

## **Henry Suso (c. 1295-1366): A Brief Introduction to his Life and Works**

### **I. The life of Henry Suso**

Henry Suso was born on the feast day of St. Benedict, March 21, in *ca.* 1295. His father was Heinrich von Berg. He took the name “Seuse” (or, in Latin, “Suso”) from his mother, who was called Süs or Sus, and who he revered as an extremely devout woman. He entered into the Dominican monastery of Constance at the age of 13. According to the Dominican Rule, 15 was the minimum age to be allowed to enter into a monastery at that time. A gift from his parents seems to have contributed to the decision to admit him (leading to future anxiety about simony). After his regular education in his home monastery, Suso was sent to Cologne for the *studium particulare* in the years 1324-1327. This education was meant for the intellectual elite of the order; Meister Eckhart was one of his teachers in Cologne. After his education he returned to Constance to become *Lektor*.

On the basis of his *Büchlein der Wahrheit*, Suso was accused of spreading heretical thought around 1330. His license to teach was withdrawn. In 1334 he was formally rehabilitated, but he never resumed his teaching activities. Instead he devoted his life to pastoral care, as he makes clear in his *Vita*. In the year 1339 the inhabitants of the Dominican monastery in Constance went into exile as a consequence of the struggle between Pope John XXII and Louis the Bavarian. It is not known where Suso stayed during this exile. After the Dominicans returned to their monastery in Constance, Suso was transferred to the monastery of Ulm in 1347/48 on order of the order general. His stay in Constance had become impossible due to the accusations of having begotten a child. He died in Ulm on January 25, 1366.

All relevant data are gathered by Bihlmeyer 1961, Introduction.  
A critical analysis of these data is given by Altrock & Ziegeler 2001.

### **II. The oeuvre of Henry Suso**

#### 1. *Büchlein der Wahrheit* (BdW)

The BdW is a philosophical treatise in the form of a dialogue between “Eternal Truth” and his pupil. The central topic is *Gelassenheit*, a complicated notion that refers to renouncing all identity and every desire and wish as a preparation to the *unio mystica*. The BdW quotes from *In agro dominico*, the bull promulgated on March 27, 1329 by Pope John XXII, in order to refute heterodox interpretations of condemned articles from Eckhart’s work. Suso saw himself as defending his teacher’s legacy, as Eckhart had died in Avignon during the proceedings against him.

The BdW was the immediate reason for the Dominican Provincial Chapter’s accusation against Suso for spreading heretical thought. At the end of Suso's life it became a part of his *Exemplar*, as the third item in a self-contained collection of his works. Likely because of its association with heresy, it did not circulate very widely as an independent text, and would have been read primarily as part of the *Exemplar*: of the twelve manuscripts of the BdW, only two were copied independently.

Critical edition: Sturlese und Blumrich 1993.

## 2. Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit (BdeW)

The BdeW, written around 1332, consists of three parts. The third part is the so-called *Hundert Betrachtungen und Begehungen* (*Hundred articles of the Passion*), a meditation exercise that was revealed to Suso, according to the prologue, in answer to his desperate ask for help to develop compassion with the suffering of Christ. The first two parts of the BdeW are divided into 24 chapters referring to the hours of the day. In these parts Suso formulates the insights he gained by his meditation on the *Hundred articles*. These insights are presented in the form of a dialogue between Eternal Wisdom and his pupil. A great number of manuscripts have been preserved. Bihlmeyer qualifies the number of copies of the text, separately from the Exemplar, as 'Legion' (p. 11\*); Barbara Fleith and Réjane Gay-Canton have identified at least 102 MSS of the entire text. In addition, some chapters (especially c.21 and c.23) and the *Hundert Betrachtungen* were very widely spread as excerpts.

Standard edition: Bihlmeyer 1965.

Literature: Blumrich 1994.

Fenten 2007

### 2.1 *Hundert Betrachtungen und Begehungen in the Netherlands*

Hardly any manuscripts of the BdeW have been preserved in the Netherlands: only two manuscripts in a German dialect from the border region. However, beginning in *ca.* 1350, the *Hundred articles* circulated independently in the Netherlands, where the text became very popular: it was the most widely-read Passion meditation in the Late Middle Ages in the Low Countries. At least twelve versions have survived, both in the vernacular and in Latin.

Literature: Deschamps 1989.

The oldest revision in a Dutch dialect is called the *South Netherlandish Version*. It has survived in 28 manuscripts and was made before 1350 in Brabant, most likely in the monastery of regular canons of Groenendaal (near Brussels). Willem Jordaens, one of the regular canons of Groenendaal, then translated this vernacular version into Latin before 1372, the year of his death. His Latin translation is called the *Centum Meditationes*; there are 55 extant manuscripts and 7 early prints. A faithful translation of this Latin text into the vernacular was made in the circle of the *Devotio Moderna*, probably close to the end of the fourteenth century. Because this translation was used as an exercise for daily masses, the text was divided into seven days. Accordingly the translation is called the *Weekly exercise*. 67 manuscripts have been preserved along with 6 early prints.

Literature: Van Aelst 2005.

A vernacular revision of the *South Netherlandish Version* was made at the end of the fourteenth century. This adaptation is called the *North Netherlandish Version*. So far 112 manuscripts have been discovered and 2 prints are known. It is assumed that it was originally made for the tertiary convents of the Chapter of Utrecht, in the northern Netherlands. This, the most widely circulating vernacular version, was then translated into Latin before 1399. The translation is called the *Anonymous Latin translation*. The unknown author of this version was most likely a Crosier Father from Cologne. There are 13 extant copies of the translation and 1 print. This Latin translation was then translated into the Dutch vernacular four times. The *First* (6 manuscripts), *Second* (2 manuscripts) and *Third* (1 fragment) *Middle Dutch translation of the Anonymous Latin translation* were most likely made by Carthusians. The so-called *Middle Dutch Free revision* is the most extended version of all. It originates from Flanders, from a circle that was influenced by the rhetoricians. It was made in the second half of the fifteenth century and is preserved in only one manuscript.

Literature: Van Aelst 2011.

Finally there is a First (2 manuscripts) and Second (4 manuscripts) Middle Dutch translation of Suso's Swabian *Hundert Betrachtungen* and an incomplete translation (2 manuscripts) in the form of a prayer. All three originate from the end of the fifteenth, beginning of the sixteenth century.

The *Hundred Meditations* does not seem to have circulated widely in medieval England. There is one verse translation of the Jordanes *Centum Meditationes*, probably made in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, which survives in a single manuscript made around 1535: Bodleian Library MS e Museo 160, f. 116r-136r.

Edition: Rozenski 2012.

### 3. *Horologium aeternae Sapientiae*

The *Horologium* is a Latin revision and elaboration of the first two parts of the BdeW. The text is also written in the form of a dialogue between Sapientia and her Disciple. The *Hundert Betrachtungen* no longer constitute the third part of the text, but are left out 'cause brevitatis', as is stated in the Prologue. Instead, the *Cursus de aeternae Sapientiae* is added at the end of the text, an exercise for the hours of the divine office.

The *Horologium* was made between 1334 and 1339. The terminus *post quem* can be deduced from Suso's quotation of a public letter from 1333, written by Hugo de Vaucemain, the Master-General of the Dominican Order. The terminus *ante quem* is based on Heinrich von Nördlingen's mentioning a copy of the *Horologium* in a letter written in 1339.

Before Suso made his text public, he asked the Dominican Master-General, Hugo de Vaucemain, to approve the text formally, which he is sure to state in the prologue (Künzle 1977, p. 367, l. 24 - p. 368, l. 9). The *Horologium* became immensely popular: over 230 Latin MSS have been preserved (along with 88 more that are known to be lost, as well as 11 early prints and 147 MSS with excerpts).

#### 3.1. *The vernacular translations of the Horologium aeternae Sapientiae*

The popularity of the *Horologium* is also attested to by numerous vernacular translations across Europe during the Middle Ages:

- Middle French (research is still on-going, but more than 70 MSS have been identified by Audrey Sulpice).
- Italian (25 MSS)
- Middle English: *Seven Points (SP)*: 8 MSS. Excerpts from the *SP*: 6 MSS. Thomas Hoccleve's verse translation of *Hor. II,2 (ars moriendi)*: 10 MSS. Two prose translations of *Hor. II,2* independent of the *SP* or Hoccleve: 3 MSS. An independent prose translation of the treatise on the Eucharist (*Hor. II,4*): 1 MS.
- German: (more than 20 MSS, most of them excerpts, have been identified by Réjane Gay-Canton. Research is still on-going)
- Czech (8 MSS)
- Two Middle Dutch translations have survived, the oldest of which originates from Brabant, and the second one from circles of the Modern Devotion.
- Swedish (2 translations, a total of 5 MSS)

The "Suso-Team" within the OPVS-Project (ERC-Starting Grant directed by Géraldine Veysseyre, Paris) deals with the French, English, German and Dutch translations with a focus on the manuscript production and circulation in Northern Europe. It is composed of José van Aelst (University of Utrecht), Barbara Fleith (University of Geneva), Réjane Gay-Canton (IRHT Paris), Steven Rozenski (Harvard University), Dirk Schultze (University of Göttingen) and Audrey Sulpice (IRHT Paris).

Standard edition of Latin *Horologium*: Künzle 1977

Edition of Dutch translation: Van de Wijnpersse 1926 and Van de Wijnpersse 1938.

Edition of *Seven Poyntes*: Schultze 2005.

Edition of the independent prose translations of the *Ars Moriendi*: Westlake 1993

James 2012a; James 2012b

Selman 1998

### 3.2 *Cursus de aeternae Sapientiae* (CdaS)

The CdaS is an exercise for the hours of the divine office. The CdaS spread separately from the *Horologium* because Geert Grote, the father of the *Devotio Moderna*, translated the *Cursus* into Dutch and included it in his vernacular Book of Hours. This was the most widely-read vernacular book in the late-medieval Low Countries. The *Cursus* does not occur in all MSS of Grote's book of hours, but it still does occur in over 300 MSS of this enormously popular text. In this way, Suso's mystical tone and manner of expression deeply influenced Dutch spirituality. We also know of three German manuscripts.

While it the CdaS did not circulate as widely in England, by the middle of the fifteenth century it can be found in Suso's original Latin in at least three English manuscript Books of Hours, as well as a printed quaternion appended (after the table of contents) to a Sarum Book of Hours printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1503 (RSTC 15899) (and retitled as "The matyns of the name of Ihesu" and "hore dulcissimi nominis Iesu"). While it begins without attribution, when the de Worde text reaches Vespers it specifies "Uespere in veneratione nominis Jesu edite a deuoto Ricardo de hampole" before continuing to reproduce Suso's text.

On the Office for the Feast of the Name of Jesus in England, see Pfaff 1979, p. 62-83

Most recent edition of the CdaS: Weiler and Bollmann 2008.

Digitally available on: [dbnl.org](http://dbnl.org) according to the edition of Van Wijk 1940, which contains the complete book of hours in the translation of Geert Grote

## 4. *Vita*

The *Vita* is the most important source of information on the historical life of Henry Suso.

However, the main aim of the text is to create a clear model for the development of a perfect spiritual life and not to convey "historical" data. This complicates the use of the text for purely biographical purposes.

The *Vita* is most likely written after 1362. According to the prologue, it is Elsbeth Stigel, one of Suso's "spiritual daughters," who has written the text. She asked Suso to tell her his life story and she secretly wrote down his account. When Suso heard of this spiritual "theft," he ordered her to give him the document. After he had thrown the first half into the fire, God interfered and forbade him to burn the second half. This is the prologue's claim for the genesis of the *Vita*, a gesture primarily intended to give the text authority.

Edition: Bihlmeyer 1961.

Literature on the illuminated manuscripts: Hamburger 2008, Hamburger 1998.

## 5. *Das Exemplar*

At the end of his life, after 1362, Henry Suso collected and edited four of his vernacular texts into one corpus, namely the *Vita*, the *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit*, the *Büchlein der Wahrheit* and the so-called *Briefbüchlein*, consisting of eleven letters. This collection is called the *Exemplar*, according to the words of the prologue: 'In disem exemplar stand geschriben vier guote buechlú'. The *Exemplar* was illustrated with eleven drawings that constitute an integral part of the text.

Edition: Bihlmeyer 1961.

### 6. Letters and Sermons

Finally there is the *Grosses Briefbuch*, containing 28 letters written by Suso. Four sermons have been attributed to Suso, but the attribution of only two of these sermons can be securely determined to be valid, namely of *Lectulus noster Floridus* and of *Iterum reliquo mundum et vado ad patrum*. At one time, Suso was thought to have written the so-called *Minnebüchlein*. However, this attribution is incorrect.

These three texts are edited by Bihlmeyer 1961, p. 403-554.

## III. Literature

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