

## Women and Petty Theft

Bregje Douwens was still young – only thirty-four years old – in 1715, but she already had an impressive criminal career behind her. In 1700, she had been arrested in Rotterdam for cohabitation and violation of banishment and sentenced to public humiliation and two years in a house of correction.<sup>1</sup> She must have entered the town illegally, since a year earlier the Rotterdam court had convicted her of theft and banished her. In 1702, Bregje was released from the house of correction, but the following year she ran afoul of the law again in Weesp. It appears that by this time the authorities saw her as a notorious thief, since they had her whipped and branded so that the mark of the criminal would remain on her skin, visible to all. Three months later, the same thing happened to her in Bommel. She was later imprisoned in Enkhuizen, Amsterdam, and Haarlem; in the last of these towns, she spent a full eight years in the house of correction. In total, Bregje was arrested and convicted eight times in sixteen years (1699–1715).<sup>2</sup>

She may have been an extreme case, since few other female delinquents went through the justice system as often as she did. But it was not at all out of the ordinary for female thieves to have multiple convictions; on the contrary, most of them were recidivists. The sentences were severe; thieves usually received both corporal punishment and a prison term. The forty-four-year-old Elisabeth received her first whipping in 1810, after her second theft conviction, and was also banished from the Netherlands for six years.<sup>3</sup> Even first-time defendants whose crimes do not sound all that serious could not count on any leniency from the magistrates. For instance, the housemaid Maria must have been in the mood for some fun when she and the kitchen maid took bottles of wine from their employer's basement and drank them in their room. That was theft, of course, but it also sounds like a fairly innocent escapade by two young women. Yet Maria was banished for four years in 1810, the same year as Elisabeth.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Violation of banishment (*banbreuk* or *infractie van bannissement*) meant that a person had violated the terms a banishment sentence by entering the prohibited area.

2 Rotterdam City Archives, ORA, Sententieboeken, 1700, inv. no. 252, fol. 69; Rotterdam City Archives, ORA, Sententieboeken, 1715, inv. no. 253, fols. 135–136.

3 Rotterdam City Archives, ORA, Sententieboeken, June 1810, inv. no. 264.

4 Rotterdam City Archives, ORA, Sententieboeken, May–June 1810, inv. no. 264.

These are just a few of the countless instances in which women were tried for property crimes in early modern Holland. Who were these women, what did they steal, from whom, and why? It has often been supposed that men and women committed very different sorts of property crimes. Men are said to have committed risky thefts and burglaries, while women stayed close to home and took fewer risks. Women, it has been claimed, did not engage in risky crimes unless working together with men.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, we look at whether that popular image is consistent with the records of the Holland courts. A second important question relates to the link between poverty and theft. Were there substantially more convictions for theft and other property crimes during the years of economic decline? We saw in the previous chapter that convictions of women with illegitimate children increased in number as economic conditions in Holland worsened, in and after the second half of the seventeenth century. Was there a similar relationship between poverty and theft? The next section first briefly discusses what proportion of property crimes were committed by women and then examines the circumstances under which they committed those crimes.

### Differences between Men and Women

According to the most recent edition of the *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics*, about 23 percent of suspected thieves in the Netherlands in 2014 were women. Women accounted for a slightly lower proportion of theft convictions: only 17 percent. If we focus on robbery and burglary, the figures are lower still. Women were responsible for about 8 percent of these convictions.<sup>6</sup>

Although the early modern period was much like the present in that women rarely committed robbery or burglary, there was a considerably larger proportion of female thieves than there is today. In her research on crime in Leiden from 1678 to 1794, Els Kloek found that women committed almost as many property crimes as did men – almost half the property offenses listed in the confession books. Men and women also committed remarkably similar types of property crimes. Kloek states that both men and women were, in most cases,

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5 Garthine Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order* (Cambridge 2008) 159; Van der Heijden, “Criminaliteit en sekse”, 16–19.

6 Marcelo F. Aebi et al., *European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics* (Helsinki 2014) 89.