Listening to Women's Letters

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Abstract

This article analyses the letter-writing practices of women, focusing on a single letter written at the turn of the eighteenth century by a woman in Paris to an opera director in The Hague. Our case study shows we have much to gain from letters written by women further down the social hierarchy, as most scholarship has focused on the elite. By reading between the lines and employing responsible speculation, historians can gain insight into the challenges and opportunities available to working women on the move, such as performers. Learning to read these letters differently – learning to truly listen to them – enables us to achieve new understanding of the ways in which women created and sustained relationships through correspondence.

Keywords: women's letters, correspondence, performance, opera, mobility

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A plastic archival sleeve. Inside: a piece of acid-free paperboard and a neatly folded letter from the turn of the eighteenth century. Pencilled onto the paperboard is the archival numeration 1 46-0022, which indicates that this is letter #22 of the Brienne Collection. This collection of over 3,000 undelivered letters, mostly originating in France, ended up in The Hague between 1689 and 1707.[1] The letter is addressed in a bold, slightly chaotic hand, marked by uneven spacing between words and unequal sizing of characters (fig. 1).

While the writing might be considered sloppy, the panel clearly communicates its destination. The letter is to be delivered to one Monsieur de Sessi, who lives in the home of Monsieur du Lis on the Lange Burgwal in The Hague. The same hand also added *holande* on the reverse panel of the folded letter (fig. 2). Other text is present here, in a different hand – the scribbles of the postal employees in The Hague: *mt. 23 niet hebben* (23 March, refused). The writing here is swift and seemingly careless; *niet* is barely legible due to the faulty pen of the writer, which likely had too much ink, resulting in the *i* and the *e* running together. On this panel, one can also make out the ghostly remains of two drops of sealing wax, hidden beneath a layer of paper. No fancy seal was used here; rather, the letter-writer dripped the wax onto the folded letter and simply closed it on itself, without leaving any identifying impression.

The process of unlocking the letter's possible meanings begins. The letter first unfolds to reveal… mostly blank paper. Opening the newly discovered inner panels results in new text (fig. 3): *servante [/] de paris ce 15 mars*. Here we learn that the letter was composed in Paris eight days before it was refused in The Hague, but the identity of the writer remains a mystery. One thing is clear: that the word *servant* bears an *e* indicates that this is a woman's letter. But which woman? And what is it about? And what might this type of source – a letter – be able to tell us *differently* about the experience of women in the early modern Low Countries, especially since it was written by a woman in France who declined to sign her name?

Historians long neglected women's letters, which were deemed irrelevant to the grand narrative of political history unless written by ladies of note. Only in the 1960s, with

1 The Brienne collection is now housed at Hilversum, Netherlands Institute for Sound & Vision (hereafter SV), Brienne Collection, DB-0022. On the Brienne Collection and its genesis, see: Ahrendt and Van der Linden, 'The Postmasters' Piggy Bank'.

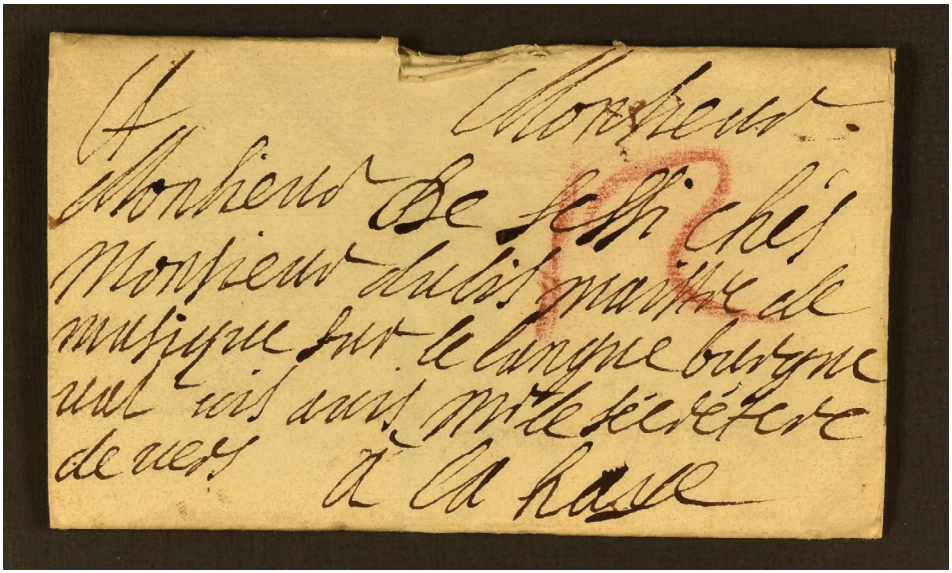

Fig. 1 Address panel of DB-0022, Hilversum, Netherlands Institute for Sound & Vision.

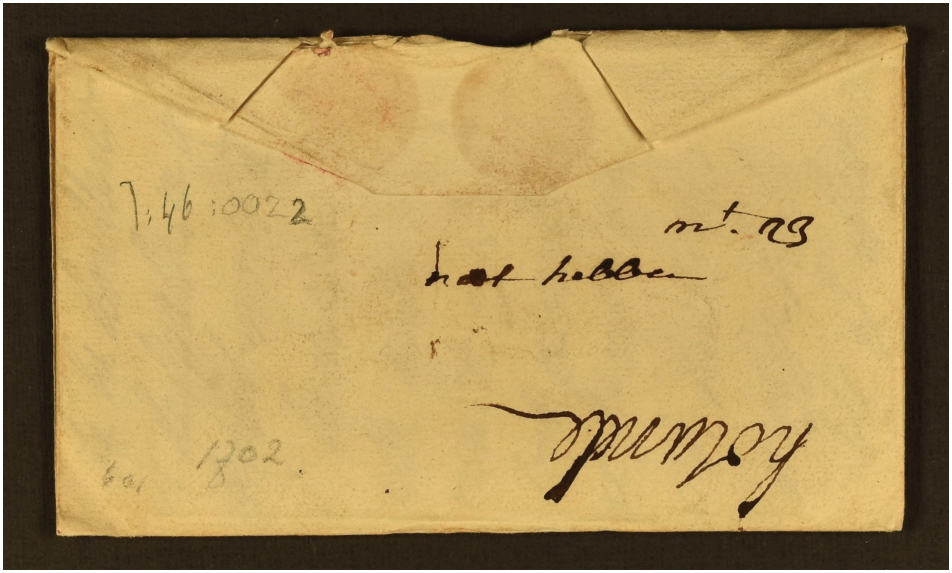

Fig. 2 Reverse panel of DB-0022, Hilversum, Netherlands Institute for Sound & Vision.

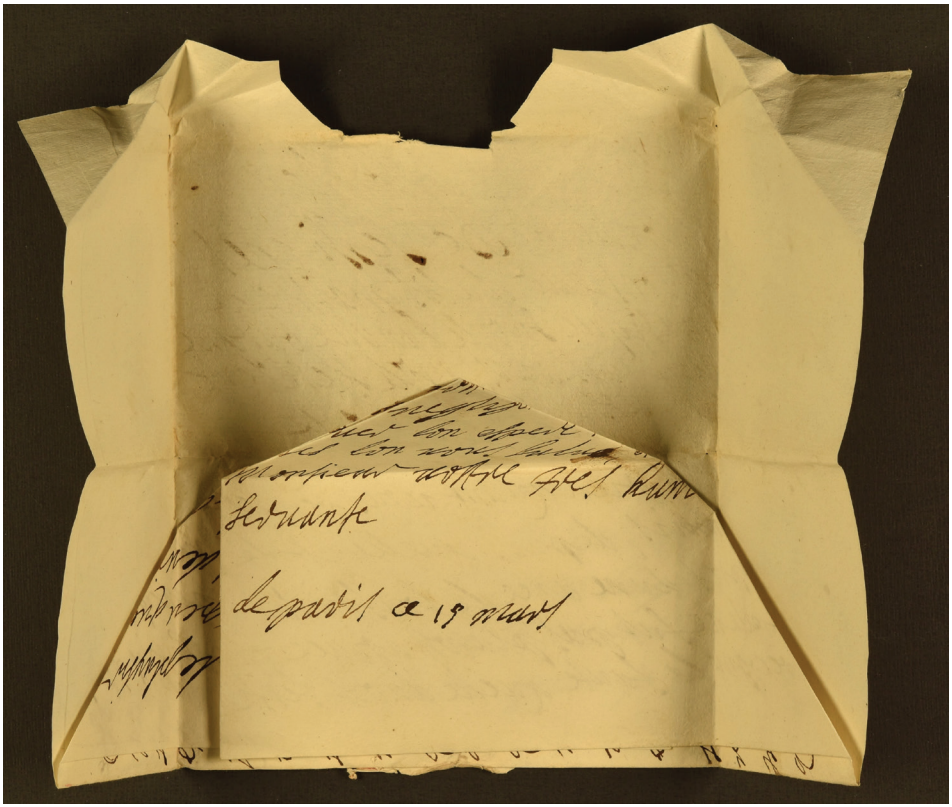

Fig. 3 Partially opened letter DB-0022, *Hilversum, Netherlands Institute for Sound & Vision.*

the advent of feminist studies and social history, did scholars begin to take seriously the correspondence left by a wide array of early modern women. They realised that letters – along with other autobiographical materials such as diaries, journals, and commonplace books – might be uniquely able to counterbalance the male canon and shed light on the often-obscured experiences of women. James Daybell, Jane Couchman, and Anne Larsen, among others, have done much to uncover women's correspondence in the archives and to explore women's letters from a variety of angles, including emotions, religion, patronage, and politics.[2] While studies of women letter-writers in England, France, and Italy are now common, there is considerably less scholarship on female letter-writing in or across the Low Countries. Most studies focus on lone luminaries and the highly literate, such as

2 Daybell (ed.), *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing*; Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*; Daybell and Gordon (eds.), *Women and Epistolary Agency*; Couchman and Crabb (eds.), *Women's Letters Across Europe*; Campbell and Larsen (eds.), *Early Modern Women and Transnational Communities of Letters.*

Anna Maria van Schurman or Elizabeth Stuart, elite women in the circle of Constantijn Huygens, the stadtholders' wives, the wealthy Duarte family of Antwerp, or exiled English nuns in the Southern Netherlands. Scholars have fruitfully used surviving correspondence to position these women within the male-dominated Republic of Letters and the world of politics.[3]

Efforts to analyse the letter-writing practices of women further down the social hierarchy, however, have often been hampered by the patchy survival of their correspondence, despite the fact that letter-writing was a common social practice across all walks of life. Simply put, archives privilege letter collections that were self-consciously curated and preserved for posterity by elites, not the missives of women writing for mundane purposes. Rather than look for complete sets of female correspondence, then, we should shift our focus to unexpected and unintended collections – what we call 'accidental archives': collections including missives from people who never dreamt of leaving behind a record of the past, but whose voices have been preserved by chance, recorded through accident and happenstance.[4]

Historians have already shown that this approach can yield great results. One of the best-known accidental archives is the Prize Papers, a collection of letters and other papers seized from Dutch ships by the British navy during the Anglo-Dutch Wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Preserved by the High Court of Admiralty and stored at the National Archives in Kew, the collection is a genuine treasure-trove for reconstructing the lives of women lower down the social scale. Judith Brouwer, for instance, has analysed the letters written by sailors' wives during the Disaster Year of 1672, in order to shed light on their emotions, economic roles, and reception of news.[5] Scholars have also explored the many German letters among the Prize Papers to highlight the role of women in shaping transnational communities, in particular female Moravian missionaries in Suriname.[6] The Brienne Collection is an example of another wondrously accidental collection that allows us to listen to women's voices, both from inside and beyond the Low Countries.

As we further unfold our letter, a tale begins to emerge. The paper is small in size and poor in quality, typical of inexpensive paper widely available in Paris at the turn of the eighteenth century. The author who so carefully constructed her feminine anonymity addresses Monsieur de Sessi in a crowded and urgent hand on behalf of a mutual friend, a female opera singer who had hastily departed The Hague for Paris. The letter opens familiarly, without a direct address to the recipient: 'It has been such a long time since I have had the pleasure of speaking with you that I shall satisfy without hesitation the desire of our friend, which is to beg you, Monsieur, to employ all of your efforts in obtaining her

3 Larsen, 'A Women's Republic of Letters'; Pal, *Republic of Women*, 52-109; Akkerman, *Elizabeth Stuart*; Blom, Kloek, and Leerintveld (eds.), 'Vrouwen rondom Huygens'; Couchman, '"Give birth quickly and then send us your good husband"'; Broomhall, 'Letters Make the Family'; Weinfield, *Leonora Duarte*; Walker, '"Doe not supose me a well mortifyed Nun dead to the world"'.

4 Ahrendt and Van der Linden, 'The Postmasters' Piggy Bank'.

5 Brouwer, *Levenstekens*. See also the ongoing Prize Papers Project, https://www.prizepapers.de (Accessed on 6 March 2024).

6 Freist, '"A very warm Surinam kiss"'; Cronshagen, 'Contrasting Roles of Female Moravian Missionaries in Surinam'.

return to the opera.'[7] This is no simple matter, it seems, for the letter-writer next provides some advice to de Sessi about how he ought to approach the then-director of the opera in The Hague, Louis Deseschaliers:

> I believe that one must sound out Mr. Deseschaliers and try to rouse in him the desire to see her again, without revealing that it is she who wishes it, lest he should be haughty because of the quarrels they have had.[8]

The matter seems personal, and as the text reaches the end of the first side, it becomes more revealing. 'Since her return, it has been nearly a year of suffering for her. No sooner had she arrived, did she realise the mistake that she had made', writes the confidante, 'and she felt a marked displeasure at having left The Hague.'[9] The matter is delicate, as her words reveal: 'You can easily guess the true cause of her sorrow. I cannot fit in so little space all that I could say to you. Content yourself with thinking about it, and returning her to life by procuring her return.'[10] Unfortunately, as the words *niet hebben* indicate, the letter was refused by de Sessi. His voiced refusal to the letter-carrier silenced the voice of the letter-writer. And since only he knew who she might have been, Monsieur de Sessi effectively erased her identity and that of their friend.

Or did he? If we listen carefully to this letter, we might begin to hear a different story, one that tells not only of the unique position of female performers who operated across borders at the turn of the eighteenth century, but also of the importance of letters to such women. Here we acknowledge that we engage in speculation, which Carla Peterson revealed as a powerful and even liberatory method to write the histories of nineteenth-century Black female culture workers, whose multiple marginalisations affected not just the historical record of their activities, but even the composition of their personal letters. For Peterson, and for us, speculation-as-method may not produce conclusive interpretations.[11] Nonetheless, probing the many possible, though often uncertain meanings of a text – performing what Rebecca Olson has more recently put forth as 'responsible speculation' – may allow us to better account for historically marginalised voices.[12] On a basic level, early modern letters functioned as a conduit of communication. As such, the letters of women were *not* different from those of men: they allowed women to conduct business, muster practical and financial support, keep in touch with family and friends, and maintain kinship and patronage networks. As James Daybell has argued, however,

7 SV, Brienne Collection, DB-0022: 'Il y à si longtemps que je nay eu le playsir de uous entretenir que je satisfes sans payne au desir de nostre amie qui est de uous prier Monsieur demploy er tous uos soings pour la fere rentrer a lopera.'

8 SV, Brienne Collection, DB-0022: 'Je croy quil fodroit pressentir le sieur des chaliers et tacher de luy fere naytre lenuie de la rauoir sans temoygner que cest elle qui le souhaite de crainte quil ne se tins fier a cause des demelles quil sont eu ensembles.'

9 SV, Brienne Collection, DB-0022: 'Depuis quelle est de retour cest pres dune anee de soufranse pour elle elle ne fut pas plutost ariuee quelle recognu la faute quelle auoit feste et quelle ut un sensible deplaysir destre partie de la haye.'

10 SV, Brienne Collection, DB-0022: 'Uous deuinerez sans payne la ueritable cause de sa doulleur je ne puis mettre en si peu despasse ce que je pourois uous dire contentes uous de le penser et de luy redoner la uie en luy procurans son retour.'

11 Peterson, 'Subject to Speculation'.

12 Olson, 'The Continuing Adventures of Blanchardyn and Eglantine'.

female letters nonetheless obeyed different rules, meaning that the theories and practices of letter-writing were 'radically gendered', which affected such features as composition and modes of address. Yet, even within these gendered assumptions of how a female letter should be composed, women could challenge the norm.[13] Adopting an intersectional approach, acknowledging not just gender but also social status, occupation, religion, geographic origin, and education, further unfolds the world of women's letters.

In the case of our example, the writer is most certainly French, most likely Parisian, and most probably a stage performer. Her orthography largely matches what was becoming standard French at the time, though some words retain a phonetic character, as if she were actually speaking to her addressee. Punctuation is nearly absent, with only the occasional virgule, and sentences run together willy-nilly, sometimes obscuring meaning unless one reads the letter out loud. She writes from Paris, but despite this geographic displacement, she is clearly familiar with the French opera company in The Hague and its notoriously bad-tempered director, Louis Deseschaliers. She may have worked there herself, just like her unfortunate friend, for performers able to shine in Parisian operas were in demand in the Low Countries, and the cross-border effect of labour contracts concluded in Paris or elsewhere meant that they could perform where work was to be had.[14]

Though female performers often came from very uncertain or unfortunate backgrounds, their profession brought with it the opportunity to associate with persons of higher classes, the experience of slipping easily in and out of different social situations, the possibility of fame and fortune, and access to literacy. Hence, it is not surprising that women associated with the opera should write letters. Through correspondence they maintained working relationships, kept in touch with friends and family, sought justice, and asked for aid.[15] How they presented themselves within their letters, particularly in letters to men, speaks to their ability to negotiate gendered boundaries and norms. Here we should listen most carefully to tone. The letter hints at the writer's social cunning, as well as her possible relationship to the addressee: though addressed to a man, she treats him as an equal, or even as someone subservient. She employs various strategies of presentation and rhetoric in order to communicate her message more clearly, while transgressing some of the modes associated with her gender.[16] There is no polite opening address – she leaps straight into her request, acknowledging only that it has been some time since they had spoken. She makes frequent rhetorical use of the impersonal French pronoun *on* to chide him, particularly toward the end of her letter. Such features do not translate well into English, where we might rather render her words as 'people complain loudly of your negligence; they do not know to what it should be attributed; we hope for a response'.[17]

Her exhortations imply that de Sessi has a social duty to care for his friend, which might indicate a higher social status than the suffering singer or even the opera director himself, for de Sessi is attributed the power to sway the difficult Deseschaliers. Yet the ways

13 Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, 11, 175-199.
14 Ahrendt, 'The Legal Spaces of Opera in The Hague'.
15 Ahrendt, 'L'activité des foyers musicaux et théâtraux en Europe vers 1700'.
16 Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers*, 175-199.
17 SV, Brienne Collection, DB-0022: 'L'on se plaints fort de uostre neglijense lon ne scay a quoy latribuer lon espere reponse.'

in which the letter-writer addresses de Sessi counterbalance the potentially uneven and gendered balance of power. Even her subscription seems to play with the epistolary conventions of the time. While she claims to be a 'humble' servant, she is not 'obedient' – the most common qualifier for recipients of higher social status.[18] Rather, she is 'affectionate', implying familiarity with the intended recipient. The lack of space between her subscription and her omitted signature further challenges conventions, for letter-writers ordinarily indicated respect to their recipients by the amount of space preceding their signatures.[19] Moreover, her claim that she has no space to tell the whole story is belied by the fact that she has written only on the recto and verso of half of the bifolium.

We can only speculate about the true nature of the relationship between de Sessi and the letter-writer. But, like de Sessi, perhaps we too can easily guess the 'true cause' of the singer's woes. Her swift departure and suffering of 'nearly a year' were most likely occasioned by an unwanted pregnancy, an occupational hazard for women of the early modern operatic stage. Many equated the profession of singer or dancer with that of a prostitute; the *filles d'opéra* (opera girls) were pilloried in a number of contemporary texts for their immorality.[20] For, though a career on the stage could provide the occasion to rub elbows with the rich, there were also expectations, fed by salacious pamphlets and rumours, of access to other parts of a performer's body. Some played the role of elite prostitute extraordinarily well, living out their lives in comfort; others were dropped as soon as biology became burdensome.[21] Such rumours accompanied foreign female (usually French) stage performers to the Low Countries, where they were regarded with suspicion and distaste. Despite the fact that there was a longstanding tradition of female actors on Dutch stages, women visibly singing or dancing on stage was considered a foreign practice.[22]

Regardless of their actual morals, what is certain about these migratory female performers of the public stage is that they existed in a liminal space, one that is not easily visited or even comprehended by researchers today, in part because of the dearth of personal documents like this letter. Such is the potential of the Brienne Collection (and other collections yet to be discovered) to shed new light on the lives of women, and women performers in particular, in the early modern Low Countries and beyond. Learning to read these letters differently – learning to truly listen to them – enables us to achieve new understandings of the ways in which women created and sustained relationships through correspondence.

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18 See for instance the epistolary guidance in Courtin, *Nouveau traité de la civilité*, 157.

19 Gibson, 'Significant Space in Manuscript Letters'; Steen, 'Reading Beyond the Words', 61-63; Daybell, 'The materiality of women's letters', 66-72.

20 Rivera, *Les filles de l'Opéra*.

21 Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*.

22 Veldhorst, *De perfecte verleiding*, 53; Rasch, 'De moeizame introductie van de opera'.

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