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Women Who Lived as Men

While I was detained in Amsterdam, I made by chance the acquaintance of a certain Willempje Gerrits of Emden, who had recently fought in the battle of Funen in Denmark, dressed in male attire; there, she had behaved herself so valiantly, according to the witness of the menfolk present at this battle with her, that she served as an example to others. This maid earned her bed and board by doing scullery work, or if she found no work of this kind, with spinning, but this was so against her spirit, that she repeatedly professed a fierce passion for war and only waited for a propitious moment to surrender once again to that bloody trade. Because I thought I could choose no better companion, I went to her house, where I found her seated at the spinning wheel. 'How sorry a sight', I said, 'to see you sitting here and spinning, while the drum is being beaten! Hurl the wheel into the fire and go into service again!.' As I spoke these words to her, I saw a small axe which was used to cut peat whereupon I so dispatched the household devil, that it could never again be used by anyone. 'What is to be done now?' said Willempje, 'you have hewn the wheel into pieces, but I have no money to buy men's clothing, without which you know I can never be taken on.' 'That is a small scruple,' I said, 'I have still enough money to buy an old suit and once we have that, we shall sell this woman's garb and we shall get enough of it to get another old suit for you, and then we shall be ready.'

Willempje found this suggestion so to her taste that we directly set out for the Noordermarkt where we quickly achieved our aims because we cared little if the garments were a trifle torn or patched, so long as we appeared to be men in them. We then bought English caps for us both, in exchange for a skirt belonging to Willempje, and each cut the hair of the other just below the ears, and we applied ourselves to the office of the Admiralty at the Prinsenhof.[1]

These lines come from an autobiography of one 'Hendrik van de Berg', which tells 'his' adventures as a soldier first and then a sailor

in the 1660s and 1670s. The book appeared anonymously, and 'Hendrik's' name as a woman we are not told. We do not know if 'Hendrik' was a historical person; but Willempje Gerrits certainly was. The names and military details in her story are accurate, and the descriptions of military life ring very true to life. The 'Stout-Hearted Heroine of the Land and the Sea', as the book is titled, can be an authentic autobiography, but may also be a work of fiction, strewn with historical facts, by an author who knew the world he was describing very well. But whatever its nature, it contains some of the most colourful and detailed descriptions of women who chose to live as men that we have found. In the fragment above, this is the moment when the heroine's decision to change her sex was made, culminating in the destruction of the symbol of women's work and women's place, the spinning wheel, and her assumption of the masculine counterpart, the accoutrements of military life.

In this chapter we will try to reconstruct the lives of the women who impersonated men: where they came from, their backgrounds, what professions they chose, what they looked like, how they succeeded and how they failed. Of course, many of these questions can only be answered tentatively. In many cases, especially when women were discovered on ships, we know little more than a name, a birthplace and their male profession. Yet these cases may well constitute the most typical of those encountered. The cases that yield the most details, on the other hand, could well be the most atypical: for example, those in which a cross-dressing woman married another woman, which usually led to extensive judicial interrogations.

TRADITIONAL FORMS OF TEMPORARY CROSS-DRESSING

In the early modern period there were several occasions where it was customary and sometimes even acceptable for women to dress as a man for a short time. The main examples of this are transvestism during carnival festivities, during riots, while travelling or in flight, for the sake of erotic stimulation or carousing. We have excluded cases like these from our list, as the disguise was for a very short time only and was sometimes easy to see through, or even meant to be seen through. Still, these forms of cross-dressing were common. 'The world turned upside down' was a powerful

image in pre-industrial Europe, and the knowledge of these traditions must have made the idea of long-term transvestism more conceivable.[2] And one type could lead to the other. We know of several instances in which a carnival provided the stimulus for more permanent cross-dressing, or where temporary cross-dressing for the purpose of a flight or a journey was the beginning of a life in men's clothing.

Cross-dressing – and of course, dressing up in general – was always among the customs surrounding carnival. This festivity was forbidden in the Dutch Republic as 'papish superstition', but it took a long time before it was repressed and remnants continued to manifest themselves in other festivities. This connection is apparent in one case in 1659, in which a woman in Amsterdam started dressing herself as a man in the second half of February, arguing that it could easily pass as one of the activities surrounding Shrove Tuesday. Demonstrations and riots were also linked to a tradition of transvestism, and the borderline between a festivity and a riot could become blurred. At a big celebration in honour of the wedding of an Amsterdam fishwife in 1784, one of the women participants took the role of a man, wig and all. Eventually, this party turned into a political demonstration in support of the Prince of Orange.[3] During an Orangist demonstration in The Hague in 1747, a woman dressed 'in Amazon garb, with a grenadier's cap of orange paper on her head'.[4] And during a riot in 1787 in Gorinchem, during which several houses were plundered, one of the leaders of the crowd was a woman in men's clothing.[5]

Cross-dressing for fun can be found in all social strata. In the middle of the seventeenth century, the daughter of the Clerk of the Estates General occasionally donned men's clothing and joined a group of young men who amused themselves by making the streets of The Hague unsafe.[6] Two maidservants in the household of a Delft regent amused themselves in a similar way in 1694. One of them donned the clothing of her master, his trousers, his stockings and his shoes, finishing her costume by placing his fur hat on her head. The other dressed in her mistress's clothes, pretending to be 'his' wife. Elegantly attired in this way, they went to a nearby village where they visited friends, then to a waffle stall, and finally to an inn, where they hired a violinist to play for them, dancing until late into the night.[7]

There were also women who occasionally donned men's clothing for erotic stimulation. An Amsterdam prostitute received her

clients dressed as a Persian boy.[8] That this type of cross-dressing was regarded as erotic is confirmed in the diary of Constantijn Huygens Jr, who described how an acquaintance was approached by a procuress who offered him a young manservant. Upon closer inspection, the latter turned out to be a young girl in men's clothing.[9] Most of these cases were mere incidents, like the visit to an Amsterdam brothel by a man and a woman who had dressed in men's clothing.[10]

There are many examples of women who dressed as men for travelling. This was considered a safety precaution, particularly for longer trips because a woman travelling alone, faced considerable danger in a time where highway robbers still were common in Europe. Masculine attire was also more practical for travel than long skirts. Maria Anna Steinhaus, a courtesan who enticed a chamberlain of the Prince of Orange into marrying her, usually travelled and even went hunting in men's clothing. When her husband went bankrupt, this male disguise proved very handy for eluding creditors.[11] Steinhaus, a German woman by birth, had been a dancer at the Italian comedy in Paris before her marriage. Her former profession and her predeliction for cross-dressing were certainly not unrelated. Trouser-roles for women were very popular in plays and opera at the time, even in the street-theatre.[12] Several actresses preferred male clothing in real life too. A Dutch example is the eighteenth-century actress Mietje de Bruin, who specialised in performing male roles and often dressed in men's clothes off stage, especially when going out at night.[13]

WOMEN WHO LIVED AS MEN: THE DATA

The cases upon which the following descriptions are based consist of women who for a considerable time lived as men in every perceivable external aspect, or whom we judge to have had the intention to do so, even if they were quickly discovered to be women. The difference from temporary masquerades was not always clear, however, and some decisions must remain arbitrary. Even within our list of 'permanent' cross-dressers, only a minority probably had in mind that this was for the rest of their lives. In these hundred or so cases there were different kinds of cross-dressing, varying in duration, intentions and motives.

We began by trying to establish what they had in common, and

we found that their backgrounds, the ways in which they transformed themselves, and the ways in which they ended their male careers showed many similarities. It is in the first place remarkable that the cases are distributed rather evenly in time, with the exception of periods of war when more female soldiers and sailors were always found, and that the pattern did not really change in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The phenomenon appeared rather suddenly at the end of the sixteenth century. In the largest Dutch city, Amsterdam, only one case was found for the whole of that century. This is no distortion of the sources as the judicial archives of this city for the sixteenth century have been well conserved and the criminal sentences were researched in their totalities. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this city produced many of our women, whereas the criminal series have only partially been researched. The only example where we studied the complete series of sentences, Leiden 1533–1811, did not show a case of female cross-dressing before 1606. Then, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the number of cases dwindles sharply and the phenomenon disappears as suddenly as it had appeared.

For nearly all the women we know how they earned their living as men, and in about half of the cases their age and birthplace is known to us. All other information, although extensive in some cases, is incidental. Especially concerning the reasons for their transvestism, their early years, and their feelings in general, information is scarce. Still, what we know forms a sufficiently coherent picture to justify our drawing some general conclusions.

THEIR PROFESSIONS AS MEN

Of the 93 women we know had their professions as men, eighty-three were – or had at one time been – sailors or soldiers. Many of the soldiers were marines or were transported overseas to serve with the East or West India Company; a minority served with the navy. So more than half of the disguised women practised a trade at sea – precisely where, in fact, the chance of discovery was greatest. Privacy was at a minimum on ships and one lived for extended periods of time with the same group of about 150 to 400 men in a crowded forecastle. This relatively great risk of discovery may have led to an overrepresentation of seafaring women, but

even so this apparent preference for the sea must be a real one, if only because young unschooled lower-class 'men' had few other alternatives from which to choose careers.

The land army harboured 22 of our women. This probably is an underestimation because it was easier to hide one's real identity in the army than at sea, as is indicated by the fact that two-thirds of our known land soldiers had been in service for extended periods of time. Only a few of the women on ships were able to continue their disguise for more than a few months.

A stable civilian's life on shore offered the best possibility to hide a female identity. We know of a few women who worked as a journeyman, silk-winder, pipemaker, stable boy or valet. Most of these were discovered under extreme circumstances, such as the examination of the body after death, or not discovered in this disguise at all. Trijntje Simons, for example, was first a shoemaker, then a stonemason, and finally a soldier. As a soldier she died, and only then her sex was discovered. A substantial number of the disguised civilian women, however, cannot be said to have had any regular profession, living instead on the margins of society, begging, stealing and cheating. Their cross-dressing often was discovered when they were apprehended for their criminal activities.

ORIGINS AND YOUTH

It is a striking and significant fact that so many of our women were born outside the Dutch Republic. Of the 55 women whose birthplace we know, 24 were born beyond the borders of the Republic. Most of these foreigners came from German harbour cities, like Hamburg and Bremen, and from Westphalia. This reflects the general pattern of immigration to the Dutch Republic. The relative prosperity of the country, especially of the cities in the province of Holland, lured many foreigners to the North Sea shores. Before 1650 most of the immigrants came from the Southern Netherlands, and thereafter from Germany and Scandinavia. Male immigrants usually ended up with the fleet, in the army, or doing the least attractive jobs on shore. Large numbers of women also left independently for Holland: their goal was usually to go into domestic service, but many of them ended up in the textile trades or in doing other kinds of lower-class women's work.

In any sample of Dutch lower-class women a substantial number of foreign-born women may be expected, but their representation among the female cross-dressers is disproportionately high, suggesting that being far from home was an element which in many cases contributed to the decision to begin living as a man.[14]

As far as we know, practically all our disguised women came from the lower classes. The number of cases for which we could determine the family background was relatively small, but these stories are remarkably alike. Most of these were orphans or they had lost one parent, and several had had family problems in their youth. One girl, Francina Gunningh, was born out of wedlock and was raised by her grandparents until she was seven years old.[15]

The youth of Maria van Antwerpen is a good example. She was the daughter of a distiller of brandy from Breda. Burdened by a large family, her father became impoverished and finally had to earn a living as a dockworker. Maria lost her mother when she was eleven, and her father when she was twelve years old. Even before that, she was taken in by an aunt, with whom she was very unhappy. Forty years later she still bitterly complained that she was 'mistreated by her aunt', and that she 'did not have the life of a dog, much less that of a child'. As soon as she could, she tried to find a place as a serving girl, but when she was dismissed, she did not dare trust her family for help, deciding instead to become a soldier.

A similar youth and background was found for Maritgen Jans a century earlier. Her father was a gunsmith. He died young, and her mother, a midwife, remarried a schoolmaster. Shortly thereafter, her mother also died, and Maritgen moved in with a married sister. Maritgen was herself betrothed at a very young age, but the marriage never took place. When she was fifteen, she fled to Amsterdam to see if she could build a better life for herself there. Like Maria van Antwerpen, she stated before the court that when she was confronted with imminent poverty, she decided to dress as a man because she did not dare go back to her family.

Barbara Adriaens testified to a court of law in Amsterdam that she had been placed in a house of correction for two years by her family when she was thirteen years old because she had been 'drinking for three days in succession in bad company'. She also told the court that she had once had a quarrel with her brother about money, during which he seriously wounded her. Anna Jans, daughter of a ship's pilot from Texel, said that she decided to disguise herself in men's clothing after a quarrel with her stepmother.

Two of the women on our list told the court that they were born in Oldenburg, Germany, around the middle of the eighteenth century. Margareta Reymers, a peasant's daughter, left for the Netherlands because she was ill-treated at home. Marytje van den Hove was a soldier's daughter. She was four or five years old when her mother died. Then she had to beg for her food in the countryside usually wearing boys' clothes given to her by her brother. Very early in her career as a vagabond she went to the Netherlands.

Most of the stories above were told by the women during their trials, and to some degree can be considered as an attempt to vindicate their cross-dressing. But even if exaggerated, these stories suggest that many of the women had been orphaned or had lost a parent and that they had left their families after conflicts, which surely must have played a role in their choosing such unusual lifestyles. On the other hand, such a background was not at all exceptional in these times. As a result of the tendency to marry late and the fact that average life expectancy was low in pre-industrial Europe many children lost one or both parents early. The remaining parent, certainly if this was the father, tried to remarry quickly, because the division of labour within the household was strongly sex-linked. The wicked stepmother described in folktales could easily have been a reality for many children in pre-industrial times. Also women married generally in their middle twenties, often long after having left their parents' homes to make their own living. Many of them emigrated to other regions or towns: these young women risked finding themselves one day destitute, alone, friendless and disoriented far from home.

Children from the common people were brought into the labour process at an early age, so that most of our women had already had a career of female labour behind them before they tried their luck as men. The information we have on this point suggests that their trades did not differ from those of other women of their class. Typically, as women, our cross-dressers had been servants, seamstresses, twine makers, sheet burlers, knitters or street peddlars: all forms of women's work, characterised by a low degree of schooling, limited prospects and poor pay. In this they did not differ from their normal female contemporaries; however, some stories we know suggest that they were not very successful in their female careers.

It should come as no surprise that the women who abandoned

their own sex and donned men's clothing were nearly always unmarried or were for all practical purposes single. However, there were a few women whom we know to have been married, and their transvestism was directly related to the marital state: they put on men's clothes either to be able to stay with their husbands, or to escape them. We shall say more about this in the next chapter.

THE TRANSFORMATION

Most women were between sixteen and twenty-five years old at the moment they decided to change their sex; that is, their ages ranged from puberty to the age where a woman was legally of age and could expect to be married. In these ten years of adolescence, women of the lower classes generally had to look after themselves, to earn their own living, and, ideally, to accumulate a dowry.

The decision to go through life as a man was followed by serious practical problems. Secrecy was one of the conditions for success, and that meant that the transformation should preferably not be undertaken in a known environment where, despite the disguise, one ran a considerable risk of being recognised. As we have seen, however, many of these women were not in a home environment to begin with. Still, in the interests of anonymity, it might be an advantage to go to yet another place. Barbara Adriaens, who had been a servant in Delft, said she 'sold her women's clothing in Utrecht and bought men's clothing in place of it', and that she 'first cut off her plaits and then went to a barber in a village outside of Utrecht'. Maritgen Jans, who lived in Amsterdam, 'went in the evening to Utrecht, and there, behind a church, took off her women's garments and donned a man's habit, shore off her hair, set a hat on her head, gathered her clothing together, and in an unknown lodging house gave her name as David Jans'.

The common people of the time possessed few clothes, and much of their wardrobe was second-hand: buying and selling at second-hand shops were common. For some women it was necessary to sell first a part of their women's clothing before it was possible to purchase the men's clothing, as it was impossible to discard their female attire openly at a second-hand shop and exchange it then and there for men's clothing. Maria van Spanjen solved this problem by stealing various parts of her new masculine wardrobe at the lodging where she was staying, and so, disguised, fleeing

before daybreak, leaving the other guests to look in vain for socks, trousers, shirts, underwear and a hat. A number of women had accomplices who helped them achieve their transformation. Lena Wasmoet, for example, was helped in Amsterdam by another woman who bought men's clothing from a Jew. She passed them to Lena who put them on in a public toilet. In a few cases, two disguised women were discovered on board a single ship and it is not unlikely that they had undertaken the adventure together. The description by the 'Stout-Hearted Heroine' at the beginning of this chapter could very well be historically correct.

These accomplices might also have been the instigators of, or interested parties in, the transformation. At her trial, Vrouwtje Frans told the court that 'a manservant, who was to sail to the East Indies, brought her to this end; he also provided her with the clothing'. This manservant may have been, or may have hoped to become, her lover, a scenario frequently described in popular songs.

There were certainly women and men who earned money by recruiting women for the army or navy. Maria van der Gijsse was made drunk by a woman who afterwards made her sign a contract to go into service as a soldier. Anna Spiesen also said that everything was arranged by another woman, who even made sure that a man registered in her place when the articles were signed. In one case dating from 1644, an army sergeant organised the masquerade. With the help of a soldier, he had persuaded two women to act as soldiers during an inspection of the troops. This seems to have occurred more often.

After changing from female to male, it was of course necessary to take a man's name. Many women chose the male version of their own name, or a male first name taken together with the old patronym or last name: Jacoba Jacobs became 'Jacob' Jacobs, Barbara Adriaens, 'Willem' Adriaens, Annetje Barents, 'Klaas' Barents, Maria van der Gijsse, 'Claes' van der Gijsse, and so on. Other women clung to their father's name, like Trijntje Sijmons, who called herself 'Sijmon Poort'. Maria van Antwerpen tells in her autobiography that she deliberately chose her father's first name, Jan. But perhaps the most striking case is that of Marytje van den Hove, who took on her paternal grandfather's name, Alemondus, thus, according to name-giving customs in this part of Europe, declaring herself symbolically to be her father's son.

At the age at which these women took on the lives of men,

averaging about 20 years, they would have been fully developed physically. The style for men's clothes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of wide jackets and large hats or caps could have hidden a great deal, but would not solve all the problems of the disguise. Nothing could change their smooth chins and high voices, for example. This meant that they were likely to resemble boys rather than men. Fortunately for them, the age at which one began to participate in adult life was younger than it is now. A boy could enter the fleet or the army as early as his fourteenth year. In general, a woman dressed as a man looks younger than her years. Maritgen Jans was among those who discovered this, when, despite her 16 years, she was refused as being too young to become a soldier. Many female cross-dressers were able to blend inconspicuously with the large group of adolescents that would be found on any ship, with any army unit, or in any workshop, and could probably have continued impersonating boys of 16 or so for some time. In fact, Maria van Antwerpen managed to enlist as a boy of 16 when she was 28, and as a young man of 23 when she was in reality already 42 years old.

We encountered few details regarding how these women solved the more intimate physical problems they confronted. Our sources give no indication whatsoever of how they hid and dealt with their menstruation, which must have been difficult in a crowded forecastle or barracks. Moreover not only the presence of feminine, but certainly also the absence of masculine, sex organs could pose problems. One might try to keep one's clothing on continually, but this could eventually raise suspicions, as Marritgen Jans found when she refused to disrobe under the hot African sun. 'Sometimes he went to bathe with the soldiers in a small river, but because he said that he could not swim he kept his shirt and kilt on and did not go further into the water than his calves.' The account told further how '"he" sometimes visited a beautiful negress in order to remove all suspicion from her person'. This, however, was not enough: precisely her refusal to join in public love-making, roused 'wicked suspicions of doing something not befitting virtue . . .'.

A rare reference to this subject is found in the case of Geertruid van den Heuvel, who had 'covered her shameful parts with a leather thong with a copper clasp' by which she more closely resembled a man in that essential spot. But then, she was a corporal of the militia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when male fashion prescribed extremely narow trousers. There are one

or two hints that some women provided themselves with some sort of artificial penis. The most detailed information we have on this point concerns a German case, Catharina Lincken, who was tried in 1721. She succeeded in passing for a man even in her married life, as she made use of 'a leather-covered horn through which she urinated and [which she kept] fastened against her nude body'.[16] In one of the versions of the story of the English female soldier Christian Davies, a 'silver tube' as a urinary device is mentioned, an instrument she was said to have obtained from another female soldier.[17] A similar device is mentioned in a Dutch popular song about a female VOC sailor:

> She pissed through a horn pipe
> Just as a young man might.[18]

Maria van Antwerpen may have alluded to such a design in her autobiography. Soldiers used to sleep two or more to a bed. Maria writes that she feared the physical contact with various young sleeping companions, and that she therefore sometimes kept her trousers on at night. She also provided herself 'with a certain precaution about which chastity forbids me to tell', as she rather mysteriously stated.

LOOKS AS A MAN

The portraits that exist of women dressed as men are not really helpful in giving an impression of how they looked. These are generally illustrations in books or commercial prints, and the figures depicted were meant to be recognised as women in disguise. In literature, these women are usually represented as handsome and charming young men, objects of passion to the women they met. The historical sources, however, do not depict our women as being pretty as women, although as men their charms were usually rated higher. Margaritha Reymers was described by a contemporary as 'large and coarse of body, by which she could easily appear to be a man in her soldier's clothing'. Maritgen Jans was said to be 'too sweet of face to be a man'. But after her discovery, when she again wore women's clothing, it was 'the feeling of many that men's habit became her better'. In her memoirs, Maria van Antwerpen tells how, as a woman, she was 'exceptionally stout', and had the manner of a dragoon. But after she had dressed as a

man she looked in a mirror, remarking with satisfaction that she was a handsome boy. In her autobiography she told how a Lieutenant-General fancied her and promoted her in the army, because he 'took pleasure in my free, candid nature and handsome stature.' This detail found its way into the ballad of Maria's life:

> A pearl, she stood there
> Before her captain's stare,
> And he thought he could swear
> He ne'er seen a lad so fair.

THE IMPERSONATION

For all these women in men's clothing, the stress caused by the fear of discovery must have been constant. Of those who succeeded in impersonating men for a considerable period of time, we can easily assume that they possessed strong nerves, some intelligence, and possibly a talent for acting.

The difficulties involved in playing a man's role convincingly and continuously were not restricted to outward appearances. We may suppose that there were adjustment difficulties on the psychological levels as well. There are innumerable differences between men and women, for example in language, mimicry, gestures, carriage, so a change of gender involves more than simply dressing in men's clothing. In general, the women came from the same strata of the population as their male companions, but even within one social group, men's and women's cultures would differ greatly. A passage in Maria van Antwerpen's autobiography indicates that the male approach to sexual matters, certainly within the male worlds of soldiers and seamen, must have seemed brutal to the disguised women. Maria wrote that the military life would have seemed perfect to her, '. . . if the natural modesty of our sex were not wounded by a few ugly words; I was frequently, especially during my first watches, put completely out of countenance'. So she would not stand out, Maria adjusted of necessity to the 'blasphemers and shameless talkers' and in view of the fact that, as she said herself, 'habit becomes second nature', she became quite convincing.

Maria's pious statements about her offended feminine modesty were uttered at a moment when a military court of justice was to

pronounce her sentence for disguising herself as a man, and as such should be taken with a grain of salt. Maria indeed cultivated masculine traits, like pipe-smoking and fishing; in fact, she seemed to enjoy these. Her quarrelsomeness, a character trait she admitted to possessing in her autobiography, and which was later confirmed in an inquiry conducted by the sheriff of Amsterdam among her neighbours, she regretted as a characteristic of her female sex. Quarrelsomeness was indeed generally regarded as a typical feminine vice at the time.[19]

One way in which the women could betray their female identity was by not being able to perform the strenuous physical tasks required by their new professions. In the most popular Dutch ballad on the theme, quoted in the first chapter, the heroine fails in her task of binding the sails with ropes to the mast.[20] But the few documented testimonies of sea captains we found concerning their 'men' are practically always favourable. 'On voyages and watches, she behaved devoutly and honestly, as it is the duty of a sailor to be', a captain reported about his 'sailor' Adriana La Noy.

Maritgen Jans, still a young girl, had difficulties fulfilling the heavy physical duties of a soldier. She could not wield a musket, so she was given a lighter weapon. But many female soldiers must have been considered boys rather than men, and boys were usually given equipment suited to their physical strength. The unavoidable fisticuffs among soldiers and seamen also brought Marritgen into difficulties. She was, however, often defended by her loyal friend, a man named Gijsbert de Leeuw, whom she had met and with whom she had signed on in Holland. Having a regular comrade was quite common among soldiers and sailors, and it was also not unusual for the elder to stand up for the younger comrade.

The chronicler of Maritgen Jans' life provided many details about her life as a soldier in a fort of the West Indies Company on the West Coast of Africa. She was friendly and helpful, good in caring for the sick, and handy with needle and thread. For practical reasons these feminine qualities were valued in this male community. Moreover, she was thrifty and eager to learn. She could use the compass and she often took over other seamen's turn at the wheel in return for a little money. She was also clever enough to have brought a small cask of brandy from Holland, from which she would occasionally treat another sailor 'from whom he could learn something or so that he might be excused from doing that which was beyond his powers to do'. We recognise here a pattern of

distinctly feminine behaviour, although the chronicler may have emphasised precisely this aspect. In the end, Maritgen was discovered to be a woman only when she became seriously ill and had to be nursed and her shirt changed.

THE END OF THE DISGUISE

Women dressed as men, time and time again encountered situations in which they risked revealing their true identities. Even so, many persisted in their cross-dressing for years. For three-quarters of the women, we know approximately how long they were able to maintain their masculine identity. One quarter of these were quickly discovered – within a few days or even hours. One quarter were able to sustain their role for between a month and six months. Half of our women lived longer than six months as men, and some of them for more than ten years, like Maria van Antwerpen (13 years in all), Catharin Rosenbrock (12 years) or Isabella Geelvinck, who was a trooper for 5 years, and thereafter a cook and a valet for ten years. Occasionally women who had been unmasked and sentenced for their cross-dressing later transformed themselves into men again. Maria van Antwerpen announced in her autobiography of 1751 that she intended to try to go into the army again, which she did eleven years later. Barbara Adriaens, who narrowly escaped a death sentence in Amsterdam in 1632, was living again as a man some years later in Groningen. Maria van Spanjen was unmasked no fewer than five times.

The majority of the women on our list were discovered; that is generally the reason why we have been able to trace them. But resumption of life as a woman could also be a voluntary act. Many of those sailing to the Cape or the Indies, for example, presumably planned to change back after the voyage. Ironically, in some cases, resuming women's clothes was precisely the reason the cross-dressing was discovered. The German traveller, Barchewitz, returned to Europe in 1722 on a home-bound VOC fleet, which also carried at least six women who had reached the East as sailors. These women apparently had not achieved their transformation back into women sufficiently unobtrusively. As a result they were sent back to Holland by the Governor-General.

However, we must not forget that discovery is a relative notion, as there were sometimes one or more close friends or relatives who

knew about the woman's disguise, as in the case of Maritgen Jans. Another example is Geertruida van den Heuvel, who lived in Amersfoort for thirty years as a respected citizen of the city with a position in the city militia. Even after her death in 1838 her true sex remained unrevealed. However her relatives requested that the body be exhumed, as they could inherit from an aunt, but not from an uncle. They must therefore have known the truth.

An arrest often meant that one's person and life would be more closely scrutinised than usual, and several arrested female criminals appeared to have had a history of cross-dressing. This was the case with Isabella Geelvinck, who was found guilty of theft and arson in Utrecht in 1673. She had lived as a man for fifteen years. When, however, she found herself in difficulties because of her thefts, she donned women's clothing again. Trijn Jurriaens, a legendary fraud and imposter, was also arrested in women's attire. If the arrest was not fateful, the punishment could be, particularly when one was condemned to a whipping of the upper body. In more than one ballad concerning this subject the dénouement occurs in this way. In reality as well, this could happen. In 1747 a woman pretending to be a man was unmasked in Alkmaar on the scaffold when her clothing was removed for a lashing. She confessed that she had also been a sailor for a long time.

The risks to a woman in disguise were many and varied: lack of privacy, illness, punishment, or an inadvertently bad performance could easily mean the end of the cross-dressing. Betrayal by others was also a real risk. Accomplices could not always be trusted. Maria van der Gijsse, for example, was helped by a woman who undoubtedly received a part of Maria's earnest-money. But the latter could not keep silent, so she told her story to some soldiers in an inn, even mentioning that Maria could be recognised by a small wart on her eye. The soldiers, having become curious about the affair, immediately set out to look for Maria and thus brought about a premature end to her military career. Lena Wasmoet was betrayed as she left the recruiting officer, just after collecting her earnest-money. Her female companion cried out 'Look, there goes a woman in men's garments' after which her masquerade was of course finished. She even had a hard time staying out of the hands of angry bystanders. Quite apart from her accomplice's betrayal, Maria apparently gave an unconvincing performance, because she was drunk at the time.

The custom of having a regular comrade meant help and

comfort, but increased the risk of discovery and betrayal as well. After months of travelling and sleeping together, the comrade of Marritgen Jans, Gijsbert de Leeuw, began to suspect that his young friend 'David Jans' was in reality a girl. One day, while at sea, Gijsbert forced the truth out of her and threatened to make this known. 'David' offered Gijsbert fifteen guilders as payment for his silence. Gijsbert accepted, then attempted to blackmail 'David' into sexual contact. This she adamantly refused, even threatening suicide. After this crisis their friendship became still closer, however, and they became inseparable. Gijsbert kept 'David's' secret, protecting her when necessary, but he could not prevent her being discovered after their arrival at an African fort of the West Indies Company. 'David' became ill and was taken to the sick-bay whereupon, her chronicler writes, 'during her long illness, her shirt became dirty; for several days she procrastinated in putting on a clean shirt, because no one should see her, but in this she was not successful, because the room was so full of people and because a light burned at night. "David" rose from her bed at night three or four times, but she was too weak to stand and fell back each time. A day later, some of the soldiers came to visit their sick comrade. Entering the room, they saw that "David"s shirt was soiled. Stating that it was not proper that he should be left in such a state, they demanded that he put on a clean shirt. Then the other shirt was pulled off and her breasts were revealed, whereupon each of them stood in amazement, to find a young girl in their company. She fell into a faint at being so discovered. . . .'

In order to avoid being discovered, the women had to be continually on the alert, especially when washing, dressing, and urinating. It often happened that a woman was discovered when she became ill or was wounded, an event which was no unlikely risk for a soldier or a sailor. Nursing and medical treatment could involve disrobing, although, as the story of Maritgen Jans shows, the standards of hygiene at the time were rather low. The 'Stout-Hearted Heroine' relates how she was wounded in the backside in battle, but was nonetheless successful in keeping her real sex hidden throughout two months of nursing. When gangrene threatened, however, the surgeon brought in another doctor to cut out the wound. 'To that end, and being completely bared by the manservants, the doctor who had been called in saw what I had till then so long hidden. "A pox to say it", he said to the other doctor, "but here is one cut more than we thought to find." The

manservants, who were young wags, poked their noses in at this sound and then began to produce such peals of laughter that the house echoed with them. In short, in the wink of an eye, it spread among all the wounded that I was a woman.'

Private living space was exceptional for the common people of the time. Servants would sleep together, often in one bed, not seldom with the children of the house. Travellers often slept together in one bed while staying at an inn. The forecastle of a ship could be a most difficult place to keep one's identity secret, especially when one was sick or drunk. In the few cases where we know how sailors on ships were discovered, this usually occurred when the woman in question was not being careful enough. 'Watched by a boatswain' (Anna Jans; Johanna Pieterse); 'seen sleeping nude in her bunk by the cook's mate' (Annetje Barents); or 'detected by a sailor while pissing, drunk' ('Claus Bernsen'). These quotes reveal how four of our women were undone. Others were not able to avoid the 'ship's games' so cherished among seamen. For example, sailors passing the equator for the first time had to submit to a certain amount of tomfoolery. This was the way in which 'Joonas Dirckxe' was discovered.

There were of course other risks: a woman in disguise could always run into someone who had known her in her female past. Maria van Spanjen made the conversion into a man five times; for three of these we know how she was discovered. Twice she was discovered by old acquaintances, a third time she used the name Claes van Vliet, and was unmasked by one Hannes van Vliet. Perhaps Hannes had asked which branch of the family she had come from.

Those who were left dead or wounded on the battlefield were usually quickly visited by human vultures who removed from them anything which might be sold; and everything was marketable in pre-industrial times. Until the nineteenth century all over Europe, there were women found among the dead after many a battle. In this manner, some of the female soldiers on our list were discovered. And not only soldiers: in 1743 a sensation was caused in Amsterdam, when a stableboy who had been in service for 15 years was found to be a woman after she died.

Maybe we should be less surprised by the discoveries, than by the fact that so many women succeeded in passing as men so long under conditions of such limited privacy. People did not wash frequently nor undress lightly, but a better explanation for their

success lies in the strictness of the differentiation between the genders at the time. A sailor, in trousers, smoking a pipe, with short and loose hair, would not easily be thought of as anything but a man. In several instances, children, not adults, were the discoverers of female cross-dressers, as was the case with Johanna Catharina van Cuylenburg and, the first time, for Maria van Antwerpen.[21] Modern psychological research shows that children are less easily fooled by cross-dressing than grown-ups.[22] And a story about a French female sailor clearly shows the extent to which 'men' and 'women' are culturally defined. This woman had been undetected among the crew of the explorer Bougainville for some months, but on Tahiti, she was immediately indicated as a woman by the natives. They made no automatic assumptions related to trousers and other outward accoutrements of a European male person.[23]

What the women felt after their exposure is seldom recorded. In 1765, a woman in Amsterdam committed suicide after having been discovered and taken into custody. Catharin Rosenbrock, who served for twelve years as a sailor and soldier in Holland, returned to her home town, Hamburg, when she was 42 years old. Her mother had her then imprisoned for 'bad behaviour' and also for the 'negation of her feminine sex'. Catharin then tried to take her life. Only Maria van Antwerpen, in her autobiography, shares with us her fears and misery the impending revelation of her true identity brought in its wake:

> One afternoon, while marching to the exercise grounds, the company came before the house where I had once served. As we were always strongly commanded to look to the right, one of the daughters of the house, looked me full in the face. I changed colour various times, fixing more certainly in her mind the suspicion that I must be Maria. She indicated me to her company who stood with her on the stoop, with hand and foot, interjecting that people must have been blind not to see what she meant. I thought to succumb to dismay, and fear had so seized all my limbs, that I still do not know today how I finished the weapons practice that afternoon. I could not hide the melancholy that this unexpected event lodged in my soul, so that upon my homecoming my wife could not avoid becoming aware of it, as my dejected countenance and defeated posture gave sufficient knowledge of it. There was no caress or blandishment which she

> did not attempt to penetrate the reason for it, and on the pretext of sickness, which I truly felt, I took to my bed. But my inner anxiety had too much overwhelmed my brain for me to be able to taste the joys of sweet rest. Fearing to make myself more suspect, and thus strengthen the doubts concerning my person, I did not dare to remain sick for long although I never had more cause to be ill. I tried to remain hopeful that the storm would pass – but I had no chance of this. I perceived from various of our officers who were looking more sharply than was usual at me on the streets and in the weapons drill that their suspicions increased daily. Each time my service required that I must make for the captain's quarters, I found the stoop of the merchant N(ivelt) and his family occupied with a host of officers from our and other regiments, and continual bursts of laughter were directed at my passage. Finally, the terrible time came which has never gone out of my memory: it was on Ascension Day, the twentieth of May of the year 1751. The company was directed to come to the captain's quarters, to pass the newly completed uniforms. I had always attended too much to my duty to be negligent in this, although I never called there with slower steps. I was kept to the last and ordered to remain, and when I had put on the new uniform I obeyed, because I could feel in my heart where this matter was heading, and in order to lighten that heavy burden, I even yearned that the issue would be soon, as it could not be otherwise . . .[24]

What Maria is describing here is in fact nothing less than a nervous breakdown. 'Melancholy' was the eighteenth-century form of what we now call 'depression'. It seems that all the fears she had so carefully suppressed during the years she had lived as a man, came suddenly to the surface. We should not underestimate the pressure these women in men's clothing permanently experienced. Certainly, the women who wanted very strongly to go through life permanently as men were not happy as women – this emerges from many details – but it also seems likely that they were not really happy as men either.