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### Wrong Lovers in the 19th Century Netherlands

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# Wrong Lovers in the 19th Century Netherlands

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**ABSTRACT.** Various styles of "male love" occurring in the 19th century are introduced. Locations and public ordinances relating to these styles of love are discussed. The development of the homosexual role is broached along with the question of whether attitudes and laws of the 19th century were responsible in part for the development of normative expectations for homosexuality which might in turn have repressed its growth.

## *INTRODUCTION*

At this writing I am working on a thesis on the construction of the medical concept on male homosexuality in the late 19th century Netherlands. Within the scope of this reconstruction, questions will come up as to the then occurring styles of male love. On the basis of the material I collected in the course of my research, I will broach and tentatively answer three questions. The first concerns the nature of the different styles of male love in the 19th Century. The second is about the development of the homosexual role and identity, about which research is in urgent need of additional data.<sup>1</sup> The third deals with the phenomenon of sexual repression: To what extent can the 19th Century be regarded as an era which set the norm for homosexuality, and in turn repressed it?<sup>2</sup>

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The terms homosexual and homosexuality were introduced into the Dutch language through medical magazines in 1892.<sup>3</sup> Before other terms specified homosexual realities; some of these words were borrowed from the classical languages, while others were very Dutch: sodomite, pederast, ganymede, crimen nefandum, cynaede, bougre, friendship, flikker (fairy), schandknaap (catamite), unnatural fornication, wrong lover, and their derivations. Problems with regard to these words and their connotations will not be dealt with here.

On the basis of my material, I distinguish three lifestyles. First, the two classical western forms, pederasty and male love of comrades or, in other words the male love of boys and the male love of men, for which Gide and Whitman respectively stand as models. I will subdivide both styles into three categories. However, besides both these lifestyles, there was also a diffuse form of homosexuality: accidental, public, physical, indetermined, inclusive.

### ***DIFFUSE HOMOSEXUALITY***

This undifferentiated form of homosexuality occurred in the street, in parks, on ramparts, in exclusively male societies such as prisons, monasteries, and armies, on ships, at boarding schools, and it was often a pursuit at any type of men's gathering. The relations concerned were characterized by a strong emphasis on physical contacts, and were of accidental nature, not lasting and not determined by particular sexual fantasies or by sexual identifications. Maybe there was a youth cult, but the dominating position of younger men in this form of homosexuality was probably the result of their lack of sexual discipline and the absence of women in their lives. Men married late and, besides, marriage was not the general rule in The Netherlands of the 19th Century.<sup>4</sup> It is this form of homosexuality to which the

legal archives rather abundantly bear testimony, and against which the responsible authorities proceeded with increasing strictness.<sup>5</sup> The transition from collective detention to solitary confinement during this period was probably prompted by the “profligacy” of the prisoners, and resulted in various measures being taken in the prison dormitories, such as installation of more lighting, a different formation for sleeping mats, and more warders. Yet these scarcely had any effect.<sup>6</sup> There is little information available about sexual conduct on Dutch ships. However, they did play an important role in the great debate about medical regulations regarding prostitution. Those who fought prostitution asserted that the Dutch sailors were paragons of chastity,<sup>7</sup> whereas their opponents claimed the very opposite, labeling the sailors as “thousands, who either privately, or secretly with someone of the same sex, satisfy their lusts.”<sup>8</sup> The first homosexual case concerned a naval officer who, after his dismissal from the navy, sent his “autobiography” to C. Winkler, professor of psychiatry, which P. F. Spaink published in 1893 in the *Psychiatrische Bladen* (Psychiatric Papers).<sup>3</sup> On every voyage this officer had had sexual adventures with many (once as many as 30) members of the crew, some of whom were regular partners. The officer labeled only a minority of his partners “uranians.”<sup>9</sup>

In the streets of the late 19th century Netherlands men had sexual contacts which often were of an accidental and transitory nature. From the legal archives, it appears that now and again there were regular relationships and regular “cottagers,” people who frequented cottages, i.e., public conveniences. Furthermore, there were boys and men who, without much ado, satisfied their sexual lusts with men they met in the street or in public conveniences. Toward the end of the century these diffuse, informal forms of homosexuality were increasingly dealt with by the police.<sup>10</sup> For legal authority to discourage such behavior, labeled as outrage to the public decency, the police appealed to

paragraph 330 of the French Penal Code, operative in The Netherlands from 1811 to 1886, and Article 239 of the Dutch Criminal code, in effect since 1886.

The modernization of the public conveniences halfway into the 19th century was an additional obstacle to sexual contacts. Before the modernization took place, public conveniences were found under bridges, in the dark, and were only accessible via a flight of stone stairs. Some juridical reports of the period talk of night watchmen who claimed they first took off their (wooden) shoes before descending to the convenience under the bridge, so that they could catch wrong lovers in the act. At the end of the 19th Century, lights were placed over the urinals and sidewalls were constructed in a way that made it easy to assess from the outside what the urinal was actually being used for.<sup>11</sup>

The homosexual needs of a great many men appear to have been satisfied irregularly; they were direct, physical, accidental, not exclusive, and were often fulfilled in a more or less public place. Because the sexual desires of other men were more differentiated, they required a higher degree of homosexual organization.

### ***MALE LOVE OF COMRADES***

The three principal forms of the male love of comrades were the following:

1. At the end of the 19th century there was a number of meeting places for sodomites in beer and coffeehouses in Amsterdam.<sup>12</sup> From closer inquiry it appears that similar meeting places existed at the beginning of the 18th century.<sup>13</sup> Data about the intervening period are as yet not available. The police raids on these public houses were, as far as I know, without juridical consequence.<sup>14</sup> According to the Dutch criminal law these places were legitimate. Police actions were justified only on the ground of by-laws or in the event of incitement of fornication with

minors. It does not appear unlikely to me, if the police raids were mainly meant to hinder the functioning of such meeting places.

The most comprehensive information about such a beerhouse we owe to a gutter-press journalist called Abraham Cornelisse. In 1897 he launched a campaign against George Hermans' beer house on Smaksteeg, which, for clarity's sake, he called "Sodom-Societeit." He did not stop at words only, but even threw in the windows of the cafe. This "sodomite" was not only the proprietor of a pub, but also a doctor of secret or venereal diseases, so a quack and a labor-broker into the bargain. This way he had various possibilities "to give rein to his debauched lusts." In his newspaper Cornelisse described the interior of the place: many flowers and portraits of the members of the royal family.<sup>15</sup>

2. These beerhouses were without doubt also places where male prostitutes could be bought and there must have been a close link with brothels, which will be discussed later. But they certainly served as places where "wrong lovers" could meet one another. Beside this possibility, the circle of sodomites was an important 19th century way of organizing homosexuals. In a discussion by the "Nederlandsche Vereeniging voor Psychiatrie" (The Dutch Association for Psychiatry) about uranism Professor C. Winkler made mention of unions in the larger Dutch cities that in some cases counted up to eighty uranians.<sup>16</sup> In 1881 the Amsterdam police caught a group of nineteen committers of "unnatural fornication" at a blow, who were nevertheless not summoned. They were all working-class men who varied in age from 18 to 67.<sup>17</sup>

Neither could I find much information about male couples, probably for the same reason: There was no provision against them. Or else, these sodomites thoroughly covered up their sexual lusts. Yet, as indicated by archives which chronicled prosecutions on the grounds of outrage to public decency, some men concerned appeared to meet each other regularly at the same spot. In 1833 nightwatches arrested a chemist's assistant and a

stage walk-on who had been kissing and caressing one another between 12 and 1 a.m. at the same streetcorner for a fortnight. The nightwatches had been chasing them for two weeks before finally succeeding to arrest them.<sup>18</sup> In 1864 alarmed citizens caught two sodomites who for nights on end had been spending one or two hours in a public convenience and had left it before the arrival of the nightwatches patrolling the bridge. A woman who dealt in pickles and eggs near the public convenience was the first to report their activities, for the sodomites had bought food from her before their cozy gathering.<sup>19</sup>

Only one case of friends living together has come to my attention. A witness testified before the Committee of Prostitution of Amsterdam City council "that on the third floor of a brothel, at night and right in front of the window, two men are powdering and caressing each other. The vice these men commit . . . (is) too obvious. . . ."<sup>20</sup> These homosexual affairs lasted longer, were more regular, more exclusive, often less public, and probably more determined by sexual preference and identities than the contacts made in the street.

3. A last variation was the romantic friendships that developed between students and other men, especially during the Romantic Period. In the 19th century Netherlands, passionate but chaste relationships must have occurred frequently, for in the corporate life of students they were generally a socially appreciated phenomenon. Well-known examples of these chaste relationships are evident in the group known as the "reverend poets" (they were protestant priests) who studied in Leiden in the 1830s<sup>21</sup> and within the literary movement of the 1880s in Amsterdam.<sup>22</sup> These relationships sometimes were of an extremely homo-erotic nature. In Leiden one of the friends was called "Jonathan," and the poetic caprices of W. Kloos, a representative of the movement of the 1880s, were overtly homosexual, whereas later on this poet quenched his desires with alcohol and marriage. Among the various lifestyles, all sorts of transitions were possible. A man could praise romantic



friendships to the sky and at the same time be an active ‘‘cottageger.’’ These transitions also took place between the love comrades had for one another, as well as between the love some men had for boys.

### *FROM PEDERASTY TO PEDAGOGIC EROS*

Lads and boys have not always been the submissive objects of male adults' lust. From the persecution records of the police, it is evident that boys from the age of 9 seduced other boys their own age and were held at least partly responsible by the justice for their deeds. Usually, however, the public prosecutor did not prosecute cases of homosexual fornication between boys under the age of 16 nor prosecute boys who were involved in pederastic relations. Yet the policies of justice and public prosecution seem to have been rather arbitrary, for lawyers were entangled in the ideology of the innocent child and the responsible adult. As a result, children potentially could become legally responsible adults somewhere between the ages of 9 and 23.<sup>23</sup>

Some pederastic affairs included a financial transaction. Sometimes the boys offered themselves for free, while other times they charged a few cents up to a maximum of a ‘‘rijksdaalder’’ (half a week's pay for an errand boy). In the 19th Century sexuality was closely linked with money. Prostitution had assumed large proportions and so had pederasty.

1. Just as there were different types of male love between comrades, so were there different types of pederasty. First, there was male prostitution in the streets, sometimes spread all over the town, sometimes at one spot. Around 1900 Kalverstraat, an Amsterdam street which borders on Munt, was where hustlers sold their love.<sup>24</sup> On the same street the ‘‘Tijdingzaal,’’ hall where the latest newspapers could be read, was probably a place where boys traded their beauty for money. By the end of the 19th Century, there were, besides male streetwalkers, boys

who worked in the brothels of Amsterdam, Arnhem, and The Hague. The word brothel is perhaps an exaggeration, though, considering the simple facilities the houses offered their customers. Such a brothel in The Hague is the only place about which we have clear information. It was a back room in a tobacco shop in which men mutually masturbated with boys whom they paid.<sup>25</sup> “De Middernachtzending” (the Midnight Mission), a society that fought prostitution, drew up a list of brothels in Amsterdam, including 5 places most of which seem to have been normal houses. One of the brothel keepers was later sentenced on the charge of inciting fornication with minors, *nota bene*, committed out of the house. To seduce boys he used pornography, and he confessed to having joined in public feasts dressed up like a woman.<sup>26</sup> In another instance, police raided a brothel in Arnhem and found 40 customers there, all of whom were later released.<sup>27</sup>

The brothels served yet other important functions for the subculture of wrong lovers as well. In a number of cases, the brothel keepers worked as agents in foreign real estate, which enabled them to house rich customers abroad in the event of a scandal or a criminal case, and as pimps, labor-broker, which enabled them to recruit new boys and get rid of boys who had served their time. For the pederastically inclined, these brothels no doubt formed the nerve center of the subculture by virtue of their various functions.

2. The fact that brothel keepers also lent boys out on contract served yet another purpose. Well-to-do sodomites could employ their lovers as coachmen, valets, or secretaries. It is possible that they selected their staff through these brothel keepers. But there were also different relationships that were based on dependence. In a 1904 novel, a teacher is described who carried off a carpenter’s apprentice and paid him a full-time salary in order to satisfy his lusts.<sup>29</sup> Labor was cheap, which meant that the richer pederasts need not go to much trouble to fulfill their needs. The legal archives bear out the fact that there were men who sent for boys at set times. These relationships were punishable under the

article of the penal code concerning the promotion of fornication by minors, but were difficult to prosecute due to lack of proof of such sexual acts and their frequency, proof which required the testimonies of more than one boy, or else the defendant's confession. Laws passed in 1911 helped to facilitate prosecution of such acts, when every single act of fornication with a minor became punishable.

3. Purely romantic and aesthetic relationships not only existed between adult men, as we saw earlier, but also between an adult and a boy. In the well-established tradition of platonic pedagogy F. Hemsterhuis, P. de Raadt, P. van Heusde, and J. Kneppelhout based their philosophical systems on warm friendships. While Hemsterhuis, an influential philosopher of Romanticism, protested strongly against pederasty in his "Lettre sur les desirs" (1770) (Letter on the Desires), as far as I know the other authors left it undiscussed. Kneppelhout was without doubt an important representative of platonic pedagogy, maybe not so much for his publication of "L'éducation par l'amitié" (1835) as for pedagogic projects: He backed young budding artists, and contributed to the development of gymnastics in The Netherlands. Unfortunately, his most important protégés died young.<sup>31</sup> At least once, rumor went, Kneppelhout got so carried away by the weal and woe of his prodigies that he committed unnatural fornication with one of them.<sup>32</sup> De Raadt's school closed down prematurely, be it after his death, owing to an "unspeakable evil, which is so easily actuated by boarding-school."<sup>33</sup>

### ***A HOMOSEXUAL ROLE AND IDENTITY?***

In the 19th Century Netherlands various homoerotic lifestyles were possible. At the end of the 19th Century, medical doctors began to regard the diffuse forms of homosexuality as pseudo-homosexuality, since in their eyes it arose from necessity. It is my assumption that although the homosexual role, including the

rituals of transvestism and a special jargon, was developed around brothels and beer and coffee houses, it also dated back further, certainly to the beginning of the 18th Century. When toward the end of the 19th Century medical doctors formulated the “homosexual identity,” they intended it to be the identity of someone who did not need to behave himself sexually. Thus, the sodomite was characterized by his sexual conduct, the “homosexual” by his sexual continence. Torn between the temptation of the cafes and the respectability of romantic asceticism, male couples and male friends were probably those who identified with this form of homosexuality. On the one hand, men who frequented beer and coffee houses were too carnal for the chaste homosexuals, while on the other hand, romantic friends did not want to tarnish their friendship with the sexual element of homosexuality. The first Dutch works on homosexual emancipation from the beginning of this century clearly were written by middle-class citizens who called themselves homosexuals, yearned for a steady friendship, and resisted the lascivious life of “cottagers” and cafe patrons.<sup>34</sup> The homosexual identity was a Pyrrhus victory for middle-class homosexuals who were in agreement with the medical doctors and held very ambivalent views as to the sexual element of homosexuality. Due to their name “homosexual,” not uranian or invert, these men were prisoners of an ambiguity; the wish to remain chaste and the enticement of eroticism. These men, who at least in The Netherlands formerly utilized the terminology that belonged to the realm of uranism and was derived from the classics, had been brought under the yoke of the quasi-scientific jargon of homosexuality.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the active persecution of the diffuse and public forms of homosexuality stimulated the development of a hidden subculture of exclusive homosexuality.

The sodomites and pederasts who were a part of the homosexual subculture which was developing through brothels and cafés despised those grouped under the homosexual identity. Those involved in romantic and pedagogic friendships, in turn,

loathed any homosexual term. But at the end of the 19th Century something else happened. In their definitions of homosexual love, doctors and homosexuals tried to avoid any association with pederasty, both in the sense of anal contacts and love for boys. Around 1900, a gap grew between male love of comrades and pederastic love. In The Netherlands, the distinction was politically and criminally sanctioned by the introduction of Article 248bis, which penalized adults who fornicated with minors of the same sex. Even a progressive instruction book on sexuality gratuitously adopted this morally colored distinction. The section on homosexuality offered no information, but foremost a warning against the dirty pederastic seducer.<sup>36</sup> Homosexual emancipation may have been so successful in The Netherlands because at an early stage it already was looked upon as something quite different from pederasty and anal contacts.<sup>37</sup>

### *VICTORIAN TIMES?*

The notion that the 19th Century was an era of sexual repression cannot be applied to the histories of England, France, or The Netherlands. However, toward the end of the century a ‘‘purity crusade’’ was launched.<sup>38</sup> Called a sexual revolution by many,<sup>39</sup> this crusade primarily fought prostitution, although homosexuality also became one of its targets. These forms of sexuality, which were unspeakable before in 1880, could be talked about after that time; however, such increased openness inhibited their practice. The very fact that ‘‘unnatural fornication’’ was unspeakable seems to have afforded room for homosexual practices. The design of the public conveniences, the architecture of prisons, a particular fashion, flap-trousers, and the existence of all-male communities were all factors which stimulated homosexual conduct. In the second half of the 19th Century a modern, sometimes scientific, rationality repudiated these diffuse forms of homosexuality. The Sadean appeal to approach

the sexual question with reason failed.<sup>40</sup> Rousseau's philosophy, which was based on nature and procreation, was triumphant, and reason made extra-marital sexuality its enemy.

By the end of the 19th Century, all non-marital forms of sexuality could be discussed: cohabitation, prostitution, pornography, homosexuality. At the same time, sexuality was regarded as something depraved by all the movements which grew up after and thanks to liberalism, i.e., orthodox christians, socialists, and feminists. Why talking about sexuality continued to be a taboo in the new realm of human reason, and why it remained a reprobate subject for a new middle-class, and for socialists and feminists in particular, is a valuable question to explore in light of the influence it has had on the development of present-day thinking regarding sexuality.

## NOTES

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2. Cf Foucault, M., Ibid., Chapter II; van Ussel, J. M. W.: *Geschiedenis van seksuele problemen*, (Meppel 1968), Chapter XI.

3. *Geneeskundige Courant*, July 8, 1892, and *Nederlands Tijdschrift Voor Geneeskunde* 1892: II, pp. 585-588.

4. Hofstee, E. W. (1978). *De demografische ontwikkeling van Nederland in de eerste helft van de negentiende eeuw*. NIDI, 2, p. 202.

5. Inquiry into the archives of the district courts of Amsterdam 1830-1909 and The Hague 1870-1909. I will always refer to the general prosecutor's register.

6. See Peterson, M. A. (1978). *Gedetineerden onder dak*. Leiden, n.p.

7. See e.g., H. K. (1883, March). "Is ontucht noodzakelijk?" *Getuigen en Redden*, 5, 44-45.

8. Overbeek de Meijer, G. van (1892). "Boekaankondiging." *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde*, 2, 422.

9. Spaink, P. F. (1893). "Bijdrage tot de casuïstiek der urningen." *Psychiatrische Bladen*, XI. "Uranians," derived from Venus Uranios, the tutelary goddess of homosexual love in Greek mythology.

10. Number of convictions in Amsterdam, 1830-1839: 10; 1840-1849: 7; 1850-1859: 7; 1860-1869: 12; 1870-1879: 27; 1880-1889: 23; 1890-1899: 48; and 1900-1909: 89.

11. See Hekma, G. (1982). Profeten op papier, pioniers op pad. *Spiegel Historiæ*, 17(11), 567.

12. Ibid., p. 570.

13. Boon, L. J. (1982). "Utrechtenaren": De sodomietenprocessen in Utrecht, 1730-1732. *Spiegel Historiae*, 17(11), 553.
14. Cf. list of brothels under the heading "sodomie" of the Prostitie-Commissie den November 6, 1895. Municipal Archives of Amsterdam, 5136.
15. *De Amsterdamse Lantaarn, weekblad voor het volk*, (1897). 1(1). See also "onthullingen uit de Sodom-Societeit," a pamphlet, Amsterdam 1897, Municipal Archives of Amsterdam, B (1897) 1.
16. *Psychiatrische bladen*. (1893). XI, 140.
17. District court of Amsterdam, 1881: Nr. 2737.
18. *Ibid.*, 1833: Nr. 64
19. *Ibid.*, 1864: Nr. 1116.
20. See note 14.
21. Kneppelhout, J. (1835). L'education par l'amite: *Opvoeding door vriendschap, toegelicht door Marita Mathijssen en Frank Ligtoet*. The Hague: van Stockum.
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25. District court of the Hague, 1900: 847.
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28. From comparison with the *Amsterdamsch Andresboek* concerning this period of time.
29. De Haan, J. I. (1904). *Pijpelijntjes*. Amsterdam: Van Cleef.
30. See Salden, M. (1980). "Artikel 248bis Wetboek van Strafrecht." *Groniek*, 66.
31. Kneppelhout, J. (1980). *Opvoeding door vriendschap* (see note 21), pp. 43-48.
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33. *Gedenkboek Noorthey*, (1920), Haarlem (without pagination).
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40. Particularly De Sade, D. A. F. (1795). *La philosophie dans le boudoir*. London: n.p.