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THE WHORE, THE BAWD, AND THE ARTIST: THE REALITY AND IMAGERY OF SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY DUTCH PROSTITUTION

Lotte C. van de Pol

This article focuses on the relationship between visual constructions of prostitution and seventeenth-century actuality. Although the Protestant Dutch Republic criminalized prostitution, it still flourished, above all, in the port city of Amsterdam. Drawing on a multitude of observations from the criminal records, the essay lays out the main characteristics of this trade, including descriptions of the behavior and the appearance of both the bawds who operated as “peddlers of vice” and the prostitutes in their thrall. These real-life women stand in contrast to the attractive and luxuriously clad whores and the old and ugly procuresses in the bordello paintings. Ultimately, both painted types owe a greater debt to visual traditions and cultural views of women than to the historical record. In the paintings (and in prints) women are depicted as seducers and men as fools, the forbidden sexuality they portray being implicitly blamed on the women, who are understood as being inspired by the devil. DOI: [10.5092/jhna.2010.2.1.3](https://doi.org/10.5092/jhna.2010.2.1.3)



Fig. 1 Gerrit van Honthorst, *The Procuress*, 1625, oil on panel, 71 x 104 cm. Centraal Museum, Utrecht, inv. no. 10786 (artwork in the public domain)

1 **B**rothel scenes (*bordeeltjes*) are a familiar type of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting (fig. 1). Their popularity poses many questions. In the first place: Who bought these pictures? In a country where prostitution, procuring, and adultery were criminal offenses, where the word *hoererij* (whoredom) denoted any kind of nonmarital sexual intercourse, and where religious piety was deeply felt not only by Calvinists but by people of other denominations, a market still existed for pictures of half-nude, lascivious women whose charms were obviously for sale.¹ Secondly, we may well ask: Where were these paintings hung? Evidence suggests they found a place in the halls and living quarters of respectable people.² Depictions of half-naked women hang, for example, in Petronella de la Court’s dolls’ house, which is an exact replica of her

own house down to the very paintings on the walls, though admittedly they appear only in the bedroom and “art room.”³ Nevertheless, like the seventeenth-century critic Gerard de Lairesse, who deplored such vulgar taste, we, too, may wonder what self-respecting woman, what respectable housewife and mother, would have allowed a picture of a prostitute to adorn her parlor in full view of her children, and whether she would have viewed such a painting as amusement or warning.⁴

- 2 In this article, I shall not grapple with the tension between the obvious sexual pleasure conveyed by many of the writings and pictures of the time and the adherence to a religion that stressed the sinfulness of bodily pleasure above all else.⁵ Instead, I shall confine myself to a more tangible question: What was the relationship between prostitution as represented in the paintings and prostitution as it existed in seventeenth-century Holland?



Fig. 2 Gerrit van Honthorst, *Merry Company (or The Prodigal Son)*, 1622, oil on canvas, 130 x 196 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. no. 1312 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 3 Frans van Mieris, *Sleeping Courtesan*, 1669 (?), oil on copper, 27.5 x 22.5 cm. Uffizi, Florence, (artwork in the public domain)

- 3 The brothel scenes primarily depict young and beautiful girls, sometimes accomplished musicians, who always appear eager and happy (fig. 2). But the pictures also include harlots of the common sort, who are lazy and insolent, drink too much, and cheat their clients in any way they can (fig. 3). Food and music accompany the business of prostitution. The proceedings are invariably presided over by a procurer (*koppelaarster*), a mercenary, ugly, often hideously grinning, old woman (fig. 4). The women are usually the most active figures in the scenes. The client is often a well-dressed young man from a good family, or a farmer or peasant of more advanced age, and the men are presented as fools who notice neither the cheating nor robbing. This is the image,⁶ but what can we discover about the reality of prostitution?

Early Modern Prostitution

- 4 As a phenomenon, prostitution has never been absent from Western society, and it has always posed a problem for authorities. The policy choice is always between regulation, which makes the authorities a party to the vice, and prohibition, which cannot be totally enforced and drives the trade underground, allying it with crime. Prostitution was regulated in the late medieval cities of Western Europe, where it was restricted to particular quarters of the city or confined to municipal brothels.⁷ The Church, despite its antisexual and repressive doctrines, regarded prostitution as a necessary evil, made sadly unavoidable by the sinful state of humanity. Saint Thomas Aquinas (ca.

1225-1274), for example, stated that it was sensible to tolerate a lesser evil if a greater evil could thereby be avoided.⁸ Prostitutes were sinners, but sinners who could be saved and forgiven. And indeed, several female saints were converted prostitutes.



Fig. 4 Dirck van Baburen, *The Procuress*, 1622, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 107.6 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. no. 50.2721 (artwork in the public domain)

- 5 This attitude changed in the sixteenth century. A fierce epidemic of a new and mortal venereal disease, syphilis, swept over Europe, bringing with it a new fear of sex and generating a hatred of prostitutes and avoidance of brothels.⁹ Reformation authors fulminated against any toleration of prostitution. In the sixteenth century, the policy toward prostitution in Protestant Europe changed from regulation to prohibition and the Netherlands were no exception. Whenever a city was taken over by the Calvinists during the course of the Dutch Revolt, one of the first acts of the new city government was to close down the municipal brothels and to suppress prostitution. In Amsterdam, this happened in 1578. All forms of illicit sex became criminal offenses to be dealt with by criminal courts. Prostitution as such was not mentioned; the word dates only from the nineteenth century. In the early modern period, concern lay not with prostitution in its current sense but with *hoererij*, “whoring,” a word used for all sex outside the marriage bed, irrespective of whether money changed hands. “Public whores,” their procurers, and brothel-keepers, however, were accorded special punishments in municipal and provincial ordinances; brothels were to be “disturbed” and closed.
- 6 The transition from Catholic regulation to Protestant prohibition represented more than a change in prostitution policy. It marked a paradigm shift in the way the relationship between God and man was conceived. God no longer forgave sins, He punished them. Never absent from Christian teaching, the vengeful God of the Old Testament became an obsession throughout late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, as the Counter-Reformation took over Catholic countries.¹⁰ Prostitutes were no longer sinners who could be saved, they were malefactors who needed to be punished.
- 7 But were the strict morality laws really enforced? As might be expected, theory and practice differed. Unwed couples living together ran little risk of arrest. Adultery, however, was another story: it was viewed very seriously indeed. This was especially the case, it must be said, where the adulterers were wealthy (or, in Amsterdam, were Jews), because the charge of adultery could be bought off (“compounded”) with a third of the fine going to the bailiff personally. The prosecution of adultery in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Holland is one of the few examples of justice

bearing more heavily on the upper classes. As the easiest way to find adulterers was to raid brothels or pay brothel-keepers a fee for informing, the prosecution of adultery was closely connected to prostitution.

- 8 The suppression of prostitution as a trade was a nearly impossible job for the authorities: urbanized, seafaring, and wealthy Holland possessed too many characteristics favoring widespread prostitution. This applied most of all to Amsterdam, which, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was the third largest European city after Paris and London. In the first half of the seventeenth century, it grew rapidly to 200,000 inhabitants, of whom the majority were born outside its walls. It was the place where every year thousands of sailors signed on and even more were paid off. Like London and Paris, Amsterdam acquired an international reputation for prostitution. Beginning in the second half of the seventeenth century, at least a thousand prostitutes resided in the city at any one time, along with hundreds of brothel-keepers. They mostly operated out of whorehouses (*hoerhuizen*), often containing no more than one or two rooms where a bawd (*hoerewardin*) lived with one, two, or at most three harlots. Disreputable inns also employed waitresses who might be willing to prostitute themselves, and, from the last quarter of the seventeenth century onward, prostitutes could be found in *speelhuizen*, or music halls, sometimes also called *musicos*. Amsterdam was famous for the latter, with their live music and dancing, and their harlots ready to pick up clients. Given the scarcity of separate rooms in these establishments, the prostitutes usually took the men to the whorehouses where they lived with their bawd. As one of Amsterdam's prime tourist attractions, the music hall served to solidify the city's reputation for immorality. Hundreds of travel accounts attest to this.
- 9 Foreigners often wrote that the municipal government judged prostitution in a harbor city like Amsterdam as being impossible to suppress and that to do so was bad policy, so the city tolerated and even, secretly, regulated the trade. This was not true. Tolerance and informal regulation gradually became the rule only in the second half of the eighteenth century. In the seventeenth century, the city government would have preferred to chase the strumpets from town, but given a police force (comprising the bailiff, his substitutes, and their constables) of only thirty men, this was hardly feasible. Even so, prostitution was actively prosecuted: in Amsterdam prostitution and brothel-keeping accounted for more than a fifth of all convicted crimes from 1650 to 1750.¹¹
- 10 In this fast-growing city, immigrants and passing sailors lived in the poorest and most overcrowded neighborhoods near the harbor. Much prostitution was also located there, in the same neighborhood that is still today the red light district. Because so many men went to sea, Amsterdam had a large surplus of women. In the poorest neighborhoods, the ratio of adult women to men probably rose as high as three to two. Women dominated these neighborhoods, and not just numerically. Most keepers of lodging houses and secondhand shops were women, but so were half of the thieves, all the receivers, nearly all the brothel-keepers, and many of the keepers of disreputable inns. The authorities were forced to take female crime seriously -- and prostitution also counted as a criminal act. It is true that in some years prostitutes were left alone to a degree, and arrests were made mainly when neighbors complained or fighting or other disturbances of the peace occurred. But until the end of the eighteenth century prostitution was actively prosecuted, in many years in the form of round-ups by the police when specific neighborhoods were raided or when streetwalkers in certain areas were picked up. In such years, one hundred to two

hundred women were arrested and tried: a substantial number given the size of the police force. Even if the punishments were not very severe compared to those for adultery, they hardly constituted toleration or action just for appearance's sake.¹² The most severe prosecution occurred in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the years following the change of government of 1672, when the Orangist party returned to power and Calvinist influence rose to its height. During this period the consistory court of the Reformed Church saw fit to send a letter thanking the city government and the bailiff for their policy of greater severity, naturally expressing the hope that this policy would last.

Confessieboeken

- 11 The prosecution of prostitution in Amsterdam in those years is a real boon to historians. The Judicial Records furnish much information both on the prostitution trade itself and on the people involved in it. Especially the *Confessieboeken der Gevangenen* (literally, the Books of the Confessions of the Prisoners), containing the interrogations before the court, constitute a very rich source. They have been preserved in their entirety, which, for early modern cities, is unique. In the hundred years between 1650 and 1750, 5,784 people involved in prostitution appeared in court in 8,099 separate trials: 4,633 as prostitutes and 898 as bawds, as well as 253 men who had organized or profited from prostitution. All were asked to state their name, birthplace, age, professional training, and marital status. These data, together with other information brought out during the questioning, allow us both to compose a “collective biography” of prostitutes and brothel-keepers and to reconstruct the reality of prostitution. It will not come as a surprise that these records present a picture different from the one found in the paintings: hard, ugly facts compared with beautiful and amusing images. Still, to an extent, the images are rooted in reality.
- 12 As the brothel paintings cluster in the 1600s, I will focus on the period 1650-99 for a closer look at the reality of prostitution. In these fifty years, 3,149 women were convicted as prostitutes for the first time. Around 20 percent of these were arrested as streetwalkers. Most were between eighteen and twenty-five years old. A few were younger, but quite a number were older: on average their age was twenty-three. Only one in five was born in Amsterdam itself, half came from the rest of the Dutch Republic, the rest had immigrated from Germany or Scandinavia. It is striking that the majority were born and bred in cities. When asked about their profession they usually listed sewing, seamstressing, spinning, lace making, or silk twining. Some mentioned peddling vegetables or turning wheels at diamond factories or other low paid, unskilled jobs.¹³ A minority called themselves maidservants, a designation that very often entailed work for an inn or brothel. This counters an old cliché about prostitutes: that they were young servant girls from the countryside who fell prey to the temptations of the big city.¹⁴
- 13 The prostitutes mostly hailed from the lower classes, or even from the marginal groups of urban societies. Bernard Mandeville, a Dutchman who emigrated to England and spent several months in Amsterdam in 1700, described the apparently well-dressed prostitutes in *speelhuizen* as “the Scum of the People, and generally such as in the Day time carry Fruit and other Eatables about in Wheel-Barrows. The Habits indeed they appear in at Night are very different from their ordinary Ones; yet they are commonly so ridiculously Gay, that they look more like the *Roman* Dresses of strolling Actresses than Gentlewomen's Clothes: If to this you add the awkwardness, the hard Hands, and course breeding of the Damsels that wear them, there is no great Reason to fear, that

many of the better sort of People will be tempted by them.”¹⁵

- 14 This description hardly squares with the elegant and accomplished women in many brothel paintings. And indeed, no class of educated courtesans existed in the Netherlands. It is true, however, that prostitutes tried to ape the clothing and finery of upper-class women, and Mandeville was not the only contemporary writer to identify such attire as mere outward adornment. Such comments, however, also reflected the deeply rooted conviction that people should dress according to their rank and station in life. Statutes dating from 1663, 1682, and 1734 even forbade Amsterdam maids from wearing costly fabrics, fashionable garments, lace, or gold -- items that maidservants surely could not afford out of their wages -- which would only lead to “disloyalty, theft, whoring, and other foul acts,” as well as to “pride.”¹⁶ These rules and sentiments did not deter the prostitutes. The Confession Books testify that quite a few prostitutes wore such fashionable clothing as satin gowns, even if they were secondhand, *fontanges* (high headdresses with ribbons), locks of artificial hair, and even makeup. Such finery was often confiscated by the judiciary, although prostitutes might first have to serve their sentences in the Spin House “clothed in the gay habiliments of love, adorned with plumes of feathers on their heads, patched and painted,” as the English traveler Joseph Shaw wrote. Prisoners in the Spin House were on show as a warning about what happened to wayward women.¹⁷

The Procuress



Fig. 5 Dirck van Baburen, *The Procuress*, 1623, oil on canvas, 109.2 x 132.1 cm. Residenz, Würzburg, (artwork in the public domain)

- 15 In the paintings, procuresses are key figures (fig. 5), indeed *koppelaarster* (procuress) is the frequent title for this type of painting, so they certainly deserve special treatment here. Who was this *koppelaarster*? Here image and reality differ. First a comment on terms. *Koppelaarster* was a medieval term that continued to see some usage in legal texts and in literature. In real life, in the seventeenth century, the female organizers of prostitution were called *hoerewaardinnen* (here translated as bawds) and the word for procuresses, (of whom there were a few, who specialized in mediating) was *hoerebesteedsters*.¹⁸ In regard to age, the *Confessieboeken* make clear that by no means all bawds were old. On average they were thirty-five years old, but 40 percent were younger than thirty; some of them were of the same age as their whores. Even if a minority of the brothel-keepers can be found in earlier *Confessieboeken* as prostitutes, more often they embarked on their careers as brothel-keepers via another route and sometimes already in their twenties. The greatest difference between the prostitutes and bawds was their social and financial capital. While prostitutes were almost all single and if married, with husbands away at sea or otherwise

absent, half of the brothel-keepers were married or were living with a man. Often they had family members also involved with brothel-keeping or other forms of crime. But the most important difference was their financial situation: the bawds had money or credit, the whores did not.

- 16 The strongest hold the bawd had over the prostitute was tied to the debts the girl owed her. Debts were first of all contracted for clothes. Clothes were expensive: A woman of the lower classes usually possessed only a few garments, generally of coarse material and drab colors, and would never earn enough money to buy the silks and satins she saw worn by rich women in prosperous Amsterdam. A girl embarking on a career as a prostitute needed pretty clothing, and a bawd could provide her with a fine outfit on credit. Indeed, in reality, the bawd tempted the girl into becoming a prostitute by showing her beautiful clothes and dangling before her a life of leisure, gaiety, and dancing, with plenty to eat and drink.
- 17 The *Confessieboeken* show the bawd usually managing only one or two girls at a time, and the brothel rarely housing more than two. (When clients outnumbered girls, whores from a nearby brothel were fetched by a servant.) There were several ways by which the bawd made money out of these girls. The usual arrangement (*accoord*) in a whorehouse was that in return for their board and lodging, the prostitutes shared with the brothel-keeper half their earnings. It was usual for the clients to be served drink and food, and the bawds made money on the sale of these consumptions and on the rent charged for use of the beds. She also profited from the clothes sold or sometimes hired out to the whores. It goes without saying that both consumables and clothes were priced high above their actual value.
- 18 Then there was payment in kind. With food being the largest item in the lower-class budget, if someone bought a girl a meal, this could mean the equivalent of a half day's work. Clients were encouraged to eat and drink, but they were joined in the meal by the prostitutes and the brothel-keeper and sometimes even the maid. If clients did not object to the bill and paid it, this constituted no small part of the women's profits.
- 19 The organization of prostitution was a predominantly female matter.¹⁹ Only about one in five of those arrested for brothel-keeping were men, and they were nearly always the husbands or partners of bawds; husbands often declared the business of prostitution their wife's affair and usually got off with light sentences. It is worth noting that contemporary writings sometimes mention "pimps" (*pollen*), but such individuals rarely appear in the *Confessieboeken*. So why were the "whore-managers" nearly always women? The answer lies in the functioning of the preindustrial economy: bawds essentially operated as small traders, peddlers in vice. Petty trading throughout preindustrial Europe was women's work, with seventeenth-century Holland no exception. Add to this the traditional custom according to which women supervised the household, including female personnel. In sum, brothel-keeping and procuring functioned as illegal forms of typical women's work. A man who performed such work would taint his honor.
- 20 As for the third party in the brothel paintings, the clients, judicial records give little numerical information for a group that as a rule escaped arrest. However, from the stories told before the court, it is clear that sailors of the VOC (East India Company) were among the main clients, which is consistent with contemporary belief.

The Literary Image

- 21 Not only did paintings construct images of prostitute, bawd, and client but so, too, did popular writings of the time. In the seventeenth century, literally hundreds of prose works, farces, song-books, pamphlets, and other writings feature sexual misconduct, whoring, prostitutes, and brothels.²⁰ Most of these texts are set in Amsterdam, and there is no doubt that they reflect a reality closer to real-life prostitution than the paintings. The literature introduces themes that are not found in the paintings, such as the venereal diseases (the pox and the clap) that befell both harlots and clients. But even so, in literature, we find all the familiar types: lewd prostitutes, mercenary bawds, and foolish clients. But in literature, special venom is reserved for prostitutes, by contrast with the paintings, which target procuresses. Just like “pictorial prostitutes,” “literary prostitutes” are active temptresses, but they are also depicted as bad women, too lazy to work, shamelessly surrendering to their evil, typically female, inclinations. These notions correspond to the medieval and early modern idea of the female as lusty, mercenary, deceitful, sweet-tongued liars.²¹
- 22 Several of these “whores’ stories” contain frontispieces that are especially emblematic. Good examples include *D’Openhertige Juffrouw, of d’ontdekte geveinsdheid (The Outspoken Damsel, or Hypocrisy Unmasked)*, the first volume appearing in 1680 and the second in 1681. Another is *‘t Amsterdamsch Hoerdom, behelzende de listen en streeken, daar zich de Hoeren en Hoere Waardinnen van dienen; benevens der zelve maniere van leeven, dwaaze bygelovigheden, en in’t algemeen alles’t geen by dese Juffers in gebruik is (The Whoredom of Amsterdam, Containing the Schemes and Tricks of which the Whores and Bawds Avail Themselves; as well as their Way of Life, Foolish Superstitions, and in General Everything that is Customary among these Damsels)*, which appeared in 1681. Both books were published in Amsterdam, frequently reprinted until the end of the eighteenth century, and translated into several languages. Indeed, *‘t Amsterdamsch Hoerdom* was published simultaneously in a French edition (*Le Putanisme d’Amsterdam*). *D’Openhertige Juffrouw* appeared in London in 1683 as *The London Jilt: or, the Politick Whore*, a translation/adaptation that transposes all names, places, and other details from Holland to England: Amsterdam becomes London, the typical Dutch phrase “hanging over the lower half of the door” becomes “standing before the door,” and so forth. It was and still is considered to be an original English work, the forerunner of Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722) and John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Lady of Pleasure (Fanny Hill)* (1748).
- 23 *D’Openhertige Juffrouw* is a fictional autobiography of a fashionable and successful Amsterdam prostitute. At first glance, the (anonymous) author appears supportive of women, suggesting, for example, that women should enjoy the same sexual freedom as men and complaining that men devise laws to the detriment of women. Despite these avowals of a “feminist” position, the book dwells at great length on the many forms of deceit practiced by women. Female chastity is a sham; all women are born whores. In *‘t Amsterdamsch Hoerdom*, a man (from Rotterdam) tells how in his sleep he is taken on a tour of the Amsterdam music halls and brothels. His guide is the devil himself, and the two of them witness scandalous deeds and deceptions so appalling that even the devil proclaims himself horrified. “The life of whores and bawds is full of deceit and falsehood” summarizes the central message of *‘t Amsterdamsch Hoerdom*, and this is illustrated by numerous examples of women as cunning, hypocritical, mercenary, cantankerous swindlers, and of their customers as featherbrained fools. It admits nothing positive about any of the women depicted.

Even among themselves these women fight, cheat, and swear. In a whorehouse everything is fraud and delusion; behind the attractive facade of a whore lie poison and putrefaction.



Fig. 6 Frontispiece from *D'Openhertige Juffrouw, of d'ontdekte geveinsdheid (The Outspoken Damsel, or Hypocrisy Unmasked)*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1680 and 1681).



Fig. 7 Frontispiece from *'t Amsterdamsch Hoerdom* (Amsterdam: van Rijn, 1681).

- 24 The frontispieces of these and comparable books reveal the origin of women's evil disposition -- the Devil. The second volume of *D'Openhertige Juffrouw* bears a frontispiece picturing a devil standing behind a seated whore counting her money with a satisfied look (fig. 6). The frontispiece of *'t Amsterdamsch Hoerdom* includes three devils (fig. 7). One whispers evil thoughts into the whore's ear, while another makes two well-dressed young men crawl through the dust before her. The whore and the standing devil have planted their feet on the men's necks. A third devil sits contentedly next to a woman lying in a "grease bed"; she is salivating as a result of mercury treatment for the pox. Another victory for the devil.

The Visual Images

- 25 The theme of venal love was a typically Northern European one and, more specifically, a feature of the art of the Low Countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The sixteenth century saw a rise in the number of representations of the prodigal son parable from which the episode with the harlots soon came to be singled out. Nearly at the same time, numerous tavern scenes and "merry companies," overlaid with such allegorical meanings as Luxury and Gluttony, were drawn, engraved, or painted. As Konrad Renger has pointed out, these were closely connected with the spendthrifts, gamblers, drinkers, whore-mongers, and fools who generally abound in the popular literature of the time, and who were, like their visual counterparts, meant to act as a warning rather than providers of mere amusement.²²
- 26 These sixteenth-century prodigal sons -- and the similar tavern scenes that included prostitutes -- have often been understood as the first examples of genre painting (figs. 8, 9), a term used here with its old meaning, a depiction of everyday life.²³ In these scenes, a lot of drinking takes place, with musicians playing, barmaids noting debts on a chalkboard, and procurers and harlots seducing foolish customers while robbing them of their purses and handing them on to male accomplices. Many of the same features are encountered again in the brothel scenes of the next century, especially in the paintings of Jan Steen (fig. 10). Differences abound, however, of which I will point out two. The sixteenth-century bordello scenes are often large in size and include a considerable number of figures, whereas the seventeenth-century whorehouse scenes are small both in scale and number of participants. This differentiation in size may well reflect reality. Where



Fig. 8 Jan Sanders van Hemessen, *Tavern or Brothel Scene*, ca. 1545-50, oil on panel, 83 x 111 cm. Karlsruhe, Kunsthalle, (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 9 The Brunswick Monogrammist (Jan van Amstel?), *Tavern or Brothel Scene*, ca. 1540, oil on panel, 29 x 45 cm. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, inv. no. 558 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 10 Jan Steen, *Robbery in a Brothel*, ca. 1665-68, oil on canvas, 410 x 350 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. R.F.301 (artwork in the public domain)

prostitution was tolerated and regulated, large and open brothels could develop; where prostitution was forbidden and prosecuted, it retreated to small, secret places. A second difference is that fighting women frequent sixteenth-century pictures but never those from the seventeenth century (fig.9).²⁴ Women were traditionally viewed as violent and irrational.²⁵ Of course, men also fought, but, apparently, never without a reason (that is, if we include drunkenness, which was considered an understandable cause of misbehavior at the time). The disappearance of fighting women from paintings is remarkable in so far as they still appeared in seventeenth-century literature, for example in the above-mentioned *'t Amsterdamsch Hoerdom*.

27 At the beginning of the seventeenth century, during trips to Italy, several young Utrecht artists learned to paint in the new, revolutionary style of Caravaggio, developing styles that gained them considerable fame and influence back in their hometown. The most successful of these “Utrecht Caravaggisti,” Gerrit van Honthorst, introduced into this Italianate style a typically Northern theme: that of venal love. Honthorst painted several pictures, which today are known by such titles as *The Procuress*, *Merry Company*, and *Musical Group* (figs. 1, 2, 11, 12), all showing beautiful, accomplished, and richly dressed young courtesans, with surroundings and clients to match. The only discordant note in these works is the ever present procuress who, old, ugly, turbaned, and often vicious, is remarkably similar to the procuresses painted earlier by Jan van Hemessen. She is, in fact, a traditional type, embodying what were seen as the vices and evil influences of old



Fig. 11 Gerrit van Honthorst, *Merry Company*, ca. 1619-20, oil on canvas, 144 x 212 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, inv. no. 1890.730 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 12 Gerrit van Honthorst, *Musical Group*, ca. 1625, oil on canvas, 168 x 202 cm. Galleria Borghese, Rome, inv. no. 31 (artwork in the public domain)

women, a belief which took its most extreme form in the persecution of witches in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At the same time, possibly in imitation of Honthorst, another Utrecht painter, Dirck van Baburen, took up this theme.²⁶ Three much-copied prostitution pictures are known: two *Procuresses* and a *Prodigal Son* (figs. 4, 5, 13). The *Procuress*, now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (fig. 4), has some fame in art history: Vermeer both knew it and made use of it as a background painting in two of his own works; he also painted a version of the subject himself in 1656 (fig. 14).²⁷



Fig. 13 Dirck van Baburen, *The Prodigal Son*, 1623, oil on canvas, 110 x 154 cm. Mittelrheinisches Landesmuseum, Mainz, inv. no. 108 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 14 Johannes Vermeer, *The Procuress*, 1656, oil on canvas, 143 x 130 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, inv. no. 1335 (artwork in the public domain)

- 28 Despite their inclusion of the procuress, Baburen's prostitution scenes are far removed from the moralizing point of view of the sixteenth-century pictures depicting the prodigal son. In fact, the extremely thinly clothed girl in Baburen's *Prodigal Son* (fig. 13) and the procuress's obscene gesture of selling a rather unwilling girl in *The Procuress* of 1623 (fig. 5) give these pictures an almost pornographic appeal. Of course, the sexually titillating possibilities of the bordello theme must have attracted quite a few painters and buyers.
- 29 As we have seen, Amsterdam was the one Dutch city most notorious for its prostitution, and contemporary writings and travel accounts focus primarily on Amsterdam brothels and whores.

The majority of the *bordeeltjes*, however, were painted in other cities. Utrecht, of course, but the Haarlem painter Hendrick Pot's series of *bordeeltjes* should also be noted (figs. 15, 16, 17) (ca. 1630).²⁸ These brothel scenes are remarkable for their sobriety and the relative absence of symbolic or "superfluous" elements. Although they should be viewed in the pictorial context of the Haarlem painter Dirck Hals's merry company paintings, Pot's brothel scenes do seem to represent the small *hoerhuizen* that dominated the real-life prostitution of the times.



Fig. 15 Hendrick Pot, *Brothel Scene (A Merry Company at Table)*, ca. 1630, oil on oak, 32.3 x 49.6 cm. National Gallery, London, inv. no. NG1278 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 16 Hendrick Pot, *Brothel Scene (Elegant Company)*, ca. 1630, oil on panel, 41 x 56 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague, inv. no. 475 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 17 Hendrick Pot, *Scene in a Bordello*, c.1630, oil on panel, 36.8 x 48.3 cm. New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, Bequest of Bert Piso, inv. no. 81.265 (artwork in the public domain)

30 The last painter to be mentioned here is Jan Steen, who lived in both Leiden and Haarlem. In his large oeuvre at least forty brothel scenes can be found, among them many showing robberies in a brothel (fig. 10),²⁹ and many more depicting sexual relations of a dubious kind -- possibly prostitution in the modern sense, but certainly "whoredom" in its contemporary meaning (figs. 18, 19). In spite of the lively appearance of his pictures, Steen was a moralizer. Aspects of sixteenth-century moralizing and seventeenth-century writings on prostitution recur more often in his oeuvre than in the works of other seventeenth-century painters.

31 What can we conclude about the relationship between the image and the reality of Dutch prostitution? Undoubtedly, many elements in the *bordeeltjes* were true to life: the prominence of the procuresses (or rather bawds), the small scale of the brothels, the importance of eating and drinking, and the chances of getting drunk, cheated, and robbed. A few of these paintings may be used

as illustrations, but none can be considered historical documents on contemporary prostitution. The beautiful, accomplished courtesans painted by Honthorst and others were extremely rare in this “bourgeois” country with hardly any court life. Depictions of women owed more to traditional ideas of the lecherous and cheating character of women than to direct observation. Many objects in the paintings were included to point out a moral to the spectators, not because the walls of real brothels were hung with musical instruments or the floors littered with oyster shells. And it is obvious that the painters usually looked first to other paintings and not to any reality to be observed in their own cities.



Fig. 18 Jan Steen, *Oyster Meal*, ca. 1660-65, oil on oak, 38.1 x 31.5 cm. National Gallery, London, inv. no. NG2559 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 19 Jan Steen, *The Wench*, c. 1660-62, oil on canvas, 40 x 36.2 cm., Musée de l'Hotel Sandelin, Saint-Omer, inv. no. 0279 CM (artwork in the public domain)

- 32 Generally speaking, while much was depicted that was normal to prostitution, just as many more common aspects of prostitution were eliminated. We see harlots in whorehouses, but never streetwalkers. We see drunkenness, cheating, and robberies, but not fighting, police prosecution, the Spin House, or venereal diseases. We see inns and brothels, but never the famous music halls. We see musicians, but never dancing. We see young harlots, but not older ones. On the other hand, we see old and ugly procuresses, but never young bawds. For clients we see well-dressed, well-to-do youths, soldiers, even farmers, but never the sailors who formed so much of the clientele. In conclusion, I stress that, however seductive and true to life the brothel scenes may appear, they usually do not, or only partly, tell us of the reality of prostitution in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic.

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Fig. 19 Jan Steen, *The Wench*, c.1660-62, oil on canvas, 40 x 36.2 cm., Musée de l'Hotel Sandelin, Saint-Omer, inv. no. 0279 CM (artwork in the public domain)

¹ For the omnipresence of religion, see A. Th. van Deursen, *Plain Lives in a Golden Age: Popular Culture, Religion and Society in the Seventeenth-Century Holland*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

² It is possible that Johannes Vermeer knew of Dirck van Baburen's *Procuress* because his mother-in-law owned a copy; see Christopher Brown, et al., *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1984), 131. Leonard Slatkes suggests instead that Vermeer knew the composition through his activities as art dealer; see Leonard J. Slatkes, *Dirck van Baburen (c. 1595-1624): A Dutch Painter in Utrecht and Rome* (Utrecht: Haentjens Dekker & Gumbert 1965), 118. An Amsterdam merchant is known to have owned a "Maria Magdalena" for which his mistress, the famous whore and madam Maria la Motte, had been the model. His wife objected to a painting of a prostitute in her house and used the painting in the divorce case against her husband; see S. A. C. Dudok van Heel, "Het 'Gewoonlijck Model' van de schilder Dirck Bleker," *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 29 (1981): 214-20, and Eric Jan Sluiter, *Rembrandt and the Female Nude* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 315. See also Klaske Muizelaar and Derek Phillips, *Picturing Men and Women in the Dutch Golden Age: Paintings and People in Historical Perspective* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), chap. 6: Erotic Images in the Domestic Interior: Cultural Ideals and Social Practices.

³ The dolls' house is owned by the Centraal Museum, Utrecht. See Jet Pijzel-Dommisse, *Het*

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⁴ Gerard de Lairese, *Het Groot Schilderboek* (1707). Cited by Christopher Brown, *Images of a Golden Past: Dutch Genre Painting of the 17th Century* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 61. (Originally published in Dutch as “...Niet ledighs of ydels...”; *Nederlandse genreschilders uit de 17e eeuw* [Amsterdam, 1984]).

⁵ Simon Schama, “Wives and Wantons: Versions of Womanhood in 17th century Dutch Art,” *Oxford Art Journal* 3 (1980): 5-13, also deals with this contradiction. See also Simon Schama: “The Unruly Realm: Appetite and Restraint in Seventeenth Century Holland,” *Daedalus* 108 (1979): 103-23.

⁶ In the discussion of the painted image of prostitution, I will confine myself to the clear cases of *bordeeltjes* and not include the “proposals” and “seductions,” where a young girl is offered money or a string of pearls by a man or an old woman. Examples of “propositions” include paintings by Judith Leyster (Mauritshuis, The Hague), Jan van Bijlert (Centraalmuseum, Utrecht and Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Kassel), and Gerard ter Borch, (Louvre, Paris). I will also not address the theme of “unequal lovers,” where a rich old man propositions a young girl, or a rich old woman propositions a young man. Examples include paintings by Quentin Massys (National Gallery, Washington, D.C.) and several by Jan Steen. I will also exclude pictures that exhibit illicit sexuality, but where professional prostitution is not certain. Examples include paintings by Frans van Mieris (Mauritshuis) and Jan Steen (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

⁷ The following discussion of the reality of prostitution is based on Lotte C. van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams Hoerdom: Prostitutie in de Zeventiende en Achttiende Eeuw* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1996), translated and reworked as *The Burgher and the Whore: Prostitution in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁸ Van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams Hoerdom*, 151, and Leah Lydia Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society: The History of an Urban Institution in Languedoc* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 158.

⁹ Oswei Temkin, “On the History of ‘Morality and Syphilis,’” in *The Double Face of Janus, and Other Essays in the History of Medicine*, ed. Oswei Temkin (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), 471-84.

¹⁰ Jean Delumeau, *Le péché et la peur: La culpabilisation en Occident (XIIIe-XVe siècles)* (Paris, 1983).

¹¹ Pieter Spierenburg, *Judicial Violence in the Dutch Republic* (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 1978), 86.

¹² The same suppression of prostitution is to be found in the first half of the seventeenth century. See A. Hallema. “Bestraffing van huwelijksontrouw en bestrijding van de prostitutie te Amsterdam in de jaren 1613-1621,” *Tijdschrift voor Strafrecht* 9 (1961): 321-40.

¹³ The same holds for the prostitutes of Leiden in the eighteenth century. See D. J. Noordam, “Prostitutie in Leiden in de 18e eeuw,” in *Leidse Facetten: Tien studies over Leidse geschiedenis*, ed. Dick E. H. de Boer (Zwolle: Waanders, 1982), 65-103, esp. 84-86, 88.

¹⁴ See, for example, Simon Schama, “Wives and Wantons,” 11-13.

¹⁵ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees, or, private vices, publick benefits* (London: J. Roberts, 1714), 75-76.

¹⁶ J. W. Bosch, “Rechtshistorische aantekeningen betreffende de overeenkomst tot het huren van dienstpersoneel,” part 1, *Themis* 92 (1931): 355-418 (see p. 412); part 2, *Themis* 93 (1932): 23-92,

esp. 81-82.

¹⁷ Joseph Shaw, *Letters to a Nobleman from a Gentleman Traveling Through Flanders and France* (London, 1709), 43-44.

¹⁸ The bawd of the paintings is recognizable in an Amsterdam ordinance of 1466, where such women are described as “ugly old bitches, who will do anything for money, gifts, or a bite of tasty food.” Quoted in *Rechtsbronnen der stad Amsterdam*, ed. J. C. Breen (The Hague, 1902), 126.

¹⁹ This seems to have been the rule in early modern Europe; see Noordam, “Prostitutie in Leiden,” 74; Colin Jones, “Prostitution and the Ruling Class in Eighteenth-Century Montpellier,” *History Workshop* 6 (1978): 7-28, esp. 17.

²⁰ J. H. Böse, “Had de mensch met één vrouw niet kunnen leven,”: *Prostitutie en overspel in de literatuur van de zeventiende eeuw* (Zutphen, The Netherlands: Walburg Pers, 1985).

²¹ See, for example, Herman Pleij, “Wie wordt er bang voor het boze wijf? Vrouwenhaat in de Middeleeuwen,” *De Revisor* 4, no. 6 (1977): 38-42. These ancient antifeminine ideas seem to have deepened in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and have influenced the witch-hunts of those times. See H. Dresen-Coenders, *Het verbond van heks en duivel. Een waandenkbeeld aan het begin van de moderne tijd als symptoom van een veranderende situatie van de vrouw en als middle tot hervorming der zeden* (Baarn, The Netherlands: Ambo, 1983), 25-26, 59-62.

²² Konrad Renger, *Lockere Gesellschaft: Zur Ikonographie des verlorenen Sohnes und von Wirtshausszenen in der niederländischen Malerei* (Berlin: Mann, 1970). See also Herman Pleij, *Het Gilde van de Blauwe Schuit: Literatuur, volksfeest en burgermoraal in de late middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1979).

²³ Renger, *Lockere Gesellschaft*, 10.

²⁴ Examples of sixteenth-century fighting among women include: Monogrammist A. P’s woodcut, *Tavern*, (reproduced in Renger, *Lockere Gesellschaft*, pl. 62).

²⁵ See, for example, Natalie Zemon Davies, “Women on Top,” in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, ed. Natalie Zemon Davies, 146 (Palo Alto, CA, 1975), 146.

²⁶ Hermann Braun, *Gerard und Willem van Honthorst* (Diss., University of Göttingen, 1966), 96, states that Gerrit van Honthorst was the first of the Utrecht Caravaggisti to introduce the procuress theme. Christopher Brown, *Masters*, 131, however, argues that Baburen was the first and that Honthorst followed.

²⁷ Brown, *Masters*, 131. On Baburen, see also Slatkes, *Dirck van Baburen*.

²⁸ See Abraham Bredius and P. Haverkorn van Ryswyk, “Hendrick Gerritsz. Pot, navolger van Frans Hals,” *Oud Holland* 5 (1887): 161-76. A century ago the whereabouts of more *bordeeltjes* by Pot was known than now. In addition to the works illustrated here, there are currently paintings with such themes in the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, and the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem.

²⁹ Counted in Karel Braun, *Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam: Lekturama, 1980).

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‘t Amsterdamsch Hoerdom, behelzende de listen en streeken, daar zich de Hoeren en Hoere Waardinnen van dienen; benevens der zelve maniere van leeven, dwaaze bygelovigheden, en in’t algemeen allen’t geen by dese Juffers in gebruik is. Amsterdam: van Rijn, 1681.

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