in English (most likely in Ghent).⁶ No items were loaned from other libraries, though I loaned my own copies of two modern facsimile editions, both fifteenth-century Dutch translations of French works that were closely related to other exhibits. It had been a deliberate policy from the outset not to rely on other libraries, partly on the grounds of economy (the expense associated with loans might have compromised funding for the wider research project), and partly in order to do the best possible justice to the Library’s own holdings.

Some of the items that could not be displayed were nevertheless able to play a part in the exhibition, thanks to the Library's imaging team. Reproductions of text or images from these items were incorporated either into the explanatory panels that accompanied each case, or into the exhibition's companion booklet. In this way the range of relevant materials could be extended, to encompass Leeu's *Cronycles of the londe of Englund* and French MS 144 among others. Besides giving visitors a richer visual experience, this served the exhibition's intellectual purpose by presenting a greater cumulative weight of evidence for transcultural exchange in the Burgundian Netherlands, and for the influence of this exchange on the poetry produced there. With the same aim in mind, the discursive text in the companion booklet (totalling some 4,000 words) considered books and topics that could not be accommodated within the cases, panels, and labels of the physical exhibition.

While the printed booklet extends the exhibition's scope and interpretative value, the use of newer technologies aims to prolong its lifespan and help to capture visitors' reactions. A Twitter hashtag, printed on the cover of the booklet, encourages visitors to express their responses in ways that may complement traditional pen-and-paper feedback (which remains available to visitors). It is also planned to develop a virtual exhibition, adapting the companion booklet and providing additional images, to augment the exhibition's online presence.⁷ Through these means, it is hoped that *Communities in Communication* will live up to its name – by conveying ideas from the academic community to a larger public, and by conveying the views of that public back to researchers and librarians.

¹ See Adrian Armstrong, 'A Manuscript of French Historical Writing', *John Rylands Research Institute Newsletter*, 14-15 (Summer-Winter 1997), 16-17. The most extensive study is Estelle Doudet, 'L'Identité bourguignonne au temps des Habsbourg: Mise en recueil et littérature de circonstance dans le manuscrit de Manchester, J. Rylands University Library, French 144', in

Tania Van Hemelryck and Stefania Marzano (eds), *Le Recueil au Moyen Âge: La fin du Moyen Âge* (Turnhout, Brepols, 2010), pp. 113-23.

² See, for instance, Wim Blockmans and Walter Prevenier, *The Promised Lands: The Low Countries under Burgundian Rule, 1369-1530*, trans. Lizabeth Fackelmans, ed. Edward Peters (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), and various essays in Lotte Hellinga, Alastair Duke, Jacob Harskamp, Theo Hermans, assisted by Elaine Paintin (eds), *The Bookshop of the World: The Role of the Low Countries in the Book-Trade 1473-1941* (Goy-Houten, Hes & De Graaf, 2001).

³ See especially Jelle Koopmans, Mark A. Meadow, Kees Meerhoff, and Marijke Spies (eds), *Rhetoric – Rhétoriciens – Rederijkers* (Amsterdam, North-Holland, 1995); Katell Lavéant, *Un théâtre des frontières: La culture dramatique dans les provinces du Nord aux XV^e et XVI^e siècles* (Orléans, Paradigme, 2011); Johan Oosterman, ‘Tussen twee wateren zwem ik: Anthonis de Roovere tussen rederijkers en rhétoriciens’, *Jaarboek De Fonteyne*, 49-50 (1999-2000), 11-29; and Graeme Small, ‘When Indiciaires Meet Rederijkers: A Contribution to the History of the Burgundian “Theatre State”’, in Johan Oosterman (ed.), *Stad van koopmanschap en vrede: Literatuur in Brugge tussen Middeleeuwen en Rederijkerstijd* (Leuven, Peeters, 2005), pp. 133-61.

⁴ See www.transculturalediting.eu [accessed 22 July 2014].

⁵ The relevant studies are, respectively, Rebecca Dixon, ‘The Blind Leading the Blind? Choreographing the Transcultural in Pierre Michault’s *La Dance aux Aveugles* and Geraerd Leeu’s *Van den drie blinde danssen*’; Susie Speakman Sutch, ‘Cross-cultural Intersections in the Middle Dutch Translations of *Le Chevalier délibéré* by Olivier de La Marche’; and Laura Crombie, ‘Target Languages: Multilingual Communication in Poetic Descriptions of Crossbow Competitions’. All are forthcoming in Adrian Armstrong and Elsa Strietman (eds), *The Multilingual Muse: Transcultural Poetics in the Burgundian Netherlands*.

⁶ On Caxton’s earliest editions and his career in the Low Countries, see Lotte Hellinga, ‘William Caxton, Colard Mansion, and the Printer in Type 1’, *Bulletin du Bibliophile* (2011), 86-114.

⁷ See www.library.manchester.ac.uk/rylands/exhibitions/communitiesincommunication/

[accessed 22 July 2014].