

NEDERLANDSE KLASSIEKEN

Constantijn Huygens Mijn leven



verteld aan
mijn kinderen

bezorgd door Frans Blom

UITGEVERIJ PROMETHEUS/DEET BAKKER

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SUMMARY

Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687), a key figure in the cultural life of the Dutch seventeenth century Republic, made significant contributions to literature, music and architecture, and had strong interest in the art of painting. The main feature of his versatile Renaissance genius was the fervent ambition to remain alive among posterity, through the arts. Hardly any person of the Dutch Golden Age has safeguarded the memory to himself, and all that was his, so frequently by depiction through the hands of artists, or descriptions in prose or verse by his own hand. The climax to all that is his autobiography in Latin verse composed around 1678, at the advanced age of 82: *De vita propria Sermonum inter Liberos libri duo* (*My Life as Told to My Children in Two Books*).

In the past, limited scholarly attention has been paid to this work. Petrus Hofman Peerlkamp released the *editio princeps*, based on one manuscript, in 1817, together with a Dutch translation in verses by Adriaan Loosjes, and, four years later, published a brief annotation in Latin. At the end of the 19th century a new text edition, based on three manuscripts, was made by J.A. Worp in his overall edition of Huygens' poetry, *De gedichten* vol. 8. By now, two new manuscripts of the poem have come to light, as well as various illuminating parallel texts by Huygens. Furthermore, modern readers find difficulties in the translation, which is not always accurate and, of course, rather dated. Then, the only existing annotation in Latin is eclectic and rather unmethodical. It does not do justice to the cultural-historical richness of the poem, nor to the specific autobiographical text type in which self-presentation and modelling of the individual is predominant. Moreover, progress in the study of ancient and humanist texts makes it more possible now to read and appreciate Huygens' Latin poetry in terms of an intertextual relationship to literary tradition.

My introduction to the poem starts from the author's social circumstances and the relation of *My life* to his many other ego-documentary writings. By going back in time to his father and mother, it is shown how the Huygens family, through the war with Spain, were immigrants from the Southern Netherlands (Brabant) to the province of Holland. Father Christiaan sr. was the *homo novus*, in the high position of Secretary to the *Pater Patriae* William of Orange, and after the murder in 1584, in the position of First Secretary of State in the Raad van State. The new family in The Hague succeeded in maintaining their high social position through next generations. By thorough education and preparation for high offices, the two sons, Maurits and Constantijn, obtained equally high functions. Furthermore, in the third generation, Constantijn Huygens' eldest son would in turn follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. Thus, Christiaan Huygens sr. was the founding father of a new highly respected family in Holland, starting a dynastic chain of servants to the court and General Colleges of the United Provinces.

As a Secretary to the Princes Frederik Hendrik and William II of Orange and as a member of the princely Council, Constantijn Huygens greatly augmented the family's fortune, both in terms of income and possessions, and in terms of social-cultural status. To the outside world, he kept up the carefully safeguarded esteem and reputation, in his poetical, musical and architectural achievements, in a wide network of influential friendships, and in the use of expensively bought quasi-nobility titles, such as Zuylichem or Zeelhem, and the English *Sir Knight*, granted by king James I. No one was to misunderstand that the Huygensen counted themselves, and wanted to be counted, as a part of the elite of their time. Likewise, inside the family, there was a

strong ambition to direct the following generations into this position of respect. Father Christiaan Huygens sr. brought up his two sons with a thorough, self-developed humanist-courtier education, not through public schools but inside the walls of the parental house. Constantijn Huygens, in his turn becoming the pater familias, copied the curriculum for his own four sons. Many family documents bear witness to this great effort. First of all there is the prose text, written by father Huygens sr., on the education and progress of his two sons, the *Jongelingsjaren* (*Years of Youth*). Likewise Constantijn Huygens went at length to describe the education of his children. Also, in Latin prose, he gave a splendid overview of his own education in the parental house in the youth autobiography *Mijn jeugd* (*My Youth*), with descriptions and comments in detail on the particular curriculum that had prepared his versatile genius for a position among the greats of his time. Furthermore he wrote instructions to his sons for their study at Leiden University, and, after that, for their grand tours. Even in the case of his self-built classical house in The Hague he left his children a Latin treatise, in which they could find the means of explaining their father's exploit, even well after his death, and defend the family reputation from jealous contumely. Thus, also in his private writings in Dutch or Latin to his own offspring, the author and pater familias took great effort to maintain the reputation of the Huygenses. The last and most extensive text in this intramural series of egodocumentary writings is the autobiography.

The poem displays Huygens' life from birth to the moment of writing, or, actually, to the significant year 1672 when William III was made stadholder and Huygens' eldest son Constantijn jr. was appointed Secretary to the Prince, a career in the footsteps of his father. The organisation of the 2162 line poem is merely chronological. The first book covers the years of education in the parental house, at university and during the educational tours to England and Italy. The second book tells about his professional career in diplomacy and princely secretary, the patronage of the Oranges, the relation between his work as a servant to the princes and his achievements as a poet and musician, about his efforts as princely decoder of enemy cryptography, his special intermediary role in the guardianship of the young prince William III, his work as an Orange envoy to foreign heads such as the *gouverneurs* of the Southern Netherlands, and his four year 'exile' as representative at the courts of Louis XIV in Paris and Charles II in London for the restitution of the principality Orange in southern France. Among these episodes of his working life Huygens also gives a clear overview of the status and augmentation of the family, by lauding both his parents and his elder brother in extensive necrologies, by extolling his wife Susanna van Baerle as the perfect match, by praising his children for their contributions in their careers, arts and offspring, and by describing the newly-bought family possessions Zuylichem and Zeelhem, with their lofty titles, the newly-built classical house in The Hague and the self-designed country place Hofwijck. The last 200 lines make up a self-portrayal, both in physical health and moral, the latter culminating in a defence of his widely published satirical epigrams in Dutch and Latin. Furthermore, Huygens depicts himself in a vast network of friends in all different fields, and as fervent book collector and reader. The poem's epilogue is a prayer of gratitude to God, and a dedication to his sons and sons of theirs to come in future generations. They might use the good points in the life as told, and avoid what went wrong.

My Life is presented as the "most valuable token of love to my children", intended for their eyes only and not for publication, which is confirmed in the author's correspondence about the poem. Dedicated to his sons, and their sons in

future generations, Huygens' autobiography might serve as an example, both in good parts and in bad. Thus, *My Life* can be regarded as intended in the first place to display the recently established reputation of the family and to guide the offspring, along parental and grandparental lines, in their high positions in society. Still there are reasonable grounds to assume that the poem was to have a wider scope than this limited domestic public. After all, Huygens took the utmost care in sculpturing his image for eternity, composing his life story in high quality Latin hexametrical verses. He even sent his work to the literary authority Nicolaas Heinsius to have it checked on possible lapses. Also, Petrus Francius was granted insight in the poem. Being thus read and checked, *My life* was in fact made ready for a wider public, possibly in a posthumous edition.

Furthermore, the address to the offspring and the presentation as an example are abundantly found in other autobiographies. The contemporary Dutch poet Jacob Cats addressed his autobiographical poem in verses to his children and children's children, serving as instruction for them. Through posthumous publication, however, the life story became an integrated part of his editions. In fact, both authors make strong tributes to literary tradition, for in ancient and contemporary biography and autobiography, the presentation of the life story as *exemplum* is found frequently, and the addressed public in Huygens' *Posteritati meae masculae*, *My Own Male Offspring* or Cats' children and children's children, is a specific variation on Ovid's dedication of his autobiographical poem *Tr.* 4,10 to *Posterity* in general, or Petrarch's *Letter to Posterity*. Huygens' organisation of *My Life* in a chronological part and a portrait is a traditional biographic device, occurring in autobiography as well, as Justus Lipsius' *Vitae descriptio* shows. Topical themes chosen for description such as *genus*, *parentes*, *educatio*, *fortuna* and *natura* also have a long biographic tradition.

Being part of the long literary tradition of ancient and humanistic autobiography, Huygens' poem cannot be regarded as an autobiography in the modern sense of the word. The humanist autobiography is a peculiar text form in which the author models a glorious monument for eternity. Show and artistry prevail over straight and sober documentation or self-analysis. Thus, Huygens models the education of his youth with the repeated self-presentation as being a son of the Muses, and that, whether true or not, can be found in many autobiographies by poets, from Ovid to Cats. The theme of friendship is worked out in Ovid to show the poet among other great writers of his time, in Lipsius to show his good character, in Huygens to underline his career as courtier and diplomat, and his talented versatility in many fields of interest. The autobiographical device of *ekphrasis* is used many times in *My Life* when Huygens takes his readers on his journeys and alters the life story into a *hodoeporicon*, a poetic travel description. Finally, his choice for Latin verse, not for Dutch language or prose, must be seen in the light of the traditional artistic self-presentation. The autobiography shows the author at his best, both in terms of content and in style.

The self-modelling process in Huygens' autobiography can not only be seen by comparing this work with his forerunners in literary tradition, but also by contrasting the life story to earlier descriptions. This technique frequently shows that the version as told in *My Life* is rhetorically more convincing as a result of purposeful selection of material, disposition, and accentuating. The famous climbing of the Strassburg Münster is a casual passage in Huygens' *Journal of the Voyage to Venice*, but a most frightening story in *My Life*, serving as an example of youthly hubris. Lessons in Latin, in the version of the biography of his youth, were most pleasant, in *My Life* however a torment, just to underline his nonetheless natural attraction

towards the Muses. From the correspondence, it is known that Huygens tried hard to obtain his Knighthood in Britain, and paid a lot of money for it; in *My Life* this is presented as fully unexpected, to stress the event as a spontaneous favour by the king. Thus, the interaction with literary tradition and the comparison with other earlier documents make it clear that Huygens is not a sober chronicler, but a poet in the tradition of humanist autobiography, recreating his life into a glorious show and monumental remembrance.

That brings the introduction finally to an analysis of the Latin poetry in *My Life*. It has been argued in the past that Huygens' verses lack *latinitas*, that is Latin in the classical style. They have even been qualified as negligent, not being alive to the ancient models. It is true that the poet is very much a man of his own, not swearing allegiance to any classical master. His vocabulary is built up from early classical to postclassical and humanist Latin, supplemented by many new formed derivations. His formulation is extremely iconical, by word-painting in contrasting verbal and nominal repetitions, by sound effects and verse rhythm. The imagery in the poem is fresh and modern. Furthermore the intertextual play reveals a wide reading knowledge of the ancient writers and cunning mastery in using their lines in new contexts.

In conclusion, this new publication of Huygens' autobiography opens up the poem in various ways. The text edition is based on the five existing manuscripts, two autographs and three copies reviewed by the author. The parallel translation in Dutch prose can be used both as stand-alone text and as a helping hand into the Latin verses, trying to preserve some of the original dynamic. The extensive commentary in part two of the study follows the poem passage by passage. It gives the cultural-historical background as far as it is needed for an interpretation of the text. Then it focuses on the manner of self-presentation, comparing the life as it was lived with the life as it is told. Thirdly, the commentary gives annotation to the text, concentrating on what is said and how it is said. Here the Latin poetic capacities of Huygens are discussed in detail.