TRANSCRIPTION

HISTORICAL CLASSICS

EPISODE 01 ANNA BIJNS

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In the first episode of this 11-part series, I take you into the life and work of Anna Bijns. She opens the series because Fixdit has its roots in the Anna Bijns Foundation, which for years awarded a prize to a woman following Bijns' motto: no better friend than money in hand.
For each episode, a writer was asked to translate ten pages of historical work by a female author into contemporary language and to discuss that process in this podcast. A guest scholar then sheds light on the historical context of the author's life and work. In the episodes that follow, we will hear about other women who, like Bijns, wrote in Dutch during the early modern period.
But now we travel to sixteenth-century Antwerp to meet a woman who held her own among the rhetoricians: men who drank together and recited poems, or refreinen, to each other. Women were excluded from these rhetorical chambers, but Anna Bijns broke that rule. She wrote sharp, humorous, but also tragic refreinen, such as:

"One day I am light, two days I am heavy,
suffering draws near, I must always fight,
more sour than sweet I must taste, it is clear,
there is always a 'but', I cannot rejoice."

Yes, she expressed her suffering in powerful language. She lived in tumultuous times: Martin Luther opposed the Catholic Church, and the Gelderland military commander Maarten van Rossem threatened to enter Antwerp with his troops. Bijns remained a devout Catholic during the ensuing religious war. With her eloquent, fearless voice, she addressed every topic—whether Luther, fate, marriage, or heartache. Listen to the life and work of Anna Bijns.

Fleur:
Sitting at my table, on one side, is award-winning poet, novelist, and translator Joke van Leeuwen. Welcome, Joke.

Joke:
Thank you.

Fleur:
You were also a kind of Anna Bijns yourself, as you were poet laureate of Antwerp.

Joke:
Yes, in 2008 and 2009 I was poet laureate. Back then, the city still appreciated how valuable that was.

Fleur:
On the other side, emeritus professor of historical Dutch literature Herman Pleij. Welcome, Herman.

Herman:
Thank you.

Fleur:
I'm glad you're both here. Let's get started. Herman, you know Bijns' world like no other. After all, you wrote her biography Anna Bijns of Antwerp and brought her refreinen together in Meer zuurs dan zoets. Antwerp, c. 1500–1550. I read that there was a kind of renaissance for women at that time?

Herman:
Yes, you can also infer it from visitor accounts. Antwerp was becoming a very international trading metropolis. Visitors—whether from southern, eastern, or northern Europe—often noted that women walked around freely, which was unusual, because according to their view and experience, women were supposed to be chaperoned. A woman walking alone was considered lower-class, like a market woman, or doing things that were improper. But in Antwerp, women of all classes—and particularly higher classes—walked the streets and conducted business.

Fleur:
And what consequences did that have for an unmarried woman like Anna Bijns?

Herman:
Well, she certainly noticed. In that sense, she led a remarkable life for her time. She grew up in a family with a brother and sister. Her sister quickly married and disappeared from the household. She lived with her brother for a while, clearly forming a bond, but she handled the business. Very remarkable. Her family was well-off: her father was a stocking maker—a rather prestigious profession at the time—and also speculated in property. Initially, her brother handled this, but it soon became clear he couldn't manage, and Anna effectively took over, while continuing all her other activities. Remarkably, she never became a nun. She clearly wanted to marry, as inferred from her behavior and statements. She was still listed in a city record at 76 years old as "not yet married"—a striking formulation. She was highly visible, but also self-supporting.

Fleur:
How did she manage that self-sufficiency?

Herman:
She had multiple sources of income: family assets, work as a teacher, and engagements from the city—despite frequent clashes with the city authorities, they hired her as a kind of professional witness or legal advisor. Women weren't supposed to do that, so she didn't have an official title. She also had patrons who supported or protected her work. She clearly directed all these opportunities herself.

Fleur:
Joke, I see you leafing through the pages. Had you studied Bijns' work so closely before?

Joke:
Not this closely. I had her work on my shelf and had read it, but translating it into contemporary language while staying as close as possible to the original really puts you right into it.

Fleur:
How was that?

Joke:
Beautiful! It's a play with rhyme that keeps recurring. For instance, one rhyme scheme goes: a, a, b, a, b, b, c, d, c, c, c, e, e. So four A's, three B's, three C's, and so on. It's like a puzzle, but a fun puzzle. I enjoy that.

Fleur:
Yes, there's a lot of colloquial language, folk wisdom, street imagery, very witty. How did you capture the same tone, also the provocative edge?

Joke:
By staying as close as possible. Then I looked at how to modernize it while keeping the tone. I had help from a valuable red book where all the refreinen were literally explained—without that, I couldn't have managed, because my knowledge of sixteenth-century Dutch is limited, and the language has changed.

Fleur:
Ah, the red book, that's by Herman Pleij.

Joke:
Yes, and we already said he knows everything about it.
(Chuckle from Herman)

Fleur:
Anna Bijns lived to 82, born 1493, died 1575. A long life. What should we know her for above all?

Herman:
I've called her one of the great authors of Dutch literature. In the sixteenth century, she was highly respected. She displayed a verbal prowess not yet seen, especially in rhetorical circles devoted to the art of language. She manipulated language brilliantly, making it seem as if she spoke in everyday, street-level language—yet inventively. She addressed highly unusual topics, especially for a woman: men's affairs, political positions, sexuality. She was the first Dutch woman, as far as we can tell, to speak frankly about sexual experience. Her mastery of the refrein form allowed her to convey humor, satire, and argument with astonishing creativity.

Joke:
It becomes slapstick. People react with shock, then join in, and she overwhelms them all. (Example from Bijns' humorous refrein about flatulence.)

Herman:
She also used contemporary medical knowledge, even etiquette books like Erasmus' advice on passing wind at the table—showing she could rhyme about anything.

Fleur:
Love was another of her themes—not idyllic love, but love that wounds and betrays. Joke, could you read a fragment from your translation of vriends ontrouwe is kwaad onverdraage ("A friend's unfaithfulness is hard to bear")?
(Joke reads translation, Herman reads the last stanza in original Dutch.)

Fleur:
You translate "nothing better than the loyalty of trusted faces"...

Joke:
Yes, I preferred "trusted faces" over "cousins," as the original metaphorically meant the people around you.

Fleur:
And "Alas, clearly I will miss the mark"?

Joke:
Yes, rhyme dictated the adaptation.

Herman:
You do this beautifully. Many literary translations exist, but yours stays accessible while honoring the text.

Fleur:
Judith Kesler studied Bijns' literary strategies in Princesse der Rederijkers. Herman, which strategies do you recognize in her work?

Herman:
She uses literature to disrupt, console, and argue. The refrein form suits her, allowing her to repeatedly present arguments, counterarguments, and to hold the listener's attention. Her use of rhyme is intricate: end rhyme, middle rhyme, internal rhymes, chaining words.

Joke:
I could preserve a lot, even in tricky cases like the flatulence poem, modifying slightly to maintain closeness to the original.

Fleur:
Another striking feature is her ironic self-effacement—"I am but a woman, fumbling along"—a conventional modesty topoi of the sixteenth century. Herman?

Herman:
Yes, it was conventional, but Bijns' self-effacement is ironic and teasing. It frames her work while subtly asserting her power.

Fleur:
Bijns was also mocked, but she defended herself fiercely in her texts. What does that tell you about women's positioning in language and the public sphere?

Joke:
It shows the importance of having and using your own voice, not overly worrying about others' opinions. It brings independence and satisfaction.

Fleur:
Would Bijns have been happy?

Herman:
We cannot know, but she was certainly very successful and continued her bold path despite challenges.

Fleur:
She was a successful author.

Herman:
Yes, her first collection (1528) was an immediate success, with many subsequent editions. She remained influential throughout her life, producing multiple collections, actively negotiating with patrons, and remaining engaged in Antwerp's literary and social life.

Fleur:
She challenged corruption, indifference, and religious disputes. Joke, your work with satire mirrors Bijns' use of language as a weapon against injustice?

Joke:
Yes, her language is sharp, daring, and satirical, criticizing marriage, men's behavior, and societal norms.

Fleur:
And her outrage shows in her poetry, including critiques of Luther and Van Rossem.
(Discussion of Bijns' religious and political positions, anti-Protestantism, and critiques of Martin Luther.)

Fleur:
We've seen that Anna Bijns took no prisoners and could do anything rhetoricians could do. She

was not alone—other women wrote in the early modern period, like Alijt Bake in the fifteenth century, and Katharina Boudewijns and Eleonora Carboniers in the sixteenth. To learn more, listen to bonus tracks specially made for this podcast, read by literary scholar Evi Dijks, available on our website.
Thank you, Joke, for your remarkable translations, and Herman, for sharing your knowledge. Thanks to all listeners.
In the next episode, we meet Anna Roemers, celebrated in her time like Bijns, a clever woman who wittily measured herself against men.