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**Danger, You Are Entering the Garbage Vortex!**

**Salvaging the History of Women's Participation in European Literary Culture**

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## **Danger, You Are Entering the Garbage Vortex!**

### **Salvaging the History of Women's Participation in European Literary Culture**

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In 2016, the British Comparative Literature Association proposed a thought-provoking and topical conference theme: Salvage. My spontaneous associations evoked dramatic scenes of shipwrecks and last-minute rescues, as well as the altogether more peaceful activity of beachcombing. But then I quickly realized that the notion of salvage strongly resonated with me professionally, as a scholar who is focusing on the participation of women in nineteenth-century literary culture in Europe, with the overall aim of contributing to a change in the ways in which we construct and tell literary history.

Together with friends and colleagues organized in the network *New approaches to Women's Writing* (NEWW, coordinated by Suzan van Dijk,

<http://www.womenwriters.nl/>), I am constantly trying to find ways of how to deal with the jetsam and flotsam of literary history, so to speak, how to deal with authors and texts that have been swept overboard – often without anybody noticing – or that have been actively discarded as dispensable, thrown overboard to lighten a vessel. This desire to salvage women's writing was also the driving force behind our recent research project *Travelling Texts, 1790-1914: The Transnational Reception of Women's Writing at the Fringes of Europe (Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Spain)*

(September 2013-August 2016). Working together at the University of Glasgow, the University of Turku, Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands, Volda University College and the University of Nova Gorica, our overall aim was to find new, more inclusive ways of constructing the history of literary culture. However, up to

which point does it help our endeavour if we see our research as a salvage operation?

In this brief position paper, I will use the notion of salvage as a de-familiarizing lens to reflect critically on our research, especially regarding the challenges and difficulties involved in developing new approaches to literary history more in general. This is a complex problem and the approach via an extended analogy is clearly rather impressionistic. Nevertheless, I would argue that this exercise is necessary, precisely because it can be difficult to find the right words if we want to change the momentum of an already existing story –a point that has been informing feminist approaches to the study of language for several decades now. It links to ideas about how images and stories frame our worldviews and behaviour, an issue that has fascinated philosophers, linguists and writers alike.

In the maritime context, *salvage* engages a complex dynamics of relations. Salvage is triggered by loss – the accidental or intentional loss of cargo and/or parts belonging to a vessel. What is lost can be salvaged, a process that apparently evolves around very precise legal dispositions concerning the recognition of ownership, the value of goods and the right to a “payment of compensation to which those persons are entitled who have by their voluntary efforts saved a ship or its cargo from impending peril or rescued it from actual loss”, according to the Oxford English Dictionary ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com) [last accessed 17 June 2017]). The desire to recover something that has been lost has fuelled the critical scrutiny of archives in search for women, an approach that is fundamental to Women’s Studies as it emerged in the times of what is usually called second-wave feminism in the English-speaking world. Projects like the History of Nordic Women’s Literature show the potential and productivity of this approach, clearly invoking the dynamics of loss and salvage in their presentation:

The History of Nordic Women's Literature provides a unique opportunity to read about works written by women of earlier generations, writing which conventional literary history has at times overlooked. Albeit the works might have had a significant impact in their day, national literary histories have often disregarded these female voices and – because they are female – eliminated them from history. ("Welcome to the history of Nordic Women's Literature", retrieved from <https://nordicwomensliterature.net/welcome-to-the-history-of-nordic-womens-literature/> [last accessed 17 June 2017]).

Looking at the construction of women's history in terms of a salvage operation provides us with ingredients for a great yarn: feminist scholars metaphorically risking life and limbs in their attempt to rescue lost goods from the seas and beaches of the archive, returning them to their rightful place in the pages of literary history, with recognition of the efforts they made to save the goods from peril or actual loss. However, the narrative we experience in our feminist salvage operations can follow a very different pattern; it often twists into another direction once we, the feminist salvage crew, try to put the salvaged goods back into circulation.

A recent example of this difficulty was the reaction to the Call for Papers for the closing conference of the *Travelling Texts* project. The title of the conference was *Cultural Encounters through Reading and Writing: New Approaches to the History of Literary Culture*, the conference venue was Glasgow Women's Library and we clearly stated that the event was organized by a research project in gender history. However, the Call for Papers reflected the aim to engage in a broader discussion about the state of the history of literary culture today. Talking about how to address women writers of the past was given as one option among several others, which included for instance the biographic turn in literary history, or the increasing interest in the history of emotions and affect. We circulated the Call for Papers in Gender History networks, but it was widely distributed through other channels too, for instance relevant subject associations.

Nevertheless, all but one abstract we received dealt with issues relating to the history of women's writing. The resulting conference programme was extremely interesting and the event as a whole was very productive while reflecting a problem that has been diagnosed many times. To borrow from Mario Valdés, our *Cultural Encounters* conference must have been perceived as firmly located in the territory of counter-histories, that is, those histories that deal with what Valdés calls the black holes of literary history: on the whole, they remain add-ons to mainstream history rather than integral parts thereof (Valdés, 2002, p. 65).

It seems that the narrative of heroically salvaging the history of women's participation in literary culture still tends to derail when we approach the crossroads of agreeing on the value of the salvaged goods. What happens if we are salvaging something that only a very specific group of people had been missing in the first place, because it was or still is considered to be useless or worthless, in other words, garbage? Moreover, in our research we certainly have to dive deep into the dustbins of literary history in order to find our primary sources, because often they have not been carefully preserved. One example is nineteenth-century fashion magazines: they were extremely important for the transnational circulation of women's writing, but for some of the most relevant publications we do not have a full run of issues – not only because those magazines were read over and over again and thrown away when they disintegrated, but also because it has been a common practice to take out the historical fashion plates for commercial purposes. In my research into serialized novels in newspapers, a very important space for the circulation of texts in the nineteenth century, I have come across digitized copies in National Libraries in which the section reserved for the novel had been cut out (and presumably thrown away at some point) by a reader of the original paper copy. Even the achievement of publishing a proper book rather than contributions

in the more ephemeral press did not mean that a work would be available to posterity. Copyright libraries have a chequered history in different countries and normal libraries prune their collections each year in a process technically called “weeding”, i.e. discarding books that are perceived to lack importance in order to make room for new items.

Despite the immediate attractiveness of the notion of salvaging women’s literary history, I would therefore argue that it could be counterproductive to conceptualize our research activity as a salvage operation. Given the type of material with which we engage, we rather seem to operate in the area of beachcombing, picking up, turning over and collecting material left stranded. Today’s voice of negotiated collective knowledge, Wikipedia, shines a bright light on the problem that comes with this approach. It says in the entry on beachcombing:

Items such as lumber, plastics, and all manner of things that have been lost or discarded by seagoing vessels will be collected by some beachcombers, as long as the items are either decorative or useful in some way to the collector. (However, this usually does not include the great bulk of marine debris, most of which is neither useful nor decorative.)

(Wikipedia, *s.v.* “Beachcombing”, retrieved in <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beachcombing> [last accessed 17 June 2017]).

Obviously, there is room for debate about what is useful, when it is useful, why and for whom, and decorativeness depends both on the context and the eye of the beholder. Nevertheless, as somebody who has been studying women’s writing in nineteenth-century Europe for quite some time, I am realizing more and more how difficult it can be to convince academics from outside our field of research that our carefully collected material could be more than just decorative curios. I think the reason is that we are still very much influenced by established narratives about literary history,

which quickly turn into not always very productive battles about the canon in all its different manifestations and layers. As a consequence, we enter into debates that push us toward trying to fit our newly collected pieces into an already existing structure, even if the structure has been designed for a different purpose. Only on rare occasions can we convince people from outside our research networks that we have rescued a proper treasure, a woman writer worthy of getting a place in the general display cabinet.

Entering the display cabinet has consequences, though. Quite often it also means that the woman writer in question is presented in isolation, as an exception; a safe bet to fall back on if we have to include “the woman’s perspective” into teaching or research; one interesting object found on the beach that somehow stands in for quite a lot of other objects of a supposedly similar kind. The underlying, problematic assumption is that if one has seen one or two of them, one has seen them all. But perhaps canonizing is not the most productive way of doing justice to our material, as pointed out by Anne Birgitte Rønning during the *Cultural Encounters* conference. Instead, I would argue that it can be really liberating to boldly venture into the garbage vortex of literary culture and see what we can learn from the bulk of marine debris, what we can learn if we seriously engage with what from today’s perspective is the “great unread” of literary culture, to quote the expression popularized by Franco Moretti (2000, p. 208).

Delving into the debris of the great unread is precisely what we are doing in the context of the *Travelling Texts* project, searching historical library catalogues and the historical press in Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia and Spain for those women writers whose texts circulated in nineteenth-century Europe. These contemporaneous places of literary culture – libraries, magazines, serialized novels in the feuilleton of newspapers – are the beaches that we use to inventory what turns up ashore, which then allows us to compare our finds and to make hypotheses about the



currents that allow our material to circulate. This approach means that we are not looking for collectibles, for useful or decorative finds. Instead, we try to understand the relations that crisscross the literary system, similar to those oceanographers who use maritime debris to develop a better understanding of currents.

System and relations are the keywords here because they shift the focus toward the complex, dynamic connectedness of elements. This relational approach facilitates an exploration of literary culture that I find frankly fascinating. Once an entry point into the literary system has been chosen, its connections to other literary sites can be followed, with the possibility of reaching any other point via different pathways, depending on the choices made according to the questions raised – this principle can be seen in action in our Prezi presentation *Women's Connections through Reading and Writing in the 19th Century* (<https://prezi.com/cgmfftjueagi/womens-connections-through-reading-and-writing-in-the-19th-century/>). One example for such an entry point from the *Travelling Texts* project would be the *Kristiania Læseforening for Kvinder*, scrutinized in detail by Marie Nedregotten Sørbo. A first, obvious connection leads to sister initiatives in Copenhagen and Stockholm, but there are also direct links from the Scandinavian Reading Societies for women to the *Damesleesmuseum* in The Hague (Duyvendak, 2003). A closer study of the writers involved in these initiatives, for instance the renowned translator from Scandinavian languages into Dutch, Margaretha Meyboom, opens further possibilities of following connections. At the same time, the comparative study of holdings in different libraries can provide new insights into which texts were read where (and sometimes, by whom). Among women writers widely read in very different corners of Europe, we find for instance (in alphabetical order) Harriet Beecher Stowe, Fredrika Bremer, Gyp, E. Marlitt, George Sand, Matilde Serao (an authentic revelation for our colleagues in Italian Studies) and Madame de Staël, to name

just a few. Although some of them will be well-known friends to some of us, others will be authentic discoveries in relation to the cultural contexts with which we are familiar, thus incentivizing us to read different texts and to ask different questions about the function of literature.

For me it was an exhilarating and enriching experience to commit fully to what I call here the garbage vortex. It showed me a way out of the endless discussions about the canon, which in turn gave me space to ask different questions. Yet there is more to this framework than personal fulfilment. A relational approach provides researchers with a sense of place of the material they are studying. Most importantly, the emphasis on connectedness is a useful reminder that all elements in a system are mutually dependent; we cannot just randomly ignore some of them, for instance women writers, without damaging the full picture. Of course, that does not mean that we are pursuing the dream of a total(izing) history. However, the conceptualization of literary culture as a dynamic network created by the interaction of many sub-systems or sites makes it easier to balance the need for both generalization and precise attention to detail. We can zoom in and out, depending on research interest: after sifting through a part of the garbage vortex we can identify the authors and texts that circulated most across the segments of the poly-system that we are studying, which in future may lead to new interest in these authors and texts. Conversely, we can enlarge a specific site that we find particularly interesting, e.g. a lending library or a magazine, and study what specific people did with these texts in a specific place at a specific time. This mechanism of scaling is not only important because it incorporates into our perspective the rootedness of literary culture in local practices. It also reminds us at each step of the level of abstraction at which we are working and of the need to consider what we are excluding at each point, which possible connections to other sites we are not following

(for instance because we are privileging female authors). In this sense, the garbage vortex has much to teach us, and not only about women's writing.

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