Bruegel's festive peasants*

Svetlana Alpers

During a recent carnival season in the Netherlands a reporter for the *London Times* sent back a brief and rather puzzled account of the goings-on. Of one thing she was certain: the historical roots of the wild frolicking in the streets and hotels went back to pagan feasts. But having dealt with the source she remained unclear about the meaning or purpose of the festivities. Why would otherwise sober citizens carry on like this? In some desperation, she turned to psychology. Such revelry, she reported she was told, appears to "function as a sauna bath for the unconscious."[1]

This story is not irrelevant to my subject. For I think this uncertainty and casting about as to how to take popular festivity has its analogue in the difficulties we have found in understanding similar festivity in Netherlandish art—specifically that of peasants at the time of Bruegel.

The 16th century was, it seems to me, rather good on just this question. In its literature and art the century was articulate about the necessity and the conditions, the virtues and the limitations of human festivity. As Mikhail Bakhtin has suggested in his study of Rabelais, it was the 16th century that saw the linking of the low and unofficial genre of medieval carnival entertainment to higher literature and thought.[2] In the works of Erasmus, Rabelais, Cervantes and Shakespeare, to name but the greatest, an entire comic mode and comic heroes, such as Folly, Falstaff and Sancho Panza, were created and developed to explore these problems. But the analogous phenomenon in art has not been recognized. In fact it has been seen very differently.

Let us take Bruegel's *Wedding dance* as the example nearest at hand (fig. 1). Recent studies have argued for the moral message of the work in the following way: "The front of the picture is defined by an abandon to human instincts ... with no regard whatever for the solemn aspects of a wedding."[3] The sin of lust is at issue. Any number of elements in the work—from the salacious bagpipes and the frank codpieces to the kissing couple and in fact the entire theme of the dance—either have or could be adduced to make this point. To support it we could cite similar pictorial images employed to represent the sin in Bruegel's own print of the *Parable of the wise and foolish virgins,* where dancing is the occupation of the sinful virgins.[4] In a similar way we could instance eating as signifying gluttony, which has been suggested as the central concern of Bruegel's Vienna *Wedding banquet* (fig. 2).[5] The scene labelled gluttony from Bosch's well-known tabletop in Madrid is evidence, if it is needed, that a scene of eating in art could refer to this sin. Bruegel's peasant paintings are treated today as moral sermons and it is thus that the closest parallel that has been drawn to Bruegel's works are the writings of the contemporary theologian, philosopher and humanist, Dirk Volckertsz. Coornhert.[6]

* This paper, in a slightly different version, was read at a session of the meeting of the College Art Association of America in Detroit, January 1974. I want to thank the members of a Bruegel seminar I taught at Berkeley, in 1972, for the contributions that their research on the ethnographic aspects of Bruegel's works and the general discussion in our sessions made to this paper.

1 I am summarizing a report from Sue Masterman, *The Times* (London), March 7, 1973.

2 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world,* trans. Hélène Iswolsky, Cambridge, Mass. 1968.

3 Wolfgang Stechow, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, London 1970. The painting, oil on panel, 119 × 157 cm., dated 1566, is in the Detroit Institute of Arts. Since its cleaning in 1942 it has been accepted by most experts as by Bruegel's hand. See *The complete paintings of Bruegel*, New York (Classics of world art) 1967, pp. 104–05, for the most complete summary of opinions about the painting and a list of copies after it.

4 Louis Lebeer, *Catalogue raisonné des estampes de Pierre Bruegel l'ancien*, Brussels 1969, nr. 39.

5 C.G. Stridbeck, *Bruegelstudien*, Stockholm (Stockholm studies in the history of art, 2) 1956, pp. 222–30.

6 The moralistic interpretation was most fully set forth in the studies of the late C.G. Stridbeck. In the notes to the plates in the first volume of his projected two-volume study of Bruegel's paintings, Grossmann has indicated that he agrees with this view of Bruegel and further with Stridbeck's opinion that Coornhert's writings provide the closest analogy to the moral attitudes presented in Bruegel's paintings. See F. Grossmann, *Pieter Bruegel: the complete paintings*, 3d ed., London 1973, pp. 199–201, for remarks on the Detroit picture and the Vienna *Wedding banquet*. Walter S. Gibson, "Some notes on

1 Pieter Bruegel, *Wedding dance*. Detroit, Institute of Arts (Purchase; City appropriation)

Without denying the genuine moral power of the *Wedding dance*, it nevertheless seems to me that it does engage human pleasure in the dance and the sexual encounters that dancing involves. This is after all a wedding. And, to turn the current interpretation back on itself, one could not have a wedding whose consummation did not involve the satisfaction of human instincts. Recognition if not celebration of this is central to the painting. If we compare this work to other contemporary renderings of the scene it becomes clear that Bruegel has chosen to emphasize the dance and to deemphasize, in fact to leave out altogether, the kinds of excesses—urinating, defecating, fighting and so on—that so often appear in such scenes.[7]

What is at issue in our interpretation of such a work is not only the exaggerated solemnity of the modern scholar's view (this in spite of van Mander's testimony in his Life of Bruegel that no one could keep a solemn face when viewing a Bruegel painting).[8] Nor is it only the admirable desire of our time to attribute high seriousness to an artist like Bruegel, who was previously seen as a talented peasant among peasants. What also concerns us is the current working assumptions of our discipline—by which I mean the context provided by the history of art as we understand it. For the iconographic or moral interpretation which sees the *Wedding dance* as an attack on lust, or the *Banquet* as an attack on gluttony provides us with a rationale for why these works were painted at all. It solves the problem of how to explain the phenomenon of a realistic secular art—popularly known as genre painting—in the 16th and 17th centuries. We can generalize thus: having wisely left behind the 19th-century view that Bruegel and other genre painters simply painted whatever they saw around them out of the sheer joy of looking and loving,[9] we have ended by making the subject- here peasant festivities—almost incidental to the message of the work. The works are seen to be about sin, and only incidentally about peasants.

Could there not be other reasons at the time for an artist to be interested in depicting peasants—reasons which might explain the tone and mood of this and other paintings better than those currently offered? Are there not other contexts in which to view such works?

Let us start with the subject itself: the peasant and contemporary attitudes towards him.

Van Mander's often-quoted description of Bruegel's interest in the peasant, his habit of disguising himself as a peasant and attending their weddings and kermises has been treated as either a topos about artistic invention (analogous to the story of Leonardo's staging a party for country people so that he might study their facial expressions), or as a peculiar, personal taste.[10] The taste however seems not to have been so peculiar. There was a true flowering of interest in peasants, their customs and costumes in the 16th century. Artists started to travel about Europe collecting, compiling and publishing costume-books illustrating the native costumes of various countries,[11] while at the same time writers were collecting proverbs in the vernacular.[12]

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Peasant wedding feast*," *The Art Quarterly* 28 (1965), pp. 194–208, refines this moralistic interpretation by seeing it as representing the abuse of generosity.

7 I am referring here particularly to those prints, first German, then Flemish, which predate Bruegel's painting and which appear to be prototypes for the painted representations. See for example Erich Schön, *Peasant wedding* (Max Geisberg, *Der deutsche Einblatt-Holzschnitt in der erste Hälfte des XVI. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 1923–29, nr. 1127), and Pieter van der Borcht, *Peasant wedding feast* (1560; F.W.H. Hollstein, *German etchings, engravings and woodcuts*, Amsterdam 1954–, vol. 3, p. 103).

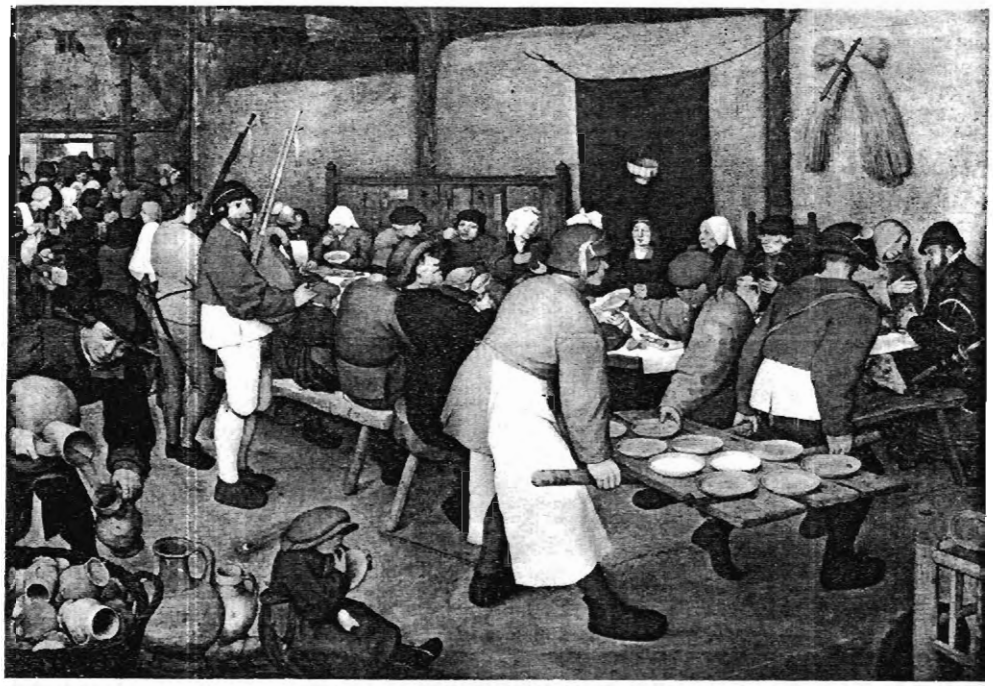
8 Carel van Mander, *Het schilder-boeck*..., Haarlem 1604, fol. 233. Grossmann provides the following English translation of the passage: "There are few works by his hand which the observer can contemplate solemnly and with a straight face. However stiff, morose, or surly he may be, he cannot help chuckling or at any rate smiling." Grossmann, op. cit. (note 6), p. 9.

9 The monumental study by Bastelaer and Hulin de Loo saw Bruegel in this way (R. van Bastelaer and G. Hulin de Loo, *Pieter Bruegel l'Ancien: son œuvre et son temps*, Brussels 1907).

10 *Het schilder-boeck*, cit. (note 8), fol. 233. Grossmann, op. cit. (note 6), p. 9, has it as follows, "With this Franckert, Bruegel often went out into the country to see the peasants at their fairs and weddings. Disguised as peasants they brought gifts like the other guests, claiming relationship or kinship with the bridge or groom." See also ibid., p. 43, and note 64, where the author thanks E.H. Gombrich for the suggestion of a source in Lomazzo's account of Leonardo's party.

11 As an example one might cite the costumes recorded by Weiditz in his travels. See *Das Trachtenbuch des Christoph Weiditz von seinen Reisen nach Spanien (1529) und den Niederlanden (1531/2)*..., ed. Theodor Hampe, Berlin and Leipzig 1927.

12 Erasmus's *Adagia*, which started appearing in 1500, were intended not only to offer moral instruction for the times, but further to offer insight into the culture of the ancient world from which they came. A similar mixture of aims motivated the numerous publications of *Proverbia communia* in the late 15th and 16th centuries. Such interests of course made their way into high literature, as well as into high art, as for example in Rabelais. I want to thank Natalie Zemon Davis for letting me read her unpublished study, "Voice of God or vulgar error? Views of popular culture during the ancient regime,"



2 Pieter Bruegel, *Wedding banquet*. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

3 Hans Sebald Beham, *Large village fair*. London, British Museum

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Bruegel's own paintings reveal a more detailed knowledge of peasant mores and a greater responsibility towards ethnographic accuracy than that of any other artist of his time.

In the *Wedding dance*, for example, Bruegel has set the festivity at the harvest time—the trees in the middle distance are dropping their leaves and at the right they are changing color—the favorite season, because of plentiful food, for village weddings.[13] (The *Wedding banquet* in Vienna [fig. 2] shares this season but there it is shown by the grain-filled barn and the ethnographically accurate last sheaf, an object common in harvest celebrations, suspended on the wall to the right.)[14] In the distance we see the only representation that I know of the crude earthen tables, the seats for which were apparently dug out of the ground for guests at large peasant affairs. Several of the men sport on their hats or sleeves the points, or laces, distributed or stolen as a trophy of the occasion (like the bride's garter today) and the musicians' hats display coins which may have come from the bride's shoes, another custom that has carried over into our day.[15] Cataloguing individual details in this manner, one is hard put to decide where description leaves off and moral commentary begins. In general I think that we have tended to read as moral commentary what is so often in Bruegel's works simply ethnographically accurate description. The large codpieces —only recently uncovered from a protective guise of over-painting—were a fashion at the time and there seems to have been more frank banter about this than we are accustomed to in our own day. The dance, though including kissing and the men's prominent codpieces, is also well within the decorum expected at the time. It is just at this time that the first modern treatises on the dance were being published—the most famous one of the 16th century being the 1589 *Orchesography* by the monk Tabourot. A comparison with that text—which incidentally argues for the morality of dance and relates it specifically to courting rituals—reveals that Bruegel's dancers do not indulge in any of the steps or gestures which were considered undecorous, such as exposing one's knees, parting one's legs, elevating the female partner high up in the air.[16] We can compare the dance, for example, to that displayed in the right half of Hans Sebald Beham's *Large village fair* (fig. 3) of

which argues that a peculiarly sympathetic view toward popular proverbs is characteristic of the 16th century. Bruegel's Berlin painting of *The Netherlandish proverbs* should be reconsidered in the context of a fuller investigation of the impetus to collect proverbs at this time.

13 It is hard to judge the actual state of the leaves on the trees to the right, although those in the middleground do appear to have shed their leaves. Other devices used by artists to indicate the harvest season in peasant weddings include the full-grown wheat field in the background to the left of Pieter van der Borcht's engraving of 1560 (F.W.H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish etchings, engravings and woodcuts, c. 1450–1700*, Amsterdam 1949–, vol. 3, p. 103), and the sheaves of wheat on which the beggars(?) sit in the left background of Rubens's *Peasant wedding* (usually incorrectly called a kermis) in the Louvre.

14 The literature on the traditions and meanings surrounding the last sheaf is enormous, but a basic source remains J.G. Frazer, *The golden bough*, part 5, *Spirits of the corn and the wild*, vol. 1, London 1912, pp. 131–70. As a member of my Bruegel seminar, Ms. Sidra Stich first suggested to me the significance of the two crossed sheaves of wheat (Sidra Stich, "*The peasant wedding* by Pieter Bruegel: an analysis and interpretation," Berkeley [University of California, M.A. thesis] 1971).

15 For the tradition of the points or laces, see Edward J. Wood, *The wedding day in all ages and countries*, vol. 2, London 1869, p. 184ff. The earthen tables are recorded as a custom in Brittany (see Paul Sébillot, *Coutumes de la Haute-Bretagne*, Paris (Les littératures populaires de toutes les nations, vol. 22) 1967, p. 125. The coins are mentioned in the still basic study of the dance by Franz M. Böhme, *Geschichte des Tanzes in Deutschland*, Leipzig 1886, vol. 1, p. 191. My thanks to Ms. Pamela Larson, who as a member of my Bruegel seminar first identified the customs behind these aspects of Bruegel's *Wedding dance* (see Pamela Larson, "Pieter Bruegel's *Wedding dance in the open air*, at the Detroit Institute of Arts," Berkeley [University of California, M.A. thesis] 1974). Since there are very few studies of 16th-century Flemish customs one must make do with the studies available although they mostly record French and German customs from a later date. The persistence of peasant customs makes such accounts relevant. Particularly useful are two books by Arnold van Gennep, *Le folklore de la Flandre et du Hainaut Français*, 2 vols., Paris 1935–38, and *Manuel de folklore français contemporain*, 4 vols., Paris 1937–48. While art historians are looking to folklore or anthropology to aid them in identifying aspects of Bruegel's peasant paintings, so, conversely, anthropologists and social historians are treating his works as source materials for their own fields of study. See, for example, C. Gaignebet, "Le combat de Carnaval et de Carême de P. Bruegel (1559)," *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 27 (1972), part 2, pp. 313–45. A central aim of the present paper is to caution against treating Bruegel's depictions of peasants either as moral sermons (as they are presently treated) or as documents of peasant life (as they might be treated in the future). My concluding interpretation attempts to make clear the way in which Bruegel in a work such as the Detroit *Peasant wedding* makes use of the peasant mores in order to articulate his sense of the conditions of human festivity, thus dealing in general terms with the nature of human experience.

16 Thoinot Arbeau, *Orchesography*, trans. Mary Stewart Evans, New York (Dover Books) 1967, is the most convenient modern edition. See pp. 12–13 for the relationship of dance to courting and weddings, and pp. 119 and 121 for undecorous steps. Böhme contains a wealth of information from a variety of sources (including statutes and treatises attacking dancing as well as contemporary descriptions) which suggest that clothing, time, place and the nature of gestures and movements were all issues at the time. Bruegel's *Peasant wedding* seems to fall well within normal customs.

1539,[17] where an undecorous elevation is taking place. Even the famous kiss was an accepted part of the dance. It is important to recognize that in spite of all the argument about dancing in the 16th century, and the extraordinary antagonism of the Calvinists, the wedding dance was exempted from stricture by even some of the severest reformers. The dance was but one of the myriad events surrounding a wedding, and it would seem that the indulgence of human instincts was the accepted custom here.[18]

Examples of the ethnographic basis of descriptive details in Bruegel's works are numerous. It helps us to understand the contented-looking bride, so often described as smug, in the Vienna *Banquet* if we know that at the wedding feast the bride was supposed to sit still and unmoving, to look lazy. A German saying existed to the effect that if someone was exceptionally lazy he looked as if he had come with the bride.[19] The absence of her husband—a puzzle to many viewers—is also due to custom, for, at least in certain parts of Europe, the bridegroom was not invited to the feast with the other guests but rather waited on them. It was the bride's day. Finally, to turn to another but related kind of festivity, it is perhaps not necessary to point out that the church in the background of the Vienna *Kermis* is justly included in this particular scene because the kermis—as the etymology of its name *kirk-mis* reveals[20]—originated as a celebration for the foundation of a church and thus combined in one occasion the license of celebration and religious commemoration.

The very popularity of the peasant wedding as a subject in art at this time certainly involved the recognition, essentially ethnographic in nature, of the peculiar importance of marriage arrangements, and hence the wedding celebration, in a peasant community. Long before anthropologists and social historians discovered the role of land arrangements in a well-made match, or the value of the expected children to the peasant couple, artists such as Bruegel bore witness to the importance of the peasant wedding in their art. The ethnographic dimension of these works does not of course remove them from the realm of moral commentary, particularly not in an artist like Bruegel, but Bruegel's interest in these customs themselves must be recognized as part of the impetus to create these works.

But how are we to account for this kind of attention being paid to the peasant by the artists and his patrons in the city? A particular factor in the case of wedding scenes is that at the time the entire society was much concerned with the conditions and nature of marriage: opposition to the clandestine marriage and assertion of the parents' responsibility toward the making of good unions were important issues of the day.[21] However I am concerned here to draw attention to more general factors. One element that certainly played a role was the economic well-being of the peasant in the middle of the 16th century. Accustomed as we are to considering the taxes imposed by Philip II and the sporadic famines that occurred from crop failures—for example the famous one of 1566 when a major uprising against the

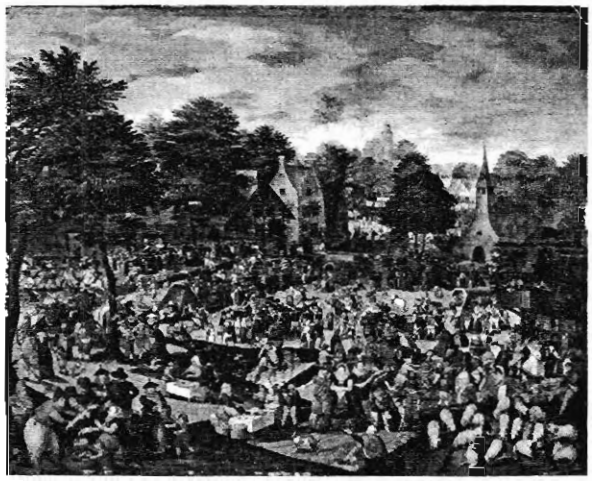
17 Hollstein, op. cit. (note 7), vol. 3, p. 255. This large woodcut combining a peasant wedding and a fair or kermis is one of the earliest works representing such a scene in the tradition which seems to have originated in Nürnberg about 1530.

18 Bullinger's *The Christian state of matrimony* (trans. Myles Coverdale, London 1541) argues that dancing at weddings is appropriate if it does not lead to excess, and Spangenberg's 1570 *Ehespiegel*, quoted in Böhme, op. cit. (note 15), p. 105ff., follows suit. Interesting evidence of a positive attitude towards the dance is contained in a 1577 letter from the arch-Calvinist Philips van Marnix to one Caspar Verheyden. Arguing against the established Calvinist view, Marnix says that dancing is appropriate at weddings, mentions that Luther, Melancthon and others were for it, notes that peasants love to dance and concludes by saying that after he has worked hard (at his desk, the implication is) he often relaxes his body by breaking into dance steps. *Brief geschreven van Philips van Marnix, Heer van St Aldegonde, aenguende de kerckelycke tucht, ende het danssen*. Dordrecht 1649. A study of the motif of the dance in Bruegel's paintings would show I think that he uses it less as a symbol of sin than as an image of the way the world is, with a forebearance and amused sympathy that is Erasmian in character rather than condemning like Brandt. Such a study should include the Vienna so-called *Gloomy day*, the Louvre *Cripples* (or better *Lepers*) who danced for alms on Copper Monday, and the Darmstadt so-called *Magpie at the gallows* where the dance represents not the folly of ignoring death, but rather perhaps some peasant custom demonstrating the continuity of life.

19 "Es ist, als ob ihr mit der Braut gekommen warct." The custom and the saying as they existed in Germany are discussed in Ida and Otto von Reinsberg-Düringsfeld, *Hochzeitsbuch*, Leipzig 1871, p. 229.

20 *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal*, The Hague, 1882–, s.v. *kermis*.

21 A variety of contemporary sources testify to attempts to give parents and/or the authorities greater control over child marriages. See for example Michael A. Screech, *The Rabelaisian marriage*, London 1958, pp. 44–54; Desiderius Erasmus, *The colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. Craig R. Thompson, Chicago 1965, p. 110; A. Esmein, *Le mariage en droit canonique*, ed. R. Genestal, Paris 1929, vol. 1, pp. 34–50; Jean Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera ... omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss, Braunschweig 1863–96, vol. 10a, pp. 106–67. My thanks too to Natalie Zemon Davis for the evidence she supplied me with on this point.



4 Hans Bol, *Kermis*. Antwerp, Koninklijke Museum voor Schone Kunsten (photo © ACL, Brussels)

Spanish took place in Antwerp and the countryside it comes as something of a surprise that economic historians now tell us that in fact prices and agricultural income were high in just these years. Weddings and kermises are not celebrated in style by starving people and for all their simple accoutrements (the earthen tables, or doors used for trays) festivities such as these are a display of well-earned leisure. The well-to-do peasant was, in other words, an attractive, perhaps enviable figure to the man in the city. Their relationship took several forms. On the one hand this was a period—until fighting made the countryside unsafe in the 1570s and '80s—when cottage industries were developed and flourished. Thus, city entrepreneurs had to go into the countryside to transact business. The attraction to, and involvement with the country was also a manifestation of a dissatisfaction on the part of the middle classes with living conditions in Antwerp, where growing population and new building created crowded and noisy conditions. The desire to get away from it all is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the innovative plans of the architect Gilbert van Schoonbeke who developed the idea and plans for a kind of garden suburb of houses—each complete with a specific amount of land and trees—for which he managed to sell lots to 44 Antwerp merchants during a single 18-month period in 1547–1548.[22]

I would not want to argue that it takes such social and economic conditions to produce the art that we have, that it is these conditions that explain the art. But added to the ethnographic interest suggested before, they at least point to a more positive relationship between city-dweller and peasant, the painters and buyers of art and its subject, than we have admitted before.

One concrete documentation of this relationship, one found actually in the art, is the depiction of middle-class city dwellers in attendance at kermises. If we now expand our horizon a bit from the representation of weddings by Bruegel to the necessarily more public celebration of the kermis or fair, as we find it again and again in Netherlandish art of the time, we shall find that the middle-class observers are a quite constant feature of these events. Once again Bruegel was not alone in his habits. The great majority of kermis paintings have well-to-do city dwellers, easily identifiable by their clothes, alighting from wagons or boats, to stroll among and observe the revellers. In a *Kermis* by Hans Bol (fig. 4), dating probably from the 1560s, the visitors

22 I owe this information to Prof. Hermann Van der Wee of the Catholic University of Louvain, who directed a thesis on the subject (see H. Soly, "Grondspeculatie en kapitalisme te Antwerpen in de 16de eeuw: de stedebouwkundige en industriële ondernemingen van Gilbert van Schoonbeke [1519–56]," Ghent [University of Ghent, Ph.D. thesis] 1972–73. Prof. Van der Wee and Prof. Jan de Vries of Berkeley both confirmed in conversation the solid economic situation of many peasants in mid-16th century Flanders.

5 Adriaen Pietersz van de Venne, *Princes Maurits and Frederik Hendrik at the Valkenburg horse fair*. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

6 Jan Bruegel, *Wedding feast with Albert and Isabella*. Madrid, Prado (photo: Mas, Barcelona)

wander among the crowd while some are placed prominently in the foreground as if posing for the painter.[23] So far we can identify the visitors only in the case of royal visitations—Adriaen van de Venne's visit of Princes Maurits and Frederik Hendrik to the horse fair at Valkenburg (fig. 5),[24] Esaias van de Velde's visit of the same pair to the fair at Rijswijk,[25] or in Flanders, Albert and Isabella's visit to a peasant wedding and a dance as represented by Jan Bruegel (fig. 6).[26] These examples of royal visitations tempt one to think that a number of such works did in fact represent particular people, perhaps the commissioners of the paintings, attending a kermis.

As the, quite literally, crowning touch, we find that peasants (or sometimes courtiers gotten up as peasants) were brought in to royal courts to stage dances and even peasant weddings as entertainment. So far peasant court entertainments of this kind have not been studied at the Netherlandish courts, but they are documented in, among other places, Dresden and in England in the 16th century and in Munich and Versailles in the 17th.[27] It is clear from the evidence that the peasant celebrations were not only central in the life of the peasants, but provided festivity for the rest of society. This suggests that when the merchant of Antwerp or Amsterdam, Cardinal Granvella or the Habsburgs bought peasant festivities by Bruegel and others they sought amusement more than the pictorial equivalent of a sermon.

Let me be quick to add, however, that all the evidence we have—verbal descriptions of peasant fêtes, inscriptions under engravings, the pictorial images themselves—reveal that the spectators we have been describing did not simply and completely embrace and accept the peasants at their amusements. Not surprisingly they felt ambiguously towards them, ambiguous both toward the participants and towards their behavior. The crude jests at the expense of the peasants delivered by Robert Laneham in his account of the peasant wedding performed before Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth in 1575 are in keeping with the description of the peasants that we find on an engraving after a drawing by van Mander but 15 years later (fig. 7). Laneham reports "Then came three pretty pucelles, as bright as a breast of bacon before the bride, Cicely, with set countenance and lips so demurely simpering as it had been a mare cropping a thistle."[28] While the legend on the van Mander reads in part, "Behold the happy children of the country celebrate their feasts ... establish meals for filthy pigs with vomit ..."[29] What is taken as the crudeness of the peasants' behavior is, in other words, fully expressed. But the occasion provides its own *raison d'être*. A drawing depicting the return from kermis by van Mander is inscribed in the artist's hand "Let us be fresh and free for it is not a kermis every day."[30] The argument is that within limits such things can occur and they are frankly accepted as necessary. Another proverb of the time could be equally well attached to these works: "It is a poor land that does not have a kermis at least once a year."[31] It is significant, I think, that I have as yet found no inscription on such works which explicitly condemn the festivities as such as sinful. The excesses here described (van Mander includes vomiting, fighting, love-making, dancing, sleeping and the ubiquitous hog), although perhaps having their iconographic source in the representation of the deadly sins, are placed in a new context, the license of the kermis.[32]

The relationship of peasant and non-peasant covers a wide range of behavior, from the separateness in the Bol *Kermis*, to the middle-class figures in a Vinckboons *Kermis* who actually join in a dance with the peasants

23 Hans Bol, *Village kermis*, Antwerp, Koninklijke Museum voor Schone Kunsten, cat. nr. 5020.

24 Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. nr. A 676.

25 Amsterdam, Six Collection.

26 Madrid, Prado, cat. nrs. 1442, 1439.

27 For an extensive discussion of the role of the peasant in Dresden court festivities, see Frederick Sieber, *Volk und volkstümliche Motivik im Festwerk des Barocks dargestellt an dresdner Bildquellen*, Berlin (Veröffentlichungen des Institutes für deutsche Volkskunde, 21) 1960. Page 26 and plate 1 present a peasant wedding. For the peasant wedding at the Munich court, see Eberhard Straub, "Repraesentatie Majestatis der oberbayerische Freudenfeste," *Neue Schriftenreihe des Stadtarchivs München*, nr. 31 (1969), pp. 153, 263, 267, 286.

28 *Kenilworth's festivities: comprising Laneham's description of the pageantry and Gascoigne's masques presented before Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth Castle, Ano 1575*, London 1821, p. 30.

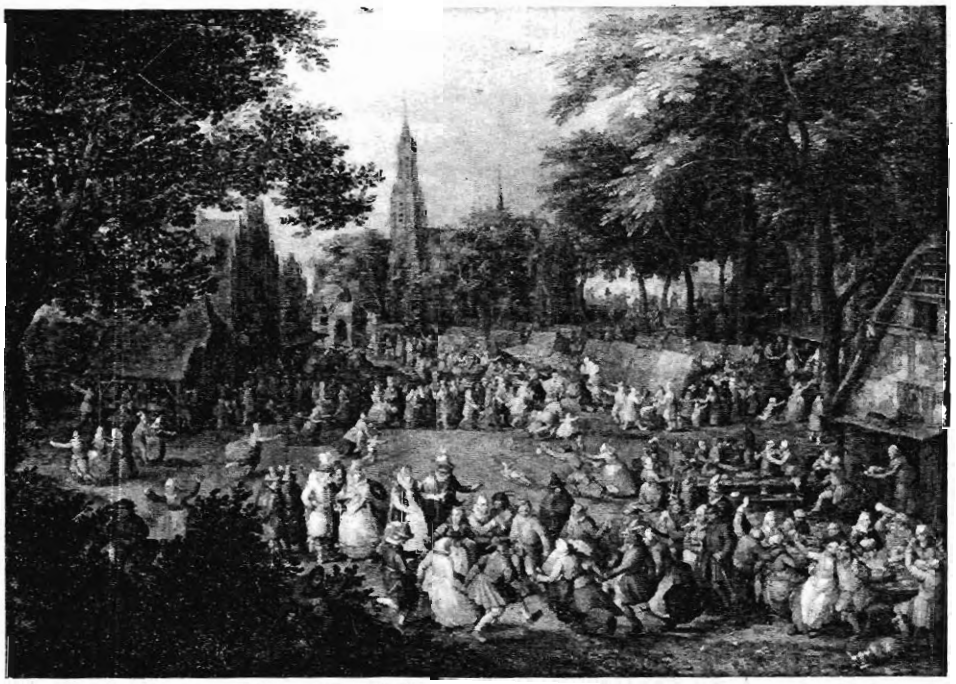
29 "En leti celebrant encenia ruris alumni... Est vomitu instauret spurcis qui praudia porcis." Hollstein, op. cit. (note 13), vol. 4, nr. 172.11.

30 "Nu laet ons wesen fraey en fris want ten is alle dagen geen keremis." Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet, nr. FV 31.

31 *Woordenboek der Nederlandse taal*, loc. cit. (note 20).

32 For a fuller discussion of van Mander's several kermises and their relationship to a comic literary mode as described and practiced by the contemporary poet Bredero, see my article "Realism as a comic mode: low-life painting seen through Bredero's eyes," to be published in a future issue of the *Art Quarterly*.

7 Nicolas Clock, after Karel van Mander, *Der bouwren kermis*. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum



8 David Vinckboons, *Village festival*. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemaldesammlungen

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9 Jan van de Velde, *Village festival*. Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet

(fig. 8).[33] The same preoccupation informs the 1623 engraving of a kermis after a design by Jan van de Velde. The caption begs indulgence for the well-earned rest of the laboring peasant whose frisky pose seems such an affront to the elegantly garbed couple at the right (fig. 9).[34]

The most extensive treatment that we have of this ambiguous relationship to the pleasure displayed, to the amusements provided by the peasant, is in comic literature of the time -the artistic mode that in its traditional concern with the lower classes, and its realistic rendering, is closest to the works of art we are dealing with here. The meeting, in a festive setting, of the high and low elements of society, and the playing out of all the questions concerning the nature of, and occasions for such letting-go is the stuff of which comedy is made—and most particularly, as we suggested earlier, festive comedy in the 16th century.[35] In literature as in paintings it does not really matter whether the work actually depicts the meeting of the classes, for this meeting is implicit in the relationship of the viewer or reader to the events within the work of art.

I have argued so far that a proper context in which to view such festive peasant works is the real world—and the peasant mores and the social and economic realities of which the art is imitative. Now I am introducing another context, that of a particular artistic mode—comedy. And the delicate question arises as to what, in a given work, we attribute to imitation, and what to a comic style and attitude? As an example of what I mean think of the peasant figure-type -invented or at least popularized in the Bruegel circle and dominant right into the 17th century. Is this compact, squat, active figure a comic device or is that how the peasant actually looked? And there is at least one other element here. Let us think of a compact, squat figure who vomits or fights or lusts after a woman or dances. We have not

33 David Vinckboons, *Kermis*. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, inv. nr. 4927.

34 D. Francken and J.Ph. van der Kellen, *L'Oeuvre de Jan van de Velde*, Amsterdam and Paris 1883, nr. 99[III].

35 The most powerful definition and application of this term is in C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's festive comedy*, Princeton 1959.

only a problem of imitation, and what I have referred to as the problem of artistic mode, but finally the one with which we started when we first discussed the modern interpretations of Bruegel, the iconographic element, the fact that certain actions or objects are already associated with certain meanings. Let me summarize: ethnography, iconography and artistic mode are all at issue here and any interpretation of such works must weigh and measure the interplay, the overlay of these various contexts. To return to the example of Bruegel's *Wedding dance*—ethnographically the dance is described as it was then performed at peasant weddings, but the dance also serves on occasion as an emblem of the sin of lust, and finally it is here presented in a comic mode. But how, with what effect, does Bruegel put this all together?

Before trying to answer this question, let me try to define what I mean by comic mode. The two strains of 16th-century comedy with which we are primarily concerned are humanist wit, on the one hand (as for example in Erasmus's *Praise of folly*), and the medieval folk carnival tradition as found in popular farces and songbooks (such as the first *Antwerp songbook* of 1544). Both of these find their way into the high art of a Rabelais, or a Shakespeare, or I would now add, Bruegel. The works drawing on these traditions generally reject the eschatological interpretation and the resulting moralistic summons to right behavior and thus salvation that we find in Sebastian Brandt's *Ship of fools* (reform or be damned he says of dancing, for example),[36] for they see folly not as something to be scourged, but as the human condition. Festive comedy starts with the admission that this is how it is, and then goes on to explore the nature and place of such natural letting-go.

Let us return to the *Wedding dance*. Bruegel draws us into his work by the spirited details of his description. His interest in peasant life is infectious, as is the dance itself, the latter, as argued earlier, being well within the accepted standards of decorum for a wedding dance. We are invited to do nothing sinful. The emblems of lust are disarmed by the very occasion. Bruegel involves us in the rhythms of the dance by means of the large foreground figures whose movements are echoed in the patterns stretching back, and by actions such as the kiss which create the very tone and spirit of the festive occasion. To this extent he, and we with him, can join in with the peasants, can in effect masquerade as peasants ourselves. And a unique achievement and pleasure of Bruegel's art is that he makes us feel this more than any other artist of the time. It is appropriate here to recall that van Mander reported, certainly wisely if not truly, that Bruegel himself masqueraded as a peasant on his visit to their fêtes. This in spite of the fact that we know that one could, that people like himself did, visit such festivities in their normal attire. But in the final analysis we, like the city dweller Bruegel, are strangers at the peasant fêtes. We are separated by the design of the painting—the high viewpoint, looking down and sweeping over the figures—and we are distinguished from them because of their appearance, the intentionally funny, awkward bodies of the careless peasants. Bruegel is playing a kind of game—drawing us in and letting us also feel, simultaneously, that we are separate; they are different from us, though whether for better or for worse is intentionally left unclear.

Separateness is suggested further by the few figures in the painting who are clearly not participating: the man leaning at the left with his elegant gloves hanging at his waist (fig. 1), the man in the right middleground with writing implements at his waist (perhaps a notary coming, as was the custom, from the town to document the wedding),[37] the curious man peering in from the right edge (fig. 10), and finally the distant little figure looking off into the landscape, turning his back on the human activity altogether (fig. 11).[38] It appears that the social event of the outside visitor is distilled to raise a

36 Sebastian Brandt, *The ship of fools*, trans. Edwin H. Zeydel, New York (Dover Books) 1962, pp. 204–05. Sebastian Brandt is too often cited as the explanation for a moralistic interpretation of motifs in Bruegel. For a contrast between the moral and artistic outlooks of Brandt and Erasmus that bears directly on the issue of how we should understand Bruegel's works see Joël Lefebvre, *Les fols et la folie*, Paris 1968.

37 Wolfgang Stechow was the first to point out the writing utensils at this spectator's waist. Natalie Zemon Davis suggested to me that he might be a notary.

38 The figure to the extreme right, behind the bagpipe players, is often cropped in printed photographs of the work. I have been unable to track down the copy of the Bruegel *Wedding dance* that I once saw in which I am certain that this figure was shown urinating. It remains unclear whether this could have been Bruegel's intention or whether this was the characteristically literal-minded interpretation of a copyist. The little figure looking off into the distance is significantly absent in all of the copies that I know. Ernest Scheyer, "*The wedding dance* by Pieter Brueghel the Elder in the Detroit Institute of Arts: its relations and derivations," *The Art Quarterly* 28 (1965), pp. 167–93, dis-

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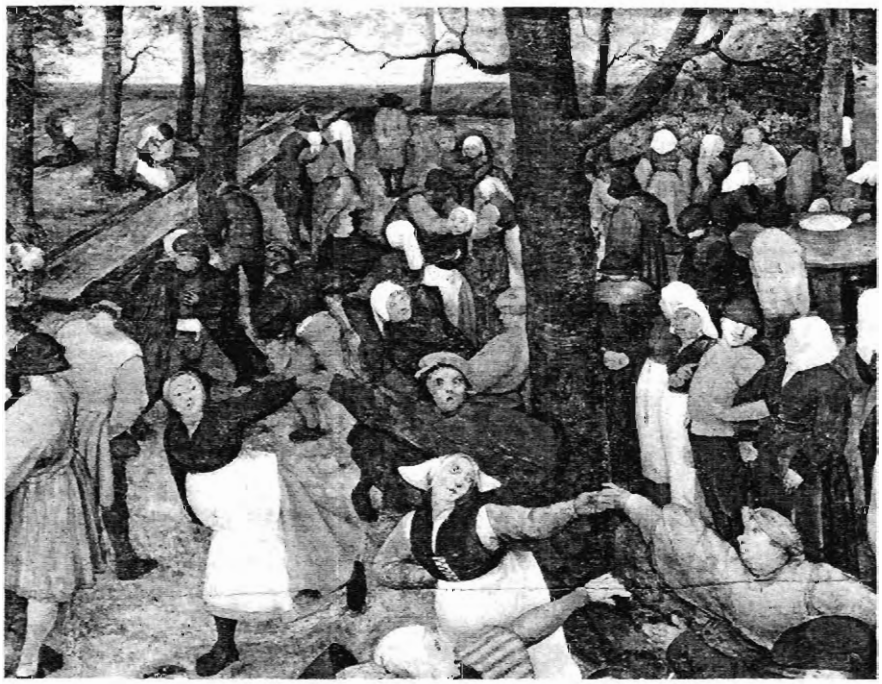
10 Pieter Bruegel, *Wedding dance* (detail). Detroit, Institute of Arts



11 Pieter Bruegel, *Wedding dance* (detail). Detroit, Institute of Arts

12 Unattributed engraving, *Village festival*. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum

moral issue. Is it that the outsiders cannot, or will not take part? How does one experience such expansive pleasure if not by joining in the dance? Can one join if one is not a peasant among peasants? The painting offers us neither a judgment on the dance, nor on the observers; it rather poses the problem. The wedding scene is rather like the greenwood in a comedy by Shakespeare. We can enter, and learn, but we cannot stay.

I do not pretend to have fully dealt with this work, but it is this vein of comic interpretation that I believe will disclose its nature. We are dealing not with moral views that are translated into art (here is where the comparison with Coornhert falls down) but with something that perhaps art alone can do. Bruegel's wit is comparable to that of Erasmus in his *Praise*: what Erasmus does there with the persona, the voice of Folly, Bruegel does with pictorial description. While one artist masquerades at being Folly, the other masquerades as a participant in a peasant celebration. Here, as in the *Praise of folly*, we have that to us odd, yet very characteristic mixture of seriousness and play that characterizes the best comedy of the 16th century. Once again, van Mander's description of Bruegel seems apt for his art: "He was a quiet and thoughtful man, not fond of talking, but ready with jokes when in the company of others."[39]

To view peasant festivities in art as a form of comedy is not to make all artists into Pieter Bruegel, for what in his hands is a subtle, problematic artistic mode, can also be a simple one, making peasants into objects of fun, as for example in an unattributed 16th-century engraving (fig. 12).[40] They lunge as they dance, lurch out of the outhouse, vomit, fight and bunch up into unattractive groups. Even here we should recognize that the stock emblems of the iconography of sins have been transformed into comic attributes. To see such works as comic is, I suggest, to focus on their essential nature and to return where we started. This recognition of a comic mode offers a perhaps more satisfactory explanation for the rise of a secular, realistic, low-life art—an art born of comic impulses rather than of the purely didactic and moralistic ones of our current interpretations.

cusses some of these figures without providing the social or literary context presented here.

39 Grossmann, op. cit. (note 6), p. 10.

40 Unattributed engraving, *Peasant feast* (actually a wedding), Oxford, Ashmolean Museum.