

The Mystical Union Between Christ and His Brides: Devotional Prints as a Source for Catholic Women's History

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Abstract

Hundreds of (semi-)religious women, so-called *kloppen* and Beguines, lived in early modern Amsterdam, many of them in a community at the Begijnhof in the city centre. This case study analyses, via an emblematically painted devotional print with a calligraphed poem on the verso, how they collectively visualised and experienced their communion with the bridegroom Christ. A significant proportion of the Dutch population remained Catholic throughout the seventeenth century. As monasteries were forbidden, many Catholic women turned to a religious life 'in the world', an act which was tolerated by the Reformed authorities. Such a life offered women the chance to develop independently, self-willed, and intellectually outside marriage, a path that was cut off for Protestant women after the Reformation. For their spiritual life, these Catholic women made intensive use of devotional prints, which they sometimes augmented with friendly poems or prayers on the reverse. Prayers were also exchanged for the salvation of deceased fellow sisters. Sometimes, texts and notes on the prints and drawings were inspired by songs that were included in their prayer books. These *devotionalia* thus provide an interesting, as yet unknown source for research into the daily life, practised spirituality, and agency of semi-religious women in the Low Countries.

Keywords: semi-religious women, female Catholic spirituality, devotional prints, prayer books, religious songs

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The Beguinage, with Saint Ursula as its patron, has been a stronghold of Catholic women in the heart of Amsterdam since the late Middle Ages. While records mentioning a *Beghinen lande* survive from as far back as 1307, the Beguinage has occupied its present site since 1511.¹ The court was the only one of Amsterdam's many religious women's communities to survive the Alteration of 1578, and it did so only because its buildings were privately owned. In 1631, 160 unmarried women and spiritual virgins, 54 of whom were Beguines, lived at the Begijnhof.² Amsterdam had remained a city with many Catholics after the Reformation; in 1681, they attended Mass at twenty-six hidden churches.³ Kloppen and spiritual virgins attached to each of these churches were active throughout Amsterdam; there must have been hundreds of them.⁴ Despite several sources surviving of these semi-religious virgins, little research has been conducted and published on their lives and spirituality.⁵ Who were these women, how did they fill their days, and live out their Catholic identity? Why did they choose to live as spiritual virgins and brides of Christ?

On a daily basis, they made intensive use of edifying booklets (written in the vernacular), songbooks, and devotional prints to which handwritten references or notes were often

1 Van Dijk, 'Der Beghinenlande', 8; Van Eeghen, *Vrouwenkloosters*, 3.

2 Van Dijk, 'Der Beghinenlande', 22. *Kloppen* (also known as *geestelijke maagden*, or 'spiritual virgins') were religiously living women who allowed Christ, who knocked on the door of their hearts, into their lives. They entered into a mystical marriage and considered themselves as a Bride of Christ. In Flanders, they were generally called *kwezels*. *Klop* was a collective term for tertiaries and spiritual widows. Beguines were also *kloppen*, but in addition they took vows of obedience and humility. They were accountable to the mistress of the court and received at their ordination a *faly*, a veil to distinguish themselves from *kloppen*. Spiritual virgins and beguines, unlike nuns living in clausure, had not taken a vow of poverty. They had legal capacity and were allowed to possess money and material goods. On the difference between *kloppen* and beguines, see also Verheggen, *Beelden*, 100-101. Van Eeghen, *Vrouwenkloosters*, plate 1, 3-4, and 12-13, notes that before the Alteration, in addition to the Beguinage, Amsterdam had 16 female convents and a population of about 350 nuns. See also De Wolf, *De kerk*, 15.

3 Mudde, *Rouwen*, 45-46.

4 Monteiro, *Geestelijke maagden*, 352. When the new hidden church of the beguinage was opened in 1682, 150 beguines and 12 widows and single women lived at the court: Caspers and Margry, *Mirakel*, 396.

5 The sermons and prayer books of Leonardus Marius, pastor of the Amsterdam beguinage, have been preserved: Sanderman, 'Voor wie leest'; Verheggen, *Beelden*, 111-112. Van Eeghen, *Vrouwenkloosters*, 324, details the Beguinage manuscripts that she could trace from before 1600.

added.⁶ These sources allow us to better understand their motives and inner emotions. The often personal notes give these women a name and a voice, and allow us to conduct more targeted research into their lives. Such knowledge also provides opportunities to place their lives within a broader international perspective. Beguinages had a long tradition and there was mutual contact with fellow sisters in the Southern Netherlands and the Rhineland. For this case study, I aim to show how a devotional prayer card, hand-lettered and hand-painted, can constitute a visual representation of their spiritual text and song culture.⁷

A Hand-Painted Payer Card with a Poem

On 10 June 1691, the Amsterdam Beguine Cornelia Willems Vlinder received a hand-painted prayer card on parchment (fig. 1).⁸ Calligraphed on the reverse is a poem:

Love the Lord and not otherwise
 Shared love finds sorrow
 God will steadily rest in you
 Whatever pleases him must please you
 Little he asks for life
 Who bears it eternally in his heart
 An exalted Soul to God
 Who considers the world a mockery
 Let, Suffer, Learn, and Love
 So are You Jesus's Beloved Child.⁹

The poem characteristically describes the relationship between a spiritual virgin and her bridegroom Christ. She has left the world ('Who considers the world a mockery') to love

6 Dietz, *Litteraire levensadere*, 124-125, analyses the manuscript containing prints made by Boetius à Bolswert for the *Pia Desideria* (now held at Nijmegen University Library) that Maria van Heel received from Catharina Simons in 1666. She suggests the possibility that the manuscript came from the Amsterdam beguinage. Many manuscripts of *kloppen* and Beguines from after 1550, while kept in archives, museums, and libraries, have not been inventoried and described, or are incomplete. For the interaction between text, image, and religion, see Stronks, *Negotiating Differences*.

7 For a long time, devotional prints remained hardly accessible for research because they were mostly inadequately inventoried. Fortunately, they can now be accessed online via the websites of Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, and the Ruusbroec Institute in Antwerp, among others. The work of several important devotional print engravers has recently been inventoried in Hollstein's series for the first time.

8 The print was previously published and discussed in Verheggen, 'Laat, Lijdt' and Verheggen, *Beelden*, 129 and 160. The connection with the book and the song had not yet then been made. Intakes and deaths of Amsterdam Beguines are recorded in various manuscripts kept in the Stadsarchief Amsterdam. There it can also be found that Cornelia Willems Vlinder joined the community in 1666; she died on 30 May 1702; De Beer, 311 and 313. For a list of Amsterdam Beguines, see: Van Dijk, 'Der Beghinenlande', 147-156; however, this list, like his book, lacks source notations. Van Eeghen, *Vrouwenkloosters*, 332-351 inventoried all Beguines and other women who lived at the Beguinage from 1406 to 1593.

9 Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent, BMH dp2702, Anonymous, Emblematic image with rising hearts (souls) and Arma Christi, 1691: 'Bemindt den Heer en anders niet/ Gedeelde min die vint verdriet/ Sal Godt gestadig in u rusten/ Wat hem belijft dat moet u lusten/ Luttel hij na 't leven vraagt/ Die 't Eeuwig in sijn harte draagt/ Een



Fig. 1 Anonymous, 'U H. Passie ende pijn is onse ziel een medecijn', emblematic image with rising hearts (souls) and Arma Christi, 1691, drawing in colour on parchment, 8,5 × 12 cm, Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent.

her Lord through sexual abstinence, penance, fasting or mortification, and emulating the sufferings of Christ ('Let, Suffer'). She learns from edifying books when meditating or listens to sermons. Her bridegroom dwells and rests in her heart.

The front features a painted, emblematic scene and the motto 'Your Holy Passion and pain is medicine to my soul'. The scene depicted is a landscape above which two souls rise to heaven in the form of burning hearts, accompanied by the *Arma Christi*, Christ's instruments of torture. One heart depicts an exalted soul to God, meant here as an example of a bride: in this case Cornelia Vlinder, the other that of her bridegroom Christ with whom she will be united in heaven after her death. The image complements the poem. It is likely that one of the Beguines made the prayer card herself.¹⁰ The note at the bottom right, 'Pray for G. v. Broek', refers to the name of the donor – perhaps the widow Geertruijt van de Broeck, who also lived at the Beguinage.¹¹

hoog verheven Ziel tot Godt/ Die acht de werelt voor een spot/ Laat, Lijdt, Leert en Mint/ Soo zijt Gij Jesus Liefste Kindt.'

¹⁰ Verheggen, *Beelden*, 160.

¹¹ Geertruijt (or Gertrudis) van de Broeck, entered the Beguinage in 1680. She was the widow of Mattheus Brinckman and died on 8 November 1691: Amsterdam, Stadsarchief (hereafter SA), Burgerlijke Stand, Burial registers 1057, fol. 28, Burial of Geertruijt van de Broeck, 8 November 1691; De Beer, *Kerkgewaden*, 307, 312, 316-317.



Fig. 2 Anonymous, 'Dit is de liefde gemeen van twee te maken een', emblematic depiction of rising hearts (souls), c. 1690, drawing in colour on parchment, 9,9 × 13,2 cm, Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent.

In the tradition of the ancient monastic rule *ora et labora*, women performed daily manual labour to contribute to their livelihood. Besides spinning and embroidery, they also traded in prayer books (*catholica*) and *devotionalia* or provided engravings with colours or flower decorations.¹² They also drew their own prayer cards after engraved examples.¹³ It fitted in with the handiwork they had to do every day.¹⁴ During this work they could contemplate virtues yet to be performed and meditate upon sermons or legends of saints. Images were also used in the process.¹⁵

More examples of such emblemata have been preserved: landscapes with acting hearts (souls) framed with flowers and fruits, the symbols of virtues (fig. 2). Flower wreaths refer to heavenly eternal life and the closed garden (*hortus conclusus*), as described in the Song

¹² Verheggen, 'Volksdevotie', 158; Verheggen, 'Flowerpower'; Verheggen, 'Bloemenoffensief'; Watson, 'Jesuitesses'.

¹³ Verheggen, 'Girlpower'.

¹⁴ Spiritual themes were attached to the performance of handicrafts: Dlabacová, 'Spinning'; Verheggen, *Beelden*, 54–56.

¹⁵ Verheggen, *Beelden*, 55.

of Songs. Pondering such images was supposed to support imaginary experience in order to reach a mystical union with Christ while contemplating and receiving communion, as the title explains: 'This is common to love: to turn two into one.'

Life and Spirituality of Beguines and Kloppen

After the Reformation, Catholics in the Dutch Republic remained in close contact with their fellow believers in Flanders. During the seventeenth century, the network of monasteries and clergy outside the Republic's borders recovered, partly due to an effective Counter-Reformation offensive. Spiritual fathers of Beguinages in the Dutch Republic corresponded with colleagues in the Southern Netherlands about the rules and regulations that the Beguines had to maintain.¹⁶ In order to facilitate the reading of spiritual booklets, chests full of edifying literature were imported from Flanders, where many books of hours and *kloppen* books written by Dutch spiritual fathers were printed.¹⁷ One of the many popular booklets to support and teach the reader how to build a virtuous spiritual life was *De gheestelycke vryagie, waer Christus de ziele is vryende* (The spiritual lovemaking, in which Christ makes love to the soul), first published by the Brussels printer Godfried Schoevaerts in 1624-1626 (fig. 3). The author is not mentioned, but was probably Joannes Mytens, the parish priest and spiritual father of the Brussels Beguinage from 1619 to 1660.¹⁸ It was dedicated to spiritual virgins in general, but 'especially to other devout believers, such as Beguines and others who often take Holy Communion'.¹⁹ The booklet was divided into chapters, each describing intentions that the women could study when meditating. The themes were introduced with a figure: a devotional print that could support the recollection of related texts during prayer.²⁰ The prints were partly inspired

¹⁶ Verheggen, *Beelden*, 66-70.

¹⁷ Van Rossem, *Gevecht*, 201-203; Verheggen, *Beelden*, 30, 51-52. For *kloppen* books, see Monteiro, *Geestelijke maagden*, 355-360. Leonardus Marius, the spiritual father of the Amsterdam Beguinage from 1631 to 1652, had his prayer books printed by Hendrick Aertssens in Antwerp. Also, many prayer books printed in Amsterdam were provided with a false Antwerp imprint: Van Dijk, 'Der Beghinenlande', 20-26; Verheggen, *Beelden*, 110-112.

¹⁸ Before that, Mytens was an esteemed lecturer in theology and Bible studies at the nearby Benedictine monastery of Affligem: Pil, 'Handleiding', 476. Nagelsmit, *Art and patronage*, 15, suggests it could also have been written by Adrian Meys, but this seems unlikely, because it was the spiritual fathers who generally wrote prayer books for the women entrusted to them.

¹⁹ [Mytens], *De gheestelycke vryagie*, 5: 'De welcke sonderlinghe dienen voor devote persoonen, ghelijck Begynkens ende andere die dickmaels totten H. Sacramente gaen.' See also Nagelsmit, *Art and patronage*; Pil, 'Handleiding'.

²⁰ The title page of the first volume of the *Gheestelycke vryagie* (1624), kept at Leiden University Library (call. no. 21221 A 7), reads: 'Elisabeth van Halewijck. Not without God.' Bound into this copy are thirty-eight prints which appear to have been sourced to accompany the edifying texts. These include prints of bridal mysticism by the Antwerp publisher Michael Snijders, eleven of which are from the series *Cor Iesu Amanti Sacrum*, as well as five unsigned prints and one print with signatures by Maarten de Vos, Jacob De Weert, and Johannes Baptista Vrints. In the second volume (1626), only sixteen rather primitive and unsigned prints have been inserted that were specially engraved for the booklet: on the prints, the page number has been added at the bottom. In the copies preserved elsewhere, for example in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague, some of the same but also other prints are bound in.

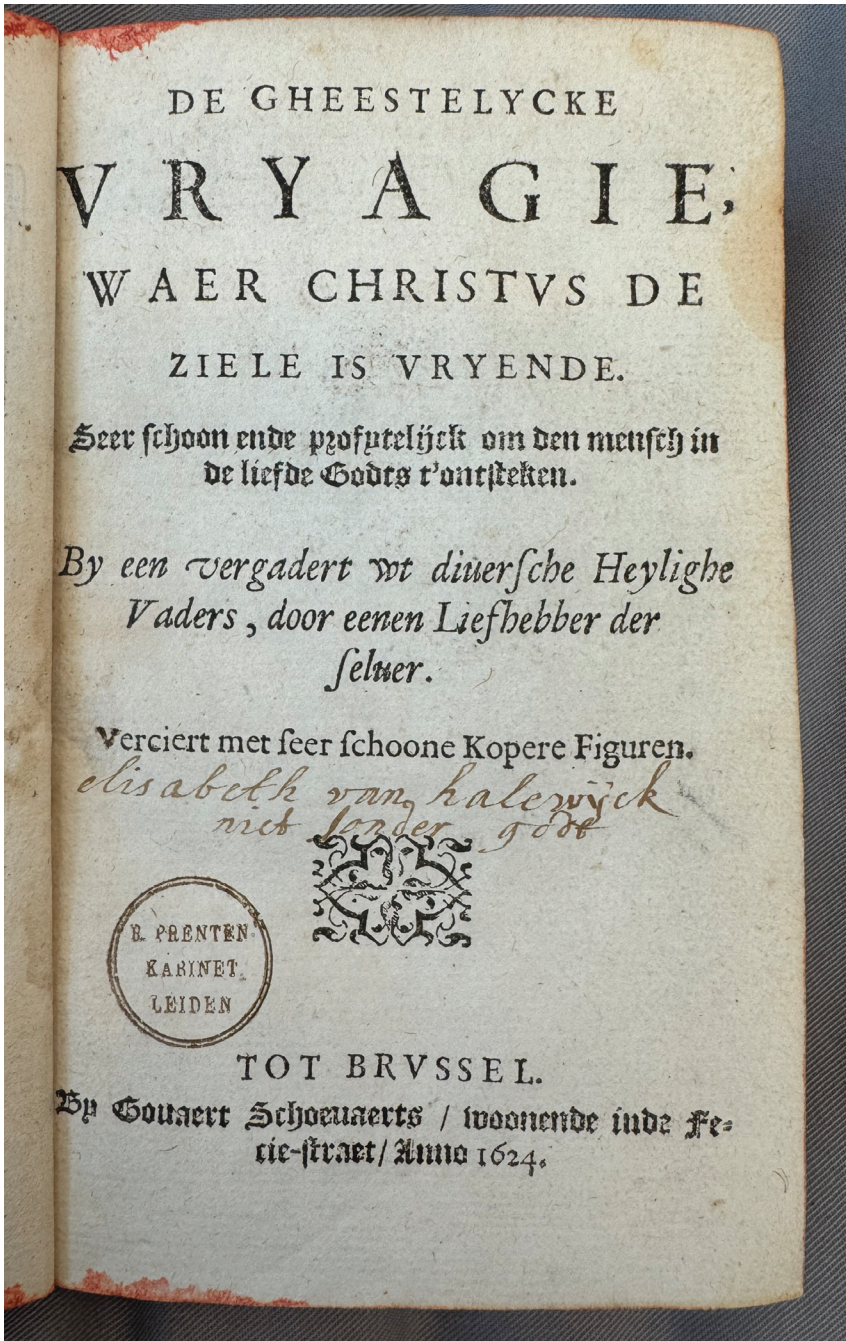


Fig. 3 Title page of *De gheestelycke vryagie, waer Christus de ziele is vryende* (Brussels, Godfried Schoevaerts, 1624), Leiden, University Library.



Fig. 4 Anonymous, Virgin being received at the gates of heaven by her Bridegroom Christ, accompanied by Faith, Hope, and Love, c. 1550-1575, engraving, 10,2 × 6,6 cm, Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent.

by older images (figs. 4-5). The origins of this visual image culture lie in the love mysticism (*minnemystiek*) and sufferings mysticism influenced by the Song of Songs – sermons written by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) – and continued uninterrupted until well into the eighteenth century.²¹

²¹ Porteman and Smits-Veldt, *Nieuw vaderland*, 479-483, place the book in the broader perspective of the revival of mystical literature in the Southern Netherlands under the influence of the Jesuits. Pil, 'Handleiding', 477, establishes a connection with the Carthusian Justus Lanspergius. Art-historical research, however, has shown that the depiction of bridal mysticism has its origins in the Middle Ages: Hamburger, *Rothschild*; Hamburger, *Nuns*; Vandenbroeck, *Hooglied*. See also Dietz, 'Media', 6-7; Smits, 'Lovers', 282.



Fig. 5 Michael Snyders, Virgin being received at the gates of heaven by her Bridegroom Christ, accompanied by Faith, Hope, and Love, engraving, in: *De gheestelycke vryagie waer Christus de ziele is vryende*, Brussels 1649, opposite p. 123, The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek.

The *De gheestelycke vryagie* initially appeared in two volumes in 1624 and 1626, followed by revised editions in 1632, 1649, and 1682.²² Apart from all kinds of prints, the booklets contain dozens of songs as an interpretation of the mysticism treated in words and images.²³ The 1649 edition includes a new song with which the painter and poet of the Vlinder print must have been familiar, given the textual similarities.²⁴ This is a spiritual song dedicated to

²² Porteman and Smits-Veldt, *Nieuw vaderland*, 483. Nagelsmit, *Art and patronage*, 12-15, assumes that the songs came from the Beguines themselves or from Mytens, who was associated with the Beguinage. In 1629, Schoevaerts published another edition under a slightly different title: [Mytens], *Den gheestelycken Yver van de gheestelycke Bruydt*. See on this edition Pil, 'Handleiding', 470-473, who first connected these titles.

²³ On the meaning of women's mysticism, see Mommaers, *Mystiek*; Faesen, *Ontmoeting*.

²⁴ [Mytens], *De gheestelycke vryagie* (1649) 140-141. The copy held in The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, kw 4 f 25, contains twenty prints, sixteen of which are by Michael Snyders (partly the same as in the 1624 Leiden copy,

the mystical union of a Bride with Christ (*Een gheestelijck Liedeken, hoe de Bruyt oft Christun ziele haect om mee Christo vereenicht te zijn*).²⁵ The title of the prayer card is based on the following stanza: 'Pressure, suffering, and great pain is medicine for my soul' (*Druck, lyden, ende groote pijn/Is mijnder zielen dan een medecijn*). The poem on the prayer card also contains similarities to the song. The stanza 'An exalted soul to God/who considers the world a mockery' was based on the lines 'For he who is united with God/esteems the joys of the world as a mockery'.²⁶ The first stanzas 'Love the Lord and not otherwise/Shared love finds sorrow' resemble the first lines of the song: 'Jesus is my love and no one else/ (...) O Lord remove me from that sorrow'.²⁷ Also noteworthy is that one of the song's stanzas was included as a caption to a print in the 1626 edition, depicting the virgin on her deathbed (fig. 6): 'O Lord my heart has no rest/Before thou quench'st my desire/Let me be united with you/Then shall I be delivered from all pain'.²⁸

Geertruijt obviously knew *De gheestelycke vryagie*, which she had consulted for inspiration of the watercolour and poem, well, because there is a connection between image, poem, and song. The booklet thus becomes an interesting source of information on the life, interpretation, and spiritual development of Catholic women in the Northern Netherlands.²⁹

During the Revolt in the late sixteenth century, paintings and statues were removed from confiscated churches, destroyed, or sold.³⁰ Mary, the saints, and love-mysticism had been declared taboo by the followers of Calvin, and songs, according to many Calvinists, distracted the believer from the word. The Reformed Church had initially reduced the liturgy to a simple word service. Until the second half of the seventeenth century, organ playing was condemned; organs were only allowed to be played before and after the service, and psalms were to be sung in unison.³¹ This was in contrast with Catholics, who had for centuries considered sung prayer an essential part of their faith. In *kloppen* and beguine communities, praying while singing was an important part of the Mass and daily tidal exercises. Singing together was also best done while undertaking crafts and in the streets. Surviving Catholic books of hours and prayers are full of spiritual songs, and often refer to the appropriate melody. In the Counter-Reformation, singing thus became, in part, a demonstrative act of resistance against the Reformed government. After all, it was impossible to ban women from singing polyphonic (Marian) songs.³² Besides the intensive

but no images from the *Cor Iesu Amanti Sacrum*), one by Hieronymus Wierix, one by Maarten de Vos, and two anonymous prints.

25 [Mytens], *De gheestelycke vryagie* (1649), 141.

26 [Mytens], *De gheestelycke vryagie* (1649), 140: 'Want die vereenicht is met Godt,/ Des wereltds vreucht acht hy voor spot.'

27 [Mytens], *De gheestelycke vryagie* (1649), 140: 'Jesus is mijn Lief en niemant el,/ (...) O Heer' haelt my uyt dit verdriet.'

28 [Mytens], *De gheestelycke vryagie* (1649), 140: 'O Heer mijn herte en heeft gheen rust/ Voor dat ghy mijn begheerten blust:/ Laet my met u vereenicht zijn./ Dan sal ick wesen uyt alle pijn.'

29 Two prints from *De gheestelycke vryagie* (1624) are also pasted in Haarlem Beguine manuscripts: Verheggen, *Beelden*, 293-294. These prints have also been found in other collections, including Museum Catharijneconvent and Kunstsammlungen der Fürsten zu Waldburg-Wolfegg, which suggests they were sold separately as well.

30 Lenarduzzi, *Katholiek*, 211-213.

31 Veldhorst, *Zingend*, 112; Visser, "'Satans Fluytenkast'".

32 Lenarduzzi, *Katholiek*, 215-244; Veldhorst, *Zingend*, 56-57; Visser, "'Satans Fluytenkast'", 20-21.



Fig. 6 Anonymous, 'O Heer mijn herte en heeft gheen rust/ Voor dat ghy mijn begeerten blust', engraving, in: *De gheestelycke vryagie waer Christus de ziele is vryende*, Brussels 1626, opposite p. 434, Leiden, University Library.

use of devotional prints, religious songs became important as they were within the scope of action and identity of Catholic women.

The Agency of Dutch Catholic Women

After the Reformation, the public road to intellectual and professional independence seemed, to many Catholic women, to have been blocked.³³ Beguinages proved to be a legal alternative to the women's convents whose lands and wealth had been forfeited or

33 Van Eeghen, *Vrouwenkloosters*, 29.

confiscated.³⁴ If a woman did feel called to ordination as a nun, a vocation considered higher within the ecclesiastical hierarchy than becoming a semi-religious, she could seek refuge in one of the hundreds of convents and abbeys in the Generality Lands, Flanders, and the Rhineland that had either survived the Reformation or had been founded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³⁵ Many of the women whose parents could afford a dowry entered them as nuns, but records of them after this point are invariably missing.³⁶ In the seventeenth century, the number of nuns, beguines, and spiritual virgins in Flanders must have exceeded ten thousand.³⁷ As yet, unfortunately, little research has been done on these convents.³⁸

Catholic women had the choice between marriage, with its related restrictions, or a spiritual vocation that allowed them to remain freer in their actions and able to assert their financial independence. They self-consciously and voluntarily chose one of the many possible religious lifestyles, ranging from becoming a tertiary (a lay member of a religious order or brotherhood) to being ordained as a beguine: the rigour of their self-chosen religious life varied greatly. Moreover, living as a virgin 'in the world' provided women with status: a pure life appealed to the imagination. Benedictus van Haeften even wrote that he considered marriage for women equal to slavery.³⁹ There was a belief among Catholics that by living virtuously on earth, virgins would be united with their heavenly bridegroom after death. For beguines and spiritual virgins, inspiration for leading a pious life was found in the hagiographies of female saints and founders of the order, including some who had lived recently and had now been officially canonised by Rome. Following these role models, they cared for the sick, the poor, and orphans, or taught girls. The booklets, prints, and songs were frequently inspired by the life stories of these women, such as Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), Joan of Valois (1464-1505), Theresa of Avila (1515-1582), her disciple Anna of St Bartholomew (1550-1626), and Maria Magdalena de Pazzi (1566-1607). The Dutch holy women Geertruid van Oosten of Delft (c. 1310-1358) and Lydwiena of Schiedam (1380-1433) also attracted renewed attention.⁴⁰ In both the Southern Netherlands and the Dutch Republic, the Catholic Habsburg monarch Isabella Clara Eugenia of Spain (1566-1633) was honoured, admired, and praised for her good works.⁴¹ After the death of her husband Albrecht of Austria in 1621,

34 Van Eeghen, *Vrouwenkloosters*, 66; De Wolf, *Kerk en Maagdenhuis*, 63-64. Beguinages continued to exist in Amsterdam, Haarlem, Breda, and Delft. The Beguinage in Den Bosch was gradually disbanded after its fall in 1629, the government no longer admitting new women.

35 For the foundation in Cologne and the surrounding area of several Clarist communities by Nicolaas Couscoubant and eight virgins from Haarlem, see Verheggen 'Volksdevotie', 151-152. For the van Haeften sisters who entered the Blijdenberg in Mechelen, see Verheggen, 'Religieuze kunst'.

36 In the Dutch Republic it was initially forbidden to bequeath money to Catholic clergy or institutions, just as it was forbidden to designate monastics abroad as heirs in one's will: Mudde, *Rouwen*, 44; Van Thielen, 'Augustinessen', 179-180.

37 De Vroede, 'Kwezels', 118.

38 Van Thielen, 'Augustinessen', 170.

39 Verheggen, 'Religieuze kunst', 295. Jacob Oly, pastor of the church De Lely located next to the Beguinage, also preached on the marital state as a prison: Verheggen, *Beelden*, 115.

40 For songs, see Van Leeuwen, *Heiligenliederen*, 81, 154-155, 230, 232, 245, 252; Verheggen, *Beelden*, 66-68.

41 Verheggen, *Beelden*, 70.

she became a spiritual widow and joined the Clares as a tertiary. From then on, she was portrayed only in the black habit and depicted in many paintings and prints.

In the Republic, many women, often those very rich and distinguished, chose a life as a spiritual virgin or beguine, allowing them to develop independently and intellectually. Most of them are unknown, because they were rarely annotated in notarial deeds and wills as religious virgins or widows. They often also remained unrecorded in genealogies because they did not provide offspring. Research on these women from the Catholic elite is still in its infancy, but evidence, such as it is, points to the fact that they also supported Catholic care of the poor with their donations.⁴² They furnished hidden churches with beautiful paintings, silver, jewellery, and precious paraments.⁴³ They thus 'bought' and acquired power, influence, and status in the Catholic Church, working closely with priests – also celibate – whom they regarded as equals.⁴⁴ Catholic networks of prominent families maintained national and international contact between themselves.⁴⁵ Through names on devotional prints, where their religious identity is mentioned, many *kloppen* and beguines can be identified as such; further research can thus be carried out into their lives and influence. A woman's spiritual state is usually mentioned on prayer cards, under her name. An example would be Agnes de Fays, a spiritual daughter and tertiary, who passed away in Amsterdam on 1 October 1761 (figs. 7-8). Many of her notarial acts have been preserved, which show that she was a wealthy woman living on the Keizersgracht. In her will, drawn up on 19 December 1759, she bequeathed her large fortune to Catholic causes such as the old poorhouse and the girls' and boys' orphanage.⁴⁶

In studying devotional prints, we should appreciate the early modern norms and values attached to these semi-religious women. The self-elected and exalted ideal of virginity could confer status on a woman and allow her to take charge of her own life.⁴⁷ It was also a good excuse to present an idealised image towards the 'evil' and 'sinful' outside world which, however, did not always concord with reality. Esther van Thielen, for instance, writes about copious feasts celebrating a profession or the jubilee of nuns in the Falcontinnen convent in Antwerp and the Vredenberg convent in Lier.⁴⁸ Such rich sources about Dutch *kloppen* and beguines are, as yet, only rarely available, but more will hopefully be

42 Noorman and Van der Maal, *Memorieboek*; Hofstee, 'Partners', 9. See also the biographies of several of these women in Kloek, *1001 vrouwen*, 292-293 (Maria van Pallaes), 290-292 (Catharina Jansdr. Oly), 307-308 (Henrica van Duivenvoorde van Wassenaar), 323-325 (Elisabeth Strouven), 351-352 (Joanna Baptista van Randenraedt), 367-368 (Agnes Maria Huyn van Amstenrade). For the wealthy Adriana van Swaenburgh in Delft, see Wijnsbeek-Olthuis, *Achter de gevels*, 259, 392. On the virgins in the Hoek (Haarlem), see Spaans, *Levens der maechden*, 82.

43 Noorman and Van der Maal, *Memorieboek*; Schillemans, *Adriaen van de Velde*; Van der Linden, 'Laveren'; De Beer, *Kerkgewaden*. Rich spiritual virgins in Flanders also appear as patrons of art to churches, but research on them is still in its preliminary stages: Marnef, 'Jezüieten'; Moran 'Resurrecting'.

44 Spaans, *Levens der maechden*; Hofstee, 'Partners', 3; Noorman and Van der Maal, *Memorieboek*. For Utrecht, see Yasuhira, *Catholic Survival*, 115-125.

45 Geraerts, *Patrons*.

46 SA, Notarial archives 9266, no. 821, Testament of Agnes de Fays, 19 December 1759.

47 Mudde, 'Rouwen', 63-64.

48 Van Thielen, 'Augustinessen', 179-182.



Fig. 7 Cornelius de Boudt and Cornelis Galle, Maria and the child Christ who is receiving the crown of thorns and the cross from an angel, engraving on parchment, 6,7 × 9,5 cm, Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent.

discovered. Surviving *vitae* mostly paint an ennobled picture, so as not to block the way to eternal life for deceased fellow spiritual virgins and nuns.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Catholic women made frequent use of religious prints in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Thousands of devotional prints circulated for private devotion, kept in prayer and song books or hanging on people's walls for spiritual imagination.⁵⁰ Because devotional prints have only rarely survived in public collections, the important role they played in the spiritual life of Catholics has remained underexposed until now.

The prayer cards – often sold individually and bound into edifying booklets – are also difficult to trace because they are either rarely described in library indexes or not at all.

⁴⁹ Spaans, *Levens der maechden*. A rare critical *vita* on the life of Angeniet Alberts is recorded in a manuscript from 1636-1647 by an Amsterdam *klopje* who lived close to the Beguinage: Verheggen, *Beelden*, 116.

⁵⁰ Noorman and Van der Maal, *Memorieboek*, 188; Verheggen, 'Santenkraam'. The Maastricht virgin Elisabeth Strouven is also known to have owned hundreds of prints of St Francis: Verheggen, 'Volksdevotie', 158; Van der Waals, 'Prenten', 98-99.

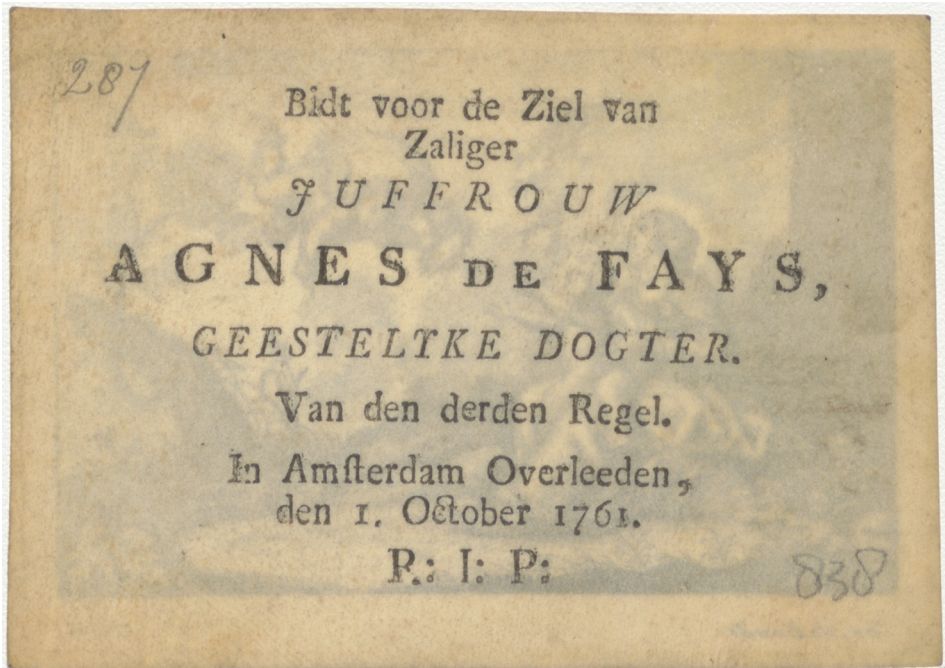


Fig. 8 Reverse of the print by Boudt and Galle (fig. 6), used as a prayer card for Agnes de Fays, 1761, Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent.

Prints with bridal mysticism from *De gheestelycke vryagie* are a striking example. Such representations, whether discrete or preserved in the context of books and manuscripts, give us insight into the inner life and spirituality of women. Texts, images, and songs contributed to the development of their religious identity.⁵¹ Together, the marginally transmitted devotionalia form pieces of a large puzzle about the doings of these women, their connection with the divine, and with each other.

In this essay, a devotional print from the Amsterdam beguinage was chosen as a starting point. The prayer card is representative of the use of Catholic prints and drawings by thousands of women who chose a (semi-)religious life after the Reformation. The representations, texts, and names found within them offer starting points for further interdisciplinary research, which might pay fruitful attention to the important mixed-media context and connection with songs, prayerbooks, and manuscripts. The Dutch examples of songs, books, and prayer cards discussed in this article crossed borders because of the strong connections Dutch Catholics maintained with fellow believers in the Southern Netherlands and the Rhineland. The role of women in forming and maintaining these connections remains, as yet, underexplored. Examples of recently canonised female saints were important for their emancipation process. But active seventeenth-century

51 Dietz, 'Media', 14.

women such as the Habsburg governess Isabella Clara Eugenia were also legendary in their lifetimes. She became an example in the Netherlands encouraging many ladies to choose an independent life as a spiritual virgin or widow, alone or in a community.

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