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van Gemert, L.

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# Women's Writing from the Low Countries

1200-1875

A Bilingual Anthology

EDITED BY

LIA VAN GEMERT (CHIEF ED.)

HERMINA JOLDERSMA

OLGA VAN MARION

DIEUWKE VAN DER POEL

RIET SCHENKEVELD-VAN DER DUSSEN

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM

JOSÉ VAN AELST

KRISTIAAN AERCKE

ORLANDA LIE

WYBREN SCHEEPSMA

TRANSLATIONS

MYRA HEERSPINK SCHOLZ

BRENDA MUDDÉ

PAUL VINCENT

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Chief ed. Lia van Gemert

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## Obstinately Pursuing Her Own Course

# Anna Berchmans

DIEST, ? – DIEST, 7 NOVEMBER 1665

LIA VAN GEMERT  
TRANSL. BRENDA MUDDÉ

THE BERCHMANS WERE A WELL-KNOWN and deeply religious family from the town of Diest in Flemish Brabant. Anna's mother was an aunt of Jan Berchmans (Diest, 1599–Rome, 1621), a Jesuit saint. A modern portrait of Anna hangs in her cousin's birth house in Diest.

Judging by her writing, Anna liked the company of Jesuits: Ignatius of Loyola, Stanislas Kostka and her holy uncle feature in the mystical visions and apparitions she describes. Anna is believed to have had a very difficult relationship with her mother, and her vocation was the product of this ordeal and her own stubbornness: *ex malo bonum* (good coming out of bad).

Berchmans was a Beguine, and her autobiography was kept in the Beguinage at Diest and printed in 1712 as part of a collection entitled *The Life of the Most Noble and Illustrious Saint Begga [...]* (*Het leven van de seer edele doorluchtigste en H. Begga [...]*). Her confessions are extremely candid and direct. Using traditional motifs of the religious vocation – leaving home and parents (see Matt. 10:37); the immediate cause of the vocation (often a chance occurrence of small importance); the choice of religious community; the protests and postponement (girls were often boarded out to learn French) – she tells a tale in which she makes no concessions to herself or her family. For a possible explanation of this disconcerting honesty, which also characterises Maria Petyt's work, we must look to the first readers of these texts, the confessors at whose orders they were written. Berchmans' confessor may well have been her uncle Paulus vanden Boom, chaplain of the Beguinage at Diest. If so, Berchmans' personal, often confusing, experiences would constantly have been judged by an objective arbiter vested with authority. In addition, she was inclined to self-disparagement and emphasising her weaknesses; her strong points she attributed to God, the source of all that was good in the world.

Berchmans comes across as a woman with a fiery temper and a passionate character. She not only subjected herself to a life of mortification, but also ardently embraced life's more lighthearted moments. Once, when there was dancing, she led a dance with her fellow-sisters with such enthusiasm that 'she pulled her arm out of its shoulder socket.'

She then asked them to  
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## Course

LIA VAN GEMERT

ANSL. BRENDA MUDDÉ

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She then asked them to take her other arm, and she danced on despite the severe pain. 'Which gives you an idea of how wild and unbridled I was,' she wrote to her confessor.

### [Een dwarse jeugd]

Dat het mij toegelaten geweest hadde, ik zoude heel nachten overgebracht hebben met spelen, waarom ik mijn ouders zeer vergramde, en bijzonderlijk mijn moeder, dewelke zo gram op mij werd, dat zij mij hierom dikwijls sloeg, en ik was zo boos, dat ik nauwelijks naar kijven of slagen en vraagde. 's Morgens als ik opstond, begost ik te zingen, en dat duurde bijna den helen dag door: waarom ik dikwijls bekeven werd, want mijn moeder die docht mij wat kwellig te zijn, om dat zij mij zo kort hield, en niet en dede als kwekken of preutelen. Zij mocht niet lijden dat ik iemand aansprak. Als ik begost wat jaren te krijgen, ik en was met veel aanspreken niet zeer gehand, maar wel tot spelen, nochtans was mijn moeder heel jaloers op mij, en woude mij heel kort houden, vrezende, omdat ik zo woest en wild was of ik voor mijzelfen niet wijs genoeg geweest en hadde.

Den Heer zij gebenedijd, die mij zo bewaard heeft door zijn goddelijke gratie, want de ouders en konnen in dees zake niet te zeer gezorgen, hoewel ik daarom dikwijls zeer gram werd, te meer, omdat ik tot zulks niet genegen en was. Ik begost kwaai zinnen te krijgen van de grote kwelligheid van mijn moeder, want ik en kost geen kijven verdragen. Ik peinsde, 'k zal van haar gaan lopen, en gaan van deur tot deur om Gods wil liever als al den dag door dit gepreutel te horen. Het was mij zulken verdriet, dat ik niet en wist waar mij keren of wenden, mij docht dat ik in den Hemel was, als ik wat van kant was. 'k Mene dat de meeste oorzaak is, dat ik den zin gekregen heb om geestelijk te worden, omdat mij zo verdroot het gekakel van mijn moeder. Ik hadde enen groten inwendigen strijd, niet wetende wat ik wou aanvatten. Ik peinsde, word ik geestelijk, ik en zal daar niet mee konnen doorgeraken; als ik mij tot stilte ga begeven, dan zal ik ziek worden, en begeef ik mij tot geen stilte, zo zullen zij mij weg zenden. Wat raad met mij? Dan zal ik van een iegelijk bespot worden, zo is 't beter dat ik niet en begin, want de beschaamdheid zou te groot zijn. Helaas! Met wat hoverdije was ik gekweld. Wederom aan den anderen kant, peinsden ik, blijf ik thuis bij mijn ouders, zo zal ik sterven van verdriet: want hoezeer ik zoek mijn moeder te believen, zo zalder altoos iets verdraaid zijn, en ik en zal nimmermeer vree hebben.

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Autobiographical fragments, recorded in *The Life of the Most Noble and Illustrious Saint Begga* (*Het leven van de seer edele doorluchtigste en H. Begga*)

[*A Troublesome Child*]. In this text Anna fills in the picture of herself as an extremely playful and superficial child. She considered entering the religious life in order to escape from her scolding mother.

### [A Troublesome Child]

Had I been allowed, I would have spent entire nights playing – to the great annoyance of my parents, especially my mother, who became so angry that she often beat me because of it. And I was such a bad child that I hardly cared about beatings and scoldings. When I got up in the morning I would start to sing, and that would go on almost all day long. Often I was scolded for this, for my mother thought I was intentionally annoying her because of the tight rein she kept on me, and she did nothing but nag and quibble. She would not tolerate it if I spoke to anyone. As I grew older, I was less given to such chattering, though I did still love to play; yet my mother was very jealous of me and wanted to keep a very tight rein on me, fearing that I would act unwisely on my own because I was so wild and unruly.

Blessed be the Lord who preserved me by His divine grace, for my parents could do little in this matter, although I often became very angry about what they did, especially because I was not receptive to it. I began to have dark thoughts because of the constant badgering of my mother, for I could not endure scolding. I thought to myself, I'll run away from her and go from door to door begging rather than listen to this nagging all day long. It was so grievous to me that I did not know where to turn. I thought I would be in heaven if I could just get away. I think the main reason I began to desire the religious life was that I was so vexed by the nagging of my mother. I experienced a great inner struggle, not knowing what course to follow. I thought, if I enter the religious life I will not be able to persevere in it. For if I try to be quiet, I will become ill, and if I am not quiet, they will send me away. What am I to do? If I end up a laughingstock it's better not even to begin with it, for the shame would be too great. Alas! I was being tormented by pride. But on the other hand, I thought, if I stay at home with my parents I will die of misery: for however much I try to please my mother, something will always go wrong, and I will never have peace.

TRANSL. MYRA HEERSPINK SCHOLZ



### [Allesoverheersend verlangen naar het begijnhof]

Ik hebbe dan een begijntjen mijnen zin te kennen gegeven, en heb haar gebeden, dat zij mijn moeder eens zoude aanspreken en hiertoe verwilligen om mij te helpen tot dezen staat, maar 't en heeft niet veel geholpen, want zij en wilden er niet eens naar horen. Hetgene dat ik hierna te lijden gehad heb van mijn moeder, is den Heer bekend: het was al dees begijn hier, en dees begijn daar. Mij dunkt dat ik het kruis van mijnen Bruidegom van toen af heb beginnen te dragen. Ik en heb niet opgehouden van mijn moeder te bidden dat zij mij zoude helpen, maar al te vergeefs. Zij werd gelijk uit haren zin, dat ik haar niet gerust en liet. Ten lesten toen zij zag dat ik niet op en hield door kijven of slagen, zo ging zij mij bestellen om Frans te leren, hetwelk haar wel honderd guldens kostte, en dat had zij liever te doen, als mij op het Begijnhof te bestellen. Zij meende dat ik daar en tussen zoude veranderen van zin, maar zij was voorwaar bedrogen. God zij geloofd, want ik vond in deze stad daar ik woonde, enen pater van de jezuieten, daar ik mij alle weken bij ging biechten; hij kost schoon Duits; dien versterkte mij zeer in mijn goed voornemen. God zij geloofd, na een jaar ben ik thuis gekomen: en ik hebbe wederom alle dagen mijn oud liedeken gezongen van naar het Begijnhof te gaan. Mijn moeder ziende dat ik niet op en hield van haar te tempteren, was zo boos op mij, dat zij mij niet een vriendelijk woord aan en sprak, min of meer alsof ik haar kind niet geweest en hadde. Dat was mij zulke droefheid ende benauwdheid des herten, dat ik met geen woorden en zoude kunnen uitspreken, want voorwaar zij was mij zo herd, dat ik 't moet zwiiggende overslaan, want het scheen, dat zij haar moederlijke affectie tot mij hadde verloren. Hetgene dat ik er kan uit trekken is, dat ik mij vastelijk laat voorstaan, dat onzen Zaligmaker toen mij dit zo bitter gemaakt heeft, omdat mij dit een oorzake zoude zijn om mijnen toevlucht alzo te nemen tot God, want ik hebbe naderhand dikwijls ondervonden, dat het verlaten van vrienden, is enen waarachtigen toekeer tot God.

Ik hebbe dan zonder ophouden mijn moeder gebeden, dat zij mij toch zoude helpen en ik beloofde haar dat ik zozeer zoude werken dat zij geen grote kosten met mij en zoude hebben; zij scheen door een grote onverduldigheid mij toe te spreken, en zeide, maakt u terstond van hier want ik en mag u voor mijn ogen niet meer zien. Daarom gaat uit mijn ogen, eer ik mij aan u ontgaan, want zeide zij, moet ik u eens onder mijn handen krijgen, gij en zult geen aarde meer betreden. Voorwaar het was herd gesproken voor een moeder, maar veel herder, en met meerder geweld trok mij den H. Geest, door de goede begeerten die ik hadde tot het geestelijk leven.

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Sources: BEGGA 1712: :  
Literature: Portemar

[*Her Overwhelming Desire to Become a Beguine*]. Anna gives a remarkably candid account of the opposition she faced from her mother and her own stubbornness.

### [Her Overwhelming Desire to Become a Beguine]

I then told a Beguine about what I desired and asked her to speak with my mother and persuade her to help me to achieve this state, but it did not help very much, for she was not even willing to listen. What I subsequently had to suffer at the hands of my mother the Lord knows: all her talk was of 'this Beguine' here and 'that Beguine' there. It was then, I believe, that I started bearing the cross of my Bridegroom. I did not stop begging my mother to help me, but to no avail. She was almost driven out of her mind because I would not leave her in peace. At last, when she realised that scolding and beating did not make me stop, she sent me away to learn French; that cost her one hundred guilders, but she preferred doing that to sending me to the Beguinage. She thought I would change my mind there in the meantime, but she was truly deluded. Praise be to God, for I found in the town where I lived a Jesuit priest to whom I went for confession every week. He spoke very good Dutch, and he encouraged me in my resolve. Praise be to God; after a year I came home, and once again I sang the same old song every day about going to the Beguinage. My mother, seeing that I would not stop pestering her, was so angry with me that she did not speak a single friendly word to me, more or less as if I were not her child. That caused me such sadness and heaviness of heart, I can find no words to express it; she was indeed so harsh that I have to pass over it in silence, for it seemed that she had lost her motherly affection for me. I can conclude from this – and I sincerely believe – that our Savior made me endure such bitterness then so that I would seek refuge in God, for since then I have often experienced that the forsaking of friends is actually a turning to God.

I then continually begged my mother to help me nevertheless, and I promised her that I would work so hard that she would not have many expenses because of me. She seemed to speak to me out of great impatience, saying 'Begone this minute, I don't want to see you here anymore! So get out of my sight, before I lose all control; because,' she said, 'if I get my hands on you, you will no longer walk on this earth.' That was indeed hard talk for a mother, but the Holy Spirit pulled me much harder and with greater force, through the good longings I had for the religious life.

TRANSL. MYRA HEERSPINK SCHOLZ

Sources: BEGGA 1712: 173-174, 175-176.

Literature: Porteman 1997d; Porteman & Smits-Veldt 2008: 822, 828.

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