Introduction: Towards a Multifaceted History of Early Modern Women in the Low Countries

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When visiting the Rijksmuseum exhibition *Point of View* in Summer 2024, we were struck by Bartolomeus van der Helst's 1668 portrait of Geertruida den Dubbelde, who had recently wed the Lieutenant Admiral Aert van Nes (fig. 1).[1] In an act of self-assurance, she puts her left hand at her side, turning her elbow prominently outwards. Clad in a luxurious black gown trimmed with fine lace and decorated with pearls, carefully coiffed, she casts a glance at her portraitist and, by extension, also to the viewer. Van der Helst was a celebrated and experienced painter, known for his elegant representations of the Dutch elite, including the young Bicker and several scions of the Trip family. He must have rarely witnessed, let alone painted a woman so assertive: Den Dubbelde struck a pose normally reserved for sovereign princes and generals. It leaves the viewer wondering whether she also had a hand in the scene in the background.[2] Her right hand seems to force the viewer's eye towards a pier, from which a crowd of men is waving goodbye to sailors in a small boat rowing towards a (war)ship. Her akimbo pose, luxurious clothing, jewellery, and the latest fashionable hairstyle, together with the scene in the background, highlight her important social and economic status.

It is significant that her portrait was chosen for the exhibition: she is one of the 'poster girls' of the so-called Dutch 'Golden Age'.[3] Her portrait embodies the stereotype of assertive Netherlandish women which started with the sixteenth-century Florentine humanist and merchant Lodovico Guicciardini.[4] His descriptions of women actively participating in ostensibly 'masculine affairs' were reiterated by a range of early modern commentators. In 1631, for example, Tomaso Obizzi, another Florentine, wrote from Brussels that the Netherlandish women were 'proud, impertinent, and want to dominate'.[5] Modern prominent

1 Our thanks to the contributors to the volume and Geertje Mak for their feedback on earlier drafts of the introduction. For more information on this family and the portrait, see Prud'homme van Reine, 'Paerlen op de kroon der Gallerij'.

2 In 2025, right before we finalised the introduction, a short piece appeared on Geertruida den Dubbelde: Ruiter, 'The Wind in his Sails'.

3 Significantly, she features on the cover of the exhibition catalogue *The Golden Age Reloaded*, an exhibition held in 2010 about the persistent fascination of seventeenth-century Dutch painting at Villa Vauban in Luxemburg.

4 Guicciardini, *Descrittione*, 30. See also De Keyser, *De visie van vreemdelingen*, 210-219.

5 Florence, Archivio di Stato, Mediceo del Principato 4259, fasc. 4, fol. 163v: 'le donne superbe impertinenti e vogliono loro dominare'.

Fig. 1 Bartholomeus van der Helst, Portrait of Geertruida den Dubbelde, *1668, oil on canvas, 139 × 125 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.*

scholars have eagerly reiterated this stereotypical image to stress the region's emancipatory climate.[6] Such stereotypes have long held sway over the historiography of the early modern Low Countries, but at best tell but one part of the story. Over the past decades, building on insights from gender studies, academic scholarship on women has advocated the adoption of – to quote the title of the exhibition – *different* points of view. The purpose of this special issue is twofold: to outline the research that has been done in the past two decades to nuance this stereotypical image and, working from these developments, to gesture towards future research.

Women's History as a Collaborative Endeavour

The international rise of women's history and subsequently gender studies in the 1970s and 1980s gave an impulse to the study of early modern Netherlandish women.[7] The 1990s

6 Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, 10, 407; Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 677. More recently also Peacock, *Heroines, Harpies and Housewives*, 1, 28.

7 Thanks to the efforts of, amongst others, Natalie Zemon Davis, Merry Wiesner-Hanks, and Susan Karant-Nunn, women's history gained significant momentum in early modern studies.

proved to be an especially fruitful period with several large-scale collaborative efforts, which resulted in a seminal literary anthology of female writers (*Met en zonder Lauwerkrans*), an extensive catalogue of Dutch and Belgian female artists (*Elck zijn waerom*), and the important *Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon van Nederland (DVL)*, launched in 2003 with two thousand biographical entries written by five hundred specialists of 'remarkable women in the history of the Netherlands and its overseas territories'.[8] In each of these cases, the project's primary ambition was to recover and uncover the voices and products of women who often had been forgotten or ignored for ages. The recovery of these individual lives and works, combined with the awareness that narratives and history are strongly influenced by power structures, provided new impetus to the study of women's positions in several historical subdisciplines.[9]

In an attempt to synthesise the flurry of new insights in these subdisciplines, in 1998 Els Kloek presented a survey of the state of scholarship on early modern Dutch women, in *De Zeventiende Eeuw*, a predecessor to this journal.[10] She focused in particular on three related fields of inquiry: political history, socio-economic history, and, finally, art and culture (including religious life). The outcomes of her overview were both hopeful and disappointing: while Kloek demonstrated how the roles, lives, and works of early modern women in the arts could count on growing interest and specialist studies, the interpretation of both the political and socio-economic position of women still lagged behind that of men. Even those of the highest ranks were still primarily described as 'background figures', and, due to a lack of large-scale quantitative data, an interpretation of the socio-economic position of women remained a desideratum. Kloek nonetheless remained hopeful and expected much from future research, mainly thanks to the integration of a focus on women's historical themes and questions into an ever-expanding group of disciplines.

With all the recent changes in the field, the current special issue marks a new moment of reflection: what has been achieved since Kloek's article, where has the field taken us, and what do we need to move forward? The question is no longer *if* women played active roles, as Netherlandish early modern women have been recovered on a larger scale, but rather *how* they did so – and, by extension, how we can integrate the role and impact of women into the dominant (still male-dominated) historical narratives of the early modern period. This time, it turned out to be far more than a 'one-woman-job' to assess the state of the field in an essay of less than ten pages – simply because over the last decades women's studies has significantly broadened its scope and diversified considerably. Therefore, this special issue is the result of a collaboration between no less than twenty-six scholars, who specialise in different domains of the early modern Low Countries

8 Some pivotal studies published in the 1990s include Kloek (ed.), *Women of the Golden Age*; Kloek, Sengers, and Tobé (eds.), *Vrouwen en kunst*; Van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams hoerdom*; Honig, *Painting and the Market*; Vandenbroeck (ed.), *Hooglied*. The results of DVL were partly published in: Kloek (ed.), *1001 vrouwen*.

9 Given that this special issue is primarily concerned with advances in women's history, we have given preference to use this term instead of 'gender history'. We do take inspiration from the concepts and vibrant debates in the field of feminist theory and gender history: Scott, 'Gender'; 'Forum. Rethinking Key Concepts'; 'Forum. Early Modern Patriarchy'. See also Pierik, 'Patriarchal Power' (thanks to Geertje Mak for this reference).

10 Kloek, 'Een nieuw studieveld'.

and the various roles that women fulfilled in these societies. This interdisciplinary and diverse group of specialists – in different career stages and working at universities as well as cultural institutions – met during three workshops in 2023 to discuss the issue's framework and ambitions, including article drafts. So, rather than comprising a collection of articles written by different scholars, this issue is the product of collaborative thinking.

We, the collaborating scholars in this project, have a different point of departure from Kloek. Whereas she focused on the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, one of our aims is to explore the state of the field for the entire Low Countries, including both the Northern and the Southern Netherlands, from 1500 to 1800. Fuelled by the aforementioned initiatives, the exploration of early modern Netherlandish women has flourished in the last decades, giving rise to a wealth of articles, editions, and catalogues of women's creative works, as well as a variety of edited volumes.[11] Since these publications will be thoroughly discussed in the various contributions to this special issue, we will here confine ourselves to the observation that several publications, including the recent edited volume *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries* (2019), stress the need for a more comprehensive interpretation of the position of the women in the Low Countries, overcoming the (perceived) boundary between north and south. As Moran and Pipkin's volume illustrates, it remains a challenge to put this ambition into practice, due to the different (often separated) historiographical traditions of both countries and the tendency to focus on individual cases.

This special issue takes stock of the field's progress and explores new directions. This two-fold ambition is mirrored in the two types of contributions: historiographical essays and case studies. In the nine historiographical essays, specialists reflect on the current scholarship in their (sub-)fields, assessing what has been achieved, what the lacunas are, and presenting future perspectives. These essays are complemented by ten case studies that explore new avenues for studying early modern Netherlandish women.[12] All the case studies have as their starting point a specific historical source or type of source.[13] Some re-evaluate often-used sources, such as trial records, wills, or a single painting, demonstrating that applying new methodologies or concepts can reveal the agency of a range of different women whose lives and works were often hiding in plain sight. Others explore sources hitherto overlooked or address the potential of recently digitised corpora. In these case studies, authors address the current imbalances in scholarship, with most of them focusing on sources from the Habsburg Netherlands. The purpose is to offer concrete examples to inspire new avenues of research, in order to develop more differentiated and multilayered perspectives on women as agents in the history of the early modern Low Countries.

11 We limit ourselves here to a few examples; more references can be found in the different essays. See for instance De Jeu, *'t Spoor*; Noorman, 'Beeldende kunst m/v'; Van der Stighelen, *Vrouwenstreken*; Sturkenboom, *De elektrieke kus*; Kloek, *Vrouw des huizes*; Van den Heuvel, *Women and Entrepreneurship*.

12 We are keenly aware that it is impossible to give a complete overview, as new fields continue to emerge, most recently environmental humanities, which question how women experienced climate change. See for example 'Forum. Early Modern Women and Climate', esp. Pierik and Van Tielhof, 'Women, Weather and Water'.

13 Broomhall and Spinks, *Early Modern Women*.

Key Concepts

When adopting a bird's-eye view of the state of the field as discussed in the contributions to this special issue, it becomes crystal clear that research on Netherlandish women has indeed moved from the question of whether women actively participated in the different domains and debates, to the question of *how*. This shifting position is connected to broader developments in international scholarship and aligns first and foremost with the prominence of the concept 'female agency'. Since the 1970s, the concept of 'agency' has spurred a wealth of scholarship highlighting women's opportunities to fulfil different roles in patriarchal societies.[14] New Social historians, in Merry Wiesner-Hanks's words, asserted 'that individuals and groups beyond white male elites had the capacity to act, make choices, and intentionally shape their own lives and the world around them to some degree'.[15] The concept has been frequently used in scholarship on historical women to denote women's ability to subvert the restrictions imposed on them and to improve their own position.[16] Although this approach has considerably advanced the field over the past fifty years, some have noted that it has had adverse consequences: in an effort to retrace women's intentional choices, scholars have tended to focus on the few women who have left sufficient documentary evidence, implicitly suggesting that only women who left such traces had agency.[17] In doing so, it has encouraged a focus on the exceptional, often prominent women who openly resisted patriarchal norms. Such an approach runs the risk of presenting patriarchal oppression as the only explanation for the position of women. As such, the concept of 'agency' alone fails to do justice to the far more complex set of historical realities in play, and offers us limited understanding into the lives and experiences of a range of different women. Moreover, scholars of gender have pointed out that patriarchal ideology was in fact 'muddled, contradictory and selectively invoked rather than a monolithic system which simply received adherence or rejection', and closely interfered with power structures that were also organised along the lines of class, religion, or race.[18]

In response to these critiques, scholars have proposed a more differentiated, layered, and historicised use of the term, especially in the past decade.[19] Martha Howell, for example, distinguished multiple types or layers of agency that different women exerted: few women were able to attack the patriarchal system, while other women's agency arose from the patriarchal system itself or their performances of expected gender roles.[20] In some cases,

14 Ground-breaking international articles on early modern women from the 1970s and 1980s are Kelly, 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?'; Nochlin, 'Why Are There No Great Women Artists?'; Scott, 'Gender'. More recently, Krylova et al., 'The Agency Dilemma'.

15 Wiesner-Hanks (ed.), *Challenging Women's Agency*, 10-11.

16 See for instance Pearson (ed.), *Women and Portraits*; Simonton and Montenach (eds.), *Female Agency*; Bronach, *Women, Agency and the Law*.

17 Johnson, 'On Agency', for a poignant critique of the concept – in this case related to scholarship on slavery, but useful as well to rethink women's agency. Thanks to Richard Calis for this suggestion.

18 Shepard, *The Meanings of Manhood*, 1.

19 However, the idea that gender as an analytical category is unable to unite women has already been addressed in feminist work from the 1980s. For instance, Denise Riley noted in 1988 that '"women" are far from being racially or culturally homogeneous': cited in Riley, *Am I that Name?*, 16.

20 Howell, 'The Problem of Women's Agency', 21-31.

as Allyson M. Poska has argued, this could result in situations where women 'acquired power or authority through their dominance over other women'.[21] Others, such as the art historian Andrea Pearson and the historian Lynn Thomas, have suggested a more contextual and historical approach.[22] Pearson recently proposed 'situational agency', defined as 'a more flexible model that accounts for contextual differences, challenges or periodization, and agentive variety'.[23]

These attempts to overturn the one-dimensional image of women go hand in hand with a growing plea for a more intersectional perspective. The notion that the experience of oppression is not simply the sum of individual or different forms of discrimination, but rather that they interact and amplify one another, was first developed in Black feminists writings in the 1960s and 1970s and was only included in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2015.[24] Over the past decade, literary and feminist scholars in early modern studies have made pleas to include an intersectional approach in the analytical toolkit. Valerie Traub, for example, notes that 'the relations of gender, race, sexuality, class, religion, and ability are densely interconnected in ways that are sometimes congruent, sometimes contradictory, but always manifesting a more capacious and complex reality than "gender" alone can encompass'.[25]

While there is agreement on the usefulness of intersectionality, scholars such as Traub, Ania Loomba, and Melissa E. Sanchez have pointed out that it confronts early modernists with multiple analytic difficulties that need to be considered.[26] These scholars share an unease about intersectionality becoming a catch-all concept and the inherent stability, that is, by its use, given to these categories.[27] An intersectional approach, they claim, strongly relies on categories such as 'race', 'class', 'gender', 'sexuality', which were not even concepts which existed in the early modern period. Traub therefore suggests that we need to focus on 'degrees of similarity and difference' between and within groups of people, and on processes of similarity or approximation rather than alterity, which has only reinforced binary thinking.[28] While we share Traub's assertion that we should avoid binary thinking, rather than treating intersectionality as a catch-all concept, it should be embraced by scholars as a 'travelling concept'. According to Mieke Bal, a concept is always flexible and can change meaning between disciplines as well as throughout time and place.[29] The added value of an intersectional lens or approach is that it yields an attentiveness to the on-going inherent dynamic and context-specific interplay between different categories and axes of difference. Studying the context-dependent changes between people and changing sets of

21 Poska, 'The Case for Agentic Gender Norms', 360.
22 Thomas, 'Historicising Agency', 335.
23 Pearson, 'Gender, Sexuality, and the Future of Agency', 38.
24 The term was popularised in 1989 by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to highlight structural discrimination and inequality in American courts: Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection'. For an overview of its history see Wiesner-Hanks, 'Gender, Intersectionality'. For the OED entry, see https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7276681610 (Accessed on 17 March 2025).
25 Traub, 'History in the Present Tense', 25.
26 Loomba and Sanchez, 'Introduction'; Traub, 'Afterword'.
27 Loomba and Sanchez, 'Introduction', propose a comparative intersectional analysis.
28 Traub, 'History in the Present Tense', 49.
29 Bal, 'Travelling Concepts', 22-55.

categories allows us to move beyond binaries and to develop more varied views of early modern women.

As both the historiographical essays and the individual case studies demonstrate, this attentiveness can increasingly be discerned in the study of Netherlandish women. It is clearly still a work in progress, with not all the disciplines moving at the same speed or following the same trajectories. Christine Kooi, illustratively, highlights that women's experiences of religious change during the Reformation in the sixteenth-century Low Countries have been ignored. In her contribution, she makes a strong case for an approach that privileges gender, in order to see commonalities and differences in how Catholic and Protestant women were celebrated as martyrs, or in their position within the different churches. In their contributions on women and political history, Dries Raeymaekers, Lidewij Nissen, and Nina Lamal show that political history remains one of the fields with the most significant gaps: most attention has been paid to ruling women. Despite the progress that has been made in recent years, we still have work to do, even when it comes to recovering the role of different groups of women. In her case study, Nina Lamal shows how seventeenth-century newspapers can be used to trace politically active women, such as the wives of Dutch ambassadors.

The value of adopting multiple perspectives with attention to various social groups has been well-integrated into colonial and socio-economic history. Suze Zijlstra points out that the specific context of a colonial maritime empire could grant women different levels of freedom depending on their location, social status, and race. Nicole Maskiell, in her case study, uses the will of Judith Stuyvesant, one of the most prominent of the women in the Dutch colonies, to study the presence of enslaved women and their role within these colonial communities. Such an approach allows for the integration of perspectives and experiences that have been marginalised or overlooked in more traditional accounts. In rethinking what constitutes work, socio-economic historians have included women in larger questions about economic developments. In her overview, Ariadne Schmidt demonstrates the progress that has been made, as she discusses several large-scale projects examining women's role in socio-economic life.[30] While socio-economic historians have long focused on the question of whether large-scale transformations, such as urbanisation and capitalism, changed the position of women, they now turn the question around to understand the impact of gender relations on economic developments in the past. In her case study, Heleen Wyffels exemplifies how women operated within the family structures and how they used familial thinking to their own advantages. Claire Morrison's case study demonstrates the potential of revisiting university's archival materials. She highlights how a diverse array of women financed colleges at the University of Leuven and provided funding for students. Through these endowments, women left their mark in the shaping of learning experiences and opportunities, even within what might be perceived as the most male-dominated academic settings of the period.

Morrison's observations align with a broader reconceptualisation of knowledge production, as the contribution of Lieke van Deinsen and Karen Hollewand highlights. They demonstrate that early modern women not only increasingly became the subject of science

30 Kloek, 'Een nieuw studieveld', 221-222.

in the form of studies of their bodies and minds, but also gained ground as scholars in their own right. Feike Dietz and Nina Geerdink explore how the outcomes of the extensive recovery projects of early modern women writers are now destabilising the canonical idea of the uniform female author. Questioning the category of women's writing, their plea is that we integrate into our analysis other factors influencing one's ability to write and to publish, such as age and race, as well as the oftentimes collaborative nature of this work.

Furthermore, Sarah Moran and Catharine Powell-Warren provide complementary insights into the underestimated presence of women in the world-leading Netherlandish art market, both behind the scenes as patrons, and as producers of art themselves. Despite this diverse range of essays, there is still much potential for further exploration of women's contributions to the creative industries and to the shaping of religious practices in the Low Countries, as becomes clear from several of the case studies. The essays by Martine van Elk, Jonas Roelens, and Kirsten Derks et al., for example, demonstrate how careful re-readings of well-known sources, such as theatre plays and trial records, as well as the implementation of new methodologies such as MA-XRF scanning and microscopic analysis, illuminate previously unknown aspects of women's artistic skills by adopting a technical perspective. Rebekah Ahrendt, David van der Linden, Renske Hoff, and Evelyne Verheggen illustrate in their case studies how new sources can bring to light previously overlooked women, such as performers, devout religious book owners, and Catholic minorities.

General Trends

Despite some of the disciplinary differences, several shared trends to move the study of early modern women forward can be formulated. Firstly, many of the contributions make the case to move from the success story of exceptional women – traditionally the prime focus of scholars, and one which has resulted in a limited understanding of how a variety of women shaped early modern society – towards the stories of 'normal' women. The appeal of exceptional women like Anna Maria van Schurman, Maria Sibylla Merian, and Amalia of Solms has meant that much general knowledge about early modern women has been determined by the exception rather than the rule. This privileging of the exceptional has cast a shadow over the experiences of other women, as Nicole Maskiell and Jonas Roelens illustrate in their case studies. Other contributors, such as Renske Hoff and Evelyne Verheggen, offer thoughtful reflections on what glimpses into the lives of hitherto completely unknown individuals may reveal about their religious beliefs and practices.

Secondly, there is a growing consensus that scholars should move from the individual to the collective, as has been emphasised by Schmidt, in order to understand the various ways in which women contributed to the shaping of early modern societies. By highlighting the collective nature of a range of early modern activities we discover a diversity of actors, women and men, whose contributions have been previously ignored. In their case studies, Heleen Wyffels and Nina Lamal demonstrate that wives, daughters, apprentices, secretaries, and other household personnel played a crucial part in running institutions, from print shops to embassies. More broadly, moving towards capturing just how collective and collaborative many early modern activities were invites us to reconceptualise our

ideas of authorship, craftsmanship, knowledge, and politics. This focus on the collective should not be interpreted as a plea for more uniform and stable group identities, however; historical women's agency must be analysed and compared along axes of similarities and differences. Schmidt, for instance, demonstrates that not only gender, but especially class and marital status are crucial considerations for the historian looking to interpret the socio-economic impact of women. Literary and art historians increasingly emphasise that authorship and craftsmanship are not solely determined by gender, but also by material conditions, class, age, and ability, which determine whether someone has access to cultural production. Several authors express the need to translate this largely theoretical awareness of the importance of an intersectional approach into practice in future studies.

Additionally, these essays emphasise the need for a contextual approach to facilitate a layered and dynamic understanding of similarities and differences. Suze Zijlstra explores the position of women in a maritime and colonial context depending on their locality, illustrating the important role of geography. The case studies further illustrate how such an approach can be put into practice, as each single or set of sources raises an entire set of new (critical) questions. Many of the contributions express the hope that the rapidly growing availability of digital resources will unlock archival material which will enable us to move forward and to explore the activities of (non-elite) women more systematically, in both the Dutch Republic and the Southern Netherlands. The authors of historiographical overviews, depending on the state of their field, have not always been able to fulfil our ambition to include and compare the Southern Netherlands more systematically and express the wish for more scholarship in this direction. Their contributions highlight what remains to be explored in future and what can be gained from the production of more comparative histories of early modern women in the Low Countries and globally.

While Kloek already underlined the need for interdisciplinary perspectives within the field of early modern women studies, the articles in our issue take stock of the manifold interdisciplinary exchanges in the scholarly tradition of the past two decades. The authors continue to advocate for interdisciplinary cross-pollination among the different disciplines as the way forward. Sarah Moran, for instance, puts this call into practice by showing how a thorough understanding of inheritance law allows us to better understand the opportunities for leaving their mark that were open to women, while Heleen Wyffels demonstrates how economic history intersects with the history of books and publishing. It seems likely, therefore, that over the next twenty-five years these interdisciplinary tendencies, together with collaborative efforts between scholars, will lead to a far more thematic approach.

Taken together, these approaches have significant impact: it requires a far more nuanced historical narrative of the Dutch Republic as a colonial power, a tolerant state and haven for religious diversity, and, to return to Lodovico Guicciardini's words, a place where even women could wield the sceptre. Even the presumed prototypical likenesses of 'poster girls' of the 'Golden Age', including that of Geertruida den Dubbelde, offers the attentive observer a multilayered perspective of early modern society. By seeing her as a woman who simply defied patriarchal norms, we fail to understand why she was even able to act in so self-assured a manner. Her portrait was not meant to be seen in isolation, but was part of a long-standing tradition of pendant portraits of newlyweds: she points to that

of her husband, and seen together, the portraits underline their status as a powerful couple with the ambition to shape the Dutch state and its empire. Moving away from stereotypical images or homogenising binaries allows us to interrogate how the processes of agency and power converge as well as emphasise women's involvement in larger historical processes. Only then do we see the different faces of the women Lodovico Guicciardini encountered, and only then can we incorporate women integrally and structurally into our methodologies, sources, and conceptions of the past.

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