Codicological evidence for a chronological rearrangement of the works of Jan van Ruusbroec (1293-1381)

INTRODUCTION

Jan van Ruusbroec (1293-1381) ranks among the most important mystical writers of the European Middle Ages. Until 1343 he was active as a secular priest in Brussels; together with a few kindred spirits he subsequently withdrew to the nearby Groenendaal forest where they lived first as hermits, and from 1350 as canons regular of St Augustine. Of Ruusbroec eleven prose treatises are known, as well as eight letters, the complete text of which is only available in a Latin translation.¹ The eleven treatises are very much disparate in size and they originated over a period of probably about half a century. Ruusbroec’s first work was Dat rijcke der ghelieven [The Realm of Lovers], which was written while he was still in Brussels. He completed his last treatise, Vanden xii beghinen [The Twelve Beguines] shortly before his death. Two texts, Van den gheesteliken tabernakel [The Spiritual Tabernacle] and Vanden xii beghinen, altogether comprise even sixty percent of his entire oeuvre. If we also include his now most famous treatise, Die geestelike bruolcht [The Spiritual Espousals], the proportion is even seventy-five percent. Markedly short treatises are Vanden blinckenden steen [The Sparkling Stone], Vanden vier becorighen [The Four Temptations], Vanden kerstenen ghelove [The Christian Faith] and Boecskien der verclaringhe [Little Book of Enlightenment]. And finally, the somewhat more extensive treatises comprise Vanden seven sloten [The Seven Enclosures], Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit [A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness] and Van seven trappen [The Seven Rungs]. The relatively short letters are generally occasional writings, obviously composed by Ruusbroec upon request. With the exception of Vanden kerstenen ghelove, which is an exegetical treatise, and some letters, Ruusbroec seeks to provide in his works a phenomenology of mysticism.²

¹ The eighth letter was recently recovered in a Latin translation; see Kees Schepers, ‘An unknown Ruusbroec letter in Willem Jordaens’ s Latin translation, found in an East-Prussian manuscript in Cambridge’, in: Ons geestelijk erf, 75 (2001), pp. 32-68.

² For their commentary on earlier versions of this article our thanks are due to: Dr Guido De Baere (Antwerp University), Dr Thom Mertens (Antwerp University), Dr Kees Schepers (Utrecht University) and Dr Paul Wackers (Utrecht University). – A slightly different, Dutch version of this article appeared in Ons geestelijk erf, 75 (2001), pp. 69-101.
Even at an early juncture much attention has been paid to the manuscript tradition of Ruusbroec’s works. The first and most important stage is *De handschriften van Jan van Ruusbroec’s werken* by W. de Vreese. Scholars have continued to rely on De Vreese’s descriptions, generally without resuming the study of the manuscripts in a systematic way. A significant exception is the article by Reypens, published in 1923, in which he presents a philological and codicological analysis of one of the four *opera omnia*-manuscripts. The results of the manuscript research which has been carried out since can be found in the exhibition catalogue *Jan van Ruusbroec 1293-1381* of 1981. In recent years scholars have paid some attention to these corpus manuscripts of Ruusbroec’s works; the studies were based on the secondary literature in particular.

The four *opera omnia*-manuscripts – known under their sigla A, D, F and G – have been at the centre of the scholarly research into Ruusbroec’s life and work. The manuscripts D and G do not only contain all treatises, but they also provide additional information about the author. Manuscript A is the extant part of a two-volume codex containing the complete works, which was probably compiled in the monastery at Groenendaal even during Ruusbroec’s life. Manuscript F provides a copy of the lost volume of this codex, while manuscript G transmits the two parts in one single volume. Moreover, A, F and G are the basic manuscripts on which the new critical edition of Jan van Ruusbroec’s works is based, which also makes them representative in a very concrete way.

A few years ago we began new research on the four *opera omnia*-manuscripts. We opted for a literary-codicological approach, in which the results of the codicological research are confronted with biographical and literary data. In this way we do not only attempt to provide a new picture of the above-mentioned manuscripts, but we also seek to draw some conclusions about the medieval reception and dissemination of Ruusbroec’s works. The previous research can be summarized as follows:

---


6 This was first argued in W. de Vreese, *De handschriften van Jan van Ruusbroec’s werken* (Ghent 1900-2), p. 48. Reypens continued this argumentation in the afore-mentioned contribution, and in the present article we will provide further arguments for this statement.