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**Man of Many Hats:
The Multiple Roles of Imbrecht
in *Boss for Three Days***

Imbrecht opens the Middle Dutch comedy *Boss for Three Days* by stating, "We shall play here a piece of shit / way above your heads" (12-13). With these words he sets the irreverent, coarse mood that prevails throughout the play. Although he does function to establish and perpetuate the crude tone of *Boss for Three Days*, Imbrecht is not a ridiculous, one-dimensional character. He is a vital, central character who devises the plan on which the plot turns, but he is more than that: he also interacts closely with the audience as a commentator on the play's action. Indeed, Imbrecht's function in this play is not unlike that of the Chorus in Greek drama. While I do not claim any direct influence of the Greek theater on *Boss for Three Days* — there is no evidence that the Middle Ages was familiar with it — I do suggest that part of the Dutch play's success lies in its author's having seen the dramatic advantages of making Imbrecht not just a character, but also a commentator and intermediary. The significance of these seemingly ancillary roles becomes clear when one realizes that Imbrecht's words as a commentator carry as much import as do his lines as a character.

Those familiar with medieval secular drama recognize that it may well have derived in part from the liturgical dramas of the Catholic church. If there was indeed a direct influence on Imbrecht's manifold duties, it might have been the liturgical services, in which the clergy performed various functions. Before the liturgy became theatrical, priests participating in the service would often sing and chant (in Latin) particular tropes. As these phrases or passages evolved into

more dramatic productions, certain priests took on the role of angels, singing and enacting the tropes. Perhaps these priestly singers provide a remote source for the dramatic role of Imbrecht.

Functioning as a character in the play, Imbrecht helps tell the story of Jan's rise to power in his home and his subsequent fall, yet he also comments on the action to the audience and serves as a middleman who seems to voice the spectators' reactions. Imbrecht thus performs the dual role of major character and vocal observer. We can see Imbrecht as an observer or middleman at the beginning of the play. First a messenger enters the stage and addresses the audience, attempting, it appears, to establish a tone appropriate for a tragedy. He laments the fate of the main character, Jan: "His suffering is renewed" (4). He continues in the same, "non-comic" vein:

We shall show you
here before you all in front of your
eyes,
beautiful examples of these
matters.
Now be quiet and be peaceful,
We shall play here immediately.
(7-10)

Then Imbrecht appears and immediately rights matters, also addressing the audience, but clearly indicating that the drama is a comedy by uttering the line ascribed to him above, "We shall play here a piece of shit," followed by "God grant you shame and great laughter! / Go home and get mixed up in a mess like this" (14-15).

Imbrecht's first speech, which is spoken directly to the audience, also reveals his function as one who comments on the action of other characters. Referring to Jan, the principal character, Imbrecht states:

The idiot, he had to interfere!
 And couldn't he keep quiet?
 We play here today for his sake:
 and with him always babbling
 away! (18-21)

With these lines Imbrecht subtly foreshadows for the audience Jan's unpleasant fate at the end of the play, but he does not give anything away because at this early stage, before Jan or any of the other characters are introduced, the spectators probably have no idea to whom "the idiot" refers — unless, of course, we imagine Imbrecht pointing to Jan in another part of the platform or stage. In any case, these lines are sufficiently ambiguous to keep the audience guessing. This passage is a commentary on Jan's inability to be the "boss for three days" in his house because he gets carried away as a result of his unexpected and new-found freedom granted by his wife, and "interferes" with this power and liberation by bragging to Imbrecht, a bragging that Jan's wife Bette overhears.

We can see more of Imbrecht's interaction with the audience in the lines immediately following the passage above, and in these lines Imbrecht's speech takes on the appearance of a song or chant: "Pour in, pour out the beer! / Pour it full, hurry up!" (24-25). And then he becomes commentator, subtly employing the beer as a metaphor for life. In the subsequent lines he voices his *carpe diem* philosophy:

God punish him, who always
 holds back!
 I shall drink without worry.
 If I live now, I die tomorrow. (26-
 28)

These words prefigure Imbrecht's helping Jan to

seize the three days and become master of and fully enjoy his life, if only for a short while.

Imbrecht's philosophy is to live life to the fullest and for today. As a commentator and intermediary — throughout this opening scene Imbrecht speaks and gestures to the audience — he voices this creed, and later, as a character, he transmits this notion to Jan, convincing him that to be careful or frugal is simply folly. Attempting to help Jan emancipate himself from Bette's tyranny and seize control of the household, Imbrecht advises, "Flatter her with gifts, if you can" (133). Jan likes this idea, and proffers a fur coat to Bette in exchange for her allowing him to be master of the house. The fur is central to the plot. Bette assents to the trade solely because of it, and when she responds to Jan's proposal, she seems preoccupied with the fur because she can speak of nothing else. When she decides in the final scene to back out of the deal and turn on Jan, she again invokes the fur coat: "Fie! God curse the fur / that I ever surrendered myself" (392-93).

Imbrecht seems to be saying that a man who is afraid to take risks in life deserves a lamentable fate. The word "him" in line 26 refers, of course, to Jan, who has "held back" for twenty-five years, putting up with his wife's domineering behavior. Interestingly, "God punish him, who always holds back!" proves to be the most ironic line in the play. Imbrecht calls down a curse on any person who is careful, economical, sparing, or reluctant to try new things, entreating God to punish him, yet Jan, who practices neither care nor economy (especially in his speech late in the play) nor "safe" behavior, is the one who is punished in the end.

Of the various functions of the Greek Chorus, one was to give advice and offer warnings to the main characters, and *Boss for Three Days* contains a couple of examples of Imbrecht's advising and warning Jan. We find the first example in the scene in which Jan and Imbrecht discuss Jan's being a henpecked husband. Jan is bemoaning his

lot to Imbrecht, asking for his assistance in providing some relief from his wife's haranguing. Imbrecht then offers his solution:

This seems to me the best advice:
Flatter her with gifts, if you can,
speak in a friendly manner at all
times.
perhaps she will quit being bad.
They are bad wives, who can't be
peaceful.
Neighbor, do that, it seems good
to me. (132-37)

The plot hinges upon this plan. Jan puts it into action so he can be master in his home for three days, and initially it works, until he strays from Imbrecht's advice by speaking in an *unfriendly* manner about his wife. Incidentally, line 136 in the passage quoted above, an observation about shrewish wives, seems to function as a misogynous comment addressed not only to Jan, but to the audience as well. It sounds similar to some lines uttered by the Messenger to the spectators at the beginning of the play: "It is said that he does not get his will / who is married to a bad woman" (2-3) and "there is no way / to overcome a bad wife" (5-6).

Late in the play Imbrecht offers Jan a second piece of advice, this time warning him not to push his luck once he has received his wife's blessing to be lord of their house for three days. In this passage Imbrecht seems to mirror the reactions and opinions of the spectators as they watch Jan gradually fall from his pedestal by shouting orders to his wife, and then seal his own fate by revealing

to Imbrecht (within earshot of Imbrecht's wife) the deal he made with her in order to be "boss." Jan had of course promised her he would not say a word about the bargain. Upon hearing Jan's blunder, Imbrecht tries to prevent any more damage when he warns, "Jan, there is enough food here with these, / even if there were nothing more served today" (342-43). With these words Imbrecht is of course suggesting to Jan that he has a good thing going, and he'd better not mess it up by going too far.

Unlike the Greek Chorus, however, Imbrecht performs his duties alone. He is completely free of attachments, relying on and speaking for himself only. Even if he were not a major character, he would distinguish himself from the Chorus, or from the chanting priests, for that matter, simply by virtue of his independent ideas. Whatever his possible classical or liturgical origins, however, Imbrecht skillfully undertakes a number of roles in *Boss for Three Days*. He participates in the action and comments on it, often addressing the spectators with his remarks; he establishes the tone for the play; and he offers counsel and issues warnings to other characters. On the surface, Imbrecht's statements, especially those he makes as an observer before he moves into his character persona, appear to be simply angry cries. But these words are filled with ironical and subtle meanings, revealing a richness of thought on the part of the Dutch playwright. Imbrecht stands out as a unique kind of character, deftly stepping in and out of his multiple personas as he both entertains and instructs the audience of *Boss for Three Days*.