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Women's Writing
from the Low Countries
1200-1875
A Bilingual Anthology

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Chief ed. Lia van Gemert

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Opportunities for Women in the Chambers of Rhetoric

Barbara Ogier

ANTWERP, BAPTISED 17 FEBRUARY 1648 – ANTWERP, 18 MARCH 1720

LIA VAN GEMERT

TRANSL. BRENDA MUDDE

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ANTWERP had been large and prosperous, a centre of trade as well as learning and home to the internationally renowned Plantin Press. After the city's capture by the Spanish in 1585, many Protestants from the Southern Netherlands fled north, to the Republic, and Amsterdam took over the city's leading role. Spanish rule did not result in a complete collapse of Antwerp's literary and artistic life, however, as is demonstrated by *The Olive Branch* (*De Olijftak*) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the male environment of this Chamber of Rhetoric, women were welcome if they had family ties with male Chamber members. Barbara Ogier was such a woman. Her father, Willem Ogier, was the Chamber's artistic leader between 1660 and 1680, while her husband, the sculptor Willem Kerricx, fulfilled several official positions in the Chamber in the 1690s. Her work was not attributed to her until scholars had traced the references 'daughter of' and 'wife of'.

After a long-running dispute with one of the city guilds had been settled, *De Olijftak* finally started staging public performances again. On 18 October 1677, they played two farces by Willem Ogier and a tragedy, *The Faithful Pantheia* (*De Getrauwe Pantheia*), by his daughter. Although the text of her play has been lost, we do have praise for its 'peerless verse'. Ogier's talent was again acknowledged in 1680, when her tragedy *The Death of Achilles* (*De Doot van Achilles*) was staged, again after a period of conflict and again followed by one of her father's farces. The prologue (Proëmium) to this tragedy has survived. In it, she argues that a woman is uniquely suited to writing about a war that was fought over a woman, Helen of Troy, and fittingly dedicates the play to the wife of the mediator in the disputes between the Chamber and other city groups.

Between 1680 and 1693 the sources are silent about Ogier, and her father's part seems to be over as well. Her name reappears in the Chamber records from 1693, when Barbara's husband took up official positions in the Chamber. Between 1693 and 1700 she

wrote a sizeable or receptions of an occasional pl of *Its New Buildi*. 1694). Success w organised by a C up writing. For r *Achilles*. On her the Dutch Repul

wrote a sizeable body of plays which were performed by the Chamber at official functions or receptions of the city council. She was once paid the sum of 20 guilders by the city for an occasional play that also appeared in print, *The Triumphant Academy, on the Opening of Its New Building* (*Zeghen-praelende Academia in de openinghe van haeren nieuwen bouw* 1694). Success was not guaranteed, however. She failed to win any prizes at a poetry contest organised by a Chamber from Bruges in 1700. After that date, she is believed to have given up writing. For 1703 the records mention a repeat performance of her tragedy *The Death of Achilles*. On her death in 1720, painter-poet Willem van Swaanenburg, an immigrant from the Dutch Republic, praised her as 'a Minerva of our age'.

8 MARCH 1720

LA VAN GEMERT
SL. BRENDA MUDDÉ

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f Achilles (*De Doot*
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s from 1693, when
1693 and 1700 she

De Doot van Achilles

Ik hadde nooit Parnas met zinnen dorven naken
zo ik Minerva niet had zien den ingank maken.
'k Heb eerst 't gebouw van mijn zang-iverig gemoed
gegrond op vaste hoop, door haar te zijn behoed
5 van Momus* gifse tong: die niet uit reden lastert,
maar omdat zijn gemoed is van de rust verbasterd.
Mijn voorgewende reën zijn niet tot de godin
van 't oude heidendom, maar een Minerv' die in
Poesis' zaal uit jonst 't geluk heeft haar t' aanschouwen.
10 Mevrouw, vergunt dat ik hier mag het steunsel bouwen
om mijn voltooide werk verdraagzaam (niet om lof)
te brengen op toneel: daar nooit volmaakter stof
voor dezen en ontbrak, doch vrouwelijk gedreven,
heb niet vermetel, maar zang-iverig gegeven
15 't gedacht den vollen toom, om Griek, en Trojens bloed
te graven weer uit d' aard. De reden die mij doet
mijn onervarenheid bewegen om de schaden
van Trojen te doen zien, door zo veel heldendaden,
en 't vreed' beminnend' oog te strelen, en vermaak
20 te wensen in den strijd, en bloedig oorlogszaak,
is, dat een vrouwenhand niet onbekwaam moet wezen
te brengen aan den dag een strijd die kwam gerezen
uit oorzaak van een vrouw. En waarom zoud' 't gedacht
niet drukken met de pen, dat anders staal volbracht.
25 Wie dorst aan d' Amazoons de strijdbaarheid ontroven
en wie zou nu ter tijd de mannen doen geloven
dat enig vrouwgemoed die vromigheid bezit?
Maar dit 's mijn oogmerk niet: ik doel alleen op 't wit
uws welgeborenheids mij plichtig te verschonen

5 god van de hyperkritiek

*The Death of A
husband had a
Olijftak). De Co
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The Death of Achilles. The prologue to the play is dedicated to Isabella de Condé, whose husband had acted on the city's behalf in the conflicts surrounding *The Olive Branch* (*De Olijftak*). De Condé will, like Minerva, have to protect the writer from criticism. Ogier also stresses that a woman is eminently capable of describing the Trojan War, which was after all triggered by a woman, Helen.

The Death of Achilles

I would never have dared approach Parnassus in verse
If I had not seen Minerva making her entry first.
For I founded the whole mansion of my poetic heart
Upon the steadfast hope that she would take my part
5 Against the critics' venom, which slanders not with reason,
But because the critics' minds know no peaceful season.
My fictitious words address not the goddess wise
From pagan times, but a Minerva whose eyes
In Poetry's hall are privileged to behold her.
10 Madam, permit me here the support to solder
To put my finished work, tolerantly (not for praise),
Upon the stage: since never was matter for plays
More perfect wanting before, yet with a woman's flair,
I have given, not rashly, a full poetic share
15 To thought, extracting blood, both Trojan blood and Greek
Once more from the earth. The reason that I seek
To move my inexperience to show the heavy price
That Troy was forced to pay for such brave sacrifice,
To please peace-loving eyes and bid them savour war,
20 The battle's turmoil and fields awash with gore,
Is that a woman's hand cannot lack the resource
To represent a conflict that first began its course
By reason of a woman. And why should not our thought
Imprint with the pen what else cold steel had wrought?
25 Who dares rob Amazons of their belligerence?
And who in our age would mock male intelligence,
Pretend that any woman has a heart so brave?
But that is not my aim: and all I wish to crave
Is licence for myself from your nobility

30 een hoog verheven zaak zo slecht u te vertonen
die met volmaakter stof 't gehoor kond' zijn gestreeld
maar t'wijl den hemel mij heeft van 't geluk gedeeld
dat uw gedoogzaamheid mijn stoutheid wilt verdragen
zo bleef ik eeuwelijk verplicht aan uw behagen.

30 To unfc
Which
But sin
May yo
And my

Sources: OGIER N.D.
Literature: Meeus &
Van Vaeck & Verhot

To unfold a noble theme with great simplicity
Which with more perfect matter the ear might enjoy,
But since the heavens above have cut me off from joy
May your forbearance now endure my foolhardy song,
And my debt to your favour will remain forever strong.

TRANSL. PAUL VINCENT

Sources: OGIER N.D.

Literature: Meeus & Van Gemert 2009a; Ogier 2009; Porteman & Smits-Veldt 2008: 732-734, 754;
Van Vaeck & Verhouft 1997.