NEWW: New Approaches to European Women's Writing (before 1900)

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Dr Suzan van Dijk from the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands is currently preparing a large European research project on the writings of European women authors before 1900, and in particular the links and influences between them as they are to be found on a European scale, including those between the Western and the Eastern parts of the continent.

This project, entitled *NEWW: New Approaches to European Women's Writing (before 1900)*, emerged from a series of preliminary projects which have been financed by the NWO (Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research) since 1997. Those earlier projects were smaller in scope and investigated in particular the literary relations between France and the Netherlands, as well as compiling a large-scale inventory of the Dutch reception of European women's writing. It includes an on-line database that documents the reception of these writings and hyperlinks them to primary texts, translations, comments, etc. as far as they exist on the Internet. Otherwise, references are provided to classic paper versions. This NEWW project responds to an increasing interest among feminist scholars in investigating the writings of female authors before 1900 and in situating them within the cultural context of the time of their production.

An Example: Russia

Taking Russia as a case study, the ensuing explanations exemplify this approach. In the domain of Russian studies, the interest in women's writing manifests itself in a number of publications that have appeared in recent years. They include studies on particular women writers, investigations of the socio-cultural background that affected female authorship, as well as anthologies and dictionaries providing essential information on the lives and works of various of female authors.¹

However, there are still many Russian women authors who have not yet received proper scholarly attention. A look at the *Bibliograficheskii slovar' russkikh pisatel'nits* (Bibliographical dictionary of Russian women writers) by the nineteenth-century philologist Nikolai Golitsyn (1836–1893), first published in 1889, gives an idea of the number of such writings.² It lists over 1200 entries on writings by Russian women, most of them dating from the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Academic studies about these works, however, have appeared on only a fraction of them. An elementary problem for researchers interested in studying any of these writings is that this bibliographical dictionary is only available in very few university libraries. In addition, even scholars who do have access often face difficulties when they obtain copies of the writings mentioned there. In many Russian libraries it is not permitted to make photocopies of texts that appeared before 1900; texts cannot be ordered via interlibrary loans, nor can they be studied anywhere other than in the respective library.

Some feminist scholars have therefore endeavoured to make such works available to a larger public. An encouraging example is Professor Elisabeth Cheauré from the Department of Slavonic Studies at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau in Germany. In close cooperation with the library of the Moscow State University, she has established an extensive collection that holds photocopies of primary works by Russian women authors, secondary literature, as well as theoretical studies on gender issues in Russia. Interested scholars may order photocopies of these works, which are not usually available via interlibrary loan; an on-line edition of the collection is also in preparation. Other, minor digitalizing projects in recent years have attempted to achieve similar objectives, for instance *The Corinna Project* by Dr Ursula Stohler hosted at the Department of Russian Studies at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom.

Once works by Russian women writers have come to the attention of a larger number of scholars, it might be interesting to investigate how these Russian women authors have responded to each other. The following example of two Russian women authors, Anna Volkova (1781–1834) and Alexandra Khvostova (1767–1853), illustrates this problem.³ Scholars have only recently begun to pay attention to them; however, the mutual impact of each other's work has not yet been explored. What is indeed of particular interest is the fact that Volkova openly acknowledged the importance of one of Khvostova's works. In 1807 Volkova wrote a poetic version of an essay published by Khvostova several years previously, in 1796. In a footnote Volkova refers to the original text and asks its author for permission to use it as a basis of her own text.⁴ It may well be fruitful to study the extent to which such links existed between works of women authors, in particular lesser known ones, who wrote in the same language.

Furthermore, the influence of texts written by women from different cultures could well prove intriguing. One may assume, for instance, that the meditative idylls by the French seventeenth-century woman poet Antoinette Deshoulières (ca. 1638–1694) had a greater impact on Sentimentalist Russian women's writing at the end of the eighteenth century than has been seen so far.⁵ This type of interrelationships between the writings of women from different countries will have to be investigated in order to build a complete picture of the cultural context in which women's writing took place.

It could be useful to focus on specific cultural themes that predominated during a particular period and to which women writers from different countries seemed to

respond. Such themes should be situated on a transnational or a European level. An example might be the question of natural rights. This is a subject that women such as the French political activist and writer Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793), as well as the Russian Sentimentalist poet Mariia Bolotnikova (published in 1817, dates of birth and death unknown) addressed in their writings. However, it has never been the topic of an exhaustive, cross-cultural study.⁶

The Near Future

In order to examine transnational cultural themes that were relevant for women's writing before 1900, scholars from different countries will have to cooperate.

The electronic database created by van Dijk provides an ideal foundation from which further work can develop. Upcoming research activities should indeed have the benefit of all relevant online resources—databases and collections of texts, such as those by Cheauré and Stohler—which can be linked to the WomenWriters database. The whole structure will serve as a 'virtual collaboratory' where researchers of women's literary history can 'meet' and share their materials. This is of course particularly relevant for the comparative study of reception of one and the same writer in different countries, as has been shown for the case of George Sand in nineteenth-century Germany, Russia, the Czech lands and Greece.⁷ In the course of 2008 van Dijk and her team are preparing an international research project involving a number of researchers from various countries, for which European funding will be requested. If you are interested in this project, please do not hesitate to contact us, either via the website www.womenwriters.nl, or by writing to Stohler or van Dijk.

More information

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◆ Notes

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4. Khvostova, 'Ruchek', in *Otryvki*, 31–48; Volkova, 'Ruchek', 74–87.

5. Antoinette du Ligier de La Garde Deshoulières, *Poésies de Mme Deshoulières: Nouvelle édition* (Poems by Mme Deshoulières: New edition), Bruxelles, 1740.

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