Transcript: Historical Classics
Episode 6: Isabella de Moerloose

In this episode, we explore the work of Isabella de Moerloose, who lived at the end of the 17th century. After the Disaster Year of 1672, the Dutch Republic had a stadtholder again, but it remained wary of the threat posed by Louis XIV. De Moerloose, however, paid no heed to politics. Her autobiography, which she calls a Treatise of Peace, reveals a woman who speaks candidly about relationships and her body. As she writes:
"I have recorded the essence of the matter to show how one makes whores, not to teach how to make them, but to speak freely in the words of Jesus."
Not a manual on becoming a sex worker, then, but a plea not to condemn the writer. We will hear more about her work shortly, in the modern translations by Lize Spit and later in her own 17th-century words, read by Karen Hollewand. Who was De Moerloose? And what makes her work so extraordinary? Did she experience a #MeToo moment before its time? And how did she respond?

Thank you for listening. Beside me is Lize Spit, writer, columnist, and writing teacher. Lize, it's wonderful to have you here!

Lize Spit
Thank you.

Fleur Speet
Also joining us is Karen Hollewand, a lecturer in early modern history at the University of Groningen. Welcome, Karen!

Karen Hollewand
Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

Fleur
Together with Lieke van Deinsen, you are writing Vrouwenzaad: The Extraordinary Life of Isabella de Moerloose. So, yes, that's why you're here. She was a Flemish author, born in Ghent. What was life like for women back then?

Karen
Isabella was born in 1661 in Ghent. She grew up in a family of textile merchants. She initially worked in her parents' shop. Then, in her late teens, she was expected to marry. But for her, that was less of a priority. She actually wanted to join a religious community, perhaps as a beguine, or maybe as a teacher. Women did have some freedom of movement and choices in life. But by her early twenties, she was expected to be settled.

Fleur
And she wasn't.

Karen
No, she wasn't. In her book, we see the struggles. There was a lot of trouble at home, and many arguments with her mother about it. At one point, there was a young man who wanted to marry her, but her mother refused. She spent time in various convents, but ultimately, she couldn't handle authority, so she had to leave. And yes, that kept happening. She kept pushing the boundaries of what the Catholic clergy would allow.

Fleur
You mentioned the book, Treatise of Peace, 660 pages long. We'll learn more about her life and work later. But first, Lize, when you first read her work, what struck you immediately?

Lize
Perhaps her candour. Even though it's sometimes written with a certain detachment, you're immediately drawn into her struggles. It's clear she wasn't someone who lived easily. She thought deeply about everything. I was lucky to receive fragments that Lieke and Karen had already translated or summarised, so I quickly understood what I was reading. The book is quite chaotic in places, so a lot of groundwork had been done for me. I could easily choose which fragments to translate—there was so much material, so many themes emerging from the book.

Fleur
Can you tell us about some of those themes?

Lize
Yes, I focused on what we'd now call #MeToo. Her literal determination to prove that she was harassed by men, that it wasn't her choice to be labelled a whore by others. That's what it's about—clearing her name. That was one theme. She felt betrayed and almost wrote a revenge tract to put men in their place. But there were also many passages about faith and her spiritual journey, which was another major theme. There was also a section that went much further into sexuality—I remember we included a fragment about that later. But what was it about again?

Karen
Ah, it was about her in the bedroom with her husband, and what happened there with violence and sexuality—those were very intense fragments.

Lize
Yes.

Karen
And I think we also sent you something about her relationship with her mother as she grew up. Beautiful passages.

Lize
Yes, yes, because as a child, she was often sickly, almost possessed by God, so to speak. Those were also very beautiful fragments.

Fleur
And Karen, why did she want to write this book?

Karen
Partly for the reasons Lize mentioned. She wants to tell her life story to clear her name. The book consists of three parts. We see this especially in the third book, where it's a chronological account from when she becomes a widow until the end of her life. She writes to clear her name of her encounters with men. But she starts

writing because she has a vision of life and religion that she can't share anywhere else. The convents don't want to listen to her. The Church—neither Catholics nor Protestants—won't listen. She feels: if only you understood what I mean, we could discuss it. She can't do it orally, so she writes it down. That's how she starts this book.

Fleur
Why does she want to talk about it so badly?

Karen
Because she feels she has something to contribute to society and the world. People don't understand how people interact, how they raise their children, how men and women are in a relationship. She also sees herself as a kind of messenger of God. She says: if we look at it this way, things will go much better.

Fleur
Then there will be peace.

Karen
Then there will be peace. Yes, and she really sees herself as someone who must speak. We see this especially in the first book. She starts in a very religious way, and eventually, it becomes more of a stream of consciousness about her own life, and religion plays a much smaller role in what she writes.

Fleur
Yes, Lize. Would you like to read a passage? But is that from the first part, Karen?

Karen
No, this is from the third part of the book. She is a widow. In Zeeland, she starts talking about her writings. First, she hasn't published anything yet. She even sends her writings to the classis because she wants the church council to read them. And they're not happy about it. Eventually, she is expelled from Zeeland, banished in 1694. And yes, she says something about what happens to her afterwards.

Fleur
Go ahead, Lize.

Lize
In Goes, where I travelled to retrieve my belongings, it turned out someone had stolen them. It must have been my niece Lena, whom I had taken in to help, or Verkat, whom I didn't trust anyway.
Once in Gouda, I received a letter from Verkat addressing me in a distant tone, as if I were a stranger. My belongings, he wrote, now belonged to him, and if anyone asked, he would say he had a claim to them because I had slept with him. When I said he would have to prove it, he replied that it wouldn't be difficult, for the whole world knew I was a whore who slept with anyone.
How would you prove that, I asked.
He answered: with your writings.
I told him he would find no proof in my writings. In them, I explain that it's all gossip, spread by a disappointed suitor and two men of ill repute who visited me.
It is precisely to clear myself of this stain that I have begun to describe all my encounters and conversations with men, including the meeting with the young man and the Lord of Goes (I only slept in his house to avoid spending the cold night outside), and about the Lord of Friesland (whom I later heard had a bad reputation!).

Fleur
You end the sentence with an exclamation mark, as if to say: he had a bad reputation, just to be very clear.

Lize
Yes, yes, yes, yes, that's lovely.

Fleur
She wants to make it very clear that she's defending her honour, but Karen, did she succeed?

Karen
Oh.

Fleur
Haha.

Karen
I don't think so. As the fragments show, and the many fragments that Lize has so beautifully translated, as well as the rest of her book—well, she is sometimes unchaste, at least she has sex and sexuality outside of marriage. And in this time, just as in ours, you risk being called a whore. And yes, she does show how that sometimes happened, how she sometimes fell for sweet talk, but she does it, and that's also in her book. So even if many people who slander her had read it—which I ultimately don't think they did—she still doesn't fully clear herself.

Fleur
You say: I don't think so. It seems as if she's also defending herself against gossip. So you'd think there must have been gossip, otherwise she wouldn't need to say it.

Karen
Yes, there certainly would have been gossip. Yes, that's true.

Fleur
Yes.

Karen
Yes. I'm saying that those who gossip wouldn't have read her book.

Fleur
Oh, I see. That's why she didn't clear her name for those people.

Karen
No, I don't think so. Yes, the book probably gave her an even worse reputation, I think.

Fleur
Yes, yes, we'll come back to that. Can we hear a passage from the original?

Karen
Yes, certainly.
Then I came to get my things. Some were stolen, or they were diminished, first by a niece I had taken in out of love to help, and then by another whom I had trusted.
There I found a letter from when I came from Friesland to Gouda, in which he addressed me as a stranger or suitor, and if I demanded my rights. So he was my friend, and my goods were his. And if anyone asked how they became his, he would say he had won them by sleeping with me. When I said he would have to prove it, he said he could, because I had said that opportunity preserves itself. And it needs no creature to preserve it. And he added: You are a whore for all men, the whole world knows it, or all who know you.

I asked him how he proved that. He answered: with your writings. To that I said: it is not so. I thought you had other proofs. And I remembered how I once had a suitor who was a bit frivolous and thought it might come from there. Also that I once had a visit from a man or two who had bad reputations. And to clear myself of that stain, I thought it good to put these encounters and negotiations on paper, including this one with a man from Vlissingen and the Lord of Goes, with whom I left the ship before the gates were open to avoid the cold of the night in his house, and about the Lord of Friesland, whom I heard had a bad reputation, after I had associated with him, and how they came to me.

Fleur
Yes, you added the exclamation mark yourself.

Lize
Yes, yes!

Fleur
Yes, because tell me, what was the biggest change you made?

Lize
I made it more readable for today's reader. Just with sentences that are complete and punctuation... more logical. I also left out bits here and there, sentences that I couldn't translate, even with the help of Lieke and Karen, I didn't know exactly what they meant. So I played it safe and didn't translate them. I left out a lot of conjunctions and then, and so, and so on. I also tried to put myself in her shoes when she wrote this. So sometimes I adjusted the tone a bit, for example, making her a bit angrier, adding exclamation marks here and there. And sometimes I had to search for a long time for the meaning of certain words—what word did she just read? Persueren?

Fleur
Yes, persueren.

Lize
Such a beautiful word. And there's also a lot of French in the text, so I often had to look in a French dictionary: how do we use that word now? I really enjoyed searching for the exact meaning of how she actually wanted to use that word.

Fleur
Yes, how lovely! You mention French words. Was it normal for a lot of French to be used? Even then, because I know that in the 18th century, French was almost the first language.

Karen
Certainly, yes. And especially in Flanders, of course. But we know that Isabella, in her teenage years, spent a year away from home to learn French. So she knows it's a language that's very close to her, that she really learned to converse and write in.

Fleur
And Lize, what did you find most exciting about translating?

Lize
I sent a first version, and I hadn't yet dared to make it my own. It was still too literal. And I found it most exciting to do justice to Isabella and not misinterpret anything. Precisely because she starts from: I want people to understand me, I want people to believe me. I didn't want to twist her words or write something wrong, because then I'd be doing the same thing. While I really wanted to understand her. So that was something I often struggled with: am I doing it well enough? Am I doing justice to her writing?

And what I really enjoyed translating is that her work also consists of very beautiful scenes, in which she, because she tries to provide proof of: this is how it happened, she uses literal dialogues and then says: he says this, and then I say that, and then he says this, and then I say that. So I made those dialogues a bit more lively, but she's really trying to recount a situation as realistically as possible, which makes it a very beautiful scene. And you also see how she tries to hold her own as a woman, often in a world of men. And I found that very exciting to read and to make into a well-flowing scene. Anyway, they have beautiful expressions. Even in the old Dutch she just read from the ship...

Fleur
It's used as a metaphor.

Lize
Yes: where I left the ship before the gates were open to avoid the cold of the night in his house. Yes, that's actually very beautiful. But it does go so far that she actually shared the ship with him.

Karen
Yes, that's very beautiful. Look, we're talking about Zeeland. And if you look at maps of Zeeland, they're all still islands, so there's a lot of shipping, and people share a ship, because it's not your private ship. That's only for the very high nobility. So you share a ship together. And what I can deduce from this is that she arrived in a town. Late in the evening, for example. She had nowhere else to go, or the city gates were not yet open or already closed. He had a house, a place where she could sleep, and it was not unusual in this time for people to share a room, a house, even a bedroom or a bed with a stranger. But the fact that she does it with an unknown man is perhaps not good.

Fleur
Later in the book, she tells about all the men she had relationships with. But I'll go back in this series, because Tesselschade Roemers was already writing about passion buried in the soul in the early 17th century, and Johanna Hobius wrote a love poem to her husband. But as openly and passionately as De Moerloose... perhaps Anna Bijns comes close, but then we're already two centuries further on. How unique was this openness, this honesty in this era?

Karen
Well, especially in this form. Because you're talking about poetry. There, you have more room for a love poem or a marriage poem... But this is a... It actually starts as a religious work, and she shows how love is in her body, how she feels the passions, how she gets a fever from love, and how she is sometimes almost possessed by God. That is unique in the way she writes it down. Because it's always very open. She has no writing education, she's not advised to follow anyone. These are her experiences. And well, sometimes she's completely overwhelmed by that love or passion. She also simply enjoys sharing a bed with men because she likes it and sometimes can't resist. That comes through very strongly, and in that, yes, that openness is unique, because it could get her into enormous trouble. That she has sexuality outside of marriage. Many people did that, even in the 17th century. But officially, it's not allowed. She could be arrested and prosecuted for it. That she not only describes it but also describes it so physically, yes, I don't know any other examples of that.

Fleur
And isn't she afraid of being mocked? Because I know that Clara Gijben wrote in '56 that she was very afraid of being mocked. But she had a role model, she had Katharina Lescailje, and then she thought: well, if she can do it, then I dare too. Could it be that she didn't feel that fear?

Karen
That's really character, I think. Isabella always goes a step too far. So often you read and think: if you leave now, if you withdraw from the discussion, if you leave the church council now, it will turn out well. But she has such a drive to tell her story. She's so convinced of her own right, yes, that self-confidence, that she also has the right

to engage in that conversation, to tell her story, and at the moment she starts writing, she's already banished, she's already had to leave Ghent. Her husband has died. She's already quarreled with almost everyone. So I also think she's past the point where she thinks: you know what, I'm just going to tell everything. And this is my story. Fear that people will read this, I can't detect that in her. No.

Fleur
No, and so no modesty topos anymore?

Karen
No, Isabella is many things, but not modest. No. I think that's one of the nicest things. Because if she had been, she would never have written this down, never have published it, and we would never have had it.
And I'm not saying that after the publication of her book, she doesn't eventually suffer a setback, but she writes somewhere about changes being frightening. She's afraid she's not doing right by her relationship with God. She's afraid she's not treating her children well. There are fears in her life. She's not strong in everything, but in the writing that she's allowed to make her point, she's thoroughly convinced.

Fleur
Very determined. Lize, could you read a longer passage? Then we can experience it too. Do we need to say anything more about it as an introduction?

Karen
This is one of those situations she describes to clear her name. And she lives here in Goes. We know where she lives: Vlasmarkt number six. Unfortunately, the house is no longer there. We know exactly where it was. She has a textile shop. And yes, then? Then things happen with men, for example with suitor Willem.

Lize
Willem had slipped into my house against my will when, in the middle of the day, I unlocked the front door, convinced that it was a friend in need who was knocking. Without asking, he forced his way through the doorway, pushed into the front room, and locked the door behind him. There I stood, looking at him, not knowing what to say, so overwhelmed was I. I was forced to sit down.
How can you be so rude as not to offer me a chair, he said, I've travelled all the way from Middelburg.
I felt compelled to laugh, however bad I felt. It's all right, I said, who brought you here?
He answered: you, with your seductive tricks.
Am I so seductive without realising it, I said. I must look in the mirror, and I stood up. At that moment, he pulled me onto his lap. Hey, behave yourself, I said, and I pulled away.
You want this too, said Willem.
Have you asked me then?
No, he said. If I asked you, you wouldn't dare admit it.
If that's what you think, it's better you let me go, otherwise this will ruin my reputation, and I'll be that scandalous woman who's been flirting with a man again.
He said: I wouldn't be ashamed of it myself, you're worth it to me.
Are you so shameless, I asked. I must go, people are waiting for me in the back room.
Who then, he wanted to know. I want to see with my own eyes who's waiting for you.
You're taking such a bossy tone, I said, are you the master of the house here?
And yet I want to go into the back room, he said, and he pulled me along.
Go to the back room, I said. But then I'll try to slip out the front door to tell the neighbours I have an intruder in the house.
Please, don't do that, he said. I'm not leaving here until you've given me your yes.
I burst out laughing. Here, get married, without witnesses?
Yes, why do we need witnesses, aren't we our own masters?
You might be, because you're big and strong, but I certainly am not, I'm just a frail girl, I said. At that, he grabbed my arm and said: you're not so frail, no one would dare call you a bedbug.

Dear man, I said, if you think you can compare me to a flea, to vermin, you're making a wrong judgement. I'm feeling a bit weak now, but if I weren't sick, you'd sing a different tune if you grabbed me like that again. I'd gouge your eyes out. Leave women alone, and don't touch them unless it's with their consent, otherwise they might just tear your testicles off.
He recoiled. Madam, he said, I don't believe you're such an aggressive person.
Again, I couldn't hold back: you only believe that saints can perform miracles, that's clear to see. If you don't believe me, I'll make you experience it firsthand! I could castrate you right here.

Fleur
Well, this isn't exactly #MeToo. There's also a lot of humour in it. Yes, yes, yes, I find that really funny.

Karen and Lize
Yes.

Lize
Also how she portrays the man, with his little ways. Actually, they're all very transparent excuses and questions. She writes it very aptly, I think. Yes, he doesn't come off well.

Karen
And here you see again a piece of self-confidence, because you also see the fear. Oh dear, he's inside, has locked the door. Now I have to... Well, she also has to laugh a lot. That's also a kind of self-confidence that she shows. What are you saying now?
She knows very well who she is and that she doesn't want it and that laughing also makes him think: oh, she's not just angry with me. But it does show: I'm here in my own house, who do you think you are? It's not going to happen. I don't want it at all.

Fleur
It's also a recognisable role. I fear there are still plenty of women today who have to speak to men like this.

Lize
Yes, you can feel that she remains cautious, because she's a woman locked in a house with a man. It's now just a part of a very long fragment, but there's also a moment when you feel she's really scared, but also scared of provoking more aggression. So she tries in all kinds of ways to get out of it without upsetting him too much. So at one point she says: okay, let's get married then, I'll just go get something next door, and then she goes into the next room and locks herself in and puts herself in safety. And then, in the end, the old suitor Willem leaves. And yes, indeed, many tactics that women still use today to get out of such a situation with a man who won't give up, because they're actually just not interested in that person.

Fleur
Actually, she says: I could castrate you right here, but he also says: well, that doesn't interest me so much, or I don't take it seriously, because he keeps going.

Karen
Yes, and it's her fault, because she applied those seductive tricks. So just that alone can, I think... every woman here has experienced that. Just smiling when someone addresses you, or just not immediately ending the conversation. Or just not immediately saying to someone: I don't want to talk to you, but just politely ending the conversation. Being that nice, polite girl. Yes, that's a shame. Hello, you seduced me. You seduced me yourself. You wanted me to come here, you contacted me yourself, et cetera. We see that here again. That he blames her: hey, I came all this way, and that's because of you, so now something's going to happen; it's her fault again. So if the woman doesn't want it after she's gone out to dinner with you: well, I paid for your dinner, so now you have to come home with me. We see that here too.

Fleur
Well, I see. Can you give us an impression of the original?

Karen
Yes, a small part.
I replied: Dear brother, do you want to compare me to a flea? You're making a wrong calculation. I'm not as good as I seem now, when I'm sick and weak. You'd see and feel something else if you grabbed me like that. Who knows if I wouldn't gouge your eyes out, so that you'd learn from that womenfolk. You should never get so close to them unless it's with their consent, or they might unman you.

Fleur
Consent...

Karen
Yes, the word consent.

Lize
Yes, yes, it's nice that it appears there.

Fleur
And that it's now generally accepted. First ask for consent. How would 17th-century people have read this passage?

Karen
It depends on which 17th-century person: the woman or the man. In general, they would have sided with him from the idea: well, you're a widow alone, you're alone at home. Apparently, you invited him in or had contact with him. He even offers to marry you first. Well, that's very decent. So it's clear here that he keeps pressing, but he does it in a very decent way. It's not that he throws her on the bed and does things.
And yet the woman, just as unfortunately today, often has the appearance against her. And that's also here: well, you opened the door for me yourself, didn't you? You let him in yourself, so I think that would have played a role here, and her whole reputation, which she herself also indicates. My reputation will suffer: at this moment, she already doesn't have a good reputation. We don't know anything about him, what kind of man he was. Maybe he had a very bad reputation, but that would certainly have played a role here. What they already know about her and about him.

Fleur
And if it came to a trial.

Karen
Yes, then the neighbours are asked, and then it's especially said: you didn't scream, did you? Did you resist? Do you have bruises, does she have them? Yes, if you don't loudly say that you don't want it, that won't be proof that she didn't want it. And in this case, she luckily gets away, so that wasn't necessary. This wouldn't have cleared her.

Fleur
Now, that was possible for women. At the end of the 16th century, there are already the first reports of women who accused their husbands of rape or beating. In the Republic, you weren't allowed to beat a woman; the punishment was banishment. And even at the Court of Holland, they often mediated: well, try again, especially in a marriage that went wrong and where the man had beaten a woman: go apart for a while, but then see each other again, talk with family too. They always wanted to settle it amicably and resolve it, but they were often surprisingly on the side of the woman.

Karen
Certainly. Yes, and if it comes to the Court of Holland, that means they also have a case, and often those are women who have a family behind them who can pay for it, who believe them. Reputation and witnesses are important, so if people have heard her, if people have experienced it, if she has people who will stand up for her, then the woman absolutely has a very strong case. And then it sometimes goes in the woman's favour. But in this case, without witnesses. Yes, it's his word against hers, and then she wouldn't be believed, I think.

Fleur
No, but I found it very remarkable that women did indeed know how to find their way to a notary or to, I think it's called the vroedschap or the schepenbank, the court at the time, and in that way tried to get justice.

Karen
Yes, and at risk to their own reputation. Even women who are raped, everyone knows: she didn't want it. Who will still marry a woman who is no longer a virgin and to whom that has happened? So even if she gets justice in the trial, she still has the stigma of the girl, the woman to whom that happened. Even today, it takes an enormous amount of courage to come forward and have such a statement made. Because the notary has no confidentiality, so it can easily spread throughout the city.

Fleur
Yes.

Karen
So yes, all respect to women who dare and dared to do that now and then.

Fleur
Yes, while—and I also find this remarkable—rapes also appeared very often in plays and such. Brederode, Vondel, Hooft. Gijsbrecht even ends with the rape of a nun. And by showing that horror, Vondel supposedly tried to awaken virtue and patriotism. I don't quite understand that, but it even had a kind of function at the time, in literature.

Karen
It's a very different time. A much more violent society where so much violence and such things are much more open. And it's about power, often in such rapes. So here, of a nun, it's about Protestantism versus Catholicism. In war situations, it's about when women are also raped. Again, the worst is not just taking the city, not just killing the men, but also raping the women, then it's often about a power relationship. And to make it all even worse than just the violence among men. So that's often the function. Yes, it's horrible.

Fleur
Yes, to what extent did De Moerloose... would she have known about those plays in which rapes were performed?

Karen
Yes, she grows up in the upper middle class, lower elite, and in Middelburg and in Goes, she's just part of the cultural life. She doesn't say a word about it, but she would certainly have been aware of it.
But rape is... Sometimes you just think: you're just raped. But she never uses that term, and she actually never talks about it, which is interesting. That she maybe also thinks: people are going to read this, that she doesn't want that label, or that she still thinks to herself: well, maybe I wanted it somewhere. She never goes that far.

Fleur
I read somewhere that it's also other terms, that rape is actually not called rape, but...

Karen
Yes, in any case, De Moerloose never says: I had sex with him, and Lize knows that too. It's always like that. Even terms that were used then, she doesn't use. So always: then I just did it. Or fiat, I'll just do it. Yes, she never really gives details.

Lize
It's almost a shame, because you build up a whole... with the handsome young man, she's really in love with him. We read pages in which she tells how she loses all ability to write, and eventually it happens. We're so looking forward to it. And then in one little sentence, she does it. But she never describes the sexual, she doesn't write that down. Then we're not allowed to look anymore.

Fleur
She only says that she spreads her legs, right?

Lize
Yes, yes, he lies in my lap or something. Yes.

Fleur
Yes. But it was called lewdness or impurity?

Karen
Yes.

Fleur
Oh, well. With that young man she's in love with, to continue on that, it doesn't actually end well, does it?

Lize
Yes, he eventually stays to sleep in the house. She lies in her own bed, he lies in another room, but at one point he pretends to be dying and lures her close to him. And yes, it's not clear, because you also get the feeling that she actually wants it.
Does she describe this now to clear herself of: I did it because he was so bad off and I ultimately wanted to help him, or did she actually also have a kind of desire for him and thought: okay? But yes, I don't really know myself, but it is the case that it's a very strange situation in which he actually doesn't dare say what he really wants from her and then tries to trick her into it, and she ultimately gives in.
But he betrays her and ultimately delivers her to gossip and hurts her very much.

Karen
I think with the handsome young man, what plays a role is the way it happens: he pretends to be sick and then says: if you don't sleep with me, I'll die. And while she perhaps hopes for a marriage proposal or at least promises, or at least a more romantic situation, he pretends to die.
But she also has a real intellectual connection with him, and that makes it so hard that he betrays her, because they're working on her writings together, and she's in love with him. He has met her brother. He's been living in a house to help her for a while, so she actually trusts him completely. And then he tries to get her into bed in that way. I think: she probably wanted it herself, but the way it happens makes her doubt: are you making a fool of me, what's actually happening here? Yes, you can all read that in the fragment. That's really one of the most exciting moments in the book. Because you think: what's going on here?

Fleur
Yes, we won't read it now because it's really too long, and you have to read it in the whole context, otherwise it's actually lost. But it's also wonderful to read it yourself, or wonderful, at least special, that the way it happens is not the way you would want it, and that makes it so poignant and so terrible, and I find that very recognisable.

Karen
Yes, and certainly also: Isabella is already a widow at this point. It's good to say: she's not a young girl who's a virgin and knows nothing. She knows well what happens in the bedroom, and she also knows what she has to lose in terms of reputation, so she also has to weigh: yes, I might really want this now, but there's a chance he'll go out and tell everyone I did this. I already don't have a good reputation in Goes, but then even less. And if I ever want to get married again or if I ever want to rebuild my good name, then I can't use that story. So what she wants physically. And ultimately, she does do it with someone else she can trust, but that trust, yes, she must have built that up. And with him, she's ultimately not entirely sure, but in the moment of passion, yes, she does it anyway.

Fleur
I think it's very beautiful, because you're saying now: she ultimately does it with someone else. So she has a lot of desire. She really wants it.

Karen
Yes, certainly.

Fleur
And she doesn't hide that at all. She's actually: is it a kind of pride? How does she deal with that, Lize? Can you say something about that?

Lize
Yes, she writes about everything in a very physical way. Also about her being in love, but also about that desire. And I get the feeling that she's just fearless in that. Or yes, not modest, just: that she just dares to write it down as it is.

Fleur
I find that so brave, and yes, with that you also run the risk of being called a slut. And certainly if you say that today: well, I just feel like having sex and I do it with this one and that one, then the judgement is ready.

Karen
Then I must say that it fits very well with the image of sexuality of man versus woman. And especially in this period. Because the idea we have now that the woman is passive, actually never wants it, comes from the 19th century, where the man is the one who wants. In the 17th century, it's the other way around, so in the 17th century, the woman is seen as: you have to be careful with her, because she always wants it. As a legacy of Eve who seduced Adam. So I also think that's why she doesn't feel shame about it. And that fits very well with the image of the nature of man and woman. And that's why that woman is of course also so dangerous according to religion. Because yes, she might just pounce on you, so it's not strange in this period that she describes that openly, that she also goes along with it. Actually, the woman must constantly restrain herself, and it's also written in many educational books: you must keep that woman busy with embroidery, or you must give her something to do, otherwise she will give in to that lust. Or you must marry her as soon as possible, because then those lusts can be kept within bounds.

Fleur
Is that actually what men are afraid of in women?

Karen
Certainly. Yes, you have to tame them in some way. Yes, be careful. And that's also where the idea comes from that you see with suitor Willem: yes, she seduced me, and he would certainly have gotten agreement on that, because the woman.

Fleur and Lize
Ooh.

Karen
If a woman just looks at you, then you can... then...

Fleur
Then is that already an invitation?
Karen
That is already an invitation, yes.

Fleur
Because she wants to, because that's the assumption.

Karen
And she can't do anything about that. But yes, it is her fault if it does happen.

Fleur
Yes, what were all those people so busy with all the time, with Eve and Adam who were messing around with that apple and that snake. Because Johanna Hobius also talks about it, and she says: Adam, he wasn't so smart because he was responsible for his wife, he should have been wise. Instead of letting himself be seduced by that woman. So there are all kinds of different interpretations. The guilt of Eve keeps coming back.

Karen
It's the basis of how they understand the world. So in this time, you also have a scientific revolution, and you get many more ideas about the world that don't just come from the Bible. But as I always tell my students: the Bible is always there. It must always match the Bible. Yes, that's how you have to understand life: the Word of God. So it must always correspond. And if everyone starts interpreting that themselves, let alone a woman who isn't educated, who isn't in the church, who is a widow, not married. Yes, then it becomes anarchy. So you have to limit that. This is how we understand it, and we're not going to discuss it. Yes, that's what she wants, so that's where it goes wrong.

Fleur
I suddenly think: Merry Wiesner-Hanks has written a book, Women and the Reformations, and in it she explains how many women were responsible for spreading the faith, how many also travelled overseas in this time. And they went to Christianise. All kinds of places where the VOC and the like went, those women went along to preach the faith, and they were believed. I find that remarkable, that a woman like Isabella de Moerloose is dismissed by the classis: well, she's not allowed to speak, but at the same time, there are also stories of women who did have a very important voice in that faith. So yes, sometimes I think about history. Everything happens at the same time, or something.

Karen
And I do think: that woman was at some point very independent. They can do their own thing, but they've already proven their obedience to the religion, to the clergy, so to speak. Before they go into that world. And Isabella tries that: in various convents, she tries to live. Maybe a religious community, but she always runs into that authority. She doesn't let herself be told what to do. And so she's an unguided projectile for them. So yes, for them, she's far too dangerous to join them and play a role. So no, she really tries, but that's not how she's made.

Fleur
In a way, you can also see it as a compliment, especially because they have the idea: she's dangerous, she can be dangerous. She can actually cause a kind of popular uprising, so to speak.

Karen
Yes, they can't handle her. I sometimes think: if a Netflix series were made of it, this would be the scene. She sends her pieces to the church council, to the classis, and she insists on coming by. Not allowed at all. She just comes by. And then at one point they say to her: you have to leave now, because we're done. And she doesn't leave. So then the whole church council just leaves. So she's standing there alone, so persistent is she. She says: I'm really not going to be silenced. Alone against all those men, and they get so angry that they just leave. So yes, she was unmanageable for them.
Fleur
Yes, wonderful. Well, we already talked about how much power there is in that text, and Lize, you briefly mentioned humour, but I'd like to go into that a bit more. Does that humour also make her more powerful in some way?

Lize
Yes, I think so, because with it she shows, especially when you read it, that she's often above the situation, but also often above the men she describes. Actually, in hindsight, she sees through them or something. She doesn't make it ridiculous, that would be a big word now. But she does take their measure a bit. For example, when she says that the old suitor Willem comes by and says: You have seductive qualities. And then she says: how so? Then I have to look in the mirror, because I've really never seen those seductive qualities in myself. That's funny, and it also makes him a bit ridiculous in that text, I think.

Fleur
Did you also find those the most fun parts to translate?

Lize
Yes, actually. Because there was also just a good story in it. Sometimes, when it's more about faith or something, it can suddenly get a bit vague, and then it was harder for me to really get something out of it, to get something clear out of it. When she writes about writing, she's also very strong and very clear about why she writes. The urge to write that book, she talks about that. At the end, when the handsome young man betrays her, she also writes about what it does to people who damage her trust. Then she really writes:
This is the punishment I inflict on all my enemies: against them I have no tongue to speak, no eyes to look at them, nor ears to hear them speak. If they say something, I ask those present: what is that stranger saying there? And I will never show my sorrow, I will maintain good manners at every meeting, and remain kind, until they regret what they have done, and lament that they have lost me, their most reliable and kindest friend.
I find that such a beautiful passage and also heartbreaking because she knows very well what she's worth. But she's also repeatedly disappointed in people who just betray her. Or who gossip about her, or about the intimate relationship they share, which they share with the outside world. Those were very beautiful passages to translate, because you also just feel her sorrow and her anger at the same time as a lot of emotion and loneliness.

Fleur
Karen, you mentioned at the beginning that she tries to find a connection with various religious movements. I think she even tried with the Labadists, where Anna Maria van Schurman once sat. But did she ever find a connection with anyone?

Karen
During her marriage, although that was certainly not a happy marriage, I think she did find an intellectual equal there. That conversation, that debate, she did have. Ultimately, she also finds it, I think, with the printer who eventually prints her book. Against the wishes of his wife. She doesn't like that. With him, she also has a kind of intellectual connection, and he doesn't want anything else from her. And I think she appreciates that.
And then there's Verkat, who came by briefly in the earlier part. That ultimately goes wrong. They do make up partially, but I think she would have liked a family of her own, and to have published her book and had a little

school at home, just a quiet life. I don't know if that was ever in the cards, but her own family, and that never worked out. So in that respect, I think that... And she's already experienced so much when she writes about how she deals with her father. She's already had to push so many people aside for her own mental health that there's certainly loneliness in it. But unfortunately, I don't think she ever finds it in her life.

Fleur
No, because what actually happens after the publication of the book?

Karen
Yes, after publication? We lose track of her. Then she publishes it, yes, then... It's censored, and in Nijmegen, for example, books are burned. But yes, we're still looking for the original trial. That's probably been lost. That does have to do with her book. She's officially arrested because of a little school she has in Amstelveen, and she's officially banished from Zeeland and Holland, so she's not allowed to be there at all. But yes, she's teaching children, and that's probably the straw that breaks the camel's back, so she's arrested and imprisoned.

Fleur
First in the spinhuis.

Karen
Yes, and then the dolhuis. After the dolhuis, we lose track of her in history.

Fleur
What are the spinhuis and the dolhuis actually?

Karen
The spinhuis is the workhouse for women, so women are put to work there. These can be beggars, sex workers who are arrested and have to be there for a month, two months, three months. Repeat offenders. We have a student who wrote a wonderful thesis about how some women come back eight times in thirty years. But really to put them to work.
So they have to spin, they have to work with their hands, because if you just do good, honest work, you'll automatically become a better person. So you have the men's workhouse and the women's workhouse. That's the Spinhuis. There she even ends up in solitary confinement.
And then she goes from the Spinhuis to the Dolhuis, the psychiatric institution, the madhouse. Well, in the early modern period, you don't want to think about what that must have been like, because there were really, yes, also people who weren't right in the head back then, and with all the consequences, who were simply chained to the wall. But what's special is, not many people come out of there alive. And she is released again in 1712. Yes, so ultimately she comes out of there, and then she disappears into history. We don't know what happens to her after that.

Lize
How old is she when she comes out?

Karen
That's 1712, so she's 51. It's just like: that can also happen today. There are plenty of people who just disappear. Yes, and maybe she got married, has a different last name, then you lose track of her too. Who knows. On the one hand, it's also nice, everyone can invent their own ending.

Fleur
A lot of those women are of course shrouded in mystery. What hasn't changed, I think, is how women constantly measure each other. The crab bucket and women were already then the enforcers of social norms, for example by controlling the sexuality of other women, and that's centuries old, we still do that. What do you

notice about that control of women in this text, Lize? Do you really notice that they're busy with that? Or how does Isabella relate to women?

Lize
When I put myself in her shoes, I did get the feeling that she's one of the boys, or one of everything. Yes, that she actually wants to measure herself against the men and not against the women. She also doesn't write much about other women. Actually, in the parts I've read, it's mostly about men.
Also because she identifies with them, I think, or has more to do with them. But actually, I have a passage where it's literally mentioned, where he forms his judgement and other women take the measure. That takes place in the passage about Willem who forces his way into her house, and she says:
I never open my front door to strangers without first checking from the window who's knocking, especially on Sundays when most people are in church. (They should call them sin-days, given the amount of wandering about of girls and servants who see their chance to behave unchastely when the people are away from home, without anyone being able to call them to account for it. Some even ask for money! They should receive many blows, even if all these things are to be understood, and they arise from people's nature.)
I find it so beautiful that she actually forms her own judgement about how scandalous it is.

Fleur
That also gives food for thought. Maybe she herself would also on those Sundays...

Karen
Yes, another warning not to see her as a modern woman. There's still a lot of early modern religion in her: well, you really don't do that. And that's absolutely not allowed. So she has very modern ideas, but this shows again that she's really a woman of her time.

Fleur
And that she takes the measure of women, insofar as she condemns other women here.

Karen
There's no woman in Isabella's life with whom she doesn't come into conflict. She's indeed, as Lize says, one of the boys. That's difficult to say something about, because she also has a reason to write about these men, because she wants to clear her name, so there may also have been very good relationships with women that she simply doesn't describe.
But about her niece, with whom she has a big falling out, who lives in her house for a long time. She has terrible arguments with her mother. Later, there's a woman who sells things for her in the shop. Also arguments. When she stays with people. With a couple, she standardly has arguments with the woman because, well, Isabella can't keep her mouth shut. Then she'll tell that woman how to do the laundry, how to raise the children, how to deal with her husband. Yes, I think that's also quite unbearable. But in that respect, she's more on the same wavelength with men than with women. But again, that's what we can gather from her book. She doesn't say much about her relationships with women, except about the relationship with her mother.

Fleur
Yes, so no sisterhood either.

Karen
Perhaps, but it's not to be found. We do know that at one point, a woman comes to pick her up for a week's leave from the Dolhuis. Then that woman takes her and also brings her back nicely. So there may have been sisterhood, but we have little evidence of it.

Fleur
And insofar as she doesn't fit into a line of other female authors, because she also doesn't refer to other female authors. And afterwards, she's never referred to again. So that's why she's of course also been forgotten.

Karen
Absolutely.

Fleur
To what extent can you also say that Isabella fits into a tradition of women who wrote autobiographies at that time, such as Maria Petyt, Clara Tweellinck, and Elisabeth Stroeve?

Karen
Well, on the one hand, yes, because she's also a woman who starts writing her own story and gets it published. On the other hand, they're women we were just talking about who operate within the framework of faith. So sometimes there's a man, someone who—only men can be in the hierarchy of the clergy—who actively reads along. Or at least it's approved, and they're allowed to publish it. And even if it happens more or less individually, the subjects are very different. Isabella writes about menstruation, about sexuality, about men breaking into her house. You don't encounter that in those religious autobiographies.
Her writing style: it's clearly not very well edited. They did their best, including the handsome young man, but at a certain point, it's really a stream of consciousness. The way it's published, that she finances and does it all herself, that's really unique to this story. And a woman who isn't in a convent or not in a... she's Protestant, she converts, but not further. It's not a clear faith or one kind of faith that comes out.

Fleur
Does she actually create her own faith?

Karen
Certainly.

Fleur
Well, Lize. Now that you've delved so deeply into De Moerloose's texts, has she gotten under your skin?

Lize
Yes, yes, certainly. I felt after a while that I really knew her too. You also really have to try to understand it a bit here and there. Yes, how she feels when she writes something down. And I've of course interpreted things. But it was the case that when I was in it, I felt a bit like Isabella too. And if I look back at it or reread it now, I'm still impressed by how she writes and how well she can express herself. Yes, it certainly got under my skin.

Fleur
Does this acquaintance perhaps also change something about your own writing?

Lize
It's more that I admire how open she is, and that it inspires me more to remain so brave myself as a writer. She's actually almost a writing activist or something. Well, yes, almost certainly. And I find that really impressive, and I think: I hope to be able to keep writing myself in such a way that you always really stand for something and fight for something and don't give up. That's very much in her text. And not too much shame, not too much shame.

Fleur
Well, thank you, Lize Spit, for the excellent translation.

Lize
You're welcome.

Fleur
And for the wonderful reading of it. And thanks also to Karen Hollewand for helping to organise all that material and for sharing your knowledge from the research into De Moerloose.

Karen
Thank you for choosing her. I'm curious what she would have thought of it.

Lize
She might have had a lot of comments.

Karen
Oh, well. If she had been present here, you wouldn't have gotten a word in edgewise, I'm sure of that.

Fleur
Yes, wonderful! Well, if you're still curious about the women who also wrote autobiographies, such as Maria Petyt and Cornelia Teellinck, you can listen to our bonus tracks online for extra background and fun facts.
In the next episode, you'll hear about the wonder of Europe, about an author whose plays people trampled each other to see. Tickets were always sold out. In short, about the one and only Lucretia van Merken.