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Love and Passion

The Secular and the Spiritual in the Leyden Love Letter (Leyden, UB, LTK 216)
and the 'Söldner Liebesgruß' (Karlsruhe, Generallandesarchiv, 66/10264)

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ABSTRACT: The rhymed love letter is a hybrid genre, positioned between the real love letter in prose and fictional love poems and love songs. In Dutch a handful of these has been transmitted from ca. 1400 onwards. This article is centered around the oldest one, the bifolium Leyden, UB, LTK 216, illustrated by a spectacular but never correctly understood gilded illustration. An analysis of the text reveals an amalgamation of sacred and profane elements, with similarities to Middle Dutch poems celebrating the mystical union between the loving soul and the crucified Christ, and correspondences with parts of the secular love poem 'Van Minnen' in the Manuscript van Hulthem (ca. 1400). A comparable mixture of the sacred and profane is also found in the short love letter known as the 'Söldner love greeting' (before 1387). Love letters were probably not written by serious lovers, but were playful pastimes by well-versed scribes; they are clear evidence of the interchangeability of sacred and profane love poetry in the Middle Dutch area around 1400.

Keywords: Rhymed love letter, Leyden love letter, Söldner love greeting, bleeding heart, chalice

KURZFASSUNG: Der gereimte Liebesbrief ist ein hybrides Genre, das zwischen dem echten Liebesbrief in Prosa und fiktiven Liebesgedichten und Liebesliedern angesiedelt ist. Im Niederländischen ist eine Handvoll davon ab ca. 1400 überliefert. Dieser Artikel konzentriert sich auf das älteste Zeugnis, das Bifolium Leiden, UB, LTK 216, das mit einer spektakulären, aber nie korrekt interpretierten goldverzierten Illustration versehen ist. Die Analyse des Textes zeigt eine Mischung aus sakralen und profanen Elementen, mit Ähnlichkeiten zu mittelniederländischen Gedichten, die die mystische Vereinigung zwischen der liebenden Seele und dem gekreuzigten Christus feiern, und Entsprechungen mit Teilen des weltlichen Liebesgedichts 'Van Minnen' in der Van Hulthemischen Handschrift (um 1400). Eine vergleichbare Mischung aus Sakralem und Profanem findet sich auch in dem kurzen Liebesbrief, der als 'Söldner Liebesgruß' (vor 1387) bekannt ist. Liebesbriefe wurden wahrscheinlich nicht von ernsthaft Liebenden verfasst, sondern waren ein spielerischer Zeitvertreib von versierten Schreibern; sie sind ein deutlicher Beleg für die Austauschbarkeit von sakraler und profaner Liebesdichtung im mittelniederländischen Raum um 1400.

Schlagworte: Gereimter Liebesbrief, Leidener Liebesbrief, Söldner Liebesgruß, Blutendes Herz, Kelch

The Leyden love letter of ca. 1400 (Leyden, UB, LTK 216) is a poem in two columns inscribed on a bifolium on either side of an eye-catching illustration, showing a golden crown of vine leaves that hovers above a heart pierced by two arrows, while a golden object stands beneath the heart (Ill. 1). The bifolium has been vertically cut in two, probably after the text was written and illustrated.¹ Some text is lost due to cropping. The poem consists of couplets, interspersed with alternate rhymed and non-rhyming lines, and begins with the request that it may be delivered to a lady who has taken the fancy of the poem's author: "Be my messenger, little letter, to a lady who has captured my heart with her love." It is the oldest extant rhymed love letter in Middle Dutch and with its spectacular illustration and its suggestive text one of the most intriguing examples of the genre.²

Between fictional love songs and actual, genuine love letters in prose, rhymed love letters occupy an ambiguous position. The content of the letters is, briefly, that a (usually male) lover contacts a 'you' in a minimal, but suggestive setting: contact is impossible, therefore a token or sign of love is invited and much desired. Whether these rhymed letters ever functioned as real love letters is matter of debate.³ In Latin verse they are found in France and Germany since the late eleventh century, and the *salut d'amour* flowered in thirteenth century France. The German boom fell in the fifteenth century, English letters only started appearing from the second quarter of the fifteenth century.⁴ Compared to surrounding literatures, the verse love letters in Dutch are small in numbers, but exquisite. The kick-off is given by the Leyden love letter. Up till now research is not united about the character of its text and illustration. Frequent changes in tone, speaker and

1 For a description see EELCO VERWIJS, *Iets over twee Middelnederlandsche Fragmenten*, in: *Handelingen en Mededelingen van de Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde te Leiden, over het jaar 1871*, pp. 101–106, and G. I. LIEFTINK, *Codicum in finibus belgarum ante annum 1550 conscriptorum qui in bibliotheca universitatis asservantur: Pars 1: Codices 168–360 Societatis cui nomen Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde descripsit G. I. LIEFTINCK*, Leiden 1948, p. 25 s. v. "Letterk. 216". VERWIJS, p. 103, notices that when the bifolium was found, it did not form part of any manuscript and there are no traces of glue, thus providing no clues about its textual environment.

2 A survey of known Dutch rhymed letters and greetings in CLARA STRIJBOSCH, *Die schönen Augen Gabriels: Boten, Schreiber und Parodie in mittelniederländischen Versliebesschreiben*, in: *Text – Körper – Textkörper*, Amsterdam German Studies, ed. CARLA DAUVEN-VAN KNIPPENBERG u. a., Heidelberg 2019, pp. 31–60, here pp. 56f. A short survey is given in the appendix of the current article.

3 See e.g. MARTIN CAMARGO, *The middle English verse love epistle* (*Studien zur englischen Philologie N. F. 28*), Tübingen 1991, p. 1, which rightly distinguishes between the form and function of rhymed love letters; for a very sceptical view see JÜRGEN SCHULZ-GROBERT, *Deutsche Liebesbriefe in spätmittelalterlichen Handschriften: Untersuchungen zur Überlieferung einer anonymen Kleinform der Reimpaardichtung* (*Hermæa N. F. 72*), Tübingen 1993, who considers most rhymed love letters as amusement and/or stylistic exercises.

4 On Latin, Provençal and Old French letters see ERNSTPETER RUHE, *De Amasio ad Amasiam: Zur Gattungsgeschichte der mittelalterlichen Liebesbriefe* (*Beiträge zur romanischen Philologie des Mittelalters 10*), München 1975; see on the development of the genre mainly pp. 12–50; see also *Lettres d'amour du Moyen Age, Les Saluts et Complaintes*, intr. HEDZER UULDERS and SYLVIE LEFEVRE, ed. ESTELLE DOUDET, MARIE-LAURE SAVOYE et AGATHE SULTAN, Paris 2016; on the German tradition see SCHULZ-GROBERT [note 3], pp. 174–228 (catalogue), and CHRISTINE WAND-WITTKOWSKI, *Briefe im Mittelalter. Der deutschsprachige Brief als weltliche und religiöse Literatur*, Herne 2000, pp. 358–363 (catalogue); for English letters consult CAMARGO [note 3].

form of address, rhythmical irregularities and defective rhymes have hampered understanding, as has the enigmatic illustration. In 1871 VERWIJS discussed this work for the first time. He had a low opinion of the quality of the author and/or scribe, stating that while its author may have been an ardent lover, he certainly was not an accomplished poet.⁵ Almost a century and a half later, FRITS VAN OOSTROM calls the poem as a whole “an elegant missive” that betrays “taste and care”.⁶ In his view this is shown by the quality of the parchment, the graceful script and the spectacular illustration in red, black and gold leaf. Such diametrically opposed views invite a new appraisal of the Leyden love letter, not just relating to its literary qualities, but especially with regard to its function and originality. The focus in this article will be on the interpretation of this oldest Dutch love letter, with an excursion to one of the Middle Dutch rhymed love greetings, the ‘Söldener Liebesgruß’?

The Leyden love letter

The text on the bifolium runs as follows:

1	Sijt mijn bode, briefkijn, aen een joncfrouwe, die therte mijn heeft bevaen met harer minnen; gruetse my seere, laet haer bekennen	Be my messenger, little letter, to a lady who has captured my heart with her love; greet her effusively, let her know
5	dat si is ghemint van mi boven alle die levende sijn ende boven alle die ie waren gheborn heeft mijn herte haer uutvercoren. Suete lief, wilt mi aenscouwen,	that she is loved by me above all living creatures and above all those who ever were born has my heart chosen her. Sweet love, please look at me,
10	want ic u scinke mijn herte, mijn bloet. Suete lief, loent mi met trouwen, want ic en weet gheen liever goet boven u te kiesene, suete lief, nemet in [dancke.	for I present you with my heart, my blood. Sweet love, reward me with loyalty, for I know of nothing dearer to me than you, sweet love, accept it thankfully.
	Ghi sijt die edelste suver rancke,	You are the noblest pure branch,

5 “Hoe vurig de minnaar was, een groot dichter was hij niet” (VERWIJS [note 1], p. 104).

6 FRITS VAN OOSTROM, *Wereld in Woorden: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1300–1400*, Amsterdam 2013, p. 371.

7 Leyden, University Library, Ltk. 216 (Leyden Love Letter) and Karlsruhe, Generallandesarchiv, 66/10264 (Söldner Love greeting). The texts presented here are my (C. S.) critical text after the MS; *i*, *j* and *u*, *v* have been modernized, abbreviations expanded and punctuation added. White lines have been inserted to indicate a change of column.

- 15 ghi hebt mi zere gheraect, claer minlijc
[bloet. [person/blood.¹⁰
Want ic u bringhe een briefkijn soet. For I bring you a sweet little letter.
Want tot uwer eeren eest dat men doet. For it is for your honour that it is done.
U eyghen willic bliven, Your own I wish to remain,
beide by daghe ende bi nachte, both by day and by night,
20 want ic en can van minnen niet for I cannot [endure] as the result of love,
[ghe[bliven?],
so hebdi mi gheraect al in mijn herte. you have touched me so in my very heart.
Och dat ic dy ie met oghen aen sach, Ah, if only I could look at you with my
[eyes.
want u minne doet my nacht ende dach for your love causes me night and day
grooten rouwen ende sware smerte great distress and heavy sorrow
25 verholentlike al in mijn herte. secretly in my heart.
[Noit man en?]⁸ lach soe swaerlijc ghevaen, Never was a man so wretchedly smitten,
nocht hi was soe nae ten doode, nor was he ever so near death,
dat hi mochte hebben den rouwe soe however great his distress,
[groot,
als ic hebbe ghehad ende altoes doe. as I have experienced and still do.
30 Want ic en can gherusten noch gheduren For I can neither rest nor wake,
nacht noch dach in gheender uren: neither during the night nor day at any
[time:
slapic, wakic, wat ic doe, whether I sleep or whether I wake, what-
[ever I do,
om haer peinse ic spade ende vroe. I think of her, late and early.
[End of first column]
- 35 Maer⁹ en mach mi leider niet gheschien But alas, that cannot happen to me
van quaden tonghen die ons sien, because of evil tongues that see us,
want sy sijn fininich ende fel; for they are vicious and cruel;
si clappen quaet, si en connen niet el; they speak evil, that is ever their way;
si en selen niemant goet unnen, they never grant anybody anything
daer sijt beletten connen, if they can prevent it,
40 want sy sijn metten viere ontsteken, because they are burning with hate,
si vinden aen alle menschen ghebreken; they find shortcomings in all people;
want si sullen noch leiden drueve dage. because of this they will one day lead
[gloomy lives.

8 The reading between square brackets was proposed in VERWIJS [note 1], p. 105.

9 VERWIJS [note 1], p. 105 l. 34 reads 'Daer'.

10 'Bloet' can mean 'blood', and more expansively 'blood as carrier of properties, especially the passion or life itself' (bloed als drager van eigenschappen, m. n. passie of het leven zelf), and also 'person' (See the Middle Dutch Dictionary via <http://gtb.inl.nl> s. v. 'bloet' 1 and 2).

	Niet meer en willewi van quaden tonghen ghewagen.	We will say no more about those of evil [tongues.
45	Soe seere bin ic, joncheere, bedwonghen van quaden valschen tonghen, dat ic niet en dar comen noch gaen, noch bi u sitten noch staen, noch ic en dar niet op u sien:	To such an extent I, young man, have now been constrained by evil false [tongues that I dare come nor go, sit with you nor stand, nor dare I even look at you:
50	groot ongeval moet quaden tonghen [ghescien, ende die viant moetse halen, die dit doen met haren talen, dat wi onse wandelinghe niet moghen ghebruken onderlinge.	great disaster must befall the evil tongues, and may the devil fetch all those who do this with their stories, that we must hide our mutual friendship.
55	Ic ben ghescoten ende gheraect met eenen stale, die wederhaect herde diepe al in mijn herte: des moet ic lyden groete smerte. Soete lief, mocht ic dijnder minnen [ghenieten,	I have been shot and hit by an arrow with barbs that has penetrated deep into my heart: therefore I must suffer great sorrow. Sweet love, if I were allowed to enjoy your [love,
60	soe soudic sijn tot uwen ghebode in alder [stont. Ende ic en can oec niet ghenesen, soete lief, eer ghi mi troest hebt [ghegheven. Troest mi, lief, in corter stont, dat mijn herte werde ghesont,	I would be at your command at all times. And I cannot be cured, sweet love, until you have given me solace. Comfort me, darling, before long, so that my heart will be whole again, secretly, as quickly as you can, so that my pure young person is not caused any shame, sweet love, by the ties of your love.
65	heymelijc, alsoe ghi ierst moghet, opdat mijn suver jonghe joghet niet en come in enegher scanden, suete lief, van uwer minnen banden. [End of second column]	

In the first lines, the letter is addressed: “Be my messenger, little letter”. This is a traditional commission for a messenger that may be found in countless late medieval rhymed love letters.¹¹ Although in the first eight lines the ‘I’ consistently addresses the letter,

11 The oldest known occurrence in German-Dutch love letters in rhyme where this formula is found is in the so-called Zürich Love Letter, dated ca. 1300: *Ich bin ein brief unde ein bode. in mins juncherren gebode / sol ich willidliche wesen* (I am a letter and a messenger. I must obey my lord’s command [or: I must be at his service]); cited according to JACOB KLINGNER and LUDGER LIEB, *Handbuch Minnereden. Mit Beiträgen von IULIA-EMILIA DOROBANȚU, STEFAN MATTER, MARTIN MUSCHICK, MELITTA RHEINHEIMER und CLARA STRIJBOSCH*, 2 Bde., Berlin/Boston 2013, here Bd. 1, p. 230.

there is an ambiguity within these lines between the letter as a written piece of material and the letter as a physically present messenger, who is informed of the contents of the message and, later on, is asked to greet the recipient effusively. The letter-messenger has to tell the beloved that she is loved more than any other living creature and more than anyone ever born. From l. 9 on the sender directly addresses the beloved as “I”, presenting him or her with heart and blood and declaring to have been deeply touched. The following information “I bring you a sweet little letter” (l. 16) is curious if we suppose that the letter is the messenger. If we assume that the I-sender himself here continues the greeting and addresses his beloved directly, the transition is a clumsy sidestep; it betrays the author’s lack of consistence in his presentation of the letter as messenger; moreover, it contradicts the later information that the lovers cannot come close to each other. Anyway, the following lines (ll. 18–33) contain a traditional love complaint which enhances the urgency of the message of the letter that the I has been wounded by love for the addressee.¹² The *haer* in l. 33 is probably a slip of the pen: the author (in all likelihood a man) forgot he is directly speaking to the beloved (*dy* in l. 22) – which once more shows the author was not very consistent in his imagery of the letter-as-messenger and of directly or indirectly speaking to the addressee. The rhyme continues unimpaired. The sheet of parchment has been cropped after l. 33, so that we must remain ignorant of what may have followed.

The text continues in a second column, in which the speaker, ‘I’, utters a passionate diatribe against gossipers who prevent the lovers from seeing each other. It ends with a complaint that ‘we’ are unable to enjoy our friendship (*wandelinghe*). The identity of the *ic* (I), speaking as part of *wi* (we), can be deduced only from the lines *Soe seere bin ic, joncheere, bedwonghen / van quaden valschen tonghen* (ll. 44f.) (To such an extent I, young man, have now been constrained by evil false tongues). It is not clear whether *joncheere* is meant to express an opposition to the ‘I’ or is a term of address, in other words, if the complaining man is still speaking, or that a different *ic*, for example, the lady who is responding, has now entered the scene. If it is the (female) beloved who speaks, we could be dealing with a form of love correspondence, as has been argued recently.¹³ Perhaps the idea was that the two lovers should each hold half of the bifolium and that, when they were united, the separated halves would also come together again. This might be done, for example, in the course of the poem being read aloud, possibly in a performative setting, with the young man responsible for the text on the left-hand

12 Barely readable; for the emendation see VERWIJS [note 1], p. 105.

13 GEERT WARNAR, *Boze tongen en een doorboord hart: Vorm en inhoud van de oudste liefdesbrief in het Nederlands*, in: *Aangeraakt: Boeken in contact met hun lezers. Een bundel opstellen voor Wim Gerritsen en Paul Hoftijzer*, ed. KASPER VAN OMMEN et al., Leiden 2007, pp. 29–33, prefers the second reading; according to Warnar the two columns together constitute a love correspondence or a performance piece.

side and the young lady for that in the right-hand column. At the end they might then hold their sheets together to show an undivided heart. This attractive but unproven hypothesis is perhaps even a little risqué, because the I in the second column declares effusively that because of backbiters they cannot get close to each other or even cast a glance on each other: “I dare come nor go, sit with you nor stand, nor dare I even look at you” (ll. 46–48).

After the extensive depiction of the misery caused by backbiters, four lines follow that, once again, stress the pain caused by love. The ‘I’ could be either the sender/lover or the addressee/beloved. Whoever it is, he or she is quite explicit about his-her state: like the lover, he-she has been wounded by love.

Finally, there are ten lines that use the epithet *Soete lief* three times. In the first two lines, the rhyme is imperfect, while the word *stont* occurs twice in rhyming position. At what stage exactly the text began to crumble is not clear. The last line was written just above the place where the sheet was cropped. It may be that one or more lines followed. The speaker, ‘I’, greatly desires to experience and enjoy (*ghenieten*) love, and will only be cured once his beloved has given him solace (*troest*). However, this will have to be done in secrecy, to avoid the virtuous young person being involved in anything scandalous. These final lines are thus linked with the idea that the lovers cannot meet because of the risk posed by ever vigilant gossipers. The words *suver jonge joghēt* (virtuous young person) appear to suggest that a woman speaks here; if that is so, she is clearly not only agreeable, but more than willing.

The Leyden love letter is an awkward poem to grasp. This is caused not only by the fact that in places the rhyme is defective or by the meaningless repetitions, but especially by the many unclear shifts between speakers, the changes of addressees and the inconsistent fiction of the letter-as-messenger. It reads like an amalgamation of a number of loose fragments that have been fused without a great deal of feeling for consistency. The aspect may be pleasant, but internally the text shows many flaws.

2. The Leyden love letter and Manuscript Van Hulthem

The suspicion that the Leyden love letter was compiled from several pre-existing passages is borne out by the fact that a substantial passage of the Leyden letter can be found in a poem in the Van Hulthem manuscript, entitled ‘*Van minnen*’ (about love) (fol. 24v–25r).

Leyden, UB, LTK 216

Van Hulthem, fol. 24vb–25ra
'Van minnen'¹⁴

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>22 <i>Och dat ic dy ie met oghen aen sach,
want u minne doet my nacht ende dach
grooten rouwen ende sware smerte
25 verholentlike al in mijn herte.
[Noit man en?] lach soe swaerlijc ghevaen,
[...]
Want ic en can gherusten noch gheduren
nacht noch dach in gheender uren:</i></p> <p>34 <i>Maer en mach mi leider niet gheschien
van quaden tonghen die ons sien
[ll. 36–43 diatribe against backbiters]
Soe seere bin ic, joncheere, bedwonghen
44 van quaden valschen tonghen,
45 dat ic niet en dar comen noch gaen,
noch bi u sitten noch staen
noch ic en dar niet op u sien:
groot ongheval moet quaden tonghen
[ghescien,</i></p> | <p>1 Ay in wiste noyt van minnen
sonder nu, ic moets beghinnen.
Grote vernoy ende sware smerte
die ic draghe al in mijn herte
5 in allen tiden om uwen minne.
Si rovet mi van minen sinne.
Ghi sijt vaste in minen sinne
vore alle die ghene die ic kinne
ende die ic noit met oghen sach.
10 U minne doet mi nacht ende dach
groet vernoy ende sware smerte
verholentlike al in mijn herte.
Ic ben int herte soe bevaen
met uwer minnen ende ontdaen,
15 dat ic gherusten niet en mach
ghenen tijt nacht no dach.
Ic ware gherne in alder tijt
soete lief al daer ghi sijt,
om te ontladene mijn herte
20 vander rouwen ende vander smerten
ende vander pinen die ic alstille
ghedoghe lief dore uwen wille.
Maer en mach mi niet gheschien
dore quade tonghen die ons spien.</p> <p>25 Soete lief ic ben bedwonghen
metten quaden valschen tonghen,
dat ic niet en der gaen
daer ghi sijt noch bi u staen,
noch bi u sijn soete lief daerment siet,
30 noch bi u sitten often spreken iet.</p> |
|---|--|

14 Het handschrift-Van Hulthem. Hs. Brussel, Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België, 15.589–623. Diplomatische editie, ed. HERMAN BRINKMAN and JANNY SCHENKEL, 2 Bde. (Middeleeuwse Verzamelhandschriften uit de Nederlanden 7), Hilversum 1999, here Bd. 1, pp. 221–223; normalisation of *i*, *j* and *u*, and interpunction by me (C.S.), after the diplomatic text in this edition. One of the love letters in the Manuscript van Hulthem (fol. 67r–67v, ed. pp. 408f.) bears the same title.

50 *ende die viant moetse halen,
die dit doen met haren talen,
dat wi onse wandelinghe
niet moghen ghebruken onderlinge.*

[next follow 14 lines that do not agree
with the Van Hulthem manuscript]

Ic woudse de duvel moeste halen,
die dit met haren talen
beletten dat onse wandelinghe
niet moghen bringhen onderlinghe.

[next follow 40 lines that do not agree
with the Leyden manuscript]

Of the Leyden love letter's 67 lines, 18 correspond virtually literally with lines in the Van Hulthem poem (i. e. a quarter, in italics in the text above).¹⁵ They concern the love complaint by the 'I' in the last part of the first column, and the diatribe against the backbiters in the second one. In the Leyden manuscript, the attack on the gossipers is even more elaborate than it is in the Van Hulthem manuscript. The phrase *So seere bin ic, joncheere, bedwongen* in the Leyden manuscript, that led to speculations whether the second column should be assigned to the beloved lady, does not show a change of speaker in the Van Hulthem manuscript. There, an 'I'-lover addresses his *soete lief*, his sweet love, from start to finish. There is no question of the letter acting as a messenger, and although the word *brief* (letter) is never mentioned, an answer is requested at the end. What we see is that the poem is very closely allied to rhymed love letters.

The poem 'Van minnen' is justifiably not mentioned in studies on rhymed love letters; there is no question of a greeting, letter or correspondence.¹⁶ Yet the similarity of the poem 'Van minnen' with the Leyden love letter shows that there is little that separates the rhymed love letter from the rhymed love complaint. Clearly, a poem could be changed into a letter by simply adding a few lines about a letter or a messenger.

The first lines in the poem in the Van Hulthem manuscript show repetitions of the rhyme and even literal repetitions (ll. 3f. are virtually identical to ll. 11f.); this suggests that in the Van Hulthem poem, too, cutting and pasting took place, and that a beginning was probably added to an existing address of an 'I' to his beloved, complete with a backbiters passage. Both Van Hulthem and Leyden, UB, LTK 216 are dated about 1400–1410. Whether the Hulthem poet based his poem on the Leyden love letter or whether it was the other way around cannot be established. Maybe a basic form of love poem that circulated separately became the foundation of both. The Van Hulthem poem is a consistent whole, unimpaired by changes of speaker or addressee, unlike the Leyden poem, which gives the impression that rather haphazard cutting and pasting has taken place. In the Leyden poem the letter is first charged with the commission to act as a messenger, a motif familiar from other sources, after which a number of passages were added in addition to a tirade against backbiters. The passages in the Leyden poem that fit in least and are most confusing are the ones about the wounded and pierced heart, which, far more than the text around it, are in keeping with the illus-

¹⁵ Lines 26–30 and 32f. in MS Leyden 216 have not been included.

¹⁶ For this reason it does not feature in the survey of rhymed love letters and greetings in STRIJBOSCH [note 2] nor is it discussed in the section on love letters and greetings in VAN OOSTROM [note 6], pp. 370–373.

tration. This illustration shows a possible direction for interpretation, which is to be found in the realm of mystical texts.

3. The mystical marriage

The Leyden poem abounds in lines in which a wounded heart is explicitly mentioned. The way the wound was inflicted is described graphically in ll. 54–58: ‘I have been shot and hit by an arrow with barbs that has penetrated deep into my heart: therefore I must suffer great sorrow.’ The first lines of the poem contain the traditional theme of the heart captured by love for a woman, but they are followed by imagery that is far less usual. Lines 9–15 say: ‘Sweet love, please look at me, for I present you with my heart, my blood. [...] You are the noblest pure branch. You have touched me deeply, pure loving person/blood’, the last line being expanded in l. 21: ‘you have touched me so in my very heart.’

The lines starting with the request ‘Sweet love, please look at me’ differ for more than one reason from the preceding lines, and from the tirade against the backbiters that follows. The episode seems out of place considering the situation described by the poem, which argues at great length that there is no way in which the lover and his beloved can meet. How then could she be in a position to look at him now? The final appellation, *bloet*, may mean ‘blood’ as well as ‘person’; the combination with ‘branch’ and with the line ‘I present you with my heart, my blood’ is strongly reminiscent of dialogues between the suffering Christ and the soul, as in medieval mystical marriage poetry – poems that also refer to the arrow of love, a pierced heart, consuming longing and the drinking of wine and blood.¹⁷

Rather than with other secular love poems, this section can best be compared with a Middle Dutch mystical song (a cantilena) in which the ‘king of love’ asks his bride, his sweet friend, to love him with all her heart:

EY sich op mi, mijn lieue vriendinne,
 Wat trouwen ic di hebbe ghehoent,
 Hoe mi verwonnen heeft die minne
 Ende mit haren rosen ghecroent.
 Si heeft mi doeruaren
 al sonder sparen
 Ende dat zwaerste ten lesten ghehoent.
 Ay laet di verwinnen van mijnre minnen
 Ende vliet tot mijnre herten binnen.
 Du en blijfster nemmermeer bi ghehoent.
 [...]

17 For a first impression, see, for example, the collection of mystical marriage poetry in STEPHANUS AXTERS, *Mystiek brevier*, 3 vols, Antwerpen, 1944–1946; esp. vol. 3, *De Nederlandsche mystieke poëzie*, 1946.

NV slach op mi, mijn lief, dijn oghen
 Ende sich wat di verbliden mach,
 Als ghi siet dat ic ghedoghe
 Van minnen so menighen zwaren slach.
 Ay haddi gheproeft
 des mi ghenoecht,
 Ghi soudt lude ropen 'owi o wach'.
 Nu laet di verwinnen
 van mijnre minnen
 Ende vliet tot mijnre herten binnen.
 Daer suldi drinken der minnen ghelach.¹⁸

Ah, look at me, my dear lady friend, what faith I have shown; how love has conquered me and crowned me with her roses [= wounds¹⁹]. She has penetrated me relentlessly and has kept the worst till last. Ah, let yourself be conquered by my love and enter into my heart; you will not be the worse for it.

[...]

Now open your eyes, my love, and see what will please you, when you see that I have suffered so many heavy blows through love. Ah, if you had experienced what I am so full of, you would loudly cry 'woe and welaway'. Let now your heart be conquered by love and enter into my heart, there you will drink the happiness of love.

As in the Leyden love letter, this cantilena comprises the request to behold the suffering One, to allow oneself to be overwhelmed by His love and to come and consume the drink of love in His wounded heart. It is not unusual for both the beholder and Christ to be addressed as the lover, and to be called bride or bridegroom, friend and beloved.²⁰

According to its editor LIEVENS, this cantilena exceeds many similar poems in its daring erotic imagery (p. 73), not least in its concluding lines: *GHi blijft maecht, als ghi mi ontfaet. / Als ghi mit mi uwen wille voldoet, / So blijfdi ioncfrou fier* (ll. 111–113) (You will remain a virgin when you receive me, / when you fulfil your wish with me, / you will remain a fine maiden). As Mary received God's message and son without losing her virginity, so the loving soul may be wholly united with Christ without violation.

18 Stanza 1 and 4 from Cambridge, Mass. Houghton Library, MS Dutch 13, fol. 191v–195r, dated 1428; the poem numbers 121 lines. For an edition, see ROBRECHT LIEVENS, *Een pseudo-mystieke Kantileen*: 1. Handschrift Cambridge, Mass., Harvard U., Houghton Library, Ms. Dutch 13, in: *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 67 (1993), pp. 66–81, here pp. 75–78.

19 See the Middle Dutch Dictionary via <http://gtb.inl.nl> s.v. 'rose'; LIEVENS [note 18], p. 78, interprets 'rosen' as a symbol of love; however, it also has the connotation of bleeding wounds.

20 As, for example, in a fifteenth-century song with the refrain: *Com heer ihesus com / Mynre sielen brudegom* (Come, lord Jesus, come, my soul's bridegroom) the lines: *jhesus, myn wtuercoren lieff / Ic bid v, hoert doch nv myn brieff* (Jesus, my chosen lover, I beg you, hear now my letter) in Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 12875, fol. 23v–24r (end 15th century), ed. in E. BRUNING, M. VELDHUYZEN and H. WAGENAAR-NOLTHENIUS, *Het geestelijk lied van Noord-nederland in de vijftiende eeuw: De Nederlandse liederen van de handschriften Amsterdam (Vienna ÖNB 12875) en Utrecht (Berlin MG 8v 190) (Monumenta Musica Neerlandica 7)*, Amsterdam 1963, pp. 45–47.

As regards sensibility and erotic imagery, most texts fall short of the Song of Songs, the most important source of inspiration for medieval poems on the mystical union,²¹ beginning with the passionate longing in the words spoken by the Bride to her Bridegroom: 1:1 *osculetur me osculo oris sui quia meliora sunt ubera tua vino* (Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth: for thy breasts are better than wine), or from the bridegroom to the bride: 4:9 *vulnerasti cor meum soror mea sponsa vulnerasti cor meum in uno oculorum tuorum* (Thou hast wounded my heart, my sister, my spouse, thou hast wounded my heart with one of thine eyes). In Middle Dutch songs and poems these lines inspired verses like the following:

Den edelen wijn, die sach ic vloedden
 Och God, hoe wel was mi te moede
 Ic hadde dorst / ick meynde drincken,
 Hadde mi mijn liefken willen schincken
 Van sijnre minnen, si is soe soet
 Het is heere Ihesus, diet my doet.²²

The noble wine that I saw flow, O God, how well it made me feel. I was thirsty, I thought I might drink. If only my beloved had been willing to pour forth his love, it is so sweet. It is the Lord Jesus who makes me feel this.

The desire for the union of lover and beloved was one of the most frequently expressed yearnings by mystics. The fusion of physical and erotic imagery with religious longing often led to alienation on an analytic and an empathetic level for modern interpreters, used as they are to a stricter separation of the physical and the spiritual. This seems also to have been the case in the interpretation of the Leyden love letter.

In the Biblical account of Christ's Passion, Pontius Pilate has Christ tortured and mocked, after which He is shown to the people, dressed in a purple robe, with the words: *Ecce homo* (Behold the man; St John 19:5) – a scene that led to countless depictions and poems. In the late Middle Ages, the antagonistic attitude of the mob was presented as a negative example, as opposed to the contemplation of Christ's suffering, since compassionate contemplation would ease His suffering and even cure Him. In many medieval representations of the Passion, a number of images of Christ's suffering became fused: the mocked and bleeding Christ with the crown of thorns, Christ's five stigmata (the wounds in his hands, feet and side), the wounded or bleeding heart and the Instruments of the Passion: the lance with the sponge that was offered the crucified Christ, and the lance used to pierce His side after His death. This combination of the Instruments of the Passion and Christ's wounds is startlingly represented in a woodcut from the late

21 Characterized as "one of the traditional hotbeds of female mysticism" (THOM MERTENS, *Mystieke cultuur en literatuur in de late middeleeuwen*, in: *Grote lijnen: Synthesen over Middelnederlandse letterkunde*, ed. FRITS VAN OOSTROM et. al., Amsterdam 1995, pp. 117–135 and 205–217, here p. 130). Bible translations are from the Douai-Rheims-Bible, via <http://www.drbo.org>.

22 See *Een devoot ende profitelijck Boecxken* (1539), nr. 39, stanza 11 (Een devoot ende profitelijck boecxken. Ed. DANIEL F. SCHEURLEER, Den Haag 1889, p. 60, also via: http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_devoo1devoo1_01).

fifteenth century (Ill. 2). The five stigmata are not just depicted in Christ's hands, feet and side, but also in His heart, which may or may not be pierced. In some texts, the instruments causing the suffering, the injuries and the parts of the body affected are also superimposed. In addition, passion and compassion merge: sharing in Christ's suffering leads to sharing His wounds and blood. All this leads to one dazzling synthesis of hearts and wounds, of Christ and the compassionate beholder. Through His heart and blood Christ offers the beholder redemption for his or her sins, as the beholder alleviates His pain by offering Him his or her heart.

It is not only the second section (ll. 9–15) of the Leyden poem that is reminiscent of medieval mystical poetry. A similar reference can be found at the end of the poem, where the beloved is addressed as *soete lief* (as earlier in ll. 9, 10 and 13) "Sweet love, if I were allowed to enjoy your love, I would be at your command at all times. And I cannot be cured, sweet love, until you have given me solace. Comfort me, darling, before long, so that my heart will be whole again" (ll. 58–63).

In a fifteenth-century lyric from a manuscript containing excerpts from the work of the mystics Jan van Ruusbroec and Jan van Leeuwen, the motif of the solace for the beloved's heart that will cure the wounded lover is found in virtually identical terms. Jesus addresses the "sweet child":

Aensich mijn wonden ende mijn smerte,
 Ende in trouwen gef mi dijn herte.
 Van minnen binnic dus gewont,
 Gef mi dijn herte, ic bin gesont.

Ay, woustu dragen in dinen moet
 Mijn cruce, mijn wonden, mijn doot, mijn bloet,
 Het soude mi vele te lichter wesen:
 Haddyc dijn herte, ic waer genesen.²³

Behold my wounds and my pain, and trustingly give me your heart. Love has wounded me so – give me your heart and I will be cured.

Ah, if only you would carry in your mind my cross, my wounds, my death, my blood, it would be a weight off my mind: if I had your heart, I would be cured of love.

23 Lines 5–9 and 19–22 from a song in manuscript Brussels, Royal Library, Ms. 2559–2562, fol. 165v, dated ca. 1440–1460 (ed. WILLEM L. DE VREESE, *Middel nederlandse geestelijke gedichten, liederen en rijmen*, in: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche taal- en letterkunde* 19 (1900), pp. 289–324, and 20 (1901), pp. 249–290, here pp. 271f. The song is found with identical text in *The Hague*, KB, 73 G 29; there, each of the of the five stanzas is devoted to one of Christ's stigma (see *Liederbank* [Dutch Song Database] www.liederbank.nl, s. v. incipit *Och ghedinc mijns wel*).

In these poems and songs, as in the Leyden love letter, the loving beholder is asked to contemplate His wounds and passion and thus alleviate His pain through compassion. The possession of her heart will cure His wounds.

The most striking part of the Leyden love letter poem is the illustration of a heart with a crown of leaves (which might be vine leaves, or fleurons), pierced by two arrows, and dramatically cut into two halves. Below the heart is an object that is described by VERWIJS as a “golden figure shaped like a top”; VAN OOSTROM considers it a “jewel”. Neither author associated the object, presented in combination with a pierced heart – which they obviously mainly interpreted as a secular symbol – with a chalice.²⁴ And yet that is probably what is depicted here.

The chalice played a central role in the celebration of the Eucharist. The words spoken by Jesus during the Last Supper, “This is my body, this is my blood” are repeated during the Eucharist, marking the miracle of the transubstantiation of bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood. In this way His incarnation, death and resurrection are celebrated anew time and time again. In many medieval texts and images, wine and blood are interchangeable. In both text and image, Jesus is compared to the vine or its branches, but also to the vintner, the pourer of wine or even the pressed grape.²⁵ His body was a vessel full of intoxicating wine, or blood, and the wounds were the openings, offering access to the wine. However profane it may sound, drinking His blood was seen as the ultimate act of love.²⁶ Images show how Christ’s blood flows straight from His body into a chalice, sometimes held up by angels hovering directly under His wounds.²⁷

An immediately visual connection between bread, wine and wounded body is provided by images depicting the so-called Mass of St Gregory, showing Christ as the Man of Sorrows rising from the chalice during the celebration of the Eucharist.²⁸ In the

24 VERWIJS [note 1], p. 104; VAN OOSTROM [note 6], p. 371; LIEFTINK [note 1], p. 25, had already described it in 1948 as ‘a golden chalice, with the foot half cut off’.

25 BARBARA BAERT, *De wassende wonde: Laatmiddeleeuwse denkbeelden omtrent Christus als Fons pietatis*, in: *Het wellende water: De bron in tekst en beeld in de middeleeuwse Nederlanden en het Rijnland*, ed. BARBARA BAERT and VEERLE FRAETERS (*Symbolae* 34), Leuven 2005, pp. 175–203, here p. 181 note 19).

26 Even referred to as “bloodthirstiness” (PAUL VANDENBROECK, *Dit raken van mij die onaanraakbaar ben ...*, in: *Hooglied: De Beeldwereld van Religieuze Vrouwen in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, vanaf de 13de eeuw*, ed. PAUL VANDENBROECK, Brussel/Gent 1994, pp. 13–153, here pp. 55f.). For an exploratory study of the motif of Jesus as wine pourer in late medieval spiritual songs, see HERMINA JOLDERSMA, *Jezus als wijnschenker in het laatmiddeleeuwse geestelijke lied: Een inventariserende voorstudie*, in: *De fiere nachtegaal: Het Nederlandse lied in de middeleeuwen*, ed. LOUIS PETER GRIJP and FRANK WILLAERT, Amsterdam 2008, pp. 175–190.

27 A fine example is provided by the Crucifixion from the workshop of Jacob van Oostsanen, 1507, New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, reproduced at <http://www.jacobcornelisz.nl/oeuvre/schilderijen/de-kruisiging-1507>.

28 See Chapter V (“The Mass of St. Gregory, the Man of Sorrows, and Prayers for the Arma Christi”) on the number of illustrations in KATHRYN RUDY, *Rubrics, Images and Indulgences in late medieval Netherlandish Manuscripts*, Leiden 2017, pp. 101–136, here p. 101.

fifteenth century, the theme gained greatly in popularity; the increasing adoration of blood at this time led to a veritable blood devotion.²⁹ A mild representation of Christ as the bleeding pourer of wine may be found in a song by the anchorite Suster Bertken (1426/27 – † 1514). There, Christ says to the “loving soul”:

[...] coemt mijn uitvercoren
 coemt ic sal u schencken den alren besten wijn (ll.11f.)
 come, my chosen one, come, I shall pour the very best wine for you

and the loving soul answers:

O Jhesu, suete brudegom, siet mi van binnen aen.
 Ic heb dijn suete beelde diep in mijn herte staen:
 metten cruce verheven, bleec, bloedich ende seer ontdaen.
 Dye vlammen dijnre minnen sijn doer mijn hert geгаen.³⁰

O Jesus, sweet bridegroom, behold my innermost heart. I have your sweet image deep in my heart: raised on the cross, pale, bleeding and greatly distressed. The flames of your love have pierced my heart.

In other words, it is not surprising to find in the Leyden love letter the crown of (vine) leaves and the chalice combined with the heart; after all, both the poem and the illustration hint at Christ’s passion and sacrifice.³¹ An unmistakable connection between the Eucharist, Christ’s body, bread, blood and wine can be seen in fifteenth-century representations of the Man of Sorrows. There, vines emanate from the stigmata and His blood drips from His body into a chalice, with the host hovering over it.³²

The secular and spiritual representations of suffering as a result of love are similar in these texts and illustrations and have become interchangeable. The mystical love for Christ or God and the worldly love for a woman or a man are presented by means of

29 WALKER BYNUM sees a gradual escalation in the “blood obsession in late medieval Christianity” (p. xv): “The visions that proliferated in Europe during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries became increasingly bloody” (CAROLINE WALKER BYNUM, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond*, Philadelphia 2007, pp. 3f.).

30 Lines 11f. and 29–32 from the song known as *Jezus en de minnende ziel* (Jesus and the loving soul), here quoted from the critical edition by A. A. M. VAN BUUREN, *Gesprek tussen Jezus en De Minnende Ziel: Suster Bertkens vierde lied*. Kees Vellekoop ter nagedachtenis, in: *Madoc* 16 (2002), pp. 130–139, here pp. 131–133 (based on the 1516 publication by the Utrecht printer Jan Berntsz).

31 LIEFTINK [note 1], p. 25, refers to a simple golden crown with fleurons; VERWIJS [note 1], p. 104, calls it a golden comital crown, which could indeed be adorned with three fleurons. However, in the context of the Leyden parchment greater significance should be attached to the fact that the leaves are probably vine leaves. The Virgin Mary was also often depicted with such a crown of vine leaves.

32 See LEOPOLD KRETZENBACHER, *Bild-Gedanken der spätmittelalterlichen Hl. Blut-Mystik und ihr Fortleben in mittel- und südosteuropäischen Volksüberlieferungen*, Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Abhandlungen N. F. 114, München 1997), pp. 11–21 and ill. 1–7, and BAERT [note 25], pp. 175–182.

the same images, giving striking examples of ‘crossover’, defined by Newman as “the intentional borrowing and adaptation of courtly themes in devotional art and vice versa”. In either case, the pain of love may be represented by a pierced heart. Spiritual lovers are wounded by the arrows of love for the suffering Christ, sometimes shot by Christ himself; worldly lovers are the victims of arrows shot by the goddess Venus or the god Cupid.³³ The ultimate medieval mystical lovers, St Augustine and St Bernard of Clairvaux, are often depicted with hearts pierced by one or more arrows.³⁴ One of the reasons for St Augustine’s reputation is a line from his ‘Confessiones’: “You had pierced our hearts with the arrow of your love, and our minds were pierced with the arrows of Your words.”³⁵ St Bernard owes his renown as a mystical lover to his sermons on the Song of Songs.³⁶ In worldly texts about love, the pierced heart was also a conventional image. A frightening survey of the torments that the amorous lover might suffer is depicted on a woodcut by Casper von Regensburg, showing eighteen hearts that are pierced, squashed or broken by *Frau Minne*.³⁷

4. The Söldner love greeting

It is likely that the same imagery that is found in the Leyden love letter – the Man of Sorrows and the mystical union – inspired one of the few surviving love greetings in Middle Dutch. It is a short poem, known as the ‘Söldner Liebesgruß’ (Söldner love greeting), which was jotted down on the last page of an account book (probably written in 1371) of the monastery of Sölden near Freiburg. It runs as follows:

- 33 BARBARA NEWMAN, *Love’s Arrows: Christ as Cupid in Late Medieval Art and Devotion*, in: *The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. JEFFREY F. HAMBURGER, Princeton 2006, pp. 263–286, quotation on p. 263 (with thanks to Beatrice Trinca who drew my attention to this article). On Cupid’s role in medieval art and literature, also see BEATRICE TRINCA, *Amor conspirator: Zur Ästhetik des Verborgenen in der höfischen Literatur (Aventiuren 10)*, Göttingen 2018. On the many medieval genres in which the secular and religious are fused, see BARBARA NEWMAN, *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular against the Sacred, Notre Dame (Indiana) 2013*.
- 34 On St Augustine and St Bernard as the patron saints of passionate lovers, see NEWMAN *Love’s Arrows* [note 33], pp. 268–273; on p. 272 a reproduction from the fourteenth-century manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS. fr. 17115, fol. 156r., showing Christ as the Man of Sorrows, flanked by the two saints whose hearts have been pierced by an arrow of love.
- 35 St Augustine, *Confessiones* Bk 9,2, 3 *Sagittaueras tu cor nostrum caritate tua, et gestabamus uerba tua transfixa uisceribus* (*Sancti Augustini Confessionum Libri XIII*), ed. LUCAS VERHEIJEN, CCSL 27, Turnhout, 1981, p. 134 (English translation: F. J. SHEED, *Confessions*, 2nd. ed. [with MICHAEL P. FOLEY], Indianapolis 2007, [1st ed. 1944]).
- 36 In spite of having left numerous traces in Middle Dutch mysticism, the Song of Songs does not survive in a Middle Dutch translation (MERTENS [note 21], p. 130).
- 37 Master Casper of Regensburg, *Frau Minne’s Power over Men’s Hearts*, ca. 1485, Woodcut, Berlin Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kuperstichkabinett (reproduced with a brief explanation in MICHAEL CAMILLE, *The Medieval Art of Love: Objects and Subjects of Desire*, London 1998, p. 117, ill. p. 104).

Suete lyef ende seer uyt vercoren,
 uyt uver harten spruyt enen doren,
 dat ys van mynnen dat altoes bloeyt,
 dat van uver harten in mijn groeyt.
 Nu byddic u oetmoedelyce
 doer onsen heer van hemelryce,
 dat ghy my mynt als ghy voermaels hebt ghedaen.
 Yc sals u dancken als yc mach,
 al sout aen myn leven gaen.³⁸

Sweet love and most chosen one,
 from your heart a thorn grows,
 a thorn of love that ever blossoms
 and that grows from your heart into mine.
 Now I beg you humbly
 by our Lord in heaven
 that you love me as you did in the past.
 I will thank you as much as I may,
 even if it costs me my life.

The lines in Middle Dutch are followed by three lines in Latin:

O(mn)ia dat d(omi)n(us) no(n) habet (er)go myn(us)
 Omnia pr(ae)teritu(m) p(rae)ter amare deum
 Ave (Maria) gracia (plena) domynus (tecum)³⁹

The Lord gives everything, but does not have less for it
 Everything perishes, except the love for God
 Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee.

In an article dating from 1972, LÖFFLER drew attention to the language of the Söldner greeting and its similarities to the vocabulary of mystic poetry of the loving soul. The suggestion of a lofty origin forms a complete contrast with VAN OOSTROM's more recent qualification of the poem as *doggerel*.⁴⁰ Yet this little poem is both: it is lofty as well as humdrum. As was the case with the Leyden love letter, it is probably the result of cutting and pasting, inspired by Middle Dutch poetry on the mystical marriage. The first four lines are strongly reminiscent of poems in which the loving soul addresses the suffering Christ. The next six lines present many difficulties of interpretation as the result of internal and formal inaccuracies. It is likely that these lines derive from, or were inspired by, a poem in which a worldly lover was addressed. After all, it is hardly to be expected that a soul addressing Christ would use phrases like 'I beg you humbly by our Lord in heaven that you love me as you did in the past'. The fact that we have to do with different speakers in each of the poem's two sections, and the halting rhyme and scansion of the last lines, contribute to the clumsy ineptitude.⁴¹ However, only a small addition is

38 Slightly normalised edition, with adaptation of *i, j / u, v* and punctuation, after MS. The dating of the poem is hard to establish, because it is not clear if it was added immediately after the year the accounts were made up.

39 According to the edition by HEINRICH LÖFFLER, *Niederländische Mystik am Oberrhein im 14. Jahrhundert: Bemerkungen zu einem mittelniederländischen Lied in einem Zinsbuch der Propstei Sölden bei Freiburg*, in: *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 120 (1972), pp. 481–492, here p. 482.

40 LÖFFLER [note 39], pp. 484–486; VAN OOSTROM [note 6], p. 370 ('*knittelvers*').

41 VAN OOSTROM [note 6], p. 370, (transl. T. S.): "the poem starts off on a lofty note, but soon gets itself into a twist, with at the end a desperate move that frustrates any sense of rhythm." It should be noted that the hand does not suggest a lack of experience, nor is it a rough draft.

needed, like the stopgap *nacht ende dach* (night and day) so often found in love letters, to correct the poem at least formally. The last four lines would then run:

dat ghy my mynt *nacht ende dach*
als ghy voermaels hebt ghedaen.
Yc sals U dancken als yc mach
al sout aen myn leven gaen

This ‘lapse’ is probably the result of careless copying.

The thorn that grows from the lover’s heart into that of his beloved is, of course, a curious metaphor. The first meaning of ‘thorn’ is a ‘thorny projection’, while in medieval religious imagery the thorn is connected with both Christ and His crown of thorns as well as with Mary, sometimes called ‘a rose without thorns’.⁴² More specifically, *der Liebe dorn* may also refer to the male member; Middle Dutch has the expression *enen den doren planten*, i. e. to plant a thorn, meaning to dishonour someone, also: to deflower (a virgin).⁴³ In LÖFFLER’S view, the growth of the thorn into the heart of the beloved signifies the *unio mystica*, the union of pain and love,⁴⁴ but an erotic connotation cannot be denied. The thorn that grows from the one heart into the other is an indication of the ‘piercing love’ that may strike both worldly lovers and mystics.

As in the Leyden love letter, in the ‘Söldner Liebesgruß’ scraps of text and image about worldly and mystical love have been fused into a confused and confusing poem. LÖFFLER seeks an explanation for the presence of the Middle Dutch poem in Southern Germany in the relationship between Sölden (near Augsburg) and the circles of the Straßburg Gottesfreunde, who entertained numerous contacts with the mystics in Brabant.⁴⁵ However, the author of this poem need not have been thoroughly versed in mysticism or particularly learned. The mystical imagery is commonplace; it is hardly more than a representation of someone addressing the crucified Christ wearing the crown of thorns, while the Latin phrases belong to the standard school curriculum. The first saying is found in the ‘Philosophia Patrum’, a collection of wise sayings for schools, the second is by the late-classical poet Venantius Fortunatus. Both sayings were used to instil morals into students’ minds by having them learn such Latin sayings by heart.⁴⁶ The first saying, *omnia dat dominus non habet ergo minus*, is also found in mirror image on a painting ascribed to Jan van Scorel or Maerten van Heemskerck, on a note held by a twelve-year old student (1531). The words that have been inscribed under the painting

42 Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek (Middle Dutch Dictionary) via <http://gtb.inl.nl> s.v. ‘dorn’ and s.v. ‘rose’.

43 See LEXER, *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch* (via <http://www.woerterbuchnetz.de>), vol. 1 sp. 384b s.v. *Minnedorn*; Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek (Middle Dutch Dictionary) s.v. ‘dorn’: ‘to dishonour someone, also said of a virgin.’

44 LÖFFLER [note 39], p. 488.

45 LÖFFLER [note 39], pp. 49of.

46 See for the origin from resp. the ‘Philosophia Patrum’ and the works of Venantius Fortunatus, HANS WALTHER, *Proverbia Sententiaeque Latinitatis Medii Aevi ac recentioris aevi. Lateinische Sprichwörter und Sentenzen des Mittelalters in alphabetischer Anordnung*, 3 vols., Göttingen 1963–1669, vol. 3 Nr. 19969 and 20040.

immediately make the meaning of these words clear: *Qvi dives? qvi nil cvpit / qvis pavper? avarus* (who is rich? the person who does not wish for anything; who is poor? the miser). In other words: Christ gives of His love from His abundance and however much He gives, it does not diminish. Like the next saying, ‘everything perishes, except the love for God’, these lines offer an oblique comment on the preceding pages of the account book. But they also seem to fit the foregoing poem.

In poems on spiritual love, there is a constant reiteration of the idea that it is possible ‘to have one’s cake and eat it’: that love for and from Christ is present in inexhaustible abundance and will only increase when enjoyed. This, of course, is attractive wishful thinking when it concerns secular love. The Hail Mary in the last Latin line on the page refers directly to the angel Gabriel’s visit to Mary. There, a single, simple greeting was to have enormous consequences: Mary became pregnant, the word became flesh. Many love letters and love greetings allude to Mary or to the visit of the Angel Gabriel, but it is not always chaste spirituality that is intended: in a series of German-language literary love letters of ca. 1433, the speaker states that he would love to send his beloved the same sort of treasure as when God sent Mary a greeting, by means of which Mary had conceived a son. He also expresses the wish for God to greet his beloved as He once embraced and kissed Mary.⁴⁷ The collection of love greetings in the sixteenth-century Venlo Manuscript has as its motto *De beata virgine*. The poems in it may sometimes be read as hailing Mary, but much more often they are addressed to a secular lover – and sometimes they are downright obscene.⁴⁸ As in the Söldner love greeting and in the Leyden love letter in these verses we see a curious and sometimes stunning amalgam of secular and sacred poetry.

5. Conclusion

The Leyden love letter and the Söldner love greeting were probably compiled from passages derived from various texts: secular love poems or letters and conversations between a loving soul and the crucified Christ. The Leyden love letter is difficult to interpret as a result of the lack of consistency in perspective and the constant shift between the secular and the sacred realm.

Both these textual examples of Middle Dutch love letters and greetings superficially have a pleasant aspect, but are messy internally. This mess is probably due to carelessness of authors using pre-existing texts and should not be considered an indication of au-

47 Karlsruher Liebesbrief XVII and XIII (Karsruhe, BLB, Cod. Donaueschingen 104), paraphrases in KLINGNER/LIEB [note 11], vol. 1, p. 157 and 154.

48 *Wye eyn soete lieff will kyesen / dye kyese maria die reyne mag(et) / want si is van herten alsoe clare / si maeckt meninge bedroefde herten vro*, Manuscript Venlo fol. 43r (Brüssel, KB, II.144), quoted in KLINGNER/LIEB [note 11], vol. 1, p. 136. On the Marian reading of this and other love letters, see STRIJBOSCH [note 2], pp. 50–54.

thenticity.⁴⁹ Hastily thrown together lyrics may be a sign of the emotional confusion of a love-sick author, but they may also be the products of uninterested hack writers passing the time by filling empty pages with scraps of songs or poems.⁵⁰ On the other hand, love letters that were highly professional both in their design and their execution may in actual fact have functioned as correspondence between two lovers, as is proven by a late Middle Dutch example, the Letter of Maerten to Tannekin.⁵¹ The professionalism of the composition of love letters does not provide us with clues as to their authenticity. Both Leyden and Solden probably were rather clumsy amalgamations of secular and sacred love poetry – and both may or may not have functioned as ‘real’ love messages.

Confirmation of the supposition that the Leyden love letter was compiled from a number of passages of various origins is found in the agreement of a large number of lines with the love poem ‘Van minnen’ in the Van Hulthem manuscript. The comparison with ‘Van minnen’ shows that in the Leyden letter it is likely that little text was lost due to cropping, which makes a shift of speaker doubtful. The most important additions in the Leyden love letter compared to ‘Van minnen’ are sections about a pierced heart that are reminiscent of poetry on the mystical union, which are closely allied to the prominent illustration. The golden object in the illustration is probably a chalice, in which the blood from the wounded heart was collected. The similarities between the Leyden love letter and the poem in the Van Hulthem Manuscript show how easy it was to change a love poem into a love letter, and vice versa.

Both the Leyden love letter and the Söldner love greeting show a startling combination of the imagery of mystical marriage and profane love. Christ’s suffering and the suffering of the worldly lover are superimposed, connected with suggestions of a possibly stormy relationship as well as secret contact. In addition, the distinctions between male and female lovers become ambiguous. In mystical texts, the loving soul could be either a man or a woman, and women and men alike expressed themselves with longing and sensual words. In the Leyden love letter, the image of the chalice catching Christ’s blood and the uninhibited eagerness of the ‘I’ – in particular if the words in the second column are those of a woman – caused confusion and disbelief among modern readers. So far the mystical undertones never have been have remained unnoticed, whereas in the ‘Söldner Liebesgruß’ LÖFFLER only saw the mystical elements, with the Latin sayings pointing to a scholarly origin. However, the Latin phrases were probably familiar to any

49 VAN OOSTROM [note 6], p. 370, refers to a “real Dutch love letter in rhyme” (*reële Nederlandse liefdesbrief op rijm*); “real” may be used here in the sense of ‘genuine’ and/or ‘used as a love letter in reality’. Which of the two is meant, is unclear.

50 On the many secular songs (of sometimes strongly lovesick or erotic nature) that were written in the margins or on scraps of parchment see CLARA STRIJBOSCH, *Vogelnestjes in de marge: De overlevering van Middelnederlandse liederen in bronnen tot 1500*, in: *Veelderhande liedekens: Studies over het Nederlandse lied tot 1600*. Symposium Antwerpen 28 februari 1995 (Antwerpse studies over Nederlandse literatuurgeschiedenis 2), ed. FRANK WILLAERT, Leuven 1998, pp. 10–29, here pp. 16–21.

51 Bruges City Archive, ca. 1500. As DIRK GEIRNAERT showed in his article *Maarten aan Tanneke. Een liefdesbrief uit de late Middeleeuwen*, in: *Biekorf* 94 (1994), pp. 248–261, this letter from Maerten to Tannekin is a very accomplished love poem which was probably written by a professional poet, but nevertheless may well have functioned as a ‘real’ love letter.

man or woman with some basic schooling in Latin and the thorn of love is not just reminiscent of Christ's crown of thorns, but it also has erotic connotations. The authors of the two texts are more likely to have been students playing around with popular tropes than genuinely enamoured couples or devoted mystics. Thus we find in both the Leyden love letter and in the 'Söldner Liebesgruß' a not very sophisticated amalgamation of literary, religious, erotic and worldly imagery. The two poems show how Middle Dutch authors around 1400 made use of pre-existing material to create a love-message in which the secular and sacred realms were intermingled.⁵²

Appendix: Short survey of Middle Dutch Rhymed Love Letters (no's 1–4) and Rhymed Love Greetings (no's 5–7)

1. Leyden, University Library, Ltk. 216 (Leyden Love Letter), ca. 1400
2. Brussels, KBR, 15.589–623 (Manuscript Van Hulthem), ca. 1410
3. Bruges, City Archive, Ms. 58 (Letter of Maertin to Tanneken), ca. 1500
4. Brussels, KBR, II.144 (Ms. Venlo) 1. Half of 16th century (partly later)
5. Karlsruhe, Generallandesarchiv, 66/10264 ('Söldner Liebesgruß') (after 1371)
6. Leyden, University Library, Ltk. 1197, 14th century (Love Greeting)
7. Weimar, Herzogin Anna Amalia Library, Oct. 146 (Zutphener Love Greeting) (between 1537–1543)
8. Cambridge, Wren Library, B 11.22, ca. 1300 (Inscription in Margin)

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52 Translation by Thea Summerfield. Translations of the poems aim at a close rendition, to enable line-by-line comparison.

Illustrations



Abb. 1: Leyden love letter (Leyden, UB, LTK 216)

Lizenziert für Utrecht University Library am 25.10.2023 um 10:33 Uhr



Abb. 2: Heart with the five stigmata (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Arch G f13)

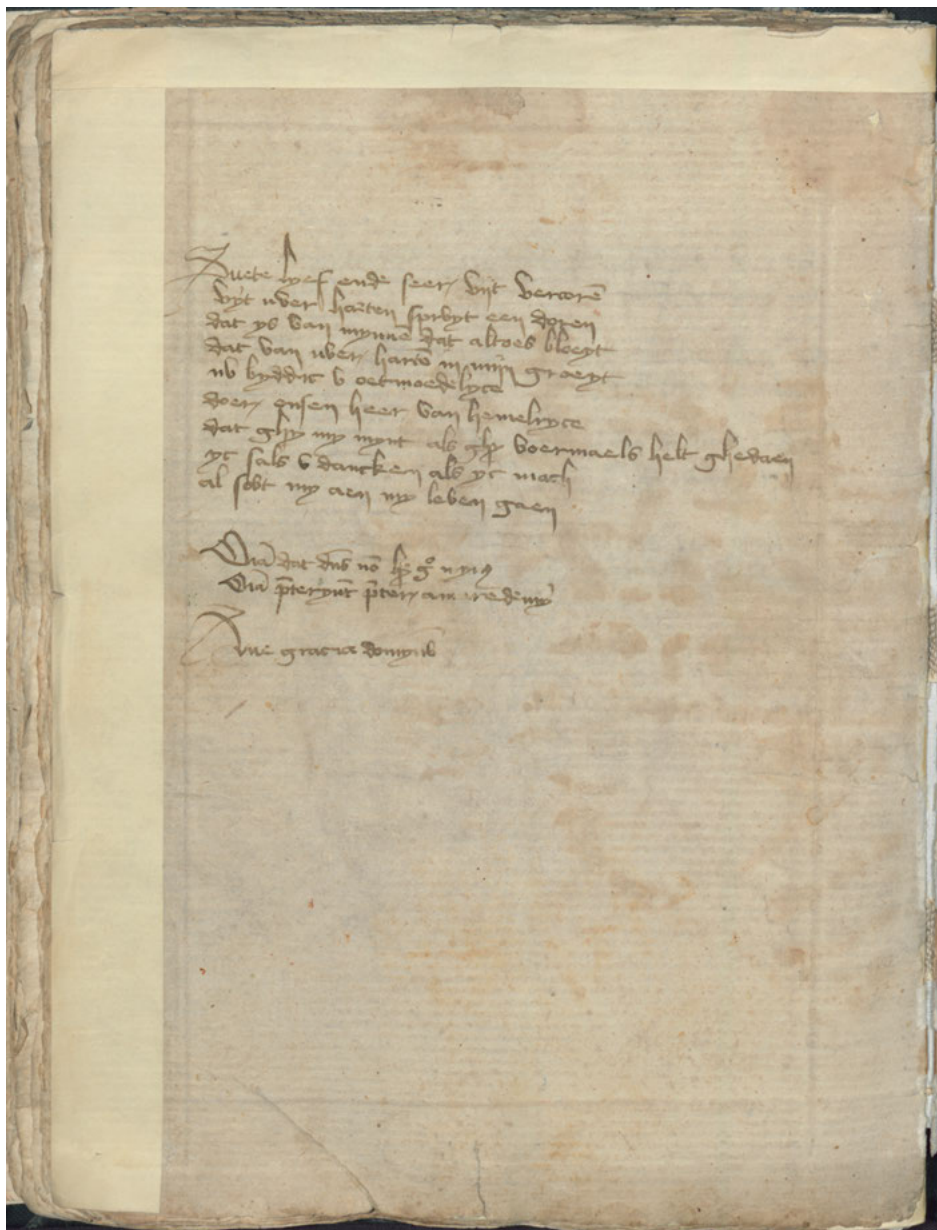


Abb. 3: Söldner love greeting (Karlsruhe, Generallandesarchiv, 66/10264)