

## BOOK REVIEWS

De Vroom, Theresia. *Netherlandic Secular Plays from the Middle Ages. The "Abele Spelen" and the "Farces of the Hulthem Manuscript."* Translated with an Introduction and Notes. Carleton Renaissance Plays in Translation 29. Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1997. 246 pp. 15 illustrations. ISBN 1-895537-41-x (bound, \$28.00), ISBN 1-895537-35-5 (pbk., \$12.00).

This excellent edition presents the first complete English edition of the four "abele spelen" and the farces contained in the Hulthem manuscript. Some of the plays have been previously translated, most of these recently (extensive bibliographical information is included in the introduction); while these will continue to be of interest, the volume under consideration here benefits from presenting all of the plays together, as they were grouped in the original, and from the consistency of a single translator and editor. While it is almost a truism to state that no modern edition can truly capture the magic of an original manuscript, and no translation can either, this edition is remarkably effective in keeping some of the flavour of the original, and making available to the many who will never know medieval Dutch an intriguing collection of some of the earliest secular plays to survive from the European Middle Ages.

The plays are presented in the order in which they appear in the manuscript, with each longer "abel spel" preceding a shorter farce, followed finally by two fragments of farces. The groupings, which scholars believe may indicate performance practice, are as follows:

Esmoreit (1021 lines) and Lippijn (200 lines); Gloriant (1141 lines) and De Buskenblaser (210 lines); Lanseloet (954 lines) and Die Hexe (111 lines); Vanden Winter ende Vanden Somer (626 lines) and Rubben (245 lines); and the fragments Truwanten (extant: lines 104-197) and Drie daghe here (lines 1-404). The original manuscript had no illustrations and very little embellishment; de Vrooms modern edition incorporates some delightful visual material drawn from other sources, ranging from Buegels sketches and paintings through woodcuts from early editions of Lanseloet to an early sixteenth-century sculpture of "The Knights Forester" as this somewhat comic figure appears in that same play (he first makes an appearance complaining that while his knight simply went to hunt one morning and met a beautiful woman who became his wife, he himself has spent "days and hours" in the forest without ever having such luck).

The plays themselves — which I recommend reading and hence will not deal with individually — bear many similarities while remaining distinct. In her introduction De Vroom argues that the longer plays "are perhaps the very first examples of tragicomedy as we define the genre much later in the history of European drama" (17), in that their subjects are ultimately love and marriage (comedy) while at the same time retaining the themes of revenge, punishment and ultimately death (tragedy). She summarizes their plots in this way: "Each abel spel is essentially constructed around the comic plot of two lovers finding each other, with a blocking figure thrown in as an obstacle to their love"

(13); a happy ending to this quest is not necessarily a given. The farces, too, deal with love after a fashion, through the very popular late-medieval theme of "de strijd om de broek" (also the subject of illustration 15): they are the typically vulgar, typically slapstick depictions of the worst elements of non-aristocratic marriage.

De Vrooms introduction provides a useful synopsis of scholarship to date on the manuscript (paper, mid to late fourteenth century), originating locale of manuscript and plays (southern Netherlandic territories, possibly Brabant), theories of authorship (arguments range from advocating a single author to understanding similarities as inherent in language and genre, not person), staging (contemporary accounts suggest that by the end of the fifteenth century indoor and professional performances were organized, and admission was charged; relatively few actors played many roles with the help of masks), and audience (more likely burghers/citizens than the nobility, as the plays bear evidence of a transformation of the ideals of courtly love on the new morality of love only within marriage, and of marriage as the primary goal). As to genre, scholars display some uncertainty about the exact meaning of "abel," and de Vrooms discussion of "tragicomedy" (see above) is an entirely plausible suggestion.

Interesting from the larger viewpoint of "Netherlandic Studies" is the matter of the series in which this volume appears. The Carleton Renaissance Plays in Translation, of which de Vrooms work is the latest volume (with seven more titles scheduled for publication in the next two years), aims at making available Dutch, Italian, French, Spanish, and German plays 1380-1680 to a much larger audience through English translation. De Vrooms is the third translation from Dutch in the series, having been preceded by two Vondel plays translated by Kristiaan

Aercke, namely Gijsbrecht van Amstel (CP24, winner of the James S. Holmes translation award) and Mary Stuart or Tortured Majesty (CP 27). In "The Needles Eye: Translation and the Publisher," a well-articulated editorial report first presented as a key-note address at the Colloquium on Translation at McMaster University in 1991 (print: Dovehouse Editions, 1991), General Editor Donald Beecher reflects on the goal of the series: "to offer the English reader a representative measure of the theatrical life of the continent during the Renaissance," a goal he estimates will be reached after "at least fifty or sixty titles" (p.22). While some of the already popular plays sell well also in translation, the series is equally dedicated to making lesser known texts available, despite the lack of demand that might exist for the text prior and even subsequent to translation.

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Bram Kempers, ed.: *Openbaring en bedrog, de afbeelding als historisch bron in de Lage Landen*. Amsterdam UP, 1995. 203pp.

We have here what will no doubt be the first in a long line of studies using the admirable resources of the Atlas van Stolk collection for historical research, now that it is readily available to the public. (Our readers had a taste of its riches in J. C. Nix's article on its materials about Indonesia, fall 1995 p.19-33). In the words of the head of the van Stolk family forty years ago (as reported in a foreword by the present head, who traces the transition from private property to State resource), the collection is "verrekte lollig" and "verdomde interessant." The editors introduction suggests one of the infinite ways in which it is darned interesting: it embodies the double-edged nature of images. They can reveal more to us in a flash than words ever