“Van den bere Wisselau”

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The Middle Dutch fragment entitled “About Wisselau the Bear” represents a Charlemagne story, albeit an unusual one. When Charlemagne and his men arrive at the castle of the giant King Espriaen, Geernout speaks to his bear Wisselau:

“Dan merct wel wie hi si,
De meester coc, ende stant hem bi.
Nemen bi den hare
Ende scouten int sop openbare.
Alse dandere dat gesien
Sele si alle vort vlien.
Dan nem den ketel saen
Ende comer met tons gegaen
Ende doe dat ic di rade.
In sconinx kemenade
Set neder den ketel
Vore tsconinx setel.
Dan nem den coc [ute tsop],
Des sele wi mak[en] ons scop,
Ende eten dan al in dinen mont."
Hoe wel de bere dit verstont
Karel enwiste des niet,
No dat reussce diet. (324-41)¹

¹ All text from the Middle Dutch “Van den bere Wisselau” is cited from M. Gysseling’s diplomatic edition in Corpus van Middelnederlandse teksten (tot en met het jaar 1300). To this diplomatic edition I have added punctuation marks, etc. A critical edition of the text is to be found in G. Kalff, Middelnederlandsche epische fragmenten. See Works Cited.
[. . .]

Met[t]ien quamen gevlowen
Scinkers, drossaten,
Die hars selfs so vergaten
Dat[s]i vloen in de zale.
Dies daric mi vermeten wale
Dat se so drongen ouer een,
Datter selc brac sin been,
Selc sin arm, selc sin hoeft.
Alle de coke, dijs geloef,
Vloen schiere op een palas
Ende riepen: “O wi, o las,
Here coninc Espriaen,
In de cokene es gegaen
Die duvel barlike!
Hi slint warlike
Al datter es gereet,
Rou, gesoden, God weet!
Wine moegen met hem niet gesijn
Gine wilt ons gehulpech sijn.
Dien liefsten coc Brugigal
Es nv verscout al
In den groten ketel!” (427-48)

[. . .]

Doe sprac Geernout:
“Stant op, kimpe stout!
Du heves geten, God weet,
Al dat hier was gereet.
Gesoden ende gebraden,

Olifant
Al heestuut verraden!
En can niet geweten
Wat wi selen eten.”
Die coninc ende sine man
Lachen began.
Wisselau spranc op sine voete
Ende scudde onsoete.
Van sinen rocke
Springen wel diere cnoppe.
Doe loech Karel ende sine man
Ende sprac ten bere vresam:
“War omme machtu dijn cleet sliten?
Dine darf men niet verbiten
Datti verwan dijn here!”
Het dochte den bere onnere
Datti clagede sin cleet
Ende van herten leet.
Doe vergramdem sin moet
Ende scorde sinen roc goet,
Datti hem dochte te lanc
[... ] so danc
[........................]
Springen alsem goet dochte.
Hi warpen in den viere,
Ende lach neder sciere,
Ende warmde sine side. (608-38)

“Take good notice of who the chef is and stand close to him. Take him by the hair and boil him in the soup. When the others see this, they will flee rightaway. Take the cooking pot then and come to us immediately, and do as I tell you. Put the cauldron in front of the king’s chair in the king’s chamber. Then take the cook out of the soup—we will have
great fun!—and eat him.” Although the bear understood this very well, king Charlemagne and the giant folk knew nothing about it.

[..]

Suddenly cupbearers and stewards came running into the hall. I dare tell you that they were pushing and shoving each other so severely, that one of them broke his arm, another his leg, and a third his head. All of the cooks fled into a room for sure and yelled: “Oh no! King Espriaen, the devil himself has come into the kitchen! He devours everything there is: raw and cooked, and God knows what else. We cannot be in there with him unless you help us. Your favourite cook Brugigal has been cooked completely in the big cauldron.”

[..]

Then Geernout said: “Get up, brave champion! You have eaten, God knows, everything that had been prepared here. The boiled and the roasted food, you have taken it all! I do not know what we will eat now.” The king and his men started to laugh. Wisselau rose quickly and shook himself forcefully. Expensive buttons flew off his coat. Then Charlemagne and his men laughed, and the king said to the terrifying bear: “Why do you tear your coat? No one ought to blame you because your master beat you in the fight.” The bear considered it a disgrace, took it out on his coat and was sad at heart. Then he became angry and tore up his costly coat, which he considered too long. [..] jump around as he would like to. He threw it into the fire, he lay down and warmed his sides.
The awesome bear, dressed up in human clothes, who cooks the cook in this episode is the titular hero of a Middle Dutch text that has come down to us in only one fragment, some 720 lines, many of which are severely damaged.

The damage to the outer edges of the double leaf has caused the loss of over a hundred lines of text, but it is still possible to follow the main line of the story and to reconstruct some of what is lost. In the text below, reconstructed passages are indicated by the use of brackets.

**Outline**

[Charlemagne and his men, amongst whom are Geernout and his bear Wisselau, have come to a hostile shore where the giant Eeric, the champion of King Espriaen, has challenged their champion to single combat. Wisselau has fought Eeric and is about to kill him.] Wisselau hits Eeric between the eyebrows and brings him down. The giant calls out to his lord Espriaen that he has been beaten by the devil. When the king, who has witnessed the fight from his nearby castle, hears Eeric’s last words, he calls for his men and goes to the beach. In the meantime, Geernout orders Wisselau to stop eating his victim and to hide in the ship. When Espriaen arrives, the bear is nowhere in sight. Yet the king is anxious to see the champion who killed his strongest man. [A conversation follows in which Charlemagne and his men obtain the dubious honour of being invited to Espriaen’s castle.] They promise to bring their champion but to leave behind his four hungry brothers—whom Geernout has quickly invented in order to impress Espriaen. The giants return to the castle, while the men prepare to go to this lion’s den.

Geernout dresses Wisselau in his special coat\(^2\) and in a secret language instructs him to go straight to the kitchens when they enter the castle. There

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\(^2\) It is not sure what exactly is meant by ll. 288-89: “Sine roc diere Van vier quarteneren” [“his precious coat of four quarters”]. The coat may be have been made of four different (or differently coloured) pieces of cloth. The text states that the precious garment was specially made when Wisselau
the bear is to find the chef, throw him into boiling water, and take the cauldron with cook and all into the king’s hall.

Espriaen’s guard at the gate flees when he sees Wisselau, but the king welcomes him and the others to his hall. [Wisselau disappears] while Espriaen talks about him with Geernout, who states that he himself could easily beat his champion.

At that moment, the servants and cooks come flying into the hall in a great panic, breaking arms and legs just to get away from the kitchen. They tell the king that his favourite cook Brugigal has been cooked by a devil. Geernout laughs when he sees Wisselau come in with the cooking pot. He puts it in front of the terrified Espriaen and starts eating the “soupe au chef.” By this time, all the giants have climbed onto the rafters of the hall. Their lord has the presence of mind to recall Geernout’s boast that he could overcome the champion and now shrewdly invites him to do so, hoping the monster will kill Geernout.

Again Geernout instructs Wisselau in their secret language: he tells him to fake a defeat in their wrestling match. They fight for a long time, but in the end Wisselau lies down as if beaten. The giants say to one another: “How can it be that this little man is so strong? Our king is in big trouble!” (ll. 576-79). Then Geernout speaks to the bear the words quoted in the third passage above, and Wisselau sheds his clothing and lies down in front of the fire. Espriaen orders his staff to prepare more food and while the giants and their king still look anxiously at the bear from time to time, they eat. When it comes to the sleeping arrangements, Espriaen asks what they will do about their frightening champion.

The fragment breaks off, leaving the modern reader with no clue as to the further adventures of Geernout, Charlemagne, and Wisselau.

came to the court at Aachen with Charlemagne. The word “quarteneren” may also have a heraldic meaning.

*Olifant*
Details

The fragment (London, British Museum, ms. Egerton 2323) consists of one double leaf, each folio having four columns of 45 lines to the page. The writing indicates that the manuscript dates from the end of the thirteenth century, but because of its versification, the rhymes, and other textual features, the text is considered to be from the twelfth century. The dialect points to the border between Flanders and Brabant. No source text (in French or German) is known. In its style and structure, the text shows the characteristics of a tale that is close to the oral stage of this kind of story. It is composed of rather short phrases and has few rhetorical flourishes. The information units seldom outrun the couplet, and enjambment is rare. The text furthermore tends to begin its paragraphs with a word like “Do,” which means “Then,” giving it a straightforward “and then…and then” narrative style. It also indicates very clearly when a person speaks, which makes the text easy to read aloud.

The layout of the manuscript is remarkable. Especially in the later Middle Ages, three or four columns on each side of the leaf are used when the verse text is long. There are three and four column manuscripts of Jacob van Maerlant’s Spiegel historiael, for instance, and a text like the Lancelot Compilation (over 77,000 lines) has three columns in manuscript The Hague, Royal Library, 129 A 10. This could be interpreted as an indication that the Wisselau fragment comes from a very long text (or from a considerable collection of texts in a single manuscript and format). Codicologist Hans Kienhorst, however, has pointed out (without further arguments) that the large number of verses on the bifolium does not necessarily indicate a long text (Kienhorst, Lering en stichting, I, p. 111, note 12). In his attempt to assess the quantity of Charlemagne material that may have existed in the

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3 In van den Berg’s survey of the versification of Middle Dutch texts, Wisselau is shown to have the “older” style of versification (van den Berg, Middelnederlandse versbouw en syntaxis, 1983).
4 Compare also Voorwinden, “Das mittelniederländische Fragment,” p. 173.
Low Countries by extrapolating from the existing fragments and their correspondence with French original texts, Ben van der Have also assumes that *Wisselau* was a short text: about 2,500 lines (van der Have, “De Middennederlandse Karelepiek,” p. 87). He argues that the related texts of the *Spielmannsepik* in general also are short narratives.

**The tradition**

In the summary, the bear’s actions may seem cruel, but in the original text they are rather comical, not unlike the bear Balou’s masquerade when he tries to rescue Mowgli from King Louie and his apes in Walt Disney’s version of *The Jungle Book*. The fact that the audience is informed beforehand of the attack on the cook invites the listeners to take Wisselau’s side and perhaps makes them—like Geernout, Charlemagne, and the others—enjoy the moment this surprise is served to King Espriaen. The sympathy of the narrator and probably the audience is entirely for the humans and their bear, who by their awe-inspiring tricks manage to bluff their way through a dangerous situation. They have come, after all, to an unknown and probably hostile land inhabited by giants. Geernout’s clever actions provide safety for the group, since he makes their opponents fear not only the awesome bear but also the bear’s human companions.

The terrifying figure of the man-bear (and *berserker*) is well known in Germanic texts and it is in this context that the origin of the *Wisselau* text has been sought. In an article from 1922, Jan de Vries has indicated several related texts that show both the Geernout-like clever man leading the bear and the fighting bear (“Van bere Wisselauwe”). In the *Thidrekssaga*, the story of Vildiver describes how he was—in full armour—sown into a bear’s skin and then led on a chain to the castle of king Osanctrix in order to deliver his companion who had been captured by one of Osanctrix’s giants. As a bear, Vildiver is called “Vizleo,” which comes quite close to “Wisselau”!

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5For a reaction to de Vries’s article, see Voorwinden, “Das mittelniederländische Fragment.”
Performing before the king, the dancing bear kills a number of hounds and two giants and sets free his friend. Although de Vries’s suggestion that Geernout may have been a Spielmann (a jongleur-like artist performing at fairs and on other occasions, sometimes with a bear doing tricks or dancing) may have been off the mark, it is in the German Spielmansepen that Wisselau-like characters appear. In König Rother a giant, called Asprian (!), is one of Rother’s companions. He fights side by side with the giant Witold, who behaves like a bear and is so untamed that he usually has to be held in chains. A bear that causes a panic in the kitchen is found in the Nibelungenlied when Siegfried on a hunt captures a bear and then sets him free in the hunters’ camp.\(^6\)

In his thesis on the role of the Brabantine dukes as sponsors of literature, Remco Sleiderink has discussed Wisselau as an early example of vernacular literature from Brabant (De stem van de meester, pp. 33-36). The connections of Brabant with Germany could be the explanation for the similarities to the Spielmansepen and Nibelungenlied, and there may have been vernacular texts made already at the court of duke Godfried III (who ruled from 1155 until 1190), but there is no firm evidence to link Wisselau to Brabant and its court.

The Wisselau poet may well have known some of the Germanic bear tales. The new element of his story, however, is the combination of this theme with Charlemagne. Because of the king’s presence, Wisselau is considered a Charlemagne epic in the Dutch tradition (resembling chansons de geste like Le pèlerinage de Charlemagne). The fragmentary nature of the text makes it hard to decide the exact relationship between Geernout and Charlemagne. Since Geernout is the person King Espriaen addresses all the time, he seems to be in charge. On the other hand, the group of humans, including Geernout, is called “Karel ende sine man” [“Charlemagne and his men”] several times, and it is the king who has given Wisselau his special coat of four quarters (ll. 288-93) when he came to his court in Aachen.\(^7\)

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\(^6\) Compare Voorwinden, “Wisselau.”

\(^7\) Compare l. 306, l. 616, and l. 622. L. 407 has “Karel ende sine genoete” [“Charles and his companions”].
Because so little of the text has come down to us, it is impossible to know whether this visit to Charles’s court was narrated earlier in the tale.

The *Wisselau* text that we do have shows a deft interplay of dramatic irony and the presentation of simultaneous events. The audience is informed of the plans Geernout discusses with his bear in the *gargoensche tale*, their secret slang, and thus suspect what Wisselau is doing in the kitchen while Geernout is talking with Espriaen, when even Geernout’s companions and Charlemagne do not know what is going on. The narrator informs the listeners of Espriaen’s devious ploy to let Wisselau kill his master and of Geernout’s clever countermove. This seems to have been planned from the start, since Geernout’s boasts invite Espriaen to ask for a demonstration of his ability to beat the bear. The awe that Wisselau inspires in the giants and their king stems for the greater part from their uncertainty about his nature: some of the giants consider Wisselau a demon and Espriaen seems unable to tell whether the champion is human until the bear sheds his coat and lies down in front of the fire.

In his 2005 survey of the occupational hazards for cooks in medieval texts, Joris Reynaert has used Levi-Strauss’s anthropological theory about the raw and the cooked to explain this ambivalence (“De kok in het vuur,” pp. 121-23). In the kitchen, Wisselau eats both the raw and the cooked food, showing himself to belong to both “nature” and “culture.” He even cooks the person responsible for making cooked what was raw and thus makes the society of the giants lose its cohesion.

Comedy seems to have been the main ingredient for the episode of the visit to Espriaen’s castle. Even for us, the mental image of the giants climbing into the rafters when Wisselau brings in the cook and cauldron is funny. We share the laughter of Charlemagne and his men, which is described explicitly by the narrator in the soup scene and in the third episode where Geernouts playfully chastises Wisselau for having eaten everything and the bear reacts by being a real bear again, shedding his clothing and his almost

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8 Its humor has been described as “situational” in Harper’s “Beer of geen beer.”
human behaviour. For Charlemagne and his companions, it is laughter com-
bined with a feeling of relief, because Geernout’s cleverness and Wisselau’s
displays of strength have turned a situation that could well have cost them
their lives into a complete victory over the giants. Espriaen even anxiously
asks if the bear will stay near the fire: he will have no appetite when he has
to eat in the presence of Wisselau.

Even in its damaged form, *Wisselau* is a great story. A pity no more of
it has been found (yet).
Works Cited


