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An unnoticed manuscript fragment of Jan van Boendale's *Melibeus* in the National Archives¹

Some forty years before Geoffrey Chaucer wrote his *Tale of Melibee*, the prolific Antwerp town clerk Jan van Boendale composed the first Dutch translation of Albertanus of Brescia's *Liber consolationis et consilii* (written in 1246).² The place and date of composition of this Middle Dutch version, known as *Melibeus*, are specified in the poet's epilogue:

Dit boec waert met mire pinen
Ghetracteert uten latine
Al t Andwerpen in die poert,
Int iaer na gods gheboert
.XIII^cXL. ende twee ... (3820-3824)³

(With my efforts, this book was translated out of Latin, in the town of Antwerp, in the year 1340 and two, following God's incarnation.)

Melibeus was first edited, from the Marshall manuscript (see details below) by F. A. Snellaert in 1869. This carefully executed manuscript has recently been digitised as part of an AHRC-funded

¹ The discovery reported here arose from investigations carried out for the research project 'The Literary Heritage of Anglo-Dutch Relations, c. 1050-1600', funded by the Leverhulme Trust, whose support I gratefully acknowledge. I would also like to thank Bart Besamusca, Daniël Ermens, Remco Sleiderink for advice on Jan van Boendale's *Melibeus*, and Paul Dryburgh, Lora Angelova, and Natalie Brown of the National Archives for advice on the conservation history of E 163/22/2/24 and for providing me with multispectral images of this fragment.

² Because Jan van Boendale does not name himself as the poet, his authorship is not absolutely certain, but it has been put beyond reasonable doubt in recent scholarship. See especially J. Reynaert, 'Boendale of "Antwerpse School": Over het auteurschap van *Melibeus* en *Dietsche Doctrinale*', in Wim van Anrooij (ed.), *Al t'Antwerpen in die stad: Jan van Boendale en de literaire cultuur van zijn tijd* (Amsterdam, 2002), 127-157, and Mike Kestemont, *Het Gewicht van de auteur: Stilometrische auteursherkenning in middelnederlandse literatuur* (Ghent, 2013), 160-167.

³ Boendale, *Melibeus*, ed. F. A. Snellaert (ed.), *Nederlandse gedichten uit de veertiende eeuw van Jan van Boendale, Hein van Aken en anderen* (Brussels, 1869).

project led by Aditi Lahiri. A diplomatic edition of the Middle Dutch texts contained in it, including *Melibeus*, was produced by Johanneke Sytskema (2014), and is also available on-line.⁴

The poem has until now been known to exist in four manuscript witnesses:⁵

1. O: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Marshall 29, s. xiv^{ex}.
2. H: Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Germ. 24, s. xiv^{ex}.
3. B: Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS IV 1284, 5, s. xiv^{med}.
4. G: Gent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, MS 1607, s. xiv^{ex}.

O and H contain complete copies of the poem; B and G are fragments (consisting of a bifolium and a single leaf respectively).⁶

To this list of manuscript witnesses can now be added a fifth, which I shall designate as L. L is in the Exchequer Records of the King's Remembrancer in the National Archives at Kew and bears the reference number E 163/22/2/24. The National Archives catalogue description (soon to be revised) reads: 'A poem in Dutch; Inc. 'Van bonen worde gheghenen'; 2ff. (fragments)'. The manuscript date is given as '15th Century'.⁷ While examining materials relevant to medieval and early modern Anglo-Dutch relations in the National Archives, I had an opportunity to read E 163/22/2/24. We are undoubtedly dealing with a manuscript fragment of Boendale's *Melibeus*. The transcription of the opening line of the fragment in the National Archives catalogue makes no sense, and must have been made by someone without knowledge of Dutch. The correct reading of the first line of L is 'Van

⁴ See <http://dutch.clp.ox.ac.uk/?q=book1>, last accessed 15 April 2019.

⁵ See *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta & Impressa*: <https://bnm-i.huygens.knaw.nl/lexicontermen/LEXI00000003736>, last accessed 27 April 2019.

⁶ Daniël Ermens notes the existence of some excerpts of Boendale's *Melibeus* in Stockholm, Kungliga Biblioteket, MS A 91a, which he dates to the fifteenth century. See his 'Functie en gebruiker: Een studie over het construeren van gebruiksprofielen van meerteksthandschriften met Middelnederlandse teksten' (PhD dissertation, University of Utrecht, 2015), 165, n. 75, accessible at <https://www.ris.uu.nl/ws/files/10439659/Ermens.pdf>.

⁷ See <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C4005490>, last accessed 15 April 2019.

bouen wordt ghegeuen' ('is given from above'), and this can now be matched up with line 1396 of Boendale's *Melibeus* in Snellaert's edition: 'Van boven wert ghegeven').⁸

L is a parchment bifolium. The folios have suffered extensive damage, and only the upper part of the leaves. When it was restored sometime in the twentieth century, the parchment scraps were mounted on modern parchment. The present leaves are 213mm wide. The written space is approximately 165mm in width. Correlating the lines in L with those in O and H, it is possible to work out that the scribe wrote around 37 lines per column, and the original dimensions of the leaves must have been c. 210mm (h) x 213mm (w), with the written space measuring c. 190mm x 165mm. Some of the bottom lines are now difficult or impossible to read, probably because of water damage. The script is a Gothic cursiva of the early fifteenth century. Lines are unruled and set out in two columns. The initials of all verses are set off and have been stroked with red ink. Red ink is also used for paragraph markers, for the heading of chapter 17 of *Melibeus* (the only chapter heading preserved in this fragment), and for the large decorated initial that marks the initial of the first line of the next chapter, 'Uier dingen des wilt my getrüwen' ('Four things, believe it from me'), corresponding with line 1423 of *Melibeus* in Snellaert's edition.⁹

The following lines in Snellaert's edition are witnessed in whole or in part in L: 1396-8 (folio 1ra) and 1419-1431 (folio 1rb); 1453-1460 (folio 1va) and 1483-1497 (folio 1vb); 2969-2981 (folio 2ra) and 2998-3011 (folio 2rb); 3025-3036 (folio 2va) and 3050-3064 (folio 2vb). It is worth noting, however, that L also contains various lines that are without parallel in Snellaert's edition, based on O. Thus,

⁸ In Sytskema's diplomatic edition this is line 1457. The transcription of MS 'ghegeuen' as 'thetheuen' is erroneous.

⁹ Snellaert reads 'Dier dingen / wilt des ghetruwen', but 'Dier' is based on his mistranscription of MS O, which has 'Uier'. Decorated initials are easily misread, of course, but in this case the guide letter 'v', written by the O scribe for the benefit of the rubricator, is still visible. Lahiri and Sytskema give the correct reading (line 1484 in their edition).

while the fragmentary nature of L obviously limits its usefulness as a witness to Boendale's poem, it is not without interest to future editors.¹⁰

How this bifolium ended up in the Exchequer I have not been able to find out. It is known, however, that the collection of documents classed E163 contains, amongst other things, 'manuscript and printed fragments recovered from book bindings and covers'.¹¹ It seems likely that L falls into that category, and that these folios from a manuscript of Boendale's *Melibeus* were used either as end-leaves of an early printed book or as a loose cover for other documents.

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¹⁰ I am preparing for publication a critical discussion of the text of L, with a full transcription of the text.

¹¹ See <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C6608>.