

Social Exclusion and Female Friendships in the Late Medieval Low Countries and England: The Works and Lives of Alijt Bake and Margery Kempe¹

'I doubt whether you will be able to live in our community, novice' said the prioress.²

'I hear that you isolate yourself from the others'.

The prioress walked to a table in the corner of the room and took a book from it. She pushed it into Alijt's hands.

'You like to read, don't you?'

What did the prioress want from her?

'Well?'

Alijt nodded and glanced at the cover of the book. 'The Four Temptations' written by Jan van Ruusbroec.³ She knew Jan van Ruusbroec. Who did not know this famous writer?

'Look for the second form of self-deceit' ordered the prioress.

Alijt turned the pages.

'Hurry!'

Alijt ran her fingers through the pages even quicker now. There it was: the second form of self-deceit was the desire for singularity.

¹ This publication forms part of the early postdoc mobility project 'Raging Love: The Late Medieval Works and Lives of Margery Kempe (ca. 1373 – ca. 1440) and Alijt Bake (1415–1455)', funded by the Swiss National Research Foundation (2019–21).

² This is a fragment (translated into English from Dutch) from a piece of creative writing. In this text, I want to tell the story of Alijt Bake in another, more creative way by using a different form and register to talk about Alijt Bake's late medieval life and texts.

³ Bake describes in her spiritual life story *Boexcken van mijn beghin ende voortganck* that the other nuns tell her: 'dat ick noijnt ghemaect en was om in een ghemeijnte te comen oft te wesen, ende dat ick emmer een van die bedroghen gheesten sijn soude oft werden, daer Heer Jan Ruijsbroeck af schrijft, ende ick moeste emmer eenen bedroghen gheest hebben', B. Spaapen, ed. 'De autobiografie van Alijt Bake' in *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 41 (1967), p. 220, ll. 52–6 ('That I was not made to be or to become part of a community. On top of this, I would be one of those deceived minds that John of Ruusbroec writes about. My mind also had to be deceived all the time'). All translations into English from Bake's *Boexcken* are my own. This is, in turn, based on Ruusbroec's text 'Vanden vier becoringhen', and more specifically the second form of self-deceit: those who think that they can reach all spiritual truths independently. For an English translation of this text, see: *The Complete Ruusbroec. English Translation with the Original Middle Dutch Text*, eds G. de Baere & T. Mertens, Corpus Christianorum Scholars Version (CCSV), 2 vols (Turnhout, 2014). For more on Ruusbroec, see also: *A Companion to John of Ruusbroec*, eds J. Arblaster & R. Faessen (Leiden, 2014).

'You are singular' said the prioress. 'You have a deceived mind. You are stubborn and self-righteous. You think you can figure out everything by yourself, but believe me, you cannot. You need the guidance of others to find spiritual truth'.

Maybe the prioress was right, Alijt thought. Maybe she had a deceived mind. Ruusbroec warned against people like her in his book. People who only trusted their own judgement.

'If you continue like this, it will all end badly, novice'.

*

In the year 1440, a Dutch woman of twenty-five years old called Alijt Bake is on her way from Utrecht to Ghent. She never married and she was probably raised in an established family, because she could read and write in Dutch – and she did so frequently.⁴ Bake was

⁴ Bake's texts are very little known outside the Dutch-speaking world. Until now, John van Engen's English translation of Bake's short epistle *Four Ways of the Cross* (2008) is the only one of Bake's texts (next to her lengthier spiritual life story *Boexcken van mijn beghin ende voortganck*, Bake wrote a number of other short treatises) available to non-Dutch speaking scholars. However, Van Engen is currently working on a complete English translation of Bake's works (*The Writings of Alijt Bake*, forthcoming). Bernard Spaapen and Wybren Scheepsma have made Bake's most important works available in Dutch editions. Spaapen published the Middle Dutch edition of Bake's *Boexcken van mijn beghin ende voortganck* and a modern Dutch translation of this text was published by R. van Dijk and M. van den Berg. A bibliographical and codicological overview of Bake's texts can furthermore be found in the appendix of W. F. Scheepsma's *Deemoed en Devotie* (1997). Notable are also Anne Bollmann's (English) articles, in which she emphasises Bake's self-understanding as a religious reformer within the context of the religious movement of the *Devotio Moderna* (2014) and her 2020 article 'Close enough to touch' in which she compares Alijt Bake's *Boexcken* to Salome Sticken's *Vivendi formula*. Furthermore, Barbara Zimbalist discusses Bake's conversations with Christ in her forthcoming book, *Translating Christ in the Middle Ages: Gender, Authorship, and the Visionary Text in England, France, and the Low Countries*. I would like to thank Barbara for allowing me to read an early version of this text. See: J. Van Engen, 'Alijt Bake, *Four Ways of the Cross*' in *Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries*, eds. R. Van Nieuwenhove, R. Faesen & H. Rolfson (New York, 2008), 176–202; B. Spaapen, ed. 'De autobiografie van Alijt Bake' and 'De brief uit de ballingschap' in *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 41 (1967), 209–301, 321–50, 351–67; R. Th. M. van Dijk & M. K. A. van den Berg, ed. and trans., *Alijt Bake, tot in de peilloze diepte van God: De vrouw die moest zwijgen over haar mystieke weg* (Kampen, 1997); W. Scheepsma, *Deemoed en devotie: De koorvrouwen van Windesheim en hun geschriften*, Nederlandse literatuur en cultuur in de Middeleeuwen 17 (Amsterdam, 1997), trans. D. S. Johnson, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The 'Modern Devotion', the Canonesses of Windesheim, and their Writings* (Woodbridge, 2004); A. Bollmann, "'Being a Woman of My Own': Alijt Bake (1415-1455) as Reformer of the Inner Self" in *Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe 1200-1550*, ed. A. B. Mulder Bakker (Turnhout, 2004), 67–96, A. Bollmann †, 'Close

born in Utrecht in 1413 or 1415, but next to nothing is known about the first twenty-five years of her life.⁵ One thing we do know about her, however, is that Bake lived together with an anchoress and dear friend in Utrecht before her departure. Possibly, Bake was the maidservant of this anchoress. In her life story, entitled *Boexcken van mijn beghin ende voortganck* ('Book on my beginnings and progress'), Bake writes:

Al was ick in groot gheselschap, soo wiert ick somtijts ghetrocken van binnen op de Passie ende doodt ons liefs Heeren te dincken, al hadde ick oock aen den dans gheghaen, of met ander idelheijt becommert gheweest. Ende mij placht somtijt te [te] dincken, hadde ick wt de weereelt gheweest, ick hadde wel altoes inde Passie willen becommert sijn. Ende mij dochte dat het oock alsoo sijn soude ende dat mij anders niet en luste dan voor sijn voeten te ligghen met Maria Magdalena, hierom dat ick die eenicheijt vander cluijse sochte.⁶

Bake tells her readers that she would have liked to become an anchoress herself too. When she describes the spiritual life of her friend the anchoress, she tells the readers that 'I would have wanted that too, if they had advised me to do so', but she is encouraged – by the anchoress among others – to join a convent instead.⁷

The life story of Bake begins when she enters the convent of Galilea of Ghent as a novice. This convent was one of the thirteen women's convents that belonged to the

Enough to Touch: Tension Between Inner Devotion and Communal Piety in the Congregations of Sisters of the *Devotio Moderna*' in *Inwardness, Individualization, and Religious Agency in the Late Medieval Low Countries*, eds R. Hoffman, C. Caspers, P. Nissen, M. van Dijk, and J. Oosterman, *Medieval Church Studies* 43 (Turnhout, 2020), 137–158; B. Zimbalist, *Translating Christ in the Middle Ages: Gender, Authorship, and the Visionary Text in England, France, and the Low Countries* (manuscript in progress).

⁵ In his new English translation, John van Engen proposes 1413 rather than 1415 as Alijt Bake's year of birth. See John Van Engen, *The Writings of Alijt Bake: Teacher, Preacher, Prioress, and Spiritual Autobiographer* (forthcoming).

⁶ 'De autobiografie', ed. Spaapen, p. 252, ll. 810–8. 'Even when I was in a big crowd, sometimes I felt the urge to reflect on the sufferings and the death of our dear Lord. This also happened when I was dancing or doing something unimportant. Sometimes I thought that I wished to be able to focus on His suffering constantly, if I had not lived in the world. I also imagined it like this and wanted nothing else than to lie at his feet with Mary Magdalene. Therefore I searched for the loneliness/seclusion ['eenicheijt'] of the cell'.

⁷ Bake writes: 'de andere wonde alleen in eenicheden en aermoede, dat mij oock wel aenghestaen <hadde>, haddent sij mij gheraden' ('the other lived in complete separation [from the world] and poverty. I would have wanted that too if they had advised me to do so'). 'De autobiografie', ed. Spaapen, p. 239, ll. 504–6.

Windesheim congregation. This congregation was named after the first convent that was established in Windesheim, close to the city of Zwolle (currently in the Netherlands) at the end of the fourteenth century. The convents of the Windesheim congregation were part of the German-Dutch reform movement of the *Devotio Moderna*.⁸ Like Margery Kempe, a medieval laywoman from England who dictated what some people call ‘the first autobiography in English’, entitled *The Book of Margery Kempe* (London, British Library, MS Additional 61823) in the first half of the fifteenth century,⁹ Alijt Bake also wrote about her own life in the vernacular. The first part of her life story, *Boeck der tribulatiën* (‘Book of tribulations’), has been lost, but her second book is still extant in a version of the text from 1705 (Ghent, University Library, MS 3854) copied by sister Augustina Baert. Baert in turn used a (now lost) copy made by Jacobus Isabeels, rector of the convent of Galilea, in 1613. The first and also lost version of the text was very likely written by Bake herself around the year 1442. We still have her autograph in another manuscript, which is now at the Royal Library in Brussels (Brussels, Royal Library, MSS 643–644).

Margery Kempe’s *Book* and Alijt Bake’s *Boecxken* are late medieval spiritual autobiographies. Kempe composed her *Book* with the help of scribes, while Bake was able to write her life story by herself.¹⁰ The *Book* and *Boecxken* counter ‘the common view that autobiography began and ended with Augustine [his *Confessiones*, written in Latin between 397 and 400 AD] until it re-emerged in the eighteenth-century’.¹¹ The two late medieval texts are comparable, because they combine spiritual passages with everyday autobiographical

⁸ For an excellent description of the women’s convents that belonged to the Windesheim congregation and for background information on the ‘Modern Devotion’ movement, see: W. Scheepsmas, *Deemoed en devotie* (trans. *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries*). For an overview of the ‘Modern Devotion’ movement in English, see also J. Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: the Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2008).

⁹ Although the fifteenth-century *Book of Margery Kempe* has been the topic of a wide variety of research in the eighty years since the discovery of its unique manuscript, recently *The Book* has been the focus of a new wave of research in medieval studies. In April 2018, the first conference focussing solely on Margery Kempe, ‘Margery Kempe Studies in the 21st Century’, was organised at the University of Oxford by Laura Kalas Williams and Laura Varnam. At the same conference, the ‘Margery Kempe Society’ was founded (<https://margerykempesociety.network>).

¹⁰ For more on Margery Kempe’s scribes, see for instance: A. Bale, ‘Richard Salhouse of Norwich and the Scribe of *The Book of Margery Kempe*’, *The Chaucer Review* 52, No. 2 (2017), 173–87 and S. Sobocki, ‘The writyng of this tretys’: Margery Kempe’s Son and the Authorship of Her Book’ *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 37 (2015), 257–83.

¹¹ K. A. Winstead, *The Oxford History of Life Writing. Volume 1. The Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2018), p. 32.

descriptions of life as a late medieval woman. Many of these descriptions are either about social exclusion or about friend- and/or mentorship. In this article, I will first elaborate on the theme of social exclusion and its use as a narrative strategy in the *Book* and *Boecxken*. Then, I will focus on the representation of female friendship in both texts, and on how their friends help to shape Kempe's and Bake's (spiritual) identities. I will argue that both social exclusion and the support and encouragement from female friends and mentors are crucial elements in these texts. This social framework functions as an important rhetorical and strategic device in both the *Book* and *Boecxken*.

Alone

In her *Boecxken*, Alijt Bake has high expectations of her life as a nun. She emphasises the strong contrast between her life in the world where she dances and she is part of big crowds and her ideal of a spiritual life in which she can completely focus and meditate on Christ's suffering. As it turns out, Bake has a very difficult time adapting to life in the convent and she has trouble blending in with the rest of the community. Therefore, the disapproval of the other nuns of the novice grows by the day:

Ende veroordeelden mij seer eijghenwijs <sijnde> ende goetdunckelijck in mij selven, ende mijns selven ghevoelen ende mij selven beter gheloovende dan imant anders. Ende aldus in mijn selven blijven ende mij selven levende ende niet anders, een vrouwe te sijn op mijn selfs handt. Dit soude al tot een quaet eijnde wtcommen, ende ten lesten soude ick hierinne bedroghen worden. Deser ghelijcke seijden sij veel.¹²

Especially during her pilgrimages, it becomes instantly clear that Margery Kempe is not only also someone who takes things into her own hands, but she is told that she is not made to live or function in a community either. Even though Alijt Bake is a Dutch nun and Margery Kempe is an English laywoman, there are some striking similarities between the late medieval texts of the two women. Already at the very beginning of her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, *The Book of Margery Kempe* describes how her travel companions have great difficulties with Kempe:

¹² 'De autobiografie', ed. Spaapen, p. 220, ll. 46–52. 'They judged I was only doing things my own way [literally: singing my own tune] and I was presumptuous, like someone who puts more faith in herself than in others. I was someone who was only concerned about herself, who stuck to herself, like a woman who takes things into her own hands. It would all end badly and eventually I would end up disappointed. These things they told me'.

And thei wer most displeyd for sche wepyd so mech and spak alwey of the lofe and goodness of owyr Lord, as wel at the tabyl as in other place. And therfor shamfully thei reprevyd hir and alto-chedyn hir and seyden thei wold not suffren hir as hir husbond dede whan sche was at hom and in Ingland.¹³

Similarly to Bake, who is accused by the other nuns of wanting to fly too high too quickly, Kempe's spiritual ambitions – the fact that she always wants to talk about Christ at the dinner table for instance – are also not appreciated by her travel companions. Both Kempe's travel companions and the nuns in Bake's convent would rather have sent the two women back home.

It bothers Kempe and Bake that they do not manage to fit in with their social and religious communities. Kempe stresses that her travel companions were considered to be good men and she desires their love. Bake has a lot of self-doubt and wonders whether the nuns might be right in their judgement of her. In Kempe's case, her travel companions actually leave her behind, initially for a night, and they take her maid with them. At this point in the narrative, Kempe is very literally an outcast: she is left on her own in a strange country. When she is allowed to return to the company the next day, she is still treated with contempt by the others. However, Kempe stresses that 'notwythstondyng al ther malice, sche was had in mor worshep than thei wher-that-evyr thei comyn'.¹⁴ As a result, the way Kempe is tested by the others also provides an opportunity for her to show her inner strength. Nevertheless, as Rebecca Krug has noted, while *The Book of Margery Kempe* illustrates that past shame and isolation can and should be reinterpreted positively, its 'lived experience also retains its overwhelming power to terrify and confuse'.¹⁵

This difference between the positive interpretation of past social exclusion and isolation and the lived experience of these feelings is also present in Bake's *Boexcken*. Bake admits that:

¹³ *The Book*, ed. Windeatt, p. 151, ll. 1974–8. Translation from *The Book of Margery Kempe. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Anthony Bale* (Oxford, 2015), p. 58: 'They were also most displeased because she wept so much and was always talking about the love and goodness of our Lord, at table as well as in other places. Therefore, shamefully, they rebuked her and downright chided her and said they would not endure her as her husband did when she was at home and in England'.

¹⁴ *The Book*, ed. Windeatt, p. 153, ll. 2011–2. *The Book*, trans. Bale, p. 59: 'notwithstanding all their malice, she was held in more respect than they were, wherever they went'.

¹⁵ Rebecca Krug, *Margery Kempe and the Lonely Reader* (Ithaca N.Y, 2017), p. 106.

Mijne crancke nature die soude haer gherne tot hunliedenwaert keeren, om hun lieden daer in te paijen, opdat ick des lijdens mochte quijt worden ende leven met vrede ende met ghenoechten ende worden gepresen, gheloft ende gheert van hun allen, daer ick nu af versmaet werde en dus swaerlijck veroordeeldt.¹⁶

Following the nuns' guidance is presented as the weak choice in Bake's *Boexcken*. Doing what the others in the convent tell her to do represents a spiritual path on which Bake will encounter no resistance and will even be praised for her behaviour. While it is apparent that Bake needs to resist the temptation of choosing this option, she does struggle with the human experience of social exclusion and loneliness.

As the criticisms of the others and Bake's self-doubt continue, she reaches a point of crises in which she feels that it is better for her to leave the convent while she still can. Her narrative builds up towards a crucial turning point here. Bake thinks that she does not want to stay in the convent any longer and therefore she also does not care what the others think of her anymore. She lets go of her fear that the other nuns may be right and she stands up to the prioress in a bold and assertive manner. She writes that she:

sprackt al wt alsoo ick < het > bekende, ende seijde haer haer ghebreken oock, ende dat mij wonder gaf dat sij aldus verblient was, dat sij des selve niet en sach.¹⁷

Bake transgresses some boundaries here. The prioress remarks that she is not used to being spoken to in this way and Bake writes how the prioress becomes 'seer verstoort ende cost al dat qualijck verdraghen'.¹⁸ This can be read as a struggle for power between the two women. It has fruitful side effects for Bake. When Bake fights with her prioress and one gets the impression that the whole convent has turned against her, it becomes clear that there actually is a substantial group of nuns who support her and who are on Bake's side. Bake's narrative of social exclusion intertwines with that of her self-representation as a reformer. It is

¹⁶ 'De autobiografie', ed. Spaapen, p. 223, l. 132– p. 224, l. 137. 'My weak being would gladly turn to them to satisfy them. Then I would be free of this torment and live a placid and pleasant life. Then I would be praised, commended, and honoured by everyone who now despises and heavily judges me'.

¹⁷ 'De autobiografie', ed. Spaapen, p. 237, ll. 472–5. 'told her everything as I had experienced it. I also mentioned her shortcomings to her and said that I was surprised that she had been so blind that she could not see what everyone else saw'.

¹⁸ 'De autobiografie', ed. Spaapen, p. 237, ll. 477–8. 'very upset and she could hardly endure it'.

important to stress that both Bake and Kempe look back on their lives in their texts. In fact, Bake writes her text when she is prioress herself. Therefore, the description of her struggles as a novice and her fights with the prioress have a rhetorical purpose.

Kempe possesses the same type of charismatic power as Bake. Her travel companions want to make Kempe look like an outcast to everyone that meets her by dressing her in foolish clothes, which is, of course, an important biblical image.¹⁹ In his translation, Anthony Bale describes Kempe's clothing as a 'white canvas made of shaggy sackcloth', which 'seems to have been a parody of the sackcloth of biblical mourning and, in particular, makes a mockery of Kempe's piety' (cf. Joel 1:8 and Apocalypse 6:12).²⁰ By moving Kempe to the margins, the bottom of the table, her travel companions also try to silence her. Comparable to Bake during the first times when the other nuns reprimand her, Kempe does not dare to speak. Nevertheless she always attracts other people:

the good man of the hows ther thei wer hostellyd, thow sche sat lowest at the tabelys ende, wold alwey cheryn hir befor hem alle as he cowed and myth and sent hir of hys owyn mees of swech servyse as he had, and that grevyd hir felawship ful evyl.²¹

The interchange between social exclusion and charismatic power is a driving force behind both late medieval female narratives that ultimately leads Kempe and Bake to perform their highly affective and embodied forms of piety such as their extensive crying.

Bake and Kempe try to keep their feelings inside, because they are afraid of how the others might react. Bake writes:

Ende aldus soo quam ick hiertoe dat ick niet alleene in de Misse groote devotie en hadde, maer dickwijs ende somtijts twee of drij of vier werf sdaechs, meer en min, near dat den tijt was en ick desen toekeer dede. Dit geschiede doen alsoo wel bij de lieden als alleen sonder werck van buijten, soo wast edel ende inderlics: Ende ten lesten soo wast alsoo sterck op den spinrocke dat <het> al mijn crachten doorghinck,

¹⁹ Christ is also ridiculed and dressed up by Herod and his soldiers to look like a fool. See Luke 23.11: 'Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate'.

²⁰ *The Book*, trans. Bale, p. 59 and note on p. 242.

²¹ *The Book*, ed. Windeatt, p. 153, ll. 2012–6. *The Book*, trans. Bale, p. 59: 'And the good man of the house in which they were lodging would (as far as he was able) always treat her with more hospitality than the others, even though she sat at the lowest end of the table, and he sent her what he could from his own meal, and that aggravated the fellowship very bitterly'.

soo dat ick de spille dicwils neder liet ligghen ende strecte al mijn aderen wt als ick bedectelijck mochte. Ende ick sat ende vloijde van tranen overvloedelijck, die ick oock verberghen moest, ende mijnem asem en mocht niet wtgaen alsoot wel noot hadde gheweest, omdat sij altoes onder de lieden was. Ende dat was doen een groeter hinder ende quetsure.²²

Bake's and Kempe's emotional experiences are, apart from exalted, also difficult and painful. They try to restrain themselves – Bake even holds her breath in her attempt to 'keep everything in' – but their feelings are so strong that they are ready to burst through their bodies. Bake stresses that her intense crying causes her long-lasting pains, but the forced restraint of these emotions has an even stronger physical effect. Kempe:

whan sche knew that sche schulde cryen, sche kept it in as long as sche myght and dede al that sche cowde to withstond it er ellys to put it away, til sche wex as blo as any leed and evyr it schuld labowryn in hir mende mor and mor into the tyme that it broke owte.²³

Laura Kalas Williams has characterised this emotional response as 'an eruption of the inner self, turning inside out'.²⁴ Both *The Book* and *Boexcken* move back and forth between a sense of community – meaning a sense of the ideas that exist within this community –, Kempe's

²² 'De autobiografie', ed. Spaapen, p. 260, ll. 26–38. 'So it happened that I not only experienced that inner ecstasy during mass, but sometimes two or three or four times a day, more or less depending on the time and whether I allowed myself to be open to it. This happened without any influence from the outside, in company as well as when I was alone. Then it was the most exalted and fervent. Eventually, while I was spinning, this experience was so intense that it took all of my power. Because of that, I often rested my spindle and stretched my blood vessels as it where, as much as I could without attracting attention. While I was sitting, the tears streamed abundantly. This I also had to hide. Because **she** had company all the time, I could not breathe out, even though that was decidedly necessary'. The narrative voice in *Boexcken* regularly switches between the first and the third person. This points to – possibly major – interpolations and adaptations by later scribes. One of these scribes was probably Jacobus Isabeels, a later rector of the Galilea convent.

²³ *The Book*, ed. Windeatt, pp. 165–6, ll. 2254–8. *The Book*, trans. Bale, p. 65: 'when she knew that she was going to cry, she held it in for as long as she could and did all that she could to withstand it or put it aside, until her complexion turned as bruised as lead, and all the time it would be working and working more in her mind until the time that it burst out'.

²⁴ L. Kalas Williams, *Margery Kempe's Spiritual Medicine: Suffering, Transformation and the Life Course* (Woodbridge, 2020), p. 41.

and Bake's awareness of how their behaviour will be viewed and judged by others, and a sense of authority and independence in both women, which grows through time.

Together

Bake has a hard time adapting to life in the convent in Ghent. After a few months she becomes so homesick that she thinks about leaving the convent and going back to her two dear friends in Utrecht. Her first friend is the anchoress, mentioned earlier, and her second friend is a nun who worked in a medieval hospital. Bake writes:

Mijn herte dat track mij seer tuijtrecht te trecken tot twee devote persoonen, dat mijn sonderlinghe vrindinnen waeren ende die seer heylich en verlicht waren, dat sij veel heijmelijckheden van Godt wisten. Ende de eene was die persoone, daer vooren, in dat eerste boeck, af gheseijdt is, die mij al mijn tribulatiën vercondichde ende voorseijde, ende mij seijde dat mij Godt niet verlaten en saude, nemmermeer, ende die mij herwaert wijsde met blijschap. Omdat sij al mijn sacken wyste, begheerde ick noch met haer te spreken, om te besien wat den wille Godts was dat ick doen oft laten soude, dat was: oft ick hier blijven wilde, of dat ick bij eenich van hun beijden blijven wille. Want die een woude in een gasthuijs ende diende de siecken ende leijde een wtghenomen heijlich leven, de andere woude alleen in eenicheden en aermoede, dat mij oock wel aenghestaen <hadde>, haddent sij mij gheraden.²⁵

Bake writes about her friendship with these two women in a heartfelt manner. Even though the two women represent two different spiritual paths, a secluded and contemplative life versus a more active life caring for the sick, Bake admires both of her friends. The nurse probably lived and worked in the 'Saint Barbara and Saint Laurentius hospital'. This hospital was founded by a community of beguines in Utrecht around 1359. Gradually, the group of

²⁵ 'De autobiografie', ed. Spaapen, pp. 238–9, ll. 492–507. 'My heart longed for Utrecht, for two devout people who were my special friends and who were very holy and enlightened, so that they had a trustworthy relationship with God. The first one [the anchoress] was discussed before in the first book [this book is unfortunately lost]. She had foreseen and predicted all my troubles. She told me that God would not leave me, now or never, and she joyfully sent me to this place. Because she knew me through and through, I wanted to talk to her again to find out what God wanted me to do or not do. Did I want to stay here or with one of them? The one lived in an infirmary, cared for the sick and lived a distinctly holy life. The other lived in complete seclusion and poverty. I would have wanted that too, if they had advised me to do so'.

women started forming a more official religious community with its own rule, but caring for the sick remained central to life in this female community. As Van Dijk has noted, the hospital was central to the Modern Devotion movement in Utrecht.²⁶

By going to the convent in Ghent, Bake in a sense chooses the path between that of the enclosed and contemplative anchoress and the social and active nurse. Apart from the affective identification with moments in Christ's life and contemplative reading, the nuns in the convent of Galilea were also occupied with more practical tasks such as spinning. During her first year in the convent of Galilea, when Bake is very doubtful whether she should stay in the convent or not, she asks the anchoress for advice on what to do. It turns out that the anchoress has died during Bake's first year in the convent, but she nevertheless speaks to Bake in a dream and tells her that it is God's will that she stays there. Ultimately, the anchoresses' advice is crucial for Bake to determine her spiritual path. The anchoress even tells Bake when it is time to officially enter the convent:

Doen men dese joffrauwe het dertichste dede, alsoo mij docht dat ick doen daer was, ende sachse ende sprackse, ende vraghde haer seer begherlijck wat den wille Godts van mij was. Doen seijde sij mij: 'Dat ghij haest in die oorden sult commen, het is tijt'. Doen verblijde ick mij seer ende sprack: 'Och, is <het> dan den wille mijns Heeren Gods, soo wille ick het gheerne doen'.²⁷

The special bond between Bake and the anchoress partly mirrors the relationship between Margery Kempe and the anchoress Julian of Norwich in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Kempe describes how she and Julian of Norwich are together for many days, so the two women must also have felt a strong connection from the moment they met. Laura Saetveit Miles stresses the importance of the meeting between Margery and Julian. She notes that behind this meeting lies a lineage of parallels of holy women meeting holy women. The most important precedent of the encounter, Saetveit Miles argues, is the Biblical scene of the

²⁶ Van Dijk, *Alijt Bake*, pp. 12–3.

²⁷ 'De autobiografie', ed. Spaapen, p. 246, ll. 681–87. 'When the thirtieth day of her death was celebrated [probably the last of the thirty special masses that were read for her after her death], it was like I was there. I saw and spoke to her and asked her what God's will for me was. Then she said to me: "You have to enter the convent, it is time". I was delighted and spoke: "If it is God's will, then I will gladly do it"'.²⁷

visitation, when Mary and her cousin Elizabeth meet.²⁸ Kempe tells us in her *Book* that she told Julian of Norwich about her visions and revelations:

to wetyn yf ther wer any decyte in hem, for the ankres was expert in swech thyngys
and good counsel coud yevyn.²⁹

Both anchoresses are major sources of knowledge, authority, and wisdom for Kempe and Bake. The meetings of Kempe and Bake with the anchoresses can furthermore be read, to use Saetveit Miles' words, as 'a positive remodelling of how spiritual relationships could and should be, a model only possible because it takes shape outside pervasive male structures'.³⁰

The bonds between these medieval women illustrate that the anchoritic life not simply represents a specific religious vocation or spiritual path in *Boexcken* and *The Book*. It gives us insight into a variety of late medieval female spiritualities and perceptions of the reclusive life. Kempe, when she is arrested by the men of the Duke of Bedford and imprisoned at Beverly, describes how she, like an anchoress, stood: 'lokyng owt at a wyndown, tellyng many good talys to hem that wolden heryn her'.³¹ Although their anchoritic friends are perhaps not convinced by Kempe's and Bake's ability to be an anchoress, they take Kempe's and Bake's spiritual experiences and aspirations seriously. This in turn allows and motivates Bake and Kempe to become self-confident and self-conscious figures of spiritual authority in their own right.

²⁸ L. Saetveit Miles, 'Queer Touch Between Holy Women: Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Birgitta of Sweden, and the Visitation' in *Touching, Devotional Practices, and Visionary Experience in the Late Middle Ages*, eds. D. Carillo-Rangel, D. I. Nieto-Isabel & P. Acosta-García (London, 2019), pp. 203–35.

²⁹ *The Book*, ed. Windeatt, p. 120, ll. 1341–43. *The Book*, trans. Bale, p. 42: 'To know whether there was any deceit in them, for the anchoress was expert in such things and could give good advice'. For more on the phenomenon of *Discretio Spirituum*, the discernment of spirits, by a woman to another woman, see: R. Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late Medieval Women Visionaries* (Woodbridge, 1999) and N. K. Yoshikawa, 'Discretio spirituum in Time: The Impact of Julian of Norwich's Counsel in the *Book of Margery Kempe*', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VII: papers read at Charney Manor, July 2004*, ed. E. A. Jones (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 119–32.

³⁰ Saetveit Miles, 'When Margery Kempe visits'. See also: K. Lochrie, 'Between Women', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, ed. D. Wallace & C. Dinshaw (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 70–90.

³¹ *The Book*, ed. Windeatt, p. 260, ll. 4367–8. 'looking out at a window, telling many good tales to those who would listen to her'. *The Book*, trans. Bale, p. 119.

Ultimately, this even gives Alijt Bake the courage to ask God to make her as strong as, and possibly even stronger, than a man. God initially gently challenges Bake by telling her in a soft and sweet voice that the spiritual path she wants to take is only suited for strong men. At this point in the text, the fact that Bake is a woman with spiritual ambitions is discussed very explicitly. Bake then gives a convincing speech about the importance of mental strength:

Heere, waer hebben die stercke mannen haer sterckheijt ghecreghen? Hebt ghijse hun niet gegheven trauwen, Heere, ia ia, ghij! Ende dat ghij hun ghegheven hebt, meucht ghij mij oock gheven, al ben ick een vrouwe also wel vermeucht gij dat een als dat ander. Ende och, Heere, al ben ick een crancke vrouwe, en sal ick u daerom niet moghen naervolghen waer dat ghij henen gaet? Ende en wilt ghij mij niet leijden, soo moet ghij mij slepen ende draghen, want van U moet het al commen alsoo wel in de mannen als in mij (...) Al hebt ghijse stercker van naturen ghemaect dan ghij mij doet, ghij mocht mij van graciën oock doen, en hondert werf stercker maken in den gheest dan sij sijn. <Want> wat baet de sterckheijt der naturen als sij die sterckheijt des gheest niet en hebben. Och Heere, de cracht der minnen die is soo groot en gaet boven die stercke nature der mannen. Hierom, soo sult ghij mij dese gheven ende mij en sal niet on<t>breken'.³²

After this speech, God gives in and tells Bake she can ask and desire anything she wants from him and he will give and explain it to her. Bake finds that women's strength lies not on the physical, but on the mental level. While God is of course presented as the ultimate source of power, the bonds and friendships between women enforce this mental strength and lead to self-confidence and assertiveness. Bake's and Kempe's female friendships are of crucial importance to them and these women help them to make important life- and spiritual choices.

³² 'De autobiografie', ed. Spaapen, pp. 298–9, ll. 98–106 and 115–22. 'Lord, how do these strong men get their power? By the way, have you not given it to them? Oh surely, Lord! And what you gave them you can give me even though I am a woman. You can do the one thing as well as the other. Lord, although unfortunately I am a weak woman, does this mean that I cannot follow you? If you do not want to lead me, you will have to drag or carry me, because everything should come from you, whether it concerns men or me. (...) Even though you gave them a stronger body than me, you could, out of mercy, also give it to me and make me mentally a hundred times stronger than them. After all, what can one do with physical strength if one is not also mentally strong? Lord, the power of love is so immense and surpasses the physical strength of all these men. Therefore you should give that to me and then I will lack nothing'.

Endings

Even though Bake eventually becomes prioress of her convent in 1445, her life-story does not end well. When a delegation of the Windesheim congregation visit the convent in 1455, they are so outraged by what they find that Bake is banished from her community. The delegation of the Windesheim congregation punish Bake severely: she is banned to the Facons convent in Antwerp. In the same year, the women in the convent in Ghent are forbidden to write on visions or doctrine any longer or to translate any texts from Latin into the vernacular. The *Acta Capituli Windeschemensis* states:

Nulla monialis aut soror cuiuscunque status fuerit conscribat aliquos libros, doctrinas philosophicas aut revalationes continents per se interpositamve personam ex sua propria mente vel aliarum sororum compositas sub poena carceris si qui inposterum reperti fuerint praecipitur omnibus quod statim illi ad quorum conspectum vel aures pervenerit eos igni trader current, similiter nec aliquem transferre praesumant de latino in theutonicum.³³

The women's writing activities, under the leadership of Bake, must have been connected to her banishment. The fact that the medieval manuscript of *Boexcken van mijn beghin ende voortganck* (dated 1451–52) was not immediately destroyed, but kept somewhere, so that it (or a copy of it) could be copied more than 150 years later by the rector of Galilea, can be considered an act of resistance.

Next to Bake's life story, the rector Jacobus Isabeels also copied a letter by Bake, written just after she was banished to Antwerp, in which she expresses her disbelief about the situation. Bake still thinks that the congregation is not allowed to punish her like this, and tries to reverse her punishment. She angrily writes to a sympathetic rector (probably Nicolaas van Duyvendyc):

³³ S. Van der Woude, *Acta Capituli Windeshemense. Acta van de kapittelvergaderingen der Congregatie van Windesheim*, Kerkhistorische studiën VI (Den Haag, 1953). 'No nun or sister no matter what her status, may, either personally or through an intermediary, copy books which contain philosophical teachings or revelations, whether these originate in her own mind or that of her sisters, on penalty of imprisonment; henceforth should any such be discovered, it is the responsibility of all to ensure that they are immediately burned as soon as they are found or heard tell of; nor should any dare to translate such texts from Latin into Dutch'. Translation by B. Zimbalist, *Translating Christ in the Middle Ages*.

Sij hebben ghenomen mijnen mantel, dat is: mijn eere ende staet van buijten voor de menschen ende mijnen goede name, die soo menich mensch vruchtbaer was, ende hebben mijn aensicht bedeckt met schande.³⁴

However, not long after her banishment, on 18 October 1455, Bake dies at the age of forty. The fact that part of Bake's life story was kept and copied twice nevertheless indicates that her voice could not be silenced completely.

Like Bake, Margery Kempe is also in serious danger multiple times, for instance when she visits Canterbury:

Than sche went owt of the monastery, thei folwyng and crying upon hir: 'Thow shalt be brent, fals Lollare! Her is a cartful of thornys redy for the, and a tonne to bren the wyth!' And the creatur stod wythowtyn the yatys at Cawntyrbery, for it was in the evening, mech pepyl wonderyng on hir. Than seyde the pepyl: 'Tak en bren hir!' And the creatur stod style, tremelyng and whakyng ful sor in hir flesch, wythowtyn ony erdly comfort, and wyst not wher hyr husbond was become.³⁵

However, Kempe does in the end 'get away' with her unconventional behaviour, while Bake does not. Does Kempe remain relatively safe because, although she has spiritual ambitions, she is never really part of a religious community, while Bake's life story develops from being excluded by her religious community to actually being in charge of it? ³⁶ Indeed, this might have put Bake in a more dangerous position.

³⁴ 'De autobiografie', ed. Spaapen, p. 359, ll. 141–5. 'They robbed me of my mantle, that is to say, my self-respect. They robbed me from the outside of my position and my good name, that was fruitful for many. They covered my face in shame'.

³⁵ *The Book*, ed. Windeatt, pp. 95–96, ll. 899–908. *The Book*, trans. Bale, p. 30: 'Then she went out of the monastery, with them following her and shrieking after her, "You shall be burned, false Lollard! Here is a cartful of thorns and a barrel to burn you with!" Then the creature stood outside the gates of Canterbury, for it was in the evening, with many people gawking at her. Then the people said: "Take her and burn her!" and the creature stood still, trembling and quaking most dreadfully in her flesh, without any worldly comforts, and did not know what had become of her husband'.

³⁶ In her article 'Close enough to touch', Bollmann asks a related question. She wonders whether Alijt Bake might have had more freedom if she had entered the convent of Windesheim regular canonesses in Diepenveen, another women's convent that belonged to the Windesheim congregation, instead of the convent of Galilea in Ghent: 'An interesting intellectual exercise, but there is no clear answer' (154). A. Bollmann, 'Close Enough to Touch'.

Looking across geographical and linguistic boundaries helps us to read the particular form of medieval female self-expression and self-representation that we can find in both Bake's *Boexcken* and Kempe's *Book* with more insight and sensitivity. Bake and Kempe were outspoken women, who challenged the religious and cultural views of their communities. It seems that even though Kempe and Bake were ridiculed and threatened, people also looked up to them and the two women held a certain position of authority and, occasionally, power. Their texts contain a layered form of self-representation. The theme of social exclusion, apart from being a test of Bake's and Kempe's faith, as well as their female friendships with significant spiritual figures, function as a framework to tell their spiritual life stories and to voice their often controversial views.

Bibliography

Primary texts and translations

Alijt Bake, 'De autobiografie van Alijt Bake' en 'De brief uit de ballingschap', ed. B. Spaapen, *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 41 (1967), 209–301, 321–50, 351–67.

Alijt Bake, *Alijt Bake, tot in de peilloze diepte van God: De vrouw die moest zwijgen over haar mystieke weg*, ed. and trans. R. Th. M. van Dijk and M. K. A. van den Berg (Kampen, 1997).

Alijt Bake, 'Alijt Bake, *Four Ways of the Cross*', trans. J. van Engen in *Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries*, eds. R. van Nieuwenhove, R. Faesen, and H. Rolfson (New York, 2008), 176–202.

Jan van Ruusbroec, *The Complete Ruusbroec. English Translation with the Original Middle Dutch Text*, eds. G. de Baere and T. Mertens, Corpus Christianorum Scholars Version (CCSV), 2 vols (Turnhout, 2014).

Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. B. Windeatt (Cambridge, 2004).

Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Anthony Bale* (Oxford, 2015).

Secondary Sources

Arblaster, J. & R. Faessen eds., *A Companion to John of Ruusbroec* (Leiden, 2014).

Bale, A. 'Richard Salthouse of Norwich and the Scribe of *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *The Chaucer Review* 52, 2 (2017), 173–87.

Bollman, A., “‘Being a Woman of My Own’: Alijt Bake (1415-1455) as Reformer of the Inner Self” in *Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe 1200-1550*, ed. A. B. Mulder Bakker (Turnhout, 2004), 67–96.

Bollmann, A. † ‘Close Enough to Touch: Tension Between Inner Devotion and Communal Piety in the Congregations of Sisters of the *Devotio Moderna*’ in *Inwardness, Individualization, and Religious Agency in the Late Medieval Low Countries*, eds R. Hoffman, C. Caspers, P. Nissen, M. van Dijk, and J. Oosterman, *Medieval Church Studies* 43 (Turnhout, 2020), 137–158.

Engen, J. van, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: the Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2008).

Engen, J. van, *The Writings of Alijt Bake: Teacher, Preacher, Prioress, and Spiritual Autobiographer* (forthcoming).

Kalas Williams, L., *Margery Kempe’s Spiritual Medicine: Suffering, Transformation and the Life Course* (Woodbridge, 2020).

Krug, R. *Margery Kempe and the Lonely Reader* (Ithaca N.Y., 2017).

Mulder-Bakker, A. *Lives of the Anchoresses. The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*, trans. M. Heerspink Scholz (Philadelphia, 2005).

Lochrie, K. ‘Between Women’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*, ed. D. Wallace & C. Dinshaw (Cambridge, 2003), 70–90.

Saetveit Miles, L. ‘Queer Touch Between Holy Women: Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Birgitta of Sweden, and the Visitation’ in *Touching, Devotional Practices, and Visionary Experience in the Late Middle Ages*, eds. D. Carillo-Rangel, D. I. Nieto-Isabel & P. Acosta-García (London, 2019), 203–35.

Scheepsma, W. *Deemoed en devotie: De koorvrouwen van Windesheim en hun geschriften*, Nederlandse literatuur en cultuur in de Middeleeuwen 17 (Amsterdam, 1997). Trans. D. S. Johnson, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The ‘Modern Devotion’, the Canonesses of Windesheim, and their Writings* (Woodbridge, 2004).

Sobecki, S. ‘‘The wrytyng of this tretys’’: Margery Kempe’s Son and the Authorship of Her Book’ *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 37 (2015), 257–83.

Voaden, R. *God’s Words, Women’s Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late Medieval Women Visionaries* (Woodbridge, 1999).

Winstead, K. A. *The Oxford History of Life Writing. Volume 1. The Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2018).

Woude, S. van der, *Acta Capituli Windeshemense. Acta van de kapittelvergaderingen der Congregatie van Windesheim*, Kerkhistorische studiën VI (Den Haag, 1953).

Yoshikawa, N. K. 'Discretio spirituum in Time: The Impact of Julian of Norwich's Counsel in the *Book of Margery Kempe*', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VII: papers read at Charney Manor, July 2004*, ed. E. A. Jones (Woodbridge, 2004), 119–32.

Zimbalist, B., *Translating Christ in the Middle Ages: Gender, Authorship, and the Visionary Text in England, France, and the Low Countries* (manuscript in progress).