INTRODUCTION:
TOWARD A NEW CONCEPTION OF WOMEN’S LITERARY HISTORY

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European interest in early modern women writers is on the rise. After a period during which research in this field was confined almost exclusively to the English-speaking world and to the American academy, there are signs that this interest is in the process of broadening its geographic scope. Thus, during the last few decades, a considerable number of new histories of women’s writing and biographical dictionaries of women authors, as well as anthologies and editions of their works, have been published in continental Europe. Important new histories have appeared of women’s writing in the Netherlands, Hungary and Scandinavia, to name but a few examples – while other countries, notably France, are currently in the process of mapping out this field. These publications, coming after and confirming earlier...
English-language scholarship, are important as corrections to ‘classical’ European literary history, with its dominance of male canonized authors. Moreover, they often also function as catalysts for renewed scholarly attention to individual women writers and their work. In addition to these historical overviews and anthologies, there is also a growing tendency within continental European scholarship to address more general questions concerning women’s writing, the professionalization of female authors, women’s reading, and the roles played by female cultural transmitters.

Yet despite their undeniable qualities, these historical overviews, anthologies, and more general works often remain traditional in the sense that authors are almost always considered within the limits of a single nation or language area. As such, these new contributions to historical knowledge about the literary past follow the lines of thought that were set out in the nineteenth century, when the nation-state became the dominant framework for the study of modern literatures. Historical questions concerning the professionalization of female authorship are likewise invariably approached from a national viewpoint. In addition, they are addressed with various degrees of intensity and depth in different language areas. Because women writers who wrote in English have been more frequently studied, their cases are also more often presented as examples, while references to (for instance) Spanish-language texts in general discourses on women’s literary history are virtually absent, as Lisa Vollendorf noted some years ago. The problem is not only that the prominence of one literature implies the neglect of others, but maybe even more so that too many generalizations on women’s writing are made on too restricted a basis. Isabelle Brouard-Arends for example, writing about the French Ancien Régime, makes a statement that is symptomatic of this tendency to generalise: ‘Les livres de femme ont beaucoup été écrits d’abord pour d’autres femmes, complicité affective, mise en commun d’intérêts privés, sentimentaux ou familiaux’. But in what sense is this impression of writing and

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7 Brouard-Arends I., “Introduction”, in Lectrices d’Ancien Régime (Rennes: 2003)10. Her statement, besides, is at odds with Joep Leerssen’s one that ‘everyone agrees that women have been the prime readers in European literary history’. Leerssen J., “Women Authors and Literary History”, in Dijk, Writing the History 253 and 256.