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 treating 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 important 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, introduced 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*, *foef*, *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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