

VIRTUS

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‘We underestimate the past’

The life and times of a fourteenth-century Dutch nobleman, Carthusian lay brother, mercenary knight, and author of religious prose

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Frits van Oostrom, *Nobel streven. Het onwaarschijnlijke maar waargebeurde verhaal van ridder Jan van Brederode* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2017, 384 p., ill., index)

Warning – this review will contain spoilers! It is not common for a review of an academic publication to require a spoiler alert, but then this concerns the biography of a fourteenth-century nobleman with an apparently uncommonly eventful life – ‘unlikely but true’, as the book’s subtitle phrases it. Jan of Brederode was the progeny of one of Holland’s most prominent noble families, inheritor of one of the Dutch Low Countries’ larger fiefdoms; having produced no offspring and landing in debt, he became lay brother in one of the stricter monastic orders, which he subsequently scandalously left when opportunity arose to attempt to restore his family’s fortunes; but, unable to regain his former status, he ended his life as a mercenary abroad. And as if all this was not enough for page turner of a historical thriller, Jan has also regularly been praised as the most eloquent of writers of medieval Dutch religious prose.

Frits van Oostrom, who has established himself as one of the more prolific, and certainly most prominent, scholars of literature in Middle Dutch (the Dutch written from circa the middle of the twelfth to the beginning of the sixteenth century), has been unmatched in his capacity to reach a popular readership with his learned studies of medieval Dutch literature and culture. Van Oostrom’s monographs, such as *Het woord van eer* (translated into English as *Court and culture*), and more recently the magisterial diptych of Dutch literary history *Stemmen op schrift* (the history of Dutch literature to 1300) and *Wereld in woorden* (1300-1400), form an unparalleled oeuvre of popular historical writing, in erudition and original-

ity of research not inferior to the best of scholarly publications in the *medioneerlandistiek* (the study of medieval Dutch literature). While others in medieval studies have attempted to reach audiences beyond academia through a form of popularisation that includes the obscuring of scholarly method, Van Oostrom has followed the course set out by that most illustrious of Dutch medieval scholars, Johan Huizinga – making his readership partake in the methodological considerations, and the historical uncertainties that are inherent in this kind of research. Van Oostrom’s latest book appropriately concludes with a respectful nod to this inheritance, reminiscing on the historical moment that Huizinga’s *The autumn of the Middle Ages* was conceived, and indeed there is much in Van Oostrom’s work that is reminiscent of that book – not merely in its attempt to sketch a culture in a rich variety of aspects, but also in the dexterity with which it explores the merits of different disciplinary methodologies in combination with each other.

Van Oostrom’s earlier biographical work, *Maerlants wereld*, was a historical positioning of the work of prolific thirteenth-century Middle Dutch author Jacob van Maerlant. Van Oostrom points out that for Jacob van Maerlant, evidence for biographical details was so sparse that the choice to sketch the subject’s *world*, rather than his *life*, was dictated by necessity. For Jan of Brederode, the situation was reversed: while in contrast to Jacob’s copious output, Jan only left us one literary work, but by contrast ‘there is no second Middle Dutch author about whose biography we know as much’ (285). Nevertheless, where a modern biographer would need to find a path through a near overwhelming wealth of information, the biographer of a medieval subject is required to do the opposite: make an account on the basis of sparse information and disparate sources – and make sense of the silences in and between these sources as much as the voices they broadcast. Chronology – or, as Van Oostrom puns, *chronology* –, then, became the guiding methodology for the interpretation of the available evidence, including the literary evidence (285-7). The downside remains that many silences remain unexplored, although Van Oostrom does remark on some of these (309-14), including the most glaring one, namely the lives of women, which remain entirely cast in shadows. Jan’s wife Johanna of Abcoude’s entry into the monastery is as interesting as her husband’s, and while reading I wondered if her case could not have been used to highlight experiences of similar women, which now (229) remain the subject of pure speculation – similar gaps in the description of Jan’s life are filled in by reference to comparable cases, such as for example an extensive description of the well-documented activities of mercenary John Hawkwood (242-246) in lieu of those of Jan himself, which lack comparable sources. Van Oostrom, however, deftly uses his observations on the unavoidable silences in medieval studies to formulate an argument about the reasons for some medieval scholars to become authors of fiction (a step Van Oostrom himself never took, which in an interesting reversal of the dynamic he describes, did not prevent him from winning the most prestigious Dutch *literary* award); he then turns the focus of his study back onto Jan of Brederode by a discussion of a historical novel, Pierre Naudin’s *Le bourbier d’Azincourt*, about a fighter at the Battle of Agincourt, who thanks to Van Oostrom’s study can now be identified as Jan of Brederode himself.

What results on the basis of these multidisciplinary methodologies is a study presenting an impressive blend of political, social, cultural, and literary history – presented as a biography of Jan of Brederode, but comprising a broad palette of cultural historical sketches; as Jan



Two pages from a chronicle of the Brederode family (682-1531). The passage relates to Jan van Brederode (*High Council of the Nobility, The Hague, MS 107*)

moves through different environments (the noble court, pilgrimage, the charterhouse, the battlefield), Van Oostrom takes us through the various cultural landscapes – the customs of tournaments, of knightly combat, of the monastic life of the Carthusians, as well as the experience of pilgrimage and life of an errant mercenary knight are described in vivid detail. It is put together with such dexterity, that the different disciplinary methodologies rarely clash; the most glaring error occurs on one occasion where the chronological flexibility of cultural history is misapplied in the context of chronicle studies – and a historical fiction written in the fifteenth century is presented as a motivating factor for an individual's actions in the fourteenth (64).

With the exception of chronicles, where Van Oostrom's treatment appears methodologically less sure-footed (at another point (197) he ascribes material from a Middle Dutch continuation of a chronicle to the author of its Latin original), his approach bears most fruit when describing individual sources – literary, but also documentary – in detail, and in their historical and cultural context (e.g., 62, 93). *Pièce de résistance* is the treatment of *Des coninx summe*, Jan of Brederode's partial translation of the Old French *Somme le roi*, which he wrote during his time as lay brother in the charterhouse Zelem. Van Oostrom's locating of Jan's literary work as resulting from the meeting of the author's worldly upbringing and experiences as nobleman in troubling, and often violent times, and his sincere devotion in the context of the impressively described intellectual milieu of the Carthusian order, leads to a convinc-

ing new interpretation of the text – as at the same time more singular than previously perceived, yet also more grounded in its own historical context. In passing, Van Oostrom also proposes a spectacular new theory for the origin of one of the most important manuscripts of Middle Dutch literature, the Van Hulthem manuscript.

In this way, Van Oostrom uses the biography of Jan of Brederode to deal with a wide range of subjects – monastic life and politics, court culture, secular and ecclesiastical politics, mercenary life, the role of religion in laymen's lives, the transition from old nobility to social climbers, the late medieval partisan troubles of the northern Low Countries, and their effects on individuals, et cetera – and the book will therefore be of interest to many. The significant role England played at all the various stages of Jan's biography, as well as in the Dutch Low Countries of the fourteenth century more in general, will warrant a translation into English – as will Van Oostrom's moving description of Jan's pilgrimage to St Patrick's Purgatory in Lough Derg in Ireland.

206 The book is accompanied by an informative website, www.nobelstreven.nl, which includes the apparatus: notes, bibliography, corrections and additions, and Ingrid Biesheuvel's comparison between the Old French *Somme le roi* and the Middle Dutch *Des coninx summe*, which underpins Van Oostrom's discussion of Brederode's translation practice. The website further contains additional materials, including the Brederode family tree, illustrations (both those already beautifully printed in the book, and additional ones), two 'deleted scenes', and a digitization of a manuscript of the Brederode chronicle. 'An early version of this book had over a thousand footnotes,' but, Van Oostrom asserts, 'nowadays, the internet is the appropriate place for such fine-grained accountability' (367; for Van Oostrom's earlier biographical work, *Maerlants wereld*, published in 1996, readers were able to choose between a hardcover edition including apparatus, and a paperback without).

While admiring Van Oostrom's determined embrace of multi-modality in academic publishing, I do worry about the durability of an apparatus presented in this way. From a quick tally of the online bibliography, it becomes apparent that more than twenty publications from the nineteenth-century, and more than twenty from the first quarter of the twentieth, underpin the research. In sifting through the evidence concerning which side Brederode fought for as a mercenary at Agincourt (268-73), Van Oostrom provides an excellent example of how our own research is served by the availability of a decent apparatus in the older scholarship we rely on – a discussion which crucially hinges on a number of nineteenth-century accounts. Considering the speed with which digital media are likely to become obsolete, and websites disappear, the choice to move to a digital-only apparatus is one that will saddle future generations of scholars with difficulties when trying to build on our research: neither Van Oostrom, nor his publisher, can guarantee that the website and its resources will still be available a generation from now, let alone a century – though Sarah Werner may have had a point when she recently tweeted, in relation to the limited durability of URLs: 'not to be morbid, but we're clearly in a civilization collapse anyway so if we get a few years out of the links, I think we're set.'

All this is not to discourage anyone from experimenting with online resources accompanying publication of the results of research in more traditional formats – the inclusion of a 'The making of' (a report of conversations between Van Oostrom and Biesheuvel about the

comparison between the *Somme le roi* and the *Des coninx summe*) for example, is inspiring, and gives an exciting glimpse into the collaborative work that underpins this single-author book. As we further explore the possibilities of multi-modal publication, we do need to think, however, how we can ensure such materials (and particularly the crucially important notes and bibliography) can avoid digital obsolescence. Johan Huizinga's *The autumn of the Middle Ages*, which looms large over Van Oostrom's study, was published 99 years ago this year; its sources can still be followed up from the footnotes (however succinct) that are accessible in every printed copy.

It is only toward the conclusion of the study that the true meaning of its subtitle – 'The unlikely but true story of the knight Jan of Brederode' – is revealed. In the final chapter concerning Jan of Brederode's life (what follows is an epilogue on the later vicissitudes of the Brederode family, as well as of Jan's book), Van Oostrom summarizes the findings of his research, together with a contemplation on the disciplinary and methodological considerations underpinning it. Here, he argues that while Jan of Brederode's life indeed may seem 'unlikely' to us, this is due not to its own contingencies, but to the fact 'that we underestimate the past, and imagine it to have been so much flatter, simpler and more even than how we experience our own times' (295). Van Oostrom's study impressively, and excitingly shows Jan of Brederode's 'unlikely' story to be surprisingly understandable.

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