

FOREWORD

Von dem selben lesemeister [ging] ein ruf uz
dz sinen glichen in kunst gotlicher geschrift in
Rinschem strom nit wer und doch uss demutig-
keit wolte er nit doctor werden.

The fame of the fifteenth-century Dominican Gerhard Comitis was once spread more widely than his few remaining texts would now suggest. According to an introductory note in a manuscript with Gerhard's sermons «he was unequalled in the art of biblical study in the Rhineland but out of humility he did not want to become a doctor [in theology]»¹. Apparently Gerhard was a trained theologian – a *lesemeister* or lector – familiar with the academic environment of the *studia* of his order and the university, but he reached wider audiences in the religious houses of his order with his preaching in the vernacular. Gerhard's sermons in German were recorded in manuscripts for female Dominicans, especially in Nuremberg and in the Alsatian convents in Strasbourg and Colmar. Although his known activities were centered in South-West Germany, his reputation spread out all along the Rhine into the Low Countries. This is not necessarily only legendary. In 1403 Gerhard Comitis was supervising the founding of a new Dominican convent in Tiel, along the Rhine in the Netherlands².

¹ G. Keil, *Comitis, Gerhard*, in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon*, 2. Aufl., herausgegeben von K. Ruh *et alii*, Bd. II, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1980, col. 1-2.

² S. P. Wolfs, *Middeleeuwse dominicanenkloosters in Nederland. Bijdrage tot een monasticon*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 1984, p. 241.

Gerhard's life and work provide us with a telling example of the themes that this book is concerned with: the late medieval dynamics of religious, literary and intellectual life in the Rhineland and the Low Countries. Gerhard was moving between the regions and languages of the Netherlands and Germany, between theological learning and religious literature, between the Latin of the learned and the vernacular of the laity. This mobility of persons, books, ideas and texts has been studied in the research project that all contributors to this volume were members of from 2010 to 2013. *MITT*, the acronym of the project with the same title as this book, looked at changes in late medieval literary, intellectual and religious culture of Western Europe³.

MITT involved medievalists from the fields of philosophy, religious studies and literature in German, Dutch and Latin. Working within their own fields of expertise, all researchers explored themes, theories, approaches and academic traditions of their neighbouring disciplines, that quite often turned out to be prompted by similar if not always the same questions. Texts, manuscripts and people crossed cultural or linguistic barriers that might have been much easier to break through than those defined in modern academic (sub)disciplines. Gerhard's theological work as a *lector* or *lesemeister* (if it had survived) would have made him the subject of religious studies or the history of philosophy, while his vernacular sermons were studied in the departments of German literature and his activities in the Low Countries could make him an interesting figure for Dutch religious and textual culture.

The disciplinary interconnectedness in the *MITT*-project, which is reflected in the contributions to this volume, may be defined threefold in terms of region, methodology and themes.

Region.

MITT focused on the late medieval culture of mystical writing in the Low Countries and the Rhineland. Here, a highly sophisticated vernacular literature on mystical theology and religious practice had introduced new lay audiences to the intricacies of man's inner relation with God⁴. In the thirteenth century female writers like the German beguine Mechthild von

³ As an Initial Training Network within the Marie Curie Actions, *MITT* received funding within the 7th European Framework Programme.

⁴ Overviews in K. Ruh, *Geschichte der abendländischen Mystik*, Vols. II-III, München, Beck, 1993-1996 and B. McGinn, *The Presence of God. A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, Vols. III-V, New York, Crossroads, 1998-2012.

Magdeburg or the Dutch poet Hadewijch had produced spectacular new forms of religious poetry and prose in their own languages. New standards of vernacular literature were created in the fourteenth-century sermons and writings of the German Dominicans Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler and Heinrich Seuse, and the Dutch secular priest Jan van Ruusbroec, from Brussels. Up to this day these authors, who deeply influenced their contemporary audiences and literary culture, stand out as formidable figures in the history of Western mysticism and religious thought.

The works of these fourteenth-century mystics circulated all over the Rhineland and the Low Countries, but also less familiar texts and writers – like Gerhard – bear witness to the medieval interconnectedness of the German and Dutch literature. This has been noted before, both for the mystical tradition and other genres, ranging from law books and didactic treatises to epic works in verse⁵. However, the exchange of texts was most intense and varied in the domains of religious literature. Many Dutch and German works were read from the region of Lake Constance and the cities on the Upper Rhine (Basel, Freiburg, Strasbourg and Colmar) to the Lower Rhenish intellectual centre of Cologne and the cities of the Netherlands. Nowadays divided over five countries (Switzerland, Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands), the Rhineland and the Low Countries can be considered as one cultural region in the later Middle Ages. Although different languages, Dutch and German were so closely related that texts and ideas could travel easily through the Low Countries and the regions along the Rhine, passing the lines that we now recognize as frontiers. Shared interests in theology and spiritual life appear to have been more significant. Texts responded to the needs of wider audiences than their original language would suggest. One of the authors of special importance for the MITT-project was Johannes Tauler, the fourteenth-century preacher whose sermons were copied and read all over the German lands and the Low Countries – and also reached the printing press. The wide dissemination of

⁵ For instance recently Th. Klein, 'Umschrift – Übersetzung – Wiedererzählung. Texttransfer im westgermanischen Raum', «Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie» CXXVIII (2008), pp. 225-262, and more systematically the contributions to the volume *Schnittpunkte. Deutsch-niederländische Literaturbeziehungen im späten Mittelalter*, hg. von A. Lehmann-Benz, U. Zellmann and U. Küsters, Münster, Waxmann, 2003; for the tradition of mystical literature especially the contribution by W. Williams-Krapp, «Ein buch verschriben ze deutsch in brabantzer zunge». *Zur Rezeption von mystischen Schrifttum aus dem niderlant im oberlant*', pp. 41-54.

his texts and ideas has been studied in detail within MITT, to understand the textual culture of medieval mysticism⁶.

Methodology.

This idea of textual culture provided the methodological concept of MITT⁷. The project started from the material sources – that is: the manuscripts – to describe literary networks, patterns of text exchange, conservation, dissemination, adaptation. But studying «textual culture» also includes intertextual relations, the use of specific genres and languages to appropriate theological and philosophical knowledge or to construct religious practices and ideological formation. The concept of a textual culture is especially relevant for the mystical theology in German and Dutch. The transmission and exchange of texts between similar reading communities in the Rhineland and the (Southern) Low Countries show literary networks that go beyond the traditional framework of national literatures, or functioned on a smaller scale in regional literary cultures⁸. Pursuing these networks helps to describe the works of the German and Dutch mystics as a cultural phenomenon, taking into account the literary, social and intellectual contexts of the authors and their audiences, the practices of textual transmission in the late medieval manuscript culture and the mobility of ideas within the schools, universities, convents and other communities in the cities along the Rhine and in the Low Countries.

The itineraries of preachers – like Gerhard's in the fifteenth century – covered the whole of the Rhineland and most of the Low Countries, suggesting an international network that facilitated the exchange of literature in a wide area and in different communities. Another case in point is the sermon preached by Nicholas of Strasbourg during the chapter meeting of the Dominican province of Teutonia in Louvain in 1324. Although Nicholas was from the German lands, his sermon must have been appreciated by Dutch listeners and readers, judging by the dozens of manuscripts in which his sermon survives. Nicholas' sermon also crossed cultural barriers. Most manuscripts agree that the sermon was delivered at the occasion of the

⁶ See the special issue of «Ons Geestelijk Erf» LXXXIV (2013), 1: *Johannes Tauler. Mobility of Ideas and Transmission of Texts.*

⁷ J. Bray – R. Evans, *Introduction: What is Textual Culture?*, «Textual Cultures» II (2007), pp. 1-8.

⁸ N. F. Palmer – H.-J. Schiewer, *Literarische Topographie des deutschsprachigen Südwestens im 14. Jahrhundert*, «Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie», CXXII (2003), pp. 178-202.

Dominican chapter meeting, some rubrics claim that the sermon was held in the beguinage of Louvain⁹.

Themes.

There are many more examples of «theological learning meeting the laity» in the religious world of the later Middle Ages. Even narrowed down to the Rhineland and the Low Countries, the interactions are numerous and varied, but the mobility of ideas was not a matter of one way traffic from the intellectual spheres of the lector (*leesmeester*) to the general audience that could only read or understand the vernacular. Again, Nicholas' sermon is a good example, as this vernacular text was translated into Latin with a commentary.

Scholarship of the last decades no longer only looks at the late medieval processes of knowledge transfer as a form of translation coming from the ecclesiastical and academic elite and aimed at the wider audiences that could be reached through vernacular texts. There is a growing interest in the autonomy or self-reliance of the laity – with the laity both in the ecclesiastical sense as different from the professional religious and in the intellectual sense as different from the literate and educated. Gerhard's sermons in the vernacular exemplify one form of the dissemination of (religious) knowledge, but this was a crucial component in a larger process of medieval cultural transfer. Related phenomena were the involvement of lay intellectuals in philosophical debate, the significant position of women in spiritual life and writing and reading, the success of new religious movements or new forms of theology outside the realms of professional learning and in the vernacular languages. Late medieval literature shows a variety of responses to religious practices and ideas associated with the laity. Although vernacular writings were translated in Latin for wider circulation, the world of professional theologians sometimes remained reluctant to fully accept literature that might recognize or acknowledge philosophical and theological models, but was in fact primarily directed towards understanding the soul and its religious experience rather than looking for universal truths. It would nonetheless be wrong to judge that the late medieval mobility of ideas was (only) the outcome of opposing views on academic objectivity and spiritual subjectivity.

⁹ C. Burger, *Gottes Gnadenangebot und der Erziehungsauftrag der christlichen Kirche im Konflikt. Die Predigt über den goldenen Berg des Nikolaus von Strassburg, in Frömmigkeit – Theologie – Frömmigkeitstheologie. Contributions to European Church History*, ed. by G. Litz, H. Munzert, R. Liebenberg, Leiden – Boston, Brill, 2005, pp. 65-80.

More often, it was the search for common ground, shared beliefs or genuine mutual interest that generated new texts and translations or the exchange and adaptations of written material.

The contributions in this volume explore a large variety of relevant case studies, like the fifteenth century Ghent canoness Alijt Bake reading and appropriating originally German material that included Eckhart sermons (Joni de Mol) or the way Hendrik Herp's mystical treatise *Spieghel der volcomenheit* was embedded in a vernacular commentary when it came to South-West Germany (Marieke Abram & Anna Dlabáčová). The fourteenth century Dutch dialogue of Meister Eckhart and an anonymous layman (Yves van Damme) is a literary but characteristic representation of the ways professional learning and religious ambitions could interact. Similar dialogue texts like the German *Neunfelsenbuch* show how vernacular religious literature incorporated religious and social contexts (Claudia Lingscheid). Translations (Myrtha de Meo Ehlert) might have been a more neutral form of knowledge transfer to new audiences that lacked the education to consult Latin texts directly. Although the translation from one vernacular language to another could simply just lead to a wider circulation of texts, the rationale behind a translation remained the authority of the original text. The originally French pastoral writings by Jean Gerson (Daniëlle Prochowski) may have been circulated in Dutch because of the author's high status as Chancellor of Paris University. Gerson's role in critically assessing mystical writing was quite different (Luciano Micali), which goes to show that one author could perform both as a guide to the religious life and as a professional theologian. Texts also could have different functions, even when only accompanying or being accompanied by other texts in manuscripts, compilation and text collections (Monika Studer and Giacomo Signore).

All in all, this book brings together work on medieval religion, literature and learning from different disciplinary perspectives, but within a broader shared context of collaborative research that offers rich results.

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