

Monthly Letter July/August 2010

A sense of drama: a quick-witted captain's wife in eleven letters and one deed



The deed in which the row is described

The focus of this Monthly Letter is Lijsbeth Philipse Amelingh, a captain's wife. We get to know Lijsbeth very well because we have eleven letters at our disposal that she once sent to her husband Lucas Lourisz Pruijs. These letters clearly illustrate Lijsbeth's daily activities, but show in particular her spunky character. Furthermore, a special find offers us another view of the life of this self-willed woman. Amongst Lucas's personal and business correspondence we discovered a deed in which a fight between Lijsbeth and a certain Grietje Everts is described. And the latter did not shun very provocative insults.

A typical captain's wife...

Lijsbeth's husband Lucas is a skipper in the merchant navy and travels to the 'Straat', an old name for the Mediterranean area. Like a true captain's wife Lijsbeth takes care of her husband's business and anything he might need on his journey. She sends him a list of all the money she has advanced for his equipment so far, among which 4 guilders for the skipper who brought Lucas to Texel, 3 guilders for books, paper, pens and ink, 5 guilders for psalm books and a "sermon book", and one guilder for a bottle of lime juice. She also keeps in touch with his trading partners in Amsterdam and urges her husband to mind the money this time around. To earn her daily bread Lijsbeth runs a tobacco shop. We know this because she complains about competition:

"Furthermore I let you know that another tobacco shop has opened on my other side and they have as many things as I do and it grieves me. But the people who have been there are already returning to me for their goods."



A seventeenth-century tobacco box with an engraving of the city of Amsterdam

... and a spunky lady

Lijsbeth is independent and arranges her affairs well when her husband is at sea. But she is clearly not to be trifled with: she is very proud, almost envious and she wants things her way. By way of illustration: she instructs (mind you, not “asks”) her husband to bring home some earthenware from his journey. She does not so much want this because she likes it, but because she wants to impress other women:

“she [a friend] showed me so much special Mediterranean earthenware that I was astonished. And when you return, you must not forget to bring me some Mediterranean pottery so that I can also say: my husband brought me this from the Mediterranean.”



Mediterranean earthenware

Lijsbeth also has a gift for rhetoric and she uses it to show her husband that she is unhappy about a few things. In nearly every letter she complains about Lucas not writing her enough and even daring to have his clerk (according to her, a very incompetent man) write letters to her for him. In order to affect her husband, she writes about Lucas using the impersonal term ‘one’. This creates a distance between the spouses and makes her lament all the more dramatic:

“I write you such long letters and I beg you in such a friendly manner to let me know how everything is, but it is not given any thought. One thinks: out of sight, out of mind. Being in Venice one has other things on one’s mind. One does not often think of me.”

In another passage Lijsbeth mentions that she has received the bills of exchange for the crew’s wives and mothers, to which she adds sarcastically:

“That is now four weeks ago. I was very ill then, but there was no time to write to me.”

After a row and rumours, peace reigns once more



"A notary in his office" by Job Adriaensz Berckheyde

We can easily imagine this sharp-tongued Lijsbeth having the occasional fight with others. However, it is not Lijsbeth who speaks the harshest words in the row recorded in the deed (she is obviously capable of venting her anger in a more refined way), but Grietje Everts, an innkeeper’s wife. Grietje has called Lijsbeth a “Jew’s whore, a Portuguese whore and a perjurer’s whore” in her presence and behind her back. On top of that she has called her victim’s husband “a cuckold”, a deceived husband. These are no mean accusations. There were heavy punishments for adultery and sexual offences in the seventeenth century. Any gossip arising out of Grietjes accusations could have grim consequences for our captain’s wife.

Apparently Grietje is aware of this too and this may be the reason why she visits the notary Jacobus Hellerus together with Lijsbeth on 5 July 1663. Grietje shows remorse and wants to take back her abuse. She declares that she made the accusations in a spurt of anger and that every single word of it is a lie. This official document is a safeguard for Lijsbeth against charges and gossip.

The notary records that both women believe the other one’s conduct to be irreproachable and that they are reconciled.

All’s well that ends well for our thoroughgoing captain’s wife then. Her relationship with Lucas may well not always be perfect and she may be pretty headstrong, Lijsbeth is not an adulteress. We have that in black and white.

The letters were found in boxes HCA 32-1823, HCA 32-1845-2, and HCA 30-224. The first transcriptions were provided by José de Bree, Renaat Gaspar, Fred Kluit, Netty van Megen, Chrisje Meima, Arie Pos, and Renske Siemens. The comment on this monthly letter is written by Judith Nobels.