

Kristien Hemmerechts's *Brede heupen* and the Social Construction of Woman

The preponderant critical view of Kristien Hemmerechts's second novel *Brede heupen* is succinctly expressed by the glum titles of many reviews: "Een middelpunt dat leeg blijft" (A. Heumakers), "Doorkijkspiegel kan geen uitzicht bieden" (J. Verstappen), "Het failliet van alle idealen" (K. Hageraats), "Onbestemde Laura" (G. J. Zwier), "Ooit een normaal mens ontmoet?" (M. van Noesel), "Vader is niet thuis" (E. Rinckhout), and -- my favorite -- "Brede heupen en verder niets" (A. Kossmann). Although six of the eleven reviews of *Brede heupen* that I have studied express essentially positive judgements, most reviewers find the novel either depressing or exasperating, and few seem to have derived much pleasure from it; the subversive ironic humor that frequently surfaces in the protagonist Laura's thoughts seems moreover to have escaped them almost entirely. Yet this novel about a young woman who endures a series of dead-end relationships and whose sister commits herself to a psychiatric hospital has an open ending that strikes this reader at least as hopeful, and includes much satirical commentary on such things as the creation and preservation of female beauty and postnatal exercises.

A common thread running through most of the reviews is the perception of Laura as "gedwee", "totaal geblokkeerd", and lacking in "dadendrang." Certainly Laura puts up with inflexible or manipulative behavior from each of the three men in her life, but before one concludes that she simply lacks a will of her own, it is vital to consider the impact family dynamics have had upon her character. It emerges in the course of the narrative that Laura has always occupied the weakest position among her siblings: the second child and second girl, she was less pretty and popular than her sister Elza, less important than her younger brother Tom, who after their father's early death assumed the privileged status of eldest male in the family, and less loved than Bart, the baby of the family. In childhood disputes, Elza's word was always taken over Laura's; and Laura's later ideas regarding Elza's illness are scornfully dismissed

by her family. Even after Laura has given birth to her own daughter, Edith, Laura's mother, who is something of a matriarch, continues to direct her life, taking the baby into her own home and insisting that Laura supplement her secretarial training with a stint in London to improve her English.

In view of this consistent domination by her family, it should not surprise the reader that Laura puts up with the wordless rejection of Jasper, the baby's father, the evasion tactics of Antonello Mela, the middle-aged Italian with whom she becomes involved in London, and her physical makeover and sexual exploitation by her boss Vincent. In my view, the reviewers' precipitate condemnation of Laura's vagueness makes them unreceptive to the oblique social criticism *Brede heupen* offers; they miss not only the humor in the novel but also the observations on women's lack of freedom to choose for themselves what sort of persons they become and what relationships they have with men. For the apparent superficiality and passivity of Laura's life reflect her limited power to direct it, just as her sister Elza's retreat into the hospital reflects her inability to function without the security of dependable male approval -- an inability fostered by a society in which a woman's success can still consist in acquiring a man of her own. *Brede heupen* illustrates the destructiveness to women of accepting without question this gauge of success, and criticizes by implication the physical and behavioral role-playing required to achieve such success.

Nevertheless one should not overlook, as nearly all the reviewers do, the significant instances in which Laura does act decisively. It is she who makes the first advance with Jasper and she who decides to leave him; she ultimately violates Antonello Mela's insistence on a father-daughter relationship by kissing him passionately when he sees her off on her return to Brussels; and after Vincent tries to impregnate her by covertly omitting to use a condom during intercourse, she makes up her mind to leave both her job and the relationship. Her vague search for

someone to marry at the end of the novel demonstrates the same combination of conformity and independence as her previous actions: although she does not seriously question the desirability of finding a mate, she is at least intent on choosing "een normale man"; and she is in no hurry. Laura is in fact the only character in *Brede heupen* who attempts to resist conventional male-female relations. The reviewers fail to look beneath surface actions for what the novel reveals about social pressures and expectations regarding gender; nor do they consider the significance of a woman's decision not to act when that means not doing the conventional thing.

Perhaps more surprisingly, only one reviewer (Jos Borré in *De Morgen*) discusses the title "Brede heupen" -- and yet it is a title resonant with significance. Big hips are among the primary features distinguishing women from men: the phrase instantly conjures up a female image that could seem positive or negative to women and men alike, suggesting anything from voluptuousness to obesity to fitness for childbearing. It tells the reader at once that female appearance and female images will play a major role in the novel -- just as they do in life. Judgements of Laura's appearance figure significantly in her romantic relationships, beginning with the blunt comment of her first lover: "Je bent mooi, maar niet zo mooi als je zus" (130). In fact Laura has been unfavorably compared with her sister Elza -- "in alle opzichten de knapste van de twee" (38) -- since they were children. Dressed alike by their mother for years, they later developed sharply different styles: "Elza liet haar haar tot aan haar middel groeien...Laura liet het hare kort knippen en droeg bij voorkeur lange broeken. Elza had een voorliefde voor wijde rokken en gebloemde jurken." Their brother Tom went so far as to call Laura "een mannelijke versie van Elza" (38). The sharp contrast suggests Laura's recognition that she could not win on "feminine" grounds and her consequent decision not to compete with Elza. Her first serious affair, with her best friend's brother Jasper, who is ugly almost to the point of grotesqueness, reveals to what extent Laura minded the negative comparisons: "Bij Jasper voelde ze zich mooi, niet langer de minder geslaagde versie van Elza" (81). She is drawn to him both because and in spite of his ugliness. Jasper eventually protests against the predominantly sexual character of their relationship; but he also senses, and resents, Laura's ambivalence about his looks. Perhaps in retaliation,

perhaps as an extension of his self-loathing, he begins to reject her when her pregnancy becomes visible: "Hoe meer lichaam ik had, hoe minder hij het wenste aan te raken", she realizes later (103). Obsessed with his own ugliness, Jasper cannot accept what he apparently views as the distortion of Laura's body by her pregnancy. Finally she ceases to exist for him; when she moves out of their flat he barely looks up (29).

For Laura's middle-aged admirer Antonello Mela, it is not her physical image that matters, but rather the daughter role he imposes upon her, in its own fashion as restrictive as an insistence that she look a certain way. Although she feels a strong sexual attraction to him, he either ignores this or deromanticizes her remarks: when she says, "Je hebt een mals lijf," he replies, "Zeg maar dat ik dik ben" (112). Her surprise upon realizing he has no intention of sleeping with her brings this explanation: "Laat ik het zo stellen dat jij de dochter bent die ik nooit heb gehad...welke vader is in staat om in zijn dochter een moeder of minnares te zien?" (117) She finds it impossible to tell him that she is in fact a mother, indeed almost begins to doubt it herself, so powerful is the image he has projected onto her. Through her unpremeditated kiss on her departure from England, Laura finally bursts out of this image and forces him to see her as the adult woman she is, and he responds for a moment: "Hij zei niets, drukte haar tegen zich aan" (120). Yet he has the last word -- and doubtless protects his private image of her from further attack -- by failing to reply when she writes and telephones him from Brussels.

The pragmatism and detachment that characterize Laura's relationship with Vincent are not surprising in light of her previous involvements. With Jasper Laura experienced physical passion, with Antonello sublimated desire; with Vincent sex loses, for Laura, all relation to love and becomes part of the ritualized acting out of roles. The connection between her appearance and her role becomes, moreover, explicit rather than inferred. Jasper's rejection as well as Vincent's incomplete approval derive directly from Laura's too-big hips; but only Vincent verbalizes his disapproval: "Het zijn je heupen," he says after critically watching her try on dresses (8). This incontrovertible judgement becomes the focus of Laura's makeover by Vincent, who buys (and expects her to use) exercising devices, prescribes a

low-calorie diet, and urges her to take up jogging and swimming (9).

Laura's relations with Vincent are expressive of a profound cynicism on her part, not only about his sexual exploitation of her but also about her chances of ever having a truly satisfying relationship with a man. Having experienced passion and tenderness as dead ends, Laura now resorts to conventional female compliance -- at least in outward behavior. In the beginning she regards her relationship with Vincent as a standard scenario in which she plays a prescribed role: the first time he makes advances she thinks, "Het hoort er gewoon bij. De baas en zijn secretaresse" (15). Her socialization as a woman has moreover prepared her to play this role effortlessly: "Op elk gebaar van hem volgde automatisch haar respons, alsof ze geprogrammeerd was om hem ter wille te zijn" (16). She also discovers the seductive rewards of gratified vanity: "Ze had, zo merkte ze, lange slanke benen. En ze had publiek nodig. Vincent bood haar dat publiek. Ze speelden op elkaar in" (21). She soon realizes, however, that she is losing control of the situation, but resists the knowledge by making up half-true stories for her friends about her boss's attempts to seduce her. When Vincent does decide to initiate a sexual relationship, Laura finds herself unable to give him the "streng blik" she has told her friends would keep him in line. Instead she nervously bats her eyelashes at him (20). Laura's failure to resist what must be termed sexual harassment has a number of causes: she has been rejected by two men, and Vincent's attentions flatter her; she considers the situation typical and therefore normal; and, most important of all, Vincent occupies a position of authority that she is prepared neither by experience nor by socialization to defy. As she thinks during one of their shopping trips, "Het had geen zin om neen te zeggen. Vincent had ja gezegd" (15). His confident assumption that he will prevail undermines the resistance she has planned, and every act of cooperation makes it more difficult to say no to the next step. Vincent, meanwhile, mistakes her compliance for consent -- just as he mistakes his domination for love.

Vincent's style of lovemaking combines conventional romantic gesture with an atmosphere of utter sterility: he undresses Laura and carries her to the bed -- "alles precies zoals het hoorde" -- in a hotel room devoid of color: "De muren, de gordijnen, het

vloerkleed, de donsdeken, het plafond en het bed waren wit"; the actual sex act is mechanical and perfunctory: "Nu zoende hij ook haar borsten, buik en schaamhaar, en rolde vervolgens het condoom over zijn penis. Daarna penetreerde hij haar met lange krachtige stoten" (23). It is over in a matter of moments, with a minimum of sensation on Laura's part: "Ware er niet de geur van rubber geweest, Laura zou nauwelijks hebben geweten dat Vincent in haar was klaargekomen" (24); the question of Laura's pleasure does not appear to occur to Vincent. It is worth noting that the verb "penetreren" is also used in every subsequent description of sex with Vincent: intercourse is something he does to her, something she passively allows him to do. Having staked his sexual claim to her, Vincent at once commences the sartorial and cosmetic "development" of his secretary by taking her shopping and to an elegant beauty parlor.

As with Antonello, Vincent's view of Laura as someone he is creating prevents her from telling him the most elementary facts about herself -- that she has a child, and even that she lives with a female friend: "Het leek niet te passen bij het profiel dat hij voor haar had uitgekiend" (25). Her resentment and alienation are expressed only by a fleeting (but savage) sadistic fantasy; her frustration produces a more habitual benign one that she uses to bring herself to orgasm during sex with Vincent. In this fantasy a Finnish masseur in a sauna expertly stimulates her body to climax, while effacing himself just as Laura understands she is expected to efface herself during Vincent's antiseptic version of intercourse. For Vincent sex has the status of a pro forma, almost distasteful business arrangement: "Vincent penetreerde mit minimaal fysiek contact. Een verrassend klein lichaamsoppervlak was betrokken bij de transactie. Laura probeerde haar poriën gesloten te houden. Het zou ongepast zijn in Vincent's aanwezigheid te zweten" (33).

Their relationship, if indeed such it can be called, never progresses beyond punctilious role-playing. Laura strives to look the well-groomed secretary and cultivates conventionally coquettish airs, while Vincent brings her occasional "romantic" presents such as flowers and perfume, and continues to choose her wardrobe (for which he always pays cash) and makeup. Upon discovering that Vincent regards his efforts as something he is doing for *her*, and that he

expects affection in return, Laura is honestly bewildered. When he says, "Ik word gek van jou," she replies, "Maar waarom? Ik doe toch gewoon mijn werk?" (162) Vincent seems to believe his emotions are genuine (surprisingly, so does at least one reviewer), but Laura feels both manipulated and puzzled:

Ze had altijd gedacht dat de afspraak tussen hen duidelijk was en dat hun rollen vastlagen. Hij was de knappe koele zakenman die met zijn secretaresse uitpakte. Zij was de secretaresse die hem ten dienste stond (165).

All along Laura has acted according to a socially prescribed female role -- she has been "doing her job". Unlike Vincent, she has never confused this arrangement with anything spontaneous or real. The very impersonality of Vincent's lovemaking has, while leaving her physically unsatisfied, reassured her that their minimal physical contact was accompanied by minimal emotional involvement on both sides. Vincent is a Pygmalion whose Galatea takes on the contours he sculpts, but does not reciprocate his affection: for the part of Laura that Vincent has created exists only on the surface and in his mind; he loves a projection of himself.

Dismayed to realize he cannot mold Laura's feelings as he can her appearance, Vincent tries to impregnate her, in a desperate attempt to trap her into marriage. But this is a fatal error, overstepping what Laura has understood as an inviolate boundary:

Het condoom dat hij in de witte kamer over zijn penis rolde voor hij haar penetreerde, bood niet alleen bescherming tegen mogelijke ziekte, was niet alleen een contraceptief. Het vormde de noodzakelijke grens en scheiding waarzonder de middagen in de witte kamer niet mogelijk zouden zijn (165).

As she frantically tries to wash away Vincent's sperm, with him begging her to open the bathroom door, she wonders, "Waar wil jij binnen?" (175) Indeed, Vincent wants to form her from the inside as well, and thus truly possess her; but this is not part of the tacit bargain that Laura has accepted. In the days following this incident, she torments Vincent with her

efficiency in the office and her unresponsiveness to his confused and agitated plans and protestations, which have a comical effect in their contrast with her total clarity now that she understands the extent to which Vincent believed in the social roles they have been playing: "'We hebben het goed samen,' zei hij en Laura had zich afgevraagd over welke mensen hij het had" (199).

The day after she discovers to her relief that she is not pregnant, Laura, suddenly afraid of being left alone in life, confusedly considers marrying Vincent after all: "Hij had geld, hij vond dat ze gelukkig waren samen, ze zou hem met andere ogen moeten leren bekijken, misschien zou ze aan het idee wennen" (209). The pull of convention, and the common wisdom that men know better, cause Laura to hesitate in her rejection of Vincent. But then she realizes it is marriage she is considering, not Vincent, and although she continues to waver between socially-induced fear of isolation and her own awareness that she need not rush into marriage with anyone, she retains her essential conviction that Vincent can only function in blind accordance with social roles:

Vreemd. Deze man wilde met haar trouwen. Wilde zijn leven met het hare verbinden...Er liepen zoveel vrouwen rond, maar hij had het in zijn hoofd gehaald dat zij de ware was, terwijl hij haar helemaal niet kende. Of misschien kende hij haar wel, wist hij meer dan zij vermoedde (213).

This last doubt suggests a final tug of the prescribed female role on Laura: perhaps she *is* Galatea after all and just doesn't realize it. But when Vincent maudlinly accuses her of coldness, she knows again that he is lost in his own role and utterly unacquainted with her or himself as real human beings. "Wat een vreemde man," she muses, "Ze moest absoluut een normale man zien te ontmoeten" (214).

Laura has not altogether escaped the social pressures that dictate her identity as a woman: she wants to be a conventionally good mother, to hold her increasingly fragmented family together, to find a "normal" man. But she retains an objective view of women like her brother Tom's fiancée Heleen, who agrees with everything Tom says and seems made for

"de rol van steun en toeverlaat" (206). It is Laura's critical response to the socially prescribed roles she finds herself playing that sets her apart from the other women; and it is above all her consciousness of these roles and her questioning of them that give the novel its subversive impact. And by the end, it should be noted, she has forgotten about her hips.

If Laura becomes a cynic in her response to socially prescribed female roles, her older sister Elza has been from childhood a believer and a conformist; her experiences provide a cautionary backdrop, a dark counterpoint to Laura's emotional and sexual adventures. Familial and societal emphasis on male approval make Elza's prettiness and ability to charm -- or her loveliness -- her most important attributes. The family's attempts to understand Elza's breakdown provide revealing glimpses of an extreme attachment to her father, who died when she was six, and an attendant sense of competition with the other females in the family, emotions that seem to have laid the foundation of her adult dysfunctionality. Their mother's recollections of their father, and of her devotion to him, provided a constant source of reinforcement for Elza's attachment to his idealized memory. Throughout their childhood, their mother repeated the same stories about their father, beginning always with the incantatory words: "Jouw vader was een grote man met brede schouders en een prachtige kop haar" (121). The stories of their courtship and marriage made it clear that her husband occupied the central place in her life, even after his death; moreover, these stories defined not only her but the whole family: "Het waren...de verhalen die het gezin samenhielden, die maakten dat zij met hun vijven bij elkaar hoorden" (121). Their father's life became a "sprookje" of which they never tired; for Elza, the only one old enough to remember him, it became something less harmless: an irredeemable loss, an unfillable vacuum, a withdrawal of love that denied her loveliness.

As a child Elza felt an exaggerated sibling rivalry with her younger sister, refusing to eat for a week after Laura's birth (40) and continuing to exhibit capricious hostility toward her throughout their childhood -- behavior that she did not duplicate with her two brothers. Other incidents suggest a similar jealousy of their mother: her insistence that their father's eyes were blue, in contradiction to her mother's statement that they were green (124); her

accusation at the age of twenty that their mother's memories of their father made him seem her possession alone. When her mother reassured her, saying, "Je vader was erg trots en blij toen jij geboren werd. Ik zie hem nog staan bij je wieg," Elza made her repeat these words over and over (196). As a teenager, Elza once asked Laura, "Denk je dat wij ooit een man als papa zullen ontmoeten?...En als we hem ontmoeten, denk je dat we dan kans hebben bij hem?" (124)

Elza's need to believe herself loved exclusively or at least preferentially by her father gave rise to her generalized need for popularity; and as an adolescent she succeeded admirably, with "aanbidders...bij de vleet," as Laura recalls (81). Yet Laura also recollects that Elza habitually cried in bed at night, begging Laura to let her get into bed with her and then insisting that she talk about her friends, tell her stories or sing songs with her (44-46). Elza's behavior suggests that she felt isolated and cut off from others, able to make real contact only through her sister. Her nocturnal anxiety must have continued after she left home, judging by her response when her brother Bart asked whether she liked living alone: "'Neen,' zei Elza en de tranen waren haar in de ogen gesprongen. Ze had haar bord weggeduwd en was op de WC gaan uithuilen, maar ze had er niet over willen praten" (36).

Whatever caused Elza's night terrors as a girl seems also to have caused her breakdown as an adult. Was it unresolved grief over the loss of her father's love, or perhaps her fear of failure to find a permanent replacement for that (male) source of love? After she moved into her own apartment, she paid increased attention to her appearance, constantly buying new clothes and using a great deal of makeup: "Het viel op dat ze meer en meer op de vrouwen in advertenties begon te lijken." On Christmas she turned up wearing a diamond ring -- but was not engaged (35). Not surprisingly, Laura once found her in the company of an older man when she dropped by Elza's apartment unannounced (36). It is not clear whether Elza was a less successful female in the adult world than in school, but certainly she seemed to be trying harder -- and becoming daily more miserable. In any case her admission to the psychiatric hospital leads, in the course of the novel, to the lapsing of former needs, as she rejects her family and the outside world completely and abandons concern for her appearance.

In so doing, she in effect if not in intent rejects the prescribed female model: attractive, well-groomed, congenial, loving. Her failure to "get better" may represent her refusal to return to a society that demands she look and act a certain way, while failing to guarantee her the reward of a devoted husband: one just like her father. Duped by the father-myth promulgated by her entire family and compounded by her own loving memories of him, Elza must have gradually realized that nothing in life could measure up to it, and have despaired of finding happiness equal to that of her parents' fairytale union. Having built her whole identity around the goal of love with a man like her father, she was ultimately overwhelmed by her fear that she would never find that love. Loss of the goal meant loss of her constructed self as well.

Unlike most of the reviewers, I find some cause for optimism in *Brede heupen*. At its conclusion, Laura has left her empty relationship with Vincent, having discovered the dangers of playing the "verzorgde secretaresse" too well; Jasper and Antonello are likewise relegated to the past. She has preserved the "spottende blik" that once got her into trouble with teachers and most recently undermined Vincent's control over her. The irony with which she has approached beauty routines and postnatal exercises prevents her from viewing them as more than a means to an end: and it is by no means certain what end she has in mind as she talks, when we last see her, about going to Paris in connection with her new job. She may not yet know where she is going, but her very insouciance about this uncertainty is encouraging: for Laura appears to have realized that she doesn't have to get married, and that, to borrow the expression of one reviewer, the old ideals -- the nuclear family, the idyllic marriage -- are indeed bankrupt. But must this be necessarily a bad thing, when it was the old ideals that put Elza in the psychiatric ward and almost caused Laura to marry Vincent? Life with a truly open end, like the open end of *Brede heupen*, seems infinitely preferable to either fate.

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