

Review

René van Stipriaan, *De Hartenjager. Leven, werk en roem van Gerbrandt Adriaensz, Bredero*, Amsterdam/Antwerpen, Em. Querido's Uitgeverij BV, 2018, 360 pp. ISBN 978-90-214-0952-8.



In 1970, Garnt Stuiveling published *Memoiriaal van Bredero*, a collection of all known archival sources (1580-1647) relating to the life of one of the most remarkable Dutch poets of the early seventeenth century, Gerbrandt Adriaenszoon Bredero (1585-1618). Factual data are very scarce, and for that reason, Stuiveling felt that a serious biography (as opposed to the numerous more or less fictitious life sketches and *vies romancées* that had appeared since the nineteenth century) would be an impossible task. Most colleagues agreed. Especially after a number of famous poems by Bredero that had always been considered autobiographical were unmasked as translations, a 'real' biography seemed out of the question once and for all.

Now, nearly fifty years later, the book that could not be written has appeared. The author, René van Stipriaan, acknowledges the main problem: what we know for sure

about Bredero's life fits on a single A4 page. He also knows, as Stuiveling put it, that a love poem is not the same as a love letter, and a devout song is not a public confession of faith. Yet, like his predecessors, but far more convincingly, Van Stipriaan turns to Bredero's work to present us with the man. 'Without again falling into the trap of taking Bredero's work too literally, an attempt will be made in this book to put the wealth and variety of his oeuvre into the light of the possibly even richer and more agile spirit that produced it' (p. 13). This also answers the question why the biography should be written: we cannot just accept that the author of such a wonderful oeuvre will never be more than a shadow from

the past. One would like to know this man, talk with him, ask him about himself.¹ ‘Bredero, Amsterdammer’, he called himself. Does Van Stipriaan bring him any closer? Impossible to say, but it is hard to imagine a better attempt.

The actual biography does not cover more than three of the nine chapters (2, 3 and 4), in which the scanty data concerning Bredero’s life are integrated into the fascinating story of the economic and cultural developments in Amsterdam of the period. Shortly after his birth as the son of a tradesman, the medieval city began to outgrow its boundaries, and Bredero saw with pride and, maybe, surprise that his Amsterdam carried the promise to develop into a ‘second Rome’ – he wrote it down with a bravado as if he had invented the phrase himself. He was trained as an artist painter and probably became a member of the old Amsterdam Chamber of Rhetoric *De Eglentier* (The Eglantine) around 1610. In this Chamber, Bredero soon must have started playing a major, if not central, role. His plays attracted vast crowds, and as a songwriter he had so much success that in 1616 a book appeared under his own name and with only his own work – quite a rare phenomenon in Dutch literature at that time. With Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft and Samuel Coster, Bredero in 1618 initiated the *Nederduytsche Academie* (Dutch Academy), an institution that, following the example of the academies in Florence and Paris, intended to provide a civic audience with both higher education in the vernacular and professional theater. And then suddenly, it was over. Bredero died on 23 August 1618. According to various testimonies this was totally unexpected. His father, who was to survive him by almost thirty years, recorded his son’s death in the *Livius* edition in which he had also entered his birth 33 years earlier. Without a word about what had happened.

After Bredero’s sudden death, a myth originated that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would make him almost the prototype of the Dutch *poète maudit*, never completely at home in the social circles where his talent brought him, always and unhappily in love, dead after a long, languishing illness that eventually reconciled him with his God. The development of this myth is the subject of chapter 5. Van Stipriaan shows that a lot of romantic fiction has crept into that image. Yet he also stresses the fact that some elements already date from the first years after Bredero’s death. He points out how Bredero’s friend and publisher Cornelis van der Plasse, in his posthumous edition of all Bredero’s poems and songs (*Groot Lied-boeck*, 1622), suggests a spiritual development from earthly love and pleasure to Christian repentance. One of the illustrations in this collection appears to tell the same story, which is also expressed in a prefatory poem. Moreover, we know for a fact that Bredero’s love life was unsuccessful and that in this respect 1618 was a particularly disastrous year for him: his beloved Magdalena Stockmans chose to marry a wealthy merchant from Antwerp. In the same year, Bredero wrote his play *Angeniet*, with a plot distantly reminiscent of Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, in which the female protagonist makes herself guilty of the most blatant breach of promise. Jan Janszoon Starter, Bredero’s contemporary who completed the play at the request of Van der Plasse, stated that it reflected Bredero’s own experiences. According to Van Stipriaan, modern researchers have been too quick to discard Starter’s comment.

1 See <https://www.neerlandistiek.nl/2018/09/het-laatste-raadsel/>. (Accessed on 5 November 2018).

So we have a story again. Van Stipriaan presents his views with due caution, but he does not hesitate to link Bredero's death to the disappointment caused by Stockmans's behaviour, and does not even rule out suicide. In the final chapter, Van Stipriaan returns to Bredero's last year, 1618. The contemporary political developments in the Dutch Republic in that year of civil strife must have been frightening for Bredero and his friends, among them Hugo Grotius, who was to be one of the main victims of the Prince of Orange's putsch and the Contraremonstrant victory. Did the 'Roman solution', so positively highlighted in a contemporary Dutch translation of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, become an option? Van Stipriaan wonders whether Bredero's famous motto *'t kan verkeeren* ('nothing is permanent') might have lost his relevance for the poet – as if everything could only get worse, and never better again.

Featuring pictures of Oldenbarnevelt's execution and other depressing scenes from those years, the biography ends decidedly in a minor key. It is a suggestive arrangement. It might be due to Van Stipriaan's book that, in October 2018, the combination of the search terms 'Bredero "and" suicide' (Dutch: 'zelfmoord') on the internet has yielded almost 14,000 hits. But hard as it is not to admire the way in which Van Stipriaan presents and combines the very limited number of biographical data, some doubts remain: should we believe that Bredero by reading *Pharsalia* became a 'Roman'? If the self-chosen death 'appealed to the imagination' in Amsterdam intellectual circles (p. 115), that does not mean that it was 'positively appreciated' (p. 116). Suicide was considered an extremely serious crime, and relatives of possible suicides had every interest in keeping it a secret. Certainly, Bredero's death, for us, is covered in mystery. But Van Stipriaan's conclusion (p. 129) that Bredero's contemporaries 'have left us intentionally or unintentionally with intriguing riddles', represents them in my view a bit too strongly as active agents leaving riddles, and I feel that the balance is slightly being manipulated. I can only put it in Van Stipriaan's words once more (p. 129): 'We do not know.'

It is hardly surprising that this part of Van Stipriaan's book has attracted most attention, but it has much more to offer than that, and serves as a great guide through the work of this wonderful poet. In chapters 6, 7 and 8, respectively, the book deals extensively with 'the comic, the amorous, and the religious Bredero'. These are rough indications, following Van der Plasse's edition of Bredero's lyrics; in reality Bredero's work is not so easy to classify. Above all, Van Stipriaan wants to show how, in Bredero's stage work particularly, a strong sense manifests itself that the human world is ungraspable and treacherous. 'Even if you see people, you do not know them': that is the telling motto of Bredero's most complete and complex play, *Spaanschen Brabander* (1617, translated by David Brumble as 'The Spanish Brabanter' in 1982). In fact, it is worse: people do not know themselves and let themselves be carried away by passions they claim to have under control. From high to low, Bredero's characters rush into disasters they explicitly warned themselves against just one scene before. Appropriately, Van Stipriaan points out the similarities with plays by Shakespeare and other contemporaries. As in their works, later generations would miss balance and clear moral lessons in Bredero's plays. But in this kind of drama nothing is meant to be obvious. Not only the characters but also the spectators must be constantly on their guard. This may be the key to the lasting vitality of Bredero's work, and it is a mystery why (most?) modern directors will not even consider to stage it.

Does Bredero still have anything to say to us? Without putting too much emphasis on it, Van Stipriaan points out the topicality of some recurrent themes in his work, such as immigration (p. 256ff.) and dealing with foreign cultures (p. 262ff.). ‘Even the fate of the bachelor politician is discussed by Bredero’ (p. 14)! Less attention is given to the more technical aspects of Bredero’s art, although there are some nice close readings, for instance of the ‘Sint Janslied’ (1610; pp. 47-49). Mostly, however, following Van Stipriaan’s approach, Bredero’s lyrics are quoted to tell us something about the author. That pays off, but sometimes Van Stipriaan seems to forget that Bredero, as a first class rhetorician, would have liked to practice art for art’s sake as well. For example, in a clever poem about ‘Elck een’ (‘Everyman’) Van Stipriaan discovers a ‘deliberate weakening or even undermining of the superiority of Christianity’. It is not exactly clear why this would be so. Because ‘Everyman’ is to be found ‘in the Netherlands as well as in the company of the Moors’? Van Stipriaan has lost me there, but then, there is always something left to be desired. *De hartenjager* (*The Hunter of Hearts*) is generally being received as a masterpiece and I wholeheartedly agree with that judgment.

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