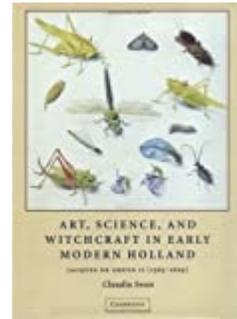




Claudia Swan. *Art, Science, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Holland: Jacques de Gheyn II (1565-1629)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xvii + 254 pp. \$87.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-82674-7.



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Published on H-Low-Countries (January, 2007)

Wit and Witches in the Art of Jacob de Gheyn II

How does the artistic imagination, or “fantasia,” work? This question has intrigued great minds at least since antiquity, beginning with philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. This quest for understanding “fantasia” continued into the early modern era where it commingled with nascent scientific inquiry.

Most of us are somewhat familiar with the mixture of proto-scientific investigations and artistic fantasies in the oeuvres of Italian Renaissance artists like Leonardo da Vinci. However, we are far less able to visualize parallel imagery from northern Europe. In her book on Jacques (or Jacob) de Gheyn II, Claudia Swan helps close this trans-Alpine gap, and to usher de Gheyn scholarship into the new millennium.

Swan’s stated purpose in the book is to elide the perceived boundaries between early modern theories of science and those of imaginative image-making with the art of Jacob de Gheyn as her case study. Her book is divided into two parts: the first emphasizes the new scientific world in which de Gheyn lived, and the second uses his images of witches to chart the early modern tension between artists’ perceptions of nature and imagination. In

her introduction, Swan states that early modern thinkers believed that the same parts of the brain that allowed artistic license also coincided with the melancholic temperament. And, in part 2, particularly chapter 4, Swan points to contemporary science-minded skeptics, who attributed belief in and visions of witches to this same troubled, melancholic state of mind, particularly among older women.

As the artist Jacques de Gheyn routinely created rigorous (even virtuosic) botanical and scientific drawings alongside his otherworldly images of phantasms and witches, Swan argues that de Gheyn was also a proto-scientific skeptic, holding the unnatural subjects of witches in a sort of bemused limbo next to his laboriously detailed animal and plant specimens. In part 1 (chapters 1 through 3) Swan convincingly situates de Gheyn among the like-minded intelligentsia of Leiden University’s faculty and local professionals. Swan is particularly persuasive in ascribing de Gheyn’s in-depth knowledge of witchcraft to the relationship of his in-laws (Thomas and Govert Basson), who served as his Dutch publishers and translators, with the English witch expert Reginald

Scot.

What is largely missing in her assessment of de Gheyn's witch imagery is a more in-depth consideration of the complementary northern European visual tradition of witches, one which ironically has a built-in antidote to melancholy-humor.[1] This oversight is all the more curious because Swan makes perceptive reference to the irony found in Scot's treatise, *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584). Swan notes the legibility of Scot's written irony in reaction to what he sees as the absurd, supposed supernatural powers of witches (pp. 172-174). Swan then seems to downplay the possibility that de Gheyn, too, might employ artistic irony. Instead, she subtly intimates that de Gheyn's Sabbath-imagery may be "akin" to such ironic description. Here, she stops short, lamenting the absence of any "qualifying text" appended to de Gheyn's imagery. Swan sees this lacuna as a stumbling block to "detect the ambiguity in images as certainly as readily as in their textual counterparts." (p. 174)

Fortunately, such defeatism is unnecessary. Scholars like the art historian David R. Smith have rediscovered irony in the work of artists like Albrecht Durer, another proto-scientific artist who forms one of the centerpieces of Swan's thesis.[2] As Smith and others have shown, irony was a long tradition in northern art, often found in images exploring figures on the margins of society: fools, the lower classes, children and the elderly, and especially women.

This subtle visual irony is related to the lost serio-comical mode. Sometimes called the "Socratic-style," this mode allows for a mixing of genres and rhetorical styles whereby serious subjects are treated with humor. Unfortunately, the serio-comical died out with the advent of rigid neoclassical genre stratification. Without knowledge of it, many current scholars fail to recognize the humor of seemingly earnest images of serious subjects. Its recognition is critical for understanding early modern ambivalent, double-voiced images.

In this vein, it is well that Swan acknowledges Hans Baldung Grien's "carnavalesque overthrow" of viewer expectation (as described by Joseph Koerner) (p. 142). Unfortunately, she fails to similarly characterize Durer, and, more importantly, Renaissance art in general. It seems in most Renaissance studies there remains an overwhelming neoclassical impulse to ossify works into dry, humorless exercises. It bears restating, therefore, that the strict hierarchy of genres arrived long after the death of de Gheyn in 1629. Instead, one might have raised the per-

tinient Netherlandish examples of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* (1511) in literature, or Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Witch of Mallegem* (ca. 1559) in art, as but two serio-comical masterpieces of great erudition that would help to reconstruct a more relevant Netherlandish worldview for the Dutchman, de Gheyn. Even more appropriate, perhaps, than the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci.

Furthermore, like her oversight of the serio-comical, the social and intellectual elitism Swan paints of the Leiden humanists is a common misstep in modern scholarship, another unfortunate result of filtering Renaissance ideas through later neoclassical lenses. Constructing an ivory-tower history of Dutch witch imagery and literature that remains divorced from the popular lore and imagination of everyday people may be compared to a look through a cultural microscope at the expense of the view through its complementary telescope. Rather, we should remember that in the lifetime of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1525-1569)—a life that overlapped with de Gheyn's—the ultimate wisdom of the common people was routinely celebrated in humanist circles through their adages and proverbs. (Again, Erasmus could be cited with his famous collection of *Adages*.)

Indeed, Bruegel's aforementioned *Witch of Mallegem* engraving, which is absent from the book, could have served Swan as a wonderful example of the folly traditionally associated with witches through their associations with the pre-scientific world of quack surgery—"witch doctors," as it were. One quick observation will illustrate this point. The round stones that Bruegel's witch-surgeon removes from the heads of members from all walks of society are a visual pun on one of the Flemish words for fools, *sottebols*.^[3] The term *sot* means "fool" and *bol* refers either to a bowling ball or head. Considering this, can one argue for a simple link between a scientific interest in nature and witches to explain de Gheyn's drawings of *Four Lumps of Rock with Human and Animal Heads* (figure 13) and *The Head of an Old Woman and Three Clumps of Sod* (plate vii)? Or, rather, might they additionally be read as examples of the proverbial (Bruegelian) Witch figure wittily (even pseudo-magically) metamorphosing into the Fool's stone she traditionally cures? Additionally, it is instructive to consider that related pricey images of laughable "Quack Doctors" (by artists like Gerard Dou) remained popular in Leiden throughout the seventeenth century, ostensibly for hanging in University doctors' well-appointed apartments.

While Swan does cite two Bruegels, the engravings of *St. James and the Magician Hermogenes* and *The Fall*

of the Magician *Hermogenes*, unfortunately, she describes them as “satiric” mixtures of “the grotesque, the comic and the demonic” (p. 133, figures 51 and 52). Like most contemporary writers on comic imagery, Swan’s use of the term “satire” is misplaced, for according to prevailing literary theory satire and comedy are two related, yet different phenomena. Whereas satire depends upon social divisiveness, comedy ends in reconciliation.[4] In this regard, Swan does insightfully note that in his writings Scot seemed aware of the possibility of reconciling compassion towards the misguided and gullible who fall victim to delusions of witchcraft. Yet, she does not find correlating evidence of such sympathy in de Gheyn (pp. 164-65). Surely the educated audience for de Gheyn’s art was not unlike Dou’s, Scot’s, or even Bruegel’s: humanists who could both perceive and lament the humorous gullibility of some common folk, as well as enjoy self-deprecating humor about their own sometimes overly complicated professions.

In closing, we may ask if Swan’s book has answered our opening question of how the artistic imagination works. In the case of the best of Netherlandish art—to

which the work of Jacques de Gheyn clearly belongs—the answer might be: often with a good dose of comic humor. Though Swan implies this sporadically in her valuable contribution, in light of the ironic visual tradition of fools, folly, and witches, one might wish for readings of de Gheyn’s witch images themselves as comic, paradoxical antidotes for the ailment of melancholy.

Notes

[1]. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, eds. *A Cultural History of Humour* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 125.

[2]. David R. Smith and Liz Guenther, *Realism and Invention in the Prints of Albrecht Durer* (Durham, NH: The Art Gallery, University of New Hampshire, 1995).

[3]. Philippe and Françoise Roberts-Jones, *Pieter Bruegel* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002), 220.

[4]. Robert Bechtold Heilman, *The Ways of the World: Comedy and Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978).

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Citation: Kimberlee Cloutier-Blizzard. Review of Swan, Claudia, *Art, Science, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Holland: Jacques de Gheyn II (1565-1629)*. H-Low-Countries, H-Net Reviews. January, 2007.

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