

# Wives and Wantons: Versions of Womanhood in 17th Century Dutch Art

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The following riddle did the rounds of the Amsterdam taverns in the 1640s:

Question: 'How is it that the Devil rules Holland?'

Answer: 'Why, because Amsterdam rules Holland; Burgomaster (Andries) Bicker rules Amsterdam; Mevrouw Bicker rules the Burgomaster; Mevrouw is ruled by her maid, and the Devil, you can be sure, rules the maid.'

The mixture of ribaldry and paranoia combined in this hoary jest accurately reflects the fluctuating attitudes of seventeenth-century Dutchmen towards their womenfolk. Seeing them, alternately, as succubi or sentinels of domestic virtue, their uncertainties surfaced not only in genre painting but in doggerel farce and the anthologies of misogynist anecdotes that became popular after 1650, as a kind of defensive hilarity. This was not the only possible response. Pieter de Hooch's affectionate studies of mothers and children, or the delicate play of manners presented by *ter Borch*, *Metsu* and *Vermeer* all suggest a less histrionic reaction than the parlour uproar of *Jan Steen*. But they were, I hope to show, two faces of the same cultural coin.

At the risk of stating the obvious it should be stressed that any consideration of the image of women in Dutch culture is inevitably an inspection of male responses towards them. Paradoxically there seems to have been a relative abundance of gifted women artists in the Netherlands at this time. *Judith Leyster*, *Maria Drebbers*, *Geertruyd Rogman*, *Maria van Oosterwyck* and *Rachel Ruysch* all made their mark in painting and drawing; *Anna Maria van Schuurman* in poetry and oriental scholarship; *Anna Roemer Visscher* in glass engraving, and *Adriana Nozeman* in the theatre all made substantial reputations for themselves in their lifetime. Notwithstanding this achievement, virtually no direct testimony of female reflections on their lot survives for the seventeenth century — in strong contrast to the century that followed. The occasional exceptions, such as the remarkable journal of the veteran midwife of *Almeland*, *Vrouw Schraders* (1655-1741) content themselves with matter-of-fact accounts of working life from which much has to be inferred regarding relations between the sexes. There are, however, tantalising glimpses (no more) of an independent sensibility at work in some of the output of women artists. Is it purely fortuitous that one of the very few proposition scenes in which a woman demurely declines a male advance was painted by *Judith Leyster*? And, more emphatically, the drawings and engravings of



Fig. 1. *Geertruyd Rogman*: 'Woman sewing', engraving. *Atlas van Stolk*, Rotterdam.

the little-known *Geertruyd Rogman* (Fig. 1), depicting women's chores, struggle through a rugged physicality to free the content from the conventions of morality imagery. To be sure, the usual emblems of *vanitas* and virtue are dutifully inserted (candles, clocks, skulls, spindles), but for once they seem incidental rather than central to the purpose of the composition.

Admittedly, this is subjective conjecture and, even were it to be granted, would constitute an exception rather than a rule. In more typical instances, the very exquisiteness of the *craft* of, say, *Anna Visscher's* glass engraving, or *Maria van Oosterwijck's* flower painting seems to reinforce the boundaries of their *art*. Both their careers, moreover, accorded with contemporary assumptions about permissible and seemly occupations for women. Both, as a result, received the flattery of male homage: *Anna Visscher* (also a poetess) being the object of one of *C.P. Hoof's* amorous sonnets; and *Maria van Oosterwijck* being painted, palette in hand by *Wallerand Vaillant*. Only *Judith Leyster's* bravura selfportrait seems imbued with a robust uninhibitedness.

This somewhat one-sided view is all the more re-

grettable since, by the testimony of contemporaries, women were anything but reticent or cloistered in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. On the contrary, the freedoms they plainly enjoyed disconcerted visitors from abroad, accustomed to a more deferential and closeted female world. Fynes Morison was shocked to discover:

“... mothers of good fame permit their daughters at home after they themselves goe to bedd, to sett up with young men all or most of the night banquetting or talking yea with leave and without leave to walk abroad with young men in the streets at night.”

In some cases, the customary hierarchy seemed to have been inverted. Husbands, English travellers noted with horror, might be hauled before magistrates charged with wife-beating and subjected to heavy fines and public obloquy. Husbands caught or even reported on good witness to have entered dens of ill-repute might be summoned by their own wives before Church councils and publicly admonished or barred from communion. Sailors returning from voyages contaminated with venereal disease could likewise be obliged by Church authorities to permit their wives separate beds, or in a few cases, an annulment of the marriage. Women shared pews, the singing of psalms and usually the communion ceremony, alongside men; widows could inherit and administer their husband's property and bequeath or transfer it to

whom they wished. The skill of some formidable matrons in the great Amsterdam clans — Witsens, Bickers, Trips, de Geers — in managing the investment portfolios (not to mention haggling over dowries and marriage settlements for their children) was legendary. Their dominion even extended to ejecting spouses from the home for excessive drinking, smoking or cursing, thereby driving them straight to the *herberg* taverns where, Fynes Morison further explained, they drowned their sorrows so copiously that they were incapable of begetting anything other than females, thus perpetuating the vicious circle.

Given the earthy ubiquitousness of women in Dutch culture, and their association with worldly susceptibilities and material experience, it is not surprising that in its art they are conspicuously (though by no means wholly) detached from the formal conventions of classical allegory and myth predominating in the rest of seventeenth-century Europe. Paradoxically, in the relatively few grand public commissions intended to advertise the majesty, power and wealth of the young Republic — the decoration of van Kampen's Stadhuis in Amsterdam, or the interior of the Chamber of the States of Holland in The Hague — official artists like Hanneman, Lievens and Bol were to use the idioms of classical and Baroque monumentalism to symbolise the perennial themes of war, peace, plenty, justice and so on. For this kind of art, their training in history painting in studios like van Swanenburgh's and Lastman's stood them in good stead. Equally, while the strict letter of Calvinist orthodoxy prohibited devotional imagery, especially that dealing with the saints and the Virgin, some pictures like Bol's *Mother suckling a child* in Oslo seem merely a superficial secularisation of Madonna and child themes. While it is a commonplace to assert the 'humanisation' of Dutch religious painting, it is difficult to say with any confidence just where, for example, Holy Family scenes depart from traditional conventions and exploit contemporary sensibilities about the sanctity of family life, rather than vice versa. If one searches hard enough and long enough it is even possible to find traces of Renaissance poetic idealisation of women — virtuous, fair, but deaf to the importuning of stricken suitors — in, for instance, the illustrations by Pieter van Laer to songbooks preserved in the Atlas van Stolk in Rotterdam.

Studious exceptions aside, however, the most casual impression of women in Dutch art discloses a distinctly more mundane and informal image than that offered by classical conventions. Even when Rembrandt dresses Saskia and Hendrickje in the attributes of Flora, a contemporary and fleshly presence is all too discernable beneath the fancy-dress. As Kenneth Clark pointed out long ago, his etchings and drawings of the 1630s seem bent on wilfully flouting classical rules of form in ways far more pugnacious and idiosyncratic than anything Mannerism had contrived. Nudes are sketched as sackfuls of palpably lumpy flesh, half-kneaded into shape. And although his later etchings return to more classically



Fig. 2. Rembrandt van Rijn: 'Woman sitting half-dressed beside a stove', etching. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



considered figures, an extraordinary work of 1658 has as model, half-naked, sitting in front of a comfortably massive Dutch stove; her undress and bonnet still on her head acting as markers (like the earlier garter-marks) of a physical presence in a contemporary setting (Fig. 2). It is a deliberate repudiation of the permissive conventions of classical nudity; a dramatic anticipation of nineteenth-century preoccupations with the business of posing.

While the treatment of women in Dutch art is indisputably informalised they are by no means regarded with unclouded dispassion as so many animate phenomena. Nor were women extricated from their roles as Diana, Venus, and B.V.M., to be set free in some notionally incipient bourgeois cultural world where observation 'from life' went hand in hand with Calvinist ethics, nominalist aesthetics, the rational management of capital and a pioneering interest in optics. The Dutch were interested in the 'objective' truth about the material world but notwithstanding the lensgrinders of Amsterdam and Delft, they viewed it through a glass very darkly indeed. Wrestling with the contrariness of nature — animate and inanimate — they saw their very existence as conditional on not succumbing to its randomness and amorality. Woman, as the incarnation of caprice, vulnerable to the enticements of the world, had to be confined within a system of moral regulation, and this was precisely the object of popular marriage and household guides, like Jacob Cats's *Maagdeplicht* (The Duties of a Maiden) and *Houwelyck* (Marriage), as well as the immensely popular *Verstandige Kok of Zorgvuldige Huishouder* (The Wise Cook and Careful Householder). Lowered from their classical pedestals, women in Dutch art were immediately encumbered with a massive baggage of secondary associations concerning their duties in the home and towards their husband, and their role in communal philanthropy. These took the form of a comprehensive inventory of symbols and visual allusions, some traditional, though adapted to post-Catholic requirements, and some freshly devised. Planted conspicuously in the middle of genre paintings, or portraits, they turned ostensibly anecdotal subject matter into visual disquisitions on human frailty.

The treatment of old women is a good example of this process. In Dutch art they rarely appear as grotesques, in the manner of Massys or Leonardo. Often, as in famous studies by Rembrandt and Dou, they are the subjects of dramatically emotional and expressive portraits. But behind the symphony of wrinkles there lie quieter strains of pious rumination. Both in emblem literature and portraiture they are frequently shown reading a book (presumably the Scriptures), the illumination from which, as in the Vienna Rembrandt, shines directly on to the face. In other versions a book (of Life) is being diligently completed, or a prayer is being said (as in Nicholas Maes's *Gebed zonder eind* — Prayer without end) over a Lenten meal of herrings and bread, images of

Christian humility and atonement. When inserted in the background of Maes's more winsome domestic genre paintings, old women generally act as a moral commentary on the fecklessness of the young women shown in the foreground committing some fairly innocuous transgression. Such images were not, however, trapped within rigid stereotypes. In the incorrigibly vicious, age merely coarsened rather than hallowed, and was used as a powerful *vanitas* image. Procuresses seen in corners of 'brothel scenes' ushering men in or out of rooms, seizing coin or demanding it, are most commonly depicted as withered hags, their countenances shrivelled by lust and avarice — an exemplary counterpoint to the beauty of the whores proffering their services. For what it is worth, historical research confirms the predictable — that many 'procuresses' were of the same age as their girls — in their twenties and thirties, but graduated, as it were, to mistressship of the guild. Gerrit Dou's Vienna portrait of an old woman framed in the conventional embrasure is decorated with all kinds of mementos of departed innocence — the empty birdcage, the white flowers and so on. In a coarser style Hendrick Bary's print after Frans van Meiris the Elder's *Goore Besje* (Fig. 3) has a crone pouring the contents of a chamber pot from her window (on which a dirty and torn rag hangs from a nail) with the following inscription:



Fig. 3. Hendryk Bary after van Meiris the elder: 'Goore Besje' (Dirty Bess), engraving. Atlas van Stolk, Rotterdam.

“Whoa, Dirty Bess, whoa, have you so lost your honour  
As to tip your filth on to honourable heads?  
Or are you trying, with this muck, to blind our eyes\*  
So that your wrinkled hide will no longer be seen?”

\*Excrement in the eyes, following the story of Tobias, was associated with blindness

It would be misleading, then, to see in the depiction of Dutch domesticity nothing more than a relaxed record of the humdrum: light relief from the epic and grave matters of classical art. There is little doubt that the Dutch did take self-conscious pleasure in the anti-heroic character of the *theatrum mundi* enacted in their own front parlours, and that the genre or picaresque painting of Quast, Brouwer, Codde, van Mieris, Steen, *et al.* found favour with a public avid for comic anecdote. But without lapsing into portentousness it should be understood that home (*'t huis*) in the Dutch Republic functioned as far more than simple abode. Just as Italian patrician culture centred on the public worlds of piazza and loggia, so Dutch culture was overwhelmingly intimate, domestic and interior in character. Even the small garden spaces attached to houses, gracefully painted by de Hooch, were outdoor extensions of interior rooms rather than ‘formal’ parks and gardens in the Renaissance sense. Nothing much like Rubens’ garden in Antwerp was to be seen behind the Amsterdam canal fronts. Similarly, away from exposed space Venetian houses *secreted* families (and especially their female members) behind latticed windows, inaccessible balconies, massive gateways or the masks of their favourite entertainments. Only too conscious of religious injunctions on shame, and exhortations to have nothing to hide, the Dutch elaborated and refined their innumerable rituals of domesticity — from child-rearing, and food preparation to the scouring of utensils — and involved friends, family and neighbours in them. They crammed their rooms with every conceivable form of furnishing and bric-à-brac, but made sure that the taste for comfort (the famed *gezelligheid*) not luxury, could be inspected through open doors or, more likely, the broad-glazed frontage of their homes.

The Dutch were not the first culture to make a fetish of domesticity, but they did perhaps refine it more comprehensively than any previous urban society since the Romans. That they could do so without incurring the odium of wallowing in the world’s vanity was partly because ‘home’ was also invested with formidable moral connotations. A microcosm of the Fatherland itself, the “fountain and source of republics” as Dr. Johan van Beverwijk described it, the family household was regarded as the irreducible primary cell from which the community of the town, and ultimately the whole commonwealth, were constructed. It was not accidental that Vermeer and Metsu interiors show maps of the Republic hanging on walls, for the worlds of home and of homeland were intimately connected. The juxtaposition of a map of the ‘old’ Fatherland of the seven-

teen provinces with the figure of Clio in the Vienna *Allegory of Painting* by Vermeer, further reflects on Dutch self-consciousness about the historical place of their young nation, as well as its art. It was domicile which conferred the attributes of citizenship: membership of a religious congregation; of a guild; eligibility for the *schutter* civic guard; and for the giving (and in old age or hard times, the receipt) of charity. To possess *poorterschap* — the mark of residence — was, far more than a vote, the indispensable insignia of an active role in the life of the Dutch community.

Home was what another moralist called the “tabernacle of virtues”: a morally purified and vigilantly patrolled terrain where rude matter and beastly instinct — dirt, food, sex, sloth, idolatry — were subjected to the regulation of the enduring Christian virtues: sobriety, frugality, piety, humility, aptitude and loyalty. Home was the crucible in which licence was governed by prudence and the wayward habits of animals, children and footloose unmarried women, were transmuted into ordained harmony and grace. In paintings by de Hooch, Maes and Jan Steen, children are shown watching with quiet intentness the performance of diurnal tasks — the preparation of vegetables — or are bidden to prayer before a meal, the emblems of their instincts, broken toys, scattered on the floor. This conquest of vagrant licence (akin to the capriciousness and amorality of the external worlds of money and politics) by the enduring serenity of family life is aptly symbolised by the transformation of Dame *Fortuna* (usually represented as a woman standing on a globe), in van Beverwijk’s *Wtmentheit des Vrouwelijke Geslachten* (On the Excellence of the Female Sex) by a woman standing on a tortoise. Being the only member of the bestiary to carry its home on its back, thereby solving the tension, much felt in Dutch life, between mobility and durability, the motto appended was ‘East, west, home is best’. Significantly, in the background of the illustration, Adam is delving while in a rude but decent hut Eve spins. In Roemer Visscher’s *Sinnepoppen*, one of the earliest and most popular emblem books in the Dutch style, the formula had already been reduced to the image of the tortoise and the simple legend: *Huis best*.

If Home was a kind of Netherlandish citadel, holding at bay the massed battalions of encroaching worldliness, not to mention schism, tyranny and vanity, its shock troops on the ramparts were, inevitably, the cohorts of women. Not infrequently the attributes of their work, especially those associated with cleansing, scouring, and purifying, were given martial associations. Kenau Hasselaer, the doughty matron of Haarlem who, as every school-child learned, had led the women of the town to harass and defy the besieging Spanish troops in 1573, is shown in some chap books and popular histories as wielding an arsenal of brooms, mops, griddle irons, pokers and pails. Another of Roemer Visscher’s *Sinnepoppen* was a scrubbing brush, providentially extended from the



heavens, and primed for action along with a legend implying its work was to scour the world of the impure refuse of the past. In yet another instance a housewife is given the refrain:

“My brush is my sword, my broom my buckler.  
No peace can I know nor any rest;  
I rub and I shine, I polish and I scrub,  
And suffer no man to take away my tub.”

The converse to this militant detergency was the drowsy sluttishness more often invoked in genre painting: the sleeping kitchen maids of Maes and Vermeer, unwashed utensils and the like. The wanton chaos into which unwatched households lapsed — the scavenging of food by animals and children; the cutting of purses and fouling of dishes — all testified to the awful consequences of dereliction of domestic duty. Sleeping, or slouching figures recur over and again in genre painting, not only in kitchen scenes where they are slumped in the attitude of *Acedia* (as portrayed by Philips Galle), but in Jan Steen’s hymn to the hangover, the Hermitage *Revellers*; in brothel scenes where sleeping clients have pockets rifled, and in the torpid figure of Carel Fabritius’s *Sentry* (Schwerin), possibly based on ter Brugghen’s *Sleeping Mars* in the Utrecht Museum.

The governance of the household, then, acted as an analogue to the government of the wider community, and within its domain women, so far from being confined to the passive, acquiescent, obedient role destined for them by both Erasmus and Calvin (albeit on different premises) were often the arbiters of authority. When philanthropy took the form of reproducing the community of a *home* or that of domiciliary assistance, there was never any question but that the responsibility for its supervision should be confided to both men and women.

This assertive role, predictably generated unease among Dutch men. Only one commentator, Dr van Beverwijk, whose authority and reputation on home medicine, herbals, baby-rearing and such like was as potent as, say, Benjamin Spock’s in the 1950s and 60s — was bold enough to argue that they were in many respects not only the equal but the superior of men; better able to stand physical pain; endowed with tenderness, fortitude, courage, constancy all of which were conspicuously lacking in the opposite sex. The mere, extraordinary fact of the agonies of childbirth followed by their utmost care and solicitousness for the infant cause of their pain should, he insisted be proof of their mettle. “To those who argue” he wrote, “that women are fit only to manage the house and no more, I reply that many women go from the home and practice trade and the arts and learning. Only let woman come to the exercise of other matters and they will show that they are capable of all things.”

However gratifying, van Beverwijk’s eulogy was untypical. Far more characteristic, and, as the crudeness of their engravings and woodcuts suggest, intended for a popular market, was the outpouring of

misogynist literature that gathered momentum through the century. Written on the lines of Swetnam’s *Arraignment of Lewd and Idle Women*, books like the *Spiegel der Quade Vrouwen* (Mirror of Wicked Women, 1644), or the more diverting *Huwlijks Doolhof* (Marriage Maze) of Jan de Mol (1634) or the *Biegt der Getrouwde* (The Trap of the Betrothed) by Hieronymus Sweerts (1679), all scorned the institution of marriage as a trap sprung by unscrupulous females for the enslavement and ruin of gullible males. In another Sweerts book, the *Tien Vermakelijkheden der Houwelijks* (The Ten Amusements of Marriage), a forlorn suitor’s meagre dowry is rapidly consumed by his young wife’s insatiable appetite for fashionable clothes, immensely expensive furniture and lavish entertainment. Supposing herself infertile he bears the brunt of her hysterics as well as the bill from a fraudulent old Jew who supplies her with the alleged antidote. Pregnant, she then develops predictably expensive cravings for white plums, asparagus and pineapple, and the hapless spouse, his profits sinking into a quagmire of debt, flees interminable visits from local gossips to the tavern where his dissipation squanders the family fortunes. A grim epilogue has him hopelessly and helplessly sozzled; his wife having taken over the running of the drapery business, and his son bankrupting his father by leading a life of vice and violence at Leiden University. Running through these and other stories, is the premise that women are capable of any act of ruthless guile to trick impressionable spouses. An engraving in this vein (Fig. 4) has a young bride availing herself of the barber surgeon to relieve herself of the unwanted pregnancy which would otherwise tarnish her nuptial credentials.

The fear of shrews, harpies, succubi, and deceitful and vengeful women leading heroes to their ruin ensured a great vogue for Delilahs and Potiphar’s wives in Dutch history painting. But it also drew on ancient Netherlandish folk traditions. The pregnant bride was a contemporary version of the game of the *vuile bruid* (dirty bride) played by young girls at kermis or may time, and included in Bruegel’s *Battle Between Carnival and Lent*. The most hair-raising instance of an army of hell-raising women is surely another Bruegel: the unnerving *Dulle Griet* (Mad Meg). One of the few paintings to depict hostilities conducted by the hearth, as it were, is Jan Miense Molenaer’s *Sense of Feeling* in the Mauritshuis where a man is being soundly thrashed by a woman wielding a lethal clog. The accompanying *Sense of Smell* it will be recalled, has a mother wiping her baby’s bottom and a man holding his nose in the background. In the *Tien Vermakelijkheden* the young wife’s subjection of her husband is signalled by her broomstick raised in triumph like a flagpole, over the conjugal table where he sits in wretched thrall enduring the ceaseless prattle of her friends. All these scenes are variants on the venerable — and international — genre of the Battle for the Trousers. A seventeenth and eighteenth-century Dutch version, in strip cartoon form (Fig. 5) *Jan de Wasscher*, has a hen-pecked husband capitulating by



Fig. 4. Cornelius Danckertsz: 'The Abortion', engraving. Douce Collection (Portfolio 139, No. 988), Bodleian Library, Oxford.

surrendering his breeches to his wife and adopting the female roles of house-cleaning, cooking and child-rearing, being soundly beaten by his wife on one occasion for maltreating the infant. Still more drastically, the *Toneel der Vrouwelike Wraakgierigheid* (The Drama of Woman's Vindictiveness) tells the story of a cuckolded husband who, tearfully beseeched by his wife, foregoes his right to have her executed for her crime. Some time later when he in his turn is caught committing the same transgression his wife actually wields the executioner's sword herself (Fig. 6).

None of this, of course, should be taken as a literal account of the conquest of Dutch masculinity by Dutchwomen. A good deal of it — even what might be classified as the Samson-Holofernes syndrome: a terror of emasculation or decapitation — represents the rites of inversion, expressly designed to reinforce, rather than subvert, prevailing norms of sexual authority. But the obsessions do indicate nagging anxieties concerning women — such as midwives, nurses and procuresses — who were strategically placed to conspire against helpless men. The most disingenuous, or possibly irrational, of these prejudices concerned serving and kitchen maids. House-

holds with more than two servants, both female, were relatively rare in urban Holland except among the patrician élite. In the vast majority of 'burgher' homes, the traditional entourage of servants had been stripped down to the barest minimum with the result that the single serving girl assumed disproportionate significance. That significance was further enhanced by the absence of marked social deference associated elsewhere with domestic service. Maids ate with their employers, addressed them familiarly, and sometimes slept in the same room or in the room of the children. Nor was the strict demarcation of labour observed between them. Maids acted as cooks, cleaners, nurses, and — not least important — companions and dressers for the wife.

If, then, the housewife role represented the incarnation of vigilant virtue in women, the maid was held to incarnate the opposing qualities: sin and corruption. *Zeven Duyvelen Regerende de Hedendaagse Dienst-Maagden* (Seven Devils Ruling Present Day Serving Maids) by the immensely popular Simon de Vries, the fourth edition of which appeared in 1682, was typical of a genre portraying maids as minions of the Devil, doing his bidding in seven capacities, loosely





Fig. 5. 'De Vernieuwde Jan de Wascher', Kolm Kinderprint c. 1700. Atlas van Stolk, Rotterdam.

corresponding to the seven deadly sins: thus, the Argumentative Maid smashing the crockery (Ira), the Gluttonous Maid, thieving from the pantry (Gula) and so on. By carrying on these nefarious activities within the hallowed portals of the home, they were in effect, acting as a kind of fifth column for Satan, in a literal sense, desecrating a temple. And in another de Vries book *Het Leven en Bedryf van de Hedendaagsche Haagsche en Amsterdamsche Zalet-Juffers* (The Lives and Deeds of Present Day Amsterdam and Hague Parlour Madames), serving maids were classed along with witches and sorceresses as imps of hell. In this work they were thought not merely to act wickedly themselves, but actively to cultivate the corruption of their mistresses, encouraging them in iniquitous extravagance such as fashionable clothing and jewellery, sumptuous entertainments, or insinuating paramours into the household unbeknown to its master. In Dutch painting — with the exception of Jan Steen — the treatment of serving girls is distinctly less crude and phobic than in popular literature. Often, as in Metsu genre scenes, they act as go-betweens, delivering or receiving letters, though in the Rijksmuseum *Love Letter* by Vermeer, the maid's knowing smirk is in decided contrast to the apprehensive expression assumed by her mistress. Gerrit Dou and van Mieris often have them bringing the

'physician' to inspect specimen evidence of *minnepein* love sickness (pregnancy); and apart from Willem van Odekerken's wry studies, only Maes, of the popular genre painters made his maids party to, or eavesdroppers on, some not very sensational peccadillo.

Historically, serving maids were more likely to end up as victim than exploiter. For every case in which employers who had impregnated them behaved (like Descartes) with a modicum of decency, there were hundreds where brutal eviction was the common outcome. If Rembrandt lived amicably with Hendrickje Stoffels as his concubine (for which, of course, she was summoned to answer charges of 'fornication' before the Church council), he hounded her unfortunate predecessor Geertje Dircx into the Gouda House of Correction with extreme vindictiveness. The *confessieboeken* records of the courts of first instance in Amsterdam are full of pathetic case histories of girls driven out of households by incensed wives or by hypocritical masters laying the blame for their own, or their son's deed on an apprentice, or exclusively on the head of the girl herself. Often they would attempt to maintain themselves during the pregnancy and nursing months by seamstress and laundress work, but not long after would drift into the ubiquitous trade of the milieu into which they had been driven — part-time or full-time prostitution. Just as in the





Fig. 6. 'De Toneel der Vrouwelicke Wraakgierheid' (The Drama of Woman's Vindictiveness). Douce Collection (Portfolio 141, No. 29), Bodleian Library, Oxford.

scenarios described by Defoe's novels in Hanoverian London, they would accompany this by petty theft, stealing from clients too frightened of public ignominy to pursue them, or using contacts inside burgher houses to lift goods from cellars and cupboards. The penalties for thieving from houses where servants were employed were very severe in Amsterdam: six weeks in the stocks on bread and water for the very smallest items; six months in the *Spinhuis* and a public flogging for the occasional item of cutlery or glass. For common whores, taken in periodic round-ups (usually of premises neglecting to pay their dues to the constabulary), sentences varied according to previous histories. First offenders might be let off with an expulsion from the city, though very few girls seem to have returned chastened to their place of origin: usually the country areas of Brabant, Gelderland, or further afield in Cleves, Julich, or the Hansa ports. More hardened malefactors might get a spell in the *Spinhuis*; public display on the city pillory; or in cases combined with theft or violence even a flogging, branding or mutilation.

Much has been made of the egregious errors of pre-iconographic generations of art historians in ascribing household and family motifs to what have subsequently been identified as 'brothel scenes', the most

notorious case being ter Borch's picture in the Rijksmuseum once known as *The Paternal Admonition* and actually showing a transaction between customer, madame and whore. Yet in some respects the confusion is entirely understandable given the extreme delicacy and subtlety with which artists like ter Borch and Metsu treat erotic subjects. The insertion of a vulgar innuendo — two dogs copulating in a corner of a van Mieris scene — is relatively rare. More frequently the nature of sexual bargaining (and in these matters art historians might like to recall that money, as well as sex, was something of a Dutch fixation) is represented by the visual equivalent of a wink, a leer or a nudge: the proffering of a single coin, or a glass of wine held at the stem, or a strategically placed foot. The point of this symbolism was not to expose sexual behaviour but to shroud it behind a gauze of allusions and metaphors. The intention, in other words, was to elicit the knowing smile of *double-entendre*, not the gleeful cackle. A gaffe in which a brazen trollop (although none of ter Borch's women seem to me the least bit brazen) could be mistaken for a penitent daughter is only risible if the dividing lines between the worlds of vice and virtue, wives and wantons, are so distinct as to make such a blunder pitiable. Bluntly put, the new orthodoxy of the icono-



graphy of genre paintings holds that, *once deciphered*, such distinctions were indeed starkly self-evident. Whatever coherence such a view might have within its own terms of reference it must be said that it finds no support from evidence located elsewhere in Dutch cultural and social history, except, that is, in the pieties of Calvinist theology. For the rest, something like the very opposite seems to be the case, suggesting a culture vulnerably bereft of watertight compartments of experience, moral and material, sacred and profane. As much as its pastors prayed it might not be so, they were incapable of preventing the norms and values of one realm leaking into the domain of the other. The exemplary story of a young girl leaving her Brabant village to seek domestic service in one of the great Holland towns, finding acceptance in an informal and companionable household, only to suffer disgrace, eviction and the wretchedness of prostitution before vanishing anonymously into the sticks from whence she came — traverses what was, in effect, a seamless and continuous society. Just as today's innocent kitchen maid could become tomorrow's harlot, so today's *pronkmadame* (lady of fashion) might be abused as tomorrow's courtesan. Much of the obsessive 'unveiling' of genre 'brothel scenes' often in locations painted with the utmost elegance and refinement, is based on an historical misapprehension. For there was no hard and fast distinction between a tavern (*herberg*) and a brothel (*bordeel*). The premises where whores congregated to pick up clients were relatively rarely the places where they gratified them. Most of the renowned Amsterdam *musicos* for, example, laid on dancing, music and abundant drink, and the powerful women who owned them extracted either a commission or a flat fee from the girls for making the assignation. But it was often a strict house rule that they should then take their client elsewhere. The girls, then, were not the inmates of a 'closed house' but more akin to oriental bar-girls, while the 'procuress' derived most of her income from drink, not sex. Equally it was entirely possible to spend an evening at one of these establishments smoking, play-

ing cards or tric-trac, and getting drunk without spending more money on women. Thus, contrary to Madlyn Kahr, 'taverns' were certainly not interchangeable with 'brothels' either in reality, or one doubts, in genre painting. Likewise the notion of a 'red light' district in which whorehouses would be concealed from the view of decent citizens, was a nineteenth-century, not a seventeenth-century institution. In seventeenth-century Amsterdam, the more riotous *musicos* and dens where girls could be hired were scattered around the older parts of the city as far apart as the Houthuinen and the Heiligerswegpoort — depending on the kind of clientèle they sought to attract. Like painters, Dutch prostitutes also specialised in styles of work, it seems.

This uncompartimentalised world, fraught with confusion, disguise, ambiguities and stratagems was, by definition, riddled with anxiety (even if Calvin had not added his own brand). In keeping with its undifferentiated components, women were rarely seen as exclusively given to either vice or virtue; to the purified world of the conjugal home, or the soiling world of vanity and lust. It was precisely the daunting suspicion that the two identities — paragon and hussy — might cohabit within the same frame that, literally, *bedevilled* Dutch men. It also gave rise to the abundant imagery of snapped tension — the broken *krakelingen* biscuits (pretzels), pulled rather like wishbones and symbolising the struggle of good and evil, which litter the floor of genre pictures. Culture and nature; morality and instinct, were locked in perpetual and unresolvable combat in the Dutch mentality, and the most successful genre paintings are two-way mirrors reflecting the outer world of polite or impolite behaviour, and the inner world of doubt and apprehension. At their most exquisite — like Vermeer's *Woman and Two Men* in Brunswick, or the *Interior Scene of de Hooch* in the London National Gallery — they might almost be classified as 'temptation' scenes, for they convey moments of delicate drama when the pure and the impure collide in a milieu of seductive affability.