Chapter Ten

Between Storytelling and Patriotic Scripture.
The Memory Brokers of the Dutch Revolt*

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During the violent sack of the Brabant town of Tienen or Tirlemont in 1635, a maidservant of a burgher family who had fled the town was tied to a tree and raped by two Dutch soldiers from the army of Frederick Henry of Orange. The young woman cried so pitifully that the soldiers began to feel sorry for her, and, as a compensation for her loss of honour, both men proposed marriage; she just had to choose one of them. So the maid did. The maid and the soldiers congratulated each other with this happy ending and had a meal and drinks together. Moreover, she showed her future husband where her employers hid their silverware and subsequently ran away with him and the stolen treasure. The author who recorded this story concludes with the moral: never tell your servants where you hide your valuables.¹

The author of this story was Johannes Jakinet alias Jean Jaquinet, an antiquarian or chronicler from Louvain, living in Tienen. He was about twenty years old when he witnessed the sack of Tienen by the Dutch and French armies in 1635. We know little about his identity, social status or office, but during his life he compiled a number of lengthy manuscripts on the history of the Netherlands and the Duchy of Brabant.² He recorded personal memories and information from learned sources, pamphlets and popular books as well as tales and jokes he acquired from hearsay.

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¹ Research for this article was funded by an NWO VICI grant for the research project Tales of the Revolt. Memory, oblivion and identity in the Low Countries, 1566–1700, and with support of the IAP project City and Society in the Low Countries, 1200–1850.

² We know of two other manuscripts both in the Royal Library Albert I in Brussels: MS. 15938, Joannes Jakenet, ‘Historie der Nederlanden onder de regering van Albertus en Isabella Philippus IV en Karel II. 1612 tot 1683, met bygevoegde portretten’ and MS. 21769, Jan Jaquinet, ‘Chronyke der Nederlanden (1500–1693)’.
We do not know whether his texts circulated widely, but it is clear that he
did his very best to entertain his intended audience. In the early modern
period, history was meant to entertain as well as moralise: some stories
were meant to amaze, others to horrify the reader. A good story articu-
lated a clear message, a warning or a lesson, or if not, at least had to be
funny.

For readers today, it is not completely clear what this particular story
was meant to convey nor whether we are meant to believe it. We are
amazed because this maid agrees to marry her rapist, but we cannot be
sure that this would also have surprised a seventeenth-century audience.
In any case that audience is likely to have been scandalised because the
maid stole the family’s silverware. The tale confirmed popular views on
the proverbial untrustworthiness of housemaids. To us, the lack of refer-
ce to any source—had there been witnesses to the rape?—gives the
impression that Jakinet merely recounted an urban legend. Yet he gave his
story an air of historical realism by adding specific details about the pro-
tagons. These were people that his local audience might have known
about. He tells us that the maid was named Maria Iuliano, that she was a
beautiful brunette, and that she was the daughter of the quarter master of
the regiment of Ian de Velasco. Her employers, the owners of the house,
were ‘Ioncker’ (Sir) Negrona and his wife ‘Louffrau’ (Mistress) Backs who
had fled with their children to Louvain. This family really existed. He
also notes that Maria should not bear all the blame because she should
not have been left alone and she had fought to defend her virginity. Jaki-
et does not explicitly mention his source, but it is likely that he knew
this story from hearsay. Orally transmitted anecdotes can be recognised
by their funny or unexpected plots and by their normative message, for
instance through recounting the consequences of a transgression of norms
and values. Although they may refer to a narrative context or common
history that is familiar to the audience, they usually lack external informa-
tion such as details about time, place and people that do not matter to
the plot. Narrative structuring is essentially a process that gives meaning
to events by identifying their role in and contribution to an outcome. Dur-
ing the structuring of narratives in plots details are omitted; some

3 Paul Kempeneers located the house of the family Negrona where the event should have
4 Donald E. Polkinghorne, ‘Narrative psychology and historical consciousness. Relationships
and perspectives’, in Jürgen Straub (ed.), Narration, identity, and historical conscious-