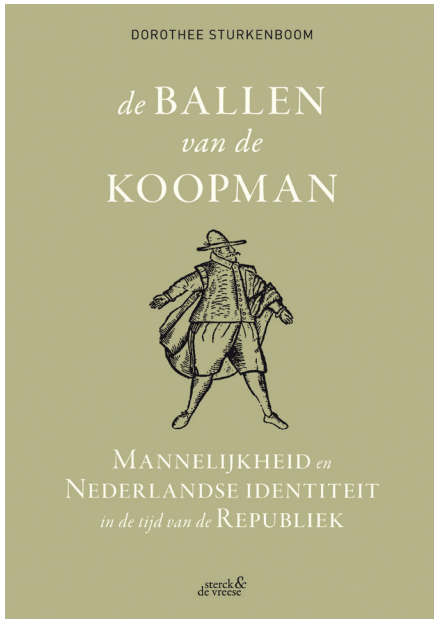


Review

Dorothee Sturkenboom, *De ballen van de koopman. Mannelijkheid en Nederlandse identiteit in de tijd van de Republiek*, Gorredijk, Sterck & De Vreese, 2019, 498 pp. ISBN 9789056155063.



Dorothee Sturkenboom's *De ballen van de koopman. Mannelijkheid en Nederlandse identiteit in de tijd van de Republiek* (*The Merchant's Balls. Masculinity and Dutch Identity in the Dutch Republic*) deserves a wide audience, both within the academic world and beyond. Sturkenboom – who has held several academic positions and now works as an independent historian – has published an important and inspiring example of scholarship that historicises and complicates pressing identity debates on gender and ethnicity.

De ballen van de koopman focuses on the ways in which early modern discourses and styles of masculinity contributed to the representation of the Dutch merchant and, as a next step, to the process of Dutch identity formation. A clear introduction is followed by four chapters that explore different aspects of Dutch masculinity, demonstrat-

ing how severe and soft styles of masculinity continuously interacted with each other in the Dutch Republic. Chapter two explores martial appearances and analyses the opposition between the brave Dutch fighter on the one hand and the peaceful merchant who restrains himself from fighting on the other. The starting point of chapter three is the independent, domineering Dutch woman, who is interpreted as an exponent of a supposedly failed patriarchal hierarchy: behind the image of the wife who wears the trousers, a docile and effeminate businessman appeared. Chapter four focuses on the role of Dutch merchants in global colonial trade, tracing a tension between the black legend of greedy,

brutal masculinity and the image of enlightened, caring fathers. In the concluding chapter on the *mercator honestus* (honest merchant), Sturkenboom demonstrates how the image of the merchant has gradually evolved from an often untrustworthy man into an example of Dutch diligence and fidelity.

De ballen van de koopman offers a valuable contribution to ongoing academic and social discussions on Dutch identity by means of its intersectional approach. In the introductory chapter, which is highly suitable for students in the field of imagology and cultural representation, Sturkenboom expertly discusses theoretical perspectives on national identity as a cultural construct and on nationality as a gendered process. Observing that masculinity – in contrast to femininity – functions as our ‘natural norm’, Sturkenboom argues that we are often unable to see the impact of masculine models on historical frameworks of national identity. By analysing national images from a gendered perspective, she problematises phenomena that appear self-evident. Instead of focusing exclusively on explicit male-female-relationships, she aims to unravel the gendered dimensions of features that were attributed to nations and groups, as these predominantly determine their social status. For example, the chapter on businesswomen demonstrates how male merchants lost social power when they became connected to female qualities such as docility.

Sturkenboom presents her intersectional approach as innovative: in recent publications on Dutch identity, she argues, ‘there has been little attention for the functioning of gender as symbolic language in processes of representation’ (26). Previous scholarship on this specific topic is only mentioned in the book’s conclusion and a couple of footnotes, including Stefan Dudink and Benjamin Roberts, who analysed masculinity in relation to Dutch identity, and a special issue from 2012 in the *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* on the question of how masculinity helped establish notions of national self in Dutch history. It would have been useful to relate *De ballen van de koopman* to this earlier scholarship in a more profound way: which specific ideas and perspectives on masculinity and Dutch nationality have been developed before, and how is this book able to enrich, strengthen, or refute them?

However, this in no way detracts from the added value of this book. Instead of reducing ‘Dutch identity’ to a natural and one-dimensional type of identity, Sturkenboom offers a nuanced analysis of the many conflicting, changing, and context-bound interactions between masculinity and nationalism in the early modern Dutch Republic. A large and rich variety of textual sources is discussed, including merchants’ handbooks, travel stories, encyclopaedias, novels, stage plays, and texts written by Dutch merchants as well as outsiders such as non-merchants or foreign traders. As Sturkenboom consistently analyses auto-images (created by Dutch people) in contrast to hetero-images (created by others), *De ballen van de koopman* traces multiple interactions and differences between in- and outside perspectives on Dutch identity. In chapter four on colonial trade, for example, Sturkenboom demonstrates how the auto-image of tolerant Dutchmen conflicted with the hetero-image of crude and greedy colonists. At the same time, auto- and hetero-images could be hybrid. Colonial and anti-colonial discourses were intertwined, and different styles of masculinity were distinguished to justify indecent practices: while the Dutch distanced themselves from aggressive masculine behaviour that created colonial violence, they embraced the image of the caring father.

One of the innovative and important aspects of Sturkenboom's analytical approach is her ambition to relate discourses on Dutchness and masculinity to historical circumstances. By introducing such 'historical checks' (108) Sturkenboom does not intend to verify discursive processes ('are these images correct?'), but instead wishes to understand how certain representations have been created and developed. The observation that Englishmen were quicker to emphasise the Dutch lack of courage and honour than the French, Germans, or Italians could be explained by the many Anglo-Dutch wars, or by the fact that the Dutch Republic often failed to help its English ally (66-68). Sturkenboom also discusses discrepancies between historical realities and dominant discourses. For example, the fact that the VOC also recruited women never impacted on the image of a male seaman (241). Sturkenboom never approaches her sources as unproblematic representations of reality and is highly aware of a text's ability to leave things unsaid that are inconvenient or too obvious to express, or even to spread alternative realities (for example reflecting a desirable norm instead of a current reality).

As a result of Sturkenboom's ambition to discuss such a wide range of sources, images, and perspectives at great length, her chapters are quite extensive and sometimes a bit long-winded. The reader's guidance is sometimes remarkably explicit: 'We need to keep this in mind when we will meet some foreign authors in the next sections' (55). Yet her accessible style has its attractiveness to the broader audience – including students – that Sturkenboom also has in mind: she gradually unfolds her argument, complicating and enriching it step by step. She is never tempted to simplify her historical sources and realities, or to draw any bold conclusions.

That is why I sincerely hope that *De ballen van de koopman* will be read by many. In Sturkenboom's own words, her book stems from a 'scholarly belief in the power of analysis' (170) and aims to offer her readers some 'intellectual vigilance' (31). Providing an overview of several early modern perceptions of identity, Sturkenboom tries to restrain herself from strong (political) judgements, although she is acutely aware of her inescapable biased position: objective histories are impossible, she explicitly notes (170). I greatly appreciate this attempt to enrich emotionally charged political discussions with a solid and multi-layered historical analysis. Sturkenboom has produced a stimulating, spirited, and theoretically informed history that deserves a wide readership.

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