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van Gemert, L.

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## Questions for Ever?

*A Response to Juvonen and Andreadis*

Lia van Gemert

Harriette Andreadis' and Tuula Juvonen's reactions to my article "Hiding behind words?"<sup>1</sup> show clearly several points which keep coming back in the debate on what we, in the twentieth century, call "lesbian love". Firstly, we know very little about same-sex relations in the past — especially those of women; secondly, in order to get a more reliable account of them, we must know whether and how the concept of female homosexual love existed and was practised; thirdly, until we have this information we risk using an anachronistic terminology and even anachronistic concepts of lesbianism.<sup>2</sup> Having read my analysis of the work of the Dutch seventeenth-century female writers Van der Veer, Questiers, Lescailje and Brongersma, both Andreadis and Juvonen comment on the problem of linking poetry like this to real life. Juvonen

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<sup>1</sup> Van Gemert, Lia (1995), *Thamyris* 2.1, 11-44.

<sup>2</sup> On these issues I referred to Faderman, Donoghue and — concerning especially Dutch literature — Dekker and Van de Pol and Everard. Unfortunately Everard's book *Ziel en zinnen* (*Soul and Senses*, 1994) is not available in English yet. Her remarks on the eighteenth-century Dutch conception of "sin" and on the cultural embeddedness of feelings of "love" (depending on differences of social class), correspond to those of Andreadis.

argues that exploring conventions of literature could be helpful, while Andreadis theorizes the concept of the biographical background of these women. In this contribution to the debate, I will pay attention to both aspects.

The fact that they were women, makes the work of the seventeenth-century Dutch writers Katharina Lescailje and Titia Brongersma rather unusual. Not many of their *female* colleagues wrote poems in which a man declares his love for a woman, in which an anonymous "I" expresses feelings of frustrated love and in which the female poetic persona addresses another woman in passionate terms. Actually, it was just this "peculiar" kind of Petrarchism that drew my attention to the texts of Lescailje and Brongersma a few years ago. Given the fact that "variation" is a key concept in Renaissance literature, I wondered whether these authors intended to write within the conventions of Petrarchan literature and meant nothing "extra", or whether they had some special reason for their variations.

I agree with Juvonen (p. 143) that this specific Petrarchan poetry could very well turn out to be a key to the time (in my case: the Dutch seventeenth century) and its ideas about women-to-women relationships.<sup>3</sup> It is significant that there was no protest when the laments are of an unidentified narrator or when a woman poses as a man addressing a woman. And, developing the argument further, even a woman complaining about her male lover, was an acceptable variation on Petrarchan themes, as both Lescailje and Brongersma showed.

Research should examine here however, just how elastic Petrarchan conventions were. One of the problems of interpreting poems such as the ones in the article is finding out *whether* a text shows emotional tensions between women. In my view, Questiers' poem about the lost garter for instance, is no "*double entendre*" (p. 144), but just an intellectual joke and the same goes for the poem about ladies smoking pipe.<sup>4</sup> At this point, one could also consider another "great" Dutch writer, Maria Tesselschade Roemer Visscher (1594-1649). Her work too, can be characterized as Petrarchan. For instance: Cupid speaks about his tricks, and several times an unidentified "I" poses as a lonely lover. But Tesselschade never

<sup>3</sup> I concentrate on the Petrarchan framework here, but Juvonen's remark (p. 145) that certain classical myths may have been used to refer to same-sex relationships, should also be investigated further, with special attention to transvestite and "sodomitic" elements.

<sup>4</sup> Van Gemert (1995), 16, 18.

refers to problematic situations of sex or gender; she gives the impression of simply wanting to show her talent and skill by playing Petrarchan games. It is even difficult to work out whether she was really in love!<sup>5</sup>

Another question still to be answered, is how people read poems in which two women disclose their feelings for each other.<sup>6</sup> I agree with Juvonen's conclusion: maybe the statement that "homosexuality was seen as an unspeakable evil" proves to be "an inaccurate generalisation" in so far as it could exist on paper (p. 144).<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the fact that neither Lescailje's nor Brongersma's reputation was hurt by their poetry, can be seen as evidence here. But this is only part of the problem and it leaves the question of how to deal with the feelings of guilt and shame in these poems. In other words: there seems to be a link to reality in the work of Lescailje and Brongersma, which forces us to consider their every day life, no matter how difficult that may be.<sup>8</sup>

One only needs to take a quick look at the studies by Faderman, Laqueur, Everard and others, to see that what we most need here, are historically accurate models for reading women's relations to each other. How to deal with the paradox of women sharing same-sex eroticism and chaste friendship at the same time? Can we — post-Freudians — ever recognize and understand matters of love, sex and gender in earlier centuries? At this point, I think Andreadis especially sharpens the debate in a useful way. I will try to examine her suggestions in relation to my material.

Andreadis points to analysing a writer's terminology and to the cultural embeddedness of love, sex and gender: one's social class also defines the meaning of these concepts. In the case of Lescailje,

<sup>5</sup> See: *De gedichten van Tesselschade Roemers*, A.A. Sneller & O. van Marion (eds), Hilversum 1994.

<sup>6</sup> As in my article, in order to be able to focus clearly, I chose to interpret the "I", the male shepherd etc. from the poems as "the writer", i.e. Lescailje or Brongersma herself (Van Gemert 1995, p. 24-5). This neglect of other possible readings is deliberate. This, of course, produces a certain narrowness, but I consider it useful in exploring the question "can this poetry tell something about real life?" It is remarkable, however, that both Juvonen and Andreadis read my analysis as the only, or at least the dominant, interpretation of the poetry involved.

<sup>7</sup> Van Gemert (1995), 11, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Unlike Juvonen, I think the question "what a good lesbian should be like" (p. 141) is irrelevant to (any) research. It may be a personal motivation for doing your work, but when "looking for a mutual background" becomes a scientific principle, it leads to invalid arguments like "only lesbians can write about lesbians", "only whites can ..." etc. (apart from risking the pitfall of anachronism).

Brongersma and the others, generally the language is passionate, though decent. I found no words at all which indicated “dirty dykes”, not even the Dutch “lollepot”. One may suspect something socially undesirable going on *only* from the references to the feelings of guilt and in the case of the “sodomite fruit”.<sup>9</sup> In my view, this does not tell us how Lescailje and Brongersma really felt, but it indicates that they were far too dignified to use these kinds of words. Perhaps, in their view, coining their feelings that way would make them comparable with lowerclass women, a horrifying thought! Even more likely, I think, they never thought of comparing themselves to the lower classes *because* they were a different kind of species, as could be seen from their education, social background etc. This also means that Lescailje’s and Brongersma’s conception of sex and gender was different from that of people of a lower class. Any feeling of sexuality (whether hetero, homo or whichever word must be chosen here) would in their eyes never be the same as feelings within lower circles, although in a twentieth-century view they may not differ principally.

This line of argument, I think, opens up the possibility of escaping the narrow patterns of heterosexuality and homosexuality; a necessity rightly stressed by Andreadis. To find proof for it will be hard, though. I think that Lescailje, managing her own publishing firm, could have had access to printed information about same-sex relations, but the question is: would she have wanted to? Furthermore, I am not optimistic about rediscovering autobiographical material, especially not when it comes down to a revelation of Lescailje’s personal feelings. I think, her position was already rather exclusive, from a poetic point of view: within the group of epigons of Vondel (absolutely the most famous Dutch writer at that time), she was the only woman. Being unmarried and managing her own financial affairs safeguarded her against attacks on her position (with arguments like: you should be at home, keeping the household and educating your children), but I doubt whether she would have wanted to emphasize this exceptional status even more by stating relatively unusual personal feelings.<sup>10</sup> After all, the dominant pattern was the common marriage of man and woman; and above that the feelings of guilt in the poems seem

<sup>9</sup> Van Gemert (1995), 23.

<sup>10</sup> We do not know very much of Brongersma’s daily life. Her “poetic” situation seems to correspond to that of Lescailje, be it on a smaller scale: Frisian poets often mentioned her and it is likely she belonged to a certain circle of writers, mostly men.

to indicate that “other” relationships had their limits — although the evaluation of “sexual” acts may have differed from our pattern (Andreadis, p. 135).

Discovering the historical truth may be beyond our reach, asking the right questions should not be. Further analysis of poetic conventions and social patterns will help understanding the world on paper left to us by former societies.

LIA VAN GEMERT is a professor of Historical Dutch literature at the Catholic University of Nijmegen.