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Do NOT give your books to children (and other rules on book conservation from 1527)

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Citation

Porck, M. H. (2011). Do NOT give your books to children (and other rules on book conservation from 1527). *Edit, Quarterly Magazine Of Ma Book And Digital Media Studies*, (Winter), 8-9. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/21047>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Do NOT give your books to children!

(and other guidelines on book conservation from 1527) *By Thijs Porck*



PHOTOGRAPH: THIJS PORCK

This manuscript from 1527, The Hague, KB, contains the text *Hoemen alle boucken bewaren sal om eewelic te duerene*. In the left margin, an eighth rule has been added by the author.

Gashed gatherings, boded bindings and faltering fly-leaves, alongside picture-perfect parchment. The current state of a medieval manuscript reflects the manner in which it has been retained and used over the centuries. Today, the concern over book preservation has led to ever stricter regulations concerning access, handling, and storage. Were books protected similarly in the Middle Ages? Did contemporary makers or users of books set any rules on how to treat these objects?

Medieval, written sources on the care of books are relatively scarce. Monastic rules reveal that monks were aware that dust, bookworms, dirt, fire and humidity posed dangers, but how these dangers could be minimised is not mentioned. Two bibliophilic texts, *Philobiblon* by Richard de Bury (1287-1345) and *De Laude Scriptorum* (1492-1494) by Johannes Trithemius, mention sixth danger to books: the user. De Bury vividly laments the ill-treatment of books by, for example, snotty youths who,

rather than wipe their noses, stain their books. Trithemius, similarly, denounces readers who do not keep books immaculate, as this would reflect their (dis)respect for the books' contents. Both texts offer practical advice on handling books, such as refraining from eating and drinking whilst reading (De Bury), and arranging books properly on bookshelves (Trithemius), but neither go into much detail or give guidelines for long-term storage. Perhaps they deemed such specific regulations unnecessary; Trithemius states: 'But why do we dwell on the care of books with many words? Those who love books doubtlessly treasure and keep them even without a word from us.'

The author of the text entitled *Hoemen alle boucken bewaren sal om eewelic te duerene* [How one shall preserve all books to last eternally], apparently, *did* find it necessary to stipulate specific rules on book conservation. The result is a unique text, in the vernacular, outlining eight rules on access, handling and storage. The text is found in The Hague, KB 133 F 2: a miscellany on 180 folia of 120x79, written entirely by one hand. Various ownership inscriptions, in the hand of the main text, suggest this book was manufactured in 1527 and that it belonged to a Margrieten van der Spurt from Ghent.

The contents of this manuscript suggest the book was used as an educational treatise for children. Most included texts

are of a didactic nature, such as a text entitled *Eenen gheestelicken A.B.C.* [A spiritual A.B.C.]. Other texts focus on the ways in which children should treat their parents, and have running headers such as 'in quade kinderen sal niement verblijden' [evil children will not make anyone happy] and 'vader ende moeder moet men in alder noot bijstaen' [one must help one's father and mother in every need]. *Hoemen boucken bewaren sal om eewelic te duerene* immediately follows the first ownership inscription and is the manuscript's first stand-alone text. This prime place within the manuscript suggests that the proper care of books was an important part of the education of a child, during the first half of the sixteenth century.

In the introduction to his guidelines on book care, the author remarks that, if his rules are followed, books will last 'menich jaer [...], ja te minsten twee hondert jaer' [many years..., yes, at least two hundred years]. [An overview of these rules can be found in the red box.] For each rule, the author outlines the consequences of ignoring it. Violating the fifth rule, for example, results in the following: 'dan werden se ter stont vort ende duergheten van de motten, ofte de stoffe duereet haer selven' [they will be eaten through by moths, or the fabric will eat itself]. Not following the sixth rule would lead to the book falling apart: 'want alser een beghint te

faelgierene dander volghen' [because if one starts to fall, others will follow].

Interestingly, the eighth rule was added in the margin after the main text had been finished: 'Ten 8sten, men sal huut gheen en boucken diemen ter heeren hauwen wilt, de kinderen laten leeren. Want wat in haerlieder handen comt, soe wij sien het blijfter oft het bedeerft.' [Eighth, one should not let children learn from any books that one wants to preserve. Because whatever

on account of the author.

Nevertheless, the fact that the book containing these eight rules is still available in the KB (albeit rebound), proves that it has far exceeded its expected 200-year life span. We can only conclude, then, that the contemporary and later users of this manuscript abided by the eight rules and that they took to heart the morale which was added to the end of the text: 'Men pleegt te segghene an de plume sietmen wat vueghel dat es ende

EIGHT RULES FROM 1527

- 1) Store your books in a dry and dustless place.
- 2) Do not handle your books with dirty fingers.
- 3) Do not let your books lie near the fire, or leave them open for too long.
- 4) Never pull the pastedowns off the boards.
- 5) Preserve books from mould and decay, by, for example, not touching them with wet fingers.
- 6) Do not tear out a page or quire.
- 7) Do not doodle in the margins.
- 8) Do not give your books to children.

an eens cleercs boucken sietmen wel wat cleerc dat es. Ende alsoe weetmen gheware an de boucken van de lieden of se reijn van ijete beseghen, goddelic ofte duechdelic van levne sijn.' [They say that one can recognise a bird by its plumage, and one can recognise a clerk by his books. And so it will be revealed by the books of people, whether they are clean, god-fearing or good of living.] ♣

For more information, see M.H. Porck & H.J. Porck, 'Hoemen alle boucken bewaren sal om eewelic te duerene.

comes into their hands, as we see, it either stays there or it is ruined]. This rule was added by the same scribe who wrote down the first seven rules. Given the suggestion that this manuscript was used as an educational treatise for children, the addition of the eighth rule could have been due to 'progressive insight'

Acht regels uit 1527 over het conserveren van boeken, Jaarboek voor Nederlandse Boekgeschiedenis 15 (2008), 7-21. A revised, English version of the article (including full translation of the text) is scheduled to be published elsewhere in 2011. The text featured can be found in *The Hague, KB 133 F 2, ff. 1r-6r.*