The Virtuous Life in Jan van Boendale’s Der Leken Spieghel (The Layman’s Mirror)

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In c.1330 the Antwerp public servant Jan van Boendale composed Der Leken Spieghel (The Layman’s Mirror), a free adaption of several earlier Latin treatises on education. Van Boendale evidently wanted to ensure that a clear and reliable handbook was available to the laity, who lacked sufficient training in Latin to access the original texts. Der Leken Spieghel consists of four books, each divided into numerous smaller sections. This article presents a fresh translation of paragraph 113, which outlines the four characteristics needed to conduct an honourable life.¹

In the medieval Low Countries, the schooling of children and youngsters was evidently an important concern, judging from the number of schoolbooks still extant. Most of these works either focused on Latin or were written in that language, teaching Latin grammar or instructing students how to use it effectively. During the later Middle Ages, however, the vernacular came to play an increasingly important role in education. Several schoolbooks came to be written in Dutch, the best known example being Den Duytschen Cathoen,² a translation of the Disticha Cathonis or Dicta Catonis. A key figure in the extension of education beyond Latin was Jan van Boendale (1279-1351), a public servant at Antwerp. Boendale’s attempts to provide instruction in Dutch are founded on two main premises:

1) The organisation of society should be dictated by reason. The local lord is sovereign, but should not be allowed to abuse his power for his own ends. The lord has a contract with his people and must defend their interests above all. The people are also

¹ An early version of this paper was given at the International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds, in 2008.
² Den duytschen Cathoen (ed. 1998).
governed by their duty to the lord, and this network of obligations shapes the framework of society. Every member of the social order is required to obey these implicit rules.\(^3\)

(2) Education is vital. Only education can supply knowledge of the principles on which society is founded, and allow the social fabric to be correctly appreciated. When education is lacking among the people as a whole, local lords are able to abuse their power with impunity. Education is therefore a corrective against tyranny.

Boendale’s chief contribution to vernacular education was the handbook *Der Leken Spieghel* (c.1330). This sought to give some basic training in correct behaviour, laying out the niceties of social conduct. The book is clearly designed for a lay reader. A significant portion of the text is dedicated to children and the correct way to rear them, and raising the young is a constant theme throughout the work.\(^4\) Since such material would be largely irrelevant to the celibate clergy, it seems clear that the *Spieghel* was intended for a secular audience. However, exactly which area of the laity Boendale was addressing has provoked some debate among scholars. It has long been assumed that the *Spieghel* was written exclusively for an urban middle-class readership. There are some grounds for accepting this point of view. At one stage, for instance, Boendale argues that literacy is important because it allows one to read and write letters: this is in turn described as ‘a great benefit to every man’. Boendale’s advice here seems to register the growing importance of mercantilism in the Low Countries. Since international trade was becoming more and more central to the economy of the Netherlands, especially in Flanders and Brabant, correspondence was indeed vital, as a means of brokering deals overseas and keeping track of agents and goods. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to regard the *Spieghel* as wholly middle class in its outlook. In certain parts of the text Boendale seems to be addressing the nobility directly, albeit in terms that do not exclude other classes from his advice. Paragraph 25 of book III refers to the story of Charlemagne ‘dede sine dochtere leren’ (‘sending his daughters to school’), making the obvious point that aristocratic fathers should follow the example of this illustrious king. Of course, this also has further implications, as bourgeois families should naturally emulate their counterparts in the nobility. But the fact remains that the middle class are not the primary target of this counsel. They are only addressed in a secondary or indirect manner, asked to imitate the group who are being

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\(^3\) Van Anrooij (1994).

\(^4\) See Kinable (1991), p.73.
most immediately advised. It seems that Boendale had no particular social class in mind for his work, but sought to instruct the laity as a whole, regardless of the finer distinctions within this group.

One of the most significant sections of the work is book III. Here Boendale makes clear that he is directly writing for the young: the tenth paragraph of the book explicitly states that good children must read its contents and follow its guidelines closely. This segment of the *Spieghel* therefore constitutes the first pedagogic work in Dutch.\(^5\) Boendale’s approach is strict and disciplinarian. He recommends that children are sent to school from the age of seven, and beaten when they fail to listen. However, this section of the *Spieghel* also contains the clearest statement of Boendale’s governing values. Here he outlines the virtues one should aim to cultivate. These fall into several categories:

- how one should behave in company;
- what politeness is and how one should and should not act;
- how husbands and wives should treat one another;
- how to raise children;
- how young people should behave;
- what judges and lords should know;
- how to govern a city;
- what types of advisors a lord should trust;
- how to compose fiction.\(^6\)

However, before one can hope to prosper in these areas, four specific characteristics must first be in place. It is only possible to develop into a good layman with a firm grounding in four particular virtues. Boendale names these characteristics as wisdom, honour, being loved by others, and righteousness. Even when referring to these core virtues, however, Boendale does not lose sight of the importance of instruction. The virtues are themselves presented as problematic concepts. For instance, in his discussion of the first point, Boendale claims that wisdom is often confused with slynys or cunning. He states that many people appear to be wise, and are able to acquire wealth easily, although the fact that they resort to deceit or theft prevents them from attaining true wisdom: this involves courtesy, industry, and respect for

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\(^6\) An English translation of this paragraph is given in Gerritsen et al (1994).
God at all times. The implication here is that even these primary values may be misunderstood: explanation is therefore required to avoid such confusion. Once again, instruction holds the centre ground in Boendale’s vision. Education must underlie even these four elementary points.

We present here a translation of Boendale’s comments on these four virtues, in modern English verse. This is, to our knowledge, the first time that this section of the *Spieghel* has been rendered into English.

**Vandes menschen zeden .c.xiij.**

**On people’s manners (paragraph 113)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dutch</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Die mensche sal dat verstaet</td>
<td>Men should always take good care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altoes hebben scoen ghelaet</td>
<td>To keep with them a cordial air,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scoene zeden ende mainiere</td>
<td>Good habits, and noble grace,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al waert thuis biden viere</td>
<td>At home by the fireplace,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oft in enen welden Woude</td>
<td>Or in a wood wild and green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daert nieman sien en soude</td>
<td>Where their deeds will go unseen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nochtan sijn scoene zeden goet</td>
<td>It is clear that manners are good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want soemen die dinc dicker doet</td>
<td>For when you act as you should</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soe mense can vele te bat</td>
<td>You will earn high renown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alsmen comt in vremder stat</td>
<td>Even in a foreign town,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Datmen daer af heeft ere</td>
<td>Great honour you will secure:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dit es socrates lere</td>
<td>This is Socrates’ ruling law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¶ Scoene seden ende daertoe goede</td>
<td>Good manners and things refined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comen vut ghestaden moede</td>
<td>Will come from a steadfast mind,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want vut onghestaedecheden</td>
<td>But from wavering and doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>En quamen noyt goede seden</td>
<td>Good manners will never sprout,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wijsheit noch oec doeght</td>
<td>Nor will wisdom, nor will virtue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dit machmen merken ane die ioeght</td>
<td>Witness youth to prove my words true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Die ioeght heeft selden in</td>
<td>There is seldom much joy for youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Wijsheit oft subtilen sin</td>
<td>In wisdom or subtle truth,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want der ioeght vlijtecheit</td>
<td>Since youth’s flightiness and play</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Benemt hare ghestaedechede
Ende daer ghestadechede
Niene es/ comt noede wijsheede
Are not, wisdom will not be found.

Ghostaechede ende scamel dat ghijt wet
Steadfast and honest I hear tell,
Goedertieren ende gherecht met
Generous and upright as well
Sal elc sijn lude ende stille
Should all men be, both meek and loud,
Die met eren leuen wille
Who wish to live in honour proud.

Comen vte desen vieren
That leads towards this sweetest fruit.

Vut ghestaedecheiden men seeght
From steadfastness, so men say,
Dat wijsheit te comene pleeght
Wisdom comes without delay.

Vten scamelheiden comt voert
From honour quickly expands
Alle dat ten doeghden hoert
Everything that virtue commands.

Ende vter goedertiernhede
And from goodhearted cheer
Soe comt liefgetallichede
The love of others will appear.

Ende vte vut gherechtecheiden gaet
And from justice there shall grow
Ons sceppers hulde dat verstaet
God’s favour, as reason will show.

Maer deen es goet den andren bi
But all are good to some degree.

Nv hoert van desen vieren meer
Now hear more about these four.
Wijsheit daer ic af sprac eer
Wisdom, which I spoke of before,
Die es herde menegherande
Means many things, please understand,
Diemen hanteert inden lande
It has senses across the land.

Selke heeten wijs om dat
Some men are with wisdom blessed,
Si gaderen renten ende scat
They gather wealth with interest,
In wat mainieren ofte hoe
One way or another they are sure
Dat hen die comen toe
To rake it in, making more.

Selc heet oec een wijs man
Another is wise without doubt

Om dat hi slands recht wel can
For he knows the law inside out.
Ende daer an hem verstaet
He knows its twisting and turning,
Ende den lieden gheuet raet
Others profit from his learning.

Selc heet oec van wisen treken
Another is more sly than wise:
Om dat hi subtijllec can spreken
Great subtlety in his speech lies.

Ende met groeter scalcheden
In secret, away from stares,
Sine zake wel can leden  
He conducts all his affairs.

Ende bedektelec bringhen voert  
Hiding his tracks, he creeps and slinks

Soe dat elken dunct diet hoert  
To ensure that each man thinks

Dat sine zake es goet ende waer  
His business honest and just.

60  
Die nochtan es al contraer  
But this is an abuse of trust.

Der rechter waerheit diet wiste  
If any should spy his ruses

Dit bringt hi toe met liste  
His tricks will crush all accusers.

Dit en es ghene wijsche  
It is not wisdom he performs,

Maer et es ene valsche  
It is spite: truth he deforms.

65  
Die enen andren des sijt vroet  
He who cheats, defrauds, extorts

Afwint sine gherechte goet  
Stripping men in the law-courts,

Dats alsoe quaet sijds ghewes  
Is just as bad in my belief

Alse roef ofte diefte es  
As any common thug or thief,

Oft quader dat dunket mi  
Or even worse in his treason,

70  
Ende segghu redene waerbi  
And I will tell you the reason:

Die rouen ofte stelen  
Those who rob, burgle or steal

Willen hore quaethet helen  
Their evil they strive to conceal,

Maer dese ander als ghi siet  
But the other earns greater blame

En scaemt hem sire valscheit niet  
Since he has no sense of shame,

75  
Want hi vor der liede oghen  
But before the people’s eyes

Sine valscheit wilt voert toghen  
His sin is shown with no disguise.

Die hen horre blamen  
Those who ought to be condemned

Vore de menschen niene scamen  
Care nothing if they offend,

Dat sire hen en scamen twint  
They lack every type of fear

80  
Vor gode die de waerheit kint  
Of God, to whom the truth is clear.

Daeromme es hi algader quaet  
Thus he is most foul and base

Die met deser valscheit om gaet  
Who turns these tricks with no disgrace.

¶ Selc heet wijs oec om dat hi  
Another is wise for his sense

Hoefsch ende verstandel si  
Of discretion and good prudence,

85  
Wijslec hem can gheneren  
He lives in a proper fashion,

Ende winnen sijn verteren  
Wastefulness is not his passion

Ende sine dinghe can beleiden  
And he manages each affair

Met goeder vorsienecheiden  
With judgment, foresight and care.

Wel swighen ende nauwe merken  
He works without strife or fuss,
90  Gode ontsien in allen werken  He honours God in all he does.
    Dese wijsheid in allen wisen  This wisdom in all ways
    Salmen vor die andre prisen  Merits by far the greatest praise.
    ¶ Dander point dat ic vore v  The other point mentioned before
    Vanden vieren noemde nv  That is also one of these four
95  Die es gheheeten scamelheit  Is by the name of honour known,
    Daer meneghe groete doeght vut gheit  From which great virtues are grown.
    Dier ic v .ij. nv ter stont  Two of these virtues I will show,
    Soe ic best can make cont  The best examples that I know.
    ¶ Dierste dat es dankelijchede  The first of these is gratitude,
100  Want scamelheit heeft den zede  For honour holds the attitude
    Datsi gheenrehande weldoen  That it makes but little sense
    Laten en can zonder wederloen  To always seek out recompense.
    Dats een poent van groeter eren  This way towards honour reaches
    Alse ons die wise leren  As each wise man clearly teaches.
105  Want ondankelecheit  The sin of ingratitude
    Es die meeste dorperheit  Is boorish, villainous and rude.
    Die in die werelt mach wesen  Nothing in this world is worse –
    Dit hebbic dicke ghelesen  This I read in books diverse.
    ¶ Dander poent dat scamelheide  Another point which honour brings
110  Vte gheeft/ dats coenheide  Is showing bravery in all things.
    Coenheit dats groete ere  Great honour is valour’s reward,
    Want si doet bi sinen here  Because it keeps men with their lord
    Den man altoes bliuen  For as long as they draw breath
    Alsoudemenne ontiuen  Even in the face of death.
115  Alsmen dicke heeft ghesien  This we very often see:
    Hi staet daer quadien vlien  They stand firm while others flee,
    Ende verwert metter spoet  They defend as matters of course
    Ere lijf ende goet  Lives and goods with utmost force.
    Daer hi lof ende ere af heeft  They earn glory, honour, praise
120  Alle die daghe die hi leeft  For the remainder of their days.
    Metten coenen houdmen dplant  The brave will secure the land,
    Coenheit versaeght den viant  Foes are crushed by their command.
    Coen gheninde can wonder maken  By bravery wonders are done,
In harde menegherhande saken
Many hopeless fights are won.

Dat hier blijft al ongheseit
There is no need to say this here,
Dus goet soe es coenheit
Bravery’s merit is so clear.
¶ Dat derde poent dat ic seide
Now the third point you shall learn:
Es gheamet liefghetteallecheide
The love of others you must earn.
Dats een poent van groeter ere
This point is not for the vain:

Want al pijnder selc omme sere
The more love that you seek to gain,
Hine ghecregher nemmermere
The less of it you will obtain,
Want sine mainiere noch sijn anschijn
For your manners and conduct
Van selker gracien niet en sijn
Will be little more than corrupt
Daer comt af groete vrome
Unless it is from God they come.

Waer hi comt hijs willecome
Where he goes, he is welcome,
Alle lieide sijn hem hout
He is loved by everyone,
Sijn vordeel es menechfout
Every advantage he has won,
Sijns nerghen en ghebrect
Of good things he has no lack:
Daermen achter van hem sprect
Should someone speak behind his back,

Al seide ieman van hem quaet
Spreading rumours, I am sure,
Een ander dat van monde slaet
Another man will break his jaw.
¶ Men vint liedie dats zonder waen
There are more men, on the whole,
Die vele meer daer na staen
Who give their lives up to the goal
Dat mense ontsie dan mense minne
Of inspiring not love but fear.

Dese dunken mi dwaes van sinne
Most foolish do such men appear,
Want die ghene diemen ontsiet
Because when a man is feared
En mach ghemint wesent niet
All trace of love has disappeared.
Al eest datmen hem vrienscap toent
Men’s friendship they seem to find,
Met dier vrienscap es hi ghehoent
But friendship of the falsest kind.

Alse ouidius seeght vorwaer
Ovid bids us to beware
Bedwonghene minne was noyt claer
That forced love is seldom fair.
Valt hi oec cleen oft groet
If they should trip, great or small,
Hem en heft niemen on thoet
No man will help them in their fall.
Noch en salne nieman claghen
Nor will any man condemn

Vanden ghenen diene ontsaghen
The robber who steals from them.
Cume vercoeuert hi meere
None will help them in court of law:
Es hi cnapa oft es hi here
Boy and lord alike withdraw.
Daer omme houdt v liefghetal
Thus you must make love your aim
Daer ghi moeght al ouer al
Each place you go, desire acclaim.

160 Soe mint v god ende die minsche
God will love you, and man too,
Dit soe es een poent van winsche
Blessings will be bestowed on you.
¶ Dat vierde poent van desen
Now the fourth point of this set
Daer wi hier vore af lesen
Which has not been examined yet:
Dat es gherechtechede
Justice is the name of this trait.

165 Gherechteheit heeft den zede
In manners justice is a state
Datsi elken gheeft tsine
That gives to all what they deserve.
Dus leestmen in latine
Several Latin books observe
Wet dat die duuel niet en heeft
That Satan will nothing accrue
Daermen elken tsine gheeft
When each man has his proper due.

170 Die minsche en doechn meer no min
Humankind would be most poor
Dan hi trouwen heuet in
If sincerity was no more.
Daer alle dinc te gaen
When all else ceases to exist
Moet gherechtecheit staen
Justice alone will persist.
Al machmense wederspreken
You may all this a fiction call,

175 Die en can nieman ghebreken
But justice can be seen by all.
Si blijft altoes dat si es
She is fixed and self-possessed,
In hoer seluen sijds ghewes
Complete, entire, always at rest;
Ende zonder hare zekerlike
And without her, it is true,
En comt nieman te hemelrike
Heaven will be closed to you,

180 Want god selue alsoement vint
Because God Himself, men aver,
Es van hare dat fundamint
Underpins and maintains her,
Ende nieman en doechn meer die leeft
And no man’s merit exceeds
Dan alsoe vele als hi trouwen heeft
The amount of justice that he heeds.

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