“John the Astonishing”

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Electronic reference
To add greatly to astonishment over the career of John of Rupescissa, whom I have begun to think of after more than thirty years of research on his life and thought as “John the Astonishing”, comes the unexpected discovery of an astonishing new treatise. The following are merely some preliminary remarks about some aspects of the *Sexdequiloquium* that I find particularly remarkable.

I begin with implications it brings regarding Rupescissa’s prison-bound productivity. In her landmark monograph of 1952, Jeanne Bignami-Odier listed Rupescissa’s theological works (broadly speaking) that she knew to be extant, as well as others he mentioned but were lost. All the works known to Bignami-Odier, as well as two alchemical writings, are now available in print or unpublished editions. To the best of our current knowledge, Rupescissa wrote all of these but one while in prison in Avignon between 1349 and 1356: I refer to the *Liber secretorum eventuum* (1349), the letter *Reverendissime Pater* (1350), *De quinta essencia* (1351/52), the *Liber lucis* (probably 1354), the *Breviloquium de oneribus orbis* (1354/55), the *Liber Ostenstor* (1356), the letter *Vos misistis* (1356), and the *Vade mecum in tribulacione* (1356). A rough estimate of the total number of modern printed pages of these works yields a sum of about 1,165 pages. And now we have the *Sexdequiloquium*, written over a few months between late 1352 and early 1353, which comes to 231 folios in the newly retrieved manuscript, or perhaps some 350 printed pages. (And to think that the author says in this work that he omits treating St. Francis’s resemblance to Samson and Jephtha [VI 3,2,11,7] for the cause of brevity!) On the basis of the known works alone we thus have a total of some 1,515 pages.

If one is tempted to say “well, that only comes to an average of 216 pages a year”, that ignores the qualifier “on the basis of the known works alone”. Bignami-Odier’s list of lost works runs to 21 titles, and three of these refer to four books within one title. Although a good number evidently antedated 1349, some definitely were written between 1349 and 1356. An example is a commentary on the *Horoscopus*, which Rupescissa for practical purposes announces in the *Sexdequiloquium* of 1352/53 (V 4,2,9) and refers to as completed in the *Breviloquium de oneribus orbis* of 1354/55. Other examples are two books of the four
that comprised the Libri conspectoris secretissimorum archanorum, for we know the first to have been the Liber secretorum eventuum of 1349, and the fourth to have been completed by the time of the writing of the Liber ostensor in the summer of 1356. With great likelihood Rupescissa wrote his commentary on the “Ascende calve” pope prophecies mentioned in the Liber ostensor around the time he wrote the Sexdequiloquium because he cites words from them in at least one place (V 4,2,13) and was intensely interested at the time in “Ascende calve”’s holy pope who follows Innocent VI. In view, then, of the additional composition of an uncertain number of missing works, the rough reckoning of 1,500 pages for 1349 through 1356 needs to be increased – and one supposes appreciably so.

And yet we still are not finished, for the Sexdequiloquium refers to lost works unknown even by title to Bignami-Odier, such as “a great letter to brother Andrew called Declaratio papalis monarchie” (II 2,10). Whether or not that was written before 1349 is impossible to say, but we are better informed regarding the Sexdequiloquium’s reference to four books falling under the collective title, Directorium simplicium electorum. It had eluded Bignami-Odier that Rupescissa’s De quinta essentia refers to a work of that title written in 1348. But that was simply one book, whereas the Sexdequiloquium refers to four. Rupescissa’s statement, moreover, that the four books deal with the theme of the reparator allows the inference that the three additional books were written after 1349 because the reparator appears to be a new term that Rupescissa adopted after writing the Liber secretorum eventuum. Especially given that our author states in the Sexdequiloquium that he discussed the reparator in the four missing books of the Directorium “prolixé”, the number of pages he wrote in prison continues to mount.

Astonishing “polygraphy”, then – or indeed “megalopolygraphy” – but also astonishing breadth of reading. The recent edition of the Liber ostensor (p. 669) already demonstrated that Rupescissa cited works of Aristotle with confidence – the Metaphysics and the Topics. Now we have him citing other Aristotelian works: for example the Physics (a reference to the fourth book at II 4,2,4) and the De animalibus (II 4,2,5). In one instance a reference to the contents of the Physics is strikingly detailed and well informed. At the other cultural extreme of citations in the Sexdequiloquium are Rupescissa’s Franciscan sources: not just Bonaventure, but also the Scripta Leonis, the “Legenda Sancte Marie de Angelis” (III 2,8,4), and others still to be identified. The Church Fathers are plentifully represented: Anselm, Cassian, Leo the Great, Gregory the Great, and Augustine’s De doctrina Christiana, from which Rupescissa derived his knowledge of the exegetical rules of Tychonius (V 4,2,1; VI 3,2,1,7; VI 3,5,4). As Katelyn Mesler points out in this number of Oliviana, Rupescissa quotes passages from several different eschatological prophecies in the Sexdequiloquium. The appearance of pieces of text from the set of pope prophecies beginning “Ascende calve” bears particular mention because it marks Rupescissa’s earliest documented knowledge of this work; this now ranks as the second earliest documented knowledge tout court after the use of “Ascende calve” by the monk of Bury St. Edmunds, Henry of Kirkestead.

To my mind the most astonishing detail concerning the prisoner of Avignon’s breadth of reading is his familiarity with a rare work by Joachim of Fiore. Hitherto the question of whether Rupescissa knew any of Joachim’s genuine works at all has hung in the air. Bignami-Odier granted that he was a “Joachimite” while greatly qualifying this statement with her view that Joachim of Fiore himself had very little to do with Joachimism. I was more willing to call Rupescissa a “Joachite” in terms of a prophetic outlook that
descended from the Abbot. But I allowed that he might have become this by means of an intermediary – Petrus Johannis. And only recently Sylvain Piron has stated categorically: “Jean de Roquetaillade ne connaît pas les œuvres authentiques de Joachim de Fiore”. This position was credible until now, for Rupescissa’s only known mention of an authentic work by the Abbot was in the Liber ostensor, where he referred approvingly to Joachim’s method of prophesying by concordances as exemplified in his “five books of concords”. Although this indicated that Rupescissa knew something about the Concordia, there was no certainty that he had actually read the work.

Yet now we can see that in the Sexdequiloquium Rupescissa refers to Joachim’s Concordia at least four times, and also to Joachim’s Apocalypse commentary (V 4,1,3; V 4,2,1; VI 3,2,14,3; VI 3,3,62). Clinching, too, he states specifically that he had read the Concordia and the Apocalypse commentary. Knowledge of the Concordia was not unusual; it was by far Joachim’s most widely circulated work. The Apocalypse commentary was less widely circulated, but not entirely rare. Astonishing, however, is a mention in the Sexdequiloquium of yet another work by the Abbot of Fiore. I refer to Rupescissa’s statement that Joachim’s understanding of the unity of the Trinity was expressed in a comparison to the unity of a populus found “in his book on the articles of the faith, as I beheld”. This is a reference to a specific work, Joachim’s De articulis fidei, where the Abbot indeed states what Rupescissa imputes to him. And De articulis fidei was one of the Abbot’s least known works. Only five copies have been retrieved, and none of these were made in southern France.

How can we explain Rupescissa’s extraordinary breadth of citation in works written in prison? Part of the answer must be that in certain years he was allowed access to books. This was probably not the case in his first year or two in Avignon, and he protests in the Sexdequiloquium that he lacked access to the books he needed. Nevertheless he surely was citing swatches of prophecies verbatim in tractate V of the Sexdequiloquium. The great likelihood that he used some books in 1352/53 seems supported by the virtual certainty that he used a copy of the “Ve mundo” prophecy in 1354 in order to write his commentary on that text, and firm proof of his gaining books from the outside appears in the Liber ostensor, when he refers to a prophetic work having been brought to him by “a devout religious”. But this line of argument can only take us so far because even if outsiders brought books to Rupescissa, they did not use wheelbarrows. He could hardly have snapped his fingers and said “please bring me the Aristotelian corpus”.

Supplementing direct access to books, then, was surely a prodigious memory. Often enough Rupescissa appeals to his recollection when offering a citation. In the commentary on the Oraculum Cyrilli he refers to a passage in Plato’s Timaeus that he remembers having read six years before and in the Sexdequiloquium he refers to a gloss on Matthew “if he remembers it correctly”. Sometimes he did not remember things correctly. Thus in the commentary on the Oraculum Cyrilli he maintains that he is alluding to a passage in Alexander of Villedieu’s Doctrinale that he had read twenty years before, but here his memory proved fallible because he seems to have been thinking of a passage from Peter Comestor’s Historia Scholastica. But such lapses might be pardoned when we recall his ability to remember an analogy from a minor work by Joachim or note his mental retrieval of a tag from (Pseudo) Jerome about Origen: “where good, no one better; where bad, no one worse”. That he dredged his knowledge of a passage from Joachim of Fiore’s De articulis fidei from his memory seems indicated by his use of the past tense: “sicut ego conspexi”.

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One must conclude, therefore, that the greater part of Rupescissa’s erudition derived from long years of reading. Some of this would have dated from his years of liberal arts study in Toulouse from about 1327 until 1332. The Doctrinale was part of the standard arts curriculum, and so was “Porphyry” (viz. his Isagoge) to whom Rupescissa refers in the Sexdequiloquium (XIV 2,6) and the Summule logicales of Peter of Spain that Sylvain Piron has noticed Rupescissa drawing on in the Liber ostensor. Evidently the same explanation must apply for the citations from Aristotle in the Sexdequiloquium and the Liber ostensor. Quite likely the citations from the Fathers dated from Rupescissa’s theological education in the years after 1332, but his learning from there must shade into continued theological, church-historical, and canonistic reading that he continued on his own during his years as a friar in Aurillac until his arrest in 1344. Throughout his unincarcerated years Rupescissa must have pursued his special interests, namely Franciscan ideals and prophetic thought, and persistently sought out contraband or semi-suppressed works wherever they could be found. And he evidently remembered a huge amount of what he had read. So far as I am aware, there is nothing comparable to the productivity and display of erudition of “John the Astonishing” in the entire annals of prison literature.

NOTES

5. This remains unpublished. I use a working edition made by Matthias Kaup.
7. Because this was quoted in the contemporary chronicle of Jean de Venette it was printed in H. Géraud, Chronique latine de Guillaume de Nangis, de 1113 à 1300, avec les continuations de cette chronique, de 1300 à 1368, Paris, Renouard, 1843, II, p. 234-236.
9. As noted by J. Bignami-Odier, Études, p. 131.
10. Liber ostensor, p. 768: “In quarto autem libro conspectoris…”
12. *Sexdequiloquium*, V 4,2,6: “qui erit ... reparator, de cuius condicionibus in quatuor libris directorii simplicium electorum disputavi prolixè”.


15. *Sexdequiloquium*, IV 3,5: “Totus enim quartus liber phisicorum et quintus et sextus et septimus per totum probant in omni specie motus et mutationis quod dixi, nisi tantum quod in mutatio esse est facta variatio circa aliquem modum, sicut exemplificat Aristotiles, dicens quod non est idem Socrates in theatro et in domo ad quam vadit per motum. Et non vult dicere Aristotiles quod si non est idem Socrates in theatro et in domo, ergo est adnichillatus.” (The passage continues. My thanks to Sylvain Piron for calling my attention to it.)

16. The latter work was written by Francesco Bartoli da Assisi, OFM, between 1328 and 1330. On that, as well as the indulgence of the Portiuncula having been a favorite theme of the Spirituals (Olivi to the fore), see Roberto Rusconi, “Dal sepolcro di Francesco all’indulgenza della Porziuncola”, in *Francesco d’Assisi: storia e arte*, Milano, Electa, 1982, p. 159-164, citing further literature.


23. *Sexdequiloquium*, VI 3,7,3: “in IX anno vinculorum meorum et de facto in carcere non habens libros neccessarios preter Bibliam non potui de vita sancti corde tenus recordari”.


26. X 2,6; I owe the reference to Sylvain Piron.


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