
Point of departure for this dissertation is the idea that the image the rhetoricians wanted to create of themselves and of their position as poets can be derived from their poetry. In order to substantiate this claim Moser did research on texts. The corpus of texts she bases her evidence on comes from secondary literature on rhetoricians’ poetry, Hummelen’s repertory of rhetoricians’ texts, and her own research in libraries. Through repetition of arguments the rhetoricians use to defend their art, it is possible to discover thematic connections within the texts of this corpus. These repetitions, recurring themes, images and phrases give us, according to Moser, an idea of the preconceptions underlying the rhetoricians’ movement. Basing herself on defences of rhetoric the author wants to shed some light on aspects of the rhetoricians’ poetics in Flanders, Brabant, Zeeland and Holland between 1450 and 1620 — as is indicated by the subtitle. The book has an appendix containing nineteen primary texts. Moser treats the rhetoricians’ poetics and their position by tracing the use of metaphors. One image that is discussed in this dissertation is the plant metaphor in rhetoricians’ poetics.

Three orations in defence of rhetoric discussed here reflect a clear conception of the art of poetry: it is of divine origin. In these three texts the plant is used metaphorically. Thus, the root, rhetoric, represents poetry itself; the leaves represent style and elocution, the fruit the poets and the seed containing art the Holy Ghost. Because poetry is represented as a plant growing under the influence of the Holy Ghost the rhetoricians put themselves on a par with the Apostles. The art of poetry is a direct gift from divinity, which cannot be learnt, an image confirmed by the fact that rhetoric is represented more than once as the Holy Ghost’s daughter. The rhetoricians also made use of biblical examples, especially of the story relating the event of Whitsunday, to emphasise their own position.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century Neoplatonic ideas had become generally known through the influence of Ficino. This Neoplatonic view is that a poet is inspired by a furor divinus. Biblical imagery now starts to occur side by side with figures from Ancient Greek mythology: God and Hippocrene are sometimes even identified with one another. At the end of the sixteenth century the Whitsuntide flame that had given fire to the early rhetoricians, and which they used to justify their rewording of religious texts, had been quenched, or had been replaced by Classical mythology.

The author also sketches an outline of the development in the relation between rhetoric and music. In the late Middle Ages both kinds of art were thought to mirror cosmic order and harmony. For that reason both rhetoric and music were considered to be of divine origin, and to have beneficial effects on the humores; also, they may be used to praise God. This idea of
the identity of rhetoric and music gradually underwent a change: both came to be regarded as different kinds of art, indeed with comparable properties, but that eventually even became rivals. Two currents of thought may be discerned: the secretary to the Leiden town council and poet Jan van Hout for instance propagates rhythmical verse to enhance the musicality of poems — referred to as "poesye", others, especially in Amsterdam, regard the art of poetry solely as a means to convince, instruct, preach and formulate law: rhetoric.

Not only form was important to the rhetoricians, so was content. Moser demonstrates that rhetoricians strove to get their point of view across by way of 'natural', 'figurative' and 'scriptural' language. These three were functional both in a theological (artes praedicandi), and in a dramatical context. 'Natural' refers to Creation as a book of God, 'scriptural' to authorities: Bible and Church Fathers; 'figurative' to the elucidation of the argument by way of similes and allegories, in which 'sinnenkens', figures representing abstractions, also came to have a part. Apart from language images were also used to communicate this: the tableaux vivants not only served to give lustre to a rhetoricians' play, but also as proof that the ideas the rhetoricians made public were true. The rhetoricians secured recognition of their art by linking it to the divine. Connections were made between rhetoric and biblical metaphors such as bread, wine, Word Incarnate, light in darkness. By doing this the rhetoricians set themselves in an almost holy position of indispensability: "Zoals Christus het door God gezonden Woord is dat de mensheid moet verlossen, beschouwen rederijkers zich gezonden door God om zijn woord te verkondigen" ["Just as Christ is the word sent by God to liberate mankind the rhetoricians regard themselves as God's emissaries to divulge His word"] (191). In the concluding chapter Moser elaborates this claim. In her view this is the cause of the deterioration of the rhetoricians' movement. The rhetoricians sought to maintain their position as mediators of God's word, a role they had at first had by assisting the everyday practice of faith in the Roman Catholic Church through the production of biblical plays and by way of tableaux vivants. Because of the Reformation the Roman Catholic Church became suspicious of the rhetoricians and many of them fled to the North. There they were received with just a little enthusiasm by Reformation ministers: in the latters' view the rhetoricians were too unorthodox in their exegesis of the Bible. Despite their influential role as 'mediators of God's word' both the Roman Catholic and the Reformed Church regarded them as "the Devil's artificers". Moser's conclusion is that especially the relations with the Church proved to be fundamental to the success of the rhetoricians. Although they had been accepted initially, in order to be of assistance in ecclesiastical activities, they came under suspicion after the Reformation, in spite of or may be just because of their defence that "zij hun gave van God ontvangen hadden en dat zij op goddelijke instigatie de waarheid moesten verkondigen" ["they had received