Ruusbroec the Author

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John of Ruusbroec was a great mystic.* We may read this in the many publications about the 14th-century author. Each of his treatises is an attempt to describe and to explain a direct experience of God that transcends human reason. Therein, apparently, lies the primary appeal of his works; the reader seeks inspiration for deepening his/her inner life or seeks what is undoubtedly a reliable guide on the path to God. This fact makes Ruusbroec’s work an interesting subject for theologians, who question what the Brabantine author says about God and whether his ideas are consonant with Christian teaching. Both groups, the seekers and the theologians, focus on the content of Ruusbroec’s oeuvre. This was not only the case in the Middle Ages but also is often the case even now. And yet, unavoidably, the form of his works is also of some importance, both for the writer and for the reader. We may assume that an author makes every effort to reach his audience and to convey his ideas or experiences as well as possible. No message, however good, interesting or important it may be, reaches and captivates an audience if it is not formulated in a gripping way. The question is whether the fact that Ruusbroec’s work has been heard and read for so many centuries is sufficient reason to consider his oeuvre to be literary. Is this mystic a great writer, a literary talent?

What is Literature?

Frank Willaert treated this question in an article on The Spiritual Espousals, the Brabantine mystic’s second treatise, which is generally considered to be his masterpiece. He remarks that ‘doubts about Ruusbroec’s literary qualities […] arise all too often in the secondary literature.’¹ This remark might be sufficient reason not to expend any time or energy on this subject, were it not that Willaert adds the following: ‘The problem lies not with Ruusbroec, but with the usefulness of the concept literature.’ He goes on to suggest that ‘the concept literature’ is not fixed and was even understood differently in the Middle Ages than it is today. Moreover, we must consider that nowadays, literature is equated with the written word. ‘Ruusbroec’s world was, however, still deeply

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ILLUSTRATION 1  John of Ruusbroec as writer, miniature in the manuscript from Groenendaal, Brussel, Koninklijke Bibliotheek 19295–97, fol. 2r