



“Por le soie amisté”

Essays in Honor of
Norris J. Lacy

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Bruun's Wisdom: Moderation in Middle Dutch Literature¹

At the beginning of *Van den vos Reynaerde*, the Middle Dutch rewriting of Branch I (*Le Jugement*) of the *Roman de Renart*, the animals complain about Reynaert. The badger tries to defend his uncle, but the fox's treachery is conclusively proved by the arrival of the body of his latest victim, a hen. As a result, King Nobel decides to summon the fox to court, appointing Bruun the bear as his messenger. Due to the over-assessment of his own abilities, however, the bear falls prey to Reynaert's cunning. Making use of Bruun's unrestrained desire for honey, the fox is able to lead the king's messenger to a carpenter. The bear, in pursuit of honey, will put his head in an oak tree that the carpenter had begun to split, and will be trapped in the tree. Just before this happens, Reynaert warns his enemy not to eat to excess:

“Al dincket u goet die honichraten,
Etet te zeden ende te maten,
Dat ghi u selven niet verdervet.
Ic ware onteert ende ontervet,
Wel soete oem, mesquame u yet.”
Brune sprac: “Reynaert, ne sorghet niet.
Waendi dat ic bem onvroet?
Mate es tallen spele goet.” (*Van den vos Reynaerde*, 665-72)²

(“Although you like honeycombs very much, eat decently and moderately, so that you will not ruin yourself. I would be dishonored and disgraced, dearest uncle, if something happened to you.” Bruun said: “Reynaert, do not worry. Do you think I am a fool? Moderation is at all times good.”)

Unlike in the *Roman de Renart*, Bruun gives expression to his conviction that he is not a stupid glutton by quoting a proverb that strongly resembles the contemporary adage “alles met mate” (moderation in all

¹ I would like to thank Frank Brandsma, Erik Kooper, and Erwin Mantingh for their comments on the first draft of this article.

² *Van den vos Reynaerde*, ed. F. Lulofs (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1983).

things).³ However, the saying that it is always—literally: under all circumstances—wise to be moderate does not seem to apply to a situation in which a bear is on the verge of eating honey. Bruun's gluttony causes his downfall.

Bruun's piece of wisdom is intriguing. One would like to know where and when in the Low Countries this proverb was used, and to what kind of situations it could apply. Until recently, trying to find an answer to these questions would demand a time-consuming search through a vast amount of texts and the *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek*, the eleven volumes dictionary of Middle Dutch, describing the Dutch vocabulary of between 1200 and 1500.⁴ In 1998, however, an electronic version of the *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek* was published. The CD-Rom contains, moreover, a great number of Middle Dutch texts: electronic versions of all the texts which were written down or copied before 1300 (2000 official documents and 46 literary works, the so-called *Corpus Gyseling*), and a large selection of Middle Dutch verse (ca. 200) and prose (ca. 90) texts.⁵ This CD-Rom promises to become an indispensable research tool.

Thanks to the blessings of high-technology, it is relatively simple to collect other passages in which Bruun's proverb is used. Including the bear's remark, my search operation covering all the material on the CD-Rom resulted in twelve references, which will be discussed in this essay. Much to my surprise the collection fitted in a distinct geographical and chronological framework.

³ Cf. *Le Roman de Renart, première branche: Jugement de Renart, Siège de Maupertuis, Renart teinturier*, ed. Mario Roques (Paris: Champion, 1948), 607-11.

⁴ E. Verwijs and J. Verdam, *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek*, 11 vols. (s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1885-1952).

⁵ *CD-Rom Middelnederlands. Woordenboek en teksten* (Den Haag: Sdu Uitgevers, 1998; Antwerpen: Standaard Uitgeverij, 1998).

The proverb in Flanders

Van den vos Reynaerde was written between 1225 and 1275 by the Flemish poet Willem.⁶ In the same period and the same region, other authors used the proverb as well. One of them was the translator of the Old French Arthurian verse romance *Fergus*. Probably around the middle of the thirteenth century this poet wrote *Ferguut*, which up to line 2592 is a straightforward translation of the French text. The part that follows is a reworking and adaptation of *Fergus*.⁷ In this second part the hero has won the White Shield which will enable him to find his beloved Galiene. Two damsels tell him that Galiene's castle is besieged by King Galarant, who wants to marry her. Without disclosing his identity Ferguut fights the besiegers. After having agreed with Galarant to end the battle by means of a duel, Galiene sends her confidante Lunette to Arthur's court in search of a champion. As all knights are out looking for Ferguut, however, there is no one left to fight for Galiene. On her way back, the distressed Lunette meets Ferguut, who is unknown to her. When Ferguut announces that Galiene's lover will come to her aid, Lunette does not understand him:

Lunette riep: "Owi! owach!
Dese ridder hout met mi sijn sceren.
Lieve vrient, waent des omberen!
Van allen spele es goet die mate.
Laet mi varen mire strate." (*Ferguut*, 4528-32)⁸

(Lunette called: "Oh, ah, this knight makes fun of me. Dear friend, stop it! Moderation is at all times good. Let me go.")

In slightly different words Lunette uses the same proverb as Bruun did in *Van den vos Reynaerde*. However, gluttony is not on the damsel's

⁶ Cf. A.Th. Bouwman, *Reinaert en Renart. Het dierenepos Van den vos Reynaerde vergeleken met de Oudfranse Roman de Renart*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1991), p. 420.

⁷ Cf. R.M.T. Zemel, *Op zoek naar Galiene. Over de Oudfranse Fergus en de Middel nederlandse Ferguut*, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: Schiphouwer en Brinkman, 1991), especially p. 6.

⁸ *Ferguut*, ed. E. Rombauts, N. de Paepe, M.J.M. de Haan (Hilversum: Verloren, 1994).

mind. What she wants to express is that in her view there is a limit to the joking. In the *Ferguut*, the saying applies to a fondness of mocking.

The second Middle Dutch Arthurian romance in which the proverb occurs is *Torec*. The text, which has been transmitted exclusively in a fourteenth-century Brabantine cycle of ten Arthurian romances, the *Lancelot* Compilation, was written by the Flemish poet Jacob van Maerlant (ca. 1230 - ca. 1295) around 1262. Maerlant translated a now lost Old French Arthurian romance, the *Torrez, le Chevalier au cercle d'or*. It has been suggested that the Middle Dutch text was meant to prepare a group of young noblemen, among whom the later count of Holland Florens V, for their future tasks.⁹

The romance deals with Torec's quest for a precious diadem, stolen from his grandmother. The object has passed into the hands of Miraude, who will only marry the knight who is able to defeat all the knights of the Round Table. Torec goes in search of Miraude. At a certain moment during his quest, a magical ship takes him to a castle where he spends three days in the "Camere van Wijsheden" (Chamber of Wisdom), listening to conversations on virtues, desirable behavior and love. In this episode, which is thought to be of Maerlant's own invention, our proverb is used.¹⁰ One of the wise old men declares:

"Dulle gichte onteret al:
Te vele geven ens geen prijs,
Hets dompheit in alre wijs.
Mate es goet in allen spele,
Daer ne es te luttel no te vele." (*Torec*, 2461-65)¹¹

("A foolish gift dishonors completely: giving too much is not praiseworthy, it is a great blunder. Moderation is always good, as it is neither too little nor too much.")

The wise man uses the proverb in connection with the virtue "miltheit," generosity. It is a highly desirable human (more in particular knightly and princely) quality, but only when one exercises some

⁹ Frits van Oostrom, *Maerlants wereld* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1996), pp. 130-32.

¹⁰ Van Oostrom, *Maerlants wereld*, pp. 238-41.

¹¹ *Torec*, ed. Maaiké and Jan Hogenhout (Abcoude, n.p., 1978). Cf. also *Roman van Lancelot*, ed. W.J.A. Jonckbloet, 2 vols. ('s-Gravenhage: Van Stockum, 1846-49), vol. 2, 25585-89.

moderation. Excessive liberality brings shame on the giver.¹² (And embarrasses the receiver, one might add). As I will show, the advice to avoid this kind of behavior is linked with our proverb in another Flemish text as well.

Sometime in the second half of the thirteenth century, a Flemish author wrote the short stanzaic poem *Van der feesten* (On the feast).¹³ The story is told by a "clerc," a man of learning, who was invited to a court feast, where he met a very friendly and courtly damsel. After dinner, when they were sitting on the lawn, she asked him to explain to her the phenomenon of love. The "I" turns out to be an expert on this subject, informing his company—and the readers of his text—about the highly complicated code of conduct concerning courtly love.

At a certain point during their dialogue, the damsel wants to know how love is won. The "clerc" states that in order to be successful one has to meet four requirements. He advises that one's language is courtly, that one keeps silent about certain matters of love, and that a request for love is made in a friendly and modest way. The fourth condition, presented as the second advice, is concerned with courteous conduct:

"Dander es, seggic oppenbaer,
Dat si zijn van sconen spele
Waer si wandelen harentaer,
Dies te maten ende niet te vele.

Want elken mensche voeghet wel
Ende elken minnere die es vroet,
Dat hi ghemate si in sijn spel;
Want mate es tallen spele goet." (*Van der feesten*, 233-40)¹⁴

("The second advice, I declare frankly, is that they [i.e. lovers] should behave courteously everywhere, in an adequate way and not overdone. It is, after all, fitting

¹² Cf. also Marian Andringa, "Vorstenethiek in het werk van Maerlant," in J. Reynaert et al., *Wat is wijsheid? Lekenethiek in de Middelnederlandse letterkunde* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1994), pp. 37-53, 362-70, especially pp. 47-48.

¹³ Cf. Dieuwke E. van der Poel, *De Vlaamse Rose en Die Rose van Heinric. Onderzoekingen over twee Middelnederlandse bewerkingen van de Roman de la Rose* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1989), pp. 215-17.

¹⁴ *Van der feesten een proper dinc. Temperamentvolle vriendschap tussen hof en hemel*, ed. H. Vekeman (Nijmegen: ALFA, 1981).

that every human being and every sensible lover behaves moderately, since moderation is always good.”)

Here the proverb is connected with good manners. According to the “clerc,” someone who is unable to behave courteously will never be a successful lover. But one should not confuse being well-mannered with posing. Although the “clerc” does not specify his dislike for affectation, one can imagine that he thinks a poseur will be regarded as, for instance, a vain or unctuous person. In order to avoid this impression one should not behave affectedly.

Whereas *Van den vos Reynaerde*, *Ferguut* and *Torec* are narrative texts, it is problematic to apply this label to *Van der feesten*. It is true that the “I” of the latter work has a story to tell, but what one reads is in fact a dialogue. *Van der feesten* is a didactic poem, disguised as a narrative work. The remaining texts that contain examples of the proverb “mate es tallen spele goet,” all of them written in verse as well, do not try to conceal their true character at all, they are indisputable didactic works.¹⁵

One of these poems was made by a Flemish author. Sometime between 1250 and 1290 he translated a Latin text containing rules of conduct, the *Facetus*, “*cum nihil utilius*.” The longest version of this translation, preserved in the so-called Comburg Manuscript, is entitled *Bouc van Seden* (Book of Manners).¹⁶ One of the ca. 180 rules of conduct in this Flemish courtesy poem deals with moderation:

Ghemate es tallen spele goet.
Die ghemate es, hi gheuroet.
Negheen mensche, die gheuroet,
Nes alte milde ouer sijn goet.

¹⁵ For the verse form, see Orlanda S.H. Lie, “What is Truth? The Verse-Prose Debate in Medieval Dutch Literature,” *Queeste*, 1 (1994), 34-65.

¹⁶ Cf. T. Meder, “*Boek van Zeden*: Three Medieval Flemish Courtesy Poems in the Latin *Facetus* Tradition,” in *Literary Aspects of Courtly Culture: Selected Papers from the Seventh Triennial Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society, Univ. of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA, 27 July - 1 August 1992*, ed. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (Cambridge: Brewer, 1994), pp. 333-41.

Onghemate scadet zeere,
Ende milde tsine dats grote eere. (*Bouc van Seden*, 1007-12)¹⁷

(Moderation is always good. A moderate person is sensible. No sensible human being is too liberal with his possessions. Intemperance causes a lot of damage, but to be generous is very honorable.)

Just like Maerlant in his *Torec*, the author of the *Bouc van Seden* connects the saying with generosity. While acknowledging that magnanimity is a virtue, he disapproves of excessive liberality. Only when one is accustomed to giving in moderation does it contribute to one's honor.

The proverb in Brabant

The only Brabantine text of the thirteenth century in which the proverb occurs was in all probability written by Willem van Affligem.¹⁸ Around 1270 he made a verse adaptation of Thomas of Cantimpré's *Vita Lutgardis*, the *Leven van Lutgart*. In this Middle Dutch biography of Lutgart of Aywières (1182-1246) the saying “mate es tallen spele goet” (Book II, 6340) is used to warn against the risks connected with striving for spiritual love.¹⁹ Concentrating on heavy exercises too quickly, as a result of hastiness, can make this form of love abhorrent to someone.

In the first half of the fourteenth century the trading town Antwerp developed into the leading literary centre of Brabant. The great number of influential didactic texts written there, tempts critics to speak of the

¹⁷ *Die bouc van seden, een Middelnederlandsch zedekundig leerdicht*, ed. W.H.D. Suringar (Leiden: Van der Hoek, 1891). Cf. also *Het Comburgse handschrift. Hs. Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Cod. poet. et phil. 2° 22*, ed. Herman Brinkman and Janny Schenkel, 2 vols. (Hilversum: Verloren, 1997), text II.3, 1003-08.

¹⁸ For the author, see Erwin Mantingh, “De derde man. Op zoek naar Willem van Affligem, auteur van het *Leven van Lutgart*,” in J.D. Janssens et al., *Op avontuur. Middelieeuwse epiek in de Lage Landen* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1998), pp. 159-78, 329-41.

¹⁹ *Corpus van Middelnederlandse teksten (tot en met het jaar 1300)*, ed. M. Gysseling, series II, vol. 5 (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985), p. 158.

“Antwerp School.”²⁰ In two of these works the proverb under discussion is cited.

In 1330 the Antwerp author and town clerk Jan van Boendale (ca. 1280-1365) completed a long didactic work, *Der leken spiegel* (The Laymen’s Mirror). It deals with sacred and secular history as well as ethics and concludes with an apocalyptic description of the end of the world. The poem is divided into four parts. In chapter 31 of Book I Boendale uses the proverb for the first time. Treating the Jewish people that lived between the Creation and the Flood, “dat eerste volc” (the first people), he praises their simplicity and remarks that they were all dressed in the same way. Thereupon he warns his audience for the dangers of power and wealth:

Ende al ghewint hi sulke spoede,
 Dathi te heerscapen ende te goede
 Coomt, hi sal altoos ghedincken des,
 Wanen hi comt ende wie hi es,
 Ende sal ander liede mede
 Laten datsi sijn, telker stede,
 Ende en sal hem verwanen niet en twint:
 So wort sijn heerscap gheint
 In eren op dit aertrike,
 Ende hi behout hemelrike.
 Het is gheseyt over tide vele:
 Mate is goet tallen spele. (*Der leken spiegel*, Book I, Chap. 31, 45-56)²¹

(And when things are so well with somebody that he becomes powerful and wealthy, he should always keep his origin and identity in mind, and should, moreover, always accept other people as they are, and he should never become arrogant: thus his earthly power will end honorably and he will go to Heaven. It has been said for a long time: moderation is always good.)

In these lines Boendale uses the proverb to warn against arrogance. In the eyes of the Antwerp author, this vice is a constant threat to the eternal salvation of powerful and wealthy persons.

In chapter 54 of Book II Boendale describes the seven ages of man (the seventh being eternal life), the seasons, the months, the weeks, the days, the hours and the seconds, which he defines as such short parts of an hour that each one of them does not last longer than a single glance (79-82). He states that God created “des hemels ommerinc” and “dit ertrike” (84-85), the firmament and this world, “met maten” (86), in proportion, and incites his audience to follow the Lord’s example:

Watmen doen sal ofte laten,
 Moet algader sijn met maten;
 Want eest dat die mate failgeert,
 Dwerc werd gherne ghedestruweert.
 Ons seeght een wijs man ende en vroet:
 Mate es tallen spele goet. (*Der leken spiegel*, Book II, Chap. 54, 89-93)

(Whatever one does or does not do, it should be done with moderation; because if the proper proportions fail, the result is easily destroyed. A wise and sensible man tells us: moderation is always good.)

This is the second time that Boendale quotes the proverb. The conclusion that God has a unique sense of proportion is combined with the advice to refrain from disproportional deeds.

According to the third book’s prologue, the reader could find in this part of *Der leken spiegel* a wealth of information concerning wisdom, right behavior and good habits (Book III, Prologhe, 53-55). In chapter 15, for example, Boendale explains what is characteristic of an author who intends to write in the appropriate manner. This chapter, entitled “Hoe dichters dichten sullen ende wat si hantieren sullen” (How writers should write and what they should pay attention to), is one of the earliest *ars poeticae* in the vernacular.²² In another chapter, Boendale deals with the question “Hoe hem die mensche houden sal onder die liede, ende alrehande wijshede” (How a person should behave in public, and other pieces of wisdom). Among many other things he warns people “Die van armer cleinre haven / Te groten state wart verhaven”

²⁰ W. van Anrooij, “Recht en rechtvaardigheid binnen de Antwerpse School,” in J. Reynaert et al., *Wat is wijsheid? Lekenethiek in de Middelnederlandse letterkunde* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1994), pp. 149-63, 399-405, especially pp. 149-50.

²¹ *Der leken spiegel, leerdicht van den jare 1330, door Jan Boendale, gezegd Jan de Clerc, schepenclerk te Antwerpen*, ed. M. de Vries, 3 vols. (Leiden: Du Mortier, 1844-1848).

²² Cf. W.P. Gerritsen et al., “A Fourteenth-Century Vernacular Poetics: Jan van Boendale’s ‘How Writers Should Write,’” in *Medieval Dutch Literature in Its European Context*, ed. Erik Kooper (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 245-60. This article contains an English translation of Boendale’s treatise by Erik Kooper.

(Book III, Chap. 3, 495-96), who were poor and became rich, against avarice:

Mate is goet tallen spele,
 Dat heeft in harde vele.
 Niement en sal verwillen,
 Elc sal hem selven stillen
 Ende hem houden in maten,
 Ende ooc enen andren laten
 Mede winnen ende ghenieten. (*Der leken spiegel*, Book III, Chap. 3, 505-11)

(Moderation is always good, which applies to many things. Nobody should be avaricious, everyone should be well pleased and behave moderately, and should allow another person to acquire and enjoy possessions as well.)

For the third time in *Der leken spiegel* Boendale cites the proverb “mate es tallen spele goet,” which covers, according to the author, many topics (506). In this passage, the saying applies to the vice of avarice. It is bad when rich people want to become even richer, they should give other persons the opportunity to acquire some wealth.

Fifteen years after *Der leken spiegel*, the second Brabantine didactic poem in which the proverb “mate es tallen spele goet” occurs was completed. In the epilogue of this work, the *Dietsche doctrinale* (Dutch moral teachings), it is stated that the Antwerp author finished his work in 1345 (Book III, 1959-64).²³ Although the *Dietsche doctrinale* has been attributed to Jan van Boendale, there are no decisive arguments to support this claim. The text, divided into three books, is an adaptation of Albertanus of Brescia’s Latin treatise *De amore et dilectione Dei et proximi et aliarum rerum et de forma vitae*. The *Dietsche doctrinale* can be characterized as a compendium of ethical wisdom.²⁴

In Book II a chapter is devoted to the problem “Van ouertollec- heiden te scuwene” (How to avoid intemperance). The author explains:

Ens gheen dinc alsoe weert,
 Noch datmen alsoe sere begheert,
 Men maegs hebben te uele:
 Mate es goet tallen spele. (*Dietsche doctrinale*, Book II, 3053-56)

(Nothing is so valuable or so desirable but one can have too much of it: moderation is always good.)

Hereafter the reader is informed of the vices he should avoid. First of all, dipsomania is mentioned. Wine is declared to be the best and healthiest drink, but when one drinks too much of it, it causes damage to one’s soul and body (3057-62). The second vice had also been described by Boendale. In theory gold, silver and other riches are valuable, but avarice leads someone astray (3063-68). Two other examples of intemperance are speaking too much, which people detest (3069-72), and—through praying and reading—meditating too much, which leads to madness (3073-76).

In Book III of the *Dietsche doctrinale* a chapter deals with moderation, in particular with regard to clothes. According to the Antwerp author, it is fitting that rulers, prelates and other highplaced persons and people of noble birth wear clothes that are more beautiful than common people’s dresses (Book III, 1635-40). He further notes, however, that things have changed. When a great lord has ordered an exceptionally beautiful garment, a rich villain’s son will desire the same thing of the same quality (1643-46). Maids share this craving:

Eest oec dat diernen scouwen
 Iet sunderlinge ane scone vrouwen,
 Si weruen daer na ende poeghen
 Hoe si des ghewinnen moeghen.
 Dit nes behoerlec twint.
 Hi es vroet die hem seluen kint:
 Aldus sal elc, sonder waen,
 Na sinen staet ghecleedt gaen,
 Niet te luttel noch te uele:
 Mate es goet tallen spele. (*Dietsche doctrinale*, Book III, 1647-56)

(When maids see that beautiful ladies wear something exceptional, they do their best to get it also. This is not fitting at all. A person with self-knowledge is wise: thus it is certain that everyone should be dressed in keeping with his status, neither too poorly nor too richly: moderation is always good.)

²³ *Die Dietsche doctrinale, leerdicht van den jare 1345, toegekend aan Jan Deckers, clerk der stad Antwerpen*, ed. W.J.A. Jonckbloet ('s-Gravenhage: Schinkel, 1842).

²⁴ Cf. J. Reynaert, “Ethiek en ‘filosofie’ voor leken: de *Dietsche doctrinale*,” in J. Reynaert et al., *Wat is wijsheid? Lekenethiek in de Middelnederlandse letterkunde* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1994), pp. 199-214, 415-19.

For the second and last time in the *Dietsche doctrinale* the proverb “mate es tallen spele goet” is cited. In this passage it refers to a code of dressing. One should avoid clothes that are not in accordance with one’s class.

The proverb in Holland

Around the middle of the fourteenth century the House of Bavaria came to power in Holland. The Hague became the residence of the rulers Albert of Bavaria (who reigned from 1358 to 1404) and his son William VI (1404-17), who both appreciated Middle Dutch literature. One of the authors who wrote for them was the itinerant poet-reciter Willem van Hildegarsberch (ca. 1350-1408/09). As the ducal account books prove, he was regularly paid to appear before the court. Between 1383 and 1408 his name is mentioned thirty-two times in the accounts. Travelling in the northern parts of the Low Countries he also recited his poems in Egmont Abbey and before the town magistrates of Middelburg and Utrecht.²⁵

Hildegarsberch made some 120 short Middle Dutch poems, so-called “spoken.”²⁶ As an admirer of Boendale’s *Der leken spiegel*, it is not surprising for Hildegarsberch to have had a strong preference for didactic and moralizing texts. In one of these poems the proverb “mate es tallen spele goet” is used. Discussing “hoede,” cautiousness, the poet advises his listeners to be on their guard against things which may harm them. With regard to gifted musicians, Hildegarsberch utters the following warning:

Al conde een vedelen ende zinghen,
 Waer hi anders onbedocht
 Ende altoes sonder hoede wrocht,
 Soe waer sijn conste cleyn te prisen.
 Hier om slacht hi naden wisen,
 Wye dat goede conste can,

²⁵ Cf. T. Meder, *Sprookspreker in Holland. Leven en werk van Willem van Hildegarsberch (circa 1400)* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1991).

²⁶ For “spoken,” see Dini Hogenelst, *Sproken en sprekers. Inleiding op en repertorium van de Middelnederlandse sproke*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1997).

Dat hise toocht voer elken man
 Int ghemaet ende niet te vele;
 Want maet is goet tot allen spele.
 Men mocht mit vedelen of mit zanghe
 Maken wel een spel soe lange,
 Datmens liever niet en hoorde. (*Van hoede* (XCIV), 90-101)²⁷

(If somebody could play the viol and sing, but, being an impetuous person, would perform without caution, his art would deserve little praise. A gifted artist is wise when he moderately shows his artistry in front of an audience, since moderation is always good. One could play the viol or sing for such a long time that people would prefer not to listen to it.)

It is tempting to interpret these lines as a sign of rivalry. Perhaps Hildegarsberch’s warning was directed at other performers at the court of Holland, whom he implicitly blamed for playing and singing too long. We know, after all, that passing reciters like Hildegarsberch had to compete with countless musicians and singers, partly employed by the duke and partly guest performers.²⁸ Be that as it may, the poet uses the saying to point out to musicians and singers that they should not show their artistic talents too much.

Conclusion

It is time to take stock. Assuming that the text corpus studied in this article is representative of the (written) use of the proverb “mate es tallen spele goet,” several conclusions can be drawn. First, the saying has travelled between ca. 1250 and ca. 1400 from the south to the north of the Low Countries, from Flanders (thirteenth century) via Brabant (fourteenth century) to Holland (around 1400). Secondly, in the thirteenth century the proverb was quoted mostly by poets of narrative texts, and afterwards exclusively by authors of didactic poems. Thirdly, the proverb confirms the general idea that moderation was a wide-ranging medieval virtue. In the eyes of medieval Dutch authors who used this saying it is wise to avoid gluttony, taking a joke too far,

²⁷ *Gedichten van Willem van Hildegarsberch*, ed. W. Bisschop and E. Verwijs (reprint Utrecht: HES Publishers, 1981).

²⁸ Cf. Meder, *Sprookspreker in Holland*, pp. 441-44.

excessive generosity, affectation, hastiness, arrogance, disproportional acts, avarice, dipsomania, speaking too much, meditating too much, clothes that are not in keeping with one's class, and showing one's artistry too much.

Is it sensible for us, the present-day recipients of medieval texts, to embrace the proverb "mate es tallen spele goet"? Should the readers of this essay in general, and Norris Lacy in particular, subscribe to the Middle Dutch authors' point of view? As far as I am concerned, I must confess, I have my doubts. After all, what is life without vices?

Emergent Direct Discourse: A Performer's Nightmare?¹

Since he has one of the finest voices in Arthuriana, it is always a pleasure to hear one of Norris Lacy's papers. Then there is of course the sensible and straightforward nature of what he says, but there is something else that caps the pleasure for me: it is very reassuring to see that even he is susceptible to the internal and external tremors of giving a paper, for instance when telling a predominantly Dutch audience a thing or two about the haphazard structure of "their" *Moriaen*, early one Sunday morning (after the disco!) in Kalamazoo.

Why everyone feels at least a bit nervous when reading a paper may have a lot of different personal reasons, yet perhaps a common denominator is the anxiety that the written text may prove treacherous in the reading, the fear that, notwithstanding the preparations, the sentences may not come out right, leaving the performer gasping for a lost breathing rhythm or making him unwittingly state absurdities. Now imagine not reading your nicely formatted typescript or even hasty handwriting but a medieval manuscript with little or no punctuation, with plenty of abbreviations and other stumbling-blocks: maybe our qualms are mere flutters compared to those felt by the medieval performers of texts like the prose *Lancelot*. Reading texts created and copied by others, they may have found surprises like the sudden change from indirect to direct discourse which Norris has called "emergent direct discourse."²

For a modern reader, these sudden appearances of direct discourse, that seem to come without any warning signals, would be disturbing pitfalls, but does the same go for the medieval performers? If so, why do the authors and translators, who depend on the performers for a proper oral delivery of their creations, insert this stylistic "special

¹ Bart Besamusca and Sophie Marnette critically read the first version of this article for our mutual friend and I am grateful for their astute remarks; any faults remaining are of course my own.

² Norris Lacy, "Emergent Direct Discourse in the Vulgate Cycle," *Arthuriana*, 4 (1994), 19-29.