

Women About Women in 17th-century Comic Theatre

Towards a Nuanced Understanding of the Representation of Female Characters

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Abstract: Scholarship on female characters in comic theatre has focused mostly on stereotypes such as chatterboxes, evil wives and horny old women. This paper will draw attention to alternative – and more positive – ways in which women figure on the Dutch stage in the seventeenth century. Especially comic theatre staged different kinds of women engaged in conversation during ‘women’s meetings’ such as birth meals and tea parties, but also during their daily chores. Women were used by playwrights to address feminine daily concerns, such as pregnancy and breastfeeding. Since they were mainly active in the household, they could credibly voice critical opinions on increasing food prices and the difficulties of managing a household during times of crisis. Moreover, female characters were often used to voice criticism on ongoing discussions on the exuberance of the rich and famous in Amsterdam. In this way, an alternative analysis of female characters in such plays can contribute to a new view of seventeenth-century female identity.

Key words: stereotypes; female characters; comic theatre; seventeenth century; Low Countries / stereotypes, vrouwelijke personages, komisch theater, zeventiende eeuw, Lage Landen

Introduction¹

In a farce by Gerrit Cornelisz. van Santen, *Babbling Siitgen [Snappende Siitgen (1620)]*, a character introduced as ‘My nosey nose’ [‘Meyn bemoeyal’] sends her handmaiden, ‘Lying May’ [‘Leugenachtige May’] out to gather news and spread more gossip:

[...] Try to
 Speak to ‘Heyl-wants-to-know’
 And ask her whether she has heard
 When the feast will be given at ‘Daring Nell’
 And if she doesn’t know, have her tell me the instant she does
 If not, she will regret it.
 Tell her at once, that ‘Toothless Stijn’, the old hag,
 Is going to marry ‘Young Jaap In the Rummer’
 They’ll make a fine pair, Winter and Summer
 He’s a fine lad of twenty-six, she an old toad of seventy.²

The woman introduced here is extremely curious and seems well aware of anything new in the gossip going around town. Because of these traits, ‘My nosey nose’ is a good example of the popular seventeenth-century caricature of a babbling and foul-mouthing woman who passes her time trading secrets. Dutch seventeenth-century comic theatre stages a myriad of similar female characters who gossip and chat over ‘women’s meetings’, such as birth meals and tea parties, and during their daily chores such as cleaning or spinning. The gossiping woman is part of a set of well-known caricatures – evil women, vicious and treacherous wives, unreliable servant girls or horny old spinsters – that can already be found in medieval text material.³ The tradition was continued in early modern literature. In seventeenth-century farces, these types are abundantly present. Scholarly research on these negative stereotypes can be said to have been almost equally

¹ This article is partly a reflection of research performed for my PhD-thesis, which has been published by Verloren as *Hekelen met humor. Maatschappijkritiek in het zeventiende-eeuwse komische toneel in de Nederlanden* (2017).

² Gerrit Cornelisz. van Santen’s *Lichte Wigger, en Snappende Siitgen: zeventiende-eeuwse gesprekken in Delfts dialect*, ed. by Adrianus Cornelis Crena de Iong (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1959), pp. 335-337, vs. 570-579: ‘[...]je selt sien / Ofje Heyl-verneem-kleed, niet te spraeck kent comen, / Vraeght heur (maer alleen) ofse niet heeft vernomen / Wanneer men tby-mael geven sal, van onbesuyste Nel, / Weet sy’t niet, dat syt mijn dan past te segghen asment doen sel / Of de roe sou in de pis legghen, want syt niet en dee, / Segter met een, dat tandeloose Stijn, de ouwe quee / Sal trouwen met jongh-Jaep-inden-Romer / ‘Trechte paertje, salt wesen, de Winter met de Somer / Hy is een fray quant van sesentwintich, en sy en ouwe tad van tseventich jaer.’ All translations in this article are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

³ Giesela van Oostveen, ‘It takes all sorts to make a world. Sex and gender in Bredero’s Farce of the Miller’, in *Women of the Golden Age. An International Debate on Women in the Seventeenth-Century Holland, England and Italy*, ed. by Els Kloek et al. (Hilversum: Verloren, 1994), pp. 59-60.

abundant.⁴ Until now, however, scholars have insufficiently taken into account that in going about their daily business, female ‘stereotypes’ often give insight into a broad range of subjects that do not appear on stage otherwise.

In this article, I will draw attention to alternative ways in which women figure on stage. Female characters, often in the background of the principal plot, talk about their daily lives, casually voicing their opinions on ‘feminine themes’ such as pregnancy, breastfeeding and the household. Playwrights also used female characters as mouthpieces to discuss news and gossip in the actual world, or to address broader issues relevant to society outside the stage – debates in which women were not normally supposed to actively engage.⁵ I propose a new way to look at female characters in seventeenth-century farces, raising the question what these comical plays can teach us about the perception of women in seventeenth-century society and about the views and opinions of the women themselves. Looking at the representation of female characters inevitably involves tackling a number of methodological issues. First, there is the question whether theatre, and especially comic theatre, can be seen as a reflection of the societies in which it was conceived and performed. Indeed, the genre is characterised by a high degree of exaggeration for comical effect, which undermines its referential character. Secondly, early modern plays were exclusively written and performed by men, which adds complexity to trying to reconstruct the image of contemporary women through their representation on stage. In the following paragraphs, I will address these issues in providing an overview of scholarship to date, before diving into the incredibly rich material of Dutch comic theatre.

Common attitudes towards female behaviour

While in the seventeenth century, women were becoming ever more active in trade and commerce, they were still considered to be primarily responsible for managing the household. Formally speaking, they had to be subservient and listen to their husbands, but in running their households, they were relatively autonomous.⁶ Leading a household incorporated many tasks: cleaning, doing the laundry, catering for and preparing decent meals, sometimes leading female staff, spending the family income well and raising the children.⁷ Women were considered essential for a good household, and were praised when they did well in managing their tasks. In comic theatre, the positions of men and women within the household was a common theme. Scholars agree that cuckolds, drunks and evil women presented a mirror to the audience, warning against unwanted behaviour in a playful way. Along these lines, exaggerated comical behaviour

⁴ A/o. Marlies Caron, *Helse en hemelse vrouwen: schrikbeelden en voorbeelden van de vrouw in de christelijke cultuur* (Utrecht: Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent, 1988); Van Oostveen, ‘It takes all sorts’; Lène Dresen-Coenders, *Helse en hemelse vrouwenmacht omstreeks 1500* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1988); Patrycja Poniatowska, ‘As you are well pronounced by all external warrants’. *Women’s Bodies and Women’s Places in 17th-century Dutch and English Drama* (Wroclaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu, 2006); Els Kloek, *Vrouw des huizes. Een cultuurgeschiedenis van de Hollandse huisvrouw* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2009), pp. 86-89.

⁵ Joy Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), p. 7.

⁶ Kloek, *Vrouw des huizes*, pp. 77-78.

⁷ Leendert Frans Groenendijk, *De nadere reformatie van het gezin: de visie van Petrus Wittevrongel op de Christelijke huishouding* (Dordrecht: van den Tol, 1984), p. 115.

of female characters is often believed to convey a moral message.⁸ By comically propagating the right way to behave through characters that acted the exact opposite, farces drew on the age-old theme of the inverted world, which is also often represented in contemporary paintings for example.⁹ A woman dominating her husband, then, comically showed that in regular practice, women were supposed to be subservient. In an implicit way, these comical depictions plead for socially accepted behaviour. It can be argued, therefore, that playwrights echoed and propagated moralistic and patriarchal ideas that were the subject of a broader discussion in society, as is evidenced by other types of sources, for example moralistic literature such as *Pegasides Pleyn* (1583) by Johan Baptista Houwaert, the popular work *Marriage [Houwelick]* (1625) and *Wedding Ring [Trou-ringh]* (1637) by Jacob Cats, *The wise household keeper [De Verstandige huys-houder]* (1660) by Johan Coler, *Paper World [Pampiere Wereld]* (1681) by J.H. Krul, and many others. At the same time, Els Kloek has shown that the representation of stereotypes such as ‘evil women’ is not to be taken all too seriously in terms of the moral message they conveyed. The exaggerated evil characteristics of these women and the all-too-obvious moral messages could be said to have been evident to the point of becoming almost an irony, their effect being more comical than moral. In every-day practice, women were probably not as disobedient as the caricatures staged, and the audience – among whom many women – were well aware that women had to be resolute to get their households in order.¹⁰ This contrast mirrors an ongoing discussion in scholarly debate, with one school of literary historians believing that comic theatre was mainly intended as humorous,¹¹ while another school stresses the didactic function of the genre, in trying to educate the audience.¹² To be able to get the message across effectively, seventeenth-century drama theory prescribed that a farce ideally showed the shortcomings of ordinary people in a recognisable way.¹³

Indeed, historical research has shown that there is a great difference between the moralist discourse on the behaviour of women and their actual roles in early modern society. Women in reality did not comply with the image in moralist treatises, and often had great societal influence and impact. For example, when social norms were being transgressed (extramarital sexuality,

⁸ Maria-Theresia Leuker, ‘Schelmen, hoeren, eerdieven en lastertongen. Smaad en belediging in zeventiende-eeuwse kluchten en blijspelen’, *Volkskundig bulletin* 18 (1992), pp. 314-315.

⁹ Kloek, *Vrouw des huizes*, p. 86.

¹⁰ Kloek, *Vrouw des huizes*, pp. 88-89.

¹¹ Willem Ornée, ‘Het kluchtspiel in de Nederlanden’, *Scenarium* 5 (1981), pp. 107-121; Willem Ornée, ‘P.C. Hooft als komedeschrijver’, in *Uyt liefde geschreven, studies over Hooft*, ed. by Eddy Grootes et al. (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1981), pp. 117-130; Inneke Grootegoed et al., [‘Inleiding’], in Jilles Noozeman, *Beroyde student en Bedrooge Dronkkaart, of Dronkke-Mans hel*, ed. by Inneke Grootegoed et al. (Amsterdam: Stichting Neerlandistiek VU, 2004), pp. 24-25; Johan Pieter Snapper, ‘The seventeenth century Dutch farce: social refractions of a gilded age’, in *Barocker Lust-Spiegel Studien zur Literatur des Barock. Festschrift für Blake Lee Spahr (Chloe)*, ed. by Martin Bircher (Amsterdam: s.n., 1984), pp. 55-74; Mark Bakker, ‘Humor voor Henk. Over de interpretatie van zeventiende-eeuwse kluchten’, *Moxi* 9 (2002), pp. 103-111.

¹² Mieke B. Smits-Veldt, ‘Samuel Costers Teeuwis de Boer: “vol soeticheyt van sin en woorden”’, *Spektator* 5 (1975-1976), pp. 668-711; Jan Henk Meter, ‘Amplificatietechnieken in Bredero’s ‘Moortje’’, *Spektator* 14 (1984-1985), pp. 270-279; Jeroen Jansen, ‘Aulularia-Warenar, adaptatie in contrast’, *Spektator* 18 (1988-1989), pp. 124-151.

¹³ Gustaaf van Eemeren, ‘Van fictie naar realiteit. Beschouwingen bij bepaalde aspecten van de communicatie- en referentiële status van personages in enkele stukken van Bredero’, *Spektator* 14 (1984-1985), p. 295.

theft, violence), the female gossips in the neighbourhood shared what happened, recording the events in a collective memory. They performed a type of social control, punishing and eventually preventing unwanted behaviour. While not being silent and retracted, as they are prescribed to behave in moral treatises, gossiping women performed an essential role in early modern communities.¹⁴ Also, in the past few decades, economic and social historians have increasingly stressed that women contributed to the early modern economy outside their households.¹⁵ Studies by Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk and Martha Howell, for instance, have presented a far more nuanced picture of women's labour and their activities in trade and commerce, albeit predominantly in low-income functions or in less well-regulated sectors.¹⁶ Specifically for the city of Amsterdam, where the bulk of preserved comic theatre in Dutch was written and staged, it is well known that women were merchants, both in local markets as well as overseas trade, even without being formally registered as such.¹⁷ Widows and unmarried women over the age of 25, were allowed to engage in commercial activities without the oversight of a man, and married women often played important roles in the trade of their husbands.¹⁸ It is clear that several early modern women had considerable economic independence and freedom of movement.¹⁹

In literary studies, a more nuanced analysis of female characters has mainly been looked attempted for early modern England. It has been shown that seventeenth-century popular texts (plays, songs, pamphlets and the like) cannot merely be seen as expressions of patriarchal morals. These texts were at the same time aimed at the interests of a growing female audience, and should be looked at as forms of contemporary comments on a society in which women were increasingly playing key parts. Despite the fact that texts were most often written by men, Sandra Clark has argued that 'broadside ballads' often explicitly targeted female audiences by involving women into their narratives. Dialogue songs, for example, feature men and women in discussions on themes such as marriage and love. By including a feminine perspective, the dominant patriarchal discourse was nuanced or plainly negated. While previous research looked at these songs as expressions of a uniquely patriarchal vision, and explained the presence of women as a rhetorical game or a way to increase audiences, Clark argues that authors were actively trying to break away from the dominant ideology of patriarchal marriage.²⁰ Taking the argument a step further, Susan

¹⁴ Leuker, 'Schelmen, hoeren, eerdieven en lastertongen', pp. 326-327.

¹⁵ Danielle van den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship: female traders in the Northern Netherlands, c. 1580-1815* (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2007), pp. 22-24.

¹⁶ Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, *De draad in eigen handen: vrouwen en loonarbeid in de Nederlandse textielnijverheid* (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2007), pp. 132-134; 163-170; 186-200; Martha C. Howell, 'Women's Work in the New and Light Draperies of the Low Countries', in *The New Draperies in the Low Countries and England, 1300-1800*, ed. by Negley Harte (Leeds: Pasold Research Fund, 1997), pp. 197-216.

¹⁷ Danielle van den Heuvel, 'De Openbaar Koopvrouw. De handelingsbekwaamheid van gehuwde vrouwen in de Republiek', *Historica* 28.3 (2005), p. 13.

¹⁸ Van den Heuvel, 'Women and entrepreneurship', p. 57.

¹⁹ Kim Overlaet, 'Gehouden ende gheacht voor een coopwijf in Antwerpen rond 1600. Een vloek of zegen voor Antwerpse handelsvrouwen en hun handelspartners?' *Historica* 34.2 (2011) p. 20.

²⁰ Sandra Clark, 'The Broadside Ballad and the Woman's Voice', in *Debating Gender in Early Modern England 1500-1700*, ed. by Christina Malcolmson and Mihoko Suzuki (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 103-116.

Gushee O’Malley noted that women in English gossip pamphlets are depicted as intelligent and independent enough to publish in their own right on the foolishness of their husbands.²¹

David Pennington concluded that the representation of market women and tavern hostesses in popular literature, was more nuanced than is often thought. These women are in fact powerful and very verbal characters, performing their every-day trades in a resolute way, with commercial insight, be it on the markets or in the taverns. And importantly: by working, they are actively contributing to the household’s finances.²²

Research along these lines for the Low Countries is lacking. In her thesis of 1992, Maria-Theresia Leuker studied the role of women and the concept of female honour in seventeenth-century farces. She analysed the behaviour of women in these plays, charting the image of the woman they conveyed to their audiences, to better grasp the role of the woman in seventeenth-century society. More specifically, she looked at the portrayal of marriageable girls, the ways in which marriages were organised and the role of women in conflicts within the marriage and in extramarital relations. One of her conclusions was that the evolution towards a more ‘decent’ or ‘civilised’ tone in plays in the second half of the seventeenth century, developed in parallel with similar evolutions in society as a whole, towards self-discipline, sobriety and virtue. Leuker argued that a medieval culture of shame was gradually being replaced by an early modern culture of guilt. In comical theatre, she traced an evolution in plays dealing with extramarital relationships: while the early examples show mainly men being ridiculed because their wives cheat on them, later plays set an example by punishing the adulterous wives and providing moral closure.²³

While Leuker’s analysis was nuanced in sketching evolutions in the depiction of female characters, most literary historians of Dutch material have looked at women on stage mainly in terms of negative portrayal and comical stereotypes. A more nuanced analysis is needed to do justice to the increasing role of women in early modern Low Countries, and how this was reflected on the stage. Foreign visitors to these regions were generally surprised by the power Dutch women wielded in the household, uncommon in their home countries.²⁴ If their independence was so evident to travellers, I hypothesise that their representation in Dutch literature will have been as nuanced, if not more nuanced and complex, than it was in England.

I propose to look more broadly at the representation of women in Dutch comic theatre. While Leuker has primarily focused on the role of women within the constraints of marriage or romantic relationships, taking a moralist approach of guilt and honour, I aim to give more attention to the day-to-day lives of women as they are depicted on stage. I will take into account all ways in which female characters engage with theatrical reality – and through it, with contemporary societal issues within as well as outside the marriage – in the comical genre.

²¹ Susan Gushee O’ Malley, “‘Weele Have a Wench shall be our Poet’: Samuel Rowlands Gossip Pamphlets’, in *Debating Gender in Early Modern England 1500-1700*, ed. by Christina Malcolmson and Mihoko Suzuki (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 121-134.

²² David Pennington, “‘Three Women and a Goose make a Market’: Representations of Market Women in Seventeenth-Century Popular Literature’, *The Seventeenth Century* 25/1 (2010), pp. 40-44.

²³ Maria-Theresia Leuker, ‘De last van ’t huys, de wil des mans...’ Frauenbilder und Ehekonzepte im niederländischen Lustspiel des 17. Jahrhunderts (Münster: Regensberg, 1992).

²⁴ Kloek, *Vrouw des huizes*, pp. 81-83.

Opinions on stage: playwrights and their audiences

While moralist discourse, such as the extensive work of Johan Baptista Houwaert and Johan Coler, reached a relatively small readership, plays were performed for large audiences and were read in printed form. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, the old chambers of rhetoric professionalised and opened their performances to a paying audience, heralding a new form of professional theatre. Later on, we see the appearance of professional theatres in the true sense of the word: the *Nederduytsche Academie* (1617) and the Amsterdam Theatre (1638) were commercial institutions that worked for profit to be invested in charity. Drawing large audiences was in their best interest. The public was socially heterogeneous, ranging from simple labourers to members of the city council.²⁵ In reflecting this variety, theatre represented a kaleidoscopic range of perspectives, incorporating the viewpoints of men as well as women, rich and poor, young and elderly, all in speaking roles. The form of dialogue allowed for the juxtaposition of opposite or contrasting opinions, often for comical effect. While generously using stereotypical characters and exaggerations, playwrights also ensured their plays to be recognisable for their audiences, mirroring their concerns and every-day lives on stage. This recognition will have been present in the background of the theatrical action, in details of characters' actions, their clothing, the setting in which they are found, their afterthoughts and so forth, just as much as – or even more than – in the development of the plot itself. These details can easily be overlooked, but will form the basis of my analysis. It is precisely in these details that theatre is able to reflect popular opinion on certain groups, for example women. Moreover, even the stereotypes could have worked differently in any given context. In their actions and their representation, these 'stock characters' of course follow the conventions of the genre, but they could also interact with events that were recognised by the contemporary audience, and thereby address issues that were relevant in the specific societies in which these 'universal' stereotypes were staged.

Theatre was dominated by men, both in terms of the authors of the plays and in terms of the actors performing them. Again, it should be stated that playwrights actively sought recognition among their audiences, so they will have tried to portray their female characters in a well-informed way. Unless authors explicitly addressed their intentions in forewords or epilogues, the characters' representation is the only way to gauge their opinions, as Dutch comic theatre does not include an overarching narrator's voice. Moreover, the question is whether authors presented their own opinions, rather than aimed to mirror or reflect that of their audiences. There is no single opinion that can be traced to the individual author. Indeed, the multifaceted representation of differing views is precisely the power of theatre. Audiences were challenged to confront their own views with the opinions represented on stage, and were left to their own judgements.

While theatre as a medium of course is performative and visual, plays were often made available in print. Book printers and publishers quickly saw potential in selling printed versions of the ever growing amount of new plays that were being written to satisfy the taste of the

²⁵ Wiebe Hogendoorn, *De schouwburg in beeld. Amsterdamse toneelscènes 1665-1772* (Houten: Hes and De Graaf, 2012), p.20.

audiences, who craved new material.²⁶ The Nederduytsche Academie as well as the Amsterdam Theatre worked together with specific printers, who obtained the privilege to publish the plays performed at these venues.²⁷ Certainly when authors had acquired a name for themselves, audiences were interested in buying their work in printed form. In this way, the act of performance and the publication in print were mutually reinforcing: printed plays relied on the success of the performance, but at the same time advertised for renewed performance.²⁸ For playwrights, the medium of print allowed them to reach broader audiences, and increased the longevity of their work.²⁹

The daily lives of women?

A look at the Dutch comic theatre material of the seventeenth century shows that playwrights attempted to represent their characters – often ordinary people – and all their shortcomings in a realistic way, which can be said to mirror society.³⁰ Therefore, not all women on stage were common stereotypes taken over from comic theatre tradition. On the contrary, many female characters are well-balanced and realistic, going about daily routines, over which tasks they casually discuss themes such as sexuality, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and their households.

In Mattheus Gansneb Tengnagel's *Frik in the front house [Frik in 't veurhuis]* (1642), the lead roles are two craftswomen. The title of the play, itself a metaphor for sexual intercourse,³¹ mirrors its central theme: Grietje and Saartje both have a child fathered by Frik, who spends his time mainly in taverns and brothels, but who is now to marry a distinguished girl. To save their honour, they go to Frik's house, bringing to light his previous actions and demanding compensation. While Grietje and Saartje are portrayed in an exaggeratedly comical way – in the confrontation with Frik's mother, for example, they behave as vulgar fish wives – and while their naive behaviour constitutes a warning against loose morals, they cannot simply be considered stereotypical characters. Tengnagel stages Grietje – who strikingly works in a sewing school, with

²⁶ Wim M. H. Hummelen, '1637: Jacob van Campen bouwt de Amsterdamse Schouwburg: inrichting en gebruik van het toneel bij de rederijkers en in de Schouwburg' *Een theatergeschiedenis der Nederlanden: tien eeuwen drama en theater in Nederland en Vlaanderen*, ed. by Rob Erenstein (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1996), pp. 202-203.

²⁷ Hogendoorn, *De schouwburg in beeld*, p. 22.

²⁸ In order to transcend the material evidence of printed plays, modern-day scholars can rely on extensive databases that chart the performances and publications of seventeenth-century plays. The most comprehensive overview is Ton Harmsen's database Ceneton (University of Leiden), which provides data for over 12.800 plays, from the earliest beginnings of Dutch theatre until 1803, in manuscript and print, including plays translated into Dutch. ONSTAGE, on the other hand, a database hosted at the University of Amsterdam, collects data on the performances of plays in the Amsterdam Theatre (1637-1772), shedding light on changes in repertoire, popularity of individual plays and the revenues of the Theatre in the relevant period.

²⁹ Hubert Meeus, 'Titelbladen van toneeldrukken in de Nederlanden vóór 1700', in *E Codicibus Impressique: opstellen over het boek in de Lage Landen voor Elly Cockx-Indestege*, ed. by Hubert Meeus and Johan Hanselaer (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), pp. 307-310.

³⁰ Van Eemeren, 'Van fictie naar realiteit', p. 295.

³¹ 'Frik' or 'Prick' is the male member, 'voorhuis', or 'front house' the vagina.

sewing having a sexual connotation still in modern-day Dutch – as a hard-working and stern teacher in her school, and as a good and tender mother:

There there there! My little baby. Why are you crying? Shush shush shush, my lamb.

Lord! To wake up as angry as you! Are you thirsty? Does the little baby want a nipple?

Give mommy a kiss. How come you are sweating? Was your little bed too hot, or are you tired of crying?³²

While the popularity of *Frik in 't veurhuis* is evident from the fact that it was reprinted several times, there is no evidence of the play having been performed on the stage of the Amsterdam Theatre.³³ Possibly, the play was refused because Tengnagel had criticised the regents of the Theatre in a satirical poem. In the 1640s, Tengnagel was both celebrated and feared as a notorious critic of the private lives of well-known members of the Amsterdam society. His satirical poems, an example quickly followed by other authors, caused real upheaval in the city: several authors, printers and publishers were arrested and punished, while Tengnagel himself was placed under house arrest.³⁴ His example illustrates poignantly how successful – or indeed: well-known – authors sold well in print.

In Thomas Asselijn's *Birth bed or Caudle meal of Zaartje Jans [Kraam-bedt of Kandeel-Maal van Zaartje Jans]* (1684), some women explicitly discuss their daily lives, including feminine subjects such as motherhood, pregnancy and breastfeeding:

It is so painful, and my nipples are soar, so that when he has fed, blood is running from them

[...]

I've had cracks in my breasts so soar that my nipples were dangling from them, as Elsje Lubberts can testify.³⁵

The women not only openly discuss intimate physical matters, they also address their roles and duties as mothers. Giertje Pieters describes the pleasure of feeding a child, and thinks 'that no good mother sends her children out to be fed'.³⁶ Elsje Lubberts responds that paying a wet nurse

³² Mattheus Gansneb Tengnagel, *Alle werken* ed. by Jacob Jan Oversteegen (Amsterdam: Athenaeum, 1959), p. 336: 'Nou! nou! nou! mijn kleyntje. Hoe zoume dus krijten! sus! sus! sus, mijn lammetje. / Heer! dus gemelijk uyt zijn sleepje te komen! het het dorst? Wil het kijntje een prammetje / Geef Memmetje dan ien zoen. Hoe is het dus beswiet? is het te warm edekt eweest, of is het van 't huylen so moe? [...].'

³³ ONSTAGE.

³⁴ Karel Porteman and Mieke B. Smits-Veldt, *Een nieuw vaderland voor de muzen* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008), p. 409.

³⁵ Thomas Asselijn, *17e Eeuwsche Treur- en Blijspelen*, ed. by Eelco Verwijs and A. De Jager (Amsterdam: Lobo, 1907), p. 294: 'Sulken pyn als het is, en daar by ist rondom de Tepel open, soo dat als hy gesogen heeft, soo loopter 'et bloed by neer [...] / Ik heb kloven in myn Borsten gehad offer de Tepel by neer hing, gelyk Elsje Lubberts kan getuygen'.

³⁶ Asselijn, *17e Eeuwsche Treur- en Blijspelen*, p. 295: 'dat 'et gien recht Moederlyk hart en is, die 'er Kinderen soo ligt uyt ten huys doen.'

is sometimes necessary, and discussion leads to a consensus about when it is appropriate to have a paid wet nurse feed your children, and when it is not.

The staged conversation aligns with ongoing discussions in seventeenth-century society. Generally, it was believed that a woman should breastfeed her own children. The moralist Jacob Cats, for example, avidly propagated the opinion that breastfeeding was an integral part of motherhood. This, however, was not self-evident. Many women died in labour leaving their children without a natural mother, and at the same time, a high infant mortality rate meant that many women were producing breast milk without children to feed. Especially in more elite circles, breastfeeding was often left to a paid wet nurse.³⁷ Contemporary voices such as the diary of ordinary craftsman Herman Verbeecq (1621-1673) show that paying a wet nurse was frowned upon, even when circumstances called for this measure. Verbeecq's wife Clara suffered repeated inflammations of her breasts, causing the malnutrition and death of a few of their children. Still, their friends and family judged it ill-spent money to hire a wet nurse.³⁸

Seventeenth-century comic theatre mirrors these ongoing discussions in society and allows women to speak out on stage about their roles as mothers and their opinions on other women. The women present in the birth meal end up agreeing that a real mother feeds her own children, unless any physical condition makes it impossible. Their consensus nicely fits with opinions circulating among the commoners in the intended audience of the plays. Quite like Tengnagel, Thomas Asselijn was as infamous as he was well-known. His first comical play, *Jan Klaasz of Gewaande Dienstmaagt* (1682), caused upheaval on the occasion of its premiere. Asselijn was accused of having criticised contemporary events and specific people, notably the Mennonite community of Amsterdam. The city's mayors prohibited the play and advised its author to leave the city until commotion had settled.³⁹ The prohibition of his play, conversely, made it increasingly popular, and ensured the success of several sequel plays he wrote to the original *Jan Klaasz*.

Women in a time of crisis

Women's pivotal role in the household is an explicit theme in farcical plays, especially when managing the household becomes increasingly difficult, in times of crisis. After the Twelve Years Truce (1609-1621) with Habsburg Spain, the Republic entered harsh times. Despite an economic boom during the Truce years, unemployment continued to be a problem. A harsh winter in 1622 made things worse, and the crisis continued throughout the 1620s, with especially tough times between 1628 and 1630.⁴⁰

³⁷ Kloek, *Vrouw des huizes*, p. 116.

³⁸ Rudolf Dekker, 'Moeders en kinderen in de zeventiende eeuw. Opvattingen over moederschap in de autobiografie van Hermannus Verbeecq', in *De vrouw in de Renaissance*, ed. by Arie-Jan Gelderblom and Harald Hendrix (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994), pp. 68-69.

³⁹ Marijke Meijer Drees, *De treurspelen van Thomas Asselijn (ca. 1620-1701)* (Enschede: Offset-drukkerij FEBODRUK, 1989), p. 34.

⁴⁰ Arie van Deursen, *Mensen van klein vermogen. Het kopergeld van de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 1992), p. 61; p. 244.

The crisis is explicitly present in comic theatre of the period. While male characters discuss their inability to find employment or complain about having to work for little pay, women address questions in their households. It is mainly the women who shed light on the difficulties of ordinary people's daily lives during the crisis. As washing maids, spinsters or shopkeepers, they look for additional employment to bring in a little extra money, but at the same time, they have to cope with their every-day household tasks.⁴¹ Plays show how inventive and creative women had to be to bring food to the table and raise their children in these harsh times.

In Gerrit Cornelisz. van Santen's *Babbling Siitgen*, poverty is an important theme. The play, which only has female characters, depicts women in different constellations and on different locations – the streets, the market place etc. – discussing the daily gossip of the neighbourhood: marriages, thievery, adultery, illegitimate children etc. At first sight, the farce seems to contain only gossip. The only story line is that Siitgen unjustly accuses her neighbour of theft, only to cover up her own wrongdoing. Her lie is discovered, and she is banished from the city, leaving the audience with a moral lesson that speaking evil about others can cause one's own downfall. Behind the stereotypes, however, this farce deals with serious themes. The first part almost only discusses impoverished people in the neighbourhood and families that have been struck by the crisis: a woman who has just given birth to her sixth child, but who sleeps on hay, an old couple too poor to pay for firewood that eats peals and coal leaves out of garbage, the children of a widowed father who are cold and hungry. In discussing the scenes of misery, the women in this play address the issues of rising food prices, the difficulty of raising children and finding adequate housing:

[...] Lord, how expensive is everything!

Peas, beans, barley, flour, carrots, coal, meat and fish

One does not know what to buy these days

If you are paid little money, there is no way

To avoid poverty

In short: if you have a house full of children

Everything is expensive, while nothing is cheaper than labour.⁴²

The play contains so many of these contemplations, discussions about morals and bad behaviour, that it seems to have been written precisely to address these issues. As a play, it contains a very limited amount of theatrical action, despite its considerable length, which prevented it from being performed as a comical addition to a serious play. Considering the fact that the Leiden

⁴¹ Kloek, *Vrouw des huizes*, p. 102.

⁴² Van Santen, *Lichte Wigger, en Snappende Siitgen*, p. 297, vs. 7-12: [...] Heer hoe dier is oock alle ding tis wattet is / Erreten, boonen, gort, meel, peen, en kool, vlees, en vis / Men weet niet huydensdaegs wat datmen coopan sal / Die kleyne dag-huyren wint raeckt altemael op sijn achter-stal / Tcomter op an die een huys vol kinderen heyt / Alle ding is kostelijck, daer is niet goe cooper dan den Arrebeyt.'

printer of the play, Bartholomeus van der Bild, was mainly known as a printer of pamphlets, one could assume that *Babbling Sijtgen* was intended to be read rather than performed. There is no indication that Van Santen's plays were ever performed in Delft, or that he was a member of the local chamber of rhetoric 'De Rapenbloem', which society performed the only theatre in the city. On the other hand, the play does contain stage directions and scenes that will undoubtedly have had a comical effect when performed. Its structure in five acts, reminiscent of classical theatre, might point in the direction of Van Santen's intention to write a 'classical' comedy, following the example of Bredero's *Spaanschen Brabander*.⁴³

Another example of a playwright explicitly addressing female concerns is the Amsterdam author Willem Dirckzs. Hooft, contemporary to Van Santen, who staged women coping with financial and economic crisis. Hooft's plays were very popular in his time, and were performed on numerous occasions in the *Nederduytsche Academie* and the Amsterdam Theatre.⁴⁴ By far his most successful play was *Styve Piet*, which was performed after a serious play in the Amsterdam Theatre no less than 117 times.⁴⁵ In his *Cunning Melis [Door-trapte Melis]* (1623), a play for which no performance data has been preserved,⁴⁶ female character Griet shows how lower-class women possibly responded to the crisis. She buys whale oil instead of regular oil to save money. In an attempt to avoid having any more children to feed, she refuses her husband's advances every night. Another problem she encounters is adequate housing. Well-aware of the going rates for houses, she lives with her family near the city walls, literally in the margins, because houses there are cheaper.⁴⁷ Merchants living more in the centre of the city in the seventeenth century paid exceedingly high prices for their rents.⁴⁸

One is nearly eaten whole by the prices for rent

Certainly anyone who is in trade, and who needs to live in a central location

For a little space, prices are as high as a hundred crowns

That's why we simple folk live here near the bulwark of town.⁴⁹

⁴³ René van Stipriaan, *Leugens en vermaak. Boccaccio's novellen in de kluchtcultuur van de Nederlandse Renaissance* (Amsterdam: University Press, 1996), p. 41.

⁴⁴ Elise Oey-de Vita and Marja Geesink, *Academie en schouwburg. Amsterdams toneelrepertoire 1617-1665*. (Amsterdam: Huis aan de Drie Grachten, 1983), p. 41; 48; 53-55.

⁴⁵ ONSTAGE.

⁴⁶ ONSTAGE.

⁴⁷ Willem Dirckzs. Hooft, *Door-trapte Meelis en Jilles Noozeman, Lichte Klaartje*, ed. by Arjan van Leuvenstijn and Jeanine Stuart (Münster: stichting Neerlandistiek VU, 1999), p. 77.

⁴⁸ Clé Lesger, *Huur en conjunctuur. De woningmarkt in Amsterdam, 1550-1850* (Amsterdam: Historisch Seminarium van de Universiteit Amsterdam, 1986), p. 46.

⁴⁹ Willem Dirckzs. Hooft, *Door-trapte Meelis*, pp. 74-76, vs. 162-165: 'Daer by wort ien mensch schier op e geten vande huys huer: / By namen die neeringh doet, die soo wat voor de hant woonen, / Moet als hy yet ruyms wil hebbe int jaer gheven hondert kroonen, / Daer van woone wy slechte luytjes hier op het nieuw werck after of.'

Playwrights apparently had their female characters voice different opinions than their male counterparts. By taking on a position sympathetic to the suffering of others, they raise awareness of the crisis among the audience. In *Babbling Siitgen*, the characters even explicitly call for a charitable attitude towards poverty, and sharply criticise those who fail to share their wealth:

For a poor man, it is difficult to keep his children from begging at richer doors
 And those who do beg, don't get enough – the rich people's compassion has waned
 How many of them do not simply bury their money in the ground?
 And have nothing to spare for a poorer man, keeping everything to themselves
 It's Saint Mark's Day,⁵⁰ they even dare say
 But don't think, you uncompassionates, that you will get off easy in the afterlife
 And be able to please the Lord with such talk
 In Heaven, the Lord is more difficult to fool
 Don't imagine getting away with that, for you are mistaken
 And betrayed by your godless thoughts
 Don't be led by your hubris and vanity
 Poor people are made of flesh and blood, like you
 And often better people at that, even if they are poor or look bad.⁵¹

Women as criticasters of wealth

The above example showed that women are not only staged as compassionate to poverty, but also sharply critical of the attitude of the wealthy. During 'women's meetings', in an exchange of ideas that transcends ordinary gossip, the characters comment on the behaviour of the contemporary audience, spreading individual stories and anchoring them in the shared consciousness of the

⁵⁰ I.e. the ascetic; a day to spare money.

⁵¹ Van Santen, *Lichte Wigger, en Snappende Siitgen*, p. 297, vs. 13-25: 'Hy doet al veel die sijn kinderen van de goe luy haer deuren hout / En die der comen crighen weynich ghenoech de rijcke luy haer liefde is al verkout / Hoe veel sijnder die haer geldt in de aerde bedelven / En voor een arm mensch niet en hebben, tis elck voor hem selven / Tis Sinte Marcus dach dat durvense noch wel segghen / Maer onbarmhartige denck niet dat ghyt hier naemaels soo sult of leggen / En datje met een praetje ons lieven Heer sult payen / 'Tselder soo niet te doen sijn, je selt hem gheen vlasschen baert an nayen / Beeld jou dat niet in of je sout u bedrieghen / En van u godloose ghedachten in slaep laeten wieghen / Wat deusen rijcken bruts, wat laetje u voorstaen door u hoochmoet / 'Tsijn mee menschen en soo goedt als ghy van vleys en bloedt / En dicmael degelijcker, al ist somwijl een arme(n) bloed ofte een slechte sleur.'

community.⁵² They keep a close eye on the behaviour of individuals and specific groups in urban society, such as the rich and wealthy,⁵³ voicing the middle-class opinion of thriftiness and simplicity.

While male characters of course voiced similar criticism, theirs is grounded less in concerns over the household. They criticise rich women who are more occupied by their vanity than by their families, who have expensive tastes and spend their husbands' money on useless items of luxury. The difference between female and male characters' opinions shows that playwrights consciously staged female characters to comment on one of the most ardently discussed ongoing themes in seventeenth-century Amsterdam: the increasing wealth of a certain class, which until about 1672 led to great excesses.⁵⁴ In *Birth bed or Caudle meal of Zaartje Jans*, one of the women present recounts the scandalous luxury in a previous birth meal at which she was present:

But I have attended another birth meal of late, that was something, I dare not say the place.

First, the child, Diwertje, was hilariously dressed, with a tie, you know, of the kind with flowers and lace, *point de Venise*, or *point de Paris*.⁵⁵

Yes, I assure you, that the tie cost 'just' twenty Ducatons, not too expensive.⁵⁶

[...]

And the mother, in a Japanese skirt,⁵⁷ sat in a chair and the mother-in-law at her side.

And on the table, there was a porcelain dish, mounted with an assortment of sugar.

People drank nothing else than Rhine wine with sugar, and talked of nothing else but important subjects.

She [the mother] was wearing a costly diamond ring, and other gold rings were lying around.⁵⁸

⁵² Leuker, 'Schelmen, hoeren, eerdieven en lastertongen', pp. 325-326.

⁵³ Elizabeth Horodowich, 'The gossiping tongue: oral networks, public life and political culture in early modern Venice', *Renaissance Studies* 19 (2005), p. 44.

⁵⁴ Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies, *1650: bevochten eendracht* (Den Haag: Sdu, 2000), pp. 30-31.

⁵⁵ I.e. both types of expensive lace.

⁵⁶ I.e. irony.

⁵⁷ I.e. Japanese latest fashion.

⁵⁸ Asselijn, *17e Eeuwsche Treur- en Blijspelen*, p. 297: 'Maar ik heb lest op een Kinder-maal e weest, dat was wat te zeggen! doch ik sel de plaats niet noemen; / Daar was het ierst kostelijk, Diwertje, het Kind had een Das aan, van dat verheven rankagiewerk met bloemen, / Soo van de point de Veniese, of point de Paris, ja wel sie daar, ik seg je dat Diwertje buur, / Hadse voor twintig Ducatons, se hadse veur al niet te duur. / [...] / En Moer zat selfs met 'er Japonse Rok in 'er stoel, en 'er Mans Moeder an 'er zy, / En op de Tafel stont een postelijne Lampet-schotel, opgehoopt met naarse van

A similar criticism is voiced in a conversation between Marry Monckjes and Giertje, an old and a younger female character in Jilles Noozeman's *Hans van Tongen* (1644)⁵⁹. Both keep a close eye on their fellow townsmen and are critical of the vanity of young women:

[...] the girls nowadays are haughty
 They rather look nice than eat properly
 And the men are no better
 No one is content with what they have,
 Everything has to be the latest novelty
 It was nobility who set this example
 But not to be followed by the commoners,
 That they should wear coats this long [Giertje shows the length]
 [...]
 And such is the way of the world, those who cannot wear the latest fashion
 Are set behind and can't get a decent marriage.⁶⁰

Sexuality⁶¹

Because of their professions, some women were in a position to disclose stories from the private sphere. Explicit, critical comments on specific events in the private life of early modern people, are difficult to trace. Peoples' public appearance and their private lives were very well separated,

Kandy, / Men schonker niet als Rijnse-wijn met Zuyker, en men praten 'er niet als van groote dingen, / Sy had selfs een kostelyke Diamant Ring aan 'er Pink, en dan lagender noch andere Gouden Ringen.'

⁵⁹ First performed in the Amsterdam Theatre on 12 December 1644, after which it was repeated several times (ONSTAGE).

⁶⁰ Jilles Noozeman and Nil Volentibus Ardumm, *Hans van Tongen Razende-liefdens-eynd en De wanhébbelyke liefde*, ed. by Arjan van Leuvenstijn (Amsterdam: Stichting Neerlandistiek VU, 2012), pp. 110-111, vs. 491-500: '[...] de meysjes sijn huydendaeghs soo met Luysefaers sieckte beseten, / Dat sy liever moy gaen en een stick te minder eten. / Oock is dit ghebrek onder 't man-volck al mee, / 't Is al van 't hof, blaes of, 't moet mit elck nae de nieuwe snee: / Maer den Adel hebben rechtevoort wel voor gheslagen, / Op dat het de Gemeent niet me doen souwen, datse duske langhe roo manghtels dragen, / [...] / En so gaet het inde werrelt, die niet kan sijn selfs moytjes op maken, / Wort achter de banck geschoven, en kan niet licht aen een groot hylick raken.'

⁶¹ Parts of this paragraph are based on: Johanna Ferket, 'De eenen kijvage is soo ras niet gedaen, of de andere die vangt weer aen': bejaarde vrouwen en maatschappijkritiek in het Nederlandstalige komische toneel', *Jaarboek de Zeventiende Eeuw* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2017), pp. 75-90.

and texts dealing with intimacies were kept out of the public eye.⁶² In a culture dominated by honour, it was important for people to guard over their public image. Any mistake or transgression quickly led to gossip and could taint a person's honour.⁶³

In more common circles, people freely entered each other's homes, and closed doors during the day immediately raised suspicion, as doors and windows were only closed at sundown.⁶⁴ Among the rich, there was more privacy, as they could often afford houses with different rooms. All of these could have different functions,⁶⁵ but a second room was often used for the private or intimate life. Period paintings often show women using a spare room to get dressed, to breastfeed a child or to receive friends, family and neighbours after having given birth.⁶⁶ The house generally was a female domain, which explains why stories on the private sphere (or criticism thereof) almost exclusively deals with women, or is recounted by women.

Handmaidens, for instance, were often ascribed the stereotypical trait of curiosity, and playwrights widely criticised the fact that they publicly gossiped about the private lives of their employers. At the same time, they were able to relate events from the private spheres through these characters. Handmaiden May, in *Babbling Siitgen*, tells how sloppy and dirty her mistress was, and about the effect this had on her relationship with her husband.⁶⁷ The handmaidens in Jacob de Rijk's *The broker for handmaidens and wet nurses [De Besteedsters van meisjes en minnemoers]* (1692)⁶⁸ gossip about the visitors to the households they serve in, about extramarital liaisons of their employers, and comment on the way their mistresses run their households.⁶⁹

The old former handmaiden Sybrich in Willem Dirckzs. Hooft's *Andrea de Pierie* (1634) knows from 'her sources' that many handmaidens have illicit relationships with their employers. She knew a handmaiden who was pregnant three times. Each time, she allegedly received a letter telling of how her parents were very ill. Only the third time, the mistress of the household realised that this was a ploy to cover up the pregnancy, and the handmaiden was forced to tell the truth. The whole matter was dealt with in secrecy, and the maiden married off.⁷⁰ Stories such as these, of handmaidens engaged in extramarital relations with their employers, were commonplace in

⁶² Orest Ranum, 'Toevluchtsoorden van de intimiteit', in *Figuren van de moderne tijd*, ed. by Roger Chartier (Amsterdam: Agon, 1993), p. 184.

⁶³ Yves Castan, 'De politiek en het persoonlijk leven', in *Figuren van de moderne tijd*, ed. by Roger Chartier (Amsterdam: Agon, 1993), p. 38.

⁶⁴ Castan, 'De politiek en het persoonlijk leven', p. 43.

⁶⁵ Julie De Groot, 'At home in Renaissance Bruges: material and domestic culture in a city in decline, 1438-1600', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Antwerp (2017), pp. 157-158.

⁶⁶ Ranum, 'Toevluchtsoorden', pp. 190-192; De Groot, 'At home', pp. 157-158.

⁶⁷ Van Santen, *Lichte Wigger, en Snappende Siitgen*, pp. 313-315, vs. 253-283.

⁶⁸ First performed on the Amsterdam Theatre on 30 October 1692, after which it was repeated a number of times in 1692 and in 1693 (ONSTAGE).

⁶⁹ [Jacob de Rijk], *De besteedster van meisjes en minnemoers, of school voor de dienstmeiden* (Amsterdam: Erven Jacob Lescailje, 1692).

⁷⁰ Willem Dirckzs. Hooft, *Cluchtigh spel, Andrea de Pierie, Peerde-kooper* (Amsterdam: Dirck Cornelisz Houthaeck, 1634), fol. B3v.

seventeenth-century Amsterdam. Because of their weaker position, they were often unable to resist their employers, tempting them into sexual relations by offering them a promise of marriage or paying them.⁷¹ There are only few stories of abortion or infanticide, but most of them feature handmaidens desperate to protect themselves, as a pregnancy could mean an immediate end to their position.⁷²

Other characters that disclose part of the private life and the sexuality of women in seventeenth-century society are procuresses. In genre painting and popular images, these women are generally portrayed negatively. They are shown tempting young and innocent women into uneven marriages, and sometimes worse – into prostitution, through the promise of a maiden’s position in a good household. In the stereotypical image, they are often old women, sometimes prostitutes that have grown too old and worn to make a living, and therefore turn to the business of trapping young girls into prostitution. In reality, the stereotype of old age seems not to be in line with historical evidence.⁷³ Often, these procuresses were poor women for whom these activities were one way to escape from poverty.⁷⁴ Prostitutes of course were easy scapegoats for any immoral situation in society. Accusing prostitutes of undermining not only the traditional family, but society as a whole, was a way to channel real fears in every-day life. Prostitutes threatened the social balance by tempting men into extramarital sex, and by having them spend great parts of the household budget. In a way, these women were independent from the patriarchal system, and therefore constituted a threat.⁷⁵

As can be expected, comical plays rather follow the stereotypical representation of procuresses, making the characters hypocritical and greedy.⁷⁶ At the same time, their criticism on the state of love and sexuality must not be dismissed all too easily. The procuresses were fully aware of the personal lives and the positions of their clients, and were confidantes of sorts, carriers of secrets and intimate information. Through their profession, they learned about the latest love affairs, while also seeing the downside of high society. They are in the peculiar position of being well aware of the moral decline in the city, while being an integral part of it themselves. In comical plays, they are subjects as well as voices of criticism: their profession and behavior are believed to be immoral,⁷⁷ but at the same time they are in a position to criticise the excesses they meet and moral issues they are entrusted with. Willem Dirckzs. Hooft used his arrangers to sketch an image of the sexual excesses in Amsterdam. In his *Jan Saly* (1622), the old arranger

⁷¹ Donald Haks, *Huwelijk en gezin in Holland in de 17de en 18de eeuw: processtukken en moralisten over aspecten van het laat 17de- en 18de-eeuwse gezinsleven* (Utrecht: Hes Uitgevers, 1985), pp. 76-77.

⁷² Haks, *Huwelijk en gezin*, pp. 84-85.

⁷³ Mario DiGangi, *Sexual types. Embodiment, Agency, and Dramatic Character from Shakespeare to Shirley*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 161.

⁷⁴ Lotte van de Pol, *The Burgher and the Whore. Prostitution in early modern Amsterdam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 26.

⁷⁵ Frédérique Fouassier-Tate, ‘Fact versus Fiction: The Construction of the Figure of the Prostitute in Early Modern England, Official and Popular Discourses’, in *Female Transgression in Early Modern Britain. Literary and Historical Explorations*, ed. by Richard Hillman and Pauline Ruberry-Blanc (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 87.

⁷⁶ Madeleine Lazard, *La comédie humaniste au 16e siècle et ses personnages* (Paris: s.n., 1978), p. 303.

⁷⁷ Anouk Janssen, *Grijsaards in zwart-wit. De verbeelding van de ouderdom in de Nederlandse prentkunst (1550-1650)* (Zutphen: Walburg, 2007), p. 202.

Trijn Ratels knows the reason why so many young women turn to prostitution: their husbands are too lazy to work and spend all their household money in taverns, allowing their wives to sell themselves to keep the money flowing. An ordinary position therefore is not enough:

Because today, one does not make much money,
 Even by spending day and night spinning thread
 It is not enough, I haven't even attempted
 How ever hard I worked in my life
 It was never enough, I stayed as poor as always
 Only now, praise God, I have a shilling to spare.⁷⁸

Trijn Ratels also explicitly voices the duality in her criticism. After just having slandered dishonest and fraudulent craftsmen and having criticised the jealousy in 'this time', she concludes:

But how am I trying to criticise all these things
 I should first change my own shortcomings
 Even if all that I have done in my life
 I can proudly step forward with and show
 Even if people do not think much of my profession
 It is only normal and everyone in the end gets married.⁷⁹

Trijn apparently is aware that her criticism should also extend to her own walk of life. This insight adds meaning to her opinion on society.

⁷⁸ Willem Dirckzs. Hooft, *Jan Saly* (Amsterdam: Cornelis Willemesz., 1622), fol. A3r: 'Want daer is huydaechs niet veel te winnen, / Al deetmen al sijn best met nacht en dach te spinnen, / T' brengt gien soon anden dijck, heb icket selfs niet besocht. / Ja wat heb ick vanme leven wel ien wercken ewrocht, / T' was altijt after 't net, 'k was altijt even pover: / In nou gort sy geloof schieter wel ien stuvertjen over.'

⁷⁹ Hooft, *Jan Saly*, fol. A3r: 'Dan wat wil ick oock alle dinghe bedisselen, / 'k mocht mijn eygen quaet selfs wel ierst verwisselen, / Doch 'k en heb mijn leven niet bedreven of edaen, / Of 'k wilt voor de wijdelicke werrelt wel in 't licht staen: / Al wort van mijn neering dien ick doe niet veel ehouwe, / Nochtans ist menschelijck want men sieter veel om trouwe.'

Conclusion

Scholarship on female characters in seventeenth-century farces has focused mostly on caricatures and stereotypes of evil wives, untrustworthy servants and horny old women. The characterisation of women on stage, however, is more nuanced than that. Many seventeenth-century farces stage women whose function in the play is far more complex. While they may still have stereotypical traits and are staged doing stereotypical things, such as talking excessively and gossiping, they do refer to the reality of seventeenth-century society. As good comical characters, they had to be recognisable and discuss recognisable subjects. The pattern of recognition, however, has its limits. Despite the fact that historians have pointed towards the importance of economically active and independent women, representations of this type do not appear all too often in comic theatre. While Grietje in *Frik in't Voor-huys* runs her own sewing school, and some female characters speak about their daily work in spinning or sowing, or serving as a handmaiden, we are far away from the picture drawn by historians of the Early Modern period. Quite surprisingly, shopkeepers, market women or women engaged in (overseas) trade do not appear in Dutch comical plays, in the way they have been encountered in English theatre.⁸⁰ Apparently, even if a quarter of small trade was performed by women, playwrights – and their audiences – continued to associate the profession with men, and did not portray women as merchants.⁸¹ Certainly in theatre from the first half of the seventeenth century, the female trader will have been in conflict with the common imagination of the audience, as women would only engage more numerously in trade from 1650 onwards.⁸² The minority of economically independent women, at least to an audience in the first half of the seventeenth century, will not have been recognisable enough for playwrights to include them in their plays. In later material, the explanation for the lack of economically active women may well lie in the fact that characters in general – male or female – were not often portrayed as having a specific profession.

The nuance in picturing women on stage in seventeenth-century comic theatre, therefore, does not lie primarily in the women's professional activities, but in their private lives. Female characters in seventeenth-century farces were used by playwrights to discuss feminine daily concerns, such as pregnancy and breastfeeding. As caring mothers, hard workers and pivotal figures in family and household, they come across as trustworthy reflections of actual society. Especially in times of crisis, families depended greatly upon women to be able to feed the children and make ends meet. Female characters therefore credibly voiced opinions on rising food prices, impoverished families and the difficulties of managing a household during the crisis. Their comments in this matter clearly differ from the comments voiced by male characters, who are exclusively occupied by problems related to labour and commerce.

Stepping outside the realm of their own private lives, female characters were often used to voice criticism and comments on ongoing discussions. While early modern women were not supposed to voice their opinions publicly, playwrights used their female stage representations to

⁸⁰ Pennington, "Three Women and a Goose make a Market"; Keri Sanburn Behre, "Look What Market She Hath Made": Women, Commerce, and Power in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and *Bartholomew Fair*", *Early Theatre* 21/1 (2018), pp. 127-144.

⁸¹ Van den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship*, p. 322.

⁸² Van den Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship*, p. 325.

position themselves implicitly in discussions on excessive wealth and the exuberance of the rich and famous in Amsterdam. Female characters criticise the vanity of rich women who in their quest for luxury, fail to properly look after their households and their families. The representation of old women arranging marriages as well, is more nuanced in comical plays than it is in early modern iconography. These women are also staged as negative stereotypes – they are often greedy old prostitutes – but their role extends beyond giving dangerous advice on love and sexuality. Being well aware of the state of things, they sharply judge lazy and drunk husbands, fraudulent craftsmen and other ill-doers. Their view of society is critical and even cynical, and at the same time they are cunning enough to capitalize on the very immoralities they address. This makes them a subject of criticism as well.

In trying to nuance the perception and portrayal of women on stage, we of course have to bear in mind that most of the farces were written by men, and that female roles, well into the seventeenth century, were played by male actors.⁸³ Nevertheless, the representation of women on stage and the discourse they use can teach us a great deal about contemporaneous discussions and opinions on women in early modern society. Playwrights apparently used their female characters to contribute to ongoing debates on the role of women, not only within the household, but in society as a whole. Because these, often popular, plays reached large audiences, both through repeated performances and in prints and reprints, the farces will have been an important medium to influence – or at the very least mirror and voice – public opinion. The way in which women were staged, as independent characters who were able to form and voice their own opinions, might have had a liberating effect on some women in the audience who in their daily lives, were restricted by the patriarchal society.⁸⁴ At the same time, the lacking of professionally active women on stage, in a society with a high degree of these independent women in real life, is surprising.

Of course, it is difficult for us today to assess the way in which some of the texts were staged, the tone or gestures used when voicing certain dialogues, and indeed the way in which the audience responded. The opinions of female characters may well have been channels for the views of the playwrights, and attempts to influence the audience's opinion, but the line between voicing opinions and ridiculing the character for them is often thin. Still, the examples show that if we are able to pierce through the surface layer of stereotypes and caricatures, the seventeenth-century farces open the view to a rather more nuanced and interesting picture of the woman in early modern society. Comic theatre, looked at in this nuanced way, is more telling about seventeenth-century opinions than any archival sources can be.⁸⁵

⁸³ Martine van Elk, “Before she ends up in a brothel”. Public Femininity and the First Actresses in England and the Low Countries’, *Early Modern Low Countries* 1 (2017), p. 34.

⁸⁴ Fouassier-Tate, *Fact versus Fiction*, p. 86.

⁸⁵ See also Paola Pugliatti, “Shakespeare and the ‘Military Revolution’. The Cultural and Social Weapons of Reformed War’, in *Shakespeare and the Politics of Commoners. Digesting the New Social History*, ed. by Chris Fitter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 151.

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