It is not my intention to present a retrospective assessment of Kamerbeek’s performance as a scholar. That has been done respectfully, though not uncritically, by Stefan Radt in *Gnomon* 72 (2000), 187–188, and several contributors to this volume touch upon the scholarly merits of Kamerbeek’s work on Sophocles. Thus I feel free to concentrate on a more Plutarchean biographical sketch, as a means of getting closer to his *êthos*.

Much of Kamerbeek’s person can be better understood by taking into account the circumstances of his youth. In Rotterdam, that rough and industrious city, his father worked hard to support his family. Having started out as a primary school teacher, he spent his free time studying, in order to acquire higher qualifications, and ultimately became a history and geography teacher at a secondary school. His long teaching days were followed by evenings in which he taught extra hours at other institutions or gave private tuition. Even so, he was very much a family man, and he devoted what leisure time he had to his children: two sons, Jan and Coen, and a daughter, Bep. Both parents wanted their children to get the best education available. In fact, all three of them consistently obtained high marks.

In these early years Coen’s elder brother Jan seems to have been his best friend. During the summer holidays the Kamerbeeks invariably went to the same small family pension in Laag Soeren, a wooded area in the eastern part of Holland, and the two boys took long walks together, or went off on their bicycles, no doubt chatting about school and exchanging the fruits of their reading, for they were both fanatical readers. Many years later Coen himself told me that on summer afternoons the two of them left the pension and went to the woods each with his own book, where they looked for a comfortable place to read. There was one particular tree Coen liked to climb into, in order to read undisturbed for hours at a stretch. When his little sister grew up to be a reader as well, he occasionally helped her to climb up and then settled her on another branch. Another pleasure the family shared during these early years was music: Jan and Coen
studied the violin, Coen later piano as well; Bep wanted to play the violoncello so she could play trios with her brothers, but unfortunately it never quite came to that. Actually, Bep is still very much alive, over ninety years old, and one of the sources for the early chapters of this narrative.

When he had reached the age of 12, Coen entered the best grammar school of Rotterdam, the Gymnasium Erasmianum. There is no evidence that he was particularly influenced by Erasmus, the scholar who lived four centuries earlier and was (still is) the ‘patron saint’ of this school. But there was someone else at the Gymnasium Erasmianum, a living person who did make a deep and lasting impression on the young Kamerbeek. It was Jan Hendrik Leopold, one of his classics masters, who would later be universally admired as the most profound Dutch lyrical poet of the period. Leopold was also a distinguished scholar: his edition of Marcus Aurelius Ad se ipsum in the Oxford Classical Texts (1908) has not yet been replaced. For three years, from 1922 to 1924, Dr Leopold taught Latin in Coen Kamerbeek’s class. He dutifully introduced his pupils to Caesar, Cicero, and Sallust, but it was in reading Vergil and Ovid that he opened a world of humanity, beauty and rhythmical refinement to these pupils, who were aware that their teacher was himself a poet. Although Leopold was then already approaching 60 and was quite deaf, they never made fun of him. Coen Kamerbeek, who often amused his parents, his brother and sister with his perfect imitations of the peculiarities of his teachers, never mimicked Leopold. For him Dr Leopold was in a class of his own.

He completed his studies at the Gymnasium Erasmianum in the summer of 1925, with high marks for languages (classical and modern) and history, and moderate results in maths, physics and chemistry. He then followed his brother to the University of Utrecht, where Jan had chosen to read Dutch and Comparative Literature. Coen initially hesitated between History and Classics and opted for the latter. This was a decision he would never regret: for it was here that he discovered the texts, the themes, and the authors which were to occupy his eager mind for life. At Utrecht, Coen was very much disappointed by the professor of Latin, Damsté, who was a dull and uninspiring teacher, but he was greatly impressed by Vollgraaff, who taught Greek, and by Bolkestein, the ancient historian. But Bolkestein was ahead of his time in his preference for social and economic history, which did not appeal to Coen. And so it happened that Coen Kamerbeek