

Monthly Letter January 2012

A letter written by Petronella Moens in our corpus of confiscated letters?

Finding a letter signed by a young woman called P.M. Moens from December 1780 is quite an exciting experience. Is it possible that we are dealing with a letter written by the eighteenth-century author Petronella Moens (1761-1843)? That excitement might seem a bit strange for an author that is probably not known by the average reader. However, Moens was a rather famous and much-read author in her days. She wrote novels and poems and was not to be sneezed at since her nickname was 'Pietje de Potentaat' [potentate/tyrant]. She was born in Kubaard (Friesland) as the daughter of a clergyman, Petrus Moens and Maria Lycklama à Nijeholt. An important part of her childhood was spent in Aardenburg (Zeeland), where she is honoured with a bust nowadays.



Petronella Moens (portrait: H.J. Backer)

At the age of four she got visually handicapped - in fact she was nearly blind - after an attack of smallpox. Her bad sight did not keep her from writing prose, poetry and drama nor from playing an active part in literary circles. She was a member of the chamber of rhetoric in Gouda and maintained several contacts with contemporary authors. Moens published children's books too, mostly with a rather moralizing content. She was also well-known for her fancywork, such as knitting. Some of her nightcaps survived the ravages of time and are now kept in various museums in the Netherlands. In these caps she knitted in ajour texts such as 'Denkd waar het lot u leid, Moens heeft mijn muts gebreid' [think where ever fate may lead you: Moens knitted my cap] or: 'Denkt op uw koets geveid, Moens heeft mijn muts gebreid' [Think while you are sitting in your bed: Moens knitted my cap]. This shows, in our opinion, that she had a very subtle sense of humour as well.

A connection with Zeeland



Knitted nightcap (collection: Historisch Museum Deventer)

The letter in our corpus is written in Vlissingen [Flushing], in the province of Zeeland, by a young woman who attended school. This would fit well in the course of Petronella Moens' life who is eighteen years old in 1780. But did the author have relatives living in Jaffanapatnam (Ceylon, present Sri Lanka) where the addressee, an uncle named Bartholomeus Jacobus Raket lives? And why is the letter signed with P.M. Moens, for as far as we know Petronella did not have a second Christian name.

Luckily for us, Dutch scholars are still examining the life and work of Petronella Moens. In 2000 Ans J. Veltman-van den Bos wrote a dissertation on the subject and she was very enthusiastic and willing to help us out with this problem. She informed us that the author never signed her letters with P.M. Moens, but just with P. Moens. And moreover, Moens did have an uncle in Ceylon, but he was called Adriaan Moens. This Adriaan appears to play a major part in the mystery, for from the Moens-family tree it appeared that Adriaan Moens is the father of our letter writer

Petronella **Magdalena** Moens (1764-1840). Petronella Magdalena turns out to be a two years younger cousin of the author Moens. Her mother was called Sara Maria Racket and she was a sister of

the addressee B.J. Raket. Our letter writer Petronelle Magdalena Moens was born in Colombo (Sri Lanka) in 1764 as the eldest child from Adriaan Moens' second marriage. He and his wife had five children, two daughters and three sons. The mother, Sara Maria Raket, died already in 1768, so the children were half-orphans quite early.

