

# Hadewych of Brabant: The Most Perfect Life One Can Attain on Earth

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## Key words

Hadewych, Minne (love),  
medieval women's mysticism,  
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The Brabant Mystic Hadewych, which lived possibly around 1240 in Antwerp, Belgium, is the author of the oldest mystical lyric in vernacular in Western Christian tradition. While the Hadewych research previously did mainly concentrate on philological and literary aspects of her writings, in my dissertation I intended to investigate some theological implications of this research in regard to fundamental concepts of the Hadewych's theology (Arts-Honselaar 2006). This article provides a brief presentation of my thesis along with the analysis of the Letter XVII, which contains Hadewych's mystical perception of the Trinity, and also marks a radical change in her religious awareness when describing how she came to the understanding that the "*most perfect life we can attain on Earth*" (*volmaectste leuen dat men hebben mach op ertike*) consists not only in "serving", as she thought before, but in the synergy of "serving" and "resting". Like the "Deity" (*godheit*) that is at the same time "pouring out" (*ute gheue*) and "giving back" (*op houde*), a human is called to keep rest in the action and to be available for action while keeping rest.

## 1 Presentation of the Research

My thesis *Ende that manen es eweleke euen nuwe* examines the formulation of content and significance of the Trinity concept in the Letters of Hadewych. In addition, it situates Hadewych's Trinity concept in relation to the theology and mysticism of her time.

Hadewych is an exponent of medieval women's mysticism. Dinzelbacher notes in his *Mittelalterliche Frauenmystik* that the texts of these religious women were used mystagogical (Dinzelbacher 1993, 308). To understand the texts of these religious women it is therefore of great importance to involve the experiences of these women as is described by themselves in their texts. Because the reading of the texts of Hadewych, and the previous study on the concept of self-respect (*fierheit*) in her works (J. T. Arts-Honselaar 1997), has made it clear that Hadewych's mysticism is dynamic in nature. I therefore searched for a method that could optimally express this dynamism. This required a method that would ensure openness to the dynamism of the text. To this end, it was chosen for the hermeneutics of Gadamer as applied by Philip Sheldrake to the interpretation of spiritual and mystical texts (Sheldrake 1991, 172–175).

The basic rules of this hermeneutics and its application within the dissertation can be described as follows:

1. Understanding of a historical spiritual text can only be successful when the one who interprets this text both the historical genesis of the text, its effect in tradition and its own interpretation horizon involves in the process.
2. Spiritual texts may be seen as classical spiritual texts that contain an "excess of meaning". This meaning goes far beyond the original and time phased intention of authors.
3. The structure of the text is the key to how the text works because the structure is closely linked to the dynamics that are embodied by a text.
4. A spiritual text is a precipitation of an experience. The text itself seeks to recall this experience with the reader.
5. The text itself plays a normative role within the discussion that is being conducted with the text. Regarding to the reading of the text, this means that the text itself determines the questions to the text.

In order to ensure the above mentioned methodical guidelines the research was carried out in two movements: a *sub-*



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*stantive-theological analysis* and a *comparative historical synthesis*. These two movements are carried out after an initial situating of Hadewych in her time and a description of her legacy.

In view of the *substantive-theological analysis*, the inner textual relations were brought to the surface by which Hadewych describes the Trinity. The Letters XVII, XVIII, XXII, XXVIII and XXX were taken into account because of their consistent and worked-out view of the Trinity. At the beginning of each Letter, a structural analysis of the relevant Letter was also presented to this effect.

From these analyses the fundamentally dynamic character of the Trinity concept into the Letters of Hadewych came to the surface. It uses five dynamics to describe the Trinity. These dynamics were then placed in the context of the entire oeuvre of Hadewych.

## 2 Works of Hadewych

Today are counted among the writings of Hadewych 31 Letters, 45 Poems in Stanzas, 14 Visions, the List of the Perfect ones, and 16 Poems in Couplets. Their number and chronology have been widely debated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The question of the literary unity of these scriptures is therefore a complicated one that encompasses many aspects. I am trying to show this discussion in a nutshell.

Four manuscripts with work by Hadewych are known: A, B, C, and D. The manuscripts A, B, and D are kept in the Royal Library of Brussels under the numbers 2879–80 (A), 2877–78 (B), 3093–95 (D). Manuscript C is kept in the university Library of Ghent under number 941. The extent and the ordering of the works are in handwriting A and C differently. Also, they contain many text variants. Therefore, both manuscripts are probably independent of each other and perhaps different source texts have been used. Handwriting B can be a copy of handwriting A, however, with texts that are also known only from handwriting C. However, these texts are not taken from handwriting C. Another, to us unknown source, has been the basis of this. Because of the differences between these manuscripts, it is already possible to decide that the Poems in Couplets 17–29 should not be counted as Hadewych's oeuvre. On the basis of word comparisons, it has also been decided that the *Tweevormich Tractaetken* should also be excluded. The manuscripts are not dated. In this article we have used the translation made by Mother Columba Hart, O.S.B. (Hadewijch 1981). For her translation, the Hadewych texts edited by Van Mierlo have been utilized. Van Mierlo used for his text edition handwriting C because this is

of Hadewych. By using this method, it was avoided that pre-defined concepts were pushed forward. In this way we aimed to uncover the inner dynamics of its own Trinity view and to avoid that the text itself would lose its normative role. Efforts were made to create the widest possible openness for the own understandings of Hadewych's experiential horizon. The analysis is based on signals in the text that suggest dynamic. Hereby paradoxes are understood as a dynamical signal.

The *comparative historical synthesis* was finally performed by exploring Hadewych's own site with regard to her Trinity concept within the context of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century Theology of the Trinity. For this purpose, thinkers and mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen, Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, Richard of St. Victor and Beatrice of Nazareth were chosen as comparison material.

a very precise version and it comes the presumably original dialect of Hadewych closer than Handwriting A. Handwriting D contains a collection of text fragments of Hadewych, as well as Fragment E and handwriting R.

The Letters of Hadewych, 31 pieces, can be characterized as treatises or sermons. However, the boundary between Letter, treatise or sermon is very difficult to draw. It concerns shorter or longer texts aimed at one or several persons.

In a few Letters, edited texts by other authors are found. So, for example, in Letter XX and XVIII, edited texts of Richard of St. Victor and William of St. Thierry are found. Hadewych may have encountered these texts and processed them in her texts because they would be illustrative of her own thinking. However, it is also possible that others have asked Hadewych to explain these text portions to them.

### 3 Letter XVII

1–15

*Be generous and zealous for every virtue,  
But do not apply yourself to any one virtue.  
Fail not with regard to a multitude of things,  
But perform no particular work.  
Have good will and compassion for every need,  
But take nothing under your protection.  
This I wished long since to tell you,  
For it lies heavy on my heart;  
May God give you to understand what I mean,  
Solely in the one nature of Love.*

The things I order you in these verses were ordered me by God. Therefore, I desire in my turn to order you the same things, because they belong perfectly to the perfection of Love, and because they belong perfectly and wholly in the Divinity.

16–23

The attributes I mentioned here are perfectly the divine Nature. For to be generous and zealous is the Nature of the Holy Spirit; this is what is his proper Person. And not to apply oneself to a particular work is the Nature of the Father; through this he is the one Father. This “pouring out” and keeping back are the pure Divinity and the entire Nature of Love.

24–43

*Fail not with regard to a multitude of things,  
but perform no particular work.*

The first of these verses expresses the power of the Father, whereby he is God almighty. The second verse expresses his just will, with which his justice works its unknown mighty works. These works are deep and dark, unknown and hidden for all who, as I said, are below this Unity of the Godhead but nevertheless render service (and, indeed, chivalrously) to each of the Three Persons, according to the verses I placed first in each Couplet:

*To be favorable and zealous for every virtue,  
And not to fail with regard to a multitude of things,  
And to have compassionate good will for every need.*

This seems indeed to be the most perfect life one can attain on Earth. And you have heard this continually, for I always recommend it above all; and I also experienced it above all and rendered service accordingly and worked chivalrously until the day it was forbidden me.

1–15

*Te alre doghet wes onstich snel;  
En onderwinter di niet el.  
En ghebreect in ghenen dinghen,  
En werct te ghenen sonderlinghen.  
Te alre noet hebbet onste ende ontfermen,  
Ende en nemt niet in v beschermen.  
Dit haddic di gherne langhe gheseghet;  
Want mi wel groet op therte leghet.  
God doe v kennen wat ic mene,  
Jnder enegher Minnen naturen allene.*

Dese dinghen waren mi van gode verboden, die ic v in desen worden verbiede. Daer omme beghericse v voert te verbiedene, om dat si volmaecteleece ter volcomenheit van Minnen behoren, Ende omme datse inder godheit volcomeleke ende gheheeleke behoren.

16–23

Die wesene die ic daer noeme, die sijn volcomeleke hare nature: Want gheonstech ende snel, dat es de nature vanden heileghen gheest; Daer met es hi proper persoen. Ende niet sonderlinghe te onderwindene, dat es die nature vanden vader; daer met es hi enich vader. Dit vte gheuen ende dit op houden: dit es pure godheit ende gheheele nature van Minnen.

24–43

*Ende ghebreect te ghenen dinghen  
Ende en werct gheen sonderlinghe.*

Dat eerst woert es die cracht des vader, daer hi al mogende god met es. Dat ander waert es sijn gherechtte willen, daer sine gherechticheit hare onbekinde moghende werke met werct, Die diep ende doncker sijn ende onbekint ende verborghen al den ghenen die beneden deser gheenechtheit vander godheit sijn, Aldus alse ic segghe, ende die nochtan den personen properleke dienen ende ouerscone, Alsoe na die eerste waerde, die ic seide:

*Te alre doghet onstich ende snel te sine  
ende in ghenen dinghen te ghebrekene  
ende te alre noet ontfermeleke onste te hebbene:*

Dit schijnt nochtan dat volmaecste leuen datmen hebben mach op ertrike. Ende dit hoerdi altoes dat ict altoes gheraden hebbe bouen al; Ende oec leuede ict bouen al, ende diende daer inne ende wrachte ouerscone tote dien daghe dat mi verboden wart.

44-77

The verses that come second in each of the three Couplets I have composed express the perfection of the Unity and of Love, and according to justice treat of Love as one being, one sole Love, and nothing else. *O Deus!* This is a frightening being who, at one and the same time engulfs in unison such hatred and such charity!

*Have good will and compassion for every need.*

That was the Son in what is proper to his Person. He was purely this and did purely this.

*But take nothing under your protection.*

Thus, his Father engulfed him in himself; this cruel great work ever belongs to the Father. Yet it is the Unity of purest love in the Divinity: so that this Unity is also just with the justice of love and includes this Devotion, this Manhood, and this Power; nor would it have anyone left in need. And it includes one's charity and compassion for those in hell and purgatory; for those unknown to God, or who are known to him but still stray outside his dearest will; and for loving souls, who have more sorrow than all the rest, since they lack what they love. Justice takes up all this into itself. And yet each Person separately has given out what is proper to him, as I have said.

But the just nature of the Unity, in which Love belongs to Love and is perfect fruition of herself, does not seek after virtues, virtuous tendencies, or particular works, however pure or of however pure authority they are; and it does not give its protection, out of mercy, to any need, mighty though it is to enrich.

For in that fruition of Love there never was and never can be any other work than that one fruition in which the one almighty Deity is Love.

44-77

Die drie andere waert die ic segghe die enicheit ende Minne volcomen maken, Ende na gherechticheit haer selues pleghen in enen persone al ene Minne ende el niet. Ay deus, wat vreseleker wesene es dat dat selc haten ende selke caritate in een verslent!

*Te alre noet hebbet onste ende ontfermen.*

Dat was de sone in properen persone; Dat was hi scone ende wrachte scone.

*En nemt niet in v bescermen.*

Daer met verslantene sijn vader: dat wrede grote werc es emmer sine. Ende dat es de alre scoenste enicheit vander Minnen der godheit; soe dat si daer es alsoe gherecht van gherechticheiden van Minnen, dat si op nemt dien ernst ende die menscheit Ende die cracht daermen nieman bij ghebren en woude. Ende sie nemt op die caritate ende die ontferm herticheit die men hadde op die vander hillen, Ende op die van purgatorien, Ende op die ombekinde van gode, Ende op die bekinde die dolen buten sinen liefsten wille, Ende op die minnende die wee hebben bouen al dit want si dies daruen dat si Minnen. Al dit nempt gherechticheit in hare seluen. Nochtan gaf elc persoen besondere tsine vte, alsoe ic gheseghet hebbe. Mer die gherechte eneghe nature, daer Minne haer seluen met Minne Ende volcomene ghebrukesesse es, sine onderwint hare noch doechde, Noch onste der doechde, noch werke sonderlinghe, Die soe scone sijn Noch van soe scoenre auctoriteit; Noch sine bescermet bi ontfermicheiden ghere noet, die si so moghende es rike te makene: Want in dat ghebruen van Minnen en was nie noch en mach ander werc sijn dan dat enighe ghebruen, daer die eneghe moghende godheit Minne met es.

78–100

What was forbidden me (as I told you it was forbidden) was to have on Earth any undue-ness of love; that is, to stand in awe of nothing outside of Love, and to live in love so exclusively that everything outside of Love should be utterly hated and shunned; therefore for those outside of Love, to have no inclination and no virtuous acts, to perform no particular works that might assist them, and to have no mercy that might protect them, but to remain constantly in the fruition of Love. But when this fruition grows less or passes away, all three of the forbidden works should indeed be performed, as justly owed. When anyone seeks Love and undertakes her service, he must do all things for her glory, for during all this time he is human and needy; and then he must work chivalrously in all things, be generous, serve, and show mercy, for everything fails him and leaves him in want. But when by fruition man is united to Love, he becomes God, mighty and just. And then will, work, and might have an equal part in his justice, as the Three Persons in one God.

101–122

These prohibitions were laid upon me on Ascension Day, four years ago, by God the Father himself, at the moment when his Son came upon the altar. At this coming, I received a kiss from him; and by this token I was shown what follows. Having been made one with him, I came before his Father. There the Father took the Son to himself with me and took me to himself with the Son. And in this Unity into which I was taken and where I was enlightened, I understood this Essence and knew it more clearly than, by speech, reason, or sight, one can know anything that is knowable on Earth. This seems wonderful indeed. But although I say it seems wonderful, I know indeed it does not astonish you. For Earth cannot understand heavenly wisdom. Words enough and Dutch enough can be found for all things on Earth, but I do not know any Dutch or any words that answer my purpose. Although I can express everything insofar as this is possible for a human being, no Dutch can be found for all I have said to you, since none exists to express these things, so far as I know.

123–135

Although I forbid you some works and command the others, you will in either case have to serve much. But lack of discrimination regarding the things I have said, this I forbid you as those works were forbidden me by God's will. But you must still labor at the works of Love, as I long did, and as his friends did and still do. For my part I am devoted to these works at any hour and still perform them at all times: to seek after nothing but Love, work nothing but Love, protect nothing but Love, and advance nothing but Love. How you are to do or omit each of these things, may God, our Beloved, teach you.

78–100

Dat verbot dat ic v gheseghet hebbe dat mi verboden was, dat was ongherechtheit van Minnen te hebbene op ertrike Ende niet te spaerne dat buten Minnen es, Ende soe na der Minnen te pleghene, dat alle dat dat buten Minnen es si ghehaet Ende daer ouer ghewroken, soe dat menre andere onst toe en hebbe, Noch doghet, Noch sonderlinghen werc vore en doe, hen met te verdraghene, Noch ontfermicheit hen met te bes-cermene, Mer slach ouerslach in ghebrukenessen van minnen. Mer in dat faelieren Ende in dat sincken van ghebrukene, dan werctmen wel alle drie de verbodene werke bi scoude ende bi rechte: alse men Minne soeket ende hare dient, dan moetmen alle dinc doen om hare ere; Want alle die wile es men mensche ende behouende; Ende dan moetmen te allen dinghen scone werken ende onnen ende dienen ende ontfermen, Want hem ghebrecht alles ende behoeuet. Mer in ghebrukene van Minnen es men god worden moghende ende gherecht. Ende dan es wille ende werc ende moghentheit euen gherecht. Dat sijn die drie persone in enen god.

101–122

Dit wert mi verboden, dies was te ascentien.iiij. laer, van gode den vader selue in dien tide dat sijn sone comen was ten outare. Bij diere comst werdic van hem ghecust, Ende te dien tekene werdic ghetoeent; ende quam met hem.i. vor sinen vader. Daer nam hi hem ouer mi ende mi ouer hem. Ende in die enicheit daer ic doen in ghenomen was ende verclaert, daer verstondic dit wesen ende bekinde claerlikere dan men met sprekene ocht met redenen ocht met siene enighe sake Die soe bekinleec es in ertrike bekinnen mach. Doch schijnt dit wonder. Mer al segghe ic dat dit wonder schijnt, Jc weet wel dat v niet en wondert: Want hemelsche redene en mach ertrike niet verstaen; want van allen dien dat in ertrike es, mach men redene ende dietsch ghenoech venden; Mer hier toe en weet ic gheen dietsch noch ghene redene. Nochtan dat ic alle redene can van sinne alsoe mensche connen mach, al dat ic v gheseghet hebbe, dat en es alse gheen dietsch daer toe: want daer en hoert gheen toe dat ic weet.

123–135

Al verbiede ic v some die werke ende ghebiede de andere, Ghi sult noch vele moeten dienen. Mer sonderlincheit van dien dat ic v hebbe gheseghet verbiede ic v voert, alse mi verboden sijn inden wille gods. Mer ghi moet noch arbeiden inde werken van Minnen, alse ic langhe dede Ende sine vriende daden ende noch doen, Ende ic een deel enen tijt hebbe ghedaen ende noch allen tijt doe: El niet te onderwindene dan Minne, El niet te werkene dan Minne, El niet te bescermene dan Minne, El niet in staden te stane dan Minne; hoe ghi elc doen selt ende laten, dat moet v god wisen, onse lief.

## 4 Structural Analysis

Even though Hadewych, compared to the later Ruusbroec, which is almost over-structured, has only a lean structure in her texts, the structure of this Letter can be called clearly.

### **Rule 1–15: The Poem**

Serving people:

1. Be generous and zealous for every virtue (Holy Spirit)
2. Fail not with regard to a multitude of things (the power of the Father)
3. Have good will and compassion for every need (the Son)

Refrain from serving people:

1. But do not apply yourself to any one virtue (nature of the Father)
2. But perform no particular work (the power of the almighty Father)
3. But take nothing under your protection (his Father engulfed him in himself)

Mission of Hadewych to her readers.

### **Rule 16–23: The First Stanza**

The first Stanza of the poem stated:

*“be generous and zealous”*; nature of the Holy Spirit; (“pouring out”)

*“do not apply yourself to any one virtue”*; nature of the Father; (“keeping back”)

### **Rule 24–43: The Second Stanza**

The second Stanza of the poem stated:

*“Fail not with regard to a multitude of things”*; power of the Father; (“pouring out”)

*“perform no particular work”*; justice of the Father; (“keeping back”)

### **Rule 44–77: The Other Verses:**

The other three verses of the poem explained:

*“Have good will and compassion for every need”*; nature of the Son; (“pouring out”)

*“But take nothing under your protection”*; engulfing of the Son by the Father; (“keeping back”)

Feedback to the human soul;

The Unity of the three Persons in the Deity.

### **Rule 78–100: The Human Soul in the Unity**

The Unity in relation to the human soul; Be in the fruition; When this fruition grows less or passes away: the works should indeed be performed, as justly owed.

### **Rule 101–122: The Vision**

The vision in which Hadewych receives the communication of God;

The “new knowledge” cannot be expressed in language.

### **Rule 123–135: Postscript**

Postscript to the readers: reception of the order.

## 5 Substantive Analysis

### **Rule 1–15:**

*Be generous and zealous for every virtue,  
But do not apply yourself to any one virtue.  
Fail not with regard to a multitude of things,  
But perform no particular work.  
Have good will and compassion for every need,  
But take nothing under your protection.  
This I wished long since to tell you,  
For it lies heavy on my heart;  
May God give you to understand what I mean,  
Solely in the one nature of Love.*

*The things I order you in these verses were ordered me by God. Therefore, I desire in my turn to order you the same things, because they belong perfectly to the perfection of Love, and because they belong perfectly and wholly in the Divinity.*

From these phrases it becomes clear that something was forbidden to Hadewych by God. The things that were forbidden to her, she forbids in turn to her readers:

*Be generous and zealous for every virtue, (order)*  
*But do not apply yourself to any one virtue. (prohibition)*  
*Fail not with regard to a multitude of things, (order)*  
*But perform no particular work. (prohibition)*  
*Have good will and compassion for every need, (order)*  
*But take nothing under your protection. (prohibition)*

When the structure of the middle Dutch text is viewed closely, it is said that these rules consist of three orders and three prohibitions. This creates a combination of things that need to be done and things that need to be left. The orders call for action and give to this action a specific direction. They shall indicate how to act.

To gain insight into the correct relationship between orders and prohibitions, Hadewych appeals to God Himself: “*May God give you to understand what I mean, solely in the one nature of Love*”. It is clear here that Hadewych means a mystical insight. Only inside the one nature of the *Minne* can the readers discover how the tension between order and prohibition should be understood.

As has already been said, and by the mouth of Hadewych herself, “these things” are Hadewych forbidden by God. It can be concluded that the orders are also entrusted to her by God; They are being performed in combination with the prohibitions. On her turn, Hadewych wants to present her readers what she has been informed of by God. Not because she wants to determine the life of her readers as a tyrannical woman. She forbids her readers what she has been forbidden because the follow-up of these prohibitions is absolutely necessary in order to reach *Minne* in its wholeness.

From this, it is clear that Hadewych wants her readers to reach *Minne* in its fullness, she teaches her readers in the way of *Minne*. On the other hand, it becomes clear that Hadewych knows that these prohibitions lead to the fullness of *Minne*. Thus, she shows that she has gained insight into the being of God. She knows that these prohibitions “*belong perfectly and wholly in the Divinity*”. What this means is gradually becoming clear in this Letter.

#### **Rule 16–23: The First Stanza**

*The attributes I mentioned here are perfectly the divine Nature. For to be generous and zealous is the Nature of the Holy Spirit; this is what is his proper Person. And not*

*to apply oneself to a particular work is the Nature of the Father; through this he is the one Father. This pouring out and keeping back are the pure Divinity and the entire Nature of Love.*

Hadewych’s insight into the essence of the Deity and in the nature of *Minne* predominates in this phrase. The tension, which was previously called the tension between “order” and “prohibition” in relation to the human soul, she now calls in respect to the essence of the Deity and the nature of *Minne* “pouring out” and “keeping back”. Both together form the pure Deity and the whole nature of *Minne*.

What is entrusted to Hadewych by God is the essence (*wesene*) of the Deity itself. Hadewych is instructed to become similar to the Deity, similar to the three Persons in their individuality and in their Unity. To understand these orders and prohibitions to the human soul, to gain insight in it, Hadewych first describes how they are inside the Deity itself. The Deity means both the Unity of the three Persons as individuals, and this in unison. The orders and prohibitions at the level of the Deity say something about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Regarding the Persons, Hadewych does not speak any more about orders and prohibitions, at the level of Deity she speaks of “pouring out” and “keeping back”.

The Holy Spirit is a Person within the Deity. This individuality contains in a way that determines his nature. This “way” is according to Hadewych: “*generous and zealous*”. It is the nature of the Holy Spirit to be generous and skillful. It is thus the nature of the Holy Spirit to “pour out”.

The Father also has his individuality within the Deity. His nature is “*not to apply oneself to a particular work*”. It is his way, the nature, of the Father to work nothing in particular. It is the Father’s nature to “keep back”.

“Pouring out” and “keeping back” is “*the pure Divinity and the entire Nature of Love*”. The essence of Deity is at the same time “pouring out” and “keeping back”.

#### **Rule 24–43: The Second Stanza**

*Fail not with regard to a multitude of things, but perform no particular work.*  
*The first of these verses expresses the power of the Father, whereby he is God almighty. The second verse expresses his just will, with which his justice works its unknown mighty works. These works are deep and dark, unknown and hidden for all who, as I said, are below this Unity of the Godhead but nevertheless render service (and, indeed,*

*chivalrously) to each of the Three Persons, according to the verses I placed first in each Couplet:  
To be favorable and zealous for every virtue,  
And not to fail with regard to a multitude of things,  
And to have compassionate good will for every need. This seems indeed to be the most perfect life one can attain on Earth. And you have heard this continually, for I always recommend it above all; and I also experienced it above all, and rendered service accordingly and worked chivalrously until the day it was forbidden me.*

The first rule (*Fail not with regard to a multitude of things*), so says Hadewych, means the power of the Father, making him the almighty God. In the previous Stanza, Hadewych assigned “keeping back” to the Father, in this Stanza it is “pouring out”. This confirms the earlier statement that both “pouring out” and “keeping back” together make up the pure Deity and the whole nature of the Minne. “*Not to apply oneself to a particular work*” proved to be the nature of the Father. “*Fail not with regard to a multitude of things,*” as shown in this paragraph, is the power of the Father, making him the almighty God. There is therefore a difference, according to Hadewych, between the nature of God and his strength. The nature of God is “keeping back”, the power of God is “pouring out”.

The second rule (*but perform no particular work*) is, according to Hadewych, the justice of the Father. Only those who are in Unity with the Deity can understand these incomprehensible works of righteousness. People who serve the Persons in a very clean manner are not given the understanding of these works of righteousness, only those who are in Unity with the Deity can understand it. Hadewych describes the actions of the people who serve very clean but who are not in Unity with the Deity. They are people who serve “only” but do not know that in the Unity with the Deity serving and resting coincide, serving is there coming to rest. As the “pouring out” and the “keeping back” belongs to the essence of the Deity and Minne, so “serving” and “refraining from serving” fundamentally belong to each other to be able to get united with the Deity in Minne. The “*chivalrous working*” belongs to it but when one is absorbed in the Unity one must refrain from serving.

Hadewych describes in this passage a radical change in her own religious consciousness. She hints at what path she travelled before. She lived a life in which she served, until the moment it had been forbidden to her by God. Until that moment she had thought that serving was the most perfect way of life. She always lived in that way. Now, however, she has understood that in order to get into the essence of the

Deity, it is necessary not only to serve and work, but also to abandon them.

The essence of the Deity is “pouring out” and “keeping back” together in one. To be unified with this essence, it is necessary for man to become a kind of blueprint of this essence of the Deity.

This is evident from the fact that to the human soul, personified by Hadewych, is entrusted what the “essence” of the three Persons is. The “pouring out” and the “keeping back” at the level of the Deity corresponds on the level of the human soul with the orders and prohibitions.

The human soul can appropriate himself, through the follow-up of the orders and the prohibitions, the mode of being of the three Persons. Thus, he can be incorporated (passively) into the Unity of these Persons, the Deity. Yonder is only “*pure Divinity and the entire Nature of Love*”. How this togetherness looks like, Hadewych has tried to make clear in the poem of Rule 1–10. She understands, however, that her words are inadequate and that God himself must help her readers to truly understand what she means with this togetherness.

#### **44–77: The Other Stanzas**

*The verses that come second in each of the three Couplets I have composed express the perfection of the Unity and of Love, and according to justice treat of Love as one being, one sole Love, and nothing else. O Deus! This is a frightening being who, at one and the same time engulfs in unison such hatred and such charity! Have good will and compassion for every need. That was the Son in what is proper to his Person. He was purely this and did purely this. But take nothing under your protection.*

*Thus, his Father engulfed him in himself; this cruel great work ever belongs to the Father. Yet it is the Unity of purest love in the Divinity: so that this Unity is also just with the justice of love and includes this Devotion, this Manhood, and this Power; nor would it have anyone left in need. And it includes one's charity and compassion for those in hell and purgatory; for those unknown to God (Mathew 25:12; Luke 13:25), or who are known to him but still stray outside his dearest will; and for loving souls, who have more sorrow than all the rest, since they lack what they love. Justice takes up all this into itself. And yet each Person separately has given out what is proper to him, as I have said.*

*But the just nature of the Unity, in which Love belongs to Love and is perfect fruition of herself, does not seek after virtues, virtuous tendencies, or particular works, however pure or of however pure authority they are; and it does not give its protection, out of mercy, to any need, mighty though it is to enrich. For in that fruition of Love there never was and never can be any other work than that one fruition in which the one almighty Deity is Love.*

In “*The verses that come second*” Hadewych refers to the Stanzas 3 to 5 from the poem at the beginning of this Letter. What is remarkable is the separation that Hadewych has made in the text. The structure of the poem does expect that Stanza 1 to 3 will be explained together and after that Stanza 4 and 5. However, Stanza 3 is joined to Stanza 4 and 5. Does Hadewych have a special intention by doing so? I do think so. Because of this separation Hadewych strongly emphasizes these last three verses. “*Have good will and compassion for every need but take nothing under your protection.*” This Stanza applies Hadewych a little further in the text to the Son. “*The verses that come second in each of the three Couplets I have composed express the perfection of the Unity and of Love.*” To achieve the Unity and the perfect Minne it is necessary to experience the essence (*wesene*) of all three Persons, however the experience of the essence of the Son, makes the Unity and the Minne utterly complete. In Minne the three Persons are one. Minne is the unifying principle. But not only the three Persons are one, also those who dedicate themselves to Minne become one with the three Persons who are one. In Minne, everything is united. So, everything is one and nothing else.

Apparently, Hadewych has been aware of this insight for a long time, “[t]his I wished long since to tell you, for it lies heavy on my heart.” There must have been a reason why she did not speak before. According to the following rules, it could be suspected that she has kept quiet because she knew that she would not be able to say what she really wanted to say. But the silence began to weigh her too heavily, and now she must speak, but with an appeal to God himself to make her readers understand what she really means. She knows that a good understanding of what is meant can only be obtained in the one nature of Minne alone. This means that the readers can only gain insight in the movement of Minne, and in this movement it is Minne itself who gives insight.

Hadewych’s sighing about hating and charity (“*O Deus! This is a frightening being who, at one and the same time engulfs in unison such hatred and such charity!*”) is based on the experience of the unison of “pouring out” and “keeping back”. How can anyone pour out himself completely and keep back ev-

erything at the same time? Hadewych does not answer this sigh. It is a kind of rhetoric question that raises the tension between “pouring out” and “keeping back” again. It is precisely this inconceivable fact, this new understanding of how the Deity is in its essence, that Hadewych wants to bring to the attention of her readers.

In the next paragraph, Hadewych relates the third Stanza from the poem to the Son. Again here, now in relation to the Son, the “pouring out” returns. This “pouring out” exists in “[h]ave good will and compassion for every need”. After all, “*He was purely this and did purely this*”. In having affection and compassion the Son exists as an actual Person, like the nature of the Holy Spirit exists in being “*generous and zealous*” (“pouring out”) and the nature of the Father exists in “*doing nothing in particular*” (“keeping back”). The “keeping back” of the Father appears again in the phrase: “*But take nothing under your protection. Thus, his Father engulfed him in himself; this cruel great work ever belongs to the Father.*” By the fact that the Son himself cannot take anything in protection (he must surrender completely, that is the self-gift of the Son) devours the Father him. The Father thus keeps back, yet it is “*the Unity of purest love in the Deity*”. From this sentence it appears that devouring the Son by the Father happens through Minne. In Minne the Son is devoured by the Father, this is the “keeping back” of the Father and the surrender of the Son, his self-giving. This work is cruel and great because in the Minne everything is reclaimed, but at the same time the Unity of purest love in the Divinity is realized.

*So that this Unity is also just with the justice of love and includes this Devotion, this Manhood, and this Power; nor would it have anyone left in need.*

The term “this Unity” refers to the situation in which the Son was devoured by the Father. In this being devoured the Unity is just with the justice of Love. This justice ensures that the Unity includes this Devotion, the Manhood and the Power. It is about the Devotion, the Manhood and the Power of the human soul. This can be concluded because Hadewych is talking about “*those in hell and purgatory*” in the next line. Hadewych changes the perspective here. Where she first spoke about the Son who was devoured by God, she now relates this to the human soul. Through the justice of love his zeal, humanity and strength are included in the Unity. This zeal, the human being and the strength are the means by which nobody would have left in need. They are the means to reach the Unity. But in the unison, itself the work has fallen silently, although it is still present, it is indeed included. Precisely because it is absorbed and becomes part of the Unity in Minne, the unison of “works” and “refrain from works” are

recreated. In the unison there is no “work” in the active sense of the word, only in the latent possibility to. The “refraining from work” occurs in the unison in the foreground.

*And it includes one's charity and compassion for those in hell and purgatory; for those unknown to God, or who are known to him but still stray outside his dearest will; and for loving souls, who have more sorrow than all the rest, since they lack what they love. Justice takes up all this into itself.*

In one sentence, the first three verses of the poem are summarized here, now from the perspective of the unison.

*And yet each Person separately has given out what is proper to him, as I have said. But the just nature of the Unity, in which Love belongs to Love and is perfect fruition of herself, does not seek after virtues, virtuous tendencies, or particular works, however pure or of however pure authority they are; and it does not give its protection, out of mercy, to any need, mighty though it is to enrich. For in that fruition of Love there never was and never can be any other work than that one fruition in which the one almighty Deity is Love.*

In this passage it becomes clear where Hadewych wants to go: in the unison cannot be any “work”. “For in that fruition of Love there never was and never can be any other work than that one fruition in which the one almighty Deity is Love ... And yet each Person separately has given out what is proper to him, as I have said.” In the unison there isn't any work, there is only the fruition of Minne. The Unity does not engage with virtues, neither with the affection to virtues, nor with certain works, no matter how clean they are or of any excellent authority whatsoever. Also, it does not give its protection, out of mercy, to any need, mighty though it is to enrich.

In God “pouring out” and “keeping back” coincide. The Persons in their individuality work the works as described above, the Persons in their Unity remain in unison and this at the same time. It is this difficult insight that Hadewych wants to clarify to her readers. Because she understands she can't do this without the help of God she appeals to him for a proper understanding for her readers. Hadewych is of the opinion it is important that her readers understand what she has seen because this insight has a great impact on the human soul. The human soul is called to the fullness of Love. To grow into this fullness is only possible when the human soul recognizes itself in the ways of the Persons. Because of this it was necessary for Hadewych to first describe how the orders and prohibitions, given to her by God, also exist at the level of

the Persons as “pouring out” and “giving back”. Thereafter she could describe how they result in the Unity of the Persons and in which way the human being becomes part of this Unity. The human soul is incorporated into the Unity and is thus given the fullness of Love.

### **Rule 78–100: The Human Soul in The Unity**

Now that Hadewych has made this clear, she can return to the human soul and its mission. For this she also takes herself as an example:

*What was forbidden me (as I told you it was forbidden) was to have on Earth any undueness of love; that is, to stand in awe of nothing outside of Love, and to live in love so exclusively that everything outside of Love should be utterly hated and shunned; therefore for those outside of Love, to have no inclination and no virtuous acts, to perform no particular works that might assist them, and to have no mercy that might protect them, but to remain constantly in the fruition of Love. But when this fruition grows less or passes away, all three of the forbidden works should indeed be performed, as justly owed. When anyone seeks Love and undertakes her service, he must do all things for her glory, for during all this time he is human and needy; and then he must work chivalrously in all things, be generous, serve, and show mercy, for everything fails him and leaves him in want. But when by fruition man is united to Love, he becomes God, mighty and just. And then will, work, and might have an equal part in his justice, as the Three Persons in one God.*

This passage shows two sides of only one mirror: the “remaining in fruition” on the one hand and “working” on the other hand. The “remaining in fruition” consists in, as is described in respect of the Unity, “to stand in awe of nothing outside of Love”. Hadewych describes how she commissioned to cease all work and dedicate herself to Minne alone. The only thing that she had to do was remaining in the fruition of Love time and time again. What is beyond Minne must be hated and offended. Hadewych summarizes here the poem from the beginning of this Letter in the sentence: “*What was forbidden me (as I told you it was forbidden) was to have on Earth any undueness of love*”. This “undueness” exists in losing oneself in virtuous works as described in the prohibitions of the aforementioned poem. The soul must remain in the fruition of Love time and time again.

However, this cannot be manipulated by the human soul: “*But when this fruition grows less or passes away*”. If this is the case, then “*all three of the forbidden works should indeed be per-*

formed” as described in the poem of Rule 1–10. “When anyone seeks Love and undertakes her service,” this is where one is not in the enjoyment, “he must do all things for her glory, for during all this time he is human and needy”. When one enjoys Minne, one has become God, one is included in the Unity in which work and “refraining from work” coincide. This soul gets part in the properties of God, mighty and just. In this Unity his will and work and power are equally just. Here his will and work and power are included in the Unity and made righteous by the righteousness of Love. In the human soul, therefore, “work” and “refraining from work” coincide: “then will, work, and might have an equal part in his justice, as the Three Persons in one God”.

### Rule 101–122: The Vision

*These prohibitions were laid upon me on Ascension Day, four years ago, by God the Father himself, at the moment when his Son came upon the altar. At this coming, I received a kiss from him, and by this token I was shown what follows. Having been made one with him, I came before his Father. There the Father took the Son to himself with me and took me to himself with the Son. And in this Unity into which I was taken and where I was enlightened, I understood this Essence and knew it more clearly than, by speech, reason, or sight, one can know anything that is knowable on Earth. This seems wonderful indeed. But although I say it seems wonderful, I know indeed it does not astonish you. For Earth cannot understand heavenly wisdom. Words enough and Dutch enough can be found for all things on Earth, but I do not know any Dutch or any words that answer my purpose. Although I can express everything insofar as this is possible for a human being, no Dutch can be found for all I have said to you, since none exists to express these things, so far as I know.*

In this section, Hadewych describes how and when she received the orders and prohibitions from God as described in the poem of Rule 1–10. It was at Ascension Day, four years ago, during the Eucharist, more specifically; During the Eucharistic prayer, when the Son came upon the altar. Upon that coming, Hadewych was, as she says, kissed by him. The mystical kiss occurs in many mystical writings. It symbolizes the fusion of the active and the passive element and is as such a sign of association with the Deity, “and by this token I was shown” (for whom or to whom is not clear). “I was shown” is indeed: the fusion with the Son: “Having been made one with him, I came before his Father ... There the Father took the Son to himself with me and took me to himself with the Son.” From this sentence it becomes clear that Hadewych experienced that she was one with the Father through the Son.

“And in this Unity into which I was taken and where I was enlightened, I understood this Essence and knew it more clearly than, by speech, reason, or sight, one can know anything that is knowable on Earth.” In the Unity a certain insight is conducted to Hadewych. Here she makes clear how she has come to this insight. In the Unity in which she was engulfed and glorified (being engulfed is at the same time being glorified, this refers again to the fruition associated with the unison, as described above), she understood the essence of God, who is three and yet one, and she learned to know it in a way that cannot be matched by human language, with human reason and with human perception. It is a new, more intensive way of knowing. This new way of knowing belongs, according to Hadewych, substantially to the unification. It’s a mystical way of knowing.

*This seems wonderful indeed. But although I say it seems wonderful, I know indeed it does not astonish you. For Earth cannot understand heavenly wisdom. Words enough and Dutch enough can be found for all things on Earth, but I do not know any Dutch or any words that answer my purpose. Although I can express everything insofar as this is possible for a human being, no Dutch can be found for all I have said to you, since none exists to express these things, so far as I know.*

In this section, Hadewych explains the form of mystical knowing she means. She calls her strange. However, she believes that her readers will not be surprised. “For Earth cannot understand heavenly wisdom.” Hadewych assumes that her readers have some experience of knowing this language of heaven, even if she denies the possibility to that at the same way. The continuation of the sentence makes it clear that, however, it is not so much about the understanding of the language of heaven, but much more about speaking the language of heaven: “Words enough and Dutch enough can be found for all things on Earth, but I do not know any Dutch or any words that answer my purpose.” In comparison to what is of the Earth, for what is of heaven there is no language that can say what should be said, namely what was perceived as heavenly. “Although I can express everything insofar as this is possible for a human being, no Dutch can be found for all I have said to you, since none exists to express these things, so far as I know.” It is possible that Hadewych here hints at the fact that she has had a thorough education as a woman of a prominent family. She understands all forms of meaningful speech. Behind this remark a developed woman can hide. But despite of the fact that she understands all these forms of meaningful speech, it is not possible for her to put into words what happened to her as “heavenly”. No Dutch is possible to express this knowing because there is no Dutch

that belongs to it, Hadewych says. Here the problem is raised that so many mystics put into words, namely the impossibility to bring the experience of God into words. It is also for this reason that Hadewych in the beginning of this Letter wishes that God himself will make her readers understand what she intended to say. She realizes that she cannot put into words what happened to her, only God himself can give the right insight into this. Hadewych knows that this insight can only grow by getting involved with Minne. Minne herself will entrain her readers to the insight that has happened to her. Yet she tries to articulate what she can't articulate; an inner force drives her to do so. After all, as it says in Rule 7 and 8: *"This I wished long since to tell you, for it lies heavy on my heart"*. Hadewych can no longer hold it back. Because she would like to bring her readers to this insight, or because her heart is full of what she has experienced and urges her to communicate herself? Probably it's a mixture of both, although we only find confirmation for the first option in this Letter. After all, she writes, *"[t]herefore I desire in my turn to order you the same things, because they belong perfectly to the perfection of Love, and because they belong perfectly and wholly in the Divinity."* (13–14). The impossibility to give a precise expression to her experience did not cause mutism to Hadewych but a flood of words to circumscribe what happened to her, aware of the fact that the actual experience can never be grasped.

#### **Rule 123–135: Postscript**

*Although I forbid you some works and command the others, you will in either case have to serve much. But lack of discrimination regarding the things I have said, this I forbid you as those works were forbidden me by God's will. But you must still labor at the works of Love, as I long did, and as his friends did and still do. For my part I am devoted to these works at any hour and still perform them at all times: to seek after nothing but Love, work nothing but Love, protect nothing but Love, and advance nothing but Love. How you are to do or omit each of these things, may God, our Beloved, teach you.*

In this passage, Hadewych focuses directly on her readers. She reminds them that before they come to the experience of Unity, they will still have to serve much. However, she directly infuses again the insights she communicated in this Letter. She says: *"Although I forbid you some works and command the others"*. Here it becomes clear that the poem of the beginning of this Letter indeed consisted of orders and prohibitions, as was previously noted in the analysis of this Letter. Hadewych here again appeals to the divine authority of these orders and prohibitions. Her readers must endeavor as she has done,

and the friends of Jesus are still doing. But they must also do what she does since she has gained the understanding of the essence of Deity: *"[T]o seek after nothing but Love, work nothing but Love, protect nothing but Love, and advance nothing but Love. How you are to do or omit each of these things, may God, our Beloved, teach you."* How these things are done and should be left, for that understanding Hadewych does an appeal to God, their Beloved. Again, Hadewych hints here that she cannot put into words what the actual experience has been. Only in Minne itself the human soul comes to insight.

## **6 Conclusions**

The Letter XVII provides a first entry to the imaginary field that Hadewych uses in relation to the triune God. It distinguishes between God in his essence (Unity) and in his Persons (the Father, the Son, and the Spirit):

- God in his essence is first experienced by her as a principle of Unity ("keeping back");
- The Person's own activity ("pouring out") forms a mirror for human action;
- The activity of the Persons ("pouring out") is mirrored in man by working the virtues and serving God;
- However, from the divine Unity, every moment a call is made to man to enjoy the Unity (at Divine level "keeping back").

The new understanding that is given to Hadewych includes the understanding that the most perfect life one can attain on Earth not exists in only activity (at Divine level "pouring out") or only fruition (at Divine level "keeping back"), and also not in the alternation of these, but in the simultaneous existence of these two, action and rest (*contemplation*). As the Deity at the same time is "pouring out" and "keeping back", so a man is called to preserve rest in action and in rest always be prepared for action.

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