

HELLA S. HAASSE (1918-)

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Hella S. Haasse was born on February 2, 1918, in Batavia in the former Dutch East Indies as the daughter of a concert pianist and a Dutch government official. She spent her childhood in the Netherlands and in the Dutch East Indies, where she received her elementary and secondary education. She moved to Amsterdam in 1938 to study Scandinavian literature, but broke off her studies in 1940 to study acting. In addition to her novels, she has published many essays in various periodicals and some of her work has been translated. The most important literary prizes she has received are the Constantijn Huygensprijs (1981), and the P.C. Hooftprijs for prose (1983). She now lives in France.

Usually the P.C. Hooftprijs, the most important literary prize in the Netherlands, is awarded to someone who has written an important work within the last three years. Hella S. Haasse is one of the few exceptions to this rule; by a unanimous decision of the jury she was elected for the prize in the category of prose for the whole of her *oeuvre* in 1983. The jury's choice was hardly surprising if one considers the breadth and depth of the works written by her. Although Haasse did write poetry, travel impressions, essays on literature (which reflect her great knowledge of European literature by the way), various translations, and dramas, she is best known to her readers for her novels. The topics dealt with in these works and the locales in which they are set are astonishingly varied. Many of her novels and stories are set in the former Dutch East Indies, where she was born and spent the early years of her life. The literature discusses the various relations between the Dutch colonials and the natives of the Islands. Haasse also wrote several historical novels, and her more recent novels have a contemporary setting.

Two of her greatest interests have always been the role of women in society and the relationship between writers and the characters they create. In an interview with Johan Diepstraten in 1984 Haasse was asked if much of her *oeuvre* did not belong to "women's literature" in the broadest sense of the word. She gave the following answer:

It depends from what point of view you look

at it. People who are acquainted with my books can see that attention is paid to the inner development of women. . . . But I am not a militant feminist. Feminism is not an invention of our period anyway. Real feminism originated at the end of the eighteenth century. At the time of the French Revolution there were female town councillors and members of governing committees. In England, in the course of the nineteenth century, the struggle for the women's vote originated. All of this led to the fact that women became equal citizens. Between the two world wars I received a good education, I started my studies, and was able to choose a profession. I've always been amazed that women in the sixties suddenly had the feeling that they had been frightfully oppressed. It's a question of the following: you have a number of possibilities and what do you do with them? What do you want? Women in our society can choose to do what they want; that is important. No formal impediment prevents you from doing what you want to do. Feminism as such has slowly developed into an anti-attitude to a man's world. I do not think that it is true that men want to oppress women. I don't want to say by that that what those women were striving for wasn't worth the struggle; many things have been achieved. This hard line against men seems exaggerated to me; I don't agree with it (141ff).¹

In "Minne: een misverstand" and "Liefde en geluk," two essays published in 1972 (*Zelfstandig*), Haasse discusses the status of women throughout the ages, especially the whole aspect of the courtly love tradition. Three of her historical novels deal with the role of women in the eighteenth century, although one can argue that the latter two

are not "novels" in the true sense of the word in that they consist of translations of letters, legal documents, and literary sketches, which are arranged, edited and commented on by Haasse. The works in question are *Een gevaarlijke verhouding of Berg-en-Daalse brieven* (1978), *Mevrouw Bentinck of Onverenigbaarheid van karakter* (1978), and *De groten der aarde of Bentinck tegen Bentinck* (1981).

It is the first book that I wish to discuss here. The title itself is intriguing in that "een gevaarlijke verhouding" means a dangerous liaison or relationship, and refers to the eighteenth-century novel by Choderlos de Laclos (which has been the subject of two recent films, "Valcourt" and "Dangerous Liaisons"). At the same time Haasse's title refers to the dangerous relationship between the writers Laclos and Haasse and the fictitious characters they have created in their novels--dangerous in the sense that Haasse abhors the Marquise de Merteuil's actions and at the same time develops some admiration for her independent spirit. "Daal en Berg" or "Valley and Mountain" is an area in The Hague, where Haasse has de Merteuil living in a house called "Daalberg", which de Merteuil renames "Valmont"--a translation from the Dutch; "Valmont" is also the name of de Merteuil's former lover, who, in the novel by Laclos, has been involved in her intrigues; and at the same time "Valley and Mountain" or "Hill and Vale" suggests the ambivalent relationship that Haasse has with her main character.

At the end of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* of 1782, the Marquise de Merteuil is snubbed by Parisian society after her correspondence with her former lover Valmont, correspondence which reveals her involvement in his seduction of Cecile Volanges and Madame de Tourvel, is made public. In addition to being outcast from society, de Merteuil's face is disfigured by smallpox, she has become blind in one eye, and is being prosecuted by her creditors. In the last letter of the book Mme de Volanges

reports that it is rumoured that de Merteuil has fled to the Netherlands with her husband's family jewels and silver and has left many debts behind her. It is at this point that Haasse's novel begins.

The form of Haasse's novel is interesting in that it is an epistolary novel, as is the one by Laclos. Haasse's novel consists of a series of letters: eight are written by the author and addressed to the Marquise; five are written by the fictitious Marquise and addressed to no one in particular, although the Marquise feels that someone may have some sympathy for her in later years and to this "someone" she tries to justify her actions; and one letter is supposedly written by the magician Merlin to Morgan, who, Merlin feels, may have been reincarnated in de Merteuil. This thought is dismissed by Haasse, who claims in the last letter:

Did I insult you, or worse, cause you grief, by taking away from you again the independence that I had granted you and banned you again into the state of an **invented** creature? . . . It is quite clear that you do not only want to distance yourself from **my** interpretations--that I can understand!--but that now you are also trying to emancipate yourself from your creator. You have accepted the idea that you have outgrown Laclos literally: you existed long before he was born . . . as the Muse of Western poets (149).

The relationship between a writer and a fictitious character created by an earlier writer is an interesting one. Haasse asks herself if a writer is allowed to reuse a character from a work of fiction and fill in details of that character's "life" that may be lacking in the original work: "Is it permitted to continue interrupted contours, colour those white spaces that stimulate the imagination, or make intriguing shadows transparent?" (7-8). Just as Laclos initially appears to condemn his literary creation and then becomes more and more fascinated with her, Haasse becomes more and more involved in her de Merteuil. She does not exactly justify de Merteuil's actions, but tries to explain them by

examining the latter's upbringing and the development of her personality. This process takes place until the imaginary letter from Merlin. At this point Haasse realizes the "dangerous liaison" that she has established with her character and that it is necessary to break it off, in the same way as Laclos, as has often been criticized, drops his character when she loses face both literally and figuratively.

Aside from their epistolary form, the novels of both Laclos and Haasse share the absence of a direct narrator in a certain sense. In his discussion of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* Rosbottom, for example, makes the following statement:

Another lack defines this novel well and that is the absence of responsibility—for the text, for its actions, for its results. From the outset, no one accepts full responsibility for the text's publication. . . . , no one accepts responsibility for the novel's plots. . . . It is only at the end of the collection, when Madame de Rosemont has all the letters, that one final, responsible act could stabilize a disintegrating world, and she relinquishes this task to an anonymous editor who, in turn, exculpates himself in the first paragraph of his preface (60).

As has been mentioned, the relationship between Haasse and de Merteuil is a complex one. Haasse is interested in the changing role of women throughout the ages. She states that de Merteuil has been seen as a female counterpart to Richard III or Tartuffe, but she feels that this too easily dismisses her character's complexity. As far as Haasse is concerned, de Merteuil is a typical product of the Enlightenment, and she is an egoist, not because she is evil, but because she is governed by her desire for reason and independence. She transforms Descartes' "Cogito ergo sum" into the idea that what she imagines, she makes or brings to reality. She does not concern herself with other people or their circumstances (*Een gevaarlijke verhouding* 8). Haasse thinks that perhaps de Merteuil could therefore be called a "monster," that is to say, a creature that cannot be judged by so-called human

criteria.

In referring to the famous eighty-first letter in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, in which de Merteuil describes her upbringing, Haasse portrays her character as a typical aristocratic woman who marries at an early age, is widowed shortly afterwards, and then embarks on a series of affairs which she manages to keep hidden from Parisian society. Then she meets Valmont, whom she sees as her male counterpart, and for the first time she falls in love and loses her self-control. In her seclusion in The Hague after her exile from Paris, de Merteuil ponders on society's double standard. She has become an outcast, she thinks, "because I—a woman—allowed myself to do what most people in our circles have permitted themselves since human memory. A woman is only permitted to be promiscuous on the condition that no one finds out about it" (32-33).

Similar thoughts are expressed by Charlotte Sophie Bentinck von Aldenburgh in *Mevrouw Bentinck of Onverenigbaarheid van karakter*, where the title character, who has left her husband for her lover, writes: "My manner of thinking is rather unusual, but, I believe, is rooted in Reason. I recognize no other judge of human behaviour than the person who is involved himself" (313). She feels that everyone has the right to act independently; she has chosen to have an affair and suffer its consequences and she is too proud to justify herself or consider what other people may think of her (132). Like de Merteuil, Bentinck feels that men have advantages over women and she jots down what some of those advantages are:

1. Men receive a better education than women.
2. More money is spent on their education and their travels than on that of women.
3. Financially they are at an advantage, since they usually receive greater inheritances than women.
4. They have more power, both in public and in private, than women.
5. Only men are allowed to study and do

academic research.

6. They make the final decisions in how their children are to be raised.
7. By their actions they can lay claim to fame and immortality.
8. Only men are allowed to legislate and make decisions on matters of religion.

According to Charlotte, this is most unfair; women should have the same rights as men because both sexes are intellectually equal (367).

In *Een gevaarlijke verhouding* the depiction of women throughout the ages in the dialogue between Haasse and de Merteuil becomes interesting. Since the latter is condemned to solitude in The Hague she starts writing letters. Now that she no longer has anyone with whom she can communicate, she, who in the past has written so many letters, feels the need to share her thoughts with someone (32). Her bookseller, the only person with whom she has any personal contact except for her servant, suggests that she write to Belle van Zuylen or Elizabeth Wolff and Aagje Deken—the latter two had achieved some reputation as authors of epistolary novels—but de Merteuil does not feel that she will have much in common with them. However, she does decide to hire tutors for English and German to help her acquaint herself with the literature in those languages, and it is at this point that a lively discussion on literature ensues between Haasse and her de Merteuil. The latter remarks:

Reading is in many ways as I have noticed, to carry on a dialogue. Involuntarily one reacts to the opinions and behaviour of the fictitious characters and formulates one's approval or disapproval. The one to whom I express my thoughts is not my lucid self, but a type of possible opponent; perhaps the peculiar, formless force, the emotional stream that I cannot bear (71).

As a product of the Enlightenment, de Merteuil has no use for the sentimental works that were in vogue at the time. She

therefore does not like Lotte in Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, nor the title characters of his later works *Stella* and *Iphigenia*. She does, however, admire Minna von Barnhelm in Lessing's play by that name, because Minna "at least shows spirit and a sense of determination, she knows what she wants, and deliberately reacts to certain exaggeratedly idealistic, real male notions of honour, duty, and self-denial. She at least has the courage to recognize that she finds her own happiness more important" (72). For the same reasons she approves of Manon Lescaut and Moll Flanders because they are not sentimental and pursue their own course in life. Julie in *La nouvelle Heloise* is dismissed for the same reason that Goethe's Lotte is rejected, and all of the women in Shakespeare's plays are considered to be overrated.

Haasse, on the other hand, defends Shakespeare, although she can understand that a lady of the Enlightenment like de Merteuil does not like his works because she finds them too barbaric. Haasse says that in Elizabethan times women did not have much of a chance to develop their independence. She defends Lady MacBeth, for example, as an intelligent, energetic woman, who unfortunately lives in a society where women do not count, and one who is married to an ambitious but not particularly intelligent husband with a weak character (86).

Haasse points out that there have been many men of the same sort as Valmont in literature since 1782, but that there has been no one who could be considered to be de Merteuil's successor. The "Belle Dame Sans Merci", who appears as a fickle ghost in Romantic literature, can be considered as irrational, inhuman, a symbol. The phrase "sans merci" can certainly be applied to de Merteuil, but she remains a figure of human dimensions.

This becomes especially apparent in the last part of the book, where the relationship between Haasse and her de Merteuil

becomes extremely complicated. The latter mentions that through her scheming it has become possible to leave Holland as quickly and unnoted as when she arrived there. She states:

Who dares to maintain that this **did not** happen? Does my name, my image have to be associated with this windy country forever? Left to my own devices, I helped myself. If it is true that reading many good books signifies a second education for a woman, the supplementation and completion of a first education that was much too superficial, at least let me have learned from my studies at House Valmont the art of literally escaping through fiction (134).

Haasse speculates that if de Merteuil had escaped she would either have become a

feminist like Mary Wollstonecraft or a type of "Moll France" at the head of a band of thieves and beggars as a type of female MacHeath or Peachum. The author is not ready to let her character go, however, for as she states, "fictitious characters never escape through breaks in reality out of their world of fiction. They have no other existence than what has been given to them by their author. 'You are in Holland, madam, everytime that Laclos' work . . . calls up echoes'"(138).

In summary, *Een gevaarlijke verhouding* is a pivotal work in Haasse's oeuvre in that it shows both her interest in the role of women, and reflects many of her ideas on the writer's craft and fascination with his or her characters.

ENDNOTES

¹ All translations from the Dutch are my own. Diepstraten's book is complemented by a complete bibliography of Haasse's works compiled by Charlotte de Cloet and a bibliography of secondary literature compiled by Aloys van den Berk.

Works by Hella S. Haasse

Stroomversnelling. Amsterdam, 1945.

Oeroeg. Amsterdam, 1948.

Het woud der verwachting. Het leven van Charles van Orleans. Amsterdam, 1949.

De scharlaken stad. Amsterdam, 1952.

Zelfportret als legkaart. Amsterdam, 1954.

De tuinen van Bomarzo. Amsterdam, 1968.

Huurders en onderhuurders. Amsterdam, 1971.

Zelfstandig. Bijvoeglijk. Zeven essays over schrijvers, schrijfsters. Amsterdam, 1972.

Een gevaarlijke verhouding of Daal-en-Bergse brieven. Amsterdam, 1976.

Mevrouw Bentinck of Onverenigbaarheid van karakter. Amsterdam, 1978.

De groten der aarde of Bentinck tegen Bentinck. Amsterdam, 1981.

De wegen der verbeelding. Amsterdam, 1983.

Secondary Literature

Buuren, Hannah van. "Hella Haasse et la thème du labyrinthe." *Septentrion* 15 (1986): 12-14.

Diepstraten, Johan. *Hella S. Haasse*. The Hague: BZZToH, 1984. (bibliography 151-163).

Rosbottom, Ronald C. *Choderlos de Laclos*. Boston: Twayne, 1978.