

The Defiant Muse. Dutch Feminist Poems from the Middle Ages to the Present. A Bilingual Anthology. Maaïke Meijer, ed., with Erica Eijssker, Ankie Peypers, and Yopie Prins. New York: The Feminist Press, 1997. 194 pp. ISBN 1-55861-152-5.

This book is a welcome fifth volume in "The Defiant Muse" series, adding to already published collections of the national literatures of English, German, Spanish and Italian, a Dutch/Flemish voice well worth listening to. It is part of the gradually increasing body of research into women writers, work that often includes first and foremost making available the literature itself.¹ The editors of this volume define the word feminist broadly, choosing "woman-identified works, poems with telling glimpses into women's lives, poems that resist mainstream heterosexual pressures and the social and erotic confinement that often accompany them," looking especially for "daring, autonomous, lusty, humorous, sassy poems, texts that strikingly portray women's dreams and fears and glories, and women's acts of writing" (p. 1). The resulting collection is delightful, playful, thoughtful, provocative, disconcerting, the kind of book one doesn't so much read straight through as savour poem by poem, like a box of special chocolates.

Maaïke Meijer's "Introduction" (pp. 1-23) provides a fascinating overview of what is likely the first literary history of women's poetry in Dutch/Flemish. This introduction is divided into chronological sections. The first, on the anonymous songs ("Beginnings"), is not entirely convincing (more about that below), but in all other sections there are thought-provoking gems of insight into the lives and the writing of individual women included in the collection, of female poets generally, and of the

fortunes of women's poetry in a literary world dominated by men and an aesthetic often less than sympathetic to a woman's voice. "The High Middle Ages" provides snapshots of two women writing religious poetry in the two very different realms open to women, mysticism and the Reformation (both Hadewijch and Anna Bijns have been profiled in previous issues of the CJNS). "The Renaissance" explores whether women in the Low Countries did indeed have the kind of Renaissance that permitted them to "participate in the vast new cultural possibilities that became available to (upper class) men at that time" (the answer: only very exceptionally: the few known women poets continued to be seen "as miraculous sheep with five legs", pp. 5-6). "The Eighteenth Century: Humor, Learning, Romantic Friendship" introduces us to poets for whom special forms of "romantic friendship" between women found expression in their poems, a phenomenon which can be observed in other national literatures as well. The twentieth century with its greater number of poets warrants a more detailed discussion: the sections are titled "Modernity," "The Encompassing Vision," "The Great Melancholy," "Toward the End of the Century," and "A House with Many Rooms" (this last section profiling especially contemporary multi-culturalism).

One recurrent theme is well-known to those who read and/or study women's writing: women inevitably occupy an "in-between position" in literary history. On the one hand they participate in poetic traditions shaped by men, on the other they fit these movements only partially because they also explore the situation of women. The inevitable and important conclusion: women periodize differently than men, and a literary history shaped according to the work of

male writers can only uneasily accommodate the work of women. Three examples: Hélène Swarth (1859-1941) was adopted by the Tachtigers, Henriette Roland Holst (1869-1952) participated in contemporary symbolist and socialist literary movements, women writing in the 1950s expressed the same existential unease about society as their male contemporaries. But they also articulated another dimension, namely the limitations imposed on women specifically; this dimension is difficult to name since it does not fit the accepted framework. As a result, new categories must be articulated, for example "The Great Melancholy" which better captures women poetic expression of their situation in the 1950s.

Following the "Introduction" the reader is treated to a delightful selection of more than 100 poems by 44 named women as well as six anonymous songs. The authors are arranged chronologically by birth date, beginning with the six anonymous songs and ending with five poems by Sjuul Deckwitz (b. 1952). There are many gems. Two immediate favourites for me were "Aan de Heeren Bestuurderen" (1772) in which Juliana Cornelia de Lannoy adeptly ironizes the distinction of being elected an honorary member of the (exclusively male) Poetry Society of the Hague, and "Afwasmachine: aan mijn bestek," in which Judith Herzberg (b. 1934), with surprisingly similar irony, bids a semi-serious "Adieu" to the washing of her cutlery. "Warme sopjes hebben hun tijd gehad," she tells her "opscheplepel" and the rest, "De wereld eist ons op voor gewichter zaken. Mijn persoonlijkheid bijvoorbeeld, moet nog ontplooid. Dat kan natuurlijk niet met jullie, of met de kopjes" (p. 130). The anthology concludes with a few "Endnotes," "Notes on the Poets," and

"Notes of the Editors and Translators."

One crucial feature of this anthology, as it should ideally be of any similar efforts to present literature in another language, is the face-to-face publication of original text and translation. The translations are for the most part quite good; their goal is clearly to translate a poem so that it reads as a good poem in English, as its original version does in Dutch. Sometimes this goal is at odds with strict accuracy. Some examples from Annie Schmidt's "Zeur niet": "en gooi het theeservies dwars door de ramen" = "pick up your tea set and break it in two"; "duw oude dametjes van het trottoir af" = "push old ladies down the stair"; "Raak aan de drank" = "Get rip-roaring drunk." These lines illustrate one of the most challenging problems of translating Dutch into English: its characteristically chatty, conversational and folksy idiom, a feature which may be even more common to women's writing than to men's. As a poem, for those who do not know Dutch, the English translation of Schmidt's "Zeur niet" "works"; for those who do know Dutch, the original is available for comparison and accurate citation.

A note must be made about the issues involved in including anonymous songs in a feminist collection. It is notoriously difficult, likely impossible, to determine the gender of the author of an anonymous text; at the same time, we know that "popular song," transmitted orally, was one genre in which medieval women did participate. The section "Beginnings" treads a very fine line in this discussion, hinting at the possibility that women authored these songs, or at the very least sang them, while never crossing the line of actually saying that they did so. Unfortunately, there are only a few instances in which female authorship or even singing

of popular song can be proven. It is not the case, as is stated, that the fourteenth-century nun Geertrudis van Oosten sang the ballad "Het daghet inden oosten"; very likely, if she sang a song at all, it was a religious song with the same first line. Certainly there is much to be gained from interpreting popular songs from a feminist perspective, and I applaud their inclusion in this collection, but the issues are more complicated than the discussion acknowledges.

There are a few inaccuracies and/or discrepancies with information in other editions. Dates of birth or death: Bijns' death date is given as "ca. 1575" on p. 4 and 47, "1575" on p. 177 (from Antwerp city records we know that she was buried on April 10, 1575); Anna Roemer Visscher's birthdate is given as 1584, in the *Lauwerkrans* it is 1583; Katharina Questiers' birth date is given as 1631, in the *Lauwerkrans* it is 1630, etc. The editors do not explain their approach to the spelling of older texts; certainly a quick comparisons with poems in both this volume and the *Lauwerkrans* show that differences abound, even if such differences are not crucial to the meaning of the text. One example: the title "Aen Joffvrouw Georgette de Monteneij" is spelled "Aan joffrouw Georgett de Montenay" in the *Lauwerkrans*. What these details demonstrate more than anything is how much research on women's literature remains to be done, and how the "Defiant Muse" volume would have benefited from the wonderful work that makes the *Lauwerkrans* such an excellent volume.

Despite some of these quibbles, however, I believe that the anthology accomplishes its goal admirably. For the first time, the

wonderful poetry of Dutch/Flemish women is available to a wider reading audience; these voices are a contribution not only to the national literatures of Belgium and the Netherlands but to world literature generally.

Note: My review is informed by the following work on Dutch women's writing:

Lauwerkrans: Met en zonder Lauwerkrans. Schrijvende vrouwen uit de vroegmoderne tijd 1550-1850. R. Schenkeveld-van der Dussen, General Ed., K. Porteman, P. Couttenier, L. van Gemert, Eds., I. Haan and K. Van der Stighelen, Illustrations Eds. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1997.

Gedichten van Anna Roemersdochter Visscher. By R. Schenkeveld-van der Dussen and A. de Jeu. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999.

H. Joldersma. "Writing Late-Medieval Women and Song into Literary History." In: *Genderaspecten in de literatuurgeschiedschrijving*. Ed. E. van Boven, T. Streng, D. van der Poel. *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal en Letterkunde* 117 (2001), pp. 5-26.

H. Joldersma. "The Anna Bijns Prijs, 1985-." *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* 13,2 (Fall 1992), pp. 29-34.

H. Joldersma. "Anna Bijns." In *Women Writing in Dutch*. Ed. K. Aercke. New York: Garland, 1994, pp. 93-146.

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