

# WOMEN WRITERS IN THE ROMANTIC AGE



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Cover image: the Brontë sisters (Anne, Emily and Charlotte) by Patrick Branwell Brontë, oil on canvas, ca. 1834. ©National Portrait Gallery, London

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## 12. Writers from the Low Countries

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Belgium and the Netherlands were briefly united under the Dutch Crown from 1815 to 1830, a cohabitation whose popularity in Belgium may be gauged by Belgium's 1830 revolution to end it. Prior to 1792, Belgium, or Flanders and Wallonia, was Habsburg territory; then part of the French Republic and Empire; then at last independent after 1830, though divided still between speakers of French and Dutch, and forever at risk of splintering in two. The old oligarchical Dutch Republic, after the failed Patriot Revolution of 1786–1787, became a monarchy at the departure of the French in 1814 and remains so today. Here, the two national traditions are grouped under the heading The Low Countries since our headings respond not only to dynastic realities but also to geographical pressures. I have identified five Belgian women writers for the period 1776–1848 and seven Dutch.

### Belgium (5 writers)

**Josine Natalie Louise Bovie** [or **Marie Sweerts**] (1810–11 January 1870) published a novella, *La Perdrix* [The Partridge], under the pen name 'Marie Sweerts.' She also wrote poetry and short stories and contributed to the *Revue de Belgique*. In 1855, Bovie toured Italy with her sister Virginie, with whom she lived outside Brussels. *Contes posthumes*, a 339-page collection of Bovie's stories published within a year of her death, included *La Perdrix* and other stories, with topics ranging from suicide to incest. It was reviewed in the *Athenæum*.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Eliane Gubin, ed. *Dictionnaire des femmes belges: XIXe et XXe siècles* (Brussels: Éditions Racine, 2006).

**Joanna Courtmans**, née **Joanna-Desideria Berchmans** (6 September 1811–22 September 1890), born in Oudegem, went to boarding school in Wallonia aged nine, then to Ghent from 1835–1844. In 1836, she married Jan Baptiste Courtmans, a co-founder of the *Gentse Maetschappij van Vlaemsche Letteroefening*. He taught her Flemish again and put her in touch with the Flemish Movement. Courtmans's first Flemish poem appeared in the *Nederduitsch letterkundig jaarboekje* in 1839; her poems thereafter won several prizes, at least eight volumes appearing before 1856. Jan Baptiste died in 1856, and Courtmans briefly opened a school to support her family. She also switched to prose after *Helena van Leliëndal* in 1855, notably with *Het geschenk van de jager* [The Gift of the Hunter] in 1865, which won a Dutch prize, and *Bertha Baldwin* in 1871. Courtmans published over thirty volumes of prose fiction between 1855–1882.<sup>2</sup>

**Maria Doolaeghe** (25 October 1803–7 April 1884) was born and died in Diksmuide. Her life is little-known outside her works, which include both prose fiction and poetry: *Nederduitsche letteroefeningen*, 1834; *Madelieven*, 1840; *De avondlamp*, 1850; *Sinte Godelieve, Vlaemsche legende uit de XIde eeuw*, 1862; *Winterbloemen*, 1868; *Najaarsvruchten*, 1869; *Madelieven en avondlamp*, 1876; *Najaarsvruchten en winterbloemen*, 1877; *Nieuwste gedichten*, 1878; and *Jongste dichtbundel*, 1884.<sup>3</sup>

**Angélique Pollart d'Herimetz** [or **Angélique de Rouillé**] (25 June 1756–4 February 1840), born in Ath and raised in a convent in Brussels, married Louis de Rouillé in 1777. He died in 1814, but the couple had lived mostly apart. Mistress of the manor of Ormeignies, Rouillé left an extensive correspondence; she also kept a diary. Ardent royalist, Rouillé welcomed Waterloo and accepted the Dutch royal presence in Belgium, though grudgingly. She detested liberalism. Rouillé made a last visit to Brussels and Antwerp to try out the railway.<sup>4</sup>

**Coralie Adèle van den Cruyce** [in marriage **Coralie de Félix de la Motte**] (13 October 1796–27 June 1858), born in Paris, wrote the plays *Les Orphelins de la grande armée*, 1834, and *Les Violettes*, 1836. Her work

2 Hugo Notteboom, Rik Van de Rostyne, and Michiel De Bruyne, eds. *Over mevrouw Courtmans' leven en werk* (Mevrouw Courtmans Comité, 1990).

3 Eliane Gubin, ed. *Dictionnaire des femmes belges* (2006); G.J. van Bork and P.J. Verkruysse, *De Nederlandse en Vlaamse auteurs van middeleeuwen tot heden met inbegrip van de Friese auteurs* (Weesp: De Haan, 1985).

4 Armand Louant, *Une épistolière en Hainaut. Angélique de Rouillé, châtelaine d'Ormeignies (1756–1840)* (Mons: Société des Bibliophiles Belges, 1970).

*Bas-bleus* defends women's right to express themselves as writers. Van den Cruyce married Eugene-Francois-Auguste Pompée de Félix de la Motte; the couple were leading members of Brussels aristocratic life.<sup>5</sup>

## The Netherlands (7 writers)

Anna Louisa Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint (September  
16, 1812-April 14, 1886)

*Het huis Lauernesse* (1840)

Eerste deel

I: In De Landsvrouw Maria

Nooit heb ik recht begrepen, waarom men lange inleidingen schrijft, om tot een eenvoudig romantisch verhaal te komen. Ik zie niet in, waarom lezer en schrijver met elkander eene lange reeks van volzinnen moeten doorworstelen, eer de een hooren en de ander spreken mag. Ik begin altijd liefst het eerst met hetgeen ik te vertellen heb: wat noodig is te weten en aangenaam, moet het verhaal zelf kunnen leeren; anders ware het beter, dat lezer en schrijver beiden niet begonnen.

Velen hebben zeker veelmalen de zon zien opgaan; allen hebben het ten minste éénmaal gezien, hoe de lichtgevende dochter der hemelen met langzame waardigheid zich verheft uit het Oosten, en de nevelen van zich wegschuift, zooals eene Oostersche bruid den sluier terugslaat van voor haar aangezicht, bij het eerste samenzijn met den echtgenoot. Zij is ook de jonge bruid der aarde: zij is ook de trouwe echtgenoot van den vroolijken dag, die met haar geboren wordt, om met haar weg te sterven: zij is ook ... dan wat is zij niet, dat niet door hare tallooze beschrijvers van haar is gezegd geworden! Wij willen niets toevoegen tot dien overvloed: maar wij vragen alleen, of er onder hen, die het zagen, niet ook sommigen waren, die het voor iets meer hielden dan voor eene schitterende tooneel-decoratie der Natuur, waarbij hunne toejuiching werd afgevraagd; of zij er ook wel eens bij gedacht hebben, hoe dit schouwspel, dat zich sedert den eersten scheppingsmorgen, door duizende jaarkringen heen, wiskundig zeker herhaalt, de dagelijksche waarachtige bekrachtiging is van het Goddelijk magtwoord, gesproken bij de Schepping: "Daar zij licht!" "Waar het zoo licht is in de wereld der Natuur, mogen de menschen het niet donker maken voor elkander, en er is nog een beter licht dan dat van de zon: het licht van de Openbaring."

5 Eliane Gubin, ed. *Dictionnaire des femmes belges* (2006).

Dat nieuwe scheppingswoord, gesproken door den mond van een bezielde en krachtig man, in den aanvang der 16<sup>de</sup> eeuw, klonk voort in alle Vorstenstaten van Europa, en zoude ook weërgalm vinden in het Graafschap van Holland.<sup>6</sup>

*The Lauernesse House [First Part]*

*I: In The Landsvrouw Maria.*

*I have never really understood why people write long introductions to lead up to a simple romantic story. I do not see why reader and writer have to struggle through a long series of sentences before one can hear and the other may speak. I always prefer to start first with what I have to tell: what is necessary to know and pleasant, the story itself must be able to teach; otherwise it would be better that both reader and writer did not start.*

*Many have certainly seen the sun rise many times; all have seen at least once how the luminous daughter of the heavens with slow dignity rises from the East and pushes the mists away from her, as an Eastern bride draws back the veil from her face at the first meeting with her husband. She is also the young bride of the earth; she is also the faithful spouse of the cheerful day, that is born with her, to die away with her; she is also ... then what isn't she, that has not been said of her by her countless describers! We do not want to add anything to that abundance; but we only ask, whether among those who saw it there were not some who regarded it as something more than a splendid stage-decoration of Nature, in which their applause was invited; whether they have ever thought about how this spectacle, which has been repeated mathematically with certainty since the first morning of creation, through thousands of annual circles, is a daily true reinforcement of the Divine power spoken at Creation: "Let there be light!" Where it is so light in the world of Nature, people must not make it dark for each other, and there is a better light than that of the sun: the light of Revelation. That new word of creation, spoken through the mouth of an inspired and powerful man at the beginning of the sixteenth century, resounded in all the Principalities of Europe, and would also be echoed in the County of Holland.<sup>7</sup>*

There is a certain irony to the opening of this novel, whose first paragraph wonders rather brusquely why people "write long introductions" while its second takes time to do exactly that. We have argued above that long introductions appealed to the Romantic period, for a variety of reasons, as they had not to the period's predecessors, who tended to begin *in medias res*.

6 Anna Louisa Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint, *Het huis Lauernesse* (Rotterdam: D. Bolle, 1906).

7 Translation reviewed by Harry van der Linden.

The opening first-person narrator is here given a good deal of leeway to interact with the reading public: they are tonally charged and opinionated. Such narrators are relatively common in the Romantic period—again, one thinks of Dickens's Pip in 1861's *Great Expectations*—and less common prior to that. Unreliable narrators certainly exist in the eighteenth century—Des Grieux in the abbé Prévost's 1731 *Manon Lescaut*, for instance, or the letter writers of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's 1782 *Liaisons dangereuses*—but that narration serves a specific moralistic purpose. Perhaps the closest parallel is Laurence Sterne's 1759 *Tristram Shandy*, where Tristram chats from start to finish. Sterne pioneered such conversational interludes, where narration is freed from the demands of plot; the device became frequent in the Romantic period, not least to open a novel.

The second paragraph, with its high tone, seems at first designed primarily to impress, or perhaps to co-opt for this novelistic production some of the prestige the epic took for granted. The sun, "luminous daughter of the heavens," is thus "the young bride of the earth," amid a string of other epithets. Such epithets stretch back to Homer, as Toussaint indicates in her mention of "countless describers;" they depend for their weight on Greco-Roman mythology, which may seem odd, given that the novel is about the Protestant Reformation. But having established her epic *bona fides*, with some added local color—"as an Eastern bride draws back the veil"—Toussaint turns from nature's spectacle to the Bible's "Let there be light," and contrasts sunlight with the "better light" of revelation. Toussaint has covered some ground from her opening epic invocation to the paragraph's conclusion, which focuses on a powerful man whose word of creation "would also be echoed in the County of Holland." Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the church door at Wittenberg in 1517; this novel opens in Holland in 1521.

As the opening irony suggests, or the text's abrupt passage from epic invocation to Luther, there is a certain lack of patina to this extract, as if it had not had time to age. One feels that Toussaint might have let it sit in the drawer for nine years, as Horace recommended, before publication.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps these ambiguities add a certain frisson to the text; I do not feel they add to its beauty. The problem may perhaps be laid at the feet of Toussaint's desire for epic; she has, in this novel, undertaken a large canvas, the arrival of the Reformation in Holland, and her opening invocation

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8 "nonumque prematur in annum." *Ars poetica*, l.389, in Horace, *Satires and Epistles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 116.

dovetails neatly into that sweeping commission. But just as epic paintings had a certain baggage from which the nineteenth century struggled to free itself—one thinks of the Musée d'Orsay and its academic painters—so epic in literature risked leaving long traces on novels that undertook to cover that terrain. Being simple is sometimes a very difficult thing.

**Anna Louisa Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint** (16 September 1812–14 April 1886), born in Alkmaar, published her first romance in 1837: *Almagro*. This was followed by *De Graaf van Devonshire* in 1838; *De Engelschen te Rome* [The English at Rome] in 1840; and *Het Huis Lauernesse* in 1841, a Dutch tale translated into several European languages. From 1840–1850, Toussaint published and conducted research resulting in an 1845–1855 trilogy: *De Graaf van Leycester in Nederland*, *De Vrouwen uit het Leycestersche Tijdvak* [Women of Leicester's Epoch], and *Gideon Florensz*. In 1851, she married Johannes Bosboom and added his name to hers. Toussaint later abandoned historical romance for contemporary novels: *De Delftsche Wonderdokter*, 1871, and *Majoer Frans*, 1875. Both did less well, though the latter was translated into English. A twenty-five-volume edition of her works appeared in 1885–1888.<sup>9</sup>

**Isabelle de Charrière, née Isabella Agneta Elisabeth van Tuyll van Serooskerken** [or **Belle van Zuylen**] (20 October 1740–27 December 1805), born in the château of Zuylen, near Utrecht, died in the canton of Neuchâtel, which then belonged to Prussia. Belle van Zuylen spoke French, English, German, Italian, and Latin, and studied mathematics and physics. She first published aged twenty-two: *Le Noble*, a satirical sketch. In 1771, she married Charles-Emmanuel de Charrière de Penthaz, and from 1782, began writing letters, pamphlets, tales, and novels, including the *Lettres neuchâtelaises*, 1784; *Lettres de Mistriss Henley publiées par son amie*, 1784; *Lettres écrites de Lausanne*, 1785; *Caliste*, 1787; and *Trois femmes*, 1796, along with plays, political tracts, and operas. Her extensive correspondence includes James Boswell and Benjamin Constant. She also composed music for piano, harpsichord, and string instruments.<sup>10</sup>

9 Lia Van Gemert, *Women's Writing from the Low Countries 1200–1875: A Bilingual Anthology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

10 C.P. Courtney, *Isabelle de Charrière (Belle de Zuylen). A Biography* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1993).



**Agatha ("Aagje") Deken** (1741–14 November 1804), born in Nieuwer-Amstel, lost her parents in 1745 and was placed in an Amsterdam orphanage, remaining there until 1767. She then served in several families before starting a tea and coffee business. In 1775, Deken published *Stichtelijke gedichten*, a poetry volume written with her friend Maria Bosch, who died in 1773. In 1776, Deken began corresponding with Betje Wolff, then well-known. After Betje's husband died, they lived together, publishing their joint *Brieven* [Letters] in 1777, then novels, including the *Historie van den heer Willem Leevend*, 1784, and *Sara Burgerhart*, 1787. When the Patriot faction was defeated, the two moved to Trévoux in Burgundy in 1788; *Wandelingen door Bourgogne* [Wanderings in Burgundy] appeared in 1789. The two returned to the Netherlands in 1797, living in The Hague. They died nine days apart.<sup>11</sup>

**Maria Aletta Hulshoff** [or **Mietje**] (30 July 1781–10 February 1846), born in Amsterdam, held her Mennonite father's Patriotic and anti-Orangist views. She was taken into custody after her first democratic pamphlet in 1804, but released when the authorities could not prove she was the author. Her second pamphlet, *Oproeping aan het Bataafse volk* [An Appeal to the Batavian People], 1806, she wrote under her own name, predicting that Louis Bonaparte would be made King of Holland. The authorities destroyed all but five copies. Hulshoff's family smuggled her to Germany, but she returned to stand trial, mounted her own defense, and was given two years in prison. Exiting, she published a new pamphlet attacking conscription. Charged again, she fled to Amsterdam, then London and New York City, 1811–1820, where she published the *Peace-Republicans' Manual* in 1817. She returned to the Netherlands in 1820.<sup>12</sup>

**Marguérite Emilie Luzac** (30 November 1748–28 November 1788), born in Leiden, married Wybo Fijnje in 1775. Wybo was a Patriot and publisher of *Hollandsche Historische Courant* in Delft; after the British and Prussians crushed the Patriot Revolution in 1787, the couple fled to Antwerp, Brussels, then Watten in French Flanders, where Luzac died in 1788. Her letters were published in 2003 as *Myne beslommerde Boedel*.<sup>13</sup>

11 P.J. Buijsters, *Wolff & Deken. Een biografie* (Leiden: Nijhoff, 1984).

12 Geertje Wiersma, *Mietje Hulshoff of de aanslag op Napoleon* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2003).

13 Emilie Fijnje-Luzac, *Myne beslommerde Boedel: brieven in ballingschap 1787–1788*, ed. Jacques J.M. Baartmans (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2003).

**Maria Petronella Woesthoven** (25 October 1760–26 January 1830), born in Dantumawoude, was a member of the academy Amsteldamse Dicht- en Letteroefenend Genootschap, 1786, and the Kunst Wordt door Arbeid Verkregen, joining the executive committee in 1793–1794. Her poem *Amsteldamse*, 1787, earned a gold medal, and two other poems earned silver medals: *Kunstliefde Spaart Geen Vlijt*, 1788, and *De invloed van een vast geloof aan de voorzienigheid*, 1789. Woesthoven married Samuel Elter in 1785; they divorced in 1803, Samuel alleging she had slept with other men. She was found guilty but awarded custody of their son.<sup>14</sup>

**Elizabeth “Betje” Wolff-Bekker** (24 July 1738–5 November 1804), born in Vlissingen, married Adriaan Wolff in 1759; he was thirty years her senior. In 1763, Wolff published her collection *Bespiegelingen over het genoegen* [Reflections on Pleasure]. After her husband’s death in 1777, she lived with Aagje Deken, the two dying nine days apart. They published together and it is difficult to determine the part of each: *Brieven* [Letters] in 1777, then novels, including the *Historie van den heer Willem Leevend*, 1784, and *Sara Burgerhart*, 1787. The Patriots were defeated in 1787 and the two fled to Burgundy, publishing *Wandelingen door Bourgogne* [Wanderings in Burgundy] in 1789 and translating the Swiss abolitionist Benjamin Sigismond Frossard in 1790. They returned to the Netherlands in 1797.<sup>15</sup>

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14 *Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon van Nederland* (<https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/vrouwenlexicon>).

15 P.J. Buijnsters, *Wolff & Deken* (1984).