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The Play about Common Trade and Play about Empty Purse: Cornelis Everaert's Prequels to *Elckerlijc/Everyman*?

Abstract

This paper proposes a possible link between *Elckerlijc*, the Dutch-language allegorical play that provided the basis for the well-known English translation *Everyman*, and two plays by Cornelis Everaert, a sixteenth-century playwright from Bruges writing from within the amateur literary society Chambers of Rhetoric (*rederijerskamers*). The two plays are *The Play about Common Trade* (*Spil van Ghemeene Neerrynghe*), a serious play, and *The Comedy about Empty Purse* (*Esbattement van Aerm in de Buerse*), a lighter comic play. The primary basis for this link is the presence in these two plays of a secondary character named Elckerlijc, the only two known examples of this character name besides the eponymous play that were roughly contemporary with *Elckerlijc*. There are, however, more than surface-level similarities built into the three incarnations of this character, which have their roots in his status as a mercantile character who has forgotten how to live according to God's command. In both *Common Trade* and *Empty Purse*, Elckerlijc is portrayed as a thoughtless, excessively prudent hoarder of wealth whose lack of virtue and charity in specifically commercial behaviour harms less fortunate tradesmen and labourers by driving them out of the workforce; Everaert blames this unvirtuous behaviour to the continuing dire economic situation that faced sixteenth-century Bruges. The paper draws on Deirdre McCloskey's theory of "bourgeois virtues" to show how Everaert uses the Elckerlijc character as a foil to participants in a healthy, functioning, and virtuous marketplace. *Everyman* has been experiencing a resurgence in popularity; directors (and, even more importantly, translators) drawn to that play may also wish to look at *Common Trade* and *Empty Purse* as different takes on the character of Elckerlijc, one from a playwright whose work has been too long overlooked.

KEYWORDS: Low Countries, Chambers of Rhetoric, Cornelis Everaert, *Elckerlijc*, economic ethics

The eponymous main character of *Everyman*, one of the most famous and best-regarded English dramas of the later Middle Ages, is by now generally agreed to have his origins in two interlocking places: the earlier Flemish play *Elckerlijc*, of which *Everyman* is a nearly line-for-line translation, and the burgeoning merchant and business classes of northern Europe in the later Middle Ages, of which he is apparently a well-to-do member. The

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Elckerlijc/Everyman story is known to have enjoyed popularity in print through several sixteenth-century translations, including *Everyman* itself, Ischyrius's Latin *Homulus*, and Macropedius's *Hekastus*. What is less well-known is how *Elckerlijc* was received, and to what end, within the theatrical traditions of its home region in the southern Low Countries. We have limited information at our disposal with which to answer the question of the reception of *Elckerlijc* on its own terms, but we may be able to shed some light on the subject in matters of adaptation and appropriation of *Elckerlijc*.

This paper will argue that *Elckerlijc* was a spiritual forbearer, and possibly a direct inspiration, to a pair of plays that emerged from Flanders (specifically, from Bruges) during the tumultuous reign of Charles V which directly link the kind of virtuous behaviour promoted in *Elckerlijc* with robust commercial activity. The two plays, both from around 1529 or 1530, both also feature a prominent morally deficient character named 'Elckerlijc'. Both are from the same author, the Bruges-based cloth dyer and very prolific playwright Cornelis Everaert. Both plays are also products of the economic devastation that wreaked havoc on Bruges throughout the latter half of the fifteenth century, and which was there to stay by the turn of the sixteenth. *Elckerlijc* has long been acknowledged as an implicitly merchant-class character rather than a truly universal representation; in Roger A. Ladd's words, "Everyman does not actually represent Every Man, as a reader might so naturally assume, but rather Every Merchant" (2007: 58). Furthermore, Elsa Strietman has previously noted the gentle pro-mercantile bent to the original *Elckerlijc*, that his sin is not merely participation but *excessive* participation in material accumulation and pleasures (1996: 107). However, if Cornelis Everaert's two *Elckerlijcs* are supposed to be other incarnations of the eponymous *Elckerlijc*, we can add a new dimension to his character as well: *Elckerlijc*'s hoarding and immoderation are sinful not only because they are excessive, but because they are corrupting to others; they keep others from participating in honest and productive commerce, and thus make trade itself unvirtuous. This appropriation of *Elckerlijc* shows a new development in the understanding of the sort of behaviour that members of a community owe to one another: charitable giving, as *Elckerlijc* learns to do in the eponymous play, is well and good, but it is also good to help your neighbours to earn their own money, as *Elckerlijc* fails to do in Everaert's two plays.

Rather than on *Elckerlijc*'s redemption at his death, these two plays focus instead on *Elckerlijc*'s sin-riddled life, and his pursuit of his own pleasures and desires at the expense of his neighbours. The first, *The Play about Common Trade* (*Spil van Ghemeene Neerrhynghe*, henceforth *Common Trade*), is a serious allegorical play, the kind we might think of as a rough analogue to the English morality play, though this is not an entirely accurate

comparison.¹ It is a deeply bitter play, caustic in its depictions of the crippling poverty present in Bruges when it was written. The second, *A Comedy about Empty Purse* (*Esbatement van Aerm in de Buerse*, henceforth *Empty Purse*) is a lighter, shorter comic play. Both focus on relationships between participants in a specialized trade economy who have fallen on difficult times. Both also use their Elckerlijc characters for similar dramatic functions: Elckerlijc, who is not the protagonist but a side character, engages in sinful behaviour, which he refuses to change by the end of the play, guaranteeing that the protagonists' poverty and suffering will continue for the foreseeable future. Both condemn him for such behaviour, though *Common Trade* does so in far more explicit terms, in a way that echoes the condemnations of Elckerlijc's behaviour in the eponymous play. And finally, both contain a significant twist from the original *Elckerlijc* in that they depict Elckerlijc's refusal to engage in *commerce*, rather than *charity*, with poor workers as a fundamental aspect of his sin.

The core story of *Everyman* and *Elckerlijc* is simple and well-known: at the behest of God, who laments the sorry state of a humanity that has learned to put worldly pleasures before their love of him, Death confronts a man, Everyman, informing him that he will soon be asked to present God with the account book of his life – which, according to death, contains “many badde dedes and good but a few” (*Ev.* l. 108). Burdened with sins on his soul and woefully unprepared to meet his maker, Elckerlijc begins a quest to find companions to aid him in his journey. Rejected by his fair-weather friends Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Goods, Everyman learns the only friend he can depend on to the end is Good Deeds – or, in the original Dutch version, Virtue (*Duecht*) – whom he has neglected and allowed to weaken throughout his life. In order to settle his accounts properly, he must conduct a sincere and public repentance onstage to achieve salvation and die with a clean reckoning and a clean soul. He dies peacefully alongside Good Deeds or Virtue, promising to give half his accumulated wealth to the poor, and an epilogue implores the audience to check that their own accounts be “hole” and “sounde” before their deaths (*Ev.* l. 916). It is a simple, elegant play with few demands for staging, props, and costumes, and one that leaves itself open, intentionally or not, to a variety of embellishments and a great deal of experimentation with form and gen-

¹ References to *Everyman* and *Elckerlijc* are taken from Davidson et al. 2007. References for *The Play about Common Trade* and *The Play about Empty Purse*, unless otherwise indicated, are from Hüsken vols 1 and 2 (2005). All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated; I thank and acknowledge Mrs Elsa Strietman for her assistance with the translations for *Common Trade*. For clarity's sake, I have left the name 'Elckerlijc' untranslated when referring to any Dutch play in which the character appears; he is Everyman only in the English play of that name.

re. This potential for experimentation is exemplified by Carol Ann Duffy's well-received 2015 modernization, performed at London's National Theatre and starring Chiwetel Ejiofor in the lead role, which emphasized the character's materialist tendencies: Ejiofor's *Everyman* is a modern-day hedonistic playboy who opens the play by celebrating his birthday with a lavish cocaine-fuelled dance party (Billington 2015).

What is curious about this, however, is that the very text of the English *Everyman* pigeonholes itself in terms of genre in a way that *Elckerlijc* does not. *Everyman*, in its introduction, calls itself "a treatyse . . . in the manner of a morall playe", but *Elckerlijc* introduces itself as "a lovely little book made in the manner of a play or entertainment" ("een schoon boecxken, ghemaect in den maniere van eenen speele ofte esbatemente", prior to l. 1). That it is first a "little book" (or a "treatyse") indicates that one may simply read, rather than watch a performance, though whether nothing is lost by removing the plays from their own theatricality is certainly a matter for debate (see Garner 1987: 277, 283-4). If it is to be a play, it may be a "klucht" or an "esbatemente", a designator usually associated with comedy or lighter amusement. The *Everyman* translator seems to have, by his own assertion, opted for one of these, but the *Elckerlijc* playwright all but invites us to adapt the play as circumstances may require. As 2015 London audiences responded well to an *Everyman* that renounced the glamour of upper-class materialism and "indifference to the future of our planet" (Billington 2015), Cornelis Everaert may have discerned that his audience did not need to see *Elckerlijc* dying well as much as they needed to see him living poorly.

What does *Elckerlijc*'s poor living look like? We know a few broad details from the eponymous play: we know that he has lived "without concern" ("buyten sorghen", l. 19) and "without fear [of God], ignorant" ("uut vresen, onbekent", l. 3, trans. by Davidson et al. 2007). We also know that he has accumulated a rather large amount of hoarded wealth, as evidenced by the scene between *Elckerlijc* and Goods (*Tgoet*), to whom *Elckerlijc* notes that he has "given great love" ("ic heb . . . geleyt grote minne", l. 344). We also know, from Goods's repudiation, that *Elckerlijc* has treated the poor unkindly, not having shared his wealth with them. These indications of *Elckerlijc*'s sinful lifestyle also apply to the *Elckerlijc* characters present in both *Common Trade* and *Empty Purse*, though they are given more specificity and the immediate consequences of his actions are made clear. His sins here are indicative of general bad behaviour in an upper-class person; in Everaert's plays, his behaviour is on display in explicitly commercial contexts, and sullies everything it touches.

We must, of course, place Everaert and the plays within their proper literary and historical context, the Chambers of Rhetoric (*rederijerskam-*

ers) that peppered the Low Countries between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries (Hummelen 1989: 170). The Chambers of Rhetoric were amateur literary societies which drew their membership mainly from the artisanal and business classes. They shared many similarities with guilds and confraternities; Elsa Strietman notes that “the element of mutual social and economic aid, so strong in the religious and craft guilds, can be perceived in the Chambers as well” (1992: 237). The Chambers originated from lay devotional brotherhoods, whose members served as assistants to and liaisons to local clergy and assisted with processions and festivals (ibid.). Their primary function, however, was the instruction of their members in the literary arts and the writing, production, and performance of poetry and drama. Bruges hosted two Chambers, the Holy Ghost (*Helichs Gheest*) and the Three Lady Saints (*Drie Santinnen*), both of which counted Everaert as a member, though there is no evidence that he ever served as factor (master poet) of either.

The drama of the Chambers’ poets, who called themselves *rederijkers* or ‘Rhetoricians’, endured several decades of scorn from critics who felt that it paled in comparison to the literature of the Golden Age that followed it, that it was stifflingly didactic and devoid of real dramatic action, and that its heavily stylized verse mostly masked that the Rhetoricians did not have anything real to say; they were simply “imitations produced by a threadbare imagination” (Pleij 1994: 63). So formidable a scholar as Robert Potter believed, as late as 1975, that *Everyman* predated *Elckerlijc* because the former was clearly the superior play from a literary standpoint, freed from the overly stylized trappings that characterize Rhetoricians’ drama: “If *Everyman* is not the original work, it is that literary miracle of poetry, the translation that transcends the original” (Potter 1975: 173-4). However, the Rhetoricians have begun to see a revival from scholars who have argued strongly for the literary and theatrical merit of at least some of their works.² They are still, however, relatively unknown in the English-speaking theatre world.

Rhetoricians’ plays were performed at all sorts of occasions, ranging from religious processions to royal banquets to competitions organized jointly by host cities and by the Chambers themselves, called *landjuwelen*. The plays themselves can be roughly grouped into three sometimes overlapping genres: the *tafelspel* or ‘table play’, a piece written for a banquet or private celebration; the *esbattement* or *klucht*, a comedy or farce; and the *spel van zinne*, the ‘play of the mind’, the genre most associated with the Rhetoricians, a serious play that attempted to answer a ques-

² Particularly worth reading on this matter are van Bruaene 2008 and Mareel 2010. Van Bruaene’s work in particular explores the middle-class origins of the Chambers’ membership and its influences on their literature.

tion or address a moral, social, philosophical, or religious issue. As in English morality plays, the characters are usually allegorical, personified qualities or concepts, and common practice was to identify them with paper nametags attached to the sleeves of actors' costumes (Hüsken 2002: 170) so that an audience could identify a character even before he was introduced in a text. This would have been especially helpful for plays like *Common Trade* and *Empty Purse*, in which the author does not explain the meaning of the allegory and the audience must extrapolate from the specific scene on the stage to the general implied by the characters' names. The fact that Everaert does not aid the audience in allegorical exegesis for these plays, though he does in several of his others, is another indication that he would have expected the audience to be able to recognize a character named 'Elckerlijc' and piece together who he was and why he was there.

Common Trade is both a *spel van zinne* and a *tafelspel*, as it seems to have been written for an event hosted by Everaert's two Chambers, and tries to offer a solution to a problem that was surely on the minds of much of its original audience: who was at fault for the continued crippling poverty in Bruges? The word *nering*, as Jan Dumolyn explains, "carries the strong connotation of being a breadwinner or making a livelihood, crucial in an economic system where small guild-masters, journeymen, and apprentices often barely made enough money to satisfy basic needs . . . during times of economic disarray and high prices" (2010: 379). Who, then, had caused *nering* to abandon Bruges?

The circumstances surrounding the composition of *Empty Purse* are less complex; Everaert wrote it for a smaller Chamber in the neighbouring town of Veurne to be performed at an outdoor contest in Ypres, and based its main character's name on the Chamber's motto, "poor in the purse and young in the spirit" ("Aerm in de beurs en van zinnen jong", De Potter and Borre 1870: 69). But to understand Everaert's motivations for writing *Common Trade* especially, we must first understand the situation that his hometown of Bruges was facing in the early sixteenth century, for *nering* had indeed abandoned it. James M. Murray has proposed that Bruges's economy in the period from roughly 1280 to 1390 was dependent on "cradle capitalism", an apparently competitive market nevertheless dependent on "foreign and internal tranquillity" for stability (Murray 2005: 21). The system served the city well for decades, during which Bruges was a powerhouse in the Hanse and a key player in the Flemish cloth industry. By the late fifteenth century, however, the cradle had fallen: a series of floods and famines had hurt the city's economy badly, and the two Flemish revolts staged against Maximilian of Austria, the Count of Flanders (and later Holy Roman Emperor), had been catastrophic; after the failure of the second uprising in 1492, a German military blockade supporting Maximilian effectively

shut down Bruges's trade networks (Schiller 1847: 34-5; Nicholas 2013: 390). In the meantime, the city was forced to spend massive amounts of money dredging the Zwin channel, a valuable connexion to the sea for otherwise inland Bruges, as revenue from tolls decreased. The channel had begun to silt in the late thirteenth century, and by the turn of the sixteenth century, it had become unnavigable and had cut off Bruges's connexion to the sea. By the 1540s, over a quarter of the city's population was receiving poor relief (Parker 2002²: 25).

In Brabant, just north of Flanders, the city of Antwerp benefited considerably from Bruges's losses: it had supported Maximilian during the revolts, and Maximilian had begun encouraging foreign merchants to go there in return. Furthermore, its advantageous location and year-round market fairs attracted more participants than Bruges (Nicholas 2013: 390-1). The exact factors that led to Bruges's sharp decline and Antwerp's corresponding rise are complex and beyond the scope of this paper, it is certain that, in the words of J.H. Munro, "in the later fifteenth century, Bruges decisively lost to Antwerp the commercial hegemony of the Low Countries that it had so long enjoyed without serious challenge" (1966: 1137). Also certain are that Bruges was an impoverished and debt-ridden city by the early sixteenth century, and that it would not truly begin its recovery until nearly four hundred years later (Nicholas 2013: 391).

This economically shattered Bruges of the sixteenth century was the one that Cornelis Everaert had known all his life. His father had been a draper before him (Hüsken 2005: 17), and Cornelis the younger spent his youth and his career entrenched in the struggling textile industry. Born in 1480, he would have come of age during the revolts against Maximilian, and watched first-hand as Bruges "decisively lost" its prosperity to Antwerp. Additionally, Flanders, as a territory of Charles V's Holy Roman Empire, had been involved in war (also one of Everaert's favourite subjects) for Everaert's entire adult life, and he would have seen taxes continually raised and coinage debased to pay for Habsburg military campaigns (Waite 2000: 107). He himself was likely in a place of relative financial stability: he received a small salary from the city as the clerk of the Archer's Guild, and his positions in that guild and as a member of two Chambers indicate that he was part of the city's elite. However, his status as a Rhetorician would have put him in a prime position to help his fellow middle-class citizens, many of whom were facing lives as paupers, find answers to their questions and an understanding of how their situation had come to be. One might expect him, given the history, to have pointed the finger of blame at Maximilian, or at the ongoing wars between Charles V and Francis I, as he did in his earlier prizewinning *Play about the High Wind and Sweet Rain* (*Tspel van de Hooghen Wynt ende Zoeten Reyn*, henceforth *High Wind and*

Sweet Rain) and several other plays, two of which were banned for their anti-authority sentiments. In *Common Trade*, however, he points the finger of blame squarely at Elckerlijc, the representative of wealthy merchants, clerics, and minor nobles – or, in the character’s own self-introductory words, “[e]very man who has money” (“Elckerlyc die ghelt heift”, l. 101).

In a study of Everaert’s depictions of social networks in his many plays about the effects of foreign wars, Samuel Mareel argues that Everaert’s plays may have helped his audiences process a constant, confusing and contradictory stream of information on the events of the day, often in an outright propagandistic way: “The *spel van zinne* of the rhetoricians was a highly didactic genre . . . the political-propagandistic possibilities of which seem to have been gradually discovered and developed by rhetoricians and city authorities in the course of the fifteenth century” (Mareel 2011: 46). Sometimes Everaert went for more outright political propaganda, as in *High Wind and Sweet Rain*, written to celebrate the victory of Charles V over the French king Francis I at the Battle of Pavia and awarded first prize at a competition held to celebrate the occasion (Hüsken 2005: 225).³ Even Everaert’s first modern editor, J.W. Müller, who did not always think highly of the artistic quality of Everaert’s plays, considered them an invaluable resource for understanding the socio-political environment of his time, a “mirror of the feelings of a significant part of the Flemish on the issues of a ‘troubled’ and ‘volatile’ society, church, and state” (Müller 1907: 440). It is with these responsibilities in mind, that Everaert likely wrote *Common Trade*.

As for the connexions to Elckerlijc, there are enough parallels and strong coincidences between the incarnations of the character to suggest that Everaert may have been familiar with, and even inspired by, the original *Elckerlijc*, though such motivations would be impossible to prove. First, there is the obvious matter of the shared names: possibly part of a larger trend in rhetoricians’ plays at the time, but too strong of a similarity to be mere coincidence. No other surviving rhetoricians’ plays use the name, though many contain universal-type characters in the ‘Mankind’ tradition with names like ‘Many People’ or ‘Most People’. However, even if other Elckerlijc plays once existed and have been lost, Everaert’s choice of name for these characters paired with a higher social class is distinct within his own oeuvre. His plays also contain two *Menichte van Volcke*, one *Menich Leeck*, and one *Meest Elc*, (Hummelen 1968: 15-28), all of whom are less

³ For a thorough treatment of the *Play of the High Wind and the Sweet Rain*, see Mareel 2006. In this play, written considerably earlier in his career than *Common Trade*, Everaert suggests that the Charles V’s eventual victory in the Italian Wars is the key to solving the economic woes in Bruges. Needless to say, he seems to have altered his official stance on the matter somewhat by the time he wrote *Common Trade*.

moneyed than the Elckerlijcs in *Common Trade* and *Empty Purse*. At the very least, Everaert's Elckerlijc in both *Common Trade* and *Empty Purse* shares a social stratum with the Elckerlijc of the eponymous play rather than with Everaert's other 'universal' types. The many printings and adaptations of *Elckerlijc* also show that it was popular enough throughout the Low Countries and elsewhere at the turn of the sixteenth century that the idea that Everaert knew it, and consciously decided to co-opt its most recognizable character for use in his own plays, is not outlandish.

The date of *Elckerlijc*'s composition is an undecided matter; estimates have ranged from R. Vos's proposed dating in the early fifteenth century, considerably prior to its first printed copies, to as late as between 1475 and 1496 (Vos 1965-66: 108; Davidson et al. 2007: 3). However, regardless of its original date, it certainly experienced a surge of popularity throughout northern Europe in the early and mid-sixteenth century, resulting in several prints and translations that spanned a few decades.⁴ The title page of Ischyrius's *Homulus* even claims that *Elckerlijc* was a rhetorician's play and that it won a prize at a public theatre festival in Brabant (Roersch 1903: XLIII, inscription), though his note is the only evidence for this claim. In any case, it is quite reasonable to suspect that Everaert was exposed to *Elckerlijc* through some medium or another while it was becoming popular and widespread, and that he may have expected the audience for these two plays to have at least a passing familiarity with the work and its messages, since it would have been comprised largely of other Chamber members (Waite 2000: 112).

Let us proceed now to the two plays; since they are not well-known, a brief summary of each is warranted. The character Common Trade (*Ghemeene Neerrynghe*) is a woman cloth seller who runs a portable stall in a town – never labelled as such, but clearly meant to stand in for Bruges – where commerce has stagnated. Though the play bears her name, her poor labourer, A Humble Man (*Sulc Scaemel*), is actually its main character. A Humble Man is in dire straits: he is desperately poor and he has accumulated loads of debt (ll. 5-18). She points out that she has no money to pay him, because she has lost all her customers: "Every man, who once bought everything from me, no longer wants my wool, linen, or weaving" ("Elckerlyc, die alle dync an my versochte / En begheert nu wullen, lynen noch douck", ll. 29-30). When they try to do business with Elckerlijc, he feigns interest in Common Trade's wares, but quickly reveals that they cannot satisfy his taste for the fashionable clothing he can buy in other, financial-

⁴ A full adaptational history of *Elckerlijc* is available from the Circulation of Dutch Literature (CODL) project database at database.codl.nl. Multiple editions from Delft and Antwerp were printed between 1493 and 1525.

ly healthy towns. Common Trade leaves, saying she will “go elsewhere, where [she is] drawn by every man” (“So speillic scuvage dan / Elders, daer ic van elckerlyc worde ghetrocken”, ll. 227-8), leaving A Humble Man alone and without prospects. Trying to help, Elckerlijc suggests that A Humble Man go seek out someone called Profit (*Oorboor*) with the help of someone else called Provision (*Provysie*), who can be found with Justice (*Justicie*). Provision, however, is fast asleep and cannot be woken up; Justice tells A Humble Man that Elckerlijc is to blame, and that Common Trade will only return to him if Elckerlijc improves himself (ll. 357-73).

Empty Purse is less directly connected to the situation in Bruges, but it is clear from the play’s opening that it also takes place against a background of financial distress. A Common Man (*Sulc Ghemeene Man*), lamenting that he has fallen on hard times and that “profit must be sick, or altogether dead” (“winnynghen moet sieck ofte teeneghaer doot zyn”, l. 2) decides to lay off his servant, Empty Purse (*Aerm in de Buerse*), whose presence has made it considerably harder for him to prosper; he suggests that Empty Purse should seek out new employment with Elckerlijc, for “Empty Purse should be in Elckerlijc’s service” (“Aerm in de Buerse moet Elckerlyc te dienste staen”, l. 38). Empty Purse finds Elckerlijc, depicted in this play as a high-living dandy who enjoys spending time in taverns, gaming halls, and bathhouses. At first, Elckerlijc seems amenable to taking on a new servant, until he learns that his prospect’s name is ‘Empty Purse’; receiving this information, he rashly dismisses Empty Purse, saying that “an Empty Purse brings one little benefit” (“Aerm in de Buerse lettel voordeel doet”, l. 150). Again, trying to help, he suggests that Empty Purse marry the lady Copious Consumption (*Couper Ghebruuckynghen*), but she too rejects him when she learns his name, suggesting that he change it to Growth (“Wasdom”, ll. 405-6) if he wants to find acceptance. As the play ends, Empty Purse decides to go back to A Common Man, reasoning “A Common Man everywhere must take up this burden” (“Sulc Ghemeene Man moet allomme den bot scutten”, l. 431), though he expresses hope that A Common Man’s time of hardship will be shortened by the arrival of the arrival of “peace and commerce” (“pays ende neerrynghe”, l. 433).

Aside from a shared use of the Elckerlijc character, *Common Trade* and *Empty Purse* have a few other key similarities that make a comparison of their functions fruitful, despite their nominal belonging to different genres of rhetoricians’ plays. There is, first of all, the matter of their primary character relationships being entirely commercial: that is, they focus on the relationships between employer and employee and between customer and supplier. His other economic plays have important interactions between businesspeople – for example, the bond between seafaring merchant Any (*Eenich*) and craftsman Many (*Menich*) over their business activities’ shared

wartime distress during the Italian Wars in the earlier *Play about the High Wind and Sweet Rain* (*Tspel van de Hooghen Wynt ende Zoeten Reyn*) – but in both *Common Trade* and *Empty Purse* the relationships themselves are commercial ones. Even the failed courtship in *Empty Purse* is approached in commercial terms; it is structured much in the same way as Empty Purse’s failed job interview with Elckerlijc earlier in the play, with Copious Consumption laying out the terms of their prospective marriage just as Elckerlijc lays out the terms of Empty Purse’s prospective employment.

However, the main employer-employee relationships in both plays, those between Common Trade and A Humble Man and between A Common Man and Empty Purse, are engaging precisely because they are *not* mere business relationships: the employers clearly care for the well-being of the employees. At the beginning of *Common Trade*, the title character plans to let her beleaguered employee go, because she can no longer afford him due to the loss of her customers. However, she makes the wildly imprudent decision to keep A Humble Man in her employ, after he begs to be allowed to keep working for her even if she can only pay him in her unsold wares (ll. 57-60): “Out of compassion, I’ll do the best I can for you. It pains me, that I don’t know how to push you away for your benefit” (“Uut compassye sallic noch te beste doen. / My deert, dat ic om proffyt hu en weet waer jaeghen”, ll. 61-2). A Common Man is much more eager to be rid of Empty Purse, but he expresses a desire to let his soon-to-be-former servant down in a way that allows him to retain his dignity: “For this reason he must leave, but one should tackle this with prudence. So I want to call him as a proud servant” (“Dies hy nu verpercken moet / maer by zinnen men alle dynck wercken moet / Dus willic hem reopen al seen vulleester fier”, ll. 6-8). He also takes a moment to offer Empty Purse advice on where he should go to look for new work, “in the friendship spirit”.

The values embodied in this sort of compassionate employer-employee relationship are explored at length from an economic history perspective in Deirdre N. McCloskey’s conception of “bourgeois virtues”. Being a form of art practiced primarily by the middle class, the poetry and drama of the Chambers often serves as an affirmation of what Herman Pleij describes as “middle class virtues . . . which revolved around the key concepts of practicality and utilitarianism” (1994: 63). But while *Common Trade* and *A Common Man* are immensely prudent characters in general, “practicality and utilitarianism” do not quite sum up the nature of their relationships with their poorer employees. McCloskey’s framework is far more appropriate: an unwritten ethical foundation that developed alongside the emergence of the business class – essentially, the traditional seven heavenly virtues (hope, faith, courage, temperance, justice, prudence, and love) as applied to behaviour in commercial settings like sales, contracts, and other business trans-

actions (2007: 63-7 in particular). Additionally, she argues that the key to the flourishing of the middle class and of its commercial version of virtue is a change in the rhetoric surrounding business and bourgeois professions, an elevation of the business class into a position of respect and esteem that they did not enjoy throughout most of history. That “most of history” includes the Middle Ages and most of the sixteenth century in the Netherlands, but McCloskey still sees evidence of the coming shift in some later medieval literature, including *Elckerlijc* and *Everyman* (2016: 449). It would seem that *Common Trade* and *Empty Purse* show a more decisive beginning in the rhetorical shift, earlier than McCloskey herself pinpoints it. The two employers demonstrate charity, faith, and even love towards their employees even to the extent that it hampers their utilitarian business sensibilities, and this is presented as the way commerce can and ought to be conducted. To see ‘Common Trade’ and ‘A Common Man’ represented as the seats of such virtue in the concepts they embody would send an audience comprised largely of common traders a powerful message to that effect.

In this way, *Common Trade* and *A Common Man* stand in stark contrast to *Elckerlijc*, who is a relentlessly prudent, coldly practical character in both plays. His thinking is emblematic of what McCloskey describes as “greed-is-good” or “Prudence Only” (2016: 186) behaviour – the pursuit of one’s own self-interest at the expense of all other considerations. When he enters the stage in *Common Trade*, his ridiculous costume – “a long cloak adorned with a belt, a priest’s cap perched on his head, his right leg booted and spurred and his left leg clothed in a sailor’s pants” (“een keerle met eenen pordeix gheghort, up thooff eenen priesters capproen gherolt, zyn rechter been gheleerst ende ghespoort ende an zyn luchter been een schippersbochs an”, ll. 100-1) – marks him as a conglomeration of several moneyed classes. His opening monologue as he heads towards *Common Trade*’s stall introduces his cold, overly prudent way of thinking about business:

ELCKERLYC Elckerlyc die ghelt heift nu proffyt doen.
 Alle dync crycht he te zynder begheerrynghe
 Want sulc scaemel, van dyveersscher neerrynghe,
 Hevet nu sober naer myn ghevoel,
 Mids da thy met alle dync my up den stoel
 Allomme achtervolcht, hier ende daer,
 Daer ic selve plochte te reysene naer
 In alle feesten, wyt ende zyt
 . . .
 Machghicker an winnen groot en grof,
 Ic en maecker gheen consciencie of
 Wient scaet of hinder, updat ict hebbe.
 (ll. 101-8, 114-16)

[ELCKERLYC Every man who has money can now make a profit / He can get all kinds of things he desires / because the humble man, in various trades / is, in my opinion, in a sorry state / for, with all his things, and no helping hand / he follows me everywhere, here and there / as I travel to all the festivals / and show myself in all corners / . . . / If I'm to make big, fat profits / I cannot feel any remorse about / whom it harms or hinders, if it helps me.]

Elckerlijc is thrilled to have found himself in such a strong buyer's market, pursued by "the humble man, in various trades" desperate for his business. He shows no inclination to be faithful or compassionate or to heed any other virtue towards those with whom he has previously conducted trade, admitting that he will act for his own benefit even if it means hurting them. The lack of any feeling other than an excess of prudence recalls a line from God's opening monologue in the original Elckerlijc: "The Seven Virtues, which were powerful, are all driven out and chased away" ("Dye .vij. Duechden, dye machtich waren / Sijn alle verdreven ende verjaecht," ll. 16-17, trans. by Davidson et al. 2007). In this play, Common Trade herself, who also embodies these virtues, is about to be driven out and chased away from town.

In *Empty Purse*, no identifying costume for Elckerlijc is described, but he displays the same general disregard for everyone who is not him. Here, his calculating prudence is emphasized less than his love of lavish living, and it harms both Empty Purse and A Common Man. When Empty Purse asks Elckerlijc for work after A Common Man lays him off, Elckerlijc quickly rattles off a list of his traits and preferred activities: he is of a constantly changing temperament, and can often be lazy, though he can be of service sometimes if he is needed (ll. 65-8); that he enjoys drinking well in the tavern (ll. 71-6); that he enjoys playing and gambling on all sorts of dice, board, and card games (ll. 79-84); and that he often goes to the bathhouse for the company of women (ll. 89-92). Empty Purse responds to these lines in a series of asides wherein he promises that his influence will cure Elckerlijc of these unseemly tendencies, but Elckerlijc does not notice until he learns Empty Purse's name, at which point he immediately orders Empty Purse to leave. His refusal to temper his own copious consumption is a large part of why, as the title character observes at the end of the play, the working-class Common Man will always be the one who is saddled with Empty Purse.

At the same time, Elckerlijc has the potential to behave virtuously. Unlike the explicitly negative *sinnemens* in many later rhetorician's plays whose main function is to "the dual task of providing entertainment and moral instruction" with their unvirtuous traits and conduct (Steenbrugge 2014: 86), Elckerlijc is not an entirely wicked character. In both plays, when the protagonist hits a nadir in his presence, Elckerlijc tries to help him. In *Common Trade*, this moment occurs after Common Trade has left and A Humble Man has begun to despair of ever finding work again; in

Empty Purse, it occurs after Elckerlijc has denied him employment. The *Common Trade* Elckerlijc is ironically the one who suggests that A Humble Man speak with Justice, for she will treat him and his situation fairly without regard to his social standing (ll. 271-81). Furthermore, she will be accompanied by Provision, who will in turn help A Humble Man find profit once again. What or who exactly Provision is, Everaert does not make entirely clear; the Hieronymous Bosch specialist Eric De Bruyn suggests that it may have referred to protectionist government policy designed to keep competition out of domestic markets (2001: 235), but the dialogue remains ambiguous about the matter, and Everaert's condemnations of dependency in his other economic-themed plays suggest that he would not have considered this a sustainable solution to the problem.⁵ The word he uses for profit, *Oorboor*, also has many connotations: it can refer to material profit, but it can also refer to something's utility, to some intangible benefit, or to the concept of common good, as in the phrase *ghemeene oorboor*, a Dutch translation of the Latin *bonum commune*, 'general welfare' or 'common good'. Müller translates it as "weer nuttige", 'regained usefulness' (Müller 1907: 469). In either case, Elckerlijc clearly has some interest in helping A Humble Man to get back on his feet, possibly through a charitable intervention, though it never occurs to him that perhaps the intervention ought to come from him.

Similarly, in *Empty Purse*, Elckerlijc is the one who suggests the ultimately unsuccessful plan that Empty Purse take Copious Consumption as his wife, even implying that he would be willing to reconsider his rejection of Empty Purse's service if he paired up with Copious Consumption (ll. 272-3). In both plays, Everaert makes it very clear that Elckerlijc is redeemable, though whether he is going to take the steps necessary for his own redemption is left open at the end of the play (a question for which a possible answer, in the positive, may be found in *Elckerlijc*).

But how is Elckerlijc supposed to redeem himself? *Elckerlijc* is largely devoted to his redemption through public repentance, culminating in his agreement to give half his hoarded goods to the poor. In *Common Trade* and *Empty Purse*, Everaert seems to have a more immediate redemption in mind: Elckerlijc can redeem himself by engaging with A Humble Man through *Common Trade*, and by taking Empty Purse off A Common

⁵ See, for example, Everaert's *Play about the Humble Community and Tribulation* (*Tspel van Scaemel Ghemeente ende van Trybulacie*) (Hüsken 2005: 300-20), or the opening dialogue between the characters Any (*Eenich*) and Many (*Menich*) in the *Play of the High Wind and the Sweet Rain*. In both plays, the suffering citizens are advised to patiently endure their burdens while they wait for matters to improve, and that those burdens must be shared by all members of society, but particularly by the middle class, who support both those above and below them.

Man's shoulders for at least a little while. A characteristic key to both *A Humble Man* and *Empty Purse* is that they do not want alms or handouts; they want to work. *A Humble Man's* desire to keep working and participating is a recurring theme throughout the play. He does not want charity, but simply wants the ability to sustain himself, to obtain the livelihood that is promised by the presence of *nering*: "[S]o long as the humble man cannot trade, he will remain poor and afflicted with grief" ("want moet sulc scaemel langhe neerrynghe missen / So blyft hy in aermoede met drucke duerviert", ll. 299-300). His depression and desperation are inextricable from the fact that he is no longer self-sufficient, and the fact that his last actions in the play involve begging for help poignantly shows how far he has fallen. His portrayal echoes the words of the Italian architect and writer Leon Battista Alberti, writing about a century prior in his dialogues on the family: "[I]t is, perhaps, a kind of slavery to be forced to plead and beg with other men in order to satisfy our necessity. That is why we do not scorn riches, but learn to govern ourselves . . . while we live free and happy in the midst of affluence and abundance" (trans. by Neu-Watkins 2004: 164).

Empty Purse's desire to work, meanwhile, is the source of much of the play's comedy. He works as a servant (*dienaar*), and his service is to live up to his name by forcing his employer to live thriftily. As he points out while trying to convince *A Common Man* to keep him on, if not for his influence, *A Common Man* might be tempted to spend his money on women. Later, as *Elckerlijc* lists his favoured pastimes of regular drinking, gaming, and visits to the brothel, *Empty Purse*, a fool speaking the truth, excitedly promises that he could cure *Elckerlijc* of these sinful (and costly) impulses:

ELCKERLYC	Ghy zout ooc naer my, by tyden, moeten Wachten ende zyen alssic by drunken date Hyeuwers in Bacus speloncken zate, Want den drank doet de zinnen cranc besetten.
AERM IN DE BUERSE	Dat zoudic hu wel eerland beletten. Ic zoude hu doen vermyden tmout, Dat ghy by tdryncken niet lichte verblyden zout Mocht ghy my by hu cleenen tyt ghezien. (ll. 99-106)

[ELCKERLYC Sometimes, for me, you should also / Wait and see if I'm in a drunken state / Anywhere in the caves of Bacchus, / For drink does weaken one's good sense. EMPTY PURSE I would stop you from that before long. / I would have you shunning the malt / So that you would not rejoice in drinking / If you saw me at your side in a short time.]

But a cruel sort of irony exists in the idea that a character called Elckerlijc might willingly take on the burden of an empty purse: the original Elckerlijc is a famous hoarder. When Elckerlijc goes to ask Goods to accompany him on his death journey, Goods describes how Elckerlijc's miserliness has resulted in his being immobile: "I lie here locked up, neglected, mouldy, as you see me, heaped up, filthy; I cannot move, pressed as I am together" ("Ick legghe hier in muten / Versockelt, vermost, als ghi mi siet, / Vertast, vervuylt. Ic en kan mi niet / Verporren, also ic ben tsamen gesmoert", ll. 350-3; trans. by Davidson et al. 2007). The most beloved of Elckerlijc's friends (ll. 343-6), he is also the bluntest and cruellest when faced with Elckerlijc's request for companionship, explaining that immodest love for him has severely damaged Elckerlijc's reckoning with God: "[L]ove for me is contrary to heaven. But if you had loved me in moderation, and shared me with the poor, then you would not need to whine now . . . Many more are lost because of me than are saved, be sure of that" ("Min minne es contrarye des Hemels staten. / Maer haddi mi gemint bi maten / Ende van mi ghedeylet den armen, / So en dorfstu nu niet Karmen . . . Die menighe blijft bi mi verloren / Meer dan behouden, weet dat te voren", ll. 389-92, 399-400).

By contrast, while Goods in *Elckerlijc* speaks of his power to damn, Empty Purse attempts to convince Elckerlijc of his own power to save, if Elckerlijc will employ him. An empty purse, he insists, forces one to live frugally and avoid temptations like brothels and barrooms, and may even profit the soul of "he who goes through the world wastefully because of wealth" ("die by ryedom hem ghuf up sweerels baerm scryven", l. 218), as the original Elckerlijc did. The *Empty Purse* Elckerlijc, on the other hand, offers an interesting counter-argument – an empty purse *deprives* people of their virtue, he says, because it disinclines people towards charitable acts:

ELCKERLYC	Wat zoude Elckerlyc met hu maken cunnen? Waer ghy hu, Aerm in de Buerse, parende zyt, Elckerlycx herte dat ghy bezwaerende zyt. Gheen duecht en es in hu gheblecken hiet.
AERM IN DE BUERSE	Hoezoo?
ELCKERLYC	Duer ghebreken, ziet, Doet Aerm in de Buerse tmagher int vette hooppen, Sueren, lueren, daghelicx te wette looppen. Sulc die ter miltheit hebben verwec, desen Moeten by Aerm in de Buerse vinnich ende vrec wesen. Tworden corliaens die te zyne liberael plaghen. Dies de aarme lieden princepael claghen, Dat elckerlyc van hemlieden behindert leeft.

Aerm in de Buerse aelmoessene vermindert heift.
 Sy en mueghen niet leven als de proffytrommers.
 (ll. 155-68)

[ELCKERLYC What could Everyman do with you? / Empty Purse, where you show yourself, / The heart of every man grows heavy. / No trace of virtue exists in you. // EMPTY PURSE How so? // ELCKERLYC Through lacking, you see, / does Empty Purse turn fat to skimpy, / Cheating, tampering, and cutting corners. / People who previously tended towards charity / Are made stingy and cruel by an Empty Purse. / They become beggars who accept liberally. / And thus, the poor people mainly cry / That every man among them is hindered, / For Empty Purse reduces almsgiving, / And they can't live like profit-makers.]

Though Empty Purse retorts that those who behave dishonourably when poor do not suddenly become honourable when rich, moments of dialogue in *Common Trade* suggest that Everaert is not unsympathetic to Elckerlijc's argument. *Common Trade* and *A Humble Man* are forced to cut corners and use substandard materials in their clothing if they are to have any hope of making profits (ll. 86-90), something the *Common Trade* Elckerlijc is quick to point out while investigating their stall. What neither the *Common Trade* Elckerlijc nor the *Empty Purse* Elckerlijc realizes, however, is that they are responsible for the situation due to their stinginess and refusal to relax prudence in order to do business with their poor neighbours (instead of, in the case of *Common Trade*, their better-off counterparts in Antwerp and Bergen op Zoom). The sharing of his accumulated wealth that they desire from him is the charity of neighbourly commerce, which he denies them. Goods's comment that "many more are lost (*verloren*) because of me than are saved" is echoed in *Common Trade*'s plaintive lament to her former customer when he first shows up at her stall: "Elckerlijc, you've let me be lost" ("Elckerlyc, ghy laet my ghaen verloren", l. 121). This is the great failing of "Prudence Only" commercial conduct, to not recognize the necessity "to care for employees and partners and colleagues and customers and fellow citizens" (McCloskey 2007: 508).

The possibility of Empty Purse as a foil to Goods is *Empty Purse*'s clearest connection with *Elckerlijc*. The area in which *Common Trade* veers the closest to the original play is at the end in its condemnation of Elckerlijc. In *Elckerlijc*, the condemnation comes directly from God, and opens the play; in *Common Trade*, the judgment is passed by Justice, and closes the play. As we have previously discussed, *A Humble Man* goes to see Justice because he is looking for Provision, whom Elckerlijc has told him will help him find Profit once again. Provision, however, is fast asleep, and *A Humble Man* cannot wake her. Justice tells him that she cannot wake Provision

either, and that only “divine inspiration” (“de goddelicke inspiratie”, l. 354) can bring her back. When A Humble Man asks her why, she gives him the following verdict:

JUSTICIE By Elckerlycx scult,
 Die daghelicx in grooten sonden leift,
 Die cleen liefde tallen student heift,
 Tot zynen Heere, tot zynen Godt,
 Ende tot zyn hevenmeinsche, naer tgoddelic ghebodt,
 Maer leven daghelicx in sulcken ghebaere
 Alsoffer noch Godt, noch wet en waere.
 Hierby moet alle dynchen verdrayt ghaen.
 ...
 Tenzy dat Gods gramscepe ghestoorlic
 By Elckerlyc met leedscip ende bedynghe
 Weder gebrocht wort tot payseghe vredynghe,
 Provysie – Sulc Scaemel, pynt hier up te rouckene –
 En zal niet risen om Oorboor te zouckene.
 Aldus, Sulc Scaemel, ten baet rechten niet crommen,
 Elckerlyc moest hem beteren, zoude neerrynghe commen.
 (II. 357-64, 366-73)

[JUSTICE Because of Elckerlijc’s fault, / He who daily lives in great sin, / Who has little love at any time / For his Lord, for his God, / And for his fellow men, as God commands, / But lives daily in such a manner / As if there were no God, nor law. / Because of this, all kinds of things go bad / . . . / Unless God’s most troubling wrath / Is replaced with peaceful harmony by / Everyman’s contrition and prayer, / Provision – Humble Man, pay attention here – / Will not wake up to seek out Value. / And thus, Humble Man, there is no other way: / Everyman must better himself if trade is to return.]

Justice’s condemnation recalls the sentiments from God’s opening monologue; God laments that he “see[s] the people so blinded by sin that they don’t recognize me as God” (“oec sie ic tvolc also verblent / In sonden, si en kennen mi niet voer God”, *Elc.* ll. 4-5; trans. by Davidson et al. 2007). He first mentions Elckerlijc by name, either as a character or as a concept, when he protests Elckerlijc’s living “without concern”. Death, God’s messenger, even greets Elckerlijc with a similar line, after noting – in a moment that may have been particularly striking to struggling Bruges textile workers of A Humble Man’s ilk – Elckerlijc’s fancy clothes: “Have you entirely forgotten God?” (“Hebdi al Gods vergeten?”, l. 71). In both cases, the only available solution to the problem is Elckerlijc’s contrition, which God intends to bring forth in *Elckerlijc* by calling him to his final reckoning; Everaert simply adds the extra dimension of Elckerlijc’s failure to show

proper love to his neighbours and former commercial partners. He must repent his behaviour, and strengthen his Virtue once again, to help both his neighbours and himself. The play closes with an entreaty from A Humble Man directly to the audience, asking them to spread the message they have just heard – perhaps in the hopes that the message would reach those whom Elckerlijc was supposed to represent.

In sum: in his life, Cornelis Everaert had barely known a time when Flanders and Bruges were not embroiled in war. During his young adulthood, he had seen the bottoming out of the cloth industry and grand markets in Bruges, and would never see its return. The disillusionment with authority figures and the institutions they represented that comes through in his plays should come as no surprise. As Charlotte Steenbrugge has written, theatre in the late medieval and early modern Low Countries was intended to function as a mirror (*spiegel*, as in *Den Spyeghel der Salicheyt van Elckerlijc*, the full title of *Elckerlijc*) that reflected, but was distinct from, physical reality, which audience members could observe and learn from (Steenbrugge 2014: 220-5). To help explain to his fellow citizens (and quite possibly to himself) what had happened and what, if anything, could be done about it, Everaert borrowed a well-recognized character from a well-regarded play, a character whose action-driving flaw is a callous neglect of virtue, and used him to hold up a mirror to Bruges's dead markets, reflecting how Elckerlijc's lack of non-utilitarian concern for other participants had irreparably damaged them. That he presents no real solution to the problem, but suggests that they will simply have to endure in want of God's grace, is in keeping with J.J. Mak's description of Everaert as a playwright who "starts as a revolutionary, a social rebel, and ends as a penitence preacher in all his plays" (Mak 1944: 109, qtd in Dumolyn and Haemers 2013: 184).

Returning at last to *Elckerlijc* and *Everyman*: whether Everaert knew or consciously chose to emulate the original *Elckerlijc* is a question that must unfortunately remain within the realm of speculation. If he did not intend these to be read as the same character, his use of a 'universal' human character, rather than a negative personification, to teach lessons about proper commercial behaviour is worth exploring on its own. But if Everaert did indeed borrow the character from the original play, the borrowing speaks to several dimensions which he perceived as being potentially present within the original character. Elckerlijc's stinginess with *Common Trade* and *A Humble Man* and his general cluelessness about the destitution of his neighbours are in keeping with the characterization in the original play as a sinner so blinded by his own misdirection that he is not even capable of recognizing it. However, his brief, misguided attempts to help *A Humble Man* and *Empty Purse* imply that he is still capable of behaving virtuously,

and that he is not totally without concern for his former trade partner, but that he will not and cannot recognize himself as part of the problem. Given that the plays were performed for audiences of Bruges and Veurne-based bourgeoisie, Everaert may have intended the same thing that Roger Ladd suggested was intended in *Everyman*: that the audience look to the character as a mirror, a cautionary tale about what happens if they are overly utilitarian and ungenerous towards each other. In this sense, *Common Trade* and *Empty Purse* are as much spiritual successors to *Elckerlijc* as *Everyman* itself is.

Alongside the recent increased interest in *Everyman*, an enterprising director may find it a rewarding project to bring translations and adaptations of the original *Elckerlijc*, *Common Trade* and *Empty Purse* to our stages as well; the latter two are the work of a playwright who deserves to be better known. They judge Elckerlijc guilty not only of sheer miserliness, but of a host of other commercial sins, the impacts of which Cornelis Everaert explored skilfully in his own dramatic telling of the downfall of Bruges. His story, for a contemporary audience in an economically depressed town, would have reinforced the necessity of behaving virtuously, temperately, and even lovingly within the bounds of life as a profit-maker. This understanding was no contradiction: Elckerlijc's sin is not that he dares to accumulate material wealth, but that he does so without paying due consideration to Virtue (in the original play), and that he strips commerce of the dignity and potential to elevate (especially in the case of poor labourers like *A Humble Man* and *Empty Purse*) that should, in the best-case scenario, be built into the act. In his relationship to his weakened, starved, paralysed Virtue, we uncover for ourselves the tragedy that Cornelis Everaert saw embedded in the character, and that he chose to explore in more concrete detail in his own two Elckerlijc plays: that without forsaking his comfortable mercantile existence, Elckerlijc had the capacity to be so much better than he chose to be.

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