

“The heart of doing research is asking questions and looking for answers”

Lotte Jensen

Lotte Jensen was born in Denmark and grew up in the Netherlands. She is now Associate Professor of Dutch historical literature at the Radboud University Nijmegen. Besides Dutch historical literature she studied philosophy and is currently involved in research on national identity formation in the 17th, 18th and 19th century. She is also a member of the board of ‘Werkgroep negentiende eeuw’ and the Young Academy.

Currently she is the head of a research project called ‘Proud to be Dutch’, a project on the role of war and propaganda literature in the shaping of early modern Dutch identity between 1648 and 1815. For this project literature is used as a cultural historical source to reconstruct the mentality of the past. Her research focuses on the way Dutch people used to think about their national identity.



Why did you choose a career in historic Dutch literature and philosophy?

My initial plan was to study English, not Dutch. After my final exams in high school I lived in Spain for a year to learn Spanish. I wanted to master the language as if it were my mother tongue. However, I soon realised that I would never be able to comprehend a foreign language just as well as the Dutch language. That was when I realised that I wanted to study Dutch language and culture. Also, I had really good Dutch teachers at high school and this caused me to develop a lot of interest in Dutch culture. A good teacher often makes all the difference in choosing your field of study.

A year after I started my studies in Dutch literature and culture I also took on philosophy. I wanted to do philosophy because I was intrigued by philosophers. Studying Dutch and philosophy has proved to be a fruitful combination, as for Dutch you have to read extensively, while philosophy requires reading fewer books very intensively and precisely.

How did you end up in the academic world?

I always enjoyed learning and reading at school. But it was not until my studies that I realised I wanted to continue in historical Dutch literature. I was really passionate about gaining knowledge of old Dutch literature, for instance, the works of writers like Vondel and Multatuli. I wanted only one thing: to enrich and extend my own knowledge and transfer that knowledge to other people.

Why did you start doing research into national identity shaping?

I think that to be able to do research you need a fascination that, in some way, has something to do with yourself. My nationality is Danish and this has shaped my identity, even though the Netherlands is my home. So, my scientific interest has something to do with my foreign background.

The direction your research takes can be a coincidence. If you are taught by an inspiring teacher, for example, it could nudge you into that particular direction. I could never have predicted that I would be involved with Dutch cultural history and literature. Like many other students, I initially began studying Dutch in order to study modern literature. Students usually do not consider Vondel or Reinaert de Vos in the first place, but think more of Grunberg and A.F.Th. van der Heijden. You do not choose the path you will take in advance; that path is created in an inspiring class or by a good teacher.

What do you like about research? What motivates you?

I have a great passion for literature. What motivates me is that you can sort of step into the shoes of writers from the past. You learn to understand why these texts functioned the way they did and why they had such an impact. Take a writer like Vondel, his work *Gijsbrecht van Amstel* is a very complicated play. It incorporates a classical layer, a mythological layer and a historical layer. It is actually a kind of game to me, to fathom and understand such a piece. It is a search for knowledge for the sake of knowledge itself; it is a puzzle you want to solve.

What further motivates me, is teaching students. It is inspiring to convey to others the pleasure you get from unravelling and understanding such a text. It is wonderful to see students become just as enthusiastic about a text as I am and believe me, no one who starts reading Vondel likes it immediately. As a student you need help. When I read Vondel for the first time I didn't take to it right away, but I thought it was intriguing: what does it mean and how is it tied together? Once I am fascinated by something it becomes a challenge to unravel it.

What is your advice to people who want to become academics?

Do it! Let yourself be led by what you like to do and become very good at that. If you are driven to do research, follow your passion. If you want to do a PhD, do it, because it enriches the rest of your life. Ignore your parents' advice that you have to find a 'real' job; follow your passion and become really good at that!

What is your dream?

I would love to do an encompassing publication on Dutch identity throughout the ages. I am saving that for when I get a bit further in my research, but it is definitely my dream. To write at least one elaborate, large, historical book that has a real impact. For this you should use the knowledge you have built up through the years.

Queen Maxima once said that the typical Dutchman does not exist. You think it does. How would you characterise this person?

In the past, authors have created many stereotypical images of the Dutchman. This Dutchman functions as a sort of literary weapon in the fight against the enemy. So what I am talking about is a rhetorical character, one that is created on paper in relation to war enemies, such as Spain and France. This Dutchman does have a number of specific characteristics: he is hardworking, thrifty, diligent, temperate, tolerant, simple, liberal-minded, and devout. Some characteristics are not deemed relevant in this current time, while others are still applicable. In conclusion I can say that THE Dutchman does not exist, but is created by those literary writings and so, in a sense, does exist but only as a literary and rhetorical weapon against the enemy.

Why do you consider research so important for a Bachelor's degree?

In your Bachelor studies you lay the basis for further development in your Master studies. If you have no experience with research in your Bachelor studies then you don't know what is like to do research. When doing research a lot of questions will arise and you will need to find ways to answer these questions. The heart of doing research is asking questions and looking for answers. Doing research is the basis of your academic career.