JULIANNE M. ROE, LEHIGH UNIVERSITY

Making Sense of Nonsense: Winning the Language Game in *Nu noch*

In the introduction to an anthology entitled *Reynard the Fox and Other Mediaeval Netherlands Secular Literature* (Leyden, London, New York 1967), Professor E. Colledge writes that *Nu noch* is a farce written solely to be performed "after some longer more serious production, depending . . . for much of its comic effect upon the spectacle of well-known actors, seen a few moments before in gallant or tragic roles, suddenly transforming themselves into knock-about comedians, designed to send the audience home in good humour" (p. 11). Professor Colledge also writes that the comedy has "no subtlety whatever" and that it is the "coarse, broad comedy of a society still close to the soil" (p. 11).

I disagree with Colledge's assessment of *Nu noch.* Though the comedy may have followed a "more serious production," it is by no means unworthy of serious consideration. The purpose of my paper is to show that *Nu noch* is not merely a "knock-about" comedy nor that it is characteristic of an intellectually unsophisticated society, but that it is, in fact, a rather subtle work: *Nu noch* is a language game whose characters win by becoming, in the neighbor's words, "boss in this house" (218). The rules for *Nu noch* are simple: players misuse language and distort meaning in order to manipulate others. Everyone in the drama plays the game; some have higher stakes than others; and no one wins. It is, in fact, impossible to win, for the playwright, through the subtle use of paradox and irony, has rigged the game in two ways. The language game has been rigged, first, by the paradoxical manner in which the characters speak to each other and, second, by the literal meanings and implications of their discourse.

In the first type of "rigging," the paradoxical way in which characters communicate, language is not used to convey meaning to a listener; rather, it is made nonsensical dialogue designed to manipulate others. The most obvious example of this type of dialogue occurs between Jack and his wife, who have a marriage characterized by mutual manipulation of each other through language. Both Jack and his wife want to change the other's tune. Jack desires control so that he may stop living his "life of a dog" (7), and his wife struggles for the power to browbeat Jack even more effectively. Jack obviously makes a practice of being late for dinner - perhaps because he spends too much time at the tavern. His return home at the start of the play is greeted by his wife's sarcastic, "Welcome to your gracious lordship" (71).

Both Jack and his wife perceive this attempt at manipulation through language as being emblematic of strength and power. For example, the neighbor, who is the chief instigator of the more formal language game, with his suggestion to articulate nonsense, reveals Jack's repertoire of control-producing dialogue through a short series of questions: "Have you tried cursing her? Sweet-talking her?" (22). Jack probably nods "yes" to each question, which signals to the manipulative neighbor that Jack is ready to take the next step in using language to control his wife and has him participate in what is in his estimation the "great hoax" of repeating the nonsensical "now again" (62).

Jack also reveals his wife's similar speaking technique during his very first lines in which he laments his situation: "My wife scolds and curses at me until I wish I was dead" (7-8). And she certainly fulfills her announced role as shrew with cursing ("Goddamn you for having lived so long, you old fool!" [74-75]) and with threats ("I'm warning you. You'll be sorry" [87]).

This manipulation of people through language, a paradoxical means of communicating by conveying *meaningless* meanings in order to gain or strengthen the speaker's power, is perpetrated also by the priest, whose dialogue is meant further to enhance his authority. Our priest, through nonsense that is on the same plane as Jack's "Now again," uses hocus pocus to exalt his position. His "warning" (169) and "admonishing" (156) of Jack are nothing more than a

show of nonsense performed to impress the other characters whom he orders to carry "my stole, my book, and my holy-water sprinkler" (143) and to "come along" (146).

More subtle and interesting than the paradox of *how* the characters speak is the second type of "rigging," the *irony* that is embedded in the characters' language: what they say rather than how they say it. This rigging becomes all too easy to overlook when a reader of the drama views the physical comedy as the focus, the only point, of the drama. This more subtle irony of the language game is, undoubtedly, unknown to the speakers and occurs only twice in *Nu noch.* Specifically this irony of meaning is found in the speeches of Jack and the priest who, in what at first may seem to the audience or reader like the mere ramblings of a couple of dolts, turn out, in fact, to contain significant allusions to the subjects of sense, nonsense, and language. In Jack's case, I am referring to the speech in which he gloats over the duping of his wife and glows with the brilliance of the nonsense that eventually, however fleetingly, makes him top dog: "This is the way to handle nagging wives! By St. John, it was good advice that I should say 'Now again.' My wife may be a terror, but this time I've outsmarted her. It makes me laugh that she thinks I've lost my mind. That's her mistake! I'm wiser than Solomon was . . . or even Aristotle" (120-26). Jack's assertion that he is wiser than Solomon or Aristotle because he has discovered that affected madness - acting "just like a cuckoo" (130) - will "be for my own benefit" (131) is ironic not only because in reality Jack is certainly undeserving of the company of the figures with whom he equates himself, but also because it brings a sophistication to the work that Professor Colledge misses or dismisses as two images the author simply pulled out of the air. Jack's assertion that he is as clever as Solomon or Aristotle is appropriately ironic for the language game. Solomon is, of course, known for his extraordinary wisdom, which in Biblical terms is synonymous with "understanding" (I Kings 3, 13). And Aristotle's basic premise about rhetoric, found in his *Poetics*, equates communication with thought. Language for Aristotle has a purpose, but does not have meaning until the speaker values the listener. And though language for Jack has a purpose, he blatantly disregards the role of the listener in making meaning and actually counts on the *inability* to understand, the impossibility of making sense out of nonsense as a means of his manipulation.

The second example of irony occurs in the priest's dialogue, which has one instance of the same sophisticated irony as contained in Jack's. During his second "prayer," the priest warns Jack by the "sun-tree and the moon, that seduced Alexander into false dreams, by every dead priest, and by all that great company lying dead in Babylon's castle" (169-72). It is in keeping with the rules of *Nu noch*, the irony of the implications of meaning, that the priest is interrupted by Jack with the nonsense of "now again" just as he mentions Babylon, which is the source for the word "babble," meaning confusing and nonsensical language.

This play is not, then, as Professor Colledge asserts, the "comedy of a society still close to the soil" (p. 11). It is a delightful and clever farce constructed through the subtle use of paradox and irony.