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Ivo Nieuwenhuis*

Performing rebelliousness: Dutch political humor in the 1780s

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Abstract: This article takes the notion of rebelliousness as the starting point for an analysis of eighteenth-century Dutch political humor. In several recent publications from humor scholars, the rebellious image of political humor in today's world is questioned. This skepticism towards the idea of humor as a form of rebellion is connected to four sources of political humor that were published as part of the conflict between the reformist Patriots and the conservative Orangists, that took place in the Dutch Republic during the 1780s. It is shown that, comparable to the situation in contemporary political humor, the rebellious outlook of these sources is to a large extent a matter of rhetoric and convention. Their crossing of social and cultural boundaries and their attacks on the powers that be are part of a long cultural tradition, of which the actual social impact is doubtful. Also, the humor used in these sources contains obvious disciplinary tendencies, that emasculate their rebellious potential in yet another way. The new insights regarding political humor of the past that are thus produced prove the scholarly relevance of connecting theoretical perspectives based on the study of contemporary humor to historical cases of humor.

Keywords: eighteenth century, political humor, rebelliousness, libels, cartoons

1 Introduction

In 1786 the citizens of Amsterdam were confronted with an etching of a swine, wearing the face of the Prince of Orange, William V, as its head, drinking wine from a trough, meanwhile urinating on some legal documents [Figure 1]. This cartoon, entitled *Het Geldersche zwyn* ('The Gelders swine'), was part of the fierce political conflict that was taking place in the Dutch Republic at the time.

William V, the stadholder of the Dutch Republic, was one of the key figures in this conflict. He was accused by an opposition movement known as the Patriots of bad leadership. Since the end of its glorious seventeenth century, the Dutch Golden Age, the Dutch Republic had experienced a strong loss in

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HET GELDERSCHE ZWYN.

W aecom of toch een Jood geen Zwijnevleesch wil eeten? —

Zou 't zijn, om dat voorheen een booze en helsche Geest;

Die een' ellendeling hadt, jaeren lang, bezeeren,

Wierdt uitgedreven in 't Geslacht van 't morfig Beest? —

Mischien. — Maar is die Geest in ieder Zwijn gedreeven? —

Neen! — Wat men daar van zeg, voor mij, 'k geloof het niet;

Hij voert slechts in een soort, waar van 'er weinig leeven,

Daar Hij 'er een van is, dien gij hier stobb'ren ziet.

Die soort weet met de snuit schier alles te ondermijnen:

Zij schipt, vertrapst, vergruist, bepijst, waer ze overgaat.

'k Stel vast, de Duivel voer slechts in die soort van Zwijnen. —

't Zij men die straffe, of mild met Spoeling overlaed,

Vergeefs is 't, nimmer is van 't Ondier iets te hoopen:

Men koopt het jong, wanneer 'er niets aan is te zien,

Doch wen 't zyn' aert ontdekt, dan wil men 't graag Verkoopen,

Maer dan is 't oud en boos; wie zal 'er geld voor bién? —

Geen mensch. — Wie koopt een Zwijn, waer voor de *Baer* moet vlién? —

Elk laet den *Boer* met zulk een raezend *Varken* loopen.

R.F.-P. 1937-1542

Fm 47456

Figure 1: *Het Geldersche zwyn* ('The Gelders swine'). Anonymous printmaker. Printed by Jan Verlem (Amsterdam 1786). Collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

economic and political prestige, which had led to growing feelings of discomfort. The stadholder was partly held responsible for the state of decay the country was in according to many. He had also lost much sympathy because of his monarchical behavior. Historically, the stadholder's main function was to be the commander in chief of the federal troops, which he did in the service of the Estates General, who were the highest legal authority. But through the course of the eighteenth century, the Dutch stadholders started to behave more and more as if they were singlehandedly ruling the country, among other things by making the stadholderate into a hereditary office, always to be held by a member of the House of Orange. Finally, William V was personally held responsible for the disastrous outcome of the war against Britain that took place in the early 1780s (Schama 1977). All these things explain how he could become the butt of such a harsh cartoon, in which he is not only likened to a swine, but also depicted as a drunkard and while he is urinating.

At first glance, this cartoon seems an obvious form of rebellious humor, humor that revolts against the powers that be and the given political order. First of all, it is part of an actual political rebellion, that of the Patriot Movement against William V. This movement was at the height of its success in 1786 and had taken over various local governments, including that of Amsterdam. The cartoon can be seen as a humorous attack on the stadholder, intended to support the military troops that tried to drive him away by force. Secondly, the cartoon also rebels against the norms of good taste. It explicitly transgresses these norms by depicting a high ranking person as a low animal, and by the prominent presence of the act of urinating in the picture.

In today's western world, we like to see humor in this rebellious role, especially political humor. Cases of humor that lead to political controversy, such as the recent performance of the German comedian Jan Böhmermann, who recited an abusive poem against the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan as part of a comic performance that was supposed to test the limits of free speech and was sued for this by Erdogan, receive wide media coverage. More generally, we expect of comedians who discuss politics in their shows that they are critical towards the powers that be, and consequently tend to interpret their humor in that direction (cf. Jones 2010). Some humor scholars, however, have recently challenged this common sense view on political humor, and claim that it is often much less critical and rebellious than it seems (Billig 2005; Holm 2012; Zijp 2014). Their ideas form the main frame for my analysis of Dutch political humor from the 1780s.

By using ideas that were primarily developed to understand the workings of humor today for the analysis of eighteenth-century humor I introduce a new perspective to the field of humor studies. Thus far, this field has been overly

focused on the present moment in its study of the practice of humor, using the historical perspective mostly to trace the development of various *theories* of humor, from Aristotle to Hobbes to Hutcheson to Freud, and not to analyze actual historical cases of humor.¹ Historians, on the other hand, have been paying attention to humor and related phenomena for quite a while now, but until now they have done so without explicitly seeking alliance with the field of humor studies (cf. Bremmer and Roodenburg 1997). In this article, I try to bridge this gap. I do so from the conviction that both the historically and the present-day oriented scholarship on humor will benefit from this approach. Students of contemporary humor can learn from it that some aspects that they consider as typical of the practice of humor today have a much longer history. Historians working on humor can learn that, although humor is by definition firmly rooted in a given period and society, it may also have characteristics that exceed the strict limits of time and place.

In what follows, I will first discuss my approach to humor in some more detail. Then I will explain the theoretical perspective that I am going to use, which is based on some recent critical accounts of humor's potential for rebelliousness, more in particular those of Michael Billig, Nicholas Holm and Dick Zipp. Finally, I will come to my analysis of Dutch political humor from the 1780s. I will discuss four humorous sources, all published within the context of the Patriot revolt against stadholder William V, including the cartoon with which I started my paper. The humor used in these sources will be set off against the theories introduced in the former section. This analysis will show that the rebelliousness of a cartoon like 'The Gelders swine' is highly rhetorical and performative in nature, and that the actual rebellious potential of eighteenth-century Dutch political humor is rather limited.

2 Studying humor from the past

Historical accounts of humor come in roughly three flavors. The first I already mentioned in the introduction. It concerns the study of the ideas *about* humor – and often also laughter – as they can be found in past societies. This type of account can take the form of a discussion of the ideas of specific philosophers

¹ It must be noted here that *The Primer of Humor Research* (2008), edited by Victor Raskin and Willibald Ruch, does contain several chapters in which historical cases of humor are discussed, most notably that of Katrina E. Triezenberg, 'Humor in literature'. Nevertheless, the field of humor studies generally pays much more attention to contemporary humor than to historical humor, as the contents of *HUMOR* and the *European Journal of Humor Research* also prove.

on the subject of humor (Morreall 2008; Carrell 2008), or of a more anthropological analysis, in which the historian tries to distill the general place that humor fulfilled in a given period and region on the basis of a wide range of sources, from scholarly treatises to diaries (Graf 1997; Le Goff 1997; Verberckmoes 1997, 1998). Either way, what we are dealing with here is more a history of the idea of humor than a history of how it was practiced. Concrete examples of humor are used in these studies, but they serve mainly as illustrations of the theory or historical mentality that is explained and do not form the core of the analysis.

A second category is formed by those studies that use historical humorous sources to make a more general point about the social or moral values of the past. A good example of this approach is the study of Simon Dickie *Cruelty and laughter* (2011), in which he argues that comic British sources from the 1740s prove that, despite the heavy weight placed by many authors of that age on politeness and sensibility, people from all classes had an appetite for rather cruel and harsh humor. Humorous sources here show how politeness at the time was more an ideal than a lived reality. In the same manner, Vic Gatrell uses the tremendous stock of cartoons produced in Britain between 1770 and 1830 to construct an argument about the changing morals of British society in this period, from libertine to prudish (Gatrell 2006). In this type of study, the analysis of historical humor is more a means than an end in itself.

The third type that I distinguish here comprises all research conducted on historical humorous sources in a specific generic context. This can be research on evidently humorous genres, such as jestbooks, cartoons, farces and comic theatre, but also on phenomena that imply the presence of at least some form of humor, like parody, irony and satire. Of the practice of satire, more in particular, many historical analyses exist, a lot of them also containing valuable information about the history of the practice of humor (Quintero 2007). But these studies usually do not intend to say something about humor per se, focusing instead on how their sources fit within the central concept they have chosen. Thus, they are not so easily translated into a relevant contribution to the field of humor studies. Moreover, most of them have their own research tradition, which in some cases, like that of satire, goes back almost as far that of humor studies (cf. Griffin 1994, Ch. 1). In those traditions, the term humor often only plays a minor role, or is not mentioned at all.

It follows from this that there is room for a new approach to historical humor, one in which the insights that have been developed within the field of humor studies over the past decades are used to interpret historical cases of humor. These cases are thereby explicitly framed as humorous, that is: as belonging to the category of humor as it is generally understood by humor scholars today, instead of being read as, for example, cartoons or satires. This

is a very broad category that includes anything that has the intention and/or the effect to make people laugh or to amuse them (cf. Ruch 1998). If a historical source can qualify as a form of humor is decided on the basis of the genre to which it belongs – a cartoon or a farce can generally be expected to be intended to amuse the audience – and on the presence of common signs of humor, such as incongruity, in the source itself. Once we have decided that a source belongs to this category, we can start analyzing it as a historical manifestation of the phenomenon we now call humor and connect it to theoretical discussions from the field of humor studies.

3 The problem of humor's rebelliousness

In the remainder of this article, I will look specifically at rebellious humor, or better said: at the performance of rebelliousness in humor, and how we can deconstruct this performance.

I use the notion of rebelliousness here to refer to a capacity that we in the western world today like to ascribe to humor when it used to discuss politics, for example on television or in stand-up comedy. This is the capacity to critically question persons or institutions with large political, social or economic power, to scrutinize their behavior and their policies, and, through this, to challenge the political status-quo. This capacity is ascribed to humor for example by communication scholar Jeffrey P. Jones, when he discusses televised political comedy in the United States, more in particular shows like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, as “a powerful means for challenging and questioning the sources of power” (Jones 2010: 20). Humor is considered as rebellious in this view, because words like “challenging” and “questioning” suggest that humor works as a counterforce in society, directly opposed to the given social and political order.

In recent years, this idea of political humor as a rebellious force has been problematized from several perspectives. The first study that has to be mentioned here is that of sociologist Michael Billig, who in his 2005 book *Laughter and ridicule* argues that in today's society, humor is all too often seen as a purely positive force, something that primarily causes joy and happiness, thus ignoring the more conservative and disciplinary social functions that humor also fulfils, particularly when it takes the form of ridicule. Billig does not talk about political humor and its rebellious reputation here, but his ideas are nevertheless relevant when we want to understand this reputation. After all, the concept of rebelliousness in our current age has an evidently positive sound. Ever since the emergence of youth culture in the 1960s the West cherishes its rebels, and generally

sees rebellion as a positive value (cf. Medovoi 2005). In this light, the rebellious reputation of humor neatly fits within Billig's theory that we currently like to see humor as a purely positive force. The disciplinary function of humor where he points to, on the other hand, can be seen as the exact opposite of rebellion. This function implies that humor is used to make people conform to a given order, by punishing behavior that goes against this order with laughter. This is the exact opposite of rebelliousness.

Nicholas Holm in his 2012 doctoral dissertation *Dissent in jest* more explicitly questions the rebellious reputation of humor. The main point of his study is that although today's political comedy, televised or otherwise, likes to see itself as rebellious and subversive, it usually is not, as it is completely integrated in the dominant liberal ideological consensus of "reasonable dissent", present in the West since 1989, a consensus that neutralizes any form of – reasonable – criticism against the political status quo by granting it permission to be uttered anyways. He works out this point by discussing various examples of popular televised comedy from the United States, such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Jackass*. What his dissertation makes clear is that even if a work of comedy presents itself as critical or is conceived as such, this does not mean that it truly is. In some contexts, the expression of discontent or doubts regarding the existing political order is more a matter of convention than an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of that order. In today's western world, the domain of comedy seems to be such a context.

The masters' thesis of Zijp (2014) makes a somewhat comparable argument. Zijp focuses on the Dutch comic genre of *cabaret*, which is a variation of stand-up comedy, not to be confused with cabaret in its colloquial English meaning of a burlesque theatre show. This genre has always had the reputation of being critical of the given social and political order. Using various examples of *cabaret* routines and the theory of Michael Billig regarding the conservative element in humor, Zijp shows that this image needs to be revised. Dutch *cabaret* appears to tend much more to conformism and an uncritical stance towards the given norms and values in society than its reputation suggests. Its use of anger against certain political or social practices, for example, is mostly a strategy to look authentic in the eyes of the public, and does not imply any serious critique on the topic at stake. Thus, like Holm, Zijp shows how humor can seem rebellious when it is not, that it can express a rebellious identity, and meanwhile still conform to the political status quo in the ideological messages that it conveys.

I want to take this idea of rebelliousness as a rhetoric that masks a more conformist attitude as the starting point of my analysis of Dutch political humor from the 1780s. If, upon closer inspection, recent examples of political comedy are often not as rebellious as they seem, can this also be true for political humor

from the late eighteenth century? I will show that this question has to be answered in the positive.

4 A tradition of bawdiness

Besides the already mentioned ‘Gelders swine’, I will include three other humorous sources from the 1780s in my analysis. They can be considered as humorous because they all contain enough comic elements to conclude that their general intent is to make the audience laugh. Before I introduce these sources, some more background knowledge is needed about the political situation in the Dutch Republic at the time.

We already met the Patriots, an opposition movement that started around 1781. The Patriots were critical of both the general state of Dutch society and of its political leadership, whereby stadholder William V of Orange formed the main target. Their opponents were known as the Orangists, supporters of the Prince of Orange. Over the course of the years, these two parties slowly brought the Dutch Republic on the brink of civil war (Grijzenhout et al. 1987; Klein 1995; Rosendaal 2005). The conflict between Patriots and Orangists was fought out through military means, but also, not in the least, through the press. Both parties published journals, pamphlets and cartoons, in which they presented their political views and tried to convince the public of their ideas (Van Sas 1987). They also produced libels, pamphlets that were mainly intended to slander and defame the enemy, often on personal grounds, saying that this or that representative of the opposing party was a bad person. It is easy to understand that humor could be a helpful means to reach this end. Making fun of the enemy was and still is an effective way of attacking him. For the same reason, cartoons were also a popular weapon of both Patriots and Orangists.

I will analyze two visual and two textual sources. All four fall under the header of slanderous attacks. Two sources are produced by Patriots, the other two by Orangists. The second visual source, next to the image of William V as a swine, is an Orangist cartoon from 1787, entitled *Dapperheid der Keezen* (‘Bravery of the keeshonds’) [Figure 2].

In this picture, we see two keeshonds copulating, the male dog wearing a military hat. The Patriots were also referred to as keeshonds. Their military bravery is presented ironically here. They are at their most brave in their sexual practice, or so this picture suggests. The textual sources are the Patriot pamphlet *De vrolyke Walon met de rarekiek-kas* (‘The merry Walloon with the peepshow’) of 1782, and the Orangist journal *Lanterne magique of toverlantaern* (‘Lanterne magique or magic lantern’) of the same year. Both of these texts refer in their title

Figure 2: *Dapperheid der Keezen* ('Bravery of the keeshonds'). Anonymous printmaker and printer (Northern Netherlands 1787). Collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

to a well-known amusement from the early-modern fair, the peepshow and the magic lantern respectively. The former was a closed wooden box in which a successive series of images could be watched through a looking hole, the latter a predecessor of the video projector, a magic light machine through which images painted on glass could be projected on a blank wall or a sheet (Balzer 1998; Crangle et al. 2005). Both the magic lantern and the peepshow were often referred to in Dutch pamphlets of the eighteenth century. The formula of a fake show in which images of public figures or recent events were described in a satirical way was a popular means of discussing the news in print (Nieuwenhuis 2014a; Nieuwenhuis 2014b; Nieuwenhuis 2016). During the 1780s, these printed sources dressed up as magic lantern or peepshow performances were mainly used to mock the enemy and make it look ridiculous.

Four types of humor can be distinguished in these sources: scatological humor, sexual humor, humor on the basis of animal metaphors and *schadenfreude*. The first three of these can all be said to perform rebelliousness, because they are based on the transgression of social or cultural norms. The last one,

schadenfreude, is of a somewhat different order and will be discussed separately, in the next section.

Scatological humor can be found for example in ‘The Gelders swine,’ where we see the swine urinating on some legal documents. This urinating symbolizes the disrespect that stadholder William V, according to the Patriots, had for the rights of the Dutch citizens, but it also defames the stadholder more generally, by associating him with the lower senses. The incongruity between the high ranking person that is depicted here and the low activity that he is performing is what makes this scatological reference humorous.

The Patriot libel ‘The merry Walloon’ also contains scatological humor. Here it is the counselor and close ally of the stadholder, the duke of Brunswick, who is the butt of the joke. The Walloon shows a picture of him in his peepshow, on which he suffers from a severe case of diarrhea, caused by all the tensions he experienced since the outbreak of the Patriot Revolution. The duke defecates himself. “He has to shit! shit! shit!” shouts the Walloon (Anonymous [Nicolaas Hoefnagel] 1782: 8). His friends try to clean him up, but by doing so, they only make it worse. This whole situation is presented by the Walloon as a source of laughter. We can again see a comic incongruity of social and cultural norms at work here, through the noble duke’s association with the low bodily practice of defecation.

Sexual humor is found in the Orangist print ‘The bravery of the keeshonds’, on which we see two dogs, keeshonds, having sex. The reason why we can ascribe to this depiction of sexuality a humorous quality is closely related to why urine and feces function as important sources of humor. Copulation was considered as a low activity in the early-modern period, as it was first and foremost a bodily activity, barely involving the back then much higher valued mind (cf. Hunt 1993). Associating this low activity with a group of people, the Patriots, that considered itself as civilized and educated, leads to another case of comic incongruity. Furthermore, the sexual reference here includes a pun, as the Dutch word ‘kezen’ not only is the plural form of the noun keeshond, but also a verb that is synonymous to copulating. In this way, the Patriots are doubly mocked.

Another example of sexual humor is offered by the Orangist journal ‘*Lanterne magique* or magic lantern’. The presenter of this fake magic lantern show tells the story of Patriot hack writer Klaas Hoefnagel, who received some money from his publisher for writing a libel, and then went to a brothel with it. He shows his audience an image of Hoefnagel at the brothel, having fun with the prostitutes there. The next image shows Hoefnagel on the day after, when he turns out to have caught a venereal disease and needs to visit a quack, who gives him a medicine that makes the poor Hoefnagel sweat and slobber heavily (Anonymous [Henrik Sterck] 1782: 13). Like in the case of the duke of Brunswick defecating himself, this situation is explicitly presented as being humorous.

Animal metaphors are used specifically in the two visual sources. ‘The Gelders swine’ depicts stadholder William V as a swine. ‘The bravery of the keeshonds’ shows the Patriots as keeshonds. Humor based on animal metaphors seems to be an all-time favorite. Comparing a human to an animal is an effective way of ridiculing the human at stake (Altena 2015). The qualities traditionally associated with a certain animal, such as the foolishness of an ass or the arrogance of a peacock, are through this comparison transposed to the human. In the case of ‘The Gelders swine,’ William V is associated with the rude and beastly character of the swine, that likes to dig around in the mud. In the early-modern period, calling someone a swine implicated more particularly that this person was immoral and a drunkard (*Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* [Dictionary of the Dutch language], lemma ‘zwijn (i)’). The comparison of the Patriots to keeshonds is also meant to abuse them. Calling someone a dog in this period usually signaled that he was despicable or stupid (Ibidem, lemma ‘hond (i)’). In both cases, the animal metaphors make the person or group they refer to look ridiculous.

All these examples of humor from the four sources could be interpreted as rebellious, at least in potential. The humor itself is bawdy in nature. It works through the transgression of social or cultural norms. Furthermore, the Patriots use this humor to rebel against the stadholder and his supporters, whereas the Orangists use it as a sort of counter-rebellion against the Patriots. When we take a closer look at the tradition in which these sources can be placed, however, we learn that this kind of bawdiness was highly conventional at the time. In the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, it was a recurring ritual to slander political opponents in libels or cartoons at times of a domestic political conflict or crisis. This for example also happened in the ‘Year of Disaster’ 1672 and during the social upheaval that took place in Amsterdam in the summer of 1748 (Deen et al. 2011; Harms 2011; Reinders 2013). This slander did not need to be humorous per se, but bawdy humor was often used in the process of defamation, not in the least because it added to the entertainment value of the libels. And after all, these libels were not only published to influence public opinion, but also to make money (Harms 2011). This all makes that, although the humor used in these sources may still have been considered as rude and impolite by many readers, their shock value was at the same time tempered by the familiarity of this form of opinionating among the public, caused by the existence of a long domestic tradition of bawdiness.

One could of course argue that even if this use of bawdy humor in libels was conventional, it can still have had a rebellious effect, in that it supported, and maybe even enforced, an ongoing rebellion. The American historian Darnton (2010) hints at this effect in his study *The devil in the holy water*, where he

discusses the strong tradition of libeling in France in the decades preceding the French Revolution and during the revolutionary period itself, thereby claiming that libels played a serious part in the downfall of the *Ancien Régime*. But this is a claim that is very hard to corroborate. Big events like wars and revolutions always have multiple causes that can barely be separated from each other. Furthermore, Darnton's argument is more about slander than it is about humor per se. His idea is that slanderous texts and images can create a negative public image of political figures, and in that way directly undermine their authority. Meanwhile, it seems overly bold to claim that sources like the ones analyzed in this article played a decisive role within the conflict between Patriots and Orangists, also because this conflict was, in the end, decided by military force. When the wife of William V was arrested by a troop of Patriots in 1787, she was so humiliated that she asked her brother, who was the king of Prussia, for help. He sent his troops, that defeated the Patriots easily. Many of them fled the country, while the stadholder restored the old political order (Schama 1977).

5 Conformist tendencies

The fourth type of humor found in the sources further undermines their rebellious potential. It concerns situations in which somebody's pain or suffering is explicitly considered as a source of laughter. This kind of laughter is often referred to as *schadenfreude*.

Schadenfreude is mainly found in the two textual sources. As explained before, these are both structured as a fake visual show, presented at the fair. The narrators of both texts describe a series of images to the supposed audience of their magic lantern or peepshow. *Schadenfreude* plays an important part in these descriptions, both in the Patriot and in the Orangist case. We already saw some examples of this. The duke of Brunswick was being laughed at for defecating himself, the hack writer Klaas Hoefnagel for catching a venereal disease. It is striking to see how, oftentimes, descriptions like these are literally followed by the phrase "Ha! ha! ha!" (e.g. Anonymous [Henrik Sterck] 1782: 3, 6, 8, 13), suggesting that the audience has to laugh loud and clear by seeing images like these. Comparable is the phrase "I have to laugh about this crazy guy!", that is inserted during the description of an image in which a well-known Patriot journalist is being beaten up by an Orangist publisher, to be found in the Orangist '*Lanterne magique* or magic lantern' (Ibidem: 89). The pain inflicted to the Patriot author is here supposed to be a direct source of joy.

Schadenfreude can be considered as a very disciplinary form of humor, to use Billig's words. It brings to mind Bergson's famous example of the man who runs

across the street, stumbles and falls down, and through this act arouses laughter among the people passing by. This is a form of *schadenfreude*, seen by Bergson as a corrective of the man's too mechanical behavior, his lack of flexibility (Bergson 1914 [1900]: 8-9). In the same manner, we could see the *schadenfreude* used in the Patriot and Orangist libels as a corrective of the supposed bad behavior of the person where it is addressed to. According to the Orangists, this bad behavior essentially comes down to the attack of the Patriots on stadholder William V. For the Patriots, it is formed by the enduring support given to a corrupt regime by the Orangists. In either case, the act of rebellion that is implied by the fact that a person from the opposing party is attacked goes hand in hand with a disciplining attitude. An important aim of these sources seems to be to make their opponents conform to their own political views.

There is one more issue that further complicates the rebellious potential of these sources. As we have seen, the use of humor to slander political opponents can be found among both Patriots and Orangists. The former can be seen as the party that is challenging the political status-quo, the latter as the party that defends it (cf. Van Sas 1987). In this situation, the party that qualifies most for the term rebels is that of the Patriots. Hence, if we ascribe to political humor a rebellious capacity, we would expect that the Patriots used the instrument of humor more than their opponents did. This would also be in line with existing research on the use of humor in parliamentary settings today, which has shown that parties belonging to the opposition are more prone to use humor in parliamentary debates than parties in office (Tsakona 2013). But it turns out that, if we look at the public debate between Patriots and Orangists as it took place in journals and pamphlets, the Orangists were the ones using humor in their publications the most (Nieuwenhuis 2014b). It is not entirely clear why this is the case. One hypothesis is that the serious commitment of the Patriots to their revolutionary ideals did not go well with comedy, whereas, for the Orangists, humor worked all the better as a weapon of the weak, compensating for their lack of a strong counter narrative with the skill to persuade the audience through laughter. We do know that the Patriots were much better at influencing public opinion, because they understood the power of the press from the outset of the conflict, and produced a tremendous amount of political pamphlets and journals. The Orangists mainly used the press to defend themselves after being attacked by the Patriots, and they never did this very intensively (Van Sas 1987). Humor, then, may have functioned as a shield for the Orangists, warding off serious attacks by the Patriots by making them look ridiculous. Whether or not this is true, we can at least conclude that humor in the hands of the Orangists was more a weapon in support of the given political order than a form of rebellion against it.

6 Conclusion

This article intended to connect ideas about the functioning of contemporary humor, developed within the field of humor studies, to a historical case of political humor, namely that of Dutch libels and cartoons from the 1780s, published within the context of the political conflict between Patriots and Orangists. The two main aims for doing so were, first, to show the added value of combining historical source material with contemporary theoretical perspectives for the field of humor studies, and, secondly, to find out how rebelliousness was performed in eighteenth-century Dutch political humor. These two aims were of course strongly intertwined.

As the analysis of two textual and two visual sources of humor has shown, the idea of political humor as a cultural domain that appears to have a rebellious intent and/or effect, but that turns out to also possess a tendency towards conformism and conventionality, is not only true for recent examples such as American televised comedy and Dutch *cabaret*, but also for humorous libels and cartoons from the eighteenth century. In both instances, the rebellious outlook of humor is mainly a matter of rhetoric, part of a broader tradition in which some types of rebellious behavior are conventional, and thus less subversive than they may seem. For today's humor, the liberal ideology of "reasonable dissent" described by Nicholas Holm forms such a tradition. In the case of the Dutch libels and cartoons from the 1780s, the ritual of slandering political opponents using, among other things, bawdy humor, is the main tradition that has to be mentioned. This does not necessarily mean that this humor is completely stripped of its transgressive or revolting capacities, because it can still cross social and cultural boundaries or attack a given political order. Yet the impact that can be ascribed to such conventional "cultured" forms of rebellion must be seriously downplayed. As tempting as it is to see humorists, both in the present and in the past, as brave warriors in the struggle for political change, it may be more realistic to consider them as producers of amusement in the first place, who cross boundaries and attack political leaders mostly because these are known strategies to make the audience laugh.

What is more, political humor in both the present moment and the late eighteenth century has been shown to contain conformist tendencies. Its use of ridicule has a disciplinary effect: it pushes individuals or groups to conform themselves to given social norms, which is the opposite of rebellion. The fact that this disciplining is performed under the guise of rebellion perhaps makes it all the more effective, in that this kind of humor can make the audience feel as if it is critical and does not easily submit to the powers that be, meanwhile making

it conform to those powers without any fuss. At the very least, we must be skeptical about humorists who cultivate a rebellious reputation, and of humorous sources that evoke a rebellious spirit, as the disciplinary effect of humor is never far away.

There are of course many differences between the social and political functioning of humor today and in the late eighteenth century. It was not my intention to deny these differences and to promote an ahistorical approach to humor. What I did want to show is that, despite such differences, and despite humor's strong contextual bind, the form humor as such also possesses qualities that have a wider temporal relevance, and that those qualities become better visible once we start connecting concrete themes from the study of contemporary humor to other historical periods. When we would do this on a larger scale, we could start tracing the development of a theme like rebelliousness throughout the history of humor. We would then also learn to make a sharper distinction between the rhetoric used in humor or in the discourse on humor and the actual effects that can be ascribed to humor, which would in turn lead to a better understanding of humor itself.

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