Katharina Lescailje's *Ariadne* and Public Femininity: Playbooks as a Source for Scholarship on Early Modern Women

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Abstract

Combining literary analysis with book history, this short essay examines how representations of women within a play may be complicated by considering the context of individual printed versions. *Ariadne*, by Katharina Lescailje, offers a translation of Thomas Corneille's tragedy, with its complicated female protagonist, for the Dutch stage. In the 1693 single edition and the 1731 complete edition of Lescailje's work, this ambivalent representation of femininity is accompanied by title pages, a frontispiece, and a dedicatory poem that present Ariadne as eroticised and victimised, conflating her with Lescailje herself. In addition, Lescailje appears on title pages as translator, author, and stationer. All of these representations together show how printed versions of plays can add to the depiction of women in drama to display a variety of female roles for the reader to contemplate and explore.

Keywords: Katharina Lescailje, drama, book history, gender, tragedy, Thomas Corneille

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Early modern plays by Dutch women writers and translators that were performed in the professional theatre have not received the critical and scholarly attention they deserve. Few studies look at the content of their plays, and the number of publications on the three female playwrights of the seventeenth century who had their plays performed in the professional theatre – Catharina Verwers, Catharina Questiers, and Katharina Lescailje – still lags far behind the number of publications on male playwrights. Lescailje, the last of the three, wrote her plays when the presence of women on stage had become well-established at the Schouwburg in Amsterdam. The theatre, which had long used women's labour behind the scenes, now also relied on the public presence of women as actresses and playwrights.[1] The last play Lescailje completed, *Ariadne*, as I would like to show in this brief case study, represents an intervention in the cultural conversation on the place of women in the public realm, particularly in its material form as a playbook. This case study explores the tensions between the different representations of public femininity offered in this play and its printed versions, to suggest how we might situate a female-authored text in the changing theatrical culture of the Dutch Republic. I want to propose a dialectical analysis of a play's content and the playbook's materiality and publication history. Such an analysis allows us to appreciate the multiplicity of roles women could take on in the production of a playbook as publishers, printers, authors, and translators – roles that demand to be treated together if we are to consider the material book in its full complexity. In the case of *Ariadne*, the text of the play offers a representation of women that is countered by the playbook and its paratextual materials, creating a space for readerly reflection.

Ariadne *and Its Themes*

Ariadne, which was published separately in 1693 and as part of Lescailje's complete works in 1731, is a translation of Thomas Corneille's 1672 play *Ariane* and was the last of

1 For a preliminary investigation into the labour of women behind the scenes at the Schouwburg, see Van Elk, 'Printers'. For actresses, see Van Elk, 'Before'; Van Marion, *Gouden*.

Lescailje's seven plays to be published in her lifetime. The play was performed five times at the Schouwburg: twice in February 1694, once in October of the same year, and twice in a revival in 1698.[2] Corneille's play was very popular in France, but Lescailje's translation was only the second of his plays to be staged in Amsterdam. In bringing works by French authors to the Schouwburg, an institution with which she, as the Schouwburg's main printer-publisher, had an intimate connection, Lescailje relied on and contributed to the popularity of French classicist drama in the second half of the seventeenth century. *Ariadne* is perfectly in line with the theatre's preference for French plays, which, as Anna de Haas has explained, favoured realism, the unities of time and place, psychological conflict, decorum, the avoidance of political or religious controversy, and very little in the way of staged violence.[3]

Ariane expands on the story familiar from the Greek myth of the daughter of Minos who falls in love with Theseus and helps him escape from the labyrinth. Having betrayed her father, she leaves Crete for Naxos with Theseus, who promises to marry her. At this point, versions of the myth diverge, but they usually include Theseus's betrayal of Ariane and his subsequent abandonment of her on Naxos. Corneille's play has Thésée fall in love with Phèdre, Ariane's sister; the two flee when Ariane discovers their love and is planning to kill her female rival. The King of Naxos, Oenarus, is himself desperately in love with Ariane, and Thésée's friend, Pirithoüs, feels sympathy for her. After the escape of the lovers from the island, Ariane tries to kill herself in front of the king and Pirithoüs. As is common in the genre, the play features little action and instead centres primarily on conversations between the different individuals until the final scene. Many scholars have debated the extent of Corneille's debt to Jean Racine. Helen Harrison has argued that Ariane's love puts Thésée into a humiliating position of dependence, one from which he can only retrieve himself by choosing another beloved.[4] The felt gender reversal, she argues, is undone by Thésée's betrayal of the woman who saved his life, undermining his heroism but also undoing the debts of gratitude he feels constrained by.

A faithful translation of the French original, *Ariadne* is largely free of public or political content; it explores emotion and the irrationality of love, which appears divorced from reason in all its forms in the play. Lescailje's translation depicts female characters who navigate the treacherous domain between desire and family loyalty. Various forms of disloyalty are weighed against each other, but the play is particularly interested in the women's responses: Phedra's reluctant betrayal of her sister is compared with Ariadne's betrayal of her father and eventual desire to kill Theseus and Phedra. While Ariadne remains constant in her love for Theseus throughout the play, this constancy becomes deceitful and even murderous, rendering her pitiful but also alarmingly violent, even in the eyes of those most loyal to her, such as her companion and confidante Nerine. Much of the play is focused on the tragic inability of the sisters to overcome their desires in favour of their reason, which would dictate selecting a more respectable course of action. Both choose love, a

2 For information about performances and revenue, see the entry in the OnStage database: https://www.vondel.humanities.uva.nl/onstage/plays/995 (Accessed on 16 February 2025).

3 De Haas, 'Frans-classicisme', 129-133.

4 Harrison, 'Tragedy'. See for a related approach that connects Corneille's play to the influence of Racine: Goodkin, 'Thomas'.

choice that has tragic consequences. Ariadne is an extraordinarily complex title character, whose longing leads her into dark emotional territory but who is nonetheless a figure whose downfall and attempted suicide evoke pity onstage and on the part of the audience. A vehicle for the star actress, the play provides its main female character with a full array of emotions, many of which violate conventional notions of female virtue.

Ariadne's psychological depth is on full display in the final scene. Within the space of a few lines, she proceeds from a reasonable acknowledgment of her promise to marry Enarus to a furious tirade directed at Theseus, momentarily stopping herself when she realises that he is not there and that she is 'threatening in the air'.[5] Then she asks Enarus to go to Athens with her to overcome her sister with fire and steel. To deserve her hand, she says, Enarus should deliver Phedra up to her so that her sister can see her fury. When Enarus urges deliberation, Ariadne suddenly opts for a surer remedy: attempted suicide. Lescailje's stage direction, 'She tries to get the sword of Pirithoüs', is ambivalent; Corneille's original, 'She throws herself on the sword of Pirithous', seems to indicate a successful suicide attempt, however.[6] Swooning, Ariadne asks to be allowed to die as Enarus calls for help, leaving the audience uncertain as to what will happen next. Even in this version, it is possible the audience assumes that she will recover, in light of the myth, which usually has Ariadne marry Bacchus after being deserted by Theseus. Lescailje's translation leaves us with more uncertainty about what will happen next and even about how the scene should be staged: should Ariadne hurt herself or not? Ariadne's final act is an impulsive attempt at heroic action, to protest her lack of agency. Admirable and pitiable though she may be, Ariadne disturbs the audience with her fantasies of retribution and perhaps deservedly ends up suffering with no clear prospect of a better life. The play allows the leading actress to demonstrate a range of emotions, creating a representation of a female protagonist that complicates ideological notions of heroic female suffering.

Ariadne *on Its Own: The 1693 Octavo Edition*

The materiality of the seventeenth-century playbook compounds this already complex representation of womanhood. Unlike the French original, the translation is attributed to a woman, enhancing the reader's impression of public femininity with what was for the Dutch Republic the relatively new phenomenon of the woman playwright. Lescailje's translation appeared in two editions: the single octavo edition published by her printing house in 1693 and the edition included in the third volume of Lescailje's posthumously collected works *Toneel- en mengelpoezij* (*Dramatic and Mixed Poetry*, 1731), printed in quarto format by her descendants. Each edition offers its own representation of Ariadne and her Dutch author, mediated by male framing in paratextual materials. By contrast with the rich textual and visual celebration of Lescailje in the collected works, female authorship is only stated in the form of a name on the title page in the earlier octavo

5 Lescailje, *Ariadne*, sig. D8v: ''k dreig in de lucht'. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.
6 Lescailje, *Ariadne*, sig. D8v: 'Zy poogt de degen van Pirithoüs te krygen'; Corneille, *Ariane*, sig. H4r: 'Elle se jette sur l'epée de Pirithoüs'.

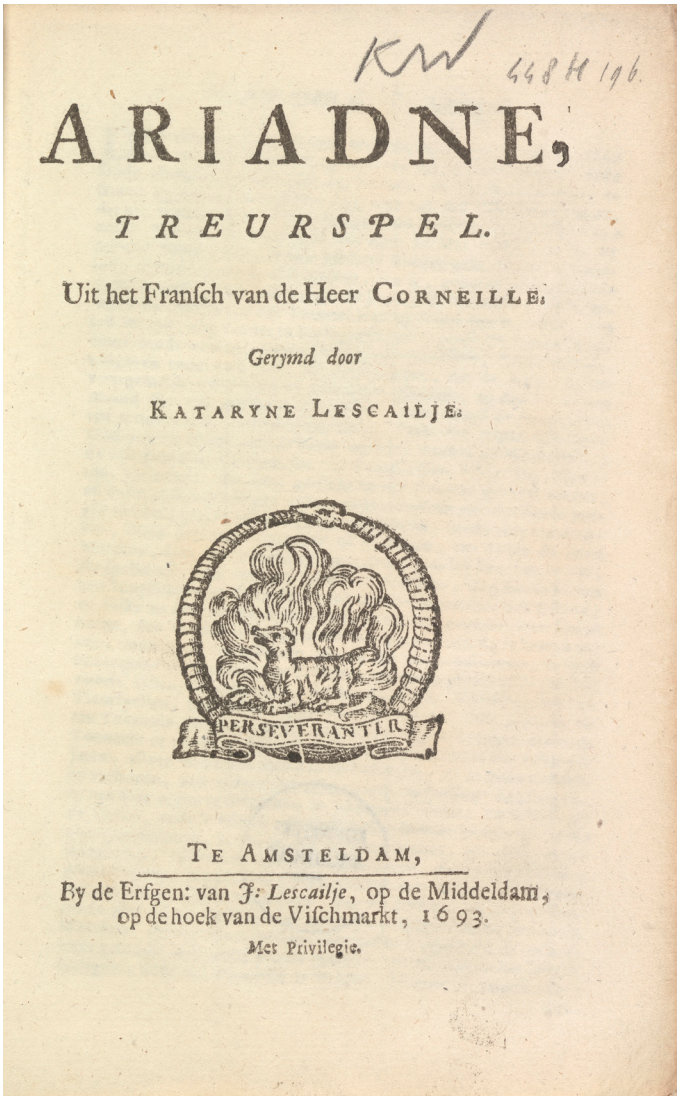

Fig. 1 Title page of Katharina Lescailje, Ariadne, treurspel *(Amsterdam: Erfgenamen Lescailje, 1693). The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek,* KW *448* H *196.*

edition, where it is positioned underneath the attribution of the play to Corneille: 'From the French by Mr. Corneille, rhymed by Katharina Lescailje' (fig. 1).[7] The use of the word 'rhymed' emphasises her role as poet in translating the play, but it appears secondary – the play is 'by Mr. Corneille' primarily. Her authorial presentation in the octavo is, in other words, somewhat understated, especially in the absence of dedicatory poetry.

7 Lescailje, *Ariadne*, title page: 'Uit het Fransch van de Heer Corneille, Gerymd door Kataryne Lescailje'.

Fig. 2 Frontispiece of Katharina Lescailje, Ariadne, treurspel *(Amsterdam: Erfgenamen Lescailje 1693). The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek,* KW *448 H 196.*

This edition's depiction of femininity is also affected by its inclusion of a frontispiece, which directs the reader to perceive Ariadne primarily as a victim (fig. 2). The engraver is Adriaan Schoonebeek, who supplied multiple engravings for other books published by the Lescailje firm, including several plays.[8] His frontispiece imagines Ariadne's attempted suicide in the final moments of the play, clearly suggesting that she was successful in gaining the sword and harming herself. A ship sails away in the background, presumably carrying Theseus and Phedra to Athens. The figure of Ariadne swooning in the arms of a soldier, possibly Enarus, dominates the foreground. Nerine tries to support her and places one

8 For instance: Elias, *De bekeerde*; De Brueys, *De knorrepot*; Poisson, *Pefroen*.

hand on her chest, a gesture that draws attention to her heart. Another soldier calls for help, and a third, in the shadows on the left, expresses his dismay at the scene. The sword with which Ariadne has tried to kill herself has fallen to the ground. The fact that it is hard to identify the three men with certainty indicates the degree of concentration on the female figures in the scene.

The emotions evoked by the engraving of *Ariadne* contrast with both the play's construction of the protagonist and the playbook's representation of the author. The image emphasises that Ariadne, in her loss of bodily control, has made herself subject to the gaze of the characters on stage and the viewer. In seeming disregard of Ariadne's violent fury in the final scene, she is here suffering in a vaguely eroticised stance. Thus, the frontispiece attests to the complexity of femininity on the stage, where actresses were frequently sexualised by their presence in a public arena. The background to Schoonebeek's engraving partly controls the potential for an eroticised response to Ariadne by including a rounded platform with the title of the play engraved on it, a metatheatrical gesture that turns it into a tableau.

While Ariadne is visually depicted as a woman whose suffering is primarily expressed physically, the author's name on the title page is present yet modest – another mode of femininity associated with creative production in the service of male expression. But Lescailje also appears in a more veiled form as the printer and publisher of the book. Her father's printer's mark with the motto *Perseveranter* (Steadfastly) joins with the colophon's phrase 'At the heirs of J. Lescailje' to subsume Lescailje's work as printer and publisher into her father's career and her family's business.[9] In this edition, then, Lescailje as a working woman and rhyming translator is distinct from the play's heroine, whose visual representation as an emotional, passive figure contrasts with the rather inconspicuous textual presence of the author and stationer.

Ariadne *in Context: The 1731 Edition of Lescailje's Works*

The quarto collection of Lescailje's works situates the play within her oeuvre. The first volume monumentalises the author in a frontispiece and a series of elegies, while *Ariadne* appears, with an accompanying dedicatory poem, as the last of her plays in the third volume. The title page of the play itself presents her as a translator, not 'rhymer' ('from the French of Mr. T. Corneille, by Katharyne Lescailje'), and this time, the font size of Lescailje's name is decidedly larger than that of Corneille's.[10] The frontispiece and praise poems in the first volume highlight Lescailje's achievements as a playwright, mostly treating the plays as being authored by her rather than as translations. Instead, in 'Op haare treurspel van Ariadne' ('On Her Tragedy of Ariadne'), Johan van Meekeren conflates play, title character, and translator, directing the reader's response to the play as had Schoonebeek's engraving. Van Meekeren was a fellow playwright and translator of at least three plays, one

9 Lescailje, *Ariadne*, title page: 'By de Erfgen: van J. Lescailje'.
10 Lescailje, *Toneel en mengelpoezij*, III, sig. Ppp3r: 'uit het Fransch van den heere T. Corneille, door Katharyne Lescailje'.

of which, *De tovery zonder tovery* (*Magic Without Magic*), also translated from the French, had been published by Lescailje in 1696. He begins by acknowledging the praise *Ariane* received at the French court, where the play 'so attractive to all eyes/ Stirred the souls and touched them with pity'.[11] The Dutch *Ariadne*, he writes, pleases audiences just as much and even gets 'more praise' than when it was shown on the Parisian stage.[12] Curiously, his grammar, particularly in the absence of punctuation, blends the main character and the translator-author:

> But here on the stage, in Dutch poetry,
> So deliciously rhymed, come into the light,
> She pleases us so well, most gifted Tragic heroine
> KATRYNE, worthy, yes, most worthy beloved Friend,
> As her.[13]

The referents for 'she' and 'her' are Corneille's Ariane and Lescailje's Ariadne, but with Lescailje herself wedged in between these lines, it is unclear who is meant by 'most gifted Tragic heroine' and 'beloved Friend'. He concludes with the idea that his praise should be trusted since his habit is not to apply 'white face paint to natural beauty', perhaps with a reference to the make-up used by actresses.[14] For him, the translator, the play, and the leading character alike delight and arouse pity in the audience with their beauty. Van Meekeren's gendered representation constructs female authorship as embodied and desirable, much like Ariadne herself, whose vengeful anger and powerful jealousy do not detract from her charms. Much like in the individual edition with its frontispiece, then, Ariadne is rendered less disturbing than she is in the play, her role being to evoke admiration and compassion, with the difference that in this case, Lescailje is drawn into a similar relationship with her audience and readership.

Conclusion

The engraving and the dedicatory poem in the single and the collected edition of *Ariadne* provide male glosses on the representation of women in the play, repressing the violent desires of revenge on the part of Ariadne in favour of a view of her and her author as valued for their attractiveness. As problematic as these male framing gestures are, the engraving was surely approved by Lescailje herself and the dedicatory poem by her descendants. These representations contrast with the play's own complex perspective on the female protagonist and with the labour of Lescailje as a stationer, in charge of the production and distribution of the octavo edition of her play.

11 Lescailje, *Toneel- en mengelpoezij*, III, sig. Ppp4r: 'zo bekoorlyk aan elks oogen,/ De zielen roeren deede en trof met meededoogen'.

12 Lescailje, *Toneel- en mengelpoezij*, III., sig. Ppp4r: 'meerder prys'.

13 Lescailje, *Toneel- en mengelpoezij*, III, sig. Ppp4r: 'Maar hier ten Schouwtooneel, in Nederduyts gedicht,/ Zo heerelyk gerymd, gekomen in het licht,/ Bekoort zy ons zo wel, begaafdste Treurheldinne/ KATRYNE, waardige, ja, waardste Halsvriendinne,/ Als haar.'

14 Lescailje, *Toneel- en mengelpoezij*, III, sig. Ppp4r: 'blanketzel aan natuurelyke schoonte'.

This case study is an argument for close attention to the material and paratextual features of editions of writing by women. Combining literary analysis with book history allows us to uncover fruitful sources for exploring questions of depictions of women in public arenas. Considering the material book itself as a public space can stimulate further investigations of writing by early modern women that pay close attention to the purposeful design of title pages and engravings and the formulations of dedicatory poetry and authorial attributions, all of which may pull against or work in tandem with the content of the texts themselves. Lescailje's translation is much more ambivalent than the paratexts suggest, because the dedicatory poem and engraving point us to the embodied allure, simultaneously erotic and pathetic, of the early modern actress. But while Van Meekeren draws Lescailje herself into a more conventional version of attractive womanhood, the octavo edition and first volume of the collected edition allow the reader a glimpse into her work as a publisher and printer and an appreciation of her as author-translator, enriching an already multivalent representation of public femininity.

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