Tussen salon en souterrain. Gouvernantes in Nederland 1800-1940.
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Summary

In Tussen salon en souterrain (Between Upstairs and Downstairs) the presence of governesses in the Netherlands between 1800 and 1940 is discussed for the first time at great length. Reliable sources for the story of this 'teacher in the margin' are not readily available and are often of a patchy nature.

Nevertheless, the existence of the governess in Amsterdam canal houses, country seats on the River Vecht, castles of the provinces of Overijssel and Gelderland, Frisian estates and residences in The Hague was noticed, described and narrated in confined levels of society. As a result, governesses are still remembered in the Netherlands to this day. The stories of these women allow us to look at all those past governesses, who remained anonymous, with different eyes. The myths connected with the word governess may be replaced by more realistic narratives like those of Catharina van Ulf, Truittje Toussaint and Elise van Calcar in the Netherlands as well as many foreign women such as Jeanne Wägeli, Jeanne-Louise Prévost, Susanna Huber, Friederike Schöle, Marie Thierrin and Henrietta Booth.

The seven chapters in this work are based on a chronological-thematic framework, combined with a variety of perspectives: the pupils, the parents-employers, the bystanders and above all the governess herself.

The governess’ profession thrived in a society of strict class and sex distinction. In the nineteenth century it was the teaching profession that was the first (and for a long time the sole) semi-intellectual profession that was socially acceptable for a relatively large group of single women. By studying the role of a governess, one is able to gain a clear insight into nineteenth-century interactions and relations between the sexes and the different social classes.

The profession of governess is a product of a class-committed conception of what the role and the task of a civilized woman should be. From approximately 1880 on, both a process of transformation inside the profession itself and the ultimate disappearance of the profession were taking place. Women’s liberation; the changing position of nobility and patriarchy, from which the majority of employers of governesses came; the introduction of compulsory educa-
tion in 1900; the Great War; and the consequences resulting from these events gradually dealt the final blow to the profession of governess.

This research poses a number of questions: has Holland been a country of governesses? Much is known about the English governess: very little, however, is known about her Dutch counterpart. It seems that the profession of governess was far less widespread in this country than in England, in absolute as well as in relative terms. It is virtually impossible to give an estimation of the number of governesses working in the Netherlands at a specific time.

The profession of governess is a good example of concealed female labor. After 1850 governesses were sometimes registered in parish registers; however, the registers fail entirely in terms of teaching statistics or counts of domestic staff. The vague definition of the profession itself enlarges the problem. In the sources we came across in the Netherlands, a certain ambivalence may be noted in the use of the word governess. The inconsistent use of the word depends on both the variable job description and implementation of the profession by either the family or the governess herself.

Although I am unable to support my theory with numbers, I am inclined to presume that the frequent phenomenon of the one-parent family contributed in a double sense to the position of the professional governess of the 19th century.

The governess frequently originated from a similar family and it was through her profession that she ended up - eventually - in a family living under similar circumstances. In the Netherlands it was the governess who was employed - and remained employed - longest in the highest noble circles. Sometimes the governess - especially the foreign governess - was a status symbol to the family. She both represented and maintained a social system at the same time.

Two contradictory impressions remain, based on the sources I found, such as the ego-documents and the conversations in which I participated. On the one hand the position of governess balanced between being a so-called 'Fremdkörper' and being incorporated, depending on the way the contemplator looked at her and on the varying reputation of the governess involved. On the other hand these very same sources show that the governess was positively accepted in the upper classes. Even if we acknowledge the limitations in both scope and dispersion the Netherlands may well be called a country of governesses.

How tragic was it to become or to be a governess? This question emanates from the victimized imagery that is projected upon the fictional character. For obvious reasons it is difficult to let go of the governess we read about in literature, as she lives on in immortal masterpieces such as Jane Eyre in Great Britain. In this respect things are different in The Netherlands, as novelists did not create immortal governesses against whom the historian has to compete.
It is thus easier for us to replace the literary image of a governess in Holland with that of a 'real' one. It would be absolutely wrong to reduce the governess from the past to merely a literary heroine or anti-heroine.

The pitiful lonely woman and déclassée who could not control her own group of pupils whom we read about in the sometimes-tearful novel is offset by the governess described in the ego-documents and the oral tradition. These point out that the destiny of a governess was not always and necessarily tougher and sadder than that of other women from the same period.

The life of a governess in the nineteenth century was different from the part she was expected to play based on her gender. She was an outsider in three respects. First, she made her own living at a time when this was not customary for women of her own class and, as a consequence, she deviated from the traditional role women played. Second, as a teacher she formed part of the teaching profession, but her task was carried out far from the official field of education. Third, from the moment she left her parental home she moved in circles of the elite, lived in their houses, but was never really one of them.

The nineteenth century was neither kind to women in general who, for whatever reason, did not reach their destination - marriage and motherhood - nor to the governesses amongst them. Every now and then governesses would notice that they were caricatured both as women and as governesses. In retrospect, the look of the other person, whether ridiculing or full of pity, either confused them or hurt their feelings, but was not easy to articulate. I did not come across any negative remarks made by governesses themselves - which does not mean they did not suffer from them. Governesses were often enterprising women who went beyond the beaten path. They frequently moved about at an early age, at a time when mobility, especially in the case of women, was rather an exception.

Dutch governesses tutored young children above all. It is true that the lessons were mainly for girls, but if there were any boys in the family, these sometimes attended the lessons too, until they were sent to a school when they were about eight years of age. It seems that, for older girls, governesses in the Netherlands mainly consisted of foreign women. One could actually speak of a small but continuous stream of immigration, the importance of which is difficult to estimate in respect to the liberation of women.

And yet in a number of countries one is able to point out various predecessors of the women's movement who used to work as a governess. In the Netherlands Elise van Calcar is a good example.

Can the nineteenth-century governess be considered to have been a genuine teacher? Both the relatively limited scope of the profession and the work done inside the classroom of a local elite have made her into a fairly nondescript figure, a sort of 'marginal' teacher. Indeed, private tuition differed from state
education in which co-education, class teaching, a uniform curriculum, supervision by an inspectorate as well as the necessary diplomas for teachers were standard. Nothing similar existed in the private classroom: the parents, who could at times make the strangest demands, determined the curriculum for girls, sometimes for only one girl. In practice it seems to have been more carefully balanced, however.

We know now that an unknown number of girls received an excellent education from governesses. Quite a few governesses had diplomas and could also have taught at a girls' school or a boarding school. The subjects that were presumed then to be the most appropriate were emphasized: languages (particularly fluency of speech), literature, social subjects such as history (including Biblical history), geography and natural science, as well as a variety of creative subjects such as needlework, drawing, painting, music and elocution. It is the versatility of didactics and content that strikes us in the education of a good governess. Free activity, differentiation and teamwork were part of it.

The variations among governesses, the differences in education, national inclination, personality as well as creativity contributed to the diversity. When one considers the complete set of subjects and methods, one cannot help but notice that the curriculum of the MMS (the Dutch equivalent of a Grammar School for girls) around 1870 was partly grafted upon the education that had been provided by governesses in the Netherlands. In the domestic atmosphere she was usually both a teacher and an educator. Part of the governess corps of nineteenth-century Holland took its educational task so seriously that the governess deserves – if indeed 'marginally' – the designation of teacher. This is different for her twentieth-century successor. At the end of the nineteenth century and especially after the introduction of compulsory education laws, schools took over her task of educator. In the families in which she nevertheless remained in service, her task as an educator dwindled. What appeared to guarantee her survival – more education for girls – in practice turned out to be her downfall. There was little employment left for the governess, though she herself no longer felt the need for it anyway. Thus it was not a dramatic paradox that the professionalization of the job nearly coincided with its disappearance.

The account of the governess as a stranger within the family circle puts the spotlight on the upper classes of society, the existence of which was intertwined with her destiny. The special place the governess occupied inside the family reveals something of the manner in which social inequality was experienced and appreciated. The governess herself has been depicted as an illustration of this inequality. The way in which she moved and maintained herself between 'upstairs and downstairs' certainly was not simple, but was not impossible, for the governess. Both parties, employer and employee, had an interest in keeping up good relations, hadn't they?
The saying that good masters make good servants is a self-evident cliché. With such employers their first consideration was decent treatment of the servants. The governess often won respect and love from both her pupils and their parents. This sometimes applied to the rest of her life, which was of vital importance to her, especially if she remained single. In that case her position was not just an economic and social one, but also an emotional safety net for the governess, who might remain in the family for over three generations.

The profession of governess was neither about spectacular lives, nor about an enumeration of great deeds, but about a profession pursued in relative anonymity in private surroundings. With her own stories and the stories about her, the governess belongs to our cultural heritage from past centuries. Governesses seemed like old soldiers who ‘just faded away’: no tragic decline, just the natural course of things.