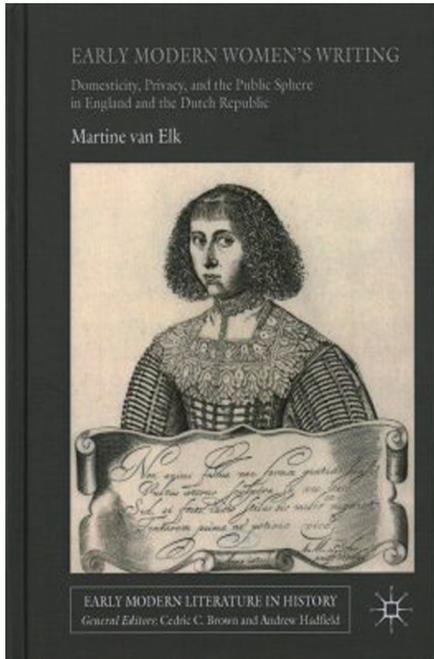


Review

Martine van Elk, *Early Modern Women's Writing: Domesticity, Privacy, and the Public Sphere in England and the Dutch Republic*, Early Modern Literature in History, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 299 pp. ISBN 978-3-319-33221-5.



For several decades now, it has been impossible to imagine literary history without paying attention to women's writing. While this is true for scholarship on both Dutch and English literary history, the scale and scope of research into women's writing in these two language areas are incomparable. Early modern women's writing in English is a very lively field of research; scholars in the field are working on thought-provoking themes such as manuscript and print or patronage and professionalism. This English-language work in particular has thus contributed pioneering work to the broader field of early modern literature and culture. Research into Dutch women's writing from the early modern period is also animated, but is only slowly beginning to move beyond its primary focus of listing Dutch women writers and what they produced.¹ Martine van Elk's study *Early Modern Women's Writing: Domesticity, Privacy, and the Public Sphere in England and the Dutch Republic* is

an important accomplishment because it incorporates the understudied works of Dutch female authors in an argument aimed to intervene in English-language debates. It invites further reading and analysis of all the texts that have been (re-)discovered over the last few decades and relates them to topical research questions on themes such as literature and politics, book history, and self-representation.

¹ In the wake of *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* (1997, partly translated as *Women's Writing from the Low Countries* in 2010), several publications about seventeenth-century Dutch women's writing saw the light of day, but only a few offered in-depth analyses of texts written by women.

Van Elk's book is representative of English-language scholarship into women's writing in that it addresses a question central to early modern studies in general. On top of that, it provides an incentive to enter new avenues, not only for the field of Dutch women's writing, but for scholarship in English more generally too. Comparing English women's writing and works by Dutch women writers, Van Elk offers a new and refreshing perspective on frequently studied texts by English women and the contexts in which these women and their texts functioned. Transnational studies into women's writing have been on the agenda for several years now, but while in-depth studies are still few and far between, Van Elk's book is a very welcome exception.²

The broader framework within which women's writing is analyzed in Van Elk's monograph is the relationship between private and public. Relying on Michael McKeon's studies about the topic, Van Elk contends that a shift took place in the relationship between private and public during the seventeenth century as a result of political developments (i.e., discussions about and the downfall of absolutism). While the public sphere opened up for private individuals to express themselves, a new ideology of domesticity made the private household into 'a separate, intimate sphere with its own importance and essence' (1). The relevance of this framework for the analysis of women's writing lies in the fact that while this shift created possibilities for early modern women (by opening up the public sphere and changing the organization of public and political life) on the one hand, it also imposed restrictions (by separating the public sphere from the private sphere, which was regarded as the women's domain). Van Elk's framework is intended to help the comparative analysis of literature by women from two countries that, generally speaking, experienced analogue developments in the divide between public and private. At the same time, the comparison itself makes it possible to identify women's writing as an important part of these developments while also illustrating precise differences between developments in the two countries.

In her introduction (Chapter 1), Van Elk describes current research into early modern publicity and privacy, but in the chapters that follow, she gives the floor to the early moderns themselves, investigating how they defined private and public. Chapter 2 describes early modern discourse about the divide in general, and Chapters 3–6 present analyses of texts by early modern women from England and the Dutch Republic, investigating how they wrote themselves into this discourse, and where they positioned themselves within these realms.

In Chapter 2, Van Elk describes how a shared, but shifting and unstable, representation of the division between public and private emerged in the public imagination (in England and the Dutch Republic). She discusses sources as diverse as humanist and religious tracts, conduct books like marriage manuals, and visual sources such as genre paintings and portraits. This diversity is maintained throughout the rest of the book, although literary sources are Van Elk's primary concern in the other chapters. This broad outlook is one of the book's major strengths. Van Elk has the gift of being able to zoom in and out without losing focus. Her analysis of sources from outside her own field of literary studies, like paintings, is as perceptive as her analysis of women's poems and plays.

2 See also the virtual research environment NEWW: <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/womenwriters>.

Each of the analytical Chapters (3–6) compares works by women from both countries. In Chapter 3, particular comparative attention is paid to the responses of Mary Sidney Herbert and Anna Roemers Visscher to praise they received from their male contemporaries. Van Elk argues that their poems should be regarded as careful rewritings of the dominant ideas about the limited access that they, as women, had to the public realm. The comparison in Chapter 4, of Katherine Philips to Katharina Lescailje and Cornelia van der Veer, shows that their friendship poetry created a ‘public realm ruled by women’ that contrasted strongly with the public realm of their own times.

The two most famous women writers of the early modern period, Anna Maria van Schurman and Margaret Cavendish (the only writers in the book that have been compared before) are central to Chapter 5. These authors had very similar strategies of self-presentation in the male-dominated literary and scholarly world, approaches which Van Elk describes as being based on ‘deliberate performativity, a public voice that is the product of retirement, and a reputation that includes only occasional display and visibility’ (168). In this way, Van Elk argues, they simultaneously adhered to and rewrote the traditional model of female publicity. In Chapter 6, Katharina Lescailje reappears as a playwright in the company of Elizabeth Cary, who also wrote a play based on the classical story of Herod and Mariamne. Since two men, one Dutch and one English, also wrote plays about the same theme, Van Elk is able to show how the women’s approach to Mariam’s public role was distinct from the men’s and focused on a confrontation of ideals about female domesticity with traditional elitist ideals of female publicity.

Van Elk’s selection of case studies works really well. The comparisons are relevant and allow Van Elk to deliver what she identifies in the introduction as the value of the comparative approach: ‘to assess the cultural climates within which they wrote and to which they responded’ (2). To give just one example, by comparing Philips to Lescailje and Van der Veer in Chapter 4, Van Elk shows that Philips’s royalism may have been less pronounced than has been thought up to now, since her poems are so comparable to Lescailje and Van der Veer’s, who were presumable devoid of royalist engagement. Reading these authors’ work together also sheds new light on the remarkable fact that Dutch women often stopped writing after they got married, while English women did not, which may be related to a greater degree of domesticity in the Dutch Republic.

From a Dutch perspective, it is a pity that two of the four analytical chapters are about Dutch women writers who have been studied more and in greater detail than those women writers who have been rediscovered in the last decades, such as Katharina Lescailje and Cornelia van der Veer. But it is understandable that Van Elk chose some familiar names. Van Elk convincingly demonstrates the value that lies in further exploring the work of both canonical and lesser known Dutch authors, and we should look forward to the results of her current projects, which are also comparative studies.

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