Comic Drama in the Low Countries, c. 1450–1560: A Critical Anthology ed. by Ben Parsons and Bas Jongenelen (review)

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Published by Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, UCLA
DOI: 10.1353/cjm.2013.0022

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She then goes on to describe the calligraphy and design of the *Codex* itself. Lia Markley explores “The History and Reception of Sahagun’s *Codex* at the Medici Court” and focuses specifically on the manner and circumstances by which the manuscript arrived in Florence.

While the first part of the book is dedicated specifically to the *Codex*, its colors, the plants represented, its structure, and the role of the indigenous scribes, the second part of the book has a broader focus so as to further contextualize the *Codex*. In this second section, Sandra Zetiza, Tatiana Falcón, Elsa Arroyo, and José Luis Ruvalcaba study the *Badiano Codex*’s structure, layout, disposition, material structure, and its role as a container for pre-European knowledge and therefore a reflection of Mesoamerican traditions. Elena Phipps in “Textile Colors and Colorant in the Andes” looks at the process of making dyes in the Andes and how the structure of a color in fact “contribute[s] to the impression, substance, and meaning of color.” Rocío Bruquetas Galán follows Phipps with an analysis of colors, dyes, and pigments used in New Spain, while Louisa C. Matthew looks at the pigment trade in Europe. Roland Krischel rounds out this section of the book with a specific focus on Venice in “The Venetian Pigment Trade in the Sixteenth Century.” “I saw It with My Own Eyes. The Three Illustrated Manuscripts of Colonial Peru” is a comparative analysis of the manuscript tradition, environment, and contexts of Mexico with that of Colonial Peru. Thomas Cummins argues that while in Mexico there was a vibrant and established tradition of production of illustrated documents, in which all groups participated, in Peru the situation was diametrically the opposite. This is born out by the fact that while in Mexico there were thousands of texts, in Peru there were only three. Gabriela Siracusano builds on the theme of color and considers how “color functioned as an autonomous element … in the Andean region.” Pellizzi and Russo close out the discussion of the *Codex* in an Afterword and Postface.

While the second part of the book may, at first, seem disjointed with the declared topic of color in the *Florentine Codex*, these comparative investigations are in fact extremely complementary and broaden the scope of exploration. By including texts beyond the *Codex*, the scholars in fact help to deepen the explanation of the significance of the *Codex* and anchor it within its time period in both Europe and the Americas. *Colors between Two Worlds: The Florentine Codex of Bernardino de Sahagún* is an example of what collaborative research can produce and how such an endeavor can contribute something new, innovative, and extremely interesting while at the same time acknowledging all the already existing scholarship on this topic. Codicologists, historians, scholars interested in the colonial period in the Americas, scholars studying effects of the new world in Europe, and those interested in inter-racial studies should all begin by reading this book.

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A rich and varied dramatic tradition existed in the late medieval and early Renaissance Low Countries. This public theatrical tradition is closely aligned, but
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not coterminous, with a humanist tradition of civic “chambers of rhetoric,” or the rederijkerskamers, found in many of the municipalities of the region. Some scholarly attention has been paid to the serious or tragic Dutch drama of this era, especially since the social, religious, and political turmoil of the Reformation and the Dutch wars of independence provide a natural entry into thinking about those theatrical pieces. But as Ben Parsons and Bas Jongenelen argue, the comic drama of this period also repays scholarly attention, especially given the historicist turn of the last few decades of scholarship. Many historicist scholars have had no access to this drama, however, since they do not read Dutch and most of this drama remains untranslated. Parsons and Jongenelen have thus done the scholarly community a great service in selecting ten fascinating pieces of theatrical comedy and translating them from Dutch into accessible modern English. This critical anthology of Comic Drama in the Low Countries, c. 1450–1560 provides a useful window into the Renaissance theatrical tradition. We can now hope that others will take a look.

The editors have selected ten pieces of Dutch comic drama of two main types. First, they have chosen five dramatic monologues, probably delivered by the zot, or “fool,” employed by most Dutch civic rhetorical societies. These monologues are not part of larger, coherent dramatic pieces, but instead would have been delivered as humorous orations, perhaps as part of the public civic competition among the chambers of rhetoric, or perhaps as part of the chambers’ own banquets and festivities. They can be quite lengthy, often approaching three hundred lines. Second, Parsons and Jongenelen have chosen five farces, pieces that require multiple actors and give a sense of the comic tastes in the Renaissance Low Countries. In each case, the editors have printed the original Dutch and the modern English translation on facing pages. The translations are mostly accurate and accessible, though some ambiguity in the Dutch may have carried over into the English. For instance, in Esbatement van den schuyfman (“The Farce of the Beggar”), the frustrated beggar shouts at a deaf crone, “Her een huijsbacken broot!” The translators render this as “Give her home-baked bread,” though it might more accurately be translated, “Hear! A home-baked bread,” given the two beggars’ humorous playfulness about the woman’s difficulty in hearing them. The dramatic texts are sparingly edited, with no interpolated stage directions. Such an intervention might have made the text even more useful for classroom purposes, as students may not be adept at imagining the action implicit in some speeches. Parsons and Jongenelen provide ample annotations at the bottom of the English page, glossing the texts’ extensive references to classical or humanist sources and commonplaces as well as references to geography and contemporary events. Very helpfully, the editors preface each piece with a lengthy headnote, in which they introduce the piece and place it in context, often with reference to similar genres and themes. These prefatory materials also help to place the texts in dialogue with recent Dutch and English criticism and demonstrate the editors’ easy familiarity with recent scholarly trends.

The editors begin their anthology with a substantial critical introduction that develops the understudied tradition of Dutch comic drama. In an effort to situate their intervention, they extend the more extensive scholarship devoted to the rederijkerskamers’ serious output into the comic realm. The chambers of rheto-
ric organized competitive theatrical festivals and some of this comic drama participates in those competitions. Such contests were a source of civic pride and the prizes for comic success could be just as meaningful as those for tragedy. Like the serious drama of the time, the comedies written by these Dutch rhetoricians participated in the humanist revival of classical material and could draw on or allude to Latin sources. Moreover, as Parsons and Jongenelen show, the comic drama could carry with it a serious intention, serving to promote devotion and instruct its audiences, particularly the youth. Of course, the comic tradition exhibits traits that are uniquely suited to that form of theatre. The editors note, for instance, that the Dutch heartily participate in a tradition of serious parody and that this thread runs through the materials, like “A Mock-Sermon on Saint Nobody” or “The Wise and Wonderful Prognostication,” included in this volume. Further, the comic drama has a unique character type, the zot, and this character figures prominently in the plays in this anthology. Parsons and Jongenelen read much of this comic drama in the tradition of carnivalesque inversion as the rhetoricians take up serious concerns—such as poverty, hunger, and mortality—within the context of farce as a way of “turn[ing] causes of anxiety into amusement … defus[ing] such pressure by means of laughter” (13). Other aspects of these comedies have a biting edge that aligns them with late medieval and early modern estates satire, critical especially of the indifference and corruption of certain elite groups.

The editors have tapped a rich vein in the vital and diverse tradition of vernacular Dutch comic drama. They have made texts that might have otherwise remained somewhat obscure available to a wider readership and increased the likelihood that serious attention to comedy from the early modern Low Countries may gain some momentum. As they show, it may be “easy to dismiss the comic as a trivial exercise,” but this tradition “possessed a high level of social importance in the early modern Low Countries” (20). And, of course, this could also be said of other national traditions. Making these texts more broadly available will help new audiences to appreciate the comic plays of the early modern period and spark an interest in the windows they open onto early modern culture.

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The textual encounters that Susan Crane explores in this book “are poised between cross-species contacts and thoughts about contact” (2). They range from the time of Bede until the late middle ages, and across the British Isles from Ireland to Chaucer’s London, a generous spread that means they begin to map a territory. Other medievalists have brought Animal Theory to the study of individual texts or used it to follow a particular thread through a series of texts, but Susan Crane casts a wider eye. She shows different ways in which to “bring literary approaches to genre, language, gender, and culture together with perspectives from evolutionary biology, taxonomy, language acquisitions, ethology, and environmental studies” (3). Because Animal Encounters is a series of linked essays applying a methodology rather than an argument with a strong central thesis, I will review high points in several chapters.