A Dominican Sister from Antwerp: Her Bible, Her Memories, Her Prayers

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Abstract

Maria Ludovica Mortgat, a seventeenth-century Dominican sister, owned a Dutch Bible printed in Antwerp in 1556. On the flyleaf of this Bible, Mortgat made extensive annotations recalling how she entered the convent. She also collected some short prayers and meditations. This case study not only provides insight into textual practice in early modern female convents, but also shows how Bibles were used as paper spaces within which one might develop a sense of religious self. Like the annotations in medieval *rapiaria* or early modern family Bibles, Mortgat used the blank leaves in her Bible to create a personalised object. In addition, this Bible confirms the relevance of reading Scripture in early modern Catholic contexts.

Keywords: book ownership, Bible, religious life, annotating

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Recent years have seen a valuable increase in scholarship on female religious book ownership in the medieval and early modern Low Countries. This relates to a broader scholarly interest in the materiality of the premodern book, including studies into layout, paratext, or images – as reflected in the contribution by Martine van Elk to this volume. Thanks to rigorous work by, amongst others, Patricia Stoop, Anna Dlabačová, Sabrina Corbellini, and Elise Watson, we now know that women in the Low Countries were active players in the production, transmission, and use of religious texts and books, for instance as scribes, commissioners, printers, donators, decorators, sellers, buyers, and – as demonstrated by ownership inscriptions in particular – owners and readers.[1] Inscriptions by women in early modern religious books not only give evidence of female ownership, but may also reveal how, where, or to what purpose women read and used their books. In other words: rather than simply providing us with names, female ownership inscriptions may serve as entries to understanding the functioning, transmission, and value of books and texts in religious contexts. In doing so, they also allow us to gain insight into the individual lives and thoughts of women whose identities are often barely represented in archival sources. In this short article, I will explore what insights can be gained from a Bible copy owned by Maria Ludovica Mortgat, a seventeenth-century Dominican sister in Antwerp. Although she lived in an enclosed community, her inscriptions make visible some of her personal concerns, memories, and prayer life.[2]

The Bible that Maria Ludovica Mortgat owned and used was printed in Antwerp in 1556, by Hans de Laet. He published a reprint of the so-called *Leuvense Bijbel* or Louvain Bible – the Bible translation by Nicolaes van Winghe that was first published in 1548 by the Leuven printer-publisher Bartholomeus van Grave. The translation followed the Latin

1 See, for instance Stoop, 'Bridging the Convent Wall'; Dlabačová and Stoop, 'Incunabula in Communities'; Corbellini, 'Sitting between Two Sisters'; Watson, 'The Jesuitesses in the Bookshop'.

2 Even in feminist scholarship, religious women have long lacked attention. As noted by Strasser, 'Early Modern Nuns', 530: 'Religious profession, the women's status as ecclesiastics, appears […] [a] relevant factor in the historiographical banishment of nuns.' Recent studies, however, have cast new light on female monastic communities, focusing on daily life in the convent or the spiritual, creative, or political endeavors of individual sisters. See for instance Evangelisti, *Nuns*.

Vulgate, which was declared the authentic Bible for the Catholic Church at the council of Trent in 1546.[3] Shortly after the first publication of this Bible, the Leuven theologians, as well as theologians in Rome, became more and more sceptical regarding the publication of vernacular Bibles, even those with Vulgate-based translations. In 1559, shortly after the publication of Hans de Laet's Bible, the Index of Rome was published, which ordained a full prohibition of the printing, reading, or ownership of vernacular Bibles. However, this statement was quickly reviewed, and five years later the Index of Trent concluded that certain religious authorities could allow individuals to read vernacular Bibles, as long as the activity was deemed to help strengthen piety and faith.[4] The Louvain Bibles would continue to be produced in Catholic contexts over the course of the next few decades, and were used for an even longer period – Maria Ludovica Mortgat used a Bible that was printed a century before.[5] The 1556 edition by Hans de Laet is folio-sized and richly illustrated with woodcuts. It contains a preface by translator Van Winghe as well as a liturgical reading schedule indicating which pericopes were to be read throughout the year. The edition does not provide extensive marginalia, but De Laet did include cross-references and short summaries above each chapter.

A copy of the edition in the Maurits Sabbe Library in Leuven was owned by sister Maria Ludovica Mortgat in the late seventeenth century.[6] She lived in the Dominican convent of the Holy Catherine of Sienna, located at the Minderbroedersrui in the centre of Antwerp. The convent was established in 1621, when several sisters moved to Antwerp from their convent in Temse, a town south-west of the city.[7] A *gestoribock* or memory book that was kept by the convent from 1621 onwards provides ample information about the development of the convent over the years, recording when new priors were chosen, when construction work was being done, or when the convent acquired special artworks, such as an altarpiece by the famous painter Antoon van Dyck in 1629.[8] Information on the personal religious life of individual sisters, however, is lacking in this institutional archival source. The same applies to the rules of this convent, which have also survived and are currently kept in the State Archives in Antwerp. Although these rules provide some interesting insights into the order of the day, practices such as fasting, taking care of the sick, or keeping silent, and the various punishments that were in place for disruptive behaviours by sisters, the document remains prescriptive rather than descriptive. They indicate how the convent was supposed to function, rather than providing insight into the goings-on of everyday life. A book such as Mortgat's Bible copy can help shine a little light on the lives and practices of individual sisters.

Mortgat left no visible traces of her reading practices on or alongside the biblical text. She did, however, write down extensive annotations on a blank flyleaf of the book, opposite

3 François, 'De Leuvense Bijbel', 276-279.

4 François, 'De Leuvense Bijbel', 296-297.

5 By the time De Laet published his Bible, the publication of vernacular Bibles in Leuven had, under influence of the theologians, fully come to a halt. However, Bible publication in Antwerp continued with five more editions of the Louvain Bible up to 1566: François, 'De Leuvense Bijbel', 298.

6 *Den Bibel*, copy held at Leuven, Maurits Sabbe Library (hereafter MSL), P22.005.1/Fo BIJB 1556.

7 On the history of the convent, see Prims, *Geschiedenis van het Prekerinnenklooster*.

8 Antwerp, FelixArchief, Dominican sisters (Predikherinnen) KK#1033, *Gestoribock* van de zusters predikherinnen, 1621-1783.

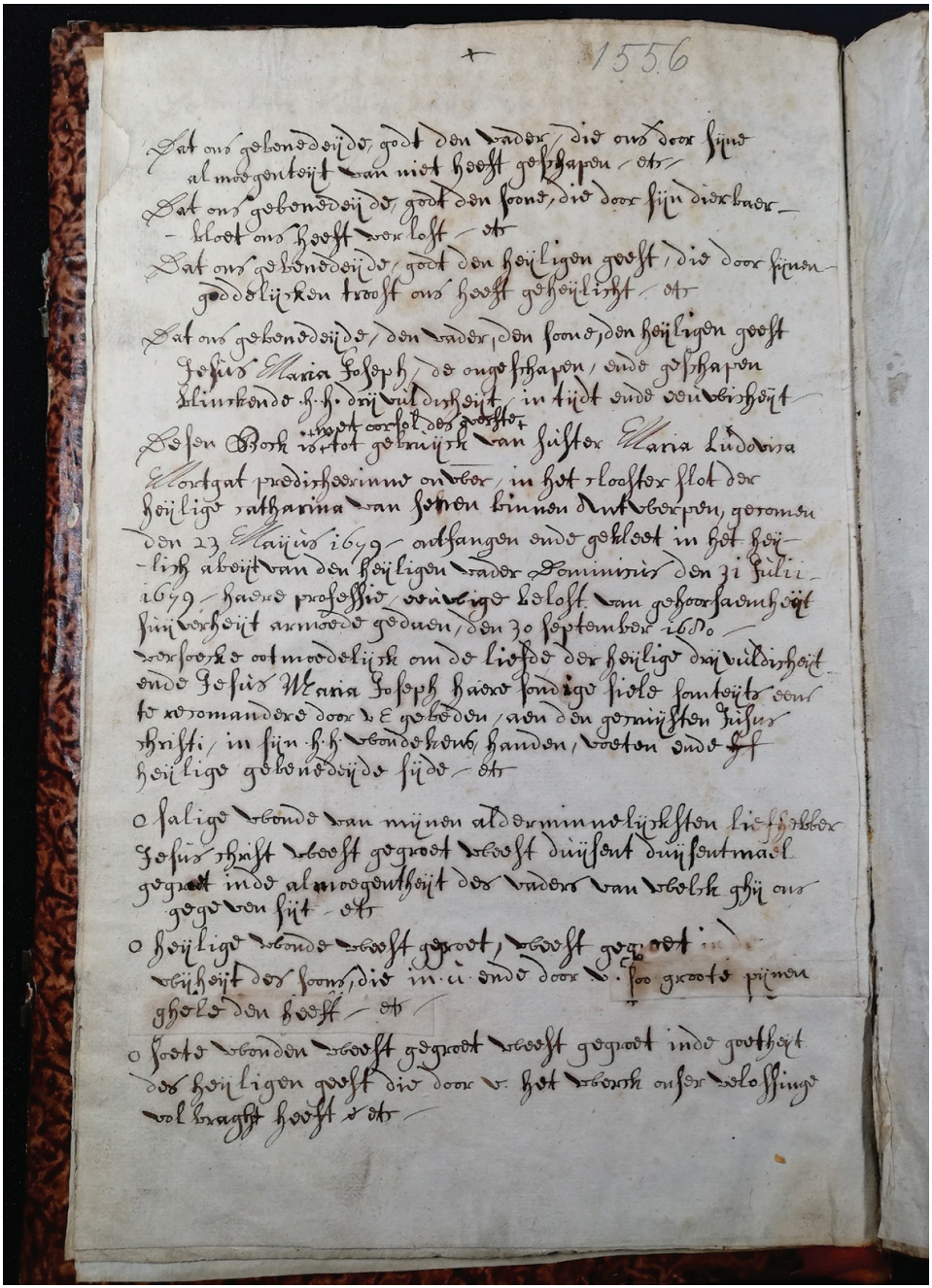

Fig. 1 Annotations by Suster Maria Ludovica Mortgat on the flyleaf of Den Bibel. Inhoudende het oude ende nieuwe Testament *(Antwerp: Hans de Laet, 1556), Leuven, Maurits Sabbe Library, P22.005.1/Fo BIJB 1556.*

the decorated title page (fig. 1). In the middle of the page, Mortgat writes: 'This book is for use by sister Maria Ludovica Mortgat, with approval by the prior.'[9] In the context of using this particular Bible, this was important information. The rules of the convent reveal that private possession of any object had first to be approved by the prior.[10] In addition, edicts and indices forbade the ownership and use of vernacular Bibles without approval from religious authorities. Mortgat continues, writing that she arrived at the convent in May 1679 and that she 'received and was clothed in the holy habit of the holy Father Dominic on 31 July 1679'.[11] She took her eternal vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty about a year later, in September 1680.[12] Mortgat concludes these notes by turning towards God and 'asks humbly for the love of the Holy Trinity, and Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, that they so now and then will recommend, through their prayers, her sinful soul to the crucified Jesus Christ'.[13]

These annotations on important moments and transitions in Mortgat's religious life are positioned between prayers. At the top of the flyleaf she wrote a benedictory prayer, asking God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as well as Jesus, Mary, and Joseph for their blessing. She used the bottom part of the page for another prayer, a meditation on the wounds of Christ. The first verse translates as: 'O blessed wound of my most beloved lover Jesus Christ, hail thee, hail thee thousand, thousand times, in the omnipotence of the father by whom you have been given to us, et cetera.'[14] This prayer can be traced back to the revelations of the thirteenth-century mystic Saint Mechtilde of Hackeborn. The text of her *Liber specialis gratiae* survives in Middle Dutch translations in both manuscript and print, for instance in the *Vyf boecken der gheestelycker gratien van S. Mechtildis Maghet*, printed by Lambrecht and Claudius de Grieck in Brussels in 1648.[15] Mortgat seems to have started her annotations with a mistake, one which she corrected by pasting some paper with a different text onto the page rather than by simply crossing it out. She apparently valued a clean, faultless text on the flyleaf of her Bible.

This single, annotated page reveals various elements of Mortgat's life and identity as a sister in the Dominican convent in Antwerp. Firstly, it displays the types of texts she interacted with. The rules of the convent state in general terms that, after the compline and the matins prayers, the sisters had a bit of time to 'read something good, or to pray and

9 *Den Bibel*, copy held at MSL, P22.005.1/Fo BIJB 1556: 'Desen Bock is met oorfol des overste tot gebruijck van Suster Maria Ludovica Mortgat'.

10 Antwerp, Rijksarchief (hereafter RAA), Dominican sisters (Prekerinnen) Antwerp 7, Convent rules, c. 1600.

11 *Den Bibel*, copy held at MSL, P22.005.1/Fo BIJB 1556: 'ontfangen ende gekleet in het heij-lich abeijt van den heijligen vader Dominicus den 31 Julii-1679'.

12 *Den Bibel*, copy held at MSL, P22.005.1/Fo BIJB 1556: 'haere professie/eeuwige beloft van gehoorsaemheijt suijverheijt armoede gedaen/den 30 september 1680'.

13 *Den Bibel*, copy held at MSL, P22.005.1/Fo BIJB 1556: 'Versoecke ootmoedelijck om de liefde der heijlige drijvuldicheijt ende Jesus Maria Joseph haere sondage siele somteijts eens te recomandere door UE gebeden/aen den gecruijsten Jesus christi.'

14 *Den Bibel*, copy held at MSL, P22.005.1/Fo BIJB 1556: 'O salige wonde van mijnen alderminnelijcksten liefhebber Jesus christ weest gegroet weest duijsent duijsentmael gegruet inde almoegentheijt des vader van welck ghij ons gegeven sijt, etc.'

15 On the Latin and vernacular transmissions of the *Liber specialis gratiae*, see Hellgardt, 'Latin and the Vernacular', 137-141.

meditate'.[16] The rules do not specify what texts should be read. Mortgat's annotations show that she had personal access to the Scriptures, and reveal her knowledge of other prayers and meditations, such as those based on Saint Mechtilde's revelations. We do not know if Mortgat also owned a copy of these meditations, or simply knew them by heart, but we can at least place them within the same religious text culture.

Secondly, through these annotations, we see how Maria Ludovica Mortgat used the blank paper spaces of her Bible copy for the safekeeping of prayers and experiences close to her heart. These prayers and commemorations of personal experiences bear testimony to how, in use and ownership, early printed religious books could function as archives of devotion and as paper spaces for the establishment and presentation of personal experiences and religious identity. In other words, these annotations do not merely tell us that this Bible copy was read and owned by this woman, but can also provide insight into the mechanisms of personalisation of the physical book, and of her claiming a certain level of religious agency by shaping the book.

This practice bears resemblance to other devotional writing practices of the premodern period, such as the composition of *rapiaria*. In *rapiaria*, like on the flyleaf of Mortgat's Bible, excerpts from religious texts were collected as a form of devotional exercise.[17] The text collection thus created formed an archive of a person's spiritual journey through the Scriptures, devotional texts, and prayers they valued. Moreover, the annotations by Mortgat also resemble the contemporary practice of creating genealogical records as separate documents or on the flyleaves of books (and Bibles in particular).[18] Such forms of life-writing played a part in the fashioning of a self, by creating an image of oneself and one's family in accordance with socio-cultural (and religious) scripts.[19] When these books were passed to a following generation, so too was the knowledge contained in them, establishing a sense of an intergenerational community by the transmission of family identities and values. As a religious woman, Mortgat had no marriages or births to record. But, similar to family record-keepers, she left her personal annotations on the flyleaf of her Bible, commemorating important events and prayers, and, by doing so, creating something new and meaningful. The book thus becomes more than simply the carrier of Scriptures: it becomes a place where the history of her salvation and her own personal journey as a religious sister are commemorated and valued alongside each other.

Thirdly, the survival of copies like these emphasises the fact that vernacular Bible-reading was not a Protestant act par excellence, but a practice that was similarly present and equally developed in Catholic contexts, both in the pre-Reformation and post-Reformation period. Historians of religion and religious reading have known this to be the case for quite some time, but the influence of the 'Protestant paradigm' on the general perception

16 RAA, Dominican sisters (Prekerinnen) Antwerp 7, Convent rules, c. 1600, fols. 3r-v: 'om wat goets te lesen, om haer te begheuen tot bidden ende mediteren'.

17 Scheepsma, *Deemoed en devotie*, 80-86; De Hemptinne, 'Reading, Writing, and Devotional Practices'; De Morrée, *Voor de tijd van het jaar*, 24-26.

18 On family record-keeping, see Ketelaar, 'The Genealogical Gaze'; Neuber, '*Exscribo Ergo Sum*'; Ashley, 'Creating Family Identity'.

19 Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe*, 18-46; Scott-Warren, 'Reading Graffiti', 380.

of religious reading proves to be persistent.[20] Catholic religious women like Mortgat, as well as lay women, read the Bible in their vernacular language, from the first Bible translations onwards and throughout the early modern period.[21] It can be difficult to trace these individual women, as Bibles kept within family contexts regularly contained the name of a male family member as the primary book owner, and Bibles kept within convents were often part of the common library, rather than in private ownership.[22] Nevertheless, cases such as this demonstrate that Catholic women indeed had access to vernacular Bibles and, as discussed above, could use the material space of these books – some of which were used by subsequent owners over decades or even centuries – to shape a sense of religious self.

Having discussed the value this type of source material may have for the study of early modern (religious) women, a final issue remains: how can we find these sources, and move beyond accidental library finds? In recent years, various initiatives that aim to collect evidence of early modern (female) book ownership have seen the light. Examples are the blog 'Early Modern Female Book Ownership', which features posts on sixteenth- to eighteenth-century female book owners, and the database Book Owners Online, which contains information about the libraries of almost three thousand early modern British owners, including women. Based on the project MEDIATE (Measuring Enlightenment: Disseminating Ideas, Authors, and Texts in Europe, 1665-1830), a database is currently being constructed that contains data from catalogues of private libraries dating from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, including female libraries. Databases such as Material Evidence in Incunabula (MEI) also contain information on book owners, amongst other bibliographical aspects. These resources reflect – as well as support – the growing interest in the material book and its reception. However, as all databases are by definition incomplete, and as most of them are not compatible with each other, they still do not lend themselves well for systematic research into female book ownership. The same goes for library catalogues. Although an expanding number of catalogues may provide information on provenance and ownership inscriptions, this information is often incomplete, while various catalogues differ in terms of their content, format, and scope. I hope that initiatives in linked open data will, in a few years, allow us to more easily reconstruct the scattered libraries of early modern women, and gain a better understanding of female book ownership across periods, places, and genres.

20 Gow, 'Challenging the Protestant Paradigm'; Corbellini et al., 'Challenging the Paradigms'.

21 In his study of the surviving copies of the 1477 Delft Bible – the first printed Bible in the Dutch language – Mart van Duijn found that 60 percent of the copies for which an owner is known by name were owned by women: Van Duijn, *De Delftse Bijbel*, 146. For sixteenth-century vernacular Bibles like Mortgat's, percentages of female ownership are considerably lower: around 15 percent (see Hoff, *Involving Readers*, 181). This differs from the material evidence in psalters, however: early sixteenth-century psalters were mainly owned by women (around 65 percent) (see Hoff, 'To shape one's own reading practice', 11). Both female- and male-owned libraries in the seventeenth and eighteenth century almost always contained Bibles, New Testaments, and Psalters, although complete editions of the Bible were more common in male-owned than in female-owned libraries: Hoftijzer, 'Boekenbezit van vrouwen', 38; Montoya, 'Women's Libraries', 304-306.

22 Property inventories are important sources in the reconstruction of female book (and Bible) ownership. See for instance Van Otegem, 'Omweg of dwaalspoor'; Dibbits, 'Vertrouwd bezit'; Hoftijzer, 'Boekenbezit van vrouwen'.

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