

Monthly Letter November 2010

A parent's pride and joy: "that he loves his brother nonetheless"



A portrait of Catharina Hooft and her nurse (Frans Hals)

The rate of infant and child mortality was very high in the seventeenth century. Every single man or woman in this century must have witnessed this from up close, since only half of all newborns reached the age of 18. Parents knew very well that the chances were real that their baby would be dead and buried before it turned one year old. Children had to grow up quickly and some among them had to earn their wages as soon as possible. All of this may create the expectation that seventeenth-century people treated their children in a more detached way than we do today. But even seventeenth-century people were only human and parental instincts are strong. That they too felt their hearts melt for their children and that they too raised them with tender loving care is reflected in a letter written by the North-Hollandic Grietje Jacobs Paal.

Grietje writes to her husband Jan Paal and her son Jacob on the 17th of November 1671. Jan is a captain and set sail to Batavia for the Chamber of Enkhuizen with the new ship 'Opmeer' earlier that year. His son Jacob is accompanying him; probably so that he can learn the trade. Grietje and Jan have two other children: Kristientje and Jan. These two stay at home with their mother. The family had almost been extended, because Grietje was pregnant when Jan left for Batavia. But the sailor's wife lets her husband know that their new baby boy has already died. On the 30th of January she gave birth to a healthy boy, but on the 20th of March the baby fell ill. To Grietje's sorrow, the child died two days later.

The apple of her mother's eye

Grietje doesn't dwell upon her recent loss. Her two other children claim her attention and their presence seems to do her good. She writes long passages of news about Jan and particularly about her daughter Kristientje. She is the apple of her mother's eye and – as a true mother should – Grietje takes care that her daughter looks as neat as a pin. On Sundays the girl wears pearls and a bonnet with a cap brooch. On week days she wears a pinafore made from an old suit that belonged to her father and that apparently has been worn down by her brother as well. Grietje describes her daughter as follows: *"she is so fair skinned with rosy cheeks, just like our Jacob. But she has the eyes and eyebrows of her father"* The mother is also proud that Kristientje has learned a lot recently:

"She knows the Lord's prayer by heart and she can go to school with Jan. Oh, my dearest, if she could only be with her father and brother for a day or six, you could hear how she can talk."



Portrait of a girl dressed in blue (Jan Cornelisz Verspronck)

Endearing togetherness



A pencil drawing featuring monkeys in 'The Life of Animals' (Alfred Edmund Brehm)

The captain's wife writes that she was pleased to learn from her husband's letter that her son Jacob is all right. He is still young and a journey at sea is not without any danger, even if his father is keeping a close watch. Jacob has written a letter of his own as well and it has made Grietje very happy. The letter does not only show that Jacob is in good health, it also proves that the boy cares about his sister, since he promises to bring her 'something pretty'. It is not only the eldest of the children who shows affection for his siblings, but all the children of the Paal family care about each other. Jealousy does not seem to exist among them. When Grietje tells Kristientje that her brother Jacob will bring her a present, the

child does not only ask for a silk skirt and a silk smock for herself, but also places an order for her brother “sweet Jan Paal”: a silk suit and a monkey. The children take each other’s side even when their mother tries to stir things up for fun:

“Today I was teasing Jan by saying that his brother will bring something for Kristientje but not for him. But Jan said that he loves his brother nonetheless.”

A silent portrait

The children are also very fond of their father and, just like Grietje, they cannot wait for his return. This is evident in a remarkable scene described in Grietje’s letter. The captain’s wife states that she often sees how Kristientje goes to her father’s portrait and tries to have a conversation with the panel, invariably bursting into tears when her father remains silent:

“and then she goes to the painting and yells: ‘my dear father, come home to our beloved mother and to your daughter Kristientje Paals!’ And then she starts crying: ‘my father is dead; he does not speak one word to me.’ I have often watched this with interest.”

A close-knit family

The Paal family is a good example of a close-knit family. The mother is undisputably proud of her children and wants nothing but the best for them – even though she teases her son Jan, she urges her husband to send him a gift so that he does not feel left out. The three children, for their part, are fond of each other and of their parents. Even though the eldest son has to sail to the East at a young age, these people definitely don’t treat their children as mere additional breadwinners. On the contrary: Grietje’s three-page letter is a string of endeared passages about Jacob, Jan and Kristientje. This woman obviously writes out of the abundance of her heart.



A girl and a boy with a cat and an eel (Judith Leyster)

The letter was found in box HCA 30-228. The first transcription was provided by Puck van Rijn-Wijnschenk Dom. The comment on this monthly letter is written by Judith Nobels.