Introduction

The writings of Maria Petyt can be considered as belonging to the most interesting autobiographical documents that have been preserved in Carmelite spirituality. Her interpreters present her as a 17th century Flemish woman who retreated from the world and was devoted to a life of prayer resulting in intensive mystical experiences.

However, this memory of Maria Petyt was challenged in 2009, when Esther van de Vate was working at the archive of the Carmelite postulator in Rome and was comparing the Flemish edition of the writings of Maria Petyt with a contemporary Latin translation of these writings in Codex Post III 70. Esther van de Vate discovered a set of folios – Post III 70, fol. 30r-49v – which present a new image of this female mystic. Here Maria Petyt proves herself to be very interested and deeply engaged in political affairs. She inwardly absorbed herself in the Dutch War of Louis XIV and intensely shared in his victories and defeats. Maria Petyt even conjoined her spiritual credibility with the outcome of his military quarrels, which she prophesied. Another interesting aspect of the newly detected folios is Maria Petyt's stance towards Jansenism. Maria Petyt obviously thought deeply about this internal Christian conflict and took up a specific position. Dealing with these themes the folios show a stronger self-awareness by Maria Petyt than her other writings: here, Maria Petyt not only realizes that she has a local significance, but in these texts she considers herself having also a political mission within Europe.

The Latin folios about the Dutch War do not have a parallel in the Dutch edition of Maria Petyt's works and were never referred to in earlier literature. Even Albert Deblaere who did important and profound work on the writings of Maria Petyt in the 1960s and thereafter and who described Codex III Post 70 to some extent, did not say a single word about the folios concerning the Dutch War.

In order to do justice to Maria Petyt and to discover the tradition of female religious involvement in the 17th century, we have to reshape the image we have of Maria Petyt. We have all the more reason for doing this when we realize that Maria Petyt's writings are unequalled in volume and mystical content within the historical context of the Flemish speaking 17th century.

Thanks to the Carmelite Institute in Rome and Radboud University Nijmegen, Veronie Meeuwssen was able to do pioneering work on these folios in her Master's thesis and in a contiguous research project, supervised by Elisabeth Hense. Because the folios about the Dutch War were found to be so interesting and cause us to re-interpret the whole life and work of Maria Petyt, Elisabeth

Hense, Veronie Meeuwssen and Esther van de Vate decided to organise an international meeting of experts at Radboud University in 2011, entitled “Maria Petyt – A Carmelite mystic in Wartime”. Colleagues from Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands joined in and discussed with us various aspects of Maria Petyt’s historical context (part I) and different perspectives on the folios about the Dutch War (part II).

Referring to the historical context of Maria Petyt, Esther van de Vate gives a broad outline of the political and religious backgrounds of Maria Petyt’s folios about the Dutch War after having presented a short biography of Maria Petyt in which she gives special attention to the period of her life when she stayed at the hermitage in Mechelen where she wrote about the Dutch War. Michel van Meerbeeck provides new details about Maria Petyt’s life in the hermitage deduced from the ordinances written by Michael of St. Augustine which van Meerbeeck succeeded in finding recently. Mirjam de Baar compares the life of Maria Petyt with that of another spiritual virgin living at the same place and in the same time – Antoinette Bourignon – both of them, without knowing each other, claiming prophetic authority.

Referring to the folios about the Dutch War Giovanni Grosso gives a detailed description of Codex Post III 70, especially of fol. 30r-49v. Esther van de Vate supplies a critical analysis of the impact of the editing done by Michael of St. Augustine. Especially regarding Maria Petyt’s writings about the Dutch War we need to be aware of his influence. Folios 30r-49v about the Dutch War have been transcribed by Veronie Meeuwssen who also gives an English translation, complete with footnotes about the historical and spiritual background. Besides this, Veronie Meeuwssen comments on Maria Petyt’s support for the French King which is based on Maria’s specific use of discernment of spirits. Elisabeth Hense shows that Teresa of Avila’s spirituality of *The Interior Castle* – mainly the higher levels of contemplation within the 4th to the 7th mansions – is present in the folios about the Dutch War. This means that Maria Petyt considered her engagement in the Dutch War as part of her spiritual life. The specific prophetic dimension of the folios is explained by Anne-Marie Bos, who compares it to Elijah who is an important model of prophecy in Carmelite spirituality.

This study is brought to a conclusion by Joseph Chalmers who reflects on the changing views of the figure of Maria Petyt and how these might impact on Carmelite spirituality in general.

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PART 1

Maria Petyt in Her Context