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Spinning with Passion

The Distaff as an Object for Contemplative Meditation in Netherlandish Religious Culture*

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Abstract

In two little-studied Middle Dutch texts, the authors present their readers with the distaff and the activities of spinning and cloth-making as a metaphor for Christ's Passion, and, as such, as a meditative object and activity. These texts represent the ultimate conjunction of ora et labora, but their transmission suggests that the meditative practice was not limited to religious communities. This article explores these texts in their broader cultural and religious context as tools for meditation and expressions of (religious) power relations between men and women in the transitional age between the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period.

In 1529, the Netherlandish painter Maarten van Heemskerck (1498-1574) painted the portraits of a married couple, nowadays held in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (Fig. 1).¹ The man is depicted as a businessman, keeping his accounts in good order. His wife is portrayed performing an exclusively feminine task: spinning. Her activity and the motif of the distaff are interpreted as symbols of female virtue and domestic diligence.²

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¹ Ilona van Tuinen, 'Maarten van Heemskerck, *Portrait of a Man, possibly Pieter Gerritsz Bicker (1497-1567), 1529*', *Early Netherlandish Paintings in the Rijksmuseum*, ed. by Jan Piet Filedt Kok (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2010), online coll. catalogue hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.8651 [accessed 24 May 2016].

² Josua Bruyn, 'Vroege portretten van Maerten van Heemskerck', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum*, 3 (1955), 27-35 (p. 31); Van Tuinen, 'Maarten van



Fig. 1. Maarten van Heemskerck, *Portraits of a Man and Woman*, possibly *Anna Coddle and Pieter Gerritsz. Bicker*, Amsterdam Rijksmuseum. 1529. Courtesy of the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum.

At first sight, it may seem as though she is fulfilling her responsibility of contributing to the household finances, yet her distant gaze suggests her thoughts are drifting beyond the materiality of the task she is performing with her hands. In order to understand this dimension of the painting, we need to look into other (textual) sources that can tell us more about the function of the distaff beyond domestic diligence.

The distaff is a gendered object *par excellence* and a symbol associated with the History of Salvation.³ In the hands of Eve, it represents the labour women had to endure after the expulsion from paradise (Genesis 3:19).⁴ The image of the spinning Eve and tilling Adam (sometimes joined by Cain and Abel) as the antitype foreshadowed by the pictorial representation of the Deluge in Noah's ark, was widely disseminated through the manuscripts and printed editions of the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*.⁵ This scene can also be related to those of the Holy Family's domestic life after the flight to Egypt in which Mary is shown spinning: Christ is the

Heemskerck, *Portrait of a Man*. Recently also in Tabea Schindler, *Arachnes Kunst. Textilhandwerk, Textilien und die Inszenierung des Alltags in der Holländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Textile Studies, 6 (Emsdetten-Berlin: Edition Imorde, 2014), pp. 63-64. Cf. Annette de Vries, 'Toonbeelden van huiselijkheid of arbeidzaamheid? De iconografie van de spinster in relatie tot de verbeelding van arbeid en beroep in de vroegmoderne Nederlanden', *Tijdschrift voor sociale en economische geschiedenis*, 2 (2005), 103-25, who argues that early modern images of spinners should be considered as representations of diligence (including domestic diligence) rather than merely representations of domesticity.

³ Frances M. Biscoglio, "'Unspun' Heroes: Iconography of the Spinning Woman in the Middle Ages', *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 25 (1995), 163-76.

⁴ Biscoglio, "'Unspun' Heroes', pp. 168-69; De Vries, 'Toonbeelden van huiselijkheid', pp. 108-10.

⁵ Adrian Wilson and Joyce Lancaster Wilson, *A Medieval Mirror: Speculum Humanae Salvationis, 1324-1500* (Berkeley etc.: University of California Press, 1984), p. 145. A good introduction to the dissemination of the *Speculum* is Nigel F. Palmer, "'Turning many to righteousness". Religious didacticism in the *Speculum humanae salvationis* and the similitude of the oak tree', in *Dichtung und Didaxe. Lehrhaftes Sprechen in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters*, ed. by Henrike Lähnemann and Sandra Linden (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), pp. 345-66. In the later sixteenth century, this image was gradually secularized; see Ilja M. Veldman, 'Images of Diligence and Labour: The Secularization of the Work Ethic', in *Images for the Eye and Soul: Function and Meaning in Netherlandish Prints (1450-1650)*, ed. by Ilja M. Veldman (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2006), pp. 171-92 (pp. 173-74).

new Adam and Mary the new Eve.⁶ The late medieval spinning or weaving Madonna has yet other connotations related to the Salvation History: after her betrothal to Joseph, Mary spun the purple wool for the Veil of the Temple. This hints at the royal ancestry of her son and foreshadows his Passion. The Gospel of Luke (23:44) tells us that the Veil of the Temple was torn in two at Christ's death. In this way, the thread of life spun at the moment of Incarnation was torn at the moment Christ yielded his spirit at Golgotha.⁷ Mary with the distaff or at the loom in the Annunciation scene thus carries a prophetic message.

In Middle Dutch literature, the distaff – also used as a symbol of adultery or bigamy – has sexual overtones. In the story of Reynaert the Fox, when the priest takes up his wife's (Julocke's) distaff as a weapon against Tybeert the tomcat, this is believed to signify the priest's effeminacy.⁸ Similarly, the stories of men such as the last Assyrian king Sardanapalus, or Hercules, who became entangled in female business and took up spinning, demonstrate the reversal of the natural order between men and women and of their traditional roles.⁹ The distaff in the hands of a man signifies weakness and foolishness as a result of irrational love. The relatively well-known fifteenth-century *Distaff Gospels*, published in Dutch around 1520 by the humanistic Antwerp printer Michiel Hillen van Hoochstraten, present the reader with a learned, male clerk. He is somewhat forced to write down the stories and advice of six aged women who gathered at his neighbour's home to spin thread and to share their knowledge – mostly on sexual matters – gained through life-long experience.¹⁰ The ironic and

⁶ Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Nigel F. Palmer, *The Prayer Book of Ursula Begerin*, vol. 1: *Art-Historical and Literary Introduction* (Dietikon-Zurich: Urs Graf Verlag, [2015]), pp. 143-47.

⁷ Gail McMurray Gibson, "The Thread of Life in the Hand of the Virgin," in *Equally in God's Image: Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Julia Bolton Holloway, Constance S. Wright and Joan Bechtold (New York etc.: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 46-54 (pp. 46-48). Cf. Biscoglio, "Unspun" Heroes, pp. 167-68.

⁸ Rik Van Daele, "Die burse al sonder naet". Scabreuze elementen in Van den vos Reynaerde, in *Literatuur en erotiek*, ed. by Rik Van Daele et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), pp. 9-64 (pp. 33-36 and 42). On the distaff as a symbol of sexually aggressive behavior see Biscoglio, "Unspun" Heroes, p. 174.

⁹ Herman Pleij, *De sneeuwpoppen van 1511. Literatuur en stadscultuur tussen middeleeuwen en moderne tijd* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff; Leuven: Kritak, 1988), pp. 269-73. Biscoglio, "Unspun" Heroes, p. 164 and pp. 173-75.

¹⁰ Wouter Nijhoff and Maria Elisabeth Kronenberg ed., *Nederlandsche bibliographie van 1500 tot 1540*, 3 vols with supplements (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1923-1971), I, no. 910. English translation of the French text in *The*

misogynist implications of this work fit into a tradition of portraying women as old witches clinging to backward superstition.¹¹ The literary historian Rik van Daele has emphasized such negative and erotic use of the distaff in Middle Dutch literature, and we get a similar image from the work of Herman Pleij.¹²

This essay aims to present a different perspective on the symbol of the distaff and the practice of spinning in Netherlandish religious culture in order to uncover a more layered meaning. An emblem of femininity and female labour, the distaff was not merely meant to be interpreted erotically or be associated with effeminacy, male humiliation, or untrustworthy aged women. In two seldom studied Middle Dutch texts, the authors present their readers with the distaff and the activities of spinning and cloth-making as a metaphor for Christ's Passion, and, as such, as a meditative object and activity: the anonymous *Spinroc* (Distaff) published by Johan Veldener circa 1483 and *Den spinrocken ghegeven voer een nyeuwe jaer* (The Distaff Given for a New Year) written by the Franciscan Observant Lucas van der Heij and published by the Leiden printer Jan Seversz in the spring of 1517.¹³ These texts represent the

Distaff Gospels: A First Modern English Translation of Les Évangiles des Quenouilles, ed. and trans. by Madeleine Jeay and Kathleen Garay (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2006). For the Dutch text and the relationship between the French and Dutch versions, see Jelle Koopmans, 'Brugge als culturele draaischijf: De casus van de *Spinrocken*', in *Stad van koopmanschap en vrede. Literatuur in Brugge tussen de Middeleeuwen en Rederijkerstijd*, ed. by Johan Oosterman, Antwerpse studies over Nederlandse literatuurgeschiedenis, 12 (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), pp. 163-81; Pleij, *De sneeuwpoppen*, p. 182; and Dirk Callawaert, *Die evangeliën vanden spinrocke. Een verboden volksboek 'zo waar als evangelie', ca. 1510* (Kapellen: DNB/Uitgeverij Pelckmans, 1992). The latter, however, provides a disputable interpretation of the text. Cf. Jef Janssens, *De middeleeuwen zijn anders. Cultuur en literatuur van de 12de tot de 15de eeuw*, Historische reeks, 12 (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1993), pp. 132 ff.

¹¹ Herman Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur, 1400-1560*, Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur, [2] (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2007), pp. 618-20. See also Van Daele, "'Die burse al sonder naet'", p. 37 and Carine Grootenboer, "'Die evangeliën vanden spinrocke'. Een revolutionair positief of conservatief negatief vrouwbeeld in een laatmiddeleeuws volksboek', *Vooyts*, 14 (1995-1996), 31-37 (pp. 34-35).

¹² Van Daele, "'Die burse al sonder naet'", esp. pp. 37-42. Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord* and Idem, *De sneeuwpoppen*, see the pages mentioned above.

¹³ *Spinroc*, [Culemborg: Johan Veldener, after 27 Sept. 1483?], 8°, *Incunabula Short Title Catalogue*, <http://istc.bl.uk> (London: British Library, s.d.), no.

ultimate conjunction of *ora et labora*, but their transmission suggests that the meditative practice was not limited to religious communities. I will explore these texts in their broader cultural and religious context as tools for meditation and expressions of (religious) power relations between men and women in the transitional age between the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period.

After discussing the contents of both texts, I will consider issues of materiality, space, and performance in the texts' historical context. Secondly, I will discuss the intended readership in connection to the materiality of the two editions, in particular, the relationship between text and image. I will argue that in the fifteenth century the ordinary materiality of the distaff and the operations of spinning and cloth-making became a deeply meditative act and powerful spiritual performance, within both religious and lay circles. The religious symbolism with which the distaff is charged in these texts should be taken into account when considering the visual language of this feminine object. Both text and image (whether a painting or a woodcut) were part of a commonly shared culture of devotion that encompassed lay people and religious men and women alike.¹⁴

is00684500; *Hier beghint den spinrocken ghegeven voer een nyeuwe jaer*, Leiden, Jan Seversz, 23 April 1517, 8°, Nijhoff and Kronenberg, *Nederlandsche bibliographie*, I, no. 1070. Both editions are available digitally through Early European Books Online. A recent and rather (unfairly) negative assesment of the latter text is in Chris Coppens, 'Een spinrokken als nieuwjaarsgeschenk voor de augustinessen van Mariëndaal, Diest (NK 1070)', in *Bibliotheek van de Abdij van Park*, vol. 1 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), pp. 62-63. The edition already caused irritation in the eighteenth century: Isaac Le Long mentions Van der Heij as a paragon of the blinded leaders of the Catholic Church who had no knowledge of Scripture; instead of expounding the text of Luke, Van der Heij discussed the qualities of the distaff. Isaac Le Long, *Historische beschryvinge van de reformatie der stadt Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Johannes van Septeren, 1729), p. 451. Cf. Wolfgang Schmitz, *Het aandeel der minderbroeders in onze middeleeuwse literatuur* (Nijmegen-Utrecht: Dekker & Van de Vegt en J. W. van Leeuwen, 1936), p. 77.

¹⁴ Cf. Reindert Falkenburg, 'The Household of the Soul: Conformity in the *Merode Triptych*', in: *Early Netherlandish Painting at the Crossroads: A Critical Look at Current Methodologies*, ed. by Maryan W. Ainsworth, The Metropolitan Museum of Art symposia (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 2-17, esp. p. 4 and p. 7.

1. Two Distaff Meditations

The distaff in female hands can be seen as a symbol of the innate creative power of women.¹⁵ Two Middle Dutch texts take this powerful symbol of femininity and turn the distaff into an object of meditation on the Passion of Christ. Johan Veldener, one of the first printer-publishers of the Low Countries, published the older of the two texts, simply called *Spinroc* (Distaff), around 1483, probably in the town of Culemborg.¹⁶ Only a single, imperfect copy survives of his edition.¹⁷ The text starts with a selection of biblical themes from Proverbs 31, focussing on the handiwork of the valiant wife:

Salomon die wyse coninck scrijft in den lesten capittel syns eersten boeckx gheheiten Proverbiorum van eenre seer sterker vrouwen dye niet traech oft ledich gheweest en heeft, maer si heeft ghegaen ter merct ende heeft dar ghesocht wolle ende vlas ende heuet seer neerstelick ghesponnen ende heeft haer ghecleet met purpuren ende costeliken cleederen. O mijn alder liefste sustere, wilt doch nae volghen dese salighe sterke vrouwe op dat u ziele inden strenghen oordeel Gods niet naect gheuonden en werde metten dwazen, traghen ende ledighen mechden, mer metten wijsen, neersteghen ende werkenden maechden ghecleet metten costeliken bruloft cleede dat ghij hier spinnen moet inden spinrock die hier nae volghet, daer ghij uwen hemelschen coninc ende brudegom eewelic zere wel behaghen sult inder hemelscher glorien. Amen.¹⁸

(Salomon, the wise king, writes in the last chapter of his first book called Proverbs about a very powerful woman who was not slow nor idle, but went to the market, looked for wool and flax (31:13), spun this

¹⁵ Biscoglio, “Unspun” Heroe’s, pp. 170-76. Cf. De Vries, ‘Toonbeelden van huiselijkheid’, pp. 117-19 on the distaff as a symbol of female entrepreneurship in the early modern Low Countries.

¹⁶ See note 13 for details. Claudine Lemaire et al., ed., *De vijfhonderdste verjaring van de boekdrukkunst in de Nederlanden* (Brussel: Koninklijke Bibliotheek Albert I, 1973), cat. no. 79, concludes that typographically the text might also have been printed in Louvain, but that Culemborg is more plausible on book historical grounds as the text does not fit into Veldener’s production during his second stay in Louvain. Veldener, born in Würzburg, started printing in Louvain (1475), moved to Utrecht in 1477-78, and then to Culemborg (1483) before returning to Louvain (1484-1486). See Ina Kok, *Woodcuts in Incunabula printed in the Low Countries*, 4 vols, Bibliotheca Bibliographica Neerlandica. Series Major, 2 (Houten: Hes & De Graaf, 2013), I, pp. 36-37.

¹⁷ The Hague, Royal Library, 150 E 9. Leafs 1 ([a1]) and 8 ([a8]) are missing.

¹⁸ The Hague, Royal Library, 150 E 9, fols [a2]^r-[a2]^v.

very diligently (cf. 31:19) and dressed herself with purple and precious garments (31:22). O my dearest sister, you should follow this blessed, strong woman so that your soul, before the severe judgment of God, will not be found naked together with the fools, the slow and the idle virgins, but with the wise, diligent and hardworking maidens dressed in precious wedding dresses that you have to spin here, on the distaff that follows hereafter, with which you will please very much your heavenly king and bridegroom in the glory of heaven. Amen.)

The diligent woman, who is looking for wool and flax and is eagerly working with her hands in order to dress her soul in fine garments, exemplifies the female reader, here addressed as 'sister'. She is urged to follow the wife by spinning her own precious garbs on 'the distaff that follows hereafter'. These garments are meditations on the Passion of Christ that form the soul's spiritual growth and prepare her for meeting her heavenly bridegroom.

The meditations are to be spun from a 'volcomen spinroc' (perfect distaff), which consists of eight elements (number four is missing in the only extant copy): (1) the distaff itself, (2) the wool or flax, (3) the ribbon that binds the fibre to the distaff, (5) the yarn, (6) the 'wordel' (spindle), (7) 'een hooreken oft i metken met water' (a small vessel filled with water), and (8) a tenter.¹⁹ Each of these elements is connected to three (usually subsequent) scenes from the Passion on the basis of material analogy. The discussion of each metaphor and moment from the narrative of Christ's suffering is framed by explicit instructions that exhort the reader to contemplate these events while handling and/or viewing the material elements of the distaff (and the images in the edition).²⁰ I will discuss three examples in more detail.

First, the reader is instructed to contemplate the large, heavy cross of Christ with great devotion and compassion in three ways. While sitting and spinning with the distaff, the sister should consider how Christ carries the heavy cross from Jerusalem to Calvary, how the angry Jews knock the cross off his blessed shoulders and start to publicly strip him, and finally, how cruelly the wicked servants nail the naked Christ to the cross. At the end of the paragraph, the reader is asked to: 'Aensiet, suster, desen salighen swaren harden wreden spinroc die v hemelse brugom geleden heeft om

¹⁹ The Hague, Royal Library, 150 E 9, fols [a3]^r-[b8]^v. The Middle Dutch word 'rane' should probably be read as 'rame', a frame to dry and stretch cloth: a tenter. The words 'hoore(n)ken' and 'metken' are not in the Middle Dutch dictionary (<http://gtb.inl.nl>). 'Hoore(n)ken' is probably derived from 'horn', which can mean a 'drinking horn'.

²⁰ See section 3 on the use of woodcuts in both editions.

uwen wille ende uwen spinroc sal verlicht ende ghenoechlic werden om synen wille' (Observe, sister, this blessed, heavy, hard, cruel distaff that your heavenly bridegroom has suffered for your sake and your distaff shall by his doing become enlightened and pleasant).²¹ The distaff and its material properties are thus implicitly compared to the cross – the sister is not merely holding the distaff, she is cradling the cross Christ was crucified on.

The body of Christ is made present in the wool or flax with which the distaff is dressed. The fibre represents Christ himself, who is to be contemplated in three ways: how he was raised on the cross naked and wounded; how he was hanging there for three hours in great pain with tears in his eyes while calling the seven holy words to his heavenly father; and how he hung there for three more hours after he yielded us his soul while the heavens turned dark, the earth shook, and the graves burst open. Again, the reader is explicitly urged to fix her eyes on the object she is handling and/or on the (mental) image from the Passion: 'O zuster, aensiet dat salige hemelsche vlas hoe naect ende mysmaect dit hanghet aen den spinroc des crucen om u ziel te cleeden' (O sister, observe the blessed, heavenly flax, how naked and disfigured it hangs on the distaff of the cross in order to dress your soul).²²

The last aspect the reader is asked to consider does not, strictly speaking, belong to the activity of spinning. The reader is invited to consider the tenter on which the woven cloth was spread and, subsequently, to think about the linen cloth Christ's body was bound in by Joseph of Arimathea, the cloth with which Nicodemus rubbed Christ's body with ointment, and, finally, the grave in which Christ was buried for three days until his Resurrection.²³

The elaboration of the eight elements concludes with instructions to continue the reader's meditation after the working day is over. Every night, when lying down in bed, the reader should lay all her thoughts in Christ's grave and take the dead, assaulted, wounded, bloody king in the arms of her soul. She is asked to kiss all his holy wounds and wash his battered body with her tears so that he will purify her of all sins, clothe her with his love here on earth and with the costly wedding dress of his heavenly glory in the hereafter.²⁴

²¹ The Hague, Royal Library, 150 E 9, fols [a3]^r-[a4]^v. Quotation on fol. [a4]^{r-v}.

²² The Hague, Royal Library, 150 E 9, fols [a4]^r-[a6]^r. Quotation on fol. [a6]^r.

²³ The Hague, Royal Library, 150 E 9, fols [b7]^v-[b8]^v.

²⁴ The Hague, Royal Library, 150 E 9, fol. [c1]^{v-v}. On fols [c1]^v-[c8]^r the edition contains two more texts; the first deals with three teachings the reader should learn if she is to 'salichlick spinnen' (spin blissfully). Interestingly, the author notes that even many religious people lack these lessons in their exercises

The text written by the Franciscan Observant Lucas van der Heij, and published by Jan Seversz in Leiden on 23 April 1517, is a much more sophisticated, elaborate work. While it shares some similar views with Veldener's *Distaff*, there does not seem to be a direct relationship between the two.²⁵ Van der Heij initially conceived the text as a sermon for the Regular Canonesses of Mariëndaal in Diest on the occasion of New Year's Day in 1515 (1514 o.s.). His text is larded with biblical quotations and metaphors. One of his main sources is Bonaventure's *Commentaria in Quatuor Libros Sententiarum*, to which he provides precise references (book and distinction) as he does with the biblical quotations.²⁶ The

on Christ's Passion. She is to consider Christ's suffering in three ways; his tormentors, and herself in her meditations on the Passion. She should, for example, always be present with her heart at Christ's suffering, sit with his mother and follow him everywhere. The last text is the *Adoro Te*-prayer in the version with seven prayers.

²⁵ This edition survives in two known copies: The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20 (imperfect) and Heverlee, Abdij van Park, H125 (Ernest Persoons, 'Prieuré du Val-Notre-Dame, à Diest', in *Monasticon belge*, vol. IV-5, ed. by Andrée Despy-Meyer (Liège: Centre National de Recherches d'Histoire Religieuse, 1971), pp. 1337-43 (p. 1341 n. 9). The latter copy is bound together with an edition of another sermon, *Die Palmsondach* (Palm Sunday), also published by Jan Seversz: Jozefa Van Bragt, *Bibliotheek van de Abdij van Park*, vol. 2 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), P16. Van Bragt seems to suggest that *Die Palmsondach* was also written by Van der Heij. On Van der Heij see Benjamin De Troeyer, *Bio-bibliographia franciscana neerlandica saeculi XVI. Pars biographica, de auteurs van de uitgegeven werken* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1969), 25-26. Idem, *Bio-bibliographia franciscana neerlandica saeculi XVI. Pars Bibliographica, de edities* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1970), nos 197-200.

²⁶ E.g. The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fol. [A2]^v: 'Hier op antwoert de grote leraer Bonaventura opten vierden boeck vanden hoghen sinne in die sesten ondersceyt ende seyt dat hi hem liet besniden om drie saken wil [...]: Bonaventura, *Opera omnia*, 10 vols (Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi): Typogr. Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1882-1902), IV, p. 151: 'Propter quarum exempla danda Christus fuit circumcisis: ut scilicet obediret Legi [...] ut Patribus non esset dissimilis.' It is interesting to note that Van der Heij also adapted and corrected the Dutch translation of *Stimulus amoris*, ascribed to Bonaventure. Van der Heij added explanations and annotations for clarity. His text was published in 1511 (Leiden, Jan Seversz) and 1519 (Antwerp, Henrick Eckert van Homberch): De Troeyer, *Bio-bibliographia franciscana neerlandica saeculi XVI. Pars Bibliographica*, nos 197-98. See also Koen Goudriaan, 'The Franciscans, the Laity and the Printing Press', in Idem, *Piety in Practice and Print: Essays on the Late Medieval Religious Landscape*, ed. by Anna Dlabáčová and Ad Tervoort,

biblical theme at the start of the older text published by Veldener might indicate that the text was originally also conceived as a sermon and later published (in an abridged version) as a printed book, but this is by no means certain. Lucas van der Heij took another theme as a starting point, namely, the Gospel reading for that day – the feast-day of the Circumcision of Christ: on the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived in the womb (Luke 2:21). Van der Heij raises the question of why Christ was circumcised even though he was free of sin himself. He brings forward four reasons based on Bonaventure: he wanted to obey the commandment given to Abraham; to show his humility; to be equal to the fathers of the Old Testament; and he desired to teach us how to circumcise ourselves in a spiritual way.²⁷ It is the last reason that brings Van der Heij to the actual matter of his sermon.

Thinking of ways in which the Mariëndaal sisters could regulate their own spiritual growth, Van der Heij came up with a ‘spiritual distaff’ as a New Year’s present for the sisters, which was based on their occupation with the production of cloth. The tradition of New Year’s presents – whether in the form of a physical object, a literary text, and/or a performance – was maintained in lay and religious milieus, and the New Year’s poem became a common genre in rhetoricians’ literature.²⁸ This was also Van der Heij’s objective: observing the distaff would allow the sisters to ‘circumcise themselves’ and become new people through the conformity of their souls to Christ. The sermon thus seems to have had a strong regulatory aim. The printed text is divided into three main parts: (1) the perfect way in which the distaff itself is made; (2) the way the thread is drawn from the distaff; and (3) the way the cloth is made from the yarn. These three points are metaphors for: (1) Christ on the Cross; (2) how to follow Christ; and (3) the perfection of those who are engaged in the *imitatio Christi*.²⁹

ReLiC – Studies in Dutch Religious History, 4 (Hilversum: Verloren, 2016), pp. 279–308 (pp. 284–85, 292, 305–06).

²⁷ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols [A2]^r–[A3]^r. See n. 26 above.

²⁸ See e.g. Johan Oosterman, ‘Meester Fransois Stoc: de virtueoze poëtica van een vroege rederijker’, in *Medioneerlandistiek: een inleiding tot de Middelnederlandse letterkunde*, ed. by Ria Jansen-Sieben, Jozef Janssens, Frank Willaert (Hilversum: Verloren, 2000), pp. 241–50, esp. p. 244. For more in general on New Year’s gift exchanges in the late Middle Ages and courtly practices and social relations in particular, see: Brigitte Buettner, ‘Past Presents: New Year’s Gifts at the Valois Courts, ca. 1400’, *The Art Bulletin*, 83 (2001), 598–625.

²⁹ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols [A4]^v–[A5]^r.

Similar to the earlier text published by Veldener, Van der Heij understands the physical object of the distaff as Christ's cross. His treatment of the subject, however, is much more precise: when observed properly, the distaff forms a figure of the crucified Christ in three ways. The distaff is made up of four parts, which reflect the four parts of the cross, made of four different kinds of wood. Observing the distaff (which can thus also be understood as a (mental) image of Christ on the cross; a crucifix), one should work to acquire the properties of these woods: to always flower before God with good works (the palm tree which stays green); to stay strong in virtues (the cedar which is imperishable); to be an example for others (the cypress which has a strong scent); and to be charitable to poor people (the olive tree that flows with oil).³⁰

The second item one should observe when looking at the distaff is the flax fixed to the shaft, which is a metaphor for the body of Christ for a number of reasons. As flax shoots from the earth, in like manner, Christ is the fruit of his mother, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy.³¹ Just as the flax is hackled a number of times before it is wrapped onto the distaff, Christ was criticized mercilessly by the Jews when he was preaching, mocked at the houses of Annas, Caiaphas, and Pilate, and humiliated on the cross. But, by analogy, just as women put a little saliva on the distaff before clothing it so that the fiber would not slip down the shaft, Christ was bound to the cross with love and would not part from it, no matter how much humiliation he endured. The sisters are instructed to think about this when they clothe their distaffs: 'Och dochteren, denckt hier op als ghi tvlas om die spinrocken wint' (O, daughters, think about this when you wind the flax onto the distaff).³²

The third element of the distaff one should observe is the parchment that fixes the flax onto the shaft. The parchment is a symbol of the title of the cross, 'Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews'. Van der Heij elaborately discusses the allegorical meaning of these four words and thus Christ's nature, because 'om dese vier woerden wel te verstaen, so suldi weten, o deuote menschen, wanneer als men enich creatuer enen naem gheeft of inset, so geeft men die naem na die proprietieit van alsulken creatuer' (to understand these four words correctly, so you should know, o devout

³⁰ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols [A5]^v-[A6]^r.

³¹ Isaiah 11:1: 'A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.'

³² The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols [A6]^v-[A7]^v. Quotation on fol. [A7]^v.

people, that when a certain creature is given or provided with a name, the name is given according to the creature's quality).³³

In the second 'principael deel' (main part), Van der Heij interprets the thread spun from the flax. Quoting from Proverbs 31:10-31, he starts with a discussion of the valiant woman we already met at the start of Veldener's *Spinroc*. She works with her hands, accomplishing the advice from the Gospels and avoiding sin. She takes a spindle with a whorl in her hands and pulls a thread from the fibre on the distaff. According to Van der Heij, this act shows that she wants to follow the son of God in perfect love: the thread is Christ, the spindle is the people God draws to Him, and the whorl is perfect love.³⁴ In order to understand how the thread represents Christ and how to imitate him, the readers are urged to focus on three properties of the yarn. They should notice that the thread they are spinning is smooth and without any knots, which symbolizes Christ's 'simple enichoudicheit' (simple sincerity) that one should follow by having a clear, simple eye, mind, and sincere intention.³⁵ Van der Heij expounds on this by discussing the importance of an honest intention on the part of those who want to enter as well as of those who receive children into a religious community. Moreover, he notes that he has written a separate treatise on this issue in Latin.³⁶ The second property of the thread is its thinness, a symbol of Christ's austerity. Van der Heij instructs the sisters and all other people to keep to this 'dunheit van spijs ende dranck' (thinness of food and drink) – too much food and drink has a negative effect on the soul and lets the body prevail.³⁷ However, the women should not make this thread 'al te dunne [...] u selven alte seer spijs ende dranck ontreckende' (too thin [...] denying yourself food and drink too much). The third and last property is the thread's colour, which is not beautiful, but a pale grey. This symbolizes Christ's ashen look caused by the harshness of his life. The readers should aspire to the same 'mismaecte verwe' (disfigured colour) by practicing strictness and austerity and by working and serving God day and night.³⁸

³³ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols [A7]^v-B4^r. Quotation on fol. [A8]^v.

³⁴ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols B4^v-B5^v.

³⁵ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols B5^v-B6^v.

³⁶ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols B6^v-C1^v. Benjamin De Troeyer does not mention such a text; cf. however his discussion of the likelihood that Van der Heij did compose more treatises than are extant: De Troeyer, *Bibliographia franciscana neerlandica saeculi XVI. Pars biographica*, p. 26.

³⁷ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols C1^v-C2^v.

³⁸ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols C2^v-C4^v. Because 'een mensche die ledich is, dye is een oerkussen daer die duvel op rust' (idle hands are the devil's workshop).

The third and last part compares the process of making a perfect linen cloth to the perfect conformity of the soul to Christ. Again, the discussion is divided into three points. Firstly, the linen is put into lye, which is made from water run through ashes from a wood fire. This should remind the readers that they are made of ashes and that their bodies will perish, creating the perfect moment to think about the four last things, and death in particular.³⁹ Van der Heij elaborates on the latter by answering a question the audience might pose to him – a technique he uses quite often, and which is common in sermons:

Hier op so mocht ghy, devote menschen, vragen: Broeder Lucas, waer om sullen wi opten doot altijt so dencken? Hier op so gheef ic antwoord ende segghe: och edel creatuer, ghi moet dicwil opten doot denken om drie saken wil.⁴⁰

(In connection to this you, devout people, might ask: Brother Lucas, why should we always think about death in this way? I answer this question and say: o noble creature, that you have to consider death often for three reasons.)

One should always be prepared for death, for we do not know on what day the Lord will come (Matthew 24:42), because one who has his thoughts fixed on death will not sin, and God will receive him before others.⁴¹ The second aspect that requires more thought is that making cloth requires numerous threads. These threads represent the good works one should perform tirelessly during one's lifetime.⁴² Lastly, the linen cloth is bleached with water. Van der Heij compares the whitening of the linen to the cleansing of the conscience with tears of sorrow and discusses the four properties water washing away sin should possess. It should be hot because one should repent for having disturbed God's goodness; clear and pure through full confession that will cleanse 'the cloth of the soul'; lively in order to perform the priest's penance; and salty and bitter because one should cry as bitterly as Peter did after he denied Christ (Luke 22:59-62).⁴³

³⁹ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols C5^r-C6^v. On the four last things, Van der Heij refers to Ecclesiastes (chapter 7), Jerome, and Bonaventure.

⁴⁰ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fol. C6^v.

⁴¹ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols C6^v-C7^v.

⁴² The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols C7^v-D1^r.

⁴³ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols D1^r-D3^r. Van der Heij goes on to discuss the power of tears, quoting Bernard, St Gregory, and Isidore: 'a tear that comes from a pure heart extinguishes all fire of hell because a tear of a pure heart is the baptism of man' (fols D3^r-D4^r).

The sermon concludes with a brief summary of the three main points, a final exhortation to the reader to take these points to heart and pursue them because ‘dair en is geen wech bequamer om te comen tot volcomenheit dan dese’ (there is no road more pleasant to reach perfection than this one), and a prayer.⁴⁴ After the end of the sermon follows an ‘editorial note’ explaining that Van der Heij originally wrote the sermon in Latin for the women of Mariëndaal and that he himself translated the text into Dutch for the benefit of all devout people: ‘Hier is gheeynt een sermoen van een geestelike spinrocken gemaect ende gepreect van broeder Lucas vander Hei tot Diest int cloester van Mariendael ende van den selven broeder Lucas ouergestelt in Duyts tot profijt van alle devote menschen’ (Here ends a sermon about a spiritual distaff, made and preached by brother Lucas van der Heij in Diest at the convent of Mariëndaal and by the same brother Lucas translated into Dutch for the profit of all devout people).⁴⁵ This is an important indication for the text’s changing audience and function, which I will discuss in the last section of this article. The edition contains a second sermon by Van der Heij, this time on Mary in the ‘gedaente’ (figure) of a sewing basket, which he delivered at Mariëndaal on Candlemas Day (2 February) 1515. This sermon, in which he discusses a ‘geestelike naycorf’ (spiritual sewing basket) as an allegory for Mary, would merit a separate study.⁴⁶

2. From Ordinary Materiality to Passion Re-enactment: Space and Performance

The two ‘distaff meditations’ give us a rare insight into a form of daily meditation that originated in female religious communities where women sought to imitate and relive the Passion in all spheres of life. In many late medieval female religious communities, the production of textiles enabled women to meet their own needs, empowering them to live together and

⁴⁴ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols D4^v-D5^r. Quotation on fol. d4^v.

⁴⁵ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols D5^r-D5^v. Goudriaan, ‘The Franciscans’, p. 294. The edition was thus *not* a present to the women at Mariëndaal as stated by Schmitz, *Het aandeel*, p. 76. Recently, a similar assumption has been made by Coppens, ‘Een spinrokken’, p. 62, who states that the edition was paid for by the (friary of) the brother, which seems unlikely since he was an Observant Franciscan.

⁴⁶ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fol. D5^v: ‘Hier beghint een sermoen vande moeder ons heren op een gedaente van een naycorf ghemaect van broeder Lucas van der Hey [...]’ (Here starts a sermon about the mother of Our Lord on the figure of a sewing basket made by brother Lucas van der Heij [...]).

focus on spiritual life. Even if labour was not necessary, women were still required to fulfil the adage *ora et labora*, which achieved special significance in the late medieval observance movement.⁴⁷

Spinning and weaving constituted one of the most important occupations for women within the religious reform movement of the Modern Devotion. The Sisters of the Common Life initially congregated in town houses where, due to the limited space available, the rooms were used for multiple purposes. In the Master-Geerthouse in Deventer, for instance, the spinning room was also used for prayer and for the celebration of the Mass.⁴⁸ The room had a portable altar with a mural above it, and in the room with looms ('werkhuys') stood another small altar 'mit hiligen' (with saints).⁴⁹ Apart from works of art, books were also regularly present in the workshops. There is some discussion about how the women prayed the hours and whether books were used for this communal prayer. In some houses of the Sisters of Common Life it seems to have been customary to read the hours aloud in the vernacular, often in the spinning house, where the sisters worked.⁵⁰ It might also have been the case that

⁴⁷ *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. by Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Susan Marti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), esp. p. 51, p. 72, and pp. 104-05. Cf. Yuri Desplenter, *Al aertrijc segt lofsanc. Middelnederlandse vertalingen van Latijnse hymnen en sequensen*, vol. 1: *Studie*, Studies op het gebied van de oudere Nederlandse letterkunde, 3 (Gent: Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde, 2008), p. 182. Wybren Scheepma, trans. by David Johnson, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The 'Modern Devotion', the Canonesses of Windesheim and their Writings* (Woodbridge etc.: Boydell Press, 2004), pp. 63-64.

⁴⁸ Anne Bollmann, 'Bedehuis, spinhuis, kerk: Räume für Arbeit und Gebet in den Frauengemeinschaften der Devotio moderna', in *Aussen und Innen. Räume und ihre Symbolik im Mittelalter*, ed. by Nikolaus Staubach, Vera Johanterwage, Tradition - Reform - Innovation: Studien zur Modernität des Mittelalters, 14 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 353-84, esp. pp. 364-66. *Hier beginnen sommige stichtige punten van onsen oelden zusteren*, ed. by Dirk de Man (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1919), p. xxii.

⁴⁹ *Hier beginnen sommige stichtige punten*, ed. by De Man, p. xxii, p. 71 (altar with saints), p. 43 (mural painting). Bollmann, 'Bedehuis', p. 365, 369.

⁵⁰ Desplenter, *Al aertrijc*, pp. 179-82. Bollmann, 'Bedehuis', p. 358. Thom Mertens, 'Praying in the vernacular. Middle Dutch Imitative Forms of the Divine Office from the 1370s to 1520s', in *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Hull Dialogue*, ed. by Virginia Blanton, Veronica O'Mara and Patricia Stoop, *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts*, 26 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 133-46, esp. pp. 139-40. A similar habit existed in a number of convents of female

the sisters, and especially choir nuns, prayed the hours by heart.⁵¹ There are, however, indications that spiritual books were kept and read in the women's workshops.⁵² A case in point is sister Ide Prumers (d. 1487) of Emmerich, who kept a book containing the Life of Christ with her while spinning.⁵³ At Diepenveen, sister Katharina van Naaldwijk (d. 1443) carried her books around in a small basket, also to the spinning house.⁵⁴ These spaces thus conflated manual labour, prayer, and religious reading and ritual. Moreover, the performances of spinning and weaving and of the liturgy share a similar cyclic, repetitive nature, which helped the women to internalize their devotion.⁵⁵

The Canonesses of Mariëndaal, for whom Van der Heij originally composed his sermon, were connected to the Chapter of Windesheim, the monastic branch of the *Devotio Moderna* of which Diepenveen was

Augustinian 'converts': Koen Goudriaan, 'The Regular Observance of Women Converts of St Augustine', in Idem, *Piety in Practice and Print*, pp. 135-79.

⁵¹ Carine Lingier, 'Hongerich na den worden Godes'. Reading to the Community in Women's Convents of the Modern Devotion', in *Lesen, Schreiben, Sticken und Erinnern. Beiträge zur Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte mittelalterlicher Frauenklöster*, ed. by Gabriela Signori (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2000), pp. 123-47 (p. 131). Desplenter, *Al aertrijc*, pp. 179-80.

⁵² Desplenter, *Al aertrijc*, p. 182. Anna Dlabáčová, *Literatuur en observantie. De Spieghel der volcomenheit van Hendrik Herp en de dynamiek van laatmiddeleeuwse tekstverspreiding*, *Middeleeuwse Studies en Bronnen*, 149 (Hilversum: Verloren, 2014), pp. 245-46.

⁵³ Bollmann, 'Bedehuis', p. 367. *Schwesternbuch und Statuten des St. Agnes-Konvents in Emmerich*, ed. by Anne Bollmann and Nikolaus Staubach, *Emmericher Forschungen*, 17 (Emmerich: Emmericher Geschichtsverein, 1998), p. 89.

⁵⁴ Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women*, p. 87. *Van den doechden der vuriger ende stichtiger susteren van Diepen Veen ('Manuscript D')*, vol. 1: *De tekst van het handschrift*, ed. by Dirk A. Brinkerink (Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1904), p. 118.

⁵⁵ Cf. Bollmann, 'Bedehuis', p. 365, 367. Claudia Höhle, 'Aspekte der Gebetskultur der Devotio Moderna', in *Sprechen, Schreiben, Handeln. Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur Performativität mittelalterlicher Texte*, ed. by Annika Bostelmann, Doreen Brandt, Kristin Skottki (Münster/New York: Waxmann, 2017), pp. 141-61. On space in the statutes of the third branch of the Modern Devotion, the tertiaries: Sabrina Corbellini, 'Mapping Spiritual Life: A Spatial Approach to Late Medieval Spirituality', *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 44 (2014), 81-100 (pp. 87-89).

the first female convent.⁵⁶ The Windesheim constitutions state that the choir nuns are expected to work from Prime to Complines and to remain silent during their work – speaking a single word is allowed only when necessary and in a low tone. While at work the sisters should frequently say short prayers.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the so-called *Vivendi formula*, written by Salome Sticken, the mother superior of Diepenveen (1412-46), strongly emphasizes the interconnection between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* that arises during manual labour.⁵⁸

The Sister books from communities of Sisters of Common Life and of the Windesheim convent of Diepenveen offer biographic examples of ‘spinning with Passion’ – of true internalization of the Passion of Christ during handiwork. Sister Ide Prumers did not only read about Christ’s life while spinning. Whenever she pushed the slay of the weaving loom, it felt to her as if she was clasping God against her chest.⁵⁹ Lubbe van Swolle (d. 1418), advised the young sisters at the Meester Geerthuis to ‘spynnen [...] in die wonden ons lieven Heren’ (spin in the wounds of Our Dear Lord).⁶⁰ While the piety during work was communal and individual at the same time, some individual’s devotion was clearly stronger than other’s. Whereas sister Haedewich van Gelre (d. 1434) was regularly moved to tears while spinning, other sisters liked to chat every now and then. Sometimes this disturbed Hadewich’s devotion; and since she could not easily get up, she kept a stick with her. Whenever she believed that a sister spoke excessively, she would hit her with the stick on the back. By

⁵⁶ On Mariëndaal see Persoons, ‘Prieuré du Val-Notre-Dame’, pp. 1337-43.

⁵⁷ Rudolphus Theodorus Maria van Dijk, *De constituties der Windesheimse vrouwenkloosters vóór 1559. Bijdrage tot de institutionele geschiedenis van het kapittel van Windesheim*, 2 vols, *Middeleeuwse Studies*, 3 (Nijmegen: Centrum voor Middeleeuwse Studies, Katholieke Universiteit, 1986), I, pp. 429-39 and II, pp. 801-04

⁵⁸ Bollmann, ‘Bedehuis’, pp. 353-54. Rudolf Theodorus Maria van Dijk, *Salome Sticken (1369-1449) en de oorsprong van de Moderne Devotie*, with the cooperation of Rijcklof Hofman and a first critical edition of the *Statuten van het Meester-Geertshuis*, ed. by Marinus van den Berg, *Bibliotheca Dissidentium Neerlandicorum* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2015), pp. 386-419 (Latin text with Dutch translation).

⁵⁹ Bollmann, ‘Bedehuis’, pp. 368-69. *Schwesternbuch*, ed. by Bollmann and Staubach, p. 86.

⁶⁰ *Hier beginnen sommige stichtige punten*, ed. by De Man, p. 53. Bollmann, ‘Bedehuis’, p. 374.

way of reassurance, the author of her *vita* states that this always happened lovingly, and that nobody ever got hurt.⁶¹

While the Sister books provide valuable clues for the women's integration of manual labour and meditation, the exact form of the meditations remains obscure. The Distaff texts offer detailed meditative programs that show how the tools and materials used in cloth production could become multifunctional contemplative objects that could spark an array of meditations due to varying analogies. Although we find a number of analogies and metaphors in both texts – for instance, the wooden construction of the distaff is compared to the cross and the fibre fixed to the distaff's shaft is a metaphor for the crucified body of Christ – some elements are interpreted differently. Cases in point are the parchment that binds the fibre to the shaft, the thread or yarn spun from the fibre, and the cloth. In Veldener's *Distaff*, the parchment band is compared to the fabric used to blindfold Christ at the house of Caiaphas.⁶² Van der Heij presents the same strip of parchment as an analogy to the title of the Cross.⁶³ The thread spun from 'the body of Christ' represented by the fibre can either be contemplated as the cord that tied Christ's hands when he was arrested and brought before Annas, Caiaphas, and Pilate (Veldener),⁶⁴ or as the perseverance and austerity of Christ's life represented by the thread's evenness, thinness, and grey colour (Van der Heij).⁶⁵ Finally, the cloth the women produced can either be considered as a symbol of their souls or as the cloth Christ was buried in.⁶⁶ Moreover, the women were not obliged to contemplate the entire story of Christ's suffering from beginning to end: in both texts, the chronology of Christ's Passion is subsidiary to the allegory.

The differences between the texts show that such meditations, performed while spinning, may well have been common among women in

⁶¹ *Hier beginnen sommige stichtige punten*, ed. by De Man, p. 113.

⁶² The Hague, Royal Library, 150 E 9, fol. [a7]^r: 'Dat derde dat behoort totten spinroc is eenen bant dar men dat vlas of die wolle met bindt aenden spinroc. Daer suldij bij ghedincen ten eersten den smadeliken bant daer die claere ooghen der godliker wijsheyde mede verbonden worden in Cayphas huys [...] (The third [part] that belongs to a distaff is a ribbon with which one ties the flax or wool to the distaff. With that you should firstly remember the humiliating band with which the bright eyes of the divine wisdom were bound at Caiaphas's house).

⁶³ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fol. [A7]^v.

⁶⁴ The Hague, Royal Library, 150 E 9, fols [b2]^v-[b4]^r.

⁶⁵ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols B^{5v}-C^{4v}.

⁶⁶ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols D1^r-D3^r and The Hague, Royal Library, 150 E 9, fols [b7]^v-[b8]^v.

religious communities. The fact that these contemplations have only come down to us in printed form and were not recorded in manuscripts might reflect two scenarios. It can be viewed as an indication of the commonness of this meditative practice in nunneries and devout communities, transmitted by word of mouth from generation to generation. Only when this body of thought was transmitted to the world outside convents (to a lay audience) were the instructions written down. On the other hand, the absence of a manuscript transmission might indicate that, while spinning and/or weaving and meditating on the Passion were connected (as shown by the Sister books), the printed texts were a way of systematizing these meditations. Indeed, they might be viewed as a way of regulating – or ‘circumcising’, as Van der Heij puts it – the spiritual life of women. Germanist Anne Bollmann claims that the poly-function of manual labour as economic activity *and* devotional exercise disappeared irreversibly in the course of the fifteenth century due to the success and growth of the communities and to the process of ‘monastization’ within the Modern Devotion. Larger buildings (constructed purposely for religious communities) increasingly separated manual labour from prayer.⁶⁷ In my view, the distaff-texts can either be seen as witnesses of an on-going tradition or as exemplars that confirm the waning of the practice and the need to impose a more contemplative attitude. Van der Heij’s sermon might indeed have been an attempt to reinforce the practice at the Mariëndaal convent.

Whatever the case, and although the printed text published in Leiden three years after Van der Heij preached to the Regular Canonesses states that it was the friar who came up with the idea of a spiritual distaff, we can assume that neither his nor the earlier text published by Veldener was written completely *ex nihilo*. They must have been (at least partially) informed by an existing practice of meditative spinning, which the Sister books also document. We cannot rule out the possibility that the Canonesses of Diest already used the distaff as an object of meditation during their long working hours. They might have asked Van der Heij to develop this in order to give their meditation more clearly outlined contours and depth – or he might have done so on his own accord, perhaps because he thought that the behaviour of the women during working hours needed to be ‘circumcised’ and regulated.

The distaff meditations seem to have been a perfect form of contemplation during working hours as the women did not necessarily need to handle a book in order to continuously contemplate Christ’s life. Once they were familiar with the allegorical meaning of their tools and operations, they could engage continuously in inner prayer and contemplation,

⁶⁷ Bollmann, ‘Bedehuis’, p. 384.

which was considered the greatest ideal in Modern Devout spirituality.⁶⁸ The texts are directly derived from a bodily, strongly tactile experience, and they aim to evoke a meditative and emotional response to the act.

Each encounter with the materiality of the distaff invited the women to derive a devotional meaning from the object and their work. The meditation was strongly tactile and visual at once. Through the sensation of handling the distaff, the women could sense the wood of the cross and, at the same time, visualize scenes from the Passion. While dressing the distaff and observing the wool or flax hanging on the shaft, they had scenes of the Crucifixion before their mind's eye. The preparation of the fibre, the hackling and beating of the wool or flax became a re-enactment of – and a meditation upon – the mocking of Christ. The actual spinning of a thread in imitation of the life of Christ, the transformation of the rough wool into smooth yarn, but also the sensation of its evenness and thinness as well as the perception of its colour, all brought scenes of harshness from Christ's life before the inner eye.

Everyday materiality was thus turned into a contemplative performance and multi-sensory devotion. These meditations are fascinating exactly because the strong material nature they possess is not religious from the outset. In fact, we are not dealing with a materializing of religion, but a 'religionizing' of mere everyday materiality.⁶⁹ A similar strategy can be found in a text written by Hendrik Mande (d. 1431) in which he explains everyday objects in a house as desirable properties of the soul.⁷⁰ Instead of giving material shape to religion and religious expression through the distaff meditations, existing material (the distaff, the wool, etc.) is shaped as a religious artefact. The material, in this case, instead of getting in the way of spiritual things, actually led the women towards a contemplation

⁶⁸ Bollmann, 'Bedehuis', pp. 384-85. Cf. Desplenter, *Al aertrijc*, p. 181.

⁶⁹ Cf. William J. F. Keenan and Elisabeth Arweck, 'Introduction: Material Varieties of Religious Expression', in *Materializing Religion: Expression, Performance, Ritual*, ed. by Elisabeth Arweck and William Keenan, Theology and Religion in Interdisciplinary Perspective Series (Aldershot-Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 1-20 (pp. 1-3 and p. 15). Cf. also Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, [2011]).

⁷⁰ Falkenburg, 'The Household', pp. 6-7. See Corbellini, 'Mapping', p. 94-96 for similar meditations on convent buildings and objects therein. In general, on the profusion of these kinds of figurative texts in late medieval literature, cf. Dietrich Schmidtke, *Studien zur dingallegorischen Erbauungsliteratur des Spätmittelalters. Am Beispiel der Gartenallegorie*, Hermaea, N.F., 43 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1982).

of the immaterial – labour thus became a spiritual exercise.⁷¹ The pious images present in the space where the sisters worked, such as the portable altar in the Master Geerthouse or miniatures and woodcuts in books, might have supported the meditation, but they do not seem necessary. Spinning and associated tasks invited an active re-enactment of the Passion of Christ similar to the rememorative-allegorical interpretations of the Mass.⁷² As meditative performances, they are akin to practices of performative reading without necessarily responding to a text and/or image but merely by fulfilling daily tasks.⁷³ Anne Bollmann describes how the feeling of Christ's presence during the Deventer sisters' handiwork was so strong that they hardly experienced any difference between their manual labour and attending Mass.⁷⁴

A similar case of 'religionizing' everyday materiality can be found in the *vita* of Katheryna van Arkel, a blind sister from the Master Geerthouse.⁷⁵ While in the convent's porch, which was used for doing the laundry, she recognized the open building in which Christ was born; in the stone washtub she saw (with her inner eyes) the crib in which Mary laid the Christ Child. Similar to the distaff meditations, this spiritual exercise turned a part of the convent into the Holy Land and bridged the time

⁷¹ Cf. Keenan and Arweck, 'Introduction', p. 8. Bollmann, 'Bedehuis', p. 353-54, 374. Corbellini, 'Mapping', p. 91 and 96.

⁷² On rememorative-allegorical interpretations of the Mass, see, for example, Jos Andriessen, 'The Boexken's Place in Liturgical and Devotional History', in Simon van Venlo, *Boexken van der officien ofte dienst der missen = Little Book of the Offices or Service of the Mass*, ed. by Ludo Simons (Antwerp: De Schutter, 1982), pp. 60-67.

⁷³ Cf. Bart Ramakers, 'Books, Beads and Bitterness: Making Sense of Gifts in Two Table Plays by Cornelis Everaert', in *Discovering the Riches of the Word: Religious Reading in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Sabrina Corbellini, Margriet Hoogvliet and Bart Ramakers, *Intersections*, 38 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), pp. 141-70 (pp. 141-42). On performative reading in the Middle Ages see also Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁷⁴ Bollmann, 'Bedehuis', p. 369.

⁷⁵ Katheryna's devotion is thoroughly discussed in Charles Caspers, 'De kerstkribbe van zuster Katheryna van Arkel, "die blijnde": Jezus en de vrouwelijke Devoten in de vijftiende eeuw', in *Geen povere schoonheid. Laat-middeleeuwse kunst in verband met de Moderne Devotie*, ed. by Kees Veelenturf (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2000), pp. 67-85. Edition of the *vita* in *Hier beginnen sommige stichtige punten*, ed. by De Man, pp. 215-23.

gap between Christ's birth and the fifteenth century. Katheryna used to visit this both tangible *and* imagined space, kneel before the stone tub and pray. Once she even saw the crying Child in the tub. Sisters who witnessed her devotional practice – which can thus also be seen as a performance – were deeply impressed. Since manual labour took place in a communal space, other sisters could act as an audience: they could 'read' a particularly passionate performance of manual labour as an exemplum.⁷⁶ While they were forbidden to speak, the women were certainly allowed to show emotions. The stories in the Sister books about sisters weeping or throwing up their arms and casting their eyes to the heavens while spinning, testify to this exemplary function.⁷⁷

3. From Convent to City

The printed distaff-texts show that at least toward the end of the fifteenth century the meditative practices that interweaved the ideals of *ora et labora* were systematized by fixing them in a text. The printed books – especially Van der Heij's – sought to disseminate this practice among lay city-dwellers. From a gender perspective, it is intriguing that a male member of the clergy recorded this exclusively female practice. His task, in fact, was not only to act as father confessor and spiritual counsellor for lay and religious people alike, but also to transmit religious practices developed in a monastic setting to lay readers, functioning as an intermediary between female convents and lay milieus. A religious practice that originated partly due to the conditions defined by lay spaces – the city houses occupied by the Sisters of Common Life – thus 'returned' to a lay setting. Lay women, whether working in the purely commercial enterprise of the late medieval textile industry or within their own household, could therefore similarly turn the distaff – an object they had to handle daily anyway – into a meditative tool that allowed them to experience their daily work in a new way: as a meditation on the Passion. In this way, they could incorporate a devotion to the suffering of Christ into their daily lives, which meant their time spent at work was also spent on a devout exercise: they generated a material income and, at the same time, gained spiritual profit that would ensure the salvation of their own souls and that of their close relatives.

⁷⁶ Cf. the vita of sister Lyzebeth vanden Damme (d. 1421) who used sister Stijne van Kalker as a book, more precisely a *rapiarium* – as an inspirational collection of texts: *Hier beginnen sommige stichtige punten*, ed. by De Man, p. 37.

⁷⁷ Bollmann, 'Bedehuis', p. 367 (Heilwich Amelonx and Lijsbet Kael, both d. 1481).

Both Middle Dutch texts, which turn the distaff and the very process of making cloth into an object of meditation, are directed at a female audience. This is not surprising as the distaff and cloth production was almost exclusively in female hands; the use of the distaff metaphor makes the texts gender-determined.⁷⁸ In the case of the *Spinroc* published by Johan Veldener, the female readership can also be deduced from the way the reader is spoken to. She is consequently addressed as 'sister'. The singular address seems to point to private study of the text, although the text might originally have been written as a sermon, as I have suggested above. Apart from the manner in which the reader is addressed and the text's subject matter, there are no explicit indications of the text's readership. The entry on the *Spinroc* in the 1973 catalogue of early printing in the Netherlands (*De vijfhonderdste verjaring*) suggests that the text might have been intended for widows, but does so without any clear argument.⁷⁹

Veldener, in any case, must have seen some (commercial) potential in publishing the booklet. His publisher's list is varied, but contains no other short meditative, allegorical treatises in the vernacular comparable to the *Spinroc*, although he did publish a number of Middle Dutch texts during his time in Culemborg. Art historian Barbara Baert has suggested that his edition of the *Boec van den houten kruis* (on the legend of the wood of the cross), printed in the same year as the *Spinroc* (1483), was connected to a local veneration of a relic of the cross kept in the church of St Barbara.⁸⁰ Might the *Spinroc* also have been directed at a local readership? Perhaps this specific elaboration on the distaff originated

⁷⁸ Cf. Annette Gris , 'Women's Devotional Reading in Late-Medieval England and the Gendered Reader', *Medium Aevum*, 71 (2002), 209-25 on the gendered reader.

⁷⁹ Lemaire, *De vijfhonderdste verjaring*, p. 161: 'Men mag zich afvragen of dit boekje in zijn tijd, met raad en voorbeeld en sterking in het geloof, niet in het bijzonder bestemd was voor die vrouwen die met alle zorgen zo dikwijls alleen achterbleven als de mannen hadden moeten uitwijken, vluchten, of ten strijde getrokken waren'. (One may wonder if this booklet, in its time, with advice and example and strengthening in faith, was not particularly directed at women who were left behind so often with all the care [for their family] when the men had to flee, run, or had gone to battle.)

⁸⁰ Barbara Baert, 'De legende van het kruishout in de Nederlanden', in *Hout in boeken, houten boeken en de 'fraaye konst van houtdraayen'*, ed. by Luc Knapen and Leo Kenis, Documenta libraria, 35 (Leuven: Maurits Sabbebibliotheek, Faculteit Godgeleerdheid and Peeters, 2008), pp. 63-78 (pp. 68-69).

in the local convent of Tertiaries (Mariënkroon) as an oral or written instruction for (one of) the sisters and was deemed of interest for a wider audience.⁸¹

If we consider the history of the *Distaff Given for a New Year*, such speculations do not seem far-fetched. The Franciscan Observant Lucas van der Heij conceived this text as a sermon for New Year's Day 1515 for the Regular Canonesses of Mariëndaal in Diest. At the time, Van der Heij lived in the local Franciscan friary and visited the convent connected to the chapter of Windesheim to provide the sisters with spiritual inspiration. Van der Heij's focus on the 'circumcision and regulation' of spiritual life is a case in point of both the Franciscans' and Canonesses' preoccupation with a strict, observant lifestyle.⁸²

Around 1517, Jan Seversz published Van der Heij's text in Dutch in Leiden in order to reach a wider audience. The intended readership of the printed book consisted of 'all devout people.'⁸³ Van der Heij translated the text and he might also have edited the sermon, but the original monastic audience and setting are still manifest in the published text. Occasionally, he addresses his readers as 'mijn uutvercoren ioncfrouwen' (my chosen maidens),⁸⁴ 'mijn lieve kinderen ende vrienden' (my dear children and

⁸¹ The only female convent in Culemborg at the time was Mariënkroon, which belonged to the Chapter of Utrecht and was thus closely connected to the Modern Devotion. See Hildo van Engen, *De derde orde van Sint-Franciscus in het middeleeuwse bisdom Utrecht. Een bijdrage tot de institutionele geschiedenis van de Moderne Devotie*, *Middeleeuwse studies en bronnen*, 95 (Hilversum: Verloren, 2006), p. 246 n. 39. A possible indication of a direct connection to religious communities of the Modern Devout is Veldener's possible involvement in setting up the printing press of the Brothers of Common Life in Brussels: see Kok, *Woodcuts*, I, p. 36.

⁸² The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fol. [A4]r: '[...] waer in dat ghi u sout besniden ende reguleren' ([...] in which you should circumcise and regulate yourself). Cf. Anna Dlabáčová, 'Transcending the Order: The Pursuit of Observance and Religious Identity Formation in the Low Countries, c. 1450-1500', in *Religious Orders and Religious Identity Formation, ca. 1420-1620: Discourses and Strategies of Observance and Pastoral Engagement*, ed. by Bert Roest and Johannek Uphoff, *The Medieval Franciscans*, 13 (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016), pp. 86-109 on the observance as an 'order-transcending' ideal.

⁸³ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fol. D5v: '[...] tot profijt van alle devote menschen' ([...] for the profit of all devout people).

⁸⁴ E.g. The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols [A4]v, D4v.

friends),⁸⁵ simply ‘ioncfrouwen’ (maidens)⁸⁶ or ‘dochteren’ (daughters),⁸⁷ while at other times, he employs a more universal address in line with his new readership: ‘devote menschen’ or ‘personen’ (devout people)⁸⁸ or even ‘kersten menscen’ (christian people).⁸⁹ The meticulous references to the Bible and to Bonaventure’s Commentaries on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard are also reminiscent of the original audience and his Latinate notes. Van der Heij’s text shows, however, that a form of address associated with religious audiences by no means excludes lay readers and that we should be careful when using this kind of address as evidence for a non-lay audience.

It was probably Van der Heij himself who brought the *Distaff Given for a New Year* to the attention of Jan Seversz as a suitable text for publication. Recent research, notably by historian Koen Goudriaan, has shown that, in the Low Countries, the Franciscan Observants were particularly active with respect to the early printing press.⁹⁰ They acted as editors and intermediaries between authors and commercial printers. The *Distaff Given for a New Year* is a telling example of their active use of the printing press to distribute new works amongst the laity. Van der Heij probably had personal connections to Jan Seversz, who had printed his work already in 1511.⁹¹ A text that allowed women to interweave their daily occupation with working on the salvation of their souls by turning their utensils, products, *and* actions into objects of meditation and devout deeds would have found a ready market in Leiden, the most important producer of cloth in the Netherlands (and Europe) at the time.

The materiality of the editions confirms the private reading suggested by the reader being addressed in the singular in Veldener’s *Spinroc*: both are practically-sized octavo booklets. These were editions women could acquire relatively cheaply and easily carry with them, perhaps also to their workshops. This kind of intensive use during manual labour, the lay readership, and ephemeral nature of the quires also explains the low number of extant copies. An interesting aspect of the materiality of the editions is the space of the page and, in particular, the insertion of woodcuts. The

⁸⁵ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fol. B4^r.

⁸⁶ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols [A6]^r, C3^v.

⁸⁷ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fol. [A7]^v.

⁸⁸ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fols [A8]^v, B6^v, C4^v, C6^v.

⁸⁹ The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fol. B5^v.

⁹⁰ Goudriaan, ‘The Franciscans’, pp. 279–308; see pp. 282 and 294 on the *Distaff Given for a New Year*. Cf. Dlabáčová, *Literatuur en observantie*, pp. 210 ff.

⁹¹ See De Troeyer, *Bio-bibliographia franciscana neerlandica saeculi XVI. Pars biographica*, pp. 25–26.

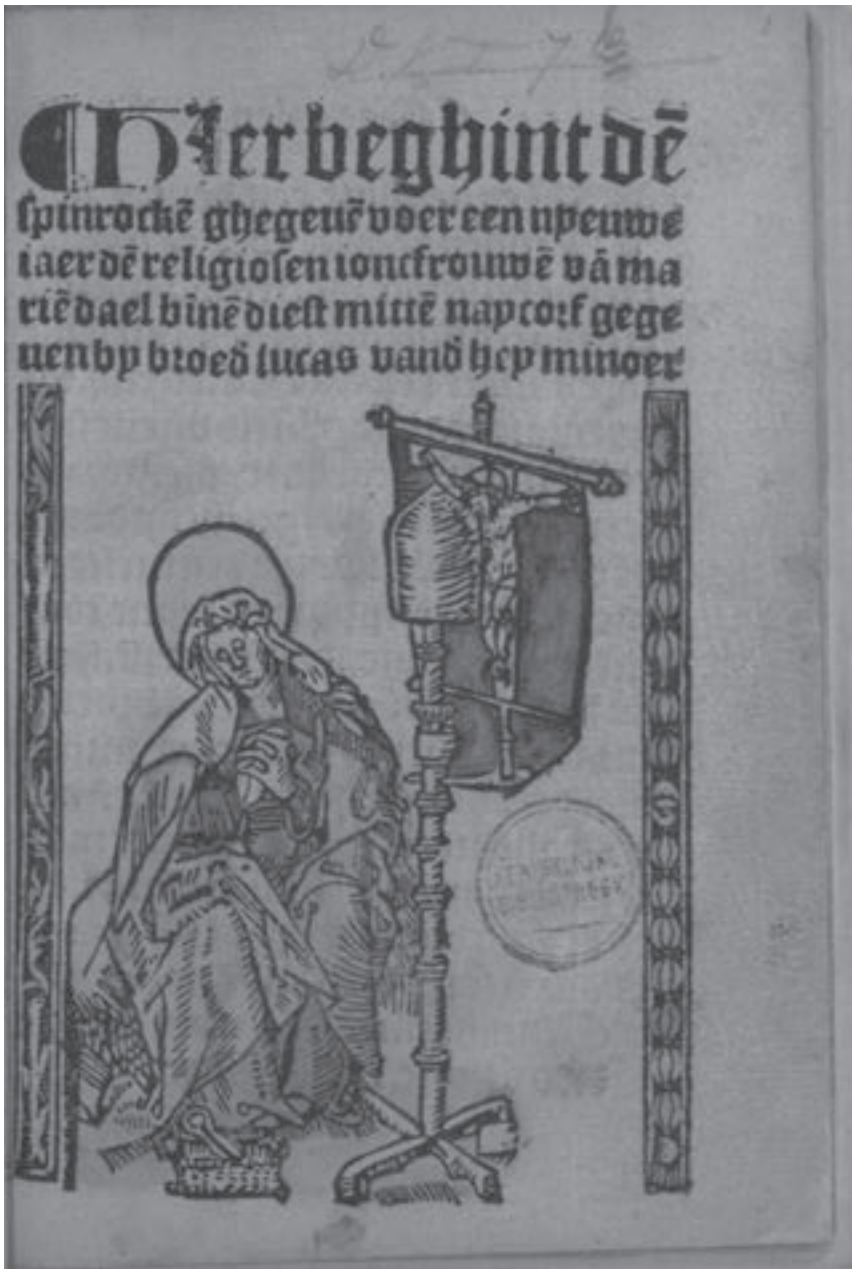


Fig. 2. Title page of the *Distaff Given for a New Year*, The Hague, Royal Library, 228 G 20, fol. ar^r. 23 April 1517. Photo courtesy of Early European Books online / ProQuest LCC, <http://eeb.chadwyck.com>.

use of pictorial images that aid the readers in their contemplation of the textual, allegorical imagery differ considerably in both editions. On the one hand, Veldener thought it useful to provide images of the events from the Passion of Christ that were signified by the distaff, while, on the other hand, Jan Seversz chose to use a woodcut for the title-page only (Fig. 2). This image did not show the figurative meaning, but the allegorical figure itself: a saintly female (probably Mary) sunk in devout prayer next to a distaff. At the top of its shaft, next to the flax, a crucifix – an image within an image – is attached to a frame-like construction. Behind Christ, a small piece of cloth is stretched onto the frame, which seems to represent the soul as discussed in the last part of the sermon. The sewing basket in the front right refers to the second sermon in the edition.

Although not of a high artistic or aesthetic value, the image is interesting because of its close relation to the text and its original iconography based on Van der Heij's text. Whereas Veldener reused eight woodcuts originally made for an edition of the *Epistelen ende evangeliën* (Epistles and Gospels), showing the reader conventional scenes such as the Carrying of the Cross (first paragraph on the distaff) (Fig. 3) or Christ nailed to the Cross (second paragraph on the fibre), Jan Seversz had the title-page woodcut especially made for Van der Heij's text.⁹² Here, the reader, i.e., the new readership of the vernacularized version, was familiarized with the allegory of the distaff presented in the text. The reader could identify herself with the saintly figure while working – literally spin in the imitation of Mary – and meditate and pray at the same time. Veldener's edition offered images that intersected the text and stimulated the reader's mental presence in the scenes of the Passion together with the textual exhortations to, for example, 'observe the blessed, heavenly flax'.⁹³

We should keep in mind, however, that the material book and thus also the woodcuts were possibly only used in the early stages of a devotee's familiarization with this kind of meditation. The aspects of the distaff and other tools and materials presented in both texts can be compared to *loci* in architectural mnemonics: the events from Christ's life and the meditations are localized in the analogous parts of the distaff, the fibre, the

⁹² On Veldener and his (re)use of woodcuts see Kok, *Woodcuts*, I, pp. 36-37 and 48. The woodcuts belong to series 22 (reproductions in Kok, *Woodcuts*, III), used in the following order: 22.24, 22.25, 22.21, 22.17, 22.20, 22.14, 22.23, 22.26, 22.28, 22.39. The *Adoro Te* prayer is illustrated with a woodcut of the Man of Sorrows (Kok, *Woodcuts*, IV, no. 174.1) previously used by the Printer of 'Kerstenspiegel.

⁹³ The Hague, Royal Library, 150 E 9, fol. [a6]r. See also n. 24 above.

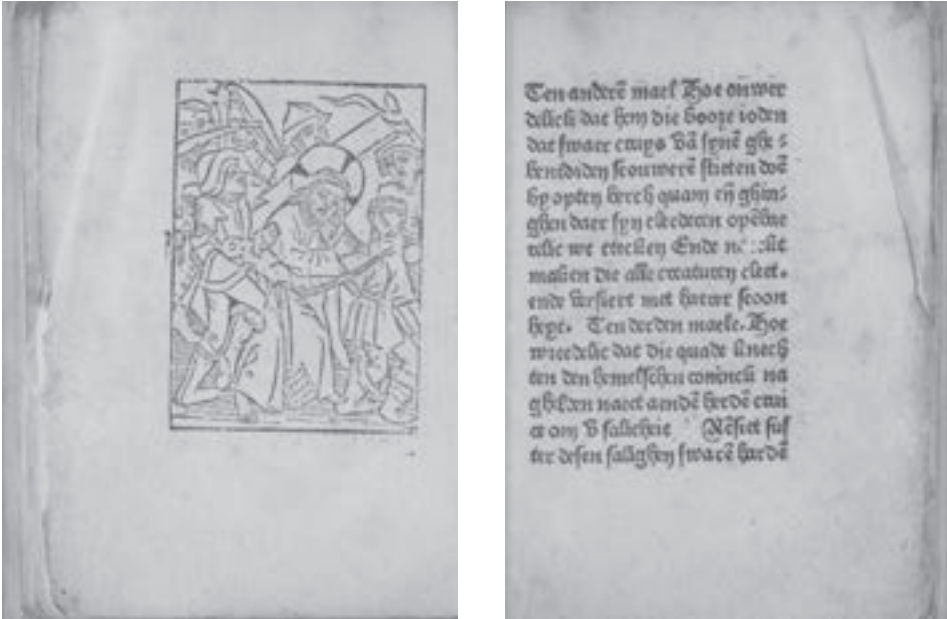


Fig. 3. *Spinroc*, The Hague, Royal Library, 150 E 9, fols a3^v-a4^r. Photo courtesy of Early European Books online / ProQuest LCC, <http://eeb.chadwyck.com>.

cloth and the operations of cloth making.⁹⁴ After the necessary repetition, the readers would have been able to remember the events, the meditations and the (mental) images ‘stored’ in the utensils, materials, and operations. In case one did not dispose of a physical distaff, the image printed on the title page of Van der Heij’s text could even serve as a mnemonic device.⁹⁵ One could ‘read’ the image and pass through all the stages of the meditative exercise without spinning physically, similar to the weaving of

⁹⁴ On medieval mnemonics and the retrieval of items stored in a ‘memory palace’, see the seminal works of Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 34 (Cambridge [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edition, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 70 (Cambridge [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁹⁵ Cf. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, esp. p. 222. See, however, also Peter Parshall, ‘The Art of Memory and the Passion’, *The Art Bulletin*, 81 (1999), 456-72 (pp. 461-62), who puts forward the critical role of the individual in memory theory.



Fig. 4. Quentin Metsys, *The Moneylender and His Wife*, Paris, Musée du Louvre. 1514. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Tony Querrec.

a chaplet or the wreathing of a garland through prayer sequences.⁹⁶ The insertion of the image could indicate that the text was indeed directed at ‘devout people’ in the widest possible sense, even at those who never set their hand on a distaff. Here, the allegory seems to prevail and break free of the materiality and act of spinning.

Reading the two distaff-texts, the object of the distaff itself becomes charged with symbolic meaning. The distaff should not only be interpreted as a symbol of domestic virtue putting women in a subsidiary position to

⁹⁶ Anne Margreet W. As-Vijvers, ‘Weaving Mary’s Chaplet: The Representation of the Rosary in Late Medieval Flemish Manuscript Illumination’, in *Weaving, Veiling, and Dressing: Textiles and their Metaphors in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. by Kathryn M. Rudy and Barbara Baert, *Medieval Church Studies*, 12 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 41-79.

men, of female inner power, or negatively as a sign of misogyny.⁹⁷ It can also be interpreted as a deeply religious object and a (mnemonic) tool for meditative contemplation. The distaff in the portrait of a woman by Maarten van Heemskerck thus need not exclusively represent feminine virtue in the domestic sphere. The woman's role might be partially comparable to the part performed by the wife in the *The Moneylender and his Wife* by Quentin Matsys (Fig. 4).⁹⁸ But while the moneylender's wife, leafing through a devotional book, is distracted by the material wealth laid out on the table, the woman in Van Heemskerck's portrait is working intently. Unlike her husband, she does not look at the onlooker straight in the eye. Her gaze can be conceived as a sign of an on-going visualization of the life of Christ before her mind's eye, while his austere life runs through her fingers, emphasizing the meditative qualities of spinning. Her position is similar to a man handling a rosary while staring into the distance (Figs 5 and 6).⁹⁹ The letters 'AEN' on the band that keeps the fibre from slipping down the shaft, whose function has hitherto remained unclear,¹⁰⁰ might be an abbreviation of 'AMEN', adding to the devout setting. Apart from domestic virtue, the distaff thus demonstrates the religiosity of the female sitter: while working she is absorbed in meditation and prayer, quite possibly also for her husband's soul.

Final remarks

The distaff meditations empowered women to turn their daily labour into a powerful meditative performance of the Passion. Work and prayer truly went hand in hand. The two Middle Dutch distaff texts give us a rare insight into the meditations of these women while they were silently

⁹⁷ Biscoglio, "'Unspun' Heroes', p. 165. Cf. Wayne E. Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 72-75.

⁹⁸ Geert Warnar, 'Elckerlijck in beeld: Jan Provoosts "Rijkaard en de dood"', *Spiegel der letteren*, 57 (2015), 273-89 (284) and Joanna Woodall, 'De wisselaer. Quentin Matsys's *Man weighing gold coins and his wife*, 1514', in *Trading Values in Early Modern Antwerp*, ed. by Christine Göttler, Bart Ramakers and Joanna Woodall, *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 64 (2014), 39-75.

⁹⁹ On this painting, see: Ramakers, 'Books, Beads and Bitterness', pp. 147-48. Cf. As-Vijvers, 'Weaving Mary's Chaplet', esp. pp. 43-55 on the rosary and Passion meditations and pp. 71-79 on the iconography of the rosary in prayer books.

¹⁰⁰ Van Tuinen, 'Maarten van Heemskerck, *Portrait of a Man*' and the literature mentioned there.



Fig. 5. Maarten van Heemskerck, *Portraits of a Woman, possibly Anna Codde*, Amsterdam Rijksmuseum. 1529. Courtesy of the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 6. *Portrait of a Man with a Rosary*, copy after Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection, 1982. 1545. Photo metmuseum.org.

engaged in their daily labour. Both texts systematize the meditative practice and provide women with directions to turn the material objects they handled daily into an object for contemplative meditation. One can suppose, however, that at least among religious women, many ‘private schemes’ existed that were never codified and that used the distaff as a template (a mnemonic image) to which private, memorable images of Christ’s passion could be attached.¹⁰¹ Through male intervention – at least in Van der Heij’s case – the systematized meditations reached a lay audience. Van der Heij’s publication is a case in point of the Franciscan Observant involvement in the production of religious literature on the early printing press in the Low Countries. In both texts, the distaff is an indisputably positive material object, a pictorial (woodcut) and mental image that allows the public to transcend materiality and structure their own meditation on the life of Christ, thus forming their spirituality. The texts can also be viewed as endeavours of re-appropriation of the

¹⁰¹ Parshall, ‘The Art of Memory’, pp. 465-69.

distaff. Despite both religious and lay audiences being familiar with the other (also negative and sexual) connotations, spinning became an act of spiritual performance and renewal, preserving the soul while performing an ordinary set of operations. Perhaps women and even men who did not participate in cloth production performed the meditations as a purely spiritual exercise. Especially in Van der Heij's text, the metaphor itself seems to take the upper hand. The distaff in pictorial images can thus also be seen as a sign of Passion meditation, similar to how the rosary is often portrayed in the hands of men.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Ramakers, 'Books, Beads and Bitterness', p. 147.

