

Pissing Figures
1280–2014

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The little bronze statue of a urinating boy that decorates a fountain in Brussels, universally known as Manneken-Pis, was commissioned in 1619 from Jérôme Duquesnoy the Elder (fig. 1). It replaced a stone figure dating from the fourteenth century, which, by the middle of the fifteenth, was known by the name 't Menneken-Pist, the boy (who goes) piss. *Manneke* or *menneke* is a Belgicism, the equivalent of the Middle Dutch *mannekijn*, a little man, which gave rise to the French word *mannequin*: denoting first a figurine or jointed statue; later, a man lacking in character; and, finally, a living male figure (1830) and then a female one (1897), employed in showcasing the designs of new fashion collections. In keeping with contemporary aesthetic criteria, they are now tall rather than diminutive.

All kinds of legends are associated with the origins of Manneken-Pis: some say the boy was dousing the lit fuse of an enemy cannon, or relieving himself in front of the home of a witch, or that he had been lost and then found “in the act” by his father, who presented the city with this votive statue. He became so popular that he was repeatedly stolen. (In 1913, the filmmaker Alfred Machin directed a short—featuring an eight-year-old Fernand Gravey and a five-year-old Balthus—in which the panther Saïda runs off with Manneken-Pis, fig. 2.) After the last theft, in 1965, a replica was installed in the fountain, and the remains of the original are now preserved in the Maison du Roi on Brussels’s Grand-Place. Since the end of the seventeenth century, it’s been a civic tradition to dress him up

on certain occasions: today, his wardrobe contains more than nine hundred different outfits. Like the *Mona Lisa*, he smiles; his pelvis juts forward, and his left hand lifts his little member higher than parallel to the ground, so that the refreshing stream flies as far as possible.

The degree to which little Julien, that being his first name, has become a kind of Belgian *Mona Lisa* (figs. 3a-3b) can be judged by his Japanese reception: in 1952, a dentist presented the city of Tokyo with a freely interpreted copy, in the form of a boy perched on a tall, rectangular pedestal, costumed as a fireman, or a baseball player, or wearing a traditional Japanese outfit complete with kimono, *tabi*, shorts, *hashimaki*, and fan. He fills a small rectangular basin bordered by flowers on a train platform at Hamamatsuchō Station (fig. 4). A half century later, in 2011, the Japanese corporation Sega developed a video game called *Toylet*, intended to be installed above urinals in public bathrooms. The game would measure the volume, force, and precision of a player's urinary stream (fig. 5). There are four versions, and one is named *Manneken Pis*.

Belgium's culture of excretion goes back centuries: from the shitting man who served as a symbol for Dinant (fig. 6), the birth city of Joachim Patinir, who occasionally used this emblem to sign his landscapes, or from the old proverb, illustrated by Bruegel (fig. 7), that warns against "pissing at the moon," up through Teniers and the series of canvases by Jordaens known as *The King*

Drinks that depicts an Epiphany feast, in some versions of which an old woman wipes a crying baby's ass, while in others the same baby pisses a vigorous, occasionally bifurcated stream, as a man vomits off to the left (fig. 8). In Brussels itself, toward 1435 or slightly later, Rogier van der Weyden, then the official painter of the city that produced little Julien, worked a man and a woman seen from behind into the background of his *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin*, a motif he might have found in Van Eyck's recent *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin*. But here, the man seems to be pointing even farther off into the distance, at the minuscule figure of another man, also seen from behind, who pisses against the corner of a crenellated wall (figs. 9a–9c).¹

Here we can see the outlines of an entire tradition preserved in popular imagery, a tradition that Baudelaire, while living in Brussels, pinpointed in his “M. Hetzel's Opinion on Faro” (“Faro, a synonym for urine!”)—a synonymy that he elaborated in his *Article on cuisine. / Brussels Beverages*: “Faro is drawn from that great latrine, the Senne: a beverage extracted from the city's excrement by a distilling device. So for centuries the city has been drinking its own urine.” Brasserie Lindemans describes faro as “a sweet, fruity, thirst-quenching Belgian beer. The favorite beer of women!” Brasserie Lefebvre, for its part, has decorated bottles of its white ale, produced in Brussels since 1989, with a Manneken-Pis urinating on the same wheat and hops the beer is brewed from.² A website devoted to rating beer describes it as:

pouring a light yellow color, on the clear side, with a head of more or less ordinary foam. Aromas of banana and orange, slightly sweet malt, and a dash of lemon. A hint of yeast in the background. In the mouth, you taste the lemon first, with yeast, malt, and coriander underneath. A bit of orange comes back in the final sips. Banana more subdued but still noticeable. The epitome of white beer.

The same Brasserie Lefebvre, in 2010, renamed one of its blonde ales Manneken Pils, The Belgian Spirit. The “i” in Pils is a Manneken-Pis with a red sun hovering above him.

In the era of women’s rights movements, it was inevitable that the eminently—if modestly—virile symbol given form by Manneken-Pis would need to be shared more equitably: in 1985, Denis-Adrien Debouvrie, or Debouverie, the wealthy owner of restaurants and real estate in the touristy center of Brussels, presented the city with Jeanneke-Pis, a bronze statue of a young girl squatting to relieve herself. His comment on the gift: “We hereby achieve equality between Men and Women.” In 2008, Debouvrie, then seventy-four years old, was found with his throat slit, dead in a pool of blood. The popular French-language tabloid *La Dernière Heure* let it be known that “Denis Debouvrie never attempted to hide his interest in young boys of North African origin.” The manager of his restaurant the Little Fountain, T*** L***, fifty-four years old, was formally charged. As I write this in September 2013, the case is still ongoing, after an initial

dismissal and the opening of a new trial. On September 13, *La Dernière Heure* added, in an eloquent preterition, “We won’t speak of the rest. . . . Not of Debouvrie’s character, and not of his predatory sexual behavior targeting young boys, nor of the ‘special’ films of those boys that he made and hoarded.” The paper does not specify whether or not these “special films” included any scenes paying homage to local folklore.

In 1998, Brussels installed, directly on the pavement, Zinneke-Pis, a dog lifting its leg to relieve itself against a post, where the Senne dear to Baudelaire still flows.

The natives of Brussels were proud to figuratively quench their thirst with little Julien’s wee, but the authorities in seventeenth-century Flanders did not look kindly on love for young boys. In 1654, Jérôme Duquesnoy the Younger, son of the father of Manneken-Pis and brother to François, the most well-known member of this family of sculptors, was accused of committing sodomy with two of his apprentices. He was sentenced to death and executed in Ghent; his body was burned to ashes.

1 A detail pointed out to me by Guillaume Cassegrain.

2 Pictured in Eddy de Jongh, “De plassende Amor,” *Kunstschrift*, no. 6 (2006): p. 28. With thanks to Carel Blotkamp.