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The relevance of the Netherlandish rhetoricians

ARJAN VAN DIXHOORN, SAMUEL MAREEL, AND BART RAMAKERS

This special issue aims to contribute to the burgeoning field of the social and cultural history of knowledge and the role of literary texts in shaping cultures of knowledge by focusing on the world of the rhetoricians, a movement that defined Netherlandish civic culture from the mid-1400s through (at least) the mid-1600s.¹ They constituted a broad (largely lay) coalition of artisans, artists, printers, traders, merchants, clergymen, teachers, officials, patricians, and aristocrats that consciously crafted a vernacular literary culture interested in theology, law, and philosophy, as well as in the liberal and mechanical arts. These people gathered in confraternity-type chambers of rhetoric to feast, converse, compete, and compose and perform poems, songs, and plays.

This typically Flemish-Dutch literary culture grew out of local Dutch-language traditions, while incorporating French-language literary practices, genres, techniques, and institutions of the *seconde rhétorique* during the early fifteenth century. It would shape vernacular culture in the early modern Dutch-speaking Low Countries. From the 1520s onwards, the rhetoricians came under increasing scrutiny from authorities (because of suspicions of heresy), and from the early seventeenth century on they became increasingly subject to critique from some humanists attacking their festivity, lack of conformity to neo-classicist rhetorical and poetical theory, and exuberant use of hybridised language (a language full of terms of Latin and French origin). However, the deep integration of rhetorical practice in Dutch-speaking culture prevented an easy demise. Instead, the attacks created new internal and external dynamics.

¹ Important contributions to the social history of knowledge are: S. J. Harris, 'Long-Distance Corporations, Big Sciences, and the Geography of Knowledge', *Configurations*, 6 (1998) 2, 269–304; Robert Darnton, 'An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris', *The American Historical Review*, 105 (2000) 1, 1–35; Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Pamela O. Long, *Openness, Secrecy, Authorship: Technical Arts and the Culture of Knowledge from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen, *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002); Joel Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004); M. Jacob, *The First Knowledge Economy: Human Capital and Economic Development, 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

After the separation of the south and the north, rhetoricians would continue to dominate cultural life in the Spanish Netherlands until the end of the eighteenth century. In the Dutch Republic, despite significant criticism and rising alternatives, they would continue to flourish at least until the middle of the seventeenth century (only gradually disappearing between 1680 and 1740 in the core regions of Holland and Zeeland for reasons largely unknown).² The history of their cultural survival and the demise of their hegemony still needs to be written. Clearly however, their leading cultural role coincided with frenzied state-formation processes, revolts, and reform movements. It can now be argued that the chambers of rhetoric were active in shaping a vernacular culture that helped record *and* further the rise of the Dutch-speaking regions of the Low Countries into a European cultural centre from the fifteenth century onwards. Not only did they promote the enjoyment of a lavishly urbane way of life, they also co-produced a political community, bent on action upon the social and natural world.

The essays in this issue show that the literary art of the rhetoricians should be seen as (re-)producing both knowledge content *and* a knowledge community. They did so through the use of verbal and visual discourses that were poetic and theatrical in form. Using theatrical tools to reach out to a wider public from within the intimacy of their poetic communities organised around oral and scripted literary exercises, rhetoricians engaged highly literate and socially mixed audiences of Netherlandish cities, towns, and villages in pondering the relationships between the spiritual and natural worlds, the body politic, and the self. By collectively posing questions and seeking answers, and building communities of action, they also actively shaped these relationships.

For about two centuries (and during the rise of the region's transregional and then global power), the rhetoricians and their chambers of rhetoric were the caretakers of a vernacular epistemology. Rather than forming a secluded scholarly community dedicated to theorising, they used the arts and sciences (broadly conceived) to study, interpret, and shape the self, the community, and the world at large for *practical* purposes. That is, they aimed to orient individual and community in the world and thus improve the ability to act (correctly and effectively) in and (increasingly also) upon it.

Why then, are these rhetoricians relevant to an international audience? Since, apart from a few exceptions, their literary works have not received international acclaim. For a long time, because of the focus on a literary assessment of their legacy from the point of view of a modern canon of national literatures, most of the theatrical and poetical works produced in the context of the chambers of rhetoric seemed to have no clearly recognisable artistic or philosophical relevance. Their importance to a larger audience, less interested in the specifics of Dutch literary history, derives from their cultural role in co-producing one of Europe's major cultural zones of the early modern era. Their centrality in the

² Tom Verschaffel, *De weg naar het binnenland* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2016).

shaping of a Netherlandish artistic, philosophical, political, and religious culture – in interaction with local French- and Latin-speaking cultures – is increasingly recognised by specialists. The rise of the Low Countries as a cultural hub in the early modern world cannot be understood without them. They represent the core of a vernacular culture, interacting with varying levels of intensity with other vernacular cultures on the rise, in particular in Germany, France, Spain, Italy, and England. If we want to understand the cosmopolitan nature of the shaping of vernacular *cultures of reference* in ‘Renaissance Europe’ we also need to consider the case of the rhetoricians.

THE STUDY OF THE RHETORICIANS

In the twentieth century, the study of the rhetoricians developed into a rich field of expertise within Dutch literary studies, grounded in a large number of critical editions of plays, poems, and songs performed during public festivals, such as Ghent (1539) or Antwerp (1561);³ of single-author manuscripts, such as those of the works of the Bruges rhetorician Cornelis Everaert;⁴ of miscellanies of rhetoricians’ poetry and song;⁵ and of the many other (mostly manuscript and archival) sources related to rhetoricians’ life (statutes of chambers, membership lists, references in city accounts or court records, etc.).⁶

Since the 1980s, five areas of study in particular have been developed that make the rhetoricians of particular interest to international audiences today. The first is that of the rise of an urban culture with its public sphere (festive and theatrical culture, conversation and poetical culture, manuscript and print culture); the second is the artistic production and the rise of the Netherlandish schools of art (whose relationships with the rhetoricians have been explored by many art historians); the third is lay, popular, and civic religion and the rise of Protestantism and Counter-Reformation culture; the fourth is cultural transfer (in particular between the literary and learned cultures in Latin, French, and Dutch); and the last area of interest is the development of a practice-oriented philosophical culture and the rise of the new sciences in the Low Countries. (The link between the culture of the rhetoricians and the arts and sciences has only recently been opened up for study, in conjunction with the social history of knowledge.) An underlying area of study that connects these five, emphasises how the local appropriation of transregional influences simultaneously forged

³ *De Gentse spelen van 1539*, ed. B. H. Ern e and L. M. van Dis, 2 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982); *De Antwerpse spelen van 1561, naar de editie Silvius (Antwerpen 1562)*, ed. Ruud Ryckaert, 2 vols. (Ghent: Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde, 2011).

⁴ *De spelen van Cornelis Everaert*, ed. W. N. M. H sken, 2 vols. (Hilversum: Verloren, 2005).

⁵ See, for example *Jan van Stijvoorts Refereinenbundel anno MDXXIV*, ed. Frederik Lyna and Willem Van Eeghem, 2 vols. (Antwerp: De Sikkel, 1930); and *Het Antwerps Liedboek*, ed. Dieuwke E. van der Poel *et al.*, 2 vols. (Tiel: Lannoo, 2004).

⁶ See in particular *Retoricaal Memoriaal: Bronnen voor de geschiedenis van de Hollandse rederijkerskamers van de middeleeuwen tot het begin van de achttiende eeuw*, ed. F. C. van Boheemen and Th. C. J. van der Heijden (Delft: Eburon, 1999).

cultural heterogeneity on a European level, and cultural homogeneity within single cultural zones. After all, the rhetoricians *are* unique and regionally specific, but *only to a certain extent*. They are the *local* expression of *larger* trends and patterns of exchange in Western Europe.⁷

The approach to the rhetoricians that was particularly strong from the 1950s through the 1980s, focused on their lyrical and dramatic genres. Most of the extant texts created in the context of the chambers of rhetoric are set in a limited number of easily recognisable forms, at least until the rise of new forms from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards. In the regular meetings of the rhetoricians and in their competitions, verse forms such as song, *refrein* (the most typical of all the genres used), *rondeau*, and *ballade* were essential. Versified plays dominated their interaction with larger audiences outside the intimacy of a meeting of rhetoricians. The allegorical arguments of the *spelen van zinne* and the comical jest of the *esbattementen* or *chuchten* [farces] were presented to audiences in open urban spaces, during processions and other urban festivals, or during interurban competitions organised by one chamber and attended by others from the (wider) region. Other forms of dramatic rhetoric such as the *tafelspelen* [table plays] were performed in smaller settings, in rhetoricians' meetings or at banquets of city councils.⁸

From the 1980s onwards, literary historians in the Netherlands and Flanders would increasingly focus on the larger cultural contexts in which the literature of the rhetoricians was produced and consumed. The most influential contributions were made by Marijke Spies and Herman Pleij. In a series of books and articles, Pleij developed the first comprehensive explanation of the cultural importance of the chambers of rhetoric and their literary culture. He argued that they played a quintessential role in bricolaging a distinctly urban Dutch-language culture. It was the result of a 'civilisation mission', focused on disciplining habits, attitudes, and emotions of townsmen, first of urban elites, and then of the middling groups, between the 1450s and 1550s.⁹

While Pleij stressed Stoic influences on the rhetoricians, Spies opened the debate on the role of Renaissance and humanist influences on the rhetoricians, a controversial topic that has not been settled. In many articles she unravelled the shift from (what she believed to be) medieval to humanist rhetorical and poetical theories and practices in the literature of the rhetoricians. She demonstrated how they created the *spel van zinne*, their most important dramatic

⁷ See Arjan van Dixhoorn and Susie Speakman Sutch (eds.), *The Reach of the Republic of Letters: Literary and Learned Societies in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

⁸ For important examples, see W. M. H. Hummelen, *De sinnekens in het Rederijksdrama* (Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1958); Dirk Coigneau, *Refreinen in het zotte bij de rederijkers*, 3 vols. (Ghent: Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde, 1980–1983); Patricia Lammens-Pikhaus, *Het tafelspel bij de rederijkers*, 2 vols. (Ghent: Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde, 1988–1989).

⁹ Herman Pleij, *De sneeuwpoppen van 1511: Literatuur en stadscultuur tussen middeleeuwen en moderne tijd* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1988); idem, 'Urban Elites in Search of a Culture: The Brussels Snow Festival of 1511', *New Literary History*, 21 (1989–1990), 629–47.

genre, by turning the older (French) *moralité* into a dramatised form of the scholastic *quaestio disputanda*. Subsequently, Bart Ramakers has shown how the *spel van zinne*, in particular in the context of competitions, nurtured a culture of probabilistic reasoning. He also stressed the strong influence of Scripture on these plays, in particular in the context of processions. Nelleke Moser has shown how scholastic principles (the use of evidence from nature and the Scriptures and of allegorical interpretation) determined rhetorical reasoning. In unravelling the ‘poetics’ of the rhetoricians, she also identified neo-Platonic influences. Hence, since the 1980s, a close study of the texts produced by the rhetoricians has revealed a philosophical sophistication that was the result of absorbing scholastic and humanist influences. Yet, it seems that the rhetoricians, those *litterati* of the vernacular, also established their own practices in reading, interpreting, and appropriating sources of learning and expertise.¹⁰

The study of the cultural context of the rhetoricians stimulated the interest in the theatrical and performative qualities of their plays, and also of their poems and songs. A well-established tradition has deepened our understanding of the use of specific times and places in their theatrical performances; of the ways they used the stage, costumes, and stage props; of how they organised the rehearsals and the final staging; how they used and preserved texts of plays; or how they scripted the speech and gestures of actors in order to create comical effects, for example. Their private meetings and public competitions gave rhetoricians a platform for reciting, performing, and playing texts written for the occasion by themselves or other members of their community. Their ceremonial meetings and festivals were also highly dialogical in nature. The little evidence that survives at least indicates that rhymed speech, scripted or not, pervaded all meetings. It was present in the longer poems, songs, or plays performed at more official occasions, but also in welcome and farewell ceremonies, installations of new members, in prize award or occasional mock ceremonies. Hence, chambers of rhetoric have come to be understood as institutions that organised communities of rhetoricians by practising a performative literary culture. Their literary texts were all intended to function in performative contexts; with one or more interlocutors engaging (real but in some of their works also imagined) live audiences with texts or lines invented, written, and most often performed by the author or his fellows.¹¹

Scholars from two other disciplines, art historians and social and cultural historians, have also become increasingly interested in rhetoricians’ culture.

¹⁰ Marijke Spies, *Rhetoric, Rhetoricians and Poets: Studies in Renaissance Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Henk Duits and Ton van Strien (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999); Bart Ramakers, ‘Tonen en betogen: De dramaturgie van de Rotterdamse spelen van 1561’, *Spiegel der Letteren*, 43 (2001) 3, 176–204; Nelleke Moser, *De strijd voor rhetorica: Poëtica en positie van redejkers in Vlaanderen, Brabant, Zeeland en Holland tussen 1450 en 1620* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001). For classical influences, see also Anke van Herk, *Fabels van liefde: Het mythologisch-amoureuze toneel van de redejkers (1475–1621)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

¹¹ Arjan van Dixhoorn, ‘Chambers of Rhetoric: Performative Culture and Literary Sociability in the Early Modern Northern Netherlands’, in Van Dixhoorn and Sutch (eds.), *The Reach of the Republic of Letters*, 119–58.

The international community of art historians interested in the Netherlandish schools of art has shown a particular interest in the rhetoricians. The reason is twofold: first, they recognised that Netherlandish painting (and engraving) is thematically close to the literature of the rhetoricians. This thematic affinity has drawn specialists of two of the most famous early Netherlandish painters in particular, Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder, towards a study of the rhetoricians.¹² Secondly, the culture of rhetoric and the culture of painting appear to have been strongly integrated socially. Many painters were members of chambers of rhetoric, and in 1480 the famous guild of St. Luke of Antwerp had even founded its own chamber, *De Violieren* [The Gillyflowers]. Rhetoricians and painters also often collaborated in the organisation of urban festivals, such as religious processions and joyous entries. The interests in the visual aspects of rhetoricians' culture and the literary aspects of the visual arts, has generated further interests in the theatrical productions (plays and *tableaux vivants*) but also in the poems and songs of the rhetoricians, as well as in the visual representations of chambers of rhetoric, the painted or engraved blazons.¹³

Historians too became increasingly involved in the field for two reasons. From the perspective of the cultural history of power, they became interested in the role of rhetoricians in the organisation of public festivals such as processions and joyous entries. Secondly, stimulated by the work of Pleij and Spies, they became interested in the role of the rhetoricians in creating an urban culture, and in their alleged role in spreading the culture of humanism and Protestant ideas. In the last two decades historians have highlighted the integration of rhetoricians, mainly stemming from the middling groups, into an increasingly engaged civic society. The chambers and their members were a force that shaped cultural networks drawing inhabitants of cities, towns, and villages into a vernacular community dedicated to a pedagogical programme. From the perspective of these institutions, their focus on rhetoric covers repertoires of (playful) literary practices that served the promulgation of the liberal arts. In the view of the rhetoricians, using theatrical and poetical forms, they were practicing the old tradition of rhetoric: a culture of public speech, exercised in the civic community, by its more learned members.¹⁴

¹² See, for example, Ethan Matt Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Todd Richardson, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Art Discourse in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

¹³ See, for example, Bart Ramakers, *Spelen en figuren: Toneelkunst en processiecultuur in Oudenaarde tussen Middeleeuwen en Moderne Tijd* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996); Stijn Bussels, *Spectacle, Rhetoric and Power: The Triumphal Entry of Prince Philip of Spain into Antwerp* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012); and Samuel Mareel, 'Performing the Dutch Rederijker Lyric: Eduard de Dene and his *testament rhetoricael* (1562)', *The Modern Language Review*, 108 (2013), 1199–220.

¹⁴ See in particular Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille: Rederijkerskamers en de stedelijke cultuur in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1400–1650)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008); and Arjan van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten: Rederijkers in de Noordelijke Nederlanden (1480–1650)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

From the middle of the fifteenth century onwards, when the prototypical chamber of rhetoric had been developed, these institutions were organised as confraternities. Like other communities of practice that were organised in confraternities, the chambers were dedicated to exercising a particular art (*conste*, in Dutch). According to the oldest surviving statutes of a chamber of rhetoric, those of Ghent's *De Fonteyne* [The Fountain], officially incorporated in 1448, the community of rhetoricians constituted the heart of a wider community of lovers and practitioners of (all) the arts. In many other documents related to rhetoricians' life, as well as in literary texts dedicated to their art, the art of rhetoric was elevated as the 'mother of the arts', the key to mastering the other liberal arts, and to igniting the thirst for learning. Often the community of rhetoricians was organised as an exclusive fellowship of men within a confraternity. The fellowship, dedicated to practicing rhetoric, would then provide the governing board of a larger community of brothers and sisters, practicing a devotion to a patron saint. In the unique case of the Gillyflowers of Antwerp, this wider community consisted of the members of the guild of St. Luke, which formed the recruiting base for the rhetoricians. In a few other rare cases, the wider community was a shooting guild.¹⁵

These chambers of rhetoric shaped a rhetorical culture that is very similar to that of the Inns of Court in the 1560s, but in this case, the members were recruited from the civic community, not from a community of professional men of learning.¹⁶ They were the playful realm of 'amateurs', mostly artisans, artists, traders, and merchants, with the occasional clergyman, teacher, or lawyer. Most of these men (women were largely excluded) came from the middling groups of society, but members of the richest circles, of local ruling families and of the lower nobility could be an influential presence. Chambers of rhetoric tended to be organised rather informally, with a few exceptions that acquired high status. Most chambers were not richly endowed, did not own buildings, often using a rented hall with modest interiors for meetings. With the exception of chambers in major cities, most of them did not establish important art collections, libraries, or archives. As a result, with the passing of time, only few traces have survived. Often such traces only survive in the records of local courts and councils, the result of conflicts or of regulations relating to public life. Other important traces of rhetoricians' life can often be found in

¹⁵ Van Dixhoorn, 'Chambers of Rhetoric'; Anne-Laure Van Bruaene and Susie Speakman Sutch, 'The Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary: Devotional Communication and Politics in the Burgundian-Habsburg Low Countries, c. 1490–1520', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 61 (2010) 2, 252–78; Arjan van Dixhoorn, 'Rederijkers (1400–1600)', in Jeroen Jansen and Nico Laan (eds.), *Van hof tot overheid: Geschiedenis van literaire instituties in Nederland en Vlaanderen* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2015), 67–93.

¹⁶ For the Inns of Court, see Michelle O'Callaghan, *The English Wits: Literature and Sociability in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Jessica Winston, *Lawyers at Play: Literature, Law, and Politics at the Early Modern Inns of Court, 1558–1581* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

the account books of cities and towns, if they were subsidised by the local government to support their art or reimburse costs of public performances at processions or other festivals. During Catholic times and in regions that remained under Catholic rule, a chamber would also have kept or shared a chapel in a local church.¹⁷

By the end of the fifteenth century, the regular meetings of rhetoricians would be led by their ceremonial figurehead, the prince. The prince and a dean together would be the leaders of the larger corporation (the rhetoricians and regular confraternity members), they would be elected by and from the body of rhetoricians, together with a few subaltern board members and a messenger. In general, these roles would rotate annually among the rhetoricians. Another leading figure that seems to have risen in the course of the fifteenth century or early sixteenth century was the *factor*, a more informal leader of the rhetorical competitions, most important poet and playwright, and director of the crew that would be assigned, again from among the rhetoricians, to act in plays. In the literary ceremonial of a chamber, the prince (and sometimes, during Carnival or other festive moments, a king), would be the honorary leader. Members would greet him upon entering the meeting, by tipping hats and reciting lines of verse; and he might return the honour. He would call for silence, if a member were to recite a poem or sing a song. In a tradition adapted from the francophone culture of the Puy, the performer would dedicate a song or poem at the beginning of the last stanza by tipping the hat, saying: 'Prince'. This apostrophe was kept in the written or printed records of poems and songs as the *prince*-stanza, and such and other references to live audiences permeate surviving rhetoricians' literature. The ceremony became more elaborate at public contests, held in open urban spaces, when members of the delegations of competing chambers would accrue virtue by parading, church-going, and other ceremony that resembled princely entries.¹⁸

The chambers were created over the course of the early fifteenth century. By the 1450s, the prototypes had been developed in cities such as Bruges, Ghent, and Brussels and a few others. They were the result of processes of cultural transfer that took place within a cultural zone that extended from the northern Flemish cities to French-speaking cities such as Lille, Tournai, Arras, Valenciennes, Amiens, and Paris. The most clearly identifiable set of cultural repertoires was transferred from the French-speaking regions to the north in three ways of which some traces can now be identified. The first type of exchange took place at contests between theatrical groups from cities and towns from the coastal regions of Flanders (*titels*) and French-speaking cities (*compagnies joyeuses*). The second type of exchange can be seen in Brussels. Here a first

¹⁷ Van Dixhoorn, 'Chambers of Rhetoric'; Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*; Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*.

¹⁸ Van Dixhoorn, 'Chambers of Rhetoric'. On Puy culture, see Denis Hüe, *La poésie palindromique à Rouen, 1486-1550* (Paris: H. Champion, 2002).

chamber, *Den Boeck* [The Book], seems to have been inspired by the much more informal *courts amoureuses* of Paris. These in turn may have been influenced by the poetical contests organised by the confraternities of the Puy that since the late fourteenth century had been established in some of the major French-speaking cities of the region. Some evidence suggests that a loosely organised network of overlapping groups of poets and playwrights (*rhétoriciens* and *rhétoriqueurs*), often meeting in literary contests, integrated these institutions into the larger phenomenon of the *seconde rhétorique*, with its literary repertoires and views of vernacular rhetoric.¹⁹

The Dutch-speaking chambers of rhetoric were the result of a clearly identifiable transfer of several of these institutional arrangements, literary repertoires, and views on vernacular rhetoric into already existing literary communities and theatrical groups. The result was a Dutch-speaking variant of the *seconde rhétorique*, whose literary language was a hybrid, full of French and Latin terms. Through a process of homogenisation, the *camer van rhetorike*, would quickly become the sole surviving institutional expression of Dutch rhetorical culture (and as *chambre de rhétorique* may have in turn influenced the French-speaking world). While local and regional practices might vary, the core elements of the chamber of rhetoric, outlined before, were identical. These elements remain easily recognisable, because of the many technical terms derived from French or Latin. As a result of their origins in earlier Dutch traditions, the chamber of rhetoric and rhetoricians' culture, may have been more grounded in a wider arts culture than the French *seconde rhétorique*. The study of these relationships however has barely begun.²⁰

The period of transfer and homogenisation lasted between the end of the fourteenth and the end of the fifteenth centuries. By the 1450s, the integration of repertoires from the French-speaking traditions had resulted in the shaping of the prototype. The Ghent statutes of 1448 show a fully developed chamber, positioning its exercise of the art of rhetoric at the heart of a wider community of people of virtue, able in any of the arts (broadly conceived). The expansion of this cultural movement of the rhetoricians gained momentum in the 1470s through 1490s, precisely at the time when three other major events occurred. The first was the series of wars following the death of Charles the Bold that ravaged the Burgundian heartlands of Flanders, Brabant, Holland, and Zeeland. The second was the introduction of the printing press in the same regions. The third event was the making of a humanist network focused on the university of Leuven, and on Rudolph Agricola, and later Erasmus. At the same time, dozens of new chambers of rhetoric were established, and several regional networks

¹⁹ Van Dixhoorn, 'Chambers of Rhetoric', Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*; Katell Lavéant, *Un théâtre des frontières: La culture dramatique dans les provinces du Nord aux XVe et XVIe siècles* (Orléans: Paradigme, 2011); Adrian Armstrong, 'Translating Poetic Capital in Fifteenth-Century Brussels: From Amé de Montgesoie's *Pas de la Mort* to Colijn Caillieu's *Dal sonder Wederkeeren*', *Queeste*, 22 (2015), 47–61.

²⁰ Van Dixhoorn, 'Chambers of Rhetoric'.

came into existence, that in these years and later years of conflict would maintain ties through competitions. In 1562, the Antwerp printer Willem Silvius published his edition of the plays of the contests of The Gillyflowers of 1561 (the so-called *Landjuweel* and *Haagspel*), which explored the link between rhetoric and the (liberal and other) arts. By then, the rhetoricians' movement had become closely intertwined with the world of printers, of humanists, and the political world of the Habsburg-Burgundian state, and later also of the Dutch Republic.²¹

The available evidence suggests that the world of the rhetoricians drew from the ranks of craftsmen and artists, merchants, clergymen, teachers, and members of local courts and councils. A chamber of rhetoric was a socially mixed company, and this was also true in terms of education. Most members would not have attended a university, most likely not even a Latin school. Instead, chambers were dedicated to training its members, most of them younger men, in writing and speaking skills. They would instruct them in the basics of writing, they would play games to improve their vocabulary, and they would learn to compose poems, songs, and plays (often in response to a question) by taking part in regular exercises and internal competitions. Thus, or so it seems, chambers of rhetoric must have been instrumental in shaping the intellectual abilities of their members on the one hand, and in providing their skilled members with a platform and audiences.²²

Chambers of rhetoric did not award titles to accomplished members (unlike the guilds of *Meistersinger* in Southern Germany or the Company of Joyous Knowledge in Toulouse), but evidence suggests that they provided more informal career tracks. Only the more skilled members would become *factor* and write plays for performances at local festivals or texts for interurban rhetoricians' contests. It is also often only the works of these leading members that have been preserved in personal manuscripts, or in some of the manuscript collections of chambers, in print, or in other forms, such as inscriptions on paintings or on buildings. Studies of the works and careers of such leading members also show that they were often engaged in larger textual communities, beyond the confines of the performative literary culture of the chambers. With most membership lists and most collections lost, crossing collective biographies of known rhetoricians and vernacular authors strongly suggests that the chambers of rhetoric had indeed managed to become the institutional heart of a vernacular world of arts and sciences.²³

²¹ Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*; idem, 'Chambers of Rhetoric'; Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*, Jeroen Vandommele, *Als in een spiegel: Vrede, kennis en gemeenschap op het Antwerpse Landjuweel van 1561* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2011); Jeroen Vandommele and Ruud Ryckaert (eds.), *Menich Constich Gheest: Het Antwerpse landjuweel van 1561 anders bekeken* (Ghent: Koninklijke Soevereine Hoofdkamer van Retorica 'De Fontaine', 2014) [*Jaarboek 'De Fontaine'*, 41–2 (2011–2012)].

²² Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*; idem, 'Chambers of Rhetoric'.

²³ Van Dixhoorn, 'Chambers of Rhetoric'.

Not only claims of chambers of rhetoric and the careers and networks of their members provide evidence that the chambers were engaged in shaping a vernacular culture of knowledge. It is also increasingly clear (and this issue will provide further evidence) that their literary texts together form a meta-discourse on what knowledge is, what it does and why it is important, how it is produced and used, as well as on the community of those who seek knowledge, and its rules. In the absence of an in-depth study of the semantic field, brief queries of rhetoricians' literature already show the importance of verbs such as *weten*, *kennen* [to know], and *menen* [to believe], and nouns such as *kennisse* [knowledge], *verstand*, *vernunft*, *geest* [intelligence; mind; wit], *practijcke* [practice], and *conste* [art].²⁴ Jeroen Vandommele has shown that the edition of the plays of the 1561 Antwerp *Landjuweel* in fact constitutes a collective epistemological investigation by the competing chambers.²⁵

The study of the role of the rhetoricians in a vernacular knowledge culture can be traced as far back as the work of Herman Pleij in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Influenced by Norbert Elias, among others, Pleij studied the literature of the rhetoricians as a tool for civilising, or rather disciplining, urban society. In this interpretation, literary texts were instruments in shaping social (urban) settings. They pioneered a new culture of and for the proto-capitalist city, in which the disciplining of human bodily functions and passions was the aim, creating (civilised) burghers out of (unruly) peasants. Disciplining the bodies and passions of individuals served an elitist purpose: it turned town-dwellers into cultural competitors of courtiers (first by elitist self-discipline and differentiation, then by an elitist civilisation mission directed at the middle and lower urban classes), in order to discipline them into obedient, efficient, and productive members of society.²⁶

Pleij identified two types of knowledge that were related to rhetoricians' culture: first, useful and practical how-to knowledge for the manipulation of nature and the management of daily life and social and gender relations. Secondly, a philosophical type of knowledge (inspired by the Stoa, according to Pleij) focused on disciplining mind and body. Literary texts would have a role in promoting both types of knowledge. At the same time, in line with Aristotelian-Galenic views of body and mind, literature was used as a therapeutic instrument, to release tensions that accumulated due to the repression of the unruly body and mind. Other literary historians have also highlighted the role of forms of knowledge from the world of learning in rhetoricians' culture. Annelies van Gijzen and Anke van Herk have stressed the role of Aristotelian-

²⁴ Such queries can be run on rhetoricians' texts in the Digitale Library for Dutch Literature (dbnl.org).

²⁵ Vandommele, *Als in een spiegel*; idem, 'Mirroring God, Reflecting Man: Shaping Identity Through Knowledge in the Antwerp Plays of 1561', in Bart Ramakers (ed.), *Understanding Art in Antwerp: Classicising the Popular, Popularising the Classic (1540–1580)* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 173–95.

²⁶ Pleij, *De sneeuwpoppen van 1511*; idem, 'Urban Elites in Search of a Culture'.

Galenic knowledge in amatory plays of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Moser has identified neo-Platonic influences in rhetorical theories, scholastic influences (the role of disputations) were detected by Spies and Ramakers, and Keßler has highlighted the influence of *copia* as a rhetorical tool promoted by humanists, in the poems of the (exceptional) female rhetorician Anna Bijns.²⁷ While Vandommele has uncovered the wide array of learned sources for the epistemological views of the rhetoricians in 1561, Ruben Buys has stressed that the crucial role of the notion of reason [*rede(n)*], in fifteenth and sixteenth century rhetoricians' literature was also a continuation of a long-lasting philosophical tradition of 'vernacular rationalism' in Dutch literature.²⁸

Elizabeth Spiller has argued that early modern (Baconian) science and (Renaissance) English literature were grounded in common epistemological principles. Side-lining the interest of scholars in the aesthetic or literary qualities of scientific texts as merely persuasive tools, she turns the focus to 'art' (in the sense of 'acts of making') as a common source for scientific inquiry and imaginative fiction. Taking literature to mean 'fiction', she argues that in the early modern world 'fiction' was not opposed to 'fact' as 'lies' are to 'truth'. Rather, 'fiction' was instrumental in the production of truth, not only in 'literature' but also, for example, in natural philosophy (through the use of fables). She found another trace of the epistemological kinship of early modern 'science' and 'literature' in the categories of texts in book catalogues. Here, texts that today would be subdivided into 'science' and 'literature' were categorised as 'delight and pleasure' for those readers 'desirous of knowledge'.²⁹ Following Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, the social history of science has awarded social virtue an important role in legitimising the truth-value of early modern 'experiments'. Yet, Spiller argues that the opposite was true. Instead of virtue shaping truth, early modern epistemological culture aimed to engender 'virtue within oneself' as the fruit of the quest for truth or knowledge.³⁰

Work by Pleij and others suggests that the same can be said for the link between 'literature' and 'science' in the epistemological world of the Dutch rhetoricians. If this is true, then 'literature' needs to be included in investigations of early modern knowledge cultures. In such an investigation, early modern 'literature' and 'science' are not simply different fields that interact or

²⁷ Moser, *De strijd voor rhetorica*; Annelies van Gijzen, *Liefde, kosmos en verbeelding: Mens- en wereldbeeld in Colijn van Rijseles Spiegel der minnen* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1989); idem, '17 juni 1514: Thomas van der Noot publiceert *Tseep vol wonders*. De drukker-uitgever als verspreider van artes-teksten', in M. A. Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen (ed.), *Nederlandse literatuur, een geschiedenis* (Groningen: Martinus Nijhoff, 1992), 121–5; Van Herk, *Fabels van liefde*; Ramakers, 'Tonen en betogen'; Marijke Spies, "'Op de questye...": Over de structuur van 16e-eeuwse zinnespelen', *De nieuwe taalgids*, 83 (1990), 139–50; Judith Keßler, *Princesse der vederijckers: Het oeuvre van Anna Bijns: Argumentatieanalyse, structuuranalyse, beeldvorming* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2013).

²⁸ Vandommele, *Als in een spiegel*; Ruben Buys, *Sparks of Reason: Lay Philosophy and Vernacular Rationalism in the Low Countries* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2015).

²⁹ Elizabeth Spiller, *Science, Reading, and Renaissance Literature: The Art of Making Knowledge, 1580–1670* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5–12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 17–19. See also Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

share some common features. Instead, with Spiller, we have to assume a deep (philosophical) kinship between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ characteristic of (the objectives and practices of) early modern epistemological cultures. At the same time we should not underestimate the impact of generic and stylistic form and performative context in the shaping of specific discourses and the explicit knowledge that they produce. The *literary* form matters even when we acknowledge that early modern ‘literature’ and ‘science’ were grounded in the same epistemological principles.³¹

CONTENT OF THIS ISSUE

This special issue explores relations between ‘knowledge’ and ‘literature’ in the world of the rhetoricians. In so doing, it aims to bring the rhetoricians and their literary culture to the attention of those interested in the new field of study of ‘literature and knowledge’, as well as those interested in the social history of knowledge (in particular scholars that focus on knowledge in the making and action-oriented knowledge).³²

The issue opens with a diachronic survey of the changing role of rhetoric in a wider vernacular arts culture (Arjan van Dixhoorn). Two contributions then focus on the role of the competitions organised by rhetoricians and on the content of the texts submitted as an answer to a prize question. The first focuses on a poetry contest held in Ghent in 1539 which stimulated an inquiry into the position of humans in the world (Ruben Buys). The second focuses on the categorisation and ideas on the use of knowledge at the Antwerp festival of 1561 (Jeroen Vandommele). Rhetoricians were not only concerned with establishing a (vernacular) discourse on the nature of humans and the pivotal role of reason and art in controlling both the inner world and the outer world. The next contribution explores their most prestigious theatrical genre, the *spel van zinne* or *zinnespel*, in which, as it turns out, the use of personification allegory exteriorised the mental forces and operations that steer human conduct (Bart Ramakers). In their use of personification allegory, these staged debates visualised what rhetoricians imagined was going on in the mind when an individual was making use of the faculty of reason. A very typical form of rhetoricians’ literature (the *spel van zinne*) was used here to search for a deeper, practical understanding of how exactly people could live up to their God-given rational nature.

As it turns out, the views that were developed and propagated in and from the world of rhetoricians were closely related to developments in the scholarly world, even though we still lack an understanding of the precise relationship

³¹ See also the theoretical reflections in R. Borgards, H. Neumeyer, N. Pethes, and Y. Wübben (eds.), *Literatur und Wissen: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2013), 5–18, 32–50, in particular on the place of ‘literature’ and ‘genre’ in Foucault’s discursive formations.

³² See in particular R. Klausnitzer, *Literatur und Wissen: Zugänge, Modelle, Analysen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008); and Borgards *et al.* For the social history of knowledge, see note 1.

between these worlds. The article on Eduard de Dene's literary testament (Samuel Mareel) shows how in his work, an exploration of the self was intertwined with an accumulation of knowledge of the outer world of a particular place (Bruges). This particular literary testament reflects the (growing) interest in chorography and cartography in the early modern world. While his attitude to the world is informed by these new interests, they are also used to map, and reflect on, one man's position in a very particular, clearly traceable urban milieu.

Similarly, in her contribution, Alisa van de Haar, argues that the philosophical interest in the nature of language grew out of the culture of experiment with which rhetoricians approached their literary texts and language. Like the community focused on the hydraulic arts that is discussed by Van Dixhoorn or the interest in cartography discussed by Mareel, Van de Haar's contribution reveals a community of interest focused on grammar and the nature and use of a particular language. These studies show a culture of practice that produced philosophical interests in the use of human (God-given) abilities. The philosophical nature of this culture of practice becomes clear from the debates on use and abuse in which many engaged members took part, as the final contribution by Didi van Trijp illustrates by discussing the interest in and use of cosmological knowledge in Amsterdam's rhetoricians' circles around 1600.

These few examples show how fruitful it is to include literary texts in the textual archive of historians interested in the social history of knowledge. They show that literary texts are relevant in a variety of ways: they were simply other tools used by members of knowledge communities to engage in philosophical discourse and explorations, and thus should be studied for their role in knowledge accumulation. They were also attractive and rhetorically sophisticated tools that could be used to attract outsiders towards the community of insiders, and thus expand the knowledge community. They were excellent tools to explore the links between various forms of knowledge, as well as their use, or to bring various 'arts' together to create new knowledge or expand technical possibilities (or reflect on them).

Literary texts were also used to develop the art of philosophising (or using reason) itself by visualising the act of thinking, and discursively developing insights into the powers of and strains on that human faculty perceived to be the very definition of what separated man from other animals. The same is true for the ability to visualise (and thus explore) the relationship between the arts, or the possibilities and limitations of a particular language. In other words, in the Dutch-speaking world, the literary techniques of the rhetoricians became part and parcel of a toolkit used to integrate forms of philosophising and a philosophical attitude into the world of daily practice. Consequently, we cannot use their textual (and visual) archive to study dissemination of knowledge through literary means. Rather, the archives of the rhetoricians allow us to uncover communities of people engaged in an endeavour to understand the very specifics of their own nature, and of the nature of the phenomena of the world and

cosmos, and use that understanding for the moral and material advantage and perfection of themselves and their communities by creating a life built on correct use in every thinkable aspect, grounded in a correct understanding.

Utrecht University/University College Roosevelt (Arjan van Dixhoorn)

Museum Hof van Busleyden/Ghent University (Samuel Mareel)

University of Groningen (Bart Ramakers)