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

Published in:
Writing the history of women's writing: toward an international approach

Citation for published version (APA):
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 zander laiwerkrans,* 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 zander laiwerkrans* 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 zander laiwerkrans* 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 zander laiwerkrans* 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

---

1 In 1997, a survey on women painters in the Republic was published too (Klock et al. 1997). I thank Annelies de Jeu, G.R.W. Dibbets 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); *Historia* 21/2, 1998 (D. Sturkenboom); *Literatuur* 15/3, 15/5, 1998 (N. Noordervliet/J. Stouten); *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde* 114-4, 1998 (T. Streng/A. van Toorn); *Boekmancijfers* 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 reaction 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 thematical 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 lauwerkranck 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.6 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. My impression is that in the Republic of an. Soeting’s opinion was severely countered by Elsbeth Etty in 9 March 1653. With thanks to Peter Altena and Hans Ester.

4 See Sturkenboom (note 2). Furthermore, a subject index would certainly have been helpful to facilitate browsing through the book.

5 See Meijer 1998, a bilingual anthology entitled The defiant Muse, presents poetry by 45 Dutch and Flemish women from the Middle Ages to the present.

6 Literature and sociability

Another topic arising from the reactions is the question of completeness. A few suggestions about missing sources have been made. To some extent it is possible to predict what kind of material is still to be found. Considering the southern part of the Dutch-speaking Low Countries (Flanders; today part of Belgium), there may be a number of names from the 17th and 18th century hidden in church archives that are not yet accessible. However, our knowledge of the cultural situation in Flanders suggests that new authors will not differ very much from the religious women in Met en zonder lauwerkranck. Of course, further research has to prove this point. For the northern part of the Netherlands, the Dutch Republic, the situation is more complex, as women writers there produced lyrical poetry, drama and prose fiction.

Striking aspects of - at least Dutch - women’s literature are its links with networks of writers (of both sexes) and its conversational character. This goes especially for the many occasional poems. In fact, quite a number of women were discovered because they dedicated a poem to praise a new book of a friend. Tracing such a poem often meant tracing more poetry, for instance on the occasions of birthdays, weddings and funerals.

This kind of verse underlines the communicative character of early modern poetry, and from a number of papers in this book it can be seen that the Dutch were not alone here: throughout Europe poetry reflected communication. This also makes it possible 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).7

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.8 Van den Heuvel is one of the authors who was not included in Met en zonder lauwerkranck, because she turned up after the closing date.

7 Van Dijk pointed to the Heineymer archive in Leyden, containing mainly 18th-century material (see note 3).

8 See De Jurer 1998, 1996. It concerns the Flemish Everarde van Gent (around 1653), and Cornelia Steen- gracht from Middelburg (around 1702). The Musaeus editors also elaborate on Helena Smering (1773: Zwijndrecht and Dongerrecht), Grietje van Dijk (Leiden) and Johanna Corlewa (Amsterdam). (For copies of Musaeus: B. Thijs, Prins Bernhardstraat 4, 3171 CP Poortugaal, The Netherlands.) Streng/Van Toorn (note 2) mention three writers from the early 19th century: Ernestine van Beijeren (alias Lucretia Tornaa), and the two Boeseken sisters, all authors of historical novels, G.J. Schutt and V. Pieters (respectively). Annelies de Jurer 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 and economic networks, not only in big cities like Amsterdam, but also around the cities of Groningen and Leeuwarden. See De Jurer 1998, 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.207-209 and 539-540, 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
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. He was a poet from the 'second level' and showed great admiration for the great Dutch model 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 Kerstnacht' - from the play Gysbrecht van Aemstel (1637)14, but for a thorough assessment whether Van den Heuvel had access to poetry from others in the Vollenhove-Goes and Katharina Lescajile. Maybe she preferred to stick to the closer circle of dangerous domains: after all Vondel was a Roman Catholic.

Thus, Van den Heuvel assumed a marginal position in a network around Vollenhove, who himself played his part in a group around Vondel. Again - as has been in the Republic. There, ambitious women could enter poetic circles. Even letter exchanges sprang from contacts and networks. My impression is that isolated individuals never published anything, and maybe writing itself was directly connected to work or other. Regarding Dutch literature, this thesis may hold very well until 1850. And I think this is also a key to poetry throughout early modern Western Europe.

The thesis that writing was connected with social networks can also be tested on material other than lyrical verse, for instance drama. Met en zonder lawenkrans has the open and it took a certain level of intellectual acumen. This goes especially for tragedies, the most esteemed form of drama: it was not until about the middle of the 18th century that women started contributing texts of their own to this genre.15 Furthermore, their plays were often translations or adaptations based on translations, like Catharina Questiers' D'ondankbare Fulvia, en de getrouwe Octavia (The ungrateful Fulvia and the faithful Octavia), originally a Spanish comedy. It served as the opening play for the rebuilt Amsterdam theatre in 1665. Ten years before, another comedy by Questiers had been performed, Den geheimen minnaar (The secret lover), an adaptation of Si no vieran las mujere by Lope de Vega. Annelies de Jeu (1996) has shown that this piece was successful. Next year another one appeared: Casimir, of gedempte hoogmoed (Casimir or composed pride), adapted from a play by Antonio Enriquez Goméz. In turn, Questiers
may have been inspired and encouraged by her friend Katarina Verwers, whose *Spaansche liedin* (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 those who had contacts in circles around the theatre wrote plays. Besides Questiers and Verwers, Katharina Lescajije and Adriana van Rijndorp are special examples here. Lescailje 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.12

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.13 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 Keysers (around 1640), and Lucretia van Merken (a century later).14

Let us have a look at the third genre that was mentioned earlier: prose fiction. This kind of literature got a minor place in *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*.

Concerning the novel, there seems to be a difference between France and 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.15 To explain the difference between France and the Netherlands, certain factors have to be taken into account.16

The Dutch novel began its heyday relatively late, around 1780, with epistolary novels similar to Richardson’s. Soon Wolff and Deken placed themselves in the forefront. They immediately took the opportunity to put a woman at the centre of their stories, and in this respect Elisabeth Post was soon to follow them. It is hard to tell whether Dutch women found their lives more or less problematic than those of foreign colleagues, but it is useful to remember that the Republic had been established on the humanistic philosophy of every individual making his or her own decisions within his or her domain. This philosophy took a kind of balanced model of responsibility and freedom as a basis for behaviour. Of course, this does not mean that women did not have specific problems, but possibly they were less acute than for women in other countries. Further, to denounce their situation, women seem to have chosen lyrical verse rather than prose fiction, as for instance Juliana de Lannoy and Elisabeth Post show.17 Maybe before 1780 the Dutch novel was too little appreciated to be a serious channel for discussing women’s themes. In this view it would have been just the epistolary novel that gave them more possibilities to draw attention to their case.

Before 1780, the prose circuit in Western Europe (for instance in the Netherlands, England and Germany) mainly consisted of ‘spectatorial’ essays and adventurous love novels, that often showed libertine elements. The problem here is that in most cases we have no idea who wrote them. Although a number of ‘spectatorial’ writers has been identified – among them two women, Wolff and Moens –, it is difficult to trace authors of anonymous novels, male or female. On this point there are not many results yet, and the recent bibliography of 18th-century prose fiction by Mateboer does not raise much hope.18 From 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.19 They both belonged to intellectual networks of a kind, and had to earn their living by writing. It is possible that more women will turn up among the translators,20 although before 1780 literature does not seem to have been a common way to earn one’s living, at least not for women. And the men who tried it, like Van Effen, Weyerman and Kersteman, were not very successful.21

17 See *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*, 1997: p.31b-32i (contr. Theanne de Boer/Lia van Gemert); p.240-243 (contr. Amelies de Jesu); p.396-402 (contr. Lia van Gemert); p.536-539 (contr. Nelleke Moser). On networks around the Amsterdam theatre see Grabowsky/Verkruysse 1996. 18 See also Van Vaeck 1996 and *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.213-218 (contr. Marc van Vaeck); p.572-579 (contr. Meijer Drees). 19 See for instance Mack 1992, p.xvi-xvii; Melocaro 1992. 20 See also Schenkenveld-van der Dussen’s notions on the contrast between milieus of cities and provinces in France, and Van Dijk’s paper, both elsewhere in this book. 21 See *Lauwerkrans* 1997 p.632-638 (contr. Pim van Oostrum); p.696-706 (contr. Riet Schenkenveld-van der Dussen) and Van Gemert 1995. 22 See Mateboer 1996. Altena (1997) argued that the author of *De Delfsche Juffer* (The young woman from Delft) (1758) may have been Fransicus L. Kersteman. He also made plausible that the leading character of the book, ‘miss W**’ from Delft, was based on Willeminjte Wijnmalen (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 *alba anturian* and in local societies of poets (‘dichtgenootschappen’). In my view this might indicate again that women in the Netherlands started to write serious prose fiction later than in adjacent countries. 23 With thanks for this information to Christien Dohmen, who is preparing a Ph.D. thesis on this subject. 24 See Kloo 1997. Mateboer mentions J.E. Geroe-de Gast (1996, nr. 1735). 25 See Kuitert 1994 and Mathijssen 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 meditational 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. And 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 lauwerkrans, 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 into account here, especially concerning the 17th century. For the Dutch material a thesis on this subject is currently being prepared by Simone Veld.31 After 1700, the standing thesis that the stereotyping of (undesirable) passions – often linked to the female sex – did not.32 Furthermore, investigations into relatively new fields like journalism, bookselling etc. should not only concentrate on finding new women or facts, but they should also emphatically make comparisons with other relevant individuals, groups and phenomena. In this way the fact that the whole literary world is ‘gendered’, instead of just the women’s part of it, can be fully acknowledged.33

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 lauwerkrans 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 functionalistic 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 lauwerkrans in the Dutch media expressed this opinion too.34

In this connection, it is striking that the reviewers of Met en zonder lauwerkrans 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 Bijns, the sisters Anna and Maria Tesselchade Roemer, Vischer and Rosalie and Virginie Loveling, and the novel-writing duo Wolff and Decker. Newcomers are the Amsterdam circle of Leeslijke, Questiers and Van der Veer, the champions of irony De Lannoy and Jeanette Delcroix the dancing nun Berchmans, the blind Getulds and Moens, the maid De Boer and the talented novelist Hasebroek. 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.

The latter explicitly judges the ‘dull poetry’ positively because it leads to a more pluri­form and realistic picture of the past. Contrary to this attitude, Fens comments on the relatively low degree of
At this point, the real question of the weight of *Met en zonder lauwerkraens* 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 lauwerkraens* has relatively little poetic 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 addresses her staff out in the open field as follows: 'Don’t think, my peasants, that I forget you, or that I ignore your warm sweat falling on the ground […]’, this is a perfect introduction to Enlightenment views on social relations. And when Elisabeth Koolaert-Hooffman urges women with brown curls not to change their colour, no one ever forgets that 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 pluriform 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 society, for instance through literature, they can be much more effective. Here a red book. This laurel-crown is heavy enough to smash through the glass ceiling one day.

Works cited


Oriental tales. M. Mack, R.L., *Studies in (historiography of) women’s writing and related subjects o*
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. 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 poetry, 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.

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, Pim van Oostnim.