

# *The Netherlandish Proverbs*

An International Symposium  
on the  
Pieter Brueg(h)els

edited by  
Wolfgang Mieder

*Proverbium*  
with support from the  
John Templeton Foundation

The University of Vermont  
Burlington, Vermont  
2004

# “She Hangs the Blue Cloak Over Her Husband”

## The World of Human Follies in Proverbial Art

*Yoko Mori*

### Introduction

In 1996 I had the great honor to be invited to Tokyo to be the keynote speaker at the founding of the Japan Society for Proverb Studies, and it was at this major event that I encountered Prof. Yoko Mori for the first time. After listening to her innovative lecture on “The Wisdom of Bruegel’s Proverbs as Found in Japanese Art,” I knew immediately that I had discovered a kindred spirit with a deep-rooted interest in cross-cultural studies of art and proverbs. We became friends quickly during those eventful days in Tokyo, and I will forever be thankful to her for being such a caring host. What a pleasure it is for me to be able to reciprocate after all these years by trying to make our symposium as memorable an event for Yoko Mori. I thank her in the name of all of us for undertaking the long voyage from Japan to Vermont. Her presence amongst us today honors us all.

Prof. Yoko Mori is a polyglot scholar, having studied art history in Japan, Munich, Bryn Mawr College, where she received an M.A. degree in 1970, and in Brussels. Her linguistic and cultural expertise has enabled her to conduct phenomenal research since earning her Ph.D. degree at Tokyo in 1988. By now she has been recognized by several international prizes for her many richly illustrated books written in Japanese. I should have asked one of the students of our steadily growing Japanese language program here at the University of Vermont to read some of the titles for you, but let me instead give you at least some of them in English translation:

*Bruegel* (1971)

*The Drawings of Bruegel* (1978)

*Bosch and Bruegel* (1978)

*The Prints of William Hogarth* (1981)

*The Complete Works of Pieter Bruegel* (1988)

*Bruegel's Children's Games* (1989)

But there is, of course, also and above all that magisterial and massive book *Bryugeru no Kotowaza no Sekai* (*The Proverb World of Bruegel*) from 1992 which I received as a present from Yoko Mori and which is exhibited at the Fleming museum together with other books on Bruegel by our symposium speakers. Never mind that I cannot read it; the book includes 652 small illustrations, and it contains 85 small iconographic, linguistic, and cultural monographs on individual proverb scenes in *The Netherlandish Proverbs* painting. This prize-winning masterpiece definitely needs to be translated into one of the western languages so that Bruegel scholars everywhere can benefit from the wisdom and insights of Yoko Mori.

Fortunately for us, there are also some articles in English that let us appreciate the invaluable work of this renowned scholar, among them:

"The Iconography of *homo bulla* in Northern Art," in *Homo Ludens* (1996)

"The Wisdom of Bruegel's Proverbs as Found in Japanese Art," in *Bulletin of the Language Institute of Gakushuin University* (1998)

"Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* and Corresponding Images in Old Japanese Art," in *Acta Historiae Artium* (2003)

I should also mention, of course, that the seven papers of this symposium will be published by the end of this year, and it will be a delight to make this volume available to you in due time as a gift in memory of your much-appreciated presence here yesterday and today.

### Lecture

This paper will discuss how the Flemish wives and husbands were observed by the proverbial world in both images and literature interpreted from four Dutch proverbs in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Netherlandish Proverbs* of 1559, now in Gemäldegalerie, Berlin [Plate 3]: 1. "She hangs the blue cloak over her husband," 2. "She would tie a devil to the pillow," 3. "One winds the distaff while the other spins," and 4. "Hen feeler." My initial focus will be the iconographic meaning of the Dutch proverb, "She hangs the blue cloak over her husband." This proverb is situated in the center of the entire composition and serves as one of the key functions of this painting. The proverb refers to the unfaithful behavior of a wife. It is one of more than 100 proverbs depicted in Bruegel's proverbs painting in Berlin. More than sixty percent of the proverbs in this painting are commonly used

throughout Europe. "She hangs the blue cloak over her husband" is a typical Dutch proverb with no equivalent expression in other European languages.

Although today we call Bruegel's painting *Netherlandish Proverbs*, it is important to note that proverbs prints or paintings in the second half of the sixteenth century were generally referred to as "Blauwe Huyck," or in English, "Blue Cloak." The engraving of around 1558 by Frans Hogenberg [Plate 2], executed probably one year before Bruegel's proverbs painting, seems to be the first one actually to be inscribed "Blauwe Huyck" (Blue Cloak) within the composition. In the upper space of his engraving, the Dutch verse reads: "DIE BLAV HUICK IS DIT MEEST GHENAEMT/MAER DES WEERELTS ABVISEN HE BETER BETAEMPT" or in English, "It is widely called The Blue Cloak, but it is more suitable to name it the Follies of the World".

In Hogenberg's engraving 43 proverbs are found with inscriptions: 37 proverbs appear in Bruegel's painting. Christopher Plantijn, a major publisher and bookseller in Antwerp in Bruegel's time, delivered Hogenberg's proverbs print "Blauwe Huyck" to Parisian booksellers, Martin the Younger in 1558 and Barthélemy Jourdain in 1559, according to their letters.<sup>1</sup> In the engraving of 1570 by an anonymous artist depicting 71 proverbs and among them 36 are common to Bruegel's proverbs. In particular, no. 62 literally reads: "Dees hangt haar man de blauwe huick" (This one hangs the blue cloak over her husband.) Then the engraving appears around 1577 by Joannes van Duetecum, a set of four sheets on "Blue Cloak". It depicts 88 proverbs of which 42 are the same as Bruegel's proverbs. The engraving by Theodor Galle, which is a faithful copy after the anonymous painter, is published in the beginning of the seventeenth century. In the 1630s Sebastiaan Vrancx painted 202 proverbs [Plate 5], 61 of which are common to Bruegel's painting. It is interesting to notice that a signboard on Vrancx's painting on the right side [Fig. 1] contains the Dutch inscription, "Spreuken Van Swerels Misbruyck. Diemen Noemt De Blauwe Huyck" (Proverbs of the Abuse of the World, which One Names the Blue Cloak.)<sup>2</sup> There is a document relating to the Blue Cloak as a title of the painting in the seventeenth century. Constantin Huygens the Younger wrote in his diary on July 11, 1676 that "Yesterday I saw at Mr. Stevens', the son of the former owner of the beautiful collection of paintings, the work by old Breugel, called de blauewe Heuijck (Blue Cloak), and it literally represents numerous proverbs and it is very beautiful without doubt."<sup>3</sup> In addition, there were several documents mentioning proverbs which make use of the "Blue Cloak".



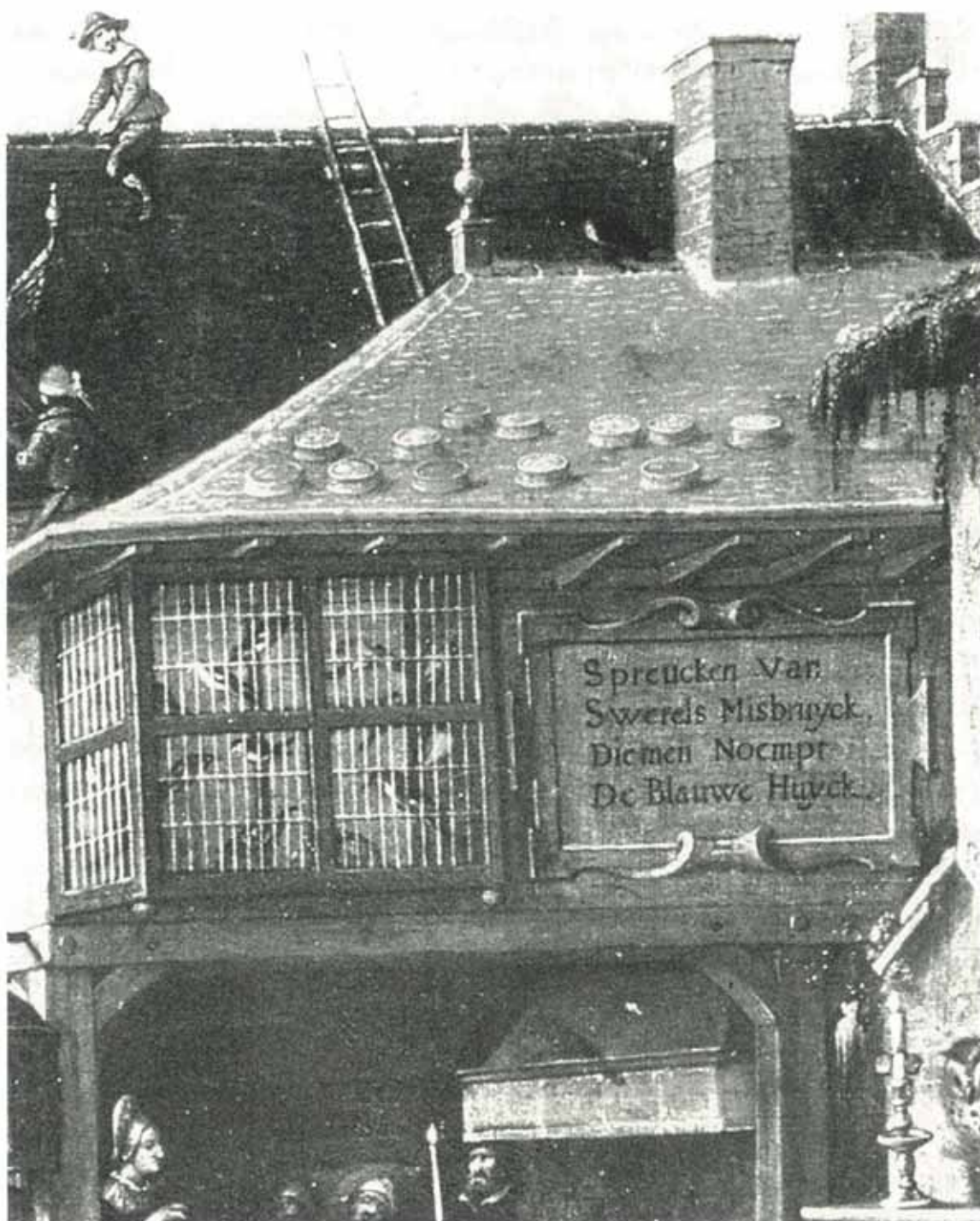


Fig. 1

### 1. *The Pictorial Background of the Blue Cloak*

Bruegel depicts the extreme contrast between the old tottering husband with a cane and his attractive wife [Fig. 2]. She looks so young she could be his granddaughter. I will later speak more in detail about this unequal couple. It is interesting to compare Bruegel's couple with the copies made by his son. One of the best qualified copies after Bruegel would be that of the Stedelijk Museum Wuyts- van Campen en Baron Caroly in Lier [Fig. 3]. The wife in Lier Museum ignores her husband and she seems to be uninterested





*Fig. 2*



in him. Her husband does not look weak and frail. The wife in the Klapper collection [Plate 4] is very charming and appears to treat her husband as if she were very kind to him.<sup>4</sup> Compared with Bruegel's figure, he does not appear to be depressed. While the couple in the Klapper collection is very impressive, the painting in Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp is, unfortunately, not in particularly good condition. But the countenance of the husband in the Antwerp painting is fairly well depicted and he has a portrait-like face. In any case, the three copies mentioned above are considered to be very good pieces and they are undoubtedly painted by Pieter Brueghel the Younger and not by his assistants. However, the strong contrast in ages between the young wife and the very old and unhappy husband is not so well achieved in the copies in comparison with Bruegel's couple.

Let me first survey the pictorial background of Bruegel's blue cloak group. One of the earliest pictorial representations before Bruegel's would be a fragment of a Flemish tapestry which dates back to the end of fifteenth century [Plate 1]. This fragment includes the blue cloak group among nine proverbs. There are many arguments concerning whether the tapestry was made in Flanders or in France.<sup>5</sup> Yet the proverb, "she hangs the blue cloak over her husband," is one of the typical Flemish proverbs. Therefore it was probably produced in Flanders. The man wearing the same type of cloak



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

which is still visible in the painting by Bruegel, looks back at his wife as if he doubts her behavior. Hogenberg's couple of 1558 looks at each other; yet there is no particular difference between their ages. The husband by the Flemish anonymous artist of 1570 has a stronger, tougher look, and he is more stately dressed than that of his follower, Theodor Galle. Yet, both couples look uninterested in each other. The husband in the engraving by Johannes van Duetechum of 1577 [Fig. 4] appears older than his wife, but he does not need a cane yet. The accompanying Dutch proverbial expression reads: "Young wives who gladly receive the offerings here and there must hang the blue cloaks over their husbands." It is interesting to remark that all the wives hold the peak of the cloak as if they control their husbands. The cloak can also be seen as a mask used to hide the unfaithful behavior of a wife. The cloak with the long peak is called in Dutch, "een hukmantel met lange klep" and in German "Schnabelheuke," and was worn both by women and men in Bruegel's time as seen in the engraving of *The Witch at Mallgem*



*Fig. 5*



by Bruegel. The couple by Sebastiaan Vrancx [Fig. 5] is a bit different from the above mentioned images. A young man hangs a cloak over the older man, while his wife tries to beat her husband with a frying pan. The Dutch proverb, “zij geeft hem van de pan” (she gives him with a pan) means a wife is cheating or refusing her husband and ferociously attacking him.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the poor man gets not only a strong beating, but also has the blue cloak hung over him by (most likely) his wife’s lover. David Teniers the Younger, the husband of Bruegel’s granddaughter, Ann, was apparently inspired by Bruegel’s composition. David Teniers the Younger also depicts the aged husband with a cane after Bruegel [Plate 6].

## 2. *The Symbolic Meaning of the Color Blue*

There is a symbolic meaning to the color blue, which plays an important role in the titles of proverbs paintings and engravings. It is interesting here to repeat the verse by Hogenberg — “It is widely called The Blue Cloak, but it is more suitable to name it the Follies of the World.” The color blue has two opposite meanings, one positive and one negative, and has appeared in Dutch sermons, several refrain poems, morality plays written by *rederijkers* (rhetoricians), popular literature and others since the late Middle Ages.

The positive meaning refers to the color of Christ’s robe or that of religious persons. In a Dutch preaching bundle titled *Jhesus Collacien* (*The Sermons of Jesus*), published in 1480, the color blue is mentioned as follows: “On the next day when the Holy Spirit preached to the nuns, the maids of Christ noticed that he was wearing a robe which had the same colors as the sky. That means Christ lifts souls to the Heavenly things.”<sup>7</sup> Here the color of the sky is apparently meant to be blue. Also in the Dutch morality play, *Wellustige Mensch* (the *Voluptuous Man*) the following personifications come on stage. The characters of the drama are, in short, the Grace of God, the Voluptuous Man, Wrong Faith, Fleshly Sins, Earthly Sorrow, Daily Sermon, Desire of Eyes, Avarice, Luxury, and others. It is worth noting that the author describes the color of the clothes of “the Grace of God” as “a religious person dressed in the color blue.”<sup>8</sup>

However, there are more negative meanings of the color blue than positive ones in old Dutch literature. Before 1473, Preacher Jan (Johannes) van Brugman born in Kempen writes in book of sermons about the corrupt and hypocritical people who live in a cloister: “They appear to be spiritual and wear grey, but to God they wear blue. Just as we see that the blue and yellow lilies that grow on the water look like lilies, but don’t have the fragrance of lilies. Thus, it is with these people; they are clean on the outside, but don’t make an effort to keep their hearts pure.”<sup>9</sup>

Brugman also wrote the following text in another manuscript: "There is nothing more demonic or displeasing to God than to be grey on the outside and blue on the inside, to look like an angel on the outside and to be a devil on the inside, and be concerned with vanity and the pleasures of the world."<sup>10</sup> There are also more examples implying the negative meaning of the color blue in old Dutch literature.

*Een Spel van Sinnen van de Hel Vant Brouwersgilde* (*The Morality Play of The Hell of Brewer's Guild*) was published around 1561, two years after Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* which talks about the blue sack. A blue sack was familiar to Bruegel's contemporaries as symbolizing illegal gains. In a long monologue, Lucifer describes the blue sack possessed by the following mighty persons. "Notice with me the game these mighty men play as governors, regents, presidents, and sovereigns, who accommodate themselves from the blue sack; /councilors, officials, bailiffs, landlords/provost marshals, stewards, captains/ who levy the excises, the tolls and the taxes in villages, big and small, under the pretext of necessity and the laws in force."<sup>11</sup> Thus from the above examples or from quotations taken from Dutch literature, it is very clear the color blue mostly signifies cheating as well as deceptive behavior or illegal profit.

We should not overlook the fact that the color blue also has a significant meaning in the proverb "Topsy-turvy World" in Bruegel's painting. The Globe is hung upside down and its blue color is meant as negative to describe the world's immorality. Some copies by Bruegel's workshop fail to depict the upside down cross.

In Bruegel's *The Combat between Carnival and Lent* of 1559, there are two blue boats in this painting. One blue boat relates to the obese leader of Carnival's group wearing a blue kerchief and a blue jacket sitting on the beer barrel on the top of blue boat. In front of him a skinny leader of Lent dressed in grey is sitting on a chair on top of a wooden plank with four wheels. Another blue boat in Bruegel's *Carnival and Lent* appears in a signboard hanging from the front wall of an inn. Under a blue boat is written, "Dit is in d blau shuit" (This is in the blue boat). It is interesting to note that a copy after Bruegel's painting follows the correct way, while another one gives a meaningless spelling like "Dit is in d blau sci". This misspelling indicates that the copy was not executed by Pieter Brueghel the Younger's workshop but elsewhere by someone without any knowledge of the Dutch language. Also not only the misspelling, but the stylistic accomplishment is weak in this copy.

According to Enklaar's research in 1975, the blue boat was a popular name of a temporary guild for the carnival ever since the late Middle Ages.



The guild was organized by the lazy and feast-loving members who preferred to act so as “to eat the blue corn” (to pass an easy going and thriftless life), paying little attention to the tradition and customs and giving priority to folly over wisdom. The Blue Boat invites all who would like to indulge in wild manners, regardless whether they are aristocrats or burghers and both of whom could belong to the guild, and encouraging them to embark into the blue boat. The guild of the Blue Boat worships fictitious St. Dimphna, patron saint of fools (or the insane), which can be traced back to Jacop van Oestvoren’s poem of 1414, “Blauwe Shuit” (Blue Ship).<sup>12</sup> Thus the color blue is applied with specific intention by Bruegel to relate to the literary sources cited here.

### 3. *To Hang the Blue Cloak Over Somebody*

Let me discuss how the proverb “She hangs the blue cloak over her husband” was very popular in literature among Bruegel’s contemporary poets, writers of morality plays, and others. Jan van Stijevoort, a South Netherlandish poet active in the first half of the sixteenth century in Utrecht, describes in his *Referein bundel* of 1524 a complaint of a husband who has a lecherous wife. Quoting the proverb, “will she now hang the blue cloak over me?” the husband explains the behavior of his wife in short: “Can she deceive me twice a day./ Does she catch the blind and mute ones in her vagina./ Will she trap them in her narrow paths./ ..../Is she open to her lovers./ That is all very offensive to me. /May she make anyone crazy from sexual desire./ Does she wriggle until her eyes pop out. /Is she like that, well, that is the way she is.”<sup>13</sup>

In the morality play, *de Spiegel der Minnen* (*The Mirror of Loves*), written in the sixteenth century, the following personifications appear in front of Katherina Sheermertens: Vreese voor Schande (Fear against the Shame), Begheerte van hoocheden (Desire of the Height), the mythological figures like Venus and Saturn as well as her parents and others. Their conversation among the allegorical figures is focused on misfortune, unhappiness and loss of reputation caused by loving a woman. The allegorical figure, “Desire of the Height”, mentions how historically famous people lost their high standing because of love. Aristotle let Phyllis, a charming prostitute and lover of Alexander the Great, ride on him. Virgil, the intellectual Roman writer whose love for a princess was unrequited, was mocked by the public: he was suspended in a basket and ridiculed by the public. The princess, herself, mocks him from a window in the high tower of the castle.<sup>14</sup> The shame of all these characters is caused by their unhappy love. Finally the allegorical figure “Fear for Shame” says: “Listen to this sermon, you are hanging a blue cloak around love’s neck.”



A burlesque, *Katemaecker*, was performed in 1578 by a fraternity on June 24th, the feast Day of Saint John. The play is titled, "Trou moet blijcken" (Loyalty must be proven) and presents the story of a woman about to go into labor, and her drunken husband, Hein. Two other women confront Hein and ask him to get a midwife for his wife. Hein refuses and says, "If you want to get a midwife, go and get her by yourself. That is the end of the discussion." One of the women reacts: "That is true, you fool! But alas, I can see it is hopeless. Could we show you the child before it is born? Go for a midwife; we want her." Hein replies: "If she were to bring a baby with her? I have never heard anything so ridiculous in my life! ...Do you mean to hang the blue cloak on me?"<sup>15</sup> The proverb apparently suggests an adulterous wife.

A refrain of the sixteenth century collected and transcribed by Jan de Bruyne talks of the typical deceived husband:

When a man is married,  
One finds many Jans  
When a man falls in love, his feeling is such:  
he is a hearing mute and seeing blind,  
not asking this and that when his wife comes back,  
and even if she spins cotton from his ear  
hanging the blue cloak over him according to the way the wind blows.  
Here one should realize something;  
although his name is Claes, he is deemed to be Jan:  
Jan the soft-headed, Jan horny man, not worried about a thing,  
Jan the comfort, Jan the disabled one, Jan the greedy one.  
But even when I name all these Jans, the obese and vulgar one,  
there are many to be found, even though they are not named so.<sup>16</sup>

From this poem, we can assume that Jan is a popular nickname for a simple-minded person over whom his wife easily hangs the blue cloak.

However the allegorical drama, *Aeneas and Dido* written in 1552 by Cornelis van Ghistele, rhetorician and humanist, does not use the proverb as an allusion to an adulterous wife, but in a different way. Aeneas plans to go home, but Dido keeps him at her place, Carthage. The personified Friendly Heart says to Fame of Honor that Aeneas secretly goes away from Dido as a thief steals a cock, so that no one will recognize Aeneas's departure. Fame of Honor explains about Dido, saying that "No, she will get sad news immediately and it will be very difficult to hang the blue cloak over her."<sup>17</sup> In this case, "to hang the blue cloak over somebody" refers to the deception of anyone, not specifically alluding only to a vicious wife, as in the other examples I presented here.

There is another usage in Dutch literature, which refers to the blue cloak as a type of job and not as an unfaithful wife. On the feast day of the Assumption of the Virgin, August 15th, 1563, the ceremonial parade *Ommegang* was held around the town of Antwerp. The parade included many allegorical figures and wagons. One of the wagons carried a motto, "Defects are now seen in all classes, / Deceit prevails now too, / Attorneys and lawyers/ All of them fix things well./ And when Justice gets bent a little?/ A small blue cloak is put over it."<sup>18</sup> In this wagon the blue cloak refers to the dishonest attorneys and lawyers carrying blue sacks as mentioned earlier.

Thus the majority of the literary examples using the proverb "To hang the blue cloak over somebody" apply to deceitful women. Thus the blue cloak being held by a young wife in Bruegel's painting has a specific meaning. Has her red dress any significance? Wolfgang Stechow points out that "red can stand for sin and impudence."<sup>19</sup> But Bruegel's son does not always show a red dress and depicts the wife in the roundel paintings wearing everyday clothes. While the copy in the Klapper collection faithfully represents the red dress exactly as in the original, another copy by Pieter Brueghel the Younger's workshop reveals a white dress. Teniers the Younger uses a light violet dress for this figure. Therefore I would like to keep the question open now because the evidence is still inconclusive.

Bruegel represents the second blue cloak in one of the twelve roundel proverbs painting in the Museum Mayer van den Bergh in Antwerp. The twelve paintings were joined together into one panel in the later period, and the Dutch proverbs were probably added at the same time between 1560 and 1580. The dating is assumed from calligraphic analysis.<sup>20</sup> The inscription in the blue cloak painting reads, "Ick stoppe mij onder een blauwe huijcke meer worde ick bekent hoe ick meer duycke." (I hide under a blue cloak. The more I do so the more I am revealed.) Although the figure of a woman is missing, it is easily presumed that the roundel painting indicates the same proverb in Berlin. In Pieter Brueghel the Younger's several roundel paintings he adapts his father's composition to demonstrate a wife hanging the blue cloak over her husband while standing in a village. It is interesting to compare that the "patijnen" (old Dutch wooden sandal) in the Museum Mayer van den Bergh has been changed into a pair of normal leather shoes. The reason for this change may be because the patijnen had already become old-fashioned. Klaus Ertz notices that a pair of patijnen will clatter while he walks, so that the more the man conceals himself, the more he is revealed by the sounds.<sup>21</sup>

There is an interesting French manuscript of proverbial poems written in the fifteenth-century. One illustration [Fig. 6] related to Bruegel's couple depicts a young wife covering the eyes of her old husband with a cloth and pro-



la femme

Douc ce q' mō maloy est vicié  
 A fin q' mō amy ne voye  
 Je luy estouppieray les yeulx  
 Tendis quil soy pea sa voie  
 Bien say quil n'aura pas q'nt joye  
 De le voir et p' tout qui puet  
 Eviter le mal je diray  
 Ce qu'il ne voit au cuer ne d'oeil

Fig. 6



protecting her young boyfriend from the jealousy of her husband. The poem reads: "As my husband is too old, I will cover his eyes in order that he does not see my boyfriend. In the meantime my boyfriend will be out of his sight. Surely my husband won't be happy to meet him." Avoiding troubles as much as possible, I will say, "What the eyes don't see would not hurt the heart."<sup>22</sup> The last phrase, "What the eyes don't see, would not hurt the heart," is a French proverb. Although the words "blue cloak" are missing here, covering the eyes with the cloth serves the same purpose, namely to hide the wife's immoral behavior.

Donae Idinau's book of sermons, *Van Wiisheyd Ende Goed Geluck* (*The Fate of Wisdom and Good Fortune*) published in Antwerp in 1606, is extremely useful for deciphering the proverbs used in Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*. Donae Idinau was the pseudonym of Jan David born in Kortrijk in 1546 and died in Antwerp in 1606. He was active as a Flemish Jesuit Father and a polemicist. He used different pseudonyms because he was afraid of Calvinist radical attacks. In his book each poem ends with a proverb. Idinau quoted 300 proverbs in his book, and among them are 39 proverbs found in Bruegel's painting. His poem is entitled, "To put on a blue cloak": "She who deceives him in every way she likes,/ Puts a blue cloak on her husband./ She who hides her bad intentions with deceit,/ Is neither virtuous nor wise nor good./ She who does not fear God is wilder than wild."<sup>23</sup>

#### 4. *The Iconography of Unequal Couples in Bruegel's Pair of "The Blue Cloak"*

Let us observe Bruegel's couple closely, especially the difference between the ages of the old husband and his young wife. The old husband is hardly able to walk without a cane. According to a medical analysis by a Japanese dentist, the man has no teeth in his lower jaw. To the contrary, his young wife looks very charming and seems to have married him because of his wealth. In order to seduce men, she wears a long red dress which reveals her ample cleavage.

Dundes and Stibbe point out that the wife hangs the cloak "behind the man's back, a perfect postural analogue for the metaphor being depicted."<sup>24</sup> Indeed it alludes to the fact that she may have a lover of her own age, as seen in many visual examples of unequal couples mentioned now.<sup>25</sup> Such a couple recalls the popular images of unequal lovers, for example, those by Quentin Massys in which the third person appears receiving money from his lover. Also there are numerous versions of unequal couples by the German painter Lucas Cranach the Elder as well as those in Flemish and Dutch prints. Cranach's purpose in producing a mass of paintings on this subject was a social satire against the unhappy results of the sexual interest of aged

men or women in young people who are foolishly tempted by their elder's money.

Some German and Flemish prints explain the feelings of both a young and an old person in verses and as examples before and after Bruegel's couple. A German woodcut by Hans Wandereisen of 1519 tells of the sorrow of an old husband toward his young wife: "My love is young and I am old,/She is very hot, and I am cold, /Her hair is gold, and mine is grey, /Her cheeks are red, mine are blue...For that reason we quarrel the whole day."<sup>26</sup> Another German woodcut by an anonymous artist around 1510-20 has two couples represented on the same sheet, that is, an old man caressing a young girl on the left and an old woman seducing a young man on the right. An old man wearing an expensive fur hat touched the breast of a young girl; she, in turn, grabs his purse which is full of money. An old man talks to her: "Oh, a beautiful woman, you bring me joy. If I could trust your firm courage, it would be very nice." A girl replies: "Oh, please do it in a hurry, my gentleman, I have a big desire for you."<sup>27</sup> Unexpectedly she does not refuse the old man, but rather flatters him with her contempt. She pretends to like him until she receives the amount of money that she desires.

The woodcut print of 1531 by an anonymous Flemish artist [Fig. 7] carries a poem of a desperate old man, a showy fellow: "I sit here dried up as an old fool, now/ With love I smother myself, this is my fortune now./ My sexual desire always burns from my insides. /It is better to be an old fool than void of emotion...."<sup>28</sup> An owl on a pole is clearly a symbol of a foolish act. The true feeling of a young girl is explained from the verse on the engraving of Jacob Goltzius, after Hendrick Goltzius of the late sixteenth century [Fig. 8]. The translated Latin verse reads: "You silly old fool, stop seducing a girl with vain flattery. My youth asks for something else."<sup>29</sup> The Dutch verse reads: "Go away, you fool, go away and let me in peace. You are looking for something young, but so am I." There are several engravings representing a young couple and an old person who tries to seduce the younger man or girl with money, as seen in Joannes Saenredam's engraving of 1577. A young girl refuses the monetary offer from an old man, "I despise money and wealth,/ A young girl enjoys a lovely look, although you will give me wonderful things."

### *5. Wives and their Roles in the Placement of Proverbs*

There are other proverbs concerning married women in the proverbs painting by Bruegel. It is important to discuss how they are observed in the painting. "She would tie a devil to the pillow" is placed in the left corner of the foreground. This proverb alludes to a powerful and mighty wife who dominates her husband at home, because she strongly conquers a devil and



Het Huys der fortuynen,



## Doude Minnaer.

Ic sit hier verdozt als eē out sot // nō  
 In minnē bsmoozt / dā is mijn lot // nō  
 Mijn innē vā binnē / ontslekē alteene  
 Tis beter een out Sot / dan egheene /  
 Om v tantwoordē / sal ic my benoutwē  
 Doozt na uy ende wilt onthoutwen  
 Tusschen tgeluc suldy zjn eē ongeluc  
 Sontijts blijde / somtijts met druck.



C bij

A loeck

Fig. 7





Fig. 8



Fig. 9

ties him to the pillow. There is a similar Dutch proverb, “Zij is de duivel te slim af” (She is much slyer than a devil.)<sup>30</sup> Several proverbs relating to a strong woman are found in other European languages, such as the fourteenth century French proverb, “Femme sait un art avant le diable.” (A woman learns a skill before the devil.)<sup>31</sup> In German, “Wo die Frau im Haus regiert, ist der Teufel Hausknecht.” (Where the wife governs at home, the devil is her servant.)<sup>32</sup>

There is an interesting anonymous Florentine engraving of around 1460 where a devil is conquered by women [Fig. 9], one by making a knot and another by tying a chain to a devil. The third woman holds a club, while the fourth beats a devil violently with a whip. Another devil is already hanged from a kind of a gallows, and he cries “O mal chompagnia!” (Oh, what a bad companion!) His companion starts to leave and cries “oime!, oime! (uncle, uncle!) to whom another woman shouts, “Aspetta vpqho” (Wait a minute!). An interesting misericord of this proverb is preserved at S. Martin au Bois in Northern France. It depicts a woman binding a devil with a strong rope and taking him away. Another misericord of this proverb, carved by Jan Borchmans around 1510 to 1525 at Mariakerk in Aarschot [Fig. 10], is the earliest example found in Flanders.<sup>33</sup> Here an angry housewife rides on a devil who is tied up with a rope. *Dulle Griet* of 1562 by Bruegel depicts two housewives tying devils either on the ladder or on the ground. Apparently they also represent the same proverb, “She would tie a devil to the pillow”. Barthel Beham expresses in his woodcut print of c.1532 that a devil is strongly beaten by an old woman with a stick when he asks her for a licensed quarter. After their quarrel, the devil complains, “Oh! I have never seen such a woman before. I should go away from an old whore giving me such pain and fear by means of torture.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, Bruegel’s proverb of a woman beating a devil refers not only to Flemish women, but to a general satire on any woman who controls a timid husband.

Let me now compare the differences between the women’s faces of Bruegel and his son [Fig. 11]. Bruegel’s fearful expression of face is weakened in the painting by his son in the Museum in Lier which changes her rather foolish looking facial feature. Also the faces of the devils of both paintings are quite different. Bruegel’s devil appears to be terrified by the woman, while his son’s devil does not show any signs of panic; on the contrary, he looks soft-headed.

A stubborn and obstinate woman sitting just behind a young wife in Bruegel’s painting represents the proverb, “One winds on the distaff while the other spins.” [Fig. 12] The meaning of the proverb is not one that many scholars often refer to as chattering evil gossips,<sup>35</sup> because Bruegel’s two





*Fig. 10*



*Fig. 11*





Fig. 12

women sit closely together and appear to talk to each other. However, it should be interpreted as when someone begins an evil plan, the other finishes it according to Marcus van Vaernewijck's *Chronicle of Ghent from 1566 to 1568*, published in Bruegel's time, as Marijnissen points out.<sup>36</sup> Vaernewijck describes in his *Chronicle* how some evil women sent five or six wheat buyers to the gallows and men will execute worse things on next Wednesday quoting the proverb of the similar form, "those women did the winding, but men should finish the spinning."<sup>37</sup> There is distance between the two women in engravings by Hogenberg, an anonymous artist, Van Duetechum [Fig. 13], Theodor Galle, and the painting by Sebastiaan Vrancx [Fig. 14], and David Teniers the Younger. Vrancx depicts the contrast between mechanized spinning by a young woman with a wheel and the



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

manual spinning by an old woman. They seem neither chattering nor gossiping. Therefore it is safe to assert that the role of the aged woman is to plan and that of the younger one is to execute. It is worth noting that the spinning can be actually done by one person, as seen in the Parable of the *Wise Women and Foolish Ones* by Bruegel.

Behind the two women with tools for spinning, Bruegel's anxious peasant checks two hens with both of his hands to see whether they are sitting on eggs [Fig. 15]. His action refers to the proverbial expression, "Hen feeler." Bruegel's proverb, "Hen feeler," does not include a woman, but the proverb contains an important and hidden function of a housewife. His behavior should not be interpreted as "a petticoat chaser or a man who cannot leave women alone."<sup>38</sup> According to the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*, the first meaning of the proverb refers to a stingy husband who interferes and scorns his wife with the trifles of a household and kitchen matters which are supposed to be a housewife's duties.<sup>39</sup> The second meaning refers to a henpecked husband who has to participate in domestic business and is controlled by his wife. The third meaning refers to a husband who is deceived by his wife. The first meaning can be deciphered by an anonymous Flemish engraving from around 1560 which was printed by Hans Liefrinck



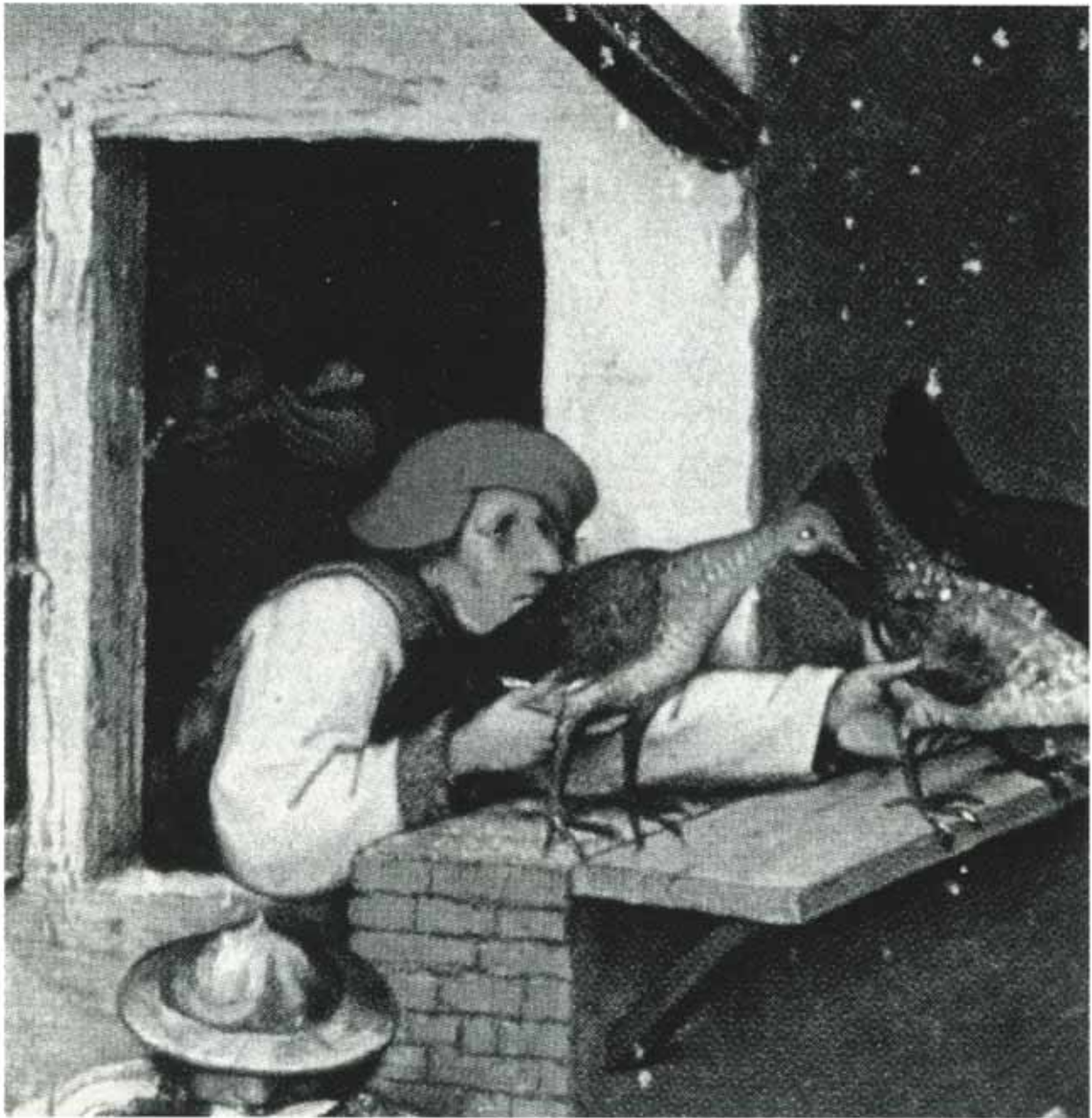


Fig. 15

in Antwerp [Fig. 16]. The engraving depicts a husband holding a hen to his breast, driven out of the house by his wife, as she shouts at him from the door. The engraving reads: "Everywhere they are detested, they are hen feelers who interfere with their wife's work." The verse on the bottom begins: "It is no wonder that the hen crows above the cock as the world is perverted. Nobody is to be satisfied with his own business, but rather disdains it badly and has fun at his wife's work. Thus he finally becomes a hen feeler."<sup>40</sup> Although a wife does not visually participate in Bruegel's hen feeler, it is suggestive of the wife's displeasure with her husband's behavior.

The passage of the verse reminds one of the description regarding Flemish women by Lodovico Guicciardini in his book, *The Description of the*



Al omme soe zijn si wel om verfoeyē De hinnenēasters die huer dwijfs werck moey



Fig. 16

*Low Countries* (1567). He died in Antwerp after his stay there for many years as Italian historian. His description reads: "The Women gouvernen all, both within the doores and without, and make all bargaines, which joined with the natural desire that Women have to bear rule, maketh them too imperious and troublesome."<sup>41</sup>

The hen-feeler appears in some misericords in the churches in Kempen, Aarschot, Hoogstraten, and other towns, and its character is also depicted in detail in the engravings by Hendrick Bloemmaert [Fig. 17] and Jasper Isacsz [Fig. 18] in the seventeenth century. The two engravings carry verses that





Fig. 17

indicate slightly different meanings than that of Bruegel's image. It is very interesting to read how the meaning has been developed from Bruegel's time to the seventeenth century. Bloemaert's verse reads: "See how the old man feels the hen, and the dried queen (meaning his old wife) also wants to do something." Isacs's reads: "The poor careless man is so naïve that he hardly notices when his purse is searched and someone lays on his egg, in the meantime he holds his hen. / A young cock keeps good time with a lecherous woman, sees her besides the bed and tempts her at the table."<sup>42</sup> Therefore the proverb, "hen feeler," implies a deceived husband in the work by Isacs. There is also a German engraving by an anonymous artist depicting a hen-feeler and his wife [Fig. 19] with their conversation inscribed on the circular margin. "What's wrong? / It's just an old hen. / But its cockscomb is red and sweet. / Surely, but it's a pity this hen does not lay any eggs." His last response suggests an irony regarding his old and barren wife. Thus, the Flemish proverb, "hen feeler" seems not to be popular in Germany.



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



# DE OUDE HOLLANDSCHE GAARE-KEUKEN.

Hollands oude gaarekeuken,  
Schaft u hollands oude spreken,

Kost die alle monde smaakt,  
Vind gy hier gereed gemaakt.



Het zyn sterke beenen die de weel-  
den kunnē draagen.



Yder moend dat zyn uit een valk is,



Die zyn neus affoyd die schend zyn  
aangezicht.



Die de duivel schiep heeft, die moet  
hem maar overvaaren.



Als morige lui zindelyk worden dan  
schuuren zy de pannen van argien.



Zy krygen alle beide handen op haar  
hoofd.



Uien by Uien, en bontekraijen by  
bontekraijen.



Glas is teer, oer nog meer.



Zy kuffen malkaar de bal toe.



Veel geschreuw en weinig wol zy  
de man, en schoor de Varkens.



Een rostige appel steekt de geheele  
mand aan.



Alt de Aspen hoog willen klimmen,  
ziet men haar naakende billen eerst.



Vuur by stroo dat braand gauw.



Hy moet nog eerst een paar natfchoo-  
nen verlijten.



Om de reuk van het smoor, likt de  
kat het braadspit.



Deur schuld een slang in 't gras.

Te Amsteldam, by S. en W. KOENE, Boekdruckers, Boek- en Papierverkoopers, op de Linde Gragt.

Fig. 20

## 6. Conclusion

I have discussed four proverbs in Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*, focusing on some aspects of Flemish wives and how they were observed by the proverbial world through images and literature.

I like to draw attention to Bruegel's century which can be defined as "The Golden Age of Proverbs." I asserted the idea already in my Japanese book *Proverbial World in the Art of Bruegel* in 1989<sup>43</sup> and in my English article in 1995,<sup>44</sup> long before Rainald Grosshans described it in his book on *Pieter*

Bruegel in 2003. Before Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* came out to the world, proverbs had already been visualized in carved misericords in numerous churches in Hoogstraten, Aarschot, Diest, Leuven, and other Flemish towns,<sup>45</sup> in Amsterdam, Bolsward, Breda, Venlo, and other Dutch towns, in addition to the German town of Kempen. Although I mentioned only a few Flemish misericords depicting proverbs in this paper, the tradition of visualized proverbs had been developed further by the engraving of Hogenberg's *Blue Cloak*, the paintings by the Brueg(h)els in Berlin and Antwerp, and numerous proverbial engravings printed throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Among these Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* in Berlin is situated as the highlight of a remarkable visual tradition. It should not be overlooked that there are more than twenty copies of the proverbs painting by Pieter Brueghel the Younger and his workshop after the father's originals: Pieter the Younger's roundel proverb paintings adapt his father's engravings or paintings, and add some anecdotal figures and a village landscape which give the onlooker a more detailed image than the original. The proverbial tradition continues throughout David Tenier the Younger's work.

An important point to note is that the pictorial tradition of proverbs paralleled the rich written world of proverbs which humanists enthusiastically collected or edited for their publications, starting with *Proverbia Communia* around 1480 in Deventer<sup>46</sup> and Erasmus's *Adagiorum Collectanea* in 1500 in Paris. Erasmus's numerous posthumous versions of *Adages*, namely 169 versions, stimulated the printing of many publications on proverbs in Europe.<sup>47</sup> However, the public interest in the visualized proverbs in the seventeenth century was directed toward more amusing and entertaining elements, as in the engraving of Isaczs *Hen Feeler* and the painting by Vrancx. The more inexpensive and simplified prints depicting one proverb in one scene were favored, as seen in a collection of 30 proverbs, and that of 16 proverbs entitled "De Oude Hollandsche Gaare Keuken" (Old Dutch Eating-House). [Fig. 20]<sup>48</sup> The paintings by Jacob Jordaens, such "As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young" and "In Luxury Beware" by Jan Steen emphasize the admonition and the amusement of the proverbial messages.

Therefore, I would name the seventeenth century as "The Age of the Visual Popularization of Proverbs." In this age, the visualized proverbs served both for amusement and admonition about the follies of mankind. In any case, there is no world, either the world of the past centuries or the present world, where the "Blue Cloak," the behavior of human oddities, follies, evil, abuses, and immorality is able to be secretly executed. As one of Bruegel's proverbs suggests, "Everything, however finely spun it may be, is finally revealed by the sun."



## List of Figures

- Fig. 1. Sebastiaan Vrancx, "The Signbord," detail of *Netherlandish Proverbs*, 1630s, oil, Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts
- Fig. 2. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, detail of Plate 3
- Fig. 3. Pieter Brueghel the Younger, detail of *Netherlandish Proverbs*, 1607, oil, Lier, Stedelijk Museum Wuyts-Van Campen en Baron Caroly
- Fig. 4. Johannes van Duetchum, detail of *Blue Cloak*, 1577, engraving
- Fig. 5. Sebastiaan Vrancx, detail of *Netherlandish Proverbs*, oil, 1630s, Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts
- Fig. 6. Anonymous, French, "What the eyes don't see, would not hurt the heart," *Proverbes en Rimes*, end of the 15th century, manuscript, Baltimore, Art Gallery
- Fig. 7. Anonymous, Flemish, "Unequal Couple," *House of Fortune and House of Death*, 1531, engraving
- Fig. 8. Jacob Goltzius after Hendrick Goltzius, "Unequal Couple," late 16th century, engraving
- Fig. 9. Anonymous, Florentine, "The Combat between women and devils," c. 1460, woodcut
- Fig. 10. Jan Borchmans, c.1510-25, misericord, Aarschot, Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk
- Fig. 11. Pieter Brueghel the Younger, detail
- Fig. 12. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, detail
- Fig. 13. Van Duetchum, detail of *Blue Cloak*, 1577
- Fig. 14. Vrancx, detail
- Fig. 15. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, detail
- Fig. 16. Anonymous, Flemish, c.1560, engraving
- Fig. 17. Hendrik Bloemaert, early 17th century, engraving
- Fig. 18. Jaspas Isacs, first half of 17th century, engraving
- Fig. 19. Anonymous, German, first half of 17th century, engraving
- Fig. 20. Anonymous, Dutch, "Old Dutch Eating-House", 17th century, woodcut

## Notes

I would like to express my deep thanks to Professor Wolfgang Mieder and his colleagues from the University of Vermont for organizing the symposium and inviting me to present my paper. I want to give my special thanks to Professor Willy vande Walle, Louvain University, Professor Herman Pleij, University of Amsterdam, Mr. Johan David and his colleagues, Museum voor de oudere Technieken, Grimbergen and Mrs. Alice Brankert, the Hague, for their invaluable assistance in the translation of the old Dutch texts into English. I am also indebted to Professor

Philip Zitowitz, Meiji University and Professor Sandra Lucore, Tokyo University for their astute suggestions regarding English usage. Finally I want to thank Ms. Sumiko Imai, Keio University for her generous assistance.

- 1 Adriaan J. Jozef Delen, *Histoire de la gravure dans les anciens Pays-Bas*, rpt. Paris 1969, vol. 2, p.156.
- 2 Jan Grauls, "Het Spreekwoordenschilderij van Sebastiaan Vrancx", *Bulletin des Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique*, III-IV, 1960, pp.107-64.
- 3 Jean Gessler, "Le Journaal de C.Huygens le Jeune," *Revue belge d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art*, III, 2. April 1933, p.103.
- 4 *The Herbert J. & Adele Klapper Collection* (catalogue), New York 2002, no.22 (n.p.)
- 5 Ella S.Siple, " Art in America - A 'Flemish Proverb' Tapestry in Boston", *The Burlington Magazine*, LXVIII, 1933, pp.29-35.
- 6 Grauls, *op. cit.*, p.130.
- 7 *Jhesus Collacien, Een Laatmiddeleeuwse Prekenbundel uit de Kringen der Tertiariissen*, ed. Anna Maria Baaij, Zwolle 1962, p.207. The bibliographies of the old Dutch texts concerning the blue color and the proverb, "She hangs the blue cloak over her husband" I owe to Eric de Bruyn's, *De vergeten beeldentaal van Jheronimus Bosch*, s-Hertogenbosch 2001.
- 8 "De Wellustige Mensh", *Dichten en Spelen van Jan van den Berghe*, ed. C. Kruyskamp, Antwerp 1950, pp.89-144.
- 9 *Onuitgegeven Sermoenen van Jan Brugman*, ed. P. Grootens, Tielt 1948, p.231.
- 10 *Jan Brugman Verspreide Sermoenen*, ed. Am. van Dijk, Antwerp 1948, p.6.
- 11 *Een Spel van Sinnen van de Hel Vant Brouwersgilde*, ed. Hüsken, 1992 , f.1r-7v.
- 12 Th.Enklaar, *Varende Luyden*, Arnhem 1975, pp.43-98.
- 13 *Jan van Stijevoorts Referein bundel Anno MDXXIV*, ed. Frederik Lyna, Willem van Eeghen, 1929, vol.1, pp.64-6. I would like to thank Dr. Herman Pleij for his help in translating the Dutch texts quoted in notes 13 and 16.
- 14 *De Spiegel der Minnens door Colijn van Rijsssele*, ed. M.W.Immink, Utrecht 1913, p.212.
- 15 A play titled *Trou moet blijcken* (1578).
- 16 *Refereinen en Andere Gedichten uit de XVIe Eeuw verzameld en afgeschreven door Jan de Bruyne*, ed. K. Ruelens, Antwerp 1879, p.93.
- 17 "Cornelis van Ghistele 'Aeneas and Dido'", *Jaarboek*, 1982-1983, pp.211-212.
- 18 P. De Keyser, "Rhetorische toelichting bij het hooi en den hooiwagen", *Gentsche Bijdragen tot de Kunstgeschiedenis VI*, 1939-40, p.134.
- 19 Wolfgang Stechow, *Bruegel*, 1969, p.60.
- 20 Jozef De Coo, "Twaalf spreuken op borden van Pieter Bruegel de Oude", *Bulletin des Musées royaux de Beaux Arts de Belgique*, 1965 pp. 83-104.



- 21 Klaus Ertz, *Pieter Bruegel der Jüngere*, 1998-2000, Lingen, vol. I, p. 130.
- 22 Grace Frank and Dorothy Miner, *Proverbs en Rimes*, Baltimore 1937, 42.
- 23 Donae Idinau, *Lot van wiisheyd ende goed geluck*, Anthwerp 1606, p. 119.
- 24 Alan Dundes and Claudia A. Stibbe, *The Art of Mixing Metaphors - A Folkloristic Interpretation of the "Netherlandish Proverbs" by Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, Helsinki 1981, p. 56.
- 25 Alison Steward, G., *Unequal Lovers*, New York 1977. See also Yoko Mori, *Children and Couples in Art History*, see pp. 244-307.
- 26 Steward, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
- 27 Mori, *op. cit.*, pp.281-282.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p.283.
- 29 The English translation of the Latin verse is from Eddy de Jongh, Luiten Ger, *Mirror of Everyday, Genreprints in the Netherlands 1550-1700*, Ghent 1997, p.80.
- 30 Ter K. Laan, *Nederlandse Spreekwoorden, spreuken en zegwijzen*, Amsterdam 1988, p. 73.
- 31 Maurice Maloux ed., *Dictionnaire des proverbes, sentences et maximes*, Paris 1977.
- 32 Karl F.W. Wander, *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon*, Darmstadt 1963, vol. I, p.1139.
- 33 Jan K. Steppe, *Wereld van Vroomheid en Satire*, Kasterlee 1973, pp.183-184.
- 34 Yoko Mori, *Pieter Bruegel, Spreekwoorden en Volksleven* (Japanese), Tokyo 1992, p. 166.
- 35 Gustave Glück, *Das grosse Bruegel-Werk*, Wien 1955, p.51. "Üble Nachrede weitergetratscht."
- 36 Roger H. Marijnissen, *Bruegel*, Stuttgart 1969, p.40.
- 37 Marcus van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden in die Nederlanden en voornamelijk in Ghendt 1566-1568...*, uitgegeven door F. Vanderhaeghen, vol.I, p. 190.
- 38 Dundes and A. Stibbe, *op. cit.*, p.45.
- 39 *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*, -sGravenhage, Leiden 1912, vol.6, p.579. "een man die zich nit gierigheid of vitzucht met de kleinigheden van huishouding en keuken bemoeit, of wel: een die zich door zijne vrouw voor allerlei huiswerk gebruiken laat, zich door haar laat regeeren, of zich door haar laat bedriegen."
- 40 Johannes Bolte, "Bilderbogen des 16. Jahrhunderts," *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche Taal- en Letterkunde*, XIV, 1895, p.149.
- 41 Lodovico Guicciardini, *The Description of the Low Countries*, London 1593, rpt. Amsterdam 1976, pp.14-15.
- 42 Mori(1992), *op. cit.*, pp.255-258.

43 *Ibid.*

44 Yoko Mori, "A Proposal for Reconsidering Bruegel: an Integrated View of his Historical and Cultural Milieu", *The World of Bruegel* (exhibition catalogue, Tobu Museum) Tokyo, 1995, pp.42-45. The idea was also described in my article on "Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* and Corresponding Images in Old Japanese Art," *Acta Historiae Artium*, 2003, vol.44, pp.191-193.

45 Steppe, *op. cit.*

46 *Proverbia Communia*, Deventer 1480, ed. Richard Jente, Bloomington 1947.

47 Erasmus, *Adagiorum Collectanea*, Paris 1500, ed. Andrea W. Steenbeck, *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia*, vol. 2, Hildesheim 1961.

48 Maurits de Meyer, *De Volkes- en Kinderprent in de Nederlanden van de 15e tot de 20e eeuw*, Antwerp 1962. fig. 136.