

Male and female authors in the Dutch postwar literary field and their participation in literary magazines

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Introduction

In the Dutch literature of today female authors are the public's favorites. The popularity with their readers and the impressive sales figures of their novels give rise to discussion. Do male and female authors participate differently in the literary field? And if so, how and why?

My study focuses on the participation of writers in the Dutch postwar literary field, with special attention to the gender-differences within such participation. My research is focused on the last three decades in particular. In this period there have been major changes in society regarding the position of women. Education and career opportunities have improved significantly for Dutch women since the sixties.

Like society in general, the literary field has also changed. Institutions such as literary magazines, publishing houses and literary prizes gain or lose influence in time. In the last decade for example, two major literary prizes have appeared, sponsored by bookstores. Besides a considerable amount of prize money, these prizes generate a lot of publicity. As the winner of this literary prize an author receives much attention in the press and the numbers of copies sold of his or her work also increases.

To gain attention it is also important that new work of writers is reviewed by critics of daily and weekly papers. Critics write about new books and give a judgement which is highly respected and reproduced by other institutions such as bookstores, literary juries and academic criticism.

It appears that writers who are active on several fronts receive more attention from literary critics than those who only publish new literary work and do not engage in other activities besides writing books. Critics also tend to be able to place these more active writers in literary movements. Authors who engage in extra activities increase the amount of relations they have in the literary field – their so-called social capital. By writing articles and giving interviews, authors are also able to change opinions about their primary work.

What are secondary activities?

There is a wide range of literary activities in which authors can participate besides writing books. These include: publication of prose or poetry in literary magazines, critical writing for daily and weekly papers and literary periodicals, membership of a literary group or movement, and publishing work in collaboration with other like-minded writers.

These secondary activities can include also more organizational roles such as editor of a literary magazine or membership of a jury for awarding literary prizes.

In my research the assumed coherence between sideline activities and the literary success of an author is placed in a gender perspective. Despite their popularity with their readers, for instance female authors are less likely to be named in literary retrospectives or generally regarded as prominent literary figures. Earlier researches on this subject show that it is impossible to point out only one cause of this inequality. It appears to be a complicated matter.

One of the causes, however, can be found in the nature of the participation of female writers in secondary activities within the Dutch literary field of the last few decades. Research on earlier periods of Dutch literary field has shown that female authors *in the past* didn't group themselves like their male colleagues often do. They also tend to take less part in boards of literary magazines or other literary organizations. Female

authors seem to operate more often on their own compared to their male colleagues. This makes them more easily left out in the overview of literary history.

Gender division

Before taking a closer look at literary sideline activities of male and female authors, the first step is to gain insight into the gender-division of writers in the postwar Dutch literary field. I have made a survey of all authors who published a new work of prose or poetry in the Netherlands in six randomly chosen years from 1947 to 1997.

Table 1

| <i>year</i> | <i>male authors</i> | <i>female authors</i> | <i>total¹</i> |
|-------------|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1947 | 205 (76%) | 63 (24%) | 268 |
| 1957 | 187 (75%) | 61 (25%) | 248 |
| 1967 | 151 (76%) | 47 (24%) | 198 |
| 1977 | 256 (73%) | 93 (27%) | 349 |
| 1987 | 316 (73%) | 114 (27%) | 430 |
| 1997 | 279 (65%) | 148 (35%) | 427 |

Looking at the total number of authors publishing in each year, the number of authors declined from 268 in 1947 to 248 in 1957 and 198 in 1967. However, in the last 30 years the total number has increased compared to the first three decades.

When we take a look at the number of male and female authors who published in the selected years, it seems that the genderproportions have remained fairly constant in the period 1947 to 1987.

¹ This is the number of authors who published a new work of prose or poetry in the randomly chosen years. The numbers are based upon the catalogue of Dutch and Flemish publishers from which it is possible to select the authors who have published fiction (short stories or novels) or poetry in a certain year. No translated works or children's books were taken into account.

The percentage of female authors remains virtually the same until the nineties: approximately a quarter of the writers are female. Only in the last decade has the percentage increased to 35 percent. Compared to developments in society this growth of female authors in the literary field is a recent phenomenon and not yet in keeping with the proportion of women's activities in other areas of society. For instance, for the last decade 50 percent of the students at Dutch universities are female.

To gain an insight into the position of female authors in the literary field, I have focused on their participation in secondary literary activities. In particular, for this paper I have taken a closer look at differences in participation of male and female authors in literary magazines over the last three decades; the seventies, eighties and nineties.

A writer can participate in literary magazines in different ways. First, it is possible to publish new work of prose or poetry in a literary magazine. Writers often publish their work first in a magazine before being selected by a publisher.

Second, literary magazines give authors the opportunity to publish non-fictional work, such as essays, or to debate with other authors in public. An author could also be one of the initiators of the founding of a new magazine or take a position in the editorial board of an existing magazine.

Periodicals have occupied an important place in the postwar Dutch literary field. The primary works of authors are often classified in connection with the literary magazine in which they were first published. Literary magazines are published by literary publishing houses. These magazines are not profitable, but give the publisher prestige in the literary field. To compensate for the financial loss, a part of the literary magazines receive endowment based on their quality by an organisation called: The Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature. For my research I have selected the magazines which receive this endowment.

It takes a more pro-active approach for a new author to publish in a literary magazine compared to authors who have already built up a social network in the literary field and are often asked to contribute work to magazines. This is the reason why I have made another selection: I focus only on the secondary activities of authors who are less than ten

years into their literary career (in other words, who published their first book less than ten years before the year being researched).

Focusing on these writers, whom I consider as new authors, I collected their contributions to literary magazines for a period of five years around the sample years 1977, 1987 and 1997.

Table 2: The gender division of new authors² and their participation in literary magazines

| | 1977 | | 1987 | | 1997 | |
|--------|----------|---------------|----------|-----------------|----------|-----------------|
| | I | II | I | II | I | II |
| male | 84 (79%) | 37 (93%) | 103(72%) | 34 (72%) | 82 (64%) | 23 (59%) |
| female | 23 (21%) | 3 (7%) | 41(28%) | 13 (28%) | 45 (36%) | 16 (41%) |
| total | 107 | 40 = 37% | 144 | 47 = 33% | 127 | 39 = 31% |

I: number of 'new' authors in data file

II: number of these authors with publications in literary magazines

The figures and the numbers in Table 2 show great differences between the three years. In the first period only a small number of the female authors in my datafile published in literary magazines. Two of them were also members of the board of a prestigious magazine and are still well known as highly reputed authors.

In 1987 the proportions of male and female authors and the participation of these groups in literary magazines are equal. But the number of male and female authors are not equally distributed over the magazines. One literary magazine is set up by writers who are affiliated with the feminist/lesbian movement and this magazine has only female contributors as well as a completely female editorial staff. On the other hand the four literary magazines in which mostly male writers publish have the highest prestige in the

literary field. These magazines get the highest endowment of the Foundation for the production and translation of Dutch literature.

Female authors in the eighties and nineties seem to have gained influence in literary magazines. The percentage of women writers participating in literary magazines increased from 28 percent in 1987 to 41 percent in 1997.

It is remarkable, however, that in the same period the number of male authors participating in literary magazines decreased: from 37 in 1977 down to 23 in 1999.

When we look at the differences between the three years, it is also remarkable that in 1997 the participation of female authors is proportionally larger than expected by the proportion of male and female authors: 41 percent of the female authors published in literary magazines while women authors as a whole formed 36 percent of the total group of new authors.

We can conclude that in the last decade of this period women publish more often in literary magazines than their male contemporaries.

I would like to put this remarkable conclusion into some broader perspective. About one-third of the new authors in general publish in literary magazine, although this percentage declines in this three decades: from 37 percent to 31 percent. I have also taken a look at the average number of publications in literary magazines and this is also declining from 4 in 1977 to 3 in 1997.

It looks as though the position of the literary magazines in the literary field has changed. Fewer authors use literary magazines as a medium to publish their work. And even when they do, they publish less frequently. It seems that literary magazines have lost some of its prestige they had in the seventies.

Taking this into account some questions about the participation of female authors in literary magazines are put in another perspective:

² With the term “new authors” I refer to the writers who have published their first literary work within less than 10 years before the year being researched.

Is it possible that female authors now get more opportunities to publish in literary magazines because the position of this institution in the literary field has changed and indeed, has diminished?

Perhaps the statistical equivalence gained by female authors over the last three decades isn't as impressive as we thought at first sight?