

'Ein schönes Ungeheuer': German women authors from 1550-1850

Ein Weib das dicht und schreibt, heist sie (bedenk es nur!)
Ein schönes Ungeheur und Blendwerk der Natur.¹
A woman who writes verse and prose is called (imagine that!)
a pretty monster and delusion of nature.

These lines are taken from a poem by Sidonie Zäunemann (1714-1740), a German poet who in her life and works went against many of the conventions of her time. However, many of her less courageous literary sisters wrote and published their works as well. In the following pages, I will relate the consistent efforts of the last thirty years to show that women *were* engaged in literature throughout the centuries, that they *did* participate in a variety of genres, and that they did so throughout the German speaking countries. In other words, modern research has sided with Sidonie Zäunemann against the traditional opinion that a woman author was a 'pretty monster' or an 'illusion of nature'. I will give a chronological overview of the research regarding women authors, highlight various features that have characterized the disclosure and evaluation of women's writings from 1550 until 1850, and then comment on the accessibility of works by German authors of a bygone era.² As Gerda Lerner has pointed out, women made history, but what they did was left 'unrecorded, neglected, and ignored in interpretation'.³ Literary scholarship is now attempting to fill in the blanks in the as yet incomplete picture of history. Some of the features of research on German women authors are similar to those in other European countries. Thus my account will feature some of the same aspects as are discussed in *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*, a very ambitious and impressive Dutch edition which provides biographies and bibliographical resources of more than 150 Dutch women and makes, often for the first time, a selection of their works available to the modern reader.

Overview

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the work of women found its way into print most often when sympathetic male friends or family members arranged for its

¹ Zäunemannin 1738, p.242.

² Among the many overviews regarding individual authors, genres and time periods, two comprehensive *Forschungsberichte* stand out: Boetcher Joeres 1986 and Sagarra 1993.

³ Lerner 1986, Introduction.

publication.⁴ I have to modify this statement somewhat by saying that throughout the period under discussion, some women arranged for the publication of their own works. This is true not only for noble women but also for women who were commoners. Christiana Mariana von Ziegler, in the foreword to her *Versuch in gebundener Schreib-Art* (1728), proudly proclaims that her publication was neither prompted nor improved upon by a 'helpful' (male) editor. From dedications and forewords it is also clear that some women found patronesses. An early example is Magdalena Heymair, the 16th-century teacher who was the author of a number of religious school-books.⁵ But, in general, the way to the printer was facilitated by males. In addition, throughout the centuries there were lexica by mostly male authors, who attempted to show the prevalence of writing women, while at the same time emphasizing this as a peculiar phenomenon.⁶ (Zäunemann was right to complain.) Such lexica were in format somewhat akin to the Dutch collection *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* in that they provided biographies and bibliographies. They were far less comprehensive in printing actual work.

Women's literary endeavours were also deemed worthy of preservation if there was a connection with famous men, for instance the letters some of them received from or wrote to Goethe, Herder and Klopstock, or the memoirs and letters of women at various courts. Women who played a role in the Reformation, who were queens, regents or *Landesmütter*, or who otherwise struck the fancy of archive hunters and library patrons, could count on an occasional, usually laudatory, article or book. Especially in the latter half of the 19th century, during a heightened interest in women's emancipation, there appeared a number of works discussing women authors in previous centuries.⁷ We should be glad to have these accounts. Although they tended to repeat each other, they also often relied on written sources in privately held archives, which in subsequent wars have been destroyed, decimated or scattered.⁸ Especially some of the hand-written literature, described by earlier generations of scholars, may no longer be extant.

The 1970s brought a renewed interest in topics involving women. *Germanist(inn)en* like myself, who had previously done research on male authors, discovered the joy of expanding our knowledge of previous centuries by exploring the lives and works of women. Most of the earliest research in this field was carried out by scholars working at American universities, connected with or influenced by (if often loosely) the emerging Women's Studies Programs there. This was followed by a generation of German, European, and American scholars. The aims of their research can be described as follows:

⁴ E.g., Susanna Elisabeth Zeidler's *Der jungferliche Zeitvertreiber* (1686) was edited and published by her brother Johann Gottfried Zeidler as a wedding present. Magdalene Sibylle Rieger's *Versuch einiger geistlichen und moralischen Gedichte* (1743) and *Geistlich- und moralischer Gedichte neue Sammlung* (1746) were both edited and published by her physician and friend Daniel Wilhelm Triller.

⁵ Moore 1988, p.173-184, 485-487, 524-525.

⁶ Woods/Fürstenwald 1984; the introduction (p.xii-xxiv) provides a systematic chronological description of four centuries of lexica.

⁷ Hanstein 1899; Klemm 1859.

⁸ One particularly informative publication deserves special mention, namely Lotte Traeger's dissertation 'Das Frauenschrifttum in Deutschland' (Prague 1943), which provided biographical and biblio-

- a. to show that women did engage in a variety of literary activities throughout the ages, throughout the German-speaking countries, and across the genres;
- b. to make accessible what women authors wrote through reprints, new editions, and translations;
- c. to reinterpret the canon of literary works to include a gender focus that was not primarily male.

The first two of these aims could be defined as a search for *Frauenliteratur*, literature by women; the third as a reinterpretation of *Frauenbilder*, the portrayal of women.⁹ In this presentation, I will concentrate on the first two research objectives, namely the commentary on and the publication of women's works, or as Inge Stephan and Sigrid Weigel have called it 'the reconstruction and «rescue» of the female tradition and the search for the beginning of 'women's literature'.¹⁰

The early 1980s saw several pioneering works which provided the necessary handbooks for this new field of literary history: Jean Woods' and Maria Fürstenwald's *Schriftstellerinnen, Künstlerinnen und gelehrte Frauen des deutschen Barock* (1984) and Elisabeth Friedrichs' *Die deutschsprachigen Schriftstellerinnen des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts* (1981) provided lexica with names, biographical and bibliographical data.¹¹ Barbara Becker-Cantarino wrote *Der lange Weg zur Mündigkeit*, a comprehensive overview, a kind of literary history of women.¹²

From the beginning women's studies has lent itself to collaboration. Collections have appeared – and continue to appear – in which a number of scholars publish their findings about a variety of women authors.¹³ In many cases, these collections were – and continue to be – published proceedings of conferences, which have brought those pursuing German women's studies together in the United States and in Europe.¹⁴ Although these anthologies provide an insight into the variety of literary activities in which women participated, the hope that in their totality they would add up to a comprehensive view has not always been realized. More recently, however, collaboration has led to broader efforts to produce monographs on groups of women who participated in certain genres. The discussions by Magdalena Heuser and Helga Gallas of the novels by women authors around 1800 show that we can move beyond the rediscovery of individual authors – and the unique position they occupy within their time – towards placing women authors within the literary tradition.¹⁵ Works like Susanne Kord's comprehensive study of women dramatists in the 18th and 19th centuries are

graphical information on many women authors from 1550-1650. See also: Hans Sviestrup and Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, *Die Frauenfrage in Deutschland, Strömungen und Gegenströmungen 1790-1930* (Tübingen, 1934).

⁹ Stephan/Weigel 1983, p.83-138.

¹⁰ 'Die Rekonstruktion und «Rettung» der verdrängten weiblichen Tradition und die Suche nach den Anfängen von Frauenliteratur'. See: Stephan/Weigel 1984, p.9.

¹¹ Woods/Fürstenwald 1984; Friedrichs 1981. See also Schindel 1823-25.

¹² Becker-Cantarino 1987.

¹³ Brinker-Gabler 1988.

¹⁴ For instance, there were a series of trailblazing conferences in 1983 (Hamburg) and 1984 (Bielefeld). See Stephan/Weigel 1984 and Berger 1985.

¹⁵ Gallas/Heuser 1990. See Susan L. Cocalis' review essay (1993), which provides a comprehensive overview of the scholarship regarding 18th-century women writers.

another example of a growing interest in genres which were traditionally considered the exclusive territory of male authors.¹⁶ It is not accidental, that the generations of women writers around 1800 are being singled out, for they in particular first attracted the attention of literary scholars.¹⁷ Other genres in other centuries remain to be investigated. In the literature before 1800 for instance, more research could be done regarding women's contributions to occasional poetry (*Gelegenheitspoesie*). I think it would be helpful to realize that much of the poetry written by women before 1800 was prompted by certain occasions, and that it adhered to – or in some cases went counter to – the conventions of a male-dominated genre.

Increasingly, there has also been a geographical diversification, with publications concentrating on women authors in certain regions. An excellent example is Mirosława Czarnecka's *Die 'verse-schwangere' Elysie*, which discusses the participation of women in the literary culture of Silesia in the 17th and early 18th centuries.¹⁸ At the same time, series have started to appear. Metzler's series *Ergebnisse der Frauenforschung* includes several works that give a comprehensive view of either chronological periods or genres, of women as authors and women as literary figures.¹⁹

Especially in the last decade we have witnessed a proliferation of bibliographical material. One example is the *Bibliographie der deutschsprachigen Frauenliteratur. Belletristik, Sachbuch, Gender Studies*, which covers the writing of women including those in modern times.²⁰ The most recent one is the Internet site Ariadne, maintained by the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.²¹ Publications like the *Women in German yearbook* containing series of articles, book reviews and bibliographies keep the reader up to date with the newest developments in the field.

Criteria

In the field of research on women's literature in previous centuries, we can distinguish several features. The first is one of selection. *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* describes the editorial attempts to find Dutch women authors of previous centuries and their works as an exploration into a *terra incognita*. This has been true for German-speaking countries as well. Being uncertain of the outcome and not always prepared for what would be found, we have combed archives and libraries, unearthing the literary endeavours of an ever-increasing number of women authors. The comment in the introduction to *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* that the number of women that had to be included was larger than originally anticipated mirrors the findings in German literature. It also mirrors our own initial misconceptions. We were as guilty

¹⁶ Kord 1992.

¹⁷ See Stephan/Weigel 1984.

¹⁸ Czarnecka 1997a. Another example: Ryter 1994, which dovetails with Stump/Widmer 1994.

¹⁹ In this series appeared: Becker-Cantarino 1987; Hilmes 1990; Runge/Steinbrügge 1991; Lehmann 1991; Kord 1992.

²⁰ Kroll 1995 and 1996.

²¹ Ariadne-site, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek: <http://www.onb.ac.at/ariadne/03fffg24.htm>.

as the rest of the scholarly world in underestimating the number of women writers in the past, treating the phenomenon of a woman author as something unique, which is only a euphemism for Zäunemann's 'pretty monster'. In our defence it must be said that women authors, especially in early modern Germany, thought of themselves as unique. Even while professing their faith in the ability of women to write and to write well, and welcoming the women in their acquaintance who could do so, they often felt that they were the only ones in their world. They laboured under the same lack of knowledge as the 20th-century explorers who set out to find them in a *terra incognita*. How could they have known that they belonged to an honourable tradition when that tradition had been systematically excluded from the history books in their time and ours?²²

Initially, therefore, the research focus was largely determined by the material that was accessible and by the preferences – not to say the fancy – of the researcher. There was also the tendency to investigate the lives and writings of the same small group of women authors, again largely dictated by the accessibility of the material. For the 17th century the canon of women authors consisted of Sibylle Schwarz, Anna Hoyers and Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg; for the 18th, preferential attention was given to Sophie von La Roche, Johanna Schopenhauer and a few others. Even within the oeuvre of these authors, certain works remained favourites whereas others were largely neglected, again mostly because of inaccessibility. As hitherto little known works of women authors are being disclosed, especially in libraries and archives in the former East Germany, there are new rediscoveries, the canon of women authors is being expanded, and comprehensive investigations into chronological periods and genres can now proceed.

From the beginning in the 1970s, German women's studies has been marked by a collaboration across disciplines, across literary periods, and across nationalities. As literary historians, *Germanist(inn)en* are indebted to historians of other disciplines. Their redefinition of the place of women in German history has helped us to contextualize women authors of previous centuries in their place and time.²³ On the other hand, there is a tendency for all disciplines to use the same literary sources, preferring those whose biographical elements are perceived as providing most clearly the woman's perspective on her own situation. Thus historians of disciplines other than literary have used for their own reinterpretation of bygone centuries the very works that literary historians have rediscovered and presented.²⁴ One should be cautious, however, and not attempt to fill in the missing gender link in history by reconstructing the past on the basis of the (auto)biographical writings of only a few individuals.

Unlike women's literature of the 20th century, the debate among literary historians concerning women authors of previous centuries has been relatively free of postmodern analysis, although, of course, gender studies themselves have been part of a modern trend in literary analysis and in their own way have systematically

²² Cf. Lerner 1986, Introduction.

²³ See also: Boetcher Joeres/Kuhn 1985.

²⁴ See Juliane Jacobi-Dietrich and Elke Kleinau in the foreword to Brehmer et al. 1983. See also Becher 1988, p.217-233.

deconstructed traditional literary history.²⁵ Modern political events have also cast their shadows across the past. For instance, German reunification has led to a deeper awareness of the diversity among the German-speaking peoples, and a renewed sense that German history was more diversified than it has been traditionally presented. This bodes well for women's studies, as it moves from an emphasis on the uniqueness of women's literary endeavours to a more comparative approach within gender studies.²⁶ A special feature of German women's studies is that it spans the literature of several European countries and also includes active groups of scholars in non-German-speaking countries like Great Britain and the United States. Prime examples of English-language contributions are the *Women in German yearbook*, subtitled *Feminist studies in German literature and culture*, the *Feminist encyclopedia of German literature*,²⁷ and most recently *Women writers in German-speaking countries*, which provides biographies as well as bibliographical material.²⁸

Another feature of German literary history which it shares with its Dutch counterpart has been a broadening of the definition of literature to include far more genres than have been previously defined as 'belles lettres'. For instance, those genres defined as trivial literature have gained wider acceptance as objects of literary research. In this context, the *Frauenromane* of the late 18th and early 19th centuries have received renewed attention.²⁹ An increased interest in a literature that was prompted and sanctioned by biographical occurrences like letters, diaries and poetry written for social occasions has also furthered interest in women's writing since much of what women wrote contained biographical elements.³⁰ Especially in the first phase of German women's studies, all efforts were directed towards finding these biographical features, rather than providing stylistic interpretations; judging the phenomenon of the woman behind the work to be more important than the work itself.

Literary merit

This leads us to the question of literary merit. The tendency to measure all literary quality by male standards has been referred to as *Goethe-Dämmerung*.³¹ We find this phenomenon in all three centuries under discussion. Even in their laudatory forewords, the sympathetic editors of the 17th and 18th centuries invariably distanced themselves from the poetic quality of a woman's publication even as they were helping it to appear in print. Whereas the female authors kept emphasizing that their

²⁵ See Lemaire 1987.

²⁶ Grossmann 1993. One example is the interdisciplinary colloquium 'Formatting gender. Transitions, breaks, and discontinuities in German-speaking Europe, 1750-1830,' in Bad Homburg, September 24-26, 1998.

²⁷ Eigler/Kord 1996.

²⁸ Frederiksen/Ametsbichler 1998.

²⁹ See Gallas/Heuser 1990.

³⁰ Eda Sagarra gives a comprehensive overview of the publication history of such autobiographical writings, including letters, and provides an extensive bibliography of original publications from 1700 until 1918. See Sagarra 1986; Heuser et al. 1994; Becker-Cantarino 1985; Holdenried 1995.

³¹ Cocalis 1993.

inborn talents were as good as those of males, the editors proclaimed that the poetry of women had to be judged by different standards, taking the intentions and morality of the female author into account rather than the literary quality of the final product. Editors are also known to have 'improved' on the works that they deigned to publish. Modern scholarship continues to emphasize the woman behind the work, rather than the literary quality of the work itself. *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* adheres to this trend; its introduction assures us that inclusion in this impressive work was not based on any value judgment. In general, modern German scholarship has likewise refrained from judging the aesthetic and literary quality of women's writings, lauding the attempt to write against all odds without passing judgment on the published product. But are we really doing these works and their authors a service by allowing ourselves to be so non-judgmental? As we move from highlighting the manifold contributions of women, towards integrating these texts into the general literary movements of the time, we shall have to come to some conclusion about the aesthetic standards by which such contributions should be judged.

But first of all we have to bring these works into the view of a modern public. The republication of long-forgotten works by women was begun in our time with the publication, in 1978, of Gisela Brinker-Gabler's *Deutsche Dichterinnen vom 16. Jahrhundert: Gedichte und Lebensläufe*, which resembles in a far more modest way the organization of *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*. Mirosława Czarnačka has recently published an anthology of Silesian women's writings of the 17th century.³² Translations have appeared in *Bitter healing. German women authors from Pietism to Romanticism*.³³ As you can see, we have nothing as fancy or as comprehensive as *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*. On the contrary, many of the reprints and new editions have been issued in print-runs of no more than 500 copies, and these have sometimes been hard or impossible to read because of the inferior quality of the reproduction. This dearth of reprints of women's works of the past centuries in German as well as in translation is especially detrimental to the inclusion of women authors in university literature courses and hinders the introduction of women's works as valid representatives of the literature of a given time.

Conclusion

German literary history regarding women authors can proudly point to the pioneering work done by its researchers and the fascinating literary works that they have been able to present to a modern audience. Our increased awareness of the tradition of women writers and their works has permeated literary studies in general and has helped to present a better picture not only of women authors but also of the tradition of writing and reading in times past. It is regrettable that no such publication as *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* exists for German women authors, which would provide a better overall picture of the efforts of German women authors in previous centuries, and provide more republications of their works. Much has been accomplished and much remains to be done.

³² Czarnačka 1997b.

³³ Blackwell/Zantop 1990.

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