

A Bunch of Books

Book Collections in the Medieval Low Countries

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The idea that the meaning of texts is determined by the material context in which they are preserved has become central to the study of historical literature from the Low Countries. Attention is nowadays often paid to the materiality of texts, the *Mitüberlieferung*, activities of scribes and correctors, et cetera. This approach was first explored by Herman Pleij in the mid-1980s, soon to be followed by the initiative of Wim van Anrooij and Dini Hogenelst to start a series of diplomatic editions of complete Middle Dutch miscellanies (*verzamelhandschriften*).¹ In 1994 the publication of the first edition in this so-called ‘MVN-reeks’ (Middeleeuwse Verzamelhandschriften uit de Nederlanden / *Medieval Miscellanies from the Low Countries*) was celebrated with a programmatic conference on Middle Dutch miscellanies.² At this conference Paul Wackers argued that medieval miscellanies should be studied as whole books.³ Studying the complete manuscript, its materiality taken into consideration, would lead to a better understanding of both the separate texts and the manuscript itself. Although the international discussion on ‘New’ or ‘Material’ Philology – initiated by Stephen Nichols in the 1990 issue of *Speculum* and discussed fiercely in Germanistics and Romanistics – only received attention in the Netherlands in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the material approach to texts has been embraced since the 1994 conference.⁴ Today, many studies, conferences and research projects in the field of historical literature from the Low Countries focus on the material artefact.⁵

The material approach has, thus far, mainly inspired literary historians to study texts in their manuscript context, especially that of miscellanies. In preparation of *Queste*’s twentieth anniversary, we decided to organise a conference in which we would take the idea of investigating a text in its material context one step further. Whereas a text should be studied in its manuscript context to understand its meaning and function – as Paul Wackers argued – we could also say that a (miscellany) manuscript should be studied in the context of a book collection to fully understand its meaning. The

1 Brinkman 2009, 7–8.

2 ‘Middeleeuwse verzamelhandschriften uit de Nederlanden. Congres Nijmegen 14 oktober 1994’. Published as Sonnemans 1996.

3 Wackers 1996, 27–28.

4 Nichols 1990 and 1997. On the reception of this approach in the Netherlands, see Brinkman 2009, 5–7. For an overview of the international literature on the subject of miscellanies (in comparison to the approach in the field of Middle Dutch miscellanies) see also Folkerts 2010, 14–22.

5 It is impossible to name them all. See, for example, the research projects ‘Mobility of Ideas and Transmission of Texts. Vernacular Literature in the Rhineland and the Low Countries (ca. 1300–1550)’ (2009–2013, coordinated by Geert Warnar, Leiden University) and ‘The dynamics of the medieval manuscript’ (2010–2013, project leader: Bart Besamusca, Utrecht University).

term *bibliotheek-in-één-band*, proposed by Jan Willem Klein as equivalent of the English 'one-book library', which was used by M.B. Parkes, already suggests that miscellanies and book collections have a lot in common.⁶ Texts not only functioned in a book, but also in a collection of books. These collections bring together elements that have often been studied separately: Latin and vernacular texts, religious and secular literature, manuscript and print, rhyme and prose, splendor and plainness, old and new. Just as miscellanies provide a meaningful context for texts, book collections or libraries give meaning to the books and the texts they include. This idea was well formulated by Jennifer Summit in her study *Memory's Library. Medieval Books in Early Modern England* (2008). She stated that '[l]ibraries were dynamic institutions that actively processed, shaped, and imposed meaning on the very materials they contained'.⁷ This, in turn, applies to miscellanies as well.

As obvious as this connection between miscellanies and libraries may sound, it is a connection that has not been explored very often or systematically in the field of medieval literature in the Low Countries.⁸ Individual scholars, mainly book historians, have long acknowledged the importance of book collections, and literary historians are increasingly finding their way to this source as well.⁹ Yet this source is not always easy to reach. Primary sources for the study of book collections are, first and foremost, the books themselves. But they are usually transmitted separately from their original collections or are lost, leaving us with only the archival sources to work from. Archival sources, such as book lists, wills, records of estates, and so on, also contribute to our understanding of books and collections. These archival sources are numerous but often undisclosed and unpublished, especially sources from the Northern Low Countries. Thanks to Derolez's magnificent *Corpus catalogorum Belgii* the greater part of book lists from the Southern Low Countries have been published. Surprisingly, however, the publication of these sources has not yet initiated a large amount of research on book collections.¹⁰ Therefore, we considered the twentieth anniversary of *Queeste*

6 Klein 1995, 25.

7 Summit 2008, 15.

8 For this approach see also Schnell 1985 and Gabriël 2009.

9 Very important work has been done by Albert Derolez and Pieter Obbema. Derolez not only edited the booklists from the Southern Low Countries (Derolez, Victor & Bracke 1994–2011), he also published substantial articles on the subject. See, for example, Derolez 1972, 1985, 1989 and 2004. Obbema did great work for the Northern Low Countries. See, for instance, Obbema 1973, 1994, 1996 and 2005. Other book historians easily find their way to this source. See, for example, Van der Vlist 1989, Biemans 1997, Kwakkel 2002. On surviving manuscripts from religious orders see Stooker & Verbeij 1997. In Nijmegen Hans Kienhorst (in cooperation with Johan Oosterman and Ad Poirters) is currently also working on book collections from religious orders. See Kienhorst 2010, Kienhorst (forthcoming), Oosterman 2011 and the contribution of Poirters to this issue of *Queeste*. Literary and cultural historians who have frequently included book lists and book collections in their research are, among others, Herman Brinkman, Sabrina Corbellini and Hanno Wijsman. See Brinkman 1997 (with editions of book lists from Leiden on pp. 281–303) and 1998, Corbellini 2002, Corbellini & Hoogvliet 2013 (on book lists with vernacular Bibles; on book lists with Middle Dutch Bibles, see Folkerts (forthcoming)), Wijsman 2003 (in English 2010) (see for more references his contribution to this volume of *Queeste*). See also the following books and special issues: Haemers, Van Hoorbeeck & Wijsman 2007, Bracke & Derolez 2005, Faems & Van Coolput-Storms 2007. A good (international) starting point to the field of medieval book collections is *The Cambridge history of libraries in Britain and Ireland (to 1640)* (Leedham-Green & Webber 2006). See also sections 2 ('The Book Trade') and 3 ('Collectors & Collecting') in Marrow, Linenthal & Noel 2010.

10 Derolez, Victor & Bracke 1994–2011.

a good occasion to initiate a debate on the theme of books in their (material) context of a collection or library.

During a conference, which was generously hosted by Radboud University Nijmegen on 14 February 2013, we discussed the possibilities and problems of investigating medieval book collections and the sources for the study of book collections. With this conference our goal was not only to encourage research on book collections and the sources for these collections, but also to encourage methodological reflection on the relations between books, miscellanies and book collections. We included both book collections and text collections, since we reason that studying them in relation to each other can give new insights into their characteristics and geneses. Book collections, however, not only tell us something about the meaning of books, texts, and collections, but they also provide insight into their users and, on a higher level, on the history of reading. The aforementioned book by Jennifer Summit provides a very useful theoretical framework from which to start. Her main point is that libraries are powerful, in the sense that they direct our knowledge and opinions about literature. 'As guardians of the textual past', she states, 'libraries supply both the material and the structure of our literary histories, by placing books in relation to one another following likenesses or distinctions between authors, subjects, and historical periods.'¹¹ Summit's book is about English collectors such as Robert Cotton. They already recognized, as Summit writes, that 'those who made libraries made history'. This is what we would like to investigate in this thematic issue of *Queeste* as well: how did medieval book collections shape the history of the book and the history of reading?

At the conference in Nijmegen, which was named 'A Bunch of Books', six speakers of various disciplines presented a paper, in which they discussed their thoughts and views on the theme. We were delighted to have Albert Derolez as our first keynote speaker. His introduction set the stage for new perspectives and research into medieval book lists and book collections. Departing from the *Corpus catalogorum*, Derolez discussed the possibilities of the study of medieval book lists for the investigation of the use and users of libraries. Our second keynote speaker, Ryan Perry of the University of Kent, shared his knowledge of and insight into vernacular books from England: devotional anthologies, to be more precise. He stated that these anthologies functioned as one-volume collections, which must have been products of a 'pooling' system of scribes and compilers. Particularly thought provoking were his detours into the relationship between the researcher and the book collections as he or she finds them in archives and libraries. Although his sources do not come from the region that is studied in *Queeste*, we considered it valuable to invite an international speaker in order to be able to learn from the differences and similarities between the two fields of study. A similarity is found in the sources discussed by Herman Brinkman, who approached composite manuscripts as witnesses of collecting habits. He asked to what extent composite manuscripts can be useful when reconstructing medieval libraries. In his paper on the Soeterbeeck Collection, Ad Poirters argued that a collection like the one of the convent of Soeterbeeck has to be studied from a diachronic

11 Summit 2008, 8.

perspective and that no distinction need be made between manuscripts and printed books. Just like Brinkman and Perry, Poirters relied mainly on the transmitted books themselves for the study of book collections. Sabrina Corbellini and Hanno Wijsman, in contrast, made use of documentary sources. In order to study lay ownership of religious manuscripts, Corbellini analysed the book collection that was bequeathed by Elisabeth de Gruutere, widow of Simon Borluut, to the Ghent beguine community of Our Lady Ter Hoye, by making use of the surviving book list. Hanno Wijsman also mainly built his argument on inventories and accounts. He showed how inventories shed light on the function of the collection of the Dukes of Burgundy and their specific fields of interest.

In the present issue of *Queeste* the papers of Derolez, Wijsman, Poirters and Perry are collected in order to offer an introduction to new ways of approaching medieval books and texts in collections, and book collections themselves. With this issue, literary historians, who study the meaning of texts or manuscripts, will hopefully be stimulated to use not only the manuscripts themselves, but documentary sources on book collections as well. Consulting Albert Derolez' magnificent *Corpus catalogorum Belgii* should become as self-evident as examining material features or the content of a manuscript.

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