Introduction: Dynamics of Neo-Latin and the Vernacular: History and Introduction

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Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artes
intulit agresti Latio (Hor., ep., 2, 1, 156–157)

In 1516, the Dutchman Reinier Snoy (ca. 1477–1537) finished his Latin historiography De rebus Batavicis. At the end of the first book, Snoy takes pride in being ‘the very first—let there be no envy at the word—to venture upon this task’. Accordingly, Early Modern Dutch historiography seems to have started in Latin, yet there is more to the story. Snoy’s book only saw the light over a century later, in 1620, whereas the first writer to publish a history of Holland was Cornelius Aurelius (ca. 1460–1531), who published his vernacular Chronyk van Hollandt, Zeelandt ende Vriesland (later known as the Divisiekrö尼克) only one year after Snoy finished his De Rebus Batavicis (Leiden, 1517). Technically speaking, therefore, the first Early Modern Dutch historiography was in Dutch, although it is clear that Aurelius used both Latin and vernacular sources for his work. Moreover, Aurelius and Snoy knew one another, as they belonged to the Gouda circle of humanists. Aurelius, who also wrote in Latin, even dedicated a treatise on the Batavians, his Elucidarium scopulosarum questionum super

3 Cf. Die Chronyk van Hollandt, Zeelandt ende Vriesland, behímmende van Adams tyden, tot die geboerte ons Heren Jhesu, voortgaende tot den jare M CCCCCe ende XVII. Met den rechten eerspronge, hoe Hollandt eert begrepen ende beweont is gheweest van den Trojanen. Ende is inhoumdende van die hertogen van Beyeren, Henegouwen ende Bourgongen; die tijt dat si ant graefscap geweest hebben; met die cronike der biscoopen van Utrecht, seer suverlic geextendeert ende int lange verhaelt (Leiden: Jan Seversz., 1517), pp. i–ii. For an edition with transcription, see <http://www.historici.nl/retroboeken/divisiekroniek>.
Batavina regione et differentia, to Snoy. In the end, it therefore appears almost impossible and, more importantly, quite senseless to say which was ‘first’ in Early Modern Dutch historiography: Latin or Dutch. The story is much more complex than that: it is one of interplay and exchange rather than isolation and divergence, in short of what we will call the dynamics of Neo-Latin and the vernacular.

The bilingualism of Snoy and Aurelius is exemplary for much of Renaissance literature. Nevertheless, it has always been something of a paradox that the Renaissance, a time-frame that put enormous faith in the Greco-Roman cultural heritage of Europe and therefore elevated Latin to the rank of the undisputable lingua franca, was the very era during which the whole of Europe would witness an increasing appreciation for the vernacular languages. This is partly explained by a growing national consciousness within Europe, but also by the didactic mission of Renaissance humanism: knowledge and culture were no longer to be exclusively accessible to those trained in Latin and Greek philology. Previous scholarship tended to interpret this opposition between the humanist fascination for the classical languages and keen attention for the vernacular in a strict binary scheme of a socially and intellectually elitist Neo-Latin culture on the one hand versus a popular or bourgeois vernacular culture on the other. More recently, however, there has been increasing attention for the dynamic interplay that existed between Neo-Latin and vernacular languages, literatures and cultures. We need only think back to the example of the Florentine archhumanists Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio to realise that from the very start Renaissance culture had to continuously redefine its position within a complex and constantly changing cultural matrix of Latinity and vernacularity. Or, to offer another significant illustration, only recently Nikolaus Thurn published a bulky volume on the manifold influence of vernacular literature on Neo-Latin texts, which puts the old story of the supreme dominance of Latin over the vernacular in a completely different light. In this way, it appears that rather than interpreting the question of Neo-Latin and

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