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Linn, Stella

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Pride and Prejudice

The Martinus Nijhoff Prize for Translations 1955-2020

« Stella Linn »

'A Nobel prize for literary translators' and 'the most beautiful prize you can get as a literary translator'. This is how the Martinus Nijhoff Translation Prize has been characterised by laureates. The prize was established in 1953 in memory of the renowned poet, translator and critic Martinus Nijhoff (1894-1953) and first awarded in 1955 under the auspices of the Prins Bernhard Cultural Foundation. It is considered the most important award for translators of literature in the Netherlands and Flanders.¹ In addition to being a token of symbolic capital,² it has a monetary value of 35,000 euros, the highest amount awarded in the Dutch translation prize sector.³

The prize is awarded annually by a rotating jury of approximately six experts to a translator of foreign literature into Dutch. In addition, usually every five years, the prize is awarded to a translator from Dutch into another language. This is informally referred to as the 'reverse prize' or 'export prize', for which the jury relies on the advice of external experts. Generally, an oeuvre rather than a single

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- 1 Flemish, spoken in the northern part of Belgium, is considered a recognised variety of Dutch. In addition, Dutch is spoken in Suriname, Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten. The Nijhoff Prize does not apply to translation into Frisian, the second official language of the Netherlands (see <http://taalunieversum.org/inhoud/feiten-en-cijfers> and <https://taalunie.org/dossiers/54/taalvariatie>).
 - 2 James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige. Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, 2005).
 - 3 For an overview of translation prizes, see the website of the Translators' Lexicon for the Dutch-speaking area: <https://www.vertalerslexicon.nl/vertaalprijzen>, and (less comprehensive but including awards for translations from Dutch) the Dutch Foundation for Literature's website: <http://www.letterenfonds.nl/en/literary-prizes>.



The medal accompanying the award, presented to Jeanne Holierhoek in 2018.

Photo: Maurice Vinken, source: blog Jeanne Holierhoek, <http://jeanneholierhoek.blogspot.com/>.

translation is awarded. Moreover, according to the first jury report, it is intended 'for those translations of poetry, drama, and narrative and contemplative prose in and from Dutch which are distinguished by their literary value'.⁴ In the early days, the award was also meant to contribute to the social recognition of translation, which at that time was still not practised as a profession. The initial close connection with Nijhoff's work soon loosened, although the poet is still often referred to in jury reports and acceptance speeches.

As the prize has now been awarded for 66 years (2020 included), we may expect a number of shifts to have taken place under the influence of social and cultural developments. In this contribution, I will

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4 All translations are mine unless otherwise specified. I would like to thank Michiel Lemmers of the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds for providing me with the jury reports and other relevant documentation. See also <https://www.cultuurfonds.nl/martinus-nijhoff-vertaalprijs>.



Martinus Nijhoff (1894-1953).

Source: NRC, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2009/05/08/martinus-nijhoff-11724094-a319163>.

explore some of these, analysing jury reports and acceptance speeches. My focus will be on the way the awarding of the prize reflects developments in the literary field and, by extension, the cultural field. Thus, I will subsequently deal with the changing poetical norms ap-

plied by the jury, the self-positioning of the translator, as well as gender and diversity issues. In doing so, the overarching question will be: To what extent does the award reflect the zeitgeist?

Prior to this, I will briefly present some essential data on the Nijhoff Translation Prize⁵ as an agent in the literary field and elaborate on some useful concepts.

Role of the translator

To date (December 2020), the 'import prize' has been awarded to 64 native Dutch-language translators working from a total of 17 foreign languages. Dutch locals have an undeniable advantage here, as it was not until 1996 that the prize first went to a Fleming, Paul Claes.⁶ In the early years of the prize, the 1950s and 1960s, we can observe a remarkable presence of translators who were primarily active as writers, such as Bert Voeten, Adriaan Morriën and Gerrit Kouwenaar. It is also worth mentioning that Dolf Verspoor, connoisseur of Romance languages, is the only person to have received the Nijhoff Prize (1958) for his translations both into Dutch – from Portuguese, Spanish and Italian – and from Dutch into French. Moreover, the first decades show a clear preference for canonical works of European literature, with source languages such as French, English, Italian, Russian, Ancient Greek and Latin.

Recent years have witnessed a broader palette, with translations from more 'exotic' source languages, such as Afrikaans, Serbo-Croat, modern Hebrew, Romanian and Japanese. In terms of genre, fiction for adult readers is highly favoured, with translators of children's and young adult literature seldom winning the prize.⁷ Perhaps to compensate for this gap, a double award ceremony was held in this

5 See also Stella Linn, 'Martinus Nijhoff Vertaalprijs', *Vertalerslexicon voor het Nederlandstalig gebied* (2020), <https://www.vertalerslexicon.nl/martinus-nijhoff-vertaalprijs>, accessed December 31, 2020.

6 Two French-speaking Belgians had previously been awarded the prize: in 1971, Lode Roelandt and, in 1988, Alain van Crugten.

7 This is equally true for the writers of this genre, who are virtually excluded from the 'normal' literary prize circuit; see Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer, 'The Canonical Status of Children's Book Authors: The Self-Image of Dutch Children's Writers since

category in the anniversary year of 2005, with Rolf Erdorf awarded for his translation efforts into German and Annelies Jorna for her work from English. In addition to prose, poetry is relatively well represented. This is considerably less the case for drama, which mainly involves canonical writers from classical antiquity. Occasionally, an international literary trend is reflected; for example, under the influence of the worldwide Spanish American boom in the 1970s, the prize was awarded three times within five years for translations in this category.

The 'export prize' has been awarded 33 times for translations from Dutch into 15 different target languages. Apart from widely studied foreign languages in the Netherlands, such as French, German, English, Spanish and Italian, languages from Eastern Europe are particularly well represented, for example Hungarian, Polish and Slovakian. One reason for this may be that the study of Dutch is relatively popular in these countries.⁸ In addition to works from the Netherlands, the foreign laureates have often translated works of Flemish literature. Alongside their professional activities, these translators frequently fulfil the role of advocates or 'ambassadors' of Dutch-language literature in their home countries.

It may therefore be useful to briefly dwell on the various roles played by translators. Since the 1960s, translation studies have moved from a focus on interlingual communication to a perception of translation as an act of intercultural or cross-cultural communication. This perspective, explored by scholars such as Susan Bassnett⁹ and David Katan,¹⁰ implies that 'the translator is an agent of intercultural

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 the 1990s', *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 52 (4) (2014), pp. 49-50.

- 8 See information from the Dutch Language Union: <https://taalunie.org/informatie/92/cijfers-neerlandistiek-in-het-buitenland>; Amber Dujardin, 'Juist in het buitenland bruist het Nederlands', *Trouw* (March 2, 2019), p. 9; Emilie van Outeren, 'In Polen is studie Nederlands wel populair', *NRC* (May 6, 2019), pp. 10-11.
- 9 Susan Bassnett, 'The Translator as Cross-Cultural Mediator', in: Malmkjær, K. and Windle, K., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 94-107.
- 10 David Katan, *Translating Cultures: An introduction for translators, interpreters and mediators* (Manchester, 2004).

communication and mediation is seen as a conscious, purposeful intervention into the act of communication'.¹¹ An opposite tendency can be observed with regard to common translation practices in the Anglo-American world. According to Lawrence Venuti, the high degree of fluency in English which is required by most publishers denies the very existence of 'the translator's crucial intervention'¹² in the foreign text; the domesticating strategy that they impose marginalises translation and renders translators invisible to the point of omitting their names from the published target text.

According to these views, however, the translator's labour is still mostly limited to textual interventions. Pusztai-Varga therefore proposes the concept of the 'cultural broker', which has a broader scope, since it focuses on additional, extratextual roles that translators may perform, such as initiating, promoting and coordinating translation activities.¹³ This is consistent with the perspective of Broomans, who uses the similar term, 'cultural transmitter', and specifies the different roles the translator can take on, such as critic, scholar, literary agent, scout or counsellor.¹⁴ Moreover, Roig and Meylaerts, who propose a comparable definition of the literary translator as 'cultural mediator', emphasise the 'versatile nature and overlap of agent roles that crucially characterize mediators'.¹⁵ Therefore, in order to be able to assess the translator's role, we need to gain an insight into these other roles as well.¹⁶ The Nijhoff jury report for the Dutch writer and

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11 Anthony J. Liddicoat, 'Translation as intercultural mediation: setting the scene', *Perspectives* 24 (3) (2016), p. 348.

12 Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A history of translation* (London/New York, 2008), p. 1.

13 Ildikó Pusztai-Varga, 'Literary translators as cultural brokers', in: *MikaEL—Electronic Proceedings of the KäTu Symposium on Translation and Interpreting Studies* Vol. 3 (2009), p. 5.

14 Petra Broomans, 'Introduction', in: Broomans, P., ed., *From Darwin to Weil: Women as Transmitters of Ideas* (Groningen, 2009), p. 2.

15 Diana Roig-Sanz and Reine Meylaerts, 'General Introduction. Literary Translation and Cultural Mediators. Toward an Agent and Process-Oriented Approach', in: Roig-Sanz, D. and Meylaerts, R., eds., *Literary Translation and Cultural Mediators in 'Peripheral' Cultures. Customs Officers or Smugglers?* (London, 2018), p. 10.

16 *Ibidem*.

translator Adriaan Morriën (1962) provides a good example, highlighting such additional roles:

(...) the jury deems it appropriate to point out another aspect of Morriën's so wide-ranging work. It does not have in mind what is usually referred to as his purely creative activity, but rather focuses on the leadership he gives to the monthly magazine *Literair Paspoort*. It is true that this aspect does not fall directly under the competence of the jury and therefore cannot be judged, but so much and so much good is done here indirectly, through literary contacts with other countries, that the jury does not want to ignore it completely. How, after all, would translation be possible and how would translators be able to find their material easily if there were no continuous and excellent information?

Within the range of possible ancillary functions, translators are particularly well suited to inform editors about the publication of promising new books – a task that is even more relevant with respect to foreign languages that editors cannot read or for which they have no scouts.¹⁷ In practice, however, Dutch literary publishers tend to follow their own course,¹⁸ which means that translators are not always given the opportunity to showcase their talents as cultural mediators.

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17 Thomas Franssen and Giseline Kuipers, 'Coping with uncertainty, abundance and strife: Decision-making processes of Dutch acquisition editors in the global market for translations', *Poetics* 41 (2013), p. 57.

18 This complaint, which is often heard at translators' meetings, was confirmed in personal email correspondence with 2018 Nijhoff laureate Jeanne Holierhoek (October 27, 2020). Although there are no general overviews of the agency of translators in this respect, their crucial intermediating role becomes manifest in several case studies. E.g., for translations from Dutch into Spanish, see Stella Linn, 'Trends in the translation of a minority language: the case of Dutch', in: Pym, A., Shlesinger, M. and Jettmarová, Z., eds., *Sociocultural Aspects of Translating and Interpreting* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2006), pp. 27-39; for translations from Dutch into Italian, see Paola Gentile, 'Van de Lage Landen naar Italië. De rollen van vertalers in de selectie, receptie en sturing van het beeldvormingsproces van Nederlandstalige fictie vertaald in het Italiaans', *Internationale Neerlandistiek* 58 (1) (2020), pp. 23-42.

In reports for the 'export prize', juries repeatedly draw attention to the performance of foreign translators as cultural brokers or ambassadors in their respective language areas. For example, they applaud activities such as publishing on Dutch-language literature in the media, giving radio talks and establishing connections with publishers abroad. This may be explained by the fact that, while translation in itself already represents consecration in the transnational literary field,¹⁹ translation from a peripheral language such as Dutch²⁰ is even more highly valued.²¹ It is conspicuous, however, that credit given to foreign translators is more common in older Nijhoff jury reports.

Since the international position of Dutch-language literature – all institutional efforts notwithstanding²² – does not seem to have improved significantly,²³ one would have expected this trend to continue. However, over the last two decades, this function has only been emphasised once, in the jury report for Irina Michajlova (2020). In its eulogy, the jury pointed out that she had contributed 'as tirelessly as

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19 Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres* (Paris, 1999). Transl. *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, 2004).

20 Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro, 'Politics of Translation: How States Shape Cultural Transfers', in: Roig-Sanz, D. and Meylaerts, R., eds., *Literary Translation and Cultural Mediators in 'Peripheral' Cultures. Customs Officers or Smugglers?* (London, 2018), p. 187.

21 Johan Heilbron, 'Responding to globalization: The development of book translations in France and the Netherlands', in: Pym, A., Shlesinger, M. and Simeoni, D., eds., *Beyond Descriptive Translation Studies. Investigations in Homage to Gideon Toury* (Amsterdam, 2008), pp. 187-197.

22 For the strong presence of the Dutch Foundation for Literature see Heilbron, J. and Sapiro, G., 'Politics of Translation', who argue that as a state-funded public agency this Foundation acts as a cultural mediator in its own right in the process of translation and transfer (pp. 184, 186-194). On certain occasions the Dutch Foundation collaborates with its Flemish counterpart, Literature Flanders (p. 203).

23 According to McMartin, who studied the translation flows from Dutch 1998-2018, the number of translations remained relatively stable at between 500 and 600 per year on average (Jack McMartin, 'Dutch Literature in Translation: A Global View', *Dutch Crossing* 44 (2) (2020), p. 149); cf. Heilbron and Sapiro, who present a more positive view of the developments up to 2010 in 'Politics of Translation', pp. 186-194.

a post-horse' to the dissemination of knowledge about the literature and culture of the Low Countries in Russia by giving numerous lectures on Dutch and Flemish literature, as well as undertaking valuable academic activities, such as writing a history of Dutch literature and a handbook of Dutch for native speakers of Russian. This was emphasised in a special video message from Anna Enquist, a well-known writer, who claimed to be very much aware of the mediating role of translators: 'Without you, we would remain trapped within our own language area'.²⁴ It goes without saying, however, that the jury reports are not so much about extralinguistic activities as about assessing the translations. That is why these will now take centre stage.

Balancing between reproduction and creation

During its first few decades, the criteria for awarding the Nijhoff Prize were not explicitly formulated in a statute but gradually took shape through the jury reports, some of which thus acquired a programmatic function. The qualities of the translator that are highlighted in virtually every jury report – although the focus may vary – are a rich command of stylistic techniques, including the use of a wide range of language registers, an in-depth knowledge of culture, exceptional inventiveness in solving both language and culture-related problems, and great accuracy in reproducing the author's characteristic tone of voice, thus creating an autonomous work of art in the target language that adds value to its literature. Depending on the works and genres translated, the jury may emphasise other specific aspects, such as a particular ability to convey rhythm and rhyme, or the skill of subtly clarifying foreign aspects to the new readership. Another recurring theme is the long-standing dilemma between fidelity to the source text versus the re-creation of a literary work of art in the target language. This was perhaps best articulated by Professor G.J. Wiarda,

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24 Anna Enquist, 'Brief aan de vertaler. Portretvideo: Nijhoff Vertaalprijs 2020', Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EefU7vfSic>, accessed December 18, 2020. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the award ceremony could only take place online.



The first laureates (1955), Bertus van Lier and Aleida Schot, with Princess Beatrix.

Source: Nationaal Archief (photographer unknown), <https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/en/research/photo-collection/adbd0d70-d0b4-102d-bcf8-003048976d84>.

chairman of the Prins Bernhard Foundation, in his opening address at the first award ceremony in 1955:

We may regard the art of translation as an intermediate form between reproductive art and creative art: it is reproductive art, insofar as it finds its starting point in another person's work of art, made understandable or better understandable by the translator; and creative art, insofar as it involves metamorphosis of the original work of art and therefore, like any metamorphosis, the creation of an autonomous work that permanently adds new beauty to the Dutch language area. A performance worthy of respect, reserved only for one who has a perfect command of a foreign language as well as his own, and who is able to summon the mentality that combines representing and creating, being both servant and master, in fidelity to the given or self-assigned task.

With the claim that the translator must be 'both servant and master', an area of tension becomes obvious, which is a repeated subject of discussion in the jury reports. The key issue here may be the recur-

ring notion of fidelity: Does this requirement imply that the translator should remain as close as possible to the original wording, or is it precisely those who apply a more wilful strategy, taking liberties with regard to the source text, who are most faithful to the author's voice? The jury is not very consistent in its assessment of the way in which the intended mastery takes shape: while Holmes was praised in 1956 for his non-rhyming sonnet translations into English, the following year Keuls was acclaimed for retaining the form of Dante's bound verses; on one occasion, the elimination of Flemish dialect was praised (Louis Paul Boon in Swedish, 1979), on another, the very reproduction of dialect is highlighted (Hugo Claus in French, 1988).

After a number of relatively smoothly run ceremonies, the balance between maximum fidelity to the source text versus artistic re-creation was at stake in a lengthy controversy in the 1970s. In 1976 and 1977, the jury did not consider any translation into Dutch good enough to be awarded the prize.²⁵ This public lack of recognition of quality caused an uproar in the ranks of translators,²⁶ who might have become more assertive in a time in which authority was no longer taken for granted and whose self-awareness had increased through professionalisation of the sector.²⁷ Gerrit Komrij wrote a vicious piece in the newspaper, the *NRC*,²⁸ in which he portrayed the jury as a 'self-opting hotchpotch of former prize-winners that has nestled itself on the hearth rug in front of the subsidy stove', a criticism that was supported by a flood of responses from the professional field. In an interview

25 In 1976, only the 'export prize' was awarded, while in 1977, the prize was not awarded in either of the two language directions.

26 Both English, *The Economy of Prestige*, and Auguscik, *Prizing Debate. The Fourth Decade of the Booker Prize and the Contemporary Novel in the UK* (Bielefeld, 2017), point out possible benefits of scandals involving literary prizes; however, it is not clear whether these benefits extend to translation prizes.

27 This includes solid academic training, a well-functioning subsidy system and the establishment of several professional associations; see Johan Heilbron, 'Nederlandse vertalingen wereldwijd. Kleine landen en culturele mondialisering', in: Heilbron, J., de Nooy, W. and Tichelaar, W., eds., *Waar in een klein land. Nederlandse cultuur in internationaal verband* (Amsterdam, 1995), p. 218.

28 *NRC Handelsblad* (January 26, 1977), quoted in Peter Versteegen, *De muze met de Januskop. 30 jaar Martinus Nijhoff prijs* (Amsterdam, 1985), p. 136.

in the cultural magazine *De Groene*, chairman Henk Mulder explained in more detail the criteria the Nijhoff jury had in mind:

In our opinion, a translation should actually be impeccable at three levels, i.e., at the level of meaning, at the level of the use of the Dutch language and in terms of stylistic aspects. And the fact is – and you can actually judge the quality by this – that we remain stuck in that first aspect, because most translations do not even meet the necessary condition that the meaning comes across. There are *countless* errors of meaning. And we do not even get to the question of whether it is expressed in impeccable Dutch. That is the situation we are facing.²⁹

Although the discussion would continue for some time, in 1978 the jury once again found a suitable candidate in Anneke Brassinga. However, in solidarity with her protesting colleagues, she refused to accept the prize, a gesture that greatly embarrassed the jury, whose collective resignation was now demanded. Instead of doing so, a statute was finally drawn up later that year. In addition to the criteria of accuracy, artistic re-creation and creativity, attention would now also be given to ‘the translator’s own initiative in making unfamiliar texts accessible’, clearly enhancing the cultural transmitter’s role. In the 1990s, the statute was once again amended and shortened to half an A4 page with mainly formal provisions. The only remaining substantive – and rather broadly formulated – criterion is now that the candidate ‘has made himself or herself highly meritorious’ in the field of literary translation.

Since the ‘roaring seventies’, the prize ceremonies have remained fairly quiet, although specialised translation journals, such as the Dutch magazine *Filter*, repeatedly report on disputes about the justifications for the awards and the standards that were applied. One example of this is the polemical debate that occurred at the end of 2009 about the dominant strategy. In the first years after the turn of the millennium, the Nijhoff jury showed a certain preference for source-text oriented translations, as evidenced, for example, by its praise for

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29 *De Groene Amsterdammer* (February 2, 1977), quoted in Verstegen, *De muze met de Januskop*, p. 144.

the translator's 'servitude' to the author.³⁰ In a piece in *Filter*,³¹ Ton Naaijken criticised the jury's 2009 choice of Slavist Marja Wiebes, who was once again acclaimed for these qualities. Naaijken depicted this tendency as 'servile and passive', while in his view the jury could have rewarded 'boldness' in the form of a creative translation that focused on conveying the author's intention. Jury chairman Willem Weststeijn opposed this view in a letter published in the following issue of *Filter*.³² In his opinion, Naaijken sketched a false contrast between, on the one hand, active and daring translators, and on the other, passive and conservative (gutless?) ones. However, appreciation of fidelity and audacity did not have to exclude each other, as was shown in the jury report for Robert Lemm (1979), for example, where the successful synthesis between the two was aptly expressed by the qualifications of 'daring precision' and 'accurate guts'. The appraisal of a specific strategy, therefore, rather than a broad social or academic trend, seems to depend on the relatively fortuitous composition of the jury, whose members are renewed on average every six to seven years. Thus, in 2014, a representative of the type that Naaijken would have characterised as 'passive' was once again chosen. The jury justified its selection as follows: 'Hilde Pach is a translator with extraordinary qualities: she combines unconditional fidelity to the source text with marvellous Dutch and a great deal of expertise'.

As far as the 'export prize' is concerned, it is noteworthy that the jury often expressed an understanding of the adjustments needed with respect to the cultural and literary conventions in the target language, while these were not always deemed acceptable for the 'import prize'. For example, in its 1981 report, the jury approved of the fact that Philippe Noble, the young French laureate, had slightly embellished the use of language in Du Perron's *Land van herkomst* (*Country of Origin*) in order to fit in with French literary conventions; in the same vein, in 2001 it endorsed Judit Gera's euphemistic rendering of explicitly erotic Dutch expressions in Herman de Coninck's poetry

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 30 Jury report for Birthe Lundsgaard (2008).

31 Ton Naaijken, 'Het vertaaljaar 2009', *Filter, tijdschrift voor vertalen* 17 (1) (2010), pp. 13-28.

32 Willem Weststeijn, 'Durf?', *Filter, tijdschrift voor vertalen* 17 (2) (2010), pp. 15-17.

in her Hungarian version, arguing that a more literal strategy would ‘unintentionally acquire a somewhat pornographic effect’.

Modesty, but pride too

After having examined the jury assessments, it is now time to look at what the laureates themselves have to say. In their acceptance speeches, the laureates traditionally address their favourite writers and the specific translation issues in their work, as well as the way in which they have dealt with them. They frequently also thank the publishers for the trust they have placed in them. In addition, numerous translators take the opportunity to speak out on behalf of their profession and, above all, to advocate recognition in the form of more appropriate payment.³³ Apart from this, there is not a common position to be distilled from their speeches, with themes ranging from criticism of inadequate dictionaries (Peter Verstegen, 1973) to a plea for the reintroduction of translation exercises into mainstream education (Hans Boland, 2015).

We could assume that the five award winners from the 1950s and 1960s who were already known for their own literary work would position themselves with more self-assurance than translators who were not. However, only one of them appears to do so, with Henricus Keuls, who was awarded the prize in 1957, declaring in his acceptance speech that, as the oldest living Dutch poet, he had been expecting to win it the year before. At the other end of the spectrum, we find the poet Gerrit Kouwenaar, laureate in 1967, who humbly qualified himself as an ‘amateur’ as far as his translation work was concerned. One

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33 Literary translators usually work on a freelance basis according to a ‘Model Contract’, obtaining a minimum fee of 6.6 cents per word (2019); see <https://auteursbond.nl/kennisbank/modelcontract-vertaling-literair-werk/> and <https://auteursbond.nl/kennisbank/honorering>. They may be eligible for additional allowances from the Dutch Foundation for Literature (<http://www.letterenfonds.nl/en/translation-subsidy> and Heilbron and Sapiro, ‘Politics of Translation’). See also Hans Bennis and Henk Pröpper, *Vertalen voor de toekomst. Een nieuw vertaalpleidooi* (Utrecht, 2019), pp. 22-23, and information provided by translators on <https://literairvertalen.org/index.php/kennisbank/vertalers-vertellen-kun-je-van-enkel-vertalen-rondkomen>.

of the five was a woman, the poet Ida Gerhardt. In her vote of thanks (1968), she discussed the great authors from classical antiquity whom she had translated, and she quoted some Dutch poets she admired, in particular Leopold. She concluded her speech by speaking up for this neglected poet rather than highlighting her own achievement:

No pupil of Leopold can receive the Martinus Nijhoff Prize without being reminded once again that he, our greatest poet, never received any official recognition in his lifetime. I realise this more than ever this evening, when I was allowed to express my gratitude for the attention that has been paid to my work.

In view of the professionalisation that translators have undergone since the 1960s, we might expect them to increasingly claim their role as cultural mediators in a self-confident manner, but on closer inspection this hypothesis cannot be confirmed. Jan Willem Bos, 2019 laureate, is a typical example of a cultural transmitter mediating successfully between two peripheral languages and literatures. In addition to his varied translation oeuvre, which includes approximately 30 translations from Romanian, he has worked as an interpreter, lexicographer, guest lecturer in the Dutch language in Bucharest, mentor of students, moderator, compiler of collections of short stories, publisher, writer of a book on Romania, as well as author of a large number of articles on Romanian culture, literature, history and politics.³⁴ Acknowledging these accomplishments, the jury paid tribute both to the high quality of Bos's translations and to his agency in the literary and cultural field, calling him in its 2019 report 'an advocate, an ambassador, a general herald of Romanian literary culture in the Dutch-speaking area'. In his vote of thanks, however, Bos did not refer to any of his achievements. Instead, after praising the quality of Romanian literature, he focused on thanking each and every person who had played a role in his career: his publishers, the Romanian author whose trilogy he translated, the Nijhoff Prize jury, his former teachers, the Romanian cultural institute, Dutch subsidizing institutions, a colleague translator and his readers.

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 34 Introduction to Bos's vote of thanks, reproduced on <https://vertaalverhaal.nl/project/dankwoord-bij-de-aanvaarding-van-de-martinus-nijhoffprijs-2019/>.

Insofar as translators do assume their status as cultural mediators, they express themselves with caution, modesty having been called an occupational disease of translators. However, the fact that this characteristic need not exclude a certain degree of professional pride is evident from Jenny Tuin's appreciation speech (1986), among others. While she stated that as a translator she operated in the shadow of the writer, she also declared that she was fully aware of the fact that translators are 'an indispensable element in cultural intercourse'. Jeanne Holierhoek, laureate in 2018 and winner of several prestigious prizes beforehand,³⁵ again in all modesty as '*prima inter pares*', also drew attention to the role of the translator as a bridge-builder. However, she also complained about the eternally poor remuneration and lack of recognition, both on the part of the readership and of publishers:

Our work is intrinsically extremely interesting, but the level of remuneration is very low. In combination with the low visibility of translators, I sometimes find it difficult. The conditions for translators have not improved over the years. Contact with publishers today is very business-like; in many cases, they look for those who translate the fastest and cheapest.³⁶

In their acceptance speeches, the foreign winners of the 'export prize' usually first set out how and why they learned Dutch and delved into our literature, with reasons ranging from 'just for fun' (Judith Gera, 2001) to joining an Amsterdam sect (Christiane Kuby, 2015). Another issue that is regularly raised is that there are several agents involved in the publishing process that the translator has to take into account: although Dutch writers clearly expect a faithful translation, in their pursuit of commercial success in the target culture, they often have their ears set on the wishes of the publisher's acquisitions editor. The overall tenor of the speeches by these export prize winners is, however, largely identical to that of the votes of thanks by Dutch and

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35 Holierhoek received the Dr Elly Jafféprijs in 2007 and the European Literature Prize (together with Marie NDiaye) in 2011. For the cumulative effect of prizes (the 'winner-take-all' effect) see English, *The Economy of Prestige*, p. 334.

36 Jeanne Holierhoek, quoted in Bennis and Pröpper, *Vertalen voor de toekomst*, p. 22.

Flemish laureates, modesty befitting them all. For example, Alain Van Crugten, presented with the 1988 Nijhoff Prize for his French translation of *Het verdriet van België* (*The Sorrow of Belgium*), praised the author Hugo Claus while humbly characterising the translator as ‘an intermediary who requires the support of the original’. In this context, it may be interesting to recall Gisèle Sapiro’s comment concerning the position of writers in France: ‘on the hierarchical scale of values of literary creativity since romanticism, even the most praised literary translation remains inferior to original writing’.³⁷ In the same article, Sapiro also points out the marginalised position of women in the literary field. Let us see whether this holds for the female Nijhoff Prize laureates as well.

Gender and diversity

A glance at the figures relating to the prize winners between 1955–2020 suffices to note a striking imbalance with regard to the representation of women. In total, the Nijhoff Prize has been awarded to male candidates twice as often as to female candidates, with the greatest discrepancy occurring in the first two decades, when the male-female ratio was 4.5:1. How can this be explained? Coincidence seems unlikely, although it cannot be entirely excluded. As far as the first decades are concerned, it is possible that more highly qualified men than women were employed in the profession. Before there were academic courses, translation was mainly a hobby for well-to-do women, while publishers usually outsourced the more prestigious literary assignments to male translators who, as mentioned above, were often writers as well.³⁸ Since the professionalisation of translators in the 1960s, these circumstances have changed. Also, the under-representation of women in the profession has long since disappeared. According to the Auteursbond (Dutch Association of Writers), there are currently more than twice as many women as men members of the Literary Translators’ Section, with 237 and 112, respectively.³⁹

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37 Gisèle Sapiro, ‘The writing profession in France: Between symbolic and professional recognition’, *French Cultural Studies* 30 (2) (2019), p. 115.

38 Versteegen, *De muze met de Januskop*, p. 8.

39 Personal email (October 15, 2019).

It may therefore be interesting to examine whether prejudice influences the awarding of the prize, thus unveiling a gender bias. A correlation with the composition of the jury, which, including the secretary, has an average of six to seven members, is striking: in the first 20 years, not a single woman was a member of the jury. Since 1975, this has happened sparingly. In 1987, more than 30 years after the establishment of the Nijhoff award, a woman became president for the first time, and out of a total of 66 juries, this has only occurred one other time, in 2008. What is equally remarkable is that most male presidents held the position for several years (Sam Dresden, did so for thirteen years), while the female presidents held the title for only one year. We know from the social sciences that the gender composition of job interview committees plays a significant role in determining job recipients.⁴⁰ Moreover, scholars working in the Dutch literary sector have shown that female authors are nominated much less often for a literary award than their male colleagues.⁴¹ According to several researchers,⁴² the literary field is a hierarchically organised space, a male bastion where women writers are a numerically under-represented and symbolically devalued population.

One clear example of the correlation between awards and the composition of juries can be found in France, where the consecrating power of literary prizes has traditionally been very strong:⁴³ Tired of being ignored by the awards, in 1904, women writers founded a

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- 40 See e.g., Iona M. Latu, Marianne Schmid Mast and Tracie L. Stewart, 'Gender Bias in (Inter) Action: The Role of Interviewers' and Applicants' Implicit and Explicit Stereotypes in Predicting Women's Job Interview Outcomes', *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 39 (4) (2015), pp. 539-552.
- 41 Corina Koolen, *Reading beyond the female. The relationship between perception of author gender and literary quality* (Amsterdam, 2018).
- 42 E.g., Elaine Showalter, *A Jury of her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (New York, 2009); Delphine Naudier, 'Genre et activité littéraire: les écrivaines francophones. Introduction', *Sociétés contemporaines* 78 (2) (2010), pp. 5-13; Gisèle Sapiro, 'The metamorphosis of modes of consecration in the literary field: Academies, literary prizes, festivals', *Poetics* 59 (2016), pp. 5-19; Sapiro, 'The writing profession in France'.
- 43 Marc Verboord, 'Market logic and cultural consecration in French, German and American bestseller lists, 1970-2007', *Poetics* 39 (4) (2011), pp. 294-295.

prize of their own, the Prix Femina. This was conceived of as a protest against misogyny on the part of the newly founded Académie Goncourt, the jury of the prestigious Goncourt Prize, since '[it] did not count at the time any woman (...) and would not award any female writer before 1945'.⁴⁴

It is therefore plausible to assume a connection in the Dutch literary field, as the following figures suggest:⁴⁵

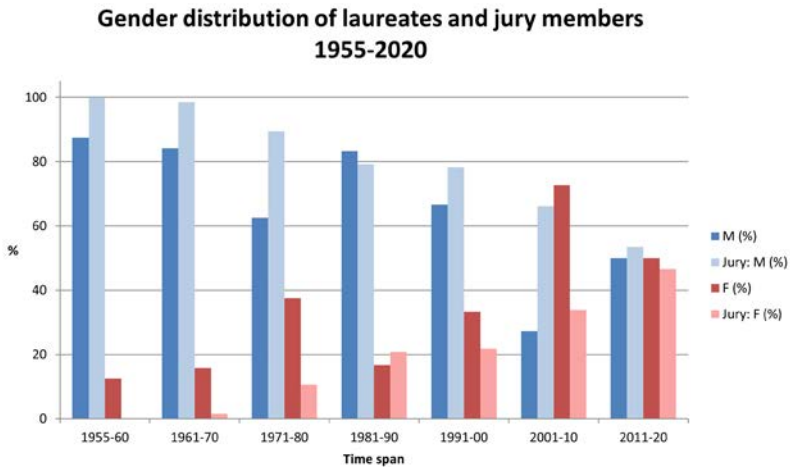


Figure 1. Correlation between gender of Nijhoff Prize laureates and jury members, time span 1955-2020.

As the figures show, up to and including 2000, there were 56 male laureates compared to 17 female laureates, whereas in the last two decades the balance has shifted to a predominance of women, with 14 female compared to 9 male winners. Of the 323 jury members in total until 2000, 284 were male and 39 were female; after 2000, out of a total of 123 jury members, there were 74 male compared to 49 female members (i.e. a ratio of 3:2). The connection becomes even clearer if we break down the data into the years before and after 2000 (Fig. 2).

44 Sapiro, 'The metamorphosis of modes of consecration', p. 11.

45 I wish to thank Wim Stok for his help in creating the graphics.

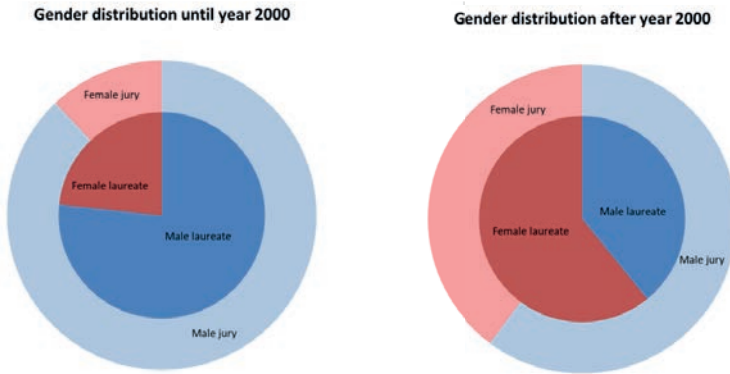


Figure 2. Correlation between gender of laureates and jury members, time span 1955-2000 and 2001-2020, respectively.

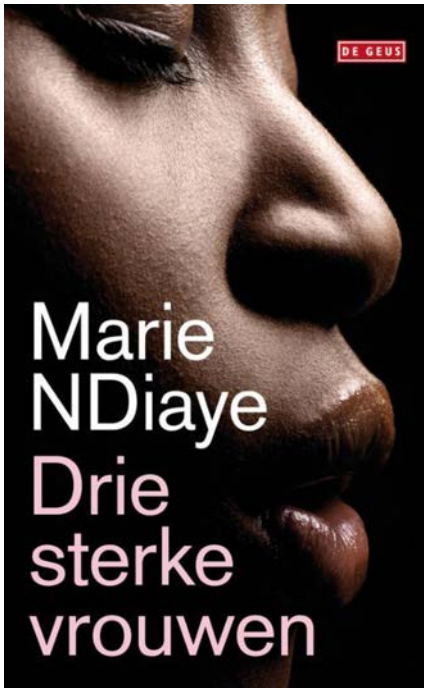
If we take a broader look at diversity and inclusiveness, in particular with regard to the origin of the writers of the source texts, a shift towards a stronger presence of women is also quite noticeable. For example, focusing on French-language literature, we can observe that, with a few exceptions,⁴⁶ translations of classics by male authors such as Proust, Flaubert, Céline and Rimbaud have invariably won awards. It is only recently that this shift has occurred, with the inclusion of a novel by the French-Senegalese writer Marie NDiaye – not only a woman but also the first writer of colour in 50 years, whose Dutch translation was part of the oeuvre of Jeanne Holierhoek, who was awarded the prize in 2018.⁴⁷

This recent attention to diversity, which is obviously inseparable from social and cultural developments, is explicitly mentioned for the first time in the 2018 jury report for Jeanne Holierhoek:

We often perceive the French cultural area all too easily as a monolithic block, as if everything that happens there could be

46 Up to 2018, only two female French writers were awarded through their Dutch translations: Simone de Beauvoir and Margu rite Yourcenar.

47 A novel by the Dutch-Surinamese writer Albert Helman was awarded in 1967 through Alex Brotherton's English translation. According to Naudier, 'Genre et activit  litt raire' (p. 5), apart from gender, class and nationality, skin colour is also a relevant factor in the dynamics that intersect the literary field.



Marie NDiaye, *Trois femmes puissantes* (*Three Strong Women*) in Dutch translation.

classified under the adjective ‘French’. But (...) [h]ybridity, a hot topic in modern translation studies, has been a characteristic of many texts translated by Jeanne Holierhoek from the very beginning (...) her latest translations include *Tram 83* by Fiston Mwanza Mujila and *Critique de la raison nègre* by Achille Mbembe.

Perhaps this could mark a break with a long-standing tradition; with regard to recent recipients of the Dr Elly Jaffé Prize for Dutch translators from French, for example, there is a focus on geographical and cultural diversity as well as on the literary production of female authors, which is equally striking.⁴⁸

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48 Jeanette den Toonder, ‘Dr. Elly Jaffé Prijs’, in: *Vertalerslexicon voor het Nederlandstalig gebied* (2019), <https://www.vertalerslexicon.nl/dr-elly-jaffe-prijs>, accessed December 18, 2020.

Regarding ‘reverse translations’, a similar trend becomes manifest. As one would expect, most of the source texts belong to the Dutch and Flemish canon, whereas fiction from the former Dutch colonies has been largely ignored until recently.⁴⁹ It was only in 2004 that a novel by Tip Marugg from Curaçao – today autonomous but still part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands – was included in an award-winning oeuvre, that is, in Waltraud Hüsmert’s German translation. Dutch-language literature by immigrant writers⁵⁰ is also sparsely represented; *Spijkerschrift*⁵¹ by Kader Abdolah, of Iranian descent, is the first novel from this category that has been awarded in the German translation by the 2015 laureate Christiane Kuby.

Conclusions

If we look back at the poetical norms applied by the Martinus Nijhoff Prize jury, there is no systematic pattern to be identified in the awarding of the prize that clearly prioritises one criterion over another. As far as can be deduced from the jury reports, the decision to award a certain strategy seems to be more related to the preferences of the changing juries, although of course in a certain sense these always go with the times. Thus, in recent decades, as opposed to the early years, the prize has almost always been awarded to professional translators rather than to writers who practise translation as a subsidiary activity. As far as their social and economic status is concerned, one could raise the question of the extent to which literary translators themselves have been able to exert influence to improve their position, apart from organising into professional associations. The protests in the media of the 1970s did not have much impact in

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49 This is not the case for *Max Havelaar* by the famous Dutch writer, Multatuli (1820–1887), set in the former Dutch East Indies.

50 In the Netherlands, this category is often discussed separately from literature from former Dutch colonies, which is regarded as postcolonial literature; see Liesbeth Minnaard, ‘Every Carpet a Flying Vehicle? Multiculturality in the Dutch Literary Field’, in: Behschnitt, W., De Mul, S. and Minnaard, L., eds. *Literature, Language, and Multiculturalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries* (Leiden/Amsterdam, 2013), pp. 97–122.

51 Literally, ‘Cuneiform Writing’, published in English as *My Father’s Notebook* (2007).

this regard, but they at least ensured that the Nijhoff Prize has been awarded every year since then without fail. However, financial and social appreciation has lagged behind, with fees hardly increasing over the years, and translators are still barely visible to the general public. This may also be due to the modesty that continues to characterise the professionals concerned, as is obvious from the acceptance speeches, although occasionally a glimmer of pride appears. While numerous translators are well qualified to perform other tasks than their core business, such as advising publishers, they are not always given the opportunity to demonstrate their talents as cultural transmitters.

However, a clear modernisation trend can be detected with respect to gender issues: in the last two decades, the skewed male/female ratios in the awarding of the Nijhoff Prize have been more than rectified. Previously, there were obvious prejudices against women. In terms of geographical origin, there also seems to be a cautious move along the road to greater inclusiveness through the awarding of more diverse literature in translation. In this respect, it can therefore be claimed that the prize does reflect the *zeitgeist*.

Naturally, there is still ample room for research in this area. For example, a comparative study of literary prizes and specific translation awards may shed more light on the position of translators as cultural mediators in the national and transnational fields, and a further analysis of jury reports and acknowledgements could reveal differences in standards with regard to translation strategies in the 'export' compared to the 'import' Nijhoff translation awards. Moreover, both diachronic and synchronic research could provide insight into the evolution of dominant conceptions of translation, and thus into the value of literature in our society in general.