

## ANNA MARIA VAN SCHURMAN (1607-1678)

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**Anna Maria van Schurman** was born in Cologne in 1607. Her father's family was of protestant nobility, originally from Antwerp, her mother's (von Harff) of protestant Rhineland nobility. As a child she moved to Utrecht, and lived mostly there until 1669 when she joined the religious community around Jean de Labadie in Amsterdam and partook in its odyssey from Amsterdam to Herford (1670), to Altona, and to Wieuwert (Frisia, 1674), where she died in 1678. She knew many languages: Hebrew, Chaldaic, Syrian, Arabic, Turkish, Ethiopian, Greek, Latin, Spanish, Dutch, and English, and authored linguistic, theological and philosophical studies and treatises in many of these. She was best known for her treatises defending learning for women, her collection of letters *Opuscula*, and for the autobiographical *Eucleria*, written in the period of de Labadie, defending faith over learning.

Wie sijt dit aardig beelt sult comen aen te  
[schouwen  
Hout vast dat gij hier siett een roem voor alle  
[vrouwe  
Van dat de werelt stant ter heden op ten  
[dagh  
Niet een die haar geleick of nu bereijcken  
[magh. . .  
O licht van Uwen tijdt en Peerel van den  
[douck  
Ghy die ons eeuwe ciert, verciert ook desen  
[Bouck.<sup>1</sup>

Thus wrote Jacob Cats in the dedication to his *Trouwingh* (1637), honoring Anna Maria van Schurman, the "Star of Utrecht," the "Tenth Muse," the learned Dutch woman, who conversed with the great minds of her time. A renowned woman scholar in the seventeenth century; such a phenomenon begs for investigation and both in her time and thereafter scholars have marveled at the sight. "To describe the high qualities of this incomparable muse with the emphasis she deserves is an impossible impossibility," wrote the German author Georg Christian Lehms in 1717 (preface). What interests us three hundred years later is how this phenomenon **could** have happened, how it was **allowed** to happen, in the seventeenth-century society of the Dutch Republic. In the following pages, I will not only marvel at Anna Maria's achievements, which certainly merit this reaction, but try to place her talents and endeavors within the framework of Dutch society. In doing so, I will focus on her adherence to the basic tenets of the circle of the well educated and well-to-do Protestant Dutch upperclasses,

until she chose to join the Labadists, a choice she so eloquently defended in her *Eucleria*. Until then, her peers formed a cheering section to her endeavors, wrote her letters and poems of praise, sought her advice in learned matters, and treated her proudly as one of the national treasures of the new republic. Until she joined the Labadists, Anna Maria outshone her contemporaries not by the nature of her endeavors but by their quality and learnedness.

Anna Maria van Schurman was born on November 5, 1607 in Cologne, where her grandparents, of Dutch nobility, had sought sanctuary with their children from the heightened persecutions of Protestants in their native Antwerp. In Cologne, her father married Eva von Harff, a member of the Reformed Rhineland nobility. When Anna Maria was a few years old, the family moved first to Dreiborn, the family castle of the von Harffs near Schleichen, and then to Utrecht, where Anna Maria spent most of her life. She was a prolific artist in various media, studied many languages, published various scholarly works, and maintained a lively correspondence with scholars and heads of state, some of whom also came to Utrecht to see her. At the end of her life, she moved to Amsterdam to join the religious circle around Jean de Labadie, becoming one of the faithful who followed this French visionary on his odyssey through Northern Europe until finally settling in Frisia, where she died in 1678 in Wieuwert.

The works of Anna Maria van Schurman highlight the various aspects of her life. Firstly, her learned works, mostly treatises in the form of letters, concern themselves with contemporary issues of the learned world. Secondly, as a member of the St. Luke painter's guild in Utrecht, she was known not only as a scholar, but as an artist as well. European collections, most notably the one in Franeker, show van Schurman's artistic accomplishments in a variety of media. Thirdly, her autobiography (*Eucleria*), written after she joined the Labadists, is an account of her pilgrim's progress and a passionate argument of faith over learning.<sup>2</sup>

To place van Schurman's scholarship into the proper framework, it is necessary to look at the status of learned women in the Dutch Republic. Van Schurman was by far the most learned woman of her time, although it is not true, as Sylvia Bovenschen has written, that she was the first *Privatgelehrte*. Neither is it true that female scholarship had been confined to cloisters and courts. In the Dutch provinces, the class of well-to-do and well-educated patricians delighted in having their daughters educated and many were supportive of the efforts of wives and daughters to reach a higher level of learning. However, these endeavors were carried out in the privacy of the home, largely through self-study, were not utilized professionally, and seldom found their way into print. This is why history plays tricks on us: the reputation of these women seldom reached beyond their own circle of friends and acquaintances and usually did not make it into the history books. In Anna Maria's own circle there were learned women, but who has ever heard of Margaretha van Godewijck (the "Pearl of Dordrecht"), of Maria and Anna van Beverwijck, or of Franske van Doyem (the "Frisian Muse"), Sibylle van Griethuysen, Anna van Pallant, Anna Suys, Catharina and Wilhelmina van Oem, and Elisabeth Hoofman. And these were luckier than most. Their fame was recorded by Johan

van Beverwijck in a now forgotten work entitled: *Van de VVtmentheyt des Vrouwelicken Geslachts* ("Of the Excellence of the Female Sex," 1636). From the work by van Beverwijck and the occasional mention of these female scholars in the works of proud fathers, friends, and acquaintances, we learn that there were other learned women than Anna Maria.

This is not to say that the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century was a Mecca for learned women. The lack of university opportunities, the established priorities that saw household duties as far more important than learned endeavors, and the lack of opportunity for scholarly exchange and professions hampered scholarly endeavors by women. But within these cultural constraints, such endeavors were possible.

Anna Maria's education, like that of her female contemporaries, took place in the home. The Dutch Republic had a well-developed system of public and private schools, but those accessible to girls did not go beyond the basics. As she tells us in *Eucleria* (20-4), the young Anna Maria was educated by her father and by tutors who paid as much attention to what she ought to study as to what was to be avoided, so as not to "assault her maiden's virtue." Musical and artistic training was not ignored, as it played an integral role in the social interactions of the educated well-to-do in the prosperous provinces of the Dutch Republic. Anna Maria amazed those around not so much because she was learned but by the amount of her learning, having mastered ten languages in addition to Dutch-English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Syrian, Maurish, and Ethiopian; for the latter she wrote a grammar.<sup>3</sup>

After receiving a thorough education at home, much augmented by private study, Anna Maria slowly entered the scholarly exchange of her time. Her medium was letters. In this medium of the educated, she could express herself on a personal as well

as scholarly level. And she did so, eloquently, in various languages, in carefully worded treatises. The genre of letters was also eminently suited as a form of expression by women: as a semi-private, personal medium it did not need to find a publisher, yet allowed dissemination. Anna Maria took full advantage of this possibility of personal expression and learned treatise, using the personal address to be polite, modest, soothing, sympathetic, earnest, friendly, womanly, never threatening, while driving home a logical, learned, always well-founded argument. To say that van Schurman's letters were humble should not be taken to mean that they were slavish. Independently wealthy and accustomed to following her own dictates, she never bowed to anyone. However, her basic modesty expressed itself in an eagerness to learn, an absence of one-upmanship, and a high regard for the learnedness and talents of others. In her choice of addressees, we find again that mixture of educated, social, religious and artistic interests. The Leiden professor André Rivet guided her religious interest as did her mentor, the Utrecht theologian Gisbertus Voetius, one of the most important leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church at the time. René Descartes was an early acquaintance, until Anna Maria's growing distaste for Cartesianism cooled her regard for the French philosopher. She was engaged in an extended exchange of letters with the Haarlem pastor Johann Albert Ban(nius) about the various techniques of music. Some of the letters were also accompanied by her own artwork, a portrait, an etching, a wooden box, all as exquisite as the prose that accompanied them, and showing the same combination of superior talent and craftsmanship which was so characteristic of all of van Schurman's endeavors.

As her reputation grew, her advice and comment were eagerly sought. The theologian J. Lydius solicited her opinion regarding baptism for the dead (I Cor.15:29) and was impressed with the "aerdige ende seer geleerde Latijnse brief" he received (Douma 36). The Dordrecht physician

Johan van Beverwijck sought her written opinion as to whether the end of a person's life is preordained. Anna Maria replied that her studies had convinced her that God had preordained the end of each person's life (Douma 38). The poet Jacob Cats, long acquainted with the family, introduced her to Dutch literary circles and she became acquainted with Anna Roemer Visscher, her sister Maria Tesselschade, P. C. Hooft, Constantijn Huyghens, Caspar van Baerle, and others.

A steady stream of visitors beat a path to her Utrecht domicile. Constantijn Huyghens came to dinner. Queen Christina of Sweden came to visit. It seems to have been the pastime of the crowned and the learned to visit the learned lady of Utrecht, to engage her in conversation and to marvel at her wisdom.

The published result of this learned activity was *Opuscula*, a collection of letters in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and French, written among others to Jacob Cats, Daniel Heinsius, Claude Salmasius, Gisbertus Voetius, André Rivet, Constantijn Huyghens, Dorothea Moore, and Bathsua Makins. Van Schurman consented to having her letters published at the advice of Rivet. The Leiden theologian Friedrich Spanheim oversaw the publication. The letters address various topics. I would like to single out those that deal with the education of women.

Anna Maria discussed the subject of education of women in her letters to Rivet, and some of the correspondence had already appeared in print (*Amica Dissertatio* 1641) before appearing in the *Opuscula*. The basic tenets for study by women as put forth by van Schurman are, first of all, that she reserved the right to study only for those women who are of independent means and are able to pursue these intellectual activities without neglecting the duties of church and household. As such her tenets did not threaten the traditional division of labor. During her own well-

guarded and protected childhood, Anna Maria herself had had the time to pursue the studies that delighted her so much. Upon marriage, these pursuits would have had to take second place to the duties of a wife and mother. However, she avoided this dilemma by following her father's advice to stay away from the "onontwarlijken verdorven wereltschen huwlijks-bant" ("the tangled and soiled ties of worldly marriage," *Eucleria* 36). After her mother died, Anna Maria did become the *de facto* head of the little household which included two elderly, invalid aunts, and her scholarly pursuits did take a tumble, which she noted without rancor in her autobiography (150).

Secondly, women should not use learning to further personal glory or deprive men of what was rightfully theirs. Anna Maria did not expound the philosophy of intellectual superiority of women over men as had Lucretia Marinella, her Italian contemporary, nor did she push for professional opportunities for women in state and church. Instead she saw the prohibition barring women from seeking public office as an advantage: arguing that it gave women more leisure time, studies would keep them occupied with harmless pursuits, and being thus occupied would keep women happy. Van Schurman herself never sought fame, and agreed to the publication of her correspondence only after having been urged by "some famous men" who had "dragged her onto the stage of this world" (*Eucleria* 13). When she learned that Johan van Beverwijck intended to dedicate his work on the excellence of women to her, she suggested another more worthy woman for that honor.

Last and foremost, she believed that the arts and sciences allow humanity to better observe and recognize God and His divine works. Therefore, the aim of study should be to seek a higher knowledge of God and His creation. In these studies, the Bible should hold a central place, as a most reliable source of information and as a

fortification against heresies; the study of Biblical languages in turn provides a better understanding of this source. As such it is only fitting for a Christian woman to study. In fact denying a woman this opportunity is to deny a Christian the chance to seek a higher knowledge of the Creator. Even if Rivet as the recipient of her letters did not share in her optimism that all knowledge will lead to an increase in knowledge of God and His creation, he nevertheless agreed with this goal in learning.

Anna Maria's aims and conditions seem to us today as modest as the woman who wrote them. She stipulated as the only valid reason for study the attempt to learn more about God (albeit a formidable task), and asked only that women be allowed to carry out in their own homes the kind of learned endeavors which they had already been exercising for several generations. In fact, the learned writer herself had already gone beyond what she proposed in her letters. In spite of the fact that women had no access to a university education, Gisbertus Voetius had allowed van Schurman to overhear his university lectures from a room adjacent to the lecture hall, separated from the main hall by a curtain. Nevertheless, there is no plea that women should be given access to these places of higher learning. It should be said, however, that van Schurman's treatise was hotly debated and translated into various languages. If one finds today that her modest claims do not break a lance for anything that women did not already enjoy, one should keep in mind that the basic tenets of van Schurman's treatise, namely that all Christians have an equal right to pursue a deeper knowledge of their Creator, was a tenet that few of her Dutch contemporaries would refute and which logically should have led to equal opportunities for all.

Her artistic endeavors earned van Schurman the admiration of her contemporaries as well. Again her artistic talents manifested themselves early in life.<sup>4</sup> At the age of six, she had already learned to

make highly intricate paper cut-outs. She became adept in making portraits of herself, her family, and friends in various media (oil, gouache, pencil drawing, and etching). Her engraved calligraphy was renowned and her wax statues elicited the admiration of all who came to visit. Anna Maria was serious about her art; the guild book of the Utrecht artist guild St. Luke lists her among its members. She was also recognized as a serious artist by her contemporaries. Jacob Cats, in the dedication poem cited above, calls her the "pearl of the canvas." Constantijn Huyghens wrote no less than six poems about one of her self portraits. Examining the range of her art, one finds that it remains well within the traditional arts and crafts done by women of the time. Anna Maria did not, for example, attempt large scale oil paintings. What distinguished her from her contemporaries was her multifaceted talent and the range and quality of her techniques. It is this quality of her artistic endeavors and the quantity of techniques that astonished her contemporaries and made the young girl, and later the woman, stand out among her contemporaries.

Van Schurman's art is "kunstkamerkunst," to be exhibited proudly in the collections of small art and interesting objects with which the European aristocracy and cultured well-to-do filled their treasure cabinets. It functioned as gifts for special occasions to be reciprocated with other gifts. Guests who came to Utrecht to see that city's "Sterre" expected, and were treated to, a tour of the collection of treasures.

Then in 1667 at the age of 60, Anna Maria van Schurman joined the religious circle around the Reformed pastor Jean de Labadie, a former French Jesuit who had joined the Huguenots and had preached in France and Geneva. Johann Gottschalk van Schurman, who had met de Labadie in Geneva, had warmly recommended him to his sister. When de Labadie was offered a pastorate in Middelburg, Anna Maria moved there to hear his sermons and partake in the devotional gatherings that

were organized there. His views on the imminent coming of Christ, but especially the reforms he advocated, caused his ouster from the Dutch Reformed Church. He moved to Amsterdam, where a small group of former Middelburg parishioners and others, among whom Anna Maria, joined him.

Her circle of learned friends did not let their "Sterre" go that easily. They enjoined her in several letters to see the error of her ways (Duker). The most comprehensive answer they received was given in *Eucleria*, her autobiography which she wrote in Altona, where the Labadists settled for a time. Like van Schurman's previous scholarly work, *Eucleria* was actually a long epistolary treatise, a learned letter, written as a contribution to a controversy. The recipients were the famous men who had "showered her with their appreciation" (1), but who now "found fault" with her new way of life, the learned scholars in Utrecht and elsewhere, who had formed Anna Maria's circle for much of her life. The medium of the letter with which van Schurman was so familiar and which she had used for most of her life explains the unique mixture of personal tone with scholarly argumentation, of autobiographical detail with learned quotations.

This mixture of autobiography and treatise was well suited to the task at hand. In the *Eucleria*, Anna Maria consciously built on the respect she had earned as a *femme savante* to lend credence to her choices. The autobiographical account gives witness to a religious awakening; the theological treatise tries to defend her choices as the right ones. The *Eucleria* shows a learned woman at work proving to an intellectual world, which had previously applauded her intellectual endeavors, that, in spite of her previous assertions, learning had not enabled her to achieve the goal she was seeking, namely a better understanding of God and his Creation. In *Eucleria* she repeated the three basic premises for

learning of the *Dissertatio* and presented a modification. Of the amount of time she had devoted to study, she now found it to have been a waste of time; of the modesty that she had claimed, she admitted that sometimes she had enjoyed the fame and had become an *eedier*, an "animal hungry for fame"(13). And her honorable reasons for studying? In the *Eucleria* she maintained that the spiritual awakening she had received as a follower of de Labadie had given her a greater knowledge of God than all her previous studies. Joining the Labadists should not be taken as a sudden conversion of a senile or dimwitted woman, as her suddenly hostile surroundings charged. Anna Maria had always been a pious woman, whose sole professed aim was learning more about God. The *Eucleria* maintains that her goal remained the same, but that she had changed her way to achieve this goal. Spiritual awakening, not a closer knowledge of the languages of the Bible, would prepare one to receive the word of God.

In spite of the fact that most of her friends thought that joining the Labadists was not the proper thing to do, it too was a reflection of life in the Dutch Republic. For all its praise for a new-found religious awareness and lifestyle, the *Eucleria* reflected the state of religion in the Dutch Republic. Gone were the days that the followers of Luther and Calvin had lost their lives for their convictions at the hand of the Spanish king. In the Dutch provinces, the Reformed Church was the established church now, recognized as an integral part of a newly-won political independence. Anna Maria recalled the lives of the early Christians as well as that of the Reformation martyrs and found few similarities with the good life of the seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed, of whom few measured up to Anna Maria's standards for Christian living. To be sure, the Utrecht circle of theologians stressed the ethical implications of Christian doctrine, and Gisbertus Voetius was one of the leaders in the ethical Christian movement of

the Dutch Reformed Church. However, Anna Maria accused him (not without justification) of advocating a Christian way of living that was "slavishly" based on primarily Old Testament dictates, exemplified in strict Sunday observances, whereas the New Testament covenant would invigorate, drench, permeate Christians through a love for Christ, and should inspire all Christians to live a Sunday life throughout the week. Most of all she chastized the established church for overlooking the worldly ways of the majority of its parishioners and allowing those to participate as full-fledged members, whose attachment to worldly things belied their Christianity. (De Labadie had voiced this same criticism in his sermons in Amsterdam. And although this teeming merchant city was a tolerant host to numerous sectarian groups, its citizens were less inclined to accept such criticism from their guests and thus de Labadie had worn out his welcome rather quickly.)

While Anna Maria believed that she had chosen the better part, her learned circle of friends begged to differ. They had been able to accept the woman whose sole aim it was to know the Bible better so that she might learn to know God. The woman who rejected learnedness as a means to God had far greater difficulty convincing her circle than had the learned maiden, who in the privacy of her own home in Utrecht had written an Ethiopian grammar. But there were those who understood. When the situation in Amsterdam became untenable, Anna Maria asked her long-time friend Elisabeth of Bohemia, the Abbess of Herborn, for a haven for her group. The invitation came immediately. The way in which Elisabeth described the Labadists in a letter to the Elector of Prussia throws an interesting light on the particular make-up of the group. Elisabeth called it a group of pious women seeking a cloistered life accompanied by a few ministers (Birch 161). Although this description downplays the important role played by de Labadie, it accurately reflected the make-up of the little group which had attracted several women

who, like Anna Maria van Schurman, hailed from the upper classes of Dutch society.

What remains now is to inquire into the influence van Schurman exercised upon her own time and afterwards. As a member of the circle around Voetius she helped shape the face of Dutch and European Calvinism. Furthermore, her treatise on the right of women to study was translated into various languages and we find it quoted in many places.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, her presence as a learned woman was enough to serve as an example to her contemporaries and most of the proponents of study for women at the time, such as Georg Christian Lehms and Georg Philipp Harsdörffer, mentioned her.<sup>6</sup> Not everyone knew what to do with the phenomenon of the famous learned maid. Johann C. Eberti stated that such rare flowers should be enjoyed with care but not necessarily followed.<sup>7</sup> And her last days with the Labadists proved to some that women, even learned ones, will be inclined to do foolish things. Johann Heinrich Feustking saw her as typically female in that she proved herself prone to the foibles of religious fanatics.<sup>8</sup> In one instance, her Labadist convictions appear to have had a greater influence than previously thought. As Goeters has pointed out, the Labadists influenced the shaping of German Pietism. How direct that influence was became

apparent upon discovery of the private correspondence between Johann Schütz and Anna Maria.<sup>9</sup> The discussion in these letters centered around two key elements of Pietism, the conventicle and the hope for better times. Anna Maria's letters appear to have been a guiding light in the formation of Schütz's thoughts on both these issues and thus on the eventual formation of German Pietism.

To a later era, Anna Maria's reasonable but modest claims for equality, with its many allowances for society's traditions, seemed outdated. Her arguments were seldom used by those who advocated higher learning for women. However, handbooks of religious history and of art continued to mention her.

Reading her autobiography today, one cannot help but admire the Star of Utrecht, who never lost sight of what she perceived as the goal of her studies, namely to learn more about God and His Creation. Her Dutch surroundings proved to be an excellent breeding ground for these intellectual endeavors, but it was van Schurman's talent and perseverance, her tendency to explore the human conditions vis-à-vis the Creator that enabled her to choose the better part that could not be taken from her.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Whoever comes across this picture should realize that he sees here the glory of womankind. From the beginning of time until today, there is not one who comes close to being her equal. Oh, light of your time and pearl of the canvas, you who illuminate this century with your presence, likewise illuminate this book!" Text accompanying the frontispiece of Jacob Cats' *Werelts Begin* (1637). Some of my findings on Anna Maria van Schurman were presented earlier in *The Maiden's Mirror. Reading Material for German Girls in the 16th and 17th centuries* (Wiesbaden, 1987), esp. 52-54 and in a paper entitled "Anna Maria van Schurman's *Eucleria*, an Autobiographical Account of a Pilgrim's Progress and a Woman's Life in the Netherlands," presented at the Netherlandic Section of the Modern Language Association Convention, New Orleans, December 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Maria van Schurman, *Eucleria of uitverkiezing van het beste deel* (Amsterdam, 1684). Page numbers quoted here are taken from this Dutch translation of the Latin original.

<sup>3</sup> Since women did not have access to the university, their education had to come from self-study, from books. Any mention of a female scholar is invariably accompanied by an enumeration of the languages

in which she was fluent. The emphasis on languages is important. The knowledge of languages other than Dutch, especially Latin, gave women access to the scholarship of their day.

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough and comprehensive discussion of Anna Maria van Schurman's various artistic endeavors see van der Stighelen. The first chapter also contains an extensive biography of van Schurman, taking into account conflicting sources.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. in a letter that a German countess Benigna von Solms-Laubach wrote to her daughter, in: *Immer grünendes Kleeblatt mütterlicher Vermahnungen* (Frankfurt, 1717).

<sup>6</sup> Georg Philipp Harsdörffer, *Frauenzimmer-Gesprächsspiele* (Nürnberg, 1644), Biiij.

<sup>7</sup> Johann C. Eberti, *Eröffnetes Cabinet deß gelehrten Frauen=Zimmers* (Frankfurt, 1706), 317-24.

<sup>8</sup> Johann Heinrich Feustking, *Gynaecium Haeretico Fanaticum* (Frankfurt & Leipzig, 1704), 593-601.

<sup>9</sup> Johannes Wallmann, *Philipp Jakob Spener und die Anfänge des Pietismus* (Tübingen, 1986), 307-24.

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