Images of overseas people, of artificial giants and natural dwarfs, and of native, boorish inhabitants of the Low Countries, were normal parts of the spectacle in public parades and court festivities in the seventeenth-century Southern Netherlands under the Archdukes Albert (1559-1621) and Isabella (1566-1633) and subsequent Spanish governors. ‘Exotic’ figures did not prevail but neither were they merely incidental. They did not simply illustrate a wider knowledge of mankind and the world, a knowledge that was certainly burgeoning in the Southern Netherlands since the sixteenth century, thanks to the printing press, draftsmen, engravers and painters. Nor did they merely reflect a passion amongst the local elite for collecting overseas and homemade *curiosa*, even though that passion was certainly indulged. Rather, showing ‘strangers’ was a way for court circles and the urban elites to celebrate both the universal rule of the house of Habsburg and the universal aspirations of the newly triumphant Catholic Church. Moreover, representing ‘non-proper’ people inversely promoted the self-image of a nobility and urban upper class keen on presenting itself as refined and elegant. In particular, extravagant and grotesque body language initiated a dynamic within which non-civilized attitudes were appropriated and the loss of control over the body attributed meaning. However certain these ideological aims seem, the use of the body as a medium also suggests a more explicitly cultural function of the ‘exotic’ in public and court entertainment. It will be argued that such a spectacle provided space for a joyful and playful exploration of the less known social and geographic corners of the world. Methodologically, instances of recorded laughter and humour in texts and images are important signs of this dimension. Whilst being a tool of power, the theatrical presentation of other worlds therefore also demonstrated that the elite was uniquely curious about its antipodes. As a symbolic site of representation, this baroque spectacle suggested dominance and reform but also fragmentation, fantasy and *hilaritas*.

**A Flemish peasant masque at the court of Philip II**

In 1593 King Philip II (1527-1598) of Spain asked the Antwerper Jehan Lhermite (1560-1622), who served as an archer of the guard at his court in Madrid, to organize a masque for Shrove Tuesday. It had to be a performance ‘à la façon et guise de celle de nostre pays’, a Flemish (or, more accu-
rately, Brabantine) show in other words. Lhermite came up with the idea of staging a Flemish wedding feast – *Flandes* as a Spanish name for the Low Countries – in which different estates and qualities of peoples would be distinguished by the clothes they wore, 'selon l'usage d'icelluy nostre pays'. In response to the carnival aspect of the occasion Lhermite decided that a second group of masked people would appear at the wedding, this one dressed as peasants (‘accoustre à la villageoise’). The confrontation between the two groups would turn the wedding party into a carnival masquerade. The King decided that the ‘masquerade’ was to be held on the last but one day of the carnival period.¹

The spectacle began with a parade of the nuptial couples, each dressed according to their social status. First on the list were the ‘Sire et Dame de nopces’, who represented nobles and wore clothes of white satin gimped with gold. The lady had long hair. They were preceded by two pairs of beautiful young girls scattering little flowers and odoriferous herbs, ‘selon en est la coustume’. These figures were dressed in carmine taffeta and joyfully decorated, ‘le tout suvyant la façon du pays’. The whole cortège was headed by an orderly group of violinists, playing good music, and a priest carrying a breviary completed the little opening group. Six other marital pairs followed in descending social order. A gentleman and his spouse preceded a councillor in his long gown and flat velvet hat and his wife with her cap. Next came a chamberlain and chambermaid of a great lord, two Brabantine citizens, a couple from Holland and, finally, a cook and his wife, also a cook, both oddly dressed in their own way. The male cook held a large spoon in his hands, while the female one carried in her arms a basket with warm waffles for the King and the princes and princesses. The waffles, made of eggs and butter, brought the plenty of carnival time as celebrated in *Flandes* to the center of the Spanish monarchy. Yet the masque was a mimesis of carnival, not carnival itself. The royal family did not eat the waffles with relish but mildly received them (‘qui par eulx furent fort bénignement receues’). The feast started and all the couples demonstrated their dances ‘à la façon du pays’. In the meantime the company of peasants prepared to enter the scene, carrying bagpipes and flails, ‘le tout à la villageoise’. According to Lhermite, their entrance was made joyfully. Lhermite’s description of the masque becomes much more graphic when the peasant group enters the scene. He shows a sudden interest in the gestures, vocabulary and mimicry of the players, emphasizing by these means the carnival humour the dressed up peasants were expected to perform. The mock peasants observed ‘toutes les cérémonies qui en tel cas se souloient user’. First they knocked on the door and asked the ‘Sire de nopces’ if he was willing to let them in. The groom came himself to the door to see what kind of people they were and, having let one of them in, took him aside and asked him secretly (by whispering into his ear) who were the members of the company. Once he had been told, these two figures began to perform a mime in which the host informed the visitor that he did not like the company’s masquerade. He returned to the party, leaving the visitor and his fellow peasants waiting outside. Receiving no response to their request to be admitted, the excluded peasants began to murmur among themselves and shout at the top of their voice that they were discourteously received. Some guests at the wedding party now spoke