

'Baard boven baard' : over het Nederlandse literaire en maatschappelijke leven 1945-1960

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SUMMARY

'A Bearded Hierarchy'

On Dutch Literary and Social Life 1945-1960

As recent Dutch literary discussions show, it is still a topical issue whether the obscurity of Dutch female writers should be seen as a consequence of the low quality of their texts, or of discriminatory processes in their reception. One frequently discussed example of this is prose from between the years 1945 and 1960. For Willem Frederik Hermans, Harry Mulisch and Gerard Reve – the three writers who are regarded as the most important – the notion of the 'Big Three' is used. Because no woman appears among the 'Big Three', and because there exists no notion of a 'Big Four' or 'Big Five' in which women are included, the peak of literary achievement is associated with male qualities.

Accordingly, a commonly aired opinion is 'that the women authors of that time were often simply not good enough' (Bukman/Dings 1997: 51) and that the oeuvre of Anna Blaman – the best-known woman author of the time – is a 'literary fossil' (Goedegebuure 1985). Many others, however, think that the marginality of Blaman and her female contemporaries 'has more to do with the phenomenon of how a literary canon is constructed than with their intrinsic lack of quality.' (Prinssen/Vermij 1991: 22)

This interesting conflict is taken as starting point for research at a meta-level: can ideas about men, women and gender be detected in the reception of the prose from between 1945 and 1960? If this is the case, how are such thoughts expressed, and are they connected with hierarchising assessments, are male writers and male achievements afforded a higher status than female ones?

It is quite clearly impossible to make a thorough analysis of fifty years of reception. Curiously enough, the participants in the discussion mentioned above agree that the women writers were quite well received by the literary reviewers. *If* they are regarded as discriminated against, this is supposed to occur in later phases of the reception process. As this supposition has never been verified, it is the first reception phase that will be investigated here. In addition, new information about this time can be gathered. In literary histories and other surveys we always read about the many rival literary magazines, the fight for the legacy of the important pre-war maga-

zine *Forum* and the clash between (provocative) literature and (respectable) society. What can we learn about the literary climate as seen from a gender analysis point of view? In what ways can it correct or refute the accepted historiographical view?

As regards the state of relevant research, several gaps are discussed. Literary gender research has up to present not answered the question as to whether gender mechanisms exist in any part of Dutch literary life between 1945 and 1960. Another problem is that publications concerning the gender bias of reviewers in other periods are quite limited, because they are mostly superficial (an exception is Van Boven 1992) and seldom take the rôle of male authors in consideration. Accurate research on reviews has been done within the field of the sociology of literature. But here, one shortcoming is that gender problems are unjustly overlooked.

For this reason, literary gender research and literary sociology will be combined in this book. The advantage of the first method is that it provides instruments for the analysis of the definitions of masculinity and femininity during a certain period. Gender is thus seen as a social and historically changing construction, not as an ontological entity. (Bosch, Butler, Meijer, Schabert, Scott, Sturkenboom etc.) It is stressed here that the construction of gender as a whole has to be scrutinized, i.e. the male, as well as the female part. This point of view has not yet been much applied in Dutch literary gender research. The advantage of the second method is that it permits exact analyses and that it concentrates on the process by which texts change in 'literature' (Bourdieu, Janssen, De Nooy, Van Rees etc.). The basic premise is therefore that both gender and literature are phenomena which are our own constructions.

As nothing is known about gender mechanisms in Dutch literary life between 1945 and 1960, it is difficult to decide what aspects of the literary reviews should be analysed. However, it is clear from existing publications that there were gender mechanisms in the social life of that time. These publications are therefore used – and complemented by my own analysis of relevant primary texts – to first of all describe the most significant gender opinions in social life. With Pierre Bourdieu I assume a structural resemblance ('homology') between social and literary life, so that the conclusions can be used as an indication as to where one should look for possible gender opinions in the literary reviews.

Secondly, the opinions of literary reviewers between 1945 and 1960 are analysed. This is done in a case-study, which permits exact analysis, both in a quantitative, but also a qualitative, i.e. historically specific, way. 'Literary reviewers' are defined as the group that produces reviews for daily and weekly publications.

Thirdly, opinions of other participants in the literary life of the time are scrutinized. Although they have different occupations and functions than reviewers have,

together they produce, in a certain time and place, a specific discourse and specific dominant definitions that shape reality (Bourdieu, Michel Foucault). The opinions of the second group can thus serve as a check on interpretations of the ideas of literary reviewers, and also provide an explanation and a background for notions or assumptions referred to by reviewers. The results of the chapter on Dutch social life are used to broaden the picture still further.

The purpose of this study is to put an end to the speculations about the non-existence of reviewers' hierarchising gender opinions between 1945-1960, and to shed light on fascinating, but overlooked, aspects of Dutch literary and social life during those years. My methods of analysis and their results will also be used to reflect more generally on gender discussions, literature, quality and ways of writing literary histories.

Chapter 2, 'Gender opinions in social life', deals with the three most important discussions – as indicated in the national bibliography, *Brinkman's Catalogus van Boeken* – in Dutch social life between 1945 and 1960: 1. The emancipation of women, 2. The 'nature' of men and women, 3. The place of men and women in social life (e.g. the construction of a female domain indoors and a male domain outdoors). Especially the first two discussions are, in part, treated too superficially in existing publications, but it is shown that they form an essential part of the gender opinions of the time.

All three discussions show a remarkable diachronic homogeneity, and also in synchronic respect the differences are quite small. The analysis also makes clear that they are interwoven and reinforce the gender definitions of the other two. They result in quite an asymmetrical order of both sexes, in spite of the central notion of 'different nature but equal importance' (*gelijkwaardigheid*). The men are seen as an unproblematic group that need not undergo a process of development, and possesses the right qualities. Women on the other hand are problematised, they are devised of as a group that still needs further development, that has to be guided, and whose intrinsic qualities are, to a certain extent, unsuitable and ephemeral. In short, a clear hierarchical distinction is made between both groups.

The problem tackled in Chapter 3, 'Questioning reviewers and their literary context', amounts to: how can these results help to interrogate literary reviewers and their literary context and to find out whether, and where, hierarchising gender opinions do occur there? The above-mentioned 'homology' between social and literary life means, firstly, that social and literary life have parallel structures, and thus some basic principles of gender order in the first one should return in the last one. Secondly, important opinions of social life – being the more dominant

and general field – will influence the opinions held in literary life, although in an indirect way. Influences are 'restructured' (Bourdieu), because each field is served by its own 'logic', has its own practices and interests. Therefore, the results of Chapter 2 can serve to formulate general questions, adapted to the specificities of literary life.

For the literary reviewers a case-study is developed, that contains the reviews of ten prose books by female writers, and ten by male writers. The female writers form a varied, heterogeneous corpus against which the corpus of male writers is matched. The criteria used for choosing the ten women writers and their books are: the size of their literary output, the number of literary activities, age, the ranking of the book within the oeuvre, the year of publication of the book (the ten books had to be spread over the period of 15 years), the number of reviews.

Women writers tend to be reviewed less frequently than their male colleagues, but this appears to be due to non-literary factors (cf. Janssen 1997b). As such factors are taken into consideration here, both groups in the corpus attract around 120 reviews (cf. the appendix). This means the analysis can concentrate on the contents, on the quality of the reviewers' attention.

Five aspects are investigated which allow one to check if reviewers (and also the other participants in literary life) tend, on the one hand, to see male and female authors as two different groups, and, on the other, maintain a hierarchical difference between both groups: 1. Differences in the extra-textual system of signals (for practical reasons only four aspects can be checked), 2. How, and how often the authors are linked with an area of Dutch literature, 3. How, and how often they are compared with other writers, 4. Remarks in the corpus on emancipation, (changing) achievements, quality, the 'ladies' novel', 5. Gendered qualities that authors and their books get attributed.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the first aspect, 'The extra-textual system of signals in the review corpus' (quantitative analysis). No differences at all are found between the female and the male group with regard to the number of reviews printed in the most important dailies and weeklies (Table 1) or the number of reviews written by the most important reviewers (Table 2). A significant difference is, however, found for the number of short reviews (Table 3), an insignificant difference exists for the number of shared reviews (Table 4). This means that reviewers show some hierarchising gender opinions, but they do not express themselves as strongly as they could have done. Maybe reviewers' discrimination after 1945 really will, in fact, prove to be more or less non-existent.

Chapter 5 investigates 'Links with a part of Dutch literature in the review corpus' (quantitative analysis, Table 5). A significant difference between the female and the male group is found for the number of links with their own sex ('She is one of the

most interesting female novel writers', etc.), which means that women authors are seen as a special group. A marginally significant difference is found for the total number of links for both groups, which is a powerful indication that female authors are not seen as potential rivals of others, but as isolated persons who have no place in any network. This seems to imply that reviewers consider the women as less central to Dutch literature than they regard the men.

An insignificant difference is found with regard to the number of innovative statements ('She/He is a talented representative of the new generation' etc.). Again, the reviewers exhibit hierarchising gender opinions, but not in all respects.

In Chapter 6, 'The status of women writers and men writers in the literary context', we have checked if these interpretations are corroborated by a first analysis of the literary context of the reviewers. Is a difference between men and women constructed here, and is it linked to the assessment that the men writers are a more central part of literature and have a higher status? Three aspects are considered here: 1. The way the notion 'literary generations' is dealt with, 2. The use of so-called generic terms, 3. Conceptions of male and female authors. The conclusion arrived at is that women writers are easily overlooked. Moreover, parallel conceptions exist of the intellectual and/or writing man versus the non-intellectual 'housewife writer' (Haasse 1957). Thus, the female authors are estimated as less professional, the male authors are seen as the centre and the most important part of Dutch literature. This confirms my former interpretations.

Chapter 7 is devoted to 'Comparisons with other authors in the review corpus' (quantitative analysis). By way of comparison an author is again seen as part of a network, but he or she is also more exactly placed in a 'literary frame of reference' (Rosengren 1983) and thus classified and valued. Here we have examined: 1. The number of comparisons for the female and male group, 2. The number of comparisons with female writers, 3. The number of comparisons with international writers (which implies a high praise). The first aspect shows a slight difference in percentage, but it is not significant. For the other two aspects a significant difference is found. Further analysis reveals that the reviewers use a three-tier model. There are three hierarchically ranked frames of reference: the first, and lowest, consists of national women writers; the second of national men writers; the third and highest of international men writers. This again confirms my former conclusion that the reviewers see male authors as the most important and central part of (Dutch) literature.

Chapter 8, 'Literary achievements and innovation in the literary context', investigates if the other participants in literary life distinguish between female and male authors, with regard to their achievements and innovative force. They turn out to

be firmly convinced that literature by women has, on the one hand, because of the social emancipation, developed, but, on the other hand, it does (still) not reach the level of literature written by men. High quality, leadership, innovation and genius are defined as masculine qualities. This analysis makes it all the more surprising that the innovative links with a part of Dutch literature in the review corpus (Chapter 5) did not show a significant difference between the male and female group. It is therefore to be expected that reviewers also use other methods to express their ideas on this subject.

Chapter 9 is a 'Digression on gender opinions, language and reality', and discusses more detailed some questions that concern gender as a social and historically changing construction and language as producing the meaning, status and reality of phenomena.

Chapter 10 deals with 'The "ladies' novel" in the review corpus and the literary context' (qualitative analysis). The notion 'ladies' novel', that was created in the first quarter of the 20th century, soon no longer referred to a genre, but received the meaning 'poor literature written by women'. In the review corpus, the concept is therefore used in praise of a woman author by contrasting her work with it, and as censure should her work be identified with it. In this way, female authors are again seen as a special and problematical group and associated with poor quality. In the rest of literary life the same view exists, but 'ladies' novel' turns out to also mean 'outdated literature'. The conclusion here is that women and tradition – and indirectly men and innovation – are also linked by the notion 'ladies' novel'; i.e. this is a second method reviewers use to express their views on innovation.

In Chapter 11 'Gender-marked qualities in the review corpus and in the literary context' are investigated (qualitative analysis). Both reviewers and other participants in literary life believe that certain qualities of authors and texts are gender-marked. They identify mainly four pairs of male and female qualities respectively: 1. A distant and compact way of writing versus a detailed and elaborate way of writing, 2. Compositional force and (self-)control versus a lack of these qualities, 3. Reflection, critical analysis and a rational mentality, versus tenderness, sensitivity and an emotional mentality, 4. Hardness, aggression and strength versus softness, weakness and compliance.

The four male qualities are generally seen as being the better ones, and as being in accordance with literary norms, which is not the case for the female qualities. The last two pairs of qualities are linked most strongly with the contemporary gendernorms in social life. As the two female qualities were valued there quite highly, in literary life they are not as severely criticized as the first two female qualities. Nevertheless, in literary terms the male qualities remain superior, especially because

they are, together with the first male quality (a distant and compact way of writing), identified with modernity and innovation. So here we find a third way in which reviewers define innovation as masculine. All in all, this goes to show that reviewers have an equally definite opinion on this subject, as the one which has become established for the other participants in literary life.

The final conclusions of Chapter 12 thus state that combining literary gender analysis with literary sociology is a fruitful enterprise, one which fills some important gaps in both methods. The supposition that women prose writers between 1945 and 1960 were not 'discriminated against' in the first reception phase is proved false. The double, thorough approach of quantitative and qualitative analysis of my case-study has shown that reviewers express hierarchising gender opinions in a set of different ways. Although they did not use all means, as the quantitative analysis has shown, all in all they show strongly gendered convictions as to the central, or marginal, rôle of authors as well as with regard to the literary quality of their products, and the qualities authors and their work possess. The recurring pattern is that writers are divided into a male and a female group and paired up with a high, and low, value respectively. Finally, 'real' literature, 'real' authorship, modernity and masculinity are interwoven: what is literary is defined as *per se* masculine, non-literary aspects and phenomena are defined as feminine. As this all fits in exactly with the hierarchising gender opinions that were found for the other participants in literary life, this interpretation has definitively been confirmed.

It is remarkable that the clash between (provocative) literature and (respectable) society, which is a recurrent item in literary history, is non-existent from a gender viewpoint. Both in literary and in social life the same kind of gendered definitions and norms are produced. Even the young and so-called revolutionary participants in literary life, who are known as 'the founders of postwar literature' (Hoffland/Rooduijn 1997), overlook female authors, believe in 'housewife writers', think that male authors are better, assume gendered qualities, etc.

With regard to more general aspects of the methods employed and their results, it is firstly argued that it is surprising to again and again see the argument of quality in today's discussions of male and female authors. As this is an obsolete argument – also for those who do not use discourse analysis or literary sociology – it deserves critical reflection. Secondly, the problem is discussed that historiography judges innovation as very important and tends to repeat the constructions that were produced in the first reception phase (cf. Gaiser 1993). For the years 1945-1960 this is also the case. In that time modernity/innovation was seen as masculine, by defining three of the four key male qualities as modern and the contrasting female qualities as outdated. In addition, one male quality – hardness, aggression, strength – was

linked especially with the new, modern prose. Therefore, hardboiled, disillusioned prose was regarded as the major modern development, and it was linked with masculinity. In today's historiography we still find this same construction applied. This means that scientists have let themselves be guided by 'the plots that the players on the literary field have themselves planned' (Van den Akker/Dorleijn 1996: 17) instead of describing and analysing this process from an independent standpoint.

How can the gender bias of earlier times be removed? It is insufficient to add a sprinkling of female authors to the existing picture, as was still supposed in a recent discussion by literary scientists (cf. Bekkering/Gelderblom 1997). The gender opinions and hierarchical gender order of the years 1945-1960 need to be described, being a fundamental structure of literary life. In the words of Til Brugman, the whole struggle that produces 'a bearded hierarchy', i.e. a hierarchy dominated by the male of the species, with femininity as something of secondary importance. Moreover, the conviction that male writers form the touchstone, the standard and are located at the centre of literature, can no longer be maintained with any credibility. The integration of both sexes at a level of equality has become a necessity. This book lays the foundation for such an approach.

Translated by Eric Dickens