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Poetry in the Age of Transition: ‘Rhetoricians’ and ‘Rhetorical’ Poetics in the Netherlands (1400–1550)

Abstract

This article offers a survey of the poetry of the late-medieval Netherlandic ‘rhetoricians.’ Netherlandic ‘rhetorike’ is placed in a historical framework (the Burgundian and Habsburg Netherlands from the early 15th to the mid-16th century); the nature of ‘rhetorical’ activities in the vernacular is examined in the context of the poetics of Matthijs de Castelein, one of the most significant theoreticians of Netherlandic ‘rhetoric.’ By linking medieval Latin ‘rhetorica’ to Netherlandic ‘rhetorike,’ one can arrive at a better understanding not only of the poetics of De Castelein, but also of the persuasive function ascribed to poetry by the entire ‘rhetorical’ movement (as shown in Dutch research, especially by Herman Pleij).

The first thing that can be said about the literary landscape of the Netherlands in the late Middle Ages (c. 1400–1500) is that it was highly diverse and strongly decentralized. Throughout this period, and later as we come into the 16th and 17th century, the Netherlands lacked a cultural hub, comparable, for example, to London or Paris, to which the literary life of the entire country would naturally gravitate. The literary map of the Low Countries was, similarly as the political one, a patchwork of mostly autonomous towns and fiefdoms. Late-Medieval Dutch literature was created, performed and listened to primarily in a town environment. The cultural influence of the central court of the Burgundians and Habsburgs in Brussels, although not negligible, was never strong enough, insofar as vernacular literature was concerned, to eclipse the towns as a centre of patronage. The municipal elites – responsible for a large part of the ‘official’ literary activity – were on the whole culturally much more heterogeneous than the court. The well-to-do burghers, who are credited with much of the surviving late-medieval literary output, communicated with their social superiors as well as with inferiors. As mainly city-dwellers, a group that was traditionally open to external stimuli, Netherlandic poets could quite freely exchange views and opinions with their equals in other towns which belonged to a relatively densely-populated civic network. In effect,

owing to their unique position in the nascent bourgeoisie, Netherlandic poets and writers of the late Middle Ages could respond to aesthetic trends that permeated almost all strata of medieval society.

As aesthetic and ideological changes occurred at a different pace in various parts of the Netherlands, late-medieval Dutch literature was also, more than anything else, an eclectic one. On the one hand, creative modes considered to be typical of the Middle Ages thrived alongside ones that hinted at the coming of what would become known as the Renaissance. On the other, purely local literary trends assimilated features characteristic of broader European ones. This had a number of consequences for the reception of late-medieval Netherlandic literature. The critics of the 19th century were classically-trained and inspired by visions of the Italian High Renaissance. They typically considered the eclecticism of this poetry and drama as an indication of barbarism or decadence. These assumptions resulted in a tendency to condemn 15th and early-to-mid-16th century authors for lacking the originality and intellectual autonomy expected of the true Renaissance artist. Whereas in English literature the period of mediocre poets between Chaucer and Shakespeare was called by C.S. Lewis the ‘Drab Age’, the Netherlandic poetry of this period was described by Dutch critics in even stronger terms as a time of regression and decay, and contrasted with the glory of the ‘Golden Age’ of the 17th century.

Negative opinions about the poetry of the late Middle Ages persisted in Dutch literary criticism until the early 20th century, when they were gradually superseded by more favourable ones, mainly owing to the work of such critics as J.A.N. Knuttel and J.J. Mak.¹ In recent years, this gradual reassessment has led to the inclusion of many previously unknown or marginal poems in the canon of Dutch literature. Poetry from this period was even published in well-received popular anthologies, such as Gerrit Komrij’s *In liefde bloeyende*. However, despite growing critical acceptance, the literature of the ‘age of transition’² still retains a reputation for being difficult in reception and aesthetically disheartening. To many readers the archaic language and overt didacticism of many poems may appear at first to be daunting and uninspiring. Yet modern Dutch critics, above all Herman Pleij, have recognized the Netherlandic poetry of the late Middle Ages as not only highly eclectic but also rich in themes, both old and new, which were adapted to convey the new moral and social vision of Netherlandic burghers. It was a poetry which was both highly formalized and self-conscious, fanciful and earthy, didactic and ironic, and acutely aware of its significance to society as a whole – factors which a modern reader can recognize and appreciate. Pleij showed that this literature, far from being a vacuous self-reflexive formal game, represented an example of

¹ D. Coigneau, ‘Rederijkersliteratuur’, pp. 41–42, [in:] *Historische letterkunde. Facetten van vakbeoefening* ed. by M. Spiess. Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1994.

² A term introduced by R.P. Meijer in *Literature of the Low Countries*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978, p. 72.

vibrant early Humanism, functioning as an instrument of persuasion, at a point when Netherlandic poets, under the guise of ‘orators’, set about creating a new set of ethical norms for a rising class of city-dwellers.³

Owing to the sheer diversity of late-medieval Netherlandic literature, individual texts cannot be easily reduced to a single ‘progressive’ historical narrative. Although many attempts have been made by critics to create such narratives, mainly illustrating the command of poetic technique, the numerous caveats, which were required, revealed their insufficiency. Yet while an unbroken ‘line of development’ is hard to come by in this unruly literature, most critics consider it to be defined by three major factors. These are: (1) the rise of the literary institutions known as the chambers of rhetoric; (2) the emergence of secular literature in Latin; and (3) the appearance of vernacular printed publications. Contributing to these three developments there was the rise of the cities in the Netherlands, coupled with a corresponding shift in the balance of power away from the courts and feudal aristocracy and towards the mercantile civic oligarchy.

At this point one should say a few words about the socio-political environment in which late-medieval Dutch literature came into existence. From the early 15th century onwards, the patchwork of provinces that constituted the Netherlands gradually lost their autonomy, passing by a series of dynastic acquisitions into the hands of the dukes of Burgundy. Flanders became a Burgundian province in 1384, after the marriage of Margaret, the daughter of the Flemish count Louis de Mâle, to Philip the Bold, duke of Burgundy. Brabant and Limburg were assimilated into the Burgundian state in 1404–1406, followed by Holland and Zeeland in 1428. By a sequence of such steps, the Low Countries became part of a single state: the Burgundian Netherlands, an entity ruled by French-speaking nobles whose main political and economic interests lay south of the great rivers – the Rhine, Scheldt and Meuse.

By a variety of administrative measures the Dukes of Burgundy sought to fashion the disparate provinces into a manageable state. This proved to be no easy task. The Northern Netherlands, especially Holland and Zeeland, differed from the South (Flanders and Brabant). While both had a relatively urban character, the municipal network of the former was formed by a network of small towns of approximately the same size, while a handful of relatively large cities dominated the latter. The principal towns of the Southern Netherlands, Ghent, Bruges, Antwerp and Brussels, all exceeded in size the largest cities of the North – Leiden, Haarlem, Dordrecht, Delft, Amsterdam, and Gouda.⁴ The North and South of the Nether-

³ H. Pleij, ‘De laatmiddeleeuwse rederijersliteratuur als vroeg-humanistische overtuigingskunst.’ [in:] *Liefde en Fortuna in de Nederlandse letteren van de late middeleeuwen*. Special edition of *Jaarboek Koninklijke soevereine hoofdkamer van retorica ‘De Fonteyne’ te Gent* 34 (1984), p. 67.

⁴ J.I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477–1806*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 16.

lands differed strongly with regard to the predominant type of commercial activity. While Northern merchants specialized in the low-value high volume Baltic trade in staple goods such as timber and grain, and the North Sea herring fishery, the main commercial activities in the South comprised trade in and production of high-value luxury commodities. These were exported to destinations throughout Europe, often in reliance on the commercial network and political support of the Hansa towns. Thanks to these 'rich trades' merchants in the Southern Netherlands could generate a large surplus of wealth. The Northern Netherlands, by contrast, lagged behind the South. The typical kinds of trading activity there did not result in the emergence, in the 15th century, of a commercial elite of a type comparable with the one that arose in the Southern Netherlands.⁵

The Burgundian administration of the Netherlands leaned in all respects culturally towards the Francophone parts of the state. The court of the Burgundian dukes Philip the Good (1419–1467) and Charles the Bold (1467–1477) resided in Lille, Bruges, Mechlin, Dijon, and finally in Brussels. The court and the administration spoke French and comprised mostly Southern nobles. Unlike the North, which remained relatively isolated throughout the 15th century, the Southern Netherlands witnessed a rapid increase in the number and quality of economic and cultural activities after 1430. The Southern provinces owed this momentum to the proximity of the ducal court and the courts of the nobility and churchmen. Highly specialized areas of artistic craftsmanship, such as painting, architecture, tapestry-making, sculpture or music, were the privileged domain of artisans from the cities of Brussels, Ghent, Bruges, Leuven, Mechlin and Antwerp. Among these artists there were some of the most renowned Northern European painters of the age: Dirck Bouts, Gerard Davids, the Van Eycks, Hugo van der Goes, Hans Memling and Rogier van der Weyden. Fine luxury items were produced on such a scale for the highest strata of Burgundian society that, by the mid-15th century, 'art and décor became one of the principal activities of the towns of Brabant and Flanders.'⁶

As the towns grew in wealth, the Netherlandic-speaking burgherdom increased its involvement with what can be broadly termed 'vernacular culture.' The medieval cities of the Netherlands formed a congenial environment for the activities of lay and religious institutions of all kinds. From trade guilds to a wide variety of devotional societies, all these organizations responded to a need on the part of city-dwellers for orderliness, control and self-policing. At the same time, such institutions provided a safety-valve through which individual energies could be released. With regard to vernacular literature, this social pattern was epitomized by literary brotherhoods known as 'kamers van rhetorike.' Those who belonged

⁵ Israel, 1998, pp. 18–19.

⁶ Israel, 1998, p. 22.

to these institutions were known as ‘retrozijnen’ or ‘retorizijnen.’⁷ The terms ‘rederijkerskamer’ and ‘rederijker’ are frequently used by modern Netherlandic authors to designate, respectively, the institution and its members. Also the entire body of literature created by these organizations, typically from the 15th century to the late 16th century goes under the name of ‘rederijkersliteratuur.’ Strictly speaking, however, it is anachronistic to designate the 15th century and early 16th century texts as ‘rederijkersliteratuur’, as the term ‘rederijker’ was coined by the poet and linguist Hendrik Laurenszoon Spiegel towards the end of the 16th century. Spiegel translated Latin *rhetorica* as ‘rederijck-kunst’ (‘the art of eloquent speech’), hinting at the connection of ‘rhetorike’ and poetry to oratory.⁸ Neither variant, however, can be unconditionally understood as synonymous with classical rhetoric, in this article therefore the English equivalents, ‘chamber of rhetoric’ and ‘rhetorician,’ will be parenthesized to emphasize their unique character.

Since in each case the Netherlandic terms (‘rhetorike’, ‘retrozijn’) point towards a French etymology (‘rhétorique’, ‘rhétoricien’), Dutch and Flemish scholars traditionally assumed that the ‘kamers’ evolved from French religious confraternities called ‘puy’ (‘podia’) whose members composed religious poetry. The actual origins of the Netherlandic chambers, however, are not adequately documented. In the 12th century the ‘puy’ most probably spread from France (where such institutions existed in Rouen and Valenciennes) to the Burgundian Netherlands, where the first association with medieval rhetoric was made in the name of the ‘Puy d’école de rhétorique’ in Tournai. Yet it falls short of the mark to say, on the strength of the above, that the ‘kamers van rhetorike’ were an entirely French cultural import. The Dutch historian J.J. Mak was the first to suggest that the chambers in the Netherlands could have evolved similarly as in France, although not directly under French influence, out of mixed lay and religious associations specializing in literary activities. Such institutions were already in existence in the Low Countries by the end of the 14th century. Such confraternities, whose members sometimes referred to themselves as ‘gesellen van der conste’ or ‘gesellen van der spele,’ participated in religious events which required the combined efforts of both clergy and laity, producing mystery plays intended to add splendour to religious ceremonies.⁹

‘Kamers van rhetorike’ and religious confraternities were by no means the only institutions in the Low Countries whose activities included the production and performance of literary texts. Other municipal organizations which shared

⁷ Cf. A. van Elslander, ‘Letterkundig leven in de Bourgondische tijd. De rederijkers’ [in:] A. van Elslander, *Terugblik. Opstellen en toespraken van A. van Elslander*. Gent: Rijksuniversiteit Gent, 1986, p. 10.

⁸ H.L. Spiegel, *Twe-spraak. Ruygh-bewerp. Kort begrip. Rederijck-kunst*, ed. by W.J.H. Caron. Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1962.

⁹ J.J. Mak, *De Rederijkers*. Amsterdam: P.N. van Kampen en Zoon, 1944, p. 9.

a similar function were 'schuttersgilden' or 'schutterijen' ('civic guard companies'). Organized on the model of trade guilds, the 'schuttersgilden' were among the oldest civic organizations in the Netherlands. Performing 'scoenen spelen' ('beautiful plays') since the mid-14th century,¹⁰ the 'schutterijen' took part in processions and staged plays. These literary activities, organized on behalf of the Church and city on religious holidays, were in many cases closely entwined with those of the 'chambers of rhetoric.' In fact, the 'kamers van rhetorike' inherited from the 'schuttersgilden' their most significant literary competitions: 'juwelen' and 'landjuwelen.' The name 'juweel' literally meant 'jewel,' after the main prize. Such contests, organized with great pomp and circumstance, were held locally ('juweel') or for several provinces ('landjuweel').¹¹ Also involved in literary activity, though on a less regular basis, were a number of other guilds, brotherhoods, and associations of clerks. Like the 'kamers van rhetorike' and the 'schuttersgilden,' these organizations created such literary products as 'zinnespelen' (morality plays), 'tafelspelen' ('table plays' performed during a banquet), 'wagenspelen' ('wagon plays': mystery plays in which a specially-constructed cart was used as a stage), and 'esbattementen' (comedies).¹²

The structure of the 'chambers of rhetoric' resembled that of other craft guilds. The chambers exercised similarly strict control over certain types of craftsmanship (in this case – literary activity) in the city, restricting it to a closed limited group of licensed artisans. Head of each chamber was a 'Prins' ('prince') or 'Keizer' ('emperor'), typically a person of wealth and authority whose position was a purely ceremonial one. The actual task of running the chamber fell to the 'Facteur' or 'factor,' the leading poet who supervised the meetings of rank-and-file members. The factor was in charge of writing and directing the plays that each chamber staged on religious festivals and other special occasions. Factors were permanently employed by the chambers and their responsibilities towards the institution were laid down in a special contract. Somewhat lower in the hierarchy of the chamber was a 'vaandrig' (the standard bearer) and a 'clerc' (clerk or messenger). Last but certainly not least, each chamber had its own 'zot' – a jester who provided entertainment in combination with performances of satirical poetry and comic plays.¹³

Each 'chamber of rhetoric' had its official iconography consisting of a blazon modeled on those of the nobility. The blazon was bestowed on the chamber during an official celebration of 'baptism' together with the name of a patron saint. A chapel dedicated to this saint was under the special care of the chamber. The members were obliged to attend (and pay for) the religious service in honour of

¹⁰ H. Pleij *et al.*, *Op belofte van profijt. Stadsliteratuur en burgermoraal in de Nederlandse letterkunde van de middeleeuwen*. Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1991, p. 19.

¹¹ Cf. Mak, 1944, pp. 11, 92.

¹² Pleij, 1991, p. 15.

¹³ Mak, 1944, p. 15.

their holy patron. Apart from this, the chambers had an official name or an adage (or both). One of the oldest chambers in the Low Countries was the ‘Heilige Geest’ (‘The Holy Spirit’) in Bruges. Founded in the first half of the 15th century, this chamber had the adage ‘Myn werck es hemelic’ (‘My work is secret’).¹⁴ Other early chambers established in this period included ‘De Fonteijne’ (‘The Fountain’) in Ghent, and ‘De Violieren’ (‘the Violets’) in Antwerpen. Among the earliest chambers in the Northern Netherlands there were ‘Het bloemken Jesse’ in Middelburg (Zeeland) with the motto ‘In minnen groeiende’ (‘Growing in love’), established c. 1480, and the Haarlem chamber ‘De Pellicaen’ (‘The Pelican’), with the motto ‘Trou moet blijcken’ (‘Being faithful requires proof’).¹⁵ The names of the chambers, which are almost without exception derived from Biblical and theological symbolism, are evidence of the close link between these institutions and confraternities of a more devotional character, especially in the 15th and early 16th century. The arrival of humanism as well as the Reformation would significantly realign the doctrinal allegiance of the chambers, reflecting the changing religious and political climate in the cities, although those in the Protestant North typically retained their pre-Reformation names until the demise of the institutions as such in the mid-17th century.

The members of the chambers were sometimes called ‘broeders’ (‘brothers’), in possible reference to religious confraternities to which ‘kamers van rhetorike’ were often related. The ‘retrosijnen’ worked under the watchful eye of the factor, editing and re-editing their work under his tutelage until they reached the desired result. The verse produced by the chambers’ rank-and-file wordsmiths was commonly regarded as less important than the plays that were the chamber’s literary flagship. Some of the ‘rhetoricians’ acted in plays produced by the factor. Together they constituted a company of poet-players whose performances added splendour to the secular and religious festivities held within the city. Membership in the ‘chambers of rhetoric’ – whether ordinary or honorary (sometimes bestowed on city officials) – was limited to wealthier burghers owing to the fact that members had to pay for their admittance, livery and the occasional banquet for their brethren. For those who could afford it, however, the financial cost was more than compensated by the benefits. The ‘rhetoricians’ were exempt from paying certain taxes, and some received a financial allowance, which allowed them to participate in literary competitions (e.g. ‘landjuwelen’).

Of even more significance than the financial benefits were the social advantages of belonging to a ‘kamer van rhetorike.’ From the earliest point in their history, the chambers were insolubly linked to municipal centres of power. They acted as the producer, purveyor and in some ways, also the censor of texts trans-

¹⁴ A.-L. Van Bruaene, *Repertorium van rederijkerskamers in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden en Luik 1400–1650*. On-line database: http://www.dbnl.nl/tekst/brua002repe01_01/brua002repe01_01_0056.htm (retrieved on December 28, 2009).

¹⁵ Mak, 1944, p. 12.

mitting and disseminating the ‘dominant ideology’ of the municipal elites. The 17th century poet Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft, himself a member of the chamber, acknowledged in his *Nederlandsche historiën* that the plays staged by the ‘rhetoricians’ were the second most effective instrument after the chancel that the magistrates could use to ‘lead commoners by the ears.’ The chambers, Hooft wrote, inculcated a morale of ‘peaceful submissiveness’ and taught ordinary townsfolk to respect those in positions of power.¹⁶ Not only Hooft saw ‘rhetoric’ as a useful propaganda device for controlling the populace. Among the first to recognize this fact were the dukes of Burgundy. In 1493 Philip the Handsome (1478–1506) ordered the establishment of a ‘sovereign chamber’ at Ghent. The ‘Jesus metten balsem’ was intended to rein in other chambers and disseminate official propaganda. Philip’s initiative, however, misfired owing to strong competition from already well-established chambers.¹⁷

The activities of the ‘kamers van rhetorike’ were overtly educational. The events organized by the chambers – whether festivals of rhetoric, celebrations commemorating the births, marriages and engagements of royalty, processions, plays, or revelry on ecclesiastical holidays – were always an opportunity to educate other town-dwellers. As the chambers frequently put on plays to gather funds for building or restoring a church, helping the victims of floods or fires, as well as for institutions caring for orphans, the ill and the elderly, the rhetoricians dedicated much of their literary talent to promoting the Christian ideal of charity. The link to such charitable institutions as homes for the elderly survived well into the 17th century, for the Amsterdam chamber ‘De Eglentier’ (‘the Eglantine’) regularly donated its proceeds to the ‘Oude-mannenhuis’ (the ‘old men’s home’), which after the Reformation was no longer under the care of the Church, but the responsibility of the city.¹⁸ One of the main ways of financing such charitable activities were lotteries. Lottery plays were organized as a means of drawing the crowds and making sure that the spectators purchased the tickets. For this the rhetoricians devised the ‘lotterijkaerte.’ This ‘lottery ticket,’ printed in the form of a pamphlet, contained an anthology of poems submitted to a poetic competition held on the day of the lottery. The poems provided the contestants’ answers to the question (mostly an ethical or theological one) assigned in the invitation. A selection of different poems on each ‘ticket’ guaranteed higher profits for the organizers.¹⁹ Apart from social considerations, it was clear that the importance of the ‘chambers of rhetoric’ for the power structures in the city lays in their perceived ability to shape the public opinion in relation to key political events. ‘Rhetoricians’ wrote poetry to mark major victories, truce agreements and

¹⁶ Quoted in: M.B. Smits-Veldt, *Het Nederlandse renaissance-toneel*. Utrecht: HES Uitgevers, 1991, pp. 28–29. Also cf. Mak, 1944, p. 98.

¹⁷ Mak, 1944, p. 14.

¹⁸ J.A. Worp, *Geschiedenis van den Amsterdamschen schouwburg 1496–1772*. Amsterdam: S.L. van Looy, 1920, pp. 77–78.

¹⁹ Mak, 1944, pp. 99–102.

peace treaties, and officially charged with the task of praising rulers, they welcomed visiting royalty with pageants, tableaux and elaborate celebrations.²⁰

Throughout the 15th and 16th century, the chambers were largely responsible for crafting the public image of Netherlandic cities. This official message of allegiance, however, was not aimed only, or even primarily, at the Burgundian or Habsburg nobility. The francophone courtiers and administrators did not, as a rule, care much about vernacular Netherlandic verse. The main addressee of ‘rhetorical’ poetry, who had to be impressed with a sense of what the events of the day were about, were the Netherlandic-speaking city-dwellers. The process of propaganda, however, was bi-directional. In their official pageantry and verse the chambers also articulated what the magistrates and prominent officeholders saw as the duty and obligation of the rulers. These responsibilities were defined not only in terms of the interest of city, but also in terms of that of a larger part of the country. Poetry addressed to monarch often served the purpose of eliciting the support and allegiance of a larger population by appealing to the ‘public interest’ (‘gemeyn oerbaer’), according to which the ruler and his administration were expected to act. In this respect major towns, such as Brussels, Leuven and Antwerp, increasingly claimed, through their literary spokespersons, to represent not just themselves but an entire province, e.g. Flanders or Brabant, contributing to the emergence of an early sense of regional cohesion.²¹

As an institution the ‘kamers van rhetorike’ were perhaps best known for drama plays. Among the earliest works for the stage written and performed by the chambers were mystery (‘mysteriëspelen’), miracle (‘mirakelspelen’) and morality plays (‘spelen van zinne’). The mystery plays consisted of a dramatized Biblical narrative set around a mystery of the faith. *Seven Bliscapen van Maria*, a partly preserved devotional cycle about the seven beatitudes of the Virgin Mary, is one of the few surviving examples of this dramatic genre. Miracle plays, on the other hand, recounted supernatural and miraculous events found in legends and chronicles. The play – like narrative of *Mariken van Nieumeghen*, for example, tells a story of temptation, sin and redemption. The protagonist of the play, a girl called Mariken, is seduced by the devil in human form and lives seven years with her satanic lover at the Golden Tree (‘de Gulden Boom’) Inn in Antwerp; after watching a ‘wagenspel,’ however, she regains her faith in God. Miraculously rescued from the clutches of the devil, she spends the rest of her years doing penance in a monastery until, finally, her sins are forgiven. Among the morality plays *Den spyegel der Salicheyt van Elckerlyc* (written around 1475–1480, possibly by Petrus Dorlandus) stands out as a Dutch version, most likely predating the English one, of the story of Everyman (it was also translated into Latin as *Homulus*). Elckerlyc, the allegorical Everyman, is called by God to account for his life. Deserted by his friends, ‘Gezelschap’ (‘company’), ‘ma-

²⁰ Mak, 1944, pp. 91, 104.

²¹ Pleij, 1991, p. 17.

ghe', 'neve' ('friends' and 'relations'), and 'tgoet' ('worldly possessions'), he discovers that only 'Duecht' ('virtue') is willing to intercede on his behalf. 'Virtue' leads Elckerlyc to 'Kennisse' ('knowledge'), who in turn shows him the way to 'Biechte' ('Confession'). After confessing his sins, the repentant Elckerlyc is no longer afraid of 'Dood' ('Death'). At peace with God and with himself, he ascends to heaven.²²

In lyrical poetry the main genre practiced by the rhetoricians was the 'refrein' ('refrain'), a Netherlandic variant on the 14th century French ballad. Although the 'refrein' was not as strictly defined in terms of versification as, for example, the sonnet of the 16th century, it was by no means free of formal constraints. Throughout the 15th and 16th century, the typical 'refrein' comprised four stanzas of equal length: usually of 15 verses each, even though in many poems these could number anything from 8 to 24 verses. Each stanza ended with a refrain-like verse emphasizing the main point of the poem – the 'stok'. The last stanza, the 'envoy' or 'Prince', was somewhat shorter than the remaining ones. As a formal device inherited from the ballad, it was addressed to the head of the chamber of rhetoric, the 'Prins' ('Prince'), hence its name.²³ The Netherlandic 'refrein' genre had a specific taxonomy which obliged poets to assign their texts to one of three thematic categories: 'int amoureux,' 'int vroed' (alternative name: 'int wijs), and 'int sot.' Refrains belonging to the category 'int amoureux' exploited the convention of courtly love. Like the Minnesänger, the rhetoricians mainly dealt with love in terms of feudal bondage to an inaccessible and idealized woman whom the poet professed to serve in obedience, humility and submission. Refrains written 'int vroed' or 'int wijs' dealt with 'pious' and 'wise' matters. Some of the most common themes included devotional poems, ethical injunctions to follow Christ's teaching in renouncing worldly possessions, reflections on the transitory nature of earthly existence, and the social critique of medieval society for failing to live up to its Christian ideals. Unlike the 'high' texts, refrains 'int sot' were intended purely as entertainment. Somewhat similar to medieval fabliaux, these rhymed comic anecdotes mainly dealt with ribald and burlesque themes, such as the love life of burghers and peasants.²⁴

Netherlandic authors of lyrical poetry, writing at the turn of the 15th and 16th century, were mostly anonymous. The 'rhetoricians' whose names have been preserved were mostly those who produced a larger corpus of texts, and who lived at a time when their works could be published in print. These group of poets includes Anthonis de Roovere (1430/35?–1480), Jan van Doesborch (c. 1470–1536), Matthijs de Castelein (1485/1486?–1550), Jan van Stijevoort (c. 1495–1576), Cornelis Crul (c. 1500–1550), and Eduard de Dene (1505–1578).

The main theorist among the 'rhetoricians' was Matthijs de Castelein. A priest and lawyer who spent most of his life in the towns of Pamele and Oudenaarde, De

²² Mak, 1944, pp. 48–57.

²³ Mak, 1944, p. 29.

²⁴ Mak, 1944, p. 32.

Castelein authored the most important Netherlandic treatise codifying the art of poetic composition as it was understood and practiced by the chambers: the posthumously published *De const van rhetoriken* (1555). In this dream-vision poem, a ‘rhetorician’, having fallen asleep on a summer day, is visited by Mercury. The god encourages him to write about the art of rhetoric as a way of restoring it to its proper state after years of neglect and abuse, for as the poet himself states:

O edel Rethorike vul wyser verstanden
 Vvat doet men u schanden, rein vrouwe vul eeren,
 Alzo wel in Vlaenderen, als in ander landen:
 Idioten met onghewasschen handen
 Scheuren u, uwe costelicke cleeren,
 Daghelicks hooric uwen last vermeeren
 Van straet dichters, zoomen te menigher sté ziet,
 Zij en kuenen niet, noch en willen niet leeren,
 Nochtans en kennen zij, een A voor een B, niet.²⁵

[O noble Rhetoric full of wise reason, how abused you have been, o honourable lady, not just in Flanders, but in other countries as well: idiots with unwashed hands tear you apart and rend your costly clothes; daily I hear street poets, whom one sees in many a city, praising you, yet they cannot, and will not learn; what is more, they do not even know their A's from their B's.]

What was ‘rhetoric’ according to De Castelein and his contemporaries? *De const van rhetoriken* is a very practical work – resembling much more a handbook of poetics than a theoretical treatise on oratory. Apart from an introductory section dealing briefly with theoretical matters, it is in fact an anthology of examples representing the poetic technique of the ‘retrosijnen’: ballads, ‘refreinen,’ and the more intricate ‘dobbelsteerten’ (‘double-tails’), ‘keten-dichten’ (‘chain poems’), a ‘schaeck-berd’ (a ‘chessboard’ with squares that could be rearranged to produce 38 different ballads), epigrams in classical meters (e.g. in the iambic and Sapphic measure), ‘simpletten,’ ‘dobletten,’ a ‘ricqueracque,’ a ‘deffianche,’ ‘rondelen’ and others.

The contents of the ‘anthological’ part of De Castelein’s work suggest that for him and for other members of the Netherlandic chambers, ‘rhetoric’ meant something different from the classical *ars rhetorica*. Nonetheless, the author of *De const van rhetoriken* repeatedly acknowledges his debt to Cicero and other representatives of ancient oratory. The authority of the ancients is called upon to justify the status and antiquity of ‘rhetorike,’ as here, where De Castelein describes the demands that the art places upon those who practice it:

Zo eist van dees const vveerachtich en taey,
 D’ingien zeer fray, tallen tide spade ende vrough
 Vverdt gheexerceerd zonder eenich delay

²⁵ M. de Castelein, *De const van rhetoriken* (facsimile of the first edition, Ghent 1555). Oudenaarde: Theater Pax Vobis, 1986, p. 10.

Tot deze scientie, net ende gaey
 Met schoonder materien daer therte toe drough:
 Ghy souckt, keerd ende wendt naer u ghevough
 Delicate substantie die u magh blijcken meest,
 Nemmermeer en hebt ghy blockiersels ghenough,
 Ende hier af es cause der rethoriken gheest.

Vvant Cicero seid tot diere satisfactie,
 Dat des oratuers actie, vul excellentien,
 Niet ghelegghen en es, in de radactie,
 In de handelijnghen, noch in de contractie
 Der rechter const, oft vander scientien:
 Maer in de opinien ende de inuentien
 Van den componiste, naer dadt hem best greit,
 In de redenen ghemaect met diligentien
 Diend magnificentie ende solemniteit.²⁶

[This demanding and difficult art calls for a subtle intellect, which is to be exercised in practicing this fine and pleasing science on the kind of beautiful subject matter to which one's heart is drawn. You must seek elegant topics which you consider to be the most appropriate, in ceaseless intellectual toil, as from this is derived the spirit of rhetoric. Because Cicero rightly observed that the orator is not to excel in the declamation, the actions or the summarizing that are part of this true art or science: instead, it is in the opinions and the *inventio* of the maker, according to what pleases him best, in arguments fashioned diligently, that there should be magnificence and solemnity.]

De Castelein does not define 'rhetorike' directly in his treatise. He does, however, repeatedly bring it into conjunction with classical oratory as a 'cuenste van seere wel te sprékene' ('the art of speaking very well' – De Castelein's translation of the Latin definition of rhetoric as 'ars bene dicendi').²⁷ Nestor and Uliesses found that by the power of fine speech ('wel sprekins cracht') words could flow like honey from their mouths, writes De Castelein. Homer, he continues, provides us with many examples showing that eloquent persons have more persuasive power ('Die wel redent gheeft zijne worden macht').²⁸ The inventor of 'rhetorike' was Mercury; it was called 'rethorica' in antiquity, but now it is called 'rhetorike gemeene.' Using the word 'gemeene' ('common'), De Castelein is hinting that his designation extends to texts crafted in the vernacular.²⁹

In *De const van rethoriken*, De Castelein consistently equates the tradition of classical Greek and Latin oratory with the practice of vernacular Netherlandic 'rhetorike' as a means of raising the status of the latter. This leads him to a rather

²⁶ De Castelein, 1986, p. 22.

²⁷ L. Roose, 'Lof van Retorica. De poetica der rederijkers. Een verkenning', [in:] *Liber alumnorum Prof. Dr. E. Rombauts: aangeboden ter gelegenheid van zijn vijftenzestigste verjaardag en zijn dertigjarig hoogleraarschap*, ed. by Norbert de Paepe and Lode Roose. Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1968, p. 113.

²⁸ De Castelein, 1986, p. 11.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

innovative conclusion. Although the classical rhetoric of ‘Orateurs’ and the art of ‘this profession’ (‘dit profes’, i.e. Netherlandic ‘rhetoricians’) appear at first sight to imply different things, they both conform to the same rules. This makes them similar regardless of differences in execution. Classical oratory and late-medieval vernacular ‘rhetorike’ are, therefore, according to De Castelein, ‘like bread and wine’: they are different and yet, since both rely on the same principle of ‘refined speech,’ they are complementary, since the one is never inferior to the other.³⁰

Unlike many earlier poets of the ‘rhetorical’ school in the Netherlands, who explicitly designated ‘rhetoric’ as a gift of the Holy Spirit (for example Jan van Stijevoort), De Castelein chose to base his art on a different ideological foundation. He constructed for his ‘const’ (‘art’) a genealogy whereby it could be regarded a successor of the rhetoric of Cicero and other ancient *auctores*. At the same time, in the ‘anthology’ part of *De const van rhetoriken*, De Castelein preserved non-classical concepts regarding the choice of subject matter and on the craft of versification which were aligned with the existing practice of late-medieval vernacular poets.

What was the reason for this eclecticism? To answer this question we have to examine the European roots of the Netherlandic concept of ‘rhetorike.’ *De const van rhetoriken* is clearly the work of an author who gave much thought to literature, and who, refusing to accept shoddy workmanship, also tried to perfect the poetic craft of his contemporaries. But De Castelein was also the scion of a tradition of poetic theory and practice, ubiquitous in medieval Europe, which saw literature in the light of the rhetorical rules for eloquent speech formulated by the classics. The Middle Ages did not have an equivalent of the modern distinction into ‘poetry’ and other types of literary and non-literary texts. The scholars and poets of medieval Europe adhered the classical model according to which poetics and the study of literary texts fell under the joint domain of *grammatica* and *rhetorica*. The former, referred to by Quintillian as ‘recte loquendi scientia,’ dealt mainly with the rules for metrical composition and the interpretation of texts, while the latter, known as ‘ars benedicendi,’ was concerned with matters of style. For the medieval scholar or poet, ‘poetry’ (in the modern sense) was seen as a product of oratory, while ‘poetria’ (a term commonly found in medieval treatises on poetics),

³⁰ De Castelein, 1986, p. 12:

By ghelijcke segghic, gheweerd alle exces,
 Hoord mijn woord expres, zonder eenigh venijn,
 Als schijntere different daer gheen en es
 Tusschen den Orateurs ende dit profes,
 Oft tusschen Rethorijcke vlaemsch ende latijn,
 Nochtans tendéren zij tot eenen fijn:
 Een praeccept, moet d’eens en d’anders beleeden scheeden,
 Dus accorderen zij tsamen als brood ende wijn,
 Vvant schoonsprake moet de wortel van hem beeden cleeden.

a stylistic instrument from the category of *inventio*, referred to the fictive subject matter of a text,³¹ although – following a misreading of a text by Martianus Capella – it also could denote ‘poetry’ and ‘poetics’ in the modern sense. Horace’s *Ars poetica* was sometimes referred to in the Middle Ages as ‘Poetria,’ while the 13th century author Geoffroi de Vinsauf published a treatise on poetics entitled ‘Poetria nova.’³²

Grammatica and *rhetorica* comprised, along with *dialectica*, the *trivium*. Together with the *quadrivium* (consisting of *geometria*, *arithmetica*, *astronomia* and *musica*), the *trivium* made up *septem artes liberales* – the canon of knowledge which formed the basis for the medieval school curriculum. The main texts for studying rhetoric in the Middle Ages were Cicero’s *De Inventione* (known as ‘Rhetorica vetus’ or ‘prima’) and a treatise ascribed to Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (known as ‘Rhetorica nova’ or ‘secunda’),³³ parts of Quintillianus’ *Institutio*, and treatises by such authors as Martianus Capella, Cassiodorus, Isidore of Seville, Boethius and Alcuine. Gradually, since the 14th century, *rhetorica* started to supercede *grammatica* as the most important discipline of the *trivium*. It was exactly at this point that *rhetorica* came to the attention of Netherlandic writers. These started to call themselves ‘retrosijnen,’³⁴ selecting oratory and ‘refined speech’ as the theoretical mainspring of their activities. Alongside classical *rhetorica*, since the 12th century medieval French authors started composing ‘artes poeticae’: manuals on the subject of poetics and versification based on the precepts of Cicero and Horace. In the late 14th century, these ‘artes poeticae,’ which started dealing increasingly with texts in the vernacular, diverged into two separate entities. As the Dutch scholar Marijke Spies writes ‘disposition, invention, and even most aspects of elocution came under *première rhétorique*,’ while ‘techniques of rhyme and rhythm were discussed in tracts known as *arts de seconde rhétorique*.’³⁵ The latter was also called ‘rhetorique laie’ or ‘rhetorique vulgaire,’ underscoring the fact that its application was limited to texts in the vernacular. Some of the treatises on the ‘arts de seconde rhétorique’ produced at the turn of the 15th and 16th century in France include Jacques Legrand’s *Des rimes*, the anonymous *Les règles de la seconde rhétorique*, and *Traité de l’art de rhétorique*, Baudet Herenc’s *Le doctrinal de la seconde rhétorique* and, perhaps the most important all of them, Jean Molinet’s *L’art de rhétorique*.³⁶

³¹ M. Spies, ‘Developments in sixteenth-century Dutch poetics. From “rhetoric” to “renaissance”’, [in:] *Renaissance-Rhetorik*, ed. by H.F. Plett. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993, p. 78.

³² E.R. Curtius, *Literatura europejska i łacińskie średniowiecze* [Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter], translated by Andrzej Borowski. Kraków: Universitas, 1997, p. 162.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ Roose, 1968, pp. 114–115.

³⁵ Spies, 1993, p. 76.

³⁶ S.F. Witstein, *Funeraire poëzie in de Nederlandse Renaissance. Enkele funeraire gedichten van Heinsius, Hoof, Huygens en Vondel gezien tegen de achtergrond van de theorie betreffende het genre*. Assen: Van Gorcum, 1969, p. 39.

The authors of the ‘*artes poeticae*’ and their successors in the ‘*seconde rhetorique*’ are credited by Dutch scholars with having suggested to Netherlandic ‘*rhetoricians*’ in the late 15th and early 16th century a large part of their key theoretical concepts. These notions included, first of all, the idea that poetry is a special form of eloquence whose function is identical to that of oratory and, second, the conviction that the instrument for perfecting such ‘*rhetoric*’ can be found in mastering the *ars versificandi*. This, as we have seen above, is precisely the point of view that De Castelein, the chief theoretician of the Netherlandic ‘*kamers van rhetorike*’ endorsed in his treatise. His *Const van rhetorike* was an attempt to renew the already strong ideological link between the Netherlandic ‘*rhetoric*’ of the chambers and medieval *rhetorica*. This enabled De Castelein to anchor ‘*rhetorike*’ on the secure foundation of classical rhetoric and canonical texts. De Castelein was strongly convinced (in the words of the Dutch scholar Dirck Coigneau) of the need to consider classical literature no longer only as a storehouse of factual information but as a valid stylistic model which poets wishing to perfect their craft needed to follow. Generally, however, he strove to reconcile such innovation with existing poetic tradition. In this light De Castelein’s emphasis on the importance of the classics should be seen as a manner of providing a powerful new *raison d’être* for the practice of Netherlandic poetics growing out of the ‘*artes de seconde rhétorique*.’

Re-establishing a connection between classical *rhetorica* and ‘*rhetorike*’ was essential for anyone wishing (like De Castelein) to legitimize, strengthen and extend the social function of the poetry of the ‘*rhetoricians*’ in Netherlandic society. In fact, an interest in poetry understood as oratory was not unique to the *Const van rhetoriken*. Dutch scholars investigating ‘*rhetorical*’ literature, most notably Herman Pleij, noted that a preoccupation with the persuasive role of literature was highly characteristic of a great many texts written by De Castelein’s ‘*rhetorical*’ contemporaries. In his highly influential *Op belofte van profijt* (1991) and in several earlier articles, Pleij argued that poetry in the 15th century in the Netherlands was inextricably related to persuasion. The aim of ‘*rhetorical*’ poetry in the Netherlands, as Pleij described it, was to legitimize the ambitions and values of the 15th century Netherlandic burghers, and to respond to the questions troubling them.³⁷ In *Op belofte van profijt* Pleij reviewed the main themes of this late-medieval Netherlandic ‘*town literature*’, profiling a wide range of texts created mainly (though not exclusively) by ‘*rhetoricians*’ within and beyond city walls. Exemplifying what Pleij calls the ‘*profit principle*’ (‘*het profijtbeginsel*’), this literature strove to provide town communities with a pragmatic philosophy that could be applied in daily life.

The main themes of this literature, examined by Pleij, include arguments in praise of the city and in favour of the common interest of town-dwellers, eulogies of unanimity in civic government, as well as injunctions to thrift and la-

³⁷ Pleij, 1984, p. 71.

bor combined with a condemnation of idleness and wastefulness. The makers of these texts transformed and adapted elements of Christian moral doctrine to the requirements of a society of burghers. They emphasized social mobility and a profit-oriented lifestyle, marshalling theological arguments and specific exempla to support their case. Some of the 15th century Netherlandic poets quoted by Pleij championed a doctrine of self-reliance, defining ‘wisdom’ (‘wijsheit’) in terms of the ability to provide for one self without the need to appeal to others for assistance. In other texts adaptability, resourcefulness and ‘pragmatic opportunism’ were depicted as the key to survive in the city.³⁸ The late-medieval ‘civic literature’ of the Netherlands acknowledged the need for individual privacy and leisure as gratification for the time spent working. In ‘De laatmiddeleeuwse rederijersliteratuur als vroeghumanistische overtuigingskunst’ (1984), Pleij gave a convincing demonstration of how Netherlandic ‘rhetoricians’ constructed new ethical guidelines for burghers by crafting texts that offered consolation against the vicissitudes of fate. These texts praised reason, promoting an ethic of self-reliance and practical empiricism while condemning unreason and stupidity (the common denominator for moral sin related to Erasmus’s *moria*). On other occasions the persuasive rhetoric designed to convince audiences of the need to adopt specific moral standards was implemented through parody and satire. Such was the function of carnivalesque ‘spotgilden’ (‘mocking guilds’), which staged plays and organized festivities showing an inverted world populated by ‘burghers behaving badly’ – allegorical representatives of medieval society who had fallen short of the standards which they were expected to obey. Such negative *exempla* gave burghers a virtual space where unwanted behaviours could be acted out, projected on a controllable ‘Other’, contained and symbolically neutralized or expelled from society.³⁹

To play their part as required, Netherlandic poets sought a theoretical basis to integrate the main functional aims of their art. A general framework, on which they could rely, was already present in medieval poetics, where poets were assigned the role of orators, whose persuasive mission was coupled to moral teaching flavored by amusement. This existing model was exceptionally well adapted to the role which Netherlandic ‘rhetoricians’ increasingly began to assume, i.e. that of makers of a new value system that benefited the upcoming class of burghers. To it the Netherlandic ‘rhetoricians’ added contemporary French concepts of versification brought under the ‘arts de seconde rhétorique,’ which they continued to perfect independently from the late 15th century onwards. De Castelein, whose work provides an insight into both the conservative and the modernizing tendencies within

³⁸ Pleij, 1991, p. 25–46.

³⁹ Pleij, *Het gilde van de Blauwe Schuit; literatuur, volksfeest en burgermoraal in de late middeleeuwen*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1983.

the ‘rhetorical’ school of poetry in the Netherlands, set out to provide exactly what his ‘rhetorical’ brethren needed most: a consistent and erudite ideology by which the claims of poetry could be justified and, illustrating these principles, a range of texts showing their author’s perfect command of the art.

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