

Cramped, Tired, and Painful Hearts: Experiences of Anxiety in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Seafarers' Wives Letters

IRIS VAN DER ZANDE

Iris van der Zande is a PhD candidate at the Open University of The Netherlands. She is currently working on her PhD project, 'The Power of the Prisoner' on prisoners' agency in nineteenth-century Dutch prisons. Before starting this project, she was affiliated with the National Maritime Museum of The Netherlands as a prof. dr. Warnsinck fellow. Her research interests are situated at the intersection of cultural history, gender history, and the history of emotions, focusing on practices of power from below. She publishes on various subjects such as travel experiences, gendered mobility at sea, and the agency of imprisoned mothers.

Abstract

This article examines a letter corpus from the Prize Papers, sent in 1664 by Dutch seafarers' wives to their men overseas, to explore what early modern letters can reveal about experiences of anxiety. These letters were sent in a time of crisis: the bubonic plague haunted Dutch port cities and the Second Anglo-Dutch War was looming. To overcome the experience-convention dichotomy of epistemic emotions, this article suggests a different approach to epistolary experiences by conceiving them not merely as internal sensations but as a series of affective practices in which the mindful body dynamically interacts with its environment. By approaching letters as sites where the body, the mind, and the environment intersect, this article reveals how women were turning their anxiety into concrete objects of fear, how they tried to communicate anxious feelings in interaction with their environment, and how they experienced these feelings in their bodies. Moreover, it encourages researchers to take formulaic language seriously when discussing the experiences of historical actors arguing that formulae reflect experienced reality and embodied feelings.

Keywords: seafarers' wives, anxiety, experience, emotions, formulaic language, letter-writing

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'I wish for you to be here with me, for God knows how sad and cramped my heart was when I heard that you were going to Guinea', wrote Belyeten Jans to her husband Jan, a sailor, on 20 November 1664.¹ She wrote this letter when the plague had reached the Low Countries, causing many deaths in Amsterdam, the port city where she lived. Her husband had left on 8 May 1664, with a squadron led by Vice Admiral Michiel Adriaenszoon de Ruyter to the Mediterranean Sea to resolve various conflicts with pirates that were obstructing Dutch trade and shipping. Belyeten expected her husband to be home within a few months because these were quite run-of-the-mill at the time.² However, this mission turned out differently. In 1664, the English occupied Dutch fortifications on the West African Coast (Guinea), the Caribbean, and New Netherland.³ Consequently, De Ruyter received the 'secret' command not to set sail homewards but instead to secure the Dutch settlements in Africa and the Americas, an act which led to the Second Anglo-Dutch War. Ultimately, the men of De Ruyter's squadron were away for one and a half years instead of a few months. Because of the impending war, Belyeten and the other seafarers' wives were uncertain when or even if they would see their husbands once more (fig. 1).⁴ As a result, Belyeten experienced a sensation that can be interpreted as anxiety: a negative feeling of worry, nervousness, and unease caused by the uncertainty about something that might or might not happen in the future, which cramped her heart.⁵

1 Kew, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), High Court of Admiralty (hereafter HCA) 30/641, Letters addressed to 't Geloof, Letter from Belyeten Jans to Jan Jansen, 20 November 1664: 'Ick genog om wens dat gij hyr bij mijn var, want God wet hu bedruet een benaet mijn hart ees dat ick hor dat gij na Gene tu gan sal gelijk hyr te sprack gaet.' This paper is based on the letters collected by Adri van Vliet, see: Van Vliet, 'Een vriendelijke'. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's. I am sincerely grateful to the editors of *emlc* and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and valuable suggestions. Their feedback has been truly helpful in shaping this article. I also warmly thank Kirsii Kanerva and Riikka Miettinen for their thoughtful remarks on earlier drafts of this article.

2 Van Vliet, 'Een vriendelijke', 18.

3 Jacobs, *New Netherland*.

4 Bosscher, *Zeegechiedenis*, 51; Van Vliet, 'Een vriendelijke', 32-34, 45, 355; Sigmond, 'Hollands glorie', 120.

5 Definition is derived from: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anxiety> (Accessed on 15 May 2023). See also Schnell, *Histories*, 66.

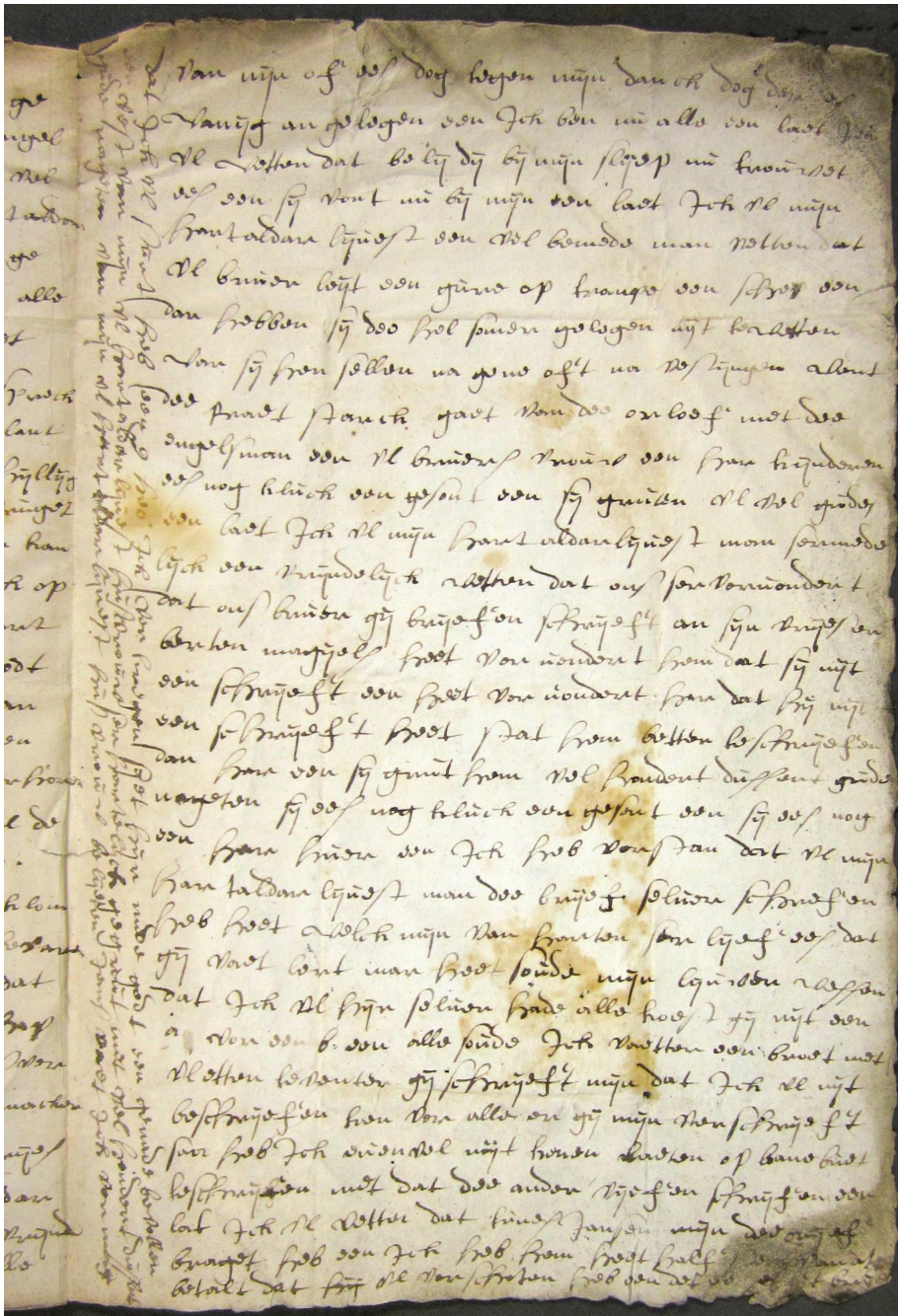


Fig. 1 Third page of Belyeten's letter in which she mentions the impending war with the English. Kew, The National Archives, High Court of Admiralty 30/641.

Although it has been suggested that premodern sources contain anxieties, because letters form the sites where anxieties are constructed, practiced and negotiated, little research has been done on how letter writers might have experienced anxiety.⁶ Taking Belyeten's embodied expression of the cramped heart as a starting point, I examine in this article what personal letters can reveal about early modern experiences of anxiety. Belyeten's letter is part of the so-called 'Prize Papers': captured letters from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch war and merchant ships preserved in The National Archives in Kew, London.⁷ The discovery of the letters in the 1980s led to numerous publications up until the 2020s, most of which aimed to introduce the letters and their writers to a broader audience.⁸ A large proportion of the letters were written by seafarers' wives to their husbands at sea.⁹ Manon van der Heijden and Danielle van den Heuvel argue that the departure and prolonged absence of the seafaring men significantly impacted the lives of their spouses who stayed behind.¹⁰ Van den Heuvel analysed the financial consequences of the absence and states that this impact must have been harsh on a social and emotional level as well.¹¹

Judith Brouwer specifically focused on the emotions of the seafarers' wives, who experienced distress during the Disaster Year of 1672, using the Prize Papers as her primary source of research. She provides a rare insight into the emotional lives of lower-class sailors' wives and convincingly reveals how they experienced the war and expressed their feelings of helplessness, resignation, and hope. Building on Mark Seymour's concept of the 'interior dimension', she searches the letters for expressions of internal, emotional experience, which she disconnects from socio-cultural conventions, arguing that while these conventions influence the expression of feelings, inner experience is a separate entity.¹² Although this approach provides a valuable avenue through which one might examine the inner lives of early moderns, its reasoning presents conceptual difficulties in determining the boundaries between inner experience and socio-cultural convention.

To provide an alternative for the experience-convention dichotomy of epistemic emotions, this article suggests that formulaic language also conveys emotional experience by building upon insights from the history of emotions and the history of experience. In doing so, I aim to deepen our understanding of the experience of anxiety in premodern letters and to provide an alternative approach to examining them. I use a corpus of fifty-seven letters taken from the Prize Papers collection – my selection incorporates letters sent by seafarers' wives from the Dutch port cities of Rotterdam and Amsterdam between September and December 1664. I chose to focus on the year 1664 because this year can be designated as a period of crisis due to the presence of the plague and De Ruyter's secret

6 Williams, 'An Emotional Company', 49–51; Schneider, *The Culture* 28, 32, 36, 56, 57; Ryrie, *Unbelievers*; Bouwsma, 'Anxiety'.

7 Van Gelder, *Zeepost*, 7–8.

8 See for example: Van der Doe et al., *De dominee*; Van der Doe et al., *De smeekebede*; Van der Doe et al., *De gekaapte*; Van der Doe et al., *Buitgemaakt*. See also: Reyes, "Tweete sielle".

9 Moree, *Kikkertje lief*; Van der Doe et al., *De voortvarende zeemannsvrouw*; Brouwer, *Levenstekens*.

10 Van der Heijden, 'Achterblijvers'. See also: Van der Heijden and Van den Heuvel, 'Sailors' families'.

11 Van den Heuvel, 'Bij uijtlandigheijt', 77, 88–90. See also: Schmidt, 'Ontbloot'; De Wit, *Leven*.

12 Seymour, 'Epistolary', 150; Brouwer, *Levenstekens*, 241–242, 247–248.

mission. Concentrating on a period of crisis, which created feelings of confusion and uncertainty – anxiety – offers the opportunity to study how people coped with such experiences. I draw on Joanna Bourke's definition of anxiety, defining it as an embodied feeling of uneasiness and uncertainty about something that is happening or might be happening in the future. According to Bourke, the difference between fear and anxiety lies in the observer's understanding of danger. Anxiety occurs when the observer is uncertain about what poses a threat or what might happen as a result. In contrast, fear emerges when the source of danger is identified, thus allowing the threat to be externalised.¹³ Bourke perceives the ability to encounter a dangerous object as a process in which individuals try to convert the uncertainty of anxiety into an identifiable object of fear.¹⁴

To identify how the women were turning their anxiety into fear, I focus in the first section on the women's attempts to externalise their anxiety by identifying specific triggers that caused feelings of anxiety. In the second section, I explore the women's encounters with their environment, how this is reflected in formulaic language, and what it can reveal about their anxiety. In the third section, I analyse how the seafarers' wives might have experienced these feelings within their bodies. Finally, I elaborate on the statements made in this article, arguing specifically that scholars ought to consider formulaic language when examining anxieties.

I choose to incorporate both autographical and non-autographical letters. I follow Brouwer's statement that the fact that someone helped write the letters did not make the content of the letter less personal.¹⁵ Instead, I claim that these letters contain experiences because they entail an intersection of bodily sensations, mindful interpretation, and the cultural, social, and physical environment. Marijke van der Wal and Judith Nobels developed the Leiden Identification Procedure to determine if the writing in the Prize Papers is autographical.¹⁶ Their procedure includes script and content analysis and applying it to my corpus reveals that at least twenty-three of the fifty-seven letters were autographical, a further eight are indeterminate, while the remaining twenty-six letters were written by a social or professional writer who wrote down the words the sender dictated to them.¹⁷ To indicate in this article whether the women had or had not written their letters themselves, the name of the seafarer's wife is accompanied by the words 'informed', 'wanted to inform', 'sent him a letter in which she mentions', or 'wanted to let her husband know' when discussing non-autographic letters. 'Wrote' or 'written' are explicitly and exclusively used to indicate that the letter in question is autobiographical.

A Sad Time

In the letters from 1664, the women tended to identify one or two specific sources for their anxiety. One of these was the journey their man had to undertake. For instance, Annickje

¹³ Bourke, 'Fear and Anxiety', 126.

¹⁴ Bourke, 'Fear and Anxiety', 126-127.

¹⁵ Brouwer, *Levenstekens*, 248.

¹⁶ Nobels and Van der Wal, 'Linking Words'.

¹⁷ Rutten and Van der Wal, *Letters as Loot*, 13-14, 180, 184-185, 398.

Jans sent her husband a letter in which she mentioned that ‘we understand that you will go to Guinea, about which I am very sad’.¹⁸ Maartje Reynders also wanted to let her husband Cornelis Symense know that she was ‘sad’ because she had heard from her cousin Elsje Wybrants, whose husband Jan Willemse was lieutenant on the same ship as Cornelis, that he was going to sail to Guinea.¹⁹ Trijntje Jacobs wrote to her husband that she was ‘very sad’ because she had understood that her husband was going to West Africa.²⁰ In addition to ‘sadness’, the word *moeyleyck* crops up a lot in the letters. Annetje Tuenis wanted her husband to know in her letter that ‘I am very *moeyleyck* that you are going to Guinea’.²¹ In modern Dutch, *moeyleyck* would be translated into *moelijk*, which means ‘troubled’. However, in the early modern period, *moeyleyck* was used by people to indicate that they felt as if someone or something caused them trouble or burden.²² People also used *moeyleyck* to express that they felt tormented or distressed and were in an unpleasant or complex condition.²³ Some letters explicitly indicate that these feelings were related to the threat of war. Lijsbet Jelis, for example, informed her husband that she was ‘deeply sad’ because she had heard there might be a war against England.²⁴ Margrietje Robbers wrote to her husband that ‘I am very sad you are going on such a perilous journey’.²⁵ Aletta van Ravensburg also called the journey ‘perilous’ and wrote that she was ‘sad and worried’ about it.²⁶

Another trigger these women referred to was the bubonic plague, which haunted Europe from 1663 until 1665.²⁷ In Amsterdam alone, almost 20 percent of the population died of the plague between 1663 and 1664.²⁸ After Amsterdam, Rotterdam was the city with the highest mortality rates in The Netherlands.²⁹ In their letters, the women mentioned the various relatives and friends, sometimes entire families, who had died of the plague. Maritjen Jans wrote to her husband: ‘So many acquaintances have died here that

18 TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Annickje Jans to Abraham Jellisen, 12 November 1664: ‘soo hebe wij veerstaen dat je nae Geneden sult gaen, daer ick hiel bedroeft om is.’

19 TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Maartje Reynders to Cornelis Symense, 11 November 1664: ‘yck ben bedroeft’.

20 TNA, HCA 30/225, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Trijntje Jacobs to Hans Teyssen, 10 November 1664: ‘seer bedroeft’.

21 TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Annetje Tuenis to Jan Sybrantse Valck, 16 November 1664: ‘ick ben seer moeyleyck dat u l[ieden] nae Gene sal gaen’.

22 <https://ivdnt.org/>. Instituut voor de Nederlandse taal, Historische Woordenboeken, Woordenboek der Nederlandse taal (WNT), *moeyelijc* (Accessed on 19 November 2022).

23 <https://ivdnt.org/>. Instituut voor de Nederlandse taal, Historische Woordenboeken, Woordenboek der Nederlandse taal (WNT), *Moeyelijcheit* (Accessed on 19 November 2022).

24 TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Lijsbet Jelis to Albert Jansen, 27 October 1664: ‘daer ick seer bedroeft om ben’.

25 TNA, HCA 30/641, Letters addressed to *t Geloof*, Letter from Margrietje Robbers to Dirck Louresen Helt, 11 November 1664: ‘yck ben daer heel bedroeft om dat gij na sulcken prykeloose reys toe bent’.

26 TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Harderwijk*, Letter from Aletta van Ravensburgh to Jan Janszoon Van Nes, 18 September 1664: ‘ick er seer bedroeft en ongerust in ben dat u l[ieden] op soo een prykeloose reis bent’.

27 The plague also had major outbreaks in England, Germany, and France around this date: Noordegraaf and Valk, *De Gave Gods*, 45.

28 Van Gelder, *Zeepost*, 81.

29 Noordegraaf and Valk, *De Gave Gods*, 54.

I can't even name half of them.'³⁰ Aeriaantje Anderys informed her husband that she was 'afraid' she would not see him again because of the plague in the city and the menacing war at sea.³¹ Witnessing so many deaths, the women feared that neither they nor their husbands would survive the next day. Jannetje Jacobs Verbernaer wrote to her husband that she was worried they would both die and that their daughter would be left alone. Jannetje was 'so sad' about this possible future fate of her daughter that she lay awake at night.³² 'I am very worried now', Lijsbet Jelis wrote to her husband, 'especially now I have such a lovely child, and I fear that I will not see you alive again.'³³ Because of the presence of the plague in the city, and the possibility that they could die because of it, made the wives fear that they would not see their husbands again.

The women explicitly linked anxious feelings to the 'sad time' they were experiencing. Jannetje Jacobs Verbernaer, for instance, wrote to her husband: 'Today is a sad time here because [people] die of the plague [...]. One day, people are healthy; the next [day], they are dead. So, we do not know how things will be [in the future].'³⁴ Grietje Maertens wanted to let her husband know it was 'a sad time. Wherever you listen or look, there is nothing but sadness.'³⁵ She saw that people were dying quickly, and she feared that a similar fate would be in store for her. If this were to happen, she hoped that God would bring her and her husband together again, 'and if it is not his will, I hope we will see each other in the afterlife'.³⁶ 'It is such a sad time right now', Lijsbet Willems informed her husband, 'that the heart of a Christian hurts because of all the sadness that one hears.'³⁷ The women thus referred to sensory experiences, like *hearing* about the impact of the plague and *seeing* people dying, introducing their bodies into the letters and describing the encounter with their surroundings.

One of the key principles of the history of experience is that experiences are not solely individual but always interconnected with other people and the environment. Instead of

30 TNA, HCA 30/224, Letters addressed to *'t Geloof*, Letter from Maritjen Jans to Pieter Carelsen, 6 November 1664: 'En hier sijn soo veel bekende gestorven dat ick se niet half can schrijven'.

31 TNA, HCA 30/225, Letters addressed to *De Rotterdam*, Letter from Aeriaantje Anderys to Toemys Jans Zoootendael, 20 September 1664.

32 TNA, HCA 30/225, Letters addressed to *De Rotterdam*, Letter from Jannetje Jacobs Verbernaer to Cornelis Willemszoon Bosveldt, 20 September 1664.

33 TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Lijsbet Jelis to Albert Jansen, 27 October 1664: 'seer bedroeft [...] En gij schrijft mijn dat niet eens. Daer ick seer ongerust in ben dat ick noch vrees dat ick u van mijn leeven niet meer sien sal nu ick sulcken lieven kint heb.'

34 TNA, HCA 30/225, Letters addressed to *De Rotterdam*, Letter from Jannetje Jacobs Verbernaer to Cornelis Willemszoon Bosveldt, 20 September 1664: 'Het is hier teegenwoordigh een bedroefden tidt dat het soo sterfdt van de gaef [pest] maer me[er]sdt om onsen oeck de lui sin den en men [ene] dach gesoondt en den anderen dach doodt so dat men niet en weedt hoe dat het met en gaen sal.'

35 TNA, HCA 30/225, Letters addressed to *De Rotterdam*, Letter from Grietje Maertens to Jacob Bartelesse, 20 September 1664: 'want het hier een bedroefden tit is. Waer dat ghi hoort of siet, men hoort niet als van droefheit.'

36 TNA, HCA 30/225, Letters addressed to *De Rotterdam*, Letter from Grietje Maertens to Jacob Bartelesse, 20 September 1664: 'Soo't sin goddelicke willen is ende soo niet, soo hoop ick dat wi malcander hier namaels sien sullen.'

37 TNA, HCA 30/225, Letters addressed to *De Rotterdam*, Letter from Lijsbeth Willems to Cornelis Janszoon van der Veer, 13 September 1664: 'Het is rechtevoort soo een bedroefden tijt dat een christenmensche sijn herte wee doet van al het verdriet dat men hoort.'

analysing historical experience from a personal perspective, concentrating on persons from a top-down or bottom-up perspective, Rob Boddice and Bettina Hitzer suggest that experience should be approached as a process or 'a series of interconnected and intersubjective practices' that come to life in dynamic encounters between people and/or an event.³⁸ Emotions play a key role in this process. Following Giovanna Colombetti, Marie van Haaster understands emotions as 'dynamical forms of engagement with the environment', stating that individuals are never indifferent to their surroundings. Meaning-making 'is always an affective process' in which affective states are realised through the mutual influence of the world and the mindful body.³⁹

Willemijn Ruberg also emphasises that scholars should consider the embodied aspects of the cultural and discursive construction of experience, 'and thus the role of the body in making sense of oneself and the world'.⁴⁰ Monique Scheer's concept of emotional practices draws in particular on the principle of the mindful body. Scheer argues that experience is something that people *do* with their bodies and minds, connecting their feelings to physical experiences within their bodies and vice versa.⁴¹ She distinguishes four kinds of emotional practices: naming, communicating, regulating, and mobilising.⁴² Van Haaster states that bodies actively change and manipulate their environment, influencing their emotional experiences. In this way, Van Haaster extends Scheer's theory on emotional practices, indicating that experiences are 'not only embodied and dependent on practices, but they often emerge from repeated engagement with specific objects of the environment'.⁴³

Drawing on these insights, this article approaches experiences as a series of affective practices in which the mindful body dynamically interacts with its environment. In doing so, it becomes clear how the women were actively making the secret mission, the upcoming war, and the plague triggers for their anxiety. The feelings the women described were strongly related to the distance they experienced between them and their husbands and the proximity of death and war. By naming their experiences 'sad' or *moeyleyck*, the women identified both near and distant threats as sources of anxiety. By connecting their troubled and sad feelings to the close and distant environment, the women tried to turn their experiences of anxiety into concrete objects of fear.

'It is God's Will, What Can We Say About It'

In their letters, the women frequently referred to God and his omniscience to make sense of their experiences. For example, Margrietje Robbers wrote to her husband: 'Wherever we are, we are in the hand of the Lord. But if I had known that you were departing from here [to go on a mission to Guinea], I would not let you go, even if we had only bread to

³⁸ Boddice and Hitzer, 'Emotion and Experience', 3, 7. See also Eyice, 'Experiencing'.

³⁹ Van Haaster, 'Meaningful', 7-9.

⁴⁰ Ruberg, 'Embodiment'. See also Goldsmith et al., 'Introduction'.

⁴¹ Scheer, 'Are Emotions', 196; Reddy, *The Navigation*.

⁴² Scheer, 'Are Emotions', 209, 212, 214-215.

⁴³ Van Haaster, 'Meaningful', 9; Scheer, 'Are Emotions'.

eat and water to drink, my dear husband but what shall we do it is God's will.⁴⁴ Aletta van Ravensburg wrote: 'I can do nothing more than pray that God will keep you safe because wherever you are, you are in God's hands.'⁴⁵ In their letters, the women reminded their husbands to keep looking for God in the world around them and to stay in contact with him in their prayers. Saartje Jans wrote to her husband that God would make things better 'if it pleases him', she added, but only 'if we keep looking for his presence in humility, with repentance for our sins'.⁴⁶ Marritje Kortoen wanted to let her husband know that following God's will was the best thing people could do in this world: 'It is the wrath of God which surpasses all [human] understanding.'⁴⁷ Although they could not understand everything that happened in their lives, accepting this view 'makes a peaceful life and a blessed death', she claimed.⁴⁸ She continued by writing that only God 'knows whether we will get back together or not'.⁴⁹ Another woman, Trijntje Batens, wrote to her husband that the other seafarers' wives ignored her and that they spoke angrily about her. 'They can despise me as much as they like', she wrote, 'but God knows my heart best.'⁵⁰ With this sentence, Trijntje suggested that God knew the core of people and their intentions, while humans could not do so. Thus, God was perceived as the 'knower' and humans, with limited sensory, bodily, and intellectual capacities, could not understand the reason behind life's events. Hence, women sought comfort in the face of an uncertain future by believing that God could oversee everything and that he would do what was right. God and his omniscience were, for the women, a source of consolation.

In both autographic and non-autographic letters, the women used several forms of Christian formulae to emphasise the sinful character of humankind and the power of God. We might assume that this formulaic language contains fewer personal experiences. However, Rutten and Van der Wal note that 'Christian-ritual formulae provided letter writers with conventionalised and generally accepted ways of verbalising information and experiences.'⁵¹ Boddice argues that how people feel relates to what people know and what they say

44 TNA, HCA 30/641, Letters addressed to 't *Geloof*, Letter from Margrietje Robbers to Dirck Louresen Helt, 11 November 1664: 'Maer yck hoop dat Godt de Heer u l[ieden] in gesontheit sal sparen, want waer dat wij bennen, wij bennen in de handt des Heeren. Maer had yck het soo wel geweeten eer dat gij hyer vandaen gyng, gij en sout niet mede g[eva]ren hebben al soude yck met u l[ieden] min lyeve man waeter en broot hebben moeten eeten maer wat sullen wij doen, het ys Godts wyl.'

45 TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Harderwijk*, Letter from Aletta van Nes to Jan Janszoon Van Nes, 16 November 1664: 'Doch ick en kan niet anders doen als Godt bidde dat Hij u l[ieden] geliefte bewaere, want waer gij sijt gij sijt in Godts handen.'

46 TNA, HCA 30/641, Letters addressed to *De Middelburg*, Letter from Saartje Jans to Hans Pieterse, n.d. 1664: 'Wij mogen hopen op een beter als 't God belieft. [...] Als wij maer sijn aengesichte soecke in ootmoedighe[lijt], met berou over onse sonde'.

47 TNA, HCA 30/640, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Marritje Kortoen to Pieter Rickersen, 11 November 1664: 'Dat is de vreessen Godts die alle verstant te boven gaet.'

48 TNA, HCA 30/640, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Marritje Kortoen to Pieter Rickersen, 11 November 1664: 'Ende het maeck oock een gerust leeven ende een salich sterven.'

49 TNA, HCA 30/640, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Marritje Kortoen to Pieter Rickersen, 11 November 1664: 'ende Godt weet oock of wij weederom bij malkanderen sullen komen of niet'.

50 TNA, HCA 30/224, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Trijntje Batens to Hendrick Batens, 10 November 1664: 'Sij mogen mij soo veel verachten als sij willen, maer Godt weet best mijn hert.'

51 Rutten and van der Wal, *Letters as Loot*, 127, 401.

and do with this knowledge.⁵² For the sailors' wives, God's wrath was real and omnipresent, a certainty which was bound up with their experiences. When Maartje Jans informed her husband about the plague, she said that they deserved 'a thousand times more' severe punishment, 'because of our sins that we commit daily.'⁵³ Maartje mentioned that she had been sick and that their child and eight family members had passed away. She claimed that things should be worse because of their behaviour: 'We deserve punishment after punishment in this sinful life', and she hoped that God would take care of 'her beloved husband' and would not send any more plagues.⁵⁴ Like many of her contemporaries, Maartje interpreted the plague as a punishment from God and used Christian formulae to underscore His wrath and the sinful nature of humanity (fig. 2).⁵⁵

When compared with the other women, Maartje did not express any sorrow about the loss of her child or her family members. However, this does not mean that her letter lacked personal experience. In the seventeenth century, the excessive expression of grief, fear, and despair was conceived as harmful to one's health, making people more vulnerable to external influences such as evil spirits. Furthermore, it demonstrated unchristian behaviour because it could be interpreted as a rejection of the will of God.⁵⁶ In her attempt to give meaning to the absence of her husband and the death of her child and family members, Maartje used Christian formulae and consciously avoided emotions in her letter. In this context, her descriptions illustrate an encounter of her mindful body with the environment, demonstrating active emotion regulation or reflecting the process of achieving this. Hence, considering the women's worldview shines a light on how they experienced the world around them and how they regulated undesired feelings.

Although women actively tried to resign to the will of God in their letters, they also pointed out that this practice required training and was sometimes hard for them. After her child died of the plague, Neeltje Tyesen sent her husband a letter expressing hope 'that it will provide the Lord' and continued: 'It is God's will, what can we say about it.'⁵⁷ At the end of the letter, however, she wished that she were dead instead of her child, 'but it did not please God', she added. Neeltje thus desired an outcome different from God's plan and expressed her struggle to accept God's will in her letter.⁵⁸ After reporting that both her

52 Boddice, *A History*, 58.

53 TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Harderwijk*, Letter from Maartje Jans to Kornelys Gerretsen Hoogenboom, n.d. 1664: 'wij wel duysentmael meer veerdyent hebben van wegen onse sonde dye wijde daegelycks doen'.

54 TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Harderwijk*, Letter from Maartje Jans to Kornelys Gerretsen Hoogenboom, n.d. 1664: 'ende verdyenen straf op straf, in dyt ons sondych leven' [...] 'bydt Godt nacht ended ach dat hij u l[ieden] mijn bemynde man in sijn heylychge bewaerynge nemen wyl [...] ende ons ge(e)n meer plagen toesenden'.

55 Noordegraaf and Valk, *De Gave Gods*.

56 Caciola, 'Spirits Seeking bodies', 77-78, 80; Kanerva, 'Disturbances of the Mind', 231-232; Brouwer, *Levenstekens*, 260.

57 TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Neeltje Tyesen to Jan Franses Kesman, 12 November 1664: 'Ick hope dat het Godt sal versien' [...] 'Het is Godts wille wat sulle wij segge'. Neeltje probably refers here to Genesis 22:14: 'So Abraham called that place "The Lord Will Provide". And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided."'.

58 TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Neeltje Tyesen to Jan Franses Kesman, 12 November 1664: 'Was ick in plae[t]s van min kint geweest, ick hadder wel aengewe[e]st. Het het en kriege heft Godt niet belieft.'

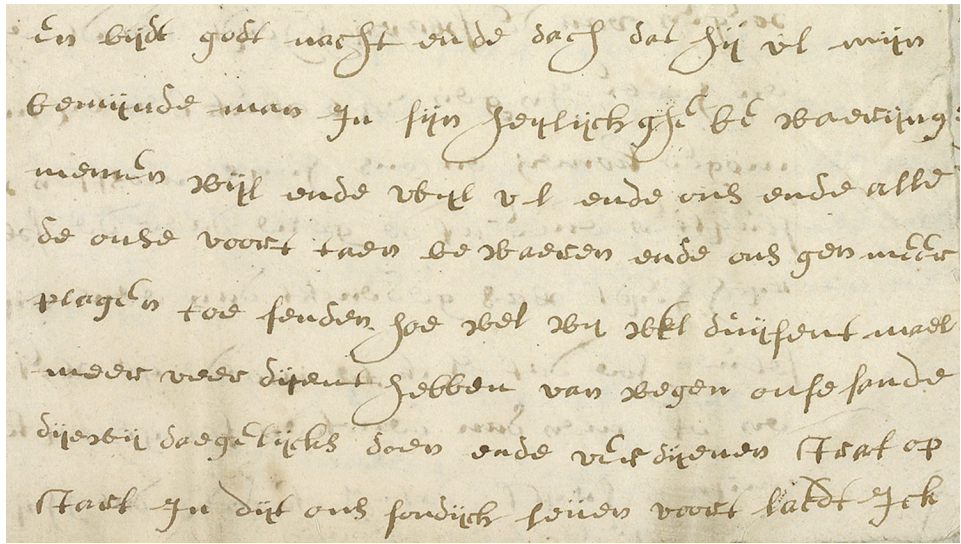


Fig. 2 Fragment from Maartje Jans's letter in which she uses Christian formulae to make sense of the world around her. Kew, The National Archives, High Court of Admiralty 30/226.

sons had passed away, Maartje Pieters wanted to inform her husband that she was very sad. 'What can I do?', she asked, 'I need to be satisfied with God's work. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, said Job. God give me that I may see my dear husband with health again. Then all my sadness would be forgotten.'⁵⁹ By referring to Job 1:21, Maartje engaged in a conversation with herself and the divine: she clung on to the expectation of her husband's return and hoped that God would fulfil this desire. Other women also used the letter to instigate a broader 'conversation' between their body, the Holy Spirit, and the sources of their fear or sorrow. For instance, Maritjen Jans wrote to her husband that she wanted he had sailed with another captain because then he would be home already. 'It is just idle talk', she wrote, 'it cannot be otherwise.'⁶⁰ She continued: 'We must equate our will to the will of God, although the flesh cannot always conceive it.'⁶¹ This last sentence was a reference to Romans 8:1-2, in which Paul instructs Christians not to live according to the laws of the flesh (the human body) but those of the spirit (the divine). These references to the Bible are expressions of Christian formulae which demonstrate active efforts

⁵⁹ TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Maartje Pieters to Augustijn Albertsen, 12 November 1664: 'Nu wat sal ick doen. Ick moet met Gost wreck tevreden sij[n]. Godt gaf, Godt, nam, sprack Job. Godt geeft mijn dat ick mijn dat ick mijn lyeven man met gesonthijt mogh weer om syen. Dan sou al mijn drofhijt vergeten sijn.' Maartje refers here to Job 1:21: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.'

⁶⁰ TNA, HCA 30/224, Letters addressed to *'t Geloof*, Letter from Maritjen Jans to Pieter Carelsen, 6 November 1664: 'och dat is mar idel seggen, het en can niet anders wesen'.

⁶¹ TNA, HCA 30/224, Letters addressed to *'t Geloof*, Letter from Maritjen Jans to Pieter Carelsen, 6 November 1664: 'Wij moeten onse wil in Godes wil stellen, hoewel het vlis het altit niet can bede[ncken].'

to regulate the emotions. Balancing and interpreting one's feelings in interaction with the mind, body, and the spiritual world was perceived as a difficult practice.⁶²

Painful Hearts

When describing the impact that the secret mission and the plague had on them, the women often referred to their bodies, including bodily fluids, such as tears. Catharina van Ravensburg wrote to her husband that she would have 'many tears of sorrow' because he was forced to go on a mission.⁶³ Women also mentioned the functioning and (in)capacity of their bodies. For instance, after Kathelynen Haexwant had heard that her husband was going to Guinea and New Netherland, she wrote: 'I was in so much sadness that I cannot speak of it.'⁶⁴ In addition to causing tears and the inability to speak, the women's hearts were significantly affected.⁶⁵ Some women wrote about sensations they experienced within their hearts, using words such as *hartenleed* or *hartseer*, which both can be translated as 'heartache' or 'pain of the heart', to describe the experience of most deeply felt sorrow, fear, and worry.⁶⁶ For instance, Maartje Pieters wrote to her husband that she 'was extremely sad' because she lost both sons: 'I have had such sadness and heartache that I will not forget it for the rest of my life.'⁶⁷ Maartje Jans informed her husband how his anger and accusations about her not writing letters to him hurt her heart. In the letter he had previously sent to her, he had blamed Maartje for not writing to him and asked mockingly if she might have died. In her response letter, Maartje reacted to her husband's accusation and assured him that she had written six letters. She wanted to inform him that it 'pains her heart' that he wrote such letters to her. She wished he could come home because her 'heart longs for it'.⁶⁸ For many women, the absence of their husband and the impossibility of talking to them in person was very hard to live with: 'It is a heartache that we cannot speak to each other, and I heartily wish you were here', Belyeten Jans wrote.⁶⁹

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Belyeten wrote that she had a cramped heart after she heard that her husband was sailing to Guinea.⁷⁰ The cramped heart can

⁶² See also Ruberg, 'Cruelty', 12.

⁶³ TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Harderwijk*, Letter from Catharina van Ravensburg to Adriaen de Vos, n.d. November 1664: 'meenege droevege traen'.

⁶⁴ TNA, HCA 30/224, Letters addressed to *De Rotterdam*, Letter from Katelynen Haexwant to Leendert Ariensen Haexwant, 10 November 1664: 'Ick ben soo veel droefeijt, dat ick het niet en kan uytsprecken.'

⁶⁵ For the heart as the seat of emotions and intellectual mind, see e.g. Kiricsi, 'The Passionate Mind'.

⁶⁶ <https://ivdnt.org/>. Instituut voor de Nederlandse taal, Historische Woordenboeken, Woordenboek Nederlandse Taal (WNT), *hartzeer* and *hartenleed* (Accessed on 8 May 2023).

⁶⁷ TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Maartje Pieters to Augustijn Albertsen, 12 November 1664: 'ick heb grote drofhijt gehat'; 'ick heb sulleken drofhijt en hartseer gehaet, dati ick het mijn leven nyet vergeten kan'.

⁶⁸ TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Harderwijk*, Letter from Maartje Jans to Kornelys Gerretsen Hoogenboom, n.d. 1664, 'ende hedt doet mijn wel seer in hart'; 'want mijn haerdt daernaer verlan[g]t'.

⁶⁹ TNA, HCA 30/641, Letters addressed to *'t Geloof*, Letter from Belyeten Jans to Jan Jansen, 20 November 1664: '[Dat] wij mancander nyt mondelijk spreken ken, heet velck mijn van harten lee tees een wel hartgrondyge wenste dat u l[ieden] hyr war.'

⁷⁰ TNA, HCA 30/641, Letters addressed to *'t Geloof*, Letter from Belyeten Jans to Jan Jansen, 20 November 1664.

also be discovered in Katelynen Haexwant's letter. She wrote: 'I have a heart enclosed between two walls. When I think about you and your ship, I die of grief.'⁷¹ In another letter, Katelynen wrote that her heart was 'heavy and filled with sadness'.⁷² She hoped that God would protect her husband on his journey, which should lead to victory, and that the Dutch Republic would be in 'eternal peace' with England.⁷³ In the letters of Belyeten, Katelynen, Maartje Pieters, and Maartje Jans, we can read how their anxious feelings, related to the news of the secret mission and the ubiquity of death around them, made their hearts heavy, cramped, and painful. Should these descriptions be interpreted as physical experiences or as metaphorical language?

To answer this question, we have to consider how feelings were experienced and how early moderns thought their bodies worked. As has been pointed out by various scholars, emotions were experienced as embodied phenomena in premodern times and were more directly and physically experienced in the mind, the heart, and the humoral system.⁷⁴ Michael Stolberg has argued that while emotional language is in modern times largely metaphorical in nature, up until the eighteenth century, it reflected what people believed happened in their bodies.⁷⁵ In premodern times, medical writers wrote extensively about the movements of blood, spirits, and the heart inside the body. In the sixteenth century, for example, intense sadness and fear were thought to stimulate a concentration of spirits and blood around the heart, 'causing sensations of tightness and cramping'.⁷⁶ Ulinka Rublack notes that these experiences were still prevalent in the eighteenth century when 'health' was defined 'as a state in which none of the bodily fluids had too much or too little movement'.⁷⁷ Regulating the premodern body was thus all about balancing the four humours 'whose attributes of hot, cold, wet, and dry carried enormous emotional, psychological and [...] ecological significance'.⁷⁸ The heart, which could expand, contract, and shudder, was the bodily site in which early modern people experienced their emotions, metaphorically and in reality.⁷⁹ The cramped and heavy heart filled with sadness was synonymous with a heart too heavy to move harmoniously in the body. Women also used other references to point out the lack of movement of their hearts. Josje Elias Verburgh, for example, wrote to her husband that her heart was 'too tired' when she heard he had to make a long journey to fight the English.⁸⁰

71 TNA, HCA 30/224, Letters addressed to *De Rotterdam*, Letter from Katelynen Haexwant to Leendert Ariensen Haexwant, 10 November 1664: 'Ick hebbe een hart ofte tusschen 2 muyeren lach van benaetheyt lach. Als ick om u l[ieden] dencke en om u l[ieder] schip dan sterffe ick van rou.'

72 TNA, HCA 30/645, Letters addressed to *De Rotterdam*, Letter from Katelynen Haexwant to Leendert Ariensen Haexwant, 16 October 1664: 'En het harte is dickmaels wel hart beswaert met droefheijt.'

73 TNA, HCA 30/645, Letters addressed to *De Rotterdam*, Letter from Katelynen Haexwant to Leendert Ariensen Haexwant, 16 October 1664: 'een ouwigh vrede'.

74 See, for example: Leemans, 'Embodied Emotions', 279; Rublack, 'Fluxes'; Frevert, *Emotions in History*.

75 Stolberg, 'Emotions', 1. Willemijn Ruberg has also demonstrated that fear sensations in eighteenth-century letters from Irishwomen often had physical components: Ruberg, 'Cruelty', 3.

76 Stolberg, 'Emotions', 1.

77 Rublack, 'Fluxes', 1.

78 Paster, *Humoring*, 20.

79 Rublack, 'Fluxes', 2, 6.

80 TNA, HCA 30/641, Letters addressed to *De Rotterdam*, Letter from Josje Elias Verburgh to Thomas Lambertsen van den Schrande, 15 November 1664: 'dat min hart te moe was'.

The heart is frequently mentioned in the letters because it plays a pivotal role in some recurring formulaic sentences. In thirty-four of the fifty-seven letters, the following formulaic sentence can be found: 'I hope that you are well, would it be otherwise than it pains my heart. God, who knows all human hearts, knows this'. This last sentence meant 'as God is my witness, I sincerely mean what I say'.⁸¹ This sentence existed in several different forms, but each related the concerns of the seafarer's wife about her husband's well-being with God as a knower of hearts. This type of Christian epistolary formulae reflects the relationship between the writer, the addressee, and their experiences of the divine world. The women used the expression to claim truth and honesty in their writing.⁸² By pointing to their hearts, the women thus might have used a form of rhetoric to emphasise the sincerity of their feelings.⁸³ However, we may also assume that through their use of such sentences, wives communicated their physical experience to their husbands because, as described above, the painful heart was experienced as a physical reality at the time. Therefore, the aching heart should not be seen as purely metaphorical but also as an embodied experience that is reflected in formulaic language.

Many women also used the trope 'even though you are out of my sight, you are still in my heart' to communicate that their husbands were not forgotten despite their distance.⁸⁴ Viewed from the context in which the seafarers' wives found themselves in 1664, this formulaic language should be perceived as an expression of intense experienced physical distress concerning the distance and absence of the men instead of 'rote epistolary conventions'.⁸⁵ Hence, social conventions and personal experiences were inseparably embedded in formulaic language which was intended to strengthen and maintain the emotional connection between husband and wife.⁸⁶

The women urged their husbands that maintaining their relationship required effort on both sides. For instance, Maritjen Jans wrote that 'when husband and wife do not put effort into each other, it their marriage is in a poor state', referring to marriage as a practice, meaning that it required active and repetitive actions to be maintained.⁸⁷ This practice included writing as often as possible to stay in contact: 'Do not forget to write me with at the first opportunity, because I am longing to know if you are in good health', wrote

81 TNA, HCA 30/640, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Marritje Kortoen to Pieter Rickersen, 11 November 1664: 'dat weet Godt dye een kender van mijn ende van alle menschen herten is'; TNA, HCA 30/225, Letters addressed to *De Rotterdam*, Letter from Jannetje Jacobs Verbernaer to Cornelis Willemszoon Bosveldt, 20 September 1664: 'Waer het anders, het soude min van harten le[e]dt weesen om te hooren dat we[e]dt Godt almachtich die e[e]n kender van alle harten is'.

82 Rutten and Van der Wal, *Letters as Loot*, 83, 185-187, 202.

83 Schneider, *The Culture*, 32, 36.

84 For example in the letters of Catrine Helmiks (TNA, HCA 30/226), Grietje Matys (TNA, HCA, 32/1822), Giertje Jans Ophoff (TNA, HCA, 30/226), Margrietje Robbers (TNA, HCA, 30/641 and TNA, HCA, 30/224) and Grietje Matys (TNA, HCA 32/1822).

85 Schneider, *The Culture*, 56.

86 Scheer states that courtship is a mobilizing practice, because it is a ritual, habit, or [every] pastime that aids to achieve a certain emotional state. Following Scheer, marriage itself is therefore also an emotional practice: Scheer, 'Are Emotions', 209.

87 TNA, HCA 30/224, Letters addressed to 't *Geloof*, Letter from Maritjen Jans to Pieter Carelsen', 6 November 1664: 'mar het can niet als man en vrou soe weinich wreck van malcander maken, dan is het een slechte toestand'.

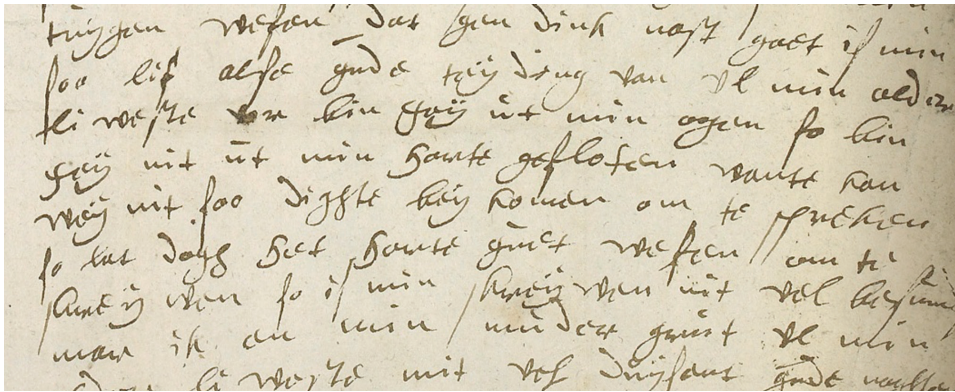


Fig. 3 Fragment from Catrine Helmiks's letter in which she writes that when they are not close enough to speak, they should write to each other. She adds that although he is out of sight, he is still in her heart. Kew, The National Archives, High Court of Admiralty 30/226.

Giertje Jans Ophoff.⁸⁸ Catrine Helmiks wrote to her husband that they should write if they could not be close enough to speak (fig. 3).⁸⁹

According to Gary Schneider, premodern letters themselves triggered feelings of anxiety because they could get easily lost during transit. They were also perceived as deceitful because letters implied the absence of the body; 'the disembodied epistle' only represents the 'body and self at a distance in time and space'.⁹⁰ To overcome this distance, authors used descriptions of the physical self and other figures of physical presence to evoke a sense of honesty and transparency because face-to-face communication was considered more reliable than written correspondence, as one had than immediately access to one's eyes – which, since ancient times, were perceived as the windows to the soul.⁹¹ Standard phrases were not just polite sentiments or routine letter-writing conventions in times of significant postal disruptions. Instead, they demonstrated the women's desire to receive letters and their importance as a way to have contact with their husband. Moreover, they revealed deep concerns about ensuring the uninterrupted transmission of letters in an era when letters were often lost, misdirected, or intercepted.⁹² These concerns are also reflected in the letters. Susannetje Jans longed for a letter to know how her husband was doing: 'I am *moeilyck* that the other wives get letters and I do not', she complained.⁹³ 'I wish I had a

⁸⁸ TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *De Spiegel*, Letter from Giertje Jans Ophoff to Jan Jansen, 28 October 1664: 'laet doch niet te schrijven met de eerste en met al gelegenheit, want ick seer verlang te weten van u gesontheyt'.

⁸⁹ TNA, HCA 30/226, Letters addressed to *Op De Edam*, Letter from Catrine Helmiks to Jan Evertse, 10 October 1664.

⁹⁰ Schneider, *The Culture*, 28, 56–57.

⁹¹ Schneider, *The Culture*, 28, 30, 32, 36.

⁹² Schneider, *The Culture*, 56.

⁹³ TNA, HCA 30/224, Letters addressed to *De Middelburg*, Letter from Susannetje Jans to Machiel Schut, 10 November 1664: 'ick ben moeylick dat die ander wyfen briewen kreggh end ick niet'.

letter from you', wrote Annetje Barends, 'I am longing for it because it is a terrible time, in which people are being ripped from life very quickly.'⁹⁴

Formulaic language can demonstrate how individuals coped with and negotiated their anxieties and 'identified what they knew they could not see'.⁹⁵ Ann Laura Stoler points to the variable character of epistolary conventions, which may seem obvious, familiar, and acceptable in certain situations but are discordant and strange in other instances. These conventions are carefully context-dependent choices that are modified or no longer used when the latter is at stake. People tend to align themselves with existing forces, such as specific beliefs about how the world operates, what constitutes knowledge, and how emotions and the body function.⁹⁶ Furthermore, formulaic language provides insight into the emotional experiences of historical actors. The desire for the husband's physical presence seeps through in the letters because the letter could not replace the man's body and yet, in their absence, it was the next best thing. The women were unanimous: they wanted their husbands, alive and well, back home again. As Maritjen Jans wrote to her husband: 'Your body means more to me than a ship full of gold.'⁹⁷

Conclusion

Perceiving experiences as a series of affective practices executed by a mindful body in interaction with its environment and other people, this article has proposed that many of the women whose letter comprise the 1664 corpus identified the plague and the 'secret' mission their husbands were on as sources of anxiety. By naming those triggers, the women turned their anxiety into concrete objects of fear, which allowed them to communicate their anxious feelings. The feelings they connected to these events were mainly sadness and that of being troubled. The women might have experienced these feelings as complex and uncomfortable, probably because they described both close and distant threats in terms of how they affected their bodies. In reaction to their identified uncertainties, the women experienced cramped, tired, and painful feelings around and in their hearts. The women described these sensations in order to appear sincere and transparent and to ensure that their husbands would understand what they were experiencing, as the heart was perceived as the seat of emotions. However, considering the embodied nature of seventeenth-century emotions, it might also have reflected the cramped and aching feelings women experienced in their bodies. The formulaic language in which the women include their men in their hearts should not be read as mere epistolary convention but rather as an expression of a more profound experiential distance between them and their men. Emotions are intrinsically connected to

⁹⁴ TNA, HCA 30/225, Letters addressed to *De Rotterdam*, Letter from Annetje Barends to Jan Ariense van den Brock, 18 September 1664: 'Voors soe laet ick u l[ieden] weeten al dat ick soo wel eens wilde dat ick eens schrivens van u l[ieden] hadde want ick seer daer na verlan(g) om schrivens van u l[ieden] te hebben, want het hier althans een veeghlicken tit is, want ter de mensche heel subitlick uitgeruckt worden.'

⁹⁵ Stoler, *Along*, 38.

⁹⁶ Stoler, *Along*, 25, 29.

⁹⁷ TNA, HCA 30/224, Letters addressed to *'t Geloof*, Letter from Maritjen Jans to Pieter Carelsen, 6 November 1664: 'want u lichham is mijn meer wart als een schip met goud'.

experiences. Epistemic emotions should therefore not be perceived as mere internal sensations or simple rhetoric; rather, they entail a series of affective practices through which the mindful body dynamically engages with its environment.

The women often used Christian formulae to express and communicate God's omnipresence to their husbands overseas. It is also thinkable that the women might have wanted to collapse the physical distance between them into a spiritual closeness as they interpreted and reflected on their embodied sensations in the light of God's providence. Some women did not mention the sensations or feelings they experienced in their bodies. Still, their letters are carriers of experiences as well because they convey the interaction between the women's selves, what they knew, and the world around them. They involved an active engagement with Scripture and spiritual truths, things which transcended time and distance. Using Christian formulaic sentences was a way for the women to create order in both social relationships, the physical world and 'the otherworldly sphere'.⁹⁸ Viewed from this standpoint, the tropes these women employed represented an active attempt to order their own world and, in particular, deny the physical distance between themselves and their husbands – connecting the physical self by the heart and the spiritual self through God. In this way, they sought to master their anxiety.

Letters are sites where body, mind, and environment intersect. The letters of the 1664 canon indicate that seafarers' wives took great pains in choosing the formulae through which they hoped to regulate, negotiate, and communicate experienced reality and embodied feelings with their husbands, thus dissolving the distance between them. Formulaic responses should thus be considered more thoroughly when discussing people's experiences as they may serve to expose the intrinsic connection between experience and emotions rather than distance the writer from the recipient. Formulaic language changes when it no longer corresponds to reality, or when it loses its regulatory purpose due to collectively experienced disruptive events that changes one's relation to other humans and the broader environment. Future research could therefore usefully investigate a longer period of time, in order to uncover which events led to adaptations in formulaic language and why. Moreover, examining the similarities and differences in the experience of seafaring communities compared to other 'communities of experience' would further contribute to our understanding of experiences of anxiety in seventeenth-century society.⁹⁹

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⁹⁸ Kuha, 'Extended Families', 158.

⁹⁹ Boddice and Hitzer, 'Emotions and Experiences', 6-; Kuha, 'Extended Families', 142; Kivimäki et al., 'Communities'.

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