THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ANIMAL IN LITERATURE AND IN THE VISUAL ARTS
On the 25th of October 1682 Constantijn Huygens wrote a short poem, entitled “Myn Geckies grafschrift” (“My Silly’s Epitaph”) on the death of his little dog. It is only a slight work, nothing special in any way; Huygens wrote thousands of such epigrams during his lifetime. And yet there is something remarkable about these four lines, as can be concluded from the fact that the poem is reproduced in the majority of anthologies of his poetry.

This is my doggy’s grave.
I won’t say more about it,
Than that I wished (and it wouldn’t harm the world)
That my little Silly lived, and all the great would die.1

In all its simplicity, this small epitaph on a dog reveals an aspect of seventeenth-century life that seems to be rarely shown in Dutch Golden Age poetry. The idea that the poet is moved by the death of his pet dog renders this poem an evident attraction for today’s readers, who recognize their own sentiments. The fact that Huygens used the death of Silly to comment on the madness of the contemporary world does not appear to detract from his personal emotion.

Animal welfare however – let alone love for pets – does not seem to have been an issue for all people during the seventeenth century. One only has to remember one of the most famous poems of the time, the “Boeren geselschap” (“Farmers Company”) by Gerbrand Adriaensz. Bredero: it describes a rustic feast in the village of Vinkeveen where one of the attractions was the game ‘pulling the goose’. A live goose was hung up, and the competitors, riding past on horseback or in a coach, tried to rip off the poor animal’s head (which was often greased with

1 Constantijn Huygens, De gedichten, ed. J.A. Worp, 8 vols. (Groningen: 1892–1899) vol. VIII 303: ‘Dit is mijn Hondjes Graf:/Ick segger er niet meer af,/Als dat ick wenschten (en de Werld waer niet bedurven)/ Dat mijn klein Gekje leefde en all’ de groote sturven’.