

**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 adaptation 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.<sup>1</sup>

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*,<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> An early version of this paper was given at the International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds, in 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *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.<sup>3</sup>

(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.<sup>4</sup> 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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<sup>3</sup> Van Anrooij (1994).

<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 slyness 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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<sup>5</sup> Van Oostrom (1989), p.25.

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> This is, to our knowledge, the first time that this section of the *Spieghel* has been rendered into English.

**Vandes menschen zeden .c.xiiij.**

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

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

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<sup>7</sup> Our translation is based on the edition of Mak & Lambermont (1998). Jongen & Piers (2003) give a prose translation into modern Dutch, pp.126-9.

	Benemt hare ghestaedechet	Sweeps stability clean away.
	Ende daer ghestadechede	And where the firm and sound
	Niene es/ comt noede wijshede	Are not, wisdom will not be found.
25	¶ Ghestaedeche 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.
	Nv hoert wat mainieren	Hear now about the fourfold route
30	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.
	¶ Vte scamelheiden comt voert	From honour quickly expands
	Alle dat ten doeghden hoert	Everything that virtue commands.
35	¶ Ende vter goedertiernhede	And from goodhearted cheer
	Soe comt liefghetalliche	The love of others will appear.
	¶ Ende vut gherechtecheiden gaet	And from justice there shall grow
	Ons sceppers hulde dat verstaet	God's favour, as reason will show.
	Dat dbeste es gheloeuets mi	That one is best, believe you me,
40	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.
45	¶ 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
50	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 subtijlle can spreken	Great subtlety in his speech lies.
55	Ende met groeter scalcheden	In secret, away from stares,

	Sine zake wel can leden	He conducts all his affairs.
	Ende bedectelec 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 wijshede	It is not wisdom he performs,
	Maer et es ene valschede	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
	Alsoe 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 quaetheit 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	<p>Gode ontsien in allen werken  Dese wijsheit in allen wisen  Salmen vor die andre prisēn  ¶ Dander point dat ic vore v  Vanden viēn noemde nv</p>	<p>He honours God in all he does.  This wisdom in all ways  Merits by far the greatest praise.  The other point mentioned before  That is also one of these four</p>
95	<p>Die es gheheeten scamelheit  Daer meneghe groete doeght vut gheit  Dier ic v .ij. nv ter stont  Soe ic best can make cont  ¶ Dierste dat es dankelijchede</p>	<p>Is by the name of honour known,  From which great virtues are grown.  Two of these virtues I will show,  The best examples that I know.  The first of these is gratitude,</p>
100	<p>Want scamelheit heeft den zede  Datsi gheenrehande weldoen  Laten en can zonder wederloen  Dats een poent van groeter eren  Alsoe ons die wise leren</p>	<p>For honour holds the attitude  That it makes but little sense  To always seek out recompense.  This way towards honour reaches  As each wise man clearly teaches.</p>
105	<p>Want ondankelecheit  Es die meeste dorperheit  Die in die werelt mach wesen  Dit hebbic dicke ghelesen  ¶ Dander poent dat scamelheide</p>	<p>The sin of ingratitude  Is boorish, villainous and rude.  Nothing in this world is worse –  This I read in books diverse.  Another point which honour brings</p>
110	<p>Vte gheeft/ dats coenheide  Coenheit dats groete ere  Want si doet bi sinen here  Den man altoes bliuen  Alsoedemenne ontliuen</p>	<p>Is showing bravery in all things.  Great honour is valour's reward,  Because it keeps men with their lord  For as long as they draw breath  Even in the face of death.</p>
115	<p>Alsmen dicke heeft ghesien  Hi staet daer quadien vlien  Ende verwert metter spoet  Ere lijf ende goet  Daer hi lof ende ere af heeft</p>	<p>This we very often see:  They stand firm while others flee,  They defend as matters of course  Lives and goods with utmost force.  They earn glory, honour, praise</p>
120	<p>Alle die daghe die hi leeft  Metten coenen houdmen dlant  Coenheit versaeght den viant  Coen gheninde can wonder maken</p>	<p>For the remainder of their days.  The brave will secure the land,  Foes are crushed by their command.  By bravery wonders are done,</p>

	In harde menegherhande saken	Many hopeless fights are won.
125	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 ghenaeamt liefghetallecheide	The love of others you must earn.
	Dats een poent van groeter ere	This point is not for the vain:
130	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.
135	Waer hi comt hijs willecome	Where he goes, he is welcome,
	Alle liede sijn hem hout	He is loved by everyone,
	Sijn voordeel es menechfout	Every advantage he has won,
	Sijns nerghe en ghebreect	Of good things he has no lack:
	Daermen achter van hem sprect	Should someone speak behind his back,
140	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 liede 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.
145	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 wesen 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.
150	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 op thoet	No man will help them in their fall.
	Noch en salne nieman claghen	Nor will any man condemn
155	Vanden ghenen diene ontsaghen	The robber who steals from them.
	Cume vercoeuert hi meere	None will help them in court of law:
	Es hi cnape 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 doech 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 gherechteheit 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 doech 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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