

MECHTILD OF HACKEBORN, *Het boek der bijzondere genade* (Dutch translation of *Liber Specialis Gratiae*) [The Book of Special Grace]

In Dutch, manuscript on paper.

Northern Netherlands, Eastern part (IJssel region), c. 1490-1510

*i*+304+*ii* leaves, paper (and vellum: pp. 7–8), watermarks: only fragments discernable, pp. 421/422 and 423/424 pot (small, crown, double line), resembling WILC 50175 (Deventer 1495), 50230 (Deventer 1496), 1970, 2544 (both Zwolle 1495) and 2454 (Zwolle 1499); modern pagination in pencil in the middle of the upper corner; mostly in quires of eight leaves, collation: *i*<sup>s</sup> lacking 4 + one leaf (pp. 7–8, vellum) after 3 (pp. 1–16), *ii*<sup>t</sup> + one leaf (pp. 25–26) after 4 (pp. 17–26), *iii*<sup>s</sup> (pp. 27–42), *iv*<sup>t</sup> lacking 5 (pp. 43–64), *v*<sup>s</sup> (pp. 65–80), *vi*<sup>t</sup> (pp. 81–92), *vii*–*ix*<sup>s</sup> (pp. 93–140), *x*<sup>t</sup> (pp. 141–152), *xi*–*xix*<sup>s</sup> (pp. 153–296), *xx*<sup>s</sup> lacking 2 (pp. 297–310), *xxi*–*xxii*<sup>s</sup> (pp. 311–342), *xxiii*<sup>s</sup> lacking 5 and 8 (pp. 343–354), *xxiv*–*xxv*<sup>s</sup> (pp. 355–386), *xxvi*<sup>s</sup> lacking 1 (pp. 387–400), *xxvii*–*xxviii*<sup>s</sup> (pp. 401–576), *xxxviii*<sup>s</sup> lacking 8 (pp. 577–590), *xxxix*<sup>s</sup> + one leaf (pp. 607–608) after 8 (pp. 591–608); no catchwords, (remnants of) signatures still present in the lower outer corners of many rectos; written in a littera hybrida, apparently by one hand; ruled in very pale brown ink, prickings for all horizontal and vertical lines still present in many leaves, 1 column, justification: 108–98 x 70–65 mm, 21–28 lines; one five-line red lombard with simple pen-flourishes in purple (p. 433), five four- and three-line red and blue lombards (pp. 117, 311, 330, 335, 339), many two- and one-line red and blue lombards; paragraph signs in red, majuscules in text stroked in red, rubrics in red, some underlining in red; generally in good condition, leaf with the beginning of the main text and with a probably seven-line blue lombard with pen-flourishes in red missing after p. 6 (some offset still visible on p. 6), a single leaf with text also missing after p. 298 and after p. 354, severe iron-gall corrosion in pp. 1–4 with loss of text, some small worm holes without loss of text, pp. 607–608 damaged with some minor loss of text. Binding from the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century, wooden boards covered with plain brown leather, board in the front covered with leather of an earlier (probably the original) binding, blind-tooled with single filets and small ornamental stamps (circular, rectangular, square and lozenge-shaped), two small brass knobs on front cover (once adjusting leather thongs), former (probably original) vellum pastedown of maculature from a 15<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript in Dutch attached after p. 608, three raised bands (Both covers worn). Dimensions 144 x 102 mm.

Rare copy of the still unpublished Dutch adaptation of the *Liber specialis gratiae* ("Book of Special Grace") by the famous German mystic Mechtild of Hackeborn (1240/1–1298), along with a few other Dutch texts, such as the equally rare allegory on the life of bees. Made two centuries after her death in the very region where the *Devotio Moderna* had originated and still flourished, the manuscript bears witness to Mechtild's enduring popularity as a female author propagating personally felt devotion. Only thirteen manuscripts are known today.

## PROVENANCE

1. Copied in the region of Zwolle/ Deventer, in the very heartland of the origins of the *Devotio Moderna* and in the neat script that characterizes the movement's book production. The localization of the manuscript is based not only on the watermarks in the paper and is confirmed by distinct dialect features pointing to the IJssel region: "eyn" (a, one), "holden" (to hold), "mennichvoldich" (manyfold), "oer" (her), "oere" (their), "Gade" (God), "apenbar" (publicly), "avermits" (because of), "werlt" (world), "woe" (how), etc. No early owners are known.
2. Belonged to Joost R. Ritman (b. 1941), Amsterdam, the Dutch businessman and distinguished collector of art and books, Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica MS 211; it

is still listed as MS 211 in the database *Medieval Manuscripts in Dutch Collections*; see below). A printed ex libris of the Bibliotheca Hermetica Philosophica was glued to the front pastedown.

## TEXT

pp. 1–4, On the destination of the soul after parting from the body, rubric: “Waer die siel vaert al si vanden licham scheidet”, incipit: “E[...] hebben a[...] heilic [...] levet [...]” (loss of text due to iron-gall corrosion), explicit: “Ende dat is eyn altoe sunderlynge groete quaetheit die hem nyet en helpen wtten vegeuur vant dat en latet got nummermeer ongevraken. Amen” (pp. 5–6 blank).

pp. 7–423, Mechtild of Hackeborn, *Liber specialis gratiae*, in Dutch: *Het boek der bijzondere genade*, rubric and beginning lost, text starting with: “daer om van dage toe nemende soe vercrege sij dat hoichste van allen doichden dat is die gotlicke mynne. Sy was van wonderlicker sueticheit ende van groiter oitmoidicheit. Inde van vil verduldicheit. Inde eyn mynresche der armoiden van groiter van groiter [sic] vuerricheit ende ynnicheit. Inde seer toe nemende in caritaten toe gade ende tot allen mynschen. Inde allen mynschen was sij fruntlicken ende dienstachtich”, explicit: “Soe datter voel seiden dat si avermits oer verloest waren van oere swaerheit. Ende nyet alleen die bynnen den cloester waren mer oec buten die van vern quamen” (pp. 424–432 blank).

pp. 433–463, Meditation on obedience, followed by examples, first rubric: “Hyer nae volget die collacie vander gehoersamheit. Ende is seer nutte ende altoe marckelick”, incipit: “Sunte Bernardus [sic] secht: Als wy gehorsam syn onsen oversten, alsoe is onse licham gehorsam onser reden dattet nyet en valle in becaringen die hem hinderen mogen”, explicit: “Ende toe den woirden benedictus fructus ventris tui knie neder want alre eeren is werdich die vrucht myns lichams menschelicke synne en moegen dit nyet gemeten. En wie my dit dagelix duet den vil ic aen synen eynde vervrouwen” (p. 464 blank).

pp. 465–562, Excerpts from the Book of Mary Magdalene, followed by examples, first rubric: “Op der heiligher drivoldicheit dach, genoemen wt den boeck Maria Magdalena”, incipit: “Op dat hoichtit van der heiliger drievoldicheit verscheyn oer die here in der gedaenten eyns iongelyncks van twelf iaren. Ende was averal wael geseirt ende gecleit myt konyncklicke cleideren”, explicit: “Here woe groit is dyn mennichvoldige sueticheit die du verborgen heves den die dy voirten. Ende die oitmoidigen des geistes wil hi behalden myn verloesynghe is my verborgen”, followed by a rubric: “Item vat voer die siele guet gelesen is” (pp. 563–588 blank).

pp. 589–590, Example from Thomas of Cantimpré (1201–1272), *Bonum universale de apibus*, in Dutch *Biënboec*, rubric: “Genomen sommigen exempelen uter byen boeck. Item eyn exempel”, incipit: “In sunte mathias cloester by trier was eyn moninck genoemt Otto die weertic iaer ende noch daer over inden voergenoemden closter prior was”, explicit: “Ende hi had wonderlicke sorge voer dat convent op dat die bruders geen gebreck en leden inder noetdrufften. Ende daerom dwanck hise te te coenlicker totter bewarynghe der regulen”; cf. Van der Vet 1902, pp. 394–395.

pp. 591–607, Example, no rubric, incipit: “Op eynen sonendach als toe metten tyt doe verscheen sich onse lieve here ihesus cristus eynre bedroifder sielen”, explicit: “Doer dy sprack

David wael doe hi sprack quid est homo quod memor. Dyn smerte ende wonden moiten besitten mynen geest”.

There is a long and important tradition in the Middle Ages of visionary literature by female mystics. Mechtild of Hackeborn (1240/41-1298) was not the founder of a new religious order like Birgitta of Sweden, but her visions were an inspiration for personal reform for many, including followers of the Modern Devotion. The German nun and mystic Mechtild of Hackeborn entered the Cistercian convent of St. Mary at Helfta, near Halle, as a seven year old oblate, joining her elder sister Gertrude of Hackeborn, who soon became the abbess. As Mechthild grew up, she became choir director and chantress and was called “the nightingale of Christ.” Mechtild had mystical experiences from childhood, but only after her sister’s death in 1291 did Mechthild begin to reveal her visions. They were written down in Latin into the *Liber specialis gratiae*, or *Book of Special Grace*, by her pupil Gertrude of Helfta and other sisters of the convent. The work was initially composed of five books of Mechtild’s visions, preceded by a brief biographical notice. In its complete form the *Liber specialis gratiae* consists of seven books. Books VI and VII, dealing with the deaths of Mechtild and her pupil Gertrude respectively, are later additions. Mechtild died on 19 November 1298 at the age of 58.

Following the liturgical year, the *Liber specialis gratiae* is Trinitarian and Christocentric, with a special emphasis on the Heart of Christ. Its mystical visions appealed to the religious fervor across Europe, especially among laypeople, expressed in private, personal devotions which focused on the works of famous mystical writers. Immediately after Mechtild’s death it was made public, and copies were rapidly multiplied. The most complete copy is dated 1370 and was compared with Gertrude’s autograph by the priest Albertus (Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek). Soon the book was translated in German, French, English, Italian, Dutch and other vernaculars. Boccaccio tells how, a few years after the death of Mechtild, the book of her revelations was brought to Florence and popularized under the title of *La Laude di donna Matelda*. Perhaps she is identical with the figure of Matelda Dante introduces into Purgatory in the *Divine Comedy*. The English king Richard III (1452-1485) and his wife Anne Neville owned a copy in English.

The *Liber specialis gratiae* has been transmitted in three main text groups. The second group shows many abridgments. It is this group which was most widely spread. It was also the source for the translations in Dutch, which in turn represent two different adaptations, Adaptation II having an altered order of chapters and no division into books, and omitting various parts of the Latin model, as R.L.J. Bromberg pointed out in his edition of Adaptation I after a manuscript in the University Library of Nijmegen. The manuscript described here contains Adaptation II. The number of manuscripts with Dutch translations of Mechtild’s *Liber specialis gratiae*, in Dutch called the *Boek der bijzondere genade*, is small: only thirteen specimens are known today, including our manuscript. Nevertheless the *Liber specialis gratiae* must have enjoyed great popularity and a wide dissemination, as is indicated by the much larger number of manuscripts in Dutch which contain quotations or small excerpts from the work. Although there are several studies of the text, there is no critical edition of the Dutch translations (see, however, Schmidt, 2010). An English translation makes the work readily accessible, see Halligan, *The Booke of Ghostly Grace*, 1979.

It is followed by several meditations and examples from other, mostly unidentified sources, among which the *Bonum universale de apibus* – in Dutch called the *Biënboec* – of the Dominican

author Thomas of Cantimpré (1201–1272). This work, an allegory on the life of bees, treats the conduct and duties of superiors and subjects. A Dutch translation was printed first in 1488 in Zwolle, a city in the IJssel region, from which our manuscript originates.

The localization of the manuscript is based on the watermark in the paper and is confirmed by distinct dialect features: "eyn" (a, one), "holden" (to hold), "mennichvoldich" (manyfold), "oer" (her), "oere" (their), "Gade" (God), "apenbar" (publicly), "avermits" (because of), "werlt" (world), "woe" (how), etc. For critical edition and study of this interesting work see Stutvoet-Joanknecht, 1999, and Vet, 1902.

## LITERATURE

*Het Boek der Bijzondere Genade van Mechtild van Hackeborn. Uitgegeven naar een Nijmeegs handschrift. Alsmede een beschrijving van haar mystiek en een onderzoek naar de geschiedenis der middelnederlandse vertalingen*, ed. R.L.J. Bromberg. 2 vols. I: *Inleiding en tekst*. II: *Partituur en bijlagen*, Zwolse drukken en herdrukken voor de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde te Leiden, 51, Zwolle, 1965. Vol. I also online: [http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/brom003boek01\\_01](http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/brom003boek01_01).

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Voaden, R. "Mechtild of Hackeborn," *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c. 1100 – c. 1500*, ed. A. Minnis and R. Voaden, Turnhout, 2010, pp. 431-451.

## ONLINE RESOURCES

Database of medieval manuscripts in Dutch collections:

<http://www.mmdc.nl>

Database of Middle Dutch manuscripts, the Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta:

<http://www.library.leiden.edu/special-collections/manuscripts/subcollections-whs-bnm.html>

Database of watermarks, incorporating Briquet Online, Piccard Online, Watermarks in Incunabula printed in the Low Countries (WILC), and others:

<http://www.memoryofpaper.eu>

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