

Monthly Letter February 2010

The emancipation of a captain's wife in Rotterdam



Sailors' wives found themselves in a difficult position when their husbands were at sea. Their husbands' wages were often only paid after they had finished their trip and the women had to make ends meet in the intervening months. In general, the seventeenth-century woman was deemed incompetent to manage any financial or businesslike affairs, but luckily the government had come up with a solution for the sailors' wives. During their husbands' absence the women were allowed to take matters into their own hands. A nice example can be found in the letters of Katelijnghe Haeswant, a captain's wife from Rotterdam. During the absence of her husband Leendert Ariensz Haeswant, who sailed with Michiel de Ruijters's fleet in 1664, she sent him letters on a regular basis. Four of these long epistles which she wrote in the fall of 1664 have been preserved.

Husband and wife

Kateljnghe was born in Gouda as the daughter of Mattheus Bernaerts and Josina van Nesten. In 1633 she married captain Dirck Gerritsz Verburch in Rotterdam. She moved to his house at the Nieuwe Haven and they had three children: Adriaentge, Josijntge and Gerrit. When Dirck died, Katelijnghe remarried one of her late husband's lieutenants, Isaak Jacobsz Coenen, in 1647. Unfortunately her second husband died shortly after their marriage. But Katelijnghe married captain Leendert Ariensz Haeswant not even a year after her second marriage. Leendert was already a father of five daughters. Therefore their marriage resulted in a large family with eight children. The marriage was a necessity for Katelijnghe, since she had three mouths to feed and thus needed a husband's income. But often Katelijnghe found herself in the exceptional position of the seaman's wife who had the right to take her own decisions.

Money and goods

Surely a seaman could benefit from a wife who took care of his business when he was away. That is why Leendert Haeswant granted his wife the authorization to look after his business and why he had a letter of authority made on 13 June 1652. Without this permission even a captain's wife like Katelijnghe would not be able to cope financially in the absence of her husband. Although it is clear from the will made by the couple that they were well-off, Katelijnghe complained in her letters that she was short of money: "I have asked for some money because it is thin with me, so the governors have granted me a month of wages that I will receive." Katelijnghe did not only make sure that she would receive the money she needed; she also made enquiries about the prize money that had to be handed out to all the sailor's wives: "I also asked for the prize money and they have also agreed to give the money to our people." Being the captain's wife Katelijnghe had a public position and a responsibility to all the wives of her husband's crew. And she acted as an intermediary between the home front and the Admiralty.



The captain's wife informs and takes care of the victuals

Since Katelijnghe functioned as an intermediary her letters differ from the average overseas mail in some respects. It is striking for instance that Katelijnghe not only utters her concern about her 65-year old husband's health, but also worries about the health of his entire crew. She also informs her husband about the state of all those who stayed at home: "*Furthermore so are all our officers' wives still sturdy and all our sailor's wives too, no one excepted.*" Katelijnghe also took care of the ship's victuals. She undertook several attempts to provide the crew of the Rotterdam with wine, brandy, beer, butter, herring, cheese and tobacco. She did the utmost to get the load to its destination in collaboration with two other Rotterdam women: "*The three of us, the rear-admiral's mother and Johan van Es's wife, hired a ship and have taken the load out of Boshuijsen's ship.*" And when she had finally managed to get a load into a departing ship, the question remained whether Leendert would receive it: "*It is a guess whether you will receive it and I do not know; I do the best I can.*"

A safe return



Leendert's ship, *the Rotterdam*, was in a very bad shape. He informed Katelijnghen about the miserable state of his ship in his letters: "You write about your sails and about the rigging and the ship that it falls apart." To ensure her husband's safe return Katelijnghen spared no effort to get him some new equipment. She needed the help of the Admiralty: "I have also heard the fiscal read out the letter you sent to the governors and your complaint that you needed sails and running rigging and gun powder and lead." This was a complaint that both Leendert and Katelijnghen had often made to the Admiralty, but the governors kept delaying the shipping of the necessary equipment. Katelijnghen did not

hesitate to denounce this attitude in front of the governors of the Admiralty: "I asked them if it was not sad that a captain had to complain about this." Katelijnghen knew that her husband was on a dangerous trip: "I have a heart that feels as if it is enclosed between two walls, it is so anxious. When I think of you and your ship, I die of grief."

It seems that Katelijnghen had a fulltime job taking care of her husband's ship and of the home front. Nonetheless, the letters she sent to her husband to inform him about business matters do not stick to business; they also have an emotional ring. Each of her letters illustrates the sadness and longing which are generally present in every sailing letter: "Furthermore I have to end with tears." It is clear what the main concern of Kathelijnghen and all the other people at home was: a safe return for their loved ones.

The four letters written by Kathelijnghen Haeswant are kept in HCA 30-224, 30-226, 30-645, 32-1822. The comment on this Monthly Letter is provided by Juliette Sandberg.