6
Some Conclusions

In her memoirs published in 1924, Aletta Jacobs described how, in 1870, when she was fifteen years old, she was seized with horror at the idea of having to dedicate her entire life to housework. She fantasised eagerly that she would flee home and, dressed as a boy, sign on to a ship, and sail to America, to become a coachman there.[1] But in 1870, it would have been most unusual to put this idea into practice. Little remained in nineteenth-century Holland of what had been a flourishing tradition of female cross-dressing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In other European countries this tradition vanished as well.[2] For women like Aletta Jacobs, who was the daughter of a country surgeon, other pathways gradually opened up. She was the first woman to be given the right to study at a Dutch university, and became Holland's first female doctor and most celebrated feminist.

The 119 cases of female cross-dressing between 1550 and 1839 described in this book show that in former times it was not at all exceptional for women to take on the appearance of men as a solution to their personal problems. And, in spite of differences, these women can in many ways be described as one group. They were young women from the lower classes in society, and generally had a background of rootlessness caused by the death of one or both parents, family quarrels, or migration. Many of them were not born in the Netherlands, most were single and alone. They all encountered the same difficulties in the practical side of their gender change, and in the problems of maintaining themselves in a men's world. The way in which most of them were discovered also showed many similarities. It is in the personal motives that we find most variety, but here also fixed patterns can be discerned. Destitution was a stimulus for many, sometimes in combination with the wish to follow or remain with husband, lover, or family. Some were full of patriotic fervour when their country was at war. Others used cross-dressing as a disguise when fleeing home or a husband, or for easing a criminal career. Deeper-seated motives of a psychological or sexual nature must have played a decisive role in

many cases. In particular, cross-dressing gave women who were in love with other women psychologically the freedom to enter into actual sexual relations. Before the end of the eighteenth century the expression of love between two women usually took the form of the imitation of a normal, often even married heterosexual couple. Female cross-dressing has therefore been an important stage in the development of female homosexuality.

Whatever the personal motives for dressing as a man, an important consideration was that the women knew that they had predecessors, that other women had made the same decision. Popular songs recounted adventures of female sailors and soldiers, and, even if they were mostly negative and derisive in tone, some of them also told how brave women were rewarded and even received by their sovereign. The fact that temporary cross-dressing was a regular element at festivities and a common theme in folklore, must have influenced the women and strengthened the tradition.

Contemporaries of higher classes were very well aware of the phenomenon, in the Netherlands and elsewhere. Handbooks for notaries discussed the question of the validity of acts which had been passed in the presence of male witnesses who later turned out to be women in disguise.[3] In 1762, an Englishman jestingly wrote that there were so many disguised women in the army, that it would be better to create separate regiments for them.[4] Another eighteenth-century English author, John Addison, more seriously noted that it would be interesting to make a list of female cross-dressers.[5] Presumably, we are the first to follow this suggestion.

Female cross-dressing was often treated in the press. The lives of many such women found their way into books, which were published in the Netherlands, England, France, Spain, Italy, North America, and which have been repeatedly translated from one language to another. Female cross-dressers apparently exercised a strong fascination over the reading public, although these readers came from the middle and upper classes, and so had a social background quite different from that of the women herself. In the eighteenth century the theme of cross-dressing was very popular in fictional novels too, whereas it is supposed that women formed the majority of those who read novels; this can be taken as an indication that the idea of female cross-dressing appealed to women of middle and upper classes also, although few of them actually took to this road.

In spite of the popularity of the theme, reactions to real-life

transvestism were fundamentally negative. It was forbidden in the Bible, and it also confused the social order and threatened the hierarchy of the sexes; ambiguity on the matter of gender presumably made people ill at ease. However, a few women who had successful careers as sailors and soldiers and who had resumed respectable lives as women met with praise and reward. Successful female soldiers or sailors were sometimes even granted exceptional favours from monarchs, or, in the case of the Dutch Republic, the *Stadhouders*. These contacts with royalty belong both to the myth and the reality of female cross-dressing.

On the other hand, it is true that a remarkable number of female cross-dressers associated with criminals. The crossing of the barrier between the sexes obviously eased the transgression of other norms, and vice versa. Of course, cross-dressing in itself had a subversive character: it turned the social order upside down. Men occupied a position in the social hierarchy above that of women, and it was felt that women who passed as men usurped male prerogatives in a fraudulent manner.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the theme of cross-dressing emerged frequently in theatre performances, novels, songs, prints, and other forms of cultural expression. Sometimes these expressions were intended as admonitions, and then the image depicted was negative; sometimes the presentation was positive. In folksongs we often find condemnation, and malicious delight in the women's downfall, whereas in the novels a more positive presentation dominated. From this, it can be seen that it was precisely among the common people – from whose midst the women themselves came – that strong disapproval existed. However, from the second half of the eighteenth century on, the popular songs became more praising and more romantic in tone. Lastly, it appeared as a rule that the greater the fictional element, the milder the reaction.

All these songs, novels and other expressions of the theme certainly influenced real-life transvestism. Oral tradition and written texts must have provided the initial idea, and gave the women models to follow. The interplay between myth and reality as well as the important aspect of role-playing is clearly demonstrated in the fact that many actresses who played trouser-roles on the stage preferred to dress in men's clothing in their daily lives. The other side of this is, that several former cross-dressers took to the stage.

Although female cross-dressers could be found all over Europe, it was in the north-west that the vast majority of them lived. In these parts the late age of marriage for women, the relatively great freedom accorded to them, and customary female migration patterns, put young lower-class women in real risk of finding themselves destitute and friendless far from home. It should not surprise us further that Holland and England produced and attracted most of these women, as they were seafaring and warring nations, who could use any supply of untrained sailors and soldiers. In France, we see a sudden boom in female soldiers in the revolutionary armies at the end of the eighteenth century. The Mediterranean countries in general did not produce many female cross-dressers. Young women were generally less free and also more protected there.

Female transvestism as a phenomenon clearly was concentrated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the Netherlands, only three cases are known for the sixteenth century. We cannot be absolutely certain that the boom in female cross-dressing only began in the late sixteenth century, as it is in theory possible that cross-dressing was tolerated before that time and that no attention was paid to such women. The theme of cross-dressing was certainly older in folklore, and traces could also be found in Medieval hagiography of female saints who resorted to a male disguise. Still, it is very unlikely that writers and authorities would have had nothing to say about such a remarkable phenomenon. The thesis of the origination of the tradition of female cross-dressing in the sixteenth century can, however, be related to the postponement of the age of marriage, the widespread migration and the quickly growing demand for sailors and soldiers which were also features of that age.

The disappearance of the tradition in the nineteenth century is not surprising. The growing bureaucracy created ever more obstacles for women in disguise, in the form of Civil Registration, enforced military service, and medical examinations. The story of Francina Gunningh Sloet, told in Chapter 4, clearly demonstrates that after 1800 it was beginning to be difficult to travel without official papers of identification. Moreover, for a number of women cross-dressing had lost its function, because as a means of entering into a relationship with another woman it was quickly becoming anachronistic. The declining attraction of cross-dressing to women can also be related to changes in the relationship between men and

women around 1800. Before the nineteenth century, this relationship was first and foremost hierarchical: the man above the woman. In the dominant ideology, from the late eighteenth century onwards, the gender roles became more complementary: man and woman stood side-by-side, each complementing the other out of his or her own sphere of life.[6] In this context, putting on men's clothes by women no longer raised women upwards to a higher status, while, by contrast, more men dared to dress in women's clothes. Moreover, after 1800, the Netherlands no longer offered a good matrix for female transvestism. The country had lost much of its attraction to immigrants, the VOC was dead and buried, and Holland entered a long period of economic decline – and peace.

The disappearance of female cross-dressing ran in parallel with its disappearance from cultural expressions. Folk songs with this theme retained their popularity longest, but only *Daar was laatst een meisje loos* is still sung in the Netherlands. But this is now only a children's song, sung and heard without the awareness that once many maids really fled home to sail the oceans.