

Early Modern delegated writing: A case of intra-writer variation or a more complex phenomenon?

Apart from literacy rates and reading and writing acquisition, the actual writing practices of the past, among which the phenomenon of delegated writing, belong to a history of literacy. Delegated writing occurred when illiterate or partly literate individuals wanted to keep in contact with relatives at distance and had to rely on the assistance of professional or social scribes. The details of this process and the role the sender of a letter and its actual, usually unknown, scribe played, often remain unclear, although different scenarios may be assumed. Lyons (2013; 2014) explored scenarios for delegated writing in France, Italy and Spain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focussing on the writing of ordinary people during the First World War and in the age of mass migration. For the Dutch language area, we have the opportunity of delving further back in time by exploring the late-seventeenth-century part of the *Letters as Loot (LAL)* corpus. This corpus previously allowed us to establish linguistic differences between autographs and non-autographs (Rutten & van der Wal 2014). For a detailed view of the delegated writing process, however, the *LAL* corpus also provides us with instances of two types of letters written by the same, identified, female (!) scribes: their own letters and their delegated ones. First of all, it is fascinating to discover that, despite their generally lower literacy rate, women appear to function as delegated writers for others. Secondly, comparing the two kinds of letters, we will be able to establish characteristics of Early Modern delegated writing. Thirdly, the comparison will allow us to determine whether the delegated letters are cases of intra-writer variation or whether they should be considered as a more complex phenomenon of collaborative writing.

References

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