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Regulations, Transgressions and Female Spaces: Women in the Urban Environment of Late Medieval Amsterdam (1413-1512)

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Abstract

Women in late medieval Amsterdam had a significant presence in and left their mark on the city's urban environment. Yet, medieval society's gendered thinking and moral anxieties greatly affected how and where women existed in public space. Women's public presence was a constant source of tension for urban authorities. Using 'keurboeken' (law books) for the period of 1413 to 1512, I explore this tension and the city council's attempted spatial regulation of women in Amsterdam's streets, markets and (semi-) public spaces. I utilize the 'corrections' women received upon violating spatial regulations to show how they resisted and asserted themselves to exist in the city's space. Finally, I analyze the Amsterdam's 'female spaces': a remarkably close concentration of women's religious houses. I ultimately argue that the city council's desired spatial control was never absolute and that Amsterdam's medieval female spaces shaped the cityscape in ways that can still be felt today.

Introduction[1]

When the canals froze during fifteenth-century Amsterdam's harshest winters, the city council saw fit to combat this. Armed with axes, hooks and other destructive gear at the authorities' behest, the people organized in groups and set out to communally break the ice in their own neighbourhoods. This activity did not, however, involve the *entire* urban community. It was the duty of eighteen- to sixty-year-old men. All townswomen were conspicuously absent. Their exclusion was not total, as rich widows and well-off women from female-headed households were expected to compensate their neighbourhood's group leader monetarily. Nevertheless, women were unquestionably denied a presence within this public workspace on the basis of their sex (Breen 1902, 113-116, 210).[2]

The situation described above is indicative of the way gender relations played out in late medieval Amsterdam's public spaces, as well as the city council's need to regulate how women existed in urban space. Although the city council attempted to regulate the public behaviour of both sexes, its legislation often targeted women as a group and tried to restrict, constrain and control their presence in streets, market squares and public buildings. In this essay, I trace the gendered spatial regulation carried out by Amsterdam's city council between 1413 and 1512, meandering through its cityscape to shed light on its varied regulatory practices. I also examine women's resistance to the exclusionary measures aimed at them—which I call their 'spatial transgressions'—and how women created 'female spaces' despite having their environment's cards stacked against them. I ultimately argue that the city council's desired spatial control was never as absolute as it would have liked and that Amsterdam's medieval female spaces shaped the cityscape in ways that can still be felt today.

Women and Gender in Medieval Urban Space

Medieval urban societies produced their own public spaces, created and shaped by the ideas and social activities of their inhabitants. These spaces, in turn, influenced medieval people's behaviour. Many different factors contributed to their production, with ideas and activities surrounding gender being just one of those, but it was a factor with significant influence on how women's public lives could play out (Ardener 1981; Lefebvre 1991; Hanawalt & Kobialka 2000; Spain 2006). Daphne Spain (1992), for example, has argued that status differences between women and men create certain types of gendered spaces. Spatial segregation, in her view, is a mechanism enabling a group with greater power (men) to maintain its advantage over a group with lesser power (women)—a theory that can be applied to late medieval cities.

The realm where medieval urban spaces were formally, institutionally regulated—in civic offices and positions of urban authority—was often closed to women, although women most certainly participated and were visible in urban public life, in different ways depending on time and place. In general, the urban spaces medieval societies produced were influenced by dominant ideas and discourses regarding gender and women. They reflected contemporary beliefs and ideals of how men and women should behave in public. Men commonly designed and regulated public spaces without women's formal involvement. Their moral anxieties about women's independent activities in city streets subsequently affected how women were 'allowed' to exist in public, leading to explicit gendering of city space. For instance, medieval city councils across Europe, fuelled by religious convictions, often worried women's presence in certain city spaces would lead to undesirable sexual contact and sought to prevent this. Urban legislators hoped to contain the 'risks' women posed to individual citizens and their city's reputation. Medieval women's behaviour in public space was therefore at least partially influenced by formal legislation, although their use of space undoubtedly also reflected personal motives and considerations: for example, awareness of vulnerability to rape and the loss of reputation they could suffer (Ardener 1981; Rees Jones 2013; Rubin 2020).

The primary source material I use to study late medieval Amsterdam, law books and criminal sentences, are flawed windows into the urban-spatial considerations of medieval women themselves. What they best make visible is how the *city council* thought: who and what had to be regulated, why, and how should it happen? (Groen 2010). These sources are therefore great for tracing how Amsterdam's city council attempted to regulate women spatially and what (gender-related) anxieties compelled it to undertake action. In some cases, women's spatial transgressions—how they resisted measures against them—also become visible. As the 'gendering' of space was subtle and varied by time and place (Rees Jones 2013), a closer look at source material from Amsterdam itself is needed to shed light on the situation there. I will proceed to examine a variety of public spaces within late medieval Amsterdam to show male authorities' spatial regulation of women and women's spatial transgressions in response.

From the Streets…

Throughout the fifteenth century, Amsterdam's urban authorities took measures to keep women off the streets when they found their ubiquitous presence undesirable. Occasionally, this seems to have been motivated by legitimate concerns for women's physical safety. When urban legislators ordered

women, children and strangers away from the streets while male citizens geared up to defend against attacks (Breen 1902, 446[3]), it is hard to imagine a good reputation was all they felt was at stake. The city council also seems to have been aware of the threats women might face in the streets, like unwanted attention from shady individuals. A law passed in 1478 mentions that women in the streets at night, alone or with a male chaperone, risked being attacked by drunken strangers (Breen 1902, 135[4]). Legislators attempted to end this by prescribing stricter punishments for offenders rather than trying to curtail women's nocturnal movements or emphasizing increased supervision by male chaperones. This implies it was infeasible to expect women to vacate the streets entirely at night and that there were valid reasons for them to be out and about at late hours, even unsupervised.

There were also, however, situations where the city council clearly did view curtailing women's street presence as feasible and necessary, despite there being no clear indications they faced more risks than men. As I have shown at the start of this essay, women were excluded from physically contributing to the communal de-icing of the canals. Similarly, in 1504, the city council decided women and children were no longer allowed to help douse the flames when fires tore through Amsterdam—a common occurrence at the time. Disobeying this order could result in punishment. The fact that this law was repeated in 1510 suggests it was not dutifully followed since its first passing; yet, the attempt at spatially regulating women is significant. As with the de-icing, no explicit rationale for it is provided, but the sudden change must have been brought on by increased gendered moral anxieties rather than threats to women's safety posed by fires themselves, as it is most unlikely those burned hotter than in the fifteenth century (Breen 1902, 411, 481;[5] Van Tussenbroek 2023). The attempted restrictions of women's activity in Amsterdam's public battles against fire and ice seem more aimed at limiting male-female contact in irregular, potentially chaotic situations.

Despite spatially regulating the roles women could play in the city's service, the city council pushed women into alternative contributions to maintaining urban order and safety. After all, female-headed households incapable of providing men for canal de-icing were expected to provide monetary compensations. Widows and single women, unable to send husbands who could fulfill city guard duties, had to find men to send in lieu of them. And when the 1510 restriction of women's firefighting rolled about, the city council ordered every female religious community to make two dozen water buckets and keep them in their convents for emergency use in the same breath. In a slightly different vein, the city council also 'encouraged' women's efforts in keeping Amsterdam immaculate: maidservants who did

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not properly clean the streets and gutters surrounding their households on Saturdays and holy days could be fined (Breen 1902, 340, 440, 478, 487, 500[6]).

Amsterdam's urban authorities, then, recognized and encouraged female contribution to maintaining the city's public spaces. Yet, concerns for women's physical safety, but more importantly, gendered moral anxieties attached to public male-female intermingling, fed their desire to regulate this contribution spatially where feasible, with varying degrees of success.

...To Market Spaces...

Even if the city council would have liked to maximally restrict women's public presence, there existed areas in town where it simply could not. Women's labour was an important part of late medieval Amsterdam's urban economy and often took place in the streets. When the city council tried to restrict women's right to merchant trade in 1492, it notably exempted women working in the cloth, hospitality and food industries. E. Tas (1938) even suggested a food industry without women's labour would have been unthinkable in premodern Amsterdam. The city housed a considerable amount of avid saleswomen and hucksters. It therefore seems women already had the ineradicable urban presence as street sellers they have been shown to have in early modern times (Breen 1902, 262-263; Van den Heuvel 2016).

Market spaces in general were highly spatially regulated, as Danielle van den Heuvel (2016) has shown in her book chapter on the premodern markets of Holland and England. While she draws primarily on early modern material, factors of time, space and gender will not only have become relevant post-1500, as the copious amounts of late medieval market regulations included in Breen (1902) illustrate. Concerns about food shortages, quality problems and challenges to public order posed by large crowds will have harried late medieval and early modern authorities alike. Because of women's omnipresence in Amsterdam's market spaces, restrictions on street-selling disproportionately affected them. They subsequently racked up many economic-spatial transgressions, which accounted for the majority of female-committed crime: the amount of women corrected for such offenses numbered almost thrice that of men (Boomgaard 1992). Female fishmongers and food retailers, for example, regularly bought fish and other foodstuffs for resale before it was officially allowed at nine A.M. This constituted a temporal transgression, but also their trespassing into a space they were not meant to be in at that time. Similarly, women got fined for setting up shop outside of permitted spatial boundaries, like in the streets rather than in front of their home (Van Dillen 1929).

Whether these spatial restrictions were *intentionally* gendered is up for debate. Van den Heuvel raises the question if temporal-spatial regulations like the ones mentioned deliberately targeted women and the poor, but formulates no clear answer. Johannes Boomgaard (1992) states that these regulations do not seem to be targeting on a gendered basis, nor aimed at pushing women out of the public sphere. He argues that both men and women were corrected for these transgressions and that the punishments meted out show no discernable differences, also citing the absence of laws targeting female street sellers specifically. It does seem likely that these restrictions and transgressions were gendered in the sense of disproportionately affecting women *incidentally*—the nature of the problems market regulation addressed suggest the majority of this legislation would still have been passed had men been primarily affected. Furthermore, it has already become apparent Amsterdam's city council need not employ such subtlety regarding women's spatial restriction.

This becomes especially clear when considering the fate of the women in Amsterdam's meat industry. While women had been allowed to work with and sell meat during the fifteenth century, a law passed in 1502 dictated that the butchers' trade ought to be practiced by men alone. Half a year later, former female butchers even had to swear oaths that they nor girls they employed had worked with meat since the law's passing. The only rationale the city council gave for this restrictive measure was that it was common practice in 'all good cities', which indicates concerns connecting women's presence to the city's good reputation (Breen 1902, 387). The city council may have found curtailing women's presence as (street) saleswomen impractical and even undesirable, but within this economic branch, it clearly saw a ban on women as necessary and feasible.

Women themselves did not take kindly to the decree. Between 1502 and 1507, they stubbornly continued working with meat. The year 1504 especially saw a correction of fifteen female butchers who had all tried to work with and sell meat publicly in the meat hall (Van Dillen 1929). Since this took place a few years after the initial decree, Boomgaard's (1992) suggestion that it was likely a deliberate, organized rule violation holds water. Amsterdam's women may have been pragmatically tolerated in the city's market spaces overall, but they met the occasional gendered spatial regulation like this one with resistance— resistance culminating in attempts to reclaim spaces they saw as theirs to share in.

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...To Back-alleys...

Another 'female' profession subject to substantial gendered spatial regulation was prostitution. In medieval Europe, 'common women', designated as such for their public selling of sexual services, were often constrained to marginal locations in town. While Amsterdam's prostitution regulations notably constrained them within the city's very center (Groen 2010), the city proves no different in its desire to spatially regulate local sex work. While its urban authorities did not go as far as requiring prostitutes to dress a certain way to make them publicly recognizable, as happened in cities like London and Buda, they sought to regulate prostitution by confining it to two alleys: the Pijlsteeg and Hallesteeg, which ran parallel next to each other from the Warmoesstraat near the Dam (Groen 2010; Rees Jones 2013; Rubin 2020; Breen 1902, 101-102, 125-127). This was decreed in 1478, in a law that specified only brothels run by the *schoutsknechten* (official authorities) were allowed to exist solely in these particular spaces—the *schoutsknechten* had already possessed the monopoly on running brothels before, but the appointed location was a new addition. Running an illicit brothel, as well as the housing of and renting to prostitutes, became expressly forbidden. Prostitutes working elsewhere in town would be summoned to move to the two mentioned alleys and, if they refused, faced banishment and the loss of their best clothes.

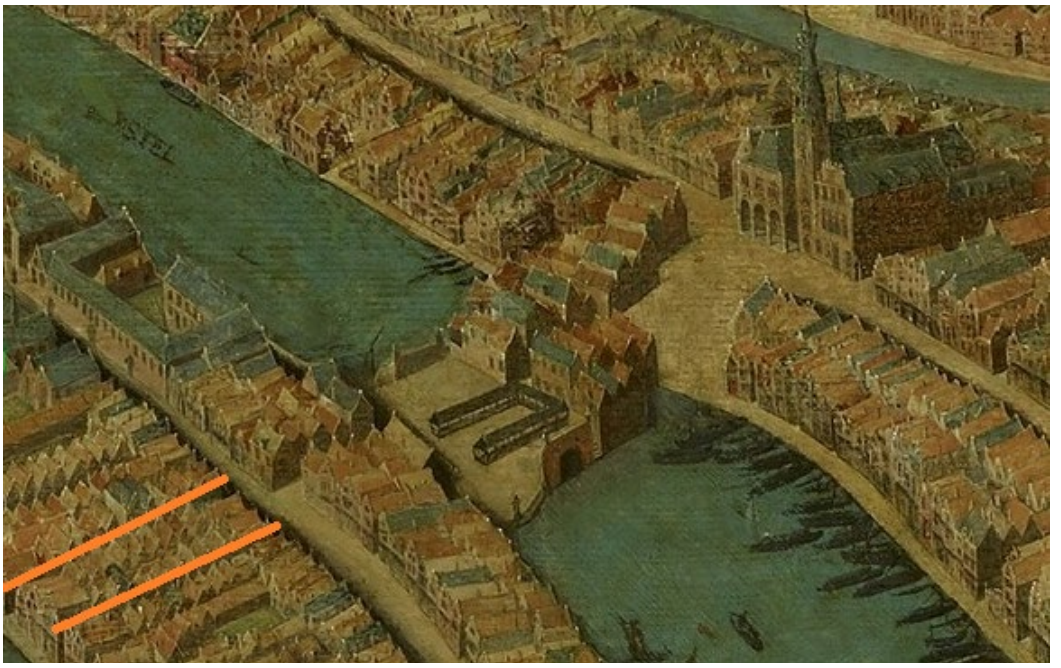

Figure 1. The locations of the Pijlsteeg and Hallesteeg, marked on a cropped version of *Gezicht op Amsterdam in vogelvlucht,* 1538. Painting by Cornelis Anthonisz. The markings are my own.

Underlying the new spatial confinement of prostitution was the suspicion urban authorities usually afforded prostitutes throughout Europe, which Jasper Groen and Lotte van de Pol respectively have already shown as present in Amsterdam as well. In fact, the Amsterdam prostitution regulations are among the ones in the medieval Northern Netherlands where the considerations of lawmakers show through most clearly. (Groen 2010; Rees Jones 2013; Mazo Karras 2018; Rubin 2020; Van de Pol 1996). While the city council, in accordance with common interpretations of canon law as shown by James Brundage (1976), regarded prostitution as a necessary evil to be tolerated in order to prevent rape, it experienced significant anxieties about the city's reputation to outsiders—which might negatively affect trade—and, most importantly, prostitutes' influence on the 'good' women of Amsterdam. The city council feared 'evil women' would coerce wives, widows and girls into prostitution and assigned the trade to the Pijlsteeg and Hallesteeg specifically so women living nearby could easily avoid it on their common walking routes to the market, without being subjected to 'bad examples'. It also encouraged communal oversight of private spaces: good men and women ought to report female neighbors they suspected of prostituting themselves so these women could be moved to the alleys they supposedly belonged in. From 1509 onwards, this forced moving could even involve a humiliating public march if the city council deemed it appropriate (Groen 2010; Van de Pol 1996; Breen 1902).

Theoretically, these measures significantly influenced how not only prostitutes, but Amsterdam's women at large existed in public space. 'Good' women and girls were expected to avoid associating with prostitution in the streets, which may have affected their chosen walking routes and their preferred company, even in their own homes. The prostitutes themselves faced obvious restrictions in their living and workspaces. In practice, however, the situation was not as clear-cut as the law makes it look. The fact that the 1478 law was reiterated in 1492 and 1509 shows that Amsterdam's populace apparently needed somewhat regular reminders of the rules. This is further supported by corrections issued during this period: although prostitutes themselves were rarely formally corrected, often being banished or moved to the alleys without getting written up, a variety of illicit (female) brothel keepers were punished for not adhering to the spatial regulations (Boomgaard 1992; Groen 2010; Breen 1902, 125, 460; Van Dillen 1929, 735-736, 765, 774). Additionally, a 1500 attempt to remove the brothels and inns from the Pijlsteeg and Hallesteeg in order to found a school ultimately failed. This failure likely occurred due to popular resistance, showing the city council was unable to exert the full spatial control it so desperately

desired (Breen 1902, 302-303[7]; Van Tussenbroek 2023). Although Amsterdam's women, prostitutes and brothel keepers may have internalized and followed some of these regulations, prostitution likely remained widespread throughout the city, women's movements never coming completely under outside control. Amsterdam's prostitutes may still have operated from their houses, in the streets, or even around the church, where they were not to be seen with any man except their own husband (Breen 1902, 9).

...To Female Spaces?

Even in Amsterdam's variety of (semi-)public buildings, gendered spatial regulation always remained present. Women's banishment from the meat hall already showed as much, but regulation did not stop there. In schools, boys and girls sat in different rooms and attended at different times to keep the sexes separate. Women cared for male and female patients in the St. Peter's Hospital, but the sick and elderly were kept in gender-segregated wards. Even in church, the bustling heart of medieval society, men were not to bring along women and crying children if they came at night—that this rule mentions women and noisy children in the same breath implies both may have been seen as disturbing presences in that space, at that time (Breen 1902, 31, 465[8]; Van Zetten 1988).

Yet, despite all this gendered spatial regulation, Amsterdam also contained spaces—buildings, land—that can be characterized as 'female'. Over the course of the Late Middle Ages, Amsterdam acquired sixteen convents and a beguinage (Van Eeghen 1941). The city's religious houses, four monasteries for men included, were located close together and took up some twenty percent of the space between the city walls by the early sixteenth century (Van Tussenbroek 2023). Gerrit Vermeer and Willemijn van den Bos (1997) identified significant spatial differences between this sizable religious quarter and the rest of the city. As the religious houses were meant to be separated from the rest of the world, the complexes had high walls and few entrances, closing them off from the streets. Located on the edge of town and away from the city gates, Amsterdam's laypeople had little to do here, which must have given the religious quarter a somewhat isolated atmosphere. This isolation is further reinforced by the fact that the urban authorities could not exert as much (spatial) control over this quarter as the city council might have liked: the religious houses owned swathes of land and property, but were exempt by law from paying taxes. Even when Count William IV of Holland tried to forbid the sale of urban land to religious houses and the city council passed a law loosely based on his decree, this was hardly if ever obeyed in practice and mostly functioned as a formally written-up power play (De Melker 2021).

When viewed in the context of women in medieval Amsterdam's city space, the religious quarter takes on new significance. The vast majority of its inhabitants were women. The average female religious house in the late medieval Low Countries had between twenty to forty members, although the numbers could vary, as Amsterdam's Sisterhouse of Mary Magdalen of Bethany housed a staggering 210 sisters in 1462 and 1493 (Simons 2010; Van Tussenbroek 2023). These women not only lived together in female communities, but also founded these communities themselves, as Bas de Melker (2021) has shown in his research on Amsterdam's late medieval religious institutions. Once these female religious communities had acquired spaces for themselves, they even facilitated the formation of other female communities around them. The convent of the *Oude Nonnen,* the first female religious house in town, sold parts of its own lands to the Convents of St. Agnes and St. Catherine when they were first founded, thereby allowing them the space they needed. The close proximity of the many female religious houses meant they regularly had to settle matters of space amongst themselves (Van Eeghen 1941; De Melker 2021; Van Tussenbroek 2023). That is not to say this sharing of space always carried on harmoniously. The neighbouring convents of St. Mary Magdalen and St. Barbara squab-

Figure 2. The locations of the convents and beguinage marked on *Gezicht op Amsterdam in vogelvlucht,* 1538. Painting by Cornelis Anthonisz. The markings are my own.

“The religious quarter can be called a decidedly female space in a society hellbent on controlling women’s rights to exist in public.”

bled endlessly over the boundaries of their properties and each other's use of space: The Magdalenes were steadfast in their complaints about the building projects of the nuns of St. Barbara, which threatened the lighting in their chapel, were initiated without permission or encroached on their property (De Melker 2021; Van Tussenbroek 2023). Neither were such female communities completely free of male influence and the wishes of urban authorities. Men, such as Gijsbert Dou in Amsterdam, assisted in the communities' foundation, acted as spiritual authorities and helped conduct worldly affairs like transfers of property (Tibbets Schulenburg 2005; Ward 2016; De Melker 2021). The city council, meanwhile, afforded the communities their formal right to exist and tried to assert its authority by demanding they contribute to the upkeep and welfare of urban space. This can be seen in its ordering the female religious houses to keep buckets in case of fires and the religious houses' payments for bridge maintenance (Breen 1902, 242-243; Van Eeghen 1941).

The women occupying the religious quarter were therefore not entirely cut loose from urban society and its thoroughly gendered spatial regulation. Yet, they exercised control over and successfully demanded a presence in the (religious) landscape of their city like few other women at the time could. The religious quarter can be called a decidedly female space in a society hellbent on controlling women's rights to exist in public.

Conclusion

Virtually every space in late medieval Amsterdam was, to some extent, regulated. This regulation was frequently gendered in every facet of society. Ideas and anxieties about women and gender bled into the minds of urban authorities, resulting in significant attempts at curtailing women's public presence where the powers that be deemed it feasible and desirable. Women had to contribute to the upkeep of urban spaces and welfare, yet could not always physically and legally partake in men's maintenance activities. They could be banned from public places on the basis of their sex, as was the case with the meat hall, or confined to specific locations because of their highly gendered sex work. Public buildings like schools and hospitals maintained strict gendered segregation, at least in the image described by the city council's ordinances. Ordinances that occasionally went as far as hoping to control women's very walking routes through the streets.

Yet, Amsterdam's women engaged in acts of resistance, consciously or not. Women's activity as street sellers was never threatened due to their importance to the city's economy. The city's female butchers protested their exclusion from the meat hall through organized rule-breaking. Prostitutes

and pimps never let themselves be fully confined to the alleys they were assigned, while simultaneously defending the space as theirs when threatened with removal. The city council's (gendered) spatial control was hardly as absolute as it would have liked.

Finally, women had a significant hand in spatially shaping the landscape of a sizable chunk of the city: its religious quarter. Traces of what were once these female spaces, like the Begijnhof and the Agnietenkapel, can still be seen today. They are lasting testaments to women's undeniable public presence in an often hostile medieval urban environment.

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Endnotes

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2 When I cite Breen 1902 or Van Dillen 1929, I am not referring to academic ideas formulated by them, but to primary sources (Amsterdam's medieval law books and criminal sentences) as transcribed in their source publications on these materials. I will also be including select excerpts of their original quotations and their translations in these endnotes.

3 "Bevelen voert, dat alle die vrouwenpersonen, kijnderen ende vremde luyden van der strate blyven zullen ; ende dat alle die poirteren ende ingesetenen hair harnasch ende andere weren by hun reede houden zullen; ende die schutteren te staen gereede ende all bereyt in heuren harnasch ende andere instrumenten van wapenen." [Translation: Ordering henceforth that all womenfolk, children and strangers stay off the streets and that all citizens and inhabitants keep their armour and defensive gear in a state of readiness and that the archers be prepared in their armour and with their weapons].

4 "…off als dair vrouwenpersoonen comen gaen by der straten, tzy alleen off mijt een man, wijllen zy die vrouwen nemen ende dwijngen die mijt hem te gaen, dair hem belyeft; ende indien die man die vrouwe hem niet nemen en will laten, soe steken ende quetsen sy die man, ende dicwijl beyde man ende wijff…" [Translation: or when womenfolk come and go through the streets, either alone of with a man, they want to take the women and force them to come with them at their will and if the man does not want to let him take the woman, they stab and hurt the man and often both man and woman].

5 "Ordineren voirtmeer ende bevelen, dat van nu voirtan geen vrouwenpersonen noch kijnderen te brant sullen rnoghen comen, op die pene van ghecorrigeert te worden…" [Translation: [We] order that from now on no womenfolk nor children may come to [fight] the fire or they may be punished; Breen, p. 411].

6 "…dat elck susterencloester binnen deser stede ende tronde Beghynenhoff voor twe gerekent sullen doen maken twe douzijn leeren emmeren ende die houden in heuren conventen omme te bezighen alst noot wesen sal." [Translation: that every convent and the beguinage counting for two will make two dozen of leather buckets and keep them in their convents in case of emergency; Breen, p. 478]; "Van gelijcken zullen alle weduwen, diet vermogen, gehouden wesen in waken ende byten eenen man in heuren plaetse te seynden." [Translation: Similarly all widows who are capable must send a man in their stead to keep watch or break the ice; Breen, p. 487].

7 "…soe gebiedt den heer ende gerecht, ende dat by consent ende goetduncken van de XXXVI, dat alle gemeen vrouwen, mitgaders die waerden ende waerdinnen, wonende in de Pijlsteghe of Halfvesteghe, ende alle andere, wair die in enighen steghen of straten deser stede wonen mogen, hem vandaen vertrecken zullen tusschen dit ende Beloken Paeschen of te langeste Meyeavondt eerstcommende…" [Translation: So orders the lord and justice, and by consent and approval of the XXXVI, that all common women as well ans the innkeepers and innkeepsters living in the Pijlsteeg and Hallesteeg and all others wherever they may live in other alleys or streets of this city, will leave between now and *Beloken Paeschen* or the upcoming longest May night; Breen, P. 303].

8 "…dat hy geenen maechden en zal mogen houden, omme die te leren lesen, scriven ende rekenen, dan mits die settende in een andere camere dan daer de knechtgens in sitten; dat oick de knechtgens een halfif ure voor de meyskens ter schole comen zullen ende een halff ure vroeger weder uuytgaen oft anders, te weten dat zy altijt op verscheyden tyden ende nyet tesamen op een ure en zullen ter schole comen…" [Translation: That he may not keep girls to teach them to read, write and do math unless they are seated in a room different from that of the boys; that also the boys will come to school half an hour earlier than the girls and will also leave it half an hour earlier or else, as long as they are always coming to school at different times and not together in an hour; Breen, p. 465].