

WOLFGANG MIEDER

Figures of Speech. Picturing Proverbs in Renaissance Netherlands. By Walter S. Gibson. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2010. Pp. 236. With 81 illustrations.

It has been my scholarly pleasure to have read this exciting book twice, once as an outside reviewer of the manuscript and now as the delighted owner of this magisterial study by one of the world's experts on the art of the Netherlands with a special emphasis on proverbial iconography. Among his many publications I might mention his earlier volumes on *Hieronymus Bosch* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973; rpt. New York: Praeger, 2005), *Bruegel* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter* (Berkeley, California: University Press of California, 2006). Of course, there are numerous articles as well, and all of the knowledge contained in them plus much more have now resulted in this comprehensive study. The impressive "Selected Bibliography" (pp. 215-228) and the most useful "Index" (pp. 229-236) bear witness to the author's expertise, but it must be stressed that his voluminous "Notes" (pp. 157-214) include incredibly important bibliographical references and much additional material. In fact, this supplementary information easily represents another whole third of the actual study with its mere but dense 156 pages that include 81 unique illustrations. I would argue then that readers should not ignore the 67 pages of notes (small print!). As it is, this book is a compact and eloquently written study by an iconographical expert who clearly masters his subject matter with great scholarly prowess and a delightful twinkle in his eyes when it comes to the fun and folly of the proverb illustrations under discussion.

It is, of course, an established fact that much attention has been paid to Pieter Bruegel's large oil painting *The Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559). Book-length studies of it abound, among them Wilhelm Fraenger, *Der Bauern-Bruegel und das*

deutsche Sprichwort (Erlenbach-Zürich: Eugen Rentsch, 1923; shortened rpt. edited by Michael Philipp as *Das Bild der "Niederländischen Sprichwörter"*. *Pieter Bruegels Verkehrte Welt*. Amsterdam: Castrum Peregrini Presse, 1999), Jan Grauls, *Volks-taal en volksleven in het werk van Pieter Bruegel* (Antwerpen: N.V. Standaard-Boekhandel, 1957), Alan Dundes and Claudia A. Stibbe, *The Art of Mixing Metaphor. A Folkloristic Interpretation of the "Netherlandish Proverbs" by Pieter Bruegel the Elder* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1981), Yoko Mori, *Byugeru no Kotowaza no Sekai [The Proverb World of Bruegel]* (Tokyo: Hakuosha, 1992), Mark A. Meadow, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder's "Netherlandish Proverbs" and the Practice of Rhetoric* (Zwolle: Wanders Publishers, 2002), Rainald Grosshans, *Pieter Bruegel d. Ä. "Die niederländischen Sprichwörter"* (Berlin: Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2003), and Wolfgang Mieder (ed.), *"The Netherlandish Proverbs"*. *An International Symposium on the Pieter Bruegel(h)els* (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, 2004). Dozens of articles have also dealt with particular proverbial scenes in this fascinating picture, and this scholarship by art historians, cultural historians, folklorists, linguists, philologists and others has been registered in Wolfgang Mieder and Janet Sobieski, *Proverb Iconography. An International Bibliography* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999) and Wolfgang Mieder, *International Bibliography of Parremiology and Phraseology*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2009). There was no need for Walter Gibson to include yet another chapter on *The Netherlandish Proverbs* in the book under review, but it should be mentioned that he obviously refers to this important proverb picture on many pages. After all, Bruegel's painting as the center-piece of Dutch proverb iconography relates back to proverb illustrations before him and has had plenty of influence on proverb illustrators during his own time and beyond to the present day. In this regard it is laudable that Walter Gibson mentions the large *Proverbidioms* paintings (see p. 145) by Thom Breitenbach from Altermont, New York, which are modeled on Bruegel's masterpiece.

Walter Gibson's new book is exactly what the iconographic doctor prescribed! The field of proverb iconography needed a comprehensive overview of what actually took place in the Re-

naissance Netherlands (roughly the late 15th through the early 17th centuries). An understanding of this “proverb-rich” time will in turn lead to a better understanding of how this proverbial art influenced the folkloric art of other European countries. Gibson obviously includes references to English, French, German, and other European proverb art, but his emphasis is naturally on the scene in the Netherlands. It also needs to be stressed that as the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of the Humanities Emeritus at Case Western Reserve University at Cleveland, Ohio, Walter Gibson (now living in Pownal, Vermont) does not only speak about the world of art but constantly brings in literary references from poems, plays, and novels that include the very proverbs and proverbial expressions that are depicted in etchings, engravings, emblems, paintings, etc. His book is indeed a most impressive interdisciplinary accomplishment by combining the study of art, folklore, history, language, and literature into an amazingly rich survey of proverb illustrations.

Walter Gibson begins his investigation with an introductory chapter on “A Passion for Proverbs” (pp. 1-17) in which he mentions the central figures of Erasmus of Rotterdam and Pieter Bruegel (with 2 illustrations) for the interest in proverbs. He also refers to the problem of defining proverbs (mentioning Archer Taylor in particular), he talks about proverbs in the literary works of Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, and he mentions some of the major proverb collections of the time. Clearly the time was ripe for proverbial matters on all fronts, and it is no wonder that the 16th century in particular has been called the golden age of proverbs. For the Netherlands it should be stressed that “the Netherlanders were beginning to take a serious interest in their native language” (p. 13), with “the Netherlandish *rederijkers*, or rhetoricians, fervently working to improve their common language and whose infatuation with proverbs embraced not only the written word but images as well” (p. 17). In the Netherlands, this linguistic struggle was not only with the scholarly *lingua franca* of Latin but also with the emerging vernacular of French. Similar emphasis on the mother tongue took place in other countries as well, notably England, France, and Germany (Martin Luther!), and Gibson is doubtlessly correct in interpreting this preoccupation with ver-

nacular languages as one of the major reasons for the appearance of proverbs in all types of oral and written communication.

The second chapter on “The Proverb Portrayed” (pp. 18-38) takes a closer look at this fascination with proverbial language. Mentioning its appearance in the German chapbook *Till Eulenspiegel* and François Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Gibson observes that metaphorical proverbs are especially “amenable to visualization” (p. 19) and that “Artists have long turned to proverbs for subject matter precisely because of this often striking and sometimes hilarious dichotomy between form and meaning” (p. 20). He then describes some of the early proverb illustrations in the form of misericords (the book is dedicated to the memory of the misericord-scholar Elaine C. Block), woodcuts (*Proverbes en rimes*), book illustrations (Sebastian Brant’s *Narrenschiff* and Thomas Murner’s *Schelmzunft*), a proverb tapestry from the 15th century (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston), etc. (with 12 great illustrations). The remainder of the chapter takes a closer look at the importance of the *rederijkers*, notably Reyer Gheurtz. The chapter thus contains a lucid overview of the linguistic, folkloric, literary, and cultural background for early proverb illustrations, including Frans Hogenberg’s multi-proverb scene engraving *Die Blau Huicke* (1558) that doubtlessly influenced Bruegel’s painting of one year later.

Having thus shown the background to this Dutch proverb world, Gibson can turn to his first case study in his third chapter “From Hay to Turnips. The Curious Career of a Bosch Invention” (pp. 39-79). It represents an intriguing study of Hieronymus Bosch’s *Haywain* triptych kept in the Prado in Madrid. The central panel of the painting is dominated by a large hay cart alluding to two proverbial passages from the Old Testament: “All flesh is grass, and all the glory thereof as the flower of the field” (Isaiah 40:6); and “Man’s days are as grass, as the flower of the field so shall he flourish” (Psalm 102:15). But while “hay” in Bosch’s painting is a “most fitting symbol of the intrinsic worthlessness of all temporal possessions, honors, and pleasures, especially when measured against the spiritual ‘goods’ that the blessed souls will enjoy after death” (p. 43), the “hay” motif underwent an interesting switch in meaning after Bosch in that it

became a metaphor for greed and avarice. Gibson traces this development of the haywain motif from Bosch to tapestries, to Frans Hogenberg's etching *Al Hoy* (1559) and on to Remigius Hogenberg's etching *The Turnip Wagon* where the hay is changed to turnips: "Most striking, however, is his transformation of the proverbial hay into turnips. Like hay, of course, the humble turnip is common, small in worth – 'Not worth a turnip,' as an old proverb has it – and thus could easily signify the basic worthlessness of temporal goods" (p. 59). In later reworkings of the proverbial hay and turnip motifs in tapestries, drawings, and etchings, "the greed and folly of all humanity [are] castigate[d]" (p. 67). The turnip metaphor also appears in Sebastian Vrancx's (attributed) ambitious proverb painting *Netherlandish Proverbs* that depicts at least 200 proverbs and proverbial expressions. All of this is enriched by 25 illustrations of which some take up an entire page, giving the viewer the ability to study them in the detail with which Gibson analyzes them in his erudite interpretations.

The second case study is dedicated to "Loquacious Pictures: Twelve Emblematic Proverb Engravings" (pp. 80-117), and with its 23 illustrations represents the most comprehensive study of these round engravings with inscriptions called *Twelve Proverbs* (seven engraved by Jan Wierix and the other five most likely by Pieter van der Heyden). As Gibson shows, Pieter Bruegel created his own round *Twelve Proverbs* (early 1560s) paintings that depict four of the same proverbs as those of the engraved *Twelve Proverbs*, and it thus becomes clear once again what central role Bruegel has played in the historical development of Dutch proverb illustrations. Of special interest are Gibson's discussions of *The Misanthrope*, *The Blind Leading the Blind*, *The Hay Chasing the Horse*, *The Henpecked Husband*, *Peddler Seated by the Bride*, and *Begging at the Deaf Man's Door*. Not only does he give detailed explanations of the engravings themselves, he also provides intriguing references from contemporaneous proverb collections and literary works to explain the meaning of the depicted proverbs. In doing so, he definitely proves himself as quite the etymological scholar in explaining the meaning of archaic Dutch words as they relate to the meaning of the depicted proverbs. Towards the end of the chapter, Gibson also shows how such engravings with proverbial verses have much in com-

mon with the emblem books of Andrea Alciati, Johannes Sambucus, and others that were becoming popular at the time. And he correctly states that the appearance of proverbs in both texts and illustrations in the emblem books “reached its height in the emblem books of Jacob Cats and other Dutch writers of the seventeenth century” (p. 112).

This brings me to the third case study of the book, this time dealing with “The Battle of the Breeches. A Proverb in the Making” (pp.118-141) with its 15 illustrations. Here it is important from the outset that Walter Gibson is not dealing with the modern proverbial expression “to wear the breeches (pants)” but rather with another proverb that once again goes back to Isaiah (4:1): “And in that day seven women shall take hold of one man, saying: We will eat our bread, and wear our own apparel: only let us be called by thy name, take away our reproach.” The marital struggle over the breeches (pants) is one thing, with people to this day speaking about who is wearing them in a relationship. But the seven women going after the breeches of a man are quite another motif. In fact, it refers to “the common belief in woman’s sexual insatiability” (p. 122). While this motif has been lost in the modern age, it once was quite popular, appearing for the first time in an engraving by Frans Hogenberg from about 1558. As Gibson shows by engravings of Johannes Galle, Adriaen van der Venne, and others, the seven battling ladies had become proverbial in the Netherlands, and obviously the sexual implications of numerous unmarried women or more grotesquely of frustrated old maids going after the breeches (symbolizing the penis) of a man must have been quite titillating to the viewers of the time. In any case, “the erotic and satirical possibilities of Isaiah 4:1 were exploited for centuries elsewhere in Europe” (p. 139). But here is Walter Gibson’s delightful final comment on this now extinct proverbial motif: “Social historians may be best equipped to explain the longevity of this theme in its various guises, but I venture to suggest that while the women of each generation may have responded to the Battle for the Breeches much like Adriaen van der Venne’s Soetje (‘silly maidens, man-crazy and silly and frisky, trashy and insatiable, wild and careless!’), many of their menfolk, especially the younger ones, would not have objected had this part of Isaiah’s prophecy come

to pass in their own time" (p. 141). A Freudian folklorist like Alan Dundes would certainly have had a heyday with this sexual/phallic motif feeding both women's and men's erotic desires and fantasies.

As the subtitle "Figures of Fun and Folly" of the "Conclusion" (pp. 142-156) with its four final illustrations – two from Pieter Bruegel! – suggests, Walter Gibson is quite willing to see plenty of humor and irony in the apparent foolishness of human-kind. As he looks shortly at the preoccupation with the fools of this world (Thomas More's *Utopia*), he is quick to point out that the obsession with proverbial matters has not really waned even though there have been those, for example Philip Dormer Stanhope, fourth Earl of Chesterfield, Elizabeth Gaskell, Jonathan Swift (pp. 143-144), who have vehemently argued against or satirically ridiculed the use of folk proverbs. The author also presents a summary interpretation of the various proverbial themes of this book with the observation that they, and notably Bruegel's *The Netherlandish Proverbs*, depict folly in satirical but also humorous fashion in the hope that viewers might become aware of their own foolishness. Without doubt proverbs still serve this purpose to this day, and so it should not surprise us that they continue to be part of all modes of modern communication, from literature, newspapers, magazines, advertisements, and political rhetoric on to cartoons, caricatures, comic strips, graffiti, T-shirts, and even new proverb paintings as those by Thom Breitenbach. Proverbs are never out of season, and as Walter S. Gibson has shown so convincingly in this superbly researched, presented, and illustrated book, the picturing of proverbs was indeed of special importance in the early Netherlands.

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