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Literary Parody and the Beast Epic: Van Den Vos Reinaerde

Although critics have discovered many verbal parallels in the Middle Dutch beast epic *Van Den Vos Reinaerde* which appear to be parodies of "serious" literary genres — in particular the *chanson de geste* and the *roman courtois* — they all downplay the importance of literary parody in this work. For example, Muller (1933) concludes the following:

Het gedicht is niet eene doorlopende, scherpe parodie, geen welbewuste, felle persiflage, met zwaarwichtige literaire bedoeling of strekking, geen "reactie" tegen het heldenepos of den ridderroman, zoals wellicht Maerlant's later werk; noch een middeleeuwsche Don Quijote; noch ook een comisch epos als de *Batrachomyomachia*; allerminst burleske poezie in den trant van Scarron's *Eneide travesti* ...¹

Arendt, in a more recent (1964) study of the *Reinaert*, comes to the following conclusion:

Sicher ist der *Reynaert* als Ganzes keine Literaturparodie; Willems Werk ... enthält aber implizit literatursatirische Intentionen.²

In fact, Arendt considers literary parody as just another *Stilmittel* serving the overall moral satire presented by the poet.

In the introduction to the Tinbergen/Van Dis edition of the poem one reads:

Van een parodiëren dat ten doel zou hebben de genoemde romans naar inhoud of vorm persifleren, kan echter geen sprake zijn; schertsend brengt de dichter zijn gehoor allerlei hun daaruit bekende situaties en

uitdrukkingen in herinnering.³

One reason for the reluctance on the part of the critics in accepting literary parody is the problem of definition. Arendt pays a great deal of attention to this concept.⁴ Parody can be defined as the use of a well-known elevated literary form to present a low-style content. The effect is one of disproportion and distortion produced by a clash of content and form. Furthermore, literary parody mocks not only the style, but also the serious intention of the work under attack. It is therefore very well suited to satirize an entire *Weltanschauung*.

The basic premise of a literary parody is that both style (vocabulary, syntax, figures of speech, etc.) and content, as well as plot, action and characterization, remind the reader of the genre which is being parodied. This, of course, presupposes a certain sophistication of literary taste. Judging from the Latin literature of the period, it would appear that such sophistication of and taste for parody were very much present in certain circles.⁵

With this definition of literary parody in mind, it is possible to consider more closely the nature of the humoristic effect produced by this literary form. The elements of distortion and disproportion work on three different levels. First of all, on the "situational" level characteristic of the beast epic, which presents beasts performing the acts of men. Secondly, on the level of style, when low-style details from the realm of beasts undercut the high-style vocabulary resulting, for example, from

the presentation of beasts as litigants at a royal court or as courtly lovers. And thirdly, on the level of content, through the distortion of the serious intention of the genre that is being parodied by having beasts express heroic and courtly ideals or sentiments.

A definition of parody as a mockery of both form and content is doubtless correct. It seems, however, that literary parody is first and foremost a parody of form: one recognizes it through such formal aspects as style and syntax. These two strike the tone of the genre that is being parodied and create the *déjà lu* effect in the hearer's or reader's mind. Even parody of action and intention are ultimately conveyed through words and phrases with definite, well-established associations.

Before giving examples of such parodies it might be useful to consider the *caveats* presented by the critics. Muller holds that one should always compare *Reinaert* with Br. I of the *Roman de Renart* to avoid mistaking for a literary parody what is really a translation of the Old French.⁶ Secondly, similarities may occur as a result of the syntactic exigencies of verse. Also, one has to ascertain whether the word or phrase parodied are peculiar to the epic or the *roman* and do not occur elsewhere as common usage. Furthermore, one may safely assume that authors such as Pierre de Saint-Cloud and Willem were steeped in the literature of the *romans courtois* and the *chansons de geste*, which implies that not every verbal echo needs to be a parody.

It is no simple matter, therefore, to distinguish deliberate parody from unintentional usage: the context should be the guiding principle in every single instance. In addition, one has to determine whether one is dealing with a general parody of the content or spirit of the serious genre, or with a parody of a specific

roman or *chanson*.

The occurrence of deliberate literary parody in the beast epic is best demonstrated by an examination of the prologues of Pierre de Saint-Cloud and Willem. There can be no doubt that Pierre de Saint-Cloud is very much aware of the existing literary genres and of his own introduction of a new and unusual genre.

In modern French, his prologue reads as follows:

Seigneurs, vous avez entendu beaucoup de contes, car plusieurs conteurs vous ont raconté comment Paris enleva Hélène, le mal et la peine qu'il en eut; ils vous ont raconté l'histoire de Tristan, des fabliaux et des chansons de geste. Beaucoup d'autres racontent l'histoire d'Yvain et de sa bête. Mais vous n'avez jamais entendu le récit de la guerre entre Renart et Ysengrin, qui fut très longue et très dure.⁷

Here the cause of the "war" between the fox and the wolf is deliberately juxtaposed with the abduction of Helen and with the illicit affair of Tristan and Isolde, i.e., with the two most famous subjects of epic and romance. This can only be interpreted as intentional literary parody on the part of a literarily self-conscious author.

Deliberate literary parody and references to existing literary genres are also noticeable in Willem's prologue.⁸ For example, he mentions that he had a search done for *Reinaert's "vite"* — the usual term for a saint's life! Similarly, the reference to the courtly lady upon whose request the "*aventure van Reinaerde*" (1.31) has been written, can only be interpreted as a deliberate parody of the tradition resulting from Chrétien de Troyes' references to his patroness, Marie de Champagne. The juxtaposition of a lady and a fox produce a

deliberate clash which leaves little room for doubt as regards the author's intention. Similarly, the author's insistence on writing for a courtly audience and the exclusion of the "dorprende doren" in the preceding lines (cf. 1.33) are typical conceits of a prologue of the *roman courtois*, again ironically deflated by the subject matter.

An interpretation of the entire prologue as a tongue-in-cheek version of a courtly prologue⁹ on the basis of these and other unmistakable parodies does not exclude a moral-satirical intention on the part of the author. The combination of literary jest and moral criticism is made explicit in Willem's dedication of his poem to those,

Die gherne pleghen der eeren
Ende haren sin daer to keren
Dat si leven hoofschelelike,
Sijn si arem, sijn si rike,
Diet verstaen met goeden sinne.
(11.36-39)

These lines gain added significance when one considers that the author, throughout his work, exposes the discrepancy between courtly ideals and contemporary reality. As usual, the satirist is a moralist at heart.

It is important to realize, therefore, that literary parody can be used deliberately, for its own sake, and, at the same time, be part of a larger satirical design. For example, Bruun's boastful leave-taking is a deliberate parody of the hero's departure, but serves at the same time to characterize Bruun as an arrogant representative of the high nobility and to present the moral archetype of "pride commeth before the fall."¹⁰

Generally speaking, the poet of the *Reinaert* satirizes the ethos of the *chanson de geste* and the courtly code of behaviour of the *roman courtois*.¹¹ These genres present two different

ideals, but the highest normative principle of both is "excellence of performance." Because they also take themselves very seriously and consistently employ the high style, both genres are open to satirical treatment on a stylistic and a moral level.

Numerous parodies of style and genre can be found in the *Reinaert*. Typical of both *chanson de geste* and *roman courtois* is the setting and the opening of the poem.¹²

Het was in eenen tsinxendaghe ...
Nobel die coninc hadde ghedaen
Sijn hof crayeren over al
Dat hi waende, hadde hys gheval
Houden ten wel grooten love.
VdVR 1.41; 11.43-7

Die coninc Aertur hadde hof ghehouden,
Daer hi groten lof eens sinxendages hadde ontfaen.
Ferguut, 1.1

Similarly, in *Carel ende Elegast*, Charlemagne

waende opten andren dach
Crone draghen ende houden hof
Omme te meerne sinen lof.
C.e.C., 11.12-14

Arendt comments on *typisch epische Verläufe* such as the leave-taking and return of the hero (cf. Bruun). Similarly, the fact that the poem is situated in rural Flanders can be seen as a parody of the romantic, distant landscape of the *roman courtois*. The epic width of this landscape is parodied in the cock Crayant, "Die scoenste hane die men vant/Tusschen Portaengen ende Pollanen" (11.300-1), and in the conspirators of Hyfte, an insignificant village near Ghent, who sent their messengers "al omme ende omme/Tusschen dier Elve entier Somme" (2441-2). In both cases the epic hyperbole is undercut by something insignificant: high style and low style are made to clash to produce a comic effect. By the same token the *hofdag* of King Noble is a very obvious parody of the epic "parliament,"

as are the speeches of the contenders, the partisanship based on family ties, and the summons of the offender.¹³

Muller and Tiberger/Van Dis draw attention to the following parodies of style in the *Reinaert*. Typical of the epic is the heroic epithet: "In wedersiden van der bare/Ghinc een hane wider mare" (293-4); and "Bruun, heelt mare" (615). Typical also are the courtly titles for beasts and villagers, as in: "Heere Bruun, wel soete vrient" (549) and in: "Vrouwe Vuulmaerte" (788).¹⁴

Characteristic of the style of the *roman courtois* are the aside to the reader: "Al seghet sine tonghe wel/Sine herte die es binnen fel" (1076-7); explanation of the motivation of the protagonists: "Dat dede Reinaert omme dat/Dat hi wilde" (2233-4); references to what is going to follow, as in: "Dus neemt hi (i.e., Bruun) orlof ende sal naken/Daer hi seere sal mesraeken" (49506); and tautologies and pleonastic expressions such as *dese voorwaerde en dit covent*; and *sine consten niet verdraghen/No sine consten niet ghedoghen*. These features, however, such as the authorial comment and the explanation of the motivation of the protagonists, and others such as *abbreviatio* (cf. 11.446-7), moralizing remarks and proverbs, are very common stylistic features of medieval literature and not necessarily parodies.

Another interesting question is the possibility of intentional parody of literary commonplaces. The most convincing parody of this kind is presented in the speech of Chanticleer, who, in his present misfortune, recalls the happiness of the past (also a *topos*!) in the safe confines of the *hortus conclusus*: "in eene paerc/Dat was beloken in eenen mure" (11.334-5).¹⁵ Similarly Coppe's idyllic grave, situated "Onder linde in een gras" (453) and her "literary" epitaph - "Hier leghet Coppe begraven/Die so wale conste scraven/Die

Reinaert die vos verbeet/Ende haren geslachte was te wreet" (461-4) are reminiscent of the descriptions of the graves of Dido (2502-19) and of Pallas (8296-8347) in Veldeke's *Eneide*, and of Blancefloer's grave and epitaph in *Floris ende Blancefloer* (1036ff.).¹⁶

Furthermore, the "aristocratic" lineage of the villagers, their battle order, their weapons, the priest's battle cry and Reinaert's mockery of Bruun and his wounds are all deliberate parodies of the epic. Reinaert's polite invitation to Bruun to partake of the honey - *magieren* - is an obvious parody of courtly manners; and Reinaert's role as Hersint's "discreet" courtly lover (11.235-46; and 11.1656-69) is probably the most sustained single parody of all.

Parody of the formulaic language of the judicial process occurs as well:¹⁷

Siet ic come u teh ghenaden
Van alle gader miere mesdaet
VdVR, 1450-1

Ic come U heden te ghenaden
Van allen minen mesdaden
Carel ende Elegast, 189-90

and the following:

Dat ghi ons secht de waerheit al
Openbare, ende brinct voort
Of ghi weet van eenegher moort
VdVR, 2158-60

Dat ghi secht ende brinct voert
Die ontdaet entie die moort
Carel ende Elegast, 1207-8

Muller has considered the possibility of deliberate parody of extant Middle Dutch literature in the *Reinaert*. He was convinced that the *Reinaert* is connected with *Carel ende Elegast* because of similarities of plot, action and characterization.¹⁸ The strongest argument for this connection is the fact that

the stolen treasure and the conspiracy motif in *VdVR* do not occur in the *RdR*, but figure very prominently in *Carel ende Elegast*, which is unparalleled in Old French literature as the only original Middle Dutch *Karelroman*.

Why, then, do the critics downplay the importance of parody? Arendt is clearly inclined to subordinate literary parody to moral satire. This appears to derive from the presupposition that the two are somehow mutually exclusive,¹⁹ possibly because his view of the author as a satirizing moralist does not allow for the selfconscious and *recherché* qualities of the literary parodist.

A similar preconception underlies the judgement of the older Dutch scholars. To them the *Reinaert* — the first work of Netherlandic literature — had to conform to the dictates of Romantic literary esthetics: spontaneity and originality. To regard *VdVR* as anything approaching a cento culled from other genres would have been distasteful.²⁰ Similarly, many of these scholars refuse to accept *VdVR* as a vehement and bitter satire. Instead, they see the work as conceived *sub specie aeternitatis*, as a mild satire of human folly, gently humorous rather than bitter, universal and timeless rather than tendentious, partisan and tied to a particular period.²¹ Here again, a definite preconception of the function of the artist and of artistic greatness predating the creation of the work intrude to prevent a balanced assessment.

Such attitudes die hard. For example, in Sivirsky's survey of Netherlandic literature (2nd ed., 1962) the notion of literary parody is accepted, but only as a manifestation of the realist, no-nonsense "genius" of Netherlandic literature, another favorite notion of Romantic criticism:

De gloed der ridderlijkheid is bij de Nederlandse schrijvers of bewerkers van

ridderromans nooit zo geweest dat er een meesterwerk uit kon ontstaan, maar de burleske spot met die literatuur, de parodie, de kritiek op een nooit ten volle eigendom geworden literaire levensstijl die alle zonden van het feodalisme diende te bedekken, de humor die de opgeschroefdheid en het theatrale terugbracht tot komedie ... daarin waren de Nederlanders meesters.²²

Once more the notion of mild satire is trotted out by the same author, this time attributed to the preponderance in *VdVR* of *gezonde Vlaamse plattelandshumor*:

... er vallen verschrikkelijk onhoofse dingen voor en de edelen zijn soms onridderlijk op het gemene af. Hun godsdienstzin en vroomheid is doorgaans huichelarij en hun aller voorbeeld, de koning, met zijn zinnebeeldige naam *Nobel* is slap, onzelfstandig en hebzuchtig. *Toch is het verhaal voor geen enkele stand kwetsend, daartoe is het te zeer geladen met gezonde Vlaamse plattelandshumor.*²³ (my italics)

In short, Sivirsky's evaluation of *VdVR* reads like a catechism of Romantic literary esthetics:

"Van den vos Reinaerde" is *origineel*. Het epos geeft *onopzettelijk* een *persoonlijke* visie op de standenmaatschappij, het zit vol *vaderlandse* grappen en grollen, *ongemerkt* worden wij door het *Vlaamse* landschap geleid. ... Het heeft ook iets van de *vrijmoedige openhartigheid* van de hofnar wie men niets kwalijk mag nemen en daarvan maakt deze gretig gebruik om 'eens goed de waarheid te zeggen.²⁴ (my italics)

It would appear, therefore, that the significance of literary parody, its use and its function, have been underestimated and neglected as a result of these preconceptions.

NOTES

¹ J.W. Muller, "Reinaert Studien II: Navolging en

Parodie van Heldenepos en Ridderroman," *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche Taal en Letterkunde*, 52 (1933), p. 218; hereafter referred to as Muller.

² G.-H. Arendt, *Die satirische Struktur des mittelniederländischen Tierepos "Van den Vos Reynaerde"* (Diss. Cologne, 1964), p. 55; hereafter referred to as Arendt. Cf. H.R. Jauss, *Untersuchungen zur mittelalterlichen Tierdichtung* (Tübingen, 1959), p. 225; hereafter referred to as Jauss.

³ D. C. Tinbergen, ed. *Van Den Vos Reinaerde*, 19e druk, verzorgd door L.M. van Dis, in *Van Alle Tijden: Bibliotheek van Nederlandse Letterkunde* (Groningen, 1969).

⁴ Arendt, pp. 42-64.

⁵ See P. Lehmann, *Die Parodie im Mittelalter* (Munich, 1922).

⁶ Muller, pp. 217-221; see also Arendt, pp. 61-64.

⁷ For the Old French see J. Dufournet, ed. *Le Roman de Renard: Branches I, II, III, IV, V, VIII, X, XV* (Paris, 1970), p. 177, 11.1-13; for the translation see J. F. Flinn, "Littérature bourgeoise et le *Roman de Renart*," in E. Rombauts and A. Welkenhuyzen, eds. *Aspects of the Medieval Animal Epic*, Proceedings of the International Conference, May 15-17, 1972 (Louvain, 1975), p. 11.

⁸ Tinbergen, ed. *VdVR*, pp. 59-61, 11. 1-40; cf. Arendt, pp. 54-55.

⁹ See Muller, p. 223.

¹⁰ Cf. Arendt, p. 55.

¹¹ Cf. Muller, p. 219.

¹² See Muller, p. 224, n. 1, for additional parallels.

¹³ See Arendt, p. 150.

¹⁴ See Muller, pp. 228-232; Tinbergen, ed. *VdVR*, pp. 23-24.

¹⁵ See Arendt, pp. 80-82.

¹⁶ See Lehmann, p. 41, for the Latin origin of beast epitaphs.

¹⁷ See Muller, p. 233ff; cf. Tinbergen, ed. *VdVR*, p. 25.

¹⁸ See Muller, pp. 240-252.

¹⁹ See Arendt, pp. 57-59.

²⁰ Cf. Jauss, p. 13, and Arendt, Anhang, pp. I-XXV.

²¹ See Arendt, *ibid.*

²² A. Sivirsky, *Het Beeld der Nederlandse Literatuur*, 2nd. ed. Vol. I (Groningen, 1962), p. 66.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*; for a discussion of recent critical approaches to *VdVR* see also J. Bosch, *Reinaert-Perspectief* (Kampen, 1972).