

***Breikocher Josef:***  
**The Medieval Origins of a Grotesque Comic Motif**  
**in the German Christmas Play**

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In the 1557-59 supplement to Georg Wickram's popular collection of comic stories, *Das Rollwagenbüchlin* (The Little Stagecoach Book) there is a tale entitled *Von einem Weyhenacht kind und dem Joseph, wie er im ein müsslin kochet inn der kirchen und einanderen in der kirchen schlügen* (About a Christ Child and a Joseph, how he cooked up some pap for him in the church and how in the church they slugged each other.) I give a translation of the complete tale below:

In the bishopric of Cologne it happened once at Christmastide, on Christmas Eve, that for a cradle-rocking of the Christ Child that same evening, they appointed a large choirboy to be the child and they laid this Jesus Child in a cradle. And so the Mary rocked him and the child began to cry lustily. Since he would not be quiet, the Joseph ran over quickly and wanted to cook the Baby Jesus some pap or porridge and feed him so he would hush up. But as quickly as he cooked, the more the child cried. As he would not in any way keep quiet, the good Joseph took a spoonful of hot mush, ran with it to the cradle and jammed the spoon with the hot stuff down the child's throat and burnt the child's mouth so badly that he left off bawling and whining. The child quickly rushed out of the cradle, grabbed Joseph by the hair, and they began to beat each other. But the child was too strong for the good Joseph, for he threw him to the floor and went at him in such a way that the people who were in the church had to come to Joseph's aid.

Wickram, vii, 200.

We see that the humor of the disastrous Christmas pageant has been with us for quite some time.

I have argued elsewhere that German *Schwank*- or *Volksbücher* (always bearing in mind of course that we are dealing with comic fiction) are a potential source for theater history, especially of the popular or “folk” layer (Walsh 2004). Episode 13 of the widely disseminated Eulenspiegel stories, for example, seems to present evidence for the survival of very early forms of Latin Easter Play in the hinterland, with the laity learning their parts strictly by rote and performing together with the literate parish priest and his staff. The humor of this tale involves Eulenspiegel as church sexton who mischievously tutors the peasants in their Latin lines as the Three Marys. When the parish priest’s housekeeper/mistress, playing the Angel, delivers her line, *Quem quaeritis in sepulcro?*, the peasants answer unknowingly, “The priest’s one-eyed whore,” thus participating a brawl before the stage sepulcher. In another example, from Michael Lindener’s *Katzipori* (1558), a doltish pastor finds himself caught in a violent brawl between two neighboring villages over the loan of an ass for the Palm Sunday pageant. Like “beloved Malchus” the priest loses an ear in the affair, but he is enthroned upon the donkey by the triumphant villagers who process with him to the sound of pipes and drums, the ringing of church bells, and the crowd shouting, *Frewet euch, frewet euch, lieben kinder, wir haben den esel gewonnen!* (rejoice, rejoice, dear children, we’ve won the donkey!). They bring the one-eared pastor right up to the high altar whereupon he intones *Christ ist erstanden*, even though it was “still fourteen days before Easter” (Lindener, 167).

Wickram’s tale of the brawling Joseph and Christ Child, likewise, would seem to be based on an essential “realism” of peasant genre subjects affording something of a window on popular Christmas plays of the later Middle Ages. In order for the comedy of this anecdote to operate successfully we must assume that the basic elements of the situation reflect current practice or must have been, at least, a recent memory of same. In other words, the situation as described must have passed a minimum test of plausibility for the literate, largely urban consumers of such material. In Wickram’s tale

we are presumably in rural parish church somewhere in the vast “bishopric.” Essential elements would include:

- a.) Christmas Eve festivities involving impersonations of the Holy Family (the expression *kindlein wiegen* being nearly synonymous with “Christmas play”);
- b.) the popular custom of “cradle rocking” itself, here employing a live child rather than a doll or sacred image; and c.): an elderly Joseph’s whose role prominently included cooking porridge. If we add to these prerequisites the tendency for amateur actors to over act their parts and for their fellow actors to respond “in character,” then the tale can proceed to its uproarious conclusion.

The comic tale thus presumes a familiarity with the image of *Breikocher Josef* in representations of the Nativity and its intimate link with the cradle-rocking ceremony. A tale from another *Schwankbuch* of the period, the *Gartengesellschaft* (1556) also depends upon this association. The compiler, Jakob Frey, recounts a Christmas sermon by an *ungelerter dorffpfaff* from a place “not far from Graben” (present day Graben-Neudrof north of Karlsruhe?). The sermon ridiculously over plays the human dimensions of the Nativity and particularly the ministrations of Joseph:

*. . .das ihm der frost nit geschadt, in allte hosen ingewicklet und gebunden unnd darnach ihme ein güten dicken schwäbischen haberbrey gekocht; damit hatt er das kind ufferzogen bitz in sein alter, davon es auch gewachsen unnd ein starcker man worden. Er ist auch sein lebtage nie kranck gewesen, bitz in die juden gekreuzigt haben; da hat er wol sterben müssen.*

[...so that the frost would not destroy him, he swaddled and bound him in old hose and then cooked him a good, thick, Swabian oatmeal. By this means he brought up the child so that he grew and became a strong adult. He also never fell sick in his lifetime until the Jews crucified him - then he had to die for sure.]

(Frey, 134).

The “unlearned pastor” goes on to endorse the almost magical properties of oatmeal for the village infants (one is reminded of Wonder Bread’s old slogan, “Builds strong bodies twelve ways”).

Both Wickram’s and Frey’s anecdotes reflect a general Reformation (as well as Counter-Reformation) unease with the “messiness” of late medieval popular religion and particularly its ritual representations. Earlier in the century Luther’s great adversary, Johann Eck, in his *Pfarrbuch* for Unser Liebe Frau, Ingolstadt, expressed disapproval of undignified Josephs leaping about and preparing food in church: *Et non habeature Joseph omnino aut saltem honestiori modo, scilicet quod non condiat pulmentum, ne ecclesia dei irrideatur* (Seitz, 188).

*Breikocher Joseph* would seem, then, to be an established image in religious popular culture by the dawn of the sixteenth century. Indeed it was part of a nexus of late medieval motifs portraying Joseph the Carpenter as provider for and nurturer of the Holy Family in Bethlehem. These include:

1. Joseph fetching a taper or lantern to illuminate the stable, the effulgent birth of the Savior rendering his effort redundant.
2. Joseph maintaining a fire for heat and/or cooking, usually in a small brazier. A bellows is a frequent prop here as well
3. Joseph cutting up his hose for swaddling clothes, with the probably related motif of Joseph warming a naked foot at his brazier.
4. Joseph drying baby clothes by the fire.
5. Joseph helping handmaidens, or midwives, with bathing the Child -  
- pouring water, wrapping up the infant, etc. (Byzantine and Romanesque Nativities might include the handmaidens bathing the Child and a Joseph, but

they are on opposite sides of the composition. Only the Gothic Joseph helps with the task.)

6. And the fairly rare motif of Joseph disciplining the Ox and Ass who are munching on Baby Jesus's bed linen.

All of the above (apart from 5), can be found in German-language Christmas plays of both the pre- and post-Reformation periods and in the *Volksschauspiele* of the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. The visual arts of Central Europe likewise reflect these same motifs, though not in a simple one-for-one temporal correspondence with the plays, as we shall see.

This cluster of motifs, most appearing only in the late fourteenth century, represent something of a countercurrent to the concerted campaign of late medieval theologians, such as Bonaventure, Jean Gerson and Isidoro de Isolano, to establish a cult of St. Joseph and exalt the figure of the *nutritor domini*. A Feast of St. Joseph was finally established in 1481. While images of Joseph's "housekeeping" in the drama and visual arts may have genuine theological underpinnings, a "hidden" symbolism, as some recent scholars suggest (Sheila Schwartz particularly) it is also obvious that the potential for low comedy was too strong to resist in this regard. Just as Noah, an important type for the Resurrection, acquired a domineering wife and had to undergo some cudgeling in the English Cycle plays, so too did the Germanic Joseph participate in the perennial comedy of the *senex*. In earlier centuries Joseph was a marginal figure, in liturgical dramas a "supporting player" only, in the visual arts usually portrayed in the classical attitude of *acedia*, cheek resting on his hand, a crutch by his side, and most often without a halo. This Joseph was the last, exhausted figure of the Old Testament, more important for his prophetic dreams than for his nurturing. But as Franciscan and Dominican influences upon devotion began to emphasize precisely the *physicality* of Joseph's connection to his foster Son and to valorize him for this, the "popular" imagination began to render him something of a loveable clown. His beard became longer and whiter, his actions more doddering and foolish. In the "Troubles about Mary" plays, as I have written elsewhere, he could display the misplaced and impotent

“comic” rage of the “Divine Cuckold.” In the Bethlehem stable he displays more of the “Holy Fool,” for which “porridge-cooking” was emblematic in the German-speaking area.

With the *Breikoche* we encounter a curious anomaly, however, for while the motif is touched upon it is not directly enacted in any of the surviving six pre-Reformation *Weihnachtsspiele* (see Addendum A). Joseph, apparently, does not cook on stage in actual “medieval” German Christmas plays. On the other hand, *Breikoche Iosef* is found frequently in the visual arts, with a geographical concentration in Central Europe, and a temporal concentration from the late fourteenth to late fifteenth centuries -- precisely the timeframe for the flourishing of sacred drama in the vernacular. These images of the *Breikoche* can be found in a variety of media: in painted altar panels particularly, but also in polychrome sculpture, manuscript illuminations, tapestries, colored woodcuts, and even oven tiles (see Addendum B). Their commonness, together with the near absence of the motif in the surviving medieval play texts, would suggest two possible hypotheses for the motif’s later availability to sixteenth-century *Schwankliteratur* and for its occurrence in post-Reformation plays and more recent *Volksschauspiele*:

- a.) The *Breikoche* was initially a convention of the visual arts and so passed over into “popular culture,” including later plays.
- b.) The *Breikoche* was part of a broader visual culture which must have included plays, now lost, or at least quasi dramatic presentations (à la Wickram) of a “popular” rather than an “elite” nature, that informed both the visual arts and later drama.

Needless to say, the first hypothesis, while tidier in some respects, is too reductionist, and ultimately less productive. The Eck reference clearly implies an earlier performance tradition and we do have instances of the *Breikoche* in Christmas plays contemporaneous with Wickram’s *Schwank*. The second hypothesis is messier and

inevitably leads us into rather speculative procedures. Nevertheless this view seems the far more likely. The remainder of this paper will examine the *Breikoche* motif in post-Reformation Christmas plays and more recent folk dramas, and then survey the same motif in the late medieval visual arts hoping to reconstruct a “lost” tradition of grotesque comic performance, with the important *Hessisches Weihnachtspiel* as our primary medieval reference.

The *Breikoche* motif has two specific loci, both in dramatic time and in visual space. Joseph either cooks porridge after the Birth and before the entrance of the Shepherds, or his porridge cooking is somewhat grotesquely contrasted with the Adoration of the Kings and their proffer of precious gifts.

In the early seventeenth century *Dialogvs in Epiphania* by Johannes Geiger the later form of *Breikoche* is in evidence. Joseph returns to the stable just before the entrance of the Three Kings with all the fixings, borrowed from the neighbors, for a good pot of mush:

*Nun Maria, du heilige Matron  
Wie ghabst du dich sambt deinem Sohn?  
Ich bin schier zlang gebliben auss,  
Bin gwesen da im nechsten Haus,  
Da gab man mir hie dise sachen.  
Ietz kennen wir schon ein Köchlein machen,  
Wir haben Milch, Meel und anders mehr,  
Die wir ietzundt bederffen sehr.*

ll. 119-126.

[Now Mary, you holy matron,/what do you have then to give  
your Son?/I've been a rather long time away/I was at the nearby  
house/They gave me these things here/Now we can soon make  
a porridge/We have milk, meal and other things more/that we  
really need now.]

He returns to the subject some lines later:

*Das Kindlein wirt schier hungerring sein,  
Muss ihm bald kochen ein Köchlein;*

[The child must be very hungry. I've got to cook him  
some porridge soon.]

ll. 199-200. (Geiger,

But this Joseph apparently never does any actual cooking on stage.

A somewhat fuller realization of the motif occurs in the 1568 *Comedie von der freudenreichen geburt Jesu Chrisit* by Benjamin Edelpöck, *Trabant* to the Hapsburg Archduke. Mary requests, *Joseph, gee! Koch ein müeselein* (l. 492) and Joseph willingly complies but grumbles a bit that he is not used to cooking under such constraints and that, while the meal is fine, the milk has gone off (*Der griess ist schon und ziemlich guet; aber die milch mir grinnen thuet*. ll.503-04). (Weinhold 214-15). While Edelpöck includes no specific stage directions it is not impossible that Joseph's long speech was underscored by props and that he engaged in some stage cooking during the long passage involving the Shepherds that follows. Joseph, characterizing himself as an *armer koch und knecht*, offers to whip up *ain wenig küchlein* for the Three Kings some 1500 lines later (ll.1760-70), implying that he has been toiling over the fire throughout the middle of the play.

From the eastern edge of the German-speaking area we find evidence of the *Breikocher* in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century folk plays. These are especially interesting since they preserve, as most isolated "language pockets" do, very conservative features. Arguably they have medieval roots. Before the entrance of the Shepherds in the *Christkindl-Hirtenspiel* from Grotitsch (from the area of



Neutitschein/Kuhländen in “Galizien,” now Ukraine) Mary produces from “under her veil a little crib with the Baby Jesus and places it before Joseph on the table and sings:

Maria: *Ach Josef, liebster Josef mein,  
Komm und wieg mir's Kindlein ein.*

Josef: *Soll ich demm schon wieder wiegen,  
kann ja kaum den Buckel biegen.  
Hullei - - hullei.*

(Alexy, Karasek & Lanz, ii, 209).

This is the traditional invitation for Joseph to rock the cradle going back to the pre-Reformation Christmas plays, as in the *Hessisches Weihnachtspiel* discussed below. Joseph's complaint, that he can “hardly bend his back,” as well as his joyful nonsense syllables, are common to many of these folk plays, but in this example he also produces “a bowl of grits from under his cloak and stirs it vigorously” (*Er holt unter dem Mantel einem Napf mit Griesbrei hervor, in dem er fest rührt*) in a bit of gratuitous comic action. At the same moment in a folk play from Neutitschein itself (west of Trembowla), Mary continues:

Maria: *Josef, liebster Josef mein,  
Koch dem Kind ein Kaschabrei!* [buckwheat mush]

Josef: (holt den Topf unter seinem Mantel vor, rührt den Brei und schimpft leise vor sich hin)

*Kaschabrei, rihr'n, Kindla wieg'n,  
Kann mei' steif'n Finger kuam beig'n!  
Riehre, riehre Kaschabrei,  
Gib a Stickl Zucker nei'!*

[Joseph takes out a pot from under his cloak, stirs the pap and grumbles under his breath as he faces out: “Stir the buckwheat mush, rock the child – I can hardly bend my stiff fingers – stir, stir buckwheat mush, put a bit of sugar in it.”]

(Karasek & Lanz, 96-97).

This is a Joseph, crotchety and a bit addled (he is dressed, as is common in these folk plays, in a fur hat and long beard made of flax), fully consistent with the *Breikoche* image we shall examine in the fifteenth-century visual arts.

The mid-eighteenth century *Geistliches Gespiel* from the Vordernberg area of Obersteiermark expands on the crotchety, complaining Joseph:

Maria *Schlag auf ein kleines Feuerlein  
Und mach dem Kind ein Kochelein.*

Joseph. *Ja, ja Maria, wol alsbald.  
Husch husch, wie ist mir so bitter kalt!  
Wir haben gar wenig Mel und Griess.  
Wenn uns doch Gott nit gar verliess!*

Maria. *Ich sorg mich nicht, o Joseph mein;  
Ich hoff Gott wirts mir schicken ein.*

Joseph kert den Koch um und spricht:  
*Mein Maria, bin denn gar nichts wert?  
han dem Kind sein Koch umkert.*

Maria. *O mein Joseph bist gar so grob,  
jetzt hat mein Kind noch keinen Koch.*

Joseph. *Nimm hin, gib ihm das Müeselein;  
ich glaub das Kind wird hungrig sein.*

[Strike up a little fire and make the child a little pap/Yes, yes,  
Mary, right away. Whoosh, whoosh, I feel the bitter cold! We have  
so little meal and grits. If God doesn't completely abandon us!/  
I don't trouble myself, O my Joseph; I trust God will send me some./  
*Joseph stirs the pap and says:* Mary mine, am I not worth anything,  
has the Child his porridge unstirred?/O my Joseph you are so coarse,  
my Child doesn't have any porridge yet./Take it, give him the pap; I  
think the Child should be hungry.]

(Weinhold, 151-52).

Despite this moment of mutual annoyance (few Marys describe their spouses as *grob*)  
the scene quickly resolves in a lullaby as attention shifts to the Shepherds on their  
hillside.

We might mention a few other indirect examples from these “far eastern”  
*Volksschauspiele*. In the play of the nearby Galizian village of Sedlnitz the motif is  
recalled in the traditional question-and-answer dialogue between Mary and Joseph:

Maria: *Josef, liebster Josef mein,  
Was hat das Kind für ein Papperlein?*

Josef: *Griesse soll die Pappe sein!*  
[Joseph, my dearest Joseph/what does the Child  
have for a little pap?/Grits shall be his pap.]

(Alexy, Karasek & Lanz, ii, 217).

Even the Kings from a *Dreikönigssingen* might refer back to the motif as in this example from Braunau in northeast Bohemia:

*Als wir oben am Berge weren,  
Da stand Maria und Josef.  
Josef macht ein Feurlein  
Und kocht dem Kind ein Breielein.  
Josef zog sein Hemdlein aus  
Und macht dem Kind ein Windlein draus*

[While we were up in the mountains, there were Mary and Joseph. Joseph made a little fire and cooked for the Child a little pap. Joseph took his shirt off and made from it a diaper for the Child.]

(Alexy, Karasek & Lanz, ii, 287).

We have the same combination of porridge-cooking and cutting up of undergarments that we saw in the *Gartengesellschaft* anecdote.

Turning to the *Breikocher* in the visual arts, the earliest example seems to be a marginal illumination in a Flemish Antiphonal from the beginning of the fourteenth century. Flemish and German artists spread the motif throughout Central Europe beginning in the late fourteenth century. Due to their respective influences the motif can be found as far afield as Spain and Poland. The fifteenth century, and particularly its middle decades, represents the heyday of the *Breikocher*. The following slides will give some idea of the range of the motif and related images:

1. & 2 A typical “brooding” Joseph of earlier centuries Antiphonal of St. Peter’s, Salzburg, c. 1160). Not only is he turned away from the scene, but he does not participate in any way in bathing the Christ Child. The same , from c. 1400 (a Salzburg Master) even though this Joseph has a halo.

3. Joseph participating now in child-care, here drying linen in an altar panel c. 1420 of the Oberrheinische Schule (Kunstmuseum, Basel).

4. Joseph tending a fire preparatory to cooking porridge, c. 1418 (Niedersächsische Landesgalerie, Hannover). Notice the skillet and receptacles for milk and meal. While Joseph's physical posture is rather clumsy (pumping the bellows while warming his foot at the same time) he appears rather dignified.

He does not merit a halo, however (Mellinkoff, )

5. Likewise this Joseph from an early 16<sup>th</sup> cent. mural (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg) is not grotesquely conceived, although his bellows pumping may be overdone—those flames are rather large. The bellows became, in the sixteenth century, a major emblem of Folly and these Josephs may not be entirely “straight men” in their respective Nativity scenes.

6. This *Breikocher* worked into the corner of this Epiphany from the Ortenberger Altar, c. 1415 is certainly meant to be “marginal,” and hence comic. He is even smaller in size than the servant of the Middle-aged King on the right.

7. In this relief from Erfurt Cathedral, c. 1470 Joseph appears enthusiastic in his caregiving, but notice the braying ass directly behind him. Images of the *Breikocher*, even essentially positive ones, cannot escape the trappings of Folly.

8. The “down on all fours” position of Joseph, as well as his blowing directly on the fire in this Nativity by Konrad von Soest may not be deliberately “demeaning” as Mellinkoff suggests, but they certainly pulls Joseph in the direction of “comic realism.” This is a fairly early example, moreover, the Bad Wildungen Altar dated 1403. This is a *Breikocher Josef*, I would suggest, fully in the dramatic tradition.

9. & 10. I conclude this brief excursus in the visual arts with two images which I feel exemplify the range of attitudes and thus of thematic employment of the aged Joseph as nurturer of the Christ Child. On the more “demeaning” side, relying on the satire of old age, is this page from a 15<sup>th</sup> cent. French Book of Hours where a rather perplexed Joseph minds the Baby while Mary catches up on her reading. And this more clearly joyous image of late fatherhood from the pencil of the Housebook Master, c. 1480.

Much of what we have seen in the visual record is evident in the *Weihnachtsspiele*, both early and late. In Edelpöck’s 1568 Christmas play, contemporaneous with our Wickram tale, Joseph performs archetypal clown routines. Sent to fetch light for the Bethlehem stable he complains of the cold and his runny nose. He blows upon embers like Konrad von Soest’s Joseph:

*Indem plast er ain dreimal, und es will nit pald brinnen* (in blows in them three times and it[the taper] does not immediately light). He prays, *Nun prinn, in Gottes namen prinn* and finally gets it lit. But in turning about and rushing off his flame goes out, and Joseph slams his hand to his head (*Do er hat anzunt, kert er sich umb, lauft fort; so erlischt im das leicht; da fert er mit der hand in kopf*). He tries again, gets it lit, turns around and is almost back to Mary when he sneezes on the flame extinguishing it (*und wann er schier hinzue kumbt, so schneuzt er im über das liecht und lescht wider auss*).

*Pfuy dich aller rozigen nasen!*

*Mit meim schneuzn hab ichs liecht abblasn.*

[Plague on all snotty noses! I’ve blown out the  
light with my sneeze.]

(Weinhold, 211-12)

Following the venerable “rule of three” Joseph finally gets his lantern lit and can proceed to veneration of the new born Child. This is obviously low comedy for its own sake.

It is hard to imagine this passage without a long comic tradition of Joseph performance behind it. Indeed, if we turn to the mid fifteenth century *Hessische Weihnachtsspiel*, we find a rather complete repertory of comic routines. Joseph begins and ends the play as a less than venerable figure. He is most anxious to get away from the pregnant Mary at the opening of the play repeating three variations of the line *ich wil mich balde von hynne machen* (l. 66), later describing his own behavior as *torlich* (crazy). At the end of the play, at the start of the Flight into Egypt, Joseph seems preoccupied with procuring beer. Mary has a veil and Joseph himself a hat that they can pawn for brew. His last lines address the audience directly in a carnivalesque invitation to join him:

*du host eyn schleier, sso han ich eyn hute,  
dy wollen wir nach bier senden  
und wollen das beth lossen wendin!  
nu woluff unnd volge mir;  
mir woln geen zu dem guden bier!*

ll. 866-70.

In between these two moments Joseph engages in what amounts to an independent farce involving the maids of the nearby inn. This passage begins with a long lament by Joseph over the lack of resources -- they have no eggs nor money to buy any; neither game nor fish; no bread, butter or lard; no pots and pans, sheets or blankets. Joseph sacrifices his threadbare, hole-filled stockings to swaddle the Child, a motif that is often bound up with the *Breikocher*:

*hie sint zwo alt hossen  
der kunde ich nij gelossen!  
dy sint nicht gar glantz  
unnd sint by den lucheren gantz:  
anderss habe ich nicht mer!  
reich mir das kint her:*

*ich wel es legin in wiege und wel im singen:*

*“susse, liebe ninne”*

(ll. 600-07)

Evidently barelegged and an object of some scorn, Joseph proceeds to the inn to beg and there encounters the maid Hillegart who insults him as an “old goat-beard” (*alder zegenbart*). He requests that she *mach dem kinde eyn brij* and Hillegart agrees, but on not finding her cooking utensils she blames her fellow servant Gutte and a loud argument ensues. Joseph acts as peacemaker as the two kitchen maids come to blows on stage. The *Breikocher* is only glanced at here but it is obvious that we are dealing with a well understood traditional motif (in the Erlauer I play, the female servant of the Holy Family has packed similar utensils for porridge-cooking). Eventually the belligerent Hillegart and Gutte, as well as their respective landlords, are folded into the same cradle-rocking, the “leaping about the crib” (*um die weige springen*) which had earlier served as the liturgical core of the play.

It is clear that Joseph for all his boorishness and comic ineptitude serves as the positive pole of comic energy in the play as opposed to Lucifer and his minions in the *diablerie*, which occurs immediately after this knockabout interlude. Joseph is, moreover, our bridge to the act of joyous worship within the drama. From lines 140 to 345 (nearly a quarter of this 900-verse play) the Nativity narrative is interrupted by an elaborate polyphonic performance centered on the cradle-rocking ceremony. Joseph brings on the necessary prop at l. 150 and sings, in dialogue with Maria, the still popular Christmas carol, *Ioseph, lieber newe mien,/hilff mir wigen dass kindelin*. With his servant Seelenfro (Happysoul), Joseph directly calls on the audience to witness and participate — *Schawet, er kinder! Mag das nicht gesyn Emanuel?* (l. 183).— and defines the joyous, if perhaps clumsy, activity of *meilichen singen/und gar frolich umb die wigen springen!* (singing like Maytide and right joyfully leaping about the cradle, ll. 169-70), rendered in the Latin rubric: *Et sic servus et Ioseph corisant per cunabulum cantando*. Joseph’s capers segue into a multi-layered musical performance featuring an angelic choir and individual voices of cantors and *puellae* interacting with Maria. Another voice is that of the Child himself who sings responses on three occasions (*Eya,*



*eya! virgo deum genuit...*). That most improbable detail in the Wickram tale, the “large choirboy” assigned to the cradle, thus has a source in actual practice.

*Breikocher Josef* and the related motifs are thus rather complex expressions in both drama and the visual arts, neither simple negative satire of the Old Law nor purely carnivalesque release, but something in between. While denigrating or demeaning the image of the Biblical character, more Homer Simpson than dignified Patriarch, these expressions are not necessarily in binary opposition to the newly sanctified Joseph of the late medieval theologians. With a more complex view of the workings of “popular culture” than a simple “popular” vs. “elite” dichotomy would suggest, they could be viewed, rather, as essentially *complementary*, bringing Joseph into the Nativity scene as an active, if all too human participant; as, briefly, the sacred clown of the Incarnation.

#### **Addendum A: Medieval and Post-Reformation German Christmas Plays** (after Bergmann and Bencker):

##### Pre-Reformation

- 1.) St. Galler Weihnachtsspiel — no “comic” Joseph
- 2.) Erlauer Weihnachtsspiel I (Nativity fragment)  
-- no “comic” Joseph
- 3.) Erlauer Weihnachtsspiel II (Three Kings Play)
- 4.) Hessisches (Kasseler) Weihnachtsspiel, c. 1490 —a decidedly “comic” Joseph.
- 5.) Tyroler (Sterzinger) Weihnachtsspiel, c. 1511 — derived from the Hessisches Weihnachtsspiel
- 6.) Schwäbisches Weihnachtsspiel, c. 1435 — no “comic” Joseph

##### Post-Reformation

- 7.) Chnustin, Weihnachtsspiel
- 8.) Christoph Lasius, Weihnachtsspiel
- 9.) Johann Leon, Weihnachtsspiel
- 10.) Pondo, Weihnachtsspiel

- 11.) 1568 Benjamin Edelpöck, *Comedie von der freudenreichen geburt Jesu Christi*
- 12.) c. 1606 Johannes Geiger, *Dialogus in Epiphania*
- 13.) 1612 Greifswalder Weihnachtsspiel

## **Addendum B: Inventory of *Breikocher Josef* and Related Subjects in the Visual Arts:**

### **Joseph cooking porridge** (beside Mary & Child in birthing bed):

- early 14<sup>th</sup> cent. Marginal illumination. Flemish Antiphonal (Grammar School, Corio, Australia).
- c. 1360 Wall painting. Cloister of the Emmaus monastery, Prague – J. with long whitebeard and mouth agape.
- c. 1375 Panel painting. Workshop of Master Bertram, Netzer Altar, Cistercian Abbey, Netze/Waldeck (Hamburg).
- 1403 Panel painting. Konrad von Soest, Bad Wildungen Altar -- J. crouching on the ground blowing on a fire on which a skillet is set **[slide]**
- c. 1410 Colored woodcut. Bohemian Master (Albertina, Vienna).
- c. 1412 Panel painting. Middlerhenish School from Friedberg (Hessen) (Catharijnenconvent, Utrecht) – J.'s left foot is bare perhaps suggesting the hose motif below.
- c. 1415 Panel painting. Master of the Frödenberger Altar, Frödenberg.
- 1435 Panel painting. High Altar, Jacobikirche, Lübeck (Landesmuseum, Schwerin).
- c. 1440-50 MS illumination Bedford Master, Book of Hours (J. Paul Getty Musuem, Los Angeles) – J. over iron pot at end of a long crane in full fireplace.

c. 1453. Wall painting. Crngrob, Slovenia.

c. 1465 Panel painting. Steiermark Master (Stiftsgalerie, St. Lambrecht).

c. 1470 Polychrome relief sculpture. Erfurt Cathedral -- braying ass behind J

[slide]

c. 1480 Wall painting. Vault of Tudse Church, Denmark.

15thc. Panel painting. Master of St. Sigmund (Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne).

15<sup>th</sup> cent. Panel painting. Small Friedburger Altar (Landesmuseum, Darmstadt).

15thc. Panel painting. Landesmuseum, Graz.

15thc. Panel painting.

15thc. Panel painting.

15thc. Panel painting.

15<sup>th</sup> cent. MS. illumination. Book of Hours (Bibliothèque de la Ville, Rouen, MS 3024, fol. 40v) -- J. with tongs in left hand, warming his right foot.

15<sup>th</sup> cent. Alabaster reredo (English, Nottingham). Genissac (Gironde).

**Joseph cooking porridge** (in a corner of an Epiphany scene):

c. 1415 Panel painting. Ortenberger Altar (Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt) -- diminutive J. cooking in lower right corner.

Wall painting. Crypt of Saint-Bonnet-le-Chateau - - J. stirring large pot to far left of Adoration

15thc. Panel painting. Alte Pinakothek, Munich – J. in lower right corner.

15thc. Panel painting. Schloss Tirol Altar (Landesmuseum, Innsbruck) – J. deep

in shadows of the stable, upper right.

### **Joseph tending a fire:**

c. 1390 Panel painting. School of Paris, Small Bargello Diptych (Museo Nazionale, Florence) – J. in right corner of Epiphany scene warming naked foot over pan of coals; he distractedly tips his hat echoing the Kings doffing their crowns.

1418 Panel painting. Niedersächsische Landesgalerie, Hannover -- J. puffing small pan of coals with bellows while warming his right foot, various cooking utensils nearby. [slide]

early 16<sup>th</sup> cent. Wall painting. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg --J. raising high flames with bellows to warm naked Christ Child. **[slide]**

early 16<sup>th</sup> cent. Bruges Master, Adoration of the Magi (Groeningemuseum, Bruges) – J. deep in stable behind Mary tending fire with bellows.

### **Joseph drying linen by fire:**

c. 1390 Manuscript illumination. Lombard (Parma, Bibl. Palatina, pal. 56) – while midwife bathes Child.

c. 1415-20 MS. Illumination. Master of the Morgan Infancy Cycle, Netherlandish Book of Hours.

c. 1420 Panel painting. Oberrheinische Schule (Kunstmuseum, Basel). **[slide]**

c. 1430 Panel painting. Miguel Alcaniz, Valencia (Philadelphia Museum of Art), fork-bearded J. in foreground

n

c. 1450 Painted limestone sculpture. Burgundian (Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY)

c. 1485 MS. illumination. Jean Poyet, Bricconnet Hours -- J. warms Child's

shirt over a brazier mounted on an elaborate marble pedestal.

15<sup>th</sup> c. MS. illumination. Book of Hours (Bibliothèque Universitaire, Liège, MS. 35, fol.49v).

**Joseph cutting up his hose for swaddling:**

c. 1400 Panel painting. Rhein-Maas-Gebiet (Museum Mayer van der Bergh, Antwerp).

early 15<sup>th</sup> cent. Panel painting. Master of the Sterzinger Altar (Frauenkirche, Sterzing).

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[[In a fourteenth century Irish carol, for example, the Breikocher motif joins with the wonder-working of the Child Jesus. When Joseph produces a small kettle from under

his cloak, the Child throws in snow, which becomes flour, ice which becomes sugar, and water drops which become milk. When Joseph carves a rough wooden spoon it turns to ivory studded with diamonds (Killen, 73).]]

The starting point for this paper is a comic tale recounted by Georg Wickram in *Das Rollwagenbuchlin* (1555). It tells how, in a parish performance, “a Christ-child and a Joseph, who had cooked up some pap for him, slugged each other in the church.” The tale reflects post-Reformation (both Protestant and Counter-Reformation Catholic) unease with grotesque comic elements in the late medieval German Nativity plays, here specifically the senile image of “pap-cooker Joseph.” The paper will survey this unusual comic construct in both German drama (particularly the *Hessische Weihnachtspiel*) and in contemporaneous visual arts, and proceed to discuss its function in the larger context of participatory rituals such as the “cradle-rocking” ceremony in the vernacular celebration of Christmas.

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