

# Jacob van Maerlant's strophic poems and Flemish literature

## Joost Van Driel (Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen)

### ABSTRACT

The thirteenth century Dutch author Jacob van Maerlant wrote ten strophic poems ('Strofische gedichten') in a remarkable form. Most of them are written in stanzas of thirteen lines with the rhyming scheme *aabaabaabaabb*, also named 'clausule'. Maerlant's choice to use this form, which is unique in medieval European poetry, is enigmatic, given the fact that in most of his other works he does not use such remarkable and experimental literary forms. In this article I relate Maerlant's choice to the literary-historical context of thirteenth century Flemish literature, in which Maerlant can be situated. The (epical) literature from this region seems to be concerned with formal and stylistic experiments. Maerlant's strophic poems could be inspired by these experiments. At the end of this article I discuss the influence of Maerlant's strophic poetry on fourteenth century Middle Dutch literature.

### 1 Introduction

The strophic poems ('Strofische gedichten') written by Jacob van Maerlant (ca. 1230 - ca.1290) are regarded as some of the masterpieces of Middle Dutch literature. In their edition Franck and Verdam (1918: XIII) state that, besides the 'incomparable' beast epic *Van den vos Reynaerde*, Maerlant's poems can be considered to be the best works that have been written in the Middle Dutch language. Some of these poems are lamentations in the form of a dialogue, such as the best-known *Wapene Martijn* (Woe Martijn!), the *Tweede Martijn* (Second Martijn), the *Derde Martijn* (Third Martijn), and the *Verkeerde Martijn* (Wrong Martijn). The other strophic poems are the *Disputacie van Onser Vrouwen ende van den Heilighen Cruce* (Dispute between Our Lady and the Cross), the *Clausule van der Bible* (Clausule of the Bible), two hymnic poems *Van ons Heren wonde* (About the wounds of our Lord) and *Van den vijf vrouden* (About the five wise men), and two complaints *Der kerken claghe* (The complaint of the Church) and *Van den lande van Oversee* (About the land overseas). In all, these poems contain more than thirty-five thousand verses.

Maerlant's ten strophic poems are exceptional in his oeuvre, exceptional from a formal point of view. Jacob van Maerlant is famous for his moralistic, didactic works, such as a rhymed translation of parts of the Bible (the *Rijmbijbel*), and a chronicle, the so-called *Spiegel Historiae*, a history of the world. In his younger days he wrote chivalric romances, for example about Alexander the Great (*Alexanders geesten*) and the Arthurian hero Torec (*Torec*). All these works are set in rhyming couplets.<sup>1</sup> This rather simple literary form with little ornamentation is the standard rhyming scheme for all thirteenth and fourteenth century Dutch narrative poetry (Van Driel 2007a, 32-37).

Maerlant's strophic poems, however, are of a very different nature. Most of them are written in a form, known by the name of *clausule*, which is unique in medieval European poetry: it consists of stanzas of thirteen lines with the rhyming scheme *aabaabaabaabb*.<sup>2</sup> A fine example of this form is the opening stanza of *Wapene Martijn*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The only exceptions are a rather isolated passage in *Alexanders geesten* (Book IV, vv. 391-1082), written in alternating rhyme (abab), and a small passage in the *Spiegel Historiae* (Partie I, chapter 47), written in monorhyme (aaaa).

<sup>2</sup> Not written in this form are *Van ons Heren wonde* and *Van den vijf vrouden*, which have the rhyme scheme 'aabaabccbcbb'.

<sup>3</sup> Characteristic for Maerlant's strophic form is the fact that the stanza can be divided in four symmetric parts (distiches).

Wapene, Martijn! Hoe salt gaen?  
 Sal die werelt iet lange staen  
 In dus cranken love?  
 So moet vrouwe ver Ere saen  
 Sonder twifel en waen  
 Rumen heren hove.  
 Ic sie den valschen wel ontfaen,  
 Die de heren connen dwaen  
 Ende plucken van den stove.  
 Ende ic sie den rechten slaen,  
 Bede bespotten ende vaen  
 Also die mese in de clove,  
 Recht offene God verscrove. (1-13)<sup>4</sup>

(Woe, Martijn! What will happen? Shall the world stay in such a miserable state? In that case, soon and without doubt my lady Honour will leave the courts of the nobility. I see the villains are welcome, who can clear the lords of all the dust. And I see the righteous being oppressed, mocked and prisoned, like a titmouse in a cage, as if God had rejected them.)

Several researchers (Franck and Verdam 1918: LX-LXI; Van Mierlo 1954, 12) argue that Maerlant, though he must have been inspired by Latin examples, can be seen as the inventor of this strophic form; especially his use of the thirteenth verse that concludes the stanza seems to be original.

Apart from the strophic structure, Maerlant's style in the strophic poems has been praised. Scholars characterize this style with terms like 'poetic glow', 'extraordinary vividness', and 'perfect rhythm' (Franck & Verdam 1918, p. LV-LX). Though these terms are somewhat subjective, they indicate that Maerlant did his utmost to give his strophic poems a high literary quality: the form of these poems must have been his priority. This observation is rather surprising. In his large oeuvre Maerlant does not seem to be concerned very much with formal aspects of literature, especially not with experiments in versification. From a stylistic point of view his oeuvre is constant, in spite of the wide range of sources he uses and the literature he must have known, ranging from Old French Arthurian romances to Latin religious works and scientific sources.<sup>5</sup> In all these works Maerlant seems to be concerned more with truth than with beauty, more with contents than with style. For this reason some scholars, especially the influential Flemish literary historian J. van Mierlo (1878-1958), have argued that the poetic beauty of Middle Dutch literature was 'chained' by Maerlant's didactic and moralistic poetics (cf. Van Mierlo 1950). The contrast leads to a question: why did Maerlant, an author with no obvious concern for experiments in versification in his other works, write this kind of poetry? What was his reason for writing poems in such a unique form?<sup>6</sup>

Several researchers have related Maerlant's strophic poems to his education. It is likely that he was educated in the collegiate church of Sint Donaas, at Bruges. In Sint Donaas a vivid cult of Maria existed, which went together with a strong hymnic tradition. Perhaps this hymnic tradition and the devotion to Maria have influenced Maerlant in the writing of his strophic poems, some of

<sup>4</sup> For all quotations of Maerlant's strophic poems in this article, I refer to the edition of Frank and Verdam 1918.

<sup>5</sup> On the sources of Maerlant: Berendrecht 1996 and Van Oostrom 1996.

<sup>6</sup> One should be careful to view Maerlant as a poet who was not concerned with the stylistic beauty of his epic and didactic works, as has been done in the past. It is true, however, that he does not use difficult rhyming schemes and openly rejects words that are too beautiful (*scone worden*). On Maerlant's style and poetics: Van Driel 2007, 170-176.

which are laudations of the mother of Jesus Christ. In this view, Maerlant is considered to be the founding father of a Flemish hymnic tradition that stays alive in the next centuries, with representatives like the fourteenth-century poets of Gruuthuse-manuscript and Anthonis de Roovere (1430-1482). This tradition combined a love for complex literary and strophic forms with the worshipping of Maria.<sup>7</sup> This explanation is tempting, but also insufficient. Insufficient because Maerlant's ten strophic poems have a much wider range of topics than simply the devotion to Maria. Most of them deal with moral questions, such as the state of affairs in the Church or the unsuccessful crusades. Therefore, a cult of Maria can not explain sufficiently the form of Maerlant's poems. But I do think there is a relationship between Maerlant and a Flemish literary tradition. In this article I will elaborate on this relationship, by placing Maerlant's strophic poetry in the literary historical context of thirteenth century Flanders. Maerlant's poems can not be seen as isolated cases, I will argue, but must be considered in coherence with the formal and stylistic features of narrative literature in medieval Flanders. If one takes this literature into account, Maerlant's decision to write these poems and the remarkable way he shaped them, becomes more understandable.

## 2 Thirteenth century Flanders and Jacob van Maerlant

Relatively early in medieval Europe, Flanders had a dense urbanization, comparable with that of northern Italy. This small region was characterized by a large population, a flourishing economy and wealth (Blockmans 1999, 413). Moreover, Flanders was a dynamic region. Cities like Bruges and Ghent were major international trading places in Europe. The region was also dynamic from a literary and linguistic perspective. It seems likely that a large part of the aristocracy was multilingual, speaking both French and Dutch. The contacts between the Flemish nobility and French literature were intense, this is illustrated by Chrétien de Troyes, who wrote his *Perceval* under the auspices of the Flemish count Philip of Alsace (1157-91).<sup>8</sup>

Recent research claims that many of the Middle Dutch epics and romances originated in this urban context. Several romances have been connected with the bourgeoisie at Ghent and Bruges and very recently even the Middle Dutch chansons de geste have been placed against the background of urban culture (Van Driel 2007a, 178; Van Oostrom 2005 and 2006). Not the court, but the upper class of the urban citizens, such as traders and merchants, formed the audience of the narrative literature. This holds especially for Flanders, where the aristocracy was interested mainly in French culture, and where an urban upper class with power and wealth was attendant.

It is in this context that Jacob van Maerlant must be situated. Jacob was born in Flanders, probably around 1230.<sup>9</sup> It is likely that he was educated in the city of Bruges, in that time a very prosperous and dynamic city. Around 1260 he is living in Voorne, where he writes several romances (*Alexanders geesten*, *Torec*), probably for the court of Holland. Years later, around 1260, Maerlant has returned to Flanders, where he lives in Damme, a prosperous city close to Bruges. There he writes his most important and voluminous works, that have a more didactic and moralistic nature: *Sinte Franciscus leven* (a rhymed biography of Franciscus of Assisi), *Der naturen bloeme* (an adaptation of *Der natura rerum* of Thomas of Cantimpré), a rhymed translation of Petrus Comestor's *Historia scolastica*; and the *Spiegel Historiael*, the history of the world in more than ninety thousand verses (based on the *Speculum historiale* by Vincentius of Beauvais). Though Maerlant is living in Flanders, he is still firmly connected to other parts of the Low Countries, such as Holland, Zeeland and Utrecht. The *Spiegel Historiael*, for example, is dedicated to Floris V, count of Holland, and *Sinte Franciscus Leven* is written for the friars minor

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<sup>7</sup> Van Oostrom 1996, 69 observes a strong connection between Maerlant's striving for poetical beauty and his worshipping of Maria.

<sup>8</sup> On French literature in Flanders: see Van Oostrom 2006, 218-223.

<sup>9</sup> A biography and overview of Maerlant's oeuvre and sources is offered by Biesheuvel & Palmer 2002.

in Utrecht (cf. Van Oostrom 1996, 523). In this period Maerlant also wrote his *Strophic Poems*, though an exact dating of the individual poems is not possible (cf. Reynaert 1996).

Because of his education in Flanders and his later working years in Damme, Maerlant was well embedded in the literary culture of thirteenth century Flanders. This region was one of the most productive regions concerning Middle Dutch secular literature, both in a qualitative as a quantitative sense. For example, the majority of Dutch romances and epics has been created by Flemish poets, and some of the more famous stories are of Flemish origin, such as the one about Reynaert the Fox, *Van den vos Reynaerde* by Willem, *Floris ende Blancefloer* by Diederic van Assenede, or the Arthurian romance *Walewein* by Penninc and Pieter Vostaert. Unfortunately, medieval Flemish literature knows an extremely fragmented and anonymous survival. For example, from this period there have survived about forty Flemish romances, but we only know the names of seven authors.<sup>10</sup> This lack of information on authorship makes the development of Flemish narrative literature from this period somewhat intangible. It is difficult to relate authors to literary phenomena and we hardly know which works have been written when and by whom.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, epical literature from medieval Flanders can be characterized more precisely than one would think at first glance. Recent investigations show that some important Flemish authors of romances and other narrative works distinguished themselves clearly in their style and language use. Most of this literature looks quite uniform and conventional, but several authors show a very deliberate, conscious stylization of their works. I will argue in this article that the style of this Flemish literature can be regarded as a major motivation for Jacob van Maerlant to write his strophic poems in such an original form. In the next sections I will discuss three writers, originating from thirteenth century Flanders. They are all contemporaries of Jacob van Maerlant.

### 3 Stylistic diversity in Flemish literature: some examples

The author of the so-called ‘Flemish *Rose*’ (ca. 1300) an adaptation of the French *Roman de la Rose*, is also known as ‘The Master of the Flemish *Rose*’.<sup>12</sup> This epithet, introduced by the Dutch scholar K. Heeroma (1909-1972), refers to the stylistic craftsmanship of the author. Throughout his work he shows a constant and remarkable predilection for all kinds of repetitive effects. In the Flemish *Rose* one can discern passages that look like songs, with refrains and couplets. By repeating words, sentences or verses the Flemish author gives his *Rose* a somewhat lyrical character. The fact that the author shows this characteristic style also in passages that are not inspired by his French source, indicates his stylistic originality (cf. Heeroma 1958; Van der Poel 1989, 107-120). In some cases the formal repetitions are relatively simple, for example when he uses parallelism (‘No te porte, no te lande’ – fragment Ab1, 133: not in the city, not in the country) or an enumeration (‘Coninc, prince, leec no clerck’ – fragment Ab1, 146: king, prince, layman nor clergyman). In other cases, the repetitions are larger and more complex. An example is the next passage, where an enumeration is combined with the use of parallelism.

Dustaen keren, dustaen gaen,  
Dustaen waken, spreken, staen

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<sup>10</sup> Based on the compendium in Kienhorst 1988. These writers are Willem (author of *Van den vos Reynaerde*), Diederic van Assenede (*Floris ende Blancefloer*), Jacob van Maerlant (author of many romances and chronicles), Loy Latewaert (author of the romance *Seghelijn of Jeruzalem*), Penninc and Pieter Vostaert (authors of the Arthurian romance *Walewein*), en Philip Utenbroeke (author of a part of the world chronicle *Spiegel Historiae*).

<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is not unsurprising that the Middle Dutch literature from the county of Flanders has not been the subject of an extensive monograph, while the literature written at the court of Holland and the literature that originated from the court of the dukes of Brabant has been given ample attention (Van Oostrom 1992; Sleiderink 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Heeroma 1958, 76 and 82. This is also the edition I use.

Sal di doen margin dijn vel. (Fragment Bj, 49-51)

(This kind of turning, this kind of going, this kind of waking, speaking, standing will make your skin lean)

These repetitive constructions seem to be composed very deliberately, especially when the repetition of formal structures covers a great distance. In the next example the poet varies on the structure that underlies the phrase ‘dorpernie sal ic vlien’. The introducing and concluding sentences enclose one verse, while the intermediate repetitions all cover two verses.

Dorpernie sal ic vlien.  
Van niemene sal ic seggen quaet  
No vertellen sine mesdaet.  
Hoveschelike sal ic groeten  
Alle de gene die mi gemoeten.  
Ribaudie no dorperhede  
Ne sal ic spreken te ghere stede.  
Alle vrouwen sal ic werden  
Ende sal mi wachten van hoverden.  
Cuusch sal ic wesen tallen tide. (fragment Al, 986-995)

(I shall flee from villainy. Of nobody I shall speak evil and tell his crimes. Courteously I shall greet all those I will meet. Nowhere I shall speak impolite. I shall hold all women in high esteem and I shall refrain from impudence. I shall stay pure always.)

The author seemed to enjoy to experiment with formal structures, repeating them in a complex way. In the *Rose* one in ten verses is part of such a formal repetition in some way. Such stylistic playfulness is very scarce in most other Middle Dutch works, as a comparative analysis shows (Van Driel 2007a, 65). Only one other poet comes close to him, namely the anonymous author of *Vanden leve ons Heren – Of the life of our Lord*.

The versification of this thirteenth-century narrative about the passion of Jesus Christ is based on the repetition of sounds, words or even complete verses. The next passage, a quotation of the words of Jesus Christ, illustrates this ‘repetitive style’.<sup>13</sup>

‘Mi selen sie verraden saen.  
Mi selen sie houden ende vaen.  
Mi selen sie geselen ende slaen.  
Mi selen sie crucen, sonder waen.  
Mi selen sie dorne setten op mijn hoeft.  
Mi selen sie onwerden, des mi geloeft.  
Mi selen sie spuwen in minen mont.  
Mi selen sie onwerden als enen hont.’ (1354-1361)

(They will betray me soon. They will catch me and prison me. They will torture and beat me. They will crucify me. They will put thorns on my head. They will debase me. They will spit me in my mouth. They will debase me like a dog.)

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<sup>13</sup> Beuken 1968 offers an edition of the text.

Sometimes the author plays with the repetition of sounds. In the following passage, for example, the *s* of the word *soe* seems to have inspired him to repeat other words that begin with the same consonant.

Die Joden gingen te rade saen  
Soe valsche ende soe gebose.  
Sie maecten onder hen grote nose.  
Sie hadden onwert sine waert,  
Sine tale, sine werke, sine vaert.  
Sie seiden: ‘Wie es dese man die dit doet?  
Sine tale en dunct ons niet goet.’ (1087-1093)

(The Jews came together quickly, in an evil manner. They made a great rumor. They felt contempt for his value, his language, his deeds, his life. They said: ‘Who is this man that is doing these things? His sayings do not appear to be right.’)

In *Vanden levene ons Heren* two of every ten verses is part of a formal repetition.<sup>14</sup> When reading this passionate work it seems that nearly all the verses are linked to each other. These repetitions lend the text a certain cadence, a rhythm. Therefore, it is not surprising that some scholars have argued that *Vanden levene ons Heren* was written in some kind of strophic form, comparable to the *laissez* of the French chansons de geste. A genuine strophic structure, however, is not characteristic for *Vanden levene ons Heren*.<sup>15</sup> But it is true that the poet of *Vanden levene ons Heren* has stylized the story of the passion of Christ in an extreme way and very passionately. With his love for repetitions, the author differs strongly from the conventional versification that characterizes most Dutch narrative works from the thirteenth and fourteenth century.

A playful attitude, similar to what we experienced in the Flemish *Rose* and *Vanden levene ons Heren*, can be encountered in *Van den vos Reynaerde*, a thirteenth century animal epic by a poet named Willem, who based this work partly on the Old French *Roman de Renart*. Willem’s work is considered to be one of the masterpieces of medieval Dutch literature.<sup>16</sup> This praise can be explained by its delicate plot and vivid conversations (cf. Van Driel 2009a), but also the characteristic versification of Willem’s work makes it charming. For example, in the following passage one can experience a rather complex repetition.<sup>17</sup> The passage combines versinternal parallelism (e.g. 2362: *In meneghen bosch, in meneghe haghén*) with versexternal repetitions (e.g. 2367/2369: *Waest bi nachte, waest bi daghe* vs. *Waest bi daghe, waest bi nachte*).

‘Ic wachte nauwe tallen stonden  
Minen vader ende leide laghen  
*In meneghen bosch, in meneghe haghén,*  
Beede in velde ende in woude,  
Waer mijn vader, die lusteghe houde,  
Henen trac ende henen liep.  
*Was het droghe, was het diep,*  
*Waest bi nachte, waest bi daghe,*  
*Ic was emmer in die laghe.*

<sup>14</sup> The exact scores are as follows: 18.6% of the verses of *Vanden levene ons Heren* is part of formal repetitions, 10.5% of the verses of the Flemish *Rose* is part of formal repetitions. For details of these measurements: see Van Driel 2007a, 65.

<sup>15</sup> See Van Driel (2007a, 68) for a discussion of the assumption that the work was written in a strophic form.

<sup>16</sup> The status of masterpiece of Middle Dutch literature is affirmed in Wackers 1999.

<sup>17</sup> I quote *Van den vos Reynaerde* in the edition of Bouwman & Besamusca 2002.

*Waest bi daghe, waest bi nachte,  
Ic was emmer in die wachte.’* (2360-2370)

(‘All the time I waited carefully for my father and I sought hiding places in many forests, in many bushes, both in the fields and in the woods, wherever my father, that cunning old man, had been walking. Whether it was dry, whether it was deep, whether by night, whether by day, always I was in my hiding places. Whether by day, whether by night, I was always attentive.’)

Willem also shows a fondness for repetition on the phonological level. He uses all kinds of alliterations, internal rhymes and other sound effects. These devices lend his verses a certain melodic quality, different from the standard epical versification.<sup>18</sup> One can experience this right from the beginning of *Van den vos Reynaerde*, in the opening verses: *Willem die Madocke maecte, daer hi dicken omme waecte*. The first verse is opened by a consonant (*w*) that is also the first sound of the last word of the second verse (*waecte*), and in the space between them the dominance of the *m* is striking. Very often these sounds have a humoristic effect, for example, when Belin the ram and his spouse appear for the first time in the story.

Doe spranc up Belin de ram  
Ende sine hye, die met hem quam.  
Dat was dame Ha Wy.  
Belin sprac: ‘Gawy  
Alle voert met onser claghen.’ (1847-1850)

(At that moment Belin the ram leaped forward and his ewe, that came with him. That was Lady Ha Wy. Belin spoke: ‘Let us all continue our complaints.’)

The name of Belin’s wife, *Ha Wy*, seems to refer to the French *ah oui*, suggesting that she is unrestrained in her sexual life. Also the next passage illustrates Willem’s pleasure in playing with sound effects. He describes the exaggerated reaction of the queen, when she has heard of the plot to kill her husband, king Nobel.

Die coninghinne wart vervaert  
Ende sprac: ‘O wy! Lieve Reynaert!  
O wy, Reynaert! O wy, o wy!  
O wy! Reynaert! Wat sechdi?’ (2151-2154)

(The queen became afraid and spoke: ‘O wy! Dear Reynaert! O wy, Reynaert! O wy, o wy! O wy! Reynaert! What are you saying?’)

Willem’s playful attitude towards the language of his work is also apparent in the use of two acrostics. One is made up by the first letters of the last verses (3461-3469) of *Van den vos Reynaerde* and reads ‘By Willeme’, clearly a reference to the author himself. The other acrostic reads ‘Aleide’ (32-36), a name of a woman. This ‘Aleide’ seems to refer to Aleide of Avesnes (1234?-1284), who acted as the guardian of the young Floris of Holland, the future count of Holland. It has been argued that Aleide of Avesnes was the patron of some of the earliest works of Jacob van Maerlant (Van Oostrom 1996).

The three Flemish writers discussed here, the authors of the *Rose*, *Vanden levne ons Heren* and *Van den vos Reynaerde*, all display a liking for an emphatic literary form and style. Recent

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<sup>18</sup> Van Driel 2004 and 2009b offer a more detailed discussion of the use of sound effects in *Van den vos Reynaerde*.

investigations have revealed that more Flemish romances show strong stylistic differences. They differ remarkably, not only in the way the verses are structured, but also in the vocabulary, the styling of conversations and the use of details and descriptions (Van den Berg 1983; Van Driel 2007a and 2009a). One could say that Flemish narrative literature shows a love for stylistic artistry. What's more, I can not avoid the impression that in some cases Flemish authors deliberately aimed for a characteristic style. This thought comes to mind in the case of parallel translations, a phenomenon I will discuss in the next section.

#### 4 Parallel translations

Middle Dutch literature knows a number of cases of French or Latin stories that have been translated into Middle Dutch twice, in roughly the same period. An example is the *Roman de la Rose*, of which a translation exists from Brabant, as well as one from Flanders, that has been discussed above. Also a Brabantine and a Flemish translation of the Old French *Châtelaine de Vergi* exists, and a Middle Dutch version of the chanson the geste *Aiol et Mirabel* written in the Eastern region around Venlo, and an *Aiol* from Flanders.<sup>19</sup>

These parallel translations have created quite some discussion by scholars of Middle Dutch literature. Translating these works from Latin or French into Dutch language must have been an expensive and time-consuming job. So why did two different poets make the effort to set up different translations of the same source? Several possible explanations have been formulated, for example, the hypothesis that writers were unknown of the existence of an earlier translation. But it is also possible that a writer deliberately tried to surpass the other translation.<sup>20</sup>

A comparison of these parallel translations shows that their styles differ strikingly and consistently. For example, the Flemish version of the *Vergi* has a predilection for complex repetitions that are scarce in the Brabantine version of the same source. The same predilection for formal repetitions is apparent in the Flemish *Rose* and lacking in the *Rose* from Brabant. The Flemish story about *Aiol* has a windy, elegant style, whereas the *Aiol* from Limburg is characterized by a rather stiff and concise phrasing (Van Driel 2007b). The fact that Flemish epic poems all differ so remarkably from their counterparts from other regions makes one think. Maybe the fact that some works were translated for the second time is related to a Flemish appreciation of emphatic and stylized literary language. Put in a different way, maybe the reason for translating a text a second time is a question of regionally bounded style and poetics.

It is conceivable that an existing translation did not satisfy the literary taste of a poet or his audience. This could be the reason for making a new version of the story. Perhaps the Brabant *Vergi*, for example, was known but unloved in Flanders, exactly because of its style, and maybe a Flemish master planned to translate the French novella again, but this time in a very different fashion, showing a love for a completely different style.<sup>21</sup> In this view, the reason for translating a French work into Dutch language for the second time is to be found in different stylistic, poetical preferences.<sup>22</sup>

The thought that Flemish poets distinguished themselves by a characteristic style, concurs with the fact that some of these writers were successful in other regions, such as Holland and Brabant. The most famous example is Jacob van Maerlant, who wrote the first part of his oeuvre for the court of Holland, but he seems to be only one of many. For this reason thirteenth and

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<sup>19</sup> Other examples are two Dutch translations of the *Lancelot en prose* (The *Roman van Lanceloet* and *Lantsloot vander Hagbedochte*), and two *Lives of Lutgard*, one by Willem van Affligem, the other by Broeder Geraert.

<sup>20</sup> For this discussion: see Van Driel 2007a, 156-157 en 2007b.

<sup>21</sup> In the cases of *Vergi* and *Rose* it is unclear exactly which texts – the Flemish or the Brabantine versions – are the earliest and first translations. In the case of the *Aiol*, the Flemish version certainly is the youngest.

<sup>22</sup> The same view applies to other parallel translations in Middle Dutch literature: the two versions of the *Life of Lutgard* (Leven van Lutgart) and the translations of the French *Lancelot en prose*. Cf. Van Driel 2007a, 156.

fourteenth century Flanders has been regarded as an exporter of literary talent to other regions in the Low Countries (Van den Berg 1992). Apparently the Flemish word craft was also appreciated in other regions where Middle Dutch literature was popular.

## 5 ‘Scone worden’

The above can be summarized as follows: thirteenth century Flemish narrative poetry distinguishes itself by a love for exuberant literary language and style. Representatives of this attitude are the authors of the *Rose*, *Vanden levene ons Heren* and *Van den vos Reynaerde*; also the existence of parallel translations becomes understandable in a literary culture with a outspoken stylistic taste. Let us now return to Jacob van Maerlant. He was part of this Flemish literary culture, in a historical sense, but also in a literary sense. Maerlant was also well aware of the Flemish literature of his time. In a number of his works he attacks other writers, especially the authors of tales about King Arthur and Charlemagne. In *Sinte Franciscus Leven* and the *Spiegel Historiael* he writes the following lines.<sup>23</sup>

Maer Tristram ende Lanceloot,  
Perchevail ende Galehoot,  
- Ghevende namen ende ongeboren! -  
Hier of willen de lieden horen.  
Truffe van minnen ende van stride  
leestmen dor de werelt wide. (Sint Franciscus Leven, 33-8)

(But of Tristan and Lancelot, Perceval and Galahad - fake names and unborn! – the people want to hear. Fairy tales of love and war one can read in the whole world.)

Hier moetic den borderes antworden,  
Die vraye ystorien vermorden  
Met sconen rime, met scoenre tale.  
Omdat die worde luden wale,  
Entie materie es scone ende claer,  
So doen sise verstaen vor waer. (Spiegel Historiael, part IV, chapter 29, 1-6)

(Here I have to answer the liars, who kill true history with beautiful rhymes and beautiful tales. Because the words sound nice and the story is beautiful and clear, they make them seem true.)

Maerlant’s aversion to the literature under attack is two-sided. Firstly, he attacks the falsity of the tales about historical persons like King Arthur and Charlemagne. Secondly, he fulminates against the too beautiful words of these tales, words that disguise the lack of truth (cf. *met scone rimen*, *met scoenre tale* and *omdat die worde lude wale*). Though Maerlant does not state precisely which works he attacks, it seems very likely that he is hinting at thirteenth century chansons de geste and Arthurian romances (the characters he names, belong to the genre of Arthurian literature). The majority of Dutch chansons de geste and Arthurian romances originate from Flanders (Kienhorst 1988). Moreover, recent research has revealed that some of the chansons de geste and Arthurian romances from thirteenth century Flanders distinguish themselves by a very manifest style (Van Driel 2007a, 154-157). Therefore, it is not far-fetched to conclude that Maerlant is fulminating against Flemish narrative literature. He attacks the cheap success of all

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<sup>23</sup> Maximilianus 1954. De Vries & Verwijs 1863, partie IV, cap 29. Other examples of Maerlant’s aversion: Van Driel 2007a, 170-172.

these writers. Their words and style are pleasant to read and listen to, but their contents are vain and untruthful. Maerlant must also have felt a similar aversion to Willem, the writer of *Van den vos Reynaerde*, whom he mocks for writing silly stories. In the *Rijmbijbel* he refers sarcastically to *Madoc*, the lost work of Willem: ‘Want dit nes niet Madocs droom, No Reynaerde, no Arthurs boerden’.<sup>24</sup>

Apparently, thirteenth century writers of Dutch literature rivalled with each other. This kind of rivalry explains Maerlant’s outbursts, but also the acrostic ‘Aleide’ in Willem’s *Van den vos Reynaerde*, that seems to mock the former patron of Maerlant.<sup>25</sup> A lot of Maerlant’s aversion can be regarded as literary rivalry or *jalousie de métier*. The success of his contemporaries stood in the way of his own success. The audience of Maerlant was the same Flemish audience that listened to or read works like *Van den vos Reynaerde*, chansons de geste and Arthurian romances. This audience enjoyed stylized literature, in which writers played and experimented with literary forms. I think the popularity of this literature must have incited Jacob van Maerlant to write his strophic poems and to search for a complex strophic form that suited the taste of the Flemish audience. The complex, strained form of these strophic poems, very comparable to the *Helinand-strophe*, fits in with this Flemish love for *scone worden*.

In a way, Maerlant attacked the literature he detested with its own weapons, namely with a manifest literary form. He introduced a new strophic form in Dutch literature, a form that could compete with the verbal artistry of the authors of romances. One could say Maerlant joins his contemporaries, but there are two fundamental differences between Jacob van Maerlant in his strophic poems and his thirteenth century Flemish opponents. Firstly, Maerlant writes about moralistic, didactic themes, very different from the popular stories about King Arthur, Charlemagne and courtly love. Secondly, Maerlant does not stay within the epical form, which was the case with works like the Flemish *Rose* or *Vanden levne ons Heren*. Though these works show an exuberant style, they are written in rhyming couplets. All the stylistic effects, such as the formal repetitions, happen within the bounds set by this form. Maerlant uses a new stanzaic form, much more complex than the plain verses of his rivals. With his *clausules* he gave a masterly example of his technical capacities, very well suited to a Flemish audience that enjoyed rich stylistic effects.<sup>26</sup>

## 6 Maerlant’s success: Father of all Dutch poets

Did this audience appreciate Maerlant’s experiments? Looking at the number of surviving manuscripts one must answer this question positively. Fourteen manuscripts of *Wapene Martijn* have survived, an impressive amount for Middle Dutch standards and much more than, for example, the lyrical works of the other great author of Dutch strophic poetry, the thirteenth century mystic Hadewijch.<sup>27</sup>

The popularity of Maerlant’s strophic poems is also illustrated by the fact that in the Middle Ages his *Martijn*-poems have been translated into other languages. In the fourteenth century, a

<sup>24</sup> David 1858 (part 3), page 388 (lines 34836-7).

<sup>25</sup> The Flemish works that are attacked by Maerlant, must also have been known in Holland and other parts of the Low Countries, given the fact that Maerlant dedicated the *Spiegel Historiae* to the count of Holland and the fact that *Sint Franciscus Leven* was written for Franciscans in Utrecht. The audience of Maerlant must have known the works he mentions.

<sup>26</sup> A liking for a stylized literature stays a constant factor in Flemish poetry in later times. For example, the lyrical poetry in the so-called Gruuthuse-manuscript has been regarded as a kind of ‘experimental’ literature, rightly because of the use of complex rhyming schemes and word play (cf. Van Driel 2007b; Willaert 2008).

<sup>27</sup> The database of manuscripts from the low countries, the *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta* (to be reached via <http://www.bibliotheek.leidenuniv.nl>) lists fourteen manuscripts. Cf. Overgaauw 1996 and Franck & Verdam 1918. The manuscripts of Hadewijch are discussed in Kwakkel 1999.

Latin translation was made in Maerlant's hometown, Damme, by Johannes Bukelare.<sup>28</sup> A Latin translation must be considered as a great honour for a thirteenth century Dutch poet. From all the known texts of this period only Willem's *Van den vos Reynaerde* and the mystic Beatrijs van Nazareth (1200-1268) have been translated into Latin (Wackers 1996). Maerlant's strophic poems also found a French speaking audience: a French translation of the *Martijn*-poems was printed at the end of the fifteenth century in Bruges (Franck & Verdam 1918: xviii-xix).

Maerlant's new strophic form also influenced other Middle Dutch writers. With his strophic experiment he founded a new tradition, that flourished especially in the fourteenth century. For example, the form of Maerlant's stanzas inspired Lodewijk van Velthem and Philippe Utenbroeke, active around the first quarter of the fourteenth century. Both authors inserted strophic poems in their continuations of Maerlant's *Spiegel Historiae* (cf. Van Driel 2007a, 33).<sup>29</sup> The Maerlant-clausule also influenced the anonymous author of the so-called *Vierde Martijn* (*Fourth Martijn*), in former times falsely identified as Hein van Aken, and Jan de Weert in his *Wapene Rogier*.<sup>30</sup> All these writers copy the Maerlant-clausule identically or with slight adjustments, but in all cases Maerlant's influence is evident.<sup>31</sup> This influence can also be seen in other fourteenth century poetry. A number of rhymed prayers and poems in the famous Gruuthuse-manuscript, all originating from the region around Bruges, show the influence of the form or vocabulary of Jacob van Maerlant's *clausules*. For example the strophic poem *Ach, moeder van ontfaermicheden* (nr. 9) is written in the Maerlant-strophe (Oosterman 1995, 157-158; Willaert 2008, 98-99). It is not possible to say if the success of the Maerlant-strophe also inspired the writer of the fourteenth century *Rinclus*, a didactic poem, to construct his poem in a remarkable strophic form, namely the *Helinand*-strophe (aabaab bbabba). The same holds for the fourteenth century *Pelgrimage vander menscheliker creature*, that contains a poem in the *Helinand*-strophe. The use of this strophic form seems to be influenced primarily by the French sources of these works, that are written (partly) in this form.<sup>32</sup>

In the fourteenth century, the Antwerp author Jan van Boendale named Maerlant the 'Vader der Dietsche dichter', the father of all Dutch poets.<sup>33</sup> With this epithet Boendale showed his esteem for his great predecessor. Indeed, Maerlant can be viewed as the father of a tradition of didactic, moralistic literature, in which knowledge from the learned Latin world was transmitted to the vernacular. But Maerlant influenced Dutch writers not only in this didactic and moral sense. With his *clausules* he also renewed Dutch literature in a formal way, by starting a new tradition of strophic poetry. Inspired by the form of his Latin sources, he introduced a new literary form, that would become a popular model in the next century.

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<sup>28</sup> One manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library: Canonici Misc. 278) contains Maerlant's texts, followed by the Latin translation.

<sup>29</sup> Editions of Velthem and Utenbroeke are offered by De Vries & Verwijs 1863-1879 and Van der Linden & De Vreese 1906-1938.

<sup>30</sup> De Weert's text is part of the so-called 'Comburgse handschrift', edited by Brinkman & Schenkel 1997. Hegman 1958 offers an edition of the *Vierde Martijn*, but considers Hein van Aken to be the author.

<sup>31</sup> The author of the *Fourth Martijn* increases the Maerlant-clausule to a stanza of no fewer than nineteen verses (aabaabaabaabaabb)!

<sup>32</sup> The *Rinclus* is based on *Li Miserere*, by Le Reclus de Moiliens, the *Pelrinage* is based on the *Pélerinage de vie humaine* by Guillaume de Digulleville (cf. Van Hamel 1885; Biesheuvel 2005, 92-5). The use of the *Helinand*-strophe in Middle Dutch literature seem to be scarce, but it has not been investigated fully. Only other examples are the poem *In ene materie ic verstoet* (from the so-called Haagse Liederhandschrift, see Kossman 1940, nr. 23; Hogenelst 1997, nr 299) and four rhymed prayers (listed in Oosterman 1995, 444). The use of the *Helinand*-strophe in Middle Dutch literature seems to be a relatively late (fourteenth century) phenomenon.

<sup>33</sup> De Vries 1846, page 163 (lines 119-120).

His decision to 'invent' this new strophic form must be seen in connection with the poetical developments and taste in Flemish literature of Maerlant's days. His strophic experiments correspond with the stylistic experiments of thirteenth century Flemish authors, who show a strong formal consciousness and a playful attitude towards literary language. Though Maerlant does not state he has written his strophic poems in reaction to his contemporaries, he knew the work of other Flemish poets and he distanced himself from their poetics. Therefore, it is possible and legitimate to interpret Maerlant's work in coherence with those writers. In this way, the rather enigmatic decision of Maerlant to write these poems becomes more understandable. Sometimes, one gets the impression that all the poets in medieval Flanders, this small and busy region, knew each other's work and competed with each other. To understand their work and ambitions, we need to reconstruct the literary culture they were part of.

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