

## AN ANONYMOUS MYSTIC TEXT OF THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

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The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were a period of great literary activity among religious communities in the Low Countries. Major figures such as Hadewijch and Beatrijs of Nazareth did not write in a vacuum, indeed the excellence of their work is itself evidence that they were writing in a recognised tradition. However, with very few exceptions, nothing at all is known about the circumstances of the lives of the women responsible for the many mystic and religious texts written in Dutch during this period. The authors were most probably members of a convent or a Béguinage. These lay-communities, which at the beginning of the period generally numbered only a handful of women, had by the end of the fourteenth century grown to rival many convents in size (see eg. Grundmann). The texts were probably written for the benefit of the community of which the author was a part, for its instruction and to provide material for meditation and contemplation. It is of course possible that some of these anonymous texts were written by men, but they are rooted in the tradition of feminine spirituality. The richness of this tradition is illustrated by the number and variety of texts collected for example by Axters in his *Mystiek Brevier*. More recently, Vekeman has edited an anthology entitled *Van Minne Spreken* ("To Speak of Love") in which he has collected a number of thirteenth-century mystic texts, including a selection of those found in the manuscripts which are the main source of Hadewijch's work. These two anthologies are eloquent testimony to the volume of texts produced at this time, most of which were written by women. They represent only a selection of the texts which have survived, several of which were published in articles written by scholars around the turn of this century (eg. de Vreese, "Geestelijke gedichten"; de Vooy). No doubt more texts remain unpublished, having been bound in manuscripts not

usually read by scholars of literature or theology.

One example of such a text recently brought to light is that published by Lievens in 1958. The poem is thought to date from the thirteenth century and was found in a medical manuscript dating from 1351. Although Lievens published it over thirty years ago, and it has been included in Vekeman's anthology, the text has not hitherto been discussed in any detail. In the following pages I will be addressing some of the issues raised in Lievens' article and examining the form and content of the poem. I came across this text in the course of my research into the collection of twenty-nine Middle Dutch poems known as the *Mengeldichten*, the first sixteen of which have been attributed to Hadewijch.<sup>1</sup> In his article Lievens prints the poem in long rhyming couplets as it appears in the manuscript, but remarks on the fact that over half the lines are distinguished by a strong internal rhyme-scheme, or use of assonance, *aab* (72). This internal rhyme-scheme is not sustained throughout the poem, so Lievens decided against printing those passages where it does occur in the short-lined form that would result if the internal rhyme-scheme were interpreted as an external one. Had he decided otherwise, large sections of the poem would have appeared in short-lined stanzas with an *abaab* or *abccb* rhyme-scheme.<sup>2</sup> For example, lines 15 and 16 of Lievens' poem as they appear in the manuscript and in their published form:

Vremde saken benemen smake ende troest  
[van binnen  
Die die wilt laten hi mach geraken in na  
[bekinnen

(Alien things deprive [one] of taste and inner comfort /he who is prepared to leave them he can achieve near knowledge).<sup>3</sup>

In view of their strong internal assonance, these lines could also be written:

Vremde saken  
Benemen smake  
Ende troest van binnen  
Die die wilt laten  
Hi mach geraken  
In na bekinnen.

Lievens justifies his publication of the poem in rhyming couplets on the grounds that otherwise the poem's form would have been too irregular. However, this has obscured a potentially interesting comparison with the form of the (probably) mid-fourteenth century didactic poem known as Jan Praet's "Speghel der Wijsheit" ("Mirror of Wisdom").<sup>4</sup> In this text, long passages in the *aabaab* or *aabccb* short-lined form occur between passages in rhyming couplets or with an *abab* rhyme-scheme. The more lyrical rhyme-schemes are used by the less elevated characters in this allegory, the use of rhyming couplets being reserved for those passages attributed to Christ, and to the figures of Wisdom and Understanding. The *abab* rhyme-scheme is similarly used only for speeches of Christ and of Wisdom and for a passage in honour of the Virgin Mary (Reynaert 30-31). An analysis of the content of Lievens' poem will show that whereas the more lyrical rhyme-scheme is used for the "lower" characters in the Jan Praet text, in the earlier poem the use of the more lyrical form is linked to the mystical content.

In the article Lievens suggests that the poem he has published may represent all, or part, of the "lost" Proverbia of Hadewijch (75). The possible existence of hitherto undiscovered texts by Hadewijch has been the subject of some debate. There is a seventeenth-century note in Hadewijch MS C (Gent Universiteitsbibliotheek 941) in which the scribe describes an entry in a late fifteenth-century catalogue of Belgian manuscripts. That entry referred to Hadewijch's "Prouerbia" which, the scribe remarks, are not among the work contained in MS C: "Prouerbia (quae hic desunt)" (de

Vreese, "Catalogus"). However, there is no evidence to suggest that the scribe actually examined the manuscript mentioned, so we are dependent on his interpretation of the catalogue entry. The fact that no part of the text is described as *prouerbia* in MS C does not necessarily mean that it may not have been referred to as such in another manuscript. In his article Lievens rejects the suggestion that the title Proverbia might nevertheless apply to the Mengeldichten 1-16 on the grounds of their form and content, and the fact that the Mengeldichten are called *Het tweede ryme* ("the second poems") in MS C. Although this description in MS C appears to refer to all twenty-nine Mengeldichten, Lievens goes on to reject the identification of the Mengeldichten 17-29 with the Proverbia on the grounds that in Mengeldicht 26 line 3 the poet describes her poem as a *liedekijn*, "small song" (Lievens 74). However, the Mengeldichten 17-24 and 25-29 are two discreet groups of poems, so a term used in poem 26 does not necessarily have any bearing on poems 17-24. The word *prouerbia* ("spreuken" in Dutch), meaning "epigrams" or "proverbs," is, moreover, frequently applied to rhymes in the short-lined form of the Mengeldichten 17-24 and it has recently been shown that these poems are probably contemporary to texts ascribed to Hadewijch and could even have been written by her (Murk Jansen).

There is, however, an arresting similarity to Lievens' poem among the Mengeldichten found in the Hadewijch manuscripts, which could strengthen his case. The second part of Mengeldicht 15 bears such a strong stylistic resemblance to lines 65-69 of Lievens' poem that it must surely be the result of direct influence at the very least. Poem 15 is in several ways unusual among the Mengeldichten 1-16. It is the only poem that is not in rhyming couplets, and unlike all the other Mengeldichten, its position within the group is not invariably the same in every manuscript. In Hadewijch MS R (Ruusbroecgenootschapsbibliotheek 385ii) the poem appears after poem 16, whereas

all the other Mengeldichten in the manuscript occur in their usual sequence.

In his edition of the Mengeldichten van Mierlo prints Mengeldicht 15 as it is found in the manuscripts, namely as a poem of thirteen stanzas with the rhyme-scheme *abab*, and remarks on the superlative quality of the poetry (x; 71-72). He also remarks that the poem has two distinct parts. He does not, however, comment on the incongruity of the fact that it is precisely in the second half of this poem, where the poet's lyricism and command of language are most apparent, that she fails to realise half the rhymes in every stanza. For example, lines 33-36:

Ic hake, ic wake, ic smake  
Die sake die mi dunct soete;  
Ic kinne met sinne daer es inne  
Die minne mijns euels boete

(I hanker after, I watch for, I taste / That which seems sweet to me / I know with vehemence [that] there is in / love the healing [redemption] of my [moral] evil).

It seems as though the poet has not even tried to make the first and the third line rhyme. However, if these same lines are printed as a rhyming couplet and are compared to a passage from Lievens' poem, the stylistic similarity is most striking:

Ic hake, ic wake, ic smake die sake die mi  
[dunct soete;  
Ic kinne met sinne daer es inne die minne  
[mijns euels boete  
(Mengeldicht 15:33-36)

Ic late, ic hate donmate der saken die mi  
[dede dolen;  
Ic swige, ic nige, ic crige, ic blive der minnen  
[scolen

(I relinquish, I hate the [shameful] lack of proportion of those things which caused me to wander; / I am silent, I incline [towards], I obtain, I continue in the school of love)  
(Lievens' poem lines 67-68).

In view of this similarity, the possibility must be considered that what we have in

Mengeldicht 15 is either two separate poems in quite different forms, or a single poem in which a shift in tone and style after the seventh stanza is reflected in a change of form.<sup>5</sup> As van Mierlo has pointed out, the first part of Mengeldicht 15 is a description of the longing of the soul for God, whereas the second part is an illustration of it (Lievens 71). The use of a different, more lyrical form here also reflects a change of content. The entire second half of Mengeldicht 15 can be presented in the form of the Mengeldichten 17-24 without straining the rhythm or the rhyme.<sup>6</sup> For example, the lines quoted above:

Ic hake, ic wake,  
Ic smake die sake  
Die mi dunct soete;  
Ic kinne met sinne  
Daer es inne die minne  
Mijns euels boete.

This brief examination of the form of these poems raises interesting questions concerning the relationship between Lievens' poem and Mengeldicht 15. Are the four lines in Lievens' poem an extract from a longer poem, part of which has been preserved as the second half of Mengeldicht 15? Or can the remarkable similarity between his poem and a Mengeldicht long attributed to Hadewijch be seen as further evidence to support Lievens' suggestion that his poem represents all or part of Hadewijch's Proverbia?

In support of his suggestion that the poem may represent Hadewijch's "lost" Proverbia, Lievens remarks that the poem appears to consist of a collection of separate couplets each expressing a single thought rather than the development of a continuous theme (74). However, many of the stanzas, though epigrammatic, are linked by a striking use of concatenation, and the following paragraphs will show that the poem is in fact a continuous argument, not a collection of separate sayings. Although I will print the text in the short-lined verse form where possible, the line numbers refer to the poem

as published by Lievens.

The first twenty-four lines of the poem as published by Lievens represent the poet's decision to follow the path of Love having strayed from "den rechten wege" (the straight, correct, way). The poem begins with the lines:

Hoe mochtic dat gelaten, in souden leeren  
[kinnen  
Heme die in die cruce ommi starf van  
[minnen

(How can I refrain from wishing to learn to know / him who on the cross died for me of love)

(Lievens' Mengeldicht lines 1-2).

The poet confesses that she has strayed, and expresses her repentance and desire for forgiveness. She then writes that God is merciful to those who leave all for him. There follows a section in the short-lined lyrical stanzas typical of the Mengeldichten 17-24, part of which are quoted above, in which the poet develops the mystic theme of leaving all for love, and the consequent reward of gaining true knowledge:

Die die wilt laten  
hi mach geraken  
in na bekinnen

(He who is prepared to leave / [all pleasures alien to love] / can [be fortunate enough to] gain / entry to near knowledge)

(Lievens' Mengeldicht line 17).

The poet then describes being without love as the worst that could ever befall humanity. She remarks that even if that fate were hers alone it would be bad enough but, she implies, it is more general. The section ends with the poet lamenting that she has never yet seen a master who could teach love.<sup>7</sup> She writes:

Maer ic ne sach nie mester der minnen wie  
[sal minne leeren?  
Ic peinse dat ic mi sal van allen dingen  
[keeren

(But I never saw a master of love, who shall

teach love? / I think that I will turn away from all things)

(Lievens' Mengeldicht lines 23-24).

The next eighteen lines describe leaving all for love. The poet stresses that she is prepared to suffer or die if love demands it of her. She writes:

Gebiedt sijt mi ic wille te hellen gerne varen  
Ende hemelrike ontseggic selve sonder hare

(If she orders me to do so I will gladly go to hell / and even heaven do I renounce without her)

(Lievens' Mengeldicht lines 33-34).

The poet explains this apparent heresy by saying that wherever love is there can be neither hell nor grief. The theme of suffering all things for love's sake is also central to much of Hadewijch's writing. In Lievens' poem, however, the emphasis is on suffering overcome with love. Using the image of love as a cure (also found in Hadewijch) the poet writes:

Minne es medicine alrehande quetsuren  
Daer omme willic haer dienen hoe soet mi  
[wert te sure

(Love is the cure for all ills / Therefore I wish to serve her however bitter it becomes for me)

(Lievens Mengeldicht lines 39-40).

This section ends with the assurance, once again in the lyrical short-lined form, that whoever endures all bitter adventures for the sake of love will move the spirit of love [to compassion].

The following section comprises twenty-five lines, ending with the lines that bear such a striking resemblance to the second part of Mengeldicht 15. The first lines express the poet's regret at the time she has wasted away from love, and love's generous forgiveness:

Minne es so faeliant si wilt mi alles verlaten  
Dat ic hare noyt ontbleef dat rouwet mi  
[uutermaten

Sine wilt negheen gewach hebben van minen  
[gebreken

Van minnen doget en can men te vollen niet  
[gespreken.

(Love is so noble she wishes to forgive me  
everything / That I ever avoided her I regret  
beyond measure / She does not wish to hear  
a word about my shortcomings / One cannot  
speak too highly of Love's virtue)

(Lievens Mengeldicht lines 53-56).

The stylistic device of dividing the poet's expression of regret and the mention of her shortcomings over two couplets, in each case paired with a line expressing the goodness of Love, serves to illustrate the all-embracing nature of Love's forgiveness.<sup>8</sup> There follows an increasingly lyrical expression of gratitude and praise of love's virtues in the short-lined form, culminating in the lines resembling Mengeldicht 15 quoted above.

The last forty-nine lines continue in praise of love. Many of the couplets can be divided into short-lined stanzas, which accentuates the lyrical nature of the passage and increases the impression that the poem is reaching a climax. Using a paradox that much resembles those found in Hadewijch, the poet writes:

Die herten fel  
die waren snel  
op minen persoon  
Met valschen oerconde  
dats mi gesonde  
ende ewelec loen.

(The fierce hearts / that were malicious /  
towards my person / with false witness /  
that is my salvation / and my eternal  
reward)

(Lievens Mengeldicht lines 83-84).

The paradox of gaining benefit from suffering is central to much mystic theology, including that of Hadewijch and of the Mengeldichten 17-24. In the following lines the poet of Lievens' Mengeldicht goes on to develop the paradox that without the strength provided by love she would be unable to withstand the blows of love.

The poet describes how she does not know the way in which love came into her, but she is certain that it is within her. She describes how, in enjoyment of love, the desire, faith and hope which had accompanied her thus far are taken from her. This definition of total submission of the individual will to that of God is found both in Hadewijch and in the Mengeldichten 17-24.<sup>9</sup> The poet of Lievens' Mengeldicht then describes her experience of love as follows:

Dan wort mi cont  
der minnen gront  
ende hare hoecheit  
Ende in haer widde dolic sonder arbeit

(Then becomes known to me / the depth of  
love / and her height / And in her expanse  
I wander without labour)

(Lievens Mengeldicht line 102).

The noun *arbeit* has a range of meanings which include "torture." In this sense it is found in conjunction with the concept of hell, for example in line 114 where the poet writes: "Maer die afkeer geliket der hellen arbeit" (But the turning away [from contemplation of the Trinity] resembles the torture of hell). The way this image is used in Lievens' poem is similar to its use in a stanza in Mengeldicht 21 in which the poet describes the experience of union in the following lines:

Want in dat wide  
Es men blide  
Jn hope so groet  
Datmen daer altoes  
Scijnt sorgheloes  
Van ewegher noet

(For in that expanse / one is happy, / with  
such great hope / that there  
one seems for ever free / of eternal  
destruction)

(Mengeldicht 21:37-42).

After this description of the wonder and expanse of love, the poet of Lievens' Mengeldicht refers to a sign which has been offered to her that she will reign eternally

with God. This too is reminiscent of Hadewijch who sees herself as the bride of Christ in her *Visions*.<sup>10</sup> The poem ends with a lyrical description of the Trinity:

Alsic sie  
 een in drie  
 ende drie ene enechheit  
 Even gelike  
 ende even rike  
 ende ene majesteit

Drie persone  
 den vader den sone  
 den heiligen gheest  
 Een wille een minne  
 een wesen een kinnen  
 een vrienſcap meest

([This is fullness of joy] When I see, / one in  
 three / three one unity / All equal, / and  
 equally powerful, / and one majesty  
 Three persons / the father the son, / the holy  
 ghost / One will one love, / one being one  
 knowing, / one friendship most of all)  
 (lines 115-118).

Lievens' *Mengeldicht* is clearly more than a collection of loosely connected epigrams. There is a development within the poem from the initial decision to follow love's road, and the regret and repentance for previous erring, through a description of what leaving all for love entails and the resolve to endure all that love requires, to praise for the forgiveness and goodness of God, culminating in the promise of reigning eternally with God and the description of the Trinity. In short, the poem traces the progress of the mystic in search of God through love. There is an interesting parallel with the *Mengeldichten* 17-24 which describe the same process in terms of the Israelites wandering in the desert before entering the promised land. In both texts the mystic must lift her soul through suffering beyond it into praise of God before she is able to enjoy union with the Trinity.

Throughout Lievens' poem the *aabccb* rhyme-scheme is used for the more mystical passages, reaching a climax in the

description of the Trinity at the end of the poem. This use of the form is consistent with that in the *Mengeldichten* found in the Hadewijch manuscripts and in contrast to that in Jan Praet's "*Speghel der Wijsheit*." In *Mengeldicht* 15 the lyrical form is used in the second half of the poem which is a mystical illustration of the soul's longing for union. The *Mengeldichten* 17-24 describe the ultimate stages of the soul's approach to God, unlike the majority of the other *Mengeldichten* which deal with the earlier stages of the mystic journey. In the "*Speghel der Wijsheit*," on the other hand, the lyrical form is used for the less elevated characters only. There appears therefore to have been a development from the use of this form in thirteenth-century mystic poetry, perhaps derived from its use in French and Latin hymns, to its use in the fourteenth-century didactic poem which would merit further research.<sup>11</sup>

The relationship between Lievens' *Mengeldicht* and work attributed to Hadewijch has proved to be more complex than thought at first. The lines which so resemble the second half of *Mengeldicht* 15 are not merely four of a series of separate sayings, but form part of a coherent whole. It is of course possible that both the lines in Lievens' *Mengeldicht* and the second part of *Mengeldicht* 15 are extracts from a longer poem which has since been lost. This would be quite a coincidence. The remarkable similarity could also be explained by positing that the author of Lievens' *Mengeldicht* was familiar with Hadewijch's work and had been directly influenced by it and by her mystic theology.

Lievens' *Mengeldicht* is not the collection of "proverbs" he, and the seventeenth-century annotator of MS C, expected to find with the title *prouerbia*. If, however, the title refers not to the content of a poem but to its form, then the fifteenth-century catalogue entry may have been referring to *Mengeldicht* 15, to the *Mengeldichten* 17-24, and perhaps also to Lievens' *Mengeldicht*. In that case, however, the reason for

Lievens' Mengeldicht becoming separated from the other texts by Hadewijch within a hundred years of her writing would need some explanation. It could, of course, be argued that the similarity between Mengeldicht 15 and Lievens' Mengeldicht is an indication that Mengeldicht 15 should not be attributed to Hadewijch. (In which case the inclusion of that text in the Hadewijch manuscripts would also need to be explained.) Such an argument would underline the unsatisfactory nature of authorship debates, as the authorship of a poem is almost impossible to determine without external evidence. However, there are sufficient similarities between Lievens' Mengeldicht and work ascribed to Hadewijch that a statistical analysis of the

language use of this poem compared to that of the Mengeldichten and of the Strofische Gedichten would be of interest.<sup>12</sup>

Although the textual similarities are not sufficient to prove that Hadewijch was the author of this poem, they do confirm that it is closely related to work attributed to her in terms of both form and content. Lievens' poem, like Mengeldicht 15, is a true "Mengeldicht" with its use of rhyming couplets and the *aabccb* rhyme-scheme, a true "poem in mixed forms." Whether or not Hadewijch was the author, the poem is further evidence of the excellence of mystic writing by women in the Low Countries during this period.

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Although the first sixteen poems have been translated by Mother Columba Hart under the title "Poems in Couplets," I prefer to use the Dutch title which can be translated as "Poems in Mixed Forms," since only fifteen of the twenty-nine poems in the collection are in couplets.
- <sup>2</sup> This form is also characteristic of the Mengeldichten 17-24.
- <sup>3</sup> Where necessary I have inserted words, shown by square brackets, to improve the English sense or to clarify its import.
- <sup>4</sup> There is a good recent edition of part of this long poem by Reynaert.
- <sup>5</sup> In a footnote Stracke suggests that the second half of Mengeldicht 15 would be better printed in a form different from the *abab* form. The rhyme-scheme he puts forward is *aaaabccccb* (281).
- <sup>6</sup> In the final two stanzas of Mengeldicht 15 the rhythm is somewhat strained in the *abab* form, and remains so when the rhyme-scheme is changed.
- <sup>7</sup> These lines could be interpreted as a criticism of the church and of contemporary spiritual leaders. Such criticism caused many devout women to face persecution for heresy: see for example Grundmann and Lerner.
- <sup>8</sup> I have capitalized the word "Love" here as it is unambiguously a personification. Where personification is simply one possible interpretation of the text, I have not used capital letters, in order to leave as many interpretations open as possible.
- <sup>9</sup> See for example Mengeldicht 3:85-89; Mengeldicht 12:45-50; Letter 13:34-39; and Mengeldicht 19:79-84.
- <sup>10</sup> See particularly Visions 10 and 12.
- <sup>11</sup> For the use of this form in devotional poetry see for example the "Prière à Notre Dame" by Thibaut d'Amiens in Bec 2:80-84.
- <sup>12</sup> In a forthcoming English edition of Hadewijch's Mengeldichten I hope to include the results of such an analysis.

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