

HERMAN DE LA FONTAINE VERWEY

Gerard Thibault and his *Academie de l'espée*

INTRODUCTION

Amsterdam at the beginning of the seventeenth century — a subject which could ever be exhausted? Surely there is always bound to be something new to say about the fantastic expansion of the port which was beginning to take over the role hitherto played by Antwerp; the tripling of the population within forty years thanks to immigration, mainly from the Southern Netherlands; the new enlargement of the city with the creation of the ring of concentric canals, begun in 1612; the buildings of Hendrick de Keyser; and so on and so forth. Coupled with these developments there was a growing interest on the part of the citizenry at large not only in theological questions, which were to lead to much unrest, but also in art and culture, sports and recreation — areas which were invaded by a new spirit, that of the late Renaissance.

This was not yet the time of Amsterdam's great painters; instead, there was an abundance of minor artists. A Southerner like Francisco Badens, whom people called 'the Italian painter', attracted large numbers of pupils. The love of drama and poetry made itself felt in the long-established chamber of rhetoric known as 'd'Eglantier' [The Eglantine], into which young poets like Hooft and Bredero tried to breathe new life — initially without success. More modern was 't Wit Lavendel' [The White Lavender], whose membership was composed principally of the many Southern Netherlanders in the city. In 1617 the new ideas began to break ground with the foundation of Coster's 'Nederduytsche Academie', on the Italian model. And we see similar changes taking place in an activity which occupied many of the townsfolk: the use of arms. The archers' and arquebusiers' guilds had been organized since 1580. In the burgher guard drill-masters trained the burghers in the handling of fire-arms. Other forms of weapons training, such as fencing and pistol-shooting, were practised in clubs of amateurs. Here too, new weapons and new methods were used, developed in Italy, Spain, France; and, of course, also in Prince Maurice's army — regarded as the international school for officers and engineers.

It is characteristic that in his brief life the Amsterdammer Gerbrand Adriaensz Bredero, who was born in 1585, should have excelled in all

the fields just mentioned.¹ Son of a shoemaker made rich through speculating, he helped his father in his business (property dealing and farming the wine impost) but was also a painter (he was a pupil of Badens), played a leading part in the activities of 'd'Eglantier' and very soon made a name for himself as a dramatist and poet. He was particularly proud of his appointment as ensign in the burgher guard, and also, with a group of friends, spent some time every day practising the noble sport of fencing. As he himself says:

Also vant ick mijn jeught te dragen, liefd' en gunst
Tot d'oeff'ningh van't gheweer, de ridderlijcke kunst,
Waer aen ick heb bestect de lente mijner jaren.

[So I, even from my youth, gave up my heart
To exercise in arms, that noble art
In which was passed the springtime of my days.]

These lines occur in an undated poem entitled 'Aan mijn Heer Tibout' which appeared in the poet's *Nederduytsche rijmen*, published in 1620, two years after his death.² Who was 'mijn Heer Tibout', how did Bredero come to know him, and when was the poem written? In what follows I shall try to answer these questions.

To begin with, a few words about the history of fencing.³ Since the Middle Ages this style of fighting had undergone a complete change of character. As the emphasis on attack and defence in warfare gradually declined, fencing became more and more a noble game with fixed rules, and instead of the long sword the weapon used was the more elegant foil or rapier. The Renaissance placed the art of fencing under the joint patronage of Mars and Minerva. Fencing classes became part of the education of the literate nobleman, an idealized picture of whom was drawn for the centuries which followed by Baldassare Castiglione in his *Cortegiano*. The fencing-master was no longer a rough fighter but a refined aristocrat who commanded considerable respect. An entire body of literature grew up on the subject of the courtly art. The first modern

¹ Biographical information on Bredero has been collected by Garnt Stuiveling in *Memoriaal van Bredero* (Culemborg 1970).

² Published by J. te Winkel in: Bredero, *De Werken*, voll. uitg. door J. ten Brink, H.E. Moltzer, G. Kalff e.a. Vol. iii (Amsterdam 1890), pp. 125, 126.

³ For the history of fencing see: Egerton Castle, *Schools and Masters of Fence* (London 1885); J.D. Aylward, *The English Master of Arms from the 12th to the 20th Century* (London 1956); etc. For the bibliography of the subject: A. Vigeant, *La bibliographie de l'escrime ancienne et moderne* (Paris 1882); Jacopo Gelli, *Bibliografia generale della scherma*, 2nd ed. (Milano 1885); and C.A. Thimm, *A Complete Bibliography of Fencing and Duelling* (London 1896).