

Wahre Hoveschheit

A Low German Manual of Manners

Amid the general paucity of sources about period North Germany, we occasionally find a few gems that illustrate life with a charming immediacy and vivacity. Unfortunately, many of them were edited a long time ago and since largely forgotten except by a few specialists in the field. This is one case in point – the only extant manners book in Middle Low German, titled '*wahre hoveschheit*' (true courtesy). It survives in two copies, the more complete one found in the monastery archives at Helmstedt, and was edited in 1876ⁱ. It is today held at the Herzog August library at Wolfenbüttel. Very little work has been done on it since, except the compilation of a glossary on part of itⁱⁱ.

The text in its surviving form probably dates to the fifteenth centuryⁱⁱⁱ. While it comes from a monastic context, there is very little in its advice that is specific to the clergy. Its choice of often humorous examples illustrates the geographical horizon and prejudice of contemporary North Germans, and its particular emphasis on avoiding theological debates – perhaps the only thing specific to the clergy in it – suggests a certain helplessness on the part of monastics longing to deliver the kind of spontaneous rejoinder it relates. This was not an audience of great theological sophistication, and we may well imagine them occasionally coming off second best in real-life discussions. The idea that they would enter into debates with Jews is interesting, though probably not realistic given how few Jewish communities still existed in North Germany at the time. The brutal insults that pass for argument here are unfortunately truer to the reality the readership lived in. Jews were often more hated in the abstract than actually known.

The table manners and rules of conduct described are fairly unremarkable, though the elaborate rules for drinking are interesting. We need to keep in mind, though, that the cleanliness, quiet dignity and courtesy the text describes are an ideal, not the reality.

You are a poor clerk or a poor squire, or a craftsman, or a smith or carpenter, or a baker, a cook, a tailor, a shoemaker or the like, you join a holy order, there you find learned clerks, honest priests, noble people, children of lords, children of princes. They receive you as a brother, you are to be their equal, though in the world they would not even have accepted you as a servant. Great honour is done to you for the sake of your order, which you should hold dear in this world. You are sat at the table of lords, the table of kings, and if you do not know manners then, that does your order no honor; if you would keep your boorish ways, that is a shame to your order. Therefore you must strive to know manners and honour and good ways. If you do not know them, I will teach you.

When you come to a lord's table, above all your hands must be clean so that you do not have to stand there and scour your hands like a priest scours his thumb after baptising a baby. You should wash your hands quickly in order not to hold up other people. At the most, you should take water thrice before eating and twice after, and that quickly.

You must not stick your finger in your mouth and feel your teeth like a dog; if you need to do so, do it before or after (the meal) when you are alone. You must not stick your finger in your mouth and whistle after the geese in front of people.

Your nails must be clean and trimmed. You must not trim your nails at the table or in front of people; do it when you are alone.

When you come to the table, you must not sit down where you choose or stand above others. Sit where you are asked to sit. Sit up straight. You must not hang forward like those who are hunchbacked. You must not rest your elbows on the table like a moneyer striking pennies. You must also not put one knee over the other the way Pilate is usually painted. And you must not put the elbow on one knee and the hand under the chin (emended from: knee) like a physician who has killed a patient. And you must not stretch out your feet and legs like a crossbowman who wants to cock his bow. You must not put your hands under your arms like a fisherman whose hands are freezing.

When you want to drink, lift up the cup above the table with both hands, drink, and set it down. If you want to put it down near you, put it so far from you that those who are supposed to have it next can reach it. You must not drink with one hand like a wagoner greasing his cart. You must not drink while the person at the head of the table is drinking, and neither while someone who sits by you is drinking. You must not blow into the cup like a cook blows into his ladle. You must not drink while you have food in your mouth like cattle do. You must not look (at people) over the cup like a cow. You must not drink noisily like an ox. You must not make noises in your throat like a horse. You must not talk over your cup like a drunken innkeeper. You must not stick your thumb into the cup like a woman tapping beer. You must not drink up to the bottom like a sexton (or: cottager? *koster*). You must not lick your lips afterwards like a bad piper who has spoiled the dance. You must not drink from all along the cup's rim like a sheep. You must not take overly long draughts like a pigeon. You must not breathe noisily afterwards like a bear. You must not hang your nose into the cup like a pig. You must not drink up the wine like an ox drinks water. You must not drink up the cup entirely or by half like an Estonian. You must not drink before the meal like a Russian. You must not drink in one long draught like a nursemaid. You must not drink on an empty stomach like people who were drunk the night before. If you want to take a drink of mead 'on an empty stomach', then know this: the first drink after eating is called a drink 'on an empty stomach'. You should wipe your nose and mouth after drinking. You must not hold the cup in your hand too long.

When you are at a lord's table, pay attention when he drinks. Do not eat while he does, but hold on to the tablecloth with both hands. While your companion drinks, you must not eat. While your companion has his hand in the (shared) eating bowl, do not stick your hand in. Do not put the bread that you have taken a bite out of back in the bowl. You must learn to eat with both hands. If the bowl stands to your left, eat with your right, and when the bowl stands to your right, eat with your

left so as not to bump into your companion who eats with you. Take what lies in front of you in the bowl and do not reach across to take what lies before your companion. You must not gnaw bones like a dog. You must not suck out the marrow like a honey bear sucks his paw. You must not slurp broth like a Russian. You must not slurp from the bowl like a Wend. If you want to drink up the broth, drink it up with the spoon like a monk, and do not drink noisily like a calf, but quietly like a maiden. You must not eat with both cheeks full, like a monkey. You must not smack your lips like a pig at the trough. You must not split an egg; either give it to your companion whole or eat it alone. You must not eat an apple alone: cut the apple apart in the middle, cut one half into two and give these halves to the people sitting to either side of you, and keep the biggest part yourself. If you have a bread, divide it evenly and let your companion choose. You must not hollow out the cheese like a hall. And you must not eat cherries like a piglet. If you want to peel a pear, start at the stem, but if you want to peel an apple, start from the head. You must not eat garlic alone so that you do not stink like a Jew sitting among the people. You must not poke around between your teeth a lot in front of people, nor pick them like a cat does. Loosen your belt before you go to eat, and not at the table.

One custom exists at court that is sometimes harmful; cutting bread holding it in your hands sometimes leads to harm. It happened at a prince's court that a young gentleman wanted to cut his bread in his hand and cut himself in the hand so badly that he died of the wound. All of his family mourned. Thereupon the prince gave permission to all his court that each man and woman were to cut their bread holding it against their chest. You have the same permission to cut your bread against your chest when you need to. A harmful custom should be changed.

You must not linger over the table. Be quick with your eating, so that others need not wait for you. Remember that there are five places where you must neither tarry nor be absent: in church, in school, at the table, on the road, and in proper obedience.

When a (serving) bowl is sent to you, take it with both hands. If a chicken or fish is in the bowl, turn its head towards the lord to who sits nearest to you. Take from the bowl what you want and pass it on; do not eat it alone. You must not look into other people's bowls; keep to your own bowl. Neither should you look into other people's mouths like a horse trader does with horses. You must not wipe your nose or mouth with the tablecloth. You must never put butter into your food at the table or in front of people without first asking your companion if he wants it. If you want to put butter into your food, try it first to see whether you like it, so you do not lose your butter. You must not spread the butter on your bread with your thumb like a Frisian.

If there is need, you must prepare (or: serve, *bereden*) the food yourself. Remember there are five things of which no man needs to be ashamed, however noble and wealthy he is: that he serves his God and his superiors, that he honours the name of ladies, that he serves his elders, that he can serve the food, and that he learns what does not know, if it is honest and good.

When you come to court, you should not speak much. Think first about what to say; speak of what is useful, speak of what is good, speak of spiritual things and good teaching. You must never tell tales at court and never hold long speeches. Do not speak while the people at the head of the table are drinking. Do not speak while another speaks. Say things that people like to hear, as long as they are not against God. Only say the best of people. If another person says bad things of his fellow Christian, do not suffer it. Excuse the victim of slander if you can. Never say anything behind somebody's back unless you are willing to have it known before his eyes. Do not criticise the host's food.

If anyone makes fun of you, do not take it personally (literally: *di nicht anteen*, put it on, as of clothing). You must be able to stand mockery. Do not be uncouth; you should be able to live amicably with others. Do not laugh alone like a fool. Likewise, do not laugh like a goat. Do not laugh loudly like a jackdaw, but laugh rarely, briefly and gently like a maiden. Be mannerly in all your conduct.

When you travel, have manners about you in your gait, your stance, your sitting, your words, your eyes and your hands. When you walk somewhere, do not caper about like a roebuck. Do not strut like a peacock or waddle like a goose. When you stand, put one foot next to the other with good manners.

You must keep your hands still. Do not talk with your hands like a child. Do not wind the belt around your fingers like a sausage maker; that does you little honour. When you speak to someone, do not cough much in front of people. If you have to cough up something, you must spit it out quickly; do not hold in in your mouth and chew it like liquorice. Spit it out quickly and step on it, and do not be unmannerly in your habits.

Do not scratch yourself much in front of people. Do not rub your hands against your shin.

When you enter another man's house, leave the door as you find it. If you find the door closed, then close it again. If you find it open, leave it open, unless you are told differently. You must not sit between the host and the hostess, nor look too much at their daughter or other women. Be mannerly

with your eyes, for the eye is the messenger of the heart. The eye is the enemy of the soul. When you sit with other people, do not throw one leg over the other. You must let the host be right. Do not criticise his house. Wherever you go, criticise nobody's work. Give good words to all people, and give lots of them, because you can give as many as you want and not lose anything by it. Hold yourself virtuously and honestly; as you bear yourself, so will others judge you. If you joke much, the people may well laugh, but they will think you are a jokester. Behave so that people do not laugh much on your account.

You must go to nobody's court appointment unless you are invited. You must also not speak about the case before you are asked. Speak wisely, with forethought, and gently.

You should not speak much with fools. Do not answer foolish questions a lot. Do not speak much of things that can not be understood. If a fool asks you about miraculous things, do not give him many answers. Tell him to ask a wiser man, that you do not understand such high matters. If he will not let up but continues to ask you about miraculous things, say that he is the first to tell you of this. That is what our dear Lord Jesus Christ did to the Jews. If a wise fool asks you how big a soul is, ask him back how big his wisdom was, so that you can explain it to him in a manner he can understand. Would he then asks you how many souls can sit on a nail, if he will not let go of his foolishness but asks other such foolish questions, then speak thus: A fool can ask more than ten wise men can answer. Thus must you at times stop the mouths of fools so that they let go of their foolishness.

In Paris there lived a rich man. He walked about the street, comfortable and respectable and swollen with pride. There he met a poor clerk who was hungry and lean and of poor appearance. The rich man began to mock him and said: "Sir clerk, how poorly you look! You look like someone who comes straight from the Devil out of Hell." The clerk replied: "Say, how well you look! You look like someone who is going to the Devil in Hell." When he heard this, he became confused and did not know what to reply.

You must also not speak much about the Christian faith with Jews. When a Jew asks you foolish questions, shut his mouth with short words and go away. If he asks you how God could become a man, ask him back how it could be that a Jew became a dog. If he asks you how a virgin could bear a child, ask him back how it a sow (lit: *verkenmoder*, mother of piglets) bore eight Jews.

A Jew once came to a clerk and began to ask him about religious topics and said: "Clerk, tell me this, how can it be that the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost are one God?" Then the clerk

said: “How can it be that you are one and yet three at the same time?” Then the Jew said: “Tell me about this, I would like to hear it.” The clerk said: “You are a man, that is one. You are a Jew, that is two. You are a right knave, that is three.” Then the Jew became confused and could ask no more.

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Reference works used in the translation:

Endermann, Heinz: *So du zu Tische wollest gan. Tischzuchten aus acht Jahrhunderten*, Berlin 1991, glossary pp. 161 ff.

Lexer, Matthias: *Mittelhochdeutsches Taschenwörterbuch, 38. Auflage mit den Nachträgen von Ulrich Pretzel*, Stuttgart 1992

Lübben, August: *Mittelniederdeutsches Handwörterbuch*, Darmstadt, on-demand reprint of the 1889 Leipzig edition.

- i Lübben, August. (ed.): Niederdeutsche Tischzucht in: *Germania* 21, Vienna 1876, pp. 424-430
- ii Endermann, Heinz: *So du zu Tische wollest gan. Tischzuchten aus acht Jahrhunderten*, Berlin 1991.
- iii Following Lübben p. 424. Endermann, p. 161 suggests a fourteenth-century date, but neither the language nor the context support this, and it may in fact be due to a typographical error.