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Sexuality, Elites, and Court Life in the Late Seventeenth Century: The Diaries of Constantijn Huygens, Jr.

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In the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the following joke circulated in the Dutch Republic:

A very fat nobleman married a lady-in-waiting of the Princess of Orange. Because of his big belly, he was afraid that he would not be able to manage intercourse with her. However, she knew how to remedy this with some cushions and body movements. Surprised, he asked her where she had learned this. She answered, "Ho, ho, don't you know that you can learn anything at court." ¹

This joke suggests that the court was regarded as an isolated society with its own rules and norms, and one where sexual liberty reigned. In other countries, royal and princely courts often had the same reputation.

One source, in particular, informs us about the sexual practices at the court of the princes of Orange, and, more generally, within the Dutch elite: the diary of Constantijn Huygens, Jr. (1628-97). Not only is this one of the most scandalous Dutch diaries from the late seventeenth century, but it is also one of the most extensive. ² Between 1649 and 1697 Huygens filled 1,599 pages. ³ Historians long ignored this text, considering it too offensive. It has never been translated out of Dutch, and when it was published in 1876-77, it was expurgated, its seeming heinousness increased by the fact that Huygens' father was a brilliant poet and his brother, Christiaan, a famous scientist. Only recently have Huygens' talents come to be appreciated. He was a good poet of Latin verses, a credible draughts-man, and a connoisseur of the arts; and like his father and grandfather, he was secretary to the princes of Orange. His diary, therefore, is a unique source for the study of daily life at court and among the Dutch and English elites in general.

The diary is not, however, a continuous text. There is a travel journal written during his grand tour to France and Italy in 1649-50; from 1673 to 1678 there are diaries from the military campaigns with Prince William, one from 1680 when he was in Cell in Germany during a diplomatic conference, and another one from 1682-83. Most importantly, there is one that is continuous for 1688-97. ⁴

The diaries, which are in large part filled with anecdotes, provide a **[End Page 94]** rather disenchanting view of the Dutch elite. Several hundred entries concern one of the most popular subjects for small talk, sexual behavior. Huygens is thus comparable to his English contemporary, Samuel Pepys, but with an important difference: whereas Pepys mainly describes his own sexual habits, Huygens almost exclusively describes those of others. Even though most of Huygens' entries are unfortunately rather short--for instance, when he mentions that he spent an evening engaged in "dirty talk," he does not tell us much more than the fact that he had taken a keen interest in these matters (10 September 1692)--his diaries are a valuable source of information for the history of sexuality. ⁵ Because of that, and because the diaries are fully available only in manuscript and only to readers of Dutch, this essay will describe their sexual contents for a larger readership and hopes to provoke further use and analysis.

Engagement, Sex, and Marriage

Officially, sexuality had to be safely confined within marriage, and many of Huygens' comments on couples who broke this rule confirm this. Huygens records, for instance, that rich Amsterdam burgers Johan and Anna Ortt already had relations before their marriage. Huygens learned this from his wife who had heard it from one of Anna's sisters who had noticed it from "soiled chemises" (4 October 1682). Similarly, much gossip circulated about the wife of Cornelis Hop, councillor in the Hoge Raad (High Court) of Holland and Zeeland, who gave birth to a baby six months after she was married (23 April 1677).

In England the situation was the same. A couple at court, the lady-in-waiting Eleanora Franklin and her lover, had called each other "wife" and "husband" and "my dearie" before their marriage. This being such an offense against good manners, they were reprimanded by Queen Mary (9 November 1691). Much worse was the case of Mrs. Mary Villiers, daughter of an equerry of Queen Mary. Within two months after her marriage to William O'Brien, son of the count of Inchequeen, the woman gave birth. The queen was deeply distressed by the case and finally got the truth from her: the oldest son of Count Boyle was the real father (6 July 1691). Royal interest in such matters was not exceptional (though what seems to be an ethical concern over social transgressions among the aristocracy and its court was complicated by concern over their political consequences). During a conversation in 1682, Prince William remarked in company that marriages with a pregnant bride were common among otherwise "respectable people of quality" and that he knew of about fourteen or fifteen Dutch cases (2 September 1682).

The rule of premarital chastity may seem clear, but it was in fact frequently broken. In Holland at the end of the seventeenth century the decisive bonding moment had shifted from the exchange of a promise of marriage between two lovers, followed by intercourse,

to an official marriage ceremony in a church or city hall. The speed of this shift varied **[End Page 95]** locally. It took place slowly in the eastern parts of the republic, and among farmers the old customs lasted longer than in the cities. In England the situation was equally complicated.

Although in Huygens' time it was no longer the decisive bonding moment, the exchange of a promise to marry was important enough that breaking off an engagement was considered improper, as several entries make clear. The baroness De Neufville, married to an army officer, told Huygens that her husband was once engaged to another woman. One day, on his way to his future bride, the officer took shelter from the rain at an acquaintance's house. The latter praised the baroness so much that he decided to break off the engagement and marry her instead (2 February 1692). Another woman told Huygens that before her marriage she was promised to someone else whom she had jilted when she discovered how poor he was. Obviously, Huygens records these stories because they were exceptional.

The degree to which parents could influence their children's marriages is a subject open to discussion among historians of the family. Huygens gives several examples of this exercise of parental power. Once he visited his niece, the widow of a sheriff of the city of Gouda, and observed that her daughter had grown gaunt. The reason, the mother explained, was that the girl's grandfather had forbidden her to marry her lover. Indeed, four years later she married another man (15 May 1693). Within the royal family, the king's power in these matters was still broader, though that power was exercised for political reasons, of course. William could even force a distant relative like Lodewijk, count of Nassau-Saarbrugge, a member of a collateral line, to break off his engagement (12 January 1693).

Breaking off an engagement, however, could bring problems, and a promise of marriage still had legal force. When someone wanted to force another into marriage, he, or in most cases she, could start a lawsuit. The army officer Sichterman, for instance, was compelled by the marital court of Holland to marry Lady Hacquart, with whom he had had two children. Nevertheless, because he would not obey the sentence and "laughed at it," the woman went to Huygens in his function as secretary to the king to confer about further legal procedures (6 October and 17 November 1690). Until now these lawsuits about broken promises of marriage have been studied only among the common people. ⁶

Adultery

Whereas sex before marriage merely violated social norms, sex outside marriage was a criminal offense. In Huygens' circles it was also a favorite topic of gossip. Besides simply mentioning many cases, Huygens informs us about reactions to adultery. In many parts of Europe, village communities punished adulterers by *charivari*. The victims were the object of insulting songs, or, even worse, of mud, or were dragged around the village on the back of a donkey. Huygens records a story told about a burgomaster **[End Page 96]** of the town of Middelburg who one morning found a pair of horns and a lampoon in front of his door, retribution for his involvement with an adulterous woman. On another occasion, Huygens' own clerk, De Wilde, nailed two horns on the door of the chamberlain, Simon de Brienne, with whom he had quarreled (10 June 1694): "horned cuckold" was a common

term of abuse for men whose wives were accused of adultery (16 April 1692). The Dutch elite had obviously adopted these charivari-like symbols and actions from popular culture. This is all the more remarkable, because historians have shown that charivari and the symbolism of the horns was popular in Southern Europe and in England, but not in the Dutch Republic. ⁷ It is possible that people from Huygens' circles imported this through Italian and French plays, which were popular at that time. ⁸

Only in a minority of the cases Huygens describes is the woman involved in extramarital relations. There was much gossip about the wife of army commander Johan Boreel, who "played the whore" and gave all her money to "pimps." Eventually, Boreel put his wife in prison for her transgressions (13 April 1690). Imprisonment of unruly family members had become a common practice in the seventeenth century and is seen by historians like Foucault, Farge, and Spierenburg as an important means for discipline of the family in this period. ⁹

Prostitution

The Dutch Republic's attitude toward prostitution was unique in Europe, as Lotte van der Pol has recently shown. Contemporary visitors and later historians were always puzzled by the ambivalence Dutchmen exhibited toward it. Although forbidden as a crime and occasionally prosecuted, in practice, prostitution was to a large extent tolerated, and the *speelhuizen* (whorehouses) of Amsterdam were an attraction no tourist seemed to miss. Although the Calvinist ideology condemned prostitution, the brothel was a favorite scene for Dutch genre painters such as Jan Steen. ¹⁰ Most studies on prostitution are based on judicial records, which mainly reveal information about the lower classes. The Huygens diaries, however, reveal the ideas and practices of the upper class--for instance, in the description of a scandal in the Hague in 1676. Local bailiffs now and then raided whorehouses, and arrested the male clients, who could escape prosecution by paying a fine (the bailiff of the Hague had in this way regularly set up a trap to catch the wealthy). Huygens specified the names of some of those who had given money to the bailiff: a councillor of the court of Brabant, a mayor of Middelburg, a deputy in the Estates-General. ¹¹

As usual, Huygens tells us very little that reflects his own experience. An exception is a notation made during his grand tour in 1649, when a traveling companion took him to a prostitute in Berchem near Antwerp. They drank some wine, but, as Huygens noted, "I was not able to copulate." The passage was written in cryptography by the then twenty-one-year-old Huygens, which suggests that he regarded this as a moment of **[End Page 97]** embarrassment best kept secret. At the end of this journal, however, he states that he has written it to send to his father, who as a secretary was accustomed to cryptography and could thus have easily deciphered it. Perhaps such incidental visits to prostitutes were tolerated and regarded as part of the grand tour; on the other hand, it may be that Huygens simply sent an abridged version of his travel journal back home.

The stories Huygens heard from others include a description of the most famous and luxurious brothel of Amsterdam, that of Madame Latouche. Willem Meester, a mechanical engineer in the army, told Huygens about a visit to her establishment. First there

appeared a young Italian woman, who displayed a variety of "lascivious arts," such as singing, playing, and dancing. Thereafter, two men dressed as young women appeared. While prostitutes dressed as men were not uncommon, male--as opposed to female--cross-dressing was exceptional. Perhaps they were part of the show more as a comical, rather than an erotic, element. ¹² On another occasion, Armand Montpoullan, an officer in the army, related to Huygens many of his adventures with prostitutes, for instance, how Willem Bartollotti, an eminent merchant and banker, had "helped him out" in Amsterdam, as a return favor (21 June 1690). Adriaan van Borssele van der Hooge, Groom of the Bed Chamber, told Huygens how he once visited the brothels of Amsterdam with members of the German embassy; they took four prostitutes with them and got them to dance naked (2 May 1692).

Prostitution in the seventeenth century was a business often organized by women. Some madames even became great entrepreneurs, like the English "famous masquerelle" Betty Cromwell. It was rumored in 1693 that she wanted to establish herself in the Hague "with her company" (27 June 1693). Huygens noted that this procuress had been the cause of the prince of Vaudemont's and Charles Henry of Lotharingen's gonorrhoea, and of Prince Frederick III's syphilis (28 August 1693). Cromwell clearly directed her catching attentions toward the higher echelons of society. An establishment of a somewhat lesser standing in London was the chocolate house of the Espagnolettes, four sisters from Tangier (30 January, 8 February, and 15 April 1692). In Ghent, a certain Babbe also enjoyed a madame's reputation. The chamberlain, Simon de Brienne, told Huygens the following story: he had bought a dildo and had taken it to Babbe's establishment, where he had "thrust it in a whore's stocking" and was "gone again" (5 October 1682). This strange brothel scene confirms an association, at that time popular in Dutch genre painting, between stockings and female sexual parts, as art historian E. de Jongh has pointed out. ¹³

However, prostitution as big business was the exception rather than the rule. Mediation usually took place between client and prostitute more or less directly. For example, while on campaign, Huygens himself was approached by a begging girl who said that her mother had a pretty young lady available for him. In another instance, a member of the prominent family Van Aerssen van Sommelsdijk was one morning visited by "a very **[End Page 98]** beautiful young woman" who came to sit on his bed and lifted her skirt above her knees. When he reacted coolly, she stood up and said that she "would come back when he was in a better humor" (25 December 1690).

Servants of those in Huygens' circles often formed connections with prostitutes and prostitution. Thus, Huygens exhibited little surprise when he was told that his coachman's wife had a brandy booth and ran a whorehouse. Female servants in these circles were sometimes regarded as little better than prostitutes. To give only one example, his friend Boison, a French refugee, harassed Huygens' niece's maid (23 November 1690). Rumors that male servants were in fact women dressed as men were not exceptional in Huygens' time, and Huygens mentions cross-dressing by servants of general-major Kirck (26 September 1691). ¹⁴ Like servants, female camp followers in the army, such as sutlers and washerwomen, were plainly regarded as potential whores. Similarly, poultry girls and dishwashers were favorites among some of Huygens' acquaintances (29 April and 30 June 1692; 12 August 1694). Looking at a dishwasher's daughter who was about ten

years old, someone remarked "that he wanted to bet that after a year or six months she would no longer be a virgin" (22 June 1695).

Both in the army and in the cities, no distinct boundary could be drawn between professional prostitutes and those who practiced prostitution as a sideline. For instance, a member of the noble family Van Heecheren had his eye on the daughters of the court of Holland's armorer, who were reputed to be "great whores." He asked an oyster seller who lived next to them if she could make their acquaintance, as he would like to "offer them an oyster." The oyster vendor answered, "Sir, what you want I can give you as well" (7 June 1689). This bit of gossip confirms the interpretation that oysters and oyster women were associated with sex in, for example, many Dutch genre paintings from this period. There was no sharp distinction between brothels and many other establishments. Waffle booths, in particular, had a bad reputation. At one point, Huygens' wife promptly reported to him that a woman from her circle of acquaintances was seen coming out of a waffle booth at two in the morning (14 May 1693).

It was not unusual for the men in Huygens' circles to maintain regular mistresses. These women were, however, kept at some distance from the court. One could hire rooms for them in the city. Nevertheless, the courtiers Van Dorp and Souteland publicly sat with their "whores" at the general dining table at Hampton Court (25 January 1693). It seems that for Huygens the keeping of a mistress in itself was hardly worth mentioning. Huygens showed interest only when, for instance, a mistress changed hands, such as the transfer of the "little whore" Nelly from Willem van Nassau-Zuytlestein to a member of the Dutch Admiralty, Diederik Buysero (17 February 1689). Having more than one mistress was also noteworthy, as when his own clerk Hulst took a second mistress, a girl from a coffeehouse, in addition to his permanent mistress--who later became jealous and ran away (6 April 1695). The Receiver General Van Ellemeten had a ménage comprised of his wife and two mistresses, and used to throw his **[End Page 99]** handkerchief to one of the women at his seraglio, just like the "Sultan of Turkey amidst his ladies" (13 March 1690).

The boundaries between prostitutes and mistress/adulterer, and between decent establishments and whorehouses, were vague. From street whore to kept woman, from prostitute to housemaid, the scales could shift. The word "hoer" was used broadly, meaning not only a whore in the modern sense, but also a mistress, a woman who committed adultery, one who had sex before marriage, or one who was only rumored to be a coquette. Nonetheless, one thing was certain: the world of prostitution was not to be too openly brought to court, nor were those in Huygens' circles to become too caught up in the world of prostitution. This did, however, sometimes happen, as is shown by what Huygens called "the continuing story" of his brother-in-law, Reinier Pauw, who had a reputation for sexual debauches and whose venereal diseases were a matter of public conversation (24 March 1691). Eventually Pauw rented a house in the Hague, across from the porcelain shop of a whore, who was pregnant with his child despite his doctors' telling him that his gonorrhea would prevent him from having children. Because he wanted to marry this woman (24 March 1692), his family petitioned the Provincial Court of Holland to imprison him (25 June and 2 October 1692). All of this did not prevent an army captain from attempting to trap the wealthy Pauw into a marriage with his daughter (26 November 1691). This story bears some resemblance to that of Johan van Baersenburg, the king's valet. According to Huygens he became mad, went to live in a brothel, and

wanted to marry a prostitute. Huygens' friend Montpoullian also once went too far, not because of his continuous whorehopping, but because he asked the king's permission to establish a "fives court," which nobody doubted was intended for one of the madams with whom he was familiar.

Bastards

Extramarital relations, of course, could easily lead to the birth of illegitimate children. The receiver general, Cornelis de Jonge van Ellemeten, had a child with a woman who refused his proposed settlement, in which she would marry someone else. Instead she threatened to take an oath that Ellemeten was the father and bring that case to court (11 October 1691). Although she could not demand a marriage, she had a right to a contribution toward the costs of childbirth and an allowance for the child. There were also other ways of pointing out the father's duties. The custom of presenting a newly born baby at the door of an accused father's house was intended to pressure him to marry, or at least to support the mother. Once Boison, a friend of Huygens, discovered a foundling on his doorstep. He immediately made his servant call the guard to take the baby away. By avoiding even touching the child, Boison sought to make it clear that he declined all responsibility (30 November 1690).

It was rumored that several courtiers had had children with their mistresses. **[End Page 100]** Within his own circle, Huygens' clerk Hulst was said to have a child with his maid, and also with the maid of a fellow clerk in the secretary (8 November 1692). Indeed, the former went to the country for some time; and when she returned, Huygens remarked that she was "thinner than before, apparently having given birth to a child" (3 December 1692). Women who disappeared into the country for some weeks were suspect and watched sharply. Lady Suze van Valkenburg, for instance, went to the countryside of North-Holland about nine months after people had noticed that she had begun to suffer from fainting spells. Some longstanding relationships led to large families. The mistress of the earl of Devonshire, chief equerry, was said to have six or seven children (13 November 1690). Once Huygens witnessed a quarrel between two courtiers that ended in mutual accusations about having illegitimate children. Huygens seems to have thought that both these accusations were well-founded. At another time he recorded a story describing how two men played dice to decide who had fathered the child of a shared mistress (29 December 1693).

The position of and attitude toward bastards varied in time and according to social class. Both in England and the Netherlands well into the sixteenth century, high nobles fathered bastards who often received good positions within their fathers' households. In the Dutch Republic, the princes of the House of Orange fathered many bastards, who in turn founded families that for centuries formed a loyal clan around the ruling stadhouders. At the court of King William several legal descendants of illegitimate children of his forefathers held high positions. ¹⁵ The attitude toward princely and noble bastards, however, changed in western Europe during the seventeenth century. First among the nobility, later also within the family of the princely and royal families, bastards lost their privileges. In Holland after the death of stadhouder Willem II in 1651, bastards disappeared behind the scenes. As they lost their political status, they also become less numerous. The mental change was reflected in an encounter between King William and a

daughter of one of the former stadhouders, Prince Frederik-Hendrik or Prince Maurits. The woman asked for assistance but was sent away; and Huygens, who had a tender-hearted nature, gave the poor woman some money out of his own purse (14 June 1694).

Assaults

The most distressing example of men's aggressive behavior toward women was the case of Miss Tondi. She told Huygens all about how, when she was thirteen, she had been locked up for two days by an army captain and was so roughly and repeatedly raped that she had not been able to sit down for eight days (24 June 1691). The officer was condemned by the court-martial, but the sentence was never executed. Thirteen years later, in 1691, she was still trying to bring the man to justice. Through Huygens, Miss Tondi presented a request to the king that the sentence be executed; William, however, decided not to take steps in the case. Miss Tondi still **[End Page 101]** kept trying to get justice done, and stayed near the court for years; and Huygens talked often with her, and seemed to like her, although in the end he tried to avoid her because he learned that she was a girl of loose morals and because he had become weary of her "weird lamentations." At last, she told Huygens that she had secretly married an army officer with whom she did not wish to go to bed until he was promoted (9 July 1694). There was another woman who told others how she and her daughter were once raped by a man whom Huygens mentions only with the initial D., but who probably was his friend Dijkveld (3 October 1691) (Siccama, *Aanteekeningen*). In fact the relation between Dijkveld and this woman had already been talked about in 1682 (20 October 1682).

Maidservants were especially easy victims for assault by gentlemen, as we have already seen. When Huygens' room at the palace at Hoogsoeren was swept by a different woman, he was given to understand that the usual girl did not wish to return because she had been assaulted by Huygens' friend Montpoullian (3 September 1682). The new maid--less handsome, according to Huygens--was also annoyed by the sixty-seven-year-old Montpoullian, but she had called him an "old, greydevil" and slapped his face, whereupon he slinked away. Montpoullian, more than any other friend of Huygens, had a reputation for "hunting in his own way" (13 July 1691). Although rape was officially regarded as a very serious crime, sexual violence seems to have been a permanent threat for women, and public opinion toward the victims was not very favorable. ¹⁶

Deviant Sex

Although Huygens wrote so much about sex, it is the more revealing how little he says about deviant sexual behavior. Recent studies on sexuality in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries show that there was considerable resistance to any position that differed from the "face-to-face," or "missionary," position. Both Huygens' silence, and what he does mention, confirm this idea. He obviously noted as an intriguing exception that one Jan van Rijvenberg "greatly favored making his advances to women from the rear." A certain Valkenberg was said to have "done the act with Jeanne Aerssen from behind, she standing with her head against the lock of the door" (Boersma, p. 38). Willem van Nassau was even said to have made a contract with his mistress specifying "how often he would do it from behind and before" (30 October 1682). Nicolaas van der Duin told Huygens how, while he was laying in bed with a whore, a friend came into the room,

who "put it in the meantime in her from behind" (Boersma, p. 38). Huygens is probably referring to an unusual position for genital intercourse, not to anal copulation, which was regarded as a criminal offense both in Holland and in England. Masturbation was equally regarded as a crime, as was manual manipulation. The former is not mentioned, and the latter figures in the diary only once: someone had seen how the daughter of the Amsterdam regent Abraham de Wicquefort had performed **[End Page 102]** this act upon the marquis de Chavigny (Boersma, p. 37). In fact, all forms of sex that were not intended for procreation were regarded as sinful and criminal. Another deviant form of sexual behavior was bestiality, mentioned once when an arrested spy surrendered himself out of remorse for having practiced this sin with a horse (23 June 1691).

Lawyers classified all these types of sex as "sodomy." More specifically, the word "sodomy" was used to denote sexual acts involving two men. Contemporary belief and later historical research suggest that royal courts were a fertile soil for such practices. ¹⁷ The homosexuality of King William has long been the subject of historical debate, and Huygens' diary has supplied one of the arguments, although the entry is too cryptic for interpretation. ¹⁸ Two entries concern an army officer's having private conversations with William. When Huygens asked for details, someone laughingly said to him that it was better not to talk about it.

There may possibly be other vague references to homosexuality in the diary. On a later occasion Huygens noted verbatim the reaction to a hunting accident that befell William's favorite courtier, Keppel: "He is such a good boy, he had to bear terrible pains" (20 February 1691). But again, this might have been nothing more than an exclamation of real concern. Furthermore, Huygens mentions that the Rotterdam bailiff Van Zuylen van Nijveld, a protégé of the king, was accused of "horrible things that cannot be repeated" (28 October 1690). Finally there is a remark about two courtiers, Willem van Hill, an aide-de-camp, and Robert Gray, a nobleman, who got drunk, and, according to Huygens, "started to cackle, falling enormously in love with each other, and calling each other 'my bird'" (13 August 1691). Recently Randolph Trumbach has argued that until the beginning of the eighteenth century a bisexual culture existed, especially among libertine circles, which gradually was replaced by the norm of heterosexuality. ¹⁹ But, since Huygens obviously described a rather innocent homoerotic conversation as exceptional, we may doubt if there was any room for more openly homosexual relations in court circles. A last remark concerns Hans Willem Bentinck, for many years the favorite courtier of King William. He said that as soon as his son was twelve, he would send him on a tour through Europe, "in that he might not learn the debauch in England" (17 April 1692). Did Bentinck refer to sodomy? (Trumbach, p. 409). Unfortunately, as is often the case, Huygens' entry is tantalizingly short.

Huygens also wrote about sexual relations between women. This is remarkable, because sources are usually even more scarce on this subject. In Holland, traces of lesbian love can be found only in judicial archives, and even then only if it was related to other crimes, in particular female cross-dressing. In a culture where all sexual activity was supposed to be aimed at procreation, and where the definition of intercourse required penetration, sexual relations between two women were theoretically impossible. Cross-dressing by one partner was at that time one of the few ways of legitimizing a sexual relationship between two women. When one woman took the role of a man, their relationship

conformed again to the common **[End Page 103]** pattern of the married couple (see Dekker and van de Pol, *Female Transvestism*). Huygens' notes all concern one woman, Jacoba van Beuningen, who had her husband, an Amsterdam mayor, imprisoned when he went mad. Jacoba had a continuing relationship with another woman, Miss Splinter; and Huygens' wife wrote him that a homemade wax dildo, which both women used, was seen lying around Jacoba's house. Afterwards Jacoba hardly dared appear in public (19 October 1691). At another time, Huygens noted that the two slept together, and that Jacoba had red marks on her throat from love bites (29 November 1693).

Also considered as deviant, and even criminal, was sex between Christians and Jews. The daughter of lawyer Jacob van Roosendael had relations with an army officer, who, after hearing that she also had a Jewish lover, drew his sword and pierced her bodice. The fact that his competitor was Jewish obviously contributed much to his anger (6 September 1695). Deviant sexual customs were ascribed to deviant social groups, as can be seen in a story told by Edward Sutton, gentleman usher to the king. Around 1630, at the age of thirteen, he had run away from home and joined a band of gypsies for some months. The leader of the gypsies had married his son to his daughter during a ceremony in which the whole company danced naked. Sutton emphasized that he never had himself "blackened," referring to the ritual by which he would really have entered the band (13 January 1690).

Pornography

In 1690, Adriaan van Borssele van der Hooghe showed Huygens the Dutch edition of "La puttana errante" by Pietro Aretino. He told Huygens that he had found it in the underbrush near the king's castle at Dieren. This lame excuse demonstrated that erotic writings were regarded as sinful and condemnable. Indeed, the Provincial Court of Holland had forbidden this book in 1669. Nevertheless a new edition appeared in 1677. Censorship in Holland, if exercised at all, was never very efficient. ²⁰ The new edition was illustrated, and Huygens presumed that the etchings were made by Romeyn de Hooge. Since Huygens was a connoisseur of the arts, this attribution is probably right (26 October 1680). Like his English contemporary Pepys, Huygens considered pornography objectionable but fascinating. Later, he bought, among other books, *Histoire des amours du Marechal de Boufflers*, an erotic political description of French court life. A boy peddled this and other French books in the army during a campaign. ²¹ The sexual overtones in Dutch seventeenth-century art are well known. Brothel scenes were a favorite genre, and a moralistic or allegorical presentation could make semipornographic works acceptable. Isac, the controller of the royal household, and reputed as a whore-hopper, favored such themes, and once he showed Huygens a little painting "of a woman in a very transparent chemise" (9 September 1694). Isac's collection of paintings consisted, according to Huygens, of "trash." The ambivalence **[End Page 104]** toward erotic themes in painting and writing is confirmed by the description of a house Huygens saw in the town of 's-Hertogenbosch. It was decorated with a sculpture of monks and beguines performing "Aretino's postures." What was forbidden in printed works was at the same time tolerated in sculpture along a public road.

Gossip

It is essential to know how and why Huygens' diary, a database with information about people around him, was compiled. Most stories in which sexuality plays a role can be classified as either boasting or gossip. Boasting was mainly a male habit, telling others about sexual exploits. Gossiping, on the contrary, was popular among both men and women. One woman was for that reason nicknamed "de Courant van Den Haag" (the "Newspaper of The Hague"). Gossip was, of course, told in absence of the subject. Sociological and historical studies have emphasized the importance of gossip in village communities. Gossip circulates within a group news about its members. By the telling of, or listening to, gossip one is explicitly included in a social group. At the same time gossip is an expression of the conventions within a group. In other words, gossip provides a means of defining a group. ²² As distinct social groups, royal courts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can well be compared to village communities. Even the Dutch regent oligarchy as a whole, consisting of a few thousand families, was, socially speaking, rather parochial.

At the Court of William and Mary nearly everybody participated in gossiping. This is confirmed by a story about Willem van Hill who once spoke "most indelicately" at the dining table at court. Afterwards, he was told that one of the guests was an army chaplain, whereupon van Hill reddened and was put "somewhat out of countenance." Obviously, the clergyman, because of his office, formed an exception, and stood outside the gossip circuit (25 June 1692). By analyzing the identity of the tellers of, and listeners to, gossip stories, and of those about whom these are told, social networks can be reconstructed. Among Huygens' main informants are his wife and other relatives, colleagues in the secretariat, and some of the courtiers. Surgeons were good sources for news, in particular about venereal diseases. For example, the surgeon, Aernoudt Fey, complained in public that he had repeatedly to treat the gonorrhoea of Helena van der Ma, wife of an army captain, exclaiming "Must I always treat old, wicked cunts?" (5 November 1680). The gossip circuit ran from high to low. On the top, the king and queen expressed great interest in the doings of their courtiers. On the bottom, servants could be good informants, and, surprisingly, were also the subject of gossip, a sign that they were completely included in this social group.

Boasting and gossip had a lot in common, because both related to the reputation, the outward appearance, of people. By boasting, an image was built up; by gossip, it was torn down again. A story told to Huygens by **[End Page 105]** his friend Brisewitz is revealing in this respect. Brisewitz had some drinks with a prostitute who had approached him. He had taken no further steps, but the woman had told him an interesting tale of going to bed with another courtier. It turned out that the courtier was impotent, and he had given her two guineas to keep this secret (22 February 1692). The money was well invested, because the woman told the story only after the man's death.

However, not all gossip must be seen as tarnishing a man's or a woman's reputation. On the contrary, stories about visiting prostitutes or keeping a mistress were not necessarily seen as offensive. Indeed, they often contributed to the social standing of a man at court. Visiting prostitutes and keeping mistresses was, like much sexual behavior in general, part of the image that men at court tried to maintain. Much of their sexual life could be presented to the outward world, but some aspects, especially deviant behavior or venereal diseases, had to be kept out of the public eye. If anything, Huygens' diary enables us to see how people at court tried to manipulate their public appearance.

Huygens necessarily participated in this behavior, not by posing as a womanizer, but because he often gleefully noted how he succeeded in hiding an illness. The importance of gossip was obvious, especially in a time when public and private life were more closely connected than in the modern period. Knowledge of the private lives of those around you was essential for survival.

Conclusion

Do the Huygens diaries confirm the picture of loose sexual morals at the court of the princes of Orange, and in the Dutch and English elite in general? At first sight, the answer is "yes." Sexuality was obviously a favorite topic for conversation, and some men and women had a reputation for being libertines. This does not mean that there were no restrictions. For men, extramarital relations and visiting prostitutes were to some extent tolerated, but various forms of deviant sexual behavior were taboo. The very fact that some sexual acts were gossiped about indicates the existing limits. Huygens' picture of sexual practices should not be generalized, because behavior remaining within these boundaries was less likely to attract his attention. It would also be wrong to distill from his work one strictly defined set of norms about sexuality. One last example of Huygens' stories can confirm this. In a conversation about the behavior of young people, the army captain Frederik Willem van Gent pleaded that they be given their liberty. The hostess thereupon said that he was "a real atheist, who believed only in the Devil," and forbade him from entering her house ever again (12 November 1690). This anecdotal description of Huygens' diary only begins to suggest its potential as a source for analyzing the social history--as, for example, sexual behavior and attitudes--of the court and upper class in both the Netherlands and England, events in the latter of which I have all but ignored here despite Huygens' frequent accounts **[End Page 106]** of them. It has been my intent only to bring the diary to the attention of cultural historians of the period.

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Notes

* This essay has been translated by Judy Marcure. I thank Mary Carlson for her critical reading of the draft.

1. Aernout van Overbeke, *Anecdota sive historiae jocosae. Een zeventiende-eeuwse verzameling moppen en anekdotes*, ed. Rudolf Dekker, Herman Roodenburg, & Harm-Jan van Rees (Amsterdam: P. J. Meertens Inst., 1991), no. 834. See also Rudolf Dekker's forthcoming *The Lost Laughter of the Golden Age: Dutch Humour in the Seventeenth Century and Beyond* (London: Macmillan).

2. The most detailed description of the diary is J. H. Hora Siccama, "Het journaal van Constantijn Huygens," *De Gids* 42 (1878): 2:1-56. Recent studies are J. F. Heybroek et al., *Met Huygens op reis* (Zutphen: Terra, 1983); and D. J. Roorda, "Constantijn Huygens de zoon en zijn ambt," in D. J. Roorda, *Rond prins en patriciaat* (Weesp: Fibula-Van Dishoeck, 1984), pp. 94-118.

3. In the printed edn., *Journal van Constantijn Huygens den zoon Derde deel* (Utrecht, Remink en zoon, 1888; Werken uitgegeven door het Historisch Genootschap Nieuwe Serie 46; 1876-77; Werken uitgegeven door het Historisch Genootschap Nieuwe Serie 23 & 25); *Journalen van Constantijn Huygens den zoon gedurende de veldtochten der jaren 1673, 1675, 1676, 1677 en 1678* (Utrecht: Kemink en zoon 1881; Werken van het Historisch Genootschap Nieuwe Serie 32). J. H. Hora Siccama, *Aanteekeningen en verbeteringen op het in 1906 door het Historisch Genootschap uitgegeven Register op de journalen van Constantijn Huygens den zoon* (Amsterdam: Johannes Muller, 1915). The MS is at the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague. Refs. in the text are given by the date of the entry.

4. Huygens transcribed his journal from rough notes, which is reported in the diary as a regular activity (4 June 1694). With the exception of the travel journal of 1649-50, the journals were obviously intended for private use. The diaries contain information about many facets of Huygens' life. He describes often and in detail incidents happening to himself or to others, and the encounters he has each day, frequently including scraps of dialogue. Most of the diaries are written in Dutch; some from the early years are in French. The diaries were published in the 19th century, but a few passages (which have been subsequently published) were omitted because of their delicate nature. Other passages were written in a code that has recently been deciphered. These passages are published separately (Arthur Eyffinger, ed., *Huygens herdacht. Catalogus bij de tentoonstelling in de Koninklijke Bibliotheek ter gelegenheid van de 300ste sterfdag van Constantijn Huygens* [Den Haag: Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 1987], pp. 167-73); F. Boersma, "Het ongelukkige lot van een dagboekschrijver. Herwaardering voor Constantijn Huygens Jr., secretaris van Willem III," *Groniek*, no. 101 (1988): 29-53.

5. The importance of "egodocuments" as a source for the history of sexuality is demonstrated by various publications, such as Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1977), and Herman W. Roodenburg, "The Autobiography of Isabella de Moerloose: Sex, Childrearing and Popular Belief in Seventeenth Century Holland," *Journal of Social History* 18 (1985): 517-39. A survey of the literature on autobiographical texts and their use by historians is Rudolf M. Dekker, "Egodocumenten. Een literatuuroverzicht," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 101 (1988): 161-89. On diaries in Holland in general, see Rudolf Dekker, *Childhood, Memory and Autobiography in Holland: From the Golden Age to Romanticism* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

6. Florence W. J. Koorn, "Illegitimiteit en eergevoel. Ongehuwde moeders in Twente in de achttiende eeuw," in Ulla Jansz et al., ed., *Vrouwenlevens 1500-1850. Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis* 8 (1987): 74-98, and idem, "Vrijen en partnerkeuze in Twente in de achttiende eeuw," *Jeugd en Samenleving* 19 (1989): 697-708. On family life in Holland in the 17th and 18th centuries, see Donald Haks, *Huwelijk en gezin in Holland in de 17de en 18de eeuw Processtukken en moralisten over aspecten van laat tide en 18de eeuwse gezinsleven* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1982).

7. Jacques le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt, eds., *Le Charivari* (Paris: Mouton, 1981). On charivari in the Netherlands, see Gerard Rooijackers and Tiny Romme, eds., *Charivari in de Nederlanden: Rituele sancties op deviant gedrag* (Amsterdam: P. J. Meertens Inst.,

1989). On the symbolism of the horns, see Anton Blok, "Rams and Billy-Goats: A Key to the Mediterranean Code of Honor," *Man* n.s., 16 (1981): 427-40; cf. idem, "Notes on the Concept of Virginity in Mediterranean Societies," in *Women and Men in Spiritual Culture, XIV-XVII Centuries*, ed. Elisja Schulte van Kessel ('s Gravenhage: Staatsuitgeverij, 1986), pp. 27-35.

8. Maria-Theresia Leuker and Herman W. Roodenburg, "Die dan hare wyven laten afweyen.' Overspel, eer en schande in de zeventiende eeuw," in *Soete minne en helsche boosheit: Seksuele voorstellingen in Nederland 1300-1850*, ed. Gert Hekma & Herman Roodenburg (Nijmegen: Sun, 1988), pp. 61-85.

9. Huygens sometimes even threatened his own son Tien, misbehaving as a student in Leiden, with imprisonment. Cf. Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault, eds. *Le désordre des familles: Lettres de cachet des archives de la Bastille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982); Pieter Spierenburg, *Disciplinary Institutions and their Inmates in Early Modern Europe* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ, 1991).

10. Van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams hoerdom. Prostitutie in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1996). On women in general, see Rudolf Dekker, "Women in Medieval and Early Modern Netherlands," *Journal of Women's History* 10 (1998): 165-89.

11. Huygens learned these details from his brother, Christiaan (18 June 1676).

12. Cf. Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. van de Pol, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (N.Y.: St. Martin's, 1989). Madame Latouche is mentioned in a list of luxurious brothels. She is also once mentioned in the judicial archives of Amsterdam.

13. *Tot lering en vermaak: Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw*, exhibition catalogue (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, 1976), pp. 259-61. (Adriaen van de Venne (?), Geckie met de kous); E. de Jongh, "Erotica in vogelperspectief. De dubbel-zinnigheid van een reeks 17de-eeuwse genrevoorstellingen," *Simiolus* 1 (1968/69): 22-72.

14. Cross-dressing by women for erotic stimulation is discussed in Dekker and van de Pol, *Female Transvestism*, pp. 7-8.

15. Chris Given-Wilson and Alice Curteis, *The Royal Bastards of Medieval England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984); A. L. Carstens, "De bastaarden van Nassau en de nakomelingen uit morganatische verbintenissen van leden van dit huis," *Jaarboek van het Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie* 2 (1948): 97-136; H. F. K. van Nierop, "Adellijke bastaarden in de zestiende eeuw," *Bestuurders en geleerden. opstellen aangeboden aan prof. dr. J. J. Woltjer* (Amsterdam, 1985), pp. 11-23.

16. Cf. Anna Clark, *Women's Silence, Men's Violence: Sexual Assault in England 1770-1845* (London: Pandora, 1987). Clark argues that in England in the period 1770-1845

rape functioned as a means of disciplining women, and keeping them out of public life. Huygens' diary, however, does not contribute to this picture of changing attitudes, because it shows that in his time although the attitude toward rape was rather tolerant, women were not deterred from actively participating in public life.

[17](#). On the history of homosexuality in Holland in the 17th and 18th centuries, see Theo van der Meer, *Sodoms zaad in Nederland. Het ontstaan van homoseksualiteit in de vroegmoderne tijd* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1995); idem, "The Persecution of Sodomies in Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam: Changing Perceptions of Sodom," in *The Pursuit of Sodomy: Male Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe*, ed. Kent Gerard & Gert Hekma (N.Y.: Haworth, 1989), pp. 263-307.

[18](#). Dennis Rubini, "Sexuality and Augustan England: Sodomy, Politics, Elite Circles and Society," in *The Pursuit of Sodomy*, p. 363. The author links this with other information.

[19](#). "Sodomitical Assaults, Gender Role, and Sexual Development in Eighteenth-Century London," in *The Pursuit of Sodomy*, p. 409. On Van Zuylen, see Rudolf Dekker, "'Private vices, public benefits' Revisited: The Dutch Background of Bernard Mandeville," *History of European Ideas* 14 (1992): 481-98.

[20](#). W. P. C. Knuttel, *Verboden boeken in de Republiek der Vereenigde Nederlanden* ('s Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1914), no. 186. Cf. Arend H. Huussen, "Censorship in the Netherlands," in *The Age of William III and Mary II: Power, Politics, and Patronage, 1688-1702*, ed. Robert P. Maccubbin & Martha Hamilton-Phillips (Williamsburg: College of William & Mary; N.Y.: Grolier Club; Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1989), pp. 347-51; A. C. Duke and C. A. Tamse, eds., *Too Mighty to be Free: Censorship and the Press in Britain and the Netherlands* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1988).

[21](#). *Histoire des amours de Marechal de Boufflers, ou ses intrigues galantes avant son mariage avec Mlle de Grammont* (Paris [Holland], 1696). See J. Lemonnyer, *Bibliographie des ouvrages relatifs a l'amour, aux femmes et au mariage*, vol. 2 (Lille, 1897), p. 537.

[22](#). Edith B. Gelles, "Gossip: An Eighteenth-Century Case," *Journal of Social History* 22 (1989): 667-83; Cf. John Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 1985), p. 16. Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), is an analysis of village gossip.

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