Recent studies of the Modern Devotion increasingly tend to focus on two aspects of its attitude to literature: the massive production of manuscripts and the receptive nature of writing among the followers of Geert Grote. Dutch literature of the fifteenth century, when the Modern Devotion played a leading role in the spiritual life of the Low Countries, is not particularly original in character. In general the textual tradition is determined by the reception of older writings from which excerpts were copied in order to collect material for private meditation. In addition, miscellanies were compiled in monastic libraries for communal reading in the refectory, during gatherings and around the liturgy.

The understanding of the literary attitude that is typical of the Modern Devotion has profoundly changed our conceptions of this spiritual movement as an agent of the dissemination of literature. The massive (re)production of texts used to be explained in terms of a strong inclination toward religious emancipation (of the layman) and spiritual education. Nowadays the view is taken that the Devotionalists chiefly produced texts for individual use in their convents and for the development of their religious life. Thom Mertens, who initiated this reorientation, aptly typified this latter aspect – collecting texts for individual meditation – as ‘reading with the pen’. For those who might not as yet be convinced of the accurateness of this explanatory model, Thomas Kock’s dissertation *Die Buchkultur der Devotio moderna* is required reading.

Kock offers his readers an excellent inventory of information on the cultivation of texts and the reading culture in the religious institutions of the Modern Devotion. In doing so, he draws from both secondary and primary sources. Kock uses Geert Grote’s letters to portray this figure as an intermediary in book transactions as if the latter were a genuine *stationarius*. Kock outlines concepts of literature and literary programmes which can be derived from reading instructions, monastic rules, chronicles and necrologies. Drawing from the same sources he charts the provision of literature (*Literaturversorgung*) and the production of manuscripts, both in the theoretical guidelines for the various groups within the Modern Devotion and in the practice of the individual and collective interaction with books. Kock does not define his field of research very narrowly, although in spite of the subtitle (*im Zeitalter des Medienwechsels*) he only deals with the manuscript culture. Otherwise his area of research covers the whole territory in which the influence of the Modern Devotion made itself felt in the late Middle Ages: convents and religious houses in the Northern and the Southern Netherlands as well as the institutions in the German-speaking regions. Kock also discusses the literature of both laymen and clerics in the circles of Devotionalists, which of course brought him into contact with both Latin texts and Middle Dutch literature. And finally, apart from considering the remarkable scholarly courage required for this project, it should not go unrecorded that Kock has presented his findings in a style which is pleasantly direct and to the point.

The arrangement of the book offers ample space for the incorporation of the numerous...
data Kock has collected. With a seemingly scholastic sense of proportion he compiled the study in three sections, each containing three chapters. This double triad presents the cultivation of books in the Modern Devotion in a number of aspects: first, how the manuscript was dealt with as a commodity and as a product of religious labour, then the theoretical concept and the actual compilation of a devote Standardbibliothek, and finally the reconstruction of manuscript holdings in some libraries of the Modern Devotion. Appendixes on the instructions and practices of refectory reading in the Brabantine monasteries of Zevenborren and Groenendaal provide an extra supplement to the abundance of information the reader is given to digest. There is not much that has escaped Kock’s attention.

The best way to gain a quick impression of this study is to leaf through right away to the impressive bibliography at the end of the book: over forty pages with approximately more than 1,000 titles, followed by another five pages comprising an index of manuscripts, a substantial number of which has been examined in autopsy. Kock based his dissertation on a compilation of material that commands respect. This is the strength of the book and at the same time its flaw.

Collecting material to describe a subject as wide-ranging in scope as the Buchkultur der Devotio moderna, requires a broad perspective. At the same time, an eye for details is required to arrive at a satisfactory selection and interpretation of the relevant data. Kock presents his material in a rather undifferentiated way. Whether he got his information from (antiquated) literature or manuscript material: he does not spend very much time on the question what he is exactly dealing with. This lack of differentiation is problematic. In Kock’s book ample space has been reserved for the Brabantine monasteries of Groenendaal and Rooklooster. Both Augustinian priories are of the greatest importance for the religious and literary culture of the Southern Netherlands during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These monasteries had already a partially shared history behind them when, in 1412, they both joined the influential chapter of Windesheim, the monastic branch of the Modern Devotion. Kock acknowledges the extremely important role of Groenendaal and Rooklooster in the fourteenth century, but he discusses the two institutions as being representative of the following century. Ample attention is given to the Obituarium of Groenendaal with cited annotations from the time before 1412 and to an inventory of Middle Dutch books from Rooklooster, which is dated by Kock around 1393. However, what we find lacking here is an absolutely necessary justification of the relevance of this information for the central theme of this study: the book culture of the Modern Devotion. The two South-Netherlandish monasteries had a literary tradition of their own, a tradition which after their incorporation into the Windesheim chapter may well have become susceptible to influences from the North, but must unquestionably – if not above all – also be characterized as a continuation of their own past.

The Brabantine monasteries continued to live up to their past; research into their patterns of historiography has clearly shown that Groenendaal, Rooklooster and Bethlehem (near Louvain) conceived of their development in terms of a Brabantine lineage. A similar independence is also revealed, for instance, in the sustained appreciation of mystical literature in the Southern Netherlands. The prioress Aljilt Bake so strongly opposed the rules issued by the leadership of the Modern Devotion in the Northern Netherlands that she was removed from office on account of her mystically oriented reform programme.