Bekkenkamp, Jonneke, and Freda Dröes, eds.

The Double Voice of Her Desire: Texts by Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes

Translated by David E. Orton

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This review must begin with an apology of sorts. If a book review should be “objective,” this one is not. The late Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, who died a little over ten years ago, was a close and very dear friend of mine. I cannot be disengaged about her work. I have always admired it, so this is going to be a rave review.

First, the book’s description. This is an English translation of the original collection of Fokkelien’s essays, edited by and published in Dutch under the same title, De dubbele stem van her verlangen: Teksten van Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, verzameld en ingeleid door Jonneke Bekkenkamp en Freda Dröes (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1995). The original publication contained fourteen articles, twelve of which were originally written in Dutch, which are here reproduced in English, and two in English (articles 5 and 13 are reprinted). Original publication data is given on pages 9–11, and further details concerning translations and reworking of pieces are to be found in the bibliography of Fokkelien’s work on pages 190–97.

The book begins with a foreword by Mieke Bal (7–8), original publication data (9–11), a “Personalia” section about Fokkelien and other collaborators in this collection (12–13), and an editors’ introduction (14–30) that describes the articles and evaluates Fokkelien and her work. It ends with an “In Memoriam” by this reviewer (185–89), a bibliography of Fokkelien’s work (190–97), a list of works cited (198–205), author index (206–7), and biblical references index (208–10).
The articles (31–184) are an editorial selection, arranged in the chronological order of publication date, so as to represent the development of Fokkelien’s work (introduction, 14): “The chronological order of this book makes it eminently suitable as an introduction to the thought of Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, but also as a progressive introduction to a feminist-literary approach to the bible” (30). This is a wise decision, and whoever is interested in the full scope of Fokkelien’s work, beyond this appetite-whetting choice, is invited to consult the bibliography for further reading.

The fourteen articles are, in order: “For Adam Was Created First, and Then Eve” (1979); “And Sarah Laughed” (1981); “Do Not Succumb to the Beauty of a Woman” (1983); “The ‘Female Nature’” (1983/4); “Tamar and the Limits of Patriarchy” (1984); “Blessed among Women”; “When H/he Speaks to Her Heart” (1988); “Reading the Bible ‘as a Woman’” (1989); “Sarai in Exile” (1989); “The Great Shunammite Woman” (1989); “Feminist Theology and Anti-Judaism in the Netherlands” (1991); “Traces of Women’s Texts in the Hebrew Bible” (1992); “The Metaphorization of Woman in Poetic Imagery” (1993); and “The ‘Double Voice’ of Her Desire” (1993). Ten articles are about Hebrew Bible passages, from Genesis and other historiographical books to and including the prophetic books and wisdom writings. Two are explicitly about “female” concerns: females as objects, females as Bible readers. One is about the New Testament (Mark 6), and one combines Hebrew Bible and apocryphal/New Testament criticism (from Deborah/Jael to Judith and Mary). Indeed, Fokkelien’s focus of scholarly activity was on the Hebrew Bible, which she loved as a passion; her original interest in Christian theology and the New Testament diminished over the years, in proportion to her growing interest in the theory and praxis of feminist criticisms, for themselves and as applied to Bible criticism.

In her foreword, Mieke Bal (who was Fokkelien’s Ph.D. supervisor as well as an admirer and friend), writes:

The questions she [Fokkelien] asked moved gradually from critical interpretation of sexism in the bible to the possibility that this cultural document must have recorded female voices. Women cannot be squeezed out. The methodological outworking of this insight mage her doctoral dissertation in the end a unique book: original and scientifically responsible, optimistic and realistic, literarily sensitive and socially committed. Reading “literarily” was no ethereal aestheticism for her; on the contrary, it was a way of taking the text seriously; so seriously, indeed, that the text itself can be called to account.

Bal says it well. My own collaboration with her showed me again and again how passionate yet flexible she was in her approach. This is a very good example of how
things worked out. Fokkelien was looking for actual women’s texts in the Hebrew Bible, using insights from feminist literary criticism about women as readers as well as authors. Defining some Hebrew Bible passages as female compositions, at least potentially, was very dear to her heart. Yet after all has been considered, she settled on implied female voices in the Hebrew Bible. Theoretically, the two options were and are different although partly overlapping. Fokkelien made that giant step forward, as was dictated by her ongoing quest; although attached to her original notion, she broke away into new methodological grounds. This was the essence of her scholarship: moving forward, with humor and grace and engagement.

As a friend, I was highly involved in Fokkelien’s work and appreciated it immensely. Upon reading the sample afforded by this book once more, I am struck by the freshness of these articles, published from 1979 to 1993. The last one was published more than ten years ago, but it is still as interesting, as groundbreaking, as refreshing as the day it was published. And this is saying a lot, isn’t it?

Run and buy it, says this biased reviewer, this fan. Have fun with the insights, the sparkle, the novelty, the responsibility of the arguments presented. Enjoy an original mind that, tragically, was taken away so early—but left a legacy for all to read. For Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Freda Dröes, the editors; for David Orton, who translated the pieces from Dutch so beautifully; and for Mieke Bal, who wrote the foreword to the book, making this book was a labor of love. For so many members of Fokkelien’s fan club, this publication is a major event, and it constitutes another fulfillment of an undertaking to Fokkelien, whose last wish was for her influential and pioneering work to be remembered.