

## **In Search of Women Authors**

An interview with Suzan van Dijk:

<http://www.huygens.knaw.nl/en/vandijk/>

by Biljana Dojčinović and Magdalena Koch

Dr Suzan Van Dijk is a researcher at the Huygens Institute for Dutch History of the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences in The Hague and the Chair of the **COST** Action (<http://www.cost.esf.org/>) IS0901 *Women Writers in History; Toward a New Understanding of European Literary Culture* (2009-2013) which gathers experts on women's literature from all over Europe. The COST Action is the most recent phase of the project which started back in the early 90s and is still dedicated to further developing and using a database on European women's writing and its reception up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>.

In view of the further development of the *Women Writers* database into a Virtual Research Environment, a ThinkTank meeting was held in the end of September 2011 in Göteborg. The similarities and differences between the online literary projects which are part of this COST Action were discussed as a first step in creating a joint online platform for research.

*Did you start the research on European women writers in the early 90s in connection with French literature and George Sand?*

It was the feeling that it was not possible to study even a famous woman writer like George Sand in complete isolation that started this kind of research. Together with some

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<sup>1</sup> [www.databasewomenwriters.nl](http://www.databasewomenwriters.nl)

Dutch colleagues, we tried to inform ourselves about the way in which women writers were connected at the time, to find a context for their functioning, because the canon as it is has actually excluded many of these women. Alternatively, in other cases, they were not studied as part of the canon but as muses or lovers, as was the case for Sand in relation to Alfred de Musset. So, the necessity of putting them inside the female literary context was the starting point.

*Did that literary context soon grow from French into a European one?*

For George Sand and the reception of her work in the Netherlands, for instance, from which we started, the German reception was instrumental. We also knew that George Sand was widely read in Europe, and interesting connections began to appear.

*In which phase of the research did you begin to use the database?*

Actually, in 1997 I started a project at the University of Amsterdam about different audiences of women authors, for which it really seemed that a database was needed. We were a group of ten to twelve researchers, with IT developers as a part of the team. At the time, the database was not online, so we would send data to each other between Amsterdam and Groningen by email. I was very suspicious about data reaching my colleagues there and I am sure that we lost something in the process, although everybody kept reassuring me that everything would be secure.

*When did you put the database on the Internet?*

This was online in April 2001. Some years later, we were granted the "International Innovation Award 2005" on the occasion of the XVI International Conference of the Association for History and Computing (Amsterdam).

In the period up to 2004, the database was primarily used to study the influence, both at

national and international levels, of selected French women novelists, as well as the literary relations between France and the Netherlands.

In the later stage, from 2004 to 2007, the project dedicated to the International Reception of Women's Writing (1700-1900) included an inventory of the literary reception in the Netherlands of the works by both Dutch and foreign women writers.

*But, even in 2004, three years after the conference "Writing the History of Women's Writing: Toward an International Approach", you and your colleagues opted for publishing ["I have heard about you". Foreign women's writing crossing the Dutch border: from Sappho to Selma Lagerlöf on paper](#). I quote: "Publication was still in the classic book form, partly in order not to scare away colleagues, some of whom were already more or less shocked by the large scope of the project and the electronic approach that we were in the process of adopting"<sup>2</sup>.*

*Can you tell us something about the way the project was received among your colleagues, esp. regarding the electronic tools as well as the scope of the project?*

I had an assistant who was working on the Dutch women's press for her PhD thesis, and I wanted her to use the database for working on her material, but she was much more "realistic" than I was, and saw that it would take a lot of time before finishing the tool development. So the complaining did not come, as one could assume, from some «old colleagues», but from the young researchers as well. In a way, she was right, of course, as PhD students have only four years to finish their work. Indeed, it is a large undertaking; first, creating an appropriate tool, for which the participating researchers need to test if it corresponds to their research questions, second, entering the research materials for an important number of countries, and then, finally, having the research and analysis done, in order to really prepare the new historiography....

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<sup>2</sup> Suzan van Dijk, Anke Gilleir, Alicia C. Montoya, ["Before NEWW \(New approaches to European Women's Writing\). Prolegomena to the Launching of an International Project"](#), in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 27, 1 (2008), p. 151-157.

*How large is the database now?*

At present, the database has data on 4000 writers, 11000 works (texts are not included themselves, but can be linked to) and 21000 reception entries. Comparing of numbers for different countries shows a very uneven distribution now, which makes it necessary to consider that at some moment the total amounts will be at least three or five times higher. It forms an important source for many potential research projects, for which it provides a *basis and starting point* for research. Most of the records in the database are open for being viewed by visitors who are just looking for information.

*How do you see the relation between digital technologies and the literary history research, esp. in the field of women's writing? Do you think that the fact that we are using digital tools changes our approach to the material as well as the paradigms in theorizing about it?*

In the research of women's literature the main problem are the sources. Before 1900, while speaking of Dutch and French literature (but it is probably the same thing for the others) we really needed to go into the sources and, for instance, find in the periodicals that articles have been written on women authors, which proves that they were read, whether appreciated or not. Facts keep emerging and that changes our knowledge and opinions. However, for many women authors it was not so clear that they were widely read. I think we will be surprised about the great numbers of women authors in each country, once the sources will be *really* looked at. Sometimes, just finding a name of a woman author mentioned by her contemporaries means that we have a trace of her work, which can be further followed.

*Do you think that documenting, in a database, these works and the ways in which they were received can influence the literary canon, or completely subvert the notion of it?*

No, all these texts and their receptions need to be studied first. We can say that the database is just a way of presenting the material in a way which enables its further use and studying. Even though our research has been carried out for a longer period of time we have not changed the canon yet. We are creating the consciousness about the authors who were present: our research is about the roles played by these women in the history. Nevertheless, the question if they should be included in a literary canon, and if they need to be presented to students in schools, is another one, not forcibly to be answered within this context.

*At present, the “Women Writers in History” COST Action is halfway completed . Has the presence of countries such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, etc. changed your understanding of European women’s writing? If so, how? Has the notion of “European” been changed accordingly?*

From the very beginning we were aware that, starting from a small country like the Netherlands, we are not the centre of the world. The idea was to include as many countries as possible. The number of women participating very early in literature is small, but I am sure that we will find more names.

*How do you see this project in five years?*

I would like to see participants of this COST Action financed in such a way that they can really collaborate, and not work separately, in order to produce a joint research outcome: preparing an entirely new perspective on the literary history. Not necessarily changing the canon as such, but showing that women did take part in the literary field, that they were published and discussed.

