

Anna Bijns (1493-1575)

A Poetess in Antwerp



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[HERMAN PLEIJ]

1528 saw the appearance in Antwerp of a remarkable collection of refrains. Among its novel features was its attribution to a living writer. Furthermore, the author turned out to be a woman, the 'honourable and ingenious young lady, Anna Bijns'. That this need be no obstacle to excellence was proclaimed at length on the title page. The book claimed to contain beautiful, refined texts, to be religiously orthodox and to offer a host of artistic refrains in line with the literary fashion of the age. This was all the more astonishing since women were not admitted as official members of the chambers of rhetoric. That was reserved for men. Yet Anna mastered like no other the art of the rhetoricians, who were the first to design a literary language and try their hand at new kinds of text.

That judgement was a contemporary one, since at least five editions of this first collection appeared during her lifetime. What is more, a Latin translation appeared as early as 1529 – virtually unheard of with literature in the vernacular – which actually gained her a European reputation. In addition, new collections appeared in 1548 and 1567, and were also reprinted. This was further proof that she had rightly been labelled ingenious in 1528, blessed with a talent inspired by the Holy Ghost irrespective of sex.

Fearing the charge of pride, Anna began her book with a dedicatory poem which immediately acknowledged her readers as her equals: 'Artistic spirits, who long for art', that is, we are all connoisseurs together, thirsting for good literature. She had not produced these texts out of vanity, but as a loyal daughter of Mother Church. And should anything have gone amiss with the style, 'tell yourselves, it's all just woman's work'. Women were intellectually less capable than men, as science had shown, and Anna did not question this. There was no question of irony, however much she might relish using it in other places. Still, this demonstration of humility after the fanfares to her genius was also very sophisticated. One did not need to be a connoisseur to see that her refrains were far superior to anything one might have read and heard up to then.

Anna Bijns, who lived and worked in sixteenth-century Antwerp, is one of the Low Countries' major authors. Yet her work is little known. But in her own time her texts were widely disseminated in manuscript and print. She was in fact the first writer in the vernacular to achieve widespread fame through the printing

press. Everything she experienced in her city was material for her sharp pen. Nothing was taboo: badly thwarted love, the vain illusions of Luther and his followers, the threat of freebooters from Gelderland at the city gates, the insufferable policy of tolerance pursued by the city council, deceit and conflict within marriage, the sad but well-deserved lot of hen-pecked husbands and the need to relax with the hilarious nonsense of the repertoire of popular festivals.

She is able to express all that excitement with a verbal dexterity almost unequalled in Dutch literature. Complex rhyme-schemes, alliterations and neologisms gave her texts an irresistible cadence, while the subtly orchestrated passion still came across as natural. She was also the first author in Dutch literature, to present herself emphatically as an individual with personal views and emotions of her own. That was undoubtedly due in part to her being a woman, which meant that the rules of public life did not apply to her and to a large extent she was able to be herself.



The family Anna grew up in must have started her on the path to literature. Her father, a successful breeches merchant, moved in rhetoricians' circles, since at least one refrain by him is known. Probably he awakened Anna's interest in the new literature, which proved exceptionally congenial. She definitely participated in the competitions between members in the chamber of rhetoric. Talented women operated quite often in these male literary preserves, but always had to do so anonymously.

Anna Bijns grew up in the direct vicinity of the old town hall, which was demolished in 1564. Print from 1561. City Archives, Antwerp

Was she not the fifteen-year-old girl from Antwerp who won a prize at a poetry festival in Brussels in 1512 with refrains in praise of the Virgin Mary? Unfortunately the age does not tally, since Anna Bijns was already nineteen at the time. But 'maiden' and an age of fifteen might well be an estimate in describing a teenager, as yet unmarried and still without a fixed position in society, who had been allowed to compete with the eminent gentlemen. With her younger



'Den Bistro', then the 'Cleyn Wolvinne', is Anna Bijns's birthplace, at 46 Grote Markt. The property next door was later bought by her father too.

brother Maarten she ran a primary school, and after his marriage in 1536 set up in business for herself: she was now officially enrolled in the teachers' guild. For many years, until 1573, she continued to teach the simple catechism, alongside reading, writing and arithmetic. Finally, at the age of eighty she was no longer able to continue. Two years later Anna died, and was buried on 10 April 1575 after a pauper's funeral that was definitely not in keeping with the reputation she had acquired in the course of a long life.

Attacking the Reformation

Besides the three printed volumes, three bulky manuscripts of her work have been preserved, having been collected between 1540 and 1550 by the Antwerp *frater minor* Engelbrecht van der Donck. In addition, refrains by Anna are found in some fifteen manuscript collections of rhetoricians' work. All in all this distribution in manuscript form points to great popularity in rhetoricians' circles, where a repertoire of such manuscripts circulated. The work that has been preserved consists almost solely of refrains, a genre that seems to have been

invented with her in mind. Modelled on the French ballad, such poems had at least four verses, with a recurring line (or refrain) at the end of each verse marking the theme. Each verse, with an identical rhyme scheme, contained an exposition with varied arguments, which always culminated in the repeated conclusion in the refrain. This made the form admirably suited for persuasion and provocation, like an axe with a repeatedly chopping blade.

Anna's approach was far from dainty. With unequalled mastery of form and virtuosity she succeeded in raising the refrain to the level of a seemingly natural mouthpiece for the heights of indignation and the depths of feeling. The impact was all the greater because of the oral nature of the literary form. It involved emotionally-charged recitations to gatherings that were frequently not predisposed to share the opinions being expressed. Many rhetoricians had Erasmian sympathies or were even bold enough to take an expressly Reformist stance, while her merciless satires of family life were not calculated to please every head of household or lady of the house in her audience. Her refrains were built on such public confrontations. The audience was often addressed in so many words, as were those at whom a refrain might be strictly aimed: Luther, his foolish followers, lax monks, deceitful lovers, bossy women and hen-pecked husbands.

The first collection of 1528 consisted almost entirely of fierce attacks on the Protestant heresy, which she invariably saw as the aftermath of Martin Luther. The Lutherans were sneered at, derided and blamed for all the misery on earth. There was scarcely any reasoned argument, for which Anna anyway lacked the intellectual baggage. She had an impressive knowledge of the Bible, but at the level of the catechism lessons she gave to primary school pupils. She simply reiterated the traditional articles of faith of the Mother Church, but now allied bizarrely with the new literary genre and quasi-realistic street language.

As a result Protestant theology was reduced to the arrogant populism of conceited laymen who thought they could take charge of their own salvation: 'Scripture these days is read in the ale-house, / With gospel in one hand, in the other a pint.' Even women believed that they were capable of teaching the gospel to scholars – what drunken idiots! They were leading the world towards a new Flood, since 'Man wallows in evil like pigs in the sty'. This tone was tempered somewhat in the second volume, to make way for moralising, self-examination and meditation. In the third volume militancy faded into the background and resignation and praise of the Creator predominated.



Maarten van Rossem as a treacherous scoundrel. Woodcut from soon after 1542. Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam

Crossed in love

Her refrains on worldly love, marriage and the family were very different, both serious and sarcastic. These are found only in manuscript form. Anna was sceptical about all aspects of earthly love. Lovers were faithless, marriage led directly to slavery and bred battle-axes and hen-pecked husbands, leading to complete chaos in the family. This was her variation on a set of literary themes that were almost de rigueur in the chambers of rhetoric and hence cannot simply be taken as an idiosyncratic preference. Still, Anna's almost obsessive choice of these themes is striking. She herself never married, though she did remain focused on the world, which at least leads one

to assume that she did not want to exclude the possibility of marriage. At any rate deep disappointments in her personal love life may well have triggered these literary settlings of account.

The refrains with the recurring lines 'You are what you are, I've come to know you well' and 'Although I don't say much, I think no less for that' are telling. But elsewhere, too, the deep amorous wounds are repeatedly mentioned. Precisely that fixation on cheating in love create the impression that she is definitely making use of her own experiences, no doubt distorted and exaggerated, since we are after all dealing with literature. Besides, private situations and current affairs also prompt her to write in other situations too. That is the purpose of poetry: to give depth to the particular, individual and private and convert it into emotions and more general messages. That is also achieved by fitting these events into significant historical contexts.

That is why she opens a refrain with Jason as the archetypal love cheat, drawing a parallel between the deceitful lover and the faithless Christian, and hence making her personal experiences an integral part of God's scheme of salvation:

View of Antwerp as the trading metropolis on the Scheldt. From: *Lofzangen ter eere van keizer Maximiliaan*, printed in 1515 by Jan de Gheet. Facsimile edition, 1925



*The one who believed so devoutly in me,
Now proves false. But I clearly see
How his passions fade.
Though once for my love he fervently prayed.*

It is not even beyond the bounds of probability that she is trying to communicate directly with her ex-lover in this way, making it appear that he is still within reach. In the other refrain she addresses him directly as 'O love', and the emphasis in the whole poem is on humbly enduring the pain he has inflicted on her. She even reveals that she constantly bombards him with (literary) texts:

*What good are my poems, all I write or say?
My lover thinks that they're hot air anyway.
Even if I read him this pretty wee refrain,
I'd declaim it in vain.*

In such repeated assertions and laments there is a single message, only comprehensible to the intended recipient, which other readers and listeners cannot make head or tail of:

*Princely love, it still makes my heart bleed,
That you should deceive me so: you know when indeed.*

We know that Anna actually corresponded in refrain form, so that such remarks have a definite meaning. However, in this case, it can only apply to the deceitful lover. Such a clause is meaningless to an anonymous readership: the secret is not solved in the text, the unsuspecting reader or listener cannot help feeling excluded. Or is this a way of reinforcing the illusion that the listener is privy to private business?

This literary game is best understood as a personal formal expression of deep hurts, whether or not at the invitation of friends, a chamber of rhetoric or a printer. After all there is no real reason to leave such deeply-felt, intensely emotional sentiments hanging in the air as superior exercises in the art of rhetoric. The formal professionalism need not be at odds with personal motives. On the contrary, it provides the right platform for giving private sorrow literary shape according to the rules of art and the taste of the time. However, we know nothing concrete about Anna Bijns' experiences in love. She does, though, write about them continually. And we find that she is capable of establishing intimate relations with a small number of monks, who act as confessors, spiritual guides, literary admirers and editors.

There's nothing worse than Luther

She also had a number of personal friends among the Antwerp *fratres minores*. Brother Matthias Weijnssen in particular seems to be the person who encouraged her to write. Elsewhere too, the *fratres minores* were known to be fervent opponents of the Reformation. And literature in the vernacular

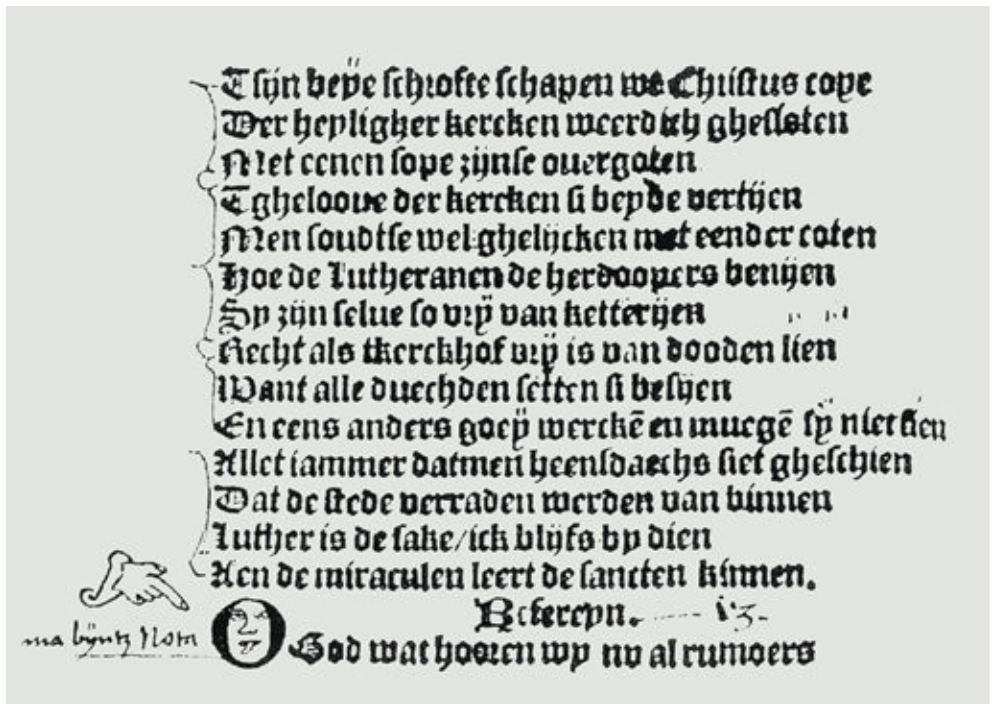


Even in 1520 Luther's work was still published openly in Antwerp: *Van den tien gheboden*, printed by Claes de Grave. City Library, Antwerp

was one of the ways they used to wage a propaganda war and reach as many people as possible emotionally. Very probably Anna allowed herself to be used for their purposes from the very beginning. Her themes matched their ambitions completely: fighting heresy, satirising marriage, and monastic entertainment in silly refrains with scores of names for anus and a farting competition among beguines – people were fond of combatting the dreaded melancholy, which could lead to suicide, with the crudest form of scatological folklore.

Her best known refrain concerns the (ironic) question: which is preferable, Martin Luther or Maarten van Rossem? This was prompted by the frustrated assault on Antwerp by the freebooter from Gelderland in 1542. In fact she used his violent actions to argue yet again how much more harmful the actions of Luther were. Van Rossem tormented bodies, but Luther sent souls to perdition. If destruction by the robber baron meant a passport to heaven, the price of selling one's soul to Luther was eternal damnation. Hence Van Rossem was after all the better of the two.

Van Rossem might be a villain, yet he had the 'advantage' of not being a heretic and therefore exercised some restraint with clergy and church property – at least so Anna maintained, before letting rip at Luther again. And for the umpteenth time she drew on her arsenal of terms of abuse, traditionally disguised as arguments. In view of his sermons no one could be sure of their own possessions any longer. And what's more Luther had set his sights particularly on the plundering and destruction of church property and egging people on to disobey the clergy. As a result of all those atrocities there had already been 200,000 deaths in the Peasant War in neighbouring countries.



In the final verse she reached the high point of her indictments of Luther, which though familiar were expressed with surprising originality. First she dubbed Van Rossem and Luther the prince of all ‘highwaymen’ and all ‘false prophets’ respectively. But why should she waste any more paper lamenting their atrocities? Actually both belonged in the company of Lucifer, whom she introduces at the last moment as the unexpected member of the trio: ‘which of the three is best?’ But even then she continued to give precedence to Van Rossem. She was most afraid of Luther’s poison – Lucifer is obviously in a class of his own. And she concluded with a vulgar image that put things in perspective: she didn’t give a ‘squashed pear’ for the choice – after which she wrote the recurring line for the last time.

Anna Bijns is the first author in Dutch literature to reach a wide readership thanks to the printing press. Her talents were fully recognised, used and exploited. The fact that she excelled in a literary form, which as a woman she was debarred from practising in the context of a chamber of rhetoric, makes it all the more piquant that in the view of her contemporaries she far surpassed all her male colleagues. ■

FURTHER READING

Herman Pleij, *Anna Bijns, van Antwerpen*, Prometheus, Amsterdam, 2011.

Herman Pleij’s anthology of her verse will appear shortly under the title *Meer zuurs dan zoets* (More Sour than Sweet).

Caricature of Anna Bijns in a copy of a 1541 reprint of the first collection of refrains. Royal Academy of Sciences, Amsterdam

Translated by Paul Vincent

Refrains

By Anna Bijns

Dedication

Artistic tempers, with art on your minds
Nothing here but what in good faith was done.
Now knowing this, relish its affection even more.¹
And in case of a fault, well, 'tis a woman's work!

Bright spirits, to learn from you what's right
I am prepared to do; let your wisdom join mine.
In technique my skill, I know, is poor,
Not masterly yet; hence my teachers I praise highly.
So, eagerly, by artists I'll be taught.

For love of Truth, for an ever stronger Faith
I have blithely worked and shed no tears.²

[January 11, 1528]

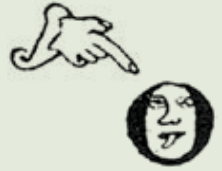
1. The affection with which she wrote the poems.
2. This dedication (with acrostic) opened Anna's first book (1528).

Artificiael geesten, die na conste haect,
Niet en is 't gemaect dan uut rechter trouwen sterck.
Neemt hieraen gemerc, opdat ghi die jonste smaect.
Al esser yet misraect, peinst: 't is al vrouwenwerc.

Bequame sinnen, onder correctie reene
Ic mi stelle: mach wijsheit in mi vermeert sijn.
In consten kenne ic mijn perfectie cleene,
Noch leerkint, dus meesters moeten geëert sijn:
Seer geerne wil ic van constenaers geleert sijn.

Liefte totter waerheyt om 's geloofs verstercken
Heeft mi sonder verdriet uut jonsten doen wercken.

Unyoked Is Best! Happy the Woman Without a Man



How good to be a woman, how much better to be a man!
Maidens and wenches, remember the lesson you're about to hear.
Don't hurtle yourself into marriage far too soon.
The saying goes: "Where's your spouse? Where's your honor?"
But one who earns her board and clothes
Shouldn't scurry to suffer a man's rod.
So much for my advice, because I suspect -
Nay, see it sadly proven day by day -
'T happens all the time!
However rich in goods a girl might be,
Her marriage ring will shackle her for life.
If however she stays single
With purity and spotlessness foremost,
Then she is lord as well as lady. Fantastic, not?
Though wedlock I do not decry:
Unyoked is best! Happy the woman without a man.

Fine girls turning into loathly hags -
'Tis true! Poor sluts! Poor tramps! Cruel marriage!
Which makes me deaf to wedding bells.
Huh! First they marry the guy, luckless dears,
Thinking their love just too hot to cool.
Well, they're sorry and sad within a single year.
Wedlock's burden is far too heavy.
They know best whom it harnessed.
So often is a wife distressed, afraid.
When after troubles hither and thither he goes
In search of dice and liquor, night and day,
She'll curse herself for that initial "yes."
So, beware ere you begin.
Just listen, don't get yourself into it.
Unyoked is best! Happy the woman without a man.

A man oft comes home all drunk and pissed
Just when his wife had worked her fingers to the bone
(So many chores to keep a decent house!),
But if she wants to get in a word or two,
She gets to taste his fist - no more.

And that besotted keg she is supposed to obey?
Why, yelling and scolding is all she gets,
Such are his ways - and hapless his victim.

And if the nymphs of Venus he chooses to frequent,¹
What hearty welcome will await him home.
Maidens, young ladies: learn from another's doom,
Ere you, too, end up in fetters and chains.
Please don't argue with me on this,
No matter who contradicts, I stick to it:
Unyoked is best! Happy the woman without a man.

A single lady has a single income,
But likewise, isn't bothered by another's whims.
And I think: that freedom is worth a lot.
Who'll scoff at her, regardless what she does,
And though every penny she makes herself,
Just think of how much less she spends!
An independent lady is an extraordinary prize -
All right, of a man's boon she is deprived,
But she's lord and lady of her very own hearth.
To do one's business and no explaining sure is lots of fun!
Go to bed when she list, rise when she list, all as she will,²
And no one to comment! Grab tight your independence then.
Freedom is such a blessed thing.
To all girls: though the right Guy might come along:
Unyoked is best! Happy the woman without a man.

Prince,
Regardless of the fortune a woman might bring,
Many men consider her a slave, that's all.
Don't let a honeyed tongue catch you off guard,
Refrain from gulping it all down. Let them rave,
For, I guess, decent men resemble white ravens.
Abandon the airy castles they will build for you.
Once their tongue has limed a bird:
Bye bye love - and love just flies away.
To women marriage comes to mean betrayal
And the condemnation to a very awful fate.
All her own is spent, her lord impossible to bear.
It's *peine forte et dure* instead of fun and games.
Oft it was the money, and not the man
Which goaded so many into their fate.
Unyoked is best! Happy the woman without a man.

1.Prostitutes.

2.Compare Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, II.2: "Never a wife in Windsor leads a better life than (Mrs. Page) does. Do what she will, say what she will, take all, pay all, go to bed when she list, rise when she list, all is as she will. And truly she deserves it; for if there be a kind woman in Windsor, she is one."

Het es goet vrouwe sijn, maer veel beeterheere.
Ghij maegden, ghij weduen, onthoudt dees leere:
Niemandt hem te zeere om houwen en spoede.
Men seijdt: daer geen man en es, daer en es geen eere.
Maer die gecrijgen can cost en cleere,
Niet haest haer en keere onder eens mans roede.
Dit es mijnen raedt: weest op u hoede,
Want zoo ic bevroede, ic zie 't gemeene,
Als een vrouwe houdt, al es se eel van bloede,
Machtich van goede, zij crijcht aen haer beene
Eenen grooten worpriem. Maer blijft zij alleene
En zij haer reene en zuver gehouden can,
Zij es heere en vrouwe: beeter leven noeyt gheene!
Ic en acht niet cleene 't houwelijck, nochtan
Ongebonden best, weeldich wijf sonder man.

Proper meijskens werden wel leelijcke vrouwen.
Arm danten, arm slooren, hoordt jonck metten ouwen,
Dit sou mij doen schouwen 't houwelijckvoorwaer.
Maer, wachermen, als zij den man eerst trouwen,
Zij meijnen de liefde en mach niet vercouwen,
Dan ees 't hem berouwen eer een half jaer.
Och, het pack des houwelijcx es al te zwaer!
Zij weten 't claer, die 't hebben ghedraghen.
Een vrouwemaeckt door vreesse menich mesbaer,
Als de man hier en daer gaet druck verjagen,
Drincken en speelen bij nachte, bij dagen.
Dan hoort men beclagen dat men 't oeyt began.
Dan en muegen u helpen vrienden oft magen.
Dus hoordt mijn gewagen en wacht er u van:
Ongebonden best, weeldich wijf zonder man.

Ooc compt de man somtijts droncken en prat,
Als d'wijf haer gewracht heeft moede en mat,
Want men moet al wat doen, sal men 't hujs bestieren.
Wilt zij dan eens rueren haer snatergat,
Zoo werdt sij geslagen met vuijsten plat:
Dat droncken vol vat moet se obedieren.
Dan doet hij niet dan kijven en tieren,
Dat sijn de manieren, wee haer die 't smaectt.
Loopt hij dan elders bij Venus camerieren,
Peijst wat blijder chieren mebn thuijs dan maeckt.
Ghij maegden, ghij weduwen, aen ander u spaectt,
Eer ghij ooc gheraectt in zelcken gespan.
Al waer 't dat ghij mij al contrarie spraectt,



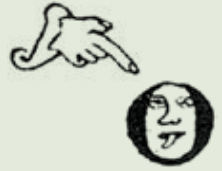
Mij en roeckt wie 't laeckt, ic blijv' er weer an:
Ongebonden best, weeldich wijf zonder man.

Een vrouwe ongehoudt moet derven 's mans gewin:
Zo en derf zij ooc niet wachten zijnen sin.
En, na mijn bekin, de vrijheidt es veel weerd.
Zij en werdt niet begresen, gaet si uutoft in.
En al moeste zij leven op haer gespin,
Voorwaer veel te min zij alleen verteerd.
Een ongebonden vrouwe werdt alom begeerd.
Al ees 't dat se ontbeerd eens mans profijt,
Zij es meester en vrouwe aen haren heerd.
Te gane onverveerd, dat 's een groot jolijt.
Zij mach slapen en waken na haren appetijt,
Zonder yemandts verwijt. Blijft ongebonden dan:
De vrijheijt te verliesen, geen meerder spijt!
Vroukens, wie ghij sijt, al creeg dij eenen goeden Jan,
Ongebonden best, weeldich wijf zonder man.

Princesse

Al es een vrouwe noch zo rijck van haven,
Veel mans die achten se als haer slaven.
Ziet toe, alse u laven met schoonen proloogen,
En gelooft niet soo saen, maer laet se draven,
Want mij dunckt, de goeij mans sijn witte raven.
Acht niet wat gaven zij u bringen voor oogen.
Also een vrouwe hebben in 't nette getoogen,
Es liefde vervloogen, dit sien wij wel.
In 't houwen werdt menige vrouwe bedroogen,
Die moeten gedoogen groot zwaer gequel.
Haer goedt werdt verquist, de man valt haer fel.
't En es vrij geen spel, maer noeyt zwaerder ban.
't Es somtijts om 't geldeken en niet om 't vel,
Dat dezelve zoo snel liep dat hij stan.
Ongebonden best, weeldich wijf zonder man.

Yet, When Compared, Martin Rossom Comes Out Best



1.

Lately, melancholy's weight was hard to bear,
Made sore my mind, chased phantoms throbbing through my head,
Kept me brooding over oh so many things.
Just considering the world's present course,
What was there to brighten up my mood
With nothing but sorrow to spare - and I was sad.
And then my weary fancy in its rambling
Called forth a pair of men
With names the same but not much else.
One, Martin Luther, whose error spawns and spreads;
The other, Martin Rossom, whose cruel sword
Proved far too sharp for many far and near.
Rossom racks the body, Luther lays waste the soul,
So what's up! "Evil creature" fits them both.
To choose between these two? Waste of time.
Still, since Luther through his error kills your soul,
When compared, Martin Rossom comes out best.

(...)

4.

Martin Rossom, nobleman by birth,
As Emperor's renegade also his honor forsook;
But Luther betrayed the Lord Supreme
To whom his allegiance he had pledged
And put a nun's coif above his own.¹
A nun who had promised God the same!
Why, Rossom spurns Emperor, but Luther's evil tongue
Wags at Pope and Emperor alike,
Teaches subjects' revolt against their betters,
Spreads defamatory libel of kings and princes,
Flings filth at church lords just the same.
Rossom wrought havoc fierce in Brabant's land
But his flaming fury did most often
Leave the Church alone, at least.
And blessed maidens he didn't even touch
(Though 'tis rumored that he did, here and there).
Martin Rossom: model of the tyrant harsh?
When compared, Martin Rossom comes out best.

5.

Where Martin Rossom's crime was treason,
Martin Luther's was double so foul,
For many a Christian soul his evil kiss
Slammed heaven's gate forever shut. Thus,
The Desecrator of Our Lord must have sent
This double plague to infect the Christian world.
Rossom a killer? Luther through his actions
Sent two hundred thousand peasants to their graves.
Blood of men and women freely flowed, with
Water and fire curbing his heretic's views.
So, he has butchered both the soul and body.
Martin Rossom merely racked the latter.
Now, he's just as cruel to the meek and lowly,
But through his hand, if they're patient, they'll soon be placed in God's.
Not that this would make his guilt seem less -
I'm not excusing him, I'm not washing him white!
Yet, though both be venomous vipers,
When compared, Martin Rossom comes out best.

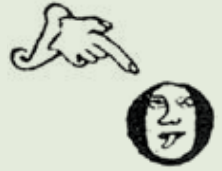
(...)

7.

Martin Rossom and Martin Luther,
The best of both still a mutineer.
'Tis not strange that Rossom knows no fear,
For he's a soldier, a worldly cavalier.
But Martin Luther, that braggart, claims, he dares,
To comprehend Scripture down to its least detail,
With the Holy Ghost leading him on the way.
If supposedly he knows the way, his erring sure looks weird
But of course the ghostly spirit that guides him most
Has firmly wrapped its tail round Dymphna's painted feet.²
Martin Rossom sacked Brabant for tons of loot,
A sad affair which many still deplore,
But Luther himself has hands none too clean.
Monasteries were emptied by apostates on his command
Of their treasure and holy vessels. God will find out
If he didn't get a share himself. How about that?
Satan clasps both Martins in a tight embrace,
Yet, when compared, Martin Rossom comes out best.

8.

Martin Rossom, Freebooters' Prince,
Mastermind in stealing and plunder;
Luther, all false prophets' Prince,
If your histories I'd set out in full,
The reader would be much distressed, I guess -
'Twould also be a loss of time and paper.
Thus for now I hold my duty excellently done.
Allow me to defer the sequel to some other time.
Luther, Rossom, and Lucifer (for he fits in real well),
I wonder who's worthiest of the three.
Rossom piles much gruesome plunder in his lair,
Luther is conniving night and day,
Intent on poisoning our Christian lands.
So, this couple is wicked, very clearly so.
But Luther's venom most of all I fear,
For eternal damnation follows in its rear.
Even though the choice of either isn't worth a rotten fig,
When compared, Martin Rossom comes out best.³



1. Viz. Katharina von Bora's, whom he married on July 13, 1525.

2. The devil, who in paintings of Saint Dymphna crouches at her feet.

1.

Onlanx bezwaert zijnde met merancolijen,
De sinnen becommert, 't hoeft vol phantasijen,
Van als overlegghende in mijn ghedachte,
Quam mij weijnich tevoren dat mocht verblijen.
Aensiende de werelt nu ten tijen,
Zijnde vol verdriets, des werdt mij onsachte.
Dus dinckende mij phantazijevoortbrachte:
Twee manspersoonen mij haest invielen,
Ghelijc van name, diversch van gheslachte.
D'een was Merten Luther, die dolinghe doet krielen,
D'ander Merten van Rossom, die 't al wil vernielen,
Die veel menschen bracht heeft in zwaer ghetruer.
Rossom quellet lichaem, Luther heeft de zielen
Deerlijc vermoort, dus esser cleijnen kuer
Tusschen hen beijen: elck es een malefactuer.
Ic en gaef om den kuer niet mijnen minsten teen.
Maer want Luther de zielen moordt duer zijn erruer,
Noch schijndt Merten van Rossom de beste van tween.

(...)

4.

Heeft Merten van Rossom zijn eere verloren,
Afgaende den keijser, hooghe gheboren,
Luther es den oppersten Heere afghegaen,
Die hij hadt gheloeft en trouwe ghezwoeren,
En heeft voer zijn cappe een nonne verzoren,
Die God ooc gheloefte hadde ghedaen.
Versmaet Rossom den keijser, merct Luther saen:
Hij spreeft van paus, keijser beijde veel blamen
En leerdtd' ondersaten teghen d'oversteopstaen.
Van princen en vorsten scrijft hij veel diffamen.
Prelaten, bisscoppen hoort men hem misnamen.
Al heeft Rossom veel quaets bedreven in Brabant,
Men sach hem niet veel kercken oft cloosters pramen
Met enighen brande aen gheenen cant.
Aen gheestelijcke maeghden en stack hij gheen hant,
Alsoo 't tot sommighen plaetsen wel scheen.
Al heet Merten van Rossom een quaet tijrant,
Noch schijndt Merten van Rossom de beste van tweeën.

5.

Es Merten van Rossom een verradere,
Luther es ooc een, en zooveel quadere.
Hij berooft met verraet van der hemelscher erven
Menich kerstenziele, dus Gods versmadere.
Lucifer heeft dees twee ghesonden tegadere,
Omdat zij heel kerstenrijc souden bederven.
Es Rossom moordadich, Luther heeft doen sterven
Tweehondertduijsent boeren duer zijn bedrijf.
Veel esser onthooft, verbrandt, ghesackt menichwerven
Om zijn valsche leere, beijde man en wijf.
Dus es hij een moordenaer van ziel en lijf.
Merten van Rossom mach meer d'lichaem hinderen.
Al mach hij d'onnoosele quellen even stijf,
Zijn zij patient, hij maect se Gods kinderen.
Dit en sal zijn sonde niet verminderen,
Ic en wil 't 's niet excuseren oft maken reen.
Al zijn 't beije twee venijnighe slinderen,
Noch schijndt Merten van Rossom de beste van twee.

(...)

7.

Merten van Rossom en Merten Luthere,
De beste van hem beijen es een mutere.
Maer 't en es niet vreempt, al es Rossom onghевreest,
Want 't es een crijchsman, een weerlijc rutere.
Maer Merten Luther vermeet hem, deesstutere,
Dat hij scriftuere verstaet na den rechten keest
En dat hij es vervult van den Heijlighen Gheest.
Die den wech dus wel weet, 't es wonder dat hij dwaelt.
Maer het schijndt wel den gheest regeert hem meest,
Die men onder Sint Dignen voeten maelt.
Al heeft Merten van Rossom veel roofs ghehaelt
In Brabant, d'welck noch veel menschen bequelen,
Merten Luther in dit stuck ooc niet en faelt.
Hij heeft d'apostaten uuijt cloosters doen stelen
Kelcken, ciboriën, ic wil 't God bevelen.
Oft hij niet mede en paert, elck knaghe dit been.
Al heeft de duvel dees twee Mertens bij der kelen,
Noch schijndt Merten van Rossom de beste van tween.

8.

Merten van Rossom, Prince van den snaphanen,
Die om stelen, om rooven zijt cloeck ter banen.
Luther, prince van alle valschen propheten,
Soud ic u legende gheheel vermanen,
't Sou den leser verdrieten, soude ic wanen:
Den tijt en 't pampier werd ermede versleten
Dus voer eens heb ic mij ghenouch ghequeten:
Tot op een ander tijtborcht mij de reste.
Luther, Rossom, Lucifer daerbij gheseten,
Mij twijfelt wie van drien es de beste.
Rossom sleijpt veel quaets aest'zijnen neste,
Luther es nacht en dach in de weere
In kerstenrijck te stroijen een dootlijcke peste.
Dus haer beijder boosheijt blijct in 't cleere.
Maer voer Luthers venijn ic mij meest verveere,
Want de menschen brenght in d'euwich gheween.
Al en es den kuer niet weert een platte peere,
Noch schijndt Merten van Rossom de beste van tween.



Translated by K.P.G. Aerccke.