

Review

Luc Panhuysen, *Oranje tegen de Zonnekoning. De strijd van Willem III en Lodewijk XIV om Europa*, Amsterdam, Atlas Contact, 2016, 592 pp. ISBN 978-90-450-2329-8.



The grand canvas of Luc Panhuysen's latest book is as big as a continent; the painting an abundant and spectacular image of a struggle to dominate Europe. The antagonists were an unlikely pair. William III (1650-1672) was born Prince of Orange but lacked any political power. Morose at times, averse to public ceremony, seemingly uninterested in women and often regarded as a soldier-king rather than as statesman. Louis XIV (1643-1715) on the other hand, was born King of the foremost state in Europe. A man that created his own theatre in which he demanded the centre stage position; addicted to amorous adventure. Ever since the Year of Disaster (1672), the two men clashed in a struggle that was to decide the fate of Europe, one that ended only with the Peace of Utrecht (1713).

It is this epic struggle Panhuysen sketches in a 600-page book that approaches the emergence of the European balance of power through the study of personality.

Essentially a double biography, he tracks the lives of the two princes throughout their youth and adolescence in the 1660s. He analyses their political development and enmity in the 1670s following the French invasion of the Dutch Republic, the 'cold war' of the 1680s and the Nine Years' War (1688-1697) that ended in stalemate. Throughout, Panhuysen effortlessly switches between and interweaves biographical sketch and geopolitical analysis so as to present the reader with a gripping account of late seventeenth century Europe. A critic might accuse Panhuysen of focusing too much on personality and not on context - witness the coloured illustrations section that is dominated by portraits. But it does make for a spellbinding story. The prose is dense but fluent, rich in detail but quick-paced. The book is solidly researched but none the less a veritable page turner.

Luc Panhuysen is one of the foremost authors of the genre of popular scientific historical literature in The Netherlands, testified by a consistent track record over the past 20-odd years. More recently, the seventeenth century has captured his imagination, and the biography should be seen as part of a trilogy, consisting also of a double biography of the De Witt Brothers (*De ware vrijheid: De levens van Johan en Cornelis de Witt*, 2005) and a monograph on the Year of Disaster (*Rampjaar 1672: hoe de Republiek aan de ondergang ontsnapte*, 2009). Neither William nor Louis lack attention by historians. Machiel Bosman's skilful case study of William's invasion of England in 1688 (2016) is testimony to the continuing fascination by the late seventeenth century of both historians and readers. But the most recent scholarly biographies by Wout Troost (2001) and Olivier Chaline (2005) now seem somewhat dusty.

Thus Panhuysen steps into the void with a refreshing approach: a double biography. Although the structure of the book is fairly straightforward narrative, Panhuysen still had to deal with the gargantuan challenge to weave the biographical strands of the lives of the two princes together. Now and then the book inevitably lapses into side-by-side history, but overall he manages to keep his eye on what must be considered the primary purpose of the book, namely to show the dialectic interaction between the careers of William and Louis. Indeed, Panhuysen goes so far as to argue that the two princes more or less created each other's identities (p.14). A second, rather surprising feature of the biography should also be underscored, namely the conclusion that, in a way, the taciturn and seemingly enigmatic William emerges as a round character after all, whereas the exuberant and theatrical Sun King manages to keep up his mask to the historian.

Panhuysen's biography does not stand out for new original research, but rather superb writing skills, to which the bland title of his book, *Orange against the Sun King. The struggle for Europe between William III and Louis XIV*, hardly does justice. Take the deftly employed method of using metaphor. For instance, when the Dutch countryside is being occupied by French armies in 1672, William III is looking from afar. Unable to see what is really happening on the ground, Panhuysen just writes that William sees 'greyish black columns of smoke on the horizon' (p. 84). It is with the simple, well-chosen image that Panhuysen is able to suggest the devastation left by the French army without going into much detail. Similarly, to describe the smothering atmosphere of mourning in The Hague after the death of William's father William II in 1650, he chooses the image of the pipes of the church organ that were wrapped in doleful black. Metaphor as method can easily derail when used casually or profusely, but Panhuysen is, without, exception, spot on in his choices. His metaphors have explanatory value and stick in the reader's mind: 'the Sun King was the epicentre of his own earthquake' (97).

Moreover, the choice of metaphor is significant on another level as well, for it is one that the subjects of his biography would have understood very well. Illustrative is a section from Louis's own diary, in which he reflects upon his tempestuous amorous adventures. The King describes his own heart as a fortress, which is besieged by the charms of women. In the end, the King's heart is just as vulnerable as an enemy town is in front of the besieging armies of France.

Panhuysen also masters the functional use of anecdote. Here again he chooses carefully. The famous coach incident of William III is one example. When the coach of the

young prince encountered the one of the French ambassador, he refused to give way. Panhuysen uses this well-known story to describe the stubborn mind-set of the Prince of Orange and his sense of dignity. Another, less well known, anecdote, is also brilliant. As a child, William was told a tale by Aesop's about a bat who declared to belong neither to the mammals, nor to the birds; in short, he did not declare himself to belong to either party. To which William exclaimed: 'That is the Portuguese ambassador, right? He is the bat'. (p. 50)

The 'bat-anecdote' is testimony to another impressive achievement, namely the way in which Panhuysen is able to connect character to wider issues of politics and international relations. The book navigates the lives of the two princes in all their aspects, ranging from highly personal matters to issues of politics and international relations. Crucially, Panhuysen weaves together all the strands fluently. Take for instance the mesmerizing 'poison and passion' chapter, in which he analyses a 1680 poison affair. An accusation at the Versailles court of poisoning and love potions leads to a cascade of accusations and arrests. Not only does the affair provide an insightful glimpse into contemporary mentalities on magic, but also how these interact with power struggles at court that ultimately had ramifications in the context of international politics, engaging the ministers of war and economic affairs. Another fascinating chapter is the ponderously entitled 'Louis and God', in which Panhuysen adroitly pilots the waters of early modern religious life, from the consciousness of the King to the role of religion in international politics.

This does not mean that there are still a number of issues that need to be addressed. There is the absence of manuscript sources in the book. Panhuysen leans on secondary sources, added with well-known printed primary sources. In the genre this is not overly problematic, but for one having delved into the archives for his previous work it somewhat lessens the originality for those more familiar with the period. Although Panhuysen has been reading widely and his literature is usually quite up to date, he has a tendency sometimes to lean on older historiography, frequently preferring, for instance, the biography of Louis XIV of John Wolfe (1968) to that of Olivier Chaline (2005). The bibliography also contains an obvious gap: there is no reference to the one book that also charted the relationship between William and Louis, namely Charles-Édouard Levillain, *Vaincre Louis XIV: Angleterre, Hollande, France. Histoire d'une relation triangulaire 1665-1688* (2010).

It does not lessen the fact that *Oranje tegen de Zonnekoning* is a must-read that will leave an impact on a wide readership. Panhuysen's book is the epicentre of its own earthquake.

David Onnekink, University of Utrecht