CHAPTER 1

Maria Petyt – A Short Biography

Esther van de Vate

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.

© ESTHER VAN DE VATE, 2015 | DOI 10.1163/9789004291874_003
This is an open access chapter distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported (CC-BY-NC 3.0) License.
whole days playing on the ice\textsuperscript{6} and with her brothers and sisters had to stay elsewhere because of an outbreak of the plague.\textsuperscript{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.’\textsuperscript{8}

A detail from her autobiography – not even mentioned by her biographer\textsuperscript{9} – marked the end of Maria’s ‘wild years’. A Spanish officer billeted in their home\textsuperscript{10} caught Maria’s fancy more than her parents deemed proper. They intervened and sent Maria to Lille to stay with ‘deeply devout, pious people’.\textsuperscript{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’\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{14}

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

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{6} Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 8.
\item\textsuperscript{7} Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 13.
\item\textsuperscript{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.
\item\textsuperscript{9} Michael of St. Augustine (1681).
\item\textsuperscript{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.
\item\textsuperscript{11} ‘by seer Godvruchtigh ende stichtbaer volck’ Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 16.
\item\textsuperscript{12} ‘om beter jemant te moghen behaeghen, ende te trecken tot mijne liefde’ Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 17.
\item\textsuperscript{13} Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 17.
\item\textsuperscript{14} ‘siet, mijn Beminden was soo overgoet, ende soo verlieft op een soo boose, quaede ende ondankbaere Creature (...) soo dat ick den derden keer daar niet teghen en kost; want hy ghebruyckte een stercker handt, ende gratie, die my scheen te overweldighen; (...) hy hadde het herte soo gheraeckt, dat de werelt my een walghe wiert.’ Petyt (1683) vol. 1, 19.
\end{itemize}