Books of hours, the most common private devotional books of the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, survive in exceedingly large numbers.¹ They are a vast fraction of all important manuscript collections and today are the only kind of manuscripts to be offered regularly for sale in the book market. All over the world, art historians are studying the illuminations of the more artistic copies and endeavouring to identify the masters and workshops who produced them. By this time the specialists in general have abandoned the exclusively stylistic approach to the miniatures of books of hours and include in their research their composition, text, calendar, ‘use’ and decoration. By their illumination and varying composition, books of hours invite individual study. Innumerable contributions have consequently been devoted to individual books of hours. By their mass-production, on the other hand, they seem to be a proper object of quantitative research. The latter type of investigation, however, has been applied only very rarely to these de luxe books.

It seems important that manuscript scholars, who often lack the expertise and sensibility of the art historian, contribute to our knowledge of this artefact of another age, which is so foreign to our own way of thinking and nevertheless attracts so much attention from the public at large and from the specialists alike. From a strictly codicological viewpoint, considering the book of hours as a manuscript and not merely or chiefly as a bearer of pictures, much can indeed still be done in this field of research, for which Delaissé has set the programme in his 1971 paper (printed posthumously in 1974), ‘The Importance of Books of Hours for the History of the Medieval Book’.²

On various occasions Peter Gumbert has firmly opposed the exclusivistic approaches to medieval manuscripts and their handwriting as advocated by some colleagues. He did so most recently in a masterly review article.³ Especially

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regarding illuminated manuscripts (as most books of hours are), the use of codicological or quantitative methods both insiders and outsiders may consider inappropriate, as 'measuring' and 'counting' an object of such an exquisite beauty would seem disrespectful and senseless. However, after more than a century of intensive study we still know comparatively little about the process of making such manuscripts in an age in which the rationalization and mechanization practised in commercial workshops had replaced the more straightforward methods of the monastic scriptorium.

To deepen our knowledge in this field, it will no doubt be useful to invert the way of studying books of hours: instead of grouping the objects around a 'master', who (alone or in collaboration with others or with his 'school') is responsible for the miniatures (and thus in principle intervenes at a late moment in the production process), one can concentrate on the books themselves and group them according to their codicological features, thus focusing on the earliest stages in their making: the making of their quires, their ruling, copying, etc. If one could assemble the data for a large number of books of hours originating in a given area, e.g. the Southern Low Countries, which produced thousands of works of that kind, one would no doubt be able to lay bare the mechanisms and techniques that were used for making these de luxe objects the most economical way. Such research would of course focus on what these manuscripts have in common, and neglect everything that makes each of them special – indeed the reverse of the common approach. The fact that so very few books of hours contain a colophon mentioning place and date of the copying and the name of the scribe should not be a deterrent, as the codicologist can rely on the results of art historical research as to the place or area and period of making of a given specimen, or, more exactly, of the making of its illumination. The following observations, dedicated to one of the most thoughtful codicologists of our age, apply to books of hours from the Low Countries, especially from their Southern part. If some of them are like kicking in open doors, they may be useful for setting a programme for future research.4

1. MATERIALS

Paper is so rarely used for the making of books of hours, that one can conveniently limit one's investigation to the normal writing material, parchment (connoisseurs would say: vellum). Given the care with which these books are

4 These observations are based on personal experience and occasional descriptions of books of hours belonging to libraries in Europe and in the United States of America. I thank my students of the Codicology class at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel for the descriptions they made of a few copies in the Royal Library in Brussels. I had the advantage of discussing a few points raised below with Dominique Vanwijnsberghe. The article by Farquhar, mentioned in n. 1, was brought under my attention by Todor Petev.