

### **Women's writing and 'the material turn'<sup>1</sup>**

*Economic Imperatives for Women's Writing in Early Modern Europe* / edited by Carme Font Paz and Nina Geerdink. – Boston: Brill, 2018, Series *Women Writers in History*, Vol 2, 262 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-38299-2 (hb), ISBN 978-90-04-38302-9 (e-book)

After having organized a panel about economic imperatives for women's writing in early modern Europe within the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual SHARP Conference in Dublin, Ireland in the period of June 26-29, 2012, Carme Font Paz and Nina Geerdink sign the proceedings published in 2018 as the editors, emphasizing in the Acknowledgements the continuous support of the *Women Writers in History* editorial board, as well as the importance of the volume's diversity in comparative scope and presented case studies.<sup>2</sup> Carme Font Paz, English literature lecturer and Research Associate for Medieval and Renaissance studies, and Nina Geerdink, Assistant Professor and specialist of early modern Dutch literature, besides the "Introduction" and Bibliography with Index, managed to edit and publish nine extensive essays which argue and contribute on the matters of the professionalization of the women's literary activities, focusing on the problem of intertwined relations of patronage, authorial reputation and the societal and economic context from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in Europe. The question of the 'material turn' and literary professionalization in women's writing, often disregarded and insufficiently elaborated from a comparative European perspective, as well as discussions on professionalization and patronage as touchstones, come to light in this book.

What seems common for this newly edited book, besides its subject, is also a variety of perspectives, representations of women writer's reputation, and sophisticated documentary approaches resulting in extensive bibliographies. Each chapter represents a different case study analyzing women's financial gain, mostly framed as exceptional, and showing, according to the editors' conclusions, that precise distinction between patronage and professionalization is in most cases – impossible. Exploring the economic dynamics of a woman writer, this volume tends to analyze and provoke the relations between the personal,

societal, ideological and political factors that shaped literary careers of women who took their profession as a social and cultural mission.

The volume opens with the essay entitled “Women Authors’ Reputation and Its Relationship to Money Earned: Some Early French Writers as Examples” by Suzan van Dijk, a senior researcher at Huygens Institute for the History of Netherlands and creator of the on-line database *New Approaches to European Women’s Writing* (NEWW). The chapter deals with the reception of several early modern French women writers and their presence in inventories and bio-bibliographical compilations, a genre highly popular in France in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. Carefully going through statistics and detailed corpus analysis of French women writers mentioned in the selected famous inventories, the author tries to connect the facts with the reputation these women had. Analyzing the male discourse on women’s authorship, the author leaves the discussion open, not being able to draw firm conclusions, among all, due to the (un)stable criterion of ‘normality’ as a product of a certain epoch.

The third chapter “Words for Sale: Early Modern Spanish Women’s Literary Economy” by Nieves Baranda, specialist in medieval and early modern Spanish women’s writing and a leader of the research digital humanities project BIESES, provides a Spanish perspective of proactive women in literature. Baranda considers the author Ana Caro “the most outstanding example of Spanish *professional woman writer* of the period” (p. 43) making an allusion to her suggestive surname [*caro* – meaning *expensive* in Spanish] connected to her success. Interestingly, besides the aristocratic exclusiveness and quiet monastery writing activities of the nuns, Baranda mentions criteria of knowledge and wisdom as key passes for successful early modern Spanish woman’s literary career.

Marie Nedregotten Sørbo, professor of English literature at Volda University College in Norway, discusses the first considered professional poet of any gender in Denmark-Norway – Dorothe Engelbretsdatter (1634-1716). Simultaneously with Aphra Ben in England, Dorothe Engelbretsdatter argued for status and recognition, as well as for publication and money. Fighting against all the controversies, Sørbo discusses in her essay “Fighting for Her Profession: Dorothe Engelbretsdatter’s Discourse of Self-Defence” that Engelbretsdatter succeeded in her battle by reducing the accusations of her opponents *ad absurdum*. A Woolfian claim, two and a half centuries before Virginia Woolf, that financial security is key to the creative process, encouraged Engelbretsdatter to fight her battles, even today in bookstores.

“Writing for Patronage or Patronage for Writing? Two Case Studies in Seventeenth-Century and Post-Restoration Women’s Poetry in Britain” is the fifth chapter attributed to one of the editors of the book, Carme Font Paz. As indicated by the title, the author presents case studies of two female English poetesses in the seventeenth century, Aemilia Lanyer and Ann Yerbury. Reading closely their poetry, Font Paz scrutinizes the used rhetorical strategies within the framework of the market and patronage on which the poets’ (in)visibility depended.

The second editor of the volume, Nina Geerdink, relying on the topic of patronage, follows with an essay entitled “Possibilities of Patronage: The Dutch Poet Elisabeth Hoofman and Her German Patrons”. Geerdink presents a case study on a Dutch poet Elisabeth Hoofman (1664-1736) and becomes the first author in the edition to define precisely the concept of patronage and its connection to modern authorship while making a comparison between the Dutch Republic and the practices in other parts of Europe. Geerdink considers patronage a reciprocal form of exchanging profit between the author and the benefactor, someone from the higher class, whereas literary ‘products’ make part of this reciprocity. Geerdink, as all other authors in the book, through complex archival research, gives a meticulous literary biography of the analyzed woman writer, making it a valuable feature of the volume.

Professor for French and Italian literature at the University of Augsburg in Germany, Rotraud von Kulesa, is the author of chapter seven, entitled “Between Patronage and Professional Writing. The Situation of Eighteenth Century Women of Letters in Venice: The Example of Luisa Bergalli Gozzi”. The essay argues about an Italian female intellectual and prolific author, Luisa Bergalli Gozzi, in relation to ‘material implications’ and transition from patronage to professionalization. Von Kulesa provides a solid cognitive background, presenting the eighteenth-century Venetian literary landscape as a birthplace of professional writing in order to expand further on the literary activity of Luisa Bergalli Gozzi, her husband, as well as their social decline. Von Kulesa reveals a tragic example of literary exclusion in the rising bourgeois society.

One among the most interesting and turbulent case studies is presented in chapter eight by Irene Zanini-Cordi. The associate professor of Italian studies at Florida State University, specialized in critical theory, in the essay “From Queen’s Librarian to Voice of the Neapolitan Republic: Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel” explores the literary production and tragic life of an Italian poetess, translator, journalist and Queen Maria Carolina’s librarian – Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel who was, due to severe accusations for Jacobinism, publicly hanged in August 1799 in Naples. Pimentel is depicted as a woman editor, the first to reconstruct an

Italian literary female genealogy by publishing an extensive volume of poetry of all women poets from Renaissance until her days. The author puts emphasis on Pimentel's political and ideological background, social idealism and her commitment to literary work, summarizing it in the following fragment, which could stand, taken in its profound meaning, as the core question of the volume:

What are the economic dynamics at play for an eighteenth-century woman who considers her writing a profession, a cultural and social mission, not just a personal, albeit educational, pastime? What influence does the economic factor have on her career and life in general? Assuming the validity of the assertion "the personal is political", and since the political almost always entails economics, one can posit also the validity of the statement "the personal is politics and economics". The destiny of an eighteenth-century Italian woman was still mostly a matter of politics and economics (p. 171).

Since many women authors, such as Bergalli Gozzi or Pimentel, not only wrote poetry and fiction, but also translated and were engaged in publishing, chapter nine informs the reader of another woman author focusing on her translational activity, which has not been properly researched yet. Essay "[S]ome Employment in the Translating Way": Economic Imperatives in Charlotte Lennox's Career as a Translator", a study by Marianna D'Ezio, who holds a PhD in English literature, interprets the case of Charlotte Lennox (1730?-1804), the author of the successful novel *The Female Quixote* published anonymously in 1752. What D'Ezio attempts to point out is that failure to achieve literary independence had its roots in the rough patronage system of Lennox's time which affirms that overcoming the limitations of economic imperatives was not reciprocal with overcoming the imposed limitations on the author's sex.

The closing chapter ten is entitled "Beating the Odds: Sophie Albrecht (1756-1840), a Successful Woman Writer and Publisher in Eighteenth-Century Germany" by Berit C.R. Royer, a German-American literary specialist who also published a dissertation on Sophie Albrecht – a German writer, editor, publisher and actress. Being named 'the German Sappho' and the only German woman writer who had witnessed the publication of her complete literary work during her lifetime, according to the author, as well as Charlotte Lennox, Sophie Albrecht stands as an example of a successful "woman writer struggling to find a niche in the male domain of published literature" (p. 195). Speaking about this renaissance-like figure in

German literary history, Royer distinguishes clearly the main factors which influenced Sophie Albrecht's career: family origin, educational background, career choices and decisions like networking with the equally minded. As the author concludes, having experienced hardship in her life and career, Sophie Albrecht's "effort to aim for modern democratic citizenship concepts for women collided with the immense discriminatory structure [against them] in society (p. 249)."

Besides being valuable for future researches within the socio-ideological context of women's writing closely intertwined with the personal element, with its clear and precise language, the book "Economic Imperatives for Women's Writing in Early Modern Europe" could also be read outside the confines of academia. The authorial strategy of mutual citing and intertextual bonding within the texts which mutually communicate makes "Economic Imperatives for Women's Writing in Early Modern Europe" neither a monograph nor conference proceedings, but a genre in between. However, the usage of the terms 'economy' and 'economic' within the case studies in the book does not strictly refer to economy in the modern global sense – as a scientific discipline, but rather as a figure of speech meaning 'management of material resources' or, tracing it back to its etymology, as 'household management' or, even more specific, *a room of one's own to maintain* (p. 248). With nicely distinguished parallels inside a large comparative European scope, the authors form a web of tentative studies of women writers in the process of transgressing the socially imposed limitations by making profit out of their literary activities and improving their economic status. The availability of this kind of co-working and comparative research gathered in one book, however, rates "Economic Imperatives for Women's Writing in Early Modern Europe" very highly.

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