

Monthly Letter November 2009

Windows in Leiden



Our database contains only one letter that was written in Leiden: a letter sent on the third of October 1673 by Annetje Koopman to her brother Antonie in Batavia. At first sight the contents of the letter are not very exciting. The brief letter contains the traditional formulae at the beginning and at the end combined with a more personal part in between. Indirectly, however, this letter reveals a few interesting details about the seventeenth-century Leiden society.

The opening formula “Praise God above all in Leiden” is followed by the traditional health phrases which communicate the sender’s health and likewise her wish for the addressee’s well-being. The immediately following passage with complaints about the failing postal service is equally common.

Annetje received a letter, but none of the three or four earlier ones, which displeases her greatly. From the sad news of her brother losing his right hand we may conclude that Annetje’s brother will not be sending self-written letters anymore. In the future, Antonie will have to ask someone else to write his letters for him.

Are things different in Annetje’s case? In 1673 not everyone was able to write. Did Annetje write her own letters or did she have to engage a friend or family member or even a professional writer? This is a crucial question that we have to answer for every letter in our database before we start our linguistic research. The details of this issue and the procedure to solve this problem are to be found in the recently published article Tackling the Writer-Sender Problem: the newly developed Leiden Identification Procedure (LIP) (*Internet Journal Historical Sociolinguistics and Sociolinguistics* 9 (2009)) written by Judith Nobels and Marijke van der Wal. Annetje’s evenly written letter (see picture) shows only a few deletions. Is Annetje having doubts about the number of received letters while writing: *because I have received no only one two letters*? Or is she correcting herself orally while someone else is writing down her words? From our experience with the corpus we know that Annetje’s remark about having *written* earlier may only indicate that she *sent* letters before. Further research using our newly developed Leiden Identification Procedure may give a decisive answer.



Annetje has news about her and her family’s fortunes. She herself remarried and gave birth to healthy twins; after the death of “our stepfather” in 1672 her mother remarried too. These two widows followed the survival strategy that Ariadne Schmidt saliently describes in her book *Overleven na de dood. Weduwen in Leiden in de Gouden Eeuw* (2001; *Surviving after death. Widows in Leiden in the Golden Age*). Schmidt found that nearly twenty-five percent of the brides in seventeenth-century Leiden had been married before (p.212) and that serial monogamy was not uncommon in those days for both men and women (p. 232). Using online data from the Leiden Municipal Archive we can add some details to Annetje’s letter.



Annetje Koopman, widow of Jan Ruwan, married Willem Gerrits, a weaver from Nijmegen, on November 22nd 1670. Both bride and groom lived in the Baatstraat at the time. The bride’s mother, Jannetje Fesan, who lived nearby in the Langegracht, was a witness. This Jannetje Fesan for her part marries the widower Jan Boeljon from the Zandstraat on September 7th 1673 after the death of her second husband Jan Joris (who was Annetje’s and Antonie’s stepfather). Jan Boeljon’s first marriage certificate informs us about his origin from the town of Liege and his profession of *drapier* (a weaver and a cloth merchant). So mother and daughter marry men from the same occupational group who

live in [the same neighbourhood](#) as they do. It is also likely that both men were regularly to be found in the clothmaker’s hall (see picture) that is situated near their neighbourhood.

Annetje almost begs her brother to return to Leiden. Nothing should keep him from doing so, because she states with conviction: *as long as I have a piece of bread, so will it be for you*. This is about the end of the letter. What is left are only the traditional closing formulae: *my husband and I and mother say hundred thousand good nights to you and all friends with this be commanded to the Lord*.

A concise letter, containing nothing more than news about relatives. Although the letter is written on the third of October there is not a single remark to be found about the commemoration of the relief of Leiden, which was yearly celebrated since 1574. Neither does Annetje refer to the war with the French and the English. Birth, death, marriage and an urgent appeal to come home form the essence of the letter: a message that never reached Antonie in Batavia.

The letter is kept in HCA 30-645. A first transcription of this letter was made by Reinald Molenaar. The comment on this monthly letter is provided by Marijke van der Wal. Quotations have been translated freely.