THE ICONOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF SPES
BY PIETER BRUEGHEL THE ELDER

I. BERGSTROM

Pieter Brueghel the Elder executed his two famous series of drawings representing the Seven Vices and the Seven Virtues in the years 1556–59/60. On each sheet of both series an allegorical figure represents the abstract idea, and round it Brueghel has illustrated a number of scenes with human or animal figures showing different aspects of the respective vice or virtue. The drawings served as the basis for the well-known engravings published by Hieronymus Cock at Antwerp.

The Vices preceded the Virtues, one drawing, Avaritia being dated 1556, the six others following in 1557. The additional scenes surrounding the allegorical figure are here conceived in a way which recalls the subjects of Hieronymus Bosch and the drôleries of mediaeval manuscript illumination; Brueghel’s monsters bring us into a world of weird dreams and nightmares.

Five sheets of the series of the Seven Virtues are dated 1559, and the two remaining 1559/60. Compared with the series of the Vices they present a totally different impression. The scenes which surround the allegorical figures no longer show an imaginary world of monstrous nightmare—Fortitudo, in this respect is an exception—but they are, on the whole peopleed with ordinary human beings in different, easily recognized situations, based on every-day life and related to the virtue in question. If the conception of the scenes in the Vices may be regarded as late mediaeval in character, that of those of the Virtues may be said to be modern in that they are precursors of the Flemish genre paintings of the seventeenth century.

In the following pages attention will be devoted in particular to the

1 See Van Bastelaer–Hulin de Loo, 177 ss.; Tolnai, nrs. 30–7, 40–6; Tolnay, nrs. 47–54, 57–64; Van Gelder–Borms, exclusively dedicated to the two series of drawings; Van Gils, 68–186. Two more sheets, The Last Judgement (1588), and Christ in Limbo (1561?), belong to the two series and were likewise published as engravings. 2 On Brueghel and Bosch and mediaeval tradition, see: Van Gelder–Borms, 6 ss. 3 The question of the date of two of the drawings (1560 or, more probably, 1559), see: Van Gelder–Borms, 33, 35.
Iconography of the drawing *Spes* (fig. 1). As in the other *Seven Virtues*, this, which is dated 1559, shows an allegorical figure, around which narrative scenes illustrate critical situations in which Hope is essential for a happy outcome.

In 1925 Tolnai⁴ first pointed out that the strangely caparisoned figures, presented by Brueghel in his series of the *Seven Virtues* were iconographically of a type already interpreted by Mâle⁵ and described by him as “la nouvelle iconographie des vertus”; Mâle furthermore suggested that this originated probably at Rouen and that it might be dated about the year 1470. Earlier examples from series of the *Virtues* had but one or two, or even no attributes. The new type, however, was invested with a number of curiously inventive attributes giving them a phantastic appearance like

---
⁴ Tolnai, 27 ss., 63 ss., Van Gelder and Borms, 10, have drawn attention for the first time to a Flemish manuscript of 1511, (The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, nr. 76 E. 13) with the allegorical figures according to the type of “la nouvelle iconographie des vertus”. See also Bergström 1956 (in print).
⁵ Mâle, 311 ss.

54