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Expelling from Top and Bottom: The Changing Role of Scatology in Images of Peasant Festivals from Albrecht Dürer to Pieter Bruegel

Alison G. Stewart

During the first half of the sixteenth century, the earliest visual representations of peasant festivals in European art were produced in Germany.¹ These works, all prints, showcase peasants expelling their drink with the result that art historians today, nearly 400 years later, have described these prints as gross and indecent. In their revulsion and distancing from sixteenth-century Germany's insistently colorful visual and verbal vocabulary, art historians of Northern European art appear to have stressed both the values and preferences of their own twentieth-century culture and that of the sixteenth-century Netherlands rather than those of the society that produced them—sixteenth-century Germany. This preference for clean peasant festival images, ones that are scatologically free, underscores the art historical preference for Netherlandish art that includes Pieter Bruegel's paintings and prints of peasant festivals over the German prints, which originated the theme.

Although Germany produced the first images of peasant festivals in European art, it is the later Netherlandish prints and paintings that have been studied and showcased in art historical literature, despite recent studies of the German imagery by Margaret Carroll, Keith Moxey, and myself. The makers of prints turned their skills to images centered around peasants feasting and celebrating first in the form of prints in Germany, at the home of its most celebrated artist, Albrecht Dürer, at Nuremberg, and then a half century later as paintings produced to the north and west in Flanders and Antwerp, with Pieter Bruegel.

In this essay I study the earliest peasant festival imagery that was designed by Sebald Beham at Nuremberg during the 1520s and 1530s. I investigate the imagery produced as large-scale woodcuts, drinking, and related issues within the cultural contexts of Lutheran Nuremberg during the 1520s and 1530s soon after the adoption of Lutheranism in Nuremberg in 1525. I then trace the production of peasant festival images from Nuremberg to Frankfurt am Main, where Beham continued designing peasant festival prints, which he reinvented as small engravings in series published in the late 1530s and late 1540s. Within a few years

the subject of peasant festivals, which Beham had invented in Germany, moved to Flanders in the Netherlands where scatology played more minor roles and ultimately none at all by the time Bruegel designed his peasant festival paintings around 1567.

In attempting to understand the changing position of scatology, a number of explanations will be posited including: 1) the conservative effect the Council of Trent had on visual art of the second half of the sixteenth century, 2) the shift from the medium of prints to painting, 3) the civilizing process of Norbert Elias, and 4) the differences in German versus Flemish culture. Although no single explanation convincingly explains the cleansing of scatology from Bruegel's peasant festival imagery, the insistence on scatology in German art finds far easier explanation than its avoidance or elimination within Netherlandish art. Although further study is needed for a definitive answer to the question why Netherlandish art shied or turned away from scatology, I show here that the German emphasis on scatology is less a gloss added by the artist than a well-thought-out strategy that had deep cultural roots. My essay attempts to show that understanding a culture is important if we are to understand specific sixteenth-century visual imagery.

Peasant Festival Imagery from Dürer to Bruegel

During the 40 years from 1527 to 1567, when the first German and Netherlandish peasant festival images were made, the German peasant festival print with its emphasis on the body and scatology, in particular vomiting and defecating, was gradually transformed in the southern Netherlands into a cleaner image that made only discreet reference to the necessity of the body. By c. 1567, when Pieter Bruegel made his two well-known peasant festival paintings, no reference at all is made to scatology. Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding Celebration* and *Peasant Kermis* (Gibson, *Bruegel* 163; and Figure 10.1), both in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, are scatologically free.

But in 1527 and 1528, the first two peasant festival images to include scatological reference were published at Nuremberg as woodcuts—works that constitute some of the earliest known visual renderings of the peasant festival theme.² Erhard Schön's design for his *Peasant Wedding Celebration* (Hollstein 48: 156), published by Hans Guldenmund who signed and dated the text 1527 at the lower right, and within the year Sebald Beham's *Kermis at Mögeldorf* (Hollstein 2:243), with small area designed by Schön,³ were both designed by two men trained by Nuremberg's leading painter, Albrecht Dürer. These designers expanded their master's earlier interest in two or three peasants made between c. 1497 and 1514 (*Illustrated Bartsch* 10: 86, 89, 90) into bustling compositions filled with peasants dancing and drinking. Although Dürer's legacy can be noted generally in the approach to subject, composition, and forms, including the sturdy peasant figure, the inclusion of peasants vomiting and defecating introduces a new cultural aesthetic alien to the decorum of Dürer's work.

In the *Peasant Wedding Celebration*, Schön shows, at the right, peasants outdoors celebrating a peasant wedding with energetic dancing. At the left is the



Figure 1. Pieter Bruegel, *Peasant Kermis*, oil painting, c. 1567–68, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. (Image: Wikimedia)

feast indoors where a number of men and the bride sit at a table and enjoy eating and drinking. The platters filled with roast fowl and sausages indicate the large quantities of food and drink consumed at the celebration. But it is the peasant man centrally placed at the bottom who directly points to the consequences of drink. He vomits onto the floor and a dog laps up what he emits. The tall drinking vessel on the table that looks much like a German *Weissbier* glass today indicates that an alcoholic beverage, perhaps beer, has caused the man's bodily distress. At the left, another peasant man seated on the same bench defecates in his pants, over the edge of the bench onto the floor.

The ideas shown here, although puzzling at first to the modern viewer, draw directly on the popular sixteenth-century notion of the four effects of wine, which Schön visualized in another woodcut from 1528 (Hollstein 47: 129), where the various reactions to wine drinking parallel sixteenth-century ideas on the four humors or temperaments. The consequences of drink for the sixteenth-century viewer were deemed comparable to the characteristics of the four animals whose blood provided the fertilizer for the grapes first grown by Noah: ape, lamb, lion (or, here, bear), and pig—emblems of the four temperaments. Schön shows men and women sanguine as a lamb or as choleric as a bear, at the upper left and right, or as phlegmatic as a pig at the lower left and right. The ape at the lower right indicates the melancholic temperament.

Schön shows one man vomiting and two more defecating at the lower left, and together they are shown to act like pigs. Not coincidentally a four-legged pig laps up the drunkard's vomit and serves as an emblem for both swinish behavior in general and the phlegmatic temperament in particular. The accompanying text by Nuremberg's poet-cobbler, Hans Sachs, describes such a drinker under the third characteristic of wine, which Sachs explains includes overeating and drinking, drunkenness, farting, staggering, lying in filth, belching and farting like a pig, urinating in bed, and filthy language. Phlegmatics were believed to lose control of their bodily functions when drunk because of excess bodily fluids (Tlusty 54).

The concept of the effects of wine was also central to an understanding of the considerable body of printed images of kermis produced at Nuremberg between 1528 and 1535. Kermis was the most popular peasant festival in late medieval and Early Modern Germany and celebrated the anniversary of a church's consecration or its name saint. In 1528 Sebald Beham designed his *Kermis at Mögeldorf* woodcut, a wide, frieze-like image with four lines of text above. Beham's woodcut begins with a small building at left, probably a tavern (see Stewart, 'Taverns'), before which a pig consumes a mound of filth. To the right a table features men and women who eat and drink while shawm and bagpipe players provide music for fifteen dancing couples who fill the remainder of the long composition to the right.

The man seated on the bench, prominently placed at the beginning of the composition, vomits as the accompanying pig serves as an emblem of gluttonous behavior. The pig symbolized gluttony in German art during the first half of the sixteenth century as seen in Hans Burgkmair's woodcut from 1512 and in Georg Pencz's engraving from c. 1540 (Hollstein 5:98 and 31:212). In the *Kermis at Mögeldorf*, the viewer is informed that too much drinking and celebrating result

in the kind of swinish behavior shown, vomiting. Here, the moralizing message and warning suggest that responses to such behavior could include revulsion and steering clear of the negative behavior shown. As we will see, other responses to such scatological imagery were possible as well.

Mögdeldorf, the location featured in the title of Beham's kermis print, was a small village four miles east of Nuremberg's walls, still within its countryside, and less than a one-hour walk from Nuremberg's old town. Mögdeldorf's kermises were so popular that half of Nuremberg's population are said to have visited them.⁴ In 1528 Mögdeldorf's population included only thirty peasants and forty-six rural workers, a small number overshadowed by Nuremberg's combined urban and rural populations estimated as high as eighty thousand inhabitants. We know that Mögdeldorf's kermis festivities were celebrated at Pentecost in late May or early June and their attraction lay in their fortuitous location outside Nuremberg's one-mile city limit restricting brandy manufacture. As brandy increased in popularity as a wine mixer, so did Mögdeldorf and its kermises.⁵

Beham's image of kermis showcasing a drunken, vomiting male peasant must have met with success and sold well despite, or because of, its emphasis on gluttony and emission judging from the several additional woodcut prints with the subject of kermis Beham had designed c. 1535, each showcasing a similar drunken peasant. In these woodcuts of kermis, Beham attempted a more narrative format that included additional kermis activities. In Beham's *Kermis (Erlangen)* (my 'Paper Festivals' figure 6; Hollstein 3:256 top), so-called because it is preserved in a unique impression housed in the University Library at Erlangen, Germany, Beham again includes peasants dancing to music beside an inn with a peasant vomiting before it. New here is the inclusion of a church in the background with a flag hanging from a window identifying the event as kermis (Pessler 2: 109 and Kramer, *Bauern* 73). New too is the maypole with peasants dancing around it. Here the peasant man vomiting at the center is aided by a peasant woman who holds his head as if to comfort him, implying ample alcoholic drink. A dog samples the man's issue thereby serving the same function as the pig in the earlier peasant wedding celebration and *Kermis at Mögdeldorf*.

Beham increased the number of scatological incidents to include defecation and a second example of vomiting. At the left, a man kneels on the ground behind the bench and vomits onto the ground. And behind the wattle fence above, to the left of the inn, another peasant man crouches as if defecating. We see only his head, in profile, but his short height suggests that he crouches or squats. In the right half of the composition (now lost but known through copies at Oxford and Gotha), Beham shows a man evacuating from behind in the midst of trees and bushes at far left, thereby switching the view of the defecator presented to the viewer. Here the man's buttocks, genitalia, and bowel movement are revealed. In the Oxford version (Figure 10.2), brown coloring added selectively throughout the print highlights the man's defecation, undoubtedly drawing attention to it.

Beham included two counts each of expulsion from top and bottom in his original kermis print at Erlangen also seen in the two copies at Oxford and Gotha. This emphasis on scatology points to a viewing audience that must have tol-



Figure 2. After Sebald Beham, Kermis Oxford, detail, Woodcut, after c. 1535, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Photo: author.

erated, if not enjoyed, such bodily acts, although some viewers would have undoubtedly been offended by them, judging from the later printed comments of Walther Hermann Ryff, published 1548 in his *Vitruvius Teutsch*:

Who can receive pleasure from a picture of a truly drunken peasant who shits and vomits behind a fence? Such repulsiveness [only] gives pleasure to someone who is improper, has the sense of a peasant, and who can inappropriately be called human. To the shame of painting, there are so many nowadays who draw and paint such inhuman things that ought to horrify a reasonable person. (Forssman ccxxxi^v; trans. mine).⁶

The vehemence of Ryff's reactions suggests that he would not have numbered among those buying, or even looking at, peasant festival prints. Buyers would have undoubtedly gone beyond tolerance to enjoyment, if not delight, of expulsion from top and bottom. The sheer number of peasant festival woodcuts produced in Nuremberg between 1528 and 1535 that include scatological incidents point less to tolerance alone than to enjoyment of scatology and to a variety of purposes that went well beyond moralizing and sinful associations.

Sebald Beham designed his largest and finest rendition of kermis in woodcut form, the *Large Kermis*, in 1535 for the Nuremberg publisher Albrecht Glockendon (Hollstein 3:255; Stewart, 'Paper Festivals' figure 9). Like the *Kermis (Erlangen)* and its two copies, the *Large Kermis* focuses on peasants eating and drinking, dancing, fighting, and playing games, but the arrangement of the scenes has been changed. Here Beham tones down the number of scatological incidents, including defecating, while underscoring the centrality of wine and vomiting, as in the *Kermis at Mögeldorf*. Beham also includes a mound of excrement to the left of the inn, below the wagon wheel, but he shows no one close by, thereby leaving the person or animal responsible open to the viewer. But human responsibility is showcased at center where Beham presents a man lying on a bench before the tavern (Stewart, 'Taverns' 104). The peasant man vomits a full stream onto the ground as a dog eagerly samples the fresh issue. Here Beham underscores the effects of wine by placing a trellis with grape leaves, vine, and a cluster of grapes above the drinker against the inn. Although the link with wine drinking is undoubtedly clear to the viewer, Beham links the emblem of vomiting man and dog with drunkenness in other ways as well.

The image of drunken man and dog visualize a contemporary proverb, the "drunken matins" ("die truncken Metten"), which ironically refers to the vomit of a drunkard as singing in church. The expression itself can be found in both visual and textual form on the title page woodcut to a pamphlet entitled *A New Song. The Song is Called the Drunken Matins* (Stewart, 'Paper Festivals' figure 12), which was probably printed at Nuremberg during the 1530s. Sebastian Franck explains the expression in detail in his book of proverbs from 1541.⁷ He writes that the drunken matins results from drinking so much that Bacchus throws the drinker under a bench, then the drinker begins to sing the drunken matins with long notes, a euphemism for vomiting, such that all dogs and pigs run to the drinker

and gobble the song and the matins he produces. Franck calls such singing of the drunken matins debauchery.⁸

Beham's image of a drunken man in his *Large Kermis* appears to function on at least three levels: as the third effect of wine, as an emblem indicating the sin of gluttony, and as the visualization of a proverb. So understood, the long, thin loaf of bread placed over the drunkard's head, a curved, split loaf, ironically appears to stand in for a halo over the head of the vomiting man. Such apparently holier-than-thou moralizing views parallel those of Humanists and civic and local authorities in Germany who, during the early sixteenth century, believed that drinking was a serious social problem and, as elite members of society, vigorously railed against drinking in large quantities. Sebastian Franck summed up such attitudes when he stated that "more people die from excessive eating and drinking than from the sword" ("Es sterben mehr leut von fressen vnnd sauffen, dann vom schwerd") (2: fol. 162).

But it is important to remember that a range of meanings could have been understood for images of individuals vomiting and defecating. People who drank to excess were nearly always men,⁹ and in visual imagery and elsewhere anyone suffering from bodily expulsion could have been understood on several levels that mixed the kind of moralizing attitudes already seen with entertainment and delight. Although art history has been slow to understand scatology within historical contexts, historians of literature have studied the subject in some detail and their interpretations offer food for thought. Johannes Merkel (192-201) uses the term "fecal comic" for the long tradition of delighting in scatology as a vehicle for the comic, through laughter and delight, in German carnival plays of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Sidney Shrager (75-95) expands this understanding of the scatological for modern drama by calling attention to it by both joking and moralizing about it, a concept he terms "scatological satire."

Expanding on these ideas, recently Eckhard Bernstein (292) called attention to Barbara Correll's merging of these moralizing and pleasurable approaches by referring to the scatological antics of the German sixteenth-century figure Grobianus as the "peepshow of civility";¹⁰ by this Correll (107) meant undesirable behaviors were both called attention to and delighted in as part of the civilizing process set forth by Elias. If we apply these various interpretations of scatology to the visual imagery of the sixteenth century, in particular to the German peasant festival woodcuts, our understanding of those images of peasants eliminating from top and bottom can similarly be understood in a variety of ways: as comic, satirical, and moralizing elements in service of the civilizing process.

Returning to Beham's kermis imagery, one notices that after 1535 Beham no longer provided kermis designs for Nuremberg publishers of woodcuts. Beham had moved west and north to Frankfurt am Main about 1531, and he returned to the subject of peasants celebrating in 1537, but this time in engraving not woodcut. Why Beham switched to engraving is unclear but there are several possibilities: perhaps he was dissatisfied with working with Nuremberg publishers over a long distance, or perhaps he received a one-time fee for each woodcut design

and not for the number of impressions printed – the scant evidence from the period does suggest that sixteenth-century publishers, not the woodcut designers, sometimes owned and therefore kept the wood blocks. Assuming that Beham designed and cut his engraving plates, as earlier painter-engravers did, and perhaps printed his plates as well, perhaps he hoped to tap into a new and lucrative audience in his still relatively new home at Frankfurt.¹¹ During the decade from 1537 to 1547, Beham rethought his earlier large-scale woodcut peasant festival images and motifs and retooled them into small-scale engravings. Presumably such engravings were more expensive than woodcuts and enjoyed a more elite audience, assumptions that are generally true about woodcuts versus engravings, but may not necessarily be true for this particular case.

Beham's *Peasants' Feast* series, with twelve small engravings (c. 2 ins × 1.5 ins) dated 1537 (Hollstein 3:94), includes what might be described as a little bit of something for everyone: musicians begin at the left, followed by eight couples dancing, the last male dancer vomiting, and ending with three engravings showing lovers and a man voiding. Partially disrobed lovers are caught by a woman who appears to be the man's wife, and the next engraving shows an older woman who wants to join in the love play. The last engraving is the scatologically centered scene, and perhaps the most scatologically rich of any we have seen. A squatting man vomits and simultaneously defecates, as a pig sniffs what he evacuates below. The male companion explains, "You are really too shameless" ("Dv machst es gar zv grob"). He points to the man's bodily functions and calls attention to what he does and therefore what might be understood as his crude, inappropriate behavior. As Erasmus stated in 1530: "It is impolite to greet someone who is urinating or defecating A well-bred person should always avoid exposing without necessity the parts to which nature has attached modesty" (quoted in Elias 130). But the men Beham shows are peasants and undoubtedly not well bred. By showcasing behavior considered crude, perhaps peasant-like, Beham offers the viewer an image with a range of associations and meanings that can be described as entertaining, humorous, moralizing, and satirical.

Beham reused his series from 1537 a decade later in his *Peasants' Feast – Twelve Months* series dated 1546 and 1547 (Hollstein 3: 98). Using ten engravings, rather than the earlier twelve, Beham moved the musicians after his dancers, and concludes with three engravings centered around eating and drinking, fighting, and making love, including the effects of drink. In the last print (Figure 10.3; Bartsch 163), Beham combined two of his compositions from the series of 1537 into one. The lovers and the spectator at the left are reversed to mirror image and placed alongside a peasant man who appears to void simultaneously from top and bottom. The peasant lovers embrace eagerly, the man gropes beneath her skirt, as an older woman explains in the banderole above, "I also want to" ("Ich wil avch mit"). In the right half of the print, which constitutes the last in the series, a squatting peasant vomits onto the ground while a pig, seated on the ground behind the man, appears to sniff the man's bowel movement, which is nearly invisible in most reproductions. The woven fence offers a modicum of privacy to the lovers in this scene, a fence that recalls Walther Ryff's question dis-



Figure 3. Sebald Beham, *Peasants Behind a Fence*, engraving, 1547, no. 10 in the series *Peasant Festival – Twelve Months*, British Museum, London (courtesy Photographic Collection, Warburg Institute, University of London).

cussed above, "Who can receive pleasure from a picture of a truly drunken peasant who shits and vomits behind a fence?"

Judging from the existing numbers of woodcuts and engraved series of peasant festivals and celebrating peasants that Sebald Beham designed or inspired, not only did an audience exist for such images but the artist appears to have established a market for the subject between 1527 and 1547, first at Nuremberg and then Frankfurt am Main, and possibly beyond into the Netherlands. In 1549 the first of several Flemish prints opened up the topic that led, over the course of a decade, to the prints and paintings of Pieter Bruegel. Although art historians have generally distanced the Flemish examples from their German antecedents because of what they have called in the latter "repugnant" or "gross" behavior, the Flemish prints initially share such characteristics and only gradually, over the course of two decades, shed all scatological references.¹²

But the Flemish prints, then paintings, actually follow the German tradition in important ways. First, most of the images are prints which offered wide distribution and thus suggest a continuous broad audience that enjoyed and was willing to purchase the subject of peasant festival imagery on paper. Second, most of the Flemish images show peasants outdoors where they eat, drink sometimes to excess, dance, and enjoy games and other amusements. Rather than departing entirely from their German models, the Flemish examples continue in their footsteps in terms of the print technique and subjects shown.

The earliest Flemish prints of peasant festivals include peasants vomiting and defecating, yet they do so in smaller numbers and in more discreet locations than in Beham's prints. In this regard, we most definitely observe a move away from the scatological emphasis of the German prints. Over the course of less than twenty years, from the first Flemish print in 1549 to Pieter Bruegel's paintings—c. 1567–68—the Flemish peasant festival images turned from a multi-peopled composition with a variety of energetic activities, including voiding from top and bottom, to monumental renderings of fewer, larger figures who comport themselves in more decorous manner. These peasants never vomit or defecate, at least where viewers can see, despite their drinking and fighting. And although they may dance with enormous codpieces displayed immediately in the viewer's face, as in Bruegel's painting of 1566 in The Detroit Institute of Arts (Gibson, *Bruegel* 161; Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel*, figure 1), these peasants behave themselves with regard to bodily emissions. No vomiting or defecating is rendered visible.

The Flemish prints mark a move toward etching and Antwerp, two increasingly important aspects of the Northern European art world in the second half of the sixteenth century. The Flemish peasant festival prints employ etching on copper plates perhaps because etching was considerably faster than engraving on copper and reduced the time to cut a small plate, according to Landau and Parrshall (30), from less than a week for a small engraving plate to less than a day for an etching. In the etching technique the design is incised by acid, rather than pushing a graver or burin into the plate. Thus the use of etching increased the ease and speed of producing images such as peasant festivals.¹³ The Flemish fes-

tival prints also stress the Flemish port town of Antwerp, which rose to great power and importance during the course of the sixteenth century.

The Flemish prints mark the shift in the center of peasant festival imagery production away from Germany to the southern Netherlands and Flanders. Between 1553 and 1560, Pieter van der Borcht from Mechelen designed three etchings that weave the effects of drink and bodily elimination into the activities rendered; these etchings may have been printed by Bartholomeus de Momper at Antwerp. In van der Borcht's etching of 1553, the *Peasant Kermis* (Figure 10.4), for example, the scene teems with energy and tall, long-legged individuals, including a man who vomits at the lower right as an animal, possibly a dog, sniffs and expresses its interest. In van der Borcht's later *Peasant Kermis* etching dated 1559 (Hollstein 3: 467), a toddler appears to defecate, or urinate at center, from its bare bottom (Orenstein figures 54, 92) while a woman discreetly squats nearby to the left of the tree. Here only the child's voiding is shown directly; no examples of vomiting or defecating are included in the explicit manner of Beham's peasant festival prints despite van der Borcht's direct borrowing of the church procession from the former's *Large Kermis* woodcut (Stewart, 'Paper Festivals,' figure 9; Hollstein 3: 255) pointing to cultural differences with regard to scatology.

By the time Pieter Bruegel's peasant festival designs were published as etching-engravings in Antwerp around 1559, scatological details were discreetly tucked into the compositions and inferred, rather than showcased.¹⁵ In Bruegel's *Kermis at Hoboken* (Figure 10.5; Hollstein 3:208; Orenstein cat. 80), etched and engraved by Frans Hogenberg and published by Bartholomeus de Momper at Antwerp, Bruegel offers a panoramic view of the village of Hoboken outside Antwerp, where tavern and church provide the setting for dancing and drinking archery and processions.¹⁶ Two peasants appear to relieve themselves in the foreground: one man urinates before the tavern and another crouches behind the archery target at the left. Bruegel employs discretion for his incorporation of scatology by showing both men in back or side views; both views imply urination and a lower, side view defecation as well. These views suggest bodily acts without explicitly depicting them. A comparison with the descriptive, graphic back view employed by Beham is informative and again points to different cultural attitudes.

Bruegel emphasizes numbers of animals. He includes at least seven pigs and four birds in his print. These numbers indicate that the inclusion of the symbolic gluttonous animal *par excellence*, the pig, was a more appropriate form of representation for Bruegel and his Flemish audience than the overt depiction of swinish behavior itself. In his engraving of *Gluttony* or *Gula* from the Seven Deadly Sins series (Orenstein cat. 45), Bruegel showcases two pigs and two dogs in the foreground along with a man vomiting from a bridge, at lower left. Expelling from the top appears to have been acceptable here for depicting the sin of gluttony, but notable is the complete absence of the association between gluttonous behavior and defecation found in the German woodcuts and engravings.

It was only a small step from Bruegel's *Kermis at Hoboken* print to Bruegel's more familiar paintings on wood panel, the *Peasant Wedding Feast* and *Peasant*

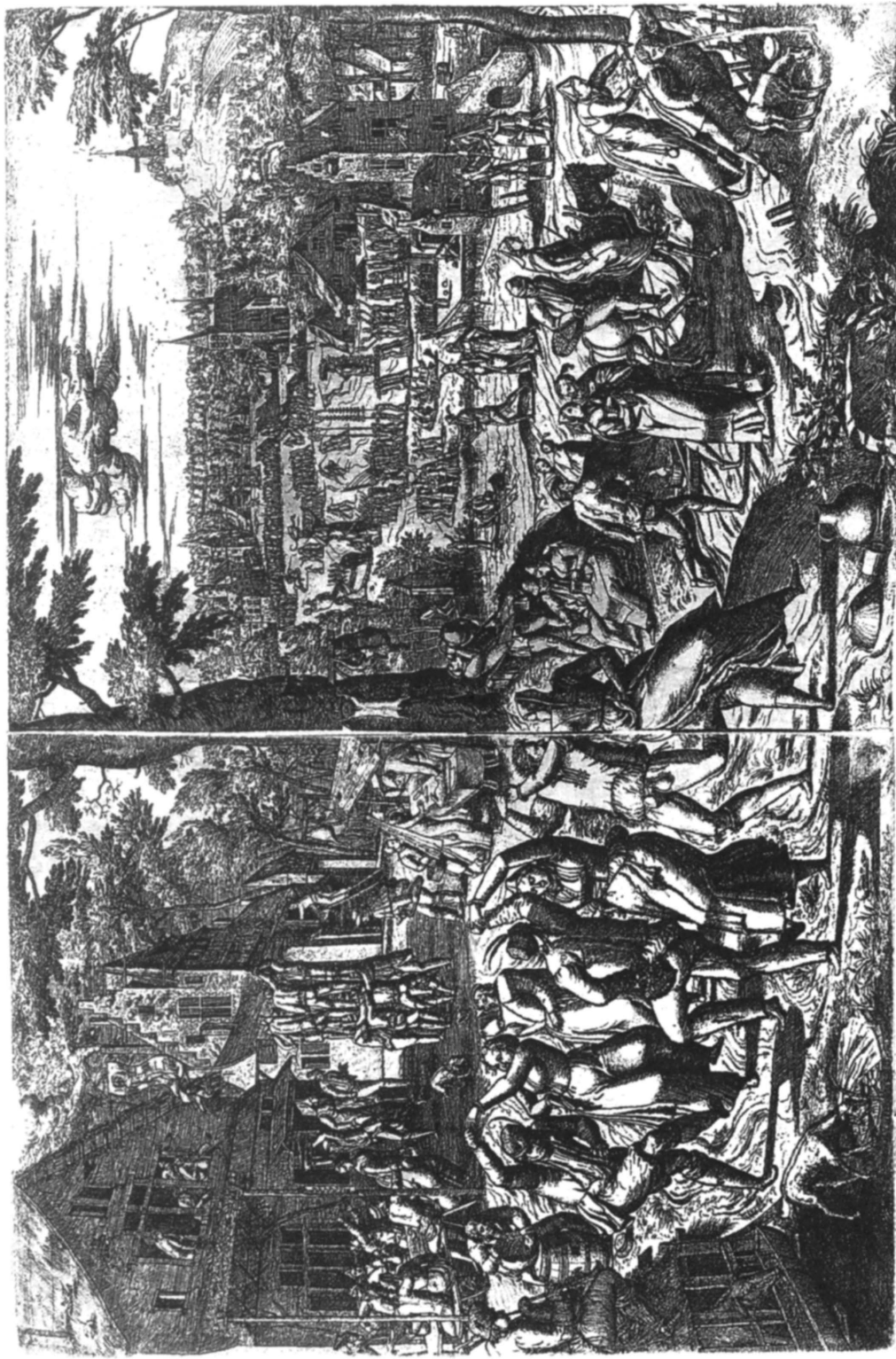


Figure 4. Pieter van der Borcht, *Peasant Kermis*, etching, 1553, Grafische Sammlung, Albertina, Vienna.



Figure 5. Pieter Bruegel and Bartholomeus de Momper (publisher), *Kermis at Hoboken*, etching and engraving c. 1559, Rosenwald Collection, Photograph © 2002 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Kermis dating c. 1567-68 (Figure 10.1; and Gibson, *Bruegel* 163). Bruegel's audience was undoubtedly interested in a highly colored, unique original. Paintings on panel were considerably more expensive than woodcuts and engravings. Bruegel's turn toward panel painting for this subject may have also taken place at Antwerp where the Flemish etching-engravings were published. Although Bruegel resided in Brussels when he made these paintings toward the end of his life he may have painted them for the Antwerp mint master, Jean Noirot, as Walter Gibson has recently shown (Gibson, "Bruegel's Rustic Revels").

Bruegel's paintings of peasant festivals, often called festive peasants within art history, are simple in design and unusually large at approximately 4 feet high by 5 feet wide, compared to the German prints of the subject at 1 or 2 inches in height and width. In Bruegel's *Peasant Wedding Feast*, peasants feast simply indoors and drink moderately. In the *Peasant Kermis*, peasants dance energetically outdoors and engage in animated, even drunken discussion. Although Bruegel included a dog and tavern in each painting, bodily functions have been nearly eradicated from his visual vocabulary. In the *Peasant Kermis*, a standing man shown discreetly from behind faces a building and stands in a pose suggesting urination.

Except for this single detail, Bruegel's paintings mark the beginning of clean peasant festival imagery in Flemish art. Bruegel's peasant festival paintings may have enjoyed a more limited audience comprising merchants and Humanists as opposed to the broader audience enjoyed by prints.¹⁷ If Bruegel's peasant festival paintings were in fact owned by a merchant, it is possible but by no means proven that such an owner sought paintings that were decorous, in keeping with the tastes of Flemish culture and classicizing Renaissance Humanism.

Explaining the Turn Away from Scatology

The turn away from the bodily element in Netherlandish paintings after the middle of the sixteenth century may be explained, at least in part, by several different but overlapping factors: by a different class of viewers who purchased paintings rather than prints, by the civilizing process explained by Elias, by a turn toward more conservative visual imagery after the mid-century as a result of the Council of Trent, and by differing German and Flemish cultural norms and tastes.

In the case of Bruegel's paintings, the omission of scatology might be first explained by the type of buyer who could afford to purchase such paintings. Panel paintings were more expensive because of their larger size and more expensive wood panel support than were printed works on paper, which were usually more modest in size due to the smaller size of individual sheets of paper then available. Bruegel's paintings could only have been afforded by a person of some wealth. As a rule, buyers of paintings were positioned higher in the social hierarchy than were buyers of prints. While prints were undoubtedly purchased by the wealthy and educated as well, they appear also to have been bought and viewed by the middle class, if not below. Because paper was less expensive than wooden panel, prints were produced in greater numbers, thereby reducing the cost of the individual work. In other words, prints enjoyed a more democratic audience.

The omission of scatology in the Flemish peasant festival images may have also been caused by an increasing sense of decorum in Renaissance society. Over the course of the sixteenth century, decorum increasingly made inroads into Northern society and influenced visual imagery in both Italy and the North as a result of the increasing influence of the classicizing aesthetic brought about by Humanism. Ryff's classicizing attitudes, discussed above, may serve as a good example here. In addition, after the mid-century a more censorious aesthetic resulted from the Catholic Counter-Reformation that directly influenced the kinds of images made and the kinds of changes made to existing ones. David Freedberg (*Power of Images*, 361–68, figures 165–76) has shown that, as a result of the Counter-Reformation, many prints with erotic subjects were censored in the late sixteenth century by reworking the plates dating from the first half of the century.

To understand the role the Counter-Reformation may have played in peasant festival imagery, let us investigate a particular peasant festival print by Beham. His *Nose Dance* woodcut was first published c. 1534 by Niklas Meldemann at Nuremberg and shows a group of mostly men dancing in a circle around a maypole. The print features large-nosed individuals who, according to beliefs at the time, would have possessed correspondingly large genitalia or breasts of corresponding size (Stewart, "Large Noses" 346–47). By the late sixteenth century, the block was cut from its rectangular form with text below to a round form with decorative border (Stewart, "Large Noses," figures 170, 176). In the altered form, the large size of the figures' noses was reduced in the block, and the exposed genitalia of the fool, at the lower right, were eliminated, thereby desexualizing the print. Beham's German woodcut appears to fit into the Counter-Reformation tendency toward prudery and censorship that Freedberg discusses with regard to Italy.

It was certainly nothing Catholic that had inspired the changes to the *Nose Dance* block, for there was no criticism of pope or emperor in the print. After the Council of Trent (1545–63) until the end of the century, increased efforts were made to revitalize Catholicism, not least by the bishops of Bamberg, who had jurisdiction over Nuremberg's religious affairs before it became Lutheran in 1525. In the last decade of the century Bishop Neithard von Thüngen (1591–98), a militant Counter-Reformationist, offered Nuremberg's small farmers the choice between emigration and conversion to Catholicism (Pfeiffer 267).

Given the Counter-Reformation pressures from beyond the city, it would be surprising if Nuremberg's publishers had not responded. Perhaps they felt the pinch under von Thüngen, or simply saw an opportunity to reissue prints and capitalize on their wood blocks. The last decade of the century, under von Thüngen, was contemporary with the reign of Clement VIII (1592–1605), whose objections to the nudes in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* almost ended in the fresco's destruction. Just as "a wind of pious and belligerent conservatism blew through the streets of Rome" in the 1560s after the Council of Trent (Landau and Parshall 361), a similar chill also seems to have blown through Nuremberg's streets under the influence of von Thüngen at the end of the sixteenth century.

The growing sense of decorum and conservatism throughout the sixteenth century may well, in itself, account for the general Flemish aversion to scatologi-

cal images in peasant festival paintings and prints, for such bodily functions are not decorous, but neither are they erotic and in need of being cleaned up. It is possible that scatological details were equally, if not more, objectionable because they showed aspects of human behavior that were increasingly becoming privatized, such as bathing, or that were deemed too private and indecorous to be shown, such as voiding. Elias's theory of a civilizing process offers another explanation why scatology had fallen into disfavor in Flanders by the second half of the century. Elias explained a process whereby society's elite and authorities encouraged social graces and manners across social classes, thereby pushing forward what Elias calls the changing "shame frontier." The definition of being "civilized," or "uncivilized," thus changed over time, as did attitudes toward the body. Elias includes sections dedicated to everyday behaviors relating to the body (which he calls natural functions) including blowing one's nose, spitting, and activities in the bedroom.

In "Changes in Attitude Toward the Natural Functions," Elias includes some remarkably poignant examples that aid our understanding of the civilizing process. As cited above, he quotes Erasmus of Rotterdam's *De civilitate morum puerilium*, or *Manners for Children*, published in 1530, and underscores attitudes about the increasing privatization of the body:

It is impolite to greet someone who is urinating or defecating

A well-bred person should always avoid exposing without necessity the parts to which nature has attached modesty. If necessity compels this, it should be done with decency and reserve, even if no witness is present. ...

To hold back urine is harmful to health, to pass it in secret betokens modesty The sound of farting, especially of those who stand on elevated ground, is horrible. One should make sacrifices with the buttocks firmly pressed together. (110)

As Elias indicates:

The thoroughness, the extraordinary seriousness, and the complete freedom with which questions publicly discussed here that have subsequently become privatized to a high degree and overlain in social life with strong prohibitions shows particularly clearly the shift of the frontier of embarrassment (111)

Elias offers a few more examples from the sixteenth century that show both what people did and what they should not have done. Writing about what one should not do, but implying that people of the time did it (otherwise, why tell them *not* to do it?), della Casa writes in his *Galateo* of 1558:

... it is not a refined habit, when coming across something disgusting in the street, as sometimes happens, to turn at once to one's companion and point it out to him.

It is far less proper to hold out the stinking thing for the other to smell (quoted in Elias 111)

Elias also offers the Brunswick Court Regulations of 1589 which indicate that peo-

ple defecated and urinated in inappropriate places: "Let no one, whoever he may be, before, at, or after meals, early or late, foul the staircase, corridors, or closets with urine or other filth, but go to suitable, prescribed places for such relief" (quoted in Elias 111–12).

As these examples indicate, the body, its comportment, and its emissions became increasing concerns of society's elite during the sixteenth century in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Erasmus, della Casa, and the Brunswick Court Regulations are typical of the elite interest in reshaping society and its members into a cleaner package, one that responded to elite expectations. By today's standards sixteenth-century Europe in general, as seen in these sources, and Nuremberg in particular were loud and dirty and the behavior there uncouth and violent. In Nuremberg people talked loudly in church and defecated on the street, even during visits by the emperor. One document stressed that residents should not use the streets in this manner during the emperor's visit to Nuremberg; rather, they should use the public *Sprachhäuser* or latrines.¹⁸

Edward Muir's recent discussion of the ambiguity of meaning held by the human body and the persistence of Christian ritual and the elite's attempt to privilege reason over passion offers another intersecting explanation for the persisting images of peasant festivals despite the objections and legislation against such real-life activities by both the secular and religious authorities and the elite. Although not mutually exclusive, these explanations parallel the changes seen in the German and Netherlandish images and, as such, they mark an important transition in Early Modern culture. And we should not forget, as discussed earlier, that the comic and satirical aspects of literature and carnival plays of the time offer entertaining antidotes to the overemphasis on the moralizing that persists in elite literature and documents from the time that have come down to us.

Although all these elements—comedy, satire, and the moralizing—worked both within the service of the civilizing process and independent of it, we should also not forget that sixteenth-century Germans enjoyed laughing at least as much as we do, with people undoubtedly laughing at different times and for different reasons. Carnival plays offer an instructive example for our discussion. In evaluating Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival, Edward Muir (91) discusses Bakhtin's concepts of the lower body, turning the world upside down, and defecation and sex, in a comic manner through "grotesque realism" and the "material lower bodily stratum." The resulting festive laughter has, as two of its characteristics, the ambivalence and duality of the body. The former combines praise and abuse; the latter combines the lower bodily stratum (which includes defecation and perhaps vomiting) and the opposite, the upper stratum with pity and reason. This mixture of laughter and the bodily functions emphasizes, once again, that attitudes toward the body in the sixteenth century were numerous and nuanced.

No single explanation accounts for why images of scatology constituted such a visible part of the German peasant festival imagery or why their Flemish counterparts increasingly turned away from scatological elements to embrace the scatologically free paintings of Pieter Bruegel. Clearly the two cultures interpreted these forces differently. The interconnected nature of such cultural forces consti-

tute the differences we must sometimes explain as culture, and in the end it may indeed have been German versus Flemish culture that embraced, or shunned imagery of the body in its visual art. Although it is tempting to argue that refined French court culture might be accountable, at least in part, for Flemish culture's more refined aesthetics, Per Nykrog's discussion (209–16) of the changing ways in which filth functioned in French literature from the late Middle Ages through the Baroque and neo-Classical periods, suggests otherwise, for he understood filth as an essential element for the civilizing process in France.

Further study is needed to wholly embrace cultural differences as the explanation why German peasant festival imagery is so scatologically charged in comparison to its somewhat later Flemish counterparts. Folklorist Alan Dundes rather compellingly argues that scatology, particularly defecation, constitutes an integral part of the German national character, and therefore German culture throughout the centuries. A small sample of his evidence includes (9–18) the frequent use of the word *shit* (*Scheiss*) in German popular expressions, a museum of chamber pots that opened in Munich in 1987 (22), and a pub in Berlin called the toilet or *Klo* (19). For the sixteenth century, the kermis woodcuts of Sebald Beham offer unquestionable evidence that scatology served both entertaining and didactic functions as extensions of German culture and its bawdy tastes at the time of the Reformation. These works also underscore Dundes's thesis that emphasizing *shit* is German in origin.

Notes

- 1 Ideas for this essay were drawn from my earlier articles "Paper Festivals," "Large Noses," and "Taverns." Due to the increasing cost of publishing (photographs and permissions), I supplement the illustrations I include here with in-text references to published illustrations. I am grateful to Russell Ganim who generously translated French passages of Per Nykrog's text for me.
- 2 Here "peasant festivals" is meant to indicate representations of peasants at wedding celebrations and at kermis. Earlier Sebald Beham designed a *Spinning Bee* woodcut c. 1524, which falls outside this study. See Stewart "Distaffs."
- 3 Sebald Beham appears to have designed the *Kermis at Mögeldorf* woodcut except for a small group of men and women at the beginning of the print, seated at the table at the back and right, designed by Erhard Schön. This kermis woodcut, along with several others made and published in Nuremberg, were earlier attributed to Barthel Beham after Heinrich Rottinger updated many of Gustav Pauli's attributions over a half century ago. I return the kermis woodcuts to the more convincing attribution of Pauli to Sebald Beham, Barthel's brother. I see no convincing evidence that Barthel Beham designed any woodcuts.
- 4 Kindler text accompanying figure 66. See also Beyer.
- 5 Braudel, *Structures* 241–43 on the appearance of brandy in Europe for the first time in the sixteenth century; he mentions that brandy was forbidden to be sold at Nuremberg on feast days in 1496. See Stewart "Paper Festivals" 310 n.23 on

Mögeldorf and the hordes that went to drink there, as mentioned by the town council in a decree of 1526.

- 6 Ryff called himself Gualther Hermenius Rivius in the manner of the university educated. For more on Ryff, see Stewart, *Before Bruegel*, Introduction.
- 7 Earlier visual examples of the drunken matins theme illustrate books and pamphlets on the subject of drinking. I know of no discussion of the meaning of the proverb in printed form before Franck's of 1541.
- 8 Franck part 2: fol. 148v. For Franck's quotation in the original German, see Stewart, "Paper Festivals," 340 n.103.
- 9 An exception to this nearly exclusively male equation with scatology is Daniel Hopper's *Peasant Festival* etching datable c.1536 (Hollstein 15:108) where at least one woman vomits at the right. On women and drinking, see Tlusty 133–46. On drinking and masculine identity, see Tlusty 122–46 and Roper 145–67.
- 10 Nykrog uses a similarly self-contradictory but titillating expression calling the use of ribaldry ("grivoiserie"), or baldly representing filth, as "naive pornography" (209–16).
- 11 Beham may have found engravings more profitable than woodcuts because he could reprint his engraving plates according to demand and thus profit directly from their popularity.
- 12 For example, Moxey 39 and Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel* 14. No historical analysis was given; thus the twentieth-century distance from bodily functions appears to have obviated the necessity of serious study.
- 13 Etchings may have offered an opportunity for artists to experiment (see Altdorfer's etched landscapes from c. 1515–20) during the first half of the sixteenth century. While German artists struggled with the technical limitations of etching on iron, which rusted easily and suffered false biting, Netherlandish artists turned to etching on copper by 1520. See Hults 103–20 and Landau and Parshall 332–34.
- 14 In the anonymous Flemish *Peasant Kermis* etching dated 1549, no scatological incidents are included. See Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel* 32.
- 15 See the recent exhibition catalog of Bruegel's prints and drawings by Orenstein.
- 16 For Bruegel's *Kermis at Hoboken* engraving from 1559 and the drawing for it, see also Freedberg, *Prints* cat. no. 28.
- 17 For the more limited audience of merchants and Humanists for paintings, see Margaret Sullivan.
- 18 The *Sprachhäuser* document is cited in full in Stewart, "Paper Festivals" 304 n.6.