

# SEXUAL CULTURES IN EUROPE

Themes in sexuality

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## Cultures of abortion in The Hague in the early twentieth century

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### Some advice

The abortion of foetuses, ah, that's only a small matter nowadays. It just depends on how it's done. Most women go to the 'Sanitas' shops. That's all nonsense. All those pills, those mimosa tinctures, that's nothing. The women, in their distress, pay sums of twelve fifty for it. But it doesn't help at all. Tell that black lady of yours, whom you made pregnant: 'one should treat oneself. The only effective treatment is to spray soap into the womb. To this end she has to buy an ordinary douche. She should unscrew the cannula and buy a catheter to screw on the syringe. The rubber ball should be filled with soap, then the catheter should be placed into the womb. When this is done, then one should squeeze the ball gently. Very carefully. Too strong a squeeze makes the woman pass out. Sometimes the catheter is put into the womb just to keep it open. But the first method is preferable. That's the safest way for women. I also know the practices of the so-called 'experts' quite well. These people are unscrupulous. They demand ample payment. These people also use soap most of the time, but the curse for the woman's health is that they always mix it with a few drops of vitriol. This produces excellent results, the foetus comes off right away, but most of the time the woman gets ill and keeps ailing. It's easy to get rid of the foetus when one knows how to do it right.

Thus the frank advice of a fortune-teller in The Hague in 1925 to a male visitor.<sup>1</sup>

### The approach

The abortion issue, so Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argued, 'functions as a sexual language through which divergent gender, economic, regional, and religious groups discuss issues of social change and social conflict far broader than the fate of fetuses or even the sexual rights of adult women'.<sup>2</sup> She may be perfectly right, but in concentrating on groups (a programme for the future rather than the result of past research) she tends, in a sense, to throw away the baby with the bathwater. Examining cultures of abortion certainly requires attention to different sexual languages. It would be rash, however, to disregard the language, experience and actions of those primarily involved: the aborting women, their male partners and the abortionists. As Barbara Brookes stated: 'The problem confronting historians ... is how to uncover the private decision-making that collectively determined the wider history of reproduction. We need to understand why and how individuals limited births and what role spouses, lovers and female friends played in this process.'<sup>3</sup>

The focus on speaking and acting individuals, on abortion practices, has hardly been applied in historical abortion studies. The abortion history of the United States has been called 'a curiously faceless one'.<sup>4</sup> 'Very little research has been done into the practices of illegal male and female abortionists', wrote the anthropologist Lodewijk Brunt about the Dutch state of the art.<sup>5</sup> The few publications in which these topics are addressed for other countries are largely descriptive. Yet as a historical anthropologist I am still, and maybe foolhardily, looking for patterns, for the more abstract and more ordered dimension behind the descriptive one. My starting point, however, is abortion and the choices made by aborting women. That is to say that most of my sources were written down only at the moment when women had already decided to resort to abortion. The choices I will discuss are those between the different possibilities of obtaining the means of abortion, such as presented in the opening quotation. For the women abortion seems to have been the only reasonable option; the choice of having the child seems not to have been realistic. As the gynaecologist Hector Treub disclosed about his sixteen years' practice, of all the women who asked him for abortion, every single one whom he (on legal grounds) had refused to help had found some other means.<sup>6</sup> Similar reports were given in the early 1930s.<sup>7</sup>

Using the concept of 'cultures' involves at least three fields of attention. I have come to consider 'culture' as processes of attaching form and meaning to fragments of everyday life, to experiences people had and situations they found themselves in. The plural 'cultures' points to the differences in these processes, arising from differences in (cultural) characteristics such as gender, class, age and occupation. Above all it points to conflicts about the production of forms and meanings. Looking for the rationales of people's choices on the abortion market amounts to concentrating on specific, situated materialisations of wishes to end a pregnancy – or, as would be more consistent with early twentieth-century discourse, to restore menstruation. The search for means to obtain an abortion can be seen as processes of communication. As only fragments of these processes have survived, the precise considerations of single individuals can be inferred only on the basis of a general, though tentative, outline, combined with selected case material.

Meaning, of course, can be only analytically separated from form; different wordings can refer to differences in meaning, even if the more obscure kind of language (as in the restoration metaphor, or in the designation of abortionists) was primarily used for moral and legal reasons. Current images of abortion and stereotypes of abortionists merely point to the meaning that was attached to the abortion issue by those who utilised these images. Whether they contained verifiable 'truth' or not is of less importance than their function in the political debates. Questions about the different meanings of abortion lead also to consideration of the wider discourses of which the abortion issue was part. Ultimately this would direct the discussion to social change. On a practical level, however, these encompassing discourses are about birth control, about 'women's responses to their physical functions' and 'male and female attitudes towards sexuality'.<sup>8</sup> They deal with norms concerning the place and function of women in society, although this could be a conclusion rather than a presumption.

This chapter attempts to reconstruct the abortion market of The Hague, the governmental seat of the Netherlands, during the early twentieth century. This city is not typical of any 'urban' culture of abortion, but neither is Amsterdam or Rotterdam. The Hague was selected merely because more records as well as records of a greater variety have survived than in the other main Dutch cities. To assess the main source, the verdicts of the court of The Hague, it is necessary to discuss their production, scope and possible bias. A

recurrent theme will be the gender division in abortion decisions. Abortion may have been 'part of a female subculture', as Patricia Knight surmised, but advice and help was *not* 'invariably provided by female relations, friends or "midwives"',<sup>9</sup> neither in the Netherlands nor for that matter in England or Germany. The situation was more complex in that the female 'subculture' seems to have been dominant in specific urban settings, even when men were participating. After all, the abortionist's clients were all women.

### The legal arena

In the early twentieth-century Netherlands a heightened attention to the abortion issue resulted in a reform of the criminal law regulating abortion. The debates were surely fuelled by a perceived increase in abortion cases, but whether this corresponded with any actual increase remains to be seen. In 1908 the leading gynaecologists Hector Treub and Catharine van Tussenbroek concluded that the crime of abortion was widespread and its frequency was rising alarmingly.<sup>10</sup> Their findings were based on figures showing the proportion of criminal abortions within the total number of abortion cases treated in several women's clinics. Four years later, however, this percentage had fallen again.<sup>11</sup> The medical opinions on these percentages were too divergent, the jurist Valkhoff deduced, they were probably too much influenced by the different gynaecologists' worldviews.<sup>12</sup> Another author pointed to the hitherto unknown existence and proliferation of professional abortionists.<sup>13</sup> Estimates were notoriously vague, but everyone agreed on the expansion of abortion practices. Foreign criminal statistics and impressions from gynaecologists from France, Germany and the United States were presented to underline the seriousness of the Dutch situation.<sup>14</sup>

The firmest figures on criminal abortion are those of the prosecution of abortionists. From 1912 onwards the new Dutch Morality Act, which added a paragraph 251bis to the Criminal Law, facilitated the conviction of abortionists. Before that it had hardly made any sense to prosecute them, as evidence was needed that the foetus had been alive. The new paragraph provided for a procedure in which it had to be legally established only that an abortionist had conveyed the impression that he or she would help a woman who thought she was pregnant. The legal formula ran as follows: 'to treat a woman on purpose by arousing her hopes of disrupting pregnancy' (the legal

subtleties probably disappear in translation). In the Netherlands the conditions for prosecuting abortionists thus did not depend on the pregnancy of the woman, nor did the abortionist have to have been operating on her body. To secure a conviction the statement of the aborting woman had to be confirmed by the abortionist, or (in a small minority of cases) by other witnesses. It needed two independent witnesses to establish a 'fact' legally. In spite of an older, but still operating paragraph 295, which prescribed a maximum of three years' imprisonment for the aborting women, they were never brought to trial. The reason behind paragraph 251bis was to protect the woman and to punish the abortionist, and it would have been counter-productive to prosecute the aborting woman, as she was the crown witness.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the police as well as the judiciary considered the violation of paragraph 295 the lesser social evil.<sup>16</sup> Prosecution of aborting women was not obligatory, as it was in Germany.

Dutch legal considerations thus differed from those in Germany, where the aborting woman was liable to prosecution; Dutch legal practice also differed from the British approach, where prosecution depended on her death.<sup>17</sup> But although Dutch conviction rates rose sharply after 1911 (and even surpassed the British), they can hardly serve as an indication for abortion rates. Evidence of only one case sufficed to convict an abortionist. The number of abortionists may have been precisely known to the vice squads of the three main cities, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague, but the scope of their practices varied too much to be of statistical relevance.<sup>18</sup> In the one case in which a cash book, running from 1943 to 1948, has survived, the abortionist performed nearly one abortion a week.<sup>19</sup> But this concerns a professional male abortionist, and he cannot be taken as representative of, for instance, occasional women abortionists.

Women wanting an abortion often had some trouble finding an abortionist. The vice squads of the city police (in the case of The Hague) had the advantage over these women in that they had more information about abortionists and abortion practices than about any other institution. The sources of their knowledge can be divided into two categories. The police monitored professional abortionists by keeping track of their newspaper advertisements and by spying on their houses and shops. Also a stream of incidental information reached the police by way of signed and anonymous letters, telephone calls and oral denunciations. Looking into the letters and journals, one finds family members denouncing their female relatives,

a woman who came to complain about her (subsequently estranged) husband of having forced an abortion on her. The language of abortion is aptly illustrated in the case where someone told the police about a conversation he had heard in the street, when a druggist said goodbye to a couple with the woman having difficulties walking: 'I hope all goes well.' The woman had allegedly remarked to her companion: 'I have such a pain; it took long, didn't it, but now I'm glad to have lost the burden.' Even if this did not refer to an abortion, by being understood as abortion speech it does reveal the secrecy surrounding it and the indirect ways it was discussed.<sup>20</sup> Another entry in the files (only a few have survived) concerns a street vendor who told the police that he had occasionally heard moans at a certain address.<sup>21</sup> Even from the few accounts that have survived, the abortion issue appears to be set in an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. Yet without asking around no woman would find the opportunity of getting what she wanted.

While every report was carefully checked, possible witnesses interrogated and suspect houses placed under surveillance, the police also met with blunt denials ('my wife wasn't even pregnant'), mere gossip and inconclusive evidence. To keep silent about abortion was as important as to talk about it. Doctors who were confronted either with patients seeking an abortion or with those who suffered from the after-effects of the operation were reluctant to break the trust that was put in them; confidentiality was part of their professional conduct and they were willing to violate it only with the woman's permission. Lay abortionists had their own reasons for secrecy, and some of them threatened women with paragraph 295,<sup>22</sup> or even put a bag over their faces, so as to avoid recognition. The aborting women, in their turn, will have had their own ideas about shame and exposure. Those who co-operated with the law were only those who, in some way or other, had resolved to break their silence.

Over the years the most persevering abortionist will certainly have left traces in the court records, the more notorious even several. Apart from recidivism, this points to the finiteness of the reservoir of abortionists. Those who were missed by the prosecuting system would have been the occasional abortionists: those who had tried it once to help an acquaintance in need. Trial figures thus grant only a distorted view of the supply side of the abortion market. This is why it seems more relevant to consider the types of services on offer, rather than their precise number.

Figures are nevertheless not totally useless. Whatever the biases in the prosecution policy and practice, they do not seem to have significantly influenced the male-female ratio. Thus some patterns of distribution, or at least hypotheses about them, may still be revealed. Between 1910 and 1930 the court of The Hague dealt with ninety-five abortionists from that town, sixty-eight of them women and twenty-seven men. (The court also convicted people from the town of Delft and Leiden and the countryside in between.) The fact that women abortionists prevailed in the city becomes even more pronounced when Rotterdam is taken into account, with 111 female and only fourteen male abortionists during the same period.<sup>23</sup> In rural areas, on the other hand, those prosecuted were almost exclusively male. This renders highly improbable the notion of a bias towards prosecuting women.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, if women abortionists had been practising in the rural areas of the Netherlands, they certainly would have been found out, as the norms about the division of labour between men and women were more strictly applied there. Within the towns, especially the urban agglomeration of the provinces of north and south Holland, women abortionists had more opportunities to practise their trade (and to attract clients from the countryside). A high prosecution rate, after all, can also be interpreted as a failure to control abortionists.

#### Public abortionists

Notwithstanding its secret nature, the abortion market needed a public face. Advertisement by word of mouth was insufficient, for the women seeking an abortion as well as for its suppliers. Open offers of abortion, however, were not just indelicate, they were also legally prohibited. Formulas thus needed to be both recognisable and inoffensive. An 'ex-nurse', for instance, who advertised herself as providing 'all medicines for ladies' and who could be consulted until 10 p.m., 'also on Sundays', was very likely to carry abortifacients as well.<sup>25</sup> From the advertisements alone it could not be inferred that abortions were procured. There merely existed a high probability that this would be the case. Judges, for example, deemed it unlikely that a woman operating a shop in hygienic articles by the name of 'Mata Hari', would restrict herself only to the one abortion for which she was convicted.<sup>26</sup> The statement of a twenty-nine-year-old office clerk may further clarify the way abortion advertisements were worded:



In November 1924 I put an ad in the *Haagsche Courant*. In it I posed as a doctor and at the top I put: 'blood circulation'. The advertisement read: 'Young doctor, gives advice; no drops etc., success ensured.' I inserted this ad several times and I received several letters. I then wrote to the women who had written to me to visit me at an address where acquaintances of mine lived with whom I had agreed to receive visitors there. That is where I treated women, to interrupt their pregnancies.

After talking about a specific case, he admitted: 'The reason for my action was that I needed to earn a living, because I had been fired from the municipal office.' He was sentenced to two months' jail.<sup>27</sup>

One of the obvious places to enquire for abortion services seems to have been a shop for 'hygienic' and 'rubber' articles, like the Sanitas company, which in 1919 had four branches in The Hague. Other shops had similar names like Sanitum and Securitas, to convey notions of safety and cleanliness. This was perfectly legal in itself, as such supplies were in demand also by medical institutions and personnel. Yet the fortune-teller's statement quoted at the start of this chapter was not only confirmed by one of her colleagues: proprietors of 'hygienic' shops were also repeatedly convicted of having procured abortion. Thus a man recommended his girlfriend to seek advice at one of those addresses from the newspaper. The one she chose said: 'Dr. Richters' drops and pills will definitely work. Absolutely harmless.'<sup>28</sup> Because of their visibility, the people running these hygienic shops were among the first to fall victim to the new law. 'Dr. M. Stopes' hygienic Articles and Patent Medicines. Consultations for ladies 1-3 p.m. and 7-9 p.m.', ran the advertisement of one merchant, who became one of the vice squad's regular targets. Thus Marie Stopes's name also drew customers outside Britain, whether she liked it or not. A couple who published a similar advertisement ('Dr. M. Stopes' Speciality, Hygienic Articles, Medicines, Ladies Syringes') explicitly told the police that they had not sunk to 'vile practices', although they did sell medicine for regulating menstruation, a common euphemism for abortion. As far as can be determined from the court verdicts, 'hygienic' shops also attracted women from outside The Hague.<sup>29</sup> Advertisements advising which tram to take to the shop, or telling the reader that the shop is located near a railway station, can be interpreted in a similar way.<sup>30</sup>

There was money to be made in the abortion business. But while abortionists' financial motives are revealed from time to time,

the perseverance of some shopkeepers cannot be seen solely in commercial terms. A case in point is a former electrician who in the 1910s advertised under the name of 'Annema'. He seems to have employed commercial, that is high profit producing, methods only later in his career. He started by selling bottles of pills for 5 guilders, and only when these did not help did he offer a treatment for 100 guilders. These potions never produced the desired effect, as can be seen from the statements of the women seeking abortion, as well as from a report of the local health committee of The Hague. This body had some of the 'specialités' analysed and found that they merely served to line the purses of their vendors.<sup>31</sup> Annema's earlier abortion prices had been around 20 guilders (although still a substantial sum of money for an average household, this was more or less the usual price for a non-commercial abortion). Bankruptcy as well as repeated prison sentences did not deter him from his trade. As he usually manipulated women's vaginas with his fingers and boasted of his expertise, procuring abortions probably also satisfied some of his other needs.<sup>32</sup> After his divorce in 1921 he changed his trade name to Van Dam, while his former wife kept the name Annema. She was equally persistent as an abortionist and prosecuted for it at least five times during the 1910s and 1920s. In contrast to her husband, she seems to have shown some concern for the women she aborted. 'Will you write to me?', she asked a woman upon leaving in 1916. And 'do you have the nerve for it?' in 1925.<sup>33</sup> Admittedly these are only fragments to which it is easy to attach too much importance, but it is the difference between the man's practice and the woman's that has been transmitted, rather than the similarity between the partners.

#### Medical abortionists

'In every middle-sized town of our fatherland', wrote Treub, 'there are one or more physicians and midwives who are known to induce abortion on no other grounds than a woman's wish.'<sup>34</sup> Doctors regarded it their inalienable right to perform abortions, whether on pure medical or social indications.<sup>35</sup> Although in theory they were liable to prosecution, in practice they were usually left alone. In Rotterdam no doctor, and in The Hague only three of them, had to face the court on this account. At first instance it would seem that doctors were usually acquitted (three out of four cases; one of the doctors was prosecuted twice), but two of those acquittals were quashed on appeal.<sup>36</sup>

The Dutch association of (qualified) midwives abhorred abortion. It considered that a midwife's task was to deliver children into the world; to prevent their birth was diametrically opposed to her mission. As in Britain, midwives were 'anxious to distance themselves from the issue of abortion'.<sup>37</sup> The image of the abortionist midwife was apparently strong enough to produce this reaction.<sup>38</sup> A 1911 inquiry of the Dutch Medical Association into midwifery revealed that qualified midwives hardly ever terminated pregnancies. Three years earlier, when Treub and Van Tussenbroek had reported a pathologist's findings that a good number of the abortionists he had come across were former, renegade midwives, the editor of the *Tijdschrift voor Praktische Verloskunde* (*Journal of Practical Midwifery*) expressed his relief by underlining the 'former'. They were no disgrace to the present profession.<sup>39</sup> Yet the Neo-Malthusian League (NMB) favoured midwives as trainees to become birth control consultants. And the general public also linked birth and abortion. 'Midwife' (in Dutch: *verloskundige* rather than *vroedvrouw*) became a label used by abortionists in advertisements to convey the impression of expertise and asepsis. 'Expert' (Dutch: *deskundige*), the title introduced by the NMB for its trainees, became synonymous with 'abortionist'.<sup>40</sup> 'Real midwives', it was remarked, 'don't advertise their services in the newspapers, and a midwife who lives in Amsterdam wouldn't really expect to perform deliveries out in Rotterdam'.<sup>41</sup>

The abortion court cases of The Hague feature only one midwife. Born in 1858 near the German border, she was found roaming the countryside at the age of forty, performing abortions by applying a bougie. At that time she lived in Amsterdam.<sup>42</sup> In 1912 she advertised in the newspapers as Mrs Bergman (a pseudonym), giving consultations at an address in The Hague. She also distributed leaflets, headed 'Neo-Malthusianism' and dealing with the limitation of offspring. The depositions by witnesses allow some insight into the secret nature of her performance. A woman had visited her, and the pregnancy she feared was confirmed by an investigation. 'If you don't want another child, you can get rid of it here', Bergman told her. The woman decided in favour of an abortion (without telling her husband). 'You don't have to be nervous, I have already helped so many people and I have never failed. It always went well.' After the midwife had completed the operation by sprinkling some blue powder into a tube which she had placed into the woman's vagina, she said: 'If you are stopped by

someone from the police in the street, you should tell him that your cap has been adjusted.' Another client was told that there would be no pain. 'If you are going to consult a doctor, he won't see that I've helped you.' Bergman appeared to be well informed about the new law but did not manage to escape its clutches, being convicted in 1912 for two years, in 1916 for one year and in 1925 for six months. While her terms in prison went down (which was rather exceptional, as recidivism usually resulted in more severe sentences), her price went up. In 1912 she charged only 40 guilders, later 100. The extra care for the patient seems to have disappeared in the meantime. In 1925 a witness declared that she had suffered much pain (Bergman had administered curettage), fallen seriously ill soon afterwards and had been admitted to hospital because of it.

The rest of the (para)medical personnel in The Hague prosecuted for abortion consisted of one nurse (the title was not legally protected at the time). She had provided an office clerk with a reddish rubber hose and a four-day stay at her apartment, for which she charged 80 to 100 guilders – the employer paid for it. The nurse was suspected of this one treatment only, and she came off with a suspended sentence.<sup>43</sup> It is impossible to draw general conclusions from these two single cases (although in other Dutch cities a few more abortion-practising midwives and nurses could be found). But the last case can nevertheless be considered as a specific type of supply available on the abortion market, with or without nurses.<sup>44</sup> The midwife merely seems to have ranked as one of the professional 'experts'.

#### Fortune-tellers

When the label 'expert' had become too transparent for public use, others had to be found. According to a midwife in 1919, it was now the fortune-tellers who 'under the veil of fortune-telling, advise their clients thus' (meaning abortion).<sup>45</sup> She was not the only contemporary to associate fortune-telling with abortion, and indeed enough examples for a convincing argument can be cited of fortune-tellers who performed or at least suggested abortion. But if the two groups are compared as a whole for one city it turns out that, of the roughly one hundred abortionists and one hundred fortune-tellers in The Hague in the first three decades of the twentieth century, there is a potential overlap of only ten. Nevertheless it is worth considering the abortion-providing fortune-tellers here because their practices were

especially noticeable. Like the 'experts' and the hygienic shopkeepers, fortune-tellers were closely watched by the vice squads. And without a trade union fortune-tellers could not, of course, present the counter-image official midwives did. A last reason to consider fortune-tellers is that reports of conversations between them and a policeman also afford another rare glimpse into everyday abortion language.

On one occasion the policeman with a remit to check fortune-tellers was brought into what he considered a rather filthy bed-sit. He sat down at a table and the woman asked him to draw seven cards (the number for an unmarried person). She told him that he had worries, that he was a businessman, that he would be lucky in his business but also get himself into much trouble. He took women into his life and they would play an important part in it. They either wanted or were forced to marry him. She also saw a death very clearly. He would have to face doctors and policemen. Then the fortune-teller asked specific questions: 'Did the woman he had made pregnant want to marry him? Did she want to get rid of it? Had she already done something about it?'<sup>46</sup> This same fortune-teller later advised a mother and a daughter who came to visit her about the pregnancy of the latter (which was visible in the cards as well) that she should bathe in luke-warm water in which soda and mustard were dissolved. As this did not help, the girl had to return time and time again; altogether she paid 90 guilders and still her baby was born.<sup>47</sup> The fortune-teller, who had been living above the family before and was thus familiar with their situation, apparently just wanted to exploit them. She was known as an 'expert' in the neighbourhood.

Between fortune-tellers and women seeking abortion, the language could be rather direct. As one woman declared: 'My menstruation was late and I suspected myself to be pregnant, so I had this fortune-teller laying out the cards for me and she confirmed it.'<sup>48</sup> It was not always necessary to consult the cards. Men seem to have been somewhat more cautious, but fortune-tellers were skilled enough to draw things out. A colleague and acquaintance of the first fortune-teller also brought her conversation with the (disguised) member of the vice squad to the subject of girls. From the man's face she deduced that he was weighed down by worries. He agreed whole-heartedly. Next she asked him whether he had perhaps 'shot' too far. He nodded confirmingly. Again studying the cards, she concluded that there was 'young' life in his family; he would not have been unaware of it. Thereupon he told her that he was at his wits'

end and was looking for a way out. She consulted the cards anew, saying he would have to let it 'melt'. He answered: 'If that would be possible.' 'That is very well possible', she replied.<sup>49</sup>

### The gender divide

'When husbands or lovers took the initiative to terminate a pregnancy they usually picked a male abortionist', Cornelia Usborne concluded from her German files.<sup>50</sup> This was very much the case in The Hague as well, with only one slight modification as the verdicts do not disclose much about who took the initiative (it presumably came from the women). The one incident of a lover insisting on his girlfriend having an abortion (typically?) involves Germans.<sup>51</sup> There is no further sign of lovers enforcing abortions. Women's own agency is more apparent; in a few cases it is disclosed that women themselves demanded abortion repeatedly and were even crying when asking for the abortionist's help.<sup>52</sup>

The more visible class of abortionists was of course consulted by both men and women, but male abortionists also acquired many customers through male networks. There is not only the almost classic image of the employer who went in search of a doctor after he had made his maidservant pregnant (he first suggested that the maid should consult her mother),<sup>53</sup> but also the husband visiting a druggist to buy medicines.<sup>54</sup> On the whole, however, it was mainly lovers who felt responsible and found other men to perform the operation. They made the appointment, paid 50 or 100 or even 200 guilders for it and had to wait outside when the abortionist demanded this in order to avoid extra witnesses.<sup>55</sup> Occasionally a lover treated his girlfriend himself, as in the case when a young woman repeatedly complained that her lover had not found an abortionist and finally got from him a potion consisting of water and essence of vinegar.<sup>56</sup>

Access to a woman abortionist, on the other hand, was often gained through other women. A particular woman living at the Hoefkade, for instance, was known to be experienced as well as cheap. She used Lysol or Sunlight soap and asked only 10 guilders,<sup>57</sup> which was the usual price. When women wanted an abortionist, they first asked around through their networks for advice. As they said in court: 'I heard that she was an abortionist'; 'A woman friend of mine arranged an abortionist and told me to visit a certain address'; 'She came to my house through the agency of another woman'.<sup>58</sup> Another

was given by an unknown woman a note which contained a telephone number. A mother arranged a 'lady' for her daughter. Women collaborated to help friends, the one providing room and instruments, the other performing the act.<sup>59</sup> One female abortionist confessed to having learned from a woman who had been living with her how to interrupt the pregnancies of 'women who wanted it'. She operated on women at their home or else outside in the dunes and actively solicited customers, for example noticing that pregnant women visited a fortune-teller, and waiting for them outside on the street and proposing to help to get rid of the foetus.<sup>60</sup>

Some women abortionists hired touts who would earn a proportion of their fee for every woman sent. Or they made a similar deal with a fortune-teller. 'The women who visited me carried a note with a sign and a number from which I could understand that they came for an abortion and how much they would pay', one of them explained to the judges.<sup>61</sup> 'She told me she was short of money', related another woman about the one who organised her practice. 'She asked me if we could take up our former business of pricking again. She would provide the room and make sure that only the patients would notice anything about it' [previously they had both served a few months in prison for the same crime]. 'She already had some customers for me.' In this instance performing abortions was deemed less serious than organising them; in prison terms the difference was six months against eighteen months, also because the organiser had formerly been involved in sexual abuse and had been receiving stolen goods.<sup>62</sup> Women's choice of abortionists could also have been restricted by the wish to avoid involvement with practitioners suspected of petty crime. In The Hague these suspicions would have arisen simply because of the ill-fame of certain neighbourhoods.

### Marriage

The bulk of the court material, however, consists of cases about which it is merely noted that so-and-so performed an abortion on certain (usually married) women in such-and-such a manner. Even the amount of money paid is not always specified. It is difficult to avoid the impression that the cases that carry more information are exceptional and that the best-known abortionists who were regularly prosecuted stand out amongst the many practitioners who operated

on a less commercial basis. In other words, by focusing on hygienic shops, experts and even fortune-tellers it appears that the ordinary is slipping through, is escaping attention. Historians must not only break through the veil of obscurantist and euphemistic abortion language, they must also take into account what is left unspoken because it was so obvious that it did not need to be entrusted to records. Of course, this is an invitation for speculation.

The fortune-teller I quoted at the beginning of this chapter appears to have been well informed about the abortion market, although it is not certain how many women would have followed her advice about self-help as these did not end up in the criminal records. The method she proposed may have been the most safe and effective (as long as one operated with clean instruments and made sure that no air entered the bloodstream), but soap was not the most popular abortifacient used in The Hague (unlike Rotterdam from whence she came). It was catheters (small rubber hoses) which were most frequently applied in The Hague.

Yet it would be unwise to write off the hygienic shopkeepers and experts as uncharacteristic. Precisely because they showed the public face of abortion, they imply the hidden, female abortion culture by contrast. If they caught the police's attention, they also caught that of customers who were not informed about the inner abortion market: women from out of town and men. One of the main features of the public abortion supply is its commercialism. Choosing a male abortionist through male contacts, or even a well-known female expert, meant that the customer had to dig deep into his or her purse. Lovers seem to have paid most. An unwritten rule on the abortion market appears to have been that the responsibility of boyfriends and lovers for pre- or extramarital pregnancies entailed a large sum of money, in contrast to the small sum women usually paid. It was expected on both sides as proper restitution of the woman's honour, at least as long as marriage was not considered.

Husbands, on the other hand, were almost entirely absent from the abortion market. Within marriage the decision to abort was the woman's province. Her plight was reflected in the price; no one thought of extorting money from her. Early twentieth-century (Dutch urban) abortion, it turns out, has to be understood within the prevailing norms of marriage.<sup>63</sup> Outside marriage abortion was shameful; inside marriage it was almost normal. And if marriage was the stable and all-encompassing point of reference in women's lives,



abortion (and by implication sexuality) was not only a means to discuss social and economic change; for women it was also a way to react to it.

### Notes

- 1 Municipal Archive (henceforth GA) Den Haag, archief gemeentepolitie, 2558, nr 27.
- 2 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Abortion Movement and the AMA, 1850-1880', in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, A. A. Knopf, 1985), pp. 217-44.
- 3 Barbara Brookes, 'Women and Reproduction, 1860-1939', in Jane Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1986), pp. 148-71, p. 156.
- 4 Suzanne Poirier, 'Women's Reproductive Health', in Rima D. Apple (ed.), *Women, Health, and Medicine in America: A Historical Handbook* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1992), pp. 217-45, p. 237.
- 5 Lodewijk Brunt, 'Engeltjesmaaksters', *Vrij Nederland* (22 December 1979), p. 27.
- 6 Hector Treub, 'Abortus provocatus en strafwet', *Tijdschrift voor Strafrecht*, 9 (1896), pp. 1-24, esp. pp. 16, 23.
- 7 J. Valkhoff, 'De omvang van de kriminele vruchtafdrijving in Nederland', *Mensch en Maatschappij*, 8 (1932), pp. 38-57, esp. p. 47.
- 8 Quotations are taken from Angus McLaren, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-century England* (New York, Croom Helm, 1978), p. 231.
- 9 Patricia Knight, 'Women and Abortion in Victorian and Edwardian England', *History Workshop*, 4 (1977), pp. 57-68, p. 67.
- 10 Hector Treub and Catharine van Tussenbroek, 'Over den crimineelen abortus in Nederland', *Nederlandsch Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde*, 52, IB (1908), pp. 1149-61.
- 11 Hector Treub, 'Eenige medisch-statistische cijfers over abortus criminalis', *Weekblad van het Recht*, 9311 (1912).
- 12 Valkhoff, 'De omvang', p. 41.
- 13 P. A. de Wilde, 'Toeneming der bevolking en stijging van den levensduur', *Mensch en Maatschappij*, 2 (1926), pp. 79-83, esp. p. 81.
- 14 P. van Heynsbergen and G. C. van Balen Blanken, *Abortus criminalis* (Amsterdam, Holland, 1925), pp. 56-62.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 48-50.
- 16 J. Valkhoff, 'De vervolging en de bestraffing van den crimineelen abortus in Nederland', *Tijdschrift voor Strafrecht*, 41 (1931), pp. 136-58, esp. p. 139.
- 17 Barbara Brookes, *Abortion in England 1900-1967* (London/New York/Sydney, Croom Helm, 1988), p. 29.
- 18 Valkhoff, 'De omvang', p. 44.
- 19 Cornelis Nicolaas Peijster, *De onbekende misdaad* (The Hague, Nijhoff, 1957), p. 42.
- 20 GA Den Haag, archief gemeentepolitie, 2532, dd. 18 IV 1923.
- 21 GA Den Haag, archief gemeentepolitie, 2531, nr 18, dd. 25 I 1925.

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- 22 Valkhoff, 'De vervolging'; Archive of the province of south Holland (RAZH), district court, arr. Den Haag 462, nr 712.
- 23 Figures are based on the indexes of the court records. RAZH, arr. Den Haag, nrs 49-67; arr. Rotterdam, nrs 732-9.
- 24 For a further discussion of the distribution and the different percentages of male and female abortionists, see Willem de Blécourt, *Het Amazonenleger: Irreguliere genezeressen in Nederland, ca. 1850-1930* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 1999), chapter 8.
- 25 *Nosokómos*, 9 (1909), p. 493, from the *Haagsche Courant* (this advertisement did not turn up in my own sample).
- 26 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 619, nr 751.
- 27 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 595, nr 230.
- 28 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 620, nr 1090; 619, nr 753.
- 29 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 492, nr 712; 507, nr 47.
- 30 See e.g. *Haagsche Courant*, 2 July 1919, 2 September 1925.
- 31 'Gevaarlijke en bedriegelijke handel met geneesmiddelen', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Hygiëne*, 24 (1922), pp. 329-34.
- 32 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 467, nr 40; 507, nr 47; 589, nr 274; 613, nr 853.
- 33 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 504, nr 861; 598, nr 976.
- 34 Treub, 'Abortus provocatus en strafwet', p. 23.
- 35 Cf. Lodewijk Brunt, 'Het schandelijk misdrijf: Artsen in de strijd tegen abortus omstreeks 1900', *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*, 6 (1979), pp. 210-26.
- 36 *Weekblad van het Recht*, 11108 (9 November 1923).
- 37 Nicky Leap and Billy Hunter, *The Midwife's Tale. An Oral History from Handywoman to Professional Midwife* (London, Scarlet Press, 1993), p. 90.
- 38 Cf. Jean Donnison, *Midwives and Medical Men. A History of Interprofessional Rivalries and Women's Right* (London, Heinemann Educational, 1977), pp. 128, 130, 147 on the role of the abortion image in the discussion preceding the British Midwife Act. See also Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 1997), pp. 90-1.
- 39 *Tijdschrift voor Praktische Verloskunde*, 12 (1908), p. 29.
- 40 *Maandblad tegen de Kwakzalverij*, 20, 3 and 20, 4 (March and April 1900).
- 41 *Tijdschrift voor Praktische Verloskunde*, 23 (1919), p. 144.
- 42 *Weekblad van het Recht*, 7038, 7064, 7113.
- 43 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 506, nr 1153.
- 44 Cf. RAZH, arr. Den Haag 481, nr 600; 549, nr 2141.
- 45 *Tijdschrift voor Praktische Verloskunde*, 22 (1919), p. 329.
- 46 GA Den Haag, archief gemeentepolitie, 2558, nr 40.
- 47 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 599, nr 1244.
- 48 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 613, nr 808.
- 49 GA Den Haag, archief gemeentepolitie, 2558, nr 14. See also Piet Bakker, *Misdadige praktijken: Een onderzoek in de duistere wereld der aborteuses* (Rotterdam, n. p., 1931), p. 5.
- 50 Cornelia Osborne, 'Wise Women, Wise Men and Abortion in the Weimar Republic: Gender, Class and Medicine', in Lynn Abrahams and Elizabeth

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Harvey (eds), *Gender Relations in German History: Power, Agency and Experience from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (London, London University Press, 1996), pp. 143-76, p. 152.

- 51 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 612, nr 613.
- 52 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 490, nr 345; 496, nr 982; 564, nr 270.
- 53 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 556, nr 532.
- 54 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 595, nr 72.
- 55 E.g.: RAZH, arr. Den Haag 486, nr 1108; 555, nr 490; 556, nr 535; 614, nr 1075.
- 56 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 619, nr 688; cf. 614, nr 1241.
- 57 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 606, nr 880; 616, nr 1880.
- 58 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 490, nr 361; 597, nr 688; 619, nr 754.
- 59 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 618, nr 512; 619, nr 751; 509, nr 400; 572, nr 1409.
- 60 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 481, nr 555.
- 61 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 506, nr 1131; cf. 561, nr 1424; 574, nr 189.
- 62 RAZH, arr. Den Haag 613, nrs 895, 896; cf. 592, nrs 909, 910.
- 63 Cf. Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime*, pp. 32-3.