OVER A PERIOD of about twenty years, Jan Deschamps had bought so many Middle Dutch manuscripts that I kiddingly told him that he should get ready for a large exhibition. A good occasion presented itself sooner than expected when a local Flemish literary and historical society wanted to celebrate its one hundredth anniversary. Over the years this society had done a tremendous job in re-evaluating Flemish literature of the Middle Ages, which from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century had an importance equal to French, German or English literature. All over Europe similar societies, which based their interest on a romantic view of the national past (which was always glorious) were active in reviving popular, vernacular literature of a given region. Never was I so much aware of the international impact of this movement as during my visit to the Matica Slovenská at Martin, a small city between Bratislava and the Tatra mountains. This national library started modestly in 1863 as a local society interested in Slovak language, literature, history and culture.

1 In the preceding chapter I did not refer to acquisitions by the Royal Library of medieval manuscripts in the Dutch language, because I was saving them for a paper I had promised to write for the Kurt Köster Festschrift. Since the Library honoured the good old maxim to “build on strength”, it was very active in the field of Dutch literature of the Middle Ages. Another explanation of the priority which this field received was the zeal of one staff member, Jan Deschamps. When I was ready with a first draft of my paper for the Festschrift I gave it to him for translation. When it came back to me it was twice as long as the original version, many times as accurate, and I would naughtily say, half as readable. For the purpose of this chapter I have retranslated it again into English and I have resisted the temptation to cut down the *apparatus criticus* except for footnotes and call numbers. My relations with Kurt Köster have been transferred to a more appropriate part of this book.
My colleague Jan Deschamps organized the exhibition of 125 items for which he borrowed from fifty libraries in Europe and in the United States, notwithstanding the wealth of our own collection. He also wrote the catalogue, which was out of print three weeks after its publication. The well-known firm of E. J. Brill at Leiden, Holland, brought a second edition on the market. It had never happened before that a catalogue of the Library was taken over by a commercial firm. Unique also about this catalogue was the fact that it was issued only in Dutch, while the Belgian law on publications by national institutions required that the two national languages should be treated on equal terms. At the Library we always abided strictly by this law and why we sinned in this case is explained in the following chapter.

When I started to work with Jan Deschamps I did not have the slightest idea of what was in store for me. He is the most happy man I ever met in my professional life. For him the only topic of importance existing on earth is Flemish literature of the Middle Ages. It protected him marvellously against the hardships of daily life, which he was not spared. Unfortunately it forced me, over many years, to give more attention to his favourite subject than I was prepared to do. At a certain moment he made me act as if any good library collection had to fall into two parts: on the one hand Flemish medieval manuscripts and on the other hand all the rest. He was irresistible and I made many mistakes which I do not regret. One day his boss, who was to become my successor, said to me about him: “If he could exchange me, in a north African souk, for a fragment of a Flemish manuscript, he would not hesitate for one moment.” They were and remain on good terms.

Jan Deschamps added to the collection about 180 manuscripts, either fully or partially written in Dutch, which brought the Library’s holdings to a total of 800, by far the largest in the world. I am going to tell the story of only 5 among them: the mystic play *Die eerste bliscap van Maria*; a volume with nine tracts by the mystic author Jan van Leeuwen; the unique manuscript copy of the moral play *Elckerlyc*; six fragments of the animal epic *Van den vos Reynaerde*; and the only known complete copy of Jacob van Maerlant’s novel, *Die hystorie van Troyen*.

The Dominican monk St. G. Axters, the author of an authoritative book on mystic and ascetic literature from the Low Countries and a faithful visitor to our Manuscript Room, told me some time