HISTORICAL CLASSICS

TRANSCRIPT EPISODE 6

LUCRETIA WILHELMINA VAN MERKEN
We fast-forward quite a bit in time. Not that women stopped writing in the meantime, but by the mid-18th century, there was an explosion of female authors. Imagine the Netherlands as one long desk stretching from Maastricht to Dokkum. Everyone was writing and innovating. Everyone had an opinion—women included.
At the same time, the Netherlands stood on the threshold of democracy, with revolutions breaking out everywhere. In this podcast, we hear how politics seeped into the work of Lucretia Wilhelmina van Merken. The performance of her play Jacob Simonszoon De Rijck was a huge success, comparable to a pop star's concert today. By the end of the 18th century, Van Merken was undoubtedly the most famous female author in the Netherlands.
She was born in Amsterdam in 1721. Her mother fanned the flames of her talent, leading to her debut at age 24 with her first play, Het Nut der tegenspoeden (The Use of Adversity), a didactic poem about sorrow that made her instantly famous in 1762. With lines like:
"O you, separated from your dearest wish,

I dedicate this song to ease your pain.
Learn with me, in misfortune, not to be unhappy."

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Enlightenment, where emotion speaks to you. In each episode, an author translates ten pages of the historical original, available to read on the Fixdit website. This time, it's Babs Gons, writer, poet, and performer. Together with her and historian Imre Bessanger, we explore what makes Van Merken's work so special—and why there's still no park named after her.
Next to me is Babs Gons—welcome, Babs.

Babs Gons
Thank you.

Fleur Speet
And here, Imre Bessanger, curator at the Zaans Museum and artistic director of Theater Kwast, which brought plays by female authors to the stage with the project Vondel Was a Woman, including the aforementioned Jacob Simonszoon De Rijck. Welcome, Imre.

Imre Bessanger
Thank you.

Fleur
Babs, I'll start with you. Were you familiar with Van Merken's work?

Babs

No, no. I'd love to say yes, but no, this was completely new to me.

Fleur
And what did you think when you first read it?

Babs
It's incredibly versatile. Very different, too. The didactic poem The Use of Adversity, which you just mentioned, really spoke to me—perhaps because it's something I try to do in my own work: turning things around, not letting everything drag you down. She does that beautifully here. It's a very different tone from some of her plays. She's incredibly passionate, engaged. She hates injustice. She's totally woke. I love how she brings politics and poetry together, how she gets so worked up. I also think she genuinely believed she could change things by writing. And I think you need that as a writer—I think I need that as a writer. That you still believe you can change something, whatever it may be. That really struck me in her work.

Fleur
We'll get back to The Use of Adversity in a moment.

Babs
Sure.

Fleur
Imre, with Theater Kwast, you restaged De Rijck. Why that play?

Imre
Because it's iconic. The theater in Amsterdam was always on the Keizersgracht. It opened in 1638 with a play by Vondel and burned down ingloriously in the 1770s. Then a new theater was built on Leidseplein. And who was asked to write the opening play? Lucretia. And that play was Jacob Simonszoon De Rijck. When I found that out, I thought: in that entire theater, on the balconies, you have all those names—Bredero, Hooft, Van Lennep. Van Merken isn't there. And I thought: how is it possible that the person who actually brought the theater to Leidseplein doesn't have a place there? I always feel a kind of indignation when someone like her is forgotten. So I started digging deeper into her life and work, and you see that she was truly the queen of theater in the 1770s. Around 1850, she was performed for the last time, and then she disappeared under the rug. You realize: it doesn't fit the 19th-century canon for women to have such a prominent role. That's when I started itching to do something about it.
It was actually the first time I delved into the 18th century. With Theater Kwast, we had been very focused on the 17th century. After all the plays we'd performed, I thought: but we've only staged men's works, and I only noticed after thirty plays. I was really ashamed of myself. And then you think: but where are the women? Aren't they there? And then you start looking, and of course they are. And then you blush with shame. This—this I have to set right. That's how Vondel Was a Woman was born. Especially when I realized: the 18th-century Vondel is Lucretia van Merken. Only that name, Lucretia van Merken, doesn't ring a bell for anyone, so the game is to push a male icon forward and say: hey, turn it all upside down.

Fleur
But with that title, Vondel Was a Woman, you're not actually making Lucretia Wilhelmina van Merken bigger.

Imre
No, no, and I struggle with that. Because you think: I'm still setting a male norm, a man as the standard, only to say: look, this woman is just as good. I think sometimes you have to shout a little louder to restore the balance. And that's where we are sometimes. Naturally, she should just be in that canon. All these women should be in the canon. But it takes time to convince people of that, so you have to bang hard on the door first and also misuse that male icon to say: hey, there's a lot more going on. So I agree with you.

Fleur
Her goal was actually to be of use to decent people through her work, as she wrote in a letter. Babs, you translated a part of The Siege of Leiden from 1774. Can you give us an idea of what that tragedy is about?

Babs
Yes, it's about the final days before the city of Leiden is recaptured from the Spanish. That's now called the Relief of Leiden, celebrated every October 3rd. In the play, you hear Van der Werff, the mayor at the time, and his daughter Elisabeth talking. The conversation is about the desperate situation at that moment. The people are starving, desperately searching for something to eat, because the city is being starved out by the siege. And the daughter has seen a plot unfolding—a kind of trap where the Spanish commander is begged by the person he's in love with to wait a little longer before attacking. And the time they gain is just enough to recapture the city.

Fleur
Would you like to recite the first scene of the fourth act?

Babs
Oh, I'm terrified.

"How long will it take for the rebels to reach Khartoum?
Papa, where are you? Will you make it?
They could storm the city any moment."

Fleur
Khartoum? I thought it was about Leiden?

Babs
Yes. Well, I actually made a modern translation. What I did was turn the Siege of Leiden into the Siege of Khartoum, the Battle of Khartoum, the civil war that started in Sudan in 2023 after the fall of Bashir, who had been a dictator for a long time. It's a power struggle between the national army and rebel forces. Since then, it's actually become the world's largest humanitarian crisis. I think about 13 million people have already fled. Many have gone to Egypt. The city is completely destroyed. It's not that it was exactly the same, but I could overlay the Battle of Khartoum onto the Siege of Leiden, with poetic license. It's also about two rival groups that essentially starve the entire city with the same consequences... The city is starving, people are desperately trying to flee, and then, within twenty-four hours or a few days, a lot happens. So I set it in modern times.

Fleur
It could have been Gaza or Mariupol.

Babs
It could have been Gaza or Congo.

Fleur
And why...

Babs
...And I also thought, it's sometimes called the forgotten war. It's all to bring more visibility to certain major crises. I think it's important to make it discussable—and I think Lucretia van Merken did the same. She made it clear where we should focus our attention. And I think what often happens is that we want to focus on one or two places—Ukraine, Gaza—but meanwhile, so many areas are on fire, and I really think... I've been

to Sudan myself, maybe that plays a role. I was at a festival in 2018—I should say 2018, because in 2019 things already started going wrong. It was actually the only period in the last century when there was a kind of openness in Sudan. It was called Open Sudan. It was a celebration for young people there too. There was culture, there was art. It was celebrated in the middle of the desert. And then, the decline began. It could never happen again, and all the people I met then had to flee. So I also had a bit of a connection there, and I just wanted to bring attention to this.
She also challenged me because she was very aware of everything happening in the world at the time. I mean, she talks about Leiden, but in her letters, she also looks at the Inca, what's happening in America. She naturally also looks at what happened in England with the Nine Days' Queen. Her view of the world was very broad. So I thought: what would she be concerned about now? And I made a choice based on that.

Fleur
Yes, lovely. I've become curious about the original. Imre, could you recite the same passage from the original—is it a first edition?

Imre
Yes, this is The Collected Works of Lucretia, a beautiful 18th-century... Look, there are also lovely illustrations in here.

Babs
Yes, beautiful.

Fleur
Of all the historical figures.

Imre
Of all the historical figures, she had them printed with it. And then the daughter of Mayor Van der Werff, Elisabeth, speaks:

"Do you also feel deadly fear? How long will your anger last?
My father, do you still linger on Leiden's weak walls.
The day has long since fallen. I feel, from moment to moment,
my soul prey to great terror.
I hear a shrill storm.
Rumbling and roaring..."

Fleur
Yes, yes, yes.

Imre
I could go on endlessly.

Fleur
Yes, that's your profession. But what strikes you, Imre, what is Van Merken doing here?

Imre
What she's trying to do is evoke emotion. For example, she brings Magdalene Moons into the city. She was never actually in the city; she was in The Hague. But within the rules of theater, you can't go to another place. It has to happen within 24 hours, so she takes a character from that whole episode of the uprising and gives her a central role. And then she pulls out all the stops to move people. And the fun thing is, if you read her letters, you see that it works. People really cried during these kinds of plays in the theater... You

can hardly imagine that now, that so much emotion is released. That's fascinating, and it's because she uses a new language. She takes a new...

Fleur
Yes, because before that, it wasn't so emotional?

Imre
No, look at the 17th-century writers, they're much more focused on spectacle, and then you have Spanish theater, but that's so hyperbolic, it feels like another world. And she tries to make it more relatable and invites her own audience: feel with these characters, and in that, it really differs from what you see before.

Babs
Yes, what's also beautiful, as you point out, is that she tries to set things right with poetic license. And that's what we always do too. And you said at the beginning that we're talking about forgotten women, but I think: they're especially silenced women. So even if Magdalene Moons was never in the city, she still tries to set things right, that women were involved, because women have always been involved in everything. And I think that's beautiful, because she can, she does, and we need that.

Imre
Yes, and what I find interesting is that if you look at the title page: the mayor is on it. He says: "Eat me if you're hungry," suggesting he's the main character. But he's not. The play really revolves around his daughter, who voices the emotions of the city, and Magdalene Moons, who ultimately saves the city with her cunning. So she places them completely center stage.

Fleur
Why did she still put Van der Werff at the forefront? That mayor?

Imre
Because she lived in a man's world. So she plays a trick on you. She hangs the prevailing moral philosophy about the place of women in society, but she doesn't adhere to it and she tinkers with it enormously, and that's very pleasant to read.

Fleur
Well, that's not new, is it?

Babs
Maybe it increases credibility, also by taking a historical figure and then letting her freedom loose on it, right?

Imre
What I find interesting is that for a long time, people thought Moons was a fictional invention. But in 2007, it was discovered that she was actually married to Valdez. So there might be more truth to it. And I liked that so much in the preface: she says, I read this and that, I delved into this and that, and I spoke to this and that person from the city who heard from their grandparents that... So there's very thorough research before she starts writing. And then she justifies: but I did make artistic choices.

Fleur
So she really puts it in, especially with that woman. And now, it was the case that in this time, and even before, many female characters were performed in theater, right?

Imre

Yes, you see a shift, and that is... A contemporary of hers, Juliana de Lannoy, does the same. And you see them pushing mother figures to the forefront. That's interesting, because the mother role is really exaggerated. Now you might think: why? Why did those women do that? Why push motherhood so much? While if you read about early modern women, when their husband died, they took over the business, and then it was the widow of... They had a lot of freedom. And suddenly they start focusing heavily on motherhood, and that comes, strangely enough, from an emancipation movement that thinks: if we, as women, claim this motherhood, then we have a lot of influence on the generations to come, the future power holders. And that was seen as an emancipatory move. That ultimately backfired against women in the 19th century, because then it was said: no, women only belong in motherhood. But initially, it was enormously propagated. And you see that happening in theater too. And in Van Merken's work, such a mother-daughter relationship often comes to the fore. And here it's a father-daughter relationship.

Fleur
But also heroines?

Imre
Yes. Then they look at queens, and you see that in The Use of Adversity too. There's a whole series of heroine letters behind it, about great women in history. And with that, they also immediately show: hey, they were there, don't forget. Elizabeth I was there too, so...

Fleur
Yes, the funny thing is, Johanna Hobius, whom we also had an episode about, does that in a way too, but she does it as a kind of defense, and here it seems more like Van Merken just presents it as a fact. In that sense, something has changed.

Imre
I never get the impression from her work that she's defending her femininity. But yes, it's... it's nowhere for her a thing that she's a woman, not the Latin School... And also when you read her letters, it's nowhere...

Fleur
Finish the sentence, that she went to the Latin School?

Imre
That she went to the Latin School or something. Look, men went to Latin school, for example, and that was often seen as a disadvantage if women went into poetry. With Van Merken, you don't find that, no.

Fleur
Well, she was also the granddaughter—if I'm correct—of Geeraerd Brandt, and Geeraerd Brandt was again a... I think a...

Imre
The biographer of Hooft and Vondel.

Fleur
And he was married to Barlaeus' daughter, right?

Imre
Yes, yes.

Fleur
And so we complete the line.

Imre
Yes. So there's a lot of poetic blood in her. You see that in the family too; a lot was written. Van Merken started reading all of that from a young age. With her father, she read the classics, and you recognize that in her language use. I often come across a sentence and think: oh, that's from Gijsbrecht van Amstel, she's copy-pasted that in there. So there are phrasings I recognize from Vondel's work, from... Because she just has it at her fingertips. Only she does something different with it. She creates a new genre that's much more emotional and is truly new.

Fleur
Babs, were you really up for working with emotion?

Babs
I didn't consciously think about it that much. I think it's also a given. Yes, with emotion... I mean: yes, where else do you put it?

Fleur
Yes, why actually? Because now it's normal to process emotions in poetry.

Babs
Yes, I think so too. I don't know. I mean, you have a little emotion, a lot of emotion. Look, for example, at the poem she wrote about Johanna Gray, about the letter of the Nine Days' Queen...

Fleur
Mary is going to murder her?

Babs
Behead her, yes, there's a bit of a sarcastic undertone there, I can say. That's also an emotion. The danger is that if you say emotional, it's all exaggerated, filled in, and I don't think so.

Fleur
Nowadays, we often see emotion as something feminine, which we can use to dismiss women...

Babs
Exactly.

Fleur
...the hysterical woman. And you're so emotional.

Babs
Yes, that's why I'm so careful with it, because I just think: she writes with everything she has, doesn't color it too much. And it's not that I can't evoke my own emotions anymore. Look, in those dialogues, there's just a lot—maybe that's what you mean by that emotion of "oh papa, what now?" Oh, and sometimes it's heart-wrenching, hands to the sky, what are we going to do? Despair is near, but I don't feel like the volume knob is turned all the way down. The challenge was to make the letter of the Nine Days' Queen sharper. But especially in this time, how would you say it? What words do you use then? Maybe it's more painful or more provocative now than back then. But yes, I...

Fleur
Yes, yes. Babs, would you like to recite the following passage from The Battle of Khartoum?

Babs
Yes, this is from Ibrahim's mouth.

"A ceasefire was announced, giving people a glimmer of hope.
It was supposed to start at 6:00 PM, but evening fell, and the fighting continued.
The crisis grew even worse; hospitals had to close because there was no supply of medical aid.
People had to abandon hope for a truce.

Then Nadia says: Saudi Arabia and the United States have just announced that the SAF and RSF have agreed to a ceasefire.
Finally, aid can be brought into the city again, and the population no longer has to flee in blind panic."

Fleur
It's based on an 18th-century tragedy, but everyone knows that feeling of hope at the news of peace, right? Because that's coming now. What was it like for you to translate that at that moment?

Babs
Yes, well, look, that hope is still there, because there's no peace here yet. Fortunately, there was at the Relief of Leiden. This is what constantly happens. What we constantly see around us too. We've heard a ceasefire announced in Gaza? And then immediately you think: okay, now there's a chance, also for the population. First, to catch their breath, to get food again. And yes, what really touches me here is that nothing changes. Everything repeats itself over and over. Again, you see the United States is one of the players; we're still in that power play. It's a pattern that repeats itself.

Fleur
With this translation, you really show that it's something that keeps happening. It's not from the 16th century; it's timeless.

Babs
Yes. And of course, much more technology is involved now. Later in the play, I also talk about how sometimes the war comes on Facebook Live, on Instagram. Messages are shared there, images are shown of: hey, we've taken the palace, we've taken the most important buildings in the city. So that's different in terms of technology, but for the people themselves, not much changes. You're in a war, you can't go anywhere, you're still being starved. And that's the sadness, and yes, what she actually makes very clear: the economic background. You see that reflected here again.

Fleur
Imre, did Van Merken also focus on hope? It does end well in the Siege of Leiden, after all.

Imre
Certainly, I think hope is a central theme in that play. From the very first moment, you see despair contrasted with hope, and you also see—and I think this is beautiful—that hope is not free. You have to work very hard for hope.

Fleur
Femke Halsema said that too.

Imre
Femke Halsema talked about it recently too. I was really moved by her saying that you can just have optimism, but hope you have to work hard for, and that's in here too. You see that mayor, Van der Werff, who against all odds keeps his courage and keeps pumping hope, and he has to use his entire being for that. And that ultimately wins, because apparently, they're going to lose terribly. I mean, the Spanish troops are at the door, there's nothing left to eat in the city. The wind isn't favorable, so the water that's supposed

to bring the prince's ships closer isn't working. And yet, hope, hope, hope, even though he has no reason for it. So hope is indeed a central theme.
But what I really liked about Babs' translation, and that also moved me a lot, is that you also see—we're in the trap of the American Empire at the moment. Just as you once had the fall of the Roman Empire, and this is about the fall of the Spanish Empire. So you see that ultimately, there's a king in a place who turns out to be a dictator, and then civil war breaks out, and discontent arises, and that empire falls. And through that analogy, I thought: damn, that's also about imperial overstretch. So you make it even more current for me than I initially saw it. I had it on emotion, but by doing this, I found it incredibly clever. But then you also see the game Van Merken plays, because she actually does the same as she says: not really writing about 18th-century society, and she really wants to appeal to those old civic ideals, and you see them in revolt.

Fleur
Yes, explain the context. The Patriots, Orangists...

Imre
Haha, okay. Shall I try in one sentence? At the end of the 18th century, there's a huge wave of democratization. People want more say in government, and that became known as the Patriots, and Van Merken is a bit of a moderate Patriot. She wants change, but she's not on the barricades. But she does sometimes stoke the fire with her writing. She also chooses, at times, to consciously keep her mouth shut. Because she knows: if I write now, it will explode, and I don't want that. I don't want a revolution. I want it to evolve, and in that, she's not, so to speak, on the full Patriotic course.

Fleur
Yes, because it really got rough, and people were killed and actually murdered.

Imre
Yes, yes. It's a struggle between the Orangists on one side, who are on the side of the House of Orange, and the Oranges weren't kings and queens at the time. It's good to know now, but not then. They were stadtholders, and in fact, that was the boss of the army. But they had raked in all kinds of positions, and especially the stadtholder in power, Stadtholder William V, who in tradition has become a bit of a fool. But he still managed to rule the republic in a fairly monarchical way. And there was enormous resistance to that, the same as you see happening in France. The same as you see in the American Revolution. That debate is also being held here, and you see it reflected in her work. And what she does is, she says: we really need to go back to those old civic virtues. Where we once deposed a king and showed: we, as citizens, can take on the government and do it much better.

Fleur
And then, as you said, she's not on the barricades. In this siege, you also see that she shows that magnanimity is important because leaders subordinate their own interests to those of the community. So she doesn't want to incite, but rather call for calm and wisdom. Almost, right?

Imre
That's wonderful. It's a combination of being very outspoken versus a sense of responsibility. That you shouldn't drive the community crazy and polarize it. It's natural, and I found that interesting as I was rereading her work for this podcast. That it resembles the time we live in now. An extremely polarizing society where Van Merken constantly tries to remove that polarization and say: but there is a way out. Look. Our ancestors did it the same way, and that's civic virtue. That's the way out, and civic virtue is a bit of a vague concept, but it's actually just common sense and not making each other's lives miserable, but trying to live with each other.
She wrote a play about the Siege of Jerusalem, for example. You have to imagine the 13th century. And what struck me there is that she gives the Muslims a very balanced voice and doesn't polarize at all in that play. While my assumption was—well, of course, it's going to be long live the crusaders and down with the

people who live there. Not at all. The solution is an exchange of ideas, an exchange of values. And then a solution arises, a kind of catharsis. And that's in a lot of her plays.

Fleur
In The Siege, it even says:

"No Dutchman, whatever faith he professes,
who does not devote his good and life to her preservation."
That's it, right? She addresses all Dutch people.

Babs
And doesn't she also have a different voice in her letters than in her plays, where a play is very much, she just shows how it all coexists.

Imre
Yes, there's something like a modesty topos, so you see that in her work, she's always very modest.

Babs
Yes.

Imre
And in her letters, I find her...

Babs
She lets loose.

Imre
About her Collected Works, it says in the front: we offer you these little pieces, while—little pieces? They're ten tragedies. They're not little pieces, so she makes it smaller to make it acceptable.

Fleur
Yes, you mention here the Letters from Bijdorp, the correspondence of Lucretia van Merken, which she only started writing when she moved to Bijdorp in Leiden, because...

Imre
Yes, they had bought a country house near Leiden, and it was mainly that the city was a bit too much for them in the summer. Even then, if you think of the damp Amsterdam canals and so on, and they were getting older, and that's not good for our health. And the fun thing is, until they did it and eventually moved to Leiden permanently, there was a need for correspondence, because when she lived in Amsterdam, she just dropped by. So now we read very intimate letters because she lives a bit further away. So that move was a blessing for us.

Babs
What I find beautiful is that those letters, well, that's just personal, that's who she is at home behind closed doors, and if you talk about the moderation in her work, yes, that's art. That she knows how to translate that in a completely different way, so that she doesn't present it in a judgmental, colored way. And I think that's fantastic to... I haven't read all the letters, but what I have read is that you just see that she's sometimes also an unkind person or just very sharp. I readily believe that as soon as I close the doors, I don't have that mild gaze I'm often associated with.

Fleur
Yes, I have a nice quote from that too. About the Patriots and the Orangists.

Babs
Okay.

Fleur
If we had that mischievous bunch of ministers here, we'd tie them to ropes and let them swim in the Rhine like frogs. But papa laughs at my anger and says I'd pull them out if they started to look distressed.
I also think that's something beautiful...

Imre
Yes.

Babs
That's also very mild, yes.

Fleur
...because you see her anger, but at the same time, her husband also knows that she would immediately give in if they appealed to her compassion at all.

Imre
Yes.

Fleur
Let's also look at how she was canonized—or not—because you've already touched on that, Imre. Because in her own time, Van Merken was already called the second Vondel, or the Dutch Corneille, after the great French playwright. Her work had high print runs, many editions, and performances. Betje Wolff wrote idolatrous and idiotic letters to her. We'll talk about that in the episode about her. Willem Bilderdijk adored her. Even Rhijnvis Feith thought she was wonderful. And yet, no biography has been written about her. What went wrong?

Fleur
A deep sigh.

Imre
The 19th century thundered over her. Look, in the 19th-century Dutch literary canon, compiled by 19th-century men, there was no place for women in the canon. So she was consciously written out, because it's very strange that she's not in there, also because of her influence—you mentioned that Bilderdijk adored her. He came to visit her, and then she writes in the letters: oh, Bilderdijk is at the door, she's not in the mood for it at all, because she's not so fond of all that fan behavior. She doesn't need that. But that does show her influence. It's enormous. The fact that she was canceled after the Patriotic uprising and not performed is because they knew: this work is explosive. That also immediately shows her influence. So she doesn't fit the image that 19th-century men had of the role of women, so it's minimized.

Fleur
Yes, like all the women in this podcast, actually. Yes, we're constantly pushing the 19th century aside.

Babs
Well, I read in Lonneke Geerlings' book, she wrote a biography about Rosie Paul, a Jewish writer, translator by the way. She was also silenced for years. And she writes right at the beginning: most people are forgotten. 99.9% of all people are forgotten. But if you want to end up in the history books, it's helpful if you are, one, a man, two, white, heterosexual, and preferably known for one thing. For example, the first man on the moon, the fastest man in the 100 meters. I think that also applies here.

Imre
Certainly.

Babs
Especially the versatility of women at that time. If you did more than just write poetry, but also scientific work. Well, that actually works against you.

Fleur
Yes, because she also wrote Biblical epics.

Babs
Psalm translations.

Fleur
Psalm translations, yes.

Imre
Well, I also think that the Patriotic voice wasn't very welcome in the 19th century. We had gone back to a monarchy, so there was an enormous conservative revolution that didn't sit well with this story. If you see how long it took for the Patriotic era to get a place in our national history at all...

Fleur
But Imre, isn't it actually strange? Because The Use of Adversity fits very well into the religious society that was, of course, very much on the rise in the 19th century. Or coming. When were we not religious? So in that sense, you'd think the 19th century would embrace The Use of Adversity.

Imre
Yes, no, they dismissed it as The Use of Rain Hats, that's a well-known anecdote by Nicolaas Beets.

Fleur
Yes, yes, stop it, haha.

Imre
Yes and no. I also think you shouldn't underestimate that from the 1850s onward, there was enormous doubt about faith. And that's because of the modernism that was emerging. Modern science was placed next to the Bible. So there was a secret dechurching already underway. In that sense, it doesn't surprise me that The Use falls by the wayside, which is still very much in that classical Christian moral philosophy.

Fleur
Yes. Shall we go there? Babs, would you like to recite the beginning of The Use of Adversity?

Babs
Yes.

"I sing a song, the words came by themselves,
For who has endured as much pain as I
Must speak of the Use of Adversity.
I dedicate it to all who suffer greatly.
Dear comrades in the struggle for a better life,
I sing this song to ease the pain,
To fight the dark thoughts
That can populate your mind."

Fleur
Van Merken immediately shows here that she speaks as an expert by experience. Could that have been part of the success of this poem at the time?

Imre
Yes, it's written from personal experience. A few years after her father died, her mother died, she cared for her sister who died, and then she herself was very ill. That's when this poem was created.

Babs
It seems so incredibly hopeful. You must be very resilient to do that precisely then.

Imre
Yes, that you then say: we turn it around.

Babs
Yes.

Imre
And I think it's also because she looks around her. And the 18th century is a society where death is all around you. Child mortality is common. Women dying in childbirth is common. One of the most common causes of death. So there's death all around you. And because she then says: yes, but we can set something against that. And that's actually the power of the spirit.

Fleur
Yes, yes, also illness. It's also about her own illness.

Imre
So she rows very bravely against that. And that strikes a chord, because it's an immediate hit. I still find it recognizable myself, even in our time.

Babs
Yes, yes, I was going to say, it's very current, if you see how many of those empowerment movements put a positive spin on things, especially in times of crisis. This is what you want to hear, I think.

Imre
It's also refusing to be pressed into the role of victim.

Fleur
But because it's God's will. That again.

Babs
Yes, but she also says: nothing is promised to us.

Fleur
Yes.

Babs
That's what I always try to say when everything goes wrong, you know. It's not promised at all that things have to go well. So you might as well make peace with it. And that's something. Yes, I think you can still apply that very broadly, whatever faith lives in you. But yes, of course.

Imre
Yes.

Fleur
Yes. Now I'd like to make room for a longer passage from The Use of Adversity. Babs, the floor is yours.

Babs
Yes, I have to say first that she's actually talking about greed. So it's about people who are so greedy.

"Their greed led to entire forests falling
for the production of animal feed.
They built an ever-growing bio-industry and slaughterhouses
so that people could gorge themselves on an abundance of roast meat
in all-you-can-eat restaurants, in parks and on lawns full of barbecues.
Man evolved from animal friend to animal murderer,
became ever more vain, opened clothing factories and sewing workshops
where workers toiled under appalling conditions
so that the rich could show off and stroll.
But all this craving for more and more,
this greed, vanity, gluttony,
only led to more inequality in the world,
to more illness, death, and chaos.
But take comfort, we are mortal beings,
we have an expiration date after all.
We all grow older, and with that come ailments.
No botox, facelift, or medicine can prevent that.
Your heart stops one day, that's certain.
So let's embrace our temporariness,
let our wrinkles adorn us, celebrate our old age.
And however difficult life can be, however much we may suffer,
remember, it's all over in the blink of an eye."

Fleur
Beautiful.

Babs
Yes, it's comforting.

Imre
This is so well done. What she's actually doing. I think, yes, embrace that temporary life. I really like how you've woven in the current debates we're having now. And that, yes, I recognize that very much from the poem. I think that's why it also resonates. Especially when it's put so directly in Babs' words. Then you realize: yes, this is something everyone can take to heart right now.

Fleur
Yes. Imre, would you like to recite the original, or at least a small part of it so we get an impression?
Imre

"Since savage gluttony, since raging excess,
which scarcely sates itself on thousands of dishes,
made mankind, whom it pretended to welcome most kindly,
drink death from its overflowing bowls;

since luxury gorged itself on flesh until it burst,
invaded the stables like a cattle plague,
and so on..."

Fleur
It also becomes social criticism.

Babs
Yes, definitely.

Imre
Well, almost, it is social criticism, haha.

Fleur
Yes, sorry, it is social criticism.

Babs
Well, I was very happy that I could incorporate my social criticism here, because I really think we're sometimes engaged in a struggle against mortality. That everything has to stay young. That we have to fight so hard not only against aging, but against being old, against being allowed to be old. Right? I sometimes think: if you walk around wrinkled now, it's your own fault. That's how it's done. It's your own fault what you let happen there. I find that very harsh, and I think there needs to be more space. Look, I'm especially in favor of individual freedom. If you want that, you should do it. But there's a tendency, and I think especially for young people, it's just very dangerous. An image is presented of how you can supposedly fight all that fantastically.

Fleur
Yes.

Imre
You're in the season you're in, and instead of making people long for another season, an earlier season. Enjoy the season you're in and the uniqueness of it, and that's very much in her poem too. And I recognize that very much in Babs' words, yes.

Babs
Yes. And that she actually just shows that all material things, those material desires and so on, must be subordinate to being able to be a complete human being, as the highest good. She says: power, money, good health. They're not given, but what you do have is yourself, and even if that self is sick, you still don't have to sit back and do nothing. And what I also really take from it is that nothing is promised. I often have that sentence in my head, you know. Nothing is promised. It's not... you don't get it with you. That it's all beautiful and vital and young and rich and...
Yes. I'm still curious what we could do to give Van Merken the place she deserves.

Imre
Well, I think she should definitely be on one of those plaques in the theater. Just in the hall. I really think, we tried that in 2021. It was her 300th death anniversary, but then I couldn't get ITA on board. But I really think...

Fleur
We'll try again.

Imre

Yes, I thought.

Babs
But maybe there should also be a prize, the Van Merken Theater Prize, because I think there are too few... Yes, in any case, there are too few women's names on prizes. Yes, I think also within her values... What's more beautiful than the Van Merken Theater Prize, an annual award ceremony?

Fleur
Then the Amsterdam Theater can finance it to make amends.

Babs
Definitely, yes.

Imre
Yes, they have something to make up for.

Babs
And maybe... Yes, yes, a statue of course, but that's been debated for a long time, but...

Fleur
Actually, I still think there should be a park named after her. We also have Vondelpark.

Babs
Exactly.

Fleur
So in Leiden, there should be a Van Merken Park.

Babs
The Van der Werff Park in Leiden could maybe...

Imre
Be renamed.

Fleur
Oh, hahaha, that's a good idea. Well, I hear it already, we're going to talk to the city councilors.

Babs
And also just really include her work more in educational materials. I think the story of silenced women from the 18th century, but also from the 17th and 19th centuries, needs to be addressed. I sometimes give lectures about these forgotten women, and we just have to keep bringing it up.

Imre
Yes, it's very good if a new generation doesn't always feel like they have to break through that glass ceiling, but that it's already been shattered by their predecessors. So if you know you're standing on the shoulders of women who have done this before, that's...

Babs
That's so important. That's so important, I always think.

Imre

That's so important, and that we just make that omnipresent. That you just know. You know, if I'm a writer, I stand in the tradition of Van Merken.

Fleur
That was there then. De Lannoy also really wanted to be a tragedy writer, but we'll talk about that in the episode about her. But she really wanted to be a tragedy writer because she wanted to be a great Lucretia van Merken.

Babs
That's what we so desperately need. I mean. I sometimes think: what if I, if you as a girl, had heard about Van Merken, Anna Maria Schurman, about Nele Marie, about Truus Oversteegen, about Corrie Tendeloo, Elisabeth Samson. Well, just all those names you've forgotten. You know, I'm discovering them now. And they do something. We just have a shortage, at least in our youth, of female role models. I would have liked to know all that. I think I would have grown up richer. And maybe I would have dared to become a writer earlier. Or just, yes.

Fleur
Well, I'll wrap up. I'd like to say with Lucretia van Merken: dear listener, don't forget that there's a big difference between living actively or spinning on a windmill blade. Van Merken was an author who fought for freedom, equality, and humanity. She could step right into our time, and like most of us, she despised every form of oppression and injustice. And that's reflected in her work. Part of that work can be found translated by Babs Gons on www.fixdit.nu. Thank you, Babs, for the translation and your contribution to this podcast.

Babs
You're welcome.

Fleur
And thank you, Imre, for sharing all your passion and knowledge.

Imre
You're welcome!

Fleur
If you're curious about the women who wrote before Van Merken, like Verwers and Questiers, you can listen to our bonus tracks online for extra background and fun facts. And in the next episode, you'll hear more about Juliana de Lannoy. A bit younger than Van Merken. Soon she would become famous for her unrelenting feminism. Was she the Mary Wollstonecraft of the Netherlands? You'll hear that next time.