THE WISE MAN HAS TWO TONGUES: IMAGES OF THE SATYR AND PEASANT BY JORDAENS AND STEEN

Kimberlee Cloutier-Blazzard

Introduction

Despite many commonalities, Dutch and Flemish culture typically remain segregated in scholarship. Indeed, the same might be said of the fields of art history and cultural history.

In my essay, I will try to partially redress these divisions by examining the rich artistic interplay between Jacob Jordaens and Jan Steen as displayed in their related images of the Satyr and Peasant. These artists make a particularly intriguing case study because Jacob Jordaens was a Protestant, the confessional minority in Counter-Reformation Antwerp, while Jan Steen was the Northern equivalent, a Dutch Catholic in Holland. As we shall see, though separated by confessional and political boundaries, they shared an over-arching interest in traditional Netherlandish popular culture and mythology.

But, what do I mean, precisely, by the term ‘mythology’? As the breadth of this volume undoubtedly reveals, the term ‘myth’ represents many things to many people. Historically, of course, its definitions vary widely: anywhere from the popular conception of a person or thing that idealizes or exaggerates the truth, to the antique means to explain natural phenomena in supernatural terms. In this paper, I perhaps approach an equal combination of both those definitions. For the purposes of this paper, the term ‘myth’ most simply refers to the appearance of the antique satyr figure in the paintings I discuss. Moreover, one could also argue that by the Seventeenth Century the peasant genre began to represent its own long-standing Netherlandish tradition, or ‘mythology.’ In deftly combining Aesop’s satyr fable with that native idiom, Jordaens and Steen invented a powerful artistic hybrid that reinvigorates the two forms of myth and serves as contemporary social criticism.
Indeed, in the course of the essay, we will see how the artists’ fascination with Aesop’s fable of “The Satyr and the Peasant” begins with their shared admiration for antiquity, and then watch as Jordaens and Steen at once personalize, expand and even invert received allegorical and pictorial conventions in order to explore their relationships to traditional Netherlandish ‘mythologies’ of class, confession and profession. Close comparison of their paintings reveals much about the cross-fertilization between these two artists, and how they used the unusual combination of Classical mythology and genre – a marriage of élite and popular culture – to openly explore their respective Netherlandish cultures and identities. The evidence that emerges from this case study reveals deep empathy between these artists, and recognizes their consonant artistic vision to reinvigorate traditional festive *communitas*.

*Aesop’s Fables*

In the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, Aesop’s *Fables* were printed and reprinted in many illustrated editions throughout Europe. In Netherlandish culture, the “Fable of the Satyr and the Peasant” in particular, it seems, had widespread appeal. In 1617 the Dutch Catholic poet and playwright, Joost van de Vondel, crafted rhyming couplets for the fable in his *Vorstelijke Warande der dieren* (‘The Princely Pleasure-Grounds of Animals’). In translation:

> One winter a farmer found a satyr wandering in the wood,  
> The satyr is half-man on top, at the bottom a goat,  
> He decided to shelter him lest he died from cold;  
> He brought him home and made good cheer,  
> When the man blew on his hands to warm them he took note,  
> Asking him why, the peasant replied, “I am warming my knuckles all stiff from the field’s windy cold”:  
> When the peasant also blew on his hot food, laid out on a rough board,  
> The satyr, rather confused, wondered at this,  
> Apprehensive, he flew out the door in fear of his life,  
> Because he perceived the peasant could breathe both hot and cold.  
> For as the saying goes, “The Wise man always shows love and goodwill,  
> Towards him that holds fire in one hand and water in the other,  
> In order to avoid his evil sorcery.”

Though Vondel added the satyr’s fear and flight to the original fable, in all versions of the story, the moral remains the same: the wary satyr rejects the perceived hypocrisy of the peasant, of “blowing hot or cold” as the situation dictates. In keeping with a long-standing tradition,