

LETTERS THAT MADE HISTORY

Lisa Jardine, *Temptation in the Archives: Essays in Golden Age Dutch Culture* (London: UCL Press, 2015), ISBN: 978-1-910634-09-7, 146 pp.

Sabin Dumitru COROIAN*

Intellectual convictions and common cultural outlooks of contemporary thought have deep roots in a long tradition of English-Dutch relations, started in the seventeenth century Europe. While revisiting the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, in spring 2013, Lisa Jardine, in her desire to capture a part of early modern history that usually escapes scrutiny, was inspired to write what would be her last book. The museum had just opened, after a long period of closure when it had gone through a process of refurbishment. The author saw in the museum a wooden box with a note inside and a rectangular block of stone on which, William Prince of Orange first set foot on English soil, a stone representing decades of political and cultural relations between the two countries. This, claims Jardine, has been the source of inspiration for a book that intends to present English-Dutch relations from a different historical perspective, a less common one, which relies on personal relationships between important figures of the era.

History is not always the result of political and economic decisions but sometimes the course of events is influenced by other factors. These “other factors”, more personal than public, represent the main topic of research for Jardine in this book. Her approach of the archives focuses on letter exchanges with private character, revealing the lives of Dutch and English intellectuals and statesmen of the seventeenth century captured in personal diaries and intimate correspondence.

Huygens’ family history and their intellectual networks are an important part of this study, personal diaries and letters written by the family members in that period being highly analysed in the first five chapters of the book. The political and cultural roles played by this Dutch family in Europe in that period are well apprehended in these texts. The lives and private letters of three important members of Huygens family make the basis of this book: Constantijn Huygens Sr. and his two sons, Constantijn Huygens Jr. and Christiaan Huygens. Constantijn Huygens Sr. was a Dutch polymath, diplomat, poet, and connoisseur of fine arts; he was also counsellor to three generations of princes from the House of Orange and father of the acknowledged seventeenth century scientist and inventor Christiaan Huygens: “in the Netherlands he is an iconic cultural figure for the seventeenth century – a distinguished man of letters and polymath who left an indelible mark upon emerging Dutch culture” (p. 45). Constantijn Huygens Jr. was First Secretary of Stadholder, Prince William III of Orange, the future King William III of England. The role played

* Vasile Goldiș Western University of Arad, Faculty of Social and Humanistic Sciences, Department of Psycho-Social and Humanistic Sciences, 15 Eminescu str., Arad, Romania. E-mail: coroian.sabin@yahoo.com

by him in the new Dutch administration of England was very important, being also considered one of the best chroniclers of his times. His diaries present vivid transcriptions of historical and political events: “Constantijn was at the very forefront of the action throughout the Dutch invasion so it is hardly surprising that other members of his family, back in The Hague, were particularly keenly interested in unfolding events.” (p. 19). Christiaan Huygens, the inventor of the pendulum clock, was one of the most brilliant scientists of his time, a mathematician that supported science in every form of expression. His higher connections with very important European intellectuals of his era were rebound when he went on a short voyage in England and visited his brother: “He rebuilt his scientific and intellectual links with key members of the Royal Society, particularly with Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle” (p. 31).

These three characters are highly influential, in Jardine’s opinion, for the development of the English-Dutch relations in the seventeenth century in multiple areas, from intellectual and political, to sentimental and marital. The Huygens family seemed to dominate the public life in early modernity but Jardine’s intention in this book is to capture what is behind the known course of history. She aims at revealing what personal motivations are to be found in the private relations between public figures and she does that by the scrutiny of their private correspondence.

Therefore, the first chapter, “Temptation in the Archives”, introduces to the public the correspondence between Constantijn Huygens Sr. and Margaret Croft. Croft was a prominent character in the Queen Elizabeth of Bohemia’s entourage (the sister of King Charles I of England). Queen Elisabeth of Bohemia tried to marry her maid of honour, Margaret Croft, with Henry Erskine, the younger son of the Scottish Earl of Marr. However, as Jardine mentioned, Croft was: “associated (mostly by hearsay) with a number of sentimental scandals at the court of Elizabeth of Bohemia” (p. 3). The potential scandal contained by a letter addresses by Croft to one of her English cousins (a female relative whose name is not mentioned anywhere) might have provoked Lisa Jardine to explore the British and Dutch archives in search of the truth about a journey in North Holland, made by Amalia van Solms, the new Stadholder’s wife, together with Elizabeth of Bohemia and their entourages, vividly transcribed by Croft as an eye-witness. Constantijn Huygens Sr., whose relation to Margaret Croft is unclear, mentions in his correspondence with Croft that parts of her letter addressed to her English cousin, containing defamatory information and innuendos were intercepted and a public scandal might have started at any given moment. Huygens Sr. ensures Croft about his protection and guarantees her that he would defend her honour in case someone would contest it. Although Lisa Jardine hoped to find something scandalous or, at least, intriguing, in the correspondence between Huygens Sr. and Croft, when she discovered a copy of the original letter after a long voyage of exploration throughout the archives in Britain and the Netherlands, she was quite disappointed by the text contained in the letter itself, which was a “cautionary tale to remind us that not everything we scholars undertake in good faith will turn out to yield fruit” (p. 14).

The second chapter, “1688 And All That: Some Curious Consequences of ‘Going Dutch’”, starts with a personal diary account about the magnitude and

opulence of the Dutch fleet invasion of England, orchestrated by Prince William of Orange on November 1st, 1688 (p. 18). The rich and detailed description was written by Constantijn Huygens Jr., Prince William's First Secretary. Having a prominent position in the new administration, Constantijn Huygens Jr. tried hard to get a position in London for his brother Christiaan. Unfortunately, the new king was not interested in science and intellectual activities, therefore all Constantijn's efforts were in vain, even though a post in The Royal Council was vacant for a long period of time. Lisa Jardine highlighted the complicated situation: "Constantijn approached the new king on at least two occasions to press Christiaan's suit for the vacant place on his Council. In the end, Constantijn records in his diary that, just as Christiaan feared, William's lack of interest in science prevented him from valuing any possible contribution he would be able to make on his behalf, and to conclude that Christiaan was overqualified for an administrative post" (p. 32).

The third chapter, "Never Trust a Pirate: Christiaan Huygens' Longitude Clocks", tells the story of a potentially formidable invention of Christiaan Huygens' that could greatly improve sea journeys, a horological solution to the calculation of longitude, the pendulum longitudinal clock. Although the pendulum claimed to solve the problem of sea navigation, in reality, the improvements it introduced were not significant in relation to the used instruments. However Jardine presents here a different perspective of the event, which gave, at first, the impression that the clocks were working fine. In reality, the longitude clocks were poorly tested and misinterpreted in a series of sea-trials conducted by Robert Holmes on his voyage to Africa: "Sir Robert Holmes (as he later became) was not known as a person of integrity. Quite the contrary: Major Robert Holmes, as he was at the time of the Guinea sea-trials, was somewhat notorious, as a notable villain" (p. 35). Apparently Robert Holmes reported the results inaccurately, affirming the success of his calculations based on the new pendulum, in spite of even Christiaan Huygens' reluctance (who personally asked his acquaintances, members of the Royal Society in London, if Robert Holmes is a trusty and even a sincere man). In a short period of time it was discovered that the convoy did not arrive at Island of Fuego (its destination) but to another island of Cape Verde Archipelago, 90 nautical miles distance from predicted destination. This important piece of information regarding the failure of Christiaan Huygens' invention, was also confirmed by one of Robert Holmes' sea captains who claimed that this type of pendulum clock calculation was not highly efficient: "according to the Master of Holmes's ship, then, there was not much to choose between the old way of calculating longitude, and that using the new clocks." (p. 38).

The fourth chapter, "The Reputation of Sir Constantijn Huygens: Networker or Virtuoso", features Constantijn Huygens Sr. as both a man of connections ("a networker", well connected with important public figures in Holland and England) and a man of knowledge, interested in science and fine arts (a "Dutch virtuoso", who capably held his own, amongst contemporary specialists in all areas of arts and science" (p. 46) The story is about Huygens Sr. buying a painting from the famous Pieter Paul Rubens (it is not clear if the two really met in person), on behalf of Amalia van Solms. After this successful episode, the two remained in good relations: "Huygens sent

Rubens a set of engravings of his completed house built next door to the Mauritshuis in the most fashionable district in The Hague, Het Plein” (p. 53).

The fifth chapter, “Dear Song: Scholarly Whitewashing of the Correspondence between Constantijn Huygens and Dorothea van Dorp”, depicts a platonic relation based on the exchange of letters between two possible friends, or, as Constantijn Huygens Sr. publicly fashioned it in many occasions: “a love based on mutual respect and designed to enhance the moral standing of both parties, and celebrate their union as a shared, blameless endeavour” (p. 68). The real situation between the two was very different, at least from Dorothea van Dorp’s point of view. She waited for him more than five years and wrote him dozens of letters when he was in diplomatic missions in London and Venice. Finally, Constantijn Huygens Sr. chose a wealthier and more suitable wife, Susanna van Baerle: “he discards the passionate ‘friendship’ with Dorothea in favour of a decorous marital union with Susanna van Baerle” (p. 81).

The sixth and last chapter of this book, “The Afterlife of Homo Ludens: From Johan Huizinga to Natalie Zemon Davis and Beyond”, is quite different from the first five. This text is about the innovative approach to cultural history, especially about medieval times, contained in the well-known history study, “Homo Ludens” written by Johan Huizinga. Other important studies about the same topic, appeared decades later: “Return of Martin Guerre” written by Natalie Zemon Davis and “Renaissance Self-Fashioning” written by Stephen Greenblatt. These books continued a historical tradition started by Huizinga’s works in the interwar period with “Homo Ludens”. Notions as “play” and “role-play” used by these authors in the process of analysing human society are appealing even to unspecialized history readers. As Huizinga says, in human behaviour: “the story of its past can be told with verve and imagination as one which connects us directly with ordinary men and women of earlier times” (p. 98). Although at a first glance the reader is intrigued by the contrast between the two parts of the book, this last chapter explains the theory behind the book: sometimes, human relationships can be interpreted as “plays” and “games”. Life is a permanent process of self-improvement that can, sometimes, call on impersonation techniques.

The importance of this book relies on the manner of interpretation, the personal relationships and the cultural networks of the seventeenth century Europe exposed by Lisa Jardine in a bright way. Huygens’ family storyline is important for understanding the complex political and private relations between English and Dutch societies. Accessibility of this study to the general public resides in her storytelling ability and her playful style of writing. Unfortunately, this was Lisa Jardine’s last published work in her lifetime. It will always remind the readers her passion for history, her sagacity and capacity of capturing the truth.