Renaissance Studies Vol. 33 No. 11 DOI: 10.1111/rest.12531

Frail echoes of singing in the streets. Tracing ballad sellers and their reputation in the Low Countries

Jeroen Salman

The early modern Dutch ballad singer represents two apparently contradicting roles: political rebel versus entertainer and performer. In this article I want to analyse how these opposing representations were shaped, how they interacted in cultural practices and also how they changed in the Low Countries in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The underlying question is the relevancy of these street singers in the process of public opinion formation. Or more specifically, did their entertaining activities, selling and singing songs, stimulate, disseminate and even provoke political and religious debates?[1] The period under scrutiny is highly relevant in the context of Dutch history, because it covers the rise of the reformist movement, the revolt of the Northern provinces against the Spanish King, the establishment of the Dutch Republic and growing importance of the local cultural infrastructure.

Researchers tend to agree that street (or ballad) singers were omnipresent and crucial in the early modern Low Countries, but rarely provide actual proof about their backgrounds, performances and repertoire.[2] There are often considered a fascinating but untraceable and intangible phenomenon. It is true that archives often remain silent when it comes to these lower-class people, but there are still multiple ways to find traces and echoes of their existence and activities. For my monograph on itinerant trade in England and the Dutch Republic (1600–1850), I used a variety of direct and indirect sources such as court records, tax-records, licence-administrations, images and literary texts and was struck by the many references to street singers.[3] For this article, I am going to explore this topic more in-depth, by going back in time (including the sixteenth century), adding information from older and recent

[1] See in this context Jo Spaans, '"A vile and scandalous ditty": Popular song and public opinion in a seventeenth-century Dutch village conflict ', in Jan Bloemendal and Arjan van Dixhoorn (eds.), *Literary cultures and public opinion in the Low Countries, 1450–1650* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011), 261–6.

[2] Femke Deen, *Publiek debat en propaganda in Amsterdam tijdens de Nederlandse Opstand. Amsterdam 'Moorddam' (1566–1578)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015); Maartje de Wilde, *De lokroep van de nachtegaal. Wereldlijke liedboeken uit de Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1628–1677)* (Antwerpen: Antwerp University, 2011).

[3] Jeroen Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press. Itinerant Distribution Networks in England and the Netherlands 1600–1850.* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2014).

studies and perusing old and new sources. By crossing borders in time (sixteenth and seventeenth century) and space (Southern and Northern Netherlands) we will get a better view on the changing role of the street singer as entertainer and political rebel in different political, cultural and religious contexts. Including the sixteenth century means automatically incorporating the Southern Netherlands (current Belgium), being then still part of the Low (Burgundian) Countries.[4] In terms of new primary sources, I have used additional normative sources (ordinances), court records and literary texts such as songs and plays. Aside from that, I could base my inquiries and synthesis on a rich research tradition in this field as well. The lyrical and musical features of Dutch ballads have been studied, although not systematically, by musicologists, folklorists, literary historians, and book and cultural historians such as Fl. Duyse, G. Kalff, F. K. H. Kossmann, D. F. Scheurleer, W. L. Braekman, L. P. Grijp, E. K. Grootes, M. de Bruin, P. Visser, N. Veldhorst, M. de Wilde, and A. Houben.[5] The performers, street singers and sellers have been addressed by a smaller group of scholars such as (again) W. L. Braekman, E. F. Kossmann, L. P. Grijp, P. Visser, F. Martin, R. Dekker, L. van der Pol and myself.[6]

For this article I will concentrate on ballad singers, but it is important to take into account that they were part of a large group of itinerant print sellers that was present in the streets of early modern cities and villages. Earlier I categorised these Dutch itinerant print traders in the following way: (a) the

[4] The sixteenth century was not included in my monograph on itinerant trade and therefore the material presented is relatively new. The information on the seventeenth century, is, besides some new material, largely based on my book. See Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press*.

[5] Florimond van Duyse, *Het eenstemmig Fransch en Nederlandsch wereldlijk lied* (Gent: Vuylsteke, 1896); Gerrit Kalff, *Het lied in de Middeleeuwen* (Arnhem: Gijsbers & van Loo, 1967) [reprint 1884]; Friedrich K.H. Kossmann, *De Nederlandsche straatzanger en zijn liederen in vroeger eeuwen* (Amsterdam: P. N. van Kampen & Zoon, 1941); Daniel F. Scheurleer, *Nederlandsche liedboeken. Lijst der in Nederland tot het jaar 1800 uitgegeven liedboeken* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1912–1923); Willy L. Braekman, 'Dutch black-letter ballads of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *Quaerendo* 4 (1974), 132–42; Willy L. Braekman, 'Dutch black-letter ballads of the seventeenth century', *Quaerendo* 11 (1981), 179–96; Louis P. Grijp, *Het Nederlandse lied in de Gouden Eeuw. Het mechanisme van de contra*-factuur. (Amsterdam: P.J. Meertens Instituut, 1991); Louis P. Grijp, 'Zangcultuur', in: Ton Dekker, Herman Roodenburg en Gerard Rooijakkers (eds.) *Volkscultuur. Een inleiding in de Nederlandse etnologie.* (Nijmegen: Sun, 2000), 337–80; Eddy K. Grootes, 'Het jeugdige publiek van de "nieuwe liedboeken" in het eerste kwart van de zeventiende eeuw', in Wim van den Berg and Hanna Stouten (eds.), *Het woord aan de lezer. Zeven literatuurhistorische verkenningen* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1987); Martine de Bruin and Johan Oosterman (eds.), *Repertorium van het Nederlandse lied tot 1600* (Gent-Amsterdam: KNTL/Meertens Instituut/ KNAW, 2001); Piet Visser, F.J. Hoogewoud & S. Voolstra, *Het lied dat nooit verstomde. Vier eeuwen doopsgezinde liedboekjes.* (Den Ilp: Doopsgezinde gemeente Den Ilp/Landsmeer 1988); De Wilde, *De lokroep van de nachtegaal*; Natascha Veldhorst, *Zingend door het leven. Het Nederlandse liedboek in de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2009); Annemieke Houben, *Vieze liedjes uit de 17e en 18e eeuw* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2015).

[6] Edward F. Kossmann, 'De liedjesdrukken van Klein Jan', *Het Boek* 25 (1938), 119–51; Willy L. Braekman, 'De "Antwerpschen roep" en andere straatroepen', *Volkskunde* 100 (1991), 27–72; Idem, *Hier heb ik weer wat nieuws in d'hand marktliederen, rolzangers en volkse poëzie van weleer* (Gent: Stichting Mens en Kultuur, 1990); Fred Martin, 'De liedjeszanger als massamedium; Straatzangers in de achttiende en negentiende eeuw', *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 97 (1984), 422–46; Rudolf Dekker en Lotte van de Pol, 'Wat hoort men niet al vreemde dingen', *Spiegel historiael* 17 (1982) 486–93; Louis P. Grijp, 'Gruwelijk geblèr of indringende voordracht? De performance van het straatlied', *Literatuur* 3 (2004), 20–5, 57; Piet Visser, '2 december 1567: De liedjesventer Cornelis Pietersz. wordt te Harlingen gearresteerd', in Maria A. Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen (ed.), *Nederlandse literatuur. Een geschiedenis* (Groningen: Nijhoff, 1993), 164–71; Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press*, esp. 208–15.

occasional pedlar; (b) the pedlar of printed matter and other goods; (c) the pedlar selling printed matter exclusively; (d) the pedlar selling specialist printed material. The ballad singer belongs, together with the news sellers and print sellers, to the last category. Of course the border between (political) news and songs is often blurred, because ballads could be applied as political propaganda and news as well, as we will see later on in this article.[7] When I refer to ballad singing this also includes selling (printed) ballads, since it is often impossible to make a clear distinction. Ballad singers/sellers can be defined as people who, with or without an instrument, tried to sell their printed songs by singing them in public places such as squares, bridges, locks and streets.

Apart from the distinction between the songs and street singers, it is also necessary to make a distinction between the more expensive song books and the far cheaper ballad sheets or broadside ballads. The last ones, which we will be our focus here, were more likely to be sung and distributed on the streets. Song books were more often used indoors (houses and churches) and at special occasions such as weddings and other festivities. The broadside ballads, printed with gothic type (and therefore often addressed as 'black-letter' ballads) are because of their ephemeral character very rare in our public collections, especially from the earlier centuries.[8]

Dutch ballads comprise just one sheet with a standardized size (30–32 cm × 40–42 cm), containing several songs (in columns) with a varied content (religious, amorous, historical etc.) and often a woodcut.[9] These slips could be cut from the large sheet and sold separately. Besides the broadside ballads also other songs on (smaller) sheets circulated, including occasional poetry, laudatory poems and battle songs. But this was not considered widely spread material.[10] In terms of content the broadside ballads did not differ much from the song books, but the last category was more aimed at people attending bookshops and not at people buying songs on the street.

Broadside ballads were in many cases, despite prohibitions, printed anonymously, and therefore often lack references to authors, publishers or book sellers. Occasionally, due to typographical or archival research, ballads are later attributed to a publisher. As a result of these earlier investigations we can identify some sixteenth-century printers of this material (including the Southern Netherlands), such as Jan van Ghelen in Antwerp, and seventeenth-century printers (only the Dutch Republic) such as Abraham Migoen (Rotterdam), Jan Andriesz Cloeting (Delft), Jan van Ghelen (Rotterdam),

[7] Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press*, 208–15. See also Una McIlvenna,'When the news was sung. Ballads as news media in Early Modern Europe', *Media History* 22 (2016), 317–33.

[8] Fragments excluded, only about six complete sheets from the sixteenth and only five from the seventeenth century have survived. See Braekman, 'Dutch black-letter ballads of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', and Idem, 'Dutch black-letter ballads of the seventeenth century'. Many broadside ballads are digitally available via de Dutch website 'Het geheugen van Nederland' [The memory of the Netherlands]: www.geheugenvannederland.nl.

[9] Braekman, 'Dutch black-letter ballads of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', 132.

[10] Kossmann, *De Nederlandsche straatzanger*, 27–9.

Kornelis Theunisz Kas (Haarlem) and Cornelis Claesz (Amsterdam). These names reveal that ballads were printed and sold (be it itinerant of not) in a relatively wide area, albeit with a strong concentration in the Western part (Holland) of the Republic.[11]

What makes the sixteenth century so different from the subsequent century is the fact that before *c.* 1550 the Low Countries were still mainly Catholic, and a political unity as part of the Spanish empire. From that moment on growing conflicts between the Low Countries and the absolutistic king Philip II, who wanted to centralize the political and legal institutions Low Countries, modernise the taxation system, cut the privileges of the aristocracy and suppress heterodoxy, culminated eventually in a violent rebellion and in the long run in an exhaustive 'Eighty Years War' (1568–1648). In 1581, the Northern Netherlands issued the Act of Abjuration, in which they no longer acknowledged Philip II as their legitimate king. From that moment on the country was divided in a group of seven Protestant provinces in the North, that eventually were united in the Dutch Republic, and a group of Catholic provinces in the South, still under Spanish, monarchical rule.

The Dutch Republic became famous for its flourishing publishing industry, its tolerance towards public expressions and its relatively high literacy rates. This strong growth can partly be explained by a large number of skilled and wealthy printers, engravers and book sellers that moved to Amsterdam in 1584, when Antwerp was conquered by Spanish troops. The dissemination of popular print, such as pamphlets, prints, almanacs and songs, via bookshops, market stalls or travelling pedlars and ballad singers, stimulated forms of local entertainment as well as the development of a public sphere. That makes this society an interesting case for studying the role of ballad singers.

In order to highlight the continuities and changes, I will discuss the representations of ballad singers in chronological order. For the sixteenth as well as the seventeenth century I will focus on the broader political and cultural context and the literary and archival manifestations of the ballad singers as a rebel versus entertainer, perusing relevant studies and primary sources as well.[12]

SINGING AND SELLING BEFORE AND DURING THE REVOLT

In order to understand the role of ballad singers and sellers in the sixteenth century it is necessary to elaborate on the literary field in that period. Chambers of rhetoric were a widespread and rather unique literary phenomenon in the Low Countries in this period. These literary societies organised

[11] Braekman, 'Dutch black-letter ballads of the seventeenth century'.

[12] In this contribution I don't focus on visual sources, because this would need a separate treatment. In my book *Pedlars and the Popular Press* (155) Karen Bowen has discussed a large collection of 290 images (often woodcuts on penny prints) of itinerant traders with printed wares in the Netherlands between 1600 and 1850. It is important to note here that 110 of these images are representations of ballad singers.

Fig. 1 Titlepage of a Dutch songbook illustrated with ballad singers: Henrick Aerts van Bocstel, *Lustighe amoreuse liedekens, elck met een refereyn daer op accorderende,* Rotterdam, Dirck Mullem, [last quarter 16th century]). Rotterdam, Gemeentebibliotheek ((© Gemeentebibliotheek, Rotterdam).

feasts, social events and competitions and produced and performed farces, serious plays, poems and songs.[13] Rhetoricians and their works and performances were highly appreciated for their entertaining effect but feared for their often controversial and polemic content. That is the reason authorities frequently tried to control and supress their activities.[14] An important factor for the success and impact of the rhetoricians' performances was the oral form, the vernacular language, and variety of their work. Furthermore, these chambers of rhetoric were in close contact with networks of publishers, printers and (itinerant) booksellers.[15]

Part of the rich repertoire of the rhetoricians was dedicated to representations of ballad singers. In songs and plays the itinerant trader or ballad singer was represented and often mildly mocked as the (penniless) imposter and entertainer. The songs in their pedlar packs are stereotypically about love, sex and drinking.[16] A sixteenth-century play by Haarlem rhetoricians, *Van een coomen, hebbende liedekens, historyen, refereynen ende nyewe tydinge* [About a pedlar with songs, histories, and newsletters], for instance, refers to a pedlar ('comen') who has been sent out by his father so sell his wares on the streets in order to earn some money. Besides farces and chivalric stories this pedlar also sold songs. In the play he laments his poverty and reflects on his pursuit to earn some money. He does this by persuading the bystanders that their melancholy will be dispelled if they buy his stuff (which only costs a few cents). He advertises his products by revealing parts of the stories or by singing some verses of the songs.[17] In other plays the ballad singer sometimes takes the role of a marriage broker or of an intermediary between quarrelling lovers.[18]

Aside from this more friendly representation of ballad singers, often by the rhetoricians themselves, also more serious and subversive representations by authorities, humanists and clergymen started to emerge. Especially in the early days of the Lutheran reformation, rhetorician songs were distrusted, because they often addressed religious and ethical topics.[19] In the second half of the sixteenth century the rise of politicised print such as pamphlets, satirical prints and songs coincides with an emerging image of the ballad singer as a social and political danger.

[13] See a special issue of *Renaissance Studies* on 'The Knowledge Culture of the Netherlandish Rhetoricians', 32 (2018), 1–157. See especially the Introduction: Arjan van Dixhoorn *et al.* 'The relevance of the Netherlandish rhetoricians', 8–22.

[14] Werner Waterschoot, 'De rederijkerskamers en de doorbraak van de reformatie in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden', *Jaarboek De Fonteine,* 45–6 (1995–96), 153.

[15] Bloemendal and Van Dixhoorn, 'Literary cultures', 1–35.

[16] Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press*, 33; Veldhorst, *Zingend door het leven*, 59.

[17] Wim N. M. Hüsken, Bart A. M. Ramakers and Frans A. M. Schaars (eds.), *Trou moet blijcken. Bronnenuitgave van de boeken der Haarlemse rederijkerskamer 'de Pellicanisten'. Deel 8: de boeken I, N, M en R* (Assen: Uitgeverij Quarto, 1998), 336–41.

[18] Veldhorst, *Zingend door het leven*, 59.

[19] Waterschoot, 'De rederijkerskamers', 141–3.

Despite the great impact of print culture, it is vital in this context not to ignore the lasting impact of oral communication and propaganda.[20] In her book on public opinion in Amsterdam during the early years of the Revolt, Femke Deen presented an intriguing thesis on the role of rumour, oral culture and public opinion.[21] Using police reports, court records, petitions, letters, pamphlets and songs among other things, she stated that oral culture, including songs and rumours had more impact on public opinion than print culture. Due to their flexible, ephemeral and intangible character illiterate people could join the discussions as well. Moreover, oral culture could easily be adapted to changing circumstances and opinions. Even authorities were aware of this and made similar use of the propagandist power of oral culture.

Deen discusses several examples of reformist songs (the so-called 'Geuzenliederen' [Beggar songs]) that circulated illegally in Amsterdam and were used as a form of propaganda. These 'beggar songs' were probably written in circles of (banned) rhetoricians and subsequently distributed in printed as well as manuscript form. The rhetoricians who in earlier years produced innocent forms of social irony and joyful representations of street culture, were now involved in public opinion formation. Beggar songs appeared to be very effective because they used familiar melodies, had a direct link with everyday events and could easily be adapted to new (political) realities. The content was pro-(Prince of) Orange, anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish, but this uniform message was presented in a wide variety of genres: narrative songs, mock ballads, religious songs and songs of rhetoric. These songs first appeared as separate broadside ballads that were distributed on the streets, but eventually ended up in a song book, such as the *Guese Liede Boecxken* [Beggars song book].[22] The most famous beggar song, the *Wilhelmus*, has become (the basis of) the Dutch national anthem. As a response to the beggar songs, also anti-Protestant and pro-Catholic songs started to circulate in this period.[23]

As a consequence many placards were issued by the Spanish king and in Dutch provinces and towns during the period 1520–50 banning the dissemination of controversial print in general and Lutheran texts and songs in particular. The censors were especially keen on the ballads and songs of the chambers of rhetoricians, because of their alleged sympathy for reformers.[24] It comes as no surprise that during these turbulent years also street singers in the Low Countries were profoundly distrusted and often considered as troublemakers and active supporters of heresy.[25] Already in 1528 a musician from

[20] Bloemendal and Dixhoorn, *Literary cultures*, 2.

[21] Deen, *Publiek debat en propaganda in Amsterdam.*

[22] *Een nieu Guese Liede Boecxken* […] (z.p. 1576/1577). A more recent edition: *Nieuw Geuzenlied-boek, […].* (Utrecht: Van Bentum, 1874).

[23] Deen, *Publiek debat en propaganda*, 125–36. See also M. de Bruin, 'Geuzen- en antigeuzenliederen', in Louis P. Grijp (ed.), *Een muziekgeschiedenis der Nederlanden* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2002), 174–80.

[24] Waterschoot, 'De rederijkerskamers', 147–8.

[25] *Ibid.*, 152.

Fig. 2 Singing (drunken?) man with a slip song. Abraham de Blois after Andries Both, *Het Gehoor* [Hearing] (part of a series of the five senses), engraving. Nicolaes (I) Visscher, Amsterdam, [between 1679-1717]. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (© Rijksmuseum Amsterdam).

Kortrijk, Loy de Velare, was prosecuted for singing songs in the 'style of the rhetoricians' in which he mocked the Catholic clergy. Indeed, it frequently occurred that rhetoricians sang seditious songs in front of the homes of Catholic priests or that they pasted the ballad sheets on the walls of public buildings. From 1531 onwards repression intensified, culminating in the introduction of the death penalty in 1540. These punishments not only hit the writers of Protestant material, but made victims among printers, (itinerant) booksellers and ballad singers as well. The ballad singer Pieter Schuttemate from Antwerp was executed in 1547 because of a ballad that mocked Friors Minor. Anthonisz Courtz was apprehended in Amsterdam in 1552 for singing and disseminating controversial songs. The same happened in Gent in 1557 to the street singer Damien Vincentszoon, who originally came from Leiden.[26]

A complicating factor for the authorities was that they not only had to deal with street selling, but also with other, less palpable and visible, forms of dissemination. In 1566 the spy Marten Jacobs reported to the governor of the Spanish king Margaret of Parma, that the printer Albert Christaensz in Vianen sold heretic books and also a sheet with an anti-Spanish song *Antwerpen Rijck, o keizerlijke stad* [Wealthy Antwerp, O imperial city] aiming at street sellers. Many of these songs, however, were distributed for free, or pasted on public buildings. And once they were appropriated by the general public, they were transmitted orally and sung in the streets, on barges and other public places.[27]

A good illustration of the networks of printers, bookshops and itinerants behind this controversial material, is the well documented case of the book seller Peter Warners from the city of Kampen (in the eastern province of Overijssel). In the 1560s he was held responsible for printing and disseminating all sorts of anti-papist and seditious works. During the interrogations the printer denied that he was the author of these worked and stated that he was just commissioned by the street sellers to print a certain booklet or pamphlet. When he was asked to reveal the name of the street seller, Warners responded that so many destitute street sellers, strangers and pedlars came to his printing house offering him three or four guilders to print an item for them. He recalled a pedlar from Brabant, Hubert van Breda, who had sold books printed by him, in front of the town hall. Van Breda had addressed several printers in the town to do some work for him. In one case a printer had printed the material but had sold it to other pedlars. Van Breda did not accept this and started to pursue this printer until he was compensated for his loss.

It is important to stress here that these itinerants were important chains in the distribution system. They were intermediaries between the official, sedentary booksellers and potential buyers that did not frequent a bookshop. They

[26] See for more examples of ballad singers that were arrested: Martin, 'De liedjeszanger als massamedium', 433. See also Herman Pleij, 'Literatuur en censuur in de zestiende eeuw', in Marita Mathijsen (ed.), *Boeken onder druk. Censuur en pers-onvrijheid in Nederland sinds de boekdrukkunst* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2011), 17–30; Veldhorst, *Zingend door het leven*, 43; Visser, '2 december 1567'.

[27] Deen, *Publiek debat en propaganda*, 126–7.

also informed the booksellers about the demands and desires of the market and they were often responsible for the dissemination of seditious and illegal print.

Warners regretted, at least that is what he told the interrogators, that he had printed seditious material for Van Breda. When he was taken into custody, a public protest arose from his friends and other civilians. They probably assumed that Warners was imprisoned because of his religious conviction. The end of the story was that he fled from prison with the help of his friends and son in law to Emmerik in Germany, where he died in freedom in 1583.[28]

A related court case (dated 9-12-1567) concerns the son of Peter Warners. A prisoner in the city of Leeuwarden revealed in his confession that the son of Warners, Berend Peters, had printed some scandalous songs. The singer of these songs was a boy of seventeen years old, named Cornelis Pieters, who was born in Haarlem. Cornelis' parents now lived in Bolsward in Friesland. This boy had, besides doing other work, travelled around for six or seven weeks singing and selling songs on the streets. Two years before he had done this as well for a period of about four weeks. Pieters had bought his songs from other street sellers. One of these sellers was named 'Saeck', in Bolsward, who had these songs printed at Berend Peters in Kampen. When Pieters was out of stock, he ordered three songs at another printer in Steenwijk, named 'Harmen', whom he paid one guilder for 1,000 copies.[29] Before Pieters was arrested he had sung and sold several of them in varies cities and villages. All this was considered to be a great evil in the eyes of the local government. The printer Peters therefore had to appear before the local council. There he denied, stating that he would never dare to print any of these songs. After this the case was, surprisingly, closed.[30]

Deen also reconstructed a network around a song about the count of Egmond, that circulated around 1570. Egmond was, together with count Horne, executed by the Spanish regime, because of their resistance against the continuing repression and harshness of the inquisition. In the song Egmond complained that the hangmen who brought him to the gallows in Brussels seemed to have forgotten his many heroic military deeds. The song was later discovered in the home of the street singer and pedlar Arent Willemsz, who was coincidently apprehended in 1570, not for singing but because of begging and vagabonding. Willemsz came from Brussels, where the execution had taken place. In the interrogations he confessed that he got the song from an innkeeper in Rotterdam, and smuggled it into the city of Amsterdam.[31]

[28] Salomon Elte, 'De rechtszaak tegen Peter Warners, boekdrukker te Kampen', *Kamper Almanak* (1951–52), 148–73.

[29] Probably Harmen 't Zangers at Steenwijk.

[30] Elte, 'De rechtszaak tegen Peter Warners'.

[31] Deen, *Publiek debat en propaganda*, 89, 93.

In a desperate attempt to contain the multifaceted Protestant propaganda, censors started to ban all the ballads they encountered in this period, including the innocent and entertaining ones. Around 1550 ballads began to be considered as obscene, controversial or seditious by default, and all street singers as a permanent hazard to public order and moral.[32] The Haarlem street singer Heynsoon Adriaenszen was a victim of this indiscriminate and extended repression. He was hanged in 1568 not for disseminating anti-Catholic propaganda, but only because he had sold 'songs, ballads and verses in public'.[33] The authorities were especially anxious towards selling and singing songs during public events and seasonal (religious) feasts such as Pentecost and New Year.[34]

SINGING AND SELLING IN THE DUTCH REPUBLIC

In my earlier explorations of the image of Dutch pedlars and ballad singers in literary sources, I discerned on the one hand a negative image of the ballad singer as a symbol of bad taste, subversive behavior and unreliable news and on the other hand a more neutral or even slightly positive image which associated the itinerant and ballad seller just as an entertainer with commercial incentives who often advertised a specific work or title.[35] The negative image was mainly reflected in comical theatre, in which the ballad seller, similar to the century before, was portrayed as a rogue, a thief, and a cheat selling songs about love, sex and drinking.[36] Other theatrical images show the ballad singer as a (as we have seen before) love broker or a source of news and sensation.[37] An ironical mixture of all three elements can be found in a love story by the Dutch poet Jacob Cats ('Liefdes Vosse-Vel. Proef-steen op het trou-geval van Faes en Alette') first published in the years 1657–58. The plot is about a song that contains a false report of pre-marital love making of a rich widow (Alette) and a young man (Faes) who is in love with her. In her attempts to ban the song and save her reputation, even the authorities have to admit that once the street has taken hold of it, there is no way back. Finally the widow, because of the unstoppable rumour, can't avoid a marriage anymore and therefore the male protagonist, who had spread the story, succeeds in his plan.[38] Besides

[32] Pleij, 'Literatuur en censuur in de zestiende eeuw', 17-30; Veldhorst, *Zingend door het leven*, 43; Visser, '2 december 1567', 164–71.

[33] Visser, '2 december 1567'.

[34] Ordinances from 1578 and 1612. *Handvesten van Amsterdam.* Dl. 2. Amsterdam 1748, 1031.

[35] Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press,* 92–6.

[36] *Ibid.* 33.

[37] Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press*, 35; Veldhorst, *Zingend door het leven*, 59.

[38] Karen Bowen,'Sounding out a public's view of pedlars with texts', *Jaarboek voor Nederlandse boekgeschiedenis*, 15 (2008), 91–108; R. Harms, *Pamfletten en publieke opinie. Massamedia in the zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 11–13. The primary source is Jacob Cats, *Alle de wercken* (Amsterdam: Jan Jacobsz Schipper, 1657–58; Antwerp, Stadsbibliotheek, C 185511 [C2-567 a]), Vol. II, fols. Aa1–5.

plays, also the printed songs themselves sometimes contain representations of ballad sellers. Often street sellers is presented here as a salesman advertising his own song.[39]

When compared to research based on archival sources we see similar occurrences of the ballad singer as rebel and entertainer, but the representations are much more complex and nuanced. After the aforementioned Act of Abjuration of 1581, the repression of the Protestant religion was abolished in the Northern Netherlands. Although freedom of conscience was officially acknowledged, this did not imply a complete freedom of oral and printed expressions. Especially street singers were still considered a source of unrest. Up until and including the seventeenth century, local authorities kept on issuing ordinances to suppress ballad singers and street sellers, focusing not only on political material, but on general seditious and improper songs as well. A Utrecht resolution of 1610, for example, was directed towards singing, crying or disseminating seditious libels, songs and verses on the streets. The criteria used by the authorities in their ordinances often went further than just the dissemination of printed ideas. In many seventeenth-century Dutch cities and villages street selling and singing was even associated and considered just as harmful as begging and vagabonding.[40]

Groups in society that were on the fringe of society, such as widows, orphans, unemployed (e.g. sailors) and disabled people (e.g. soldiers), indeed often combined selling songs, because of the low profits, with begging. In Rotterdam placards were issued in 1614 and 1632 in which singing and music making on the streets was considered equal to beggary. In this climate of repression street singing, offensive behaviour and crime were easily connected. There is indeed proof of small groups of people, sometimes organized in gangs, arrested for crimes such as theft or violence, that used the selling of ballads as a cover up. In interrogations they frequently called themselves 'ballad singers', although in reality they were active as robbers and thieves. That is the reason why 'street singers' often were so severely punished in court (e.g. corporal punishments and banishment). More frequently, however, we encounter innocent forms of collaboration between ballad singers and booksellers in court records. Just as in the sixteenth century we see instances of balladeers commissioning booksellers to print a specific song for them. This could lead to the reprint of an old song, but also to new ballads about topical events, rumors and gossip. In reverse, printers and publishers also frequently took the initiative to produce new songs, trusting they could easily be sold on the streets. They made sure, via messengers or apprentices, that local street sellers knew what was in press.[41]

Around 1650, internal conflicts that threatened the political stability after the Peace of Munster (1648), were followed by a growing concern about

[39] Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press*, 32–50.

[40] See the Rotterdam placards of 1614 and 1632. Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press*, 25.

[41] Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press*, 211–14.

seditious pamphlets and songs. In this respect the situation was similar to the post-1560 period, when the Dutch Revolt broke out. Statutes issued in Amsterdam in 1648, for instance, included explicitly the suppression of displaying and singing songs. Offences were punished with seizing the stock, followed by fines of several guilders. Partly due to the polarisation between the Orangist (supporters of the Prince of Orange) and Republican party (provincial and local regents), the repression of pamphlets and ballads in Amsterdam was even more intensified during the years 1670–1700.[42] Also in other parts of the country this danger was acknowledged. The magistrate of the city of Deventer (province of Overijssel), issued a statute in 1671 against libellous poems and sheets that were disseminated and sung in the local streets.[43] Interestingly, in the last decades of the seventeenth century the censorship became less generic and more directed towards specific titles of pamphlets and ballads, and indication that the ordinances remained without effect. This again is similar to the kind of repression we have seen in the late sixteenth century.[44]

Juridical and administrative sources reveal that the itinerants were often intangible due to their mobility and frequent travels from city to city and city to countryside. This strategy was obviously applied for commercial reasons, but considering the permanent repression, it could also be a consequence of their banishment or a way to avoid policing.[45] The ballad seller Maerten Matheus, for instance, originally came from Geertruidenberg (province of Brabant), but was on 19 January 1624 banned from Rotterdam because of selling scandalous songs and books.[46] In 1671 the ballad seller Hendrick Dercks from East-Friesland (in the North) was arrested in the city of Zwolle (Overijssel) because of singing and selling a 'slanderous pasquil' on the weekly market. Interestingly, he was protected by a local bookseller who stated that Dercks had not produced the song himself. According to the bookseller the ballad seller could not read nor write. This example shows that established booksellers and shop owners did not always see itinerants, contrary to common notion, as their rivals, but considered them partners (in crime) as well.[47] The same close relation can be observed between the local public (from high to low) and ballad singers. There are several examples of well-known, popular

[42] Another reason was the declining book industry that led to a growing irritation between booksellers and irregular street sellers as unfair competitors. Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press*, 26.

[43] Ingrid Weekhout, *Boekencensuur in de noordelijke Nederlanden. De vrijheid van drukpers in de zeventiende eeuw* (Den Haag: SDU, 1998), 262.

[44] Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press*, 26–7.

[45] In Leiden the ballad sellers Oth Roeloffs and Thomas Sirxz worked together when they were apprehended in 1626. Roeloffs came from Blokzijl, in the eastern province of Overijssel and Sirxz from Amsterdam. Both were banned for three years from Leiden, the surrounding Rijnland, The Hague and The Hague shire; Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press*, 214.

[46] Weekhout, *Boekencensuur*, 178.

[47] Weekhout, *Boekencensuur*, 264–8; Veldhorst, *Zingend door het leven*, 43.

Fig. 3 Illustration of the story 'Liefdes Vosse-Vel. Proef-steen op het trou-geval van Faes en Alette,' in: Jacob Cats, *Alle de wercken*. Amsterdam: Jan Jacobsz Schipper, 1657-1658. Antwerp, Stadsbibliotheek. (©Antwerp, Stadsbibliotheek).

street singers, who frequented squares and other central spots in Amsterdam, amusing an enthusiastic and loyal audience.[48]

Connected to this it is also good to realise that urban ballad singers, although often represented that way, were not automatically 'strangers'. In the case of Amsterdam 26.6% of the ballad singers in the period 1600–1850 were inhabitants of that city, and another 9.3% can be probably be seen in the same way. About 30% came from another Dutch city and only a small group can be considered 'foreign' ballad singers (*c.* 14%) coming from neighbouring countries such as Germany, France and the Southern Netherlands. We do see that non-local ballad singers were more severely punished for the same offences than Amsterdam inhabitants, however. Another relevant observation is the high number of recidivists, almost a fourth, among the prosecuted ballad singers in Amsterdam. This implies that they often had no economic alternative and thus risked recurring punishment, even in the places where they were banned from.[49]

[48] Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press*, 210.

[49] *Ibid.* 208–15.

Fig. 4 Anonymous, A man singing on a stool with a ballad in his hands, surrounded by an audience (part of a series of the five senses), Aert van Waes (possibly the printmaker) and Isaac Vos (possibly the publisher). Between 1600 and 1670. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (© Rijksmuseum Amsterdam).

CONCLUSION

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Dutch ballad singers were a permanent phenomenon in public, cultural and political life. In the sixteenth century chambers of rhetoric were to a certain extent responsible for the production and disseminations of entertaining songs and ballads in the local public sphere. In the context of growing political and religious tensions however, the rhetoricians began to be associated with reformist and rebellious songs and plays. As a consequence, from the 1550s onwards ballads and street singing in general, be it entertaining or propagandistic, was suppressed by the Spanish rulers. In my view, this process of merging the entertainer with the rebel, was completed during the Dutch Revolt at the end of the sixteenth century. Ballad singers and their songs were from that moment on seen by the authorities as a recurring instrument of propaganda and subversion. Even after the establishment of Dutch Republic, with its relatively lenient attitude towards popular forms or printed and oral expressions, the ballad singer remained a distrusted figure. This does not mean that the entertaining role completely disappeared. In the sphere of comical theatre, festivities, fairs and public entertainment, the ballad singer was still highly appreciated and relatively free from prosecution. But the endemic animosity against the street singer could easily flare up under pressure of regular book sellers who feared competition, local governments that wanted to safeguard moral order or authorities that were allergic for political propaganda during periods of turmoil.

An important difference between the sixteenth and seventeenth century is that the beggar songs and their authors and street sellers eventually became a symbol of the heroic identity of the newly established, independent Dutch Republic. In the seventeenth century the still rich ballad and pamphlet culture developed into a regular, albeit decisive, part of public opinion formation. But the enemy wasn't a foreign regime anymore, but another political or religious party, or a local or provincial authority.

Despite the omnipresence of printed ballads and street singing in Dutch culture, the actual ballad singer him- or herself, was very difficult to trace. The ballad singer as entertainer, in the sixteenth as well as the seventeenth century, can be especially found in literary sources, such as plays, poems, songs and stories. In these fictional representations they are mildly mocked, but also appreciated for their humour and divertissement. The more negative connotations can be traced in administrative and legal sources, such as ordinances, guild protests and criminal records.

Especially during periods of political and social unrest, street sellers and ballad singers became more visible. But just because these (normative and disciplining) sources are richer in these contexts, we have to be aware of an unbalanced representation. Potentially, in many places, and especially larger cities, there was always a group of destitute, unemployed or low-waged people

available who had to resort to these forms of street trade. A small number of them became relatively successful and satisfied singers, performers and entertainers. The sources indeed reveal that many ballad singers were respected and cherished by the local people, artists and dissidents. It goes without doubt, furthermore, that they were an indispensable partner of writers and publishers of news, pamphlets and songs.

University of Utrecht