

## MARIA TESSELSCHADE ROEMER VISSCHER (1593-1649)

Fred J. Nichols  
City University of New York  
New York, USA

**Maria Tesselschade Roemer Visscher**, daughter of the poet and humanist Roemer Visscher, was born in Amsterdam in 1593. She was a central figure on the literary scene of her time, maintaining friendships with all the leading poets of the *Muiderkring*; most of her own poetry has unfortunately been lost. We know her mainly through the poetry of others, as well as through the correspondence she maintained with her friends and acquaintances.

Maria Tesselschade Roemer Visscher is both an elusive and a central presence in Dutch seventeenth-century literature. She is elusive because much of her work has been lost: less than thirty poems and about the same number of letters survive. She exists for us mainly in the texts of the male writers of the period, the major figures in Dutch literature, who found her so fascinating.<sup>1</sup> She was the central attraction of the *Muiderkring*, that literary and musical circle which the poet and historian P.C. Hooft assembled each summer at the Muiderslot. This was the castle, still preserved as a museum, where he lived in his capacity as "drost," the chief administrative officer of a rural district under the jurisdiction of the city of Amsterdam. Those associated with this circle included Vondel, Constantijn Huygens, Barlaeus and many other prominent luminaries of the time. It is in their correspondence and in the poetry that they wrote to and about her, that Tesselschade (as she has always been called then and since) still lives for us. In these texts we get a sense of a gifted, intelligent and strong-minded woman.

She was born in Amsterdam in 1593, one of three daughters of the poet and humanist Roemer Visscher, who gave his daughters an education remarkable for women at that time. Tesselschade and her almost equally gifted sister Anna, ten years older, learned French and Italian fluently. Tesselschade seems to have been especially at home in the latter language; two of her surviving poems are written in it. The sisters were taught calligraphy, drawing, painting, and engraving on glass. Engraving became a kind of specialty of theirs, of which at least

one specimen has been preserved. One of their other accomplishments was that they learned to swim, remarkable for anyone at that time; in Huygens' account of his own childhood he makes a point of the fact that he had not been able to master this skill. But what made Tesselschade most appreciated in the *Muiderkring* was her musical talent. She was able to play several musical instruments and had by all accounts an especially fine singing voice. Her singing was perhaps the first attraction of a visit to the castle at Muiden.

The name by which she has always been known (which, to judge by her correspondence, she preferred to the plainer Maria) is the result of a curious whim of her father's. Roemer Visscher was by profession an Amsterdam merchant, a grain dealer. He had invested in a convoy carrying grain to the Mediterranean which was wrecked by a storm off the island of Texel on Christmas Eve, 1593. His loss must have been still fresh in his mind when his third daughter was born the following March. Although she was baptized with the familiar diminutive *Marritgen*, he called her Tesselschade, literally, "Texel-harm." Did he regard her birth as a compensation for that loss?

There remains one portrait of her, done at the age of eighteen by Goltzius. It shows a young woman with a remarkably beautiful face, calm, composed, introspective, and as intelligent as she is beautiful; both her beauty and intelligence impressed those who met her throughout her life. Her father's house, on what is now the Gelderse kade in Amsterdam, was itself a lively center for those with literary and

artistic inclinations, where Hooft and Vondel were regular visitors. The two gifted sisters were not yet married when their father died in 1620. By this time Tesselschade was being courted by the poet Bredero, and had already made the acquaintance of the writer with whom she had her most complex friendship, Constantijn Huygens. With her sister Anna, she seems to have made her first visit to the Muiderslot in the summer of 1621, where she quickly became the central ornament.

Though she fascinated the leading literary figures of her time, she disconcerted all her admirers by marrying a naval officer, Allard (Adelaert) Crombalgh, in 1623, and moving with him to Alkmaar where he lived. To the puzzlement of observers then and since, the only remarkable thing about him seems to have been that he was very handsome. Her marriage did not, however, end her involvement with Hooft's circle. Hooft, Huygens and Vondel all wrote poems on her wedding. She kept in touch with her eminent friends by letter, and she and her husband were regular visitors at Hooft's castle, where she continued to be a center of attention. Every bit of evidence suggests that the marriage was a happy one, but it ended abruptly eleven years later when her husband unexpectedly died just after the death of their second child. One child had already died at birth and Tesselschade was left alone with her third daughter, also named Maria. We have the letter she wrote Hooft about her loss:

You will be able to understand sickness's nature, death's swiftness, and other circumstances which I have borne with a weeping soul, an oppressed heart and a grieving spirit, but with dry eyes, no other thought occupying my mind in so sad and grievous a night, robbed of my soul's sun, than recalling my beloved, and oh! all too affectionate Adelaert, who as if on the wings of love rose to heaven after his Tadea, having chosen an immortal over a mortal lot, leaving me behind (alas!) in my depression with the company of his beloved other half, that in her, as in a mirror, I may always have his form with me in my mind's eye, trusting in

that higher will against which there is no willing.<sup>2</sup>

As a highly eligible widow, she maintained her attraction for these highly attentive literary men. Huygens describes her in a Latin letter to his friend Puteanus, a professor of rhetoric at Louvain, who had just met Anna. He thinks his friend would have been far more impressed

if you had met her sister Tesselschade, a widow also most able with her hand, but far more delightful in her beauty, speech and character, yet with truly distinguished intellectual abilities. . . . I think very highly of her, nor would you be able not to do the same, if you had only seen one little poem of those which she engenders every day. . . . (Worp 268).

In 1637, a few years after the loss of her husband and child, she had occasion to console Huygens on the death of his own beloved wife, Suzanna van Baerle, the focus of some of his most intensely felt poems. This Tesselschade did in one of her most effective poems, a sonnet in which she urges him to express his grief in the form of poetry:

Zeght *Vastaert*, dat hij moght  
 [pampieren raet vertrouwen  
 Zoo dinnerlycke smart  
 [zich schriftlyck uyten kon  
 Hij staroogh in liefs glans  
 [als Aedlaer in de Son,  
 En stel syn leed te boeck,  
 [zoo heeft hij 't niet t'onthouwen.

Pampier was 't waepentuijch,  
 [waermee ick heb geweert  
 Te willen sterven, eert  
 [den Heemel had begeert  
 Daer overwon ick meê  
 [en deed mijn Vyand wijcken.

(Tell *Vastaert* that he must entrust himself to paper's wisdom / This way he could utter his inner pain in writing. / Let him look into love's brilliance like an eagle at the sun, / And record his pain, then he doesn't have to keep it with him. / Paper was the weapon which I used to avert / My wish to die before heaven intended; / With it I

conquered myself and drove my foe to flight).<sup>3</sup>

Just before this time, the *Muiderkring* had acquired a distinguished new member, Caspar van Baerle, better known under the Latin form of his name, Barlaeus. A former professor of logic at Leiden and a trained physician, he was rounding out a distinguished and animated career as a professor of philosophy at the Academy in Amsterdam, and he was a recent widower. He also enjoyed a considerable reputation in his time as a writer of Latin verse. He immediately fell under Tesselschade's spell—his own play on words, since the Latin form of her name, *Tessela*, can also refer to Thessaly, a region notorious in antiquity for its witches—and proposed to her in 1636. That she turned him down, attached as she remained to her dead husband's memory, did nothing to dampen his ardor.

Tesselschade's accomplishments did not include a knowledge of Latin, and this put him at somewhat of a disadvantage. As he himself observed in a letter to Huygens (qtd. in Worp 148), he felt far more comfortable writing poetry in Latin than in Dutch, which meant that his poetic compliments to Tesselschade had to be translated for her. On the other hand, he and Huygens took advantage of her not knowing the language to occasionally exchange Latin poems of a decidedly gamy character about her. Hooft and Huygens encouraged Barlaeus in his hopeless campaign; it seems to have amused them.

But the independent-minded woman again confounded her admirers by a decisive step. Sometime around the beginning of 1642, she converted to Roman Catholicism. This was not a sudden move. Her sister Anna, now also a widow, had converted to Catholicism, and there is evidence that Tesselschade had felt a growing sympathy for that religion, to which the poet Vondel had also converted in 1641. This conversion had the effect of placing her out of reach as an object of matrimony of the Protestant widowers Barlaeus and Huygens. Interestingly

enough it was Huygens, a generally tolerant man toward Catholics although himself a convinced Calvinist, who reacted the more strongly.

Huygens' attitude toward Tesselschade remains something of an enigma. He enjoyed the company of attractive women, and particularly of gifted attractive women. At times he took upon himself the role of Barlaeus' rival as her suitor, although always in a joking vein. Yet his reaction to her conversion was sharp, even harsh. He himself said of it, "I don't spare the rod, I love the child too much" (Worp 261). His intense campaign to make Tesselschade see the error of her ways and return to what for him was the true faith, finally stirred this even-tempered woman to an unusually pointed retort. In one of the many poems by her that have been lost, she seems to have accused Huygens, who was the secretary to the *Stadhouder*, the de facto ruler of the Dutch Republic, of owing his religious convictions to political expediency rather than to genuine belief. This stung Huygens in turn to write one of his most trenchant sonnets:

Mijn Tong en was noijt veil,  
     [mijn' Penne noijt verkocht,  
 Mijn' Handen noijt in strick  
     [van Goud of Diamanten,  
 Mijn' Vrijheid noijt verslaeft,  
     [om met fluweele wanten  
 De waerheid aen te gaen,  
     [en anders dan ick docht.

(My tongue was never venal, my pen was never sold, / My hands never ensnared by gold or diamonds, / My freedom never bound, so that with velvet gloves / It went against the truth, diverging from what I thought)(Worp 297).

Huygens concludes this burst of indignation with one of his characteristic plays on words, addressing his errant friend as "Beroemde, maar, eilaas, beRoomde Tesselscha" (Renowned but alas, Romanized Tesselschade).

Yet even this exchange did not shake the

friendship between them. About a month after he wrote his angry sonnet to her, she had accepted his invitation to be his house guest in The Hague, a visit--we should note--which obeyed all the proprieties of the time. The fact that on this occasion she occupied a guest room over his, provoked a witty but ambiguous poem which he addressed to his ostensible rival Barlaeus.

Tesselscha boven mijn slaep-caemer.

De weew leit t'mijnent thuijs,  
 [maer ick belegse niet;  
 Siet, ick besittse maer.  
 [O wonderlick verdriet!  
 Of doen ick? jae ick toch.  
 [Maer, o verdrietigh wonder!  
 De Weew leit boven, en  
 [de Wewenaer leit onder,  
 Barlaee, hoe vatt ghy dit?  
 [wat meent ghij dat ons scheidt?  
 Myn' kouwe solderingh,  
 [en haer' koele eerbaerheid.

(Tesselscha over My Bedroom

The widow lies in my house, but I don't lie with her, / See, I merely have her. O strange annoyance! / Or do I? Yes, I do. But O annoying strangeness / The widow lies above, and the widower lies below. / Barlaeus, how do you take this? What do you think keeps us apart? / My cold ceiling, and her cool sense of honor) (Worp 311).

Commentators have wondered if Huygens' supposed courtship was altogether a jest. Tesselschade's biographer Worp even suggests that Huygens himself may have proposed to her during the visit. We will probably never know just how he felt about her; perhaps he was not clear about that himself. What is certain is the depth of the impression she made upon him. More than thirty years after her death, Huygens at the age of eighty-four recalled her consolation on the death of his wife, in a poem which he concluded by quoting her text:

De kloecke Tesselscha,  
 [die 'k noijt en kan vergeten  
 Heeft m' haer' vertroosting eens  
 [soo geestigh toegemeten,

Dat vriend en Vreemdeling  
 [bekennen, wie het hoort,  
 Dat noijt soo stercken sin  
 [geschroeft stack in een Woord.  
 Sy sagh mij quijnen in  
 [een diepen rouw, met reden,  
 Daer noch mijn oude Hert  
 [kan suchten aen besteden,  
 Sij raedde, wild' ick eens  
 [ten kortsten zijn verlicht,  
 Dat ick mijn' klachten heel  
 [uijt rijmen soud' in Dicht.  
 Dus seid sij 't, (hoort, en leert  
 [soo spreken, Mans, en Vrouwen)  
 Heer, stelt uw leed te boeck,  
 [soo hoeft ghy 't niet t' onthouwen.

(The wise Tesselschade, whom I can never forget, / Once dealt out solace to me in such a witty way / That friend and stranger acknowledge, whoever hears it, / That never so strong a sense was wound up in a word. / She saw me pining in deep sorrow, for a reason / On which my aged heart can still spend sighs. / She counseled, if I would be relieved at once, / That I should rhyme out my complaints in verse. / So said she (hear and learn to speak, O men and women), / "Sir, record your pain, then you don't have to keep it with you") (Worp XLV).

Death dissolved the *Muiderkring* rather quickly. Tesselschade paid her last visit to the castle in late summer of 1646, and Hooft died in the spring of the following year. Another blow came in August of 1648 with the death of her last surviving daughter, named Maria after her, who seems to have inherited her mother's beauty and some of her poetic ability. Tesselschade's persistent suitor Barlaeus died in January of 1648 and the last poem of hers which we have deals with his death. Her own health was failing. We have a last glimpse of her in a Latin letter to Huygens from Hendrik Bruno, a former tutor to Huygens' children who had moved to Alkmaar:

Before I speak of myself and my concerns, first accept the greetings of our brave Tesselschade, who, although in her sickroom is all tormented under the reign of the goddess fever, yet avenges herself on her illness and the troubles that come with it by the firmness of her patience. I was with her

yesterday, as I am in the habit of seeing her often, and quite a bit more often do I see this one widow than all of whatever girls there are, however few in this town, who to my taste possess charm and refinement (Worp 112).

Even the much younger Bruno seems to have fallen under her spell. She died in June of 1649, at the age of fifty-six, and was buried in the Old Church in Amsterdam, where she had been baptized.

If I have called Tesselschade an elusive presence, it is partly the result of circumstance. As is the fate of so many women of her time, she exists for us as much in the words of others, all of them men, as in her own. Much of her work has been lost. Her major project, a translation, perhaps unfinished, of Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, has been lost except for one stanza preserved in one of her letters to Barlaeus. There is some evidence that she also undertook a translation of Marino's *Adone*. We know of many poems and letters that have not survived.

Yet she certainly was a presence. It is remarkable that the foremost literary figures of the time made it their business to be on friendly terms with her. It is remarkable too that in a time when people aged much faster than we now conceive of, they were writing praises of her beauty when she was in her fifties. But she stood out among the women of her time and place especially through her artistic and intellectual qualities. She seems also to have had a kind of quiet inner strength and outward gracefulness, and in a society where men ruled she did very much what she wanted to do, and only the touchy Huygens ever caused her to be abrasive. Yet her presence for us is not altogether without a voice of her own. Here and there in the texts that survive, and more often in her poetry, we hear her speak of inner struggle (Keesing 113). The serenity which we see in her portrait and which so impressed her contemporaries was not effortless. We hear her in an extract from a sonnet written on

the second anniversary of her husband's death:

't Is onrecht, seij de Geest,  
 [gheruste vreucht te myen;  
 Maer 't Lichaem riep: O Neen,  
 [en doopte d' Overlast  
 Met Naem van suchte-Plicht  
 [tot het in Traenen plast;  
 Soo most de vloghe Geest  
 [van 't logghe Lichaem lijen:  
 Van dagh een stercker Geest  
 [dat van syn Aerde licht,  
 En overreed' het dus, en eysten ander Plicht  
 Alst 't vruchteloose wrangh  
 [van Alberts smack verjaeren  
 Dees deed', dat ick de Sucht  
 [weerstribbich van my stiet.

("It is wrong," said the spirit, "to flee from quiet joy;" / But the body cried, "Oh no," and called the heavy burden / By the name of 'seeking-duty' until it watered into tears. / So must the nimble spirit suffer from the clumsy body. / Today a stronger spirit lifted it from its earth / And hence prevailed upon it, and called for different service / Than celebrating the sterile bitter taste of Allard's loss. / This worked so that with a struggle I thrust the seeking from me) (Worp 162).

The involuted heavy tension of these lines expresses the difficulty of the struggle between passion and grace that Tesselschade lived with and which, as she advised Huygens, she dealt with by transmuting into texts, a few of which survive to keep us aware of the cost of that lovely serenity which so impressed her contemporaries.

One suspects that the people of her age were not prepared for a woman as complex as she, and with her very real attainments she elegantly played the role which was there for her to play with consummate skill. Worp drew the title for his book on her, "An Invaluable Woman," from Huygens' poem on her death. One cannot get very far into the literature of the Dutch Golden Age without becoming aware of her. She fascinates us as she fascinated her contemporaries and at times we do hear her speak.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This sketch is based on the indispensable volume of Worp, which as its title indicates is an elaborate edition of her writings and the writings of her time which deal with her. The heart of this material is her correspondence with Hooft. For that material better texts are to be found in the recent standard edition of Hooft's correspondence (ed. van Tricht). A handy anthology of the writings of the members of the *Muiderkring* is van der Heijden's book. I am also indebted to the very solid and useful study by Keesing. Translations from the Dutch and Latin are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Worp 132-133; *Briefwisseling* II, 525. The "other half" is the surviving daughter Maria.

<sup>3</sup> Worp 175. "Vastaert" is Huygens.

**Works by Maria Tesselschade Roemer Visscher**

See Worp below, and especially endnote 1.

**Secondary Literature**

Worp, J.A. *Een onwaerderlijke Vrouw. Brieven en verzen van en aan Maria Tesselschade*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1918.

Heijden, M.C.A. van der, ed. *'t Hoge huis te Muiden*. Utrecht-Antwerp: Prisma, 1972.

Keesing, Elizabeth. *Het volk met lange rokken. Vrouwen rondom Constantijn Huygens*. Amsterdam: Querido, 1987).

Tricht, H.W. van, ed. *Briefwisseling van Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft*. 3 vols. Culemborg: Tjeenk Willink/Noorduijn, 1976-79.