CHAPTER FIVE

NEO-LATIN DRAMA IN THE LOW COUNTRIES

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THE LOW COUNTRIES AS A HISTORICAL, RELIGIOUS AND LITERARY MELTING POT

Between c. 1500 and 1750 some hundreds of Latin plays were written, staged and printed in the Low Countries from south to north.¹ Some of them had a huge international resonance, witness the many editions and performances all over Europe. In the selection of ten representative biblical dramas printed by Nicolaus Brylinger in Basel in 1541, seven of them were written by authors from the Low Countries, which were a leading region in drama in the sixteenth century. However, speaking of the ‘Low Countries’ involves some geographical difficulties. The early modern territory encompassed roughly the area that now comprises the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, small parts of Germany and some parts of northern France.² The area was divided into rather autonomous provinces, while the cities had their own forms of autonomy. The rulers confirmed their dominion by magnificent ‘Joyous Entries’ (‘Blijde Intredes’) in the cities, mainly in the southern provinces, which formed the economic heart in the beginning of the sixteenth century. With approximately 2.5 million inhabitants, the Low Countries were highly urbanized.

The Protestant Reformation, which, starting with Martin Luther in the 1510s and 1520s, would ‘divide Europe’s House’, also divided the Habsburg rulers and the Low Countries. While both parties had conflicting interests and conflicting religious convictions, Emperor Charles V (1500–1558) and his successor Philip II (1527–1598) tried to stop the spread of ‘heretical’

¹ For a list of Dutch plays, see IJsewijn, ‘Annales Theatri Belgo-Latini’. The Low Countries were called ‘a main region for Latin drama’ by, for instance, Creizenach, Geschichte des neueren Dramas, 2, p. 70, 83. In Germany, however, religious drama was written long after a series of plays was published by the Dutch, ibid., p. 71.
² For the historical backgrounds I have based my account on Blockmans and Prevenier, The Burgundian Netherlands; Duke, Reformation and Revolt in the Low Countries; Parker, The Dutch Revolt; Israel, The Dutch Republic; MacCulloch, The Reformation; and the intr. by Strietman and Happé in idem, Urban Theatre in the Low Countries, pp. 1–33, esp. 1–24.
ideas by confining the autonomy of the provinces and the cities. As a consequence, the rulers had to deal with not only religious dissidence, but also political rebellion. In these quarrels, literature written by Rhetoricians took a prominent role. Their Chambers were a place of discussion and exchange of ideas and, according to the authorities, potential centres of dissidence. The central power reacted vehemently with Edicts and other proclamations against them and against the spread of ideas through the printing press, which was a forceful agent in spreading the Reformation.3

The Low Countries’ government, comprising the States General (a collective representative body of the provinces and the main cities) and the ‘Stadtholder’ (representative of the King) William the Silent (1533–1584), reacted in the form of the ‘Dutch Revolt’ from 1568 onwards, and the ‘Act of Abjuration’ in 1581. These eventually caused a division of the Low Countries: six southern provinces—Hainault, Artois, Walloon Flanders, Tournai, Namur, Luxembourg and Limburg—submitted themselves once more to Philip’s authority and returned to Catholicism, while the Northern provinces Zeeland, Holland, Utrecht and part of Gelderland separated and became the Protestant Dutch Republic. Many Protestants from the south, including Rhetoricians and humanists, fled to the Northern provinces. The Dutch Revolt, which became the Eighty Years’ War, would last until 1648.

The years of war and religious strife did not prevent economic growth in parts of the Low Countries; in fact they advanced it. One of the major events was the Fall of Antwerp in 1585, when the city was conquered by the Spaniards. This effected a shift in the economic centre from ‘south’ to ‘north’ and the rise of Amsterdam as a trading centre. Economic success is a good basis for cultural blossoming, and the Low Countries became and remained a region of much cultural activity, in painting, music, literature and humanistic learning.

Both Latin schools and universities were centres of Humanism. The Low Countries had two universities. The first one was the University of Louvain, founded in 1425, which initially had a medieval, scholastic spirit, but gradually became a centre of renewal. In 1518 Erasmus was one of the founders of the *Collegium trilingue* or ‘Collegie der drie Tonghen’ (where ‘the’ three languages, Latin, Greek and Hebrew were taught) in the

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3 See, for example, Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*. As she also acknowledges, besides the printed word, the spoken one was important in spreading reformatory ideas.