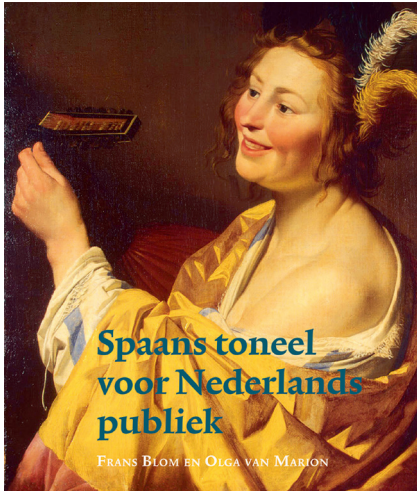


Review

Frans Blom and Olga van Marion, *Spaans Toneel voor Nederlands Publiek*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2021, 88 pp. ISBN 9789087046866.



In 2016 a special issue on the influence of Spanish theatre on the Golden Age Low Countries appeared in the *Zeventiende Eeuw*, the predecessor of this journal in its primigenious Dutch cloak. It addressed a much-neglected topic within Dutch literary historiography: the undeniable role of the Spanish *Siglo de Oro* drama on the development of the Dutch dramatical tradition. Compelling and cutting-edge research lines were first unpacked and further elaborated on in the following five years, both by experienced scholars and young academics, also placing the topic in a broader transnational setting. Two of the contributors, Frans Blom and Olga van Marion, have continued their pioneering work and joined forces in writing *Spaans Toneel voor*

Nederlands Publiek, a compact but excellent study on the success of the Spanish *comedia* on the Amsterdam *Schouwburg*, focusing on the extraordinary case of the Dutch afterlife of *La vida es Sueño* ('Life is a dream', 1635) by Pedro Calderón de la Barca. The play was to become part of the Dutch theatrical repertoire for more than one hundred and fifty years.

The title neatly illustrates the focus of the book: the recipient Dutch public. Although this scope may at first glance seem restrictive, nothing is further from the truth. In order to evince how and why Spanish theatre was so appealing and successful for Dutch audiences, a wide array of research fields are, seemingly effortlessly, interwoven. Firstly, the reader gets acquainted with early modern popularity and taste as well as the production side of the theatrical experience, such as selection and marketing strategies of plays and general repertoires. Secondly, the book clearly illustrates processes of cultural transfer within the Low Countries and beyond, contributing to the ever-developing field of transnational cultural exchanges, in particular regarding theatre. Thirdly, *Spaans Toneel* offers insight into the 'experience' of the early modern public, reflecting on how and why Spanish plays moved and appealed to Dutch spectators.

The book also confronts the Dutch reader with an uncomfortable truth: canonical playwrights like Vondel were less successful than authors from Spain, the arch-enemy of the Dutch Republic. Such a finding requires quite a mind reset, and this is precisely what makes this book so thrilling for a wider audience, both academic and professional, as well as for students and all others interested. From the 1640s, a growing 'hispanization' of the Amsterdam *Schouwburg* began to take shape, with star dramatists like Félix Lope de Vega and Pedro Calderón de la Barca taking the lead in the repertoire. Blom and Van Marion lucidly and succinctly expose how these Spanish plays offered the public something unexpected. Due to the genre of the *tragicomedia* – the hybrid form where comic and tragic elements were combined – the public's emotions were turned entirely upside down. Spectators were probably also taken by the role of strong women, frequently involved in gender-crossing plots, and by the trepidant rhythm caused by the lack of respect for the classical units of time, place, and space.

The compelling case study of Calderón's *La vida es sueño* (first translated into Dutch in 1654 as *Sigismundus, Prins van Poolen*) is particularly instructive for understanding why some plays became such internationally acclaimed masterpieces. It also beautifully illustrates the other two foci of the volume: the production side around the new cultural temple in Amsterdam (with the interrelation between authors, translators, printers, editors, and theatre officials) as well as the cultural transfer of the plays, tracing the transmission route from Spain, through the contact zone of the Southern Netherlands, to the Dutch Republic and beyond, including Germany and Scandinavia. Travelling theatrical companies, such as the Nederduytsche Comedianten, played a crucial role in this process.

In passing, the authors also discuss differences in national theatrical traditions. For instance, they point at differences regarding the presence of actresses on stage (which became customary in Spain by the end of the sixteenth century, but in the Amsterdam *Schouwburg* only since 1655), costumes and staging, and the existence of *toneelboekjes* (play text booklets) sold before performances, in which much-valued information on the branding of plays and authors is elicited such as the provenance of playwrights (Spanish) and the high quality of the plots. The attention paid to edition changes also reveals fluctuations in public taste, changing trends in Dutch theatre life, and the ways in which the 'Spanishness' of these plays was renegotiated over time. Particularly interesting is the role of intermediary translators, such as the Amsterdam Sephardic Jew Jacobus Baroces, who translated and selected Spanish plays in prose for further dramatical elaboration.

The volume obviously benefits from the in-depth research that both authors have published over the past years, to be found in the attached bibliography. The list further attests to the presence of a state-of-the-art overview on the topic. A useful appendix is included with the list of Spanish plays performed at the *Schouwburg*, with relevant information on authorship, Spanish and Dutch titles, intermediary translations, translators, and the number of performances. The list is based on the ONSTAGE online data system for theatre in Amsterdam, initiated by Frans Blom.

The compact format of the book obviously imposes certain choices. It is already commendable that such a rich panorama can be charted in only a small number of pages. However, one question in particular would have deserved more contextualization, as it also engages with the role and meaning of canons in current societies: why have we

forgotten that Spanish plays had been so relevant for Dutch drama and its theatrical tradition in the early modern period? The authors rightly state that the translation of *La vida es sueño* is not only an example of cultural contact but also a result of conflict (38). In the afterword, the authors address the reception of this play in the nineteenth century and in later literary histories, and conclude that ‘nationalism constituted an obstacle to the appreciation of Spanish comedies’ (66). Nonetheless, this point requires further elaboration. In the particular case of Dutch-Spanish relations, we cannot overlook the role of the protracted conflict of the Dutch Revolt, nor the role of prejudiced representations of the Spanish (and Catholic) historical enemy. Because most nineteenth-century scholars did not know what to do with that Spanish influence when forging a narrative of a distinctive and original national theatre in the so-called Golden Age, silences, omissions, and historical prejudices followed in their interpretations. The fascinating fact, however, is that the early modern public – even in times of war – did not seem to mind consuming and enjoying Spanish plays with Spanish characters, while at the same time these spectators were thrilled by deeply anti-hispanic plays performed on the same stage and during the same years. This assertion nuances the entrenched rigid views on cultural exchange and Dutch-Spanish relations. It was precisely the intention of that 2016 special issue to reveal how Spanish theatre conquered the Dutch theatrical scene, bending in this way the nineteenth-century legacy. The authors of *Spaans Toneel* have entirely succeeded in this long-term intention, both in other publications and in this particular one. Furthermore, although they are well-known scholars for their *elocutio*, now they surprise us as well with their mastering of the *brevitas*.

Yolanda Rodríguez Pérez, University of Amsterdam