

Dutch Genre Painting (II): Gender Trouble



Views of women in the 16th and 17th centuries

Martin Luther: “ ... it is evident therefore that woman is a different animal to man, not only having different members, but also being **far weaker in intellect**. ... For as the sun is more splendid than the moon (although the moon is also a splendid body), so also woman, although the most beautiful handiwork of God, **does not equal the dignity and glory of the male.**”

Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 9-10

Schama reading: Dutch genre images place women in opposing categories: “as succubi or sentinels of domestic virtue”



A common female type in genre paintings: the prostitute.

How do these paintings characterize the prostitutes in appearance, expression, and attitude? How does that match up with the reality of prostitution in the 17th century?



Dirck van Baburen, *Procuress*, 1622



Gerrit van Honthorst, *Procuress*, 1625



Gerrit van Honthorst, *Procuress*, 1625



The beautiful, accomplished courtesans painted by Honthorst and others were extremely rare in this “bourgeois” country with hardly any court life. ... it is obvious that the painters usually looked first to other paintings and not to any reality to be observed in their own cities.

Lotte van de Pol, Dutch historian

The opposite of the prostitute: housewife/mother



Woman, as the incarnation of caprice, vulnerable to the enticements of the world, had to be confined within a system of moral regulation ... women in Dutch art were immediately encumbered with a massive baggage of secondary associations concerning their duties in the home and toward their husband, and their role in communal philanthropy.

Schama, "Wives and Wantons," p. 7

Frontispiece from Jacob Cats, *Houwelijck (Marriage)*, 1625



Cats' popular conduct manual lists the ideal stages of a woman's life:

- Maiden
- Lover
- Bride
- Wife
- Mother
- Widow

Dutch Ideal of Domesticity

- Dutch saw the home as a microcosm of the state. Virtuous, well-managed family life was the foundation of national character
- Ideal of separating home from the outside world
- Each realm is gendered: moralists insisted that women belonged to the home and men worked in the world
 - Difference between theory and reality: women were part of the Dutch workforce

Child rearing and cleaning were popular subjects in Dutch genre paintings after 1650. De Hooch is known for his paintings of quiet, ordered domestic life featuring women and children.

De Hooch, *Woman Nursing*, 1658



Pieter de Hooch, *The Linen Closet*, 1663



Pieter de Hooch, *The Mother*, c. 1670



Pieter de Hooch, *The Mother*, c. 1670 (detail)



Home was ... a morally purified and vigilantly patrolled terrain where rude matter and beastly instinct—dirt, food, sex, sloth, idolatry—were subjected to the regulation of the enduring Christian virtues: sobriety, frugality, piety, humility, aptitude and loyalty.

Schama, p. 8

Jan Steen's paintings were also a warning of what could happen if the housewife did not fulfill her domestic duties.

Pieter de Hooch, *The Mother*,
c. 1670



Jan Steen, *In Luxury, Look Out*, 1663



Numerous Dutch genre paintings show women of all ages sewing, making lace, spinning cloth. These activities symbolize feminine virtue.

Netscher, *The Lacemaker*, 1662



Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*,
c. 1669 (9.6 x 8.3 in)



... the boundaries of domesticity are also the boundaries of class. The ideal feminine home is also a wealthy home; the heroines of domesticity are, by implication, the wives of men of substance. ... all those attributes that define virtue in domesticity are options open only to a certain type of woman. ...

Elizabeth Honig, "Space of Gender," p. 199



De Hooch, *Woman Nursing*, 1658



Despite what Dutch (male) moralists demanded, Dutch women were not confined to the home

- Women were part of the work force
- Depending on the city and trade, they could join guilds (e.g., Judith Leyster)
- Even women of the upper middle class were tasked with shopping for provisions for the home
- Women could and did conduct businesses

These contributed to male anxiety about the reversal of gender hierarchy and/or moral corruption of the burgher's home.

Such male anxiety is expressed in misogynistic, satirical literature and images about weak men being duped or bullied by their bossy wives.



Adriaen van de Venne, *Man Cleaning the Floor while his Wife sits by the Hearth*, 1630s

Gerard ter Borch, *Gallant Conversation* (formerly "Paternal Admonition"), c. 1654-55



Ter Borch, *Gallant Conversation* (formerly "*Paternal Admonition*"), c. 1654-55 (detail)

No eye-contact between the figures (or with the viewer). Ter Borch does not provide a clear narrative.





Gerard ter Borch, *Gallant Conversation* (formerly "Paternal Admonition"), c. 1654-55





Vermeer, *The Concert*,
c. 1665

Dirck van Baburen, *The Procuress*, 1622



Vermeer, *The Concert*, c. 1665



Ter Borch, "*Paternal Admonition*",
c. 1654 (Amsterdam)



Gender Roles: Theory vs. practice

- Ideal of separating work/world and home; domesticity as important idea in Dutch culture
- Each realm is gendered: moralists insist that women belong to the home, men work in the world. In reality, women were part of the workforce.
- Genre paintings use well worn tropes to convey ideas of female virtue, e.g., child rearing, cleaning, needlework
 - Gender and class issues are entwined: the perfect housewife belonged to the affluent classes
- Opposite category: brothel—but how do they relate to reality of prostitution in the period?
- More ambiguous pictures by Maes, Ter Borch, Vermeer that address the anxiety about potential corruption of the home