In the summer of 1616 fifteen chambers of rhetoric – lay societies which composed and performed erudite vernacular plays on formal occasions – met for a festival in Vlaardingen, a port and fishing town on the Meuse just west of Rotterdam. The Vlaardingen chamber, The Oaktree (De Akerboom), had invited sister-chambers from a number of towns and villages to come and compete in a rhetorical display. The occasion lasted for several days. It began with the formal reception of the visiting chambers, who processed in, wearing their stage-costumes. They presented their hosts with ornamental shields emblazoned with their coat of arms, accompanied with appropriate poetic greetings, which were answered with a similar form of welcome by the brothers of The Oaktree. Over the next few days the chambers staged morality plays and held contests in the recitation of poems, both prepared and extempore, developing a theme set by their host. A jury awarded prizes for various aspects of performance, presentation and content, and the festival was concluded by a formal closing ceremony.

Festivals of this kind were obviously not only a literary competition but also an occasion for public festivity. The Reformed Church was highly critical of these public performances and put pressure on secular authorities to prohibit them altogether. The plays usually had a moral content, expressed in religious terms sometimes drawing upon Bible stories for their subject matter. The Church resented this use of theologically sensitive material, as the popular format of a morality play almost inevitably led to deviations from established orthodoxy. Moreover, the Church condemned performing on Sundays, the travesty of male players impersonating female characters and the general incitement to frivolity that the theatre represented. Even the
activities of the rhetoricians in the privacy of their chambers were deeply mistrusted, as they provided a forum where Reformed and non-Reformed exchanged playful verses on matters of political, social and moral relevance over drinks and tobacco.¹

Recent research, however, has convincingly shown that the activities of the chambers of rhetoric also had more serious aspects. Besides venues for male conviviality they functioned as popular academies, providing adult men with a formalized education in vernacular linguistic skills, both written and oral, that were necessary for all those aspiring to public office.² These skills were honed in the regular meetings of the chambers under the patronage of local magistrates and in the more controversial locally performed public plays and supra-local festivals. Until well into the eighteenth century the chambers of rhetoric provided this educational role, despite the misgivings of the Church. Recently they have even been credited with preparing the way for a modern public sphere, in forming public opinion, both among the members of the chamber and in the audience. It has been claimed that the plays presented a variety of possible points of view on often controversial issues and intended to offer the audience food for thought and for further discussion.

This view had recently been advocated by Arjan van Dixhoorn. His thesis has demonstrated that the founding of new chambers and supra-local festivals noticeably coincided with periods of heightened tension, such as the penetration of Protestant thought into the Netherlands, the Revolt, the discussions on humanist reforms in poor relief and the Twelve Years’ Truce.³ Dixhoorn’s view is in line with the recent work of Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies, who coined the term ‘discussion culture’ to describe the cultural formation of the Republic. Its decentralized political structure, with an abundance of corporate bodies on all levels of government and administration, demanded constant rounds of consultation and the building of con-

² Above all A. van Dixhoorn, Lustige geesten, Rede-rijkers en hun kamers in het publieke leven van de Noordelijke Nederlanden in de vijfde, zestiende en zeventiende eeuw (n.p., 2004).
³ Van Dixhoorn, Lustige geesten, 366–388.