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Oratione devotissima (Devotional Prayers)

In Italian, illuminated manuscript on parchment

Central Italy, c. 1475-1500

i (paper) + 14 + i (paper) folios on parchment, modern foliation in pencil, 1-14, complete (collation i^s ii^o), a catchword on f. 8v in a small cursive hand, ruled in brown ink (justification 119 x 84 mm.), written in gray ink in a fine rounded gothic bookhand (Italian textualis) in a single column on 18 lines (last ruled line was left blank), rubrics in red, capitals touched in red, three 2-line initials in burnished gold on grounds painted in red, blue and green, the first of which is further decorated with hairline tendrils terminating in two bezants and a leaf in burnished gold (ff. 2, 7v, 10v), a medallion with a grinning skull in a starry landscape painted in gold, blue and green in the bas-de-page on f. 2, the lower corners of ff. 6-13 slightly burned and lost, some small spots and stains, otherwise in very good condition. Bound in the sixteenth or early seventeenth century in Venice in dark brown morocco over pasteboards, blind-tooled with a frame around a central cabochon and gilt leaves in each corner, small holes from silk tags at edges of boards, cracked at spine (but with only surface damage), a few chips and holes, overall in excellent condition, refreshed by skilled restorer (perhaps in nineteenth century) who added modern paper pastedowns and endleaves, but without restoration to outer surfaces of binding. Dimensions 161 x 106 mm.

This delightful Italian prayer book has a rich history. Commissioned in the fifteenth century for a young noblewoman, it was later owned by a Dutch merchant living in Venice who used it, in part, to teach his son to read. Written in Italian, the manuscript highlights the growing importance of vernacular texts in fifteenth-century Italy. Finely decorated initials and a frontispiece with a skull on burnished gold add to the manuscript's luster. Though largely unstudied, vernacular prayer books such as this offer rich literary witness to the practice of lay religion in the late Middle Ages.

PROVENANCE

1. The manuscript was made for a young lay woman or girl in Central Italy at the end of the fifteenth century. There is no mention of a religious order or status in the text. The supplicant identifies herself as a girl, "filiola" (f. 2, line 6), and all adjectives referring to the person praying use feminine forms. The language of the text is that used in Central Italy. The use of the definite article "lo" instead of "el", as well as certain words, such as "siagurata" (unfortunate), exclude an origin in Venice, where the manuscript was found in the seventeenth century (see below). The prayers appear to be unrecorded, and are probably unique, composed for the personal use of the book's original owner. She might be Gabriela Marcela, whose erased name appears on f. 1.
2. In the early seventeenth century the manuscript belonged to a certain Alvise Bochini of Venice, who inscribed his name on f. 1v "Alvise Bochini", and on f. 1 (now nearly erased) "ALVISE BOCHINI VENEZIA 12 APRILE." He is likely identifiable as Alvise du Bois, of one of the most important Netherlandish trading families resident in Venice (Bois (forest) was *Boch* in Flemish and Dutch; his Italianized first name Alvise is a

typically Venetian given name); on this family, see van Gelder, 2009, pp. 60-61, 110-114. Alvisè du Bois of a Southern Netherlandish family, worked from 1599 in the Venice branch of the family-owned trading company, which was managed by his uncle (his mother's brother), Pieter Pellecoorn (italianized Pietro Pellicorno). Alvisè du Bois and his cousin Martin Hureau were first trained by Pellicorno as apprentices, before becoming partners. In 1607, following the death of Pellicorno, du Bois and Hureau took over the management of the Venice branch. The other principal branch of the company was in Amsterdam, and there were smaller branches managed by other family members in Pesaro, Cologne, Leiden and Hamburg. The company traded mainly textiles from Northern and Southern Netherlands to Italy, and silk, rice and currants from Italy and the Levant to the Netherlands. Alvisè du Bois continued trading in Venice after the death of Hureau in 1630; in 1638 he returned to the Netherlands for his retirement. The inscription "Andrea S" on f. 13, written in the same style as "Alvisè Bochini" on f. 1v, records perhaps the name of his child.

3. On f. 1, an early eighteenth-century owner signed his/her name (now illegible) above the name of Alvisè Bochini, and added a calculation on the top left corner of that page as well as the date "1719" at the end of the date in the Bochini inscription.
4. Sold in France in the nineteenth century: a sale ticket in French pasted to the front pastedown.

TEXT

f. 1rv, Ruled, otherwise originally blank, now with ownership inscriptions and alphabet exercises added to the empty space at different times (see Provenance above);

ff. 2-12v, [prayers in Italian], ff. 2-7, *Oratione devotissima ad excitare la contricione del core*, incipit, "O Signore Jesu Christo: dinanci al conspecto tuo io confesso contra me la iniusticia mia. . . quale vivi in eterno. Amen; ff. 7-10, *Oratione devotissima per dimandare remissione de suoi peccati et emendatione de quelli: et per li proximi suoi*, incipit, "Fa misericordia meco, o benigno et pientissimo signore dio. . . me In eterno faci triumphare: lo quale vivi et regni dio omnipotente: In secula seculorum. Amen; ff. 10-12v, incipit, *Oratione devotissima a dimandare gratia de fugire li peccati et Imitare le virtu*, incipit, "O Signore dio mio: concede gratia al mio core, di te desiderare: et te desiderando, te circhare...et havere continua sete et desiderio dela celeste patria gloriosa. Amen. *Finis*";

f. 13rv, Ruled, otherwise originally left blank; the prayer *Kyrie eleison* and a prayer to the Virgin Mary were added to the empty space on ff. 12v-13 in the sixteenth or seventeenth century; an ownership inscription on f. 13 and alphabet exercises on f. 13rv;

f. 14rv, Leaf from a contemporary manuscript written in Latin in a tiny cursive script in three columns; the ink has almost entirely faded and the text is mostly illegible. It was attached, upside down, to the end of the second quire, in order to secure the singleton, f. 9, in the beginning of the quire, probably at the time of making the manuscript.

This manuscript contains three long prayers in Italian, which may be unique and composed for the personal use and circumstances of the original owner at the end of the fifteenth century. They beseech the Lord to give remission for the supplicant's present and future sins, and to aid

her soul in escaping Purgatory. The volume is accordingly decorated with a skull on the frontispiece.

The gold-tooled leaf corner pieces that decorate the front and back boards of the binding are identical to those found on the binding of a Venetian *Dogale* dated 1506 (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library and Museum, M. 977; Needham, 1979, no. 35, pp. 122-125). *Dogali* were official documents of appointment issued by the Republic of Venice, typically bound in fine bindings very similar to the binding chosen for our manuscript. These ceremonial Venetian bindings continued from the end of the fifteenth century until well into the seventeenth century (Needham, 1979, p. 124). It is therefore possible that that our book was already in Venice before Alvisé du Bois acquired it sometime after 1599; alternatively, the present binding could have been made for Alvisé in the beginning of the seventeenth century. Tracing the history of the tools used for the binding of our book, and establishing when they ceased to be in use, would allow us to determine more precisely when the book arrived in Venice.

An added interest in our book is provided by the alphabet trials on the empty leaves, made in the early seventeenth century when the manuscript was owned by Alvisé du Bois, perhaps by his son Andrea. They suggest that the manuscript was used for teaching a child to read and write. Only in the sixteenth century had the orthography of the Italian *volgare* become sufficiently fixed for it to be considered suitable for teaching, until then only Latin was used for learning to read (cf. Black, 2004, pp. 41-42).

Medieval prayer books as a genre—as opposed to Books of Hours—have been relatively neglected in the scholarly literature, and indeed, medieval prayers themselves—present in both books such as this one and in some Books of Hours—are a relatively unexplored field. That is certainly the case with vernacular prayers from Italy; it is at present still difficult to identify them, or to gauge accurately their popularity in the manuscript tradition. Nonetheless, they represent both a rich literary source and one of our most important direct witnesses to what recent historians have called “traditional religion” (Duffy, 1994, p. 3; and 2006).

As eloquently summarized in the description of the Burnet Psalter, a fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript that includes 288 prayers and hymns (see Online Resources), medieval prayers are a direct reflection of the religious life of the period: “The men and women who read or recited these prayers and hymns knew themselves to be weak and vulnerable in a hostile and hazardous world. They turned to God, to his son and the mother of his son, to the orders of angels and the ranks of the elect, for help in avoiding or surviving the dangers and crises of everyday life For further reassurance, they invested some of their prayers with the properties of charms or incantations, carrying them on their person, saying them at various times and in various ways, in order to enhance their efficacy. Beyond this, however, the laity prayed for salvation, for guidance and help in living the righteous life and in making the ‘good end’ that would secure it.”

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ONLINE RESOURCES

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