Fabels van liefde : het mythologisch-amoureuze toneel van de rederijkers (1475-1621)
van Herk, A.C.M.

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Among the Dutch sixteenth-century drama there are nine theatrical plays that dramatize love stories from ancient mythology, in particular Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Narcissus and Echo, Pyramus and Thisbe (twice), Mars and Venus, Jupiter and Yo, Aeneas and Dido, Cephalus and Procris, Leander and Hero and Iphis and Anaxarete. From 1475 onwards, these vernacular pieces were written, performed, and finally published in print (the last edition dating from 1621), by so-called ‘rederijkers’ or retoricians: urban societies that marked the cultural life in the Low Countries with their dramatic and other literary activities. They established a highly sophisticated dramaturgy that combined poetry, rhetoric, and allegory in order to educate a lay audience, to discuss moral questions and to define social groups within urban society. The retorician’s movement is considered a prominent agent in the cultural changes that took place during the sixteenth century, spreading humanist and reformist ideas among a wider audience, and the mythological-amorous plays can be considered as a part of these dynamics. The purpose of this study is to analyze how the classical heritage was dealt with in these plays (chapter 1), how the antique fables were adapted to the vernacular dramaturgical practice of the period (chapter 2), and how these plays, either performed or read (the reception history being discussed in chapter 3), took part in the contemporary discourse on love, sexuality, and marriage (chapter 4).

It appears in chapter one that the playwrights of the early mythological-amorous plays were directly inspired by the medieval tradition of reading classical mythology. While Italy and France witnessed their first pieces of drama with mythological subjects, at the same time the Dutch retoricians took the French *Ovide Moralisé* and its successor, the printed *Bible des poètes*, as examples. In one case, the early *Narcissus and Echo*, also Christine de Pizan's *Epistre Othea* seems to have been of some influence. In these large compendia Ovid’s text was not only translated -or in some cases paraphrased-, the versified epic was also segmented, each episode being followed by a long and diverse commentary on the historical, moral, and allegorical meanings of the fable. These

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commentaries served as a proof of legitimacy to the pagan narrative of Ovid. In the same manner some of the mythological-amourous plays use allegory to frame the myth in accordance to christian doctrine. This is obvious in the two Pyramus and Thisbe plays, one of which was written in Bruges between 1484 and 1520, the other in Amsterdam, presumably around 1500. What these plays have in common, beside their subject, is the embedding of the dramatized fable in an outer play, which explicitly opposes the carnal love of Pyramus and Thisbe to the spiritual love of God. The allegorical explanation in the Bruegen epilogue is an almost literal translation of the corresponding lines in the *Bible des poètes*.

But the vernacular tradition of the *Ovide Moralisé* also served playwrights who seemed to give priority to the love story itself and ignored the christianizing allegory. This tendency to exploit antique mythological figures as amourous examples had already been present in medieval epic and lyrical poetry, and in didactic treatises like Dirck Potter’s *Der minnen loep*. In the retorician’s plays the mythological characters were presented as medieval romantic heroes and heroines, including the required courtly speech, manners and rituals. Their exemplificatory significance was stressed by means of personifications, following the tradition of the *Roman de la rose*. These mediaeval romantic influences are most clearly visible in three early plays from Brussels: Narcissus and Echo (Colijn van Rijssele, before 1503), Mars and Venus (Jan Smeken, before 1517) and Jupiter and Yo (anonymous).

In the course of the sixteenth century the use of mythology is being revised by reformers and humanists alike. The unbridled interpretations, deferring widely from the classical narrative, and the mixing up of pagan stories with christian teachings are dispelled, but the didactic value of the the fables remains in high esteem. This revaluation of the classical heritage leads to a boom of Dutch translations and editions of classical texts in Antwerp retorician’s circles. In the wake of this development four mythological-amourous plays were written, based on one of these recent translations: Cornelis van Ghistele, translator of Vergil’s *Aeneid*, wrote a two part play on *Aeneas en Dido* (1551), Willem van Haecht based his *Cephalus en Procris* (written before 1564) on the translation of the *Metamorphoses* by Johannes Florianus (1552), the anonymous *Leander en Hero* depended on Van Ghistele’s translation of the *Heroides* (1553) while Arent Jans Fries seems to have written his *Iphis en Anaxarete* (published in 1600) with the original Latin of the *Metamorphoses* in mind. The mediaevalizing tendency of
the earlier mythological plays is replaced by a more litteral translation and the addition of neo-classical elements. The moralizing intentions remain, but they are restricted to the level of the didactic exemplum, demonstrating unambiguously positive or negative behaviour in matters of love.

In the second chapter the transformation from fable to theatrical play is described, including the dramaturgical aspects as well as the mise-en-scene and the context of the performance. In this process the conventions of the retorician's theater were dominant, but the mythological-amourous subject matter also incited creative negotiations with these conventions. For instance amourous complaints, songs, courtly conversations, debates and allegories were adopted from other literary genres. The so called 'sinnekens', personifications that are characteristic of the serious retorician's drama, were attributed a specific amourous meaning and their seductive effect on the protagonists became even more subtle and dangerous by their invisibility. Another challenge must have been the representation of the pagan gods. The playwrights solved this problem either by humanizing them or by adopting carefully the conventions of the religious drama. The heaven of Venus and Cupid (in Narcissus and Echo) thus could be staged in the place where normally God with his angels would reside.

The retorician's drama has been characterized as a drama of shifting perspectives. This also goes for the mythological-amourous plays. The original fable, told from an auctorial perspective, was dramatized by adding several new characters, thus framing the pagan myth by adding new perspectives to the lovestory and manipulating the involvement of the audience with the fable. Beside the conventional 'sinnekens' there were gods, parents, servants, guards and neighbours, each with his or her own opinion on the amourous situation. One moment the viewer sympathizes with the Ovidian heroes and heroines and their passionate feelings, the other moment s/he hears a mother memorating the dangers of an unbridled youth. Then again, the sinnekens pop up with their jokes and jests to make clear that love is nothing more than animal lust. This constant alternation between identification with and distance from the fable incited the audience to reflect on its own moral position towards the amourous behaviour in question.

When we consider the mise-en-scene of the mythological-
amourous plays, it appears that high standards were put to the performances. Could the Amsterdam *Pyramus en Thisbe*, with a maximum of four actors on stage at a time, be performed on a small platform with only a curtain to hide the tableau-vivant of the crucifix, most other plays suggest the use of one or more compartments. There is mention of a tempel, a gazebo, a bedroom or a dining room, which could have been staged in separate locations behind a stage façade. Most impressive however must have been the use of the upper compartment as a pagan heaven, in which several gods could be made visible in the manner of a tableau-vivant. An indication of what the characters may have looked like can be found in the contemporary visual culture, abundant with pictures of classical figures in miniature and print. In the older plays the costumes presumably were in a contemporary, or maybe even mediaevalized style, the later plays from Antwerp probably benefited from the artistic knowledge of renaissance imagery among retoricians and used more classicist costumes.

May celebrations were a suitable occasion for the performance of mythological-amourous plays. Although there is no clear evidence, the allusions to may rituals in some of the plays indicate that they were performed during these festivities, in which retorician’s chambers, as in many public festivities, are known to have participated. The mythological-amourous plays must have been a prestigious genre, considering the poetic and dramaturgical sophistication of the texts, the spectacular mise-en-scene and the often extraordinary length of the plays. Probably this prestige was partly due to the status of classical mythology. This special status is also expressed in the textual proliferation.

The transmission of the play texts in manuscript and print is analyzed in the third chapter. In general, a development from (collective) performance texts to (individual) reading texts could be constructed. The manuscript of *Cephalus en Procris*, abundant with stage directions, probably served a specific theatrical production in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, as one of the very rare director’s copies from the retorician’s era. Most play texts that have come down to us are archival copies from the chambers. The collections of Reyer Gheurtsz (Amsterdam, around 1550), with copies of *Mars and Venus, Narcissus and Echo* and *Aeneas and Dido*, and of Goossen ten Berch (Haarlem, around 1600), in which the Amsterdam *Pyramus and Thisbe* can be found, are important examples. The retorician’s chambers collected plays written by their own
playwrights, but also pieces from other chambers, and assembled them in large volumes in order to expand their dramatic repertoire. However, Reyer Gheurtsz, the collector and transcribant of the Amsterdam chamber De Eglentier, may also have had another purpose: to assemble a corpus that could serve as study material and work of reference. Mythological plays form a substantial part of his collection, probably resulting from a close cooperation with the Antwerp retoricians. Gheurtsz thus can be characterized as a vernacular humanist, disclosing classical literature and knowledge to a non-latinist audience. The transformation from performance text to reading text is also apparent in the printing of the mythological-amourous plays. The oldest edition of the Brugean Pyramus en Thisbe (ca. 1540), has the appearance of a chapbook, but later on in the sixteenth century the text was attributed to Matthijs de Castelein and inserted in his collected works. In all cases, the text was meant to be read and not performed, as was also the case with the editions of Jupiter en Yo under the title Handel der amoreusheyt in 1583, Iphis en Anaxarete titled Het loon der minnen in 1600 and Aeneas and Dido, Narcissus and Echo, Mars and Venus and Leander and Hero together with a number of shorter dramatic dialogues, in Den handel der amoreusheyt in 1621. But the intentional association with the chapbooks was left behind in favour of a presentation in accordance with contemporary anthologies of amourous retorician’s poetry. The classical mythological subject matter and its Ovidian origin became a valued asset. Printing design and illustrations showed a growing tendency towards a renaissance classicism. With a young reading audience in mind the didactical purpose of the plays, especially in Den handel der amoreusheyt of 1621, was strengthened through the addition of prologues and the replacement of explicit sexual metaphores. This redaction was made by Johan Baptista Houwaert, who passed away before his project was finished and actually published.

The long sixteenth century was a period of great cultural change, including ideas on love, marriage and sexuality. The question how the mythological-amourous plays functioned in this discourse is addressed in chapter four. Although the ideal of courtly love had become obsolete around 1500, the love literature of the time was still dominated by the images, forms and language that were developed within this cult of love. However, through subtle shifts in the use of language, through a polyphonic dramatic structure and through an effective use of allegory, the plays clearly present a more pragmatic view on the attraction
between men and women, which is nourished by ethical-philosophical, medical and social notions. These notions themselves weren't new, but only from the late fifteenth century onwards did they penetrate the vernacular love literature and drama, which from then on took part in the broader discourse on nature and free will, emotion and selfcontrol, individual choice and social responsibility.

The mythological-amourous plays all adress the same question: why and by what means should we control this passion called ‘love’? The answers they formulate are not always unambiguous, but nonetheless certain tendencies can be recognized. Only two mythological plays, the Amsterdam Pyramus and Thisbe and a may play on Pluto and Proserpina, the text of which has been lost, seem to condemn its protagonists categorically by opposing their carnal love to the love of God. All other mythological plays accept love as a human faculty, a natural force which has its due place in the course of life, although it is sometimes hard to control; by showing the sad consequences of such unleashed passion, they incite the audience to cultivate their own rational selfcontrol. Another possibility, offered in some plays, is the relief of erotic or marital tensions by addressing a most painful amourous situation, adultery, in a humoristic manner (Mars and Venus, Jupiter and Yo). However, the ironic and playful tone in these pieces should not be misunderstood as sympathy for the adulterous lovers. In the Antwerp plays (Aeneas and Dido and Cephalus and Procris) the accent is put on the positive potential of humans, on the faculties which enable both man and woman to make the right choices in life. The character of Aeneas is constructed as a positive exemplum in contrast to the figure of Dido, who –despite all her noble intentions and wisdom- chooses the wrong option and looses herself in passionate love. In Cephalus and Procris the seductive sinnekens are countered by two servants who personify the virtue of the protagonists and try to keep their master and mistress on the right track. These two plays show a more consistent and clear didactic purpose, thus reflecting the pedagogic intentions of the humanists and announcing an era which finds its new praeceptores amoris in Johan Baptista Houwaert and Jacob Cats.

In the concluding chapter an attempt is made to explain the relationship between mythology, love and drama throughout the long sixteenth century. First of all, the increased availability of mythological narrative in print should be taken into account. In this respect the role of the Bible
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des poetes for the mythographic knowledge among retoricians should not be underestimated. Secondly the pagan fables and the allegorical mode of reading them perfectly suited the didactic purpose of the retorician’s drama. On the one hand mythological figures offered a canvas on which all human virtues and vices could be projected, presenting human characters which the audience could easily identify with. On the other hand, the notoriously pagan nature of the stories enforced an exemplary reading, which guaranteed a ‘healthy’ distance to the narrative. The obvious fictionality of the narrative, its pagan nature combined with Ovid’s authority and reputation as ‘praecceptor amoris’, created a space in which playwrights could freely experiment with the dramatic presentation of sexuality and emotions. And it was in this field, labelled ‘amoureasheyt’, that the need for new forms had become apparent. This is the third circumstance: courtly literature, with its idealizing concept of love, did not meet with the needs of an urban society in which a more pragmatic attitude was required, and in which love became associated with sexuality and marriage. Thus the plays focused on love as a natural phenomenon, a physical and mental experience inherent to the course of life and generally leading to matrimony. If this natural course could not be followed, love would turn into a dangerous illness, a disturbance of one’s physical and mental balance, causing loss of judgment and selfcontrol.

Insight in these processes and in the ways to control them, were considered important in an urban society that imposed many social and economic constraints to sexuality and marriage. Unruled love could lead to poverty, unlawful children, fighting spouses or loss of honour. Therefore the mythological-amourous plays form a part of the retorician’s literature that was devoted to the propagation of a sensitive, controlled life style. With exciting and spectacular love stories this message would reach a wide audience, particularly young amourous people. The mythological amourous drama of the retoricians thus fits into a general cultural and educational program, to which reformers and humanists contributed alike, that intended to reshape the norms and rituals concerning choice of partner and marriage. The genre, designed in Brussels as playful erotic entertainment with a sharp moralising edge, became more unambiguously didactic in the course of the sixteenth century, with the prestigious edition of Den handel der amoureasheyt in 1621 as a final conclusion.