

The Despisers of Rhetoric Origins and Significance of Attacks on the Art of the Rhetoricians (Rederijkers) in the Sixteenth Century

Abstract

The art of the *rederijkers* was constantly attacked, from its own day on, by so-called lovers of real literature, who claimed that the *rederijkers* abused the mother-tongue. For their part the *rederijkers* responded in kind. This paper battle drew upon pre-existent rhetorical traditions concerning the craft itself. Literary *topoi* are only employed, however, if there is a certain congruence with reality.

Probably no literary movement in the Low Countries has been the target of more derision than that of the *rederijkers*. No sooner had it seen the light of day than it was called a malformed bastard child of the literary world. In the prime of its life the number of bad fairies pronouncing their maledictions increased steadily to form a clique — surviving right into our own time — of tasteful guardians of the literary tradition, who found that they could best profile themselves by emphatically rejecting *rederijker* art.

Certainly an important role in these modern disparagements was played by the renowned Johan Huizinga. In his *Waning of the Middle Ages* he totally ignored the *rederijkers* and their work, even though they occupied what was in many respects a central position in the cultural scene he was describing. He simply found them uninteresting, a rather late and peripheral symptom of what the age he proclaimed to be waning manifested much more clearly in French literature of the time, dominated by the *rhétoriciens*. By implication the descriptive terms he launched for the products of French writers can also be applied to the art of the *rederijkers*: threadbare imagination, rehashers, rampant exploitation of images and ideas, dry, stiff, false, producers of artificial light, overripe, withered, hollow, lacking style, debilitated, hackneyed, wearisome, boring, superficial, mere glitter, banal. In short, he concludes elsewhere, the middle classes had as yet no idea of beauty.¹

The most recent handbook of Dutch literary history minces no words on this point, declaring that the entire production of hundreds of morality plays, comedies, farces, as well as thousands of poems is hardly worth the effort of

¹ Huizinga 1955: especially final chapter. See also Knuttel 1910; Mak 1944: chapter ix; De Bock 1969/70; Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen 1972.

reading: 'A great deal of the production of fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is completely worthless'.² It is not surprising, then, that specialists in this area, such as the Anna Bijns scholar Lode Roose, keep apologizing for their boring subject matter.

In an article about an Antwerp ode to Rhetorica, Roose starts by maintaining that it is worth looking at *rederijker* work 'despite its general lack of artistic value'. It might be interesting, he suggests, to look at *rederijkers'* own views of their art, as in the poem to be discussed, which 'undoubtedly will be of little interest in terms of any intrinsic aesthetic value'. This defender of *rederijker* literature considers it a 'transitional art form' which paved the way, so to speak, for the true beauty ushered in by the Renaissance. The best descriptive label in his opinion would be enthusiasm — in other words, give them an A for diligence the way the Dutch school system still rewards incompetent but well-meaning pupils.³

The unhistorical nature of this approach, completely terrorized as it is by post-romantic aesthetics, needs no further elaboration. For almost two centuries the work of *rederijkers* fulfilled urgently felt needs of city dwellers in the Low Countries. The fact that they made use of stylistic techniques such as allegory and extensive personification may be a problem for our modern sense of beauty, but it is completely irrelevant if we want to assess the significance of the role they played in late medieval and early modern society.

The *rederijkers* gave new and cohesive form to the young literary life of the city. They employed subtler forms and techniques than their predecessors and shaped their work with specific functions in mind. These functions were in the first place aimed at legitimizing and promoting the vested interests of the city in its competition with other cities. Such aims manifested themselves in richly attired processions, triumphal entries and competitive events. On occasions like these plays performed in theaters and on stationary or moving pageant wagons, tableaux vivants and triumphal arches decorated with allegorical figures were supposed to convey all that the city wished to project in terms of its self-image.

Rederijker art also served as a weapon in the hands of the established middle classes and others who wished to join their ranks. It attempted to provide answers, often in the form of consolation, to the everyday frustrations and ambitions of that social milieu. The issues most frequently addressed were the whims of fortune, the dangers of foolish love and the constant lurking of death. At the same time chambers of rhetoric (*rederijkerskamers*) were especially well suited to serve as educational institutions in the city. Their public appearances in processions and tableaux vivants illustrated the same lessons they sought to convey in their dramatic and poetic work: self-control, moderation, proper behavior, refined conversation. Often the pleas for these values took the rather heavy-handed form of an uncompromising offensive against everything that failed to meet the new standards.⁴

² Knuvelde 1970: 368.

³ Roose 1964/65: 121-124.

⁴ Cf. Pleij 1990: 158-191; Pleij 1993 A.

But why then all that scorn for this much desired and widely practiced art? The *rederijkers* themselves were already very much aware of the campaigns against them. From their earliest days they wrote heart-rending laments about their detractors, using the occasion to provide fine specimens of their rhetorical skill in the lower registers. They depict their enemies as uneducated, half-witted simpletons, idiots, uncouth oafs, beasts, swine, and simply peasants.⁵

And why, then, all this intense aggression on the part of *rederijkers* themselves? Who started it? The well-known outbursts of medieval poets against frivolous colleagues who out of monetary greed paste together fantasies about knights are mild by comparison. Were there other reasons for all the hostility, were *rederijkers* really a dubious set, or was it rather the nature of their art and its tradition that drove them to such extreme formulations?

Like many sixteenth-century morality plays, *The Prophet Elisha* is framed by a dramatized prologue and epilogue. The function of this rather sophisticated theatrical technique is to take the public by the hand, as it were, and lead them into the performance. On stage the suggestion is made that the spectators move closer together since the play is about to begin. But then a character called Despiser of Art starts to complain about the crowd. Why don't all these people go to church to hear God's word? Another character, Rhetorica, sets him straight by saying that a morality play is about to be staged. This sends Despiser into a near panic:

That you will come with something good I cannot believe;
it brings me grief. Away, away with Rhetorica. (1.72-73)

But then Rhetorica argues that she is badly needed, for wherever she is absent evil flourishes. Despiser cannot imagine that this is true of that frivolous art of words, practiced by 'lichte gasten' (1.84), that is, irresponsible or unsavory types. Rhetorica then emphasizes that she can not only edify but give delight as well. The only problem is that she is so often misused.

And that is precisely why she should be silenced, Despiser declares, for wherever she makes an appearance people become unruly. But Rhetorica says that his displeasure can better be directed at the abusers; Rhetorica herself is blameless. For isn't it true that she is also used in church, both in sermons and in the singing of psalms? Isn't it nonsense, after all, to let one of God's gifts lie unused?

Despiser then goes back to the frivolousness he touched on earlier. They will undoubtedly once again perform some rollicking farce about Tom, Dick or Harry, and cap it off with a lot of eating and heavy drinking afterwards. Triumphantly Rhetorica then informs him that the play is about the prophet Elisha. She goes on to explain that he will be able to see, in the form of an exemplum, how idolatry, evil behavior and greed lead to chaos. But no matter how much she stresses the useful effect of this visually didactic art form (using

⁵ Mak 1944: 130-134; Roose 1968; Pleij 1974: 45-48; Spies 1993.

a variant on the Modern Devotionalist phrase 'seeing makes us remember'), Despiser is not at all convinced and leaves the stage still grumbling. Rhetorica then warmly welcomes the spectators, calling them 'wise gentlemen' (l.189) who can appreciate this 'art' and who will therefore help her flourish 'no matter how much the despisers shame me with blame'. (l.191)

But who are those despisers? Their ranks apparently included more than rigidly pious persons like Despiser, who considered all that fiddling with words and meanings not only senseless but dangerously subversive. Rhetorica herself also mentions those who misuse and disgrace rhetoric. She probably has in mind here the same group Despiser alludes to repeatedly with his talk of frivolousness and immoderate living. Rhetorica, after all, insists that she is not staging a farce but an exemplary play. Another possibility is that she is referring to *rederijkers* who place their skills in the service of religious or political propaganda, instead of pursuing general didactic goals.⁶

However that may be, it is clear that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the despisers of rhetoric were a very heterogeneous group. We get to know a little about them from the tirades of the *rederijkers* and, more directly, from their own polemical pronouncements or from the records of local authorities, who played a role all their own. In short we encounter the following groups: raconteurs and street poets; assorted people who consider *rederijker* work boring; persons who abuse the art, treating rhetoric like a set of quickly learned tricks useful for misleading others; scholars and humanists who look down on rhetoric; and spiritual and secular authorities who want to curtail its activities.

The idea that the writings and performances of the *rederijkers* were considered boring seems to be a rhetorical ploy originating in their own circles. This becomes quite apparent in the comedy produced in Leiden *Of Human Understanding and Transitory Beauty*. A citizen on his way to the performance of a morality play in Gouda asks a fellow citizen to accompany him. Certainly not, is the reply, I would be bored to death, it simply does not interest me at all. His companion persuades him to come nevertheless, and after the play is over, his enthusiasm knows no bounds. No doubt the public could identify to some extent with the recalcitrant spectator. His triumphant conversion could therefore serve as a real challenge to put themselves to a similar test on a regular basis.⁷

Elsewhere, too, we encounter this sophisticated complaint. In the Amsterdam morality play *Of the Ailing City* a character maintains that some people would rather go to hear the croaking of frogs than attend the outstanding performances of the *rederijkers*. Cornelis Everaert remarks in a number of his plays how little interest there really is in rhetoric, and how boring people find it. A public which does show appreciation is labeled cultured and artistic, a form of upgrading which finds its counterpart in the suggestion that the 'folk' (i.e., the uncultured) would rather go to performances by magicians and jugglers than to a morality play. Similarly, in the comedy *Of Music and Rhetoric*, the fondness

⁶ Trou 1992: fol. 62 recto-64 recto.

⁷ *Esbattement* ed. 1967.

of part of the public for ‘the crude lies of farces’ is deplored. Finally, Anna Bijns describes uncivilized people like these — in a *refrein* dealing generally with foolishness in art — as talking, eating and drinking during the performance of a play or the recitation of a beautiful poem.⁸

A qualitatively different reaction to *rederijker* art is found in the increased censorship by the authorities — measures which soon assumed the form of systematic persecution. These ‘despisers’ are repeatedly alluded to in the texts themselves, but we also learn about them from the records of their own censoring activities, prohibitions and court decisions. Taken together these all clearly testify to both the immense popularity of the new verbal art in the cities and to the enormous fear which its influence on public opinion instilled in the church and society. In fact this sixteenth-century witch hunt grew out of the realization — new in the history of world literature — of the far-reaching ideological potential of literary texts.⁹

The play *The Prophet Elisha* mentioned earlier already touched on the ability of rhetoric to stir up unrest. Wherever it appears things get out of hand. In *Human Understanding* the reluctant character laments the fact that rhetoric is being applied to Biblical subject matter. This, he assumes, is for the purpose of maligning the clergy. Fortunately the other character can put him at ease, for censorship has been introduced and shameful practices of that kind are now a thing of the past.¹⁰ In *rederijker* circles opinion also appears to be divided on the question of the Reformation. By no means did all *rederijkers* offer themselves as mouthpieces for the fundamental revamping of the faith.

The chamber play *The Three Fools*, however, takes a stand for the Reformation, and a performance in Brussels in 1559 led to prosecution. In the dramatic prologue to this play Rhetorica complains that she is being suppressed and is therefore doomed to die. The character Friend in Need insists that this cannot be so, since she is a teacher of indestructible truth. Then the play itself is performed, in which the religious and secular authorities are presented as undergoing a complete change of heart. Rhetorica then makes a final elated appearance in the epilogue.¹¹

Also familiar is the image of the deathly sick city maid, the personification of a given city, whose suffering is caused by the banning of rhetoric. We find her as the representative of Amsterdam in the play *Of the Ailing City*. A little later, starting in 1561, the Antwerp city maid is depicted as robbed of the arts, of rhetoric in particular, and as a result in danger of serious decline.¹²

The complaints of the *rederijkers* are, however, above all directed against street poets and others who abuse rhetoric and stain her reputation. The metaphor of

⁸ *Spul* ed. 1917: especially 1.646-653; Everaert ed. 1920: *Tspel van dOnghelycke Munte*: 1.22-26; *Tspel vanden Crych*: 1.101-113; *Spel van Ghemeene Neerynghe*: 1.375-378; *Tspel van Tilleghem*: 1.55-58. Kalf 1906/12: III: 128; Bijns ed. 1886: nr. 77: b: 1.11-13.

⁹ Mak 1944: 146-148; Decavele 1975: I: 193-230.

¹⁰ *Trou* 1992: fol. 62 recto-64 recto: 1.107-108; *Esbatement* ed. 1967: 1.97-112.

¹¹ Van Eeghem 1937: 44-47.

¹² *Spul* ed. 1917: 1.1287-1295; Pleij 1993 B: 82.

making stains on textile is explicitly used by Matthijs Castelein in his handbook on *rederijker* art, *The Art of Rhetoric*, printed in 1555:

Idiots with unwashed hands
Tear at you and your costly clothes.
Daily I hear that your troubles are multiplied
By street poets, seen in so many places.
They are neither able nor willing to learn,
Nor do they know an A from a B.

His publisher Jan Cauweel already mentioned in the foreword that illiterate street poets of this kind should be challenged by the *rederijkers*, and that the first step in doing so would be to distribute their own work in print already during their lifetime. The problem is that a misplaced sense of modesty often prevents them from taking such measures. But how else can those charlatans ever be put in their place?¹³

Anna Bijns maintains that these would-be poets can be distinguished from true poets mainly by their greed for money. The abusers of rhetoric have no qualms about providing entertainment for carousing groups. They could better call themselves *raconteurs*, because:

My limbs tremble, my heart aches
When I see them selling Rhetorica for money.¹⁴

Shameless money-grubbers build their careers by flattering their public, or the persons who commission their work, in the most revolting way. And these opportunists are now winning out against true artists. The main character of *Mariken of Nieumeghen* makes this point at some length in a poem about the true nature of *rederijker* art:

The artist will almost die of poverty.
The flatterer is in demand all through the year.¹⁵

A *refrein* in Jan van Stijevoort's collection makes the point even more emphatically. The first-person narrator is so furious that he can hardly eat. Nowadays rhetoric is being peddled in the streets and even tries to reach the public at large by means of farces. It is questionable whether the performers even understand what they are talking about. They deserve to be beaten with clubs for disturbing the peace.

The false poets compose extremely clever songs to charm the money out of people's pockets, then drink up all their earnings in the nearest inn. They are especially interested in peddling their political songs:

They sing, they cry, as if they were ravens,
Caw-caw, new songs for sale, will no one buy them?¹⁶

¹³ Castelein ed. 1986: stanza 29 and foreword.

¹⁴ Bijns ed. 1886: nr. 77: d: 1.10-11.

¹⁵ *Mariken* ed. 1982: 1.535-539.

¹⁶ Stijevoort ed. 1930: nr. 199: 1.21-22.

Attacks like these on street poets who abuse rhetoric for reasons of profit are almost standard formulas in *rederijker* literature. But before further discussing this tradition, it should be noted that these low-level poets were very real historical people. Repeatedly they are mentioned in municipal reports and court records and — significantly — in the rules and regulations for ‘guest houses’ and other establishments which offered refuge to vagrants and others on the lower end of the income scale.

It is difficult to distinguish these street poets from raconteurs, as is evident from Anna Bijns’ preference for this term. The latter group comprised professional makers and reciters of texts who appeared in a variety of social guises, from court functionary to rootless vagabond dependent on public favor. A municipal record of Bruges dating from 1474, for example, mentions ‘Wallin the poet and other beggarly folk’, with the emphasis apparently on ‘other’. This explains why they also regularly turn up in the neighborhood of the guest house, as suggested by the little poem cited earlier.¹⁷

The guest house was a charitable institution for sheltering vagrants and homeless persons, as well as the sick, aged or handicapped who were without financial means. The regulations of the guest house in Deventer, set down in 1418, take special pains to spell out the rules for street poets:

Also, if they start to rhyme and tell stories we will forbid them to do so. If they reply that they think it a good thing, we will answer that we think it bad; for the evil spirit would like to bring those words back into our thoughts later: you must stop. Also, if they are in bed and want to tell stories and use many words we will tell them to say their prayers and be quiet and let those who are tired from walking or sick get their rest.¹⁸

In everyday reality, too, a clear distinction was made between the behavior of a wandering singer of songs and that of an educated literary artist. The city authorities of Haarlem stated in 1503:

A clerk who makes a living by keeping a brothel or a cabaret or a gambling house, or who goes about singing in taverns or leading other forms of a dissolute life is not to be considered a clerk.¹⁹

In fact this type of wandering public performer matches the description of certain entertainers given by Thomas de Cabham, a subdeacon of Canterbury, in 1300:

There are also others, without a fixed residence or place of abode, who do nothing but engage in sinful activities. For they follow the courts of the powerful lords, uttering reproaches and accusations about those who are not present in order to please the others. They are also to be condemned, because the apostle forbids taking food with such persons, and they are called idle vagabonds, because they are good for nothing but to stuff themselves with food and to speak ill.²⁰

¹⁷ In general Hogenelst 1993. See also Pleij 1977 and Meder 1991.

¹⁸ Dumber 1732: 473-476.

¹⁹ Kalf 1906/12: III: 129.

²⁰ Vellekoop 1983: 100.

Persons of this type are also denounced by Jacob van Maerlant in his *Mirror of History* and *Wonders of Nature* as flatterers who lead people into temptation with the lies they write. In his handbook on nature Maerlant compares the entertainer with a particularly raucous bird, the jay.

Garrulus, I often think, jay
Is what some minstrels should be called,
Who are always on the move
Calling out both night and day
Their many jokes and many lies,
Imitating everyone they can,
Both priests and knights,
Ladies, pages, castellans,
Collecting lovely feathers for it, too.²¹

Other literary texts also make repeated mention of such poets and their performances. Passages which describe the favorite activities of the characters known as the Aernout brothers give a particularly vivid picture of this type of behavior. The brothers are encouraged, for example, to entertain the mixed public of nobility, clerics and bourgeoisie in the inns by singing about hunting and the game of love, falcons and dogs, tournaments and round tables and all sorts of other high-class pastimes. That will bring rewards in the form of money, goods or weapons.²²

The fact that poets of this type were known to bill themselves as *rederijkers*, and that many a *rederijker* had no qualms about making profits from public performances, can also be inferred from a number of court records. In Kortrijk in 1528 the *rederijker* Loy de Velare was reprimanded for singing in the local 'school of rhetoric' a song which lampooned the clergy in a most disgraceful way. In 1514 the authorities in Bruges forbade the singing of songs about friendly heads of state and other persons of high standing. The prohibition included songs, ballads and rondeaus — the last a much-loved form in *rederijker* circles. In 1550 someone posted satirical poems in Hasselt, and every effort was made to track down the culprit. He was undoubtedly a member of a *rederijker* guild, because the poems were composed 'in a rhetorical manner'.²³

Rederijkers also accused one another of being street poets, in other words, complete or half illiterates who curried public favor for money with occasional texts that were often directed against ecclesiastical and secular authorities. The street poet can be further characterized as a variant of the raconteur, or rather his urban-style descendant. At times the reproaches about the abuse of rhetoric are especially confusing because the target of such complaints was not necessarily a member of a chamber of rhetoric, but anyone at all who, while generally ignorant of the art, used it to his own advantage.

It is also a case of the pot calling the kettle black. This was quite simply the opinion of many humanists who, starting in the fifteenth century, dismissed all literature in the vernacular as the work of uneducated street poets. Even

²¹ Maerlant ed. 1878: 1.2133-2141.

²² *Dichten* ed. 1899: 99.

²³ Decavele 1975: 1: 221; Stalpaert 1959: 11; Vanderstraeten 1937.

Castelein seems to take up this theme when he introduces his attack on street poets by mentioning many serious practitioners of the ‘noble art of sweet rhetoric’ who also heap disgrace on her with their clumsy rhymes. This attitude becomes clearly visible when ‘humanists in the vernacular’ such as Dirck Coornhert, Jan van Mussem and Jan van Hout go on the attack around the middle of the sixteenth century. Their strong condemnations are aimed at existing *rederijker* art in its entirety. The authors are presented as uneducated amateurs who do not even know what rhetoric is. They destroy the language with their preference for foreign expressions, their unbridled and completely superficial use of rhyme, and the ignorant way they delight in mythological name-dropping. On top of all that they also lead an absurdly frivolous life, full of banqueting and carousing.²⁴

These learned humanists are also taken to task in *rederijker* texts which complain about the despisers of rhetoric. Who else could Anna Bijns have in mind when, already in the first stanza of her *refrein* on this topic, she mentions the ‘conceited fools’ who dismiss rhetoric as nothing more than fanciful twaddle. And in *The Prophet Elisha* the man with the superior smirk who keeps pointing to the church and calling *rederijkers* a band of boisterous farce players should also be viewed as one of those rigid scholars. In his *Rhetorical Testament* of 1561 Eduard de Dene speaks of the ‘blamers of rhetoric’, that is, the hypocritical enemies of art who lead completely joyless lives and who look askance at *rederijkers* and their art (or, as the critics see it, their artifice) because of the pleasure they afford.²⁵

As indicated earlier, there was nothing really new about the complaints that incompetent amateurs were turning out doggerel for money, and in doing so damaging the true art of poetry. The oldest surviving poetics in Dutch, written by Jan van Boendale around 1330, begins by asserting that lay persons are now trying more and more to imitate the learned by writing poems about all sorts of topics. For this reason, he maintains, clear rules must be formulated, ‘For poetry is no mere game’. (1.8) He then lets loose a barrage of criticism against the charlatans who tell one lie after another in chivalric novels and animal fables.

This negative picture gives sharper outlines to the profile of the true poet. He practices his art not out of a desire for money or prestige but in obedience to an inner compulsion bestowed on him by nature, and he does so in the service of the common good. The passage concludes with an illustration. False poets wish to become famous, earn money or impress a lover. But the true poet simply cannot help but write, regardless of the external circumstances. Even if you put him all alone in the middle of a forest, he would still set to work, undaunted by the total lack of response.²⁶

²⁴ Peeters 1984: 186-187, 194; Castelein ed. 1986: stanza 28; Van Hout ed. 1993: 13, 59-60; Spies 1993: 75-76, 84-85, 87-88.

²⁵ Bijns ed. 1886: nr. 77; *Trou* 1992: fol. 62 recto-64 recto: l.124-126; Dene ed. 1976/77: 50.

²⁶ Boendale ed. 1844/48: III: cap. 15.

In Middle Dutch literature, mocking mention is often made of the fact that every Tom, Dick and Harry is trying his hand at poetry. This can undoubtedly be explained by the relatively young tradition of writing poetry in the vernacular. Lay persons, the reasoning went, could have no idea what it means to be learned and literary; at most they could form part of the public, which is why some Latin texts of scholarly poets were translated. Lay persons who start writing poetry themselves, however, had to be treated with the greatest suspicion. And those who undertook such activities in a pioneering spirit may well have shown the greatest tendency to set standards as high as possible and to dismiss the work of their colleagues as lying fantasies and clumsy doggerel.

Attacks of this kind can be found in the work of Lodewijk van Velthem, who presents himself as a highly serious historian and didactic writer. At present, he maintains, there are poets at work who have no knowledge whatsoever and are incapable of putting order into even a few simple facts. They try to write about battles as a way of flattering powerful lords, then hold out their hands for payment. They produce an unending stream of rhymes and lies:

John, William, Henry, George,
Everyone wants to make rhymes these days.²⁷

The fabliau *This is Insanity*, which presents a parody on the poetic vocation, opens with the first person sighing that he would also like to compose a poem someday:

Everyone who licks a spoon
is writing poetry.
Is it, you think, insanity
that I'm not writing, too,
at night when I can't sleep?
Many's the one who when he sleeps
opens wide his arse and bleeps
and blasts his trumpet tunes.

Everyone is writing poetry nowadays, so why shouldn't he be able to do so as well? He makes reference to the topos of sleepless nights which are conducive to true poetic labor. But why, then, the next remark about trumpet blasts of wind which many people emit in their sleep? Undoubtedly he is here alluding to the debate about the nature of poetic inspiration. True poets experience this as nature, God or the Holy Spirit breathing into them. But since the false poet receives no blessing of this kind, he has to resort to empty expirations. His work is compared to the forced expulsion of air from all the orifices of the body.²⁸

Poems are then coughed up, spat out, hiccupped and snorted; rondeaus and *refreins* are defecated. This is how the charlatans lacking inspiration produce their work. Opponents of traditional *rederijker* art couch their mockery in images like these, which are also used repeatedly by Rabelais in his descriptions

²⁷ Velthem ed. 1906/38: III: part v: book 5: cap. 1.

²⁸ *Boerden* ed. 1957: 96-97.

of poetic activity. Jan van Hout provides a graphic example when he depicts *rederijkers* as belching a poem:

When such persons, their bellies full of drink, boozy and bloated like a pig's bladder so that their skin is stretched taut over their fat bodies, manage with eight lines (which they scavenge together like magpies hopping from branch to branch) to belch out a little roundelay, they claim to have composed a masterpiece.²⁹

The discussion about authentic poetic activity which is in danger of being choked out by profit-seeking charlatans is already present in model form, however, in the classics. Matthieu de Vendome refers to Horace when he describes these dangers in his Latin *ars poetica* of approximately 1170:

Furthermore, let those who patch together rags be excluded from a scrutiny of this work. For though many versifiers are called, few are chosen. Certain persons who shall remain nameless, however, relying only on the title poet, pant after the number of verses rather than the elegance of the verses numbered. They turn out their ragged verses, attempting to make a unified poem out of an assortment of trifles.³⁰

A contemporary of his, Walter of Chatillon, thought to be the author of several satirical poems in Latin belonging to the corpus of goliardic poetry, puts it more concretely:

They make beggars' poems, comparable to the lowing of hungry cattle, while I have at my disposal the refined tone of a subtly varied art.³¹

The true poet always steers a wide berth around the suspicion that he might be doing it for money — even though some writers note in this connection that there is a place for proper payment. Money must simply never be the main impetus for writing. Therefore the poet also mentions in the prologue how little material benefit he reaps from his activities. Some say that it seems crazy for him to work for next to nothing or for nothing at all. This, too, is a topos rooted in Latin literature, which came to occupy a standard place in the prologues of medieval authors.³²

Perhaps the most important reproach leveled at Rhetorica is that she sows unrest. She does this mainly by manipulating language in such a way that truth suffers. All types of texts she exploits to her own advantage. It is not surprising, then, that in the Middle Ages rhetoric was viewed as the most important weapon of the devil. He, after all, had used beautiful words to tempt Eve into eating from the Tree of Knowledge. As a result, knowledge and erudition in general also became suspect, since they were evidently both causes and symptoms of arrogance.

According to Caesarius van Heisterbach, linguistic simplicity is the most effective weapon against the devil. He objects to ornamental language and

²⁹ Van Hout ed. 1993: 59-60; In general Pleij 1983: 117-125.

³⁰ Matthew ed. 1980: 26, 67.

³¹ Chatillon ed. 1929: 62.

³² Cf. Pleij 1980.

elaborate figures of speech which worldly philosophers use to show off their vain knowledge. *The King's Compendium*, an authoritative handbook on sins, dating from around 1400, and which later also found its way into print, fully supports this idea:

Against this devil who can preach one should guard oneself most closely, for he can paint his words or ideas so beautifully that they sound reasonable, right as if they were true, and one does not feel that they come from the prince of lies, who always prefers to tell lies rather than the truth, unless he can bring evil to someone, or keep him from doing good, by telling the truth.

A similar note is struck in many other texts. Truth in its bald and naked form is found in the Bible. For this reason *The Imitation of Christ* enjoins the reader 'to seek the truth in Holy Scriptures, not in beautiful language'. Dirc Potter also warns repeatedly against false flatterers who try to rise to higher ranks by blinding people with lies so beautifully ornamented that they appear to be the truth.³³

The antithesis of this is the simple confession of pure truth, to which even the simplest person has access. Knowledge all too easily leads to wrong kinds of power. Thus the devil in *Mariken of Nieuwmeghen* immediately promises the protagonist that he will teach her all the languages of the world, plus the seven liberal arts, 'For to be elevated above everyone else is most excellent'.³⁴

Arrogance in other words. To eliminate that impression some *rederijkers* adopted names or mottoes for their guilds which humbly claim a great lack of knowledge: *The Uneducated* in Lier, *The Lightly Laden* in Ypres, *The Dull-witted* in Arnemuiden, *The Unesteemed* in Antwerp, *The Simple-minded* in St. Niklaas, *Of Scant Wisdom* in Nieuwpoort. A large dose of prejudice is needed to interpret these labels as personal testimonies of *rederijkers* to their known incompetence — a view which has actually been put forward by modern despisers.³⁵

This insistence on one's own lack of education, however, is a topos regularly found in prologues to medieval literary works. There it is related to the *modestas* formulas of classical rhetoric, and takes the form of competitive declarations of modesty and ineptitude. The writers claim to owe everything to the Holy Spirit who in fact is credited with composing the text. For this reason total anonymity of the 'writer' was thought most appropriate.

The Book of the Origin of 1352 presents the author as an especially insignificant instrument of God. The text makes this point at some length:

When the writing of this book was completed, God took back from this person all joyous gifts and left him so poor, it seemed as if he had never received anything from God....This book was begun in Lent in the year 1352 after the birth of Christ. No one should ask through whom God wrote this book.³⁶

The 'true' *rederijkers* try to place themselves in this tradition. Rhetoric is a gift of the Holy Spirit by virtue of Pentecost, but it is unfortunately corrupted by

³³ Verbij-Schillings 1993: 117; *Summe* ed. 1900: 287-288; De Bruin 1954: 63; [Potter] ed. 1904: 36, 38.

³⁴ *Mariken* ed. 1982: 1.267. Cf. Warners 1975; Peeters 1984.

³⁵ Pleij 1988: 245; David 1841/42: 111-112.

³⁶ *Boeck* ed. 1882: 146-147.

false profiteers who turn her instruments into tricks for defrauding their fellow man and doing violence to the truth. It was knowledge of rhetoric of the latter type that Moenen tried to teach Mariken, and which she demonstrated herself in the Golden Tree Inn.

In her poem, however, Mariken takes a stand against the devil by insisting that true rhetoric cannot be taught but is a gift of the Holy Spirit. She is obviously also a recipient of His gift at this point. Regrettably, there are 'ignorant beasts' (l.514) who bring disgrace to rhetoric and reduce it to a set of clever tricks. This is exactly how the devil had presented it to her.³⁷

Those who profit from rhetoric while presenting themselves as *rederijkers* form the most prominent group of abusers and despisers deplored by true *rederijkers*. The character Rhetorica makes this point herself in the play *The Prophet Elisha* cited earlier. She is extremely capable, but she is much abused. In the play *Of Human Understanding* the abusers are colleagues who mistreat the Bible and attack the clergy with rhetorical techniques. But most revealing of all is Castelein's appeal in his *Art of Rhetoric* to put an end to the maltreatment of rhetoric:

You ask which art is often wronged;
It is the noble art of rhetoric sweet
That many a poet harms and grieves.³⁸

Just how rhetoric should be used, and to what ends, can be found in a series of odes to rhetoric which often make a point of distancing themselves from the despisers and abusers. They are firmly buttressed by medieval ideas of classical rhetoric and its effects as set forth by Augustine. A passage from Galbert of Bruges' famous account of the murder of Charles the Good in 1127 illustrates views on the use and abuse of rhetoric current in the Middle Ages:

Thanks to this boon of peace, men governed themselves in accordance with laws and justice, devising by skill and study every kind of argument for use in the courts, so that when anyone was attacked he could defend himself by the strength and eloquence of rhetoric, or when he was attacking, he might ensnare his enemy, who would be deceived by the wealth of his oratory. Rhetoric was now used both by the educated and by those who were naturally talented, for there were many illiterate people, endowed by nature herself with the gift of eloquence and rational methods of inference and argument, whom those who were trained and skilled in the rhetorical art were not able to resist or refute. But, on the other hand, because these by their deceits brought action in the courts against the faithful and the lambs of God, who were less wary, God, who sees all from on high, did not fail to chastise the deceivers so that He might reach by scourges those whom He had endowed with the gift of eloquence for their salvation because they had used this gift for their own perdition.³⁹

Galbert actually presents a more subtle picture than the *rederijkers*. In his view misuse is regularly made of the gift of God, who then gives the sinner a harsh reminder for his own good. The *rederijkers* ascribe the abuse to the attempts of persons lacking all divine inspiration to imitate those who are truly gifted.

³⁷ *Mariken* ed. 1982: 1.504-555. Cf. Warners 1975.

³⁸ *Trou*: fol. 62 recto-64 recto: l.105-111; *Esbatement* ed. 1967: 1.97-112; Castelein ed. 1986: stanza 28.

³⁹ Galbert ed. 1967: 84.

Finally, the violent attacks on the despisers of rhetoric can also be placed within the framework of the late medieval cultural offensive taking place in the cities. Since the *rederijkers* played an important role in this process, their guilds can be termed prime examples of civilizing institutions. Elites were forming among the middle classes, and on the literary scene this meant that appreciation for poets and their work was on the rise.

Generally speaking, attempts were made to profile oneself by depicting the rest of the city population as uncivilized: crude beasts, illiterate fools, whose animalistic, irrational behavior was most reminiscent of peasants. A well-known technique in literature and the visual arts was to project the opposite of the behavioral aspirations found among the growing elites on to rural caricatures, who then represented everything that was declared not (or no longer) acceptable in upper urban circles.⁴⁰

Striking here is that similar accusations of crudeness dominate in the *rederijkers'* depictions of their despisers. Rhetoric therefore also appears to have been a useful instrument in the struggle to distinguish oneself from the rabble. This aspect of the attacks coincides with the broad movement of elitist language use in Western European literature of the late Middle Ages.

The English printer William Caxton began his career in Bruges and later moved to London. In the prefaces to some of his editions he remarks that the literary language in his native country now seems strange to him, especially since rhetoric has become fashionable. Thus he writes in one of his dedications:

...to pardoune me of the rude and comyn Englyshe, where as shall be found faulte; for I confesse me not lerned ne knowynge the arte of rethoryk ne of suche gaye termes as now be sayd in these dayes and used.

The common introductory topos aside, there is good reason to take Caxton at his word about this feeling of being behind the times in his profession. Also present here is a critical undertone about the decline in ordinary intelligibility. He introduces a translation of Virgil with similar remarks:

Certainly it is harde to playse every man bycause of dyversite and change of langage. For in these dayes every man that is in ony reputacyon in his countre wyll utter his commynycacyon and maters in suche maners and termes that fewe men shall understonde theym.⁴¹

Obscure jargon is chic. In the German language area this type of social milieu is clearly sketched by the writer who adapted *Theuerdank*, the pseudo-biography of Maximilian of Austria, for the beautiful edition of 1514. He points out that this is an exclusive text, not suitable for ordinary citizens and peasants. A conscious choice was made, he maintains, for an esoteric shrouding of the material in enigmatic allegories — words which are obviously intended to recommend the book. He is of the opinion that 'the common man does not need to understand the reason for this'. This kind of elite formation by means of literature

⁴⁰ Pleij 1988: chapters iv and v.

⁴¹ Hellinga 1982: 13-14.

manifested itself already at an earlier date with the printing of *Parzival* and *Titirel*, both in 1477. Since nothing was altered in these age-old texts, both the language and the content were difficult to penetrate, and were thus suited only for tradition-conscious aristocrats and scholars.⁴²

The *rederijkers'* aggressive attacks on their opponents are in the first place drawn from the rhetorical traditions of their own craft. Modesty, the claim to true inspiration and technical skill are the marks of a true poet — which also means, of course, that a writer could elevate himself by accusing his (pseudo) colleagues of stupidity, lack of education, hedonism, flattery and thirst for money. This entire repertoire was already worked through in the Middle Ages, with the classical tradition in hand. The *rederijkers* simply took their turn at exploiting this heritage.

But literary topoi can only survive if there is a certain congruence with reality. In other words, the *rederijkers* could make excellent use of this ancient and medieval tradition in their battle against their real attackers, despisers and abusers. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a large part of literary life continued to be dominated by raconteurs, street poets, and other entertainers who had no interest whatsoever in either the organizations of the *rederijkers* or all their rules and regulations. But they were successful in a territory which the *rederijkers* also wished to claim as their own, namely the street.

This explains why there are *rederijkers* who try to peddle their work in a similar way, and street poets who find it opportune to pose occasionally as *rederijkers*. Both groups are roundly berated for prostituting art. It remains true, however, that opponents of this kind were at times fabricated for the sake of enhancing one's own esteem.

An additional real factor was the scorn of early Renaissance humanists and their later colleagues who wrote in the vernacular. But above all it was the ecclesiastical and secular authorities to whom the *rederijkers* addressed their most indignant complaints. They all are doing violence to rhetoric and trying to banish truth itself. When this last term is used, the issue is usually one of reformist sympathies which make use of rhetoric.

All this is embedded in the civilizing offensive of the cities. In that framework people commonly profile themselves at the expense of self-fabricated opponents who are held up as examples of unparalleled coarseness. Rhetorica offers herself as a willing servant for the cause. The poet takes her with him on his ascent of Parnassus. Halfway up he turns around to scold and fulminate against a half-imaginary band of attackers. That makes the rest of the climb considerably more pleasant.

⁴² Becker 1977: 196, 243-259.

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