Bruegel's *Cripples* and Early Modern Humor

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Floris Harmenszoon, a crippled church beadle, is one of many vividly drawn characters who animate Bredero's *Spaanschen Brabander* of 1617. Harmenszoon, during his brief appearance in the play, comes in for rough treatment from a pair of boys. They harry and mock him as he goes about the task of carrying a coffin-scaffold across the churchyard. To their cries of "Cripple, cripple, crooked-leg," and their punning jests that he has been "declawed," he responds with vehemence and malediction, calling them Devil's knaves and threatening them with a thrashing. The boys, as they exit, pelt him with stones and Harmenszoon is heard to cry: "They vex me so, and me a cripple too. God help me. My legs tremble. They can't support me."[1] Earlier in the play, Robbeknol, one of two main characters in the play, informs the fop Jerolimo (the other lead, to whom he seeks to be apprenticed) that as a youth, he had been given over by his mother as a guide to a "cocky, withered, bastard, blind man."[2] This, like the rest of the abundantly crude language in the play, is played for laughs and the treatment meted out to cripples or to the blind is anything but gentle. The earliest and richest sources still available for this popular Dutch model of humor are several medieval farces, including those collected in the Hulthem Manuscript of 1405-10. Plays like *The Box-Blower*, *The Witch* and *Truwanten* are characterized by an outrageousness and verbal energy, in which scatology, blasphemy and violence are all employed as stock devices. Occasionally, a sacred figure is invoked in the coarsest possible terms.[3] The range of targets for these jokes is wide, including country bumpkins, the clergy, beggars, shrewish women, gullible men, and the disabled. A group of popular notions about disability, and about the disabled, can be traced in this dramatic literature, as well as in jest books of the sixteenth century, in printed music, and in the visual arts.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder ought to be considered within this matrix. That no other Northern visual artist of the early modern period was as reputed for humor as he was has been the subject of much comment. Less attention has been paid to the corollary fact that none other gave as much attention to the various pathologies of the human form. That nexus of disability and humor is the subject of this paper.

The spirit of carnival is the active force in Bruegel's work and the imagery to which we attach the term "Bruegelian"—those paintings, drawings and prints that the artist created in a fecund ten-year span during the third quarter of the sixteenth century—are testament to his carnivalesque view of the world. By carnival, we do not simply mean festivity, since feasts could be, and often were, official. The official is sanctioned by temporal powers, but carnival, by contrast, pertains to the alternate life of the people: that other, uncontrolled way of being in the world. It is an energetic disruption of the normal order of things.[4] In this periodic eruption, hierarchies are subverted and that which is ordinarily improper is given rule over the seemly. In Bruegel, the carnivalesque spirit has as its center of gravity the human body. Bruegel's people are different from those created under the influence of Greco-Roman antiquity. They do not simply adopt pious poses, or display nonchalant classical ease, rather: they run and dance wildly; they eat and over-eat; they drink to excess and face the walls to urinate; they fight; they doze; they kiss noisily; they squat to defecate; they are damaged by disease and by violence, subjected to various restraints, or lost in the rhythms of various

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1 Gerbrand Adriaenszoon Bredero, *Spaanschen Brabander* (Culemborg: Tjeenk Willink/Noorduijn, 1974) 174-76.

2 "Een weetighe, teetighe, versoorde blinde-man,/Die versocht mijn tot zijn laytsman." Bredero, 164.

3 In medieval Dutch farces, there are frequent epithetical references to God, the Devil, Termagant ("Allah"), St. Mary, St. Michael, and so on. *Three Days Lord*, a play about a shrewish wife, has a character that fulminates, "Look at these gawking fools, by St. Nick's ass" ("Coels sette," St Nicolaas' ass; also sometimes "by God's ass," or, "by Mohammed's ass"). *Netherlandic Secular Plays of the Middle Ages: The "Abele Spelen" and Farces of the Hulthem Manuscript*, trans. Theresia de Vroom (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1997) 234, 246.

4 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968) 11. See also Bakhtin 89: "For a short time, life came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom. The very brevity of this freedom increased its fantastic nature and utopian radicalism, born in the festive atmosphere of images."

physical exertions, and, always, they are animated by the spirit of carnival which carries, as one of its characteristics, the invitation to inventory-making. The unreality that is carnival is heightened by several means, one of which is the alteration of the body through injury, illness or folly.

The *Cripples* (Figure 1), at eight inches square, is the smallest of Bruegel's surviving paintings, and one of his last.[5] Set within an enclosure, painted in a rough impasto style, the horizon line set high in the picture plane, and possessed of an airless mood, it feels small. The physical confinement of the amputees that dominate the visual field of the painting is underscored by the attenuated means of their depiction. The inscription on the reverse of the panel, partly obliterated, is a benediction: [*k*]*ruepelen—hooch—dat u nering beteren moeg*, meaning, "Cripples—high—may your business improve" or "Cripple, may it go better with you."[6] Additionally, there is a pair of Latin distichs of unknown authorship commending Bruegel's rivalry with and equality to Nature.[7] The hagiographical distichs are probably of later date. While we do not know how Bredero's church beadle Harmenszoon's lost his limbs, there are enough clues in Bruegel's *Cripples* to warrant a diagnosis for his entire group. Earlier interpretations of the picture had read the figures allegorically. The foxtails[8] that dangle conspicuously from their tunics (visible on four of the men) were seen to signify a political identification with the signatories of the Compromise of Breda, the nobles who in opposing Margaret of Parma in 1566 were proud to call themselves "beggars."[9] This interpretation is no longer accepted: as early as 1559, long before any organized political resistance to Spanish rule in the Netherlands, similarly costumed figures were presented in Bruegel's the *Battle of Carnival and Lent* (Figure 2), in which they are integral to the carnivalesque spirit, and are not mere political ciphers. The evidence indicates, rather, that the wearing of foxtails was closely related to leprosy[10] and would have been recognized as such in the context of the *Cripples* as well as the *Battle of Carnival and Lent*. The men's loss of limbs is secondary to the edema and nerve damage from the variant of the disease known as lepromatous leprosy.[11] The pock-marked faces are also typical of this disease.

The man closest to the foreground in the *Cripples* has a wooden clapper dangling from his belt. The man just behind him bears a festoon of tiny metal bells on both his curtal shins. The men have some means of alerting passersby that they might give a wide berth to these bearers of contagion, but the clapper and bells play another role: by their characteristic noise, they complement the cries and supplications of the men, and call townspeople to the Christian virtue of alms giving. In this sense, they are symbols of poverty and of the beggar's complex role in society.[12] Such was the visual effectiveness of the clapper that a century later, in Jan Steen's *Topsy-Turvy World* (Figure 3), it was twinned with the cripple's crutch as an ominous warning about poverty's abjection.[13] Steen's use of the clapper and the crutch raises important questions about how the lepers in Bruegel's painting would have been viewed in their own time. In light of the warning being sounded about the ill-effects of *ijdelheid*, would it not mean that leprosy and its accompanying poverty were seen, to a certain extent, as merited, particularly by those who spent too much of their time on leisure and carousing? If so, was the insistent moralism of informed seventeenth-century Dutch art anticipated in Bruegel's painting? A constellation of issues subtend this one: vagrancy, disease, beggary, and charity. The remainder of this discussion is concerned with showing how these issues are layered into Bruegel's depiction of the lepers, and how he effectively seconds them to his work of laughter.

Let us begin with the lepers. Leprosy is, by any historical or medical account, one of the most feared of diseases. Familiar across a broad range of cultures and present in the most antique literatures, there yet remains no consensus on what leprosy is in a given historical context. Part of the difficulty is that the name has been used in different times and places for a

5 1568, oil on panel, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Édouard Michel, *Catalogue Raisonné des Peintures du Moyen-Age, de la Renaissance et des temps modernes: Peintures flamandes du XVe et du XVIe siècle* (Paris: Éditions des Musées Nationaux, 1953) 42.

6 Michel 42.

7 The compliment, which echoes Ortelius, is as follows: "There is nothing in nature that is beyond our art,/So great is the favor granted the painter./Here nature, transformed into painted images and seen in its cripples,/Is bewildered to find Bruegel is its equal." Michel 42. Stechow suggests that the distichs could have come from Ortelius himself, and that the panel might have been a gift to him from the artist. Wolfgang Stechow, *Bruegel* (New York: Abrams, 1990) 124. The Latin inscription was first deciphered by M. Genaille. See F. Grossman, "New Light on Bruegel I: Documents and Additions to the Oeuvre; Problems of Form," *The Burlington Magazine* 101 (1959): 342.

8 Or badger tails. Phillipe and Françoise Roberts-Jones, *Pieter Bruegel* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002) 230.

9 Gustav Glück, *Das große Bruegel-Werk* (Vienna: Anton Schroll & Co., 1963) 88.

10 Stechow describes the foxtail as an "emblem of lepers, displayed during their customary procession on the Monday after Twelfth Night and the days of Carnival." Stechow, 1990, 124. The association of foxtails with fools and jesters is antique. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites *Robert of Cicyle* (1370) 57: "The fole Roberd with hym went, Clad in a fulle sympulle garment, With foxe tayles to renne abowte."

11 Saul Nathaniel Brody, *Leprosy in Medieval Literature: The Disease of the Soul* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974) 29.

12 F.D. Kligender suggests that the beggar was occasionally seen as a symbol of the people's struggle. Francis D. Kligender, "Les Misères et Malheurs de la Guerre," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 81 (1942): 205. Virginia Tuttle's study of Bosch's *Wayfarer* (on the exterior of the Haywain triptych) addresses the ambiguous nature of poverty (the vice of avarice, the virtue of charity) in the Low Countries in the early sixteenth century. Virginia G. Tuttle, "Bosch's Image of Poverty," *The Art Bulletin* 63 (1981): 89-92.

13 Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988) 209-210.

rather disparate range of conditions. There is no certain way of determining which of the many instances of leprosy in literature and art were caused by the bacillus *Mycobacterium leprae*.[14] However, the priority in a socio-historical minded study such as this one is not so much on whether a given depiction was actually leprosy, but whether the people of the time thought so, and acted accordingly.

In medieval Arabia, leprosy was often taken to be God's punishment for immoral behavior: early Islamic literature invokes leprosy as a curse for those suspected guilty of fornication,[15] and in Europe during the middle ages and well into the early modern period, leprosy was associated with various moral defilements.[16] There was also a widespread belief that leprosy was a venereal disease—it was often confused with syphilis—and that lepers burned with desire for sexual intercourse.[17] The disease was accordingly seen as punishment for lust.

The leprosy that afflicted the Judean king Naman and others, so frequently cited in the Old and New Testaments, is typically characterized by the epithet "white as snow."[18] This is a different condition from the one that Robert Henryson in the fifteenth century evoked with such exactness (the "spottis blacke") in his Chaucerian sequel the *Testament of Cresseid*. Henryson, whom earlier scholars took to have been a physician, describes a disease that it is now believed to have relied heavily on medical tradition instead of clinical observation;[19] Cresseid's spots are emblematic not only of the humoral theory that governed medical diagnosis of the disease at the time, but are also distinctive of the many depictions of lepers in medieval manuscripts. A fourteenth century German missal depicting Job and his comforters shows the surface of his skin covered with the dermatological pathology known as rose spots.[20] The disease is represented in a similar fashion in Hans Wechtlin's 1517 woodcut of Job as round, raised nodules.[21] These depictions, and most others from the late middle ages, tended to indicate leprosy by the spots on the skin instead of deformities of the extremities or face, but both skin spots and limb deformities are typical of lepromatous leprosy.

Bruegel's lepers were founded on this ambient cultural influence. To an even greater extent, they answered the specific examples provided by Hieronymus Bosch. Two related sheets of drawings—one by an unnamed follower of Bosch (now in the Albertina in Vienna), the other by an imitator (Figure 4, Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale)[22]—depict dozens of cripples, beggars and indigent musicians in a variety of attitudes and poses. Some of these are related to figures in the *Feast of Saint Martin*, a tapestry ostensibly woven after Boschian design or inspiration.[23] Saint Martin was reputed to have healed lepers miraculously. While neither sheet is accepted as autograph any longer (the Brussels sheet in fact carries a bogus Bruegel signature and the date 1558), it is generally agreed that the figures must be close copies of designs by Bosch. Certainly, they bear a close stylistic affinity with his work: an engraving of the Vienna drawing (the engraving is at the Albertina) from Hieronymus Cock's *Aux Quatre Vents* names Bosch as inventor.

Bosch's cripples, in their peculiar combination of cheerfulness and pathos anticipate Bruegel's. Other than in the copied drawings, Bosch depicted cripples in the outer wings of his *Last Judgment* triptych (1505, Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna). One such figure, on crutches, bears a sinister avian head. Another stretches out a bowl and begs for alms, with a shrunken, severed foot in front of him deployed as a prop. In these images, as well as in the drawings, Bosch makes a strong connection between disability, begging and deception. It has been suggested, for example, that the severed foot (which the cripple would have us believe is his) could have been hacked off a corpse. In a recent study, these drawings are interpreted to indicate an attitude of unremitting hostility towards the cripples: "negative" and based on "strict, middle-class" values.[24] This interpretation, though, seems anachronistic, and it discounts the comedic aspect of the depictions.

We cannot properly read Bruegel's image of the *Cripples* without attempting to understand some of what it was to be an outsider in his place and time. These men are not merely medi-

14 Identified by Dr G. H. Armauer Hansen in 1874 as the microbe that causes leprosy. Saul Nathaniel Brody, *Leprosy in Medieval Literature: The Disease of the Soul* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974) 22.

15 Leprosy has been identified in Aswan, Egypt, as early as A.D. 500 on the basis of osteological studies. Research by Møller Christensen has located proof in two skeletons. Michael W. Dols, "The Leper in Islamic Society," *Speculum* 58 (1983): 894-95.

16 In a sermon given in 1520, Luther allegorizes a New Testament text (Luke 17: 11-19) by insisting, as some medieval exegetes had done, that leprosy is the "internal sickness of faith" or "unbelief," which one contracts by disbelieving the Word of Christ. Interestingly, just one year later, Luther rejects this interpretation in favor of one (shared with Saint Augustine) that equates leprosy with heresy. Timothy J. Wengert, "Recently Discovered Notes on Two Sermons from 1520 by Martin Luther," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 14 (1983): 193-94.

17 Brody 57.

18 Exodus 4:6, Numbers 12:10, 2 Kings 5: 27, Luke 17: 11-19. The typical leprosy of these biblical texts is likely not identical with that caused by the *Mycobacterium leprae* identified by Hansen, and is more probably a skin condition like psoriasis or leucoderma (vitiligo). See Peter McNiven, "The Problem of Henry VI's Health," *The English Historical Review* 100 (1985): 747-72.

19 Brody 50.

20 Most likely from the elevated and inflamed nodules secondary to lepromatous leprosy. Illustrated in Brody 29.

21 Brody 48.

22 Erwin Pokorny, "Bosch's Cripples and Drawings by His Imitators," *Master Drawings* 41 (2003): 295, 299.

23 Otto Kurz, "Four Tapestries After Hieronymus Bosch," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 30 (1958): 156-160.

24 Pokorny 293.

cal cases; they are "social cases" as well, with their physiological condition compelling them into a role that is, among other things, performative.[25] We should seek to understand what it was about disability that was so easily linked with performance, vagrancy and folly. There is undeniably an aspect of false charity in the depiction, but the picture is more complex than presented by those who see in the *Cripples* "less a record of contemporary carnival customs than a timeless image of human deceit."[26]

The epidemic character of leprosy was stemmed in the sixteenth century, and this brought about certain social changes. In the early modern period, concerted efforts were made throughout Europe to sequester, control and "treat" lepers. This led to the isolation of infected populations, and a subsequent reduction in the numbers of the afflicted. While the woman who walks across the background of Bruegel's *Cripples* is sometimes described as uncaring or nonchalant, it seems clear from the walls around the foreground that the cripples are in an enclosed space (probably a leprosarium) and the woman is probably a nurse or sister of charity. From the fourteenth century onwards, populations fell so steeply that many leprosaria stood empty,[27] and this sharp drop in numbers created a vacancy which was eventually filled by those deemed insane, criminal or mentally abnormal.[28] According to Foucault, this substitution was possible because both the leper and the mental outcast were linked by their exclusion:

> What doubtless remained longer than leprosy, and would persist when the lazar houses had been empty for years, were the values and images attached to the figure of the leper as well as the meaning of his exclusion, the social importance of that insistent and fearful figure which was not driven off without first being inscribed within a sacred circle.[29]

The sacred circle is a reference to the peculiar terms of the leper's exclusion: he manifests God's presence by being a bodily example of both divine anger and divine grace.[30] This liminal position, before it is later supplanted by the figure of the madman, is common to all those who, for reason of anatomy or employment, are marginal to society's function. They are excluded, cast out in order to expiate society, in a manner similar to the purifying function of the *Narrenschiff* (Ship of Fools) and because they move from those margins into the center during periods of misrule, they literally embody carnival. In Bruegel's paintings, and in his prints of feasts and kermises,[31] there is a statistical overrepresentation of fools, cripples, vagabonds, and musicians. The literature suggests that these ranks would also have included Jews, heretics, homosexuals, fugitives, witches and gypsies.[32] By the seventeenth century (in the works of Jan Steen, among others), this retinue of "freaks" expanded to include *terata* such as dwarves, hunchbacks and others born with genetic defects.[33]

While Foucault describes the way out of society for these marginalized figures, it is Bakhtin who takes up the task of describing a way back in. Much of what Bakhtin has to say about Rabelais's bodily humor is relevant to Bruegel, not only because these masters are contemporaries, but also because they mine the same vein of mirth to powerful effect. They suggest that order, state control and civic harmony provide only part of the story of societies. In so doing, they point out the life of "the material bodily principle,"[34] what we might call the biological life of the people. The work Rabelais and Bruegel have bequeathed to the ages is an important revivifying aspect of what one writer has memorably termed "the persecuting society."[35] In a complex matrix that included the im-

25 Koerner mentions this aspect in passing when he notes that "revelers were licensed to force all bystanders to join them or else become the victim of their fun" and that in the case of the cripples and lepers in his picture, "Bruegel portrays persons who have been roped into enacting cruel, negative allegories about themselves." Joseph Leo Koerner, "Unmasking the World: Bruegel's Ethnography," *Common Knowledge* 10 (2004): 229.

26 Walter S. Gibson, *Bruegel* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1977) 184.

27 A Stuttgart magistrate's report of 1589 indicates that for fifty years already, there had been no lepers in the house provided for them. There is similar evidence from lazar houses in England and France. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Pantheon, 1965) 6. For more in-depth detail on the foundation of the leprosaria and the social sanction for the exclusion of lepers, see Françoise Bériac, *Histoire des Lépreux au Moyen Age: Une Société d'Exclus* (Paris: Editions Imago, 1988) 151-204.

28 "Leprosy disappeared, the leper vanished, or almost, from memory. Poor vagabonds, criminals, and 'deranged minds' would take the part played by the leper." Foucault 7.

29 Foucault 6.

30 Moore suggests that lepers, who were often called *pauperes Christi*, were, like hermits and monks, considered something of a quasi-religious order. The leper was considered the grantee of a special grace by which he entered into early payment for the sins of this life, the better to gain redemption in the life to come. See R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe 950-1250* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987). The issue is also discussed, with particular regard to institutionalized lepers' uniforms and priests' habits, in Peter Richards, *The Medieval Leper and His Northern Heirs* (Cambridge [England]: D.S. Brewer, 1977) 55-57.

31 The arguments presented here could easily be expanded to deal with the several prints, believed to be after Bruegel's designs, that feature cripples (like the engraving of *Charity*), musicians, and epileptics. These are comprehensively catalogued in H. Arthur Klein, *Graphic Worlds of Pieter Bruegel the Elder* (Toronto: Dover, 1963).

32 Moore 66-99. See also the discussion of "the marginal population" in Henry Kamen, *European Society 1500-1700* (London: Hutchinson, 1984) 167-193.

33 Barry Wind, *A Foul and Pestilent Congregation: Images of Freaks in Baroque Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998) 112-14.

34 Bakhtin 18.

35 Moore 5.

pulse to Christian charity, sponsored and fostered by both church and state, there also existed a fearful and aggressive attitude towards those marked out for difference. In the categories we have already mentioned, heretics and Jews were subjected to particularly rough treatment. In the case of lepers, their diagnosis was sometimes linked to a rite of exclusion closely modeled on the rite for the dying.[36] Yet, such was the ambivalence with which lepers were considered that charity to them was considered particularly meritorious. This uncertainty about the right attitude, in early medieval times, had even led to the curious practice of washing the sores and kissing them, almost as a fashionable religious exercise,[37] the better to emulate the virtue of Christ.

Some of that ambivalence fell away with the increasing centralization of states in the early modern period. By the early sixteenth century, when vagrants came to be seen as threats to the stability of the state, legislation was enacted to confine those people without visible means of support, or even to press them into forced labor. The English vagrancy act of 1531, for example, permitted judicial action against beggars and wanderers.[38] This period marks something of a shift in the view of the poor and dispossessed. Where they had been chiefly characterized as objects of charity in the past, they became, in the view of the state, criminals.[39] Yet even with all this considered, neither Bosch's nor Bruegel's cripples can accurately be read as presenting a purely "pessimistic world-view." We must keep in mind the considerable delight the artists took in limning the details of grotesque malformations. Indeed, were drawings audible, these would be among the least-gloomy ever set down: the sounds of clappers, the bawdy music of lutes and the keening of hurdy-gurdies, the clatter of crutches and wooden prosthetic limbs, as well as the cries and songs of the beggars themselves, would all emanate from the sheets. At the top left of the Vienna sheet is a figure with a fool's costume; at the bottom right a man whose otherwise undamaged limbs have been twisted into an unlikely amphibian pose, with one leg on the ground and the other flapping over his back to rest on his head. There is more variety here than in Bruegel's condensed composition. A recent analysis by some doctors from the Netherlands has identified a number of afflictions in the Vienna sheet: syphilis, leprosy, ergot poisoning. In addition, they have also concluded that a few of the figures are actually hale, feigning disability.[40] Otto Kurz cites a satirical tale from the contemporary *Mystère de la vie et hystorie de monseigneur sainct Martin, lequel fut archevesque de Tours* in which two cripples tried desperately, but in the end unsuccessfully, to escape Saint Martin's healing power, knowing that once cured, they would be deprived of the easy money that came from begging.[41]

Bruegel's world-view is certainly of a troubled reality, but the comment it makes on human life is not wholly negative. There have been attempts in the literature to tie Bruegel's ideas too closely to the neo-Stoic philosophy of Abraham Ortelius' humanist circle.[42] Bruegel's images, however, insist that he is not programmatic in this way, and the evidence does not support a conscious neo-Stoic or Platonist program. The Bruegelian image is less prescriptive than inclusive, and the visual style, even in the most discomfiting subject matter (the *Triumph of Death*, for example, or the print of the *Allegory of Justice* from the virtues series), is distinguished by its enthusiasm. It is not simply the lepers, pivoting on their crutches, jangling their bells, crying out in song, who are eager to please, it is their maker: he, too, wants their business to improve.

The Boschian influence is helpful for our reading of Bruegel's disabled bodies. At this late point in his career Bruegel revisits the fantasist technique, derived from Bosch, which had featured so substantially in his earlier works. The influence is now sublimated, so that where there was outright unreality—humanoids, animal hybrids, life forms emerging directly out of the slime—there is instead the profound and actual grotesquerie of the body deformed. Bruegel rescues the Boschian image from what James Elkins has termed the "edge of visual desperation."[43] Visually, the results are as eerie as Bosch's, but with a new firmer basis in the natural world. None of Bruegel's lepers is physically impossible. They are real people who, either from disease or from injury, or even from a temporary contortion, find themselves in the category of the grotesque. Where they had appeared earlier as part of the narrative—for example in the *Battle of Carnival and Lent* or the *Netherlandish Proverbs*—they are now isolated and

36 Writing of the Third Lateran Council of 1179, Moore indicates that "Lepers were to be segregated from the rest of the community by expulsion or confinement and deprived of legal rights and protection, and of their property and its disposition…the leper was treated henceforth as being effectively dead, with all the cruelty and all the ambivalence that implies." Moore 11.

37 Moore 61.

38 Julius R. Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 226.

39 Valencia expelled vagrants in 1586, and France issued an edict against all those without visible means of support in 1666. Ruff 226-28.

40 J. Dequeker, G. Fabry and L. Vanopdenbosch, "De processie van kreupelen naar Jeroen Bosch (*c*. 1450-1516): een historische analyse," *Millenium, tijdschrift voor middeleeuwse studies*, 15 (2001): 140-53.

41 Cited from R. Schenda, *Die französische Prodigienliteratur in der zweiten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts*, 1961, 53 in Otto Kurz 161.

42 De Tolnay characterizes Bruegel as the "platonicien" of the "monde renversé." Charles de Tolnay, *Pierre Bruegel L'Ancien* vol. 1 (Brussels: Nouvelle Société d'Editions, 1935) *intro* and 20. Zagorin provides a necessary corrective to this in his survey of the literature on Bruegel's philosophy, in which he suggests that neither Bruegel's purported knowledge of classical antiquity nor his adherence to neo-Stoic ideals is proven. Perez Zagorin, "Looking for Pieter Bruegel," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (2003): 77-78.

43 Elkins uses the term to highlight the extent to which we rely on analogic thinking when we are confronted with an image that barely makes visual sense. James Elkins, *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999) 219.

presented with the starkness of icons. It is not enough that Bruegel plumbs the more difficult aspects of human experience: it is his particular combination of dark themes with laughter that is one of the hallmarks of the grotesque.[44] In the absence of laughter, we would cease to have a true grotesque and instead be left with unrelieved horror.

Bruegel, having started his career with the weird images that met market demand for Boschian subjects, gradually began to retrieve the uncanny from mundanity. This is the late Bruegelian world of the *Beekeepers*, the *Magpie on the Gallows*, the *Parable of the Blind*, the *Cripples*—legs without feet, heads without eyes, blind men and isolated lepers in their curtal condition who stand as metonyms for the world beyond control. The paradox by which humor is paired with infirmity resists historical retrieval, and the fact that these damaged bodies are comical is related to the unwritable history of laughter. It is not only depictions of laughing people that are funny, for few of Bruegel's figures are seen laughing. In fact, laughter can be inimical to comedy, precisely because laughter is not the joke but the reaction to it. A case in point is Bruegel's exact contemporary, Pieter Aertsen, who depicts reveling peasants in his *Egg Dance* of 1557. Yet Aertsen's peasants are completely un-Bruegelian in effect: the torsos are elongated, the bodies elegant, the laughter clinical. Where Bruegel is an empathic humorist, Aertsen's strengths lie elsewhere. He is an anthropologist, viewing the goings on with a sophisticated outsider's gaze, a different take on the visual vernacular. By the same token, the laughter that becomes so abundantly present in seventeenth-century Dutch painting, such as that of Steen, Honthorst and Hals, functions as emphasis for the moralistic tone of the images.[45]

The straight-faced exaggeration of comedy in Bruegel, on the other hand, is a source of the bubbling, Falstaffian mirth for which he was renowned. It is akin to the slapstick that has endured through the ages. Because his bodies are so extreme, so mangled, so outrageous, because they go beyond the pale of the ordinary, because of the unease of their plenitude and peculiarity, uncontrollable laughter is elicited from the viewer. The jokes continue to generate mirth for as long as the cultural context permits. Have we perhaps lost the contextual frame that would initiate us into the *Cripples*, the *Parable of the Blind*? Humor is difficult to translate across centuries. We are to take Ortelius, who says "viewers cannot help laughing, or at least smiling," and Lampsonius, whose claim is that "Bruegel abounds in jokes and wit," at their word.

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[44] Geoffrey Harpham, "The Grotesque: First Principles," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34 (1976): 464.

[45] For more on the link in the seventeenth century between dietetic laughter and explicit moralizing, see Johan Verberckmoes, *Laughter, Jestbooks and Society in the Spanish Netherlands* (New York: Macmillan, 1999) 75.

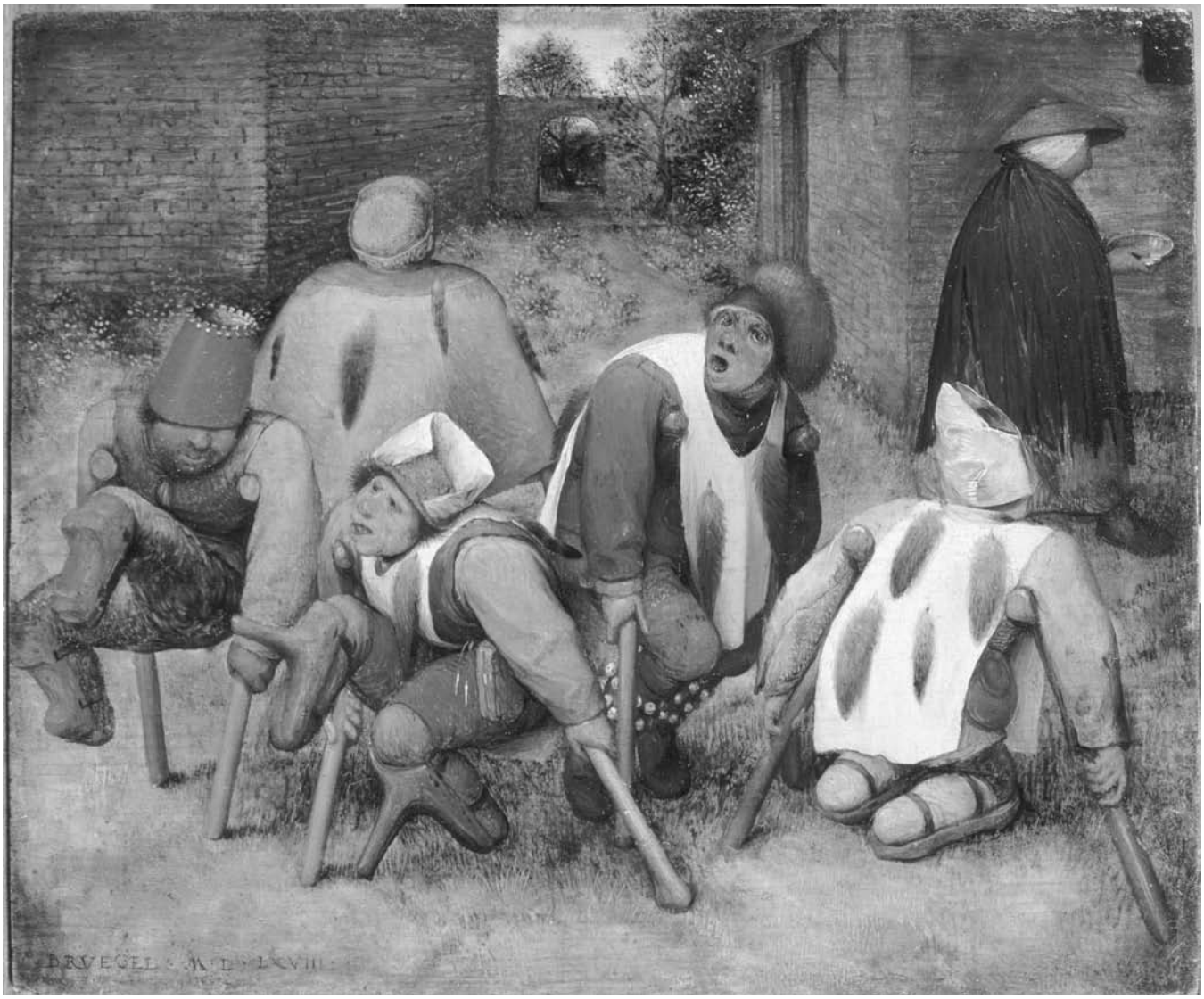

Figure 1. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Cripples*, 1568, oil on wood, 18 x 21 cm, Inv.: RF 730, Photo credit: C. Jean, Louvre, Paris, France, Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

Figure 2. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Battle of Carnival and Lent*, 1559, oil on oakwood, 118 x 164.5 cm, Cat. 45, Inv. 1016., Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing, Art Resource, NY.

Figure 3. Jan Steen, *Topsy-Turvy World*, 1663, 105 x 145 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing, Art Resource, NY.

Figure 4. Follower of Hieronymous Bosch, *Cripples and Beggars*, early 1500s, drawing, Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium.