The Low Countries are renowned for their rich theatre tradition in the early modern period. Numerous chambers of rhetoricians dominated the scene in the sixteenth century, but from the 1540s onwards, their position was counteracted by the government. Ideas expressed in the rhymed poems and plays of the rhetoricians were not always in harmony with official opinion, and the state had considerable difficulties in controlling the lurking dangers of this type of literary production. Time after time, official rules and ordinances were issued to suppress potentially seditious songs, poems, and theatrical performances. At a given moment, even the very existence of the chambers of rhetoricians was at stake, but in the end this social and cultural movement proved to be too firmly and broadly embedded to be eradicated. As organizers of many a public feast and manifestation, the chambers of rhetoricians carried out an important social function.

From 1560 onwards, the rising Jesuit Order was established in the Southern Netherlands and opened its first secondary school in the Flemish Province—the so-called Provincia Flandro-Belgica—in 1574, followed by seventeen more Latin schools in that region over the next few decades. The flourishing development of this tightly knit network of Latin gymnasias was structurally supported by the government, which secured qualitatively excellent educational institutions in return. They did not charge any school fees and they guaranteed a firmly Catholic education. Very soon, the Jesuits emerged as highly talented organizers of public spectacles.
Not only did they understand the art of composing splendid festival programmes and playing upon the public’s emotions, but at the same time the message they propagated also served as a Counter-Reformation tool, affirming the ideology held by the political authorities. From the outset, the training of pupils in dramatic arts formed a major part of the Jesuit educational school programme. Additionally, the Jesuits organized a large number of public festivities, processions, inaugurations, and solemn entries for both secular and religious authoritative figures, such as governors, abbots, and bishops, and they steadily took over from the chambers of rhetoricians their role as masters of ceremonies.  

School drama was not a monopoly of the Jesuits. This theatrical culture was embedded in a larger tradition that was alive in most schools and still practised there, as well. At that time, in schools of the Augustinian fathers, among the Oratorians and other orders, as well as in municipal and cathedral schools, theatre was widely performed. It can be stated without exaggeration that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, tens of thousands of school dramas were attended by a multitude of spectators, and thus the social impact of this medium can hardly be overestimated.

Although in the early Christian period Augustine had disapproved of theatre, this did not prevent his persona from being dramatized in the Southern Netherlands during the ancien régime—albeit not very often. In total, there are no more than four dramas known in which Augustine plays a major role. A single play dates from the seventeenth century and was performed by the pupils of the Jesuit College in Brussels. Measured against the total output of plays by the Flemish Jesuits, who in

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4 Augustine, Confessions 3.2.2.

5 For the Northern Netherlands—going well beyond the scope of this article—the online repertory Ceneton (www.let.leidenuniv.nl/Dutch/Ceneton) mentions only one Augustine text which is in need of further research. The manuscript is kept in the University Library, Leiden, shelf mark Ms LTK 513, and is entitled (fol. [1]r): Bekeering van Augustinus of Spiegel van Gods Voorsienigheid; Blyeindich treurspel door Bernardus Brandt, 26 fol. A note on fol. [26]v dating from 1734 indicates that the manuscript belonged to a certain W. K. Berg. It is not clear whether this versified play has been performed or not, and if so, by whom, where, and when. The majority of the sheets bear a watermark referring to Amsterdam’s coat of arms.