CHAPTER 3

The Multilingualism of Dutch Rhetoricians: Jan van den Dale’s Uure van den doot (Brussels, c. 1516) and the Use of Language

Arjan van Dixhoorn

Introduction

One of the most important trends in the communication history of Western Europe is the often neglected rise of communal theatrical cultures after 1450. That is to say, the advent of the printing press, the surge in manuscript production, and the technological innovations of visual culture were chronologically tied to the flourishing of theatrical cultures. In fact, evidence from all over urban Europe indicates that print and manuscript culture as well as visual and theatrical culture became increasingly interdependent and integrated on the level of content and form, skills and techniques, and the creative communities that patronized, sustained, developed, appropriated and used them. At the intersection of these modes and communities were regional cultures of performative literature (dramatized and poetical eloquence typical of early modern urban life). The growth of theatrical culture at the intersection of other innovative media cultures suggests that even the combination of the printing press and manuscript culture could not meet the thirst for the kind of learning derived from texts.

This theatrical world is the context which any study of the spoken and written word, of language strictly speaking, must take into consideration. The early modern world of Christian Europe was a world in which the spoken word (and its arts, which are rhetoric and music) functioned as the model for communication in general. This essay will explore the role of language in one of the regions

1 Works that trace the development of a new theatrical culture include: Arnade, Realms of Ritual; Ashley and Hüsken, Moving Subjects; Hanawalt and Reyerson, City and Spectacle; Cauchies, Fêtes et ceremonies; Fischer-Lichte, Horn and Umathum, Wahrnehmung und Medialität; Kipling, Enter the King; Lavéant, Théâtre et culture dramatique d’expression française; Lecuppre-Desjardin, La ville des ceremonies; Van Bruaene, Om beters wille; Van Dixhoorn, Lustige geesten. For the development of print culture and the flourishing of manuscript culture in the fifteenth century, Würgler, Medien in der frühen Neuzeit, particularly 69.
of urbanized Europe, the Low Countries, where Dutch-speaking communities developed a theatrical culture based on the liberal arts that chose the art of rhetoric as its paradigm. The focus will be on the sociolinguistic communities of rhetoricians that gathered in the so-called chambers of rhetoric from the early decades of the fifteenth century onwards, starting in the cosmopolitan creative cultures of the urban networks of Brabant and Flanders. The prototype of the chamber of rhetoric was consolidated around 1450 and the rhetorical knowledge, practices, and techniques that the early chambers developed became paradigmatic for vernacular literary culture in Dutch after the 1480s.2

The paradox of rhetorician life is however that it is the institutionalization of the increasingly important role of the written or even printed text as the basis for a reading, reciting, or performance among live audiences. A written text in early modern culture was completed orally: the performance of a memorized written text or its reading aloud gave it its finishing touch. While Pleij has stressed the aurality of the production, completion, and reproduction of written texts, Kramer has argued how in rhetorician farcical culture most theatrical action was typically verbalized simultaneously by the actors while performing the acts. Such a verbalized Rabelaisian world required the creation of a literary language for the material, organic, dirty, common, low, deformed, decaying, inverted, bizarre, and confusing features of life. At the same time, the farcical was characterized by a special fascination for the anatomy of language, and its ambivalent potential for miscommunication.3

Although Kramer focused on the farcical language of the rhetoricians, these features, such as the fascination for the material and organic world of the senses or the anatomy and communicative quality of language, were also typical of rhetorician language in general. This is evident in the common use of word stacks, neologisms, meaningless or ambivalent words, word extensions, synonym stacks, and homonyms. The sensuous language of the rhetoricians used expletives, swearing, oath-taking, incantations, colloquial vocabulary, nonsense and street terms; it transgressed and merged jargons, inverted linguistic snobbery, and abundantly used praise-abuse-forms. If the context of conversation, literary ceremony and ritual, performances, and competition of the chambers of rhetoric is taken into account as well, the world of the rhetoricians meets many of qualities of oral cultures identified by Walter Ong.4

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2 For introductions to the culture of the chambers of rhetoric in English see Van Dixhoorn, ‘Chambers of Rhetoric’; and Van Bruaene, ‘“A wonderful triumfe”’.
3 Pleij, Het gevleugelde woord, pp. 253–62; Kramer, Mooi, vies, knap, lelijk, passim.
4 Ong, Orality and Literacy, pp. 36–70.