

Met en zonder lauwerkrans: crowned and uncrowned women writers in the Netherlands during the early modern period (1550-1850)

The study of women writers of the past has only in recent years gathered momentum in Belgium and the Netherlands. By way of introduction I should like to make a few tentative suggestions as to why this is so. In the first place, there is the essentially Dutch concept of consensus which in its political and economic manifestation has become known worldwide as the Dutch *polder model*. The effect of this model is that movements here are less stormy and differences are rarely pushed to extremes. So emancipation movements have equally been more moderate here. Accordingly, women's writings in the past were seldom fiercely oppositional to the patriarchal *status quo*, and therefore provided no stimulating basis for modern feminists. There were no Mary Wollstonecrafts here. On the contrary, Elisabeth Bekker (better known as Betje Wolff, 1738-1804), though firmly rooted in the Enlightenment, did not seem to tire of sympathizing with men married to women who preferred to spend their time studying Rousseau rather than taking care of their husbands and children. And the influential Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint (1812-1886), a well-known and successful 19th-century author, had nothing good to say about the concept of emancipation and everything that went with it.

A more restricted explanation has to do with the specific problems of a small country, with a language not widely spoken and a limited number of academics. The number of specialists in the field of literary history is small, and the proportion accounted for by women was, at least in the past, minimal. The amount of work to be done is in principle no smaller than in the case of a larger body of literature, but the number of people engaged in it is tiny compared with the numbers involved in France, Germany and England, let alone the United States.

A third explanation is incidental but probably not unimportant. If one of the few women scholars of literature of the past, and by no means the least influential, deals yet another blow to women's writings for ideological reasons, then the result is particularly negative. In 1936 Annie Romein-Verschoor wrote a stirring study of modern 'women's novels', *Vrouwenspiegel* (Women's mirror) from a Marxist perspective, condemning them in the most absolute terms as being entirely concerned with rich, middle-class women with no conception of life's real problems. It was a well written book that attracted much attention, but its impact on women's studies might well have been disastrous. The introductory chapter, where Romein rapidly presents an account of women's writings from Anna Bijns (1493-1575) to Bosboom-Tous-

saint, is full of astute observations, or rather, intuitions, which corresponded to the results of recent research, but places in an unforgiving light almost all the writers mentioned: they had failed from an ideological perspective. Such a negative book hardly bears comparison with Virginia Woolf's stimulating *A room of one's own* (1928), written less than ten years earlier.

This is not to say that nothing has been done at all. In the 1970s and 1980s some pioneers offered surveys, such as the anthology *Vergeten vrouwen uit de Nederlandse literatuur tot 1900* (Forgotten women in Netherlands literature before 1900), a special issue of the feminist magazine *Chrysalis* (1980). Of course, the rise of women's studies in the universities was a great help – especially, however, in the modern field. Moreover, already in the polyhistoric 19th century a lot of material concerning women authors had been assembled in large biographical dictionaries. In our own time, canonized women have received due critical and biographical attention. To give but one example: the *dix-huitiémiste* P.J. Buijnsters has written no less than five books on the life and work of Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken (1741-1804), who usually published their writings jointly, including an edition of their wonderful correspondence.

Aims and methods of *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*

But whatever the causes of this state of affairs, much pioneering work had to be done for *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*. *Schrijvende vrouwen uit de vroegmoderne tijd 1550-1850: van Anna Bijns tot Elise van Calcar* (Wreath of laurels. Crowned and uncrowned women writers of the early modern period 1550-1850: from Anna Bijns to Elise van Calcar). Models and initial studies were to be found abroad rather than in Holland and Belgium. To a certain extent, the structure and method employed in *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* were decided by the material we found, but the most important choices had already been made at the beginning of the enterprise. This is of course primarily true of the decision to take the women writers as a separate group. The discussion on this point can be as lengthy or as short as one wishes. Why should women be shut up in a sort of ghetto, indicating that the only real literature is that written by men? For us, primarily working as literary historians, the decision was not, in fact, a difficult one. It is evident that the women from this period regarded themselves as 'other', as outsiders who knew themselves to be tolerated, or had to fight their way into a man's world, and this became one of the leitmotifs of our book. Anyone who wished to succeed had to conform to the existing male standards. That meant, for example, that women, too, had to strew their texts with mythological and classical references. They had to be able to practise the same genres as men did, and *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* shows clearly how they began close to home with moralistic and religious lyric poetry, but then moved on to political pamphlets, and then to plays and even epics. The real innovation came only with a genre which came into being in the Netherlands at the end of the 18th century, that of the domestic novel. Here, instead of running desperately to catch up, women led the field. The process of fighting one's way in and achieving success on the part of a group universally considered as outsiders can thus be clearly delineated in the early modern period.

A second decision was that the book had to be a combination of reference work, anthology and a general introduction to the phenomenon of women writers in the period. The first thing to be done was simply to collect the material. Virtually no-one knew how many writers were actually involved, where the emphases lay in their work, or which genres we would encounter. For this reason, the third decision was taken quickly, that of aiming for completeness. We were forced to compromise on this last point. As we got into the 19th century, the number of women writers became so large that completeness became unattainable. From the 16th to the 18th century we stayed close to our aim, but reviews and other contributions made it clear that we were not entirely successful. We can only hope that more writers will surface. Linked to this principle is a fourth criterion, that also has its own, independent significance, and that is that quality should not be a yardstick. In principle, everything written by women in the field of the humanities fell within our purview as long as the authors had a reading public in mind. The bulk of the book contains what has been considered to be literature since the 19th century at least, but we made room also for biographies and autobiographies, as well as pamphlets, travel writings and philosophical treatises.

As a result of these choices, the approach adopted for the book became one based on both literary and social history. This is reflected in the introduction, where the emphasis lies not on presenting fine and interesting texts that have hitherto been overlooked, but on women's place within the literary enterprise, the conditions which enabled them to work, the problems they encountered, the help they received from male insiders, and so on. It seemed the best method in a situation in which a practically new area of study had to be presented. As researchers, we did not want to be solely led by our own ideas on quality and relevance. All the piety of the period discussed, for example, can so easily be dismissed as sanctimonious whining, but anyone who sees it in this light misses an essential part of the culture of the time. In this context the title – 'Met en zonder lauwerkrans' meaning 'With laurels and without' – finds its explanation. Some of the women in the book aimed to measure themselves against other writers and to achieve recognition in the form of a symbolic laurel wreath. Indeed, there are a number of portraits of women writers wearing such a wreath. Others, however, probably the majority, were different. They did not strive for literary fame, but wanted to edify and educate those around them.

Met en zonder lauwerkrans is in principle limited to writing in the Dutch language. This restriction is not really important since women in the Netherlands seldom wrote in any other language. Johanna Othonia (1560-1617?) and the famous woman scholar Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678) wrote in Latin, but they were exceptions to the general rule. A famous Dutch woman who only wrote in French was Belle van Zuylen, otherwise known as Isabelle de Charrière (1740-1805). Because she principally lived in France and Switzerland during her writing career, the influence she had on her contemporaries in Dutch literature was negligible.

The result is a big book with perhaps an almost comical effect in an international context. A thousand pages on three centuries of Dutch women's literature, while the *Norton anthology of literature by women* (1996²) manages with its 800 pages to cover the same period for the whole of the literature in the English language, including American literature. The explanation is that the *Norton anthology* can build on a



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whole series of previous studies and that there are also English-language anthologies covering separately the 17th century, the 18th and the Romantics.

We have very little of this in the Netherlands, and the hope is therefore that this new book will inspire further study. The authors of *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* cannot complain about the tone of the many reviews we have received, but really annoying was a remark by one reviewer that he could not really see what was left to be done now. The lack of monographs on important authors, studies of genre, explanations for the ideological swings that have taken place through the years, studies of readers' responses, the lines along which the canon was formed, the international context – he could think of none of this.

A few names

When we look at the official literary canon, we can see that only a few women writers from the period concerned are known to the educated Dutch. Here are some of the important names. Anna Bijns was a school intendant in the cultural metropolis of Antwerp. She has left us a diverse oeuvre of polemical, light, amorous and religious verse, usually in the form of ballades, which places her within the tradition of the literature of the rhetoricians that flourished at that time. Due to the stimulating influence of Franciscan brothers of her acquaintance, from a nearby monastery, three collections of her work were published. Nowadays, her name is mostly associated with the Anna Bijns prize for women who have made worthy contributions to the field of literature.

Subsequently, non-religious literature in the southern Netherlands went quickly into decline. The course of events during the Dutch revolt against Spain, the start of the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648), resulted in the Southern Netherlands, present-day Belgium, once again becoming a Catholic country, whereas in the Northern Netherlands or the Republic of the United Provinces, later to become the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Protestantism was the dominant religion. In the South, everything pivoted around the Counter-Reformation. Beguines and convent nuns created a rich literature; a familiar name from this period is that of Maria Petyt (1623-1677). She lived in accordance with the rules of the third Carmelite order and, following in the footsteps of St Teresa of Avila, she wrote a penetrating, mystically tinged autobiography.

In the Republic, a secular literature could still thrive. The most significant names from the first decades of the 17th century are those of the two sisters Anna and Maria Tesselschade, daughters of the well known Amsterdam poet Roemer Visscher (1583-1651 and 1594-1649 respectively). Roemer Visscher was the central figure in a literary and cultural circle which gathered at his house. He also gave his daughters a good education, although they were not allowed to learn Latin, the language of the scholarly. Anna and Maria Tesselschade were both writers and their work was appreciated by important contemporary authors such as Heinsius, Hooft, Vondel, Bredero and Huygens. The work of the sisters mainly consisted of lyrical verse: occasional verse, as well as religious and moralistic poetry. In addition to this, Anna wrote emblematic

verse while Maria Tesselschade spent a long time translating Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, of which, unfortunately, only a very short fragment has survived. Their work was only occasionally published in collections of verse made by male authors of their acquaintance or in anthologies. Their reputation was in fact established in the 19th century, when they were considered to be models for the ideal Dutch woman and they were appreciated as witty and humane members of the Dutch literary elite. The work of Anna was only published at the end of the 19th century, and Maria Tesselschade's work found its way to the reading public at the beginning of the 20th century in a remarkable book in which she is portrayed less as a writer than as a 'female friend of letters', as it contains 'letters and verse written by and for Maria Tesselschade'. It is only very recently that her verse has seen the light of day in a richly annotated edition. After the Visscher sisters, for more than a century, there were no literary works written by women writers, if we are to believe traditional literary history: hitherto, only women writers from the second half of the 18th century have been deemed worthy of attention. Lucretia Wilhelmina van Merken (1721-1789) is named because of her biblical epic *David* (1767) and her widely read didactic poem, *Het nut der tegenspoeden* (The usefulness of adversity, 1762). Juliana Cornelia de Lannoy (1738-1782) is also mentioned: a self-assured and witty writer of tragedies, didactic poems and lyrical verse, who considered her pen to be as worthy a weapon for her fatherland as the sabre of her brother, himself an officer. But neither of these writers now belong to collective Dutch memory. Recently rediscovered and republished, Elisabeth Maria Post (1755-1812) wrote sensitive and pious poems and novels. Her *Reinhart, of natuur en godsdienst* (Trueheart, or nature and religion) is about the life of a Surinam planter and has now a certain curiosity value.

Today, the best known women writers in Dutch literary history are the previously mentioned bosom friends Betje Wolff and Agatha Deken. The novel which they wrote in close collaboration, *Historie van mejuffrouw Sara Burgerhart* (History of miss Sara Burgherheart, 1782) from 1782, is the first novel in a domestic setting to be published in the Dutch language. It is still read at school and is still reprinted at regular intervals. It certainly deserves its special status: for the very first time, the everyday life of the normal citizen is considered worth writing about, and Wolff and Deken do this with great insight into human behaviour, with wittiness and the desire to educate. In the letters which make up the novel – a form they borrowed from Richardson – numerous men and women from all walks of life come to life and speak to the reader; each does so in his or her own idiosyncratic and inimitable way. In this respect, Wolff and Deken easily surpassed Richardson. With this book they gained admission to the literary canon. The same cannot however be said of their many imitators who, in the 19th century, explored the potential of the 'roman intime'. They have remained obscure, often undeservedly so.

However, Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint, who also wrote novels, is still read today. During her own lifetime, she was generally admired for her detailed and psychologically perceptive historical novels; nowadays, it is her *Majoor Frans* (Major Frans, 1874; a fragment is shown in this volume) for which she is well known: the story of an independently minded woman who in the end lets herself be won over by her lover. One contemporary called the story a 'novel of female emancipation', prob-

ably because Major Frans, the female protagonist, is sympathetically portrayed in the novel. However, emancipation is certainly not the issue here as Bosboom-Toussaint had little sympathy for the emancipation of women, which she considered to be a superfluous cause in the Netherlands of her day. Remarkably, at a time when grammar schools were still closed to girls in the Netherlands, she was of the opinion that there were no unassailable barriers for women.

In the South, there was a resurgence of non-religious women's literature after many years of silence. Today, the names of the sisters Rosalie and Virginie Loveling (1834-1875 and 1836-1923 respectively), who were writers of lyrical verse, novellas and novels, are still quite well-known. In 1997, an essay on their life and work was published by Ludo Stynen.

The names of the twelve women writers mentioned above are still evocative, if not for the public at large, then at least for specialists in the field of literature. Whether such specialists really know the work of these writers is an entirely different matter. The image that has been created of some of these writers is hardly realistic: for example, Anna Roemers has been seen, over the past 150 years, as a moralistic epigone of the then widely read poet Jacob Cats, who used almost all of his vast oeuvre for the sole purpose of spreading views on marriage which were prevalent in his time. Nothing can be found in the literary histories about the ironic, critical quality of Anna Roemers' work as a poet. Neither does one find anything on what principally motivated De Lannoy's writings: her struggle to gain a position as a woman author, and her introspection regarding this issue.

The 'wreath of laurels'

But these twelve names are only the tip of the iceberg. Some 160 woman writers have been included in *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*, and this illustrates how many women wrote during the period concerned. Some of them, who are now completely forgotten, were in their time more successful than their male contemporaries, who are well-known today. There were more reprints of the pious songbook of the Baptist songwriter Soetken Gerijts (?-1572) in her day than of the lyrical verse of the Netherlands' most famous lyrical poet Pieter Cornelisz. Hooft, who was almost her contemporary. This can be easily explained: Hooft wrote his fine, perceptive, and, for that time, groundbreaking, lyrical poetry for a literary elite, whereas Soetken Gerijts wrote her simple songs for both the educated and uneducated members of her religious community. An aesthetically-oriented writing of literary history includes one writer but ignores the other – a woman, moreover, who is blind and illiterate! A history of literature, that gives serious thought to the place of literature in society, however, cannot fail to discuss Soetken Gerijts. It is therefore appropriate that in *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*, the works of the women included are presented not from a modern-aesthetic perspective but according to norms determined by literary and cultural history. A biographical introduction to each writer is given and her most important work is discussed; this is followed by a selection of texts which are characteristic of her work. In a general introduction, an outline of the findings is presented.

The chosen period (1550-1850) has been demarcated according to specific criteria. It starts with the great Antwerp poetess Anna Bijns. As far as we know, she was the first woman living outside a religious community whose voice could be heard in public debate. She was a fervent Catholic, and maybe this is why she had little influence in the North and was quickly forgotten there. In the South, however, she was well known and was even read at schools. The period ended with the first wave of feminism which manifested itself in the last decades of the 19th century in the Netherlands. Elise van Calcar (1822-1904), who had an international reputation, did not really participate but she did often write on the question of women's education. The voice of emancipation can also be heard in Rosalie Loveling's work. The Netherlands and Belgium were quite late in joining the international debate on emancipation.

Political and religious context

The Dutch-speaking territories had two systems of government until the end of the 18th century. First, the Republic with the Reformed (Protestant) religion as the dominant religion (roughly the present-day Netherlands). This republic was born out of the revolt against the Spanish king, which was instigated, among other things, on religious grounds; this revolt constituted the beginning of the Eighty Years' War which came to an end with the Peace of Munster in 1648. In the Republic, the princes of Orange played an important role as stadtholders. They were not rulers in the true sense of the word as they were, from time to time, sidetracked for shorter or longer periods, but they had a dynasty of a kind. Furthermore, the Dutch-speaking territories in the South remained under Spanish rule: cities such as Antwerp which initially had been centres of Calvinist and Lutheran reformation were quickly and efficiently made Catholic once more. This territory now, more or less, corresponds to the Flemish provinces in present-day Belgium. These southern 'provinces' belonged, until 1715, to the Spanish Empire; later they were annexed by Austria and were ruled by governors. After the French Revolution, the Batavian Republic was created in the North, which was followed by a short-lived monarchy under the aegis of one of Napoleon's brothers, Louis Napoleon, and its annexation by the French empire from 1810 to 1813. Subsequently, the kingdom of the Netherlands was founded, which, based on international agreements, also included Belgium until 1830. However, the Belgian rebellion of 1830 brought about two separate states, present-day Belgium and the present-day Netherlands. These political developments have had significant religious and cultural consequences for literature in general and women's literature in particular. In the Republic, the Reformed church may not have been a state religion, but it played a dominant role in society. The Catholics had freedom of religion but were not allowed to practise it openly. So they had to say mass in so-called conventicles, and convents were severely restricted in their activities, although sister orders such as the beguine order flourished here and there as communities. As a result of this, there was hardly any Catholic literature. There was, however, religious literature written by Calvinist and Mennonite women, which, in the 18th century, was pietistic

in tone. In addition to this religious literature, a secular, bourgeois literature started to flourish in the Republic. Women contributed to this literature, albeit much later than men, and they wrote about domestic, moral and even political matters, practising genres such as comedy, epic, tragedy, the didactic poem and, from the 18th century on, the novel.

The Republic hardly had any court culture. During his reign from 1625 to 1647, Frederik Hendrik was the first stadholder who had sufficient means to initiate anything worthy of note in the field of culture; however, he was interested not so much in literature as in the visual arts and architecture. After the death of his son William II in 1650, a lengthy period of rule without stadholders commenced, and when William III came to power in 1672, the defence of the vulnerable Republic was much more his concern than the state of art and culture. Things did not improve when he later became king of England and had to devote all his energy to running that nation. Besides, the language used at court was principally French and the court undertook no initiatives to further the cause of literature in Dutch and women's literature in particular. This was even more the case in the 18th century. There was a court in Brussels, namely that of the governor who ruled on behalf of the monarch, but its literary tastes, too, were influenced by French culture and not by Netherlands culture.

Moreover, in the South, the Counter-Reformation had transformed culture and society. The influence of Protestantism had more or less been eliminated. There were numerous convents, and beguine communities were to be found everywhere. Women's literature was for many years almost exclusively a religious affair. The practice of a wide variety of genres that we see in the Northern Netherlands is lacking. It was, however, in the South that this secular literature had begun. The Counter-Reformation put an end to this, although one would have to mention significant exceptions such as the playwright Barbara Ogier (1648-1720). Flemish women's literature would only start to flourish again in the 19th century. Women then started to write novels and novellas. A striking aspect of this development is that women joined the struggle for the use of Flemish (i.e. Dutch) against the ever stronger influence of French in upper social circles. The irony of the situation is perfectly illustrated when Jeanette Delcroix (1826-1897), who clearly sympathized with the Flemish cause, wittily ridiculed the ambivalent attitude of many Flemish radicals: in public, they profess their support of Flemish but in private they choose to use French.

Women's writing as a sign of civilization

The rise of non-religious women's literature is closely linked to the growing influence of the Renaissance in the Netherlands. The collection *Den hof en boomgaard der poesien* (The garden and orchard of poetry, 1565) by the Southern Netherlands poet Lucas de Heere, in which, for the first time, new forms of Renaissance poetic forms such as sonnets and odes were demonstrated, is also the book in which, for the first time, a woman, the author's wife Eleonora Carboniers (?- after 1584), is presented, with two poems both concerned with wifehood: a laudatory epigram to her husband and the translation of a French sonnet of his. From other texts it is clear that

the male-dominated culture did indeed see the rise of women writers as the sign of a new culture. Thus the Zeeland poetess Johanna Coomans (?-1659) was celebrated as the symbol of renewal because women poets were shown to be writing in the Netherlands, just as they had done in classical Antiquity and its new model, Italy. Coomans is presented to the reading public as a new Corinna or Vittoria Colonna. An even greater star in the firmament, Anna Roemersdr. Visscher, was, as it were, discovered by the Leiden professor-poet Daniel Heinsius. Some time later she was seen by the Leiden student Johan van Heemskerck to be proof of the theory that the arts had spread, in turn, throughout the countries of the civilized world – the course of these developments was generally conceived to move from East to West – and her appearance in the literature of the day demonstrated that it was now the turn of the Netherlands. She was considered to have even surpassed Sappho.

There should, however, be no misunderstanding about these acclamations. The eulogies these and other women received are ambivalent. Anna Roemers was praised by all the reputed poets of her time, but in such a way that she was quite clearly seen as an exceptional case: this was not a normal woman. Even at birth, her mother had to take a ‘back seat’: Heinsius wrote that she was not brought forth out of her mother’s womb but out of her father’s head. And a few years later, Vondel is the bearer of the news: she is neither a virgin nor of the female sex. She is *like* a man and that is precisely the only door open to her in practising poetry: ‘the poet’ is conceived as a man: the *poeta doctus*. Whoever wants to be a poet must assume a male persona: ‘virgins’ may be able to do this but surely not married women.

The married woman Johanna Coomans stresses her motherhood but, in doing so, establishes a hierarchy at the same time. Her poetical oeuvre was, as she herself wrote, produced beside the cradle and that explains its inferior quality. It is therefore quite appropriate that, although she admires Anna Roemers, she also addresses her in a poem as not having fulfilled her highest vocation, that of the married woman.

As a matter of fact, the situation for writing women was a complicated one: they had a double identity, the one almost excluding the other. Women did indeed see themselves as ‘the others’ and the viewpoint of their male peers did not differ in this respect: they were sometimes adulated and treated in a friendly but condescending way, but they were, in fact, to all purposes ignored.

A poet’s requirements

Classical Antiquity had already formulated what was required of a poet: talent is, of course, a main requirement, but much more than that cannot be said about it. Women quite often observe that they feel an inner compulsion to write poetry. But usually they express this in modest terms because they realize they are not in a position to develop their poetic potential to the full: not only talent but also *education* and *leisure time* are needed, as well as the *opportunity to publish*.

With regard to *education*, the vast majority of women lacked the classical education that was indispensable for the learned profession of poetry. During the three centuries covered in *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*, the complaint was often heard that they

lacked the knowledge needed for writing. Entry to grammar school, let alone university, was closed to women. They therefore did not have access to knowledge of classical mythology and history which provided most of the poetical imagery of their day. Likewise, the education of girls from the bourgeois classes usually left a lot to be desired. At the so-called French school they did learn to speak and write French, but a decent education in French literature and culture was out of the question. Perhaps even worse was the fact that women were not expected to have any discipline: they did not need to spell correctly or use punctuation properly. Nor was a thorough knowledge of syntax required of them. In this respect, it is noteworthy how often men were asked to correct their work or assumed a paternalistic attitude towards it. That too encouraged women to feel less committed and to consider their work as a pastime. Women were thus not seen to be serious rivals.

If the opportunities for pursuing studies were scarce, then finding *leisure time* was an even greater problem for women. In the Republic, where the modern, bourgeois family came into being, – Jacob Cats was mentioned earlier in this respect – men of repute were convinced that a woman's task was to be with the family at home, and there was a complete lack of models for any other roles. In the three centuries covered by *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* hardly any developments in this respect can be discerned. Women themselves often wrote that caring for a husband and children is their main goal in life. Betje Wolff professed the ideals of the Enlightenment and demonstrated in her own life that the practice of literature was a full-time affair. Still, she constantly warns that women should not neglect their real duties for the sake of writing. Until late into the 19th century, one can still find women being praised in literary reviews because they have completed their work in their own leisure time. In fact, they did not in general have a lot of time for themselves. The housewife of the Low Countries saw it as her duty, even when she was wealthy enough, to run the house herself, to order the servants and, especially, to take care of the children herself. Now, one of the peculiarities of housework and childcare is that it just never seems to stop and is, in any case, difficult to manage. Children become sick at the most awkward moments. It is therefore quite difficult to systematically keep time free for writing. The image of Jane Austen writing at the kitchen table is also a familiar one in the Netherlands. The poetess Aurelia Zwartte (1682-?) – whose quality as a writer is in no way comparable to Jane Austen's – writes in a poem to a male admirer that she is constantly burdened with chores at home and therefore reads while she cleans fish and writes while she sews – especially the latter combination seems a veritable *tour de force*.

Many women realized all too well that by marrying they were shutting themselves away and denying themselves the freedom to practise the arts. There are enough texts which show that women, time and time again, chose the freedom of unmarried life. This meant in effect that many women writers stayed unmarried or stopped writing after marriage. It was only when the novel made it possible to make a living out of writing that women decided to become professional writers. As a matter of fact, they sometimes wrote to sustain their families whenever the husband was in some way unable to do this.

It is also worth noting that despite these problems many women managed to have a 'room of their own'. In quite a few texts, a cubbyhole or summer-house, or at times even a study, are praised as a place of refuge for their work.

There were therefore many obstacles for women in pursuing a writing career, but still many women, more or less successfully, managed to overcome these obstacles. So, female literary production of a kind existed. Women's position in literary culture remained marginal, however, and this is reflected in the difficulty they often had in finding *opportunities to publish*.

Almost no printed text remains of the work of Maria Tesselschade Roemers, the younger sister of Anna and now the most well-known of the 17th-century Netherlands women poets. Her translation of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* being lost, we know only a few lines of it because these are quoted in one of her letters. Her children showed little care in handling her manuscripts. For example, one of her poems can still be read today, but only because her contemporary, the poet P.C. Hooft, who assumed the role of her mentor and guide, used the other side of the manuscript sheet to write down his histories of the Netherlands – and Hooft's manuscripts *were* carefully kept.

If their contemporaries and children took little care in handling their literary production, neither, for that matter, did the writers themselves: neither Anna nor Maria Tesselschade took steps to have their poems published. Nevertheless, Anna Roemers did value her own work. A part of it has been retained for posterity in a calligraphed booklet, the so-called *Letter-juweel* (Letter-jewel), and there is evidence that another handwritten booklet existed. It may have been due to feminine modesty that these booklets were not published, although we should not forget that male authors, too, were reluctant to publish lyrical verse, which was small in scale and considered not very significant. The Netherlands' greatest 17th-century poet, Joost van den Vondel, published his very first book of lyrical poetry at the age of 57. However, in the case of the male author, a friend would often take charge of collecting and publishing poems whenever the author, for whatever reason, was too modest about his work. In spite of the great praise Anna Roemers received from her male peers, no-one ever did her this favour. And even when a woman's work is published, it usually appears in the book of a male author: as an introductory ode, as a poem to which a man had responded, to fill up blank pages, and also to supplement a book of the husband.

The earliest known publication of a collection of a woman's writings was a posthumous homage to the female author. The book, *Het lof der vrouwen* (In praise of women), by Johanna Hoobius (1614-1642) was published in 1643. The central part of the collection was a long laudatory piece on women, one of the many contributions to the discussion on the dignity of women, such as had been begun by Boccaccio and continued by writers like Christine de Pizan. The publication of Hoobius' book will have had a certain curiosity value: it presented the first Netherlands woman to fully participate in the debate – her poem is an adaptation of Jean de Marconville's *De la bonté et mauvaiseté des femmes*.

In 1654, this was followed by *Den Cleefschien Pegasus* (The Pegasus of Cleves) by Maria Margareta van Akerlaecken (1605-±1670), but this was also an exceptional case. Van Akerlaecken had followed in her father's footsteps and was appointed as a kind of court poet to the court of Cleves, which had its seat outside the Republic, and which had family ties with the House of Orange. There she wrote all kinds of odes in honour of the princely members of court, which were published

not so much to immortalize the poetess but rather as a token of respect towards the patrons.

Much more interesting, from the perspective of the women who really wanted to publish for themselves, is what took place in 1665. It was then that Catharina Questiers (1630-1669) and Cornelia van der Veer (1639-after 1702) published a joint collection in which they made their own poetical practice the central theme. The book, *Lauwer-stryt* (The battle of the laurels) consists mainly of poems in which the two women praise each other, and in doing this they put themselves on the map. Odes written by them to others and, above all, many odes written by others, including men, complete the book. It was to take another twenty years or so before a woman would publish another collection of poetry. That was in 1686 when Titia Brongersma (±1650-after 1687) had her book *De bron-swaan* (The Swan of the fountain) published, which is not only historically an interesting collection. From then on, it became less unusual for women to publish their own work, although women writers were still often published posthumously; moreover, even when their work was published within their lifetime, this was often not on their own initiative but on that of their family, in particular proud fathers and husbands playing a significant role.

Subjects

The search for the singularity of women's literature, the female eye and voice, has produced variable results. Indeed, it is the traditional character of women's writing, especially in the first half of the period under discussion, which is most striking. This does not really surprise. Women as outsiders had to compete within an established literary milieu, with fixed conventions and genres. They still had to catch up with some of the major literary developments; it would be asking too much to expect them to completely ignore existing models and to produce a new literature which would reflect their own interests, and take their own knowledge and skills as a starting point. So, we rarely see this in their work. For instance, at the beginning of the period under discussion, women diligently, and more often than not amateurishly, incorporated elements of classical mythology in moralistic poems and occasional verse. In the three centuries between 1550 and 1850, we can in fact see women gaining more and more ground in the existing literary world. They certainly did not try to create a new domain for themselves, nor did they aim at changing the established literary milieu. As time went by, women no longer restricted themselves to lyrical verse, for they started to write tragedies and epics; however, such genres seem to have not really been practised from a female perspective.

On the other hand, it is, of course, not mere coincidence that Anna van der Horst (1735-1785) chose female protagonists for her two biblical epics: Ruth and Deborah. Research still has to be done in this field. It is only when women from the Netherlands start to write novels at the end of the 18th century – and within the European context this is a late development – that they focus on the specific territory which they have been allocated in life: the home and private life. This is not to say, however, that one cannot find anything specific to women in women's literature. There

are subjects and themes which during the entire period are raised by women writers. First of all there is the theme of their own artistic practice, or almost taking precedence in this respect, that of the many obstacles which stand in their way in pursuing an artistic profession. This is clearly illustrated by everything which has been mentioned above on the dominant role of housekeeping, the lack of a proper education, the lack of leisure time, and the blessings of having a 'room of one's own'.

The female voice can be heard – although this, unfortunately, is quite rare – in a form of irony. The 17th-century poetess Anna Roemers is able to wittily and subtly question the dominant poetics, which attached so much significance to elevation of the spirit and scholarship. More than a century later, this irony would become a gratefully used weapon in the hands of women like Juliana Cornelia de Lannoy and Betje Wolff.

But the most significant development was the use of the female voice in love poetry. In the 17th century, love poetry in the Petrarchistic tradition was a dominant genre in the Netherlands, practised by almost all the male poets. They happily played the game of the humble admirer who worships the woman placed on a pedestal. This had very little to do with reality. In anthropological terms, these were exploratory, liminal texts in which the situation in normal society is reversed and potential conflicts are expressed. From this perspective, Petrarchism can be seen as a prolonged 'carnival' which constantly tests and investigates a powerful worldview, in which women are 'naturally' allocated a subordinate role. Games of this kind offer little attraction to women. When placing their beloved on a pedestal and worshipping him, they would be describing in literary terms the very situation that their world in its harsh reality expected of them: obedience in marriage, a servitude in which man's every wish is catered for. The Petrarchistic idiom was therefore not of any use to them, and we see accordingly no poetry of this kind written by women for men. The only love poetry dedicated to men that we can find – albeit rarely – consists of the poems written by women for their husbands: these are not in a distant, worshipful idiom but expressed with warmth and comradeship.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the Petrarchistic idiom was practised in poems written to female friends. The situation was in this respect completely different. In principle, everyone is equal, and it can then be fascinating to play the game of worshipping from afar and in subordination. In *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*, numerous erotically tinted poems written by women for women are to be found. For instance, Titia Brongersma, mentioned above, had gathered, at the end of the 17th century, a large circle of female friends for whom she wrote poems, and the most beloved of these was the much praised Eliseen. The reader of these poems could quite easily establish that the friend in question was a certain Elisabeth Joly; no attempt was made to keep her identity secret. At about the same time, we can find comparable texts written by Cornelia van der Veer and Katharina Lescailje (1649-1711): the entire range of emotions from love to desire and jealousy are expressed, and the names of the women addressed in these poems are printed in full. The discussion as to how this should be interpreted is still in progress. Lia van Gemert in her article 'Hiding behind words? Lesbianism in 17th-century Dutch poetry?' uses the term 'lesbianism'. Not everyone is in agreement as to this use of the term, as homo-

sexual practice and behaviour was at the time considered a serious criminal offence and there is no evidence of any criticism of these writers. Furthermore, when, in the 18th century, Wolff and Deken live together and write texts for each other, but also for other beloved female friends, they are not attacked for this despite the fact that Wolff was a controversial figure on the literary scene. There is however agreement on one question: many of the women who wrote found their bosom friends and 'soulmates' in other women, and these erotically tinted friendships were often with other women writers. Apparently, women's emotional and spiritual world developed most easily and flourished in a culture shaped by women. In this respect, the many networks established by women will have to be researched in depth.

When, in the 18th century, the Petrarchistic idiom finally loses its influence, a new paradigm for the language of sensitivity and the emotions comes to the foreground. Within the framework of 'love, virtue and religion', women could now apparently express their amorous feelings for men, although this caused some astonishment in the world at large. Bourgeois society believed that a woman should not express her feelings of love so openly.

The domestic and historical novel

The genre in which the specific qualities of women were most clearly illustrated, and in which they did not suffer from a lack of knowledge in classical literature, was the domestic novel, which, to use the terminology of Sainte-Beuve, is also known as the 'roman intime'. To write a good novel, one needs keen observational powers, a good ear for dialogue and, above all, knowledge of the human heart. Women had these in abundance, and after Wolff and Deken had written their *Sara Burgerhart* in 1782, more women followed their example. Critics were quick to categorize this genre as a feminine one, and consequently as a genre aimed at a female reading public. This immediately resulted in a loss in prestige: the 'roman intime' has since then been undervalued in the history of Netherlands literature. Little attention has been paid to the psychologically innovative novels of Betsy Hasebroek (1811-1887) which were regularly reprinted in the 19th century, but of which there are no modern editions. In Flanders, we have a similar situation. There have been no reprints of Jeanette Delcroix's work, and studies of her work are rare. This neglect was to be the beginning of a literary trend: until recently, women's novels on domestic life have been treated condescendingly. No wonder then that women who wanted to avoid this kind of categorization applied themselves to the historical novel. Because of its studious nature, this genre had much more prestige. As a writer of lengthy historical novels based on detailed research, Bosboom-Toussaint gained true acceptance and recognition in the literary world.

Religious literature

As already observed above, a secular literature in the Southern Netherlands was, after a very promising beginning, interrupted for many years. There was, however, an

extensive literature written by convent nuns and beguines. Within the communities, they wrote for each other and to propagate their beliefs. The sisters were often asked by their confessors to write about their own lives. Such autobiographies are often fascinating documents, which bear witness to unique, mystical experiences and express intensely their experience of sickness and pain, penance and contrition. The personal tone one finds in these works can hardly be found in secular literature. The many small songbooks also give a picture of the spiritual life of beguines and other sister orders. Although these devotional poems and hymns to the saints would not appear to have any great attraction for a modern reader, some of them are a revelation, such as the story of sister Johanna de Gavre (around 1700), who longed to be a missionary and die as a martyr in Japan. She expresses this desire in a dream, and concludes at the end, in the traditional manner, that all earthly matters are as a dream. One's only duty is to fulfil one's task properly – one just has to be satisfied with that. Apart from the texts about their own lives and their communities, the nuns also wrote songs: those for school children who were entrusted to their care, as well as working songs for girls.

It should be pointed out that religious literature also flourished in the Northern Netherlands, mainly written by women in the pietistic movement within the Protestant church. The sheer quantity of this literature suggests that it was widely read. In those days, one saw the link between women and religion as a natural one. The female virtues, humility, obedience and charity, are also religious virtues par excellence. Nevertheless, the tone often used in this respect was an apologetic one. The apostle Paul's warning that women had to be silent in the religious community had to be got round in one way or another; this is why women were often said to be 'weak vessels'. That God would want to use such simple souls to declare the message of salvation actually demonstrated that everything depended on Him. Apart from devotional poems, pious Protestant women also wrote their instructive autobiographies, in which they illustrated how they had been saved from the evil world by the grace of God.

Getting religious literature published was, apparently, much less difficult than the publication of secular literature. Already by the 16th century, songbooks written by pious women in the North and South were put into print; sometimes these were posthumous, but they were also printed in their own lifetime at the author's initiative, such as in the case of Katharina Boudewijns (about 1587) from Brussels. During the three centuries covered by *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*, devotional literature written by and for women is an important genre.

Men's helping hand in women's work

Women writers in the early modern period often did not have enough knowledge of grammar and punctuation, of poetic techniques or of classical literature. From that perspective, it is understandable that they enlisted the aid of their more educated peers. There are numerous examples of women writers who first submitted their work to male friends for improvement. There is nothing wrong with that. But

it is a different story when men, as was quite often the case, changed texts without having been requested to do so by their female colleagues. Sometimes this is quite innocuous, for instance when it is limited to bringing texts in line with the conventional spelling; this is often mentioned in an introduction. But some editors are so zealous that they change the composition of a poem and even 'improve' a poem's content. Occasionally, when the original manuscripts have been kept, this can be checked. In general, this raises the question whether we are actually reading what the author has written – and this is particularly the case with posthumous texts – or in fact reading a text through the eyes of a self-appointed editor. What could happen is clearly shown by the following example of a letter from the noted 19th century critic E.J. Potgieter to his friend J.P. Hasebroek, brother and enthusiastic advocate of the novels of his sister Betsy Hasebroek. Unconcernedly, Potgieter suggests that he amend the text during the correction of the proofs: he does not like the male characters and brother Hasebroek will have to do something about it. The latter is, fortunately, more sensible, but the case is characteristic of male attitudes at the time.

The role of men in women's literature is, both in a positive and negative sense, important in another way too. Men have designated women's literature as a phenomenon which has a special position in literature. Through their interest – even though this was fed by a certain penchant for the exotic which 'women writers' held for them – men have at least ensured that, in the 19th century, many names of female authors have been kept in literary lexicons. There were plans for the publication of an anthology of texts by women, such as that of the romantic reserve officer Eduard de Witte, who was married to the writer Maria van Zuylekom (1759-1831). This only came to fruition in 1856 when A.J. van der Aa – who had previously included many women writers in his lexicon of Dutch poets, *Nieuw biographisch, anthologisch en critisch woordenboek van Nederlandsche dichters* (1844-1846) – published the anthology *Parelen uit de lettervruchten van Nederlandsche dichters* (Pearls from the literary fruits of Dutch poetesses), a book with a preface written from a peculiarly male perspective, in which he argues that women use their literary work to please 'us', just as they always want to 'impart their womanhood for our pleasure'. In Belgium, Ange Angillis was a great promoter of women's literature. Another Belgian, Maurits Basse, was the first to write a separate study of the phenomenon: *Het aandeel der vrouw in de Nederlandsche letterkunde* (Women's contribution to Netherlands literature, 1920-1921), a book which took stock of the situation at the time, and which was written according to the then prevalent norms. In the major literary histories of the 19th and 20th centuries, women's literature is given short shrift. Even when historians, like the positivist Jan te Winkel, mention names, there is hardly a serious, historical study of their work. We have come full circle. We can end this article as we have begun, by declaring that 'the study of women writers of the past has only in recent years gathered momentum in Belgium and the Netherlands'.

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