

Masculinity and Nationhood, 1830–1910

Constructions of Identity and Citizenship in
Belgium

Josephine Hoegaerts



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Masculinity and Nationhood, 1830–1910

Constructions of Identity and Citizenship
in Belgium

Josephine Hoegaerts

University of Leuven, Belgium

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For Ferdinand and Odin, great men in the making

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Abbreviations

- E.H.C. Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, Antwerp
M.R.A. Musée Royal de l'Armée (Royal Museum of the
Armed Forces and of Military History, Brussels)
P.A.A. Provinciaal Archief Antwerpen (Antwerp Provincial
Archives, held at the Belgian State Archives,
Beveren)
P.P.R. Parliamentary Proceedings: House of
Representatives
P.P.S. Parliamentary Proceedings: Senate
S.A. Stadsarchief Antwerpen (Antwerp City Archives)

Three Anthems, a Flag and a Tenor: Introduction

On 25 August 1830, the *beau monde* of what would soon become Belgium was attending a performance of Auber's romantic nationalist opera *La Muette de Portici*. Common lore of the Belgian 'operetta revolution' speaks of crowds inspired by the martial tones of the opera running into the streets of Brussels while chanting '*vive la liberté*' and opening the fight with the army of the Dutch ruler. Negotiations with the Dutch King commenced a mere three days later. The revolution, so it seems, had consisted mainly of an excitable mob smashing factory machinery in their anger over their lack of employment, along with the display of the *tricolore* of Brabant-Hainaut. In September, however, fits of rebellion became more numerous and violent, and when Dutch prince Frederik entered Brussels with his army, he encountered a popular fury that quickly turned into a national uprising. The skirmishes in the Warande-parc inspired the revolutionaries to form a provisional government but also inspired the creation of a Belgian nation that could be lived, written and sung.¹

Making the operatic central to the revolution once again, the story of the birth of Belgium turns to *L'aigle d'or*, a café in the centre of the city, where the celebrated tenor François Van Campenhout was the first to sing *La Brabançonne*. The words to the hymn for the new nation had been written by French poet and actor Jenneval and its reference to *La Marseillaise* was as clear as the new flag's resemblance to other *tricolores*.² Nevertheless, over the next 75 years, both the flag and the hymn turned into the unmistakable symbols for a distinctly Belgian nation. Romanticised images of the revolution spread, Jenneval and Van Campenhout became national heroes, Marie Abts-Ermens gained celebrity as a woman who made sewing an act of politics and the rest, as they say, is history.

Much of this history has been written, and much has been done to debunk romanticised, nationalist and invented histories of the romantic and invented nation.³ I do not intend to rewrite or even reinterpret national history. Rather, I want to focus on the *Heldentenor* who was once believed to be at the cradle of the nation and unravel the ways in which voice, virility and violence were entangled in a slowly changing common language that, in 1860, resulted in a new version of *La Brabançonne*. Tellingly, its reinvented lyrics boldly stated that ‘a manly people should dare to sing with manliness’.⁴

Masculinity and citizenship

Despite the anthem’s insistence on the masculinity of the country’s population, histories of masculinity in Belgium are surprisingly rare, and have only started to appear in the last decade.⁵ Moreover, most studies of masculinity ‘in Belgium’ do not deal explicitly with its specific national context, and focus rather on the gendered history of life in the trenches, of Catholic institutions and societies, and of criminalised ‘perverts’. Bruno Benvindo’s *Des hommes en guerre* deals with the construction of a military masculine identity in the trenches of the First World War and offers a first exploration into the borderland between military history and a history of masculinity in Belgium.⁶ His keen interest in the often ‘hidden’ individual soldier shows to what extent an analysis of gendered identity can also be a ‘history of emotion’, and how narratives of masculinity can be interwoven with the evolution of the concept of psychology (especially at the beginning of the twentieth century).

Tine Van Osselaer has likewise brought to the fore a group of men who had been deemed ‘invisible’: her critical reappraisal of the scholarly narratives of secularisation and the feminisation of religion shows not only that men did not disappear from Catholic life in nineteenth-century Belgium, but also that ‘sentimental’ forms of devotion in this period were carried out by men as well as women and that the relation between sentimentality and martiality in Belgian religion between 1800 and 1940 were dialectical rather than an oppositional. Rather than masculinity and femininity, however, the construction of gender differences, as such, is at the centre of her analysis.⁷ Thomas Buerman, on the other hand, equally focusing on gender and religion, studies the young masculinity of Catholic schoolboys and the papal Zouaves and offers a possible road out of the often too easily presupposed equation of masculinity and maturity.⁸

Wannes Dupont tackles a last dark and invisible alleyway in Belgium's constructions of masculinity: dealing mainly with legislation and legal practice, he is delving into the construction and suppression of male homosexuality in Brussels, finding himself at the crossroads of the study of gender and sexuality.⁹ Henk de Smaele is standing at the same crossroads, yet bringing highly visible men to the fore: not only do the public figures of Flanders's literary avant-garde occupy the stage, but male (nude) bodies are also equally exposed.¹⁰ It seems that modern Belgian masculinity has been 'coming to light' in the past decade.

The absence of a political, national perspective on the history of Belgian masculinity or, conversely, of a gendered history of citizenship is all the more surprising as the country was so explicitly part of the process of modern nation-building in the nineteenth century. With its liberal constitutions, the contrived character of its political and cultural unity, and its central position between Western Europe's great nations, Belgium appears almost as a laboratory of European nationhood and citizenship. Moreover, for the neighbouring nations – with which the country engaged in constant cultural and institutional exchange – the intersection between the construction of the nation and articulations of modern masculinity has received ample attention.

In fact, the nation is one of the earliest companions of masculinity in its histories. George Mosse's *The Image of Man: the Creation of Modern Masculinity*, published in 1996, is highly sensitive to its links and tensions with nation(alism), and conversely, as Joanna Bourke has noted in her review of *Image of Man*, Mosse's 'seminal works on nationalism, sexuality, anti-Semitism, and warfare each deal (in a much less systematic way) with masculinity'.¹¹ More recent work reveals a similar preoccupation with the national context of masculinities,¹² and an almost exclusive focus on 'modern' masculinity.¹³ Much like John Tosh's *A Man's Place* is a history of British masculinity,¹⁴ André Rauch's *Le premier sexe* deals with French masculinity.¹⁵ Ute Frevert's *Men of Honour* are German,¹⁶ 'The unheroic men of a moral nation' in Stefan Dudink's work are Dutch, Ernst Hanisch's *Männlichkeiten* is concerned with Austrian masculinity and David Tjeder's *The Power of Character* is – though not explicitly – mainly about Swedish masculinity.¹⁷

These geographical and temporal parameters account for the lavish attention given to the interplay between constructions of masculinity and modern modes of power distribution and seem to have been engrained in historians' definitions of the concept of masculinity itself. Sociological theories of masculinity tend to see an intrinsic link between masculinity and modernity, largely based on a definition of modernity

as a process of individualisation. This is perhaps most notably the case in work influenced by R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity.¹⁸ The framework of hegemonic masculinity does not easily translate to other periods or cultures, however.¹⁹

Even if it is agreed that men and masculinities have a history, the concept of masculinity remains difficult to trace in the archives. As many historians have argued, masculinity is largely 'invisible' in historical records. This is the consequence partly of a cultural trope that interpreted women as 'the sex' and men as gender neutral, but also of the simple fact that 'masculinity' as a term only appeared toward the end of the nineteenth century.²⁰ Whereas historians of the Late Modern period are therefore basing their analyses on mostly contemporary, 'post-modern' interpretations of gender and the construction and performance of identity, historians of Medieval and Early Modern societies (and most notably of Early Modern England) have tackled the 'problem' of masculinity from a different angle, radically historicising the terminology of gender and fleshing out the meaning and use of the term 'manliness' and researching its strong associations with concepts such as honour, credit and reputation.²¹

In Germany, studies of Early and Late Modern masculinities seem less divided – possibly because both concepts are expressed by the word *Männlichkeit* – and the concept of hegemony has been adopted for the study of earlier periods as well.²² Likewise, in France, the distinction between manliness and masculinity seems of minor importance: most authors focus on the concept of virility, or on the 'maleness' of what André Rauch has called *le premier sexe* (rather than *genre*).²³ Dutch historians rely on the term *mannelijkheid* (or its plural), which can denote a code of conduct, a conglomerate of externally attributed characteristics or the construction of a corporeal, biologically defined entity, depending on the period at issue.²⁴

This linguistic chaos is of particular salience for the study of a bilingual country in a period when languages and dialects were believed to reflect the population's character. When referring to sources, I have attempted to respect the heterogeneity in the terms that could be associated with masculinity. The French terms *mâle* and *virile* are rendered as male and virile, the Dutch term *mannelijk* is translated as manly in order to differentiate between the historical use of referrals to gendered characteristics and contemporary analytical terminology ('masculinity'). Moreover, the term 'manly', as it has been defined by, among others, Gail Bederman, seems to be a more apt translation of the nineteenth-century 'mannelijk' as the latter mainly appears as a word

to denote characteristics such as courage, steadfastness and rationality rather than referring to a 'natural' or biologically defined differentiation from femininity. The Dutch language does not allow for a differentiation between masculine, manly or male, but nineteenth-century dictionaries indicate a strong relation between the meaning of the words 'man' and 'mannelijk' and qualities such as courage and strength. According to an 1859 Dutch dictionary, 'the idea of courage and strength radiates through most meanings' of the apparently 'ancient' word *man*.²⁵ Moreover, in this as in other dictionaries as well, composite words feature 'man' in conjunction with courage (*manmoedig* or *manhaftig*), strength (*mannenkracht*) and labour (*mannenwerk*).²⁶

A common language of masculinity?

Rather than constituting an attempt to define historical interpretations of the abstract concept of 'masculinity', 'manhood' or 'manliness', the following chapters aim to trace the multiple discourses and practices that were considered to be part of 'being a man' in Belgium and could be used as a means to communicate one's gender to other men, women and children. Instead of untangling different masculinities in different contexts, then, I will focus on this process of communication (which could consist of discourse, but was also largely carried out in wordless practices, images or bodies) and tease out a common language of masculinity, referring to a continuous performance and representation aimed at the conservation of a specific (albeit historically changeable) position within a social environment defined by gender, and also by categories such as age, military rank, region and political ideology.

If a 'common language for women in the integrated circuit' at the end of the twentieth century could only be imagined as ironic, and could only be dreamt by Donna Haraway, a common language for man or a common language of masculinity seems to be central to nineteenth century discourses of not only family, factory and market but also of politics, crime, society and identity. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Haraway's cyborg dream is a matter of learning 'not to be Man'.²⁷ Despite differences in class, age, religion, language and ideology, nineteenth century men were easily recognisable as men, and it was widely accepted that various duties and privileges were attached to masculinity. The story told here is that of the (re)construction of this common language and of its use in various spaces and by different voices. My interests lie in the unifying power of the concept of nineteenth century masculinity, rather

than in processes of differentiation between masculinity and femininity or between different masculinities.

This is, however, not to deny the interdependence of masculinity and femininity, nor to refute the multiplicity within masculinity. On the contrary: in focusing on masculinity as a common language, I aim to lay bare the chaotic character of masculinity – containing the wildly varying and even conflicting practices that make up its heterogeneous and often hierarchic discourse – and to show how similar or even identical practices could be simultaneously perceived as masculine and feminine, without eroding the continuous practice of gender differentiation.²⁸ Indeed, as Judith Surkis has noted, ‘instability, rather than undermining masculinity as a regulatory political and social ideal, actually lent it its force’.²⁹ Masculinity, then, appears as an outcome of the continuous process that also generates femininity, but not as femininity’s counterpart or mirror image.

A history of a common language of masculinity, its generation and repetitious regeneration, can only be a partial one. I have chosen three cases where (in the most literal sense) the common language of masculinity has been documented: the army, the primary school for boys and parliament. These are, of course, not the only spaces (nor perhaps the most important ones) where the language of masculinity reverberated, but they are representative to the extent that they had the explicit aim of ‘representing’ citizenship in different ways. Moreover, documents on the three cases largely present an official discourse that pertains to the whole of Belgium.

I started my explorations in the archives at the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History, in the basements of the triumphal arch at the *Parc du Cinquantenaire* in Brussels. The park – a former military exercise ground – was designed in 1880, most buildings being commissioned by King Leopold II, to celebrate the 50th birthday of Belgium’s independence and the arch itself was erected in 1905 to celebrate 75 years of independence. Housing not only the Museum of Armed Forces, but also the Royal Museums for Art and History, it serves as a monumental reminder of the multiple ways in which nationalism, militarism and the production of art and history can intersect.

The archives of the museum hold not only a host of ‘prescriptive’ source material, ranging from officers’ and soldiers’ manuals to medical treatises on hygiene in the barracks and model plans for garrisons, but also the full archival record of the construction and upkeep of Belgium’s military buildings – including those of the Beverloo camp, where every Belgian recruit would spend some time during his training. Moreover,

it also provides access to published and unpublished reports of the manoeuvres held in the camp. It was while hunting down these reports on the camp that I came across a large number of reports of *grandes manoeuvres*, taking place across the country throughout the nineteenth century, and haphazard poems and songs authors claimed they recorded while observing the manoeuvres.

The final list of material was selected along these three axes: the material on the construction of barracks in general and of the Beverloo camp in particular; the regulations, plots and reports of the *grandes manoeuvres*; and a canon of patriotic and marching songs written for and sung by the exercising troops. Although all source material held in the military archives is, necessarily, written or approved by the military establishment and is thus unlikely to show moments of rebellion or internal conflict, it also includes reports of all kinds of bricolage, self-regulation, improvisation and difficulties in the maintenance of discipline.

Whereas, for the army, the building history of its encampments and the canon of songs are quite clear (and gathered in separate folders in the archives), material on primary schooling is much more scattered. There is no school-pendant of the Beverloo camp, no central place where all pupils are gathered and trained, and not even a clear-cut set of objectives defining what knowledge children should acquire. I have therefore chosen to treat the conglomerate of the Antwerp community schools as one case – this would not only allow me to delve into the relations between the city's very liberal communal government and its schools, but also provide me with more material and the possibility of looking for recurring practices in different schools. Moreover, since the relation between the communal government and the organisation of the city's primary schools was so tight, parents often turned to the alderman responsible for education to complain about their children's mistreatment, or to plead for a place for their offspring in one of the community schools.

Archival material on the construction of the schools was easily located, as it is still bound to the state institutions responsible for the construction and upkeep of these buildings. Community schools were, usually, designed by provincial architects and engineers, and the town council – who partly subsidised their construction – took responsibility for hygiene in and small improvements of the buildings. Plans, financial records and reports for the school's construction are thus held at Antwerp's provincial archives. Correspondence detailing complaints and questions from teachers concerning the school buildings are held at the Antwerp City Archives.

Documents on schooling practices in Antwerp schools are less obviously bound to state institutions. The city archives hold a number of documents concerning the organisation of school trips and celebrations, correspondence between parents, teaching staff and town council and different histories of and reports on the state of primary education in Antwerp, but those are hardly informative of in-class practice. I decided to turn to the schoolbooks used or written by Antwerp teachers,³⁰ using the complaints and discussions I found in the city archives as a corrective tool to add nuance to the normative image they would cast. I added two additional bodies of source material to look at the singing practice in the Antwerp schools: on the one hand, I included the songs and cantatas that had been written for all kinds of celebrations in which the schoolchildren performed in a choir (most of which are held in the Antwerp City Archives – the works of Peter Benoit for mass choirs have also been published); on the other hand, I added manuals and song collections used in community schools across the country in order to get a better view of the schools' 'canon' of songs.

Although the analysis is based on the Antwerp case (and, crucially, excludes Catholic schools), the normative framework upheld in these schools was under state control and was likely to have been conventional across the country. Specific problems and solutions concerning individual teachers, parents and pupils are necessarily local in nature, but the constant interaction between political and educational actors does throw light on a more generally shared understanding of the central place of schools in cementing notions of citizenship – and the definition of citizenship itself.

My third case took me back to the heart of the nation, or rather, to the nation's echo chamber. The hemicycle in which, according to representative Paul Smeets, the 'echo' of the government's problems could be heard has produced a staggering amount of documents³¹ – internal regulations as well as detailed accounts of all discussions held from 1831 onwards. I compiled a list of discussions concerning primary schooling and the military and an additional list of discussions on the more delineated themes of the 'problem' of the duel and discussions dealing directly with the construction of an image of the Belgian nation (more specifically, discussions on national celebrations, attendance of members of parliament at the annual *Te Deum* and debates over a geological map of Belgium commissioned by the national government).

Apart from the largely normative sources for these three institutions, then, (regulations, architectural plans, school manuals, military journals, etc.), the archives also contain a limited number of documents

detailing their inhabitants' agency and even rebellion (reports on ill-behaved children, complaints over soldiers' debauchery in town, shouting matches in parliament). Together with the prescriptive material, they allow for a reconstruction of practices within parliament, barracks and schools beyond the official public discourse of these institutions.

Spaces and sounds

Within the common language of masculinity, I am privileging two modes of expression to communicate (and establish) gender. The first part of the book, 'Spaces', looks into spatial expressions of masculinity. It focuses on the built environment of schoolboys, soldiers and politicians as well as their thoughts of what seems to have been the most important place in a nineteenth-century man's life, the nation. It also explores the intersection of the construction of various spaces with the construction of masculine identity. The second part, 'Sounds', turns toward examples of acoustic expressions of masculinity and more explicitly to the construction of masculinity through man-made sounds such as patriotic songs and parliamentary debates.

The spatial environment of parliament, barracks and school is largely an architectural environment, built with the explicit intention to represent the institution it contains, and to impose that institutions' values on its environment and inhabitants. Indeed, as Margaret Kohn indicates in *Radical Space. Building the House of the People*, 'particular places orchestrate social behaviour by providing scripts for encounters and assembly'.³² Yet, if buildings can forge groups and social structures, they can also exert discipline in other, more subtle and maybe more profound ways. '[S]pace is also lived and experienced', Kohn continues, and 'spatial forms serve the function of integrating individuals into a shared conception of reality'. Buildings such as the monumental Palace of the Nation not only radiate power by including or excluding certain groups of people, but also by inscribing different norms and expectations unto people's bodies. Unlike spaces such as clinics, prisons – or indeed schools and barracks – the buildings of representative politics are rarely studied as anything but impressive or monumental.³³ Studies of the architecture and arrangement of parliament mainly focus on their artistic merit (occasionally reflecting their extension as parliaments gained members). The influence of the paintings, halls and benches on members' mobility and behaviour does not often surface.

The study of gender in a military environment has occasionally dwelt on the army's built structures – where it notably has led to an analysis

of masculinity as a situated practice. Histories of warfare and of life in the barracks often use spatial categories metaphorically, but they go a long way to show that the performative character of gendered identities is visible and changeable and that the practice of masculinity can be located in time as well as in space.³⁴ Ute Frevert's study of a German *Nation in Barracks* has shown how recruits' confinement to a homosocial environment played an important role in the formation of masculinity and citizenship.³⁵ Likewise, Odile Roynette's monograph on the experience of the barracks in late nineteenth-century France, *Bons pour le service*, combines a 'Foucauldian' perspective on the barracks as a disciplinary space with a sharp attention to a military history of the senses in the wake of Corbin, all while taking the hierarchies of class, age and gender into account.³⁶

Schools have also been studied as the locus of situated practices creating gender.³⁷ Judith Surkis's work on French nineteenth century citizenship, *Sexing the Citizen*, devotes considerable attention to the role of boys' schooling in the process of creating French masculinity.³⁸ Robert Morrell's analysis of the transformation *From Boys to Gentlemen* in colonial Natal similarly approaches the history of masculinity as a subject defined by its (institutional) environment.³⁹ Studies of the history of gender in Belgian schools, however, have mainly focused on the feminisation of education, girls' schooling and the issue of single-sex education, with the exception of Thomas Buerman's study of Catholic high schools for boys.⁴⁰

Finally, the nation itself can be regarded as one of the spaces in which boys and men moved, and developed their identities. After all, none of them were consistently confined to their barracks, classrooms or benches – in fact, their mobility was often framed as a characteristic that distinguished them from women or girls. The interplay between nation – as a geographical location and a landscape – and gendered identities is a well-established subject in history, anthropology and geography. Not only have nations been gendered themselves (resulting, for example, in motherly images of one's home country), love for the nation or nationalism was often connected to masculinity (the inherent 'modernity' of both allows for extensive comparison).⁴¹

The second part, 'Sounds', builds on the less established 'acoustic' turn, which turns the attention from the nation as landscape to the national 'soundscape'.⁴² Historians like Alain Corbin, in France, and John Picker in Britain, have established that the modernisation of the rural and urban soundscape was a process influenced by national and local politics as well as evolutions in science, literature and art.⁴³ Rather

than attempting to reconstruct the Belgian *paysage sonore* by the objects, machines and habits that produced sound, however, the second part of the book looks at interpretations of the soundscape by the composers and performers of music. In numerous scores, a sonorous rendition of the landscape was created, to be performed by musicians and singers. Both these composers and the singers engaged with the language of masculinity to communicate ideas of gender and citizenship for an audience whose 'period ear' was attuned to their sounds.⁴⁴ The speeches of politicians, the obedient silence of soldiers, the harsh sound of orders but – above all – the singing voice of boys and soldiers could be heard by these period ears as the sound of masculinity. Voices were not simply emitted, but consciously trained to produce a specific sound.

Studies on the sound of the gendered voice have hitherto mainly looked at the stage and professional singers. Patrick Barbier's study of the castrato, for example, provides a history of an influential but limited and highly specialised group of male singers.⁴⁵ Naomi André's study of the representation of gendered voices on the nineteenth-century operatic stage has observed the rise of the tenor voice as the normative timbre for men. Interpreted as a natural (because unaltered) male voice, the sound of the tenor became interchangeable with the sound of heroism and virility throughout the nineteenth century.⁴⁶ The fixation on the tenor as the normal male voice, moreover, paralleled the construction of a similarly rigid concept of a female voice. Or, as André states, 'in the same sonic world where the hero's voice needed to more closely match the new conceptions of the "virility" and "masculinity" of his behaviour, women's voices needed to be heard as more "feminine"', expressing the moral and social values thought to be lodged in the female body.⁴⁷ And thus, the signpost characteristics of the female voice (a high pitch and sharp tone) were magnified to cast the dramatic soprano as the tenor's securely feminine counterpart on stage.

Illuminating as the evolutions on the operatic stage may be for an appreciation of the development of its audience's acceptations of different voices as male or female, they only inform us about a fraction of the voices of the nineteenth century – and an atypical fraction at that. As Ian Biddle has noted, the 'voice in song' did an enormous amount of cultural work for modern nations, especially at the end of the nineteenth century, but it has but rarely been a male voice.⁴⁸ The 'male voice in song' constituted to the contrary, according to Biddle, 'a challenge to the modernist economy of objects'.⁴⁹ Within the context of nineteenth-century music besides the operatic stages, the male singing voice indeed presents a paradox. On the one hand, musical theory and a

number of composers associated professional, instrumental music with male performance and aural masculinity, and amateur vocal music with female singers and the acoustics of femininity.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the close association between a typical modern notion of ‘classical music’ attached to the nation and the intersecting concepts of the masculine individual and the nation’s citizen, prompted the construction of the singing patriot as a cultural icon that found its material realisation in the members of numerous and increasingly popular male choirs.⁵¹ Attached as the generation of classical music was to a feminine ‘sphere’, classicism quickly became the territory of men and a site for the construction of masculinity in the context of the nation. Despite the naturalisation of gender and voice throughout the nineteenth century, then, the production of a male singing voice and the masculine gendering of certain branches of or themes in music were never completely in sync with each other.

This book, therefore, looks at more casual uses of the voice: speech, non-professional singing, involuntary noises (such as laughter and cries) and silence. The vocalisations by boys and men within explicitly homosocial spaces are perhaps the most literal manifestations of a common language of masculinity. Their sounds reverberated across the borders between different spaces. Additionally, boys carried the acoustic know-how they had acquired in school with them to the spaces they inhabited as they matured.

As the three cases are all national, state-bound institutions and because nineteenth-century interpretations of European geography rely heavily on a (mental) map consisting of a patchwork of nation-states, the documented common language of masculinity found in these institutions cannot be separated from a language of nation and nationalism. Given its geographical position between France, Germany and Britain, its inception as a liberal (yet romantically imagined) nation-state in the first half of the nineteenth century and its preponderantly Catholic and bilingual character, Belgium was in many ways at the crossroads of a number of more general Western European cultural, economic and political developments. The slowly changing and broadly supported discourses on gender and nation formulated within its borders are hardly unique, and although I will not attempt a thorough comparison with similar institutions in neighbouring countries, I will point to the regular practice of borrowing French, Dutch, British, German and even Russian narratives of nation and patriotism that staged Belgium as one of many partakers in the common language that is to be described.

Yet, even if the Belgian nation is 'just' a case, it is also the place where this book has been written and contemporary debates on the country's supposed nature and composition have frequently intruded into the research process. Newspapers and television have appealed to various forms of 'we' in which I was meant to feel included, reminding me of the power of narratives of nation on the individual. More specifically, debates over the possibility of national unity and surges of Flemish separatism have characterised the environment in which I was working. The soundtrack of the past years has resonated with arguments over language facilities, crisis-talk over the inability to form a federal government, hopes and fears concerning the division of electoral districts and the nation itself, and commentaries on politicians' inability to sing the national anthem.

Why the Brabançonne has never become a popular song

Yves Leterme's 'gaffe', as it became known in the press, was of minor importance for national politics, but gained him temporary fame as the prime minister who mistook the French *Marseillaise* for his own anthem. As the country was debating whether or not this was important, I was in the military archives, piecing together the genesis of the anthem and marvelling at the number of early Belgian hymns set to the melody of *La Marseillaise*.

Come, children of Belgium
Liberty is yours again;
Let's undo this tyrannical regime
We have put up with for too long
Away with this hated bond.
The torturers in the service of a barbaric king
Will turn on us in vain.
Let them come - our young heroes
Will face up to certain death.
Rise my friends, I hear the cockerel crowing
Nations everywhere are rising together...⁵²

The above text, first verse of a song entitled *La Bruxelloise*, was printed by a Parisian publisher 'at the office for Belgians' subscriptions' and set to the music of the French anthem. The text was addressed 'to the Belgians who have regained their independence' and ascribed to a soldier of 29 July 1830 thereby explicitly linking the Belgian revolution

to the French July revolution. If the first verse could have been French (the references to ‘a barbaric king’ and the ‘Gallic cock’ fit the bill of the three glorious days of revolution), the subsequent verses show a vitriolic anti-Dutch narrative resembling that of Jenneval. The ‘proud Batavians’ were staged as blood-thirsty tyrants who did not spare ‘children at their mothers’ breast’, and as ‘tigers’, ‘torturers’ and ‘scoundrels’. Opposing the villains are ‘the nations’, a characterisation that included Belgium in a general patriotic and gendered discourse of progress, in which ‘young heroes’ protected women and children who were assaulted by the enemy.

Rather than trying to stress the specificity or the character of the nation, as would later be the case, the early ‘Belgian songs’ were pragmatic means to revolutionise the crowds. They employed an easily recognisable vocabulary of heroism and sacrifice that could be rehearsed frequently by a singing practice that was encouraged by the already existing popularity of the song. As a ‘new’ song, the *Brabançonne* seems to have been less suitable for spontaneous singing and the mobilisation of the masses. As late as 1928, when Van Campenhout’s composition had been sung as the national anthem for almost a century, the *Revue Belge* published an article entitled ‘Why the *Brabançonne* has never become a popular song’, which enumerated ‘the defects of the *Brabançonne*’.⁵³ The problem, the author explained, was that despite obvious quotes from existing music, the *Brabançonne* was not accessible ‘like an old song’, it was not fit to be sung by ‘the labourer, the farmer, the child, the illiterate’.⁵⁴

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the hymn had been performed by professional singers and bands (most notably by the composer himself, who was a celebrated star of the operatic stage), serving almost as a counter-image to the spontaneity of the combative marches that could be heard in the streets. By the end of the century, however, musicians could only be seen as legitimate representatives of the nation if they joined in spontaneous choral outbursts of nationalism (hence the story of the quick genesis of the song in a café, as a part of the revolution).⁵⁵ As the story of the birth of a liberal state and the elaborate history of the *Brabançonne* were romanticised, and as Belgium came to represent a people as well as a state, the ability of the masses to tie themselves to the symbols of Belgium through folkloric practices, such as singing ‘old’ songs, became a central concern in politics. The difficulty of including the anthem in a canon of old and popular songs was seen as a problem.

Nevertheless, a large part of the 'people' had been taught the anthem and had sung it on numerous occasions. Performances of the *Brabançonne* graced all kinds of patriotic feasts, greeted the Royal Family wherever they went and were an unwavering ingredient in educational excursions of both school and army. If the anthem could not serve to mobilise the masses for revolution, it could accompany their movements through the country and be a vehicle for knowledge about that country. Until 1860, the song carried political information and recounted the antagonisms that had led to the revolution. The new lyrics, in the second half of the nineteenth century, served as an acoustic rendition of the national landscape, evoking both the soil and the people as it described the outline of Belgium ('from Hesbaye to the Flemish shores'), enumerated its symbols ('its name, its rights and its flag') and solemnly spoke of the national forefathers ('the blood of the fathers' shed for independence). Moreover, the song also carried gendered ideals of citizenship and martiality. In different contexts, and in the cases of the school, army and parliament in particular, the anthem was an often recurring quote in the common language of masculinity.

Professionally masculine

The frequent resounding of the *Brabançonne* was not the only feature that tied school, army and parliament together. More important, perhaps, than the fact that all three were institutions of nation, was their apparent homosocial character. The boys' school, the barracks and the hemicycle explicitly presented themselves as all-male spaces (despite the presence of at least some women) and even as spaces where masculinity was taught or made. In a study that chooses the construction of a common language of masculinity as its central theme, it seems logical to look for men and 'their' language where they gather. There is, however, more to all-male spaces than the mere fact that one finds men in them. Rather than the simple presence of men in these spaces, the heavily gendered character of the strict criteria for in- or outsider hood, of the conscious construction of the 'ideal' inhabitant and, most pointedly, of the public staging of these institutions' members is at issue.⁵⁶ In all three cases, one could argue that the institution's goal has been not so much to contain men, but rather to collect, form and display what they understood to be exemplary specimens of masculinity.

Boys' primary schools went to great lengths to stress their own importance in the formation of a future generation of men. From the phrasing

of mathematical problems to the courses of gymnastics, every subject in school could be interpreted as a preparation for pupils' future lives as heads of the household. The dichotomous understanding of brave, active, rational and potentially manly boys versus sweet, passive, emotional and potentially motherly girls was not only tediously practiced within the classroom, but also staged publicly, as when children of the municipal schools performed patriotic cantatas for national feasts. Although boys and girls received (almost) exactly the same education and were taught the same discourse, even if no primary school was ever an exclusively homosocial space, schoolbooks, songs, parades and children's and teachers' performances managed to uphold the idea that although children were not gendered in the same way as adults were, only boys would grow up to be men.

The way in which the army selected and treated its members reflects the difficulties that could arise in this assumed 'natural' process. As other historians of military masculinity have indicated, the recruitment of soldiers in the nineteenth century was an ambiguous enterprise: on the one hand, the medical examination recruits had to undergo before entering distinguished those who passed as 'manly' and those who failed as 'weak'.⁵⁷ On the other hand, the official discourse of military training (in manuals, journals and exercises) explicitly framed young recruits as boys who needed the special training the army was offering them in order to become not only soldiers, but also citizens and men.⁵⁸ Likewise, civilian characterisations of military men or civilian reports of their behaviour stressed the unrestrained, uncivilised and irrational nature of soldiers. Moreover, anyone who could afford to find themselves replacements for their military service did so, which resulted in an army that largely consisted of poor young peasants and paupers gaining their living by replacing well-to-do draftees.⁵⁹ The routines practiced in the barracks and displayed during the *manœuvres*, then, were a performance of class as well as gender. Not surprisingly, military education was often described using metaphors of age and kinship – presenting 'fatherly' generals and officers, and staging soldiers as 'sons' of the nation – as recruits were supposedly acquiring the discipline and strength that was needed for family life as well as for battle.

A similar paternal metaphor was applied to members of Belgium's parliament, who were simultaneously fathers and sons to the nation, claiming both a bourgeois and a martial identity. More than in the schools, and even more than in the army, politicians' identities were dependent upon a complex range of prerequisites of in- and outsiderhood. Despite radical changes in the criteria for suffrage at the end of the nineteenth

century, conditions for entering the parliamentary circle remained strict, forging ideals of masculinity that were not only contingent on gender and class, but also on age, citizenship and ideology. The importance of these intersecting hierarchies was voiced during parliamentary discussions, but also communicated to the Belgian 'people' in journals, art and politicians' public appearances. Clashes between individual delegates, based on personal or ideological disagreements, were quickly translated into fierce parliamentary discussions and reported in the national newspapers. As journalists and politicians transported debates into the public sphere, they invoked notions of nationalism, faith, civility and masculinity to explain and legitimate their behaviour – aware that they were being watched by women and men alike, as were soldiers on their manoeuvring field and boys at prize day.

Part I

Spaces

The story of the composition of the *Brabançonne*, the glorification of the revolution and its heroes, and the creation of the nation that played the lead role in these heroic stories, were largely the doings of a number of nineteenth-century artists. Gustave Wappers' famous tableau of the Belgian revolution, for example, did much of the rhetorical work that was needed to implant the story of a spontaneous revolutionary outburst and legitimized the authority of future Minister of War Félix Emmanuel Chazal by depicting him as a fierce patriot on horseback.¹ Likewise, romantic novelist Hendrik Conscience, 'the man who taught his people how to read', crafted not only a colourful prehistory to the modern Belgian nation, identifying a host of pre-national Belgian heroes, but also provided an autobiographical account of the Belgian revolution.²

His *Revolution of 1830*, published in 1858, has the middle-aged author casting an almost fatherly glance over to his younger self.³ Although the work is a novel, directed at a large audience, it shares much of its stylistic characteristics with the bourgeois memoir, the author aiming to educate his readers as much as to amuse them.⁴ The work is hardly of value as a nineteenth-century history lesson though. Rather than teaching his readers about the course of the revolution, its grand heroes or the political and military tactics underlying the movements of the revolutionary army, Conscience tells the tale of a young, dreamy and somewhat weak boy going through the painful process of becoming a man. The old Conscience, through the young first-person narrator of the story, ties his own rite of passage to a critical moment in his nation's conception.⁵ He thereby not only presents his own identity as one bound to the nation, and defined by patriotism and citizenship, but also projects an image of the Belgian revolution as the story of a country 'coming of age' and acquiring attributes of masculinity.⁶

Conscience's description of his road to manhood begins at his father's house: the young narrator, 'still having a child-like complexion', witnesses an encounter between the Dutch troops and Belgian