

WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN THE DUTCH REPUBLIC IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY*

Lotte Jensen

In a late eighteenth-century Dutch dictionary the following definition is given to a journalist:

"It takes a man with outstanding knowledge and intelligence to meet all the requirements of a good journalist because [...] only he can adequately judge the recent developments in the arts and sciences."¹

The entry *Journalist* is not to be found in the earlier editions of this Dutch dictionary, and this shows that a new profession had come into being. Journalism gradually developed into a new profession during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Due to the growing importance of the periodical press it became a new way of making a living and this profession opened up new means of spreading ideas about society, politics and everyday life. The earliest journalists also included a number of women, although this is not obvious from the definition quoted from the Dutch dictionary, which only mentions men. Although the number of female journalists was limited, their activities often attract the attention of present-day historians, because these

* I am grateful to Alicia Montoya for correcting my English.

1. "Uit deeze korte schets der voornaamste plichten van een Journalist, en der nodige hoedanigheden om dezelve te volbrengen, blykt, in de eerste plaats, dat daar toe een man van uitneemende kunde en doordringend vernuft vereischt wordt, gemerkt de zoodaanige alleen in staat en bevoegd kan wezen, uit hoofde van zyne uitgebreide en groote kundigheden in de kunsten en wetenschappen, om over de vorderingen, welke daar in van tyd tot tyd gemaakt worden, te kunnen oordeelen." From: J.A. de Chalmot. *Vervolg op M. Noël Chomel. Algemeen Huishoudelijk-, Natuur-, Zedekundig- en Konstwoordenboek* [...]. Amsterdam, 1878-1792, part V, 1790, p. 3642.

women accomplished something extraordinary: they entered a profession that was dominated by men and this offered them the possibility of reflecting upon public debates and influencing public opinion.

In this paper I will focus on Dutch women's activity in the press during the eighteenth century. First I will offer a survey of their activities and then I will compare the Dutch situation with the situation in other European countries. I will argue that it can be fruitful for future research not only to concentrate on the development of female journalism in individual countries, but also to approach female journalism from a broader, international perspective.²

Anna Margareta von Bragner was probably the first Dutch woman to have worked in journalism. Very few facts are known about her life. She was born in 1701 or 1702 and most certainly died in 1772. She moved to Sweden, because of her marriage to the successful Swedish publisher Petter Momma, and this probably made it possible for her to enter journalism. In 1738 she founded a weekly magazine entitled *Samtal emellan Argi Skugga och en obekant Fruentimbers Skugga* (*A Dialogue between the Shadow of the Dead Argus and the Shadow of an Unknown Woman*) and between 1742 and 1752 she was editor-in-chief of the *Stockholm Gazette*. Both of these works were published by her husband, who had learned the art of printing in the Netherlands (where he also probably met Von Bragner). However, many of these facts remain uncertain. It is for example uncertain whether Von Bragner was Dutch, and the grounds on which these journalistic works are ascribed to her are even more hypothetical. They were usually ascribed to her because of the many spelling and grammar mistakes.³

To find more reliable traces of Dutch female journalism, we have to go to the second half of the eighteenth century. During the 60s and

2. Suzan van Dijk has also argued in favour of an international perspective in women's press history. See especially her "Vrouwen en hun Republiek der Letteren. Internationale contacten tussen schrijfsters vóór de feministische golven," *Tijdschrift voor vrouwenstudies* 17 (1996), pp. 235-253.

3. See Margareta Berger. *Pennskaft. Kvinliga journalister i svensk dagspress 1690-1975*. Stockholm 1977, p. 22.

the 70s of the century the well-known novelist Betje Wolff (1738-1804) contributed to many weeklies, but she was never the founder or editor of any of them. Twice did she try to found a periodical, but in both cases her manuscripts remained unpublished.⁴ Only in the 80s and 90s of the eighteenth century do we find women as editors-in-chief or as co-editors of periodicals and newspapers. Such was, for example, the poet and novelist Margaretha Cambon-Van der Werken (1734-1800), who founded a periodical that especially targeted the female readership. She translated a German women's periodical into Dutch and called it *De algemeene oeffenschool der vrouwen* (*The General School for Ladies*). It was a translation of *Damen-Journal, von einer Damen-Gesellschaft* (1784), a periodical written and published by the literary hack Franz Rudolph Grossing. Grossing published three other women's magazines in the 80s of the eighteenth century.⁵ *De algemeene oeffenschool der vrouwen* included prose and poetry, anecdotes, moral lessons, short articles on famous women, book reviews and so forth. Its purpose was both to instruct and to amuse its young female readers. Literary critics praised the periodical for its 'Dutchness': the editor did not translate the original text literally, but adapted the texts for a Dutch reading public. In this way, it was argued, she served her country.⁶

Betje Wolff, whom I previously mentioned, also tried to found a women's periodical and equally looked to Germany for inspiration. Her original intention was to publish a translation of the German

And see Lisbeth Larsson. "Min kære søster og uforlignelige ven! Om 1700-tallets svenske presse og dens fruentimertidsskrifter," *Nordisk kvinde literatur historie*. Dl. 1: *I Guds navn 1000-1800*. København 1993, pp. 429-430. Ann Öhrberg (Uppsala University, Sweden) is writing a dissertation about Swedish women writers in the eighteenth century. She has been so kind as to provide me additional information about Anna Margaretha von Bragner.

4. See P. J. Buynsters. *Wolffen Deken. Een biografie*. Leiden, 1984, pp. 294-295, 233.

5. On Grossing and his publishing activities, see Ulrike Weckel. *Zwischen Häuslichkeit und Öffentlichkeit. Die ersten deutschen Frauenzeitschriften im späten 18. Jahrhundert und ihr Publikum*. Tübingen, 1998, pp. 191-197.

6. *Algemeene Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* (1785), pp. 89-91.

magazine *Pomona* (1783-1784), with some adaptations for the Dutch reading public. Although she sent the first issue to her publisher, it was never published, probably because the publisher feared that he wouldn't sell enough copies. It was no coincidence, however, that Betje Wolff decided to translate *Pomona*. She deeply admired the editor of this magazine, the well-known woman novelist Sophie von La Roche (1730-1807). She especially admired the fact that La Roche could make a living by writing. As Betje Wolff writes in one of her letters: "Lady La Roche enjoys the fact that she is becoming more and more famous nowadays, and that she has exchanged her low living standards for a comfortable income [...]. This honourable woman has the courage to think that money can be earned not only by managing estates, but also by writing good books."⁷

This quotation also makes it clear that, besides spreading certain ideas, an important reason for women writers to undertake journalistic activities was to increase their income.

The last Dutch female journalist I'd like to discuss here is Petronella Moens (1762-1843). She was probably the most active woman journalist in the Dutch Republic in the eighteenth century. In her time she was a well-known writer of poems, novels, books for children, magazines and so forth. She covered nearly all genres of literature. One of the most striking elements of her career is that she was blind. This blindness was caused by a childhood disease that she had at the age of four. In spite of her blindness she was very well educated by her father who read her aloud the works of contemporary Dutch writers. In the beginning her sister transcribed her texts, but later on she hired personal assistants to do this for her.⁸

Petronella Moens had already written poems in early childhood,

7. 'Mevrouw La Roche heeft het genoeg dat zij haaren roem vermeerdert, en haare zeer bekrompen omstandigheden voor een aanzienlyk genoeg inkomen verwisseld heeft. Geheel Duitschland leest *Pomona* want, dit in 't voorby gaan, deeze waardige vrouw heeft den moed om te denken, dat het even geoorlooft zy zyne inkomsten door wel geschreven boeken als door wel bearbeide Landeryen te verbeteren'. Fragment of a manuscript by Betje Wolff, from the University of Leiden, The Netherlands, Ltk 493.

8. A chapter by Lia van Gemert deals with her activity in *The Dutch*

but her career really got started in 1785, when she was honoured by an Amsterdam poetry society for one of her poems. Another important turning point in her career was her meeting the Dutch writer and politician Bernardus Bosch (1746-1803), who initiated her into journalism. Together they edited at least six periodicals during the last two decades of the eighteenth century. The most influential of their periodicals was called *De Menschenvriend* (*The Friend of Men*). It appeared for ten years, from 1788 until 1797. Moens started to contribute to it in 1793, when one of the editors died, and she became editor-in-chief three years later. When *De Menschenvriend* ceased to appear and the cooperation between Petronella Moens and Bernardus Bosch came to an end she founded her own periodical, which was called *De Vriendin van 't Vaderland* (*The Lady Friend of the Nation*). This weekly appeared for one year, in 1798 and targeted a mixed readership of men and women.

The content of the periodicals which Moens edited contain typical Enlightenment issues. The magazines advocated a life that was constructed on a rational basis. Readers were advised to read books in order to augment their knowledge, and reason was to prevail over passion in their activities. They were to behave virtuously, because this would eventually be to the benefit and the welfare of the Republic. This enlightened rationalism was combined with elements from traditional Christianity: religion and the love of God were to guide the readers in their lives. The contents of the magazines were also clearly influenced by the French Revolution. Moens and her male colleague Bosch, obviously sided with the revolutionaries or the "Patriots," as they were called in the Netherlands.

The question, of course, arises whether Moens responded to the demands for women's rights which could be heard in several countries at that time, for example in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Dutch*

Women's Literary History. Eds. Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen, Karel Porteman, Lia van Gemert en Piet Couttenier. "Met en zonder lauwerkrans. Schrijvende vrouwen uit de vroegmoderne tijd 1550-1850; van Anna Bijns tot Elise van Calcar." Amsterdam, 1997, pp. 742-754.

Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792). Wollstonecraft's appeal for women's rights was translated into Dutch in 1796. In the same year the problem of women's rights was discussed in an issue of *De Menschenvriend* which contains a letter written by a woman called Julia to her friend Louize.⁹ Julia is a fictional character, but it is obvious that the opinion of the editor, Moens, is reflected in the letters. The female letter-writer in this issue states that women have benefited a lot from the Enlightenment. They have gained as much freedom as men to play active and prominent roles in society. She is pleased with the fact that the Enlightenment finally led to the acknowledgement of women as human beings, because, surely, it is evident that women's intellectual capacities are equal to those of men. Those men who still doubt this are, in her opinion, the remnants of a primitive society of savages. But when it comes to the right to vote and to govern, the female letter-writer is less revolutionary. Using Rousseau's concept of "la volonté générale" she concludes that men and women have different responsibilities in society. The general will of society is best fulfilled when men rule and protect the country and women assume the moral responsibility for domestic life and the education of children. She adds that women should not take this exclusion from government as an offense, because their contribution to society is just as indispensable and valuable as that of the governing men:

"The female part of society is the heart, the life-force of man; because of us, the nation is dear to them, we're saints to them, we're the source of their most noble ambitions, we're the motivating force behind their diligence. In the domestic sphere, we sow the seeds for the richest harvest of bliss. We are the mothers of the race whose liberty they affirm; in women's wombs lie the yet unborn citizens, whose happiness is the aim of the contemporary Batavians. At our breasts the sons of liberty are nurtured. The whole uninterrupted chain of important concerns in society, has its origin in the love of women. Our

9. "Brief van Julia aan Louize over het tegenwoordig lot der vrouwen," *De Menschenvriend*, vol. 9, 1796, pp. 81-88.

protection, our defense, our safety, inspires all ventures and aims of the male sex."¹⁰

This text fits into a discourse that has been described by Linda Colley in her study *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837*. In this book Colley shows how, at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the doctrine of separate spheres for men and women led to the proclamation of women's moral superiority in the sphere of domesticity. The prosperity of the country became dependent on the qualities of the wives and mothers and in this respect their influence became more important in society.¹¹ Colley's argument is based upon the British situation, but the same sort of discourse also exists in other European countries. Petronella Moens would become one of the many writers who defended the moral superiority of women in the domestic sphere in the Netherlands at the end of the eighteenth century. She would continue doing this in the nineteenth century, but she wouldn't do this by means of a magazine of her own any more. Her pioneer position as a woman journalist would be taken over by another woman writer, Anna Barbara van Meerten-Schilperoort (1778-1853). This woman had her own boarding-school for girls, and in 1821 she founded a magazine for young women entitled *Penélope of maandwerk aan het vrouwelijk geslacht toegewijd* (*Penelope or Monthly Magazine Devoted to the Fair Sex*). It was the first successful

10. "Het vrouwelyk gedeelte der Maatschappy, is het hart, is de levenskracht der mannen; om ons, is het Vaderland hun dierbaar, wy zyn hun heilig, wy doen hun in de edelste geestdrift ontvlammen, wy zyn de dryfveeren van hunne werkzaamheid. In den huyslyken kring, zaaiën wy voor hun den ryksten oogst van zaligheden. Wy zyn de moeders van het geslacht, welks Vryheid zy bevestigen; in den vrouwelyken schoot sluimeren de nog ongebooren Burgers, wier geluk door de werkzame Bataaven bedoelt word. Aan den vrouwelyken boezem, worden de Zoonen der Vryheid opgevoed. Den geheelen onafgebrokenen keten der Maatschappelyke belangen, neemt zyn oorsprong in de liefde der vrouwen. Onze bescherming, onze verdeediging, onze veiligheid, bezielt al de pogingen, al de bedoelingen van het mannelyk geslacht" (*De Menschenvriend*, vol. 9, 1796, p. 88).

11. Linda Colley. *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837*. New Haven: Yale U.P., 1992. See the chapter "Womanpower," pp. 237-281.

Dutch magazine for women: it existed for fourteen years (1821-1835) and was praised by many contemporary Dutch writers. Anna Barbara van Meerten-Schilperoort's purpose was to teach girls and young women how to become good wives and mothers, and, at the same time, develop the girls' and young women's necessary intellectual capacities for fulfilling this task. Van Meerten-Schilperoort claimed that the welfare of the nation depended on the qualities of women as mothers and wives, and thus they needed proper education. An important source of inspiration, both for *Penélopé* and for her other writings, was the French novelist, journalist and governess Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1711-1780). Van Meerten-Schilperoort translated several of her works, and adapted them to the demands of Dutch society at the time: she made her female protagonists speak more piously and a bit less ambitiously about female education.¹²

After this short survey of Dutch female journalists the question arises as how the Dutch situation relates to that in other European countries. It appears that Dutch women entered the field of journalism later than in England and France, but more or less at the same time as in Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Several English and French women had already been actively involved in journalism by the middle of the eighteenth century, while in Germany and in the Scandinavian countries there was a growing participation of women at the end of the eighteenth century.¹³ This late start in the Netherlands can partly be explained by the fact that the population of native speakers was much smaller than in other countries, which led to a slower development of the press in general. Perhaps the status of journalism

12. See Uta Janssens-Knorsch, "Virtuous hearts and critical minds." The progressive ideals of an eighteenth-century governess, Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1711-1780)," *De achttiende eeuw* 19, 1987, 1, pp. 1-16.

13. See Suzanna van Dijk, *Traces de femmes. Présence féminine dans le journalisme français du XVIII^e siècle*. Amsterdam, Maarssen, 1988, p. 6 and Nina Rattner Gelbart, "Les femmes journalistes et la presse (XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles)," *Histoire des femmes en Occident*. Tome III: XVI^e-XVIII^e siècles. Natalie Zemon Davis et Arlette Frage. Paris, 1991, pp. 427-443.

was also lower than in other countries, but this hypothesis still needs further investigation. Besides differences there are also similarities: if one compares the countries separately, certain patterns become visible.

One of these patterns is the fact that in many European countries the development of the eighteenth-century female journalism was closely (though not exclusively) linked to the development of women's magazines; in Germany at least five women's magazines were founded by women; in France there is the well-known example of *Le Journal des Dames* (1759-1778), which was edited by women for a long period. In England there are several examples as well, out of which Eliza Haywood's *Female Spectator* (1744-1746) is probably the best known. Most of the women who entered the field of journalism published women's magazines, and this connection between female journalism and women's magazines would, at least in the Netherlands, remain until the late nineteenth century and eventually become very restrictive. When, for example, Elise van Calcar (1822-1904), one of the most famous women writers and feminists of the nineteenth century, tried to found a new periodical, she wrote to her publisher: 'It is obvious that a woman works first and foremost for her sisters.'¹⁴

Another pattern that becomes visible is that many female journalists lived on their pens and were also active in other literary genres: Eliza Haywood in England, Marianne Ehrmann and Sophie von la Roche in Germany, Charlotte Lennox in Ireland, Marie Leprince de Beaumont in France, and so on. Some of them were already established novelists, others would become well-known authors after having started a career in journalism. From a national perspective the Dutch women journalists seem to have occupied isolated positions, but when we look at these women from an international perspective it becomes clear that their activities fit into an international pattern: in many other European

14. "Het spreekt vanzelf dat eene vrouw in de eerste plaats voor hare zusters arbeidt." Letter from Elise van Calcar to A.C. Kruseman, 10th of March 1857, in J.H. Sikemeier, *Elise van Calcar-Schiotling: haar leven en omgeving; haar arbeid; haar geestesrichting*. Haarlem, 1921, p. 276.

countries women writers gradually became involved in the press as well. Some of the foreign women journalists even functioned as examples for the Dutch women journalists. I have already mentioned the influence of German women's magazines and their contributors. Eliza Haywood may also have set an example in England. Her periodical *The Female Spectator* (1744-1746) was translated into Dutch and several other European languages.¹⁵ In the Scandinavian countries a German woman author might have served as a role-model. Marianne Ehrmann's *Amaliens Erholungsstunden* (1790) was translated into Danish in 1794 and she perhaps inspired other women to undertake journalistic activities.¹⁶ Some women journalists literally crossed the borders. The French Huguenot Anne-Marguerite Dunoyer (1663-1719) travelled to Switzerland and finally ended up in the Netherlands where she made a living by writing and editing two periodicals in French: *Nouveau Mercure Galant des Cours de l'Europe* (1710) and *Quintessence des Nouvelles* (1711-1719).

Thus, when trying to understand the development of female journalism, it can be fruitful to consider the developments in individual countries from a broader, international perspective. This is especially necessary when it comes to smaller countries such as the Netherlands, where foreign influences played an important role in shaping cultural life. An international perspective not only enables us to see the differences, but also brings to light the similarities in the lives of women in this particular area of the public sphere in the eighteenth century.

15. In Dutch: *De Engelsche Spectatrice of Britsche Leermeesteresse der Zeeden* (Amsterdam 1762-1763), in French: *La Spectatrice* (The Hague 1749-1751), and in German: *Die Zuschauerin* (Hannover 1747-1748).

16. *Amalies nyttige Moerskabstimer, de Danske Damer opofrede* (København 1794).



P. Moens

PETRONELLA MOENS (1762-1843)