

Wayne Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 271 pp., illus.

Els Kloek, Nicole Teeuwen and Marijke Huisman, eds, *Women of the Golden Age: An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland, England and Italy*, Hilversum, Verloren, 1994, 190 pp., illus.

Angela Vanhaelen

Volume 21, numéro 1-2, 1994

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072674ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072674ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

#### Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

#### ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

#### Citer ce compte rendu

Vanhaelen, A. (1994). Compte rendu de [Wayne Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 271 pp., illus. / Els Kloek, Nicole Teeuwen and Marijke Huisman, eds, *Women of the Golden Age: An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland, England and Italy*, Hilversum, Verloren, 1994, 190 pp., illus.] *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 21(1-2), 137–143. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072674ar>

Tous droits réservés © UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada), 1996

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

ence sources?). Heckscher's article, as is to be expected, is a laudatory intellectual biography that constructs a very sympathetic portrait of Panofsky and discloses little of his personal life, though the Panofsky we meet is a humane and attractive figure in harmony with the humanistic principles associated with his writings. Panofsky's humanism was of course related to his intellectual tradition, but it was also contemporary. At the end of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, in a well-known and beautiful passage, Kant states that the two things that fill him with respect are the starry heav-

ens above and the moral law within. Heckscher relates to us that "at the end of an electrifying evening with Ernst Kantorowicz in which the topic of discussion had been man's innate sense of the Sublime, [Kantorowicz], stepping out of the house on Battle Road, remarked, 'Looking at the stars, I feel my own futility.' To which Panofsky replied, 'All I feel is the futility of the stars'."

ALLISTER NEHER  
Humanities Department, Dawson College  
Montreal, Quebec

WAYNE FRANITS, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 271 pp., illus.

ELS KLOEK, NICOLE TEEUWEN AND MARIJKE HUISMAN, eds, *Women of the Golden Age: An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland, England and Italy*, Hilversum, Verloren, 1994, 190 pp., illus.

#### Dutch Culture and the Politics of Difference

Two recent publications, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* by Wayne Franits, and *Women of the Golden Age: An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland, England and Italy* edited by Els Kloek, Nicole Teeuwen and Marijke Huisman, reveal that issues of gender are becoming increasingly central to (re)writing the history of seventeenth-century Dutch culture. While the concerns of "women's history" are not new to historical understandings of this period, both Wayne Franits and Els Kloek point out that there is still much work to be done on the place of women in early modern Dutch society. As Franits states in the preface to *Paragons of Virtue*, the fields of Dutch seventeenth-century art, women's studies and social history have recently undergone sweeping changes.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, these changes are ongoing, as the study of gender relations opens these disciplines to new questions about the operation of power in the past. Thus, *Paragons of Virtue* and *Women of the Golden Age* are both significant contributions to considerations of seventeenth-century Dutch culture. An examination of these two books accesses recent methodological debates which converge and often conflict at the disciplinary intersections of women's history, socio-economic history, literary studies and art history.

Franits carefully draws the parameters of his study and, with clarity of style, limits his analysis to seventeenth-century genre paintings imaging domestic virtue and the ways in which they functioned in Dutch society. Negotiating his

way through ongoing methodological contests over the interpretation of Dutch genre painting, Franits incorporates some of the concerns of feminist social art history in an examination of the role that these images of women played in reinforcing the patriarchy. Virtuous domesticity is conflated with ideal femininity as Franits argues, "the paintings were carriers of cultural significance,...they shaped and in turn were shaped by a firmly established system of beliefs and values about women that were endorsed within the patriarchal social order of the day."<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, while this method opens the paintings to fresh interpretations, in the final analysis, it serves to close off meaning and to circumscribe "Dutch women" within the extremely rigid categories of a patriarchal value system.

This incongruity can be explored in terms of the manner in which *Paragons of Virtue* both moves beyond, yet remains constrained by recent, often heated, critical debates which fragment the field of seventeenth-century Dutch art history. These debates are by now well-rehearsed, and are most often discussed in terms of disparities between the approaches of two art historians, Eddy de Jongh and Svetlana Alpers.<sup>3</sup> Influenced by Irwin Panofsky's notion of concealed symbolism, Eddy de Jongh has used emblem books, prints and popular literature to tease out moral meanings which lie hidden behind ostensibly realistic representations. In disputing this method, Svetlana Alpers has called for renewed attention to the descriptive surfaces of Dutch paintings, which, she argues, function in terms of seventeenth-century empiricist theories of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Thus, allegory, or content, has been pitted against naturalism, or style. Because both de Jongh's and Alper's methods have been extensively criticized, scholars working on Dutch genre paintings struggle to find effective new approaches. Franits rightly argues that the naturalism/symbolism split is a false polarization, and that style and content intertwined impart meaning: "The propensity in much current scholarship to divorce form, that is, pictorial style, from content is therefore anachronistic for both are inextricably bound together."<sup>5</sup>

Franits critiques Svetlana Alper's interpretation of Dutch painting as a neutral art of describing by examining the ways in which artistic conventions influenced what and how "reality" was represented. He convincingly argues that both the style and content of these images of domestic virtue were governed by conventions of this genre, and concludes: "Owing to the extremely limited number of subjects depicted and the repetition of specific formulations, the much-vaunted 'reality' represented in these paintings can only be described as a selective, fictitious construct."<sup>6</sup> For example, he points out that women were usually depicted as "types," who embodied specific feminine virtues, and were surrounded by a limited number of objects and motifs, which carried the same moral meanings.<sup>7</sup>

*Paragons of Virtue* also departs from Eddy de Jongh's formulation that the meanings of repeated themes, types and motifs are concealed within the paintings. According to Franits, symbolic motifs, which may seem hidden to a twentieth-century viewer, were readily apparent to seventeenth-century viewers "because they were immediately perceived on the surface of the painting as they were intrinsic to its skilful and engaging presentation of a plausible reality."<sup>8</sup> In order to avoid the problems of de Jongh's "hidden symbolism," Franits argues that all seventeenth-century viewers shared a common value system, and therefore would have understood the "commonplace," "firmly established" and "universally held ideals about women and domesticity"<sup>9</sup> which the paintings both expressed and reinforced. Although Franits departs from de Jongh and Alpers, he also combines their theories by asserting that images of domestic virtue were both descriptive and prescriptive: they did not only reflect contemporary ideals of domesticity but played an active role in shaping the range of virtues and obligations expected of women at this time.<sup>10</sup> In this way, they functioned as "paragons of virtue" to be imitated by female viewers.

Thus, Franits participates in a recent methodological trend in seventeenth-century Dutch art history:<sup>11</sup> although artists' intentions are not rejected as key to meaning, more weight is placed on the interpretations of seventeenth-century viewers as a method to uncover the "multiplicity of meanings" which was attached to this type of imagery.<sup>12</sup> In his introduction, Franits writes,

Contemporary viewers must have "read" domestic imagery on various related levels that were contingent on a number of governing factors, among others their level of education, the degree to which they conformed to the value system, and the popularity and conventionality of the subjects portrayed.<sup>13</sup>

However, in the body of his text, Franits concedes that while domestic practices certainly varied throughout Dutch society, "It is impossible to determine the extent to which [images of domestic virtue] actually affected domestic life during the seventeenth century."<sup>14</sup>

This is where Franits' method lets him down, for the assertion that symbols in the paintings would easily have been apprehended by seventeenth-century viewers who adhered to agreed-upon common values functions to subsume the multiple differences amongst viewers and meanings. To determine the nature of this value system, Franits examines and synthesizes a wide variety of sources: emblem books, prints, portraits, sermons, embroidery pattern books, conduct books, poems, etc. He concludes that these visual and textual sources present an ideal, yet theoretically imitable female: "...it is most accurate to view domestic imagery in art as visually analogous to the prescriptions of contemporary authors and their elucidation of the roles and duties of women...."<sup>15</sup> However, if viewers were familiar with moralistic representations, they also were shaped by a large genre which depicted unruly housewives and chaotic households. Franits critiques Simon Schama's handling of this material in *The Embarrassment of Riches*,<sup>16</sup> claiming that Schama's opposition of virtue and vice in Dutch culture is "not always convincing," and "somewhat forced."<sup>17</sup> In a footnote, however, Franits states that he intends to address genre paintings of "wanton women" in a sequel to *Paragons of Virtue*: "The reason that these images are not included here is quite simple: if they were, this would no longer be a study purely of domestic virtue."<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, the choice to isolate representations of virtuous private life erases many of the conflicting meanings of domestic imagery, as the proliferation of representations of both ideal and chaotic households and housewives in Dutch culture at this time indicates that there was much debate over the definition of domesticity throughout the seventeenth century.

As a result, *Paragons of Virtue* resolves instable contradictions in order to assign monologic virtuous readings to often ambiguous paintings. For example, Jacob van Loo's *Wooing* is an image of an amorous young couple in an interior. In the background, we see a large canopy bed and an old woman who leaves the room through a doorway which has a cockle shell in its pediment. While the aged proprietress, the bed and the shell are all motifs often found in farcical depictions of brothel scenes, Franits negates their enigmatic bawdy associations:

...the presence of a canopied bed does not necessarily mean that [this is a] brothel or even a bedroom....During much of the seventeenth century, beds could be found

in any number of rooms, including the kitchen. While the shell is unquestionably an attribute of Venus, it must not necessarily be interpreted as a symbol of sexual impropriety. After all, Venus herself sometimes appears on the title pages of songbooks devoid of prurient content.<sup>19</sup>

Franits does not address the figure of the old woman, but goes on to find virtuous meanings for other motifs found in the painting, and concludes that this is a virtuous image of romance and civilité.<sup>20</sup> While this is certainly a possible interpretation, positing it as the only one closes off the multiple meanings that the painting's ambiguities allowed.

Moreover, Franits is not always consistent in his interpretations of comparable images. For example, he reads the motifs of a cat stealing a plucked chicken and of cooking pots and utensils scattered on the floor as symbols of the idleness and sloth of the sleeping maid in Nicolaes Maes' chaotic kitchen scene entitled *The Idle Servant*.<sup>21</sup> However, in Maes' *Woman Plucking a Duck*, the same motifs of overturned crockery and a cat prowling towards a duck are not mentioned, as this work is described as the portrayal of "a demure, industrious young woman completely absorbed in her work within a tranquil interior."<sup>22</sup>

By closing off the ambivalent humorous aspects of these paintings, *Paragons of Virtue* leaves little room to speculate on their appeal. Part of the attraction of seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings for their viewers must have been the equivocal combinations of the didactic and the comic in images which both moralized and mocked, as the conventions of virtuous and farcical traditions intersected on their surfaces. The visual pleasure of these images trades on their ambiguity, as the contradictory associations of motifs allowed multiple meanings and subject positions to emerge, revealing a struggle over the definition of domesticity. However, because all of the paintings which Franits has selected are interpreted as exemplary models of behaviour, they can only "illuminate the subordinate position of women in Dutch society."<sup>23</sup>

The organization of the book reinforces the theme of women's subordination. The chapter headings and divisions are derived from *Houwelyck*, Jacob Cats' best-selling conduct book on marriage, which divided women's lives into distinctive stages, outlining specific tasks and virtues for each life phase. *Paragons of Virtue's* chapter headings "Maeght" and "Vryster" (maiden and sweetheart), "Bruyt" and "Vrouw" (bride and housewife), "Moeder" (mother), and "Weduwe" (widow) model the organization of *Houwelyck*. These chapters are then subdivided according to the obligations expected for each stage of a woman's life. Thus, the book takes the form of a rigid taxonomic grid which minutely categor-

izes women's lives. The re-representation of these categories locks seventeenth-century Dutch women into a monolithic patriarchy with very little space for resistance.

Franits' definition of the patriarchy as a "system of values, ideals and even prejudices, all of which reflect men's attitudes toward women that were commonplace in seventeenth-century culture"<sup>24</sup> constructs men as those who created and upheld a value system which made women into passive victims. Because the women in domestic images are dealt with as ideal types, the multiple differences between women within patriarchal society cannot be accessed. By focusing exclusively on the women in the paintings, Franits also overlooks the interesting role that male types played, not only in these images, but also in the definition of gender roles. While *Paragons of Virtue* convincingly demonstrates that representations of domestic purity created constraints and controls by imposing patriarchal values, an analysis of these paintings would have been strengthened by an examination of the ways in which the images concurrently secreted tactics which allowed viewers to mitigate or subvert their didactic effects. This would open up a consideration of the agency of Dutch subjects by indicating some of the different positions that were available to both women and men within the constraints of the time.

The limitations of Franits' study seem to stem from the decision to stay within the disciplinary boundaries of seventeenth-century Dutch art history. *Paragons of Virtue* rightly attempts to break down some of the polarities which have structured this field. Its premise that genre images both reflected and participated in a common value system signifies a move away from considerations of these images as either symbols of deeper hidden meanings or as empirical descriptions of the world. However, the monolithic quality of this structure tends to limit possibilities for understanding historical subjects who were formulated in terms of domination, but also found ways to act as contestatory social agents.

A different picture of women's lives emerges in *Women of the Golden Age: An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland, England and Italy*, an interdisciplinary collection of essays by several scholars working on the history of women in early modern Europe. *Women of the Golden Age* reformulates Joan Kelly's question about women of the Renaissance to ask, "Did women enjoy a Golden Age?"<sup>25</sup> This terminology certainly raises a number of methodological questions, which Kloek addresses in an analysis of the implications and exclusions of the categories "women" and "Golden Age" for seventeenth-century Dutch historiography. Both terms have been used in stereotypical ways to formulate Dutch national identity. In this way,

"Golden Age" indicates untold wealth, political power and cultural growth: "absolute happiness lost long ago" in an era when Dutch identity was pure and untainted by French classicism.<sup>26</sup> As Kloek points out, while the historical and geographical limits of the "Golden Age" have been notoriously difficult to map, its social boundaries are more evident, for a national character defined in terms of "moderation, austerity, realisticness [sic], simplicity, tolerance, domesticity and 'burgerlijkheid'"<sup>27</sup> certainly is based on stereotypes of middle-class identity.

This list of characteristics has also served to define women of this period. Thus, Kloek rightly advocates that women's history must turn to an examination of differences within the larger category "women." Indeed, many of the essays in this book seek to examine women who did not fit into the prescribed mould of virtuous middle-class housewife. However, while Kloek advances the importance of studying difference in order to break down stereotypes and avoid the obvious difficulties of homogenizing half the population as a separate group to be researched, she concurrently attempts to reassert the category "women" as an object of study. Thus, she asks, "if we concentrate on differences within this group, what then is the common element of women's history?"<sup>28</sup> Indeed, this is a real dilemma for feminism, which is both based upon, yet seeks to refuse the essential category "women." In response to this seeming impasse, historian Denise Riley has argued that it is feminism's job to scrutinize all definitions of gender:

... "women" is historically, discursively constructed, and always relatively to other categories which themselves change; "women" is a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject of "women" isn't to be relied on... Yet, it must be stated that these instabilities of the category are the *sine qua non* of feminism, which would otherwise be lost for an object... "women" is an unstable category, and this instability has a historical foundation, and feminism is the site of the systematic fighting-out of that instability—which need not worry us.<sup>29</sup>

These theoretical considerations do seem to worry Kloek, for in the end, she does not take a clear position. While the use of the terms "women" and "Golden Age" are rightly challenged, the choice to entitle this collection of essays, *Women of the Golden Age*, which reasserts these stereotypes, is not explained. Kloek ends her introduction with the statement, "I am convinced that the contributions to this volume will help us bring to life the history of women in the early modern times, and at the same time it will show us how very

much alive is the discipline of early modern women's history."<sup>30</sup> Thus, while this book questions the usefulness of the category "women," in a contradictory movement, it leaves the disciplinary frontiers of "women's history" intact.

Kloek's introductory overview of the field of women's history in the Netherlands reveals that "women" usually are bracketed off for separate treatment within larger studies of seventeenth-century everyday life,<sup>31</sup> which subsumes all Dutch women of this period within the category of "ordinary people." Simon Schama's chapter on Dutch women, entitled, "Housewives and Hussies: Homeliness and Worldliness" in *The Embarrassment of Riches* is especially singled out for criticism. Indeed, this chapter "functioned as a springboard"<sup>32</sup> for the masterclass which generated this publication, and critiques of Schama's work act as a leitmotiv, linking the various essays in *Women of the Golden Age*.

Many of these criticisms are warranted. For example, most of the contributors seem to agree that Schama's study categorizes women as opposite types, such as housewife and whore, in order to fit them into his definition of "Dutchness" as the peculiar tension between virtuous morals and excessive wealth which, he argues, structured Dutch society at this time. In this way, Schama's understanding of the polarities of Dutch society is merely mirrored in the behaviour of Dutch women.<sup>33</sup> Kloek points out that this structural anthropological approach lacks chronology and differentiation.<sup>34</sup> As Lia van Gemert argues, rather than attempting to reconcile the contradictions of their experience, the Dutch lived their diversity in a multifaceted world.<sup>35</sup> Thus, *Women of the Golden Age* seeks to counter the limitations of Schama's polarities by effectively emphasizing differences between women who did not fit neatly into the binary categories of housewife or hussy, and the essays in this volume demonstrate "detailed research, set up around specific questions" regarding women's history of this period.<sup>36</sup>

Schama is also criticized for objectifying women, as he sees them only through the eyes of male commentators. As Mirjam de Baar argues, he gives little sense of how women fashioned their own identities and negotiated the constraints of the patriarchy.<sup>37</sup> Because he bases many of his conclusions, especially notions of the extreme neatness and freedom of Dutch women, on the accounts of foreign travellers, Schama probably overstates the "typically Dutch" nature of these characteristics.<sup>38</sup> To avoid these sorts of national stereotypes, *Women of the Golden Age* takes an "international comparative perspective" in order to test the "Dutchness" of Dutch women against the experiences of women in other countries at this time.<sup>39</sup>

While many of the critiques of Schama's approach are certainly useful in opening up debates about women in the

early modern period, some of the charges against Schama's work included in this book make me uneasy, for I think they could also function to close the field of gender studies. For example, Mirjam de Baar conflates Schama with seventeenth-century men who had the power to define, and thus objectify women: "...he seems to follow the lead of his seventeenth-century [male] fellows. In other, stronger words, he identifies with—indeed even appropriates—their vision."<sup>40</sup> From here, it is a slippery slope to an essentializing view of the study of gender as the task of female historians. Of the twenty-one contributors to *Women of the Golden Age*, only three are men. Although this may reflect the state of the research in this field, it is interesting that in her analysis of the limitations of the study of Dutch women's history, Els Kloek only examines the writings of male historians and does not critique the extensive work done by women historians.<sup>41</sup> Thus, *Women of the Golden Age* risks defining women's history as a discipline that has been dominated by male commentators and now needs to be rewritten by women historians. Such an approach illuminates the danger of reinforcing and replicating the divisions and antagonisms which structure patriarchal power relations within the disciplinary terrains of history.

By setting itself up solely in opposition to *The Embarrassment of Riches*, *Women of the Golden Age* tends to negate the importance of Schama's research. Heidi de Mare's interesting examination of gender classification in architecture is one of the few contributions which articulates the value of Schama's analysis of the ways in which gender defined many of the boundaries of Dutch identity and experience.<sup>42</sup> *Women of the Golden Age* is organized in terms of a debate, as each essay is followed by the comments of a respondent. This is a very productive approach which allows a range of opinions and approaches to emerge. However, while Schama's views are extensively discussed, his voice is not heard in this debate, and his noticeable absence is not explained.<sup>43</sup> Through its attack on and exclusion of Schama, *Women of the Golden Age* risks creating yet another polarization in the study of Dutch culture.

In spite of these dangers, I think that *Women of the Golden Age* certainly contributes to an understanding of seventeenth-century Dutch culture. This is the first time that the work of many of the Dutch contributors has been made accessible to an English reading audience. The decision to publish these works in English was undoubtedly influenced by a desire to reach an audience whose knowledge of Dutch women's history is shaped almost exclusively by Schama's extremely popular study. Thus, it is unfortunate that in several instances the translations from Dutch into English are quite poor, for many of the nuanced ideas

of these essays are obscured by awkward use of grammar and terminology.

The book is divided into three parts, which arranges the essays according to their different approaches to archival material. This structure allows for a consideration of some of the difficulties of accessing and interpreting information about women's experiences in the past. Part One, "Images of Seventeenth-Century Women," includes studies which focus on the views of male contemporaries who represented women in their writings. Part Two is entitled "A Social and Cultural Approach of [sic] Women's Lives," and these essays seek to depart from a reliance on men's opinions of women to find traces of women in other types of sources. Part Three, "Transgressing Gender Codes," consists of examinations of the self-representations of women who found ways to overcome the limitations of gender roles in order to enter the public sphere.

The essays in "Images of Seventeenth-Century Women" investigate the works of three men who wrote extensively about the place of women in Dutch society: the moralists, Jacob Cats and Johan van Beverwijck, and the playwright, Bredero. As these writings have been used by many historians as sources for women's history of this period, an analysis of these texts as representations, rather than an acceptance of them as transparent reality, is long overdue. Cats and van Beverwijck have been constructed by a number of historians as seventeenth-century "champions of women."<sup>44</sup> The essays by Agnes Sneller and Lia van Gemert convincingly disrupt this view, and their close examinations of the gender biases implicit in these author's texts reveals some of the ways in which these works functioned to uphold the patriarchy.

However, the essays included in the "Images of Seventeenth-Century Women" section also leave patriarchal structures intact. As feminist art historian Griselda Pollock has argued, the phrase "images of women" conflates women with the image and reinforces the masculine right and power to represent.<sup>45</sup> Within this construct, masculine artists and writers possess a mastering gaze, which, as Svetlana Alpers has convincingly demonstrated, served as a powerful metaphor for knowledge at this time. Thus, "images of seventeenth-century women" tell us very little about the lives of actual women of this time and much about the power of masculine subjects. As in Franits' analysis of "images of women," the notion of controlling male subjects and passive female victims leaves little room for an analysis of the ways in which women were able to shape their own lives within the limits of the patriarchy.

Part Two, "A Social and Cultural Approach of Women's Lives," attempts to avoid this theoretical dilemma by

moving away from an analysis of male opinions to search for “traces of women themselves” in other types of sources.<sup>46</sup> These essays draw on documents such as marriage registers, notarial records, architectural plans, popular prints and travellers’ tales in order to analyze the lives of mainly lower-class women in terms of issues of migration, employment and housing. While this approach circumvents some of the complications of “images of women,” it poses its own methodological problems, for the mode of analysis used when approaching sources which deal with lower-class women can function to reassert hierarchies of class and gender.

Lotte van de Pol begins her essay on female migration with a description of a catchpenny print which depicts the life of a female servant. She argues that while emblem books, paintings and literature were meant for the Dutch middle class, “for a different image we must turn to the cheap and numerous pennyprints that catered to the lower classes.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, she categorizes catchpenny prints as lower-class imagery, which contrasts with the middle-class images of women found in other sources. However, the circulation of printed material in the early modern period was quite fluid and cannot be considered solely in terms of socio-economic class divisions. While inexpensive printed material was accessible to lower-class audiences, these types of images of lower-class women did not cater to the lower classes alone, but probably also played an important role in shaping middle-class definitions of lower-class groups. By fitting cultural objects into a pre-existing hierarchy of wealth, historians risk overlooking the multiple divisions which fragmented the social body and the processes by which class and gender identities were fashioned.

Both van de Pol and Marybeth Carlson use qualitative statistical research, drawn from marriage registers and notarial records, to examine the experiences of lower-class female migrants and servants. While this type of analysis provides a way to access the experiences of groups who are usually excluded from histories of this period, it tends to yield general information about the collective aspirations and shared experiences of lower-class women. In his response to Carlson’s essay, Rudolph Dekker proposes that the surviving diaries and memoirs of servant women are a rich alternative source for a more detailed examination of the specific experiences of lower-class women.<sup>48</sup> This is a useful suggestion for, as cultural historian Roger Chartier has argued, close internal analyses of texts are usually reserved for the ideas of the intellectual elite (such as Cats and van Beverwijck), while an external, collective, quantitative approach is most often applied to the culture of the greatest number.<sup>49</sup> In this way, methods of examining different types of sources can serve to reinforce the hierarchi-

cal notion that the writings of elite individuals are worthy of close scrutiny, while documents which represent the thoughts of the majority do not merit the same type of analysis.

Carlson uses information gleaned from the notarial archives of Rotterdam to counter the negative stereotypes of maids constructed in seventeenth-century theatrical farces and comic literature.<sup>50</sup> This comparison is governed by the implicit assumption that archival sources are several degrees closer to reality than are farcical representations. However, as many historians have argued, objective truth cannot be apprehended in the archives, for archival documents and the archives themselves are structured by exclusions and mediated by biases.<sup>51</sup> A close critical analysis of the conventions and conditions of production of archival documents is necessary to reveal some of the specific ways in which people considered, transposed and shaped reality. For example, Anne Lawrence’s essay, which compares seventeenth-century observations on the freedom of Dutch and English women, effectively demonstrates how the demands of the form of traveller’s tales influenced and restricted the ways in which women were represented.<sup>52</sup>

The essays in Part Three of *Women of the Golden Age*, “Transgressing Gender Codes,” deal with women writers, artists and intellectuals who managed to find space within patriarchal constraints in order to represent themselves and their world. In an attempt to evade Schama’s cliché of housewife and hussy, Mirjam de Baar turns to an examination of unmarried elite women. De Baar’s interesting comparison of the writings by and about Anna Maria van Schurman and Antoinette Bourignon demonstrates how these women used various strategies to manoeuvre within the parameters of prescribed gender roles in order to gain public recognition. These strategies were often ambiguous, and de Baar convincingly argues that these very ambivalences reveal some of the tensions of negotiating within constraining definitions of women’s roles.

While the essays in “Transgressing Gender Codes” allow for a close analysis of the ways in which women were able to shape their own identities, the women analyzed are exclusively from wealthy families. Thus, while these essays access women’s agency, they give the overall impression that only women from certain segments of the population were able to assert themselves. Certainly, it was the case that women from privileged backgrounds did have more opportunity to enter the public sphere and to represent themselves, while our knowledge of lower-class women is based mostly on the little that was written about them. However, this defines women’s “power” as their ability to participate in the public realm, which neglects feminism’s important

contribution to considerations of the ways in which power functions in private spheres.

In conclusion, an examination of *Paragons of Virtue* and *Women of the Golden Age* reveals that the study of seventeenth-century Dutch culture has much to gain from the theoretical rigour and contestatory politics of feminist interventions in history. These works participate in a movement away from histories which seek master-narratives to define laws that govern Dutchness. Thus, they illuminate some of the difficulties of accessing and interpreting sources in ways which open up the possibilities for writing about groups who, until recently, have been excluded from history. Both books are provocative, for they raise substantial questions for the disciplines of art history, literary criticism, social history and women's studies, as they participate in recent theoretical debates about writing the history of power, gender and subjectivity.

ANGELA VANHAELEN  
University of British Columbia

- 1 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, xix.
- 2 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 1.
- 3 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 9-11.
- 4 See Eddy Jongh, *Zinne- en minnebeelden in de schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1967), and Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983).
- 5 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 196.
- 6 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 13.
- 7 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 13-14.
- 8 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 16.
- 9 See Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 1, 14, 17.
- 10 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 70, 195.
- 11 This became apparent at the Historians of Netherlandish Art session at the College Art Association in 1993.
- 12 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 16.
- 13 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 17.
- 14 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 112.
- 15 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 5.
- 16 Simon Schama *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York, 1987).
- 17 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 4.
- 18 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 198.
- 19 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 47.
- 20 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 51.
- 21 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 108-9.
- 22 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 90.
- 23 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 197.
- 24 Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 17.
- 25 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 19.
- 26 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 10.
- 27 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 11.
- 28 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 12.
- 29 Denise Riley, 'Am I That Name?' *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (London, 1988) 1-2, 5.
- 30 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 18.
- 31 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 15.
- 32 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 143.
- 33 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 14, 16.
- 34 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 16.
- 35 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 50.
- 36 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 18.
- 37 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 144.
- 38 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 127, 133.
- 39 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 18, 32.
- 40 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 144.
- 41 For example, the work of Alice Clare Carter, Bertha Mook and Sherrin Marshall Wyntjes.
- 42 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 105-6.
- 43 Thus, when A.T. van Deursen is given a chance to reiterate his perceptions of the history of Dutch women in his response to the first essay, he speaks in defence of both himself and Schama, essentializing their approaches as masculine: "All of those [seventeenth-century writers] were men. The same goes for Simon Schama and for me. Perhaps it is male solidarity that makes me take up Schama's part." Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 38.
- 44 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 22, 40.
- 45 See *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, ed. R. Kendall and G. Pollock (London, 1992).
- 46 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 71.
- 47 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 73.
- 48 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 97-98.
- 49 See Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Cambridge, 1988), 37.
- 50 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 91.
- 51 See, for example, Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. T. Conley, (New York, 1988); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language* (New York, 1972); and Gayatri Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives," *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, XXIV, no. 3 (1985), 247-72. As Dekker points out in his response to Carlson, notarial records have their biases, as only certain segments of the servant population, such as the educated and the elderly would have come into contact with a notary. Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 97.
- 52 Kloek, et al., eds, *Women*, 133.