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A Tale of Two Johannas: Gatekeeping, Mobilities, and Marriage in Cochin and Amsterdam

BOB PIERIK AND ALEXANDER GEELEN

In the mid-eighteenth century, on different sides of the globe, two women attempted to escape their husbands. One of them lived in Amsterdam in the Dutch Republic and the other lived in Cochin, which was controlled by the United East India Company (VOC), in southwest India, on the Malabar Coast. In these different social and institutional contexts, both women were subject to “gatekeeping” by authorities who intervened to restrict the extent of their mobility. Although considerable research has been done on how marriage influenced early modern women’s opportunities and life in general, less attention has been paid to the impact of marriage on a woman’s mobility, especially when marital desertion was the motivation behind that mobility.¹ The literature on marital desertion generally focuses on husbands who deserted their wives; however, in the two cases discussed here, we find not only that women’s mobility was affected by marriage, but also that women’s mobility could be seen as a threat to the institution of marriage.²

¹ See, for example, Ariadne Schmidt, “The Profits of Unpaid Work. ‘Assisting Labour’ of Women in the Early Modern Urban Dutch Economy,” *The History of the Family* 19, no. 3 (2014): 301–22; Maria Ågren, ed., *Making a Living, Making a Difference: Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

² In the second half of the eighteenth century in Amsterdam, women initiated almost 80 percent of the cases in which separation was requested based on desertion, Dini Helmers, *Gescheurde Bedden: Oplossingen voor Gestrande Huwelijken, Amsterdam 1753–1810* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2002), 205.

A Tale of Two Johannas

On 26 May 1739, sixteen-year-old Johanna Schildhouwer was drinking deep into the night in VOC-controlled Cochin. Cochin was the most important VOC possession on the Malabar Coast. Conquered from the Portuguese in 1663, the VOC's main interests in the region were the pepper and cinnamon trade, over which they claimed a monopoly. Three European sailors, who had been in the woods (probably drinking), decided to continue their evening at the inn owned by Johanna's husband, Claas van der Laan. The sailors also drank until late into the night, joined by Johanna, even after Claas went to bed at nine. A free woman who worked for Claas, Maria Rosa, served them drinks. After Maria Rosa went to bed, Johanna took a gold necklace, some *fanums* (the local currency), and her clothes, and left the inn. According to Claas, Johanna had already admitted to him that "she did not want to live with him anymore, as he had offered her a bad life and that she would leave him."³ Unfortunately, Johanna's attempt to run away with the three sailors was not successful. After leaving the inn, the four travelled to the house of the *toepas* (a local Catholic of mixed Portuguese and Asian descent) Bernardo Rebello. As they were hungry, they asked him if he could sell them a pig, to which he responded that he could offer them some chickens and rice. Then the four inquired if he had a boat with which they could sail down the river, but Bernardo refused. While Bernardo's mother prepared them a meal, the four exhausted (and probably inebriated) runaways fell asleep on Bernardo's porch. They awoke to find four armed *lascorins* (Christian soldiers) standing over them, and they were promptly arrested.⁴

The prosecutor branded the three sailors as deserters, drunkards, and vagabonds. He labeled Johanna as a woman who "roamed the land with loose people, and who exhibits her honor as an easy prey for the whole world, embarrassing her husband and guardian."⁵ Claas, hoping to be allowed to divorce her, brought the case to the prosecutor himself, claiming that she was guilty of infidelity, thievery,

³ Nationaal Archief, The Hague (NL-HaNA), Nederlandse bezittingen in India: Digitale Duplicaten van Archieven aanwezig in de Tamil Nadu Archives te Chennai, 1.11.06.11, inv. nr. 284, scan 108.

⁴ NL-HaNA, 1.11.06.11, inv. nr. 284, scan 110–11.

⁵ NL-HaNA, 1.11.06.11, inv. nr. 284, scan 113. Original text: "Met ongeband volk door het land gaat swerven, ende haar eere ten prooje mitsgaders haar egte man en heer en sorge in verleegehit: en voor de geheele wereld ten thoon stelt." Translated by Alexander Geelen.

and desertion. However, in the end, the prosecutor concluded that she must have been insane and she was returned to her husband without penalty, while the sailors received corporal punishment.⁶

A few years later, on the other side of the world, on 30 August 1742, Johanna Meijers returned to the Fransstaalsteeg on the *Zeedijk* in Amsterdam, the street where she had once lived. Her former neighbors, a porter and his wife, had invited her for tea. Together with their child, they all sat on the street in front of their door with a cup of tea when Johanna's husband Laurens van Lintel appeared. She greeted him, but he scornfully silenced her as he returned the greeting by saying, "Yes mother whore, here I am."⁷ He demanded liquor, drank it, and left, only to reappear fifteen minutes later, again demanding liquor and calling her a whore again. She protested firmly and told her former neighbors that he was making her beg for money. This enraged him even further, and he threatened to hit her. He reached for his knife while asking, "What would stop me from cutting off your head?"⁸ One of their former neighbors intervened, and Johanna fled into another house followed by Laurens who attacked her with the knife until neighbors pulled him away. Johanna then stayed with her former neighbors, where a surgeon treated her wounds. Of course, she could not return to her home where she was vulnerable to further domestic abuse. A group of neighbors testified before the chief officer's notary that Laurens had often hit Johanna when they lived in the Fransstaalsteeg and had threatened to attack her with a knife on other occasions.⁹ These witnesses helped Johanna take the first steps towards marital separation.

How do we understand the social contexts of these two women? Although both were married, their position in their respective societies requires further analysis. First, although Johanna Schildhouwer's name sounds Dutch, she did not speak the language, and a translator was necessary to hear her confession. Johanna was very likely of Eurasian descent and a Christian, as she was married to Claas, who was a ship's carpenter for the United East India Company. Cochin had been a Portuguese colony from 1503 to 1663 and the Eurasian population retained

⁶ NL-HaNA, 1.11.06.11, inv. nr. 284, scan 115.

⁷ Stadsarchief Amsterdam (NL-AsdSAA), Archief van de Notarissen ter Standplaats Amsterdam, inv. nr. 11735, Minuutacten Salomon de Fremeri, scan 301.

⁸ NL-AsdSAA, Archief van de Notarissen ter Standplaats Amsterdam, inv. nr. 11735, scan 301.

⁹ NL-AsdSAA, Archief van de Notarissen ter Standplaats Amsterdam, inv. nr. 11735, scan 300–302.

much of their Portuguese heritage; they were predominantly Catholic and spoke a creolized form of Portuguese.¹⁰ Under Portuguese control, European men had been allowed to marry local women, citing a dearth of European women, and the VOC continued this practice. Anjana Singh has argued that through Eurasian women, European men were able to plug into local social and commercial networks both inside and outside Cochin.¹¹ As intermediaries, Eurasian women like Johanna established networks in both worlds, marrying a European and escaping them to the house of a *toepas* with the three European sailors. Moreover, Johanna's Eurasian background, besides granting her the ability to maneuver in both cultural spheres, provided her with significant mobility. Johanna was born in Cochin and as a local she was familiar with the surroundings, spoke the *lingua franca* (Portuguese), and had access to places unavailable to many Europeans. This is shown by the fact that she could approach the *toepas* Bernardo Rebello and eat in his house, something a European-born Dutch-speaking woman would not have been able to do.

Johanna Meijers in Amsterdam was also marked by her mobility. It is very likely that she was a migrant from Hamburg. She married in 1736 under the name "Anna Meijers from Hamburg" to "Lourens van Lintel from Groningen."¹² Since no other Laurens van Lintels (or other variations of this name) are found in Amsterdam's marriage and baptism registers, it is very probable that this Anna Meijers is our Johanna.¹³ Amsterdam might have felt familiar to Johanna when she arrived from Hamburg. Like Amsterdam, Hamburg was a financial center and commercial port city that boasted a reputation of relative tolerance and attracted migrants from a wide hinterland of German territories.¹⁴ Hamburg was part of the German North Sea coast area where migration to Amsterdam was common, facilitated by existing trade networks and the presence of a Lutheran

¹⁰ Anjana Singh, *Fort Cochin in Kerala, 1750–1830: The Social Condition of a Dutch Community in an Indian Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 93.

¹¹ Singh, *Fort Cochin in Kerala*, 227.

¹² NL-AsdSAA, Archief van de Burgerlijke Stand: doop-,trouw- en begraafboeken van Amsterdam, inv. nr. 579, 32.

¹³ Further indication that this Anna from Hamburg is the same woman as the above Johanna is that the marriage register includes ex-wives, so there would have been an entry if Laurens van Lintel had remarried in Amsterdam to a Johanna after having been married to a woman named Anna.

¹⁴ Mary Lindemann, *The Merchant Republics Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Hamburg, 1648–1790* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 18–33.

community.¹⁵ As an immigrant to Amsterdam, Johanna's mobility had brought her a host of opportunities. Kuijpers and Van de Pol have shown that not only work opportunities, but also the promise of health care and poor relief attracted female migrants to Amsterdam at all life stages.¹⁶ They also indicate that as a female migrant, getting married was harder than it would have been for a native woman or a male migrant: "Immigrant women had the weakest position of all on the marriage market. They had to compete with native daughters with much more economic and social capital. For an immigrant craftsman, a marriage to an Amsterdam burgher's daughter was especially attractive."¹⁷ Marrying a native daughter would give a male migrant citizenship, along with a dowry exclusive to daughters of Amsterdam natives. In addition, male migrants would have had an easier time finding marriage partners, as there were more women than men in the city. Van de Pol estimates that there were up to three women for every two men in the poor neighborhoods of the city.¹⁸ On the other hand, Kuijpers raises the possibility that migrants from cosmopolitan port cities like Hamburg could more easily integrate and marry in Amsterdam than migrants from smaller villages and towns.¹⁹ Johanna had overcome the obstacle of finding a marriage partner as a female migrant, which initially probably strengthened her position. However, the fact that she was a migrant probably weakened her position when she became the victim of domestic violence and had no family to turn to.

Marriage and mobility

Despite the vastly different social contexts of these women's situations, they were both married and both suffered from domestic conflict. Dutch women, especially when married, were urged to stay at home in prescriptive literature by moralists, conduct book writers, and theologians. Several of them claimed that the general term for married women was "housewife" (*huisvrouw*) based on the idea that

¹⁵ Erika Kuijpers, *Migrantenstad: Immigratie en Sociale Verhoudingen in 17e-eeuws Amsterdam* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2005), 80, 91, 105–7.

¹⁶ Lotte van de Pol and Erika Kuijpers, "Poor Women's Migration to the City: The Attraction of Amsterdam Health Care and Social Assistance in Early Modern Times," *Journal of Urban History* 32, no. 1 (Nov. 2005): 57–58.

¹⁷ Van de Pol and Kuijpers, "Poor Women's Migration," 48.

¹⁸ Lotte van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams Hoerdom: Prostitutie in de Zeventiende en Achttiende Eeuw* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1996), 106–11.

¹⁹ Van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams Hoerdom*, 183.

married women were more suited to stay inside.²⁰ At the same time, marriage gave many women wider access to economic opportunities than did single life.²¹ As a result, the decision to leave a marriage was not taken lightly, and an attempt to dissolve a household would be quite radical. When a woman left a marriage, she left not just a husband, but the entire household and its corresponding opportunities.

The law in Holland after the Reformation stressed that only under specific circumstances could a woman leave her husband without being branded as a *desertrice* (malicious deserter) and charged with *egtmyding* (marital avoidance).²² The law required women to follow their husbands when they moved and wanted their wives to move with them.²³ A wife was only exempted from this requirement if her husband violently mistreated her: "If a wife shows, that she has been hit, she does not have to return, even if the husband vows not to act violent in the future."²⁴ But even when violence excused a wife from her obligation to live with her husband, a complete divorce could only be obtained in Holland if she could prove adultery or "malicious desertion." Of course, in practice, many separations of "bed and board" happened, in which the marriage was not dissolved but partners lived separately.²⁵ This was typical of the Dutch post-Reformation approach towards marriage as a legal contract that could be potentially amended or dissolved under particular circumstances, rather than as a sacramental, unbreakable union.²⁶

²⁰ Ariadne Schmidt, "Labour Ideologies and Women in the Northern Netherlands, c.1500–1800," *International Review of Social History* 56, no. S19 (December 2011): 51–53.

²¹ Schmidt, "The Profits of Unpaid Work," 311.

²² Donald Haks, *Huwelijk en gezin in Holland in de 17de en 18de eeuw: processtukken en moralisten over aspecten van het laat 17de- en 18de-eeuwse gezinsleven* (Utrecht: HES, 1985), 179; Manon van der Heijden, *Huwelijk in Holland: stedelijke rechtspraak en kerkelijke tucht, 1550–1700* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1998), 241–44; Helmers, *Gescheurde Bedden*, 244–48; Eduard van Zurck, *Codex Batavus, Waar in het Algemeen Kerk-, Publyk, en Burgerlyk Recht van Holland, Zeeland, en het Ressort der Generaliteit, Kortelyk is Begrepen* (Rotterdam: Jan Daniel Beman and son, 1757), 562.

²³ Helmers, *Gescheurde Bedden*, 89.

²⁴ Van Zurck, *Codex Batavus*, 563. The original text in a combination of Dutch and Latin is: "Als een Vrouw toont, datze geslagen is, en behoeft zij niet weer te keeren, al stelt de Man cautie *de non saeviendo in posterum*." Translated by Bob Pierik.

²⁵ Helmers, *Gescheurde Bedden*, 196.

²⁶ Van der Heijden, *Huwelijk in Holland*, 30–44.

The historiography of early modern desertion has been predominantly concerned with people deserting from military service, such as soldiers or sailors. As a result, the majority of deserters who have been discussed are men.²⁷ When women are analyzed as deserters in the Dutch literature, they are usually enslaved people in the colonial context or as domestic workers in western Europe.²⁸ We know much more about wives that have been deserted by their husbands than about wives that deserted their husbands.²⁹ The history of divorce and marital desertion can be a welcome addition to the history of other types of desertion. In the early modern period, even beyond enslavement, labor was increasingly seen as the property of the employer. This meant that if workers did not fulfil their contracts or did not provide the amount of labor their employer expected, they were branded as deserters.³⁰ Marital desertion, however, fell into a different legal category, in which not property (slaves) or labor (workers), but the unity of the household was protected through the regulation of mobility.

In Amsterdam, the fine for being married but not living together without permission of a court was 100 guilders to be paid every month, a significant penalty for ordinary people.³¹ Even more interesting from the perspective of mobility is that Amsterdam's commissioners of marital affairs were allowed to penalize anyone who failed to pay marriage-related fines with a type of house arrest in which "the unwilling are ordered to stay inside their house with closed doors

²⁷ See, for example Matthias van Rossum and Jeanette Kamp, eds., *Desertion in the Early Modern World, A Comparative History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

²⁸ Notably, Eric Jones wrote about deserting female slaves in early modern Batavia. See Eric Jones, *Wives Slaves and Concubines: A History of the Female Underclass in Dutch Asia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 90–126. Although this is not within the scope of this forum contribution, literature regarding wives and desertion in early modern England, its American colonies, and Italy does exist. See, for example, Mary Beth Sievens, *Stray Wives: Marital Conflict in Early National New England* (New York: New York University Press 2005), and Daniela Hacke, *Women, Sex and Marriage in Early Modern Venice* (London: Routledge 2004).

²⁹ See, for example the category of deserted women discussed in Ariadne Schmidt and Manon van der Heijden, "Women Alone in Early Modern Dutch Towns: Opportunities and Strategies to Survive," *Journal of Urban History* 42, no. 1 (January 2016): 30–32.

³⁰ Alessandro Stanziani, "Runaways: A Global History," in *Desertion in the Early Modern World*, 23.

³¹ Hermanus Noordkerk, *Handvesten; ofte privilegien ende octroyen mitsgaders willekeuren, costuimen, ordonnantien en handeligen der stad Amstelredam* (Amsterdam: Hendrik van Waesberge, Salomon Schouten and Petrus Schouten, 1748), 648.

and windows and may not do any work, neither leave the house.”³² In this way, the fines and punishments for marital infractions look like extreme variants of the domestic ideology of immobility for housewives that we find in prescriptive literature. Yet, it seems unlikely that the commissioners actually used these legal powers: Dini Helmers suggests that the violation of this obligatory cohabitation was rarely prosecuted in the eighteenth century, as it does not appear in the criminal documentation.³³ So, while there was certainly an ideal of domestic immobility and partners in marriage were, in theory, obliged to live together, marital reality diverged from this legal and theoretical framework. We have seen that Johanna Meijers transgressed these ideals of domestic immobility when she went to another neighborhood for a social visit. The fact that she had social contacts throughout the city (or at least, on the street where she used to live) eventually strengthened her position against a violent husband, as her former neighbors could act as witnesses. Likewise, Johanna Schildhouwer also transgressed the legal and moral ideals of domestic immobility when she deserted with three sailors, although she remained married. In the cases of both Johannas, social contacts with people that were not members of the household played a major role in the resolving of domestic conflict. Despite cultural and legal expectations of married women’s immobility, both Johannas made use of a wider social network that they either successfully or unsuccessfully used to move out of their households.

Gatekeeping mobilities

A process of “gatekeeping” by authorities determined the success of women’s mobility to a great extent. On the one hand, to increase the chances that she could leave successfully, Johanna Meijers had announced to her former neighbors that her husband had left her begging for money, obtained official witness statements that he had mistreated her, and found a temporary place to stay. The testimony of neighbors would help her to be seen as an appropriately acting victim in the eyes of authorities, rather than a *desertrice*. On the other hand, Johanna Schildhouwer was considered a deserter just like her male sailor accomplices. All four were prosecuted for *vagebonderen* (to be a vagabond, or to roam) which to the VOC

³² Noordkerk, *Handvesten*, 647. Original text: “den onwilighen belast sal werden in heuren huijse te blijven met besloten deuren ende veijnsteren, ende sonder eenige neeringe te moghen doen, noch oock uijt den huijse te gaen,” translated by Bob Pierik.

³³ Helmers, *Gescheurde Bedden*, 94.

was synonymous with desertion.³⁴ However, in Schildhouwer's case the goal of the authorities was to hold her to her marriage contract, despite the fact that both partners wanted to dissolve it. She was put back into the household that she had tried to flee and escaped further punishment because the authorities wanted the marriage to continue. By ruling that Johanna Schildhouwer's act of mobility was an act of insanity, they prevented Claas from divorcing her on the grounds of malicious desertion. Although the authorities in Amsterdam provided women like Johanna Meijers with the opportunity to leave a dangerous situation, even though the law gave them ways to keep households together, the authorities in Cochin actually went so far as to deny the sanity of Johanna Schildhouwer to prevent a household from breaking up.

The fact that the VOC authorities kept Johanna Schildhouwer's marriage intact was directly tied to their desire to maintain the population of their colonies through what they referred to as "honorable procreation." Throughout the VOC-controlled regions, VOC employees regularly married local Eurasian and Asian Christians. However, the VOC worried that local women did not uphold the same moral standards as European women and that the Asian environment had a bad influence on European men. As a result, the Company's administrators were very concerned with local marriages and heavily regulated practices that they viewed as potential threats to the honor of their employees, in particular, and the VOC in general.³⁵ The close scrutiny of Johanna's marriage and mobility came out of the VOC's desire to ensure their colony's "honorable reproduction" of future generations. Johanna's mobility was a direct threat to that policy.

Finally, what made the case of Johanna Meijers a legitimate escape and the case of Johanna Schildhouwer a case of desertion is the role of violence. In a cruel way, the fact that Meijers's husband had attacked her so severely enabled her to leave him. She had been a victim of domestic violence before, but once

³⁴ As is also shown in the court case under discussion, *Vagebondeeren* is described as a type of absenteeism and desertion. NL-HaNA 1.11.06.11, inv. nr. 284, scan 113.

³⁵ The VOC's policy of honorable procreation is discussed in L. Hovy ed., *Ceylonees plakkaatboek: plakaten en andere wetten, uitgevaardigd door het Nederlandse bestuur op Ceylon, 1638–1796*, vol. 1 (Hilversum: Verloren, 1991), 48–49, and J. A. van der Chijs *Nederlands-Indisch Plakkaatboek, 1602–1811 eerste deel* (Batavia, 1885), 586. For more insight into the VOC's intentions for regulating marriage, see Carla van Wamelen, *Family Life onder de VOC: een handelscompagnie in huwelijks- en gezinszaken* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2014), and Sophie Rose, "Love' in the Time of Company Rule: Dutch Colonial Categorization and the Policing of Sex in Theory and Practice" (unpublished paper).

he assailed her with a knife in front of witnesses, she was assured of the legal ability to separate from him. Whether or not she actually legally separated from him remains unclear. Whatever the case, she had successfully created a paper trail that could help ensure her safety and allowed her move out of a dangerous household. By being able to prove that it was her husband and not herself who had failed to maintain a proper household, the “gatekeeping” of authorities could rule in her favor and allow her act of mobility. The cases of the two Johannas demonstrate that during the early modern period not all women living under Dutch rule experienced the same constraints on their mobility. Although both women were supposed to adhere to similar legal and moral ideals of domestic immobility, their experiences differed greatly because the context determined how gatekeeping impacted both women’s mobilities. Johanna Schildhouwer in Cochin was branded a deserter and forced to return to her husband as a result of a policy of “honorable reproduction,” while Johanna Meijer in Amsterdam was able to use the legal system to her advantage to escape from severe domestic violence.

We hope to have given scholars an invitation to further research women as marital deserters across the early modern world and to have shown its relevancy for research on women’s mobilities. Marital desertion involves acts of female mobility where marital ideals were challenged, but it also reveals the contexts in which such mobility could take place, allowing us to better understand the complex relation between early modern marriage and mobility.³⁶

³⁶ This work is part of the research programs “The Freedom of the Streets. Gender and Urban Space in Europe and Asia (1600–1850)” with project number 276–69–007 and “Resilient diversity: The governance of racial and religious plurality in the Dutch empire, 1600–1800” with project number 360–53–210, both financed by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). The authors further want to thank the editors of *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* for their helpful suggestions and comments.