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Enacting Devotion

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Conclusions

Practice makes perfect. In the case of devotional literature produced in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in the Low Countries there was certainly the hope that this was the case. These books were designed for readers to practise their performances, performances in which they took up the role of spectator or, in most cases, even participant in the scenes evoked by the books. In these books variants of the word *oefenen* (to practise or exercise) were repeated over and over again. Devotee-performers were particularly encouraged to ‘practise in the Passion’. Various mechanisms were presented with which devotees could develop their practice. These mechanisms have been examined in the three main chapters of this study. Chapter 2 analysed the different dynamics involved in the concept of space. One recurring feature was the way that devotees were invited to actively take up a role in their surroundings, activating sacredness through their activities of reading and meditating. Through the way that books directed readers’ attention to space, readers were taught how to work with their spatial settings: to move through them as if moving through the sacred places of Jerusalem, or Rome. The books helped to bridge gaps in time and space and enforced the constant connections devotees were supposed to make between their own lives and the events of sacred history. Acting out activities in space brought the performance to life.

Chapter 3 zoomed in on the use of the body. Performances required a carefully arranged choreography, which was provided in the booklets through their instructions on how to use the body in specific postures, movements, or display of emotions. These instructions provided guidance by showing how devotee-performers could use the movements of their bodies to identify with Christ and learn about his suffering, bridging the experiential gap. An emphasis on how to employ the senses while reading helped to make the imagined scenes even more accessible, more vivid. The idea of performative presence was central, and the use of the body was recognised to be instrumental in the practice of being present in the story.

Chapter 4 then examined the source material in relation to the concept of mind, specifically the cognitive strategies at work during performative reading and the language used to describe them. Through the efficacious employment of mechanisms like the imagination, memory, multimodal reading, or use of metaphor, performances became effective and transformative. Performances relied on the reader-performer’s ability to be transported to the world of the book, where he could use the information and experience gained through other means to fuel his sacred enactments.

With this focus on the performative aspects of religious reading in the late Middle Ages this study has contributed to our understanding of the role that this literature could take on in the lives of devotees living in the urban environments of the Low Countries.

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These books provided them with the opportunities to practise religion for themselves, in their own homes or at their work. Even though the formats of many of these books are short and straightforward, the mechanisms at work in them are complex and their effects far-reaching. This literature provided readers with new lenses with which they could view their own lives and their environments and further develop their religious identities. This identity was based on practice, on performance, and on living out the precepts given to them by the books, which were supposed to be activated through repeated use. Devotees were brought up in performance literacy which extended from the books outward to participation in other activities, both religious and non-religious. Many of these books also promised great rewards to those who took the devotional practice seriously, most specifically the reward of a blissful afterlife and a limited sojourn in Purgatory.

Although all of the books examined in this study display a common emphasis on performance, there are nuances in the way that they set up or evoked this performance. There existed a continuum in the specific operation of the themes and mechanisms used, in the attention for the active use of space, body, or mind, along which the different sources can be placed. The work that contained the most extensive instructions on how to practise Passion meditation is the *Fasciculus mirre*, the author of which clearly and consciously guided his readers in the appropriate and effective strategies to use. However, one could also argue that the bulk of the books somewhat hindered the easy access for readers to its performative content. On the opposite end of this continuum are works like the *Berch van Calvarien* and the *Devote meditacie*, which facilitated the performance of virtual pilgrimage, providing guidance through their combination of instructions in the prologues, their prayers, and their prompts to say Paternosters and Hail Marys, and their woodcuts depicting the *Via Crucis*. Their almost pocket-sized formats allowed readers to practise these exercises regularly, incorporating them in their daily routines, while also doing their jobs, developing their religious personas through the constant imaginative transportation to the Holy Land.

Then there are works like the *Geestelike boemgaert*, which had the same goal as the *Berch van Calvarien* and *Devote meditacie* but packaged this in allegorical form. Without any instructions for devotions or even prayers, it is somewhat atypical compared to the rest of the core material. However, it is illustrative of the way that the Passion of Christ was made available to devotees through imagery akin to that in the mystical tradition that centralised the symbolism of Christ as bridegroom and the devotee as the loving soul. It provided readers with narrative ways with which they could conceptualise their performance. The journey of *Siel* was an effective model for reader-devotees in the way that it connected space, impacted the body, and moved the mind. Informed by findings from cognitive science, we saw that readers could mirror the actions they saw narrated in the text and depicted in the images, and in this way could take on the role of *Siel* themselves and develop experiential knowledge of Christ's Passion and the consolation, satiation, and healing flowing out of it.

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Of the core material, the *Negen conden* booklet is unique in the way that it offered its readers a wide range of devotional exercises from which to choose. In its selection of material, it is exemplary of the endless new ways with which the Passion was reimagined and offered to readers. The author-compiler shows himself to be of the same mind as Godscalc Rosemond in the latter's advice to regularly change the material for meditation, in order to prevent meditation from turning into a sorrowful habit. Most of the texts in the *Negen conden* were focused on guiding readers in their identification with and compassion for Christ, either by leading them through the scenes of the Passion and focusing attention on particular aspects, or by connecting to Christ's physical and mental suffering in very concrete ways, notably through the list of the times Christ suffered from the experience of being cold. These techniques helped readers embody a particular role by which they could increase their understanding of the Passion and practise their responses to it.

One central notion that one can detect in the source material is that the transformations instigated through the practice of the exercises offered in the books were supposed to be permanent. Turning back to the idea of method acting that was explored in the Introduction we can say that the ideal was to actually *become* the character – not acting, but being. The devotee-performer's way of being, seeing, and acting in the world was reconfigured in the light of sacred history. Some sources put specific prompts in place (i.e. the name of Jesus on the walls of the house or the sounds of church bells) to help remind devotees of their religious place in the world. In other words, the sources pushed readers outside of the books, to implement the mechanisms they were taught through the performance of reading in their other daily activities.

This again returns us to the notion of literacy, and performance literacy specifically. We have seen how the encounter with dramatic or visual media informed the expectations of devotees of the contents of the books. But the books themselves also had many techniques to offer that readers could apply in other contexts. For example, the books taught how to transcend the barriers of one's physical location and blend it with imagined and/or metaphorical spaces. Readers could then learn to live in this new, sacred blend. Books also focused attention on details, gestures, postures, and movements observable in other bodies and the meaning and significance behind them. They repeatedly stressed the importance of reaching further with the mind, employing cognitive techniques to develop the imagination and gain embodied knowledge. All of these mechanisms could then be applied when participating in other performative activities as well.

It should be stressed that this performance literacy did not function only in religious contexts. Precisely because performative reading interacts with a broader performative culture, it allows readers to rehearse their roles outside the sphere of devotional reading as well. Furthermore, many of the mechanisms studied in this book can be observed in other areas too. Examples can be found in the use of the dialogue genre in didactic and scholastic texts; the use of mirror characters in narrative literature; or the

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extensive body of sources on the role of physical or cognitive processes, such as the senses or memory. Reader-devotees could have been familiar with these other forms of knowledge and could use this experience when reading their devotional books. And vice versa, the experience gained through the performative reading of devotional literature would shape readers' interaction with other activities and content. After all, readers were not only devotees, but also citizens, artisans, and labourers, using their ability to read, learn, and perform to sustain all of their other roles as well.

Therefore, I would argue that when we assess late medieval reading culture, we should carefully expand our understanding concerning the notions of literacy and reading. In a late medieval context, these terms should encompass a much broader interpretation, one that includes performative modes of reading, types of reading that extended outside the pages of the book. It is not enough to develop only a literary analysis of these books, but we should concern ourselves with functions and effects, and interpret these in combination with the broader performative culture of the period. In their engagement with these books, readers did not only learn how to decode the letters, symbols, and images on the page. Much more than that, they learned how to perform. They learned how to take the book, including its texts and its materiality, activate it, and turn it into a guide for their active, performative practices.

The significance of the fact that most of the sources discussed in this study are printed works should not be underestimated. In this period a flourishing market for books developed, one that did not rely on the mechanism of individual commission, as had been the case for most of manuscript culture. Instead, the printing business functioned through the activity of commercial printers, businessmen who attempted to cater their output to the demand of their readers. As noted, in opposition to some earlier research traditions, it is now clear that these printing businesses, with some exceptions, did not operate from the initiative or control of religious institutions. Instead, these printers were lay men (and occasional women) who printed for their fellow citizens, which included the laity as well. In other words, we see an evolving market of books produced by the laity for the laity.

These printers selected material that they thought would be commercial successes. They printed a wide range of books, meaning that there must have been a widespread demand for books that guided readers in becoming the devotional performers as trained by the books. Many of the books examined in this study were among those most frequently printed, but even these are only a small portion of the total number of devotional titles printed in these decades. Readers had a wealth of options from which to choose. Books were easily accessible and readers could go and choose one suited to their possibilities and wishes.

The last chapter drew attention to the way that this appearance of a steady flow of new titles operates in some tension with the goals expressed in them. If readers actively applied themselves to practise the exercises provided for them, the books would ultimately make themselves redundant. However, there is clearly an unwavering demand for these

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books. This points out an obstacle that always remains in research on historical reading practices: our knowledge on what readers actually did with their books is limited. In most cases we do not know whether readers followed the instructions, if they practised the postures, or if they read the meditations on a daily or weekly basis. An interesting parallel that could be offered in this respect is the current trend for self-help literature, which sometimes uses language remarkably similar to that of late medieval devotional literature. This literature is undeniably popular, which makes one wonder whether these books are actually successful in making their readers happy. Their failure to do so would make continued consumption of this literature inevitable.¹

The ambition expressed in late medieval devotional books is undeniable, some even containing terminology more generally associated with men and women living under a religious vow or with mystics. Performative devotional reading was to initiate a process of spiritual and moral transformation: these books seek to shape their reader's inner experience, through or combined with the training of outward behaviour. They want to guide a devotee's access to God, helping him to obtain visions of the divine or even union. This is expressed in a variety of ways, such as an evocation of spiritual progress through the notion of 'climbing' (as in the *Berch van Calvarien*) or using imagery of consumption in descriptions of contemplation of Christ's Passion (in, for example, the *Geestelike Boemgaert* or *Negen Conden*). Whether the books have achieved these effects is impossible to know. The practical circumstances of most lay men and women would usually have prevented them from spending their days in contemplation, as their religious neighbours had more opportunity to do. However, the books themselves assume a high level of intellectual and religious capacity in their lay readers.

Thus, although it is not possible to come to definitive conclusions about the effects of these books, the material itself, combined with contextual evidence and modern insights, make it plausible that the expressed expectations in the books were actually met in reality. Their wide dissemination is an indication of the demand for them. The works themselves offer a systematic approach to devotional performance, making their techniques achievable. The popularity of theatre, which is observable from other sources, suggests that there would have been a susceptibility in lay devotees to the performative mechanisms expressed in these materials. And lastly, modern cognitive studies confirm the effectiveness of some of the techniques offered in the source material. Although, of course, the level of participation would have varied significantly from reader to reader, it seems an acceptable conclusion that the books achieved their goals, making devotional enactment widely available for lay devotees.

¹ Note the following comment of Jessica Lamb-Shapiro 2013: 'Publishing statistics claim that 80% of self-help book customers are repeat buyers, which could indicate that they are not helping. Some suggest that buyers of self-help books don't read more than the first twenty pages, if they open them at all. Just the act of buying a self-help book is reported to make someone feel better.'

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This performative enactment helped lay devotees to support and expand the active roles they took in religious culture. Engagement in performative reading activities made the possibility of living a religious life in the world available to the 'common man'. Without negotiation of religious authorities or institutions, lay men and women could buy these books and take responsibility of their own devotional lives. Returning to the notion of performance literacy, we have seen how the experience of being a spectator-viewer of medieval theatre and art would have shaped engagement with these devotional works. The reversal of this process is certainly significant as well: the books and their invitations to performatively interact with them aided the reader in his subsequent experience, perception, and understanding of other performative media and activities. It is precisely because of these reasons that these books provide us with invaluable insights in the role of devotional literature in late medieval society, in this period of religious development and change.

In historiography the significance of this period, the early sixteenth century, has often been a subject for debate. Various scholars have attempted to answer questions concerning periodisation and causation, debating whether this period should be acknowledged as the birth of Humanism or the Reformation, or as the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern period.² This study does not presume to have offered new answers to these questions, offering instead new explorations of hitherto largely neglected material. Although these sources have been featured in overviews of publication numbers in this period, the actual contents of the works have too often been put aside with only generalised characterisations. This study has shown the potential inherent in not only the books themselves but also in a performative approach. It is clear that the early sixteenth century was a period brimming with initiative and opportunity for the laity, both the producers and consumers of the book. The examination of these books through a performance perspective allows for a more nuanced view on the role of religious literature in this period, and with it, opens up not only new perspectives with which to approach older questions, but also new questions. Future research may expand on various issues, connected to the books themselves or their broader context. It is clear, for instance, that there is still much to explore on the subject of the printers, as active agents, intermediaries, designers, and compilers, making religious material available to their fellow lay citizens.

As has been explored, the ultimate goal of the devotional reading process, as expressed in many of these books, is to obtain spiritual progress and union with God, if not in this life, then in the afterlife. One of the authors, Godscalc Rosemond, phrases this in the following passage, at the end of a prayer devoted to the five main wounds of Christ:

² See, for reflections concerning issues, for instance, Goudriaan 1994 and 2015; Cockx-Indestege and Heijting 2010. Of course, traditionally the year 1517 has been taken to be representative of an important shift in religious reading culture. In this view, Luther made vernacular reading of the Bible available to the laity. This view has been challenged repeatedly, see, for instance, Gow 2005; Corbellini et al. 2013.

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And [grant us] that we with our reason may learn to know God and heavenly things, with memory may ruminate on his grace and many blessings, and with will love him above all, so that we in the last judgement of God and in eternity may mirror ourselves in the glorious glittering wounds of the humanity of Christ Jesus and in his divine being.³

In another of his works a prayer is included, addressed to ‘our holy angel’, to recite every morning and evening. It states:

O, my holy faithful guardian, please stand by me in the hour of my death and then bring me forth as a mirror of the bloody passion of Christ. And imprint in my heart the naked, bloody, crucified Jesus with his five holy, flowering, running fountains.⁴

Rosemondts script for prayer was thus the expression of a desire to become a mirror of Christ, of his Passion, of his wounds. In this way a devotee would be made sure of his salvation, in the last judgement of God. This fundamental desire, to become like Christ, lay at the heart of medieval Christianity and was also the underlying principle of the devotional literature examined in this study.

Rosemondts himself has created a body of literature specifically designed to guide readers in many different aspects toward this underlying goal. As a member of the learned clergy Rosemondts shows himself to be fundamentally concerned with providing this type of literature for the laity. The traditional division between lay and religious seems to break away in his vision, as he gives all his readers the opportunity to take responsibility for their own devotional lives, the opportunities to become ‘mirrors’ of the Passion of Christ. As becomes especially clear in his *Boecxken vander biechten*, he puts the burden on all his readers, both lay and religious, to order their lives according to divine will, whatever their station. He repeatedly points out to them their responsibilities not only for their own lives, but also the care for other souls, in this life but also those in the afterlife.

Occurring often too in his vision is the notion that his readers are his brothers and sisters, becoming so through the reading of his books and the shared devotion to Christ’s Passion. For instance, in the *Leeringhe vanden Pater Noster*, as cited earlier, he states: ‘All those that read in any of these three books and have devotion, I choose to be my faithful brothers and sisters’.⁵ An almost identical statement can be found at the end of the *Boecxken vander biechten*, where he also expresses the wish to be unified with his brothers and sisters and not be parted from them at the hour of the Last Judgement.⁶ Rosemondts shows himself

³ *Saligh boecxken*, fols. a4v-a5r.

⁴ *Dit boecxken is seer profitelijken ghelesen voor die ellendighe arme ghevangen sielkens*, fol. 2v.

⁵ *Leeringhe vanden Pater Noster*, fol. b7v.

⁶ *Boecxken vander biechten*, fol. cc9v.

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to be an author who does not write from a learned distance; instead, he pours much effort into his community of readers, regarding them as brothers and sisters. The gateway to this community is formed by the books, which allowed readers to practise active participation in devotional performance.

Rosemondts and his works form a significant illustration of the dynamics that lay at the heart of the production and reception of devotional literature in the sixteenth century. While he himself was educated and had a religious profession, he made sure to connect with his audience of lay readers. In order to do this, he did not limit himself to the oral medium of his sermons but created a body of literature for his 'brothers and sisters', choosing the printing press as the means with which to disseminate his works. These were produced by commercial printers in the capital of print at the time, Antwerp, most notably by Michiel Hillen van Hoochstraten and Henrick Eckert van Homberch. Rosemondts was thus an author who successfully engaged with the printing business, with the medium of the printed word, to make his devotional exercises available to lay readers.

While Rosemondts's vision is rare because of his clearly defined sense of authorship and community, these dynamics were not. Through the medium of the printing press, operated by lay businessmen, a diverse range of books became available, which made possible the wide dissemination of performative modes of reading. This study aimed to show the fruitfulness of a performative approach to devotional literature of the late Middle Ages, while also giving further rationale for the continuation of interest in these books. There are still many opportunities for further exploration in this field. Analysis of this literature through the perspective that readers were not only readers but also spectators of medieval theatre, viewers of the visual arts, and participants in a variety of religious rituals will open up new avenues. The laity's literacy and active participation in religious culture was negotiated through their engagement in this wider performative culture. This perspective will benefit our understanding of the ways that late medieval communities allowed for a host of different opportunities concerning living a religious life.