CHAPTER 8

The World of Literary Societies

The Literary Societies

Almost all the Dutch administrators and teachers who went to work in the South around 1820 became involved in new or existing Southern literary societies. In the larger cities a new network of societies emerged in addition to the existing chambers of rhetoric, mostly established and supported by the Dutch. Membership files and formal regulations show that they were 'Dutch' societies, as the regulations of Northern groups had served in many cases as a model for the Southern ones. One of the societies was the Maatschappij van Nederlandsche Taal en Letterkunde [Dutch Linguistics and Literature Society] in Ghent, which was established in 1821 and adopted the motto ‘Regat Prudentia Vires’ [Prudence Rules Powers]. The most important person in the society, and founding chairman, was the Ghent professor Johannes Matthias Schrant. Although various chambers of rhetoric had received royal titles around 1819 as a token of government support, Regat Prudentia Vires had already been well supported by the government before the society was officially established: the committee submitted the proposal to establish the society and its regulations to Education Minister Falck for approval; he immediately became a patron and honorary member of the society. Furthermore King Willem I provided Regat Prudentia Vires with starting capital of six hundred guilders and added another two hundred guilders after three years.

The city of Ghent already experienced an industrious world of literary societies, including the activities of the chamber of rhetoric De Fonteine, in which Schrant had taken the role of chaplain (spiritual leader) after his arrival in the South. De Fonteine had obtained a royal title in 1819 as had a large number of other Southern chambers, and from then on it remained in close contact with the government and the monarch. The question is, what more could a new society contribute to literary activities in Ghent and why did the government find it necessary to support a second society in the same city? Perhaps it promoted the world of literary societies, particularly in light of ‘the emerging Dutch popular spirit in Ghent’, as phrased by Willem I regarding the establishment of the University of Ghent.

At first sight there were not many differences between Regat Prudentia Vires and De Fonteine. The traditional distinction between the chamber of rhetoric as a body for creating literature, primarily concerned with poetry and plays,
and the eighteenth and early nineteenth century societies, which undertook and supported learned work, did not apply in this case. Comparing the reports of their respective meetings, it appears that both paid attention to contemporary poetry, whether or not it was written by their own members; and to presentations on literary, historical or philosophical topics. Both also had a relatively open character, in the sense that Regat Prudentia Vires and De Fonteine made efforts to project themselves externally. They did so partly by organising various prize contests for a broad public, in which the Dutch also won prizes.

However, from a Dutch perspective the two societies could never be equal. In previous years Jan Frans Willems, Leo de Foere, Karel Vervier and others had exploited what they considered to be the glorious history of the chambers of rhetoric to legitimise the illustrious past and hence the quality of Southern Netherlands literature. How different was the image of the rhetoricians that emerged in the North at the time. In Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde [Provisional history of Nether-Dutch poetry] (1810) Jeronimo de Vries had spoken extremely negatively about the chambers of rhetoric in the Low Countries. Although the rhetoricians may ‘admittedly have awakened and sustained the desire to practice Poetry everywhere, […] the essence and excellence of the art were still unknown to them’; ‘most of them, if not all, possessed nothing poetic except the name’. And:

One should be amazed at the monstrous and defective works of these Societies. Taste was lacking in their Introductions and Insignias, as in their Morality Plays and Refrains. Impurity of language, lack of sweet fluency makes their Poems […] barely readable, at least not without torturous effort.

Matthijs Siegenbeek adopted the picture of the rhetoricians sketched by De Vries in his Beknopte geschiedenis der Nederlandsche letterkunde [Short history of Dutch literature] (1826) and wrote that their poetry possessed ‘little or no value’ and ‘usually betrayed a very uncivilised or sometimes extremely poor taste’. In addition to the lack of refinement De Vries had also related the rhetoricians to the uncouth, unpolished coarseness of the countryside. He wrote that from the early eighteenth century, chambers were only really to be found in rural areas, distant from the educated and urban world, and lacking the prevailing bourgeois ideals.

After Siegenbeek’s and De Vries’ condescending statements, a literature that wished to stand for civilisation, progress and quality could hardly continue to be attached to the history of the chambers of rhetoric. The rhetoricians were