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The social and economic status of women reflected in the medieval Dutch legend of *Beatrijs*

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1. Introduction

The position of women is certainly one of the important issues of recent decades, and not only in academic research. Facing concrete forms of vulnerability all over the world (which may include lower social status, the lack of choices women have, or the distinction between genders in schools, at work, and in the public sphere) and the current escalating presence of violence against women in the media and the temptation of formulating simple remedies to these problems, contemporary research in the humanities has to become sensitive to current developments and must dare to undertake the task of shaping the culture. We have to become aware that culture products such as literature, music, or art must not only reflect reality but also influence or (re)structure social statuses.

This article focuses on one medieval Dutch text, *Beatrijs*, and the way the central figure of the woman is portrayed in it. It presents the link between the different social positions of the protagonist *Beatrijs*, the norms she has to follow, and the possibilities she has to choose from at particular turning points of her life. *Beatrijs* clearly belongs to the canon of medieval Dutch literature, and many aspects of it have been discussed already. After the first edition was published by

Jonckbloet in 1841,¹ the text did not receive much attention, and it was not until the new revival of the story at the beginning of the twentieth century when its diverse features were studied. With the publication by Deschamps,² interest in the material characteristics of the manuscript itself piqued and detailed textual study with close-reading analysis and a diplomatic edition with Latin sources presented by Duinhoven³ has raised new questions about the interpretation of the text. The most recent research was presented in a publication that is the summation of the international project *Beatrijs internationaal*, which focused on the circulation of the text within and outside of the Netherlands in the past and present.⁴

Beatrijs is also one of the most widely circulated medieval Dutch texts with translations, adaptations, and intersemiotic interpretations all over the world. It has served as the source material for opera, films, modern literature for young readers, and theatre. This is why it is important to see *Beatrijs* not only as a story of one girl but more as a reflection of the social relations in the middle ages and a tool to influence them. This article shall not discuss how women were generally regarded in the Middle Ages but rather present the image set by literature and more precisely by one particular Dutch text and the way social attitudes are shown in it.

2. The text

The rhymed Middle Dutch legend of *Beatrijs* is an undisputed jewel of Dutch medieval literature. The story is as follows. A nun flees from her convent to marry a young man she has loved from childhood. After seven years of wealthy life, he leaves her with two children and no money. She is forced into a life of sin and sells her body outside of town. Remorse eventually drives her back to religious life, and she becomes a beggar. That way she finally arrives back at the convent where she discovers that she was not missed because the Virgin Mary had taken her place.

¹ *Beatrijs. Eene sproke uit de XIII eeuw*, ed. W.J.A. Jonckbloet, Den Haag 1841.

² J. Deschamps, *Middel nederlandse handschriften uit Europese en Amerikaanse bibliotheken*, Leiden 1972, pp. 70–72.

³ A.M. Duinhoven, *De geschiedenis van 'Beatrijs'*, Utrecht 1989.

⁴ O. Réthelyi, R. Sleiderink, T. van Kalmthout, *Beatrijs de wereld in. Vertalingen en bewerkingen van het Middel nederlandse verhaal*, Gent 2013.

The legend dates to the beginning of the thirteenth century and is known from texts in many languages. The tale can be found as prose legends in Latin collections of exempla by Caesarius of Heisterbach and probably based on these in other vernacular prose versions, the Dutch included. The rhymed Dutch legend dates to the end of the thirteenth century. The text is preserved in only one illuminated manuscript from about 1374 kept in the National Library of the Netherlands in The Hague under signature 76 E 5.⁵ It has inspired many poets, writers, composers, and film directors and not only in the Netherlands. There are several translations, adaptations, and works inspired by the Middle Dutch tale, some of them in English. There are three relatively faithful English verse translations:

- I. Harold de Wolf Fuller, *Beatrice: A legend of our lady* (1909)
- II. Pieter Geyl, *The tale of Beatrice* (1927)
- III. Adriaan J. Barnouw, *The Miracle of Beatrice. A Flemish Legend of c. 1300* (1944)

All of them try to follow the source text not only with regard to the content but also to the style using rhetorical devices typical for medieval epic poetry and archaism.⁶ A verse translation into Polish has been prepared within the programme of the international project *Beatrijs internationaal* where the international circulation of the medieval Dutch legend has been studied, but it has not yet been published.

3. The social status of Beatrijs

The nun Beatrijs assumes several different positions in her life. First she is a nun, then a wife and mother, then a prostitute and a beggar before finally returning to the starting point and becoming a nun again. Each of these choices is ruled by procedures that apply to a certain hierarchy. In each of these positions the choices she can make are also limited according to her status at a certain moment. Although

⁵ The digitized manuscript, the transcription, modern translation, and the general information on the text is available on the website of the National Library: *Koninklijke Bibliotheek: Beatrijs*, <https://www.kb.nl/en/themes/middle-ages/beatrijs> [accessed: 05.09.2017].

⁶ M. Dowlaszewicz. 'Stilistiek en vertaling. Analyse van stilistische kenmerken in de versvertalingen van Beatrijs', in: *Beatrijs de wereld in. Vertalingen en bewerkingen van het Middelnederlandse verhaal*, eds. O. Réthelyi, R. Sleiderink, T. van Kalmthout, Gent 2013, pp. 59–72.

there are many exceptions, most women were generally regarded as subordinate in the Middle Ages. This idea was rooted in the classical notion, expressed by great philosophers such as Aristotle, an authority until the late Middle Ages, for whom the relation of male to female was that of ruler to ruled. From the religious point of view the first woman, Eve, expressed weakness in Eden by succumbing to temptation, and this generated a deep distrust of women. Of course Eve had her counterpart in the person of the Virgin Mary. The legislation emphasized male superiority and women's rights regarding property, inheritance, or crimes, such as rape, were limited. Generally medieval women have to be regarded in relation to men and the social position with little independence and a range of possible choices defined by their status.⁷ This inferior position of women is not presented in the Dutch legend explicitly and at some points the reader can even assume that the female protagonist is a strong, independent woman. A closer look shows though a person in fact deprived of choice and limited by her current state.

3.1. Beatrijs the nun

At the beginning of the text Beatrijs is a young nun in charge of church fabrics, candles, door keys, etc. in the convent, a sacristan. The text underscores that she has good manners and is courteous, which is a sign that she was a girl of noble origin before joining the nunnery. Not all nuns came from really wealthy families, although a certain sum was required as dowry and to provide the right equipment, but the high birth of Beatrijs is emphasized a few times in the text, not only by her manners and way of speaking, but also, for example, by the fact that she is not acquainted with manual work such as spinning. In the nunnery she occupies an important position, dealing with the preparation of all formalities, which requires literacy, at the least. The image created shows a girl who is very conscious of her duties, who fulfils all her tasks perfectly, but her devotion to God does not play any significant role in the description at the beginning of the text. One may expect that a nun should be mainly devoted to her sacred life, but Beatrijs is rather devoted to her tasks.

⁷ J.C. Ward, *Women in medieval Europe, 1200–1500*, London 2002, pp. 1–13.

There were several reasons for girls to join a convent one of which was a vocation. But noble girls often chose to live as nuns for non-religious reasons.⁸ In families with many daughters if there was not enough money for dowries for all of them, one of the girls was sent to a convent, and, consequently, most of the goods fell to the rest of her sisters. A nunnery was also a refuge from forbidden love; thoughtful parents enclosed their daughters in convents to avoid unwanted romances making it a way to protect girls' virginity if another marriage was planned for them. Sometimes it was the desire to acquire knowledge that pushed young girls into the life of a nun.⁹ There was gender differentiation in access to education. While men could be educated in the liberal arts and become clerks, learning to read and write was generally forbidden to women (with some exceptions as we learn mainly from the lives of some female writers from well-to-do families who received good educations and did learn Latin and from other women in urban milieus in the Low Countries¹⁰).

In the case of Beatrijs, one reason seems to be most likely. As she was probably from a wealthy family, the lack of dowry did not concern her. It is also difficult to accept a vocation as the reason for choosing such a path as there is not much information about her devotion. We know though that there is a young man for whom she has had feelings since the age of twelve. This is the most likely reason for her monastic journey. The family opposed this love and decided to do as much as possible to separate the two.

Being a nun, she is obviously limited by the rules of the convent. They were not always written, but they were often configured as conventions or imposed by custom and usage. The clothes she wears are grey; her contact with men is restricted.

She tarried not, but soon did call
 On him at the window, which with bars
 Of iron crosswise covered was¹¹
 (ll. 101–103)

⁸ S. Shahrar, *Tussen ideaal en werkelijkheid; vrouwen in de middeleeuwse wereld*, Houten 1986, pp. 49–50.

⁹ E.M.F. Koch, *De kloosterpoort als sluitpost? Adellijke vrouwen langs Maas en Rijn tussen huwelijk en convent, 1200–1600*, Leeuwarden 1994, p. 106.

¹⁰ A. Baryn, 'Vrouwen in de middeleeuwse samenleving', in: *Gouden Tijden. Rijkdom en status in de middeleeuwen*, eds. V. Lambert, P. Stabel, Tiel 2016, p. 285.

¹¹ All citations from *Beatrijs* in the translation of Barnouw: A.J. Barnouw, *The Miracle of Beatrice: A Flemish Legend of C. 1300*, New York 1944.

The window with bars was a place for contact and communication with laypeople, and it is a clear sign of the division between the inside (convent) and the outside world. All decisions Beatrijs makes are preceded by prayers. Regarding the lack of true devotion, this seems more to be a sign of a custom she follows.

3.2. Man and woman

The moment Beatrijs leaves the convent, she assumes the role of wife. Throughout the story, the relationship between Beatrijs and her lover is not described as a marriage. The couple from our story were not married following modern rules (they do not sign any documents nor does any institution confirm their relationship), but the image of married life and views of it change over time. As early as in the eighth century, marriage was declared a sacrament, but this did not mean that it had to be concluded in the presence of a priest or a church. The relationship between a woman and a man, their love, and the promise of fidelity to each other was often enough to view such a couple as (privately) married. The moment when during the conversation Beatrijs and her beloved promise each other a life together can be considered as the conclusion of the sacrament. It was not until the Council of Trent in 1563 that the sacrament of marriage required the presence of a priest and two witnesses to recognize its validity.¹²

When examining Beatrijs' relationship with her beloved it becomes clear that her position was rather that of a companion than a subordinate. She has her voice and is able to make decisions (e.g. regarding leaving the convent), but she is bound by custom. In a unique moment of passion at a *locus amoenus* the young man suggests to Beatrijs that they become intimate. She refuses fiercely and does not want to be treated as a peasant woman. Later she provides clarification regarding under which circumstances intercourse between the two would be acceptable:

When I am naked in a bed,
 Neatly made with sheets and spread,
 Then mayst thou do thy will with me,
 To whatever thy heart prompteth thee.
 (ll. 359–362)

¹² J.C. Ward, *Women...*, pp. 26–40.

In many marital relations women were inferior to men in almost all aspects of life. However, in the sexual relations there was much more equality. In this respect Beatrijs's words seem to confirm the opposite. The assumption of a passive attitude and the willingness to answer to the desires of the young man do not comply with the partnership that was presented in the text before. The contrast between the proposal of the young man to make love in the fields and the idea of a well-made bed also reflect the idea of Beatrijs as a noble woman.¹³

3.3. Choices of a poor woman

The text does not tell us much about the subsequent seven years of the life of Beatrijs and her beloved. They have two children and after the money runs out, they sell all their belongings, and he leaves her in despair. As a noble lady, she is unable to earn anything as she is incapable of spinning or performing any other works a woman of a lower social status would probably do, and mendicancy is a shame she cannot accept at this moment. She is left with no other choice than opting for prostitution to earn a living. As early as the fourteenth century so-called 'prostitution of chance' was known in the Netherlands. Some brothels were owned by the town, and in some cases even the church. Prostitution was considered necessary for the sake of controlling lust, but the prostitutes themselves were expelled from the centres of towns. Since prostitution was not a very profitable profession, it was often combined with other waged activities, but, as we know, Beatrijs is not able to perform any of them. This means that she lives with her children in poverty and stays away from the inner cities. The text indicates also that she is likely performing non-institutional prostitution:

I must needs go in stead
Outside town to a lonely spot
And with my body earn somewhat
(ll. 448–450)

¹³ See also S. Vecchio, 'De goede echtgenote,' in: *Geschiedenis van de vrouw. Middeleeuwen*, ed. Ch. Klapisch-Zuber, Amsterdam 1991, pp. 111–116.

She is operating outside of town regulations, which was typical for poorer prostitutes, and this probably brings her even less financial benefit than if she were working in a recognized institution.¹⁴

The part of the text that describes her major choices is the least detailed. She has been abandoned and left without any support. As a woman deprived of the means to live, she is faced with the choice between prostitution, begging, and asking for help in a monastery. The last is not an option for Beatrijs because of her escape from the convent. She has to choose between the first two ways, and she chooses to save her honour and compromise her soul. There was still salvation for sin in the church by cleansing and forgiveness through confession and atonement. In the seven years following the young man's departure, her courtliness prevails, she chooses to stain her soul, and only after that first period of time does she feel repentance followed by conversion, and she decides to abandon this sinful path, and starts living as a beggar. This is also the moment in the text when Beatrijs reveals for the first time no doubts regarding her decision:

She would rather have her head
Cut off with a naked sword
Than to have sinned any more
With her body as was her way.
(ll. 486–489)

At this moment she clearly separates herself from her courtly origin and chooses definitively the path of a pure soul. Her devotion, which was not emphasized at the beginning of the text, overcomes the other values and becomes the driving force of her deeds. With social decay she reaches spiritual renewal and is ready to return to the convent.

The image of beggars shifted in the thirteenth century because of the growing popularity of mendicant orders (such as the Franciscans and the Dominicans). Its esteem was higher than before, and begging was seen as condemnation by poverty and was turned into a spiritual value. By changing her decision and leaving the life of a prostitute behind, Beatrijs makes a clear turn in her behaviour. From that moment on all her choices are ruled only by her devotion (mainly to the Virgin Mary). Without any remorse, she leaves her children

¹⁴ S. Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, London 2003, pp. 207–210.

behind with a widow and goes back to the convent to reclaim her previous life as a nun.

3.4. Maternity

Amongst all the medieval texts based on the exemplum of a sacristan only the medieval Dutch rhymed version discusses the nun's offspring. The two children she has with her beloved are mentioned occasionally, but they do not play any significant role in the story. They are one of the reasons why Beatrijs chooses prostitution; she has to feed them and this is the only way for her to earn enough to do so. She has no guilty conscience leaving them with a widow when she decides to become a nun again. It gives her reassurance, though, later on to see her children taken care of. Maternity is not a typical subject in medieval Dutch literature. Here the nun offers first her soul and then her honour to ensure that the subsistence needs of her children are met. Motherhood does not belong to the courtly culture, and maternity is not a characteristic of a woman's ideal. Thus, sacrifice for children is not a model to be followed.

3.5. The widow

There is one other female character in the text that is worth mentioning, namely the widow. Beatrijs reaches her house as a beggar and is allowed to spend the night there with her children. She stays longer, but on the third night Beatrijs disappears leaving her children behind. We know little about the widow. She lives near the convent, holds the nuns in great esteem, and, realising that the woman has fled, takes pity on the children and decides to keep them. She requests support from the convent, and the abbess offers to pay for the children's expenses as long as the widow wants to take care of them. Finally, after Beatrijs confesses her story to the abbot, he takes the children from the widow to raise them in the monastery.

Although the widow is not an archetype in medieval Dutch literature, we see the character appear in texts with some common features. As a widow, a woman becomes more independent with financial autonomy. For many women widowhood is the first opportunity to enjoy full legal identity with the possibility of making their own

decisions and engaging in business. It is also the moment to earn personal respect.¹⁵ In literature the widow also has a particular role to play. In *Beatrijs* she is the saviour with many more possibilities to care for the children than the nun who flees has. Being independent she can decide to take them in, ask the abbess for financial support, and actually raise them.

4. Conclusion

Secular and religious literature did not develop in isolation; on the contrary, they often drew motifs from each other's traditions. *Beatrijs*, which is based on a Latin exemplum, serves primarily paraenetic purposes and shows ideal devotion. And this is a devotion that is not inborn but achieved throughout the story by continuous changes in social status. At the same time the text reflects on courtly values and the importance of following them. The person of *Beatrijs* belongs to both traditions, the courtly and the religious, but this protagonist shows the rules that are to be followed in each stage of her life. Her actions are a consequence of her status, not of her natural temperament.

Literature is not mere entertainment. On the one hand it often reflects the historical circumstances in which it was created, while on the other it is a tool for influencing change. In *Beatrijs*, especially, it cautions young girls that a path of love and sin will not end well and that salvation is only to be achieved through devotion.

¹⁵ W. Prevenier. *Prinsen en poorters*, Antwerpen: Mercatorfonds 1998, pp. 194–196.