

LITERATURE AS ACCESS TO THE PAST:  
THE RISE OF HISTORICAL GENRES IN THE  
NETHERLANDS, 1800–1850

*Lotte Jensen*

I shout with joy! no higher welfare has ever caressed my soul,  
Than the fact that I, o Netherlands, was raised on your soil,  
I hope that some of the clear lustre that radiates from you,  
A tiny little spark may descend on my skull.  
I hope I will share in the honour, the fame which the ancestry  
Brought to us and made us proud, and which surprised Europe.  
I swear upon that inheritance, upon the faith and virtue of our fathers,  
That thankfulness will flow through my veins.  
I will remain, o fatherland! until the hour I die,  
Proud of my beautiful, honourable name as a Dutchman!<sup>1</sup>

These verses are taken from one of the most nationalist poems ever written in Dutch literature: *De Hollandsche natie* (1812) by the Amsterdam poet Jan Fredrik Helmers (1767–1813). In this poem, which comprises more than three thousand verses, Helmers argues that the Dutch should be proud of their country: no other nation has such a glorious past. He demonstrates this by pointing to the late sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century. In this period the Dutch Republic rapidly grew to become a world power, experiencing a period of economic, scientific, and cultural growth. Helmers praises all the famous men of this age, such as the stadtholders William and Maurits of Orange, the sea hero Michiel de Ruyter, and the poet Joost van den Vondel. Helmers' poem was a reaction to the political situation of his own time: in 1812, the Netherlands were occupied by the French, and

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<sup>1</sup> 'Ik juich! geen hooger heil heeft ooit mijn ziel gestreeld, / Dan dat ik, Nederland! ben op uw' grond geteeld. / Dat van den heldren glans die van u af mogt stralen, / Een nietig sprankjen, op mijn' schedel af mag dalen. / Dat ik ook deel in de eer, den roem, dien 't voorgeslacht, / 't Verbaasd Euroop' ten trots, aan ons ten erfgoed bragt. / 'k Zweer bij dat erfdeel, bij de trouw en deugd der vaderen, / Dat steeds de dankbaarheid zal gloeijen in mijne aderen, / Ja! 'k blijf, ô Vaderland! tot aan het uur des doods, Als Nederlander op dien schoonen eernaam grootsch'. J.F. Helmers, *De Hollandsche natie, in zes zangen* (Den Haag: J. Allart, 1812), 3. Recently a new edition with an introduction was published, see J.F. Helmers, *De Hollandsche natie* (Ed. Lotte Jensen, met medewerking van Marinus van Hattum, Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2009).

Helmerts hoped that this poem would cheer up his fellow citizens by reminding them of their impressive past.

*De Hollandsche natie* is part of a large body of Dutch nineteenth-century literary texts in which the national past is glorified. Between 1800 and 1850, a fundamental change took place in the Dutch literary system, as the national past became part of the literary present. All the successful writers of that period—such as Hendrik Tollens, Willem Bilderdijk, Jacob van Lennep, and Nicolaas Beets—made use of historical subject matter for their literary works, which were used as an instrument of nation building. New genres appeared—such as the historical novel and the narrative poem—while older genres were given new life by using historical topics. Romance and drama, for instance, regained new popularity due to the heightened interest in history.

The rise of historical genres was by no means specific to Dutch literature: the national past was integrated into the production of literature throughout nineteenth-century Europe. It was part of an international process that Joep Leerssen describes as a period and condition that might be called 'literary historicism', which points at 'the presence of the literary preoccupation with culture's rootedness in the national past'.<sup>2</sup> This 'pervasive common condition' affected 'the field of literature, as well as antiquarian and philological scholarship'.<sup>3</sup> The developments in the Netherlands should therefore be placed in their larger European context, not least because English, German, and French literature proved a fertile source for Dutch authors. The influence of such authors as Walter Scott and Lord Byron can hardly be overestimated. From the comparatist point of view, however, it might turn out that the development of historical genres followed its own national pattern in the Netherlands, since contemporary social and political circumstances had a considerable impact on the rise and fall of these genres.

Up to now, most attention, at least in the Netherlands, has been paid to the historical novel.<sup>4</sup> This is understandable, because the historical novel, of which Scott is considered to be the founding father,

<sup>2</sup> Joep Leerssen, 'Literary Historicism: Romanticism, Philologists, and the Presence of the Past', *Modern Language Quarterly* 65.2 (2004'), 221–243, here 239.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>4</sup> Most recently by J.R. van der Wiel, *De geschiedenis in balkostuum. De historische roman in de Nederlandse literaire kritiek (1808–1874)* (Leuven / Apeldoorn: Garant, 1999).

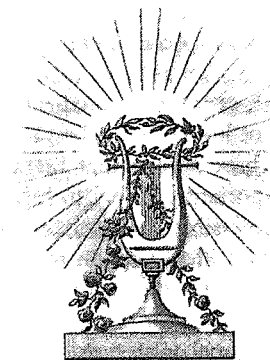
DE  
HOLLANDSCHE  
NATIE,

IN ZES ZANGEN,

DOOR

J. F. HELMERS.

TWEDE DRUK.



IN 'S GRAVENHAGE, BIJ  
JOHANNES ALLART.  
MDCCCLIV.

Fig. 1. Title page of the second edition of J.F. Helmers, *De Hollandsche natie*. 's-Gravenhage: Johannes Allart, 1814.

was one of the most influential genres in literary history. It rapidly gained immense popularity, placing the novel first in the hierarchy of the most read genres. However, in this paper I argue that it can be fruitful to place the historical novel amidst other historical genres of the same period. In this way one gets a better understanding of the embeddedness of the historical novel in the literary system, the boundaries between the different genres, and their various applications. First, I comment on the way literature made the past accessible to wider audiences, and then I offer a survey on the rise of various historical genres in the Netherlands between 1800 and 1850. I focus on texts that were about the Dutch national past, since they played a crucial role in spreading feelings of patriotism and transferring historical knowledge to a broader audience.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Literature as Access to the Past*

In research into nineteenth-century nationalism, increasing attention has been paid to the role of literature in the process of nation forming. Peterson and others have shown that literary works offered to a broader audience an important gateway to historical knowledge by presenting the past in an accessible and attractive way.<sup>6</sup> Literature provided readers with important identification roots, since authors used history as a way to affirm a set of national values. The main characters, for example, exemplified all kinds of virtues that were considered to be typical of the nation. National awareness and feelings of patriotism were especially increased by the depiction of great military victories of the past. Throughout Europe, authors preferred stories of revolt or liberation that had been significant for the founding of the nation. Not only did they create new myths, but they also exaggerated well-known historical episodes in order to create a positive self-image. In

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed account of the way historical literature was used in the Netherlands as an instrument in nation building, see: Lotte Jensen, *De verheerlijking van het verleden. Helden, literatuur en natievorming in de negenhiende eeuw* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Brent O. Peterson, *History, Fiction, and Germany: Writing the Nineteenth-Century Nation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005). Some other recent examples: Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories. The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (London and Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Joep Leerssen & Marita Mathijsen (eds.), *Oerleken. Nationalisme, edities en canonvorming* (Amsterdam: Instituut voor Cultuur en Geschiedenis, 2002).

the case of the Netherlands, authors usually depicted scenes from the Dutch Revolt or the Eighty Years' War against Spain, which had led to the recognition of the United Provinces as an independent state. By presenting the past as a continuous story of oppression and liberation, literary works contributed to the constitution of a coherent and meaningful national history. Besides literature, such artistic expressions as painting, music, architecture, and sculpture were also used as instruments in nation building, as were historiographical, educational, and philological writings.

*Mythen der Nationen: ein europäisches Panorama* (1998) presents an overview of the *Gründungsmythen* (national myths) that were most frequently used by nineteenth-century artists in seventeen European countries.<sup>7</sup> National myths nearly always referred to glorious victories of the past—victories that had liberated the nation from mental and physical oppression. For example, one of the most popular themes amongst nineteenth-century artists in England was the Battle of Hastings (1066), while in Spain it was the conquest of Granada (1492), and in Belgium the Battle of the Golden Spurs (*Guldensporenslag*; 1302). According to Henk Slechte, the five most popular myths and celebrated heroes in the Netherlands were Claudius Civilis and the Batavian Rebellion (69–70), William of Orange (1533–1584), Mayor Van der Werff and the Relief of Leiden (1574), Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), and Jan van Speyk (1802–1831), who died in the battle against Belgium. It is evident that heroic leaders who were willing to sacrifice their lives for their nation appealed most to the imagination of Dutch artists. Rembrandt van Rijn is the exceptional figure in this canon, because his status relied upon artistic qualities instead of rebellious deeds. Then again, his presence is typical of the general interest in topics related to the seventeenth century—the Dutch 'Golden Age'.

While Slechte's list embraces all kinds of arts (painting, music, sculpture, literature) and the entire nineteenth century, my survey focuses on the first half of the nineteenth century and, within this period, the specific role of literature in spreading feelings of nationhood and patriotism by giving readers free access to their national past. The role and importance of literature for the transmission of historical experiences can hardly be overestimated. Literature enabled

<sup>7</sup> Henk Slechte, 'Niederlande. "Durch eigene holländische Kunst angeregt, fühle ich daß ich Holländer bin"'. *Mythen der Nationen: ein Europäisch Panorama* (Herausgegeben von Monika Flacke; München / Berlin: Koehler & Amelang, 1998), 223–247.

readers to identify themselves with their ancestors by experiencing what they went through. And because authors often drew parallels with the present, audience members realised that they were part of history themselves. It was a continuous story, in which they played their own part.<sup>8</sup>

### *Poetry about the Dutch National Past*

A great volume of literature about the national past was published in the Netherlands between 1800 and 1850. However, writing about the past was not an invention of this period: historical plays had been staged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Of these plays, Joost van den Vondel's *Gysbrecht van Aemstel* (1637) is probably the most well known. In the last decades of the eighteenth century, the general atmosphere of moral and economic decline led to a growing tendency towards patriotism in literature. Authors used the past as a touchstone and propagated all kinds of virtues that had once made the Dutch Republic a strong nation and were classified as being typically Dutch.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the literary interest in the national past increased drastically. It became one of the key themes in literature and inspired many Dutch poets, playwrights, and novelists. This period saw the publication of approximately eighty theatre plays with a historical theme, more than a hundred historical novels, and innumerable poems about the national past.<sup>10</sup>

When one looks at the production of national-historical poetry in the Netherlands, it is useful to make a broad distinction among three different, but partly overlapping, types—namely, heroic poetry, romance poetry, and narrative poetry. These three distinctive and more or less chronological and ordered subgenres are also frequently used in literary scholarly handbooks.<sup>11</sup> Yet, it should be kept in mind

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Marita Mathijssen's contribution to this book.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Joost Kloek & Wijnand Mijnhardt, 1800. *Blauwdrukken voor een samenleving* (Den Haag: SDU Uitgevers, 2001), 219–226; N.C.F. van Sas, *De metamorfose van Nederland. Van oude orde naar moderniteit, 1750–1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 73–81.

<sup>10</sup> Jensen 2008, 10–12.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Romanticism. An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Gero von Wilpert, *Sachwörterbuch der Literatur* (8., verbesserte und erweiterte Auflage; Stuttgart: Kröner 2001).

that the boundaries between them are very fluent and that some of the following cited works also fit into the other mentioned categories.

The first category comprises both lengthy and shorter poems about heroic persons and crucial events in national history. A typical example is the abovementioned *De Hollandsche natie*, in which Helmers describes many highlights of Dutch history. Other lengthy poems celebrate only one specific hero, such as Adriaan Loosjes' *De laatste zeetogt van den admiraal de Ruiter* (1812)—a poem in twelve volumes about the naval hero Michiel de Ruyter—and Hendrik Harmen Klijn's *Johan van Oldenbarneveld* (1806), which is about the well-known statesman Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547–1619), who played an important role in the struggle for independence from Spain. Both men excelled in leadership, moral behaviour, and perseverance, and they are presented to the reader as examples worthy of imitation.

By holding prize contests, civic societies also contributed to the literary trend of celebrating the country's heroic forefathers. In 1803, the Bataafsche Maatschappij van Taal- en dichtkunde (Batavian society for language and literature), for instance, invited its members to submit poems about the well-known intellectual, jurist, and politician Hugo Grotius (1583–1643). The poet Cornelis Loots won the gold medal, while his opponent Hendrik Tollens was awarded the silver. In 1806, the society requested lyrical celebrations of the counts of Egmont and Hoorne, who had been decapitated by the Spaniards in 1568. This time, Tollens' contribution was considered to be the best, and Loots' the second best.<sup>12</sup> All prize-winning contributions were published in the society's proceedings.<sup>13</sup>

Writing a lengthy poem about a well-known figure in Dutch history demanded a lot of a writer in terms of historical investigation and commitment—which is probably why a considerable number of poems about national heroes and heroines are much shorter. Many

<sup>12</sup> On the activities of de Bataafsche Maatschappij voor taal- en dichtkunde, see: G.W. Huygens, *Hendrik Tollens. De dichter van de burgerij. Een biografie en een tijdsbeeld* (Rotterdam / 's-Gravenhage: Nijgh & van Ditmar, 1972), 77–109.

<sup>13</sup> C. Loots, 'Huig de Groot'. *Werken der Bataafsche en Hollandsche maatschappij* (5 vols.; Amsterdam: J. Allart, 1804–1810), 2:37–66; H. Tollens, 'Huig de Groot'. *Werken der Bataafsche en Hollandsche maatschappij* (5 vols.; Amsterdam: J. Allart, 1804–1810), 2:67–98; H. Tollens, 'De dood van Egmond en Hoorne'. *Werken der Bataafsche en Hollandsche Maatschappij* (5 vols.; Amsterdam: J. Allart, 1804–1810), 5:59–82; C. Loots, 'De dood van Egmond en Hoorne'. *Werken der Bataafsche en Hollandsche Maatschappij* (5 vols.; Amsterdam: J. Allart, 1804–1810), 5:82–119.

of these poems appeared in literary almanacs, such as *Nederlandsche Muzen-almanak* (1818–1846), *Belgische-muzen-almanak* (1826–1830), and *Almanak voor het schoone en goede* (1821–1860). All the great men of the past are celebrated, such as William of Orange, Michiel de Ruyter, and Rembrandt van Rijn. However, it is remarkable that the majority of these poems deal with less known figures who have now been completely forgotten, all of whom played a brave role during the Eighty Years' War. These poems express an intensified need for civic role models, people who had put their lives at stake out of love for their country. At the same time, poets deliberately tried to expand the national pantheon of heroes and heroines by choosing relatively unknown figures of the past.

The production of heroic poetry was clearly influenced by political circumstances, as rapid growth in this genre occurred in years of political turbulence, such as the period in which the Netherlands was occupied by France (1806–1813) and during the Belgian Revolution (1830–1832). Historical subject matter was used as a powerful tool to propagate feelings of patriotism and loyalty in order to counteract the threat posed by foreign nations. A parallel with the present situation could easily be drawn by the audience: since the Dutch had shown so much strength in the past, the present generation should also be confident of overcoming foreign oppression.

The second category is literary romance, a genre that became immensely popular throughout Europe during the Romantic period.<sup>14</sup> It was based on relics of medieval poetry, which features aristocratic court life and the heroic deeds of young knights. The revival of the medieval romance in the second half of the eighteenth century can be explained by the progress of philological editorial scholarship that rediscovered and edited many medieval texts and 'analysed the social institutions and aesthetic theories informing them'.<sup>15</sup> Some of the groundbreaking authors and works were the French author F.A. de Moncrief (1687–1770), who published a collection of medieval folk tales and legends, Richard Hurd (*Letters on Chivalry and Romance*,

<sup>14</sup> For the development of this genre in English literature, see: Greg Kucich, 'Romance'. Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Romanticism. An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 463–481. The Dutch situation is discussed in Arie Zijdeveld, *De romancespoëzie in Noord-Nederland van 1780 tot 1840* (Amsterdam: Kruyt, 1915); Willem van den Berg & Hanna Stouten (eds.), *De duinen gillen mee!* (Amsterdam: Em Querido's Uitgeverij, 1997) and Jensen 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Kucich 1995, 467.

1762), and Thomas Percy (*Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 1765). The eighteenth-century transmission of romance to Romantic writers took a wide variety of pathways: romances differed greatly in length, style, and narrative motifs.

In 1780, poets in the Netherlands started to write romances whose subject matter was related to the Middle Ages. At first, these romances exuded a vaguely historical atmosphere and usually concerned the love between a lady and a knight. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, poets like Willem Bilderdijk, A.C.W. Staring, Adriaan Loosjes, and Hendrik Tollens used this generic form to celebrate national heroes of the past (here, the subgenre of the literary romance starts overlapping with the first mentioned category of heroic poetry). As a result of this nationalistic transformation, the genre of the romance was given a new impetus and a new cultural significance. Literary romances became an important way both of transferring historical knowledge to a broader audience and of creating national awareness. These romances sketched relatively unknown events in national history and engendered new interest in the medieval past and medieval heroes. Bilderdijk, for instance, wrote about the courageous medieval knights Floris IV (count of Holland) and Albrecht Beylinc, both of whom died honourable deaths while trying to live up to their ideals. Staring made local history the centre of attention by featuring men from the province of Gelderland, such as Wichard van Pont, Folpert van Arkel, and Eduard van Gelre.

The rapid progress of national-historical romance was also influenced by political factors. Tollens' romances, for instance, can be read as an expression of the growing resistance against the French domination in the years between 1806 and 1813. In this period, Tollens wrote an immensely popular series of romances featuring Dutch heroes, namely, *Jan van Schaffelaar* (1807), *Albrecht Beiling* (1809), *Kenau Hasselaar* (1811), and *Herman de Ruiter* (1812). He not only treated medieval subject matter, but also featured resistance fighters in the Dutch Revolt (Kenau Hasselaar and Herman de Ruiter). Tollens also wrote a romance about the siege of Breda (1813), which he called one of the most courageous episodes in Dutch history (in 1590, the Dutch army had managed to capture the city of Breda by hiding their soldiers in a ship filled with peat, which was overlooked by the Spanish soldiers). The main theme of the poem is the liberation of the Dutch from foreign domination, and again a parallel with the present time could easily be drawn by the audience:

We strike up the song of these miraculous deeds,  
With non-bastard blood,  
We speak of the ship filled with peat in Breda,

And of the bravery of Prince Maurice.  
This bravery filled the Spaniards with great fear,  
And was painful for their proudness,  
And lifted the heavy weight of foreign oppression  
From our shoulders.<sup>16</sup>

By portraying great men of the national past, Tollens propagated virtues of loyalty and patriotism in order to counteract French domination. Tollens therefore belongs to the 'resistance poets', who, through their literary writings, tried to resist foreign oppression by drawing attention to the strength of the Dutch people in the past and present.

The popularity of Tollens' poems did not go unnoticed by the French censor. It is interesting to read how the censor both expresses his admiration for Tollens' poetical skills and criticises him for abusing of the generic form of the literary romance for his own nationalist purposes:

Ce poète est un de ceux qui peuvent compter dans la Pleïade hollandaise. Il brille surtout dans la romance qu'on y appelle ballade du nom français d'une espèce de poème à laquelle nous avons renoncé et qui n'ait rien du genre de la romance. Les hollandais s'en sont emparés du mot et l'ont appliqué à une chose tout à fait différente.<sup>17</sup>

The third category—narrative poetry—is very closely related to the genre of romance (again, the borders between the categories are fluent). It too includes poems about the medieval world, dealing with such topics as courtly love, chivalric adventures, and the supernatural. In general, however, narrative poems are more lengthy and are characterised by a greater variety in metre and the use of free verse. Also, the narrative perspective shifts constantly: in a series of cantos, various characters air their views on the events.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Wij heffen van die wonderdaan, / Met onverbasterd bloed—/ Wij van 't Bredasche turfschip aan / En van prins Maurits moed. / Die moed viel Spanje zwaar en bang / En deed haar trotschheid zeer, / En smiet het wigt van vreemden dwang / Van onze schouders neër. H. Tollens, *Gedichten* (2 vols.; Rotterdam: J. Immerzeel, 1822), 2:31.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in P.B.M. Blaas, 'Tollens en de vaderlandse herinnering'. P.B.M. Blaas, (ed.), *De burgerlijke eeuw. Over eeuwwenden, liberale burgerij en geschiedschrijving* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2000<sup>2</sup>), 54.

<sup>18</sup> For an account of narrative poetry in English literature, see: Peter Vassallo, 'Narrative poetry'. Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Romanticism. An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford

Again, foreign literature was a fertile source for Dutch authors, who were especially inspired by the works of Walter Scott and Lord Byron. Both poets had an immense impact throughout Europe and were seen as important literary innovators. Byron exerted an immediate and powerful influence on European literature, while the subversive content of his works was met with a much criticism and resistance everywhere. As for Scott, his reputation was (and still is) mainly based on his invention of the historical novel. However, the influence of his narrative poetry should not be underestimated, as it was his poetry that brought him fame in the first place: before his Waverley novels, he published a number of poems, including the popular 'Lay of the Last Minstrel' (1805), 'Marmion' (1808), 'Lady of the Lake' (1810), and 'Rokeby' (1813).<sup>19</sup>

In the Netherlands, the Dutch poet and novelist Jacob van Lennep (1802–1868) was the first to imitate Scott's narrative poems and adapt them to a national context. He wrote five narrative poems—or *Nederlandsche legenden* (Dutch legends)—with themes taken from the national past: *Het huis ter Leede* (1828), *Adelgild* (1828), *Jacoba en Bertha* (1829), *De strijd met Vlaanderen* (1831), and *Eduard van Gelre* (1847). Van Lennep's poems are all situated in the Middle Ages and vividly describe the emotions of the main characters. Literary critics accused him of having 'shopped' too abundantly at the foreign literary market; they even accused him of plagiarism. Van Lennep countered by stating that although he was indeed a literary thief, he should be excused because he had created new poems by giving them a typical 'Dutch colour' and 'Dutch form'.<sup>20</sup>

These 'Dutch legends' were Jacob van Lennep's response to a lecture that his father, David Jacob van Lennep, had given in 1826 and published a year later. In the lecture, he encouraged all Dutch writers to follow in the footsteps of Walter Scott. They should let themselves be inspired by episodes from the national past and write about 'the

University Press 1995), 350–361. For verse narrative in the Netherlands, see: Jensen 2008, 153–174.

<sup>19</sup> For the reception of Byron and Scott in several European countries, see: Richard Cardwell (ed.), *The Reception of Byron in Europe* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004) and Murray G.H. Pittock (ed.), *The Reception of Sir Walter Scott in Europe* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> M.F. van Lennep, *Het leven van Mr. Jacob van Lennep* (2 vols.; Amsterdam: P.N. van Kampen en zoon, 1909–1910), 1:331–333.





M. J. VAN LENNEP.

Fig. 2. Portrait of Jacob van Lennep (1802–1868).

typical beauty of the Dutch landscape'.<sup>21</sup> Van Lennep had compiled a list of possible historical topics and especially advised his listeners to depict the lives of the counts of Holland.

Jacob van Lennep chose one of these topics: in 1831, he published a long narrative poem about Witte van Haemstede (1280/1281–1320), a bastard son of Floris V, count of Holland. It is entitled *De strijd met Vlaanderen* (The battle with Flanders) and refers to van Haemstede's defeat in 1304 of the Flemish, who had been threatening the city of Haarlem. His poem can also be read as a metaphor for the contemporary situation: in 1831, the Dutch were fighting the Belgians in order to prevent the establishment of an independent Belgian state. In the introduction to his poem, van Lennep encourages his readers to be inspired by the heroic victory of van Haemstede:

My poem is meant to inflame the dejected mind  
In a heroic spirit  
It is meant to lift up the bended souls  
Of the civilians.  
It will show the glorious deeds  
And present my Witte [van Haemstede] as the most honourable role model.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the story of Witte van Haemstede conquering the Flemish gained new significance against the background of the actual, political circumstances.

Adriaan van der Hoop (1802–1841) is another poet who was greatly inspired by the narrative poetry of Scott and Byron. Besides several plays, he published a number of long narrative poems. Two of them are about the national past. In 1833 he published *Leyden ontzet in 1574*, which is about the well-known Relief of Leiden in the sixteenth century. The mayor of the city, Van der Werff, is represented as a brave and courageous man who was willing to sacrifice his life for others. Again, the historical situation is set forth as an example for present-day readers: although the war against Belgium had been lost,

<sup>21</sup> Jacob van Lennep, 'Verhandeling over het belangrijke van Hollands grond en oudheden voor gevoel en verbeelding'. *Magazijn voor wetenschappen, kunsten en letteren* (1827), 113–142, here 117.

<sup>22</sup> 'Zoo moog' mijn zang 't bedrukt gemoed / Ontgloeien doen in heldengloed: / Zoo stort' hy fieren burgerzin / De neêrgebogen zielen in. / En toon' hy, op de gloriebaan, / Mijn Witte als 't edelst voorbeeld aan'. Jacob van Lennep, *Nederlandsche legenden* (Derde druk, nieuwe uitgave. 4 vols.; Arnhem: D.A. Thieme, 1865), 3:23.

they should maintain their moral strength and patriotic loyalty, just like van der Werff had done. In *Het slot van Ijsselmonde* (The Castle of Ijsselmonde, 1834), the aftermath of the Belgian Revolution can be perceived in the introduction, in which the poet summarises the story as being about 'the victory of a hero, who in the name of justice and law, destroyed the yoke of the foreigners'.<sup>23</sup>

The hero of the medieval narrative is Diederik V, count of Holland, who manages to conquer the castle of the bishop of Utrecht. Interestingly, the villain (Manfred) is modelled after the main character in Byron's play *Manfred* (1817–1818). Van der Hoop represents him as the personification of evil, seeking refuge in demonism and trying to kill himself and his enemies by setting the castle afire. This negative representation of a Byronic character is in fact illustrative of the reception of Byron in the Netherlands. Dutch poets were attracted to his work, but rejected its subversive content. Theo d'Haen has convincingly shown that Dutch translators rewrote Byron's poems in such a way that they better suited the Dutch moral and religious climate. Also in their original work, Dutch authors 'eventually opted for the tradition of Scott, rooting their tales in Holland and in the Dutch national past rather than in the Orient'.<sup>24</sup> Theo d'Haen also points to the possible negative influence of the Belgian Revolution on the reception of Byron's works in the Netherlands: 'the Dutch, then, had little sympathy for an author whose life and work went to justify revolts such as that of the Belgians'.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, two authors came very close to imitating Byron's writing style: Nicolaas Beets and Henrik Arnold Meijer. Beets wrote two long narrative poems on subjects taken from the medieval national past—*Kuser* (1835) and *Guy de Vlaming* (1837)—while Meijer's *De Boekanier* (1840) tells the story of a seventeenth-century Dutch robber who wanders around the world after having lost his mistress. As

<sup>23</sup> Adriaan van der Hoop speaks of 'de zege van een held / Die in naam van recht en wetten. / 't Juk van vreemden kwam verpletten'. In: Adriaan van der Hoop, *Het slot van Ijsselmonde* (Dordrecht: Van Houtrijve, 1834), 13.

<sup>24</sup> Theo d'Haen, '“A splenetic Englishman”: the Dutch Byron'. Richard A. Cardwell (ed.), *The Reception of Byron in Europe*. (2 vols.; London / New York: Continuum, 2004), 2:269–282, here 280.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 281. The reception of Byron in the Netherlands is also discussed in two PhD dissertations: Tjeerd Popma, *Byron en het Byronisme in de Nederlandsche letterkunde* (Amsterdam: Paris, 1928) and Ulfert Schults Jr., *Het Byronianisme in Nederland* (Utrecht: Beyers, 1929).

in Byron's works, the main characters in these works are lonesome, troubled outcasts who are struggling with their emotions. Although Beets and Meijer undoubtedly adopted many features of the Byronic hero, their poems end with a clear religious moral for their audiences: these characters are not to be emulated, since they lacked moral and religious seriousness.

### *The Dutch National Past on Stage*

The heightened interest in the national past can also be perceived in the production of theatre plays: the period 1800–1850 saw the publication of approximately eighty theatre plays based on themes related to the national past.<sup>26</sup> However, these plays represent only a small percentage (less than 10%) of the total number produced. The majority of plays were translations of the work of French and German authors, and literary critics often complained about the lack of original Dutch plays. Nevertheless, if we take a closer look at the repertoire of the Schouwburg (Theatre) of Amsterdam, it becomes clear that a considerable number of national-historical plays (representing 42% of the total number of plays produced) were staged both frequently and relatively successfully.<sup>27</sup>

The production of plays was closely linked to political events. Peaks in the production of national-historical plays occurred in the periods 1806–1810 (sixteen plays), 1815–1818 (nine), and 1830–1832 (fifteen). These periods mark important political events in the Netherlands. Between 1806 and 1810, the Netherlands was under the political power of France. Napoleon had appointed his brother—Louis—as king of the Netherlands. The rise of historical plays can be explained by the fact that Louis Napoleon gave Dutch cultural life a great vitality in general: he supported many cultural projects and often went to

<sup>26</sup> All plays are listed in Lotte Jensen, 'Helden en anti-helden. Vaderlandse geschiedenis op het Nederlandse toneel 1800–1848'. *Nederlandse letterkunde* 11.2 (2006'), 101–135. For some additional titles, see: Jensen 2008, appendix 1.

<sup>27</sup> For a quantitative analysis of the repertoire of the Amsterdam Schouwburg, see Hennie Ruitenbeek, *Kijkcijfers. De Amsterdamse Schouwburg 1814–1841* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2002). For specifics about the number of national-historical plays, see: Jensen 2006', 104–105, and Lotte Jensen, 'In verzet tegen "Duitslands klatergoud". Pleidooien voor een nationaal toneel, 1800–1840'. *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde* 122.4 (2006'), 289–302.



the theatre himself. Interestingly, however, some of the historical plays seem to have been written in order to counteract the French authority. In many plays, a longing for independence and freedom is expressed under the veil of the past. Again, authors frequently chose events that had occurred during the Dutch Revolt, a period in which the Dutch Republic had become an independent state. Examples of these 'resistance plays' are Marten Westerman's *Het ontzet der stad Leiden* (1808) and three plays by Adriaan Loosjes: *Laurens Koster* (1809), *Magdalena Moons* (1810), and *Baarte van IJsselstein* (1810).

Between 1811 and 1813, only one national-historical play was published. This can be explained by the fact that the Netherlands was incorporated into the French empire. They immediately started carrying out censorship on all printed material, which had a large impact on the book market in the Netherlands.

Following the defeat of Napoleon, the Netherlands regained its independence. In 1815, the House of Orange was restored to the throne, and William I became king of the Netherlands. This led to a stream of patriotic literature, in which his restoration was cheered. Again, authors drew parallels between the past and present: William I was seen as the successor to William of Orange, who had revolted against the Spanish king. Yet, authors also chose episodes from the Middle Ages, especially episodes in which peace and reconciliation had been achieved between two different parties. Again, the present-day message was clear: the kingdom of William I consisted of two different parts, namely, the Protestant north and the Catholic south (today's Belgium). In history, important lessons could be learned about war, reconciliation, and peace. Examples of these 'reconciliation plays' are *Jan van Schaffelaar* (1820) by D.H. ten Kate van Loo and *Diederijk en Willem van Holland* (1821) by Jan van Walré.

A third and last peak in the production of theatre plays occurred in 1830–1832. These were the years of the Belgian Revolution, which began with a riot in Brussels in August 1830 and eventually led to the establishment of an independent, Roman Catholic, and neutral Belgium. Great victories of the past were staged in order to remind the audience of the strength of the Dutch nation. Seventeenth-century naval heroes were again celebrated and used as heroic examples. To give just one example, parallels between the past and the present are an important ingredient of *De admiraal Piet Hein te Delfthaven* (1832). The scene of action is the harbour of Delfthaven, where Piet

Hein—who has just defeated the *Spaanse Zilvervloot* (Spanish treasure fleet loaded with silver)—is being warmly welcomed by his family and the citizens of Delft. Hein explains to the crowd the secret of his success: 'Our naval forces are impassioned with one spirit, and with such unity a nation may call itself invincible'.<sup>28</sup> United we stand, divided we fall: that, in short, is the message. To intensify this message, the spectators are constantly reminded of the bad character of the Flemings. At the request of another well-known naval hero, Maarten Tromp, Hein agrees to sail off again to fight the Flemish Duinkerker Kapers. The spectators know that Hein will die in this battle, but they are not confronted with the sad ending of his life; he sails off, cheered by a choir of sailors: 'We force the robbers to stand in awe of Dutch courage, the Dutch flag'.<sup>29</sup> Sentences like these were a direct reference to the war the country was fighting against Belgium.

After 1832, the production of historical plays diminished. This might be partly explained by the fact that the political situation in the country had become more stable. More importantly, however, a new genre had emerged, one that would become the most popular form in which to present the past: the historical novel.

#### *Historical Novels about the Dutch National Past*

Although Walter Scott published his first historical novel in 1814, the first historical novels with themes related to the national past started to appear in the Netherlands only in 1829.<sup>30</sup> In that year, two novels appeared, both modelled after Scott: *De Schildknaap* (The shield-bearer) by Margaretha Jacoba de Neufville, and *Eduard Dalhorst* by Herman

<sup>28</sup> 'Onze geheele zeemagt is thans met ééne geest beziel, en waar zulk een eendragt heerscht, kan een volk zich onoverwinnelijk noemen'. In: A.P. Muller-Westerman, *De admiraal Piet Hein, te Delfthaven* (Amsterdam: M. Westerman & Zoon, 1832), 85.

<sup>29</sup> 'Men dwing de roov'ren tot ontzag / Voor Hollands moed, voor Hollands vlag'. In: Muller-Westerman 1834, 88.

<sup>30</sup> Before 1829, we do find some novels about the national past, but they lack the typical Scottish way of evoking the past as a place where people behaved, felt, and dressed differently. The historical novels of Adriaan Loosjes, however, should not be overlooked. Between 1808 and 1816, he published four novels about the national past, which were used during a long period of time as important reference points in the discussion about the nature and purposes of the historical novel.

van Apeltorn (a pseudonym of A.W. Engelen). There had of course been a feeling of competition amongst Dutch authors to be the first to imitate Scott. For example, Engelen explains in the introduction of his novel his disappointment at being beaten by De Neufville.<sup>31</sup>

In subsequent years, the national-historical novel gradually gained more ground and eventually outstripped all other historical genres in popularity. In the first half of the nineteenth century, at least ninety-eight novels about the Dutch national past were published. Production reached a high point in the period 1835–1843, with between six and eight novels being published each year.<sup>32</sup> Most of the authors have now been completely forgotten, except for Anna Louisa Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint, who became one of the leading authors in the Netherlands. From 1842 onwards, the production gradually decreased, and by 1850 the historical novel had passed its first peak in the Netherlands.<sup>33</sup>

As for the content of these novels, most authors chose subject matter from the Dutch Revolt or the seventeenth century (fifty-four out of ninety-eight novels). The Middle Ages comes second (twenty-nine), and only nine novels are situated in the eighteenth century. The underrepresentation of the eighteenth century might be explained by the fact that the eighteenth century was closest to the present time, not yet considered as the past. Of more importance, however, is the fact that the eighteenth century was considered to be an age of moral, cultural, and economic decline, and as not having produced any great heroes or national victories worth portraying. In *Ferdinand Huyck*

<sup>31</sup> Herman van Apeltorn, *Eduard Dalhorst. Een Nederlandsch verhaal uit het laatst der zeventiende eeuw* (2 vols.; Groningen: W. van Boekeren, 1829), 1:vi. There was, and still is, discussion about the question of whether Jacob van Lennep was the first to write a Scottish historical novel in Dutch. In 1833 he published *De Pleegzoon*. He claimed to have written it five or six years before it was published, which would make him the first. It has not yet been cleared up whether he spoke the truth. See on this issue M.F. van Lennep, *Het leven van Mr. Jacob van Lennep* (2 vols.; Amsterdam: P.N. van Kampen & zoon, 1909–1910), 1:200, and G.P.M. Knuvelde, *Handboek tot de geschiedenis der Nederlandse letterkunde* (Den Bosch: Malmberg, 1973), 316.

<sup>32</sup> For a more thorough overview of the rise of the national-historical novel, see Jensen 2008, 175–204.

<sup>33</sup> In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the historical novel went through a revival; the historical novel also seems to attract many present-day authors, such as Louis Ferron, Hella Haasse, Arthur Japin, Thomas Rosenboom, and Nelleke Noordervliet. Parallels between the past and the present use of the historical novel are discussed in: Marita Mathijssen, 'Weg uit het boosaardige heden; de opbloei van de historische roman'. *Literatuur / De Groene Amsterdammer* 130.4 (2006), 8–9.

(1840)—a novel about the adventures of an eighteenth-century adolescent—Jacob van Lennep deliberately tried to change this negative image by pointing to the distorting effect of stereotypical images in general. His vivid description of eighteenth-century Dutch life, however, did not generate any successors.

As for the choice of subject matter, the parallels between the historical novel and the other historical genres are evident: there was a preference for the period of the Dutch Revolt and the seventeenth century, although the Middle Ages also attracted numerous authors. However, there are two important differences. First, the main characters were often fictional rather than historical figures—historical figures often entered novels as side characters. Although some novels were dedicated to actual national heroes—such as Albrecht Beylinc, Jan van Schaffelaar, or Herman de Ruyter—the majority featured nonhistorical figures. The choice of a fictional main character offered the novelist an important advantage: he did not have to take the long historiographical tradition into account in sketching the main character's feelings and acts. Besides, the audience could probably identify more easily with a nonpublic figure. The sketch of other public characters, historical events, and local customs, costumes, and surroundings was usually based on thorough historical research.

Second, the parallel between the past and the present was often less obvious in historical novels. In the case of drama and poetry, the present-day application of the past often lay at the heart of the work: playwrights and poets explicitly and primarily wanted to educate their audiences, and they used a range of rhetorical strategies to propagate their moral lessons. In the case of the previously quoted epic poem by Helmers, for example, the repetition of certain phrases and words ('in the name of the fatherland', 'patriotism', 'holy ancestors', and so on) was meant to stir and inspire the audience. In contrast, the relationship between a novel and its readers was quite different: it was usually read in silence, and the narrative plot was stretched out over a longer period of time. Of course, many novelists also had messages to put across, but these were often more hidden, or even secondary to the plot.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Jensen 2008, 180–183.

*The Mutual Dependency of Generic Developments*

Why did the rise of the historical novel start so late in the Netherlands? In response to this question, scholars usually point to the importance of David Jacob van Lennep's lecture, published in 1827, in which he argued that Dutch authors should take Walter Scott as an example. However, Wagemans and others have reminded us of the gap of at least six years between this lecture and the serious breakthrough of the historical novel in the Netherlands.<sup>35</sup> In my opinion, one should therefore relate the development of the historical novel to the rise of other historical genres in the same period. By placing the historical novel in the midst of related genres, one gets a better understanding both of the embeddedness of this genre in the literary system and of the various applications among the various genres.

As I have shown, the production of national-historical poetry and drama was clearly related to political events. Production peaked during years of turbulent political changes, such as during the reign of Louis Napoleon, the restoration of King William I, and the Belgian Revolution. Both poetry and drama were used as tools of resistance and as means to propagate feelings of loyalty and patriotism amongst the Dutch people. Authors pointed to the continuity between the past and the present: important lessons could be learned from the past, and heroic figures were used as exemplars. Poetry and drama were much more suitable to pass on political messages than was the historical novel, the reading of which induced a different, more solitary reading experience. Therefore, the Belgian Revolution especially might have slowed the rise of the historical novel, as authors preferred to communicate with their readers in a more direct way.

Literature was undoubtedly one of the most important gateways to history, since it made the past accessible to a broad audience. It opened up new horizons and created new historical sensations of long-forgotten worlds. Although the various literary genres all contributed to the constitution of a coherent, national history, the mutual dependency of these genres should be taken into consideration when discussing their role in the process of nation building.

<sup>35</sup> K.M. Wagemans, 'Invloeden op de ontwikkeling van de historische roman in de periode 1827-1840 of De Redevoering en de Roos'. *De Negentiende Eeuw* 6.4 (1982), 149-158. See also W. van den Berg, 'Moeite met een manifest'. *Literatuur* 5 (1988), 357-358, and Van der Wiel 1999, 230-254.