

Patricia Stoop

Monastic Book Production in the Late Medieval Low Countries: The Sister Scribes of Jericho and the Building of their Manuscript Collection

Abstract: Numerous women living in religious communities in medieval and early modern Europe participated actively in book culture, both in the vernacular and Latin, to support their devotional and intellectual lives. Female religious houses functioned as ‘textual communities’ and ‘communities of learning’, in which literature and knowledge were produced, consumed, shared and exchanged. Thus, they contributed importantly to premodern literary, religious and intellectual culture. The Augustinian convent of Jericho in Brussels was one of the major centres of manuscript production in the late medieval Low Countries. This article studies the canonesses as skilled and diligent book producers and investigates what the manuscripts they produced looked like. It explores the development of the manuscript collection and considers what incentives drove its formation. Additionally, it focuses on the nature of the extant collection, and the ways the books may have been used, by whom and in what spaces. Thus, this article highlights Jericho as an important community of literacy and learning and the significant role the canonesses played in building a rich text culture to support their individual as well as the community’s devotional, literary and intellectual aspirations.

1 Introduction

Thousands of Christian women living in religious communities in the European Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period engaged actively in book culture, as owners, commissioners, readers, copyists, illuminators, translators, compilers and authors. Despite the restrictions imposed on them by the ecclesiastical authorities and their exclusion from hegemonic centres of learning and knowledge (Latin and cathedral schools, universities), female religious interacted with (para)liturgical

books and devotional texts in both the vernacular and Latin, the language of the clergy, in support of their devotional and intellectual lives.¹

Female religious houses functioned as ‘textual communities’ in the sense of ‘places or social circles where manuscript texts are or were produced, read, and circulated by and for a certain group’ and ‘communities of learning’, in which literature and knowledge were produced, consumed, shared, and exchanged internally and externally.² Women in many convents in several regions in Europe spared no effort to build a rich book collection. As a result, convent libraries functioned as a mirror of women’s spirituality, and reflected the multiple levels of their literacy and learning. Texts and manuscripts – and, after the establishment of the printing press, early printed books – were often obtained from elsewhere (through, for example, bequests, purchases and donations), and, in many cases, the female inhabitants of religious communities also produced – often collectively and collaboratively – the books they needed or wanted for themselves, or even for third parties outside the convent walls. Women not only copied books but also compiled them, and even composed new, original texts. Thus, they played a large role in shaping literary, religious and intellectual culture.

Although some promising studies have been published recently, the richness of book collections in female convents is still vastly understudied.³ As a consequence, it is still largely unknown what books women religious owned and used. In this article, I will examine the late-fifteenth-century manuscript collection of Onze Lieve Vrouw ter Rosen Gheplant in Jericho, a convent of canonesses regular of the order of St Augustine, which was founded in 1456 from the merging of two other convents – the convent of St Catherine (located just outside the second city rampart of Brussels at the Oude Graanmarkt) and Onze Lieve Vrouw ter Cluysen in Braine l’Alleud (Fôret de Soignes). The new community was housed in the buildings of the convent of St Catherine.⁴

1 Several important publications in recent decades have provided insights into women’s literary production. Substantial projects include Beach 2004; Lowe 2004; Scheepsma 2004; Winston-Allen 2004; Cyrus 2009; Moreton 2013; Carmassi, Schlotheuber and Breitenbach (eds) 2014; Blanton, O’Mara and Stoop (eds) 2015; Blanton, O’Mara and Stoop (eds) 2017; Brown and Legaré (eds) 2016; Hamburger et al. 2017; Schlotheuber and Lähnemann 2023; Stoop and Blanton forthcoming.

2 Beal 2008; see also Mews and Crossley 2011.

3 Stoker and Verbeij 1997, especially vol. 1, 123–186; Hamburger et al. 2017; Kienhorst and Poirters 2023. Hans Kienhorst and Ad Poirters importantly highlight the multilayered nature of book collections as they developed and changed over time, and have remained in use for centuries in (women’s) convents. They propose a stratification model to study them.

4 Stoop 2013, 43–54.

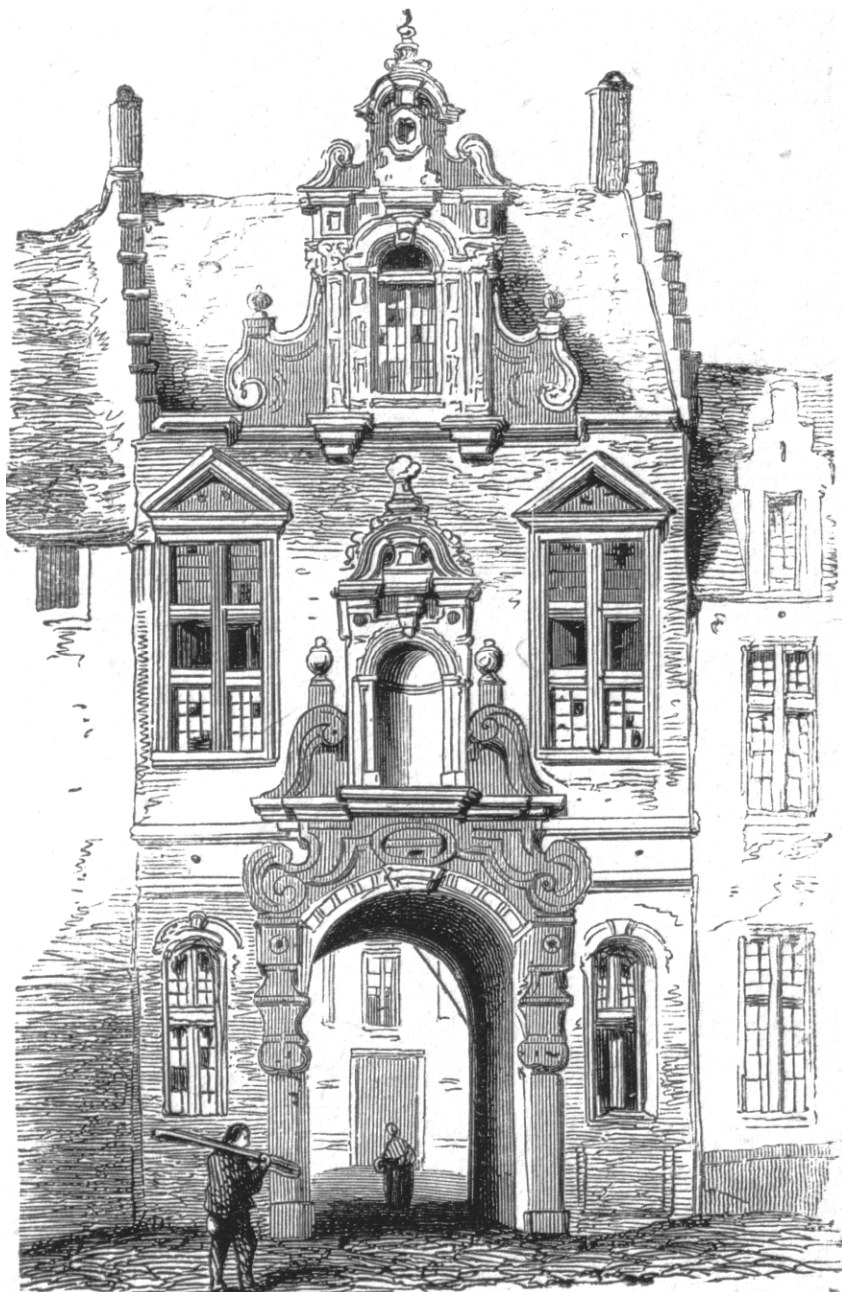


Fig. 1: Engraving of the entrance gate of Jericho at the Oude Graanmarkt. Brussels, Archief van de Stad Brussel, Iconografische collectie, D. 231. Reproduced with permission.

Previous research has shown that Jericho was an important literary hub in Brabant. Its extant manuscript collection is the third largest in the Low Countries, and the majority of the books were produced by the convent's sisters.⁵ In the current article, I will investigate how the women – individually and communally – built their book collection and consider the incentives that drove its creation.⁶ My main focus will be on the sisters as able and diligent book producers and the manuscripts that they created. In the final part of my article, I will focus on the nature of the extant collection and the ways the books may have been used by whom and in what spaces. Thus, this article highlights Jericho as an important community of literacy and learning in which women played a pivotal role in building a rich text culture to support their individual as well as the community's devotional, literary and intellectual aspirations.

2 Late medieval book production in Jericho

The writing activities in Jericho reached their pinnacle in the period between November 1465 and 1500. Over three-quarters of the forty-one manuscripts that have survived were written during this period, and the production of manuscripts for people and institutions outside the convent walls – in many cases for pay (*pro pretio*) – also peaked during this period.⁷ A scriptorium was installed and furnished in the autumn of 1466 to make all this scribal activity possible.⁸ The majority of the

5 Stoop 2012a; 2014; and 2021.

6 The research underpinning this article is published in a more extensive form in Stoop 2013, 111–153.

7 In Stoop 2013, 366–426, I offered extensive descriptions of thirty still extant medieval manuscripts, six post-Tridentine codices and four manuscripts which still existed at the beginning of the twentieth century, but are now lost. I recently discovered another manuscript that should be added to this list: Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek (hereafter KBR), 5014, with a collection of texts on St Catherina of Alexandria, belonged to Clara Wafelaerts. Although both Prosper Verheyden (1935, 165) and Herman Mulder (Deschamps and Mulder 2005, 6–8) suspected that the manuscript belonged to Jericho, neither of them were able to conclusively attribute the manuscript to the Brussels convent. The eighteenth-century list of Jericho's inhabitants that has been preserved in Brussels, KBR, Fonds Goethals, ms. 1610 (*Beschrijvinge*), however, mentions Clara as the 133rd professed canoness on fol. 8^r. She passed away in 1586. Cf. Stoop 2013, 433. For the three incunabula that are thus far known from Jericho, see Dlabáčová and Stoop 2021, 223–224, 228–229, and 241.

8 Maria van Pee noted several expenditures related to the scriptorium in her account books of the period between 1 November 1464 and the same date in 1481 (Brussels, Rijksarchief, Archives écclesiastique de Belgique (AEB), 12.779; 12.780, fols 101^r–161^r; and 12.781, fols 40^r–190^r). These included

manuscripts created within the convent walls were probably produced in that room, even if it is conceivable that some sisters also carried out scribal work in places outside the scriptorium, for example, in their cells. Jericho, in fact, is not the only female convent affiliated with the Chapter of Windesheim that had a scriptorium: Sint-Agnes in Dordrecht, Bethanië in Arnhem, Bethanië in Mechelen, Diepenveen, and Facons in Antwerp also had their own scriptoria. In some convents, however, the scribes had to share a space with sisters who were engaged in needlework. In the Barberendal convent in Tienen, for example, ‘a bequame plaats for scriverssen ende de nayerssen’ (‘a convenient space for the scribes and seamstresses’) was provided.⁹

In all probability, the production of new manuscripts was at least partially driven by the convent’s desire to adhere to the regulations of the Windesheim chapter, the monastic branch of the *Devotio moderna* that was committed to religious reform in the Low Countries from the late fourteenth century onwards.¹⁰ Additionally, scribal activities were an important kind of handicraft – in line with the Benedictine adage *ora et labora*, men and women in religious communities were supposed to spend part of their day in prayer, and the other part in manual labour.¹¹ Writing was held in high esteem in many convents, not only because the scribes helped build their own library, but because they also engaged in spiritual literature during their working hours, thus, combining ‘physical activity with spiritual edification’.¹²

the installation of a stained-glass window and a sink (respectively Brussels, AEB, 12.779, fol. 4^r and AEB, 12.780, fol. 104^v).

⁹ Persoons 1980, 79. Cf. also Lingier 1993, 289–293; Scheepsma 2004, 69. An interesting introduction to manuscript production in medieval monasteries (in the Low Countries) and the functioning of scriptoria is Kienhorst 2011.

¹⁰ Dlabáčová and Hofman 2018. Also cf. Scheepsma 2004; Van Engen 2008. On the relationship between literary production and monastic reform (especially in Germany), see Williams-Krapp 1986–1987; Williams-Krapp 1994; Williams-Krapp 2020; Heinzle 1995; Willing 2004. For the significant contribution of women religious in the production of such literature, see e.g. Winston-Allen 2004; Cyrus 2009; Schiewer 2013; Voltmer 2022. On the Chapter of Windesheim, see Scheepsma 2004, especially Chap. 1. Eventually, Jericho was not allowed to become a formal member of the Windesheim Congregation. After 8 November 1436, the chapter did not accept any new female convents (the number stayed limited to thirteen), in order not to overburden the male communities that were responsible for the *cura monialium*.

¹¹ The majority of canonesses would spend their working time on needlework. In Jericho, an average of five out of the fifty canonesses were involved in scribal activities per year.

¹² Gumbert 1990, 56. See also Scheepsma 2004, 65–66; Mertens 2024. On reading and writing as meditative, spiritual activities, see e.g. Carruthers 1998; Newman 2005.

Presumably, however, part of the explanation for the strong impetus for writing activities in Jericho after 1465 must also be sought in the sphere of interest of the convent's leaders. It is no coincidence that the heyday of the book production in Jericho concurs with the rectorate of Jan Storm (between 1457 and his death on 3 May 1488), of whom 121 sermons were written down, as well as the leadership positions of precisely those sisters who were also involved in the noting down of his sermons, which they heard over the course of twenty-two years (between 1459 and 1481) within their convent: Maria van Pee (c. 1435–1511), the convent's first long-serving prioress between 21 November 1465 and the end of 1480, Elisabeth van Poyle (d. 1499) and Janne Colijns (1453/1454–1491).¹³ These women, like their rector and confessor, clearly had an intellectual profile, which is evidenced not only by the fact that they held managerial positions and redacted the sermons preached by their confessors, but also by the fact that the latter two also worked in the scriptorium themselves.¹⁴ This is similarly true of Barbara Cuyermans (d. 1507), who, as the convent's 'meerstersse van scrijven' ('writing instructor'), obviously played an important role in the scribal activities.¹⁵ It seems very likely that these women, through their own interest in books and spiritual texts, determined the convent's 'literary' course in the second half of the fifteenth century.¹⁶

¹³ Biographies of these sermon redactors can be found in Stoop 2013, 85–110. On women and leadership, see Kerby-Fulton, Bugyis and Van Engen (eds) 2020.

¹⁴ For the books they produced for Jericho, see below on pp. 280–282. Janne is also involved in five writing projects for pay in the period between 1473/1474 and 1488/1489. Three of these were destined for male religious, *in casu* Mark van der Straeten, prior of the Norbertine abbey in Grimbergen from 1477 to 1489, Friar Thomas from Groenendaal (was he the same person as Reverend Thomas Monincx who is mentioned below?) and the Dominican Friar Dyonys. Cf. Stoop 2013, 96–96, 163–164.

¹⁵ Barbara Cuyermans, who was professed in Ter Cluysen and one of the more senior canonesses of Jericho, is mentioned as such in the prologue to Janne Colijns's sermon collection (Brussels, KBR, II 298, fol. 5'): 'Ende die andere [i.e. Storm's sermons] sijn uutghecopieert van sijne gheestelijker dochter ende religioeser suster ons cloesters van Jericho, met namen suster Barbara Cuyermans, die, in den heere ghestorven, voertijts mijn meerstersse van scrijven gheweest is' ('And the others have been copied out by his spiritual daughter and religious sister of our cloister of Jericho, namely, sister Barbara Cuyermans, who, having died in the Lord, used to be my writing instructor'). Barbara also wrote a few books *pro pretio*. She copied a booklet on the Passion of Christ, a Book of Hours (which she also illuminated), and, in 1496/1497, an unspecified book for Maria van Pee, who at that moment was the mater of the convent of Vredenberg in Breda. The fact that in 1480/1481 Barbara wrote a collection of sermons intended for Park Abbey in Heverlee near Louvain is highly noteworthy. Cf. Stoop 2013, 106.

¹⁶ When the leadership positions were taken over by Philips Niclaes and Janne van den Velde (d. 1509), the writing activity decreased markedly.

3 The sisters' literary training

As has been mentioned above, the zenith of scribal activities within the convent walls of Jericho – both for the production of books for the sisters' own use as well as for people and institutions outside the convent walls – is situated between 1466 and 1491 with a run-out to the end of the fifteenth century. The manuscripts and the account books kept by the prioresses mention the names of no fewer than forty-three scribes. Many of them had presumably learned this skill within the convent walls.¹⁷ That a writing instructor was present in the convent to this end has already been mentioned. Barbara probably not only taught the students the mechanical side of writing – scribes often mastered more than one type of script – but also the three classical components of text composition: grammar, dialectic and rhetoric (the elements of the *trivium*, the linguistic dimensions of the *artes liberales*).

The teaching most probably took place in the school which, as Maria van Pee's account book shows, had been set up in a separate room. A sink was installed in that room (as in the scriptorium) in 1465/1466, and a new ceiling was constructed in 1472/1473.¹⁸ Unfortunately, the sources nowhere provide any concrete details about what kind of training was given in the school. However, the account books by Katheline Tscraven (d. 1488), who was the convent's procuratrix between All Saints' Day 1475 and the same day in 1478, attest that education was given to young girls who, although they were not yet novices or postulants (for which girls had to be 12 years old), lived in the convent. Janne Colijns, for example, was only 7 or 8 years old when she entered the convent on 29 May 1461. This seems to imply that the girls

¹⁷ Eight sisters were only involved in copying manuscripts for Jericho itself; twenty-one sisters wrote only for third parties, and thirteen others worked both for their own convent and for others.

¹⁸ See, respectively, 'item om twee gootsteens, een in tscrijfkamer ende enen in tscole tstuc 2 denieren' ('item for two sinks, one in the writing chamber and one in the school, 2 pennies each'; Brussels, AEB, 12.780, fol. 104^v); and 'item Jan den timmerman van vi dagen den solder int scole te legghen 6 schellingen' ('item paid 6 shillings to Jan the carpenter for six days for installing the ceiling in the school'; Brussels, AEB, 12.780, fol. 143^r). Other convents also had schools: Diepenveen had a school in the mid fifteenth century where education was given to future canonesses; a few decades later, Sister Daya Dierkens (d. 1491) taught 'kinderen' ('children') there. Cf. Scheepsma 2004, 44. Although women religious were among the most highly educated women of their time, not much is known about the level of their education and formation. Relevant preliminary information for the Low Countries can be found in Lingier 1993, 283–286; de Hemptinne 2004, especially 49–52; Scheepsma 2004, 41–47; Corbellini 2017.

received most of their formal literary and intellectual training within the convent and learned how to read and write there. What implications this had for their scribal hands and, hence, for what books from Jericho looked like, will be discussed later.

Other women will have been adequately educated before entering the convent. After all, noblewomen – and quite a few of them lived in convents of canonesses regular in the Low Countries – learned to read with the help of the (Latin) psalter.¹⁹ Thus, they already had a certain level of familiarity with reading and writing, and reading Latin, although the mastery of that language will also have depended on the intellectual capacities of the individual sister. Regarding most enclosed women – especially the choir nuns – we can assume that they knew enough Latin to use the Latin choir books for the liturgy and sing the liturgical texts appropriately.²⁰ Whether and to what extent they could also read other Latin texts and communicate and write in that language is the question. There is no doubt, however, that some sisters in Jericho had an excellent command of Latin. Maria van Pee and Janne Colijns, for instance, both independently translated the tenth *lectio* from the *Speculum beatae Mariae virginis* by the Franciscan author Conrad of Saxony (d. 1279).²¹ Moreover, their Middle Dutch sermon collections and the ones written by their colleagues contain Latin citations from the Bible as well as other *auctoritates*.²²

19 Scheepsma 2004, 42–43.

20 Monica Hedlund draws a positive image of the Latin literacy of women religious (in particular of the Vadstena Birgittines) in her groundbreaking essay ‘Nuns and Latin, with Special Reference to the Birgittines of Vadstena’. She quite bluntly states: ‘As I see it, only a total blockhead could have avoided learning quite an amount of Latin just by listening to it several hours a day, provided someone said what it was about. We have absolutely no reason nor right to assume that there were many blockheads among the Vadstena sisters – quite the opposite’, Hedlund 2013, 105. Cf. also Churchill, Brown and Jeffrey (eds) 2002.

21 Stoop 2016.

22 Cf. Stoop 2013, 169–353 (Chaps 4 and 5). The following publications in English deal with the late medieval sermon collections from Jericho (in addition to Stoop 2016): Stoop 2007; Stoop 2010; Stoop 2012b; Stoop 2015; Stoop and Mertens 2015.

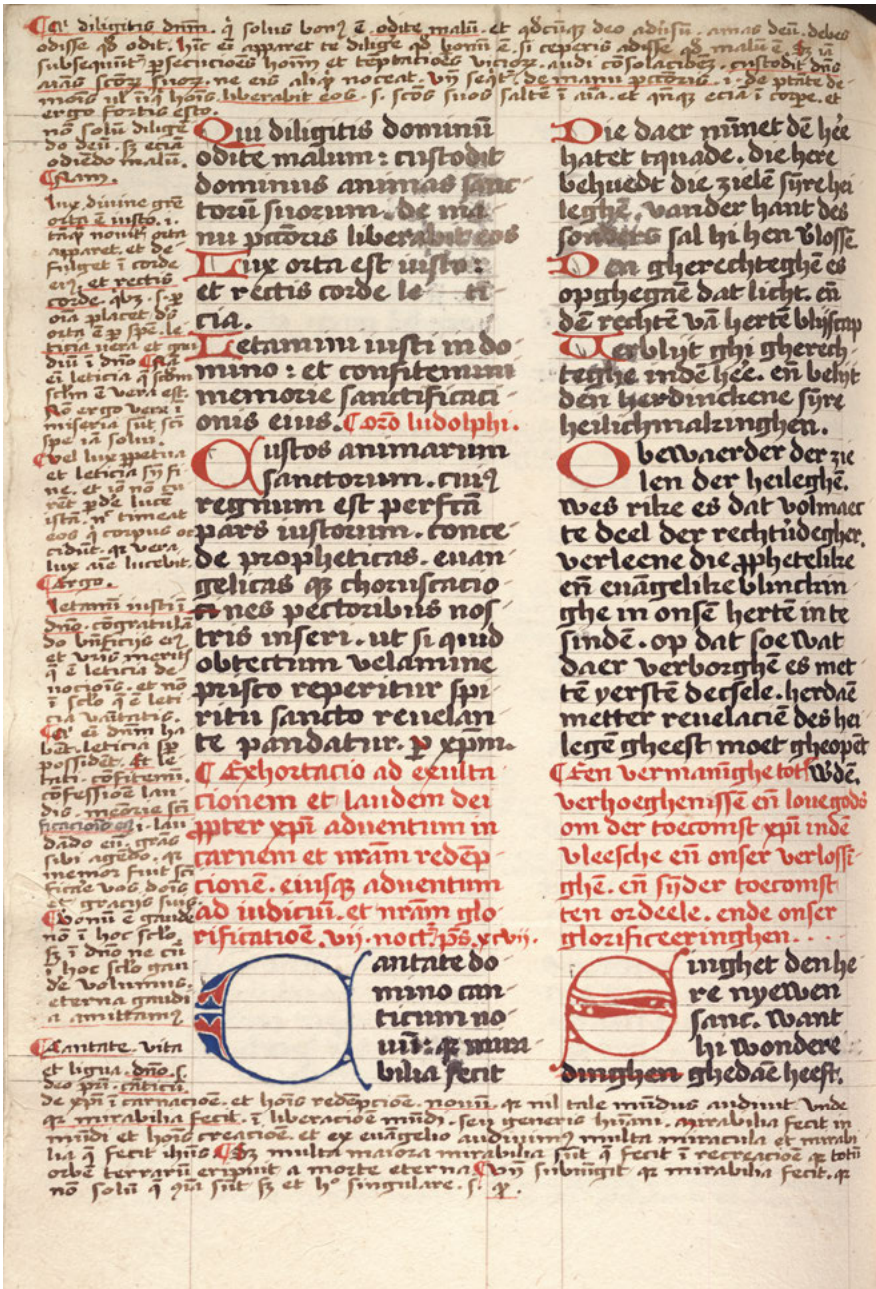


Fig. 2: Bilingual psalter with Latin commentary, written by Sister Elisabeth Mols. The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 133 C 1, fol. 129r. Reproduced with permission.

Additionally, Elisabeth Mols (d. 1538) wrote a psalter, ‘in den tijt dat sij aen die schive diende’ (‘in the time that she served at the *rota*’), in both Latin and Middle Dutch (The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 133 C 1).²³ The psalms are accompanied by a prayer in Latin and Middle Dutch and by a commentary, written only in Latin and taken from Ludolf van Saxony’s (c. 1295–1378) *Ennaratio in psalmos sive expositio super psalterium*. Since Elisabeth assembled and copied the texts from various sources (and possibly translated parts of the texts herself), she must have had good fluency in Latin. Incidentally, Elisabeth noted in the colophon that she wished that the book should always be near the prioress in the choir at the disposal of anyone who wished to consult it:

Desen boeck heft ghescreven ende met groeten aerbeyt vergadert onse gheminde medesuster suster Lijsbeth Mols ende dat in den tijt dat sij aen die schive diende. Ende sij heeft begheert dat desen boeck altoes op den choer sal ligghen omtrint oft voer die priorinne op dat een yghelijc daer in mach vinden na sijn beliefte. Ende sij bidt ende begheert zeere oetmoedelijc uwer alder devoet ghebet voer haer arm ziele die oec wilen in den last der priorinscap onweerdich ghedient heeft (fol. 3^r).

Our dear fellow sister Elisabeth Mols has written this book and assembled it with great labour and she did this while she was serving at the *rota*. And she desired that this book should always lie in the choir next to or in front of the prioress, so that everyone may find something according to their need in it. And she, who also unworthily served in the office of prioress, asks and requests humbly for your pious prayer for her poor soul.

Maria and Janne’s sermons as well as Elisabeth’s psalter prove that there is a clear correlation between these women’s advanced levels of literacy and their leadership positions. All three sisters, who showed in their writings that they had mastered Latin superbly, became prioresses in later stages of their lives. The books they produced also prove – as they were used by the members of the community – that a substantial group of sisters, even if not all, had at least some passive knowledge of Latin.

Reading Middle Dutch would not have posed major problems for most choir sisters, even if they may not have been able to write (reading and writing skills do not necessarily go hand in hand in the late Middle Ages).²⁴ Because all women in the community, including converses, novices and postulants, were supposed to be able to understand what was said or read, the vernacular was of great importance in

²³ The *rota* is the wheel which connected the enclosed sisters to the outside world. It was typically used to receive messages from the outside world.

²⁴ Clanchy 1979, 183; Mertens 2024, 240, n. 83.

female communities to complement the Latin that was used during the liturgy.²⁵ For this reason, the majority of texts were produced in Middle Dutch; this way, all books and texts, in principle, were accessible to all community members.²⁶ This is also reflected in Jericho's book collections. Of the thirty-one extant manuscripts up till 1510, only five contain texts in Latin; the rest are written in the vernacular.²⁷

4 Writing in collaboration

The majority of scribes in Jericho were – as to be expected – professed canonesses.²⁸ This applied to the sisters who were involved in book production for their own house as well as in the writing *pro pretio* for their external contacts. Of the forty-three scribes known by name, twenty-three can be connected to extant books from Jericho.²⁹ The names of Maria van Pee, Elisabeth van Poyle and Janne Colijns have already been mentioned. Before they took on their leadership positions, they were all involved in redacting sermons that were preached within the convent walls. The same applies to Barbara Cuyermans. Maria's redaction of sermons by Jan Storm found their way into Brussels, KBR, 4367–68 (dated 1466–1467) – and into a later copy, written around 1486 (Brussels, KBR, IV 402). The older codex was written by four hands, which makes it a bit unclear whether and to what extent Maria van Pee actually produced the extant codex.³⁰ Did she write the lion's share of the book?

25 Van Engen 2020, 259: 'Latin and the vernacular could often prove complementary rather than adversarial and were not gendered strictly male and female. Circumstances and cases always count, for women as for men'.

26 Stoker and Verbeij 1997, vol. 1, 128; Scheepsma 2004, 229.

27 I would like to add a caveat to this observation without implying that the vernacular was not the dominant book language for women: the provenance records of Latin manuscripts in library collections in the Netherlands and Belgium (and elsewhere) are poorly inventoried. Consequently, in all likelihood, many Latin manuscripts from female convents remain hidden from our view. The same applies to the collection of early printed books women's institutions may have owned. Cf. Dlabačová and Stoop 2021, 221–222.

28 *Conversae* Mergriete van Steenberghen and Liesbeth Vlieghe are the exceptions to this rule. Their work is discussed below.

29 Stoop 2013, 121–124, Table 5.

30 Cf. Stoop 2013, 373–376. On the layered authorship revealed in these sermon collections, see Stoop 2013, 169–353 (Chaps 4 and 5). We know Maria's scribal hand – that is, her hand for administrative documents – from her account books. See above, n. 8. Brussels, KBR, IV 402 is discussed below on p. 286.

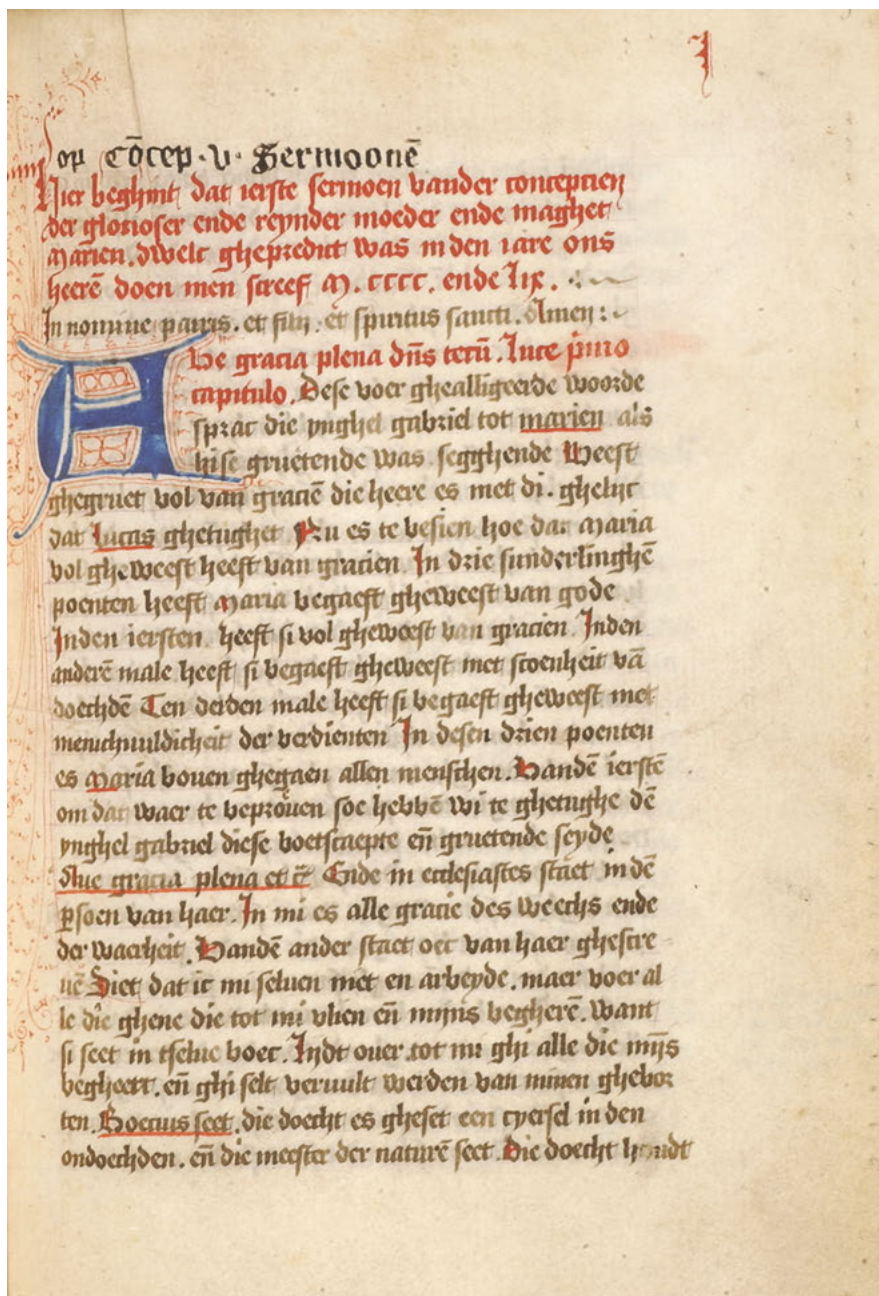


Fig. 3: Opening of Jan Storm's first sermon, as written by Maria van Pee and copied into the 1466 collection. Brussels, KBR, 4367-68, fol. 5^r. Reproduced with permission.

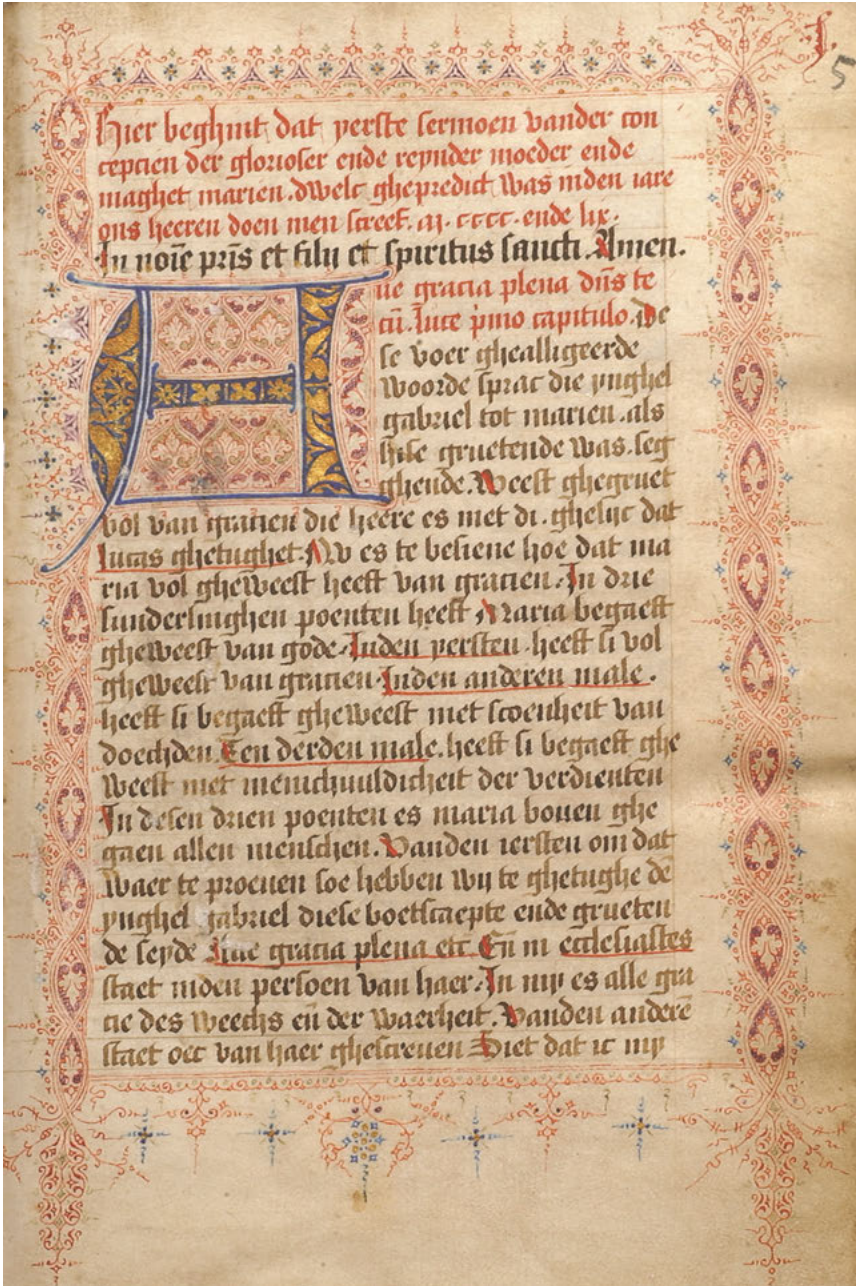


Fig. 4: Opening of Jan Storm's sermon in the 1486 collection, copied by an anonymous scribe. Brussels, KBR, IV 402, fol. 5r. Reproduced with permission.

Barbara Cuyermans's book hand is not known: the four sermons she wrote down have subsequently been copied by *Conversa* Mergriete van Steenberg (d. 1504) into Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902 (the same applies to the sermons by Elisabeth van Poyle), and by an anonymous scribe into Brussels, KBR, II 298.³¹ This codex, which holds forty-four sermons by Jan Storm and two of his letters, was probably partially written by Janne Colijns. Folios 79^r–119^v are, based on the watermarks of the paper, from the 1470s. The rest of the manuscript – according to the 1507 colophon also written by her – was posthumously attributed to Janne, who had passed away in 1491, but written by an anonymous scribe. The same applies to codex Brussels, KBR, 15071. This manuscript with Gregory the Great's (c. 540–604) *Homiliae in evangelia* is ascribed to Janne in 1510. Did the community attribute the manuscripts to her by way of honouring and memorising her for her important work as a sermon writer, and a prioress?

The last collection of twenty-five sermons that were preached by Paul van Someren in 1479 and 1480 in Jericho (Brussels, KBR, 4287) is attributed posthumously to Anne Jordaens (d. 1495): 'Dit boeck heeft ghescreven suster Anne Joerdaens zalegher ghedachten ende het hoert toe den cloester van Jericho bij sinte Katherinen' ('Sister Anne Jordaens of blessed memory has written this book and it belongs to the convent of Jericho near St Catherine'; fol. 254^v). As in the previous cases, the codex was written by more than one scribe, which makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about Anne's role in the actual production of the extant book. Did she write the majority of the book and was it, therefore, attributed to her?³²

As far as we can deduce from the surviving manuscripts, Maria van Pee, Barbara Cuyermans and Mergriete van Steenberg were not involved in producing other books, but Elisabeth, Anne and Janne were. Around 1470, Elisabeth van Poyle copied the mystical textbook *Dat spiegel der volcomenheit* ('The Mirror of Perfection') by the well-known mystical author Hendrik Herp (c. 1410–1477): 'Dit boec hoert toe den cloester van Jericho binnen Bruesel bij Sinte Katherinen ende het hevet ghescreven suster Lijsbeth van Poelc' ('This book belongs to the convent of Jericho in Brussels at St Catherine's, and Sister Elisabeth van Poyle wrote it'; Brussels, KBR, 2136, fol. 155^v).³³

³¹ Mergriete van Steenberg added a prologue to the collection, in which she explained that four sermons were redacted by Barbara Cuyermans, and the rest by Elisabeth van Poyle (Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902, fols 1^r–2^r). An English version of the prologue can be found in Mertens 2004, 138–141 and, in a slightly revised version, in Mertens 2024, 267–268.

³² In the period between 1520 and 1550, this collection was copied by an anonymous scribe into Brussels, KBR, 15130. For Anne Jordaens, see Stoop 2013, 107–110.

³³ On Hendrik Herp's *Spiegel der volcomenheit* and its transmission, see Dlabáčová 2014.

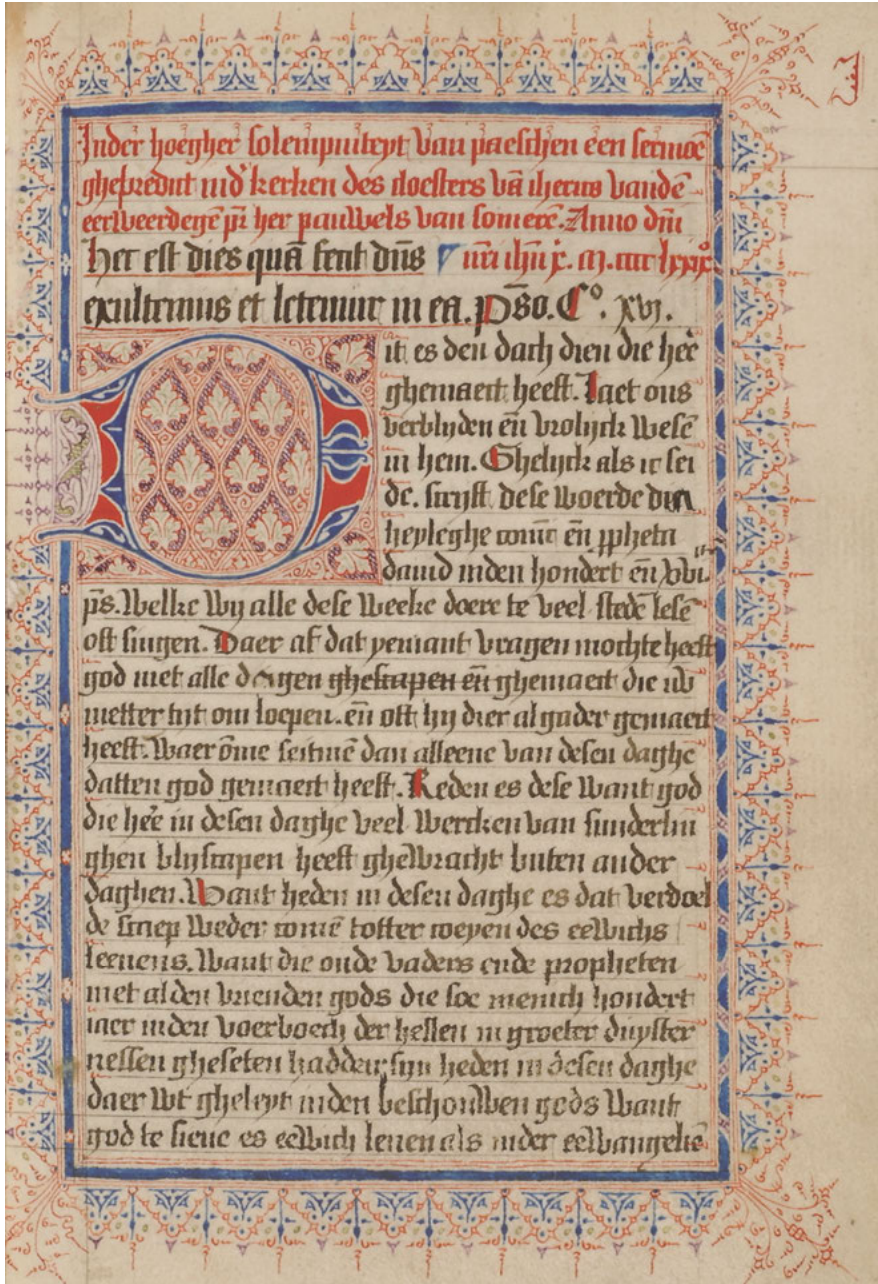


Fig. 5: Opening of Paul van Someren's sermon in the 1479 collection, probably copied by Anne Jordaens. Brussels, KBR, 4287, fol. 2r. Reproduced with permission.

Anne Jordaens and Janne Colijns were both involved in the writing of Philadelphia, Free Library, Rare Book Department, Lewis European 213, which contains the *Regula ad servos* – St Augustine’s rule as it was observed by the canonesses regular – followed by Hugh of St Victor’s (c. 1096–1141), *Expositio in regulam sancti Augustini*.³⁴ They were part of a group of no less than twelve scribes, who each successively wrote a section of the manuscript. Their names are mentioned in the colophon on fol. 118^r. Interestingly – and exceptionally – Philips Niclaes (d. 1506), who succeeded Jan Storm as the rector and confessor in 1488 but was already present in the convent in 1483, participated in the copying of the manuscript:

Dit sijn der gheender namen die dit boexsken ghescreven hebben uut caritaten. Ons eerweerdighe pater heer Philips Nycholaes – god sij sijn loen –, suster Beatrix Noeys, suster Margarete Bont,³⁵ suster Janne van den Velde, suster Marie van Hansbeke, suster Katherie Tymmermans, suster Maria Meerts, suster Margarete Joerdaens, suster Janne Colijns, suster Anne Joerdaens, suster Rijckmoet van Zellien, suster Maergarete van den Rade. Int boeck des levens sij haerder alder name (fol. 118^r).

These are the names of those who wrote this little book out of charity. Our venerable Father Philips Niclaes – may God be his reward –, Sister Beatrix Noeys, Sister Margarete Bont, Sister Janne van den Velde, Sister Marie van Hansbeke, Sister Katherie Tymmermans, Sister Maria Meerts, Sister Margarete Joerdaens, Sister Janne Colijns, Sister Anne Joerdaens, Sister Rijckmoet van Zellien, Sister Maergarete van den Rade. May all their names be in the book of life.

34 Cf. Webber 1976, 504–506; Stoop 2014, 400–402. Anne Jordaens probably – that is, if she actually is the main scribe of Brussels, KBR, 4287 – wrote a devotional miscellany in collaboration with Elisabeth Waelbeerts (d. 1502) (Brussels, KBR, IV 296). It included among many short treatises, (excerpts from) Ekbert of Schönau’s (c. 1120–1184) *Sermo de vita et passione Jesu Christi* (fols 128^r–138^r), Nicholas of Strasburg’s (first half of the fourteenth century), *Preek over de gulden berg* (‘Sermon on the Mountain of Gold’; fols 157^r–158^v) and a treatise on the Sacrament from Book IV of Thomas a Kempis’s (1380–1471) *De imitatio Christi* (fols 161^r–184^v). Anne copied fols 1^r–144^r and Elisabeth fols 144^v–223^r. There was a third person involved in this project, but she could not be identified. This person wrote fols 223^v–231^v, the text in the margins of fols 124^v–125^r and in a space that was left open on fol. 125^r–v. Elisabeth Waelbeerts also individually copied a collection of so-called gospel sermons around 1480 (Brussels, KBR, 1678).

35 Margarete Bont also copied a collection of sermons by Paul van Someren. The codex is mentioned in *Catalogue d’une belle et riche* 1800, 8, no. 473. Its current repository is unknown.

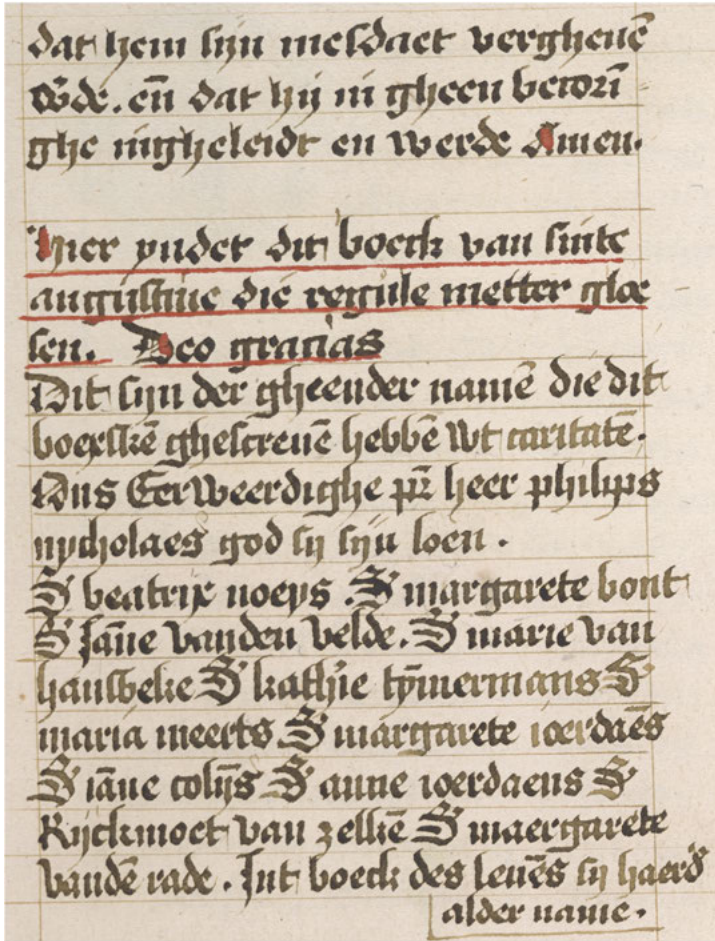


Fig. 6: Colophon demonstrating collaborative writing; Philadelphia, Free Library, Rare Book Department, Lewis European 213, fol. 118^r. Reproduced with permission.

Most of the books mentioned above show collaboration between scribes.³⁶ In many cases, this is deduced from palaeographic research, which has identified scribal hands (even though we have not been able to attribute all those hands to

³⁶ Only six books are copied by one scribe: Brussels, KBR, 2136 (Elisabeth van Poylc); 15071 (attributed to Janne Colijns but not written by her; cf. above, p. 280); 15130 (anonymous); 15136 (Catharina van Ghiseghem); 15139 (Liesbeth Vlieghe); and Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902 (Mergriete van Steenberghen).

specific sisters). In other cases, such as for the Philadelphia manuscript, collaboration is mentioned explicitly in the books' colophons. Catharina van Molenbeke (1441–1529), for example, mentioned that she finished the *Mariale* by Jacobus of Voragine (1228/1229–1298) which Sisters Lijsbeth Wijtens (d. 1491) and Magriet Raes had started over eighteen years earlier, in 1471:

Aen dit boeck heeft ghescreven suster Lijsbeth Wijtens ende suster Magriet Raes. Ende na dat over xviii jaer was begonnen te scriven, soe hevet suster Kathlinen van Molenbeke volscreven ende gheint op onser liever vrouwen dach xv trappen, op sinte Cecielen avont int jaer ons heeren mcccc ende lxxxix doen was sij out ontrint L jaer. Wilt om gode eenen Ave Marie hertelijc lesen voer hen drien op dat hen god voer haren arbeyt wil gheven glorie in der ewicheit (Brussels, KBR, 15069, fol. 192^v).

Sister Lijsbeth Wijtens and Sister Magriet Raes have contributed to this book. And more than eighteen years after it was started, Sister Catharina van Molenbeke has completed and ended it on the day of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin, on Saint Cecilia's eve in the year of Our Lord 1479, when she was about 50 years old. For the love of God read a heartfelt Ave Maria for the three of them so that God may give them glory in eternity for their labour.

Catharina van Molenbeke also participated in the writing of the first book of Gallus von Königssaal's (*fl.* c. 1370) *Malogranatum*. She wrote in the colophon on fol. 284^v that she finished the project on 14 December 1485:

Hier ynt dat yerste boeck gheheeten Malogranatum. Dat volscreven wert op sinte Nychasius dach int jaer ons heeren m cccc ende lxxxv van suster Katherinen van Molenbeke als si out was xlviij jaer. Dit heeft sij om die minne gods ghedaen ende tot ghemeynder stichtinghen. Waer af ons heere haer loen wil sijn in der ewicheit. Amen (Brussels, KBR, 15156, fol. 284^v).

Here ends the first book called *Malogranatum*. It was finished on St Nicholas's day in the year of Our Lord 1485 by Sister Catherine van Molenbeke, when she was 44 years old. She did this for the love of God and for general edification. May God be her reward in eternity. Amen.

The 'volscreven' (the verbatim translation is 'to write to the end') should be understood literally here. A marginal note on fol. 114^v states that Catharina van Molenbeke started her scribal work at that page: 'hier suster Molenbeke [ver]der heeft ghescreven' ('here Sister Molenbeke has continued writing').

The collaborative effort has been taken quite far in some manuscripts, as is demonstrated by the Philadelphia codex. Other examples can be given. Eleven people collaborated to create a composite volume with the *vitae* of twelve (local) saints, which is nowadays appropriately kept in the Bollandist library in Brussels (shelf mark 487).

The only scribe mentioned by name is *Conversa* Liesbeth Vlieghe (1422/1423–1502).³⁷ The copyist herself wrote a colophon, in the third person, on fol. 30^v, at the end of the *vita* of St Rombaut, the patron saint of Mechelen (fols 2^r–30^v): ‘Dese leghende heeft ghescreven suster Lijsken Vlieghe, bidt voer haer om gode’ (‘This legend has written Liesbeth Vlieghe, pray for her for the love of God’; fol. 30^v). Liesbeth’s name is mentioned again at the end of the *vita* of St Gummarus (fols 41^r–50^v), the patron saint of the neighbouring town of Lier: ‘Dit boeck heeft ghescreven suster Lijsbeth Vlieghe conversinne profes int cloester Ter Clusen. Bidt voer haer om gods wille’ (‘This book has written Sister Liesbeth Vlieghe, professed *conversa* in the convent

37 Liesbeth was a prolific scribe. In addition to the parts of Brussels, Bollandisten, 487, she copied a codex (Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0904) with Middle Dutch texts on St Jerome (including the so-called *Sinte Jheronimus sterfboeck*, consisting of Pseudo-Eusebius’s *Epistola de morte Hieronymi*, Pseudo-Augustine’s *Epistola de magnificentiis beati Hieronymi* and Pseudo-Cyrille’s *Epistola de miraculis Hieronymi*): ‘Dit boeck van sinte Jheronimus es volscreven int jaer ons heren M III^c ende LX op onser liever vrouwen avont nativitas op den sondach van suster Lijsken Vlieghe. Ghedinct harer’ (‘This book on St Jerome was completed in the year of Our Lord 1460 on the eve of Our Lady’s Nativity, on the Sunday, by Sister Liesbeth Vlieghe’; fol. 173^r). At a later stage, a quire with a ‘Leeringhe om te comenne int ewighe leven’ (‘Lesson to come to eternal life’) was added to the codex (fols 177^r–184^v). This quire was also written by Sister Vlieghe. Fourteen years later, on 27 October 1474, Liesbeth completed the first part of Brussels, KBR, 15139, containing a Middle Dutch translation of the *Stimulus amoris* of the thirteenth-century Franciscan James of Milan, and a so-called *Jhesuscollacie* (fols 1^r–74^v). Again she added a colophon: ‘Dit boec es volscreven op sinte Symon ende Yuden avont int jaer ons heren M cccc ende LXXIII van suster Lijsbeth Vliechs doen si out was LI jaer. Bidt voer haer om gode. Dit boec hoert toe int cloester tot onser liever vrouwen te Yericho dat men heet te sinte Katerinen’ (‘This book was completed on Sts Simon and Jude’s eve in the year of Our Lord 1474 by Sister Liesbeth Vlieghe when she was 51 years old. Pray for her for the love of God. This book belongs to the convent of Our Lady of Jericho, which is called “at St Catherine’s”’; fol. 74^v). Probably not so much later, she completed the second part of the codex with a treatise on the Lord’s Prayer by Johannes Bellens (fols 77^v–158^r), which can also be found in Brussels, KBR, 2555–58 (see below on pp. 296–297) as well as a short text on how to recognise sins (fols 158^r–164^v). The colophon at the end of this section is written by an anonymous sister; it repeats the contents and the date of the colophon on fol. 74^v (which makes the date unreliable), but also mentions Liesbeth’s industry as a scribe: ‘In den jaer ons heeren M cccc ende LXXIII soe heeft suster Lijsbeth Vlieghe desen boeck volscreven ende met groeten arbeyde op sinte Symon ende Yuden avont volyndet ter eeren gods ende tot stichtinghen ende salicheit alre devoter menschen doen sij out was LI jaer. Bidt ghetrouwelijc om die minne gods voer haer, want sij seer neerstelijc ende vlietelijc vele jaren ghearbeit heeft in vele goeder boeken te scrivene’ (‘In the year of Our Lord 1474 Sister Liesbeth Vlieghe completed this book and she finished it with great effort at St Simon and St Jude’s eve, in honour of God and for the edification and salvation of all devout people when she was 51 years old. Pray faithfully for God’s love for her, because she very diligently and expeditiously spent many years of effort in writing many good books’; fol. 164^v).

of Ter Cluysen. Pray for her for the love of God'; fol. 50^v). The colophon was clearly not written by Liesbeth herself.³⁸ Palaeographical research shows that although some codicological units were written by more than one scribe, the quire boundaries coincide with the scribal hands. This implies that the different parts of the manuscript were written independently of one another, and that scribes – unlike in the case of the Philadelphia codex – may have worked on the project simultaneously.

Almost as many people worked on manuscript Brussels, KBR, IV 402, the copy of the collection of sermons by Jan Storm that Maria of Pee noted down. In the codex, which was completed around 1486,³⁹ nine (anonymous) hands can be identified, 'qui pratiquent un style d'écriture uniforme, en sorte que la différenciation des mains est malaisée'.⁴⁰ The summit of collaboration is the so-called 'Catherine Collection' (Brussels, KBR, 1683–87). This collection of sermons, *vitae*, miracles and short treatises on Mary and St Catherine of Alexandria, the patron saints of Jericho, and the *vita* of St Elisabeth of Thuringia (1207–1231), was commissioned by Prioress Elisabeth Mols (who held this office between 1504 and her death in 1538):

Desen boeck es bleven van onser eerwerdeghe priorinne suster Lijsbeth Mols, die sij in haren tijden voer dat convent [van Jherico] dede scriven ter eeren gods ende sijnder ghebenedider moeder Marien ende der heylegher glorioser maghet sinte Katherinen haerer liever patronesse. Requiescant [!] in pace. Amen. (fol. 208^v)⁴¹

This book has been left to us from our honourable prioress Sister Elisabeth Mols, which in her time she commissioned to be written for the convent [of Jericho] in honour of God, his blessed mother Mary, and the holy glorious virgin St Catherine, their beloved patroness. May she rest in peace. Amen.

No fewer than seventeen hands can be distinguished.

As is clear from the previous manuscript, book production was often a joint venture in Jericho. Women collaborated intensely to build a manuscript collection that radiated unity and coherence. The majority of the books are written in a neat

³⁸ Liesbeth wrote fols 2^r–30^v, 41^r–50^v, 83^v–91^r (the end of the *vita* of Amelberga, the patron saint of Temse), and possibly 37^r–40^r (the end of the *vita* of St Apollonia of Alexandria). The codex consists of ten codicological units. Liesbeth copied units 2 and 4 completely, and finished the work that other scribes had begun in units 3 (scribe C and D) and 7 (scribe G). For the full division of the work, see Stoop 2013, 411–412.

³⁹ According to the colophon, fols 1^r–319^v were completed on 24 May 1486; the rest of the codex (fols 320^r–352^v) is undated but was probably finished shortly thereafter.

⁴⁰ Wittek and Glorieux-De Gand 2005, 27, no. 619.

⁴¹ 'van Jherico' has been added at a later stage.

littera hybrida (occasionally in a *littera cursiva*),⁴² and even though individual differences never completely disappear, on the whole, the writing style in the books (with some notable exceptions) is remarkably uniform.⁴³ This makes it extremely difficult to determine the number of copyists of projects, let alone decipher which sisters were involved in which projects (especially when the manuscripts do not contain colophons). It should be added here that the handwriting of individual copyists is not always completely stable and consistent.⁴⁴

Moreover, as has already been mentioned, some scribes have a clear command of more than one type of script. A good example of this is the sermon collection copied by Mergriete van Steenberghen. Mergriete who, in her own words, ‘desen boeck ghescreven ende vergadert [hevet] met aerbeyde, in cleynten gherieve ende in groter tribulacien’ (‘undertook the arduous task of writing and compiling this book with little [bodily] comfort and great tribulations’; Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902, fol. 2^r), started her writing in the usual neat *littera hybrida* (see Fig. 7). However, on fol. 228^r – at the start of the thirty-ninth sermon in the collection by the observant friar minor Hendrick Berrinck (c. 1396–1492) – she shifted to a cursive script. Instead of the normal black-brown ink she also used a pink ink here (Fig. 8).

42 A *littera cursiva* is used in the following manuscripts: Brussels, Bollandisten, 487 (fols 98^r–110^v); Brussels, KBR, 2555–58 (fols 72^r–111^v); 15130 (full manuscript); II 293 (fols 9^r–14^v); Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902 (fols 228^r–233^v); and London, British Library, Egerton 677 (fols 126^r–210^v). The *cursiva* in Brussels, KBR, 2555–58 and 15130 was written by the same woman. The *cursiva* in London, British Library, Egerton 677, is the same as that in Brussels, KBR, II 293. The one in Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902, was written by Mergriete van Steenberghen, who copied the rest of the manuscript into a *littera hybrida* (see below).

43 Hedström 2013, 264, suggests that ‘The odd occurrences of unusual scribal hands in the sisters’ manuscripts (in collaboration with known Vadstena sisters) perhaps indicate that there were a number of sisters who could already write before they entered the convent, and who brought their own scribal conventions with them. Perhaps they kept their own conventions throughout their life in Vadstena, or maybe they were re-trained to follow the convent’s standards and subsequently changed their writings later in life.’ The renowned Dutch palaeographer Johan P. Gumbert stated earlier that if hands of copyists can be quite easily distinguished, that this can be explained from the fact that they entered as adult women ‘with fully developed handwriting’. Cf. Gumbert 1990, 58. In Jericho, this could have been the case regarding Liesbeth Vlieghe, whose script clearly differs from that of the other scribes.

44 Wittek et al. 1982, 61, no. 518: ‘les religieuses de Jéricho ne sont pas toujours constantes dans leur écriture, tout en pratiquant un style commun’. Exemplarily, from fol. 98^r onwards in the oldest manuscript with Paul van Someren’s sermons (Brussels, KBR, 4287), the scribe added diacritics to some letters (u/v), for no apparent reason. These marks disappear after fol. 111^v as suddenly as they appeared.



Fig. 7: Mergriete van Steenberghe's *littera hybrida*. Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902, fol. 5^r. Reproduced with permission.

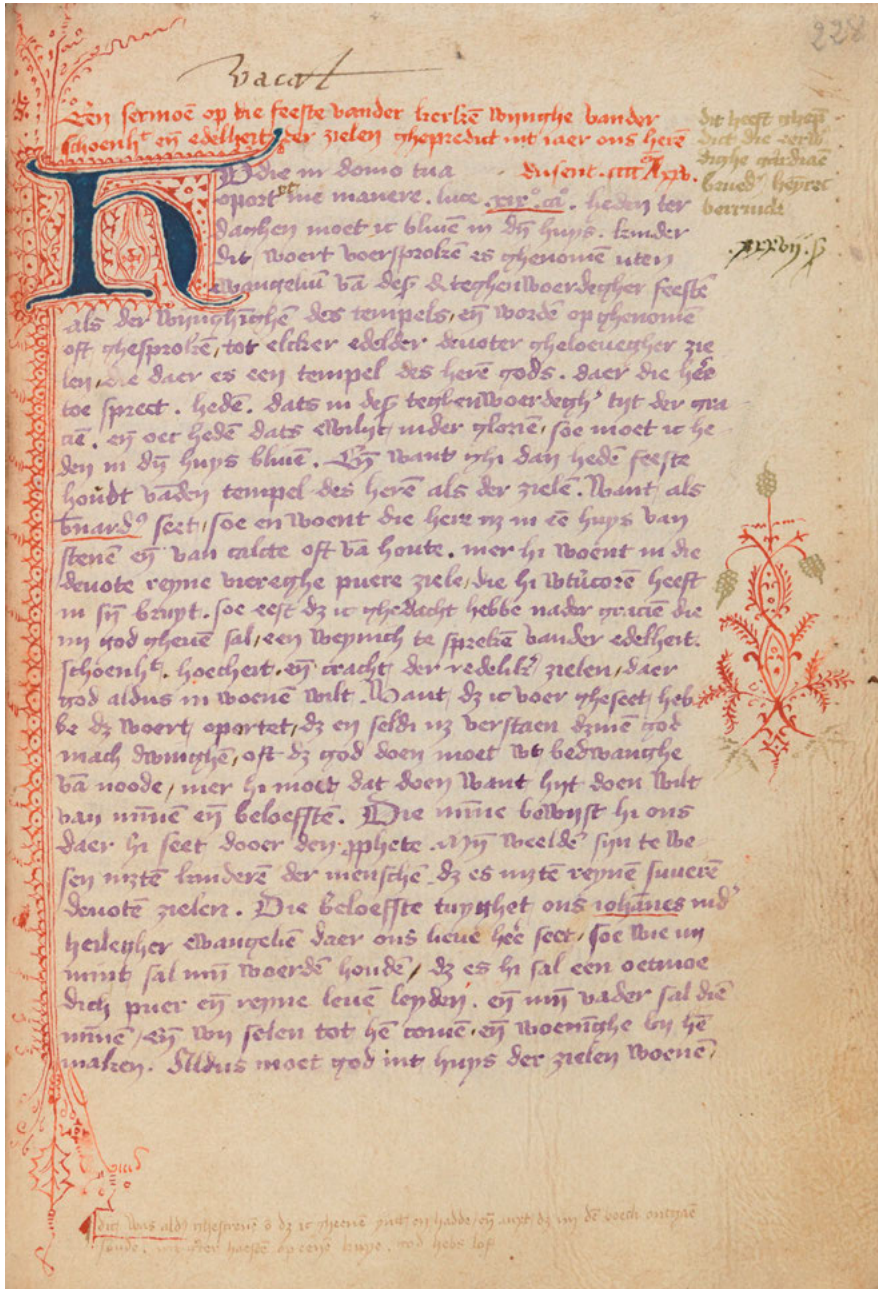


Fig. 8: Mergriete van Steenberghen's *littera cursiva*, in purple ink. Written on a knee in a great hurry. Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902, fol. 228r. Reproduced with permission.

The scribe explains the reason for this uncommon behaviour in a note in the lower margin – in green ink (which is normally only used for the penwork in initials): ‘Dit was aldus ghescreven om dat ic gheen en yndt en hadde ende anxt dat mi den boeck ontgaen soude. Met groter haesten op eenen knye. God hebs lof’ (‘This was written this way because I did not have ink and had fear that the book would escape from me. In a great hurry on a knee. God be praised’). Mergriete’s fear that the book would escape from her is quite peculiar. It seems to imply that she had only temporary access to the sermon she wanted to copy into the manuscript, even if – as far as we know – the sermon was preached within Jericho’s convent walls. When Mergriete had finished the copying of Berrinck’s sermon (on fol. 233^v), she switched back and finished the last five lines of the page in the black-brown ink and the *littera hybrida* and continued as if nothing had ever happened.

5 Embellishing the manuscripts

Uniformity was the goal for illumination as it was for writing.⁴⁵ Over time, the style developed. The oldest manuscripts (e.g. Brussels, KBR, 4367–68 and Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0904) contain rather plain initials, which were decorated with basic penwork (see Fig. 3). The initials become more ornate in the 1470s. They are now provided with decorative recesses and the penwork – both in the interior of and around the letters as well as in the margins of the page – becomes more elaborate, as is shown in the opening initial from manuscript Brussels, KBR, 15136, written by Catherine of Ghiseghem between 29 June 1472 and 4 April 1473 (Fig. 9).

We encounter initials in Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902 (second half of the 1470s; cf. Figs 7 and 8) in their full glory for the first time. The body of the initial is painted in a highly developed *littera duplex* style in red and blue, with ‘the two colours interlocking but separated by a blank space’.⁴⁶ The interior of this type of initial is decorated with floral motives or foliage in red and blue, and – for the more subtle details – pink and green ink. The pen flourishing in these later manuscripts stretches out into the four margins of the page.

⁴⁵ I will focus here on the initials that appear at the openings of manuscripts or the beginnings of texts and codicological units, as they are typically more elaborate than those that occur elsewhere in codices.

⁴⁶ Derolez 2003, 41.

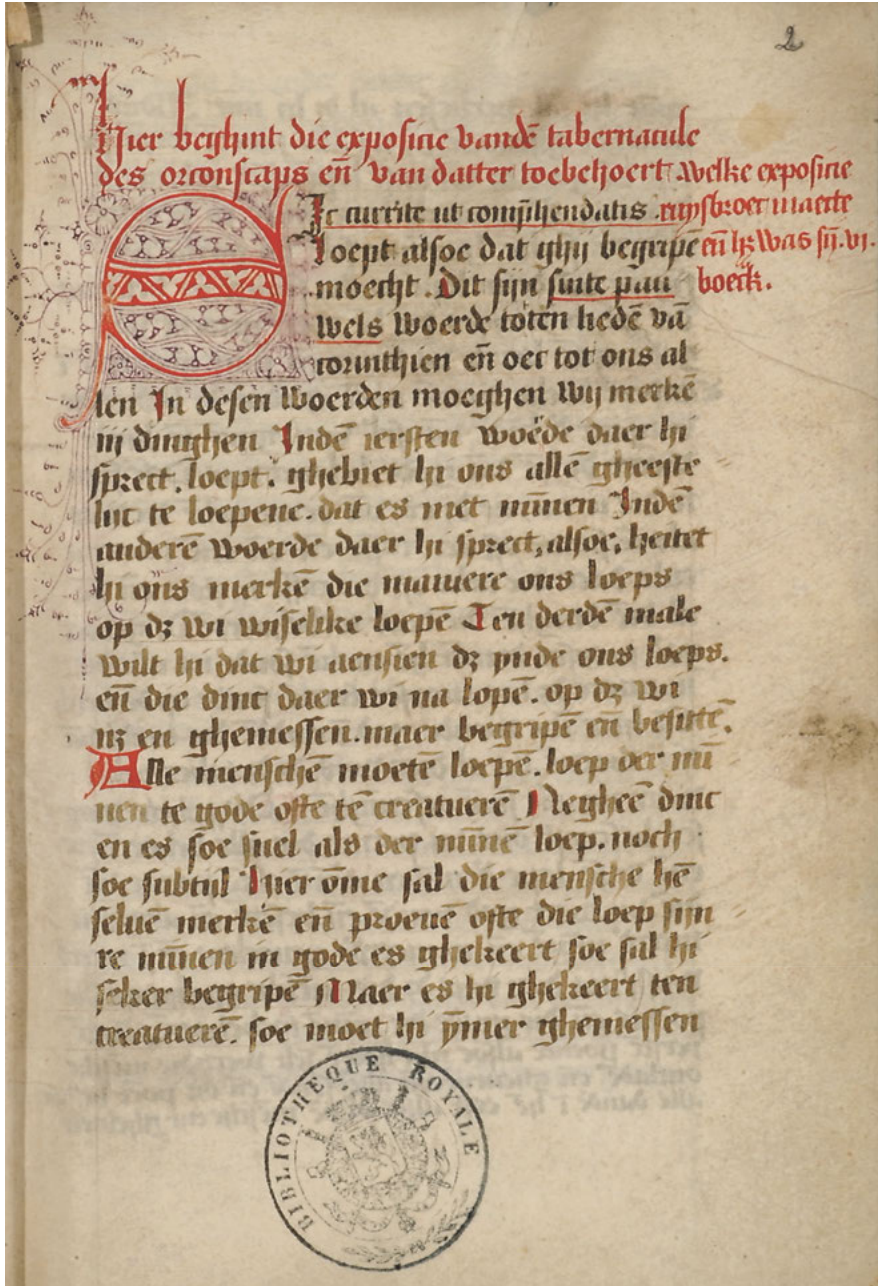


Fig. 9: Opening initial of Jan van Ruusbroec's (1293–1381) *Van den gheesteliken tabernakel* ('Spiritual Tabernacle') in Brussels, KBR, 15136, fol. 2^r. Reproduced with permission.

Comparable decoration is found in the manuscripts Brussels, KBR, 4287 (between 1480 and 1495) and IV 402 (completed in 1486) (Figs 5 and 4, respectively), the two collections of sermons that we have encountered before. Again, the opening initials are duplex letters. Both codices feature abundant four-colour pen flourishing in and around the initials, which continues in all margins in both manuscripts. The illumination in manuscript Brussels, KBR, IV 402 differs from that in Brussels, KBR, 4287, in that the red in the body of the initial has been replaced by gold leaf.

And this very element brings us to the latest manuscripts. Although initials with simple penwork still occur in these codices, the opening initials are much more exuberant. Gold leaf is present in all initials, and the decoration of the eyes of the initials no longer consists of mere penwork (flowers or foliage), such as in manuscript Brussels, KBR, 4287, but parts are coloured with green ink and sometimes even a drawing is added. The penwork in the borders is also extraordinarily exuberant. Interestingly – and in contrast with the older books – some of these early sixteenth-century manuscripts contain miniatures. St Elisabeth of Thuringia is depicted at the beginning of her *vita* on fol. 172^r in manuscript Brussels, KBR, 1683–87, which was commissioned by Prioress Elisabeth Mols.

Who applied these decorations is not known. The prioresses' account books that offer us a glimpse into the manuscript production for individuals and institutions outside the convent walls mention that Janne van den Velde (d. 1509) and Liesbeth Wijtens not only wrote manuscripts – Janne was one of the twelve scribes of Philadelphia, Free Library, Rare Book Department, Lewis European 213 and Liesbeth Wijtens copied Jacobus of Voragine's *Mariale* together with Catharina van Molenbeke and Magriet Raes (Brussels, KBR, 15069) – but from the early 1480s onwards, also illuminated them.⁴⁷ Janne, in particular, must have been a very talented illuminator, as she was very regularly called in to decorate codices. She was also capable of working with lapis lazuli and gold leaf.⁴⁸ Is she the very capable illuminator of the late – and perhaps even earlier – manuscripts from Jericho?

47 In 1480/1481, Maria van Pee registered two payments from illumination and penwork ('verlichten ende floreren') executed jointly by Janne en Lijsbeth (Brussels, AEB, 12.781, fol. 132^r); in 1482/1483, Janne embellished a book (?) for 'meester van Ghyleymus' (Brussels, AEB, 12.785, fol. 27^r). In 1486/1487, she illuminated several quires that Maria van Hansbeke had written for a priest ('her Jacob'), and, in the same year, she collaborated with Elisabeth van Poyle on a project (Brussels, AEB, 12.788, fol. 4^r). The last time that Janne's name is mentioned as an illuminator is 1499/1500 (Brussels, AEB, 12.797, fol. 88^r).

48 'Item ontfanen van mijnder suster Van der Beke voer een ghetijtde dat suster Janne van den Velde haer screef ende verlijchte met gouwe ende lazuer tsame der aen verdient ende van te floreren 1 pond 17 schellingen' ('Item received from my sister Van der Beke for a Book of Hours which Sister Janne van den Velde wrote for her and illuminated with gold and lapis lazuli. Earned on this and on penwork together 1 pound 17 shillings'; Brussels, AEB, 12.788, fol. 14^r).



Fig. 10: Miniature of St Elisabeth of Thuringia in Brussels, KBR, 1683–87, fol. 172r. Reproduced with permission.

6 Book production as a community marker

The surviving late medieval manuscripts from Jericho – as well as the few books they produced for other religious institutions known to date – show that the women were trained to produce meticulous manuscripts and adopt a communal style of writing and illumination.⁴⁹ This was not uncommon in other (female) convents either. Monica Hedlund points out, for example, that many nuns in the southern Swedish Birgittine motherhouse of Vadstena learned to write a very uniform *hybrida* for vernacular texts, making it often very difficult to distinguish their hands.⁵⁰ The use of a collective book style, by the way, is not new in the fifteenth century. The twelfth-century Benedictine nuns of Admont (Austria) also tried hard to produce books that reflected the identity of their monastery. Their manuscripts have ‘thanks to careful coordination of parchment, ruling, and script, [...] a remarkably unified appearance’.⁵¹

There is also further evidence regarding the Low Countries that religious institutions developed a house style. Gouda, Stadsbibliotheek, 159, for example, which originates from the convent of Sint-Margaretha, a community of canonesses regular of the order of St Augustine in Gouda, was written by seven sisters:

Explicit collectarius scriptus per manus septem monialium scilicet Marie Johannis, Geze Yzenoudi, Ave Trici, Jacobe Gerardi, Agathe Nycolai, Marie Martini et Marie Gerardi. Finitus anno domini millesimo quadringentesimo quinquagesimo quarto ipso die sancti Odulphi confessoris (fol. 238^v).

Here ends the collectarius which was written by hand by seven *moniales*, namely Marie Johannis, Geze Yzenoudi, Ave Trici, Jacobe Gerardi, Agathe Nycolai, Marie Martine, and Marie Gerardi. It was ended in the year of the Lord 1454, on the day of St Odulphus confessor [12 June].⁵²

⁴⁹ The script and penwork in a *collectionnaire* that belonged to the Cistercian convent in Muizen near Mechelen shows that it was produced in Jericho. The Jericho sisters also illuminated a Latin convolute with a collection of glossed sermons and a world chronicle, that can be located in Tienen (Tirlemont), a small town about 19 km east of Louvain. Cf. Stoop 2014, 402–405.

⁵⁰ Hedlund 2003, 39; Hedström 2010, 172–175; Hedström 2013, 264.

⁵¹ Beach 2005, 188. For an example from Medingen in northern Germany, cf. Lähnemann 2018.

⁵² Five of these scribes – Ave Trici (Aef Dircsdochter), Jacobe Gerardi (Jacoba Gherijtsdochter), Agathe Nycolai (Aechte Claesdochter), Marie Martine (Maria Martijnsdochter) and

The distinction between the hands is very difficult to make.⁵³ Jan-Willem Klein has pointed out that the constitutions of the Brethren of the Common Life and the houses and monasteries inspired by them also regulated the book production, and especially the writing *pro pretio*. Contracts often included the provision that another scribe would complete the work ‘in alia manu equivalenti’ (‘in another, equivalent hand’) if the original copyist fell ill or was unable to complete his work for some other reason.⁵⁴

The scribes at Jericho and their supervisors clearly cared deeply about producing a book collection in their own unique, recognisable style. There is no concrete evidence regarding how the community went about producing their book collection in its evidently standardised form. Whether the sisters were ‘all following the lead – but each quite uniquely – of a model scribe’, as Philip Webber suggests in his description of the Philadelphia codex, or that they participated in writing training – whether or not collectively – as Karl Stoker and Theo Verbeij propose, we may assume that the presence of the convent school and the writing instructor in Jericho was paramount in this.⁵⁵ Perhaps, then, we can think of the manuscripts on which many copyists collaborated as exercise projects, in which, of course, it was a bonus that the students *en passant* were introduced to, respectively, the stories of the patron saints of their community (Brussels, KBR, 1683–87), the sermons of their own superior (Brussels, KBR, IV 402) and their own monastic rule (Philadelphia, Free Library, Rare Book Department, Lewis European 213).

Marie Gerardi (Maria Gherijtsdochter) – copied Jan van Ruusbroec’s *Van den gheesteliken tabernakel* (‘Spiritual Tabernacle’) in 1460 (The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 129 G 4; cf. Stoker and Verbeij 1997, vol. 2, 163–164, no. 481). Moreover, Geza Yzenoudi and Ave Trici jointly copied a Latin codex with the *Vitae patrum et verba seniorum* (‘Lives and Sayings of the Fathers’) in 1449 (London, British Library, Add. 22562). Cf. Watson 1979, vol. 1, no. 266. These few examples show that collaborative scribal activity was probably not uncommon at all.

⁵³ Noordzij 1975, 58.

⁵⁴ Klein 1995, 13.

⁵⁵ Webber 1976, 506; Stoker and Verbeij 1997, vol. 1, 157, n. 178. For the suggested role of a scribal school in the homogeneity of convents books collections, also see Hedström 2013, 264.

7 Jericho's manuscript collection

As we have seen, the majority of the late medieval manuscripts we know from Jericho were produced by the convent's own sisters.⁵⁶ There are six (partial) exceptions. Two of the surviving manuscripts were produced before the foundation of Jericho on 10 May 1456. The oldest (Brussels, KBR, II 2111) contains a commentary on the Songs of Songs (*Bedudinghe op Cantica canticorum*, Chaps 4:1–5:16) and was finished by an anonymous scribe on Maundy Thursday 1429 (1430 n.s.).⁵⁷ The second, Brussels, KBR, II 1300, containing a Middle Dutch translation of the *Meditationes de passione Christi* by the Augustinian hermit Jordanus van Quedlinburg (1299–1380) is dated 28 June 1446. Perhaps both manuscripts originally came from Ter Cluysen in Eigenbrakel or from the convent of St Catherine and were included in the new library when these two convents merged. In any case, the manuscript containing Jordanus's *Meditationes* was given a new first quire, which brought the book more in line with the rest of the book collection in terms of style. Where the two codices containing Jordanus's *Opus postillarum et sermonum de tempore* (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 11.898 and Cod. Series nova 12.753) were written is not clear. Of the two following manuscripts, it is known.

The first codicological unit of Brussels, KBR, 2555–58, a composite volume, contains a treatise on the Paternoster by Johannes Bellens (fols 1^r–63^r) and two short treatises on the Passion (fols 64^r–68^r). According to a (later?) note, Bellens wrote the treatise himself and gave it to the canonesses of Jericho at the request of Katheline van Limborch (d. 1497), who was the convent's procuratrix in the period from 1447 to All Saints' 1461 and sub-prioress in 1486/1487:

Item desen pater noster heeft ghemaect, ghescreven ende ons ghegheven die eerwerdeghe pater Bellens, ter beden van suster van Limborch. Een weerdich vader van onser ordenen. Bidt ghetrouwelijc voer sijn ziele (flyleaf at the front, verso).⁵⁸

⁵⁶ This also applies to two now lost Middle Dutch manuscripts. Margareta Bont and (probably) Catharina van Ghiseghem, the scribes of *olim* Du Bois de Schoondorp, no. 8 (cf. n. 34) and *olim* Louvain, Universiteitsbibliotheek, 87, were both professed canonesses in Jericho.

⁵⁷ This commentary to Song of Songs is extensively analysed in Schepers 2006. It is based on the *Glossa Tripartita super Cantica*, an anonymous Franciscan scholastic commentary on Song of Songs from around the year 1300.

⁵⁸ Father Bellens can most likely be identified as the regular canon Johannes Bellens (d. 1483), who was prior of the Windesheim convent of canons of Bois-Seigneur-Isaac in Ophain (Fôret de Soignes) between 1450 and 1458 and later rector of the convent of canonesses regular of Sint-Agnes

Item this Paternoster has made, written and been given to us the venerable Father Bellens, at the request of Sister Van Limborch. He is a worthy father of our order. Pray faithfully for his soul.

At a later stage, Bellens's work was bound together with two other codicological units that actually were copied within the convent walls.

The last codex written outside Jericho is Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, 1016. The canonesses received it from Thomas Monincx, prior of Groenendaal (Fôret de Soignes) between 1467 and 1483:

Dit boeck hoert toe den cloester van Jherico bij sinte Katherinen. Dwelc ons es bleven van prior van Gruenendale her Thoemaes Moenens zalegher ghedachten. Bidt voer hem om gode (fol. 216').

This book belongs to the convent of Jericho near St Catherine. We have received it from the late Reverend Thomas Monincx. Pray for him to God.

The codex contains the story of Christ's Passion taken from the four gospels (a *passieharmonie*) followed by a commentary. Whether Thomas Monincx was involved in the production of the manuscript is not clear. That he donated the book to Jericho is not surprising; the priors of Groenendaal were *visitatores* of the convent in Brussels, and, therefore, partly responsible for the pastoral care of the sisters. There is no doubt that a *passieharmonie* was considered appropriate to support their spiritual lives.

7.1 Liturgical books

So, what does Jericho's book collection look like in terms of its contents? And what can be said about who used the books and where? Female convents needed books for all aspects of religious life and primarily liturgical books. The prioresses' account books show that the Jericho scribes almost exclusively wrote books of hours, missals, diurnals, psalters, breviaries and so on for people and convents outside their own convent. Such liturgical books were also regularly written (or bought) for the convent's own sisters.⁵⁹ We may assume that quite a few liturgical books circulated in the convent. It is likely that all the canonesses – and there were about fifty

in Gent (1458–1464 and 1469–1474) and Ten Elzen in Zichem (1483). Cf. Berlière et al. (eds) 1890–1993, vol. 4, 1051–1052, 1277; Berlière et al. (eds) 1890–1993, vol. 7, 799, 810, and 812; Stooker and Verbeij 1997, vol. 2, 80–81, no. 217.

⁵⁹ Cf. Stoop 2012a.

of them on average – had some personal liturgical manuscripts.⁶⁰ Virtually no part of any of these books survived. We know of one Middle Dutch manuscript with the summer part of a lectionary (*temporale* and *sanctorale*) that may have come from Jericho. This manuscript, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Series nova 12.891, also contains a psalter. Presumably the lectionary and psalter were originally used as two separate books. The only other liturgical book we know of is the bilingual psalter with Latin commentary that Elisabeth Mols wrote for use in the choir.⁶¹

7.2 Manuscripts for communal use

The manuscripts that did survive from the monastery were probably mostly kept in the library, for private or communal use. Some of them will also have been used in the refectory. However, few traces can be found that explicitly point to the specific context of use. It is explicitly mentioned in only two manuscripts that they belonged to the *librije*. The parchment binding of Jacobus de Voragine's *Mariale*, copied by Catharina van Molenbeke, Lijsbeth Wijtens and Magriet Raes (see above), bears the following inscription: 'Van den eerbareghen love der weerdegheer maghet Marien gheheeten Mariale. Librije' ('Of the honourable love of the worthy Virgin Mary called Mariale. Library'). The other is a codex with Gerard van Vliedervoven's (d. 1402) *Cordiale de quattuor novissimis* ('On the Four Last Things') and Pseudo-Bernard's *Meditationes piissimae de cognitione humanae conditionis* ('Devout Meditations on the Knowledge of the Human Condition'). This last book, written between 1460 and 1487, initially belonged to *Conversa* Geertruyt Tsofyongers (d. 1487).⁶² After her demise, it was given to the library for communal use: 'Dit boeckscap toe te behoren suster Ghertruyt Hofjongers salegher gedachte. Van nu

⁶⁰ Cf. Stoop 2013, 51–52.

⁶¹ See above, p. 276.

⁶² Geertruyt was one of the very few individual owners of late medieval manuscripts in Jericho. She also owned the obituary that is now part of Brussels, KBR, II 293, fols 15^r–20^r. The ownership inscription says: 'Desen boeck hoert toe suster Geertruyt Tsofyongers. Ende sij begeert van eenen yegelijken die daer in leest ende sijn profijt doet, dat sij deylechtich mach sijn der devocien die sij daer uyt crigen bi der gracen gods. Ende dien hi tot eenen deele valt na haer doot, / die wil haers gedincken ende hulpen haer uytter noet / op dat sij saen ontfangen worde daer boven in Abrahams scoet. / Met gode moeten sij leven / die daer aen hebben gescreven / op dat sij tallen tiden te samen mogen verblijden. Amen' ('This book belongs to Sister Geertruyt Tsofyongers. And she desires from everyone who reads and profits from it, that she may partake in the devotion they receive from it

voert sal toe horen int ghemeyne ende verwaert in die liberie' ('This little book used to belong to Sister Geertruyt Tsofyongers of blessed memory. From now on it shall belong to the community and be kept in the library'). Unfortunately the book that belonged to the University Library in Louvain (shelf mark 87) was burnt in 1914.

Furthermore, we can deduct from Jan Storm's second collection of sermons, attributed to Janne Colijns, that it was used during refectory readings.⁶³ The fact that sermon collections were ordered according to the liturgical year, made them ideally suited for that. Maria A. de la Folije (1622–1695) also refers in the prologue to her seventeenth-century sermon collection to 'boecken der homelijen ende sermoenen van onsen hijlighen vader Augustinus, Gregorius, Bernardus, Jordanus ende Thaulerus die in onsen refter ghelesen worden' ('books of homilies and sermons of our holy father Augustine, Gregory [the Great], Bernardus [of Clairvaux], Jordanus [of Quedlinburg], and [Johannes] Tauler which are read in our refectory'; Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 13.690, fol. 2^r).⁶⁴ This seems to imply that the manuscripts Brussels, KBR, 15071 (Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in evangelia*), 1683–1687 (Bernard of Clairvaux's *Homiliae super missus est* on fols 2^r–26^v) and 2555–58 (Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermones super Qui habitat* on fols 117^r–193^v) and the two codices containing Jordanus's *Opus postillarum et sermonum de tempore* (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 11.898 and Cod. Series nova 12.753) were used in the refectory.⁶⁵ This also extends to all the collections mentioned above with sermons preached in Jericho. Obviously, refectory reading did not exclude other uses, such as private or communal reading, meditation, and religious and intellectual edification. Janne Colijns's sermon collection has several marginal annotations, explaining figures of speech, that indicate that this book was, in fact, also used in the convent school.⁶⁶

The fact, however, that the ownership inscription of Brussels, KBR, 4287 – the oldest copy of Paul van Someren's sermon collection – seems to indicate that sermon

through the grace of God. And she, to whom it falls after her death, should remember and help her out of her distress so that she will soon be received up there in Abraham's bosom. With God must live those who had part in writing it so that they may rejoice together at all times. Amen'; fol. 20^r). The only other individual owners are Beatrix Noeys (see below on p. 300) and Maria van Locquenghien (d. 1487), who owned London, British Library, Egerton 677.

⁶³ Note in the margin of Brussels, KBR, II 298, fol. 256^r: 'Nota. Dit en leest men niet ten refter' ('Nota. This shall not be read in the refectory'). Why this section was not considered suitable for the refectory reading is not clear, but the very exclusion of this passage implies that the rest of the manuscript was indeed used for that purpose.

⁶⁴ Stoop 2007, 292–293.

⁶⁵ We do not know of collections with sermons by St Augustine or Tauler from Jericho.

⁶⁶ Stoop 2013, 237–257.

collections were not exclusively intended for communal use is also interesting. Someone has noted on fol. 254^v: ‘Dit boec behoort toe den cloester van Jerico. Suster Beatrix Noeys’ (‘this book belongs to the convent of Jericho. Sister Beatrix Noeys’). Beatrix (d. 1497) was one of the scribes who collaborated in the Philadelphia manuscript and active in the writing *pro pretio* between 1484 and 1489, but why she would own a manuscript that would typically be used for the whole community is not clear. The ownership inscription in Brussels, KBR, 4367–68 – the oldest manuscript with sermons by Jan Storm and redacted by Maria van Pee – suggests, in its turn, that books could be borrowed by individuals: ‘Dit boeck hoort te Bruesele der Rosen gheplant in Jherico tonser liever vrouwen. Soe wie dat ontleent oft vent, hi bewaert ende gheeft weder in rechter trouwen’ (‘This book belongs to Brussels, to Our Lady of the Rose Planted in Jericho. Whoever borrows or finds it, should look after it and return it reliably’; fol. 1^v).

On top of sermons, the convent owned a huge variety of – some longer but more often shorter – devotional treatises and texts. I will highlight some of the most prominent and important texts and genres here. Firstly, the sisters owned some treatises by famous mystical authors. Most important for modern devout circles are Jan van Ruusbroec’s *Van den gheesteliken tabernakel* and Hendrik Herp’s *Dat spiegel der volcomenheit*.⁶⁷ In addition, a number of Bible commentaries are among the sisters’ belongings. The *Exposicie der passien ons heren Jhesu Christi* (‘Exposition on the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ’) with its preceding ‘passieharmonie’ and Ludolf van Saxony’s *Ennaratio in psalmos* have been discussed above. The second part of *Bedudinghe op cantica canticorum*, the widespread commentary to Song of Songs, mentioned previously probably already belonged to the convent’s book collection shortly after the foundation of the new convent. The sisters added the Middle Dutch translation of *Postilla in Apocalypsis*, a commentary on the Apocalypse by the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270–1349), to their collection in the mid-1470s. The manuscript (Brussels, KBR, 15055–56) was finished on 20 July 1475, but unfortunately the colophon does not mention by whom.

In addition to mystical texts and Bible commentaries, the sisters possessed several manuscripts with texts about saints. Manuscript Brussels, Bollandisten, 487, which contains twelve *vitae*, mostly of local saints, has been discussed earlier. Manuscript Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0904, that contains, among other

⁶⁷ The convent also owned an excerpt of Ruusbroec’s *Van den kerstenen ghelove* in London, British Library, Egerton 677, fols 203^r–209^v. Some other convents of canonesses regular, such as Nazareth in Geldern, just across the present-day border of Germany, and the convent of Sint-Agnes in Maaseik, had a much stronger interest in mystical literature. This interest is also reflected in their sermon collections. Cf. Kienhorst 2010; Costard 2020.

texts, the so-called *Sinte Jheronimus sterfboeck* and was written by Lijsbeth Vieghe, also seems to belong to this category. Two other manuscripts, already discussed in this essay, each focus on one female saint. The *Mariale* of Jacobus de Voragine, as its name implies, contains only texts about Mary, and Brussels, KBR, 1683–87 contains almost exclusively texts, including sermons, relating to St Catherine. Both, in addition to being important role models for the nuns, were patron saints of the convent.

8 Conclusion

The analysis above shows that some female communities in the Low Countries had an extraordinarily rich and diverse book culture, even if presumably only a small part of the original collection – in manuscript and print – has survived through the centuries (the inventory made at the convent's dissolution in 1783 mentions that it possessed a 'zeer groote quantiteit boeken' ['a very large quantity of books']).⁶⁸ Future comparative research will have to show to what extent something like a 'standard book collection' existed in communities of canonesses regular as well as in other religious orders, and whether Jericho's manuscript collection fits that picture. In any case, the extant number of late medieval vernacular sermon manuscripts in Jericho is unique. The *Repertorium of Middle Dutch Sermons* established with a good degree of certainty that so many sermons were copied and recorded nowhere else.⁶⁹ As many as seventeen Middle Dutch (and three later) manuscripts contain one or more sermons, and of those twenty manuscripts, thirteen almost exclusively contain sermons. Such a strong preference for collecting texts of the same genre is unprecedented. But even more unique is the fact that the sisters specialised in saving hundreds of original sermons by their confessors and visiting priests for posterity. Many of these sermons show a wide range of *auctoritates* (from the Bible, the church fathers and other religious authors, as well as from classical and philosophical sources) and literary and stylistic tools. Therefore, studying those sermons in addition to the extant book collection will help us understand the level of literacy and learning of the Jericho sisters better, and, by extension, of religious women in the Low Countries. It can also teach us many of the yet unknown facts about the extent of their participation in the book culture of the medieval Low Countries, both in manuscript and early print.

⁶⁸ Theys 1944, 75.

⁶⁹ Sherwood-Smith and Stoop 2003, and Ermens and Van Dijk 2008.

Further exploratory studies are needed to map women's access to learning, knowledge and the learned culture of their day more broadly. The diverging levels of literacy and different forms of interaction with literature and knowledge of women can be highlighted by studying variables such as the heterogeneous (socio-economic) background of the women, their standing within the convent, the geographical location of convents and the religious orders to which they belonged. By shedding light on women as creative producers and disseminators of both existing and original texts, convents become visible as textual communities and centres of knowledge and learning.

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