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### 'Een voldoende bewijs van ware vaderlandsliefde': de creatie van literair erfgoed in Nederland, 1797-1845

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## Summary

In the second half of the eighteenth century the inhabitants of the Dutch Republic experienced a feeling of national decline. This feeling had set in at the end of the seventeenth century, the Golden Age. The Dutch people no longer believed in the greatness and uniqueness of their nation. They felt it had lost its leading position within the fields of culture, economics and politics, and that it no longer had any international importance. This negative self-image is one of the main reasons underlying the development of the Dutch literary history. The development of the literary heritage in the first half of the nineteenth century is the focus of this study.

The literary past became vital for engendering a national recovery. Authors from the past were used to reverse the literary decline, to awaken patriotic feelings and to create a sense of national unity. First of all the authors from the past were used to improve the contemporary Dutch literature by pointing at good and bad examples from the literary corpus: authors could learn from their predecessors. With this the focus was not just the example given by earlier authors but also the idea that people could learn from how literature had developed. Literature was no longer viewed as a universal phenomenon, but as a phenomenon which differed per country and period. People tried to determine which factors influenced literature so that they could gain a better understanding of contemporary literature.

Another reason for the emerging interest in the literary past was the belief that patriotic feelings could be disseminated through literature. The Dutch people needed great examples; people they could look up to. From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, writers and literary scholars repeatedly pointed to the greatness of their predecessors. Authors from the seventeenth century, in particular, like Joost van den Vondel, P.C. Hooft or Jacob Cats were set on a pedestal and portrayed as heroes.

Works of authors from the past were also used to spread national sentiments. The prevailing view was that the nation was in decline because people had neglected the national character. The focus came to lie upon the restoration of the national identity and the literature had a role to play in this. Seventeenth century literature, in particular, expressed the national identity. Using the old literature an effort was made to shape the national identity and to disseminate typical national virtues such as morality, religious tolerance and patriotism among the citizens.

The literary histories published in the first half of the nineteenth century all show a similar picture of the Dutch literary past. The first person who published a history of Dutch poetry was Jeronimo de Vries. In 1810 he published his *Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde*, which is a literary history as well as an anthology. He described Jacob van Maerlant, an author from the thirteenth century, as

the 'founding father' of Dutch literature. The medieval literature, however, played no important role in his history. He felt that chronicles from the authors from the thirteenth century such as Jacob van Maerlant and Melis Stoke had no poetic value: He appreciated the purity of the language in their works but felt that these works had no aesthetic merit. De Vries was negative about the medieval literature from the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. He considered the old texts to be important historical and linguistic sources, but regarded them as unimportant for literary history. He saw an improvement in the sixteenth century. The emerging Reformation brought freedom of thought, which exerted a positive influence on the poetic spirit. Furthermore, the chamber of rhetoric, *De Eglentier*, played an important role. Coornhert, Spieghel and Roemer Visscher, all members of this chamber, contributed to the construction of Dutch language and literature. According to De Vries they laid down the basis for the literary flourish of the seventeenth century. It was in this century, the Golden Age, that Dutch literature reached its climax. A main contributory factor to this was the rediscovery of the classical texts of Ancient Greece and Rome. Authors such as Vondel and Hooft studied the classical literature and this enabled them to develop their own literary talent. De Vries believed that every author needed to study good examples of literature. The Spanish liberation also had a positive effect on Dutch poetry. De Vries saw freedom as an absolute condition for authorship. According to De Vries, Vondel was the 'father' of Dutch poetry, the greatest Dutch author of all times. Other important poets of the Golden Age were Hooft, Huygens, Cats, Antonides van der Goes, De Decker and Camphuysen.

De Vries noted a literary decline at the end of the seventeenth century, which persisted in the eighteenth century. The literary societies founded in the eighteenth century had a particularly negative effect on the literature. Although these societies were founded to improve poetry, De Vries saw them as a threat. He felt that within these societies literature was polished and rewritten too much: Poetry was being discussed according to a set of rules instead of being compared to good examples. These rules suppressed the good poetic spirit. However, De Vries saw an improvement by the end of the eighteenth century. Men became less obsessed with rules and people once again focussed on following good examples. Unlike in the Golden Age when only the classical texts were taken as a source of inspiration, outstanding texts from Dutch authors were used as examples as well. The literary histories which appeared after De Vries describe the same development.

The literary canon as composed in the first half of the nineteenth century, fed by the need for national recovery, has up until today undergone only small changes. The activities of the pioneers of the literary history, like Jeronimo de Vries, are not to

be underestimated. Their heritage lives on in the contemporary history of Dutch literature.