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Maer denckt meer dan gij leest, en leest meer dan er staet: tegendraadse elementen in het werk van Geertruida Toussaint

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Summary

Geertruida Toussaint (1812-1886) is one of the few nineteenth-century women writers who deserves a place in the Dutch literary canon. Toussaint is perceived as a successful writer of novels in which the doctrines of evangelicalism and contemporary rules of conduct are important. She is not given a leading role in the female literary tradition: her fiction is considered to be masculine and does not reflect feminine values. In addition to this, her style is thought to be powerful and logical. As a result, Toussaint is seen as a woman who is not interested in the problems of her own sex, let alone interested in feminism. Toussaint's conventionality is directly derived from her characters, their actions and their words. Therefore, the author is often identified with her literary figures. In the nineteenth century, Toussaint's traditional values did not provoke criticism in the way they do today: the key comments concerned her verbosity, which was seen as a means to broadcast traditional, more specifically, religious ideas.

Narratological and stylistic analysis may lead to a new interpretation of Toussaint's oeuvre. An analysis of the three layers of a narrative text – fabula, story, text – and examination of metaphoric language cast a different light on the characteristics of Toussaint's work, that traditionally have been criticized. If these aspects are seen as a part of the writer's strategy, they appear to be a demonstration of unorthodox thinking instead.

This dissertation explores how Toussaint's work can be read as an expression of resistance against the repression of women. Six novels are analysed and each analysis produces an conflicting element that, seen as intentional, alters the meaning of the narrative. To illustrate Toussaint's strategy of undermining the apparent implication of the story, the same aspect is examined in her other novels.

Chapter 1 explains how in Toussaint's first historical novel *De Graaf van Devonshire* and other literary works metaphoric language – seen as a reflection of the way an individual perceives the world – demonstrates unorthodox gender conceptions. Traditional metaphors exemplify contemporary culture, but their unusual relations with each other and with their contexts activate remarkable connotations. In line with strongly criticized atypical metaphors, they present the subject matter of the novel: relationships between men and women. As a rule, these affairs are metaphorically presented as a combination implying dependence, whereas the negative association of the metaphor confirms the rejection of unbalanced relationships. As often as not, men are metaphorically characterized as

ambitious, power hungry, self-centered and conceited. Women are their victims, who by means of metaphors are encouraged to find independence. In Toussaint's novels, metaphoric language destabilizes the obvious meaning of the narrative and draws attention to the circumstances of women.

Chapter 2 discusses *Het Huis Lauernesse*, the novel that established Toussaint as a successful writer and also the novel in which religious ideas seem to dominate the story. At the same time the narrative can be read as a story of female development: the traditional femininity transforms into determination. The goal is freedom of choice: the woman opts for a belief, a way of living, possibly a husband. The narrator introduces an archetype female protagonist (modest, demure, religious and selfless) and emphasizes her religious convictions. Yet, occasionally he is undecided, which encourages the reader to have their own view. The female protagonist also influences the reader, because of her position as subject of focalisation or subject-actant, so there is a conflict between text and story: the narrator who gives a traditional marriage plot and a heroine whose struggle for freedom is discernible.

In each of Toussaint's novels, women pursue happiness, sometimes openly resisting male domination, sometimes concealing their true motives. Every so often this means 'writing beyond the ending'. Then, the traditional plot which means marriage or death for women is replaced with a quest plot involving an ending in which the heroine sometimes awakens to limitations, but now and again lives in a way she herself has chosen.

These feminist plots are not always immediately recognisable: chapter 3 describes how structure in Toussaints novels functions as an indication of what is important. In *Mejonkvrouwe de Mauléon*, embedded texts and the reiteration of events demonstrate how each of the characters fights the same battle against religious and conventional restrictions.

Again, there is a first-level narrator who provides the reader with explanations and commentaries. The attentive reader, however, now notices how the narrator is silenced by characterbound narrators who tell a different story. Their narrations operate as mirror texts, revealing what is crucial in the fabula: the parallel experiences reflect the pain of the characters, whereas the difference between their stories and the narrator's stimulates the reader to contemplate the truth.

Another mode of resonance suggests a direction: certain elements – motifs – appear frequently, providing links between story and text. They are like beads of a broken chain: when the reader finds and strings them together, in other words, sees

their coherence, they function in fabula, story and text and are indispensable in when interpreting the novel. Toussaint's novels are full of motifs such as slander, masquerades, monastic life, ambition, fanaticism, dependence on others, needle-work and boredom. Together these motifs represent the theme of conventionality and restriction, especially for women. Along with mirror texts they indicate how to value the narrator's often complex information and, in due course, to see the narrator also as an structuring element. In this way the novels appear to be traditional historical novels with 'romantic' parts, but in fact they emphasize the gender theme.

Chapter 4 focuses on style, which is another instrument used to highlight the way men act. In *De vrouwen van het Leycestersche tijdvak*, Toussaint's strongly disapproved verbosity illustrates the pomposity of men. Particularly, the historiographic parts of the novel that focus on religious and political opinions and events (that is, the parts in which men are in charge), are wordy and full of complex syntactic structures and French phrases. Criticism from narrator as well as characters on this wording, along with an entirely different style in the parts that deal with the 'novel', the story, indicate that the basic commitment of the author is not to historiography.

Toussaint writes a novel about sixteenth century events with a story about the role women had to play in those days. The difference in style between the two parts of the novel may be a symptom of the way she played her role in the literary world: she wrote a solid historical novel in a traditional, masculine and at the same time dissident style. If the language used by male characters is seen as the product of humour and irony, the mockery of self-importance, hypocrisy, ignorance and impracticality is not to be mistaken. All kinds of illogical or unethical disparities, evidences of the double standard and the male blindness in these aspects confirm that the style of this literary work can be perceived as a woman-oriented end.

With *Majoer Frans*, Toussaint wrote a contemporary novel that was to be her greatest success. At the same time this narration about an adamant young woman who eventually 'surrenders' to the male authority of her fiancé brings about the outcome of Toussaints conventionality. Chapter 5, however, shows how this female character changes from actant-object and 'helper' to actant-subject and 'receiver': only when she assumes a 'masculine' role, can she become truly feminine. Often, the heroines in Toussaint's novels are assertive, display 'manly' behaviour and as a result, are perceived as 'monsters': unconventional women.

They achieve their goals, while the ‘angels’ (the pliant, submissive women) end up in a disappointing marriage or simply die.

The central male characters can be divided into three categories: men who represent an idea, Byronic Heroes and men of feeling, the so-called Byronic heroes of sensibility. These romantic heroes lack the traditional male contentment with themselves and do not control their emotions: they reveal feminine features.

All in all, representation of men and women clearly expresses ‘gender bending’. Here the masculine and feminine principles are not defined through the standard static polarities, but show fluidity instead. This can be understood as androgyny, a signal of provocation.

Most of Toussaints novels fit the genre of the historical novel, which defines certain expectations: by the type of text the reader is guided how to use it, what to expect and how to react if this potential is not confirmed. Chapter 6 explicates how the formal organisation, the rhetorical structure and the thematic content of the historical novels in Toussaints oeuvre for the most part fulfill the expectations. The elements that do not fit in were ignored or rejected by contemporary critics and their successors. If, on the contrary, these conflicting elements are considered to have a function in the text, they are meaningful in relation to the subject matter: they offer a source for rewriting the traditional order.

The narrator's ambivalence makes the reader aware of inconsistencies between fabula, story and text, which show that the political and religious controversies are related with gender issues and freedom of choice. The representation of the past reflects the problems of the nineteenth century: the fact that both in historical as well as contemporary novels metaphoric language, plot, structure, style and the representation of men and women operate in the same way; this demonstrates that their use is strategic. If read in a heretical method they reveal unorthodox thinking. *Don Abbondio II*, a novel about a nineteenth century young woman, divulges in an identical furtive mode the limitations restricting Eva, or for that matter Arabella, Ottelijne, Yolande, Margaret and Francis. These women pursue their freedom, like Geertruida Toussaint did for hers: a woman writer in a masculine genre that she used as a masquerade, articulating her comment on the patriarchal culture in a technique that can be grasped only through deconstruction of her work.