

# Children's Correspondence as a Pedagogical Tool in the Netherlands (1770–1850)

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*Correspondence can be studied as a social practice, letter writing being influenced by several cultural and social values and habits. In this article, letters to and from children of the Dutch elite from the period 1770–1850 are studied as results of a social and educational practice. Correspondence was used as a pedagogical instrument. Parents and other relatives instructed children how to write correct letters. They commented on style, tone and contents of children's letters. Dutch elite parents wanted their children to write in a confidential tone, since they strove to be their children's best friends. In practice, however, this confidentiality was limited. Children should not complain about their teachers in boarding school and their letters were sometimes read aloud to relatives or friends. The ideal style, taught to children, was the natural style. This did not mean that children were completely free to write what they wanted. "Natural" could be opposed to "artificial", but could also mean "decent, as a bourgeois should" or "as a child". The themes children were encouraged to write on were topics that testified to their moral and intellectual progress. Beneath the surface of confidentiality, childishness and naturalness, each parent revealed to value deference and neatness in style. By defining confidentiality, childishness and naturalness implicitly as "appropriate for polite society", elite parents found a solution to the ambiguous bourgeois "pedagogic double ideal", the tension between seeing the child as a free child and raising it to be a decent bourgeois citizen.*

Writing letters is studying too.<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction: Letter Writing as a Social Practice and a Pedagogical Tool**

Letters and other so-called "egodocuments" such as autobiographies and diaries are no longer considered to be unproblematic sources that reveal all kinds of intimate details concerning daily life in the past, or the personal feelings of correspondents. Historians are paying more and more attention to the rules of letter writing and the

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Jan Bernard Blijdenstein to Benjamin Willem Blijdenstein, 30 Sept. 1793. In *Een Twentsch Fabriqueur van de achttiende eeuw. Uit brieven en familiepapieren samengesteld in 1923*, edited by C. Elderink. Hengelo, 1977: 64.

function of correspondence for individuals, families or social groups. Instead of the contents of letters, the act of writing itself, regarded as a result of cultural and social beliefs and practices, is of central importance to this approach.<sup>2</sup>

Cultural norms in writing letters are often most visible when explicitly taught to children. In historical studies on parent–child relationships children’s letters have sometimes been used as sources unveiling the historical reality of parental love.<sup>3</sup> This approach, however, does not take into account eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideas and habits regarding correspondence. This essay will therefore describe the way Dutch upper-class children were taught to write letters in the period from 1770 until 1850 and the set of cultural and parental rules to which children’s correspondence was subjected. Parents and other relatives tried to socialize the boy or girl into an upper-class and gendered citizen by teaching him or her the right style and the correct contents of a letter. By studying writing ideals and practices we can gain more knowledge of the central values of bourgeois culture, and in particular of bourgeois education. Moreover, this focus illuminates the way correspondence was used as a pedagogical tool.

The decades between 1770 and 1850 are often considered as a period in which notions regarding public and private spheres changed. To be specific, a separation of the spheres of work and home is thought to have taken place. The home and more generally the private sphere were valued highly and demarcated. Although these changes remain the subject of debate, historians have mostly agreed on the increasing interest in autobiographical writing in this period as a reflection of the growing significance of the private sphere. Introspection and individuality are considered to have been important motives for writing diaries, autobiographies and letters.<sup>4</sup> The study of correspondence as a social practice has, however, emphasized that letter writing also had important (semi-) public functions.<sup>5</sup> Letters were often read by more persons than the receiver alone and had an important function in creating social networks. Besides,

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<sup>2</sup> Overviews of recent developments in the research into egodocuments are offered by: Rutz, A. “Ego-Dokument oder Ich-Konstruktion? Selbstzeugnisse als Quellen zur Erforschung des frühneuzeitlichen Menschen.” *Zeitenblicke* 1, no. 2 (2002) [20.12.2002]. Available at: <http://www.zeitenblicke.historicum.net/2002/02/rutz/index.html>; and Dekker, R. “Introduction.” In *Egodocuments and History. Autobiographical Writing in its Social Context since the Middle Ages*, edited by id. Hilversum, 2002: 7–20. On letter writing as a social practice, see: Barton, D. and N. Hall. “Introduction.” In *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, edited by D. Barton and N. Hall. Amsterdam–Philadelphia, 2000: 1; *La correspondance. Les usages de la lettre au XIXe siècle*, edited by R. Chartier. Saint-Amand-Montrond, 1991; *Epistolary selves. Letters and letter-writers, 1600–1945*, edited by R. Earle. Aldershot, 1999; *Briefkultur im 19. Jahrhundert*, edited by R. Baasner. Tübingen, 1999; Linke, A. *Sprachkultur und Bürgertum. Zur Mentalitätsgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Stuttgart, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Roberts, B. *Through the keyhole. Dutch child-rearing practices in the 17th and 18th century. Three urban elite families*. Hilversum, 1998: 11.

<sup>4</sup> Weintraub, J. “The theory and politics of the public/private distinction.” In *Public and private in thought and practice*, edited by J. Weintraub and K. Kumar. Chicago, 1997: 7; Dekker, “Introduction,” 15.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Hasselberg Y. “Letters, social networks and the embedded economy in Sweden: some remarks on the Swedish bourgeoisie, 1800–1850.” In *Epistolary selves*, 95–107.

many social norms influenced letter writing: for example, the labelling of particular subjects as taboos or the imitation of a fashionable epistolary style by correspondents.

Letter writing seems to have been at the crossroads of the public and private spheres. Moreover, individuals could appropriate concepts such as public and private and shape them according to their own ideas and needs. Both the tension between the public and private sides of correspondence and the discretion to mould existing norms become evident when studying parental writing instructions to their children. Parents tried to harmonize the private and individual aspect of letter writing with the more public side of outward presentation. On the one hand, they claimed that their children should write in an individual and natural style, on the other they had specific ideas on the proper definition of these concepts, and encouraged their sons and daughters to write in a style appropriate for polite society.

This educational process was part of a new view on children's education in the second half of the eighteenth century. Enlightened pedagogues saw the child as an individual who had to be respected and raised in a confidential atmosphere. They emphasized the free development of the child's natural capacities and treated children as children, not as small adults.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, this little individual also had to be socialized into a bourgeois citizen. This "pedagogical double ideal", the wish to let children be children as well as to raise them into well-behaved upper-class adults, comes to the fore in letters to children.<sup>7</sup>

New ideas on child-raising were part of a broad general discussion on education in Dutch society around 1800. Since, according to new egalitarian ideals, everybody should in theory be able to become a socially and culturally active citizen, everyone should have the opportunity to develop his or her capabilities by way of education and sociability. Part of sociability was the formation of group norms in familiar and friendly conversation.<sup>8</sup> Children's correspondence also functioned as a means of sociability or socialization.

The sources used for this essay are, first, conduct books, letter manuals and advice literature, all of which contain prescriptions on the composition of correct children's letters. Second, more than 180 letters were studied, written by children to parents, siblings and other relatives, and 150 written by adults to children. These letters, for the most part written in Dutch and French, and dating from the period 1770–1850, are conserved in Dutch family archives. In particular, the archives of the Protestant Hubrecht family in Leiden, the Catholic Van Lanschot family in Den Bosch, and the Protestant Van Schinne and Hora Siccama families in The Hague were consulted.

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<sup>6</sup> Bakker, N. *Kind en karakter. Nederlandse pedagogen over opvoeding in het gezin 1845–1925*. Amsterdam: 1995, 19, 228.

<sup>7</sup> Budde, G.-F. *Auf dem Weg ins Bürgerleben. Kindheit und Erziehung in deutschen und englischen Bürgerfamilien 1840–1914*. Göttingen, 1994, 78; Hamlin, D. "The Structures of Toy Consumption: Bourgeois Domesticity and Demand for Toys in Nineteenth-Century Germany." *Journal of Social History* 36 (summer 2003): 859.

<sup>8</sup> Kloek J. and W. Mijnhardt. *1800. Blauwdrukken voor een samenleving*. Den Haag, 2001: 73, 165–185, 283.

Although originally families from different denominations were chosen because I expected religion to be an important variable, the denomination did not turn out to be very relevant for the analysis of children's letters. The patterns found in letters to and from children that are discussed in this essay are similar in Catholic and Protestant families. All families belong to the Dutch upper or upper-middle class. Many male relatives in the Hubrecht family were lawyers or factory owners. The Van Lanschots traded in colonial products, but were also important bankers. The Van Schinne family, trading and occupying important administrative positions, was, like the Hubrechts and Van Lanschots, typically bourgeois. Some members of the Van Schinne and Hora Siccama families also had contacts with aristocrats, and would themselves be elevated to the nobility in the nineteenth century. The terms "upper class" and "bourgeois" will be used as synonyms in this essay.<sup>9</sup> Besides the manuscript letters of these families, some additional published letters from the same period were analysed.<sup>10</sup>

### **Learning to Write a Letter**

Children learned to read and write both at school and in the family circle. Bourgeois mothers taught their children to read and write at a very young age. Four-year-old children often knew the basics of reading and one or two years later they also started writing letters. They were encouraged in their correspondence by relatives. An eight-year-old boy from the Van Lanschot family, for instance, was rewarded with money for his New Year letter by his great-uncle because of his progress in writing.<sup>11</sup>

Besides being taught by their parents, most upper-class children were educated either by a governor or governess, or at a secondary school in town. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a large number of elite boys and girls were sent to boarding schools. There, they were taught spelling, grammar, punctuation, foreign languages and letter writing, amongst other subjects. Three sons of the Hubrecht family studied, between the ages of ten and twelve, with Mr De Gelder, who headed a boarding school in Leiden. They had to learn rhetoric, of which the composition of letters formed a part. Letters written by famous writers were read too, for example those of

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<sup>9</sup> For a recent overview of research into the bourgeoisie and its defining characteristics, see De Nijs, T. *In veilige haven. Het familieleven van de Rotterdamse gegoede burgerij 1815–1890*. Nijmegen, 2001: 14–19.

<sup>10</sup> Letters from the following family archives were studied: the papers of the Hubrecht family (FAH) and the related Siegenbeek Van Heukelom family (FASH) in the Municipal Archives of Leiden (GAL); the papers of the Van Lanschot family (FAVL) in the State Archives of Noord Brabant in Den Bosch (RANB) and the papers of the Van Schinne family (FAVS) and the Hora Siccama family (CHS) in the National Archives in The Hague (NA). The published correspondence, 24 letters written by adults to children and 7 written by children, is from Elderink, C. *Een Twentsch Fabriqueur*.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from A. J. Ingen-Housz to Augustinus van Lanschot and Maria Helena Oomen, 3 January 1842, RANB, FAVL, inv. nr. 117.

Cicero (106–43) and Lady Montagu (1689–1762).<sup>12</sup> At Noortheij, a famous institute for boys in Voorschoten, where for example crown prince William (1840–1879), son of King William III (1817–1890) and the Dutch satirist Kneppelhout were educated, the letters of Madame de Sévigné (1626–1696) were prescribed as examples.<sup>13</sup> Later in life, adults sometimes compared their own epistolary styles with that of Madame de Sévigné, whose natural style was generally admired.<sup>14</sup>

Sixteen-year-old Maria Helena Oomen, a Catholic girl placed under the supervision of nuns in the convent of Berlaymont in Brussels, a boarding school for girls from the foremost Catholic families, was dictated fictional letters by her teachers. The little book in which she wrote down these letters has survived in the Van Lanschot family archive. As we shall see later, these fictional letters had a considerable impact on the form and contents of the actual letters Maria sent home to her mother.

Other children used children's books to learn to compose letters. The popular children's book *Magasin des Enfants* by Madame Le Prince de Beaumont, originally published in French but translated into many languages and reprinted in many editions, was read aloud to fourteen-year-old Magdalena van Schinne and her classmates at a boarding school for girls in Oosterhout. The main character in this book, Madame Bonne, recommends to girls the keeping of a diary. At boarding school, however, the teachers replaced the diary by letters, as Magdalena writes to her older sister in English, which language they practise by corresponding with one another:

We make no more our lessons in the morning but in the evening Master Wagenaar comes in the morning at eight a clock then we take our lesson of dance and to draw there is always one who read in the Magsin of children otherwise named Madam bonne and instead of the journals we make letters who contained a short relation with the reflections we have made on the historys we have read, in short we will traduct from french in dutch. in particular j have read the memoires de Milady B: and the Doyen de Killerine but it are romans and j like much better the History of England or some others.<sup>15</sup>

In this case, letter writing was learned with the help of a schoolbook, the contents of which were adapted to fit educational purposes. However, the letter here is not so much a personal message, but resembles an essay on a book and functions as an aid to translation.

The finer points of children's correspondence skills were actually developed in practice by writing letters to their relatives. Petrus de Raadt, principal of Noortheij boarding school, rightly stated that his institute could not provide adequate letter-writing education.<sup>16</sup> The family was conducive to the acquisition of writing skills. It

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<sup>12</sup> List of assignments during the course of 1836 until the summer holidays 1837 from 22 August–8 July, GAL, library nr. 50281/1.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, P. "Kneppelhout en de Franse klassieken." *De Negentiende Eeuw* 26 (2002): 227.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Louise to Magdalena van Schinne, 2 September 1802, NA, FAVS, inv. nr. 174; letter from Anthony Jan van Schinne to Magdalena van Schinne, 20 January 1835, NA, FAVS, inv. nr. 157.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Magdalena van Schinne to Catharina van Schinne, 15 December 1776, NA, FAVS, inv. nr. 157.

<sup>16</sup> De Raadt, P. *Noortheij, huis van opvoeding en onderwijs*. Amsterdam, 1849: 121–122.

was not only parents and grandparents who commented on the contents and style of children's letters: this was also done by siblings. A unique correspondence between two brothers Hubrecht has been conserved in the Municipal Archives of Leiden. In the years 1846–1849 they wrote each other three letters a month on average. At the beginning of this correspondence the oldest brother, Paul, was sixteen years old. His brother Ambrosius was fourteen years old. Ambrosius was sent to Zutphen because he did not behave well: he suffered from fits of anger. In Zutphen, he lived with the head of the municipal grammar school, who owned a kind of boarding school, and went to this grammar school daily. Paul stayed in Leiden and they exchanged letters about their subjects in school, their hobbies (smoking was very popular) and their family. Paul assured his brother that the contents of their correspondence did not matter much; to keep in touch was what counted. Paul encouraged Ambrosius to write Latin because he would later have to master that language at university, where all classes were taught in Latin. The older brother commented in Latin on the younger one's Latin grammar, but also on his general style of writing:

When we want to use the Latin language in our letters, I think we should par excellence follow the example of the ancient Romans. Concerning the salutation, that would be appropriate as well. If I remember correctly, Cicero used to begin his letters to Atticus as I have been taught to. That very famous orator never wrote “dearly beloved Atticus!! nor dearly beloved brother or son!” but he only saluted the reader, and he wished him good health. Finally, you have written “I am the most stupid pupil of the grammar school in Zutphen”. Modesty is a good virtue, but like the French use to say: “les extrêmes se touchent.”<sup>17</sup>

The older brother Paul praised the simple style of Cicero. Besides commenting on Ambrosius' style, Paul also made remarks on the way Ambrosius wrote the address on the envelope, his use of titles and his method of signature. Sometimes, Paul ridiculed his younger brother. Once, Ambrosius had signed his letter with “77”. After Paul had asked what these numbers meant, Ambrosius explained that he had copied his brother's signature, namely TT, the well-known abbreviation of *Totus Tuus*, all yours. Since he did not recognize the term, he had simply drawn a resembling sign. Paul laughed scornfully at this.<sup>18</sup> The point is, however, that a fifteen-year-old, well-educated boy

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<sup>17</sup> Letter from Paul Hubrecht to Ambrosius Hubrecht, without date, GAL, FAH, supplement II box 19. (This is the final version of a draft dated 7 April 1847 inv. nr. 675.) [“Neque te pigere arbitrator quum vitiorum, quae ego in istas observavi te certiore reddo, non ad te reprehendendum, procul hoc a me absit! laudo contra te sed si litteras latinas ad studia nostra utiles erint, necesse credo ut invicem vitia observata dicemus. Primum quaedam de initio. Duum in epistolis nostris latina uti volumus sermone, veterum romanorum exemplum inprimis sequendum esse arbitrator. Hoc quoque de initio valet. Si bene memini Cicero in epistolis ad Atticum incipere solet ut ego studivi facere. Nequi orator umquam scripsit ille celeberrimus: ‘Attice amatissime!! Neque ‘frater vel fili carissime!’ sed solum salutem dicit lectori, bonaque valetudine fatii (?) ei optat. Denique scripsisti: ‘me stultissimum esse discipulorum gymn. Zutph.’. Humilitas pulchra virtus, sed quod franco-Galli dicere solebant: les extrêmes se touchent.”]

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Paul Hubrecht jr. to Ambrosius Hubrecht, 25 February 1847, GAL, FAH, supplement II, box 19.



obviously had not learned this familiar term in school. He had to be taught by his elder brother.

The monitoring of correspondence by parents often continued into adolescence. Thus, the finer points of the art of letter writing were acquired in the realm of the family, after elementary skills had been taught by parents and schoolteachers.

### The Ideal of Confidentiality

Based on the notion that a decent letter reflected a decent character, children had to learn to compose correct letters. A good letter meant neat handwriting, correct use of punctuation, a fine style and mastery of the right topics. But what exactly did adults have in mind when they mentioned a fine style and appropriate contents?

To answer this question, let us first turn to advice literature. Besides conduct books, which often contained a chapter on correspondence, many letter books were published in the period from about 1750 to 1900. The status of such literature in general is complicated. To define etiquette books as containing guidelines that are projected onto a society that is eager to follow those lines might be too simplistic. It is more appropriate to emphasize the interplay between social practice and the norms of behaviour mentioned in advice literature.<sup>19</sup>

In the course of the nineteenth century, letter books with advice on the composition of letters started paying more attention to children's letters and more books were published that were specifically aimed at children.<sup>20</sup> Advice was given on topics, length and style. A letter manual published in the middle of the eighteenth century recommended that "children who write to their parents have to use the most deferential, submissive and humble expressions".<sup>21</sup>

Letter books from the nineteenth century also prescribed respect in children's letters to their parents, but added the demands of cordiality and candour. As the German author Claudius advised in the revised Dutch edition (1855) of his letter book:

The simpler, more sincere and more cordial the expressions in a letter from a child to its parents, the better these [letters] will be and the greater the impression they will bring about.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Bryson, A. *From courtesy to civility: changing codes of conduct in early modern England*. New York, 1998: 7, 279 and Linke, *Sprachkultur und Bürgertum*, 35–38.

<sup>20</sup> Dauphin, C. "Les manuels épistolaires au XIXe siècle." In *La correspondance*, 233–234. Landré for example added more diverse children's letters to the fifth edition of his *Verzameling van brieven, om met behulp der Nederduitsche taal, de jeugd, door het vertalen van geschikte en uitgezochte voorbeelden, tot de kennis van den Franschen briefstijl op te leiden*. Leiden: 1865, 1839.

<sup>21</sup> Anonymous. *Handleiding tot de kunst van het brievenschryven*. Third edition, Amsterdam, without date, but probably dating from around 1750, 77.

<sup>22</sup> G.C. Claudius, *Volledig brievenboek* (Tiel: 1855, revised Dutch edition based on the 21st German edition) 248–249.

From these quotations, we get the impression that the demands placed on children's letters have changed somewhat over the course of time. In the nineteenth century, deference was still important but cordiality, candour and sincerity had also become essential components of children's letters according to the authors of letter books.

Cordiality was not only recommended by authors of conduct books. Some boarding-school teachers also put to paper their thoughts on the ideal content and the function of children's correspondence. Petrus de Raadt, a progressive educationist who founded Noortheij boarding school in Voorschoten, elaborated on the function of correspondence for his schoolboys. At Noortheij, the boys set themselves to write letters home on Saturday morning after breakfast. Silence ruled during these writing sessions, while the children pondered on the topics of their correspondence. De Raadt emphasized that the schoolboys' letters were not read by their teachers. He described the correspondence between parents and son as "a continuous conversation that no one may overhear".<sup>23</sup> According to De Raadt, correspondence served to increase the love children and parents cherished for each other by creating a confidential relationship.

In De Raadt's opinion, parents' letters were to serve as examples for their children's correspondence:

There is something in the letter style that does not belong to school education, namely the natural, the cordial, the intimate, the true.<sup>24</sup>

De Raadt thought that school lessons on letter writing did not cover all the things the pupils needed to know. Instead, he saw correspondence with relatives as the best way for a child to acquire writing skills. Therefore, let us examine the practical advice parents and siblings gave to children.

A large number of letters kept in family archives are letters sent by and to children who were away at boarding school. The fear that these letters were being read by teachers and supervisors was widespread. Sixteen-year-old Maria Helena Oomen wrote a comforting letter to her mother a few days after she had arrived at boarding school:

... the letters from parents are not being read, I am not forced to show mine, so you do not have to feel embarrassed.<sup>25</sup>

Her mother was relieved after hearing this:

I am glad that you can write to me without having to show your letters, and that mine will not be seen either, tell me frankly how the other young ladies are behaving towards you, polite or very grand and do you not have any girl friends? ... you can see, dear Mieke, that my writing does not look like a letter, when something occurs to me, I already begin writing before I forget but this does not matter since they are not seen by anyone else.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> De Raadt, *Noortheij*, 122. Also see De Nijs, *In veilige haven*, 123–126.

<sup>24</sup> De Raadt, *Noortheij*, 121–122.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Maria Helena Oomen to Elisabeth Oomen Ingen-Housz, 13 August 1825, RANB, FAVL, inv. nr. 1304.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Elisabeth Oomen-Ingen-Housz to Maria Helena Oomen, 25 August 1825, RANB, FAVL, inv. nr. 135.



This oft-expressed concern about letters being read by supervisors must mean that the practice of checking children's letters at boarding schools was or had been widespread. This is illustrated by a letter written by Auguste van Lanschot to his parents, on the writing skills of one of his brothers. At the time of writing, fourteen-year-old Auguste was staying at a boarding school in Katwijk, together with his two brothers. Before coming to Katwijk, they had been taught at a boarding school in Baarle-Nassau, where their letters had been corrected by their teachers:

... about his letters which came from Baarle you cannot judge his ability to write French, because, you know as well as I do, that they were written and corrected completely under the direction of Mister De Brand.<sup>27</sup>

Fifty years earlier, in 1799, a father had also asked his fifteen-year-old daughter if she wrote her letters all by herself:

Your letter has satisfied me pre-eminently; have you composed it yourself, or has Mad<sup>lle</sup> corrected it?<sup>28</sup>

The reason children (and parents) were afraid their letters were read by others lies in the ideal of confidentiality. Correspondence should encourage confidential parent-child relationships. This idealized picture reigned strongly among the Dutch bourgeoisie. Again and again, Elisabeth Oomen-Ingen-Housz encouraged, almost begged, her daughter to be candid in her correspondence. The mother herself claimed to write "the sincere truth".<sup>29</sup> Parents and children should be best friends, as a mother wrote:

... continue my very dear child to write us just like you think, if you want to ask something, do it boldly, you know your parents are your best friends.<sup>30</sup>

This ideal of confidentiality seems to have been limited in practice. When fourteen-year-old Jan van Heukelom stayed at boarding school, his father wished for an intimate correspondence:

... much contact and especially confidential contact should exist between us and since the circumstances keep us personally apart the correspondence should make amends for that.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, around the same time, this boy was rebuked by his stepmother for mistrusting the teachers at boarding school:

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<sup>27</sup> Letter from Augustinus Jacobus Arnoldus van Lanschot to Augustinus van Lanschot and Maria Helena van Lanschot-Oomen, 2 February 1849, RANB, FAVL, inv. nr. 140.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Jan Bernard Blijdenstein to Maria Christina Blijdenstein, 3 March 1799. In *Een Twentsch Fabriqueur*, 160.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Elisabeth Oomen-Ingen-Housz to Maria Helena Oomen, 25 August 1825, RANB, FAVL, inv. nr. 135.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Sophia Hubrecht-de Veer to Pieter Hubrecht, 18 May 1816, GAL, FAH, inv. nr. 404.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Jan van Heukelom to Jan van Heukelom, 7 April 1854, GAL, FASH, inv. nr. 148.

You fear that the letters are being read, this is a very bad supposition, that you must not have, and that has not got any appearance of truth, that I can assure you, and I request you never again to think or speak about this, do not ever suspect anyone of doing something wrong of which you are not certain, you are doing a great wrong by that, always think and suspect good things of others, the effect of that will be that your thoughts and letters may be seen by everyone.<sup>32</sup>

On the one hand, Jan's father strove after confidentiality and honesty; on the other hand, this came to nothing since his stepmother immediately reprimanded Jan because he complained honestly about his teachers. Confidentiality certainly did not mean a child could pour out his or her heart without any inhibitions.

This conception of confidentiality did not only hold for children at boarding school. Catharina van Schinne, called Cato, was sent to her aunt and uncle in Switzerland at the age of fifteen or sixteen. Her parents hoped the stay would improve the girl's health. Cato, who would live with her Swiss relatives for almost two years, from 1773 until 1775, exchanged letters with her mother during this period. In one of her first letters, Cato's mother told her daughter in somewhat faulty French what kind of letters she expected to receive:

ils faut m'écrire naturellement et que tu en penses, comme à ta meilleure Amie, car soijes persuadé que je le suis plus que personne, et que tous mes desins se forment à te voir heureuse et contente, cest pourquoi ma Chere, il faut toujours etre ouverte et de bonne foi, sans détour, et n'avoir de reine caché afin que dans l'occasion je puisse etre en etat de te servir de conseil.<sup>33</sup>

Cato's mother described herself as her daughter's best friend, to whom Cato should write candidly. At the same time, however, Cato's mother encouraged her daughter to show her own and her mother's letters to her aunt and uncle. The idea of confidentiality obviously did not correspond with privacy, but with a semi-public sphere of relatives. Indeed, in her subsequent letters, Catharina's mother wrote to her daughter that she read Catharina's letters aloud in a circle of family and friends, who all admired them. One of them had even said that Catharina possessed the style of an angel. The mother added that her daughter need not feel embarrassed by this, and should continue to write freely, since she would be able to distinguish between the passages fit to be read aloud, and those to be passed over because they belonged to mother and daughter alone.<sup>34</sup>

Cato seems not to have felt impeded by her mother's remarks. But one of her younger sisters expressed her fear to Cato that, while composing a letter at home, their grandmother would comment on her mistakes in spelling. Besides, she was afraid that Cato, after having received her letter, would show it to their aunt.<sup>35</sup> It

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<sup>32</sup> Letter from Octavie van Heukelom-Steenlack to Jan van Heukelom, 23 March 1853, GAL, FASH, inv. nr. 146.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Sara Anna van Schinne-van Ruster to Catharina van Schinne, 1 June 1773, NA, FAVS, inv. nr. 157.

<sup>34</sup> Letter from Sara Anna van Schinne-van Ruster to Catharina van Schinne, 21 Dec. 1774, NA, FAVS, inv. nr. 157.

seems, then, that at least some children wanted their letters to be kept private. Although parents promoted confidentiality in the correspondence with their children, by forbidding them to write certain things or reading their letters aloud to others they testified to a somewhat different conception of privacy from that of their children.

### Natural and Grandiloquent Letters

A recurring pattern emerges in children's correspondence: children are encouraged to write freely, but this superficial freedom is bound by rules. Comments on children's writing styles illustrate this pattern even more clearly. These comments not only concern letters written at boarding schools but also address daily correspondence. Elisabeth Steenlack-Francken complained about the writing skills of her eleven-year-old grandson Paul Hubrecht in a letter to her daughter Bramine, Paul's mother. Although in general she did not like solemn letters, and preferred children to let their imagination reign, she also appreciated the expression of respect:

When I have time I shall write a word to Paul, not to thank him for his little letter, but to make him notice that he is growing too old to dare writing such a sloppy note to Grandmother, you understand dear Bramine that I am not particularly fond of a Solemn Letter, and I think it much more pleasant when children write in their own manner, but this was too much and I believe it is necessary to point it out to him, so that he feels the respect he owes to his parents and Grandparents, something he sometimes does not pay enough attention to.<sup>36</sup>

Besides bad handwriting, another complaint about children's letters was a lack of reverence. However, grandiloquence and humility were not exactly what adults had in mind either. Individuality ("in their own manner") was deemed important as well. In general, letters written on formal occasions offered the least opportunities for expressing individuality. New Year letters for example, which children had to write to their parents and other relatives, were often very clichéd. Many books were published, from which children could copy these New Year wishes.<sup>37</sup> Although a large number of these standard letters were composed every year, not every parent appreciated this kind of writing. Jacoba van Lanschot-van Rijckevorsel admitted to her fifteen-year-old daughter in 1818:

I would have answered your letter before, but I thought I would receive a New Year letter in time not inform, since you know I do not like these composed letters.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Letter from Magdalena van Schinne to Catharina van Schinne, without date, but written between 1773 and 1775, NA, FAVS, inv. nr. 157.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Elisabeth Steenlack-Francken to Abrahamine Hubrecht-Steenlack, 10 April 1840, GAL, FAH, inv. nr. 409.

<sup>37</sup> One example is Mej. C. Brinkman, wed. A. Fokke Sz., *Kleine verzameling van gedichtjes bij gelegenheid van het nieuwe jaar, ten gebruike der jeugd*. Amsterdam, 1821.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Jacoba van Lanschot-van Rijckevorsel to Theodora van Lanschot, 1 January 1818, RANB, FAVL, inv. nr. 230.

The mother here clearly differentiates between a formal (“informa”) letter and a natural letter, with more individual input. Another mother also encouraged her seven-year-old daughter to compose her letters freely, as she explains in a letter to her own mother:

... the Children will write you too, they are very busy writing, I prefer leaving them alone, although it results in less quality, I think a personal idea is better than twenty copies, Marie has suddenly turned to writing as well and loves to send little notes now.<sup>39</sup>

This same mother lectured her thirteen-year-old son on the style of his letter to his grandmother. She preferred a natural style:

Your letter to Grandmother was fairly good and decent, only commas and full stops were missing entirely, the punctuation obviously seems superfluous to you in the Dutch language! Besides, the letter was also somewhat bombastic, not a natural style for your age; one easily becomes pedantic and for a birthday of a dear grandmother, would not she prefer a simple but cordial word from her grandson to a poetic depiction of a happy old age? I do not say this to reprimand you but to put you in your place and make you realize that at your age childish simplicity still fits well, and is liked the best.<sup>40</sup>

Obviously, there were two kinds of letters: on the one hand “solemn”, “informa”, “grandiloquent”, “poetical” and “composed” letters; on the other hand “simple”, “natural” letters, written “in a unique manner” or “according to an individual idea”. Although hundreds of “solemn” letters like New Year letters and birthday congratulations kept in family archives testify to the widespread habit of writing grandiloquent epistles on formal occasions, often presented in a larger circle of relatives, the need was felt to propagate an ideal of letters as natural, free outpourings of an individual mind, to be read by parents only.

This ideal of a natural and individual style was a familiar concept in letter books that theorized the perfect letter. In particular, eighteenth-century German authors such as Gellert and Lessing revitalized these ideas. The letters of Madame de Sévigné and Lady Montagu were often considered perfect examples of a natural style.<sup>41</sup> As we have seen, the letters of these ladies were sometimes read by children at boarding schools. Relating this theoretical advice to everyday writing was, however, more difficult. How does one express one’s individuality? How does one write in a natural style? What was meant by “natural”? Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, who published his famous theory on letter writing in 1742 and 1751, furthered a natural style, in contradistinction to the officialese and gallant style reigning in Germany. At first sight, “natural” seems to contrast with “artificial”, these adjectives often having the connotations

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<sup>39</sup> Letter from Abrahamine Hubrecht-Steenlack to Elisabeth Steenlack-Francken, 30 December 1841, GAL, FAH, inv. nr. 1369.

<sup>40</sup> Letter from Abrahamine Hubrecht-Steenlack to Paul Hubrecht jr., 10 August 1843, GAL, FAH, inv. nr. 674.

<sup>41</sup> Vellusig, R. *Schriftliche Gespräche. Briefkultur im 18. Jahrhundert*. Vienna, 2000: 100, 118; Percy, C. E. “‘Easy women’: defining and confining the ‘feminine’ style in eighteenth-century print culture.” *Language Sciences* 22 (2000): 315–337.

of respectively “bourgeois” and “noble”.<sup>42</sup> Gellert, however, did not mean by “natural” “completely free to write whatever one feels like”. Rather, “natural” stands for “decent, testifying to bourgeois values”. Writing in a natural style signified making the *impression* of naturalness, *pretending* to write as one speaks.<sup>43</sup>

Gellert’s concept of a natural style soon became very popular. Until the end of the nineteenth century, nearly every Dutch letter book recommended a natural style in correspondence. As we have seen, children were also encouraged to write natural and individual letters. The practice of correspondence testifies to different meanings of the concept of a natural style, however difficult to distinguish from one another.

First, natural could be contrasted to artificial. For example, the mother of sixteen-year-old Herman Blijdenstein, who had just arrived as a student at Leiden University in 1825, preferred a natural style. She urged her son:

Continue writing us, send us your rough draft; do not spend art on your parents – Grandfather is of the same opinion – writing to others, e.g. the Rector ... you may edit your epistles a second time.<sup>44</sup>

This woman differentiated between the confidentiality of the parent–child relationship and other, more formal recipients, to whom letters were to be written in an artful style.

We have encountered the same meaning in the reprimands of grandmother Steenlack, who wanted her grandson to write in an individual and simple style, as distinct from bombastic and artificial. This natural style was limited, however, by the respect due to older persons. We can trace here the sense of naturalness as decency or conventionality, the second connotation of naturalness.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the comments made by this old lady point to a third sense of the concept of naturalness, namely “as a child”. Paul Hubrecht had to write in a style that fitted his age, not pretending to be older than he really was. This opinion reveals the idea, developed at the end of the eighteenth century amongst others by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that children should be allowed to be children, and not be treated as small adults.

We have seen so far that the ideal correspondence between children and parents was one in which confidentiality reigned. The ideal writing style was a natural and individual style. All this did not mean, however, that the child was completely free in choosing how and what to write. “Natural” generally meant “decent, as it becomes a bourgeois child”. Beneath the surface of confidentiality and naturalness, each parent, it turned out, valued deference and neatness. In this way, upper-class parents could bridge the gap of the so-called bourgeois “pedagogic double ideal”: on the one hand, children should be allowed to be children; on the other hand, children had to be

<sup>42</sup> Linke, *Sprachkultur und Bürgertum*.

<sup>43</sup> Gellert, C. F. *Die epistolographischen Schriften*. Facsimile after the original editions of 1742 and 1751, Stuttgart: 1971; Arto-Haumacher, R. *Gellerts Briefpraxis und Brieflehre. Der Anfang einer neuen Briefkultur*. Wiesbaden, 1995: 139–141.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Catharina Blijdenstein-ten Cate to Herman Blijdenstein, 9 October 1825, in: *Een Twentsch Fabriqueur*, 228.

<sup>45</sup> Schramme, T. “Natürlichkeit als Wert.” *Analyse & Kritik* 24 (2002): 258.

socialized into decent bourgeois citizens. By defining “confidentiality” and “naturalness” implicitly as “appropriate for polite society” the Dutch upper-middle class invented a way to pay lip-service to new ideals like individuality, naturalness, and the acceptance of children as children, while at the same time clinging to the basic importance of class, decency and appropriate behaviour.

## Topics

The acquisition of writing skills was inextricably interwoven with learning moral and bourgeois values. Modification of behaviour was, however, not only mediated through comments on tone and style, but also through advice on the right topics of letters. In letters from adults to children, this process of socialization becomes clear. Some of these letters resemble advice books in their admonitory and haughty tone. In 1793, a father used a long letter to imprint such values as orderliness, frugality and diligence upon his son.<sup>46</sup> Five years later he wrote to his daughter:

From your latest [letter] we are glad to see that it was not carelessness, nor negligence that had made you forget to inform us of the reception of the ring. I am content to find my children to be punctual and attentive, even in minor things.<sup>47</sup>

Some children complained that they did not know what to write about. Parents or siblings then answered that they were interested in all their daily experiences. Sixteen-year-old Ambrosius Hubrecht, for example, helped his older brother Paul to find topics for his correspondence:

Your writing has not improved this new year, I hope it will, you say you have nothing to write about; in that big city of Leiden material cannot be lacking; about the gas, about the advertisement in the trade journal of Stoffels, and the consequences thereof; and otherwise you choose a subject; with the greatest pleasure I will correspond with you about something specific.<sup>48</sup>

Just as an individual style did not mean a completely free style, writing about “anything they liked” was in practice also confined to certain topics. A large part of the letter exchange of children at boarding school was taken up by the description of their daily schedule. In this way, boys and girls were taught bourgeois values such as efficiency, time management, diligence and hard work. Furthermore, children emphasized in their correspondence with their parents that they did not neglect their schoolwork, and the progress of siblings was often compared. This contributed to the internalization of the bourgeois achievement ethic.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Letter from Jan Bernard Blijdenstein to Benjamin Willem Blijdenstein, 30 September 1793. In *Een Twentsch Fabriqueur*, 61–64.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Jan Bernard Blijdenstein to Maria Christina Blijdenstein, 11 June 1798. In *Een Twentsch Fabriqueur*, 155.

<sup>48</sup> Letter from Ambrosius Hubrecht to Paul Hubrecht, 7 February 1848, GAL, FAH, inv. nr. 675.

<sup>49</sup> Budde, *Auf dem Weg*, 162, 405.



For Petrus de Raadt, founder of Noortheij boarding school, correspondence was a means to monitor the moral and intellectual development of his schoolboys. Not only should the child in his opinion describe his achievements in all subjects but his handwriting, style and contents testified to this progress.<sup>50</sup> Most children were aware of the function of correspondence as a monitor of their advancement. They felt the need to stress that they really tried their best.

However, the stress on the acquisition of values did not mean that topics that typically fascinated children were entirely left out of letters. Many letters for example report on the condition of birds and other pets that were kept by the children at home and thereby give evidence of a genuine interest in the child's imagination. At the same time, this was an ideal solution to the dilemma of the "pedagogic double ideal": on the one hand, the mentioning of pets allowed the construction of a specific children's world; on the other hand, the keeping of pets was thought to promote bourgeois values. Birds, for instance, were considered models of sociability and demureness.<sup>51</sup> From observing these animals, children could learn sociable behaviour. Parental questions after the well-being of pets kept an eye on this suitable hobby.

Children sometimes complained about their busy programmes, at times even about the quality of their teachers. Conspicuously, several children dared to write about homesickness. This contradicts the opinion of Barbara van Meerten-Schilperoort, an early nineteenth-century expert on the education of boys and girls, who thought children staying at boarding schools were forbidden to write about their feelings openly:

Homesickness, that yearning desire for the parental home, that feeling that is so touching to my heart, is ridiculed and laughed at, until the good children learn to be ashamed of showing attachment to their parents. The letters to their parents are usually read before they are sent, and because of that the children dare not even speak freely with their very closest relations: they have to write against their own feelings and get used to lies and hypocrisy.<sup>52</sup>

Rather, it seems that in practice writing on homesickness was allowed by teachers at boarding school on condition that it was followed by an expression of consciousness about the necessity and beneficial effect of staying at boarding school. Maybe the voicing of loneliness, within the boundaries of propriety, fitted the image of confidentiality. Sixteen-year-old Maria Helena Oomen, for instance, wrote that she missed her mother, but also that she saw the need to complete her education:

[I] became very sad, however, the necessity of completing my education here, considering and picturing the happy prospect of, after having spent some time here, being united with you again and even stronger, revived my hopes and made me recommend you in a cordial prayer to God.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> De Raadt, *Noortheij*, 123.

<sup>51</sup> Frykman, J. and O. Löfgren. *Culture builders. A historical anthropology of middle-class life*. New Brunswick-London: 1987: 79–81.

<sup>52</sup> Van Meerten-Schilperoort, A. B. *Encyclopédie of handboek van vrouwelijke bedrijven en raadgever in alle vakken van den vrouwelijken werkkring*. Amsterdam, 1835: vi.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Maria Helena Oomen to Elisabeth Oomen Ingen-Housz, 19 August 1825, RANB, FAVL, inv. nr. 135.

Remarkably, the phrasing of this letter resembles several sentences from a little book in which Maria wrote down fictional letters dictated to her by the nuns who taught her at boarding school. Both the fictional and the real letters mention a function of correspondence: “par vos lettres adoucir une absence”, letters as a means to lessen homesickness.<sup>54</sup> In this case, the interaction between letter-writing education and letter writing in practice becomes visible.

The letter book of this Catholic girl contained French fictional letters full of admonitions and advice. All qualities needed by adult women to raise a family and oversee a household were mentioned, such as gratitude, modesty, patience, sincerity, piety, sweetness and useful time management. Vanity, selfishness and capriciousness were condemned. Since girls had to be sweet (“douce”), letters that could soften (“adoucir”) homesickness were in a way very appropriate for women.

### Gender

The encouragement to be sweet and modest characterizes letters to girls. A letter book for girls from 1829 emphasized the importance of modesty in the writing style of girls.<sup>55</sup> Although parents impressed emotional control upon boys as well, forbidding fits of anger, self-love and pride, and promoting cheerfulness, satisfaction and piety, the correct display of emotions in correspondence seems to have been more important for girls than for boys. Otto Hora Siccama, for example, reproached his nineteen-year-old sister Angelique for not remembering their father in her letter written on the first anniversary of his death. In his opinion, this negligence was inexcusable for young women:

À un homme, plus insensible en général, j’aurais plus volontiers pardonné un tel oubli, mais à une jeune fille, juste en cet âge où le cœur doit avoir le plus d’empire sur elle, je ne saurais qu’exprimer mon regret de la voir passer une telle journée sans honorer d’un seul souvenir de tristesse & d’amertume.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, Otto thought neat handwriting was more important for women than for men. He reprimanded Angelique after he had congratulated her on her twentieth birthday, this time in Dutch:

Your letter pleased me very much, however, allow me one remark! Although haste prevents me to be an example to you. – teach yourself to write slowly and neatly! – One forgives a man some carelessness, particularly knowing that he is very busy! But a woman, especially a girl, is never so busy as to permit herself to be sloppy! – What would her suitors say, when they see such a thing! They will deduce the big from the small and think (I think & trust wrongly) that it is not limited to your handwriting.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Fictional letter book of Maria Helena Oomen 1825–1827, RANB, FAVL, inv. nr. 137 and Letter from Maria Helena Oomen to Elisabeth Oomen-Ingen-Housz, 19 August 1825, inv. nr. 135.

<sup>55</sup> Anonymus. *Brieven over allerlei onderwerpen, voor jonge jufvrouwen, van tien tot vijftien jaren; benevens eenig onderrigt over den uiterlijken vorm der brieven*. Second edition, Rotterdam, 1829, 6.

<sup>56</sup> Letter from Otto Hora Siccama to Angelique Hora Siccama, 4 June 1828, NA, CHS, inv. nr. 91.

<sup>57</sup> Letter from Otto Hora Siccama to Angelique Hora Siccama, 27 July 1828, NA, CHS, inv. nr. 91.

In Otto's opinion, a woman's sloppy handwriting indicated a careless character. Maybe the outward impression of letters was indeed more important for women. In any case, the social rules of letter writing concerning handwriting and the expression of emotions seem to have been stricter for girls and women than for men.

Nevertheless, the similarities between boys' and girls' correspondence outweigh the differences. Both were taught the ideal natural style, although women had always been seen as mastering this style better than men.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, most of the values children were supposed to learn through correspondence were the same for boys and girls: respect for their parents, time management, progress and neatness. Moreover, gender differences seem only to have come into being during adolescence. Young men then began to learn and to write Latin to each other, whereas the classical world and its languages remained closed to girls.<sup>59</sup> Boys then started writing on typically male themes like smoking and playing chess, using a student vocabulary. At the same time, girls were prepared to be society ladies, and the focus in their correspondence is on social abilities and events like conversation and dinner parties.

The contribution of letter writing to the formation of a bourgeois and gendered identity is striking. At first sight, children seemed free in their choice of subjects on which to write. Topics that testified to the moral and educational development of the child, however, as well as themes which touched upon bourgeois values such as time management and usefulness were preferred. Children's pens were directed inwards, but their letters should present an image appreciated by the outside world.

## **Conclusion**

The very fact that children's letters received compliments and, more often, rebukes, combined with the publication of letter books and advice of boarding-school masters concerning correspondence, indicates that the ability to write letters was not a skill every child possessed naturally. Paradoxically, teachers, but mostly parents and other relatives thought they could teach, that is, artificially develop, the ideal of a natural style and of confidentiality in the exchange of letters between parents and children.

Enlightenment pedagogy, which encouraged respect for the individual child in an atmosphere of parental confidentiality, had clearly reached Dutch upper-class parents. The analysis of letter-writing ideals and practices shows that children were supposed to write as children with an individual character and in a natural style. The concept of naturalness was a familiar concept in letter books that theorized the concept of the perfect letter. In practice, however, confidentiality, individuality and naturalness did not mean that the child was completely free in composing letters. A natural style could, to be sure, be contrasted with artificiality, but could also signify bourgeois decency. Another sense, moreover, was "to write as a child".

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<sup>58</sup> Steedman, C. "A woman writing a letter." In *Epistolary selves*, 111–133.

<sup>59</sup> Ong, W. "Latin language study as a Renaissance puberty rite." In idem, *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology*. Ithaca, 1971: 113–141.

Parents thus had some discretion in defining concepts as “naturalness” or “confidentiality”. Sometimes their children had different ideas on the meaning of these notions. Parents could promote confidential letters written in an individual and natural style, but at the same time censure children’s letters that were composed too freely or lacked reverence and coherence. The stress on sincerity and truthfulness was repeated desperately again and again, as if the repetition itself could attain the openness. Beneath the surface of confidentiality, childishness and naturalness, each parent showed to value deference and neatness in style, and topics that testified to the child’s moral and intellectual progress. Upper-middle-class parents found a solution to the ambiguous bourgeois “pedagogic double ideal” by defining confidentiality, childishness and naturalness implicitly as “appropriate for polite society”.

Children’s correspondence was meant to be proof of the individuality of the child, but in practice this was illusory: a child was first and foremost considered as a person who had to be socialized into the values of the upper classes. Boys and girls should learn the rules of polite society. One of those rules was to show bourgeois values by writing letters. Studying correspondence as a social practice discloses these values. This focus, moreover, highlights the importance of letter writing as a pedagogical tool.