'Some tymes J have a shillinge aday, and some tymes nothinge, so that J leve in great poverty': British actors in the paintings of Frans Hals

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From the mid-sixteenth century, touring troupes of Italian actors brought the commedia dell'arte to courts and marketplaces all over Europe. For a half-century from the 1580s, English troupes regularly crossed the channel, where their most lucrative European destinations were the trade fairs and courts of the German-speaking regions, often via The Netherlands. From the 1590s, Robert Browne, later joined by his son-in-law Robert Reynolds and John Green, essentially co-led the European operations of Philip Henslowe and Edward Alleyn's London-based theatrical empire. After the Thirty Years War, its leadership passed to John Wade, William Roe and Roe's son-in-law George Jolly, whose many European aliases included that of 'Gideon Gellius', and who took on the role of a troupe-leading 'Peckolhering' (stage fool) throughout the 1650s. Together with other itinerants such as 'Juglers Pedlars Tynkers' and Petye Chapmen', such 'Common Players' were legally classified within the lowest strata of society, as 'Roges Vacabundes and Starde Beggers' in the London 1572 Acte for the punishment of Vacaboundes and for Relief of the Poore and Impotent. Most European states vigorously enforced equivalent legislation. A letter from a member of Browne's troupe, Richard Jones, to Alleyne offers some insight into the economic deprivations that could be experienced by touring English players:

m' allen I commend my love and humble duty to you giv in you thanks for yo' great bounty bestoed vpon me in my sickness, when I was in great want, god bless you for it, sir this it is. I am to go over beyond the seases w' m' browne and the company but not by his meanes for he is put to half a shaire, and to stay hear, for they ar all against his goinge... now good sir as you have ever byne my worthye frend so healp me nowe J have asuot of clothes and acloke at pane [pawn] fo' three pound and if it shall pleas
you to lend me so much to release them I shalbe bound to pray for you so long as I 
leve, for if I go over and have no clothes I shall not be esteemed of and by gode help 
the first mony that I get I will send it over vnto you, for hear I get nothing, some 
tymes I have a shillinge aday, and some tymes nothing, so that I leve in great poverty 
hear, and so I humbly take my leave praining to god J and my wife for ye health 
and mistris alones we are god continewe, / Yo' poor frend to command / Richard Jones

Historians of their activities unanimously base their accounts of them sparingly 
on textual documentation. The early commedia dell'arte has inspired an immense 
visual record, ranging from ephemeral and popular art to works by artists 
of the first rank. In contrast, the rarity of accepted images linked with the 
activities of the English players in Europe is such that few theatre historians 
would argue with the assertion that there are 'very few extant iconographical 
documents depicting English actors on the continent. Although there are a 
number of interesting parallels between the English players and their Italian 
counterparts, a striking difference is the iconographical blackout pertaining 
to the English actors.' My own increasing uneasiness with this view stems 
from a re-assessment of some previously insufficiently recognized sources for 
visual records of English players. I here suggest that these include certain 
paintings by Frans Hals, and examine the possibility that his oeuvre includes 
portraits of touring English actors.

The perceived 'iconographical blackout' is starkly demonstrated by the 
relative quantity of pre-1650 images of the commedia dell'arte stock stage fool 
Harlequin, and of Shakespeare's Hamlet, a role acted in Europe by the English 
players from the 1620s. Nicoll sharply contrasts our ability to visualize these 
two most universally known theatrical characters: 'no one could describe what 
[Hamlet] looks like; Harlequin's appearance we could immediately present in 
detail.' While numerous pictures of Harlequin can be authoritatively dated to 
within the lifetime of Harlequin's creator Tristano Martinelli (1557–1630), only 
asingle image pre-dating 1650 has ever been linked with Shakespeare's Hamlet. 
Moreover, this painting has been assessed neither with detailed reference to 
the English actors in Europe, nor to a group of portraits in which its artist 
depicts the English players' rival to Harlequin, their stage fool Pickelherring. 
If scholarly sources offer scant pickings concerning the appearance of 
Shakespeare's Hamlet, popular publications favour an altogether more robust 
approach. They routinely reproduce authentic Elizabethan and Jacobean 
documents jostling with images of historically genuine actors and actresses 
in Shakespearean roles, and a myriad of less easily theatrically definable 
Shakespeare-inspired images. Every last Hamlet among the illustrations of 
one such publication is by a modern artist. Chronologically, they range from 
Anthemle François Lagrenée's early nineteenth-century portrait of the actor 
Joseph Talma as Hamlet, two of Eugene Delacroix's magnificent Hamlets, 
and Sir John Gilbert's Hamlet of 1849, to sadly feeble Hamlets of 1875 and

1883 by Ladislav von Czachorski and Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret. One painting 
conspicuous by its absence is Young Man with a Skull, by Frans Hals (c. 1580– 
1666), who was born 16 years after Shakespeare and outlived him by exactly 
half a century (Figure 9.1). 

As well as his wealthy and successful official sitters, the great Dutch 
portraitist habitually sought out non-paying sitters at the margins of society. 
Some of his most penetrating and spontaneous works depict those condemned 
to poverty through old age, youth or the pursuit of low-paying, often 
socially marginalized occupations. One of the largest of these latter groups
was itinerants. Just the merest whiskyery fluff ruffles the cheeks of his Young Man with a Skull. The youthful energy radiating from his fresh open face is accentuated by his pert red feathered cap and by his gesturing right hand, which appears to seek out the spectator, wherever he chooses to stand. The sitter’s liveliness contrasts with a skull of exceptional decorum, without its lower jaw and most of its teeth. The vivid flesh-coloured cap-feather vigorously links the living sitter, whose flesh tones dominate the upper part of the picture, to the dull greys and muted ruddles of the skull-dominated lower part. Painted less than two decades after Shakespeare’s death, earlier generations of Shakespearean scholars were delighted to hail its skull as that of Yorick, and the young man holding the iconic stage prop as the earliest depiction of an actor in the role of Hamlet. This identification, which goes back to when the painting was catalogued as Hamlet with Yorick’s Skull (1806), then Hamlet Prince of Denmark, Mourning on the Skull of Yorick (1815), has been accorded a resoundingly negative reception by modern specialists.7 The National Gallery has dropped all reference to Hamlet, and the painting is dismissively footnoted by Young, for whom ‘the earliest visual rendition of Hamlet with Yorick’s skull was a 1773 engraving by John Hall.’8 Slive has championed the current acceptance of ‘the so-called Hamlet’ as nothing more than a typical vanitas composition.9 He dates the painting to the late 1620s, and places it firmly within a strong Flemish visual tradition dating back to at least 1516, when Lucas van Leyden produced an engraving of the same title. Concerning possible Shakespearean connections, Slive notes that Bode-Binder and Valentiner correctly expressed laconic reservations regarding this ... Borenius and Hodgson were sceptical ... as well. Noting that ‘there is no evidence that a work by Shakespeare was ever performed in Holland or translated into Dutch in Hals’s time’, he concludes of the painting’s sitter that ‘it is hardly probable that he represents Hamlet’.

There is nothing absolutely impossible in the suggestion that Hals may have been inspired by a strolling player’s performance of the character in Shakespeare’s play, but... this hardly Netherlands pictorial tradition supports the conclusion that the skull held by the boy in Hals’ painting is meant as a reminder of the transience of life and the certainty of death, and that the picture was intended as a vanitas.10

The vanitas tradition is overtly acknowledged by Hals himself, for example in Portrait of a 60-Year-Old Man holding a Skull, one of his very earliest portraits.11 By the seventeenth century, Dutch painters liked to incorporate favourite vanitas motifs (such as skulls, smoke, bubbles, snuffed-out candles and spent pipes) into their works in a matter-of-fact way that allows them to be enjoyed on a purely realistic level, as more or less plausible reflections of everyday life. So, evidently, did Shakespeare. Hamlet, of all his plays the one that most relentlessly addresses theatricality, human transience and the inevitability of death, may be read as an extended vanitas, culminating in the graveyard scene, and specifically in Hamlet’s confrontation with the skull of Yorick. Indisputably, both Young Man with a Skull and Shakespeare’s Hamlet merit their place in the vanitas tradition. Given Hals’s known working methods, his subject is unlikely to be an abstract personification rather than a genuine portrait of a specific individual. His sitting, holding this bluntly ‘cheepful’ and grubby skull, is not preoccupied with solitary introspection, but with striking a memorable pose. The classic Hamlet pose of declaiming, skull in hand, is based on post-Shakespearean stage directions. But acting and music were considered fitting subjects of the self-conscious vanitas tradition, whose concerns (transience and mortality) are especially compatible with theatricality.

Could Hals, rather than producing ‘a painting that secedes from its own creative particularity for a belatedness that renders it merely a visual corollary to Shakespeare’s play’,10 here be consciously seeking to enhance his visual reflection of the artistic vanitas tradition by direct reference to Hamlet? The painting’s theatrical pretensions, essentially punctured by the rejection of the traditional identification of its sitter as Hamlet, have been revived by recognition of his gestures and costume as those of an actor. But the low societal status of the English itinerants has been used to rule them out as the subjects of such a monumental painting, and to point instead to identification with an amateur Dutchman from a Rederijkerskamer,14 such as the Haarlem ‘De Wiingaardranken’ to which Hals belonged during the years 1616–24.15 The possibility that this sitter was an English professional – perhaps even in the role of Hamlet – warrants serious attention because Frans Hals had a proven interest in depicting performing marginals, and he had ample opportunities to observe and meet visiting English players, both in his birthplace of Antwerp during the first two decades of his life, and in and around Haarlem, his home from 1600. Slive was aware of only one visit to Holland by travelling English actors before Hals painted Young Man with a Skull.16 In fact, during Hals’ lifetime, there is documentary evidence for numerous performances by English troupes, including at least one whose repertoire included Hamlet, in towns all over The Netherlands, and prominent English troupe leaders permanently settled their families and households close to his home town of Haarlem.17

The Englishman Fynes Moryson, whose travels took him to the Frankfurt Fair in September 1592, confirms their precarious beginnings. He disparages the ‘stragling broken Companies’ of touring British players: ‘some of our cast disposed Stage players came out of England into Germany, and played at Frankcford in the tymne of the mart, hauing neither a complete number of Actors, nor any good apparell, nor any ornament of the Stage’. He takes a jaded view of their efforts, describing them as ‘peeces and Patches of English players,
which my selfe and some English men there present could not heare without great wearysomenes'. But a German spectator at this same fair reminds us that Europeans viewed them very differently. Writing on 13 September 1592 from the Frankfurt Fair to his wife Magdalena Behaim, Balthasar Faumgarter enthusiastically praised Robert Browne's troupe of ten or twelve performers. Their music, acrobatics and dancing excelled any he had ever previously heard or seen, and their costumes struck the Nürnberg cloth merchant as impressive and costly. On 17 September 1592, Magdalena replies: 'I would most gladly have watched the English performance and players of whom you wrote'.

By the early seventeenth century, Dutch playwrights felt economically threatened by the extent of their activities and popularity. Bredero, for example, in around 1615, admonishes the local Amsterdam women for deserting his plays in favour of those of the visiting Englishmen, and Dutch theologians such as Voetius warned their parishioners against going to see the professional players. At least one of the troupes that visited The Netherlands in the 1620s had demonstrably added Hamlet to its repertoire within three years of publication of the folio edition in 1623. This was the renowned troupe of John Green, who had performed in Utrecht in July 1620, and in Ghent in April 1624. Hamlet, absent from detailed records of Green's 1608 Austrian tour, is named in the repertoire of his 1626 Dresden season. Der heilige Brudermond, a late eighteenth-century German version of Hamlet, has been widely hailed as a more reliable reflection of productions by English troupes in Europe from the 1620s onwards than any of the three earliest published versions of Shakespeare's Hamlet. First published in the late eighteenth century, and said to be based on a unique (now lost) manuscript of a script of 1710 that had belonged to German touring actors, it has inspired Shakespeare scholars to heroic flights of imagination. Despite its uncertain provenance and late date, many scholars hailed this text as a Shakespearean equivalent to Goethe's Ur-Faust. According to them, it is based neither on Shakespeare's 1623 folio nor the 1603 or 1604/05 quarto Hamlets, but directly on a lost version of around 1590, perhaps by Thomas Kyd or the youthful Shakespeare, that some thought to be the Hamlet performed by English troupes on the continent. However, it has so many stylistic features consistent with its eighteenth-century provenance that it is impossible to establish the individual miniatue of any meaningful relation to earlier performance practice. The fact that this Hamlet has no graveyard scene and no skulls is no more relevant to the staging of Hamlet in early seventeenth-century Holland than the fact that its play within a play is represented by actresses as well as actors. Its existence does not stand in the way of any version of Hamlet seen by Hals being performed complete with grave diggers and skulls.

If Young Man with a Skull (Figure 9.1) is a portrait of an English actor, then it seems likely that Hals also portrayed other English actors. Guillaume's
its front. His identity, suggested by the first line of a verse inscribed on an engraved copy of Peckelhaereng: 'Siet Monsieur Peckelhaereng an', is lent a high degree of authenticity by several factors. The engraver, Jonas Suyderhoef, lived from c. 1613 to 1686, and is thought to have been commissioned by Hals himself to copy his paintings, and Hals is named as the artist of a portrait of Pickelhering in an auction catalogue of 1631. In contrast to Young Man with a Skull, these portraits' theatrical credentials are undisputed since Gudlaugsson identified their sitters as northern performers, and they are routinely identified as 'a stock type in contemporary Dutch farces', or as Dutch rhetoricians (amateur actors).27

Popular stage clowns often attracted imitators who adopted their stage name within, or more usually after, the lifetime of their creators. Like the Italian Harlequin, Pickelhering became, during the course of the seventeenth century, a generic stock role. Although the identities of many actors who created clowns are known, controversy surrounds Pickelhering's origins as a stage role. Bruegel's Fight between Carnival and Lent and a host of lesser images demonstrate the herring's venerable iconographic links with carnival practice, not least through the astrological sign for February and for some, Pickelhering has been 'known as a carnival clown or quack's assistant: since the Middle Ages'. Others suggest or imply that he is a social type, clown or stock theatrical role who originated in Holland itself, perhaps inspired by Pieter Cornelisz van der Morsch, portrayed by Hals in 1616 while wielding a kipper in his role as Piero, the stage fool of the Leyden rhetoricians 'De Witte Accoleijen'. Most theatre historians are agreed that the role was created in Europe by an English actor, during the second decade of the seventeenth century. This is supported by a German chronicle of 1631, that dates the introduction of the stage role Pickelhering into Germany to shortly before the start of the Thirty Years War (1618), by English actors. A pirated version of the English troupe's playtexts, many featuring Pickelhering, was published in 1620 and 1624. From then on, Pickelhering gained in popularity as a stage name, eventually establishing himself as the most popular stage character of the English troupe in Europe – the comic scene-stealer of their shows. One of the 'Boertigheden' of J. Starter's Friezche Lust-Hof, published in Amsterdam in 1621, sings with the voice of 'Peckelharign'; A. von Buchell watched a Pickelhering perform in Holland in 1629, and the role is alluded to in several Haarlem publications of around the time Hals painted the portraits. One is Andreas Valerius's 1626 collection of theatrical jigs, some still in the original English, which includes 'Pots hondert duyset of Almande Pekelharing'. Another is a free translation of Bochorn's Latin poem 'Halicis salati vires' patriotically praising Holland's most characteristic export, 'den ghesuete Haringh', published as 'Loi van den Pekelharinig' in Jacob Westerbaen's Minne-Dichten of 1633. By the 1650s, Pickelhering features indiscriminately on the playbills of touring companies of every level of competence, all over German-speaking Europe.

Robert Reynolds is the actor-manager traditionally identified as the creator of the stage role Pickelhering. Indisputably, Reynolds' troupe included a Pickelhering. 'Der Churf. Drl. in Sachsen Engellendischen comedianten, welche sich des bieklinkherings compagnia nennen', which petitioned to play in Nürnberg on 30 July 1627, is surely the 'kurfürstlich sächsische englische Komödianten' led by Reynolds to Cologne in May 1628, as is the English troupe with a Pickelhering in Prague 1627–28. The seventeen-year-old Archduchess Maria Anna, writing to her younger brother on 5 January 1628, suggests that it was not yet a generic stage role in the late 1620s:

On Sunday [9 Jan] we will dine in the King's castle [in Prague], after the meal the English will perform a play there as it isn't possible in this castle. I'm told they are very vulgar, and no comparison to the Italians ... I'm told they have a fool named 'bickelhairing', he is. I'm told, the best, I think he is an exceptionally good fool.27

Reynolds' own claim to the role is critically undermined by the use, as early as May 1615 in Wolfenbüttel, of the stage alias 'Pickelhering' by George Vincent. Schrickx concludes that by 1620 Vincent had returned to Britain for good to tour the provinces. However, the post-1620 English records that he cites relate not to George Vincent, but to the conjurer and impresario William Vincent who, with his troupe of rope-dancers and other entertainers, toured the British provinces from 1619 (or even earlier) to at least 1642, under the stage name 'Hocus Pocus'. Neither European tours nor connections to George Vincent have been noted for him, and little is known of his family connections beyond the death of two of his infant children Margaret and James in May 1632, and his own probable date of death, shortly before 1650.40

George Vincent's membership of John Green's troupe is confirmed by documents such as one of 25 August 1615 in which Green, having already performed in Danzig for four weeks, petitions to play for a further month, citing the high cost of bringing his troupe from Wolfenbüttel. Notable among several documents supporting long-term connections between Pickelhering and Green's troupe is a broadsheet of 1621 claiming that 'Pickelhering' had also played 'Niemand', the role at the heart of Green's 1607–08 Graz repertoire. The coloured frontpiece drawing of Green's signed presentation copy to the Graz court of his own personal adaptation of Nobody and Somebody depicts 'Niemand' as a bearded redhead, routinely identified as Green. That Green's troupe then included at least one genuine redhead is confirmed by Archduchess Maria Magdalena. Her 'theatre letters' of 1608 from Graz notes the 'one with long red hair who's always playing his little fiddle'. Whether or not Pickelhering or 'Niemand' were played by, or as, redheads, the possibility that Vincent played both roles in Green's troupe is not ruled out.
by the 1627 Torgau accommodation list's separate entries for two players, as 'Pickelheringen' and 'Der Rothkopf.' Reynolds, a colleague of Vincent who did not survive him, is so unlikely to have shared or assumed his stage name, that despite his longstanding traditional association with the role, he may be ruled out as a possible Pickelhering.

Pickelhering's commercial undertakings are illuminated by two broadsheets of 1621. Among the earliest of numerous seventeenth-century images based on the role, their depictions of Pickelhering as an iron merchant may allude to George Vincent's arms-dealing. In strong contrast to their early seventeenth-century rivals, French and Italian travelling actors, the commercial interests of the English players were not primarily medical. Rather than practising as quacks, significant numbers of English players pursued non-medical commercial interests, dealing in anything from arms, metal, cloth, luxury goods or musical instruments to livestock, or the importation and training of English performers, whether boys or adults, for the European market. George Vincent built up long-term connections - both theatrical and commercial - with the court of Poland, importing goods and performing from at least 1617, when he was in Warsaw with Green's troupe. London Privy Council passes permitted him to bring to Warsaw in 1617, eight 'musicians' including Richard Jones and the boy-player John Wade (b. 1607), and in August 1618:

... to returne into Poland, to the Prince, his master, and to take over with him such things as he hath bought for the Kinge, Queene and Prince of Poland, viz. A perfumed sweete bagge and two beaver hattes, one wassoot and foure pair of rich gloves, sixe wastochtes and sixe nighte coppes, a dozen of [rhy]ng gloves and such instruments of musicke as he shall have use of for his maister's service, together with his wife and children and also five musitians for the service of the Prince of Poland, and the wife of one Joannes residing in Poland.

Richard Jones' wife Haris evidently stayed across the channel for some time, as she wrote to Edward Alleyn from Danzig in April 1620 of her plan to join her husband, then 'with the prince.' Jones, whose correspondence with Alleyn is quoted above, had been with Brown on the tour of 1592 seen by Morison. By 1622, he was no longer in Poland, but with the court of Duke Philip Julus of Pommern-Wolgast. In a letter of 10 July 1624 requesting the Duke to take him back into his service, he blames his decision to return to London in 1623 on his fellow countryman 'Jürgen', who has been identified as George Vincent.

The English merchant and traveller Peter Mundy saw Pickelhering perform while he was a resident in Danzig from 1641 to 1647:

Some Summers come here our English commedians or players which represente in Nederlandishe Dutche, having bin at Corinbes before the prince Elector of Brandenburger. Allboe att Warsawo before the king off Poland. Among those Actors was one here Nicknamed pickled herring, much talked of and admired

For his dexterity in the Jesters part: Amo. […] Hee died att Warsaw. His wife now liveth here in towne. Hath allowance From the king For her Maynetenance.

In confluating George 'Pickelhering' Vincent with William 'Hocus Pocus' Vincent, Schrieks erroneously truncated George's continental career at 1620 and ruled out identification of him as Mundy's 'Pickled Herring', generally identified as Robert Reynolds. From 1629, Reynolds' home was Den Haag, where his wife's presence is documented throughout the 1640s. It was George Vincent's wife who followed her husband to Poland, and it seems clear that the actor who had maintained life-long links with the court of Poland, and whose wife was granted a royal pension to live in Danzig when he died in Warsaw under the stage name Pickelhering in 1642, was not Reynolds, but George Vincent.

Mundy's Pickelhering performs in Dutch. In suggesting a possible explanation for the strange features of Hals's sitter, Mundy's description is of specific relevance to the question of whether Hals portrayed a Dutch amateur or an English professional: 'It is said off him that hee could see Frame his Face & countenance that to one half off the people on the one side, he would seem heartily to laugh, and to those on the other side bitterly to weep & shedde tears, strange.'

The facility for manipulating facial expressions and emotional responses was explored to new limits by early modern professional performers. The entry scene of Shakespeare's Launce is an extended solo involving the comic demonstration of half a dozen different styles of weeping, copiously punctuated by his own. Neronhythema, a play of 1600 written, according to its North German schoolmaster author Hector Conradus, in the style of the travelling players, opens with the clown Claus Narr punctuating an extended laughing fit by demonstrating different types of laughter. The substitution of weeping for laughter and vice versa, a stock in trade of Tiberio Fiorillo (1608–94), creator of the role of Scaramouche, was perhaps influenced by the early modern fascination for Democritus and Heraclitus, the laughing and weeping philosophers. Some have tried to identify a female counterpart to Pickelhering. Instead, it may be worth considering whether it was not intended as a pendant to the pointing So-Called Mulatto, in the manner of the laughing Democritus, and weeping Heraclitus. Broadsheets inform readers that Jean Potage (the stage clown created by Thomas Sackville) accentuates his foolishness by crying despite not being sad, and then laughing again; and of Pickelhering's effortless ability to frame his features into a thousand expressions. The specific variation of Mundy's 'Pickled Herring' on the theme of facial dexterity, namely the simultaneous combination of laughing and weeping, is alluded to by the Pickelhäringer of Gryphee's Shakespeare-inspired play of 1658, Peter Squintz, as a trademark of Jehan Potage.
an acutely observant portraitist, depicts a Pickelherring whose unsymmetrical facial features give a disconcerting edge to his superficially jovial expression. If his unusual expression depicts the simultaneous weeping (on the right-hand half of his face) and laughing (on the left), of Mundy’s ‘Pickled Herring’, his most plausible identity is George Vincent, the probable creator of the role.

Another important group of pictures linked to Hals with possible connections to the English players concerns the lost dated Merry Trio of 1616, thought to be privately owned in America, and the similarly dated Metropolitan Museum’s Shrovetide Revellers. Gudlaugsson, accepting Poensgen’s attribution of the lost Berlin variant of Merry Trio as a copy by Willem Buytewech after Hals’s original, recognized its carnival revelers as depictions of performers, and identified its seated male as the northern stage fool Hanswurst.45 Shrovetide Revellers’ modern title is based on the inscription ‘Vastenavont-gasten’, on the verso of Mathys van den Bergh’s ink copy of 1660, which, although produced within Hals’s lifetime, post-dates his original by over four decades. Slive has suggested that the principal models of Shrovetide Revellers may be actors, either itinerants or local amateurs.84 Its half-length seated couple is flanked by two standing males. Slive identifies the seated male as Pickelherring, his partner as a possible cross-dressed actor, and the right-hand male (whose dress actually does resemble Pickelherring’s pom-pom buttoned costume) as Hanswurst.85 Behind the four main characters, the heads of five further males, their features distorted by alcoholic excesses, are compressed into the background shadows, forming a grissaille-like upper border to the composition. Until the painting was cleaned in 1951, these five heads were painted out, and the explicit gesture of the right-hand male was obliterated with the addition of a walking stick. These alterations bowdlerized a rumbustiously vulgar carnival celebration, softening its explicit theatrical connections and moralistic overtones into a blander genre scene, innocuously referred to by nineteenth-century specialists as A Merry Supper Party. The lower border is marked by a table bearing bagpipes and a range of foods and drinks associated with Lent (such as oysters and bread) and with carnival (such as sausages, pancakes and beer). The seated male wears a black hat garnished with a pipe, and a black outfit with a simple white ruff, decorated with an elaborate garland of typical foods of carnival (such as sausages, eggs and pig’s trotters) and of Lent (such as oysters, legumes and cured herring, from which Pickelherring takes his name). These herring are not sauced or pickled but a type of kipper (the Dutch lukking or German Bückling) that was traditional Dutch Lenten fare. The painting pre-dates the generic spread of the Pickelherring role. The bearded seated male, with his distinctive black costume and wart under his right eye, also features in Merry Trio, where his partner’s low neckline identifies her as unmistakably female. In Shrovetide Revellers, the equivalent figure is flat-chested and coarse-featured, with a disturbingly knowing expression, a flushed complexion indicative of alcoholic excess or heavy make-up, outsize hands and more than a hint of an adam’s apple. Professional English troupes did not introduce on-stage women before the 1650s, so if the painting depicts English actors, then it provides a very rare portrait of a seventeenth-century cross-dressed English boy actor.

Of what relevance are the activities of the English players in the Low Countries to the oeuvre of Frans Hals and his followers? As previous generations of artists drew on court fools, seventeenth-century Dutch artists turned to itinerant comic actors, and specifically their popular stage fools, as personifications of certain sinful characteristics, notably folly, deceitfulness and greed. Pickelherring’s association with folly was further heightened by the perceived aphrodisiac and alcohol-imbibing effects of cured herring.86 Hals’s portraits of Pickelherring inspired many artists. They form the basis for the wine-pourer at the centre of the Stockholm Nationalmuseum’s Banquet Scene of 1639 by his brother Dirck Hals, and the mountebank’s stage fool in Edward Le Davis’s The Mountebank Doctor and his Merry Andrew. This late seventeenth-century engraving, one of the earliest English prints based on the paintings of Frans Hals, is a pastiche of two unconnected portraits by Hals, the So-Called Mulatto (Figure 9.2) and a portrait now in the Hermitage.87 Perhaps the artist whose works most clearly illustrate the iconographic significance of English stage fools, and especially Pickelherring, is Jan Steen. Peekaebaan itself, possibly once owned by Steen, is prominent amongst portraits of itinerant and marginal characters by Hals featured in the backgrounds of some of Steen’s interiors. In the Wellington Museum’s Physician’s Visit, Steen gives us his version of the popular subject of the lovesick girl attended by her physician. He rejects unsophisticated old-fashioned iconographic devices for drawing attention to the girl’s illness, and its foolish nature, such as including an actual Cupid or Foul in the scene. Instead, Steen has found naturalistic solutions that powerfully evoked their symbolic presence to spectators of his day: the child with his toy bow and arrow, and a painting of a stage fool. The latter is Hals’s Peekaebaan, included as a picture within a picture hanging on the wall directly behind the lovesick girl, filling the top right-hand corner of Steen’s canvas.

The Physician’s Visit is not the only painting being known in which Peekaebaan personifies folly. In the background of the Berlin Christening Feast, of c. 1660, it is the right-hand one of three paintings depicted as hanging on the back wall (Figure 9.3). Its pendant, to the left of a large landscape, is based on Hals’s Male Babbe. The sheet of paper lying in front of the newly christened baby’s crib is inscribed with a Dutch proverb (‘The young will sing to the same tune as their elders’). Here every generation of the living are gathered together to celebrate the family’s newest arrival. They are presided over by, not by believable representations of ancestral portraits, but by portraits of two
characters nominated by Steen as an explicit gloss on what he sees as this family's moral and spiritual deficiencies. Malle Babbe and Pickelhering are not casual inclusions. The foolish connotations of these disreputable marginals is enhanced by Malle Babbe's owl and by Pickelhering's fool's costume. Steen's intention in coupling the pair is linked to the proverb spelt out in his picture. They are the symbolic pater - and mater - famillia of his celebrating clan, a potent comment on the origins of their foolish and sinful behaviour. Steen's iconographic recycling of Hals's portraits of marginals remind us of their powerful symbolic connotations. But Malle Babbe and Pickelhering are not generic pastiches. Malle Babbe, popularly regarded as the semi-mythic witch of Haarlem, was no fantasy of Hals's imagination, but a woman personally known to him. A document of 1653, recording her confinement to the Haarlem house of correction, establishes her as a fellow citizen of Hals's own home town.68

Underpinning the arguments presented here is the assumption that no less than his commissioned depictions of paying clients, Hals's portraits of marginals are accurate, penetrating records of historically identifiable individuals. Like Malle Babbe, the sitters of Peckelaer's, So-Called Mulatto, Young Man with a Skull, Streetlife Revellers and Merry Trio were personally known to Hals. Societal disapproval of performers extended even to depictions of them. They were considered so much less desirable than other categories of portraiture or genre that, as in the case of Streetlife Revellers, some owners altered their titles, or went to even further lengths to obliterate their theatrical connections. Hals's paintings are now recognized as depicting performers, and have been linked with Dutch amateur actors. Contextualization within the activities of the English players in Europe lends weight to their identification as portraits of specific English actors. The fact that they have no obvious iconographic precedents enhances their theatre-historical interest. It suggests that they may have the rare distinction of being depictions of stock theatrical characters that draw primarily not on the extant iconographic records, but on the very actors responsible for playing, in some case even creating, these roles. The oeuvre of Frans Hals represents a previously disregarded iconographic source for English comedians in the Netherlands, and further researches into their activities will throw new light on his enigmatic portraits of stage performers.

Notes

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8. National Gallery visitor information label, 2003: 'This painting is not a portrait, but is intended as a memento, a reminder of the transience of life and the certainty of death. The subject of a young man holding a skull belongs to a well-established Netherlandish tradition, and can be traced back to engravings of the early 16th century. The exotic
In Search of the Marginal and the Outcast: The ‘Lower Orders’ in the Cries of London and Dublin

Sean Shesgreen

Cries, defined as street characters pictured in likenesses with captions recording their shouts, trades, or identities, is the only genre in art to take as its object the urban poor, those invisible men and women Edmund Burke described as working ‘from dawn to dark in the innumerable servile, degrading, unseemly, unmanly and often most unwholesome and pestiferous occupations, to which by the social economy so many wretches are inevitably doomed’. In life and art, these ‘lower sort of people’ include a broad expanse of urban characters, stretching from valued and sentimental proletarians like milkmaids and balladeers to prostitutes, gamblers, thieves, and political or religious renegades, who fall outside the pale of respectable society, even at its bottom. The structural commitment of Cries to ‘low-born, servile’ men and women goes back to the first example, the Cries of Paris, cut about 1500; it continues in images appearing up to 1900, when the genre vanishes and the task of tracking the marginal is taken up by sociologists. Cries, adding up to pictorial inventories of urban street traders but quickly expanding to include city characters of all types, come in four formats: broadsides, oil paintings, children’s books, and ensembles of prints; the last, the most formally complex, are my focus in this essay. Ensembles exist for large and small cities of Europe, including (in the three kingdoms) London, York, Glasgow and Dublin.

Though Cries, by definition, illustrate the lack of money, class, power and status among the disadvantaged, they have been overlooked as sources of information about commoners. Finding information about the lives of the urban working classes – especially women, who are often doubly invisible – and about their distinctive material culture – the tubs, baskets and rag bags they used or the turnips, bog wood and ‘Bullrudderie’ cakes they sold –
Others and Outcasts in Early Modern Europe
Picturing the Social Margins

Edited by Tom Nichols

ASHGATE
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