THE SEVEN SORROWS CONFRATERNITY OF BRUSSELS

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STUDIES IN EUROPEAN URBAN HISTORY (1100–1800)

SERIES EDITORS

MARC BOONE

ANNE-LAURE VAN BRUAENE

Ghent University

THE SEVEN SORROWS CONFRATERNITY OF BRUSSELS
DRAMA, CEREMONY, AND ART PATRONAGE
(16th-17th CENTURIES)

EDITED BY EMILY S. THELEN
With the collaboration of SUSIE SPEAKMAN SUTCH

BREPOLS

Cover illustration: Detail, *Liber authenticus sacratissimae utriusque sexus christifidelium confraternitatis septem dolorum beatae mariae virginis nuncupatae*, Archives of the City of Brussels/Archief van de Stad Brussel, Historical Archives/Historisch Archief Register 3413, fol. [2]r.

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D/2015/0095/56

ISBN 978-2-503-55333-7 (printed)

ISBN 978-2-503-55431-0 (online)

Printed in the EU on acid-free paper

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DRAMA AND CEREMONY

THE BRUSSELS PLAYS OF THE SEVEN SORROWS

Remco SLEIDERINK

KU Leuven – University of Leuven

Introduction

In the Dutch-speaking Low Countries, vernacular theatre played an important role in the propagation of the devotion to the Seven Sorrows of Our Lady, the most painful moments in the life of the Virgin Mary: Simeon's Prophecy, the Flight into Egypt, the Loss of the twelve-year-old Christ in the temple, the Bearing of the Cross, the Crucifixion, the Deposition and the Entombment. Archival evidence has been found for performances of plays on the Seven Sorrows in cities as diverse as Mechelen (1494, 1532), Leiden (1494), Antwerp (1495), Bergen op Zoom (1497), Gouda (1497), Aalst (1499, 1521), Blankenberge (1502), Tielt (1508, 1513), Roeselare (1512), and Geraardsbergen (1518-19).¹ In most of these cases, it is clear that the staging was organized by the local chambers of rhetoric, guilds devoted to the composition and performance of vernacular literature. Studying the play texts would help to understand how lay people in the Low Countries experienced the devotion of the Seven Sorrows, but unfortunately none of these texts are extant, and the references in the archival sources are, in general, too succinct to allow for a proper reconstruction of form and content.²

More information on some of the vernacular plays on the Seven Sorrows can be found in the history of the confraternity of the Seven Sorrows that was written in 1519 by Jan van Coudenberghe – the *Ortus progressus et impedimenta fraternitas beatissimae virginis Mariae de passione quae dicitur de septem doloribus* (Antwerp: Michiel Hillen van Hoochstraten, 1519).³ Van Coudenberghe describes in some detail the play that was

1 Susie Speakman Sutch and Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, 'The Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary: Devotional Communication and Politics in the Burgundian-Habsburg Low Countries (c. 1490-1520)', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 61 (2010), 252-78 (pp. 272-77). See also Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille. Rederijkerskamers en de stedelijke cultuur in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1400-1650)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), pp. 66-71 and Susie Speakman Sutch, 'Jan Pertcheval and the Brussels Leliebroeders (1490-1500). The model of a conformist rhetoricians chamber?', in *Conformisten en rebellen. Rederijkerscultuur in de Nederlanden (1400-1650)*, ed. by Bart Ramakers (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), pp. 94-106 (p. 97). The performances in Mechelen (1532) and Aalst (1521) are mentioned by E. Van Autenboer, *Volksfeesten en rederijkers te Mechelen (1400-1600)* (Ghent: Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde, 1962), pp. 126 and 152.

2 Speakman Sutch suggests that the Aalst play, which lasted for two days and was staged by the local chamber of rhetoric St Catherine, may have resembled a mystery play (Speakman Sutch, 'Jan Pertcheval', p. 97).

3 Van Coudenberghe's remarks on vernacular theatre (sig. Ci^v) are cited *in extenso* by Willem Van Eeghem, 'Rhetores bruxellenses (15e-16e eeuw)', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 14 (1935), 427-48 (pp. 433-35). The Dutch translation by Jacob Stratius S.J. is also useful and available on Google Books: *Onse L. Vrouwe der seven weenen. Met de mirakelen, getyden, ende misse der selver: insgelyckx den oorspronck, ende voortganck der broederschap* (Antwerp: Guiliam Lesteens, 1622); the section on vernacular theatre is on pp. 219-23.

performed in Mechelen in 1494 on Annunciation Day, in the presence of Archduke Philip the Fair. This play was written, according to Van Coudenberghe, by the canon and talented poet Hendrik Maes (d. 1512), a member of the local chamber of rhetoric, The Peony. Even though the performance lasted for five hours, no one found it too long, Van Coudenberghe asserts. In Maes's play each of the Seven Sorrows were represented as well as scenes from the Old Testament. Before the representation of each sorrow, two expositors explained what would be brought on stage, refuting at the same time all possible arguments against the devotion. The magnificent and emotive performance had great success, not only among the court elite but also among the people of Mechelen, who urged for a second performance.⁴

On the Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows – which will be the focus of this article – Van Coudenberghe offers interesting details too. Recently, however, new evidence about these plays has become available: in 2009 I discovered the account book of the Brussels chapter of the confraternity of the Seven Sorrows, from 1499 to 1516 (340 pp., seventeen years altogether).⁵ These accounts mention the composition and staging of Marian plays several times, with detailed information that supplements Van Coudenberghe's description. For example, the accounts allow us to assert that in Brussels not just one play was composed – as some scholars had deduced from Van Coudenberghe's remarks – but a *series* of plays, forming a cycle that must have been comparable to the well-known *Bliscappen*, plays on the Seven Joys of Mary that were composed in Brussels in the middle of the fifteenth century. The accounts also reveal that the Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows were composed from 1508 onwards and not in 1497 as was commonly assumed. Therefore, the composition and staging of these plays should be situated entirely in the context of the Brussels chapter of the Seven Sorrows confraternity, founded in 1499, and more specifically at a moment when the Brussels chambers of rhetoric, The Lily and The Violet, were already merged into The Garland of Mary ('t Mariacranske, as of 15 September 1507). Though Van Coudenberghe ascribes the Brussels plays to the Brussels rhetoricians Jan Smeken (d. 1517) and Johannes Pertcheval (d. 1523), only the authorship of Smeken is confirmed by the accounts.

I will start here with a short overview of the information that can be deduced from Van Coudenberghe's exposé, before turning to the new evidence from the accounts. These two sources, however, will not suffice to reconstruct the form, content, and performance of the plays of the Seven Sorrows. Therefore, I will complement this image by taking the preserved plays by Jan Smeken into consideration, and I will also make a comparison with the *Bliscappen*. Although such a tentative reconstruction can never replace the now-lost plays, it will allow us to demonstrate how the Brussels rhetoricians used vernacular theatre to make the devotion of the Seven Sorrows a resounding success among city dwellers.

⁴ The Mechelen play is more thoroughly discussed by Van Autenboer, *Volksfeesten*, pp. 150-53, Speakman Sutch and Van Bruaene, 'The Seven Sorrows', pp. 267-68, and Emily Catherine Snow, 'The Lady of Sorrows. Music, Devotion, and Politics in the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Princeton University, 2010), pp. 32-38. Given the five-hour performance, Speakman Sutch suggests that the Mechelen play was 'a kind of dramatised sermon' (Speakman Sutch, 'Jan Pertcheval', p. 97). She also suggests that the scenes from the Old Testament were represented in the form of *tableaux vivants* (p. 97).

⁵ Archives of the City of Brussels/Archief van de Stad Brussel, Historical Archives/Historisch Archief (hereafter ASB, HA), Register 3837. An exploratory study of these accounts is Remco Sleiderink, 'De dichters Jan Smeken en Johannes Pertcheval en de devotie tot Onze Lieve Vrouw van de Zeven Weeën. Nieuwe gegevens uit de rekeningen van de Brusselse broederschap (1499-1516)', *Queeste. Tijdschrift over middeleeuwse letterkunde in de Nederlanden*, 19 (2012), 42-69 (English summary on p. 66).

Jan van Coudenberghe and the Date of 1497

Van Coudenberghe starts his digression on the Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows with the more general remark that the adherents to the devotion of the Seven Sorrows, and especially the lay people, were so offended by the opposition against it, that they started to write, in Dutch verses, plays on each particular sorrow, to be performed on stage instead of more worldly plays.⁶ It is clear that Van Coudenberghe has a particular series of plays in mind, as he continues to describe two negative personae brought on stage in these plays, one that he calls *Malorum Incitator* (instigator of evil things) and the other *Bonorum Impeditor* (obstructor of good things). At each representation of a sorrow, these traitorous servants of the Devil have a dialogue. The 'instigator of evil things' expresses his fear for all the benefits that can come from the confraternity of the Seven Sorrows, while the 'obstructor of good things' boasts that he is prepared to hinder these benefits by instructing his own disciples. In the context of Van Coudenberghe's history, these disciples should be understood as the opponents of the devotion to the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin.

Van Coudenberghe then attributes the composition of this specific series of plays to the skilled Brussels rhetoricians Jan Smeken and Johannes Pertcheval. Filled with arguments and citations from the Holy Fathers, their plays were performed in public, on stages that were built especially for these occasions. In doing so, Van Coudenberghe asserts, these lay people not only presented in words and images the Seven Sorrows, but they also exposed the spiritual benefits of the confraternity. Especially in the dialogues between *Malorum Incitator* and *Bonorum Impeditor*, all the frauds, snares, defences, and lies of the opponents of the devotion were made clear to the audience.

The now-lost Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows are not dated by Van Coudenberghe. The Brussels philologist Willem Van Eeghem, however, situated the Brussels plays in 1497, and this date has been repeated by scholars ever since.⁷ Van Eeghem does not give arguments for his dating, but apparently he is following Pérégrin-Marie Soulier who accorded, in a book published in 1912, dates to different sections in Van Coudenberghe's narrative. Soulier rephrased the section on vernacular theatre in a small chapter with the date 1497.⁸ This dating, however, should have been doubted by scholars, as this would have been two years *before* the establishment of the Brussels chapter of the Seven Sorrows by the rhetoricians of The Lily. Moreover, the Brussels city accounts, which have been preserved for the period 1497-1507 and contain numerous details on performances by chambers of rhetoric, never mention plays on the Seven Sorrows.

6 Van Eeghem, 'Rhetores bruxellenses', p. 433. I thank Susie Speakman Sutch for sharing with me the tentative English translation of Van Coudenberghe's remarks on the Brussels plays made by Dr John Pairman Brown in 2001. Cf. also Speakman Sutch's rephrasing in her article 'Jan Pertcheval', p. 98.

7 Van Eeghem, 'Rhetores bruxellenses', p. 433. The same date also appears in, for example, Speakman Sutch, 'Jan Pertcheval', p. 97 and Speakman Sutch and Van Bruane, 'The Seven Sorrows', p. 275.

8 Pérégrin-Marie Soulier, *La confrérie de Notre-Dame des Sept Douleurs dans les Flandres 1491-1519* (Brussels: Pères servites de Marie, 1912), chapter 11 ('Pieuses représentations des douleurs de Marie'), pp. 40-42. After mentioning the Brussels plays, Van Coudenberghe turns to Hendrik Mae's play, that was composed, according to the city accounts of Mechelen, as early as 1494. This is another indication that Van Coudenberghe did not strictly follow a chronological order in his story.

Evidence from the Confraternity's Accounts

The account book of the confraternity offers new evidence not only on the dating and authorship of the Brussels plays but also on the place where the plays were staged, the participation of actors from the chamber of rhetoric, and the props that were used. From 1508 onwards, 'Onser Vrouwen spel' (the play of Our Lady) is mentioned virtually every year in the newly discovered accounts, usually with a detailed section on payments.⁹ Compensation for composing a *new* play, with both a prologue and epilogue (and proper copying of the text) is found in six consecutive years in the accounts from 1508 to 1513.¹⁰ These entries demonstrate that what Van Coudenberghe refers to in his history of the confraternity is indeed a *series* of plays, one play for each sorrow, instead of one play representing all seven sorrows, as most scholars in the past have presumed. The first sorrow would have been staged in 1508, the second in 1509, etc.¹¹ In 1514, however, there is not one entry about a play in the accounts, although it is likely that a play on the seventh sorrow was composed that year. Perhaps this play was financed in an alternative manner that would preclude recording in the account book. In 1515 and 1516, the Marian plays are mentioned again, but only briefly and without payments for composing or copying.¹² We can thus assume the cycle on the Seven Sorrows was finished in 1514 and performed for a second time from 1515 onwards.

In the past it has also been assumed that the Brussels rhetoricians were 'explicitly commissioned' to write plays on the Seven Sorrows, and that 'the content had been approved by the court'.¹³ The new evidence does not support these interpretations. Of course, the founding of the Brussels chapter was welcomed by the Burgundian-Habsburg dynasty – as Philip the Fair proved by donating a pew to the confraternity.¹⁴ And yes, the most fervent promoter of the devotion in the Low Countries, Petrus de Manso from Mechelen (Peter Verhoeven), seems to have preached in the Brussels church of St Gorik on the occasion of their first procession in 1505.¹⁵ He would certainly have given his opinion on the Seven Sorrows, but the specific activities that the Brussels rhetoricians developed in their own chapter of the confraternity seem to have been their own initiative.

Already in the first year of their existence, when more than 6000 brothers and sisters were inscribed in the membership register, the *Liber authenticus*,¹⁶ the rhetoricians bought simple printed images and booklets on the Seven Sorrows that they resold in their chapel.¹⁷ They ordered paintings and sculptures, and they organized their own annual procession on the fourth or fifth Sunday of Easter, which every year comprised more *figurae* and *tableaux vivants* visualising the Seven Sorrows.¹⁸ And then, in 1508 – after the merging of The Lily and The Violet into The Garland of Mary – the rhetoricians finally started to

⁹ Sleiderink, 'De dichters', pp. 62-65.

¹⁰ ASB, HA, Register 3837, pp. 156, 187, 213, 239, 262, and 278.

¹¹ Sleiderink, 'De dichters', pp. 62-63.

¹² ASB, HA, Register 3837, pp. 316 and 333.

¹³ Speakman Sutch, 'Jan Pertcheval', p. 101; Speakman Sutch and Van Bruaene, 'The Seven Sorrows', p. 277.

¹⁴ Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*, pp. 70-71.

¹⁵ Sleiderink, 'De dichters', p. 60.

¹⁶ ASB, HA, Register 3413.

¹⁷ Sleiderink, 'De dichters', pp. 56-57; see also the section 'meditation: images and texts' in Speakman Sutch and Van Bruaene, 'The Seven Sorrows', pp. 254-61.

¹⁸ Sleiderink, 'De dichters', pp. 57-62, and Edmond Roobaert's and Trisha Rose Jacobs' chapter in this volume. See Emily Thelen's chapter for the date of the procession.

stage plays of the Seven Sorrows to show the audience more effectively what this specific devotion was about. There is no indication at all that it was not their own initiative to do so.

In the entries for 1510 and 1511, Jan Smeken is explicitly named as the author of the Marian plays.¹⁹ Smeken had been the city poet of Brussels since 1485 – receiving 90 shillings ‘Brabantse groten’ each year, apart from gifts in natura and additional rewards – and as a leading rhetorician of The Lily, and later of The Garland of Mary, he was heavily involved in the organization of the Brussels chapter of the confraternity of the Seven Sorrows.²⁰ He was in fact one of its founders, together with Johannes Pertcheval, Jan II Borreman (the sculptor), and Claes der Weduwen. For composing and making proper copies of the plays, Smeken received 12 shillings each time. This same amount is mentioned every year from 1508 to 1513 and is equivalent to the amount that an experienced artist like the painter Joris Schernier (who was also active in the confraternity) received for ten days of work.²¹

Remarkably, Pertcheval is not mentioned in the account book in relation to the Marian plays, although Van Coudenberghe in 1519 explicitly linked the plays to Smeken and Pertcheval. The city accounts affirm that the two rhetoricians often worked together, especially when they organized, commissioned by the city, theatrical competitions, solemn entries, and other public feasts.²² Of course, it is possible that Pertcheval wrote some of the plays that are not linked in the accounts to a specific author, or that he co-authored some of these plays with Smeken. Another possibility, however, is that Pertcheval played a different role in the process, as a producer or as a director of the plays, for example, or maybe even as *auctor intellectualis*. From the apparently learned Johannes Pertcheval, who wrote a new almanac every year for the city of Brussels, we have only one text preserved, namely the translation he made in 1493 of Olivier de la Marche’s *Le chevalier délibéré*, which is an allegorical treatise, not a play.²³ Jan Smeken, on the other hand, wrote many plays, several of which are preserved. These plays by Smeken will be compared below to the evidence about the plays of the Seven Sorrows to strengthen the hypothesis that Smeken wrote the whole cycle of plays and that Pertcheval’s role was a different one.

According to Van Coudenberghe, the plays of the Seven Sorrows were performed on stages that were specially constructed for this purpose, but he does not say where exactly these stages stood. The accounts of the confraternity reveal that in 1510 – and probably also in the previous years – the Marian play was staged in the churchyard of St Gorik’s church, where the confraternity had its chapel.²⁴ From the church accounts of St Gorik,

19 ASB, HA, Register 3837, pp. 213 and 239.

20 E. Roobaert, ‘De parochie van Sint-Jans-Molenbeek en de Brusselse rederijkers’, *Eigen schoon en De Brabander*, 84 (2001), 421–49 (pp. 442–43). Cf. Samuel Mareel, ‘Urban Literary Patronage in the Early Modern Low Countries. Public Festive Culture and Individual Authorship’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 64 (2011), 50–78, and Sleiderink, ‘De dichters’, p. 52.

21 Sleiderink, ‘De dichters’, p. 63.

22 J. Duverger, *Brussel als kunstcentrum in de XIVe en XVe eeuw* (Antwerp: De Sikkel / Ghent: Vyncke, 1935), pp. 86–92.

23 On Johannes Pertcheval see also Sleiderink, ‘De dichters’, *passim*, and Remco Sleiderink, ‘Johannes Steemaer alias Pertcheval. De naam en faam van een Brusselse rederijker’, in *Want hi verkende dien name wale. Opstellen voor Willem Kuiper*, ed. by Marjolein Hogenbirk and Roel Zemel (Amsterdam: Stichting Neerlandistiek VU / Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 2014), pp. 149–54. On his activity as a translator, see Bas Jongenelen, ‘Jan Pertcheval’s translation of *Le chevalier délibéré*: Den camp vander doot. Source, translation and public’, *Publications du Centre européen d’études bourguignonnes*, 43 (2003), 199–212.

24 ASB, HA, Register 3837, p. 213.

we already knew that this churchyard was sometimes used for theatrical performances, in particular by the confraternity of St Sebastian in 1494-95.²⁵

The churchyard of St Gorik seems indeed a convenient place for performances of plays on the Seven Sorrows. In 1511, however, the next play in the cycle was not performed here but at the *Markt*, the prestigious central market place of Brussels, in front of the city hall. That very year the city's treasurers were willing to pay 10 shillings for the labour-intensive construction of the stage on this particular site.²⁶ Probably all the subsequent performances – at the least the one from 1513 for which the city paid 12.5 shillings and an anonymous patron another 10 shillings – took place at the *Markt*.²⁷ The reason as to why the location of the performance changed is not explicitly mentioned, but one could suppose that the city council wanted to present the devotional efforts as their own once they started to sponsor the plays.

From the accounts it is clear that, at least from 1508 to 1512, there were two subsequent performances each year.²⁸ The exact date of the performances is not stated in the accounts, but the accounts suggest that it was on or around the day of the procession that was organized yearly from 1505 and onwards by the confraternity on the fourth or fifth Sunday of Easter.²⁹ From 1508 to 1512, security personnel were paid every year for guarding the stage for two nights,³⁰ but the specific nights are not given – probably the night before and after the procession. In 1515 and 1516, the guards were paid for three nights,³¹ but it is not clear whether this implies a third performance. In these years – when the cycle was staged for the second time – the accounts are unfortunately less specific.

For their two performances, the actors of The Garland of Mary received 6 shillings from the confraternity.³² At both presentations they also received beer for free.³³ In 1516 – when most probably the second sorrow was put on stage again – a certain actress *Clere* was paid 2.5 shillings for playing Our Lady. The justification given in the accounts for this relatively high amount is that she had a lot to learn, and she was not eager to do it.³⁴ Combined with evidence from the city accounts and from the confraternity's *Liber authenticus*, it becomes clear that this actress was a member of The Garland of Mary (and earlier of The Lily) and that she also acted in a rhetoricians' play on the *Markt* in 1503. Her full name was Clara Goolens.³⁵

25 They staged a St Sebastian play; see E. Frankignoul and P. Bonenfant, *Notes pour servir à l'histoire de l'art en Brabant* (= Annales de la Société Royale d'Archéologie de Bruxelles 39) (Brussels, 1935), p. 60, n. 257; Roobaert, 'De parochie van Sint-Jans-Molenbeek', p. 432, and Remco Sleiderink, 'Sebastiaan en Swa. De zoektocht naar het cultureel erfgoed van de Brusselse handboogschutters', *Madoc. Tijdschrift over de Middeleeuwen*, 27 (2013), 142-57 (p. 149).

26 'Totter stellinghen van Onser Vrouwen spel dat opde merct voere stathuys gemaect was' (ASB, HA, Register 3837, p. 230).

27 ASB, HA, Register 3837, pp. 272-73.

28 ASB, HA, Register 3837, pp. 156, 187, 213, 239, and 262.

29 Sleiderink, 'De dichters', pp. 57-62. A connection with a procession was already supposed by B.A.M. Ramakers, *Spelen en figuren. Toneelkunst en processiecultuur in Oudenaarde tussen Middeleeuwen en Moderne Tijd* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), p. 414.

30 ASB, HA, Register 3837, pp. 156, 187, 213, 239, and 262.

31 ASB, HA, Register 3837, pp. 316, and 333.

32 For example in 1511: 'Item van tspele 2 werven te spelene, den rethorisieneen gegeven, 6s. gr.' (ASB, HA, Register 3837, p. 239).

33 For example in 1511: 'Item opde 2 spele aen 8 potten cuten ende 6 pot hoppen, 14.5d. gr.' (ASB, HA, Register 3837, p. 239).

34 'Item Cleren die Onse Vrouwe spelde ende vele leerens dair in hadde want sijt qualijc doen wilde, 2s. 6d. gr.' (ASB, HA, Register 3837, p. 333).

35 Sleiderink, 'De dichters', pp. 63-64.

From 1508 to 1512, the account book also mentions props that were used by the rhetoricians while performing the plays on the Virgin's sorrows. In 1509, when the second sorrow (the Flight into Egypt) must have been on the programme, the confraternity ordered Our Lady's mantle and Jesus's cloak to be made.³⁶ But there must also have been Old Testament scenes in that year's play because Joris Schernier was paid 5 shillings for painting four children who were drowned by Pharaoh.³⁷ In 1511 (fourth sorrow: the Meeting of Mary and Jesus on the Way of the Cross) 3 shillings worth of cloth was bought for Adam's cloak,³⁸ and a female hairdresser or wig maker was paid 1.5 shillings for adorning the women.³⁹ In 1512 (fifth sorrow: the Crucifixion) expenses were made for armour for pagan soldiers who rode with King Herod, but these entries mix costs for the play with costs of the confraternity's annual procession.⁴⁰ Explicitly intended for the performance of the play this same year was a hollow lance used for stabbing Christ.⁴¹ The fact that Longinus's lance was made hollow suggests a special effect, probably for the sudden appearance of blood and water from the side of Christ (John 19. 34). Also in 1512, there were payments for paintings for Our Lady's play, including the painting of a snake, which could have been a general image for the devil or more specifically a reference to the biblical snake of copper (Numbers 21. 4-9), a prefiguration of the crucified Christ.⁴² After 1512 the entries on the plays are more succinct, and props are no longer mentioned.

Jan Smeken and a Play in Breda

The account book of the Brussels confraternity for 1499-1516 does not allow for a more detailed reconstruction of the plays of the Seven Sorrows. There is enough evidence to assume that the plays formed a cycle of seven and furthermore that the cycle treated subjects larger than the Seven Sorrows alone. Scenes from the Old and New Testaments were apparently intertwined as the props suggest, probably creating typological relations. The accounts do not contradict the description by Jan van Coudenberghe.⁴³ Especially interesting, however, is Van Coudenberghe's explanation of the role of the two negative personae *Malorum Incitator* (instigator of evil things) and *Bonorum Impeditor* (obstructor of good things), who vividly express their hopes for the confraternity's demise and their fears for its success.

Remarkably, Van Coudenberghe's *Malorum Incitator* and *Bonorum Impeditor* are identical to two devilish characters in the play of the Sacrament of Niervaart, the *Spel vanden heilighen sacramente vander Nyeuwervaert*, which is preserved in a manuscript from c. 1520, belonging to the confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament in the city of Breda, sixty

36 'Item van Onser Vrouwen mantel en Jhesus rocke, van makene, 12d. gr.' (ASB, HA, Register 3837, p. 187).

37 'Item Joris Scherniere van 4 kinderen die Pharo dede verdrincken, 5s. gr.' (ASB, HA, Register 3837, p. 187).

38 'Item 6 ellen tAnne Veyts om eenen rock voer Adam totten 5ten spele van Onser Liever Vrouwen, cost 3s. gr.' (ASB, HA, Register 3837, p. 234; cf. Sleiderink, 'De dichters', p. 65, n. 87).

39 'Item een hoomakersse om de vrouwen te pallerene, 18d. gr.' (ASB, HA, Register 3837, p. 239).

40 ASB, HA, Register 3837, p. 260.

41 'Item van eenen speere te makene ende binnen hol daer ons heere met ghesteken was aent cruce hangende, betaelt 18d. gr.' (ASB, HA, Register 3837, p. 262).

42 'Item van eenen slangen met ander scilderie int spel behorende, is 18d. gr.' (ASB, HA, Register 3837, p. 262); cf. Sleiderink, 'De dichters', p. 65 and Marcel van der Voort, *Dat seste boec van serpente. Een onderzoek naar en een uitgave van boek VI van Jacob van Maerlants Der naturen bloeme* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2001), pp. 246-48.

43 Van Eeghem, 'Rhetores bruxellenses', p. 434.

miles north of Brussels.⁴⁴ Here these characters are called *Sondich Becoren* and *Belet van Duechden*, which indeed could be translated in Latin as *Malorum Incitator* and *Bonorum Impeditor*. Although the subject of the play is specific to Breda and the former village of Niervaart, where the Blessed Sacrament was found, there is a direct link to Brussels because the manuscript explicitly mentions Smeken as the author of the play ('Smeken fecit', fol. 66^r) and the prologue ('Smeken fecit', fol. 69^v).⁴⁵ There has been a long discussion among scholars about the attribution of the Breda play to Jan Smeken, but from the striking combination of elements, it is clear without doubt that the Brussels rhetorician must have been the author of the play of the Sacrament of Niervaart.⁴⁶ He could have composed this play on the basis of a book chronicling the history and miracles of the Sacrament of Niervaart. This prose text is also preserved in the manuscript from Breda.⁴⁷

On the basis of the *Spel vanden heiligen sacramento vander Nyeuwervaert*, Susie Speakman Sutch analysed the role that *Sondich Becoren* and *Belet van Duechden* may have had in the Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows. Although she was wrong in assuming that there was just one Brussels play, representing all Seven Sorrows in one play, most of her analysis still holds ground.⁴⁸ In the play from Breda, the historical scenes, which are based on the aforementioned chronicle and miracle book, are intertwined with lively and comic dialogues between the little devils *Sondich Becoren* and *Belet van Duechden*, who are Lucifer's servants. In his prologue, Jan Smeken explicitly mentions that he added the scenes with these devils to the basic story:

Duvelrije sal comen in ons spel
Hoe dat inden boec soe niet en staet
Maer ghij mueght beuroeden wel
Dat de duuvels mesten in alle quaet
Om dueght te beletten es al haer daet
In smenschen qualijcvaert zij oit verbliden
Des zij dit sacrament benijden

Scenes with devils will come into our play,
although they do not occur in the book in this manner.
But you may imagine
that devils grow in all evil.
They do everything to prevent good things from happening.
They are always rejoicing over the misfortune of men
and that is why they are angry about this sacrament.

⁴⁴ For an edition of the whole manuscript, see *Het spel vanden heiligen sacramento vander Nyeuwervaert*, ed. by W. J. M. A. Asselbergs and A. P. Huysmans (Zwolle: Tjeenk Willink, 1955); the play text is edited on pp. 112-208. See pp. 23-24 on the identification of the devilish characters.

⁴⁵ *Het spel vanden heiligen sacramento*, pp. 205 and 116.

⁴⁶ Herman Pleij, '24 juni 1500. Spectaculaire duivelscènes domineren de opvoering van het mirakelspel Vanden heiligen sacramento vander Nyeuwervaert in Breda', in *Een theatergeschiedenis der Nederlanden. Tien eeuwen drama en theater in Nederland en Vlaanderen*, ed. by R.L. Erenstein (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), pp. 64-69 (p. 66); Ramakers, *Spelen en figuren*, pp. 413-14; Speakman Sutch, 'Jan Pertcheval', p. 99. For the former discussion on the attribution, cf. *Het spel vanden heiligen sacramento*, pp. 22-28.

⁴⁷ Edited in *Het spel vanden heiligen sacramento*, pp. 63-95 (analysis of Smeken's adaptation process is on pp. 32-35).

⁴⁸ Speakman Sutch, 'Jan Pertcheval', pp. 99-100; see also Pleij, '24 juni 1500'.

It is very likely that a similar justification was used in the prologues of the Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows.

With the inclusion in his Breda play of these two characters who ‘delight in hatching devilish plots for carrying out Lucifer’s orders and tremble in fear of Lucifer’s punishments, because of course each of their schemes backfires’, Smeken succeeded in creating a lot of dramatic tension.⁴⁹ The effect would have been the same in the Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows. Moreover, Van Coudenberghe clearly indicates in his story that the polemic function in the Brussels plays was realised most fully in the devilish scenes that were juxtaposed to the scenes on the Seven Sorrows. Speakman Sutch formulates it as follows, and she also explains why Smeken’s dramatic composition must have had an inescapable impact on the audience:

The juxtaposition of the seven holy scenes with scenes presenting the exchanges and pranks of the devil characters must also have embodied a strategy of argumentation that functioned both scenically and verbally. On the one hand the sacred scenes would have represented the Truth incarnate; on the other hand, the devil scenes would have represented the manifest falsity of the action and words of Satan and his accomplices. The effect of this kind of scenic juxtaposition on the audience would have been dramatically compelling and would have served to certify visually the verity and sacredness of the devotion to the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin and the deceit inherent in any opposing argument.⁵⁰

The ongoing discussions between *Sondich Becoren* and *Belet van Duechden* must have also exposed – with the same rhetorical irony – the qualities of the confraternity of the Seven Sorrows. Speakman Sutch convincingly suggests that in order to justify their intrigues, the two little devils echoed all kinds of criticism, as voiced by the opponents of the devotion.⁵¹ From the very beginning of the devotion, some of its rivals had argued, according to Van Coudenberghe, that there were more than Seven Sorrows – fifteen or even more than one hundred – and that the seven venerated were not very well chosen, while others advocated that there was only one ongoing sorrow in Mary’s life. All of these opponents claimed to have built their arguments on a theological basis.⁵² Van Coudenberghe says that the Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows were filled with authoritative statements by the Holy Fathers.⁵³ Apparently this was especially the case in the dialogues between the two devils.

Whatever *Sondich Becoren* and *Belet van Duechden* discussed, they never reached a conclusion, and at the end of each sorrow they withdrew, Van Coudenberghe asserts.⁵⁴ So, the Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows must have ended like the play in Breda, with the devils leaving the stage quarrelling, using strong language, and expressing the hope that next time they will have more success in their efforts to deceive the righteous people:

⁴⁹ Speakman Sutch, ‘Jan Pertcheval’, p. 99; see also Pleij, ‘24 juni 1500’, p. 67 (‘In theatraal opzicht zijn de duiveltjes met hun gekift en gezanik een gelukkige vondst, omdat ze Smeken in staat stelden dramatische spanning te kweken in wat anders weinig meer dan een verbeeld feitenrelaas zou zijn’).

⁵⁰ Speakman Sutch, ‘Jan Pertcheval’, pp. 99-100.

⁵¹ Speakman Sutch, ‘Jan Pertcheval’, p. 100.

⁵² Cf. Stratijs, *Onse L. Vrouwe der seven weenen*, pp. 199-200; Soulier, *La confrérie*, p. 17; Speakman Sutch, ‘Jan Pertcheval’, p. 100.

⁵³ ‘Rationibus tamen et autoritatibus sanctorum Patrum refertis’ (Van Eeghem, ‘Rhetores bruxellenses’, p. 434).

⁵⁴ ‘Et quicquid disputarunt, sine conclusione, ad quemlibet dolorem recedebant’ (Van Eeghem, ‘Rhetores bruxellenses’, p. 434).

SONDICH BECOREN:

Nv vervliegen wij ghij bottecroes
Laedt ons tvolc tempteren met sonden

BELET VAN DUECHDEN:

Wij hebben hier gedaen bijden wonden
Borre laedt ons van hier vervliegen
Wij sullen noch menigen mensch bedriegen

INSTIGATOR OF EVIL THINGS:

Now, we will fly away, you fool!
Let's seduce the people with sins.

OBSTRUCTER OF GOOD THINGS:

Our role is played out here. Jesus!
Brrr, let's fly away from here.
Later, we will entrap many people.'

The audience must have been thrilled and excited by these opposing characters and the prospect of hearing and seeing them again the following year, when another sorrow was represented on stage.

The close relationship between the Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows and the play from Breda also invokes questions about the chronology of the composition of both plays. Until now with an assumed date of 1497 for the play(s) of the Seven Sorrows, most scholars presumed that the characters *Sondich Becoren* and *Belet van Duechden* were first introduced in Brussels and recycled by Smeken in the play he wrote on commission by the confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament of Niervaart.⁵⁵ With the new dating of the Brussels plays in the period 1508-14, this borrowing seems less secure, as there already was a performance of a play in Breda on the Blessed Sacrament in 1500.⁵⁶

Another possibility, however, is that the reference to the performance in 1500 of the Breda play is related to an older play that was not necessarily written by Jan Smeken. There is evidence that plays that were meant for yearly performances were often replaced by newer ones. The accounts of the parish church of St John the Baptist in Molenbeek, in the near vicinity of Brussels, which are preserved from the middle of the fifteenth century onwards, provide such an example of plays replaced frequently. The accounts contain numerous references to performances of a play on St John, being mentioned, for example, three times in a row in 1455. Expenses for a *new* play on this subject are recorded in 1487 (written by 'the clerics of Leuven') and 1505 (written by the rhetorician Janne de Smet). In 1523-24 the accounts of the parish church reveal that Jan Smeken's widow received some wine when she returned the play on St John that her deceased husband improved or adapted ('gecorrigeert hadde').⁵⁷ Given the evidence of Molenbeek, we cannot exclude the possibility that Jan Smeken wrote the Breda play later on in his career. The confraternity in

⁵⁵ See, for example, Pleij, '24 juni 1500', p. 66.

⁵⁶ 'Item op Sint Jans dach als men tspel speelde van den Sacramente'. Entry cited in *Middelnederlandsche dramatische poëzie*, ed. by P. Leendertz (Leiden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1907), p. LXXX.

⁵⁷ Roobaert, 'De parochie van Sint-Jans-Molenbeek', *passim* (the entry on Jan Smeken is on p. 442).

Breda may have been inspired by the success of the Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows to commission a play in the same style, with the same devilish characters.

Other Works by Jan Smeken

The plays of the Seven Sorrows certainly had a lot in common with the play of the Blessed Sacrament of Niervaart, but it is also interesting to take the other literary works by Jan Smeken into consideration to get a clearer view on the form and content of the now-lost plays. By far the most studied work by Jan Smeken is a nonsensical strophic poem that he wrote immediately after the harsh winter of 1510-11, when numerous ice sculptures were built everywhere in Brussels. Although Smeken's description of these sculptures seems quite absurd, they reveal the cultural and literary background of Jan Smeken and his audience. This poem was published in 1511 by the Brussels printer Thomas van der Noot.⁵⁸ In 1516 Van der Noot also published Smeken's strophic poem on the Brussels meeting of the Order of the Golden Fleece that year.⁵⁹ Both poems were probably written by Smeken in his capacity as city poet, and Van der Noot likely published them supposing there would be enough interested readers in the city.

The majority of the surviving works written by Jan Smeken were plays, but plays were normally not published without adaptation. In 1508 or shortly thereafter – coinciding with the period in which the plays of the Seven Sorrows were written – Van der Noot published the *Spieghel der behoudenessen* ('Mirror of Salvation'). The author's name – SMEKEN JAN – is revealed in an acrostic in the penultimate stanza. The lengthy text, 271 stanzas of ten lines each, appears to be an adaptation for readership of a didactic, allegorical play built on *tableaux vivants* (a so-called 'toogspel'). A lost man finds the way back to salvation thanks to his interaction with a whole series of allegorical characters and by meditating on the Passion of Christ. The typological character of these meditations is clearly influenced by the widely known *Speculum humanae salvationis* or its Dutch translation, *Spieghel der menschliker behoudenisse* ('Mirror of Human Salvation'). In his own *Spieghel*, Smeken underlines the importance of the Old Testament for understanding the importance of the Passion.⁶⁰ The same kind of typological relations must have been part of the Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows, for example in the play on the flight to Egypt, which showed four children who were drowned by Pharaoh. The use of allegorical scenes and *tableaux vivants* is another commonality.

The *Spieghel der behoudenessen*, the *Spel vanden heilighen sacramente vander Nyeuwervaert*, and the revised version of the play on St John (now lost) were all devotional

58 Herman Pleij, *De sneeuwpoppen van 1511. Literatuur en stadscultuur tussen middeleeuwen en moderne tijd* (Amsterdam / Leuven: Meulenhoff & Kritik, 1988); modern Dutch translation by Rick de Leeuw in *Rederijkerskamer 't Mariacranske 500 jaar aan het woord*, ed. by Rick de Leeuw, Anna Luyten and Remco Sleiderink (Roeselare: Roularta, 2007), pp. 35-69. See also Remco Sleiderink, 'Op de wijze van de literatuur. De held achter de Brusselse stadsdichter Jan Smeken', *Helden bestaan! Opstellen voor Herman Pleij*, ed. by Herman Brinkman and others (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008) pp. 207-15.

59 Jan Smeken's *gedicht op de feesten ter eere van het Gulden Vlies te Brussel in 1516*, ed. by Gilbert Degroote (Antwerpen: Seven Sinjoren, 1946); Samuel Marcel, *Voor vorst en stad. Rederijkersliteratuur en vorstenfeest in Vlaanderen en Brabant (1432-1561)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), pp. 132-34.

60 Elly Cockx-Indestege, 'Jan Smeken en Thomas vander Noot. Makers van Den spiegel der behoudenessen, Brussel ca. 1508', in *Liber amicorum Herman Liebaers*, ed. by Frans Vanwijngaerden and others (Brussels: Gemeentekrediet van België, 1984), pp. 213-34.

plays, as were the now-lost plays on the Seven Sorrows.⁶¹ But Jan Smeken wrote secular plays too. Some of these plays no longer survive, like the short comic plays ('esbattementen') that Jan Smeken, according to the city accounts, wrote in 1507 when Jacques de Croy made his entry as bishop of Cambrai.⁶² The secular plays that are not lost are preserved in several manuscripts. Together they shed light on the ability of the city poet to incorporate political vision into his literary works, they bear witness to his thorough acquaintance with ancient mythology, and they demonstrate his theatrical and comical talents.

The *Spel op hertoge Karle* (play on Duke Charles) is preserved in a Brussels manuscript from c. 1525.⁶³ It is a sophisticated (and quite complicated) allegorical and mythological play in 796 verses that reveals what Brussels city dwellers expected from their future ruler, that is peace and prosperity. The play may have been written in 1505, when the future Emperor Charles V was five years old. The text talks at length about allegorical gifts presented to the young prince.⁶⁴ It is also interesting to note that in the manuscript, the play is attributed to Jan Smeken with a simple 'Jan Smeken maectet' at the end. This resembles the 'Smeken fecit' found twice in the manuscript from Breda.⁶⁵

Another secular play by Jan Smeken is *Mars en Venus*, preserved in the manuscript from a rhetorician in Amsterdam, dated 1551, and published also in print, in an adapted version, in Rotterdam in 1621.⁶⁶ It is a humoristic play, in 1128 verses, on the love affair of Mars and Venus, which is finally discovered by Vulcan, Venus's husband. For the elaboration of this Ovidian story, the bilingual Smeken seems to have used the printed *Bible des poètes*, an adaptation of the *Ovide moralisé*.⁶⁷ Particularly interesting is the role played by the 'sinnekens' *Jolijt van Ooghen* (Joy of Eyes) and *Ghepeijs van Minnen* (Amorous Thoughts), which resembles the role played by *Sondich Becoren* and *Belet van Duechden* in the play from Breda (and therefore also in the Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows). They interact with the mythological characters and comment upon the erotic encounter of Mars and Venus with vivid, obscene expressions.⁶⁸ They are, in a certain way, devilish characters, symbolizing human vices, and they are the real instigators of the misadventures of Venus and Mars. An important difference from the devotional plays is that the 'sinnekens' succeed in their plans, where *Sondich Becoren* and *Belet van Duechden* do not. Incidentally, the manuscript version of *Mars en Venus* mentions at the end 'Smeeken fecit', two words that apparently functioned as Smeken's 'signature'.⁶⁹

61 Jan Smeken also wrote a short strophic prayer, preserved in the manuscript known as *Jan van Stijvoorts Refereinenbundel*. It praises the name of JHESUS, with an acrostic of the author's own name in the seventh stanza: 'Jesus Almachichste Notabelheyt / Soet Minlic Edel Keyser Eerlic Name'. See *Jan van Stijvoorts Refereinenbundel anno 1524*, ed. by Frederik Lyna and Willem Van Eeghem (Antwerp: De Sikkell, 1928), pp. 279-80.

62 Duverger, *Brussel als kunstcentrum*, p. 93.

63 Ed. by Ton Van Bruggen, 'Een spel op hertoge karle ons keyser nu es. Een allegorisch toneelspel van Jan Smeken', *Jaarboek Koninklijke Soevereine Hoofdkamer van Retorica 'De Fonteyne' te Gent*, 55 (2005), pp. 9-78.

64 Mareel, *Voor vorst en stad*, pp. 165-173.

65 Mareel, *Voor vorst en stad*, p. 100.

66 Ed. by Ingrid Van de Wijer, 'Hue Mars en Venus tsaemen bueleerden. Rederijkersspel toegeschreven aan Jan Smeeken, uitgegeven naar Ms. II 368 Kon. Bibl. Brussel', in *Uut goeder jonsten. Studies aangeboden aan prof.dr. L. Roose naar aanleiding van zijn emeritaat*, ed. by K. Porteman (Leuven / Amersfoort: Acco, 1991), pp. 33-91.

67 Anke van Herk, *Fabels van liefde. Het mythologisch-amoureuze toneel van de rederijkers (1475-1621)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), pp. 20-21, 44-45; Pleij, *De sneeuwpoppen van 1511*, pp. 102-03, 141-43.

68 Charlotte Steenbrugge, 'Jan Smeeken: "Sinnekens" and Devils', *European medieval drama*, 12 (2008), 49-66; Van Herk, *Fabels van liefde*, pp. 20-21, 44-45. Van Herk also discusses the Brussels play of *Jupiter en Yo*, which may also be attributed to Jan Smeken.

69 Cf. Van de Wijer, 'Hue Mars en Venus tsaemen bueleerden', p. 91.

Seven Sorrows and Seven Joys

Focusing on the preserved literary works by Jan Smeken is certainly helpful to get an idea about the form and content of the now-lost cycle of plays of the Seven Sorrows. But to understand the reason as to *why* the plays were composed, and why a whole *cycle* was written, instead of just one play, we must also take a look at another cycle of seven Marian plays, the *Bliscappen* or Joys of Mary, which were also performed in the context of a Brussels procession.

The procession of Our Lady of the Sands (Onze Lieve Vrouw op de Zavel) had been organized by the Great Crossbow Archers' Guild of Brussels since the fourteenth century. This procession attracted big crowds, even from outside Brussels. In 1448 the city council decided to increase their sponsoring, but also to take more control over the procession. They declared that from then on, the crossbow archers should stage one of the seven plays on the Seven Joys of the Virgin Mary every year.⁷⁰ The tradition was firmly established, as is proven by the city accounts from 1485 to 1507, which contain many references to these annual performances.⁷¹ In 1486, for example, the crossbow archers performed one of these plays on the *Markt*, in front of the city hall, once on the Saturday evening, and once on the Sunday on which the procession took place, that is the Sunday after Ascension Day.⁷²

The procession of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows was, from 1505 onwards, organized on the fourth or fifth Sunday of Easter, that is only one or two weeks before the procession of Our Lady of the Sands. When the rhetoricians of The Garland of Mary started in 1508 with two performances of the first play of a cycle of seven Marian plays, the audience most certainly was prepared to make a comparison between the two cycles, one on the Seven Sorrows and one on the Seven Joys of Mary. The performances were probably organized in a competitive atmosphere. In his history of the devotion of the Seven Sorrows Jan van Coudenberghe hints at animosity between the two devotions. Just before he talks about Smeken and Pertcheval he asserts that some of the opponents argued that given the uncertainty about the Sorrows of Our Lady, one should better venerate her Joys.⁷³

Fortunately two of the seven *Bliscappen* have been preserved, the first and the last, in manuscripts from the middle of the fifteenth century with annotations that prove that they were still performed in the middle of the sixteenth century.⁷⁴ These two surviving texts do confirm the hypothesis that the plays on the Seven Joys and on the Seven Sorrows resembled each other. The most striking commonality is of course that the

70 Robert Stein, 'Cultuur en politiek in Brussel. Wat beoogde het Brusselse stadsbestuur bij de annexatie van de plaatselijke Ommegang?', in *Op belofte van profijt. Stadsliteratuur en burgermoraal in de Nederlandse letterkunde van de middeleeuwen*, ed. by H. Pleij and others (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1991), pp. 228-43 and Robert Stein, 'The Bliscapen van Maria and the Brussels policy of annexation', *Publications du Centre européen d'études bourguignonnes*, 31 (1991), 139-51.

71 Duverger, *Brussel als kunstcentrum*, pp. 84-92.

72 Duverger, *Brussel als kunstcentrum*, p. 85.

73 Van Coudenberghe's words are translated by Stratijs, *Onse L. Vrouwe der seven weenen*, p. 218: 'Ende aenghesien dese sake soo twyfelachtich oft onseker was / dattet beter waer de blyschappen te eeren'; see also Soulier, *La confrérie*, p. 41.

74 *Die eerste Bliscap van Maria en Die sevenste Bliscap van Onser Vrouwen*, ed. by W.H. Beuken (Culemborg: Tjeenk Willink / Noorduijn, 1978). The manuscript of the seventh *Bliscap* apparently lacks one quire (some 350 verses). A modern Dutch translation of both plays is *Maria op de Markt. Middeleeuws toneel in Brussel*, trans. by Willem Kuiper and Rob Resoort (Amsterdam: Querido, 1995). On the relation between theatre and processions, see, with a focus on the *Bliscappen*, B.A.M. Ramakers, '5 mei 1448. Begin van de traditie van de jaarlijkse opvoering van een van de zeven *Bliscappen* in Brussel', in *Een theatergeschiedenis der Nederlanden*, pp. 42-49 and, more generally, Ramakers, *Spelen en figuren*.

plays were organized as a cycle, which was not at all common in vernacular theatre in the Dutch-speaking Low Countries.⁷⁵

The use of prologues and epilogues is another commonality. In the *Bliscappen* they functioned as a way to link the different plays into a cycle. Already in the prologue to the first *Bliscap*, the following six *Bliscappen* are announced:

Ende altemet jaerlix, soet hoert,
Sonder verlet ende sonder discoert,
Soe meinen wier vort, ter stat bevelne,
Verstaet mijn woert, noch .vj. te speelne.⁷⁶

Mark my words: annually and consecutively,
without delay and without discord
as commissioned by the city
we will play six more plays as needed.

In the epilogue of this first *Bliscap* we find another reference to the performances in the years to come (ll. 2062-71). The prologue of the seventh *Bliscap* brings back to mind the performance of the sixth *Bliscap* in the previous year (ll. 16-20), and its epilogue summarizes all seven *Bliscappen*, that is the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, the Finding of twelve-year-old Christ in the temple, Christ's Ascension, Pentecost, and Mary's own Assumption and Coronation (ll. 1697-1722). From the accounts of the confraternity of the Seven Sorrows, we know that each play on the Seven Sorrows had its own prologue and epilogue. We may assume that they too functioned to forge the seven plays into a cycle.

From a compositional point of view, the cycles may also have resembled each other. The first *Bliscap* contains 2081 verses. If we take the preserved plays by Jan Smeken into consideration, we may assume that the plays on the Seven Sorrows had a comparable length, which means that they probably could be performed in approximately an hour and a half.⁷⁷ Like the plays of the Seven Sorrows, the *Bliscappen* make abundant use of the juxtaposition of scenes with positive biblical and allegorical characters and scenes with negative personae (in the *Bliscappen* devils, Jews, and villagers). The devils in the *Bliscappen* especially resemble what we know about *Sondich Becoren* and *Belet van Duechden*. They are excessive in their joy and anger, and their extremely emotional behaviour is reflected by the vivid and vulgar language they use. Lucifer is their master, whom they fear, but they tremble even more before the archangel St Michael (also patron saint of Brussels) and the Virgin Mary.

Given the record of the purchase of the props described above, the plays of the Seven Sorrows incorporated scenes from the Old Testament, probably typologically linked to the Virgin's sorrows as drawn from in the New Testament. From Van Coudenberghe's remarks we know that the plays on the Seven Sorrows also contained arguments and citations from the Holy Fathers. The first *Bliscap* in particular offers comparable episodes. The story of the Annunciation, which is the main theme in the first play of the cycle of the

⁷⁵ Ramakers, *Spelen en figuren*, p. 370.

⁷⁶ *Die eerste Bliscap van Maria*, ll. 41-44.

⁷⁷ Cf. Speakman Sutch, 'Jan Pertcheval', p. 103, n. 34, where a comparison is made with the play in Breda which comprised, prologue and epilogue included, almost 1500 verses.

Seven Joys, has a long prelude with a scene that shows how Adam and Eve lost paradise, orchestrated by devils. There is also a long scene in the first *Bliscap* where allegorical personae like Justice, Truth, and Mercy explain the history of salvation.⁷⁸ Whether allegory was used in the plays on the Seven Sorrows as well remains uncertain, but Jan Smeken was certainly capable of doing so.

The fact that Jan Smeken, city poet of Brussels, and his fellow rhetoricians from The Garland of Mary competed in a certain way with the crossbow archers and their *Bliscappen* may have caused some tension in the city. Van Coudenberghe suggests that some of the opponents of the devotion found the Joys of Our Lady more apt for veneration than the Sorrows. Although we cannot exactly reconstruct the circumstances, it is remarkable that from c. 1530 onwards, every new city poet of Brussels, was obliged to swear that he would help stage the *Bliscappen* in the context of the annual procession, using the best actors available in the city, regardless of the chambers of rhetoric they belonged to.⁷⁹

Conclusion

The Brussels plays of the Seven Sorrows are lost, but thanks to the confraternity's account book, Jan van Coudenberghe's history, and some of the preserved plays by Jan Smeken, it is possible to get an idea of their form and content. There must have been seven plays all together, forming a cycle of which, starting in 1508, each year one was brought on stage by the rhetoricians of The Garland of Mary, in the context of the procession of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows. Jan Smeken was probably the author of all seven plays. His fellow rhetorician Johannes Pertcheval was most likely involved in the organization of the performances.

Each play focused on one of the painful moments in the life of the Virgin Mary, but at least some of the plays contained other biblical scenes as well, probably connected to the Seven Sorrows in a typological manner. The seven plays were forged into a cycle by the use of prologues and epilogues and also by two devilish characters that made their appearance in each of the seven plays. They were called *Sondich Becoren* and *Belet van Duechden* and were also used by Jan Smeken in a play that he wrote on commission by a confraternity in Breda. In a very vivid and emotional way, they commented on the action in the scenes and expressed all the arguments one could have against the devotion of the Seven Sorrows. But at the end of each play, their objections proved to be wrong from a theological point of view, and so they had to leave the stage ashamed and disgraced.

It is obvious that the plays were written and staged to propagate the devotion of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary among the Brussels city dwellers. Since 1499 the rhetoricians had tried to communicate the content and emotional importance of the Seven Sorrows. They embellished their chapel in St Gorik with paintings and sculptures, they distributed cheap printed booklets and images, and they organized a popular procession

78 John Cartwright, 'From the Old Law to the New. The Brussels Eerste Bliscap van Maria', *Medieval English Theatre*, 20 (1998), 118-26.

79 The oath of the city poet of Brussels (c. 1529-33) can be found in Edmond Roobaert, 'De Brusselse rederijders in de 16de eeuw, hun plaats in het stadsgebeuren en hun beroepsactiviteiten', *Eigen Schoon en De Brabander*, 95 (2012), 542-94 (p. 590). Until now, scholars assumed that Frans Van Ballaer in 1559 was the first city poet to organize the staging of the *Bliscappen* (cf. e.g. Ramakers, '5 mei 1448', p. 46). The oath proves that this development came decades earlier.

that showed the Seven Sorrows in words, images, and *tableaux vivants*. By using vernacular theatre too, they found a way to attract an even larger audience and to communicate the importance of the devotion more effectively. With humour and other rhetorical techniques, all possible arguments against the devotion could be refuted.

Forming a seven-year cycle of Marian plays was not common in the Low Countries, but in Brussels it was a tested recipe. The rhetoricians of The Garland of Mary copied the idea from the Great Crossbow Archers' Guild that staged one of the seven *Bliscappen* every year at the procession of Our Lady of the Sands, apparently attracting big crowds. By associating their own initiative with this successful example, Jan Smeken *cum suis* showed how ambitious they were. They wanted to further the devotion of the Seven Sorrows to a level that could compete with the religious fervour that surrounded the Church of Our Lady of the Sands. Whether they fully succeeded in this aim is difficult to affirm. From 1511 onwards, the city sponsored the plays of the Seven Sorrows, and from then on, they were performed on the prestigious central market place. But sources are lacking to assert whether the plays continued to be successful after Jan Smeken's death on 15 April 1517.