HISTORICAL CLASSICS TRANSCRIPT EPISODE 02 ANNA ROEMERS

We move on from the end of the sixteenth century to the first decades of the seventeenth century. The Republic is at war with Spain, Antwerp has been taken, but Amsterdam is bursting at the seams, for that is where it is happening: Amsterdam is becoming the epicentre of the Western world. In this episode I shall take you into the life and work of Anna Roemers. Rubens, her friend, called her the most famous Dutch star of all. She grew up in a gifted Amsterdam household; her parents received celebrated poets, merchants, and intellectuals. Thus Anna and her sisters Geertruyt and Tesselschade came into contact with literature at an early age. They were raised according to the humanist ideal of Erasmus: they learnt French, Italian, they engraved roemers—that is, glass vessels—could paint, sing, and weave artistic garlands of flowers. They could even swim.
Although it was unusual for women to publish a volume, they did become increasingly visible in literature by circulating their poems in small circles. So too Roemers, whose poetry, even as praise, appeared in men's volumes. She wrote for example:
Fortune does not depend upon the heedless judgement of the crowd.
Happy is he who deems himself to be happy.
Allow yourself to be carried along by the retranslations of Alfred Schaffer and the insights of Lieke van Deinsen, and discover the world of one of the wittiest female voices of the seventeenth century.

FLEUR SPEET
Welcome to Historical Classics. Beside me sits Alfred Schaffer, poet and lecturer at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa. Laureate of the P.C. Hooft Prize, the greatest literary prize imaginable, named after a friend of Anna Roemers, no less. The first link has therefore already been made. Welcome, Alfred.

ALFRED SCHAFFER
Thank you very much.

FLEUR
Also joining us is the Dutch scholar Lieke van Deinsen, member of the Young Academy and research professor at KU Leuven. She investigates how female authors presented themselves in the early modern period. Welcome as well, Lieke. Hi.

LIEKE VAN DEINSEN
Thank you very much.

FLEUR
Delighted that you are here. I shall first bring you up to date, for in the previous episode we spoke about Anna Bijns. Someone of humble origins who wrote as a rederijker: learned and popular at once. We now enter a transitional period from writers who together composed plays and refreinen to the individual author who began to write emblems and sonnets. Tentatively still, for in principle it is not particularly chic to publish one's poetry, and poems circulate among one another in letters. Meanwhile, authors increasingly look beyond borders, not only to other cities or provinces—which already feel like foreign parts—but also to

other countries. In the humanist tradition this often takes place through translatio, imitatio, emulatio, that is, translating, following, and surpassing. Lieke, did Roemers also begin in this way?

LIEKE
Yes, certainly. So the first known poem that we possess by Anna Roemers is a translation of an emblem book by a French woman writer who at that time had already passed away: the sixteenth-century woman writer Georgette de Montenay. And Anna, in a shrewd manner, manages to obtain a volume by this Georgette de Montenay and, alongside those printed poems, she makes her handwritten translations.

FLEUR
And could one call her a typical humanist child?

LIEKE
I believe so. She fits her time very well. She grew up here near the Geldersekade in Amsterdam, where she was born, in a wealthy merchant family. And she is educated at home in all the important languages for the Renaissance: Dutch, of course, but especially French and Italian.
In addition, she learns—as in fact every woman at that moment also does—to play music. She learns to engrave, she learns embroidery, she learns all manner of art forms that fit what we would call the Renaissance ideal of womanhood.

FLEUR
So Alfred, you first retranslated the poem by Georgette. Did that poem blow you straight out of your shoes?

ALFRED
No, it did not blow me out of my shoes. But what did strike me immediately was a certain lightness, which I always appreciate in poetry and in literature in general. Well, a sign of a sort of equality—of: I am now going to play with your texts, whether you approve or not. And I shall also put something of myself into them. So a certain free-spirited conception of practising literature. I do not know whether that precisely corresponds with emulatio or whether that poem is thereby engaged in surpassing your work, but it is certainly clear that I, she says or writes, am going to put something of myself into it. And that is of course, in translation as it is generally practised today, not really the intention, is it? You are truly faithful and in service to the text and those sorts of things. So I find it very pleasant that she therefore has a conception of translation that is not only based on: I must treat the text faithfully, but: I can also do something with it myself.

FLEUR
The amusing part is: you actually do that as well?

ALFRED
Yes, not in such a personal manner, but I do very consciously draw it towards the present day; that was at any rate the task I set myself. And interestingly enough, precisely because of that poem, I thought: well then, I can do so as well.

FLEUR
All right then, let us hear it.

ALFRED
To Georgette de Montenay
A little strange that I should write to you, Georgette,
if I may address you familiarly,
for you are, after all, no longer alive — maintenant n'existe pas.
Please forgive me for having translated your French

somewhat freely into Dutch.
I have not always faithfully followed what you relate —
brazen and obstinate, it is, so they say,
the nature of the undersigned, and yes,
sometimes I even hid something of myself in your tale.
Your book blew me completely out of my shoes.
Unbelievable, written by a woman, of all people.
What a force of nature you are!
We should certainly have been perfect friends.
That cannot yet be, but one day all is spirit.

FLEUR
Yes, splendid. Lieke, would you let us hear how the poem originally went?

LIEKE
To Mistress Georgette de Montenay
Georgette, ah forgive me
that I am so bold, so rash
as not in our German tongue
from word to word entirely
to have followed the French, nor your meaning
to have rendered quite precisely; but I cast therein
the judgement of my small understanding.
When I received your book in hand,
it pleased me so wondrously,
all the more because it was written by a maiden.
That seemed to me great indeed.
I wished for such a playfellow.
But if it cannot be so in the flesh,
my spirit will nevertheless fly to you.

FLEUR
It sounds quite different, does it not? It does not sound terribly old-fashioned, but in fact it is indeed, as you just said, Alfred: it has a lightness, something very open and accessible.

ALFRED
Yes, it is very playful. And now that I have heard it recited as well, I think precisely the same. This is really not so incredibly inaccessible.

LIEKE
That is what I also find so remarkable about Anna. She is rather down to earth; she masters—and I think we shall also see this in the other poems you have taken in hand—the rules of the game, but she bends them entirely to her own will. And that stubbornness, which in my view came across so beautifully in your retranslation, is also present in the manner in which she approaches poetry.

FLEUR
Did you therefore find it easy to retranslate?

ALFRED
Yes. That period is not my speciality, absolutely not. But also because of the context, of course, and the commentaries that meanwhile exist concerning those various texts, I found it astonishingly accessible to read and, consequently, to retranslate or adapt. I had anticipated a heavier burden, but it was manageable.

FLEUR
She herself, then, was blown off her feet by De Montenay.

LIEKE
Yes, she was a great admirer. That volume by Georgette de Montenay is a whole collection of emblems. These are images accompanied by poems. But this poem is in fact remarkable, for it is the poem written beside the female author portrait of George de Montenay. So you can imagine that Anna was in a sense looking straight into the eyes of her Georgette—her admired idol—when she wrote down these words, a poem of her own devising. And in that respect I find it very interesting, because it is hyper-personal. She truly forms a bond with a woman whom she could never have known in life, but in spirit and in ideas they are, according to Anna, equals.

FLEUR
Yes, beautiful. At the same time, I also think at once of the fact that we do not possess a portrait of Anna and therefore can never look into her eyes.

LIEKE
No. Well, we still hope, of course, that those portraits may surface, for it is actually very strange that they do not exist. We have only the nineteenth-century invention of the joint portrait of Anna and Maria Tesselschade, her sister, but we do not yet have a true likeness. I hope to find one before I retire.

FLEUR
Yes, let us simply search everywhere. And let this broadcast also be a kind of appeal to everyone to have a look in the attic to see what lies there. Is it in fact remarkable that a woman translates the work of a female emblem poet and then posthumously enters into such a friendship, or did that happen more often?

LIEKE
No, one does indeed see that more often. The whole idea that women seek female examples is very important. They create a kind of genealogy of successful predecessors. What I find very interesting is that Anna herself will soon occupy that role as well. Because many women after her are again inspired by her and likewise form a similar kind of intellectual bond.
So in that respect it is very interesting. But the effort that Anna must have made in order to obtain precisely that emblem book by Georgette—she writes a letter to Germany, to a professor there, to request the volume; she must and shall obtain it in order to make that translation—there is a drive in that which I greatly admire in Anna.

FLEUR
Yes, I understand that. Were there many female authors who wrote emblem books?

LIEKE
There are many more than we think, and there will be many more discovered. You have Margareta van Godewyk, Johanna Coomans. And that is, of course, only the Dutch tradition. One sees that those emblems truly flourish here, and it is also a genre that begins as a very elite genre among students, always in Latin. But you see, over the course of the seventeenth century, very quickly a vernacular variant emerging. And in the Roemers household this was also practised. Anna's father is the creator of one of the most delightful emblem books, I think, in Dutch literary history: Sinnepoppen, actually a Dutch translation of the much more difficult Italian-Latin word "emblem": a depiction of everyday life accompanied by wise sayings. A handbook for life, but in literary style. And that book appears in the 1610s. Her father dies at the end of 1620, and in 1622 Anna decides to bring a revised version of that emblem book of her father onto the market—perhaps inspired by that Georgette de Montenay: "I can do this as well"—she undertakes a complete revision of that immensely popular text of her father. And that is really a unique phenomenon in literary history and for that

reason is now also part of the literary canon as established every five years by the Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature in Ghent.

FLEUR
Yes, for she also adds a great deal to it. It is not only that she rearranges it or removes a few errors, but she adds lines as well, does she not?

LIEKE
Yes, she adds lines. Indeed, she particularly rewrites the poems that she sometimes considers somewhat misogynistic, or where she believes her father provides too little explanation. So that need not necessarily be on feminist grounds, but it may be for all sorts of reasons. She decides to write new commentaries, and she does so in rhyme. Thus she also shows that she has indeed mastered the literary language.

FLEUR
The name Jacob Cats has already been mentioned. He was important for Roemers, was he not, Lieke?

LIEKE
Certainly. Jacob Cats is, I think, important for every poet in the seventeenth century, but for Anna perhaps all the more so. They also had much contact. During her own lifetime no volume of poetry by Anna Roemers was published, but we do see her poems appearing everywhere, including in the work of Jacob Cats. He even includes a poem by her in his poetic debut, again an emblem book, which is also well known under the title Sinne- en Minnebeelden.

FLEUR
Yes, I have two reflections on this. One concerns the importance of men, and the other concerns the importance of social poetry. The first. We often think that men were essential for women to be able to make their way in literature. At least, that is often what is repeated: that the men ensured that the women could be published. But the reverse is also true. Had Marie de Gournay not copied out the essays of Michel de Montaigne and brought them to the publisher, we should never have been able to read his famous Essais. Moreover, women had a role as mediators. Johan Koppenol suspects that quite some contact between Jacob and Roemers took place via Jacob's wife. Does Koppenol's hypothesis also tell us something about the role of women in literary networks, Lieke? Can you see them as invisible links in cultural exchange?

LIEKE
I should always describe them as visible links, but it says a great deal about our idea of what literature is, and you were actually already speaking about the fact that it concerned the publication of work. And there is, in fact, a certain image of literature implied there, namely that you only count once your work has been published. And perhaps that already applies today as well. Although with the spoken-word tradition you of course have something of a counter-movement. But in the seventeenth century that was not the case at all. It was really only just emerging. We see that cautiously arising around 1600 with the first individual volumes of poetry.
But poets in the seventeenth century are far more creative, and someone like Anna most certainly so. We have just seen an example of translations in manuscript attached to a printed volume. That is already one form. And glassware upon which you could write your poem. You gave those as gifts, and at every banquet in a literary society those glasses would be placed upon the table and your poetry would be there. Those glasses are now still in the Rijksmuseum, at least a portion of them, so we can still actually view them. The fact that we still have so many of them means that there must have been very many indeed — and we have them especially from women. So in that sense I think that we must look in a different way at the question What is literature, and how did literature function in the seventeenth century? in order really to do justice to the position of women in that literary society.

FLEUR
We are going to conduct more research into that. Women, of course, also often sat at table where discussions were held; there were very long dinners, people sat at table for a very long time. Feasts lasted for days, so yes, people must talk about something, and then they speak, for instance, about poetry or “I am working on this or that — how do you think this sounds?” Women are seated at that table as well; they also say something. In that way they also exercised influence, at least that is what I think.

LIEKE
I am quite certain of it, but they are not merely sitting beside it. I think we must simply see them as a fixed component of that setting. The same applies when it concerns printing houses, for instance: there is always a man upon the label. So the printer is always the man. Christophe Plantin, Elsevier. There are very many women beside them who play a fundamental role in that business, but because in our historiography we have so strongly focused upon the front man, as it were, they come to stand in the shadows. But I do not think that this was perceived as such at the time. And if you then return to Anna and see how many of those famous seventeenth-century poets — if we speak of the Great Three: Hooft, Cats, Vondel — all of them had contact with Anna Roemers. She is a visitor at Rubens’ house. If you reconstruct, on the basis of Anna, where she must have been present within those networks, you cannot maintain that she was simply sitting at the table there by accident. She was an essential component.
She is everywhere, and involved in everything. Merely because her poems were not published as an independent publication until the nineteenth century does not mean that she was not already part of that entire network, and with that I also think simply one of the voices. And not a voice that was less important or that ought to remain in the shadow of a Cats or of a Vondel.

FLEUR
Yes, I had another thought about Cats, one that concerns social poetry; social poetry was of course important for both sexes. For men too it functioned as a kind of currency. But from Roemers we know relatively much social poetry. Well, we have already mentioned them all — also to Hugo Grotius and Huygens — and from her younger sister Tesselschade Roemers we scarcely have such poems of praise. And that strengthens the idea that Anna was an enormous social networker. But perhaps simply less social poetry by Tesselschade has been preserved, and she may have been just as industrious a networker. You cannot in fact really know that, but nevertheless we very often present Anna Roemers as the one who knew so many people.

LIEKE
This says something about what has been preserved. And of Anna we know that there are very many poems. Social poetry is perhaps also a term that requires a little clarification. But in that seventeenth century there is no email, there is no telephone, there is no— So how do you communicate with one another? You write one another letters. And how do you show that you devote attention and care to such a letter? By adding a poem to it. So communicating in poems is something that everyone does. You do not have to be an Alfred in order to write a poem. Everyone who is able to write, and who belongs to that higher elite — for that is of course what we are speaking about — writes poetry and communicates by means of it.

FLEUR
Anna did that too with Jacob Cats. Alfred, would you be willing to recite the poem?

ALFRED
To the most learned Jacob Cats, upon his book of emblematic conceits
If I, O Cats, the first should be
To honour you in this your book,
Then shall I be the first as well
To learn from it how many faults

I in my youthful greenness made—
Foolish they were, though never base.
I shall aspire to higher things,
Drive wanton love away
And in its stead invite
The venerable power of Reason in.
She shall, by her bright light, disperse
The mists of childish folly,
So that I may behold at last
Not empty show (at which
So many gaze in rapture),
But the true essence of all things.
Then hope nor fear shall trouble me,
Nor lust for riches, rank, or fame.
Is it not laughable indeed
That poor mankind should toil and sweat
For useless superfluity?
Is it not worthy to be wept
That many dare to hazard
Goods, and blood, and even soul
Merely to wear a servile crown?
This is Reason's foremost lesson;
And when I know it well,
She shall proceed to teach me
Who I truly am.
Good master, do your utmost:
Make me shun all vice,
And earnestly desire all virtue—
That I may mock both world and self
And set my heart and hope on God alone.

FLEUR
Lieke, I heard you laughing now and then. Would you like to do the original? For then we can see very clearly what has changed.

LIEKE
Yes, that is also something to laugh at, but differently:
To the most highly learned Dominus Jacob Cats upon the book of his artful Emblems of the Mind
Am I, O Cats, the first whom you honour with this book?
Then shall I be the first who from it shall be taught
to see the faults which I in my green years
have committed, foolish indeed, yet never wanton,
and to rise higher up, to drive away wanton love
and in its place to bring in the venerable Reason.
She shall by her radiance indeed cause to disappear
the mist of young foolish youth. Then shall I not have the mere appearance
of many things (at which the greater part of people
gape in amazement), but once behold the true being.
Then shall neither hope nor fear any longer disturb the mind.
Desire for riches, rank, nor ambition shall not torment me.
Is it not worthy of laughter that poor man toils so,
and grubs, and slaves, and sweats for useless abundance?

Is it not worthy of tears that many would even hazard
goods, blood, yes soul, in order to wear a servile crown?
This is Reason's first lesson, and if I know it well,
then shall she proceed and teach me who I am.
Master, do your utmost. Make — I beg you — me averse
from vice, and towards virtue wholly diligent and eager.
Cause that I mock both myself and all the world,
and henceforth set my heart and hope on God alone.

FLEUR
What do you find laughable in this? Lieke?

LIEKE
Well yes, truly laughable it is not, this poem, and that is why I found Alfred's re-rendering interesting, because that humorous quality of Anna — which perhaps at first sight is not present in this poem; it comes across as rather serious. That is also somewhat due to that last line, in which God is then brought in for a moment: that is seventeenth-century, religion sits in every fibre, but it is also a little dutiful.
But what she does here is really very interesting. She receives, then, a volume by Jacob Cats. A volume of poetry by a great man, and she proceeds to reflect upon it. She describes all sorts of things, yet utterly over the top. The exaggeration lies here: the young foolish youth, that shall indeed disappear. We see the rhetoric of repetition. Is it not ridiculous? Is it not something to weep over, worthy of tears? She plays here with exaggeration. And that is something which very strongly characterises Anna's poetry.
Seemingly it satisfies the entire frame of reference which those seventeenth-century people are awaiting. It feels a little dutiful, but if you read carefully, then you see that she administers pin-pricks. And with Jacob Cats that still remains a little cautious. This is also a poem that is included in that publication of the Emblems of the Mind and of Love. So probably Cats asked for what is called a threshold-poem, a poem that was added as a kind of promotion, a blurb, to such a publication. So she remains still a little — so it still remains somewhat polite. But she nevertheless shows you — just as we actually also saw in that poem to Georgette — that she dares to choose her own style.

FLEUR
Yes, remarkable, for in fact, Alfred, you do that too. You also choose your own style in that re-rendering, even by bringing in Mrs Dalloway. You really draw it very strongly into the present, and thereby also, I think, make the exaggeration very clear.

ALFRED
Yes, it is pleasant that Lieke mentioned that "over the top", for that struck me very strongly. I am also very, very curious whether Cats then recognised that. Or perhaps it passed entirely him by, that he did not see that clever irony at all. For you see in that text… I have written it down somewhat hyperbolically. But "nice to be freed from hope, desire, fear", something like that. I exaggerate that a little, but it is actually there, and then you know — yes, this is so ironic; the poor Cats will not have seen it.

FLEUR
Yes, and you made that earlier even stronger with "nice finally to be freed from hope, desire, fear". But then to go on to speak about "excessive sweet-eating", as though that were the most important thing.

ALFRED
Yes, and that drawing it into one's own time, that is what I see in many creative translations of often female writers. A great example for me is Anne Carson, Canadian poet and classicist. She does that very much. That has really been a guiding thread in my re-renderings. And if you see how she translates the Antigone, how she runs off with classical myths and deals with them indeed rather anachronistically, and thereby also brings the humour into those texts. But I always think that precisely thereby the contrast with the tragic is

strengthened, whereby it is not merely something to laugh at, but in fact becomes far more moving. That was somewhat my guiding principle, especially with this poem and a few other re-renderings: think of all that Anne Carson dares. Hence, for example, also that Miss Dalloway — draw it into the present. And yes, I cannot ask her, but I hope that Anna forgives me that reference.

LIEKE
What I also find so admirable in your re-rendering is that in that sense it is entirely in the spirit of Anna, if you think back to that Georgette de Montenay poem, where she enters into that genealogy, that connection with that woman from the sixteenth century. Well yes, you now place her in dialogue with the twentieth-century woman. That seems to me entirely Anna.

ALFRED
Beautiful.

FLEUR
How characteristic is this form of exaggeration or self-mockery for social poetry?

LIEKE
Certainly for women — if I may then make a small demarcation — then the whole idea of the modesty topos, that will be a word that will occur in many of the episodes — the presenting of oneself modestly is something that you see very often with women. You receive a compliment — we shall also see that shortly in a poem to Heinsius — and of course you wave it away. An honour is accorded her here. She receives the book as the first. Or at least, she presents it as such. That is already a little Anna, for it plays very much with expectations on the one hand, and then you wave it away, but then afterwards again go over the top about it. And this is actually the reason why I so love Anna, Anna's poetry — that play. Thus it is expected that, as a woman, you present yourself modestly, but what Anna does, in my view in a very shrewd and a very deliberate manner, through the hyperbolic, through the ironic, through just slightly twisting that language and just slightly seeking the exaggeration, also in the repetition of sounds, you see that she shows what she actually thinks of it.

FLEUR
That she dares to do it — but Alfred, you just said: "I am curious whether Cats also understood that." But…

LIEKE
I am certain that Cats understood this. He was a phenomenal poet — if anyone… And he also appreciated it. He did not ask Anna for nothing. This was indeed her reputation when he must have approached her around 1618 to write that threshold-poem.

FLEUR
Ambition is very quickly regarded as resentful in women. There are all sorts of judgements about it. And of Anna Roemers it is always thought that she was so wise and serious.

LIEKE
In my view she is quite undaunted. And I always find it difficult that Maria Tesselschade is always placed upon the pedestal as the — well yes, she probably was — the beautiful younger sister who, when she entered a room, then filled the space, and then there in that shadow, in that little corner, there still sat the elder sister, the serious Anna. And thus she has also often been depicted in the nineteenth century. But I think that if you once again return to that poetry and look at what she draws out of it and what she dares to do, then you surely cannot say that Anna is serious and dull?

FLEUR
Yes, that. But she was also in fact much more famous in her own time.

LIEKE
She was more famous in her own time, was of course also a little older, so she was more in the field of vision of those whom we have now come to call the great poets of the seventeenth century. Thus she appears in that context very often as a conversational partner in that social poetry, in the exchange, in the prefatory materials of the volumes of poetry by Cats, by Heinsius, in De Zeeusche Nachtegael. In that respect she is in that seventeenth century already much more visible in print. And that is of course also what we as literary historians have chiefly studied for a long time. There is now indeed some change coming in that.

FLEUR
Yes, exactly. Alfred, would you like to recite the poem Ha die Daan?

ALFRED
Most noble, well-learned and illustrious Lord Daniël Heins, or:
Hi there, Daan
How I loathe that backward swilling with which
clever people plunge themselves into total stupidity.
But look at me now, secretly begging for a little sip
of the stuff that makes poets tipsy, no sour wine
or French (which is the same thing), but lovely spring water
from Pegasus© for inspiration. Sparkling or still.
Waitresses, dear muses, influencers, three times three
goddesses of art and of learning,
pour me a drink, so that I may cleverly parry
the sly praise of myself and be ahead of the whining
of jealous types when I demonstrate how one writes poetry.
Apollo, “Heinsius” to friends, Chief Executive Officer
of the poets — I am not a genius and too modest
to shout my greatness from the rooftops, in any case.

FLEUR
A very abrupt ending as well. You are laughing again.

LIEKE
I always have so much fun with Anna.

FLEUR
I also have a great deal of fun with those re-renderings, with simply deviating so far and yet managing to strike the right tone. How? Do explain, Alfred — how do you do that? How do you find it?

ALFRED
By rereading a great deal, the original, and each time going just a little further. So yes, if I want to make it modern — how am I going to smuggle the Muse in here? In this time, does that sound anachronistic if you do that? And what do I do with Pegasus?

FLEUR
Yes, you add — one cannot hear it, but…

ALFRED
I add such a little sign after it — how do you call it — copyright. Yes. How do I bring the irony in? Already in the title. So I have gone searching for that. What are all the alternatives for “learned”? And then you arrive at such extravagant titles, and I place them all behind one another: Most noble, well-learned, illustrious, so

that it already has something of... And thus you build it up. So it needs a kind of alt-rewriting, and what was also important for me was to keep it still within the form — and you of course do not hear that — but to maintain the same number of lines, whereby you also retain a certain concision and do not go too far beyond the mark. But thus always with the idea — and that is a view, and it is pleasant, I think, that, insofar as I understand it, every re-renderer in this series does it again differently — but my assignment was really: go wild, eh? Do your best to deviate as far as possible, but preserve that irony and perhaps highlight it somewhat. Yes, and it is thus strange: through the poetess whose language I am adopting here, I myself was prompted to deviate from it. As I already said, I thought: if she does that — and look at the beauty that her work yields — yes, with the idea that perhaps young people will also read this, I thought, then it is nice to emphasise it somewhat, to accentuate it a little.

FLEUR
Hence also the influencers.

ALFRED
Of course, of course — how do you describe those muses, eh? Well: influencers.

LIEKE
What I find very interesting is perhaps that, in terms of content, in the choice of images, you indeed move towards the present, but it is not only the number of poetic lines that remains the same, but the entire form. This is a sonnet — that is the summit of the literary forms. If you wished to show that you could flex your literary muscles, then you wrote sonnets, in alexandrines. That fits completely. That fits Anna. That fits you. So in that sense you do remain — you also remain very close in showing that Anna too could be a virtuoso of form, when she wished. And that I find tremendously delightful. That is why I am very glad that we have highlighted this poem.

FLEUR
Yes, would you like to recite it?

LIEKE
Yes — the title is a little disappointing after this onslaught from Alfred.
To Daniël Heins
(literal translation of the 17th-century Dutch)
With revulsion, indeed to the highest degree, I have despised that
which robs the gifted human being of all reason:
dull drunkenness. Yet behold, I now beg, with wheedling knocks,
for a small portion, and of that which they greedily swallow,
a tiny drop on the sly; of that (I mean) of those who are
drunkards too, not of French or thin Rhenish wine,
but of the fountain of Pegasus. O thrice three goddesses,
distributors of that drink, grant me grace,
so that I may contradict this praise, which I do not deserve at all,
and thereby flee from Envy,
who always growls at honour and wilfully refuses to know
that this is the custom of witty poets.
For you, Apollo, do not even imprint upon your thoughts
that I presumptuously deem myself worthy of the same.

FLEUR
Perhaps the listener now has the impression that Alfred has deviated enormously.

ALFRED
As regards form, I also found it a challenge, because I myself am not really a poet who writes in fixed forms, to maintain that nevertheless, because it is immediately noticeable. That applies, of course, to the majority of the poetry from the centuries we are talking about here, that it is bound to form. So then it is a challenge for a poet who is not form-bound to adhere to it. I did not find that easy at home, but what helps is, when rereading, to reread it aloud, so that — oh, this no longer works rhythmically — and then you again obtain other words and ideas in order to perfect the rhythm without padding it out. For that is another matter as well. You do not want padding; it must remain compact and concentrated. So it really was, it is a totally different way of working than the way I normally have, at any rate. And thereby also in a certain sense not my poetry. Although I am present in it, it was a highly challenging project to set to work in that manner with a kindred spirit.

LIEKE
I think that here you have expressed exactly what the aim was in the seventeenth century with that poetry bound to form. You must show that, within the limits that are set for you, you know how to pour the virtuosity of your language, without it appearing artificial. The sentences must flow; it must sound sonorous. There must be alliterations in it; there must be assonances in it. In that respect, we had to show that that clumsy, low Dutch language lent itself to imitating that grand Italian form. And in that respect it is very pleasing that this poem stands in the Nederduitse Poemata, for that is a volume of poetry that Heinsius composes. Heinsius, lecturer in the classics in Leiden. He does something very strange. Whereas all his contemporaries write in Latin, he decides to write a volume full of sonnets, all in Dutch. What he shows is what is possible here in the Dutch language, and Anna forms part of that, and I find that — in that respect — this is, from a literary-historical point of view, a very important volume, and also very important that Anna appears in it.

FLEUR
For it actually marks a new development in literature.

LIEKE
It is, at any rate, a milestone. Heinsius publishes his Poemata — it is moreover a Latin title, so indeed “Low Dutch”, but Poemata: the tension already lies therein. And that adherence to form constitutes part of it. And above all showing that Dutch is capable of this. And Anna can play with that Dutch.

FLEUR
If we go looking, we find many more women who mastered Latin. The Ghent-born Johanna Othonia, for example, who already in 1616 brought out two volumes of poetry in Latin, long before Anna Maria van Schuurman’s Dissertatio went to press. If anyone was truly the embodiment of learning, then it was she, Van Schuurman. She mastered fourteen languages, was a gifted artist, and corresponded with scholars throughout the whole of Europe. Roemers already foresaw that at an early stage. Alfred, we are reading very many poems this time, but this is again such a brilliant one. Would you like to recite it?
(Alfred’s English poem already stands in English and is therefore not translated.)

FLEUR
Again such a beautiful ending, yes. How much older was she than Anna Maria van Schuurman — fifteen years older, or so?

LIEKE
She must have been a young teenager when Anna Roemers — all those Annas are of course rather complicated — heard of that phenomenon that was unfolding in Utrecht, this young Anna Maria van Schuurman, who so quickly and early appeared on the radar of virtually the entire literary elite.

FLEUR
She too was someone who very much wished to show that, to bring it out into the open.

LIEKE
Anna Maria van Schuurman? Certainly. Yes. If there is any woman of whom we possess many publications from the seventeenth century, then it is Anna Maria van Schuurman — at least until she made a religious about-turn and ended up in a kind of religious sect in the 1660s. But she very much wished to display herself. We were just speaking about those portraits, for instance, of women, and the fact that for many women they are lacking — as with Anna and Maria Tesselschade. But of Van Schuurman we have very many portraits. In 1633 she already makes her first engraved self-portrait. She truly wished to be in the picture.

FLEUR
Yes. She also says, take care that you are not only dazzling on the outside. It is not only about looks, but about your brain. Well, that, of course, was certainly evident in her case as well.

ALFRED
It is a strongly feminist poem. That struck me immediately. In which it really concerns sisterhood. So it is also not a patronising poem, as one might expect, simply due to the age difference. But immediately it is noticeable that Anna sets herself on an equal footing, and almost as a sister, like a friend, saying: do your best, think about this and that, work on yourself, work on your knowledge. And I found that to resonate very strongly throughout from the very beginning. And, of course, it is a story that I also tell my students — when did the first woman actually study in the Netherlands? — but I did not know that it was this one, and I did not know this poem either, so it was very nice for me to get to know it. And also something that I, naturally, will try to incorporate into my lectures in the future, in the original as well. For I was unfamiliar with it, to my shame.

LIEKE
Well, there are still so many hidden corners of literary history to be discovered in that respect.

FLEUR
And especially when it comes to female authors. You just said that this work exists because it is bound to form, which does not at all fit with your usual poetic practice. But do you think it inspired you in any way?

ALFRED
Well, that is a good question. It is difficult to say how that will shape your poetry, of course, but I do notice with many reading moments that were important, or with which you engage intensively, the work of other writers, that they ultimately leave their traces. One cannot yet say how that will work, but it has been shown that, for example, Anne Carson has had quite an influence on the work of the past ten, fifteen years. So who knows. And this has indeed been poetry — though now ten or eleven poems, in total not many — but ones with which you have worked very intensively. Precisely because you do not translate but re-translate, you read differently, perhaps more sharply. You have to research and consult much more, because in my case much knowledge is missing, unlike for Lieke. So a whole world opens up to you, and thereby also a whole world of writing and style. So who knows, maybe in ten years I will come with all sorts of emblemata and sonnets. Who knows. And this was the starting point.

FLEUR
That sounds very good. Thank you, Alfred, for the beautiful recitation and also for re-translating the poems for this project. And Lieke, thank you as well for sharing all your knowledge and passion, and I think we could make ten more episodes about this.

LIEKE
Sounds fun to me!

FLEUR
In this podcast, we saw how Anna Roemers could be refined and witty in simple language, thereby gaining fame in the 1620s of the seventeenth century. But she did not stand alone. She was part of a tradition, growing in that period, of women who made their voices heard through literature, such as Gesina Brit, Johanna Coomans, or Margareta van Godewyck. If you wish to hear more about them, listen to the bonus tracks made especially for this podcast. Written and read by literary scholar Evi Dijks, and available on our website.
The next episode will focus on Tesselschade Roemers, Anna's younger sister. She reached the greatest heights conceivable: in her own time known and loved in a small circle, later surrounded by all kinds of myths. Who was she really? You will hear that next time. Thank you for listening.