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Author

Sellin, Paul M.

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AN INSTRUCTIVE NEW *ELCKERLIJIC*

Den spiegel der salicheit van elckerlijc. Hoe dat elckerlijc mensche wert ghedaecht gode rekeninghe te doen van sinen wercken. Edited with introduction, notes, and appendices by R. Vos. ("Van alle Tijden," no. 4; Bibliotheek van Nederlandse letterkunde, General Editor L. M. van Dis.) Groningen, J. B. Wolters, 1967. Pp. 125. Dfl. 4.90.

Generally, Anglo-American concern with the "mediaeval" play *Everyman* pretty well ignores continental treatments of its Dutch, Latin, and Low German cousins. When the debate turns to whether the Dutch *Elckerlijc* or the English *Everyman* is the original, we are courteous enough to listen, but not to revise permanently our feelings that the play is English. And as this is so, we feel little obligation to heed outlanders telling us about our literature. The loss in this case is ours, I think. It is true that the recent *Elckerlijc* edition by R. Vos is a deceptively modest paperback that hardly seems to promise a serious scholarly endeavor. A glance at the contents soon dispels that assumption, however. The edition consists of an extensive analytical introduction to the work, a comprehensive bibliography of *Elckerlijc* studies, including *Everyman* literature, the edited and annotated text, plus four appendices containing respectively 1) analogues of the *Everyman* story in Hebrew and Buddhist literature, 2) a list of proverbial expressions that *Elckerlijc* shares with Dutch texts contemporary with it, 3) a collection of passages illustrating the agreement between the tone of *Elckerlijc* and the Old Testament, and 4) a provocative sampling of verses from *Elckerlijc* that occur literally or almost literally in other Middle-Dutch works. The whole closes with a list of works on which the annotations and appendices draw.

What distinguishes Mr. Vos' edition is originality, and this is immediately apparent in his choice of copy text. Three printings of the *Elckerlijc* have survived. The oldest appeared in Delft about 1495, the second at Antwerp about 1501, and the third

was done by Willem Vorsterman in the same city about 1525. There is also a manuscript version dating from 1593-94. Nearly all modern editions of *Elckerlijc* have been based on the Vorsterman printing, for though it is the latest and the most corrupt version of the text, it is also the most complete. Mr. Vos, however, bases his edition on the earliest version on the grounds that, in comparing the English and Latin texts with the Dutch *Elckerlijc*, it appears that they represent translations from a stage of the text older than the surviving Netherlandic poems and that therefore the Delft printing of 1495 is closer to the original than any of the later Dutch texts. A corollary of this should be that the earliest of the three *Elckerlijc* printings agrees better with the English and Latin texts, and according to Mr. Vos, this is just the case. Gaps in the Delft text are filled with readings from 1501. Punctuation in this edition is modernized for the sake of legibility (one might add, also as a commercial concession), and obvious misprints are corrected. The verse numbering follows that of the *editiones majores* of Logeman and Endepols for the sake of uniformity and convenience within existing tradition. Text and annotations are arranged on the same page. Notes are of two sorts. Textual variants follow the text immediately, and contain readings not merely from the Dutch texts but from *Everyman*, the Latin *Homulus*, and the Low German *Der Sünden Loin ist der Toid* as edited by Logeman, Roersch, and Norrenberg, respectively. Interpretive notes follow the textual notes, and are separated from the rest of the page by a rule. They mainly explain difficult vocabulary items and expressions, but they include historical and cultural observations as well. All is useful and to the point. The printing is skillful, for the physical arrangement is easy to follow, makes a simple, neat impression, and avoids clutter. As the original materials are not readily available, it has not been possible to check the accuracy of the text. Dutch reviews indicate that it is very carefully done and remarkably free of errors, however.

Mr. Vos' introductory essay is compact, yet comprehensive. It too is original. In the first place, it addresses itself chiefly to central problems in the artistic interpretation of the play. Those who know only the English text should first consider Mr. Vos' view of the title and what he thinks it implies about the author. Unlike

the English version, which speaks only of the "summoning of Everyman," the Dutch play is called "The Mirror of the Bliss of Everyman," a title which to me personally better reflects the ending of the play than the English. To Mr. Vos, the Dutch title and sub-title — how that every man was summoned to give a good account of his works — specify the intention and contents of the work. He throws great emphasis on the use of the definite article in the title ("Den spiegel" — "The Mirror") as showing that the writer knew and considered no values or truths as tenable other than the ones he presents in his play, and that he therefore believed unshakably in what he wished to say. Yet at the same time, Mr. Vos objects to the usual characterization of the poem as didactic and moralizing. A didactic work, he thinks, brings something new to an audience, whereas *Elckerlijc* heightens awareness of truths generally acknowledged and accepted. Similarly, works that moralize aim to improve behavior, but the end of *Elckerlijc* is simply to bring men to the realization of such truths. He therefore classifies the piece not as a morality play but as gnomic literature designed to afford philosophical insight, a genre characterized by the liberal use of proverbs and proverbial expressions such as those commonly occurring in Middle-Dutch literature which he finds woven all through *Elckerlijc*. That these generic distinctions transcend mere quibbles regarding the application of appropriate labels such as "didactic" or "moralizing" and touch on elements truly essential to the structure of the work I remain unconvinced. But the proverbial dimensions which the piece shares with earlier Dutch literature are for English ears a significant discovery, and to dissociate *Elckerlijc-Everyman* from the usual commonplaces regarding mediaeval morality plays and to link it instead with philosophical literature on the same theme in Hebrew, Buddhist, and Mohammedan rather than with Christian traditions is surely refreshing. Though dangerous, this direction holds promise for future exploitation.

With regard to the structure of the play, Mr. Vos finds it organized around the two motifs of rendering an account and of going on pilgrimage. The first determines the roles that God, Death, and Everyman play, and the way these figures interact in the piece. The second determines Everyman's relationships to

the other allegorical characters such as Fellowship, Goods, Good Deeds ("Doecht"), Discretion ("Vroescap"), Strength, Beauty, and Five-Wits ("Vijf Sinnen"), all of which are held up to the public as a mirror reflecting the sad plight of mankind vis-a-vis their inevitable pilgrimage and the final accounting. Mr. Vos' approach leads to several interesting observations regarding the allegorical personifications. Consider Goods, for instance. Goods were lent, not given, to *Elckerlijc*, and he must account for his use of them. His problem is that in receiving and distributing them, he has misused the gifts of God. Honoring them idolatrously, he has enriched himself illegitimately, taking what rightfully belonged to his fellow man (lines 18, 360) and also refusing in time of need to come to his neighbor's aid from the surplus he enjoys (lines 400-403). Therefore, Goods in this play are possessions that *Elckerlijc* obtained and kept by unjustifiable means. Again, Good Deeds and "Doecht", which to some suggests virtue, not its effects, have always been a problem in comparative studies of *Elckerlijc* and *Everyman*. To Mr. Vos "Doecht" instead represents *Elckerlijc*'s righteousness and incorporates the Old Testament concept of "Zedaka" (*Zedek*). She is not so much things done or a quality of character as the power to do good. Hence, she is initially crippled by *Elckerlijc*'s love of wicked goods and is later restored to usefulness through the offices of Knowledge. It is through "Doecht", the power to do "Good Deeds", then, that *Elckerlijc* becomes a man who walks in the way of righteousness. Hence, the grave cannot separate her from *Elckerlijc* as it does her fellows.

The *Everyman* Editions notwithstanding, Knowledge ("Kennisse") is not knowledge in general, but Knowledge of God, and hence it is appropriate that she remains to explain to the audience what happens to *Elckerlijc* after his death. I find it regrettable that Mr. Vos treats Discretion ("Vroescap") in no greater detail than he does in both his edition and his articles. Since *Elckerlijc* calls the figures of Discretion, Strength, Beauty, and Five-Wits to his aid at the charge of Good Deeds, Mr. Vos views them as attributes and "instruments" of the righteous man, and elsewhere (*Spiegel der letteren*, 9, 1966, 25-27) notes that "Vroescap" (Discretion), Strength, and Beauty are all attributes assigned to the

righteous in the Old Testament. Mr. Vos also paraphrases "Vroescap" as "Wisdom" (*wijsheit*), but one feels that his insights could be applied more deeply to this provocative figure with great profit. As these all remain properties tied to the body regardless of their source, they must abandon Elckerlijc at the grave, and the scene is touching because it makes us aware of the cost of mortality. Mr. Vos does not think of Five-Wits as bodily organs or the senses. From other uses of the term in Middle-Dutch literature, he concludes that they were conceived as faculties for perceiving what man receives from God. In his use of his "wits", then, a man's direction becomes evident. If he applies them to God and his works, he is on the right path; if to what is inimical to God, he misuses his capacities. So it is that Death reproaches Elckerlijc for being impure within even though he has his Five-Wits, and for applying them to things that alienate God. Thus it was that Elckerlijc came to be ruled by pride, covetousness, and envy (*afgunst*), and wicked Goods was the result. As Goods is not per se evil, but the gifts of God freely given, it is Elckerlijc who bears responsibility for what he does with them. All this has extensive implications for the interpretation of Elckerlijc himself. Unlike De Vocht and other critics who find the Dutch text inferior to the English, Vos does not choose to view Elckerlijc as an abstract personification, but as a true-to-life human being on the stage. Besides his responsibility for the gifts God has given him, he is also responsible for the time entrusted to him, and he is presented as a man who is past the meridian of his life ("na noene", line 175). By his being cast at a specific age, it also becomes clear in his encounters with Fellowship, Kindred, and Cousin especially, that he is a man with a past, and that filled with trespasses. Elckerlijc's story, then, is one of a man who through the right use of his powers moves from unrighteousness to a state of justification, and to Mr. Vos, the arrangement of the whole drama depends on the opposition between the righteous and the unrighteous in the Old Testament.

The introduction concludes with an evaluation of the artistic success of the piece in terms of a Jungian analysis of the relationship between the personality of the author and his central character. All of this rests only on speculative dialectics and

should never have been brought into the discussion of the dating, since it is the weakest portion of his argument. Most of Mr. Vos' other conclusions, however, are drawn not only from close reading of the text but solid scholarly forays into other Middle-Dutch literature for confirmation. To do proper justice to his positions, one should go beyond the necessarily summary statements in his introduction and consult the many outstanding articles where—as in the *Spiegel der letteren* and *De nieuwe taalgids* for the years 1965 and 1966—his arguments are given full support. Though unorthodox and provocative, Mr. Vos' conclusions are not irresponsible, and they square with phenomena undeniably in the text. One troubling omission is that although the power of the keys, confession, penance, the eucharist, and extreme unction occupy prominent places in the *Elckerlijc*, little discussion is given to the institutions of the church and the sacraments in the play. It may be that the editor prefers not to summarize much that is commonplace, since his bibliography includes matters of this sort, but one should like to know what he thinks of them too.

In revising the date of the play, finally, Mr. Vos is at his best, and what he has to say undercuts most standard notions about the authorship of the work and its relationship to other versions of the story such as *Everyman*. One should refer directly to his excellent article, "*Elckerlijc-Everyman-Homulus-Der Sünden Loin ist der Toid*", *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde*, 82 (1966), 129-43, in which he proves that *Everyman* and both the Latin and Low German versions do not go back to the third printing of *Elckerlijc* but are closer to the first; that the English translation agrees literally with the Low German text at points where it diverges from the Dutch; that *Everyman* as well as the Latin and Low German texts stem from an older version of the *Elckerlijc* than any now extant; and that the English, Latin, and Low German treatments are not all based on the same version of the Dutch play. Since several different texts of the *Elckerlijc* were in circulation, Mr. Vos concludes that between the extant Dutch texts and the original, there must have been at least five texts, three on which the various Dutch texts are based, one that gave rise to the Latin *Homulus*, and one from which *Everyman* was translated—possibly there were several states of the latter too.

Indications are, then, that the play is much older than assumed. Since it has traditionally been dated as *circa* 1475, so as to fit the lifetime of Petrus Dorlandus of Diest, to whom the work has been attributed on very shaky grounds, Mr. Vos thinks that the *Elckerlijc* probably existed before Dorlandus was born. Inasmuch as Mr. Vos also finds numerous points of agreement between the diction and style of several Middle-Dutch authors of the fourteenth century (e.g., Jan van Boendale, Willem van Hildegaersberch), as well as traces of poetic and rhetorical conventions characteristic of the Dutch fourteenth but not the late fifteenth century, the poem probably dates not from the end but from the beginning of the fifteenth century or even earlier. What this does to the ordinary grounds for maintaining the priority of the English to the Flemish version is obvious. If the English translates proverbial expressions and commonplace idioms that can be found in earlier Dutch literature, the work is clearly Dutch unless the same verbal formulae can be shown to occur independently in previous Middle-English documents. Revising the date also may suggest Caxton as the possible translator, although Mr. Vos is far too wise to urge this except in the most tentative terms. The suggestion is very appealing, though too neatly simple. As a man known to have lived and worked in both the southern and northern Netherlands from 1445-1472, he is the one Englishman whose knowledge of Dutch is not a matter of speculation, and his interest in translating Dutch is on record in the books he printed. According to Mr. Vos, the translator of *Everyman* rendered his Dutch into English as literally as possible, and, as the quarrel on the priority of *Elckerlijc* has long shown, even the rhyme words in the Dutch couplets were slavishly reproduced on many occasions. Although critics such as N. F. Blake might take some exception to the idea, Mr. Vos (seconded, incidentally, by Mr. D. B. Sands) points out that such precision in the rendition of the original, even to the point of translationese, characterizes Caxton's translations from the Dutch, at least in *Reynart the Foxe*, at the end of which Caxton himself declares that he has "not added ne mynussed but have folowed as nyghe as I can my cotype whiche was in dutche." And of course the printers of

the surviving exemplars of *Everyman*—Pynson and Skot—learned their trade from Caxton.

This new edition of *Elckerlijc*, then, is an excellent example of how a classic text that has been repeatedly edited and (one would have thought) discussed to death still offers opportunity for fresh and needed revelations if attempted with independent spirit, responsible methods, and long dedication to the text and its cultural environment. It is a pity that the state of language learning in this country cuts most of us off from the original version of and some fine scholarship on one of the acknowledged masterpieces of our literary heritage simply because these are couched in a Germanic language. Mr. Vos' next step should be obvious. What the English speaking world could much profit by is a scholarly edition of *Everyman* incorporating the latest thinking on its text and descent, and equipped with full commentary in English by an editor capable of dealing with the issues and international scholarship on its Flemish, Latin, and Low German brethren.

Paul R. Sellin

University of California, Los Angeles