CHAPTER ONE

THE COMMODITY OF LAUGHTER IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

In memory of Hilde Junkermann, who knew,
perhaps better than most, the value of laughter.

If there is a mistake worse than believing that the present and the past are the same, it is thinking that they are completely different. There may be worlds of difference between yesterday and today, but the past is not a different world. We are continuous. The past draws us to itself and we learn from it precisely because we discover ourselves there under altered conditions.

STEVEN OZMENT

The specific forms of the thought of an epoch should not only be studied as they reveal themselves in theological and philosophical speculations, or in the conceptions of creeds, but also as they appear in practical wisdom and everyday life. We may even say that the true character of the spirit of an age is better revealed in its mode of regarding and expressing trivial and commonplace things than in the high manifestations of philosophy and science.

JOHAN HUIZINGA
How much people of the sixteenth century laughed, in what manner, and
at what: on these topics there is very little agreement. The Dutch scholar
Hessel Miedema once insisted that persons of refinement and erudition
in this period seldom laughed at all, but, to quote Miedema, “contented
themselves by smiling with the mouth closed. The harder someone
laughed, the closer he was to the object of that laughter: the aggressive
scoffer, the doltish peasant.”¹ By this token, we must conclude that Aert
Molkeman and his friends did not comport themselves like gentlefolk,
but I am not so sure.² As it happens, Miedema gives no source for his
statement, but he may have been referring to what has been described as
the upper classes’ gradual withdrawal from participation in popular cul-
ture, including the traditional festive culture of the marketplace and coun-
tryside, as unworthy of their higher status, as well as their increasing in-
ternalization of the ethos of self-control. This is a social phenomenon
that many scholars have studied: Peter Burke, Robert Muchembled, and
above all Norbert Elias.³ But as Elias himself is at pains to emphasize, in
the sixteenth century, this “civilizing process,” as he calls it, was only in
its earliest stages,⁴ and a wide gulf still existed between the ideals of proper
behavior and the everyday comportment of actual people. Nowhere,
perhaps, is this more evident than in the case of laughter.

Aristotle first proposed that laughter is a uniquely human character-
stic. Although some writers have denied this claim (among them Desi-
derius Erasmus, who insisted that dogs and monkeys also laughed), it be-
came a commonplace in the Renaissance.⁵ Juan Luis Vives, a Spanish
humanist scholar residing in the Netherlands, explained that other crea-
tures cannot laugh because they do not have a face like ours.⁶ As the Ger-
man poet-satirist Johann Fischart later summed it up in his version of
Rabelais’s Gargantua, “full-throated laughter / Is the true distinguishing
characteristic of Man.”⁷ But laughter had also long been condemned by
serious minds as frivolous and even sinful, and these critics supported this
opinion with references to the Sermon on the Mount, in which Christ
said, “Woe to you that now laugh: for you shall mourn and weep” (Luke
6:25); in fact, it was often claimed that Christ himself had never laughed.⁸
This was the opinion, for example, of the early church father John Chrysostom,9 who traced the dreadful consequences of laughter: it leads often to foul speech, and from foul speech to foul actions, and so on to murder.10 Writing much later, in the twelfth century, the German nun and visionary Hildegard of Bingen expressed a similar idea when she described the faculty of laughter as one of the unfortunate results of original sin.11

The English writer Richard Rolle, however, was able to speak of good laughter calling it “mirth in the love of God,” which “exists only in the righteous,”12 and a compatriot, the mystic Margery Kempe, found cause for laughter in the trials she suffered for Christ.13 Similarly, in Bruegel’s century, Queen Marguerite of Navarre, sister of Francis I of France, wrote of the “divine mirth” that rose within her,14 and named laughter an attribute of the followers of the evangelical faith that sustained them even in the face of torture and death.15 Nevertheless, majority opinion held that there was little enough for good Christians to laugh about, especially when they contemplated eternity. This is the gist of a story long popular in the Middle Ages. When a king who never laughed was questioned about his solemnity, he replied that he was threatened by four swords: the memory of Christ’s death on the cross, uncertainty about the hour of his death and the fate of his soul, and fear of the Last Judgment.16

Bruegel’s century too decried laughter, at least in its more extreme manifestations. In a volume on physiognomy first published at Antwerp in 1554 and reprinted there ten years later, Jan Roelants insisted that much laughter was the sign of a foolish, unstable, and gullible nature (and also, he added, the sign of a great lover).17 Writing somewhat earlier, Juan Luis Vives did not argue against laughter as such but condemned hearty laughter as “excessive outbursts that shake the whole body,” and as “convulsions of the ignorant, the peasants, children, and women.”18 Such opinions anticipate by two centuries Lord Chesterfield’s dictum that “Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners;... There is nothing so illiberal, and so ill-bred, as audible laughter.”19 Vives counseled young maidens never to respond with laughter in public when...
a man laughed, lest they be thought an easy catch. In like fashion, widows were advised by several Italian writers to avoid hearty laughter and even broad smiles. For his part, Erasmus insisted that “Loud laughter and the immoderate mirth that shakes the whole body . . . are unbecoming to any age but much more so to youth . . . And the person who opens his mouth wide in a rictus, with wrinkled cheeks and exposed teeth, is also impolite. This is a canine habit . . . The face should express mirth in such a way that it neither distorts the appearance of the mouth nor evinces a dissolute mind.” Erasmus offered this prescription for the right kind of laughter in his immensely popular De civilitate morum puellarum, a little book on manners for children. First published in 1530, this work went through more than a dozen editions in that year, was soon translated into several vernacular languages, including a Netherlandish edition of 1559, and inspired many later treatises on social conduct and proper behavior. But while the flood of conduct books published from the sixteenth century on is truly impressive, it would nonetheless be hazardous to write a history of humor based exclusively on these manuals of etiquette. As one Dutch scholar has sensibly remarked, while such handbooks were certainly read, it may be asked to what extent their contents were taken to heart by the middle and upper classes.

In any case, I know of no one who has made a careful study of how the upper classes of the sixteenth century laughed and to what extent this laughter might have differed, if at all, from that of the ‘tgemeyn volck’ (the common folk). Perhaps no such study is possible. But we can approach this subject obliquely through a famous treatise on refined behavior, Baldesar Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier, a dialogue composed when the author was at the court of the duke of Urbino and first published in 1528. In the second part of his book, Castiglione devotes considerable attention to the subject of laughter. Laughter, we are told by Cardinal Bibbiena, one of the speakers, “is something so peculiarly ours, that, to define man, we are wont to say that he is a risible animal . . . But what laughter is,” he continues, “where it abides, and how it sometimes takes possession of our veins, our eyes, our mouth, and our sides, and seems apt to make
us burst, so that no matter what we do we are unable to repress it—this I will leave to Democritus [the laughing philosopher of antiquity] to tell, who would be unable to do so, even if he should promise as much.” But Bibbiena does discuss the various types of humor that evoke laughter. These range from witty remarks and anecdotes to practical jokes. As an example of the latter, he tells how on one occasion two fine ladies, having been tricked into believing that an uncouth but elegantly dressed peasant was really a polished dancing master, tried to converse with him as a near social equal. This took place in the presence of other members of the court, who were in on the deception and, in Castiglione’s words, “everyone’s sides ached from laughing.” Significantly, Castiglione apparently did not condemn this hearty laughter as a breach of polite manners.

The Book of the Courtier was still widely read in the later sixteenth century in various translations, including French, English, and German. An Italian edition was in the library of Cardinal Granvelle, one of Bruegel’s patrons, while a French edition was acquired sometime before 1568 by the Protestant Huijsch van Alkemade, a resident of Leiden. Although a Dutch translation appeared only in the following century, two Spanish editions were published at Antwerp during Bruegel’s lifetime. It was also familiar to Bonaventure Des Périers, a secretary of Queen Marguerite of Navarre and the author of a number of books, including a moral treatise and translations from the classics. In his Nouvelles récréations et joyeux devis, first published in 1558, some years after his death, we may discern echoes of Castiglione (as well as Rabelais) in his claim that “The noblest lesson for life is Live well and rejoice.... Odds boddikins! Let’s laugh! And with what? With our mouths, noses, chins, throats, and all our five natural senses. But that’s not enough if we don’t laugh with our hearts.” And if these words do not constitute a recommendation for hearty laughter, then we may turn to an anecdote told of the famous English buffoon Richard Tarleton: once when he performed before Queen Elizabeth I, she “bade them take away the knave for making her laugh so excessively.”

More to the point, however, many people saw laughter as a positive virtue. Whatever moves us to laughter, Cardinal Bibbiena tells us in The
Courtier, "restores the spirit, gives pleasure, and for the moment keeps one from remembering those vexing troubles of which our life is full." Laughter is the sweetest gift of nature, as the Flemish scholar Erycius Puteanus put it sometime in the following century. The nature of laughter, its sources, and the objects and situations that excite it had been discussed by the ancient writers, among them Quintilian, whose chapter on laughter in the De institutio oratoria Folly herself described in Erasmus's Praise of Folly as "longer than the whole Iliad." Cicero too devoted an extensive section to laughter in his De oratore, the very text that inspired Castiglione's characterization of laughter quoted above. It was probably also due in large part to Cicero and Quintilian that laughter occupied many other writers in the sixteenth century, with a particular emphasis on its effects on the body and the mind. In 1579 the French physician Laurent Joubert published a treatise devoted exclusively to laughter, Traité de ris. Joubert, a professor of medecine at the University of Montpellier (where, appropriately enough, François Rabelais had been a student), informed the reader that "God has ordained, among man's enjoyments, laughter for his recreation in order to conveniently loosen the reins of his mind." This was true even for the clergy. As the Catholic schoolteacher and poet Anna Bijns pointed out in a referen, or poem, first published in 1528, if priests sometimes laugh and sing and make merry, so what? They are people, too, and need to unwind; he who is never merry is a beast. Indeed, many people in Bruegel's day would have agreed with the Dutch diplomat Jacob van der Burgh, who wrote in the next century to a compatriot, the statesman and poet Constantijn Huygens: "I would not wish a wise man never to laugh and deprive himself of a faculty that is proper to him and not given to the rest of [God's] creatures."

Laughter was especially prescribed as an antidote to what Thomas Nashe, about 1593, called "foggy-brained melancholy," the terrible affliction of the spirit that some centuries earlier Hildegard of Bingen had insisted was, like laughter, another of Adam's punishments for original sin. There were two kinds of melancholy. "Natural" melancholy was one of the four temperaments, and those who possessed it tended to be intel-
lectual. The “pathological” strain of melancholy, however—what is now diagnosed as clinical depression—was a disabling condition caused by a superfluity of black bile, that made the body excessively cold (or hot) and dry; its victims tended to be fearful, incapable of positive thought or action. Both types of melancholia, especially the pathological sort, could be alleviated by means of medicine, diet, and pleasant diversions, but above all by laughter. Among the warm, moist passions believed to counteract the adverse effects of the cold, dry passions, laughter was the one that best expanded the heart and stimulated the production of new blood. The Homeric Hymns to Demeter offers perhaps the earliest recorded use of “laugh therapy” for melancholy: Demeter plunged in grief for the loss of her daughter, Kore, who had been kidnapped by Hades, was roused to laughter by the jokes and mockery of the servant woman Iambe.

Thus, whatever incited laughter was good for the body and soul, especially those of the melancholic. The sixteenth-century Italian physician Giovanni Marinello, for example, advised pregnant women to avoid fear and melancholy by laughing heartily (although another writer cautioned that a belly laugh at some ribald story might abort the baby). That is also why the jokes and antics of Richard Tarleton, we are told, cured Queen Elizabeth’s melancholy “better than all her physicians.” Thanks to the pioneering work of Herman Pleij, and a number of younger Dutch and Belgian scholars, we now know that an abundance of literature was published from the later fifteenth century whose function, often expressly stated, was to recreate weary and melancholic spirits by inciting laughter. The most famous is Gargantua and Pantagruel, whose often salacious episodes François Rabelais justified on the grounds, according to the introduction to his fourth book, that he wanted to “give such little relief as I could to the sick and unhappy.” The publisher of a sixteenth-century Netherlandish translation of the German Til Eulenspiegel informed prospective readers that he hoped this account of Eulenspiegel’s tasteless, often quite vulgar pranks would not offend, but lighten and renew the spirit. Similar claims were made for the often
risqué stories in De pastoor van Kalenberg, a collection of German origin first published in a Netherlandish edition in the earlier sixteenth century.

But it was above all the jest books, called cluchtboeken (now spelled kluchtboeken) in the Netherlands—that is, collections of anecdotes—that often stressed the recreational function of their contents. Barbara Bowen gives an excellent introduction to these jest books in her One Hundred Renaissance Jokes, published in 1988, containing comic stories from no fewer than twenty-seven collections written and published between 1343 and 1559. One of the earliest was a collection of anecdotes in Latin compiled by the Italian humanist Poggio Bracciolini in the early fifteenth century; it was often republished in the sixteenth century throughout Europe, including the Netherlands, and influenced later jest books. Among these was the Facetiae, or Facetious Stories, by Heinrich Bebel, professor at the University of Tübingen, the three books of which appeared between 1508 and 1512. Another was Schimpff und Ernst (Jest and Seriousness) by the Franciscan preacher Johannes Pauli, first published in 1522, in which the humorous stories outweighed the serious ones two to one. The Netherlandish collection circulating in Bruegel’s time was Een nyeuwe clucht boeck, or A New Book of Anecdotes, published at Antwerp by Jan Wijnrijcx in 1554. A truly portable volume, scarcely two by four inches, it nonetheless contained 253 anecdotes, a few taken from Bebel, but the vast majority of them derived from Pauli. Some were serious anecdotes, but about half of them conform to the definition of clucht or boerd offered by a Netherlandish-French dictionary of 1572: “something that is said in sport and not for imparting knowledge.” A revised edition of the Nyeuwe clucht boeck appeared at Antwerp in 1576, advertising itself on the title page as a “Clucht Boeck containing many recreative stories and jokes.” Travelers could easily have carried little volumes like these to while away the long hours at sea or on the road; indeed, a similar collection published in 1555 by the German poet—book dealer Georg Wickram bears the title Rollwagenbümeln, meaning in effect “a little book for reading while traveling in a rollwagen, or carriage.”

Joubert lists among the causes of laughter pratfalls and the acciden-
tal display of the buttocks and genitalia, apparently without condemning them. Similarly, the stories in the *kluchtboeken* are occasionally bawdy, and many show no qualities we might call socially redeeming. What kind of stories are they? The *Nyeuwe clucht boeck* of 1554 prefaced its anecdotes with the assertion that they included “all social ranks and professions of the world,” a promise amply realized in the succeeding pages. We encounter a throng of knaves and swindlers, court jesters, prostitutes, erring wives and their lovers, priests, students, merchants and tavern keepers, and various ancient rulers, including Vespasian, Titus, and Charlemagne. We also read tales of murder almost as suspenseful as modern detective dramas and the tragedy of Rosimunde, daughter of the Lombard prince Alkinus, which is as lurid as any Jacobean tragedy. Among the more lighthearted stories is the one about two dumb Hollanders who travel to Antwerp and go hungry on the road because they are served no butter with their eggs, contrary to the custom at home. When they arrive in Valenciennes, because they cannot speak French, one fellow tries to pantomime his wish to have something to eat but has a tooth pulled instead. As it happens, this tale is most likely an ethnic joke, for the Dutchmen to the south traditionally viewed Hollanders as dull-witted. Another anecdote concerns the artist who made paintings of beautiful children. Asked why his own children were so ugly, he explained that he made the former in the daytime and the latter at night—a tale that goes back at least to the fifth century A.D., when it was told by Macrobius, and reappears later in various forms in collections of anecdotes, including one compiled by Petrarch. The final story in the *Nyeuwe clucht boeck* of 1554 involves a bride on her wedding night, two kitchen assistants, and a bowl of *witmoes*, or wheat porridge, that was administered to a most unsuitable part of the anatomy. A number of these anecdotes, among them some of the bawdiest (though not, as it happens, the tale of the bride and the kitchen assistants), have moral lessons attached to them, but we may suspect that these embellishments were prompted chiefly by a desire to make such stories respectable. It may be asked if people did not regularly neglect the “les-
son” of such klucht in favor of their salacious details, much like the young man in a twelfth-century collection of exemplary stories, the Disciplina clerica, whose avid interest in tales of unfaithful wives has little to do with the moral instruction they supposedly provide. Moreover, like the kluchboecken, published collections of popular songs and refereinen of the period, even some from the pen of Anna Bijns, have scatological and obscene subjects.

More to the point, the libraries of members of the upper classes contained such collections of comic stories. A collection of late medieval fabliaux, the Cent nouvelle nouvelles (Paris: Antoine Vérard, ca. 1495), was in the library of Margaret of Austria, regent of the Netherlands, where it kept company with historical works, moralizing treatises (including Thomas à Kempis’s Imitatio Christi), and other edifying literature. Similar volumes of comic tales were owned by the lord of Vianen Hendrik van Brederode, the fervent Protestant writer Philips van Marnix van St. Aldegonde (who also owned two copies of Boccaccio’s Decameron), and Jan van Brouchoven, burgomaster of Leiden and rentmeester, or bailiff, in the Rhineland. In Italy, Saint Filippo Neri’s favorite reading, we are told, was a book of facetiae, his maxim being that “a light spirit acquires perfection more easily than a melancholy one.” It is very likely that when such gentlefolk read one of these stories, whether silently to themselves or aloud to friends, they permitted themselves a chuckle or even a guffaw. The French buffoon Tabarin performed before Marie de Médicis, queen of France, in 1619, and the dedication of a published collection of his jokes indicates that these anecdotes were intended for everybody, including the court and other members of the upper classes. A number of anecdotes, in fact, were attributed to some of the famous court fools of the sixteenth century, such as Kunz von der Rosen, a court fool of Emperor Maximilian I, and Klaus Narr (Claus Fool), who served the Elector Friedrich of Hanover in a similar capacity. Narr had already figured as “Claeus Nar” in three anecdotes in the Nyeuwe clucht boeck of 1554, one of them scatological, and his name was attached to a collection of 627 anecdotes published toward the end of the sixteenth cen-
tury, and a volume of jests purportedly by Richard Tarleton appeared about 1600.72

Laughter was also an important commodity offered by the Netherlandish rederijkers. The rederijkers are most often consulted today for their scoone moralisacien, the morality plays that were characterized in the religious drama Mariken van Nijmegen (Antwerp, 1518) as being better than a sermon,73 intended, according to one document of the period, “for the teaching and edification of all people.”74 But the rederijkers also provided much entertainment of a more lighthearted kind. The foundation charter of the Fonteine chamber of Ghent, established in 1448, stated specifically that its most important task was to provide pleasant and good recreation against “melancholy, the greatest enemy of humanity.”75 As

Figure 6. Peeter Baltens, Peasant Kermis with the “Clucht van pleijerwater.” Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.
the Belgian scholar Dirck Coigneau has observed, a substantial portion of rederijker literary and dramatic production was comic in nature.\textsuperscript{76} It included referien in ’t sotte, that is, “in a foolish mode,” with each stanza ending in a single-line refrain (the other two types being in ’t wijs and in ’t amoreuze, or in the wise and amorous modes).\textsuperscript{77} as well as a variety of plays: esbattements, tafelspelen, and kluchten. While many of the esbattements and tafelspelen, or banquet plays (of which more later),\textsuperscript{78} sought to instruct their audience in good Christian virtues, other rederijker plays were intended as pure entertainment: they are clearly recreaties, a term with something of the meaning of the English recreations, and employed in the sixteenth century to designate an amusing or entertaining play.\textsuperscript{79} In a tafelspel for a Twelfth Night celebration, the character called Prologue says that
he serves to create joy and drive away “alle zware gheesten” (all heavy spirits).80

Some of these plays dealt with social satire, on the venerable principle of *ridendo dicere verum* (to tell the truth with laughter).81 By this means, as Erasmus explained, “what is sinful in individuals is brought out not by a reprimand but by the enticement of a joke.”82 supremely exemplified by his own *Praise of Folly*. But while, as one recent scholar has wisely remarked, “the relationship between humor and satire is not an easy one,”83 other *roderijker* plays seem to have been nothing more than *recreaties* pure and simple, especially the *kluchten*.84 These were farces,85 often involving peasants—husbands and wives, wives and their lovers, and the like—in comic situations. One of these was the so-called *Clucht van pleijerwater*, probably written for the Violieren chamber of Antwerp at the beginning of the sixteenth century.86 It seems to have enjoyed considerable popularity in Bruegel’s time, for its performance was often included in depictions of village kermises. A good example can be seen in a painting by Peeter Baltens, made probably sometime after 1550 (Figs. 6, 7).87 Its plot can be briefly summarized. A wife feigns a severe illness and sends her husband on a wild-goose chase for *plaijerwater* (phony water), whose supposedly miraculous powers will cure her—all this so that in her husband’s absence she can enjoy her priest-lover. Her plot is foiled, however, when the husband encounters a poultry seller who informs him of the deception and smuggles him back into his house concealed in a large basket, where, as we can see in Baltens’s painting, he catches the guilty pair.88

Plays like this must have provided a welcome relief to the didactic *spelen van sinne*.89 At the beginning of her oration, Erasmus’s Folly says of her audience, “as soon as I came out to speak to this numerous gathering, the faces of all of you immediately brightened up with a strange new expression of joy. You all suddenly perked up and greeted me with congenial laughter.”90 We may imagine that a similar crowd greeted the actors in a *klucht*, when they first appeared onstage. *Kluchten* could be performed on many occasions. During the triumphal entry into Brussels of Prince Philip of Spain, later Philip II, in April 1549, two *kluchten* were performed in
the evening on a stage erected in front of the city hall. In attendance was a German observer, Dr. Franz Kram, who later described the plays in fair detail. Both resembled *Plaatjewater*, in that their plots involved wives who deceive their dim-witted husbands to be with their lovers, and this entertainment, it seems, was well received by the crowd of viewers. Everyone in the audience laughed. Dr. Kram remarks rather disapprovingly, not only the men (and none more heartily than Aert Molckeman and his friends, we may suspect, if they were present) but even the women and young maidens.91 Although the Violieren chamber of Antwerp condemned such comic plays as *ijdeldichtinge* (vain rhymes) from which nothing good comes, this opinion would probably have been shared by few in the audience.92

Like the courts and wealthy households everywhere in sixteenth-century Europe, each *rederijkers* chamber had at least one fool who figured prominently in its dramatic activities, including the great *landjuweel* held in Antwerp in 1561.93 These fools also conducted their own festival in Brussels in July 1551, presided over by a “king.” All participants on this occasion, audience as well as fools, had to swear loyalty to this mock king and to protect wayward nuns and monks, wastrels, vagabonds, the ne’er-do-well of all kinds: whoever asks these people to work for their living will be exiled from the Kingdom of Fools.94 The groups targeted here, of course, had long been denounced by preachers and moralists of all stripes; however, we may doubt the people present on this occasion were very much edified, if only because they were asked to seal their oaths with a particularly obscene gesture.95 The balance between moral instruction and pure entertainment, always a delicate one, tipped on this occasion decisively toward the latter. And there can be little doubt that Bruegel’s contemporaries spared neither effort nor expense to make sure that they had appropriate opportunities for laughter.