HOW TO BE A GOOD SHEPHERD IN DEVOTIO MODERNA: 
THE EXAMPLE OF JOHANNES BRINCKERINCK 
(1359-1419) 

MATHILDE VAN DIJK

1. Introduction

"Nobody in their right mind should be eager to be a pastor of 
women".¹ This quotation is taken from the Copulata pro confessore sororum, a short treatise that was written in support of the spiritual leaders of communities of religious women. Its author was a prominent adherent of Devotio Moderna: Dirck of Herxen (1381-1457), the rector of a house of Brothers of the Common Life at Zwolle. Dirck was a prolific author. Next to the Copulata, he wrote devotional works and a defence of the Common Life. Many of his brothers served as rectors in communities of religious women. He wrote the Copulata to provide for their education.²

Apparently, the leading figure in this article, Johannes Brinckerinck (1359-1419), would have thoroughly agreed with Dirck’s assessment of the rector’s job — at least, that is, if his biographers have provided a trustworthy account of his ideas. In 1392, he was appointed rector in a house of Sisters of the Common Life at Deventer, the Master Geert’s House. In 1373, the founder of Devotio Moderna, Geert Grote (1340-84), had created this community in his own home.³ Brinckerinck’s predecessor, Johannes ten Gronde, recommended him for the job while lying on his deathbed. A lot of persuasion was needed to get Brinckerinck to accept it. Both the men of his own religious community,

¹ Dirck of Herxen, Copulata pro confessore sororum a domino Theoderici de Hairxen, in Amsterdam, University Library, MS I E 26, fol. 107v.
the Brothers of the Common Life at the Father Florens' house, and the city magistrates insisted that he take the sisters on. In the end he relented, apparently with bad grace. He told a female friend that he would rather lose both legs than be the spiritual leader of women. Brinckerinck was to serve the sisters until his death, a period of 27 years. He took on several other Deventer communities of Sisters of the Common Life. Furthermore, in co-operation with the friend, with whom he shared his dismay about being a priest to women, he created the convent of canonesses regular at Diepenveen, St Agnes and Mary. Under his spiritual leadership, it was to become one of the very few female convents in the Chapter of Windesheim. Evidence suggests that adherents of *Devoitio Modema* regarded both St Agnes and Mary and the Master Geert's House as exemplary communities. Several sisters from these communities were invited to create or reform other female communities. Furthermore, lives and other texts written by or about the Deventer and Diepenveen sisters served as exemplary literature for both male and female adherents of *Devoitio Modema*.

Johannes Brinckerinck was the subject of at least seven biographies, all written at least twenty years after his death. Furthermore, he appears in a supporting role in the lives of several women who were described in the sisterbooks of Diepenveen and Deventer. Lives of exemplary brothers and sisters were an important genre in *Devoitio

---

1 Paraphrased after the account in Deventer, City and Atheneum Library, MS 101 E 26 (MS DV), fols. 5'-6'. I am grateful to Dr. W.F. Scheepsma (Leiden) for allowing me to work with his transcription of this manuscript.

2 For instance, the treatise *Super modo vivendi* by the Diepenveen prioress Salome Sticken (d. 1449) was included in a manuscript written for the Brothers of the Common Life at the Father Florens' house, Brussels, Royal Library, MS 8849-8859 (MS B.), fols. 169'-76'. She wrote this text at the request of a rector of a women's convent, Hendrik Loder. An edition is to be found in W.J. Kühler, *Johannes Brinckerinck en zijn klooster te Diepenveen* (Leiden, 1914), pp. 362-80. J. van Engen translated Salome's text into English in his *Devotio Modema. Basic Writings* (New York, 1988), pp. 176-86.

3 The appendix to this article gives basic data about the works that include lives of Johannes Brinckerinck. I numbered the separate lives according to date of origin. In the following, the references point to the numbers in the appendix.