

Rudolf M. Dekker. *Humour in Dutch Culture of the Golden Age*. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 187 pp. + 23 illus. \$55.00. Review by LARRY SILVER, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

Back in 1977, Amsterdam art historian Hessel Miedema could assert (presumably with a straight face) in discussing Pieter Bruegel images that “it is out of the question that anyone of erudition . . . could ever have laughed uninhibitedly at peasant scenes in Bruegel’s day.” He goes on to contend that people laughed “above all at the bizarre, the deformed and the weak.” In the quarter-century since those extreme claims to empathetic understanding of past attitudes (and in contradiction to Miedema, who considered readings out of pictures by modern interpreters to be anachronistic), we have broadened our understanding about the breadth of Dutch humor in both art and literature. For art historians one major contribution has been the contextual researches of Dr. Mariët Westermann, particularly into the paintings of Jan Steen (who was also largely ignored until recently) in her 1996 dissertation, *The Amusements of Jan Steen* (published in 1997).

Another rejoinder to the dour, Calvinist stereotype has now been provided by cultural historian Rudolf Dekker of Erasmus University, Rotterdam, co-author most recently of an essay on childhood education during the Dutch Golden Age for a recent exhibition of children’s portraits (*Pride and Joy*, Exhibition Catalog, Haarlem-Antwerp, 2000-01). The core of his new study is a recently discovered manuscript, entitled “Anecdotes,” by Aernout van Overbeke, a lawyer and poet, a Lutheran connected with the Dutch East India Company but also displaying bohemian tendencies. This collection of some two thousand jokes (imagine a Dutch Milton Berle) reveals a ribald sense of humor, perhaps not so far from the accusations by Miedema that associate laughter with vulgarity and joke-makers with the butts of their jokes. This is oral rather than printed material, so without the decorum of literature. Many of the subjects remain marginal or controversial, including topics with sexual or religious content.

Dekker is a native speaker with a strong sense of the linguistic history even of Dutch words for “joke,” and his first chapter historicizes the emerging national association of laughter with dishonorable behavior and the loss of self control that Miedema evokes. He suggests that such reliance on etiquette manuals (including Erasmus’s) or Calvinist criticisms limits the cultural picture to one side of a debatable issue, the more so at a time when humor increasingly began to split into distinctions between high and low, elite and popular, wit and vulgarity. In a well researched second chapter, Dekker traces published works with humorous content as well as foreign influences, chiefly from Germany in the earlier sixteenth century, followed by Italy and Spain (note the allusion to Spain in Bredero’s celebrated *Spanish Brabander*, 1618). Jestbooks formed a publication genre during the seventeenth century, though their rate of survival is low, and they disappeared by the eighteenth century. Young males seem to have been the principal audience, and the texts suggest that jestbooks were meant to be read aloud or performed like theater pieces. Dekker also points to visual humor and the role of jesters in sixteenth-century images as well as the farcical elements in Steen and other seventeenth-century painters. Here the presence of beggars and cripples as ludicrous figures shows how little decorum prevailed in the visual sphere (on deformities as joke material, see 119–20).

Of course, the heart of this study is the analysis of the van Overbeke text. The third chapter builds up the biography of the author as well as of his father, Matthijs, including impressive family intellectual and friendship circles, including Constantijn Huygens. Like commonplace books, the collection includes venerable examples culled from classical and medieval literature as well as Erasmus and Bacon. References to jesters abound in the tradition of *rederijker* verses, and some jests are credited to historic rulers, but there are also more personal citations of Dutch contemporaries. Ultimately the jokes mix traditional forms with personal references, and Dekker points out, they extend the realm of humor out of the defined place (fairs) or time (Shrove Tuesday) or role-players (jesters) into a more inventive, less structured en-

semble. Another fascinating connection is the insertion of the author into his works, much as Jan Steen featured self-portrait cameos in his boisterous paintings.

Chapter four (“Polarity and Inversion”) attends more closely to the thematic content of the humor. Many of the jokes resemble modern teen movies in excretory or sexual focus. They also have a contemporary penchant for lawyer jokes as well as doctor (and enema) jokes. The male audience frequently got entertained at the expense of women, particularly shrewish wives and other rebels against gender decorum in the late medieval tradition of misogyny. Some jokes extend *rederijker* farces about adulterous marriages, hen-pecked husbands, or other social inversion. Ill-matched pairs, or unequal matches in age or social rank, also extend late medieval targets. Dekker’s discussion of sex norms and jokes (104-11) offers a rich store of material. His knowledge of children and families also stands out (111-16). Political correctness is entirely absent, as foreigners (especially Germans) and Catholics become butts of jokes, and there is precious little self-deprecation towards either the Dutch or Protestants.

Perhaps analysis of humor is in the air. Recently a more philosophical approach to the principles of joke-making appeared: *Jokes* by Ted Cohen (Chicago, 1999). But humor is so topical and temporary that even television reruns or old *New Yorker* cartoons require footnotes or subtitles. Humor exists within a fleeting and informal, largely oral discourse, with little written evidence left behind. Hence the need for serious and local historical studies like this one. Dekker offers us a rare glimpse of the Netherlandish world we see more often in paintings from Bruegel to Steen, and in the process he has recovered for the Dutch and for students of Dutch history a vital, missing piece of culture. No longer can Dutch humor be considered an oxymoron.