Women and Authorship in the Low Countries: Towards a Differentiated and Collaborative Approach

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Abstract

Netherlandish women writing literary texts in the period 1550-1830 are well-studied. The aim of this essay is to show how existing scholarship creates a tension between exceptionalism and marginalisation: scholarship primarily focuses on the challenges female authors faced because of their sex and does so by studying sources surrounding literary publications (such as journals, preliminaries, and portraits), with the notable exception of the works of some canonised women writers who are regarded as exceptions to the rule. As such, early modern Netherlandish women writers are primarily represented as a homogeneous group in scholarship. Yet, we argue, the diversity of

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literature (co-)authored by women, as well as the heterogeneous identities of these female authors themselves, invites us to destabilise the idea of 'the female author' in at least two interrelated ways: by linking their gender to other factors such as age, health, or race in women's writing; and by approaching female-authored work as 'collaborative', i.e., reflecting different voices and hands, enabling scholars to view women in sometimes understudied roles and sources (such as translators and manuscripts, respectively). The future success of these proposed approaches depends on necessary infrastructural steps, as the digital availability and searchability of female-authored texts from the Low Countries is currently lagging behind that which is necessary.

Keywords: women's writing, literature, intersectionality, collaborative authorship, historiography

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While most well-known Netherlandish women writers were doubtless better educated than the average, their backgrounds, biographies and the ways in which they were educated differ wildly.[1] Whereas tailor's daughter Anna Bijns (1493-1575) had to work as a teacher for her entire life to earn her daily bread, Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678) was of noble descent and schooled at home on a par with her brothers, while the sisters Anna (1583-1651) and Tesselschade (1594-1649) Roemersdr. Visscher were born in a middle-class Amsterdam family where they were educated with the aim of 'cultivation': they had to be able to participate in social interactions with guests of the family.[2] Elisabeth Wolff-Bekker (1738-1804) was, like the Roemersdr. Visscher sisters, from a middle-class, rich family, while her literary partner Agatha Deken (1741-1804) was a farmer's daughter who grew up in an orphanage. The Roemersdr. Visschers and Wolff got married, the other women did not, and Anna Maria van Schurman even presented this as a conscious choice, since she told the story that she promised her father on his deathbed she would stay a virgin to be free to write and study. For the sisters Roemersdr. Visscher, it is thought their marriage meant the end of their literary productivity, which is why they were and still are commonly acknowledged as young, maiden writers. In the case of Wolff, whose oeuvre was built up throughout her life, age seems to have influenced her authorship too, albeit in another way: while she had a very critical voice when she was young, this became gentler and more commercial in the latter stages of her life. Geographically, the women lived in different parts of the Low Countries, which probably influenced their writings as well: Bijns and the sisters Roemersdr. Visscher were respectively born in Antwerp and Amsterdam, cities that were culturally blossoming metropoles, while Van Schurman grew up in the much smaller city of Utrecht, and Wolff in Vlissingen.

This glimpse into the world of early modern Netherlandish women writers, showing how diverse their backgrounds were, is based on the rich scholarship into female authorship in

1 All biographical details in this paragraph are drawn from Schenkeveld-van der Dussen et al. (eds.), *Lauwerkrans*; Van Gemert et al. (eds.), *Women's Writing*; and the online dictionary Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon, https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/vrouwenlexicon (Accessed on 21 February 2025).

2 The ideal of female cultivation – and its complex relation to female learnedness – is discussed by Larsen, *Anna Maria van Schurman*. Larsen, for instance, analyses how Anne le Fevre Dacier's family, friends, and sponsors highlighted her housekeeping and spinning qualities instead of her vast learning.

the Low Countries. This small cadre of well-known women is commonly discussed, while the large number of other women writers from the Low Countries are mostly considered marginalised, with any study focusing on the constraints they experienced because of their gender. In this essay, we aim to understand where this tension between exceptionalism and marginalisation comes from, and how we can work towards a more differentiated perspective on 'early modern female authors', that is: women who wrote literary texts in the period between 1550 and 1830.[3] We elaborate on two directions for future research that would, we argue, enable us to understand and unravel the multiplicity of women's writing better: intersectional perspectives on authorship and literary output; and the understanding of authorship as collaborative, including the incorporation of (more) collaborative products (co-)authored by women.

State of the Art

The appearance of the anthology *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* in 1997 was the culmination of the growth of the field of Netherlandish women's writing, which had gradually emerged in the 1980s and 1990s.[4] Inspired by comparable undertakings in other European countries, a group of around twenty-five literary historians from the Netherlands and Flanders took the initiative to collect 'their' women writers. They were surprised by their own success: they turned out to be unable to include all the women they had found. The anthology counted 158 women, including several newly discovered ones. In *Met en zonder Lauwerkrans*, an introductory notice detailing each author's life and work was included alongside a selection of their writings. These entries reflected the variety of the women's biographical and cultural circumstances, as well as the different genres in which they participated, such as religious poetry, social and political poetry, *emblemata*, translations, prose works, and songs. A lengthy introduction aimed to generalise from these individual cases, and synthesised important insights into women's writing from the Low Countries. The introduction highlighted differences in female authorship, paying particular regard to religious and geographical background. While in the Southern Netherlands, women's writing remained a predominantly religious activity clustered in the many convents during the whole early modern period, in the Dutch Republic women's writing expanded enormously in the eighteenth century, leading to a literary field in the second half of the century in which women played a dominant role, especially in the production of novels, translations, and children's literature. Alongside highlighting these geographical and temporal differences, the introduction focused on the women's shared constraints: as women lacked, or were supposed to lack, the 'knowledge', 'time', and 'talent' to be an author, their opportunities for entering the literary world were limited. Those who were able to publish

3 Following the current trend in the field of early modern Dutch literature, with the term 'literature' we refer to more than only highly-esteemed literary genres such as tragedy and poetry, but also less high-brow works such as religious meditations, songs, or didactical texts. In the 'long early modern period' (1550-1830), the literary world experienced important transformations with regard to the commercial position of authors, as well as the intellectual climate. The scope of this article allows for only limited attention to be paid to these transformations.

4 Schenkeveld-van der Dussen et al. (eds.), *Lauwerkrans*.

their work mostly wrote religious and social poetry, and were often assisted by their husbands or other male contacts.[5]

The *Lauwerkrans* – as the anthology is generally referred to – fell on fertile soil, as its underlying ambitions fitted the concurrent development of the field of early modern literary studies perfectly. Mirroring international developments, late-twentieth-century Dutch literary historians were interested in the social, cultural, and material functions of literature, and began to challenge the traditional canon by studying marginalised writers such as women. As a result of a broadened definition of 'literature' – including also more practical or occasional texts such as wedding poetry or pedagogical texts – the production and circumstances of female authorship attracted growing interest in the 1990s. Another pivotal development was the ongoing academic institutionalisation of feminist scholarship: the *Lauwerkrans* was reviewed in the first issue of the newly-founded Dutch *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* (*Journal for Gender Studies*) in 1998.[6] Feminist and gender-based approaches also had their impact on the field of early modern Netherlandish literature: Arie Jan Gelderblom and Lia van Gemert were among the first to reveal how semiotic reading methods helped to deconstruct gendered stereotypes and power relations in early modern Dutch texts.[7]

As the *Lauwerkrans* thus appealed to changing needs in the field of early modern Dutch literature at the end of the twentieth century, other scholars began to conduct research in the slipstream of the project. Working from within the cultural-historical paradigm, several dissertations and other publications in the 1990s focused on women's possibilities to participate in the literary field by studying, for example, their networks and opportunities to (print-)publish or their roles in the world of literary societies and journals.[8] Other scholars analysed women's contemporary representation in so-called *vrouwenloven* (praise of women) and literary criticism.[9] In addition, some have focused on the female-written literature itself and have used feminist, semiotic approaches to unravel the hidden queerness in the works of, for instance, author-bookseller Katharina Lescailje.[10] This reading method was somewhat overshadowed by the dominant socio-cultural approach of the day, which sometimes clashed with the feminist semiotic analyses supposedly lacking historicity.[11]

At the start of the twenty-first century, Suzan van Dijk and others pleaded for the inclusion of a new, transnational perspective: Netherlandish women did not operate in isolation, but often were part of transnational networks.[12] This perspective has gained ground in the last two decades and led to the development of an important digital tool, the transnational

5 Schenkeveld-van der Dussen et al. (eds.), *Lauwerkrans*, 33-50.

6 Van Dijk, 'Met en zonder lauwerkrans'.

7 Gelderblom, 'De maagd en de mannen'; Van Gemert, *Norse negers*.

8 De Jeu, *'t Spoor der dichteressen*; Baar-de Weerd, *Uw sekse*; Van Oostrum, *Juliana Cornelia de Lannoy*; Veltman-van den Bos and De Vet, *Par Amitié*; De Vries, 'Dichten is zilver'; Dijcks and Van Marion, 'Uit de archieven'; Jensen, *'Bij uitsluiting voor de vrouwelijke sekse geschikt'*.

9 Veld, *Tot lof van vrouwen?*; Van Gemert and Veltman-van den Bos, 'Schrijfsters in de literaire kritiek'.

10 Spies, 'Oudejaarsavond 1675'; Van Gemert, 'De vrouwenzucht'; Van Gemert, 'Hiding behind words?'.

11 Grabowsky, 'Katharina Lescailje'.

12 Van Dijk, Montoya, and Gilleir (eds.), *Women Writing Back*; Van Dijk, Van Gemert, and Ottway (eds.), *Writing the History*; Van Dijk et al. (eds.), *'I have heard about you'*; Van Deinsen and Vanacker, 'Found through Translation'.

reception's database SHEWROTE (Studying Historical Early Women's Reception. Oeuvres, Texts, Engagements).[13]

Another dominant perspective in the recent study of women's writings from the Low Countries is a focus on women's position as literary authors. Research, including that of the authors of this piece, has for instance revealed the textual and visual strategies of (self) representation employed by these writers, as well as their constructions of authority and agency.[14] These perspectives are also central in international research, which compares Netherlandish women writers with women writers from other countries.[15]

Although scholarship has broadened its perspectives over time and contributed significantly to the increase of insight into the various ways in which women participated in the literary world, there are some remarkable tendencies to be addressed here as a starting point for the new directions we propose in this article. In the first place, there is an imbalance in the use of source material. Most studies focus on printed works as opposed to handwritten texts that were 'published' in scribal publication, and the analyses are more often focused on the sources surrounding these publications than on the texts themselves, such as correspondence, laudatory poems, and other prefatory material. Relatively few studies present an in-depth analysis of women's writing itself.[16] Manuscripts are generally also understudied.[17] This probably should be related to the lack of large-scale digitisation projects for Netherlandish (manuscript) writings by women. Women are underrepresented in the largest and most used digital collection of Dutch literature, the DBNL (Digitale Bibliotheek der Nederlandse Letteren), and there are no digital collections of women's writings (in manuscript or print) available for the Low Countries comparable to those in the Anglophone world.[18]

Secondly, scholarship seems to be interested primarily in the constraints women experienced in participating in the literary world. Many publications focus on the question of how women managed to participate despite the limitations imposed on them. Both

13 Larsen, 'A Women's Republic of Letters'; Pal, *Republic of Women*; Geerdink, 'Possibilities of Patronage'. SHEWROTE, formerly known as the women writers database, is currently being redeveloped by Alicia Montoya's team at Radboud University Nijmegen: https://shewrote.rich.ru.nl (Accessed on 21 February 2025).

14 Dietz and Geerdink, 'Clever, but not learned?'; Geerdink and Dietz, 'Women's Strength'; Geerdink, 'Economic Advancement'; Van Deinsen and Geerdink, 'Cultural Branding'; Van Deinsen, 'Visualizing Female Authorship'; Van Deinsen, 'Female Faces'; Paijmans et al., 'Pathways to Agency'; Van Bodegraven, Dietz, and Geerdink, 'Grijs vernuft'.

15 Larsen, 'A Women's Republic of Letters'; Van Elk, *Early Modern Women's Writing*.

16 Van Elk, *Early Modern Women's Writing*, also addresses this problem in her introduction. Some notable exceptions, apart from Van Elk herself: Schenkeveld-van der Dussen, 'Liefdestalen'; Van Marion, 'Geen Homerus!'; Van Deinsen and Dietz, 'The General Graphometer'; Geerdink, 'Cultural Marketing'; Pipkin, *Dissenting Daughters*; Van Oostrum, 'Dutch Interest'. See also the semiotic, feminist approaches mentioned in footnote 7.

17 On manuscripts as a blind spot in historical Dutch literature studies, see Moser, 'Poezijlust'. This is also a problem in research on women's writing. Schenkeveld-van der Dussen et al. (eds.), *Lauwerkrans*, mainly focuses on printed publications.

18 Cf. the Perdita Project: https://www.perditamanuscripts.amdigital.co.uk (Accessed on 6 March 2025). A notable exception is the ongoing work by Patricia Stoop on a large-scale Digital Database of Books Related to Women (c. 1350-1600), with a strong emphasis on the Southern Netherlands: Patricia Stoop, 'Unveiling Female Engagement'. For the DBNL, see https://www.dbnl.org (Accessed on 21 February 2025). The DBNL is currently prioritising the digitisation of women's writings to make up for the imbalance.

the emphasis on (the front matter of) printed texts and this interest in constraints have contributed to a process that ensures that those exceptions to the rule, such as the women discussed in the opening paragraph of this article, are the themes studied most extensively. Finally, scholarship on those periods and areas where women's writing was able to blossom is more elaborate: the quantity and depth of studies on the Dutch Republic is larger than on the Southern Low Countries, and there is more in-depth research on the (late) eighteenth century than on the seventeenth.

Current scholarship thus focuses primarily on the challenges female authors faced because of their sex, and does so by studying printed publications and their preliminaries, mainly those created and distributed within the Dutch Republic during the eighteenth century, with the notable exception of the works of some canonised women writers active earlier and in the South. This focus on shared female constraints presents most early modern Netherlandish women writers as existing within a homogeneous group, although differences between women writers have not been invisible in past scholarship.

The six well-known authors that we discussed in the introduction, for instance, are studied as individuals in their specific cultural and intellectual contexts. Regarded as both exceptionally learned and exceptionally active in the literary world, they have not been seen as challenging the dominant ideas about female authorship, however, but rather treated as the exceptions that proved the rule. While the *Lauwerkrans* was crucial in establishing the idea that a (perceived) lack of knowledge, time, and talent limited women's opportunities – and as such anchored a firm shared image of female authorship – the anthology also, but less explicitly, illuminated the diversity of women in the literary world. It included women of high birth without money or spouse (Maria Margaretha van Akerlaecken), unmarried working middle-class women (Katharina Lescailje), married elite women (Lucretia van Merken, Johanna Coomans), married Protestant women regarded as (co-)leaders of religious communities (Sybille van Griethuysen), Catholic women living and writing in convents or beguinages (Maria Petyt and Anna vander Heyden), women living outside of the Low Countries (Elizabeth van der Woude, who wrote during her travels to Dutch Guinea), disabled women (the blind and productive author Petronella Moens), and women who died at a very young age (Cynthia Lenige), or who debuted only after their fortieth birthday (Anna Rethaan). This diversity, however, has not been as central to scholarship to date, (the *Lauwerkrans* focuses on women as one, marginalized group) and has thus not fundamentally impacted the idea of female authorship.

In the remainder of this article, we aim to explore possibilities to further diversify our understanding of women's writing, by suggesting the incorporation of aspects of women's identities that have been underexposed so far (such as ability), and the analysis of intersections between women's identity categories, and by extending the conception of 'authorship' towards a more collaborative understanding of female writing.

Intersectional Perspectives

Following international attempts to develop intersectional perspectives on early modern women, we would like to highlight interactions between gender and other – sometimes

continuously changing – factors such as age, religion, geography, health, or race in women's writing, both in discourse and in practice: how were differences reflected upon in female-authored works, and what was the impact of factors like age or health on women acting as authors?[19] Although 'intersectionality' was only introduced as a term for academic research in the late twentieth century, early modern women writers themselves were already sensitive to the differences amongst them.[20]

The idea that a woman's family situation was an important factor in her development as an author was widespread.[21] Anna Maria van Schurman, for example, shows awareness of age as a factor in differentiating between women writers when she distinguishes between young maidens and older (married) women in her correspondence with André Rivet: while van Schurman agrees that married women are unable to combine their household obligations with intellectual activities, she argues that young girls have ample opportunities to dedicate themselves to philosophy and science.[22] In the afterword to her epic poem *Debora in vier zangen* (1769), Anna van der Horst expresses the awareness that female authorship was inflected by social differences. She argues that most women are unable to write not because of a natural incapacity, but because of circumstance: many women were denied the necessary education or were consumed by activities relating to childcare.[23] Almost a century earlier, in an anonymous foreword to Anna Morian's posthumously published poetry, the anonymous author (m/f?) argues that women, though unable to write and think as men due to their natural limitations, might yet be exceptionally gifted. Such talented women could become successful writers if the circumstances allowed them to develop. Although the idea of female nature put forward by Morian's editor differs markedly from Van der Horst's, these 'necessary circumstances' were broadly similar: a woman requires support and education from 'pious and wise men', and she should not be bothered too much by household affairs.[24]

One of the intersections that deserves further research is that between gender and (dis)ability or health. We have discussed the front matter of Henrica van Hoolwerff's religious poetry collection, *Kracht in zwakheid* (1696), in an earlier publication. In the preliminaries to this posthumously published book, the opposition between Van Hoolwerff's weak body and strong mind is highlighted by male pastors, suggesting that her 'highly learned Soul' and 'quick Mind' were the consequence of her ability to patiently suffer her diseases and 'worn-out body'. As such, her physical infirmities seem to compensate for the

19 The concept of 'intersectionality' is discussed in the introduction to this special issue. Specifically focusing on early modern literature, gender has been analysed in relationship to race in the past decades: Hall, *Things of Darkness*; MacDonald, *Women and Race*; Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race*. Other categories, such as sexuality, religion, and class, remain somewhat underexplored.

20 Kimberlee Cranshaw is often considered to have introduced the concept of 'intersectionality' into scholarship, but intersectional thinking is much older. Traub, 'History in the Present Tense', dates it back to the Combahee River Collective of 1977. Cole, 'Intersectionality', argues that intersectionality was already discussed by black feminists in the late nineteenth century.

21 Van Elk, *Early Modern Women's Writing*; Geerdink, 'The Phenomenon'.

22 Van Schurman to Rivet, Utrecht, 6 November 1637, published in translation in Schurman, *Verhandeling*, 80.

23 Van der Horst, *Debora*, fol. L3r.

24 Anonymous, 'Voorreden', fol. 3v: 'vrome en verstandige mannen'.

womanhood that was considered to render her less able to write and publish.[25] A broader analysis of the intersection between gender and ability could help scholars understand to what extent physical weaknesses were considered as typical for women as a group, or if differences between female authors were considered to depend on their particular physical circumstances. Such an approach can produce new insights about authors who have been studied previously, such as the blind author Petronella Moens, or help to create attention for unknown disabled authors.

While the examples discussed show how intragroup differences between female writers were discussed within the period itself, we also propose the analysis of how female authors contributed to the creation of differentiated images of femaleness in a broader sense, and how they related femaleness to other identity markers, in both prefatory texts and their literary production. A rare example is Sybille van Griethuysen's reflection on Johan van Beverwijcks *Van de uutnementheyt des vrouwelicken geslachts*, and her vivid awareness of class: she asks why he did not include 'the people, that spin yarns, and sew, and wash, and scrub, and rinse'.[26]

Whereas Van Griethuysen's reflection on class seems to be exceptional, there are several female contributions to discourses about race in connection to womanhood. It is this discourse that became more explicit over time, as Enlightened ideals empowered the position of women and fuelled critique on matters of social injustice. Petronella Moens, for instance, is famous as an advocate for the position of women, whereas it is less known how her work also underlines the differences between women: her girls' novel *De jonge Sofia* (1820) depicts young girls as well as older women, elite as well as lower-class girls, and white as well as black girls. Although the novel propagates the idea that all female beings are equal, it simultaneously stresses the differences between them: the black face of Gama, brought by Sofia's father from his West Indian plantation to the Netherlands, is opposed to the white face of the poor girl Mina, but Sofia argues that both girls should be loved as they both reflect a virtuous soul.[27] *De jonge Sofia* could be regarded as an emancipatory book, as it questions the idea that white people were superior to black individuals, and explicitly criticises slavery practices in the West Indian plantations, but it equally confirms the otherness and strangeness of black people.

The complex dynamics between progressive and conservative voices among Netherlandish women writers in the way they reflect on identities and diversity deserves further research. This ambition is in line with recent pleas by Kimberly Coles and Melissa Sanchez, who observed that Anglophone women writers are mainly studied in their roles of emancipators or even saviours, whereas they also actively contributed to discourses of race and inequality.[28] The fact that female authors were marginalised throughout the early modern period possibly creates a blind spot for the fact that many active writing women also belonged to an elite that was (co-)responsible for the marginalisation of other groups in

25 Van Hoolwerff, *Kracht in Swakheit*, 10-11: 'hoog-geleerde Ziel', 'vlugge Geest', 'afgematte lyf'. See also Geerdink and Dietz, 'Women's Strength'.

26 Van Griethuysen, 'Aen de Wel-Edele Ionge Iuffrou', A3r: 'Volck, dat spint, en naeyt, en wast, en schuyrt, en spoelt'. See also Van Deinsen and Hollewand's contribution to this special issue.

27 Moens, *De jonge Sofia*, 45.

28 Coles, 'Undisciplined'; Sanchez, 'What Were Women Writers?'.

society. We argue for more in-depth analyses of the complex ways women writers, who were often from a privileged social position, reflected on gender in relation to race as well as other identity factors, both in prefaces and tracts as well as in their fictional literature, and against the background of changing cultural and political circumstances.

Future scholarship requires some necessary infrastructural steps to further enable research on differentiated female authorship in the Netherlands. First of all, the field requires an updated, online version of the *Lauwerkrans*, which could be progressively expanded over the years, and which should include manuscripts (co-)created by women, following the example of international databases on female-written manuscripts, such as the Perdita Project. The DBNL should enlarge its number of female-authored texts considerably, especially because these texts would then not be presented in isolation, and users would be able to find and analyse women's writings in the contexts of all kinds of research questions – not only those focusing on women specifically, but also on ideological discourses, or an author's religion, age, place of residence, and its many intersections.

Secondly, we argue for a digital open-access database with prefatory material from female-authored publications, preferably also including front matter from male-authored texts, which would enable scholars to analyse authorship representations intersectionally. We hope to create such a database ourselves in the near future. We have gathered all front matter texts from female-authored works printed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the Dutch Republic, whether written by women authors or by others. We have already shown the fruitfulness of exploring the intersections between religion and gender, and between age and gender, in a few exploratory studies focusing specifically on women writers from the Dutch Republic.[29] Gender and age, for example, intersect in the legitimation of female authorship: while male literary careers were commonly regarded as progressive, we found some women whose authorship was represented as already full-grown and complete at an early age, because it was connected to typically feminine qualities such as virtuousness and handiwork skills, as opposed to intellectual capacities which were considered typically masculine and held to increase over the years. Digital infrastructure projects like these would make ever larger amounts of data and source-materials both available and digitally searchable, enabling scholars to reveal larger patterns of diversification: is there, for example, a difference between how younger and older authors represented themselves; did higher-class women approach themselves as different from lower-class authors, and so forth?

Collaborative Female Authorship

As a second direction for future research, we propose to approach female authorship as a collaborative practice. While it is undesirable to reduce individual female authors to only one of their identity markers, the situation becomes even more diffuse when we admit that women's writings often came into being in collaboration, either between various women with sometimes different backgrounds, or between women and men. It is

29 Geerdink and Dietz, 'Women's Strength'; Van Bodegraven, Dietz, and Geerdink, 'Grijs vernuft'.

commonly acknowledged that early modern authors were nothing like the individual geniuses we have come to consider them as ever since Romanticism.[30] Early modern authorship was a social practice in which tradition and community were more important than originality or innovation. This perspective has also impacted scholarship on early modern Netherlandish women's writing, by shifting focus onto the networks surrounding women's publications and traditions into which women were writing themselves.[31] However, recent scholarship argues that we should go further and regard (female) authorship as fundamentally collaborative in nature.[32] Joan DeJean was making these arguments already in her early 1990s study of the French early modern novel.[33] More recent Anglophone scholars such as Patricia Pender and Rosalind Smith opt for a broad definition of collaborative authorship, which holds that all of those involved in the creation of a literary product, such as translators, editors, and publishers, are as much collaborators as those explicitly deemed 'authors'.[34] This collaborative approach invites us to push sometimes underexposed sources to the centre of our research. Below, we will highlight three types of literary products co-created by women (translations, manuscripts, and posthumously edited volumes), and discuss how approaching those as the result of collaborative authorship challenges our understanding of female authorship.

Translations have been identified by Patricia Pender as 'a particularly fertile field for the study of collaboration'.[35] Recent developments in the field of translation studies invite us to focus on the varied processes of collaboration and exchange undertaken by mediators who, from their different geographical and linguistic contexts, together succeeded in creating a translation.[36] An interesting example from the seventeenth-century Netherlands is Maria Heyns's *Bloemhof der doorluchtige voorbeelden* (1647), primarily comprising translations of essays from Michel de Montaigne. As Alicia Montoya's excellent analysis of this case has revealed, the *Bloemhof* is the product of the merging of Heyns's and Montaigne's voices, as Heyns did not only act as a translator, but also guided readers' interpretation of Montaigne's texts by selecting particular essays and adding moralising introductions to each chapter, and as such reinforced Montaigne's emancipatory perspective on the position of women.[37] Heyns also added a preface in which she elaborates on the strong affinity between herself and the female author Sybille van Griethuysen, rendered by their shared young age and religious orientation which distinguished them from other women who might lose

30 See for the (still ongoing) debate about early modern authors as talented individuals versus people working collaboratively: Pender, *Gender, Authorship*.

31 De Jeu, *'t Spoor der dichteressen*; De Vries, 'Dichten is zilver'; Denissen, 'De meerstemmige auteur'; Kemp, Powell, and Link, 'Accounting for Early Modern Women'.

32 This is a general trend in authorship studies, as is evident from two recent handbooks: Berensmeyer, Buelens, and Demoor (eds.), *Cambridge Handbook of Literary Authorship*; Boes, Braun, and Spiers (eds.), *World Authorship*.

33 DeJean, *Tender Geographies*.

34 Pender, *Gender, Authorship*; Pender and Smith (eds.), *Material Cultures*; Smith, 'Authorship, Attribution, and Voice'. See also Phillippy (ed.), *A History*, esp. 119-136; Shirley, 'Between Women'.

35 Pender, *Gender, Authorship*, 11.

36 Roig-Saiz and Reine Meylaerts, *Literary Translation*. With regard to the Low Countries, see esp. Van der Haven et al. (eds.), *Literature Without Frontiers*.

37 Montoya, 'A Woman Translator'.

themselves in worldly, useless entertainment. As Heyns and Van Griethuysen seemed not to have been in contact during their lives, this imagined partnership was a way for Heyns to position herself within the existing tradition of female authorship.[38] By underlining the affinity between herself and other authors (in regard to their shared opinions and characters), Heyns was able to act at the intersection between translating, editing, and writing.

While seventeenth-century female translators seem to have been quite exceptional, women were vital actors in the eighteenth-century translating industries, where they often combined their translation activities with other roles.[39] Maria Geertruida de Cambon-van der Werken, for instance, translated several English and French texts, including a children's novel written by Mary Wollstonecraft, into Dutch. She was also a published author, reaping most success from her children's novel *De kleine Grandisson* (1782), which was translated into English by her acquaintance John Hall and edited by Wollstonecraft before being published by Joseph Johnson in London as *Young Grandison* (1791). A product such as *Young Grandison* can certainly be approached as collaborative, as it was created by men and women who cannot each be reduced to a single role, but whose voices merged. The relationship between De Cambon-van der Werken and Hall, vital for its publication, seems to have been fed by their shared political (Orangist and pro-English) position – this underlines the assumption that the collaborations could take root in various common grounds and that (a shared) gender was by no means the only factor that counted.[40]

Scholarship on early modern manuscripts has also pointed at their collaborative nature: handwritten collections often display the hands of several writers, who frequently copied or imitated examples of literature that were circulating, which were in their turn generally gathered with the help of friends and family members.[41] Recent international projects show how fruitful the study of manuscripts can be in the context of women's writing.[42] Scholars have already focused on the alba amicorum of young elite women or manuscript production in female religious communities as examples of collaborative manuscript practices.[43] Both the alba and the manuscripts helped to shape and maintain the social and creative relationships between members of a specific community or social class. As such, attention for female-authored manuscripts could help to increase scholarship on women's writing from the Southern Netherlands.

In the case of those manuscripts resulting from collaborations rooted in a shared age, class, or religious orientation, authorship cannot be attributed to a single woman. What has been highly invisible in scholarship, however, is the significance of collaborations in manuscripts that seem to express the voice of one female author alone. Elizabeth Hoofman,

38 Heyns, 'Aen d'E Iuffrou Sybille van Griethuysen', fol. 2r.

39 Van Deinsen and Vanacker, 'Found through Translation'.

40 This case has been discussed in Dietz, 'Bringing Young Grandisons'; Dietz, *Lettering Young Readers*, ch. 6.

41 Ezell, *Social Authorship*; Moser, 'Poezijlust'.

42 See the projects RECIRC, https://recirc.universityofgalway.ie/ (Accessed on 24 February 2025) and STEMMA, https://stemma.universityofgalway.ie/ (Accessed on 24 February 2025).

43 Reinders, *De mug en de kaars*; Ouwerkerk, 'The Latin Poems'. Patricia Stoop focuses on handwritten texts by Catholic women in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, and is particularly interested in the dynamics between manuscript and print culture: O'Mara and Stoop (eds.), 'Circulating the Word'; Stoop, 'Female Authorship'. On female-authored religious manuscripts from the seventeenth century, see Dietz, 'Gedrukte boeken'.

for instance, began a handwritten collection of the poems she wrote during her life, in which she included a poem she wrote on behalf of and maybe together with her young daughter and her deaf stepdaughter.[44] As her death prevented her from finishing this manuscript, her daughter and son-in-law continued her work. This suggests that manuscripts connected to specific female authors should nevertheless be viewed from the perspective of collaboration and shifting authorial roles. A lot of work still needs to be done here to unravel collaborations in manuscripts and to understand how shared or divergent characteristics of co-creators fed their collaborative practices.

Finally, the work of several early modern female authors can only be accessed through posthumously published collections: as it was not self-evident that a woman ought to publish her work on her own account, the initiative was often taken after her death, by her husband, friends, or other supporters. Examples are the abovementioned poems by Hoofman that were copied by her family members and partly edited and published by Willem Kops, and the poetry collection of Petronella Johanna de Timmerman as published by her husband Johann Friedrich Hennert.[45] These posthumously published volumes are mostly considered female-authored books instead of collaborative works co-produced by (often male) editors who impacted the work's ultimate form by selecting and sometimes changing poems and adding paratextual material. The value of this perspective is proven by, for instance, the volume *Nagelatene gedichten* (1730), which consisted of poetry written by Anna Rethaan and Anna Maria Vincentius, and was posthumously published by Pieter de la Ruë. It was De la Ruë who decided to combine the work of these two women, although they probably did not know each other, presenting them in the context of Zeeland as a literary centre.[46] So it was De la Ruë, instead of the female poets themselves, who left his mark on the representation of Rethaan and Vincentius as Zeeland icons.[47] This type of posthumously published volume challenges our perception of male and female authorship as distinguishable categories, inviting us to unravel the moments in which male and female voices merged in the production of literature.

While a collaborative approach is relevant in the case of those products discussed here – translations, manuscripts, and posthumously published books – we are convinced that single-authored original publications can often profit from this perspective, too. Starting from the concept of collaborative authorship as it is broadly defined by Smith et al., it is important to also consider writings and publications which are not collaborative at first sight, such as any publication which is dedicated to someone, inspired by someone, printed by someone, applauded by people in front matter texts etcetera.[48] One example of a collaborative product that is easy to overlook is the volume of poetry that is attributed to one author but displays works written by others. A case in point is *Mengel-digten* by Aletta Beck, published in print in 1750.[49] Beck wrote mainly coterie poetry, and she

44 Geerdink, 'Possibilities of Patronage'.
45 Van Deinsen and Dietz, 'The General Graphometer'.
46 On De la Ruë and his activities, see Van Deinsen and Van Strien, 'Een canon met couleur locale'.
47 This has been convincingly argued in Bijl, *Leven na de dood*.
48 Smith, 'Authorship, Attribution, and Voice'. See also Heleen Wyffels's case study in this special issue.
49 Van Wissing, 'Tussen beschaafde dichtkransers'; Beck, *Mengel-digten*.

alternated poems with those sent to her by poets she had befriended, often when her own poem was a direct response to such a poem. Of the sixty-four poems in the collection, eight were written by someone other than the author named on the title page.[50] Moreover, the sociable origin of many of her poems suggest that they were the result of explicit or implicit collaboration. Before Beck left for South Africa, she was an active member of an informal Arnhem circle of poets. Since this was the context in which many of her poems came into being, the voices of the other members are also represented in her published work.

Whereas polyphony in the case of coterie and occasional poetry might seem evident, voices other than the main author's can also be heard in other genres. An intriguing example is the work of Maria Sibilla Merian, discussed in more detail by Van Deinsen and Hollewand in their contribution to this special issue. Merian published a single-authored book with illustrations and descriptions of Surinamese insects which we should consider the result of collaborative female authorship that bridged black and white voices, as she was helped by women of Amerindian and African origin.[51] This example shows the importance of analysing women's writings with a sensitivity for double and communal voices.[52]

Conclusion

In this essay, we have proposed two interrelated and new directions for the study of early modern women's writing from the Low Countries. Because of its contextual approach, its emphasis on constraints, and its primary focus on printed sources, the rich body of existing literature has created a small canon of 'exceptional women writers' and promoted the assumption of homogeneity among those women as well as other published women writers. Yet the diversity of literature (co-)authored by women, as well as the heterogeneous identities of these female authors themselves, we argue, invites us to destabilise the idea of 'the female author' in at least two interrelated ways: by linking their gender to other factors such as age, religion, geography, health, or race in women's writing, and by approaching female-authored work as reflecting different voices and hands. This approach enables scholars to view women in sometimes understudied roles (such as translator, editor, or publisher), to turn their attention to underused sources (such as manuscripts and translations), and to develop new perspectives on known sources (such as posthumously published anthologies). To successfully pursue these proposed directions, it is necessary for scholars in the field to invest in infrastructural projects to make texts from Netherlandish women fully available and searchable, both in collections focusing on women specifically and more wide-ranging databases, whether these texts are in manuscript or print.

50 Van Wissing, 'Tussen beschaafde dichtkransers', 152.
51 Morrison, 'Whitewashing Nature'.
52 These terms for polyphony were already being used in the context of women's writing in the 1990s by Susan Lanser: Lanser, *Fictions of Authority*.

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