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Anna-Christina Giovanopoulos, Paper presented at the symposium "Herdenking Maarten Maartens", 26.09.2015: "*Feminisme avant la lettre?* Over de positie van de vrouw in het werk van Maartens" (Part 1) [Part 2 by Hendrik Breuls]

Let me begin with a question:¹ Why do we read? Why do we – and why *should* we continue to read? This is closely connected with another question: What do we read, that is: what stories, what characters speak to us across the times? In addressing these issues, we hope to show how tales of Maarten Maartens can be relevant for readers of the twenty-first century.

My focus is the short story "Her Last Word", which comes from the collection programmatically entitled *The Woman's Victory* (1906).² In order to contextualise the topic I am also looking at the position of women in the mid- to late nineteenth century – both in society and in literature – because literature had and still has much to say about the important topics of the day. My contribution also provides the general background for the second part of the talk: An investigation of women in Maarten Maarten's stories, of women, whom we meet mainly as wives, also as daughters and sometimes as mothers.

Let us now turn to the title. What are your associations when you hear "*Feminisme avant la lettre*"? Are you thinking of the strategies of twenty-first-century radical feminists, who embark on outrageous projects designed to upset society? Today's 'femen' could have been late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminists like Emmeline Pankhurst, who had themselves imprisoned or went on hunger strikes. Nothing of that sort will occur here. You know enough of Maarten Maartens to realise that his women were – on the outside – not given to extreme demands. They may reach 'Victory' – however you wish to define it – by other means. We have heard in the reading of "Her Last Word" how the characters (with minimal interference by a narrator) try to hide their turmoil inside and communicate on more subtle levels. As Alice, the wife, has just said when she is forced to explain her reasons for leaving her husband: "Great heavens! don't let's grow melodramatic!" (HLW 211). She "cannot stand scenes" (HLW 208), she is "not that sort of woman" (HLW 201), as the quotations in English go.

And, one might add, she would not want to have anything to do with extreme forms of 'feminism', a word that was only coined in France in the 1870s and in England in around 1895.³ But the term did not gain wide-spread acceptance and use until the mid-twentieth

century, when it was applied to the political movement towards equality of men and women. We define 'feminism' very broadly to refer to an awareness and support of a woman's right to have power over her life and independence. This does not privilege woman over man, either, but it helps a woman to re-assess her position.⁴ This is one of the contemporary definitions of feminism, but ideas about women's rights and aspirations did exist in the nineteenth century (and, of course, before).⁵ It is another matter how acceptable such views were in mainstream society and in literary characters. What was Maartens' particular stance and what is his lasting contribution? Let us keep these questions in mind and turn to women in the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century was one of "unprecedented change and transition"⁶ – especially in industry and in social expectations. The changes following the industrial revolution combined to increase the "pace of work and life"⁷ – like today with globalisation and the digital revolution. As today, these rapid changes led to deep anxieties and insecurities,⁸ some of which were projected onto women. Thus woman became the symptom of change – within in the frame of marriage and family relations. Gaining impetus in the mid-nineteenth-century, the big issue was the 'Woman Question', which is the debate on the position of women, their place and especially their (legal) rights.⁹

Literature also addressed these questions. The realistic novels of the early Victorian period had concentrated on the immediate social upheavals produced by industrialization, on the condition of the working classes, conditions in factories and similar topics, with a view on advocating reform.¹⁰ But the most *popular* novels of the century discussed the 'womanly woman',¹¹ who is also the underlying ideal in Maartens. However, the attributes, that is the definition, of a 'womanly woman', changed over time.

With the rise of capitalism the concept of the so-called 'separate spheres' for men and women emerged: The private sphere of home and family stood in contrast to the public sphere of work.¹² The home was presided over by the woman, who provided peace, integrity, and harmony to the man who struggled – as a warrior – in the outside world.¹³ Consequently, women were excluded from the masculine "realm of intellect and commerce".¹⁴ In fact, just like in "Her Last Word".

Thus, when one thinks of nineteenth-century women, one thinks of two (or perhaps three) particular types.¹⁵ Typically, women, as the 'fair sex', were supposed to be passive and to espouse feminine skills and virtues. Such views led to an idealisation of women as the 'Angel in the House'. This is the Victorian version of putting women onto a pedestal. But if one subscribes to one extreme, the other extreme may not be far away. As soon as a woman did

not entirely conform to the virtuous ideal, she became the demonised other: the 'fallen woman' (the madwoman, the promiscuous woman). We may remember that when Alice expresses her wish to leave her husband, his first reaction is: "You are mad!" (HLW 209)

Towards the end of the century, another type of women emerged. A "new generation [...] born in the 1870s and 1880s refused to enter the 'cult of domesticity' that had entrapped their mothers; they also refused to undertake unpaid"¹⁶ philanthropic work.¹⁷ In 1894, there even appeared a new term for this kind of an emancipated woman:¹⁸ As her predecessors in the eighteenth century, the 'New Women' saw education and access to professions as a means to improve their position.¹⁹ In addition, they demanded the right to vote and own property in their own name, and sexual freedom.²⁰ It is obvious that Alice in "Her Last Word" does not belong to this middle-class phenomenon that was widely discussed in novels.²¹ But she may have taken up a suggestion here and there. Needless to say, the 'Angel in the House' remained the dominant ideal for a woman.

The phrase 'Angel in the House' was popularised in a poem by Coventry Patmore that defined the ideal woman like this: "And all the wisdom that she has / Is to love him for being wise".²² She would unquestioningly submit to the man. Alice, to come back to our story, had questioned Reginald's decisions which gradually stripped her of her personality, but she had complied with her husbands demands nevertheless. In consequence, she almost feels imprisoned. Reginald, on the other hand, believes that Alice had had enough room to develop and to take decisions: "Why, you had everything you could possibly want. And besides, it is absurd to say that I never asked you what you wanted to do" (HLW 208-9). She interrupts him: "Of course, you let me choose trifles ... matters of no importance – whether we should go to Yorkshire or to the Highlands ... But you have never once asked me what I really wanted to do" (HLW 209).

It becomes obvious that the two have completely opposite views on their relationship. According to Reginald, love is the basis of his marriage to Alice and of his daughters to their husbands. According to Alice, it is duty. When Reginald states that a woman finds fulfilment in marriage only, because marriage "is the one happiness for a woman" (HLW 204), Alice would like to agree, but she knows otherwise.

Reginald also knows different models and relationships gone wrong. For example, in connection with their daughter Mary he does not even want the word 'separation' or 'divorce' to be uttered. He would rather advise her to learn "how to manage" her straying husband, who obviously "likes to enjoy himself –" (HLW 205) After all, his redeeming grace is "plenty of money" (HLW 205). That is a key to the times: marriage guaranteed a woman's survival, and

thus, marriages often were – and sometimes still are – mercenary, to a degree, unless a woman can support herself on her own, both financially and psychologically, as Alice learns to do. This we also see in some of the daughters in Maartens' stories.²³

As far as Alice is concerned, during her marriage she has conformed to the image of the 'Angel in the House'. Her submission went to such extremes that Reginald could even decide what his wife was to wear and how she was to do so. She invited the people he chose and even stopped seeing her family (when he objected to them because they were of another religious creed). She was (or at least she defines herself like this) absolutely dominated by her husband: "You have always had your own way in everything all these eight-and-twenty years" (HLW 208). Obviously, such a relationship was only possible because she soon gave up her earlier attempts at resistance. But there may have been mitigating factors.

To understand some of Maartens' concerns – and the actions of Alice, we have to realise what the legal position of women was. Despite their relatively high authority in the house, women did not have many rights as married women of the middle and upper classes. Initially, they were not allowed to own property, to sign contracts and they were legally dependent on their husbands. Thus, quite apart from moral and religious considerations, separation was a problem. True, there were a number of reforms. Divorce was properly introduced in England in 1857, and after legal provisions in 1870 and 1882 married women were allowed to possess property.²⁴ Remember, Alice tells Reginald: "Oh, I shall not disgrace you, or myself, in any way. No, nor the children. We have each got our own money, haven't we? I shall go and live very quietly in the country, not too far from London, for I must come up and see the children often. I shall not be in your way." (HLW 209).

Despite some reforms, even in the 1880s and beyond, married women still had significantly fewer rights than men.²⁵ Especially their right to their children was insecure²⁶ – something that might help to explain why Alice waited to leave her husband until the wedding of the youngest daughter. What she stresses, however, is her motherly affection – and her duty, one of the important Victorian concepts.²⁷ She had attempted to say it before, but takes up her courage to continue to the end and have 'her last word' only at this stage, after her youngest daughter's wedding. Because as married women, her daughters' "happiness lies in their own hands" (HLW 207). And come to think of this, staying together for the children's sake is a modern perspective to which we might be able to relate.

When it comes to Maartens, you will find that he prefers the virtuous ideal, but he does not wholly condemn everyone who strays from the path, and he develops much more complex characters. For instance, look at Alice. And there is the dedication to *Some Women I Have*

Known, a collection published in 1901: "To the women without a history these histories of women". 'History' being also a code word for a transgressive woman with "a past". Ideally, however, as we have it in "Her Last Word", the wife leaves her husband not to elope with a lover, not because she has become an adulteress (a popular topic). Alice leaves because in her marriage she was not valued as a person. Crucially, she says: "I loathe you for treating me all these years like your servant, your spaniel, your plaything!" (HLW 211). She confesses this, however, only when driven to extremes. In the end, taking a mature attitude, she does not wish to "part in anger" (HLW 211): "I have been a faithful wife to you all this time, the keeper of your home" (HLW 210). Maartens modernises the 'Angel in the house'. She has raised her family, she has done her duty and, as she expresses it, served her time. Now Alice hopes that she is still young enough to create a new life for herself (HLW 210).

This is something Reginald does not understand. He conventionally and jealously suspects something else. But Alice reassures him: "Oh, don't make yourself nervous! I have never loved any other man. I have met men I thought I might have loved"- but only, she continues "had I been married to them" (HLW 206-7). In this respect she is also a modern, independent woman: she does not need a man to liberate her – or entrap her in a new relationship (as popular plots in literature tended to go.)

I started by asking: Why do we need stories? There will be as many answers as there are people in this room, and some more. But (since antiquity) one answer has been: to learn something, to grow – while being entertained. Literature can provide us with alternative models, with new ways of thinking. Just by showing what might be, it can lead to a deeper understanding of the world around us. Of course, what is thought as entertaining has changed over time. This can cause problems when reading literature from the past. Since the more time-bound a tale seems to be, the greater the effort for the reader to take away the layers of history, of values, judgments, perhaps language as well, until one hopefully reaches insight. Good literature does both: It speaks to the readers of its days and it is still meaningful for later generations. One good example is the story that we have heard, because in "Her Last Word", there does not seem to be much that we need to take away. Alice, in the end, can continue in her role as a caring mother – and as a respectable woman, as she sees it. But she has become a woman, who not only *knows* what she wants, but who *acts* on this knowledge and asserts her independence – which was and is a courageous thing to do.

¹ This is a slightly revised version of the paper presented at the symposium. It followed the reading of "Her Last Word" by Anne van Delft, who modified the existing Dutch translation.

² Maarten Maartens, "Her Last Word: Being a Bit of a Conversation," *The Woman's Victory and Other Stories*. London: Constable, 1906, 7-16. Henceforth abbreviated as: HLW. All quotes are from this edition. An online version can be found at: <<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hn2hs6;view=2up;seq=10>> (New York: D. Appleton, 1907).

³ See e.g. the definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which lists for 1895: *Athenæum* 27 Apr. 533/2: "Her intellectual evolution and her coquettings with the doctrines of 'feminism' are traced with real humour." (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2nd ed. 1989).

⁴ For a 'cooperative view' see e.g. Steven P. Schacht and Doris W. Ewing, eds, *Feminism and Men: Reconstructing Gender Relations*. New York: New York University Press, 1998. For a short history of feminism see Sally J. Scholz, *Feminism: A Beginner's Guide*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2010 (Ebook 2012). See also the internet database "Gender Inn" as a starting point: <http://uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/englisch/datenbank/e_index.htm>.

⁵ Among women who demanded a degree of equality and who already pointed out the importance of education in this respect during the eighteenth century were Mary Astell, Catherine Macaulay, and, probably most widely known, Mary Wollstonecraft, who is considered to be the first modern feminist (see Gregory Castle, *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2007, 94).

⁶ Shari Benstock et al, *A Handbook of Literary Feminisms*, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 66.

⁷ Benstock 2002, 66.

⁸ Benstock 2002, 66.

⁹ See Randolph/Scott 2007, 3-4. See also Judith Lowder Newton, "Power and the 'Woman's Sphere', Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991, 765-780.

¹⁰ A notable example is Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1845). See Joseph W. Childers, "Social Class and the Victorian Novel", Deirdre David, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed. 2012, 148-169, here 155-157.

¹¹ Benstock 2002, 69.

¹² Benstock 2002, 69.

¹³ See Vera Nünning, *Der englische Roman des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart: Klett, 2004, 17.

¹⁴ Benstock 2002, 70. For the theory of the public sphere see the English translation: Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge: MA: MIT Press, 1989.

¹⁵ For this paragraph see Benstock 2002, 70.

¹⁶ Benstock 2002, 91.

¹⁷ In Maarten Maartens, we find several women of the older generation who engage in that kind of work, but often with a critical twist. See e.g. "Little Mary" (*Some Women I Have Known*, Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1901, 104-125).

¹⁸ The term 'new woman' had been used before (in the *Westminster Review* 1865), but the more specific meaning arose only in 1894, when 'Ouida' wrote an article called "The New Woman" (and spelled the term with capital letters) in her response to an article by Sarah Grand (Sally Ledger, "The New Woman and Feminist Fiction", Gail Marshall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin De Siècle*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 153-168, here 154).

¹⁹ See Lyssa Randolph and Marion Shaw, *New Woman Writers of the Late Nineteenth Century*, Tavistock: Devon: Northcote, 2007, 3.

²⁰ Benstock 2002, 91.

²¹ A critical debate focus on the question whether the 'New Woman' was an historic or only literary phenomenon. It was probably both, and it worked on the imagination of the public (see Shaw/Randolph 2007, 4-5, 7).

²² Book 2, Canto 8 of the poem written and expanded between 1854 and 1862. Available online at the Victorian Web <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/patmore/angel/21.html>>.

²³ See esp. "The Heiress", *A Woman's Victory* 1906, 136-149; "Diamonds", *A Woman's Victory* 1906, 98-114.

²⁴ Benstock 2002, 67 and Nünning 2004, 18.

²⁵ Nünning 2004, 18.

²⁶ Randolph/Shaw 2007, 3.

²⁷ See Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870*. New Haven: Yale University Press, first edition 1957.