

Review

Johanna Ferket, *Hekelen met humor. Maatschappijkritiek in het zeventiende-eeuwse komische toneel in de Nederlanden*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2021, 313 pp. ISBN 9789087048617.



Given the vast quantity of Dutch comic plays from the seventeenth century, and the prominent role that comic theatre played in the early modern Low Countries, it might come as a surprise that this body of texts has thus far never been systematically studied by literary historians. But ever since antiquity, the attention paid to comic forms of art and literature has been dwarfed by the unremitting interest in their ‘serious’ counterparts, so maybe this is not so surprising after all. In any case, a monograph offering a general picture of comic theatre in the early modern Netherlands was long overdue, and, if only because of this, the publication of Johanna Ferket’s study *Hekelen met humor. Maatschappijkritiek in het zeventiende-eeuwse komische toneel in de Nederlanden* (‘Denouncing through humour. Social critique in seventeenth-century comic theatre in the Netherlands’) has to be greeted with joy.

Hekelen met humor is the slightly reworked version of Ferket’s doctoral thesis, which she defended at the University of Antwerp in 2018. In this clearly structured and well-argued monograph, Ferket analyses seventeenth-century comic plays from both the Dutch Republic and the Southern Netherlands, using the perspective of public opinion as her dominant framework. She asks how these plays discussed topical social issues, such as migration, corruption, and poverty, and how they contributed to contemporary public debates. Of the 336 surviving seventeenth-century comic plays she selected 123 works in which she detected explicit social critique, and these form the basic corpus of her research.

The systematic nature of Ferket’s analysis is reflected in the four chapters in which she has divided her study. After introducing her topic and outlining her research questions and methodology in the first chapter, she starts by mapping the main trends that can be

observed in the social critique offered by the comic plays from her corpus in chapter two. She distinguishes four categories of critique – lifestyle, social problems, professions, and private life – all of which are illustrated through one thematic case study. For example, the critique on lifestyle is specified through an analysis of how the theme of fashion is discussed in the plays. This ‘horizontal’ approach to social commentary in comic theatre, which looks at recurring topics throughout the corpus, is complemented with a ‘vertical’ approach in chapter three. In this chapter, Ferket discusses the oeuvres of six authors of comic plays, both from the Dutch Republic (W.D. Hooft, Thomas Asselijn, G.C. van Santen, and Joan van Paffenrode) and from the Southern Netherlands (Willem Ogier and Cornelis de Bie), thereby not only looking at the differences between north and south, but also between plays originating in the urban environments of Amsterdam and Antwerp, and those conceived in the more rural parts of both countries. The fourth and final chapter focuses on the rhetorical strategies used in the plays, thus addressing the more formal question of *how* social critique was communicated. Ferket necessarily limits herself to verbal strategies here, as she has to work with printed texts and cannot analyse the original performances, in which dress, gestures, and facial expressions no doubt also played a critical communicative role.

Apart from the pioneering role that Ferket’s book fulfils because of its systematic nature – previous scholarship usually limited itself to the study of specific authors or a relatively small set of plays – it differs from existing research on early-modern Dutch comic theatre in another important way. When discussing the function of comic theatre in the seventeenth century, scholars in the past either declared that these plays were primarily designed to make audiences laugh, and hence should be considered first and foremost as a form of entertainment, or argued for a didactic reading of the plays, in which the comic characters and their antics become vehicles for moral or other lessons, for example on how to distinguish truth from deception. Via her focus on social critique, Ferket breaks out of this dichotomy. The presence of various forms of specified critique on topics like the influx of German migrants in Amsterdam or the functioning of the local bailiff, which Ferket convincingly indicates in the plays, on the one hand shows comic theatre to be more than ‘innocent’ entertainment. On the other hand, it also proves that these plays not only contain universal lessons on how to behave well or how to tell right from wrong, but are also strongly embedded in local political and social contexts. For example, the economic prosperity of the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century is reflected in the growing attention that comic plays paid to the dangers of too much wealth, and to the fear of existing social hierarchies being turned upside down by *nouveaux riches*.

Another plus of Ferket’s study is that it has a remarkable eye for the role of context. Using a wide variety of secondary sources, this context is presented to the reader in a clear and concise way, leading to sound interpretations of the comic scenes and characters that are easy to follow. The emphasis on the solid embeddedness of the plays in concrete social developments also makes clear that comic theatre transcends the level of commonplaces and stereotypes to which it is often reduced, but on the contrary was rather topical, and engaged with contemporary concerns and issues on many occasions. The latter makes sense, given the central role farce and comedy played in early modern public life, especially in a town like Amsterdam.

Ferket's main argument, however, albeit refreshing, is still rather too much guided by the work of her predecessors in the fields of Dutch literary history and early modern theatre studies. Her goal to indicate a new primary function of comic theatre, namely to utter social critique and thus contribute to public opinion, presupposes that there indeed is one overarching or dominant function of this genre. It forecloses the possibility that comic plays can fulfil various functions at once, all dependent on time, place, and audience. Ferket's functionalistic perspective also diverts attention from the vital question of how comic theatre works formally and structurally, especially how it generates laughter, and what this tells us about the ideological meaning of the plays. This question is touched upon only in the last chapter, which suggests that form follows content and that the former is eventually a matter of secondary concern, whereas in reality, the comic form is where it all starts.

Ivo Nieuwenhuis, Radboud University Nijmegen