‘One of the Finest Poems of that Nature I ever Read’: Quantitative Methodologies and the Reception of Early Modern Women’s Writing

Marie-Louise Coolahan

In a letter to Charles Cotterell on 18 March 1662, Katherine Philips reported her reception of an elegy in French by Henriette de Coligny, relating that it was: ‘One of the finest Poems of that nature I ever read’. She identifies for particular praise the ideas and style of the French original: ‘the Thoughts are great and noble, and represent to the Life the vastness of her excellent Soul; the Language is pure, and hardly to be parallell’d’.1 Philips’s letter unfurls two layers of international reception: Cotterell’s receipt and endorsement of the poem as well as her own. This is a single case of the cross-channel circulation and critique of a woman poet. But we know that Coligny was widely read in other countries. Her Poésies (Paris, 1666) is listed in 10 per cent of the eighteenth-century Dutch library catalogues analysed by Alicia Montoya.2 The WomenWriters database (described below) yields further references: her authorial reputation is alluded to in one eighteenth-century Russian, one Dutch and five French sources; her Poésies in one eighteenth-century and one early twentieth-century source.3 This chapter proposes some preliminary methodologies for researching the reception of early modern women’s writing on a large scale, in order to open up a transnational perspective on its circulation and influence. Writing of this period was not confined within borders; writing by women was translated and received in locations beyond as well as within national literatures – and national boundaries themselves fluctuate in history. The chapter considers the value of quantitative research and analysis, and the challenges of maintaining a balance between the quantitative and the qualitative in this field. Finally, it interrogates the ways in which the study of reception can open up broader questions about the perception of gender and authorship in the period.
The chapter stems from my involvement in the ‘Women Writers in History’ research network, which is focused on the reception of women’s writing across Europe prior to 1900. This network began with the work of the Dutch scholar, Suzan van Dijk, on the reception of women’s writing in the Netherlands. From 2009 to 2013, it expanded, thanks to EU funding under the COST programme, to include over 100 researchers from 25 countries. The project seeks to share records of the transmission, translation and reception of women’s writing across Europe in an online, open database, called WomenWriters (online since 2001 and subject to ongoing development). The emphasis here must be on ‘open’, because ‘database’ often connotes conclusion, a closed repository of information. This online digital tool is constantly in flux, never comprehensive nor complete, and the information it contains is eclectic because it depends upon the time and research interests of those who input their data. Current coverage of English women writers is not at all comprehensive, but that of women writers who were read in the Netherlands is. The online tool is intended as a starting-point for research, not a definitive resource from which statistics should be extracted. Furthermore, its capacious timeframe highlights the pitfalls of a solely national focus; the shifting, contingent frontiers of sovereign boundaries underline the value of a transnational approach to reception in Europe.

The ‘Women Writers in History’ project is concerned with questions of reception, rather than the recovery of women writers, or the history of women’s reading (although both are recorded). Which women were read? Where and how were they read? Its quantitative focus, and concentration on literary reception rather than production, aim to move beyond case-studies, which – although yielding excellent results in qualitative terms – are not so efficient in accessing the bigger picture of women’s participation in, and impact on, the literary field across Europe. The original research project was designed by scholars working primarily on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The increasing dominance of print in this later period, combined with the twenty-first-century electronic distribution of sources such as periodicals and library catalogues, mean that a range of resources focused on those centuries is useful and available and, furthermore, that methodologies for handling such material are being developed.

But there are particular problems, specific to the early modern period, in researching reception on a large scale. Current methods of accessing, retrieving and analysing large quantities of data on reception have been skewed toward the later period. For example, Continuum’s ‘The