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# ‘Dulle Griet’ in seventeenth-century Flemish painting: a risible image of popular peasant culture

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This article investigates the representation of “dulle Griet” by the seventeenth-century artists David II Teniers and David III Ryckaert in the context of Catholic Flanders. In a society preoccupied with hierarchical order both the state and church aimed to root out archaic beliefs and customs, and to save society from witchcraft. The representations of mad Meg are interpreted as comic archaisms satirising the magical culture of the peasants to confirm the superiority of the urban elite. While these imaginative inventions heightened their artistic prestige and social standing, it is argued that the painters also contributed to the efforts to demystify the ideology of witch hunting.

## ‘Dulle Griet’ in sewentiende-eeuse Vlaamse skilderkuns: ’n lagwekkende beeld van populêre boerekultuur

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die voorstelling van “dulle Griet” deur die sewentiende-eeuse kunstenaars David II Teniers en David III Ryckaert in die konteks van Katolieke Vlaandere. In ’n maatskappy wat behep was met hiërgargiese orde het beide die staat en kerk daarna gestrewe om argaïese gelowe en gebruike uit te roei en om die samelewing van heksery te red. Die voorstellings van dulle Griet word geïnterpreteer as komiese argaïsmes wat die magiese kultuur van die boere gehel het om die superioriteit van die stedelike elite te bevestig. Terwyl hierdie verbeeldingryke uitvindings hul artistieke aansien en sosiale status verhoog het, kan dit bepleit word dat die skilders ook bygedra het tot die strewe om die ideologie van heksevervolging te ontmasker.

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In his book on *The art of laughter* Gibson (2006: 144) describes Bruegel's *Dulle Griet* as "one of his most comic creations". Painting nearly a century later the Flemish artists David II Teniers and David III Ryckaert repeated this motif of a mad Meg who fearlessly fights demons. This article aims to examine the theme of a "dulle Griet" or mad Meg as presented in seventeenth-century paintings in the Spanish Netherlands. In trying to understand its meaning and function, it is important to consider timing and the audience for such art.<sup>1</sup> In the period under discussion (1630-1650) society was preoccupied with hierarchical order. The Counter-Reformation aimed to christianise the masses by rooting out archaic beliefs and customs, while the church and state combined efforts to save society from another form of heresy, namely witchcraft. Both movements essentially strove to repress the popular culture of the peasant classes. As far as the audience is concerned, paintings of this size and type were generally purchased by the middle- to upper-class citizen. In trying to define their meaning I first consider the concept of a "dulle Griet" as it was explained by Grauls (1957) and interpret the seventeenth-century paintings as visualisations of popular sayings and farces. Considering iconographic qualities and formal characteristics within the pictorial tradition,<sup>2</sup> the paintings are investigated as comic images, as satirical works targeting the lower echelons of society. I examine the motif of mad Meg as the old peasant woman ridiculed as the bearer of an archaic and magic culture and as the stereotype of the angry wife striving to wear the pants. Different approaches to the interpretation of the images are considered. With reference to the contemporary literature<sup>3</sup> I also attempt to ascertain whether such paintings were created to be comical and elicit

1 This idea is based on Sullivan's argument for an interpretation of the witches of Dürer and Hans Baldung Grien (Sullivan 2000: 333-401).

2 This methodology is in line with the views of Johan Vanbergen 1986. Cf De Clippel (2006: 39-45) for an incisive summary of the debate on the interpretation of genre paintings.

3 The study of genre painting from a contemporary perspective was first propagated by Raupp (1983) and Muylle (1986) who regard the artists' biographies of De Bie, Houbraken and their followers as useful source material with regard to the earliest reception of genre paintings.

laughter from their intended audience.

## 1. The Counter-Reformation and witch-hunting

Before turning to the actual artworks, it is important to contextualise them. In addition, one should pay attention to regional and temporal variations, emphasising the interaction of a number of different factors (Sullivan 2000: 339). The depictions of mad Meg considered in this instance were made between 1630 and 1650, that is, after the most zealous phase of the Counter-Reformation had reaped its fruits. From about 1609, with the support of the Archdukes Albert of Austria and Isabella, the Counter-Reformation made significant progress in the Spanish Netherlands. According to Verberckmoes (1997: 76-7), the Catholic Reformation was not only a campaign of Christianisation but also “a reaction against all kinds of traditional customs” as practised by the peasantry. In particular, public festivities marked by drinking, dancing and masking “were considered a threat to orthodoxy and good morals”; hence participation in “dancing parties, mixed recreation and visits to village taverns” were restricted.<sup>4</sup> The prosperous middle classes supported the attempts of the ecclesiastical and secular authorities to curb the excesses of the peasantry in order to protect their own offspring. This resulted in a “civilizing offensive” launched by the elites and “the middling social groups”, demonstrating that hierarchical differences played a crucial role in determining the ways in which society evolved (Soly 1993: 46).

The Catholic Reformers identified an even more important form of heresy than Lutheranism or Calvinism, namely witchcraft (Vanhemelryck 2000: 278, 288). Witchcraft was considered the principal crime: it was a violation of the divine majesty – a crime against God – and a violation of the worldly majesty – a crime against the King

<sup>4</sup> Verberckmoes admits, however, that there is no consensus among church historians as to whether the Counter-Reformation was successful or instead provoked passive and active resistance in the form of excessive eating, drinking and laughing.

who is the patron of the Catholic religion (Dupont-Bouchat 1989: 11, 12). In the Spanish Netherlands witch-hunting was “most intense and widespread between 1590 and 1620 as a result of princely edicts issued in 1592 and 1606, which let loose a fearsome campaign of repression” (Muchembled 1990: 140). The trials were only abandoned in the late seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> Although the entire region of the Netherlands did not belong to the core areas of witch-hunts, the belief in the possibility of witchcraft persisted throughout the seventeenth century among all layers of the population (Lucas 1996: 91, Vanhemelryck 2000: 292).

Witch-hunting has been explained in various ways. Vanhemelryck maintains that while precarious social conditions and the social and economic inequality led to serious tensions, there are other motives that explain the witch-craze. These are, among others, the need for control in an uncertain world, the lack of priests, problems with the quality of the clerics, and the poor state of the religion of the people. Most convincingly, however, is his argument that the witch-hunts must be regarded as an attempt made by the Church and state to lift the cultural level of the masses and to bring the rather primitive and superficial religious beliefs of the masses to the level of the elite (Vanhemelryck 2000: 273-84, 288). Muchembled (1990: 139) puts it more bluntly:

Witch hunting is a liturgy of fear. It spreads obsessions that are essentially those of the learned, but which inspire real dread and anxiety among the peasant masses. Holding up to the latter a mirror of Satanism and sorcery, magistrates and demonologists exacerbate the social rifts in rural society by conferring on them a cultural, moral, and religious justification.

Muchembled is of the opinion that satanism and sorcery were figments invented by theologians whose ideas governed the imagination of the political elite in Europe. The picture painted by the demonologists was a diabolised version of practices, beliefs and customs of popular culture. The witch trials and savage executions were motivated by a desire to stamp out the “errors”

5 Martha van Wetteren, who was burnt alive on 23 October 1684 in Belsele, was the last witch to be burnt in Flanders (Vanhemelryck 2000: 243).

and “superstitions” of rural communities. The more the peasants defended their customs (such as amusements by night), the more diabolic they seemed to the authorities who would charge their practitioners with witchcraft. The reason why peasant women are usually linked with sorcery is due to their importance “in transmitting and preserving popular culture” by educating their children (Muchembled 1990: 148, 150).

Although a witch could be either a man or a woman, witch-hunting was essentially aimed at women. Like the early Christian authors, the demonologists and first inquisitors were fierce anti-feminists who regarded woman as the source of all evil, decay and death (Vanhemelryck 2000: 239, 240). Because the lustfulness of women is the main reason for witchcraft, women of all classes were prone to use their erotic nature for demonic purposes (Lucas 1996: 120).<sup>6</sup> Essentially the crimes committed by a witch consisted of participating in the sabbath, making a pact with the devil and having sex with him. The typical witch was an old, poor woman between 50 and 70 years of age, mostly a widow who was reputed to be a witch because her mother had been one (Dupont-Bouchat 1989: 15, Vanhemelryck 2000: 192-4). Though old and ugly, she was sexually insatiable and hence an easy prey for the devil who would present himself as a young handsome man seeking sexual favours (Vanhemelryck 2000: 222). In the minds of upright male citizens, women in general could inspire fear as potential witches.

In the region where Ryckaert and Teniers were active (Flemish Brabant and Antwerp), the last witches had been executed in the first decade of the seventeenth century, except in Mechelen where three witches were burnt to death in 1642 (Vanhemelryck 2000: 321). While witch-hunting was still part of the artists' lives, the

6 Note that young women of the prosperous *bourgeoisie* are also included in witch paintings such as those by Frans II Francken (Lucas 1996: 117, figures 9 and 10). Davidson (1987: 49-50) claims that Teniers portrayed his own wife Anna Bruegel in the *Incantation scene* (New York, The New York Historical Society) as the young witch studying a black book in the central vignette of the painting. Davidson speculates that Teniers probably included her “as a representative of the nobility”.

resistance to it was growing as a result of the changed mentality and the progress of science. Through a gradual mental evolution the worldly and clerical elite distanced itself from a demonological conception of witchcraft and rather advocated a worldview in which strange events were not ascribed to supernatural intervention but explained as the result of natural causes. The change in religious climate also had an impact on the disappearance of witch trials. From 1630 and in the second half of the seventeenth century, in particular, the quality of the clergy improved considerably. After 1650 the most vehement religious conflicts were over and no longer played such an important part in politics (Vanhemelryck 2000: 263-4, 284). It may be postulated that in the period when the “dulle Griet” paintings were created, witch-hunting was under severe public scrutiny.

## 2. The concept of a ‘dulle Griet’

The pictures by Teniers and Ryckaert portraying a mad Meg are derived from Bruegel’s painting of *Dulle Griet*<sup>7</sup> which has been the subject of many studies.<sup>8</sup> Considered by Karel van Mander to depict a mad Meg who plunders in front of hell, Grauls investigated van Mander’s statement and analysed Bruegel’s painting in terms of sayings and proverbs.<sup>9</sup> Gibson (2006: 127) accepts Grauls’s interpretation as the most convincing “chiefly because he situates its subject matter firmly within the popular culture of Bruegel’s time”. While I agree, I consider it crucial to emphasise the importance of the legend of St Margaret as recorded in *Den Roomschen Uylen-Spiegel* (Isaac le Duc 1671). This primary source provides several keys to unlock the meaning of a mad Meg in seventeenth-century paintings.

7 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Dulle Griet* (1561). Oil on oak, 117.4 x 162 cm. Marked bottom left: B(?) . . . L(?) MDLXI. Antwerp, Museum Mayer van den Bergh. For an extended bibliography, cf de Coo (1978: 37-40).

8 For a list of publications dealing with the interpretation of Bruegel’s *Dulle Griet*, cf Gibson (2006: 219, n 11).

9 “een dulle Griet die een roof voor de Helle doet”: Karel van Mander (Grauls 1957: 43).

The concept of a “dulle Griet” or mad Meg is derived from the apocryphal legend of St Margaret of Antioch.<sup>10</sup> According to this legend, St Margaret had to fight two devils. The first one appeared in the form of a dreadful dragon. This dragon devoured the virgin but as soon as she made the sign of the cross it tore in half, enabling the girl to escape from the dragon unharmed. The second devil took on a human form. Through the power of Margaret’s prayer his hands were tied to his knees or to his hips, or he was bound with his hands and feet to an iron band or else he was tied up with her veil. Margaret threw this devil to the floor, grabbed him by his hair, by his head, his beard or his hands and placed her foot on his neck, on his head, and so on. In the end he was very pleased when the virgin allowed him to depart from her cell. In the popular imagination this virgin and martyr, who was forced to fight the devil, gradually turned from a frail girl into a strong, ill-tempered woman. Hence two disparate figures evolved from the legend of St Margaret of Antioch: on the one hand, St Margaret, the patron saint of pregnant women – in particular those in labour – who still is a popular saint and the object of active popular devotion and, on the other, the “kwade” (ill-tempered), “dulle [mad] Griet”, more of a “helleveeg” (hellcat) than a saint, the personification of the malicious woman (Graulds 1957: 7-8, 68-9).<sup>11</sup>

The split between these two figures happened long before Bruegel painted his *Dulle Griet* who, Graulds (1957: 43, 69) argues, represents this malicious woman derived from the devils’ tamer of the legend of St Margaret. By the first half of the seventeenth century, the name Griet was commonly used to denote any ill-tempered, scolding woman, the personification of a *kwaad wijf* (an angry woman). By adding the adjective *dulle*, her characteristics are simply reinforced; *dulle* should be translated as wrathful, angry or hot-tempered (Gibson 1979: 9, Gibson 2006: 127).<sup>12</sup> A mad Meg is also often described

10 For an elaborate account of the legend of St Margaret of Antioch, cf Graulds (1957: 6-8); for an account of the legend of Margaretha-Pelagius, cf Graulds (1957: 20-21) and Caron (1988b: 19-20).

11 Cf also Caron (1988b: 20) who draws a distinction between the “heavenly” Margaret and the “hellish” mad Meg.

12 “Een dulle Griet” means an ill-tempered, very angry woman in Flemish dialects; the Walloons call her “ine mâle Magrite” (Graulds 1957: 28-31).

as a “helleveeg”. According to Tuinman (1726: 220), the term *belleveeg* refers to a bold woman who could sweep hell by chasing out the devils.<sup>13</sup>

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this “Griet” or Meg appears in several farces (*kluchten*) to personify an angry woman, the *belleveeg* – a meaning which she also adopts in various sayings (Grauls 1957: 69). One of these sayings is “de duivel op een kussen binden”, to bind the devil on a cushion.<sup>14</sup> It first appeared in 1500 but without any reference to the legend of St Margaret.<sup>15</sup> The expression was then used in *Den Roomschen Uylen-Spiegel ofte Lust-Hof der Catholijcken*, published in Amsterdam in 1671. In this work the author conflated the two different legends of Margaret-Pelagius, on the one hand, and of Margaret of Antioch, on the other. It is written that Margaret-Pelagius behaved herself so well and religiously that it inflicted the envy of the devil. He came to torment her but like a man she warded him off and conquered him:

Once when he came to her room, she scared him to such an extent that he was forced to crawl into a barrel standing there on which she threw a cushion to suffocate him. At the same time (or some other time because this is not clear) she took the devil and tied him to a cushion. (Because hardness has to be conquered by the gentleness of women). In memory of this brave deed a wooden image is still to be found on the choir of the Grote Kerk in Dordrecht representing this story for the laymen (my translation, BvH).<sup>16</sup>

In this instance Margaret binds the devil on a cushion, establishing a clear link between Meg and the saying. Finally, in Tuinman

13 Also quoted in Grauls (1957: 45): “... een stout wijf, die de hel zou kunnen vagen, door de Duivelen daar uit te jagen”. I disagree with Gibson (2006: 134) who accepts the literal translation of a *belleveeg* as a “damned [one] from Hell”.

14 The expression can be understood in two ways: either to tie the devil to a cushion, or to bind the devil (while he is lying) on a cushion. It has been represented visually in both ways.

15 Grauls (1957: 23): “den duvel op een cussen binden”.

16 Cited by Grauls (1957: 20): “Als hy eens by haer in een kamer quam / soo maeckte se het hem aldaer soo bangh / dat hy genootsaect wierdt in een tonne te krupen / die aldaer stondt / op welcke sy een kussen wierp / om hem daer onder te smoren. Op de selve tijt (of op eenen anderen (want dit onseker is / heeftse

(1726: 23), the saying was explicitly related to the legend of St Margaret: "The best Meg one could find was the one who tied the devil to/on a cushion".<sup>17</sup> Hence it is clear that any representation of a woman binding a devil on a cushion is a "Griet", a mad Meg.<sup>18</sup>

This same "Griet" or Meg also acts as the personification of an angry woman in the saying "een roof voor de hel halen", to take (a) booty in front of hell. According to Grauls, the oldest example of this saying appears in the *Ghemeene Duytsche Spreckwoorden* (Campen 1550): "She would well take a booty in front of hell and return unscathed".<sup>19</sup> The French equivalent of the saying<sup>20</sup> which translates as "He would go into hell with sword in hand" also existed in Flemish.<sup>21</sup> In later publications the saying is variously phrased as "sy/hij sou een roof voor de hel (vandaan/weg) halen", meaning that s/he is so undaunted that s/he, regardless of any danger posed by the devil or hell, dares to undertake something for gain (Grauls 1957: 44-5). Because a *belleveeg* is considered to be capable of sweeping hell by chasing out the devils, there is a clear relationship between a *belleveeg* or mad Meg and this saying.<sup>22</sup> As argued by Grauls (1957:

den duyvel genomen ende op een kussen gebonden. (Want de hardigheyd moet met sachtigheyd der vrouwen overwonnen worden). Tot memorie van welcke kloecke daed / een beeltenisse van hout op het Choor van de Groote-kerck tot Dordrecht als noch gevonden werdt / het welcke dese Historie voor de leecken enen vertoont."

17 Also cited by Grauls (1957: 25): "'t Was de beste Griet die men vond, die den Duivel op een kussen bond". In this instance "best" has the meaning of Meg being the most fitting prototype of the malicious woman.

18 Grauls (1957: 32-5) is at pains to demonstrate that the saying "de duivel op een kussen binden" must be attributed to St Margaret. His argument is entirely convincing.

19 Cited in Grauls (1957: 44): "Sie solde wel een roof voer die helle halen, ende coemen ongeschendet weder".

20 The French equivalent of the saying "Eenen roof voor d'helle halen" was recorded by F Goedthals (Antwerp, 1568) as: "Il yroit a l'enfer l'espee au poing" (Grauls 1957: 44).

21 The Flemish saying "Hij zou in de hel gaan met het zwaard in de hand" was published in a bilingual collection of proverbs in Antwerp in 1549 (Grauls 1957: 46).

22 Tuinman (1726: 286) regards the "helleveeg" as the sister of the one who would

45), a mad Meg taking booty in front of hell is the basis of Bruegel's composition of *Dulle Griet*.

### 3. *Dulle Griet* as comic image

Bruegel's *Dulle Griet* belongs to the peasant genre. De Clippel (2006: 42-3) argues that the humanistic public of Bruegel and the artist himself used ancient sources such as the writings of Pliny to lend artistic legitimacy to the lowly esteemed peasant genre.<sup>23</sup> According to Raupp (1983: 402), this positive perception of genre painting persisted in the seventeenth century with the new insight, however, that the low and popular were considered to be the explicit equivalents of the burlesque and comical. Stressing the importance of the humanistic *ut pictura poesis* theory reflected in the contemporary discourse on genre painting, Raupp explains that the norms and categories of the literary *comoedia* similarly informed the discourse. Since the sixteenth century genre paintings were evaluated on the basis of the humanistic theory on the comical which was ultimately derived from the writings of Cicero. The ancient definition of comedy as *imitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis, imago veritatis* remained the same throughout the seventeenth century: the comedy is an imitation of everyday life, a mirror of morals and an image of the truth (Raupp 1983: 402).<sup>24</sup> Considering the norms and categories of comical theory as well as their application in art, Raupp arrives at certain characteristics of genre painting which contemporary art lovers appear to have valued most: realism, not as expression of a worldview but as mode of representation, as instrument of visualisation and instruction;<sup>25</sup> the painting of the passions and

take away booty in front of hell. He also remarks that the taking away of booty in front of hell often becomes a plundering of hell; cf Grauls (1957: 45).

23 For a discussion of the genre of peasant painting in seventeenth-century Flanders, cf Van Haute 1999: 20-1.

24 Cf also De Clippel 2006: 44. Mariët Westermann (1997) uses this same point of departure for her discussion of Jan Steen.

25 Comic genre paintings are by their very nature moralising: they carry a message or warning, because for the seventeenth-century public the comical was undeniably intertwined with moralisation. Cf De Clippel (2006: 65) for an

state of mind,<sup>26</sup> including a clear and explicit portrayal of the class and character of the figures; the theme of peasant life as a material sphere for amusing, witty and entertaining representations; wit and humour as means of instruction, of class differentiation and self-esteem or simply as means of amusement (Raupp 1983: 412). Comic paintings, like farcical anecdotes, were considered a prime remedy against melancholy, an entertaining pastime after a day's work, a means to sharpen the brain and a virtuous form of pleasure (De Clippel 2006: 65). The following discussions of mad Meg paintings by Flemish artists in the seventeenth century focus on their characteristics as comic genre paintings.

#### 4. A mad Meg tying the devil on a cushion

A mad Meg tying the devil on or to a cushion is a motif that found expression in the visual arts before Bruegel. Isaac le Duc, the author of *Den Roomschen Uylen-Spiegel*, refers to a wooden sculpture on the choir of the Grote Kerk in Dordrecht, the whereabouts of which are questioned by Grauls (1957: 43). In the exhibition catalogue of *Helse en hemelse vrouwen*, an image is reproduced of exactly such a sculpture representing a woman tying the devil to a cushion (Caron 1988a: 19, figure 15). Stated to be executed by Albrecht Gelmers (1532-1548), the sculpture is a knob of a choir stall to be found in the Church of St Catherine of Hoogstraten in Belgium.<sup>27</sup> Considering the location, the woman portrayed is without doubt St Catherine metamorphosed into a mad Meg. Staring ahead, she sits with a cushion on her knees, ready to tie a wriggling little monster to it by means of a flat strap. Although she wears a neat long dress and a pious cap, her

informed discussion.

26 In the art theoretical views of the day on genre painting, the depiction of character and the passions represents at least just as important meaningful moments as a possible literary layer of meaning (Raupp 1983: 414).

27 I thank Kees van Schoten of the Museum Catharijneconvent for referring me to the website of the Centrum voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, Radboud Universiteit, Nijmegen, which documented the photographs of the late J A J M Verspaandonk. Cf <[www.let.ru.nl/ckd/koorbank](http://www.let.ru.nl/ckd/koorbank)>.

fearlessness shows in her mouth, the corners of which are pulled down in a determined grin.

In his painting of *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559),<sup>28</sup> Bruegel depicts the Middle-Netherlandish expression “to bind the devil on a cushion” in the form of a dauntless housewife who holds down a screeching devil on a cushion with her knee while tying him up with a cloth – or her veil as legend would have it. Next to the pillow lies the distaff – symbol of the diligent housewife – which Meg used to batter the devil. In 1561 Bruegel repeated this theme in the painting of *Dulle Griet* (Grauls 1957: 32, figure 2, de Coö 1978: 34, Gibson 2006: 130-1). A devil with the head of a bird lies face down on a cushion positioned over a ladder. Bending over and pinning him down with her knee, a woman of thin posture ties the devil’s hands together on his back.

In the seventeenth century the expression was taken up again by David II Teniers in *A mad Meg tying the devil to a cushion* (late 1630s) (Figure 1).<sup>29</sup> This painting shows an old peasant woman in an interior kneeling in a magic circle which she has drawn with an *arthame*, a consecrated witches’ knife (Lucas 1996: 107-8). The woman is tying a screaming demon-fish to a pillow, while a horde of devils flees away from her probably causing a hellish noise. Davidson (1987: 56) and Lucas (1996: 114-5) acknowledge that the painting illustrates the Flemish saying “Zij zou de duivel op het kussen binden” (She would tie the devil on the cushion) in a humorous manner. However, Davidson (1987: 56) mistakenly identifies it as a witch scene, commenting that the old peasant witch “has gone in over her head and is really very scared of the demons she has conjured”.<sup>30</sup> Lucas (1996: 115), on the other hand, recognises the old woman as a “dulle Griet”

28 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559). Berlin, Museum Dähl-  
em. For an illustration of the detail, cf Caron (1988a: 76, figure 59b). Cf also  
Grauls (1957: 33).

29 David II Teniers, *A mad Meg tying the devil to a cushion* (former title: *The witch*)  
(late 1630s). Panel, 31 x 46 cm. Signed bottom right: D.TENIERS. Munich,  
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, inv no 1845.

30 Gibson (2006: 228, n 70) replies that “her expression is more baleful than  
fearful and the general movement of the devils is distinctly away from her”.

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who is not afraid of the devil, and adds that such a figure has a great deal in common with witches.



Figure 1: David II Teniers, *A mad Meg tying the devil to a cushion* (former title: *The witch (Hexenspuk)*) (late 1630s). Panel, 31 x 46 cm. Signed bottom right: D.TENIERS. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, inv no 1845. Photo: Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Staatsgalerie im Neuen Schloß Schleißheim.

Despite the presence of the magic circle and the witches' knife, Lucas concedes that hardly any specific witches' activities are discernable. Gibson (2006: 143-4), who gives the painting the title of *Old woman binding a devil to a cushion*, is not certain whether the old woman represents another "dulle Griet". Although he agrees that the proverb speaking of "the best Griet that one found, was the one who bound the Devil to a cushion" circulated in this period, Gibson is of the opinion that the "old woman can hardly be St. Margaret; rather, the artist apparently conceived her as a witch, for she kneels within a magic circle inscribed on the floor".

The varying opinions expressed by Davidson, Lucas and Gibson indicate in the first instance the measure of confusion regarding witches and the figure of mad Meg. In 1978, de Coö (1978: 35) complained about the fact that the central figure of Bruegel's *Dulle Griet* is frequently referred to as a witch (*heks*).<sup>31</sup> This is essentially incorrect: a mad Meg stands in marked contrast to a witch. I would argue that in this work the artist conflates these two closely related yet distinct personae and that this conflation is deliberate and in itself the crucial message. In the witch processes, the most difficult task was for the judges to establish whether a mad old woman with odd behaviour and of ill reputation was a witch, even though this could never be proven (Vanhemelryck 2000: 166). The question arises as to whether this painting could present the artist's comment on the dubious nature of accusations of witchcraft.

It appears that David II Teniers took a deep interest in the theme of witchcraft and witch-hunting from the start of his career.<sup>32</sup> Although Lucas (1996: 95) states that it is nearly impossible to establish whether a painter of witch scenes believed in the existence of witches or not, she nevertheless concurs with Davidson (1987: 51) that Teniers probably believed in witches because he was a good Catholic. His witch paintings vary greatly in iconography, showing witches preparing for the sabbath, invoking devils, cooking a magic potion while uttering magic formulas, being anointed for the flight to the sabbath, and so on. Lucas (1996: 91, 96) maintains that the artist obtained his iconographic elements from reading demonological books, listening to sermons and attending trials.<sup>33</sup> His most important source, however, was most probably the *Witches' Sabbath*<sup>34</sup>

31 Glück (1932) even called her "vielleicht die bedeutendste Hexenfigur in der bildenden Kunst des Abendlandes" (de Coö 1978: 35).

32 For a well-researched discussion of the witch paintings of David II Teniers, cf Lucas 1996.

33 Teniers owned a country estate close to Mechelen (Malines) where between 1544 and 1663 thirty-three witches were sentenced to death. Lucas (1996: 95) is of the opinion that Teniers must have heard about or even attended trials. Cf also Davidson 1987: 49-50.

34 Frans II Francken, *Witches' Sabbath* (1607). Signed and dated: Den.IoN franfis francken fecit et INtor 1607. Panel, 56 x 83.5 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches

painted by Frans II Francken in 1607 (Davidson 1987: 49, 50). It is one of the first representations of its kind, displaying an overwhelming array of motifs related to witchcraft (Härting 1989: 69; Lucas 1996: 116).

As Teniers was well informed on the issue of witches, he did not make a mistake in the painting of *A mad Meg tying the devil to a cushion*. He shows how easy it was to manipulate the situation by merely adding a couple of incriminating paraphernalia of witchcraft.<sup>35</sup> By making the viewer aware of the dubiousness of the situation, Teniers questions the legitimacy of witch-hunting but he cautiously camouflages his criticism by the clever use of the comic genre. He presents mad Meg as an old peasant woman dressed in plain simple clothes, acting out the proverbial anger of a “dulle Griet” by tying the devil to a cushion. Her physical ugliness and deplorable demeanour mirror her entire being and state of mind.<sup>36</sup> This characterisation in itself gives the figure – and the painting – its meaning as a comic image. Moreover, mad Meg is represented as a woman of the peasant class. In this respect this “dulle Griet” painting follows the tradition of comic theory: satirical artworks entertain and instruct their audiences by employing subject matter drawn from the lowest echelons of society (Raupp 1983: 402, Franits 2004: 37). As a peasant woman Meg is the “savage” or the “other”, representing all those qualities which the artist and his clients despised.<sup>37</sup> For the urban elite, the milieu of the peasants functioned as their counter-world. While causing much hilarity, this counter-world underpins very clearly the superiority of the real world. So the “dulle Griet” was not only turned into an object of amusement, but also served to flatter the sense of self-esteem of the beholders who considered themselves superior to the

Museum, inv no GG 1070 (Härting 1989, Cat no 408).

35 It is, of course, also possible that the magic circle was added later by a less discriminating, zealous believer in witchcraft.

36 For an overview on the relationship between physical ugliness and moral baseness, cf De Clippel 2006: 58-60.

37 For the notion of negative self-definition, cf Paul Vandebroek 1987; on the peasant genre, cf Jan Muylle 1986. For additional sources, cf Van Haute 1999: Chapter 3.

evil, stupid or foolish woman represented via the inversion (Dresen-Coenders 1988: 73, 78-9).

So far *A mad Meg tying the devil to a cushion* fits the description of comical genre painting as defined by Raupp, except for the aspect of realism. The realism in the painting can be seen in the life-like representation of a plain, low-life setting and figure. The overall sombre tonality defines the style as low in accordance with the low subject (De Clippel 2006: 57). No references to learned literary traditions spoil the semblance of a banal reality, except of course the demons which are derived from the popular works of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. This motif, which also appears in the themes of a mad Meg taking booty in front of hell and of the temptation of St Anthony,<sup>38</sup> has no particular significance other than to create a hellish atmosphere and to highlight the woman's fearlessness.<sup>39</sup> Contrary to the concept of *imitatio vitae*, the artist created an infernal setting that bears no relationship to the real world. Mad Meg thus belongs to another world, namely the world upside down, the opposite of what is considered the normal or ideal world. This is a comic inversion of prevalent norms.<sup>40</sup> And because the instruction is wrapped in an amusing package, the inversion confirms and enhances the truth value of those norms (Westermann 1997: 124, Dresen-Coenders 1988: 73).

38 As a matter of fact, there is a painting representing *The temptation of St Anthony* that shows the anchorite seated at a table facing more or less the same crowd of devilish creatures: Follower of David II Teniers, *The temptation of St Anthony (s a)*, panel, 31 x 45 cm. Location unknown. Auction London, Sotheby's 8-4-1987, no 126 and 25-5-1988, no 27. Cf Van Haute 1999: 169, Cat C1.

39 These demons were not experienced by the seventeenth-century viewer as frightening or repugnant *diableries* (as was the case in Bosch's time) but rather as bizarre fantasies and clever visions (De Clippel 2006: 64-5).

40 Jests work on the same principle of inversion: what is said or done is in fact the exact opposite of what is meant (Verberckmoes 1999: 166).

## 5. A mad Meg taking booty in front of hell

Inspired by Bruegel's illustrious example, David III Ryckaert painted his own version of *Dulle Griet* or *A mad Meg taking booty in front of hell* (Figure 2).<sup>41</sup>



Figure 2: David III Ryckaert, *Dulle Griet (A mad Meg taking booty in front of hell)*. Panel, 47.5 x 63 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv no 722. Photo: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

41 David III Ryckaert, *Dulle Griet (A mad Meg taking booty in front of hell)*. Panel, 47.5 x 63 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv no 722 (Van Haute 1999: 145, Cat A145). It is interesting to note that Lucas (1996: 122) gives it the title *Helleveeg* as an alternative to 'dulle Griet'. Gibson (2006: 143, figure 82) re-titles it *Old woman attacking devils*, eliminating its more specific meaning. A copy after this painting exists, the authorship of which is not certain: *A mad Meg taking booty in front of hell*. Canvas, 47 x 61.5 cm. Auction Vienna, Dorotheum 10-6-1997, no 252.

Whereas Gibson (2006: 142) states that it “cannot be determined with certainty if she represents Dulle Griet”, in my view the Vienna painting is without doubt a representation of mad Meg. On the left-hand side a wild-eyed, gaping old crone stands at the mouth of hell, the fire of which is seen burning behind her. Her thin grey hair streaming out from beneath her cap, she wields a broom above her head in both hands, while a sword or knife dangles from her left side. Dressed in a simple top and skirt, she also wears an apron in which costly vessels and glittering chains are bundled up. She sways her broom to chase a horde of devilish creatures out of hell into the daylight; they occupy the right half of the painting. In the upper right-hand corner, daylight brightens the sky against which a branch stands out, harbouring a little owl (Van Haute 1999: 145).<sup>42</sup> While the iconography of this picture is clearly inspired by Bruegel’s *Dulle Griet*, Ryckaert’s mad Meg wears no armour. In Bruegel’s painting she is depicted wearing a breastplate, a mailed glove and a kind of metal cap on her head. She brandishes a sword in her right hand, while a knife dangles from her belt. Ryckaert’s mad Meg, on the other hand, wields a broom sideways above her head directed at a horde of devilish creatures. She is thus represented quite literally as a *bellevveeg* who sweeps hell by chasing out the devils with a broom.<sup>43</sup> At the same time mad Meg acts out the saying “een roof voor de hel halen” by taking away the booty in front of hell. The loot which is bundled up in her apron consists only of costly items.

What stands out as the most striking characteristic in this work is the painting of the passions. The figure of mad Meg is a superb illustration of the artist’s skill and sensitivity in portraying her essential character traits and mood. Following the rules of decorum he depicts the figure’s dress, actions, gestures and facial expression in accordance with her gender, age, social class and occupation (De Clippel 2006: 51). “Dulle Griet” is an old, ugly woman dressed in peasant clothes, swaying a broom in a position of attack, her face

42 The little owl in the background symbolises Ryckaert’s comment on the foolishness of mad Meg’s behaviour (Van Haute 1999: 56).

43 Cf also Lucas 1996: 124.

drawn into a grimace. Ryckaert represents her with eyes as round as saucers, characterising her as a very angry or "kwaad wijf". Like the "dulle Griet" pictured by Teniers in *A mad Meg tying the devil to a cushion*, Ryckaert's protagonist is characterised as a comic image by means of her physical ugliness and uncivilised behaviour. As a representative of the peasant class, she reappears as the "other", reviled and ridiculed by the urban elite.

As in Teniers's painting of *A mad Meg tying the devil to a cushion* the realism of Ryckaert's work resides in the mode of representation. He paints a plain figure in a simple setting in a life-like style, using a sombre palette to match the low subject matter. This reality is turned upside down by the inclusion of the devils whose fear for mad Meg underpins her wildness. Ryckaert displays a considerable degree of creativity in the conceptualisation of the demonic. His devils are skeletal creatures inspired by animals, the sight of which provokes an instinctive repulsion: serpents, batrachians, saurians, bats, insects, or else, decomposing organisms, which he combines to increase the horror of the scene (Van Haute 1999: 56). In addition to testifying to his creative powers, Ryckaert's demons conjure up another world, both frightening and amusing, yet confirming the truth value of the real world.

An interesting motif in this painting is the broom. While this attribute – symbolic of womanhood – identifies mad Meg literally as a *belleveeg*, it was also the favourite means of transport for the witch to fly to the Sabbath (Vanhemelryck 2000: 152, 153). By placing a broom in the hands of mad Meg, the artist brought her closer to the witch. The question arises as to whether Ryckaert, like Teniers, also aimed to puzzle his viewers and cast doubt in their minds about the legitimacy of the procedures which were followed to identify and prosecute presumed witches. Unlike Teniers, however, Ryckaert did not paint any explicit scenes of witches involved in recognisable acts of witchcraft, despite his vivid interest in devilries.<sup>44</sup> Lucas (1996: 125) admits that, even though his paintings of 'dulle Griet'

44 Apart from explicit devilries (Van Haute 1999: 407), Ryckaert also incorporated demonic elements in his paintings of *The temptation of St Anthony* and *The alchemist in his laboratory*.

are demonic scenes, they are only related to witchcraft in so far as witches are often linked to treasure hunting and greed as one of their vices.<sup>45</sup> Secondly, I have identified only one witch in his oeuvre, namely in the *Demons serenading a witch* (Figure 3) where she barely fits in the picture space.<sup>46</sup>



Figure 3: David III Ryckaert, *Demons serenading a witch*. Canvas, 50.5 x 64 cm. Location unknown. Photo: Dorotheum, Vienna.

On the left-hand side of the painting, she is seen appearing in the open door of the house to look at the demons which have

45 Accordingly, in Ryckaert's *Woman weighing gold* (1650s) (Panel, 36 x 30 cm. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts, inv no A 2854 (Van Haute 1999: 148, Cat A151)), the old woman who personifies *Avaritia* is accompanied by a pig-headed monster from hell.

46 David III Ryckaert, *Demons serenading a witch*. Canvas, 50.5 x 64 cm. Auction Vienna, Dorotheum 18-10-1994, no 121. This is another version of Ryckaert's *Diabolic concert* (early 1650s). Canvas, 60 x 80 cm. Collection Jules Steurs-Van den Broeck (Van Haute 1999: 126-7, Cat A110).

come to give her a strange serenade. Apart from the fact that the iconography of this work is highly original, the more recognisable witch activity of gathering at night for the sabbath has been relegated to the very distant background on the right-hand side.<sup>47</sup>



Figure 4: David III Ryckaert, *Dulle Griet (A mad Meg taking booty in front of bell)* (1650s). Panel, 45.5 x 60 cm. Signed bottom left: D.R.yck ... . Location unknown. Photograph courtesy of Sotheby's, London.

If Ryckaert showed an interest in the polemical issue of witch-hunting, this engagement proved to be of a fleeting nature. In another version of *Dulle Griet* (Figure 4),<sup>48</sup> which is a variation of the Vienna

47 The painting of a *Witches' Sabbath* (Panel, 46.4 x 62,8 cm. Location unknown. Auction London, Christie's 10-7-1981, no 33 (Van Haute 1999: 188, Cat C133)) discussed by Lucas (1996: 125-7, figure 13) is not a work by David III Ryckaert.

48 David III Ryckaert, *Dulle Griet (A mad Meg taking booty in front of bell)* (1650s). Panel, 45.5 x 60 cm. Signed bottom left: D.R.yck ... . Location unknown. Formerly collection Charles De Pauw, Brussels; auction London, Sotheby's

painting in mirror image, the artist has replaced the broom with a sword in accordance with Bruegel's iconography. The old woman wields the sword straight above her head with both hands, chasing an odd assortment of devils from hell, the fire of which is burning behind her. On the extreme right in front of a rock formation, a skeletal monster with an extended ribcage appears to be guarding the entrance to hell but also scurries away in fright. The woman is recognisable as a mad Meg who loots in front of hell on account of the treasures gathered in her apron. The sword in her hands is probably derived from the saying "He would go into hell with sword in hand" discussed earlier.<sup>49</sup>

David II Teniers also painted the theme of mad Meg. This representation of *Dulle Griet* (Figure 5) was probably not painted by Teniers himself, but it is representative of his manner.<sup>50</sup> A mad Meg is depicted plundering at the mouth of hell and chasing a group of screeching devils out of hell towards the right-hand side. Cerberus, the three-headed dog guarding the entrance to Hades, forms part of the infernal setting. Another figure guarding the entrance is the Teniersian devil (usually hooded like a monk) holding a broom with a candle inserted in between the twigs.<sup>51</sup> Another feature typical of Teniers is the strong tendency to humanise the appearance as well as the behaviour of the demons (Van Haute 1999: 56). Among the cast of demonic creatures, the figure riding on the back of a draped

9-4-1986 (Van Haute 1999: 145-6, Cat A146). Although originally I retained the title of *A witch driving devils from a cave* from the auction catalogue, I interpreted the painting as a representation of 'dulle Griet' plundering at the mouth of hell.

49 Cf also Gibson 2006: 139.

50 Workshop of David II Teniers, *Dulle Griet*. Panel, 56,5 x 81,5 cm. Location unknown. Auction Sedelmeyer 3-6-1907, no 53; collection Bernard C Solomon, Beverley Hills, California; auction New York, Sotheby's 5-6-1986, no 29 (as David III Ryckaert); auction New York, Christie's 2-6-1988, no 115A (as attributed to David III Ryckaert); auction Brussels, Paleis voor Schone Kunsten 7/9-11-1989, no 651 (Van Haute 1999: 188, Cat C132). This may be the painting referred to by Davidson (1987: 66) as Ryckaert's copy after Teniers, although she provides no specific data.

51 This motif is usually included in the witch scenes painted by Teniers (Lucas 1996: 104).

monster with a horse's skull is a recurring motif, along with the horned human female. The large bat-man seen further in the background also features prominently in a witch scene by Teniers.<sup>52</sup> "Dulle Griet" points a sword in the direction of Cerberus.<sup>53</sup> With her left hand she holds together the apron in which she has gathered a costly treasure. On her left arm a basket can be discerned – perhaps reminiscent of the basket carried by Bruegel's *Dulle Griet*. In this instance mad Meg is a young woman who looks calm (no bulging eyes), determined and in control; this constitutes a clear violation of the iconographic tradition. The entire scene is also reminiscent of Teniers's numerous depictions of the temptation of St Anthony.



Figure 5: Workshop of David II Teniers, *Dulle Griet*. Panel, 56.5 x 81.5 cm. Location unknown. Photograph RKD.

- 52 David II Teniers, *Departure to the Sabbath*. Medium and size not mentioned. Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle (Lucas 1996: 106, figure 5).
- 53 Although Lucas (1996: 124) and Davidson (1987: 66) identify the sword as a large magic witches' knife, I consider the weapon to be too large for a knife. The witches' knife seen in other witch scenes painted by Teniers is considerably smaller.

The painting of *Dulle Griet* auctioned by Sotheby's London in 1987, which was accepted by Lucas (1996: 122-4, figure 11) as a work of David III Ryckaert, must be attributed to a follower of Teniers (Figure 6).<sup>54</sup> While it is a variation on Ryckaert's *Dulle Griet* auctioned in London in 1986 (cf Figure 4), in terms of style and iconography it is more closely related to the previous version of *Dulle Griet* (cf Figure 5) though in reverse. On the right the silhouette of Cerberus stands out sharply against the bright fires from hell. Unlike Ryckaert's "dulle Griet" who fiercely fights off the horde of devils in front of her, this mad Meg is quite unresolved in her action. She also does not point her sword at Cerberus, but looks back as if to make sure that she is not being followed. The types of demons represented on the left closely resemble the ones seen in the other version *à la* Teniers.



Figure 6: Follower of David II Teniers, *Dulle Griet*. Panel, 51 x 71 cm. Location unknown. Photograph courtesy of Sotheby's, London.

54 Follower of David II Teniers, *Dulle Griet*. Panel, 51 x 71 cm. Location unknown. Auction London, Sotheby's 18-2-1987, no 105 (Van Haute 1999: 188, Cat C131).

Van Haute/'Dulle Griet' in seventeenth-century Flemish painting

A similar painting representing *A mad Meg taking booty in front of hell* was auctioned in New York in 2001 (Figure 7).<sup>55</sup> It deviates from the previous example in that "dulle Griet" has collected the costly booty only in a basket suspended from her left arm and not in her apron. An interesting detail is the devilish creature riding the draped monster back to front. This motif is also encountered in Teniers's painting of *A mad Meg tying the devil to a cushion*. Typical Teniersian demons make their appearance in forms resembling bats, serpents and fishes, along with the more humanised types such as the horned female. A new element is the little devil sitting on the ground towards the left and holding a torch, presumably to make the demons more visible.



Figure 7: Follower of David II Teniers, *A mad Meg taking booty in front of hell*. Panel, 43.8 x 66 cm. Location unknown. Photograph RKD.

A last variation on this type of representation of a mad Meg is the *Dulle Griet* auctioned in Amsterdam in 1990 (Figure 8).<sup>56</sup> She

55 Follower of David II Teniers, *A mad Meg taking booty in front of hell*. Panel, 43.8 x 66 cm. Location unknown. Auction New York, Sotheby's 25-1-2001.

56 Follower of David II Teniers, *Dulle Griet*. Panel, 38.7 x 58.4 cm. Location

is portrayed as a seemingly young woman with wildly flowing hair, her eyes wide open. Although the entrance to hell, guarded by a very docile Cerberus, appears to be pictured on the right (as in the last two paintings), Meg seems to be running out of hell towards daylight. On the left-hand side another light source is present indicating a pathway that leads to the depths of hell. Here the silhouettes of figures with hats can be discerned. In a change of fortune Meg is being chased by a whole horde of demons. Scared to death, she looks back and holds out her sword towards this threatening army, clutching the looted treasure in her apron. Clearly this female figure is far removed from the fearless old crone pictured by Bruegel, Ryckaert and Teniers.



Figure 8: Follower of David II Teniers, *Dulle Griet*. Panel, 38.7 x 58.4 cm. Location unknown. Photograph RKD.

The mad Meg paintings produced by followers of Teniers and Ryckaert generally display fatal deviances in the treatment of the iconography, in particular the figure of “dulle Griet”. She appears

unknown. Auction Amsterdam, Christie’s 12-6-1990, no 314.

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either too young and stylish or too composed and calm, lacking the determination and fearlessness of a "kwaad wijf". Instead attention is lavished on the imaginative depiction of monsters and demons as the main focus. These paintings are clearly the work of *derderangsschilders* or mere copyists working in serial or semi-industrial fashion for the free market (Van Haute 1999: 17-8). In this process of mass production the depiction of the fantastical and diabolic took centre stage while the "dulle Griet" figure was watered down to a secondary motif stripped of its original meaning.



Figure 9: David II Teniers, *A mad Meg taking booty in front of hell* (former title: *Entrance to the underworld with Cerberus*). Canvas, 20 x 17.5 cm. Location unknown. Photograph RKD.

Returning to the question as to whether Teniers would confuse a 'dulle Griet' with a *heks* or witch, I found an interesting pair of pendants that provide a clear answer. It concerns *A mad Meg taking booty in front of hell* (Figure 9) and a *Witches' Sabbath* (Figure 10), both formerly at Warwick Castle.<sup>57</sup> The paintings are clearly conceived as companion pieces because their dimensions match, they mirror each other compositionally and they form thematic opponents. The painting of "dulle Griet" represents her taking booty in front of hell which is located on the left-hand side of the painting. The entrance to hell is again guarded by the three-headed dog Cerberus. Meg is depicted as an old woman holding up her sword to frighten Cerberus while the demons, which she has chased out of hell, are seen behind her on the right-hand side. Bats and other creatures are fluttering above her head. The *Witches' Sabbath* is a night scene where the main figure of the witch is seen holding a broom in her left hand and raising a torch in her right hand. Standing turned towards the left of the painting, this decidedly younger looking woman forms a mirror image of mad Meg in the "dulle Griet" painting. Her dress is hanging loose, revealing her breasts and chest. She is the typical Teniersian witch type which Davidson (1987: 50) describes as follows: "she has hair which is 'magically' arranged straight out in front of her head as a symbol of the evil which she is creating". Some witches' paraphernalia such as the magic book and an hourglass are depicted but the demonic nature of the witches' sabbath is especially emphasised by the devilish creatures creeping on the floor and flying in the air above her. In contrast to mad Meg

57 Follower of David II Teniers, *A mad Meg taking booty in front of hell* (former title: *Entrance to the underworld with Cerberus*). Canvas, 20 x 17.5 cm. Location unknown. Formerly collection Earl of Warwick, Warwick Castle; Follower of David II Teniers, *Witches' Sabbath*. Canvas, 20 x 17.5 cm. Location unknown. Formerly collection Earl of Warwick, Warwick Castle. I was informed by Pamela Bromley (Archive Support, Warwick Castle) that the paintings were sold in the 1970s by Lord Brooke to the Tussauds Group in 1978 (e-mail 11-5-2009). Their present whereabouts are unknown. Although I do not consider the works to be by Teniers himself, it is conceivable that they are copies after originals.

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who chases them away, the witch welcomes these demons who, like her, are Satan's devoted followers. Although the witch and "dulle Griet" are depicted in similar circumstances – surrounded by devils – the artist has made it quite clear that they oppose each other. Mad Meg is a formidable woman indeed, but she is clearly not a witch.



Figure 10: David II Teniers, *Witches' Sabbath*. Canvas, 20 x 17.5cm.  
Location unknown. Photograph RKD.

In summary, the "dulle Griet" paintings of Ryckaert and Teniers were informed by the art-theoretical views on comedy. They

display the characteristics of comic genre painting in the use of a realistic style as an instrument of visualisation and in the masterful portrayal of the passions and state of mind, including an explicit portrayal of the class and character of the figure. As a representative of the peasant class mad Meg is turned into an object of ridicule to the amusement and entertainment of the respectable viewer. Wit and humour are employed not only as means of instruction, but also as devices to establish class differentiation and ensure self-esteem, both for the artist and the viewer.

Since the depictions of mad Meg by seventeenth-century Flemish painters are derived from Bruegel's *Dulle Griet*, this reliance on an old theme in itself lends a comic quality to the paintings. Such archaism was considered comic because outdated forms had a humorous effect in a sophisticated urban context.<sup>58</sup> The inventive adaptation of the work of such an illustrious predecessor also increased the artists' status and prestige. Though not aligned with elevated theoretical notions of artistic invention, their fantastical creations accrued to their recognition as artists in a competitive environment (Hults 2005: xiii).

Lastly, there may be one more piece of supporting documentation found in the contemporary literature. In 1644 Dirck Pietersz Pers's translation of Ripa's *Iconologia* was published in which an old, laughing woman with a "verrompelt en lelijck aangesicht" (wrinkled and ugly face) functions as the personification of the Old Comedy (*Comedia Vecchia*) (De Clippel 2006: 58).<sup>59</sup> Although mad Meg is certainly not laughing, her ugly old face establishes a parallel with this personification, placing her squarely in the tradition of ancient comedy.

58 What was old was experienced as unusual and therefore surprising. Cf Muylle 1986: 254-5, De Clippel 2006: 60, Westermann 1997: 197-203.

59 The Old Comedy aimed to mock and satirise human shortcomings and decrepit social circumstances with the intention of effecting change (De Clippel 2006: 58).

## 6. Mad Meg as *kwaad wijf*

Mad Meg is not only an angry woman who violates all norms of civil behaviour. She is also a counter-image to the ideal wife whose prime qualities were her vulnerable chastity and dependence on her husband. "Dulle Griet" is fearless, the prototype of the bossy woman whose lustfulness and ambition reduce man to slavery (Caron 1988b: 19, Dresen-Coenders 1988: 76).<sup>60</sup> As mentioned earlier, Meg appeared in several farces as the personification of a *kwaad wijf*. One such farce was the *Kluchte van de Broeckdragbende Vrouwe* or *Simpelen Giel*, played in Antwerp in 1683 in which Giel complained: "My Meg was really pleasant when with someone else, but at home [she was] like a dragon, so angry and so furious".<sup>61</sup> In 1670, Cornelis de Bie from Lier published his farce *Jan Goedthals en Griet syn wyf*, a second edition of which appeared in 1719. This lively piece written in very common language had as motto: "Discord creates quarrel and disgraceful nagging in the home: Beware who misses his freedom and lives with an angry wife".<sup>62</sup> Jan Goedthals's wife is a 'quade Griet', an angry Meg who swears at him, beats him up and makes him do all the work while she does nothing and goes out to have fun. This is the fate of any man marrying a Meg: that he must hand over his trousers to his wife (Grauls 1957: 27).

These farces of Meg as the wife wearing the pants cast her in the role of the domineering wife. In this instance the process of inversion involves the role reversal of husband and wife. In counter-images of this type the wife is portrayed as the active and domineering seductress who lures the man into marriage, and the man as the victim and slave. The deepest humiliation for a self-respecting male citizen is to hand over his position of authority to his wife. When the woman

60 Similarly, Gibson (1979: 13) describes mad Meg "as the archetype of all women who usurp masculine prerogatives or otherwise defy standards of behavior considered proper for them".

61 Cited in Grauls (1957: 25): "Myn Griet was goet plesant, was sy by iemant el, Maar thuis als eenen draeck, soo boos ende soo fel".

62 Quoted in Grauls (1957: 26): "Ooneenigheyt baert twist, en schandigh huys gekyf: Wee die sijn vryheyt mist, en leeft met een quaet wijf".

wins this “fight for the breeches”, the hen-pecked husband is but a fool who slavishly follows her orders (Dresen-Coenders 1988: 77-9).

“Dulle Griet” is but one of the variations on the international genre of the battle for the trousers which deals with the fear for “shrews, harpies, succubi, and deceitful and vengeful women” (Schauma 1980: 9). In the mad Meg paintings by Ryckaert and Teniers the woman is portrayed as a fearless crone fighting demons, not literally opposing her husband. Yet she wields a sword and/or owns a knife seen dangling from her side. Since such weapons are traditionally male attributes, Gibson (2006: 138) claims that she has clinched “her victory over her husband by appropriating” his knife. This appears to ensure the interpretation of the seventeenth-century ‘dulle Griet’ paintings as satirical comments on the folly of the nagging, aggressive, domineering wife who strove to “wear the pants” (Van Haute 1999: 56, 146).

Verberckmoes (1999: 162) questions the one-sided interpretation of this stock comic character as the mirror image of what really happened. He suggests that the domineering housewife with the big mouth should be related to the increased importance of male honour and man’s reputation to protect.<sup>63</sup> While this hypothesis is by his own admission “rather speculative”, it is perhaps more useful to ponder his conclusion that the insistence on male honour “may be understood as reflecting a real shift to a more equal partnership between men and women”.<sup>64</sup> Echoing this line of thought, Gibson speculates that perhaps Bruegel’s *Dulle Griet* “was inspired by the unusual independence that Netherlandish women seem to have enjoyed during Bruegel’s lifetime”. Since this was not a new development,<sup>65</sup> the foundations of this argument are rather shaky.

63 For a full discussion of this argument, read Verberckmoes (1999: 159-63).

64 In the conclusion he put it more cautiously: “May we infer [...] that in the *bocheipot* culture of the Spanish Netherlands male domination over women by means of patriarchal violence was slowly becoming outdated, perhaps also thanks to jokes?” (Verberckmoes 1999: 162, 163).

65 While relying on Lodovico Guicciardini’s description of the Netherlands of 1567, he concedes that women already “enjoyed a similar economic independence in earlier centuries” (Gibson 2006: 141, 227 n 61).

In her study on the witch in early modern Europe, Hulst maintains that “the abject image of the female witch served as a foil for positive masculine identities, including that of artist”. Convinced that binary notions of gender pervaded early modern culture and society, she argues that “male artists marshalled these polarities to construct identities that overcame the dangers of fantasy, exemplified in extremis by the female witch, with a presumed masculine superiority of reason and virtue, and a control of the senses, the body, and matter” (Hulst 2005: xiv). While gender issues may have been at stake, I would argue that a representation of a mad Meg should rather be interpreted in terms of class differentiation instead of gender classification.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, a real shift in mentality had occurred. People started to seriously question the entire ideology of witch-hunting where some women – previously ‘good witches’, experts in herbal and other healing remedies, and, in particular, midwives (Vanhemelryck 2000: 170)<sup>66</sup> – would ultimately be driven to believe satanic delusions to be true. Undoubtedly, such hysterical and psychically disturbed women, who themselves believed to be possessed by the devil, brought themselves and others in court on account of their hallucinations, strange language and behaviour. Some old peasant women were probably also mistaken as witches because they suffered from senility and dementia, the signs of which were not understood (Vanhemelryck 2000: 166, 190).

Mad Meg was *par excellence* the type of woman that could be confused with a witch. By reintroducing the Bruegelian theme the Flemish artists in their own way contributed to the resistance to the idea of witch-hunting.<sup>67</sup> Mad Meg resembles a witch – old, ugly, wild and uncivilised – but by presenting her as a recognisable comic figure the artists made the viewer aware of the possibility of mistaken identity. They raised doubt about the beliefs in witches.

66 The fear for women was primarily based on her power in the entire sphere of procreation (Dresen-Coenders 1988: 82).

67 Also note that it was risky to refer to or treat the theme of the witch in a direct manner because of the political and intellectual implications of witchcraft and its persecution (Hulst 2005: xiv).

At the same time, however, their concerns also centred on social upliftment.<sup>68</sup> By highlighting the human shortcomings of the peasant class – not only women, in particular – the artists supported the efforts to sanitise the popular culture of the peasants. They achieved this goal through ridicule which was highly important as a means of defining social norms and hierarchies (Verberckmoes 1999: 183-4). By condemning the superstitions of the poor and illiterate the ‘dulle Griet’ paintings served to confirm the superiority of the educated elite. They were a source of delight, amusement and flattery for both the men and women of the higher classes.

## 7. Contemporary responses

In order to establish whether the seventeenth-century audience experienced these paintings as humorous, one would have to find evidence of contemporary responses. Verberckmoes (1997: 77, 78) states that the “Counter-Reformation has a bad reputation regarding humour”; laughter was oppressed because of its association with the lower functions of the body. In addition, as a result of this negative attitude towards profane laughter, the Counter-Reformation exercised severe censorship. After 1627 no more collections of jest-books were printed, although copies of the old editions were still being sold (Verberckmoes 1997: 85).<sup>69</sup> This means that at the time when Teniers and Ryckaert painted their old crones, say around 1650, only old copies of jest-books published before 1627 constituted the available comic literature. Although these conditions combined to create a rather morbid environment, it never kept the Flemish citizens from having an occasional good laugh, but only within their own social group (distinguished by birth, work, age, sex, religion, and ultimately

68 Hulst (2005: xiv) also states that the “competitive conditions of artists’ careers and the varied elements of artistic self-construction assumed an importance equal to the historical narrative of witchcraft and witch-hunting” in her interpretation of images of witches.

69 For nearly a century the *Clucht boek* of 1576, published by the Antwerp printer Heyndrick Heyndricsen, was the “uncontested model of the genre” (Verberckmoes 1999: 141).

locality). While “subduing one’s laughter was not yet de rigueur”, laughter was a source of social definition (Verberckmoes 1999: 185).

I referred earlier to *Den Roomschen Uylen-Spiegel* as a primary source crucial to a deciphering of the meaning of a mad Meg in seventeenth-century paintings. Although it was only published in 1671 in Amsterdam, its contents were drawn from various old Roman-Catholic legend books and other writers. One may thus assume that these ideas were already common knowledge in 1650 (Grauls 1957: 23). More significantly, its Protestant author wrote this very anti-Roman-Catholic work to be “amusing and edifying to read for all Catholic little hearts”<sup>70</sup> – repeating the well-known Netherlandish adage “tot lering en vermaak”. Targeting the Catholics at large, it was clearly the author’s intention to make the reader laugh. Being Catholics themselves the Flemish artists redirected the satire at the marginal figure of the poor peasant woman who refused to abandon what Muchembled (1990: 159) calls “an archaic and magic culture”.

Another literary source is Cornelis de Bie’s *Het Gulden Cabinet van de edel vry Schilderconst*, first published in 1661 and written while Ryckaert and Teniers were alive. While the entry on David II Teniers is purely a praise poem (De Bie 1971: 334-8), De Bie was more specific in his description of Ryckaert’s art. He seems to have been rather impressed by the artist’s depiction of devilries judging by the attention they receive in his poem:

Another particularity that I must bring to light and add to his other art in this poem is the strange tumult of all mischievous jokes which he can depict very artfully in painting.<sup>71</sup> That is the deformed ghost of the abyss, horrible sights which tormented Saint Anthony, with infernal lightning full of fury, fire and flame, full of terrible noise which sometimes his virtue made vanish through the cross. Furthermore other magic and strange adventures which he is able to execute so artfully that it can only come from his hand, if

70 Cited by Grauls (1957: 19): “Vermakelijck, ende stichtelijck om te lesen voor alle Catholijcke Hertekens”.

71 The Middle-Netherlandish term *aerdich* means neat, polite, artful and in dialect it means weird, strange (De Vries 1971).

it has particular virtue and vitality for the instruction of the youth.  
(my translation, BvH)<sup>72</sup>

The fact that De Bie describes Ryckaert's depictions of the temptation of St Anthony as playful jokes clearly indicates that they were meant to make the beholder laugh.<sup>73</sup> Although he also praises the virtues of Ryckaert's "other magic and strange adventures" as instructive for the youngsters, the "dulle Griet" paintings belong to the same satirical range as the pictures of St Anthony. Lastly, De Bie starts his description of Ryckaert's art "which he reveals to us with the brush in a very witty (*gheestich*) manner".<sup>74</sup> The term *gheestich* is one of the comic terms which Karel van Mander had introduced for Bruegel's art and person (Westermann 1997: 196). In this way De Bie acknowledged the comic character of Ryckaert's art.

## 8. Conclusion

When David II Teniers and David III Ryckart painted their versions of a mad Meg they were not simply trying to instruct and entertain the viewer by means of a comical archaism harking back to Bruegel's famous painting. The "dulle Griet" paintings offer commentaries on the human shortcomings and uncivilised behaviour of the peasant class; they question the legitimacy of witch-hunting; they ridicule the aggressive, domineering wife

72 "Noch een besonderheyt moet ick in 't licht hier brengen / En met sijn ander Const in des' ghedichten mengen, / Dat is het vrempt ghewoel van alle snaeckery / Die hy seer aerdich weet te thoonen in schildry. / Dat is t'wanschappen spoock des afgronts wree ghesichten / T'gen' quelden *Sint Antboon*, met helse wederlichten / Vol furi, vier en vlam, vol vreeselijck ghedruys / T'gen somwijl sijne deught ded' vluchten door het Cruys. / Voorts ander toovery en vremde aventuren, / Weet sijne wetenschap soo constich uyt te vueren, / Dat niet van hem en compt, oft t'heeft besonder deught / En t'levens crachten in tot leer- ingh vande jeught" (De Bie 1971: 310-1).

73 The word *snaeckery* seems to be a corruption of the current term *snaekerij* which means a mocking, playful or mischievous joke (Knuttel 1936).

74 "die hy ons met Pinceel seer gheestich openbaert" (De Bie 1971: 308). Although I translated the term *gheestich* as "ingenious" (Van Haute 1999: 222, n 59), its meaning as "witty" may be more appropriate.

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who strove to “wear the pants” – the iconography lends itself to multiple interpretations. At the same time, the artists enriched their adaptation of the pictorial tradition with imaginative inventions which added another dimension to their artistic identity. In seeking artistic recognition and concomitant social standing they served and took sides with their clients by satirising the popular culture of the peasant class. The well-off *bourgeoisie* delighted in such *snaeckery* as it made them laugh and feel good about themselves, confirming their superior social status.

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