In his *Nederlandsche Historiën (Dutch History)* of 1642, the Amsterdam man of letters Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft examined the significance of ‘the art of rhyming’ in the origins of the Dutch Revolt. That art, Hooft tells us, was practised in most towns and many villages of the Low Countries by ‘the ablest and liveliest minds’ in their chambers of rhetoric. They published poems to ‘pass from hand to hand’ and staged public performances of farces and serious plays in which they ‘showed where everyone’s duties lay’. According to Hooft, it was impossible for anyone to compete with ‘de scharfheit van een gladde tong’ (the sharpness of a honed tongue), which could ‘persuade in one hour’ and, through the passion of ‘the characters’, could instantly influence more people than liberally distributed ‘handwritten pamphlets or printed books’ could ever hope to. Rhetoricians, with their ‘freedom of speech’, attacked the failings of the ‘papists’, mocked ‘blatant abuses’ and fiercely condemned the persecution of heretics.\(^1\)

The recital of rhymes, Hooft wrote, had therefore made a vital contribution to the growth of a critical disposition towards the clergy and towards the persecution of heretics, and as such amounted to a substantial contributing factor in the causes of the Revolt. He gave three reasons for attributing a greater influence to spoken works than to written or printed texts: the physical power of the speaker to persuade, the immediacy of the experience, and the number of people

---

who could be reached. For contemporary historians writing about the Dutch Republic, the importance of the rhetoricians for the origins of the Revolt was a truism they deployed, among other things, in the defence of the chambers and their public plays against attacks by clergymen of the Reformed Church.²

Sixteenth-century political, religious and intellectual authorities were themselves concerned about the persuasive power of songs and poems. Fearing the divisive potential of such works, they developed special censorship rules such as bans on the treatment of certain subjects, the checking of texts prior to performance, and thereafter prosecution and, where deemed necessary, sanctions.³

Hooft’s belief in the efficacy of performative literature to communicate ideas is at odds with the notion still prevailing today that the printing of books was responsible for an enormous increase in the rapid and extensive dissemination of opinions, and that the Reformation would not have been possible without this revolution in communications. The latter view has been modified substantially in recent years by historians of the Reformation, giving more weight to the spoken word that received so much praise from Hooft for forming a connection between the public and the world of written and printed texts.⁴ Hooft believed that by 1560 the Low Countries had an organized literary life, sustained by cultured minds who criticized frankly the performance of the authorities in public, reminding both citizens and people in positions of power of their responsibilities. The rhetoricians’ regional

² Among those who quote this argument with approval are Geeraerd Brandt in his *Historie der Reformatie*, I, 229 and Emanuel van Meteren in his *Historie der Nederlandscher ende haerder Na-buren Oorlogen ende geschiedenissen*, fol. 29r–v. See also for example Waterschoot, ‘De rederijkerskamers en de doorbraak van de Reformatie’, pp. 151–53.

³ For the ban on the printed collection of stage offerings for the competition in Ghent in 1539 see Van Bruaene, ‘Printing Plays’. For a discussion of the Protestant nature of these plays see: Waite, *Reformers on Stage* and Ramakers, ‘In utramque partem vel in plures’. For the development of the censorship policy with regard to the stage in Holland and Zeeland and the failure of a local commission of theologians established in 1551 for the censoring of plays prior to performance, see Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten*, p. 324. It is worth adding that the authorities sometimes acted harshly but on other occasions were comparatively mild, and local governments varied in the extent to which they took notice of orders from central government.

⁴ The relationship between the spoken, written and printed word outside the world of scholarship has been explored by, for example, Scribner, ‘Oral Culture and the Diffusion of Reformation Ideas’; Fox, *The Spoken Word*, and *idem, Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500–1700*; and Pettigree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion*. They emphasize that spoken and performed works were often written down or printed, and printed and written works often read aloud, recited and acted.