
Early Modern Women in the Low Countries is an unusual and groundbreaking work that, unfortunately, does not fulfill the expectations created by its title. The book is interesting because of its willingness to cross traditional scholarly boundaries. Broomhall and Spinks explore women from different time periods, moving through the Middle Ages, the early modern period (broadly defined), and today. They analyze material from what are now three different countries, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. Moreover, their approach is truly interdisciplinary in two ways: they examine early modern representations of Dutch women in a wide variety of sources, including letters, art, dolls’ houses, and textiles, but they also consider how modern scholarship and the tourist and heritage industries have constructed narratives about these women. Thus, they work within several disciplines, including history, literature, art history, urban planning, fashion design, and museology. With the exception of art history, these other disciplines have not devoted sufficient study to early modern Dutch women, so the proposition of this book is long overdue. Broomhall and Spinks write that their larger intention is to “study the production and use
of sources in various contexts to create narratives of the past” (1), a wide-ranging approach that allows them to bring together very different types of evidence on which representations of early modern Dutch women are based. This wide range is exciting, but at the same time it comprises the book’s major drawback: the arguments in these disparate chapters remain vague and do not come together in anything but the broadest terms.

*Early Modern Women in the Low Countries* contains seven chapters on a diverse set of subjects. The first chapter, which offers a good example of the book’s method, concentrates on elite women of the Burgundian and Habsburg period, such as Eleanor de Poitiers. Beginning with the assertion that these women are often treated as exceptional individuals, despite being left out of larger political histories, Broomhall and Spinks propose that alternative sources, such as conduct books and commissions for funeral monuments, can be used to rewrite women’s place in political history. When seen as so-called ego-documents on a par with autobiography, these materials can create more complex narratives about women’s lives, both in scholarship and in museum exhibits.

The second chapter concentrates on a set of paintings by Isaac Claesz van Swanenburg entitled *The Old and New Trades*, which depicts scenes from the textile trades in Leiden and prominently features women. In what is perhaps the strongest chapter of the book, Broomhall and Spinks argue that Van Swanenburg’s images of women working alongside men in these trades provide a counterpoint to larger developments of the period that saw women increasingly confined to the domestic sphere. They suggest that Van Swanenburg’s depiction of women was “individual and quite innovative” (70) and that the paintings as representations of women’s labor deserve to be incorporated in both scholarship and museum exhibitions.

In Chapter Three, Broomhall and Spinks turn to letters by Louise de Coligny, written after the assassination of her husband, William of Orange, a central figure in the Dutch Revolt against Spain. These letters should be read, they argue, not merely as personal expressions of grief but also as political efforts to connect the Orange-Nassau family to the early Dutch Republic and thus construct “a familial and national narrative in which the Nassau family’s bodily and financial sacrifice had enabled the nation state” (83–84). They assert that museums and exhibits that present de Coligny’s
mourning as only personal and private miss the mark. They further argue that such representational practices are part of a longer historical narrative that prioritizes the sacrifice of male members of the Nassau family over female mourning.

Chapter Four turns to seventeenth-century dolls’ houses on display in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, which are conventionally, as in this museum, treated as objects of conspicuous consumption and reflections of real life in the period. Instead, Broomhall and Spinks see them as ego-documents, works through which wealthy early modern women narrated their own identities and imagined a playfully utopian household. The next chapter takes us into two real houses, the Rembrandt House in Amsterdam and the Rubens House in Antwerp, to examine the place of early modern women in these heritage sites. The Rembrandt House makes the wives and lovers in the artist’s life central to the exhibit. By contrast, they argue, the Rubens House features far fewer women and ignores the importance of the painter’s second wife, Helena Fourment (1614–1673), to the house itself. Instead, women appear primarily as patrons in the exhibit. These contrasting presentations are key to what Broomhall and Spinks see as the dominant curatorial narrative about Rembrandt, which emphasizes his turbulent personal life, and about Rubens, which focuses on his social status.

The final two chapters concentrate entirely on modern-day curatorial practices and tourism. Chapter Six considers places as sources for stories about late medieval and early modern women, and Chapter Seven looks at objects related to early modern women that are offered for sale in gift shops and that cater primarily to modern female consumers. In the former chapter, Broomhall and Spinks show that individual women are often linked to buildings as patrons or founders of charitable institutions; they also tend to be associated with and displayed at locations either because of their masculine achievements and behavior or because they were connected to famous men. Buildings that might offer visitors information on ordinary women’s daily lives, such as Beguine sites, convents, and hospitals, rarely do so. Thus, although images of early modern women, like Vermeer’s “Girl with the Pearl Earring,” feature prominently at museums and throughout Dutch cities, their actual experiences are generally disregarded. This con-
contrasts with what we see at gift shops, as Chapter Seven shows. The privileging of women’s experience at gift shops, however, is intended merely to encourage consumption by modern female tourists, who are thereby made to feel a special connection with the past. This final chapter also considers exhibits of lace, showing that, surprisingly, although women were vital to the making of lace, such displays do not explore the conditions under which women worked, but rather showcase their consumers, the wealthy elite. As they do for other types of evidence, Broomhall and Spinks propose treating lace as ego-documents that might be read as deliberate forms of self-expression by early modern women, deserving of scholarly analysis and presentation to tourists.

The thread that runs through these chapters, then, is the desire to broaden the range of sources we use to analyze early modern women’s identities by labeling objects, places, monuments, and other sources as ego-documents. Broomhall and Spinks claim that such a move would benefit both scholarship and curatorial practices, allowing for a more complex view of early modern women and a richer tourist experience. While I applaud this larger sentiment, I was disappointed by the actual results of the analyses offered in these chapters. Frequently, the authors were still asking questions and making suggestions near the end of chapters, gesturing towards possibilities for future exploration rather than actually doing the exploring in depth. It is wonderful to see that there are so many opportunities for further research and enrichment, but I would have liked to have learned more from the experience of reading this book. A second shortcoming is that the book uses very few Dutch-language sources, leading me to suspect that the authors do not possess adequate familiarity with the language. This is also suggested by more than a few mistakes in the Dutch, at times made repeatedly.

My main problem with the failure to incorporate early modern sources in Dutch is that the title of the book promises a much larger overview and engagement with early modern women of the Low Countries. In light of the 1997 publication of the landmark anthology *Met en zonder lauwerkkrans* (*With or without laurels*) and the bilingual shorter version, *Women’s Writing from the Low Countries, 1200–1875* (reviewed in Volume 7 of this journal), it is clear that the authors of *Early Modern Women in the Low
Countries omit a major and obvious set of sources and ego-documents, as well as overlooking much scholarly literature that is only available in Dutch. Broomhall and Spinks make some generalizations about Dutch identity and culture, such as the notion that “the House of Orange-Nassau is today at the heart of the Dutch nation” (96), the idea of “the enduring appeal of the dolls’ house within Dutch culture” (103), or even their casual remark that “Foreign visitors are surprised by the extent to which families in the Netherlands live their lives under the view of passers-by, brightly lit and seen through gleaming glass windows” (104). These comments take no account of the fast-changing nature and cultural diversity of the Dutch population today and instead treat “the Dutch nation” as a cultural monolith. This also begs the question why the authors never really address the difference in the experience of the past for foreign tourists and Dutch visitors to heritage sites and museums; the only distinction made between tourists is related to gender. In light of their interest in tourism and the heritage industry, Broomhall and Spinks could have fruitfully explored their own engagement with early modern Dutch women as mediated by their status as foreign readers of Dutch culture. While this book is innovative and interesting, it is only a beginning, and a more thorough exploration of early modern women in the Low Countries is yet to get underway.

Martine van Elk
California State University, Long Beach