Paulus de Kempenaer was known to his contemporaries as a theologian and a calligrapher. He was appreciated as an emblemator and a poet, and occasionally employed as a herald-painter. We first encounter him in an official capacity as secretary to the Council of Brabant in 1582, during the brief rule of the Duke of Anjou in Antwerp, and we lose sight of him in 1618, a few weeks before the Arminian controversy, in which he displayed so marked an interest, reached its climax at the Synod of Dort. But all that would seem to remain of his work is a translation, a number of loose emblems and drawings, some annotated books from what must have been a well-furnished library, and six somewhat puzzling manuscripts which combine the characteristics of the commonplace book, the emblem book, the spiritual notebook and, more prosaically, the diary. Each of these manuscripts covers a period of a year or so, but every volume contains later additions which appear to have been made more or less simultaneously.

Paulus de Kempenaer was born in Brussels in the 1550s, the second of three children. The family was from the gentry of the Southern Netherlands, his mother Clara Bruynseels Pietersdochter, and his father Paulus, an apothecary by profession. I have been able to ascertain nothing about Paulus de Kempenaer’s early education. Educated, however, he was — well-read in Latin, French, Dutch, Spanish and Italian, versed in theology and, perhaps because of his father, in chemistry and medicine. In about 1572, moreover, he was apprenticed to a lawyer, Jean de Leeuw, active in Northern Brabant. The breadth of his knowledge and the variety of his talents may have won him the favour of Nicasius de Silla, the jurist who was to end his career as pensionary of Amsterdam and who occupied a series of diplomatic and political posts in the 1570s, becoming secretary to the Council of the Archduke Matthias in 1578. Many years later De Kempenaer, to whom Silla seems to have been distantly related, referred to him as ‘mynen lesten vader heere ende doctor’, and in about 1578, possibly on Silla’s staff, De Kempenaer settled in Antwerp. At an early period in his life, furthermore, De Kempenaer established his
relationship with the Egmont family. If, as is probable, he met Count Lamoral, it must have been in Brussels well before the Count's execution in 1568. All we know for sure is that he remained on close terms with the Count's son, the younger Lamoral, with the Count's daughter Sabina, and with her husband, Georg Eberhard Count of Solms.

On 9 June 1582 De Kempenaer was nominated secretary extraordinary of the Council of Brabant by commission of the Duke of Anjou. In January of the following year, at the Protestant church of St. Jan in Ghent, he married the seventeen-year-old Jacqueline Darbant, daughter of Elisabeth Caillet and Anthonis Darbant, a member of the Flemish gentry living in Lille. One of Jacqueline's brothers, Dominique Darbant, a lawyer who had studied at the university of Louvain, was to play an important part in De Kempenaer's life, a part which led De Kempenaer to describe him some thirty-five years later as 'frater, amicus et hostis uwer swager'.

Present at all the assemblies of the States of Brabant, his interests ranging from politics and theology to scholarship and the arts, both literary and figurative, De Kempenaer, in those days, was a figure of some prestige. He knew, though superficially, the most distinguished of the Antwerp humanists — Plantin, Jan Moretus, Justus Lipsius and Ortelius. Filips Galle dedicated an edition of his engravings to him; he was closely acquainted with the painter Balthasar Flessiers and with two of the leading poets of his day, Nicolas Oudartius and Jean-Baptiste Houwaert, while the man he was later to call his 'only true friend', Pieter Sterlinckx the younger who, though born in Antwerp, spent the early 1580s with his father in Mechelen, was the son of a well-known rederijker.

By the time he settled in Antwerp De Kempenaer was a Protestant, marrying, and having his first child baptised, in Protestant churches. He was probably converted to the Reformed faith in the late 1560s, and when in Antwerp, he later insisted, he was loyal to William of Orange and the confederate noblemen. His Protestantism, like that of many of the Prince's allies, was, first and foremost, anti-Catholicism strongly tinged by humanism. It emerges repeatedly from his writings that he was concerned with finding an alternative to the religion defended by the Duke of Alva and represented by the Jesuits, for whom he had as much aversion as the ingenious creators of the 'Black Legend' could ever have desired. De Kempenaer himself was attracted to mysticism, as we shall see; he was also a keen reader of Erasmus, Vives, Justus Lipsius and other humanists; and his piety was essentially irenic within the spectrum of the various Protestant churches. It must have been during his stay in Antwerp, for example, that De Kempenaer