

Beatrice de Graaf – Transcript Translation (ENG)

VO

Welcome to, Met Terugwerkende Kracht (With Retroactive Force), a podcast and audio tour from Utrecht University in honour of International Women's Day. We are podcasters Corinne Heyrman, Marieke van de Ven, and Jozien Wijkhuijs, and we are taking you on a tour through Utrecht. Along the way, we will make stops at places with an underexposed history and listen to people with a story to tell. We learn about the history of intersectional feminism in the city and at the university. At this stop: Beatrice de Graaf on Hortense de Beauharnais.

Beatrice de Graaf: the women in Utrecht are ugly, she says, they look ugly. It stinks here, doesn't it, the canal. And there are far too many rats and it's so grey here. Then I think: yes, she isn't entirely wrong, it's not a very nice image of Utrecht, but I can forgive her.

VO

Hortense de Beauharnais, the forgotten queen of the Netherlands, did not like living in Utrecht. But not the women, nor the rats, nor the stench could do anything about that. Her aversion had a deeper cause, which you will hear about later in this episode.

My name is Beatrice de Graaf. I am a professor at the Faculty of Humanities, at Utrecht University. I am a historian; I do research on conflict and security in a historical perspective. That means I do research on contemporary terrorism, but my passion project is the early 19th century.

VO

And Hortense de Beauharnais lived in precisely that period.

So I started looking into this five years ago, and that has since become a book. That is, about terror, security policy, and so the fight against terror in 1814-15 to 20. So the countries of the 6th and 7th coalition who acted together against Napoleon, who tried to build a kind of collective security system, a kind of NATO, after Napoleon's defeat. I found that very interesting. And then I went into the archives – and I looked for women. I always do that. When you look in archives you have to think to yourself: are there any women in the story? Well, unfortunately, there aren't many in the official archives. But there is one woman: Hortense. Then it struck me that Metternich, but also Tsar Alexander, and Hardenberg the Prussian chancellor were all talking about Hortense. They all saw her as a security risk. So I thought: well, she must have been an exciting woman if she was considered a problem by all the princes and monarchs of Europe.

VO

A problematic woman, but a forgotten woman nonetheless.

I just recently tested this out on a colleague of mine here at the history department in Utrecht, *nota bene*. I said: who is the first queen of the Netherlands? People often mention either Wilhelmina of Prussia. She wasn't even queen, she was just the mother of King William the First. Or they mention the wife of King William the First, Mimi. She was also called Wilhelmina. But the real first queen of the Netherlands was Hortense de Beauharnais, who was married to the Napoleon's brother. And we tend to forget that.

VO

You are currently standing at the Utrecht University Library, an important place for Hortense.

I have one of the reasons for this in my hands. This is the first edition of a book, the *Memoires de la Reine Hortense*. They are housed here in Utrecht. The second reason is that in those memoirs, Hortense also writes about the Utrecht University Library. That was not the University Library then, this was her palace. She lived here. So, we are here not only because her memoirs are in a case here, but also because she herself walked around here.

VO

The building was the same on the outside, the inside has of course been rebuilt.

For example, in the Sweelinckzaal and also the entrance hall, you can still see something there. I don't know for sure that this still literally is as it was – I don't think so – but you can still see some of that imperial period style. If you look outside you will also see exactly the view Hortense described. The canals, the rats every now and then if you look closely (laughs), the women walking by – who I think are quite well dressed in Utrecht...

Interviewer: She is not a historical figure that can be captured in a short Wikipedia page.

No, there are actually a lot of different episodes in her life that all almost reflect a whole other woman.

VO

Beatrice de Graaf sums her up as follows.

From her memoirs it appears that she was a very sensitive woman, that she was very well-read. She was born in France, in Paris, but she spent her childhood in Martinique. She had a very carefree, happy childhood. Then she came back to France and went to a boarding school – a modern boarding school for girls. Then she had the misfortune, so to speak, of being the daughter of Josephine de Beauharnais, who was Napoleon's great love. Josephine already had Hortense from a previous marriage, Hortense's father ended up on the scaffold during the French Revolution. Josephine remarried Napoleon, who really liked his stepchildren, Hortense and her brother, Eugene. They were known as very sensible and sweet children. Eugene was also one of Napoleon's best generals. But then he more or less forced Hortense to marry Louis Napoleon, and that constituted a drastic break in her life. You can see that she becomes bitter and doesn't know how to deal with Louis. It becomes a very tragic story.

Hortense does not come across as very 'good' in the media, which is partly her husband's fault. We in the Netherlands know Louis Napoleon as a nice, kind, friendly king, who helped people during disasters and floods, who made funny remarks, and who tried to learn Dutch and then said: *Ik ben konijn van Olland* (trans.: I am the rabbit of Holland). We still have some memories of this, but it was said of Hortense that she was a woman of easy virtue, who would rather be in Paris than here. She did not love her husband. It was a forced marriage, so she did not stand out too well. But what we have now learned is that it was actually Louis Napoleon himself who instigated this negative image of Hortense. He asked Minister of Justice van Manen at the time: 'please spread ugly rumours about my wife'. Van Manen said: 'yes, but why? She is your queen, isn't she?'

But he did– they just did not like each other at all. It was not a good marriage. And they did try, Napoleon had to, but when Louis Napoleon arrived here he wanted to show at last that he could step out of his brother's shadow, that he could be a great king. It then became clear fairly quickly that his wife was very popular; she went shopping, she could paint beautifully, she could also sing beautifully, she made music. She became very popular very soon after their arrival here in

1806, and he didn't like that. He thought: 'I want to steal the show now. First my brother always hogged the limelight, now my wife is doing the same'.

He ended up bricking up the door to her room and staircase so that she could not go through the main entrance but had to follow through a small staircase that he could keep an eye on. So he knew exactly how she got to her room and whom she was receiving there. That is of course extremely childish. He also begins sending her very stern letters with all kinds of instructions and extra nuptial agreements, and she writes back. She prints those letters in her memoirs and writes: 'What am I supposed to do with this? How distrustful is this?'

He also thought that Hortense had lovers, though she did not have any yet. Only later, and which is also very bad. Their young son also died fairly soon after their arrival in the Netherlands, [arguably] because her husband refused to renovate the palace, to which she said: 'it is not good for my son, he has asthma'. The boy is then taken away by Louis Napoleon and, well, he does get pneumonia and dies. She blamed her husband for that.

But she didn't give up then. Instead, she literally packed her things and left for France, before travelling around Spain. She went hiking and wandering through the Pyrenees with friends. Well, that's very peculiar for a woman, coming from that social status. Later, in 1814-1815, when she was forced into exile by the Allies, she set off by herself and her sons. She had diamonds sewn into her clothes and found a very nice place in Switzerland. It was there that she re-built a kind of idyll space. She allowed music back into her house again – books, literature. And then she kind of became the old Hortense again. She invited several philosophers, teachers, and musicians; she composed a song; and she raises her two sons there. This was a very happy period for her, though it lasts only for a short time. In 1837 she dies – she was born in 1783, so she is only in her fifties. She died of cancer.

What the listeners can learn from Hortense is that, even when you experience terrible things, enormous setbacks – a crisis in your marriage, you are framed wrongly, you are pursued... Your child dies, which must be just about the very worst thing for a mother – that she picked herself up again and that she picked up a pen. That she started writing, and that she started composing. That she tried to find beautiful things, poems, art, paintings. That she starts painting. How brave are you? How resilient are you when you try to still see beauty in the face of setbacks like these?

VO

My own interpretation: she didn't think Utrecht women were ugly, it was that her life stank at that moment. It was a grey existence. Hortense de Beauharnais was a woman who did not give up. A forgotten queen, a special woman.

You have reached the end of With Retroactive Force. This audio tour is a production of Audiocollectief Horens, in cooperation with the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) programme of Utrecht University, and was created especially for International Women's Day 2022. With a special thanks to Eline Pollaert, Rosi Braidotti, Nancy Jouwe, Beatrice de Graaf, Nadia Comvalius, Ernestine Comvalius and Pearl Pengel, Marischka Verbeek, Melle Schakel, Inge Matthijssen and Roos Wijnants. Cover image and illustrations by Nanna de Jong. Go to uu.nl/iwd for a transcript of this audio tour, background stories, an illustrated route map, archive images and additional illustrations. Would you like more information about what UU does in the field of inclusion and diversity? Then go to uu.nl/edi.