

Genders effects of male literary discourse: the case of H el ene Swarth¹

The way in which male writers, critics and historiographers discuss the work of women writers has been a topic of research since the very beginnings of feminist literary criticism.² Rightly so: for a long time male discourse has been the sole source of information on women's work, and a highly biased one. The unravelling of this gender bias is a form of necessary source-criticism. Women writers have been adulated and trivialized, they have been collectively dismissed,³ and underrated.⁴ Some of these trials have, to a lesser degree, befallen male writers as well, and their fate might sometimes also be explained by the power of gender. Gender does not only regulate the relations between women and men: it also regulates the relations between men.

In this essay I shall analyze aspects of male critical discourse on women poets. How does this discourse lead to the construction of gender on both sides: for the subject and the object of the discourse? How can certain male projections on women poets be explained? How can we make sense of the striking transgenerational imitation which sometimes characterizes the discourse on women poets? To address these questions I shall focus on the critical discourse on one specific woman poet, the Flemish/Dutch H el ene Swarth. By exploring this case I shall argue that male discourse on women poets does not only construct feminine positions. It also constructs masculine positions. The paradoxical function of male discourse on literary women is that it silently, indirectly, but very effectively, reinforces normative *masculinity*. *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* offers many examples of this type of discourse: consider Willem Bilderdijk, who writes in the introduction to a book he composed together with his wife, Katharina Wilhelmina Schweikhardt:

The reader will see from the pieces themselves which texts have been contributed by my wife. One recognizes the soft, sensitive heart in them, characteristic of a woman, who is only created to be a source of happiness to her husband and who would not even consider asking for more.⁵

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² Important pioneering works: Ellmann 1979²; Showalter 1972; Russ 1984.

³ Cf. Tompkins 1985 and Van Boven 1992.

⁴ Cf. Meijer 1988.

⁵ 'Wat mijne eegade tot dezen bondel heeft bijgedragen blijkt uit de tekening der stukken zelve. Men zal daar het zachte, aandoenlijke hart in herkennen, de vrouw kentekenende, alleen gevormd om het

Elsewhere he describes himself as a big firm tree, while she is depicted as a lovely little branch sprouting from his side, again 'gans aanspraakloos' (not asking for anything). In the discourse of many critics and fellow poets – as *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* amply documents – woman is the weaker vessel, the lesser poet and so on: my point is that this discourse functions as one long male self-congratulation. It involves a culturally sanctioned projection on women, which constructs *masculinity* all the time. In my view feminist critics often focus too exclusively on the way it constructs femininity. This projection-mechanism of man onto woman is also interesting from a psychoanalytical perspective, which I intend to touch upon later on.

Willem Kloos on Hélène Swarth

I would like to draw attention to the way in which Hélène Swarth is discussed by her male colleagues. Swarth (1859-1941) falls just outside of the scope of *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*. She was born in Amsterdam but raised in Belgium, and she published her first book of verse in French. She acquired a dazzling popularity in Belgium and the Netherlands alike until about 1910. Swarth could easily be added to the enormous list of women writers which Van Boven has compiled: writers who were adored in their own time, who attracted many readers, and who were completely forgotten later on.⁶ It is as if success is the best guarantee for later oblivion – and this may be more true for female than for male writers. When Swarth was twenty-five and already quite well-known in Belgium, the Dutch poet Willem Kloos met her in Brussels, and briefly fell in love with her. Dutch scholars do not agree whether it was love or admiration and friendship. It is clear, however, that Kloos felt that he had found a great sister-poet. He sent Swarth four sonnets, especially devoted to her, and Swarth answered him in sonnets as well, building on Kloos' themes.⁷ The erotic attraction, if there was any, was not mutual, but they became friends. Through Kloos Hélène started to publish poems in *De nieuwe gids* (The new guide). From then on she was regarded by the 'Tachtigers' (the movement of romantic individualistic poets from the 1880s) as one of them. The words in which the leaders of the movement characterize their new fellow-poet are interesting. Lodewijk van Deysse, in his review of Swarth's first volume in Dutch, *Eenzame bloemen* (Lonesome flowers, 1884) is delighted that Swarth has introduced a new, frank and explicit love-lyric into Dutch literature:

and the fact that a woman does this in Holland, and gives herself in all sincerity to the people, is very special.⁸

Willem Kloos writes, in a similar but more elevated tone:

geluk van haren gemaal te zijn, en die op niets anders aanspraak maakt' (from the chapter on Schweikhardt, *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*, 1997, p.777 (contribution Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen)).

⁶ Cf. Van Boven 1992.

⁷ Cf. Van Eeten 1961 and Kralt 1968.

⁸ '[...] en dat in Nederland een vrouw dat doet en zich zoo in oprechtheid geeft aan de menschen, dat is iets heel bizonders [...]' (quoted in Reitsma 1985-86, p.60).

[Swarth] is the singing Heart in our literature, which gives itself to the world, naked in its glorious beauty and goodness, beautiful in its breathing, bleeding humanity, sacrificing itself on the altar of the Muse.⁹

The metaphor of 'the singing Heart' is significant. To 'sing' is a gender-neutral topos for the composition of lyrical verse, but 'Heart' has distinct feminine connotations. It invokes the deeply-entrenched gendered division of the human faculties: he's the head, she's the heart.¹⁰ Also the 'giving herself' – as Van Deysel and Kloos both define Swarth's poetic activities, seems to me a distinctly gendered metaphor. To give oneself away to the people, or to the world, can be read as offering complete autobiographical disclosure. Women poets were indeed generally supposed to speak more directly of their own personal lives. But 'to give oneself' also implies a sacrifice and a loss of self which in the cultural imagination was and is more easily associated with femininity than with masculinity. Masculinity evokes opposite associations, that of self-possession, of self-containment, of borders between the self and the other. The only man who gives himself completely – to the people, to the world – is Jesus Christ. In the rest of Kloos's statement the association with Christ is definitely invoked: 'which gives itself to the world, naked in its glorious beauty and goodness, beautiful in its breathing, bleeding humanity'. Christ is also often represented as naked, glorious, good, human. In fact, the statement is an interplay of the image of Christ who sacrifices himself – poetry as a religious sacrament – and the image of a beautiful seductive woman, offering herself in all her naked beauty – in which the sacred poetry is definitely feminized.

What Kloos does here, completely unintentionally – it is the dominant discourse which makes him do this – is to construct Swarth not only as a poet, but also, through his choice of words, distinctively as a *female* poet. Could Kloos have said of a *male* poet that he was 'the singing Heart in our literature, that gives itself to the world, naked in its glorious beauty and goodness, beautiful in its breathing, bleeding humanity'? That would have been quite impossible, because it would be seriously in conflict with the dominant discourse on masculinity and by implication on that of the male poet.

In two of his essays Kloos compares Swarth to a Pythia-like prophetess, watched by masses of people:

This is no longer a human voice, but the noble complaint of a seer, who loud and calmly, with regal movements reveals the great visions of her god-entrusted soul to the stunned masses.¹¹

⁹ '[Hélène Swarth] is het zingende Hart in onze letterkunde, dat zich geeft aan de wereld, naakt in zijn glorievolle schoonheid en goedheid, schoon in zijn ademende, bloedende menselijkheid, offerhande van zichzelf op het altaar der Moisa' (Kloos 1898; this article had been published originally in 1889).

¹⁰ Around the same time – in 1889 – the influential gynecologist Mendes de Leon deployed his vision on the modern Dutch hospital: the male medical superintendent had to be the *head* of the hospital, whereas the woman-doctor, director of the nurses, could be the *heart* of it (Bosch 1994, p.173). Literary discourse is always intertwined with extra-literary, social discourses.

¹¹ 'Dat is geen menschelijke stem meer die spreekt, dat is het hooge klagten eener zieneres, die kalm en luid, met koninklijke gebaren de groote visioenen harer godverpande ziel voor de verbaasde menigte onthult' (Kloos 1887, p.464).

And elsewhere:

She must stay away [from the confinement of the Netherlands] and sing on, and keep on singing, so that the people in these narrow regions learn to see her high stature emerge before their eyes, as a strange Being from afar, benignly sending over their crowded heads her streams of sorrow, her rhythmic rejoicing, as she dreams and creates images, seated as a godhead in her heavens on the horizon. I know that I am fantasizing. Miss Swarth is but a human girl, and a very unhappy one, living in a small Belgian town – but what matter? I have always loved to embellish my life with my imagination.¹²

Kloos first makes Swarth into a goddess – comparable to the way in which the beloved is seen as a goddess in Bizet's famous opera *Les pêcheurs de perles*, with the people in the crowd falling devoutly and dramatically to their knees while the two male rivals sing: 'Oui c'est elle, c'est la déesse/ plus charmante et plus belle [...] et la foule est à genoux',¹³ an image which is also comparable to Jacques Perk's vision of the goddess/ Muse in the poem 'Sanctissima Virgo'. But then Kloos cuts her down to size (she is just a human, unhappy girl). This mode of aggrandizing and subsequent belittling seems contradictory and strange: 'ni ce mépris, ni cet excès d'honneur' as the French would say. Yet it can be understood if we look at the beginning of Kloos' essay: he started out by stating that the lyrical poet always sees everything through the lens of his own powerful imagination. This is exactly what Kloos demonstrates in the passage quoted: he shows how he can elevate Swarth, in his own poetic imagination, to a goddess, the Muse in her classical appearance. But this implies that the passage is no longer about Swarth as a poet. It becomes proof of Kloos' lyrical capacities, of his ability to see everyday life through the lens of poetic fantasy. Thus the female fellow-poet is used as the raw material, out of which the visionary (male) poet creates his Muse. The essay turns out to be not about Swarth at all, but about Willem Kloos himself. It would be hard to find a more cynical example of a procedure through which female creativity is erased and replaced by masculine creativity as the source of art. Kloos' text is a very ambivalent tribute to Swarth. It is a monument of egocentrism.

Swarth was also frequently called 'The Netherlandish Nightingale'. The epithet 'Nightingale' seems to have been reserved for women poets only. For example Giza Ritschl, a Hungarian-born Dutch poetess who also published around 1900, was called

¹² 'Zij moet daaruit blijven, en blijven voortzingen, altijd maar voortzingen, opdat de menschen in die benauwde streken langzaam leren zien hare hooge figuur opdoemen voor hunne oogen, als een ver, vreemd Wezen, zendend goedgunstig over hunne wemelende hoofden hare stroomen van weeklacht, haar rhythmen van gejuich, droomend en beeldend, zetelend als een godheid in haar hemel aan de kim. Ik weet wel dat ik fantasieën maak, dat Mejuffrouw Swarth maar een menschelijk meisje is, dat in een Belgisch stadje woont, en veel verdriet heeft – maar wat doet dat ertoe? Ik heb er altijd van gehouden mijn leven te vermoopen met verbeeldingen voor mijzelven' (Kloos 1898, vol. II, p. 111).

¹³ This intertext might well be the one which literally echoed in Kloos's mind. Bizet's opera dates from 1863, but became a huge success in 1886, shortly after which Kloos wrote his essay. The image of the Divine Muse is a widespread stereotype, cherished at the *fin de siècle* and popular among the 'Tachtigers'.

‘The Hungarian Nightingale’. The image of the nightingale invokes a charming wild bird that sings beautifully, and the metaphor is also definitely gendered. After all, Willem Kloos was not called the Amsterdam Nightingale. There are too many connotations with smallness, with loveliness, with the function of an ornament, maybe even with the cage in which a bird can be caught for the image to be appropriate for a male poet. Through these discursive strategies gender is imported time and again into the literary field – creating the symbolic separation of male writers from female writers – creating men and women. I think these discursive formations should be studied much more as producers of gendered values within the literary field. This also applies for the muscular language with which new groups of young male poets present themselves in manifestoes and for polemical purposes in general.¹⁴

Kloos’ emphatic and ambivalent praise of Swarth was repeated many times, also by a series of ‘re-discoverers’ of Swarth’s work: the poet J.C. Bloem tried to rehabilitate Swarth, with an anthology called ‘The singing heart’: *Het zingend hart* in 1952. Bloem’s introduction shows an interesting mixture of admiration and disapproval. A more wholehearted attempt at rehabilitation is an anthology by Hans Roest, *Een mist van tranen* (A mist of tears, 1969). A third, again half-hearted, attempt at re-canonization of Swarth was recently undertaken by Jeroen Brouwers. I find these repetitions of the same ambivalent appreciation interesting: they are all effectively tributes to Kloos – an intergenerational literary exchange between men – rather than informative appreciations of Swarth. In order to demonstrate this I would like to focus more in depth on Jeroen Brouwers’ discourse on Hélène Swarth.

Jeroen Brouwers on Hélène Swarth

Brouwers wrote two books on Hélène Swarth. The first of these, a biography, was published in 1985: *Hélène Swarth. Haar huwelijk met Frits Lapidoth 1894-1910* (Hélène Swarth. Her marriage to Frits Lapidoth 1894-1910). The second, a small book published in 1987, pretends to analyze Swarth’s fame and fall into oblivion: *De schemerlamp van Helene Swarth* (The shaded lamp of Hélène Swarth). Both of these books are highly ambivalent. As regards the biography it is strange that Brouwers chose her marriage to Frits Lapidoth as the focus of his book. This marriage only lasted for fifteen years, whereas Swarth was 81 when she died. Lapidoth was by no means as important a literary figure as Swarth was. He was certainly important for Swarth’s life and work, but that does not elevate him to the same stature, nor does it justify a double-biography. In fact Brouwers actually writes about Swarth’s life also before and after her marriage to Lapidoth, so his title does not even cover the content of his book. Brouwers defends his decision by saying that he does not want to duplicate a biography on Swarth’s early life, Herman Liebaers’ *Hélène Swarths Zuid-Nederlandse jaren* (Hélène Swarth’s years in the Southern Netherlands). That is understandable, but Swarth’s life in the Northern Netherlands still lasted for more than 50

¹⁴ Cf. Showalter 1987.



Héléne Swarth ca. 1893.

Klein.

Klein is de dauwdrup, in de roos gehangen;
 Klein is de kinder met zijn fraaie kleening;
 Klein is 't schoolje en 't spreidt toch zachte geuren;
 Niet groot, de roos, doch rood als kindersvingen.

Wie zal zijn lof der ster niet waardig heenen,
 't is licht zij klein, aas 't blans gewelf gehangen?
 Wierklinkt het woord van nachtegalenzangen,
 Klein is de kogel, doch wie zal 't behouwen?

Reus' mij when 't loof den pracht der zonneloomen,
 Doch laet mij zacht de fyner schoonheid raamen,
 Van lelieliken, frisch dondams bepereld.

Klein is het lied, dat lieft mijn hart wil zingen,
 Doch in mijn kinderrecht ligt een ganse maelt
 Van luxe trouw noch minningen.

Héléne Swarth

(Sneeuwvlokken, bl. 139.)
1892.

Handwriting Héléne Swarth: sonnet LIX from *Sneeuwvlokken* (Snowflakes)

years – so there is no need to attach Swarth so much to this husband of hers. I am afraid Brouwers had an undoubtedly unconscious but quite trivial reason for presenting his subject in this way: he felt Swarth could not function independently. A woman needs a husband. This is part of the gender conventions of literary and biographical discourse: highlight the men in the case of great women writers, and show how indispensable they were. Joanna Russ provides many examples of 19th- and 20th-century critical discourse in which husbands, male teachers or brothers have been unduly manoeuvred into the foreground of the lives of women writers.¹⁵

Brouwers states as his aim that he wants to save Swarth from the total oblivion into which she has sunk at present. He reminds us of her enormous productivity: many massive volumes of published poems appeared before she was 60, while manuscripts of her five last poetry collections are still in the archives of the 'Letterkundig Museum' (Museum for Dutch literary history) in The Hague. No one wanted to publish these lengthy manuscripts after 1921, when the public became less interested in her work. Swarth died in 1941, so she wrote on for twenty more years. This huge productivity means, also according to Brouwers, that parts of Swarth's work are repetitive and of lesser quality. Brouwers, however, considers a substantial part of her oeuvre to be very good. In his opinion Swarth should be elevated to the Pantheon of the canonized 'Tachtigers', such as Kloos, Perk, Verwey, and Van Eeden.

I would support this view, which is why I was very interested in Brouwers' attempt at re-canonization of this woman author. In our times it is usually a feminist scholar who undertakes such attempts. When a male writer does this it might point to a weakening of gender prejudice. Unfortunately Brouwers is not a good helpmate to the feminist scholar. In the first place he never illustrates his claim to a re-canonization of Swarth with a serious study of her poems. He quotes a poem now and then, but does not care to give even a rough analysis of its qualities. This makes his claim to reappraisal a very thin one. Much more serious is his discourse on Swarth as a person: he ridicules her, belittles her, makes her even the object of condescending jokes. In political affairs she was, according to Brouwers, 'as naive as a toddler'; politics and the War were something like the Big Bad Wolf to her.¹⁶ In his view, she was very vain, and her whole world revolved around the question who did or did not write a favourable review of her latest book. She naively believed in spirits and was addicted to superstitious seances. She limited herself to only one subject matter: lost love. The shortest love-affair was aggrandized by her to mythical proportions. She devoted her poems time and again to the fact that she was left, abandoned and deceived. About Swarth's husband Frits Lapidoth – who later divorced her – Brouwers writes:

That Mr Lapidoth really must have been an admirable man. His fate was that he was married to the greatest Dutch poetess of his epoch – an impossible character, a sourpuss, a pathetic whining woman, who made herself lonely, who was always getting in the way

¹⁵ Cf. Russ 1984.

¹⁶ 'Hélène Swarth bleef tot aan haar dood, op eenentachtigjarige leeftijd, zo naïef en wereldvreemd als een kleuter. Politiek? Oorlog? De vooral in bezettingstijd geldende begrippen «Goed» en «Fout»? Het bestond voor haar allemaal wel, maar vaag, op afstand en als het ware onrealistisch, – zoiets als «de boze wolf» in de belevingswereld van een kind' (Brouwers 1987, p.6).

of herself, some one who was afraid of life.

'How very little have I seen of the world. And I would have enjoyed it so much', Swarth wrote at the end of her life to her friend Jeanne Kloos.

How could she possibly enjoy herself, being as *melancholy* as she was? [Brouwers writes 'Swarthgallig', punning on Swarth's name.]¹⁷

Swarth's husband Lapidoth is consistently depicted by Brouwers as a very interesting, generous and happy man, whereas Swarth is pictured as a nagging old bore, wallowing in self-pity. Especially Swarth's melancholy and depressive disposition are ironized time and again.

Such is the tone of Jeroen Brouwers. His biography is mainly a showcase for his own stylistic qualities – look how funny and ironic and cynical I can be – not a showcase for Swarth's stylistic qualities, which would have been more apt. As I have demonstrated, Kloos played a similar trick – by focusing on himself as a poet instead of on her as a poet. There is a lot of *petite histoire*, of gossip and small talk in Brouwers' book, and no analysis or contextualization of H  l  ne Swarth's life and work whatsoever. The fact that Swarth was politically rather naive may be true, but this has everything to do with a lack of proper education, a dearth that all girls seriously suffered from at that time. Swarth was no exception, and she deeply regretted her superficial schooling.¹⁸

Feminists started to campaign against this lack of schooling in the last decennia of the 19th century, but Swarth could hardly profit from that campaign: she had been raised in Flanders, where her family had settled when she was six years old. Feminists were less successful there in promoting proper education for girls. Swarth later moved back to Amsterdam and returned to Flanders again when she was eleven, which interrupted her already superficial education even more. The fact that she limited herself to topics such as nature, religion and particularly unhappy love has to do with the fact that women poets were severely constrained by the literary conventions of that time, which more or less prescribed the appropriate topics. With these conventions in mind Swarth in fact *tested* and *challenged* some of these limits, by being unusually explicit about passionate feelings. But Brouwers treats H  l  ne Swarth as a completely isolated individual. He does not historicize or contextualize her attitudes, he does not read her life and work against the background of historical gender relations. He cuts Swarth loose from the constraints which were of course not created by her, and ridicules her because of these constraints, which seems extremely unfair. It also seems intellectually and politically naive: thus the political naivety that Brouwers perceives in Swarth he demonstrates himself to a considerable degree. The same applies for Brouwers' decision to present H  l  ne Swarth in the narrow context of her

¹⁷ 'Die Lapidoth moet w  kelijk een bewonderenswaardige man zijn geweest. Zijn ongeluk bestond eruit dat hij was getrouwd met de grootste Nederlandstalige dichteres van zijn epoque, een onmogelijk, totaal verzeurd persoon, een meelijwekkende, zichzelf vereenzamende en voortdurend in de weg lopende vrouw die bang was van het leven.

«Hoe bitter weinig heb ik van de wereld gezien! En ik zou er zoo van hebben genoten!» (Aan het einde van haar leven aan Jeanne Kloos, ongedateerd.)

Zij en genieten, zo Swarthgallig als zij was?' (Brouwers 1985, p.97).

¹⁸ Cf. Reitsma 1985-86, p.60 and Liebaers 1964, *passim*.

marriage to Lapidoth. While he attacks her for her continuous mourning over this lost love – why could this woman not free herself from the constraints of marriage, he goes on to ask – he himself locks her into the framework of her marriage more closely than seems reasonable.

One might question his behaviour – and here is where some psychoanalysis comes in. Jeroen Brouwers is himself a very melancholy man who suffers from depression, as he testifies time and again in his own literary and autobiographical writings. Why does he have so little compassion with Swarth's fundamental lack of joy in life? He ridicules her melancholy savagely, which I cannot but interpret as a distancing strategy. Brouwers may have been attracted to Swarth because she is so much like him: depressive, unable to create a happy life. But this aspect of similarity is completely disavowed, in my view, by removing Swarth as far as possible from the position of an equal, a soulmate, someone to be understood from the inside.

Brouwers does not touch upon Swarth's work. His two books do not even list her many published volumes. He keeps her at a distance, not writing from a sense of equality, or likeness, but presenting Swarth as an *oddy*, with cool detachment and without any empathy. I would even suggest that Brouwers projects onto Swarth his own inability to live, trying to unburden himself from it, because she can play Woman, the Other, who is too depressed to go on living.¹⁹ This would explain Brouwers' ambivalence towards Swarth: she is like him (which is why he wants to canonize her) yet she has to be unlike him (which is why he obstructs this canonization, rendering it an almost impossible task).

I mentioned before that I was struck by the repetitiveness in the critical discourse on Swarth, in the discourse on many women poets in fact. The essay by Anton van Duinkerken on Swarth's depression has the same condescending tone; Brouwers seems to admire this essay greatly, and repeats it, in a way: his loyalty towards Van Duinkerken is much stronger than his bond with Swarth. In this sense Swarth becomes an object of exchange between two men, who can restore their masculinity thanks to her. There is a lot of male bonding going on in the discourse on women poets, and this aspect of literary discourse deserves much more attention and research.²⁰

¹⁹ I was inspired by Silverman's psycho-analytical analysis of projections of male fear onto women in Hollywood films (Silverman 1988, especially chapter 1).

²⁰ Another example can be found in Meijer 1998: in the introduction I have tried to interpret the repetitive praise for the 17th-century sister-poets Anna and Maria Tesselschade Roemers. They seem to partly owe their place in literary history to a self-perpetuating tradition of rather excessive male praise. First these poets were extolled by contemporaries, later by a series of historiographers who often devoted more words to literally repeating what contemporaries had said *about* these women writers, than to discussing their work. I think this invoking of male authority has to justify the woman's presence in the canon. When Vondel, Bredero, Huygens and Cats said she was wonderful, then transhistorical inter-male solidarity prevents her from being ignored. Men's praise for their fellow *men* is not repeated as emphatically by later generations of scholars; the presence of men in the canon does not require such justification. See also the contributions of Maria-Theresia Leuker and Marijke Spies.

Gender effects of literary discourse

Literary discourse has far-reaching gender effects. I see gender as an effect of human acts, of the material organization of the world and of discourse – or of discourse in the broad Foucauldian sense. We become men and women because we adopt the spaces, the clothes, the ways of behaviour, the ways of speaking, addressing and desiring which are available as cultural repertoires. Femininity and masculinity are not only acquired in a relatively short period of socialization in our early lives. Gender is acquired in a complex process of never-ending discursive massage, which continues until we breathe out our last breath. This same process of never-ending massage ensures that gender is constituted not only at an individual level, but also at a collective level. Literary discourse is one of the machines, so to speak, which keeps gender in place: individually, socially, institutionally and symbolically.²¹ What I have tried to argue in this essay is that the discourse of literary criticism does not only have a profound effect on women writers. It also creates the men, the masculine symbolic power, and the often invisibly gendered literary values which relegate woman to 'her place'. Literary men seem quite dependent on this discourse to maintain their masculinity. Masculinity turns out to be an uncertain, vulnerable and slippery thing. It needs constant maintenance.

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²¹ See also Meijer 1997.

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**Margareta Geertruid van der Werken
(1734-1780)**



Willem [die enige tijd doorbrengt bij de familie Grandisson in Engeland] aan zijne Moeder.

Den 24 juli

[...]

Een van de dienstmeiden hier in huis is zeer ziek. Zie nu, lieve Mama, hoe goed Emilia is. Zij was des morgens al vroeg op om zelf aan die meid een kommetje kalfsnat te brengen; en zij was niet tevreden, voordat zij het haar had zien uitdrinken; er werd terstond op haar bevel een doctor gehaald, en zij laat de zieke oppassen als of het hare zuster ware. Hoe beminnelijk is het in een jongejuffer zo menslievend te wezen. Eduard verweet het haar: 'Het staat u mooi,' zeide hij 'uwe meid te dienen'. 'En waarom niet, broeder?' antwoordde zij. 'Gij speelt wel met een knecht op het kegelspel; en ik draag zorg voor ene meid uit medelij. Ene dienstmeid is een mens gelijk wij: ik bedenk hoe blij ik zou zijn, als ik in hare plaats ware, dat men mij liefde bewees'. Eduard werd wat beschaamd en sloop uit de kamer. Mijne moeder doet ook gelijk Emilia, dacht ik hier op. Het heugt mij nog, dat onze Hanna de koorts had, en dat gij toen ook zorg voor haar droeg. Maar dit geheugen brengt mij iets te binnen, dat mij bedroefd maakt: hoe ongelukkig zijt gij! hier zijn zoo vele dienstboden, en gij, arme Mama! hebt maar een enkel meisje: gij moet zelf zo vele bezigheden waarnemen, die zo weinig passen aan de weduwe van een kolonel. [...]

Margareta Geertruid van der Werken, *De kleine Grandisson, of de gehoorzame zoon. In eene reeks van Brieven en saamspraaken (1782)*. The Hague: J.C. Leeuwestijn, 1793, p.26.

Guillaume D*** [garçon néerlandais passant quelque temps en Angleterre chez la famille Grandisson] à sa mère.

Le 24 juillet.

[...]

Une des servantes de la maison est très-malade. Vous allez voir, maman, s'il est possible d'avoir un coeur plus sensible et plus compatissant que la bonne Emilie. Elle s'est levée ce matin à la pointe du jour pour porter elle-même une potion à la pauvre malade. Elle n'a pas eu de repos qu'elle ne la lui ait vu prendre tout entière, parce que c'étoit absolument de l'ordonnance du médecin. On diroit, à la voir, que c'est une soeur chérie à qui elle donne ses soins. Que c'est une chose aimable dans une jeune demoiselle d'avoir tant d'humanité! Edouard a voulu lui en faire des reproches.

Il te sied bien, lui a-t-il dit, de servir toi-même ta servante! Et pourquoi non, mon frère, a-t-elle répondu? Tu joues bien aux quilles avec les domestiques. S'il est de leur devoir de nous servir lorsqu'ils se portent bien, c'est à nous de les soigner lorsqu'ils sont malades. D'ailleurs la pauvre Peggy ne m'a-t-elle pas veillée plus d'une fois dans les maladies de mon enfance? C'est bien le moins que je fasse pour elle ce qu'elle a fait pour moi. Je pense combien j'aurois de plaisir à sa place de voir que l'on me témoigne de l'attachement.

Edouard s'est trouvé si honteux qu'il est sorti brusquement de la chambre. Ah! me suis je dit à moi-même, Emilie ne fait que ce que j'ai vu faire à ma chère maman. Lorsque notre pauvre Nannette avoit la fièvre, c'était maman qui lui donnoit ses soins. Mais ce souvenir me fait venir une pensée qui m'attriste. Il y a tant de domestiques dans cette maison! Et vous, ma chère maman, vous n'avez qu'une servante pour vous servir. Combien vous devez vous trouver malheureuse! Il faut que vous fassiez vous-même une infinité de choses qui conviennent si peu à la veuve d'un colonel. [...]

Publication in French under his own name by Arnaud Berquin: *Le petit Grandisson, imité du Hollandais* (1787). Paris: Ant. Aug. Renouard, 1803, p.59-61.

