Narratives of Low Countries History and Culture

Fenoulhet, Jane, Gilbert, Lesley, Tiedau, Ulrich

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Van Nyeuvont, Loosheyt ende Practike: Hoe sij Vrou Lortse verheffen, Nyeuvont for short, is a play, printed around 1500, revolving around the deceitful elevation of a false saint. It was printed by Roland van den Dorpe, an Antwerp printer who worked between 1496 and 1500. Vrouw Nyeuvont, the instigator of this plan, enlists the help of two lawyers, Loosheyt and Practijke, to aid her with the elevation. They in turn present her with two men, the cassenaers Hardt van Waerseggen and Cleyn Vreese, who help to carry the relics of Sinte Lorts and sell indulgences. The word cassenaer stems from the word cas, which denotes a reliquary. The whole affair is set up with profit in mind, and we even see profiteers such as Meest Elc, a banker, being deceived. Throughout the text the author poignantly criticizes the bourgeoisie who, he feels, are only out to make money and to imitate the rich. In addition comic and truth-telling interludes are provided by the fool or sot, Schoon Tooch, and his bauble or marot, Quaet ende Waerseggen. By means of his text the author paradoxically presents his version of a new morality. Bad behaviour and deceit are specifically highlighted and, especially through the intervention of the sot and the marot, exactly the opposite behaviour is promoted.

Within this volume’s overall theme of presenting the past I hope to place this text in the context from which it emerged and to clarify its apparently obscure meaning. The previous in-depth study was carried out in 1910 by Elisabeth Neurdenberg and like many works from the period, concentrates much less on the function of the text than has been the tendency over the last couple of decades. Rather than being a simple attack on clerical practices, as many literary historians have previously thought, I would prefer to think that Nyeuvont is an attempt to create a
behavioural code for a bourgeoisie which by 1500, although powerful, was still rudderless.

The dating and localization of Nyeuvont are of inestimable importance for a proper comprehension of the text, for with this knowledge a more detailed background can be reconstructed in which the text came into existence. The Antwerp in which Roland van den Dorpe lived and in which our author may have worked was the centre of a Europe-encompassing economic network which was undergoing the transition from a relatively parochial economy to a semi-global one which has been described by Braudel as ‘proto-capitalist’. It was in Antwerp that the various trading routes of the world converged, and here the merchants perfected the experiment of the ‘credit’ economy which had started in the Italian city-states and in parts of France in the thirteenth century.

By the late fifteenth century the credit economy had been receiving two new and vital impulses: an increase in non-European trade and a release of labour resulting from the cheaper supply of wheat to the Low Countries from the Baltic after the conversion of Lithuania. This boost to the economy also gave rise to increased usury and credit, which, as Le Goff, Braudel and Toynbee have noticed, are inherent taboos in all civilizations. It was the sanctioning by the institutions of civilization, whether overtly or implicitly, of the lifting of this taboo which led to social and religious change in the sixteenth century and which probably stimulated the author of Nyeuvont to write his play.

The church and the state

How then did the church react to the growth of credit and usury? The church based its stance against usury on both Matthew 6:24: ‘Ye cannot serve God and mammon’ and Deuteronomy 23:20: ‘Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury’, the brother being of course all fellow Christians. That the Catholic church and capitalism are natural opposites can, however, no longer be maintained when one considers the period of Nyeuvont. From early on, the church responded to capitalism with surprising flexibility. It condemned usury and maintained this stance, but the Scholastics, led by St Thomas Aquinas, had introduced a number of nuances as early as the mid-thirteenth century, which enabled the papacy to turn a blind eye to the emergence of proto-capitalism. He introduced a new subtlety into the anti-usury dogma of the church. Aquinas argued that usury was acceptable if a risk accompanied the investment or if profits were
communal. This in turn led the church to condone lending to rulers and to accept the profit principle for banks and trade companies. During the Papal Schism (1378–1417) the costly maintenance of a Renaissance papal court, a prerequisite for indicating one’s worldly power, undermined its prestige and prevented it from taking a puritan stance against the social effects of proto-capitalism, stimulating our author’s proposition for a new morality.

At the time when the text was published, the selling of indulgences had reached its apogee. In return for a decrease in the amount of time spent in purgatory, one would pay a certain amount of money which would contribute to the building of religious institutes, the financing of papal wars and the balancing of the papal accounts. The effect of this trade seriously undermined the moral high ground which the church had occupied. That the *Nyeuvont* author deplored the selling of indulgences needs no illumination; it is not accidental that the *casseniers*, two of the most morally depraved of the characters, sell false indulgences. To him, this is evidence of the church’s incapacity to provide proper moral guidance for its flock.

Besides indulgences, the author finds more fault with contemporary religious life. I suspect him to be rather puritanical – or should we say fundamentalist? – for he sees little use in the religious practices of his day. Like Erasmus he wants a church, and not a new church, that can cope with the encroaching proto-capitalist ethos. Thus religious guilds, saint worship and faked confessions are all criticized.

**The social climate**

Looming large as the setting of *Nyeuvont* were the prosperous towns of Brabant in the early modern period. Here, the class whose lifestyle is the butt of the author’s criticism and wit – the bourgeoisie – developed in a region which had, even at this early stage, become densely urbanized. This was accompanied by a shift in the world view in this part of the Low Countries. Vrouw Nyeuvont realizes this and urges her followers to elevate Sinte Lorts ‘in elcke stede’ (in every town). The new element in this world view was the all pervasive influence of money. Instead of being a suspicious practice, the possession of money became the measure of success, and ‘correct’ behaviour was no longer sanctioned by a commonly accepted set of rules, thus causing many to regard the behaviour of the well-off as ‘Scoon Tooch’, or Fine Pretence.
The ‘rise of money’ was also accompanied by a new ‘evil’, namely money criminality, and it is this that causes the wrongs in Nyeuvont. Money is the supreme vehicle for social mobility and it made power and status more accessible.\(^\text{11}\) For a powerless bourgeoisie, financial fraud became a means of climbing in society, increasing the sense of social dislocation already keenly felt as a result of proto-capitalism, and represented in the text by Loosheyt and Practijke.\(^\text{12}\)

**Satire, parody, irony and allegory**

The Nyeuvont author’s choice of specific literary tools to reinforce the impact of his personal view of the world does not appear to be arbitrary. Apart from comedy, presented mainly by the sot and marot, we encounter four devices: satire, parody, irony and allegory. I demonstrate how these tools contributed to the author’s message of a new morality.

One of the most appropriate and concise definitions of the intentions of the author could be to term his work a ‘satire of deceit’. The central issue around which the text revolves is the ridicule of deceit, whether through lies, money or appearance.\(^\text{13}\) The author is scornful of those who pretend to be what they are not and the means by which they try to climb the social ladder. It is for this reason that the majority of the cast represents exactly those elements of society which he wants to denounce. People’s behaviour in general also becomes the target of his satire. When Hardt van Waerseggen encourages the public to come and join the guild of Sinte Lorts, he calls on specific types of people and exaggerates his descriptions: ‘Hoorst ghi, meyskens, met uwen faelgekens … hoort, ghi ghesellekens … den aessack opden eers!’ (‘Listen, you girls with your wide veils, listen, you comrades with your purses hanging from your belt’).\(^\text{14}\) Next he targets married men and women who do what they should do at home elsewhere. He does not call everyone to join immediately; his first appeal is to certain groups, thus singling these out for specific criticism.

Another main object of satire in Nyeuvont is the way in which people dress. Dress at the time was crucial as it reflected one’s status in society.\(^\text{15}\)

The marot provides us with a direct satirical attack on those who hire their clothes in order to keep up with the latest fashion, thereby attempting to hide their lowly class: ‘dat alte menich verrompen vuylvat met ghehuerde cleederen frisch en moy sijn’ (‘that many a wrinkled dustbin struts around in rented clothes’).\(^\text{16}\) The marot again criticizes those who try to give the impression of being richer than they are:
‘Sy en hebben naw een mijte oft een hemde aent dlijf tharen onproffijte van buiten hem toonende al warent ionckers’ (‘They have hardly a penny to their name, but they dress like lords’), and this satirically stresses their pretence.\textsuperscript{17}

The second literary device in \textit{Nyeuvont} is parody. Parody, as is often claimed, is not always used derogatorily, as the parodied object is not necessarily the object under attack. This problem is highlighted in the play, where one could be forgiven for initially regarding the parodying of church practices by the characters as being anti-clerical. In \textit{Nyeuvont} we encounter amongst others the deceptive elevation of Sinte Lorts, false indulgences and a parodic sermon. These practices are employed in the parody to exemplify the presence of deceit in the world and are not expressly intended to undermine the church. A clerical parody replaces a worldly one in order to reinforce the extent to which deceit permeates the world. \textit{Nyeuvont} is therefore not a parody against the elevation of saints or their worship, nor against established religious ritual per se. It does, however, challenge the ineffectiveness of the church in maintaining morality, which expressed itself most blatantly in the use of church practices such as indulgence-selling in order to earn money which is evidence of the church’s open participation in the growing capitalist economy.

In \textit{Nyeuvont} we find a parodic sermon where instead of announcing that he is going to read a passage from the Bible, Hardt van Waerseggen says that his story comes from ‘the book of Lueren’.\textsuperscript{18} The word ‘Lueren’ would immediately have conjured up a less than trustworthy atmosphere as it means ‘to mislead’.\textsuperscript{19} Similarly Hardt van Waerseggen uses the pattern of the introduction to a hagiography, when he stresses that Sinte Lorts comes from a ‘noble’ lineage: ‘Haer vader was machtich, gehieten Sueringe, ende haer moeder was edel ende hiet Lueringhe’ (‘Her father was powerful and was called Unpleasant Outcome and her mother was noble and was called Deceit’).\textsuperscript{20} Again we are informed that Sinte Lorts stands for nothing but deceit, as the family names ‘Sueringe’ and ‘Lueringhe’ suggest.\textsuperscript{21} We also find macaronic Latin in the parodic sermon, where Latin-like words have been invented to parody the fraudulent character of Sinte Lorts and her elevation: ‘Lexta, texta. Notoria in maniribus. Luera, Suera, scriptum in pampiribus.’\textsuperscript{22} Again we encounter those words linked to falsehood and deceit, ‘Luera, Suera’, intended to inform the public of the deviousness of the cassenaers and their practices.

A contrast effect in \textit{Nyeuvont} is obtained by the author’s subtle use of irony. Certain remarks made by some of the characters are humorous or mildly sarcastic and imply the exact opposite of what the words would
normally mean. In this way, the *Nyeuvont* author is also indicating to his audience what he regards as ‘correct’ behaviour.

Practijke’s words stating that if you worship Sinte Lorts you will hardly ever experience poverty and wretchedness sum up the whole devious and deceitful line of thought behind the elevation of Sinte Lorts and they form a sharp ironic contrast with the words spoken by the cassenaer, Cleyn Vreese: ‘Men sal u al inscrijven! Wilt nabesaet gheven, so langhe als ghijt hebt’ (‘We will enrol you! Give a donation for as long as you can’). In other words; to be a member of the guild of Sinte Lorts you have to give as much as you can for as long as you can, which certainly will lead you to poverty!

By using irony the author tries to promote a new set of ethics. His ability to see the negative side of society enables him to show that the increasingly powerful mercantile ethos of money-lending and spending beyond one’s means is not the way to a secure future. It will inevitably lead to poverty if a strong set of moral guidelines does not accompany it.

Finally we will examine briefly the use of allegory. The characters have all been attributed a particular function which is demonstrated by the author’s choice of names. These names are allegorical in nature and their apparent meanings are used as symbols of the deeper moral undertone in *Nyeuvont*.

The character who initiates the plan to elevate Sinte Lorts is Vrouw Nyeuvont. ‘Nyeuvont’ implies that she is the ‘crafty inventor’ of the plan, thereby paradoxically becoming the instigator of the *Nyeuvont* author’s guide to a new morality. We are introduced to her negative aspect in her monologue at the outset of the first scene when she speaks of the Wheel of Fortune. She herself predicts that she will be favoured by Fortune and that everyone will soon praise her. Here, and later in the play, we see that she is not prepared to wait for Fortune to come her way, but that she is going to take charge of her own destiny and use her ‘crafty invention’ to crank herself to the top of the Wheel, thereby initiating the action.

The allegorical names of the two lawyers, Loosheyt and Practijke, suggest respectively that they are ‘misleading and false’ and capable of ‘wily practices’. By means of Vrouw Nyeuvont’s ‘crafty invention’ of the plan to elevate Sinte Lorts, the two will ‘mislead’ people with their ‘wily practices’ with the goal of making money at the expense of others.

The saint which the three plan to elevate is called Sinte Lorts. ‘Lorts’ comes from the verb ‘lortsen’, which means to deceive, and more particularly to deceive in trade. Sinte Lorts’s name can therefore be translated as ‘Saint Deceit’ and represents the crux of the whole text: the worship and practice of deceit.
Hardt van Waerseggen’s name, which literally means that he has difficulty in telling the truth, stands for ‘mendacity’, and this becomes clear when we consider the falsehoods he tells the public about the guild of Sinte Lorts. Cleyn Vreese, his helper, has ‘little fear’, which points towards his shamelessness. Both allegorical names grasp the mentality which the author dislikes.

Finally we must turn to the character of Meest Elc, whose name implies that he represents ‘Nearly Everybody’. Meest Elc does not fulfil the same function as Elckerlijc in the Middle Dutch morality, as he does not undergo a process of sin followed by repentance. This serves to emphasise the depth to which society had plunged and increases the acceptability of the author’s message. Meest Elc and his sons, Die Sulcke (Some People), Veel Volks (Many People) and TCommuyn (the Townspeople), all stand for that section of the mercantile middle class who, by whatever means, set out to get rich quickly without any moral scruples.

The obvious failure of the old moral order is reflected by the blatantness of the characters’ names, which flaunt their immorality publicly, once more underlining the fact that a new morality based on shame was required.

**Sot and marot**

The lack of respect for the truth and of shame is further highlighted by the fool or sot, Schoon Tooch, and his bauble or marot, Quaet ende Waerseggen. Schoon Tooch represents ‘fine pretence’ as he tries to cover up what is said by his marot, who, by implication of his name, speaks the ‘evil truth’.

Together the sot and marot symbolize the paradox of the wisdom of human folly and were used prolifically in literature and art towards the end of the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the early modern era. Around 1500 the fool and his bauble began to take on a highly moralizing stance and the figure of the fool became a commentator on and a ‘mirror’ of humanity.

In contrast to the tradition in which fools were used to portray wisdom, Scoon Tooch falls for every deceit. Thus he says of the blatantly devious Meest Elc: ‘Maer hi es ghetrouwe in sijn wandelinghe’ (‘He is trustworthy in his ways’). The sot’s *alter ego*, Quaet ende Waerseggen, however, has here usurped the moralizing role which normally belonged to the fool in this period. Thus Quaet ende Waerseggen is the instrument by which the author introduces the element of shame.
Indicative of their function is the crucial scene where the cassenaers start their recruitment drive for the guild of Sinte Lorts. The sot considers entering the guild and asks his marot’s opinion, who subsequently ‘whispers’ in the sot’s ear that she thinks that there are a lot of easy women in the guild, thus showing its dubious morality and embarrassing both the sot and the onlooker. Instead of keeping the words of the marot to himself the sot repeats them, gets angry, threatens to hit the marot and curses the marot’s mouth: ‘God bedroef haer muylgat!’ The comical device deployed by the author in this instance heightens the sense of embarrassment and clearly indicates to the onlooker what direction he wants the development of a new moral code to take.

In Nyeuvont the marot plays a similar role to that of a feeder in a comical duo to which the sot can then react, and between them they represent and reveal common sense and reason. Their lines are often directly linked to the lines of the other characters, thus facilitating the transfer of their fool’s wisdom into the main action. Throughout the play the sot and marot act therefore as the signposts employed by the Nyeuvont author to direct his audience towards the path of a new morality.

The characters as instruments of class criticism

The primary concern of the Nyeuvont author as reflected in the text, was centred on the rapid social changes which were being wrought by the burgeoning proto-capitalist economy. Living in or near Antwerp, he witnessed these changes at their most acute, as Braudel noticed, coastal towns were more open to social mobility than the countryside and those therein. This distrust towards social mobility is not reflected across the board. Indeed, our author is solely concerned with the petty bourgeoisie, a class which was created by the new economic pattern, and not with the extremely rich merchants who were moving up the social ladder. Pirenne noted as early as 1922 that the latter did not form a disruption to the existing social hierarchy, as their offspring allowed themselves to be absorbed into the aristocracy by adopting an aristocratic lifestyle. The characters are therefore utilized to illustrate what is fundamentally wrong with the class born out of capitalism.

The author’s major challenge was how to portray the catalyst for the socio-economic changes in a manner which would be comprehensible to his future audiences. This led him to endow the character of Vrouw Nyeuvont with the abstract notion of proto-capitalist values. Seen in this light, her enigmatic figure becomes understandable, for if we take her to
mean the new economic principle, we may understand her role of stimulus, both for the plan to increase wealth, as well as for the moral disruption which accompanies this.

The author has divided the bourgeoisie into two halves: the lawyers who are the parasites and the rest, Meest Elc and his sons, who are parasites being preyed upon. The lack of moral distinction between both halves already indicates the author’s feelings that the bourgeoisie as a class is rudderless. It is no coincidence that the Nyeuvont author selected two lawyers and a family of bankers to represent the bourgeoisie. Both professions became prominent as a result of the growth of the proto-capitalist economy, without in most cases actually attaining power. Both professions also made their fortune without involving themselves in manual labour. They were, in the old terminology, usurers. As Aubailly mentions, ‘avocats ... ne songent que s’enricher’ (‘Lawyers dream only of getting rich’).

Superficially, the presence of the cassenaers in the play seems to be almost accidental, and certainly out of place amongst the other characters. Hardt van Waerseegen and Cleyn Vreese are in all probability not members of the bourgeoisie. They are referred to as ‘twee caelgen’ (‘men of the world’) by Practijke, which may lead us to consider them as vagabonds. What, then, are Hardt van Waersegen and Cleyn Vreese doing in Nyeuvont? It seems to me that without their sardonic behaviour, and that of the sot and the marot, the audience would have been at a loss to understand the author’s message. Their actions show the unacceptable in the seemingly acceptable facade of the petty bourgeoisie. The Nyeuvont author deploys his cassenaers on three different levels in order to clarify to his audience what it is that he wants to become the moral basis for the bourgeoisie. The first of these is the pretence at being respectable. This should have a real foundation and not just rest on appearance. As with everything in Nyeuvont, the author states the exact opposite of what he believes to be ‘good’: thus we find Hardt van Waersegen urging pretentious people to join the guild of Sinte Lorts.

Just as they uncover the truth behind pretence, so the cassenaers mercilessly attack that other weakness of the bourgeoisie, sex. Adultery was the main sin against the new bourgeois ethos. This disrupted the essential productive unit and of course also made use of false pretence.

The third area under scrutiny by the cassenaers is that of squandering money, which, unlike sexuality, did not have its antecedents in the Seven Deadly Sins of medieval Christian morality. To spend too much money, or to spend beyond one’s means, became a major offence against propriety. The cassenaers therefore invite everyone to do just this: ‘Leent
ende borcht, onthoudt dit vaste, ende en past opt betalen niet een jacke’
(‘Lend and borrow, remember this well, and don’t give a toss about repay-
ing it’).\textsuperscript{45}

A last and all-encompassing attack on the initiator of all this change can be found at the end of the text. It portrays Vrouw Nyeuvont and the lawyers showing a complete disdain for the victims of the new economic system: ‘Vrou Nyeuvont … seyt: Hach hach hay! Dan selense naect ende bijstier werden’ (‘Then they’ll just have to be broke’).\textsuperscript{46} Telling also is the remark made by Practijke, who says that these people are without shame, a last indication of the author’s preferred foundation for the new moral order.\textsuperscript{47}

Ultimately, as we have seen, this text is one of paradox: the evil cassenaers indicating the way to salvation; an apparent attack on the church, forming the basis of a new moral code which does not want to do without the church; an attack on capitalism without a wish to abol-
ish it and finally the apparent absence of a solution which is of course to be found in the hidden meaning of the text. \textit{Van Nyeuvont, Loosheyt ende Practike}, long classified by many as just another anti-clerical text, or even as obscure, can, with paradox as a key, be interpreted as an attempt to create order in the confused world of a \textit{fin-de-siècle} new bourgeoisie.