

Griet Reyniers

New Amsterdam's Grand Harlot, 1602-1669

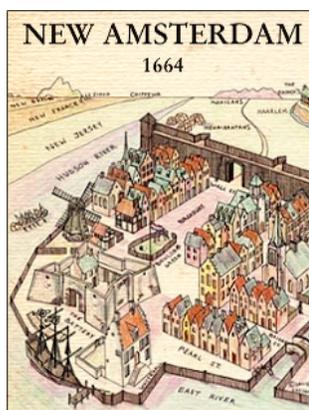
by David Rosen

As the truism goes, prostitution is the oldest profession ... and hookers in the Big Apple date from the earliest Dutch settlement. The city's first madam is reputed to be Griet or Grietje ("Little Pearl") Reyniers, a lively *bawd* or *doxie*. In 1668, when taunted by seamen on a departing sloop with the cry, "Whore! Whore! Two pound butter's whore!" She allegedly responded accordingly: lifting her petticoat, she pointed to her naked backside, replying: "Blaes my daer achterin." Repeatedly assailed by respectable citizens, she thumbed her nose at them, insisting, "I have long been the whore of the nobility, now I want to be the rabble's whore."^{*}

Reyniers was born in Amsterdam (some say Wesel, Germany) in 1602 and died around 1669 in Gravesend, Breuckelen (now Brooklyn). According to some researchers, her name indicates that her family was of Huguenot descent. As a young woman in Amsterdam, she reportedly worked at Peter de Winter's tavern, but was argumentative and was fired for acting discourteously to customers. The tavern mistress claimed to have seen her in a back room, "her petticoat upon her knees." Nevertheless, she was married twice, the first time to Aelbert Egberts, a 20-year-old tailor from Haarlem, in September 1626. A widow in December 1629, she married Anthony

Jansen Van Salee [Jansz], a seaman from Cartagena; some reports say they married while sailing to the New World, while others claim they met and married in New Amsterdam. In May 1647, she is reported still married and the mother of four daughters.

Reyniers sailed to New Amsterdam in '29 aboard the *de Zoutberg* ("Salt Mountain") and, according to some accounts, plied her trade with male passengers and seamen alike. Some aboard were scandalized when Reyniers pulled "the shirts of some of the sailors out of their breeches." In addition to settlers, the ship she sailed on would likely have carried livestock, wagons, plows, tools, clothing, food seeds, firearms and cheap goods for trade.¹



The Fort Amsterdam she found is really unimaginable today. It was a tiny port enclave with a population of about 270 Dutch folk and some Lenape Indians. Over the next three decades, the

town's population grew exponentially, reaching about 1,500 people in 1664 when the English seized it, renaming it New York. A few years before Reyniers arrived, in 1625 or '26, the settlement witnessed the arrival of 11 slaves. These African men had been seized by Dutch privateers from Spanish or Portuguese ships and had names like John Francisco, Antony Portugsee and Simon Congo. The Dutch claim to New Amsterdam was part of larger territory that stretched

^{*} Source: Nueva Amsterdam International Trade

along the East Coast known as New Netherlands. It stretched from Gloucester, NJ, to Albany, NY, and into Brooklyn. In the 1698 census, the city had nearly 5,000 inhabitants.²

Quickly making the port home, Reyniers apparently loved to walk-the-walk up the Big Apple's first "ladies mile," the East River shoreline meeting-place known as the Strand (now Pearl Street). On these strolls, she is reported to have often hiked her petticoats to display her wares for passing sailors. Many of the goodly settlers of New Amsterdam were staunch Calvinists, members of the Reformed Dutch Church, and were deeply offended by her conduct. They organized a banishment campaign that led to the Common Council expelling her from New Amsterdam; adding insult to injury, she was forced to pay the cost of the trial.³

1898 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Notes:

¹ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

² Cantwell and Wall 2001; Jaffe/xxx' NYC gov/xx]

³ Morning News, June 21, 2005; Burrows & Wallace/34-35; http://d1xkzao2ij.site.aplus.net/genealogy/docs/d_reyniers_grietje_1602_bio.pdf

For more information:

Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to*