The weight of a laurel-crown: the future of Dutch early modern women writers
van Gemert, E.M.P.

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Lia van Gemert

The weight of a laurel-crown: the future of Dutch early modern women writers

Compiling an anthology of Dutch women writers between 1550 and 1850, called *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*, has been a very interesting task. At first, the 26 Dutch and Flemish contributors did not expect to find very much material because the Dutch and Flemish countries form a relatively small area, but in the course of the project they became accustomed to finding ever more facts and to developing many hypotheses based on them. There was at least one profitable consequence of this. When the book appeared, it was so huge and heavy that it could hardly be overlooked. However, this created a countereffect. Dutch and Flemish bookstores were not so eager to put *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* onto their shelves, including women’s bookstores. Apparently, even proprietors of women’s bookstores had not reckoned that their own past has its ‘monuments of maidens’ too.

In this paper various responses to *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* in the Dutch media are discussed. They will lead to some thoughts on future investigations concerning women writers. Finally, the problem of extending projects like these for a broader audience will be considered.

The Dutch media

*Met en zonder lauwerkrans* was given a good deal of attention in Dutch daily newspapers and cultural magazines, where both professional reviewers and professional scholars gave their impression for a broad public. Most reactions were positive. The majority of the reviewers were women. This indicates not only that women conduct

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1 In 1997, a survey on women painters in the Republic was published too (Kloek et al. 1997). I thank Annelies de Jeu, G.R.W. Dibbits and Frank van Wijk for their help in collecting the work of Elisabeth van den Heuvel. I also thank Annelies de Jeu for her information on some material in this paper.

2 Some 40 reactions appeared in magazines, newspapers etc., among them the influential Dutch daily journals *De Volkskrant* (K. Fens, 8 December 1997) and *NRC Handelsblad* (M. Meijer, 16 January 1998), and the weekly magazine *Vrij Nederland* (A. van den Oever, 28 March 1998). Also, some 10 radio programmes payed attention to the book. Within a year reviews were published in some scholarly journals: *Neder-L* 7 February 1998 (M. Smolenaars); *Historica* 21/2, 1998 (D. Sturkenboom); *Literatuur* 15/3, 15/5, 1998 (J. Stouten); *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde* 114-4, 1998 (T. Streng/A. van Toorn); *Boekmanachter* 10-37, 1998 (S. Janssen); *Nederlandse letterkunde* 3-4, 1998 (M. de Baar); *Tijdschrift voor genderstudies* 1-4, 1998 (S. van Dijk).
the prominent research in this field, but also that men still rather leave this tricky business to the other sex.

Most critics were amazed that so many women writers had been active in early modern times, and they were even more surprised when they realized how many had been left out of the book. We left out a number of authors, partly because only printed material has been selected, and partly because beyond some point - about a year before publication of the book - no new names were added any more, unless someone turned out to be a striking case of female authorship.3

Most of the reactions combined astonishment with praise. In brief, the critics especially applauded the way in which the vast amount of new names was brought to life: their writings are now - at least partly - accessible, while the short essays on lives and ideas give an adequate description of the authors, along with the many portraits and other illustrations. In addition, the thematic introduction provides a lucid analysis of 300 years of female authorship in the Northern and Southern Netherlands. This positive reception makes it clear that one of the contributors' goals has been reached. They wanted a book that would not only be read by professional historians of literature, but that also would be interesting for other colleagues within the field of history, literature and women's studies, and preferably also for the large but rather unknown group of general readers. The reactions confirm a certain level of accessibility.4

But this does not mean that the problem of reaching a wider circle has been solved. Again, the reactions illustrate this. Although the critics praised the thematic introduction, they found it hard to jump forward and back in time, meanwhile having to remember names and dates of unknown people. Some suggestions for an alternative order were made, for instance a totally thematic one.5 An additional problem is how to hold up this colossal book in order to read it. Simply reading Met en zonder lauwerkrans almost immediately becomes studying. More than once reviewers suggested that a pocket edition would be very helpful, especially for teaching purposes. Such an edition would be even more fruitful if it appeared in English, containing both the original texts and translations. The point of reaching a broader audience will be discussed again at the end of this paper.

3 Like Meynarda Verboom, who severely criticized the famous Dutch poet Joost van den Vondel, for his play Adam in ballingschap (Adam in exile, 1664). Vondel was a leading author, especially in the field of tragedy, praised by many of his colleagues. Not many people dare for teaching purposes to reconstruct social circles of acquaintances. My impression is that in the Republic these networks almost always consisted of a number of males (a majority) and a few females (the minority).6

It will be useful to continue this kind of investigation. To illustrate this, I focus attention here on Elisabeth van den Heuvel, a 17th-century widow of a clergyman, probably living in The Hague, the city where the affairs of central government of the Republic were conducted.9 Van den Heuvel is one of the authors who was not included in Met en zonder lauwerkrans, because she turned up after the closing date of the book.10

1498). Van Dijk pointed to the Heinemeyer archive in Leyden, containing mainly 18th-century material (see note 2; see also Hochstenbach/Singel 1988). Other new material was presented by De Jeu in Museum (5-4, 1998). It concerns the Flemish Everarde van Gent (around 1653), and Cornelia Steen­gracht from Middelburg (around 1702). The Musea editors also elaborate on Helena Smunick (1733; Zwijndrecht and Dordrecht), Grietje van Dijk (Leiden) and Johanna Corleva (Amsterdam). (For copies of Musea: B. Thijs, Prins Bernhardstraat 4, 3711 CP Poortugaal, The Netherlands. Streng/Van Toorn (note 2) mention three writers from the early 18th century: Ernestine van Beijeren (alias Lucretia Tornaaar), and the Boeseken sisters, all authors of historical novels, G.J. Schutte and V. Pieters focus on Aletta Beck, who in the early 18th century left Amsterdam to live in South Africa (Zuid-Afrika 74­ 9 (1997), 75­2 (1998), 75­3 (1998)). Furthermore, we did not explore daily newspapers. Political poetry by women can be found there, for instance in the revolutionary decade 1790­1800 (i.a. J.J. van Haren­Beaumont (Haagsche Courant 1798, January 10, July 4). With thanks to Peter Altena and Hans Ester.

8 Annelies de Jeu is preparing a Ph.D. thesis on literary networks, which will appear in 2000. She has already shown that the literary starting point leads to intellectual, political, religious and economic networks, not only in big cities like Amsterdam, but also around the cities of Groningen and Leeuwarden. See De Jeu 1996, 1998.

9 Her date of birth probably was 7 February 1631, as can be concluded from the poems by her friend Vollenhove (Vollenhove 1656, p.207­209 and 539­540, see note 11). In 1659 she married Johannes de Carpentier, clergyman at Barendrecht, near Rotterdam. He died in 1660 or 1661. According to one of
for admission. With a few variations, the works of this author fit into the pattern of conversational lyrics directed to friends. We become acquainted with her when she publishes some religious work of her husband after his death. This indicates a relatively independent lifestyle; otherwise she seems to be a self-conscious widow too, truly pious but not satisfied to be a perfect housekeeper like the biblical Martha. From 1665 to 1695 Van den Heuvel produced some 40 poems.10 The word "produce" is used here intentionally, because many verses are of the type "variations on a theme", or even: "variations on one occasion". Her friend Johannes Vollenhove, a poet himself, once thanked her ironically for the great quantity of poems she produced on the occasion of his birthday.11 Quantity is a dominant element in Van den Heuvel's work: in mourning someone's death, seven or more variations are no exception. The same goes for poems of praise, especially a series of more than 20 on the Royal family of William III and his wife Mary Stuart. Obviously, writing meant playing with language: besides the variations on a theme, one finds many examples of word play in anagrams and acrostics. And letter games seem to have been a speciality: almost every name is shifted into a sentence. She used four devices herself, all derived from her name: 'Belust na de lieve Haven' (Longing for sweet Heaven) and 'Helt Jesu dau val(t) beneen' (Lord Jesus, inspire us), plus two variations on the last one.12

Van den Heuvel's work has a religious character. Apart from many references to the Scriptures, there are allusions to sermons and poetry by several clergymen, colleagues of her late husband. Maybe they paved her way to a writer's network. The most important of these clergymen is the above-mentioned Johannes Vollenhove.13 He was a poet from the 'second level' and showed great admiration for the great Dutch poet Joost van den Vondel. In fact Vollenhove imitated Vondel so often that he was ironically called 'his son'. Whether Van den Heuvel caught this fever too is doubtful. She wrote a poem on the melody of the famous Vondel-song 'O Kerst-

the Dutch biographical lexicons, Van den Heuvel may have had a son, Casparus (Nieuw Nederlands biographisch woordenboek vol.ii, p. 300). We do not know when she died.

10 So far poems have been found in J. de Carpentier, De bruyenlot des Lams [...] (The wedding of the Lamb). Amsterdam 1662; J. Vollenhove, Aphietschi [...] (Good-bye). The Hague 1666; Verscheide voldichen [...] (Simoniade) (Funeral poems on Simoniades). The Hague 1675 (Knuttels pamphlet catalogue nr. 11362); Zions herten-leert [...] (The grievie of Zion). The Hague 1681 (Knuttels's pamphlet catalogue nr. 11791); Vorstelyke eertrap [...] 1660 [...] tot 1688 (Royal stairway from 1660 to 1688). The Hague 1689 (Knuttels pamphlet catalogue nr. 13287); Vorstelyke holden victory-kron [...] (Crown of victory for royal heroes). The Hague 1695 (Knuttels pamphlet catalogue nr. 14036); 't Ontsteilde Europa (Europe upset). The Hague 1695 (Knuttels pamphlet catalogue nr. 14088).

11 In 1679 Vollenhove wrote: 'Vrienden, die ons verplicht/ En sticht met dicht op dicht' (Friend, we are obliged to you, because of the many edifying poems you send us). We do not know when she died.

12 'Ndang. Op 't Wettig verkieschen der Majesteyten William en Maria [...]. Stem: O korsang'. Vorstelyke eertrap, p.23-24 (Song to the legal election of Their Majesties William and Mary, on the occasion of the melody of the song 'O Holy Night'. In: Royal stairway).

13 In Antwerp, Barbara Ogier (1648-1720) may have written original plays, serious and comic. In the Northern Netherlands, tragedies were adapted by, for instance, Katharina Lescailje (French) and Maria de Zaytikon, Petronella Meens and Anna Barbara van Meerten-Schilperoort. See De Jeu 1996, p.23-24 (Song to the legal election of Their Majesties William and Mary, on the occasion of the melody of the song 'O Holy Night'. In: Royal stairway).
may have been inspired and encouraged by her friend Katarina Verwers, whose Spausche leydin (The Spanish pagan woman) had been performed already in 1644. As far as we know, this comedy, adapted from Miguel de Cervantes' popular Gitamilla, was the first play by a woman to be performed on the Amsterdam stage in the 17th century.

The drama material points in the same direction as the occasional lyrics. Again, in order to have one’s plays performed, it was essential to be a member of a network. Only they who had contacts in circles around the theatre wrote plays. Besides Questiers and Verwers, Katharina Lescajle and Adriana van Rijndorp are special examples here. Lescajle owned a bookshop that was closely tied to the theatre and sold many plays; she herself translated plays from French. Van Rijndorp managed a theatre company of her own – the ‘Duytse comedie’ – in The Hague in the first half of the 18th century; she wrote a comedy for her company.²³

But the drama material may also shed light on other sorts of literature, making it possible to predict what kind of work is still to be found. Looking at the performed plays written by women, it is striking that they are all based on Spanish originals and adapted from Dutch (or possibly sometimes French) prose translations. Thus, it is shown again that Dutch women confined themselves to the popular, but more lowly esteemed, trivial models.²⁴ Also the conversion from prose to verse is important: prose required much less technical skill than lyrics and often reflected the starting point of a career or modest aspirations – for both male and female writers. And a third point can be added: as we know, prints of plays did not always reveal their author. Concerning women, this is shown in the cases of Petronella Keyser (around 1640), and Lucretia van Merken (a century later).²⁵

Let us have a look at the third genre that was mentioned earlier: prose fiction. This kind of literature got a minor place in the Netherlands, at least for the 18th century. In France, women began writing novels earlier than in the Dutch Republic, and it seems that they took more opportunities to bring specific women’s themes to the fore. This has also been suggested concerning (English) Orientalism and the oriental tale of the 18th century: this new, exotic ‘genre’ provided women – and other ‘marginal’ groups like homosexuals – with the opportunity to develop their own forms.²⁶ To explain the difference between France and the Netherlands, certain factors have to be taken into account.²⁷

¹⁷ See Met en zonder lauwerkrans, 1997: p.31b-321 (contribution Theanne de Boer/Lia van Gemert); p.240-243 (contribution Annelies de Jess); p.396-402 (contribution Lia van Gemert); p.536-539 (contribution Nelieke Moser). On networks around the Amsterdam theatre see Grabowsky/Verkuijse 1996.²⁸ See the huge popularity but low official esteem for Spanish drama Smits-Veldt 1991 and De Haas 1996.


¹⁹ See Kuitert 1994 and Mathijse 1996.

²⁰ With thanks for this information to Christien Dohmen, who is preparing a Ph.D. thesis on this subject.


²² See Mateboer 1996. Altena (1997) argued that the author of De Delftsche Juffer (The young woman from Delft) (1758) may have been Franciscus L. Kersteman. He also made plausible that the leading character of the book, ‘miss W**’ from Delft, was based on Willemijnje Wijmanken (1729-?). In a letter, Altena suggested to me that the more private circuit was still important for women writers during the second half of the 18th century, as can be seen in the local societies of poets (‘ichtigemoetshappen’). In my view this might indicate again that women in the Netherlands started to write serious prose fiction later than in adjacent countries.

²³ See Mateboer’s account we can see that foreign authors like Elizabeth Hamilton and Madeleine de Scudéry have been translated into Dutch, but by whom we mostly do not know. Likewise, up until now investigations into a great number of Dutch prose tales ‘from the East’ have revealed only a few women, the well-known Betje Wolff and one of the minor authors, Anna van Streek-Brinkman.²⁴ They both belonged to intellectual networks of an kind, and had to earn their living by writing. It is possible that more women who tried it, like Van Effen, Weyerman and Kersteman, were not very successful.

²⁴ With thanks for this information to Christien Dohmen, who is preparing a Ph.D. thesis on this subject.


²⁶ See Kuitert 1994 and Mathijse 1996.
This does not mean that there is no prose material to be found any more. If we go back one century, we see a lot of religious meditative prose going together with the religious verse. To give just one example: Geertruida Sluiter published pious thoughts on the life of the soul in Amsterdam in 1685. This book was at least five times reprinted until 1741.27

On the other hand, we must be cautious: not every woman is a woman. In prose pamphlets for instance, male authors now and then use female pen-names to criticize political or religious matters. Authors of erotic 18th-century novels also disguised themselves as writers of women's memoirs.28

Thus, especially concerning so-called 'trivial' prose fiction, a lot of material is anonymous. As history has told us before: the 'lower' someone sinks, the harder it is to retrieve him or her. It will be difficult to associate specific authors with anonymous works. In fact, it may be wise to shift the focus of attention from questions of authorship to problems of female and male point of view, introduced by either a female or a male author. At this point it is possible to benefit from results in other fields of women's history, for instance in the study of gender.

The question of gender

Generally speaking, gender is not given very much attention in Met en zonder lauw-erkrans, except for the basic observation that women had fewer opportunities than men to participate in literary life. The gender observations do not go much beyond confirming the model of harmony that was dominant in the early modern period throughout Western Europe. Both sexes have their complementary tasks in keeping the world balanced, the man outside, the woman inside. Following this principle, explanations were offered for female docility and modesty, and for women's limited participation in literary affairs. There is certainly some truth in this. The concept of balance restricted the number of political works by women and resulted in their reluctance to write plays.29

But we have to find a way to get to other questions, like whether women really did not want to be their opponents' rivals, and what the consequences were of the so-called 'double identity'.30 The role of the rhetorical tradition will have to be taken

27 I.C.S.V. [Geertruida Sluiter], Het geestelijk leven der ziele […] (The spiritual life of the soul). Amsterdam, 1685. De Jeu will explore this subject in her thesis.

28 See for instance Anna Vlas-braeck, Pannekoek voor Screperus op den Vastelavondt ofte Buur-praatje, Tusschen Grietje van Moordt, ende Annetje van Wenst-veen […] (Pancake for Screperus on Shrove-Tuesday, or dialogue between neighbours Gretha Murderess and Ann Wishful). Gouda 1664 (Knaulit 776583). Baking her pancake, this so-called 'Anna Vlas-braeck' (her name indicating that she breaks the flat instead of neatly spinning it into a thread) comments on quarrels between clergymen and Deken. Newcomers are the Amsterdam circle of Lescailje, Questiers and Van der Veer, the champions of irony De Lannoy and Jeanette Delcroix the dancing nun Berchnans, the blind Gerijts and Moens, the maid De Boer and the talented novelist Hase-broek. They all illustrate 'the law of canonization', as I would like to call it: only extremes are taken into shortlists, either because of their talent or because of other remarkable features, that mostly do not have much to do with literature.

29 Since Spies 1986, quite a few contributions to the Dutch part of this field have been made. For recent results see Van Gemert 1994, Sneller 1996, Veld/Imkes/Thijks 1996, Veld 1998 and b. See also Sneller 1996, Van Gemert 1998.


The glass ceiling

Some final observations on the weight of a laurel-crown will be made from the starting-point of literary history. There is no doubt, as for instance Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen states elsewhere in this book, that the anthology Met en zonder lauw-erkrans springs from sociological and functional research. In the Dutch language area this research has been going on since the 1960s, mainly concentrating on Dutch and Flemish historical literature. In fact, because of the results of this method — also to be seen in the success of authors like Bourdieu —, research on modern Dutch and Flemish literature tends to become more and more functionalist too. Many scholars emphasize the necessity of breaking the established order of famous 'classics'. They appreciate the broadening of the literary field and the growing opportunities to investigate more elements in it than just a highly esteemed text. Most of the reviewers of Met en zonder lauw-erkrans in the Dutch media expressed this opinion too.31

In this connection, it is striking that the reviewers of Met en zonder lauw-erkrans immediately constructed a new shortlist, as we had done ourselves, working on the book. This illustrates that it is hard to relinquish old habits, but also that reading literature often means looking for aesthetic pleasure. At the top of the ranking are for instance the already well-known Anna Bijnis, the sisters Anna and Maria Tisselschade Roemer, Vischer and Rosalie and Virginie Loveling, and the novel-writing duo Wolff and Dekkers. Newcomers are the Amsterdam circle of Lescajle, Questiers and Van der Veer, the champions of irony De Lamme and Jeanette Delcroix the dancing nun Berchman, the blind Gerijts and Moens, the maid De Boer and the talented novelist Hase-broek. They all illustrate 'the law of canonization', as I would like to call it: only extremes are taken into shortlists, either because of their talent or because of other remarkable features, that mostly do not have much to do with literature.
At this point, the real question of the weight of *Met en zonder lauw-erkrans* poses itself. First, to the scholars. If the results of the search for women writers are to be taken fully into account, the historiography of literature will have to be renewed. New phenomena must be integrated, like the construction of shortlists, the existence of what seem to be the two fundamental concepts of literature (renewal and tradition), the position of various networks and their living up to the conditions of the literary world etc. In the Dutch language area the project of writing a new history of literature, which has just been started, will have a task here.

But secondly, a broader audience for these results has to be spoken to more effectively than has been done up until now – at least in the Dutch language area. It can be found among students of universities, high schools, secondary schools and among all kinds of general readers. This may seem difficult because *Met en zonder lauw-erkrans* has relatively little poetical talent to offer. However, the pleasure of literature does not come from aesthetic value alone. Often, people ask what those men and women from the past were really like. And to this question, women writers have the perfect answer: a great deal of literature reflecting on everyday life. When, for instance the 18th-century baroness Clara Feyoena van Sytzama adresses her staff out ignore your warm sweat falling on the ground [...]', this is a perfect introduction to dyeing your hair was as much an 18th-century habit as a modern one.35

Using examples in this way, a different view on literature is offered from those old rankings of superior poets. This may be just the tool to bring the pluriiform concept of literature to other platforms than circles of scholars alone. The same goes for views on gender, which often lead to tired reactions from students when they are presented in an isolated form. When integrated into a deeper view on society, for instance through literature, they can be much more effective. Here a pocket edition of the anthology would help, but in the meantime let us use the big red book. This laurel-crown is heavy enough to smash through the glass ceiling one day.

**Works cited**

Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen

Met en zonder lauwerkrans in an international perspective

In Met en zonder lauwerkrans, history and anthology of Dutch-language female writing, only incidental attention is paid to international aspects. This was inevitable given the method and purpose of the book, but it is a pity. The Low Countries have been internationally oriented in many fields, and it is of crucial importance to know what the position of Dutch women’s writings was in the international field. On this subject almost all the work still has to be done, so what I offer here are some introductory remarks and suggestions.1 I shall confine myself to a number of points of comparison, in certain sub-areas, in the hope that the not too distant future will bring us a ‘History of European women’s literature’, surely desirable from not only a Dutch perspective.

Similarities

In the first place I should like to note a few similarities between our findings and what has been remarked in other countries. With regard to the dissemination of texts, for example, the common practice in the Netherlands of copying by hand was also widespread in the rest of Europe. Many of the same complaints and strategies with regard to writing itself can be noted. The conflict between household work and writing, spanned the continent. ‘My work doesn’t amount too much, I did it while rocking the cradle’, wrote Johanna Coomans (1623). Anna Roemers complained (1619), half seriously, half in jest, that she had no business on Mount Helicon any more now that she had to care for her aged father. Her Scottish contemporary Mary Oxlie (1620) echoed her complaint: ‘Perfection in a Woman’s worke is rare. / By Hoarse encumbrances of household care’, as did Lady Masham (1620): ‘T’is in Vain that you bid me Preserve my Poetry. Hou.sehold Affairs are the Opium of Soul’. No less effective is the sonnet ‘A ma quenouille’ by Catherine des Roches (1579), in praise of her spindle, which she will never neglect in favour of pen and ink, although she points out that it is pen and ink that have made her tribute possible.2

1 Currently in preparation, a volume with the working title ‘I have heard about you’. Women’s writing crossing borders will discuss the question of the international relations between female authors in different countries and illustrate the role played in the Dutch literary landscape by foreign women (Middle Ages – ca. 1900). Editors: Petra Broomans, Suzan van Dijk, Janet van der Meulen, Piin van Oostnim.
2 See e.g. Greer 1988, p.6 and passim; Gifford/McMillan 1997, p.xvi and 28.