



New Amsterdam
HISTORY CENTER

New Amsterdam History Center's BOOK REVIEW

Susanah Shaw Romney. *New Netherland Connections: Intimate Networks and Atlantic Ties in Seventeenth-Century America*. Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2014. ISBN 978-1-4696-1425-0 (hardback); 978-1-4696-1426-7 (ebook). Pp. xviii + 318; illustrated. Price: \$45.00 cloth; \$44.99 ebook.

On the cover of Susanah Shaw Romney's *New Netherland Connections* is a color photo of Johannes Vermeer's well-known painting at the Frick Collection in New York, titled *Officer and Laughing Girl* (or, in Dutch, *De soldaat en het lachende meisje*, ca. 1657). At the outset of the book, the author discusses the implications of this scene, which exemplifies some of the personal relationships that she explores in this thoroughly-researched, interesting, and original study.

In the foreground, with his back to the viewer, a soldier is emphatically silhouetted through the artist's dramatic use of perspective. He and his purpose are dark to us in more ways than one. The face is turned only just enough to be slightly visible. His right arm is jauntily posed on his hip, where one notes the elaborately frilled white cuffs of his shirt. Over his right shoulder is a black military sash. On his head is a high-crowned, broad-brimmed beaver hat in a style that was then ultra-fashionable and very expensive. At that time it was not unusual for a man to wear a hat indoors, as shown in countless paintings and prints of the period. Through a complex process of manufacture, fur was carefully shaved from beaver pelts and made into felt that provided the material for the hat. In the early days, the substantial profits from trade with Indians for beaver pelts were a prime motive for the Dutch settlement of New Netherland.

Opposite the soldier, and in the spotlight, almost literally, as she sits before a window from which the sun is pouring in, is a young woman, wearing a white cloth cap that covers her hair so as to highlight her brightly smiling face. She is dressed in a gown with a golden bodice and sleeves with gold brocade stripes. She certainly does not look like a servant and she seems quite at home in the gracious, comfortable room, with carved and upholstered chairs at a table before a partly open casement window of decoratively arranged panes of glass. Hanging on the wall behind her is a large engraved map of the Netherlands, so

precisely rendered by the artist that the Dutch publisher (Blaeu) and the specific edition can be identified. In her right hand is a wineglass with golden white wine in it. Her left hand lies open upon the table toward the soldier as if in expectation—of what?

What is going on in this scene? Is she welcoming a close relative or dear family friend on his return home from a tour of duty? Or is there perhaps a more romantic relationship implied, as if she is waiting to take his hand? Or could there be a mercenary dimension to their encounter, in which her open hand could suggest that a golden payment of some kind is desired or expected?

Romney discusses this scene in detail and with special consideration of its strong suggestion of the Dutch empire as a context for the scene, indicated by the window open to the outside world, and the map showing ships from all over the globe arriving in and departing from the Netherlands. Her theme is that personal connections of all kinds—familial, friendly, romantic, mercenary, legal—linked men and women in 17th-century New Netherland with people at home in the Dutch Republic, and all over the world, wherever the interests of the far-flung Dutch empire extended, including Africa, the West Indies, South America, Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, as well as Manhattan and environs.

She states in her prologue: “Seventeenth-century Dutch expansion along the Atlantic coast of North America cannot be fully understood without bearing in mind the correlations between intimacy and empire captured in Vermeer’s painting. . . . Vermeer’s painting reveals in a dramatic, visual way a truth about how people constructed, interacted with, understood, and resisted long-distance trade and colonization. Intimacies did essential social, political, and economic work to sustain the empire” (p. 5).

Romney illustrates the “connections” referred to in the title of the book by using many contemporary sources, especially court records that bring to light claims and counter-claims between men and women at all levels of society. This use of documentary materials gives authenticity and immediacy to her examples, and greatly strengthens her presentation of her main point, which is that New Netherland was never an isolated entity, but was always tied to outside interests, and must be understood in its global context.

By contrast, Washington Irving’s humorous, satirical depictions of the Dutch—as in his famous *History of New-York* (1809) by the fictional Diedrich Knickerbocker—are comic caricatures, and should not be taken as actual history, as many readers have done, perhaps misled by the title (which is part of the joke). Susanah Shaw Romney’s excellent book is a salutary reminder that the women and men of New Netherland were part of a powerful 17th-century Dutch mercantile network that encircled the globe, and they deserve to be taken seriously.

Francis J. Sypher
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