EMBLEMATIC MYTHS: ANNEKE’S FORTUNE, BOGARDUS’S FAREWELL, AND KIEFT’S SON

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Most contributions to this volume deal with myths of considerable weight and consequence in history. The authors analyze their genesis, shape, function and meaning, and try to discover how they serve history. This essay intends to tackle lesser myths, of a smaller size, which some may prefer to stigmatize as ‘mystifications’ or simple ‘hoaxes’. I have called them ‘emblematic myths’, since they serve as emblems of group identity, though in different ways. Let me first state what I consider the basic definition of a myth in history. A historical myth may be defined as a narrative, fictional by intention or by the standards of historical scholarship, but expressing the perception of the past as meaningful history, meant to affirm one’s, or better: the group’s or community’s sense of identity. Myths are not random fiction; embedded in the categories of historical credibility, they rise and fall on the tide of the credible, which make them a particular object of historical research and cultural awareness. Myths, and similar fictitious narratives, are appropriated as real history. They are believed to be true or valid, but truth itself is a contingent commodity and a contextualized historical category. For a historian, understanding a myth takes therefore a considerable effort of contextualization.

In the following pages, I shall briefly present three different myths, or elements of myths, focussing on persons from New Netherland history taken as emblematic for the cohesion and the destiny of a particular family group or kinship. These persons are Reverend Everardus Bogardus (1607–1647), since 1633 the second minister of the Reformed Church of New Amsterdam, his wife Anneke Jans (1604/5–1663), and their opponent Willem Kieft (1602–1647), the director of New Netherland for the Dutch West India Company (WIC) since 1638. I shall conclude by a short assessment of the differences between these three types of fictional narrative and their meaning.
Nobility and royalty have always fascinated the burghers of the world’s republics. In America, genealogical myths about a noble or royal origin of the founding fathers of New England and New Netherland or, better, of the first families to have settled there, served to justify their socio-political ambitions. In Europe, as in America, many families cherish family legends and myths about their origin. In America, however, elements of European ascendancy easily play a mystifying role inasmuch as the structure and meaning of ancient European social organizations are not perceived any more, or falsely understood. Until recently, those myths remained family treasures. At most, they were printed in family genealogies. Moreover, pretensions to noble and princely origins became rarer after the first half of the twentieth century, when historical scholarship gradually pervaded genealogy and family history. Ever since the rise of the Internet, however, they are migrating to the public domain and interfering again with historical narratives. A search among the several thousands of Internet hits on Anneke Jans (Bogardus), one of the earliest settlers in New Netherland, shows an astonishing mix of old myths, junk genealogy, historical representations of uncertain value, and warnings by professional historians and other serious researchers. Some new narratives seem produced by the connection of traditional myths with historical elements taken from the Internet. The Internet itself functions sometimes as a mystifying machine, making it virtually impossible for an untrained user to distinguish between false and true, or between mystification, myth and historical evidence. Quite often, the desire for a glorious group history or family past works with demonstrable elements of history in order to build up an apparently plausible family myth.

One such element is nobility. As early as the start of the Dutch Republic itself, when ennoblement by a native sovereign became impossible, its burgher regents, successful merchants and international traders, looked eagerly for ennoblement by the French, English or Danish kings, the German Emperor or even the Italian princes. The wealthy corn trader Reynier Pauw (1564–1636), for instance, grandson of an apothecary, son of a soap-boiler and a fierce Calvinist, a councillor and many times burgomaster of Amsterdam, was ennobled together with his descendants by the English king James I on February 12, 1612, and by the French king Louis XIII in February 1622. His son Adriaen (1585–1653), the future grand pensionary [i.e. the prime minister] of