

“The world is in Amsterdam”: Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and the Dutch in Guinevere Glasfurd’s *The Words in My Hand*

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ABSTRACT

The article presents an imagological study of the recent historical novel The Words in My Hand (2016) by British author Guinevere Glasfurd with the focus on how the Dutch and the 17th century Netherlands are portrayed in the novel, especially regarding the use of stereotypes. After offering an introduction into how the Dutch were perceived by the English in the 17th century, the article goes on to argue that Glasfurd makes use of both historical and contemporary stereotypes in order to highlight the personal traits of the characters and create sympathies and antipathies in the reader. To do so, she not only employs stereotypes about the Dutch and their country, but frequently uses France as its superior counterpart. Thusly, she contributes to a larger discourse of literature which relies on the use of national stereotypes and perceives the nation and national character as perceptible actuality rather than a changing social concept.

KEYWORDS

historical novel, British literature, imagology, the Netherlands, stereotypes, national character

Introduction

The stereotype that would nowadays arise in a British, or indeed European, imagination when asked about the Netherlands would most likely fall into one of two very different categories: the rural Netherlands associated with tulips, windmills, polders and wooden clogs,¹ or the exact opposite represented by densely inhabited Amsterdam filled with tourists looking for entertainment in the form of coffee shops, or eyeing legalized prostitutes in the infamous Red Light District. The origin of the first image likely comes from the beginning of the nineteenth century from the group of Dutch painters of the “Hague School” who focused on such scenery painting;² another possible source for this image might be the first travel journals published in English dealing with the area of Low Countries, including John Murray’s *A Hand-book for Travellers on the Continent*. This work issued in London in 1838 describes the Netherlands “as the most wonderful country, perhaps, under the sun.”³ The latter notion can be traced to the second half of the twentieth century, when the tolerant attitudes of the Dutch and their government towards drugs, prostitution, but also abortion or euthanasia, began to lead to increasing criticism from other countries⁴ and a shift in the public imagination. Nowadays, it is mostly in connection to the second image that the

1 Jaap Verheul, “In Foreign Eyes,” in *Discovering the Dutch: On Culture and Society of the Netherlands*, ed. Emmeline Besamusca and Jaap Verheul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2010), 267.

2 Ghislain Kieft, and Quirine van der Steen, “The Making of Rembrandt and Van Gogh,” in *Discovering the Dutch: On Culture and Society of the Netherlands*, ed. Emmeline Besamusca and Jaap Verheul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2010), 154.

3 John Murray, *A Hand-book for Travellers on the Continent: Being a Guide to Holland, Belgium, Prussia, Northern Germany, and the Rhine from Holland to Switzerland* (London: John Murray & Son, 1836), quoted in Verheul, “In Foreign Eyes,” 273.

4 Verheul, “In Foreign Eyes,” 274.

Dutch would be characterized: most often as tolerant, open-minded, and peace-loving, but also materialistic and rude.⁵

A significant number of these stereotypes find their way into British novels dealing both with the past and the modern era of the Netherlands. A prominent example of the former is one recent historical novel which takes place in the seventeenth-century Netherlands: Guinevere Glasfurd's *The Words in My Hand* (2016). Despite the fact that this is Glasfurd's first novel, *The Words in My Hand* was shortlisted for the 2016 Costa First Novel Award and Authors' Club Best First Novel Award and has received very positive reviews in print. Her second novel *The Year without Summer* (2020) has also been shortlisted for the Historical Writers' Association Gold Crown Award 2020.

Glasfurd's *The Words in My Hand: A Novel of 17th Century Amsterdam and a Woman Hidden from History* tells the story of Helena Jans and her lover and the father of her child, René Descartes. As the subtitle of the novel suggests, the author takes a feminist approach and uses the story of real-life Helena Jans to point out "how history is written [and] women written out of it."⁶ As such, it falls into a larger group of recent novels which bring attention to the marginalized voices of the past. It also follows a trend of historical novels being situated in the early modern period of The Netherlands.⁷

This article examines the novel from an imagological viewpoint, arguing that the characterization of the country and its inhabitants in the novel is strongly influenced by stereotypical images that still exist in the British imagination. However, instead of relying exclusively on the stereotypes commonplace today or on those typical for the seventeenth century, the novel combines these stereotypes to highlight the personal traits of the characters and to create sympathies and antipathies in the reader. Above all, the stereotypes seem to serve to better communicate the feelings of the main character of the novel so that the readers can sympathise with her more strongly. To achieve this result, Glasfurd frequently makes use of contrasts, especially of those between the Netherlands and France and their inhabitants.

Imagology

The theory of imagology (or image studies) examines how nations and national cultures are portrayed in works of literature with regard to the "origin and function of characteristics of other countries and peoples."⁸ Beller and Leerssen use the word imagology for the study and critical analysis of national stereotypes as "mental images of the Other and ourselves."⁹ In imagology, these images are critically investigated in order to understand the discourses created by centuries

5 Emmeline Besamusca, and Jaap Verheul, "Introduction," in *Discovering the Dutch: On Culture and Society of the Netherlands*, ed. Emmeline Besamusca and Jaap Verheul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2010), 12–13.

6 Guinevere Glasfurd, "Now and Then," *Guinevere Glasfurd*, August 28, 2019, available at: <guinevereglasfurd.com/2016/11/28/now-and-then/>.

7 Such as Rosalind Laker's *The Golden Tulip* (1991), Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), Deborah Moggach's *Tulip Fever: A Novel* (2001), V. A. Richardson's *Windjammer* series (2003–2008) or Robert Dodd's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2015).

8 Manfred Beller, and Joep Leerssen, *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 7.

9 Beller and Leerssen, *Imagology*, xiii.

of literary and other representations of the “national character,” which imagologists consider to be a “myth.”¹⁰ The theory is therefore dedicated to the study “not of nationality per se, but of nationality ‘as seen,’ as a literary trope.”¹¹ Thus the aim is not to view these representations as reflections of reality, but rather as “fiction,” ideas that were at some point constructed and later repeated without necessarily being based in reality or even related to original notions.¹² The aim of implementing the theory of imagology in the reading of this novel is therefore not to consider how the Netherlands and the Dutch characters are represented with the intention to find some sort of *real* Dutchness, but to critically examine the stereotypes and clichéd portrayals of the characters with relation to nation and nationality, and to establish what function these stereotypes serve and what discourses they take part in.

The Low Countries in the English Imagination of the 17th century

The 17th century in which *The Words in My Hand* takes place is also the time when we can first speak about the concept of a nation in the modern sense of the word,¹³ with many national stereotypes and images originating in this era. Furthermore, as Chew points out, “one of the key features of national stereotypes is their durability,”¹⁴ and it is therefore relevant to consider historical images, which “are likely to reveal patterns still at work.”¹⁵ For this reason, before the analysis of the novel itself I will offer a brief look into how the Netherlands and its people were perceived by the British in the 17th century and introduce the popular tropes and images of the time, some of which can also be identified in Glasfurd’s work.

The foundation of the Dutch Republic, or officially, the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, can be traced to the treaty of Utrecht signed in 1579 which united the provinces in the area of Low Countries that had split from the Spanish rule and formed an independent state. Although significantly smaller than the power states of the time both in terms of territory and population, the Netherlands soon became a world power itself, entering an era which is in English best known as the Dutch Golden Age, but is more accurately reflected in the Dutch counterpart *De Gouden Eeuw* (The Golden Century) given that it spanned from the beginning of the seventeenth century almost to its end. The era is characterised especially by the military and trading success

10 Beller and Leerssen, *Imagology*, xiii.

11 Marius-Francois Guyard, “L’etranger tel qu’on le voit,” *La littérature comparée* (1951): 110–119, quoted in Beller and Leerssen, *Imagology*, 22.

12 Hugo Dysenrick, “Imagology and the Problem of Ethnic Identity,” *Intercultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2003): 5.

13 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE, 1995), 19.

14 W. L. Chew, “What’s in a National Stereotype?: An Introduction to Imagology at the Threshold of the 21st Century,” *Language and Intercultural Communication* 6, nos. 3–4 (2006): 183.

15 Maria Cristina Caimotto, “Images of Turmoil. Italy Portrayed in Britain and Re-mirrored in Italy,” in *Interconnecting Translation Studies and Imagology*, ed. by Luc Van Doorslaer et al. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2016), 253.

of the country, an influx of immigrants caused by the country's economic growth and religious toleration¹⁶ as well as its art.¹⁷

During this era, the Netherlands was an important trading partner to the United Kingdom and many people of Dutch origin lived in London and its surroundings. In the seventeenth century the Dutch constituted the biggest foreign population in the city¹⁸ and were well-known to the English mind.¹⁹

In her study *Doppelgänger Dilemmas: Anglo-Dutch Relations in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (2014), Marjorie Rubright points out that the relations of the two nations were represented most of all by their proximity: "throughout the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, the English regularly characterized the Dutch as 'neere neighbours', 'friends', 'allies', even kin, whose bonds were thought to tie them in 'perpetual union.'"²⁰ They were close not only geographically, but also economically, linguistically, historically, and religiously.²¹ The most prominent cartographical publication of the era, Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1608), even situated the origin of the English people in Belgium, or the Low Countries.²² J. F. Bense maintains that "in the 16th century at least, the Anglo-Dutch religious and industrial relations are almost inseparable."²³ A close relationship between the two countries and nations existed which the English were well aware of.

Nonetheless, Rubright argues that there was certain "doubleness" to this relationship, which was reflected most of all on the stage. The portrayal of different nations in drama had a strong tradition in the Renaissance, with many English plays situated in continental Europe.²⁴ The portrayal of another nation on stage would therefore have had strong influence on how it would be seen among the general population, thus would naturally reflect the image prevalent among common people of the time. The portrayal of the Dutch in particular, Rubright argues, was filled

16 While the official religion of the state was Calvinism, in the article 13 of the treaty of Utrecht the provinces agreed that "nobody shall be persecuted or examined for religious reasons" (Mout qtd. in Hsia et al., 2). Although the state was tolerant towards other religions, this did not mean complete freedom of public worship. For instance, Catholics had to use "hidden churches" (*schuilkerken*) for their masses, which were only tolerated thanks to the fact that they brought significant amounts of money into the hands of the city officials in the form of bribes (Prak, 105). The general attitude was also far less tolerant than is the case today. As Price writes, "even at the end of the seventeenth century, liberal Protestants still continued to regard the Catholic Church, if not all Catholics, as evil" (38).

17 For a more detailed discussion on the topic, see for instance J. L. Price's *Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012).

18 Marjorie Rubright, *Doppelgänger Dilemmas: Anglo-Dutch Relations in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 2.

19 It is important to note that the category of "Dutch" was nowhere as clearly defined as it is today. Due to the fact that the geographical or linguistic borders were not particularly clear, the English word "Dutch" could refer to the people of the United Republic of the Netherlands, but would also very often include the whole of the Low Countries, i.e. today's Belgium. Sometimes the word could also refer to German people in general (Rubright 13–17). This means that the understanding of the Dutch in the 17th century covers a much wider area than today, and the following text is therefore better understood as the image of the whole of Low Countries rather than just the contemporary Netherlands.

20 Rubright, *Doppelgänger Dilemmas*, 5.

21 Rubright, *Doppelgänger Dilemmas*, 5.

22 Rubright, *Doppelgänger Dilemmas*, 74.

23 Johan Frederik Bense, *The Anglo-Dutch Relations from the Earliest Times to the Death of William the Third: An Historical Introduction to a Dictionary of the Low-Dutch Element in the English Vocabulary* (Springer Netherlands, 1924), 97.

24 Ton Hoenselaars, "Europe Staged in English Renaissance Drama," *Yearbook of European Studies* 6, no. 1 (1993): 87.

with double meanings and “double entendres”²⁵ which served not only for comic effect, but also to identify differences between the Dutch and the English. These double meanings were frequently of a sexual nature, with the Low Countries represented as “an extension of London’s sexual and commercial geographies.”²⁶ Rubright characterizes “the Dutch prostitute [as] a familiar and long standing figure in the English sexual economy and cultural landscape,”²⁷ highlighting a stereotype which to a certain extent exists to this day.

Nevertheless, in his study on the Anglo-Dutch relationship in Shakespeare’s time, Huizinga argues that it is not the Dutch woman, but the Dutch man who is most often the target of stereotypes. Taking as an example William Haughton’s play *A Woman Will Have Her Will* (written in 1597–1598, first printed in 1616), he summarizes the character of the Dutch man as “the fat, ugly, calculating yet stupid, greedy, lecherous, drunken fool,” which “just about describes the general image of the Dutchman on the English stage.”²⁸ The character would often serve as a contrast to other nationalities and would, of course, highlight the superiority of the Englishmen.²⁹

The same “doubleness” of the Dutch-English relationship can also be seen in language, as the playwrights of the era “portray stage Dutch as at once comic and comprehensible by emphasizing the ways in which stage Dutch approximates English speech.”³⁰ By accommodating Dutch into English, a sense of proximity is created; however, the “Dutchness” of the language still singles the characters out, as “for an Englishman is Dutch, of course, an ugly language.”³¹ Huizinga also holds that it is from this era that the many English negative sayings containing the word “Dutch” originate.³² This is surprising to Huizinga, since at the time, Dutch and English were “helpers and allies” united against the French and the Spaniards, whose language presence in English common phrases is decidedly not as frequent.³³

Although according to Robert Fruin reports of English travellers from the 17th century showed nothing but admiration for the Netherlands and its people,³⁴ we also find ambiguous

25 Rubright, *Doppelgänger Dilemmas*, 1.

26 Rubright, *Doppelgänger Dilemmas*, 2.

27 Rubright, *Doppelgänger Dilemmas*, 44.

28 Johan Huizinga, “Engelschen en Nederlanders in Shakespeare’s Tijd,” *De Gids* 88, no. 1 (1924): 357, all quotations in my translation.

29 Huizinga, “Engelschen en Nederlanders,” 357.

30 Rubright, *Doppelgänger Dilemmas*, 46.

31 Huizinga, “Engelschen en Nederlanders,” 361.

32 “It is known that the word Dutch, used metaphorically, in English indicates just about everything that is ugly. In particular, it is related to drunkenness. The term ‘Dutch courage’ is just one of many. ‘A Dutch bargain’ is a bargain that took place when the participants were drunk, ‘a Dutch feast’ a meal, where the host gets drunk earlier than his guests. ‘A Dutch concert’ is a performance in which different tunes are played together, ‘a Dutch widow’ is a slut. The most hurtful of all to our national feeling is ‘a Dutch defense’, that is to say: a treacherous surrender” (Huizinga, “Engelschen en Nederlanders,” 350).

33 Huizinga, “Engelschen en Nederlanders,” 350.

34 Robert Fruin, “De Nederlanders der Zeventiende Eeuw door Engelschen Geschetst,” In *De Tijd van De Witt en Willem III*, (Martinus Nijhoff, 1929). Fruin’s publication is one of the first writings dealing with how the English view the Netherlands. He begins by saying that “Holland’s appearance, the rich development of the land, the countless canals, the ever-revolving mills, the endless fleets and vessels, the rapid succession of great cities, the harbors adorned with thousands of masts, the broad and elegant houses, the richly furnished rooms, the painted cabinets, the country houses, the tulip beds, gave the English travelers at that time the same impression as the first sight of England today to a traveler from Norway or Canada” (my translation).

attitudes in these accounts. In 17th century travel literature, the British often negatively portray the flatness of the land but are very much impressed by the Dutch cities. An English traveller named Coryat pointed out, for instance, that “the elegance of their buildings, the beauty of their streets, and all things whatsoever in this town, did wonderfully delight me, insomuch that as soon as I entered into one of the longer streets, methought I was suddenly arrived in the Thessalian Tempe.”³⁵ In the same vein, the essayist Owen Feltham called the lining of the houses “yet more rich than our side.”³⁶ But the images that appeared most often were connected to water. As Verheul points out, “images of sea, rivers and mud, and, of course, the windmills, clogs and the dikes that the Dutch developed to cope with their aquatic enemy, would remain associated with the image of Dutch society for many centuries.”³⁷ For instance, in a poem by Samuel Butler the Netherlands was described as “A land that rides at anchor, and is moor’d, / In which they do not live, but go a-board.”³⁸ Another satirical piece by Andrew Marvell claimed that the country “scarce deserves the name of land” and that “This indigested vomit of the sea/Fell to the Dutch by just propriety.”³⁹ These negative connotations of Dutch waters might be explained by the nation’s strong maritime presence, which endangered the status of England as a naval superpower and ultimately led to a series of Anglo-Dutch wars.

Nevertheless, what the British travellers most often tried to depict was the Dutch character. The travellers mostly agreed that the Dutch were a pragmatic, quiet and orderly people who “daily scrubbed the cobbles in front of their houses and sprayed their windows with water,”⁴⁰ a series of character traits which, however, also reflects on their lack of passion. Ambassador to the Hague Sir William Temple wrote that “[i]n general, all Appetites and Passions seem to run lower and cooler here than in other Countries. Avarice may be excepted [...]. Their Tempers are not airy enough for Joy, or any unusual Strains of pleasant Humour, not warm enough for Love.”⁴¹ The 18th century Scottish author James Boswell seemed to agree, commenting on the “coldness, dampness and fogginess of the climate which are held responsible for the chief characteristics of the people.”⁴² In fact, many travellers of the era connected the Dutch character, especially their phlegmatic attitude, to the damp climate.⁴³

35 Thomas Coryat, *Coryats Crudities Hastily Gobbled Up in Five Moneths Travells in France, Savoy, Italy (...) and the Netherlands*. London, 1611 quoted in Fred G. H. Bachrach, “The Low Countries Through British Eyes in Ages Past,” *The Low Countries* 5, no. 1 (1991): 63.

36 Owen Feltham, *A Brief Character of the Low-Countries* (London: Seile, 1652), 13, quoted in Bachrach, “The Low Countries,” 66.

37 Verheul, “In Foreign Eyes,” 269.

38 Samuel Butler, *The Poetical Works of Samuel Butler, 2 vols.* (London: William Pickering, 1835), 290–291, quoted in Verheul, “In Foreign Eyes,” 269.

39 Andrew Marvell, “The Character of Holland,” *Poetry Foundation*, accessed December 14, 2020, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44678/the-character-of-holland>>.

40 Bachrach, “The Low Countries,” 63.

41 William Temple, *The Works of Sir William Temple, Bart. To Which is Prefixed the Life and Character of Sir William Temple Written by a Particular Friend* (London, 1750), 50, quoted in Bachrach, “The Low Countries,” 65.

42 Bachrach, “The Low Countries,” 67.

43 Rob Van Ginkel, “Foreigners’ Views of the Dutch: Past and Present,” *Dutch Crossing: A Journal of Low Countries Studies* 20, no. 1 (1996): 118.

A number of writers also indicated that the Dutch did not seem to be very clever: Temple called the Dutch lower classes “diligent rather than laborious; dull and slow of Understanding, and so not dealt with by hasty Words but manages easily by soft and fair; and yielding to plain Reason, if you give them Time.”⁴⁴ The English writer William Beckford referred to the Dutch as “the most uncouth bipeds in the universe.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the British did praise the Dutch for their solidarity and the way in which they provided for the sick and the poor,⁴⁶ with a number of authors also showing appreciation for their “industriousness and economy.”⁴⁷

Overall, the Dutch were represented by their ambiguity: they were England’s neighbours and kin, but their land, character, language and customs set them apart; they were either quiet, pragmatic, simple people, or lusty prostitutes and drunk brutes; their land was unappealingly flat and hardly held itself above the water, but their cities were worth of admiration; they lacked passion, joyfulness and love, but had strong sense of solidarity and took care of their weak; and although they were not very intelligent, they showed talent for industry and trade. Of course, it is hardly surprising that we find these dichotomies in the portrayal of the Dutch in this era, given their general proximity to the English, but also their success in commerce and the rivalry which necessarily came with it. Nevertheless, what is curious is that a number of these characteristics also appear in recent literature, as will be further discussed using the example of the 2016 historical novel *The Words in My Hand*. These stereotypical traits are both used by the author in their original form in order to strengthen the historicity of the novel as well reversed with the intention to make the reader sympathize with the narrator, as well as provide a feminist viewpoint.

Holland and the World in *The Words in My Hand*

One of the areas of the novel in which Glasfurd makes frequent use of both modern and long-established stereotypical images, is the portrayal and use of geographical locations. The story of *The Words in My Hand* is situated in the Netherlands between 1635 and 1640, although the characters move through a number of different places: beginning her story in Amsterdam, Helena later lives in smaller cities of Deventer, Leiden and Amersfoort as well as in the rural area of Santpoort. The Netherlands – or Holland, as it is referred to by the characters – is in the novel most often defined by contrasts. Unlike in some other historical novels set in the era,⁴⁸ the country of the Netherlands does not exist in a vacuum but is throughout the course of the novel frequently compared to Descartes’ homeland, France, or discussed in relation to wider Europe or the distant Dutch Indies.

Especially when compared to France, the Netherlands is often given a negative image. At the very beginning of the novel Helena reminisces about her father, who often travelled to

44 Temple, *The Works*, 47, quoted in Bachrach, “The Low Countries,” 65.

45 Elizabeth Mavor, ed., *The Grand Tour of William Beckford* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 23, quoted in Bachrach, “The Low Countries,” 64.

46 Bachrach, “The Low Countries,” 66.

47 Van Ginkel, “Foreigners’ Views,” 120.

48 Such as Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earrings* (1999) or Kim Devereux’s *Rembrandt’s Mirror* (2015).

France, with her memories associated with a “yellow shawl”⁴⁹ which he had brought for Helena’s mother. Her father “said he’d had it spun from sunshine he’d found in a French field. It was her [mother’s] favourite and she wore it until the day he did not return. Then she folded it away, and the sun seemed to slip away with it too,”⁵⁰ giving France a very strong connection with sunshine and happiness. Later when Descartes is asked about France, he also associates it with the sun and warmth: “The France I remember, the France I love, is from my childhood – the happier parts of it – summer hayfields running down to the river.”⁵¹ Contrastingly, when Descartes and his valet Limousin first arrive in the house in Amsterdam where Helena lives, Limousin complains that “[t]he cold in this country is a nightmare,”⁵² creating a negative association and at the same time drawing on the stereotype of Dutch bad weather, an image which has existed since before the seventeenth century as testified by authors such as Boswell and his comments on the “coldness, dampness and foginess of the climate.”⁵³ In this sense, France is given an almost paradise-like status, a place of sun and happiness which in all respects stands above the damp, depressing Netherlands.

This portrayal of the country is not limited to its weather. Showing Descartes the impressive new church Westerkerk – “the finest church in Holland”⁵⁴ – Helena’s English employer remarks, “Nothing like the cathedrals of Paris, of course! [...] Ah, Paris – now there’s a city,”⁵⁵ once again highlighting the idea that the Netherlands and its cities do not measure up to those of France. These comparisons create a clear sense of inequality between the two countries which seems to define the Netherlands in the novel, as the differences between the French and the Dutch define the characters, which will be discussed later.

Besides the recurring notion of the country’s inadequacy, the Netherlands is frequently portrayed as merely a part of a bigger world which is very remote and to which an ordinary Dutch maid such as Helena has no access. While France is the closest of these distant countries not only geographically but also through its connection to the character Descartes, there is a clear sense of distance and inapproachability at the same time: when Helena’s daughter Francine is to be sent away to France for education, Helena notes, “France – it was as far away as the moon.”⁵⁶ However, if France seems distant to her, other countries are even more beyond Helena’s imagination. At the beginning of the novel when Helena asks him whether they will be staying for long, Limousin explains thusly:

“*Sais pas*. The Monsieur has a certain... a certain way of life, a habitude. First Dordrecht and then Franeker. ... Then Amsterdam, then Deventer. And before that ..., Italy, Poland, Germany... We keep moving. Many times. I lose count.”

49 Guinevere Glasfurd, *The Words in My Hand: A Novel of 17th Century Amsterdam and a Woman Hidden from History* (London: Two Roads, 2016), chap. “Books”.

50 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Books”.

51 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Lines”.

52 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Flowers”.

53 Bachrach, “The Low Countries,” 67.

54 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Books”.

55 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Flowers”.

56 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Tulips”.

Poland, Italy, Germany? The names flashed bright as mirrors. I tried to think if I'd seen them on one of Mr Veldman's maps. "I'd lose count too!"⁵⁷

Helena's reaction to Limousin's travel experiences is shown in sharp contrast to her own closed-off world, of which she becomes more and more aware as the story progresses. At the beginning of the novel, even moving to Amsterdam seems like conquering the world to her; but after spending some time with Descartes, she realizes that "His world was not mine. It went beyond Amsterdam and Holland,"⁵⁸ suggesting that she comprehends not only how much bigger the world actually is, but also that Holland is where it ends for her. Indeed, when she takes a look back at her life towards the end of the novel, Holland is all she sees, and it is also where she imagines her life ending:

I could see in all directions from the top of the dyke. Santpoort, Haarlem and, in the far distance, Amsterdam. If I looked south, there was my childhood. To the north, my life with Mr Sergeant; east, Deventer and Mrs Anholts. And here I was in the west. Everywhere I looked brought me back to where I was standing. Should I fill my pockets with stones and step into the dyke?⁵⁹

In her eyes, her life is bound to Holland, and it is telling that even her considered suicide attempt is connected to something as thoroughly Dutch as the dykes.

Helena and the other characters either seem to be bound to Holland or are given the freedom to travel and discover the world. An important distinction exists between the male and female characters, building on the aforementioned feminist approach which the author takes. Except for the other, more distinctive hardships of women of the time that the novel portrays – such as Helena's difficult position as a single mother – the inequality of the sexes is also visible in the sense of their existence in relation to the surrounding world. For instance, like Helena, her friend and fellow maid Betje is in her imagination limited to Holland. When Betje finds out that Helena can write, she "point[s] to a tree. 'You could write about that?' I nodded. She pointed at one thing, then another. 'And that stone? And the wall? And that house there? And the sky? Amsterdam?' She swept her arms wide. 'Holland?'"⁶⁰ This suggests that Betje's native country is the limit of her imagination. In contrast, Helena's brother Thomas explains to her where he will be going after joining the Dutch East India Company:

He picked up the salt cellar and an apple from a dish. "See here – this is Holland." He placed the salt cellar in the centre of the table, then set the apple not far from it. "And here's France." He took a coin out of his pocket and slid it to the far corner of the table. "And the East Indies – *that's* where the money is."⁶¹

Although the two siblings come from the same poor, uneducated background, it is clear that Thomas, as a man, knows much more about the world at large, and has the possibility to experience it, while Helena's future is constrained to Holland, a small country which can be seen from a top of a dyke.

57 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. "Flowers".

58 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. "Invitations".

59 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. "Ditch".

60 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. "Feathers".

61 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. "Quay," original italics.

All in all, it can be said that, as there was a certain “doubleness” to the portrayal of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, so does Glasfurd’s novel show certain dualism in its portrayal of the country in relation to the rest of the world. Glasfurd’s Holland, and Amsterdam especially, is impressive as such, but nothing compared to France. It is also without doubt connected to the rest of the world, be it France or the rest of the Continent, throughout which Descartes is often travelling, or the East Indies, which belong under the Kingdom of the Netherlands. While the places abroad are tied to the lives of many Dutch citizens, such as Helena’s sailor brother, the novel also shows Holland’s isolation, especially in regard to its female inhabitants – neither Helena nor Betje can hope to ever leave their homeland, and it is difficult for them to even imagine what lies beyond its borders. By creating this contrast, Glasfurd manages to highlight the gender inequality of the period even as Holland of the seventeenth century is set into an international context.

Amsterdam and the Rest in *The Words in My Hand*

While the Netherlands as such is often defined by its negatives and against a much larger world, the same cannot be said about Amsterdam. Unlike Holland as a whole, the capital is almost exclusively described through the eyes of Helena. Its portrayal is extremely positive, especially as compared to the rest of the country. While a city-country distinction is a common imagological trope not limited to the Netherlands, the portrayal of the country’s capital in the novel is strikingly different as compared to other cities and places.

The novel begins with the heart-breaking scene of Helena leaving Amsterdam as she is sent away to the small town of Deventer. The scene is tragic not only because she is leaving behind her home and her lover, but also the city as such, “Each house we passed took us further from Westermarkt. To see the city slip away like this was more than I could bear.”⁶² It is only after this introduction, which itself creates a sense of longing for the capital, that the reader is taken back in time to Helena’s life in Amsterdam and learns why leaving the place is such a tragedy for her. This is of course partly related to her being separated from Descartes, but the city itself plays a significant role as well.

Before Helena arrives in Amsterdam, she lives in Leiden with her mother and brother, having recently lost their father. To lift her spirits before leaving, her mother encourages her, “The world is in Amsterdam – *imagine*.”⁶³ This is indeed the impression that Helena gets from the city – an impression which she also mediates to the readers. She initially does so in an indirect manner, by bringing attention to several aspects of the city. Firstly, its cultural diversity – Helena’s employer, Mr Sergeant, is English; his lodger, Descartes, French; and in the harbour, there are people from all over the world. Secondly, it is Amsterdam’s richness – Helena, for instance, notes, “I thought Mr Sergeant’s house was like a palace, but it was a thin finger of a house when compared with the new ones being built on Herengracht.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, she brings attention to Amsterdam as a successful commercial centre represented above all else by the harbour, where “ships of all

62 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Ice”.

63 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Glass,” original italics.

64 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Glass”.

sizes, from all over the world, rafted together.”⁶⁵ These images create a sense of awe and prosperity which the city represents.

Another aspect which strengthens the positive image of Amsterdam is that all the other places in the novel are constantly contrasted to it and it is obvious that they can in no way compare. While “there seemed no edge”⁶⁶ to Amsterdam, Deventer is the “edge of the country” and “ten, twenty such could fit in Amsterdam.”⁶⁷ Later the town of Amersfoort is described in more positive terms, but it again reminds Helena of Amsterdam, being “an Amsterdam so small it might be folded away and slipped into a pocket.”⁶⁸ The biggest contrast to the capital is the village of Santpoort, a “*godforsaken place*”⁶⁹ where “[a]part from farmhouses and windmills, there had been little else to see... Everywhere was flat.”⁷⁰ The houses in the village, Helena notes, are “not slim and tall like those in Amsterdam.”⁷¹ Here, we can also see the negative connotation with the flatness of the land so typical of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century descriptions of the country.⁷² However, as far as Santpoort is concerned, the biggest contrast can be seen in the portrayal of its inhabitants, which will be further discussed in the following section.

Overall, Amsterdam is given a clearly superior status, supported by both the imagery and the judgement of the main character as well as the contrast between the capital and other cities in the country. Contrasted to the rest of the country, the positive portrayal of the capital without a doubt reflects the centre-periphery division common for stereotypical portrayals of places: “[c]entrality, as a stereotypical characteristic, is perceived as dynamic, progressive, and modern, whereas peripherality is viewed as its antithesis, i.e. static, traditionalist, and old-fashioned.”⁷³ The superiority of Amsterdam is to be found in a number of seventeenth-century sources as well. In his extensive work on the Low Countries, William Aglionby declares that Amsterdam “has not its like in the whole world, if we consider its Commerce, the conveniency of its Harbour, and the means it has of setting out powerfull Fleets”⁷⁴ and even refers to it as to “that powerfull City, from which Neptune seems to take his Orders.”⁷⁵ Nevertheless, in Glasfurd’s case, the positive portrayal of Amsterdam has to do not only with the progressiveness and dynamism of the city – although these tropes certainly show – but also with Helena’s own personal experiences. By making use of the centre-periphery distinction, Glasfurd creates a sense of longing for Amsterdam throughout the novel, which is linked with Helena’s hope for a life that she was able to taste in Amsterdam, but with which no other place can provide her. This is strengthened by the fact that the reader sees

65 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Quay”.

66 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Map”.

67 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Sketch”.

68 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Clock”.

69 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Sand,” original italics.

70 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Seeds”.

71 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Seeds”.

72 Bachrach, “The Low Countries,” 64.

73 Chew, “What’s in a National Stereotype?,” 184.

74 William Aglionby, *The Present State of the United Provinces of the Low-Countries as to the Government, Laws, Forces, Riches, Manners, Customes, Revenue, and Territory of the Dutch in Three Books: Collected by W. A., Fellow of the Royal Society* (London: John Starkey, 1669), 271.

75 Aglionby, *The Present State*, 270.

Holland and its different parts only through the eyes of Helena. In this way, Helena's happiness is metaphorically connected to the capital, and the further she moves away from Amsterdam, the harder it is for her to reach happiness.

The Dutch and the Others in *The Words in My Hand*

Like the Netherlands as a whole, Dutch people are throughout the novel also often portrayed stereotypically, and are constantly contrasted with other nationalities, especially the French. The contrast of the Dutch and the French in many aspects reflects the portrayal of the two countries: just as the novel portrays France as superior to the Netherlands, so are the French clearly positioned above the Dutch, although with a slightly different agenda. The best example is of course the character of Descartes (to whom Helena throughout the novel refers as *Monsieur*), who in many ways serves as an antithesis to the local Dutchmen both in his appearance and his demeanour.

One of the first things that Helena notices about Descartes are his hands, "delicate and smooth, fingers stained with ink. A writer's hands."⁷⁶ These are then contrasted to the "rough hands" of her own,⁷⁷ which are the same as those of all the other working Dutchmen and women throughout the novel – farmers, maids or yarn spinners. This creates a clear difference between the Frenchman, who works with his mind, and the Dutchmen, who earn their living by manual labour. Another aspect of appearance in which Descartes strikingly differs from the natives is his hair and eye colour. Helena notices his "black, black eyelashes"⁷⁸ his hair "black, flecked with grey" and the eyes "dark as his hair, wide-set and heavy-lidded."⁷⁹ To strengthen the feeling that this is indeed a French characteristic, Descartes' and Helena's daughter Francine inherits his dark hair and eyes, a feature which makes her stand out. During Francine's baptism in Deventer, Helena, for instance, notes that "my dark-haired girl – so painfully, clearly *other* – would join with them in their church."⁸⁰ Later on, she also points out how Francine's hair was "dark, with a curl – not fair and straight like mine. *Francine*, daughter of France; his and mine; north and south combined in her,"⁸¹ drawing a clear connection between Francine's looks and her father's origin. In contrast, the Dutch characters in the novel are portrayed as fair-haired, like Helena, and often freckled: when describing her friend Betje, Helena notes that "[f]reckles patterned her cheeks; her eyes were the palest blue."⁸² Likewise, Daan, a farmer who becomes interested in Helena, is freckled and has "rough hair," "dusty skin" and "fair eyelashes."⁸³ It is therefore clear that nationality has a direct influence on the characters' appearance, although none of these stereotypes would play a dominant part in contemporaneous literature.

76 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. "Books".

77 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. "Books".

78 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. "Books".

79 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. "Flowers". This portrayal is of course based on the famous real-life portrait of Descartes by Frans Hals.

80 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. "Water," original italics.

81 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. "Ash," original italics.

82 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. "Bruises".

83 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. "Ditch".

What can, however, be traced back to the seventeenth century sources is the “Boorish” character of the Dutch people.⁸⁴ Most of the Dutch characters in the novel are of a lower class, and are therefore uneducated and unrefined – again, in strong contrast to Descartes. However, this is not the only thing making them “boorish.” Helena’s friend Betje is rather rude, “bossy”⁸⁵ and easily loses temper; women in the church of Deventer call Helena a “*hoer*”⁸⁶ (“slut”) when they see her dark-haired baby, and Daan attacks Helena and beats her unconscious after finding out that she lives with Descartes and has his child, calling her “whore” and “shit.”⁸⁷ Nevertheless, there are also Dutch characters of the higher classes who show this kind of behaviour. A merchant who visits Helena’s employer attempts to rape her, and when Descartes comes to her rescue, the man tells him: “Fuck off, Descartes. This isn’t France,”⁸⁸ creating a strong contrast between the two countries and their customs. Another of Mr Sergeant’s guests then asks Descartes during dinner, “Tell me, how do you find our women, Monsieur? Do they compare favourably? Plain, humble and honest, would you say, or too cold-blooded and dampened by our northern climate for your liking?”⁸⁹ not only going back to the seventeenth-century stereotype in which the climate influenced the character of the people, but also showing his lack of manners. Descartes again reacts like a gentleman, thus highlighting the crudeness of the Dutchman.

In several instances throughout the novel, Descartes’s “Frenchness” also serves as an obstacle in his and Helena’s relationship. For instance, in trying to talk to the valet Limousin, Helena notes that she was “only a maid, a Dutch maid at that, not even French,”⁹⁰ as if a different nationality would change her position. Later, when Helena is unhappy about Descartes not visiting her and their child, her companion Mrs Anholts tells her: “Put him from your mind! He has means. He has a valet. He’s French”; furthermore, according to Helena, “[s]he said [the last] as if it were the biggest obstacle of all.”⁹¹ This creates a further distinction between the Dutch and the French, making Descartes superior to Helena not only by his social standing, but also by his nationality.

Nevertheless, the attitude of the Dutch towards the French in the novel is not entirely positive: while they clearly realize the French superiority, there is also a negative side: “[t]he minister at Noorderkerk said terrible things about the French – their frills and ruffles, silks and satins, ribbons and lace,”⁹² invoking stereotypes that not only directly clash with the Dutch “pragmatic, quiet”⁹³ and simple character, but also have to do with the Catholic background of the French. However, when Helena first sees Descartes, she distinctly points out that he does not fulfil these stereotypes: he is “dressed in a plain, black cape with a collar turned over the top. No silk or satin, no lace cuffs.

84 Feltham, *A Brief Character*, 26, quoted in Bachrach, “The Low Countries,” 66.

85 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Bruises”.

86 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Water”.

87 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Ditch”.

88 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Crows”.

89 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Crows”.

90 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Flowers”.

91 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “List”.

92 Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Flowers”.

93 Bachrach, “The Low Countries,” 63.

No silver-tipped cane. No wig.”⁹⁴ This, along with the protective and gentlemanly behaviour of Descartes discussed earlier, suggests that the extreme differences portrayed between the French and the Dutch serve more to highlight the personal and social differences between Descartes and Helena rather than to comment on the general characteristics of the French and Dutch in the era. Nevertheless, the result is that the two nationalities become very separate in the novel not only on a personal level, but in a broader sense as well. Especially Dutch men are portrayed as villains or lowlives – in fact, very similarly to their portrayal on the English stage in the seventeenth century, where the negative stereotypes were also employed to distinguish the “low” Dutchman from the local gentleman who would win the woman’s adoration.⁹⁵ While the difference here is that the gentleman is not English but French, the intention behind the use of the stereotype remains the same – the highlighting of differences between the noble traits of the hero in contrast to other men, distinctions seemingly caused by national character.

Conclusion

Guinevere Glasfurd’s *The Words in My Hand* builds on a number of stereotypes about the Netherlands and the Dutch, some of which can be traced back to the seventeenth century when her novel takes place. Firstly, the author makes use of a centre-periphery division when it comes to Amsterdam and the rest of the country in which the city is portrayed as significantly more progressive and overall superior to all other places in the Netherlands. Further, this stereotypical portrayal serves as a characterisation device – it is closely connected to Helena’s life experience and is used to create a longing for the capital which Helena idealizes.

The portrayal of the country and the Dutch people is also in many respects stereotypical. Glasfurd especially makes use of stereotypical images of the weather not only to describe the Netherlands, but also to create a sense of its inferiority to France – while the Netherlands is cold and foggy, France is associated with sun, warmth and happiness. Overall, the comparison to France and the rest of the world is the strongest element that defines the Netherlands and its people. Just as Amsterdam cannot compare to the almost mythical Paris, the Dutch clearly do not measure up to Descartes, the most prominent French character in the novel, who differs from the former not only in his appearance, but in particular in his behaviour. Still, this superiority does not serve to disregard Dutch people in comparison to the French in general, but rather strengthens the positive image of Descartes, making the differentiation very personal to the characters. The stereotypes therefore serve to create sympathies in the reader, and to thus make them feel closer to the experience of the main character.

Finally, Glasfurd makes use of the contact between the Netherlands and the rest of the world – Europe as well as the Dutch Indies – to point out the inequality of men and women in the era. While many of the male characters either travel or are knowledgeable about the world outside of the Netherlands, Helena and other female characters of the novel are bound to Holland, both in the physical sense and in their imagination, which begins and ends with their homeland. In

⁹⁴ Glasfurd, *The Words*, chap. “Flowers”.

⁹⁵ Huizinga, “Engelschen en Nederlanders,” 357.

doing so, Glasfurd manages to use space to highlight the position of Helena as “a woman hidden from history.”

It can be said that, while the novel makes use of stereotypical portrayal of the country and its people, this is done consciously and the stereotypes serve a literary purpose, and thus cannot be viewed entirely as a negative. Nevertheless, while their primary functions seem to highlight the personal traits of the characters and draw the reader into the story, the stereotypes also create a discrepancy in the portrayal of France and the Netherlands and their inhabitants, while relying on national character as something real and perceptible, and in this sense remain problematic.

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