

# Prostitution in Early Modern Amsterdam

Lotte C. van de POL  
University of Utrecht

## *Introduction*

Amsterdam, in the seventeenth century the third city of Europe, had a reputation as a prostitution city. This reputation, national as well as international, can be traced in published books, travel stories and descriptions of Amsterdam, as well as in unpublished private letters and diaries. The *spinhuis*, the women's prison where the inmates, all considered to be whores, were on show, and the *speelhuizen*, music-houses-cum-brothels, were among the main tourist attractions of Amsterdam. In Dutch popular literature there were hundreds of farces, picaresque novels, pamphlets and songs that described the low life and the prostitution of Amsterdam. The same holds for the visual arts. *Bordeeltjes* (brothel-scenes), *koppelaarsters* (depictions of procuresses and whore-madams) and *voorstellen* (indecent propositions) were popular themes in genre painting; first rate artists like Johannes Vermeer, Gerard van Honthorst and Jan Steen all painted them.

The writings, plays, prints, paintings, songs of the seventeenth century often have sexual immorality and prostitution as their subjects, and they deal with it in an open and outspoken way. In Amsterdam and other Dutch cities there was extensive prostitution, openly visible, and, everybody was convinced, tolerated by the authorities. On the other hand, the Netherlands were a protestant nation in the aftermath of Reformation and Counter Reformation, a time in the history of Christianity when religious piety was deeply felt and politically influential. Calvinism, with its deep sense of the sinful nature of man and fear of the punishing wrath of God was the dominant religion; adultery, fornication and procuring were criminal offences. Still, the Amsterdam city fathers accepted prostitution seemingly without problems, and there was a market for brothel paintings and for writings on the vice trade. **(Colour plate I)**

This, of course, poses questions. How to explain this curious contrast between tolerance of prostitution and the lack of prudery and (freely expressed) pleasure in sex so obvious in much of the writings and pictures of the time, and the adherence to a religion that stressed the sinfulness of the pleasures of the flesh above all things?

### *Prostitution in Amsterdam*

Prostitution, that is sex for money as a trade, is typically an urban phenomenon. In the early modern period the province of Holland, in the western part of the Netherlands, was one of the most urbanized regions of Europe. There were many other factors contributing to a thriving vice trade. The professionalisation of the armies and the growth of standing armies -- the Republic had the largest standing army in Europe -- meant an increase of soldiers, always prominent among the prostitutes' clients. The expansion of trade, not only within Europe but to other continents as well, meant that the same holds for sailors, another traditional group of clients. Holland's riches attracted tens of thousands of immigrants, mostly young unmarried men and women, increasing both the demand for, and the supply of prostitution. The average age of marriage was high for both sexes, and some fifteen percent of the population never married at all, resulting in a large number of single adults. In this urban, affluent, trading and seafaring society there was also a high degree of commercialisation of services.

In all cities of Holland prostitution was found, but nowhere more so than in Amsterdam, the largest and richest city of them all. It was an immigrant city: of those who married in Amsterdam less than half were born there. The number of its inhabitants rose from ca 50,000 in 1600 to ca 200,000 in the second half of the seventeenth century and 230,000 in the first half of the eighteenth century. In the seventeenth century Amsterdam was the third largest city in Europe, after London and Paris, two other metropolises with a reputation for prostitution. Amsterdam was the main port of the Republic, both for the merchant fleet and for the East and West India ships, and every year many thousands of sailors disembarked and received their pay there. The sailors and soldiers of the VOC (the United East India Company) were considered the best clients of the brothels, as they had been away for years and at sea for months; they had the reputation of spending in a short time the money they had earned in years. For many of them, brothels even were temporary homes. Late summer, around the time of the September Fair, when the ships had returned from the East and new crews were being recruited, was the high season for the vice trade. The Amsterdam prostitution also attracted young migratory workers and immigrants, single Amsterdam apprentices, skippers and boatsmen of the inland shipping trade and farmers and merchants doing business in the big city.

The demand for prostitution is easy to explain, but the supply of (potential) prostitutes in Amsterdam is not difficult to chart, either. To start with, there was a huge surplus of women in the city. A "sex ratio" of 110, that is 110 women to 100 men, is

considered to be demographically normal, but in the cities of early modern Western Europe the ratio was usually higher. A deviation from the natural sex ratio would, in Europe, be caused by sex-specific migration, and in Amsterdam two such types of migration stand out: the great number of men who left the city to go to the East Indies, from where many would not return, and the great number of female immigrants, looking for and finding places as servants. **(fig.1)**

At the time of the first comprehensive census (1795) Amsterdam had an overall sex ratio of 123. The surplus of women, however, was concentrated in the adult population of the lower classes, especially in the poorest neighbourhoods, where the sex ratio may have been as high as 150, that is three women to two men. Probably a quarter of the women never married; poor immigrant women certainly did badly on the marriage market. Of the women in Amsterdam who did find a husband, the average age of marriage was about twenty-six years. Added to the fact that many women were married to (absent) sailors, the conclusion must be that at least half of the adolescent and adult women of the lower classes in Amsterdam were effectively single.

Ideologically, women were taken care of by their parents or their husband. In reality, at least half of the women of the lower classes in Amsterdam had to earn their own bread. Women, however, had access to only a few, badly paid professions. As a rule, their pay was about half the amount of that of men for the same type of work. Women's wages were essentially subsidiary, supplementing their husband's and family's income, but not enough to live on independently. Many single women were servants or lived with parents or family, and so had their lodging, food and heating cheap; but it was also quite normal for women to live on their own, renting a room or sharing quarters with other single women. They would typically work as seamstresses, dressmakers, spinsters, lacemakers and knitters, as cleaners and washerwomen, as pedlars and shopgirls. Thus, in Amsterdam there was a large surplus of poor, single women who had difficulty finding adequately paid employment and stood little chance of marrying, and were therefore at risk of turning to prostitution, the one type of work where women could earn good money.

Prostitution is by no means a simple matter of supply and demand, but economic and social determinants are important, as can be seen from the fact that relatively many prostitutes were immigrants, the most vulnerable group. The force of economic circumstances can also be seen in the eighteenth century, when the textile industry had moved away from Amsterdam and conditions of domestic service deteriorated. As unemployment and poverty amongst single women increased markedly, more of them drifted into prostitution, and rates of payment for sex decreased considerably.

The extent and structure of prostitution as a trade is also dependent on what society tolerates and the state permits. As will not surprise in a Christian society, prostitution was forbidden. In early modern Holland, prostitutes, brothel keepers and procurers were considered to be criminals, and prosecuted as such. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the police was at some times more repressive and at other times more tolerant, but on average about twenty percent of all judicial and police activity was devoted to the suppression of prostitution. However, in a metropole and port of the size of Amsterdam, with a police force of less than thirty men, the prohibition was difficult to enforce. Arrests were made and culprits tried, but it was never enough. The heritage of this sometimes fitful prosecution in Amsterdam can be found in the municipal judicial archives. These archives are very rich, and enable a detailed reconstruction of the prostitution business in early modern Amsterdam. This paper is mainly based on research in these archives, and most of all on more than 8,000 trial records concerning prostitution from 1650-1750.

### *The prostitution business in Amsterdam*

In Amsterdam, there was an ample variety of forms of prostitution. Sexual services could be bought in many places. There was street prostitution, where for a small fee, and in the open air, men had sex with a woman who had accosted them. There were "whorehouses," small brothels where clients stayed for hours or even the night, and where the bill for food, drink and bedding often exceeded the fee for the prostitutes. Prostitutes could be found in disreputable inns and dancings, and especially in the famous *speelhuizen* ("play houses") or *musico's*, where there was live music, dancing, food and drink; everyone knew that the beautifully dressed girls there were prostitutes, who withdrew with their clients to a backroom or took them home. As these establishments were "officially" no brothels, they attracted many visitors, including women, who just came to satisfy their curiosity. Although much of the "pleasure industry" was concentrated in a few streets near the harbour, there was no prostitution district, and brothels and streetwalkers could be found in other parts of the city as well.(fig.2)

There were also many types of prostitutes. There were streetwalkers, women who lived and received their clients in small brothels, women who picked up men in disreputable inns and *speelhuizen*, "call-girls" who were fetched from their homes, women who lived alone and received a few selected clients in their home; there were prostitutes plying the trade alone or with a female "comrade" and prostitutes who were "managed" by a madam, often tied to her by debts; there were full time, professional

prostitutes and women who made a little extra on the side. There were "public" whores and "secret" whores; the latter had managed to keep their trade secret and their reputation intact. However, many prostitutes fitted into more than one category during their career.

The form and characteristics of the vice trade were to a considerable extent dependent on the intensity of policing. In times of effective policing prostitution went underground and became small-scale; as the threat of prosecution limited capital investment, the larger and highly visible *speelhuizen* disappeared. In times of lax or ineffective policing, the size and visibility of brothels increased, and more money and, therefore, more men were attracted to the business.

In spite of the vicissitudes of policing, there probably were, at any time, hundreds of small brothels and, at some times, twenty or more *speelhuizen*. There were at least 800 to 1,000 professional prostitutes and hundreds of brothel keepers. To these must be added hundreds of servants, dressmakers, musicians, victuallers, and others who earned their money in brothels or around prostitution. All in all, prostitution was an important business within the urban economy.

Despite being unregulated and illegal, the vice trade exemplified many features of pre-industrial commerce. Like other trades, it was essentially small-scale and organized as a household. The business of prostitution revolved primarily around the *hoerhuis* ("whorehouse"), that is any house, room or apartment where illicit sex took place. Most of the commercial sex took place in such a small brothel, even if the client was picked up on the street or in a *speelhuis*. As in the pre-industrial economy generally, the "employees" lived in as members of the household; as the cost of food was very high, there was only a small staff of two, at most three prostitutes. These girls paid either a fixed sum of money or half of their earnings to the *hoerenwaardin* ("whore-madam"). Whenever the number of clients exceeded that of the women, "call-girls" or prostitutes from other brothels were fetched. The number of clients a prostitute had was small and the relationships were personalised. Time was cheap and productivity low, and rates of pay were not fixed but negotiated according to circumstance. Often, the greatest profits were made from serving drink and food.

Prostitution was essentially a female business. As a rule an Amsterdam prostitute was without a man, either because she was single, or because her husband had died, abandoned her or enlisted on a long-term voyage with the East Indian Company. Very few lived with or were protected by a man; significantly no word in Dutch existed at the time with the exact meaning of "pimp." Often prostitutes were "managed" by whore-madams. Those of the prostitutes who were in debt could be bought from and sold to other whore-madams. One out of every five arrested organizers

of prostitution was a man, but nearly all of these were the partners of a brothel keeping woman, and many stated in court that the prostitution was their wife's business, with which they had nothing to do. They were usually let off with a light sentence. Less than half of the madams lived together with a man. A man at hand was certainly useful for the business: he could rent a house, throw out troublesome customers and hire musicians more easily than she could; the large *speelhuizen* usually had a couple as brothel keepers. But just as elsewhere in business roles and tasks were divided according to sex; "keeping a whore-household" was still a "household," and therefore within the female domain.

Prostitution was, in effect, a commercial enterprise, that can be seen in terms of economic and demographic forces. It was, however, in early modern Holland certainly not accepted as a simple fact of life. Prostitution was problematical, a minefield of dilemma's and anxieties. The problem with prostitution was the illicit sex, not the payment. In fact, there was no equivalent of the modern term "prostitution"; "whoredom" is the word commonly used, denoting any kind of sex outside the marriage bed. A "whore" could, in our terms, either be a prostitute or a licentious woman. "Whoredom" was a problem of morality, which is to say, in this period, a problem of religion.

### *Christianity and prostitution*

Sexual morality was, until very recently, largely based on Christian ethics and doctrine. In the Christian tradition, sexuality is not a neutral subject. Christian doctrine, as formed and formulated by celibate clerics in the first centuries after Christ, was undeniably anti-sexual. The body was considered to be the root of all evil; celibacy was the highest human stage. For those who could not repress lust, the only option was to marry. Sexual intercourse was only allowed between a married couple, preferably with an eye to conception. Even within marriage, spouses should practice moderation. Sexual practices that were not aimed at procreation, such as masturbation or coitus interruptus, were forbidden. Sodomy, that is anal intercourse, was judged as deserving the death penalty. Adultery was especially abhorred, as it was forbidden in the Ten Commandments Moses had received directly from God. The denial of the body and the rejection of sexual lust made sex into a problem and a area of guilt.

Christian sexual doctrine was not only anti-sexual, it was also misogynic. In Paradise Adam and Eve had been chaste. After the Fall, however, God had punished man by giving him sexual lust, thus lowering him to the level of animals. Eve, herself tempted by the Devil, had seduced Adam to break God's commandment and so was the

prime cause of men's expulsion from paradise. As retribution for Eve's crime women were subjected to their husbands' power. Blaming woman for the fatal seduction has been detrimental for the status of women in Western society. However, the tradition of Christian thinking in western society has also had great benefits for women. The church may have justified the subjection of women, but always proclaimed the equality of men and women where it mattered most: in the eyes of God, in their immortal souls. Moreover, the principled choice for monogamy, the prohibition of adultery, and the impossibility of divorce was on the whole beneficial to women. Most of all, in its moral commandments, the church made no distinction between men and women.<sup>1</sup> In the early modern period, at least in the protestant Netherlands, neither church laws nor state law had a markedly double standard.

In the sixteenth century the religious unity of Western Europe fell apart. Protestant doctrine "upgraded" sex by abandoning celibacy for the clergy, and stating explicitly that sex between spouses supported the marital bond, but there were no fundamental changes in the way of thinking about sex and women. There was, however, a great change in the way of thinking about prostitution, which was connected with changes in the perceived relationship between God and man. Historically, Christian thinking concerning sex and prostitution knows two traditions. The first is the conviction that fornication is a sin. This is bad enough; but since the Fall all men are sinners, and it would be hubris to expect perfection in this life. Sinners should be helped to convert, and sins can be forgiven. This is the traditional catholic point of view. According to the Church Fathers St Augustine (fifth century) and St Thomas Aquino (thirteenth century) prostitution could not be eliminated and was even useful as a means of channelling (male) lust; thus prostitution was a "necessary evil." On the basis of this doctrine, in the late Medieval cities of Western Europe prostitution was accepted and regulated: restricted to certain designated parts of the city or confined to municipal brothels, that were in theory only open for unmarried men. The prostitutes who wanted to get out were helped. Once converted, they were forgiven; one of the most popular female saints, Mary Magdalene, was a converted prostitute.

The other tradition sees fornication as a crime. The sin of unchastity is abhorred by God, and as is evident from the Old Testament, God will punish a whole people for sins committed by one person, or tolerated by the authorities. "Whoredom" and adultery and therefore, by inclusion, also prostitution, are serious crimes, which endanger society. This is the orthodox protestant view and the standard in the early modern period, which resulted in the repression and criminalization of prostitution from the middle of the sixteenth to the middle of the eighteenth century. In the Netherlands the tolerated brothels were closed in every city as soon as it became

Protestant in the course of the Revolt against the Spanish. In Amsterdam this happened in 1578. From that moment on, prostitutes, brothel keepers (and some, but not all) clients were treated as criminals. Syphilis, the new and mortal venereal disease that had struck Europe as an epidemic since the late fifteenth century was considered a just punishment for fornication. The (officially privileged) Calvinist church regularly exhorted the city government to eradicate brothels for fear that God would punish the city for permitting such "crying sins."

### *Misogyny*

In most times and cultures, the cause of prostitution has been seen to be male sexuality. In this view, men had more sexual needs and a greater sexual drive than women; the availability of venal sex was mostly seen as unavoidable or even necessary for reasons of public order and (male) health. The role of prostitutes was essentially passive, and at many times prostitutes have been considered to be victims. The villains of the business have usually been the organizers: madams, brothel keepers, pimps and all others who seduce or force a girl into prostitution and profit from her.

Early modern Holland was an exception to this kind of thinking. Especially in the late sixteenth and in the seventeenth century the attitude towards prostitutes was hard: they were judged to be criminals and instigators of crime, certainly not as victims. This merciless attitude is visible everywhere. To start with, in the seventeenth century the police was more after prostitutes than after organizers, which is an exception in the history of prostitution. In prison, where the inmates were on show for a few pennies, they were jeered at and insulted. There was no help, either personally or institutionally, for a prostitute who wanted to leave the business. In the discussions why women became prostitutes there is no compassion, no mention of poverty, seduction or ill fortune; laziness, longing for luxury, and wantonness were stated to be the main reasons for a girl to become a prostitute. On the other hand, their clients are depicted as poor deluded fools, as victims of the tricks of women.

Not only prostitutes, but women in general had a bad press in the seventeenth century. The misogynic tradition of the church helped to define women as creatures inferior to men; medical tradition, too, taught that women were imperfect men. The list of bad characteristics women were accused of was ancient and long, but one of them came to the fore in this period: namely that women were at least as, or even more lustful than men. A psychological explanation can, tentatively, be offered here. Reformation (and Counter Reformation) had tightened the control over sexual morals, imbuing everyone with the fear of God's wrath, and so greatly strengthening the sexual



guilt-culture. Even more so, men were no longer excused: they were expected to live as chaste as women had always been compelled to do. Many men did not, as can be seen from the extent of prostitution. But those men who lived a promiscuous life faced many dangers. Syphilis was rampant. Whore-hopping, if known, sullied your reputation. Married men caught in the act with a prostitute faced arrest for adultery, which could cost them their reputation of honourable man, their marriage and their job. But in this male-dominated culture the guilty party was easily found. The women, innately vain, deceitful, intemperate and lustful, were to blame for promiscuity. All women were considered to be openly, secretly, or at least potentially, whores.

Contemporary writings give many examples of this anxiety and blaming. "Women in whom Nature had overcome Education," is the way in which an English traveller described the women who were imprisoned for prostitution in Amsterdam: "Clothed in the gay habiliments of love, adorned with plumes of feathers on their heads, patched and painted and just as they used to charm and coax the fond, admiring and deluded gulls who know not the fatal Arts of women."<sup>2</sup> Another Englishman described *speelhuizen* as places where "lewd persons of both sexes could practice their villainies."<sup>3</sup> A recurrent theme in popular literature is that of a young man who discovers that his mother is a secret whore.

Above all, the defining of women as instigators of criminal sex can be seen in the visual arts. In prints, it is often the Devil himself who is behind the whore, blowing with a pair of bellows evil thoughts into her ear -- just as he, in the form of a snake, seduced Eve, the first woman. The title-print of the hugely popular book *Het Amsterdamsch Hoerdom*, which first appeared in 1681, even shows three devils: one is behind the prostitute, the second drags the clients down to her feet. (fig.3,4)

The young men are held down by a chain and both the devil and the prostitute have, as victors, a foot on the men's necks. The third devil sits, very contentedly, at the bedside of a woman who takes the vomiting treatment of syphilis -- another piece of mischief. The longer title of this book translates as *The whoredom of Amsterdam, describing the wiles and tricks of whores and whore-madams*. There is not a woman in the book who is not thoroughly bad.

The painted brothel-scenes show us many young, beautiful and often accomplished girls, who are always very willing and gay, but also prostitutes of the common sort, who are lazy, insolent, drink too much, and will cheat you any way they can. Food and music accompany the business of prostitution. Every contact, every act is presided over by a procuress, a mercenary, ugly, often hideously grinning old woman. The women are the actors on the scene. The client, however, is often presented as a fool, who does not notice that he is being cheated or robbed. It cannot be accidental, that the

only exception to this is a painting made by a woman, Judith Leyster (1609-1660).

**(Colour plate II)**

In her painting "The Proposition" of 1631, the man is the active partner, and the woman is not a half-nude seductress, but a working class girl, being tempted by the offer of money. Whether she will give in, is left in the air in this, arguably quite deliberate female view, but her decent clothing and her needlework -- symbol of the good woman - stress the point that women are by no means all potential whores.

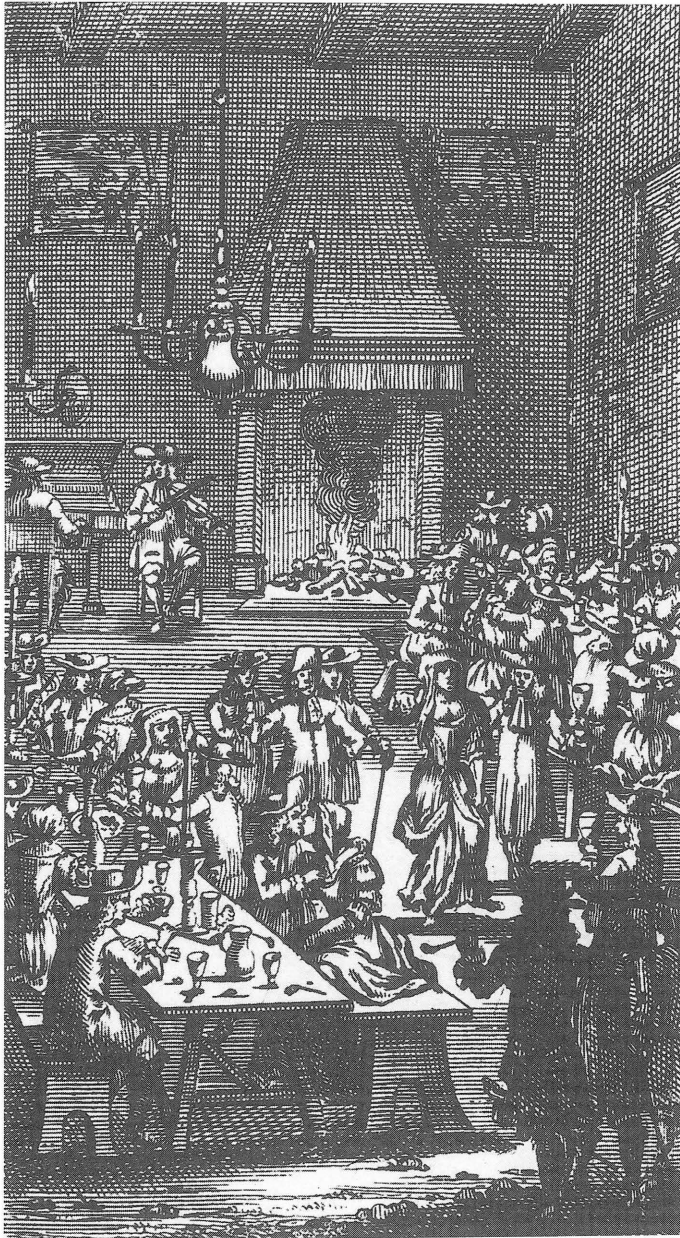
**NOTES**

N.B. This paper is largely based on Lotte van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams Hoerdom. Prostitutie in de Zeventiende en Achttiende eeuw* (Amsterdam 1996); idem, "Beeld en Werkelijkheid van de Prostitutie in de Zeventiende Eeuw," in: Gert Hekma and Herman Roodenburg (Eds), *Soete Minne en Helsche Boosheit. Seksuele Voorstellingen in Nederland, 1300-1850* (Nijmegen 1988), pp. 109-144; idem, "The Lure of the Big City. Female Migration to Amsterdam," in: E. Kloek a.o. (Ed.), *Women of the Golden Age. An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-century Holland, England and Italy* (Hilversum 1994), pp. 72-81, and idem, "Seksualiteit tussen Middeleeuwen en Vroegmoderne Tijd," in: H. Peeters a.o. (Ed.), *Vijf Eeuwen Gezinsleven. Liefde, Huwelijk en Opvoeding in Nederland* (Nijmegen 1988), pp. 163-193.

1. Margaret Sommerville, *Sex and Subjection. Attitudes to Women in Early-modern Society*. London, 1995.
2. Joseph Shaw, *Letters to a Nobleman from a Gentleman travelling through Flanders and France*. London, 1709, pp. 43-44.
3. Cornelis D. van Strien, *British Travellers in Holland during the Stuart Period*. Amsterdam, 1989, p. 109.



**fig.1** Dancing sailor with prostitute: "Like natures make fine couples" ("gelyk van aart, is wel gepaart"). Lithography by Jacob Gole after a painting by Cornelis Dusart. (Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam)



**fig.2** The interior of a "speelhuis." Illustration from *Het Amsterdamsch Hoerdom* (1681) (University Library, University of Amsterdam)



**fig.3** Title page of *D'Openhertige Juffrouw*,  
of *d'Ontdekte Geveinsdheid*, part II (1699)  
(Royal Library, The Hague)



1681

**fig.4** Title page of *Le Putanisme d'Amsterdam* (1681), the French edition of *Het Amsterdams Hoerdom*. (University Library, University of Amsterdam)