

## National Poets and Cultural Saints of Europe: Frisian (questionnaire)

Literary culture: Frisian (in the Netherlands)

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1. *Which individual poet (male or female) is generally considered to be the greatest poet in your literary tradition? (Give the first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death.)*

Gysbert Japicx (1603–1666)

2. *Are there other poets that come near or even reach such a status? If yes, name up to two, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the greatest poet (scale 1–5; 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

This is a difficult question, for two reasons. First, the “founding fathers” of (sub)national literatures do not necessarily have to be selected on the basis of their poetry (even if they were also poets). Still, if I were to mention two poets, I would choose:

Eeltsje Halbertsma (1797–1859) [2, 5]

Obe Postma (1868–1963) [3, 5]

Second, the reputations of more recent writers and poets are probably less stable than those of their equals from earlier eras. Recently, one contemporary Frisian poet, Tsjèbbe Hettinga (1949–2013), was ascribed a national (Dutch) and international reputation, which momentarily gains him the status of the best-known Frisian poet around, but probably only temporarily.

3. *Is there a (single) poet that is considered the “national” poet? (Give the first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death.) Is the notion of “national poet” (NP) widespread in your literary culture? (Assess on a scale of 1–5; 1 = “irrelevant,” 5 = “very common.”)*

Gysbert Japicx (1603–1666)

In the case of this poet, I would say a score of 5 is justified. However, in my literary culture the notion of “national poet” can only be attributed to poets from earlier centuries (I would presume earlier than the twentieth century).

4. *Were there many rival poets to the position of national poet during the canonization process that were later marginalized? If yes, name up to three, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess the decade of their utmost presence in the canonization processes (e.g., 1880s). (If there is no NP, answer for the “greatest” poet.)*

No. Gysbert Japicx’s position is totally undisputed (even though almost nobody reads his work anymore). In fact, the nineteenth-century realization of the concept of a national Frisian culture was highly dependent on the study and admiration of Gysbert Japicx among the Frisian intellectual elite.

5. *Which period of canonization of the NP (or the greatest poet in case of no NP) was most important? (State the year or decade.) Name up to five of the most important canonization events (state the year and type; e.g., 1860: crucial textual edition; 1905: unveiling of an important memorial). Assess the current stature of the national (or greatest) poet compared to the most intense period (scale 1–5; 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

The period from 1820 to 1830; even though the process of the canonization of Gysbert Japicx had started before 1800 and had known some highlights already, the commemoration in his native town of Bolsward, in 1823, has been by far the most important event, not only for the afterlife of the poet but also for the Frisian national movement as such. Whereas earlier interest among intellectuals had been of a more strictly literary and linguistic nature, this 1823 ceremony clearly had a broader, (sub)national Frisian character. Before an audience of hundreds of interested citizens from all over Friesland, a bust of the poet was unveiled, which was followed by many laudatory speeches and the declamation of modern Frisian poems. One year before, in 1822, a new edition of Japicx’s work had been published, and one year later a dictionary on the work of the poet was issued. As to his current stature, the idea of having Gysbert Japicx as a national poet has decreased (from 5 to an estimated 3.5). Large parts of the population still know his name (be it sometimes only because many streets in Friesland are named after him); however, due to external developments such as the decrease of knowledge-based (sub)national historical consciousness in general, fewer people acknowledge the impact of his poetry on Frisian national consciousness in particular. (See also Answer 4.)

6. *Who were the individuals, institutions, and interest groups (cultural factions, political parties) that played major roles in the promotion of the canonization process? State the names and assess the most active decade(s).*

Gysbert Japicx’s canonization began in the eighteenth century, especially among students of Everwinus Wassenbergh (1742–1826), who, as a professor of classical studies at Franeker University, paid some attention to Gysbert Japicx. One of these pupils was Ecco Epkema (1759–1832), who reedited Gysbert Japicx’s work (in 1822) and composed a dictionary on it (in 1824). Important to the process of canonization was also Joost Hiddes Halbertsma (1789–1869), the foremost intellectual leader of the first generation of nineteenth-century Frisian writers. The large volume of academic work on Gysbert Japicx, in comparison to other Frisian authors, is another proof of his stature as a Frisian (sub)national poet. In the course of the last century, six dissertations have been written on various aspects of the poet’s life and work. In general, the process of canonization intensifies in the decades that hold memorial days (of his birth and death): for example, 1936, 1966, 2003, and 2016.

7. *When were the works of the national (or greatest) poet fully integrated into the education system? (Name the decade; e.g., 1910s.) Assess the overall presence of the national (or greatest) poet and his or her works in education (scale 1–5; 5 = “excessive,” 3 = “not particularly strong,” 1 = “marginal”). If there were unusual shifts or breaks (due to politics, etc.), add a brief comment.*

Because Frisian literature and history have never become regular school subjects in Friesland, Gysbert Japicx and his work have only been discussed marginally in primary and secondary education. Only the small number of students of Frisian at universities will have had a less shallow exposure to the man and his work.

8. *Are there other literary writers (prose writers or playwrights) in your literary culture that come close to the canonical position of the national (or greatest) poet? If so, name up to three, give their information (first name,*

last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = “much more important,” 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).

The Halbertsma brothers: Joast Halbertsma (1789–1869), Tsjalling Halbertsma (1792–1852), and Eeltsje Halbertsma (1797–1858); writers of the most influential Frisian book from the nineteenth century: *Rimen en Teltsjes* (Rhymes and Tales) [8]

Waling Dykstra (1821–1914); writer of a more popular, realist oeuvre [4]

Obe Postma (1868–1963); poet [7]

9. *Are there other artists (composers, musicians, painters, architects, etc.) in your literary culture that come close to the canonical position of the national (or greatest) poet? If yes, name up to three, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = “much more important,” 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

Mentioning names of successful Frisian artists does not make sense. Compared to literature, and to poetry in particular, the “language” of other arts can be much less tied up with a (sub)national culture. The reputation of such artists is therefore, by definition, not restricted to Frisian culture.

10. *Name up to three other individuals (in politics, military, scholarship, etc.) that were most venerated in the nation-building context and remain highly canonized today. Give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death) and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = “much more important,” 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

Abe Lenstra (1920–1985); a Frisian soccer player; athletes have increasingly taken over the place of writers and artists as icons of Frisian cultural history [9]

Mata Hari (1876–1917); a striptease dancer and spy, shot in 1917 by the French [9]

Peter Stuyvesant (1612–1672); governor of New Amsterdam (New York) [8]

11. *Briefly describe the main reason why the chosen poet was considered “national” (or greatest in the case of no NP).*

Gisbert Japicx’s stature as a national poet can only be understood against the backdrop of the history of the Frisian language. Like many other European language territories, which became part of larger national state territories from the sixteenth century onwards, Friesland’s medieval written tradition of administrative and legal texts halted in the early modern period, only to revive again from the late eighteenth century onwards. Gysbert Japicx was among the very few that, in these “dark centuries,” actually wrote serious literary work in Frisian. What is more, he was the only one that produced a full-fledged oeuvre: *Friesche rijmlerye* (Frisian Rhyming).

12. *Speculate briefly on reasons why the concept of NP did (or did not) gain ground in your literary culture.*

My explanation rests on the theoretical presumptions of intellectual elites as intermediators between the periphery and the center of national states. The surge of the national Frisian movement was part of the process of eighteenth-century state formation in the Netherlands. By appropriating and amalgamizing certain older phenomena, Frisian elites more or less constructed a common culture which they, being representatives of the state apparatus at a central level, then shared with the Frisian people back home. Implicit to this process is the paradox that the rise of Frisian cultural nationalism was instrumental to an overall Dutch nationalism too. The iconization of important Frisian persons from the past was a standard

component of this process, and Gysbert Japicx was probably the most salient among these because he symbolized the most distinctive property of Frisian culture: its language.

13. *Speculate briefly on the reasons why the position of a national (or greatest) poet was either occupied by a single poet or shared by a number of poets.*

See Answer 11.

14. *Do you notice any interesting connotations regarding the canonization of a national (or greatest) poet that resemble the veneration and cults of religious saints? What about other artists? Specify briefly.*

No relevant comments.