

Illusion and Deception

Construction of a Proverb in Hieronymus Bosch's *The Conjuror*

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“Ce visiteur encore inconnu [...] qui serait peut-être une déception.”

—Jules Romain, *Poèmes*

Introduction

The Conjuror, one of Hieronymus Bosch's most enigmatic paintings, has long been a subject of scholarly interest. Often considered to be a genre painting with a moralizing purpose or a humorous little scene inspired by a real-life situation, this work has also been linked to medieval fables, interpreted in astrological terms, and considered as a representation of an anti-Mass.¹ This study will analyze the iconography of the *Conjuror* to show that the painting, on the level of composition and with the help of constant inversion and references to verbal similes and metaphors, represents its own proverb. By placing the painting in the artistic and theological contexts of fifteenth-century Flanders, this paper demonstrates that the *Conjuror* constantly calls for its own re-interpretation, subsequently revealing shifting layers of meaning.

A reliable copy of the lost original, the *Conjuror* is now found in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, in the Musée Municipal (Figure 1).² The painting can be only approximately situated in the late 1480s, and its patron is unknown, a fact that further complicates the analysis of this already complex image.³ The small oil-on-wood, measuring 53 x 65 cm, presents the viewer with a conjurer entertaining a crowd by making a frog jump out of a simpleton's mouth. The sex of this onlooker is

hard to determine; both male and female traits are ambiguously blended together to create an androgynous figure.⁴ This genderless person may be taken to represent all humanity, both men and women; in a sense, this is the Flemish *Elckerlyc* (Everyman) of the fifteenth-century morality play by the same name.⁵ A large key hangs from *Elckerlyc*'s belt, as does a purse, which is in the process of being snatched by the trickster's assistant; neither the dunce nor the crowd, staring at the conjurer with gullible stupidity, notices anything.⁶ Among the crowd stand a nun and a child with a toy windmill who seems more amused by the tricked *Elckerlyc*'s face than by the trick itself: he is staring into the simpleton's mouth. The table between the magician and his victim is set with various paraphernalia—beakers, balls, and a wand; a hoop leans against it. A small dog in a fool's cap, with a belt adorned with bells, sits at the conjurer's feet. At the magician's waist hangs a peculiar-looking basket with an owl visible within. A small frog, sitting on the table, seems to be as hypnotized by the ball in the magician's outstretched hand as the simpleton is. There certainly is an ironic relationship between the shiny eyes of the fool and the white gleaming spots of the frog's eyes. The horizon is blocked by a wall, parallel to the painting's picture plane, its monotony broken by occasional sprouts of vegeta-

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private collection in California. For further information on these copies see Gerd Unverheft, *Hieronymus Bosch: die Rezeption seiner Kunst in führen 16 Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Mann, 1980) 100-114 and Darriulat 15-19.

¹ For the *Conjuror* as a genre scene, please see F. Schmidt-Degener, “Un Tableau de Jérôme Bosch au Musée Municipale de Saint-Germain-en-Laye,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* I (1906): 153 and Walter Gibson, *Hieronymus Bosch* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991) 24-25. Schmidt-Degener perceives the painting as a warning to the simple folk against the trickster who will take your money and turn you into a laughing stock for the children, while Gibson compares it to genre scenes found among Dutch illuminated manuscripts, especially those executed by the Master of Evert van Soundenbalch, who infused jocularly into his miniatures. For the parallel between the *Conjuror* and a medieval fable about a woman who became pregnant by a toad, please see the monograph by Jacques Darriulat, *Jérôme Bosch et la fable populaire* (Paris: Lagune, 1995). Andrew Pigler perceives the protagonists of the *Conjuror* as Luna's children in “Astrology and Jerome Bosch,” *Burlington Magazine* 92 (1950): 132-136. Finally, for the imagery of the painting as an anti-Mass, see Jeffrey Hamburger, “Bosch's *Conjuror*: an Attack on Magic and Sacramental Heresy,” *Simiolus* XIV/1 (1984): 4-23.

² Copies of the *Conjuror* are now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Nicholson Gallery in New York, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and a

³ Carl Linfert, *Hieronymus Bosch* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1972) 9.

⁴ The identity of the simpleton has been debated; it is not clear whether the tricked person is a man or a woman. Although the facial features look male, the costume identifies the onlooker as a female. For those who see this person as a woman, see Dirk Bax, “Bezwaren tegen L. B. Philip's interpretatie van Jeroen Bosch' marskramer, goochelaar, jeisnijder en voorgrond van hooiwagenpaneel,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 13 (1962): 1-55.

⁵ Written sometime before the end of the fifteenth-century, the Flemish play “*Elckerlyc*” (as well as its English counterpart “*Everyman*”) is, as Arthur Cawley has aptly put it, “the spiritual biography of a microcosm man.” Arthur C. Cawley, *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1959) XV.

⁶ Indeed Charles de Tolnay once compared the crowd with a kind of an indefensible hydra at the mercy of preposterous magic in his *Hieronymus Bosch* (New York: Reynal and Company, 1966) 16.

tion and a circular aperture with a metal bar dividing the moon in half. A long-beaked bird appears in this opening, its head turned to the sky.

*The First Deception: From Genre Painting
to Iniquitous Parody*

Often considered a didactic genre scene, the *Conjurer* appears to have been based on two Flemish proverbs.⁷ The first states: “He who lets himself be fooled by conjuring tricks loses his money and becomes the laughing stock of children.”⁸ The child with a toy windmill and the magician’s confederate who steals the dunce’s money seem to have directly materialized out of this proverb. Another one, “No one is so much a fool as a willful fool,” would also indicate that the tricked *Elckerlyc*, who, if not willfully, at least willingly submitted to the conjurer’s spectacle and the subsequent theft, is doubly obtuse. The latter saying comes from *Proverbia Communia*, a collection of proverbs published c. 1480, right around the time of the creation of *The Conjurer*, in ’s Hertogenbosch, the painter’s native town.⁹ Widely distributed, *Proverbia Communia* was no doubt known to Bosch and his contemporaries, and might have inspired the Saint-Germain-en-Laye piece. Such a connection with an adage is not unprecedented in Bosch’s oeuvre; for instance, his *Hay Wagon* comes directly out of the Flemish proverb “The world is a haystack, and each man plucks from it what he can.”¹⁰

However, the indices are evident that the *Conjurer* is not merely a didactic genre painting based, perhaps, on a couple of Flemish sayings. Instead of relying on a known proverb, the painting begins to construct a maxim of its own by using both symbolic and compositional devices. Firstly, the composition distorts and transforms the role of the magician as a mere trickster and thief. *The Conjurer* is clearly constructed according to the medieval canon of representing saints or Christ performing miracles and addressing a crowd, prevalent in fif-

teenth-century woodcuts.¹¹ Determined by the limitations of the medium, and especially by that of quantity, these prints had to be executed in a rather concise manner, which led to the setting of certain canons for the woodcut illustrations that popularized the symbolic form.¹² Just as the key hanging at the man’s waist came to denote Saint Peter, so did a lonely figure with a raised hand counterbalanced by the crowd of spectators become a standard for representing Christ performing a miracle or preaching the Word.¹³ Examples of such composition are numerous; it suffices to list only a few. Pictorial structures similar to Bosch’s the *Conjurer* are found in *Die Neue Ehe Und Das Passional Von Jesu* “Christ Healing a Sick Man” and in Augsburg *Plenarium* “Christ Addressing the Pharisees” (Figures 2 and 3), where the holy protagonist on the right is counter-balanced by the mesmerized crowd on the left.¹⁴ Of special interest are woodcuts, with representations of Christ casting out demons, found, for instance, in the same Augsburg *Plenarium* and in *Auslegung des Lebens Jesu Christi* from Ulm (Figures 4 and 5).¹⁵ There, little demons jumping out of men’s mouths are reminiscent of Bosch’s frog getting ready to jump from the dunce’s lips. The resemblance is even more remarkable since in the woodcuts others are assisting the miracle by holding up the afflicted men, not unlike the magician’s associate “assists” the conjurer’s trick by holding up the *Elckerlyc*’s purse.

The Conjurer, then, appears as a parody of a miracle or preaching scene, and as such it gains an inverted meaning. A representation of Christ healing the sick or addressing people has been transformed into an evil magician, an impostor. The conjurer, dressed in a scarlet caftan, reminiscent of a minister’s clothes, extends his hand as if for blessing, but instead a little ball, an instrument of hypnosis, is placed in this “benedictory” hand.¹⁶ The figure of the disciple is here replaced by that of the accomplice in crime. The crowd has also undergone a similar transformation. The onlookers, who are supposed to be

⁷ This notion is discussed in Schmidt-Degener, Linfert, Bax and Delevoy.

⁸ Delevoy 26.

⁹ “Nyemant so geck als willens geck.” *Proverbia Communia*, ed. Richard Jente (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1947) 87. On page 10 Jente lists the places of the book’s publications, mentioning the fifth location as ’s Hertogenbosch.

¹⁰ Tolnay 24. Here Bosch heralds a pictorial tradition, fully exploited by artists such as Pieter Bruegel and Adriaen Pietersz van Venne. On Breugel see Alan Dundes and Claudia A. Stibbe, *The Art of Mixing Metaphors: a Folkloristic Interpretation of the Netherlandish Proverbs by Pieter Bruegel the Elder* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1981) and Wilhelm Fraenger, *Das Bild der “Niederlandischen Sprichwörter”: Pieter Bruegels verkehrte Welt* (Amsterdam: Castrum Peregrini Presse, 1999). On van de Venne, see Annelies Plokker, *Adriaen Pietersz. van de Venne, 1589-1662: de grisailles met spreukbanden* (Leuven: Acco, 1984).

¹¹ The *Conjurer* is not an exception; other paintings by Bosch that derive or appropriate compositions from woodcuts are *Ecce Homo*, *The Last Judgment* and *The Hay Wagon*.

¹² Adam von Bartsch, *The Illustrated Bartsch. German Woodcut Illustration Before 1500*, ed. Walter S. Strauss, 80 (New York: Abaris Books, 1981) 1.

¹³ On Dutch and Flemish woodcuts see especially Martinus Joseph Schretlen, *Dutch and Flemish Woodcuts of the Fifteenth Century* (London: E. Benn, Ltd., 1925); *Catalogue of Early German and Flemish woodcuts preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, ed. Campbell Dodgson, (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: Quarto Press in association with British Museum Publications, 1980); and F. W. H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish etchings, engravings, and woodcuts, ca. 1450-1700* (Amsterdam: M. Hertzberger, 1949).

¹⁴ “Christ Healing a Sick Man” was published in Lübeck by Lucas Brandis 20 August 1478 (*The Illustrated Bartsch* 80, p. 15, woodcut no. 47 [10.138]); “Christ Addressing the Pharisees” was published in Augsburg by Anton Sort in 7 May 1478 (*The Illustrated Bartsch* 80, p. 116, woodcut no. 389 [4.345], fol. 98v).

¹⁵ For the first woodcut see *Plenarium* (*The Illustrated Bartsch* 80, p. 116, woodcut no. 387 [4.343], fol. 78r); for the second, see *Auslegung des Lebens Jesu Christi* published in Ulm by Johannes Zainer c.1478 (*The Illustrated Bartsch* 80, p. 153, woodcut no. 548 [5.359] fol. 74v).

¹⁶ The gesture has also been interpreted as “iunctio digitis,” which has eucharistic references in Hamburger 17.

attending the saintly miracles or divine words, have become the stiff spectators, mesmerized by the conjurer. A man standing next to a young woman draws her attention to the theft, but she pays him no heed. The unsuspecting victim's head is placed just above the edge of the table as if for sacrificial decapitation. It seems that Bosch is drawing a parallel between this figure and an innocent lamb, ready to be butchered by the mountebank. A table, bisecting the painting, appears to mimic the altar or the preacher's lectern; but instead of the holy book, the sorcerer's paraphernalia is neatly arranged on it. The hoop leaning against the table shines like a halo, which has been cast aside. Finally, the wall on the background seems to mimic a *hortus conclusus*, a common symbol of Mary's purity.¹⁷ However, instead of a low wall enclosing the garden, here a high unkempt rampart, a parody on the *hortus conclusus*, obscures the view. When combined, all the aspects of this panel lead to the interpretation of the *Conjurer* as a parable of evil disguised as something innocuous. The viewer is confronted with the transmutation of a harmless trickster into a heretic turning people away from God by masquerading as a saint, and therefore blindly accepted by the crowd. The stolen purse of the tall stooge perhaps symbolizes the faith stolen by the advocates of the devil in the guise of the magician and his assistant. The painting, in its artful inversion of a common subject matter, already warns the viewer of a danger: the man in red is no mere trickster, his tricks are not so harmless, and the world may not be as it seems.

Symbolic devices support this interpretation. The prevalent colors of the painting are red and white, which, when used together, are emblematic of folly in Flemish lore.¹⁸ The creatures that accompany the conjurer—the frogs, a dog and an owl—have a negative connotation in the indigenous folklore of the Netherlands.¹⁹ The association of frogs with diabolical manifestations, and especially heresy, was established through the words of Revelation 16:13: "And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet."²⁰ Specifically in Flemish tradition, the frog was

a symbol of the blasphemer and the embodiment of poverty because of its naked skin.²¹ The word *puut* (frog) was a verbal simile that could also denote a bad and depraved person; Bosch also draws on a popular expression, "to swallow frogs," which connotes human credulousness and extreme naïveté.²² According to Jan van Ruysbroek, the principal initiator of a great mystical movement in Flanders, credulity led to heresy.²³ Ruysbroek's followers opened two schools at 's Hertogenbosch in 1424 and 1480. Bosch, unquestionably, was acquainted with their dogmas, and may have alluded to them by representing the frog in the *Elckerlyc*'s mouth.

The small trained dog, often used by entertainers to amuse the public, stood for the greed and dishonesty of entertainers themselves. In Flemish legends dogs are involved in all sorts of tricks, usually gruesome and unfair.²⁴ Dog-headed demons haunt Bosch's works, and they are especially prevalent in his *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, where the dog-headed priest conducts a mass, with blood pouring out of his torn cloak, and nearby the diabolic creature of a dog in a jester's cap, not unlike the one sitting at the conjurer's feet, accompanies a minstrel-devil.

Finally, to best characterize the symbolic nature of the owl, we turn again to *Proverbia Communia*: "The owl is like the lie, she flies by night and wants to be secret." As an emblem of an informer and obscenity, the owl populates many of Bosch's paintings.²⁵ It is described in Dirk van Delf's characterization of Asmodeus—"this devil of unchastity roams by night like a barn owl,"—and in Van Spiere's play "De Christlycke Ridders," Huben and Ulen are two diabolical owls summoned by the devil.²⁶

Common in Netherlandish verbal and pictorial traditions, a frog, an owl, and a dog become symbols not only pointing to the world of proverbs, but also designating the conjurer as a being of another order, and his world as a different world. Upon close examination, the painting sheds its misleading didactic genre layers and instead draws the viewer to witness an irreverent parody of a sacred scene. Lit by the crescent moon, itself a symbol of licentiousness and evil,²⁷ witnessed

¹⁷ George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 1989) 42. Initially, this concept was taken from the Song of Songs 4:12, "A garden enclosed is my sister; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed" in *The Holy Bible* (New York: Ballantine Book, 1991) 617.

¹⁸ Dirk Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch, His Picture-Writing Deciphered* (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1979) 63.

¹⁹ For a full encyclopedia of Netherlandish folklore, see Kornelis ter Laan, *Van Goor's folkloristisch woordenboek van Nederland en Vlaams België* (Den Haag: Van Goor Zonen, 1974).

²⁰ Revelation 16:13, King James Version. For further discussion of frogs in biblical and medieval Christian literature see Hamburger 8-12.

²¹ Dirk Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch and Lucas Cranach* (Amsterdam, Oxford, New York: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1983) 57.

²² *Freidank, Bescheidenheit* (Aalen: O. Zeller, 1962).

²³ For a wealth of information on Jan van Ruysbroek, see Cornelis Wilkeshuis, *Jan van Ruysbroec* (Zeist: W. de Haan, 1964) and Paul Mommaers and Norbert de Paepe, eds. *Jan van Ruysbroec: the Sources, Content, and Sequels of His Mysticism* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven UP, 1984).

²⁴ Charles de Coster, *The Glorious Adventures of Tyl Ulenspiegel* (New York: Limited Editions Club by Joh. Enschede en Zonen, 1934) 24. For more on Flemish legends see Charles de Coster's *Flemish Legends* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920) and Antoon Joseph Witteryck, *Contes populaires, coutumes religieuses et superstitions* (Bruges, 1889).

²⁵ Numerous representations of an owl are found in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, *Ecce Homo* and *The Garden Of Earthly Delights*.

²⁶ Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 83. On Dirk van Delf(t) see Franciscus Antonius Maria Daniels, *Meester Dirc van Delf, zijn persoon en zijn werk* (Nijmegen, Utrecht: N.v. Dekker & van de Vegt en J.W. van Leeuwen, 1932).

²⁷ The crescent moon may also designate heresy. See Jacques Combe, *Jérôme Bosch* (Paris: Editions Pierre Tisné, 1957) 14.

by unclean animals, the painting constructs a proverb that is a far cry from “No one is such a fool as a willful fool.” It is rather a cautionary proverb warning that appearances are deceptive.

*The Second Deception: From Impious Parody
to Ridicule of the Church*

The viewer, then, has been tricked, if not by the conjurer then by Bosch himself. Instead of a genre scene based on a harmless proverb, the viewer is presented with the charlatan as a source of malignancy, as an anti-Christian *par excellence*, a heretic in a magician’s clothing. However, Bosch does not cease his deceptive tactics, and so he inverts our expectations once again. If the conjurer is a sinner leading simple folk away from the Church and its proper ways, then why is there a nun standing among the others in the crowd, as transfixed on the little hypnotizing ball in the conjurer’s hand as everyone else? The only person to be shown in clothing betraying her social status, the nun in her black and white garb stands out in the crowd, almost becoming its focal point. Here Bosch seems to suggest that the Church has been lost to evil as well.

This view is not as unorthodox as it initially seems. A member of the Brotherhood of Our Lady, the artist was an advocate of the *devotio moderna*.²⁸ This movement originated in Flanders and the Netherlands in the fourteenth century, and one of its initiators was Jan van Ruysbroek, who retired to the Groenendael Hermitage, and while in this hideaway, wrote a number of books. One of his students, Gerhard Groote, instituted the Brotherhood of the Common Life, or *devotio moderna*, which became extremely successful, and, as was noted before, opened two schools in ’s Hertogenbosch.²⁹ The precepts of this movement despised the pointless isolation of the monasteries and the corruption of the Catholic Church. *Devotio moderna* adherents also condemned the mendicant friars and the indulgences they sold. Ruysbroek wrote that these worthless pieces of paper brought “to each his heart’s desire: the bishop has the money; the fools, their passing pleasure; and the devil, the souls of all.”³⁰

In the middle of the fifteenth century the Church turned

magicians and sorcerers into actual symbols of heresy, giving the inquisitors the right to methodically destroy the Netherlandish population, which apparently abounded with theurgists. Flemish folk legends tell many stories about the cruelty with which innocent people were burnt or buried alive when accused by the Church of being magicians and witches.³¹ In 1461 an exceptionally cruel wave of persecutions took place in the city of Arrace; the *Conjurer* was painted soon after it. In this context, the panel emerges as a commentary by a follower of *devotio moderna* on the merciless practices of the Church and the Inquisition.

This hypothesis may be examined in relation to the first edition of *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Witches’ Mallet*), published around 1484–85.³² Pope Innocent VIII wrote the preface to the book, in which he supported every effort of Henry Kramer and James Sprenger, the two Dominican monks featured in *Malleus Maleficarum*, in their quest against heresy.³³ A recently postulated argument proposes that the painting serves as a parody on the Pope and Inquisition inasmuch as the peculiar shape of the tall figure in red, awkwardly bent over the table to form the shape of the *malleus* (the mallet), wears the Pope’s red and white attire, and carries a large key (that of Saint Peter’s) on his belt.³⁴ The man who steals the Pope’s money is dressed in the white and brown colors of the Dominican order, and no wonder—it is known that the most zealous executors of the Inquisition often kept a large part of the victim’s money for themselves, instead of donating it into the holy treasury.³⁵

In light of this interpretation, what becomes of the magician’s role? The conjurer and the man stealing the purse are clearly accomplices; the connection between the two is made explicitly clear. The trickster’s triangular-shaped nose is echoed in his co-conspirator’s bespectacled proboscis; the position of the trickster’s left hand that holds onto the basket is replicated by his assistant’s right hand holding onto the purse; finally, both wear pseudo-scholarly robes, those of a teacher and his disciple.³⁶ If the assistant wears the colors of the Dominican orders, then the conjurer surely represents a mendicant friar, preaching at a pulpit, here replaced by a table

²⁸ Although Bosch’s adherence to *devotio moderna* is widely accepted, some authors believe he belonged to heretic sects—Fraenger calls him an Adamite (see Wilhelm Fraenger, *Hieronymus Bosch* [Basel: The Gordon and Breach Publishing Group, G+B Arts International, 1994]), while Harris believes him to be a Cathar (Lynda Harris, *The Secret Heresy of Hieronymus Bosch* [Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1995]). For good sources of information on *devotio moderna* see Albert Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance; a History of the “Devotio moderna”* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965) and *Devotio moderna: Basic Writings*, translated and introduced by John Van Engen (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).

²⁹ Combe 20. On Groote see also Karl Gruhe, *Gerhard Groot und Seine Stiftungen* (Köln: J. P. Bachem, 1883) and Regnerus Richardus Post, *Geert Groote: Levensschets* (Den Bosch: Geert Groote Genootschap verzendhuis Marienburg, 1940).

³⁰ Quoted in Combe 20.

³¹ *The Glorious Adventures of Tyl Ulenspiegel*, based on such Flemish leg-

ends, tells of a young boy, the Spirit of Flanders, who never dies but travels around his land to help people in misery and trick the rich and dishonest monks and nuns.

³² Institoris Henricus, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. M. Summers (New York: Blom, 1970).

³³ “Desiring with the most heartfelt anxiety ... that all heretical depravity should be driven far from the frontiers and bournes of the Faithful...” *Malleus Maleficarum* xliii.

³⁴ H. Stein-Schneider, “Le Charlatan de Hieronymus Bosch du Musée Municipal de Saint-Germain-en-Laye,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 100 (1985): 47–51.

³⁵ Stein-Schneider further proposes that in this context the magician acquires a positive role as a mystic, but I believe otherwise.

³⁶ Fraenger 473.

with magical paraphernalia. The conjurer, then, is cast in a few roles simultaneously. Positioned across from the mesmerized nun and the Pope figure—the two representatives of the Catholic Church—the conjurer may be seen as either an innocent entertainer about to be unjustly persecuted for heresy, or a trickster who mocks the Church by demonstrating its gullible folly, or a mendicant friar who profits from its stupidity and keeps the gold to use for his own pleasure. Is he a heretic, a mere thief, or something different altogether? His character is ambiguous, and so is Bosch's painting as it manipulates the viewer's perceptions, perpetually revealing new layers of meaning.

Conclusion

The proverb that the *Conjurer* constructs, then, is further strengthened: truly, appearances are deceiving; the role of the

magician and his surroundings changes with every new look at the painting. As we peel off each layer, the conjurer turns from a trickster and a thief into a diabolical creature and then metamorphoses into an instrument of mockery of the corrupt clergy. The universe of this work is symptomatic of the late medieval worldview: it depicts a place lost and abandoned by God, immersed into ambiguity where vice and virtue, good and evil, are constantly inverted. The painting leads to interpretations that contradict one another—is the *Conjurer* an attack on the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church, or is it an affirmation of the Church's view of tricksters as evil sorcerers? Bosch is playing with the idea of the false and illusory, and his painting, like the conjurer himself, finds itself in constant flux as it builds up its own pictorial proverb about illusive appearances and their elusive meanings.

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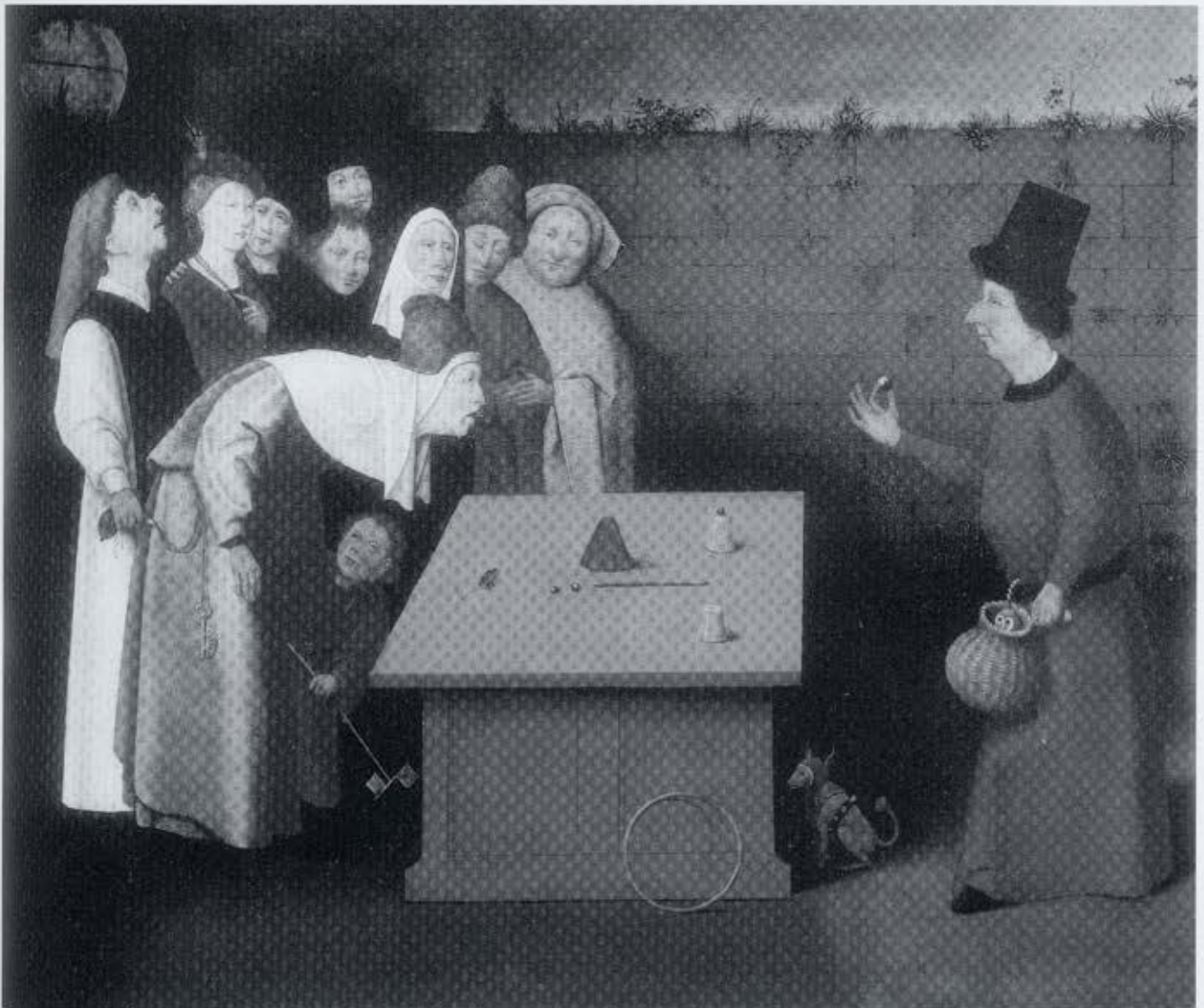


Figure 1. *The Conjurer*, Hieronymus Bosch, 1475-1480, oil on panel, 53 x 65 cm, Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Photo courtesy of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Musée Municipal.



Figure 2. *Christ Healing a Sick Man*, from *Die Neue Ehe Und Das Passional Von Jesu*, woodcut, published in Lübeck by Lucas Brandis, 20 August 1478. Photo courtesy of the Rare Books Division of the Library of Congress.



Figure 3. *Christ Addressing the Pharisees*, from the *Plenarium*, woodcut, published in Augsburg by Anton Sort, 7 May 1478. Photo courtesy of the Rare Books Division of the Library of Congress.

Figure 4. *Christ Casting Out Demons*, from the *Plenarium*, woodcut, published in Augsburg by Anton Sort, 7 May 1478. Photo courtesy of the Rare Books Division of the Library of Congress.



Figure 5. *Christ Casting Out Demons*, from *Auslegung des Lebens Jesu Christi*, woodcut, published in Ulm by Johannes Zainer c. 1478. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.