

MARJA BROUWERS (1948-)

Nancy L. Chadburn
Gustavus Adolphus College
Saint Peter (MN), USA

Marja Brouwers was born on 28 July 1948 in Bergen op Zoom, and attended school in Breda, Best, Oirschot, Eindhoven, and Venlo. While working at various jobs she pursued music studies (piano) at the Conservatories of Maastricht and The Hague from 1965 to 1970. Via evening studies she qualified as an English teacher (full qualification in 1974), teaching at Bussum till 1982. After completing the *Kandidaatsexamen* in English (1975) at the University of Amsterdam, she pursued graduate studies in English literature, linguistics, and philosophy there from 1975-78. She ceased regular teaching in 1982, and since 1984 has been active as writer, lecturer, and in occasional teaching positions, e.g. at 't Colofon (writing school) in Amsterdam. She was Writer-in-Residence, University of Minnesota, from 1987-88. She has two daughters and lives in Amsterdam. Her novel *Havinck* was filmed by Frans Weisz in 1987; in addition to three novels she has written stories and articles in various literary journals and magazines and numerous reviews in *Vrij Nederland*.

One Dutch critic has written that Marja Brouwers's novel *Havinck* can be read as "an attack on the spiritual poverty of the bourgeois lifestyle" (review of *De feniks*, *De Volkskrant*, 4-10-85). Brouwers herself has said that she is concerned with the powerlessness of women in a world run by men. Although Brouwers does not ally herself with outspokenly feminist writers such as Hannes Meinkema and Renate Dorrestein, certainly her first two novels (her third was just published) are nevertheless profoundly feminist in the conflicts they chronicle as well as in their implicit and sometimes explicit criticism of male attitudes. Both *Havinck* (1984) and *De feniks* (1985) assert a causal link between patriarchal values and personal alienation: for in each novel male adherence to an ethic that stresses individual enterprise, self-sufficiency, and rationalism at the cost of feelings and human relationships ultimately produces emotional and spiritual isolation. The similarity of theme is the more striking because the structure and narrative techniques of the novels are so dissimilar: *Havinck* is a third-person narrative told entirely from the (male) title character's viewpoint, whereas *De feniks* consists of two first-person narratives told alternately by two different female characters. One of Brouwers's subtly brilliant achievements in *Havinck* is the reader's gradual loss of sympathy with the narrator, which results not from the perceptible worsening of Havinck's character, but on the contrary

from the slowly and as it were involuntarily emerging truth about what he has always been and intends to remain: a profoundly--and conventionally--selfish man.

Robert Havinck is a quintessential old-style male: he ignores or suppresses his feelings, expects only support and accommodation from his wife, thinks that all that every woman wants is a man (any man), insists on being in control of every situation, and considers child-rearing a woman's domain. Although his wife Lydia's disappointments and misfortunes are far greater than his, he makes little attempt to understand her and reacts to her suicide more as a disruption of his life than as the termination of hers. And at the end of a series of traumatic events and situations, he seems grimly satisfied to have gotten through it all "onbewogen . . . onaangetast" (180).

The novel begins as Havinck is leaving the crematorium after Lydia's funeral, feeling not grief but a sort of ironic bemusement: his habitual technique, it becomes clear, for keeping the world at bay. When his lover Maud, the first person to whom he talks about Lydia's death, asks how he feels, he replies: "Ik weet het niet. . . Ik let daar niet zo op, hoe ik mij voel" (26). If he takes scant notice of his own emotions, he has no comprehension at all of the feelings of others: this is abundantly demonstrated by his recollection of Lydia's two miscarriages

in the early years of their marriage.

Lydia, a dilettante student and adored only child of strictly Calvinist parents, takes marriage as a cue to abandon her desultory studies and embrace domesticity; when she becomes pregnant she is conventionally thrilled; when she shows signs of miscarrying after a few weeks, she is devastated. Havinck recalls the next days as "onplezierig"; he cannot grasp "haar doffe ellende" (118). When the miscarriage occurs Lydia reacts with shock and then hysteria as Havinck tells her he has flushed the "thing" down the toilet. Repulsing his attempt to comfort her "over al die onnutte emoties," she begins to shriek, whereupon he shakes her, telling her to calm down: "Het is weg! Er is niets! Hou er nu mee op!" (119). As for himself: "Hij onderging de gebeurtenissen. Zijn zintuigen verteerden ze niet" (119). A second, still more nightmarish miscarriage (they are repeatedly stopped by carnival revelers on the way to the hospital), after which Lydia is "wekenlang stil en somber" (121), is followed by a successful pregnancy, which leaves Lydia with a more than understandable post-partum depression and an attendant loss of interest in sex; but after her death Havinck complains to her psychiatrist that having to care for the baby almost gave him a post-partum depression, "En daar zit ik nu dus wéér mee," he adds (100). Havinck seems completely unaware that Lydia's miscarriages and post-natal anxieties call into question her very identity as a wife and mother; her pursuit of "self-development" through feminist activities, psychiatric therapy, and, eventually, a series of lovers (to balance Havinck's) seems confused but not surprising. Havinck however interprets her scathing analyses of him and their marriage as "aanslagen op zijn zelfrespect"; he thinks she resents his very existence (41). Yet he admits he invested "bijzonder weinig emotionele energie" (42) in this relationship. Certainly Lydia is difficult to live with; but in his complete abdication of responsibility for either their marriage or the upbringing of their daughter Eva, Havinck shows his

essential incapacity for and indeed indifference to the give and take of real relationships.

The fourteen-year-old Eva's waywardness and confusion stem in large part from parental neglect: Havinck has always been a distant father, and in recent years Lydia has become preoccupied with her own problems. He recognizes his ignorance of Eva's character, but even when he observes, after finally starting to listen to her, that she feels "in hoge mate afgewezen . . . en in antwoord daarop niet beter weet te doen dan een pralend overtrokken beeld van zichzelf te construeren, dat de anderen in het ongelijk moet stellen" (174), the parallel with Lydia's behavior escapes him entirely. Ultimately he resorts to the blunt assertion of fatherly authority to bring her under control, and congratulates himself when this appears to work.

From his lover Maud Havinck expects compliance, amusement, and sex. He calls her at all hours, arrives unwanted on her doorstep, and expects her to move in with him after Lydia's death--for his convenience, not because he is interested in commitment. Her refusal enrages him: "Hoe kan dat onaangepaste, ondermaatse mormel in vredesnaam denken dat zij nee kan zeggen tegen hem!" (171). Yet he has only the vaguest notion of his feelings for her: "ben ik nog steeds verliefd op haar?" he wonders. "Er moet wel iets zijn, als ik blijf terugkomen" (168). What he decides he cannot do without are her sexual services: "Wat zou hij eigenlijk doen als hij haar niet had? Hem tussen de deur steken?" (169). He bases his appeal to Maud on the conviction that women "alleen maar zoeken naar een man, en feitelijk ook nooit iets anders hebben gedaan," and his method of persuasion is foreplay; her response--"Man, ga pissen!"--seems entirely appropriate (170).

"Op zijn vijftiengste," writes Brouwers halfway through the novel, "was Robert Havinck al heel goed in staat om zijn gevoelens te verbergen, desnoods ook voor

zichzelf" (104). Havinck's avoidance of feelings and self-analysis stems from his need to reject or ignore whatever he cannot control or attain. This attitude is epitomized by a visit to a bordello with an urbane colleague from his law firm. Havinck lacks the confidence to approach the stunning black-haired woman who really attracts him, and so makes do with a more accessible blonde; afterwards he tries to blot out his sense of failure by condemning the whole adventure as "burgerlijke viezigheid." His colleague tells him he demands too much of himself (126); and this is indeed the heart of the matter: in all he undertakes Havinck demands success on his own terms, and deals with failure by denying the value of what he has lost. In this incident he blots out his frustrated desire with contempt, and he reacts analogously to other defeats and disasters: he cannot stop Lydia's miscarriages nor assuage her pain, so he tells her to stop crying and forget it; baffled by Eva's adolescent irresponsibility, he takes refuge in laying down the law; when Maud rejects him and acquires a new lover, he feigns indifference. For at all costs he must remain "onbewogen . . . onaangetast." The crowning irony is that all his personal failures result from his refusal to risk his idea of failure by investing anything in feelings and relationships. He avoids losing the game by declining to play.

Havinck's assumption that a woman's actions and desires should suit the convenience of the man in her life recurs in the relationships that figure in *De feniks*. Thomas Asberg is the founder of the Fretura firm, which begins as a "frites" stall and gradually expands to the manufacture of deep-fat frying equipment. He pours all his energies into the firm's development, moving house repeatedly in connection with professional expansion and a number of fiery accidents. His wife Catherine, a brooding woman who occasionally plays a curious violin-like instrument, does not sympathize with his commercial aspirations, which she considers futile. Asberg ignores

her skepticism and carries out his plans without consulting her: to him she is merely an appendage to be dragged along, and ultimately their only contact is coldly hostile sex. The deaf ear that Havinck turns to his wife's criticisms and analyses has its counterpart in the silence and individual isolation that characterize the households of Thomas Asberg and his grandson Lukas Asberg. The mutual alienation of Thomas and Catherine becomes definitive during a savage argument: in a fit of rage she kicks dents in the sheet metal for a new frying apparatus, and he retaliates by smashing her violin, saying: "Jij stelt prijs op je viool? Welnu, ik stel precies evenveel prijs op mijn spullen. Misschien dat je dat nu begrijpt" (116). What she—and the reader—understands is that her damaging his equipment authorizes him to silence her sole medium of self-expression, which he places on the same level as sheet metal. Soon after this incident she decides to poison him, in order to "redeem" him and destroy his "madness," which is what she calls his devotion to Fretura (143). In this way she gets the last word, but paradoxically, in so doing she produces in herself the very disjunction of thought and feeling against which she has struggled in their marriage: "Vanaf die dag kon ik mij verliezen in bespiegelingen over de dingen, over de mensen, over mijn leven, zonder angst of medelijden, zonder schuld of verantwoordelijkheid" (143); in effect she has taken Thomas's place as "een volwaardig en aangepast lid van de maatschappij" (143): that is, a ruthless and detached contender.

Lukas Asberg shows an indifference reminiscent of his grandfather's to the interests and wishes of the young woman he lives with, a piano student who is the primary narrator of the novel. When she becomes fascinated by his complex and murky family history, and embarks on a speculative, ultimately unresolved search for the truth, he is annoyed and openly scornful of her efforts to piece events together. His actions toward her seldom express tenderness, but frequently

impatience or contempt; he considers musicians "buitengewoon ongearticuleerde mensen" (70) and criticizes her insufficient rationality: "Alles is bij jou een kwestie van intuïtie. Maar ik denk" (22). Eventually he even objects to her preference for "passionate" composers like Beethoven and Rachmaninov, whom he calls "onweersachtige herriemakers" (185).

Lukas becomes interested in the Fretura firm not for family reasons but for economic ones: the funding is about to run out for his position as *wetenschappelijk medewerker*. He angrily rejects the narrator's hesitant objection to his involvement in the firm: "Als ik iets aan die fabriek zou willen doen. . . dan moet ik dat zelf weten. . . En dan heb ik daarbij geen behoefte aan jouw interpretaties of verdachtmakingen" (185). In the end his needs do not include her at all, and their relationship is broken off.

In the Asberg family the men make the plans and decisions, and the women are expected to accept these; if they rebel they are swiftly punished, as in the violin incident; when they offer criticism or their own views the men respond with *ad feminam* attacks. The Asberg men pride themselves on their pragmatism and intellectualism—even when the former is applied to as ignoble an enterprise as deep-fat frying and the latter comes down to the outright rejection of non-empirical thinking; they despise intuition and keep an eye on market values. [The middle generation is represented by Lukas's father, who considers contemporary art a consumer item, and asks the narrator what the "use" of her piano studies is (160-161).] When the narrator comes to see Lukas after their break-up, his first words, "Jij hebt ook niet veel trots!" (195) confirm his view of relationships as power struggles (Havinck's

studied nonchalance upon hearing of Maud's new lover has a like origin). The conclusions of both novels reflect the continued dominance of such patriarchal values as pride, control, logic, and self-sufficiency, in the women as well as in the men: for Maud beats Havinck at his own game by dropping him before he can drop her, while Lukas's utter unreceptivity forces the narrator of *De feniks* into a silence and stasis similar to his own: the last sentence of the novel is: "Hij bewoog niet, ik bewoog niet, en zo was alles daar stil" (199).

The short-circuited relationships portrayed in Marja Brouwers's novels are not the product of a society that is too free and too fast, as some reviewers have suggested, but on the contrary of one still encumbered with rigid ideas about gender and sexual roles and a male terror of vulnerability. Havinck's sin, and that of Thomas and Lukas Asberg, is their avoidance of emotion and rejection of human involvement; but this has consequences for women as well as for the men themselves: Catherine and Maud become hard-headed controllers; Eva and the piano student give up trying to break through the barriers to connection; and Lydia, in committing suicide, quits the game in the most final way possible. Ultimately they are all like the blank silhouettes in the Dantesque art exhibition called "La Città Dolente" that Havinck visits at the end of the novel bearing his name. As the artist explains to him:

In de vestibule van de hel, het voorportaal, daar verblijven de nuttelozen, de onbeduidenden. De lege silhouetten. In hun levens, zo staat het, was lof noch schande. Het goede kozen zij niet en het kwade kozen zij niet. Trouw waren zij alleen aan zichzelf. Dit is te verachtelijk voor genade of doem (179).

Works by Marja Brouwers

Havinck. 1984.

De feniks. 1985.

De lichtjager. 1990.