Summary *Reading beyond the female: The relationship between perception of author gender and literary quality*

>   'Men, be warned, female writers are on the rise!'[1]
>   (De Coster, 2014, my translation)

For some years now, the rise of 'the female author' is sung in Dutch national newspapers. She sells well, is read often and it will not be long, some speculate, before women take over the Dutch literary field. On the other hand there are those who claim the opposite, like Dutch blog *Lezeres des Vaderlands* (2016) does. It shows by means of counting that at least the percentage of reviews in Dutch and Flemish periodicals in no way reflects such favouring of female authors. However, some critics argue, these counts do not matter because the discussion should not be centered around gender, but around Literary Quality (i.e. Grunberg, 2015); thereby suggesting that women simply do not produce enough material of high quality. This 'ultimate' argument is not easy to dismantle, since differences between female and male authors do exist. And to argue that the measuring stick is faulty, that of literary quality, will not result in the situation that many female authors desire: an equal position to that of male authors.

    That is why in this thesis I unravel the relationship between the author's (female) gender and the assignment of literary quality to a work, from two sides: 1) the prestige of female versus male authors and the perception of their work; 2) the texts of the novels themselves. This I do in the context of digital humanities project The Riddle of Literary Quality, funded by the Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie voor de Wetenschappen (KNAW; Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences). The project aims to find correlations between textual characteristics and judgments of literary quality. It uses computational analyses of novels on the one hand and ratings of literary quality assigned by readers to those novels on the other. These ratings were collected in Het Nationale Lezersonderzoek (NLO; National Reader Survey). Respondents were asked to supply a rating of literary and of overall quality – on a scale of 1 to 7 – to novels they had read of a list of 401 recent (published between 2007-2012), Dutch-language (translated and originally Dutch work) fictional novels for young adults and adults, who were most often bought from book stores and most often loaned from libraries in the

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[1] Original text: 'Mannen, wees gewaarschuwd, vrouwelijke schrijvers rukken op!'
https://www.volkskrant.nl/opinie/-mannen-wees-gewaarschuwd-vrouwelijke-schrijvers-rukken-op~a3577912/

period of 2009-2012 (see Appendix A.1 for the full list of titles). I use these ratings in my thesis, but I do not connect them to the texts of the novels. For this, I refer to van Cranenburgh (2016). My stress is on the perception of female and male authors on the one hand, and the relationship between their novels on the other.

First the image and position of authors. In Chapter 2 I show that female authors are present in the Netherlands, that they produce hundreds of literary novels per year, but that they are not equally present at the literary top. [2] The percentage of female authors that wins a literary prize in the Netherlands is decidedly below fifty percent. There is a 'leaky pipeline', where with each step up the literary ladder more women disappear. In the final part of this chapter I show that the idea that this situation is just about to change is most likely incorrect and might even be risky, because it leads to complacency: why would anyone take action when it is about to change anyway?

In Chapter 3 I discuss the results of the National Reader Survey. I show which position the (white) female author takes who writes Dutch-language prose. This gives a more complete view of the literary field. In Chapter 2 I consider the elite, the gatekeepers, in Chapter 3 I examine the larger reading audience.[3] The list offered to respondents is, as I stated earlier, based on the novels' popularity, which means I also have a rough estimate of how often originally Dutch *literary* novels by women have been bought and borrowed. This does not result in good news, either, even though half of the novels in the corpus has been written by female authors. Despite the repeated declared rise of the female literary author in the Netherlands, her male colleagues and her translated female colleagues have the upper hand in the literary genre. When I then consider the ratings that respondents give to works by female authors, it is not strange that they are low. Female authors are overrepresented in the genre of romantic fiction, which holds the overall lowest average ratings. Female and male authors take an equal part in the suspense genre. According to the respondents, there is little difference in literary quality of these novels, but the suspense novels by female authors are less good.

Reading behavior is also tied to gender: female respondents report having read male and female authors, with a slight preference for the former. Male respondents mainly report to have read male authors. The men who do read female authors, give higher scores to their novels than female respondents do; female respondents give lower average scores to works by female

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[2] When I refer to a 'literary novel', I mean a novel that has been assigned a specific code by the publisher. In the Netherlands, there is a uniform system called NUR (Nederlandstalige Uniforme Rubrieksindeling, roughly translatable as 'Dutch-language Uniform Classification'). Literary novels are those that have been assigned either the code '301 Literary novel, novella' or '302 Translated literary novel, novella'. I do not judge the literary quality of those novels, nor do I refer to the readers' judgments in the NLO. When I do refer to the ratings of literary quality, I will state this explicitly.

[3] Note that the elite is also part of this larger reading public. Respondents were allowed to motivate one of their ratings, and some of them indicated being a professional critic.

authors than male respondents. The idea that more female judges would benefit female authors, is thus most likely incorrect. Respondents were also asked to motivate one rating of a novel. Again, there are differences between female and male authors – even when I only isolate the female respondents. The first are judged according to content, the second to structural and formal characteristics. Translation might be a confounding factor here (literary novels by female authors are more often translated than originally Dutch in this corpus, and vice versa for male authors), but a closer examination of motivations on originally Dutch work by female authors shows that there are indeed subtle differences. All these results indicate that also in the eyes of the general reader, female authors take a different position than male authors.

A downside of the NLO is that female and male authors are not evenly distributed across genre, nor across the translation/originally Dutch divide within the genres. There are more literary novels by male authors than female authors, and within the group of female literary authors there is little originally Dutch work. This means that I cannot easily isolate author gender as a factor: genre and translation might play a role. On the one side, this is one of the strengths of the research, as it show which factors are at play in the backbenching of female authors and how they interact. Dutch female literary authors are less visible in the whole field. However, the question of the importance of gender *sec* remained. That is why I undertook follow-up research with the Riddle of Literary Quality team, in which texts were manipulated to see if the Dutch public believes that female authors are worse at writing literary prose. We split the respondents into three groups and offered them all the same text of 250 words. In the accompanying information the gender of the author was mentioned. Group 1 was told that they were reading work by a male author, group 2 was told the text had been written by a female author, and group 3 received no information on the author's gender. Then the respondents were asked to provide a rating of literary quality on a scale of 1-7, like in the NLO. Contrary to expectations, the average rating for the 'female' author was not significantly lower than in the other conditions. Group 3 however, when asked, had imagined the author to be a man significantly more often than they thought it was a woman. (Literary) authorship is indeed associated with maleness. An important point to note here is that the text was presented in isolation, and the author was presented as making a debut. Respondents therefore had no idea of the author's prestige. This is a possibility for further research.

In sum, Part I of this thesis shows that female authors in the 21st century are not on par with male authors in the Dutch literary field, that this sustained by the whole field (from consumers' buying behavior through juries handing out awards), and there is no indication that it is about to change. A cause is hard to pinpoint, because all layers of the field, from the general reader to the literary jury, sustain the current situation, it is a vicious circle. I do not want to point to a guilty party either, I merely map the current situation. My goal is to provide insight, so

I can push the field a tiny step towards change, and I mainly hope to do this with the second part of my thesis. The critic, on the basis of Part I, can still claim that no change is possible or necessary, because it is the female author's own fault. She writes works of lower literary quality and is therefore not equal to the male author. We should not talk about the women, but about what they write. That is exactly what I will do next.

In the second part of my thesis I examine texts by several authors. Not just female authors, not just literary works, but the texts of all works in the Riddle corpus (which is the list of the National Reader Survey; see Appendix A.1), supplemented with two other corpora. I will get back to those later. The analyses are performed partially by computational analysis and partially by close reading. My question is: how firmly can we connect the novel's text to the author's gender? First I build a theoretical framework in Chapter 4, based on literary-feminist research, supplied with answers from the National Reader Survey. This shows how in earlier days the female author's gender has been attached to the texts she wrote to downplay literary quality and how this is still done today. The style of a woman's novel, in the form of sentiment ('emotional'), choice of words and subject, used to be seen as feminine, according literary historians van Boven (1992) and Vogel (2001), which equated the novel with being less literary. Such 'femininity' of text is still associated with 'less literary' by the respondents of the NLO. There is also the somewhat surprising result that ideas on 'women's books' in 2013 are still current, which shows that this second part of the thesis is not unnecessary.

In Chapter 5 I relate the research I undertook with Andreas van Cranenburgh (Koolen and van Cranenburgh, 2017b). We research through Natural Language Processing (NLP), in other words computational analysis of text, to which extent the author's gender can be linked to the texts she writes. In practice, when textual gender differences are researched by way of a computer, there is not enough rigorous attention to how the corpus is built. Fiction for instance is seen as one genre, and subgenres are ignored. Of the differences researchers find between texts by female and male authors in such a corpus, it is assumed that they are *caused* by author gender, while there are possible other confounding factors. To show this is indeed the case, we perform computational analysis on the Riddle corpus, which contains multiple genres of fiction. We examine subject, sentiment and overall style. When we look at the differences between female and male authors, they appear to be large. Then we perform the same analyses again, but then on a corpus of novels that were all nominated for a large literary prize in the Netherlands (see Appendix A.2). The 'gender differences' turn out to be much smaller in the set of nominated novels. This shows the importance of genre. Additional visualizations also show that the nature of the differences are not what they appear to be at a first glace. For instance, a topic that the computer identified from the novels and that we labeled as 'settling down', was indicated to be one of the biggest differences between female and male authors: it was more typical for female

authors. However, upon closer scrutiny we find that it is present in almost all of the novels by male authors, and more so than the topic of 'military' that was seen by the computer as more typical for male authors. It shows the importance of the angle at which we look at the data. Finally, there are indications in our research that the difference between dialogue and narrative is more important than the differences between author gender – which, in my view, is more interesting from the perspective of literary analysis. In other words: computer analysis also wants interpretation, and this interpretation is too easily used in Natural Language Processing and digital humanities to enlarge and stress gender differences, even though commonalities are also often large. Gender is not a self-explanatory variable and female authors are not a different kind.

In Chapter 5 I performed bottom-up analysis with my colleague, we analyzed the texts with little prior focus. In the final two chapters I take on a different perspective and perform top-down research, starting with a specific topic. This is a subject that I identified in Chapter 4 as a subject that is seen as 'feminine', namely that of attention to physical appearance. For this analysis, I use a set of originally Dutch chick lit and literary novels, that was used in Jautze et al. (2013), see Appendix A.3. In Chapter 6 I describe the process of automated extraction of the sentences that have as their main subject 'a description of physical appearance of a human character'. By applying several computational analyses, I attempt to localize such sentences, but this proves to be more complex than anticipated. The first method is based on queries, a sort of basic frame for sentences, which I have written manually (see Appendix B), the second is a form of machine learning, where the computer attempts to learn which sentences contain such a description, based on sentences that I marked as containing a description of physical appearance. Both methods have their strong suits – the queries are good at finding sentences that deal with the body in general, the machine learning is good at finding descriptions – but neither separately, nor together do they reach a high enough percentage of performance to be applied to unseen sentences. There are other results: the chick lit novels turn out to be less varied in language use than the literary novels. The second result is more surprising. The sentences I have used to teach the computer which of them do contain a description of physical appearance show that there is more attention to physical appearance in the literary novels than in the chick lit novels. Therefore I choose to analyze these sentences in the next chapter.

In Chapter 7, I analyze a set of over 200 sentences which contain a description of a character's physical appearance, selected from the first chapters of the chick lit and literary novels used in Chapter 6. Applying the concept of the 'gaze' – roughly definable as looking at a character with lust – I identify (without a computer this time) patterns in the 'viewing behavior' of characters in the novels. In other words: who looks at whom and how? I attempt to find patterns, repetitive types of descriptions. This shows again that the gender of the author is of

importance, but not crucial. More important is the gender of the main character – although in this corpus this roughly equates to author gender.[4] Because I examine two genres on the same level, that of the literary novel and of chick lit, it becomes clear that stereotypical descriptions are not just part of the chick lit but also of the literary novels. In chick lit I find, seen through the eyes of the female protagonist, the Caring Adonis, the beautiful man with (often) blue eyes who pampers the female protagonist. In literary novels I find a mirror and anti-thesis, from the perspective of the male protagonist: the Destructive Nymph, a beautiful woman with something delicate in her appearance or constitution, who both seduces and eventually betrays the male protagonist. The common factor over female protagonists in both genres is the appraisal of one's own appearance, with undefined 'others' in mind as judges.

      In other words: male and female protagonists look at female characters in both genres in these first chapters. Only in chick lit novels does the female protagonist consistently look at a (potential) male love interest, which rarely happens in the literary novels. Men are hardly looked at in the literary novels. Surprisingly, the male literary author, through the eyes of the male protagonist, produces the most sentences on description of physical appearance; only not on the male protagonist's appearance. Description of appearance is 'feminine' in the sense that women are most often the subject of such descriptions in literary novels, not that it is described by female authors. Moreover, in chick lit the men are also described, so in that sense the subject is also not exclusively feminine. Nor is it strongly linked to the 'woman's novel' in the form of chick lit, in the literary novels more of such sentences are present. This shows, again, how important the perspective is with which we analyze the idea of 'femininity' in a text.

      With this second part of my thesis I show that perception is key. Female authors are not a different kind, they write, like male authors, in the style of the genre they practice. Of course there are some differences, women and men are socialized differently, but gender is not the cause of all differences. The stress lies both with 'cause' and with 'all' in this previous sentence. The work of an author is not less literary, *because* the author is a woman. Moreover, the idea of femininity is put into texts by female authors, where first there is no explanation of why female equals 'less literary' – and, even more problematic in my view, why 'male' does not – but which is quite easily subverted, when we also take other types of literature into account. In other words, let us indeed talk about literary quality, but without wielding words such as 'female author', 'emotional' or 'women's book', because these concepts have much less content than their frequent use suggests. Let us, like my title proposes, 'read beyond the female'.

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[4] In the corpus that I used in Chapter 5, that of the literary award nominees, this was not the case. There the connection male author – male protagonist was strong, but female authors used protagonists of different genders.