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Women's Writing
from the Low Countries
1200-1875
A Bilingual Anthology

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Chief ed. Lia van Gemert

ISBN 978 90 8964 129 8

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An Everyday Patriot

Maria-Francisca Doolaeghe

DIKSMUIDE, 25 OCTOBER 1803 – DIKSMUIDE, 7 APRIL 1884

LIA VAN GEMERT
TRANSL. BRENDA MUDDÉ

AS THE ELDEST CHILD, Maria-Francisca Doolaeghe was forced to give up her education and help out her mother when her father, a potter from Diksmuide, near Dunkirk, died in 1818. Years later and a mother herself, she would again be faced with the harsh realities of death, as two of her three children died before her.

Although a teaching job was now beyond her reach, she refused to relinquish her intellectual aspirations entirely. She was a voracious reader, joined the local Chamber of Rhetoric and made many literary contacts. Frans Rens in particular gave her the chance to publish her work and termed her the 'Belgian Sappho'. Her breakthrough came in 1850 with her second volume of poetry, *The Night Lamp* (*De Avondlamp*). Memberships of numerous Poetry Societies and many prizes followed. She was a prolific correspondent, exchanging letters with fellow writers and artists in both Flanders and the Netherlands, Petronella Moens among them. Her two thousand letters were destroyed in the First World War.

The Southern Netherlands rose up against Dutch rule in 1830 and in 1839 gained independence as Belgium, a country where three languages were spoken: Flemish (a form of Dutch), French (the language of public life), and German (spoken by a small minority on the German border). Doolaeghe initially opposed Belgian independence because she believed that only an alliance with the North would enable the creation of a modern Belgium with full rights for the Flemish language. A few years later, however, she joined the Flemish patriots' struggle for an independent Belgium, and she would continue to advocate linguistic rights and education in Flemish.

Doolaeghe published mostly poetry: her first volume, *Daisies* (*Madelieven* 1840), was followed by five others. *Flanders' Agriculture* (*Vlaanderens landbouw*, below) has been taken from *The Night Lamp* and is a good example of her work. It is an optimistic ode to a prosperous Flanders and a united and harmonious Belgium, written in a lofty style. The title *The Night Lamp* also articulates the ideal of the motherly author who takes care of her family during the day and burns the midnight oil in order to write. But Doolaeghe's poetry went beyond traditional, innate feminine characteristics such as emotiveness, sensitivity,

spirituality and artistry. For them with manly characteristics. Van Duyse considered her a patriot because it required a woman to write a number of volumes on women. She also wrote on her vulnerability as mother and the caring mother's role in providing consolation and support.

The commonality of women proved valuable in Belgium to be a part of *Winter Blooms* (*Winterbloemen*) (Nieuwste gedichten) in the public eye through her work in three volumes of poetry, musical adaptations, and German.

spirituality and an affinity for the material and practical world of the family, and combined them with manly ingenuity, power and boldness of imagination. Or so the leading contemporary Flemish author Prudens van Duyse opined in his preface to *The Night Lamp*. Van Duyse considered her the best representative of this model, which was in fact repressive because it required women to continue fulfilling all their traditional tasks. Doolaeghe herself wrote a number of scathing poems in which she openly attacked the limitations imposed on women. She also drew attention to the personal experiences of women and their vulnerability as mothers, as in the ode *Palfyn* (1849) given below. She connected the role of the caring mother with moral categories such as righteousness, dedication, courage, pity, consolation and love.

The combination of patriotic themes and the everyday life of married bourgeois women proved very popular and gained Doolaeghe great prestige; she was the first woman in Belgium to be awarded the Order of Leopold in 1881. Because of her steady production – *Winter Blooms* (*Winterbloemen* 1868), *Autumn Fruits* (*Najaarsvruchten* 1869), *Newest Poems* (*Nieuwste gedichten* 1878) and *Latest Volume* (*Jongste dichtbundel* 1884) – she remained in the public eye until her death. She gained recognition abroad when her collected works in three volumes were published in The Hague between 1876 and 1878, through numerous musical adaptations (e.g. by Peter Benoit), and through translations into English, French and German.



Van mijn achtzigste levensjaar
 Vrouw Vanacker
 geb. Maria Doolaeghe

49. Maria Doolaeghe – the headdress and the pen stand for housekeeping and writing

VAN GEMERT
 BRENDA MUDDÉ

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 eness, sensitivity,

Vlaanderens landbouw, bij 't landbouwkundige feest gevierd te Dixmude

5 Neen, neen, de deugd is niet gezonken
van Vlaandrens moedig voorgeslacht.
Waar de ouderen vol grootheid blonken,
weegt op hun kroost geen schandenacht.
10 Daar dooft geen krachtig geestvermogen,
daar blijft het vrij en onverbogen;
daar plant de domheid nooit haar staf.
De zielenwaarde, er ingeboren,
gaat bij dien volke niet verloren;
15 maar schittert over tijd en graf!

15 Wij schallen 't uit, met trotse zinnen:
ons spoort de deugd der vaadren aan.
Zij doet ons de eedle kunsten minnen
en 't hart den vaderlande slaan.
20 Zij is 't, die zielverzustring baarde,
die ons ten bondgenoten schaarde,
en landbouwkunde een outer schonk,
waarop wij blijde bloemen strooien,
en kransen om haar beeldnis plooien,
25 bevallig als een lentelonk.

[...]

Flanders' Agricult
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Flanders' Agriculture. Doolaege read this ode aloud at an agricultural and horticultural show in Diksmuide in 1849, in the presence of ministers Rogier and Rolin. As a token of their appreciation, they presented the poet with a parcel of books. The work is an example of Doolaege's idealistic, patriotic poetry. The flourishing of Belgian agriculture and industry is related to the grandeur of the national past and the Arcadian paradise of the Flemish countryside, with a vivid evocation of the abundance provided by the fields.

Flanders' Agriculture, at the Diksmuide Agricultural Show

mude

No, no, the virtue has not gone
Of Flanders' brave past renown.
Where the ancients' greatness shone,
No night of shame weighs their offspring down.
5 No powerful genius is snuffed out,
Free, upright life puts bondage to rout;
There, stupidity can never plant its stave.
Spiritual value, which is innate,
In that, people does not dissipate,
10 But shines through time, beyond the grave!

We shout it out, with pride in our hearts:
With forefathers' virtue we strive to compete.
It makes us love all the noble arts
And makes our country's own heart beat.
15 It created the unity of minds,
That us with our allies combined and combines,
And raised an altar to farming here,
On which we joyful flowers strew,
Weave garlands to its statue due,
20 Charming as looks that in springtime appear.

[...]

Schoon wieglen, bij Dixmudes rozen,
de vruchten, door uw vlijt vergaard.
Ziet, bloemen geuren, fruiten blozen:
bij milde veeteelt snuift het paard,
25 stoffering onzer weelge weiden,
waarvan het oog niet af kan scheiden,
dat, vonkelend, hun tegenjuicht.
O volle veldschat! wat priëlen
vermogen meer den Belg te strelen?
30 Wat, dat van breder rijkdom tuigt?

Gelukkig, waar uit rappe vingeren
de vette melkstroom nederplast,
waar 't koren mag in golven slingeren,
en 't koolzaad bij de vlasplant wast.
35 Gelukkig, waar de Heer zo zegent,
en vruchtbaarheid op de akkers regent,
en overloed de dalen dekt.
Weest fier op zulken erfgrond, Belgen;
geen tijd kan die trezoor verzwelgen,
40 die t'elken jare een goudmijn wekt.

't Is paradijs zo ver wij schouwen:
Natuur sloeg hier haar tempel op,
om al de scheppingspracht te ontvouwen;
voert, vrienden, Belgies naam in top,
45 Die steeds in landbouw uit mag gloren.
Haalt uit zijn opgevulden horen
den zelfgewonnen overloed,
om dien Europa rond te delen:
verhoogt de wondren, dien hij telen --
50 den rijkdom, dien hij baren moet.

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[...]

By Diksmude's roses sweetly they sway,
The fruits gathered by your hard-working hands.
Look, flowers smell, and fruits blush away:
Next to mild grazing cows the snorting horse stands:
25 Furnishing our lush fields as they lie,
Which rivet every single eye,
Which, sparkling, acclaims what it sees.
O great wealth of the field! What arbours with flowers galore
Could sing Belgians' diligence more?
30 What show greater riches than these?

Happy, where from fingers fast
The full fat milk splashes down,
Where the corn in waves rolls past,
And rapeseed with flax shares the ground.
35 Happy, where the Lord can bless,
Drenching the fields with fruitfulness,
And abundance covers the dales.
Belgian, be proud of such a land;
This treasure's safe from time's greedy hand,
40 And us each year with new wealth regales.

Heaven as far as eye can see:
Nature has built its temple here,
Unfolding creation's majesty;
Friends, raise on high our flag so dear,
45 Let our farming's great name abide.
Let its cornucopia provide
The abundance you yourself produce,
And spread through Europe's other states:
Increase the wonders it creates -
50 The wealth it is bound to induce.

[...]

TRANSL. PAUL VINCENT

Palfyn. Vaderlands gedicht

'k Ben moeder: 't zegt genoeg, opdat ik voor u kniel' –
den warmen toon u zing', geofferd door de ziel;
op uw eerwaardig graf, Palfyn, gebloemte strooie;
erkentlijk nederzink', de handen samenplooië,
5 en 't dankgebed u storte, u, die aan 't zwak geslacht,
naast Gode de eerste, hulp in doodsgevaren bracht.

't Is 't uur
der sluimrende natuur.
De maan speelt over berg en vlakke,
10 en giet verzilvring op 't getakte;
een grafrust overheerst de stad.
Er gaat op 't eenzaam, treurig pad
een priester, voorgestapt van lichten,
die 't naken van den dood berichten.

Hij treedt
15 in 't huis, waar angst en leed
een jonge moeder fel benauwen.
Gene uitkomst, die zij op ziet blauwen:
verschriklijk woelt de barenstijd,
20 met leven, met natuur in strijd.
Geen schrandre hulp, door de aard gezonden,
kan redden in die bange stonden.

O Heer,
de hope leeft niet meer!
25 zal 't graf die jonge bloem verslinden –
den teersten huwlijksband ontbinden –
en haar ontrukken aan het wicht,
dat, schreiend, nog in 't wiegje ligt;
en haar ontrukken aan de klenen,
30 die aan des vaders knieën wenen?

*Palfyn. Ode to
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scene in which
Palfyn wields*

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Palfyn. Ode to Jan Palfyn, a Flemish surgeon and anatomist (Kortrijk, 1650 – Ghent, 1730). In 1712, Palfyn demonstrated the parallel obstetric forceps in Paris. Doolaege begins her paeon with a reference to her own experience of motherhood, and continues with a fictional scene in which a young mother undergoing a difficult labour is saved from death. The heroic Palfyn wields the rescuing ‘steel’ of the forceps blades.

Palfyn. Patriotic Poem

I'm a mother: that's enough to make me kneel to you –
To sing with warmth my heartfelt tribute too;
Round your honoured grave, Palfyn, a host of flowers wind,
Sink down in gratitude and with my hands entwined
5 Pour out a prayer of thanks to you who the weaker sex
After God brought relief from labour's dire effects.

It is night
And nature slumbers tight.
The moon plays over hills and plains
10 And covers the branches with silver veins;
A tomb-like hush cloaks the town like a load.
Down the lonely, gloomy road
Walks a priest with lights that are borne ahead
Which say that someone will soon be dead.

15 He goes
Into the house where care and woes
Attend a young mother's grievous plight.
No escape is there in sight:
Her labour pains cause dreadful strife,
20 Conflict with nature and with life.
No able help, by Nature sent,
Can save her now that by fear she's rent.

O Lord,
All hope is overboard!
25 Will the grave consume that young life –
Sever the marriage bond with its knife –
And tear her from the little mite
That in the cradle cries with fright;
And tear her from the family,
30 The children who weep at father's knee?

Ach, 't zijn
 onnoozle duifjes, die 't satijn
 der donzen pluimen nog ontberen
 om koude en regen af te weren,
 35 het naakte lijfje zou vergaan:
 laat hen de moederwiek omslaan,
 om lust en leven uit te broeden;
 laat nog dien engel hen behoeden!

Ze is groot,
 40 ze is moeder bij dien nood.
 Haar moed groeit onder leed en tranen:
 ja, schoon, bij 't priesterlijk vermanen,
 elk rond haar vruchtbre sponde rouw',
 en, neergeknield, de handen vouw',
 45 om heuglijke uitkomst af te smeken,
 de moederhoop staat onbezweken.

Maar eer
 de stille mane weer
 haar glans onttrok aan berg en vlakke,
 50 en 't zilver afdreef van 't getakte –
 maar eer de stilte week uit stad,
 keerde op het eenzaam treurig pad,
 de priester, biddend: 'Albehoeder,
 verzacht ten minste 't uur dier moeder!'

55 Wie is 't,
 die haar aan 't graf betwist,
 en op den dood wil zegepralen?
 Wie doet er troost op 't sterfbed dalen?
 Palfyn!.... Zijn geest rees, en doordacht,
 60 en schiep, vol stoute vindingskracht.
 't Geheim der vroedkunst ligt ontbonden:
 't verlossingstaal is uitgevonden.

Zijn hand,
 geleid door vlug verstand,
 65 beproeft dat staal met vast vertrouwen;
 nu staakt het droef gezin zijn rouwen;
 God steunt de lijderes: daar glijdt
 het wicht, verlost uit fellen strijd,
 in de armen van 't ontkiemde leven,
 70 met haar den greep des doods ontheven.

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Oh, this pack
Of innocent doves, they still lack
The satin down feathers round about
To ward off cold and rain without,
35 Their naked bodies would not survive:
Let mother's wings fold and keep them alive,
Hatching out their life and will;
May that angel preserve them still!

She is great,
40 A mother despite her state.
Her courage grows with pain and tears:
Yes, even when the mother hears
At her fertile bedside the priest's grim call
To fold hands all and to their knees fall
45 To pray for a happy ending,
The mother's hope is unbending.

But e'er
The silent moonlight there
Withdrew its sheen from hill and leas,
50 And silver flowed down from the trees –
But e'er the silence left the town,
The home-bound priest the path came down,
Praying to the Saviour plain:
'Alay at least that mother's pain!'

55 Who's he
Would wrest her from fatality
And would rob death of its sting?
Who to the deathbed sweet comfort will bring?
Palfyn!... His spirit rose and he thought
60 And created, bold inventiveness wrought.
Obstetrics' secret has been laid bare:
His forceps transform women's surgical care.

His hand,
65 Guided by what his quick brain's planned,
Tries that steel with firm conviction;
The sad family throws off its affliction;
God helps the sufferer: the little mite
Slips, released from its desperate fight,
70 Into burgeoning life's safe clasp,
Escaped with it from death's grim grasp.

75 Nu stroomt,
door blijdschap eerst onttoemd,
de traan van d'afgestormden vader:
hij vliegt den aardsen engel nader,
en drukt de hand, die redden mocht,
en kust den vriend, die rustloos zocht
om 't wondermiddel uit te denken,
en adem aan het kind te schenken.

80 Hij sluit
in de armen gade en spruit,
en laat zijn boezem overlopen
van heil: het moederhart gaat open;
volzaalge tranen klimmen op,
en danking zingt in elken drop;
85 Zij poogt ze in woorden uit te drukken,
maar hijgt, bedwelmd in dit verrukken.

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Tears flow,
Freed by happiness' glow;
The storm-tossed father's joy gushes:
As to his angel on earth he rushes,
75 And shakes the hand that saved her he loved best
And kisses the friend who hunted without rest
To discover the magical cure,
And give breath to the child so pure.

80 The two,
He embraces wife and baby too,
And lets his bosom overflow
With joy: the mother's heart lets go;
Blissful weeping rises up,
Each drop resounds in a thankful cup;
85 She tries in words to find the sum,
But gasps, by rapture overcome.

[...]

TRANSL. PAUL VINCENT

Sources: DOOLAEGHE 1850: 1-10, 11-14.

Literature: Couttenier 1997b and 2001; Doolaeghe 2009;

Van den Berg & Couttenier 2009: 151-152, 191-192, 320-322, 379-380, 485.