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The *Anna Bijns Prijs* (1985-)

In one sense, the origins of the *Anna Bijns Prijs* constitute relatively recent history: at this writing 1985 lies a mere seven years in the past. In another, however, 1985 and the origins of the prize are far enough removed to serve as material for myth and legend, and the prize has become one of those events in (at least literary) history with potential to rank among the Netherlands' most memorable occasions. For in 1985 the prize was a mere idea, born at a kitchen table in the humble surroundings of a private home; it grew into a major fundraising foundation in that same year, into a smashingly successful arts festival in the early months of 1986, and into an actual prize of 10,000 guilders awarded for the first time nine months later. The prize's beginnings are singularly inauspicious. One day some scrutinizing eyes spotted the list of writers who, over the years, had been awarded the P.C. Hooft prize, the Dutch government's most prestigious, and lucrative, literary distinction. In all, this prize had been awarded thirty-five times, thirty-one times to male writers, four times to female writers. Further investigation into other Dutch literary prizes showed this to be a common pattern: there was never more than one female laureate for every seven males (Dorrestein 1988, 54; Meulenbelt 136). Discussion of this phenomenon led to practical action, as it seems to do in the Netherlands, and the four women involved (Renate Dorrestein and Anja Meulenbelt, writers; Elly de Waard, poet; and Caroline van Tuyll, publisher) decided that they would have to rectify the situation. Their solution was to establish a new literary award, a twin sister of the P.C. Hooft, as prestigious and as lucrative, specifically for the female voice in literature. As patroness they chose the first independent female poet in the Dutch language, Anna Bijns (1493-1575), who very conveniently also pre-dated Hooft by a century.

In the seven years of its existence the *Anna Bijns Prijs* has come to be a "happening," a series of delightfully brash and impertinent events which have yet to become repetitious ceremonies. The first fundraising event was a mammoth gala benefit performance celebrating women in the arts, held in the Amsterdam Schouwburg on February 23, 1986. It lasted from eight o'clock in the evening until four the next morning, as on seven stages female artists presented the fruits of their interests and talents: opening remarks by Andreas Burnier, dramatized scenes from Anna Bijns' life by the all-female Dutch group *Theater Persona*, a show by the English punk poet Anne Clark, non-stop readings by twenty authors, medieval music and dance, songs such as "Zuidamerikaanse strijdliederen van vrouwen," an auction of writers' personal effects, and a discotheque with the "disc-amazone Yolande de Boer" (*Het Anna Bijns Feest*). An audience of two thousand was highly appreciative, and altogether the occasion raised enough money to enable the Anna Bijns Foundation to award the prize a number of times. Money and success do much for respectability, also in the case of literary prizes. What had been a mere footnote to current literary history suddenly became a *cause célèbre*. Reports Dorrestein: "So our party was an elegant and successful affair. National television broadcast some of it. Next day, the papers ran page-long articles. All of a sudden, we had arrived and we were established" (1988, 61).

In the next years the founders of the prize showed themselves to be adept in the pursuit of long-term as well as short-term goals, and while it would have been impossible to duplicate the audacity of the initial *Anna Bijns Feest*, a variety of similar though smaller-scaled celebrations has kept the prize in the public eye. Each of the ceremonies awarding the prize, beginning with the first to Josepha Mendels in November, 1986, echoes the original *Feest* in its celebration of the female artistic imagination. So the programme for the Mendels evening included songs from the sixteenth-century environment of Anna Bijns, scenes from Mendels' work dramatized by *Theater Persona*, and music by *'t Vileinig Vel*, a women's folk-music ensemble. The ceremony awarding the prize to Ellen Warmond in December, 1987, included music by the all-female *Syrinx Saxofoonkwartet*, while the programme awarding the prize to Inez van Dullemen in November, 1989 featured the world premiere of "Wijfken Staat Oppe," three texts by Anna Bijns reworked as a triptych for soprano and flute/alto flute. The 1990 decision to extend the concerns of the Anna Bijns Foundation to Belgium provided the impetus for a two-day Flemish *Anna Bijns Feest* (May 24 and 25, 1991), which featured a walk-about in Antwerp to unveil plaques at the three houses where Anna Bijns resided during her life, and a celebration of modern female Flemish writers in

a programme entitled the "Nacht van de Vrouwelijke Stem." In November, 1991, the first Flemish poet, Christine D'Haen, was awarded the *Anna Bijns Prijs*.

Having arrived and being established, however, does not insure immunity from controversy and criticism, and the prize's inherent function of consciousness-raising about inequalities between the sexes in modern Dutch society has led to heated debate on this subject. In the Netherlands, to be sure, women are not the only ones responsible for controversy, literary or otherwise, for 1985 was also the year that Hugo Brandt Corstius was nominated by an independent jury for the P.C. Hooft prize, which the minister responsible then refused to award because Brandt Corstius had too often insulted him and his government colleagues (Meulenbelt 136). But by comparison the controversy caused by the *Anna Bijns Prijs* touched chords which ran much deeper. Some of the initial skirmishes were relatively minor and somewhat humorous. Dorrestein reports that the notary public who was to draw up the official documents for the Foundation in mid-1985 balked at using the word "secretaresse" in article five:

> Dat een stichting een secretaris bezit en geen secretaresse, verklaarde de notaris. "Tussen die twee functies bestaat een groot maatschappelijk verschil," lichtte hij ons in. Ja meneer. Toevallig is dat net de reden waarom wij lijden en strijden, wij weten er alles van, vaart u alstublieft voort met artikel zes. Nee, riep de notaris uit: zouden wij zwart op wit van een secretaresse reppen, dan zou die post nimmer door een man kunnen worden vervuld. Perzoonlijk zouden wij niet weten waarom niet, als omgekeerd dames ook voor secretaris kunnen worden uitgescholden. De notaris nam zijn pen weer op. Hij wou gaan schrijven, echt waar, maar het ging niet. "Maar dat kun je een man niet aandoen!" barstte hij uit. Toen werden wij heel streng van luistert u eens hier en gazomaardoor. Dat zette zoden aan de dijk (*Het Anna Bijns Feest*).

A more heated controversy arose around the decision to price men's tickets to the festival at the Schouwburg higher than women's. The founders had reasoned that, since in the main men earn one guilder to women's seventy-five cents, the tickets to this event would cost men that much more; Dutch men were, by and large, not amused. But all of this was minor irritation compared to the fracas that ensued following the initial announcement that the prize was being established not for feminists, nor even for female writers, but for "the female voice in literature." This concept, though not clearly defined, was clear enough to rouse violent emotion and bring tacitly held assumptions about women and literature into the open. Particularly provocative was the specific statement "that male writers who were able to write just like women would also be taken into consideration as possible candidates" for the award (Dorrestein 1988, 58; Meulenbelt 137). In the ensuing tempest, aired publicly in the press and on television, many critics revealed that their intellectual adherence to gender neutrality had the shallowest of roots in emotion. "Celebrities appeared on talk shows, calmly stating that the word female signifies weakness, whining, complaints, lack of interest. Writing like a female, lowering yourself, becoming a specimen of a lesser order - never" (Dorrestein 1988, 59). Finally it was Brandt Corstius who had the audacity, and perhaps the honesty, to articulate the general mood: "Maar WIE zou er in hemelsnaam willen schrijven als een vrouw?" (Dorrestein 1991b, 15).

Ironically, such disdain for the female voice implies tacit recognition of its existence, and the establishment of the prize has launched a discussion about the female voice in literature which has extended even to the pages of newspapers such as *Trouw* (Dorrestein 1991b). In this discussion Dutch feminist critics like Dorrestein and Meulenbelt participate in the international and interdisciplinary debate on the issue, drawing on French, English, and American literature in their analysis of the Netherlandic situation. The main focus of Dorrestein and Meulenbelt is what has been called "woman as reader": they examine how female characters are portrayed in literature written by men, at how literature written by women has been treated in critical reception, at who influences canon and who determines what is "good" literature and what is not. From their analysis it would seem that Dutch critics are at least as adept as their counterparts in other national literatures at excluding female writers from the general discussion.

For example, in a chapter provocatively entitled "Boeken van vrouwen lees ik niet" (a direct quote from the critic Bob den Uyl, cited in Meulenbelt 156), Meulenbelt provides a purely statistical analysis of *Het literaire klimaat 1970-1985*, in order to check how female writers have been discussed (51-53). In a series of essays this handbook purports to provide a comprehensive overview of Netherlandic literature of these recent fifteen years, of precisely the years in which also an unprecedented number of women published their work. The book is edited by three men (Tom van Deel, Nicolaas Matsier, and Cyrille Offermans) and

consists of essays by seventeen contributors, fifteen men and two women. Rob Schouten's introductory chapter on general trends and movements (feminism is not mentioned) names eighty men and four women; a chapter on new writers, the *debutanten*, mentions twenty-four men and six women; chapters on literary critics, on academics, on "great men," on poetry, and even on "neglected voices," mention only men. Only the chapter on "the female voice," added as an afterthought, names female writers, over eighty of them in fact, but it seems that once women have been assigned to a category of their own, they can be virtually ignored in the rest of the book. In all, the index lists seven hundred names, of which one hundred are women; of these hundred about seventy-five would not have been included if the two chapters (by women) on women's and children's literature had been left out.

Why is this so, one wonders; is it the result of a conscious and overt (male) conspiracy to exclude women from literature? For most critics this is probably not the case. Rather, they share the general societal belief, most often held subconsciously, that men are more important than women, and they participate in an uncritical acceptance of "the male voice" as constituting the norm for "good" literature. This state of affairs is perpetuated by the fact that most of the critics who contribute to the discussion of canon, be it by book reviews in newspapers, by teaching literature at universities, by publishing articles in literary histories, and by deciding on prize recipients, are also male. The *Anna Bijns Prijs* is irksome to this male literary establishment because it focuses a spotlight on the gender imbalance in critical reception, and in so doing calls into question the claim to objectivity that critical reception has always made. That a major literary prize can dramatically affect public and critical reception of an author's work is clearly demonstrated by the fortunes of the *Anna Bijns Prijs*'s first recipient, Josepha Mendels. Though her work was always published and read in certain circles, she received little official recognition and was not distinguished by a major literary prize until the age of eighty-four. Once crowned with the *Anna Bijns Prijs*, however, she suddenly became a writer worthy of attention. "Ze verscheen in meerdere televisieprogramma's, werd geïnterviewd. Haar oude boeken werden herdrukt. De oplagen ervan waren in het jaar na de Anna Bijns Prijs tien keer zo hoog als ervoor" (Meulenbelt 138).

Such analysis of the fortunes of female writers in critical reception is relatively unambiguous and straightforward when compared to the discussion of "the female voice," which, not unlike something as nebulous as "love," remains theoretically elusive despite its clearly felt existence in everyday experience. Even members of the jury charged with awarding the first *Anna Bijns Prijs* operated from an experiential rather than a theoretical basis. At the first meeting the chair proposed that the committee begin its deliberations with a discussion of just what might be understood as "the female voice."

> Er valt een stilte. Een van de vrouwen zoekt haar leesbril, een andere haar sigaretten. Een derde scharrelt wat met haar papieren. Dan zegt de uitgeefster: misschien kunnen we beter beginnen met het noemen van de namen die we in ons hoofd hebben. De anderen stemmen ogenblikkelijk in, halen blocnoots tevoorschijn, praten door elkaar heen. Natuurlijk, die moet er ook op. En die. Binnen een half uur is er een lijst opgesteld... Tijdens de volgende vergadering wordt besloten wie de laureaat zal zijn... Over de definitie van "de vrouwelijke stem" hebben we het niet meer (Meulenbelt 135).

The jury reports accompanying each recommendation for a prize winner, however, and some of the deliberations by critics such as Dorrestein and Meulenbelt, begin to sketch the contours of this elusive female voice. They soon realize that *a single* female voice, easily identifiable through time and social class, and unified by gender, does not exist. Rather, writes Meulenbelt, one must be attuned to "a complete choir" (144) unified by its expression of different facets of women's existence and experience. Another difficulty is posed by the fact that the female voice will not differ completely from its male counterpart, as both share certain aspects of a common culture. Nevertheless, writes Dorrestein, the female voice is different: it speaks a "vernacular language," an "accent or dialect" which "serves to describe specifically female experiences or activities" (1988, 56). This female vernacular differs from male language in that it seeks to do away with "stereotypes and lies about women," describing "female experiences and the female imagination" from the inside out rather than the outside in (58).

Mendels' work is a good example of this aspect of the female voice. Her main characters are by and large women, and while these women do occupy traditional roles such as mother or wife, they do so in less than traditional ways. The short story entitled "Achttien paar handen," for example, focuses on the (even now) more female than male dilemma of having to leave a child to another person's care if one works. In the story, a single

mother who must work full-time takes care of her son with the help of a series of not particularly trustworthy au pair girls; despite her misgivings, she discovers that the boy has not sustained irreparable psychological damage and the mother-son bond remains strong, a source of sustenance for them both (*Feestelijke uitreiking...1986*, 11-13). In a 1950 novel, *Als wind en rook*, the main character Eliza leaves her orthodox Jewish husband and their children because she can no longer tolerate his reproaches for her inability to bear sons or keep a kosher household. In the husband's bitter remark that his wife has "geen religie, maar een leegte die zij met menselijke liefde en geluk tracht te vullen" (quoted in *ibid.*, 13), Mendels casts a critical eye on the inhumanity of both the subjection of woman to man in marriage, and on the subjection of humanity to a God who despises human love and happiness.

If one aspect of the female voice explores non-traditional reality for women, another aspect seeks to overcome the dichotomies characteristic of traditional "male" thinking, and in particular to reformulate the polarized relationship between the sexes (Meulenbelt 147). This exploration of alternatives to polarized opposites seems to be most characteristic of the female voice of Ellen Warmond, the second *Anna Bijns Prijs* winner. Already her first collection of poems, *Proeftuin* (1953), touches on themes which continue to be characteristic of her work through the next decades: "lichaam/geest, passiviteit/actie, beweginloosheid/beweging, stilte/stem, dood/leven, ontstaan/verdwijnen, inzicht/uitzicht, taal/een andere taal, vraag/antwoord, waarheid/leugen" (*Feestelijke uitreiking...1987*, 11). In her exploration of these polarities, Warmond posits a world in which subjectivity and relativity are the only stabilizing factors, in which the self is perceived via conflicts and contradictions (19). Yet this situation is not an occasion for despair, for sorrow and anger, but rather it becomes a point of departure for a fruitful exploration of the self and its relationship to the world in which it lives.

Inez van Dullemen, winner of the *Anna Bijns Prijs* in 1989, represents yet another manifestation of the female voice. Characteristic of her work is a refusal to accept the categories of self versus other as absolutes, particularly when such categories imply that an objectifying artist presents characters to the reader for observation; rather, Dullemen is very much an interested party present in her texts. Many of her works take the form of travelogues, more a male than a female genre in that men have traditionally been the greater travellers, but even in these texts Dullemen melds the observing self with the observed (*Feestelijke uitreiking...1989*, 14). *Vroeger is dood*, her 1976 novel about the gradual decline and inevitable death of aging parents, was a pioneering work, for there had never yet been a book which dealt with the tragedy of old age in this way (17). This work manifests the female voice in several ways: it deals with an experience more often reserved for female than for male children (women tend to be the primary caregivers for aging parents), and it diffuses the borders between personal experience and fictional literature, for the book is about Dullemen and her parents even as it is about all women and their parents.[1] Some themes, however, seem to require greater distance, and Dullemen's most recent novel, *Het gevorkte beest* (1986), deals with the Second World War, with the major question of the origin of good and evil in humanity, in a purely fictional form. Set in modern Germany, with a male protagonist, the novel depicts how the characters are gradually forced to come to terms with the past before they can go on with the present. But though it seems that Dullemen is able to formulate the questions she addresses in the novel so clearly because of the objectivity of pure fiction, even this book represents the ripening of seeds planted in her own experiences during the War (17).

Beyond having an impact on the reception of contemporary writers and influencing discussion of the female voice, the *Anna Bijns Prijs* is also initiating a rereading of female writers from previous times, in particular of the Prize's patron, Anna Bijns. Some of the connections which have been made between patron and Prize are extremely tenuous, though amusing: served at the first *Anna Bijns Feest* was the *Anna Bijns Cocktail* (Campari with Caveno Bianco, or alternatively Campari with soda or orange juice); in the *Anna Bijns Cup* Dutch writers pitted themselves against their Flemish counterparts in their knowledge about Anna Bijns and *Anna Bijns Prijs* winners; the *Anna Bijns Casino* was a midnight fund-raising affair (*Feestelijke uitreiking...1989*, 9). Other connections are more apt: in particular, the use that has been made of the only known visual representation of Anna Bijns, a face drawn into a capital "O" in one of her books, is in keeping with the spirit of this author. The caricature, comprised of only eyes, a pointed nose, and a tongue impertinently protruding, aptly captures the spirit of Bijns herself as well as the attitude of the Anna Bijns Foundation to the literary establishment. Besides serving as a visual motto on the Foundation's publications, it has been reworked as a small silver sculpture by the artist Maja van Hall, and is the *Anna Bijns Trofee* which accompanies the monetary prize.

Beyond this, however, the attention deflected from the Prize to its patron has led to a renewed interest in the sixteenth-century author. For the first time the three

Antwerp houses in which she resided during her life were distinguished by plaques, and Flemish radio aired a play about her life written by the modern author Elisabeth Marain. The play is divided into three sections: part one depicts Bijns' most intensively creative period, the years 1515 to 1530 when she lived with her mother and brother (the dates as given by Marain incorrectly imply that Bijns' mother died in 1535); part two is set in 1536, the year that her brother Marten married and Bijns moved into a house across the street, setting up an independent household and school; part three shows Bijns at eighty years of age, making the difficult decision to close her school and give up her hard-won personal independence for the kind of security required by the elderly. In the drama Marain has convincingly intertwined known facts about Bijns' life, scholarly surmise about much that remains unknown, and a twentieth-century sensibility about the subjective experience of a woman fiercely intent on maintaining her independence and using her gift for writing even in the face of opposition from virtually all quarters. Some of the dialogue is composed of direct quotations from Bijns' work, which lends new life to both author and text; in the play Marain has created a character both plausibly sixteenth-century and entirely sympathetic to modern audiences.

The Prize's emphasis on the female voice also affects the way in which scholars will read the work of Anna Bijns in times to come. Previous appreciation came primarily from the Catholic camp, for most of the poems in the three volumes published during Bijns' lifetime were either anti-Reformation or devotional, and she was one of the major Roman Catholic voices of the sixteenth century (echoed by the reaction of Annemarie Grewel to the establishment of the prize: "Anna Bijns? Dat is toch een Roomse trut?" *Het Anna Bijns Feest*). Non-Catholics as well as Catholics appreciated the unparalleled animation and linguistic virtuosity with which she inspired the standard refrain form of contemporary rhetorical poetics, although the passion which lay at the heart of this inspiration was viewed with some suspicion by (male) critics who held emotionality to be a handicap in the writing of "good" literature.

Bijns' emotional nature was viewed somewhat differently when, in the nineteenth century, manuscripts containing other works by her were discovered: with equal passion and linguistic virtuosity, it seems, she had written poems on friendship, love poems, and biting satires on the relationship between the sexes in marriage. This created some consternation, for how could a "virtuous old maid" have written such convincing poems on these themes without actual experience? If one reads these texts with a broader notion of the female voice or the female experience, however, a very convincing picture of a fiery, intelligent woman in the lower middle classes of sixteenth-century Antwerp emerges. It seems, for example, that Bijns managed to maintain close friendships with some of the Franciscan Minorites in Antwerp, certainly an unusual but not entirely unthinkable form of interaction between the sexes. In her friendship poems Bijns reworks conventions of late-medieval love poetry to create an entirely different genre. Her marriage satires also participate in a popular genre of the time, but hers are the only ones that we know of that were written by a woman, and the poems give every evidence of expressing that different point of view. Bijns is one of the few identifiable female voices in European literature of the period, and work on its "difference" has only just begun (Aercke; De Waard; Joldersma).

In her play Marain has an aging Bijns make an inventory of the few pieces of furniture she possesses (a list Bijns did indeed have made, under unhappy circumstances, at the end of her life), and Marain follows scholarly surmise when she has Bijns articulate a certain fondness for these items: "Dat moet met mij mee, waarheen ik ook ga, tot de dood mij van deze dingen scheidt. Ik heb ze nog van moeder geërfd" (III, 17; cf. De Waard 31). Among these possessions is "een tafel," probably a kitchen table, possibly the very table at which Bijns sat while she wrote her poetry in younger days. As such, this kitchen table is not merely a kitchen table; rather, it is a tangible expression of women's experience, literary or otherwise, throughout the centuries, for women have more often worked at kitchen tables than at desks, and the production which comes from a kitchen table will most likely differ substantially from what is completed at a desk. It is fitting that in the context of the *Anna Bijns Prijs* this aspect of kitchen tables has been accorded a new prominence; indeed, kitchen tables are seen as birthplaces for great things, of things which are great precisely because they stand at the centre of life.[2] At Elly de Waard's kitchen table (a respectable oak one), the Prize was born, and if journalists initially joked about how clearly that proved that a woman's place was in the kitchen (Dorrestein 1988, 54-55), the Prize's success had them scrambling for other explanations. "Aha! Dat bedoelen jullie natuurlijk als metafoor!" exclaimed a (male) friend who could not accept the kitchen table for precisely what it was, a dual-function kitchen table. At Renate Dorrestein's kitchen table (a new, marble-topped one, exuding boardroom respectability), the four founders discussed the organization of the *Anna Bijns Feest* (Dorrestein 1991a). At another kitchen table (anonymous this time), the first jury committee met to decide on the first prize recipient

(Meulenbelt 135).

That something as concrete as a kitchen table should come to symbolize a phenomenon as abstract as the female voice seems once again typically Dutch, but the connection is delightful. No doubt Anna Bijns' kitchen table differed significantly in style and magnificence from those at which the Prize in her name originated. At all of these tables, however, significant developments grew from insignificant beginnings: a major corpus of sixteenth-century literature, a major twentieth-century literary prize. All of them sustained female voices determined to express through literature their experiences of and their ideas about the world in which they lived. In its intent, in its aplomb, in its choice of patron, in its use of symbols, even in its making much of kitchen tables, the *Anna Bijns Prijs* will be a hard act to follow.

NOTES

[1] Meulenbelt devotes one chapter, "Is het persoonlijke literatuur?" (90-108), to the problem of *Wahrheit* versus *Dichtung*, truth versus invention, reality versus fiction. She concludes, quite rightly, that arguments assigning books to the non-literary or literary realm on this basis are often contradictory and that such judgements are arbitrary.

[2] A popular view is articulated by Dorrestein: "Persoonlijk echter vind ik het geheel geen last dat ik mijn eigen kleren moet strijken, mijn eigen eten moet koken en mijn eigen verjaarskalender moet bijhouden, want, zoals Fay Weldon eens zei: 'Die arme mannen die dat allemaal voor zich laten doen, staan zo ver van het leven af dat je je afvraagt hoe ze er in vredesnaam nog over kunnen schrijven'" (1991, 15). Meulenbelt quite rightly points out that this is true only up to a point, particularly when children are involved, and that an excess of household responsibilities will negatively affect at least the quantity of writing, even if it would affect the quality positively (26-27).

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