

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION:
"WOMEN WRITERS," "WRITING BY WOMEN" AND "THE FEMALE VOICE"

Hermina Joldersma
The University of Calgary
Calgary, Canada

Embarking on a project such as this issue is not unlike embarking on an all too brief journey into a vast, unknown territory—similar, perhaps, to trying to "experience" Europe, or alternatively the USA and Canada, in two or three weeks. The traveller may have some vague notions of what terrain lies ahead, but these notions soon show themselves to be but mere shadows of the real thing. The actual encounter is far more exciting than could have been imagined, and with each new experience the traveller regrets that there is not more time to spend in further, intensive exploration. So it is with this issue: the more one explores the writing of women in the Netherlands and Flanders, the more one realizes just how much there is still left to explore, the more one wishes that there was additional time to spend on one author, and the more one intends to return to this or that writer when time permits.

For at least three reasons it is impossible to do justice to the topic of women and writing in the Netherlands and Flanders in a single issue of a journal. In the first place there are far more authors than there is space in which to discuss them, and for every writer profiled here there are easily ten others who, out of space considerations, had to be left out. So Hadewijch is only one of a very large and internationally significant group of Flemish mystics in the Medieval period; conspicuous by her absence is the schoolteacher and poet Anna Bijns, author of three volumes of *Rederijker* verse between 1528 and 1567, after whom the Anna Bijns literary prize, established in 1985, was named; Anna Maria van Schurman is but one of the many seventeenth-century learned women mentioned in *Van de VVtmentheydt des Vrouwelicken Geslachts* of 1636 (this issue 26). Also left out are Betje Wolff (1738-1804) and Aagje Deken (1741-1804), well-known as

authors of one of the earliest successful epistolary novels, *Sara Burgerhart* (1782); Maria Dermoût (1888-1962), whose subtle prose is inspired by Indonesian narrative tradition; Carry van Bruggen (1881-1932) and Anna Blaman (1905-1960), who express their perception of existential despair (Schouten, "Exploring" 4); Etty Hillesum (1914-1943) and Anne Frank (1929-1945), killed in Nazi death camps, who are almost better known outside of Dutch literary circles than within them. Even more authors from both the earlier and later twentieth century are omitted: Josepha Mendels (1902-), winner of the first Anna Bijns prize, and Inez van Dullemen (1925-), winner of that prize in 1989, as well as other well-established or very new writers such as Hester Albach, Mireille Cottonjé, Renate Dorrestein, Kristien Hemmerchts, Mensje van Keulen, Helen Knopper, Hannes Meinkema, Ethel Portnoy, Annie Romein-Verschuur, Mischa de Vreede, Aya Zikken. And these names represent only a fraction of active authors: the overviews listed in the bibliography below (Schouten, "Exploring" and "La Querelle"; Stamperius; *Surplus*; Vermij) offer the beginnings of a more complete list.

But sheer numbers are not the only reason for the impossibility of doing justice to the topic. Rather, the second reason has to do with the dilemma of discussing "writing by women" in a special issue, thereby reinforcing the prevalent notion that one ordinarily discusses "writing by men" and women constitute a special category. As Maya Bijvoet points out in her contribution on Andreas Burnier, that author would object strongly to being included in such an issue: "Burnier has often said that grouping together artists or writers on the basis of their sex alone is not only unliterary but also discriminatory and, in fact, symptomatic of the very masculinist

thinking that studies of this kind often purport to combat." Women are separated out while "de gewone litteraire stromingen. . . gereserveerd [blijven] voor mensen met een mannelijk lichaam" (this issue 61). Without a doubt, a special issue on "Writing by Women" runs the danger of ghettoizing women once again. Nevertheless, because so little has been written about Dutch female authors outside of the Low Countries, and because the little which has been written is scattered throughout various publications, I as editor of this issue am convinced that profiling "writing by women" in such a pointed way was warranted. This issue is therefore intended as "an interim measure" (Blackwell 54), filling the gap between relative ignorance of writing by women and the automatic inclusion of their writing in discussions of "de gewone litteraire stromingen."

There is, however, yet a third reason for the impossibility of doing justice to the topic at hand: the complexity of the entire discussion about "a female voice" in literature. This discussion revolves around whether there is such a thing as "the female voice," what it might be if there is, and whether exclusively women possess it (if it exists) or whether some men might also write in "a female voice." One of the four founders of the Anna Bijns prize, Renate Dorrestein, describes "the female voice in literature" as "the kind of writing that does away with stereotypes and lies about women. In its style, in its imagery and in its contents, it reflects female experiences and the female imagination." This does not mean, she contends, that "only women possess this female voice," which has "little to do with gender and a lot with choice." Accordingly, the women who launched the Anna Bijns prize "told the press that male writers who were able to write just like women would also be taken into consideration as possible candidates for our award. This really sent people into a tizzy. . . . All those critics who always claim that they don't make a distinction between genders, all those writers who claim to represent both male and female points of

view, in fact the whole literary world, stumbled over us, shouting: but who *wants* to write like a woman?" (58-59). Interesting though the discussion of "the female voice" may be, in the journal before you it is barely raised, especially because this complex topic is an unresolved issue in the literary world far beyond the realm of Netherlandic Studies (eg. Moi; Ruthven; Showalter). Perhaps, at some future date, an editor braver than I might attempt to organize a volume called "The Female Voice in The Netherlands and Flanders," which might in fact include discussions of male writers as well.

A word should be said about the way in which the authors profiled in this issue were selected from among the imposing number who could have been included. Guided by the philosophy that scholars write best about what interests them most, I left the selection to each contributor. The end result, however, constitutes a strikingly unified discussion. Not only are almost all historical periods represented, but the essays establish links between themselves and address certain themes again and again. There is the shared social world of the historically distant Maria Tesselschade Roemer Visscher and Anna Maria van Schurman as well as, of course, the most recent authors; there is the ever recurring significance of letters for the literary expression of women, whether these letters be personal correspondence or part of an epistolary novel; and there is a strikingly similar distrust of "Reason" by writers several centuries apart, such as Belle van Zuylen and Andreas Burnier, a distrust which finds fascinating fictional expression in the conflict between "emotional woman" versus "rational man" in works as diverse as Belle van Zuylen's *Mistriss Henley* (1784) and Marja Brouwers' *Havinck* (1984). Finally, a significant number of the articles addresses the question of whether the author being discussed is "a feminist." The very raising of this question is a phenomenon interesting in and of itself (would one wonder whether P.C. Hooft,

Simon Vestdijk, or Leo Vroman are, or are not, feminist?).

These, then, are some of the issues involved in a discussion of "women writers," "writing by women," and "the female voice" in Dutch and Flemish literature. This volume profiles some authors who happen to be women and focusses on the issues their literature addresses. As such it sees itself as a beginning for a very interesting, certainly lengthier, and potentially more pointed discussion of the entire topic. There is certainly more to be learned by bringing insights about the "female voice" from other

literatures (French, English, German) to bear on this question in Flemish and Dutch literature. There is certainly more to be learned from the theoretical debates that have been going on in the Netherlands for the last decade, during which tempers flew so high that Maarten 't Hart's 1982 essay "De vrouw bestaat niet" and Renate Rubinstein's *Hedendaags feminisme* (1979) were banned from women's book stores (Schouten, "La Querelle" 122). And there are certainly many authors who have not been mentioned here. There is a great deal of exciting literature which remains to be explored.

Secondary Literature

- Blackwell, Jeannine. "Anonym, verschollen, trivial: Methodological Hindrances in Researching German Women's Literature." *Women in German Yearbook* 1. Ed. Marianne Burkhard and Edith Waldstein. Lanham, MD: U P of America, 1985. 39-59.
- Dorresteijn, Renate. "How I became a writer." *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* 8,i (Spring 1988): 52-62.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics. Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Ruthven, Ken. "Gynocritics." In K. Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies, an Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984. 93-128.
- Schouten, Diny. "Exploring the World of Women. A Survey." *Writing in Holland and Flanders* 36 (Spring 1979): 2-10.
- . "La querelle des dames: De discussie over de vrouwelijke stem." *Het literair klimaat 1979-1985*. Ed. T. van Deel, N. Matsier, and Cyrille Offermans. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1960. 121-130.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." In *Essays on Women, Literature, Theory*. Ed. E. Showalter. New York: Pantheon, 1985. 243-270.
- Stamperius, Hannemieke. *Vrouwen en literatuur: een inleiding*. Amsterdam: Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij, 1980.
- SURPLUS *Vrouwenboekenkrant*. Ed. L. Th. Vermij. 1987-.
- Vermij, Lucie Th. and Margriet Prinsen. Essay collection on women's prose from the 1950s. In preparation.