Art and the Culture of Love

in Seventeenth-Century Holland

H. RODNEY NEVITT, JR.

University of Houston

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typefaces Janson Text 11/15 pt., Locarno, and Amazone *System* LaTeX 2ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Nevitt, H. Rodney, Jr., 1959–
Art and the culture of love in seventeenth-century Holland /
H. Rodney Nevitt, Jr.
p. cm – (Studies in Netherlandish visual culture)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-521-64329-5 (hc.)
1. Love in art. 2. Art, Dutch – 17th century. I. Title. II. Series.
N8220 .N479 2002
760′.09492′09032 – dc21 2002016583

ISBN 0 521 64329 5 hardback

Contents

Illustrations

Introduction

Courtship and the Dutch Youth Culture

This book is about art and love in Holland during the first half of the seventeenth century. Chapter 1 explores "garden parties," images of elegant young men and women feasting, chatting, and making music in garden or landscape settings, which descend from the tradition of the garden of love. More specifically, I am concerned here with paintings and prints by David Vinckboons (1576–c. 1632) and his follower Esaias van de Velde (c. 1590–1630) that define an important moment in the history of this pictorial type. Chapter 2 examines a variety of paintings that seem, at least initially, to place amorous desire in a more explicitly moralizing or satirical context. Here are "merry company" paintings by Willem Buytewech (1591/2–1624); paintings by Isack Elyas (active c. 1620) and Jan Miense Molenaer (c. 1610–68) in which well-dressed young couples (in certain cases, perhaps portraits of betrothed or newlywed pairs) stand to one side and observe a comic action of some kind taking place in the middle of the scene; and, finally, two portraits by Frans Hals (1582/3–1666) that include gardens of love in the background. Chapter 3 focuses more narrowly on two etchings

by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), *The Three Trees* (1642) and *The Omval* (1645), in which we find the curious detail of lovers partially hidden in the landscape. Nature, which figured in the preceding chapters (in either garden or landscape form) as a setting for love, here becomes the main subject. The organization of the book has a chronological logic to it, albeit a rough one. The geography is more roundabout. We shuttle mainly between Amsterdam and Haarlem, though Esaias van de Velde worked for a time in The Hague, and Buytewech moved back to his home town of Rotterdam soon after his initial training in Haarlem. (The "Holland" of my title therefore denotes, more or less, the seventeenth-century province. When referring to the larger nation, I alternate between the usual options: the Dutch Republic, the United Provinces, and The Netherlands.) But getting physically lost is the least of our problems here. It is, after all, a small country.

More eccentric perhaps is the variety of iconographies this book brings together, as well as the ones it leaves out. The reasons my work took this form are, or seemed at the time, rather aimless. At libraries in The Hague, Amsterdam, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, I sifted through whatever seventeenth-century Dutch books, pamphlets, and prints appeared to have anything to do with love, courting, and sex, and thought about how they related to better-known works of art. And I ended up writing, more or less, on the images about which I felt I had something new to say. My focus on "modern" scenes of love (to adopt a seventeenth-century Dutch term) – genre images, portraiture, and local landscapes – emerged from a curiosity about material that had perhaps not been as thoroughly plumbed as mythological and pastoral images, both of which place amatory themes in a more overtly imaginary context, and which had also been the subject of several recent art-historical studies.[1] The year 1650 struck me as an imminently reasonable stopping point for my project since I never got beyond that date in the chronological card catalogue at the Universiteitsbibliotheek in Amsterdam. On the other hand, the first half of the century also seemed genuinely less familiar, and therefore more inviting of exploration, than the second, despite important monographic studies that already existed of artists like Esaias van de Velde and Buytewech.[2] Thus Dutch painters who most readily come

FIGURE 1 Johannes Vermeer, *The Concert*, c. 1665–6 (oil on canvas, 72.5 × 64.7 cm). Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Photo: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

to mind at the mention of love as a subject – Vermeer and Ter Borch, for example – are mostly absent from this account. But chief among my arguments is that the Dutch imagery of love in the early years of the century is no less complex than the better-known works from the second half of the century, and in fact is crucial for understanding the latter.

In Vermeer's *The Concert* (Fig. 1) of circa 1665–6, two women and a man make music, which itself suggests a courting theme. Two landscape paintings accompany the group, like remnants of the garden-of-love tradition moved indoors (one is the framed painting on the left,

the other decorates the open lid of the keyboard instrument). Scholars have differed on the interpretive significance of the other picture-in-the-picture hanging on the right, identifiable as the Utrecht painter Dirck van Baburen's *The Procuress* of 1622 (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts). For some, the presence of Van Baburen's prostitution scene implies that Vermeer's interior with its fashionable group is a high-class brothel, while others have proposed that Vermeer was drawing a contrast between Van Baburen's bawdy lovers and the proper courtship of his own figures. It seems unlikely that Vermeer's scene is actually a brothel, though that says little about what his musicians are really up to. As I have pointed out elsewhere, Dutch prose romances in the seventeenth century frequently included characters of high social status and low morals.[3] For some time now it has been a cliché to speak of Vermeer as a poet of ambiguity, and with good reason. My argument in this book, however, will be that such styles of occlusion had long been attached to love as both a literary and a pictorial theme. Seventeenth-century Dutch texts described courtship as a perilous activity in which the possibility of sin lurked beneath the surface of seemingly polite activities. Along with that went the usual emotional chaos and subterfuges of love, a condition in which both men and women tended to hide their feelings even as they sought to discern those of others. Desire is always liminal, of course. Nothing about the body language of Vermeer's figures guides us in understanding what is "really" going on between them, and that, I would argue, is precisely the point. But in this Vermeer drew on an earlier tradition.

Such enigmas were embedded in the very language used in Holland in the seventeenth century to talk about love. A Dutch cognate for the English verb "to court" – *hofmaken* – derived from the French *faire la cour*, was occasionally used at the time.[4] Much more common in Dutch, however, was the word *vrijen*, which is rather more vague in meaning. In English one always "courts" with a view to marriage. The Dutch historian Knappert maintained that everyone in his day

FIGURE 2 Frontispiece of Jacob Cats, *Houwelyck. Dat is de gansche gelegentheyt des echten staets*, Middelburg, 1625. The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 759 B 15. Photo: Koninklijke Bibliotheek.

(1914) distinguished between *vrijen om* (to court honorably) and *vrijen met* (to trifle with).[5] But this usage appears to have developed only in the nineteenth century. Earlier, the transitive verb *vrijen* (with no conjunctive) had denoted a range of activities: to court, to be in love with, to have an affair with, to have illicit sexual relations with.[6] Today it is often a euphemism for sexual intercourse.[7] The context, of course, would often have served to clarify the meaning, but we are reminded of the word's potential ambiguity in images that seem to lack such a frame of reference. What form of *vrijen* – honorable or dishonorable – do we have in Esaias van de Velde's garden parties (e.g., Fig. 24) or Willem Buytewech's boisterous merry companies (e.g., Fig. 40)? And do these images deliberately pose such questions?

On the title page (Fig. 2) to Jacob Cats's popular and relentlessly rhymed book of advice on courtship and marriage, *Houwelyck*, *dat is Het gansche Beleyt des Echten-Staets* (Marriage, that is, the entire conduct of the conjugal state, 1625), *vrijen* appears in the context of a moral chronology of life that unfolds in stages from birth to death. Here it is congruent with the English "courtship," with marriage as its end. In the left foreground, a young courting couple make their way through a garden maze, which Cats terms a "doolhof der kalverliefde" (literally, "maze of calf-love," often translated as the English "puppy love"). Then they depart from the garden. Then they stand together as a married couple by the vine-covered tree at upper left. Then comes the family with children. Finally, the husband's death, his wife's widowhood, and her own death follow. The chapter titles – *Maeght* (Maiden), *Vrijster* (Young woman of courting age), *Bruyt* (Bride), *Vrouwe* (Wife), *Moeder* (Mother), and *Weduwe* (Widow) – suggest the patriarchal tone of the book, which in his preface Cats advises would make a fitting gift from a bridegroom to his bride.[8] Nature here is put to allegorical work. Cats and his illustrator, Adriaen van de Venne, used the garden maze as a marker of adolescence, the stage of life in which one is most easily led astray by sensual temptations. The thorny rosebush by the *doolhof* suggests the bittersweet nature of youthful love, while the vine-covered oak next to the married couple refers to the more mature love of marriage, which is as secure as the union of tree and vine; the tree, Cats explains, supports the vine as a husband supports his wife. The tree next to the family then bears fruit to symbolize children, and the tree next to the elderly couple withers in the storm as the husband is taken by death. Such analogies between human life and nature suggest that the course of life so described is part of a natural and divinely ordained plan.

Houwelyck reflected widely shared ideals about courtship and marriage.[9] To take but one example, Cats's condemnation of premarital sex certainly squared with the teaching of both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.[10] This issue, in turn, was bound up in the complex history of Christian marriage. The pre-Reformation Church had long held that private vows between a man and a woman (*sponsalia de praesenti*) formed a valid marriage, as did an exchange of promises

to marry in the future (*sponsalia de futuro*, or betrothal) if the latter was consummated by sexual union. The Church, however, also discouraged such clandestine marriages, declaring them in effect to be both valid and sinful. Protestant churches maintained that only a public exchange of vows witnessed by a minister constituted a true marriage, and Rome adopted similar reforms at the Council of Trent.[11] In The Netherlands, the Reformed Church also supported the government's tighter regulation of betrothals; the *Ordonnantie* on marriage passed by the States of Holland in 1580 stipulated that only betrothals confirmed by the publication of banns three weeks in succession were binding.[12] In practice, however, a private exchange of vows, especially if followed by sexual relations, continued to be recognized by local courts as binding on both parties.[13] The notion that a betrothal gave one license to engage in sexual intimacy was widespread, though church records indicate a shift in attitude from the sixteenth century, when betrothed couples hauled before disciplinary councils regularly claimed not even to be aware that premarital sex was proscribed by the church, to the early seventeenth century, when such couples no longer expressed (or feigned) ignorance on such matters.[14] The archives also suggest that unwed mothers were rare in seventeenth-century Holland, but pregnant brides rather less so.[15] How class differences affected sexual morality remains an open question; the rich and the middle class likely maintained somewhat stricter mores in this regard than did rural people and the lower classes.[16] Low rates of illegitimacy across the board indicate that sex for most people remained closely tied to the institution of marriage, even if the celibate ideal was not always maintained by engaged couples.

With regard to the finer points of courtship, however, we find considerably more variation than Jacob Cats would have wished. In *Houwelyck*, Cats hectors young women to assume a passive role in courting. According to Cats, the *vrijster* must not express her love save in response to her suitor's entreaties; she must not seek out male company or socialize without adult chaperones; she may receive love letters, but not write them herself.[17] Other Dutch writers of the time entertained different views. One was Johan van Heemskerck (1597–1656), a poet and government official who lived variously in Amsterdam and The

Hague, and who wrote a free translation of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (Art of love), first published in 1622 and then in 1626, with some additions, as *Minne-Kunst. Minne-Baet. Minne-Dichten. Menghel-Dichten* (Art of love, Profit of love, Love poems, Assorted poems), which adapted the Roman poet's advice on love to the circumstances of seventeenth-century Amsterdam.[18] The illustrations to Van Heemskerck's book alternate between the imagery of young lovers in contemporary Dutch settings and mythological subjects taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (which Ovid himself had invoked in his *Ars*). The frontispiece (Fig. 3) shows a group of young couples in a lecture hall. Ovid holds the reins of Cupid, who addresses the assembly. The motto "Utendum Est Aetate" (Make Use of Your Age) is here given a slightly different cast of meaning from how Cats might have read it. Thus Van Heemskerck advises unmarried women to show themselves in public and actively seek out the society of male admirers.[19] His *Minne-Kunst* is full of handy tips for lovers in Amsterdam, such as where to meet women (one reason to go to church, he opines) and how to impress the ladies with witty banter. Van Heemskerck's book must also have had a wide though perhaps more exclusively upper-class audience than Cats's *Houwelyck*, for it was part of a long tradition of Dutch reworkings of Ovid called *vrijerijboeken* (courtship books), the first published in 1564.[20]

On the other hand, there were also writers in seventeenth-century Holland of sterner stuff than Jacob Cats. In his sermon collection *Den spiegel der zedicheyt* (The mirror of virtue, 1620), the Reformed Middelburg preacher Willem Teellinck rails against the habits of courting youth, in particular their clothing.[21] Cats may have sympathized with Teelinck on this point, but his tone in *Houwelyck* is somewhat more indulgent; he seems to accept for the most part that young people will dress more ostentatiously than their elders in order to attract a mate. Other antisumptuary critics like Jean Taffin, a Huguenot preacher in Amsterdam who had been spiritual advisor to William the Silent, similarly made allowances for the wearing of fancy dress at special occasions like weddings.[22] Van Heemskerck, characteristically, goes further. His *Minne-Kunst* offers up profuse praise of the sartorial splendor of Dutch youth, identifying it as a sign of the newfound sophistication of his generation, and even as evidence of a divine blessing of the United

FIGURE 3 Frontispiece of Johan van Heemskerck, *Minne-kunst*, Amsterdam, 1626. The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 174 F 8. Photo: Koninklijke Bibliotheek.

Provinces. There were other bones of contention in the discourse on youth in seventeenth-century Holland – drinking, smoking, dancing, and long hair for men – each of which had both its enthusiasts and detractors. To be sure, something of a moral consensus prevailed among all but the most libertine writers. While Ovid, for example, had assumed that true love would necessarily be adulterous (like many later poets of the courtly love tradition), even Van Heemskerck stressed that a virtuous marriage was the ultimate goal of *vrijen*, however many carnal delights one might enjoy along the way.[23] Attending to these variations in Dutch society however, it seems to me, opens up somewhat the interpretive possibilities with regard to the paintings. To take the two limit cases: would Teelinck and Van Heemskerck have found different things to say in front of Buytewech's merry companies with their foppish young people (Figs. 40, 41, 42)? More interesting, would they have disagreed about what the paintings were saying to them?

Essential to my argument here is that what we may reasonably call a youth culture in seventeenth-century Holland must be taken into account in understanding this imagery. Conceptions of youth in European society have been debated ever since Philippe Ariès's thesis (1960) that adolescence was not even recognized (in France at least) as a distinct phase of life until the late eighteenth century.[24] More recently, historians seem to have concluded that in fact adolescence

was conceptualized in most European cultures as the period of life between the onset of puberty and the assumption of adult responsibilities, during which time one courted and found a marriage partner.[25] Unmarried young people constituted a highly visible segment of the population throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in part because both sexes tended to marry in their early to mid-twenties.[26] In Amsterdam in 1622–7, the average age for a man's first marriage was 25.8, for a woman, 24.6.[27] Adolescence, of course, appears prominently on the title page to Cats's *Houwelyck* (Fig. 2); Van de Venne's organization of the course of human life into an arc that moves from left to right probably derived from the iconography of the Stages of Life.[28] To court and to be in love were the defining conditions of adolescence, and many traits commonly ascribed to young people – their taste for the latest fashions, their emotional instability, and tendency to melancholy – revolved around their love lives. This was as true for Shakespeare as for Jacob Cats: when Jaques in *As You Like It* (II. vii. 147–9) catalogued the Stages of Life, he described the young lover "Sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad/ Made to his mistress's eyebrow." The attributes of youth are summarized visually in an engraving by Raphael Sadeler I after Maarten de Vos, dated 1591 (Fig. 4), from a series of the Four Ages. Under a tree, a young man plays a lute; behind him is the imagery of both love and war: a garden party of young men and women, and men fighting each other with swords. Cupid hovers above. At the young man's feet are musical instruments, songbooks, rackets, balls, a purse with coins spilling out, a feathered hat, sword, and gloves. The Latin text reads as follows:

> While glad youth adorns my cheek with its flower,
> I enlist in your army, O Cupid.
> Spendthrift and carefree, heedless and rash,
> I love every kind of loose living.
>
> Now gaming holds me in its thrall, now a pretty girl,
> Now I spend the night in wild fighting,
> But as the grass withers, so falls that flower of youth.
> He is happy who can say "Such a one was I."[29]

FIGURE 4 Raphael Sadeler I after Maarten de Vos, *Amor* (*Youth*, from the series *The Four Ages of Man*), 1591 (engraving, 22 × 25.2 cm). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum. Photo: Rijksmuseum-Stichting Amsterdam.

We shall have reason to return to this image; for the time being it is enough to note how the engraving conflates adolescence and love: in the framework of the Four Ages, it represents Youth, yet it is titled *Amor*. In Dutch, similarly, the substantive forms of *vrijen* – *vrijer* (male) and *vrijster* (female) – force an especially strong link between youth and love (or courtship). The words by themselves imply youth: if a *vrijer* is old he is qualified as an *oude vrijer*; likewise for an *oude vrijster* (old maid).[30] In English, youth and love are not so deeply conflated on a linguistic level, "bachelor" and "maiden" denoting the state of being unmarried, but neither by itself referring to love.

A youth culture, so-called, would seen to imply a measure of independence on the part of young people in choosing their marriage partners. In theory the Reformation strengthened parental authority. According to the *Ordonnatie* on marriage passed in Holland in 1580, parental permission was required for the marriage of underage children

(men under twenty-five and women under twenty); parents could even obstruct the marriage of older children, though they had to offer reasons for their objections.[31] Such laws, of course, tell us little about how people actually behaved. Indeed, some historians have argued that in early modern Europe, young people – in particular, those of the nobility and urban middle classes in England and The Netherlands – enjoyed an increasing level of freedom in their choice of marriage partners.[32] Letters written by Maria van Reigersberch from Paris in the 1630s to her husband, the exiled Hugo Grotius, suggest a difference between Holland and France in this regard: Van Reigersberch reports that parents in Paris had greater control over whom their children married than in Holland.[33] In one letter she writes that she is tempted, but hesitates, to put pressure on their daughter Cornelia to favor a certain French nobleman who would have made a splendid match in terms of wealth and rank, but for whom, she admits, Cornelia felt little affection.[34] Surely both adolescents and their parents took stock of many factors – class, religion, age, and money – but Van Reigersberch seems to represent a trend in the seventeenth century toward conceiving of emotional attraction as a prerequisite for marriage.[35] Thus young people could expect to have some say about who they would marry, however much they had to contend with meddling parents. In fact, Cats's worried admonitions to girls to keep their virginity, to evaluate carefully the character of their suitors, and to respect the authority of their parents in choosing a marriage partner only make sense in the context of such a youth culture.[36] His definition of adolescence as a time in which both the propensity and opportunity to sin are greatest – as the English called it, "the dangerous season" or "the slippery age" – that is, presumes a certain autonomy in the courting activities of young people.[37]

The Dutch youth culture left traces of itself in a literature marketed to courting young people, Van Heemskerck's *Minne-Kunst* being one example. The moral tone of such texts varied widely. Eddy de Jongh has suggested that in the early seventeenth century there was a relatively high tolerance for erotic language and obscene puns even in mixed company, and that over the course of the century the Dutch *schaamtegrens* (level of shame) in this regard narrowed considerably.[38]

Of course, young people were especially concerned to keep the more risqué texts from the prying eyes of their elders, and here we get a sense of the private social space they sought for themselves. In the preface to the tiny duodecimo volume *Scoperos Satyra ofte Thyrsis Minne-Wit* (Scopus's satire or Thyrsus's Wit of love, 1636), another *vrijerijboek*, the author Johan van Dans explains why he has printed the book so small:

> . . . which is not done to save printing costs, but [because it will thereby be] most fitting and appropriate to be carried along here and there in the pocket, when you hold the sweet receptions and gatherings. . . . Also I have reduced it to this small little thing so that should you by chance be perusing it some evening, and are surprised by your parents who are desirous of your company, then it may be hidden under your apron. Or, should you be an orphaned daughter living with your grandmother or aunt, and they chance upon it, they will find it difficult to read because the letters are so small.[39]

Young people would have had good reason to be secretive with dour souls like Teelinck lurking about: in another of his tracts, the preacher condemns "the evil, harmful little Farce books, Amorous little Songbooks and still other fantastic and harmful books," which would certainly have included Van Dans's text.[40] One also senses something of a generational divide in the sonnet titled "From all the young daughters, in criticism of the critics," from *t'Vermaeck der Jeucht* (The pleasure of youth, 1612), in which the Amsterdam poet Gerbrandt Adriaensz. Bredero puts the following lines into the mouths of young *vrijsters*:

> Frigid graybeards, you who for many years,
> Derived pleasure from rebuking everything,
> While you consider love as youth's diversion,
> You feel your youthful time ebbing away to Lethe's flood.[41]

Bredero was twenty-seven at the time (he would die, unmarried, in 1618). Notwithstanding its rhetorical conventions, there is surely in a

text like this something of the authentic voice of youth defending itself against finger-wagging members of the older generation.

Integral to the Dutch youth culture were the popular secular songbooks or *liedboeken*, printed collections of (mostly) love songs, from which I shall quote extensively in the following pages. The musicologist Louis Peter Grijp has emphasized how these books reflected the local culture of the town or province where they were produced and to which their titles often refer: for example, songbooks like *Friesche Lust-hof* (Frisian pleasure garden, though it was actually published in Amsterdam) and *Amsterdamsche Pegasus* (Amsterdam Pegasus).[42] In the 1620s the songs themselves began to include local references – to specific trysting spots, popular taverns, and so on.[43] Some songs proclaimed the beauty of local women over those of other towns or provinces, and in some, the *vrijers* and *vrijsters* of one town throw good-natured taunts at those of another.[44] It seems to me, however, that such texts also allude to a generational identity that in some measure transcended parochial loyalties and also speaks to a growing sense of national identity in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century. Many songbooks clearly sought such a readership, which is evident in the more generic titles like *Den Nieuwen Lust-Hof* (The new pleasure garden, 1602), and certainly in the titles that explicitly invoked a national audience, like *Den Bloem-hof van de Nederlantsche Ieucht* (The flower garden of the Netherlandish youth, 1608) and those of dedicatory prefaces such as that to the "Young Ladies of the Netherlands" (Jonck-Vrouwen vant Nederland) from *Den Nieuwen Lust-Hof*.[45] We know that songbooks circulated among towns. In the preface to *Utrechts Zang-Prieeltjen* (The little Utrecht song arbor, 1649), the publisher complains that local youth had not purchased his previous volumes of songs because they preferred the more richly produced songbooks of Amsterdam and Haarlem.[46]

The moral tone of the songbooks also varied widely. Some included risqué lyrics, some were more consistently polite, and quite a few mixed together every conceivable genre without any sense of contradiction: so that, in one volume, the reader might encounter refined Petrarchan laments, bawdy songs about prostitutes, festive drinking songs, and a few pious hymns and patriotic tunes thrown in.[47] The

songbook *Nieuwen Ieucht Spieghel* (New mirror of youth) of 1617 is in this vein; its engraved title page shows courting couples personifying the five senses as the pathway to love, while the last page recalls the transience of those pleasures with an engraving of a baby blowing soap bubbles seated on a skull: the conventional theme of *Homo Bulla*.[48] We shall have more to say about such curious mixtures of the epicurean and the admonishing.

There was another distinct trend in Dutch songbooks in the early seventeenth century that invites comment. These are songbooks that emphasized moral probity but that also went out of their way to avoid admonishing their readers; rather, they appealed to them as young people who were assumed already to be of impeccable moral character, and who desired precisely such scrupulously polite love songs. In *Den Nieuwen Lust-Hof* (The new pleasure garden), for example, the publisher Hans Mathysz. addresses his readers:

> The Printer to the viewers of this Book
>
> Honorable young Youth, it pleases me
> To bring before you what you now see.
> A songbook, which will be for your pleasure,
> Nothing improper will be found herein,
> For such I have avoided, in order that none
> Be offended through singing and reading [it].[49]

Clearly this was not a counterculture in the modern sense.[50] In fact, a youth culture that sought its own social and emotional space, its own "freedom" apart from adult supervision yet at the same time shared the basic moral framework of its elders, is crucial to our subject. It suggests, I would argue, an interestingly complex dynamic between image and viewer. If there is a moral or satirical aspect to these pictures, what does it mean for a viewer to identify both with that message and with the emotional viewpoint, as we might call it, of the courting or merrymaking figures in the scene, who are themselves also, ostensibly, the objects of that message? What we need here is a nuanced account of how an image with moral content might address its audience, not as

passive recipients of a didactic exhortation, but as engaged viewers with their own ambivalent mixture of empathy, self-recognition, humor, and moral judgment.

In recent years, the "role of the viewer" has perhaps appealed to scholars as a way of proceeding beyond the argument about how Dutch paintings balanced the moral message of their iconography with the visual pleasure they also elicited – the debate set in motion, first of all, by Eddy de Jongh's invocation (1976) of Horace's dictum (in Dutch) *tot lering en vermaak* (for instruction and delight) as an interpretive framework for Dutch art, and then Svetlana Alpers's counterproposal (1983) to locate the meaning of the art in its description of the visual world.[51] Yet the viewer was always implicated in this dialectic. De Jongh himself wrote that, even if a moral lesson in a painting could be identified, the artist's intention remained at issue: was it chiefly to convey the moral or did the iconography merely allow the artist to display – and his viewers to enjoy – other "pleasing" aspects of the image?[52] Eric Jan Sluijter has explored mythological paintings like Joachim Wtewael's *Diana and Actaeon* of 1612 (Fig. 5), in which Actaeon's transformation into a stag that is killed by his own hounds appears as a minuscule detail in the background landscape, while the transgression that precipitated his death – his inadvertent viewing of Diana and her nymphs – is displayed much more prominently in the foreground.[53] As Sluijter observes, the fact that we are likely to see the nymphs before noticing Actaeon's demise means that as viewers, we visually reenact something like the narrative progression from temptation to judgment that Actaeon underwent.[54] The tone, however, is not hortatory but ironic, even whimsical; in Sluijter's words, "the beholder of the picture is both seduced and – playfully – reprimanded."[55] More recently Sluijter has suggested that such an image was deliberately open-ended, the near invisibility of the moral reference allowing viewers to take note of it or not as they wished; thus the viewer could be said to "activate" the moral of the painting.[56] Here we seem to have entered rather murky interpretive waters, for between admonition and delight there is surely always a muddle of authorial intentions and viewer responses which, from the moment of a work's completion, is impossible to describe fully or reconstruct historically. Yet

FIGURE 5 Joachim Wtewael, *Actaeon Watching Diana and Her Nymphs Bathing*, 1612 (oil on panel, 56.4 × 75.9 cm). Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Abbott Lawrence Fund. Photo: Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

here also certainly is something of the original contingency of the works themselves, for already in the sixteenth century, humanist writers like Erasmus were complaining about paintings of nudes that enticed the viewer into the very sins they pretended to warn against.[57] What I have in mind, however, is an even more intimate union of morality and delight: one in which images do not merely accommodate both "moral" and "epicurean" readings from differently minded viewers, but assume the existence of viewers to whom such meanings are not at all contradictory.

This book sets out to explore the dynamic between an imagery of love and its viewers. But it also proposes to give the latter, at least initially, a rather concrete historical identity: that of the Dutch youth culture. The songbooks and *vrijerijboeken* were meant to be used in social situations, "[to be carried along] in your pocket . . . to the sweet gatherings and parties," as Van Dans wrote. They are traces, therefore, not merely of a literary but a social and cultural frame of reference. Because there is a curious circularity to them – both their texts and images representing the very audience that consumed them

(Fig. 3) – they suggest ways, I shall argue, to reconstitute that audience's response to such themes.

Once we consider the lived experience of the Dutch youth culture, we shall find in the art, I think, a closer joining of moral content and sensual pleasure than has generally been described by scholars. To see the paintings as celebratory rather than moralizing has been an impulse in the discipline ever since Alpers's forceful, and much needed, valorization of description, which has usually seemed to privilege readings oriented to "delight" over "instruction."[58] This has been a welcome antidote to schools of thought that at times reduced Dutch paintings to a kind of ascetic sermonizing. On the other hand, the moral content of both images and texts does not, it seems to me, have to be thought of in quite that way. Certainly Hans Mathysz. conceptualized it differently when he addressed his young readers in *Den Nieuwen Lust-Hof* not as an audience in need of moral instruction, but as one whose virtue he was only appealing to, and implicitly, affirming. This is the model I want to try, then: to imagine these images as part of a youth culture speaking to itself, a culture in which seemingly contradictory readings of a text or an image might often have been radically unified into one interpretive experience. Consider, for example, how easily morality and delight coexist in a song text from *Den Nieuwen Lust-Hof*, in which the narrator begins by referring to certain critics of youth:

> Despite the scornful efforts of Momus [god of ridicule],
> Benevolent Apollo
> Lets sound his lyre,
> Rhetoric erects her banner.
>
> Enjoy yourselves, you lovers,
> Make use of the sweet time.
> It is now that you must pair off.
> You who hold your heart in heaviness,
> Declare also your love,
> In order that she free you.
> You beautiful earthly goddesses:

Give heed to love's council,
And allow him to receive solace.
He is upright in love,
Yes, do not be hard-hearted,
Like obstinate Daphne . . .
Hear how the small animals
Of the woods cry out in song . . .
They do not wish to be silent,
But to pursue their interests.
For this God prepares them,
Thus is His honor magnified,
His majesty must be believed.[59]

Here indeed are subtleties. The singer praises the sensual pleasures of youth, comparing them to nature in springtime. He also speaks of the emotional pains of male lovers and advises that their only relief will be to declare their feelings by means of the songs in the book (its "Rhetoric," presided over by Apollo, god of poetry). Conversely, the women are enjoined to be open to their suitors' entreaties before it is too late. The usual theme of transience is trotted out. It is used, however, not to condemn earthly pleasures but to affirm them in the carpe diem tradition that we encountered before in Van Heemskerck's "Utendum Est Aetate" (Make Use of Your Age). Yet in this text, such rhetoric, as Van Heemskerck maintained, might not be without its own claims of virtue, if "pairing off" means, finally, a virtuous marriage (which would be a switch from Ovid, who admonished married people to taste the delights of adulterous affairs before they grew old).[60] In the Dutch song, the pleasures of youth will end. Winter will return. It closes on the pious note that all creatures have been created by God to mate. "Nature" here is fit into a somewhat different context from that of Cats's title page (Fig. 2) for this text, I would argue, was written more intimately from within the world of the youth culture itself. On the other hand, it contains nothing to contradict Cats's tenets of how to lead a virtuous life.

The song also contains, in miniature, something of the varied mix I shall explore in the following chapters: both the pleasures and

pains of love; the moral criticism (variously, condemning or satirical) of young lovers; and nature as a controlling metaphor. Add to that the mythological reference of Apollo and Daphne, and we are indeed contending with a hodgepodge of themes that, in their visual forms, are more often divided by art historians into discrete iconographic traditions. Here they stand together as the common rhetoric of a youth culture in which the demands of morality and the enticements of pleasure were closely, necessarily, intertwined. Surely there is no reason to think that the images that reflected and shaped that culture were any less complex.