

Iron-fisted Varius

In 1720 Hendrik Bosch, publisher and bookseller in Amsterdam, brought out a tragedy entitled *Bassianus Varius Heliogabalus, of de Uitterste proef der standvastige liefde (B.V.H., or: The ultimate test of constant love)*. This was written by Gysbert Tysens (also found spelled as Gijsbert Tijssens).

Gysbert Tysens Jr was born and lived all of his fairly short life (1693-1732) in Amsterdam. He was a hack writer who produced poetry and especially drama, at least six tragedies and twenty-six comedies. The earliest of these works is a tragedy dated 1717. So Tysens was a very prolific author in his fifteen active years. His works will have been well-read because Tysens dealt in his plays and poems with many burning issues of his day, some now difficult to fathom, others still part of history, such as the speculative ‘Bubbles’ of the early 18th century. I say well-read, as it seems likely that most of Tysens’ plays have never been performed on stage. In the preface to his tragedy *Klearchus, dwingeland van Heraklea* (1727) he states that it was never intended for the stage, “because since they refused to stage my Bassianus Varius Heliogabalus, without any reason (truly a verdict not known in any other place), I have never felt the least urge to try again, rather the opposite, to leave this for ever to my poet contemporaries”. Whether this was a great loss for the theatre may be doubted. The famous historian of the Dutch stage J.A. Worp, in discussing eighteenth-century Dutch tragedy in the French manner, stated: “In all of these tragedies, in large part with subjects taken from classical antiquity, there is talk and nothing but talk. It must have been a real treat for the audience when in some of these plays someone commits suicide on stage, which, from the actors’ point of view, must have seemed the most natural thing to do.” Here Worp explicitly refers to Tysens. Is Tysens’ *Bassianus Varius Heliogabalus* really as bad as that?

Yes, in fact it is: one can hardly imagine it on stage: it is indeed nothing but talk, and this talk is unrelieved by anything happening at all, not even a single suicide: the only deaths occurring are those of Varius and his mother, but these are reported by an eye-witness. And all’s well that ends well: with its subplot of thwarted lovers reunited, this is not much of a tragedy really. But although Tysens certainly was no great dramatist, there are some interesting touches to his reworking of Herodianus (because that is what it seems to be; I will look into some of his possible sources). Tysens portrays Varius not so much as an oriental decadent – though there are some references to that too – but above all as a fearful, strong and ruthless tyrant, who threatens his enemies with his iron fist that will smite them to dust. No hint here of a slender boy with good looks dancing for his god. And there is more.

Frederick Naerebout, June 2005