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Marco Prandoni

African and African European characters in Bredero's early 17th-century plays

This article explores a chapter of the Dutch 'black archives': the presence of fictional African and African European characters – a man, a woman, and a child, on stage and in staged narratives – and the construction of the African(ist) Other and blackness in two plays (*Moortje* and *Spaanschen Brabander*) by canonic playwright G.A. Bredero. These plays were successfully staged and printed in Amsterdam during the second decade of the 17th century, at a time when the Dutch transoceanic trades were rapidly expanding and some African Europeans appeared in the city of Amsterdam. The powerful medium of theatre reflected on that and contributed to topical discussions about dealing with racial, ethnic, and gender differences. Bredero's plays thematized the process of racialization in highly ambivalent ways and engaged with the discourse on the legitimation of enslavement and slave trade – a discourse that was not completely stabilized yet.

[early modern drama; slave trade;
theatre in Amsterdam; G.A. Bredero; African Europeans]

1. Introduction

The present research shares in the growing interest for what Gloria Wekker has called the 'black archives' in Dutch culture (Wekker 2016): centuries of intertwined history between The Netherlands, West Africa and America – most notably Suriname and the Antilles, but also Brazil and North America – with legacies that remained for a great part untold or even unseen, until recently. "The books no one has read", to put it with historian Alex van Stipriaan (Van Stipriaan 2006). Only a few years ago, Wekker wrote of a central paradox of Dutch culture, the persistent denial of racial discrimination and its ties to slavery and colonialism in the dominant narrative of a tolerant and progressive nation (Wekker 2016); Emily Raboteau of a hidden core, a taboo, and of a case of cognitive dissonance (Raboteau 2014), a signal of colonial amnesia/aphasia and misrecognition of the own postcoloniality (Bijl 2012; Boehmer/De Mul 2012a: 3). In the foreword to a book on the Dutch Atlantic, Stephen Small remarked in 2011:

> It is common in the Netherlands (as it was in Britain until recently) for slavery to be thought as something that happened over there, far away, not for long and with little consequence for Dutch society today. (Small 2011: xiii)

It is only in recent years that public awareness of such issues (that until then had remained non-issues in the public domain: Nimako/Willemsen 2011: 149) has gained momentum, with mixed signals and conservative resistance pointing at how difficult this ongoing process is (Fatah-Black 2021: 138 ff.; Delputte 2023). Partially in the wake of the American, and global, Black Lives Matter movement, there has been a growing urgency to reclaim that silenced history and to raise awareness of those lost stories: in the first place among people of Afro-Surinamese and Caribbean descent, but also Dutch society at large.

The city council of Amsterdam, a city which was in fact for centuries co-owner of the slaves in Suriname (Fatah-Black 2020: 71-73), initiated the process which led in 2021 to explicit apologies for the role played by the city in the slave trade, opening the way to possible reparations, after the publication of a large scale academic research, financed by the same city council (Brandon *et al.* 2020). The same happened in Rotterdam. On 19 December 2022, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte at the National Archives in The Hague apologised for the countries' role in the slave trade (Moses 2022). At the celebration for the 160th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the Dutch colonies, on the Keti Koti festivities in 2023, King Willem-Alexander expressed the official apologies of the Dutch state, and his own, following a process that had already taken place in other former imperial powers. Nowadays, cultural institutions of any sort in the Netherlands engage in questioning the history and the stories related to the legacies of the slave trade (Delputte 2023: 60).

The heightened discursivity on these issues is demonstrated by several recent cultural productions targeting a general audience in a diffuse mediascape: for instance an exposition in the Rijks Museum, a podcast, and a TV series. The exhibition *Slavery* (*Slavernij*, 2021) has questioned how history was constructed and narrated in that renowned museum, hosting the most glorious tangible cultural heritage of the so-called Dutch Golden Age. The slave trade was by no means absent in the museum collection but this exposition put the experience of enslavement at the core, to enhance the possibility for visitors to empathize with the people who had to endure it and to get to know the stories of those who profited enormously from slave trade and of those who rebelled against it (Sint Nicolaas *et al.* 2021). The podcast *The Plantation of Our Ancestors* (*De plantage van onze voorouders*, 2020) confronts different perspectives on the legacies of the transatlantic trade: that of descendants of plantation and slave owners and descendants of enslaved people. In the TV series *In Chain. Back to the Plantation* (*Geboeid. Terug naar de plantage*, 2020) policeman Dwight van van de Veer undertakes a journey – firstly alone,

later on accompanied by other people sharing the same background – to discover his family roots in a plantation of Suriname. In his quest, he gets support from psychiatrists, genealogists, and historians (among others, Van Stipriaan) working for several Dutch institutions like the Amsterdam City Archive. Nowadays it is possible, thanks to projects such as *Metamorfose*, hosted by the Royal Library in The Hague, to do such an inquiry on your own (Van der Doe 2021): millions of documents concerning the slave trade are being digitized and made accessible to preserve tangible paper heritage, and disclose it, even to non-specialists.

In his long-awaited speech, King Willem-Alexander referred to the existence and availability of such documents but added that the real voices of those who experienced enslavement have vanished (Redactie 2023). Of course, this is true but literature and even more so theatre can give us a glimpse of those voices, even if in the early 17th century they were fictionally fabricated by almost exclusively white authors, mostly men, and performed on stage, at least until the 1650s, by white men. Although there are some (drama) texts, sometimes canonical ones, that deal with issues connected to the slave trade and sometimes feature African and African European characters, until recently those issues did not receive any particular attention or were just ignored (except for those works in the 18th century that were overtly anti-slavery − Adams 2020), because of powerful mechanisms of selective blindness among critics and public. The case of drama is particularly interesting: it is a tangible and intangible cultural heritage since performance texts were usually both staged and printed in the Republic, with a porous interplay between stage and print. Drama being at the time a great source of entertainment but also a powerful visual and auditive medium, an arena of conflicting discourses and a stage for all sorts of embodied narratives and representations, it is urgent to critically engage, as literary and theatre historians, with such representations and performances. Some stories and characters were silenced or ignored (Modest 2019), but other stories – maybe even more poignantly – were performed and printed many times over the years and the centuries, but did not strike a deep chord, or lead to whatever significant critical self-inquiry.

That is why I concentrate on the presence of African and African European characters, on stage and in staged narratives, in two successful plays – a comedy (*Moortje*) and a tragicomedy (*Spaanschen Brabander*) according to the genre conventions of the Renaissance – by the canonical playwright and painter from Amsterdam G.A. Bredero:

> Gerbrand Bredero has belonged to the Dutch literary canon since the early nineteenth century. He stands out for his refined style, vibrant technique and the

> subtle way in which he gave his work a deeper meaning. Bredero, born and raised in Amsterdam, wrote songs and plays for his fellow citizens about local matters. This may have been an important, if not decisive, reason to use the epithet 'Amsterdam citizen'. Contemporaries were particularly fond of Bredero's jocularity in his Amsterdam scenes. (Jansen 2021: 285)

A true icon of Amsterdam culture at the dawn of its cultural, political, and economic grandeur, he was commemorated and celebrated with a variety of cultural activities – not only in the academic circuit – in 1986 and 2018, 400 years after respectively his birth and death (Van Schaik 2019). He has thus a prominent and long-standing presence in the Dutch cultural archives. He was a proud Amsterdammer but also intensely engaged with the boom of foreign immigration and the transformation it brought to his native city: a crisis he openly thematized for his diverse audience. He offered them "a rare set of observations upon the migrant, transnational and global mercantile forces that made up the extra-ordinary agglomeration that was seventeenth-century Amsterdam, producing exceedingly intelligent dramatic analysis of the meaning of mass migrancy and urban renewal" (Smith 2020a: 111).

In this article, I specifically focus on the construction of the Africanist Other – not African, but the production of white, European fantasy (Morrison 1992; Meijer 1996: 137-140) – on stage and in staged narratives and on how these plays reflect on and engage with the process of racialization and the topical discourse on the legitimacy of the slave trade, at a moment of "fast-changing economic relations of white Europeans and their darker 'others'" (Hall 1995: 4).

2. *The Little Moor*

Even nowadays it is possible to see so-called 'Moor heads' (*Morenhoofden*) on the façade of buildings in Amsterdam, dating from the 17th century:

> The word 'Moor' is derived from the Greek word 'mavro' which literally means 'black, blackened or charred'. Ancient Greeks used the term to describe the complexion of Africans […] The word Moor in Dutch has been used to signify 'dark, black' in reference to black Africans. The 'Moor head', often crowned, is frequently seen in medieval European heraldry […] After the European trade in enslaved Africans expanded, representations of Moors mixed up with images of enslaved people. (Hondius *et al.* 2018[2]: 39-40)[1]

[1] Unlike in Spain and Southern Europe in general, in Dutch the term *Moor* usually did not indicate the Muslim religious identity (Hondius 2014: 134).

Moortje (*The Little Moor*) is the title of a play by Bredero that was staged in 1615 in the Old Amsterdam Chamber and published in 1617 by Cornelis vander Plasse who greatly contributed to the early process of canonization of his friend, after his premature death (Jansen 2021).

The plot was drawn on Terence's play *Eunuchus* (*The Eunuch*), or was rather an adaptation – actualized and localized in Amsterdam – of that classic Roman play, 'as if it had happened here in the Netherlands'[2], as Bredero writes in one the printed paratexts. A courtesan receives as a 'gift' an Angolan woman and employs her, who is enslaved, as a chambermaid of sorts. In Terence's Latin model, this was a eunuch[3]. It is a crucial substitution or, rather, a concentration of two different characters into one, because in the Dutch play there is a white enslaved girl, too: Katryntje (Bosman 2006: 149). Bredero writes that since a eunuch ('person who was neither woman nor man')[4], a harem guard in Terence's play, is almost unknown in the country, he has decided to replace it with 'a Moor'[5]: an Angolan woman. So, we must infer, a 'Moor' must have been a familiar, albeit rare, face in town. Recent historical research in archival data has shown that there were indeed African and African European people (Otele 2020) walking around in the Republic, and especially in Amsterdam, at that time. In the early 17th century, Dutch traders had been involved for a couple of decades in the slave trade from West Africa. Some of them had visited the coast of West Africa, on which the inhabitants of the Republic could extensively read in de Marees' successful *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea* (1602). Angola was under Portuguese rule at the time, but "trading by private Dutch merchants in the south Atlantic was already underway" (Smith 2020a: 108). The first encounters with African people had thus by then begun and some Africans were present in the city (*ibidem*: 106). Their number was negligible if compared to some Spanish or Portuguese cities: calculations tell us about a few dozen people, but still: they were there, both *de-facto* enslaved (enslavement being formally prohibited in The Republic) and free, especially in the part of

[2] "oft hier in Nederlandt waer ghebeurt" (*Moortje*, *Inhoudt*; Bredero 1984: 119). Translations from *Moortje* are by the author of the article. "'Moor' […] originally referred to inhabitants of Mauretania but soon came to designate any North African, non-white or even Islamic person" (Paijmans 2023: 27).

[3] Terence was *nota bene* himself a freedman from Africa (see Smith 2020a: 107). At the end of Bredero's play, we can hear/read that all the credit goes to 'the African' ("t'Affricaensche hooft", v. 3356) who wrote the original play, i.e. Terentius. Terentius' African origin gets foregrounded in a very positive way.

[4] "die Vrouw noch Man en was" (*Inhoudt*; Bredero 1984: 119).

[5] "een Moor" (*ibidem*).

Amsterdam where Rembrandt lived, with many Sephardite Jews from Spain and Portugal as neighbors, offering him a source of inspiration. The iconography of black characters such as Ridder Morriaen was already well-known since the Middle Ages, but these were 'co-inhabitants' of flesh and bone in the multicultural city of Amsterdam, borrowing a term Simon Schama has used for the people of the Jewish diaspora in the city (Schama 2017). The Black Heritage Tours, in the footsteps of those in Liverpool, Paris, and elsewhere, make it possible for locals and tourists to go in search of the traces of the transatlantic trade and of those African Europeans who lived in the early modern city of Amsterdam: for instance, the 'Moor heads' (Hondius *et al.* 2018[2]).

In the play, young Writsart, a merchant son of the Amsterdam commercial elite, dresses up as a black woman to sneak up on Katryntje, the girl who lives under the protection of the courtesan. The cunning servant Koenraat undresses the 'pitch-black Moor'[6], then turns his lord 'into a black'[7], using her dress and 'soot, black glue or whatever else'[8] on the young man's face and hands. In disguise, crossed-dressed and with blackface, Writsart is smuggled into the courtesan's house and rapes Katryntje. This travesty scene, about which characters discuss at length, does not happen on stage.

The *Moorin*, referred to as *Negra* in the printed text, is suspected of the assault and questioned. In her intimidated responses, she does not get much further than 'Oh lord, mercy!'[9], 'yes my lord'[10], 'no'[11]: small chunks of text. Thus, according to Morrison (1992: 6), the Africanistic idiom (of a "nonwhite, Africanlike presence or persona") is employed to establish difference. The African and her language are a fabrication, an invention, the product of an altering fantasy. It is not possible in this case to speak of a disruptive, transgressive use in a performance of an Africanized language as Nicholas R. Jones (2019) has done in his book about the agency of African characters on the Spanish stage, for instance in plays by Lope de Rueda. In that context, we are confronted with the artistic recreation use of a contact language, empowering black Africans' agency; in Bredero, it is the stammering of a terrified woman in captivity. The woman is scolded for being

[6] "een pick-swarte Moorin" (v. 1620).
[7] "maakt een Swart van my" (v. 1633).
[8] "met roet, | Met lijmswart, of met tuych van eenich ander goet" (vv. 1095-1096).
[9] "och Heere, genaed och" (v. 1888).
[10] "ja heer" (v. 1963)
[11] "neen" (v. 1972).

'deformed'[12] and a 'bitch'[13]; she is the object of mockery and public contempt. Her presence on the stage is only functional to allow her ugliness to highlight the beauty of her male counterpart, Writsart: a young white man, in travesty, dressed as a black woman. He is described as 'in his prime of years', 'with nose, kin and cheek equally spright', 'a lively body' and 'a sweet laughter'[14], whilst

> 'that one is clumsy, with no manners, and gross,
> and sleepy, lazy, crippled, old and worn out,
> her beck and nose are flat and from her thick lips
> one could cut off scraps with sharp scissors.
> Her eyes are big, and the tench-white pupil is yellowish,
> shining like a cat's at night'[15].

The staging of blackness is thus functional, in the play, to establish "Eurocentric notions of beauty" (Hall 1995: 133).

The 'Moor' is anything but a protagonist, despite the title: an almost silent, dull character, a kind of doll, an object of laughter and scorn. The woman, parodistically and caricaturally portrayed, is a subaltern, in all respects. In a thoroughly racist and sexist scene, she gets commented upon and associated with different animals, while she can hardly express herself. Moreover, the reference to the cat's eyes in the darkness arouses devilish connotations: in the Western Europe of the early modern period, the association between black and devilish was a common one, with practices "demonizing and reifying the range of color" (Morrison 1992: 7). As Kim Hall (1995: 6) remarked, "tropes of blackness drew their primary force from the dualism of good and evil and its association with African cultures and people". The cultural other is here also a deviant other. The performance results in a complete expropriation, deterritorialization, and appropriation of the body and the voice of an African woman. She stands alone, under the searching gaze of the other characters who scrutinize and undress her, and of the audience. The black body is relegated to a space of absolute otherness, stigmatized, reified: not a source of knowledge, but an all-negative pole,

[12] "mismaackten mensch" (v. 1065).
[13] "teef" (v. 1890).
[14] "int hartje van zyn Jaren, | Wiens nues, wiens wangh en kin, al even kaluw waren. | Het lyf stond hem zo quicx, hy had so soeten lach" (vv. 1919-1920).
[15] "Wat desen die is lomp, manierloos en grof | En slaperigh, en luy, en kruepel, ouwt en of. | Wiens beck en noos is plat, en dicke lippen | Men eenen afval sou met een scherp schaartje knippen. | Haar óóghen die zyn gróót, en 'twit is Zeeltich gheel, | Dat glinstert als een kat by nacht" (vv. 1924-1929).

in binary opposition to the body of the young Dutch trader[16]. What is at stake is 'difference'[17]: the merchant's body is exhibited and commented upon as well, as normal, indeed perfect. The various intersectional categories (sex, skin color, age, social status, etc.) do not simply add up but produce a multiplying effect of mockery, hatred, and discrimination: the violence lies in the acts on stage, in the words, in the gaze. And it is no coincidence that this masquerade of cross-racial cross-dressing, intended to arouse the hilarity of the audience, is the preparation for a rape (Smith 2020b: 85).

Representations of that sort, produced in a medium of great visual and acoustic impact such as theater, are a powerful means to justify and legitimize colonialism and slavery. Writsart, the youngest son of the wealthy family, is sanctioned for his youthful hubris, but mildly, as he will marry the girl he raped. He is corrected and brought back into line, as it was common in ancient and early modern comedy: it was a faux pas, from now on he will improve and become a *mercator honestus*. It was known in the Republic that young and rash behavior could lead to disaster: prudence in business is the main virtue of a successful merchant, which is the moral at the core of the play. But in *Moortje*, we can see something else very clearly staged too: what the capitalist endeavor of enslavement was all about – both the incredible wealth accumulated by these sons of Amsterdam merchant families involved in overseas trades, their double moral standard and the subjugation of African subjects, reduced to captivity and deprived of whatever agency, dignity (here even of their clothes), capacity to act and speak for themselves. Eventually, they were reduced to merchandise, that is commodities: the black woman in Bredero's play is presented as a 'gift' (Paijmans 2023: 28). At the time, the ideological construction and legitimacy of imperialism were in an early stage but binary opposition, in fact, a dichotomy between the white character(s) and the black one (man vs. woman, master vs. slave, white vs. black, young vs. old and so forth: the parallel is very articulated) betrays the fundamentals of this hierarchy on which imperialism would later be established.

However, I want to point at two aspects that somehow temperate this horrifying picture. The first one concerns the cross-dressing that, however brutal, is possibly complicating, if not destabilizing. The travesty can open up a space

[16] In a similar way, she gets compared to the other enslaved woman in the play, Katryntje. "When compared to Katrijntje, Negra is structurally considered less beautiful because of her skin colour, and while Katrijntje's beauty is related to whiteness […] Negra is considered ugly because she has a Black African appearance" (Paijmans 2023: 28-29).

[17] "tussen dees en die, is toch te groot verschil" (v. 1917; 'Between the two of them the difference is too big').

for speculation: what Giorgio Agamben (2007) has called the power of 'serious parody'. In a short-circuit, the spectator might realize that also the body of the black woman on stage has been, to all intents and purposes, 'manufactured' by the male white actor performing her role, dressed up, probably with blackface, considering that characters on stage openly discuss it: an Africanist appropriation, the fabrication of "a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona" (Morrison 1992: 6). The carnivalesque performance (Meter 1987) and the parody at the same time complicate and reveal, stirring a complex dynamic.

Secondly, it is very intriguing that somewhere in the play the human trafficking gets sharply condemned by Ritsart, although he bought that Angolan slave himself and gave it to his beloved as a gift, as an object of use – he is thus a slave owner himself:

> 'Inhuman custom! Godless rascality!
> That people are being sold, to horselike slavery!
> In this city too there are those who engage in that trade
> In Farnabock, but God will know'[18]

It is a condemnation on moral grounds of the Portuguese, competitors of the Dutch, but also of those in town, especially Sephardic Jews, who engage in that trade. Discourse on the slave trade gets openly introduced, discussed, and thematized. Critics have argued that this condemnation fits in the anti-Spanish (and Portuguese) discourse at the time of the Truce and that Ritsart primarily refers to the enslavement of Christians, like the white girl Katryntje (Bosman 2006: 149; Smith 2020b: 82). We might also point to the incongruence of many loose moral maxims in Bredero's plays (Schenkeveld 1985). However, such incongruence implies a possibility for reflection in the public arena of theatre. It reflects, in my opinion, a discourse that was not yet stabilized and betrays the moral inconsistency and double standard of many 'civilized' merchants. Some Angolan people were present in Amsterdam, in Sephardic families (sometimes of mixed African descent − Antunes 2020: 89), and the first Dutch trading station was established on the Gold Coast in 1612 (Postma 1990: 57). The audience knew that not only Portuguese and Spanish participated in the slave trade, but also an increasing number of Dutch. At the very beginning, enslavement had been condemned in the Republic: in 1596, 130 (baptized) enslaved 'Moors' aboard a captured Portuguese ship were freed by the municipality of Middelburg in

[18] Translation in Postma (1990: 11).

Zeeland[19], after lengthy discussions (*ibidem*: 130). A few years later, the open condemnation by a character on stage testifies to an existing debate in the Republic about the slave trade and slave labor: is it ethically acceptable? Is it compatible with Christianity? Is it legitimate? Preacher Festus Hommius from Leiden spoke out against slavery in 1617, as (few) other Reformed ministers would do later (Van Stipriaan 2020: 301)[20].

This debate would quickly fade away in the following decades as the Republic became more and more involved in that lucrative trade, especially after the creation of the West India Company (WIC) in 1621 and the resumption of the war with Spain. A commission on this issue was created by the WIC in 1623. The secretary of the Nineteen Gentlemen, the board of the company, merchant Rombouts Jacobsz, wondered what usefulness that 'commerce in Angola, that is of black people'[21] might have since the Dutch by then 'did not have place nor chance to use it in Brazil or elsewhere'[22]. This very practical argument was followed by an ethical one: 'it seems that such a commerce should not be permitted to a Christian'[23]. The minutes of that commission are lost, but we know what decision they took: the company would participate in the slave trade, especially after the conquest of Northern Brazil, with its plantations, in 1630[24]. Hugo Grotius faced the issue in his *De iure belli ac pacis* (1625). Although "introducing some minimal strictures to accommodate the demands of natural reason and intrinsic justice", influential as he was, in fact, Grotius "provided the agents of Dutch colonial expansion with an account of slavery that could legitimate the buying,

[19] Cf. Hondius (2014: 134-144). Nothing is known about the fate of those people. Hondius suspects that they were eventually taken away by the same ship and sold as slaves in the West Indies.
[20] Such voices "constituted a minority position within the Reformed Church" (Sierhuis 2021: 57). Most Reformed ministers would for centuries justify slavery using the curse of Ham in Genesis as argument (Van Stipriaan 2020: 300).
[21] "handel in Angola, te weten van de swarten" (quoted in Van Engelen 2013: 97; transl. M.P.).
[22] "men [heeft] geen plaetse noch gelegenheyt om deselve in Brasil of elders te gebruycken" (*ibidem*; transl. M.P.).
[23] "[dattet] schijnt dat die handel den Christen niet geoorlooft en is" (*ibidem*; transl. M.P.); cf. Emmer (2003[2]: 40). In a navigation manual from 1623 (*Toortse der Zeevaert*), Dierick Ruiters strongly condemned the practice of slave trade in West Africa (*ibidem*: 35).
[24] Very few people continued to oppose that practice, like Willem Usselincx, one of the founders of the company. He was not against enslavement as such but pleaded for the presence of only migrated Dutch and local baptized population in the South American colonies, unlike the Spanish and Portuguese colonies (*ibidem*: 40). Caspar Barlaeus wrote in 1647 in defense of Dutch colonialism in Brazil (good for civilization and Christianization) but condemned slavery with arguments drawn from the Bible and the Stoic philosophy (Weststeijn 2012: 504-505; Sierhuis 2021: 57).

selling, and owning of slaves" (Sierhuis 2021: 56). A double standard was then crystallized: Dutch merchants fashioned themselves as gentlemen on European soil, not on the other continents, where the softer traits were hardened in a harsh, authoritarian, brutal – inhuman, with Ritsart's words – mercantile spirit[25]. In this respect, Marrigje Paijmans (2023: 34) speaks of the "split personality of the white merchant and the black spectre of colonial shame".

Such remarks as Ritsard's could be heard at that time in the public arena, for instance in the sermons of some preachers: rare cases of dissent. *The Little Moor* speaks of the ambivalent attitude – probably caused by the anxieties connected to emerging imperialism[26] – that prevailed in the early Republic at the time and engages in that debate in many shades.

3. 'My Moorish stepfather': the Spanish Brabanter

Let us now turn to Bredero's most famous play, the tragicomedy *The Spanish Brabanter* (1617). The play is set 40 years before, thus in the 1570s, during the war with Spain. The main protagonist is Jerolimo from Antwerp. He is bankrupt and tries to cheat everyone in Amsterdam, by affecting lordly airs. The first person he meets as a newcomer is a beggar-boy, Robbeknol (an Amsterdammer and a Frisian on his father's side), who becomes his servant-helper. They get to know each other in a vivid dialogue. Robbeknol introduces himself in a long narrative: a so-called self-narrative, for a great deal modeled on the successful picaresque novel *Lazarillo de Tormes*[27]. The boy is a picaro of sorts, eternally condemned to search for something to eat and shelter with different masters. In his narrative an important part is occupied by an encounter with a black African European man: again, an encounter, but of a very different sort.

This man does not appear on the character list and that could be one of the reasons why he has received very little critical attention. However, thanks to that long narrative – shaped after the *Lazarillo de Tormes*, who had a 'moreno' stepfather too (Smith 2020a: 95-96) – Robbeknol's self-narrative, a quite complex, multifocal, and dynamic portrait of this character is evoked: we get some access to his focalization and listen to his reported speech. Robbeknol's mother, the widow of a mercenary soldier during the war against Spain, ran an inn and met there the servant of a squire of the Duke of Alba. Again a reference to the

[25] Cf. Sturkenboom (2019: 209-210). "Bredero is surely exposing the expropriations, economic and sexual, and the compromising hypocrisy of emergent colonial mercantilism" (Smith 2020a: 108).
[26] As Hall (1995: 136) remarks for James's England.
[27] *Spaanschen Brabander*; Bredero (1974: 7-17).

Spanish cultural universe, thanks to the crucial mediation of the intertext of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, but connected to the city of Amsterdam (*ibidem*: 95). In the play, the 'Moorish' character appears associated with the presence of African European soldiers in the Netherlands at a very early stage. That is thus historically correct. Unlike in the *Lazarillo de Tormes*, this man is never called a slave: he serves in the Spanish army, as was historically the case with some Africans who first came to the Netherlands at that early date.

His origin is not named, nor is his name[28]. He is black, and the color of his skin is immediately foregrounded, accompanied by the denigrating aesthetic judgment 'ugly': 'an ugly black he was'[29]. He is reduced in his first appearance to a hyper-eroticized body, like the woman with whom he has a relationship, Robbeknol's mother, a widow. Both are portrayed, disdainfully categorized and stigmatized as driven by instinct and 'animal' sensuality. However, Robbeknol's mother appears to be also a fiercely independent, free-spirited woman, an entrepreneur.

Robbeknol's mother gets pregnant and gives birth to 'a beautiful black baby'[30]. Again an aesthetic qualification, but with an interesting shift: being black can also mean being beautiful. Robbeknol tells honestly about his fears and suspicions in the first period that he was confronted with that man. He saw him approaching in the distance and screamed: 'A thunderstorm is coming up, / it's so dark there yonder!'[31]. Her mother's partner is perceived as a threat, like an ominous element of nature. In Robbeknol's eyes, he gets reduced to his 'dark' skin color, once again with devilish connotations: 'I thought he was the Devil, | or some hobgoblin'[32], the devil on earth.

However,

> 'the more I saw of pastries, bread,
> and other treats, of wine as well as food,
> the more he seemed an angel, not a man'[33].

[28] In the *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the stepfather has a name: Zaide; see Fra Molinero (1993).
[29] "Dees was een lelicke swart" (*Spaanschen Brabander*; Bredero 1974: v. 92). I quote from the English translation by H. David Brumble (Bredero 1982).
[30] "een moye jonghe swart" (v. 100). Brumble omits this element, and translates: "a little black". In the *Lazarillo*, we read of "un negrito muy bonito" (*Lazarillo de Tormes* 1987: 17).
[31] "Het sal donderen van desen dagh, | So bruyn komtet ginder op" (vv. 112-113).
[32] "Mij docht het was de duyvel, | Of de bulleback" (vv. 113-114).
[33] "Maar doen hy ons brocht broot en suyvel, | En andere snuystering, so van eten en van wijn, | Doen docht hy mijn gheen mensch, maar een Enghel te zijn" (vv. 114-116).

From devil to angel! A sudden reversal, not without irony and self-mockery, deconstructing whatever automatic association between black and devilish. Robbeknol stresses how hasty and opportunistic our categories and judgments often are, driven by interest: he appreciated that man when he started to fill his stomach. In doing so, the unproblematic, 'natural' connection black-straight is turned around and put away with a burst of laughter. As Robbeknol gets to know his new father better, gets food from him, and begins to socialize with him, all altering constructs regarding the other begin to falter. As Isabel Hoving (2012: 47) once put it, all simplistic representations are destabilized "when the cultural other actually becomes a partner in discursive exchange": an interlocutor, not just a projection that can easily be kept at a distance.

The relationship between this man and Robbeknol's mother appears to be more than sex: a relation of 'a year or two'[34], that is steadfast love between a Dutch woman and an African-Spanish man. One of the first African European men we know of in Amsterdam in the 16th century, a few years after the time in which Bredero's play is situated – just a coincidence but worth mentioning – is registered in the city archives as married to a local woman (Ponte 2020: 70). In the new household, there must be bread on the plan. From this moment on Robbeknol talks about him as a gentleman, capable of caring and of true affection for his wife, and his child, 'for he loved him with all his life'[35] and also for stepchild Robbeknol. Then, a few years later, the young child himself speaks up:

> 'The child saw that we were white, his father black as pitch,
> he sprang to his mother, all afraid, and cried:
> "Oh mama, mama! Help me, help! The Devil's there!"'[36].

Exactly like in the intertext of the *Lazarillo de Tormes*, it is "a moment of racial awareness" (Smith 2020b: 95; Fra Molinero 1993: 23-24; *Lazarillo de Tormes* 1987: 18): the child becomes aware of the difference between the skin color of his mother and brother and that of his father who then scolds him as a 'little whore's whelp'[37]. "'tKijnt sagh" ('The child saw'): Robbeknol is the narrator on stage but the black character, in this case, the child is not silent, a passivity on

[34] "een jaar of twee" (v. 117).
[35] "wantet hem so lief as zijn hert was" (v. 119).
[36] "'tKijnt sagh dat wy wit waren, en dat hy so pick swert | was | Het liep nae mijn Moer verbaast, en 't triep met een schrick; | Och memmetje! memmetje! waartme, waartme, hier is heyntje pick" (vv. 120-122).
[37] "hoeren kijnt" (v. 124).

which fears and desires are projected. The emphasis is explicitly placed on his focalizing gaze, his sight, and primarily on the perception of skin color (other people's, his own) and the associations constructed on it. Robbeknol interrupts his story to insert a moralistic element, a general truth about the human lack of self-insight:

> 'Ah, thought I, how common 'tis that men
> do rudely blame and scold another
> for those faults foulest in themselves'[38].

Such moralistic outbursts are common in Bredero's plays, but what is at stake here is that the black man gets support. It even becomes the occasion for a moralistic tirade (as was already the case in the *Lazarillo de Tormes*), to which ethnic semiosis and racialization are the immediate cause: how people – generally speaking – usually see others and tend to ascribe meaning to the differences they perceive. Reflection is expected from the audience as well: indirectly, we might say that the audience is driven to speculate on the mechanisms and implications of the process of racialization (Van Stipriaan 2018: 263).

When Robbeknol tells us that the man was forced to go stealing, once again he wants to explicitly justify his behavior: if some men do that for their mistresses, should we wonder if he did it, 'for love'[39], just to support his family? Robbeknol sympathizes with him and even admires him, and sides with him. Eventually, the man is caught and tortured, like in the *Lazarillo de Tormes*. He is reduced to a body again, a naked body delivered to the authority: *nuda vita* in the hands of cruel executioners, whose tortures 'he bore patiently'[40]. Narrator Robbeknol suffers with him, feels empathy for his pain, and makes his interlocutor on stage Jerolimo and the audience feel it as well. He says 'my Moorish stepfather'[41], with an affectionate possessive adjective, expressing the full acceptance of that man in his own family.

4. Conclusion

Two plays by Bredero from the beginning of the 17th century feature different African and African European characters: a woman, a man, and a child. At that time, some Dutch people had the chance to meet African European soldiers

[38] "Och docht ick hoe mennich hoort men met een schotseren tong | Een ander lasterlijck schelden en schennen | Van de gebreken daar sy selfste vuylst' van bennen" (vv. 126-128).
[39] "uyt liefden" (v. 144).
[40] "Dat most hy afstaan met ghedult" (v. 154).
[41] "de moor (mijn stief-vader)" (v. 150). In the *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1987: 20), we read "mi padrastro".

during the war with Spain and participated to the first colonial expeditions to West Africa and the South Atlantic. The young 'republican empire' (Weststeijn 2012) witnessed the first Africans in Amsterdam, a city that was demographically booming, at a historical moment that was in many ways liminal, a liquid transitional phase full of tensions and contradictions during the Twelfe-Years Truce with Spain, when the slave trade was in development, the 'Dutch Atlantic' for a big part uncharted and the WIC still to come. In Bredero's plays, audiences and readers had to cope with warring forces of signification within the text, to put it dramatically with Barbara Johnson (2014).

When the character of an African woman appears on stage, played by a white male actor, that performance leads to an "uncomfortable proximity of one Angolan and several Amsterdammers […] entirely from the viewpoint of the latter's" (Smith 2020b: 85). What happens is a caricature and a terrifying appropriation of that body and voice that gets explicitly denigrated. The fact that the Angolan woman is inscribed in the title is misleading: since she is all but a protagonist, it is rather a signal pointing at her 'exceptional', destabilizing presence in the play: an ambivalent fascination with otherness that leads to its complete denigration. The social and political process of racialization is performed and verbalized before the eyes and ears of the playgoers: the 'Moorish woman' gets categorized (slave, black, Angolan, old) and labeled as inferior. The comparison with Writsart articulates a racialized and genderized binarism 'young white free man' vs. 'old black enslaved woman'. This shocking process is only partially tempered by the possible speculation offered by the cross-racial travesty on stage and by the cracks on a still not completely stabilized discourse legitimizing slavery. Ritsart's tirade stirs debate by revealing the double standard of Dutch traders: civilized Christians at home, brutal slave-owners in other continents where human beings were reified, constructed as essentially inferior, reduced in captivity, and exploited to the bone. In this respect, we can contend that the play utters the deep anxieties of emerging imperialism and confrontation with non-European peoples and cultures, prompting "reflection on the ethical challenges of colonial trade" (Paijmans 2023: 36).

In the long staged narrative of *The Spanish Brabanter*, the situation is quite different, also bacause "the Moors originate from the Spanish presence, and indeed in the text of *Lazarillo de Tormes*" (Smith 2020a: 107). This narrative intertext is useful for introducing the issue of racialization and its implications in a critical way, as people were accustomed to doing in the Iberian peninsula. The black man is a free man, a soldier serving in the Spanish army, and the narration gives access to different focalizations. It foregrounds the issue of seeing, constructing

racial difference, ascribing values to it, and establishing hierarchies and power relations. The on-stage narrator and main focalizer, young boy Robbeknol, starts from a totally othering perspective, that reflects "the dominance of white/light" and foregrounds "the role of color in organizing relations of power" (Hall 1995: 7). However, he ends up knowing his mother's partner better, getting involved with him and attached to him, and even questioning altering stereotypes and racial hierarchies. By doing this, he confronts himself, his interlocutor on stage (Jerolimo) and his audience with the mechanisms and the effects of those altering mechanisms, and how to possibly overcome them.

It is a destabilizing and challenging staging indeed, even more so because of its reflexive nature, and possibly effective precisely because of the absence of the fabricated Africanist body on stage. Of course, this remains an imaged encounter with the Africanist other: a white representation of an African people, not more than that. As Morrison (1992: 17) points out, "the fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious". However, it is also an impressive trace of one the first literary and theatrical encounters with African Europeans in early modern Dutch culture, in Amsterdam, at the dawn of the so-called Dutch Golden Age when some encounters did happen in real life and such stagings could trigger debate. "Bredero comes to the very cutting edge of race perceptions in his time, revealing how emergent trading empires were transporting and mixing peoples, as well as subjecting some of them" (Smith 2020a: 111).

Moortje and *De Spaanschen Brabander* have had long and lasting success both as books and on stage, from the very beginning. We don't know about possible reactions to the presence on the stage of the character of an Angolan woman[42]: blackness, racialization, and slavery seem to have been lost in cultural amnesia/aphasia[43]. *Moortje* was mainly perceived as a lively yet gloomy carnivalesque comedy on the risks of deviant bold behavior in the youth of the emerging mer-

[42] According to Van Groesen (2016: 109, quoted in Smith 2020b: 82), slave owners might have felt growing uncomfortable when watching *Moortje* in the 1630s and 40s.

[43] Quite the same happened in the case of early modern French theatre: "what is missing from the landscape of ancien régime race scholarship is a study of racial thinking as it applied to Blackness in 16th and 17th centuries metropolitan France. […] Studying representations of Blackness in early modern metropolitan performance culture can help unsettle the comfortable belief that racism in France has traditionally been the exclusive property of the uneducated and operates – both in the past and the present – in contexts combining ignorance and poverty, at a remove from the enlightened circles that constitute the social and intellectual elite of the nation" (Ndiaye 2021: 4).

cantile elite, the contrast between appearance and reality and the unreliability of perceptions and taxations, and human nature in general. When thirty years ago, in 1993, the play was staged by renowned stage director Hans Croiset, specializing in classic Dutch repertoire (Croiset 2018), that was still the main key to interpretation, in an exuberant production that included intermezzos from Bredero's *Songbook* (Alkema 1993; Freriks 1993). I wonder if *Moortje* could be staged again now, and whether it would need to be somehow 'highjacked' to make the performance accessible and acceptable to contemporary playgoers and their urgencies and concerns (Flotow 1997: 14-34).

On 23 August 2018, during a soiree for the celebration of Bredero in the Public Library of Amsterdam, the cultural program included a sketch from the rehearsal of a new production of *The Spanish Brabanter* by Theatergroep De Kale directed by Gerardjan Rijnders: a scene from the first act, with the encounter between Jerolimo and Robbeknol. It was just a short sketch, but I was intrigued by the director's casting choice: Robbeknol's role was played by Michiel Mwaka Blankwaardt, a Dutch actor of African descent, born in Tanzania. Such a choice challenged the audience to question the discursive and performative (de) construction of gender and race and to un-silence stories (Ndiaye 2021: 11) related to the enduring legacies of Dutch imperialism and participation in the slave trade[44]. Unfortunately, the play, planned in 2019, was postponed, due to practical reasons. A missed opportunity. The Dutch cultural archives still deserve to be studied and explored much deeper, and creatively addressed for historical and contemporary enquiries. A critical revisitation of Dutch historical plays by scholars and an actualization by playrights can stir issues that nowadays have a heightened discursivity in society, at the core of contemporary preoccupations with racism and all sorts of discrimination.

[44] Mears (2022) pleads for "vigorous diversifying across the board" as "the best way forward" for opera, and drama in general.

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