What is more important in life: money or happiness? This is the topic of a Dutch strophic disputation between a student and his master (dispitacie tusschen enen clerck ende sinen meester), surviving in a Brussels manuscript from 1410.¹ The student (clericus), who brings up the question, is convinced that money rules the world and therefore is to be preferred. In a series of stanzas he argues that money solves all problems, pays all debts, allows you to order every wine, makes you popular in all taverns, keeps you out of prison, lets you roll the dice, gets you all the women you want and buys you absolution in the end. The master attempts to change his pupil’s views by showing the higher importance of happiness – the meaning of the Dutch geluck seems to include both intellectual and spiritual happiness, but also good fortune and prosperity.² The master fails to convince his student that happiness does not lie in material wealth, wine or women. Only when the master broaches the topic of eternal life, is the cleric willing to accept the primacy of a different kind of happiness, which is now for the first time in the poem defined more precisely as that which ziele ende lijf bewaert: literally, that which protects and ensures soul and body – although the expression ziele ende lijf in this context should be understood broadly to refer to man’s spiritual and earthly existence.³

This pious conclusion may come as a disappointment to the modern reader: the streetwise student seems to have a better understanding of

what makes the world go round than his idealistic teacher. But in spite of the boy’s bravura in highlighting money’s charms, he does not really challenge the authority of the master. A medieval audience would have recognized immediately that the cleric delights in all the pleasures from which he was supposed to refrain. Contemporary school texts and ecclesiastical rules tell young clerics to ‘stay away from dice and malicious women [and] not to enter taverns. Whoever is attracted to these will often end up poor’. This is a Dutch translation of the Facetus, one of the first texts to which medieval schoolboys were exposed. Another translation of the same sententia brings in eternity: ‘Stay away from pride and gambling, prostitutes and the tavern, if you want to be given honor in this life and eternal life in the hereafter’.

Read against the backdrop of clerical education, the disputation appears to have been written with the intention of making schoolboys accept the ecclesiastical conditions for an intellectual life or a career in the Church. The term disputatie in the rubric of the poem does not refer to debate or dispute in the modern sense, nor to the Latin disputatio as a method of academic teaching. Like other medieval Dutch dialogues that have been labeled as disputatie, the text should be read in the context of the contemporary school practices of clerics, who gathered to have discussions and debates with each other or their teachers in order to increase their knowledge of various topics – or so says the Tafel vanden kersten gelove, a Dutch theological summa that was written by the Dominican Dirck van Delft in 1404.

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