TRANSCRIPT
HISTORICAL CLASSICS
EPISODE 03 – MUIDERSLOT: TESSELSCHADE ROEMERS

We remain in the Amsterdam of the first half of the seventeenth century, yet we also journey to Muiden, to Muiderslot Castle, where this episode was recorded. Here we encounter Roemers, ten years the junior of her sister Anna Roemers, whom we came to know in the previous episode.

Roemers was a keen-witted and well-read poet, of whom only thirty-four poems have survived. They were often written in response to friends with whom she corresponded. She wrote of love, of grief, and of the final path that every human being must take. I shall be frank: her work is not always easy to follow. It aligns with Baroque mannerism, a style marked by abundant wordplay and rhetorical ornament, and by subtle, often ironic, allusions to other literary works. Thus she wrote:

How fiercely I languish,
whether through truth or semblance,
seeking with cold discourse to smother
that which burns so ardently within my heart.

Here the lover seeks, through sober reason, to restrain a heart aflame.

Roemers was also musically gifted. Leonora Duarte, the Antwerp niece of her closest friend, composed in the mid-seventeenth century the musical theme that accompanies this podcast.

By now her given name alone suffices, yet Roemers has seldom been acknowledged for the substance of her work. Allow yourself, therefore, to be guided by the modern reworkings of Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer and the scholarship of Van Marion, and discover one of the most remarkable poets of the seventeenth century: Roemers, who also helped shape the myth of the Muider Circle —the writers who gathered at Pieter Hooft's Muiderslot. With the arrival of Roemers, he would invariably entice his friends to the castle. As I now entice you.

Welcome to *Historical Classics*. In this episode we find ourselves in a most exceptional location: Muiderslot Castle. From 1633 onwards, Maria Tesselschade Roemersdochter Visscher spent many summers here as the guest of the drost, her closest friend. We climbed the narrow staircases to his study and are now seated in the attic. Outside, one hears the gulls over the Zuiderzee and sees the orchards where Roemers once gathered apples. Beside me sits writer, poet, classicist, and on this occasion adaptor: Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer. Welcome, Ilja.

ILJA LEONARD PFEIJFFER
Thank you.

FLEUR SPEET
And on the other side of the Persian table rug sits Van Marion, literary historian at Leiden University and editor of Roemers's poetry. Van Marion, it is a pleasure to have you here.

OLGA VAN MARION
Thank you.

FLEUR
What a place this is. Do you feel the history here?

VAN MARION
Very much so. I even find it somewhat unsettling up here in the attic.

FLEUR
Tell us more.

VAN MARION
It feels almost as though the place is haunted. That recalls the occasion when Constantijn Huygens stayed here and heard the Ghost of Muiden—the voice of the murderer of Count Floris V—calling out, moaning, shrieking outside, so that he could not sleep.
Well, he did sleep; it was a nightmare. He later wrote a fine poem about it, addressed to Roemers: *The Ghost at Muiden*. And it almost seems to me now as though I, too, hear the ghost faintly.

FLEUR
As if it still lingers here. We often call Roemers "Tesselschade" or simply "Tessel," because it sounds so familiarly intimate. Yet when we speak of men, we usually refer to them by their surnames. What if we were to reverse that practice? In this episode we shall refer to the women by their surnames, and the men by their given names. But Van Marion, could you first explain the origin of that given name?

ILJA
Then you should call her Van Marion.

FLEUR
Quite right—you are absolutely correct: Van Marion.

VAN MARION
It is a well-known story. When Roemers was born, her parents had just suffered a dreadful shipwreck. One of the vessels they owned—they were merchants—was lost off the coast of Texel. The damage sustained near Texel gave rise to her second name, after Maria: Tesselschade.

FLEUR
Precisely—to remind him that something far more important than financial loss had occurred: the birth of a daughter.

VAN MARION
Her first name, of course, remained Maria.

FLEUR
But did she herself use the name Tesselscha or Tesselschade?

VAN MARION
Many of her poems are signed “Tesselschade,” and many of her letters as “Tesselschade Roemers.” Other poems are signed, as was customary, with her motto: *Elck zijn waarom*—“To each his own reason.”

FLEUR
There is another matter we should perhaps dispense with: the myth of the Muider Circle. Ilja, are you familiar with that myth?

ILJA
Certainly. I grew up with it, and it is a myth I have no wish to abandon. I am quite content to preserve it. It is a romantic image: a circle of poets, scholars, and culturally engaged members of the seventeenth-century elite, gathering here at the castle.

FLEUR
Yes—though not always the names that are usually cited, and certainly not in such large numbers. More often they gathered in groups of three or four. Still, let us preserve the myth; it is a pleasing notion. But let us turn to the work itself. For when Roemers is discussed, it is almost always as the charming friend; her poetry receives comparatively little attention.
Van Marion, you know this work as no one else. In 1994 you edited her poems—thirty-four in total—together with Agnes Sneller, most of them undated and unsigned. Roemers was ten years younger than her sister Anna, whom we discussed in the previous episode. She lived from 1594 to 1649. Is there a poem or a theme that you would consider truly characteristic of her?

VAN MARION
What delights me most in her work is play—linguistic play. The sheer pleasure radiates from it. Her poetic play with the works of those around her is remarkable. Roemers responds brilliantly to the poems of others, giving them her own twist, her own inflection, and presenting this with great wit and skill. What is typical, then, is variation and imitation—emulation—taking up what circulates within a circle of friends and giving it a distinctive and elegant turn.

FLEUR
So, her idiosyncrasy after all.

VAN MARION
Certainly. But that was also what one expected of a good and learned poet.

FLEUR
And she grew up, of course, among learned poets in her parents’ household.

VAN MARION
Poets frequented their home. She must have received an excellent education—multilingualism alone attests to that. And I believe she could readily measure herself against the poets around her.

FLEUR
To what extent would you say her poetry differs from that of her sister? They both composed a *Schoncken* sonnet sequence, in which each poet wrote a poem on the word *schoncken*.

VAN MARION
From Anna Roemers we know a splendid metrical psalm—sadly, none by Roemers. To discover such a psalm by her would be the greatest find of my life. Anna Roemers devoted herself far more explicitly to the religious domain.

FLEUR
Although Roemers did write two poems on Mary Magdalene.

VAN MARION
Everything is religious in the seventeenth century. Yet in Roemers's work there is a lighter wit, a more playful literary spirit, more so than in her sister's poetry.

FLEUR
Ilja, you were eager to adapt her work, and when I asked you, you agreed almost immediately. Why was that?

ILJA
I knew the sisters' work only superficially—far too superficially—but what I did know fascinated me greatly. It was therefore a wonderful opportunity to immerse myself more deeply. And it proved a beautiful commission, especially because it was so difficult—and I relish difficult things. It is extraordinarily refined poetry. As Van Marion has just said, it is densely packed with subtle, ingenious linguistic play, and therefore highly compressed. One cannot grasp it fully at a single reading; it demands careful study. To render it into modern Dutch—my thankless task—makes it exceedingly difficult to preserve all these elements. That was not entirely possible; some sacrifices were inevitable.

FLEUR
What, to your mind, makes her work so distinctive, so characteristically Roemers?

ILJA
I would again point first to what Van Marion mentioned: the language play. An attention to poetry at the level of the square centimetre, so to speak—the minutiae that shape the verse, more than the ideas themselves. The ideas are often conventional; she frequently imitates existing poems. But the variation and brilliance reside in the details: subtle phrasing, rhetorical manoeuvres. I find that deeply fascinating. One might almost call it a form of mannerism—without intending the term pejoratively, of course.

FLEUR
Yes. Could you explain for the listener: what is mannerism?

ILJA
Well, I must admit I did not devise a watertight definition before travelling to Muiden—haha.

FLEUR
Olga?

OLGA
It involves extensive use of contrasts, of sound-play, and of concetto—that is, of paradox. One seeks oppositions within half a line, within a full line, or across the entire poem, and then stages

those oppositions with great elegance, or lets them collide. Especially oppositions that are, strictly speaking, impossible. Yes—she finds that utterly delightful.

FLEUR
I immediately think of the ponderous body as well. There are alliterations there too.

OLGA
Indeed—there is a great deal of sound repetition.

FLEUR
Well then, let us listen to a love poem, for this is where all of that comes into play as well. A female lover addresses Cupid. T'amo Mia vita. Ilja, would you read your version?

ILJA

"I love you, my beloved." Thus my dear love spoke,
with lips upon my lips, which like a joyful thief
tasted those sweet words she so freely offered,
yet in confused delight could not return that sweetness.
O Cupid, mark these words, you little tyrant,
great ravager of bosoms, small tormentor of hearts.
I beg you, bury them so deep within my feeling
that they bestow upon my fragile soul
the gift of passion. Grant that then my body
obey the commands of this desire in every limb,
so that I too may say: "My love, I love you,"
and wish that I might speak those words forever.

FLEUR
Thank you, Ilja. Olga, would you recite the original?

OLGA
With great pleasure.

Myn Lief ik min uw. Dus mijn lieve leve seyde,
Mit dat mijn lippen van haer lieve lippe scheyde.
Geen meerder soetigheyd ter voren inne quam:
Dan als sy my dat gaf, het geen ick haer ontnam.
Onthout die toontjes ey! ick bid uw Cupidootje
Gy kleyne Sielen-vooght, gy machtigh wonder Goodtje!
En steltse in mijn borst op sulken even maet,
Dat daer op pols, en mild, hert, longh, en lever slaet.
Gebied, hier door, mijn Siel aen 't Lichaem 't sijn te geven,
En stadigh dat te voen met sulk een lieve leven;
En seggen dan: mijn lief ik min uw, liefste mijn:
Gy sult altoos, ô lief, mijn lieve leven sijn!

FLEUR
Hartenwringer instead of machtigh wonder Goodtje. "Great ravager of bosoms" instead of "little guardian of souls." Ilja, how did that translation come about? Where did you begin?

ILJA
This one was particularly difficult. You see, the point of departure is actually a very simple sentence: Ik hou van je, mijn lief—"I love you, my beloved." But that phrase functions very differently in seventeenth-century Dutch. If you want a neutral, everyday equivalent in modern Dutch, you end up with Ik hou van jou, mijn lief—and immediately the rhythm changes and your rhyme is gone. So you have to rebuild everything from scratch. You cannot follow the original line by line. In some poems you can more or less preserve the original rhymes, but here that was impossible.
And then there is Cupidootje. That is so charming: he is portrayed as simultaneously very small and immensely powerful—which, of course, Cupid is. One of those paradoxes again. But I could not place Cupidootje in the rhyme position, so I had to solve it differently. And before you know it, you have spent hours on a single poem. Very enjoyable, though.

FLEUR
It is a kind of puzzle—puzzling with language. But then again, is that not what writing poetry always is?

ILJA
Yes, it is.

FLEUR
Olga, what strikes you about this adaptation?

OLGA
That the paradoxes are preserved. I find that wonderful. "Mini-tyrant," "great ravager of bosoms," "small tormentor of hearts"—that is really splendid. And most importantly, what is retained is the way Roemers reshapes tradition to her own ends. She is responding to earlier poems—T'amo vita by Guardini, for instance. In his poem, the ideal is that the beloved repeats those words again and again. Then Pieter Hooft varies on this, turning it into a dream that collapses: in his sonnet, the words the speaker thought he heard were not true at all—it was only a dream.
Roemers goes one step further. First, she points out that one cannot speak while lips are still pressed together. You must kiss first, and only then part your lips. And then—and this is essential—the speaker wants to answer in return. That is the heart of this beautiful poem: the speaker has heard those wonderful words, "my love, I love you," but cannot yet say them herself. She needs Cupid to give her the power to speak. That helplessness one can feel within a love relationship is captured here—and it is beautifully preserved in the adaptation. I value that enormously.

FLEUR
What I also find amusing is that this has now become a kind of relay: from Guardini to Pieter, to Roemers, to Ilja. A baton passed from hand to hand. Roemers herself translated quite a lot—possibly together with Joost—Seneca's Troades, certainly Tasso's Gerusalemme Liberata, and Marino's Adone. Ilja, do you see that erudition reflected in her poetry, beyond something obvious like a motto?

ILJA
Yes—one sees it in virtually every line. Even where there are no direct quotations, every word betrays a profound knowledge of poetry in general and of the classical tradition in particular.

FLEUR
How do you notice that?

ILJA
It is highly self-conscious poetry. Poetry that knows exactly what it is doing.

FLEUR
And that is characteristic of the classics?

ILJA
Yes. It is not poetry that tries, in a forced way, to be original, or that assumes a poem succeeds merely by finding an individual wording for an individual emotion. Rather, it works as poets before her and alongside her did: taking themes that may not be especially original and articulating them just slightly differently. But to do that, you need an acute awareness of the tradition.

FLEUR
To deviate, you must first know what you are deviating from. Personally, I find her work terribly intricate and often hard to grasp. I have to read each poem several times, and even then some words remain opaque because I lack the context. How did you deal with that?

ILJA
You really have to study it. And when you begin adapting it, your first instinct is to simplify, to explain. The line of thought is often complex, and the formulation even more so. You try to make it clearer in a contemporary version—but you must restrain that impulse. You can only go so far. In fact, you should probably do it as little as possible, because the complexity was part of the original reader's experience as well. So you have to try to preserve something of that complexity in the modern version.

FLEUR
I suddenly recall that you once expressed opposition to adapting old poetry at all. Is that right?

ILJA
Oh yes, I am very much against it. Indeed. I have done something I do not actually want to do.

FLEUR
Tell us—why then did you do it anyway?

ILJA
Well, I have essentially confirmed my own point: one should not do it, because my versions inevitably remain inferior to the original. So why not simply read the original? Still, I can console myself with the fact that the original stands beside it. We have just heard it from Olga's own mouth. There are now two versions of the same poem.
Language is music. Immense thought has gone into it—especially in poetry, and especially in the poetry of Tesselschade Roemers. Every syllable has been considered: the music of each syllable, the alliterations, the assonances. One should not meddle with that too much.

FLEUR
But you mention melody—and Mia Vita is also the title of a song, a madrigal.

OLGA
You mean that it became the name of a melody? Do you think this poem could have been sung? We have assumed that only one contrafact by Tesselschade Roemers is known: Hoe krachtig ik verpijn.

FLEUR
What are contrafacts?

OLGA
Contrafacts are new texts written to existing melodies. Folk poets did this; psalm writers did it. Anyone with some poetic skill would compose a new text to a familiar tune—much as we still do at celebrations. It is an age-old Dutch tradition, one we excelled in. But it is often associated with poets who were not formally learned.
In the circles we are discussing here, in this attic of the Muiderslot, one would instead collaborate with a composer who set your poem to music—something we know she did. We believe she composed only one contrafact, Hoe krachtig ik verpijn, to the melody L'Orangier. Otherwise, she worked with composers such as Joan Ban, with whom she shared the ideal of expressing words and emotions together—she through language, he through music. In that sense, she and her friends considered themselves somewhat above contrafact-writing.

FLEUR
Downstairs, in 1636, Roemers' daughter Maria Tesselschade—named after her mother—and Pieter's daughter Constantia sang a duet here. One was thirteen, the other eight. It must have sounded magnificent: we have wandered through the Muiderslot and heard how the acoustics carry. Roemers herself was here in the summer of 1638 with Caspar. In one of his letters, Caspar calls her his pupil. They sat together in the summer garden, working on poems for a visit by the French queen—perhaps on the very spot where Roemers' statue now stands, made by Gerarda Reuter in 1971.
Apparently, she learned Latin from Caspar at that time. The idea that women received no education does not quite hold: according to Herman Pleij, they did attend the Latin school, though their names were not recorded. And even without formal schooling, women learned from fathers or brothers, through self-study, or—like Tesselschade Roemers—through friends. Besides, let us not pretend one can only write poetry after attending Latin school. In 2025, researcher Pieta van Beek discovered two Latin poems by Roemers, despite the long-held belief that her command of Latin was insufficient.
Ilja, as a classicist: must one have studied at a Latin school in order to compose Latin poetry?

ILJA
It is not easy to write poetry in Latin. One must study a great deal. Latin verse operates very differently—the metrics are quantitative, not syllabic. All of that must be learned. And one must immerse oneself completely in existing Latin poetry; otherwise, one gets nowhere. Yes—you must study very hard indeed.

FLEUR
She even wrote in a letter that she could not read the Latin of Barlaeus. Was that irony, Olga?

OLGA
It may well be the familiar topos of modesty. Women employed it very readily in the seventeenth century. One makes oneself small; one withdraws a little. It was considered refined, even civilised, to say that one was not particularly good at something. That could very well be the case here. Most female authors say: I am not capable of this at all.

FLEUR
Indeed, this is a modesty topos that we encounter throughout the entire series. Virtually all female authors from the early modern period employ it—often with a distinctly ironic undertone.

OLGA
And irony, I think, is one of the most difficult rhetorical figures to detect.

ILJA
But it may also genuinely reflect the nature of his work. Caspar Barlaeus was an extraordinarily learned man, and it could equally be a very elegant way of emphasising that fact. “I understand nothing of his Latin” may also mean: of course I can read Latin, but what he writes is so profound that I cannot fully grasp it.

FLEUR
Yes. What is often forgotten is that women also brought their own lived experiences into their poetry, as Roemers did. All three of her daughters died during her lifetime, and it is sometimes suggested that people in the seventeenth century were less attached to their children because of the high rate of infant mortality. Is that true, Olga?

OLGA
Oh, I do not believe that for a moment. We have compiled an entire anthology of mourning poetry, and the tears run down your cheeks when you read it. I simply do not believe that people felt less grief. What is true is that there was far more grief in the seventeenth century than there is now. Many children died—estimates run as high as fifty percent. Many young women died in childbirth. Men succumbed to the most dreadful diseases. There was constant burial, and consequently a great deal of mourning poetry. And that poetry is heartbreaking.
Paintings, too, bear witness to heartrending scenes: families portrayed with their dead children depicted as little angels still hovering above them. Death was always present. These portraits remained in the home. One museum owns a painting showing several children from a single family, all deceased as swaddled infants. There was more death within families—and therefore even more grief than we know today.

FLEUR
Yes, there was a great deal of suffering, including in the life of Tesselschade Roemers herself. She also lost the sight in one eye. I have the sense that Roemers mastered the art of sprezzatura like no other—that elegant nonchalance in which everything appears effortless, an ironic, stoic mask turned toward the outside world. What do you think, Ilja?

ILJA
Yes.

FLEUR
Could that also have functioned as a form of self-protection?

ILJA
I would actually say that her strong poetic self-consciousness is the very opposite of sprezzatura.

FLEUR
Oh?

ILJA
It is not a feigned nonchalance; quite the contrary. It is highly constructed—deliberately so. And Stoic philosophy is, by definition, a mechanism of self-defence. It already was so in the third century BCE, when it was conceived. It is a way of armouring oneself against the uncertainty of earthly existence. In the seventeenth century it became almost a kind of civic philosophy, particularly here in the Northern Netherlands, not least because Stoicism aligned so well with Calvinism. And when it comes to mourning poetry, this comes immediately to the fore. The Stoic response is the most obvious response to grief in the seventeenth century.

FLEUR
Would you read the consolatory poem that Roemers wrote in 1637, when Constantijn lost his wife Susanna?

ILJA

For Constantijn Huygens
On the death of his wife Sterre
Sent to P.C. Hooft

This beacon of grief in a sea of sorrow,
whose trunk and branches have been cut away
yet must go on living, offers this message
of helpless consolation to a heart bereft, abandoned, inconsolable.
Tell Huygens that he must trust in his poetry.
When he translates his grief into verse,
he gazes upon his Sterre's radiant face.
He who commits his sorrow to the page
need not suppress his grief.
With this paper weapon I myself once won
the battle against the impious wish to die before my time.
I conquered my sorrow through poetry.
Let him recall his own lesson about pain,
for he himself says that grief, once measured, cannot rage as fiercely.
Tell him to lighten sorrow by the metre of verse.

FLEUR
Did this poem move you?

ILJA
Yes, I find it a beautiful poem. It moves me in a particular way, though I find it hard to articulate exactly why. Perhaps because it is an indirect message: the poetess, who herself knows grief all too well, offers consolation to Constantijn Huygens, who has just lost his wife Sterre—but she does so via P.C. Hooft. Hooft must pass the message on to Huygens. I find that extremely refined.

FLEUR
It mirrors something as well, now that I think of it—the poem Constantijn Huygens sent via Pieter Hooft to Tesselschade Roemers when her husband died. It is exactly the same—

ILJA
So it was a kind of post office here. A sorting office—(laughs)

FLEUR
Indeed. Many letters travelled that way: “send this to him,” “pass that on to her.” That was fairly common, I think. And Olga, you mentioned John Donne.

OLGA
It is once again a game. A very sorrowful subject, but still a game. John Donne articulates this in The Triple Fool, which Constantijn Huygens translated. And then she says, in effect: this is your translation—now live according to your own translation. Is that not marvellous? This is precisely what she excels at: a deeply sensitive, learned awareness of everything that is happening literarily around her, and then composing a pointed variation upon it.

ILJA
It is elegant in every respect.

FLEUR & OLGA
Yes.

OLGA
Would you like to hear the seventeenth-century original?

FLEUR
Very much so, Olga.

OLGA
We will then hear Constantijn Huygens’s translation of John Donne: “For grief brought into measure cannot be so fierce.” That is his opening line. We also hear wordplay involving the copyist of the poem, a beacon at sea. And there is more: baerelijke rouw—raw, unbridled grief—but baren are also waves, whether in a lake or at sea. And Sterre’s name was Susanna van Baerle, so the poem is saturated with such imagery.

(original seventeenth-century text recited)

FLEUR
“This weak…” What does she mean by “this weak”?

OLGA
“This weak assistance” is a metaphor for her own poetry, her own gesture of consolation. It necessarily falls short. Such immense grief cannot truly be relieved, but it offers a small measure of comfort—a weak assistance.

FLEUR
Yes—beautiful. After being widowed, she did not remarry. Men then pressed for her hand, and she became truly famous: her sister in her twenties, she herself in her forties. That is the image carved in stone—Roemers and her admirers. Either a woman is elevated as a muse on a pedestal, or she is ignored, like so many other women writing poetry at the time. In a sense, Roemers also eclipses others. What do you think of that idea, Olga?

OLGA
Eclipses? That places the blame on Roemers—and I would never do that. I think we constructed a canon of seventeenth-century poetry that was far too heavily dominated by male-authored verse.

I would rather place the blame on the nineteenth century—on nineteenth-century nationalism. In the twentieth century there was greater appreciation for Roemers's poetry, and also for that of other women. The first collections of women's poetry appeared then. So let us not blame her, but later historiographers. And let us, as you are doing, approach this afresh and acknowledge that perhaps as much as half of seventeenth-century poetry was written by women. It has simply been transmitted imperfectly. You must search in convents and manuscripts, as we did, because women's poetry was less readily sent to the printer. There was a certain reticence—among male authors too—about publicly displaying one's poetry. Women did so even less.

FLEUR
In the nineteenth century, Roemers was also praised for her sincere faith and elevated into a Catholic ideal. It was written that a world of men lay at her feet. One biographer even locked his door in order to whisper sweet words to a drawing he believed depicted her. Ilja, how do you view this idolatry? What does such veneration say to you?

ILJA
Well, I recognise it. I too have whispered sweet words to Tesselschade Roemers—certainly.

FLEUR
To which painting? Or which drawing? For we have none.

ILJA
No—to the poems, to the poems. (laughs)

FLEUR
Yes—only to the poems. That biographer, by contrast, really did whisper to a drawing by Goltzius that he believed portrayed her. We do know the name of a painter who painted her, but the painting itself has not survived.

OLGA
Perhaps it will resurface at an auction.

FLEUR
Yes—perhaps one day someone dismantles a cupboard and discovers it built into the wood. They often painted on wooden panels in those days.

ILJA
Such things do happen. A new Caravaggio was found in an attic not long ago.

FLEUR
Well—we are in an attic now. Perhaps we should search more carefully.

ILJA
Let us search.

OLGA
We will search in a moment.

FLEUR
Let us do so. One thing that greatly troubled Caspar was that she spoke so often about faith.

Around 1640 or ’41 she converted to Catholicism, and her friends protested vehemently: “But we are Protestants!”—especially since, in the Republic, one was expected to be Protestant.

OLGA
Half the population was Catholic.

FLEUR
True—and in Alkmaar, where she lived, even more: about sixty percent.

OLGA
Amsterdam was overwhelmingly Catholic. Haarlem as well.

FLEUR
Then let us address why Constantijn, Pieter, and Caspar reacted so fiercely. Caspar even travelled to Alkmaar for two weeks to persuade her.

OLGA
I cannot look into their souls, but it is a misconception that the Dutch Republic was Protestant. Many people remained Catholic, and around 1640 many returned to Roman Catholicism. There were also forms of Catholicism with a distinctively Dutch character, less dependent on the Pope. A great deal was happening religiously. There were many churches and many currents. I truly think the men around Roemers should have held their tongues and shown greater tolerance. That is something I fault them for in retrospect.

ILJA
There is also that poem about it—one of those I translated: That Barlaeus’s pen should dare to treat me so…

FLEUR
Shall I briefly explain? Pieter was ill with quartan fever. Then a campaign arose that Tesselschade Roemers believed was directed against her. It had seemed settled, but was revived after she wrote a kindly letter to Caspar about faith, asking a question. Constantijn then wrote a ferocious poem accusing her of being a whore’s child, and she responded with a counter-poem, accompanied by a consolatory letter to Pieter.

ILJA
Shall I read it?

To P.C. Hooft
On his sickbed, concerning the accusations against me
by Barlaeus and Huygens

That Barlaeus should dare to bandy me about with his pen
and write idle chatter, which Huygens then endorses,
is perhaps intended to amuse you,
to lighten your sickbed with their nonsense
and to lower your fever with some jesting trifles.
Truth is not always the best medicine.
Sometimes a less bitter remedy proves salutary.
Thinking thus of your well-being, I endured it all.

As a fever purges the patient's bile,
so I hope a fit of laughter will break your fever.
However long the night, a new morning dawns at last.
Their sick attacks, from which reason recoils,
deserve my bitterness—but any sign of your recovery
will earn them my gratitude.

OLGA
(recites original seventeenth-century text)

FLEUR
There is something very interesting in that final line—about enduring suffering. How did you interpret that, Ilja?

ILJA
It is double-edged. It is a way of overcoming her own suffering. She has suffered because of these attacks. But if that suffering contributes to Hooft's recovery—through humour, through the belief that humour is healing—then it is suffering she can endure. That is how I interpreted it, and that is what I emphasised in my adaptation.

OLGA
Beautiful, is it not—the temporality of fever attacks and of attacks on her faith? They are temporary; she brushes them aside.

FLEUR
Ilja, on to another poem: The Final Journey. It begins with an Italian motto.

ILJA
Yes. The original poem has—how many lines?

OLGA
Sixteen.

ILJA
Sixteen. Right. At a certain point, Italy appears, and I could not resist making it a little longer. In my version it is about twice as long.

(Italian motto and poem recited)

FLEUR
Olga, you look thoroughly delighted.

OLGA
This is so beautiful—the idea and the wordplay! I am especially pleased that the fine contrast is preserved: "I cannot go on foot; I would like to crawl to Italy, but I cannot. I am going to a higher Italy." It is all there, and sharpened even further in the adaptation. My compliments!

FLEUR
Ilja, you have now adapted ten of her poems. Do you think this will inspire you going forward?

ILJA
As you may know, I have long been fascinated by fixed verse forms. My last collection, Idylls, was entirely in alexandrines. There should one day be a second volume. I remain deeply engaged with alexandrines, and I love the musicality that comes, as it were, for free when one writes in fixed forms. I find it fascinating to be free within a constraint—that paradox. And that is precisely what Tesselschade Roemers excels at. So yes—it is inspiring.

FLEUR
I hope listeners will read her poems—either the adaptations on the Fixdit website, or the editions prepared by Olga van Marion and Agnes Sneller, which are still available.

OLGA
And on DBNL as well. Ideally, read both.

FLEUR
You can also visit the Muiderslot and, as a kind of pilgrim of Maria Tesselschade Roemersdochter Visscher, see her statue in the garden. Thank you, Ilja, for this conversation and for your beautiful adaptations.

ILJA
It was a great pleasure. Thank you.

FLEUR
Likewise—and thank you, Olga, for sharing all your knowledge and passion.

OLGA
My pleasure.

FLEUR
You have been listening to us in the attic of the Muiderslot, speaking about Tesselschade Roemers, who combined intellectual depth with personal engagement.
Would you like to hear about others who wrote poetry in this period—Alida Bruno and Judith Lubbers from Alkmaar, or Antoinette Bourignon, who travelled with her own printing press? Then listen to the bonus tracks created especially for this podcast, written and read by Evi Dijcks and available on our website.
Next time, we will cross swords with Johanna Hobius, a contemporary of Roemers, who wrote a defence of women because female learning still required justification. Why was that necessary? You will hear then.
Thank you for listening.