

## Art or nature? Womanly ways to literature

When the issue of the relation between women and literature is raised, most attention is generally given to the female side, to the position of women writers in the different periods of history, how they were regarded, what subjects they wrote about, and how their works were received, etcetera. But there are always two sides to any relationship, and so when we consider the relation between women and literature, we have to look into both the changing position of women as well as the changing position of literature itself.

My thesis is that the ways in which women could and would participate in literary life depended to a huge degree on what 'literature' was supposed to be: on the objectives it was supposed to serve, the means it had to employ in order to realize those objectives, and, consequently, the ways by which one could become a writer. Therefore, this time I will use literature as my point of departure, and from that vantage point try to analyze how women came to write the way they did, and how changes in the realm of literature affected their position and production.

In doing so I will limit myself to 17th-century Holland, my area of specialization as a literary historian. But I hope that, in a more general way, my reflections may help to shed some light on the processes of interference between the social and the cultural situation in which women were – and not infrequently, still are – caught.

### Anna Roemers

Around 1600, when Dutch literature came under the influence of the new Italian-French poetical mode, which we generally refer to as the 'Renaissance', vernacular poetry was thoroughly permeated by classical learning for the first time. The most important poet in this regard was Daniel Heinsius, who was appointed to Leiden University as lecturer in 1602 at the age of 22, and made 'professor extraordinarius' of poetry in 1603. His inaugural lesson, *De poetis et eorum interpretatoribus* (On poets and their interpreters), heralded the beginning of a new poetic era in Holland, marked by the influence of Latin and Greek lyric poetry and Neo-Platonic literary philosophy.

Heinsius not only discussed this, but in the same years realized his ideas in Neo-Latin and, what is more important to the subject at hand, in Dutch vernacular poetry, amplifying Petrarchist and Pléiádist influences with those of classical poets as

Catullus, Propertius and, above all, Theocritus. His poems were charming, playful and direct, but at the same time extremely erudite.<sup>1</sup>

It is certainly significant that Anna Roemersdr. Visscher (1583-1651), the very first Dutch woman we know of to have practised poetry on a more than incidental basis, started her literary activity in close contact with the very same Daniel Heinsius. At any rate, the oldest surviving poetry in her hand are poems addressed to him and to his cousin Jacob van Zevecote, in response to verses in which they had praised her as, in the words of Heinsius, the

Goddess who once was born by Amstel's riverside,  
Whom Phoebus loves and Pallas takes as her pride  
[...]  
Minerva of our realm and tenth one of the nine,  
Whom Pegasus besprinkles with all his sweetest rain.  
[...]<sup>2</sup>

Compliments she, of course, politely rejected.

### The matrimonial role-model

In my view this literary correspondence attests to two different, but closely connected, social and cultural developments. On the one hand, the new lyrical poetry also embodied a new poetic function, that of a social binder. These poems were not so much intended to be morally instructive, but rather to be first and foremost socially affirmative. They were supposed to fulfil the function of polite 'conversation', a function that had been current for over a century in the Neo-Latin culture of the intellectual upper classes and had now become fashionable also in vernacular literature.

On the other hand there was a marked and growing tendency in Dutch upper middle-class society to embrace what I would call a 'matrimonial' ideology. Girls were supposed to be educated as spouses, housewives and mothers, and were not permitted to participate in outdoor social and economic life. This conception, already put forward by Erasmus in his declamation *De laude matrimonii*, was fairly new to 17th-century Holland. Up to that time, women normally participated in public life, sometimes to a high degree. To quote a well-known and often repeated statement by

<sup>1</sup> Becker-Cantarino 1978, p.23-63; Meter 1984, p.23-34 and 38-58.

<sup>2</sup> Heinsius 1983, p.33:

Godin die by den stroom des Amstels sijt geboren,  
Van Phoebus seer bemint, van Pallas uytverkoren,  
[...]  
Minerva van ons landt, en tiende van de negen  
Die Pegasus bestort met zijnen soeten regen,  
[...]

All translations are mine (MS). Cf. also Visscher 1881, vol.ii, p.1-6 and 17-20; on her: *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.150-151 (contribution Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen and Hans Luijten); poems translated in English in: Meijer 1998, p.50-56.

Lodovico Guicciardini, in his *Descrizione di tutti i Paesi Bassi* (1567, translated into Dutch in 1612):

The women in this country [...] not only go to and fro in town to manage their affairs, but they travel from town to town through the country, without any company to speak of, and without anybody commenting upon it. [...] they occupy themselves also in buying and selling, and are industrious [...] in affairs that properly belong to men, and that with such an eagerness and skilfulness that in many places, as in Holland and Zeeland, men leave it to women to handle everything.<sup>3</sup>

But since that time a veritable ‘civilization offensive’ forced girls and women to stay within the confines of the home, beginning with the upper middle-classes. The Visscher family belonged to this social group, as did Heinsius, who was one of the very first in Holland to express this ideology. In the verse introduction to his *Spiegel van de doorluchtige, eerlicke, cloucke, deuchtsame en de verstandege vrouwen* (Mirror of illustrious, honest, brave, virtuous, and intelligent women) of 1606 he wrote:

It is an old debate, originating from long ago,  
And yet not clearly solved today,  
Who, on the point of virtue and intelligence,  
Is to be given the prize and victory: women or men.  
The men have with brave hands  
Conquered cities and countries,  
And have brought in their power and command  
The whole globe of the world.  
On the contrary the virtues and talents  
Of women are hidden and buried,  
And woman’s faithful nature, her chaste behaviour  
Have the threshold of the house as their boundary.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Guicciardini 1612, p.29:

‘De Vrouwen van desen lande [...] gaen niet alleenlijck over ende weder, in de stad, om haer saecken te beschicken: maer reysen oock over landt, van den eenen ten anderen met luttel geselschaps, sonder eenighe berispinghe. Zy zijn seer sober, besich ende altijdt wat doende, beschickende niet alleenlijck huyswerck ende huyshoudinghe, daer de mans hen luttel met becommenen: [...] Maer onderwinden haer oock met coopmanschap, in’t coopen ende vercoopen: ende zijn neerstich in de weere [...] in hante-ringhen die den mans eyghentlijck aengaen, met alsulcke bendicheyht ende vlyticheydt, dat te veel plaetsen, als in Hollandt ende Zeelandt, de mans den vrouwen alle dinghen laten beschicken’.

<sup>4</sup> Theocritus a Ganda 1606, p. (2) recto:

Het is een out gheschil, van langhen tijdt gheresen,  
En noch op desen dach niet duydelick ghewesen,  
Wie datmen geven moet van deuchden en verstandt  
De Vrouwen oft de Mans den prys en d’overhandt.  
De Mannen hebben eerst met cloeckicheyht van handen  
Ghenomen in haer macht de Steden ende Landen,  
En onder haer ghebiedt, en onder haer ghewelt  
Des aertrijcx ronde Cloot ghetrocken en ghestelt.  
Daer teghen is de deucht, daer teghen zijn de ghaven  
Vant vrouwelick gheslacht besloten en begraven.  
En haer ghetrou ghemoet, end’ haeren handel kuys,  
Heeft tot zijn leste pael den Dorpel van het huys.

In the course of the first half of the century these ideas would slowly spread throughout Dutch middle-class society, thanks to the propaganda of Jacob Cats, the uncontested best-selling author in Dutch literature on translations of works by Cats in German and the Scandinavian languages.<sup>5</sup>

The matrimonial role-model was not devoid of all intellectual content. As a spouse, her husband's partner, and as a mother, the educator of her children, a woman needed at least some cultural baggage. Erasmus had already emphasized this point, and Heinsius and Cats agreed. But 'culture' in the upper middle-class milieu where these ideas were first embraced meant for the most part classicist – and therefore intellectual – culture. Women's share in it could only be second-hand. There was no 'Latin school' or university training available to them. They were dependent on what they could learn from their fathers, brothers or husbands, or were able to pick up from casual reading.<sup>6</sup>

### Literature as social conversation

Returning to Anna Roemersdr. Visscher – shortly called Anna Roemers –, we can now define her literary position more precisely. Nearly all the work we know of by her is written in relation to the poetry of men. A few years after her poetical correspondence with Heinsius and Zevecote, there followed a similar exchange with Constantijn Huygens and Pieter Cornelisz. Hooft, the two leading Dutch poets of the new generation, and with some friends in Zeeland on the occasion of a visit there, particularly Jacob Cats and Johanna Coomans.<sup>7</sup> Aside from that, we have a few laudatory poems, also addressed to men. Her only surviving independent literary works are a translation of a collection of religious emblems by the French Huguenot poetess Georgette de Montenay – this translation was published only in the 19th century<sup>8</sup> –, and the brief poems she added to the reprint of her father's emblem book. That's all – and please note: she was the most famous Dutch poetess of the 17th century.

This does not mean, of course, that she did not write more. But it is telling that only the poetry she wrote in connection with men was saved from the ravages of time. Why? Because it was printed in their publications. The rest remained in manuscript form, and was preserved only by accident, if at all. Such were the consequences of the new social function of lyrical poetry.

The consequences for the nature of her verses are no less significant. Riet Schenkeveld has argued that Anna Roemers marked her own literary position by reacting with critical irony towards the high poetic pretensions of her male friends. We may even say that in doing so she formulated, to a certain extent, a female poetics. But if this is true – and I think it is –, the awareness thereof remained within the boundaries of her private correspondence.

<sup>5</sup> See Spies/Frijhoff 1999, p. 586–589.

<sup>6</sup> See also Spies 1995b, p.9-11.

<sup>7</sup> See on her *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.156-159 (contribution Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen).

<sup>8</sup> For this translation, see Margolin 1989; for a useful discussion of Montenay's work: Matthews Grieco 1994.

Een de  
 Vermaerde Constrycker Petrus  
 Paulus Rubbens, doe ic Mac  
 Syn Wtrock schilderde  
 Anno 1621

Wat een Mensch al can begripen  
 Als hij sijn Vernuft wil slijpen,  
 Wat op t'uijterst hy vermacht  
 brengt gij Rubbens aen den dach.  
 Sachens Waert is mijn Vermeyten  
 Dat ic nachtoots de Poëten,  
 Spottens Waert is dat ic tast  
 Mac een Pen, een naelt die Past

Dat soo geel niet en besterft  
 Moch de tijt soo niet bederft.  
 Hier door sult gij mij verblinden  
 Dat ic v en v bemunde  
 Fluysse rouwe die door deesen moet  
 Oock sijn hertelijck gegroet  
 Weesen sal met hert En sinne  
 Anne Roemers  
 v Vrindinne

Anna Roemersdr. Visscher's hand-writing: first and last pages of a poem addressed to Rubens (1621).

Besides, men could find the time to write other, more serious kinds of poetry than love lyrics and conversational verses. There is no indication that Anna ever tried her hand at some greater work – a tragedy, an epic, or a long descriptive poem. With a household on her hands, first after her mother's death, and then when she was married, she simply was not able to do so: for a woman housekeeping always came before any other activity.<sup>9</sup>

The literary fate of Anna Roemers can stand for that of most female writers of the Dutch 17th century. Out of the oeuvre of her younger (perhaps even more gifted) sister, Maria Tesselschade,<sup>10</sup> some twenty-odd poems survive because she communicated them to male friends. Of her translation of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, which she worked on for about twenty years, we know only the stanza she quoted in a letter to Hooft.<sup>11</sup>

To my knowledge, there exists only one publication of an original major work by a woman in the 17th century: *Het lof der vrouwen* (In praise of women, 1643), a long didactic poem written by Johanna Hoobius, daughter of a burgomaster in Zeeland.<sup>12</sup> It testifies to rather wide reading and a skilful rhyming ability, but nothing more than that. Apart from translations, on the whole women confined themselves to religious and social lyrical poetry.

I will come to the religious poetry later on. The secular poetry written by women nearly always performed the function of social 'conversation', even entertainment. The latter phenomenon is illustrated by the popularity of a poetic device: the repetition of the same rhyming words from poem to poem, that was introduced by Huygens in his correspondence with Anna Roemers in 1619. In 1621 it was repeated in a whole series of sonnets by Hooft, Huygens, Anna and Maria Tesselschade Roemers, and other friends; in 1623 it was used again by Hooft and Huygens in an exchange of poems between them. It was revived in 1648 – not without a nod towards the past – by the Frisian poetess Sibylle van Griethuysen, who was quite famous at the time, in a poetical exchange with Huygens.<sup>13</sup> The culmination of the game was reached when in 1654 a group of no fewer than twelve poets, three of whom were women, played it around a rather daring erotic theme.<sup>14</sup>

### Middle class women writers

By that time, however, the literary situation itself had changed. What in the first quarter-century had been the custom of a small elite had now spread throughout the broad, middle-class layer of the population. Writing poetry had become a kind of national sport. At the same time the number of women engaged in it had also

<sup>9</sup> *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.229-239 (contribution Annelies de Jeu).

<sup>10</sup> See the contribution of Maria-Theresia Leuker for a discussion of her 19th-century reputation.

<sup>11</sup> Roemers 1994, passim; Spies 1995b, p.21; on her: Smits-Veldt 1994; *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.171-172 (contribution Ton van Strien); poems translated in English in: Meijer 1998, p.56-59.

<sup>12</sup> *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.226-235 (contribution Els Stronks).

<sup>13</sup> *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.256-258; on her: idem, p.252-253 (contribution Dorthe Schipperheijn).

<sup>14</sup> Minderaa 1964, p.118-145.

increased considerably. As far as I know, until about 1640 Anna and Maria Tesselschade Roemers, together with Johanna Coomans from Zeeland, were the only women in the Dutch Republic who had published any secular poetry. But twenty years later the situation was completely different. In the ten or so anthologies and songbooks that appeared between 1650 and 1660, a host of new poetesses came forward: Sibylle van Griethuysen, Sibylle van Jongstal, Catharina Questiers, Katarina Verwers, Katharina Lescailje, Alida Bruno, Goudina van Weert. And there were quite a lot more of them – *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* bears abundantly testimony to that.

Both developments – an increase in the popularity of poetry writing and in the number of female poets – were the result of the growth of a rather well-to-do and relatively well-educated middle class. But something else may have been at work, which would explain the kind of poetry that was written.

By far the greatest part of the lyrical poetry written after 1650 consists of what is known as occasional poetry. The sheer quantity of birth, marriage, anniversary and funeral verses written from that time on is almost unimaginable. At the same time the poetical subtleties that had been characteristic of the poems of the Visscher sisters and their friends, as well as the intimacy and friendship that had pervaded their verses, seemed to make room for a more formal diction and a more polite tone. The most important reason for all this, I think, was the programme of the ‘Latin school’.

In 1625 the government of Holland established a regulation for all ‘Latin schools’ which prescribed the composition of occasional poetry in the sixth and final class. Not many pupils would have mastered Latin well enough to continue this activity for the rest of their lives, at least in Latin. But it can hardly be accidental that from the moment the generation of 1625 left school, this type of poetry, for which classicist poetics had developed fixed rules, became so extremely popular also among poets writing in Dutch.

For women this development resulted in a paradoxical position. The social situation in which this poetry functioned was closer to their way of life than ever before, but at the same time women lacked the formal education to write it in a proper, scholarly, way. Male authors were trained for years in the forms and content of classical poetry, and the best, such as Heinsius, Hooft and Huygens, were able to play with it and come up with innovations that defined the superiority of their verses. Women, however gifted they may have been, simply missed the opportunity to surpass the level of mediocrity. The many textbooks and self-help manuals which supported schoolboys in their efforts, and from which examples and devices could easily be transferred to vernacular poetry, were no help to them because they were written in Latin.<sup>15</sup> The more poetry became subject to formal rules, the more women inevitably fell short of them.

To give some examples: Sibylle van Griethuysen was, as mentioned previously, quite famous in her time. And she was as eager to adapt the Horatian ode to her needs as Vondel, the greatest Dutch poet of her age. The fatal difference, not only between her work and Vondel’s unsurpassable poetry, but between her work and that

<sup>15</sup> Spies 1995a, p.100-105.

of every educated man at the time, was a lack of sense of style and decorum. It is difficult to give an impression of this in translation, but allow me to try a few verses. They are directed to Adrianus Hasius, a Protestant clergyman who had written a pious book. The literal meaning of 'Hasius', by the way, is 'hare':

Here's Adrian, an alert Hare,  
[...] whose watchful eyes never do slumber,  
Nor can be frightened by Babel's thunder,  
But who is concerned with zealous care  
To push with his ordained hare's feet  
The gruesome, self-conceited sinners  
Off their doomed, erroneous street;  
[...].<sup>16</sup>

The same violation of good taste characterizes the 'battle of laurels' in which two other poetesses, Catharina Questiers and Cornelia van der Veer, engaged themselves. Catharina, this time not imitating Horace but Pindar, wrote:

No, priest of Phoebus, I do not deserve laurels,  
My verses are weak, they have neither power nor muscles  
To climb to the top of famous Helicon; [...]

And Cornelia replied in the same manner:

I am unworthy for the service of him who kisses laurels  
Instead of Daphne's mouth; your verses have muscles  
And veins loaded with marrow, to climb Helicon  
With pleasure; [...].<sup>17</sup>

Appalling verses indeed – in Dutch as well. They are the result, I think, of a poetics that was not internalized in any way. The life-long adaptation to classical modes that

<sup>16</sup> In: *Klioos kraam 1656*, vol.1, 1656, p.14-15:

Hier's Adriaen, een wacker Haes,  
[...] wiens oog'-wit nimmer slommert,  
Noch schrickt voor Babels hol geraes;  
Maer die in d'ijver sich bekomert,  
Om 't eygen-heylig grouwel-pack,  
Met sijn gewijde Hase-poten,  
Van 't pestig dool-padt af te stoten;  
[...].

<sup>17</sup> Questiers/Van der Veer 1665, p.4:

Neen, Febus Priesterin, my passen gheen Laurieren;  
Mijn vaarzen zijn te swack, zy hebben kracht noch spieren,  
Om op den top van 't wijd-beroemde Helicon  
Te klauteren; [...]

and p.7:

Ik ben onwaardt den dienst van hem die Lauwerieren  
In plaats van Dafne kust; uw vaarzen hebben spieren,  
En aaders vol van merch, waar door gy Helikon  
Beklauterdt met vermaak; [...]

On the two of them: *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.316-317 (contribution Theanne Boer and Lia van Gemert) and p.354-356 (contribution Lia van Gemert); some poems by Questiers translated in English in: Meijer 1998, p.58-61.

men were trained for in school could not be caught up with by simply copying superficial appearances.

### Female literary consciousness

But that is only part of the story. At the same time, the increasing activity of female writers brought about a distinct perception of their own special position. One preliminary sign is the awareness of a female canon, to which many women addressed themselves. I have already mentioned Anna Roemersdr. Visscher in this context. In most cases, however, this awareness did not extend further than simply mentioning the names of female predecessors. Johanna Hoobius already had spoken of the 'worthy Coomans child', who

Was loved by everyone for her spirituality  
And served the juveniles with pretty poetry

and of Anna Roemers, who wrote such 'sweet verses'.<sup>18</sup>

In 1652 a lady from Leeuwarden, Eelkje van Bouricius, took up the theme, writing in a poem addressed to Huygens:

I am no Roemers child, no Coomans, no Griethuysen,  
Who from Hippocrene with wide opened sluices  
Are watered through and through with Helicon's sweet rains,  
Whereof I never had one drop in my young veins.<sup>19</sup>

But like Anna Roemers some decades earlier, one poetess, Maria Margareta van Akerlaecken, testified to her awareness of the poetical implications of her special position. Maria Margareta van Akerlaecken was connected with the court of the great elector Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg and his wife Louise Henriëtte of Nassau at Cleves, and was one of the very first women to publish her own secular poetry. In the opening poem of her bundle *Den Cleefschē Pegasus* (The Pegasus of Cleves, 1654) she too declares herself a lesser poet than Anna and Tesselschade Roemers, Johanna Coomans, and, of course, Anna Maria van Schurman, the most learned woman of the Dutch Republic, who is often named in this context. But, in contrast to her colleagues, Maria Margareta turns her shortcoming into an advantage:

<sup>18</sup> Hoobius 1643, p.8:

Het is ons noch bekend hoe Comans weerde kint  
Wert om haer geestigheydt van yder een bemint.  
Sy gaet een aerdigh Dicht de jonge jeught vereeren.  
[...]  
En luffrou Anna oock, een Maeght vol geestigheden,  
Gingh die niet menichmael haer jonge tyd besteden,  
In soete Poësy [...]

<sup>19</sup> Ick ben geen Romers kint, geen Comans, geen Griethuysen,  
Die uyt het Hingste bron, als met geheele sluysen,  
Ten volsten sijn gedrinckt met Heliconis nat,  
Daer ick den minsten drop noch noeit en heb gehad.

From: Huygens 1869, p.488. On her: *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997 p.248 (contribution Dorthe Schipperheijn), and p.59 (Introduction).

[...] I do not say I have studied a lot,  
 But I write simply, plainly, just as Nature taught,  
 And am thinking on my own: the poets at the start  
 Of time, they also did not know of any 'Art'.  
 Therefore I am quite happy in my mind  
 That for this reason I am of the first poet's kind.<sup>20</sup>

The 'first poets' being the greatest and most inspired of all according to classicist poetics.

### The lack of formal education

Maria Margareta van Akerlaecken was quite right, I think, although contrary to Anna Roemers she did not demonstrate it in her clumsily written verses. Women's poetry was at its best when it remained plain and simple, rather than trying to imitate the learned artfulness of men. Not because women are essentially closer to 'nature' – whatever that may be – but because they were forced to be, by the lack of formal education. *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* bears ample testimony to the fact that when women forgot about poetics delightful verses tended to appear.

Here we come to a point where religious poetry should enter the picture. One would suppose that, when writing pious verses, women would be most genuine and least impressed by any learning whatsoever. I must say that as far as the Northern Netherlands are concerned, *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* does not support this idea. Judith Lubbers, a Mennonite woman who was converted to Roman Catholicism, published some beautiful religious poetry in her album *Der lijden vreucht* (The pleasure of suffering, 1649).<sup>21</sup> But for the most part the religious poetry published in *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* does not excel in simplicity. What is more, the whole criterion does not really apply to this area, because religious poetry as such was often direct and simple, also when it was written by men. However, looking at the verses written by the many religious women in the Southern Netherlands, I think there may be something in my hypothesis.

At any event, I would suggest that the lack of formal education formed the greatest if not the only impediment to women's creativity in the classicist period, whether in religious or secular poetry. Once naturalness and originality became the most prized virtues of literature, women such as Betje Wolff, Aagje Deken and Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint proved to be as good if not better writers than many of their male colleagues. And that seems to me sufficient support for my assertion.

<sup>20</sup> Van Akerlaecken 1654, p. A 1 verso:  
 [...] ick en segghe niet, ick hebbe gestudeert,  
 Maer schrijve simpel slecht, soo de Natuer my leert,  
 End' dencke in myn selfs, de alder eerst Poëten,  
 Die hebben in haer tijdt meed' van geen Cunst geweten,  
 Waerom ick seer wel ben, in mijnen Geest te vree,  
 Dat ick hier door gelijk ben d'eerst Poëten mee.

On her: *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.200 (contribution Ton van Strien).

<sup>21</sup> On her: *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.190-193 (contribution Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen).

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