Introduction

Writing occasional verse brings little fame. Nevertheless the Latin humanists produced it in enormous quantities, and for most occasions they could and did make use of ancient models. How did they cope with, process and appropriate this classical Latin poetry? In the following I shall, after some preliminary remarks on definitions and problems, and on translation as a means of appropriation, examine how Dutch Neolatin poets from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries handled three subgenres of occasional poetry, the *epithalamium*, the *epicedion*, and liminal verse. Since any discussion of the vast ocean of occasional verse must perforce be limited to grazing across the tip of one small iceberg, I have chosen material relatively well known to me, in the hope that this has a wider scope and will at least suggest some patterns of appropriation in this humble, yet revealing poetry. For occasional verse is one point where literature and history, or fiction and reality, intersect. More than most other kinds it may show us the conditions under which literature is produced, received and functions, precisely because of its relation to contemporary reality. Since occasional verse is provoked by events which are of all time but take place in specific historical circumstances, it adapts and appropriates existing forms, thus opening itself to approaches from New Historicism or from intertextuality. Besides, it may inform us about the biographical and historical facts, be instrumental in the self-fashioning of the poet, and serve as a key to unlock networks of European intellectual history.¹

¹ Compare Heinz Hofmann’s remarks on one desideratum of Neolatin Studies in *Neulateinisches Jahrbuch* 2 (2000) 88: ‘Studien…welche die Autoren und Texte, aber auch die Bedingungen von Textproduktion und -rezeption und die Funktionen untersucht, welche die lateinische Literatur im Kontext der volkssprachlichen Literaturen,
Occasion, praise and a client-patron relationship are closely linked: every occasional poem is a laudatory poem, but not all panegyric poetry is written for a certain occasion. In ancient Latin verse of this kind literary patronage is a decisive factor, that is to say an asymmetrical relationship between poet and patron—although both use the language of friendship. In late renaissance Holland on the other hand, without a royal court and with relatively few noblemen, much poetry was exchanged between friends and equals. Whereas Janus Secundus (1511–1536) in the beginning of the sixteenth century still spent much of his time looking for a patron, and hopefully composing panegyric poetry for royalty, change was on its way. The economic development and urbanization of the Northern Netherlands, their war with Spain, the exchange of hierarchical Roman Catholicism for a more egalitarian religion and society, and the founding of Leiden University in 1575 all brought change: the professors, indeed the rectors of Latin schools, burgomasters, administrators, doctors, preachers, merchants and the well-to-do bourgeois in general, might still need a social network, but only a few sustained relationships were really asymmetrical. In Dutch Neolatin poetry literary patronage plays virtually no part. Nevertheless, praise of the poet’s equals and betters is at the heart of the three examples I will discuss below. They will be focused on the two primi inter pares of Dutch Neolatin poetry, Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) and Daniel Heinsius (1580–1655), the former a brilliant poet, politician, jurist, historian and theologian, the latter a young and ambitious professor, renowned as a highly-gifted poet all over Europe.