CHAPTER ONE

A PASSION FOR PROVERBS

Among other things that profit our tong
Those which much may profit both old and young
Such as on their fruite will feede or take holde
Are our common playne, pithy proverbes old.
—JOHN HEYWOOD, 1546

I

In the third book of his Essais, first published in 1588, Michel de Montaigne remarked that had he ever met Erasmus of Rotterdam, he would have taken for proverbs everything that Erasmus said to his servant or his innkeeper’s wife.1 Montaigne was undoubtedly thinking of Erasmus’s great compilation of proverbs and proverbial expressions, the Adagiorum Chiliades. But had he known Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Montaigne with equal justice might have said the same about him. Indeed, proverbs are nowadays closely associated with Bruegel’s name, and among his proverb pictures the most familiar to us is Netherlandish Proverbs (Fig. 1), a painting of 1559 that depicts a village and the surrounding countryside. This is a veritable proverb country whose inhabitants are literally figures of speech acting out some one hundred or more proverbs, many of which we may still recognize today.2 To mention only a few, in the lower left quadrant (Fig. 2), just inside the tavern, we encounter the fellow who “falls between two stools into the ashes,”3 that is, he cannot make up his mind on a course of action and so misses his opportunity. In the
courtyard is the woman who “carries fire in one hand and water in the other” (she is “two-faced,” hence inconsistent or untrustworthy). Leaning against the wall is the soldier literally “armed to the teeth” who “bells the cat,” that is, he embarks on a potentially dangerous enterprise, alluding to the old tale of the mice, none of whom volunteers to place a warning bell on their mortal enemy. Nearby is the man who “butts his head against the wall,” and just across the barnyard, at the extreme left, is a man biting a pillar: he is a *pilaarbijter*, or “pillar biter,” a hypocrite or bigot. Not far away is the housewife who is so mean and spiteful that she can tie the devil to a pillow. Just around the corner, on the other side of the wall, are two seated men, one shearing a sheep, the other clipping a pig, the latter creating “much squeal but little wool,” which is said of those who boast of doing much but achieve little. To the right of this pair, a woman drapes a blue cloak over an older man: she is the adulterous wife
who makes her husband a cuckold, to use an old English expression. Farther to the right (Fig. 1), one man “fills the well after the calf has been drowned” (formerly we might “lock the barn door after the horse has been stolen,” an expression that also appears in several collections current in Bruegel’s day). Another “casts roses before swine,” inspired by Christ’s Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:6: “Neither cast ye your pearls before swine lest they trample them under their feet”). Farther to the right, an elegant youth “spins the world on his thumb” (we might say “the world is his oyster”), someone else “puts a spoke in another’s wheel,” and behind them, another hypocrite “puts a flaxen beard on Christ,” while just beyond them, an anxious man “sits on hot coals.”

In addition to this surreal landscape, Bruegel depicted proverbs in other works, ranging from his early designs for prints, including *Big Fish Eat the Little Fish* and *Elck* (see Figs. 31, 33), through the *Twelve Proverbs* (see...
Fig. 10), to such late paintings as *The Misanthrope* and *The Blind Leading the Blind* (see Figs. 44, 46), as well as the enigmatic *Peasant and the Nest Robber.*

Neither this passion for proverbs nor depictions of them were unique to Bruegel. As perspicacious an entrepreneur as he was supremely gifted as an artist, Bruegel was exploiting a long-held interest in proverbs that peaked precisely during his lifetime.

We use proverbs every day, often without being particularly aware of doing so, but what exactly are they? A recent dictionary of literary terms defines the proverb as “a short pithy saying that embodies a general truth. . . . Common to most nations and peoples, it is a form of expression of great antiquity.” This pretty much fits our commonsense understanding of proverbs: they are old, they are often picturesque in phrase, and they include such familiar advice as “A stitch in time saves nine” and “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch,” as well as often wry observations on human affairs, such as “Birds of a feather flock together,” “Once bitten, twice shy,” and “A fool and his money are soon parted.”

Earlier centuries would have accepted such homely advice as proverbs. An ancient Greek handbook on rhetoric defines proverbs as brief sayings compressing “much meaning into a few words,” for example, “Know yourself” and “Follow God.”

For the Byzantine scholar Michael Apostolius (d. ca. 1480), proverbs presented “the truth in furtive fashion.” And in a treatise on grammar and rhetoric published at Antwerp in 1566, Joannes Susenbrotus defined the proverb as “a celebrated or well-known saying . . . common to everyone, commended equally for its antiquity and its wisdom.”

But the proverb cannot be defined so easily. As James Obelkevich remarks, proverbs employ “a wide range of poetic and rhetorical resources within their limited compass. Metaphor, rhythm, alliteration, assonance, binary construction: these and other devices create in the form of the proverb an echo of the sense.” But these qualities also appear in other kinds of verbal expression, including, Obelkevich notes, proverbial phrases.
a passion for proverbs

(“To have an ace up one’s sleeve”) and conventional sayings (“I have other fish to fry”), as well as similes (“green as grass,” “dark as night”), metaphorical expressions (“tempest in a teapot,” “ship of state”), and other idiomatic expressions. As we shall see, earlier writers readily accepted such figures of speech as proverbs, even though they offer no particular advice on human conduct or observations on human nature. Thus Archer Taylor could claim some years ago, with only slight exaggeration, that in his *Netherlandish Proverbs* Bruegel depicted not “true” proverbs but only proverbial phrases. Bruegel also included two fables by Aesop, which William Hansen has called the fable proverb, the belling of the cat and the fox and the stork, shown just to the right of the tavern porch (see Fig. 1). Each creature invites the other to a meal he cannot eat. While modern scholars of proverbs, or paremiologists (from the Greek *paremia*, or proverb), still argue about what constitutes a true proverb and its relation to such comparable expressions as maxims, apothegms, and “sentences” (*sententiae*), Mark Meadow offers excellent advice: “The distinction drawn today between proverbs proper and proverbial expressions, or indeed other linguistic figures, is not one supported by the original sources, and should be, if not dismissed altogether, at least set aside when considering pre-modern materials.”

Nowadays many people are inclined to view proverbs as the quaint but increasingly musty verbal remains of an earlier time and a simpler life, on a par with superstitions and folklore in general. We may cherish the picturesque formulations of proverbs without using them as infallible guides to wise conduct. For one thing, they may offer contradictory advice, such as “Haste makes waste” and “He who hesitates is lost,” or “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” and “Out of sight, out of mind.” They may even appear nonsensical, as does “The exception proves the rule,” until we recall that “to prove” once commonly meant “to test.” Proverbs may also be denigrated as clichés, bromides, and platitudes—the ultimate sins in our search for originality, for a more personal expression in our speech and writing. Nevertheless, while the death of the proverb has often been proclaimed, new proverbs and proverbial expressions are
born all the time. “Ballpark figure,” meaning “an estimate based on an educated guess,” is a colloquial expression that has emerged only in the last half century or so; and “It isn’t over until the fat lady sings,” used to describe a situation that remains unresolved until a some event takes place, appears in a recent dictionary of proverbs.

Even more to the point, proverbs played an important, even vital role in the past. The Greek and Roman writers esteemed proverbs as “simply the vestiges of that earliest philosophy which was destroyed by the calamities of human history,” as Erasmus would later put it, and this very antiquity recommended their continued use. Aristotle, in his handbook on rhetoric, places a discussion of proverbs in the section on persuasion, and with good reason. Orators appealed to proverbs to make a point in their arguments, to persuade their audiences by assuring them that the speaker’s own opinions and pronouncements were not idiosyncratic but accorded with the opinions and experiences of generations past. These “ancient witnesses,” as Aristotle calls them, are “the poets and all other persons whose judgments are known to all,” who can be trusted because they have no stake in the matter at hand. Conversely, people, especially uneducated ones, “are delighted when a general statement of the speaker hits those opinions which they hold in a particular case.” Or, as Erasmus said, “What could be more convincing than what is said by everyone?” Proverbs, as generally acknowledged repositories of wisdom and as ornaments of rhetorical persuasion, have long been quoted much as modern preachers quote scripture, academics cite eminent authorities in their field of study, and politicians lift patriotic sentiments from the speeches of Abraham Lincoln or Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Thus, the ancient writers cited proverbs to clinch an argument in a lawsuit and employed them copiously as rhetorical devices elsewhere in their speeches and writings. The writers of the Bible, too, employed proverbs and proverbial expressions. King Solomon “spake three thousand proverbs,” we are told in 3 Kings 4:32 (Douay-Rheims version), and it was generally believed that the book of Proverbs was his enduring legacy.
Christ also often quoted proverbs. We have already encountered a variation of his “Neither cast ye your pearls before swine” in Bruegel’s Netherlandish Proverbs, and Bruegel also depicted Christ’s “If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.”

The twin literary heritage of proverbs, in classical sources and the Bible, recommended them to later ages. Medieval treatises on poetry and letter writing advocated the use of proverbs, preachers used them in their sermons, and writers of every variety eagerly incorporated proverbs into their historical works, legal treatises, poetry, plays, and prose fiction such as the chansons de geste and romances. Chaucer sprinkled proverbs liberally throughout his Canterbury Tales, although fewer, so the poet tells us, than were collected by the fifth husband of the Wife of Bath who, his widow claimed, knew more proverbs concerning bad women than the world has grass or herbs. Similarly, the author of The Celestina, a Spanish picaresque novel first published in 1491, larded his dialogues with proverbs, identifying them with such phrases as “as the old proverb has it,” “as they say,” and “to prove the truth of the old proverb,” and in one speech he strings together a series of old saws and related expressions.

In the seventeenth century, the characters in Miguel de Cervantes’s Don Quixote display a similar fondness for proverbs, especially the rustic but sensible Sancho Panza. Among English writers, proverbs appear frequently in Edmund Spenser’s Faerie Queene, and not only do Shakespeare’s characters speak proverbs in the plays, but the playwright himself derived some of the play’s titles from proverbial expressions (Measure for Measure, All’s Well That Ends Well). Conversely, Shakespeare created many original expressions that passed into common proverb lore: “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” for example, comes from Romeo and Juliet (2.2.43).

Writers used many proverbs at once for rhetorical and often humorous effects, as in the medieval folk book Solomon and Marcolphus, which begins with a long dialogue in which the solemn pronouncements of King Solomon, many drawn from the book of Proverbs, are deflated by the earthy, occasionally scatological, and often irrelevant responses of the peasant.
Marcolphus. The English translation published by the Antwerp printer Gerard Leeu in 1492 gives an idea of this exchange. Early on, Solomon boasts, “God gave wisdom in my mouth, for no one is like me in all parts of the world,” to which Marcolphus replies, “He that hath evil neighbors praiseth himself.” Later Solomon counsels, “Feed up your children and from their youth learn [i.e., teach] them to do well,” and Marcolphus responds, “He that feedeth well his cow eateth often of the milk.” In the fifteenth century, the French poet François Villon composed a *Ballade des proverbes* that begins, “So much the goat paws, her bed’s spoiled; So much the pot’s filled that it cracks; So much one heats iron that it glows.” And in the century that followed, the English dramatist John Heywood composed a poetical treatise on marriage whose long title begins with the modest claim, *A Dialogue Containing in Effect the Number of All the Proverbs in the English Tongue*. Some ten editions of Heywood’s *Dialogue* were published between 1546 and 1598; the work owed its popularity, perhaps, to such “playne, pithy proverbes old” as the one enshrined in the plea I once encountered on a sign (crediting Heywood) in a bar and grill near Utica, New York: “I pray thee let me and my fellow have, A hair of the dog that bit us last night.”

Against this background we can understand Erasmus’s lifelong preoccupation with proverbs that so impressed Montaigne. The Greek and Latin writers, particularly those of late antiquity and the Byzantine period, had made collections of proverbs and proverbial expressions, and beginning no later than the eleventh century, proverb collections appear for use by preachers, writers, and schoolboys. Among the collections for the schools are the *Liber parobolarum* (Book of Proverbs), attributed to Alain de Lille, and the especially popular *Distichs of Cato* that was widely used during the Middle Ages to instill the principles of moral conduct into schoolboys. By the later fifteenth century students learned Latin by translating Latin proverbs into the vernacular and vernacular ones into Latin.

The revival of ancient Greek and Roman literature, initiated by Petrarch in fourteenth-century Italy and later spreading throughout
Europe, only increased the general interest in ancient proverbs. Greatly facilitated by the invention of the printing press, this dissemination of the classical heritage was accompanied by a need for commentaries explicating these texts, as well as dictionaries of proverbs and related phrases. The first such compilation seems to have been the Proverbiorum Libellus (Book of Proverbs) published at Venice in 1498 by the Italian priest and humanist scholar Polydore Vergil and comprising 306 adages with short commentaries. It was soon eclipsed, however, by Erasmus’s Adagiorum Collectecteana (Collection of Adages), which first appeared at Paris in 1500. Containing 818 proverbs, this evolved to become the most monumental—and most famous—of these literary enterprises. Erasmus reworked and considerably expanded this work, publishing it in 1508 under the title Adagiorum Chiliades, whose “thousands of adages” advertised in the title numbered 3,260. Its author prepared a number of later editions of the Adages, each larger than the previous one. The sixth edition, published in 1536, the year of Erasmus’s death, included 4,251 proverbs and continued to be republished long afterward. As a modern scholar has said, it was “one of the world’s biggest bedside books; and a great deal more.”

Erasmus mined his proverbs from ancient Greek and Latin literature and proverb collections, occasionally citing comparable sayings from his native Netherlandish. To each entry he added a commentary that varies from a few sentences to many pages. These commentaries explain the significance of each proverb, the circumstances of its origin, often buttressed by copious extracts from the ancient writers, and the various ways it could be employed. In addition, he used these commentaries as springboards to voice his opinions on current religious, political, and social issues, demonstrating how relevant the ancient proverbs were to the readers of his day.

Like his predecessors and contemporaries, Erasmus had a conception of the proverb that was much more liberal than ours: after reviewing the various definitions offered by the ancients, he concludes by saying that a proverb is “a saying in popular use, remarkable for some shrewd and
novel turn.” For him the proverb encompassed many kinds of verbal expressions, including what he termed “proverbial metaphors,” to which he devoted a long section of his introduction, citing such familiar similes as “light as a feather,” “black as pitch,” and “white as snow,” as well as less familiar ones, among them “seething as Etna” and “licentious as the carnival of Flora.” Erasmus thus offered the *Adages* not only as a prodigious haul of antique lore ranging from the sublime to the trivial, to help students retrieve the often obscure allusions they might encounter in classical literature, but also as a veritable fountain of rhetorical forms from which users could draw suitable words and phrases to grace their own speaking and writing. “To interweave adages deftly and appropriately,” Erasmus insists, “is to make the language as a whole glitter with sparkles from Antiquity,” and he is often at pains to explain just how a certain proverb or proverbial phrase can be used or varied to meet the needs of a particular writer. He also recommended introducing proverbs with such phrases as “as the proverb runs” and “to use an old phrase,” so that they would be recognized and appreciated by the audience, a practice that had already been followed in *The Celestina* of 1491.

Even with his inclusive definition of a proverb, however, Erasmus must have occasionally wondered if some of the expressions he included would pass muster as proverbs with his readers. He felt it necessary to point out “there is a proverb hidden here” in the phrase “more roughly and more plainely.” He assures us that “almost all figures” like the expression “willy-nilly” [nolens volens] “are proverbial.” He comments on a witticism attributed to the emperor Augustus, “to fish with a golden hook,” that is, to risk a great loss while trying to achieve a modest gain. If this is not a proverb, Erasmus observes, “it is at least proverbial, and not unworthy to be promoted to this rank.” Conversely, in his pursuit of rhetorical elegance, Erasmus did not hesitate to stigmatize an occasional proverb in his collection. “Among the blind the one-eyed man is king” and “The dog offended, the sow paid the penalty,” he said, come from “the dregs of the people” or smack “of the common herd.”
The outstanding success enjoyed by the many editions of the *Adages* not only earned Erasmus the title “the father of proverbs,” but it also inspired the publication of abbreviated editions of his *Adages* intended for use in the Latin schools, sometimes with translations or equivalents given in the vernacular. One such schoolbook was issued by Johannes Sartorius in 1544, a collection of three hundred proverbs culled from the *Adages*; in 1561 he published a second volume that contained more than a thousand proverbs from the same source. In addition, numerous vernacular proverb collections were issued during the sixteenth century. To mention a few, they include Heinrich Bebel’s *Proverbia Germanica* (German Proverbs) of 1508, Johannes Agricola’s *Gemyener Sprichwörter* (Common Proverbs) published in three volumes between 1529 and 1544, Sebastian Franck’s *Sprichwörter*, a massive collection of some seven thousand proverbs and related expressions published in two parts in 1541, and Charles de Bouvelles’s *Proverbium Vulgarium . . . Libri Tres*, published in 1531, a collection of French proverbs accompanied by Latin commentaries.

A collection of Netherlandish proverbs, with Latin translations, had appeared even earlier in the Lowlands, the *Proverbia Communia* (Common Proverbs), first published at Deventer in 1480, and adorned with a woodcut frontispiece depicting the twelve-year-old Christ in the Temple, perhaps implying that the learned disquisitions of the temple elders were no match for Christ’s homely parables and proverbs. It predated Erasmus’s *Adagiorum Collectectanea* by twenty years and by 1497 had gone through twelve editions, three of them in a Low German version. Probably intended for use in grammar schools, it contains only what we would consider “genuine” proverbs, with none of the proverbial figures of speech in which Erasmus took such delight. However, it was not until some time after Erasmus’s death that his countrymen returned to publishing compilations of vernacular proverbs, both Netherlandish collections and bilingual editions in Netherlandish and French.

Three proverb collections appeared at Antwerp, one of the major publishing centers of sixteenth-century Europe. The earliest was the
anonymous Seer schoone spreeckwoorden oft proberbia in Franchoys ende Duytch (Very Beautiful Proverbs in French and Dutch), published by Hans de Laet in 1549 and containing 906 French proverbs along with their Netherlandish equivalents, but lacking commentaries. More than 500 of these proverbs were taken from a French collection, Bonne response à tous propos, which had first appeared at Paris in 1547, the latter being a translation, as its title page tells us, of an Italian proverb collection whose contents the compiler had printed along with their French counterparts. All this suggests that publishers eagerly capitalized on the popularity of proverbs collections. In fact, in the Netherlands De Laet’s volume was followed the very next year by Duytsche Adagia ofte spreeckwoorden (Dutch Adages or Proverbs), compiled by Symon Andriessoon, an Amsterdam notary and schoolmaster, and published at Antwerp by Hendrick Alssens. It contains hundreds of entries, each proverb accompanied by a succinct explanation of its meaning. This was the only Netherlandish proverb collection to do so, a feature that Andriessoon explained in his prologue: “Many kinds of proverbs are in daily use among the people, but the same are at times not completely understood, however they are used and spoken. Instead these proverbs are used more out of custom than from complete understanding.” Andriessoon’s complaint may be more than a rhetorical flourish justifying his commentaries. It suggests that among the proverbs circulating in his time there were some old-fashioned expressions whose significance were gradually fading from memory.

In 1568, some years after the publication of the Seer schoone spreeckwoorden in French and Netherlandish, Christophe Plantin published a second bilingual collection, François Goedthals’s Proverbes anciens flamens et francois correspondants (Old Flemish Proverbs and Corresponding French [Ones]). Far more limited in scope than the vast enterprise represented by Erasmus’s Adages, these modest proverb collections nonetheless contain linguistic riches that can be sampled in still another compilation, the anonymous Gemeene Duytsche Spreckwoorden, published by Peter Warnersen in 1550 at Campen in Holland. Borrowing almost all of the first 750 proverbs in Agricola’s Gemyener Sprichwörter of 1529–44, the editor supplemented them with
further examples, some in Latin, for a total of more than 2,600. This collection lacks commentaries, but, like Erasmus’s *Adages*, it mingles what we would deem true proverbs with figures of speech, including “He has a double tongue in his mouth,” “This is not cooked for your mouth,” and “I know him hide and hair,” as well as the sort of commonplace similes endorsed by Erasmus: “green as grass,” “black as pitch,” and “red as a rose in May.” Also included is a fragment of conversation that might have been excerpted from a modern tourist’s handbook of foreign phrases: “Thank you for asking. It goes well with me, God be praised.” Warnersen evidently thought highly of this little volume. He wrote in his prefatory letter to the reader: “Gracious reader, the books and writings of all learned men, especially the highly learned Erasmus of Rotterdam, demonstrate how useful and fruitful the common proverbs are, and how well they ornament and embellish a speech: they present much meaning in a few words when used at the right time and place . . . if you take this little book in good faith, you will undoubtedly gain enjoyment and profit from it.” These entries, ranging as they do from the most exalted thoughts on the providence of God and scraps of biblical wisdom to the common, even scatological expressions that one would hear on the street and in the tavern, offer us an excellent cross section of the earthy Netherlands speech of Bruegel’s time.

II

This great preoccupation with vernacular proverbs in sixteenth-century Netherlands cannot be seen as a manifestation of a new interest on the part of the upper classes in the peasantry and other common folk, as has sometimes been assumed in the case of Bruegel. Even Warnersen made no such claim, merely recommending his homespun sayings and expressions as a way to “ornament and embellish a speech,” thereby echoing Erasmus. But it may be more than a coincidence that Warnersen’s collection and the others described here were published at a time when the Netherlanders were beginning to take a serious interest in their native language, composing spelling books, rhetorical treatises, and the
This phenomenon was not confined to the Netherlands but also occurred in France, England, and Germany. Earlier humanists, Erasmus included, had touted Latin—not the church and scholastic Latin of the Middle Ages, which Renaissance humanists considered barbarous, but the elegant Latin of classical antiquity—which for many humanists (an outstanding exception was Erasmus) was exclusively the Latin of Cicero—as a literary language superior to the modern vernacular languages. The vernacular, it was argued, was only the natural, artless speech that one learned almost unconsciously from birth and could hardly match Latin in eloquence or in conveying logical thought and abstract reasoning. Erasmus did not deny the value of the vernacular languages for preachers, and he wished that the Bible could be read by plowmen and other common people. But for scholars, Latin was a mature, noble language with its clearly defined rules of grammar and, as Juan Luis Vives, a Spanish humanist living in the Netherlands, expressed it, these very qualities made it preeminently suitable as a universal language, not confined to a particular country or locality. Thus, late in the fifteenth century, the Deventer schoolmaster Bartholomaeus Coloniensis could mock a colleague for speaking his mother tongue more fluently than he did Latin. A similar opinion was expressed a generation or so later by Charles de Bouvelles, who in his three volumes of French proverbs assured his readers that he walked the streets and roads to record the common speech of his day. However, he was probably only vouching for the authenticity of the proverbs he listed, for he was also proud that he could trace his native French to that “shining splendor,” Latin.

Other writers, less intimidated by these formidable claims made for Latin, began to celebrate the merits of their own languages as equally suitable for literary activity. This “linguistic nationalism,” to borrow a felicitous term from Jean-Claude Margolin, had already appeared among the Italians during the fifteenth century, followed in the sixteenth by the other linguistic groups of western Europe. The French poet Joachim du Bellay, for example, in his La Deffence et Illustration de la Langue
François (The Defense and Enrichment of the French Language), published in 1549, made an impassioned plea for his native tongue, explaining how it could be developed into a literary language the equal of Greek and Latin. As it happens, Du Bellay and his fellow poets in the group known as the Pléiade eschewed proverbial language in their own poems, but some decades later, in 1579, Henri Estienne, in his Précérence da la langage français (Preeminence of the French Language), cited some 280 French proverbs and proverbial expressions as examples of the infinite riches of the national language. Even earlier, some compilers of proverbs collections had been moved by a similar impulse. For the first volume of his proverbs, published in 1529, Agricola took his examples not only from ancient classical sources but also from medieval German literature, while Franck’s collection, designed for use as a school book, paired Latin proverbs with their German equivalents to demonstrate the equality of the two languages in richness of expression. And when Martin Luther preached his sermons and translated the Bible from the Latin vulgate into German, he employed many colloquial proverbs and proverbial expressions, not so much to demonstrate the linguistic resources of his native language as to attract as wide a public as possible. Nevertheless, as Luther explained in his open letter On Translation composed in 1530, he strove for a German as it was commonly spoken, for “‘What fills the heart overflows the mouth.’ That is speaking good German, the kind I have tried for and, unfortunately, have not always reached or hit upon; for Latin letters are a great hindrance to good German speech.”

In the Netherlands, the vernacular had to contend not only with Latin but also with French. Even though French coexisted as a parallel language spoken throughout much of the southern provinces, native speakers of Netherlandish often felt that their mother tongue suffered in comparison. Jan Gymnick (or Gymnicus) expressed this opinion in his translation of Livy’s Histories, published at Antwerp in 1541. In his introduction, Gymnick complains that while other languages flourish, “I cannot understand how that it comes that our Netherlandish language is so poorly ornamented or deemed so incompetent,” and he urges his
countrymen to write more in their native tongue so as to improve its powers of expression.101 A dozen years later, in 1553, the jurist Jan van den Werve published *Het Tresoor der Duytsscher talen* (The Treasury of the Netherlandish Language), a book explaining the Latin and other foreign terms that had crept into the Netherlandish vernacular. The author prefaced his volume with a plea that his readers help him to put back on its feet “our mother tongue (that lies like gold under the earth),” so that it does not need to seek help from other languages.102 The publisher of this treatise was none other than Hans de Laet, publisher of the 1549 French and Netherlandish proverb collection, and in his “dedication” to Van den Werve’s book, De Laet repeated the author’s lament about the Netherlandish language but insisted that it is “as mighty, as rich, and as capable as none other.”103 And a few decades later, the Ghent poet Lucas de Heere congratulated his Antwerp colleague Jan van der Noot for demonstrating in his poetry that the Netherlandish tongue was as rich as “German or French, Greek, Roman or Italian.”104

Other writers also vaunted the excellence of the Netherlandish tongue, although none more enthusiastically than the physician and scholar Joannes Goropius Becanus, who in his *Origines Antwerpianae* (Origins of Antwerp) of 1569 revealed a linguistic nationalism that was downright chauvinistic, demonstrating to his countrymen by means of careful linguistic arguments that Netherlandish was not only the best language in the world but also the oldest, having been spoken by Adam and Eve in paradise.105 While Becanus’s claims were ridiculed by other scholars,106 they were later revived in part by the Dordrecht preacher Abraham Mylius (or Van der Mijl) in a treatise published in 1612 at Leiden.107 Although Mylius accepted the traditional view that the language of Eden had been Hebrew,108 he insisted that the second-oldest language was “Teutonic,” comprising roughly what linguists today term the Germanic family.109 Having survived the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel, it was still a living language in Mylius’s time, hence not only older than Greek and Latin, but its chief variants, German and what he called Belgian (i.e., Netherlandish), had not changed since their
inception and were uncorrupted by influences from other languages. That is why, Mylius assured his readers, the Netherlanders have so little trouble learning other languages. As Arno Borst has suggested, such attempts to demonstrate the preeminence of the “lingua belgicae” (the Belgian language) reflect the rising tide of nationalism in the Netherlands, particularly in the northern provinces that ultimately achieved independence as the Dutch Republic. Even the German scholar Philipp Cluvier, the first professor of geography at the recently founded University of Leiden, insisted, like Becanus and for much the same reasons, that the speech of Adam and Eve had been Teutonic.

How much these scholarly but often far-fetched speculations did to further the Netherlandish vernacular would be difficult to determine. Indeed, probably much more effective were the Netherlandish rederijkers, or rhetoricians, who fervently worked to improve their common language and whose infatuation with proverbs embraced not only the written word but images as well. For that reason, we will consider them in the next chapter.