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The Narrenschneiden or, The Fool-ectomy

Comedy by
Hans Sachs

Translated by
I. E. Clark

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(THE NARRENSCHNEIDEN OR, THE FOOL-ECTOMY)

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NOTES ON THE PLAY

The year is 1557, and you are sitting at a table in a German inn. Outside in the streets of Nuremberg, revelers dance and sing. Here inside the inn the noise is deafening. This is Shrove Tuesday—Mardi Gras—*Fastnacht*. Since Lent begins at midnight, the entire city is trying to crowd as much merriment as possible into these last few hours.

You look toward the door and see a richly robed gentleman enter, followed by an attendant in plainer garb. He steps to the nearest table and raps loudly with his cane. In a moment the revelry dies down to an inquisitive hush. The man announces that he is a doctor and that he has been called to this inn to attend someone who is sick. He bids the patient, wherever he might be, to come forward. You look at your companions and then at the revelers at the other tables; they, too, are looking around—but no one shows any signs of needing a physician.

Apologizing to the host for having disturbed his guests, the doctor and his assistant prepare to depart. At that moment an inner door opens and the most pitiful looking human being you ever saw comes gasping into the room. He is holding his stomach and wincing with terrible pain. When you see that the stomach is bloated to the bursting point, you can understand the sweat of anguish on the man's brow.

The doctor quickly examines the wretched man and indicates that he must operate immediately—right here in the inn. You and the other erstwhile revelers watch in horrified fascination as the doctor and the assistant lay the patient on a table and begin to cut the swollen stomach open. You can hardly bear the patient's screams (there was no anesthetic in the sixteenth century).

The doctor probes with a gleaming instrument and slowly withdraws an ugly, grotesque.....doll!

There is an instant of bewildered silence—and then the innful of revelers bursts into laughter and applause. Obviously, Hans Sachs has done it again—another *fastnachtspiel*!

The *fastnachtspiel* ["last-night-before-lent play"] was a favorite form of foolishness in sixteenth century Germany. And one of Sachs' best is presented here in a new translation by I. E. Clark.

Only the director's imagination will limit the types of dolls and other objects which the doctor draws from the patient's stomach. But whatever they look like, Sachs has a name for each one—for each doll represents one of the follies (Narren) which make man the miserable creature he is. Here is a play which is full of as much fun and foolishness as the cast and director want to put into it—but with an overriding message which makes it worth the time of all who participate in its presentation.

THE NARRENSCHNEIDEN

(Or, *The Fool-Ectomy*)

This translation of Hans Sachs' "*Das Narrenschneiden*" was first presented at the Schulenburg Theatre Festival on March 31, 1967, under the direction of Callie Schaefer with the following cast:

THE DOCTOR Kurt Vornsand

THE NURSE Joan Schulze

THE PATIENT Larry Owen

The scene is the stage
of a community auditorium.
The time is the present.*

†

* *Das Narrenschneiden* was written by Hans Sachs in 1557, and the cast was made up of three men: *Der Arzt* (The Doctor), *Der Knecht* (The Assistant), and *Der Kranke* (The Patient). Any of the roles may be played by a man or a woman. The discussion of costume and set in the Director's Production Script (prompt book—see page 15) will help each troupe decide whether to present the play in a modern setting or in a sixteenth century setting.



The Narrenschnneiden

(or, The Fool-Ectomy)

By Hans Sachs

[The curtain opens on an empty stage. The only furnishings are a large table on which are a pillow and a neatly folded bed-sheet, and a smaller table nearby. The DOCTOR, carrying the usual black bag, and the NURSE enter. Placing his bag on the small table, the DOCTOR bows to the Audience and speaks:]

DOCTOR. *Ein guten Abend!* I was called
Here by a patient—where is he sprawled?

[He waits patiently; nothing happens.]

Come forward, whoever you are—*mach schnell!*

Just say what hurts—I'll make you well.

For I am skilled in my profession

To cure a backache or depression,

Bunions, coughs, sore throats, and mumps—

I feel your pulse and give some thumps...

The rubeola, appendectomy,

Halitosis, tonsillectomy,

Carcinoma, nasal whine—

I cure them—malignant or benign.

I honor my oath with zest and zeal

As you can see by this golden seal.

[Holds up his medical certificate]

NURSE. I see no patients anywhere!

Oh, Doctor, what a strange affair!
 Everybody's healthy, fresh—
 There's not a pound of excess flesh...
 There's not a groan, not even a cough—
 I guess we'd just as well be off.

DOCTOR. [*Bowing to Audience as he and NURSE prepare to leave*]

God bless this hall and all its guests;
 We hate to be such stupid pests,
 So we beg your pardon and cure your pain
 By leaving now...*auf Wiederseh'n*.

[*The PATIENT, his stomach bulging, enters groaning.*]

NURSE. Doctor, here's your patient now!
 Just see that tubby tummy—wow!

PATIENT. Oh, Doctor, please...I need your skill;
 As you can see, I'm very ill.

[*Groans, holding his stomach.*]

I rumble inside by day and night.
 Oh, please deliver me from this plight.
 Why is my stomach swollen so big
 Until I look like a pregnant pig?
 Have I swallowed the Straits of Magellan?
 Or am I growing a watermelon?

[*DOCTOR feels PATIENT's stomach; PATIENT groans. DOCTOR nods to NURSE, who assists PATIENT in lying on table. DOCTOR examines PATIENT carefully; he looks at NURSE sadly and shakes his head. PATIENT sees the look and is worried. DOCTOR listens to stomach with stethoscope, indicating with horrendous facial expressions that he hears something bad. PATIENT nearly faints with terror and suspense. DOCTOR replaces sheet, puts his stethoscope away, looks at PATIENT sadly, looks at NURSE resignedly, motions NURSE away from PATIENT's hearing. They converse in whispers, looking at PATIENT sadly. PATIENT is*

petrified with frightful anticipation. DOCTOR returns to PATIENT, who sits up on end of table. DOCTOR places a hand kindly on PATIENT's shoulder and says in sympathetic tones:]

DOCTOR. The trouble is...your tummy's too big.

PATIENT. You can see that without all this rig [*indicates stethoscope*].

DOCTOR. [*X to small table to mix medicine.*]

Now first of all, to ease your pain...

[*Mumbles to himself as he mixes*]

A dab of this...another grain...

[*Aloud to PATIENT*]

Take a drink of this nice tea

From that little old medicine-maker—me.

[*He holds the glass out to PATIENT. As PATIENT reaches for it, DOCTOR withdraws the glass and pats PATIENT's stomach again.*]

Jawohl, mein Herr, it's quite a bump!

PATIENT. Ouch!—it hurts me when you thump!

I'm getting tired of being sick;

Let me have the medicine, quick...

To stop this burning at my waist!

DOCTOR. Hmm, ~~umm~~, you may not like the taste.

PATIENT. Oh, don't let that thought worry you.

I often empty a bottle or two...

And crawl home on my hands and knees.

So let me have it now, sir, please!

DOCTOR. But I should tell you first, *mein Herr,*

That you must have the best of care.

To cure your problem once and for all

We must get rid of that super ball.

[*He pats PATIENT's stomach again.*]

PATIENT. [*Trying to get medicine*]

What concoction have you here?

Is it wine, or ale, or lager beer?

I believe I'm just about to burst—

Oh Lord, I've got a terrible thirst!

- DOCTOR. Behave—*'raus mit 'im*—stop it—quiet!
 You'll have to go on a very strict diet:
 First, a bowl of sauerbraten...
 Some limburger cheese—a little rotten...
 Some buttermilk that's not too clear,
 And then a quart of summer beer.
 You take this twice a day. No doubt
 It soon will flush your stomach out.
- PATIENT. But, Doc, I ate two hundred prunes
 And drank some beer in three saloons.
 I rumbled like a hurricane
 But didn't lose my bulge...or pain.
- DOCTOR. I'd better have another thump
 To see what's brewing in that lump.
[He examines PATIENT's stomach with stethoscope.]
Achtung! Himmel! Ach du liebe!
[He whispers in Nurse's ear so that we hear only a mumble which sounds something like:]
 Dusseldorf...Hamburg...*dummkopf*...amoeba!
- NURSE. Oh, the poor unfortunate dunce—
 We'll have to operate at once!
- PATIENT. Doctor, what is it? ulcers?—cancer?
- DOCTOR. You're full of "Narren"—that's your answer.
[PATIENT obviously doesn't understand. DOCTOR pats PATIENT's stomach and shakes his head sadly]
 Your stomach there is full of "Narren."
- PATIENT. What's a—"Narren"? Something foreign?
- DOCTOR. Well, a "Narr" is— *[to NURSE]* you explain!
- NURSE. A "Narr" is— *[working hard at it]* the thing—
[she has the answer!] that gives you pain!
 A little—fool—an imp—an elf...
 A tiny copy of yourself...
 Or of the folly in you, I should say—
- DOCTOR. *[Impatient with her stuttering explanation]*
 I'll tell him myself, in a better way.
 These "Narren" here *[pats PATIENT's stomach]*
 that cause your pain

- Are ugly little— [*much gesturing; then to NURSE roughly*] you explain!
- NURSE. Each “Nar” is a foolish characteristic...
For instance, when you’re pessimistic—
[*She, too, gives up; takes glass and bottle from the small table and pours PATIENT a drink.*]
Here, drink the Doctor’s private brand,
And then perhaps you’ll understand.
- PATIENT. [*Takes glass and drinks...and reacts to the great activity in his stomach as the drink stirs up the “Narren”.*]
Now I feel them—they’re having a party—
There are twenty, thirty, thirty-five, forty!
They’re leaping like a bunch of frogs—
Oh, Doctor, help!—call off the dogs!
How’d all these “Narren” sneak inside me?
Help me, Doctor—stay beside me!
- DOCTOR. Nurse, we’ll have to operate.

[*NURSE helps DOCTOR lay PATIENT on table; PATIENT resists*]
- PATIENT. No, no, no—wait, wait, wait!
- NURSE. Surrender yourself to the Doctor’s knife;
Lie down, relax, for the rest...of your life.
- PATIENT. [*Pops up*]
When I close my eyes a corpse appears—
Mine! [*He cries.*]
- DOCTOR. *Ach Himmel*, calm your fears.
- PATIENT. I hate to think of myself as dead—
My wife wouldn’t cry; she’d laugh instead.
- DOCTOR. Well, if you make me wait too long
To operate, your funeral song
Will be played by the “Narren” as they slit
Your insides apart, bit by bit.
- PATIENT. I’d rather cheat the devil—and live.
[*Resigning to his fate*]
If that’s the only way, then give

Me the works.

[He lies down. Just as DOCTOR brings scalpel down to begin operating, PATIENT grabs DOCTOR's arm.]

But wait! How much is your fee?

DOCTOR. To prove my skill, I'll do it free.

Besides, you seem to be a poor man.

It's going to be fun...that's for sure, man!

NURSE. *[Bringing the bag of tools from small table]*

Doctor, here are your tools and things—

[She holds each one up as she names it]

Your scalpel, forceps... *[puzzled]* little strings?

DOCTOR. Little strings?

NURSE. These things.

DOCTOR. Ja. That's a suture. *[She doesn't understand]*

Suture?

NURSE. *[Shrugging]* Suits me.

[Bringing more items out of bag]

Sponges...

[Looks sadly at PATIENT, mutters to herself]

...what a future!

[Takes more items from bag]

Some juices to refresh and heal....

PATIENT. Doctor, I don't like this deal...

Let me have another drink.

DOCTOR. *[Taking NURSE aside]*

Miss Nurse, when I give you a wink,

Sneak up on him and tie him tight,

Or we won't finish here tonight.

[DOCTOR walks to small table, softly singing "Where, Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone?" He pours a drink and gestures as though he is going to hand it to PATIENT. When PATIENT lets down his guard and reaches for the drink, DOCTOR winks: NURSE throws a rope over PATIENT and ties him to table. DOCTOR nonchalantly drinks the drink.]

NURSE. Now grit your teeth together tight—
For that helps ease the pain. Don't bite
Your tongue off, though; you'd starve.

DOCTOR. [*To NURSE*]

Hold the bucket here. [*Sharpening knives*] I
carve.

[*He begins to operate.*]

PATIENT. Oh! Stop! Help! The pain! Oh woe!

NURSE. I told you it would hurt, you know—
This isn't like a chicken dinner.
Do you want the "Narren" to be the winner?

[*The DOCTOR reaches in with the forceps and pulls out
the first "Narr"—a grotesque doll with a huge head.*]

DOCTOR. Well, here's an imp that's full of folly—
What a big head he has, by golly!

PATIENT. It seems to me I'm better already.

DOCTOR. And I believe it. Steady, there, steady!
An elf like this one brags and stunts
And fills you full of arrogance.
He makes you feel important, big,
Proud, haughty, a snobbish prig,
Pompous, sneering without surcease—
While he eats your insides piece by piece.

[*He drops the "Narr" in the bucket.*]

NURSE. [*To DOCTOR*]

You'd better look inside again;
There may be more of the little men.
His stomach's no smaller, it seems to me.

DOCTOR. [*Probing*]

Aha! you're right—another one—see!

[*DOCTOR works with great energy trying to get it out.*]

PATIENT. Ouch! My stomach! You're causing a riot!

DOCTOR. *Dummkopf!* Stop! Don't move! Keep quiet!

[*He removes a square-shaped "Narr".*]

Aha! what have we here—a square!
Didn't he jab you anywhere?

PATIENT. He did! And it's a relief to blow
Him out. But tell me, if you know,
What kind of evil was his creed?

DOCTOR. This is the fool that causes greed.
The covetous greed that leads a man
To fawn and cringe and work and plan
To gain the favor of a higher up...
Only to drink the bitter cup
Of disinheritance and scorn.
By the horn of a unicorn,
Isn't this calamitous?

[*Holding the "Narr" for all to see*]
Such a thing to cause such a fuss!

[*NURSE takes the "Narr" and drops it in the bucket.*]

PATIENT. I feel another "Narr" right here.
He's been biting there at least a year!

NURSE. [*Putting an ear to PATIENT's stomach*]
Listen, this one gnaws like a mouse.

DOCTOR. Just wait! I'll steal him from his house!

[*He removes a long, lanky "Narr," looking much like a snake*]

PATIENT. Doctor, he's a funny fellow—
So skinny, meager, pale, and yellow....

DOCTOR. Well, this "Narr" might be labeled "Jealous,"
For it was he who made you zealous
In hunting ways to trick your friends
And turn their mishaps to your ends.
You smiled when bad luck plagued your neighbors
And chafed when profit blessed their labors.
This fellow gnawed around your heart;
The wonder is, his wicked art
Has failed to eat your heart completely.

[*DOCTOR throws it offstage.*]

PATIENT. You're right—I acted indiscreetly
When this one nibbled my insides.