Introduction

The genesis of the joke

Historians tend to be serious. There is little laughter in the study rooms of the Dutch National Library; in fact, it is strictly forbidden. However, visitors there do not complain about that. After all, they do not go there to entertain themselves. At any rate, that was not my intention a few years ago, on the day when a remarkable seventeenth-century manuscript landed on my desk among some political tracts. The general title Anecdotes turned out to contain a collection of surprisingly coarse jokes. As I read on, I discovered that the author, the little-known poet Aernout van Overbeke, poked fun at all kinds of people in his milieu. That was enough to make me decide to venture further down this side-street.¹

Next to nothing has been written about Aernout van Overbeke and his Anecdotes. Nevertheless, the manuscript has passed through the hands of a number of historians of Dutch literature, as can be seen from the fact that their names are listed on the cover of the manuscript, as was once obligatory. They probably considered the material too indecent to write about it. But perhaps there was also another reason. The exuberant fun that emanates from Van Overbeke’s jokes is difficult to reconcile with the conventional image of the culture of the Golden Age: Calvinist, serious, composed and heroic when necessary. Of course, there are the comedies of Gerbrand Bredero and the paintings of Jan Steen, but it is characteristic that the historian Johan Huizinga did not know how to handle them in his famous essay on Dutch seventeenth-century culture. He
virtually ignored Jan Steen. Subsequent art historians have brought
his paintings into line with the conventional canon by explaining
them iconographically: according to this interpretation, Jan Steen
was really a moralist whose canvases were intended as a warning.
Another solution is to see such paintings and stage farces as no more
than a counterpoint to the serious character of the dominant
culture of the Netherlands. Yet others resolve the paradox by treat-
ing the Dutch simply as hypocrites.

These reactions tell us more about our own century than about
the Golden Age. If we are to get to grips with figures like Aernout
van Overbeke and Jan Steen, an aspect of the seventeenth century
that has been glossed over to date has to be brought to prominence
again: cheerfulness. A reading of the Anecdotes shows how impor-
tant humour was in seventeenth-century culture. Laughing together
is an expression of mutual understanding. Laughing with Aernout
van Overbeke can be a way of understanding the culture of his time
better.

Aernout van Overbeke’s jokes are a good guide to seventeenth-
century Dutch humour. The first problem arises, however, as soon
as we refer to the Anecdotes as jokes. The manuscript does not have
a title, and it was a librarian who once described it as a collection of
anecdotes. Modern readers are more likely to refer to its content as
jokes (Dutch: moppen). Both terms are problematic. In fact, it is
impossible to find the right word, and that is all the stranger given
the extremely rich Dutch vocabulary on this topic.

Grap, grol, mop, bak, poets, kwinkslag, geintje, zotheid are only a few
examples of the wealth of terms that can be applied to something
amusing in the Dutch language. Dutch has dozens of other words
to indicate all kinds of nuances. This wide vocabulary shows how
important humour is in Dutch society. It seems that people need to
be able to talk about humour in precise terms.

Words are not static, but have their own history. The Dutch word
mop, for example, is a late nineteenth-century invention, intro-
duced when jokes first began to appear in magazines. The word was
felt to be lacking in refinement and was generally used in the sense
of a popular song – a meaning that it has now lost. Today the word
mop refers to a short, comic narrative that moves towards its
punch line in no more than a few sentences. Other words in
contemporary usage such as grap and grol are also nineteenth-century coinages.

Many words have changed their meaning in the course of time. The term geestig once used to be employed in the sense of ‘intelligent’ and – like the English ‘witty’ – was only used later to refer exclusively to those who used that ‘wit’ to make others laugh. Similar shifts can be observed in the development of the words guit, schalk and schelm. Initially these were terms of abuse (a schalk was a criminal and a schelm was a carcass), but later they came to mean no more than the English equivalents ‘rogue’ and ‘rascal’.

The Dutch vocabulary of humour has been considerably expanded by loan words. Scherts is from the Italian scherzo, witz is from German and geintje is Yiddish. These loan words often have a long history of their own. In the seventeenth century the German word Witz was used for accomplishment in sparkling conversation; it only came to mean ‘joke’ later on.

Various terms have a medical background. The archaic word luim is connected with the French lune (moon) and the English lunatic. The phases of the moon were thought to influence mental states. The word gek still has two meanings: ‘amusing’ and ‘crazy’. The word ‘humour’ itself, from the Latin, was originally a medical term. The humours were the four bodily fluids. When they were out of balance, this was taken to lead to an exuberant mood or to abnormal – and thus amusing – behaviour.

The diversity of terms for all aspects of the comic has increased, but other words have fallen into disuse. One example is the medieval boert. This word was in use until the nineteenth century, but it came to be regarded increasingly pejoratively in the sense of a coarse, vulgar joke. Other words such as kortswijl, gabberij and snakerij have completely disappeared. The term Kamper ui (onion from Kampen) has lost currency, but it used to mean ‘joke’ because of the proverbial foolishness of the people of the town of Kampen. The old word jok in the sense of joke disappeared in the nineteenth century, when it was replaced by humour. The verb jokken lost the sense of ‘to make jokes’ and was confined to the meaning ‘to tell lies’.

These shifts in terminology raise problems for historians. First of all, there is the problem of anachronistic terminology. Whenever we apply a modern word to the humour of the seventeenth century,
we should realise that the term did not exist at the time, and that we are probably talking about a form of humour that did not exist then either. In other words, is not just the word, but also the idea to which it refers, not a product of our own era? On the other hand, it can be difficult to reconstruct the precise meaning that words such as *frats, jef, trek, kuur* and *tuil* had in the seventeenth century. It is not only the many terms but also the various manifestations of Golden Age humour that have disappeared for ever.

Chapters 1 and 2 show how robust the image of the cheerful Dutch was, in both the Netherlands and abroad. Then comes the rise of the Netherlands as a centre of printed works for amusement, with an emphasis on jestbooks, which with their short comic narratives are the precursors of modern joke books. Who wrote, printed and read these books? What role did humour play in everyday life? Who cracked jokes, what were they about, who were the audience, and on which occasions were they told? Some clues are provided by fragments from diaries. This immediately raises the question of why this cheerfulness has disappeared. An important role was played by theologians and moralists in their offensive against laughter.

Chapter 3 presents Aernout van Overbeke, the son of a wealthy merchant, who lived a semi-bohemian life but who nevertheless held a prominent position in the Dutch East Indian Company for two years. Aernout van Overbeke, who both recorded jokes and translated the psalms, was the personification of the apparent contradiction between seriousness and fun which can be seen in the Golden Age. Chapter 4 deals with various themes from Van Overbeke’s *Anecdotes* in more detail, thereby showing what made Van Overbeke and his friends – of both sexes – laugh so much. Their laughter offers us fresh insight into seventeenth-century life in the Dutch Republic.

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