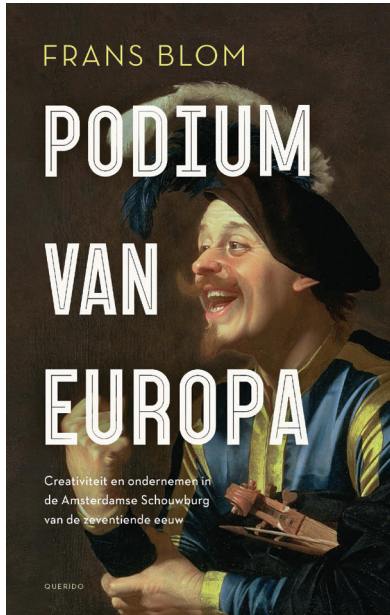


Review

Frans Blom, *Podium van Europa. Creativiteit en ondernemen in de Amsterdamse Schouwburg van de zeventiende eeuw*, Amsterdam, Querido, 2021, 509 pp. ISBN 97890214 2580.



In recent years, the study of early modern Dutch literature has taken a new turn, moving away from classical works and canonical authors towards a broader understanding of the cultural production and transmission of texts, as well as the analysis of the socio-economic networks that determined literary production. Frans Blom's engaging new study of the Amsterdam city theatre, *Podium van Europa*, is firmly rooted within this trend. Despite its traditional chronological framework – roughly spanning the period between the early seventeenth century, dominated by the activities of the chambers of rhetoric and the founding of Samuel Coster's new Nederduytsche Academy (the forerunner of the new theatre that opened on the Keizersgracht in 1637), and the rise of French classicism under Lodewijk Meyer and Andries Pels in the late 1670s – the theatre history it re-creates is anything but conventional. Apart from a brief

discussion of Amsterdam dialect and local colour in *Spaansche Brabander*, Bredero, long regarded as one of the canonical figures of the early seventeenth-century stage, is largely absent from this book, as is P.C. Hooft. Coster figures, but only as the driving force behind the Nederduytsche Academie. Vondel does occupy a prominent place in the book, with chapters on *Gysbrecht van Aemstel* and the *Joseph* trilogy, but other canonical plays such as *The Brothers*, *Jephtha*, and *Lucifer* are absent. Instead of writing a theatre history that moves from one celebrated text to the next, Blom presents the reader with an account of the theatre as a cultural enterprise determined by dynamic forces, such as the popularity of plays with theatre audiences, internationally changing fashions, and the presence of cultural mediators who were able to translate foreign repertoire for domestic consumption.

The book draws extensively on the systematic overview of repertoire, performances, dates, and revenues gathered in the on-line database *OnStage*. The light these data shed on theatre's contribution to the city's cultural life is refreshingly different. Overwhelmingly popular were the Spanish *comedias* by authors such as Lope de Vega, Luis Vélez de Guevara, Francisco de Rojas Zorilla, and Pedro Calderón de la Barca, of which no less than fifty were a fixture of the theatre's repertoire throughout the seventeenth century, and, in some cases, until well into the eighteenth century – much longer, Blom notes, than in Spain, or anywhere else in Europe. For this reason, the book devotes particular attention to the figures who enabled or facilitated processes of cross-cultural translation, adaptation, and appropriation. They appear in different guises. The erudite and well-travelled lawyer and politician Jacob van Heemskerck, for example, a friend of Constantijn Huygens, had earlier adapted Ovid's *ars amatoria* for a new Dutch audience, and proved instrumental in the introduction of Corneille's *Le Cid* onto the Amsterdam stage. Or take the actor Adriaen van de Bergh, who, before he joined the Amsterdam Schouwburg, had a career as a strolling player and had been part of a mixed theatre group with players from England. It was van den Bergh's prose translation of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* that furnished the raw materials on which Jan Vos based his notorious *Aran en Titus* (1641). Not all of these stories are new, perhaps, but they are presented here in a new way, for a new generation of students, and for a wider audience.

Actors play a central part in the story of this book, as cultural entrepreneurs, translators, and mediators. Blom shows how the travelling theatre company of Jan Baptist van Fornenbergh, whose actors split from the Amsterdam Schouwburg in 1647, were instrumental in the transmission of plays such as *Cid*, *Don Hijeronimo*, *Maarschalk van Spanje* (an adaptation of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*), and *Beklaaglyke dwang* into the repertoire of German theatre companies.

A special role is reserved for some of the key figures behind the adaptation of Spanish literary material, quite a few of whom were Sephardi Jews living in Amsterdam. Blom's analysis of Jacob Barocas's role in the co-production of *comedias*, culminating in a discussion of Serwouters's *Hester* (based on Lope de Vega's *La hermosa Ester*), is one of the book's best chapters, connecting the historical conditions of religious co-existence of Christians and Jews, as well as the encounter between different theatrical traditions (the professional theatre of the Schouwburg, and the Sephardi tradition of Purim plays), with a study of the process of adaptation and wider cultural mediation. In this way, the staging of *Hester* emerges as a powerfully resonant cultural moment, reflected in the intense interest taken by artists such as Rembrandt and Jan Steen in the Esther story in the years following the first performance of the play. Fascinating is also the fact that the play, throughout its performance history, would be staged during the Jewish holiday of Purim.

There are, inevitably perhaps, also some weaker aspects of the book. If seventeenth-century theatre audiences are central to this book as consumers, they are not similarly involved as participants in a wider public sphere of political discussion and debate. While events such as the Peace of Münster (1648) play an important part in the book's narrative, there is little attention to the way in which the theatre, as the most social of the arts, encourages reflection on contemporary political events, or how, on a more abstract level, it meditates on questions concerning political power, tyranny, law, and the relationship

between church and state. Only in the book's last chapter do we learn that the triumph of classicism among the regents of the Schouwburg in the 1670s meant not only the rejection of Biblical drama, but also the excising of political dramas on events such as the English Civil War or the 1647 Masaniello Revolt.

Yet as one contemporary visitor of Shakespeare's Globe wrote, the theatre is the place where English men and women came to learn about the world. Surely it was in essence no different for the Amsterdam stage. It is a shame, therefore, that Blom, who does such an excellent job in examining the cultural exchange between different national languages and theatrical traditions, does not extend his scope towards the broader news and information networks that brought stories about the fall of the Ming dynasty to European audiences, such as Vondel's *Zungchin*, or commented on the victories and defeats of the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean, a subject about which Blom himself has written elsewhere.

Another weakness is the book's relative lack of interest in the feminist, gender, and queer scholarship that has given a vital impulse to early modern literary studies over the last three decades. This has implications for the way in which the book discusses the plays' engagement with questions of love and desire, questions here seemingly regarded as self-explanatory rather than in need of historicization or critical analysis. While one might agree that it is surely interesting that the appearance of female actors on the Amsterdam stage in 1654 led to a marked growth in audiences and revenues (as it did, of course, in Restoration London), it is perhaps not directly the single most significant issue here. To argue, as Blom does, that the introduction of female actors enabled more explicit engagement with the *comedias*' thematization of gender, is to overlook the erotic and intellectual affordances of cross-dressing performance, as well as the ways in which early modern plays explored different forms of desire – homosocial, gay, and queer, as well as heterosexual.

These comments aside, this is a lively and stimulating book. Blom's broad knowledge of the sources of Dutch theatre history paints a vivid panorama, full of colourful characters. It is gratifying to see an author give serious attention to genres such as the farce (a theatrical form often dealt a rather poor hand in Dutch literary studies) and to explore in-depth the scabrous and rather hilarious pamphlet exchange between Jan Vos and his colleague and rival, the poet and playwright Jan Zoet. The book is convincing in the way it shows the theatre to be embedded in the life of the city, and the social and political culture of the Dutch Republic more widely. But the main pleasure of this book is that from its pages, the seventeenth-century theatre emerges as undeniably the most dynamic, transnational, and cosmopolitan art form of the early modern period.

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