TRANSCRIPT: HISTORICAL CLASSICS

Episode 9: Aagje Deken and Betje Wolff

We arrive at perhaps the most famous writers in our entire series: Aagje Deken and Betje Wolff. Their 1781 novel Sara Burgerhart remains in print, read, retranslated, and even discussed in high schools—thanks to Tonnus Oosterhoff's magnificent modern adaptation. That's remarkable: a nearly 250-year-old book still captivating readers. But they wrote so much more—13,000 printed pages, including advice like this:

Sing with lovely voices.

He who is grateful is joyful.

Do not sigh through life.

Do not mistake melancholy for piety.

You should know: the Orangists and Patriots were still fiercely at odds in their time. People clashed violently. New translations emerged, new ideas spread. After all, it was the Enlightenment. In this setting, Deken and Wolff gave literature a fresh voice—not just reflecting the manners of the age, but also the thoughts, doubts, and emotions, in a language that sparkles and speaks directly. Behind that style lies a deeper drive: moral sensitivity and curiosity about what it truly means to live a dignified life.
They wrote epistolary novels, fables, and "economic songs" (socially engaged poems). After fleeing to France and returning to the Netherlands, they died in poverty and illness. Yet their legacy remains vibrant. Meet the phenomenon of Deken and Wolff: two women who captured society with their sharp pens, flawlessly and optimistically.

Fleur
For each podcast, we ask a writer to retranslate ten pages of the original work. Abdelkader Benali doubled that —building a bridge to the 18th century. We're sitting in Wolff's former attic in Middenbeemster,
Here present Abdelkader Benali, welcome Abdel.

Abdelkader
Thank you.

Fleur
We are joined by her biographer, Marita Mathijsen, emeritus professor of modern Dutch literature and author of A Free Spirit: The Extraordinary Life of Betje Wolff. Welcome, Marita.

Marita
Thank you.

Fleur
My first question is for you, Abdel. Did you learn about Deken and Wolff in high school? And what did you learn?

Abdelkader
It was so long ago, and I wasn't paying much attention. We started with Marieke van Nimwegen and Reinaert de Vos—rustic, medieval tales that fire the imagination. Then came the first Dutch sentence: "Hebban olla vogala nestas hagunnan..." Fascinating. But the Enlightenment? I didn't pay much mind. Now, diving into these texts, I'm struck by their romanticism—the invention of the individual, the "I" taking center stage. We never discussed that in class. Yet as a young person, you're so sensitive to the idea of someone sitting down, writing, talking to themselves, exploring their own confusion: Who was I then? Who am I now? There was no space for that. Even if it had been taught, it might have passed me by. So for me, this has been a wonderful journey.
Fleur: So this retranslation has given you something?
Abdelkader: Absolutely. I've always been fascinated by Romantic poets and the Romantic era, especially how the "Other"—the Orient, the Islamic world—was viewed through a Romantic lens in the 19th century. Wolff's work already pulses with that subjective intensity. It's exhilarating. I can't help but enjoy it.

Fleur
Would you read a passage from your retranslation of "To My Spirit" (1774)? How did you translate the title?

Abdelkader
"Conversation with My Rebellious Self."

Stop it now, know your place; you drive me mad.

Whoever or whatever you are, your capricious fervor

demands a fence. You made me write in prose and rhyme—

I caught this bug young, you nested in me

as fairy tales, riddles, a deep quatrain,

translating yourself into those glorious forms—

vessels of stories. I don't know what came first: you,

who said stories were waiting, or the books

where I found the tales you seemed to know already.

What happened? I was just a child, but I felt

recognition—call it coming home—when I began to read,

and the books devoured me, like the whale swallowed Jonah,

an old story. I read deep into the night; my mother worried,

"Child, you'll lose your sight," which I didn't understand,*

for through the vistas the books offered, I saw

sharper than any eagle ever had.

So yes, I owe you so much, that all-consuming brain,

restless, untamable, always chasing dopamine.

I devoured books like a pelican devours fish—

and still, it wasn't enough for you. You always wanted more.

I learned early what addiction feels like—

that intellect, the byproduct of excess,

kept growing, blooming, not a tidy garden

but an overgrown patch of weeds, healing and poisonous plants,

thorns in the mind. So how shall I name you:

delicious imagination, highfalutin brain lobe,

chemical stew, organized chaos—

life itself.

Fleur
Now, the original. Marita, would you read it?

Marita
Abdelkader's version is a beautiful adaptation. Here's the original, from the second edition of "To My Spirit":

Oh yes, my Spirit! I am and remain dissatisfied with you;

My patience is exhausted—do not think to persuade me

To ignore what you abuse,

Whether in earnest or jest, in prose or verse.

It's incredible what I've endured for you:

Even in my earliest youth, I had to lament you.

Was it not your command that I, still a child,

(Speak, am I wrong?) came to love books?

How often did I not feel you harm my health,

Simply by making me think before my time!

Fleur
What a difference! It's completely transformed. Abdel, what did you do?

Abdelkader
We shouldn't even call it a retranslation. I didn't want to translate it—its beauty stands alone—but I let it inspire me. The idea of rebelling against your own spirit fascinates me. You create a dialogue with yourself, yet it's also a monologue, because you're talking to yourself. It's stormy, rebellious, and witty. She mocks the precocious girl she was, devouring her brother's books, that hunger for reading. It's a love letter to the hunger for reading. I don't know about you, but I was that kid reading the labels on peanut butter jars just to read. It was an addiction, restless. That modern aspect—that's what makes her a modern author for me—lies in that restlessness, that sawing off the branch you're sitting on. The way she looks back, forward, blends past and present, the images she evokes. So much happens. It's almost like a rap. That's what inspired me.

Fleur
Marita, does it bother you that it's changed so much?

Marita
Not at all. Abdel captures the modernity of the text brilliantly. At the time, it was extraordinary to question yourself like this. She even says: Some of my works I shouldn't have published. I started too young. Reflecting on your own writing—that didn't become common until the 20th century, with someone like Harry Mulisch. Food for psychologists. She was way ahead of her time.

Fleur
Betje Wolff wanted to join the female canon. She admired Christina de Neufville, became close friends with poet Anna van der Horst, and later connected with Petronella de Timmerman, Elisabeth Maria Post, and Petronella Moens. It's as if all the names from this podcast's 18th century converge in her—like she was at the epicenter of 18th-century Dutch women writers. Is that accurate?

Marita
You can't say there was a formal society of female writers who all knew each other, but Wolff actively sought out women writers. Even as a young girl in Vlissingen, she reached out to Petronella de Timmerman in Middelburg. Later, in Middenbeemster, she continued to seek out women who were or could become famous in poetry. She had a soft spot for young girls trying to break into poetry—sometimes she even fell a little in love with them. Anna van der Horst, for example, who later gained some fame. Wolff adored her—perhaps not in love, but she had enormous affection for this young girl trying to become a poet.

Fleur
So she's also known for her friendships with women?

Marita
Throughout her life, you see her repeatedly drawn to young women with literary ambitions or who read voraciously. Every few years, it's someone new. But her friendship with Aagje Deken was truly intense—a partnership, a soul connection.

Fleur
After the minister's death in 1777, Wolff moved in with Deken in De Rijp. Why did they switch to prose when they'd both been poets before?

Marita
Their friendship began aggressively. Deken, then unknown, wrote to Wolff—already famous as a fierce critic of orthodox Calvinists—saying, "I've heard much evil spoken of you, but I think you're not as they say. I want to

help you improve." Wolff was furious: "How dare you! You don't even know me! You're engaging in slander!" Deken was shocked and wanted to destroy the letter. But they met, and from then on, they were friends. After the minister's death, they needed money. They realized there was a lack of literature for the middle class. The upper class had plenty, and the lowest class had simple booklets. But the bourgeoisie—the Patriots—had nothing, nor did women seeking guidance on child-rearing. So they decided to write accessible works: a parenting manual, "Economic Songs" (social poems), and novels. They wrote the first Dutch epistolary novel.

Abdelkader
Entrepreneurs.

Fleur
Abdel, would you read your retranslation of a poem about animal suffering?

Abdelkader
"The Servant Who Couldn't Stand Seeing the Earth's Other Inhabitants Always Get the Short End of the Stick."

Call me soft, laugh at me,

Call me crazy if you must: I stand by my decision.

Horses must not be beaten. Like you, they know pain.

As a child, I was already devoted to these animals.

Nothing can rival the love I feel for them.

Just because it's common to treat animals brutally

doesn't mean we should do it too. Think about it.

If I see someone abusing a horse, I feel it in my toes.

I want to intervene immediately, tame the abuser, teach them decency.

If a heavily laden horse can't move forward,

my heart aches. What are we worth

if we burden animals so heavily they barely live?

And when the beast of burden, exhausted, can't take another step,

we start yelling and cursing—as if that helps!

Something dark in us believes

the laws of gravity and energy don't apply to animals.

It shows how small our minds are, how petty our hearts.

Marita
Beautiful.

Fleur
Remember, there were no cars—draft horses were everywhere: for carriages, wagons, barges.

Marita
And for racing by the nobility. Those horses were whipped to run faster, and it seems that still happens in horse racing today.

Fleur
So this is still relevant. Marita, would you read the original?

Marita
It's called "The Brave Hauling Servant."

Call me a bleeding heart,

Laugh at me all you want;

Call me foolish if you must:

I stand by my decision.

I won't beat the horses so;

They feel pain too;

I'm deeply moved by the beasts,

And always will be.

I'm just a hauling servant,

But it pains me, it makes me ache,

When the horse is overloaded,

And struggles with cart or sleigh.

The dumb beast reaches a lock,

It wants to, but can't go on:

They curse, they rage, they make threats

As if that's part of the job.

They whip, they beat it senseless,

My heart shrinks from it—

And what's the end of all that labor?

The beast dies as their punishment.

Abdelkader
So individualistic.

Marita
Yes.

Abdelkader
It's all about duty, taking responsibility. They elevate a man from the lower class to a moral voice. So much happens in this poem.

Marita
This is exactly what they meant by reaching ordinary people. Here, someone can identify with it, and at the same time, they show that even a servant has worth and does his duty. He says: "I can barely read, but I know what the Lord, what God has said."

Fleur
Why did you stay so close to the original this time, Abdel?

Abdelkader
I hope I stayed true to the spirit in the other translations too. Here, it's the voice of one man standing up for the horse's cause. It's written in verse, with a specific rhythm, which is easy to recreate. It's all in the rhythm—if you keep that, it flows.

Marita
That was very clear in your adaptation.

Abdelkader
Yes, tam tam, tam—it aligns with the core humanistic message: the horse is also an inhabitant of this earth, and how we treat the horse reflects how we treat ourselves. Our brutality reveals our own brutality. It's a disgrace. As you said, an animal rights activist!

Fleur
Did others write about class or animal suffering?

Marita
Petronella Moens and Elisabeth Maria Post also wrote against it. You often see women showing a keen awareness of injustice in society.

Fleur
You say especially women?

Marita
Yes. Whenever I think: Who wrote against slavery? I come back to Petronella Moens, Betje Wolff, and Post.

Fleur
It's too beautiful not to quote. In Beemster Winterbuitenleven, Wolff writes about slavery:

Driven by greed and tyranny,

Condemned to harsh slavery,

Swept to the mines by cruelty,

Dragged along the rugged mountains—

That slave, oh tyrant, is a human being!

Stop, barbaric European!

Marita
A stunning passage.

Abdelkader
It's interesting. In modern debates about slavery, defenders often say: "It wasn't just European or Western—it was universal." But Wolff clearly emphasizes: This is a European phenomenon. We do this. That's sharp! I don't know if these were widely held views, but this activist tone is still relevant today.

Fleur
Isn't this abolitionism?

Marita
Yes, it began in England and France. Wolff translated a book by a French abolitionist during the French period. But organized opposition—societies against slavery—emerged in the 19th century.

Fleur
Van Merken and De Lannoy also lamented the displacement of Native Americans during the American Revolution. So they noticed that too.

Marita
Yes, that's a different issue—advocating for indigenous peoples.

Fleur
Could they say that as women and be accepted?

Marita
The opposition they faced was mainly directed at Wolff for attacking orthodox Protestants. She was cornered: "That woman is no good, resisting true Protestant faith." She was called "the she-wolf of Middenbeemster, whose bite you should fear."

Fleur
It's hard to summarize Wolff's life in a nutshell, but I'll ask you to try.

Marita
At 17, she ran away with a young ensign from Vlissingen. They were gone for five or six weeks—she practiced free love. The church censured her, not because it was non-consensual, but because it was scandalous. She later called him "my dear boy" and wrote that the wound still bled. She hid in her father's house, read voraciously, and wrote letters—including one to the minister in Middenbeemster, who had published a book arguing that sermons should be simple for ordinary people. She wrote to him, and he, a widower, assumed she was an unmarried woman in her forties. He traveled to Vlissingen by ferry and asked her father for her hand in marriage. He must have been shocked—she was tiny, just one meter fifty.

Fleur
How old was he?

Marita
51—31 years older. He knew nothing of her affair. He asked colleagues in Vlissingen: "How can such a lovely girl still be unmarried?" They replied: "Don't you know about her scandal?" No, he didn't. Later, he reportedly said: "Well, she was so young—anyone can make a mistake. It was seduction, not her fault."

Fleur
That must have always lingered with her.

Marita
The censure made her fiercely anti-orthodox.

Fleur
And that fueled her satire. So in a way, it was fortunate for us, because it led to such brilliant, exciting literature?

Marita
I think so. You see it in Sara Burgerhart and in everything we've read today. "To My Spirit" is certainly about self-reflection, which you can only do if you've been cast out.

Fleur
They wrote Willem Leevend and The History of Miss Cornelia Wildschut—13,000 printed pages! Was it all read? Did they remain popular?

Marita
Not really. Their biggest successes were the "Economic Songs"—reprinted endlessly, bought, memorized, and sung, because they were set to existing melodies. Sara Burgerhart was a huge hit. But the later novels, though fascinating—Cornelia Wildschut features atheists, a rape, and a suicide over a #MeToo issue—were 1,200 pages long. Even then, it was...

Abdelkader
...ready for a retranslation.

Fleur
To retranslate you, Abdel.

Abdelkader
But the plots are so cinematic!

Marita
They should be turned into series. Sara Burgerhart would make a fantastic series—so many twists, rural and urban settings, high and low society.

Fleur
I haven't asked you much, Abdel.

Abdelkader
I've been hanging on Marita's every word. I didn't pay attention in high school, but it's all being made up for now.

Fleur
Perhaps this is a good moment. You also retranslated Wolff's Reflections on the State of Justice. What did you do with that?

Abdelkader
"The State of Justice, or What It Means to Be a Good Person."

Close your eyes and listen to the music. Open them. Do you see a man or a woman? Who do you see? And does it matter? If I had presented myself differently to be read by you, would you be surprised to learn I was of a different gender than the one I revealed? Would that change what made you laugh? Or would you shrug and turn the page? From what gender do the sounds of nature arise? Thunder. Lightning. Avalanches. Rain. Doesn't this prove that our entire thinking is infected by dualities that confuse, paralyze, and obscure rather than clarify or enlighten?
That duality is a tricky thing—once set in motion, it forces us to choose, and choosing implies hierarchy, placing one above the other without real justification. An athlete can appeal to physical prowess that determines performance—there's a clear first, second, and third. But in art or science, what do we base our judgment on? Does it matter if it's written by a man or woman, someone old or young? The revealing truth is that it doesn't matter. But the damage is done—for thousands of years, we've divided the world into male and female, assigned them different qualities, and stubbornly clung to it, chained by ignorance, denying ourselves progress. How do I know all this? Because I read. And write. And in writing, the truth revealed itself, overwhelmingly simple: the only thing that matters is that you create what moves you, that you write from the freedom to discover. What you breathe life into lives.

Fleur
It's as if you're speaking to all writers today.

Marita
And to yourself.

Abdelkader
It's striking that this text, which I retranslated, is still so relevant. We're still stuck in these dualities. To this day, we talk about female authors or female readers. Opinion pages are filled with it, but it shouldn't matter.

Fleur
But as you say, the male norm has been so dominant for so long that we still do it. Marita just said the same. Would you read the original?

Marita
Abdel's version is a kind of summary of the ideas in the entire text, including the introduction. Here's a passage from the introduction about female authorship:

But can it be unknown to me, dear Readers, with all my learning, what clever men have said about women who write? Or do men have the privilege, with their greater strength of mind and understanding (we poor, weak women!), to have such great weaknesses? I know of no such privilege. What gives them the right to mock or ridicule us for a folly they fall into daily?
Is there any science that does not have a useful influence on life? Though I admit there are sciences that seem more suited to women. But why should a woman, in her hours of leisure, not be as free to choose a compass, a drawing pen, or a harpsichord? Is genius not free? Are women excluded from that freedom? Let them say I thus give women the right to become not only poetesses and painters but—what is more—mathematicians and philosophers. Those who speak thus understand exactly what I mean. And to what, gentlemen, would you confine women? To a dark ignorance? To an incompetence as shameful for a thinking being as idleness itself? What moves you to place your once so flatteringly praised companions below their own worth?

Fleur
Almost even sharper?

Abdelkader
Yes, a real polemic.

Fleur
There's a lot of sarcasm. "Oh, poor weak women..."

Abdelkader
Yes, yes.

Marita
Fierceness, above all. Oh, she's so angry.

Fleur
Why did she want to write this?

Marita
The State of Justice" is essentially paradise. She wanted to explore, through writing—because for her, writing was also research—what the true meaning of humanity is. That's what it comes down to.

Fleur
You made your retranslation much longer than the original. In the original, there might be two or three sentences, and you expand it into two or three paragraphs. How did you decide to lengthen it?

Abdelkader
It happened organically. When I write, I never think about length. It's more about what the text evokes—a dialogue, a conversation—and suddenly, I have a paragraph or two. It's about the quality of the engagement.

Fleur
But here, it's really about ignorance, the male norm, and the inequality in how female and male authors are valued. You clearly had a lot to say about that.

Abdelkader
Maybe that's it. It resonates so strongly because it's the same debate we're having today. I'm 30, and when I debuted, the literary world was a men's world—not in terms of gender, but in attitude. It was macho: lots of smoking, drinking. I've seen that world change. The current young generation says: "No, we must fight this structural inequality." They've become much more activist. They're addressing what I read in Wolff's text: "Hey, why have you all accepted this? Why do you accept it? This doesn't make sense. If you use your reason, why? She dismantles the system. That's the challenge we face now. The personal is political; the political is personal. Reason is the vehicle for the argument I'm making to reach you. Because I want to engage with you. It's polemical, a pamphlet. And it's strange to shake your head and say: This is still relevant. There's still work to be done."

Fleur
Yet many men dig in their heels and say: "There's nothing wrong. We judge by quality, right?"

Abdelkader
But that argument has become so worn out. Quality is subjective. There's no such thing as quality. No one in the literary world knows what quality is. You only know it when you see it. There's no universal norm. That norm is biased. It's self-satisfied. It's viewed through the lens of gender. That's what the young generation is cleaning up now. The only way to clean it up is to be angry, to be furious, like Wolff. Because the reader must feel it. Then you become engaged. We need translators, writers, independent spirits—truly independent spirits—to get that message across.

Fleur
Maybe it's also because we no longer have to talk about male and female, but can focus on personal passion and anger.

Abdelkader
I'm all for that. People used to say: "Why are you angry?" I heard that often and felt misunderstood. So I can imagine that if the spirit of the times isn't with you, you feel misunderstood. In Wolff's case, they had the wings of the Enlightenment. It was the ideology of the time, which gave them confidence. Now we're in an activist era again. That gives wings too. And I think men say they feel threatened. I understand that—you should feel threatened. Hopefully, it leads to reflection, to reaction, to change. It shouldn't lead to bitterness. It's a question being asked: What do you do? What can you do? How do you position yourself? That's the intellectual challenge we must take on. If you can't do that, you don't belong in the intellectual debate. Because we're always shaping society by asking sharp questions.

Fleur
In a way, she also connects to a topic we've discussed earlier in this series: Johanna Hobius's The Praise of Women and the querelle des femmes, which began with Christine de Pizan's The City of Ladies, advocating for greater appreciation of women. Wolff takes it further. She says: "A woman has the freedom and duty to throw off the yoke of men." That's a bold statement.

Marita
Yes.

Fleur
It's still a debate today. People quickly claim that men and women in literature have equal opportunities. But how can that be if the norm has been male for centuries? How do you see it, Abdel? You retranslated this as if it were your own, but do you agree?

Abdelkader
Well, you know. Over the past few thousand years, women have been treated terribly. Abused, threatened, killed for their gender. You mention all these female authors from the Enlightenment, developing ideas, buzzing with energy. But I know nothing about them. There's a silence—not silence, but ignorance about women's contributions to the Republic of Letters. So there's work to be done—not to correct or set right, but to create awareness. That literature was a vast house with many voices, and we simply don't know. That's painful. In a way, we're more backward than the Enlightenment era. Do you see what I mean? Deken and Wolff created their own market in De Rijp, selling books they wrote themselves. Why don't I know this?

Fleur
What would you do with this knowledge?

Abdelkader
Keep telling the story. You never forget a good story. And you pass it on. When these issues come up—whether in personal education, intimate spaces for transferring wisdom, or in forums discussing structural inequality—you tell this story to show that it's not new. There were people like Deken and Wolff, making things, raising awareness, teaching, inspiring. They were there.

Fleur
Would it help if men cited female examples more often?

Abdelkader
What I find important is showing that literature is made by minorities, by individuals. And they don't really have a gender. It starts with the Epic of Gilgamesh—the oldest literary work we have. The female voice is both creative and destructive. There's also male love, male friendship. All these forces manifest, and it's up to us—inhabitants of 2025 and beyond—to be aware. Not to be narrowed by the societal gaze pressing down on us, but to read texts like this with an open mind, a fresh perspective. Then all those voices rise to the surface, and you begin to understand.

Fleur
That seems like a beautiful closing. 13,000 printed pages, and we've covered it in less than an hour. There's so much more to say—today we saw three facets of Deken and Wolff, but there are many more. We saw the struggle with the spirit, the writer's calling, compassion for animals and people, and the fight against gender inequality. Deken and Wolff were modern, razor-sharp, and incredibly productive. Abdel, thank you for your productivity with these extensive retranslations. And Marita, thank you for your love of the original.
If you want to learn more about Maria van Zuylecom, Anna van der Horst, or Petronella de Timmerman, who wrote during the same period, listen to the bonus tracks made especially for this podcast, written and read by literary scholar Evi Dijcks, available on our website.

The love of women for each other—not sexually, but as sisterhood—also means dying when the other dies. Deken died nine days after Wolff. Next time, we'll visit the Tongeren estate, where Elisabeth Maria Post is buried next to her BFF. How deep does sisterhood go? More on that next time. Thank you for listening.