The Circulations of *Matthea*, the Legendary Ghent Beguine, in Time, Space, and Genre

In post-revolutionary Belgium, writers associated with the Flemish Movement, in conjunction with German philologists, promoted the legend as a key resource in their cultural activism. As a traditional, oral genre, legends transferred authority about the history and character of the nation from elites to 'the people'. They were the raw material from which to construct a new, national culture that would reunite a class-divided society. At the same time, they became omnipresent in more ephemeral literature aimed at an international audience, such as tourist guides, because they supposedly offered ethnographic insight. In the 1840s one Flemish legend inspired numerous retellings, both for domestic audiences and for foreign visitors. The legend concerned Matthea, a poor Ghent beguine, who died after a miraculous encounter. In this chapter, I consider the origins of this story, and how it passed from oral culture into literature. I also speculate about why this modest legend, originally narrated among the lacemakers of Flanders, should have found such international appeal.

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Introduction

According to legend, Matthea (or to use a popular diminutive, Mattheken) was a beguine – a Flemish lay sister – who lived in poverty in the Ghent beguinage, a community of pious women. On Shrove Tuesday 1470 all the other beguines were celebrating with feasts, but no one had invited Matthea. Lonely and hungry she went to pray before the beguinage's church crucifix. The Christ on the cross told her to join the feast of the Mistress (*Grootjuffrow*) of the beguinage, and to prove that he had sent Matthea, she should tell the Mistress that she had neglected to fulfill her last penance and that the embroidery waiting to be done under her pillow had been completed by his mother, the Virgin Mary. The Mistress, astonished that Matthea knew things only between her and God, allowed her to join her table. After the meal, Matthea went to give thanks before the crucifix, where she promptly died. The bells of the

beguinage church rang by themselves to bring the other beguines running to witness this miracle.

This information, drawing on local traditions, was recorded in the seventeenth century by the Augustinian hagiographer Joseph Van Rijckel. Before the nineteenth century, his Latin tome was the only printed account of Matthea's life. According to Van Rijckel, memory of Matthea continued to be preserved in the Ghent beguinage: the Mistress's feast on Shrove Tuesday was called "Matteken's meal", one of the rooms in her house was called "Matteken's room", and one of the communal houses shared by beguines was dedicated to "Saint Matthea", although she has never been officially canonized (Van Rijckel 1631: 319–323). The crucifix before which she prayed had become a site of pilgrimage – it was visited by the archdukes Albert and Isabella in 1614. It remained an attraction over the following centuries, having been carried by the beguines, when they were expelled from Ghent in 1874, to their new beguinage church of Saint Amandsberg..

Matthea had no officially recognized status, but her story was preserved in Flemish popular culture, because at some point she had become the subject of a ballad. Who composed this ballad and when are impossible questions to answer; no manuscript or print version survive from before folksong collectors recorded it in the 1840s, but internal evidence suggests it had circulated for decades, if not centuries, before. What we do know for certain is that, by that time, the song had become a favorite among lacemakers who sang it while working together in the lace-schools and workshops of Flanders. It was from lacemakers that folksong collectors recorded oral versions of Matthea's legend.

However, after centuries of relative obscurity, Matthea became the subject of a literary cult in the mid nineteenth century. In the two decades following Belgian independence in 1830, her story was taken up by poets, folklorists, cultural, and religious activists. Some of her new devotees were to be found in the Flemish Movement, a loose group of scholars and politicians who sought to promote the Flemish language and Flemish culture within the new Belgian state. However, she also appealed to writers beyond Flanders, particularly in the German lands. These various literary retellings drew their inspiration not only from Van Rijckel's book but also the local legend preserved in Ghent as well as the lacemakers' ballad version. Poems about Matthea appeared in the burgeoning periodical press in Belgium, and her story also circulated in cultural manifestos. But she also figured in tourist guides and other literature aimed at visitors to the medieval attractions of Flanders' cities.

In this chapter I will examine who espoused her story in the nineteenth century, and why; however, as will become clear, Matthea's was just one of many legendary narratives that took on new life in this same period. Matthea had become part of a Romantic re-evaluation of the legend as a genre and as source for both literary inspiration and ethnographic data. This new appreciation of legendary matter was galvanized by the example of the Grimms.

The Ripple Effect of the Grimms' *Deutsche Sagen*

According to Terry Gunnell, in the first half of the nineteenth century the Grimms' collection of German legends – the *Deutsche Sagen* (1816, 1818) – was more influential than the brothers' fairy tales (*Märchen*) for which they are better remembered today. Gunnell and the other collaborators to the Grimm Ripples project have traced the impact of the *Deutsche Sagen*, initially to Denmark, then across the North Sea to Scandinavia, the Baltic region and the British Isles (Gunnell 2022). The Grimms were the first to draw a clear distinction between these two genres of oral literature: "The fairy tale is more poetic, the legend is more historical; […] [the legend] adheres always to that which we are conscious of and know well, such as a locale or a name that has been secured through history" (Grimm 1981: 1). The legend, therefore, was the genre best adapted to the needs of romantic nationalism, as it fused both dimensions of the nation's supposed existence, space and time, through narrative. Because legends were tied to specific localities – a mountain or a river, a castle or a church – so they delimited the nation's territory. And because legends were fixed in time, associated with a particular historical person or event, so they related to the nation's history. The Grimms arranged their collection in rough chronological order, moving from the oldest legends about the pre-Christian Germanic tribes through to narratives of medieval princes and nobles. Collectively they offered a folk chronicle of the German peoples, an account of their origins, and a justification for their continued existence and occupation of the places that have, according to legend, always been theirs.

Crucially, a *Sage* – that which is said – transferred authority about the nation's history from the literate elite to the common people. Literate chroniclers such as monks, a favorite target of the Grimms' disdain, were subject to cosmopolitan influences, whereas the common people were free of such taints. In practice the majority of the Grimms' collection derived not from oral narration but from written sources: but still the assumption was that these earlier texts also captured the common lore of the folk. In the early nineteenth century's age of

revolutions, as ‘the people’ emerged onto the political stage as the nation’s source of legitimacy, so their version of national history began to matter. Neither the Grimms nor other Romantics believed that legends were necessarily factually accurate, but they were still ‘truthful’. As the French historian Jules Michelet, an enthusiastic reader of the Grimms, explained in relation to the Swiss legend of William Tell, “[t]his narrative may well not be real, but it is eminently true, that is to say, perfectly conformable to the character of the people which has given it for history” (Michelet in Rearick 1971: 76). In other words, legends were ethnographically ‘true’.

Part of the Grimms’ purpose in collecting legends was to provide sources for a revived, national literature. Contemporary writers and artists, like the monks of old, had detached themselves from native sources of creativity through their penchant for foreign models. To be true to themselves, they needed to return to the people, and to the people’s language. Through their legend-inspired poems, plays, and operas they could fulfill the proper function of artists in this age of mass literacy, which was to reconnect the people with their own collective narrative. The task was particularly urgent given the rise of newly educated and leisured social classes who were, because of their novel urban mode of living, in danger of deracination.

However, while the legends collected by the Grimms and their followers across the North Sea region served as the genesis for high art, they also made their way into more ephemeral and disregarded forms of literature, such as travel writing and tourist guides. Steamships, trains, and Cook’s Tours were making it possible for many more people, and of more varied social backgrounds, to travel for pleasure and instruction. Legends provided tourists with a quick and easy means to gain some understanding of the places they visited, their history and character. Locals played up these legends, performing them in pageants or memorializing them in statues, partly in order to draw in tourists. To be effective, narratives of national, regional, and civic identity need to be accepted by outsiders as well as insiders. It is the outsiders’ recognition that the narrative holds some truth-value that confirmed the distinctiveness of the nation, region, or town, even in its own eyes. Hence symbols derived from legends are reproduced in their millions as souvenirs. But while such iterations of legendary material may be banal, they are not trivial. As part of the common culture, they shape all our notions about the relationship of different peoples both to place and to time (Leerssen 2022).

Grimm Ripples in Belgium: The Flemish Movement and German Philology

Belgium does not feature in the Grimm Ripples project, but nowhere more clearly illustrates Gunnell's contention about the significance of the legend as a genre. Belgium only came into existence as a separate state in 1830, forged through romantic ideals and popular revolution. The 1830s and '40s were also the period when steam presses, wood-pulp paper, stereotype printing, and lithography were radically reducing the cost of publication and thus putting books and other printed matter into the hands of a much wider public. In Belgium, the collection and dissemination of legends, whether as folkloric scholarship or repurposed as high art, helped shape an emergent national culture in this period. At the same time, legends suffused that new literary form, the tourist guide. Belgium was an early and enthusiastic adopter of railway technology and in a few years had created the densest network in Europe: "from Malines, you may run to any point you choose in a few hours – Ghent, Liege, Louvain, Tirlemont, Brussels, Bruges. Belgium is covered with lines of railroad, which enable you to traverse the entire country in a few days" marveled one Irish visitor (Bell 1849: 369). This network linked the Channel ports with the Rhine valley, and so was central to the developing European tourist market. Flemish cities became destinations in their own right, as well as attractive stopovers on the line between fashionable resorts such as Ostend, Spa, Bad Ems, Baden-Baden, and the Swiss cantons (François 2012). Legends packaged in travel books helped visitors make sense of these encounters. Hence the legend was a key resource for two new reading publics: a growing domestic middle-class and even working-class audience, but also travelers from abroad.

This enthusiasm for legends was present on both sides of the language divide in Belgium, but the genre had more significance for the Flemish half of the population. French was the official language of the new state, the language of the constitution of 1831, the language used at court, in both houses of parliament, in the universities, in the upper reaches of the administration, army, and the Catholic Church. Even in Flanders, it was the preferred means of communication for the aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie. And it was the language of artistic culture. Flemish was often looked down upon as a coarse dialect, fit only for servants and peasants. However, in an age that turned to the 'voice of the people' for authority, these plebeian connections could become virtues. In the Flemish cities of post-independence Belgium, a movement arose to protect and promote the language and the people who spoke it. These defenders of Flemish recorded legends and other oral traditions, seeking in the people's words evidence of the language's roots, its vitality, its creativity, its authenticity.

The people's stories, their history, were meant to inspire new generations of Flemish writers to create patriotic art. The revival of Flemish literature in the mid-nineteenth century was not, on the whole, meant as a statement of Flemish autonomist ambitions, but rather to emphasize Flanders' distinctive contribution to Belgian history and national life. Yet possible tensions between Belgian patriotism and Flemish particularism were present from the beginning.

Ghent was a pivotal center for the nascent Flemish Movement from the late 1830s. While the city's medieval architecture began to draw tourists, its rapidly growing textile industries created the conditions for a new urban politics. It was here that language scholars and historians, librarians and archivists, poets, and writers all gathered in societies such as De Tael is gantsch het Volk (Language is the People Entire), founded in 1836, and contributed to journals such as the *Kunst en Letterblad* (*Journal of Art and Literature*), first published in 1840. Probably the most important figure in this circle was Jan Frans Willems (1793–1846), a friend of Jacob Grimm (Schlusemann 2014). Like the Grimms, Willems was both a literary historian, seeking after the origins of the Dutch language, and a campaigner on language issues. And, like the Grimms, he drew connections between the literature preserved in medieval and early modern texts and the literature preserved in oral traditions, principally, in his case, in the form of ballads. Ballads, as we will see, were also an important source for Flemish legends. Willems' collection of *Oude Vlaemsche Liederen* (*Old Flemish Songs*) was published after his death by his loyal lieutenant and fellow language scholar, Ferdinand Snellaert (1809–1872) (Willems 1848).

Another important figure within these organizations was the Ghent city archivist Prudens van Duyse (1804–1859), who combined his antiquarian research with poetry writing and language (and music) activism. Van Duyse, along with Willems, had been an Orangist and therefore opposed to the revolution that separated Belgium from the Netherlands (Witte 2014). His unhappiness with the post-revolutionary political situation led to a flirtation with Germanophilia in the 1840s, of which the most obvious expression was his role in founding the Vlaemsch-Duitsch Zangverbond (The Flemish-German Singing Union) (Dewilde 2015). As more folksong collections became available, the clearer became the links between the Flemish and German repertoire of ballads, which provided the raw material for a choral society that aimed to bring together works in both 'Low German' (Flemish) and 'High German' (Deleu 1957). Legends, another oral traditional genre that attracted Van Duyse, could also help demonstrate the continuity and coherence of the Germanic cultural area from the Danube to the Scheldt.

However, the ‘legendary turn’ in national literature often required an outsider to serve as a “cultural conduit” (to use Gunnell’s term). In the case of Sweden, it was the Englishman George Stephens, in the case of Iceland it was the Bavarian Konrad Maurer, and in the case of Flanders it was the Rhinelander Johann Wilhelm Wolf (1817–1855), who arrived in Brussels in 1840. He was, according to the German mythologist Eugen Mogk, “the most faithful follower of [Jacob] Grimm’s method, and the person who exploited its results to the utmost and brought them to the masses” (“Der gläubigste Anhänger Grimmscher Methode, der ihre Resultate zum äussersten ausbeutete und unter die grosse Menge brachte, ist Joh. Wilh. Wolf”) (Mogk 1907: 239). Wolf was one of a number of German philologists drawn to Belgium, and Flanders in particular, in the Vormärz period, the most famous of whom was the librarian, poet, and song-collector August Hoffmann von Fallersleben (1798–1874). In this period, philologists saw Dutch (including Flemish) as an extension of the low German dialect, and the packed libraries of its many urban centers offered rich, and relatively unexplored, fields for historians of the German language. But for Fallersleben, the liberal constitution of the new kingdom also provided a refuge from the reactionary politics of the German Confederation (Leerssen 2011). Whether Wolf was a political exile or migrated for more personal reasons is uncertain but, like Fallersleben, his visit had an objective. He wanted to research Flemish traditions which, he believed, demonstrated the region’s cultural connections to the wider Germanic world. He contacted Van Duyse in his role as archivist, and Van Duyse then introduced him into Ghent cultural circles; he probably also helped him obtain a temporary teaching post at the city’s university (Verschaeren 2000).

Willems, Snellaert, Fallersleben, and Van Duyse were interested in oral traditions, but they were primarily literary historians; their research was undertaken in manuscripts and old books. Wolf was more of a folklorist. He too researched in libraries and archives, but he also recorded songs and stories from oral performance. He published the results in two journals, *Grootmoederken* (*Grandmothers*) (1842) and *Wodana* (1843a); these are the earliest known specialist folklore magazines. Both contain a variety of folk genres – tales, songs, games – but in both cases Wolf put the *Sagen* first, underlining their importance. In 1843 he also published 585 legend texts in German translation in his *Niederländische Sagen* (*Netherlandish Legends*). This collection was explicitly modelled on the *Deutsche Sagen* and, like the Grimms’ volumes, drew both on written sources such as medieval chronicles and more recent almanacs. However, he also cited oral sources which he had recorded himself, and these account for about a quarter of the stories. While many of their narrators go

unidentified, those that are – including Eugene Stroobant, Constant Serrure, Philip Blommaert, Jaak van de Velde, Maria Van Ackere (née Doolaeghe) and, the most regularly cited contributor, Johanna Courtmans (née Berchmans, 1811–1890) – were figures associated with the Flemish Movement in Brussels and Ghent.

Given the overlapping personal and literary connections between Wolf and the partisans of the Flemish Movement, it is sometimes hard to determine who was a 'conduit' for whom. However, Wolf's legend collections undoubtedly inspired Flemish writers of the romantic period. Van Duyse's and Wolf's relationship came under strain towards the end of the decade as the latter's Pan-Germanic outlook took on increasingly political tones (Hanot 1990; Langhendries 2019). Nonetheless, the poet still paid generous tribute to the German folklorist's work in his 1848 collection *Het Klaverblad* (*The Cloverleaf*), in which Wolf's legends were cited as the source for eleven poems, most of which had previously appeared in Flemish periodicals. As Van Duyse explained in his introduction, he saw legends as resources to restore a national culture (Van Duyse 1848: IX).

Van Duyse's choice of Wolf's legends to versify demonstrates a distinctive feature of the genre in Flanders, its overt religiosity. The Grimms, as good Calvinists, tended to eschew Catholic miracle legends even as they embraced what they considered pre-Christian supernatural entities. Wolf was a Grimmian and equally enthused by remnants of Northern paganism, hence the title *Wodana*, and he was likewise allergic to anything that smacked of a classical pagan inheritance; but he was also a Rhineland Catholic. In the latter years of his short life, Wolf's religious identity loomed larger in his published work, bordering on mysticism (Fränkel 1898). The attraction of Belgium was not just that it was a revolutionary country, but that it was a Catholic country, and its Catholicism had been an important motivation for the 1830 revolt against the Protestant north. Van Duyse, like some other Ghent activists, was a freemason and on the liberal wing of the Flemish Movement, but he too was a Catholic and so immersed in the popular devotions of Flanders. They left a deep mark on his writings.

To take an example that has at least a thematic relationship to the story of Matthea, Van Duyse's poem "De Nonne" ("The Nun") was based on a song – "Van het Maegdeken" ("About the Maiden") – that Wolf had first published (Wolf 1842: 76 f.). "Van het Maegdeken" itself barely ranks as a legend: it is a relatively simple story of a young woman who is not, in the original, identified as a nun, but who so longs to see Jesus that her heart breaks. In death, she is united with her heavenly bridegroom. Wolf named no specific

informant for this song, but song collectors later in the century recorded several versions of "De Hemelbruid" ("The Heavenly Bride"), as it is popularly known, from one particular milieu: lacemakers (Cafmeyer 1968: 278). Lace was a long-established craft industry in Flanders, and in the 1840s was the largest employer of women in the province. As lacemakers trained and worked together – initially in 'lace schools' and later out of the street – they developed a strong work culture that fostered oral traditions. In particular, they favored long, narrative songs which, as a genre, overlapped with legends (Hopkin 2019). The maintenance of historical traditions in the form of songs brought them to the attention of literary scholars. Most of Willems' *Oude Vlaemsche Liederen* were assembled from manuscripts and printed sources, and those few songs which were collected from "the mouth of the people" ("uit den mond van het volk") often lack any detailed attribution. However, we know that some of them were sent to Willems probably in 1841, by Edmond de Coussemaker (1805–1876), a lawyer from over the border in Flemish-speaking France, where he had recorded them in the lace schools of Bailleul and the surrounding villages (Willems 1848: 529 f.). Coussemaker was already engaged in his own project of song-collecting that would result in a major publication a few years later (Coussemaker 1856).

Wolf did not mention lacemaking as part of the background to his collecting practices, but he had connections to the industry. Joanna Courtmans, who later wrote a novel about the lace schools, was one of his most regularly cited sources; at the time Wolf met her she was living in Ghent in the house of an 'aunt' Coleta Tanghe, a lacemaker (Pée 1932: 272).[1] 'Sagen' invoked the authority of the 'voice of the people', a people undivided; however, in Flanders, when one examines who actually made up '*het volk*' ('the people') who supplied oral traditions, one very often finds lacemakers.

This can be illustrated by some of Van Duyse's other poems that cite Wolf as their source. For example, "De kinderen van Stockhem" ("The Children of Stokkem") relates a miracle in which a poor woman, unable to buy food for her children, plans to kill them and herself. Instead, they all fall asleep for three months until the harvest, after which food becomes affordable (Van Duyse 1848: 13–15). Wolf's source for his version of the legend is simply cited as a "Flemish folksong" ("Flämische Volkslied") (Wolf 1843b: 259 f.). The story circulated as a broadside ballad in Flemish cities of the first half of the nineteenth century,

[1] The songs Wolf collected from Van Duyse's wife, Sophie Woutters, also suggest she had familiarity with lace schools, though, given the absence of biographical information, this is speculation on my part (Wolf 1843a; 198 f.).

but the only version of this song recorded in Belgium from oral tradition came from Ypres lacemakers (Blyau 1962: 119 f.). Van Duyse's poem "De twee zusters" ("The Two Sisters") tells of another food miracle which had previously been narrated by Wolf (Van Duyse 1848: 75–77; Wolf 1843b: 436 f.). A poor woman goes to her sister begging for bread to feed her children, but her sister denies she has any to share. When she returns to her own kitchen her loaf of bread has turned to stone. The legend is associated with both Leiden and Ghent, and was recorded in early modern chronicles, as both Van Duyse and Wolf knew. But it was also sung as a ballad by Ypres lacemakers (Blyau 1962: 113–17).

Matthea, the Ghent Beguine, Between Legend, Ballad, and Poem

All of these strands – legends and lacemakers, hunger and miracles, Flemish activists and German philology, high art and travel guides – come together in the story of Matthea, the Ghent beguine. Beguines, laywomen who had withdrawn from the world to pursue lives of piety, were a distinctive feature of urban life in the southern Netherlands from the late Middle Ages to the twentieth century. They dressed like nuns, and are often described as nuns, but they were not members of a regular order, nor did they take permanent vows. Their communities formed enclaves within Flemish cities, but they consisted of private houses which the beguines themselves collectively owned. The largest such enclave was the Great Beguinage of Ghent. By the mid-nineteenth century this had become a thorn in the side of the liberal municipal councilors who coveted the land: they would finally succeed in expelling the seven hundred beguines in 1874 (Ollivier 1903: 111 f.). In the meantime, however, the beguinage was a recommended tourist attraction. According to Robert Bell, whom we last heard extolling the benefits of the Belgium railway network, the Ghent Beguinage

> "is almost a small town in itself, has little silent streets, and a large ancient chapel of its own […] The transition is felt in a moment from the noisy clattering pavement you have just left, to the tranquil and solitary place you have entered […] the deep tranquility of life in this retirement, its unvarying round of devotional offices and charitable labours […] forces on the spectator an involuntary contrast with that wayward existence on the open highway of the world, where […] the bulk of mankind expend their energies and waste their hearts in struggling after shadows" (Bell 1849: 392–400).

This unworldly atmosphere would have been rendered more tangible to visitors by references to Matthea's legend. Tourists passed her house, and in the chapel they beheld the very Christ before whom she had prayed: a label explained the miracle.

However, Matthea's wider fame in Flanders beyond Ghent depended on the ballad version of her story. It was recorded three times in the nineteenth century by song collectors: by Edmond de Coussemaker in Bailleul in the 1840s; by Adolphe Lootens (1835–1905) from his mother in Bruges, probably in the 1850s though she had learned it decades earlier; and by Albert Blyau (1872–1946) from Marie Ingelaere in Ypres at the end of the 1890s (Coussemaker 1856: 175 f.; Lootens 1879: 52 f.; Blyau 1962: 104–106). The origins of this ballad are obscure: no written text predates these orally performed versions. The first line's injunction to "listen to a new song" ("Al die wilt hooren een nieuw lied") is one commonly found on broadside ballads which were sold at markets and pilgrimages by street-singers. Yet no broadside version of Matthea has survived, and the marked variation between these recordings – for example, Coussemaker's version replaces the name Matthea with Dorthea – suggests this ballad had circulated orally for several generations. What we can say is that, beyond Ghent, by the nineteenth century, her tradition was only maintained among lacemakers. In each of the three cases listed above the singers were lacemakers who had originally learnt the song in a lace school, where singing was used both to regulate the work pace and to inculcate a religious outlook (Hopkin 2019). The ballad had become a distinctive part of lacemakers' work traditions.

The miracle's presence in lacemakers' song repertoire may be explained by the fact that beguines were often lacemakers themselves, and they also taught lace skills. Thus, they were in a position to pass on the legends of their community. The lives of lacemakers – orderly, laborious, secluded, tranquil – were often compared to those of beguines. The Virgin as a heavenly textile worker also appears regularly in Flemish legends of lace, though oddly this element of the Matthea legend, which was recorded by Van Rijckel, was not included in lacemakers' ballads (Hopkin 2021). The feature of the story that probably appealed to lacemakers was Matthea's social position: she is identified as a poor and hungry woman, and yet it is she and not richer and more powerful figures who achieves a direct relationship with God. The same is true of the heroines in other lacemakers' ballads about miracles such as "De kinderen van Stockhem" and "De twee zusters". And, as in these cases, Matthea's miracle revolves around food. Lacemakers were an overtly pious workforce, but they were

also notoriously poor and ill-fed (Degreef 1886). These ballad-legends compound both these aspects of their working lives.

Matthea's legend prompted several artistic treatments in the 1840s. Van Duyse included the story of "Het Gentsch Beggijntjen" ("The Ghent Beguine") in the first volume of his collection of *Vaderlandsche Poëzy* (*Patriotic Poetry*) (Van Duyse 1840: 50–56). That volume also included texts inspired by other legends such as "De Monnik van Afflighem" ("The Monk of Afflighem", a medieval Rip Van Winkle) and the magical horse Bayard who carried the Carolingian knight Renaud and his brothers. This reliance on legends illustrates Van Duyse's belief about the importance of folk history for the creation of a new, national culture. In the same year, 1840, the notary Francis Josef Blieck (1805–1880) also published a poem about "Mattheken" in the first volume of the Ghent journal *Kunst- en Letterblad*, an off-shoot of Van Duyse's society De Tael is gansch het Volk, and whose editor was Ferdinand Snellaert (the man who published Willems' collection of folksongs). It had previously been read by Snellaert at a meeting of the society in December 1839, and so probably predates Van Duyse's attempt. The poets were close friends, and it seems likely that they chose the same topic as a good-natured competition in writing patriotic poetry (De Keyser 1960).

It is plausible, given the turn towards 'the voice of the people' among Romantics of this generation, that the poets drew on the lacemakers' ballad tradition for their inspiration. However, this is unproven. Van Duyse only acknowledged Van Ryckel's hagiography as a source: it was precisely the kind of work that might appeal to the Ghent city archivist. Blieck too must have known Van Ryckel's text as he included elements of the narrative, such as the Virgin's embroidery, that are left out of the ballad. Yet, while he did not mention any specific source, Blieck probably knew the ballad. His poem followed its rhyme scheme – aa/bb as the song, whereas van Duyse's poem is ab/ab; he used some of the same rhymes, such as '*mond*' ('mouth') and '*terstond*' ('immediately'); and some of his verses echo precisely the contents of the ballad (Blieck 1850: 89–92). Blieck, though by correspondence part of the same Ghent circles as Van Duyse, actually lived in the region between Ypres and Courtrai, in the middle of the West Flemish lace district (Staes 1875). Another possible connection to lacemakers' repertoire of songs is that both poets link Matthea to the *Hemelbruid* theme about the young woman who dies for the love of Jesus. In their poems, the beguine and Jesus are described as bride and bridegroom, and her death, therefore, becomes the consummation of their love. Lacemakers sang "De Hemelbruid", so they were familiar with the figure of Christ as

heavenly bridegroom, although he was not specifically invoked in their ballad narration of Matthea.

What was it about this legend, and this ballad, that attracted two leading Flemish poets of the romantic generation? Blieck was more firmly a Catholic writer than the freemason Van Duyse, yet both thought the purpose of literature was to inspire and ennoble, to encourage Christian virtue and patriotism. Not surprisingly then, their female characters had particular burdens to bear, as repositories of national traditions, victims of injustice, instructors in morality, and guardians of the patriotic flame. But patriotism for what? Both these men had been born when their region had been part of France, they had grown up in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and they only became Belgians as adults. Van Duyse's loyalty to the Dutch King persevered for several years after the separation of Belgium from the Kingdom of the Netherlands. By 1840 he had become more reconciled to the new state, and from that period onwards his political ambitions focused on making the distinct Flemish contribution to Belgian history and culture more visible. Neither Van Duyse nor Blieck planned to undermine Belgium's national identity, yet their concept of patriotism certainly meant being anti-French. France had not only been the occupier, it was the nation of martial aggression, imperial hubris, rationalism, atheism, and libertinism. All of these vices were inherent in its language, which the Belgian state was trying to impose on Flanders. Hence Flemish language activism was a moral as well as patriotic act. Their imagined Flanders, in contrast, was pious, tranquil, domestic, and feminine, it was the country of legends, miracles and naïve faith. All of these virtues were encapsulated in the story of Matthea.

Matthea's Fame in Germany

Matthea proved popular not only in Flanders but also in Germany. Between 1841 and 1846, four interrelated versions of her story reached the German-reading public. The first was made by Eduard Duller (1809–1853). Duller, a writer and theologian, visited Ghent in 1840 and participated in meetings of De Tael is gansch het Volk. He was so enthused by Van Duyse's poem that he translated it into German and it was published in a Romantic literary journal (1841: 164–170).

Duller was then living as a political exile from his native Bavaria under the relatively liberal regime of Hesse-Darmstadt. In Darmstadt he was the confidant of the poet Luise von Ploennies (1803–1872) who held a literary salon in that town. Possibly Duller put her in

touch with Van Duyse because the pair were corresponding by 1843. Then, in 1844, she followed in Duller's footsteps and took a tour through Belgium. Her cicerone during her tour of Flanders was Johann Wilhelm Wolf. He introduced Ploennies to Willems, Snellaert and other figures connected to the Flemish Movement. She also became acquainted with the poetry of Blieck and Courtmans.

Luise von Ploennies published an account of her travels on her return to Germany (Von Ploennies 1845). This work is part travel guide and part national romantic manifesto, proclaiming the virtues of the Flemish Movement and the cultural connections of Flanders to the Germanic language region. To illustrate her argument, she included samples of the work of Flemish writers and poets in her *Reise-Erinnerungen aus Belgien* (*Travel-Memories from Belgium*). For example, she translated Van Duyse's poem about the bread turned to stone to illustrate her account of her visit to the Saint Nicholas Church in Ghent, where the miraculous loaf was preserved (Von Ploennies 1845: 61–64). Every chapter also included a legend, sometimes several, largely drawn from Wolf's collection.

On this trip Luise was accompanied by her daughter Maria (1826–1909). A relationship developed between Wolf and Maria, and the following year they were married. Two years later the couple relocated from Brussels to Darmstadt.

In 1844, while they were being guided round Ghent by Wolf, the von Ploennies party visited the Great Beguinage and saw a painting in the church that told the story of Matthea. Wolf had already published a version of her legend (Wolf 1843b: 425–27). Luise von Ploennies also retold her legend, in poetic form, in her travel book (Von Ploennies 1845: 26–30). Later, her daughter Maria wrote a prose version of Matthea in a collection of legends that drew heavily on her husband's work, even though it was published under her own name (Von Ploennies 1846: 90–93). Unlike her mother's more overtly polemical work, Maria's was squarely aimed at tourists. The legends were arranged by city, making the book more user-friendly than Wolf's substantial tome, and it was published in Cologne by F.C. Eisen, a printer who specialized in the burgeoning Rhineland travel trade. Two years later this collection was translated into French by Louis Piré, a Brussels horticulturist, in an edition dedicated to Prudens Van Duyse (Von Ploennies 1848: 83–86). Although Van Duyse and Wolf had fallen out, they, and their wider circle, still admired each other, cited each other, and were inspired by each others' work. Luise von Ploennies remained in contact with Van Duyse through the 1850s.

Although all three of Wolf's and the von Ploennies' retellings of Matthea's legend depend, to a greater or lesser extent, on Van Duyse and Blieck, there are, nonetheless, some differences between the German and Flemish versions of her story. For example, all three German authors place greater emphasis on the moral chasm between Matthea and her fellow beguines, and in particular the Mistress. Their Matthea was the only morally upright beguine, the others were given to self-indulgence – specifically eating waffles, all three dwell on this heinous and distinctly Belgian gratification. Matthea was not so much forgotten, as she was described by both Van Duyse and Blieck, as deliberately excluded from the feast. The German authors differ again from the ballad versions in that their Matthea did not get to enjoy the feast after her confrontation with the Mistress; as soon as she had delivered her message she went back to the church and died. One feels that for impoverished Flemish lacemakers in the 'Hungry Forties', this change would have completely missed the point.

Luise von Ploennies, even by the standards of the time, had an exalted view of the role of the poet: in particular she saw the female *Dichterin* as a conduit for national feeling (Cassel 2002: 174–248). In the introduction to her *Travel-Memories* she wrote that in Belgium "I was regarded as the ambassador from Germania, sent to her sister who had been lamenting for a long time under the oppression of her French stepmother, to bring her the assurance of her undying love" "ich wurde als die Gesandtin betrachtet, welche Germania ihrer lange unter dem Druck der französichen Stief-mutter seufzenden Schwester hinüberschickte, um ihr die Verstcherung ihrer nicht erloschenen Liebe zu bringen" (Von Ploennies 1845: vii–viii). She enthusiastically used fairytale symbolism to construct female national allegories. In one chapter she related a dream in which a mourning-clad woman told the poetess that

> "I am an outcast, exile, outlaw, the mighty of this land have condemned me and expelled me, the wealthy and notable have trampled me under foot, but the faithful common people have not forsaken me, and in the hovels of the poor I have found a refuge, and the little children love me… Then I tell them the beautiful legends of 'Godefroy of Bouillon', of 'Margaret of Limburg', of 'Rudolph the Smith' […]" (ich bin eine Verstossene, Verbannte, Geächtete, die Gewaltigen im Lande haben mich verurtheilt und verwiesen, die Reichen und Vornehmen treten mich mit Füssen, aber das treue Volk hat mich nich verlassen, in der Hütte der Armuth habe ich eine Zuflucht gefunden, und die kleinen Kinder lieben mich… Dan erzähle ich ihnen die schönen Sagen von 'Gottfried von Bouillon', von dem lieben 'Margarethchen von Limburg', von 'Roeloff dem Schmied' […]" (Von Ploennies 1845: 111–115).

This Cinderella figure represented the Flemish language, and her means of maintaining Flemish national consciousness, albeit only among the poor, was through the genre of legends. At the end of the 'dream' von Ploennies' promised to help restore the Flemish language and culture.

Matthea's was not the only religious Flemish legend in which Luise von Ploennies found inspiration. For example, she was also drawn to Mariken van Nijmegen – a sort of female Faust. In the story Mariken moves from Nijmegen (now in the Netherlands) to Antwerp, and so she can be claimed as a Flemish heroine. Van Duyse had studied the origins of this narrative and Wolf had already published a version (1843b: 539–550). Von Ploennies retold this story, first in her travel book and then in an epic poem (1853). This legend too emphasized that the Catholic Low Countries was a land of miracles and female piety (Mulder 2018). It seems that Belgian and German authors agreed on what kinds of narratives were ethnographically 'true' for Flanders: ones that featured women, religion, and supernatural encounters. But what 'truths' did such stories relay for these German visitors?

Duller, Wolf, and Luise von Ploennies were all German nationalists of one variety or another, looking to bring about some kind of political transformation, hoping for some kind of unity within the German sphere. Nationalism in this period was associated with liberalism, the achievement of political freedoms. Duller was connected with revolutionaries in the 1830s and remained a committed radical; von Ploennies' Darmstadt salon was known as a hub of liberal activism in the 1840s. One of the attractions of Belgium to this generation was that it was a revolutionary state, with a liberal constitution that guaranteed freedom of religion, education, and association, freedom of speech, and liberty of the press. This last was of particular concern to von Ploennies: the relative freedom of both writers and women in Belgium was a theme to which she returned in her writings.

At the same time, all three were also drawn towards the spiritual, the mystic even. After the failures of the 1848 revolutions, religious concerns increasingly dominated their political interests. Almost all of von Ploennies' later poetry focused on pious women: in addition to Mariken, she wrote epic poems about the Biblical Ruth, Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary (incidentally the patron of the Ghent beguinage). In 1851 Duller would become a priest in the breakaway New or German Catholic Church which advocated for freedom of religion, an end to clerical celibacy, and against the Pope's influence in Germany, among other things. The position of women in society, and in spiritual life, was of particular concern to 'German Catholics', as it was to Ploennies. Meanwhile Wolf

was also on a spiritual journey which would, in the 1850s, bring him back to the Catholicism of his childhood. Ploennies, born a Lutheran, oscillated between these alternate spiritualities: Wolf's ultramontanism and its exaltation of feminine mystical authority, and Duller's German Catholicism with its overt commitment to liberation within a national framework.

Belgium was a revolutionary state, but it was also a Catholic state: the revolution had been brought about through a union between liberals and Catholics. Even if Catholicism was not officially the state religion (there was none) the Church was the paramount arbiter on moral, social, educational, and even political matters. The French revolutionary tradition, as Wolf and von Ploennies, Van Duyse and Blieck all believed, led to materialism, anticlericalism, libertinism, and atheism. The Belgian revolutionary tradition, on the other hand, promised a reconciliation between freedom and morality, the State and the Church, and this was attractive to many radicals over the border in the Rhineland, particularly when the alternative was domination by Protestant, militaristic Prussia (Brophy 2007: 271–278).

Matthea the poor, hungry beguine might not seem a militant figure. But as was the case with the allegory of the Flemish language in von Ploennies' dream, her poverty and her humility were also the source of her power. The Beguine movement was, originally, also a radical challenge to the existing order, which enabled the laity, and women in particular, to have equal access to the spiritual realm, so much so that in most of Europe it was banned and persecuted in the late medieval period, only surviving in the southern Netherlands. The beguine model continued to allow women freedom outside of male control. Marie von Ploennies for one found this way-of-life quite attractive (von Ploennies 1845: 30). Beguines' poverty and their form of communal living stood as a rebuke to bourgeois society in this period; this was one of the reasons, according to Catholic commentators, that the City Council of Ghent wanted to banish them. In the legend, God speaks to the poor and excluded, not to the great in their halls. Matthea was neither a liberal, nor a nationalist, nor a revolutionary, but yet she did speak up on behalf of the poor, the humble, the overlooked and the oppressed. This was the reason, of course, that she was celebrated by lacemakers. Both Flemish and German authors could, for different reasons, identify with the figure of the poor, pious, and spurned woman, and turn her into a symbol for their respective causes.

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