

The Chambers of Rhetoric in the (Southern) Low Countries: A Flemish-Dutch Project on Literary Confraternities

Anne-Laure Van Bruaene

Although the late medieval and early modern Low Countries boasted a strong confraternal movement, confraternities in the Low Countries have not yet received the full scholarly attention they deserve.¹ Fortunately, this does not hold true for one type of confraternity particular to the Low Countries: the Chamber of Rhetoric. A Chamber of Rhetoric can be defined as a confraternity of laymen devoted to the practice of vernacular theatre and poetry —what was called the Dutch Art of Rhetoric (*Const van Rhetoriken*). The Chambers of Rhetoric organized poetry competitions, performed theatre in public places, and participated in large-scale theatrical festivals in other cities. As such, they were responsible for the bulk of vernacular urban literature (both religious and secular) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At the same time, Chambers of Rhetoric were structured as traditional confraternities: they were dedicated to a patron saint, held religious services at their altar in a local church, organized an annual feast, and held funeral services and Requiem Masses for their deceased members.

Because of their literary activities, research into these institutions has been almost exclusively conducted for quite some time by literary historians.² However, thanks to the growing interest in urban culture in general, and guild culture in particular, social historians have recently turned their attention to this multifaceted subject.³ Although literary historians have not only studied the texts the rhetoricians (or *rederijkers*) produced but also the institutions they formed and the practices they performed, social historians have put forward new questions and have pushed for a more integrated study of the rhetorician movement. As a result, in 1998 an interdisciplinary Flemish-Dutch project on the Chambers of Rhetoric was launched: “Rhetoricians: Conformists and Rebels. Literature, Culture and Urban Networks (1400–1650).”⁴ The project was carried out at Ghent

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- 1 A notable exception is the confraternities of late medieval Ghent; see Trio, *Volksreligie als spiegel van een stedelijke samenleving*.
 - 2 Some of the authoritative studies by literary historians are Van Elslander, *Het refrein in de Nederlanden tot 1600*; Hummelen, *De sinnekens in het rederijkersdrama*; Coigneau, *Refreinen in het zotte bij de rederijkers*; Hüsken, *Noyt meerder vreucht*; Pleij, *De sneeuwpoppen van 1511*; Ramakers, *Spelen en figuren*; Moser, *De strijd voor rhetorica*.
 - 3 See for example Waite, *Reformers on Stage*.
 - 4 The project was sponsored by the *Vlaams-Nederlandse Commissie voor Nederlandse Taal en Cultuur* (VNC), a joint committee of the *Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onder-*

University (under the supervision of Prof. Hilde de Ridder-Symoens) and at the Free University of Amsterdam (under the supervision of Prof. Hilde de Ridder-Symoens and Prof. Marijke Spies). Three full-time researchers were involved: a literary historian (Bart Ramakers) and two social historians (Arjan van Dixhoorn and Anne-Laure Van Bruaene). In 2004, Van Dixhoorn and Van Bruaene completed their dissertations on the Chambers of Rhetoric in the Northern and Southern Low Countries respectively.⁵ Since September 2005 a joint repertory of the Chambers of Rhetoric in the Low Countries (1400–1650) with source material and literary references has been made available on the internet (<http://www.dbnl.org>). In what follows, I will discuss some of the results of the research project especially with regard to the Southern Low Countries (in particular the County of Flanders and the Duchy of Brabant).⁶ The aim of this contribution is not to propose a developed argument on the meaning of rhetorician culture, but to present some results of the rhetorician project to the larger community of confraternity scholars in order to make these Dutch literary confraternities more familiar to scholars and in order to invite comparisons with other areas.⁷

The proliferation of the Chambers of Rhetoric (1400–1650)

The first goal of the research project was to map the Chambers of Rhetoric that were active in the Low Countries in the period 1400–1650. Lists of Chambers of Rhetoric have been compiled since the eighteenth century. The most comprehensive to date was the one published by the literary historian Antonin Van Elslander in 1968.⁸ This list has been a valuable resource for scholars, but is far from complete. Thanks to a systematic probing of archival and secondary sources (ranging from city accounts to local histories), the research project uncovered the

zoek-Vlaanderen (FWO) and the *Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek* (NWO).

- 5 The commercial editions will be published by Amsterdam University Press in 2006/2007. For an English discussion of some of the results see: Van Bruaene, “Brotherhood and Sisterhood in the Chambers of Rhetoric in the Southern Low Countries”; Idem, “A wonderfull tryumfe, for the wynnynng of a pryse”; Idem, “*In principio erat verbum*”; van Dixhoorn and Roberts, “Edifying Youths.” For those who read Dutch another good introduction is the interdisciplinary volume containing the contributions to the international conference that concluded the project: *Rederijkers: conformisten en rebellen*.
- 6 Unless otherwise indicated, this article is based on Van Bruaene, *Om beters wille*. For the numbers of Chambers of Rhetoric in the Northern Low Countries, I used the online database (<http://www.dbnl.org>) and van Dixhoorn, “Burgers, branies en bollebozen” (especially p. 68).
- 7 For a more elaborate argument, see Van Bruaene, “A wonderfull tryumfe.”
- 8 Van Elslander, “Letterkundig leven in de Bourgondische tijd: de rederijkers.” For Holland, a more recent and more complete source inventory was already available: van Boheemen and van der Heijden, *Met minnen versaemt*.

existence of many hitherto unknown Chambers of Rhetoric. This enabled us to make detailed maps of the proliferation of rhetorician culture from the early fifteenth century until the formal separation of the Spanish Netherlands (in the South) and the Dutch Republic (in the North) in 1648. I summarize the results that are most relevant for students of (literary) confraternities in areas other than the Low Countries.

First of all, it should be stressed that rhetorician culture was remarkably well established in the core regions of the Low Countries. Between 1400 and 1650 no less than 386 Chambers of Rhetoric were active for a longer or a shorter period. This means that in this period (especially from the sixteenth century onwards) every city and town had at least one, but often two, three or more Chambers of Rhetoric within its walls. Of these, 227 (59%) were established in the Southern Low Countries (especially in the core regions Flanders and Brabant), while 159 (41%) in the Northern Low Countries (especially in the core regions Holland and Zeeland).⁹ Of course, not all of these Chambers were active at the same time. While some Chambers continued for several centuries, others enjoyed only a short-lived existence before merging with another Chamber or simply disbanding.

For the year 1500, the sources indicate that there were (approximately) 103 Chambers active. The majority were established in the Southern Low Countries (86), especially in the County of Flanders (57). The oldest was the Chamber of *De Heilige Geest* (The Holy Spirit) in Bruges, founded as a religious confraternity in 1428 by a group of well-to-do master artisans (including a painter who had adopted the new painting style of Jan van Eyck). *De Heilige Geest* was first mentioned in contemporary sources in 1442, when it performed a play in one of Bruges' public places. The members were probably also actively involved in the development of a new Dutch lyrical genre, the *refrein*, which was an adaptation of the older French *ballade*.¹⁰

A similar literary confraternity, *De Fontaine* (The Fountain) was founded in Ghent in 1448 (again by a group of master artisans with links to the Burgundian art scene).¹¹ The statutes granted by the city magistracy to *De Fontaine* on this occasion are the oldest that have survived for a Chamber of Rhetoric. They can be considered a blueprint for the developing rhetorician movement. The members of *De Fontaine* argued before the city magistracy that a formal recognition of their confraternity was needed for three reasons. First, honourable entertainment offered a remedy for melancholy and idleness. Second, the Holy Trinity – the source of inspiration of the confraternity's literary activities – needed to be formally

9 183 of these Chambers were situated in modern-day Belgium, 182 in the modern-day Netherlands, and 21 in modern-day France (Département du Nord).

10 Oosterman, "Tussen twee wateren zwem ik"; Derycke and Van Bruaene, "Sociale en literaire dynamiek in het vroeg vijftiende-eeuwse Brugge."

11 Van Bruaene, "Abel in eenighe const."

revered. Third, Ghent, the capital city of Flanders, risked falling behind in a broader movement.¹² In making this last remark, the founders of *De Fonteine* were referring in the first place to the example of Bruges. They were probably also thinking of the many local theatre groups in Flanders and Brabant that were performing during and after civic processions. These loosely organized groups were gradually evolving into established guilds, with a patron saint and an elected board. By the end of the fifteenth century, all these different types of guilds and confraternities were considering themselves to be societies of Rhetoric (*gheselscepen van der Retorike*).¹³

The crystallization of the model of the Chamber of Rhetoric marked the beginning of its rapid geographical proliferation. As such, rhetorician culture reached its heyday in the sixteenth century. In 1566, on the eve of the Dutch Revolt, (approximately) 248 Chambers of Rhetoric were active in the Low Countries. With more than two thirds of them (173), the Southern Low Countries still offered the most fertile soil for this institution. Furthermore, more than half (125) of all Chambers of Rhetoric were established in the County of Flanders. Particularly remarkable is that in Flanders in this period (especially in the first half of the sixteenth century) the rhetorician movement expanded to the countryside. Almost 40% of the Flemish Chambers were now situated in large and sometimes even small villages. We do not have much information on the social composition and local practices of these rural Chambers, but urban sources reveal that they frequently participated in theatre competitions in nearby towns (especially on the occasion of civic processions). This fact points to the remarkable cultural integration of town and countryside in this populated, urbanized and industrialized core region of Western Europe.¹⁴

At the same time, the Chambers of Rhetoric in Brabant (with their more formal organization) increasingly took the lead in the literary, intellectual and religious debates of their age.¹⁵ Already in the fifteenth century, the privileged occasion for discussion between rhetoricians was a formal literary competition (either for poetry or for theatre). These kinds of literary competitions were either held behind closed doors among a Chamber's members, or else publicly between the Chambers of Rhetoric of one town, or else among the Chambers of different towns. The most famous of all competitions, even to contemporaries, was the theatrical festival held in 1561 in Antwerp, at that time the commercial metropolis of Northern Europe. There, the competing Brabantine Chambers had to offer a dramatized answer to the

12 Van Elslander, "De Instelbrief van de Rederijkerskamer 'De Fonteine' te Gent."

13 For an excellent case study, see Ramakers, *Spelen en figuren*.

14 See also Stabel, *Dwarfs Among Giants*. Compare, for example, with Chittolini, "Civic Religion and the Countryside in Late Medieval Italy."

15 Waite, *Reformers on Stage*; Van Bruaene, "Printing Plays"; Moser, *De strijd voor rhetorica*.

central question “What thing does most cause the spirit of man to be desirous of cunning?”¹⁶ More illustrative of the growing involvement of the Chambers of Rhetoric in the Reformation, however, were the many Brabantine *refreinen* competitions that were open to participation by rhetoricians from different Chambers and were, by their less public nature, very hard to censor.¹⁷

The Dutch Revolt (1568–1648) disrupted social and cultural life in the Low Countries. Many merchants, highly skilled artisans, and intellectuals left the Southern Low Countries (most of which was reconquered by the Spanish in 1585) and sought refuge and a new life in the larger towns of Holland such as Gouda, Haarlem, Leiden and, of course, the rising commercial centre Amsterdam.¹⁸ At the same time, the Spanish Catholic government in the South adopted a repressive attitude to institutions, such as the Chambers of Rhetoric, that had traditionally fostered heterodox religious ideas. This did not, however, lead to a total suppression of rhetorician culture. Many of the Chambers that had survived the religious wars and the continuing political turmoil preferred to conform to the Counter Reformation ideal of uncritical Catholic devotion and, at least outwardly, resigned themselves to the new regime. As a result, in the seventeenth century the Chambers of Rhetoric in the Southern Low Countries evolved into social clubs for local elites or even into simple devotional confraternities without literary activities.¹⁹

In the same period, the balance gradually shifted towards the Northern Low Countries where many Chambers of Rhetoric (some established by immigrants from the South) continued their literary practices in a secularized form. Some of these Chambers were able to participate in the intellectual debates of the day until well into the seventeenth century.²⁰ In 1621, at the conclusion of the Twelve-Year Truce between the North and the South, the Low Countries still counted (approximately) 188 Chambers of Rhetoric. Almost half of these Chambers were established in the Northern Low Countries. This meant that while the number of Chambers of Rhetoric had dropped by more than 40% in the South (98), it had risen by 20% in the North (90).

We can thus conclude that rhetorician culture was remarkably well-established in the Low Countries, especially in the sixteenth century.

The social and cultural background of the members of the Chambers of Rhetoric

This leads to the second central question of the research project, namely what was the social and cultural background of the members of the Chambers of Rhetoric.

16 Van Autenboer, *Het Brabants landjuweel*, pp. 48–56.

17 Coigneau, “Tot Babels schande.”

18 On this episode, see Briels, *De Zuidnederlandse immigratie 1572–1630*.

19 For a case study, see Vanhoutte, “Noyt soo grooten luyster van Edeldom.”

20 This is one of the main arguments made by van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*.

Who were the members of the Chambers of Rhetoric and what social, religious and intellectual needs were they trying to fulfill by joining a Chamber? Literary historians have tried to answer these questions by interpreting the sparse indications in literary texts and in a few archival sources. The research project, however, sought to answer these questions by conducting a systematic analysis of membership lists.²¹ For the Southern Low Countries, the cities of Ghent (Flanders) and Brussels (Brabant) were selected for this “prosopographical” approach on the basis of the available sources. For one of Ghent’s four Cha In what follows, I summarize the most relevant results.

The members of *Mariën Theeren* belonged to the middling groups of the city of Ghent. Most of them were master artisans. They can be divided into three groups. The numbers for the period 1556–1590 are as follows: 75% of the board members practised a craft where the stress lay on skilled manual labour, notably in the textile, clothing, leather and fur sectors ; 21% were active in the local trade and transport sector (which was also organized into guilds). Half of these traders were second-hand dealers who sold used garments and other second-hand goods. A little less than 4% were painters and belonged as such to the world of the arts and printing. Together, all of these master artisans could contribute to the theatrical activities of the Chamber because they could make or supply cheap costumes, scenery, props, and cloth. Furthermore, these skilled artisans were sufficiently literate to handle literary texts, for example, to copy them and learn them by heart. These men did not have the social means, however, to go beyond the corporative milieu of the industrial city of Ghent. In this corporative milieu they were respectable men who lacked greater prestige. A majority were elected at least once to the board of their own craft, but only a handful (1%) were able to break through to a higher political level, namely the magistracy of their city. This means they did not belong to the corporative elite that was well represented on the benches of the aldermen.

In the case of Brussels, *De Corenbloem*, the most attractive Chamber to potential members, is best documented for the period 1559–1585. As in Ghent, the majority of board members were master artisans. However, whereas in Ghent 75% were engaged in skilled manual labour, in Brussels only 44% belonged to this category. On the other hand, the sectors of trade and transport (36%) and of arts and printing (14%) were much better represented. 5% exercised what can be called an intellectual profession, in this case apothecary, barber-surgeon and solicitor. Those engaged in trade did so on a local level, such as the second-hand dealers and grocers, but also on a regional and even interregional level, such as the merchants in wool, silk, wine, and English and Eastern goods. Many of the rhetoricians who belonged to the skilled manual labour category were active in

21 One early example of such a “prosopographical” approach is Van Autenboer, *Volksfeesten en rederijkers te Mechelen, 1400–1600*.

the luxury industries serving the court and the international market. Most striking was the membership of many established master tapestry weavers, who were renowned for the high artistic quality of their products. In addition, some of the painters in the Chamber specialised in tapestry designing. Altogether, at least half of the board members of *De Corenbloem* were active in the Brussels luxury industries as producers or traders. The scantier information for the other two Brussels Chambers suggests the same pattern.

In comparison with Ghent, more members of the Brussels Chambers took up a function in the city magistracy: 5% of the members of *De Corenbloem* and 10% of the members of *Den Boeck*. In addition, the attitude of the master artisans and merchants in the Brussels Chambers was marked by a much stronger sense of geographic mobility. The Brussels tapestry weavers were completely dependent on the commercial channels of Antwerp for the trading of their finished products. In like manner, the Brussels rhetoricians applied the concept of mobility in their literary practices: they participated enthusiastically in theatre and poetry competitions outside the city.

It can be concluded that the Chambers of Rhetoric in Ghent and Brussels recruited mainly from among the middling groups of skilled artisans, shopkeepers, and local merchants. The Ghent Chamber *Mariën Theeren* assembled mainly skilled manual labourers from the textile, clothing, leather, and fur sectors. The Brussels Chambers also recruited from among highly skilled artisans such as painters and tapestry weavers, but also from among well-to-do merchants. The differences in recruitment can be partly attributed to the divergent economic structures of Ghent and Brussels: Ghent was an industrial city primarily oriented towards mass textile production, while Brussels was a centre for luxury products, particularly renowned on the international scene for the quality and composition of its tapestries. The more scattered data available for other cities show other variations, but at the same time corroborate the general picture: certainly until the late sixteenth century the Chambers of Rhetoric recruited almost exclusively from among the middling groups, especially from among the milieu of skilled artisans and local merchants.²²

What attractions did membership in a Chamber of Rhetoric offer to these middle-class men? In addition to their guild training, these men had attended primary and secondary schools (sometimes Latin schools), yet only a few were able to obtain a university education for themselves or for their sons. The Chambers of Rhetoric, therefore, offered this literate middle layer of society not

22 We have comparable results for the Northern Low Countries, see van der Heijden, "Aanzet tot een sociale stratificatie van de rederijders in het gewest Holland" and Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*. The surviving Chambers of Rhetoric in the seventeenth-century Spanish Netherlands tended towards a more elite membership, see Vanhoutte, "Noyt soo grooten luyster van Edeldom."

only a honourable pastime, but also additional training in intellectual and communication skills: young men learned to improve their reading and writing skills, to analyze, compose, and discuss literary texts, and to stage plays and perform in them.²³ The members of the Chambers of Rhetoric were ultimately expected to perform in the public sphere, most often in the context of civic rituals such as processions, princely entries, or theatrical contests. As such, the Chambers of Rhetoric offered a privileged medium in which to voice and influence public opinion on such matters as local and princely politics, social concerns ranging from taxes to conjugal ethics and, of course, controversial religious issues.²⁴ A theatre competition in Ghent in 1539, where the competing Chambers had to offer a dramatized answer to the central question “What is the dying man’s greatest consolation?,” caused such a public scandal that a later commentator (1561) concluded that “in those plays was the worde of God fyrst openyd in thys contrey” and that those “plays were, and ar forbeden, moche more strettly than any of the boks of Martyn Luter.”²⁵

The exact role of the Chambers of Rhetoric in the Reformation has been a long-standing matter for debate.²⁶ Again, we have to take into account local variations. The Ghent Chamber *Mariën Theeren* did not have a great impact on the intellectual and religious debates that took place in that city in the second half of the sixteenth century. Instead, it adapted itself, willingly or not, to the changing religious context in Ghent. A few of its members, however, chose a more active path. The most striking case is that of the ex-schoolmaster Jan Onghena, who repeatedly ran into trouble for composing anticlerical *ballades* and songs. Onghena was a very popular young man who entertained people at parties and at the inns with his grimaces and verses, but in 1566 he revealed his real commitment to the Calvinist cause by taking the lead, together with his brother, in the iconoclast riots. A few other rhetoricians from other Chambers were also in the forefront. This involvement of individual rhetoricians seems to have been the main reason why in 1566 the city decided to drop the financial support it had given for more than thirty years to the four Chambers of Rhetoric.

Brussels’ case, on the other hand, presents a different picture. In the 1520s a group of Brussels rhetoricians were already manifesting Lutheran sympathies. Incidents surrounding the public performances in the late 1550s indicate that by then they advocated, at the least, anticlerical ideas. In the 1560s, the Chambers organized poetry competitions and attended competitions outside Brussels that

23 van Dixhoorn, “Als retorica regeert.”

24 See, for example, Pleij, *De sneeuwpoppen* and Waite, *Reformers on stage*.

25 Burgon, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Gresham*, pp. 379–80. On this competition, see *De Gentse spelen van 1539*; Van Bruaene, “Printing Plays.”

26 See, for example, the divergent opinions in Decavele, *De Dageraad van de Reformatie in Vlaanderen*; Ramakers, *Spelen en figuren*; Waite, *Reformers on Stage*.

caused increasing controversy, but that still tolerated diverse opinions and confessions. But by the mid-1560s many Brussels rhetoricians had become notable Calvinists. They organized and attended Calvinist conventicles and were zealous advocates for the permission of public preaching. A report from 1568 on Calvinist activities in Brussels in the preceding years named no less than 15% of the members of *De Corenbloem* and 10% of the members of *Den Boeck*. Together these men represented as many as 12% of all the people mentioned in the report. When the radical Calvinists managed to take over the city council in the years 1577–1585, both *De Corenbloem* and *Den Boeck* organized a blatantly Calvinist *ballade* contest that defended the policies of the magistracy and rejected the Catholic mass and the worshipping of images. However, the surviving records of these Chambers of Rhetoric testify that at the same time these Chambers struggled with internal conflicts and a considerable decline in membership numbers.

It can be concluded, therefore, that due to their practice of free discussion and public satire, and due to their familiarity with religious subject matter (especially vernacular bible texts), many rhetoricians were attracted to some form of Reformation theology and took an active role in spreading Reform ideas.²⁷ Yet, the paradox is that the Chambers of Rhetoric were as apt to be conservative institutions tenaciously maintaining older traditions as they were to be remarkably flexible institutions facilitating religious and social change.²⁸ Therefore, the remarkable public role of the Chambers of Rhetoric must not blind us to the fact that for many contemporaries (in Flanders in particular) the Chambers continued to be in the first place devotional confraternities. Many members did not choose active membership (with extended financial, administrative, and literary duties) but became brothers of the Chamber. As such, in exchange for a single fee (death duty), they enjoyed the spiritual benefits of devotion to the patron saint. For example, the Ghent Chamber *Mariën Theeren* recruited 285 members between its establishment in 1478 and 1484, but only a fraction of this number were active members. Most striking in this respect is the membership of women. About 9% of the members *Mariën Theeren* recruited between 1478 and 1484 were women. In the period between 1556–1590 this number increased slightly to about 10%. There are no indications that the role of these female members was anything other than devotional, since women were not formally admitted to the literary practices the Chambers organized.²⁹

27 See also Waite, *Reformers on Stage*.

28 See Nicholas Terpstra, “De-Institutionalizing Confraternity Studies.”

29 On the role of women in the Chambers of Rhetoric and on female “rhetoricians,” see Van Bruaene, “Brotherhood and Sisterhood.”

Conclusion

Much more can be said about the Chambers of Rhetoric, their members, their practices, and the literature they produced. On the basis of this brief overview it is safe to state, however, that the Chambers of Rhetoric played an important and complex role in early modern Low Countries society. Flemish and Dutch scholars (both literary historians and more recently social historians and art historians) have become increasingly aware of the need to study these institutions intensively. The claim that these Chambers are a particular aspect of Low Countries historiography, however, and the failure to compare them with similar institutions (such as *puy marials*, *sociétés joyeuses*, *Singschulen* and academies) in other geographical areas in Western Europe,³⁰ has led, unfortunately, to their being largely neglected in international confraternity studies. The work conducted by the interdisciplinary Flemish-Dutch rhetorician project has already stimulated a more extensive internal debate on the nature and role of the Chambers of Rhetoric. It has also begun to make the larger community of confraternity scholars more aware and better acquainted with the Dutch case. And this, in turn, has helped to raise new questions not only about the Chambers of Rhetoric, but about (literary) confraternities across Western Europe.

Ghent University, Fund for National Research – Flanders

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