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Margriet Boelen as a Reader

Manuscript, Print, and Painting in Amsterdam around 1500

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Abstract

Margriet Boelen, who hailed from Amsterdam, is known to have commissioned a painting from Jacob Cornelisz in 1512 with the Nativity and devotional portraits of her and her family members. This contribution attempts at portraying Margriet as an owner and reader of books. Her (family's) books provide additional information about the Boelens as well as about Margriet's devotional interests and religious practice. Margriet's book(s) – and more in general the increasing information about ownership of early printed books – also trigger questions regarding the role of the early printed book within a wider array of media, and the relationship between text and image in late medieval lay devotional culture in particular. When applied to viewing as well as reading, the concept of 'ethical reading' introduced by John Dagenais can be helpful in providing an indication of the way(s) in which lay readers and viewers connected both texts and images to their every day lives and used both media to advance their devotion.

Keywords: Late medieval spirituality, Religious reading, Lay book ownership, Text and image, Incunabula

The final decades of the fifteenth century saw an enormous increase in the production of printed books in the Dutch vernacular.¹ Printers catered to the demand of a wide range of readers, lay and religious alike. The growing

¹ This article has been written as part of the Veni-project 'Leaving a Lasting Impression. The Impact of Incunabula on Late Medieval Spirituality, Religious Practice and Visual Culture in the Low Countries', 2018–2022, funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) (grant number 275-30-036).

attention currently granted to the individual copies of early printed books generates new data about the ownership of incunabula.² I believe that in order to truly value the role and impact of printed books in these decades, their ownership needs to be carefully analysed, contextualised and interpreted within a wider spectrum of media and cultural consumption. In particular, the later medieval manuscript book still needs to be further integrated into our interpretation of the form and function of the early printed book, and vice versa. Data about the ownership of printed books can, for example, significantly increase the number of Middle Dutch books known to have been in the possession of religious communities; this, in turn, will strengthen our knowledge of the dissemination of texts and consumption of books.³

Establishing a context for the consumption of a printed book is particularly difficult in the case of lay owners. Not only is the number of surviving books from a particular reader's possession generally small – often a single book only –, an institutional context for his or her book consumption is often lacking, as well as further historical data that could help us determine the role of a book in a reader's religious practice. Owners often tend to remain a name only. The 'Dirck' who wrote his name beneath the printer's mark in a Paris copy of the *Passionael*, a fourteenth-century Dutch translation of Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea* that had been first printed in two volumes in 1478 by Gerard Leeu in the town of Gouda, will likely always remain a mystery to us.⁴ Unless we find his 'signature' in other books, Dirck is – however significant a fact this may be in itself – simply a layman who owned a printed copy of the first edition of this collection of saints's lives. Intriguingly, more lay people are recorded as owners of printed editions of the *Passionael* than for manuscript copies.⁵

This article delves into the history of another copy of the 1478 edition, whose lay owner, the Amsterdam burgher Margriet Boelen, brings a rich cultural setting to the table for the consumption of religious incunabula at the eve of the Reformation. As such, this article endeavours to carefully explore how owners' inscriptions in incunabula and information about

2 See e.g. the 15th-century BOOKTRADE project (University of Oxford), which resulted in the MEI (Material Evidence in Incunabula)-database.

3 Compare the remarks made by Stooker & Verbeij 1997, vol. I, 3. For a preliminary investigation of incunabula owned by communities of canonesses regular and tertiaries connected the Modern Devotion, see Dlabáčová & Stoop forthcoming.

4 *Incunabula Short Title Catalogue* (ISTC), no. ij00139000. Copy: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, RES-H-272. On the *Passionael* in print see Goudriaan 1997.

5 Goudriaan 1997, 86, n. 31.

small book collections owned by lay people can enrich our understanding of the place of the printed book in late medieval Netherlandish culture.

Margriet's *Passionael*

In 2012, Truus van Bueren and S.A.C. Dudok van Heel published an article in which they identified the sitters in the *Nativity with the Family Boelen in Prayer* (1512) by Jacob Cornelisz (2012, 169-179). The painting was originally destined for the Amsterdam Carthusian Monastery of St Andrew 'at the Blessed Harbour' [Sint Andries-ter-Zaliger-Haven].⁶ Jacob Cornelisz used his creative talent to work in other media as well. In collaboration with the Amsterdam printer Doen Pietersz., he designed large woodcut series to be printed on single sheets and smaller woodcuts to be used as illustrations for printed books.⁷

Apart from being involved in the production of printed material, the painter was a consumer of printed books himself. Research by Mart van Duijn on the extant copies of the so-called Delft Bible has revealed that Jacob Cornelisz owned one of these Bibles.⁸ The Delft Bible, published in 1477 by the printing partnership Jacob Jacobszoon van der Meer and Mauricius Yemantszoon van Middelborch, was the very first book printed in the Dutch language. Jacob Cornelisz's copy carries his owner's inscription beneath the colophon on the last page of the second volume: 'Dit bouck hoert toe Jacob Cornelis zoon die scilder wonende in die Caluerstraat' [This book belongs to Jacob Cornelis's son, painter, who lives on the Kalverstraat]. Jacob also added shading to the printer's mark (two coats of arms hanging from a branch) and the year '1502' in red chalk, which indicates that the vernacular Bible came into his possession two years after he moved his workshop to Amsterdam's Kalverstraat, currently the city's main shopping street.⁹

Perhaps not surprisingly, the painter was not the only person involved in the creation of the 1512 painting to own printed books: the painting's patron,

6 See also Falque 2019, cat. 299. On the painter in general see Meuwissen 2014 and 196-197, no. 13 on the painting in particular. For additional information and corrections, see Dudok van Heel 2014.

7 See for example Leeftang 2014.

8 Van Duijn 2014. Van Duijn 2017, 183-188. The painter's copy is held in the Morgan Library in New York, ChL 1630, 2 vols.

9 Van Duijn (2014, 153) also provides an image of the inscription. Jacob Cornelisz owned at least one other (printed) book, but its title/content as well as its present whereabouts are unknown: Van Duijn 2014, 152, n. 2.

Margriet Boelen, portrayed on the far right of the central scene, owned some too. Her copy of the second volume (the ‘Somerstuc’ or summer part) of the 1478 edition of the *Passionael* is nowadays held in the John Rylands Library in Manchester.¹⁰ Margriet probably owned the first volume (‘Winterstuc’) as well, but what we find in the John Rylands Library is a composite set of the *Passionael*, in this case with a winter part from Leeu’s second edition from 1480.¹¹ Another female reader owned the latter volume: Lijsbet vanden Venne, likely from Haarlem, stated in her owner’s inscription that the devil would grab the foot of the person who found the book and failed to return it to her.¹² Lijsbet apparently donated her book, as well as a manuscript, to the convent of Tertiaries of Saint Mary Magdalene in Haarlem – a convent whose members were former prostitutes.¹³ The initials inserted throughout the book, decorated with pen flourishes or ‘pen work’ in a local style typical of the Haarlem area, provide an additional argument for the Haarlem provenance of this copy.¹⁴

Margriet Boelen seemingly lacked Lijsbet’s sense of humour and wrote a plainer ownership notice – or had someone else write it for her, likely her custodian – on the blank recto side of the first leaf (the table of contents starts on the verso). After an inscription in Dutch follows a second note in Latin (Fig. 1):

10 Manchester, John Rylands Library, 19570.1. Gerard Leeu arranged the legends according to the liturgical calendar of the Utrecht diocese and published the summer part, which is the actual second volume, on 10 May 1478 before the winter part, the first volume, which he finished printing on 31 July.

11 Manchester, JRL, 19570.2.

12 Lijsbet’s inscription can be found on the verso of the last folio of the copy (Manchester, JRL, 19570.2, f. bb5v: ‘Item desen boeck hoert toe / lijsbet vanden venne / dien vijnt dien brenghen / hare weeder om gods wil / [added at a later moment:] In dient ghy dat nyet / en doet zoe gript die duvel biden voet’ [Item this book belongs to Lijsbet vanden Venne, the one who finds it should return it to her for the will of God. If you do not do that, the devil will grab you by the foot].

13 Below Lijsbet’s verse, a different hand has written the following in a large letter: ‘Dit boec hoert toe die magdalenen binnen haerlem’ [This book belongs to the Magdelenes in Haarlem]. This seems to indicate that Lijsbet donated her book to the convent established in 1474: see Goudriaan 2019, ID H23. One of the extant manuscripts from the convent, dated 1476 (currently Leiden, University Library, hs. BPL 76 C), contains an inscription in which Lijsbet identifies herself as ‘joncfrouwe’ (lady), followed by an owner’s inscription by the Magdelenes: see Lieftinck & Gumbert 1988, cat. 534. Gumbert 2009, no. 01161.

14 Haarlem pen work is discussed in Hülsmann & Nieuwstraten 1992. On pen work in printed books in particular, see Korteweg 2011.

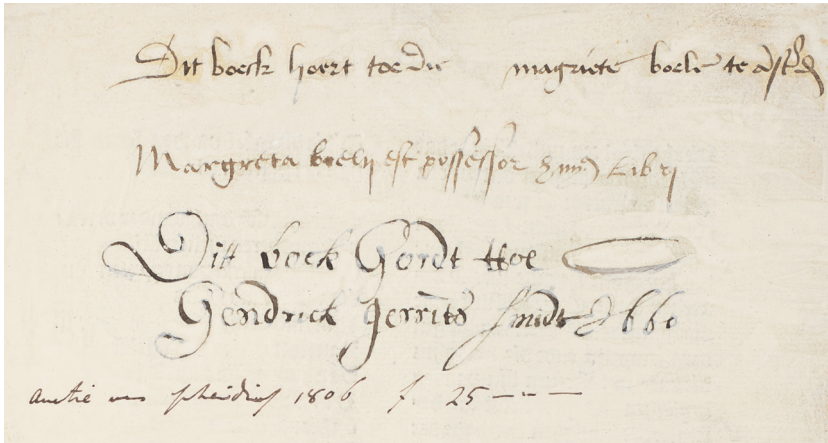


Fig. 1 – Margriet’s owner’s inscription in her copy of the *Passionael* (1478). Manchester, JRL, 19570.1, unsigned leaf in the front.

Dit boeck hoert toe die magriete boelen te amsterdam

Margareta boelen est possessor huyus libri¹⁵

[This book belongs to Margriete Boelen in Amsterdam

Margareta Boelen is the owner of this book]

Both inscriptions require further attention.¹⁶ In the first note, written in a *cursiva* script datable to the period when the book was printed, something seems to be missing after ‘die’. The blank space between ‘die’ and ‘magriete’ offers room for all kinds of speculation. There are no signs of erasure, however, and the same hand appears to have written both parts of the inscription. Perhaps Margriet or her custodian initially meant to include a designation such as ‘vrouwe’, but hesitated and eventually stated her name and place of residence only.

The second note in Latin can be dated to the sixteenth century on palaeographic grounds. We can only speculate why Margriet chose to add the note – or have the note added – in the language of the literati. A possibility can be that the person who put her in touch with Latinate book culture and

15 Manchester, JRL, 19570.1, recto side of the first of two unsigned leaves that contain the introductory text and the table of contents. Beneath her inscription, a seventeenth-century owner, Hendrick Gerrits Smidt (1660), has written his name.

16 I am grateful to Marinus van den Berg, Rijcklof Hofman, and Thom Mertens for their invaluable help with the analysis of these inscriptions.

owners' marks was to be found among her siblings, who were mostly priests and members of religious communities in Amsterdam (see below). It is even possible that it was the same sibling – likely, but not necessarily, one of her brothers – who added the second note, maybe because Margriet had lent her book to him/her and/or to the respective religious community. This would also explain the fact that the differences between the two inscriptions point not only to a later addition, but also to a different hand.

Margriet does not mention a date in the first inscription, but since her note is datable to the period in which Leeu printed the book, she must have purchased the book around that time. Similar to the copy owned by Lijsbet vanden Venne, Margriet's copy contains initials added by hand. The larger ones, in blue, are adorned with contrasting pen flourishes in red, touched up with green (Fig. 2). The style of the pen flourishes is different from the ones in Lijsbet's copy, and certain features of the pen work – e.g. the 'aubergines', the 'loops', and the motifs in the 'eyes' of the initials – seem to point to Gouda as the place of decoration.¹⁷ Unlike Lijsbet's copy, Margriet's book was thus probably decorated in the city where it was printed before it was shipped to Amsterdam.¹⁸

The 'Boelen Book of Hours'

A closer investigation into Margriet as an owner of books has revealed that she might also have been in the possession of at least one manuscript, nowadays kept in the Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht.¹⁹ The manuscript contains the Hours in the translation of Geert Grote in the following constellation: Hours of Our Lady, Hours of the Cross (long version), Hours of Eternal Wisdom, Seven Penitential Psalms, Litany, prayers for during and after Communion, and the Vigils. The texts are preceded by a calendar.²⁰

While Margriet's printed books (presuming she owned both the winter and summer part of the *Passionael*) were produced and hand finished in South Holland, the manuscript stems from the eastern part of the Low Countries. In the 1990s, the manuscript was the subject of art-historical

17 On Gouda pen work: Klein 1989.

18 On other female owners of the *Passionael* see Hellinga-Querido 1993, 20 and 28 (FLG 20). She also mentions the copy of the Haarlem tertiaries in Manchester JLR. Compare Goudriaan 1997, 85-86. Goudriaan (1997, 82) has suggested that Leeu himself may have supervised the insertion of pen work in the copies of his *Passionael* editions.

19 Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent, hs. ABM h16.

20 For an elaborate description of the manuscript, see Wierda 1995, no. 47.

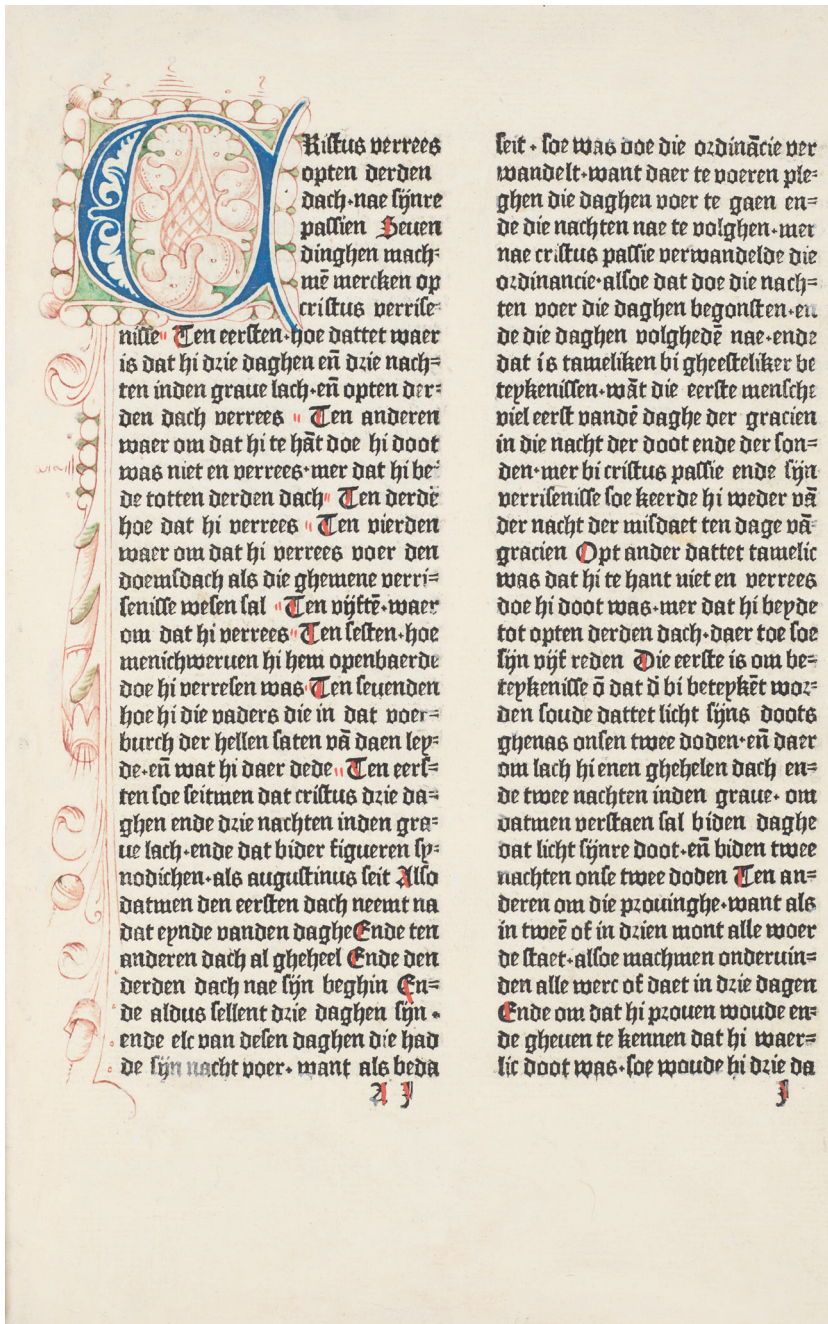


Fig. 2 – Example of the pen work in Margriet's copy of the *Passionael* (1478). Manchester, JRL, 19570.1, f. A1r (1r).

research by Lydia Wierda: she placed it within the group of the so-called Sarijs-manuscripts, which, according to her, originated in the Zwolle Domus Parva, one of the houses belonging to the Brethren of the Common Life. Wierda also noted that the manuscript contains rather elaborate notes on the years of death of the owner's family members.²¹ She suggested a family of Frisian, or possibly Groningen origin. We are, however, dealing with the family of Margriet Boelen, the commissioner of the painting by Jacob Cornelisz.²² The notes clearly pertain to Margriet's family history, and were added at the end of the calendar, after Saint Silvester's feast. Written in a neat *textualis* that fits with the style of the scribe who copied the book, the notes are nevertheless clearly distinguishable as written by a different hand (Fig. 3a). The same hand also added a prayer – the *Salve Regina* – at the end of the Long Hours of the Cross (Fig. 3b).²³

Anno domini M^o.cccc. lix opden vierden dach in september sterf dirc boelen zoon mijn lieue vader. Item Anno domini .M.cccc. lix. op sinte maria magdalenen dach sterff margriet dirc boelen soens wijf was mijn lieue moder .:

In anno domini M^occcc ende liij opten xvi dach der maent Januarius starf gheertruut dirc boelen zoon dochter mijn lieue suster

In anno domini M^occcc ende lxiiij opten xxviiij dach der maent Nouember starf nyese dirc boelen zoon dochter mijn lieue suster

In anno domini M^occcc ende lxvi opten xvij dach in Maerte starf duue dirc boelen zoon dochter mijn lieue suster bidt voer hoerre alre zielen²⁴

[1459 AD on the fourth day of September died Dirc Boelenzn my dear father. Item 1459 on Saint Mary Magdalene's day died Margriet Dirc Boelenzn's wife, [who] was my dear mother.

In 1453 AD on the 16th day of the month January died Gheertruut Dirc Boelenzn's daughter, my dear sister.

In 1463 on the 28th day of the month November died Nyese Dirc Boelenzn's daughter, my dear sister.

In 1466 AD on the 17th day of March died Duve Dirc Boelenzn's daughter, my dear sister. Pray for all their souls.]

21 Wierda 1995, 166.

22 The online catalogue of the Museum Catharijneconvent points to the Amsterdam family.

23 Utrecht, MCC, hs. ABM h16, f. 84r-v.

24 Utrecht, MCC, hs. ABM h16, f. 11r-v.

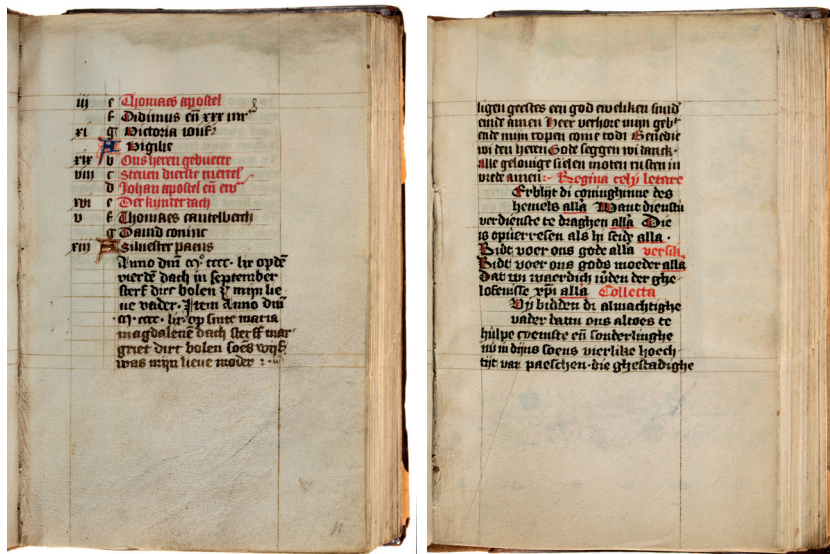


Fig 3a and 3b – The family notes (left) and the prayer (right) added by the same hand to the Boelen Book of Hours. Utrecht, MCC, hs. ABM h16, f. 11r and f. 84r.



Fig. 4 – The Nativity with the Family Boelen in Prayer (1512) by Jacob Cornelisz Margriet is the woman dressed in black on the far right. Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte.

The painting commissioned by Margriet contains no less than sixteen devotional portraits, eight males and an equal number of females (Fig. 4). Van Bueren and Dudok van Heel have identified most of them on the basis of archival documents, clothing, and comparative research.²⁵ The parents Dirc Boelen and his wife Margriet (both d. 1459) are the ones closest to Jesus' crib; behind the father we see their sons Vechter (priest, dressed in a tabard, d. 1520), Gerrit Dirc (priest, dressed in an alb, d. 1485), Hillebrand (Carthusian monk, d. 1501) and Jacob Dirc Sr. (Carthusian converse, d. 1508), and further Jacob Dirc Jr. (d. between 1484-1494), Boel Dirc (d. 1483), and another brother who could not be identified. Behind the mother, who is holding a book with a red leather binding, we see the patron of the painting, Margriet (d. 1515), with her sister Gheertruut just behind her. Gheertruut entered the tertiary convent of Saint Lucia in Amsterdam, of which the Boelen family was an important benefactor, but passed away during her noviciate, hence the white habit.²⁶ Van Bueren and Dudok van Heel postulate a date of death before 1460.²⁷ The family notes in the Book of Hours testify that she died already in January 1453. Apart from three unknown sisters, Nyese (Agnes) and Duve (or Duifje) can be identified. They both entered the same convent, made it through their noviciates – hence the brown habits – and passed away in 1463 and 1466, respectively.

Because the note in the Book of Hours does not mention any deaths after 1466, and as far as we know the next sibling's death occurred in 1483, the note can be dated with some certainty between these years. This also corresponds with the dating of the manuscript by Peter Gumbert – based on his palaeographic expertise – between 1465 and 1480.²⁸ It has been suggested that Gerrit Dirc, one of the priests, was responsible for adding the family notes: he passed away in 1485.²⁹ Another possibility might be Vechter, who entered priesthood probably around the time Duve passed away, in 1466.³⁰ He might have acquired the manuscript around that time and added the notes and prayer. We can obviously exclude Margriet's sisters as owners of the manuscript, since the note mentions them all.

But what about Margriet herself? The Book of Hours could have been passed on to her as an heirloom, but she also may have been the original

25 Van Bueren & Dudok van Heel 2012, overview on 176.

26 See Gaens 2008, 89.

27 Van Bueren & Dudok van Heel 2012, 176, no. 11.

28 Gumbert 2011, no. 20.

29 Museum Catharijneconvent, online catalogue: 'Mogelijk heeft hun broer heer Gerrit Dirsz Boelen (priester) dit opgeschreven.'

30 He turned to priesthood after his wife's death, which must have occurred before July 1467: Van Bueren & Dudok van Heel 2012, 174.

owner. It was fairly common, especially for women from the higher echelons of society, to own a Book of Hours in the vernacular. For priests, and particularly from a well-to-do family such as the Boelens, one would rather expect a breviary in Latin. It is not unlikely that Margriet acquired the richly decorated manuscript sometime in the 1470s and added the notes and the prayer by way of personalisation of the codex. Although the handwriting in the Book of Hours differs from the owner's inscription in the copy of the *Passionael*, it may be the case that in the former instance she adopted a 'book hand' and decided to use a *textualis* instead of the *cursiva* found in her owner's inscription – if such inscription was indeed written by her. Alternatively, she could have had the notes and prayer copied by one of her siblings or by a professional scribe at, for example, the St Lucia convent, which was closely connected to her family. Other manuscripts were copied in this convent in the later decades of the fifteenth century.³¹ According to Wierda, a professional intervention is likely due to the quality of the handwriting and the presence of rubrics.³²

The acquisition of a Book of Hours would also fit in with Margriet's interest in religious and devotional literature, which prompted her to acquire a copy of Leeu's *Passionael* some years later, around 1478. Her position as a member of an affluent family – her husband was the mayor of Amsterdam – put her in a privileged position when it came to purchasing books. We do not know exactly why and how she obtained the printed *Passionael*, but within her family alone, Margriet already had several channels through which she could gain guidance in her devotional reading and acquire religious reading material. The sisters of St Lucia had an interesting book collection, including Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus miraculorum* in Dutch, that might have attracted Margriet's attention. Margriet was not the only Boelen sibling who obtained printed books once they became available: her brother Hillebrand, the Carthusian monk who passed away in 1501, probably owned a collection of texts by Augustine and Jerome in Latin, printed in the early 1470s by Ulrich Zel in Cologne.³³

31 The minister of the sisters copied a Dutch translation of the *Dialogus miraculorum* around 1460 (Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, hs. Theol. 1125). Manchester, JRL, ms. Dutch 10 was possibly also written at the convent. See Stoker & Verbeij 1997, vol. II, nos. 110 and 111 and the online database of the *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta*.

32 Wierda, however, assumes that this was done in the atelier where the manuscript was made: Wierda 1995, 166.

33 According to the *Material Evidence in Incunabula* database, Hillebrand signed his name as 'M. Nicolaus Hillebrandi al[ia]s boelen' in a copy currently kept in Cambridge, University Library, Inc.5.A.4.1[292]. ISTC, no. ia01279000.

Both Hillebrand and Jacob Dirck Sr also had access to the library of the Amsterdam Carthusians, which included not only Latin texts, but also vernacular manuscripts with works such as the mystical guidebook *Spiegel der volcomenheit* (Mirror of Perfection) by the Franciscan Observant Hendrik Herp.³⁴ What is more, the Carthusians owned printed books as well. Their library was, for example, home to a copy of the second, 1487 edition of a weekly meditative exercise ascribed to Jordanus of Quedlinburg and published by Gerard Leeu at Antwerp on the small sedecimo format under the title *Meditationes de vita et passione Christi*.³⁵ The Carthusians' copy is bound together with a copy of the *Psalterium Beatae Mariae Virginis* printed in Zwolle in 1491 or 1492 by Peter van Os.³⁶ Since there were both spiritual and business connections between St Lucia and the Carthusians (beyond the Boelen patronage), an exchange of spiritual literature between the two communities is likely.³⁷ Moreover, Margriet's two other brothers, who chose to become secular priests, could also have provided some form of guidance regarding suitable reading material.

Ethical Reading and Viewing

Unlike Margriet's copy of the *Passionael*, the Dutch Bible owned by Jacob Cornelisz contains visible traces of extensive use in the form of crosses, underscored words, and summarizing notes. Van Duijn assumes that these are the remnants of the painter's reading practice (2014, 153).³⁸ He goes on to claim that Jacob Cornelisz used the text for his personal religiosity and not so much as a source of inspiration for his paintings and prints. This argument is established on the fact that the reading marks focus on the book of Deuteronomy, a part of the Bible that does not feature in episodes painted by the painter, at least in so far as these are still extant.³⁹ Could the book, apart from being a guideline for moral and religious behaviour,

34 Dlabáčová 2014, 106-116.

35 ISTC, no. ij00473900. Copy: The Hague, Royal Library, 150 F 5 (2). Van der Vlist 2017, 439-440, n. 65. On the *Meditationes*-text and editions, see Dlabáčová 2021.

36 ISTC, no. ip01049460. Other printed works owned by the Carthusians include a copy of editions of the *Ortus sanitatis* and the *Gemma vocabulorum*. See Van der Vlist 2017, 439-441.

37 Gaens 2008, 89

38 Also in Van Duijn 2017, 183. Jacob Cornelisz uses the same red chalk in his artist sketchbook. Reading marks in Margriet's *Passionael* may have been removed: the margins of many pages have been covered with a white, chalky substance.

39 Van Duijn 2014, 153.

notwithstanding the placement of reading marks, have functioned as a source of creative inspiration? Perhaps the contact between reader and text, the very moment in which meaning is made, did not leave a visible trace in these instances. To interpret the absence of reading marks as a sign that the text was not read, would end up relegating any text without reading marks to the realm of unread works. But if we cannot simply hold on to physical traces of book usage,⁴⁰ how should we then understand the relationship between book, painting and woodcut, or more in general, between text and image?

Our increasing knowledge concerning the ownership of incunabula generated by a surge in attention for the specifics of individual copies, makes these questions ever more urgent: what can we – as book or literary historians – do with this new knowledge? Over the last decades art historians have increasingly brought text and image together, arguing that these were not separate realms, but that they should rather be seen as expressions of – and meditative instruments in – a shared devotional culture.⁴¹ Most recently, Ingrid Falque has effectively shown how Early Netherlandish devotional portraits form a *mise-en-image* of meditative experiences, just as treatises, handbooks, and other texts try to put this experience in words.⁴² Her study uses the works of the mystic Jan van Ruusbroec as well as texts from the beginning of the *Devotio Moderna* movement by its initiator Geert Grote and his friend Florens Radewijns, written in the latter part of the fourteenth century, but disseminated in manuscript throughout the fifteenth century. Although Falque's analysis takes place on a different level, i.e. the *potential* role(s) of the painting in the viewer's spiritual development and the role of images in meditation and contemplation, we can hardly leave the (personal) possession of books aside when exploring devotional practices and the role of cultural products – whether of a visual or textual nature – therein. In the case of the Carthusian Jan Vos, who ordered devotional paintings with his portrait from Petrus Christus and Hans Memling, Falque makes use of the contents of the library of the Utrecht Carthusians, where Vos was the prior, as evidence of the sitter's awareness and knowledge of texts and 'key concepts' of late medieval mysticism.⁴³

40 Apart from reading marks, book usage may also include signs of wear due to touching and kissing: see Rudy 2011.

41 See notably Falkenburg 2001 and Hamburger 1997.

42 Falque 2019.

43 Falque 2019, 187ff.

But how can we incorporate small, private book collections of lay individuals into an analysis of their devotional attitudes? In the case of Margriet Boelen, her devotional practice comprised practically all media available around 1500: manuscript, print, and painting. While most readers of incunabula remain faceless to us, the painting Margriet commissioned in the last years of her life provides us with a rare portrait of an individual who owned and read – even though her reading did not leave physical traces – the 1478 *Passionael* printed by Leeu. In the prologue of the *Passionael* – whose title refers to the ‘passions’ the Saints suffered in imitation of the Saviour – the translator points to Christ’s life as the central example of all saints and sinners.⁴⁴ The descriptions of the lives of the saints and martyrs serve to make the readers aware of how much their own lives differ from those of the saints (‘om dat wi daer in vinden sullen ende mercken hoe verre ende hoe seer onse leven vanden heylighen leven versceyden is’) and to prompt them to follow Christ by becoming martyrs in their own right, subduing their bodily desires, bearing suffering with equanimity, and helping their fellow Christians. A person who knows how to live and does not follow the guidelines will be doomed and punished more severely than the one who lives in ignorance. Priests and parishioners who stimulate their (fellow-)parishioners to lead a sinful life instead of encouraging virtues in them, are put forward as negative examples. Such priests are said to gain more joy from ‘conquering’ one decent woman than from saving a hundred souls: the fact that a priest has a lover is unfortunately seen only as a small sin – concludes the prologue.

Considered from the perspective of John Dagenais’ ‘ethical reading’, which implies that medieval readers applied the works they read to their own morals and experiences, we can assume that Margriet would have connected the passages about priests to her brothers, and more importantly, the role of exemplary parishioners to herself: her family background and her marriage to the mayor of the city made her a prominent member of Amsterdam society.⁴⁵ Perhaps the most direct parallel between Margriet’s books – if we assume she indeed (co-)owned the manuscript Book of Hours – and the painting is the presence of her family members. While in the Book of Hours they exist in words written in black ink only, in the painting they have become images of actual persons. The ideal expressed in both media

44 Winter part, f. A1r-v. Copy: Ghent, University Library, BHSL.RES.0040.

45 Dagenais 1994. Although Dagenais used this concept exclusively for manuscripts, I believe that the distinction he made between ‘the Middle Ages’ and ‘the era of the printed book’ constitutes a false premise and that the concept can – and should – be applied to book printed in the fifteenth and first decades of the sixteenth century as well.

remains the same, however: pray for all their souls. Both the painting she commissioned and her reading – if one implies she used the Book of Hours for daily prayer – can be viewed as fulfilments of Margriet’s exemplary role.

If we transfer the concept of ethical reading to the act of viewing and consider how Margriet may have related the scenes in the painting she commissioned from Jacob Cornelisz to her own conduct and principles, the Nativity scene at the centre of the painting can be viewed as a reflection of the centrality of Christ’s life in her own redemption – and that of her family members – and devotional practice. Moreover, Margriet could have compared the course of her life and the lives of her family members to the fortunes of St Margaret and St Andrew, who in the painting present her parents to Christ. Such a comparison by its readers is after all encouraged by the prologue to the *Passionael* quoted above, so that the readers will realize how stark the difference is between them and the saint, and how prayer, religious exercise and reading may help them to come closer to Christ. St Margaret’s perseverance in her faith and her detachment from beauty and body expressed ferociously in her scolding of the prefect who had her captured and tortured – ‘ontscamel hont ende onversadelike leeu, du heves inden vleysche macht, mer Christus sel die ziele behouden’ [detrimental dog and insatiable lion, you have power over the flesh, but Christ will save the soul] – may have been inspirational to Margriet’s own devotional attitude and her – exemplary – focus on eternal life.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Hitherto, Margriet Boelen has been mainly known as the commissioner of the *Nativity with the Family Boelen in Prayer*. I have endeavoured to explore her ownership of books and provide glimpses of her devotional reading practice, also in relation to the painting she commissioned. The printed religious book constitutes an important component within the historical media-spectrum with all its complex interconnections, both on the production and consumption side. I hope to have shown that while further analysis and contextualisation of the ownership of early printed books can be a laborious undertaking, it can help us map the specific contexts in which these books were read and the role(s) they fulfilled in people’s lives, thus illuminating our understanding of the impact of the printing press on late medieval society. The concepts of ‘ethical reading’ – and in extension ‘ethical viewing’ – can be helpful in providing an indication of the role of

⁴⁶ Summer part, f. Ciiijv. Copy: Amsterdam, University Library, Inc. 420.

these books in lay devotional culture and the way(s) in which lay readers and viewers connected both text and images to their every day lives. The book(s) that the hands of the patrons and/or viewers of a painting would have actually held – for example Margriet's *Passionael* – can be complementary to the analysis of a painting within the more general context of a shared devotional culture expressed in both text and image.

In fact, Margriet's case shows that different – complementary – modes of reading and viewing are, even historically speaking, never far away. Even if the only book Margriet unquestionably owned was the *Passionael*, her family network alone provides numerous connections to other religious materials – in manuscript and in print – that she might or might not have been acquainted with. All these works were part of the devotional culture of the time; moreover, Margriet's siblings would all have brought their own intellectual baggage, and thus various, complementary modes of viewing, to the painting – provided they would have been able to actually see it (most of them had already passed away by 1512). The different devotional modes that Margriet and her siblings represent are all relevant for our understanding of the steady profusion of the printed book in a broader cultural context as well as for the function of texts and images in late medieval devotion.

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