



Domestic Heroes: Saint Nicholas and the Catholic Family Father in the Nineteenth Century

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This article focuses on Saint Nicholas, a “hero of the hearth”. Retracing the narratives and imagery on Nicholas in the Catholic region of Flanders from the end of the eighteenth until the beginning of the twentieth century, the Saint is brought forward as a romance-related patron, a stern authoritarian figure and a sentimental grandfather. Rather than simply restating researchers’ observations on the “sentimentalization” of Saint Nicholas throughout the last two centuries, the article argues that Nicholas can be seen as an icon of Catholic domestic masculinity and as an ongoing support to paternal authority. The construction of Saint Nicholas by folklorists and artists as well as teachers, priests and parents is analyzed with particular attention to the interaction between the Saint and the nineteenth century pater familias. Saint Nick, it turns out, faithfully followed the path Catholic grandfathers had laid out towards a construction of old age and masculinity that legitimated and supported paternal authority, all while weaving emotion and sentimentality into a “manly” identity.

Suddenly, as if on its own, the door opens widely: the holy man “in his Sunday best,” with mitre and crosier, stately enters; the headmistress follows with two little angels who carry, besides a basket full of goodies in the middle, a book with locks on the one side and a rod on the other. (Rudolfsz, 1868, p. 548)¹

In 1868, this scene is described in a Belgian teachers’ journal as an old, disappearing custom in schools. The “stateliness” and purity of the tradition surrounding Saint Nicholas, so the author stated, were in decline in the “unchildly” times of the late nineteenth century and Saint Nicholas was slowly disappearing from children’s lives.

He could not have been more wrong. It is true that the ritual of Saint Nicholas’ Day has gone on changing ever since: the Saint no longer delivers sermons to children, he stopped citing the bible and—as many of the quoted authors’ successors have lamented—became “commercial”. Nevertheless, Saint Nicholas remains, especially in the southern Low Countries, one of (if not *the*) most important and best-known “Catholic” figure in children’s lives. The Saint still visits numerous schools, appearing in

his Episcopal garb and flanked by playful figures (no white angels but, since the turn of the century, black Moors²). The night before the Saint's visit, children still sing the songs that originated in the nineteenth century, hoping that Nicholas will bring them candy and toys, and parents still make great efforts to keep Saint Nicholas alive and hidden from children's eyes.

It is therefore surprising that so little has been written on the cultural history of this tradition. Apart from a handful of studies on the protestant, Northern Low Countries (Van Leer, 1995), the history of Saint Nicholas has remained in the hands of various folklorists.³ Looking for the "origin" of the Saint, these studies have uncovered much of the changing habits and practices regarding Nicholas and along the way, have constructed their own Saint Nicholas story. The older folklorist work, especially, forms a chronicle of the invention of Saint Nicholas' tradition. The first "scientific" work on Nicholas started to appear in the 1830s. From the middle-ages onward, Saint Nicholas of Myra / Bari⁴ had been venerated and celebrated as the patron saint of sailors, merchants, students and many others, but in the nineteenth century the holy bishop started to act as the ultimate children's friend. He became (and remains to be) one of the most popular religious figures appearing in households of the Low Countries. In the Netherlands, he turned into a vehicle of middle-class domesticity and family values as he offered an unambiguous model of child-rearing for the entire nation (Van Leer, 1995, p. 67). Simultaneously, various folklorists started to publish on the origins of Saint Nicholas and the development of the traditions accompanying the yearly visitor.⁵ Authors such as Eelco Verwijs and Joseph Schrijnen locked many newly invented "traditions" into a perceived national past,⁶ thus engaging in the activity of creating a powerful cultural symbol of Dutch society.

For the American Santa Claus, a parallel story can be told. His feast— and especially the "physical" image of Santa—became part of popular practice at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But his middle-class antiquarian inventors immediately propelled him into public memory, thus creating the illusion that Saint Nicholas had traveled from Holland to New Amsterdam with the first migrants (Nissenbaum, 1997, p. 49). In America, too, the child-loving bringer of sweets and gifts went on to act as a quintessentially domestic "Victorian" sentimental symbol of family structures, much in the way that Father Christmas came to embody British family values (Tosh, 1999, p. 146). Significantly, all these mysterious guests lose much—if not all—of their religious connotations throughout the nineteenth century. Santa was, in the words of Stephen Nissenbaum, "defrocked" in the course of the nineteenth century (1997, p. 78). Father Christmas lost his reputation as a stern punisher and his patriarchal authority to replace it with sentimental, new paternal care. Saint Nicholas, meanwhile, turned into a secular *Weihnachtsman* in Germany. In Holland, the bishop received civil and modern characteristics. From *Sint Nicolaas* he turned into *Sint Heer Klaas* ('Sir' Klaas), which later became *Sinterklaas*⁷ (Van Leer, 1995, p. 66).

Protestantism and *Bürgerlichkeit*, so it seems, were crucial to Saint Nick and the likes. The question remains if the figure of a bishop could so easily be "defrocked" and reframed as a symbol of domesticity, modernity and consumption in a Catholic region. Flanders possibly presents a specific case of bourgeois domesticity and—thus—of a specific reflection thereof in the figure of the children's favorite saint.⁸ An analysis of the image of the Saint and especially the relation between him and the families in which he performed his role can therefore not only add the "confessional" perspective to existing

interpretations of *Sinterklaas/ Santa Claus*, but also—more importantly—start to sketch the contours of a “Catholic” version of nineteenth century middle-class domesticity. So far, there is no research tradition on the Flemish middle-classes matching the German, French and English canon on *Bürgerlichkeit*, *bourgeoisie* or Victorianism.⁹ As a consequence, the question of domesticity has been largely disregarded. In this paper I will, therefore, aim to relate my questions on Saint Nicholas’ function as a model of behavior and his place in the Flemish family not only to constructions of masculinity but also to the construction of domesticity in a Catholic region of nineteenth-century Western Europe.¹⁰

Gathering Round the Hearth

The question of domesticity is of particular interest, since Saint Nick guides us necessarily to the center of the nineteenth century home: the fireplace. As the Saint’s feast took place in the midst of winter, he visited families at a time when they would spend their evening huddled round the stove,¹¹ a situation that was heavily romanticized in the second half of the century: “O, how gay and attractive was the Flemish hearth”, the December issue of *Belgische illustratie* recounted in 1868, “The lamp on the table was lighting a whole ring of elderly and youths. The nodding grandfather was sitting there, like the little boy of only a few months old on his mother’s lap.”¹² Small children, too, were reminded of the importance of the family fireplace. A picture in a schoolbook for beginning readers showed how “Sweet Peter” kneels in front of the fireplace in search of goodies (see illustration 3). Multiple poems vividly narrated how children hurried to the fireplace on the morning of December 6, to see if Nicholas had filled their shoes with toys and candy.¹³ The shoes were reminiscent of the old Christian legends surrounding the Saint; in several versions, the story was told that Saint Nicholas had helped an old poor shoemaker by throwing three purses with gold through an open window. The next day, the shoemaker found the purses in some unfinished shoes, and although he had not seen his nightly visitor, he immediately came to the conclusion that it had to have been Nicholas.¹⁴

The centrality of domesticity to Nicholas’ visits is perhaps best exemplified through a counter image. In 1858, Jan Van Beers wrote a tear-jerking poem he called “Sint Niklaas” (Van Beers, 1859, p. 11). The poem is not so much a “popular” text, directed at children, but rather a part of romantic “high” literature. It contains vivid depictions of the sensibilities of the nineteenth century Flemish bourgeoisie. In 26 verses, the poem tells the story of a poor young girl and her widowed mother on the night of December 5. Appealing to the middle-class sentimental meaning attached to the hearth, the first line goes “No light, no sparkle scintillated in the low, musty little room”.¹⁵ The cold hearth immediately places the story outside the ideal, cozy domestic setting in which Saint Nicholas normally appeared. And indeed, when “little Mary” (*klein Mieken*) asks her mother if she, “who had behaved so well” should not put her shoe in the corner in order to receive presents, the widow uses the empty fireplace to explain to her daughter why the Saint will not visit her:

Oh, Mary, yes certainly!
You were always good, but know—the Saint
Only comes in through chimneys,
In which a fire burnt by day.¹⁶

The poem firmly locks Saint Nick in a middle-class setting, uttering a rather typical critique of social injustice,¹⁷ but also refers to the ubiquity of the Saint. Although *klein Mieken* has never received any presents or candy, she is well aware of Nicholas' upcoming visit and the ritual surrounding it. Moreover, both mother and daughter express feelings and show a behavior that would be fitting for their bourgeois counterparts. The mother acts as her child's confidant, an ideal "loving" mother¹⁸; not only does she confirm her daughter's good behavior, she also "warm's Mary's cold feet in both her hands", carries the girl to bed and kisses her goodnight and then "weeps for a long time", not over her own misfortune, but over her daughter's upcoming disappointment. *Mieken*, on her part, acts as the ideal innocent child. Sitting on her mother's lap, she enthusiastically talks about toys and candy and—above all—of her blind belief in the Saint's goodness.

The two women—who perfectly fit the mould of what the nineteenth century middle-class believed to be "natural" femininity—are not the cause of the lack of warm domesticity in this poem. What is lacking is a head of the household. A father would not only have been able to provide for the family, but would also have constituted a bridge to the outer world where "dolls with satin clothes (...) sugar and gingerbread, and marzipan ships" were available. The absence of a father not only deprived *Mieken* and her mother of the financial possibility to create domesticity, but also broke the fine balance of love and authority in which Saint Nicholas operated. Without a domestic hero waiting at the hearth, his heavenly counterpart could not come down the chimney.

Yet, Saint Nicholas visited *Mieken* after all. Looking through a crack in the roof, the little girl sees the stars and then suddenly hears heavenly voices when angels come down, carrying baskets full of toys and sweets. In the midst of them floats a man:

He wore a golden cloak;
His beard sparkled like the whitest of silver;
And with all his angels, he descended,
Coming ever closer to the earth!¹⁹

The solemn old man whispers in the girl's ear, asking her to join him and *Mieken* immediately trusts the figure that seems to come straight from heaven. When the widow awakes the next morning, she finds her daughter dead.

The staging of Saint Nicholas as a personification of death is rare, but also refers to a broader trope of a dreadful Saint Nicholas. Until well into the nineteenth century, Nicholas not only appeared as a children's friend, but also as a stern punisher of children, as a martial saint and as a sexualized figure. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the shoemaker's legend explained that the three purses offered by Nicholas were to be the man's daughters' dowry so as to save them from prostitution. The legend was thus at the basis of a far more 'adult' way of celebrating the Saint, framing him as a matchmaker. Young women would pray Nicholas to send them a lover, and young men offered gingerbread *Klazen* to their sweethearts to declare their love.²⁰ The carnival-like festivities surrounding this "sexualized" Saint Nicholas (such as balls, pub-crawls, and gatherings at the local baker) had disappeared in the course of the eighteenth century, and throughout the nineteenth century Nicholas directed himself exclusively to (young) children (Van Leer, 1995). Nevertheless, it remained clear that the

Saint was not an overall sweet or jolly man. In 1848, for example, the poet Prudens Van Duyse described him as “the one, who exchanged the sword for the crosier” and as a “knight of the poor” (Van Duyse, 1848, p. 134).²¹

The imagery of the Saint could also be rather “martial”. Early (eighteenth century) Dutch images of Nicholas on cheap prints for children were often revivals of old woodcuts, depicting kings and knights, and the general style of these pictures was maintained in other prints of the Saint (Van Veen, 1976, p. 580). A mid-nineteenth century image printed in Turnhout shows Nicholas as if in an equestrian statue (on a very “active” horse, lifting one leg). He sports a long but dark beard, and his stature is one of forceful lead, rather than being carried by the horse.²² (*Illustration 4*). In the text accompanying the image, the Saint is called a bishop and a children’s friend, a holy man, the patron Saint of Amsterdam and as riding a “courageous” horse.²³ Similarly, in the poems, songs and stories directed at primary school children, Nicholas’ mobility (by virtue of his horse) appears as the Saint’s most important characteristic, rather than his physical appearance or his age.

The lack of “physical” or visual descriptions or images of the saint in the early nineteenth century (and even up to the beginning of the twentieth century) is partly due to the way in which the practice of gift-giving through Nicholas was organized. The Saint was presented to children as a mysterious figure, traveling through the night, and Nicholas remaining invisible was crucial to the atmosphere of excitement and anticipation parents attempted to incite in their children (Hamlin, 2003). In the Netherlands, where Protestantism was the dominant denomination, depicting the Saint was prohibited in the beginning of the nineteenth century, a prohibition that was avoided by various printers by ‘adopting’ other images to go with texts about Saint Nicholas (martial pictures of sixteenth century monarchs were used, but images of “civil”, wealthy gentlemen served just as well) (Booy, 2003, p. 30). In Flanders, Nicholas was just as invisible as in the Netherlands when dropping gifts, but in this Catholic region, the depiction of the Saint was not prohibited and the population could draw on their experience in identifying Saints through their attributes. Hence, he appears in songs and poems “Seated on a snow-white horse, with golden saddle and reigns” (Van Duyse, 1849, p. 6),²⁴ as “the Illustrious, with mitre and crosier” (Van Duyse, 1848, p. 133),²⁵ or he is simply addressed as “bishop”. In “Catholic” images of the Saint (printed in the Southern Low Countries), too, his mitre and crosier are prominently present, and sometimes the tub with the three rescued children is used as a tool of recognition (*Illustration 5*). Although it is hard to stake any claims, due to the small amount of sources and the difficulty to pin down exact dates for several images and songs, there does seem to be an evolution throughout the nineteenth century, in which the depiction of Saint Nicholas moves from youthful yet stern and mature to an older, more sentimental figure. But various imagery and text are likely to have interfered with each other, and much of Saint Nicholas was probably left to the children’s and parents’ imagination.

Young and Old Voices: Conversations with Saint Nicholas

If children could rarely see Saint Nicholas, they had ample opportunity to hear him. On the night of December 5, when the Saint was riding his horse on the roofs, children would hear him galloping about, knocking on doors and invisibly throwing candy in. At the end of the nineteenth century, the scary sounds of the nightly visitor were gradually

replaced by Nicholas' calming voice. Especially towards the turn of the century, that voice was mainly used as a bridge between the children and God: Nicholas was often presented as innocent children's intercessor. In 1903, *Le patriote illustré* devoted two pages to "the miracle of Saint Nicholas", in which *Gagnard* has killed and pickled three school children to steal their precious clothing (Vicaire, 1903, p. 572). Seven years later, the Saint passes his house and forces him to open the cupboard in which he has stored them. When *la gagnarde* finally opens the cupboard, the children look "as if they were sleeping". When the Saint sees them, he shows himself versed in the romanticism of the late nineteenth century, and offers a shining and highly sentimental description of the "ideal" children: "Still their beautiful smile and their curly hair! Death has not withered this flower of innocence. They sleep, as pure as on the day they were born, the dream of their lives has hardly been achieved, and on their lips still floats a last ave".²⁶

Although this is a rendition of one of the traditional legends of Saint Nicholas, the children (and not their father) are at the center of this story. The journal, directed at Catholic adults, presents the wealthy children as similar to angels: they are innocent, pure and pious. The devotion to Mary, expressed in the children's "last ave", is mirrored by Nicholas, who calls to the Virgin to resurrect the children. Like a model bourgeois grandfather, Nicholas acts as a go-between between the children and their Holy Mother, apparently governed by a "natural" (or divine?) bond of affection. Rather than aiming to convince children of the rewards of domestic obedience (as was often the case in stories in schoolbooks), this story wanted to provide a model for parental behavior. Especially fathers would have recognized the intercessor's role, as they were commonly expected to act as a bridge between the private and public world, between the safe and soft environment of the home and the stern hierarchy outside: legal, confessional and common-sense codes of behavior all stipulated that fathers were to guide, protect and govern their wives and children.²⁷ This particular interpretation of fatherhood, expressed and reinstated in stories, poems and songs for the night of December 5, granted the household's head a particular kind of authority, based on "paternal love" (which differed greatly from the "maternal love", that was equally present in Nicholas stories and poems, as we will see). For fathers, loving their children was equal to sternly controlling and—if need be—punishing them.

A poem by Prudens Van Duyse, "Children's hope fulfilled" (Van Duyse, 1849, p. 17), makes blatantly clear how the Saint Nicholas ritual reinforced the family father's authority over his wife and children. "The mother", who is the first personage in the poem, announces that the children's "joy will be heightened" as Nicholas will "reward them". After that statement, "the father" interrupts her and starts questioning his wife on their children's behavior: "Mother, have they been obedient?" he asks, "do they both deserve the Saint's visit?" He then goes on to specify various desirable acts and behavior for his son and daughter, thereby reinforcing the gender-dichotomy the poem reflects for him and his wife in the norms he sets for his children.²⁸ "Say, was Pieter sweet and kind?" the questionnaire on his son starts, "studious in school and quite, well-behaved at home and outside, did he always obey your will?" Daughter Clara is expected to be "sweet, never angry, never cross, never neglectful of needle- and knitting-work, well-behaved at home and outside". Finally, he asks after the children's piety: "did they kneel, their hands together, when they read the Our Father?" After every verse, the mother answers affirmatively to every question, as if going through a checklist. The poem reaffirms the mother's simultaneous roles as her children's

confidant and supervisor, while also endorsing the father's authority over the family without the necessity to be present in the home to actively exercise control. The question on the children's prayers is particularly telling about the position of the Catholic family father within the home: as head of the household, he is also responsible for the family's spiritual guidance, but as women were considered more apt for both child care and piety, the actual confessional "work" was left to the mother.

Domestic religiosity, so it seems, was a woman's job, and a man's responsibility. Fathers represented their family in the public world, and—as the poem suggests—also in front of Saint Nicholas.²⁹ The position of the father as an intermediary between his children and the Saint is strikingly similar to the position he holds in the civil code as the executor of state power within his household. And just as his "civil" responsibilities grant him the power to "speak" on a state level, his religious responsibilities allow him to "speak" with regard to higher spiritual authorities. The family father holds the privilege to speak to the Saint: in another poem by Van Duyse, written for his five-year-old son, the poet promises: "I will have a word with the good man then", and as a true representative of the child he will "bid him for some toys for you" (Van Duyse, 1849, p. 7).³⁰

And the communication monopoly also worked the other way around: the family father held the highest authority in speaking about Saint Nicholas, in order to inform the children of Nicholas' demands and upcoming visits. "Listen, darlings, to your father",³¹ the father in Van Duyse's poem says, confidently claiming knowledge on the Saint's criteria for granting children their sweets and toys. In Zweer's cantata, the father's knowledge is even more elaborately shown: all children gather around the fireplace and remain very still, because—as the full choir joyously announces "father will tell about Saint Nicholas".³² What follows is a baritone-solo ("father") occupying almost a full quarter of the cantata in which a version of the legend of Saint Nicholas and the poor shoemaker is told. Significantly, the center of attention in this version of the story is the poor father, rather than his children.

The shared role as "intercessor," then, gave rise to a fascinating solidarity between Nicholas and the pious father. In yet another Van Duyse poem, published in 1848, this solidarity between the Saint and the unfortunate father is presented as a form of comradeship in a martial context: the poor father of three beautiful daughters is introduced as an "old warrior", and therefore similar to the "knight of the poor, son of the church"³³ (Van Duyse, 1848, p. 134). Rather than assuming a role complementary to the one fulfilled by the parent in need (as is the case with the loving mothers who delegate the stern, authoritative element of parenthood to Nicholas), the Saint carries a part of the burden of fatherhood. By anonymously throwing money through the window, Nicholas helps to provide for the family, without exposing or blaming the father who fails to do this himself. And whereas, in the first half of the nineteenth century, a man had to prove worthy to deserve the Saint's money (by his past as a courageous warrior), at the turn of the century fatherly love and concern were the criteria to receive a helping hand.³⁴

In many ways, then, the family father and the invisible Saint joined forces in order to perform the role of the ideal Catholic man. Nevertheless, the way in which Saint Nicholas and Catholic family fathers were interrelated is not identical to the strong bonds between Father Christmas and the Victorian family father. Rather than allowing the family father to become a playful companion or (temporarily) neglect his duty of

controlling and punishing his children,³⁵ Saint Nicholas fortified the family father's authority. He did so partly by confirming children's subordination through the practice of gift-giving (Hamlin, 2003, p. 857), but even more so by providing various narratives that recreated fathers as the bridge between the domestic and the public world.

The role of mothers within this hierarchy of children–father–Nicholas–God is not always clear. Obviously, mothers were central to the tradition around the hearth, and poems and songs hardly ever failed to mention them. Yet, they seem to have had no responsibility in family life: mothers did not tell Saint Nicholas stories; they did not punish children and did not mediate between their children and Nicholas. Their main role seems to have been that of their children's accomplices. Mothers urged their children to ready their shoe or basket because they "believe that Saint Nicholas will bring something" (Segers, 1894, p. 26)³⁶ or assured them that they "need not be afraid" (Gregoir, n.d., p. 1)³⁷ of the rod. In these narratives, mothers seem to seek the support of Saint Nicholas for their educational task: more specifically, the Saint takes on the duty of exerting authority over the children, as his visit invariably results in children's promises to behave "even better next year" (Segers, 1894, p. 27).³⁸ Nevertheless, even though a mother's love was unconditional, the Saint's presents had to be earned: delegating the exercise of authority to an invisible figure gave mothers the possibility to act as their children's supervisors, without losing the sentimental, love-based bond with their children.

Despite the presence of these two authoritative intercessors, children could occasionally also converse directly with the Saint. The contact between the old bishop and his young wards was usually a matter of one-way traffic, in which children praised Nicholas, asked him for presents or thanked him after receiving them. Although devoid of all authority, children's voices were a crucial part of the celebration of Saint Nicholas. Most Saints could count on a number of songs dedicated to them that were sung in churches or processions in their honor, but only in Nicholas' case was the practice of singing such a vital part of his celebration and—therefore—such an important tool for the construction of his "identity". Every Flemish songbook for primary schools contained at least one song dedicated to the Saint and Edouard Grégoir even included one in a booklet entitled "to the Belgian nation", by which he accorded Nicholas the statute of national importance (Gregoir, n.d.). These songs, and other tunes that were not included in the school curriculum,³⁹ were apparently meant to be sung around the fireplace.

It seems plausible, however, that the songs originating in the nineteenth century resounded at least as often in classrooms as around the domestic hearth.⁴⁰ The collections and song-cycles in which Saint Nicholas poems and songs appeared, were largely school-oriented and part of a more general effort to promote (children's) singing in an educational context.⁴¹ To which extent children brought the songs home remains unclear, but the texts chosen obviously befitted the bourgeois domestic world. Texts referred to the shops filled with toys and confectionery, recounted conversations between loving mothers and obedient children, pointed out children's piety to the saint and, above all, described how on the morning of December 6 all kinds of gifts were to be found around the fireplace (Willems, n.d., p. 108; Grégoir, n.d., p. 1; Ruttens, 1893, p. 16). In most of these songs, Nicholas' capacities as children's friend and as stern bishop were both mentioned, showing that—in the Catholic region of Flanders—Nicholas' Catholicism and his symbolic place in the hierarchical structure of the Christian family

remained important throughout the century. In a song published in a *Songcycle for Catholic schools* for example, children addressed Nicholas as a “noble man”, a “great bishop”, a “holy man”, and as a “child’s friend”.⁴²

In 1898, the heightened attention that went to singing voices in the Saint Nicholas ritual reached an apotheosis when Bernard Zweers composed a full Saint Nicholas cantata. The work consisted mainly of a compilation of popular children’s songs. It was richly orchestrated, echoing the romanticism of the great composers of the nineteenth century, and staged—besides a children’s choir—a pious family father and, strikingly, the Saint himself. The cantata is of particular interest here, not only for its collection of popular Nicholas songs, but also because of its acoustic image of a Catholic hierarchy of masculinity. In the cantata, the relation between the children and their father on the one hand, and the relation between the family father and Nicholas are clarified not only in text, but also in music. In the first part of the cantata, especially the father’s knowledge-monopoly is elaborately shown: all children gather around the fireplace and remain very still, because—as the full choir joyously announces—“father will tell about Saint Nicholas” (Zweers & De Rop, 1892).⁴³ What follows is a baritone-solo (“father”) occupying almost a full quarter of the cantata in which a version of the legend of Saint Nicholas and the poor shoemaker is told. In the second part of the work, after a long and monumental choral intervention, father welcomes the Saint and urges the children to make room for the holy man. In the last quarter of the cantata the Saint appears on stage and addresses the children in a deep, basso voice to ask them “did you lovingly honor your parents? Were you obedient in school and did you learn well? And have you handsomely read your prayers? Have you not teased each other? Did you always speak the truth when asked?”⁴⁴

A Grandfatherly Hero: Domesticity, Old Age and Heroism

The difference between the father’s clear baritone and Saint Nicholas’ sonorous bass was all but coincidental: composing at a time when masculine voices became more and more defined as low chest-voices rather than the previous idea of a sharp, “penetrating” masculine voice⁴⁵; Zweers efficiently used the contrasting timbres to evoke Nicolas’ authority and age versus the fathers’ acoustic volatility and youthfulness. In many ways, the Nicholas appearing in Zweers’ cantata and in late-nineteenth century imagery came to resemble a nineteenth century grandfather, rather than being domesticated into a bourgeois father as seems to have been the case for the English Father Christmas.

The Catholic Nicholas, at the turn of the century, carried many of the “grandparental” characteristics identified by Vincent Gourdon. In nineteenth-century France, “the grandparent is a mixture of the dominant image of the ‘spoiling’ grandparent and biblical references” (Gourdon, 2001, p. 112)⁴⁶—a mixture of sentimentalism and religiosity. It is hard to pin down if Nicholas would have corresponded to what Gourdon calls the Catholic-reactionary conception of grandfatherhood, or to the construction of grandparenthood he identified as part of the “modern” family in which “the supposed key-principles are affection and autonomy” and “the power of the grandparent over the father and the grandson (...) is a complete aberration” (Gourdon, 2001, p. 113).⁴⁷ It seems fitting, though, that in a society steeped in Catholicism such as Flanders, the so-called “modern” family was Catholic by definition, and that the stark differences Gourdon observes in France were more blurred or even absent in Belgium.⁴⁸ Moreover, the very characteristics Saint Nicholas shared with grandfathers were those

who provided the bridge between the authoritarian and the sentimental elements of the nineteenth century family. Gourdon noted that grandparents could often play a part in the cementing of paternal authority within the “modern” (bourgeois, companionate) family.

Much like the figure of Nicholas did in various songs and poems, grandfathers acted as adults to whom children could turn to ask for a favor (and—as the term “grandpère gâteau” indicates, many grandfathers showered their grandchildren with presents); nevertheless, this role as the child’s accomplice never led grandfathers to question parent’s punishments or authority (Gourdon, 2001, p. 120). Even though grandfathers often offered a “softer” image of paternal authority, “in front of the child, they guaranteed the legitimacy of parents’ repressive actions” (Gourdon, 2001, p. 122).⁴⁹ Urging children to behave well, and rewarding them with presents when they did so, Nicholas legitimized, like an ideal grandfather, the norms and limits set out and controlled by children’s parents. (If a father could communicate with the Saint on his children’s behavior, obviously their rules and demands were in keeping with Nicholas’ standards). A last parallel between the white-haired Saint and his earthly counterparts was the unconditional sympathy of children for both: even if she had never seen her grandfather, a child was expected to love him nevertheless. And even though one would expect that children’s sympathy for Saint Nicholas greatly depended on his willingness to present them with sweets, the unshakable belief in the goodness of Nicholas expressed by the idealized poor children in romantic stories and poems reflects the general belief that children’s love for their forebears was “natural” (Gourdon, 2001, p. 116).

The parallels between grandfatherly love and Nicholas’ care were—more than in children’s songs—explicitly present in texts directed at adults. In 1890, a Catholic grandfather published a short article in *Le patriote illustré*, entitled “Should we tell?”⁵⁰ Summarizing “scientific” as well as “theological” arguments, the author pondered upon the question if one should tell children about the “real” course of the Saint Nicholas ritual. His most developed consideration, at the end of the article, stages the author in the role of grandfather. “Let us try”, he begins, implicitly assuming the responsibility to tell his grandchild the ‘truth’: “my granddaughter stands before me, opening her eyes wide and waiting for me to tell her what she already accepts as the truth. What is there to say? One hesitates, and fears to be pedantic and cruel”.⁵¹ Again referring to the presupposition that children unconditionally loved and trusted their grandparents, this grandfather shows himself reluctant to break the hierarchal structure of the family (in which children are subordinate by virtue of their innocence and ignorance). His most compelling argument to preserve this structure is a sentimental one, thus framing both the grandfather and Saint Nicholas as reconciliatory figures in the household, serving as catalysts for the mixture of vertical authority and horizontal affection in the “modern” Catholic family.

As a Catholic domestic hero, then, Saint Nicholas aimed for inspiration rather than imitation. In his old age, the Saint reflected a particular interpretation of justice and wisdom that was mainly directed at younger men: young children’s fathers. Even though mothers and grandparents could play an important part in the Saint Nicholas ritual, the Saint was hardly their hero. To a certain extent, he was not a children’s hero either, but rather a foil on which all kinds of expectations regarding domestic authority and the “fairness” legitimizing that privilege of authority could be projected. Although

Saint Nicholas was clearly not a fatherly figure (and therefore not a model of paternity), his “grandfatherliness” was understood as a stage surpassing paternity, which placed him in a more privileged position both within the family and the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Conclusion

It is striking that many of Nicholas’ characteristics that could have been termed ‘heroic’ had disappeared by the turn of the century: apparently Nicholas did not need his martiality, his “courageous horse” or his initial scariness to be a Catholic hero. Rather to the contrary: with his long beard, his warm voice, his apparent lack of sexuality and his increasingly less impressive stature, he provided a counter image for the “virile” ideals of manliness of the end of the nineteenth century.⁵² Despite the feeble body, the lack of offspring and other markers of “masculinity”, Nicholas was in every respect a man—or, to frame it another way, he was not and could not be a woman or a child.

Nevertheless, Nicholas’ masculinity and authority greatly depended on precisely women and children, and the course of the Nicholas ritual showed how fathers’ positions within Catholic families were for a large part defined by their wives and offspring.⁵³ Especially the different roles fathers and mothers played *vis à vis* their children as respectively spokesmen and accomplices showed how a continuing negotiation went on among parents, constantly re-establishing their respective gendered roles within the family as well as within society at large. Mothers who delegated the work of punishing their children to their husbands and Nicholas not only secured their self-image as sentimental home-makers, but also underpinned their husbands’ paternal authority. And fathers acting as spokesmen for their children in front of Saint Nicholas repeated and practiced the behavior they were expected to show in the public sphere. By the end of the nineteenth century, then, Saint Nick was no longer “the hero who rides on roofs and chimneys” (Van Veen, 1976, p. 580),⁵⁴ but rather the hero who fortified paternal domestic authority by reverting to ecclesiastical structures of power and the provision of a Catholic alternative image of forceful masculinity.

Illustration 1: "Dans l'atelier de St. Nicolas", in *Le patriote illustré*, 1901, p. 56. A 'modern' Saint Nicholas: pictured as old children's friend, but surrounded by angels.



DANS L'ATELIER DE ST-NICOLAS. — Un dernier coup de pinceau aux jouets.

Illustration 2: "Nicolas – le grand Saint chez une famille Hollandaise", in *Le Patriote Illustré*, 1898. The 'great Saint' is accompanied by a black boy with turban.



St-Nicolas -- Le grand saint chez une famille hollandaise; (Voir la rubrique: Noëls)

Illustration 3: "De Brave Pieter", in: Cesar Segers, *Het aanvankelijk leesonderwijs, vierde boekje*, Antwerpen, 1894, pp. 26-27: "Den volgenden morgen was Pieter al vroeg op; want hij was nieuwsgierig te weten, wat Sint Nikolaas zou gebracht hebben."



Illustration 4: Sint Nikolaas. Print: Glenisson, Turnhout. Held at the museum for folklore in Antwerp. Coenraed Van Veen, *Centsprenten*, p. 580.



Sint Nicolaas, sinds lang vermaard
 Als Bisschop van een heilig leven,
 Was deugdzam, goed en mild van aard,
 Zoo als ons alijd is beschreven,
 Hij stond den armen bij in nood,
 Was altoos met hen lot bewogen,
 En schonk hun sijn geheel vermogen,
 Hij bleef hun trouw, tot aan han dood.
 Hij was een groote vriend van kindren,
 Geen wonder dan, dat hij alijd
 Van hun bemind wordt en geveld.
 Niets kon hem in sijn doen verbliden.

Vier ouwen is het reeds geleden,
 Dat men in 't magtig Amsterdam
 Hem tot Patroon of Schuttheer nam,
 En als een Heilige aangebeden.
 Zijn naam en waandag blijft men achten
 Bij kindren, die veel lekkerij
 En ook geschenken van hem wachten,
 Dat hoort men die verheugd en lij
 Leidrechtig aan den schoorsteen singen:
 * O Sint Nicolaas! goed heilig man!
 * Trek uwen besten tabbaard an!
 En nog een aantal andre dingen

Men zegt dat hij te paard gezeten
 Van d'eenen schoorsteen op den aar,
 Zegt kindren, zegt, is dit niet waar?
 U brengt veel lekkers om te eten.
 Hier stot gij hem sijn giften deelen,
 Gezeten op sijn moedig paard,
 Veel dingen van verscheiden aard,
 Die uwen smaak en oogten streelen.
 Hij sturt hier uit sijn grooten zak,
 Een menigte van lekkerijte,
 Bunket en allerlei gebak,
 Ja, alles wat u kan verbliden

Maar voor een ongehoorsaam kind,
 Die naar geen ouders raad wil hooren,
 Die is een rot, ten deel beschoren
 Als Nicolaas die deugd bemint!

Illustration 5: Het leven van den heiligen Nicolaus. Belyder en bisschop van Myra, Venlo, 1805. Coenraed Van Veen, *Centsprenten*, p. 583.



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Notes

¹ “Op eens, daar gaat de deur als van zelve wagenwijd open: de heilige man ‘met zijnen besten tabbert aan’, gemijterd en den staf in de hand, komt statig binnengestapt; de grootjufvrouw volgt met de twee engeltjes, die, benevens eene mand vol lekkernijen in het midden, het eene een boek met sloten, het andere eene roede dragen.”

² Saint Nicholas had long time been accompanied by dark, “devilish” figures, but it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that “Black Pete” turned into his regular helpmate. The little Moor was introduced in the Netherlands by Jan Schenkman and gradually spread throughout the Low Countries. In Belgium, the childish black helpmate and the solemn white angels coexisted until well into the twentieth century (see illustrations 1 & 2) (Booy, 2003).

³ The work of linguist Rita Ghesquiere forms a notable exception. Her book is the only study considering Flemish material and consists of an analysis of narrative tropes in Dutch and Flemish children’s stories (Ghesquière, 1989).

⁴ Saint Nicholas performed his miracles in Myra, but was buried in Bari, both coastal towns in Turkey.

⁵ A survey of the Dutch “scientific” work on Saint Nicholas in the nineteenth and early twentieth century can be found in Van Leer (1995, pp. 33–105).

⁶ The focus of most of these studies is on the “Germanic” origins of the traditions and imagery surrounding Nicholas. Discussions among the folklorists usually entail the question if Saint Nicholas as was a truly “religious” figure (and his miracle stories the basis of the tradition of presenting children with gifts through Nicholas), or rather an adaptation of an earlier, mythical figure (Germanic or classic) by early missionaries trying to Christianize already existing feasts.

⁷ Fritz Booy, in his book on the Saint’s black helper, talks about this change to *Sinterklaas* and frames it as a “civilization” of the Saint (2003, pp. 7, 24).

⁸ Or one of their favorites. In Flanders, Saint Martin and *Sinte Greef* were also active as generous givers. Both bear striking resemblances to Nicholas (Saint Martin, for example, was also accompanied by a black helpmate, and *Sinte Greef* also multitasked as a matchmaker and a bringer of gifts), but will not be dealt with in this paper.

⁹ This is not to say that there has been no interest in the middle-classes, but rather that most of these studies adopt a socio-economic perspective, focusing on entrepreneurship versus labor (the lower-classes) or leisure (the nobility). The work of Peter Heyrman, for example, is concentrated on the *middenstand* (self-employed middle-class), and themes such as female entrepreneurship, domestics or middle-class individuals (biographies) have been explored, but larger syntheses are still lacking (Heyrman, 1998; Van Molle & Heyrman, 2001; De Maeyer, Ghesquière & Van Rompaey, 1996).

¹⁰ Works on religion and gender are often strongly centered on the theory of the “feminization of religion”, that presupposes a lack of religiosity in men (“home heathens”) and a strong association of femininity with piety (“domestic angels”).

Calumn Brown, in his work on Britain, offers an example of this usage of the theory of feminization (Brown, 2001). For a critical examination of the thesis and its possible applications to the Belgian context, see the survey by Tine Van Osselaer and Thomas Buerman (2008). Since the thesis of feminization has its flaws and cannot easily be translated to the Belgian context, I prefer to understand Catholic fatherhood and domesticity in terms of “differentiation” (as has been suggested by Van Osselaer) rather than as defined by processes of feminization and masculinization. This does not only avoid running into the trap of essentialism, but also allows for an analysis of Catholic masculinity *within* the household (Van Osselaer 2008a, 2008b).

¹¹ In Flanders, Nicholas visits households on the night from December 5 to 6, in the Netherlands, he arrives one day earlier.

¹² “O, hoe vroolijk en aantrekkelijk was de Vlaamsche haard! De huislamp brandde op tafel en verlichtte gansch eenen kring van ouderen en jongeren. De knikkende grootvader zat daar, gelijk de kleine knaap van pas eenige maanden op moeders schoot”.

¹³ In a reading lesson in *La vie de tous les jours*, a schoolbook from 1903, the text on Saint Nicholas recounts how the children rise at six in the morning to find their presents (Swagers & Finet, 1903). In songs, too, children’s impatience was addressed: in a Saint Nicholassong in a 1893 songbook, the third verse sketches how the children go to bed “bursting with impatience”, after which, in the fourth verse, they immediately look for what Nicholas has brought them at night (Ruttens, 1893).

¹⁴ In an 1848 poem, Prudens van Duyse makes the rescued father say “That shadow, it must have been Nicholas...only he can flee human rewards” (Die schaduw, ‘t was vast Nicolaes...hij alleen kan vluchten voor menschenbelooning) (Van Duyse, 1848, p. 134).

¹⁵ “Daar vonkelde licht noch laaie, in ‘t lage vunzige kamerkijn”.

¹⁶ “Och, Mieken, ja voorzeker! / Gij waart steeds braaf; maar weet – de Sant / Komt enkel in langs schouwen, / Waar bij dag heeft vuur gebrand.”

¹⁷ Saint Nicholas’ annual visit often served as an opportunity to practice charity. From the 1850’s onwards, the Vincentians, for example, organized the distribution of toys and sweets for poor families and orphans on Saint Nicholas’ day. Even in this context, though, the celebration of the Saint remained a “domestic” occasion: Nicholas’ visit would be celebrated within the bourgeois or genteel home, after which well-off families would visit the less fortunate to hand out gifts (De Maeyer, Heyrman & Quaghebuer, 1992, pp. 279-312; De Maeyer, 1994, p. 196).

¹⁸ Several studies on ideal femininity and motherhood have been conducted in the last decades, for example Eliabeth Badinter, for France (1980), Teresa Kulawik for Sweden and Germany (1999) and Carol Smart with an edited volume on Canada, the US and the UK (1992).

¹⁹ “Hij droeg eenen gouden mantel; / Als ‘t witste zilver blonk zijn baard; / Hij daalde, met alle zijne engeltjes, / Steeds nader en nader tot de aard!”

²⁰ Of one particular song, several versions were sung in the Low Countries throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century. It was later also recorded by Prudens Van

Duyse in his folklorist work on songs of the low countries (Van Duyse, 1903-1908, p. 1367). The song was framed as the plea of a young girl for a lover and was also known under the title “Complaint of a love-sick maiden” (Klagte van een min-sieke Maegt). The text repeatedly stressed the need for a lover who would “satisfy my lust” (Die mijn minne-lust voldoet) and “knows how to treat his wife in bed” (zijne vrouw ‘in het Bed onthalen kan’). In exchange for this lover, the girl singing the song promises to call her son Nicholas (De naam van ‘t kind zal Klaasje zijn), as Saint Nick would be its godfather.

²¹ “hem, die het zwaard verruilde voor kerkstaf”, “ridder der armen”.

²² The image refers to the older woodcuts, and therefore also to older notions of horsemanship, which constituted an important element for early modern “manliness” (Mattfeld, 2006).

²³ “Hier siet gij hem sijn giften deelen / gezeten op zijn moedig paard.”

²⁴ “Op een sneeuw wit paard gezeten / met een gouden zaël en toom”.

²⁵ “die Doorluchte, met mijter en staf”.

²⁶ “Toujours leur beau sourire et leurs cheveux boucles! / La mort n’a pas flétri cette fleur d’innocence. Ils dorment aussi purs qu’au jour de la naissance, / le songe de leur vie est à peine achevé / et sur leur bouche encore / flotte un dernier ave”.

²⁷ On father’s authority in the Catholic household, see Van Osselaer (2008a). The civil code, too, contained a basis for marital/paternal authority (Hoegaerts, 2008).

²⁸ The cementing of gendered family values was further reflected in the gifts the children received (Hamlin, 2003, p. 7).

²⁹ A fathers’ role to represent the family in the public sphere has been noted especially in Britain (Tosh, 1999; Nelson, 1995). The idea of the family as a state within the state, in which the head of the household acted as a representative of the state within the family, and as a representative of the family within the state, was also translated into a more religious perspective on the family. According to Pope Leo XIII, the Catholic family should be a “little Church”, in which the *pater familias* should aim to love his wife and children like Christ loved his church, and vice versa (Gevers, 1995; De Maeyer, 2000).

³⁰ “k zal den goeden man dan spreken / en wat speelgoed voor u smeken”.

³¹ “Luistert, lieven, naar uw vader”

³² “Vader gaat vertellen van Sinterklaas” (Zweers & De Rop, 1892).

³³ “er was een oud krijger”(…) ‘O ridder der armen, o zone der Kerk’”.

³⁴ The definitions of manliness and heroism, and the blurred distinctions and unstable relations between both were subject to radical changes throughout the nineteenth century. The combination of martial heroism and sentimental fatherhood proved to be a field of continuous friction, but was never entirely impossible (Francis, 2002).

³⁵ In the Victorian family, the transformation of Father Christmas into Santa Claus parallels a shift from an interpretation of fatherhood as the exercise of authority to one as “material largesse”. According to Tosh, “Father Christmas was now the apotheosis of the generous, indulgent father” (1999, p. 149).

³⁶ “Moeder zegde: ‘Pieter, gij moet uwen korf zetten, want ik denk wel, dat Sint Nikolaas iets voor u zal brengen”.

³⁷ “o moeder lieve moeder / zyn wy wel braef geweest / wel kindjes lieve kindjes / weest daer niet voor bevreesd”.

³⁸ “Pieter bedankte Sint Nikolaas, en beloofde het volgende jaar nog braver te zijn”.

³⁹ A number of these songs are still well-known today. Two very famous songs (“Hij komt” and “Zie ginds komt de stoomboot”) were based on music by Schubert and Mozart (“Fröhlicher Landmann, von der Arbeit zurückerend”, from the *Album für die Jugend* and “Menuet” from the “Haffner serenade”), and thus probably originated in the middle-classes. Most Nicholas songs, however, were adaptations of popular folksongs that were rarely written down and could be arranged according to the singer’s fancy.

⁴⁰ Nineteenth century songbooks for children carried titles such as “Songs for school and hearth” or “Song-collection for school and home”.

⁴¹ Especially Edouard Gregoir was very active in promoting musical education for young children at the end of the nineteenth century.

⁴² The song “St. Niklaas”, in one Antwerp schoolbook, contains four verses, each beginning with one of Saint Nicholas’ “titles” (Willems, n.d., p. 108): “Sint-Niklaas, gij kindervriend. (...) Sint-Niklaas, gij heilig man (...) Sint-Niklaas, gij bisschop groot (...) Sint-Niklaas, gij kindervriend.”

⁴³ “Vader gaat vertellen van Sinterklaas”.

⁴⁴ “hebt gij uw ouders liefdevol geëerd? / waart g’op school gehoorzaam,/ hebt ge braaf geleerd?/ En ook schoon gebeden?/ Niet elkaar geplaagd? / Waarheid steeds gesproken/ werd u iets gevraagd?”

⁴⁵ Throughout the nineteenth century, the popularity of male alto’s and soprano’s waned, castrato’s disappeared and male operatic roles were transposed, so as to fall into the lower chest range (Barbier, 1998).

⁴⁶ “l’*à*ieul est un mélange entre l’imaginaire dominant de la grand-parentalité ‘gâteau’, et les références bibliques”.

⁴⁷ “les principes-clés supposés sont l’affection et l’autonomie” and “le pouvoir de l’*à*ieul sur le père et le petit fils ... une complète aberration.”

⁴⁸ More generally, one can hardly claim that Catholicism was opposite to modernism by definition. (Hellemans, 1997 & 2001).

⁴⁹ “ils se font auprès de l’enfant les garants de la légitimité de l’action répressive parentale”.

⁵⁰ “Doit-on le dire ?”

⁵¹ “essayons ... Ma petite fille est là qui ouvre de grands yeux et qui attend de moi la vérité acceptée d’avance. Que lui dire ? On est arrêté par je ne sais quelle pudeur, on a peur d’être pédant et cruel”.

⁵² Even though John Tosh's idea of a late-nineteenth century "retreat from domesticity" has been questioned, the general image of this period is one of a construction of masculinity based on martiality, adventure and authority (Frances, 2002).

⁵³ In a sense, the Saint Nicholas ritual concretized the very abstract dependence of constructions of masculinity on its feminine counterpart that has been recently pointed out by Christoph Kucklick (2008).

⁵⁴ "Dit's de Held, die op zyn tyd/Over dak en schoorsteen ryd".

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