

Before NEWW (New Approaches to European Women's Writing):
Prolegomena to the Launching of an International Project

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The project *New approaches to European Women's Writing* (NEWW) is an international collaborative network that has begun to take shape over the past decade. It seeks to produce new historiography about European women's writing, viewed from an explicitly transnational and relational perspective. Unlike previous histories of women's writing, it takes as its starting point not the *production* side of women's literary works, but their *reception*--especially by readers contemporary to the publication. This approach means that we do not restrict ourselves to those writers who have survived canon formation or even to those who have (re)emerged recently thanks to feminism. We take into account all female contributions to the literary field, with connections to male contributions when relevant, but with a particular focus on the reception of women's writings by other women. A second innovation is that women's writing is viewed from an explicitly transnational perspective, foregrounding the many networks that existed between individual women writers in different countries and language areas before the advent of organized feminism in the late nineteenth century. Finally, the project is organized around an ever-expanding database (www.databasewomenwriters.nl), which at present holds some 18,000 entries containing references to the reception of women's literary works before 1900.

Early Considerations

The present NEWW project grew out of an increasing awareness among a group of researchers based in the Netherlands that we lacked the tools necessary to carry out adequate research into the history of women's writing. This was because, as we discovered, we were not sure how to evaluate and contextualize the few surviving, canonized women authors in the literary field of their day.

The start was Suzan van Dijk's work on French women's literature and its contemporary reputation, especially eighteenth-century novelists such as Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni and Jeanne Marie Leprince de Beaumont, as well as George Sand in the nineteenth century. Sand's work in particular had been studied, re-edited, and discussed in international conferences since the eighties, but with little attention paid to its impact during the nineteenth century. Although positive reactions to Sand's works by Henry James and Dostoyevsky had not been completely forgotten, they remained isolated statements. Their isolation and lack of context explained in part the ease with which Sand had been dismissed until recent years.

At a 1992 conference in Debrecen, Hungary, for the first time the subject of Sand's international contemporary reception was on the program. From then on a variable group of researchers has been working on the subject. Once we started to get an impression of the number of translations in European languages, others--in particular the organizers of the 2004 bicentennial "Année George Sand"--also became convinced of the important international status of this author, who enjoyed wide recognition among her contemporaries. For the Netherlands, where Suzan was working, Sand's reception raised questions that could not be answered while remaining within a bilateral, Franco-Dutch context. The reception seemed relatively meager, especially in the domain of translations (three or four of them were known at the time), given the large number of Sand's publications (more than one hundred titles). This impression was in need of confirmation and explanation; it called for more thorough research in Dutch sources, especially those that allowed for a comparison of the Dutch reception of Sand with her reception elsewhere.

It turned out that comparison was, as it were, inherent to our material. In Dutch "reception traces" (comments and articles in the periodical press) Sand is constantly compared to other authors, particularly to other women: to George Eliot of course, but also--not always with the best intentions--to those German women writers who were said to smoke cigars and to have been influenced therein by Sand, such as Louise Aston, and those--like the German-born Countess Hahn-Hahn--whose morals were considered to be as loose as Sand's own. But critics also established oppositions between Sand and more "feminine" authors who were considered better examples for the Dutch female reading public: Fredrika Bremer from Sweden, Madame de Gasparin from Switzerland, and Henriette Hanke from Germany. By making these comparisons, critics were in fact sketching whole "networks" of resemblances and oppositions, which Suzan assumed might provide a context for interpreting the reception of individual authors, and might explain publishers' decisions to translate--or not--Sand's novels. Finally, not only did critics include Sand in comparisons to other women authors, but

Suzan was also finding mounting evidence that these women in some cases really were under Sand's influence, or may have come to writing because of reading Sand.

It was precisely here, in this discovery that throughout Europe during the nineteenth century women authors were compared to Sand, that the problem started. Sand herself can be said to be familiar to us now. But for many of those who were compared to her, and whose works we would want to read in order to interpret the comparisons, we are much less aware of who they were and what they wrote. Sand's own correspondence indeed provides us with the names of other women who wrote and were published or wanted to be published and therefore addressed letters to Sand asking for her help. These women confirming--in their own way-- Sand's celebrity are also part of the literary landscape of the time, and Suzan wanted to be able to study their position and role. In short, it seemed necessary to create a site where these scattered pieces of information could be put together, while offering colleagues working on other women authors the possibility to consult and complement the data.

The Idea of Creating a Database and the First Collaborative Efforts

At this point, Suzan realized steps had to be taken to create a practical basis for a transnational approach to women's literature during this period (1700 to 1900 in the first concept; later, the dates were extended to cover all texts published and commented on before 1900). While pursuing a research project at the University of Amsterdam (1997-2004), funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), she decided to develop a first version of a database structure that would allow her, as well as others, to stock information about the reception of women's works. Thus, the electronic component of the project started with a simple Microsoft Access database, which Suzan sent from time to time to Petra Broomans, at the Department of Scandinavian at the University of Groningen, all the time hoping that no data would be lost during the electronic travels. During this period Suzan already realized the need for future expansion, and so much time went into discussing with IT developers the technical aspects of a more ambitious structure.

At this earliest stage, as part of her work on the project, Suzan also supervised two doctoral students' dissertation projects that contributed to the database: Lotte Jensen, who worked on Dutch female journalists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, provided important background information, while Alicia Montoya, who worked on the French dramatist Marie-Anne Barbier, documented the presence of works by French and English women authors in a corpus of eighteenth-century private library auction catalogues. It was

from this time that Alicia's involvement in the project--which was not yet known as such--started, and was to grow progressively from there.

During this period, too, Suzan co-organized the first of several conferences dealing directly with the question of how to write the history of women's writing from a transnational perspective. Held in 1998 at the headquarters of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences (KNAW), the conference *Writing the History of Women's Writing: Toward an International Approach* brought together scholars from the United States and Europe. In the concluding statements, Joep Leerssen, professor of European Literature at the University of Amsterdam, argued that literary history should be seen not so much "as part of the discipline of literary studies, but as part of cultural history." He concurred that it would be "refreshing . . . to look at literary history, including women's literary history, as a history of readers; for everyone agrees that women have been the prime *readers* in European literary history."¹ The publication of the conference proceedings in 2001 was followed, in 2004, by the first volume clearly identified with what would later be called the NEWW project: *I Have Heard about You: Foreign Women's Writing Crossing the Dutch Border: From Sappho to Selma Lagerlöf*, edited by Suzan together with Petra Broomans, Janet van der Meulen (medieval literature, Free University of Amsterdam) and Pim van Oostrum (Dutch literature, independent scholar).² Publication was still in the classic book form, partly in order not to scare away colleagues, some of whom were already more or less shocked by the large scope of the project and the electronic approach that we were in the process of adopting.

Digitizing and Network Building

But the digitizing went on. We were conscious of the fact that the questions raised in the *I Have Heard about You* volume necessitated the unearthing of countless pieces of information that had been lost, such as the references to women's novels contained in the eighteenth-century Dutch library catalogues studied by Alicia.³ In 2000 and 2001 Suzan was supported by two student assistants, Emmanuelle Radar and Martine Brunot, who did much of the work of systematically recording and entering those pieces of data into the database structure. With the expansion of the project's content, it also became necessary to put the database online. In April 2001, this milestone was reached. And from that moment, the university library of the University of Utrecht began to host the project. Several IT specialists were enthusiastic about a digitizing project initiated by scholars rather than IT specialists, since this seemed to them a guarantee that the field would benefit from it directly. In particular, IT specialists Ben Brandenburg and Nicolien Gouwenberg helped to develop an adequate format and interface,

and they contributed equally to the creation of an online publishing site that appeared useful for communicating preliminary results to the outside world.

We decided at this point that consultation of the database should be free, but that complete access to all the data should be restricted to password owners. (To obtain a password, please contact Suzan van Dijk, Suzan.vanDijk@let.uu.nl, providing some information about your research and your intended use of the data.) It is also possible for password owners to participate actively and to contribute to the virtual collaboratory: to this end, the password can be adapted so that they can also edit and enter new data. This, again, is possible after consultation with the database director, Suzan. We have not ruled out the possibility that, during one of the next phases of our project, this relatively open access to the database may change. We may opt to display less of the information contained in the records, or we may decide that consultation will no longer be free of charge for those not participating in the research program. This, of course, will also depend on the requirements of the institutions which will ultimately host the database (www.databasewomenwriters.nl) and companion website (www.womenwriters.nl).

Work on data entry has continued apace. It has proved to be rewarding and at the same time frustrating: rewarding because we were able to show that assumptions about the reception of women authors were often evidently false and in need of serious documentation; frustrating because of the repeated discovery that, although many colleagues appeared willing to contribute to this corpus, they could not always find the time to keep promises perhaps too easily made.... For this reason, Suzan decided to hire assistants again. With NWO funding, she found three qualified collaborators: Susanne Parren (Dutch literature), Johanneke Straasheijm (Scandinavian literature), and Els Naaijken of the Department of Italian at the University of Utrecht. Between 2004 and 2007, this most recent phase of the program involved carrying out a pilot project concentrating on the large-scale entry of data concerning the *Dutch* reception of Dutch as well as non-Dutch (primarily French, English, and German) authors. The pilot project demonstrated that, while the database has more than proved its worth (we were able, for example, to find more than 700 names of women publishing in Dutch before 1900). we will need to create a new version to respond to the new phase the project is currently entering.

While work continued on and in the database, at the same time Suzan was expanding her network of fellow researchers in women's literary history who had expressed interest in collaborating on a larger-scale project. Ever since 2000 at least, we had toyed with the idea of using the database not only as a much-needed repository of information, but also as a basis for

producing a new history of women's writing before 1900: new source materials would accumulate there that would enable (future) researchers to address new questions. We first formulated a large-scale research project with an explicit historiographical component in 2001 but we were unable to obtain funding for it from Dutch scientific organizations. (The 2004-2007 digitizing project, which was successful in obtaining funding from NWO, was in fact a downsized version of the original project, concentrated more exclusively on the technical component.) Following up on the idea of producing a new history of women's writing, in June 2005 Suzan invited a number of colleagues from across Europe, including Alicia, now a postdoc at Leiden University, and Anke Gilleir from the University of Leuven in Belgium (Department of German), for a meeting in Utrecht. There we created the first of the formal collaborative structures out of which NEWW was to grow. After meeting again and organizing a study day at Chawton House Library in the U.K. (March 2006), we decided to start preparing a proposal for submission to the Seventh Research Framework Program of the European Commission (FP7). An NWO grant was applied for, with the collaboration of colleagues from the Universities of Warwick, Southampton, Bochum, Lausanne, and Geneva, in order to strengthen and extend our network. We succeeded again in obtaining funding from NWO. We also organized and will be organizing, during the period 2007-2010, three yearly conferences on the subject of women writers and their international reception.

In February 2007, finally, in an effort to streamline our efforts, we established an executive committee of three (Suzan, Anke, and Alicia) that could meet on a regular basis to coordinate future NEWW efforts, and we created a quarterly NEWW newsletter, edited by Alicia, thereby giving a more official status to our group. Thus, from a shifting alliance of interested researchers, we are now turning ourselves into a more formally structured network, out of which an even more formalized consortium of participant universities will have to be constituted if we are to apply successfully for large-scale, European-wide funding for the next phase of the research program.

The Road Ahead

While much has been achieved--most importantly, the creation of the *Women Writers* database--many questions and challenges remain ahead. We still have to decide what shape our future history of European women's writing will take. Will it be a traditional series of edited volumes, perhaps suggesting a closure that will prove elusive? Or should we, rather, opt for a more interactive, World Wide Web-based history in the form of a textbase, allowing readers to make their own nonlinear way through the "chapters," in constant and immediate

contact with source material that can be accessed by clicking straight into the database? Of course, current discussions concerning literary historiography must also be taken into account, forcing us to rethink and break open accepted literary categories and (national and temporal) divisions.

The biggest question, however, is that of the funding and the continuity of the program. The increase in scale of the project now entails a substantial amount of administrative work, lobbying and patience, for which not everybody is equally well suited. Happily enough, universities and other institutions are keen on promoting themselves in the international marketplace and are often very helpful for that reason in applying for European funding. The other major question is that of the closure of the program. While it is conceivable that the program itself will have an “end” in the foreseeable future (most likely with the publication of our history of women’s writing), the database *WomenWriters* will ideally stay open and continue to be moderated, which implies that discussions raised by the newly written history can continue to be fed by supplementary source material. It implies also that Suzan, who has been the database and program coordinator and director until this point, will in the future hand over the management of the database to another colleague or, more probably, another institution. While that moment may seem far ahead right now, we are all aware of the fact that, having come this far, we will one day have to let go of “our” project, confident that it will be able to stand on its own and engage in the ongoing dialogue on women’s place in the literary field.

NOTES

¹ Joep Leerssen, “Women Authors and Literary History,” in *Writing the History of Women’s Writing: Toward an International Approach*, ed. Suzan van Dijk, Lia van Gemert, and Sheila Ottway (Amsterdam: K.N.A.W., 2001), pp. 253, 256.

² Suzan van Dijk, Petra Broomans, Janet van der Meulen, and Pim van Oostrum, eds., *I Have Heard About You: Foreign Women’s Writing Crossing the Dutch Border: From Sappho to Selma Lagerlöf*, trans. Jo Nesbitt (Hilversum: Verloren, 2004).

³ Alicia C. Montoya, “French and English Women Writers in Dutch Library Catalogues, 1700-1800: Some Methodological Considerations and Preliminary Results,” in *I Have Heard about You: Foreign Women’s Writing Crossing the Dutch Border: from Sappho to Selma Lagerlöf*, pp. 182-216.