

# Review: (International?) Literary History and Women's Writing

*Women's writing from the Low Countries 1200-1875: an Anthology*, ed. by Lia van Gemert, Hermina Joldersma, Olga van Marion, Dieuwke van der Poel and Riet Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010)

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Keywords: Dutch literature, Flemish literature, Women's writing in Dutch, International Dutch studies, Dutch literary history, Flemish literary history

The task of constructing a tradition of women's writing where none had been visible before is vitally important for creating a full picture of any literature. Decades of feminist literary criticism have shown us that conventional literary history is not the right place to do this. Even now, when the field has opened up to writing from what used to be the margins, or perhaps because it has, there is still not enough room to do justice to the wealth of women's literary production. So what should the picture of women's writing through the ages look like? Not an authoritative narrative, since that would employ the very means through which women and others have been excluded in the past: selection by those whose power is to canonise and to speak about, or possibly for, those included. While I have no objection to some kind of chronology, this does not need to take the form of a linear narrative. I favour the use of juxtaposition whereby a complex picture can emerge that is as much in the reader's mind as emanating from the historian's pen. Of course selection is necessary, but the best guide for that is the history's intended audience rather than the voice of authority. With the new web tools for collaborative working, I would even suggest that it is no longer possible to exclude the audience on grounds of impracticability.

These reflections stem from my work on *Making the Personal Political. Dutch Women Writers 1919-1970*, though I confess that at the time I did not consider involving the potential readership in the choice of writers to be discussed.<sup>1</sup> There are a number of reasons for bringing in the audience as a structuring element. In the context of Dutch Studies as an international field, many colleagues who teach Dutch beyond the Netherlands and Flanders object to the methodological nationalism which

forms the implicit basis of many of the literary histories published within the Low Countries and even outside this territory.<sup>2</sup> The new multi-volume *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Letterkunde*, funded by the Nederlandse Taalunie, has a clear political cultural function: to represent the literature of the Dutch language area. While this is a perfectly legitimate undertaking, the main criticism, as, for instance, recently expressed by Arie Pos,<sup>3</sup> is that those teaching and learning Dutch literature outside the main language area who favour an intercultural approach relate to different writers than scholars steeped in the national canon. In the discussion which follows I will bear in mind these two dimensions: how best to represent the body of writing produced by women writing in Dutch; and how to do this for an international audience.

Amsterdam University Press has published two volumes in English of *Women's Writing from the Low Countries*. The first, edited by Lia van Gemert, Hermina Joldersma, Olga van Marion, Dieuwke van der Poel and Riet Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen, with contributions from others, covers the period 1200-1875, while the second volume, edited by Jacqueline Bel and Thomas Vaessens, spans the years 1880-2010. Given the timespan, and the shifting political boundaries that go with it, the regional designation of 'the Low Countries' is appropriate, and it has the added advantage of being a way of referring to the area where Dutch is spoken that does not set up confusing terminological cross-currents in English. These two volumes have been beautifully produced and timed to appear together with the result that they do make a symbolic statement. The covers alone convey the idea that there is a serious body of work in Dutch by women writers spanning the entire history of Dutch literature; a welcome undertaking and as far as I know the first on such a comprehensive scale. Despite their titles which are the same except for the dates, and designation as anthologies, the two volumes are actually rather different in the way they go about representing Dutch women writers to the outside world.

The most obvious difference is that *Women's Writing from the Low Countries 1200-1875* is a bilingual anthology whereas its sequel does not present separate samples of the writing in either language. The informative and substantial introduction to the first volume places the writing in its social and cultural context; the anthology which follows presents over fifty women and their work. Most of them are allotted around ten pages. A short introductory piece incorporates biographical information and characterises the work before examples of the writing itself are given, Dutch text on the left, English text on the right, printed in parallel. The collection opens with Beatrice and Hadewijch, two medieval mystics whose writings are known and studied in the English-speaking world: they were first presented in English translation in the pioneering *Bibliotheca Neerlandica*<sup>4</sup> and later in the anthology *Women Writing in Dutch*<sup>5</sup> in 1994. That anthology was edited by Kristiaan Aercke who has contributed the section on the sixteenth-century catholic poet Anna Bijns to this one.

Since the point of an anthology is that it enables the user to dip into it, I propose

to do just that, homing in on one woman I know nothing about. This takes me to Berta Jacobs, or Sister Bertken, who lived in self-chosen confinement as an anchoress in Utrecht in the fifteenth century. Her devotional account of the birth of Jesus conveys spiritual delights, but it also celebrates the female body and succeeds in uniting the two: '[...] the divine radiance shone so powerfully in her heart that she grew warm and translucent, she immediately stood up and removed all her clothing from head to toe, leaving only the garment closest to her body.'<sup>6</sup> Bodily functions are present, but transformed into something beautiful. 'This moisture was not pressed out of her precious body by the violence of immense strain, but flowed from it sweetly out of exceeding jubilation.'<sup>7</sup> Nor does the text shy away from breastfeeding: when the child cries, 'the pure virgin and mother immediately, with great love, gave her beloved son her virgin breast.'<sup>8</sup> One of the great strengths of an anthology like this is the unexpected glimpse of a singular woman's mind and life, a voice heard across centuries that is both alien and familiar.

The anthology includes translations of female 'wisdom' and women's writing by male translators. These are important for our appreciation of women's contribution to knowledge and understanding in the Low Countries across cultural boundaries. Interesting and not altogether surprising are the obvious tensions between female originators and male reproducers of texts, so much so that the translator of the Flemish version of Christine de Pisan's *City of Ladies* adds a chapter of his own which mimics and seeks to undermine the main text.

The second section of the introduction by Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen which deals with the period 1575-1875 explains how exceptional women gradually pushed back the boundaries of the literary field by taking on male roles as translators, publishers, or commentators. Before this, however, work like the poetry of the sisters Anna Roemers Visscher (1583-1651) and Maria Tesselschade (1594-1649) was not published until some time after their deaths, despite their accomplishments being accorded recognition during their lifetime. As Schenkeveld-van der Dussen points out, this prevented them from serving as role models for other women.

The excerpts from the writings of all these extraordinary women illustrate their literary talent and spirited view of men. Juliana Cornelia de Lannoy's poem 'The Perfect Man' ['De volmaakte man'] is urbane, witty and self-confident. Writing as a woman about women's ways in 'To My Intellect' ['Aan myn geest'], De Lannoy both represents the development of women's culture since the religious women of the middle ages and shows how far there is still to go in the process of women carving out a place for themselves in the society and culture of the Low Countries.

Everything in this impressive and substantial volume leads towards the bilingual samples of writing, most of them originating from what is now the Netherlands and Flanders, some of them religious, some secular, revealing a witty, acerbic or polemical spirit. They practise many genres and styles of writing; some of these are literary, some scientific or medical, others devotional or epistolary. And the range

of the topics covered in the writing is wonderful: agriculture, cowpox inoculation, girls' education, love between women, ecstasy, Queen Elizabeth I, girls behaving badly and more. All this richness is made available together with enough background information about the author for readers to get a handle on the work. In my experience of teaching Dutch at Bachelor's level in London, students will use the Dutch and English versions in a variety of ways, moving happily between the two. By their fourth year, particularly if they are also studying translation as an intercultural process, they will also take a critical interest in the rendering of a Dutch literary text in English. In this way the anthology tradition as we know it in English is upheld: it provides a first engagement with a particular writer's work, possibly starting with the English version, but soon moving back and forth. And success is when students are motivated to want to read more in Dutch.

I wonder whether *Women Writing's from the Low Countries 1880-2010* is aiming at a wider audience, and if so, who this audience might be. There are two significant differences from the first volume: the entire text is in English, and although it calls itself an anthology, it does not correspond to expectations, by which I mean that it does not present free-standing examples of the writing. However, there is sampling incorporated in the excellent portraits of women writers. The editors explain their approach in the introduction, pointing out that they have deliberately not privileged any particular literary movement or genre. 'On the contrary, our aim was to show the wide variety of roles played by female authors in the last hundred and fifty years, in literature and as public intellectuals, in social debate.'<sup>9</sup> I feel strongly that this is the most appropriate way to present women's writing and there is no doubt that the volume succeeds in its aim. But before going on to give a flavour of one or two of the portraits, it is worth noting that the first paragraph of the introduction betrays a perspective located within the Low Countries. Comments like 'Besides well-known names such as Carry van Bruggen [...] there are authors who are less familiar (today)' do exclude the vast majority of readers outside the Low Countries, even those with some knowledge of Dutch culture. This perspective is also found in the portraits, such as that of Anne Frank by Bel, which does lead me to conclude that the primary audience for the volume may even be a Dutch-speaking one, because the dedicated bibliography consists only of works in Dutch. For example, when Bel refers in the portrait to the Kitty figure (the addressee of the entries in Anne's revised version), there is a good article in English on the subject by Berteke Waaldijk which could be included.<sup>10</sup> And why, when there is an English version of the complete, comparative edition of the diaries, does the bibliography give the Dutch version? Clearly there is something of a mismatch between my expectations and those of the editors, probably due to intercultural factors of which we are still largely unaware.

It is not possible to discuss in detail the fifty portraits in this book, so in the end I picked just one for purely personal reasons: that of the feminist writer Anja Meulenbelt. I read *De schaamte voorbij* (*The Shame is Over*) around the time it appeared, and remember the shock of the personal, having been brought up in a very male

English literary tradition where writing frankly about the self was considered to be in poor taste. Standing up for Anja Meulenbelt in discussion with male teachers and colleagues became something of a consciousness-raiser. Or, as Maaïke Meijer puts it: 'Politically the book represented an important step towards the visibility and legitimization of feminism as a social movement.'<sup>11</sup> As the Dutch version was not published until 1976, this statement must refer to the Netherlands, since Germaine Greer had fulfilled a similar role in the UK in the early seventies and Betty Friedan in the US in the sixties. Meijer quite rightly compares *The Shame is Over* with other 'fictional autobiographies' from the US, Germany, France, England and Turkey, such as Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* or the work of Doris Lessing and explicitly situates it as part of an international surge of women's writing. Using substantial quotations, Meijer gives a vivid impression of Meulenbelt's seminal text.

Despite the misgivings about the intended audience of the second volume, these two books will certainly find a place in the library of University College London alongside *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* (*With and without laurels*) of which the first volume considers itself to be an updated English-language version, and the second a 'concise sequel', and other short portraits of women, such as those in Prinszen and Vermij's *Schrijfsters in de jaren vijftig* which has a similar format to the second volume with photographic portraits as well as a sketch of the writers' life and work. First- and second-year students just setting out on their study of Dutch literature may well use *Women's Writing from the Low Countries* to identify writers for more in-depth study in individual project work. The fact that the two books are in English clearly increases accessibility to the literature in Dutch for this group, engagement with Dutch texts being the main aim for international students of the Dutch language and culture. It must be said that the books themselves are beautifully produced and all the portraits are written in a lively engaging style, covering in few words the plurality and the particularity of each woman's writing. They also demonstrate a willingness on the part of literary scholars in the Low Countries to break out beyond the dikes and borders and claim a rightful place on the international stage. *Women's Writing from the Low Countries* is definitely a step in the right direction.

## Notes

- 1 Jane Fenoulhet (Oxford: Legenda, 2007).
- 2 See Jeroen Dewulf, 'Over vogels zonder nesten. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur en de internationale neerlandistiek', *Internationale Neerlandistiek* 48/3, October 2010, pp. 76-80. For a more general critique of methodological nationalism, see Rosi Braidotti, 'Nomadism: against methodological nationalism' in *Journal of Policy Futures in Education* 8/3 & 4, 2010, pp. 408-418.
- 3 Arie Pos, 'Intercultureel vertalen. Een multiculturele kijk op de Nederlandse literatuur' in Jane Fenoulhet & Jan Renkema (eds.), *Internationale neerlandistiek: een vak in beweging*, *Lage Landen Studies* 1, Gent: Academia Press, 2010, pp. 123-146.

- 4 It described itself as 'A Library of Classics of Dutch and Flemish Literature', published jointly in Leiden, London and New York by Sythoff, Heinemann and London House respectively during the 1960s.
- 5 Kristiaan Aерcke et al, *Women Writing in Dutch* (New York/London: Garland, 1994).
- 6 *Women's writing from the Low Countries 1200-1875: an Anthology*, ed. by Lia van Gemert, Hermina Joldersma, Olga van Marion, Dieuwke van der Poel & Riet Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen ed. by (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), p. 101.
- 7 *Women's writing from the Low Countries 1200-1875*, ed. by Lia van Gemert et. al, p. 101.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 9 *Women's writing from the Low Countries 1800-2010*, ed. by Jacqueline Bel and Thomas Vaessens, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), p. 13.
- 10 Berteke Waaldijk, 'Reading Anne Frank as a Woman' in *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16/4, 1993, pp. 327-35.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 175.