

11. Women as Multilingual Readers in Late Medieval Flanders

Exploring the Manuscript Evidence

▼ **ABSTRACT** The relationship between the literary patronage of women and the increasing popularity of vernacular literature has been well studied in historical and literary research. The language of literary patronage was not only influenced by gender, but also by the intersectionality of social status. In the last few decades, in-depth analyses of the book collections and libraries of individual women, as well as of female communities, have addressed the complex factors influencing women's reading practices and literary patronage. This contribution offers a quantitative and qualitative analysis of female book ownership from a multilingual perspective. Examining the extant manuscripts owned by women in the late medieval County of Flanders, it shows how monolingual manuscripts hide a multilingual reading context and, moreover, that multilingual utterances often resulted from cross-generational reading and rewriting practices.

▼ **KEYWORDS** Medieval Flanders; multilingualism; women's history; manuscripts; medieval book ownership; medieval readers

Beginning in the twelfth century, the written language of literature gradually moved from Latin to the vernacular within western European courts. As June Hall McCash argued, this cultural shift coincided with a shift from heroic culture to courtly culture, which included a new position for women as

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literary patrons.¹ The important role (noble) women played as benefactors of twelfth-century literary culture has been widely attested, but what happened after 1200? By the fifteenth century, vernaculars were well established as languages of literature, historical record, and personal expression. Moreover, the social stratification of late medieval society became far more complex, resulting in a more varied readership comprising diverse social groups. However, as vernacular languages such as Picard French became cosmopolitan languages of ‘power and legitimacy’, women’s roles as readers and writers of vernacular literature in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were by no means common.² For this reason, this contribution explores the relationship between gender and multilingual literary culture in the late medieval County of Flanders from the perspective of female readers and book owners through their material possessions: manuscripts. Extensive research has established the role of women as patrons of medieval literature. Though actual women writers were scarce, women played an important part in literary culture as patrons of vernacular, and particularly Middle Dutch, literature in the Low Countries.³ Since the popularity of ‘material philology’ in the 1990s, however, the focus on medieval readers has shifted from patronage to manuscript ownership.⁴ Manuscripts are key to understanding the connection between text and context. Textual variations in manuscripts on the one hand, and traces of use such as *ex libris* or marginal notes on the other, offer insights into intended audiences and literary patrons, as well as the actual manuscript readers and owners.

The County of Flanders provides a fascinating setting in which to analyze multilingualism, gender differences, and their intersection. Firstly, regarding multilingualism, the southern part of the county, and specifically the castellanies of Lille and Douai, was Picard-speaking, whereas the northern part of Flanders was home to a predominantly Dutch-speaking community.⁵ Furthermore, in addition to the dynamics of geographical space, there is a particularly social aspect to language use. The Flemish court, for example, was predominantly francophone, and even in the northern part of the county where trade centres and industries developed in Ghent, Bruges, and Ypres, French was the language of culture and economy for a significant proportion of the nobility and urban elite. Citizens invested in vernacular multilingualism as ‘linguistic capital’ through education and school manuals to engage in commercial circuits, and this also influenced urban literary culture.⁶ At the

1 McCash, ‘The Role of Women’, p. 45; see also Dearnley, ‘Women of oure tunge’.

2 McCash, ‘The Role of Women’, p. 55.

3 See, e.g., van der Poel, “‘Mijn lieve joncfrouwe’”, p. 249 and Walters, ‘Jeanne and Marguerite de Flandre as Female Patrons’.

4 Nichols, ‘Introduction’.

5 De Hemptinne and Prevenier, ‘La Flandre au Moyen Âge’.

6 Cooper, ‘Urban Utterances’, p. 138. On education and literacy in the late medieval Low Countries, see De Ridder-Symoens, ‘Education and Literacy’. Multilingual manuals and

end of the sixteenth century, the Italian merchant and chronicler Lodovico Guicciardini noted the excellent language skills of city-dwellers in the Low Countries: 'For there are many who, although they have never been abroad, can speak foreign languages in addition to their maternal tongue, particularly French, which is very common among them; many speak German, English, Italian and other foreign languages.'⁷

Secondly, women held a relatively independent position in the County of Flanders: they were well educated, had equal inheritance rights, and participated in family businesses.⁸ Both sons and daughters of the mercantile and guild elite attended primary school in the cities.⁹ Multilingual manuals such as the *Bouc vanden Ambachten/Livre des Mestiers* (Book of Crafts) written by a Bruges schoolmaster in the mid-fourteenth century (but with multiple later adaptations), could well have been intended for both boys' and girls' schooling.¹⁰ This conversation book includes a French and Dutch example of the girl Margot or 'Grielekin' (a diminutive of Margaret) who must fetch an order from the local butcher, perhaps intended to teach an actual role played by Bruges schoolgirls.¹¹ Ghent orphan girls, for instance, mentioned in the records of the aldermen of *de Ghedeele* — one of the two benches of aldermen in Ghent — were placed with persons or in institutions to be educated and to learn a specific craft. The beguinage of St Elisabeth in Ghent, for example, sheltered many orphan girls who there learned to read and write.¹² Schooling for girls was also organized in the convents of the canonesses of St August, known as Sisters of the Common Life. Ghent girls and orphan girls were also sent to the 'Walsche scole' (French schools), a more advanced middle school where reading and writing were taught both in their mother tongue, Dutch, and in French. Only the Latin schools, the medieval high schools often preparing boys for an ecclesiastical or university career, were inaccessible to girls.

The *Multilingual Literary Dynamics of Medieval Flanders* project was a large-scale investigation devoted to the multilingual literary culture in the County of Flanders from the thirteenth to the late fifteenth century. It had a two-fold approach, exploring both textual and manuscript culture in its research. In this project, we developed a database of extant manuscripts

their role in language learning are also discussed in Rozanne Versendaal's contribution to the present volume.

7 De Ridder-Symoens, 'Education and Literacy', p. 6.

8 Haemers and others, *Wijvenwereld*.

9 De Munck and De Ridder-Symoens, 'Education and Knowledge'.

10 Demets and Hugen, 'Grenzeloze teksten'. For an edition, see *Het Brugsche Livre des Mestiers en zijn navolgingen*.

11 *Livre des mestiers*, p. 11: 'Margot, preng de l'argent, | si t'en va en le boucherie; | si nous acate de le char. | Grielekin, nem ghelt, | ende ganc in't vleeschuus; | zo coop ons vleesch.' (Little Margaret, take some money, and go to the butcher to buy us meat).

12 De Hemptinne, 'Lire et écrire', p. 152.

produced or used in Flanders which date (or are datable) to c. 1200 to c. 1500.¹³ This dataset includes metadata of around 2540 manuscripts holding ‘literary’ texts such as romances, chronicles, and Books of Hours, but also law treatises and theological works.¹⁴

There are some important considerations for collecting and using this dataset. First, it includes only extant manuscripts, thus excluding library lists or lost manuscripts. Research on manuscript survival has pointed to a survival rate of around seven to nine per cent.¹⁵ This survival rate was influenced not only by a manuscript’s content, but also by its material value (illuminated manuscripts were probably more likely to be passed on and preserved) and ownership. Manuscripts owned by private persons tended to have a slimmer survival chance than manuscripts in institutions.¹⁶ Consequently, manuscripts owned by women in private contexts may have been much more likely to be lost over time. Second, this dataset is almost entirely sourced from online library catalogues. Origin attribution can be highly problematic and vague in library catalogues, and especially older examples, which makes it difficult to confidently select only Flemish manuscripts. For this reason, we only included those which could be attributed to a Flemish context with relative certainty.

Third, this contribution addresses book ownership, but how does one define book ownership and with what evidence? Owners may be overtly indicated by an inscription, patron portrait, or coat of arms. Nevertheless, catalogue information is quite fragmented with respect to ownership: for instance, the owner’s milieu could not be identified for 549 of the manuscripts included in our database. In the case of women, defining ownership can be even more problematic as they were often jointly owned by couples. Indeed, as Hanno Wijsman suggested, there are striking similarities in the manuscript patronage of women and married couples. Therefore, he proposed that if marks of ownership refer to the couple, the actual book patron was probably the wife.¹⁷ Furthermore, readership is more expansive than ‘ownership’: people

13 This essay is based on the January 2022 version of the database; an updated dataset (version 2024) is available on Zenodo, doi: 10.5281/zenodo.10589077. For additional information about the database and methodological issues related to quantitative analysis of our manuscript data, see Jenneke Janzen’s contribution to the present volume, especially pp. 34–35.

14 Furthermore, as our dataset is largely based on library catalogues, we relied on the correct and complete input of cataloguers; while some data is missing for many of our included manuscripts, we excluded those for which the available information was insufficient or unreliable.

15 This estimate relates to the Burgundian court; see Wijsman, *Luxury Bound*, p. 20. A pan-European estimate applying an ecological species model puts the survival rate at around nine per cent; see Kestemont and others, ‘Forgotten Books’.

16 Institutional collections are also heavily influenced by their preservation contexts. Medieval sources from Bruges, for instance, are overall well preserved in comparison to other Flemish cities, such as Ypres, which was largely destroyed in the First World War. See also Derolez, ‘Medieval Libraries in the Low Countries’, p. 78.

17 Wijsman, *Luxury Bound*, p. 134.

borrowed, co-owned, and inherited books. One woman may have possessed many books, and one book may have been owned by many women. Such nuances are hard to retrieve in the dataset.

For these reasons, identifying medieval female book owners and readers can be challenging, particularly when focusing only on extant manuscripts. Only occasionally one finds an unequivocal mark of ownership, such as a flyleaf inscription.¹⁸ Nevertheless, a data-driven approach is still necessary, as even the analysis of fragmented pieces of information, no matter how small or ambiguous, contributes to our understanding of the lives and activities of medieval women, as this contribution demonstrates. Moreover, a very solid proportion of the manuscripts in our dataset has robust data, compiled not only by single cataloguers, but from multiple recent, thorough studies by various scholars. Digitization over the last decade has helped improve the accuracy of cataloguing immensely, and the quality of the research which draws on it.

The approach presented in this contribution is twofold. The first part focuses on the consumption of manuscripts by women by means of a quantitative analysis. It offers an overview of the mono- and multilingual manuscripts owned by women, and zooms in on popular genres amongst women readers. In the second part, several case studies of women's reading contexts are addressed.¹⁹ The intersection of gender and social status is important here, as women's reading interests were influenced by the religious, urban, or court environments in which they lived and engaged with literary culture.

Gender and Multilingual Ownership: A Quantitative Overview

Before looking into the particularities of female book ownership in Flanders, women's multilingual literary culture is here contextualized through comparison to manuscripts owned by men. For 1582 of the 2540 manuscripts in the *Multilingual Literary Dynamics Database*, the gender of the first owner is identified. Unsurprisingly, both individual laymen as well as male institutions were by far the most common book owners in late medieval Flanders: 1380 of the 1582 manuscripts with known ownership data (or 87 per cent) were owned by men, whereas only 202 manuscripts (or 13 per cent) could be attributed to female owners. These percentages are marginally lower than what is typically observed for the Low Countries as a whole. Hanno Wijsman's research on Burgundian luxury manuscripts (for which ownership may be better known than average by virtue of their longstanding preservation in royal and institutional libraries) indicates a slightly higher percentage of female owners of illuminated manuscripts

¹⁸ Watson and Kaplan, 'Books of Duchesses'.

¹⁹ Wogan-Browne, 'Cest livre liseez ... chescun jour'.

in the Low Countries (19 per cent versus 81 per cent male owners).²⁰ When examining illuminated manuscripts, it is crucial to consider the significance of genre, especially because a substantial portion of the illuminated manuscript collection comprises Books of Hours. Women were often the principal users of Hours. Furthermore, Anne-Marie Legaré demonstrates that all too often it is automatically assumed that men were the predominant manuscript collectors based on heraldic details, whereas various other factors point toward their wives as primary users and readers.²¹ Consequently, the figures below probably underestimate the actual proportion of women readers.

Table 11.1. Language of manuscripts owned by Flemish men and women, c. 1200–c. 1500. (Representing ownership by individuals and institutions, with absolute numbers and relative proportions of category totals.) Figure by the author.

Language	Men (n = 1380)	Women (n = 202)
Dutch	36 (3%)	25 (12%)
French	437 (32%)	41 (20%)
Latin	803 (58%)	65 (32%)
Multilingual	98 (7%)	68 (34%)
Dutch-French-Latin	6 (<1%)	8 (4%)
Dutch-Latin	28 (2%)	28 (14%)
French-Latin	57 (4%)	31 (15%)
French-Dutch	7 (1%)	1 (1%)
Other	6 (<1%)	3 (2%)

As Table 11.1 shows, Latin is the most common literary language for readers of both sexes, followed by the other *lingua franca*: French. Noteworthy is the prominence of Dutch amongst female readers. This can be related to the Dutch literary activities of religious women in convents, whereas Dutch was (with some exceptions) overall absent in manuscripts from male monasteries in Flanders. Interestingly, the relative language variation for each gender shows that manuscripts owned by women often include more than one language. Table 11.1 illustrates that, most often, books owned by women included a combination of Latin and a vernacular language. Were women more commonly multilingual than men? Again, it seems evident that genre has a significant impact on these numbers. As previously noted, Books of Hours are the predominant literary category among female book owners, and these manuscripts tend to exhibit a greater degree of multilingualism. Indeed, the presumed multilingual capabilities of women suggested by this

20 Wijsman, *Luxury Bound*, p. 133.
21 Legaré, ‘Livres d’heures’; see also Reinburg, *French Books of Hours*.

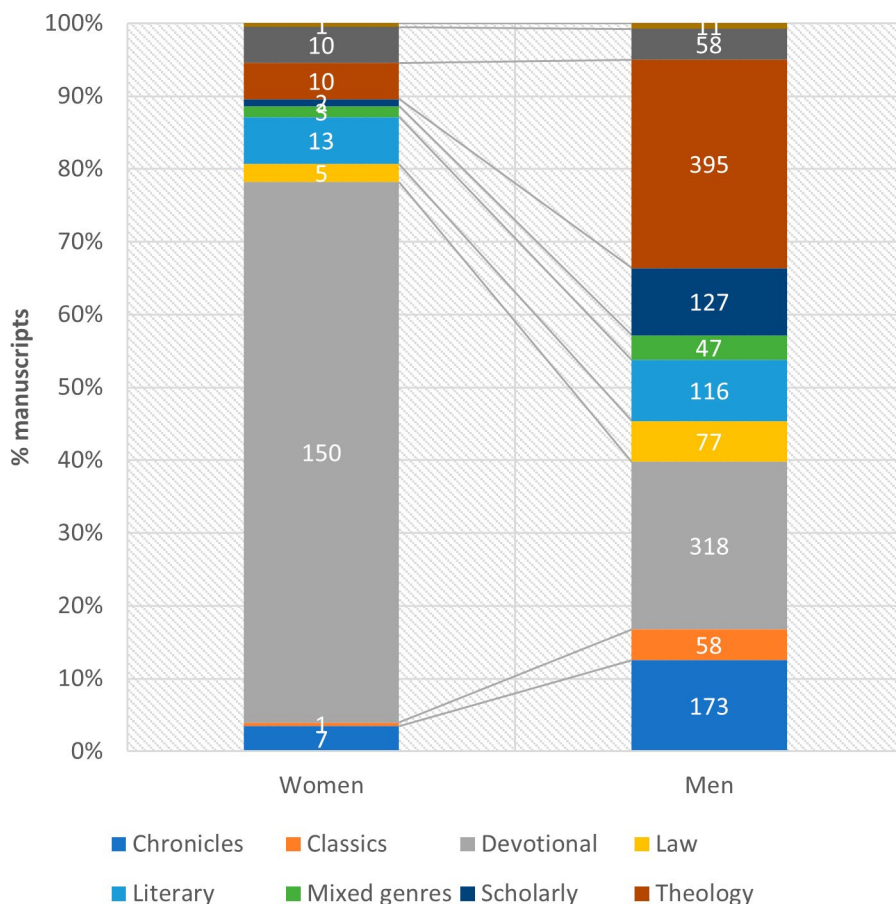


Figure 11.1. Graph showing the manuscript genres owned by Flemish women and men, c. 1200–c. 1500 (representing ownership by individuals and institutions, with absolute numbers and relative proportions of category totals). Figure by the author.

table should be nuanced as the inclusion of Dutch alongside French or Latin in a multilingual manuscript could indicate both a high or low level of multilingualism: either the book owner read in multiple languages with facility, or the reader's French or Latin was insufficient to understand the text without instructions in Dutch.²²

Research on female patronage and manuscript use shows that opportunities for women as readers were limited. Many assumptions have been made about the relationship between gender and genre. The beliefs that women had 'more

²² See also the contribution of Jenneke Janzen to this volume.

time to read' and 'only read for pleasure', no longer stand: men and women both read for educational, religious, and recreational purposes.²³ Nonetheless, scholarly research does indicate the existence of a conventional medieval 'women's library' which predominantly comprised religious texts.²⁴ Also, genres related to the *artes liberales* such as conversation books, medical books, and other moral-didactic texts could be found in women's collections. To a lesser extent, women also owned literary texts such as romances. Chronicles, frequently characterized by their political content, were often considered 'male genres'. Only a limited number of women are known to have possessed chronicle manuscripts, with the exception of certain prominent noblewomen or princesses.

Our dataset confirms this idea of the typical 'men's library' and 'women's library'. As Figure 11.1 suggests, Flemish men's library collections generally consisted of a wider variety of genres than women's. Manuscripts owned by women were most commonly Books of Hours (listed as 'devotional' manuscripts in the figure).²⁵ This does not mean that women did not engage with other genres. While classics and chronicles may be categorized as 'typical male genres', there is evidence of seven chronicle manuscripts that can be associated with women readers in Flanders. Most examples date from the fifteenth century. In the St-Trudo convent near Bruges, a short Middle Dutch chronicle was written and read by the canonesses.²⁶ Duchess Mary of Burgundy and her stepmother, the dowager-Duchess Margaret of York shared a copy of the *Chronique de Flandre*.²⁷ The younger duchess probably offered the manuscript as a gift to Margaret in 1477. The peculiarities of Margaret of York's library are addressed in more detail below. Figure 11.1 also demonstrates that certain genres traditionally linked with female readership were, in fact, 'gender neutral', as they appeared in both male and female reading contexts in the County of Flanders at a relatively equal rate. These genres predominantly encompass literary texts like romances, as well as practical books such as school texts, pilgrimage guides, and medical manuals.

Figure 11.2 illustrates the shift in the number of manuscripts owned by women or women's institutions from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, with specific attention to the evolution of language and multilingual manuscripts. The remarkable increase in the fifteenth century stands out immediately: 1632 of the 2540 manuscripts (64 per cent) in our dataset were produced in the fifteenth century. While the fifteenth century witnessed a surge in manuscript production across Western Europe,²⁸ there are distinct characteristics within the Flemish context. These include better preservation conditions and the

23 Wijsman, *Luxury Bound*, p. 136.

24 Watson and Kaplan, 'Books of Duchesses', p. 40; Wijsman, *Luxury Bound*, p. 136.

25 De Hemptinne, 'Reading, Writing, and Devotional Practices'.

26 Huyghebaert, 'Een kroniek van de Sint-Trudo abdij'.

27 Wells-next-the-Sea, HH-LEL, MS 659.

28 Buringh, 'The Role of Cities'.

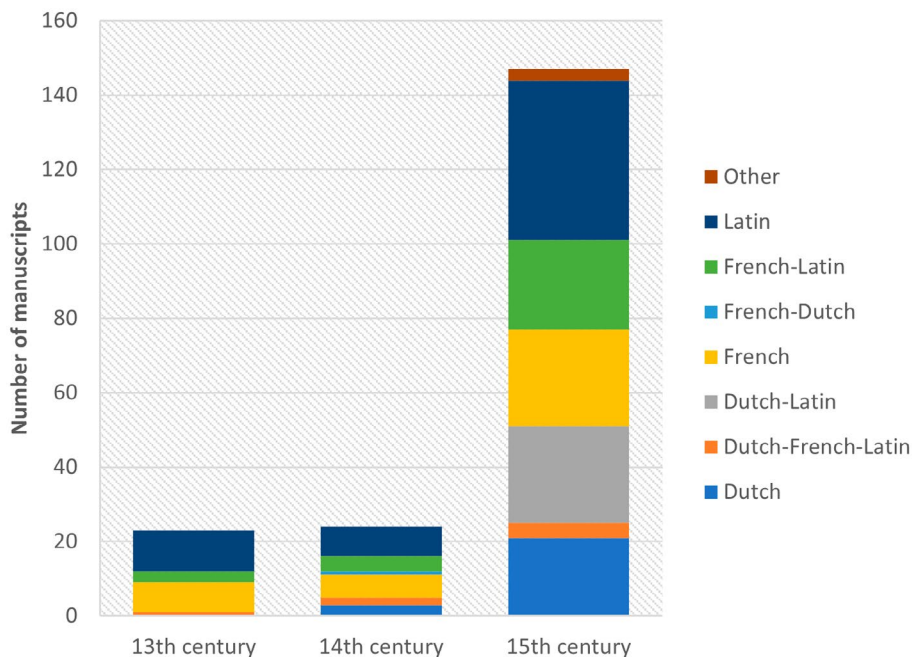


Figure 11.2. Graph showing the languages of manuscripts owned by medieval Flemish women, per century (representing ownership by individuals and institutions, with absolute numbers). Figure by the author.

evolving status of Flanders as the epicentre of interregional book production and illumination during the fifteenth century, which undeniably impacted the reading habits of the Flemish populace.²⁹

Three key observations related to language use can be made based on Figure 11.2. Firstly, despite women's involvement in the promotion of vernacular languages during the twelfth century, Latin remained the predominant language for written works, even among female manuscript owners in the thirteenth century. This phenomenon can be observed in the prevalence of Latin psalters, such as those found at the Flemish court. During the thirteenth century, vernacular reading was primarily confined to works written in (Picard) French.³⁰ This corresponds to the literary patronage of the Flemish sister-countesses Joan and Margaret of Flanders and Constantinople who hosted francophone poets such as Wauchier de Denain and Baudouin de Condé.

²⁹ Demets, 'Bruges as a Multilingual Contact Zone'.

³⁰ Textual evidence points to some Middle Dutch patronage by Countess Jeanne of Constantinople (called the 'Flemish Aïol'), although this is still debatable; see Demets, 'French Literature'.

Secondly, it is important to note that the number of manuscripts owned by women did not diminish during the fourteenth century. This contrasts with the overall trends observed in fourteenth-century Flanders. The production, distribution, and preservation of manuscripts in Flanders were significantly impacted by the political, economic, and social upheaval of the fourteenth century, which bore the brunt of devastating events such as the onset of the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) and the Black Death (1348–1349).³¹

Lastly, the graph conspicuously depicts a rise in multilingualism among women readers. In the thirteenth century, French and Latin held foremost positions as the primary languages of books owned by women. As the fourteenth century unfolded, however, Dutch gradually gained significance and nearly matched the representation of French by the fifteenth century, both in monolingual manuscripts and when combined with Latin. This stands in contrast to the prevailing trends among other readers in the region, where French-language manuscripts dominated in fifteenth-century Flanders. It appears that women who owned books played a distinctive role in promoting the circulation and consumption of Dutch manuscripts in Flanders.

Women, Prayer, and Education in the Multilingual Town

While it is important to acknowledge that the numbers are likely underestimated due to the reasons previously addressed, it is worth noting that laywomen are still fairly well represented in our dataset: a considerable 112 manuscripts can be attributed to laywomen. Even more noteworthy is the equal division of ownership between court and urban milieus.³² As depicted in Figure 11.3, a considerable proportion of multilingual books is evidently linked to an urban setting. Latin, in particular, enjoyed widespread usage as a literary language among urban women, a phenomenon closely tied to the popularity of Books of Hours within the city.³³ In contrast, Flemish noblewomen predominantly engaged with monolingual francophone manuscripts. While this could be linked to the probable underrepresentation of cities like Lille, Douai, and Ypres in the dataset,³⁴ which were either francophone towns or had a francophone elite (as in the case of Ypres), this explanation is not entirely sufficient. What is particularly noteworthy is the absence of monolingual French manuscripts in an urban context, as even in the northern towns like Ghent and Bruges,

31 Wijsman, *Luxury Bound*, pp. 17–20.

32 Of course, it is not always easy to distinguish noble from urban milieus in the County of Flanders, particularly in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; see Buylaert, *Eeuwen van ambitie*.

33 Corbellini and Hoogvliet, 'Late Medieval Urban Libraries'.

34 This is largely due to loss of local collections and lack of knowledge about book production in these locations.

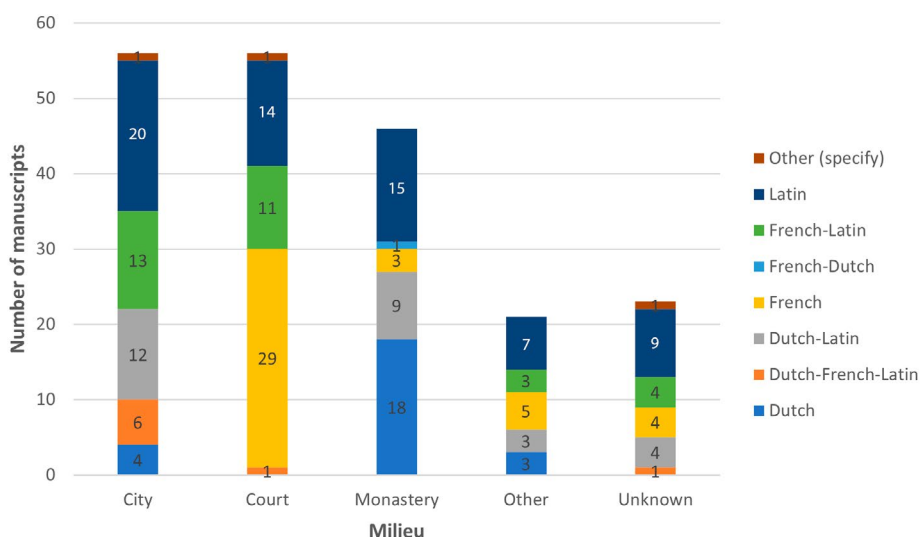


Figure 11.3. Graph showing the languages of manuscripts owned by Flemish women presented by social milieu, c. 1200–c. 1500 (representing ownership by individuals and institutions, with absolute numbers). Figure by the author.

French books were widely prevalent.³⁵ While it is true that some women attended the abovementioned ‘Walsche’ schools in Flemish towns, it appears that French language proficiency should not be overemphasized in the urban settings of women. Genre, once more, may be the predominant factor at play, as three Dutch monolingual manuscripts included psalters, Books of Hours, or other religious texts.

In our dataset, manuscripts owned by city-dwelling women are almost exclusively Books of Hours.³⁶ The importance of Books of Hours in the lives of female citizens both for educational and devotional purposes has been well established.³⁷ A late fourteenth-century poem by Eustache Deschamps satirically characterized Books of Hours not only as luxurious devotional objects typically owned by women, but also as symbols of wealth and status.³⁸ Multilingualism

³⁵ Demets, ‘Bruges as a Multilingual Contact Zone’.

³⁶ Valenciennes, BM, MS 838 is a thirteenth-century obituary-martyrology commissioned by Marie de Muerchin, living in Douai around 1274. She donated the manuscript to the Cistercian nuns of Notre Dame de Prés in Douai. It is quite unclear if this woman should be categorized as ‘urban’ or ‘noble’.

³⁷ Reinburg, ‘For the Use of Women’, Corbellini, ‘The Voice of Silence’, and Bennett ‘Making Literate Lay Women Visible’.

³⁸ ‘Heures me fault de Nostre-Dame | Si comme il appartient à fame | Venue de noble parage, | Qui soient de sutil ouvrage, | D’or et d’azur, riches et cointes, | Bien ordonnées et bien pointes, | De fin drap d’or très bien couvertes; | Et quant elles seront ouvertes, | Deux

is a primary feature of Books of Hours, as these manuscripts were products of many hands: scribes, artists, booksellers, devotional writers, and above all, lay patrons and owners. Their contents were primarily conventional, often monolingual Latin (and sometimes bilingual), but owners personalized their (inherited) books by, for example, adding vernacular prayers to local patron saints. Books of Hours in lay communities were family heirlooms, passed on from father to son, mother to daughter, and parents to their children or grandchildren.³⁹ As a result, Books of Hours tend to have more owner notes than other literary manuscripts and might be over-represented in our dataset.

Nine Books of Hours owned by Douai women are now preserved in the Bibliothèque municipale in Douai.⁴⁰ The oldest manuscript dates from the mid-thirteenth century and was (later) owned by Catherine Lobegeois who belonged to a prominent patrician family in Douai. In the calendar, richly decorated with figures depicting hunting and sowing scenes, later female owners added family obituaries, such as ‘Obiit demisella Elisabeth Lermaing, mater mea’ (Milady Elisabeth Lermaing, my mother, died).⁴¹

Among these manuscripts four are bilingual French and Latin, while five are exclusively in Latin. It is worth noting that the majority of these manuscripts were originally created as monolingual Latin texts, but subsequent owners incorporated vernacular memorial notes and religious works in French. A fourteenth-century manuscript owned by a woman (depicted on fol. 3^v), who the calendar suggests was from Douai, or perhaps St-Omer, even includes later notes in Dutch.⁴² Four fifteenth-century multilingual Hours contain a variation of *Les Quinze Joies de Notre-Dame* (The Fifteen Joys of Our Lady), a popular litany for lay devotion, or other French prayers.⁴³ These manuscripts were owned by women of the De Pres family, and were passed on as gifts from mother to daughter (or even daughter-in-law), often on the occasion of the younger woman’s wedding. A particularly meaningful example of how these heirloom books were used is a prayerbook with a clear memorial function: a sixteenth-century hand added vernacular notes dealing with marriages, births, and other family events within the De Pres family.⁴⁴ The multilingualism

fermaux d’or qui fermeront, | Qu’adonques ceuls qui les verront | Puissent partout dire
et compter | Qu’om ne puet plus belles porter’ (Hours, too, must be mine, | Where subtle
workmanship will shine, | Of gold and azure, rich and smart, | Arranged and painted with
great art, | Covered with fine brocade of gold; | And there must be, so as to hold | The
pages closed, two golden clasps. | So any whom a glimpse might catch | Should everywhere
count and see | That no one could ever carry more lovely) Deschamps, *Le miroir de mariage*,
pp. 23–24; for most of the translation, see Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish painting*, I, p. 68.

39 On Books of Hours as prestige objects and heirlooms (here for neighbouring France), see Reinburg, *French Books of Hours*, especially Chapter 2, ‘Owners and their Books’, pp. 53–83.

40 Douai, BM, MSS 178, 179, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 191, and 193.

41 Douai, BM, MS 186, fol. 3^v.

42 Douai, BM, MS 193.

43 Douai, BM, MSS 178, 179, 188, and 189.

44 Douai, BM, MS 188.

found in these manuscripts was dynamic, as it developed through accretion during their multigenerational use.

Figure 11.3 illustrates a set of six trilingual manuscripts, all associated with urban women. Four of these can be traced back to a Bruges origin and readership context.⁴⁵ Two were in the possession of prominent Bruges patrician families known for their involvement in international trade. For instance, one remarkable manuscript was probably owned by a woman of the Metteneye family, who had considerable influence in Bruges as brokers and innkeepers and held numerous public offices there. The manuscript was made around 1500, richly decorated in the Ghent-Bruges style, and holds Latin prayers with French rubrics, as well as Dutch prayers.⁴⁶ Notably, there exists another slightly older trilingual Book of Hours containing prayers in Latin, Dutch, and French which can be ascribed to a male member of the Metteneye.⁴⁷

Indeed, Books of Hours were not exclusively intended for either men or women but often served as family books. Such is the case with the trilingual Book of Hours, written around 1479, owned by Bruges burgomaster Willem Moreel and his wife Barbara van Hertsvelde.⁴⁸ Moreel was a tradesman and banker active within the Italian market.⁴⁹ The only full-page miniature of this prayerbook shows the couple's patron saints, Sts William of Maleval and Barbara, flanking the Virgin Mary.⁵⁰ Remarkably, the manuscript's border decoration and illumination were common features in both Ghent and Bruges, but the hybrid script employed is typically Italian, suggesting it was written by an Italian scribe or someone well versed in the Italian script style. Given Moreel's involvement in Italian trade networks and financial markets, it is plausible that he commissioned the main text from Italy and had it adorned by a workshop in Bruges. In contrast to the Metteneye Hours, which were originally multilingual, this Moreel prayerbook was created as a monolingual Latin manuscript.

The manuscript quickly gained a specifically memorial function in the Moreel family. Between 1480 and 1520, several French Marian poems, based on *Les Quinze Joies de Notre-Dame*, were added. Furthermore, nestled between two French texts, a short Middle Dutch poem was also incorporated,

45 Vienna, ÖNB, MS 13240; Brussels, KBR, MS 21975; Neuchâtel, BPU, MS A.F.A. 28; and The Hague, MM, MS 10 F 13.

46 Neuchâtel, BPU, MS A.F.A. 28.

47 Bruges, OB, MS 675. This manuscript was probably owned by a Cornelis Metteneye, but there were two men of this name living in Bruges at the time: one a son of Jan, and the other a son of Christoffel.

48 Boeren, 'Een getijdenboek'.

49 Haemers, 'Willem Moreel' and Haemers, *For the Common Good*.

50 Its content is almost entirely focused on Marian devotion. Various historiated initials show scenes of the life of the Holy Virgin. Moreel and his sons were members of the Confraternity of Our Lady of Hulsterlo; see Boeren, 'Een getijdenboek', p. 143.

providing an intriguing illustration of a monolingual manuscript evolving into a multilingual one, thanks to the influence of its users. It is likely that these additional texts were penned by Willem's eldest son, Willem II (who eventually assumed the position of burgomaster in Nieuwpoort) and his wife Maria van den Berghe, through whose descendants the manuscript was passed down.⁵¹ Several little memorial crosses in the calendar exclusively remembered and honoured deceased female relatives: the one at 20 June could refer to Barbara van Hertsvelde, the Book of Hours' first owner, who died in June 1499. Similarly, the two crosses at 23 May must memorialize the abovementioned Maria van den Berghe, Barbara's daughter-in-law, who died on 22 May 1542.⁵²

The fact that these women from Bruges owned, read, and left traces in their trilingual manuscripts, passing them down to their sons and daughters, highlights their active engagement in the development of 'linguistic capital' within the multilingual commercial and political milieu of Bruges. Just like their husbands, they actively participated in these networks, playing a significant social role as connectors between the city's patrician families. For instance, Barbara van Hertsvelde's father, Jan van Hertsvelde, was involved in finance, representing the Bank of Venice in Bruges, among other activities. He possessed a manuscript that was later incorporated into a complex miscellany.⁵³ All of the manuscript's four parts were copied in fifteenth-century Bruges, but were eventually relocated to Italy (probably through the family's economic activities). Its second part contains the *Wapene Martijn* by Jacob van Maerlant and its Latin translation. Its third part, that belonging to Jan van Hertsvelde, is the oldest (c. 1460) and contains both Middle Dutch and French translations of the *Disticha Catonis* (Distichs of Cato). Notably, the colophon of this part shows it was written by an anonymous female scribe identified only as 'SR'.⁵⁴

This was almost certainly a schoolbook: the classical Latin original was one of the most popular texts in medieval Latin schools, and the Dutch and French translations were likewise used for educational purposes.⁵⁵ As mentioned above, since the thirteenth century both boys and girls of wealthy merchant and guild families went to vernacular city schools in Flanders for an elementary education. As such, this schoolbook may well have used, not only by van Hertsvelde and his son, but also by his daughter Barbara, either in such a school or while they were home-schooled by the same private tutor. As a daughter and later wife of international bankers, Barbara van Hertsvelde certainly received a proper education in both languages and finances.

51 De Gryse, 'Willem Moreel'.

52 Boeren, 'Een getijdenboek', p. 137.

53 Oxford, Bodl., MS Canon Misc. 278.

54 Kienhorst, 'Een reis zonder wederkeer'.

55 Van Buuren, *Den Duytschen Catoen*.

French Literature at Court and Dutch Chronicles in Convents

Figure 11.3 points to several Dutch manuscripts in female convents (eighteen manuscripts in the dataset). In Flanders, religious women in particular read and owned Middle Dutch books. Remarkably, the ‘other’ category, including hospitals and beguinages, shows a more diversified language picture: perhaps this should be related to the urban environment and context of these particular institutions. The large proportion of Dutch manuscripts owned by religious women could explain why Jeanne Verbij-Schillings found remarkably high female ownership (364 of 845 books, or 43 per cent, in contrast to our 13 per cent) in her research on female book owners in the broader Low Countries.⁵⁶ Her corpus was drawn from the *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta* (BNM) dataset which contains Dutch texts and manuscripts.

Within our dataset, Dutch manuscripts from male monastic settings are scarce. Of the sixty-nine manuscripts that contain Dutch and can be associated with a monastic context, twenty-eight were connected to convents, while only twenty-four were linked to monasteries, leaving seventeen manuscripts with an uncertain origin.⁵⁷ Of those attributed to women’s houses, most of the manuscripts with Dutch were owned by the Bridgettine convent Mariatroon in Dendermonde,⁵⁸ followed by the Bethanie convent in Bruges and St-Anna-ter-Woestijne, a Carthusian convent about ten kilometres outside Bruges. Religious women often combined the roles of writer and reader. Dutch manuscripts in women’s convents mostly contain devotional and religious works, but there are some notable examples of chronicle writing in Dutch. Marie van Oss (1430–1507), abbess of Mariatroon, wrote her convent’s chronicle.⁵⁹ The chronicle begins with hagiography of the order’s fourteenth-century foundress, St Birgitta of Sweden, but quickly shifts to the history of her own convent in Dendermonde.

Another example, already briefly mentioned above, is the short Dutch chronicle manuscript of the St-Trudo convent in Steenbrugge which also contains some translated letters of Abelard and Heloise.⁶⁰ The chronicle was written by an anonymous nun and dedicated to her abbess Pieternelle van Aertrike. As the lords of Tillegem, the van Aertrikes were an important patrician family in Bruges and in the rural district surrounding the city.⁶¹ It

56 Verbij-Schillings, ‘Les relations entre femmes et livres’, p. 165.

57 One notable exception is the prior and librarian of St Bavo’s in Ghent, Olivier de Langhe, who translated many texts to Dutch; see Vanderputten, ‘De kroniek van prior Olivier de Langhe’ and Bart Besamusca’s contribution to the present volume.

58 For a case study of multilingual manuscripts from Mariatroon using the *Multilingual Dynamics* dataset, see Besamusca and Janzen, ‘Multilingual Manuscripts’.

59 Cologne, HA, MS GA 178; see Olsen, ‘The Late Medieval Chronicle’.

60 Brussels, KBR, MS II 517.

61 Buylaert, *Repertorium*, p. 22.

was quite common for daughters of the local rural and urban elite to obtain prominent positions in nearby convents in and around the city. Notably, Dutch was the main literary language in these female elite convents. While the abovementioned manuscript was owned collectively by the convent, Pieternelle van Aertrike herself illustrates the entanglement of social milieus in the later Middle Ages. By virtue of her family, Pieternelle could be classified as belonging to the urban elite and rural nobility, and by virtue of her position as abbess of St-Trudo, also as religious high society. Remarkably, language use seems to follow the various social roles these women played.

The strong association between French literature and noblewomen, as evident in the twenty-nine manuscripts in Figure 11.3, might not come as a surprise. There is no significant gender distinction in this regard, as Flemish noblemen also displayed a predominant interest in francophone texts and manuscripts. However, it is (again) worth noting that genre plays a pivotal role. The Flemish rural elite had a penchant for French literature and conducted their prayers in Latin, but directed their administrative affairs in Dutch. An example of this practice can be seen in the Middle Dutch Rental Book of the Lady of Massemine, originating from a village in Eastern Flanders. It can be dated to the early fourteenth century and illustrates this linguistic diversity.⁶²

An overwhelming number of francophone manuscripts in our dataset which are known to have been owned by noblewomen belonged to the library of the Burgundian Duchess Margaret of York.⁶³ In total, twenty-three manuscripts can be attributed to her collection.⁶⁴ An additional five she presented as gifts to religious institutions, friends, and relatives. Sister of the English King Edward IV, Margaret of York became duchess of Burgundy after her marriage to Charles the Bold in 1468. Inspired by the Burgundian library collection, she commissioned multiple works herself.⁶⁵ She is one of the few Flemish countesses whose library can be reconstructed based on extant manuscripts.⁶⁶ This is particularly owing to the portrait miniatures in many of these manuscripts, which make it easier to link them to Margaret's patronage.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, it is highly likely that her actual library was considerably more extensive and, strikingly, was assembled within a relatively brief span of time. Most of her known literary patronage is constrained within her

62 London, BL, Add. MS 11431; see De Flou and Gailliard, 'Verslag bij de Koninklijke Vlaamsche Academie', p. 248.

63 Cockshaw, 'Some Remarks'.

64 Barstow, 'The Library of Margaret of York'. Only seventeen manuscripts were included in the dataset as explicitly Margaret's; those which have been lost, are in private collections, or were commissioned by Philip the Good are excluded from this number.

65 Likewise her brother had a huge library collection (many commissioned from Bruges after his banishment there); see Backhouse, 'Founders of the Royal Library'.

66 Cockshaw, 'Some Remarks', p. 57.

67 Blockmans, 'The Devotion of a Lonely Duchess', p. 40.

tenure as duchess-consort between 1468 and 1477.⁶⁸ Throughout her years as dowager-duchess from 1477 to 1503, a quite turbulent political period, her manuscript commissions dwindled, and she expressed her patronage through alternative (mostly religious) means.

Duchess Margaret's library mainly consisted of richly illuminated devotional manuscripts on parchment.⁶⁹ With the exception of a Latin breviary, her book collection consisted entirely of francophone manuscripts, devoid of any English texts. This absence of English manuscripts is expected, given that the literary preferences of both the English and Burgundian courts during this era primarily centred around French literature. A consideration of only those manuscripts attributed directly to Margaret of York's ownership might lead one to assume that, where reading was concerned, she had no political, cultural nor philosophical interests.

However, it is important to introduce a nuanced perspective on this matter: Mary of Burgundy offered a copy of the *Chronique de Flandre* to Margaret of York which makes her one of the few laywomen in our dataset to own a chronicle manuscript.⁷⁰ Moreover, an ownership inscription reading 'Margarete d'Angeletare' in her own handwriting is found in a manuscript containing Jean Mansel's *Fleur des histoires*, a voluminous world chronicle from Creation to the reign of Charles VI of France.⁷¹ The manuscript was commissioned by Duke Philip the Good in 1460, and serves as evidence that the Burgundian library, often associated with the readership of the dukes exclusively, was probably also frequented by their wives and other female relatives. Additionally, Duchess Margaret's religious book collection was not limited solely to the usual devotional books commonly found among noblewomen's possessions. She also owned theological and philosophical works by authors like Boethius and Jean Gerson. Furthermore, her devout manuscript collection often conceals a political dimension. Wim Blockmans has pointed to her commission of *Les Visions du chevalier Tondal* during 1474–1475, coinciding with the Siege of Neuss (from 29 July 1474 through the end of May 1475) during which Charles the Bold distanced himself from his wife and focused primarily on battle.⁷² *Les Visions* recounts the tale of an Irish knight who fell asleep at a banquet and there had a fantastical dream. In it, he embarked on a journey through Hell, Heaven, and Purgatory. Upon awakening, he reconciled with his enemy and dedicated his life to acts of charity and a faithful marriage. Could this be interpreted as a subtle message to her husband, who was engrossed in warfare during that time?

68 Blockmans, 'The Devotion of a Lonely Duchess', pp. 39 and 41.

69 Cockshaw, 'Some Remarks', p. 58.

70 Wells-next-the-Sea, HH-LEL, MS 659.

71 Brussels, KBR, MS 9233, fol. 220^r.

72 Blockmans, 'The Devotion of a Lonely Duchess', p. 44.

The seemingly monolingual nature of Margaret's library conceals a broader multilingual backdrop to her patronage.⁷³ For instance, she played a role in supporting William Caxton to finish his *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* in 1471, a work he dedicated to her. Flemish illuminators in her circle, such as David Aubert, evidently influenced the visual aspects of this project.⁷⁴ Further, shortly after her marriage in 1468, Duchess Margaret commissioned a richly decorated *Life of St Colette of Corbie* by Franciscan author Pierre de Vaux. She then donated the manuscript to the Poor Clares convent founded in 1442 by St Colette in Ghent.⁷⁵ A similar version of the work already belonged to the Burgundian library, commissioned in 1460 by Charles's predecessor, Philip the Good.⁷⁶ Other motives could have spurred Margaret's devotion: St Colette had interceded at difficult births and was particularly revered by pregnant women and women hoping for a pregnancy, as the childless duchess herself may well have been.⁷⁷

The presence of a French manuscript in the context of Ghent is indeed noteworthy, given that Ghent was primarily a Dutch-speaking city, and it is likely that most religious women there were Dutch native-speakers. One possible explanation for the inclusion of French content could be its use for educational purposes within the convent. Latin and Dutch translations of the same work were already in circulation within the male religious circles of Ghent. In 1450, the Franciscans commissioned a Latin translation, and in 1451, Olivier de Langhe, the librarian and prior of St Bavo's in Ghent, authored a Middle Dutch version.⁷⁸

A final example concerns a manuscript Margaret commissioned together with her stepdaughter Mary of Burgundy. It contains a French translation of Quintus Curtius Rufus's *Historia Alexandri* by Vasco de Lucena, a Portuguese diplomat and writer first in the service of Duchess Isabella of Portugal and later of Margaret of York. The manuscript was offered as a gift to Sir John Donne, and holds two inscriptions. The first, in English, by Margaret reads: 'For yet not har that ys on of yor treu frendes, Margarete of Yorke', and the second, in French, by Mary, 'Prenez moy a jamais pour votre bonne amie Marie de Bourg[og]ne' (Take me forever as your good friend, Mary of Burgundy).⁷⁹ These two examples also underscore Margaret of York's vernacular bilingualism: whereas the *Historia Alexandri* shows an inscription in English, the manuscript presented to the Poor Clares contains a dedication in French: 'Votre loyale fyllle Margarete d'Angleterre pryer pour elle et pour son salut' (Your loyal daughter, Margaret of England, pray for her and for her salvation).

73 In the contribution of Natalia I. Petrovskaja in this volume, this type of 'hidden' multilingualism is referred to as 'implicit multilingualism'.

74 Hellinga, 'Reading an Engraving'.

75 It remains in the Poor Clares's library as Ghent, AK, MS 8.

76 Brussels, KBR, MS 10980.

77 Blockmans, 'The Devotion of a Lonely Duchess', p. 37.

78 Ghent, UB, MS 520.

79 London, BL, Royal MS 15.D.iv, fol. 219^v.

Individual ownership by laywomen is often hard to detect. For instance, the Middle Dutch translation of Christine de Pizan's *Cité des Dames*, the *Boec van der stede der vrouwen*, was commissioned by the Bruges burgomaster and nobleman Jan III de Baenst in 1475. The work certainly belonged to his library and is almost exclusively linked to his patronage.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, since the translator included a prologue specifically aimed at a female audience, it is highly probable that Anna and Antoinine, the daughters of Jan de Baenst, and perhaps even his wife, Margareta de Fever, were equally readers of the text. These family libraries, often linked to male patronage, were probably accessible to both male and female family members. This equal access and shared ownership by female family members has similarly been overlooked for other extensive lay libraries of influential Bruges families. For example, the multilingual library of the Adornes family was thought to have been a kind of 'public library' housing twenty-five Latin, six French, and three Middle Dutch books,⁸¹ to which women may have also contributed and accessed. Around 1500, Elisabeth de Gruutere, the widow of the Ghent patrician Simon Borluut, donated no fewer than seventy books of their personal library to the beguinage of Our Lady Ter Hooie;⁸² books which had been her husband's or which she had shared with him passed into her sole ownership when he died, and were then bequeathed to a women's community. Much research still remains to be done, as ample evidence from Flanders points to the participation in literary culture of noblewomen, religious women, and women of the urban elite, both in French and in Dutch. In his *Kaetspel ghemoralizeert*, the Bruges sheriff Jan van den Berghe refers to a literary society hosted by a well-respected local nobleman, Roeland of Uutkerke, in the 1430s.⁸³ The group frequently gathered to read new rondels, ballades, and other kinds of poetry to one another. Unlike the institutionalized all-male Chambers of Rhetoric in the Low Countries,⁸⁴ this literary society mixed genders, as van den Berghe refers to a 'young lady' reading and performing an 'excellent new poem'.

Conclusion

This contribution delved into the subject of multilingual book ownership and readership among medieval women in Flanders, offering both quantitative and qualitative insights. On a quantitative level, we observed that Latin stood as the most prevalent literary language for both men and women, closely

80 Lie and others, *Christine de Pizan in Bruges*, p. 47.

81 De Keyser, 'Het boekenbezit'.

82 Derolez, *Corpus catalogorum Belgii*, III, pp. 28–31; on this donation, see also the contribution of Bart Besamusca to the present volume.

83 Van den Berghe, *Dat Kaetspel ghemoralizeert*, p. 110.

84 Chambers of Rhetoric are literary societies with a guild structure unique for the Low Countries and northern France; see van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*.

followed by French, which has a pronounced association with noblewomen. This connection underscores the significance of French as a cosmopolitan language intertwined with power dynamics.

The cases of trilingual manuscripts provide intriguing evidence of urban women in northern cities like Bruges and Ghent actively engaging in vernacular multilingualism, much like their male counterparts. Quantitative analysis suggests that women appeared to be more multilingual than men. However, nuance is needed: firstly, language relates to genre. Books of Hours, a genre commonly associated with women, tend to be more multilingual due to their continual adaptations and extensions within lay contexts. Secondly, the presence of multilingual manuscripts can indicate both a high or low level of multilingualism, as vernacular instructions may have been essential to facilitate the reading of Latin devotional texts. Notably, Dutch manuscripts were especially common among female owners, primarily due to the Dutch literary activities of religious women in convents in the northern part of Flanders. Flemish religious women played a significant role in introducing Dutch into the dataset.

Women's book ownership appears to have been largely confined to devotional genres, while the libraries of Flemish men seem to encompass a broader array of genres. The data aligns with the conventional image of a typical medieval 'woman's library', characterized by religious books, particularly Books of Hours, some of which were multilingual. Chronicles, typically containing historical and political content, fell into the category of 'male genres', with few women known to have been singular owners of vernacular chronicle manuscripts, with some notable exceptions among noblewomen (in French) and convents (in Dutch). Literary texts such as romances, and practical vernacular books such as educational texts, pilgrimage guides, and medical manuals, were relatively 'gender-neutral', present in both male and female reading contexts. Several genres, especially juridical and classical works, were largely excluded from women's libraries.

Analysis of quantitative data sheds light on book ownership by Flemish women in the late Middle Ages, revealing a social stratification of language use within Flanders, where French was associated with the court, Dutch with the convent, and multilingualism with the cities. However, the data are influenced by exceptional cases like Burgundian Duchess Margaret of York who left handwritten notes in books she commissioned, received, and gave as gifts. Margaret's ownership inscription in a manuscript originally commissioned by her late father-in-law, Philip the Good, exemplifies the collective ownership of late medieval books. Books of Hours, for instance, were 'family books' passed down through generations of urban women and men, as demonstrated by multilingual cases from Douai and Bruges. Furthermore, these multilingual books may have played an essential role in educating both girls and boys.

In light of these findings, it is clear that the focus on individual ownership falls short in fully comprehending women's reading habits. To gain a deeper understanding of the role of women as readers, we must adopt innovative

approaches. Library inventories, heraldry, or owner notes, often associated with the patronage of a single — usually male — individual, should be seen as evidence of books co-read by friends and relatives, women and men alike.

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