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“Good evening, you hag”: Verbalizing Unhappy Marriages in Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam

On 10 January 1725, five women appeared in front of Amsterdam notary Jan Ardiinois to testify at the request of their neighbor Johanna de Motier. Johanna’s husband Willem van Ginkel had been sailing for the Dutch East India Company (VOC) for many years and had rarely been at home.¹ It was not a happy marriage. Whenever Willem repatriated from the East Indies, he mistreated and beat Johanna. One night, Willem returned home after a day out and greeted Johanna with “Good evening, you hag.” Johanna stood her ground, and replied “those do not live here, people live here”. This angered Willem. He called her a “whore”, boasted that he could get an even better whore than her, and then beat her with his cane.²

The exchange between Johanna and Willem, as reported upon by their neighbors, is only one example of previously buried conversations found in the Amsterdam notarial archives. Hundreds of thousands of individual voices are recorded in so-called *attestaties*: witness testimonies on any and all subject matter that was considered worthy of official documentation by the *requirant*, on whose behalf the deed was drawn up. The nature of the *attestatie* as a document, as well as the sheer size of their numbers, make for an intense variety of actors, their voices, and the subjects represented: from the fabulously wealthy to those unable to pay for the rags on their body, men and women of all geographic or social origin found their way to the notary to officially record their voice in writing.

Many (if not the majority) of the social incidents recorded in *attestaties* feature around the breakdown of marriages. The restricted availability of divorce in the eighteenth century, as well as dominant ideas on honor and virtue, left unhappy partners with limited means or will to separate. Whereas authors working on early modern marriage and divorce have provided extensive insight on the judicial process of marriage dissolution,³ there are few perspectives on the private and personal events that preceded the couple’s decision to separate. Behind the closed doors of many homes in eighteenth-century Amsterdam, the pressure was rising

1 Amsterdam City Archives (NL-SAA), Ondertrouwregister, 5001, inv.nr. 552, 3-9-1716; NL-SAA, DTB Dopen, 5001, inv.nr. 80, 20-1-1717.

2 NL-SAA, Inventaris van het Archief van de Notarissen der Standplaats Amsterdam, 5075, inv. nr. 9098, nr. 10, 10-1-1725.

3 See for example: Helmers, 2002; Roodenburg, 1992; van Weeren and de Moor, 2019; Philips, 1988.

and eventually gave way to explosive, abusive, heartbreaking, passionate, and occasionally humorous or sarcastic language. The resentment felt between husband and wife, however, was no longer a private matter if they (loudly) verbalized it: it was witnessed by servants, neighbors, family or friends, who subsequently felt obliged or were called to step in to report upon the cries of misery. Documenting the words of bickering partners was, in short, a communal affair.

For this chapter, we employed newly developed technologies and tools in archival research to find and access these voices in the *attestaties*. Recent advances in the digitization and indexation of the Amsterdam notarial archive allow increasingly in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis of early modern Amsterdam marriages falling apart. Using these tools, we assembled a dataset with a selection of 205 *attestaties* (dated 1700–1780), querying the search engine with commonly used key terms related to marital strife (e.g. “husband”, “wife”, “adultery”, etc.⁴), and subsequently analyzed the characteristics of the involved parties, given quotations, and descriptions of sound, human or otherwise. Centuries-old voices that were previously mundane and by all means forgotten, now resurface.

The aim of the chapter is threefold. First, we contextualize the early modern unhappy marriage by outlining the possibilities for separation/divorce and provide an overview of the dataset we assembled. Second, we analyze content: which words or phrases were often used during the quarrels? Third, we assess the sounds of the bickering voices: exactly *how* were things voiced – or what was perceived? As we will demonstrate, our sources yield the answers to these questions in lively detail.

Parting Ways

In the Dutch Republic, the options to get out of an unhappy marriage were very limited. Some spouses simply left and started a new life elsewhere. In 1715, Sico de Mol confessed to some acquaintances that he impregnated his mistress, and that he had been having sexual intercourse with her mother as well. Instead of taking responsibility for his misconduct, Sico decided it was best to leave his wife,

4 The full list of queries we used in Dutch: *echtelijke*, *echtgenoot*, *echtgenote*, *echscheiding*, *hoer*, *huwelijk*, *overspel*, *scheiding*, *scheiden*, *schelm*, *separate*, *separeren*, *vreemd(ge)gaan*, “*zijn vrouw*”, “*haar man*”. In English the queries are: marital, husband, wife, divorce, whore, marriage, adultery, parting, to part, rascal, separate, to separate, to commit adultery, “his wife”, “her husband”. These queries were selected based on the extensive experience of the authors with (the digitization, indexation and querying of) the source material.

mistresses, and future child, and flee to England.⁵ In the *attestaties*, there are several instances of people complaining that their spouses had left them behind.

An available but rarely achieved option was divorce. During the eighteenth century, very few marriages were dissolved. Legal divorce was only granted if there was sufficient evidence of adultery or abandonment, which were often too difficult to prove. Abandonment could mean one of either two things: abandonment by malicious intent, or uncertainty of return if the spouse was on a voyage far away. The latter was possible after five years of no return, the former was more difficult to determine. Divorce granted the right to remarry.⁶

Far more common was separation from bed and board, which was granted on the same grounds as divorce but more easily obtained. With a separation from bed and board, the marriage itself was not dissolved; only the obligation to cohabit was suspended. Separated spouses were thus prohibited from marrying someone else until their former partner had died, after which they would be addressed as their widow(er).⁷

Although separation offered dysfunctional couples a solution to their failing marriage, it did not completely resolve the issues between them, especially not when there were children involved. Husbands were often required to pay alimony and therefore had to maintain contact with their separated wives. Because they remained officially married, they were restricted from having other romantic or sexual relationships. Hence, separated spouses often meddled with their former partner's social lives. When Dirk Valkenburg visited his separated wife Margareta Kleijnmans to pay alimony, for example, she started yelling at him, accusing him of spending his money on several “whores”.⁸

The *attestatie*

Legal documentation has gained broad recognition among (gender) historians as a fruitful source to gain insight into matters of marital abuse and emancipation. Court records in particular have been used to find “ordinary” voices.⁹ However,

5 NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 8310, nr. 143, 8-11-1715; NL-SAA, 5001, inv.nr. 17, 28-6-1715.

6 Haks, 1982, 182, 201; Helmers, 2002, 155–167.

7 Haks, 1982, 182, 201; Helmers, 2002, 155–167.

8 NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 8467, nr. 91, 18-5-1719.

9 Among others: Van der Heijden, Van Nederveen Meerkerk and Schmidt, 2009; Lyndon Shanley, 1993.

not every marital fight made it to the courts. The notary's office was a much more accessible space to make a preliminary deposition: the *attestatie*.

Attestaties could be used in the legal processes of obtaining separation or divorce, but they were not considered binding proof. Several factors determined the credibility of the witnesses and the *attestatie* in general: the reputation of the *requirant* (on whose behalf the *attestatie* was drawn up), the time elapsed since the described incidents, whether the witnesses were willing to affirm their testimony under an oath, and finally why, according to them, their testimonies were credible.¹⁰ Most witnesses stated they had seen and/or heard the incidents themselves, or that they had known the spouse(s) for a certain period. Despite this, some uncertainty remains about the reliability of the statements, as the witnesses or *requirant* could have an agenda or the notary could have made some editorial changes. However, considering that this was part of a rhetorical strategy, the actual veracity of the claims made in *attestaties* is of lesser importance for this chapter.

The *attestaties* were drawn up by a notary in the presence of two official witnesses, often clerks working for the notary. The deed always started with the introduction of the notary, the witnesses who had come to make their statements, and the *requirant*. The notary (or his clerk) then proceeded to write down the witnesses' statements, often in great detail. Lastly, the deed was signed.

The *requirant* was usually one of the spouses, but sometimes it could be the local authorities,¹¹ or another third party. The data shows that *attestaties* were mostly drawn up at the request of the wife (62%), followed by the husband (28%), local authorities (5%), and others (5%) (Fig. 1). The services of the notary required payment, but the less fortunate were offered the possibility to draw up *attestaties* pro deo (for free or against a small fee). Most people, however, were able to pay for the *attestatie*: only 15% was pro deo (Fig. 2).

To strengthen their claims, many husbands and wives called in the help of employees, neighbors, or other people to testify on their behalf about the (failing) marriage. We have divided the witnesses into five categories: employees, neighbors, friends and family, others, and unknown (Fig. 3).¹² Most frequent among the witnesses were friends and family (31%). Fighting couples often resorted to their family and friends, who helped them resolve fights, end instances of violence, or let them stay the night. Sometimes *requiranten* even deployed them as trustworthy spies to bust cheating spouses. In 1770, Helena Teuling sent two friends to

¹⁰ Roodenburg, 1992, 372–375.

¹¹ The *hoofdofficier* or *ratelwachten*.

¹² “Others” was used for people whose occupation was mentioned but whose relationship to the *requirant* was not clear. “Unknown” was used for people whose relationship to the *requirant* was not specified.

IDENTITIES OF THE *REQUIRANTEN*

■ Husband ■ Wife ■ Local authorities ■ Other

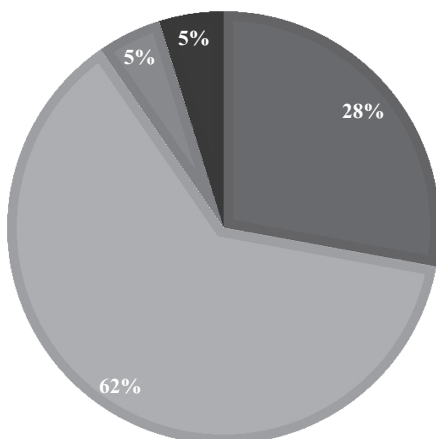


Fig. 1: Identities of the *requiranten*. N=205.

Source: Dataset.

PRO DEO ATTESTATIES

■ Yes ■ No

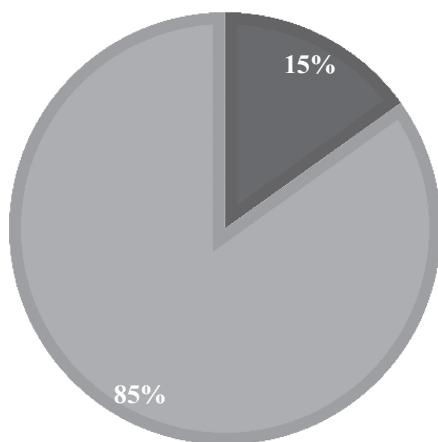


Fig. 2: Pro deo attestations. N=205.

Source: Dataset.

IDENTITIES OF THE WITNESSES

■ Neighbors ■ Employees ■ Friends and family ■ Other ■ Unknown

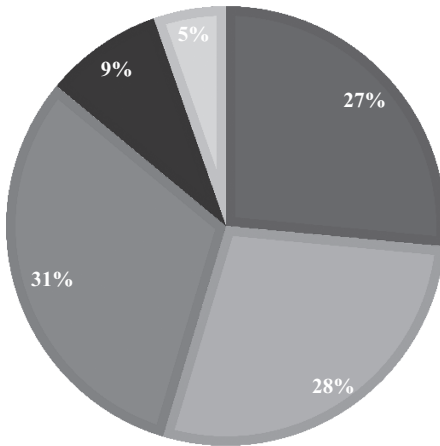


Fig. 3: Identities of the witnesses. N=657.
Source: Dataset.

follow her husband Coenraad van Lemel. Although the couple had been married for twenty-three years, it had not been a happy marriage.¹³ Coenraad mistreated Helena, sometimes even in front of their children. Additionally, Helena suspected Coenraad of infidelity. The two friends shadowed Coenraad for several nights and eavesdropped on his conversations with various prostitutes. At times Coenraad was aware that he was being followed, and took a detour. One night, after having seen and heard him conversing with a prostitute called Naatje, the friends decided to confront Coenraad about his adultery in front of Helena. Coenraad vehemently denied all allegations, claiming the two witnesses were lying. However, they stood their ground, and dutifully reported “You even said ‘good night sweet Naatje’ and she said ‘good night sweet Coentje’, and then you again said ‘good night sweet Naatje, sleep well’”.¹⁴

The second-largest category of witnesses was employees (28%). The nature of their work brought them in close proximity with their employers, and thus they were often dragged into the conflicts of these employers. Most of them tried their

¹³ NL-SAA, 5001, inv.nr. 590, 7-7-1747.

¹⁴ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 11196, nr. 42, 19-2-1770.

best to intervene between a fighting husband and wife, though not always successfully. When silk worker David Salander beat his wife Pieterella Ploeg with his cane, his servant Hendrik Hoijer tried to interfere, but David ordered him not to meddle: “It is none of your business, go sit and smoke a pipe of tobacco”.¹⁵

While some employees were able to stay out of the drama, others felt a strong sense of duty to get involved. This was especially true for maidservants, who were surrounded by their employers day and night. They witnessed spouses arguing, fighting, drinking, and cheating, and were usually the first to offer a helping hand. They put an end to violence, cared for wounds, secured the children, and helped endangered spouses escape to their families and friends.

Yet, because of their intimate bond with their employers, maidservants were also the first to suffer from their employers’ unhappy marriages. They constantly had to deal with the violence committed by drunk, mentally unstable, and cheating employers. When Jannetje de Boer’s secret escapades had left her pregnant, she asked one of her maidservants if she knew a way to abort the pregnancy. The maidservant, however, refused, replying that “she would rather get something to strengthen the child she was carrying, instead of killing it”.¹⁶

The dissolute lives of their employers greatly affected the work of maidservants and other employees. Some lost their jobs, while others decided to leave themselves, unable to bear it any longer. Maidservant Grietje Spekking, for example, decided to leave her job after years of having to witness her mistress cheat on her husband with several other men, during which Grietje was frequently ordered to be on the lookout to warn her mistress about the husband’s arrival.¹⁷

Other frequent witnesses were neighbors (27%). This is not surprising, considering that Amsterdam was a densely packed city. As Helmers explains: “Houses were often divided into front and back rooms, basements, and front and back houses. A family often lived in only one room. Those who lived in basements had a front-row seat to everything that happened on the street.”¹⁸

Finally, when we look at the sex of the witnesses, 62% were female and 38% male (Fig. 4). This is not surprising, considering the prominence of maidservants among the witnesses. Helmers further explains that female neighbors appeared more often as witnesses than their male counterparts, because women were more present in and around the house.¹⁹ Another more general explanation for

¹⁵ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 8069, 20-2-1711.

¹⁶ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10023, 29-3-1732; NL-SAA, 5001, inv.nr. 570, 14-4-1730.

¹⁷ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 8463, nr. 36, 17-5-1714; nr. 38, 2-6-1714.

¹⁸ Helmers, 2002, 325.

¹⁹ Helmers, 2002, 325.

SEX OF THE WITNESSES

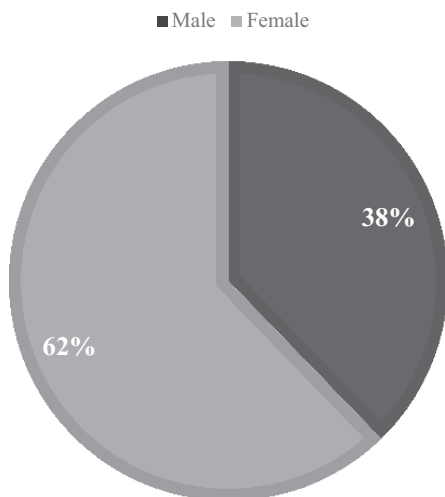


Fig. 4: Sex of the witnesses. N=657.
Source: Dataset.

the higher presence of women in *attestaties* is that there was a strong surplus of women in eighteenth-century Amsterdam, as many men went to sea.²⁰

The Conversations

Although the *attestatie*, like any other notarial deed, was subject to standardized formulas, notaries frequently recorded the exact words that were used in fights between husband and wife, granting a unique insight into the private conflicts within the household, which usually took place behind closed doors. In 1756, for example, an entire conversation between Jan Aubert, his wife Maria Kemp, and their neighbors is noted verbatim in a notarial deed. When Jan arrived home after a voyage with the VOC, an unpleasant surprise was waiting for him: his wife Maria was lying in bed sick, and Jan strongly suspected that she had just given birth to a child that could not possibly have been his – after all, he had been away for years. Determined to expose his wife’s actions, he called out to the neighbors: “Orderly neighbors! Be good and come into my house”. When his neighbors responded to his call and entered the house, he asked them to have a conversation with Maria to discover what had happened.

²⁰ Van de Pol, 1996, 107.

The neighbors asked Maria if she had just given birth. Maria answered: “Yes, I am a woman in childbed and I have done it on purpose, because I want to get a divorce”. One of the neighbors replied: “I congratulate you on your child, but do take proper care of it”. Maria said: “Perhaps I have sinned, but I will not commit sins against my own flesh and blood”. Jan, who had eavesdropped on this conversation, screamed: “Mietje, Mietje, what are you doing to me and my family?” Maria was utterly unimpressed, and answered: “It is all right, if I have sinned, I will see if you have not sinned too”. One of the neighbors who was in the room then said to Jan: “Well now, do not say anything else. She has now confessed to being a woman in childbed. If you have something to say, go to court”.

A few days later, Jan asked his neighbors to accompany him to the midwife that had assisted Maria through childbirth. The neighbors overheard a conversation between Jan and the midwife that was recorded word for word in the notarial deed as well: “Miss, did you assist my wife during labor?” The midwife replied: “Captain Aubert, is that you? Yes, on Monday I helped your wife give birth to a daughter, who is now in the care of a wet nurse who lives in the Jordaan. I have taken the child to this nurse at the request of your wife. If you need my testimony in a court case, I am happy to testify and tell the truth. Your wife sent for me while I was at a wedding at the Boomsloot”.²¹

The words of the midwife indicate the purpose of this particular notarial deed. The deed was drawn up at the request of Jan, so that he could use it if he wanted to obtain a separation or divorce from Maria. The voices of Jan, Maria, the neighbors, and the midwife were thus officially recorded. This was by no means the only instance in which this happened. Entire conversations, alongside a multitude of shorter phrases and exclamations were recorded in the *attestaties*. In these quarrelsome conversations various tropes or modes can be discerned: swear words and curses, (death) threats, denials, wishes (for example, to have never been married), and (adulterous) romantic talk. What words did spouses, neighbors, employees, friends and family members use to express their feelings during the quarrels?

The Vocabulary

Quarreling in the heat of the moment resulted in the usage of the most insulting and abusive language. The resentment felt between husband and wife was loudly verbalized through a multitude of swear words. These swear words were significantly gendered. Men were often called *schelm* (“rascal”). This was by no means an innocent or

21 NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10049, nr. 65, 15-5-1756. “Mietje” is a variant of the name Maria.

mundane slur, but rather the opposite, because it referred to the professional and financial reliability of the men and was one of the worst insults a man could be subjected to.²² In addition, men were often called “thief”, “whoremonger”, “adulterer”, and “(cursed) dog”. Women were often called “whores”, to which there were all sorts of variations: “young whore”, “old whore”, “little whore”, “Portuguese whore”, “thieving whore”, “street whore”, or “Judas’ whore”. The term “whore” did not solely refer to prostitution, but was a synonym for unchastity and referred to all sexuality outside of marriage.²³ Another word that was principally used for women was “beast”. Hendrik Helmhout furiously screamed at his wife Judith Schravelaer: “Beast, pack your things and go to your parents, I do not want you anymore!”²⁴ Benjamin Jesurum also wanted his wife Abigael de la Penja to go away: “I want to get rid of you, beast, I am the angel of angels but you are the devil of devils”.²⁵ Not only wives, but also mothers-in-law were often attacked and subjected to verbal abuse. Jan Wallis called his mother-in-law an “old beast” and told his wife Petronella Brouwers that her mother had to leave. Petronella answered: “Is she a beast now? When she helped you with her money, she was not a beast”. Jan replied: “She has been a beast for over two years”.²⁶

Donder (“thunder”) and *bliksem* (“lightning”) are adjectives that were often used to invigorate the swear words and can best be understood as synonyms for “devilish”. These adjectives were for example combined with the aforementioned *schelm*, “whore” and “beast”, but were also often attached to the infantilizing word “child”. For example, Jan Willem van Straten called his wife Marretje Valk “thunder and lightning child” and said that he wanted her to go back to her parents.²⁷

In addition to the curses and swear words, serious and violent (death) threats were made. While Geertruijd Bartels, the wife of Jan Furstenberg, was lying in bed sick, Jan behaved very violently and shouted that if his wife hadn’t been pregnant, he would have “cut her throat”.²⁸ When Warnar van Wierst, who was having an affair with the wife of his cousin Simon van Wierst, heard that the couple had reconciled, he became enraged and said, “If I get him [Simon], I will stab him and throw him in the canal.” He later added that if the reconciliation was definitive, Simon “would die by his hands”, and he did not mind going to prison for it.²⁹

²² Roodenburg, 1992, 376.

²³ Roodenburg, 1992, 377.

²⁴ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 8069, nr. 3, 5-1-1712.

²⁵ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 12305, nr. 3, 13-1-1747.

²⁶ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 11704, nr. 147, 29-1-1749.

²⁷ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 14291, nr. 95, 4-5-1760.

²⁸ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10146, nr. 203, 19-12-1748.

²⁹ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 12306, nr. 40, 2-6-1748.

Alongside the curses, swears and threats, romantic talk between adulterous lovers was also reported upon in the notarial deeds. Anna Lincklaar called her lover Lambert Brugman “Sweetheart, Brugje dear”. Philippus Dulleman, who had an affair with Trijntje Kroon, called her “my dear *spitsneusje*”, and Trijntje said: “My sweet Dulletje” and “my dear *prince neusje*”.³⁰ The first or last names of people were often shortened as pet names: “Brugje” as a short version of Brugman and “Dulletje” instead of Dulleman. It was important that this loving talk was written down as well because it could serve as proof of adultery, which, in turn, could help in obtaining a divorce or separation.

Sounds

The notarial *attestatie* does not only allow us access to the bare contents of marital bickering. Rather unique for institutional early modern sources, a great amount of information centered around sound and the auditory experience is contained in *attestaties*. We can distinguish three primary – perhaps consecutive – roles attributed to sound in the *attestatie*. Firstly, witnesses describe *which* sounds lured them to witness the exchanges in the records. Were they specifically called upon for help, or did the noise of the fight propel them to act and intervene on the spot? Secondly, they describe *what* the voices in question sounded like to them. What intonations were ‘spotted’ in the language of marital crisis? Thirdly, they describe *how* the sound of marital crises made them feel. What emotions or actions did certain sounds, voices and their intonations invoke in spouses or bystanders?

Judging from the considerable amount of reflection on it in typical *attestaties*, sound was considered an important aspect of telling the story of a bad marriage. Abuse, infidelity, alcoholism, and other typical causes of marital breakdown were accompanied by a characteristic range of sounds, the descriptions of which could significantly add to the overall narrative of the *attestatie* and its purpose. An unusually lively, and usually chilling picture is sketched through accounts of three-hundred-year-old sounds. A wide range is recorded: children crying, the rumor of dozens of neighbors gathered by the front door, drunken mumbling, and adulterous sex.

³⁰ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10143, nr. 222, 9-10-1745. *Spitneusje* literally translates to “little pointy nose” and *prince neusje* to “little prince nose”.

A Call for Help

The *attestatie* was born at the moment the witnesses learned the details of the bad marriage. In most cases, these witnesses call upon three sources of knowledge: they had *seen*, *experienced*, and, most relevant in this context, *heard*. This could mean directly – they had heard the sounds and voices themselves, or indirectly – they had heard gossip *about* the marital crisis. Usually, the context is clear regarding which type of hearing is referred to.

In a significant part of the witness narratives, they explain that it was a sound – usually a human voice – that drew them to the central scene. This is most often described by neighbors, as a witness type. Neighbors were often close enough to the conflict in question to *hear* it, but unlike servants or guests, not physically close enough to *see* it before hearing it. As mentioned previously, the quality of housing in early modern Amsterdam varied, with building quality and personal space obviously diminishing the poorer the inhabitants. The *attestatie* affirms the living conditions of poor spouses in detail: the collective of witnesses called upon their marital breakdown were often the tenants of the rooms directly next door, underneath, above, and wherever else a room could be squeezed in. The poor building quality subsequently ensured that everything that the spouses perpetrated was audible to these neighbors. In 1718, Stijntje Jans provided a particularly lively description of these conditions for listening in: there was only “a single wooden panel” between her and her next-door neighbor Marritje Sardijn, “which was the cause of her ability to hear almost anything that happened in that house” – in this particular testimony, the daily visits of unfaithful husband Anthony van der Sprong to drink coffee, and, after Marritje sent her children away for groceries, extramarital “frolicking and kissing”.³¹ Adulterous spouses, almost naturally, produced rather hushed sounds; additionally, these were not necessarily situations that invited the witness to immediately reveal and involve themselves. This was much different in the other major “bad marriage” situation type: open violence and abuse. Witnesses often became privy to a violent situation through the sounds it produced – either the victimized spouse explicitly called out for help, or the persons hearing the sounds were drawn to the situation out of curiosity or worry. It tended to vary whom acutely endangered spouses called upon for help, using their voice to attract someone to pacify the situation. If applicable, employees would be the nearest, and we often see maids or manservants detailing how they heard a cry for help from another place in the house. A comprehensive example was provided in 1712 by Hendrikje Brand, a maid of the

31 NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 8468, nr. 211, 8-10-1718.

aforementioned Hendrik Helmhout, whose disturbing and abusive behavior towards his wife Judith Schravelaer is the subject of an entire series of *attestaties*:

When she was in the scullery, she heard Helmhout's wife utter a loud cry, upon which she went to the kitchen & saw that Helmhout's wife was sitting on a chair; Helmhout was holding his wife by her arms and had his knee against her stomach; Helmhout's wife then said to him that he had to release her, and jerked her hands loose, upon which Helmhout kicked his wife in her stomach twice, and she [Hendrikje] called for help, whereupon Helmhout's brother and manservant came from the front of the house and threw themselves between them.³²

If no employees were maintained in the house, the next type of witnesses typically attracted by the voice of abusive or abused spouses was neighbors. Violent noises often attracted a crowd, whose members could help de-escalate the situation. However, in some cases, the potential of aid offered by neighbors did not counterbalance the shame of being abused, especially not when the victim was male. We can observe this in Jan Struijs, a wealthy man who faced mistreatment from his wife Sara Schippers and his two stepdaughters. During an episode where his wife was “shouting curses and swears” at him:

[Jan] continuously tried to get her to lower the volume, out of shame for the neighbors; however, she did not want to hear any of that, saying that she did not give a damn about the neighbors, and threatened that if he did not shut his mouth, she would beat him.³³

In some cases, local law enforcement officers (*ratelwacht*) were alerted by violent sounds. One of such exchanges with the *ratelwacht* was recorded in 1725, when a nameless *ratelwacht* passed by the residence where Dirk Heybroek was “cursing, beating, raging and ranting” to his wife Barbara Swart. The *ratelwacht* decided to knock on the door upon “hearing the hubbub” inside, asking: “What is going on here?” – adding, when Dirk opened the door and Barbara appeared behind him, looking battered and desperate, “Scoundrel, is that your wife? Come here, I will teach you a lesson!”³⁴

Sounds of Perpetrators and Victims

After voluntarily or involuntarily finding themselves in the midst of a scene of marital breakdown, perhaps drawn to the scene through the sound of it, the witnesses next describe what the words that were exchanged between partners

³² NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 8069, nr. 46, 8-4-1712.

³³ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10125, nr. 160, 22-5-1736.

³⁴ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 8320, nr. 29, 2-2-1725.

sounded like. How were they verbalized, pitched, emphasized? What impression was the speaker trying to give to their words, or in any case, what did the witness perceive? Overall, a distinct set of vocabulary is used to describe the voice of the perpetrating spouse on the one hand and the victimized spouse on the other. The usefulness of these “glossaries” in interpreting the characteristics of sound has been previously established in voice studies.³⁵ Our case affirms the applicability of this methodology.

Perpetrating voices were used in many ways, all of them – according to the witnesses – profoundly negative: they *rage*, *swear*, *rant*, *curse*, *threaten*, *scream*, or otherwise “vomit horrendous words”,³⁶ to the point that it is explicitly recorded that the witnesses considered them to be so vile they were unwilling to repeat them to the notary to record. A similarly reoccurring set of adjectives is used to describe the way these swearing, ranting voices sounded, or how they were perceived. Witnesses most often stated them to have sounded *despicable*, *inhumane*, *indecent*, *horrendous*, *intense*, *evil*, *insane*, *insolent*, or *terrible*, often adding a “very” to emphasize the severity. These adjectives are similar to the ones used to describe the actual contents, e.g. what was actually said, but the ones listed here specifically refer to the qualities of the sound. This separate assessment of content and sound is exemplified by the testimony of some servants in an inn who were privy to a conflict between two Italian spouses: they reported that they did not understand the Italian language, but were nevertheless able to distill that husband Jean was subjecting his wife Catarina to *violent ranting* and *raging*.³⁷

Occasionally, perpetrators used their voices in ways other than the loud, generally abusive modes as described above. Elizabeth Tomma *delightedly* reported to the notary to have cheated on her husband Sjoert Hamertsma on a trip to France;³⁸ Johannes Schmelser *silently* and *covertly* assured the witness that his wife Gesina Blom would get what was due to her;³⁹ Joan Meeler *heavily pressured* his maid Angenietje for sex.⁴⁰ However, none of these diversions were meant to be perceived in a positive or flattering way; instead, they serve to further incriminate the perpetrator’s voice.

Victimized voices are described in somewhat less uniform ways, perhaps because they feature less often (explicitly) in the narrative – the *attestatie*’s main character is the perpetrator, although from the perspective of the victim and

³⁵ Hoegaerts, 2021, 122–127.

³⁶ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 8303, nr. 26, 21-9-1725.

³⁷ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 10294, nr. 942, 6-12-1760.

³⁸ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 14310, nr. 15, 10-1-1767.

³⁹ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 16367, nr. 148, 15-6-1780.

⁴⁰ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 16365, nr. 111, 1-9-1778.

their entourage. We mostly capture victimized voices when they (directly) reacted to the attacks by their perpetrating spouse, or when they complained to a third party – almost always the witnesses – about their desperate situations. In the face of (violent) abuse, victimized voices most often *cry*, *scream*, *weep* and *pray*. These cries were often specified as either having being *very loud*, or the opposite, *muffled* and *suffocating*. In both cases, they were perceived as *pitiful*, *lamentable*, or *bitter*. In the worst cases, witnesses stated that the victim’s screams “sounded as if [s]he was being murdered”,⁴¹ which could very well be an actual possibility, as some victims are recorded to literally have screamed “Murder! Murder!” and multiple (attempted) homicides feature in the dataset.⁴² Another way in which the (sound of the) victim’s voice featured in the *attestatie* is when they attempted to pacify the situation. Their tone is consistently portrayed by the witnesses as considerate. This is exemplified well in the case of Joan Rudolf van der Upwigh, who, together with his infant son, was subjected to physical and verbal abuse by his wife Geertruijd Ermen, described in several *attestaties* dating from the early 1700s. Joan Rudolf was described by the witnesses as gentle, mild and affectionate, and desperate to keep the peace with his volatile wife.⁴³ He *sweetly and amicably* requested a raging Geertruijd to join him to go to bed, and he *politely* requested that she would leave his office after she entered with the intent to destroy it – to no avail.⁴⁴ Statements of the kind and constructive victimized voice’s attempt to (unsuccessfully) de-escalate were presumably included to demonstrate that even in the face of calm and rational resistance, the accused spouse still persisted in their heinous behavior.

Emotional Impact

Marital breakdowns have a profound emotional impact on the spouses and on those in their immediate circle.⁴⁵ The history of emotions is a relatively new field of inquiry, partly because traditionally favored (institutional) sources were either devoid of relevant information or because tracing emotion required a style of reading that was not yet concocted. The *attestatie*, however, abundantly features

⁴¹ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 8320, nr. 29, 2-2-1725; NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 8312, nr. 19, 16-2-1717.

⁴² Among others, see: NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 16136, nr. 76, 23-4-1776; inv.nr. 8303, nr. 26, 21-9-1725; inv.nr. 12303, scan 615, 17-11-1745.

⁴³ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 7453, folio 411, 21-9-1706; inv.nr. 7453, folio 491, 13-10-1706.

⁴⁴ NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 7452, folio 167, 8-2-1706.

⁴⁵ For new studies on emotion and (historical) marriage, see for example Seymour, 2020; Hollo-way, 2019.

“everyday” voices explicitly discussing their own emotions or assessing the emotions they perceived in other people. As such, it is recorded how the voices of marital strife made actors and bystanders *feel*. What emotions did these voices – contents as well as sound – invoke in the involved parties?

As mentioned previously, some of the witnesses refused to repeat the actual language they had heard from (usually) the perpetrator’s voice. When looking for traces of emotional impact, it is abundantly clear why. Witnesses consistently reported that the voices in question uttered such horrific words, and in such an offensive tone, that it was utterly *embarrassing*, *horrendous*, *shameful*, or *unbearable* for a decent or polite human being to have to listen to them.⁴⁶ Occasionally, gender is brought into the discussion, with one witness stating that for women in particular, listening to such abusive language was highly embarrassing.⁴⁷ Female perpetrating voices had a similarly scandalizing effect on the witnesses, as evidenced by the testimony of two neighbors secretly listening in on a conversation between the adulterous wife Sophia Elizabeth van der Meer and her maids, whilst standing in her garden. Having heard Sophia and her maids discussing their favorite kinds and shapes of “cock”, they reported that “[these words] were too horrific to listen to, and it was even worse that they were spoken by a married woman”.⁴⁸

The emotions of the perpetrating and victimized spouse, reacting to one another’s voices, were fairly straightforward and predictable. Perpetrators were regarded as *heated* and *insane*, occasionally clearly *delighted* with their own behavior. The witnesses perceived victims to be *distraught*, *sad*, *embarrassed*, or in some cases, *surprised* at the abusive voices directed at them, either because the victim’s own behavior (crying, screaming) clearly betrayed these emotions, or because the victims explicitly shared their feelings with the witness. Occasionally, a hint of slight amusement and self-mockery (perhaps induced through sheer desperation) can be traced in the victims: after his wife Sara violently jettisoned a plate of cabbage towards Jan Struijs’s head during dinner, he requested that next time, she could at least add a sausage to it.⁴⁹

46 NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 8467, nr. 88, 14-5-1718; inv.nr. 9452, nr. 26, 3-9-1719; inv.nr. 12305, nr. 5, 13-1-1747.

47 NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 8483, nr. 110, 18-4-1725.

48 NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 14305, nr. 409, 29-8-1765.

49 NL-SAA, 5075, inv.nr. 14305, nr. 160, 29-8-1765.

Conclusion

The notarial *attestatie* has a unique set of characteristics that make it a valuable source in uncovering, reconstructing, and listening to the voices of the past. Whereas other early modern (institutional) sources do in fact feature “ordinary” people, and occasionally record their (literal) words in writing, the *attestatie* doubles down on this by closely scrutinizing their actual sound. Our study on the verbalization of marital breakdowns illustrates this: the *attestatie* grants unprecedented access to private or public, loud or hushed, hateful or romantic exchanges, all of them between by all means and definitions regular couples whose voices were not impressive enough to reverberate into traditional historiography. A vast multitude is still waiting to be uncovered.

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