

Rederijkers, Kannenkijkers

Drinking and Drunkenness in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Low Countries

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Abstract

This article discusses drinking practices and conceptions of drunkenness in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Low Countries from the perspective of the *rederijkers* or guildsmen who would regularly gather together to practice the vernacular art of rhetoric. The essay surveys the regulations and accounts of the chambers of rhetoric in which these gatherings took place, as well as the literary texts the *rederijkers* produced (including poetry, songs and theatre plays). It also examines the intersections with contemporary genre painting. The central argument of this paper is that drinking, and even drunkenness, was an essential aspect of *rederijker* culture and the urban middling groups represented by this culture. This argument nuances the influential thesis of the pervasiveness of a Dutch *burgermoraal* or bourgeois morality. Even though they created comical caricatures of drunkards, *rederijkers* indulged in heavy drinking themselves. These guildsmen were well aware of the need for moderation, but their regulations and literary texts go beyond moral didacticism and often reveal double layers and self-parody.

Keywords: alcohol, drunkenness, guilds, *rederijkers*, genre painting, Low Countries

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An open window; a gathering of companions. A spectacled man sings a *Lof Liet* ('song of praise') handwritten on a piece of paper, while another man peers over his shoulder. A third man is listening attentively while he holds a jug firmly. A pipe is attached to his hat. In the middle of the scene, a laughing jester points at us. There is no doubt that Jan Steen's famous picture (c. 1658-1665, fig. 1) shows a group of *rederijkers*, middle-class men who gathered in chambers of rhetoric or guilds devoted to the practice of vernacular poetry and theatre. The lower part of the canvas shows a *blazoen*: a coat of arms that the *rederijkers* would display at the place where they were meeting.² The painting is clearly about drinking. This motif is indicated by both the jug in the centre of the scene, and the man emptying a cup in the left background. A vine with ripe grapes covers the upper part of the window. Jan Steen seems to have intentionally and quite literally depicted the expression *rederijkers, kannenkijkers* ('rhetoricians, jug watchers') that had become a popular saying in the seventeenth-century Low Countries. There was certainly some truth in this representation of the *rederijkers* as heavy drinkers: Raymond Van Uytven has documented how, in the early seventeenth century, a chamber of rhetoric in Leuven spent a quarter to half of its budget for its annual three-day banquet on alcohol. The chamber provided up to ten litres of beer and wine *per capita*.³

Historians of early modern Europe have established that drinking is an important subject of research, since the consumption of alcohol reveals much about the social practices, gender relations and cultural assumptions of a wide range of men and women.⁴ Because of the poor quality of water and the need for calories, in the *Ancien Régime* almost everyone consumed fairly large amounts of alcohol on a daily basis.⁵ But the benefits of drinking were not just nutritional; it was also essential from a social perspective. Drink was poured

¹ This research was sponsored by the Belgian Science Policy Network IAP 7/26 "City and Society in the Low Countries". The authors would like to thank Tine Meganck and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable remarks.

² Heppner, 'The Popular Theatre', 29; Westermann, *The Amusements of Jan Steen*, 138.

³ Van Uytven, 'Met de rederijkers aan tafel', 243-244.

⁴ Brennan, 'Towards the Cultural History'.

⁵ Martin, 'Fetal Alcohol Syndrome', 6-12.



Fig. 1 Jan Steen, Rhetoricians at a Window, c. 1658-1665, Oil on canvas, 75,9×58,6 cm, John G. Johnson collection, Cat. 512, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

liberally on occasions when people bonded, such as at births, engagements, weddings, funerals, the signing of contracts or public festivals, in order to celebrate, honour the other party or seal the agreement. Contractual drinking was also at the core of religious ceremony, both in the Catholic mass and the Protestant Lord's supper. Most of the existing studies on this subject are firmly rooted in social history and use legislative, administrative and juridical sources to analyse drinking in taverns or in informal settings such as

the household. In addition, several historians have documented changing theories about drinking in Reformation Europe through an examination of the writings of moralists and visual images produced in order to warn people about the effects of alcohol. More recently, a number of authors have questioned the success of these civilizing efforts, by highlighting literary texts like drinking songs and broadside ballads and the ways in which convivial drinking contributed to the formation of both elite and popular male identities.⁶

A survey of how *rederijkers* drank and thought about drinking offers an additional perspective. Chambers of rhetoric were formally organized as guilds, and thus complemented the rich Netherlandish urban landscape of merchant and craft guilds, religious confraternities and shooting guilds. Guild ideology explicitly attributed religious and social agency to collective drinking. In the late Middle Ages, every guild held an annual fraternity feast, which combined the liturgical celebration of the patron saint with a banquet that was, in theory, open to all brothers. On this occasion the guild union was regenerated, and social and political bonds were cemented.⁷ Although this general picture holds true for the Low Countries, a number of comparative studies have shown that there were important regional variations in the way guilds were organized, and that the Dutch Revolt (1568-1648) brought significant changes, including the secularisation of guild ritual in the Dutch Republic.⁸ However, there are few indications that the dominance of Calvinism led to more sober guild meetings in the Northern Low Countries. The generally rising consumption of alcohol and the success of the artistic genre of the guild banquet suggest the contrary: a growing emphasis on eating and drinking.⁹ In the Southern Low Countries, the Catholic Church endeavoured to purge guild ritual of all profane elements as part of the implementation of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Nevertheless guild brothers seem to have maintained traditions of heavy drinking.¹⁰ Moreover, campaigns against the visiting of unrespectable taverns led to the organisation of banquets in the more private contexts of the family or the guild.¹¹ Harald Deceulaer and Frederik Verleysen have argued that, in the seventeenth-century Habsburg Netherlands, the meals of craft guilds became more copious, but also less inclusive. They contend that excessive eating was a form of conspicuous consumption in an increasingly competitive society.¹²

Like other guilds, the chambers of rhetoric were subject to change. Initially, the centre of gravity lay in the South: the first chambers were instituted in Flanders and Brabant in

6 See in particular: Clark, *The English Alehouse*; Brennan, *Public Drinking*; Thlustly, *Bacchus and Civic Order*; Martin, *Alcohol, Sex, and Gender*; Kümin and Thlustly, *The World of the Tavern*; Rau and Schwerhoff, *Zwischen Gotteshaus und Taverne*; Smyth, *A Pleasing Sinne*; Holt, *Alcohol*; Kümin, *Drinking Matters*; Hailwood, *Alehouses and Good Fellowship*. For the Low Countries, see Hermesdorf, *De herberg*; Aerts, *Het bier van Lier*; Van Uytven, *Geschiedenis van de dorst*; Roberts, 'Drinking like a Man'; Deseure, 'Questie en Afdronk'.

7 For England see Rosser, 'Going to the Fraternity Feast'; Idem, *The Art of Solidarity*, 133-146 and Withington, 'Company and Sociability', 298-303. For the Low Countries, see Crombie, 'Honour, Community and Hierarchy'.

8 Lis and Soly, *Werelden van verschil* and Prak et al., *Craft Guilds*.

9 Knevel, *Burgers in het geweer*, 295-304; Roberts, 'Drinking like a Man', 237-240; Nichols, 'Double Vision', 161-164.

10 Thijs, 'Religion and Social Structure', 170.

11 Thijs, *Van Geuzenstad*, 149-159; Deseure, 'Questie en Afdronk', 100-101.

12 Deceulaer and Verleysen, 'Excessive Eating'. For comparable evolutions in England, see Withington, 'Intoxicans and Society'.

the 1440s, in Zeeland, Holland and Hainault in the 1480s, in Liège and Overijssel in the 1490s, in Utrecht and Guelders in the early 1500s and in Frisia only in the 1570s. On the eve of the Dutch Revolt, the Southern Low Countries counted approximately 175 chambers of rhetoric, while in the Northern Low Countries around seventy companies were active. The most important *rederijker* festivals took place in Flanders and Brabant, such as the competition in Ghent in 1539, and the *landjuweel* in Antwerp in 1561. The outbreak of the Dutch Revolt occasioned a shift in the dynamics of *rederijker* culture. Many chambers of rhetoric in the Habsburg Netherlands ceased their activities until the Twelve Years' Truce (1609-1621), because of the military unrest and the repressive measures issued by the central authorities. Meanwhile, *émigrés* instituted 'Flemish' or 'Brabantine' chambers in the Dutch Republic. During the Truce new chambers were established in both the North and the South, and many public festivals were held. By the end of the Truce, both regions had similar numbers of chambers: about one hundred were active in the South compared to about ninety in the North. Around that time the chambers of rhetoric began to gradually reduce their public role. They staged fewer plays in the urban public sphere, both because of tightening Calvinist and Catholic censorship regulations, and because of new notions of decorum among *rederijkers* themselves. As a result, in the course of the seventeenth century an increasing number of chambers of rhetoric opted for performances behind closed doors. Yet, the social aspects, including regular Sunday meetings, were at the heart of the rhetorical practice, both in the Northern and Southern Netherlands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹³

Prosopographical research in the Northern and Southern Low Countries has established that the chambers of rhetoric recruited mainly among skilled and highly skilled artisans, shopkeepers, traders and clerks, or what have been labelled the 'urban middling groups'.¹⁴ These middling groups played an important role in the economic, social, cultural, and in some cities also political life, precisely because the guild model offered powerful levers for collective action.¹⁵ A study of the drinking practices of the *rederijkers* can therefore contribute to our understanding of guild culture more generally. The statutes and accounts of these chambers frequently refer to the regulation and practice of drinking.¹⁶ The *rederijkers* have also produced a wide range of literary texts - theatre, poetry and songs - both of a serious, allegorical and comical, satirical nature.¹⁷ In their literary texts, *rederijkers* reflected

13 See the studies of Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille* and Arjan van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*. The repertory they compiled is available online at <http://www.dbnl.org/organisaties/rederijkerskamers/index.php>. (Accessed on 7 May 2017).

14 There are several case studies in Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille* and Arjan van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*. See also Van der Heijden, 'Aanzet tot een sociale stratificatie'.

15 For a recent synthesis, see Van Bruaene, Blondé and Boone, *Gouden eeuwen*.

16 The sources of the chambers of rhetoric have been inventoried by Van Bruaene and Van Dixhoorn. We use their systematic analysis of a corpus of about 150 statutes and other regulations (references are to their studies or to the edited sources). For an overview of sources pertaining to Holland see Van Boheemen and Van der Heijden, *Retoricaal Memoriaal*. For the accounts, we use the case study of *Mariën Theeren* in Ghent, in addition to the case of Leuven studied by Van Uytven and cited above.

17 The literary production of the *rederijkers* is well studied and inventoried (although better for the sixteenth than for the seventeenth century). See in particular Hummelen, *Repertorium van het rederijkersdrama*; Coigneau,

both on their own drinking practices and on the drunkenness of stereotypical others. In about five percent of the more than six hundred *rederijker* plays still in existence, drinking was the central theme.¹⁸ About fifteen percent of the more than three hundred *refreinen in 't zotte*, a comical poetic genre, make explicit allusions to eating and drinking.¹⁹ Farces in particular were a favourite genre in which drinking behaviour was depicted: about half refer to food and drink.²⁰ The *rederijkers* also had a specific dramatic genre, the *tafelspel* or 'table play', which they performed during banquets.²¹ Moreover, since many *rederijkers* were professionally active as visual artists, there was a close connection between *rederijker* theatre and genre painting; similar themes were explored in the two mediums.²² Tavern scenes are particularly common in both literary texts and contemporary genre painting.²³

Accounts, regulations, literary texts and visual images are sources that had very different functions. Financial records were drafted to justify the expenses of the guild corporation and offer only summary information. For example, they do not document gifts of food and drink by individual members.²⁴ Statutes were usually ratified by the local magistracy at the moment of the official institution of a chamber of rhetoric. In some cases they were almost exact copies of the statutes of other local guilds or of other chambers of rhetoric. Sometimes amendments were added, but in general regulations stayed valid over a long period of time. They represent norms rather than reality and it is unlikely that guild members strictly respected them.²⁵ Of course, texts from different literary genres have their own conventions. These texts were composed in specific contexts that cannot always be easily reconstructed. Moreover, with the exception of plays or poems written for public competitions, *rederijkers* did not usually bring their literary products to the printing presses. Most of the texts from that period have therefore been preserved by chance, in manuscript collections of chambers of rhetoric or of individual *rederijkers*.²⁶ The analysis of paintings, of course, requires visual methodologies and there has been a fierce debate on the interpretation of Dutch genre painting in particular.²⁷ Yet we believe that by combining these different sources and methodologies, we can reconstruct how *rederijkers* conceptualized drinking and drunkenness both from a practical and a rhetorical viewpoint.²⁸

Refreinen in het zotte and De Bruin, Oosterman and Strijbosch, *Repertorium van het Nederlandse lied*. For an overview of texts on drinking and a more extensive analysis, see Van Bouchaute, *Set an u mont*.

18 Van Bouchaute, *Set an u mont*, 186-188.

19 This is a rough estimate based on Coigneau, *Refreinen in het zotte*, II, 495-497. These texts date from the sixteenth century, but Coigneau also refers to later examples (p. 388).

20 Kramer, *Mooi vies*, 158.

21 Lammens-Pikhaus, *Het tafelspel*.

22 Ramakers, 'Bruegel en de rederijkers'.

23 For an overview see De Bruyn and Op de Beeck, *De zotte schilders*.

24 Deceulaer and Verleysen, 'Excessive Eating', 168.

25 Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*, 236-249.

26 Hummelen, *Repertorium van het rederijkersdrama* and Coigneau, 'Bedongen creativiteit'.

27 Most famously, between Eddy de Jongh and Svetlana Alpers. See, amongst others, Alpers, *The Art of Describing* and De Jongh, 'De iconologische benadering'. For a historical interpretation of genre painting see Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, 136-139.

28 See also the discussions on method in Martin, *Alcohol, Sex, and Gender*, 14-15 and Kümin, *Drinking Matters*, 8-10.

In this essay we contend that the ideas about drinking expressed by the *rederijkers* in both text and image, reveal much about the urban culture of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Low Countries – both the Habsburg Netherlands and the Dutch Republic. Many studies on early modern drunkenness have rightly pointed out the tension between the social necessity of male drinking and the concern for moral disorder.²⁹ It remains to be seen, however, whether moralists, like Catholic publicists or Calvinist ministers, had a great impact on day-to-day urban life.³⁰ Therefore, a study that focuses on the perceptions of guildsmen can reveal more about mainstream practices and opinions. This also brings into play the influential thesis of the Dutch *burgermoraal* ('bourgeois morality'). Herman Pleij and Paul Vandenbroeck, amongst others, have typecast *rederijkers* and genre painters as the vanguard of a bourgeois civilizing offensive. In their view, around 1500, urban elites developed a new moral code that promoted the values of profit, rationality and utility, prescribed the control of passions and rejected all forms of licentious behaviour or popular recreation. Pleij and Vandenbroeck have forcefully argued that literary texts and genre paintings used the technique of comical inversion to project negative images of the self and to warn viewers, both at a conscious and subconscious level, about inappropriate conduct.³¹

Although we agree that *rederijker* texts and images should not be taken at face value, we advocate a more nuanced view when it comes to their significance as instruments for disseminating bourgeois morality. First of all, most *rederijkers* did not belong to the elites but were rather part of the broad urban middling groups. These groups had their own set of 'corporative' values: they were first and foremost concerned with collectively defending their place within urban society and creating strong social bonds within their own milieu.³² As we will show, drinking and even drunkenness were in many ways constitutive of the collective identity of the *rederijkers* and the social group they represented until well into the seventeenth century.

Drinking Practices in the Chambers of Rhetoric

Conviviality and drinking were essential to the social life of the chambers of rhetoric. The annual celebration of the patron saint was followed by a banquet with large amounts of food and drink.³³ In the Dutch Republic, the chambers of rhetoric gradually dropped this form of religiously inspired feasting, but there were many other occasions to raise the cup. Every week, fortnight or month, *rederijkers* held a Sunday meeting in their rooms. During these gatherings, they practised verse, rehearsed plays and drank together. In some cham-

²⁹ This is quite explicit in Robert, 'Drinking like a Man' and Lemon, 'Compulsory Conviviality'.

³⁰ Tlustly, *Bacchus and Civic Order*, 209-212; Withington, 'Intoxicants and Society'. A case study in Verbeke, 'Condemned by Some'.

³¹ See in particular Vandenbroeck, *Jheronimus Bosch* and Pleij, *De sneeuwpoppen van 1511*.

³² Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*, 231-233; Dumolyn and Haemers, 'Let Each Man Carry'. Dumolyn, 'Het corporatieve element' summarizes the critiques on Herman Pleij's influential thesis and points out the 'corporative' values in many Middle Dutch texts.

³³ Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*, 154; Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, 58; Van Uytven, 'Met de rederijkers aan tafel'.

bers of rhetoric drinking was part of the literary game: the cup went round and he who took a sip was expected to toast in rhyme to his neighbour's health.³⁴ Every chamber had its own customs in this respect. Sometimes the Sunday meeting was called a *colve* (literally 'club'), while in other cases the *colve* was a drinking bout, which a new brother was obliged to pay for.³⁵ Some chambers appointed a 'king' by lot-drawing on the feast of Epiphany. This 'king' presided over a lyrical contest and had to finance the banquet.³⁶

Drinking not only defined the closed sociability of the chambers of rhetoric. When they staged plays in the public sphere or interacted with fellow companies, alcohol was always close at hand. We owe our knowledge about the development of *rederijker* culture in the fifteenth century in large part to the fact that city magistracies offered *presentwijnen* ('wine gifts') to companies that performed on the occasion of civic processions or Shrovetide celebrations. These 'wine gifts' are registered in the city accounts and are often the only attestations of the early *rederijker* guilds.³⁷ The chambers of rhetoric also spent considerable amounts on beer and wine to seal their dealings with the outside world. The accounts of *Mariën Theeren* from Ghent for 1556-1566 list expenditure on drinks for the banquets and the performances after the annual Corpus Christi procession, but also wine gifts for members who married and for the other chambers of rhetoric in the city. When messengers came from other towns with invitations to a literary contest, *Mariën Theeren* treated them to a bout of drinking.³⁸

About half of the statutes and regulations of chambers of rhetoric that contain rules of conduct list guidelines pertaining to drinking and drunkenness. The general message is that making merry and drinking is fundamental to the rhetorical practice, but that moderation is essential. The regulations for *Mozes Doorn* in 's-Hertogenbosch from 1539 stipulate that a *droncken verken* ('drunken pig') dishonours the chamber.³⁹ In Kruishoutem in Flanders, the guild board could reprimand a *rederijker* who acted like a drunkard in the village (1630).⁴⁰ Arjan van Dixhoorn and Benjamin Roberts have argued that the chambers of rhetoric in seventeenth-century Holland played an important role in the education of middle-class youths, by training them in civilized manners.⁴¹ This extended to drinking behaviour: in a number of chambers in Zeeland and Holland, a fellow could be fined for spilling more drink than he could cover with his foot, hand or a dish.⁴² The detailed description of bad drinking practices in guild regulations suggests, however, that the ideal of moderation was often disrespected. Many regulations refer to a drinking game, in which one brother drank to another's health and expected a toast in return.⁴³ These drinking

34 Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, 140-143.

35 Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*, 78.

36 Ibidem, 37.

37 Ibidem, 29-41.

38 Ghent, State Archives, Archief Sint-Jacobskerk, no. 1473. On the practice of the giving of food in late medieval Ghent, see Boone, 'Dons et pots-de-vin'.

39 Edited in Hermans, 'Geschiedenis der Rederijkers', 117-125.

40 Walters and De Baere, 'De Mastbloem', 43.

41 Van Dixhoorn and Benjamin Roberts, 'Edifying Youths', esp. 333-335.

42 Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, 151.

43 On the practice of 'healthing' in early modern England and its presumed Dutch origins, see Lemon, 'Compulsory Conviviality'; McShane, 'Material Culture'.

games could easily get out of hand. Statutes warn that it is not appropriate to drink from bowls or jars, to drink unsolicited from another fellow's cup, to overfill a fellow's cup, to write the score of drinking games on the walls with charcoal, or to shout defiantly through the windows to passers-by.⁴⁴

We can safely assume that the drinking of the *rederijkers* was not excessive by contemporary standards, and that it was representative of guild practices in general. In craft guilds, shooting companies, religious confraternities and chambers of rhetoric, collective identities were constantly reaffirmed with alcohol.⁴⁵ For example, the shooting guilds in Brabant also marked special occasions with drinking; these included the annual celebration of the patron saint, shooting days and *colven*. Their regulations similarly warn of the dangers of drunkenness and of inciting others to excessive drinking.⁴⁶ In seventeenth-century Holland, the shooting companies or *schutterijen* spent considerable amounts of money on collective meals, including on beer and wine. Therefore, contemporary observers readily associated the *schutters* with eating, drinking and drunkenness.⁴⁷ In sum, in the early modern guild culture of the Low Countries, there was a general tension between the ideal of conviviality on the one hand and of civility on the other hand. Drinking was indispensable for a joyful atmosphere, but the message was that uncontrolled drunkenness could harm unity and harmony.

Foolish Verses

The chambers of rhetoric did not differ from other guilds in their level of consumption of alcohol, but stand out because they also created literary sources that document their drinking practices. There are a few examples of on stage re-enactments of the drinking rituals of chambers of rhetoric. The toasting in verse to each other's health forms a cheerful intermezzo in an allegorical play staged in Ghent in 1539 by the chamber of rhetoric from Kaprijke. In an abundant atmosphere, all characters are provided with *een lekker zaeynkin* ('a tasty drink'). The allegorical character *Der Zonden Voetsele* ('The Fuel of Sin') shouts *Het comt u* ('There'), while *Mensche* ('Man') answers with *Ic maerct* ('Cheers'). Both characters continue their toasting in a typical *drinkrondeel* or drinking verse.⁴⁸ The allegorical and sinful nature of the characters indicate that the scene has a moralizing intention, although the inclusion of a familiar sounding *drinkrondeel* was also a clever literary strategy to bring some comic relief to the serious play.

A number of recent studies on early modern England have argued that drinking was fundamental in generating sociability or 'good fellowship' on all levels of society. Several authors have pointed to the role of drinking songs and printed broadside ballads, as these were performed in taverns and male societies.⁴⁹ *Rederijkers* also wrote drinking poems,

44 Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*, 239; Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, 151.

45 Deceulaer and Verleysen, 'Excessive Eating'.

46 Van Autenboer, *De kaarten van de schuttersgilden*, II, 540-549 and 618-623.

47 Knevel, *Burgers in het geweer*, 295-304; Prak, *Gouden Eeuw*, 180-181.

48 Play of Kaprijke, vs. 312-335, edited in Ern  and Van Dis, *De Gentse spelen*, II, 441-468.

49 Fumerton, 'Not Home'; Withington, 'Intoxicants and Society'; Hailwood, *Alehouses and Good Fellowship*, 113-170.

ballads and songs for their own circle. Dirk Coigneau has dissected the genre of the *refrein in 't zotte*, a comical or satirical ballade. These *refreinen in 't zotte* refer to drinking and eating in various ways: they evoke joyful companies or banquets, present monologues by drink-loving artisans and drunkards, or reflect on drinking and guild life more generally. Some of these verses contain warnings about drunkenness, but others straightforwardly celebrate the joys of drinking.⁵⁰ Although there are few references to identifiable guild contexts, there can be no doubt that these *refreinen in 't zotte* were often performed in real drinking settings: both in the Northern and Southern Low Countries, during the Sunday meetings or *colven*, the guild brothers of the chambers of rhetoric were expected to compose and recite verses, including *refreinen*.⁵¹

Some of the surviving *refreinen in 't zotte* laud the effects of beer and wine on the human body, defend the right to good food and drink and call for feasting in company. In a *refrein* by the famous poet-priest from Oudenaarde, Matthijs de Castelein, posthumously published in his *Const van Rhetoriken* in 1555, the author refers to the love of the ancients for drinking and calls on his listeners to follow their example, albeit with moderation: 'Fill your bottle daily with Bacchus's wine/Drink freely, and let the mind be merry/It will be medicine to the body/As people have drunk since ancient times.'⁵² Eduard de Dene, a clerk and prominent *rederijker* in sixteenth-century Bruges and a documented hard drinker, exhorts his local audience, in several verses, to consume large amounts of food and drink.⁵³ In *Lof vanden Wyne* ('Praise of the Wine') De Dene enumerates more than ten different kinds of wine with their specific qualities for body and soul.⁵⁴ In a drinking song he advises men and women to fill their bellies on Shrove Tuesday for six weeks with beer, wine and food. Every stanza ends with a call to heavy eating and drinking on the eve of Lent. The reference to soberness seems more regretful than moralistic: 'Empty your drinking bowls/Revel and devour/Tomorrow you have to be sober.'⁵⁵

Rederijkers also wrote *refreinen in 't zotte* about drink itself and, more specifically, about the quality of beer. *Een beklaghelijck Refereyn van dat arme bier* ('A sorrowful refrain of this poor beer'), dated around 1540, laments that the *Kuitebier* has become sick because of too much water, a reference to fraudulent practices of brewers in times of rising grain prices.⁵⁶ More than just an exhortation to brewers to add more hop and malt, the poem expresses the hope that its audience can keep on drinking beer and visit taverns.⁵⁷ The

50 Coigneau, *Refreinen in 't zotte*, I, 259-268, 297-305, 362-366 and 388-392.

51 Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*, 46; Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, 141-142.

52 'Vuld daghelicks u flassche met Bacchus wine:/Drijnct vryelick, ende laedt den gheest verbliden,/Het werdt den lichame een medicine/Want, men heeft ghedroncken van auden tiden'; *Banck Refereyn, van xv*, vs. I. 14-17, facsimile edition in De Castelein, *De Const van Rhetoriken*, 184. On the classical references, see Iansen, *Verkenningen*, 440-455. For similar rhetorical practices in early modern England, see Achilleos, 'The Anacreontea'.

53 Coigneau, 'Een Brugse Villon of Rabelais', 200. Compare with the examples from seventeenth-century England in Brown, 'Sons of Beer'.

54 'Lof vanden Wyne', edited in De Dene, *Testament Rhetoricael*, III, 51-53.

55 'Drynct bacxkens huut/Brast en schranst/Moorghen moet ghy sober wesen'; 'Vastenavond Dansliedeken', edited in De Dene, *Testament Rhetoricael*, III, 99-100.

56 Aerts, 'Dorst heeft een prijs', 593 and 602-603.

57 Verhuyck, 'Slecht bier'.

Kuitebier was in fact one of the most popular beers in the Low Countries.⁵⁸ Yet, in addition to a demand for quality, *rederijkers* cultivated a sort of beer chauvinism. Local beers were often pitted against imported ‘foreign’ beers. In a *refrein* from 1567 the poet defends the *Crabbeleere* beer from Ghent against the *Kuitebier* from Gouda. The *Crabbeleere* is not only lower-priced, but it also causes joy, makes people sing and dance and it is *vet vul graen* (‘fat and full of corn’). Therefore, the author advises against drinking *Kuitebier*, which lacks taste, and to let *Crabbeleere* keep its crown.⁵⁹

The Staging of Drinking

How can we understand the verses and songs that encourage the consumption of alcohol? There is no doubt that they refer to a social reality of drinking. Chambers of rhetoric were involved in festivities that called for large amounts of beer and wine, in the closed context of their meeting rooms as well as in the public sphere. There is even one documented case of a *rederijker* contest in Diksmuide in 1560, organized by the farmers of the excise taxes on beer to raise their income.⁶⁰ Especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, *rederijkers* also performed plays on the occasion of large-scale dynastic events, such as joyous entries or celebrations of peace treaties, marriages or births. Wine fountains were often among the popular attractions on these occasions.⁶¹ Other events, in a Catholic context, were civic processions, after which the established corporations would receive ‘wine gifts’ from the city magistracy. Shrovetide celebrations were all about eating and drinking.⁶² In the Dutch Republic, *rederijkers* staged plays on the festive occasion of public lotteries intended to raise money for charitable purposes.⁶³ Alluding to these contexts in an explicit or implicit way, the literary representations of the drinking of the *rederijkers* often include a moral note, even if the general tone usually remains joyful. This is particularly clear in the case of two dramatic genres, the *tafelspel* and the *factie*, which were composed for actual festive settings, and thus offer a commentary on the real-time drinking of a merry audience.

Patricia Pikhaus has inventoried more than one hundred ‘table plays’ written by *rederijkers* in the period from c. 1500 to c. 1620 (she also refers to later examples). The *tafelspel* or ‘table play’ is a short, simple play with one to four actors that was performed during banquets. This could be a banquet organized by the *rederijkers*, or by rich burghers on the occasion of their marriage, or by the city magistracy during festive events. The connection with food and drink was very direct, since the audience was a dining company and the actors often alluded to this context in their performances.⁶⁴ One interesting example is the table play of *De wijncan en de pispot* (‘The wine jug and the piss-pot’), written for

58 Van Uytven, *Geschiedenis van de dorst*, 80-82.

59 Braekman, ‘Een onbekend Gents handschrift’, 63-68 (esp. 66, vs. 24).

60 Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*, 106.

61 Mareel, *Voor vorst en stad*, 14.

62 Pleij, *Dromen van Cocagne*, 113-190.

63 Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, 253-255.

64 Lammens-Pikhaus, *Het tafelspel*, 87-100; Goldstein, *Pieter Bruegel*, 75-85; Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, 201.

a Shrovetide banquet. The play, which comes from the collection of *Trou moet blijcken* in Haarlem (compiled c. 1600), is a word-fight between the wine jug and the piss-pot – impersonated by two actors – about which one is most useful to man. The wine jug boasts that he is very popular among *rederijkers*, a clear nod to their drinking practices. He also brags about how he is needed during ‘processions, king feasts, weddings, fairs and large banquets’, making explicit the role of alcohol in the civic culture of the Low Countries.⁶⁵ The piss-pot replies with a moral note by describing in detail the physical discomforts of the drunkard. Yet, the satirical play comes to a humorous conclusion when the actors agree that they are both useful, since ‘when one drinks a lot, one has to piss a lot.’⁶⁶ In a similar vein, in a *tafelspel* staged in The Hague in 1665 at the birthday party of a local apothecary, the character of taste triumphs over the four other senses, because he brings the gifts of food and drink to the guests.⁶⁷

The *factie* is a short satirical play that concludes with a dancing song, intended for a festive context. During the *landjuweel* festival in Antwerp in 1561, a large public theatre contest, the *factie* plays were performed not on the central stage, but on wagon stages at various places in the city. Broadsheets with the text of the concluding song were distributed among the audience.⁶⁸ The *facties* were easy crowd pleasers that combined joyful song and play with exhortations to avoid excess. They fitted the purposes of the Antwerp city fathers, who made every effort to turn the *landjuweel* into a magnificent but well policed public event.⁶⁹ In the *factie* play of the Zoutleeuw chamber of rhetoric, Bacchus addresses his followers who have gathered in his vineyard. These followers are allegorical characters that impersonate types of drink; along with eight different wines, one character is named after the local beer of Zoutleeuw. But the concluding song also warns of drunkenness.⁷⁰ The play of *De Christusooghen* of Diest directly refers to the occasion of the Antwerp festival, by re-enacting a meeting in the city of a group of merry-makers from all over the country. Every character is named after a quality or attribute that fills the head. ‘Head full of joy’ opens with: ‘Hear hear/come around all merry spirits//which are here in Antwerp for the feast//low and high//because it concerns you all.’⁷¹ One character named ‘head full of hop’ is only interested in drinking beer, but the other ‘heads’ reproach him. In a similar vein, the concluding song calls for peaceful and civil entertainment.⁷² A comparable rhetoric was employed at a contest in Mechelen in 1620, the last large public *rederijker* festival in the seventeenth-century Habsburg Netherlands.⁷³

65 ‘ommegangen, coninxfeesten, brijloften, cermessen en in groote bancketten’; Pascal, *Drie tafelspelen*, 65-72, esp. v. 232.

66 ‘daermen veel drinct datmen daer veel pissen moet’, Pascal, *Drie tafelspelen*, v. 324.

67 Gelderblom, ‘Smakelijk eten’.

68 Ryckaert, *De Antwerpse spelen*, 1, 135-147; Vandommele, *Als in een Spiegel*, 33.

69 Vandommele, *Als in een Spiegel*, 34-36; Heuer, *The City Rehearsed*, 57-98.

70 ‘Factie van Zoutleeuw’, edited in Ryckaert, *De Antwerpse spelen*, 1, 674-677.

71 ‘Hoort hoort/coemt by alle vrolijcke gheesten//Die hier in Antwerpen sijn comen ter feesten//Minst metten meesten//want tgaet u allen//an’; ‘Factie van Diest (*De Christusooghen*)’, vs. 1-3, edited in *Ibidem*, 800-810.

72 *Ibidem*, 800-810.

73 Thijs, *Van Geuzenstad*, 155.

The Drunkenness of Others

The guild regulations, the verses and the theatre plays of the *rederijkers* all praise conviviality and positively assess drinking alcohol, while warning of excess. These moral notes are never formulated very strongly. Yet, literary texts comment upon the drunkenness of stereotypical others far more often than they reflect on their own drinking. *Rederijker* plays borrow from a stock of drinking types that also frequently appear in contemporary genre painting: the foolish youth, the drunken husband, the dissolute monk, the bawdy soldier, the seedy vagabond, the boorish peasant and the voluptuous tavern hostess. By drinking too much, these characters create disorder, as in Hieronymus Bosch's famous representation of the Ship of Fools (c. 1500-1510, fig. 2). The unruly world of these unsocial types is at first sight far removed from the joyous meetings of the *rederijkers*.⁷⁴ The omnipresence of precisely these stereotypical caricatures in Dutch drama and genre painting has led to the notion that a *burgermoraal*, or bourgeois morality, was a driving force in the urban culture of the Low Countries. In the 1980s Herman Pleij argued that the *rederijkers* formed a cultural elite that propagated a neo-stoic lifestyle by formulating strict moral prescriptions, cultivating a rational individualism and firmly condemning popular culture.⁷⁵ However, it has since emerged that most *rederijkers* did not have an elite background. Also, guild values often included an appreciation of collective drinking and drunkenness. It seems that rather than functioning as didactic 'negative images' of the self, the exaggerated nature of these drinking types was intended first and foremost to create laughter.⁷⁶ In fact, these literary drunkards represented behaviour that was not so far removed from the drinking habits of many guildsmen. We agree with Pleij's emphasis on the social function of literature, but in our view, instead of presenting stringent moral admonitions, these caricatures helped to uphold a fiction of a firm distinction between the joyful drinking of the *rederijkers* and the excessive boozing of others.

Femke Kramer has highlighted the very physical nature of *rederijker* farces, half of which give food and drink a central role. The actors eat and drink, but also accidentally or intentionally spill their beverages, smear food and throw victuals at each other in grotesque scenes intended to provoke laughter from the crowds.⁷⁷ In *Droncke Taverne* ('Drunk Tavern') the main character gets into a fight with a straw puppet that he mistakes for his new bride.⁷⁸ The two actors in *Een droncken man ende zijn wijf* ('A drunk man and his wife') engage in a scuffle, which the woman wins in a topsy-turvy manner.⁷⁹ Another typical farce is *Een cluijtte van plaijerwater* ('A farce of spoof water') that pits a naive husband against his unfaithful wife and her lover, the parish priest. Pieter Baltens, himself a member of the

74 Van Bouchaute, *Set an u mont*, 68-80. On genre painting, see Rothstein, 'Bear and Loafing'; Nichols, 'Double Vision', 157-161.

75 Pleij, *De sneeuwpoppen*, 188, 348-349 and 378-379; Pleij, 'Restyling Wisdom'. On the Ship of Fools, see in particular Pleij, *Het gilde van de Blauwe Schuit*.

76 On genre painting, see Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel*, esp. 145-156. On the role of laughter and its relation to the Dutch 'burgermoraal', see Verberckmoes, *Schertsen, schimpen en schateren*, 16-17.

77 Kramer, *Mooi vies*, 158-166.

78 *Ibidem*, 272.

79 *Ibidem*, 299.

who are making out at a set table. The priest holds his lover with one hand and a cup with the other. A jug is standing underneath the table, ready for a refill. Also, a stick with a tankard hanging from it (often used as a tavern sign) signals to the audience that the scene is about drinking and drunkenness (fig. 3b).⁸⁰

Drinking scenes in farces were intended to provoke laughter.⁸¹ The moral message was wrapped in the humour of watching drunk and over-the-top characters arguing and making a mess of things. Comparable scenes in allegorical morality plays are seemingly more openly disapproving. These plays highlight the weak and sinful nature of man. The role of the *sinnekens*, a devilish twosome that tries to seduce man, is crucial in these plays. They personify bad qualities and human weaknesses. It is important to note that they were also very popular with urban audiences, because of their antics and foul and irreverent speech.⁸² The play by Kaprijke at the theatre contest in Ghent in 1539 lets two *sinnekens*, *Vieryghe Lust* ('Fiery Lust') and *Dwaze Jongheyt* ('Foolish Youth'), mislead Man. They take him to a tavern with the unmistakable name *Poel van Desperacyen* ('Pool of Desperation'). Together, they have a meal, which degenerates quickly into a drinking orgy. Man indulges in wine and is seduced by the hostess *Der Zonden Voetsele* ('The Fuel of Sin'). She offers him food and drinks and takes him *int groene* ('into the garden'), a clear sexual reference. The moral warning is made explicit when two other characters arrive, *Zalyghe Leerijnghe* ('Blessed Teachings') and *Redene* ('Reason'). The *sinnekens* leave the scene and Man stays behind defeated, while the tavern turns into a dark hole.⁸³

The Tavern and the Chamber of Rhetoric

The tavern is one of the favourite settings in *rederijker* farces and morality plays. Conveniently, this setting could be constructed using a minimum of props: a set table and a few stools or benches sufficed. The cast consisted of a stock of recognizable characters: an innkeeper and/or his wanton wife, and a few loud tavern-goers.⁸⁴ This is exactly how taverns are represented in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century genre painting. From Pieter Aertsen's *Egg Dance* (1552, fig. 4) to Adriaen Brouwer's *Tavern Scene* (c. 1635, National Gallery London, fig. 5) images abound of sparsely furnished, but messy tavern interiors. These scenes evoke disorder and even vice. The tavern is a place of loose morals, where people carouse, gamble and engage in illicit sexual activity.⁸⁵ This literary and pictorial *topos* corresponds strikingly to the contemporary social construction of the 'bad' tavern.

Historical studies of early modern drinking have stressed that contemporaries made a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' taverns. The 'good' tavern was an indispensable social

80 Ramakers and Eykman, *List en bedrog*, 47-89; Van der Coelen and Lammertse, 'Inspiratie en imitatie', 239-241.

81 Kramer, *Mooi vies*, 72; Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel*, 55-56.

82 Hummelen, *De sinnekens*.

83 Play of Kaprijke, edited in Ern  and Van Dis, *De Gentse spelen*, II, 441-468.

84 Van Bouchaute, *Set an u mont*, 34-36.

85 On Aertsen's *Egg Dance*, see Lammertse, 'Tussen Antwerpen en Amsterdam', 179-180; Kwak, *Proeft de kost*, 102-109. On Brouwer's *Tavern Scene*, see De Clippel, 'Rubens Meets Brouwer', 325.



Fig. 3a Pieter Baltens, Village Fair with the staging of 'Een cluijte van plaijerwater', c. 1570, Oil on panel, 112×157 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 3b Detail of the Village Fair with the staging of 'Een cluijte van plaijerwater' (theatre stage).

space in the early modern city. For men from the middling groups the tavern had a direct professional function. In the tavern, sellers and buyers drafted contracts; master guildsmen engaged new journeymen; conflicting parties reconciled; men proved their solvency by treating their friends and fellow guild brothers to a drink. The presence of an audience to witness the transactions and the availability of drink to seal the agreement was crucial. Drunkenness was tolerated and even encouraged when it stayed within bounds. Innkeepers were usually respectable, educated men who maintained a close working relationship with the civic authorities. After all, beer taxes provided one of the most important



Fig. 4 Pieter Aertsen, *Egg Dance*, c. 1552, Oil on panel, 84×172 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 5 Adriaen Brouwer, *Tavern Scene*, c. 1635, Oil on oak, 48×67 cm, London, The National Gallery.

sources of income to the town's finances.⁸⁶ In contrast to these 'good' taverns, there were also so-called 'bad' taverns. The 'bad' tavern was usually located outside the city walls (or

⁸⁶ Tlustly, *Bacchus and Civic Order*, 158-182; Tlustly, 'Drinking, Family Relations and Authority'; Forster, 'Taverns and Inns'.

outside a village) where it escaped control and tax collectors. It was also often a place where prostitution was part of the business. The distinction between a hostess or maid and a professional prostitute was particularly vague. Yet, despite these contrasts between the 'good' and the 'bad' tavern, in reality the opposition was far from absolute.⁸⁷

At first sight, the *rederijkers* sought to clearly differentiate themselves from the tavern. The regulations of a number of chambers of rhetoric proclaim that the civilized drinking practices in their own rooms were the opposite of the disordered boozing in taverns. In a contract *De Goudbloem* in Antwerp drafted in 1525 for its playwright, the chamber demands that he let the actors rehearse in the guild's meeting rooms and not elsewhere in the city, certainly not in taverns.⁸⁸ The statutes of *De Kersouwe* in Oudenaarde from 1556 stipulate that the brothers may make merry during banquets and drinking bouts by singing spontaneously or in chorus, but that they may not brawl and yell like drunks in a tavern.⁸⁹ However, upon closer inspection, the chamber of rhetoric and the tavern can hardly be considered as completely distinguished social spaces. Many chambers of rhetoric did not own a meeting room and therefore had to rehearse in taverns.⁹⁰ This was the case for example for *Mariën Theeren* in Ghent.⁹¹ An innkeeper in Borgerhout (near Antwerp) sued the local *rederijkers* in 1567, because they had neglected to pay their rent and their drink bill.⁹² The distinction between a chamber of rhetoric and a tavern was not always very clear, even to the city government. The magistracy of 's-Hertogenbosch decided in 1595 that *Mozes Doorn* could no longer serve beer at the lower burgher's excise, and had to pay the tapper's excise instead. *Mozes Doorn* resisted but did not deny the similarities between chambers of rhetoric and shooting guilds, on the one hand, and (respectable) taverns, on the other hand.⁹³ In 1681, *Bloemken Jesse* in Middelburg sold its premises to a couple of former members, who kept the furniture and turned the place into an inn.⁹⁴ In fact, quite a number of *rederijkers* were professionally active as innkeepers.⁹⁵

We can conclude that the chamber of rhetoric was a social space that overlapped in many ways with the 'good' tavern. At the same time, the *rederijkers* criticized the licentiousness and excess of the 'bad' taverns precisely in order to uphold their own moral reputation. By exaggerating the *topos* of the 'bad' tavern and accentuating its grotesque features, the *rederijkers* conveniently presented their own, often extreme, drinking practices as reasonable and civilized. However, matters were not always that straightforward. The most famous tavern scene in Dutch literature (in a prose text from c. 1515) is the visit of Mariken van

87 Martin, *Alcohol, Sex, and Gender*, 58-78. For the Low Countries, see Deseure, 'Questie en Afdronk', 100-101 and Van Dijck and Vrints, 'De kroeg'.

88 Edited in Donnet, 'Un manuscrit', 12-13. For similar regulations for the shooting guilds in seventeenth-century Antwerp, see Thijs, *Van Geuzenstad*, 154.

89 Edited in Van der Meersch, 'Kronyk der rederykkamers', 254-265.

90 Examples for literary companies in other regions in Kümin, *Drinking Matters*, 124-125.

91 Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*, 150.

92 Ibidem, 111.

93 Hermans, *Geschiedenis der Rederijkers*, 174-176.

94 Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, 62.

95 Numerous examples for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Holland in Van der Heijden, 'Aanzet tot een sociale stratificatie'.

Nieumeghen and the devil Moenen to the *Gulden Boom* in Antwerp. Mariken, who has mastered the liberal arts in no time, recites a hymn in praise of the art of rhetoric. At first she wins the approval of the tavern-goers, but soon the scene degenerates into a brawl, and a man is slain. Although there can be no doubt that a tavern where the devil thrives is a ‘bad’ tavern, the fact that it is centrally located in Antwerp, that there is a noted presence of respectable burghers and guildsmen, as well as the allusion to the performance of the art of rhetoric, indicate that it is an ambiguous setting.⁹⁶ Similarly, the reference to the drinking rituals of the *rederijkers* in the bad ending to the tavern scene of the Kaprijke play from 1539, has a self-parodying rather than a moralizing effect. Bret Rothstein has likewise suggested that the depiction of tavern scenes by the early sixteenth-century painter Jan Sanders van Hemessen was intended more as a game of wits than as a high moral judgment.⁹⁷ In a similar vein, *rederijkers* played with their own stereotypes to tease and entertain their audiences.

A literary text that brings together the moralizing, satirizing and self-parodying conceptions of drinking and drunkenness by the *rederijkers* is the *Mandement van Bacchus* (‘Mandate of Bacchus’) from 1580. The performative context of the printed pamphlet is unknown, but it formed part of a Shrovetide celebration and belongs to a wider genre of mock sermons and mock charters.⁹⁸ In a very formal manner, directly reminiscent of princely ordinances, Bacchus calls his subjects to appear on Shrove Monday and Tuesday in his courts of justice, which are in fact Antwerp taverns. The text is unique because it enumerates a long list of wines and beers and no less than ninety-two identifiable Antwerp inns and taverns. Both the drinks and the taverns are named in an order from high to low, showing a keen appreciation of quality and of social distinction. While the drunkards parade from posh inns to shabby taverns, they too degenerate socially and physically. The mock mandate is signed by a set of satirical characters *voor die kerckduere van ‘t groot Gasthuys* (‘for the church portal of the great hospital’), where incorrigible drunks are bound to end up. Yet, the moral warnings do not detract from the reader’s amazement at the bedazzling diversity of drinks and taverns in Antwerp.⁹⁹

Rederijkers, Kannenkijkers

By creating disordered tavern scenes with hard-boozing, over-the-top characters, the *rederijkers* legitimized their own drinking practices and affirmed their self-image – albeit often with a sense of irony – as convivial but civil guildsmen. In an odd reversal of this cultural strategy, they were themselves reduced to a stock drinking type in the seventeenth century. *Rederijkers* became *kannenkijkers* or ‘jug watchers’. The exact origin of this expression is unknown. An often-cited source is Jan van Hout, a town secretary of Leiden and one of the first Renaissance poets in the Low Countries, who tried to reform both the poetics and

⁹⁶ *Mariken van Nieumeghen*, 89-99.

⁹⁷ Rothstein, ‘Bear and Loafing’.

⁹⁸ Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord*, 275-285.

⁹⁹ Verhuycck and Kisling, *Het Mandement van Bacchus*, 7-11. For a similar interpretation of seventeenth-century English texts that ‘condemn’ drinking, see Smyth, ‘It were far better’.

the social practices of his fellow *rederijkers*. In a satirical text from 1578 he refers to *hare penssen mit dranc verladen* ('their bellies full of drink'), but he does not yet use the word *kannenkijzers*.¹⁰⁰ The expression seems to have first appeared during the Twelve Years' Truce (1609-1621), when *rederijker* culture was again thriving in both North and South. In the context of a dispute about the social and literary developments in the local chamber of rhetoric in 1613, Adam van der Hagen, former playwright of *De Wijngaertrancken* in Haarlem, complained that many slanderers spoke mockingly and contemptuously, out of ignorance or malice, of the chambers of rhetoric. According to Van der Hagen 'it has become for many, almost a common saying: Rhetoricians/Wife-beaters/Jug watchers'.¹⁰¹ In *Jean de la Roy of d'ingebeelde Rijke*, a farce from 1665, the Amsterdam author Joost van Breen lets his boastful title character patronizingly narrate: 'Recently I came to a place where there were rhetoricians from the village of Hazerswoude, those boorish jug watchers'.¹⁰²

Contemporary to Joost van Breen's farce are a number of paintings by Jan Steen in which he represents the *rederijkers* reciting verse, making merry and boozing. *Rhetoricians Carousing* (c. 1665-1668, fig. 6) shows an indoor meeting of the *rederijkers*: a *blazoen* is attached to the wall; the well-dressed company includes a standard bearer and a drummer; a man with an embroidered cap may well be the elected 'king'. The guild's drummer is leaning through the window, reading out a poem to an amused crowd. Above their heads hangs a tree branch with a pitcher and a tankard, signalling the occasion for drinking. In the right-hand corner a man is effectively emptying a jug, while two others are striking a deal or maybe gambling. In the foreground, in a gesture reminiscent of tavern scenes, a jester is grabbing a servant maid who is smiling at the viewer of the painting. A wreath of flowers with a piece of paper attached to it hangs from the ceiling. The quatrain scribbled on it plays with the literal and poetic meanings of food and drink. The short text jokes that *rederijkers* are better at drinking than at writing verse: 'They rhyme of dry fare/Excellent poets of Bacchus/Dry is an empty barrel/But there has to be some food too'.¹⁰³

The interpretations of Jan Steen's *rederijker* paintings diverge widely. Although there is no direct documentary evidence, Albert Heppner has asserted that Steen was himself a *rederijker*. Heppner pointed at Steen's accurate representation of the *blazoenen* and the mottos of the chambers of rhetoric in Holland. He argued that although the scenes are humorous, they are never truly mocking or condescending. Therefore, he concluded that the chambers of rhetoric themselves may well have commissioned the paintings.¹⁰⁴ Mariët Westermann has defended the opposite position. She claims that Jan Steen belonged to a

100 Koppenol, *Leids heelal*, 113-118.

101 'dit nu by velen schier een gemeen spreek-woort geworden is: Retorijckers/Wijvensmijters/Kannen-kijckers', cited in Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, 186.

102 'Lest quam ick op een plaets, daer waeren Rederijkers/Uyt 't dorp van Haesersou, die lompe kannekijkers', in Van Breen, *Klucht van Jean de la Roy*, 8. There was effectively a chamber of rhetoric in Hazerswoude, which participated in a competition in Haarlem in 1606 for example. See Ramakers, 'De "Const" getoond', 129, 133 and 146; Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, 130.

103 'Sy rymen van droge cost/Bachus poeten fijn/Drooch is al een vat bost/Maer ook moet er eten sijn'. See Heppner, 'The Popular Theatre', 27. A different, but less plausible reading in Westermann, 'Steens komische ficties', 58.

104 Heppner, 'The Popular Theatre', 24-35.



Fig. 6 Jan Steen, *Rhetoricians Carousing*, c. 1665-1668, Oil on canvas, 86×100 cm, Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts Belgium, Photo: J. Geleyns - Ro scan.

bourgeois cultural elite that looked down upon the popular entertainment of the old-fashioned *rederijkers*. In the second half of the seventeenth century the chambers of rhetoric had become a thing of the past, which now evoked both a feeling of nostalgia and distaste.¹⁰⁵ So, in Westermann's interpretation the *rederijkers* were no longer the subject of a civilizing offensive but its object: they had become the laughing stock of the educated bourgeois. The precise intentions of Jan Steen (who interestingly also exercised the professions of brewer and innkeeper) thus remain open to discussion, but a better understanding of the dynamics of seventeenth-century *rederijker* culture brings some nuance to this debate.

In his detailed study of the Dutch *rederijkers*, Arjan van Dixhoorn has discussed the attacks on the drinking practices of the chambers of rhetoric in early seventeenth-century Holland. He has shown that these charges formed part of a wider dispute about the future of *rederijker* culture in the new political and cultural context of the Dutch Republic, where

¹⁰⁵ Westermann, *The Amusements of Jan Steen*, 138-144. Chapman, 'Jan Steen', 11-23 and Chapman et al., *Jan Steen*, cat. 24 present a more nuanced view.

the now secularized guilds had to find a new social role. On the one hand, a small but influential group defended the position that a chamber of rhetoric had to be a sober sodality of scholars and culturally refined amateurs.¹⁰⁶ This was the path chosen by the famous – but short-lived – *Nederduytsche Academie* (1617-1622) in Amsterdam. Jan van Hout's earlier satirical attacks on the excessive drinking of the *rederijkers* must be understood as a similar endeavour to reform the chambers of rhetoric in a culturally exclusive way. On the other hand, however, a much larger group defended a more inclusive position: the chambers of rhetoric should not create high intellectual barriers and should place sociability – including collective drinking – before sophisticated poetry.¹⁰⁷

Many literary scholars have uncritically repeated the judgment of the 'moderns' and have taken for granted the fact that the 'ancients' were marginalized, both culturally and socially, during the seventeenth century.¹⁰⁸ However, comprehensive research on the social background of the *rederijkers* contradicts this interpretation. In the Dutch Republic the chambers of rhetoric continued to recruit from among the broad middling groups and also attracted prominent burghers, intellectuals and artists.¹⁰⁹ This was equally the case in the Habsburg Netherlands, where some chambers of rhetoric became more socially exclusive than in the sixteenth century. The more restricted recruitment amongst established and well-off guild masters went hand in hand with a partial withdrawal from the public sphere and a growing preference for a closed sociability in the presence of representatives of the local elites.¹¹⁰ We assume that this also led to more copious banquets.¹¹¹ It seems likely that the general trend of more exclusive and more abundant guild meals established by Harald Deceulaer and Frederik Verleysen also holds true for the chambers of rhetoric.¹¹² Therefore, independently of his own personal position, Jan Steen's *rederijker* paintings can best be understood as relatively mild satires on the continuing appeal of the drinking practices of the mainstream *rederijkers* in his own time.¹¹³

The complexity of the *kannenkijker* cliché (and proof of its reception in the Habsburg Netherlands) is perhaps best illustrated by a work by Adriaen Brouwer, known as *The Smokers* (c. 1635, fig. 7). At first sight the small panel shows a simple tavern scene, but Karolien De Clippel has established that it actually presents a group portrait of Antwerp artists, with Brouwer in the central position. Brouwer painted the portrait for a very specific occasion: in 1635 two of the depicted painters, Jan Lievens and Jan Davidsz de Heem, registered as masters in the Antwerp artist guild of St Luke. The same year Brouwer became a *liefhebber* ('amateur') in the chamber of rhetoric *De Violieren*, which functioned as a branch of the

106 A comparable case study for Germany can be found in Herdman, 'Amethystus Princeps Sobrietatis'.

107 Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, 185-188.

108 Most paradigmatically in Grootes, 'De ontwikkeling'.

109 Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, 110-119 and 302.

110 Van Bruaene, 'De contouren van een nieuw cultuurmodel'.

111 For Bruges see, Vanhoutte, *Mijn werck es hemelick*, 134-140.

112 Deceulaer and Verleysen, 'Excessive Eating'. For the shooting guilds, see Knevel, *Burgers in het geweer*, 299-300.

113 On Steen's adequate representation of the literary practices of the *rederijkers*, see Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, 146.



Fig. 7 Adriaen Brouwer, *The Smokers*, c. 1635, Oil on wood, 46,4×36,8 cm, New York, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

guild of St Luke.¹¹⁴ A strong point in favour of De Clippel's thesis is the manner in which Brouwer depicts himself: the painter who is raising a jug, seems to be taken by surprise by

114 De Clippel, 'Adriaen Brouwer', esp. 203-204.

the viewer. Brouwer is unmasked as a *kannenkijker*, and thus as a *rederijker*. In sum, this group portrait disguised as a tavern scene warns us that we must not consider the *topoi* of genre painters and *rederijkers* as static conventions.¹¹⁵ This particular painting is both an ode to conviviality and to friendship and a parody on the drinking clichés Brouwer had built his career on.

Conclusion

In *Nederland's beschaving in de zeventiende eeuw* (first published in 1941), Johan Huizinga writes favourably about the shooting companies and the chambers of rhetoric. Their old forms of sociability had guaranteed a unity in culture and an open communication between different social groups in the Dutch Republic.¹¹⁶ While Huizinga paints a very rosy image of guild practices, his vision acknowledges the importance of corporative conviviality in the urban culture of the Low Countries. The quintessential Dutch word *gezelligheid* aptly captures this early modern phenomenon.¹¹⁷ We have argued that drinking and even drunkenness were fundamental in the constant regeneration of this ideal of sociability, both in the Habsburg Netherlands and the Dutch Republic. This does not imply that there was no diversity or that nothing changed within *rederijker* culture. The notorious boozer Eduard de Dene (1505-1576/79) from Bruges, and the cultural reformer Jan van Hout (1542-1609) from Leiden, although both contemporaries and respected authors, viewed the carousing of their fellow *rederijkers* very differently: De Dene lauded heavy drinking in his *refreinen in 't zotte*, while Van Hout condemned this practice and pleaded for more cultural refinement. *Rederijker* culture also underwent important transformations, including a secularization of its guild practices in the Dutch Republic. Yet, while there were also changes in social recruitment, in both the Habsburg Netherlands and the Dutch Republic, the chambers of rhetoric continued to represent the urban middling groups of skilled artisans, shopkeepers, clerks, schoolmasters and visual artists. From the late sixteenth century onwards, a small cultural elite distanced itself – at least verbally – from the drinking practices of the guilds, but this seems to have had the opposite effect on the much larger group that maintained this tradition. As a result, from the fifteenth century until at least the second half of the seventeenth century, drinking alcohol remained an essential social act in mainstream guild culture.

In the same period, drinking was a central theme in many *rederijker* texts, from *refreinen* composed and recited during Sunday meetings to allegorical plays and farces staged at public festivals. The representations of drinking and drunkenness were clearly dependent on genre. The *tafelspel* or ‘table play’ was performed during banquets and thus commented playfully upon the eating and drinking of a dining company. The *factie*, with its concluding dancing song, had to incite the joy of the crowds at festivals while simultaneously keeping them from excessive drinking and maintaining public order. The many drama, prose and lyrical texts that represented the drunkenness of stereotypical ‘others’ and/or re-enacted

115 Nichols, ‘Double Vision’, 164-167.

116 Huizinga, *Nederland's beschaving*, 67-68.

117 For England, see Withington, ‘Intoxicants and Society’, 644.

tavern scenes are the most complex to read. These literary texts have many layers of meaning. On a first level, they triggered the laughter of the public, which enjoyed watching (or hearing descriptions of) the antics of grotesque drunk characters. On a second level, these texts created a fiction of a clear distinction between the *rederijkers*, with their self-image of convivial and civilized guildsmen, and all kinds of low-life drinking types. Yet, on a third level, these literary creations offered the opportunity to tease the audience by turning clichés upside down and making fun of the excessive drinking habits of the *rederijkers*. Much depended on the precise performance context, but more research is needed to reconstruct these settings in more detail.

Finally, the *kannekijker* cliché should not be taken as proof of decadence or of backwardness. It is significant that the saying invented in the early seventeenth century by the cultural critics of the chambers of rhetoric, was quickly appropriated by the mainstream *rederijkers*. Adriaen Brouwer's pictorial reinvention testifies to the fact that the *topos* of drinking was continuously played with in *rederijker* texts and genre painting. The unfathomable Jan Steen seems to have favoured a similar ironic but sympathetic approach in his *rederijker* paintings. Of course *rederijkers* were aware of the need for moderation and, if they were not, they were frequently reminded of this by regulations, theatre plays, songs and poetry. Yet previous studies seem to have overemphasized the moralizing intentions of these texts and the visual images that mirrored them, or have overestimated their ability to discipline social behaviour. A more integrated study of guild culture in particular and urban culture in general can nuance many of the claims about the pervasiveness of the Dutch *burgermoraal*. When read closely, the diverse cultural documents presented here are often full of irony, self-parody and witty references. These regulations, verses and images were in any case more about defining the self than about disciplining the other. In a sense, they were an integral part of the early modern drinking game.

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