# Urban Elites in Search of a Culture: The Brussels Snow Festival of 1511*

Herman Pleij

IN THE WINTER of 1510–11, a long period of cold and frost prompted the citizens of Brussels to build all over the city groups of snowmen which gave expression to their ambitions, fears, and frustrations in a highly entertaining way. In addition to short accounts in several chronicles, this event is the subject of a lengthy ballad by the Brussels city poet Jan Smeken which was published by his friend Thomas van der Noot.[1] The individual figures and groups represented narratives and themes drawn from a wide variety of cultures and periods, ranging from biblical and classical antiquity to the immediate local past. In addition, all sorts of mythological and folklore figures were included, such as the unicorn, the wildman, and the sea knight, as well as representations of current events.

The text of Smeken's poem has been completely neglected by literary historians in spite of its availability in a modern edition published in 1946.[2] Its neglect is due to the fact that as the product of one of the late medieval rhetorical societies, it has been classified as popular literature belonging to the artisan class. In other words, it has traditionally been viewed as the work of amateurs who took up the pen after working hours to express themselves in rhyme in a vulgar tongue on account of their ignorance of Latin and French. The work of the rhetoricians is usually thought to exemplify incompetence and a failure to comprehend the canonical works of high medieval literature. Smeken's text has been singled out as an egregious example of this debased literary form. The editors of the modern edition, for example, fault him time and again for his confusion without realizing that he may have manipulated established literary forms for humorous or moralizing effect.[3]

The classification of this poem as "low" art appears ensured by its subject matter. Playing with snow is not usually regarded as a

*I am very grateful to Keith Moxey, Professor of Art History, Barnard College, for correcting and improving my English.

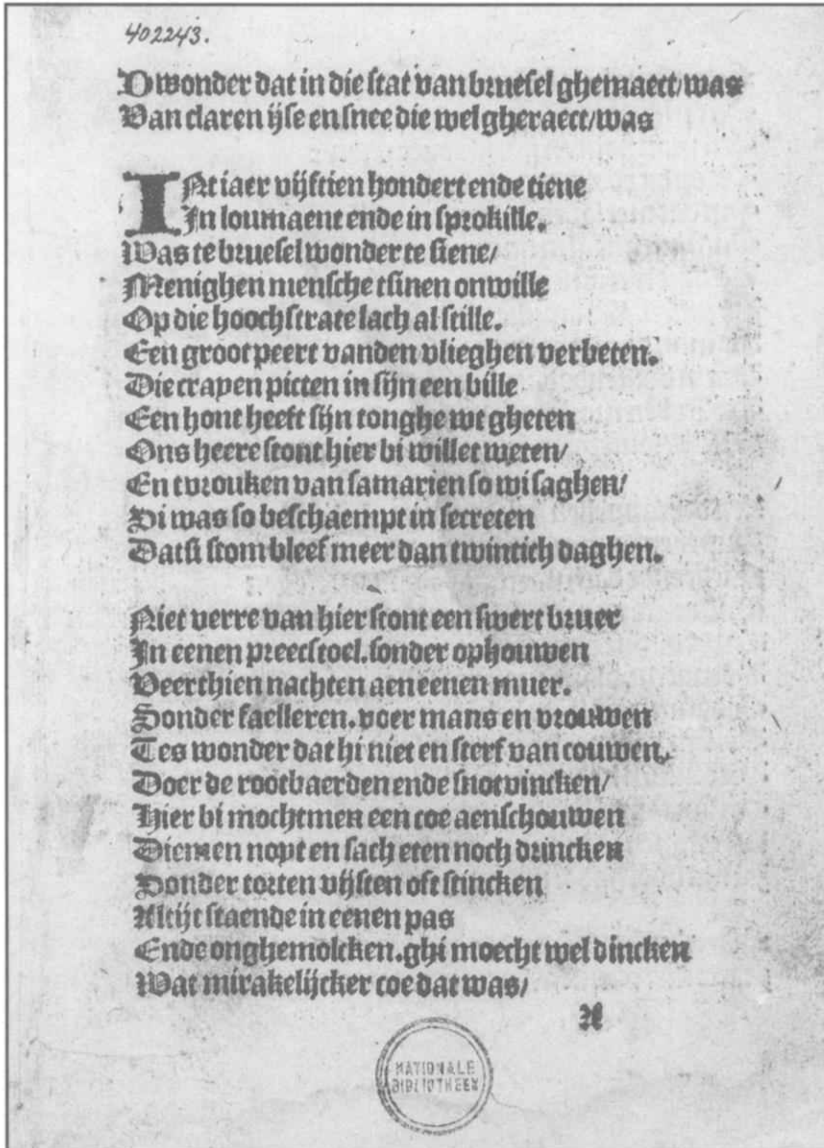
This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

cultural pastime for adults. It calls up memories of playing on the ice as a child if not of building sand castles on summer holidays. According to this view both the text and the snow festival are regarded as awkward examples of popular art. Art historians have also ignored this event, though perhaps with greater reason, since the ice sculptures lasted only six weeks; that is, between 1 January and 12 February 1511, and the only remaining record is Smeken's text.

If the traditional classification of this poem as popular art is correct, then it becomes a particularly relevant subject for study in an age that is interested in evidence regarding the "mentalité" or worldview of the past. Does this ice festival represent what peasants and artisans regarded as their own culture during the transition period from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance? As far as the text is concerned we must insist that such a view is completely out of the question. The poetry of the late medieval rhetorical societies cannot in any way be regarded as popular art. It is more appropriately viewed as a vernacular expression of humanist culture, one exercised by leading members of urban society. Not unlike the religious fraternities or urban militia companies, these rhetorical societies were founded from about 1400 onwards by well-to-do citizens. In large cities such as Brussels, membership in these societies was highly restricted—at least until the middle of the sixteenth century. Not only were the financial obligations heavy, but one had to have some education in rhetoric. The most highly regarded writing was the work of semiprofessionals, one of whom was usually appointed head (*factor*) of the society (*kamer*). Within the city the societies functioned as schools for the education of the rising patriciate, while outside the city they represented it before the sovereign and at other urban centers.[4] As a consequence, their texts are obscure both in form—being filled with complex structures and neologisms—and in content—they consist of difficult allegories which presuppose a broad cultural background. The intentionally elitist character of this type of vernacular literature, which constitutes a new departure, represents an attempt by the bourgeoisie to distinguish itself both from the peasant culture of the countryside and from the other strata of urban society.[5]

Smeken's text represents the interests of the new bourgeoisie. The degree of difficulty involved in reading his work serves to exclude the common people and creates a situation in which the reader or listener believes that admission to a higher culture depends on the ability to solve its riddles. At the same time, it serves to confirm the attitudes of elite social circles whose education afforded

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions



402243.

O wonder dat in die ſtat van brueſel ghemaect/was
Van claren yſe en ſnee die wel gheraect/was

INt iaer vijftien hondert ende tiene
In louuaent ende in ſprokille.
Was te brueſel wonder te ſiene/
Menighen menſche tſinen onwille
Op die hoochſtrate lach al ſtille.
Een groot peert vanden vlieghen verbeten.
Die crapen picten in ſijn een bille
Een hont heeft ſijn tonghe wt gheten
Ons heere ſtont hier bi willet weten/
En tvrouken van ſamarien ſo wi ſaghen/
Si was ſo beſchaempt in ſecreten
Datſi ſtom bleef meer dan twintich daghen.

Niet verre van hier ſtont een ſwert bruer
In eenen preecſtoel.ſonder ophouwen
Veerthien nachten aen eenen muer.
Sonder faelleren.voer mans en vrouwen
Tes wonder dat hi niet en ſterf van couwen.
Door de rootbaerden ende ſnotvincken/
Hier bi mochtmen een coe aenſchouwen
Diemen noyt en ſach eten noch drincken
Sonder torten vijſten oft ſtincken
Altijt ſtaende in eenen pas
Ende onghemolcken.ghi moecht wel dincken
Wat mirakelijcker coe dat was/

A

NATIONALE BIBLIOTHEEK

Fig. 1. First page (also the title page) of Smeken's text concerning the snow festival of 1511, printed by Thomas van der Noot in Brussels. Courtesy of Royal Library, The Hague.

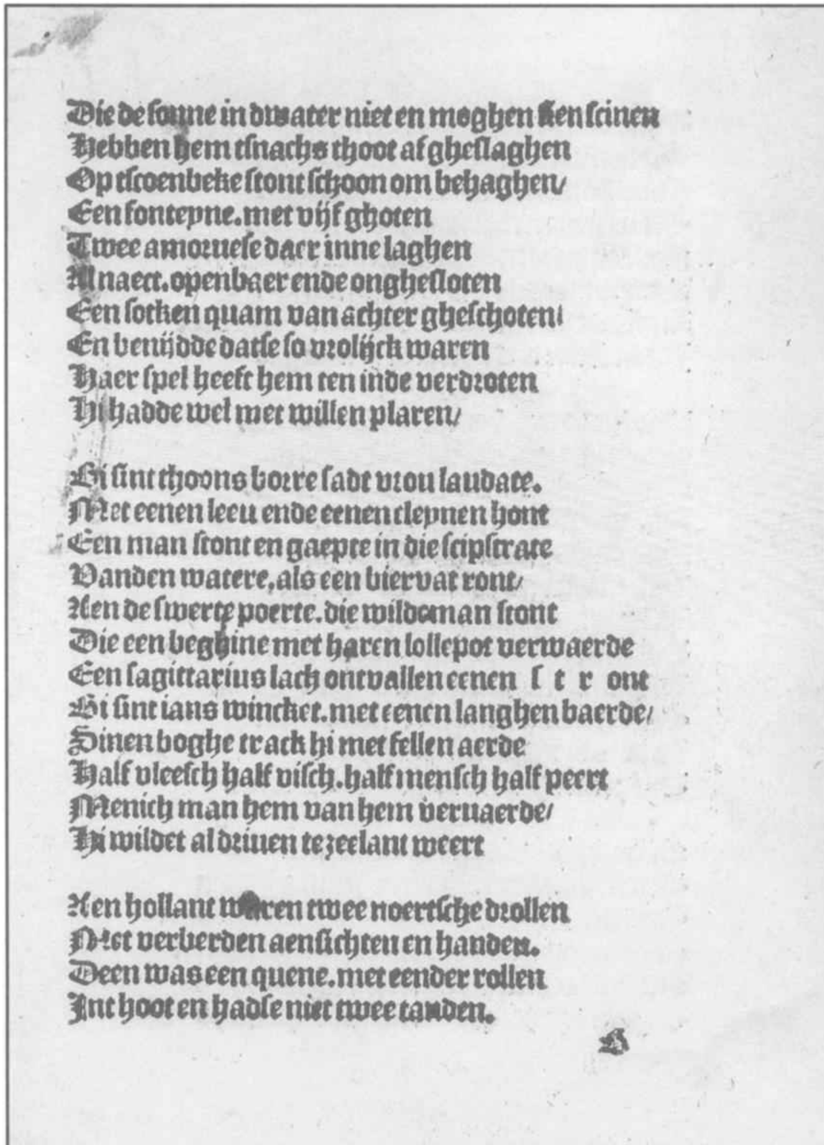
This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

them access to its complexities. This also serves to explain why, in contrast to other texts published by Thomas van der Noot, this one appeared without illustrations. Gregory the Great had described images as the books of the laity. As a consequence, woodcut illustrations were often intended for illiterates. Just as the Latin texts by the humanists were not illustrated, so the texts of the rhetoricians appeared without images—a fact which was undoubtedly intended to emphasize their elevated character.[6] Furthermore, Smeken makes a clear distinction between the people who were bewildered by the snowmen and his own circle, whose members he addresses as "beloved friends." At the end of the poem he further contrasts the plight of the "people" with the situation of his own class by describing how the former suffered as a consequence of the floods produced by a sudden thaw.

There is the possibility that Smeken's text offers us an elaborate interpretation of what was in fact no more than a spontaneous activity by citizens who took advantage of the enduring blanket of snow to give concrete form to the thoughts that occupied their minds. Smeken certainly goes beyond a mere description of what he sees. He drapes many a snow shape with visions of his own, and what is more, he wittily suggests all sorts of interaction between the snowmen, who could not have been expected to move of their own volition. But we should not, on the other hand, conclude that he gave the names of classical and biblical figures to a haphazard collection of snowmen, or that his imagination was responsible for the identification of certain figures as the sea knight and the wildman. To our relief, other sources, such as the chronicles, confirm that such snow figures were actually present.[7]

There is some indication that the construction of snowmen was not a spontaneous happening at all. The city magistrates appear to have been involved in their planning and execution in the same way that they organized state entries, funerals, marriage processions, and other public spectacles. This would also explain the involvement of Jan Smeken, for it was his task to organize festivals of this kind, from the invention and design of suitable images, to reporting the event after it had taken place. The fact that his poem bears a dedication to the city of Brussels indicates that the city was his patron if not his employer. It also appears, from a passage in one of the chronicles, that the authorities carefully watched over the snowmen so as to prevent them from being damaged under the cover of darkness. Edicts were proclaimed in both oral and written form, which prescribed severe punishment for any person caught damaging a snowman.[8]

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions



Die de sonne in dwater niet en moghen sien scinen
Hebben hem tsnachs thoot af gheslaghen
Op tscoenbeke stont schoon om behaghen/
Een fonteyne. met vijf ghoten
Twee amoruese daer inne laghen
Al naect. openbaer ende ongheslo ten
Een sotken quam van achter ghescoten/
En benijdde datse so vrolijck waren
Haer spel heeft hem ten inde verdroten
Hi hadde wel met willen plaren/

Hi sint thoons borre sadt vrou laudate.
Met eenen leeu ende eenen cleynen hont
Een man stont en gaepte in die scipstrate
Vanden watere, als een biervat ront/
Aen de swerte poerte. die wildeman stont
Die een beghine met haren lollepot verwaerde
Een sagittarius lach ontvallen eenen s t r ont
Hi sint ians wincket. met eenen langhen baerde/
Sinen boghe track hi met fellen aerde
Half vleesch half visch. half mensch half peert
Menich man hem van hem veruaerde/
Hi wildet al driuen te zeelant weert

Aen hollant waren twee noertsche drollen
Met ververden aensichten en handen.
Deen was een quene. met eender rollen
Int hoot en hadse niet twee tanden.

Fig. 2. Even the compositor takes part in the scatological humor: see how he sets up *s t r ont* (shit) in line 17 of this page of Smeken's text. Courtesy of Royal Library, The Hague.

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

The importance ascribed to this ice art may be gauged from the following incident. Philip of Burgundy, bastard son of Philip the Good and commander-in-chief of the Netherlands, personally assisted in the erection of an image of Hercules outside his residence. According to Smeken's text this snowman was a miraculous beauty, being endowed with ideal human proportions. This passage is of great importance. First, it informs us that a great nobleman joined in the building of a mythological figure with whom he liked to identify. Second, the reference to ideal proportions indicates that Philip may have been assisted in this enterprise by his court painter Jan Gossaert, one of the first Netherlandish artists to demonstrate an interest in the revival of the Vitruvian theory of ideal human proportions so popular among Italian artists of the Renaissance. In view of the fact that Gossaert had executed several nude paintings of Hercules for Philip of Burgundy, such a collaboration would not have been unlikely.[9]

The selection of individual figures and the subject matter of the groups of snowmen suggest that they represented topics expressing the values of the city patriciate who made up the majority of the magistrates' bench. Before the ducal palace at Coudenberg in the upper city, a virgin with a unicorn in her lap was sculpted. As a traditional element of religious high art, the unicorn was a symbol of Christ born of the virginal womb of Mary. However, both the location (the residence of the sovereign) and Smeken's comment make it clear that the city used this figure as a means of expressing its concern at the persistent absence of its ruler. The young duke (later Charles V) lived with his aunt Margaret of Austria in Molines (Mechelen), for the regentess showed a decided aversion for Brussels. The city, however, wished to have him in its midst, living in the palace in which the ruler was meant to reside.[10] The allegorical significance of the snow figure was thus: Just as the Virgin protected her son against his enemies, so Brussels desired to offer Charles its hospitality. Smeken adds further to the allegory by saying that the way in which the image of the Virgin and the unicorn was melting away was a metaphor for the citizens' refusal to eat out of sorrow at the absence of the duke. This passage also offers us insight into Smeken's literary technique. He animates the snowmen by ascribing them the properties of flesh and blood that properly belonged to the figures they were meant to represent. In the passage cited above he draws an analogy between the way in which people waste away when they do not eat and the way in which snowmen melt at the onset of a thaw.

The adaptation of subjects and themes from both contemporary

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

and traditional forms of elite culture for use by the urban patriciate is only one aspect of the Brussels snow festival. Urban values were also manifested in other ways. When elegantly clad gentlemen are portrayed gambling near the *Houtmarkt* ("Wood Market"), the city gives a clear indication of the nuisance posed by the court nobility who were renowned for their misbehavior in the streets. More complex is the meaning of a group in the Ruysbroeck quarter. This group represented the castle of Poederoijen in which the commander Sneeuwint was shown hiding. Sneeuwint was accompanied by a defecating man who was intended to suggest the commander's fear. For the inhabitants of Brussels in 1511 such a scene would have served an exorcising function; that is, by ridiculing a much-feared enemy in public, it would have served as a means of exorcising their own fear. The subject of this scene is taken from an incident which took place in the continuing struggle between the province of Brabant, in which Brussels was located, and the province of Guelders. In 1507 a joint army of the provinces of Holland and Brabant had besieged the castle of Poederoijen, home of the robber baron Sneeuwint. However, a rumor that the duke of Guelders was approaching was enough to make this powerful force scatter and flee despite the fact that the latter proved to have been accompanied by only ten men. The allies later tried to lay the blame for their humiliating flight at each other's door. The event received wide publicity and was well known to all sectors of the population. A folk song became popular in the province of Holland which ridiculed the cowardice displayed by the nobility of Brabant before the castle of Poederoijen, suggesting that they had been armed with wooden swords and straw shields. A new effort against the castle of Poederoijen was undertaken in 1508. Thanks to the use of an enormous German cannon, imported along with its crew, the castle was destroyed and the dreaded Sneeuwint killed.[11]

The snow scene described gives expression to two aspects of urban sentiment concerning the war against Guelders. First there is a celebration of Brabant's recovery from the humiliation of 1507, something that was particularly relevant in light of the popularity of the folksong. It is clear that Brabant wished to be seen as the architect of victory. Secondly, the enemy is to be defeated a second time—this time by means of the excrement of the man who loses control of his bowels out of fear. Guelders was after all still a feared enemy, and it was not until well into the sixteenth century that this part of the Burgundian empire was eventually pacified. One of the techniques of venting or exorcising the fear of a dreaded opponent is to reduce him to human proportions. In late medieval literature

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Fig. 3. This country wedding by Petrus van der Borcht in 1560 presents a "catalogue" of despicable behavior, from vomiting, below right, to relieving oneself, above left. Courtesy of Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam.

frequent defecation is often attributed to characters who were very much feared. The most obvious example is perhaps the way in which the devil was represented on the medieval stage. He was repeatedly represented rolling about in his own dirt and often announces his presence by loud farting and a loathsome stench. In the visual arts he is not infrequently represented as a farting monster. The reason for this characterization is not that the devil was ridiculous to a medieval audience: just the opposite. It was the truly awesome nature of his power that necessitated his degradation. Ridicule was the means by which this power could be circumscribed and controlled. Similar strategies are found in the ways in which the medieval public dealt with death, the inquisition, and sexuality. These powerful forces were dealt with by means of the very human weapons of excrement and pornography.[12]

The importance ascribed to sexual and scatological themes is a remarkable aspect of the Brussels snow festival. More than half the scenes deal with subjects of this kind—a fact that is all the more striking given the public context in which they were displayed. On the other hand, it is clear that Smeken's description appears to

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

emphasize this dimension of the festival. He describes, for instance, a cow that delivers "turds, farts and stinking" despite the fact that, on account of its snowy nature, it never eats or drinks. Nonetheless, much of what he describes must have been visible to the spectator. There was, for example, a defecating centaur, a drunkard drowning in his own excrement, and a fountain representing a small boy urinating rose water into the mouth of a greedy drinker. One is also struck by the number of nudes, often depicted making love. In Rozendal, the red light district of Brussels, a whore was represented whose breasts and genitals were carefully sculpted so as to attract the attention of passersby.[13]

At this point one might conclude that the spectacle belongs in the category of popular art. From our contemporary point of view, these scenes would be regarded as examples of "low" art. However, in view of the manipulation of these themes so as to express the values of the patriciate, they should be characterized as elements of popular art which have been adapted and suited to the interests of the elite. Alternatively, we might say that it is when we scrape off the varnish that we encounter the expression of genuinely popular culture. We could thus describe the process used here as analogous to that described earlier with regard to the borrowings from court culture. That is, the new elite culture of a bourgeois nature plucks elements not only from court culture but also from popular culture, a culture which was still present in those quarters of the city where rural immigrants tended to live. Thus elements of both "high" and "low" art grew into a new elite art of a bourgeois nature. How far this interpretation can be maintained must be judged by a closer analysis of the sexual and scatological ingredients of the Brussels snow festival.

Traditional histories of medieval culture have made the burgher responsible for the decline of a refined form of literature filled with knights, ladies, courtly manners, and complicated symbolism.[14] The burgher is said to have appeared on stage in the fourteenth century introducing a so-called "realism" into literature which consisted of rude and satirical representations of the lowest human functions. There is even the thesis that the "dirty" literature of the late Middle Ages owes its existence to the invention of reading glasses.[15] According to this view, old men, who had previously been prevented from reading and writing on account of their weakening eyesight, were now able to see again. And what do old men do when given the opportunity to take up the goosequill again? They immediately begin composing fabliaux (*boerden*) and farces (*kluchten*) full of the erotic fantasies that constantly preoccupy

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

them. By this time, it should be clear that such "realism" does not really exist at all. Rather than glimpses of the real world we are offered caricatures of "low" life fabricated by circles that wished to distinguish themselves from such ways of living. It is for this reason that we find among the elite, at first at court and later in the cities, many texts that make abundant use of sexual and scatological metaphors in order to portray a "low" life populated by make-believe peasants and vagabonds.[16]

It is consequently a mistake immediately to associate large amounts of sex and excrement in art objects and literary works with popular culture. They cannot all be associated with folk feasts and rural fertility rituals, for they play a substantial role in "high" culture, as for example in the literature of the wandering scholars and in the French fabliaux—both of which have their roots in courtly circles. Rather than use elements of popular culture from their immediate context, the new urban patriciates appropriated subject matter from courtly circles. I wish to emphasize the word "appropriate," for the appreciation of scatology in bourgeois circles appears to be something new. In late medieval cities we find a striving for greater civilization, a concern to which the chambers of rhetoric were intended to cater. Through an increasing control of the passions and the masking of natural functions, the new urban elite sought to develop a set of standards of its own as a means of distinguishing itself from the rest of society. These efforts coincided with a growing awareness that infectious diseases were produced by overcrowding and that polluted air and the public disposal of excrement were injurious to health.[17]

These changing attitudes found expression in different literary genres. On the one hand, humor based on scatological references derived from an earlier aristocratic literature is suppressed or eliminated altogether. The story of "Reinard the Fox," dating from the thirteenth century, whose origins lay in courtly culture (most probably that of Ghent), contains a description of the way in which Reinard, while fleeing from a trap, hugged himself with delight at the sight of a parson castrated by his opponent Tibert the cat. According to the text the fox laughed so loudly "that his behind was torn open and he let out a cracking wind." When this passage was printed in 1479 in an edition intended for a bourgeois audience it underwent a remarkable correction. We now read that the fox was barely able to remain standing.[18] Many of the products of the rhetorical societies echo the application of this new standard of decency—for example by deleting any reference to burping, farting, or spitting. In doing so they appear to have wanted to excise from

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

their literature any reference to practices that were still quite accepted among the general population.[19]

On the other hand, this civilizing movement also found in scatology a useful weapon for the denigration of its opponents, the generally uncivilized. Scatology thus passes from being a subject for humor to an object of shame. Around the year 1500 this results in a situation in which scatology occasionally functions as a vehicle for humor—as a means, for example, of entertaining scholars threatened with melancholy—but more frequently as a weapon of ridicule.[20] As a consequence, scatology is to be found in the literature of the highest social circles. To us it is quite shocking that the likes of Martin Luther and Thomas More should have made elaborate references to the lowest bodily functions. Writing on behalf of Henry VIII, More tells Luther that "as long as your reverent person is determined to tell these shameless lies, others will be permitted . . . to throw back in your shitty mouth, truly the shit pool of all shit, all the muck and shit which your damnable rottenness has vomited up, and to empty all the sewers and privies on to your crown." But Luther himself is hard to beat in this field. Addressing Satan he writes: "For take note of this, I have shat in my pants and you can hang them around your neck and wipe your mouth with them."[21]

But let us return now to the urban quality of the Brussels snow festival of 1511. The nondefecating cow and the shitting drunkard were caricatural exponents of a despised rural life. They correspond to the representation of other rural types labeled with names loaded with class ridicule, such as "Baldwin Long Tooth" (*Bouwen Lanctant*) and "Little Henry the Farmer" (*Henneken Huysman*), who are portrayed drinking and eating to excess and who are described as "fools"—an epithet much invoked in the satire of peasants.[22] The defecating centaur serves both as a means of exorcising fear and as a vehicle for class-directed humor. This mythological figure, associated with "high" culture, was viewed as a symbol of heresy and evil in general. The bourgeois text reduced it to a farcical figure by characterizing it as a producer of excrement and thus similar to the devil. But at the same time, Smeken subjects it to the same elaborate travesty to which he subjects other figures, by means of which the elevated are made to behave in a lowly manner.

In view of the theme of this paper—that is, the relation between "high" art and "low" art—special attention is due to the snow fountain with the image of a pissing boy. Smeken's description of this motif would immediately suggest that we are on the track of a typical expression of popular culture. This is especially likely since it is

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Fig. 4. Repulsive behavior projected on the caricature of a farmer, by Hans Sebald Beham, 1537. The text says: "You are behaving very rude indeed." Courtesy of Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam.

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

known that a small fountain of this type was already in place at the corner of Eik and Stoofstraat in Brussels by 1452. This sculpture was described in fifteenth-century records as the "Pissing Boy" (*Manneken-Pis*).[23] It is well known that a small statue of this subject still stands in Brussels today, where it has become a kind of tourist symbol of the city. This sculpture has aroused an extraordinary urge to find a popular legend on which it may have been based. A folklorist, for example, has recently argued that the image is an illustration of a medieval anecdote regarding the magical power of drunkards to piss endlessly in the presence of running water in the apparent belief that they were themselves the cause of the splashing sounds.[24]

The folkloric interpretation of the *Mannekin-Pis,* however, must be repudiated. Perhaps the only "popular" thing about it is its name. The image is actually the product of a fashion, blown over from Italy in the fifteenth century, which favored pissing men or boys as fountain motifs in aristocratic settings where they were valued for their suggestive humor. This playful theme appears to have been taken up first by the Burgundian court from which it passed to the city of Brussels. Olivier de la Marche's description of the famous "Voeux de Faisan" banquet in Lille in 1453 describes one of the table decorations as "un petit enfant tout nu, sur une roche, qui pissoit eau de rose continuellement" (a little boy completely naked, who stood on a rock and continually pissed rose water).[25] Other Burgundian court parties also seem to have included spouting animals as well as men. The idea is present in an engraving by Alaert du Hameel, a follower of Jerome Bosch, who was active in Brussels about 1500. The engraving represents a cherub fountain of the Italian type which is part of a love garden occupied by a young couple and a court fool.[26] Thus the *Mannekin-Pis* of snow is anything but a reference to popular legend or even the contemporary customs of spectators. It is, on the contrary, a typical example of the persistence of court culture, a piece of aristocratic entertainment eagerly appropriated by the new bourgeoisie.

The sexual dimension of the snow sculptures can be associated with popular culture with as little success as the scatological one. This is revealed by a consideration of the double meanings and comic metaphors that fill Smeken's text. For example, a beguine (or lay nun) seduces a wild man with her *lollepot.* While a *lollepot* was a foot warmer particularly favored by women, the context makes it quite clear that the word is used to allude to her genitals. Elsewhere he uses a variety of metaphors as well as much descriptive detail to describe the physical qualities of a whore waiting in the nude

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

for customers. By using the words "furrow," "rose," and "trunk," he wittily maneuvers his way around a direct description of her private parts, whereas her immense breasts and buttocks are accounted for more straightforwardly.[27] The sport of designing erotic ambiguities was originally developed in the context of popular urban festivals, particularly the medieval carnival. There it was associated with the desacralization of sexuality, which was viewed by the church as the dangerous playground of the devil. However it is false to associate these scabrous metaphors with the fertility rituals of the countryside and other popular customs. While it is true that these traditions were abundantly represented in urban festivals, for example in tournaments and exorcising rituals, they incurred the ire of the public authorities, which resulted in their being banned in a number of edicts dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In fact these practices were continued only in the city boroughs, particularly the outermost ones in which rural immigrants clung for a long time to their earlier life styles.[28]

Scabrous metaphors, on the other hand, were an integral part of aristocratic culture. Here they had been used as a means of diminishing and exorcising the power of the object at which they were directed. They furnished materials for the construction of a "world upside down"—that is, a world of chaos and disorder populated by earthy creatures who indulge their animal appetites and passions. This world was evoked, even acted out, by the supposedly civilized order in order to establish, protect, and define a world governed by strictly rational, orderly behavior. Examples are found in the culture of the clergy (the "Feast of Fools"), the nobility (fabliaux and farces), as well as that of the urban patriciate (carnival texts). The latter make use of sexual and scatological elements time and again in order to denounce their class opponents—the peasantry—as uncivilized victims of ungovernable passions.[29] An indication of the tradition according to which such materials were handled ironically by the civilized may be found in the *artes poeticae,* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which offered directions and provided models for use in the composition and adaptation of Latin texts. One of the most famous of these, the *Parisiana Poetria* of John of Garland of about 1220, offers an elaborate model of the technique to be used in weaving citations from different ancient authors through one's own text. This example, which was intended for young pupils, was taken from the "Feast of Fools," for he entitled it *De licencia puerorum* (concerning the licence of boys). This feast, which was known throughout Western Europe from the tenth century until the end of the Middle Ages, was observed on Innocents

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Day (and the days thereafter) in convents and cathedrals. It was characterized by an exchange of roles which permitted an inversion of the usual social hierarchy and a complete parody of the liturgy undertaken with the assistance of all kinds of sexual and scatological humor. The imitation of the ancient rites of the *Saturnalia* played a significant role, for John's text makes much of the sexual ambiguities inherent in the *baculum* or staff. This staff, which was carried by the mock bishop in lieu of a crozier as a token of his temporary dignity, is also viewed as a phallus with which he added to the gaiety.[30]

Literary manuals of this kind, which circulated until the end of the Middle Ages, make it clear that we should not be too swift to associate scatological motifs with "low" life or "low" art. One last example from the snow festival illustrates better than any other the inadequacy of classifying this event as "low" art. The sculpture built on the *Houtmarkt* ("Wood Market") represented the King of Friesland. He is described by Smeken as having lost his nose and mouth in combat with the sun. The comic treatment of the cold and frost is a characteristic of both Smeken's text and the festival itself. Every year the approach of winter posed a serious threat to the existence of the average citizen not only on account of the physical discomfort imposed by the cold but because of the loss of earnings. For this reason both the literature and the popular festivals of the period were populated by an army of images and figures associated with the cold whose function was to expel or exorcise such fears. We hear of tyrants like "Usurper" (*Ringelant*), "Teeth Chatterer," (*Clippertant*), "Blue Beak" (*Blauwbek*), and the like, all allegorical personifications of some aspect of the suffering brought about by the cold, who are finally ignominiously expelled by "Spring" or "Summer." The ambiguities inherent in the Dutch words *vorst* (meaning "frost" or "prince") and *Friezen* (meaning "freezing" as well as "a native of Friesland," the northernmost province of the Netherlands) allowed the "King of Friesland" to become a well-known comic tyrant responsible for bringing frost to the land. In identifying the snowman in the Houtmarkt as the "King of Friesland" Smeken was subscribing to a traditional play on words.[31]

It is tempting to associate the King of Friesland's battle, which was not infrequently represented as a tournament and played by actors, with well-known customs such as the battle between Summer and Winter. In doing so we would thus be interpreting the Brussels snow festivals as an emancipation of popular culture or as the appropriation of "low" art by members of a higher social class. However, among the *artes poeticae* already cited, indeed in the most

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

authoritative of them all, namely the *Poetria nova* of Geoffrey of Vinsauf which dates from around 1200, there is a compelling model for the literary strategy adopted by Jan Smeken. This model recommends that students transfer human qualities and behavior onto lifeless abstractions. According to Geoffrey, "If, for instance, you wish to describe the malignity of winter, introduce this trope: Winter ever threatens with mouth agape, harsher than harsh tyrants. At its command, storm clouds spread gloom through the sky; darkness blinds the eye of day; the air gives birth to tempests; snow closes the roadways; hoar frost pierces one's marrow; hail lashes the earth; ice imprisons the waves."[32] This compelling image occurs repeatedly in medieval literature and, as we have seen, in the Brussels snow festival of 1511.

In conclusion I should like to make the following points: First, the distinction "high art/low art" is a difficult point from which to begin answering questions regarding the historical meaning, the intention, or the function of bourgeois literature and art in the cities of the Netherlands at the end of the Middle Ages.[33] The cities of Flanders and Brabant witnessed the formation of new patriciates who wished to distinguish themselves from other urban groups, especially rural immigrants. To that end they tried to establish new standards of civilization, supported by the local rhetorical societies. Their values are best illustrated by the ways in which they sought to caricature their opponents. The latter are supposed to be dominated by wild impulses and uncontrollable passions as well as characterized by low behavior in general. Moreover, they demonstrate an increasing exclusivity which is imposed by the use of esoteric language and enigmatic allegories. A characteristic of their culture is the principle of appropriation which enabled them to adapt parts of traditional elite culture, namely that of the clergy and the nobility, to their own purposes. By adding, deforming, or deleting, these appropriate elements were made to fit their own program.

Second, they also make use of popular culture—but to a much lesser extent than some modern scholars have claimed. However, most of the customs and metaphors in their literature are present much earlier in elite culture. Indeed, urban festivals of possibly rural origin appear to have been suppressed by the patriciates. During the course of the fourteenth century the city's spontaneous popular festivals were replaced by tightly organized spectacles that expressed the morals and ambitions of the new elites. The common man could only gaze at such festivals in surprise, no longer possessing the right to take part.[34] Perhaps the title of Smeken's poem is most

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

telling in this regard; the work is called *Dwonder van claren ijse en snee*—the miracle of pure ice and snow.

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

NOTES

1 See in general my monograph, *De sneeuwpoppen van 1511: literatuur en stadscultuur te Brussel tussen middeleeuwen en moderne tijd* (Amsterdam, 1988); Willem van Eeghem, "Brusselse dichters, XXII, 1–4: Jan Smeken," *De Brusselse Post,* 7 (1957), Nos. 8–11; and Paul Vandenbroeck, "Betekenisoverdracht, axio-/ideologie en folkloristische substraten in het werk van Jheronimus Bosch (ca. 1450–1516) als paradigma van een vroege middenburgerlijke kultuurproduktie," Diss. University of Leuven 1986, pp. 560–64.

2 Jan Smeken, *Dwonder van claren ijse en snee; een verloren en teruggevonden gedicht,* ed. Rena Pennink and Dirk Enklaar (The Hague, 1946). A short description of the text, as part of the production of printer-publisher Thomas van der Noot, is given in Herman Pleij, *De wereld volgens Thomas van der Noot: boekdrukker en uitgever te Brussel in het eerste kwart van de zestiende eeuw* (Muiderberg, 1982), pp. 59–62.

3 Rena Pennink and Dirk Enklaar, Introduction, in Smeken, pp. 7, 9–10; Vandenbroeck, p. 562, n. 560. A brief account of the low esteem in which the work of rhetoricians has been held is to be found in Herman Pleij, "De laatmiddeleeuwse rederijkersliteratuur als vroeg-humanistische overtuigingskunst," *Jaarboek De Fonteine,* 34 (1984), 65–95, esp. 65–69.

4 About the rhetoricians in general, see Dirk Coigneau, "Rederijkersliteratuur," in *Historische letterkunde: facetten van vakbeoefening,* ed. Marÿke Spies (Groningen, 1984), pp. 35–57. See also Herman Pleij, "Vijftienhonderd," *Literatuur,* 2 (1985), pp. 342–48.

5 See Pleij, *De wereld volgens Thomas van der Noot,* pp. 30–34. Instances of similar tendencies towards an elevated style in the vernacular are also present in late medieval France, Germany, and England: see, respectively, Paul Zumthor, *Anthologie des grands rhetoriqueurs* (Paris, 1978), pp. 7–12; Peter Becker, *Handschriften und Frühdrucke mittelhochdeutscher Epen* (Wiesbaden, 1977), pp. 196, 243–59; Lotte Hellinga, *Caxton in Focus: The Beginning of Printing in England* (London, 1982), pp. 13–14.

6 See Herman Pleij, "Is de laatmiddeleeuwse literatuur in de volkstaal vulgair?" in *Populaire literatuur,* ed. Jan Fontijn (Amsterdam, 1974), pp. 34–106, esp. p. 70.

7 A sixteenth-century Brussels chronicle speaks of "many beautiful, splendid and surprising images of snow, placed all over town" (Brussels, Royal Library, ms. 14.896–8, fol. 56 verso).

8 The information about Jan Smeken is in his *Gedicht op de feesten ter eere van het Gulden Vlies te Brussel in 1516,* ed. Gilbert Degroote (Antwerp, 1946), pp. viii–xx. The regulations are mentioned in the Brussels' chronicle (n. 7). Smeken's text ends with "This is made in honour of the city of Brussels / And of all who love and admire her; / And wherever you are, here or elsewhere, / Let God help you with all your sorrows!" (Smeken, ll. 405–8).

9 See Smeken, ll. 125–26 and 131–32: "My Lord the admiral with his own hand / Assisted in the construction of a Hercules before his house . . . He [Hercules] was so well made, that it was quite a miracle, / Bearing the right measures in all his members." About Philip's obsession with Hercules and the role Jan Gossaert played in that respect see Johan Sterk, *Philips van Bourgondië (1465–1524), bisschop van*

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

*Utrecht, als protagonist van de Renaissance; zijn leven en maecenaat* (Zutfen, 1980), pp. 25, 100–1, and *passim.*

10 See Smeken, ll. 109–20 and commentary pp. 42–43.

11 See Smeken, ll. 101–4. Detailed information about the Poederoijen case and the folksong is given by Herman Pleij, "Een onbekend historielied over het beleg van Poederoijen in 1507," in *Weerwerk. Opstellen aangeboden aan professor Garmt Stuiveling* (Assen, 1973), pp. 19–31, 246–49.

12 See Mikhail Bakhtin, "*L'oeuvre de Francois Rabelais et la culture populaire au moyen âge et sous la renaissance* (Paris, 1970), pp. 366–432; Pleij, *De wereld volgens Thomas van der Noot,* pp. 7–12; Herman Pleij, *Het gilde van de Blauwe Schuit. Literatuur, volksfeest en burgermoraal in de late middeleeuwen,* 2nd ed. (Amsterdam, 1983), pp. 56–62; and Dirk-Jan Lust, "Anale folklore in laatmiddeleeuwse literatuur," *Literatuur,* 3 (1986), 273–80.

13 See Smeken, ll. 19–24, 223–28, 289–92, 25–36, 317–24, respectively.

14 This tradition is discussed in Herman Pleij, "The Function of Literature in Urban Societies in the Later Middle Ages," *Dutch Crossing,* 29 (1986), 3–22, esp. 6–7. See also Frits van Oostrom, "Jacob van Maerlant: een herwaardering," *Literatuur,* 2 (1985), 190–97.

15 See Gerhard Eis, "Vom Lesestein und der spätmittelalterlichen Literatur," in his *Vom Werden altdeutscher Dichtung* (Berlin, 1962), pp. 39–57.

16 A real breakthrough in this respect was Per Nykrog, *Les fabliaux* (1956; rpt. Geneva, 1973), ch. VIII. He concluded that the very obscene French fabliaux of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries originated in court circles as both amusing and aggressive caricatures of low life. See also Herman Pleij. "Taakverdeling in het huwelijk. Over literatuur en sociale werkelijkheid in de late middeleeuwen," *Literatuur,* 3 (1986), 66–76, esp. p. 68.

17 See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford, 1978–82; first published in German as *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* [Basel, 1939]), 2 vols.; Johan Goudsblom, "Civilisatie, besmettingsangst en hygiëne. Beschouwingen over een aspect van het Europese beschavingsproces," *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift,* 4 (1977), 271–300; Anton Blok, "Infame beroepen," *Symposion,* 3 (1981), 104–28; and Pleij, "Vijftienhonderd."

18 See Reinaert, *Van den vos reynaerde* (Zwolle, 1952), ll. A–1286/7, P–934/5.

19 See Pleij, *De wereld volgens Thomas van der Noot,* p. 11.

20 Apart from the literature mentioned in n. 12, see Herman Pleij, "Literatuur als medicijn in de late middeleeuwen," *Literatuur,* 2 (1985), 25–34.

21 As cited by Stephen Greenblatt, "Filthy Rites," *Daedalus* (Summer 1982), 1–16, esp. 11–12.

22 See Smeken, ll. 157–68 and 337–38.

23 See Paul de Keyser, "Sporen van waterspuitende fonteinbeeldjes in de Nederlanden en in Italië. Het Manneken-Pis-beeldje van Hieronymus Duquesnoy de Oude," *Gentsche Bijdragen tot de Kunstgeschiedenis,* 17 (1957–58), 197–207, esp. 200–1.

24 See Kurt Ranke, "Manneken-Pis und verwandtes," in *Miscellanea Karel Peeters,* ed. Willy van Nespen (Antwerp, 1975), pp. 576–81.

25 As cited by De Keyser, p. 202. See also Guy de Schoutheete de Tervarent, "L'origine des fontaines anthropomorphes," *Koninklijke Academi van België: mededelingen van de klasse der schone kunsten,* 38 (1956), 122–29; and Nicolaes Despars, *Cronijcke van den lande ende graefscepe van Vlaenderen* (Bruges, 1839), III, 438, which describes the Entry of Philip the Good at Bruges in 1440. It is remarkable that this representation, in its turn, was adapted during the latter part of the sixteenth century to the wishes of the lower strata of the urban population. On the occasion of a rhetoricians' festival at Tielt in 1562 the central place was adorned with "a little

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

angel, pissing *beer* for the *lower classes,* to the great joy and satisfaction of the *people*" (August de Vlaminck, *Jaerboeken der aloude kamer van rhetorika Het Roosjen te Tielt* [Ghent, 1862], p. 114; my italics). As it is, the rhetoricians of the second half of the sixteenth century do not any longer represent the urban aristocracies in the Southern Netherlands.

26 See F. W. H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts ca. 1450–1700,* VI (Amsterdam, 1952), 22, and the literature mentioned there.

27 See Smeken, ll. 222 and 317–24, respectively.

28 See Pleij, *Het gilde van de Blauwe Schuit,* ch. 2.

29 See the literature mentioned in n. 12. Cf. also Bob Scribner, "Reformation, Karneval und die Verkehrte Welt," in *Volkskultur. Zur Wiederentdeckung der vergessenen Alltags (16.–20. Jahrhundert),* ed. Richard van Dülmen and Norbert Schindler (Frankfurt a/M, 1984), pp. 117–52, esp. p. 143.

30 See John of Garland, *The Parisiana Poetria,* ed. and tr. Traugott Lawler (New Haven, 1974), pp. 188–91, 270–71.

31 Many examples of the allegorizing of cold are given in *Het zal koud zijn in 't water als 't vriest. Zestiendeeeuwse parodieën op gedrukte jaarvoorspellingen,* ed. Hinke van Kampen, et al (The Hague, 1980), pp. 48–49; these were mainly derived from the so-called mock prognostications of the sixteenth century.

32 Geoffrey de Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova,* tr. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto, 1967), ll. 800–7.

33 This point is discussed in general by Peter Burke in his *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), pp. 58–64.

34 As for the towns in the northwest of France a process like this is described by Robert Muchembled, *Culture populaire et culture des élites dans la France moderne (XVe–XVIIIe siècles): essai* (Paris, 1978), part 1, esp. pp. 216–17.

This content downloaded from 130.240.43.43 on Fri, 15 Jan 2016 07:29:01 UTC
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions