Maria Petyt – A Short Biography

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This biographical overview outlines Maria's girlhood, her period in Gent and her life in the Cluyse. The focus is mainly on the latter. It describes Maria's spiritual journey, her burgeoning spiritual authority and the last years of her life. The concluding section places Maria Petyt's spirituality in the context of her time.¹

Maria's Youth

Maria Petyt was born on 1 January 1623, the eldest daughter of a middle class family in Hazebrouck, a town in northern France which at that time still formed part of the southern Netherlands.² Maria's education – she describes it at length in her autobiography³ – reflects the strong confessional identity of the early seventeenth century Catholic reformation. At an early age she longed for the religious life and pledged eternal faithfulness to Jesus.⁴ Fulfilling this ideal proved to be a long road, especially at a mental level. Maria was a child of her times, and the seventeenth century was a turbulent age fraught with spiritual confusion, the toll of bitter political friction, much warfare, a minor ice age and several plague epidemics.⁵ Although many of these events affected Maria's youth, she mentions them only in passing in her autobiography: she spent

¹ I want to thank Marcelle Manley (†) for the translation of this article.

² At the treaty of Nijmegen in 1678 the places where Maria spent her youth (Hazebrouck, Ieper, Menen, Poperinge, Saint-Omer) were ceded to France. Staring (1948) contains a compact but excellent biographic survey on Maria's youth.

³ The autobiography appears in Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 1–195. The completeness of the information still needs to be researched. The earliest version – the Latin translation – contains 31 chapters in addition to the 155 of the subsequently published Dutch version: *Het leven vande weerdighe moeder Maria a S.ta Teresia, (alias) Petyt* (1683). See Giovanni Grosso's contribution to this volume, p. 86. So far most historiography has been based on the Dutch version.

⁴ Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 10.

⁵ Lehmann (1999) provides a good introduction to the history of the religious mentality of this century.

whole days playing on the ice⁶ and with her brothers and sisters had to stay elsewhere because of an outbreak of the plague.⁷ She devotes far more attention to the mental impact of these events, which commenced after she was scarred (for life) by smallpox: 'I became much rougher and wilder, and playful like other children (...) so gradually I acquired all sorts of bad ways and inclinations.'⁸

A detail from her autobiography – not even mentioned by her biographer⁹ – marked the end of Maria's 'wild years'. A Spanish officer billeted in their home¹⁰ caught Maria's fancy more than her parents deemed proper. They intervened and sent Maria to Lille to stay with 'deeply devout, pious people'.¹¹ There Maria's mind complied with their devotional piety. Her prayers to Our Lady to give her a nice and pleasant body 'to please someone more and to attract to my love'¹², were not unavailing. When the bells chimed on St. Stephen's day Maria had a foretaste of the glory and bliss of heavenly life.¹³ Nonetheless she had to be touched by her Beloved no fewer than three times before she was able to write:

Look, my Beloved was so overly generous and in love with such an evil, bad and ungrateful creature (...) that I could not resist it the third time; for he used a stronger hand, and grace, that seemed to overwhelm me (...) he touched my heart so deeply that the world became disgusting to me.¹⁴

Maria returned to Hazebrouck and presented herself to the Regular canonesses of the Groenenbriel abbey in Gent, where she was accepted. However,

6 Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 8.

7 Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 13.

8 *'Ick wiert wat meer woest ende wilt, en speelachtigh ghelijck andere kinderen, (...) soo dat ick allenskens aen namp veele quaede manieren, ende gheneghentheden.'* Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 8.

9 Michael of St. Augustine (1681).

10 Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 16. In 1635 France declared war on the Austrian and Spanish Hapsburgs and in the same year formed an alliance with the northern Netherlands. The result was French incursions on the southern border of the Southern Netherlands, which Maria mentions in her autobiography. This unrest continued until 1660, albeit with a peaceful interlude of a few years.

11 *'by seer Godtvruchtigh ende stichtbaer volck.'* Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 16.

12 *'om beter jemant te moghen behaeghen, ende te trecken tot mijne liefde'* Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 17.

13 Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 17.

14 *'siet, mijnen Beminden was soo overgoet, ende soo verliefte op een soo boose, quaede ende ondanckbaere Creature (...) soo dat ick den derden keer daer niet teghen en kost; want hy ghebruyckte een stercker handt, ende gratie, die my scheen te overweldighen; (...) hy hadde het herte soo gheraecht, dat de werelt my een walghe wiert.'* Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 19.

the vicissitudes of war on the French border, especially the financial losses that her father suffered, prevented her from joining at once. After waiting a year she finally left home to enter. Meanwhile she trained herself in solitude and detachment.¹⁵

It seems to me that I spent entire days just praying, devoutly contemplating sacred images and reading good books (...) especially Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380–1471) and Benedict of Canfield (1562–1610).¹⁶

Her Gent Period

Maria was not to stay long in the Groenenbriel convent. Some six months after having received the habit, she was sent away on account of an eye disease. She spent a brief, solitary spell in the small beguinage in Gent, whereafter she moved in with a spiritual daughter¹⁷ and her mother in the vicinity of the beguinage. The two women had the same spiritual director, an unknown Carmelite with a rather severe outlook, probably of the strict observance. Under his tutelage Maria, then about twenty years old, took her vows in the Carmelite Third Order. On this occasion she chose the name Maria of St. Teresa because of her special devotion to this great saint. Although Maria and her fellow inmate belonged to the third order, their director trained them in the strictly regulated daily schedule of Carmelite nuns, including the numerous devotional exercises and penances of those times. Despite a few excesses – her biographer questioned them¹⁸ – Maria was not perturbed by the strictness. She even wrote about it:

These and similar mortifications did me a lot of good. Gradually it brought me such equanimity that I no longer concerned myself much, if

¹⁵ 'Afgetrockentheyf' is a key term in Maria's spiritual moulding. She practised seclusion from the world, her fellow humans and herself.

¹⁶ 'My dunkt, dat ick heele daghen anders niet en dede, als bidden, de Heylighen Beelden devotelyck aensien, ende lesen in goede Boecken (...) besonderlyck in Thomas à Kempis ende in Cantvelt.' Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 21.

¹⁷ 'spiritual daughters' lived a semi-religious life. They observed no official enclosure and took no vows, or only very simple ones.

¹⁸ Michael of St. Augustine (1681) 10. He refers to Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 37f.

at all, with outward things but looked for everything within, where I eventually found everything.¹⁹

Some three years later her spiritual director moved elsewhere. Maria and her companions then entrusted themselves to the spiritual guidance of Michael of St. Augustine (1621–1684). Michael was 25 at the time, a philosophy lecturer at the friars' college in Gent. Maria corresponded with him for the rest of her life. Later in his career he served three terms as provincial and played a major role in the implementation of the strict observance in the Flemish province.²⁰ Michael was educated in the Carmelite Thomist spirituality of his day²¹ and used this to guide his directorship of the second novitiate Maria Petyt and the other spiritual daughter followed in the Carmelite Third Order.²² He initiated them into a profoundly interiorised Christological spirituality. The main aim was to bring the personal will into conformity with God's will. To that end sensory forces had to be purified and spiritual forces – memory, will and intellect – unified. But actual union with God surpasses all these spiritual exercises. God communicates himself in the ground²³ of the soul and thus accomplishes a union that human beings cannot attain through their own endeavours.

In this new framework Maria's outward mortification, so deeply inculcated by her previous director, moved into the background and the yearning for love featured more prominently. Under Michael's tutelage Maria devoted herself

19 *'Dese ende dierghelijcke verstervinghen deden my groote deught; ick quam daer door allenxkens tot sulck een gelijckheyt des ghemoets, dat ick daer naer luttel, oft gheen werck en maeckte van het uytwendigh, maer socht het al inwendigh, ende ick heb't allenxkens daer al ghevonden.'* Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 51.

20 In 1640 – the year Michael was professed – the Belgian province rallied behind constitutions based on the reformation of Touraine, in this article denoted by a current term in that time: strict observance. For the reformation in Belgium up to 1649, see Panzer 2006; for Michael's role in it, see Hoppenbrouwers 1949.

21 The four main premises of this framework were: control of passions that are the sources of vice; acquiring virtues that are lacking; union with God by means of prayer exercises; and fulfilling the vocation through active participation in the community. (Hoornaert (1996) 182). Besides this training in virtues, discernment of affects featured prominently. (Nativitate (1650) 118f.) Michael also strongly emphasised self-denial and mortification.

22 Maria refers to it as a 'half novitiate' (Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 52). A copy of her notes during this novitiate, Petyt (1647), is preserved in the archive of the Dutch province. Both women were professed a second time under the new third order rule published in 1646: *Af-beeldinghe van de derde orden onser L. Vrouwe des berghs Carmeli*, written by Daniel of the Virgin Mary.

23 In this passage 'grondt' is the point where God touches the essentiality of the soul with his graces.

fully to her spiritual journey. Yet during this second novitiate – notwithstanding all efforts to the contrary – an increasingly ambivalent attitude about her attempts at perfecting herself grew within her. As yet the Beloved did not reveal himself and even thwarted Maria's progress, 'as if with some violence'.²⁴ Maria was unable to reach perfection through her own efforts. She had to become more receptive to divine reality.²⁵

Life in the Community of Cluyse

As time went by Maria Petyt started longing for a stricter hermitic life. Together with a beguine from Mechelen, Catharina van Orsaghen,²⁶ she conceived of a plan to live according to the first rule of her order, albeit not like the discalced Carmelites²⁷ but more in the spirit of saints Euphrasia²⁸ and Euphrosyna,²⁹ two (proto-)Carmelite desert saints. This dream of a rigorous, secluded hermitic life was realised. On 1 October 1657 Maria went to Mechelen and moved into the Cluyse adjoining the Carmelite monastery, where Michael was living at the time.³⁰ Catharina van Orsaghen followed barely a year later. Michael formulated their ordinances, which were approved by the prior general on 5 January 1660.³¹

Maria's call to a heavenly life – her Beloved told her: 'I want (...) you to be entirely celestial and divine.'³² – was a crucial facet of the spiritual life in the

24 'Ghelijck met eenigh ghewelt.' Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 57.

25 Cf. Blommestijn (1983) 6.

26 Here the Dutch version of the Life omits part of the story; see Deblaere (1962) 330.

27 Unlike the discalced, the strict observance recognised the mitigations to the Rule of 1432. The mitigations include tempering the article on remaining in the cell and allowed Carmelites to eat meat three times a week.

28 Euphrasia, born in 387 and of imperial descent, entered an Essene desert convent in Thebaid at the age of seven. In the seventeenth century she was erroneously taken to be a Carmelite saint.

29 Euphrosyna (c. 424) rebelled against her father when she was married off. She proceeded to live a rigorous life in the desert, first in a male monastery, then in a hermitage. She, too, was mistakenly considered a Carmelite saint in the seventeenth century.

30 Initially Maria lived in the Cluyse with her former house-mates from Mechelen, but they returned to Ghent eighteen months later.

31 Alas, there is little archival information about this convent of spiritual daughters and the events have to be reconstructed, mainly from Maria's autobiography. See Van Meerbeeck 53f.

32 'Ick wilde, seyde Hy, dat ge heel hemels ende goddelijck sijt' Petyt (1647) 137. This quote is from a letter from Michael sent on 31st August 1681 from Thienen to some women who were admitted to profession in the Cluyse.

Cluyse,³³ a spirituality closely associated with the strict observance desire to live in 'internal loving conversation with God'.³⁴ The sisters 'of the holy Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, of the regular life of oral prayer and of inner prayer'³⁵ practised the exercise of God's presence that was current at the time. They tried to rid themselves of all external images in order to discern God's 'eenigheyt' (i.e. oneness) in their own lives and in the world around them.³⁶

Some eighteen months after moving to Mechelen Maria dedicated the Cluyse in 1659 to the care of Our Lady and felt called to 'appropriate this place, or the origin of our form of life, entirely and to call it by her [Mary's] name'.³⁷ The hermitage sisters entrusted their prayer intentions 'in, about, with and through Mary'³⁸ to God. In Maria's correspondence with Michael a profound Marian spirituality emerges.³⁹ Where the image of Our Lady is reflected in the soul, motherly and compassionate qualities evolve.⁴⁰ Through this grace, communicated by Mary, the soul is fertilized with new life and generates this new life in God.⁴¹

Despite this Mary-form spirituality and 'detached way of life'⁴² conflicts – both in and around the Cluyse – escalated, not least because of Maria's leadership. She writes about it at length in her autobiography.⁴³ These and later sources⁴⁴ make it seem doubtful whether the small community could ever have acquired sufficient inner cohesion to withstand the religious and theo-

33 *Ordonnantiën*, 'Vande Novitien ende geprotestide'.

34 Healy (1956) 149.

35 '*van de alderheijghste Maeghet Maria des berghs Carmeli van't regulier leven van 't mondtgebedt, ende van't inwendigh gebedt*' *Ordonnantiën*, exordium.

36 More particularly the strict observance focused on aspiratory prayer. However, from Maria's letters we know that she was little inclined to urgent 'flash' prayers. Her prayer rather fits the definition of essentially aspiratory prayer. See Blommestijn (1987) 231. When the soul is spiritually touched by God it engenders a spiritual arousing to God, beyond all formal prayer.

37 '*dese plaetse, oft beginsel van onse forme van leven haer heel toe te eyghenen, ende te titeleren met haeren naem.*' Petyt (1683) vol. 2, 314f.

38 'in Maria, om, met, ende door Maria' Petyt (1683) vol. 2, 343.

39 Michael collected Maria's letters on this subject in Petyt (1683) vol. 2, 306–404.

40 Petyt (1683) vol. 3, 164f.

41 Petyt (1683) vol. 2, 343.

42 '*afghetrocken maniere van leven*' Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 102. *Ordonnantiën*, 'Van den Handel met Menschen te vlieden', states the rule on this point. 'To shun dealings with people.'

43 See e.g. Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 81. 87 and 110. Michael provides information not mentioned in the *Leven*, Michael of St. Augustine (1681) 18.

44 See e.g. Michael's letter on 24 February 1680 to his friend Seraphinus in Rome, from Brussels. Arch. Gen. Ord. Carmelitarum, II Flandro-Belgica.

logical tensions of the latter half of the seventeenth century. Hence, sadly, the community was not to be long-lived.⁴⁵

Maria's Spiritual Journey in the Cluyse

Maria Petyt initially fared well after her move to the Cluyse. Although her health was shaky, she felt she belonged there. In one of her first letters we find a eulogy to the narrow '*eenigheyt*'⁴⁶ [oneness] as a place to experience union with God. In her own words, Maria felt bathed in light and grace.⁴⁷

The luminous start very soon gave way to profound darkness. This dark night, lasting a good four or five years, entailed great endurance and struggle. All Maria's regular practices palled on her.⁴⁸ She was prone to harm herself and felt doomed forever.⁴⁹ She experienced the desolation of this night as an opportunity to practice virtues.⁵⁰ She even refers to it as a spiritual crucifixion.⁵¹ The Christ-like life that Michael had initiated her in during her novitiate now assumed a face of his own.⁵² Maria experienced the dreadful pain of this night as purgatory and a penance imposed on her for the sins of others.

Maria's dark nights – there were more than one – probably contributed to the emergence of the Nothing in her writings. The conception of Nothing in her time was voluntaristic – that is, annihilation as an active means to perfection – and a widespread spirituality in beguinages and among other semi-religious. Yet comparative studies⁵³ reveal few parallels with the substantive Nothing in Maria's writings.⁵⁴ Thus Maria was not much concerned with 'work exercises'⁵⁵, hence with a doctrine of active perfection. Her encounter with the Nothing happened in the dynamics of practicing the presence of God, an experience based on an ever more profound awareness of the divine All.⁵⁶ It was in

45 See Van Meerbeeck, p. 58.

46 The term '*eenigheyt*' is synonymous with monastic cell or hermitage.

47 Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 102.

48 Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 123 and 130.

49 Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 132.

50 Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 104.

51 Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 117.

52 Deblaere (1962) 183–196; also see Mommaers (2003) 97–105.

53 An interesting article in this regard is Porteman (1973).

54 Uyttenhove (2004) 234.

55 '*Werckelijckke oeffeninghen*' Petyt (1684) vol. 4, 74f.

56 Her spirituality has features of the spirituality of St. John of the Cross that reached the southern Netherlands in the 1630s. Cf. Porteman (1973) 405.

annihilation that Maria Petyt came to know her Beloved. Entering the Nothing formed part of the love story. Maria's self-awareness grew from this relationship. Thus she gradually grew beyond herself and came into contact with the All of God's presence.

Growth of her Spiritual Authority

Five years after the establishment of the Cluyse in 1662 Maria was afire with prayer for the *pristinus splendor*, the first lustre of Carmel. The prayer was applied to the austere Belgian province⁵⁷ and gave Maria some spiritual authority in the implementation of the strict observance in this province. Maria's spiritual motherhood – which is how she experienced her prayer – was not confined to acting as spokesperson with the Beloved,⁵⁸ but entailed penances and severe pain. Maria was confined to bed⁵⁹ to atone for sins committed by her brothers. Her prayer for heretics – who feature copiously in the document on the Dutch War⁶⁰ – is couched in terms of her spiritual motherhood. Michael describes it thus:

Virtually all her prayers are aimed at bringing many sinners, one by one, to the bosom of Christ, where they can imbibe some mercy and strengthening, alleviating grace, so she becomes mother to many souls that are born again in Christ. She describes these spiritual fertilizations and births beautifully in her *Leven*.⁶¹

Maria's first visions – a major factor in her spiritual authority at the time – antedate her spiritual motherhood and date to the year 1658.⁶² They were not apparitions but mental images. The first signs of special visions only occurred

57 Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 171.

58 Petyt (1683) vol. 3, 156f.

59 Petyt (1683) vol. 3, 149f.

60 Rome, Arch. Post. III, 70: *Vita Venerabilis Matris Mariae a Sta. Teresia Tertiariae ordinis Bmae Virginis Mariae de Monte Carmelo*, fol. 30r-49v.

61 'By-naer alle (...) hare ghebeden, [waren] tot diën eynde; stellende vele Sondaers, een voor een, aen het herte Christi, om daer uyt te suyghen eenighe bermhertigheydt, en versterckende, ende verlichtende gratien: soo dat sy Gheestelycke Moeder wirdt van vele Zielen, die in Christo wurden her-boren. Welcke Gheestelycke bevruchtinghe ende baringhe sy wonderlyck beschryft in haer *Leven*.' Michael of St. Augustine (1681) 63f.

62 Michael of St. Augustine (1681) 59.

round about Ascension Day in 1669.⁶³ Then Maria saw the images outside her mind as well. In these first ten years, when Maria still experienced the visionary communications inwardly, she tested these experiences using Teresa of Avila as her frame of reference.⁶⁴ A telling example is Maria's descriptions of angels that she sent to assist souls in distress.⁶⁵ She experienced their appearance as an inward illumination or communication.⁶⁶ She saw them in the heavenly mirror of her mind. The flowering of Maria's love play with her Beloved likewise happened in her mind.⁶⁷ The visions Maria was given in the course of this play accompanied and oriented her in her spiritual phases as betrothed, bride and mother.

Deblaere calls Maria's descriptions of her heavenly experiences 'masterpieces of psychological observation and accurate discernment'.⁶⁸ Maria maintained this cautious approach in 1671 when recording her first prophetic visions.⁶⁹ Thereafter she increasingly often received communications from heaven: 'A soul thus united with God, what will it not know?'⁷⁰ Maria appears to have experienced great difficulty in this development⁷¹ and on some points preserved secrecy, as may be seen in the document on the Dutch War.⁷² Nonetheless her supernatural intuition continued to evolve, or rather it intensified from prophetically tintured visions into 'bridal love with some executive authority'.⁷³ In several visions she was given the mind of a ruling queen and exercised heavenly authority.

Maria's Last Years

All these developments took place some years after the completion of Maria's autobiography and her spiritual journey has to be reconstructed more or less

63 Petyt (1683) vol. 2, 195.

64 Cf. Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 282f. Later she saw herself more as a reflection of Catharine of Genoa. Petyt (1684) vol. 4, 273f.

65 Petyt (1683) vol. 3, 177.

66 Deblaere (1962) 108.

67 Petyt (1683) vol. 2, 195.

68 Deblaere (1962) 115.

69 '*Eenen ziele met Godt soo vereenight, wat sal sy niet weten?*' Michael of St. Augustine (1681) 99. See Anne-Marie Bos' contribution to this volume, p. 266–281.

70 Michael of St. Augustine (1681) 37.

71 Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 249.

72 See Esther van de Vate's contribution to this volume, p. 94.

73 '*Bruydelycke liefde met eenighe uytwerckende autoriteyt.*' Petyt (1683) vol. 3, 151.

from external sources and her letters, inasmuch as these provide a fair reflection of her spiritual journey.⁷⁴ As noted already, the document on the Dutch war provides an important supplement for historical study of her person. Maria's prayers for the French king, for example, were not yet known to historians.⁷⁵ This document also provides the sole indication in Maria's writings that she adopted an explicitly anti-Jansenist⁷⁶ stance and was greatly concerned with the anti-monachist trends of her day.⁷⁷

In the last years of her life, too, Maria was unable to live tranquilly with her vocation, driven as she was by her desire to lead an even more secluded life. The already meagre community life in the Cluyse still evoked resistance. Nevertheless apostolic prayer grew ever deeper in her soul: 'something new has happened to me (...) it seems to me that I am acquiring an apostolic spirit, both apostle and hermit. Dear father, what does your Reverence think? Can the two go together?'⁷⁸, she wrote to her spiritual director.

As she advanced on her journey Maria increasingly experienced heavenly life – whose reality she yearned for so passionately and which gradually unfolded in her soul – in a dynamic in which love and death went together.⁷⁹ But Maria also experienced this advance to heavenly life in reverse mode. She frequently writes about a painful love death that purified her energies and made her receptive to God's spirit of love.⁸⁰ However, this spiritual death, however painful, happened in mutual overtures, intimacy between her and her Beloved. Her Beloved was no longer an external image. She received him as the Other living within her.⁸¹ Maria calls this experience God-suffering.⁸² Her prayer life

74 See Esther van de Vate's contribution to this volume, p. 112–116.

75 See Veronie Meeuwssen's contribution to this volume, p. 244f.

76 Rome, Arch. Post. III, 70, fol. 35f.

77 In the controversies about Jansenism pro-reform bishops were often regarded as Jansenists, while Rome was seen as anti-Jansenist. This polarisation had major implications for religious in the southern Netherlands, who regularly clashed with the bishops. Roegiers (1996) 55. See also Esther van de Vate's contribution to this volume, p. 42–45, Michel van Meerbeeck's contribution to this volume, p. 56, 58 and Mirjam de Baar's contribution to this volume, p. 76f.

78 *'Daer is my noch wat nieuws aenghecomen (...) my dunckt, dat ick eenen Apostolycken gheest kryghe; Apostolinne ende t'samen Eremytersse; lieven Vader, wat dunckt U-Eerweerdigheyt daer van? zal dit soo wel gaen?'* Petyt (1683) vol. 3, 203.

79 Petyt (1684) vol. 4, 149f.

80 Petyt (1684) vol. 4, 49.

81 Mommaers (2003) 104.

82 Petyt (1683) vol. 3, 108f. Maria's work reflects a broad integration of Flemish themes that structure her spiritual journey. Crucial in this regard are the place and dynamics of the

moved in step with the spirit of love, which moved her prayers from the ground of her soul.

All the same, right to the end Maria was to experience her spiritual journey along with its counterpoint, the dark night. Even on her deathbed she still referred to this, according to Michael:

Where are all my earlier illuminations and divine interventions now? Now only I can do this. Keep my mind united with my Beloved. She requested that all her writings, which were full of heavenly teachings obediently recorded in her *Leven*, be burnt, for she had never relied on all these illuminations but solely on God. And she feared they contained hidden falsehoods. But in order to die in obedience she left everything to the decision of her spiritual director.⁸³

Maria died in 1677 on 1 November, All Saints' Day.

Maria in Her Own Times

At this stage a balanced picture of Maria Petyt in her day and age calls for further comparative study of the spirituality and position of female religious in the seventeenth century.⁸⁴ So far the main contribution to our understanding of the subject has been the study of the model of Teresa of Avila and its influence in the seventeenth century. The model had a great impact on early modern female spirituality.⁸⁵ Teresa showed many 'searching' women the way to the mystical heights and depths of another 'new world' that was discovered in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁸⁶ This mystical journey has parallels

encounter with God. The place of encounter is the ground of the soul. There the intellect can only behold the supreme Good 'passively' and receptively.

83 'Waer zyn nu alle myne voorgaende verlichtinghen en Goddelycke inwerckinghen? dit kan ick nu alleen doen: myn ghemoet vereenight houden met mynen Beminden. Sy versocht dat-men alle hare schriften die vol Hemelsche onder-wysinghen zyn, en in haer leven, door de ghehoorsaemheydt beschreven, soude verbranden, want sy op alle die verlichtinghen niet ghesteunt hadde; maer op Godt alleen: vreesende dat daer bedrogh mede schuylden. Maer om ghehoorsaem te sterven, liet alles in den wille van haren Gheestelycken Vader.' Michael of St. Augustine (1681) 103.

84 See Mirjam de Baar's contribution to this volume, p. 77ff.

85 Burke points out that saints model themselves on an earlier example. Burke (1984) 52. See Elisabeth Hense's contribution to this volume, p. 252ff.

86 C.f. Bilinkoff (2006) 116f.

with the church's expansionary movement into missionary territory, but it took place within the Tridentine constraints on female religious life.⁸⁷ Maria was indeed afire with apostolic prayer, but in her letters she nonetheless sighed:

Oh, if only I were a man! How I would travel the world, like another St. Francis Xavier to carry souls to my Beloved.⁸⁸

Teresa of Avila's influence extended beyond this female quest for a 'new world'. In her study of Teresa's spiritual daughters, Jodi Bilinkhoff convincingly demonstrates that the image of Teresa also inspired great female creativity. Her 'daughters' not only read her books, but also wrote books of their own. A new literary genre evolved, comprising autobiographies and collections of letters, often written to spiritual directors.⁸⁹ Maria Petyt's writings and her fluent style unmistakably place her in this creative circle, which played a major role in handing down female Catholic culture.⁹⁰ There is an important difference, however. Whereas prayer in the Teresian model of sanctity is marked by an anagogic, ecstatic 'upward' movement, Maria's prayer is characterised by a downward movement into the depths of the soul. Her striving for union with God assumes a distinctive form in the '*eenigheyt*' [oneness], in which she encounters both God and the world around her. In this respect Maria's frame of reference is reminiscent of medieval Flemish mysticism that made a comeback in the seventeenth century. However unique Maria's spiritual journey may have been, its source and framework can be traced to the Tridentine reforms that caused a revival of medieval and Rhineland mysticism.

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Archives

Boxmeer, Nederlands Carmelitaans Instituut: Petyt, Maria & Michaël à S. Augustino. 1647. *Veele Schoone ende seer geestelijcke leeringen bequaem om een Godtsoeckende ende minnende siele tot de opperste volmaecktheyt te stieren door Godts ingeven aan-*

87 Monteiro (1996) 24–27. See also Esther van de Vate's contribution to this volume, p. 30–33.

88 'Och waer ick eenen Man! hoe soude ick de werelt door-lopen, als eenen anderen H. Franciscus Xavierius, om mijnen Beminden Zielen aen te brengen.' Petyt (1683) vol. 2, 126.

89 Bilinkhoff (2005) 24.

90 Bilinkhoff (2005) 110.

gedient, door den seer Eerweerdigen pater Michael a S. Augustino provinciael van d'order der Eerw. paters Carmelieten onse Lieve Vrouwe Broeders in de nederlansche provintie; aan alle geestelijke sielen naementlijk aan de weerdige Moeder Maria a S.ta Theresia alias Petyt. door haer selven aengeteeckent int jaer 1647. (Dutch Carmelite Institute, Steenstraat 39, 5831 JA Boxmeer. The Netherlands)

Mechelen, Archivum archiepiscopalia, *Oud parochiearchief, St. Servaas, Schaarbeek*, kluis van St. Servaas, s.n.: *Ordonnantien voor de heremitagie der susteren van de Alderheylichste Maget Maria des Berghs Carmeli*. Aen hun door Godts ingeven voorgescreven door den seer eerweerdighe pater Michael a Sancto Augustino, provinciaal der Neder-duytsche provintie der eerweerdighe paters carmeliten onse lieve vrouwebroeders in 't jaer 1660. Geapprobeert door den seer eerweerdighsten pater Marius Venturinus, generael van de voorseyde order ende apostolischen visiter der carmeliten, op den vijffden january 1660. (Aartsbisschoppelijk Archief, Varkensstraat 6, 2800 Mechelen)

Rome, Arch. Gen. Ord. Carmelitarum, *II Flandro-Belgica commune provinciae 1675–1698*. (CISA, Via Sforza Pallavicini 10, 00193 Rome; Michael of St. Augustine's letters are stored in a separate folder.)

Rome, Arch. Post. III, 70: *Vita Venerabilis Matris Mariae a Sta. Teresia Tertiariae ordinis Bmae Virginis Mariae de Monte Carmelo*, fol. 30r-49v. (Curia Generalizia, Via Giovanni Lanza 138, 00184 Rome)

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