6

Travel Testimonies: Migrant Women's Mobilities in London Consistory Records, c. 1560–1600

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In 1577, Lionne Foullon and her daughter were summoned to account for themselves at the French Church on London's Threadneedle Street. The two women had recently traveled to Bruges, a journey which the consistory — the church's governing body — believed to have been undertaken in the company of "scandalous and debauched people." Under questioning, Foullon's daughter told the consistory that she and her mother had gone to Bruges "to make a better living," but that in the end the pair had been forced to return to London. The consistory admonished both of them, but especially Lionne Foullon — as a mother, she was particularly to blame for her bad behavior and for the bad company she had kept during the journey.[1]

1 Anne M. Oakley, ed., *Actes du consistoire de l'église française de Threadneedle Street, Londres,* vol. 2: *1571–1577* (Huguenot Society of London, 1969), 199. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

Lionne Foullon never wrote down the story of her travels: if she wrote letters or kept a journal describing where she went and what she saw, they have not survived. That she and her daughter undertook the journey to Bruges and back is only known from her answers to the questions of an all-male consistory. But her experience of traveling between England and the European continent was not an unusual one among the women of London's sixteenth- and seventeenth-century migrant communities. The consistory of the Dutch Church at Austin Friars would also hear the story of Mayken de Grave, who had traveled from London to the continent and back again and was suspected of having "fallen into popishness" while abroad.[2] They would show an interest in the woman who had traveled to London from the Low Countries with Jan Oosterlinck, and who he claimed was his wife.[3] And they would urge Janneken Schuttens to take a journey from London to Antwerp in order to "seek her right" in a case before the magistrate there.[4]

The women who migrated to England in the latter half of the sixteenth century were, by definition, travelers — but their experiences of mobility were not preserved in the same way that men's travel narratives in the period commonly were.[5] This essay argues that the consistory records of London's "stranger

2 A.J. Jelsma and O. Boersma, eds., *Acta van het consistorie van de Nederlandse gemeente te Londen 1569–1585* (Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 1993), 225.

3 Ibid., 391.

4 Ibid., 595.

5 On women as migrants and travelers, see Lotte van de Pol and Erika Kuijpers, "Poor Women's Migration to the City: The Attraction of Amsterdam Health Care and Social Assistance in Early Modern Times," *Journal of Urban History* 32, no. 1 (2005): 44–60; Eva Johanna Holmberg, "Introduction: Renaissance and Early Modern Travel — Practice and Experience, 1500–1700," *Renaissance Studies* 33, no. 4 (2019): 516; Patricia Akhimie, "Gender and Travel Discourse: Richard Lassels's 'The Voyage of Lady Catherine Whetenall from Brussells into Italy' (1650)," in *Travel and Travail: Early Modern Women, English Drama, and the Wider World,* ed. Patricia Akhimie and Bernadette Andrea (University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 124–26; and Amrita Sen, "Traveling Companions: Women, Trade, and the Early East India Company," *Genre* 48, no. 2 (2015): 193–214.

churches," which played host to the city's growing foreign Protestant communities from the latter half of the sixteenth century onwards, can be used to reconstruct some aspects of these migrant women's experiences of mobility: what they did, what they felt, what they knew.[6] The travel testimonies found in consistory records are often fragmented and incomplete: More often than not, the stranger church consistories whose questioning shaped them were not primarily interested in mobility itself, but sought to investigate rumors, illicit sex, or marital disharmony within their communities and beyond the seas.[7] The words spoken before the consistories are not transparent: different speakers offered very different versions of events, tensions within the community bubbled over, emotions ran high, and the record that survives is one kept by male scribes serving all-male consistories.[8] But the women who were summoned to account for themselves before the elders of London's French, Dutch, and Italian churches — and those who presented themselves in order to state their own cases — frequently told (or had told about them) stories of migration and mobility. Women's voices are rare in the printed travel literature and manuscript accounts of travel which form the basis for many histories of early modern mobility, but these consistory records can shed light not only on the experience of travel for early modern migrant women, but also

6 There is no space here to summarize the rich historiography of London's stranger churches and migration to London in the sixteenth century. Key scholarship includes Owe Boersma, "Vluchtig voorbeeld: De Nederlandse, Franse en Italiaanse vluchtelingenkerken in Londen, 1568–1585" (PhD diss., Theologische Universiteit Kampen, 1994), and Andrew Pettegree, *Foreign Protestant Communities in Sixteenth-Century London* (Clarendon Press, 1986).

7 On social discipline in the consistories, see Pettegree, *Foreign Protestant Communities,* 182–214. On the archives of the "stranger churches," see Andrew Spicer, "Migration, assimilation et survie: Les archives des consistoires du Refuge anglais," *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 153 (2007): 671–93.

8 For an instructive investigation of the relationship between consistory business and the contents of consistory records, see Judith Pollmann, "Off the Record: Problems in the Quantification of Calvinist Church Discipline," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 33, no. 2 (2002): 423–38.

the ways in which networks, reputations, and personal histories could cross borders as they built a new life far from home.[9]

For men or women, journeys back and forth to the continent were physically taxing and fraught with danger, as the Dutch Church consistory recognized when it warned of the "great peril on the way" to the Netherlands.[10] Writing to his wife from Norwich in 1567, Pauwels de Coene told her to sell what she could and come to England. He sent her a barrel of herring with which to finance the journey and urged her to travel as soon as she could, "For the journey, as we understand is everyday becoming more dangerous, and will become [still] more dangerous because the devil will become more furious."[11] Some women undertook journeys to and from England while pregnant. Writing following his excommunication from the London Dutch Church and his "pilgrimage" to Emden, Adriaen van Haemstede wrote how his wife had had triplets — two boys and a girl, of whom the youngest boy had died.[12] In 1579, Tanneken van den Hove appeared before the consistory of London's Dutch Church, having recently come from overseas and seeking to have her child baptized in the church.[13] For other women, the journey must have been a substantial physical challenge: the mother of

9 Mary C. Fuller, "Afterword: Looking for the Women in Early Modern Travel Writing," in *Travel and Travail: Early Modern Women, English Drama, and the Wider World,* ed. Patricia Akhimie and Bernadette Andrea (University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 331.

10 Jelsma and Boersma, *Acta,* 716.

11 Pauwels de Coene to his wife in Ieper, Norwich, August 21, 1567. Alastair Duke, ed., "Private Correspondence Between Flemish Strangers in England and Their Families and Contacts in Flanders, 1566–1573," *Dutch Revolt,* https://dutchrevolt.library.universiteitleiden.nl/english/sources/english_sources_janssen-correspondence/. See also Alastair Duke, "Eavesdropping on the Correspondence between the Strangers, Chiefly in Norwich, and their Families in the Low Countries, 1567–70," *Dutch Crossing* 38, no. 2 (2014): 116–31.

12 J.H. Hessels, ed., *Ecclesiae Londino-Batavae Archivum. Tomus Secundus. Epistulae et Tractatus cum Reformationis tum Ecclesiae Londino-Batavae Historiam Illustrantes (1544–1622),* vol. 2, part 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1889), 146.

13 Jelsma and Boersma, *Acta*, 538.

Jacobus Bucerus arrived in Sandwich in 1562, having renounced Catholicism and traveled to join her son and the stranger Protestant community in that town at the age of 72.[14]

Traveling alone was deemed to be risky for women. In 1561, the consistory of the London French Church debated at length how the wife of their minister, Nicolas des Gallars, should travel to England. The minister asked the consistory's advice on the best route, wondering whether it was best for her to travel through France or Germany. After some discussion, it was settled that the deacon Nicolas Binet was to be sent to collect her, since he was already planning to travel and see his parents.[15] Later, the consistory would deal with a mother's desire to go to Geneva in order to fetch her children: at her husband's suggestion, she was to be accompanied by a young man. The consistory demurred, unwilling to allow her to take such a long voyage with a lone man who was not her husband.[16] Some traveled with other family members, with children, or with friends, but even in a group, female travelers could find themselves and their enterprise treated with suspicion, as in the case of Lionne Foullon and her daughter with whom this essay began. The consistory's concerns about solo female travel were not only to do with physical danger, but also perceived threats to chastity and reputation. The suspicion and concern with which the all-male consistories viewed women's travel did not mean that they were implacably opposed to it. In 1596, a meeting of the Colloquy of England's French churches urged the wife of Jean Baudin to return to Holland in order "to prove the incestuous adultery of her husband before the magistrate of the place where he is."[17] In spite of its

14 Hessels, *Epistulae et Tractatus,* 195.

15 Elsie Johnston, ed., *Actes du consistoire de l'église française de Threadneedle Street, Londres,* vol. 1: *1560–1565* (Publications of the Huguenot Society, 1937), 26.

16 Ibid., 55.

17 Adrian Charles Chamier, ed., *Les actes des colloques des églises françaises et des synodes des églises étrangères refugiées en Angleterre 1581–1654* (Huguenot Society, 1890), 36.

dangers, women's mobility between London and the continent was a feature of the stranger churches' community life.[18]

Traveling in company was not necessarily safer for women. One journey where we have a little more information began in Arras in 1571 and took ten days to travel to England. The travelers were a group made up of Jeanne, the wife of Jean du Bois; Robert Bloquet and his wife Cateline Midy; a young man named Pierre, a baggage-carrier; and the group's leader, Jean du Quief. They left Arras on St. Christopher's day, July 25, and headed for the coast, spending the night in Hesdin before reaching Boulogne-sur-Mer, where they stayed for two nights before setting sail for England.[19] The reason we have more detail about this voyage is because of a scandal that emerged some months after the party had arrived in London. In December of that year, the consistory of the French Church first interrogated Jean du Quief about whether he had solicited Jeanne du Bois to engage in adulterous sex or slept with her. Du Quief attempted to stonewall the consistory, but there were more questions to come: Had he told her that she would pay nothing for her voyage if she agreed to sleep with him? Under pressure, he admitted that something had happened between the pair at Sandwich, but denied having initiated matters, claiming that she had told him to come and sleep on her bed.[20]

Interrogated the next day, Jeanne du Bois offered a rebuttal of du Quief's accusations. She told the consistory "that Jean du Quief had importuned her several times both beyond the sea and in England," describing how at Sandwich he had wheedled

18 Silke Muylaert argues convincingly that the term "exile" in this period "can divert us from the high mobility and socioeconomic opportunities underlying religious migration." Silke Muylaert, *Shaping the Stranger Churches: Migrants in England and the Troubles in the Netherlands, 1547–1585* (Brill, 2021), 17.

19 Oakley, *Actes,* 46. The du Quief case is considered by Susan Broomhall, "Authority in the French Church in Later Sixteenth-Century London," in *Authority, Gender and Emotions in Late Medieval and Early Modern England,* ed. Susan Broomhall (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 137–40.

20 Oakley, *Actes,* 41–42.

his way into her bed, promising not to do anything, but — when she eventually agreed — changing his manner and telling her that she would have to tell people she was his wife, and that if she said anything she would be thrown in prison.[21] When du Quief denied his actions, Jeanne du Bois fervently affirmed her words, saying "everything I've said is true, on the damnation of my soul."[22] Their companions in the voyage were called to give testimonies, which attest to the cramped, emotionally intense, and potentially dangerous experience of cross-Channel travel. On the first night of their journey, Cateline Midy recalled how du Quief hadn't dared to sleep "since someone had told the sergeant of the place that they were going to England."[23] The company often slept in close quarters, where Robert Bloquet could hear "the bed creaking loudly." Bloquet attested to having risen from bed with his dagger in his hand, "not wanting to permit such villainy in his company," before being talked down by his wife.[24] The witnesses attempted to speculate about Jeanne's motives and culpability and challenged both her narrative and du Quief's, but what emerges most clearly from the consistory's investigations into the case is that travel, for a woman like Jeanne du Bois, carried risks of pursuit by the authorities, physical and sexual violence or assault, and damage to reputation.

While the fear of physical assault colors some men's accounts of travel in this period, for women, the threat of sexual violence could loom large. The case of the fifteen- or sixteen-year-old Janneken Maldron was brought to the consistory of the Dutch Church in 1585.[25] Jan de Backer brought a written statement by Maldron which alleged that on the road between Oudenaarde and Tournai, Geeraert Truyen had "pushed his manhood into

21 Ibid., 43–44.
22 Ibid., 44.
23 Ibid., 46.
24 Ibid., 45.
25 Jelsma and Boersma, *Acta,* 756–57. On sexual violence and rape in early modern English sources, see Garthine Walker, "Rereading Rape and Sexual Violence in Early Modern England," *Gender & History* 10, no. 1 (1998): 1–25.

her hand and sought to have intercourse with her."[26] In the Green Lion in Tournai, Truyen had come naked to Maldron's bed while she slept and lain at her feet, pulling at her clothes and seeking the same. When she refused, Maldron said that Truyen had asked "why you wouldn't let me, you let the soldiers do it," a remark which, while not expanded upon in the hearing of the consistory, suggests the risks of sexual violence which came with the surveillance and policing of migrant routes in wartime.[27] On the road between Dover and Canterbury, Maldron had told the wife of Jan de Backer (with whom she would lodge in London) everything that had happened.[28] Janneken Maldron was not the only woman to report behavior of this kind on the road: Susanne, the widow of Phillips Janssen, was summoned before the Dutch consistory for her "immodest going overseas with Hans Walckneel," and because "people say that she has committed dishonorable acts with him."[29] Susanne countered by arguing that she had done nothing wrong, neither on the road nor in Antwerp, but recounted that Walckneel had come to her bed while drunk in her cousin's house, but that she had called out to her cousin and he had called the watch.[30] The consistories' concern with illicit sex meant that their records asked questions which other records of early modern travel did not, and may have ensured the survival of more information about sexual activity, sexual violence, and gendered experiences of travel than the more canonical accounts of elite male travelers.

Discussing one member who had spent time overseas, the Dutch consistory asked for witnesses to his good behavior, musing that while abroad he had been "out of our and the whole community's sight."[31] Susan Broomhall writes that overseas travel by members of the French Church "often separated husbands and wives, and youths from supervizing elders […] and

26 Jelsma and Boersma, *Acta,* 756.
27 Ibid. For Maldron's further testimony, see ibid., 770.
28 Ibid., 757.
29 Ibid., 643.
30 Ibid., 643–44.
31 Ibid., 692.

left individuals freer (and more at risk) to apply their own moral codes."[32] Both consistory and community were intensely aware that when individuals traveled, so too did rumors and reputations, in spite of the efforts made by some migrants to leave their past lives behind them. In 1571, the Dutch consistory heard how Ebe, the widow of Rems Juyt, had promised to bring a document attesting to the life she had led while abroad. On reading the document, the consistory murmured about the "public shame" that attached to her by reason of some wicked deeds.[33] The power of a story that could follow a woman from beyond the seas is also seen in the case of Catherine de le Deulle, who first came to the attention of the French consistory in September of 1571 when the man to whom she was betrothed asked to be released from his promise of marriage, as he had learned that his fiancée had killed a man in Lille some years before. The consistory called a number of witnesses in order to investigate this shocking accusation.[34] But those who knew the story put a different spin on it, explaining that le Deulle had been the victim of aggression, and that her blow against her assailant had not caused instant death — in fact, some said that her assailant (a man, they said, of bad character) had been seen going around the town before he died some weeks later.[35] His family had not pursued le Deulle; in fact, when she was questioned by the consistory, she admitted having injured the man as described by the witnesses. She had been five years at Lille without being asked about the case, she said, and it was only since she had arrived in London that she had heard it spoken of.[36] The consistory's investigations offer some sense of the mobility of these rumors in London. Jan le Brun was admonished for having spread the story around the city, while Martin de Buisson told Jeanne le Cat that le Deulle was a murderer.[37] The next spring — after le

32 Broomhall, "Authority in the French Church," 137.
33 Jelsma and Boersma, *Acta,* 176.
34 Oakley, *Actes,* 16. See also Boersma, "Vluchtig voorbeeld," 151.
35 Oakley, *Actes,* 16–18, 56.
36 Ibid., 18.
37 Ibid., 33, 64.

Deulle's fiancé had sought to marry another woman in secret before himself dying of the plague — de Buisson would be admonished by the consistory for, among other offences, spreading rumors about the case "in houses and in the streets."[38] But by that time, le Deulle would be gone, having left London and headed for the Low Countries — whether still pursued by this mobile story, these sources do not show.[39]

The dislocation of migration could break relationships or offer an opportunity to start anew. For some women, this meant forging new relationships and seeking to marry, even though they might have a husband still living abroad.[40] The consistory concerned itself closely with investigating women's claims of the deaths of their previous partners.[41] Sara Ravets found herself in trouble for having been secretly married in an English church to a man "of reckless life" when it was not even clear that her first husband was dead.[42] A male member of the congregation was accused of living in "whoredom" with Eyken van Erckendale when, the consistory thundered, "a strong suspicion and rumor circulated that [her husband] was still alive."[43] Judith Janssens brought a man and a woman from 's-Hertogenbosch to attest to her husband's being eight years dead: the next year, she would remarry in London.[44] Cathelene Verhamme made her case for being allowed to remarry with the aid of a document signed by a notary in Middelburg stating that her first husband was dead.[45] In cases where reputation was at stake, words "out of the mouth

38 Ibid., 76–77.

39 Ibid., 76. Susan Broomhall considers the mobility of information in the French Church in "Authority in the French Church," 137.

40 On strangers' letters and separations among spouses and families in the migration context, see Duke, "Eavesdropping on the Correspondence between the Strangers," 118.

41 Jesse Spohnholz, "Instability and Insecurity: Dutch Women Refugees in Germany and England, 1550–1600," in *Exile and Religious Identity, 1500–1800,* ed. Jesse Spohnholz and Gary K. Waite (Routledge, 2015), 111–25.

42 Jelsma and Boersma, *Acta,* 135.

43 Ibid., 62–63, 72–73.

44 Ibid., 517.

45 Ibid., 497.

of a woman who had come from overseas" could be central to the consistory's deliberations. When these female migrants traveled, so too did knowledge — or speculation — about their pasts.[46]

For other women, time and distance meant that bonds had been broken, and some claimed not to know about the partners they had left behind. Janneken Cocq's husband had been absent for ten years and she purported not to know whether he was dead or alive. Her life had continued in his absence: she had become pregnant by Denys Denisschen but, the consistory was told, she had lost the child.[47] In August of 1581, Janneken Kramers was admonished for her dealings with her husband, who remained overseas. The Dutch consistory noted that "with many words" she had explained how she had tracked down her husband but that he had deceived her — it seems from her testimony that he was shacked up with a woman described in the consistory record (possibly by Kramers) as "the whore" — so she had returned to London. There, she found herself at odds with the consistory, who sought to urge her to return to her husband. She demurred, saying that she was not minded to follow their advice, at least before the winter. She declared her willingness to reunite with her husband, if he would leave the woman with whom he was involved, but she would not travel before the next summer.[48]

While consistory records can give some sense of the actions of some migrant women in early modern London, it is much more difficult to get a sense of their inner lives, and the impact that their experiences of migration had on them. Some moments of intense psychological distress stand out in the consistory records: a laconic mention in the records of the French church of a woman named Denette or Druette Barde, who "thought to throw herself in the river twice or three times," and was sum-

46 Ibid., 398.
47 Ibid., 399.
48 Ibid., 602–3.

moned to be admonished by the consistory.[49] Another member of the French congregation had not left her house for several years, "due to some trouble she has in her mind," and had not been seen at the church's services, even though she had shown herself "by her piety and charity to be a Christian woman."[50]

In September of 1567, Clement Baet wrote to his wife to tell her of the opportunities for them in Norwich, where he had settled, and urged her to set out for England to join him. She was to bring clothes for herself and her daughter, "for people go about decently dressed," as well as some furniture. Once she was ready to make the journey, her husband told her to "bring all this to the Nieuwe Dam and go to Nieuwpoort, to the Halve Maan: the woman there will help you."[51] Clement Baet's letter gave no further information on the identity or activities of the woman who could be found at the sign of the Half Moon, likely an inn, but the question of what kind of help she could offer remains tantalizing. She may have been a source of information, advice, or practical help for the onward journey, a moneylender, or an early modern migration broker. But while the exact nature of the "migrant knowledge" possessed by the woman at the Halve Maan is impossible to access, the travel testimonies found amongst the disciplinary records of London's stranger churches — however fragmented and contested their accounts of women's mobilities — trace what migrant women knew from experience in early modern Europe.

49 Oakley, *Actes,* 57.

50 Ibid., 17.

51 Clement Baet to his wife, Norwich, September 5, 1567, in Duke, "Private Correspondence Between Flemish Strangers."

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