

‘Disaster upon Disaster Inflicted on the Dutch’

Singing about Disasters in the Netherlands, 1600-1900

45

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This article focuses on Dutch songs about natural disasters, published roughly between 1600 and 1900, and investigates which functions they fulfilled from a long-term perspective. It argues that this particular genre is an important source to understand how people coped with catastrophes in the past by highlighting three of its main functions. Firstly, they were used to spread the news by communicating detailed information about the happening from the time of the event to the location and number of deadly incidents. Secondly, authors made sense of the events by interpreting them. In all cases, disasters were interpreted as signs of God’s vengeance and as warnings that the audience needed to repent in order to prevent new disasters. The heated religious debates, caused by the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755, were not reflected in Dutch songs about disasters at all. Thirdly, songs could shape a shared sense of religious or geographical identity. National solidarity reached a height in the nineteenth century, when songs were used as a means to raise money for the victims. Even songs about disasters abroad were primarily used to strengthen communal feelings at the national level.

In dit artikel wordt de rol van liederen bij natuurrampen in de zeventiende, achttiende en negentiende eeuw onderzocht. Na rampzalige gebeurtenissen als overstromingen, insectenplagen, runderpest en branden verschenen tal van liederen waarin de gebeurtenissen werden bezongen. Grofweg zijn er drie functies van de liederen te onderscheiden. Ten eerste fungeerden ze als een belangrijk medium om het nieuws te verspreiden onder grote lagen van de bevolking. De liederen bevatten dan ook veel concrete gegevens over de locatie, het aantal slachtoffers en de gevolgen van een ramp. Ten tweede werden de gebeurtenissen in de liederen geïnterpreteerd door er religieuze en soms ook politieke lessen aan te verbinden.

Door alle eeuwen heen overheerst een stichtelijke boodschap; de godsdiensttwijfel, die na de ramp van Lissabon in 1755 in sommige intellectuele en wetenschappelijke kringen opkwam, drong niet door tot dit populaire genre. Ten derde konden liederen gevoelens van solidariteit vanuit een religieus en geografisch perspectief bevorderen. Zo konden ze de verbondenheid op het stedelijke, regionale en nationale niveau verhogen. Deze solidariteit kreeg een extra dimensie in de negentiende eeuw, toen de liederen ook werden gebruikt om geld in te zamelen voor de slachtoffers. Zelfs wanneer ze bestemd waren om te collecteren voor de slachtoffers van buitenlandse rampen, stonden de liederen in het teken van het vergroten van nationale saamhorigheid.

Engulfed by water

In February 1799, large parts of the Dutch provinces of Gelderland and Brabant were flooded. The material damages were enormous: numerous houses and churches fell prey to the waves, and the town of Nijmegen was partly destroyed. Twenty people lost their lives in the Land of Heusden, when they tried to escape to the higher parts of a dyke.¹ A rather lengthy song entitled ‘Elegy about the severe flood, the breaking of the dikes and huge floods, in particular in Gelderland’ reported about the many dreadful events during this month as follows:

Hark the horrible and gloomy moaning
 In sorrowful Gelderland
 Nijmegen is almost entirely
 Engulfed by water [...]
 Valuable cattle languish there
 Nearly drowning
 So too the houses,
 Up to their attics, are sinking...²

1 For a thorough description of the flood of 1799, see Anneke Driessen, *Watersnood tussen Maas en Waal. Overstromingsrampen in het rivierengebied tussen 1780 en 1810* (Zutphen 1994) 161-198. Research for this article was funded by NWO (The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research) and carried out with a Vici grant for the research project, ‘Dealing with disasters. The shaping of local and national identities in the Netherlands, 1421-1890’. I would like to thank Natasha Veldhorst, and the anonymous referees

for their comments on an earlier draft, and Jodi van Oudheusden-Peita for her translations of the Dutch lyrics.

2 ‘Hoor ’t naar en droef gekerm / In ’t treurig Gelderland, / Nymeegeen word haast heel / Door ’t water overmand [...] Het nuttig Vee ligt daar / Byna geheel verdrongen, / De Huizen zyn tot by / De zolders toe, verzonken.’ Quoted from: ‘Treur-zang, Omtrent de hooge Watersnood, doorbreeken van Dyken, en geweldige Overstromingen, byzonderlyk in Gelderland,

Three elements are remarkable about this song. Firstly, it provides very detailed information about the events during the flooding, moving from day to day and town to town. Secondly, the song offers concrete examples to illustrate the terrible impact of the flood on the townsfolk. Seven people were, for instance, killed, their screams muted by the water. Thirdly, it conveys a distinct moral message at the end of the song. Listeners were reminded of the fact that this catastrophe should be seen as a punishment sent by God. The only remedy against such punishments was to repent one's sins: 'Devote yourselves to His Will, fall before His power as an obedient servant reverently on your knees and, henceforth, fear His Power.'³

In the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, songs were an important medium to spread the news of disastrous events. Songs not only provided factual information but also expressed grief and compassion for the victims. Furthermore, they functioned as educational tools by showing the listeners-singers how they were to interpret the dreadful events. This article focuses on Dutch popular songs about natural disasters, published roughly between 1600 and 1900, and investigates which functions they fulfilled in mediating and presenting the news from a long-term perspective.

Although there is a growing interest in the history of Dutch coping strategies when confronted with nature-induced disasters, the songs themselves have not yet been studied from this perspective. In this article, I argue that the particular genre of songs is an important source to understand how Dutch people dealt with catastrophes in the past by highlighting three of its main functions: spreading the news, making sense of the events by interpreting them, and shaping shared local and/or national identities. Although many other genres, such as poems, chronicles, prose pamphlets and plays, communicated news about disastrous events as well, songs have some particular assets. Most importantly, songs differ from other genres in their manner of delivery, both discursively and musically. Not only were songs meant to be performed, as is mirrored in the form and structure of the texts. The act of singing was also an emotional and physical practice, which made them particularly apt for community building.⁴ In this article, the analysis

in de maand February 1799', in: *De vrolyke Nederlander, zingende met zyn increíble meisje de hedendaagsche liederen*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam 1800) 121-122.

3 'Treur-zang', 24: 'Maar wil u aan zyn dienst / En aan zyn wil gewinnen, / Valt voor zyn Sceptermacht / Als willig Onderdaan / Eerbiedglyk te voet, / En vreesst zyn magt voortaan.'

4 On the production and consumption of Dutch songs in the past, see: Stefaan Top, *Komt vrienden,*

luistert naar myn lied. Aspecten van de marktzanger in Vlaanderen (1750-1950) (Tielt 1985), Natascha Veldhorst, *Zingend door het leven. Het Nederlandse liedboek in de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam 2009) 59-89, and Jeroen Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press. Itinerant Distribution Networks in England and the Netherlands 1600-1850* (Leiden 2013) 167-247. On early modern song culture, see Louis Peter Grijp and Dieuwke van der Poel, 'Introduction', in: Dieuwke van der Poel, Louis



A heavy storm and drifting ice on the river Waal at Nijmegen, February 1799. Etching drawn by Reinier Vinkeles, adapted from a drawing of Cornelis van Hardenbergh, 1799-1800. ©Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, RP-P-1944-1885, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/rm0001.collect.407488>.

is largely focused on the content of the songs and less on the production, distribution or reception of the songs, or the study of singing as an emotional and physical practice. These aspects deserve more attention in future research.⁵

In order to study the factual and ideological content of song lyrics, I compiled a list of Dutch songs about natural disasters between 1600 and 1900. This time frame is mainly chosen for pragmatic reasons. Before 1600 hardly any songs about natural disasters can be found, while 1900 marks the transition to an era in which new mass media arose such as film, radio and, later on, television.⁶ It should be noted that concepts like ‘disaster’ and ‘catastrophe’ are difficult to define. Firstly, the line between nature-induced and man-made disaster is thin: there is often a clear connection between social and human factors.⁷ Fires, for instance, could be the result of human action while lack of maintenance could cause breaches and floods. Secondly, natural and warlike disasters can be discussed within the context of the same song, which gives some of the songs a political meaning as well. Nevertheless, within the scope of this article not *all* kinds of disasters (murder, unhappy love affairs, war, sieges, battles) are included, as I specifically focus on nature-induced disasters like earthquakes, animal plagues, storms, shipwrecks caused by storms, floods and fires.

Status Quaestionis

During the last two decades, the study of long-term human reactions to disasters has developed into a flourishing area of research. Historians have cogently shown that a wide variety of historical sources can be used as a ‘laboratory’ to understand what sustainable and resilient societies have in

P. Grijp and Wim van Anrooij (eds.), *Identity, Intertextuality, and Performance in Early Modern Song Culture* (Leiden / Boston 2016) 1-38. The relation between disaster-related songs and the processing of grief is discussed in Heather Sparling, “‘Sad and solemn requiems.’ Disaster Songs and Complicated Grief in the Aftermath of Nova Scotia Mining Disasters”, in: Helen Dell and Helen M. Hickey (eds.), *Singing Death. Reflections on Music and Mortality* (New York 2017) 90-104.

5 This will be part of the Vici-project ‘Dealing with Disasters’ (see note 1). See also Lotte Jensen, ‘Traanrijk en Troosthart. Zingen over watersnoodrampen in de achttiende eeuw.’

Mededelingen van de Stichting Jacob Campo Weyerman 42:1 (2019) (In press).

6 The oldest title I found dates from 1597 and reads: *Een jammerlijcke beschrijvinge ende geschiedenis binnen Strale-sondt int landt te Pommeren, hoe dat het aldaer Bloet ende Sulpher uut de Loch in ende buyten der Stadt gheregent heeft* (Amsterdam: Peeter Geraerts). I would like to thank Marieke van Egeraat for this information.

7 On the difficulties on defining these concepts, see: Gerrit Jasper Schenk, ‘Historical Disaster Research. State of Research, Concepts, Methods and Case Studies’, *Historical Social Research* 32:3 (2007) 9-31, 11-14.

common.⁸ Furthermore, scholars in the field of media and literary studies have pointed out that media play an essential role in our perception of disasters, because the dissemination of information and the interpretation of events primarily take place through narratives and images.⁹ As the historians Jasper Schenk and Monica Juneja have convincingly argued, transdisciplinary cultural approaches are most apt to fully grasp the impact of disasters upon different societies in different times: the perception of disasters is profoundly influenced not only by a people's cultural habits and beliefs, but also by the cultural discourses that communicate these events.¹⁰ Indeed, the cultural path is very much 'worth pursuing', as the *Handbook of Disaster Research* emphasises.¹¹

A growing number of case studies testify to the fruitfulness of a culturalist approach.¹² Recently, Marijke Meijer Drees and Raingard Esser held a plea for more historical research in this area from the Dutch perspective. They persuasively argue that especially longitudinal investigations on nature-induced disasters are needed to better understand how the Dutch dealt with crises in the past.¹³ In this article, I would like to contribute to this call for

- 8 Monica Juneja and Franz Mauelshagen, 'Disasters and Pre-Industrial Societies: Historiographic Trends and Comparative Perspectives', *The Medieval History Journal* 10 (2007) 1-31; Bas van Bavel and Daniel Curtis, 'Better understanding disasters by better using history: Systematically using the historical record as one way to advance research into disasters', *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* (2015) 1-32; Gerrit Jasper Schenk, "'Learning from History." Chances, Problems and Limits of Learning from Natural Disasters', in: Fred Krüger, Greg Bankoff, Terry Cannon, Benedikt Orloswiki and E. Lisa F. Schipper (eds.), *Cultures and Disasters: Understanding Cultural Framings in Disaster Risk Reduction* (London / New York 2015) 72-86.
- 9 Ansgar Nünning, 'Krise als Erzählung und Metaphor: Literaturwissenschaftliche Bausteine für eine Metaphorologie und Narratologie von Krisen', in: Carla Meyer, Katja Patzel-Mattern and Gerrit Jasper Schenk (eds.), *Krisengeschichte(n). "Krise" als Leitbegriff und Erzählmuster in kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive* (Stuttgart 2013) 117-144; Monica Juneja and Gerrit Jasper Schenk (eds.), *Disaster as Image. Iconographies and Media Strategies across Europe and Asia* (Regensburg 2014).
- 10 Juneja and Schenk (eds.), *Disaster as Image*.
- 11 Gary R. Webb, 'The Popular Culture of Disaster. Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research', in: Havidan Rodriguez, Enrico Quarantelli and Russel Dynes (eds.), *Handbook of Disaster Research* (New York 2007), 430-434, 434. On the cultural approach and its varieties of disaster studies, also see: Per Illner and Isak Winkel Holm, 'Making Sense of Disaster. The Cultural Studies of Disaster', in: Rasmus Dahlberg, Oliver Rubin and Morten Thanning Vendelø (eds.), *Disaster Research. Multidisciplinary and International Perspectives* (London / New York 2016) 51-65.
- 12 To mention only a few examples: Schenk, 'Historical Disaster Research' and Gerrit Jasper Schenk (Hg.), *Katastrophen. Vom Untergang Pompejis bis zum Klimawandel* (Ostfildern 2009).
- 13 Raingard Esser and Marijke Meijer Drees, 'Coping with Crisis: An Introduction', *Dutch Crossing. Journal for Low Countries Studies* 40:2 (2016) 93-96. For an earlier plea for more research in this area, see: Raingard Esser, 'Fear of Water and Floods in the Low Countries', in: William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts (eds.), *Fear in Early Modern Society* (Manchester 1997) 62-77.

a 'cultural turn' in disaster studies by exploring the genre of songs from a cultural-historical and longitudinal perspective.

Although music is recognised as an important expression of popular culture and one through which people make sense of catastrophic events, very little systematic research in disaster-related songs has been carried out so far.¹⁴ Recently, the literary scholar Una McIlvenna made an important contribution to the field by exploring how early modern English ballads mediated the news of death and disaster. Significantly, she discussed two main functions of disaster-related songs. The first was that these songs were an important medium in spreading the news and transmitting factual information to large groups of people, including those who could not read.¹⁵ The second function was that they made use of strong, sensational and emotive language to underline moral lessons, which were mostly of a religious nature. In this article, I would like to add a third element to McIlvenna's observations. Songs about nature-induced disasters also played a role in community building. Listening and singing together could reinforce all sorts of collective identities on both the local and national level.

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Netherlands enjoyed a rich song culture, as previous research has demonstrated.¹⁶ Songs could be used for religious and political purposes, evoking feelings of belonging to a group of like-minded people. For example, songs that supported the ideals of the Reformed Church reinforced the Protestant identity, while other songs encouraged people to engage themselves politically, as was the case in late eighteenth-century revolutionary circles or in songs against Napoleon.¹⁷

14 Webb, 'The Popular Culture of Disaster', 430; Bob Alexander, 'Hazards and disasters represented in music', in: Ben Wisner, JC Gaillard and Ilian Kelman (eds.), *Handbook of Hazards and Disaster Risk Reduction and Management* (London / New York 2012) 131-141.

15 See Una McIlvenna, 'Ballads of Death and Disaster: The Role of Song in Early Modern News Transmission', in: J. Spinks and C. Zika (eds.), *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400-1700* (London 2016) 275-294. On the role of songs in spreading the news, also see Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News. How the World Came to Know About Itself* (New Haven / London 2014) 121-129.

16 See, for example, Natascha Veldhorst, *Zingend door het leven*; Louis Peter Grijp, *Het Nederlandse lied in de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam 1991).

17 Els Stronks, *Stichten of schitteren. De poëzie van zeventiende-eeuwse gereformeerde predikanten* (Hilversum 1996) 139-145; Karel Porteman and Mieke B. Smits-Veldt, *Een nieuw vaderland voor de muzen. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1560-1700* (Amsterdam 2008) 470-479; Lara Mason, *Singing in the French Revolution: Popular Culture and Politics, 1787-1799* (Ithaca 1996); Bart Verheijen, 'Singing the Nation. Protest Songs and National Thought in the Netherlands during the Napoleonic Annexation (1810-1813)', in: Lotte Jensen (ed.), *The Roots of Nationalism. National Identity Formation in Early Modern Europe, 1600-1815* (Amsterdam 2016) 309-327.



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The singer of songs portrayed by Jan Gillisz. van Vliet, ca. 1650-1700. Atlas van Stolk

Historians have emphasised the importance of early modern print culture, and in particular printed religious texts, sermons and catechisms, in the formation of ‘imagined communities’ or ‘print-communities’ based on a common language – to use Benedict Anderson’s well-known concept.¹⁸ Songs may even have played a more direct role in community building, because of the shared experience of singing together about traumatic events.¹⁹ The sense of belonging together could be intensified in several ways. Firstly, the act of singing could be done in groups, for instance during church ceremonies, riots or demonstrations. The communal performance created a feeling of belonging together, as it still does today.²⁰ Secondly, generic conventions and linguistic characteristics could contribute to a sense of community. As literary scholar Cornelis van der Haven has demonstrated for eighteenth-century political songs, message and form were strongly interconnected. Characteristics such as simplicity and the use of understandable language and simple plots, the repetition of lines and verses, and the use of the first-person-plural ‘we’ all contributed to a ‘unity of feeling’.²¹ Thirdly, songbooks were often reprinted many times and songs were performed and re-performed over longer periods of time. Songs could also be easily memorised, making them apt ‘identity-markers’ for religious, political, or national communities.

Although the news about these disasters was disseminated through many other media as well, such as prose pamphlets, newspaper articles, plays and poems, songs could be easily performed, and re-performed in public spaces, thus ensuring their circulation among wider audiences.²² Songs were published as broadsheets, sold on marketplaces, and performed by street singers. There was also a large production of songbooks in the Netherlands, which often contained miscellaneous texts on both joyful and sad occasions. These songbooks were often reprinted, which allowed for longer circulation periods and enabled the songs to become part of the collective memory.

18 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London / New York 1987) 49. The term ‘print-communities’ is used by Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism. Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge 2013) 86. For an early modern perspective, see Peter Burke, ‘Nationalisms and Vernaculars, 1500-1800’, in: John Breuilly (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism* (Oxford 2013), Online publication (May 2013), DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199209191.013.0002.

19 On this aspect of community building, Grijs and Van der Poel, ‘Introduction’, 4-17; see also Sparling, ‘“Sad and solemn requiems”’.

20 Nowadays songs can still have an identity-forming function. See, for example, the bonding effect of songs about disasters within present Japanese culture: Athusi Sawai, ‘Flowers Will Bloom. How Japanese People Mentally Cope with the Massive Loss Caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake’, in: Anthony Elliott and Eric L. Hsu (eds.), *The Consequences of Global Disasters* (London / New York 2016) 19-33.

21 Cornelis van der Haven, ‘Singing the Nation: Imagined Collectivity and the Poetics of Identification in Dutch Political Songs (1780-1800)’, *Modern Language Review* 111 (2016) 754-774.

22 Cf. McIlvenna, ‘Ballads of Death and Disaster’, 289-290.

A telling example is a song about the flood of 1682 in the provinces of Zeeland and Holland, which appeared in a songbook that was reprinted almost 200 years after the event.²³

One of the issues to be explored in this cultural-historical study of the ideological content and the functions of the Dutch disaster songs, is whether the famous Lisbon earthquake influenced the way in which disasters were perceived in Dutch songs. The news of this catastrophe, which occurred on the morning of 1 November 1755, Feast of All Saints, literally and metaphorically produced severe aftershocks throughout Europe and in the fields of science, philosophy, and literature. Intellectuals wondered what God – if there was a God – could have intended by inducing such a punishment on a holy day. Voltaire's international bestseller *Candide* (1759), in which he used the earthquake to attack the idea of a benevolent God, in particular caused heated ethical and religious debates across Europe.²⁴ The Dutch had their own way of perceiving the news about the Lisbon earthquake, as they largely incorporated it into Protestant discourses on religion and providence, as has been established in previous research on preaches and poems.²⁵ The question therefore has to be raised to which extent the news of the Lisbon earthquake influenced disaster discourses particularly in songs during the subsequent decades.

In the following, I first offer some general characteristics of the corpus of songs under analysis and next I discuss the contents of these disaster songs according to their three main functions: spreading the news, drawing lessons, and shaping a shared sense of identity.

Corpus

The main source for this article is the 'Liederenbank' (Dutch Song Database) in which songs in the Dutch and Flemish language from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century are listed.²⁶ This collection includes a specific category of 'disaster songs', which contains songs about disastrous events in general,

23 Tannetje Kornelis Blok, 'Wat grooter nood wat droever tyd', in Tannetje Kornelis Blok, *Een nieuw liedt-boekje, genaamt het Dubbelt Emausje, bestaende in eenige nieuwe liedekens* (Terneuzen 1854) 34-36.

24 Nicolas Shrady, *The last day: Wrath, Ruin & Reason in the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755* (London 2008) 123-132.

25 Catholic responses are hardly to be found. See Jan Wim Buisman, 'Het bevend Nederland. De Republiek en de aardbeving van Lissabon

1755-1756', *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 92 (1979) 2-42; Jan Wim Buisman, *Tussen vroomheid en Verlichting. Een cultuurhistorisch en –sociologisch onderzoek naar enkele aspecten van de Verlichting in Nederland (1755-1810)* (Zwolle 1992), 79-107; Theo D'Haen, 'On How Not To Be Lisbon If You Want to Be Modern – Dutch Reactions to the Lisbon Earthquake', *European Review* 14:3 (2006) 351-358. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798706000354>.

26 The database was developed by the Meertens Instituut, Amsterdam, see: www.liederenbank.nl.

including unhappy love affairs.²⁷ A second database is 'Geheugen van Nederland' (Memory of the Netherlands). It comprises a section of broadside ballads (21,761 songs in total) including scans of the original sources. By searching the keywords 'disaster', 'plague', 'drought', 'ship disaster', 'fire', 'storm' and 'flood' in both databases, a list of songs about nature-induced disasters was compiled. Titles from the database 'The Early Pamphlets Online' and incidental findings from songbooks were added to this list, which added up to a corpus of 84 songs in total.²⁸

While this list is far from exhaustive and while many more songs could be added by searching other collections of poems and songbooks systematically, this corpus does offer a general insight into the ways the Dutch coped with disastrous events between 1600 and 1900. Before discussing the content of the songs, the nature of the corpus needs to be clarified by four general observations. Firstly, most songs were published in the nineteenth century (53 percent, while the other half dates from the seventeenth (18 percent) and the eighteenth century (29 percent). This means that in all cases, we have to be very careful in drawing long-term conclusions. The corpus is somewhat unbalanced, which may be explained by the databases used as these contain more sources from later centuries. Secondly, the corpus deals with a broad range of different types of disasters, such as floods, fires, famines, drought, shipwrecks (caused by storms) and animal-related disasters (mosquito, mice, grasshopper or caterpillar plagues, cattle plague). The number of songs about floods is the highest (28 percent in total), followed by shipwrecks (20 percent) and fires (13 percent). Most songs deal with one single historical event, such as the flood of the river Lek at Vianen in 1624, the burning down of the New Church in Amsterdam in 1645 or a dreadful fog in the city of Amsterdam on 31 December 1790, which caused the death of dozens of people.

Thirdly, the corpus contains several songs that deal with disasters in a more general sense or deal with a series of catastrophic events. A good example is 'Afternoon song. On the 26th Day about the Land plague' ('Middag-gesang. De ses- en twintichtste dagh over De Landt-plaeg') published in 1658 by the reverend Franciscus Ridderus.²⁹ This song, which was part of a very popular collection of religious songs, summed up the different types of plagues or punishments that God could inflict on a sinful nation, such as war, famine, plague, pests and scarcity. Immoral behavior and idolatry were to be seen as the causes of these disasters; hence, these punishments should be taken as a

27 http://www.liederenbank.nl/genre_lijst.php ('rampliedereren').

28 The database is hosted by BrillOnline Primary Sources: <http://primarysources.brillonline.com/browse/dutch-pamphlets-online>.

29 Franciscus Ridderus, *Huys-gesangen* (Rotterdam 1658) 26. For an analysis of the work and thought of Ridderus, see Stronks, *Stichten of schitteren*, 55-84.

warning sign sent by God to improve human behaviour. Another example is the song ‘Holland’s plagues’ (‘Hollandts Plagen’) written by the farmer and elder Cornelis Maertsz. He presented a historical overview of all kinds of disasters that had been cast over the ‘fatherland’ between 1650 and 1660. These included a horrific storm (1652), the thunder clap in Delft (1654), fire in De Rijp (1654) and the plague (1656).³⁰ Natural disasters were alternated with political events, such as the *coup d’état* in Amsterdam by Prince William II in 1650.

Fourthly, the geographical scope of the songs under scrutiny is not limited to Dutch territory. There are, for instance, songs about the Lisbon earthquake (1755), the floods in Poland (1829), and the burning down of the theatre in Vienna (1881). Some catastrophes happened at an even further distance from the Netherlands, such as the earthquake in Martinique (1839) and the floods in Mexico (1888). Two eighteenth-century songs describe shipping accidents involving Dutch ships on their way to the colonies in the East Indies. Sensational topics like these may have appealed to a broad audience.

Spreading the news

One of the three main functions of songs about nature-induced disasters was to spread the news about the catastrophe to wide audiences and inform people about the nature of the event. All sorts of facts were mentioned, varying from the date and time of the happening to the exact location and the number of deadly incidents. Offering detailed information applies to the entire corpus, from a song about the failure of a dike along the river Lek in 1624 to a song about a shipwreck in 1883, which summed up all the dreadful consequences for the community of Scheveningen.³¹

The factuality of the songs is especially visible in songs that were based upon newspaper articles. This is particularly the case in eighteenth- and nineteenth century songs, when the circulation of news through newspapers became more common. Yet, songs reported the news in a different way than newspapers. As McIlvenna has pointed out, songs differed from newspaper articles as songwriters used sensationalist and highly emotive language to heighten their affective and educational impact.³² Many examples testify to the fact that songwriters used newspapers as a

30 Cornelis Maertsz, *Stichtelijcke gesangen, behelzende Bijbelsche invallen, geestelijcke bedenkingen, eerlijcke vermaeckingen* (Hoorn 1661) 309-318.

31 ‘Een Nieuw Liedt van eenen Water-vloet, door het inbreken van de Leck by Vianen’, in: Leenaert

Clock (ed.), *Het groote liede-boeck* (Leeuwarden 1625) fol. Fff8v-Ggg1v; *Vreeselijke ramp der Visscherij van Scheveningen* (Amsterdam 1883).

32 McIlvenna, ‘Ballads of Death and Disaster’, 278.

source of information. Take these lines in a song about the eighteenth-century cattle plagues:

Oh! The plague is abiding
And she rages in both village and city.
Newspapers bring new tidings
Full of misery.³³

These verses not only provided factual information, but communicated this by using rhetorical techniques, such as an exclamation ('oh!'), the personification of the plague and reinforcing adjectives ('full of misery'). The preacher Olivier Porjeere, who lived in Delfshaven at the time of the flood of 14 November 1775, based his musical account of the event on a newspaper article. One of the opening verses reads: 'I was shocked when the newspaper came into our world!'³⁴ Porjeere not only gave an eyewitness account of the destructive powers of the flood in his surroundings, but also included an extensive list of other places that had been flooded.

In most cases, authors referred to the newspapers in a more general sense, but sometimes they included specific references. An extreme case is a song about the North Sea Flood of 1825, which contained footnotes to indicate the sources that were used.³⁵ In most instances, however, the references were less specific. This was the case in a song about the disaster of a ship called Pyslwaard on 24 February 1765, which had been sent by the Dutch East Indies Company to Batavia. It had been struck by lightning before it could reach its destination, had caught fire and exploded. A total of 183 people died, including the captain and the steersman. The author of the song referred to a story in the newspaper on the '16th of this month', which had moved him deeply.³⁶ We may assume that all the factual information was taken from this source. The song also informed the audience about the survivors of the tragedy, such as the engineer, the boatswain's mate, the helmsman and his assistant. Other elements, such as the historical reference to the death of the sea hero Jacob van Wassenaer Obdam in the seventeenth century, the lamenting of the widows and orphans at home, and the religious

33 'Ó! De plaag is algemeen; / En zy woed in Dorp en steeden? Cranten brengen tyding meede! Vol van Elendigheen', in: *De nieuwe Amsteldamsche buyten-zingel* [...] (Amsterdam 1770) 49.

34 'Ik schrikte als 't Nieuwspapier in onze waereld kwam!' Olivier Porjeere, 'Traanrijk en Troosthart. Tweezang. Op den geweldigen storm en buiten gewoonen vloed. Den 14den van Slagtmaand, 1775 in drie afdeelingen gezongen te Delfshaven', in: Olivier Porjeere (ed.), *Zangliedende uitspanningen*

(Amsterdam 1788) 215. On this particular song, see: Jensen, 'Traanrijk en Troosthart.'

35 Petronella Moens, *Na de rampvolle overstromingen in mijn vaderland, gedurende den nacht tusschen den 3den en 4den februarij 1825* (s.l., s.a.). The text is included in the Dutch Song Database with the remark that the last part of the poem was perhaps intended to be sung.

36 The exact source could not be traced.

interpretation of the disaster, must have been added by the author to enrich the song. The song was printed in several different songbooks that same year, which indicates the popularity of the song.³⁷

A newspaper article also served as the main source for a song about a plague of grasshoppers that raged through the city of Zevenbergen in the south-eastern part of the Dutch Republic on 22 August 1747. The eight stanzas offer a vivid description of the thick swarm of grasshoppers that flew over the city and caused an immense darkness.³⁸ A present-day reader might consider this a very unlikely event to have happened, but contemporary news sources confirm that the incident indeed took place. The song was based on a newspaper article in the *Amsterdamsche Courant* of 19 September 1747.³⁹ There are many similarities between the article and the song. Both texts mention the fact that the swarm circled for at least three hours over the city and that the visibility was reduced to a distance of twenty fathoms. The texts also refer to the large-scale destruction of the crops in the area. There are some important differences between the newspaper article and the song as well. In the latter, the emphasis was on the religious lesson that could be drawn from a disaster. The plague, which could easily be associated with the seven plagues of Egypt, reminded the listeners that they would be punished for their sinful behavior. Unless they repented, new plagues would hit them. The song further reminded the audience of earlier disasters (such as the cattle plague or the war with France) and warned that new disasters were on their way.

Songs presented the news in a more sensationalist way than newspaper articles. This sensationalism becomes clear in a ‘weeping song’, which lamented the loss of many people on New Year’s Eve 1790 in Amsterdam. The inhabitants of the city were taken by surprise by a very thick fog. Because of the extremely low visibility, people were unable to find their way and consequently fell in the water and drowned. The song reported the many dreadful events that happened that day:

Around forty people, so they say,
Lost their lives
And another fifty got away

37 Reiner Cornelis Verton, ‘Op het verongelukken van het Schip Pylswaard voor de Kamer Enkhuizen uitgevaren, naby Batavia door de Blixem in de Brand geslagen, en alzo door zyn eigen Kruid verteerd’, in: Reinier Cornelis Verton (ed.), *De nieuwe Dirklandise Speel-wagen* (Amsterdam 1767) 48-51. This song was also published in *De nieuwe vermakelyke Utrechtse min-stroom* (Amsterdam: Abraham Cornelis, 1767) 31-34 and *De Nieuwe Domburgsche speel-wagen* [...] (Amsterdam 1767) 18-21.

38 *De ware en pertinente beschryving van de plage en straffe des Heere, die het land van Zevenbergen overgekomen zyn door de sprinkhanen, gelyk ons de Amsterdamsche Courant van den 19. September 1747. op de volgende wyze komt te vermelden* (s.l., s.a.).

39 The news was also published in *Nederlandsch gedenkboek; of, Europische Mercurius*, vol. 2 (’s-Gravenhage 1749) 11-13.

They received aid
 From many a citizen;
 Freed from danger and saved,
 Were many a denizen
 According to their wishes and needs.⁴⁰

The main function of this verse was to offer factual information about the catastrophe. The other couplets were used to give a more personal touch to the news. They described the disaster from a human-interest perspective: a son drowned in front of his father's house, a lover became hysterical when confronted with the dead body of his bride, and a maid carrying a small child desperately cried for help, without any success:

A maid at the river Amstel
 Carrying a small child in her arms
 Was endangered by the fog
 O hear the sad screaming
 But there was no help in the neighborhood
 For her or her sweet child
 And so, she drowned in those dark hours
 And was swallowed by Death.⁴¹

These kinds of tragic but also sensational narratives were primarily meant to provoke emotions among the listeners: nobody could remain untouched by these dreadful stories. The inclusion of these anecdotes added an extra dimension to the factual coverage of the news in newspapers.

Drawing lessons

Songs also played an important role in making sense of the events by drawing certain lessons. Take, for instance, the opening verses of a song about the continuous cattle plagues in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic: 'Oh, people, do convert, / Look at the plagues in our country / The Lord is angry

40 'Wel veertig mensen zo men zyt, / Die raakte om het Leeven, / En nog wel vyftig zyn bevryd, / Die daar nog hulpe kreegen, / Door meenig een de Burgerschaar, / Raakte meenig een uit gevaar, / Redde haar even Menschen, / Al na hun zin en wenschen.' Quoted in 'Treur-Lied, Op de droevige en akelige toestand van de laatsten Dag in 't Jaar 1790', in: *De vrolyke schoorsteenveeger, Zingende, onder het Veegen, de aldernieuwste Liederen. die*

hedendaegs Gezongen worden (Amsterdam 1791) 88-90.

41 'Een dienstmeit by den Amstel daar, / Met een klyn kint op haar armen, / Raakte dor de mist in 't gevaar, / Hoort wat droevig karmen, / Dog kwam geen hulp daar omtrent, / Voor haar of voor dat lieve kint, / Ook in deezen donkere stonden, Al door de dood verslonden.' 'Treur-Lied', 90.



Zwaare Mist te Amsterdam, den 31:
December 1790.



This print produced by Cornelis Brouwer shows the heavy fog in Amsterdam on New Year's Eve 1790, with people running on the street carrying torches. A carriage has fallen into the canal. Songs were made about this disaster. ©Rijksmuseum, RP-P-OB-861.177, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/rm0001.collect.507588>.

at us / As can be seen everywhere.⁴² The song describes how animals were perishing throughout the Dutch Republic: the provinces of Holland, Drenthe, and Friesland in particular were struck by this terrible disease. As if this was not enough, the nation was also troubled by mice plagues, floods and shipworms. These tribulations recalled the times of Noah and the deluge that God cast over the Earth, which suggested that the end of times was near. The only way to avert disaster was to reject conceited ways of living.

Disasters were interpreted as signs of God's vengeance and as warnings that the audience needed to repent in order to prevent new disasters. In this respect, there is much continuity across times: from the seventeenth century through to the nineteenth century, religious lessons were predominant in the songs. In some songs, offering factual information played an equally important role while in others the description of the events was completely subordinate to the religious message. Additionally, the style and tone of the song could differ. In seventeenth and eighteenth-century Orthodox Calvinist songs, all emphasis was placed on God's vengeance and on people's sinful behavior as the cause of all misery. In other songs, such as the nineteenth-century shipwreck songs, more attention was paid to the grief of those who were left behind and the hope that the community would be spared from similar disasters in the future.

Orthodox Calvinist songs placed all the emphasis on the importance of repenting one's sins and often included parallels with the plagues of Egypt. According to the biblical book of Exodus, ten calamities were inflicted upon Egypt to obtain the release of the ill-treated Israelites from slavery: water turning into blood, infestations of frogs, lice, swarms of wild animals or flies, livestock disease, boils, hailstorms, locusts, a darkness lasting three days, and the death of firstborn children. After the tenth plague, the pharaoh capitulated and the Israelites could safely leave Egypt. Dutch songbooks contain numerous entries devoted to the theme of the ten plagues.⁴³ This biblical context resonated in songs about contemporary plagues and strengthened the religious message of those songs. An insect plague in the province of Friesland in 1664 was, for example, compared with the third plague of lice. The suffering was absolutely unbearable and worse than any other plague that the Frisians had ever experienced.⁴⁴

42 'Ach! menschen wilt u dog bekeeren, / Aanschouw de plagen in ons Land / De Heer die op u is vertoornt, / Als men nu ziet aan alle kant.' 'Een Nieuw Geestelyk Lied, of Opwekking tot Bekeering der Menschen op gesteld wegens de straffe des Heeren, de aanhoudend Runder Pest. Oorlog en duuren tyd, veroorzaakt door onze Zonden', in: *De zingende koddenaar* (Amsterdam 1774) 75-77.

43 To mention just one example: Dirck Pietersz. Pers, 'De tien plagen Egypti', in: *Gesangh der zeeden: zijnde het derde deel van Bellophoron, of Lust tot wijsheid* (Amsterdam 1662) 13-15.

44 Joannes van Dyck, 'Van de Friesche Muggen', in: Joannes van Dyck (ed.), *Oude mede nieuwe vreughde-klanck die haer laet hooren, hier in verscheyde soo Geestelycke als Kluchtige zangen* (Antwerpen 1664) 88-90.

The song ‘De sonden slaan wonden’ (Sins beat wounds), first published in 1661 and reprinted many times, demonstrates how contemporary disasters were interpreted in biblical terms.⁴⁵ It was written by Cornelis Rhijnenburgh, a council member and physician living in Medemblik, a town in the province of Holland, and deals with various calamities that the Dutch had recently experienced, such as floods, mice, black death and shipwrecks. Rhijnenburgh did not refer to any concrete events and refrained from giving any factual information. His main point was to warn the public that sinful behaviour was always witnessed by the almighty God and led to new disasters: ‘Oh, oh! If we do not wake up, / And remove ourselves from sins, / Then God will rise in revenge / And God will bravely smite with the rod.’⁴⁶ He paralleled the current situation with the punishments that God had inflicted upon Egypt and stated that the Dutch nation was approaching the end of times. The nation should take Ninive as an example. According to the biblical Book of Jonah, this city was spared by God when people converted after having listened to the preaching of Jonah. Reference was also made to Manasseh of Judah, who re-instituted polytheistic worship, as a warning symbol of decay. The structure of the song reinforced its religious scope. It started and ended with a plea for obedience and devoutness, and the middle section in which the series of disastrous events were summed up was instrumental to this pious message.

Similar biblical parallels were used by the preacher Aemilius van Cuilemborgh who published a song about the storm surge of 1682, which flooded large parts of the provinces of Zeeland and Holland. The song did not reveal any information about this particular catastrophe – it was referred to only in the title – but situated this catastrophe in the larger context of the seven bowls of God’s wrath, a set of plagues mentioned in Genesis and Revelation.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the song summed up a series of contemporary plagues, which bore resemblance to the plagues of Egypt, such as thunderstorms and plagues of frogs, mice and other animals. The stream of disasters seemed endless: ‘Oh disaster after disaster, inflicted upon the Dutch house.’⁴⁸

45 Cornelis Rhijnenburgh, ‘De sonden slaan wonden’, in: Cornelis Rhijnenburgh (ed.), *Vreugdebergh, bestaende in ziel-suchten, bruylofts-gesangen, en stichtelijke vermakelijkheden* (Amsterdam 1661) 28-37. A fifth edition was published in 1661, and as late as the second half of the eighteenth-century reprints were still being published.

46 ‘Och! och! Soo wy niet op en waken, / Om eens van sonden af te staan, / Soo sal hem God in wraak opmaken / En dapper met zijn Roeden slaan.’ Rhijnenburgh, ‘De sonden slaan wonden’, 30.

47 It is interesting to compare his work with another song about the same event, in which

the offering of factual information prevailed.

See: Tannetge Kornelis Blok, ‘Wat grooter nood wat droever tyd’, in: Tannetge Kornelis Bok (ed.), *Een nieuw liedt-boekje, genaamt het Dubbelt Emausje, bestaende in eenige nieuwe liedekens*. 11 ed. (Dordrecht 1742) 27-29.

48 ‘O Ramp, op Ramp, voor ’t neerlants Huis’, in Aemilius van Cuilemborgh, ‘De Phiolen van Godts Gramschap in overvloed uyt-gegooten, te overweegen by geleentheid van die groote watervloedt des Jaers 1682’, in idem, *Godtvruchtige sangh en rym-stoffe [...]* (Utrecht 1683) 91.

The song employed a widely used technique to reinforce the religious message: *contrafactum* or the re-using of existing melodies. As musicologists have shown, this common pan-European practice was more than just a technique to facilitate memorisation as melodies could be deliberately chosen to manipulate the meaning of the song.⁴⁹ This seems to have been the case in Cuilemborgh's song. The latter was set to the melody of 'O Kerstnacht schooner dan de dagen' ('Oh Christmas night, more beautiful than all other days'), which originated from the tragedy *Gysbreght van Aemstel* (1637) by Joost van den Vondel, one of the best-known seventeenth-century Dutch poets. Within the context of this play, the song depicted two horrifying episodes: the rape of nuns in a monastery and the murder of infants by King Herod in Bethlehem. These scenes may have resonated in the song about the flood in 1682 and given it an additional, sorrowful touch. The use of this familiar melody may have also strengthened the song's religious message and reminded the audience of the deeply religious moral of Vondel's play. Although God's ways were incomprehensible, they should never be doubted.

Religious messages were predominant, but sometimes disastrous events were used to reinforce certain political statements as well. Natural and warlike disasters were often dealt with in the same context. For instance, the aforementioned song 'Hollandts Plagen' ('Holland's Plagues') by Maertsz offered a chronological survey of the political and nature-induced disasters during the years 1650-1660. This historical overview was entirely written from a pro-Orangist point of view. It supported the political cause of the Orange-Nassau family, who, at the time of publication in 1661, had lost their power. The short history of Dutch plagues begins with two catastrophes in 1650: the failed attempt of the Stadtholder William II to restore internal order, and his sudden death later that year. This was the start of the so-called First Stadtholder-less Period, which would last until 1672. The song seamlessly moved from the political disasters to the flooding of Amsterdam on 4 and 5 March 1651 and the large-scale loss of cattle in the late summer of 1652. The next verses are dedicated to the war with England that broke out the same year and commemorated the death of admiral Maarten Tromp on 10 August 1653. Next, the song smoothly transitioned to a series of very different catastrophes, including a mice plague (1653), the destructive fire in the small town De Rijp (1654), the thunder clap in Delft (1654) and the heavy storm of 1659. Although a clear religious statement was made at the end, the author did not hide his political convictions. He openly lamented the loss of power of the House of Orange-Nassau. Most notably, *contrafactum* was also used to strengthen this political undertone. The song was set to 'Treurt edel Huys Nassou' ('Lament, noble House of Nassau'), which brought to mind the

49 Una McLivenna, 'The Power of Music: Contrafactum in Execution Ballads', in *Past and Present* 229:1 (2015) 47-89. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtv032>

On the Dutch tradition of *contrafactum*, see Grijp, *Het Nederlandse lied in de Gouden Eeuw*.

murder of William of Orange in 1584, the main leader of the Dutch in the uprising against the Spanish Habsburgs.

Shaping communities

Songs were also an important medium to create a sense of community amongst groups of people. In their studies on singing practices in the Dutch Republic, literary historians Els Stronks and Natascha Veldhorst have pointed out that every religious group had its own repertoire. The songs were often collected and printed in songbooks, which articulated their beliefs, habits, and daily practices. Arguably, singing together and listening to repertoires that expressed communal ideals would strengthen these collective identities. Through different rhetorical-musical techniques, songs could arouse feelings of collectivity.⁵⁰

This sense of belonging together was often emphasised by the use of the first-person-plural forms ‘we’ and ‘us’. Hence, natural disasters were represented as shared experiences. God’s vengeance was directed not only at the victims but at the entire community: ‘How our Netherlands must suffer / And undergo sad punishments / How the Lord punishes us, / His hand and rod never stop beating, / Over the last forty years the Lord / Has afflicted our Netherlands so miserably.’⁵¹ People were constantly reminded of the fact that catastrophes were caused by their own sins and that they had to change their immoral behaviour to avoid such catastrophes in the future: ‘It appears that the Lord / Shows us, we sinners / That he will overthrow our pride.’⁵² The repetitive structure of songs added to this idea of inclusiveness.

Communal feelings were addressed not only on religious grounds, but also on urban, regional, national and transnational levels. Some songs were primarily aimed at the people who lived in proximity to the catastrophe. In the early morning of 16 May 1744, for instance, the powder mill in the Frisian town of Stavoren exploded. This disaster had a major impact on the small community. The song about this event summed up all the losses: a dozen people were killed, animals died, and practically every house in the town was damaged.⁵³ A ship from a neighboring town was totally destroyed, the captain

50 Veldhorst, *Zingend door het leven*, 21; Stronks, *Stichten of schitteren*, 39-47.

51 ‘Wat moet ons Nederland al lyden / En droeve straffen ondergaen: / Hoe komt de Heere ons kastyden; Zyn hant en hout niet op van slaen / De Heere heeft wel veertig jaeren; Ons Nederlant zoo droef bezogt.’ ‘Treur-zang: Over de Plaagen van ons Land’, in: *Gekroond Batavia. Zijnde Verciert*

met de Voornaemste Liederen, Die Hedendaegs Gezongen worden 4th ed. (Amsterdam 1767) 81.

52 ‘t Schijnt soo dat den Opper-Heer / Toont aen ons sonderlingen: / Dat hy den hoogmoed brengt ten val.’ *Een Nieu Lied op het Droevig ongeluk veroorsaekt door het springen van de Kruid-Molen en Kruid-Toren tot Stavoren binnen Vriesland [...]* (S.l. 1744).

53 *Een Nieu Lied op het Droevig ongeluk.*

did not survive the terrible accident. The worst thing, however, was that this was already the third time that the powder mill had exploded, which could only mean, according to the lyrics, that the people of Stavoren had to change their way of life drastically. They had to stop showing off their wealth and start repenting their sins. The concluding verses consisted of a prayer to God to send His blessings to their city. The lyrical content makes clear that the song was primarily written for the people of Stavoren, who, not coincidentally it seems, had been struck by the same catastrophe three times in a row.

Amsterdam was also the focus of several songs. The bookseller and author Hieronymus Sweerts dedicated a song to the inhabitants of Amsterdam. He wrote about the storm surge of 20 October 1669, which had flooded many basements and houses in the middle of the night. In line with his Calvinist background, he saw this event as a result of the townspeople's sinful behavior, which made the text apt to be sung in Reformed circles. Indeed, the song appeared in a Reformed songbook he published that was representative of the flourishing of Protestant songbooks in the Dutch Republic.⁵⁴ As a result, the song may have reached Protestants outside of Amsterdam as well.⁵⁵

A shift from the local to the national level could be made in one and the same song. The burning down of the New Church in Amsterdam in 1645 was, for example, interpreted as a warning sign for the Dutch Republic as a whole ('Nederlanden'). God had inflicted His wrath upon 'us in Amsterdam'. Nevertheless, this local event was also a wake-up call for the entire nation: 'Wake up, wake up, thou Netherlands, wake up, wake up, it is past time that thou shalt leave thy sins and shame.'⁵⁶ The author compared the relatively prosperous state of affairs in the Netherlands with the perpetual conflicts that Germany and England were drawn into and concluded with a warning: the Dutch had to prepare themselves for severe punishments by God. The song was published in a volume with biblical songs in 1664 in Bergen op Zoom, which attests to its wide circulation and trans-regional dissemination.

From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, nearly all songs were national in scope. This fitted in with a general tendency in literature to discuss topics concerning the state of 'the fatherland'.⁵⁷ Several disaster-

54 Hieronymus Sweerts, 'Aan de Amsterdammers, Op de zeer hooge water-vloet, aldaar voorgevallen, op Saturdagh nacht den 20 Octob. 1669', in: Hieronymus Sweerts (ed.), *Innerlycke ziel-tochten op 't H. Avondmaal en andere voorvallende gelegentheden* (Amsterdam 1673) 129-130. On the flourishing of the Reformed songbook, see: Stronks, *Stichten of Schitteren*, 36-37.

55 On the spread of Calvinist songbooks, see: Stronks, *Stichten of Schitteren*, 142-145.

56 'Waeckt op, waeckt op ghy Nederlanden. / Waecht op, waeckt op, 't is meer dan tijdt / Wilt aflaten van sond' en schanden.' Quoted from: 'Waerschouwinge aen de Nederlanden over het af branden van de Nieuwe Kerck tot Amsterdam. Den 11 Januarius, Ano 1645', in: *Bybelsche History Liedekens, Lof-sangen ende Gebeden, des Ouden ende Nieuwen Testaments*. Bergen op Zoom 1664, 185-190.

related songs reflected the eighteenth-century discourse of decline, which echoed the idea that the Dutch Republic had lost its glory and power due to economic, cultural and moral decay.⁵⁸ Abraham van Beaumont, who published several Protestant poems and was an active member of the literary society Witte Angieren in Haarlem, wrote an extensive song on prosperity and decay in the Netherlands. The song was especially composed for a nationwide day of thanksgiving and prayers, celebrated on 20 February 1743. In his song, he described a clear causal relationship between the economic decline of the nation and the number of plagues that God had cast over the nation: ‘Worms, Winds, Floods, / Severe Frost, Infertility, / Are in God’s hand as bright rods, / With which he castigates the Netherlands / Shortage of commerce and trade / Instills in you a sad atrophy.’⁵⁹ Similar arguments were put forward in the songbook *De Nieuwe Dirklantse Speel-wagen* (1767) by Reinier Cornelisz Verton. He composed ‘A New Song on the decay of the Netherlands’, in which he contrasted the former flourishing of the Dutch Republic with the current situation of economic and moral decline. He linked this with the growing number of natural disasters that had hit the provinces of Holland and Zeeland and interpreted them as a warning sign for all Dutch people.⁶⁰

In the nineteenth century, another element was added to the shaping of a national community: charity. Helping victims was explicitly linked to a shared national identity. People in other provinces were called upon to express their empathy with their fellow countrymen and donating money and goods to the victims.⁶¹ In the aftermath of the great floods of 1850, 1855 and 1861, which hit the south-eastern part of the Netherlands in particular, musical pieces were written in other provinces with the aim of collecting money for the sufferers. The farmer and poet Samuel van den Bergh from The Hague, for example, encouraged his fellow countrymen in 1850 to be generous and to unlock their ‘hearts and suitcases’ to donate anything useful for the victims in

57 See on the rise of publications dedicated to the fatherland: Joost Kloek, ‘Vaderland en letterkunde, 1750-1800’, in: Niek van Sas (ed.), *Vaderland. Een geschiedenis van de vijftiende eeuw tot 1940* (Amsterdam 1999) 237-274.

58 On this discourse of decay, see: Jonathan Israels, *The Dutch Republic, Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806* (Oxford 1998) 959-1062.

59 ‘De Wormen, Winden, Watervloeden, / Gestrenge Vorst, Onvrugtbaarheid, / Zyn in Gods Hand als felle roeden / Waar door hy Nederland kastyd; / Gebrek aan Koopmanschap en Neering / Verwekken u een droeve uitteering’, in:

Abraham van Beaumont (ed.), *Nederlands voor- en tegenspoeden, Ten deele opgezongen en toegepast op de algemeene dank-, vast- en bededag, Geviert in alle de Generaaliteits Nederlanden, op Woensdag den 20^{ste} van February 1743* (Haarlem 1743) 11.

60 Reinier Cornelisz Verton, ‘Nieuw Gezang, gemaakt over ‘t vervallen Nederland’, in: Verton (ed.), *De nieuwe Dirklantse speel-wagen* 11-14.

61 See on this so called typically Dutch charity culture in times of disaster: Lotte Jensen, *Wij tegen het water. Een eeuwenoude strijd* (Nijmegen 2018) 37-43.

the provinces of Brabant and Gelderland, ranging from clothes to wood and grain.⁶² In 1855, a song reminded the inhabitants of Amsterdam, including the mayor and aldermen, of the horrific flood in 1825 and were encouraged to be just as benevolent as their fellow countrymen had been earlier on.⁶³ And in 1861 'A new song on the flood of 1861' was published with the aim of generating as much money as possible: 'Come on, my honourable fellow countrymen, / Now give generously, / Everyone according to their rank and class, / Offer to those who suffer / That which will make yourself and them happy'.⁶⁴

Finally, empathy with the victims could also be encouraged on an international level. As has been mentioned before, a considerable number of songs was dedicated to catastrophes abroad, including the earthquake in Lisbon in 1755. These songs not only recalled many factual details, but also made an appeal to the Dutch audience to draw lessons that could be applied to their own lives and help them to avoid God's vengeance. Feelings of community were addressed on a national level in different ways. Firstly, the national 'we' was contrasted against a foreign 'they' who had experienced a horrific event. Authors emphasised that the Dutch needed to draw lessons on the national level to be spared from such plagues. In a musical account of the great floods in Mexico in 1888, a clear distinction was made between the victims in this distant nation and the appropriate reaction of the 'we' in the Netherlands:

God has spared our country;
Sometimes, the rain fell formidably
Pouring down from the skies
And there arose many complaints and cries
From the people's hearts of fears and woes
But of our fate, only God knows!⁶⁵

Ultimately, the song described the Dutch people as a nation that had to draw lessons from the catastrophes that had hit these far away areas.

Secondly, the Dutch people were encouraged to show empathy with the victims abroad, not only by mourning but also by giving donations. In

62 Samuel Johannes van den Bergh, *Voor de overstromden. Februari 1850* ('s-Gravenhage 1850).

63 S. Rondeau, *De Dijkbreuk. Dichtregelen (Uitgegeven ten voordeele der Ongelukkigen door den Watersnood)* (Amsterdam 1855).

64 'Komt waarde landgenooten, / Geef thans aan hen met milde hand / Elk een naar zijnen rang en stand / Breng een offer aan hun lijden / Dat zal u en hen verblijden'. *Een nieuw lied, op de watersnood van het jaar 1861* (Amsterdam 1861) 2.

65 'God heeft ons Neêrland nog gespaard / Viel regen soms geducht, / Met stroomen uit de lucht, / Zoo dat er menig klaagtoon rees. / Uit 's menschen hart van angst en vrees, / Maar ons toekomstig lot, / Dat is bekend bij God!', in: *Watersnood jammerlijk het leven, voorgevallen in de steden Leon en Silao, volgens telegram uit Mexico* (Leeuwarden 1888).



EEN NIEUW LIED,

OP DE

WATERSNOOD

van het jaar 1861

Menschen liefde is zeker goed.

Hetzij in voor- of tegenspoed,

Komt vrienden wilt aanhooren,
Hetgeen helaas thans is geschied
En niets dan treurigheid ons bied,
De overstrooming in ons land
Verneemt men thans van allen kant.

Ginds ziet men dijken breken,
Het water overstroomt het land
De noodklok luid van elken kant,
En men is ijy'rig in de weer,
Zoo 't kan, dat men het water keer.

1839, a heavy earthquake hit Martinique and killed around 700 people. The Dutch ‘friends’ were encouraged to follow other nations and help by sending money and goods.⁶⁶ Again, the international catastrophe gave the sense of communal feeling on a national level extra weight.

Concluding remarks

Although further research is needed into the manner of production, delivery, the singing practices and the reception of the songs, this study allows several preliminary conclusions. Throughout the period under study, disaster-related songs were used to spread news and inform wider audiences about the course of events in an understandable and accessible way. The songs, however, differed from newspaper articles that often had inspired them, as the songs added sensational and moving narratives, which were meant to arouse emotions. This strategy would make the public more susceptible to the religious and, to a lesser extent, political messages of the songs. The rise of mass media in the nineteenth century, including illustrated newspapers, made the songs less relevant as the providers of actual information. Nevertheless, a new function was then added to the songs: collecting money for victims across regional and national borders.

Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, disasters were interpreted as a sign of God’s vengeance. In that respect, there is not much difference between one song written in 1624 to commemorate the failure of the dike along the river Lek and another song written in 1883 to lament the fishermen who died in the storm of 1883 in Scheveningen. The heated religious debates, caused by the earthquake of Lisbon 1755, were not reflected in Dutch songs about disasters at all. While enlightened, secularised thought entered scientific and intellectual discourses in the eighteenth century, we see no signs of such secularisation in the Dutch disaster songs. This is in line with what Buisman concluded in his study on the early perception of the Lisbon earthquake in Dutch periodicals and pamphlets – only very few reactions reflected secular ideas.⁶⁷ There may be a generic explanation for this observation as well. Songs were aimed at a broad

66 *Nieuwe Couplettten van de Vreeselijke Verwoesting van Martinique* (’s-Gravenhage 1841).

67 Buisman, ‘Het bevend Nederland’; Buisman, *Tussen vroomheid en Verlichting*, 89-99.



This illustration shows the text of the song entitled ‘A New Song about the Flooding of the year 1861’ which was meant to encourage people to raise money for the victims. © Geheugen van Nederland, Lbl KB Wouters 07012, p.1, nummer 1. <https://www.geheugenvannederland.nl/nl/geheugen/view?coll=ngvn&identifier=kbmio1%3A41898>.

audience and were mainly used for spreading the news and offering religious consolation.

Generic conventions such as the use of the first-person-plural ‘we’, repetitive phrases, and directly addressing the audience, added to this sense of togetherness. Sometimes, the group identities expressed in these songs can be clearly defined as for instance being orthodox Calvinist or Orangist, but the borders between these groups are often rather fluid and also defined by geographical markers. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, nearly all songs were national in scope. Even songs about disasters abroad were primarily used to strengthen communal feelings at the national level, as these happenings functioned as instructive examples for the Dutch people, who should all be grateful that God had saved them from such disasters.

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