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# The Reception of Bruegel's *Beekeepers*: A Matter of Choice

*Jetske Sybesma*

The Prince of Orange has come to battle:  
Long live the Beggars!  
You Papists, like apes, you should be hesitant,  
Cover your nose,  
Because the Prince dislikes all papists  
We remain Beggars!  
.....  
Now one can hear the Clergy's Hope complain,  
Long live the Beggars!  
Because one sees that the soul-murderers are chased  
out of their nests,  
This is the slogan.  
Because the Prince dislikes monks and nuns,  
We remain Beggars!  
Flemish beggars' song, ca. 1569<sup>1</sup>

*For James Snyder*

Carel van Mander, the Dutch Vasari, who in 1604 published *Het Schilder-boeck*, was one of the first writers to compile biographies of Netherlandish artists.<sup>2</sup> His detailed biography of Pieter Bruegel suggests that he had access to well-informed sources who knew the artist personally. Apparently Bruegel was a quiet, likeable man who enjoyed jokes, puns, and riddles. One particular passage is of interest for this paper because it suggests he made some political drawings:

One can see many strange allegorical designs in his comical prints: on his deathbed he asked his wife to burn several fine drawings, which had inscriptions, because some were too critical or sarcastic [*bijlich oft schimpich*].

De Prins van Orangiën is te velde gecomen:  
Vive le Geus!  
Ghy Papen, als apen, ghy meucht wel schromen,  
Bedeckt u Neus,  
Door den Prince spijt alle papisten,  
Wy blijven Geus!  
.....  
Nu hoort men den gheestlijke hoop seer clagen,  
Vive le Geus!  
Om dat men de ziel-moorders wt haer nesten siet jagen,  
Dit is de gleus  
Al door den Prins, spijt Jacobijnen, Bagijnen,  
Wy blijven Geus! enz.

Quoted in A. W. Bronsveld, *Het Volkslied in 1569*, Harderwijk, 1870, viii, 146–147.

<sup>2</sup> Carel van Mander, "Het leven der Doorluchtige Nederlandsche en Hoogduytsche Schilders . . .," *Het Schilder-boeck*, Haarlem, 1604.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 233–234. The Dutch text is quoted in R. H. Marijnissen and M. Seidel, *Bruegel*, New York, 1984, 55–56, n. 4.

<sup>4</sup> The *Beekeepers*. Pen and brown ink; 203 × 309mm. Signed and dated in the bottom right corner, "BRVEGEL MDLXV . . ."; inscribed in the bottom right corner, "dije den nest Weet dije[n?] Weeten dijen R oft dij heeten." Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabi-

net SMFK, Berlin, inv. no. KdZ 713. Provenance: Von Nagler Collection (Lugt 2529). Acquired by the Kupferstichkabinett in 1835.

Either he regretted this, or after his death he did not want to get her into trouble with these drawings because she might be held responsible for their content.<sup>3</sup>

This comment probably refers to current drawings in his studio, that is, to art made during the latter part of the 1560s.

One of the most enigmatic drawings of this period is Bruegel's *Beekeepers*, signed and dated "MDLXV . . ." (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the right edge of the drawing has been cropped so that the date "MDLXV" appears incomplete. As the *Beekeepers* is very similar in size, style, and technique to Bruegel's *Summer*, a signed drawing dated 1568, it might originally have been dated "MDLXVII" or "MDLXVIII."<sup>5</sup> The *Beekeepers* has an inscription, as do those drawings with texts that Bruegel asked to have destroyed in 1569, while *Summer* has no additional text. His drawings with texts probably had political connotations and satirized either the Catholic Church or the current Spanish regime. Their content, according to Van Mander's inferences, could provide circumstantial evidence to the authorities and implicate his wife. On what grounds other than heresy would Bruegel fear that someone might question his wife about his drawings?

During the latter part of the 1560s political tensions over religious issues increased dramatically in the Spanish Netherlands. The Inquisition's *Raet van Beroerten* (Council of Troubles) was an official, State institution that zealously pursued its mandate to question anybody or anything about deviation from the Catholic faith. This fanatical Council of Troubles was established in September 1567, shortly after the arrival of the Duke of Alba in Brussels.<sup>6</sup> The "Iron Duke" anti-

nett SMFK, Berlin, inv. no. KdZ 713. Provenance: Von Nagler Collection (Lugt 2529). Acquired by the Kupferstichkabinett in 1835.

<sup>5</sup> Pieter Bruegel, *Summer*. Pen and brown ink; 220 × 286mm. Signed ". . . RVEG[EL]" in the bottom left corner, dated in the center of the bottom "MDLXVIII." Hamburger Kunsthalle, Kupferstichkabinett, Hamburg, inv. no. 21758. Cut at the left, first letter of the signature cut away. Preliminary drawing, in reverse for the engraving (R. van Baste-laer, *Les Estampes de Pieter Bruegel l'Ancien*, Brussels, 1908, no. 202). See also Bruegel's drawing, *Spring*. Pen and brown ink; 223 × 289mm. Signed and dated at the lower right corner, "MDLXV BRVEGEL." Albertina, Vienna. Inscribed along the lower margin, "De lenten Mert April Meij." Preliminary drawing in reverse for Pieter van der Heyden's engraving (Bastelaer, no. 200). Both *Summer* and *Spring* measure twenty-eight centimeters with a difference of three millimeters. This suggests that *Summer* has been cut three millimeters at the left. The *Beekeepers*, cut at the right, measures two centimeters wider than *Spring*, which indicates that it did not belong to this series of preliminary drawings for prints depicting the seasons.

<sup>6</sup> The Duke of Alba arrived in Brussels on 22 August 1567. See *Mémoires anonymes sur les troubles des Pays-Bas 1565–1580*, annot. and ed. J. B. Blaes, Brussels, 1859; rpt. Nendeln, Liechtenstein, 1977, I, 43, n. 1. Viglius organized the Council of Troubles, chaired by the Duke of Alba (44, n. 2).



1 Pieter Bruegel, *Beekeepers*. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett (photo: Kupferstichkabinett)

pated that the Council of Troubles would not only stop, but also reverse the growing tide of Protestantism then sweeping the Spanish Netherlands. Anyone who was critical of the Catholic Church or the Spanish regime could be anonymously accused of heresy or treason and, if convicted, would be severely punished by this feared judicial arm of the Inquisition. Probably for good reasons, Bruegel may have worried that after his death the Inquisition might interrogate his widow about his work. Alternatively, perhaps on his deathbed, expecting to receive the last rites, as a matter of conscience he may have decided to destroy drawings critical of the Church.

Although the date of the *Beekeepers* has been cropped at the right edge of the sheet, the remaining Roman numerals "MDLXV" clearly indicate that the work postdates 1564. Bearing in mind Bruegel's instructions to his wife, the fact that the *Beekeepers* was not destroyed suggests one of three situations: that the drawing was no longer in Bruegel's possession at the time of his death, that his wife did not burn every one of these implicating drawings, or that it had no overtly negative connotations and so was a "safe" work. Another possibility might be that critical allusions in the *Beekeepers* were so cleverly disguised that any evidence of "bijtich oft schimpich" (critical or sarcastic) innuendos would be impossible for the Inquisition to prove. Hence, the alternative references would have to be so vague as to be meaningless to all but the most perceptive audience.



2 Detail of Fig. 1

The meaning of the *Beekeepers* has indeed remained enigmatic, even though the clearly visible Flemish aphorism at the bottom left of the drawing states: "Dije den nest Weet dije Weeten, dijen R oft di heeten [Who knows where the nest is has the knowledge, who robs it has the nest]."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> R. van Bastelaer and G. Hulin de Loo, *Pieter Bruegel l'Ancien, son oeuvre et son temps*, Brussels, 1907, II, 199, no. 100. All subsequent scholarship follows Van Bastelaer's reading of the aphorism. J. Grauls, *Volkstaal en Volksleven in het Werk van Pieter Bruegel*, Antwerp-Amsterdam, 1957, 161, traces this aphorism back to the collection of aphorisms published by F. Goedthals in 1568. Grauls interprets this to mean that only active people win.

Traditionally this has been recognized as a cryptic version of the still common Dutch saying, "Who knows the nest, has it not, but who robs it has it."<sup>8</sup> Kjell Boström proposed that the three beekeepers in the foreground with their protective clothing seem to be trying to catch a bee swarm, while the boy in the tree, without a special protective outfit, has snatched the swarm away.<sup>9</sup> Konrad Renger agrees with Boström's recognition of a dialectical opposition of caution and audacity, expressed by the protected beekeepers and the unprotected boy.<sup>10</sup> He points to the basic meaning of this aphorism, "gain is only achieved by action," as the inherent content of the drawing. However, Renger wonders why Bruegel's aphorism refers to "nest" while there is no bird's nest visible in the tree. Furthermore, he questions why the artist emphasizes beekeepers in the foreground.

Recently, Wolfgang Brandt has proposed a different interpretation of the *Beekeepers*.<sup>11</sup> For him, these three masked men are robbers who are searching for something hidden in one of the hives, while the boy in the tree is an accomplice on the lookout. The thief at the right is still looking into the upside-down hive, but the other two men know better. The robber at the left, having drowned the pesky bees in the brook, has found the loot, as the man in the center knows. Throwing his hive away, he grabs at the vaguely visible dagger underneath his clothes because he realizes that his partner at the left is ready to take off without sharing the spoils.<sup>12</sup> For Brandt, the drawing illustrates the deadly sin of avarice: the thief in the center knows the nest with the loot while the robber at the left has it and may keep it.

Although Renger and recently Judson accept the handwriting as genuine, the Flemish inscription at the bottom of the drawing seems to confuse matters rather than clarify the visual images (Fig. 2).<sup>13</sup> It may be argued that since the drawing, the text of the aphorism, the signature, and the date are by Bruegel's own hand, the enigmatic meaning of the drawing, combined with the aphorism, reflects the polemical intention of the artist. Because the interpretations

presented thus far have been incomplete, it is likely that the meaning of the text and drawing has not been fully understood.

Past research has concentrated on the pictorial details in this drawing to unravel its arcane meaning. Considering contextual aspects of the work (rather than looking only at the drawing) may broaden our understanding of the artist's intent. For instance, what *audience* and what *reception* did Bruegel anticipate for the *Beekeepers*? Van Mander clearly implies that Bruegel was concerned about the response of the Inquisition to his drawings with texts. In the event that the *Beekeepers* was commissioned by Protestants, the Inquisition should be recognized as an official, but unsolicited, hostile audience, quite different from a receptive, Protestant audience. If the work was commissioned by a Catholic client, its content might express criticism of Protestant leanings. Since the overt content had to pass scrutiny by the Inquisition, the covert, if anti-Catholic, content had to be unintelligible to the inquisitors and thus difficult to decipher.<sup>14</sup>

Bruegel's official religious affiliation must have been Catholic. Cardinal Granvelle is known to have collected his work, and it is unlikely that this exemplary Catholic would have patronized a heretic, directly or indirectly.<sup>15</sup> If Bruegel had not appeared to be a practicing Catholic, he would not have been buried, in 1569, in Notre Dame de la Chapelle in Brussels. However, the artist's personal affiliations seem to have included people of Protestant persuasion. Bruegel was not only a close friend of Abraham Ortelius, the well-known cartographer, but also of Christopher Plantin, the successful Antwerp publisher.<sup>16</sup> The two humanists definitely were associated with the Family of Love, a mystic sect also known

<sup>8</sup> K. ter Laan, *Nederlandse Spreekwoorden Spreuken en Zegswijzen*, 24th ed., Amsterdam, 1988, 234, *nest*, 4: "Die't nestje weet, die heeft het niet, maar die het rooft, die heeft het [Who knows the nest, has it not, but who robs it, has it]," meaning: It is not sufficient that one knows about something, but one has to take action at the right moment. This relates especially to a lover who gets his beloved by taking decisive actions.

<sup>9</sup> K. Boström, "Das Sprichwort vom Vogelneest," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, xviii, 1949, 77–89.

<sup>10</sup> K. Renger, *Pieter Bruegel d. Ä. als Zeichner Herkunft und Nachfolge*, Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett, 1975, 86–87.

<sup>11</sup> W. Brandt, "Die Bienenzüchter verraten was sie sind," *Kunst und Antiquitäten*, iv, 1989, 59–61.

<sup>12</sup> The outlines of this dagger seem to be erased. I do not find the location of the knife on the thigh underneath the clothing convincing.

<sup>13</sup> Renger (as in n. 10), 86; J. R. Judson, *The Age of Bruegel*, Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, 1986, 105, follows Renger's German text closely. Boström (as in n. 9), 88, doubts that the handwriting of the aphorism is genuine. Renger, 86, remarks that the ink of the inscription is the same as the ink in the drawing. Judson, 105, agrees with Renger that the inscription is written by Bruegel himself. He remarks that this is unusual because all inscriptions on the remaining drawings have been added by other hands. Both Renger and Judson mention that this carefully executed drawing is typical of designs for a print, although it was never published.

<sup>14</sup> That people were aware of an overt and covert meaning in art is evident from a letter, dated 1561, to Abraham Ortelius, in which Johannes Terennumus (Vyfpenninck) warns his friend, "You must avoid all pictures, engravings etc. which might offend the religious, and those [images] that are obscene as the Inquisition examines such things as much as books." Quoted in J. H. Hessels, *Abrahami Ortelii . . . et virorum eruditorum ad eundem . . . epistulae, Ecclesiae Londino-Batavae Archivum I*, Cambridge, 1887, 22. See also R. Boumans, "The Religious View of Ortelius," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xvii, 1954, 374–377.

<sup>15</sup> *The Flight into Egypt*, oil on panel, 35.2 × 55.5cm. Signed and dated "BRUEGEL MDLXIII" (the last two figures are indistinct), London, Courtauld Institute, inv. no. 5. This painting was listed in the inventory of Cardinal Granvelle's heirs, Besançon, 1607. Additional evidence of Bruegel being above heretical suspicions can be found in Carel van Mander (as in n. 2). The magistrates of Brussels had commissioned Bruegel in the 1560s to record the digging of the canal linking Brussels to Antwerp. This commission was left unfinished because of his death. The city magistrates would not have given this official commission to an artist who was suspected of heretical activity. See Marijnissen (as in n. 3), 46, n. 3. The artist probably died in September 1569, and he was buried in the third chapel of the right aisle of Notre Dame de la Chapelle in Brussels. He thus received a Catholic burial. Marijnissen, 58, n. 46; 343.

<sup>16</sup> In his *Album amicorum* Abraham Ortelius wrote an epitaph expressing his admiration for Bruegel: "No one . . . will ever deny that Peter Bruegel was the most perfect painter of this century." Reproduced in Jean Puraye, *Album amicorum Abraham Ortelius*, Amsterdam, 1969, fol. 12v on pp. 21–22. Marijnissen (as in n. 3), 58, n. 45, quotes A. E. Popham, "Pieter Bruegel and Abraham Ortelius," *Burlington Magazine*, lix, 1931, 188, regarding a letter dated Bologna, 16 June 1561, in which Scipio Fabius asks Ortelius about "his dear friend . . . Petrus Bruochl." Ortelius and Bruegel were acquainted prior to 1563 when the artist married and moved to Brussels. They thus remained close friends.

as the *Familia Charitatis*.<sup>17</sup> Bruegel, during his Antwerp years, prior to his marriage in 1563, might have been introduced to these Familist beliefs by his friends. Familists were known to practice overtly the accepted religion of their community, while covertly adhering to their mystic faith. Ortelius and Plantin both followed this pattern and it is possible that Bruegel might have sympathized with this mystic sect.

That Bruegel addressed typical Familist ideas rather than Calvinist beliefs in a work of 1558 has been shown by K. G. Boon.<sup>18</sup> In examining a number of sixteenth-century prints of *Patientia*, a favorite Protestant theme, he found that Bruegel's selection of iconographical details expressing this virtue was similar to that in a print by Dirck Volkertsz. Coornhert. Coornhert, a printmaker and a poet and friend of Bruegel, was also a friend of Ortelius and Plantin.<sup>19</sup> Boon demonstrates that the prints of both Bruegel and Coornhert emphasize pacifism in association with *Patientia*, while Calvinists interpret this theme in a much more militant way. He concludes that the pacifism expressed by Bruegel and Coornhert typifies sympathizers with gnostic sects. Coornhert, like Plantin, personally knew the founder of the Family of Love, Hendrick Niclaes, although his own religious leanings resembled the mystic gnosticism of Sebastian Franck.<sup>20</sup> Boon's evidence that Bruegel's *Patientia* of 1558 reflected Niclaes's specific Protestant sympathies indicates that Bruegel, during his residence in Antwerp, which had a sizable Protestant population, accepted commissions directed at a Protestant audience.<sup>21</sup> As well, the artist's life-long friendship

with covert gnostics like Plantin and Ortelius suggests that he tolerated a moderate Protestantism.

This attitude of Plantin and Ortelius certainly was not unusual. Francis Junius, an officiating Calvinist minister at Antwerp during 1565–66, wrote Philip II the following explanation in his *Brief discours*:

It is not difficult to indicate the reasons for this situation. These people see that there are grave abuses in the Church but they are not permitted to adopt any other discipline or religion. In such circumstances they consider it legitimate to conform outwardly to the rules of a Church which they reject provided their hearts are pure. . . . There is no better means . . . to exterminate such heresies than to permit, nay expressly to command that all who profess the religion called reformed or evangelical, assemble openly and keep a strict discipline in accordance with the obedience due to God and the authorities, and correct all vices and licentiousness.

If this is done . . . there will be only two ways of public worship in public sight, each of them keeping to the obedience due to God and the King. Even if there were no other benefit, this would be valuable enough in the maintenance of public order.<sup>22</sup>

While those adhering to a mystic gnosticism conformed outwardly to Catholic worship, Calvinists like Junius advocated accepting the public practice of Protestantism together with Catholicism.

In 1563, Bruegel moved from Antwerp in Flanders to Brussels, the French-speaking seat of the Spanish Regent. Here it would have been dangerous to express openly Protestant themes. During the volatile political climate of the 1560s, a placard issued by the King on 1 May 1566 emphasizes this danger. "Ordinance and placard of the King . . . all subjects are . . . forbidden . . . to make pasquilles . . . or offensive texts etc. or will be punished by means of the gallows."<sup>23</sup> Because all art had to pass scrutiny by the Inquisition, artists had to be extremely careful in making anti-Catholic innuendos. In pamphlets, songs, or images, disguised criticism of the Church was presented in such a way

<sup>17</sup> See Popham (as in n. 16) See also R. Boumans (as in n. 14). Boumans, 376, refers to two letters, dated 10 Feb. 1588, by the town clerk of Antwerp to the Privy Council, requesting information as to why Abraham Ortelius had been disarmed and how Ortelius was listed. The reply was that Ortelius always behaved as a true Catholic and denied his registration as a Lutheran. His arms were taken away because of his close association with Peter Heyns, a fervent Calvinist and member of the revolutionary municipality. Ortelius came from a Protestant family in Antwerp. See M. Rooses, *Correspondence de Christophe Plantin*, Antwerp, 1883; rpt. Nendeln, Liechtenstein, 1968, I, 80, no. 30. Plantin's letter to Guillaume Postel, 17 May 1567 and Postel's reply, 25 May 1567 (Rooses, 83), establishes without doubt that both Plantin and Ortelius were associated with the Familists prior to 1567. Rooses, 82, in a note mentions that Plantin and his friend remained faithful until 1567. See also C. Clair, *Christopher Plantin*, London, 1960, 23–26, esp. 29, 34, n. 12 and 42–56. Further, L. Voet, *The Golden Compasses*, Amsterdam, 1969, I, 21–31. Voet, 22 and n. 2, lists heretical publications ascribed to Plantin. Voet, 30: "In the context of the religious turmoil of the sixteenth century, Plantin was a good Catholic in spite of his associations with Niclaes and (later) Barrefelt." Voet, 34–35 and 34, n. 3, discusses how in February 1562 Plantin and his family were investigated by the Margrave of Antwerp because they were suspected of being "entachés des erreurs et sectes nouvelles." See also H. Stein-Schneider, "Pieter Bruegel peintre hérétique illustrateur du message familiste," *Gazette des beaux-arts*, ser. 6, CVII, 1986, 71.

<sup>18</sup> K. G. Boon, "Patientia dans la gravure de la Réforme aux Pays-Bas," *Revue de l'art*, LVI, 1982, 7–25.

<sup>19</sup> Ortelius's *Album amicorum* (as in n. 16) has an epitaph for Bruegel (fol. 12v on pp. 21–22) and contributions by Plantin (fol. 73 on p. 58), Arias Montanus (fol. 17 on p. 24), and Coornhert (fol. 120 on p. 94).

<sup>20</sup> H. Bonger, *De Motivering van de Godsdienstvrijheid bij Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert*, Arnhem, 1954, 6, 123. Regarding Plantin's association with Niclaes, see Voet (as in n. 17), 23–30.

<sup>21</sup> E. H. Kossman and A. F. Mellink, *Texts Concerning the Revolt of the Netherlands*, Cambridge, 1974, 75, doc. 7. The Prince of Orange to the Duchess of Parma, Antwerp, 4 Sept. 1566: ". . . Those of the new religion who are so numerous in this town, had become so licentious and audacious, that they tried to subject everything to their will."

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Kossman and Mellink, 57–58, doc. 2, *Francis Junius (François Dujon) Brief discours envoyé au Roy Philippe . . . 1566*.

<sup>23</sup> E. Cockx-Indestege and G. Glorieux, *Belgica typographica 1542–1600*, Nieuwkoop, 1968, I, 197, no. 2489. See also *Mémoires de Jacques de Wesenbeke*, ed. C. Rahlenbeck, Brussels, 1859; rpt. Nendeln, Liechtenstein, 1977, 368, an extract comprising fourteen articles from a total of fifty-three regarding moderation of the content of the placards against heresy, proposed initially by the Regent, Margaret of Parma, April, May, and June 1566. Freely translated, it states that printers and those who sell books, songs, broadsheets, heretical texts, or other heretical materials are as guilty as those preachers. They will lose both their life and their property, whether they support heresy or not (p. 368). This placard reinforced an earlier edict of Charles V, dated 29 April 1550 (Cockx-Indestege and Glorieux, 188, no. 2381; quoted in Clair [as in n. 17], 27 and n. 5), which declares that anyone found guilty of printing, copying, disseminating in any way, or even knowingly possessing the writings of those whom the Catholic Church considered as heretics is liable to be put to death, men by sword and women by burial alive, if they recanted; if they did not, by burning. For a listing of official proclamations, see Cockx-Indestege and Glorieux, "Overheids publicaties" (1515–1600), in *Belgica*, 183–322.

that it could be interpreted variously, to safeguard its sources. In visual art, one might expect this veiled criticism particularly in small works, like prints or drawings, because these could be stored safely out of sight.

Previous research suggested that the *Beekeepers* might have been a design for a print that was never published.<sup>24</sup> If so, what prevented publication? One plausible explanation is that this was one of those drawings that was too critical of the Church to be openly associated with Bruegel's name. Therefore the artist or his family withdrew it from publication as a print immediately after his death. If for political reasons the *Beekeepers* was not published as a print, what could have been the nature of its political content? Given the circumstances of the time, it must have referred to the strife between Catholics and Protestants.

Most research mentions that the drawing was cut at the right side so that the last digits of the date "MDLXV" are missing. Renger noticed that an almost identical copy of the *Beekeepers*, oddly enough, is cropped in the same fashion so that the last digits of the date are also cut off.<sup>25</sup> This parallel suggests that the date might be incomplete not because of accidental damage at a later time but because of a deliberate act. The reason for deliberate cropping would be to conceal the complete date, which could be used as a clue to something in the drawing forbidden by the Inquisition. Perhaps the complete Roman numerals of this date would implicate Bruegel's wife and children after his death. Rather than burning this exquisite drawing, someone decided to cut a small strip from the right side of the sheet so that potential evidence was permanently removed.

The difference between the active beekeepers and the passive boy in the tree has long been associated with the obvious meaning of the aphorism, suggesting that somebody knows where the "nest" is while the other robs it. In Bruegel's drawing, the boy climbing the tree does not have his hand in a nest; both hands are concealed and the structure of the tree indicates that there is no bird's nest hidden by the boy's body. Instead, this young man seems to be on the look-out. He can see a hive under the shed and can also spy a farm and a church behind it.

The three beekeepers in the foreground carry hives, the "nests" of bees. At first glance, this seems a straightforward genre scene of common folk at work. However, a beehive is a long-established symbol of the Catholic Church. Under the pseudonym of Isaac Rabbotenu van Loven, the Calvinist Marnix van St. Aldegonde published the scathing *De Biënkorf der H. Roomsche Kercke* (*The Beehive of the H. Roman Church*),

<sup>24</sup> Renger (as in n. 10), 86, mentions that an undated copy exists in the British Museum (see A. E. Popham, *Catalogue of Drawings by Dutch and Flemish Artists in the British Museum*, London, 1932, v, 145, no. 7). He observes that this carefully drawn copy seems to be a preparatory drawing for a print that was never executed. Judson (as in n. 13), 105, follows Renger and mentions also that an engraving after the *Beekeepers* was never cut. This argues in favor of a late date for the drawing, after 1565 and close to 1569, when Bruegel died (presumably on 5 September).

<sup>25</sup> Renger (as in n. 10), 86, mentions that in this second, almost identical copy (C.G. Boerner, *Neue Lagerliste* 44, 1966, no. 14; Sotheby's, 12 April 1969, no. 16) the last digits of the Roman numerals "MDLXV" are missing. He remarks that, according to K. E. Simon, it could only have been a "7" ("MDLXVII").

dedicated in 1569.<sup>26</sup> The deliberate omission of the publishing date, as well as the name and location of the printer, clearly was to protect all those involved in this publication from prosecution by the Inquisition.<sup>27</sup>

In this book, the Protestant Marnix ridicules the Catholic Church, comparing its organization to that of a hive, the clergy to bees. Writing in Flemish, the author explains the nature and species of bees:

The second variety is very similar to wasps or horseflies . . . except that they do not fly to the horses and cows but prefer to get the sheep. In this they are different from the common honeybees which avoid sheep, fearing to become tangled in the wool. But these [bees] have a good solution to this because they first bite off the wool, and thereafter the skin, and finally they suck the blood which they find delicious. Therefore they are called by some bitesheep or, in short, bishop.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Isaac Rabbotenu van Loven, *De Biënkorf der H. Roomsche Kercke*, n.p., n.d. Isaac Rabbotenu was a pseudonym of Philippe de Marnix, Lord of St. Aldegonde. See A. A. van Schelven, *Marnix van Sint Aldegonde*, Utrecht, 1939, 52–65. Van Schelven, 65, points out that the text in *De Biënkorf* is written vernacular Dutch so that the common man could enjoy its biting wit. The date, January 1569, has been logically deduced from the dedication of the book. Van Schelven, 53, n. 3, finds a hint in *De Biënkorf* referring to the death of Don Carlos, which occurred in July 1568. This and the date under the book's dedication to Franciscus Sonnius (5 January 1569), according to Van Schelven, form the *termini ad quo* and *ad quem* of *De Biënkorf*. All editions up to 1600 follow the text of the first edition. Later editions have been expanded with additional text.

<sup>27</sup> Regarding Marnix's deliberate use of fictive printers etc., see R. Fruin, *Verspreide Geschriften*, 's-Gravenhage, 1900–05, VIII, 411–412. See also chapter 7, "Het Wapen der Schijnadressen Schuilnamen en Antidateringen" ("The Weapon of Fictive Addresses, Pseudonyms and Pre-dating"), in M. E. Kronenberg, *Verboden Boeken en Opstandige Drukkers in de Hervormingstijd*, Amsterdam, 1948, 111–127. Kronenberg discusses here the deliberate practice of changing dates and locations of publications in order to avoid prosecution by the Inquisition. See further, J. F. van Someren, "Wesenbeke of Marnix?" *Oud Holland*, IX, 1891, 73–105. On the basis of the watermark in the paper, Van Someren (p. 82) argues that *De Biënkorf* (1569) was printed in Emden.

<sup>28</sup> *De Biënkorf* (1569) (as in n. 26), fol. 365r-v.  
De 2 specie of soorte is de wespe / horsele en brēmen seer gelijc / Sy en macke so vele honichs niet als de yrste / om dat sy van so goeden aert niet en zijn. Doch arbeyden sy seer neerstelyck ende brengen ook veel honichs in de korf / sy zijn byna van aert en natuere de peertvliegen en brēmen gelijc / behalve dat sy niet zo seer op de peerde en coeye als op de schape geerne vliege / Waer in zy een contrarie aert hebben van de gemeyne honich-byen welcke de schape seer vermyde / van vrees dat zy inde wolle verwert mochte blijve. Maer dese weten goede raet daer toe / Wat sy bijte haer de Wol af / en daer na het vel / en ten leste suygen sy het bloet wt daer sy wonderlic op verleckert zijn: en worde derhalven Bijtschape van sommige genoët / of om de cortheyt der sprake bisschoppe.  
For the sources of *De Biënkorf*, see J. Wille, *Marnix' Bijenkorf*, Scheveningen, 1919; J. G. Sterck, *Bronnen en samenstelling van Marnix' Biënkorf der H. Roomsche Kercke*, Louvain, 1952; M. Govaert, *La Langue et le style de Marnix de Sainte-Aldegonde (Académie Royale de Belgique, classe des lettres, deuxième série)*, Brussels, 1953, XLVIII, 211–215. G. Oosterhof, *La Vie littéraire de Marnix de Sainte-Aldegonde*, Kampen, 1909; Geneva, 1971, 70, n. 1, mentions that the first edition of *De Biënkorf* is extremely rare. One copy exists in the library of the Rijksuniversiteit of Leiden (1371 G 13). For a reprint of *De Biënkorf*, see A. Willems, ed., *De Werken van Ph. Van Marnix van Sint Aldegonde. De Bijenkorf der H. Roomsche Kercke*, Brussels, 1858. According to Wille (41, n. 52) Willems's reprint is based on the edition of 1595 with unreferenced additions and variations from a 1657 edition. For an early English translation, see *The Beehive of the Romische church*, London, Thomas Dawson for John Stell, 1580.

Seen in the context of Marnix's *De Biënkorf*, the three beekeepers in their protective clothing literally are people who manage beehives. They have not robbed them; rather their role is to restore the disturbed hives to order. When one reads the drawing figuratively, using *De Biënkorf* as a guide, the beekeepers are those who restore order to the Catholic parish churches. Safely protected by their special outfits, which make them anonymous, these beekeepers allude to the Spanish regime or to the Inquisition. After an apparent robbery, where the hives have been emptied of their contents, one beekeeper carries an empty hive, open at the top, away from the brook, a second one walks to the brook, presumably to pick up another hive, while a third one, without protective gloves, uses his thumbs to press the bottom cover back onto this empty hive. In the context of Marnix's satirical use of Flemish in *De Biënkorf*, the drawing can be read as illustrating that after several Catholic churches (hives) have been emptied of their clergy (bees) and their contents (honey), three faithful Catholics (anonymous beekeepers) attempt to restore the hives and put them back in their proper place under the shed's sheltering roof.

Historically, the iconoclastic raids of August 1566 ruined many Catholic churches in Flanders.<sup>29</sup> The riots were followed by a severe backlash in which all Protestant activity was strictly forbidden. The Duke of Alba, who arrived in Brussels a year later, in August 1567, immediately established the Council of Troubles.<sup>30</sup> Its mandate was to eradicate Protestantism "with fire and the sword" in the Spanish Netherlands, the country under Alba's jurisdiction.<sup>31</sup> The Council of Troubles, aptly nicknamed by Flemish-speaking citizens the "Council of Blood," welcomed anonymous accusations from informers, with the result that after September 1567 there was an increase in suspicion and terror among the population.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Mémoires de Jacques de Wesenbeke* (as in n. 23), 249–321. Jacques de Wesenbeke gives a detailed recollection of the tensions mounting to the iconoclastic raids in Antwerp and the Netherlands of 21–27 August 1566. (See also pp. 279–280; 286–290; 309–311.)

<sup>30</sup> For a brief account of the actions of Alba, see S. Groeneveld *et al.*, *De Kogel door de Kerk*, Zutphen, 1979, 81–83. The Council of Troubles was established on 5 September 1567. About 9,000 citizens were sentenced *in absentia* and about 1,000 were executed. See also *Mémoires anonymes* (as in n. 6), 44, n. 2. For an excellent analysis of the political context of this period, see Kossman and Mellink (as in n. 21), 1–15 and 53–59 (docs. 1–13).

<sup>31</sup> Emanuel van Meteren, *Belgische ofte Nederlantsche historie van onsen tyden*, Delft, 1599, XLVIII, mentions that in May 1569 Pope Pius V presented the Duke of Alba with a golden sword and a costly hat in recognition of his piety and his ardent fight on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church. A street song from ca. 1570 mocks this gift:

The Pope sends Duke Alba a golden sword  
To chase the Beggars  
Yes, so this bloodthirsty tyrant  
Can kill wife and man . . .  
This [Papal] benediction has come to Brussels . . .  
So that the earth can be soaked in blood.

For the Dutch text, see Bronsveld (as in n. 1), 147.

<sup>32</sup> An English translation of the account by Jacques de Wesenbeke (Jacob van Wesenbeke) of the public distrust of the authorities, mounting already in 1566, is found in Kossman and Mellink (as in n. 21), 66–69, doc. 5.

The three masked beekeepers, actively engaged with their hives, seem to allude to such anonymous informers. The Middle Dutch word *corfdrager*, "hive" or "basket carrier," can also mean "secret informer."<sup>33</sup> Seen from this perspective, the activity of the three beekeepers may refer to good papists working for the Inquisition after 1566 to restore order and to inform the Council of Troubles about suspicious heretical activities. Seen from a Protestant point of view, in August 1566 the Catholic clergy had been cleared out of their "nests" like bees chased out of their hives. But within a year of his arrival, the Duke of Alba had restored order with the help of secret informers. In the drawing, the beekeepers are busy managing the hives while the boy sits quietly in the tree. Although he is not hidden from their view, he is out of their reach, like the Protestants who escaped the Inquisition by fleeing to Germany or England.

The obvious interpretation of the aphorism implies a difference between the three beekeepers and the boy in the tree, suggesting that someone knows the nest while the other robs it, or "gain is only achieved by action." A Flemish-speaking inquisitor would know that *corfdrager* could mean secret informer, yet he would be inclined to follow the clichéd interpretation of the maxim. Even if he recognized the beekeepers as secret informers, their activities, in his eyes, would represent "gain achieved by action," as the aphorism indicates, because the beekeepers are engaged in what he would consider good work: restoring hives (i.e., churches damaged by the iconoclastic raids). In this context, whoever cropped the drawing ensured that the incomplete date, "MDLXV," could never be used by the Inquisition as evidence that the robbed hives referred to actual raids on Catholic churches in August 1566, "MDLXVI."

The boy in the tree spies both a hive under the shed and a church in the background. There is no evidence that he was involved in hive robbing, or "nest robbing" according to the maxim. Nest robbing is painted more obviously by Bruegel in *The Peasant and the Bird Nester*, signed and dated 1568 (Fig. 3).<sup>34</sup> As this work is contemporary with the *Beekeepers*, its meaning is usually associated with that of the more enigmatic drawing. In the painting, a boy climbs a tree and takes a mature bird out of the nest. In the foreground a second youth, with a puzzled look on his face, points to the lad in the tree. However, in the drawing no nest is visible.<sup>35</sup> The correlation between the bird nester in the painting and the boy in the drawing has led to assumptions that the aphorism of the drawing also relates to the meaning of the bird nester in the painting. But while the boy in the painting examines the kind of bird in the nest, the second boy merely looks puzzled. Previous scholarship has not recognized that Bruegel is alluding here to a different maxim: "Op datmen vyt den nest sien mach wat Voghel datter in is [So that one can

<sup>33</sup> E. Verwijs and J. Verdam, *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek*, 's-Gravenhage, 1894, III, 1916, *corfdrager*, *stille verklikker*.

<sup>34</sup> *The Peasant and the Bird Nester*. Oil on panel; 59 × 68 cm. Signed and dated "Bruegel MDLXVII." Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. 1020.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Wied, *Bruegel*, New York, 1980, 176, gives a good synopsis of various interpretations of this painting.



3 Pieter Bruegel, *The Peasant and the Bird Nester*. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (photo: Kunsthistorisches Museum)

see by the nest what kind of bird is in it].”<sup>36</sup> The young man in the foreground of the painting looks puzzled and points to the stupid boy in the tree who examines the bird. Because the structure of the nest shows the type of bird that belongs to it, one does not need to climb into the tree to inspect the bird. In contrast to the nest, the closed sack on the ground next to him at the right does not reveal its contents.<sup>37</sup> The Flemish saying—“so that one can see by the nest what kind of bird is in it”—has little to do with actual birds and their nests. Rather, it is a metaphor meaning that the house

usually tells you what type of person lives in it—or, someone’s actions can tell you with whom you are dealing. That in Bruegel’s time Marnix van St. Aldegonde used this maxim in *De Biënkorf* more than once indicates that it was not unfamiliar.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Hoffman von Fallersleben, *Altniederländische Sprichwörter nach der ältesten Sammlung*, in *Horae Belgicae*, Hannover, 1854, IX, 42, no. 676: “Tis goet sien aen den nest, wat Voghel daer in woont. Nidus Testatur, ibi qualis avis dominatur [It is easy to see on the nest, what bird lives in it].” The original text was printed at the end of the 15th century (Hoffman, 50).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, no. 82: “Als men den sac ontbint, so siet men watter in is. Contentum scitur, saccus dum post aperitur [When one opens the sack one can see its contents].” The nest and the sack are thus opposites.

<sup>38</sup> *De Byencorf*, Utrecht, 1659, 275: “Soo wil ick daer een Exempel vyt verhalen / op datmen vyt den nest sien mach wat Voghel datter in is [So I want to tell you a story as an example, so that you can see on the nest what bird belongs to it].” A story about a monk who had outfoxed the devil demonstrates the duplicity of this man. Marnix uses the aphorism again in a slightly different version in the following: “Of de Geestelycke Persoonen . . . [About the clergy . . .] soo wil ick . . . hare edele ende lieffelycke afkomste eenen ydern voor-ogen stellen op dat men de Voghelen vyt den nest mach leeren kennen / ende richten van de Beulens na dat de Moeder is [So I want to place in front of everyone’s eyes their noble and dear lineage, so one can distinguish the birds from the nest / and (recognize) that the actions by the executioner are in line with those by the Mother (Church)]” (*De Byencorf*, 1659, 399–400). Although editions after 1600 are expanded, the *Byencorf* edition of Utrecht, 1659, follows the original edition of 1569 closely.

Illustrated in *The Peasant and the Bird Nester*, the maxim could also apply to the boy in the drawing. In the *Beekeepers*, the boy in the tree can see both a hive and church. The steeple in the background is cut off by the edge of the print, so that the traditional Catholic cross crowning it is not shown. Any Catholic in Bruegel's time would assume automatically that this signifier belongs on the top of the spire. Marnix van St. Aldegonde satirizes the association in *De Biënkorf*: "Yes, the papists themselves cannot be papists without crosses."<sup>39</sup> The absence of the cross on the church in the drawing may mean that the boy is actually looking at a Protestant church. The boy in the tree therefore sees both a Catholic "hive" and a Protestant church—two churches coexisting peacefully together.

At the left of the drawing is a glimpse of a brook with a sketchily described goose and three ducks or three goslings, as well as a water mill surrounded by trees. Chapter eight of *De Biënkorf* concludes with remarkable advice:

And when you have the opportunity to have a running brook nearby, or a canal, such will be very useful. You should plant in there herbs, called *Umbilicus Veneris* [the umbilical cord of Venus] and *Rostum Menonis*, which is called in German 'Foolscaps.' You should not forget to have not far from the beehive some blossoming trees. And if you could manage it try to get a mill not too far away, because they like to fly near a mill. . . .<sup>40</sup>

The brook, trees, and water mill in the drawing correspond to *De Biënkorf's* description of the likes and dislikes of the bees, that is to say, of the Catholic clergy. The satirist of *De Biënkorf* implies through the mill (the wheel of fortune), which the bees like so much, that the changing fortunes of the Catholic Church are inevitable. Protestant eyes, especially those eyes that had read *De Biënkorf*, could interpret the background of the *Beekeepers* as a subtle allusion to the fate of the papists; Catholic eyes, instead, would view it as an idyllic landscape. Likewise, Protestants would notice the vague outlines of a goose and her goslings, which would remind them of the *Geuzen*, the Protestant freedom fighters against the Spanish who adopted the name *Gueux*, Beggars (in Flemish, *Geuzen*), in 1566.<sup>41</sup> Their name became associ-

<sup>39</sup> *De Byencorf* (1659), 344, "Ja de Papen selve konnen sonder Cruycen gheene Papen werden." The third edition of *De Byencorf* (1573) has a woodcut on the title page with a beehive in the shape of a papal tiara and distant churches with crosses on top of their spires.

<sup>40</sup> *De Biënkorf* (1569), fol. 373r-v: "Dat 8 Capittel. Uytwat Bloemen ende Kruiden dat deze Byen wercken [About what flowers and herbs the bees use]. . . . Ende soo ghy de gheleghentheydt hebt om een loopende waterken daer by te hebben of een gracht dat sal seer nut wesen ende daer in sult ghy sette de cruyden genaemt umbilicus Veneris ende restum Merionis, d'welck in hoogduytsch gheheeten wort narren kolben. Sult ook niet vergheten niet verre vanden Biecorf boonen [boomen?] te hebben die in hare bloestel staen. Ende so ghy ymmers cont sult maken datter een meulen niet verre van daer stae / want sy vlieghe seer gheerne na by de meulen."

<sup>41</sup> P. J. Blok, *Willem de Eerste Prins van Orange*, Amsterdam, 1919, 135. On 5 April 1566, the Dutch and Flemish nobles presented to Margaret of Parma, the Regent, a request asking suspension of the injunctions of the placards and moderation in persecution by the Inquisition. Berlaymont is reputed to have told the Regent that these nobles "ce sont que des *Gueux*" (they are but *Beggars*). The name stuck and those Protestants

ated with geese, a Flemish wordplay on *Geuzen*, *ganzen* (geese), in 1568, when William of Orange and his *Geuzen* on the nights of 5 to 6 October of that year crossed the Meuse River at Stockem, an early action in what would be called the Eighty Year's War between Spain and the Netherlands. This maneuver so surprised Alba that he is reported to have responded that the crossing was impossible because they were not birds.<sup>42</sup> A Protestant street song from ca. 1572 refers to this feat: "It was a surprise that they did not guess/that the goose learns how to swim/How wide is the stream/Still the goose has a good idea/to cross over it."<sup>43</sup> A goose with her goslings is such a common sight in the Lowlands that the Inquisition could never claim that this small detail referred to the *Geuzen*.<sup>44</sup> In the context of the religious turmoil of the 1660s, Bruegel appears to be deliberately, even carefully ambiguous in his use of a politically charged iconography.

The strange plant in the foreground of the drawing, next to the fallen hive, is identified by Boström as the mythical mandrake plant.<sup>45</sup> This rare *Aropa Mandragora* grows in southern Europe and in North Africa. Renger recognizes that its popular German name is *Galgenjunge* (gallows boy), so that for him the plant foreshadows the fate of the young robber in the tree.<sup>46</sup> However, the leaves of the mandrake have a midriff-to-margin veining, which is different from the parallel base-to-tip veins in the leaves drawn by Bruegel. It is more logical that one should go closer to Flanders for the identification of this special plant. The whorled leaves of Bruegel's plant have a basal arrangement, typical of the (now rare) *Arnica montana*, which is *Valkruid* in Flemish (trap-herb or fall-herb).<sup>47</sup> The leaves are also similar to those of the large

fighting for religious tolerance called themselves *Gueux*, in Dutch, *Geuzen*. The *Mémoires anonymes* (as in n. 6), 8–9, records this: "Que lors monsieur de Barlaymont, estant près Son Altèze avecq aultres seigneurs, dict ces motz: 'Madame ne ayez crainte de riens, ce ne sont que gueux.'" <sup>42</sup> Blok, 192.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in E. T. Kuiper, *Geuzenliedboek*, Zutphen, 1924, 25, 101, v. 46, "Een ander nieu Liedeken. Opde Wijse: Laat ons den Lantman Loven" (Another New Song. To the tune of Let Us Praise the Landman).

- 10 Die Vos subtijl van listen,  
altijt hy practiseert,  
Twas wonder dat sy niet gisten  
Dat de Gans dus swemmen leert,  
Hoe wijt dat zyn de stroomen
- 15 Soo weet de Gans wel raet,  
Om doer over te comen,  
Daer den Vos voren staet  
Daerom heeft hyt nu so quaet.

Kuiper notes that v. 14 indicates William of Orange's crossing over the Meuse River. He suggests that the song dates from 1572. The fox, according to Kuiper, denotes the clergy, while the goose is a reference to the *Beggars* (101, nn. 3, 5).

<sup>44</sup> The *Geuzen* became associated with geese only after 6 October 1568. If Bruegel alludes in this detail to the *Geuzen*, the *terminem post quem* for the *Beekeepers* is 6 October 1568.

<sup>45</sup> Boström (as in n. 9), 87–88.

<sup>46</sup> Renger (as in n. 10), 87. For a 16th-century depiction of the mandrake (*Aropa Mandragora*), see R. G. Hatton, *Handbook of Plant and Floral Ornament*, New York, 1960, ill. 633 on p. 327.

<sup>47</sup> *Valkruid* (*Arnica montana*). See H. Kleijn, *Geneeskruiden*, Zutphen, 1957, pl. vii on p. 136, who mentions that the name in Dutch is *valkruid* or *wolverlei*. Probably the plant was described for the first time in K. Gesner, *Horti Germaniae* (1561). Hildegard of Bingen called the plant *Wolfesgelegena*. In Germany it is known as *Arnika* or *Wohlverleih* (Kleijn, 136).

*weegbree* (great plantain), a common weed in the Lowlands.<sup>48</sup> Whether *valkruid* or *weegbree*, the plant is drawn conspicuously next to the fallen hive in the foreground so that it seems related to it. The author of *De Biënkorf* commented in detail about plants in relation to the allegorical beehive. Playing with puns on the popular names of plants, Marnix advised:

These bees work almost on all flowers and herbs: except Plinius tells that they could not use one herb, called *Rumex* in Latin and Patience with us: but there is another one he mentions, *Chenopodium*, called in German, Swine's Death. These two herbs are not liked by our bees. . . . Therefore, who wants to keep this beehive, . . . should plant and sow in his yard the following herbs because they [the bees] are very fond of them, namely, Plantain, Ragged Robin, Asses Cucumber. . . . Further, Pitcher-herb and Mug-gazing because they often like this more than Seven Tides-herb or Papist-herb which are next to their beehive.<sup>49</sup>

It seems likely that Bruegel drew a common plant, like the plantain, rather than an exotic mandrake. As the plant in the foreground does not have flowers, its precise identification remains open to interpretation. A Protestant could read it as *valkruid*, next to the fallen hive which looks like a trap. A Catholic could recognize the great plantain, the French name of which could allude to the well-known Antwerp printer Christopher Plantin.<sup>50</sup> After 1566, Plantin was actively engaged in securing permission to print the Polyglot Bible in honor of King Philip II of Spain.<sup>51</sup> This permission was officially granted in April 1568, when the Council of Inquisition gave its approval.

In contrast to the subtlety of these allusive pictorial details, the basic meaning of the aphorism, "gain is only achieved by action," is clearly evident in the drawing. The active beekeep-

ers restore the hives while the passive boy sits in the tree. This boy can be seen by the masked beekeepers, but he is out of their reach. There is no evidence that he has stolen honey or disturbed the hives. The young man just sits tight with his back to the beekeepers: he is not interested in them.

Since the text of the aphorism is in Flemish, Bruegel's native tongue, the drawing must be directed to a Flemish audience, that part of the population of the Spanish Netherlands where Protestants had gained the greatest number of converts. One suspects an allegorical content because most of the Flemish-speaking people were in conflict with the Catholic Church. The literal meaning had to pass close examination by the Inquisition, yet still might have a hidden anti-Catholic content. Such a "double message" may also be expressed in the cryptic text of the Flemish aphorism written on the drawing: "dije den nest Weet dije Weeten, dijen Rofit dij heeten" (Fig. 2). Without doubt, the translation, "he who knows where the nest is, has the knowledge, he who robs it has the nest," is correct, because it is a common Flemish maxim. The actual text written by Bruegel on the drawing is slightly different and condensed. The last word of each sentence is a combination of two words, *weet [e]jen* (knows one) and *heet [e]jen* (has one), while *dijen* at the beginning of the second sentence is a fusion of *dij* and *[e]jen* (who, one). When these words are separated, the literal text reads:

dije den nest Weet dije Weet en  
dij en Rofit dij heet en

(Who knows the nest, knows one  
who robs one has one)

However, the second sentence can mean something else. The Flemish word *heet* is indeed the third person of *hebben*, to have, but it is also the third person of *noemen*, to name or to be called.<sup>52</sup> Further, the word *en* (*een*) indicates the number one as well as the indefinite article *a*. The alternate reading of the text means something entirely different from the conventional reading of the cliché:

Who knows the nest knows a—  
Who robs one is called a—

This alternate reading gives two incomplete sentences, which, like a riddle, invite the viewer to fill in the two missing end words. Since aphorisms often have rhyming end words, one expects that a rhymed couplet is intended. A typical example of political content disguised in an innocent couplet is the well-known rhyme: "Op èen April verloor Alva zijn bril [On the first of April, Alva lost his spectacles]." This alludes to the capture of Den Briel (a pun on *bril*) by the Protestants' unofficial naval forces, the Sea Beggars, in 1571, on 1 April, Fools' Day. In the *Beekeepers* the obvious clichéd reading would almost automatically be accepted by the Inquisition because one cannot prove that the cliché, or its inherent meaning—"gain is only achieved by action"—is offensive to the Catholic faith. The alternate, disguised reading most probably would be unacceptable.

<sup>48</sup> *Weegbree* (*Plantago major*), Great Plantain. See Hatton (as in n. 44), ill. 660 on p. 338.

<sup>49</sup> *De Biënkorf* (1569), fols. 372v–373r. "Dese Bien werken byna wt alderley bloemen ende cruyderen: dan Plinius verhaet dat sy wt een cruyt niet en connen wercken / dat in Latijn ghenoeemt wort *Rumex* / ende by ons wort het gheheeten Pacientie / noch oock van een andere dat hy noemt *Chenopodium* / ende wort vande Duytschen ghenoeemt Swijnendoot. Aen dese twee cruyderen hebben onse Bien oock geen en lust. . . . Daerom wie desen Biecorf houden wil / . . . sal in synen hof sayen ende planten dese navolghende cruyden daer sy een sonderlinghe behagen aen hebben: als namelic / wechbree / coeckcoecx-bloemen / esels comkommeren / . . . Item cannencruyt / ende croesbesien want dese hebben sy dickmael liever dan sevenghetijden cruyt of Papencruyt die naest haren Biecorf staen."

<sup>50</sup> Voet (as in n. 17), 3–4, refers to a family saga of the Plantins. According to Christopher Plantin's grandson, Baltasar J. Moretus, the printer was a son of a French nobleman, Charles de Tiercelin, Lord of LaRoche du Maine. Christopher and one of his younger brothers decided to pursue a career in business. To conceal their noble heritage, the two young men decided to choose a new name, based on a plant. Christopher selected the plantain and his brother the leek, *porrée* in French. Thereafter the printer called himself Plantin and his brother, an apothecary, Porret. Although this story may have been fabricated, it clearly establishes that the name Plantin was associated with the plantain. Plantin's native tongue was French, although he corresponded also in Flemish.

<sup>51</sup> Rooses (as in n. 17), no. 20 on p. 48. The first letter is dated 19 December 1566. Plantin writes de Gayas, secretary to Philip II, almost every month.

<sup>52</sup> *Middelnederlands Woordenboek* (as in n. 33), 237, *heet*.

As Marnix van St. Aldegonde's *De Biënkorf* was presumably completed in 1568, the satire reflects the vernacular spoken by Flemish Protestants during this period. According to Marnix, "It is true that the heretics mock here our Holy Mother the Church, saying that papists are real apes because they want to imitate everything about which they don't know the least bit."<sup>53</sup> The use of the word "nest" in the first line of the aphorism would not escape a Protestant, who would read it in the context of the beekeepers managing bees' nests or beehives, three conspicuous objects in the foreground. The hive, as we have seen, was a well-known metaphor for the Catholic Church. When the Flemish word for papist is added to the first sentence of the aphorism, it reads: "Dye den nest Weet dye Weet en paep [Who knows the nest knows a papist]." The addition of *paep* makes the first line a derogatory comment about Catholics. The missing word to be added to the second sentence has to rhyme with *paep*. Following Marnix van St. Aldegonde's text in *De Biënkorf*, the obvious choice would be *aap* (ape) because Flemish Protestants like Marnix frequently associated *apen* with *paepen*: "Aan dese Apen/dese Papen will ick Segghen [To these apes, these papists/I want to say]."<sup>54</sup> However, the choice of *aap* at the end of the second sentence would be nonsensical because a Catholic "ape" would not rob his own church.

The passive boy in the tree might provide the clue for the second "missing" word. The role of young men in the iconoclastic raids was significant. Jacob van Wesenbeke, a former Antwerp *Pensionaris*, gives in his *Mémoires* a detailed account of what happened in his city during the August raids on churches. According to him, youths, *la garzonaille*, were mainly responsible for the destruction.<sup>55</sup> This opinion is confirmed by another eyewitness account, the *Mémoires anonymes*, which also mentions that in August 1566 small bands of poor young men were the culprits while the population watched.<sup>56</sup> Marnix van St. Aldegonde in his *True Narrative . . . of what has happened . . . in the year 1566*, records:

Various master masons assert that even with the help of fifty men they would not have been able to destroy in eight days what a small number of boys destroyed in one or two days in the most famous and bustling towns of the

<sup>53</sup> *De Byencorf* (1659), 323: "Het is wel waer dat de Kettters hier met onse Lieve Moeder de Heylighe Kercke wederom spotten / seggende dat de Papen rechte apen syn / die alle dinghen willen nae doen / daer sy verstandt noch bescheyt van hebben."

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>55</sup> *Mémoires de Jacques de Wesenbeke* (as in n. 23), 283–287. See esp. 283: "Entreant fut la garzonaille s'entrejoiant auprès la chaire de presche en la mesme église, dont enfin l'ung d'entre'eulx s'avança. . . ."

<sup>56</sup> *Mémoires anonymes* (as in n. 6), 14. The chronicler refers also to young men as the culprits, ". . . qui estoit facile à faire pour estre lesdicts rompeurs en petit nombre de pouvre jeunes gens." See also pp. 14–15, n. 2: in a letter to the King, Margaret of Parma writes on 22 August 1566: "Ce jourd'huy, j'ay en nouvelle qu'ilz ont pillé et sac cugé la grande église de Nostre-Dame d'Anvers et tous les aultres monastères, cloistres et églises parochiales, voyant et spectant le peuple sans contredire, et estoient environ de nombre de cent tous canailles." The population was thus watching while about a hundred hoodlums destroyed church property. In 1568, "28 povres jeunes gens" were executed because of their alleged participation in the iconoclastic raids (*Mémoires anonymes*, 71).

Netherlands, in full view of everyone and without meeting with any difficulty or interference.

Who is so blind or so dull that he does not see and understand that the hand and power of God brought all this about?<sup>57</sup>

These three sources, all sympathetic to the Protestant cause, emphasize that the iconoclastic destruction was the work of boys. Marnix, whose reaction to the revolt is addressed to Protestant citizens, asks rhetorically, "Who is so blind . . . that he does not see?" In Bruegel's drawing, clearly the beekeepers' vision is obstructed while the boy in the tree has a fine view.

Boys were thus significant in the revolt. The Flemish word for boy is *cnaep*, meaning "adolescent," "armed soldier," "apprentice," "daredevil."<sup>58</sup> With the word *cnaep* added to the second line of Bruegel's aphorism, the covert reading of the cryptic text gives a different message:

dye de nest Weet dye Weet en paep  
dy en Roft dy heet en cnaep

(Who sees the nest recognizes a papist  
who robs one is called a daredevil)

This is a clear expression of Protestant opinion, even though it is a guarded one. The boy in the tree must allude to those bold young men, *cnaepen*, who defied the Inquisition by raiding Catholic churches in August 1566. While sitting safely in the tree, this "Protestant" *cnaep* is out of reach of the beekeepers, the Catholic "informers," who busy themselves in Bruegel's drawing restoring the "hives" after an apparent raid. Historically, when in 1567 the Protestant cause seemed lost, many fled into exile to be out of reach of the Inquisition.

Notwithstanding Bruegel's inescapable dualism, it is striking how clearly the drawing follows Marnix's *De Biënkorf* in the descriptive details surrounding the active beekeepers. The drawing even alludes to Marnix's basic intent in *De Biënkorf*—to explain the theological publications of the Doctors from "Love[n]" (a pun on Louvain and on praise), "that a blind man may feel with his hands and learn without fear and without using spectacles what wonderful things are hidden in these hives."<sup>59</sup> He actually asserts that "[I] with my small and limited gifts will contribute to restore the fallen house of the Roman Church into its true and natural foundation of the Holy Roman Pope."<sup>60</sup> Like Marnix, Bruegel indicates in the *Beekeepers* the difference between the true

<sup>57</sup> Kossman and Mellink (as in n. 21), 81, doc. 9, Anon. (Marnix van St. Aldegonde), "A true narrative and apology of what has happened in the Netherlands in the matter of religion in the year 1566. By those who profess the reformed religion in that country, 1567."

<sup>58</sup> *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek*, III (as in n. 33), 1610, *cnaep* or *cnape*, a young man.

<sup>59</sup> *De Biënkorf* (1569), fol. 8r-v. In this context, the beekeepers are blinded and hold the hives with their bare hands. However, they seem not critically aware of the theological contents inside these metaphorical hives. They are thus good Catholics.

<sup>60</sup> *De Biënkorf* (1569), fol. 5v: "Op dat ick met mijne cleyne gheringhe gaven oock helpe het vervallen huys der Roomscher kercken in het recht Fondament des H. Roomschen Paus wederom te setten."

Christian Church without a cross, in the distant background, and the fallen Church, symbolized by the hives in the foreground. The boy in the tree has to exercise *Patientia*, patience, that favorite Protestant theme. Like the Calvinist Francis Junius, this boy envisions both a hive and a church in peaceful coexistence in the background. Unlike the boy, the beekeepers behind their masks focus only on their tasks, the management of hives. The difference between the active beekeepers and the passive boy, the main protagonists in the drawing, could only refer to the period after April 1567, when the Protestant cause seemed hopeless, because their leaders were killed, imprisoned, or in exile, so that Protestants had to lie low.<sup>61</sup>

One may be tempted to speculate that Bruegel either accepted a commission to design a print to be circulated at the same time as *De Biënkorf* (published apparently in January 1569), or else, after reading this strictly forbidden Protestant satire, was inspired to draw the *Beekeepers* on his own initiative. These speculations can never be proved with certainty. Correspondences with *De Biënkorf* would argue for late 1568 as a plausible date for a commissioned design for a print, while 1569 could be the likely date if Bruegel had made the *Beekeepers* in response to reading *De Biënkorf*. Given the overt meaning and the carefully disguised Protestant connotations in the drawing, it is highly unlikely that an ardent Catholic would engage in exposing with these hive-carrying beekeepers the work of those informers in the service of the Council of Troubles. To consider both churches alongside one another would be clear evidence of heresy in the eyes of the Inquisition.

Seen in the context of the political climate of 1568, Bruegel's attitude to Alba's informers is not surprising. The Council of Blood's torture of notables accused of Protestant sympathies was intended as a deterrent to those who strayed from the faith. The persecution backfired because the cruelties used in the execution of respected citizens, like Antonie van Straelen, the six-time mayor of Antwerp, who had presumably protected Protestants, aroused moral indignation in many people.<sup>62</sup> Bruegel, a former citizen of Antwerp, who sympathized with the Protestant cause, expresses his feelings with subtle sarcasm when he draws these "beekeepers." Any prudent person would realize that Protestants and their sympathizers had to keep out of reach of the Inquisition, especially after the arrival of the Duke of Alba.

<sup>61</sup> Jan van Marnix, Lord of Toulouse, Marnix's brother, was killed at Oosterweel, near Antwerp, on 13 March 1567. Hendrik van Bredero, Marnix, and William of Orange went into voluntary exile in April 1567. See *Mémoires anonymes* (as in n. 6), 32–34, 33, n. 2. Counts Egmont and Horne were imprisoned in September 1567 and beheaded in Brussels on 5 June 1568. (*Mémoires anonymes*, 63–67 and 313–316.)

<sup>62</sup> Antonie van Straelen had been mayor of Antwerp in 1555–57, 1561, 1565, and 1567. He was a well-liked mayor. Bruegel could identify with the fate of Van Straelen, because he lived in Antwerp during his tenure as mayor. The *Mémoires anonymes* (pp. 70–71) records: "Backerzeele et Strael, aprez qu'ilz eurent souffert plusieurs cruelz tourmens en jeheyne . . . où ledict duc d'Alve les feist mourir quelques temps aprez par l'espée." See also *De Kogel door de Kerk* (as in n. 30), 82. On judicial grounds, the activities of the Council of Troubles were interfering with local and regional jurisdiction. The severity of punishments aroused moral indignation in many objective citizens who favored more humane sentences.

While sitting tight a Protestant would keep the true Church in sight, like the boy in Bruegel's drawing who turns his back toward the beekeepers. Bruegel might have been officially a bona fide Catholic, but in this particular drawing he expresses his misgivings about certain activities related to the Catholic Church. Like many moderate citizens, he hopes that a church without a cross on its spire can exist peacefully alongside a hive: a Protestant house of worship together with a Catholic church. In this sense, Bruegel's veiled satire is less extreme than the militant sarcasm expressed by Marnix in his anonymously published *Biënkorf*. This is not surprising, because Bruegel signed his work.

Immediately after Bruegel's death in September 1569, the drawing would have been received by two different audiences: Catholics and Protestants. The Inquisition could recognize that the activities of the beekeepers illustrated the Flemish aphorism, "gain is only achieved by action." If some doubt existed in the inquisitors' minds, the date "MDLXV," without the additional numerals I, II, or III, would be a safeguard because the complete date could not be used as evidence that the beekeepers actually satirized Alba's *corfdragers*, who began their zealous activities in September 1567. Nor could "MDLXV" alone be used in allegations against Bruegel, or his family, that the fallen hives allude to the iconoclastic raids of August 1566. If a later date was complete, it might implicate the artist as a collaborator with heretics. The drawing would only be "safe" if these implicating Roman numerals, mere bits of information, only existed in the mind of the beholder, a contemporary of Bruegel, who was familiar with the context of the tragic religious strife then tearing Flanders apart. Likewise, the two "absent" words, *paep* or *cnaep*, at the end of the two sentences, alter this cryptic aphorism completely; since these words were dangerous, they could only be added in the mind of a Flemish viewer who had experienced the political tensions of the fateful 1560s.

Bruegel's aphorism addresses the Flemish viewer. Marnix, in the conclusion of his book, addresses the "Christian reader." He states that in *De Biënkorf* he has revealed the two most important foundations of the Church according to Doctor Master Gentiani Hervet:

The first/what the H. Catholic Church is, what it consists of and how far its power can reach. And the second/the explanation of the Text which each person can see with his own eyes/Although Huguenots and Lutherans always rely on the text of the Bible, our Dear Mother the H. Church can modify and twist with learned explanations the same Text so that it totally strengthens her case.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> *De Biënkorf* (1569), fol. 360r-v: "Aen den Christelycken leser. Want wij hebben hier in op het aldercortste en alderduydelickste verhaelt de twee voornemelickste fundamente daer alle hare schrifte bewijsredenen conclusien en Syllogisme op gefondeert ende ghestaen zijn / namelick / het yerste: de H. Catholische Kerke wat sy is waer in sij bestaet en hoe verre hare macht strecke can: ende het tweede namelick de wtlegghinghe der Schrift alwaer een yeghelick met ooghen sien mach dat hoewel de Hugenooten ende Lutheranen het altijt op den text der Schrift beroepen nochtans soo can onse lieve moeder de H. Kercke den selven text met bequame wtlegghingen also fijn matighen ende buyghen dat hy ganselick tot haren voordeel is streckende."

Like Marnix, Bruegel demonstrates that the Catholic Church is a mere empty hive. Further, each person can read with his own eyes the text of the aphorism. Protestants who read these two sentences literally would understand the aphorism differently than Catholics who, according to Marnix, "modify and twist . . . the same Text so that it totally strengthens their case."

One other thing is clearly shown in the drawing—and would presumably have been obvious to the Inquisition: the *Beekeepers* definitely was made *before* the heretical text of *De Biënkorf* was published. The dedication to Sonnius, a zealous inquisitor, reads: "The date in our museum, the fifth of January which was the evening of the Three Kings, when good Catholics enjoy themselves and call: The King drinks. In the year 1569."<sup>64</sup> As the remaining Roman numerals on the drawing are "MDLXV," this drawing clearly has nothing to do with the forbidden book published in 1569, "MDLXIX." This fact would be significant because as early as 1566 the Spanish Regent, Margaret of Parma, reissued the royal edict that declared that authors and other seducers of people, "like those who compose books, songs, or scandalous pamphlets," would be executed.<sup>65</sup> On 11 November 1568, Alva's edict reinforced this deterrent against heretical publications. It reminded all citizens that those who make "scandalous and seditious little books . . . or writings, decorate, . . . print or show these, or have them in their possession," will be sentenced to death.<sup>66</sup> Thus, even the slightest reference to this most blasphemous booklet, *De Biënkorf*, if detected would result in the death penalty for Bruegel. A protection against the Inquisition's verdict of guilty lies in the date "MDLXV." Complete or cut, it is visible evidence that the *Beekeepers* was drawn before *De Biënkorf* was published.

The Prince of Orange's response to Alva's edict was swift. He urged the population: "Do not be blinded henceforth by the unjust strictures which our common enemies pass on the virtuous acts of our liberators in order to hoodwink your trustful minds. . . . Open your eyes and consider the present situation more closely."<sup>67</sup> In this context, the blinded eyes of

Alva's masked beekeepers contrast starkly with the opened eyes of the boy. In the eyes of this boy a Catholic church and a Protestant one exist together, a vision that corresponds to the one expressed by the leader of the Protestant revolt. Bruegel, therefore, does not reflect the attitude of the Familists who would pay lip service to the official religion. Instead, he represents a Protestant point of view.

Given the striking correlations between these Protestant publications and Bruegel's drawing, it is entirely possible that the inscrutable artist deliberately falsified the date of the *Beekeepers* in order to deceive the real *corfdragers* of the Inquisition. Such a practice was widespread among those who distributed heretical material.<sup>68</sup> When one considers the heretical reception of *De Biënkorf* in addition to the punitive intention of Alva's edict, the danger of engaging in overt criticism is inescapable. Bruegel, a cunning artist, guaranteed in the *Beekeepers* that the Roman numerals "MDLXV . . ." on this signed drawing would lead any viewer to the automatic assumption that the date is correct, and that the artist never read *De Biënkorf*. Bruegel, or someone who was in possession of the drawing, most likely did cut it deliberately so that the removal of all digits after the remaining *V* of MDLXV would eliminate all clear proof of potential heresy.

By far the most remarkable aspect of the *Beekeepers* is the fact that its arcane content is deliberately open to alternative interpretations. It was meant to be that way. Intentionally ambiguous, the complex innuendos in this drawing play with two antagonistic groups of viewers: the Catholic Inquisition and the Flemish Protestants. Inevitably, Bruegel encapsulates his political, moral, and religious sympathies in this enigmatic drawing, and with caustic wit and guarded irony he manipulates both a Catholic and a Protestant audience. No wonder that in its contextual ambiguity the *Beekeepers* appears arcane but not indecipherable. It was a matter of life or death for Bruegel.

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<sup>64</sup> Oosterhof (as in n. 28), 68, n. 1: "Datum in onse Museo, den vijfdien Januarij, welcke was dry Coninghen avont, als de goede Catholicken hen vrolick maken en roepen: De Conick drinckt. Int Jaer 1569." This specific date refers to a Flemish folk custom to celebrate Epiphany with an eating and drinking feast. Marnix's reference to 5 January 1569 seems a satire directed at King Philip II, so that it is possible that this is a fictitious date. All the literature on *De Biënkorf* has accepted that it was published early in 1569.

<sup>65</sup> *Mémoires de Jacques de Wesenbeke* (as in n. 23), 367.

<sup>66</sup> Cockx-Indestege and Glorieux (as in n. 23), 200, 1568, no. 2524, "Placcaet ende ordinancie tegens de ghene die . . . schandaleuse oft seditieuse boecxkens . . . oft schriften maken, versieren, . . . drucken, ten voorschijne bringen, oft onder hen houden. Oft quade ende valsche roepen uutgeven (gegeven in onse leger tot Binch . . . den xi dach van november MDLXVIII) Brussele, M. van Hamont, 1568."

<sup>67</sup> Kossman and Mellink (as in n. 21), 87, doc. 12, "Fidelle exhortation aux inhabitants du pais bas . . . ."

<sup>68</sup> Kronenberg (as in n. 27). There is one instance where Bruegel makes a "mistake" in the date of a drawing, *The Fall of Hermogenes*, signed and dated "MDXLIII," 1544 rather than 1564. In a future study I will propose why switching the *L* and the *X* was a deliberate error. *The Fall of Hermogenes*, pen and brown ink; 223 × 296mm. Signed at the bottom left corner "BRUEGEL MDXLIII." Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, cat. no. B. 93. Renger (as in n. 10), 77, mentions that this drawing was intended to be engraved; the sheet has some evidence of tracing. Hieronymus Cock published an engraving, dated 1565, identifying the theme of Hermogenes in the text.