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# Introduction

On 23 February in the year 1769, a woman was condemned by the court of the Dutch city of Gouda for 'gross and excessive fraud in changing her name and quality' and 'mocking holy and human laws concerning marriage'. Her crime was that she had eight years before dressed herself in men's clothing, given herself a man's name, and had enlisted as a soldier. Worse, in this disguise she had courted and married another woman. Moreover, in 1751 she had been tried for exactly the same offences.

The story of Maria van Antwerpen, as this woman was christened, generated some sensation in her own time. In later centuries she would sometimes be found among the footnotes of military history, where her story was presented as a curious, amusing incident. But however fascinating the story is, we are interested in it for more than its anecdotal value. The difference between a male and a female is the primary and most essential differentiation made in society. The notion that one is male or female is formed very early in infancy and is the most deeply rooted aspect of our identities. A 'change of sex' is therefore a very dramatic decision.

What is more, Maria van Antwerpen was in her time not so exceptional as she would have been in ours. During extensive, but by its very nature not systematic, research we collected 119 cases of women living as men in the history of the Netherlands, nearly all of them from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[1] More superficial research showed that female cross-dressers were not only to be found in the Dutch Republic. From Denmark in the north to Spain and Italy in the south, there were examples of such women.[2] However, only in England did we find a quantity of cases comparable with Holland. A far-from-exhaustive investigation into the literature resulted in fifty authentic cases of female transvestism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Great Britain.[3]

In this book we argue that such women should not be categorised as incidental human curiosities, but that their cross-dressing was part of a deeply rooted tradition. In the early modern

era passing oneself off as a man was a real and viable option for women who had fallen into bad times and were struggling to overcome their difficult circumstances. This tradition existed throughout Europe, but was strongest by far in the north-west, in the Netherlands, England and Germany. We will also argue that the pressures which led to the decision of cross-dressing could be both material, such as poverty, or emotional, such as a patriotic fervour or love for another woman, or a combination of these.

This tradition of female cross-dressing may have had its roots in medieval times, but it became visible in the late sixteenth century; it was lost in the nineteenth century. Traces of this are very limited nowadays; in Holland, we find them only in a popular children's song, *Daar was laatst een meisje loos*, which begins in the following way:

There once was a maiden gay*
Who wished to sail
Who wished to sail
There once was a maiden gay
Who wished as a sailor to sail away.
*'loos' in Dutch also means naughty, cunning

In the following lines she enlists for seven years, but when she fails to hoist the sails properly, she escapes punishment by revealing herself to be a girl and offering herself as the captain's mistress. This song goes back to at least the eighteenth century, when it was certainly not a children's song, but a sailor's working song, to be sung as the sails were being hoisted.[4]

We found many more popular songs with this theme in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, not only in Holland but all over Europe. Moreover, female cross-dressers appeared in novels, in fictionalised biographies and memoirs, in prints, and in plays and operas. The prominence of the theme in literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries must have fed upon and shaped the reality of female transvestism to some extent, but as a literary theme it had its own tradition and clichés.

We decided to study the reality rather than the image of female cross-dressing, and will concentrate on the documented Dutch cases. We found these women in all sorts of printed and archival material, but our best sources turned out to be judicial archives and the archives of the VOC (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* = the Dutch East India Company). Newspapers, chronicals, medical

treatises, collections of anecdotes and travel reports also yielded cases. No archives of the time, however, had entries or headings that could be looked through systematically for cross-dressers. Only those judicial archives that had been made accessible before have been researched in their totality. Chance findings of our own and of fellow historians added to our list considerably.

Many archives have been lost and many others have not been researched. Moreover, we do not know how many cross-dressers left no trail behind them in written source-material. We can make a guess that this especially concerns those women who transformed themselves so successfully that they were never unmasked. For these reasons, we presume that our 119 cases are only the tip of the iceberg. For the same reasons, it is impossible to know how representative they are, and we can only guess that there is an overrepresentation of failure, and of women on ships where it was most difficult of all to hide one's real identity.

In spite of this, it was possible to sketch a coherent image of the women concerned. We could see clear lines and patterns that fitted most of these cases of cross-dressing. The practical problems, for example, were the same for all the women; we noted a number of similarities in motives, and equally so in the reactions to this phenomenon by the women's contemporaries. Above all, it was clear that these were not incidental cases, but that they were part of a tradition of cross-dressing of which they were well aware.

In Chapter 2 we will first give a description of the background of these women, of how they impersonated men and how they were discovered to be women. In Chapter 3, we will try to reconstruct what motives each of them had personally and how these fitted in with the general tradition of female transvestism. Chapter 4 is devoted to sexual aspects, discussing if biological or sexual incentives for it can be found. In Chapter 5, we will explore the reactions of the contemporaries to the phenomenon.

But before going into these questions, we want to return to Maria van Antwerpen, our best documented case, to discuss some methodological problems.[5] Maria van Antwerpen was born in the garrison town Breda in 1719. She was an orphan at twelve, and worked as a maidservant with different employers. In 1746, she enlisted as a soldier under the name of 'Jan van Ant', and a year later officially married a woman who was not aware of her true sex. When her army unit was billeted in Breda, in 1751, Maria was recognised and discovered.

Her arrest caused a great deal of commotion: the news appeared in the press, a song was written and sung about her, and even before she was sentenced an autobiography appeared, named *De Bredasche Heldinne* ('The Heroine of Breda'). This book was written by Franciscus Lievens Kersteman. According to the book's introduction, 'The Heroine of Breda' was based entirely upon Maria's own words. It was common practice in the eighteenth century to chose the form of an autobiography as packaging for a primarily fictional story, but in this case we do believe the author. The sources confirm Kersteman's claim that he served in Maria's army unit at the time, and we could verify most details of names, places, dates and army movements. We feel justified in considering 'The Heroine of Breda' as a journalistic autobiography, with Kersteman as 'ghost writer'.

After her sentence of exile Maria went to live in Gouda, where a few years later a woman persuaded her to live as a man again, in order to marry her. This marriage took place in 1762, and Maria also enlisted as a soldier again. This time her military career was short-lived, but 'Machiel van Antwerpen' continued pretending to be a man, a husband and even a father, until a visit to Gouda in 1769 brought recognition and arrest. The 5 consecutive hearings, in which she was intensively interrogated, resulted in 43 folio pages of text. The court also asked for information in other towns, so that these interrogations form an important source, confirming and supplementing much of what she told Kersteman in 1751. Maria was banished again, and the only thing we know of her further life is that she died in Breda in 1781.

It should be clear from the above that the life of Maria van Antwerpen is unusually well documented – far better, in fact, than that of other women from the common people in the eighteenth century or before. Cases of cross-dressing drew most attention when the disguised women courted or married other women. The extensive documentation of these was supplemented quantitatively with other, less spectacular cases: together this formed the firm foundation upon which to build this study of women who went through life as men in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.