

Monthly Letter November 2011

It's enough to make you weep. A heartbreaking letter from a mother to her son

The Letters as Loot-corpus comprises a large number of moving letters. Obviously, letter writers miss their relatives from whom they are separated for months or even for years. Moreover, many letters deal with illness and even death that strikes family and friends. But since our project aims at the language in the letters, we do not allow ourselves to be distracted by the sad contents. And in fact, we are quite down-to-earth and therefore it is not likely that we get carried away by other people's misery from 200 or even 300 years ago. But yet, at times, we do get upset by a letter. To give an example from a rather touching letter: this one is written in January 1781 by Laurentia Catharina Trotz-Spoors. She lives on a plantation in Essequibo (in present Guyana) and writes to her son Adriaan Christiaan Trotz. The son is sent to an uncle and aunt in Middelburg in the Netherlands to be educated. Apparently it was not possible to get this kind of education in Essequibo.

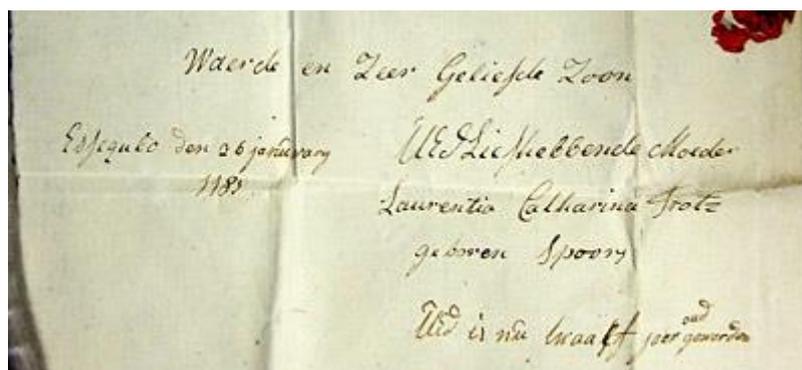


Françoise Duparc (1726-1778),
Femme à l'ouvrage

Six pairs of socks and eight caps

The son had written to his mother that he has been suffering from malaria. This news distresses her and she replies that she has shed so many tears over him. She wishes that he is feeling better now, but the distance between them is bothering her: she cannot be a good mother while she is in Essequibo and he stays in Middelburg. Luckily, in the meantime the boy's sister arrived in Middelburg as well, so that must have been very nice to Adriaan. Mother Laurentia recommends him to keep his head up for in due course she and Adriaan's father will pay him a visit in the Netherlands.

As a kind of substitute for her daily presence, Laurentia sends some practical goods to her son: six pairs of socks and eight caps. Through another ship she will send some cocoa and jam and father will arrange some sugar and coffee. The knowledge that the whole parcel never arrived in Middelburg but got caught by English privateers, makes you feel sorry for Adriaan. At the end of the letter, after her greetings and the signature, Laurentia adds a sentence that underlines the tragic side of the affair: 'Your honour is now twelve years old'. It really breaks your heart when you realize that this letter is written to a rather young boy of only twelve years old.



Forms of address

While reading the letter, you might think that the son is a (nearly) grown-up boy for Laurentia uses rather formal terms of address, namely *Ued[ele]* (your honour) and *U* (you). In present-day Dutch we would not use these forms in an intimate relationship between a mother and her child. However, research on our eighteenth-century corpus shows that *Ued[ele]* (your honour) is the most frequently used form of address in these letters. To address your son in such a way was rather a convention than a sign of detachment.

But of course, mother and son were literally detached from one another. Adriaan was more or less isolated from his beloved ones and the only way to get in touch was by writing a letter. Anyone can imagine how the boy must have felt. And anyone will understand why his mother shed so many tears. If you are troubled by reservations, feel free to let yourself go. Have a look at pictures of the letter on YouTube and listen to an appropriate song (*I'm losing you* written by Kate McGarrigle and performed by her and her sister Anna). A mother misses her son, put into words two hundred years later in a similar way: [[Click here to play the related Youtube video](#)]

But I'm writing you a letter
I'm sending you a kiss
I'm sending you some money to buy a pair of shoes
'cause you've grown out of the last ones
I know I'm losing you

[...]

I'm sending you some money
To buy a pair of socks
But you never wore 'em anyway
And a little money talks

[...]

I'm wishing you were here
To help me with these chores
Or just to build a fire
And we can sit and watch it as it roars
I'm sending you a letter
I'm sending you a kiss

Laurentia Trotz surely would have preferred having her son around her as well. But for now she can only embrace him in her heart and she closes the letter by saying: 'farewell my dear son, adieu my sweet child'.

The letter is kept in the National Archives (Kew), HCA 30-329. A first transcription was made by Tjeerd Zaaijer for Wikiscripta Neerlandica. This monthly letter is written by Tanja Simons.