

Women writing in 19th-century Flanders

The contribution and importance of women's literature in the southern part of the Low Countries has strongly depended, in the past, upon the circles in which women writers were working. Women played a major role in religious literature, which reached an apogee in the 17th century. Around that time women were leading the way as active participants in the large-scale projects of the Counter Reformation, and as writers of polemical texts, devotional and mystical literature. In the 18th and 19th century this literature gradually came to lose its significance, while profane literature, conversely, became increasingly more important. Even though women's literature written in the Dutch language originated in the Southern middle classes, its share there remained rather modest. It was only in the 19th century that women writers of non-religious literature came to the fore again.

This development was very strongly influenced by cultural and political factors. From the 17th century onwards the importance of the Dutch vernacular dwindled in intellectual and cultural contexts. In the Austrian Netherlands of the 18th century, the political and cultural elite spoke French. Due to the annexation to France between 1795 and 1814 public life became even more francophone, and consequently the progressive cultural elite became denationalized in that period. People who promoted modern liberal ideas did not believe that a national culture could be a sound basis for constructing a modern society. As a result, literature in Dutch remained in the hands of traditional writers, amateurs and rhetoricians who met and competed with each other in literary contests. Literature in Dutch received a new impetus in the culturally favourable climate during the existence of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands between 1815 and 1830. But the Belgian Revolution of 1830 restored the prominent role of French as the official language and as the cultural language of the upper classes. Nevertheless literature in Dutch was soon stimulated by a wave of enthusiastic patriotism, and it came to be important to the national Belgian cultural movement which expressed and defined a new national awareness.

A number of Dutch-speaking writers in the new Belgium believed that they could play a prominent role again. They were convinced that they, rather than the Walloons, were the real heirs of the legendary Belgians of ancient times. These Dutch-writing authors were loyal to the Belgian State and gained prestige and authority by means of their cultural activities in their struggle for the recognition of the language and literature of the Netherlands in a country dominated by French. Initially, their national, linguistic, literary-historical and literary activities had an entirely Belgian

character. But from 1840 onwards their cultural production became completely subordinate to the defence of a Flemish subnation within the Belgian State.

For this reason the development of 19th-century literature in Flanders was closely related to the creation of a distinct profile for the Flemish population, who at first defended the own language and culture, and who obtained some guarantees for legal equality and economic autonomy only towards the end of the century.¹ In the whole of the 19th century Flemish literature was closely linked up with extra-literary goals. As 'art engagé' it placed itself in the service of the national emancipation of a people, articulating ideals of civilization. Its objectives were very specific and well defined, oriented towards a new Flemish middle-class reading public. Only towards the end of the 19th century – the first traces of renewal date from around 1880 – did this literature develop into a relatively autonomous system. It was only then that Flemish literature became a modern and professionalized literature. This change occurred here later than in France or the northern part of the Netherlands, but the specific situation makes Flemish literature a special object of study from one perspective: it reveals the complete revision of a literary system in less than 60 years.

The poetess-mother

Women's contribution to Flemish literature of the 19th century and the way in which female writers experienced their authorship cannot be disconnected from these external factors.² Until the end of the century male mentors and critics called upon women writers to participate in the great civilization project of national literature. The role that women played in 19th-century Flemish society was strongly culturally conditioned. In spite of the progressiveness of the civil society of the time, where all civilians were in principle equal, women had no political voice. On the basis of intellectual and biological arguments they were supposedly predestined to play a maternal role in the middle-class family. The presupposition in the mostly favourable reviews of works by the relatively small group of women writers was that the main task of women is the care of their families and relatives. Literary activity was seen as a matter of scarce spare time, a free Sunday, a late evening under '*De avondlamp*' (The evening lamp), as an album by Maria Doolaeghe (1803-1884) was entitled symbolically in 1850.³ Admittedly, women writers were allowed the right to participate in the civilization project – on the strict condition that their main task was never neglected. They, too, appeared to be able to produce literature expressing great ideas, it those concerning the right to use one's own language, the existence of a distinctive national character, the defence of freedom, independence and legal authority, the belief in the progress and affluence of the Flemish nation. Women who managed to combine both tasks were even showered with praise. Accordingly, this very same Maria Doolaeghe was flatteringly referred to as the 'Belgian Sappho'. Praise was also bestowed upon

¹ See Coopman/Scharpé 1910 and Couttenier 1998.

² For the first studies in this field, see Basse 1920-1921 and De Weerdt 1980. Bibliographical information is to be found in Sury 1898. For recent research see *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997.

³ See also *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.835-846 (contribution Piet Couttenier).

those women writers who succeeded in combining male, rationally formulated objectives and elements like power and boldness of imagination with features which were – quite ‘naturally’ – considered to be typically feminine: a propensity for emotiveness and spirituality, and contact with the material and practical world of the family. Feeling for kind-heartedness, geniality and sensitivity was seen as a natural talent and inborn gift of women writers. This was the model of the poetess-mother as it was designed by Prudens van Duyse for the Flemish 19th-century poetess *par excellence* Maria Doolaeghe. This model would continue to dominate for part of the 20th century. Almost without exception, female writers adapted themselves to this model and rarely if ever offered resistance to this cultural imposition. Rather, they enthusiastically participated in the support of the national literature and even derived from this action a feeling of legitimacy and a rationale of their existence as women writers.

Shifts and innovations

In this strictly regulated literary system there were some Flemish women who resisted the pressure to conform to the culturally prescribed norms and who managed to deviate from what was expected from writers in the 19th century. They are rather scarce, but nevertheless conspicuous within the landscape of the 19th-century Dutch literature in Flanders. Once Maria Doolaeghe was considered by leading critics to be the exemplary poetess who promoted patriotic literature in the Flemish part of Belgium in the best way possible, after 1850, she mainly used the known topoi and genres of patriotic literature. She produced an impressive amount of lyrical and epic verse, as well as topical poetry that praises domestic happiness or national agriculture, art and industry. Whenever she reflects on her own authorship, she confirms mainstream expectations, i.e. a woman writing literature provides support for the great patriotic cause, but her role remains subordinate to her main tasks within the family, her familiar habitat, separated from public life.

But it is striking that Doolaeghe reached her highest expressiveness before the time of her canonization as poetess-mother. Her debut album from 1840, *Madelieven* (Daisies), contains some remarkable poems about motherhood which are characterized by an exceptional over-emphasis of feeling, a sentimental excess that we find, for example, in the pathetic dramatization of a mother giving birth who is sacrificed like a martyr, and in the pitifulness of the woman whose life balances between happiness and despair. Every happy scene hides a possible catastrophe, especially projected in anxious thoughts about the loss of a child. Here Doolaeghe clearly pays no heed to the strict standards set by the Flemish patriotic and civilizing literature which emerges around 1840.

Although these standards were generally accepted, some women writers obviously did manage either to get away from the conventional mainstream or to play a progressive role in the literary development. For example, Johanna Berchmans (1811-1890),⁴ better known under her husband's name as Mrs. Courtmans, introduced an

⁴ See on her *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.860-870 (contribution Piet Couttenier).

important element of social criticism in her realistic-didactic sketches and stories, which was until then – though less prominently – present in Hendrik Conscience's idealistic and romantic novels. In 1864 she wrote a novel, *De hut van tante Klara* (Aunt Clara's cabin), that was evidently inspired by Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's cabin*, on the exploitation of children in Flanders by schools that combined education with forced and lucrative lace-making. In other novels of the 1860s and 1870s she openly criticized the intolerance among ideological factions that surfaced in a political fight between Liberals and Catholics over the organization of education, which had disastrous effects for Belgium.



Jeanette Delcroix

Thanks to a systematic study of women's literature in 19th-century Flanders we could bring to the fore an interesting woman writer, Jeanette Delcroix (1826-1897),⁵ who until now has been completely overshadowed by her more famous brother Désiré, a playwright who had a successful career as the first Flemish official for culture. Jeanette Delcroix published only one short story and one novel, but in this

⁵ See *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.913-922 (contribution Piet Couttenier).

limited production she combines seriousness and humour in a surprising way – especially in comparison with other Flemish writers. She expresses sympathy for and commitment to the Flemish cause while sharply criticizing the self-conceited linguistic imperialism of French culture, but at the same time she portrays the fiercest defenders of that very same collective movement with biting irony. In her short novel *Fernandina en Frederika* (Fernandina and Frederika) of 1860, she describes the ups and downs in the lives of two very kind middle-class women and their plump cat. The quiet lives of these women are disturbed by the arrival of an other-worldly, conceited and naïve man who believes he has been called as a writer to lead the Flemish people to a better future. Delcroix shows the other side of a heroic Flemish faint-heart and do-gooder who gradually loses all sense of reality, from the perspective of these two down-to-earth wise women. She does this in a sophisticated way, and in doing so, she criticizes mercilessly the typical Flemish militant who defends the most radical Flemish-nationalistic ideals in public, but who is opportunistic enough to speak the hated and dominant language, i.e. French, in order to climb the social ladder. What is most striking about Delcroix's writing is her commonsensical style which ridicules the bombastic Flemish militant discourse. This ironical style is supported by narratorial comments which put her own story into perspective, by a dialogue acted out with the reader, and by the extensive use of indirect speech. Using these techniques, she is more than a decade ahead of the other Flemish novelists. Jeanette Delcroix's novel bears witness to the rise of realism in Flanders. Consequently we must reconsider the role in this context of Anton (Tony) Bergmann (1835-1874) and Domien Sleenckx (1818-1901), authors of the essay, generally seen as pioneering, *Over het realisme in de letterkunde* (On realism in literature): they only published it in 1862.

The innovatory role and literary-historical importance of the famous writers' duo, the sisters Rosalie (1834-1875) and Virginie Loveling (1836-1923),⁶ is well established. These two writers played a crucial part in the renewal and professionalization of Dutch literature in Flanders. Their realistic and plain style enhanced the transformation of traditional and idealistic writings into a modern literature that can be characterized as an intellectually edifying and refined exploration of authentic individuality and social consciousness. They pay special attention to the place of women in their families and in society. In doing so, they do not try to avoid problems. On the contrary, both authors are rather inclined towards melancholy seriousness and pessimism. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that after the untimely death of Rosalie Loveling, Virginie alternately produced realistic novels and naturalistic experimental work, containing merciless analyses of bourgeois hypocrisy, social injustice, and women's difficult search for independence, intellectual training and social responsibility. Especially daring for her time and her milieu are a number of novels from the 1870s. One of these novels was published in 1877 under a male pseudonym and deals with political issues – then taboo for women –, namely, the ideological intolerance that reigned supreme in the Belgian educational policy: W.G.E. Walter, *In onze Vlaamse gewesten* (In our Flemish regions). Loveling's broad themes and the psychologically sound analyses of her characters presage the modern Dutch novel of the 20th century.

⁶ See *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.937-952 (contribution Piet Couttenier).

Concluding remarks

Finally, we would like to present some general conclusions that emerge from our study of women writers in the Dutch literature produced in Flanders in the 19th century. Firstly, in general their poetry is, technically speaking, not of high quality. As poetesses, they are mostly unable to meet the high formal standards of poetry. In the 19th century women in Flanders write well only if they write prose. There is no sound explanation for this, apart from the lack of education and poetical scholarship. It is possible that prose is more suitable for reflection and critical distance, attitudes that are characteristic of women writers in view of the context we have described.⁷ Throughout the 19th century, Flemish women writers are a rather exceptional group, a marginal phenomenon with respect to the mainstream literary establishment. In this position they can escape more easily from the standards and conventions of the system. Literary prose gives them more opportunities to question the obviousness of the conventional with critical acumen and, in the case of Jeanette Delcroix, with supreme irony.

Secondly, the 19th-century Flemish literary system was generally rather strongly connected with extra-literary factors and anchored in the ideological-political debate between traditionalists and progressives, between Catholics and Liberals. Hence it is obvious that as soon as a woman writer gained some importance on the literary scene, she, too, had to take this into account. It is striking that a woman writer whose debut was said to be promising, was welcomed with praise, if necessary labelled and incorporated into the ideological groups that determined the cultural debate. The case of Delcroix illustrates the reverse. When she made her debut in 1860, she was praised, because of her talent for observation. But – because of the sharpness of her pen? – the critics pointed out a number of important weaknesses in the composition of her novel: she did not meet the requirements of veracity and unity of action. She got the advice to pay more attention to action rather than to reflexion in her way of characterization. As she felt not really encouraged, she did not continue her writing, and after her marriage she did not write anything of significance. Arguably, Jeanette Delcroix symbolizes the woman writer who is castigated for her progressiveness and her audacity, and who is consequently discouraged from pursuing a promising literary career.

⁷ Nevertheless, the situation can be compared to French literature. See Planté 1989, p.227-253.

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Anna Bijns
(1493-1575)



Is zonde deugd, de Lutheranen zijn santen

Door d'abuiselijk wonder 't herte mespaaid staat.
Als ik overzie de heel wereld in 't ronde,
Zo dunkt mij, dat alle ding verdraaid gaat,
En 't volk ook met allen winden waait (ja 't),
Recht of men geen God of geen helle en vonde.
Luttel iemand es recht gelovig van gronde,
Maar meest elk es tot twijfelingen genegen.
't Kwaad heet nu goed en men acht 't voor zonde,
Dat goede werken te heten plegen.
Men laakt 't nu al, dat den vleze gaat tegen:
Dat den vleze mee gaat, wordt voor deugd geprezen.
Dit doet ook den monken haar kappen verwegen.
Och, waar is kerstenrijk toe bedegen
Door Luthers doctrijne, vol erreurs gerezen?
d'Evangelie Christi wordt nu gelezen
Van bankboeven, dronkaards, roekeloze calanten,
Om naar 't vlees te trekken, het blijkt uit dezen.
Is zonde deugd, de Lutheranen zijn santen.

Waar 't dat de mensen dit wel gade slaan wouwen,
Elk zou hier met mij zijnen zegel aansteken.
Is achterklap deugd, wilt dit vermaan knouwen,
Zo zijn 't al santen, die met Luther aanhouwen,
Want van niemand en kunnen zij wel gespreken.
Is 't zonde, dat wij biechten ons gebreken?
Is 't deugd, dat zij hem derren vermeten,
Hoe zondig zij zijn, vol vleselijker treken,
Dat met enen zuchte al wordt gekweten?
Is 't deugd, dat zij 's vrijdags vlees willen eten,
En is 't zonde, dat ander Christenen derven,
Zo houd ik ze ook voor heilige profeten.
Is 't deugd, dat zij alle weldoen vergeten,
Met niet te doene den hemel willen erven,
Zo mag men haren dag wel vieren, als zij sterven.
Is 't deugd onkruid in Gods akker planten,
Zo denke ik en zeg 't ook menigwerven:
Is zonde deugd, de Lutheranen zijn santen.

Is 't deugd in Bachus' kerke grote teugen drinken?
Is 't deugd hoveren, brassen, slampampen
En door onzuiverheid meer dan zeugen stinken?
Is 't deugd, dat zij menige stoute leugen dinken,
Paus, kardinalen, bisschoppen beschampen,
Tegen papen en monken roepen en stampen,
Den rechten weg laten en gaan den krommen?
Is 't deugd voor 't sacrament storten de lampen
En achter straten met toortsen lopen mommen,

If sin be virtue, then Lutherans are saints!

Through wondrous folly my heart is disturbed
As I survey the whole world round:
There is not a thing that's not upside down,
And winds blow mindless folk about, yea,
As though there were no God, no hell.
Nary a one's a believer through and through
But all, it seems, incline to doubts.
Evil is named good, and what's now called sin,
Ere this had claim to title: good works.
Faulted is all that fights 'gainst flesh,
While pleasing the flesh is held great virtue;
Hence monks think the cowl too heavy a burden.
Alas, and has the Christian realm progressed
Through Luther's doctrine, sheer bursting with error?
The Gospel of Christ is now so construed
By foolish chumps, drunkards, hobbledahoys,
As fav'ring the flesh, one can learn well from this.
If sin be virtue, then Lutherans are saints!

Would folk accord careful attention to this
Their seal of approval they'd stamp on my words.
If slander be virtue – here's a word to the wise –
All they would be saints, who to Luther do hold,
For speaking well of their neighbor, that they can't do.
Confessing our failings, is that now our sin?
And is it their virtue, to loudly proclaim
The extent of their sins, their fleshly wiles
That are all acquitted with one single sigh?
To eat meat on Friday, is that virtue now,
And do Christians sin, should they choose to abstain?
Then I will concur: they are prophets holy.
And if it be virtue, good deeds to neglect,
Thinking that faineancy earns heaven's reward.
Then surely is holy the day that they die.
If it be virtue, sowing tares in God's field,
So think I to myself, and proclaim many a time:
If sin be virtue, then Lutherans are saints!

In Bacchus's temple to drink great draughts,
A virtue? to carouse, pig out and loaf about
And through impurity to outstink sows?
Is it virtue to invent brazen lies,
Deride cardinals, bishops, popes,
Holler and rage against priests and monks
Leave the straight for the crooked way?
Upsetting lamps at the altar: virtue that be,
And in back alleys mumming with torches

In geestelijke habijten met fluiten, met bommen,
Van brooddronkenschap wetende wat beginnen,
't Geld verdubbelen met vollen kommen
En kloosters beroven, kerken en dommen?
Mag men hiermede de hemel winnen,
Zij varen in den koor der serafinnen.
Is 't deugd dat men straft d'oprechte predikanten,
Gods moeder veracht, santen en santinnen?
Is zonde deugd, de Lutheranen zijn santen.

Is 't deugd Gods woord naar 's vlees' beroeren trekken?
Is 't deugd d'evangelie te lezen kwansuis,
Opdat elk daarmee mag zijn valse kuren dekken?
Is 't deugd met der heiliger figuren gekken,
De beelden te verwerpen, ja en 't heilig kruis,
Venus, Cupido en zulken gespuis,
Naakt in kameren te hangen zeer putertier?
Is dit al deugd, dit maakt mij confuis,
Zo behoefde men wel enen nieuwen brevier.
Daar wordt er vast vele gedood daar en hier.
Zal men die al voor martelaars eren,
Zo mag men wel scheuren den ouden kalengier,
Want daar en staan geen santen in dit papier,
Die 't gelove bevechten en de waarheid verkeren,
Met den evangelie alle deugd verleren,
Gelijk nu doen dees Lutherse plavanten.
Maar ik derf wel zeggen voor vrouwen en heren:
Is zonde deugd, de Lutheranen zijn santen.

Is 't dat de Lutheranen hovaardig blijven
In haar opinie, zo zij gewoon zijn,
Gulzig, onkuis, brooddronken, aalwaardig blijven
In dees deugden tot der dood volhaardig blijven,
Het eeuwig leven zal haren loon zijn.
In den hemel, daar Lucifer zal patroon zijn,
Daar zullen zij snap zonder vaagvuur varen,
In den hoogsten troon: zal 't daar niet schoon zijn?
Met Arrio, Helvidio, dat ketters waren,
Bij Hus en Wiclef zal men ze paren,
Daar hen sulfer en pek niet en zal missen,
Daar zullen zij met der duivelser scharen
Eeuwelijk moeten braaien en kissen,
Totdat de ratten de helle uitpissen,
Die 't vaagvuur uitpisten; hoort Lutherse kwanten,
Ik zegge nog eens al met der gissen:
Is zonde deugd, de Lutheranen zijn santen.

Anna Bijns: 'Is zonde deugd, de Lutheranen zijn santen'.

From: Herman Pleij (ed.), *'t Is al vrouwenwerk. Refreinen van Anna Bijns*.
Amsterdam: Querido, 1987, p.49-52.

Running 'round cowed, with flutes and with drums,
 While madness of excess has gained sole possession?
 They gamble their money hand over fist
 And rob monasteries, churches, cathedrals:
 If one could gain life eternal through this,
 They'll soon rise to join seraphic choirs.
 Is it a virtue, to insult upright preachers,
 Despise saints and saintesses, the Mother of God?
 If sin be virtue, then Lutherans are saints!
 Perverting God's word to approve fleshly lusts,
 A virtue? to 'interpret Scripture,' as it's called
 In order to justify any false whim?
 A virtue to make mockery of statues holy,
 To spurn icons, yea, even the Holy Cross;
 While Venus, Cupid and similar scum
 Hang naked in chambers most lecherously?
 If this be virtue, I'm totally confused,
 The breviary I'm used to must be written new.
 No doubt here and there many are killed for this faith;
 If honor were due them, as Martyrs for God
 The old Church almanac might as well be torn up,
 For in that old paper there are no Saints
 Who do battle with faith and pervert the truth,
 Use Scripture to erase all virtuous habit,
 As these Lutheran skunks are now wont to do.
 But I dare say loudly, to women, to men,
 If sin be virtue, then Lutherans are saints!

Prince:

If indeed the Lutherans do remain proud
 In their opinions, as they tend to do,
 Remain piggish, impure, impertinent, stupid,
 Remain dogg'dly in these virtues up to death's door,
 Surely life eternal will be their reward,
 In heaven, where Lucifer is the patron saint,
 No purgatory for them, they'll zip up in a trice
 To the highest throne; what a marvelous place!
 With Arius, Helvidius, they'll be trusty chums,
 With Huss and with Wyclif, those heretic louts.
 There they'll have plenty of sulphur, of pitch,
 There, together with all of the devilish hosts,
 Ever and ever they'll sizzle and fry,
 Till rats' piss douses the fires of hell,
 As purgatory was pissed out; hear well, Lutheran chaps,
 I'll say just once more, I'll make a wild guess:
 If sin be virtue, then Lutherans are saints!

Anna Bijns: 'If sin be virtue, then Lutherans are saints'.

Translation by Hermina Joldersma.

From: Kristiaan P. Aercke, *Women writing in Dutch*. New York/London: Garland, 1994, p. 120-123.

