

Between Ornament and Argumentation: developments in 16th-century Dutch Poetics

Abstract

The Dutch *rederijker* movement initially shows influences not only from the *artes poeticae*, but also, and most distinctively, from the Medieval *artes praedicandi*. Influence from the French *rhétoriciens*, in terms of versification and (mythological) fiction, is only discernible beginning in the second half of the 16th century. Classical, argumentative rhetoric becomes a dominant factor only in the 1580s in the Amsterdam chamber D'Eglentier. Here again the theory of preaching is an important factor, although this time in its Erasmian version.

Over thirty years ago the late professor Roose of the University of Louvain called attention to the numerous, albeit mostly short, group of texts in which Dutch rhetoricians expressed their poetical views. These include several refrains 'In Praise of Rhetoric' or against the 'despisers' of this *ars*, as well as an impressive number of passages in plays wherein 'Dame Rethorica' has a role, sometimes even a central one. He emphasized the importance of these texts, the analysis of which could provide valuable information on the development of Dutch *rederijker* poetics between the inheritance of the middle ages, the influence of French *rhétoriciens* and the new challenge of classical rhetoric.¹

Following his lead I will try broadly to sketch some of these developments. Of course this is more to present a preliminary overview that still has to be validated by further research than to offer any definitive results, since — notwithstanding the important contributions offered by the few specialists in this field — most of the work still remains to be done.²

It is clear that from the very beginning some notion of classical rhetoric underlay the poetical conceptions of the *rederijker* movement. This notion undoubtedly rests on the standard school-knowledge of the *rhetorica vetus* and *rhetorica nova*, respectively Cicero's *De Inventione* and the *Ad Herennium*.³ One of the first Dutch rhetoricians we know by name, Anthonis de Roovere, wrote a refrain around 1480 in which he is rather explicit on that point. He compares

¹ Roose 1968: 111-128, esp. 125-126.

² For a basic outline, see Spies 1993a: 72-91.

³ Murphy 1974: 109.

his art to a plant: in the first strophe the roots are identified with conceptual invention, in the second, sweet smelling leaves are identified with elocution, and in the third, the resulting fruit is identified with, I think, the message.⁴

The combination of invention and versification (that is: aspects regarding elocution) as presented in the first two strophes is characteristic of the French *artes poeticae* of the 13th century.⁵ In itself, the comparison of *rethorica* (as the *rederijkers* themselves, following the medieval custom, spelled it) with a plant with sweet smelling leaves, points into the same direction. It indicates the extent to which traditional elocutionary aspects continued to constitute the main characteristics of the *ars*, just as they did in France 100-150 years earlier.⁶ Perhaps even the fact that most 'chambers of rhetoric' were named after flowers can be traced back to this feature.

In the third strophe, however, the impression that De Roovere's opinions could be unequivocally traced back to the secular tradition of medieval poetical thought is belied to a certain extent. For this flowering plant bears its fruit thanks to the inspiration of none less than the Holy Ghost itself. It is not quite clear what this fruit might be. But at any rate it is founded on the Holy Writ, as is made explicit in the fourth and concluding strophe.

We have come upon a very characteristic feature of the early Dutch rhetoricians' movement: the concept of the Holy Ghost giving birth to *rethorica*. It turns up in all texts on the art up to 1550, as well as in the names and blasons of several chambers. Elsewhere I have argued that this notion, which does not seem to appear in any secular medieval rhetorical treatise, must have come down by way of the *artes praedicandi*, where it was quite common.⁷ Perhaps it can even be regarded as an indication of religious origins of the Dutch *rederijkerij*.

We should remember that within the treatises on the art of preaching the image of a tree or a plant was also often used as a metaphor for the text of a sermon.⁸ And one gets an idea about the sort of fruit such plants bear. In this respect, I should like to point to another refrain, preserved in a collection gathered around 1524 by the Utrecht vicar Jan van Stijevoort. Here too the Holy Ghost gives birth to *rethorica*. But the anonymous author is somewhat more explicit than De Roovere had been about the essence of this art. He defines it as the divinely inspired art of eloquence known to David and Solomon, but also as God's own word materialized in the Annunciation, Trans-

⁴ Roovere 1955: 131-133.

⁵ See for instance the *Poetria Nova* by Geoffroi de Vinsauf, vs.60-61: 'When due order has arranged the material in the hidden chamber of the mind, let poetic art come forward to clothe the matter with words.' (Mentis in arcano cum rem digesserit ordo,/ Materiam verbis veniat vestire poesis.) In: Faral 1924: 199.

⁶ For example Geoffroi de Vinsauf, vs.1584-1586: 'Bring together the flowers of diction and thought, that the field of discourse may blossom with both sorts of flowers [...].' (Verborum flores et rerum confer in unum,/ Area semonis ut floreat his speciebus/ Florum.) In: Faral 1924: 245. See also: Arbusow 1963: 17-19.

⁷ Spies 1993a: 73.

⁸ Caplan 1970: 76-77; Miller, Prosser and Benson 1974: 252. Cf. also: Stijevoort 1930 I: 109, nr. 57.

substantiation and the seven sacraments. Besides being a way of using words inspired by God, rhetoric here has become the Holy Word as such. Mary's conception of Jesus Christ was effected by rhetoric, the refrain says, and again: the world was saved from original sin by rhetoric emanating from Christ.⁹

I think rhetoric could assume this holiness because of the allegorical and anagogical dimensions of medieval religious interpretation, the use of which was so often advised by the *artes praedicandi*.¹⁰ That the refrain I quoted was not an isolated phenomenon in this respect, can perhaps be gathered from the work of one of the most prolific dramatic authors of the early 16th century, Cornelis Everaert. He wrote several small plays in which 'Dame Rethorica' organizes such allegorical interpretations of the Old and New Testament in honor of Saint Peter and Mary.¹¹

At the same time, this religious conception of rhetoric continued to be equated with the secular classical tradition. The Van Stijevoort-refrain, for instance, formulates the civic qualities of rhetoric after formulating its religious qualities: the forming of societies and the institution of marriage, social duties and law, all directly derived from Cicero's *De Inventione* (I.2).

As a matter of fact, it was only towards the middle of the century that a more autonomous literary conception, as formulated much earlier by the French *rhétoriciens*, began to emerge also in the Netherlands. In the same years the first fully-fledged classical rhetoric in the Dutch language, written by Jan van Mussem, was published.¹²

For the first time specific literary qualities were formulated. These include such aspects as versification, in terms of rhyme and rhythm, and *poëzie*, in the sense of mythological and historical subject matter. The chief evidence is, of course, provided by Matthijs de Castelein's *Art of Rhetoric*, which appeared in 1555.¹³ The *seconde rhétorique* of the French and Burgundian *rhétoriciens* and De Castelein's position in relation to it, are amply discussed elsewhere in this volume. Therefore it is enough to say that in my opinion his work marks the point from which rhetoric and poetry (in the modern sense of the word) began to separate.

Whether this means that the Dutch rhetoricians did or did not consider classical rhetoric an important prerequisite to their art, is another question. Jan van Mussem stated that his book serves all writing, be it in prose or in verse.¹⁴ But it does mean that the specific poetical qualities were to be found elsewhere. It is perhaps not coincidental, that from this time on the comparison with the two sister arts, music and painting, became more and more popular.

⁹ Stijevoort 1930 I: 63-67, nr.166.

¹⁰ Cf. for example Caplan 1970: 93-104.

¹¹ Everaert 1920: nr.18 'Maria gheleken byden throon van Salomon', esp. 299-301; nr.21 'Tspel van Sinte Pieter ghecompareirt byder duue', esp. 345-347; and nr.24 'Tspel van Maria ghecompareirt byde claerheit', esp. 389-395.

¹² Mussem 1553.

¹³ Castelein 1555.

¹⁴ In his dedication to the readers. In: Mussem 1553: A2verso-A3recto.

Finally, at the great rhetoricians' competition of Antwerp in 1561 the fundamentally different natures and aims of rhetoric and poetry were explicitly expressed. The author of the chamber of Herenthals did so by stating that Cicero was a great orator but no poet, and Virgil a great poet but no orator. And the author of one of the Antwerp chambers, Cornelis van Ghistele, made it clear that he shared this opinion by consecrating two different passages in praise of rhetoric and poetry respectively, without making any connection between them. He explicitly formulated that rhetoric was the art of persuasion and reason of Cicero's *De Oratore*, while poetry was a question of godly inspiration and pleasant instruction, as was attested to by Ovid and Horace and proven by authors from Homer to Virgil.¹⁵

In the years to come, these new poetic qualities underwent a further evolution under the influence of the French renaissance poets, first with authors such as Lucas D'Heere and Jan van der Noot in the south, and somewhat later in the north. But there was also another, different development manifesting itself around the same period.

As early as the 1550s Dirck Volkertsz. Coornhert, born in Amsterdam but at that time living in the neighbouring city of Haarlem, had put forward severe objections to the use of mythology as it had recently been employed by rhetoricians. Thirty years later his antagonism was still greater. Not only were all 'poetic' (that is: mythological) fabrications according to him empty pomp, but so too were the devices of rhyme, rhythm, artfully formed strophes, and rich verbiage so dear to the rhetoricians. Instead he proposed and practiced a form of literature based on classical rhetoric and aimed at moral argumentation.¹⁶

Coornhert's opinions were followed by the Amsterdam rhetoricians' chamber D'Eglentier, particularly when his friend Hendrick Laurensz. Spiegel took over the leadership of this organisation in 1578. Under Spiegel's guidance the chamber published a Dutch rhetoric and recommended its use to all 'rhymesters'. He himself wrote highly argumentative moral-philosophical poetry. There are even traces of discussions with other poets who followed the renaissance trend of Van der Noot *cum suis*.¹⁷ And, as so many rhetoricians before him, he too wrote a poem in praise of rhetoric, or, to be exact, a song: a New Year's song for the year 1580.

In this song it seems as if Spiegel goes back to the old tradition formed by the *artes praedicandi*, for he begins by saying that rhetoric is a gift of the Holy Ghost, practised by Moses and David. But this time it is not the medieval theory of preaching that lies behind this conception, but the renewed Augustinian Christianity of Erasmus.¹⁸ The wisdom Spiegel's rhetoric generates is not the allegorical or anagogical wisdom of medieval figural thinking, but that of the Paulinian, Erasmian fool.¹⁹

¹⁵ *Spelen van Sinne* 1562: resp. c1verso and Q1recto-Q2verso.

¹⁶ Coornhert 1955: 18-19 and 156-158. See also Spies 1991: esp. 231-233.

¹⁷ Spies 1991: 237-241.

¹⁸ Shuger 1988: 63.

¹⁹ Spiegel 1723: 206-208.

It was another member of the same chamber, Roemer Visscher, who, taking up Spiegel's cue, identified this Christian foolishness — using the figure of Momus to represent him — with the critical rationality that unveils deceit and serves truth. Again, as in the early 16th century, rhetoric is viewed as emanating from Christ himself. Only this time that occurs not because of the metaphysical dimensions of figural speech, but because of the moral truths that can be attained by discursive reasoning.²⁰

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²⁰ Spies 1993b: esp. 114-116.

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