History of Crime and Criminal Justice Series
Written in Blood
Fatal Attraction in Enlightenment Amsterdam

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Contents

Acknowledgments vii
Prelude: First Blood ix
Preface xv

1. A Big City in Cultural Flux:
   Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam 1

2. No One Suspected He Would End As a Murderer 21

3. A New Woman 47

4. How to Dump a Body When There Are No Cars? 67

5. Nathaniel’s Ascension 95

6. An Unsuccessful Career 117

7. An Infamous Infatuation 138

8. Honor, Shame, and Notoriety 169

9. Van Gogh’s Last Blood 191

Notes 199

Bibliography 219

Index 229
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On June 28, 1775, the magistrates of Amsterdam announced they would purge the city of mad dogs. Concern about rabies had been mounting for several weeks. The infection had spread among the city's canine population from the surrounding countryside. Eight days earlier, the authorities in the village of Ouderkerk, where Van Gogh's mother lived, had issued a similar ordinance. It encouraged the inhabitants to club stray dogs to death. The Amsterdam purge was to begin the next Monday, when every owner of a faithful quadruped had better keep it in the house or else on a leash. All other dogs would become outlaws.\

In the evening Van Gogh sat alone in his home: a simple room in the house of a craftsman who made felt slippers. Van Gogh probably did not worry about mad dogs. Since January his obsessive mind had focused on only one person: Annie. For him it had been love at first sight. He had paid her debts so that she could leave the brothel where she lived and she had promised to stop seeing her former favorite. But had she? Van Gogh reviewed the events of the past six months: her compliance and pleasing behavior, which soon turned into hesitation about the engagement; the frequent occasions when he had caught this other man in her room; his well-founded suspicion that she continued in her horizontal profession; the published mockeries, which had made her realize that her fiancé was a notorious citizen; their reconciliation for a brief spell, followed by renewed doubts on her part; the stubborn efforts of her neighbors over the last few days to prevent him from seeing her. It was now clear. He had to take a drastic step.

Van Gogh had made up his mind, which gave him tranquility. He sat down and rolled up his left sleeve. He knew what to do. Although he lacked an official surgeon's license, he had mastered the art of bloodletting. His patients had been sailors and ordinary residents, but never before did he have to perform venesection in connection with lovesickness. Surely, it had never been necessary to cut his own vein. Since he was
right-handed, he had to take the blood from his left arm. Bandaging the arm was the hardest part of the job. The bandage had to be tied tightly enough to cause his veins to swell—that was the standard procedure. Van Gogh took his lancet and held it for a moment in the flame of the candle that lit the room. He could conveniently use the bandage to wipe away the blackened residue. A bowl stood ready on the table. With the lancet Van Gogh made one incision in his swollen vein, not too deep to avoid touching a nerve. Then he turned his arm over, to allow the blood to flow into the bowl. When he had obtained a sufficient quantity, he removed the bandage, using a clean part of it to cover the wound. According to medical custom, the patient was to take strong food and beverages to recover from this treatment. This surgeon-patient, however, had no time to eat. He had to act quickly before the human ink dried up. In his mind he had already formulated the words he was about to write. He dipped his pen into the blood and began.
In Nomen Deus, Sanctus Trinitatis
Adorable object of my purest Love
Annie Smitshuizen

Revered lady, yes adorable beauty, rightly you have made yourself the object of my reverence. This has made your worth a thousand times greater for me than it has ever been before. No tender prayers, no humble supplications, no ocean of bitter tears have been capable of reconciling your embittered heart. Well then, beautiful woman, let my own blood, which I now use for writing, accomplish it. Let my blood, shed for you and for your sake, provide you satisfaction. Grant me your tender heart again, your heart which, by senselessly acting upon an evil hatred, I have lost, alas lost. No, beautiful lover, I hope and pray to God that he will make you choose me for a husband again. I will atone for my crime through a thousand good deeds; with thousands of friendly actions I will wash away my guilt. Realize that my heart is honest and pure and that I have a holy intention to comply with that pure heart, because I swear to you and the whole world that it is impossible for me not to love you. My love is rooted so much in your virtue that death itself will be incapable of extinguishing the love I feel for you. My property and my blood, my body and my life, my soul and salvation, they all lie in your hands. Save me, I pray to you in the name of the Holy Trinity for the sake of Jesus Christ. God will cherish your soul forever, if you save my poor soul now, you, the only medium in God's hands to make me happy. I swear to you with the most precious oaths that I love you purely and sincerely, without any ulterior motive.

Take it, therefore, that everything I say and write today is sincere and pure: if I would lie just a tiny bit or withhold anything, or if there were the slightest dishonesty or ambiguity in my heart, or if I intended to draw any wrong conclusion from what has happened and it were not my holy intention to make decent use of your favor, mercy, and love, then I dare challenge the Judge of all crimes to punish me in the most severe manner. Yes, in that case I wish—and I hereby confirm this wish with my blood—that God chastise my soul and body, in this world and eternally, with all penalties that can befall upon all mortals simultaneously: may he let me live in a state of constant dying and let me die alive; may the worm of remorse continuously shake my conscience; may he cast all his thunders upon me and crush me, yet without making me experience death, by which my wretched soul would
leave this miserable body; may this soul then plunge into the most hor-
rible abyss, to be tormented eternally with all pains suffered by all the
damned together. I am not afraid of these oaths, my beautiful sun,
because they spring from a sincere heart; don’t think that my con-
science has been dulled so much that I would venture to provoke the
Deity outright.

What I have presented you with words, I also present with my
blood; that is, I will tolerate everything and sign for everything you
desire, if only I can become your husband. Draw up a marriage settle-
ment as detailed as you want; estimate goods worth a guilder at a ducat
and so on at the same rate. Put me in wardship; nothing can be too
heavy, no price too high, if only I can be married to you. Make me
incapable of ever hurting or injuring you and keep all authority in your
hands. On this condition, give me back your heart and love. Don’t cast
me away from you. Don’t separate me from my blood that I believe
you are carrying in your womb. No, beauty, let it be and always remain
a token of our love; I have no doubts that I am its true father.
Therefore, let me also be your true husband.

Leave this dismal and disastrous place with me, this place that is
deadly to both of us; then we can be the happiest and most perfect
spouses in the world. I am not only fully prepared to let you have your
way in this, I even request it from you. Have no fear that during our
marriage I will think about the things that have happened, whatever
they were, but I swear with the same oaths as mentioned above that
everything will be immersed in eternal oblivion. There is no suffering,
no sorrow, no soul-grieving treatment, which cannot be sweetened by
having your beloved person near me. Take a firm decision now in the
name and the fear of God, as I have done in this matter. Pronounce
now, unabashedly and without dissimulation, the final sentence, the
sentence of my life or death. If it is, as I hope and expect from divine
grace, that you should pronounce the sentence to spare my life, then I
will consider myself the happiest of all mortals and I assure you and
swear as done above that you won’t regret it. In that case, keep this let-
ter, so that you can confront me with it time and again. Yes, let this let-
ter serve as an eternal whip for me. But if I am—and I dare say if you are—so unfortunate that you should pronounce my death sentence,
then I request and demand this letter back. You can keep all others, as
I will keep yours.

That’s it, Beautiful Annie, the last letter that I think you will ever
get from me, with the ultimate and most heartfelt determination.
Accept that this is the real and veritable truth; and, to attest this, I refer to the above-mentioned Oaths, with which I proclaim once more that I am, and hope to remain by your doing with God’s grace,

Beloved Soul-Guardian,
Your tender loving lover

Johannes Bartholomeus Ferdinandus van Gogh

Van Gogh dated the letter for the following day, June 29, and lay down his pen.1 It was in blood that he had been writing and “blood” was the noun that he had used most often. With hindsight, almost every word appears ominous. Did Van Gogh have the slightest suspicion that this blood-red letter anticipated events soon to come? The phrase that the place in which he and Annie had lived was deadly to both of them would literally come true. That night, however, Van Gogh merely hoped that his words would move his loved one to tears, that she would take him in her arms again and promise to become his wife. He laid the letter in a drawer, intending to take it to Annie’s home the next morning. Then he blew out the candle and went to bed.
As the prelude suggests, this book is about love and violent death. The man who wrote that letter of hope and fear would spill his blood in vain. Eventually, his name would become known throughout the entire city of Amsterdam and far beyond. It had been eight and a half years since the previous murder that every Amsterdamer had talked about. Twice, within a decade, Amsterdam had been a witness to killing for love: two cases of lethal passion in an age of Enlightenment. These murders are the subject of this book.

The dossiers of these crimes, first assembled by the city court and now enlarged upon by historical research, are voluminous. They form the basis for the two tales presented here. Obviously, a nonfictional murder story cannot be told as a “whodunit.” Instead, this book’s narrative elaborates on the personality of the protagonists, the events of their lives, and why they became killers; all against the background of an age of reason and sentimentality. A brief overview of the two cases follows.

The narrative beginning in chapter 2 revolves around Nathaniel Donker, born in Indonesia and sent to the Netherlands in his youth. A rich orphan at twenty, he meets Cecilia, a working-class widow, and they join in an illegal marriage contested by his older brother. They roam around and live for several years as fugitives just across the border, but finally they settle down with their two children on a country estate. Then, Dora enters the picture, a younger woman of German descent who completely enchants Nathaniel. He runs away with her to Amsterdam and, as Cecilia pursues them, they make plans to murder her. In December 1766 they lure her into their “house at the water” and strangle her. Despite some difficulties, they manage to dump the victim’s corpse in the moat outside the city wall and think they are safe. A week later, however, the discovery of a truncated female body is the talk of the town. The court
arrests Nathaniel, while Dora remains in hiding. But, after a month, someone betrays her. In a long trial, Nathaniel finally confesses, which leads to his execution. Dora, however, withstands the third degree of torture and survives in Amsterdam’s prison for women.

The main protagonist in the tale beginning in chapter 6, J. B. F. Van Gogh, is approaching forty at the time of the crime. He has unsuccessfully pursued the careers of actor, surgeon, and hack writer. In January 1775, while visiting a brothel, he meets Annie, twenty-four, and falls in love with her at first sight. She agrees to marry him but secretly continues to work as a prostitute and to see her former lover and pimp. For six months, the engagement is on and off, with many quarrels, tears, and reconciliations. The tension escalates when a hostile hack writer publishes two pamphlets mocking the affair. At the end of June, Van Gogh writes a letter with his own blood, hoping to persuade his beloved to marry him after all. He recites it to her in the presence of the neighbors, but to no avail. Her rejection induces him to commit suicide, but at the last moment he turns his knife and stabs her in the heart. His trial, with successive appeals, goes on for years, while several writers publish accounts about him and his deeds. Some consider him a freethinker, including the prosecutor, who despises sentimentalism and depicts the defendant’s deed as an ordinary crime of revenge. In the end, the public executioner decapitates Van Gogh on Amsterdam’s main square in April 1778.

Microhistories often deal with only one case, but there are good reasons why this book focuses on two. In many ways, they complement each other. First, they represent the two prototypes of killing for love: eliminating a rival and turning against a lover who ends the affair. They also differ with respect to the social milieu, the character of the main actors, and the strategy used to get them convicted. Finally, the public impact of these two cases was different: a collective shuddering over an atrocious crime and great astonishment about the murderer’s high standing in the first case and a lively interest in the persons of the killer and the victim in the second. But why should history writing be concerned with sensational crimes at all?

Emerging as a separate field in the 1970s, the history of crime had an ambitious program. Crime was a window to social relations. Court records revealed hidden secrets about common people’s existence, the antagonism between the rich and the poor, and the position of various minorities—in short, the whole web of social relationships. Moreover, crime reflected economic conditions. Did the number of thefts and robberies rise in years of dearth or recession? Did the pattern of crime change with industrializa-
tion? Solid statistical work formed the basis for answering such questions. A key word was “serial research,” a term indicating that the properties of the series itself constituted the object of investigation: annual fluctuations in the number of offenses, the ratio of theft to violence, the average age of offenders, the percentage of women prosecuted, sentencing patterns. The scholars who devised this program frowned upon the study of separate, exemplary cases. To focus on one sensational crime surely was anathema.

The serial program no longer holds sway. Although much work in the history of crime and criminal justice continues to be based on extensive data sets, few scholars belittle the study of exemplary cases. In part, this change of orientation is due to a decline of confidence in quantification. It also owes a great deal to the modern interest in questions of representation. For example, if a historian’s subject is crime literature, the notorious cases obviously predominate. A third important factor in the change of orientation, next to lesser confidence in quantification and interest in representation, is the increasing interest in cultural themes, such as the concept of honor. Historians now recognize that the in-depth study of one or a few trial or police dossiers can deepen our insight into the culture and social relations of the society in which they were compiled. Examples are the small dramas investigated by the papal court in sixteenth-century Rome or the much-publicized but unsolved murder of Mary Rogers in nineteenth-century New York. And yet, as serious historians, we may feel uncomfortable when confronted with severed body parts found in a canal or letters written with blood. Is there a justification for focusing on these two sensational cases? Can we analyze them, look beyond their mere sensation, and use them as a source of information about the world that witnessed them?

The justification is based on a simple argument: the brutal or unexpected murders of the past are not only sensational to today’s consumers of popular historiography, they equally fascinated the contemporaries who heard or read about them first-hand. That fact makes these crimes legitimate objects of scholarly research. Contemporaries were eager to learn everything about the offenders, the victims, and any relevant circumstances, so their interest mirrors their perceptions of the world. Apparently, the fascinated public recognized a familiar element in the life stories of notorious murderers. They morally condemned the crime, no doubt, but somehow they could imagine themselves in the killer’s shoes. However twisted, they showed a degree of empathy. If fatal attraction fascinated Amsterdamer in the 1760s and 1770s, this was because many could imagine what it felt like. A revolution in love, discussed in the
opening chapter, was taking place at this time. As extraordinary as they were, the two cases dealt with here reflected the cultural mood of the age.

But this book goes beyond the analysis of mere sensation. It also takes up the program of microhistory, first laid out by authors such as Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Davis. These historians have shown that a detailed study of an individual case can reveal hidden secrets about the larger society. What do abstract notions like gender roles or popular versus elite culture come down to when applied to real people who lived in the past? In *The Return of Martin Guerre*, for example, Davis carefully assesses the room for maneuvering available to Bertrande, the female protagonist, within the cultural and social constraints she encountered. She lived with a man who was not her husband, but she had to maintain that she had never known that he was an impostor. Otherwise, she would have lost her chaste reputation and become an outcast.

The concept of “room for maneuvering” forms a bridge, moreover, between microhistory and the epistemological work of the famous German sociologist Norbert Elias. One of Elias’s main goals was to do away with discussing the behavior of historical actors in terms of dichotomies such as structure versus agency or voluntarism versus determinism. As he put it, society is just the name we give to the network of individuals who constitute it. Social processes, and specific social situations within them, result from the interactions of millions of men and women, but simultaneously these processes and situations become relatively autonomous from the wishes and efforts of individual men and women. The network, which we all form together, in its turn constrains us and limits our options. People can make choices, but at a certain risk. A French aristocrat at Louis XIV’s court, for example, might choose to retire and forget about the rules of etiquette. However, if he did so, he put his social existence at stake, risking the loss of everything that gave life meaning according to his world view. It is understandable, therefore, that only a few nobles chose to avoid the court.

Similarly, a jack-of-all-trades in eighteenth-century Amsterdam, fancying a prostitute, might choose to marry her, but with serious consequences for his honor in the eyes of others, who would treat him accordingly. And a married man in love with another woman might prefer her permanent company over keeping her as a courtesan, but at the cost of becoming a fugitive libertine, condemned and shunned by respectable people. Thus, the exceptional choices made by a few individuals make it understandable why the majority opted for more predictable life courses.

In sum, social circumstances leave individual persons with a limited set of options. Many people, in the past as well as today, act simply as we
expect them to act in their situation. The protagonists of our story sometimes acted differently. The voluminous dossiers about these murder cases allow us to ascertain the options open to a few men and women who lived some 250 years ago and to understand what the consequences were of taking the one road or the other. The method is a dual one: we must carefully assess the motives and thoughts of the principal actors during the main phases of their lives, and we have to perfect this assessment by confronting it with the best knowledge we have of Dutch society and its culture in the eighteenth century.
1

A Big City in Cultural Flux:
Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam

In the years between the two dreadful murders that are the subject of this book, if any event made an equally profound impression on Amsterdam’s inhabitants, it was the great fire of 1772, which destroyed the city’s theater. That disaster serves as a focal point to introduce the cultural setting in which the tragedies narrated here unfolded. Unlike the microhistories presented by other scholars, whose scene is usually a village or a small town, the two narratives treated in this book are situated in Europe’s third largest city of the time. With a population of well over two hundred thousand inhabitants, Amsterdam was a place of learned as well as popular culture. Even national developments involving the Dutch Republic as a whole always had a bearing on Amsterdam, and they were widely discussed in coffeehouses and private dwellings along its many canals. We need to be concerned especially with the period from about 1750 to about 1780, coinciding with the mature years of the principal actors (and, in one case, her entire life).

On Monday, May 11, 1772, some five hundred opera lovers flocked to the theater in Amsterdam to watch and listen to two performances. The regular season, during which the city’s own troupe of actors performed comic, tragic, and allegorical plays, had just finished. During the summer season the stage customarily was the domain of foreigners, often opera singers.
That night a Flemish company put on two French operas, the second of which was *Le Déserteur* by P. A. de Monsigny. It was an immensely popular piece, first performed with great success in Paris in 1769. The Flemish company was famous for its refined technique of illumination. This time they hung a huge tray containing twenty pots of wax, with two wicks burning in each, in front of the stage. During a scene situated in a prison, however, they dimmed the lights by lowering the tray down in front of the stage and partly covering it. When it somehow became overheated, a stage hand, realizing that the awful smell meant danger, ran for a bucket of water. But, when he removed the tray’s cover, a shooting flame rose from it right up to the ceiling—it was already too late. The stage consisted mostly of wood and linen, and the scenery pieces were equally flammable. In less than half an hour, the entire theater was ablaze. Understandably, the audience panicked, the more so since one of the exit doors turned out to be locked. The first group that reached that door tried to ram it, but they failed because of the crowd pressing against them. Many spectators were trampled. The fire brigade could do no more than try to stop the flames from spreading to neighboring houses, with only partial success. When they had mastered the situation at three A.M., the theater and five houses lay in ashes, and thirty more buildings had severe or light damage. The death count amounted to eighteen persons who had died from suffocation, trampling, or in one case jumping down eight meters from a box.¹

Unsurprisingly, the fire became the subject of conversation in Amsterdam for weeks to come, with much exaggeration and myth making. Rumors about the number of people killed, for example, ranged from one hundred to over two hundred. A periodical recording the conversations of a “nameless society” had several of its members debating the fire at their meeting the next day. Member A arrived first. He had been home the previous evening, unaware that the fuss around his house concerned the theater. Member B had stayed overnight across the harbor north of the city, where he saw the flames brightly lighting the sky. In several villages, he said, the inhabitants had rolled out the hoses, thinking the fire was nearby. Member C, joining the company a little later, had watched everything from close by. Then member D came in. He had actually visited the theater and managed to escape with torn clothes and a shoe missing. He had observed pickpockets and thieves taking advantage of the panic. In particular, they had robbed the ladies of their precious watches and earrings. Two of them had their ear lobes torn, and one robber had even threatened to cut off the ears of a Jewish lady if she refused to hand over her jewels. That night, the whole city was so bright that one could
read the time from every tower clock with ease, and even in faraway places a shimmering light appeared on the horizon. 2

The rumors, the exaggerations, and the sensationalism underline the impression this immense fire made on Amsterdam’s inhabitants. Many compared the event to earlier disasters, in particular the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Traditionally, such calamities were considered a sign of God’s wrath. In the second half of the eighteenth century, however, a lot of people rejected the notion of a punishing God. Thus, one member of the “nameless society” emphasized that most accidents stem from recklessness. 3 The Amsterdam fire of 1772, then, forms a test case for the spread of rationalist or enlightened ideas. The subject of the Enlightenment is important because Van Gogh, the protagonist of our second story, consorted with hack writers (persons who made a living by producing a vast amount of writings) and, while he was jailed, people speculated that he was a freethinker.

Religiously oriented people, the Calvinists of the leading Reformed Church in particular, had always disliked the theater. In Calvinist theory, acting was pretending to be another person, an infamous habit of the devil. Moreover, plays were often frivolous, both the dialogue and the singing and dancing. Even the more permissive Remonstrants barred actors from Communion, based on the unlikelihood that any of them acted only in decent plays. 4 In 1638 the Reformed leaders had acquiesced in the debut of this temple of sin, because the profits it generated went to charity. The beneficiaries were the orphanage and the old men’s home, whose regents were also regents of the theater. During the French invasions of 1672 and 1747, the magistrates temporarily closed the theater to appease God. They did so also in 1732, when they believed that God, as a punishment for the prevalence of sodomy in the Netherlands, had sent a host of worms to the country, which had eaten away the foundations of the dikes. 5

No wonder the ruling gentlemen sensed trouble in 1772. On May 14, with the ashes still smoldering, the presiding burgomaster invited a representative of the Reformed ministers to his home. Perhaps, he suggested, his guest might be so kind as to inform his colleagues of the burgomasters’ desire that no one should discuss the fire from the pulpit on Sunday the seventeenth, or let them at least preach in a restrained manner. He did communicate the request to his colleagues, but to no avail. Although relations between magistrates and ministers were harmonious in this period, such an exceptional occasion precluded ecclesiastical compliance. On Sunday, most ministers chose to comment on passages from the Old Testament, which left no doubt about their intentions: “I shall send fire to his cities”; “light
the fire . . . to make his impurity melt with him”; “all their idols will be destroyed and all their whores’ rewards consumed by fire.”

That the Reformed ministers considered the theater’s destruction by fire as God’s punishment for the citizens’ indulgence in sinful amusement comes as no surprise. Not every contemporary commentator shared this view. Some, although religiously oriented, refused to believe it was God’s habit to intervene directly in earthly affairs. Others tolerated the theater or even had sympathy for it. The views of those who denied God’s punishing hand and loved the theater can be considered the most enlightened. The historian Buisman analyzed some two hundred pamphlets and poems published in reaction to the fire. Forty-one authors made a personal statement about whether or not the calamity was God’s punishment. Buisman identified twenty-eight reactions as enlightened, ten as unenlightened, and three as ambiguous. Among the first group, several authors charged their opponents, who had seen God’s punishing hand, with delighting in the death of innocent people. This was an arrogant and inhumane idea, they argued, in fact an offense to the deity. The views of these commentators conformed to the mild image of God that characterized the Christian Enlightenment in the Netherlands. Among the reactions to disasters that had struck the country a few decades earlier, such as a severe cattle plague, the unenlightened views still had predominated slightly.

The increasing currency of enlightened ideas ranks high among the cultural changes during the years we are concerned with. In fact, all major changes of this period were cultural, pertaining either to the realm of learning or that of habits and emotions. The three decades from 1750 to 1780 witnessed few changes in the economy or demography, or in relations between social classes and the political and religious situation. Amsterdam’s economy, expanding since the middle of the sixteenth century, had ceased to grow, but real decline set in just a little later. The population explosion that had made Amsterdam the third-largest city of Europe was generations ago, and the number of inhabitants was more or less stable. Despite the disagreement over preaching about the fire, church–state relations were much less conflict ridden than they had been in the previous century. There were no political upheavals between a series of disturbances and riots in 1747–1748 and the Patriot movement, which challenged the prominent position of the Prince of Orange in the country in the 1780s. Nationwide, this was also a time of quiet labor relations; a long tradition of labor unrest came to a halt by the middle of the eighteenth century.

The breakthrough of the Enlightenment in the Netherlands has been documented also in a more conventional way, in studies of writing, phi-
losophy, and publishing. The country’s infrastructure certainly was favorable to the spread of culture: due to the high degree of literacy, the Dutch book market was of considerable size. The province of Holland—the most important of the seven that made up the Dutch Republic—had the highest density of bookstores of all European regions. Amsterdam alone boasted 121 bookstores in 1778, whereas Paris, with over twice the number of inhabitants, had a mere 129. No precise figures are available for earlier in the century, but we know reading was already widespread in the Netherlands by then.

Historians usually identify the first half of the eighteenth century as the period of the early Enlightenment, and in the Netherlands Justus van Effen counts as its principal representative. This very popular writer, who believed in the perfectability of mankind, valued both reason and religion. Whereas reason was the principal guide on the road to virtue, religion served as the basis of all human morality—an ambivalence that illustrates the moderate Christian tenor of the Dutch Enlightenment. Van Effen expounded his views in a periodical entitled the Holland Spectator. His epigones after midcentury published periodicals of their own—a genre that Dutch historians call spectatoriale bladen, which might be translated as
observing magazines. Thirteen of these magazines appeared in the 1750s and 1760s and no fewer than twenty-six in the 1770s. The authors were mostly middle class, criticizing the patrician elite for its lifestyle but never challenging its ruling monopoly. This was equally true for the learned or philosophical societies, first founded in the 1750s and 1760s and emerging in greater numbers in the 1770s. Like the “observing” writers, most members of these learned companies were solidly middle class and philosophers in their spare time. Real revolutionaries and freethinkers were few in number; before 1750 they were mostly foreigners, while a few radical societies, whose members discussed the ideas of Rousseau, Diderot, and D’Alembert, emerged after midcentury. Even these societies consisted of socially respectable people.

In prerevolutionary France, a less respectable figure, that of the hack writer, was closely associated with radicalism. We are well acquainted with this figure through the work of Robert Darnton, who describes hacks as poor writers leading a precarious existence, many of whom became radicals out of sheer hatred for the system. The police of Paris, however, were occasionally able to recruit one of the hacks as a spy. Around 1700, London had been the first city in Europe to house a group of hack writers. They lived on or near Grub Street, which became a synonym for the milieu of hack writers everywhere. After London, Paris took the lead. What about Amsterdam or, possibly, other cities in the Dutch Republic? The equivalent of a Grub Street in the Netherlands of the eighteenth century is an underresearched subject. In a volume on the Dutch Enlightenment published a decade ago, two American historians even pronounced it undiscoverable. Whereas Jeremy Popkin simply stated that the Netherlands lacked hack writers, Margaret Jacob supposed that Amsterdam had a literary underground but that it remains elusive for modern investigators because the police showed no interest in it. Students of Dutch eighteenth-century literature, however, are familiar with several hacks.

The hacks’ godfather was Jacob Campo Weyerman, a prolific writer who produced not only a series of books and pamphlets but also several periodicals, one of them entitled *Echo of the World*. The private lives of his contemporaries formed his favorite subject. At first, Weyerman only made a living by publishing scandals, but in the 1730s he began to extort money from public figures by announcing he was writing a book about them and promising to keep the manuscript private if they paid off. The Court of Holland had him arrested in 1738 and imposed a life sentence for his extortions the next year. Weyerman, who died in prison in 1747, inspired several hack writers who were active after midcentury. The most notorious of
them, Franciscus Lievens Kersteman, was rather critical of his predecessor. Kersteman specialized in semifictional biographies, beginning with Weyerman in 1756. He called his colleague a freethinker, libertine, swindler, and false player, ending however with his positive side, in particular his habit of mediating for friends in love. The first edition of this book appeared while its author was staying in a private prison in Rotterdam at the request of his uncle. In 1757 Kersteman published a biography of the healer-astrologist J. C. Ludeman, revealing himself as his follower and even claiming, quite improbably, to have been his student. In 1773 the Rotterdam court arrested and tried Kersteman for falsifying exchange bills, and he was imprisoned in that town for another thirteen years.

The fact that both Weyerman and Kersteman were imprisoned suggests that Dutch hack writers, too, belonged to a less respectable segment of society. Whereas political motives may have played a role in the former's trial, the latter served his two prison terms for nonpolitical reasons. Kersteman never attacked the social hierarchy outright. Yet he counts as a representative of the Enlightenment because his work is completely secular in tone. Even though he denounced his predecessor as a freethinker, he wrote about his own and others' adventures without moralism. This absence of moralism also characterized another hack writer of the time, Nicolaas Hoefnagel. He explicitly acknowledged Weyerman as his spiritual mentor, by publishing a periodical also named *Echo*. During most of his career Hoefnagel was equally a nonpolitical writer, but in the early 1780s, shortly before his death, he enjoyed fame as a supporter of the Patriot cause. Unlike his two colleagues, he never went to prison, save for one night in jail after a tavern brawl. Another hack writer of this period, Willem Ockers, was a radical from the beginning, fiercely attacking established religion. Since Van Gogh was acquainted with Hoefnagel and Ockers, we will get to know them better in chapter 6.

These writers operated in an increasingly hostile political climate. The relative freedom of expression that had characterized the Republic for a long time came under strain after midcentury. Faced with the radicalization of the Enlightenment into deism and criticism of the social hierarchy, Dutch authorities grew weary of dissenting voices and resented it when ordinary citizens meddled in affairs of state. Moreover, the authorities yielded more easily to diplomatic pressure concerning works displeasing to a foreign power. The prohibition of La Mettrie's *L'Homme-Machine*, by a committee of the Estates of Holland (the supreme governing body of the province), inaugurated this shift to intolerance in 1748. In 1762 the Amsterdam magistrates prohibited Rousseau's *Du Contrat Social*. No wonder that Swiss
publishers became serious competitors on the market for printing illegal French books. The Dutch-language market increasingly split into two sectors. The established bookseller-publishers preferred to print works with an official approval, often ordered by church or state agencies. This provided assured sales and no troubles. Less established booksellers printed the more risky works. The movement toward intolerance affected hacks as well as mainstream writers, but the hacks' vulnerability was greater. Whether or not they were radicals, the established booksellers usually refused their manuscripts.20

Although the Enlightenment was above all an ideological movement, it also brought a change in the field of sensibilities and emotions. Opposition to judicial torture, for example, owed as much to a rationalist critique as to a heightened sensitivity that decried every human suffering. In a recent study of eighteenth-century emotional culture, Dorothée Sturkenboom makes use of the same observing magazines that were such a conspicuous feature of the Dutch Enlightenment. According to her, the crucial shift took place around 1760. Before that date, the authors of periodicals judged their fellow citizens primarily in terms of a moralistic typology; thereafter, the quality of one's inner feelings was an equally important criterion. This shift in emotional culture has a direct bearing on our two murder tales.

In essence, the prevailing view of human passions turned from outright negative to mildly positive. Writers of the first half of the eighteenth century had unequivocally condemned men and women whose passions controlled them. In the parade of “intemperate persons,” the coquette occupied first place. She always wanted to please, was conscious of her beauty, and made a habit of flirting, but could never be had. She did not act from lust; if she gave in to a man, it was because of his seductive cunning and her naïveté. In the end, the coquette remained a decent bourgeois woman. Her male counterpart was the petit-maître who, even though he liked to please women, was somewhat effeminate and had no sexual desire for either women or men. He was often of patrician status. A second male type, the lichtmis or libertin, was noble or patrician as well, but he threatened to infect the bourgeoisie. He was the typical womanizer, potent and virile, who easily turned his attention to a prostitute if a respectable woman proved too difficult to seduce. Nathaniel Donker, of upper-middle-class descent and under the spell of a former prostitute, matched the description of the observing writers. These writers completed their catalogue of intemperate types with the masturbating youth, the miser, and the religious enthusiast.21

When a new emphasis on the expression of emotions broke through in the 1760s, these types continued to receive bad press. Asked to characterize
J. B. F. van Gogh, who did everything to please the woman he loved without explicitly voicing a sexual desire, an observing writer would probably have called him a petit-maître. The writers’ recognition of the positive power of emotions was reserved in particular for pity and love. When referring to an “emotional person,” they thought of a sensitive mind with an open eye for the world’s problems. By contrast, their predecessors before 1760 had defined the “emotional person” primarily in terms of an unstable, egocentric character, dominated by his passions. The new view was compatible with the Christian tenor of the Dutch Enlightenment. God had planted pity, friendship, and altruistic love in human nature, the writers argued, in order to strengthen the bonds between all people. These feelings, therefore, benefited society as a whole. The writers even allowed men to cry, as long as they shed their tears out of compassion for the miserable. Sensitive men cried, but never out of self-pity and preferably in the company of others to make them share the compassionate mood. In this way, a man could be sensitive and remain honorable. Women, on the other hand, were expected to display their sensitivity at home, as mothers and wives. For both men and women, excessive feelings of romantic love were anathema. The observing writers partook of the European-wide new sensibility, but they distrusted the type of infatuation that was the stuff of sentimental novels. Passionate physical love was dangerous; they unequivocally ranked it with the darker side of the new sensibility.22

As we will see, the main protagonist of the second tale behaved much like a character in a sentimental novel. He shared the writers’ positive view of emotions, but he expressed this in ways completely unacceptable to them. It makes us aware that real life might be different from the lofty ideals voiced in respectable magazines. Indeed, next to the breakthrough of the Enlightenment and a shift in emotional standards, the period 1750–1780 witnessed cultural changes of a more mundane nature. These included a transformation in the character of interpersonal violence, from a prevalence of knife fighting to a greater share of violence against intimates. The timing of this transformation was probably peculiar to Amsterdam, so an incident that took place in that city serves to introduce it.

Jan Amsins and Margaretha van Heems lived on the “French Path,” an ill-reputed back street in the Jordaan quarter. He was a fifty-four-year-old porter, a resident of Amsterdam from birth. The neighbors called her Rotterdam Griet, which betrayed her place of birth. Her age remained
unrecorded. Although Jan was a married man and his legal wife had borne him four children, he had been with Griet for more than ten years. During that period she had given birth to two children, whom everyone had always considered to be Jan’s. After his arrest he told the court he was not sure that he was their father, possibly as a conscious tactic to cast doubt on his concubine’s character. The couple did have a tumultuous relationship. When they were drunk, which was often the case, they quarreled constantly. Jan claimed that Griet once punched him so hard that he almost lost some of his teeth. All the neighbors confirmed their drunken brawls. They declared that, although both of them drank, she was intoxicated more frequently, which made her very obnoxious. In a sober state, the couple was quiet.

On a Monday night in February 1771, Jan was out drinking wine with the wife of a friend and another woman. When he came home, Griet heavily reproached him for drinking in the company of married women. She quarreled and fought with him all night, pinching his privates several times. The next morning Jan left the house, maybe for his porter’s station, but he came home again in the afternoon with a lot of brandy in his stomach. When he demanded food from Griet, she started scolding him anew, calling him a sodomite and a thief. When she pinched his privates again, he became so furious that he grabbed a kitchen knife and stabbed her in the back. Seeing her bleeding heavily, he laid his hand on the wound and cried out, “my lord Jesus, what have I done?” The fuss alerted two neighboring women, who rushed in but could not prevent Griet from bleeding to death. Meanwhile, Jan had left the house. Later that night he visited a nearby tavern. Word went around that a woman had been murdered in the French Path and some customers knew that Jan had a relationship with her. Indignantly he retorted, “she is not my wife; she has been a whore of mine and all such women deserve to be killed.” Those were his last words before they came to arrest him. Jan was tried and decapitated the next month.23

Viewed from one angle, this homicide case is modern in nature, since modern partner killings often are sudden eruptions of long, pent-up tensions. Because of the neighbors’ testimonies, we know that the couple had a history of mutual conflict. The case is traditional to the extent that gendered honor played a key role. First, with the neighbors hearing a drunken Griet scolding Jan, his reputation in the eyes of the community was at stake. Second, he was keenly aware that by respectable standards his partner for ten years was a “whore.” Although the inhabitants of the French Path had less concern for these standards, they surfaced in Jan’s mind at the moment of
More concretely, Griet had aroused his anger by pinching his privates and calling him a sodomite. These words and deeds amounted to questioning his manhood. She had probably done so earlier, and for him to go out drinking with other women served to underline his virility and independence. Traditional or modern, the case is typical of homicide in Amsterdam in the second half of the eighteenth century, a period in which many killers were intimately related to their victims. The story of Jan and Griet, then, is about gender, honor, and violence. These three themes were closely related, but we may conveniently continue with the first.

Gender relations were changing in most of Europe in the eighteenth century. For the Netherlands, this can be illustrated by a detour, that of homosexuality. During several waves of sodomy trials, conducted in Amsterdam and other towns beginning in 1730, a new conception of the homosexual gradually surfaced. According to the traditional view, prevalent until then, sodomy was just one of the perversities in the repertoire of a dissolute man. Moralists thought it unlikely that such perverts restricted themselves to sex with other men: they were considered equally eager to commit adultery or incest, and they might even be womanizers as well. From the middle of the eighteenth century onward, however, the notion of a gay identity gradually emerged. Dutch people began to speak of a person who is a sodomite instead of someone who merely practices sodomy. Consequently, *sodomite* became a word of abuse regardless of a man’s real sexual orientation, as in Griet’s words to Jan.

The emergence of a gay identity formed part of a more encompassing transformation involving a redefinition of sex and gender. That transformation was a European-wide phenomenon, affecting the Netherlands no less than England, France, and Germany. For centuries, anatomists had viewed the difference between the female and the male body as a matter of external design. According to the prevalent image, behavior and personality shaped a person’s sex, leaving room for intermediate human specimens such as hermaphrodites and viragos. The idea that intercourse between a Jew and a Christian was unnatural, for example, implied that religious differences formed the basis of biological differences. In the course of the eighteenth century, base and superstructure underwent a complete reversal. A new view of the body emerged, and according to this view sex differences were rooted in nature itself. Now it was biological sex that shaped gender. Just the male and the female body existed, and only intercourse between these bodies was natural. Heterosexuality still was a Christian prescript, but it also was now a biological norm. Consequently, deviations from this norm were defined more precisely and demarcated more strictly. That is how the rise
of a gay identity fits into the transformation, but more was at stake. The redefinition of sex and gender and the new biological basis for heterosexuality undoubtedly affected the character of marriage and the family. Exactly how is harder to ascertain.

Up to now, historians have vehemently disagreed about the character of marriage and the family in preindustrial Europe and the extent to which relations among spouses were subject to change. Did spouses treat each other in a distanced manner and were parents largely indifferent to small children? Did “modern,” affective bonds between family members take the place of this indifference from the late seventeenth century onward? That is one extreme view. According to the opposite view, spousal and parent-child relations always were warm and caring. Only the fashion of expressing them changed. The parties concerned posited these extremes largely without a mutual debate. Even though several historians have tried to bridge the gap, the great question concerning marital affection essentially remains unresolved. Fortunately, there is no urgent need to resolve it here. Whatever the “real,” innermost feelings of spouses and parents, the cultural significance of marriage and the family unmistakably changed in the course of the eighteenth century. Again, this development was visible in the Netherlands as well as in most other European countries. Especially among the upper and middle classes, family life became a fundamental part of a person’s identity. It moved from a semiperipheral to a central stage of culture. This change owed something to the new biological base for heterosexuality, but it had wider ramifications. It owed at least as much to the increasing emphasis on sentimentality and romance.

In the Dutch case, a few clearly identifiable trends support the idea of cultural change concerning marriage. For the children of the elite, free choice of partners was the rule in the eighteenth century, whereas among the upper classes in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, parents had played the key role in bringing a couple together. Similarly, in the eighteenth century, husbands wrote intimate letters to their wives and vice versa. Women and men addressed their spouses informally, calling each other by their first names or by private sweet epithets. There is little information, however, on the modes of address prevalent before 1700. The third trend was the decline of litigation over marriage vows. It had been a venerable custom to sue another party for breaking a promise of marriage that he or she had once given. Mostly women did this, but men did as well, and often the vow had been made years earlier. Courts and consistories frequently handled such cases until the middle of the seventeenth century. Women and men who wanted to embark upon a union against the desire of the other
party obviously could not claim mutual affection. In Amsterdam two judges held a session each week as the committee for marital affairs. In the first half of the seventeenth century, the majority of plaintiffs demanded the implementation of a marriage promise. In the first half of the eighteenth century, mostly couples in love called upon the commissioners, in order to overrule parents or guardians unwilling to give their consent. The observing writers of the second half of the eighteenth century tuned in to this development. They propagated the ideal of marital bliss, enjoyed preferably in the safe haven of one’s home. Although this ideal had been around for a long time, it received a much greater emphasis and was expressed in a purely secular context now.

Seen in a broader perspective, the above trends represented an acceleration in a long-term process covering the sixteenth to twentieth centuries. The character of love itself changed. Once, to love somebody primarily meant performing your duties toward your partner, according to a set of cultural expectations. Nowadays, the psychological dimension of love is paramount, couples mutually exploring their innermost feelings. As a major step on the long road from then to now, the eighteenth-century revolution in love primarily concerned the affection expressed in marriage or courtship. This revolution encroached upon a pattern of behavior that historians call homosocial, a somewhat awkward term. They mean that, outside the marital bed, men were mostly in the company of men and women of women. During the eighteenth century, on the other hand, it became common for husbands and wives to spend more time with each other. This new custom first arose among the middle and upper classes. Note that husbands and wives, or engaged couples, were expected to stay in each other’s company. When this revolutionized love befell a man and a woman who, for whatever reason, were unable to marry each other, that couple was bound to get into trouble. The new sensibility demanded that they stay together anyway, but social customs still were a formidable barrier to that. The ensuing predicament was the stuff of the sentimental novels of the period. In these novels, the solution sometimes consisted of suicide. About actual suicide in the Netherlands, we have little information, but we do know that in a few cases the predicament of impossible love led to murderous conflict; this may be called the darker side of the new sensibility.

The phrase “revolution in love” serves as shorthand for the interrelated changes regarding marriage, gender concepts, and emotional standards that were going on as the affairs dealt with here unfolded. This narrative examines the revolution in love from the angle of love gone wrong. Of course, the two murder cases cannot “prove” that a revolution in love took
place in the eighteenth century. The evidence for that is contained in the
works of the scholars referred to here, directly or indirectly. The murder
stories shed new light on the character of the revolution in love by exploring
its darker side. More important perhaps, they reveal how, in individual lives,
modern sentiments remained inextricably intertwined with traditional views.
Historical change never means a total reversal in the behavior and attitudes
of all women and men making up a society.

About extramarital love, for example, conventional views persisted
throughout the eighteenth century and beyond. Not surprisingly, preachers
and religious moralists continued to condemn adultery and premarital in-
tercourse. The active moral discipline at consistory meetings, however,
was on the wane by this period. The secular courts occasionally tried
women and men for such offenses. Equally conventional, but in a differ-
ent sense, was the double standard, which allowed men an unofficial free-
dom denied to women. A large part of the population still endorsed it. As
a rule, the more religiously inclined a person, the less likely he was to con-
done the double standard. Among "respectable" workers and shopkeepers,
it was also a matter of honor to be a faithful husband. The observing
writers accused the French-influenced elite of thinking lightly about adul-
tery, but even in the beau monde, discretion was everything in extramarit-
al affairs. Had Nathaniel Donker just kept a mistress whom he cautious-
ly visited at times, few people would have bothered about it. For all
appearances, he had been an honorable husband and father.

Conventional views certainly remained prevalent concerning sex for
sale. Honor played a key role here at several levels. The world of venal sex
forms an integral part of our story because a prostitute or former prosti-
tute was involved in both murder cases, in the first as a co-killer, in the
second as the victim; this fact, in particular, led to the intertwining of
modern sentiments and ancient attitudes.

For today's visitors, Amsterdam's number-one attraction is its red-light
district. Try to pass through the crowd there on a Saturday night!
Eighteenth-century Amsterdam was equally famous for its brothels,
although their physical presence was more concealed. We are well
informed about prostitution in early modern Amsterdam through the
work of Lotte van de Pol. Since 1578, when the city embraced the
Reformation, prostitution was an underground business. The degree to
which it was nevertheless visible varied over time. The period 1670–1720
was the "golden age" of night life in Amsterdam, exemplified by the music
hall. Music halls were no straightforward brothels. They were taverns
where men and women drank and danced and some men sought a sexual
rendezvous. Popular books spread the fame of the music halls (and the
prostitutes who lived there), which attracted an increasing number of for-
eign tourists. Yet, disembarked sailors formed the most conspicuous set of
clients in this period. Whether or not because music halls attracted
tourists, the authorities left them practically undisturbed. But around
1710, a concern over Amsterdam’s reputation for vice prompted the city
fathers toward rigorous action. The court’s attention shifted from novice
prostitutes to recidivists and the organizers of the trade. Many proprietors
of music halls went bankrupt through the confiscation of musical instru-
ments and whores’ clothes. By 1720 most music halls had disappeared.
Demand on the amusement market remained high, however, and the
factors pushing women to offer their services on this market, if anything,
only grew stronger. Until about 1700, Amsterdam was a center of the tex-
tile industry, in which many women found employment. Most arrested
prostitutes had been working in that industry earlier or had looked for a
job in it. When the textile industry moved to the countryside, domestic
service remained as the only major respectable employment for women.
Historians estimate the number of domestic servants in eighteenth-centu-
ry Amsterdam at twenty thousand, but the demand in that sector did not
increase after 1700.30 Moreover, the city constantly witnessed a surplus of
women. Many women migrated to Amsterdam independently and stayed
there, while many men went to sea. Within the adult Christian popula-
tion, the sex ratio was probably as high as four women to three men;
among the lower classes possibly even three women to two men. The
Jewish community had a more equal sex ratio, because Jews prevented
their women from migrating alone and the men did not enlist as sailors.
After 1700 the combined factors of an unequal sex ratio and the disap-
pearance of the textile industry caused unemployment and poverty to
strike many women. This induced a number of them to try their luck in
the illegal sex trade. The tighter control of Jewish men over their women
meant that few Jewish women became prostitutes, while Jewish men did
contribute to the demand. Consequently, some Christian women accept-
ed Jews as clients, even though sex between Jews and Christians consti-
tuted an offense in its own right. The total number of professional pros-
itutes active in the city lay between eight hundred and one thousand.
After the waning of the music hall’s golden era, then, prostitution
remained a flourishing sector of the urban economy. The second and third
quarters of the eighteenth century were the period of the secret brothel.
Brothels always had existed in sorts, some more covert than others. In the
decades after 1720, the covert establishment became the rule. Many
brothels looked like ordinary taverns, but the door leading to the back room was open for steady or trustworthy clients, whose wishes went beyond wine and beer. Some procurers exploited their business under the guise of a store or even an ordinary dwelling. In *The Amsterdam Libertine*, written around 1730, an Amsterdamer leads a stranger to a place that in no way looks like a whorehouse. No women are living there, but the hostess asks a man who occasionally helps her to call a prostitute.

After midcentury, however, music halls reappeared, but in a more modest format than their predecessors. Women came in at night and danced, but if a client wanted sex, the woman took him out to some shabby room nearby. These establishments had a lower-class imprint, while secret brothels continued to cater to the wishes of a wealthier clientele. The nameless society, which we met in connection with the theater fire, once discussed the pleasures of different classes of people. The rich gentleman, one member said, liked to go out at midnight. He knew where to find such a house that, from the street, looked like a decent clothing or jewelry shop, but it stayed open at least until four A.M. and it lodged “beauties with very low heels, who tumble backwards more easily than a stone statue.”

Throughout the early modern period, the management of brothels in Amsterdam was largely a female affair, although several male procurers figure in our first tale. Even when married, women usually managed brothels alone. The husbands of arrested madams routinely claimed they had nothing to do with their wives’ affairs. Although this sounds like a convenient excuse, it appears to have been true in most cases. Madams with thriving businesses hired the services of strong fellows with a reputation for violence, to protect the whores against clients who made trouble. Streetwalking women enjoyed no such protection. They were the most vulnerable group, because the judiciary pursued them relentlessly and they earned a meager income. Their standard fee was a *sesthalf* (five and one-half stivers). In a brothel, the client easily paid six to twelve times that amount, not to mention what he owed the madam for drinks, room rent, bed clothes, and the tip. The net income received by the prostitute herself was often zero. As a rule, she was heavily indebted to the madam, who provided her with “whores’ clothes” and sometimes jewelry, too. Pregnancies, of streetwalkers as well as women who worked in brothels, were infrequent, due to bad health, venereal disease in particular, more than to contraception. According to a contemporary saying, grass seldom grows on heavily trodden paths.

As everywhere in Europe, contemporaries used the word *whore* in a broad sense. Any woman considered dishonorable might be called a whore.
Professional prostitutes counted as infamous without exception. The stigma of dishonor even extended to women who worked as seamstresses, charwomen, or domestic servants in a brothel. There were considerable numbers of them, according to the judicial records, but again the claim was a convenient excuse in at least some cases. Whereas outsiders considered all whores as infamous, within the world of prostitution subtle degrees of dishonor existed. These had to do with the type of sex and the status of clients. Most women only offered the standard service of simple coitus in the missionary position, with half their clothes on. They found it perverse when a client proposed to do it entirely in the nude. If a prostitute agreed to special variants, her colleagues certainly looked down on her. Women who insisted that their clients should be single men or widowers equally looked down on less discriminate colleagues. “Married men’s whore” was a formidable insult.

It is hardly surprising to hear about these degrees of disreputability. Their existence followed from the undemocratic character of honor as a cultural commodity. Honor presupposes infamy or, at least, lesser honor. Ultimately, from an individual perspective, personal honor can be ascertained only in terms of other people who lack it or possess less of it. This characteristic formed the basis of a mechanism by which honor determined the lives of ever lower groups. If you have doubts about your reputation, look for others with an obviously baser character: others who are even more infamous than you fear you yourself are. For an ordinary Amsterdam prostitute of the eighteenth century, the infamous other was the married men’s whore.

Up to now, we have discussed female honor, as ever centering on the woman’s sexuality. In the world of prostitution, male honor was at stake, too. Most married men who visited a brothel did so as secretly as possible. If it became public knowledge, this was highly embarrassing, especially if they were active church members. This applied to almost every married brothel visitor, since men who could only afford the services of a street-walker came from a milieu in which the neighbors (if not their wives) did not frown on this behavior. If a respectable housefather had anything to do with a prostitute, it was a severe stain upon his honor in the eyes of his peers. Even if his servant got pregnant, the only way to avoid suspicion was to dismiss her immediately. This code resulted from a gradual broadening of the base for male honor during the early modern period. Likewise, economic solidity had become an important source of honor for men. Once, this had been different. Male honor originally depended on a reputation for violence, bravery, and a patron’s capacity to protect the
women and men dependent on him. An echo of this older conception of male honor resounded in Amsterdam at the beginning of the eighteenth century in the milieu of knife fighters.32

The typical knife fighter always carried a stabbing weapon in his pocket, and he was prepared to use it whenever someone challenged him. Ordinarily, the challenge was a phase in a conflict that arose among a company of men in a tavern or in the street. Insults often were the immediate cause. This made knife fights akin to the official duel, fought with sword or pistol, even though that was uncommon in the Netherlands. Far from issuing written challenges, however, popular duelists settled the matter on the spot. In a tavern, the words “follow me outside” constituted an unmistakable signal. The yell *sta vast* (stand your man) was the sign to start fighting.

Popular duels were ritualized and bound to a code of honor. First and foremost, it was anathema for any third person, friend or foe, to intervene, except for the purpose of separating the combatants and convincing them to stop. Only a one-on-one combat was a fair fight. If one of the men intending to start a duel was in the company of a friend and the latter stated his intention to refrain from interfering, it usually earned him the compliment of being an honorable man. The fight as such was a test of skill, in which the combatants proved their manhood. It was over when one man had cut the other or obtained a clear advantage, but sometimes it went wrong with a lethal result. When a popular duel ended in the death of a combatant, this counted as a pardonable accident in the milieu of knife fighters. The court, however, took it as seriously as any other homicide. Once, a considerable part of Amsterdam’s population had been involved in knife fighting, but around 1700 its practitioners occupied a social position along the border of the “respectable” and the “disreputable” segment of the city’s lower classes. About half of the protagonists in popular duels also were petty thieves or they committed property crimes on an occasional basis.

Honorific knife fights, hardly visible since the 1720s, play no direct role in our murder stories. Their demise, however, was another feature of the cultural changes that affected Amsterdam in the eighteenth century. For one thing, the popular duel was the last major manifestation of an honor code that obliged a man to be brave and violent. Its disappearance shifted the balance of views of honor definitively toward a more bourgeois conception of respectability, which predominated in the years 1750–1780. The disappearance of the popular duel also meant that the character of violence in the city changed. This coincided with a considerable drop in Amsterdam’s homicide rates, from about nine per one hundred thousand
in the first quarter of the eighteenth century to about three in the third quarter. Thus, the change was most pronounced with respect to homicidal violence: from knife fights gone wrong to killings in the domestic sphere or property crime. A simple count of killer-victim relationships illustrates this shift. In the first half of the eighteenth century, 44 percent of homicide victims were strangers and 15 percent intimates. In the period 1751–1810 this ratio had reversed: 18 percent strangers and 43 percent intimates. **33** These figures, obtained from trial records, are probably a little biased, but the trend is unmistakable. The typical homicide in Amsterdam after 1750 was the killing of an intimate person, usually in a domestic setting. Our two murders were characteristic of their time.

To be more precise, these two crimes represented a distinct subcategory of violence against intimates. They were not just the culmination of domestic quarrels; they resulted from vehement desire and subsequent frustration. This takes us back to the darker side of the revolution in love.

Of course, the desire of a man for a woman, and vice versa, has been around for a long time, and this desire has sometimes led to the spilling of blood. In the Old Testament, King David wants the beautiful Bathsheba, so he arranges for her husband to be killed in battle. The knights of courtly romance put their lives into the service of their favorite ladies, but they seldom met these ladies, constantly roaming around to perform heroic deeds for them. Elizabethan courtiers praised their peers who had committed suicide because of a lost love. To take matters into your own hands and eliminate a rival or kill the one you cannot get implies an entirely different attitude. It combines the romantic desire to be with one loved person all the time with a firm resolution and conscious planning to reach that goal. It also requires an overwhelming feeling that the deed, however abject, is inevitable.

Such feelings, that is the contention here, were new in the eighteenth century. Earlier periods—possibly with the exception of the Italian Renaissance—hardly witnessed such expressions of an intense longing and desire for another person, coupled with the compulsive idea that you have to be and remain with this person all the time and no matter what. Such an attitude presupposes a touch of romanticism, which many historians consider a relatively modern state of mind. Literary evidence supports the idea that something new was around in the eighteenth century. In most of Europe, before circa 1700, popular literature as well as published speeches and sermons routinely described wife or husband killers as drunken men and wanton women. Their inspiration, if any, came from the devil rather than some romantic compulsion. It is only after that date, also in the
Netherlands, that the latter motif gained prominence. The revolution in love affected a large part of Europe’s middle and upper classes. Needless to say, for the majority of men and women the consequences were less drastic. The average tragic lover might shed a million tears or confide his or her feelings to a diary. Couples with a third person standing in their way could ignore or run from that person. Even though murder was unrepresentative in quantitative terms, as a corollary of the revolution in love, it nevertheless reflected this cultural transformation.
Index

acting, 121–24, 168
Amsterdam
  criminal procedures in, 95–96
  hack writers in, 135–37
  theater fire in, 1–4
  theater, opening of new, 134–35
Batavia, 21–22, 25
Bicker Raye, Jacob, 48, 82–83, 94
Bosselman, Dorothea
  arrest of, 93–94
  background of, 48
  escape attempt, 113–15
  flight to The Hague, 88–92
  impersonation of Cecilia by, 64–66
  imprisonment of, 112–16
  lawsuit against Cecilia Klos, 49–50
  looks of, 48–49
  sentence of, 112
  trial of, 97–105. See also Donker, Nathaniel

Cleves, 32, 39–42, 91
Corver, Marten, 119, 123
crime, historiography, xvi–xviii

Darnton, Robert, 6, 135
Davis, Natalie Zemon, xviii
Dedel, Willem Gerrit, 115, 135, 178–90, 191
Donker, Nathaniel
  adolescence of, 25–26
  affair with Dora, beginning, 51–55
  annulment of first marriage, 31–32
  discharge from Prussian army, 36–37
  escape from private prison, 38–39
  execution of, 107–10
  family background of, 22–25
  fleeing Amsterdam, plans, 83–87
  marriage with Cecilia: first, 28–29; second, 40; third, 42–43
  meets Cecilia, 27–28
  murder of Cecilia: carrying it out, 63–64; the day after, 67–69; events preceding, 59–63; preparations for, 55–57
  sentence of, 106–107
  settles on estate, 44–46
  sons of, 40, 45, 105–6
  trial of, 96–103. See also Bosselman, Dorothea; Klos, Cecilia
Effen, Justus van, 5
Elias, Norbert, xviii
Enlightenment
  breakthrough in the Netherlands, 4–6
  emotional standards of, 8–9

Gaubert, Jan, 32, 85–87, 100
Ginzburg, Carlo, xviii
Gogh, Johannes Bartholomeus
  Ferdinandus van
  affair with Lizette, 133
  arrest of, 167–68
  background of, 117–18
  blood letter: disappearance of, 197; reciting of, 165; text of, xi–xiii; writing of, ix–x
  conflicts with Annie, 158–60
  and emotional standards, 8–9, 147
  estrangement from Hoefnagel, 132
  execution of, 194–95
  freethinker, considered as, 174–75

229
killing of Annie: carrying it out, 167; events during the day, 162–64; events immediately preceding, 165–66
literary production about, 170–71, 192–94, 195
medical condition of, 162
meets Annie, 146–47
meets Hoefnagel, 129–31
pamphlets against, 153–55
proposes to Annie, 147–48
sentence of, 194
spies on Annie, 150, 152
surgeon's career, 124
theater performance by, 117, 118–21
trial of: first, 178–81; second, 181–84; third, 184–85; fourth, 185–86; fifth, 186–90. See also Smitshuizen, Anna

homicide, 9–11, 18–19
honor, 14, 16–18, 30, 97–98, 136, 169–70, 171–74
imprisonment, private, 33–36
Jacob, Margaret, 6, 125
Jaunis, Johanna (Madam Sjoenis), 88–91, 101
Kersteman, Franciscus Lievens, 7, 141
Klos, Cecilia
clothes of, 57–59
corps of: discovered, 77–79; displayed, 78–79, 80; dumped 75–77; trans
ported 72–75
dismemberment of, 69–70
family background of, 26–27
lawsuit against Dorothea Bosselman, 49–50
petitions Court of Holland, 47–48. See also Donker, Nathaniel
knife fighting, 18
La Mettrie, Julien Offray de, 7, 125–26
Linden, Maria van der, see Steffens, Maria
Ludeman, Johan Cristoph, 7, 110–11, 141
marriage, 12-13
microhistory, xviii–xix
Nijmegen, 32–33, 36, 49–50, 91
observing magazines, 6, 34, 151–52, 161
Ockers, Willem, 7, 124–27, 128–32, 152, 176
Ouderkerk, ix, 118, 151
Paris, hack writers in, 135–37
Pol, Lotte van de, 14
Popkin, Jeremy, 6
prostitution, 14–16, 196–97
Punt, Jan, 119–20, 123
sentimental novels, 9, 160–62, 188
Smitshuizen, Anna
adolescence of, 139–40
and atheism, 175–76
biography of, 140–42
corps of: displayed, 177–78; inspected, 178
family background of, 138–39
first years in Amsterdam, 142–46
moves to Herengracht, 155–58
resumes prostitution career, 148–49. See also Gogh, Johannes Bartholomeus
Ferdinandus van sodomy, 11
Stalli, Michiel (porter), 70–75, 81–82, 100-101
Steffens, Maria (mother of Cecilia Klos), 26–27, 53, 80–81, 83–84, 87, 98, 105–6
Sweers, Isaac, 96–107
Thomeze, Leonard, 38, 184–87
Verhoef, Pieter, 56, 60, 70
Weyerman, Jacob Campo, 6