CHAPTER TWO

‘YOU SERVE ME WELL’: REPRESENTATIONS OF GOSSIP, NEWSMONGERING AND PUBLIC OPINION IN THE PLAYS OF CORNELIS EVERAERT*

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I

‘You serve me well’ (‘Ghy zyt die my naer tbehooren dient’), a character called A Certain Rhetorician (‘Sulc Rhethorisien’) remarks to Everyday Chitchat (‘Den Daghelicxschen Snaetere’) at the beginning of the sixteenth-century Dutch rhetorician play *dOnghelycke Munte* (*The Uneven Currency*). A Certain Rhetorician subsequently invites Everyday Chitchat, who is dressed as a huckster selling apples, to mount the stage and be part of the play that he is about to perform in honour of the Peace of Cambrai (1529) and the coronation of Charles V as Holy Roman Emperor (1530). In accordance with her name and attire, throughout the play Everyday Chitchat voices bits of news and opinions that supposedly circulated in Bruges regarding the events celebrated.

Although we should obviously be cautious in identifying the author of *The Uneven Currency* with the A Certain Rhetorician character simply because they share the same literary pastime, there are some grounds to attribute autobiographical content to the line quoted above. The play was written by the Bruges rhetorician Cornelis Everaert (ca. 1480–1556), a dyer, fuller and clerk by profession and a member of the two chambers of rhetoric from Bruges, The Holy Spirit (‘De Heilige Geest’) and The three (female) Saints (‘De Drie Santinnen’). *The Uneven Currency* came down to us as part of a group of 35 dramatic texts that the author copied out in a single manuscript. They constitute

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the largest number of extant plays by one single Dutch rhetorician known by name.¹ Like A Certain Rhetorician, Everaert does indeed seem to have been fond of using the news and gossip that circulated in the streets and on the squares of his hometown as material for his plays. Three of the texts in his autograph contain allegorical characters whose names and/or actions refer to the spreading of news and the commenting on the current political, social and religious situation. Most of the events discussed are related to the so-called Italian Wars, a series of military conflicts that opposed the houses of Habsburg and France and that had serious repercussions for economic and social life in Bruges.² It was for the public celebration of the successes of Charles V in the Italian Wars that Everaert wrote the plays. *Ghewillich Labuer ende Volck van Neerrynghe* (*Willing Labour and People of Commerce*) glorifies the Peace of Madrid of 1526, the aforementioned *The Uneven Currency* the Peace of Cambrai (1529) and the coronation of Charles V as Holy Roman Emperor (1530), and *Pays (Peace)* the gathering of Charles V and Francis I at Aigues-Mortes and the ensuing Truce of Nice (1538). Most of these festivals were organized by the Bruges city government at the instigation of the central authorities. The dramatic performances that adorned them generally took place in the context of a competition during which theatre groups, generally chambers of rhetoric, competed with one another.

Scenes in which characters discuss political matters were not uncommon in late medieval and early modern Dutch dramatic texts, the most famous being probably the one in the generically hybrid prose novel and drama *Mariken van Nieumeghen* (*Mary of Nijmegen*) where Mary's aunt vehemently discusses a conflict between Duke Arnold van Gelderland and his son Adolf. The woman gets so excited that, according to the text, she resembled more a devil than a Christian woman.³ Plays like the ones by Everaert under discussion here—which do not just give evidence of the existence of practices of popular newsgather-

¹ Brussels, Royal Library, ms. 19036. Everaert's plays have been edited by Muller and Scharpé, *Spelen van Cornelis Everaert*, and by Hüsken, *De spelen van Cornelis Everaert*. For what is known about the life of Everaert and the genesis of his autograph, see the introduction to these editions. The quotes in this article come from the Hüsken edition.

² On the effects of the Italian Wars on the Bruges economy, see Vandewalle and Vandamme, 'Het Spaanse Brugge, 1490–1600'; Blockmans, "Fondans en melencolie de povreté": Leven en werken in Brugge 1482–1584'.

³ Coigneau, *Mariken van Nieumeghen*, p. 58.

ing and public opinion but allegorize them, thus turning them into a central and integral part of their argument—are rare, however. What makes them so interesting is that they do not just illustrate popular newsgathering and public opinion but also offer us insight into the way in which the nature and the working of these phenomena themselves were perceived, how and why they could be used in a literary text and how this text, in turn, functioned in the processes that it represented.

II

Through characters such as Everyday Chitchat, Everaert’s plays suggest a lively informal circulation of political news—which had often travelled a considerable distance—in sixteenth-century Bruges. In *Willing Labour and People of Commerce*, Consoling Assistance (‘Troostich Confoort’), a character dressed as a sailor, announces ‘something new’ (‘wat nyeus’, l. 143) to the duo Willing Labour and People of Commerce, who have been lamenting the disastrous consequences of the Italian Wars. Before he came sailing from Spain, Consoling Assistance heard people mention that peace had been declared. It was said that the French King had taken Eleanor, the Emperor’s sister, as his wife. The announcement is disputed vehemently by Turbulent Times (‘Den Beroerlicken Tyt’). He points to the frequency with which bits of news of this kind were spread, the avidity with which they were received and their uncertain veracity:

Hearsay counts as a lie to me,
because people lie all the time going from door to door
as anyone can notice on many an occasion.
By Saint Louis, buddy, you are talking bunkum.
It is merely to get a tip that you are saying this. (ll. 171–75)⁴

The same impression of an active passing on of bits of news and gossip is put forward by the opening scene of *Peace*, in which, eight years after *The Uneven Currency*, Everaert reused the character of Everyday Chitchat. This time she is selling hazelnuts instead of apples and is accompanied by The People’s Gossip (‘sVolcx Clappage’), a labourer.

⁴ ‘Thooren segghen achtich als een luere, / want men liecht daghelicx van duere te duere / so elck mercken mach te meneghen stonde. / By Lo, maet, ghy speelt ooc metten monde. / Om dryncghelt thebbene maect ghy dit voortstel.’

Everyday Chitchat and The People's Gossip introduce themselves to one another and to the public:

Everyday Chitchat

What's your name?

The People's Gossip

The People's Gossip,

I am everywhere: on the land and on the sea.

But how are you called?

Everyday Chitchat

Everyday Chitchat,

who can talk about anything.

The People's Gossip

We belong together,

Everyday Chitchat and The People's Gossip.

We have something exceptional to say about everything:
of this person, of that person, of here or there.

Everyday Chitchat

Of happiness, of sadness.

The People's Gossip

Of light or heavy matters,

of what goes on far away or nearby, we know it all.

Everyday Chitchat

Whether something is public or secret,

the moment we start talking about it

the whole world will know about it right away.

That which we know nothing about, we will keep a secret.

The People's Gossip

We will not tone down anything.

Everyday Chitchat

We will not leave anything out.

We would rather embroider something than trivialize it.⁵ (ll. 25–40)

Political news was not just spread and received as such but also heavily commented upon, Everaert's plays suggest. After the excerpt from

⁵ 'Den Daghelicxschen Snaetere Hoe es uwen naeme? / sVolcx Clappage sVolcx Clappage, / die my allomme scicke: te lande, te watere. / Maer hoe heet ghy? / Den Daghelicxschen Snaetere Den Daghelicxschen Snaetere, / die alle dynck can vercombinen. / sVolcx Clappage Wy zyn juuste die tegare dienen, / den Daghelicxsche Snaetere ende sVolcx Clappage. / Wy weten van als te segghene rage: / van dien, van desen, van ghunder, van daer. / Den Daghelicxschen Snaetere Van blyscpe, van druck. / sVolcx Clappage Van licht, van zwaer, / van varre, van naer hebben wy de wete. / Den Daghelicxschen Snaetere Eist openbaer oft int secrete, / wanneer wyt cryghen in den mont, / al de weerelt die weetet terstont. / Dat wy niet en weten, wy wel helen. / sVolcx Clappage Wy en sullen niet verminderen. / Den Daghelicxschen Snaetere Wy en sullen niet stelen. / Wy zouder eer toedoen dander ghebraecke.'

Peace reproduced above, The People's Gossip wants to know from Everyday Chitchat whether the people are saying anything about the recent agreement between Charles V and Francis I. They are saying all sorts of things, the huckster replies: some call it a peace treaty, others a truce. It is hard to draw consistent conclusions about what the public is thinking, however, 'because the opinion of the people / is so unstable and changeable' ('[o]mdat svolcx ghedochte / soo wanckelbaer es ende variabele', ll. 49–50). Some rejoice at the peace, but many get no satisfaction out of it at all. Treaties have so often been concluded and were just as easily broken, they feel. Why would this one last? Moreover, it has been made by mutual consent and not by means of an official contract. Finally, a lot of people are dissatisfied because they have not fully understood the significance of the treaty, despite the fact that an official ordinance has recently been proclaimed from the tower of the Bruges belfry (ll. 51–70).

Besides characters that stand for the circulation and commenting on of news among the inhabitants of Bruges, Everaert's plays also contain representatives of the government, who voice the official version of the political events discussed. Thus, the announcement of the Peace of Madrid, brought from Spain by the sailor Consoling Assistance in *Willing Labour and People of Commerce*, is later confirmed by The Will of the Lord ('sHeeren Wille'), 'dressed in a tunic like a herald, carrying the Emperor's coat of arms'.⁶ When, in *Peace*, Everyday Chitchat has expressed the mixed feelings of the population concerning the Truce of Nice, New Tidings ('Nyeuwe Tydynghe'), an elegantly clad woman, mounts the stage. She incites People of all Estates ('Volc van Allen Staeten'), a man dressed half as a nobleman and half as an artisan, and Clerical and Secular ('Gheestelic ende Weerlick'), a man dressed half as a clergyman, half as layman, to rejoice in the news that she is bringing and to thank God for it. People of all Estates would first like to know 'the full facts of the meaning of the peace treaty' ('van den toeghanck des pays den rechten keest', l. 106), however, a request that New Tidings gladly complies with: it is God's grace that has sent them this gift; through the mediation of the Holy Spirit, who governs the hearts of kings, He has brought about the peace that will be talked about for all eternity (ll. 106–10).

⁶ Hüsken, *De spelen van Cornelis Everaert*, p. 401.

The 'popular' and the 'official' voices often disagree with one another. Incited by New Tidings's announcement of the Truce of Nice, the characters of *Peace* start to praise the benefits of peace. When they state that it brings quiet and prosperity, however, Everyday Chitchat heavily opposes the claim. Peace has brought her nothing at all so far. She puts herself out all day long and still has to add money out of her own pocket to keep her business running (ll. 161–64). But the most outspoken clash between the two types of characters is to be found in *The Uneven Currency*, a play dealing with the heavy fluctuation of the currency and its effects on Bruges industry and trade, represented by A Big Part of the Population ('Menichte van Volcke') and The Needy Craftsman ('Den Scaemelen Aerbeyder'). Although not directly apparent from her name, it is clearly Common Sense ('Redelic Ghevoel') who embodies the official stance to the situation. Her religiously inspired calls for endurance are ridiculed by Everyday Chitchat, who overtly criticizes the slowness with which Habsburg authorities deal with the problems. If measures are not taken, uneven currency will ruin both A Big Part of the Population and The Needy Craftsman (ll. 154–57). When Common Sense claims that only endurance can make the currency rise again, Everyday Chitchat wonders aloud whether trying to influence the value of money had not been forbidden by the Emperor (ll. 370–71). Common Sense's reassurance that Charles will fix the monetary problems makes Everyday Chitchat remark that if they are to wait until the Emperor does something about the crisis, they will have to show a lot of patience (ll. 388–93). After Common Sense has reproached A Big Part of the Population for showing more love for earthly goods than for God and thus turning himself into a heretic in the eyes of the Almighty, the huckster concludes that if one were to consider everyone who loves earthly goods more than God a Lutheran, one would find a great number of Lutherans in the world (ll. 516–23).

III

The representation put forward by Everaert's plays of a speedy and busy transmission of intensely debated political news among broad layers of the Bruges population, of the often limited verifiability of the news items and of the endeavours of the central authorities to control their circulation and the opinions people formed on the basis

of them seems to correspond to a great extent to what the study of chronicles, diaries and court records have made apparent about newsgathering and formation of public opinion in early modern Europe.⁷ What distinguishes the dramatic works of the Bruges playwright from these administrative and narrative sources, however, is their distance and ontological relationship vis-à-vis the situation that they reflect. Unlike in the case of chronicles, diaries and court records, we are not dealing with renderings *a posteriori* here; Everaert's plays functioned in the middle of the events represented in them. They were generally performed only a few days after the political occasions discussed in the texts.⁸ In other words, they brought to the stage an image of the spreading of and commenting on an item of news at the very moment when that same item of news was being spread and commented on in the streets and squares of Bruges. Therefore, if we want to capture fully the value of these plays as sources for our knowledge of the relationship between literature and early modern newsgathering and public opinion, we should not only ask *how* they reflected a particular situation but also *why* they did this. Or to paraphrase the words of A Certain Rhetorician at the beginning of *The Uneven Currency* once more, in what way did Everyday Chitchat serve the playwright well? What was the author's aim with this character?

In order to get a clearer view of the function of Everaert's allegorizations of popular newsgathering and public opinion we have to consider the actions and interventions of these characters within the larger framework of the *spel van zinne* (the Dutch version of the morality play), the dramatic genre in which these plays have been composed. *Spelen van zinne* were a highly conventionalized type of drama. Their aim was to transmit to the audience a *zin*, i.e. an idea, an opinion or an argument that was generally of a moral nature. At the centre of the *spel van zinne* are always one or more protagonists that represent humanity as a whole or specific groups therein. These main characters pass through an evolution from a state of sin to a state of grace, from a problem to a solution, from ignorance or confusion to understanding. In this process they are confronted with opponents that try to cross

⁷ See, for example, Fox, 'Rumour, News and Popular Political Opinion in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England'; Shagan, 'Rumours and Popular Politics in the Reign of Henry VIII'; Van Nierop, '"And Ye Shall Hear of Wars and Rumours of Wars"'.
⁸ Hüskén, 'Kroniek van het toneel in Brugge (1468–1556)'.

them, the so-called *sinneken*,⁹ and with advisers that keep them on the right track and from whom they receive help.¹⁰

Everaert's plays for the celebrations of the Peace of Madrid, for the Peace of Cambrai and the imperial coronation of Charles V and for the Truce of Nice fit neatly within the basic structure of the *spel van zinne*. Its three distinct types of characters can easily be discerned. Willing Labour and People of Commerce (*Willing Labour and People of Commerce*), A Big Part of the Population and The Needy Craftsman (*The Uneven Currency*) and People of all Estates and Clerical and Secular (*Peace*) are the central human figures, who in this case stand for the Bruges population that was watching these performances. As for the two other types, they clearly set the 'official' and the 'popular' voices in the plays apart from one another. The characters that represent Habsburg discourse, Common Sense in *The Uneven Currency*, The Will of the Lord in *Willing Labour and People of Commerce* and New Tidings in *Peace*, fulfil a distinct advisory function. They patiently lead the protagonists—and through them the spectators that they embody—to a correct understanding of the *zin* of the plays: the positive effects that are to be expected from the Peace of Madrid and the Truce of Nice, especially for the Bruges' economy, and the divine intervention in the coming about of these agreements in the case of *Willing Labour and People of Commerce* and *Peace*, and the need for endurance and charity in trying times in *The Uneven Currency*. Everyday Chitchat from *The Uneven Currency* and Everyday Chitchat and The People's Gossip from *Peace*, on the other hand, show an outspoken resemblance to the *sinneken*. Their interventions are generally strongly opposed to those of the advisory characters and the willingness of the central human figures to listen to what they are saying diminishes as the authority of the councillors grows. A turning point, typical of *sinneken-spelen van zinne*, is when, under the influence of their adviser(s), the protagonists come to a full understanding of the negative nature of the *sinneken* and realize that they have been seduced into evil by them.

⁹ On the characters of the *sinneken*, see Hummelen, *De sinneken in het Rederijersdrama*. The term *sinneken* refers to the natural, bodily impulses and desires (Hummelen, *De sinneken in het Rederijersdrama*, p. 32).

¹⁰ The dramatic development of the *spel van zinne* is discussed in Coigneau, 'Rederijersliteratuur', p. 45; Spies, "'Op de questye...'", p. 139; Hummelen, 'Het tableau vivant, de "toog", in de toneelspelen van de rederijers', p. 209; Ramakers, 'Horen en zien, lezen en beleven. Over toespelen in opvoering en druk', p. 130, and Moser, *De strijd voor rhetorica*, p. 131.

'Ward off Everyday Chitchat, who is full of scandalmongering, right away' ('Weert van hulieden, zonder resspyt, / den Daghelicxschen Snaeter vulder blamacien', ll. 598–99), Common Sense calls on A Big Part of the Population in *The Uneven Currency*, after which the latter addresses Everyday Chitchat in terms that clearly indicate his conversion and his realization of the negative influence of the huckster:

Everyday Chitchat, leave this place immediately.
I regret ever having associated with you
or ever having chattered
about any prince, city or land.¹¹ (ll. 604–07)

Through the conventions of the *spel van zinne*—with which, as the substantial number of plays of this type that have come down to us suggest, the public was well acquainted—characters such as Everyday Chitchat and The People's Gossip were clearly marked as negative examples not to be followed. Like the protagonists that represented them on the stage, the spectators were to turn away from people that spread rumours about the princes or about political events or that talked about the state of the land and of its leaders in an overtly critical way. Instead, they were to confide in the information and the guidance that the government provided them with and rejoice in the event that was being celebrated.

Everaert's use of allegorical characters representing the circulation of political news and the formation of public opinion thus served a propagandistic purpose. Through a dramatic allegorical rendering of the world of the spectators, the author demonstrated to his audience how to deal with the heterogeneous stream of information and opinions that circulated about the Habsburg princes and their policy. This kind of political-propagandistic use of the performance of literary texts, especially of song and of serious drama, was highly common in the late medieval and early modern Low Countries. Both genres were primarily oral and highly popular among broad layers of the population. They could therefore be used to transmit messages to large groups of people simultaneously and, because of the direct contact between performers and audience, in a more controlled manner than anonymously distributed written texts. By the middle of the sixteenth

¹¹ 'Den Daghelicxschen Snaeter, maect hu van hier schier. / My es leedt, dat ic oynt an hu verselde / of dat ic my oynt om clappene stelde / van eeneghe princhen, steden of landen.' Cf. *Pays*, ll. 276–85.

century songs had been used in the Low Countries to inform people of politically related events for at least 350 years.¹² The *spel van zinne* of the rhetoricians, on the other hand, was a highly didactic genre that had originally been primarily religious-moralistic in theme, but the political-propagandistic possibilities of which seem to have been gradually discovered and developed by rhetoricians and city authorities in the course of the fifteenth century.¹³ The number of plays and songs of this type that have come down to us is relatively limited, but references in chronicles and urban accounts to the performance of lost texts that have been presented in a similar context indicate that they must have been very common, especially during the kind of urban public celebration for which Everaert wrote his political drama.¹⁴

The use of plays and poems to influence public opinion was obviously not restricted to those in power. Their opponents could just as easily employ them. Conflicts between the prince and groups or individuals outside or within the state were not only fought on the battlefield and within the legal system but also in the streets and the squares, where texts in favour of or against the monarch were performed, and especially in the minds and the opinions of the people at whom these literary products were aimed. In the course of his long series of wars with the Burgundian Duke Charles the Bold, the French king Louis XI had, according to the *Excellente Cronike van Vlaenderen*, 'songs sung and plays performed against Duke Charles' ('liedekens singhen ende speilkins spelen contrarie den Hertoghe Kaerle').¹⁵ In 1514 a

¹² The oldest historical song in Van de Graft, *Middelnederlandsche historieliederen*, pp. 43–44, dates from 1173.

¹³ Mareel, *Voor vorst en stad*, pp. 27–32.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the texts that have come down to us as well as references to the performance of lost plays and songs, see Mareel, *Voor vorst en stad*. The popularity of political songs and the often highly contested veracity of their content is also apparent from an interesting poem in the manuscript collection compiled by the Utrecht canon and vicar Jan van Stijvoort in 1524. In the poem the author rages against singers who perform and sell political songs in public: 'Ist datse connen cluijten versieren / Van princhen heren coninghen graven / Sy soecken grote list ende nouwe manieren / Om liedekens te maken om sgelts vertieren / Daer sy int gasthuys haer kelen met laven / Sy doent tvolc mitten mont te degghen draven / Ende mitten ganghe weten sij min dan niet' ('Whenever they can, they make up stories about princes, lords, kings and dukes. They sharpen their ingenuity and set about making songs for money, with which they quench their thirst in their lodging. They give the people a lot to talk about, but about the true nature of events they know nothing.') (Komrij, *De Nederlandse poezie van de twaalfde tot en met de zestiende eeuw*, pp. 689–91).

¹⁵ *Dits die excellente cronike van Vlaenderen*. Antwerp: Willem Vorsterman, 1531, fol. C.lix.ʹ.

proclamation was issued in Antwerp forbidding anyone 'to make, recite or sing songs, poems and the like taunting, disdain or insulting any king, monarch, prince or other important lord'.¹⁶ A number of pro-Habsburg songs that have come down to us and that were written around the year 1543, during one of the many military conflicts between Charles V and Francis I, explicitly deny the report spread by the enemy that Charles had drowned, 'that the codfish had eaten him'.¹⁷ The texts do not mention how this rumour had been put about, but it is not unlikely that the French had used the same medium as did the Habsburgs for the denial.

What makes the Everaert plays under discussion interesting and unique compared to these other propagandistic literary texts is the fact that, through their allegorization of the very process of news-spreading and formation of public opinion, they not only give us insight into the messages that were transmitted but also into the way in which these were received and discussed. Messages were not sent out at random, but had to interact with pre-existing beliefs and opinions among the spectators. These plays confirm what Henk van Nierop suggested with regard to the function of rumour during the Dutch Revolt, namely that it did not constitute an alternative circuit of information for the powerless, for those that were cut off from government-controlled information, as certain historians have thought. Instead, both sources interacted intensely with one another.¹⁸ As the interventions of Consoling Assistance and The Will of the Lord in *Willing Labour and People of Commerce* and Everyday Chitchat and The People's Gossip in *Peace* indicate, official versions of the celebrated events often arrived later than the unofficial ones, which they had to confirm or refute. The theatrical glorification of the Truce of Nice, *Peace* shows us, had to take into account the fact that a great number of previous agreements of this kind had not lasted, causing growing disbelief among the population as to their effectiveness.¹⁹ Moreover, as Everyday Chitchat in *The Uneven Currency* suggests, news about Habsburg policy was interpreted against the background of a general

¹⁶ 'Liedekens, gedichten en diergelyke [...] te maken, te spreken of te singen in schimpe, cleynigheyden of versmadenissen van eenige Koningen, Vorsten, Princen oft andere groote Heeren'. Joldersma, *Het Antwerps liedboek*, pp. XLVIII–XLIX.

¹⁷ '[d]at hem die cabbeliauwen hadden eyn'; Van de Graft, *Middelnederlandsche historieliederen*, p. 229; cf. pp. 233, 237.

¹⁸ Van Nierop, "And Ye Shall Hear of Wars and Rumours of Wars", p. 73.

¹⁹ *Pays*, ll. 41–60.

dissatisfaction about the slowness with which the government dealt with economic and social problems.²⁰

IV

Although Everaert's allegorizations of popular newsmongering and formation of public opinion are clearly related to the *sinnekens*, somehow this garment does not completely fit Everyday Chitchat and The People's Gossip.²¹ The nature of the traditional *sinnekens* was outspokenly amoral, even demonic, their aim being to seduce the central human figure into sin and thus bring about his damnation.²² From the outset of the play, the spectators could easily recognize them as such. However, it remains to be seen to what degree this was also the case with the rumour and news-spreading characters in *The Uneven Currency* and in *Peace*. E. Shagan defined rumour as 'unofficial or improvised news, whose claim to legitimacy depends more upon the resonance of its content than upon the reliability of its source'.²³ When we broaden this definition to pertain to the circulation of not only rumour but also opinions and apply it to the interventions of Everyday Chitchat and The People's Gossip, these characters take on quite different connotations than their traditional *sinnekens* counterparts. The plays in which they appear were performed during a period of latent dissatisfaction with Habsburg policy, caused by an economic and social crisis that was seriously aggravated by the Italian Wars of Charles V.²⁴ Whether well-founded or not, the remarks of Everyday Chitchat and The People's Gossip about the unwillingness or inability of Habsburg authorities to deal with the situation, about the inappropriateness of their repeated religiously inspired appeals to patience and perseverance and about the inconstancy and lack of effectiveness of the peace treaties in which they engaged must have resonated strongly among the spectators in this context and, according to Shagan's definition, make a considerable claim to legitimacy.

²⁰ *dOnghelycke Munte*, ll. 392–93.

²¹ Hummelen apparently did not consider them to have enough typical characteristics of the *sinnekens* to mention them in his study.

²² Hummelen, *De sinnekens in het Rederijkersdrama*, especially pp. 34–40; cf. Coigneau, 'Rederijkersliteratuur', p. 45.

²³ Shagan, 'Rumours and Popular Politics', p. 36.

²⁴ Cf. note 2.

When we focus on what Everyday Chitchat and The People’s Gossip are actually saying rather than on the way in which their behaviour dovetails with the conventions of the *spel van zinne*, they show more similarities with another character type from late medieval Dutch drama culture, namely that of the *nar* or fool. Pleij characterized the fool as an intangible outsider who tells the truth.²⁵ Both aspects of this definition are highly revelatory as to the nature and function of Everyday Chitchat and The People’s Gossip. As a petty retailer selling goods from door to door and in the streets, Everyday Chitchat was obviously well placed to pick up gossip and bits of news and pass them on. At the same time, however, women who practiced this trade—for in real life as in Everaert’s plays they were usually women—were also people on the fringe of society, recent immigrants who were too poor to rent a stall in the market or find some other kind of job that required relations and/or starting capital.²⁶ Like the more traditional fool, they were marginal figures that were generally not taken seriously and were therefore able to possess a virtually limitless freedom of speech.²⁷ They supposedly used this liberty to voice ‘the truth’, a central element in the concept of the fool. In his *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus considered fools ‘the only ones who speak frankly and tell the truth’, wondering at the same time ‘what is more praiseworthy than truth?’²⁸ After he has been chased from the stage by the central human figures and their allegorical counsellor, The People’s Gossip exclaims in *Peace* that ‘he who tells the truth isn’t welcome anywhere’ (‘[d]ie de waerheyt seght en es nyeuwers ghesien’, l. 286), thus emphasizing before the audience his marginal fool-like character.

The foolish nature of Everaert’s allegorizations of the distribution of news, gossip and political comments lends outspoken positive connotations to the practices that these characters stand for. They are presented as channels allowing the utterance of ‘truths’ that could not be distributed in another way. This association was not uncommon in early modern Dutch drama. Comparable characters can be found in at least two other plays from the period. *Van Nyeuvont*, *Loosheit*

²⁵ Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord*, p. 649.

²⁶ On the huckster, see McRee and Dent, ‘Working Women in the Medieval City’, pp. 245–46.

²⁷ Cf. Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord*, pp. 434, 647.

²⁸ Quoted in Otto, *Fools are Everywhere*, p. 96. Otto devotes an entire chapter of her book to this characteristic of the fool (Otto, *Fools are Everywhere*, pp. 96–131).

ende Practike (Of Shrewd Invention, Slyness and Cunning) was printed between 1497 and 1501 and deals with human love for luxury.²⁹ This vice is denounced by Glamor ('Schoontooch'), who is assisted by a *marot*, a bauble, the traditional attribute of the fool, called Backbiter Telling Truths ('Quaet en Waersegeen'). *Charon de Helsche Schip-pere (Charon, Hell's Skipper)*, a play from 1551 based on Lucian's dialogue *Charon, or the Inspectors*, contains a fool called Newsmonger ('Nieuloop'), who rides the hobbyhorse Gossip ('Clappage').³⁰ As in *Of Shrewd Invention, Slyness and Cunning*, it is through these two characters that the *zin* of the play, in this case the transience of all earthly glory, is conveyed to the audience.

The critical nature of the interventions of Everyday Chitchat and The People's Gossip is confirmed by a marginal note that Everaert added to his autograph copy of *The Uneven Currency*. In it, the author mentions that the performance of his play has been forbidden. We know from extant Bruges municipal ordinances announcing theatre competitions that the city fathers tried to control the content of the plays by demanding participants hand in a copy of the text they wanted to stage in advance.³¹ It was probably at that moment that the performance of Everaert's play was blocked. In his explanatory note the playwright links the reason for the ban to one of the main characteristics of the fool. In terms that seem to foreshadow the final speech of The People's Gossip in *Peace*, he states that the text could not be performed 'because truth had not been withheld' ('omdat de waerheyt niet was gheheilt').³²

How, then, are we to reconcile the *sinnekens* and the fool-function of Everyday Chitchat and The People's Gossip? Did these characters serve the author in glorifying Habsburg authority or rather in denouncing its slowness and inefficiency? Considering the fact that Everaert endorsed the 'truth' in the outspoken critique uttered by the apple and

²⁹ Neurdenberg, *Van Nyeuvont, Loosheit ende Practike*; cf. Hüsken, 'The Fool as Social Critic'.

³⁰ De Vreese, 'Een spel van Charon de helsche schippere'; cf. Hüsken, 'The Fool as Social Critic', pp. 133–35 and Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord*, pp. 458–59.

³¹ References to literary activities in the Bruges municipal ordinances have been edited, discussed and translated in English in Hüsken, 'Politics and Drama: The City of Bruges as Organizer of Drama Festivals'.

³² Hüsken, *De Spelen van Cornelis Everaert*, p. 526. The author made a comparable remark in the margin of *Crych*, a play that was also banned (Hüsken, *De Spelen van Cornelis Everaert*, p. 437).

hazelnut vendors and by the workman, it might seem as if the conventions of the *spel van zinne* have only been respected to get the plays through the preliminary inspection, as if the glorification and marks of loyalty towards central authority constituted nothing more than a thin sweet veil hiding bitter invective. The real stance of the plays, and of their author, towards the sociopolitical issues discussed seems to be more subtle and complex, however. A key passage for a correct understanding of these texts is made up by ll. 272–77 of *The Uneven Currency*, in which A Certain Rhetorician, after Common Sense has reproached him for not entertaining A Big Part of the Population on the occasion of the imperial coronation of Charles V, remarks:

At the time of the victory I had done my duty.
When peace was announced I had given myself entirely
In honour of my Emperor, whom I love as I love God,
I have shown my skills.
[...]

Too much of the same thing does not give satisfaction, however.³³

This passage is uttered by A Certain Rhetorician, who, as noted above, seems to share Everaert’s own fondness of the news and opinions that circulated on the streets as dramatic material. There is some evidence that will allow us to carry even further the identification of A Certain Rhetorician with the Bruges playwright; it is very likely that the role of A Certain Rhetorician was performed by the author himself. Everaert’s first editors, J.W. Muller and L. Scharpé, have drawn attention to several passages in his plays that indicate that he not only wrote the texts but also acted in them.³⁴ But even if A Certain Rhetorician was not impersonated by Everaert, the spectators will surely have interpreted the first lines of the passage as a reference to the three highly laudative plays that Everaert wrote a few years earlier for theatre competitions on the occasion of the victory of Habsburg troops over French troops near the Italian town of Pavia in 1525 and the ensuing Peace of Madrid of 1526.³⁵ As both the evolution of these earlier political plays into

³³ ‘In den tyt der victorien ic myn devoor ghedaen hebbe. / In de tydinghe van payse en hebbic niet ghespaert / Ter eeren myns skeysers thoochdic mynen aert, / die my naest Gode es liefghetal. / [...] / Te vele van een en es gheen become.’

³⁴ Muller and Scharpé, *Spelen van Cornelis Everaert*, p. 604.

³⁵ *High Wind and Sweet Rain* (Hooghen Wynt ende Zoeten Reyn) and *Aragonese* (Aragoenoyssen) for the victory near Pavia and *Willing Labour and People of Commerce* (Ghewillich Labuer ende Volc van Neerrynghe) for the Peace of Madrid; see Hüsken, *De Spelen van Cornelis Everaert*, pp. 219–49, 274–99 and 386–413.

the more critical later dramatic texts discussed in the present article and the lines quoted above suggest, Cornelis Everaert seems to have felt a growing disappointment at the slowness and ineffectiveness of Habsburg policy, the consequences of which, as a dyer and fuller in the cloth industry of his hometown, he must have experienced personally. Like A Certain Rhetorician in *The Uneven Currency*, he seems to have used his theatre as a means to express this disappointment.

V

In *Willing Labour and People of Commerce*, *The Uneven Currency* and *Peace*, Cornelis Everaert left us fascinating examples of both the function of popular newsgathering and formation of public opinion in the literary text and of the function of the literary text in the process of popular newsgathering and formation of public opinion. As allegorizations of practices that were at the same time perceived as reprehensible and as allowing the expression of ‘truths’ that could not circulate in another way, characters such as Everyday Chitchat and The People’s Gossip concurrently represented and voiced Everaert’s double feeling of love and loyalty towards the Emperor on the one hand and his disappointment at the slowness and ineffectiveness of the monarch’s policy on the other. However, as public performances, these texts were also agents in the very process of newsgathering and formation of public opinion that they visualized—something of which the author, we may assume, was well aware. Because of the ambiguous nature—related to both the *sinnekens* and the fool—of Everyday Chitchat and The People’s Gossip, the plays actually reinforced the messages they were supposed to, and at a superficial level also seemed to, suppress.

In a broader perspective, these compositions show both the advantages and disadvantages of the use of popular drama as a means to control the circulation of news and gossip and influence public opinion. Everaert wrote two, possibly all three of the plays for theatre competitions during public festivals in honour of the princes. One of the aims of these events was to direct political gossip, informal newsgathering and formation of public opinion along pro-Habsburg lines. Because of its didactic nature and typical techniques such as audience representation and allegorization of abstract notions, the *spel van zinne* of the rhetoricians lent itself particularly well to this kind of political

propaganda. Moreover, the genre was very popular, providing a wide and enthusiastic audience, and its authors belonged to the social groups at which the texts were aimed, and were thus well aware of its opinions, ideas and sensibilities. However, the use of popular drama in this way was a two-edged sword. As a member of the community that harboured the rumours and opinions the authorities wanted to alter, a playwright such as Cornelis Everaert was equally affected by the circumstances that had given rise to these rumours and opinions. He might therefore use the privileged position on the public forum that the stage granted him to express not only his loyalty but also his dissatisfaction. As a skilled rhetorician, by slightly subverting the conventions of the *spel van zinne* he subverted the political message of his text as well, turning a genre with high propagandistic potential into a medium for the very opposite. The allegorical representations of informal newsgathering, gossip and public opinion thus became as intangible as the phenomena they stood for.