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# Zot & zotter in de Vlaamse schilderkunst

LARRY SILVER

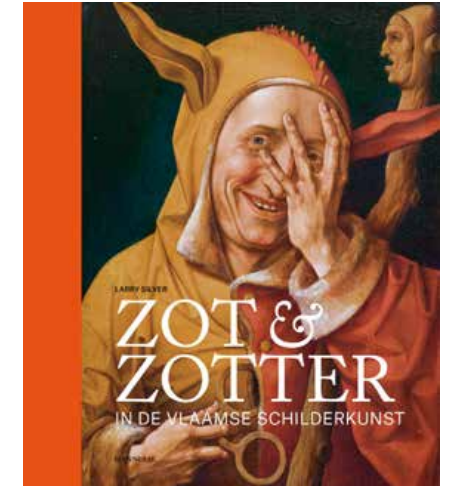
*“In this universal folly everyone might well find self-recognition.”*

LARRY SILVER

Volgens de middeleeuwse theologen is geloven een zaak van bittere ernst. Humor en deugd moeten wel onverenigbaar zijn, want lachen is onbedwingbaar en ontsnapt aan de controle van de rede. Zedig glimlachen, tot daar aan toe. Maar schateren, grijnzen en grimassen: dat moet wel het speelveld van de duivel zijn – even verderfelijker als andere onbeheersbare driften, zoals de lichamelijke liefde of de verslaving van de gokker. Dat is het terrein van de boer of de zot.

In de late middeleeuwen weet iedere rechtgeaarde stedeling dat het verschil tussen boeren en dwazen gering is. Boeren zijn onnozel, primitief, belust op feesten, schransen, zuipen en seks. De boer is het antivoorbeeld voor de gecultiveerde stadsmens, die zijn driften keurig beteugelt – en dus vooral niet te hard mag lachen. Alleen tijdens onnozele kinderfeesten of vastelavondvieringen mogen de stedelijke feestvierders hun andere kant tonen, hun onderkant. De collectieve roes laat toe de onaangename kanten van het dagelijkse bestaan tijdelijk te ontkennen.

In tegenstelling tot de boer ontsnapt de zot bovendien aan de bestaande orde. De zot houdt de zelfverklaarde wijze een spiegel voor, want ‘al lachend zegt de zot de waarheid’, ook al zit die dan verscholen tussen pis en stront, seks en snot. Precies daarom voert ook Erasmus in zijn *Lof der Zotheid* niet zelf het woord maar laat hij die eer aan de Dwaasheid, een brede rug waarachter de wijze zich kan verschuilen wanneer hij maatschappelijke problemen aan de kaak stelt. Zo verandert de lach de wereld en draagt hij bij tot een maatschappijverandering, een cultiveringsproces.



*Lof der zotheid:  
over de nar en de zot  
in de Vlaamse kunst*

In deze context worden de zot en ironie belangrijke motieven in de middeleeuwse kunst, met name in de Nederlanden. Dit originele kunstboek is geïllustreerd met tientallen topwerken van Vlaamse meesters uit wereldwijde collecties.

Met een introductie door dr. Katharina Van Cauteren, kunsthistorica en stafchef van The Phoebus Foundation.

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in Flemish Art

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LARRY SILVER

FOOLS &  
FOLLY

IN FLEMISH ART

HANNIBAL

# EXCREMENTAL MIRTH

*or how Humour Laid the World Bare, from the Sixteenth Century to the Present*

## THE DEVIL'S DOMAIN

Homer's gods can roar with laughter. Zeus, Hera, Poseidon and the rest of the cabal — grinning, giggling, splitting their sides. Anything man can do, the gods can do better. The Greek pantheon is a projection of the terrestrial on to the celestial. It's only when God becomes man that he stops laughing. Jesus doesn't do stand-up. There are no gags in the Bible, no guffaws or gales of laughter. The Christian faith is an awfully serious thing.

Or so medieval theologians conclude, at any rate. In the absence of so much as a muffled biblical titter they decide that humour and virtue must be incompatible. Christianity is an ode to reason, in the best Platonic tradition. And as far as reason is concerned, anything received and perceived by the senses is a bad thing — Dionysian, bestial, impulsive, uncontrolled. Reason can't bear unrestrained laughter. Worse, laughing distorts God's creation: cheeks puff out, eyes squeeze shut, teeth are bared, bellies, buttocks and bingo wings jiggle, bladders are compressed, you may even wet your knickers. No, a modest Marian smile is just about acceptable, but splutters and smirks, grins and grimaces — they definitely belong to the devil's domain, as pernicious as other unreasoning urges like the lover's libido, the drunk's delirious hilarity, or the gambler's addiction. It's the realm of the primitive impulsive outsider, of the peasant, of the fool.

## YOKELS AND BUMPKINS

In the late-medieval Netherlands, every right-minded burgher knows that 'peasant' and 'fool' are virtually one and the same thing. Urbanites look down their noses at villagers, even though their parents, grandparents or great-great-grandparents were probably peasants themselves. But now, in the Low Countries, beside the grey North Sea, the old world is shaking on its social foundations. For in strategically sited towns and cities a new species of human is making its entrée. While the divine dramatis personae included only clergy, nobles and peasants, enterprising citizens are now elbowing their way on to the social scene.

Generally speaking, entrepreneurs are critical, level-headed, realistic beings. They can do without heroism or conceit — life is truth enough. They can afford to chortle at jokes that a nobleman may find funny but can't laugh at, since social decorum requires him to keep a straight face. At the same time, peasants and fools are just yokels and bumpkins, so they're ideal objects of ridicule and jest. And thus the growing pains of a new social structure make the prosperous towns and cities of the Netherlands the perfect testing ground for a whole new kind of humour.

Peasants, apparently, are doltish and primitive; all they think about is feasting, eating and drinking to excess, and sex. They eagerly indulge in every conceivable vice and have no control over their bestial tendencies. But what else can you expect — peasants are part and parcel of nature, sons of the soil, tasked by God with tilling and growing and breeding. A mission that they carry out with far too much enthusiasm, according to the morally pedantic townfolk. In the self-satisfied eyes of merchants and entrepreneurs, God made the peasant to be the antithesis of the civilised city dweller, who, if he has urges, knows how to curb them and would never be guilty of laughing too loudly.

## GREASY SAUSAGES AND BAWDY BALLADS

Except, that is, when that thin layer of civilisation is briefly scratched away. During the Church's feasts of fools, the social order is inverted, the world is turned upside down in a jaw-dropping extravaganza of excess. Clerics found foolish kingdoms ruled by child bishops or donkey popes. Venerable brothers dress up in drag, cavort in the choir and bellow bawdy ballads. Greasy sausages are served on the altar and holy water is replaced by piss. Then the monks move out of the church and into the town.

Sooner or later, a party will attract gatecrashers. What started as a parody of ecclesiastical ritual takes on a secular life of its own in the sixteenth century. Tavern-crawling, binge-quaffing citizens treat the world to a view of what they normally keep decorously covered and gleefully moon their shitty bare arses.

### Quinten Metsys

*A Fool or Folly* (detail), c.1525–30

Oil on panel, 60.3 × 47.6 cm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION



A couple of times a year, the townsfolk carouse in a collective crapulence that negates everyday life's less pleasant aspects and, for a little while, turns them into the exact ecstatic opposite.

While they hijack the feast from the clerics, they choose their fool from the nobility. And — genuine nutters or not — these buffoons egg on the boozing brothers and bacchanalian burghers in their folly. They caper and gibber, use obscene gestures and scatological slapstick. To make you laugh till you cry! Christ may not have been given to giggling, but late-medieval man certainly knows what nonsense is.

#### EXCREMENTAL MIRTH

The newfangled humanists bemusedly observe the chaos from a safe distance and wonder what on earth is going on. Striving for some kind of intellectual grasp of the proceedings, they disinter the reflections of Aristotle, Quintilian and Cicero on the workings and effects of laughter from their thick layers of medieval dust. And thus opposing yet complementary worldviews develop, comedy juxtaposed with tragedy, like yin with yang, Democritus with Heraclitus — a kind of theatrical peristalsis in which profound throat-constricting insight is relieved by the fool's fart. Which is how the uninhibited medieval joke enters the category of 'folly', as a counterbalance to the seriousness of 'wisdom'. It happens on stage, but equally in painting. And around 1500, 'painting' is synonymous with 'the Netherlands'.

In the sixteenth century, when it came to the visual arts, cities such as Bruges and Ghent and especially Antwerp were international quality brands. Where there is demand, supply will follow: in Antwerp around 1560 there were more painters than bakers. Add a middle-class buying public with middle-class norms and values, season with middle-class humour, and the result is the perfect recipe for a whole new artistic genre.

The fool is uprooting himself from the margins — literally. In medieval manuscripts and church sculpture, drolleries and jests were usually to be found around the edges. Now the marginalia become subjects in their own right. Fool-filled pictures present us with a mirror, for aren't we all a tad foolish, a bit preposterous? Images of unequal love show

lustful old men embracing artful damsels who make off with their purse, hahaha! In illustrations of gender-reversal, viragoes wear the trousers while their henpecked husbands are turned into jessies, heeheehee! Monkeys ape people, and so monkey paintings — *singeries* — act as a witty spoonful of honey to help inconvenient truths go down. Often, cackling characters will turn to the viewers and encourage them to chortle along with them, like the canned laughter in a TV sit-com.

A lot of the humour is on a level that would make Benny Hill seem intellectual. But even the biggest brainiac secretly slumps on the sofa and laughs at *Dumb & Dumber's* flatulent farts and puerile pranks. In 1604 that renowned biographer of artists, Karel van Mander, cheerfully describes turds in paintings as *aardige bootsen* or 'pleasant jests'. The French, of course, are above that kind of thing. Piss and poo are not *de rigueur*: in the seventeenth century, a French dealer in Flemish paintings specifically asks for pieces in which no one is urinating. Evidently the Parisian *beau monde* is too po-faced for jokes involving excrement.

#### SALVE FOR THE WOUND

Fortunately for the more sensitive souls there is also nonsense of a different calibre. Set a humanist to piss-taking and the result is more Monty Python than Mr Bean. The medieval gags acquire Erasmanian irony and evolve into an intellectual game that you can play with your like-minded mates. In that context, painters such as Quinten Metsys (c.1466–1530) and Marinus van Reymerswaele (c.1490–c.1546) are quick to recycle the caricatures of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), poignant portraits demonstrating that nature herself is not averse to a little irony, as she lets beauty wither and smooth skins shrivel into crow's feet and crumpled craters with sunken eyes and hooked noses. We may smile at the vanity of youth, but the decay of the elderly is painfully funny, for humour is also a salve for the wound of reality.

No one in the visual arts understands that better than Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c.1526/30–1569). His paintings give us a glimpse into the convex mirror of life. Laugh at the blind leading the blind and you're likely to fall into a pit yourself. This is next-level humour,

#### Quinten Metsys

*Fool with a Spoon* (detail), c.1525–30  
Oil on paper, mounted on panel, 25.3 × 19.4 cm  
ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION



pp. 26-27  
**Frans Hogenberg**  
*The Dance of Fools*, c.1570  
Etching with engraving, 321 × 523 mm  
ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

**Circle of Jan Massijs**  
*Rebus: The World Feeds Many Fools*, c.1530-40  
Oil on panel, 37.5 × 48.2 cm  
ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION





# STULTORVM CHOREA

Der sotten dans

*Stultorum non est numerus sua nam voluptas  
Quae trahit sese nemoq. nosse s. tudec*  
Den hoop der sotte es sonder ghetal  
Want elck volghet sijn Wellustichz oueral

*Omnib. in rebus mediis modumq. tenere  
Qui sapit impune hunc transeat ille choru*  
Wie mate en regel can houwe in alle dinghen  
Die mach sijn dans der sotten ontspringhen

**Adulator** pluystrijckedot  
*Omnia dissimulo, simuloq. blandus adulator.  
Omnibus ore, manu, vultu animoq. duplex.*  
Alle dinck versuck die elck can foeteijck vleyen  
Mette monde en therie Vol dobbelheijen

**Loquax** Clapachtichsot  
*Prodit lingua loquax stultu, facile regat ipse  
Stultitia furvus si tacuisse queat*  
De clappende tonghe can den sot betijghen  
Wut sulx sotte bedecte bleef cost hy gezwijge

**Superbus** hooghveerdichsot  
*Solus ego bon. sapiens nec dignor honore.  
Quae, aliquo pre me, na mihi nemo placet.*  
Ick en eere niemant Want ick alle ben goet en wijc  
Niemant calshaget mij maer mij sicut ghruet en prij

**Ambitiosus** Eerghierichsot  
*Omnis presumo temerarius omnia de me  
Pollicor propria laudu amore furcis*  
Alle dinghe vermetick mij en beroemt mij seer  
Want ick ben rasende om mij eyge eere

**Detractor** Achterclappichsot  
*Solus tu qui agas alij nouit, labore.  
Et mea no sperans facta aliena noto.*  
Wat anderhe make wil ick alijc aemercken  
Niet sende mijns sijn, herghuek es aders wercke  
Alle verucht en blifschep es mij foier pijn  
Om ee anders weluer ick ghel verdwijne

**Invidus** haetnijlichsot  
*Gaudia tristitia, luctu parant mihi risu.  
Tabro cunctoru, prosperitate misor*  
Alle verucht en blifschep es mij foier pijn  
Om ee anders weluer ick ghel verdwijne

**Ignavus**  
*Figura proha sunt, vana inuanda mille  
Ora de seculo esse laetis, feru.*

**Curiosus**  
*Omnia diu sector, nil gignor, omnia nosse  
Omnia habere parans, noui habere, nihil*  
Me diru Eumenides agitant, pacisq. quietem  
Exosus, rixas vndiq. spargo truces  
De hellsche raserij doe mij peijs en vrede haten  
Dus stroje ick ghekijs en t wijt in alle staten

**Contetiolus**  
*Contetiosus*

Frans Hogenberg  
The Dance of Fools, 1570  
Engraving with engraving, 21 x 523 mm  
ANTWERP, THE PHOENIX FOUNDATION

**Nivichsot**  
*Et nihil al. nihil gignor, nihil  
Et nihil gignor, nihil gignor, nihil*

**Luxuriosus** Luxuriosus  
*Non mi serabilior nemo est, qm spurca libido  
Eman xit nemo viribusq. animo.*  
Ghec ongheluckiger du ick! Wiens Wel  
Mij heeft Van ghelde nacht, en sin be

**Preco**  
Deherault/achterdanser  
*Antemhi pulsu buazq. crepent vocitanda  
Quam munero claudi nostra chorea queat*  
Mij souerde rad blifsch over sijnreij de ha  
Atruwij der sottej dat zou conij voluandich

**Tubicen**  
De tromp  
*Qui no ipse videt rectu, nec recta monent.  
Solus hui doctis, parique ille nubi.*  
Dit niet en siet dat recht et nochtan en hoort na recht Vermaent  
Gheue mij de hant en houwe hier and.

**Preco**  
de herault  
Voerdanser

**Gulosus**  
Gulichsot

**Avarus**

*Du soruples, moriar viuo miser Inter aer  
Auri senper egen, et mihi doctis? putat*

**Ghierichsot**

Om dat ick rijck sou sterue leuic armelijck loos  
Al heb ick goets genoeg nochtan clagheick altoos

**Prodigus** Vergastensot  
*Dispero res, nulla dando seruam rationem  
Nec mihi proficiens, pauperumq. timens.*  
Het mijne verstroyd ick hondende ghespant mit ghelue  
Niet verlijsting, nocht verlijsting d'ermoeidich kien

*Vice al vlaght, waer toe he stiert, sijn sinlichheijt bloot  
Dit naeye dese ooren vast aen sijn hoot*

*Qui no ipse videt rectu, nec recta monent.  
Solus hui doctis, parique ille nubi.*  
Dit niet en siet dat recht et nochtan en hoort na recht Vermaent  
Gheue mij de hant en houwe hier and.

*publere epuli profat. Vnoq. futuri.  
Sollicito memet, qua macerare metu.  
De beer op een smeylen en drinkt te stellene  
Dan my solum met sorchvuldicheij de quellene.*



Joris Hoefnagel

Gonzales Family from *Igni*, c.1575/80

Watercolour and gouache on vellum, 143 × 184 mm

THE FOUR ELEMENTS/WASHINGTON, NATIONAL GALLERY

An unusual feature of this picture is the presence of a Bavarian lion symbol behind the fool, resting his paws on his shoulders.<sup>18</sup> His outfit is elaborate: a feathered red cap in an expensive fabric, which matches the warm colour of both his costume and fancy purse (also adorned with gilded lion clasps). Mertl wears large rings with red cut stones and an ostentatious gold and jewelled crucifix on a gold chain at his neck. However, the jester is not glamorised as an individual; his unshaven face and visible tooth compromise his dignity and suggest his outsider role. In a 1598 Munich inventory, the sitter is identified as *Mörtl Witz* ('Mertl the Witty').

The Phoebus Foundation owns a most unusual portrait — by the Flemish artist Jan van Hemessen — of a well-dressed but singularly unattractive, wrinkled old woman, who also might have been such a court figure (p. 35). She has been identified as Elizabeth, or 'Foolish Bess,' a fool employed by Anne of Hungary (1503–1547), wife of a Habsburg archduke and eventual Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I (1503–1564).<sup>19</sup> Despite being dressed in rich court fashion, with bright yellow and green fabric as well as a necklace strung with rings and finely embroidered gold brocade at her brow, her distracted look suggests that this woman was retained to entertain as a natural fool. Additionally, her portrait was associated with other human rarities, such as giants and dwarves.

Closest to the Phoebus female fool is another Flemish painting of a court figure; in this case, a dwarf who served Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle (p. 34 right), principal adviser to the regent of the Netherlands, in Brussels. The painter, a Dutch specialist in portraits, especially of Spanish royalty, was Antonis Mor (active 1544–1576/77).<sup>20</sup> This portrait is not only a careful delineation, but also a parody of royal command. To feature a large hunting dog (as Velázquez did later in his Spanish palace decorations of the 1630s) is to emphasise the martial skills of a nobleman, hunting in peacetime; indeed, Titian had famously painted Emperor Charles V with a hunting dog (1533; Madrid, Prado; based on a previous portrait from life by Jacob Seisenegger; 1532, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum).<sup>21</sup> Dressed in elaborately embroidered matching cape, jerkin and cap, and wearing a fine golden chain, Granvelle's unnamed dwarf stares defiantly out of the picture, though he stands only a head above the dog itself, which he touches familiarly. He carries a sword and a sceptre-like staff, to convey his own mock authority and to reinforce his own seriousness. Both the physical limitations of Granvelle's dwarf and his courtly mien, now overshadowed rather than dominating the large dog, show how his earnest performance could still provide entertaining royal parody. While one cannot ascribe the *Elizabeth* portrait

certainly to Hemessen himself, that picture does find its later, Netherlandish echo in the *Granvelle Dwarf*.

During the sixteenth century, other such individual human oddities often served at court, just as rare animal specimens were collected in royal menageries. A good example of this kind of rarity is an extraordinary, hairy family from the Canary Islands.<sup>22</sup> Pedro Gonzales (also known as Petrus Gonsalus) and his two oldest children suffered from a congenital illness that covered their entire bodies and faces with hair. As an infant, Pedro was sent to the French court of Henri II and there took on the manners of a nobleman, as well as the name Don Pedro. Later, the family moved to the Farnese Palace in Rome, and their portraits appeared in the Ambras collection of Habsburg Duke Ferdinand II, as well as the court collection, part of the cabinet of curiosities of Bavarian Duke Wilhelm V. In a miniature painting (p. 36) by Joris Hoefnagel, among his diverse images of animal specimens in the manuscript *Four Elements* (1570–1600), the children of Pedro Gonzales appear on the folio immediately after his own portrait, alongside his unshaven wife. The inscription accompanying Pedro's image, dated 1582 by the artist himself, reveals some assumptions underlying these rare human specimens:

'Tenerife bore me, but a miraculous work of nature strewed my whole body with hairs; France, my other mother, nurtured me from a boy up to a virile age, and taught me to cast aside uncivilised manners [...]  
Here you may discern the munificence of nature: those born to us resemble their mother in form and colouring, yet likewise take after their father, as they too are cloaked in hair.'<sup>23</sup>

Not surprisingly, most court masquerades and other festivities remained internal, reserved for privileged guests (and thoroughly documented earlier in the century for the masques staged by Emperor Maximilian I). Thus portraits of individual court fools, even within such events, are rare. These depictions of individuals, including Gonzales, in a prized manuscript, were almost always made for the enjoyment of their court patrons, sometimes displayed in palace settings.



Unknown Artist  
Schembart Parade in Nuremberg, 1539  
Watercolour on paper, c.320 × 410 mm  
NUREMBERG, GERMANISCHES NATIONALMUSEUM





Harmen Jansz Muller after Maarten van Heemskerck  
Judah and Tamar, c.1566  
Engraving, 247 × 355 mm  
WASHINGTON, NATIONAL GALLERY

JUDAS ET THĀMAR COEVNT PROMITTITVR HOEDVS ANNVLVS, ARMILLĀ, ATQVE PEDVM PRO PIGNORE DANTVR,  
Genesis 38. 15.

Meemskerck In.  
ML. sc. Fischer excu.

I



**Quinten Metsys**

*Grotesque Old Woman*, c.1520

Oil on panel, 64 × 45.5 cm

LONDON, NATIONAL GALLERY



**Jan Massijs and workshop**

*The Bride Being Led to her Wedding Bed*, c.1550

Oil on panel, 77 × 108 cm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION