What Santa Claus Brought to the Youth of Amsterdam

One of the few constants in history, regardless of country or culture, is how sensitive ruling elites are to criticism. Even democratic regimes are perpetually in danger of letting their elected representatives suppress unwanted critiques (as occurred with the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 in the United States). The authorities that ruled 17th century Amsterdam were elected by co-optation, which was hardly a democratic procedure. Liberal as they may have been in some respects, they did not brook criticism easily. So it is not surprising to hear that, as soon as the anonymous pamphlet, called “The Mild Gifts of St. Nicholas to the Youth of Amsterdam or the Last Quarter of the Amsterdam Moonshine” ("St. Nicolaes milde gaven aen d’Amstelse ionckheyt. Ofte het laatste Quartier der Amsterdamsche Mane-schijn"), which invoked the names of many of the prominent citizens of Amsterdam, appeared in a few book shops at the end of 1640, the police of Amsterdam soon began to interrogate suspects and to confiscate copies of this “libel”. In reading the following account, which deals with other libels as well, it should be kept in mind that the New Amsterdam Theater (de nieuwe Schouwburg) had been inaugurated in January 1638, two years before these events. The authorities were apparently nervous about the mocking of its directors in these ephemeral booklets. One should also keep in mind that the police interrogations of suspects, as they were recorded in the “Justice” and “Confession books”, were not stenographic transcripts. The clerk only set down the questions and answers that seemed to be of primary interest or that he could keep up with as he went along.

The “mild gifts” in the St. Nicholas libel are those that the popular saint gave to good children on the day of his feast (December 6). But as the authors of the libelous pamphlet remark in their introduction, they had seen so many bad deeds “sitting on the mantlepiece” (where the good and bad gifts to children were exposed), which have been perpetrated by a multitude of evil-doers, that they could not forbear to at least warn the culprits in the hope of a betterment. They went on to rake over the coals “twice six pious men”, including (Michiel) Pauw, lord of Achttienhoven, Jan Six, and a certain Joncker Jan van Piepenfoye. They also alluded to the broker De Haes, and to Nieuwenhoven, (Werner) van Bassen, Bevers, and Cappit. They then ironized about the “high and clever mind” (booch en cloecke geest) of six attorneys, (Jan ?) Davelaer, (Nicolaes) van Loon, Kloecckje (Pieter Jansz. Cloeck?), Vogelzangh, De Raet, (Ernst) Roeters, and (Abraham) Oyens. Finally, they sent up a num-
ber of men sitting in the Amsterdam Vroedschap and in the highest circles of Amsterdam governance, including the militia: “(Hans) Bontemantel, (Floris) Soop, and Backer, Campen, (Pieter?) Hasselaer and (Jan?) Six, (Andries?) Vinck and Bas, Outgers, Vlaming, and Dirck Hoveling, (Andries?) Bicker and (Joachim) Rendorp.” When we include the names already cited, the ruling, commercial, and professional elites of Amsterdam were pretty well covered.

On Saint Nicholas Day 1640, which fell on a Tuesday, only two days after the first copies of the libelous pamphlet had first been distributed, the sheriff and his aldermen began their interrogations. The bookseller Lubbert Meynertsz., on being shown the “St. Nicolaes” booklets, denied knowing who might have written them but confessed that a young boy had brought him a pack of them. After he had sold them all, he obtained a half dozen more from the bookseller Joost Hartgers. Hartgers, 27 years old, interrogated on the same day, told the police that a worker had brought to his house a hundred copies of a pasquinade titled “St. Nicolaes”, which he had sold for four and six stuivers a piece. He did not know who had sent the package. Twelve copies had been bought by Abraham de Wees, bookseller on the Dam. Naturally, the sheriff proceeded to interrogate de Wees, who claimed that he didn’t know where the copies of the “St. Nicolaes”, which he had received and paid for, came from. Next, Hartgers was again questioned. This time he reported that the preceding Sunday (which was two days before the interrogation), shortly after 25 copies of “St. Nicolaes” had been delivered to him, a certain Pieter van den Broeck had come to his house and asked him “whether there was anything new”. At Van den Broeck’s insistence, he acknowledged that he did have something new, which he then showed him. He had then given Van den Broeck two printed sheets that were still wet and asked him not to tell any one about them.

Two days later, on December 8th, the police summoned Pieter van den Broeck for his first interrogation. Van den Broeck said he was from Amsterdam and about 24 years old. No craft or profession was mentioned. The world of Amsterdam being a fairly small one, the reader will not be surprised to learn that Pieter van den Broeck was the younger brother of Marten van den Broeck of Chapter 18, who swapped diamonds, textiles, and valuable paintings in exchange for ship’s equipment in 1647.

There is little doubt about this identity. Pieter van den Broeck was baptized on 5 April 1615. This implies that he was 25 years old in December 1640, one year older than he told the sheriff, an inaccuracy that was more than common at the time. His father was Gregorius van den Broeck, his mother, Catharina Soolmans. He was the cousin of Marten Soolmans, portrayed by Rembrandt in 1634. In 1657, he published a poem in verse about “The Illustrioussness of Brederode of the House of the Counts of Holland” after an historical chronicle by Paulus Voet.

To resume the interrogation of December 8: Van den Broeck was asked whether he had not been recently in the Schilt van Vranckrijck on the Dam (near the present Town Hall). The Schilt van Vranckrijck was a well-known inn which, for many years, had been managed by the painter and art dealer Barend van Someren. It was
there that the great sale of Van Someren’s art works had been held by the Orphan Chamber in 1635, shortly after his death. Had Van den Broeck spoken there with a certain Van Rijn? Yes, he conceded, this had taken place about 14 days ago. Had he spoken there with the “son of the house”? No, he answered, but the son of the house had once come to his own house with some one else in order to see paintings (om schilderijen te sien). They might have spoken about paintings but about nothing else.

The only other evidence that Van den Broeck was a collector of art at all is his purchase of two lots at the Gommer Spranger sale of 1638: a copper plate of Albrecht Dürer for 9 f and a plate incised on both sides for 7 f. But it is clear from the interrogation that he owned a collection of paintings as well.

Next, Van den Broeck acknowledged that he had been at Hartgers’s shop and had picked up two copies of a “new” pamphlet that were still wet. Asked whether he knew (Mattheus) Tengnagel, he said he did not, but “Schipper Jan” (Jan Jacobsz. Schipper, bookseller and poet) had told him that Tengnagel was about to publish a little book called “de Lindeblaetjes” in which he, Van den Broeck, was called a poet. But this was not true since he had not published anything under his own name. He denied knowing anything at all about the St. Nicholas pamphlet. He did volunteer that he had been at the house of a bookbinder where there was talk about the writers of libelous poems, on which occasion he said that “he would be willing to lend his arms to help deliver [to the police] those that had done these things”.

The next interrogations brought Tengnagel, 27 years of age, before the sheriff. Tengnagel denied making a “Maneschijn” poem and asking a certain printer to print it. This denial was a lie. He was indeed the author of the “Amsterdamsche Maneschijn” (the Amsterdam moonshine), a Pasquinade that had appeared in 1639 in at least three editions. It took him less than a day to concede that he had indeed “made part of it”. He had received assistance from Adam van Germez, a surgeon, poet, and popular actor in the Nieuwe Schouwburg. At a later point, Van Germez rejected Tengnagel’s allegation in a face-to-face confrontation. Had he asked Van Someren (“son of the house” in the Schilt van Vranckrijck) to give him the names of some people who might have composed (libelous) farces (“kluchten”)? He denied it, even though a previous confrontation with Van Someren and a certain Gerrit Anthonisz. (not identified in the interrogations) showed that it was so. He persisted in his denials, but finally stated that Van den Broeck had brought him eight men, including the poets Hans and Lambert Bontemantel, who presumably had made such libels and were willing to do so again. Tengnagel also confessed that he had got into a fight in the inn “de Toelast” with “the son of Abraham Anthonisz.”, who had provoked him. He said that Van Someren (who now seemed distinct from the “son of Abraham Anthonisz.”) had pulled out his rapier, and that he, Tengnagel, to defend himself had drawn his knife, but “more to scare off (his assailants) than to wound any one”.

Three days later, on December 11, the interrogation resumed, in part to go over old ground. The printer and bookseller Joost Hartgers, who by this time had been
taken into custody, stated that on the preceding Thursday (29th November), a worker had brought a certain package to his shop and that Pieter van den Broeck, who was sitting there, had asked whether there was anything new (in the package). He had answered, “nothing special”. Whereupon Van den Broeck had asked him whether Jacob Valcksz. had been there. On hearing that he had not, Van den Broeck had left. Bound up with the package, Hartgers had found a little letter, with the following contents: “Hartgers, I send you these ‘St. Nicholaes’ (booklets), so that you will print them and sell them. It’s one of your good friends who asks you to do this. If you are willing, make a circle with a cross above your door with a piece of chalk by tomorrow noon. But if you are not willing, the worker will take them [the booklets] away again.” When, on the next day, Valcksz. came by his house along with his brother-in-law (Van den Broeck), both men were laughing (presumably because they had seen the circle and the cross). Later that evening, when Hartgers had asked Valcksz. why they had been laughing, Valcksz. had answered: “I have knowledge of certain things, I must be frank with you” (Ick hebbe kennisse van saecken, ick moet tegens u rondt gaen). Whereupon Hartgers had said, “I thought I recognized your handwriting,” and Valcksz. had answered, “I thought that you knew my handwriting, and Van den Broeck knows it too”.791

The next day, which was a Saturday afternoon, Valcksz. and Van den Broeck had come by again and asked whether a sheet had already been printed. Hartges said no, even though one had indeed been printed. Later that day, the two were in the shop again. Van den Broeck left with two sheets. Hartges had asked Valcksz.: “Well, so you are a poet? I did not know that. You have never published anything.” Valcksz. had answered: “Yes, that is true. I don’t know how we came to it. We just did it to while away the time in five or six weeks.”792 He named no other person who had taken a part in the venture. Later Hartgers confirmed that the handwriting on the note appended to the “St. Nicholaes” was indeed Valcksz.’s. The bookseller also informed his questioners that he had consulted Notary Pels, asking him what he thought of the material that had been sent to him. Pels had advised him not to print it because many persons were explicitly named there (both by their first and last names). To which Hartgers had answered, “I don’t see that there’s anything there that will offend the magistrates. It’s just little playlets.”793

Jacob Valcksz., the brother-in-law of Pieter van den Broeck, is the second protagonist of this story. He, too, as we shall see presently, was a buyer at Orphan Chamber auctions and a far more important one than Van den Broeck. Born about 1601, he was considerably older than Pieter van den Broeck (he was 39 in 1640, while Van den Broeck was only 25). He had lived from 1627 to 1634 in Leghorn (Livorno) in Italy where he was a merchant’s representative (“factor”). He was betrothed with Altie Danckers on 10 May 1640, only a few months before these events. Adolph van Forckenburch, who assisted him on this occasion, was the husband of Jacob’s sister Margrieta. Van Forckenburch signed the Remonstrant petition of 1628.794 Jacob Valcksz. was buried on 12 October 1643.795
Valcksz.'s first known purchases at auctions occurred in 1625, two years before he left for Livorno. At two separate sales, he bought small lots of anonymous prints. Soon after he came back from Italy, he attended the Van Someren sale of 1635, where he bought 9 lots (8 of prints, one of drawings). But he only became a major player at the Basse sale of 1637 when he made winning bids on 82 lots, almost all of them anonymous prints (see the Appendix to this chapter). His strong interest in prints calls to mind that a certain Jan Valcksz. de Jonge appeared in two documents dated in the year 1615 as the guardian (and probably husband) of Maritge Muller, the sister of the printmaker Jan Harmensz. Muller. Jacob Valcksz. may have been his son. Unfortunately, I have not been able to figure out through what marriage connection Jacob Valcksz., who was fourteen years older than Van den Broeck, became the brother-in-law of his younger friend.

Although the interrogations continued, Pieter van den Broeck was never questioned again. As to Valcksz., he seems never to have been questioned at all. We only hear about the two partners again on January 23, 1641, when Joost Hartgers told the police that Jacob Valcksz. had told him that Pieter van den Broeck was “at the origin of the work” (of the “St. Nicholas” pamphlet). Neither, of course, was punished. Joost Hartgers was condemned to pay a fine of 250 f “because he had allowed to be printed various notorious booklets, some of which he had reprinted, sold and distributed”. He also had to pay for his imprisonment and the costs of justice. He was only released from jail after two merchants had given their guarantee that he would appear before the judges if and when he was summoned. Mattheus Tengnagel was convicted of having made and allowed to be printed “t Amsterdamsche Maenschijntje”, and another booklet named “t Amsterdamsche Sonschijnten” (but not the “St. Nicholas”). Both of the pamphlets for which he was condemned were said to be “notorious and scandalous libels”. He was also condemned because he had drawn a knife on the son of Abraham Anthonisz. He was therefore condemned to pay a fine of 100 f and further ordered to stay in his mother’s house for the following three months, without being allowed to go out, by day or by night, or to step on the street, on pain of being confined to the House of Correction (Tuchthuis) and of spending the rest of the time of his condemnation there. The poet Jan Soet, who had also been apprehended and had confessed to writing a libelous almanach for the year 1640, was released from jail under caution and promised to appear before the Sheriff upon being summoned. His punishment does not appear to have been spelled out.

The punishments were not particularly severe, especially for the writers of the libelous pamphlets. The heaviest punishment fell on the printer and bookseller Joost Hartgers, as if printing and distributing libelous pamphlets was a worse crime than composing them.

Two years after being condemned to house arrest, Tengnagel wrote another playlet, “Frick in ’t veurbuys”. In the next to last act of this fablieau, he introduced “Mr. Pieter the poet”, who, as Izak Prins pointed out nearly 70 years ago, was none other than Pieter van den Broeck. The dialogue makes this identification clear. A
character in the playlet, named Bliekvijst, asks Mr. Pieter where he is going. He answers that he is going to Aeltje Verwou’s place, to father Abram’s, to Joost Hartge’s, or to Jacot’s to get some “newsies” (een nieu-tijntje). Two other characters then tell Mr. Pieter that they would be glad to tell him all the news that there is to tell in Amsterdam. Then Bliekvijst, who presumably speaks for Tengnagel, says, “but first you must promise us that you’ll also turn this news into a poem, because the little book Santa Claus (‘St. Nicholaes’), that you released in print two years ago, even though it was dishonest, so pleased me here and there that I thought it couldn’t be improved.” Whereupon Mr. Pieter answered: “That I promise you, but then I had my comrade Jacob still with me, the loose Vallek, and now I am all alone.” The “loose Vallek” was of course Jacob Valcksz., but it was also a pun on Valck, meaning falcon. Next, another character named Roodneus said: “You’ve caused enough trouble, to cheat an innocent man to a rogue. You must think that you had more time than you had then.” And then he adds, “through your fault, you got an innocent man into great trouble and deep suspicion with the authorities.” All this chimes with the events that had occurred in 1640. The only thing that is new here is that Van den Broeck could no longer count on Valcksz.’s partnership. Yet Valcksz., as we have seen, did not die until 1643. Could the two men have fallen out over Van den Broeck’s confession in the course of the interrogation? And what did Tengnagel mean by the “loose falcon”? There is not much chance we shall ever find out. In any case, Pieter van den Broeck survived this minor scandal by many years. He was buried 33 years later, on 8 June 1673, apparently unmarried.

Appendix 22

Table 22.1
Purchases at auction by Pieter van den Broeck and Jacob Valcksz.

Pieter van den Broeck:

Gommer Spranger sale of 1638
1 plate (plaat) by Alborduer f 9:--:--
1 plate incised on both sides
(plaat van weersijde gesneen) f 7:--:--

Jacob Valcksz.:

Jan Gansepoel sale of 18 July 1625
1 lot of prints f 1: 5:--

Jan Basse sale of 1637
78 lots of untitled, unattributed prints f 81:--:--
1 lot of drawings f 1: 5:--