LANSELOET VAN DENEMERKEN AND ITS BIBLICAL SOURCE

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The Hulthem Manuscript Collection, 1400-1410, in the Royal Library of Brussels, contains the first European secular dramas of the post-Roman era: eight plays written between 1350 and 1375.[1] This set of eight was written in pairs: four serious plays, the *abele spelen*, i.e., the able, serious and artistic, each followed by a counterpart, the *sotterniën*, i.e., farcical. The four couplets are *Esmoreit* Prince of Sicily and noble foundling who is betrayed by his treacherous cousin, and *Lippijn*, a somewhat stupid man openly cheated by his wife, but persuaded not to believe his own eyes;[2] *Gloriant, The Duke of Brunswick*, centering upon the theme of *hoher muot*, or high, ennobled spirit soaring beyond its proper sphere into arrogance, needing to be tamed by the gentle hand of a wise young woman, and *The Boxblower*, a farce about an old man attempting to buy back his lost youth: and *Lancelot of Denmark*, a play about intrigue, rape, and death in a royal family, paired with the farce *The Witch*, surviving only as a fragment. And finally, *Winter and Summer*, a play which investigates the question of which season is more beneficial to love, followed by the farce *Rubben* which presents us with a rather stupid man who permits himself to be persuaded that he is indeed the father of a healthy baby boy after only three months of marriage.[3]

It is not surprising that women play the dominant role in the *sotterniën*. As is the tradition in farcical tales throughout Europe, they are very clever in maintaining dominance over their slow-thinking, henpecked husbands. The *abele spelen*, however, present us with four strong women of intelligence and independence. Thus, in *Esmoreit* it is Damiete's determination to search for her lost beloved which leads to the final resolution of the conflict and Esmoreit's reinstatement as the rightful heir to the throne of Sicily. Florentijn, Gloriant's object of affection, is not only instrumental in saving the couple from certain death, but is also the one to convince the proud duke that his concept of *hoher muot* had resulted in unbecoming arrogance. In *Winter and Summer* the goddess Venus is the final arbiter of the potentially dangerous quarrel between the two seasons. The most fascinating heroine, however, is Sanderijn of the play *Lancelot of Denmark*. It is the purpose of this paper to compare this remarkable Middle Dutch play and its heroine with a source from which the story might have been derived, and to work out their similarities as well as their important differences.

P. Leendertz, Jr. was the first to point to a somewhat surprising literary source which contains important elements of plot and *dramatis personae* similar to the story of Lancelot and Sanderijn.[4] This story occurs in the Bible, *2 Samuel 13*, the affair of Amnon and Tamar.[5]

The basic elements of the bible story are quickly told: Amnon, one of King David's sons, falls in love with his half-sister, Tamar. Jonadab, a cousin, advises Amnon to pretend to be ill and to ask his father to send

Tamar to his house so that she might prepare special foods for him. David complies with his son's wishes and instructs the unsuspecting girl accordingly. As soon as Tamar arrives to undertake her special duties, Amnon drops all pretense of being ill and first tries to seduce the girl and, when she refuses to cooperate with his wishes, rapes her. After this singularly brutal act, Amnon's love turns to hatred and he has the girl thrown out of his house. Tamar goes to her brother Absalom, who instructs the girl to keep silent about the incident, while he quietly formulates plans to avenge his violated sister. Two years later Absalom takes revenge against his brother Amnon, when he lures him into a trap. He gets him tipsy on wine and orders his servants to kill him. Tamar is never heard from again; presumably she remained in her brother's house, desolate and unloved, shamed before the eyes of her people.

Now, in short outline, the story of Lancelot and Sanderijn: Lancelot, Prince of Denmark and heir to the throne, is in love with Sanderijn, daughter of a lowly but free knight and handmaiden to the Queen, Lancelot's mother. But Lancelot's mother will not acquiesce in what she considers an inappropriate alliance for her son, and she works out a plan to make such a union impossible. She proposes to induce Sanderijn to come to his chamber one night so that he might have his will with her; but afterwards he is to turn away from the girl, having insulted her in a most brutal manner. After some hesitation, Lancelot agrees to this scheme. The queen tells Sanderijn that Lancelot is gravely ill and in need of comfort. The unsuspecting girl goes to Lancelot's room, where she is insulted and raped by the prince. Deeply shamed, Sanderijn decides to leave Denmark. In a forest she rests by a fountain. There she is found by a nameless knight, who questions her. Sanderijn tells him her story in an elaborate, poetic metaphor about a fruit tree in bloom from which one single bloom had been taken by a noble falcon. The knight, deeply in love with the girl, considers the loss of one single blossom unimportant and marries Sanderijn. Back in Denmark, Lancelot has come to realize that he cannot live without Sanderijn, and he sends his servant Reinout to search for her throughout the world. Eventually, Reinout arrives in the same forest where Sanderijn had met the nameless knight; when he finally gets to speak with her he tries to persuade her to return with him to Denmark. But Sanderijn refuses to leave her husband, and as a sign that Reinout had actually spoken with her she repeats the metaphor of the flowering fruit tree and the noble falcon. Reinout returns to Denmark; but he is afraid to tell Lancelot that he had found the girl happily married. Instead, he tells his master that he had found Sanderijn, but that she had died in his arms hearing Lancelot's name; and, in order to convince his master of the truth of this message, he repeats, word for word, the metaphor of the fruit tree, the blossom and the falcon. Lancelot laments the loss of Sanderijn and, hoping to meet her again in heaven, dies of a broken heart.

Superficially, the biblical account and the Middle Dutch play do not seem to have much in common. However, a closer examination of the texts might reveal some surprising parallels, and one may be able to discern how the author of the play made use of the stark elements of the

bible story, while simultaneously taking careful note of the many changes the author of the drama made.

Certainly in the biblical tale it is not Amnon's mother who suggests to the lovesick young man to feign illness; it is a friend, indeed Amnon's cousin Jonadab, thus a close member of the family. King David, on the other hand, is merely an unwitting collaborator in the plot against Tamar. No motive is mentioned as to why Jonadab should want to help his cousin Amnon to entrap the girl. The Danish queen, however, has a reason as to why she seeks to separate the two young people. As she puts it (l. 196-199),

> Lanseloet, ic wille, ghi u bat besiet,
> U scone lijf, u hoghe gheboert,
> Ende werct na minen rade voert,
> Ende wilt minnen uus ghelijc.

(Lancelot, I wish that you would have a better opinion of yourself, / your handsomeness, your high birth, / and act in future according to my advice / and love someone your equal).[6]

Thus at first glance neither love seems permissible In the case of Amnon and Tamar, it is because of close blood ties: Tamar is Amnon's half-sister. Lancelot's love for Sanderijn seems impossible for dynastic reasons: he is a prince, heir to the throne, and must satisfy demands of state in any marriage he concludes, which would preclude a legal union with Sanderijn because of her lowly birth.

Yet neither girl is opposed to a legitimate proposal. Tamar urges her half-brother, "Now, therefore, I pray thee, speak unto the king; for he will not withhold me from thee." (v. 13)[7] Clearly, the girl would not object if her father gave her in marriage to Amnon; she merely counsels patience and forbearance. Sanderijn, on the other hand, rejects Lancelot's advances because her lowly station within the social order seems to preclude a legal union. In the following speech she makes clear that she fully understands her social position, regardless of what her heart desires (l. 72-83):

> O edel ridder hoghe gheboren,
> Dat en mach nemmermeer ghescien;
> Al eest, dat ic u gerne mach sien,
> Ic en ben niet uus ghelijke,
> Ghi sijt mi te hooch gheboren ende te mechtich
> Edel ridder, te sine u wijf:
> Daeromme soe moet sijn een blijf,
> Al eest, dat ic u met herten minne.
> Ende oec en willic gheens mans vriendinne
> Sijn, die leeft onder des hemels trone:
> Al waer hi een coninc ende spien crone,
> Soe en dadic mi niet te cleine.

(O noble, highly born knight, / that may never come to pass; / even if it is true that I see you gladly, / I am not your equal, / you are too highly born and too powerful, / noble knight, for me to be your wife: / therefore, it cannot take place, / even if I love you from my heart. / Also, I do not want to be any man's lover / who is alive on earth: / even if he were a king and wore a crown, / I would not lower myself.)

Thus a legitimate union would be possible for both couples: for Amnon and Tamar, marriage would be possible if the king were to give his blessings; Lancelot could offer marriage to Sanderijn if he were less influenced by his mother. But since neither of the two is in control of his passions, they are incapable of seeking reasonable solutions to their problems.

As mentioned above, it is Amnon's cousin, Jonadab, who suggests to the lovesick man to pretend to be ill; yet it is interesting to note that it is actually King David who sends his daughter to her disgrace and who eventually causes a fratricide in his family, when Absalom avenges his sister by killing Amnon. Certainly in contrast to Lancelot's mother, who is also the ultimate cause of her son's death, David cooperates unwittingly with the deception. Nevertheless, a parent is the catalyst of the catastrophe. Yet this change in the role of the Danish queen forces the dramatist to make an important change in the sequence of the plot. Jonadab tells Amnon to pretend to be sick in order to deceive primarily King David, who has Tamar, a virgin daughter, under his parental care and supervision. The King must be deceived so that he will send Tamar to take care of her brother in his supposed illness. The Danish queen, on the other hand, only needs to convince the girl that her son is weak and helpless in his sickness. Thus, she tells the girl (l. 294-309):

> Sanderijn, dat mijn herte sere deert,
> Moetic u claghen minen noet.
> Hier es mijn lieve sone Lanseloet,
> Es met siecheden sere bevaen:
> Hi wert ghister navont alsoe bestaen,
> Dat hi noit sint woort en sprac.
> Ic en weet niet wat hem ghebrac,
> Ochte wat dat hem deren mach.
> Maer heden merghen, doent was dach,
> Gaf hi enen swaren sucht:
> Sanderijn, ic hebbe sijns levens ducht,
> Dies doeght mijn herte grote pijn.
> Nu biddic u, scone maghet Sanderijn,
> Dat ghi wilt gaen te Lanseloet,
> Want hi leghet in groter noet,
> Dies doeght mijn herte swaer verdriet.

(Sanderijn, because my heart aches so very much / I must lament to you my sorrow. / Here is my dear son Lancelot / who is sorely stricken with illness. / Last night he was so badly infected / that he has not spoken a word since. / I don't know what ails him, / or what might hurt him. /

But this morning, when it was daylight, / he heaved a deep sigh. / Sanderijn, I fear for his life, / because of that my heart suffers great pain. / Now I beg you, beautiful maiden Sanderijn, / that you will go to Lancelot, / because he lies in great sorrow, / which hurts my heart very much.)

Sanderijn is not ordered to prepare food for Lancelot, but the food motif is employed by the Queen Mother. She promises Lancelot a night with Sanderijn, if he agrees to act in a certain way after he has had his will with her. Lancelot, overly eager, agrees to anything his mother might suggest, and she instructs him in the following manner (l. 236 - 49):

> Heer Lanseloet, gheloefdijt mi
> Bi ridderscape ende bi trouwen:
> Als ghi met Sanderijn der joncfrouwen
> Hebt ghedaen al u ghevoech,
> Dan seldi segghen: "ic hebbe uus genoech,
> Sanderijn, ic ben uus nu sat
> Ende van herten alsoe mat,
> Al haddic VII baken gheten":
> Dies en seldi emmer niet vergheten,
> Ghi selt spreken dese woert,
> Ende dan seldi rechte voert
> U van hare keren al den nacht,
> Ende ligghen ende slapen soete ende sacht,
> Sonder spreken, ende swighen al stille.

(Lord Lancelot, promise me this / by knighthood and faithfulness: / When you have done with Sanderijn, the young lady / all you desire / then you shall say: "I have enough of you, / Sanderijn, I am bored with you / and so heartily exhausted, / as if I had eaten seven cakes": / You must not forget this, / you shall speak these words, / and then immediately afterwards you shall turn / away from her all night / and lie sleeping sweetly and softly, / without speaking, keeping completely still.)

Thus, while Tamar actually prepares cakes for her brother, Sanderijn becomes, metaphorically, the cakes themselves.

Amnon does not seem to care that what he is planning to do to his sister is wrong, even when she implores him to reconsider, "Nay, my brother, do not force me; for no such thing ought to be done in Israel: do not thou this folly." (v.12) Indeed, Amnon has only one goal: to possess Tamar. If she submits willingly, all the better; if she protests and struggles it will not deflect him from satisfying his need. Lancelot, on the other hand, is very much aware that his mother's suggestion is vile (l. 250 - 61):

> O lieve moeder, es dat u wille,
> Dat ic spreke dese dorper woert?
> Des ghelike en hebbic niet ghehoert:

Wat mach u hier met gheholpen sijn,
Dat ic dit tot Sanderijn
Spreken soude met minen mont,
Ende ligghen voert ane als een hont
Sonder spreken, als een keytijf?
Wat soude peinsen dat reine wijf,
Dat ic die dorperheit begonste,
Ende ic haer draghe soe vriendelijke onste?
Dat soude mi daer mijn herte deren.

(O dear mother, is that your wish / that I speak those vile words? / I have never heard of anything like it: / How could it benefit you / if I should say this / to Sanderijn with my lips, / and afterwards lie like a dog, / without speaking, like a wretch? / How that pure woman would be hurt / if I committed this vileness / while I bear towards her such friendly favor? / That would hurt my heart.)

Only after his mother insists that this will be the only way in which he will ever enjoy Sanderijn, does he give in to her demands (l. 266 - 68):

Vrouwe moeder, doetse mi comen dan:
Ic sal doen, dat ghi begheert,
Al eest dat mire herten deert.

(Dear mother, make her then come to me: / I shall do as you desire, / even if it hurts my heart.)

Even after he had agreed to cooperate with his mother's plans, Lancelot worries about the effect his words and actions will have on Sanderijn and he rationalizes (l. 269 - 73):

"De meneghe sprect, hi en meines niet:"
Al dier ghelike es mi ghesciet,
Want al spreict mijn mont,
Ic en saels niet meinen in minen gront,
Want ic an hare alder doecht.

("Many a person says what he does not mean:" / The same thing has happened to me, / for even if my mouth speaks, / I shall not mean it in my heart, / because I think differently of her.)

And he hopes that Sanderijn will not take his words to heart, because he fears that he will lose her. No such doubts haunt Amnon as he chases his violated sister out of his house as if she were a dog. Indeed, for Amnon passionate love has turned to hatred: "Then Amnon hated her exceedingly; so that the hatred wherewith he hated her was greater than the love wherewith he had loved her." (v.15) Thus sick, unreasonable passion has turned into its opposite: sick and unreasonable hatred. Clearly, this is also the result the Danish queen had in mind for her son when she explains (l. 319 - 21):

Want, als die wille es ghedean,
Soe es die minne al vergaen,
Dit es menichweerf ghesciet.

(Because, as soon as desire is satisfied, / love has vanished already, / that has occurred many times.)

With this observation, the Queen Mother recalls the actual situation in the biblical tale. But Amnon's hatred for Tamar is real, whereas Lancelot makes an insulting remark which he himself does not believe.

Tamar never suspects who was involved in the plot against her. In contrast, Sanderijn knows full well that it was the queen who had tricked her with her tale about Lancelot's illness. But she blames Lancelot for having taken advantage of her helplessness because, like Tamar, she was forced against her will (l. 342 - 45):

Ic bidde gode, dat hi mine scande
Wille decken, die ic nu hebbe ontfaen,
Want ic hebt sonder danc ghedean,
Dies es mi te moede wee.

(I pray God that he will hide / the shame which I have suffered now / because I did it against my will. / Because of that my heart aches.)

Sanderijn felt particularly hurt by Lancelot's behavior after the assault. As she puts it (l. 332 - 37):

Nochtan deert mi boven al,
Die woorde, die hi sprac die ridder vri,
Ende keerde sijn anschijn omme van mi,
Al haddic gheweest een stinckende hont.
Dat hebbic soe vaste in minen gront,
Ende doet mijnder herten alsoe seer;

(In addition hurt me above all / the words he spoke, the noble knight, / and that he turned his face away from me / as if I were a stinking dog. / That I feel so deeply in my heart / and hurts my heart so much.)

Clearly, both girls felt that the rape was a horrible experience, but that the brutal behavior of their attackers after the act was even harder to bear, in that it made the victim feel absolutely worthless, and, in the case of Sanderijn, something less than human.

At this point in the biblical tale, Tamar vanishes into history. Of the two women, she is the more helpless, having to place herself under the protection of her brother, who uses her as an excuse to initiate a rebellion against his father. In order to hide his hatred and his plans for revenge from his half-brother and King David, Absalom "spake unto his

brother Amnon neither good nor bad" (v.22). Sanderijn once again echoes these words when she muses (l. 338 - 39):

> Ic meine, dat hi mi (nu) nemmermeer
> Van mi en weet goet noch quaet.

(I believe that he will never again / hear anything about me, either good or bad.)

Thus, Absalom carefully guards his tongue and waits patiently to put his plans into effect. Since he succeeds in hiding his true feelings behind a wall of silence, he is able to lure Amnon into a trap and get him tipsy on wine, and has him killed by his servants. Lancelot, on the other hand, is quite literally killed by words which bring both "good" and "bad" news.

For Sanderijn does not hide her shame by hiding away from the world. She determines to leave Denmark in order to find a new life in foreign parts. Soon she finds herself in an orchard where she seeks rest by a fountain. There she is found by a nameless knight, the ruler of this country. After some initial misunderstandings, the knight falls deeply in love with the girl and offers her marriage. Sanderijn would be glad to accept his proposal but is too honest not to inform her suitor of what has happened to her. And she chooses a most charming and delicate metaphor to explain her situation (l.484 - 505):

> Nu gawi dan in dese warande,
> Her ridder, spreken al luttelkijn,
> Ende verstaet die redene mijn,
> Dies biddic u, hoghe gheboren baroen.
> Anesiet desen boom scone ende groen,
> Hoe wel dat hi ghebloyet staet;
> Sinen edelen roke, hi daer gaet
> Al omme desen bogaert al;
> Hi staet in soe soeten dal,
> Dat hi van rechte bloyen moet;
> Hi es soe edel ende soe soet,
> Dat hi versiert al desen bogaert.
> Quame nu een valcke van hogher aert
> Ghevloghen op desen boem, ende daelde,
> Ende ene bloeme daer af haelde,
> Ende daer na nemmermeer neghene
> Noch noit en haelde meer dan ene,
> Soudi den boem daeromme haten,
> Ende te copene daeromme laten?
> Dat biddic u, dat ghi mi segt,
> Ende die rechte waerheit sprect,
> Edel ridder, in hovescher tale.

(Now let us go then into this park, / Lord Knight, and talk a little, / and understand my words, / that I beg you, highly born baron. / Look at this tree, beautiful and green, / how well it stands in bloom; / its noble aroma

permeates / this whole orchard; / it stands in such a sweet valley / that it is right that it should bloom; / it is so noble and so sweet / that it beautifies this whole orchard. / If now a falcon of noble character came / flying upon this tree and lit upon it, / and took a blossom from it, / and thereafter never again a single one, / not ever picked more than one / would you hate the tree / and make it pay for it? / I beg you that you tell me this / and speak the honest truth, / noble knight, in courtly words.)

By transforming a horrible, brutal act committed against her into such a charming and gentle metaphor, Sanderijn conveys two important messages: the attack no longer evokes bitter memories, and she feels no loss of personal worth or virtue. She was a victim; but now she has overcome the past and is ready to get on with her life. The nameless knight understands her message and wholeheartedly agrees with her (l. 506 - 17):

> Scone wijf, ic versta u wale.
> Ene bloeme, dat en es niet:
> En esser nemmer toe ghesciet,
> Daer omme en salic den boem niet haten.
> Noch te copene daer omme laten,
> Want hi es soe scone ghedaen.
> Ic sie daer op soe meneghe bloeme staen
> Met groten hopen sonder ghetal,
> Daer edel vrucht af comen sal,
> Opdat god ghedoghen wille.
> Nu doet ewelijc hier af een ghestille,
> Ende comt met mi, wel scone wijf.

(Beautiful woman, I understand you well. / One flower, that is nothing: / Furthermore, it shall never come to pass / that I shall hate the tree because of it. / Nor make it pay for it, / because it is so beautiful. / I see on it so many a beautiful flower, / in great masses without number, / from which will come noble fruit, / if God is willing. / Now keep quiet about this forever / and come with me, truly beautiful woman.)

Thus, while it is Tamar's destiny to live an empty, barren life, Sanderijn manages to put the past behind her and may now face the future with confidence.

The narrator of the biblical tale does not indicate whether Amnon ever regretted his foul deed. He had wilfully sought instant gratification of a momentary passion without considering the consequences either to himself or his victim. We only know that his passionate love had turned into an even greater hate. Perhaps this overwhelming hatred for his victim is also the cause for his lack of remorse. This attitude may have lured him into a false sense of security: he never suspects that Absalom harbors thoughts of revenge, since the latter hides his true feelings behind a wall of silence.

Lancelot, on the other hand, soon discovers that he truly loves Sanderijn and that he cannot live without her. Indeed, he is now determined to marry her despite his mother's strong objections. Yet he too is unwilling to accept blame for what has occurred. He had been fully aware of the vileness of his actions and words (l. 524 - 25):

> Mi dochte, dat mi mijn herte brac,
> Doe ic sprac die felle woert.

(I thought my heart would break / when I spoke those evil words.)

Yet, he continues (l. 528 - 29),

> Dat heeft mijn moeder al ghedaen,
> Die mi die woorde spreken dede.

(All this was done by my mother / who made me speak those words.)

Lancelot has still not matured sufficiently to realize that all along he had had a choice in the matter. He could have refused to accept his mother's conditions outright; or, having once agreed to them, he could have decided not to adhere to them. Indeed, since he is now willing to marry Sanderijn, this must have always been an option, if only he had had the will and firmness of character to control his desire for immediate gratification.

As mentioned before, Lancelot sends his friend and chamberlain Reinout out into the world to find Sanderijn and to bring her back. Reinout does indeed find the girl; however, she categorically refuses Lancelot's belated proposal of marriage. She sends Reinout back to Denmark with the following message for Lancelot (l.793 - 812):

> Ghi selt segghen den ridder vri,
> Dat wi stonden, ic ende hi,
> In enen sconen groenen bogaert,
> Ende dat daer quam van hogher aert
> Een edel valcke van hogher weerde,
> Ende beete neder op ene gheerde
> Die scone met haren bloemen stoet.
> Dat seldi segghen den ridder goet,
> Ende dat die valcke, die daer quam,
> Ene bloeme van dier gheerden nam,
> Ende alle die andere liet hi staen.
> Sine vlercken ghinc hi van hem slaen
> Ende vloech wech met haesten groet:
> Dit seldi seggen den edelen ghenoet.
> Ende cort soe quam die valcke daer weder
> Ende sochte die gheerde op ende neder,
> Maer hi en mochse vinden niet:
> Dies doeghde die valcke wel swaer verdriet,
> Dat hi die gheerde dus niet en vant:

Dit seldi segghen den coenen wigant.

(You shall tell the noble knight / that we were standing, I and he, / in a beautiful green orchard, / and that there came of outstanding character a noble falcon of high worth / and flew down upon a branch / which stood beautifully in bloom. / That you shall tell the good knight, / and that the falcon which came there / took a flower from that branch / and all the others he left alone. / He beat his wings / and flew away in great haste, that you shall tell the noble companion. / And soon the falcon returned / and sought the branch up and down, / but he could not find it; / because of this the falcon suffered indeed great unhappiness, / that he could not find the branch; / this you shall tell the brave knight.)

In other words, before meeting the nameless knight, Sanderijn had viewed herself as a whole tree in bloom from which one little blossom had been picked; and with this metaphor she had revealed, without hesitation, her whole personality and soul to this gentle and understanding man. With regard to Lancelot, however, she now states that she had never offered him more than a part of her - one branch - from which the falcon thoughtlessly removed one single, negligible blossom. Whatever part of her spirit and soul had at one time loved and respected Lancelot has now irretrievably vanished along with its now unimportant little flower. If this causes the noble falcon - Lancelot - suffering and heartache, then that is no longer of concern to Sanderijn. She has found happiness in her union with the nameless knight, and a horrifying experience, which might have ruined her life, has become an insignificant event of the distant past.

The death of the two young men is also similar and yet very different. Absalom himself does not kill Amnon, but rather instructs his servants (13:28): "Mark ye now when Amnon's heart is merry with wine, and when I say unto you, Smite Amnon; then kill him, fear not: have not I commanded you? be courageous, and be valiant."

Reinout, Lancelot's servant, also becomes the direct cause of his master's death. On the road back to Denmark he ponders the situation and examines the effect his message might have on Lancelot. He had warned his prince that Sanderijn might not accept his marriage proposal; and Reinout is very much aware of Lancelot's desperate state of mind. He believes it quite possible that Lancelot would plunge Denmark into war, in order to bring Sanderijn back by force (l. 826 - 31):

Ic weet wel, het cost hem dlijf,
En al den ghenen, die hem bestaen
Ende ten tienden lede anegaen,
Sal hi daer omme avonturen.
Daer sal die meneghe om besueren
Die bitter doet, dat wetic wel te voren.

(I know well, even if it should cost him his life / and all those related to him / to the tenth degree, / he shall risk it all. / For that many a one shall suffer / bitter death, that I know in advance.)

Convinced that Lancelot's private agony is not a sufficient reason for risking war with Sanderijn's new homeland, he decides to tell his sovereign that she is dead. Upon his arrival in Denmark, Lancelot joyfully welcomes his servant and eagerly queries him about the whereabouts of his love. Reinout carries out his plan by explaining that he had indeed found the beautiful lady but that at the mention of Lancelot's name her heart had broken and she had died in his arms. At first, Lancelot does not believe this tale and suspects that Reinout had not found Sanderijn at all. At this point Reinout gently repeats the metaphor of the fruit tree in bloom and Lancelot interprets the message correctly (l. 894 - 99):

O Sanderijn, ghi waert die gheerde,
Die scone met haren bloemen stoet.
Ende ic die valcke, dies benic vroet,
Die ene bloeme daer af nam.
Want mi nie sint vroude en gequam,
Dat ic die edele gheerde verloes.

(O Sanderijn, you were the branch / which stood beautifully in bloom. / And I the falcon, that is clear to me, / who took a flower from it. / Because I have had no joy and comfort / since I lost the noble branch.)

Even now Lancelot refuses to acknowledge his own culpability. He forgets that he willingly complied with his mother's scheme in order to satisfy a momentary, transient desire. And just as he had permitted his mother to control his actions at the very beginning of his relationship with Sanderijn, so she now dominates his thoughts at the very brink of death (l. 906 - 13):

Met rechte roepic "o wi! o wach"
Over die moeder, die mi droech,
Want haer herte in vrouden loech,
Doen si mi gaf den valschen raet:
Owi der bitterliker daet
Ende der jammerliker moert,
Dat si mi spreken dede die woert,
Daer ic bi verloes dat scone wijf.

(Justly I call "o woe, o woe" / upon the mother who deceived me, / because her heart was joyful / when she gave me that treacherous advice. / O woe the bitter deed / and lamentable murder / that she made me speak those words / by which I lost that beautiful woman.)

And he dies of a broken heart, mistakenly hoping to be reunited with Sanderijn in heaven.

If the author of *Lancelot* drew on the *Amnon and Tamar* episode for inspiration - and there is little doubt amongst scholars that this is the case - then he manipulated the events of his source rather freely. In the biblical tale it is Jonadab, a cousin, who advises Amnon to feign illness, while the parent, King David, is merely an unwitting instrument in the plot against his daughter. In the play, Lancelot does not need to pretend illness; the queen merely needs to convince Sanderijn that Lancelot is weak and helpless and, therefore, no threat to the girl. Certainly, both parents lose their sons in the end; but while David is deeply affected by the loss of both Amnon and Absalom, the Danish queen vanishes from the stage, and the audience is left in the dark about her reaction to the utter disaster she has brought down on her family.

The most telling difference between the plot of the biblical source and the play, however, concerns the two heroines. Tamar, the ultimate victim, enters the house of her brother and avenger Absalom, never to be heard from again. Sanderijn, on the other hand, emerges triumphant from what seemed utter degradation and hopelessness. Indeed, in the end she occupies the elevated social position which the Danish queen had denied her.

Essentially, the *Amnon and Tamar* episode represents the initial stage of the dynastic struggle between David and Absalom, in which the tragic death of the latter ultimately leads to the installation of Solomon as king of Israel. In contrast to this majestic canvas, the *Lancelot* play has been reduced to a typical love triangle, even though the queen initially seems to have been motivated by dynastic concerns in her plot against Sanderijn. The author of the play forgets about this element of his plot and the play ends with Lancelot's death, and no mention is made as to who will occupy Denmark's throne.

There is a further, more subtle difference between the epic tale of the Bible and the Middle Dutch drama. One would expect that the epic would tell its tale in a narrative style, while the drama would present its plot to the audience in actions carried out by the actors. Yet the styles of presentation seem to have been strangely reversed: the plot of the epic is advanced by actions, while the story of the drama is presented by transforming actions into words. Thus Amnon actually pretends to be ill, not only in front of his father, whom he must convince of his illness so that the unsuspecting king will send Tamar to his son's room, but also for a while in front of Tamar in order to lure her into his bedroom. In contrast, the Danish queen merely needs to lie to Sanderijn; Lancelot does not have to *act out* the charade. In the bible, the rape itself is described in terms of actions, while this important plot element is covered in the drama by a sparse stage direction, only to be narrated by the heroine afterwards. Tamar actually prepares cakes for her brother, whereas Sanderijn herself is metaphorically transformed into seven cakes whose consumption has exhausted Lancelot. Clearly, both girls are utterly devastated by the assault; but Tamar is physically thrown out of bed and, more importantly, out of the house, an act which makes her shame public

knowledge. In contrast, Sanderijn claims to have been even more distressed by Lancelot's *words* after the attack.

But the most important transformation of an action into words is Sanderijn's creation of an elaborate image of herself as a beautiful fruit tree in bloom from which one single blossom had been stolen. Repeated three times, it serves a different purpose at each stage. When Sanderijn uses it initially to explain her situation to the nameless knight, it transforms a traumatic experience - the forced loss of her virginity - into an event of negligible importance; the loss of one little blossom from among thousands of others is of little consequence to either the girl or the knight. When she uses it a second time as proof for Reinout that he had actually found her, she changes the purpose of the metaphor since it now must convince Lancelot that he has lost her forever. Indeed, whereas Amnon is killed in a brutal attack by Absalom's servants, Lancelot dies while listening to this charming yet deadly poetic image, repeated yet again by his own servant.

The author of the *abel spel* may have been inspired by the biblical tale;[8] but he changed and transformed it in more ways than one. He reduced the number of characters and changed their roles; he transformed a helpless victim into a triumphant heroine; but most importantly, he used the epic dynastic struggle of the House of David, told in dynamic actions, to present us with a drama which unfolds in poetic images and beautiful metaphors.

NOTES

[1] Although the plays by Adam de la Halle, *Robin and Marion* (after 1283), and *The Play of the Bower* (approx. 1276), and the *oeuvre* of Jean Bodel and Rutebeuf precede the *abele spelen* and *sotterniën*, one may characterize Adam's plays more as *Singspiele* rather than dramas, while the plays of the latter two poets are not wholly secular.

[2] An English prose translation of this farce will soon appear in P. Beidler and T. Decker, "Lippijn: Another Source for Chaucer's *A Merchant's Tale*?", *The Chaucer Review*.

[3] All references to the plays in general and *Lanseloet van Denemerken* in particular are from H.E. Moltzer, *De middelnederlandsche dramatische poëzie*, Vol. I (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1875), which is still a reliable edition of all the plays.

Although the plays are not all grouped together in the manuscript, we can be quite certain that they were meant to be played in pairs, as is announced in the epilogues of the serious dramas. As further evidence of this intention, the last line of *Winter and Summer* rhymes with the first line of *Rubben*.

[4] P. Leendertz, Jr., *Middelnederlandsche dramatische poëzie*, Bibliotheek van middelnederlandsche letterkunde, Nos. 13-14 (Leiden: W. W. Sijthoff, 1907), pp. CLX-CLXI. Since the publication of Leendertz' study, in which he presents the results of his thorough search for analogues, no scholar has yet succeeded in tracing any of the *abele spelen* to a unique source, although much effort has gone into searching for possible predecessors; cf. A. M. Duinhoven, "De bron van Esmoreit," *Niewe Taalgids*, 72 (March 1979), 124-144; "Tekstreconstructie: een abel spel," *Spiegel der Letteren*, 19 (1977), 193-244; G. Kazemir, "Lanseloet van Denemerken," in *Taal- en letterkundig gastenboek voor Prof. Dr. G. A. van Es. Opstellen, de 70-jarige aangeboden ter gelegenheid van zijn afscheid als hoogleraar aan de Rijks-universiteit te Groningen* (Groningen: Archief voor de Nederlandsche Syntaxis), 1975; J. W. Muller, "De taal en de herkomst der zoogenaamde 'abele spelen' en 'sotterniën'," *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche Taal- en Letterkunde*, 46 (1927), 292-301; L. Peeters, "Esmoreit tconincx sone van cecielien: siciliaanse historie als abel spel," *Spiegel der Letteren*, 19 (1977), 245-79; M. Ramondt, "De bronnen van den Gloriant," *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche Taal- en Letterkunde*, 41 (1922), 31-46.

[5] For the sake of convenience, all references to the biblical story are cited from the King James Version.

[6] My translations are meant to be accurate rather than elegant. I am planning an edition of all the plays for the stage in the near future.

[7] In *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles M. Laymon (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 176, one finds the following observation with regard to "Amnon and Tamar": "Marriage between half brother and sister was forbidden in later legislation (Lev.18:9, 11; Deut. 27:22) but at this time was still acceptable."

[8] He could not have derived his story from Jacob van Maerlant, *Rymbybel*, ed. J. David, Vol. I (Brussel: M. Hayez, drukker der Koninklyke Akademie, 1858), 462-63, which covers the episode in these few lines (my translation):

> Amon, David's oldest son,
> loved Absalon's sister, his brother's,
> who was born by Absalon's mother,
> and who was Amon's half sister.
> Thamar was her name, as I read it.
> He made himself sick because he wanted
> that she should take care of him;
> and when she was secretly with him
> he said: "Sister, lie with me,"
> and he was with her with force.
> And then right there at the same time
> he hated her and threw her out.
> Then she walked away crying very much
> and complained to Absalon

who was quiet and (who) took the matter
upon himself.

These lines do cover the essential events of the story, but most of the salient parallels with the *Lancelot* play are either barely mentioned or totally omitted. The author must have had access to either the Vulgate or a more elaborate translation based on the Vulgate.