Grotius among the Dagonists: Joost van den Vondel's *Samson, of Heilige Wraeck*, Revenge and the *Ius Gentium*

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In his depiction of the Samson *fabula* 'drawn from the Book of Judges and from Josephus's fifth book of Jewish history', Joost van den Vondel is the first dramatist in early modernity to give voice to Dagon.¹ Dagon does not appear as a character in any of the other early modern Samson plays: not in the humanist Hieronymus Ziegler's *Samson* (1547); the prominent Lutheran Hans Sachs's *Tragedia der Richter Simson* (1556); the Jesuit Andreas Fabricius's *Samson* (1568); the Rheinpfalz minister Marcus Andreas Wunstius's *Samson* (1600), written for performance in Strasbourg; the Lutheran Theodorus Rhodius's *Simson* (1600); *Simsons Treur-spel* (1618) by Vondel's fellow Wit Lavendel rhetorician Abraham de Koningh; or John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671).² But Vondel gives primary place to Dagon, the first character to speak in *Samson, of*

1 In fact, few supernatural figures appear in the Samson plays, save for the angel of Judges 13 who appears as 'Acme' in Rhodius's *Simson*, and de Koningh's *Treurspel* features a Senecan apparition, the ghost of a Timnite ('Thimneters Gheest') who materializes before the drowsy Philistine princes in 11.3. Joost van den Vondel, *Samson, of Heilige Wraeck*, in *De werken: Volledige en geïllustreerde tekstuutgave*, ed. J.F.M. Sterck et al. (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1927–1937) (WB), IX: 1660–1663, p. 178. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Dutch and Latin are my own. I cite Vondel's *Samson* by line number in the text. Many thanks to Jan Bloemendal, Freya Sierhuis, and Nigel Smith for their invaluable comments on this essay.

2 See Hieronymus Ziegler, '*Samson, Tragoedia*', in *Dramata sacra: Comoediae atque tragoediae aliquot e Veteri Testamento desumptae*, ed. Johannes Oporinus (Basel: Johannes Oporinus, 1547), pp. 394–451; Hans Sachs, 'Tragedia, mit 17 personen, der richter Simson, hat fünff actus', in *Hans Sachs*, ed. Adelbert von Keller (Tübingen: Litterarischen Vereins and H. Laupp, 1876), pp. 186–215; Andreas Fabricius, *Samson: Tragoedia nova, ex sacra iudicum historia desumpta, premissis ad eius illustrationem insignibus orthodoxorum patrum sententijs* (Cologne: Maternum Cholinum, 1569); Marcus Andreas Wunstius, *Simson, tragoedia sacra: qua totum fere Simsonis Hebraeorum iudicis curriculum continetur* (Strasbourg: Antonij Bertrami, 1604); Theodorus Rhodius, '*Simson, tragoedia*', in *Dramata sacra* (Frankfurt: Balth. Hofman, 1615), pp. (?)10^r–C3^r [with separate pagination]; Abraham de Koningh, *Simsons Treur-spel* (Amsterdam: Cornelis Lodewijcksz. vander Plasse, 1618), p. E4^v.

Heilige Wraeck (1660)—Dagon, ‘the prince of the abyss and chief idol of the Philistines’ (‘De vorst des afgronts, en allergrootste afgodt der Filistijnen’).³ The language is vivid, and Dagon’s baroque description of the occasion communicates a macabre restlessness and excitement, as the captive Samson finally lays at the disposal of the Philistines:

Ick, die den ysren staf, van roest half opgegeten
 Beneden zwaeie, en, in den helschen raet gezeten,
 Voorstelle, en sluite wat ten dienst van ’t zwarte rijck
 Wort goet gekent, koom hier te Gaza, d’oude wijck
 Der geesten, wien het luste in ope lucht te zwieren
 Met vleermuisvleuglen en dit feest te helpen vieren,
 Den grooten ommegangk te volgen met mijn’ stoet,
 Die naer den zwavel stinckt, en morssigh, vuil van roet,
 Met kromme krauwels kemt mijn pruick, en ruige locken,
 Al giftige adders, boos en afgerecht op wrocken,
 Gelijckze ’t gloeiend nest, den diepen zwavelpoel,
 Ontruckt zijn, my tot pracht ...

ll. 1–12

(I, who wield the iron staff, half devoured by rust, below and am a member of the infernal court, proposing and deciding what is considered good in the service of the black empire, come here to Gaza, the old quarter of spirits, who delight to whirl about the open sky on bats’ wings, to help celebrate this feast—to follow in the great procession with my own throng, which reeks of sulfur and filthy and foul from grime stroke my hair and hoary locks with crooked claws, venomous vipers all, mean and crafty in malice, still the same as when they were snatched suddenly from their fiery nest, that deep sulfurous morass, to adorn me.)

They always are among him, he says, whether he speaks from his ‘throne below’ or is present in his ‘idol’ (‘kerckbeelt’) on the altar where his ‘priesthood reverently approaches the altar to slaughter bulls and consecrate sacrifices in honor of [his] divinity, to welcome the grand prince of the night with triumph and celebration, with songs and shows of offering (‘offerspelen’)’ (ll. 12–18). Vondel employs the spectacular resources of the theater from the outset, perhaps to appeal to a Schouwburg audience that ‘wanted to be enthralled by visual

3 This is how Dagon is described in the list of ‘De treurspeelders’. Vondel, *Samson*, p. 179.

effects', particularly salient during this late period in his career when playgoers showed little interest in his dramatic work.⁴ Spectacle is also integral to the declamatory style of the poetry. Dagon directs readers and spectators alike, ekphrastically, to the visual elements of the scene, to his dreadful appearance and to the 'kerckbeelt', the hellish idol or image on the altar ('helheiligh outerbeelt', l. 96) into which Dagon retreats at the close of the scene—a device that adorned the stage across the three performances of *Samson* at the Schouwburg in 1660.⁵ As 'the play begins before sunrise' Dagon emerges from the darkness to great effect, establishing his infernal provenance and his influence over the Philistines before reveling in anticipation of Samson's punishment: 'What a joy it will be', he announces, 'to have the Archenemy Samson ('d'Aertsvyant Samson') led around in triumph before our majesty' (ll. 19–20).⁶ To this point Dagon behaves like an ostentatious stage devil, reminiscent of Senecan ghosts looming from the netherworld, setting a lively scene without altering or adding anything substantial to the *fabula* as audiences knew it.

But it would be a serious mistake to dismiss Vondel's Dagon as a mere embellishment or, following W.A.P. Smit, to identify Dagon and his Philistine subjects as obviously and unambiguously evil, as if 'the only essential function of the prologue' is to demonstrate that 'the Philistines serve the devil himself and their celebration of victory is a sneering provocation to God.'⁷ Vondel incorporates Dagon into *Samson* to a counterintuitive purpose: this unlikely source recounts, in convincing detail, Samson's offenses against the Philistines. Samson is the imprisoned 'Aertsvyant', and Dagon presides over 'the infernal

4 Mieke B. Smits-Veldt and Marijke Spies, 'Vondel's Life', in Jan Bloemendal and Frans-Willem Korsten (eds.), *Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679): Dutch Playwright in the Golden Age* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012) Drama and Theatre in Early Modern Europe, 1, pp. 51–83, esp. p. 78.

5 According to the nineteenth-century editors Van Lennep and Unger, 'Dagon wordt hier geschilderd al seen echt-leelijke, vuile en vieze duivel of heintje-pik, hoedanige men zich dien in Vondels dagen voorstelde.' See Joost van den Vondel, "Samson, of Heilige Wraeck," *De werken van J. van den Vondel*, vol. 1: 1660–1662, ed. J. van Lennep and J.H.W. Unger (Leiden and Antwerp: A.W. Sijthoff and De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1889–1894), pp. 11, 14; and E. Oey-de Vita and M. Geesink (met medewerking van B. Albach en R. Beuse), *Academie en Schouwburg: Amsterdams toneelrepertoire 1617–1665* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Huis aan de Drie Grachten, 1983), pp. 138–139.

6 In the *Inhoudt*, Vondel notes that the play or "spel begint voor den opgang, en endight met den ondergang der zonne." Vondel, *Samson*, 177.

7 W.A.P. Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah: Een verkenning van Vondels drama's naar continuïteit en ontwikkeling in hun grondmotief en structuur*, vol. III: *Koning David-Spelen—Noah* (Zwolle: W.E.J. Tjeenk Willink, 1962), p. 152.

court' ('den helschen raet') with jurisdiction in Gaza; he introduces and closes ('voorstelle, en sluite') cases there, deciding 'that which is considered good in the service of the black empire.' In other words, Dagon serves as a judge, a great irony considering Samson stands as Judge ('Richter') over the Israelites in a *fabula* depicted in the Scriptural book of Judges ('Richteren'). And despite his spectacular introduction Dagon moves promptly to an inventory of Samson's offenses against the Philistines, in a markedly different idiom. Samson, according to Dagon, is the 'plague of our land,' 'the circumcised Jew, the curse of my community' (ll. 27–28).⁸ These are not unsubstantiated claims, as he reminds us:

Wat heeftze twintigh jaer, en langer al geleden
 Van dezen rechter, daer alom de Joodsche steden
 Om vierden, toen hy haer verlichte van ons juck,
 Een juck wel veertigh jaer bezuurt met smerte en druck

...

Wat plaeghde hy ons vroegh,
 Die stout voor Askalon wel dertigh mannen sloegh,
 Hun kleeders stroopte, en ging met al dien vrybuit strijcken.
 Noch slimmer ging 't toen hy, tot afbreuk van vijf rijcken,
 Dryhondert vossen ving, hen knoopte staert aen staert,
 Met vierwerck, hars, en vlas, en zwavel. Hier op vaert
 De vlam in 't koren, waer zy voor zijn gessel streven.
 De hongerige vlam, in 't voortslaen noch gedreven
 Van eenen stercken wint, zet al het korenlant,
 Veel mijlen wijt en breed, in eene zee van brant,
 Zoo veele duizenden van Dagon's onderdaenen,
 Vijf hoofsteên, langs de zee, en al 't gebiet in traenen.
 De wijnbergh mist zijn druif, d'olijfboom zijne vrucht,
 De korenbloem haer eer. De zeekust kermt, en zucht,
 Van Gaza tot aen Geth, daer onze tempelheeren
 Spijsoffers, inkomste, en kerckschattingen ontbeeren.
 Toen een Thamnijt dees plaegh verstack van zijn vrou,
 Bezuurde 't gansche lant dien smaet met zulck een' rou:

8 Although Smit hints at Dagon's indictment of Samson on behalf of the Philistines, he ultimately denies its relevance and emphasizes instead the extent to which Dagon's 'proloog', together with the angel Fadaël's 'epiloog', introduce an unmistakable duality of good and evil into the play. See Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, III, pp. 150–160.

En schoon de Filisteen dit straffen, en den vader
 Met zijn dochter in een zelve vier te gader
 Verbrandden, noch sloegh hy uit wraeklust echter voort,
 En brackze hals en been. De Filistijns, gestoort
 Met reden, quamen fel de Joôn beoorlogen,
 Die zich onschuldighden, en zelfs, tot recht bewogen,
 Den rechter leverden in zijn dootvyants maght:
 Toen brack hy koorde en bant, als vlas, door sijne kracht,
 Sloegh duizent helden met een ezels kinnebacken

ll. 29–32, 39–65

(What they—my people—have all suffered, for twenty years and longer, from this Judge, celebrated throughout the Jewish cities when he relieved them from our yoke, a forty-year yoke suffered with pain and grief ... How he plagued us in the past, he who boldly slew thirty men at Askalon, stripped them of their clothes, and went off carrying all his spoil. Still worse it was when he, to the detriment of five states, caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail-to-tail, with fiery braziers full of resin, flax and sulfur. Then the flame ascends in the corn, as the foxes fly from the whip. Driven fast over the field by a strong wind, the hungry flame turned all of the cornfields, many miles wide and broad, into a sea of fire and left many thousands of Dagon's subjects, five capital cities and the entire region along the coast, in tears. The vineyard lost its grapes, the olive tree its fruit, the cornflower its prize. The seacoast moaned and sighed, from Gaza to Gath, where the lords of our temples went without offerings, revenue, and tithes. When a Timnan robbed this plague of his wife, the whole land paid for his indignation, with an enormous grief. And although the Philistines punished this Timnan's act, and burned the father and daughter together in the same fire, Samson slew Philistines from that day forward out of a lust for vengeance, and broke them, neck and bone. The Philistines, justifiably angered, came to wage war fiercely against the Jews who apologized and were even moved by justice to deliver their Judge into his mortal enemy's power. But he broke both rope and bond as flax, and through his strength slew a thousand heroes with an ass' jawbone.)

However dreadful his appearance (whether audiences found him frightening, unnerving or deliberately theatrical), however unreliable he may be under other circumstances, Dagon's forensic account of Samson's adventures among the Philistines is easily confirmed by Scripture. Dagon delivers an accurate description of the events in Judges, an account that even reflects the language

of the 1637 *Statenvertaling*.⁹ If this alone is unexceptional—after all, students of early modern drama are apt to recognize how often ‘The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose’, and Dagon’s purpose at the outset is to sway the audience against Samson—Dagon’s appeal to an abiding *ius gentium* is remarkable.¹⁰ Preoccupied with the unwarranted and excessive destruction wrought upon his people by the rival magistrate Samson, Dagon frames the *fabula* in a nascent language of international law.

Vondel’s strategy here is singular. He evinces an abiding interest in the constitution and execution of a *ius gentium*, one that might realize unity and effect justice even in the age when ‘there was no King in Israel, but everie man did that which was good in his eyes’ (‘wasser geen Koninck in Israël: een yegelick dede wat recht was in sijne oogen’, Judges 21:25). But he expresses this interest in the voice of Dagon, an otherwise depraved stage devil. Moreover, Vondel introduces a Philistine Prince who upholds justice and *imperium* in the region, who protects the Israelites even as he condemns Samson. Samson is often cast as a rogue, a force of chaos, a man who has lost his way, erred, and done wrong.¹¹ Vondel’s genius in *Samson, of Heilige Wraeck* is to let Dagon and the Prince of the Philistines bear witness to this, to establish and execute *ius gentium* and *imperium* in a language pioneered in Dutch republican contexts by Vondel’s friend and correspondent Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), an architect of modern international law, an able historian and theologian as well as one of the most important and influential proponents of irenicism in the seventeenth century.¹²

9 See, for instance, the version of the corn fires in Judges 15:5, where Samson ‘stak in brand zowel de korenhopen als het staande koren, zelfs tot de wijngaarden en olijfbomen toe’—or, in the English of the 1560 Geneva Bible: he ‘had set the brands on fier, he sent them out into the standing corne of the Philistims, and burnt up both the riekcs & the standing corne with the vineyardes & olives.’

10 William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Jay L. Halio, *The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 123 [I.iii.95].

11 See, for instance, Joseph Wittreich, *Interpreting Samson Agonistes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 111, pp. 140–150; and more recently, Feisal G. Mohamed, *Milton and the Post-Secular Present: Ethics, Politics, Terrorism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), esp. pp. 87–126.

12 Richard Tuck, *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and International Order from Grotius to Kant* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 78–79. I admire Wilhelm G. Grewe’s caveat, that authors which ‘still refer to Hugo Grotius as the “Father of International Law”’ subscribe to a ‘narrow view’ of the *ius gentium* in which they can ‘only conceive of modern sovereign States as subjects of this law.’ See Wilhelm G. Grewe, *The Epochs of International Law*, transl. and rev. Michael Byers (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), pp. 7, 191–195.

In this essay I will illustrate, first, how Grotius treated revenge, particularly with reference to Samson, in his monumental *De iure belli ac pacis libri tres* (*Three Books Concerning the Right of War and Peace*, 1625), as well as how he defined *imperium* in *De imperio summarum potestatum circa sacra* (*The Authority of the Supreme Powers in Matters of Religion*, 1647).¹³ I propose to illustrate how Dagon and, later, the Philistine Prince follow Grotius in their articulations of *imperium* and *ius gentium*, such that the chief antagonists of Vondel's *treurspel* speak rationally and at times equitably about life and law in the chaotic world of the Book of Judges. In the end, however, I will demonstrate that Vondel does not endorse Dagon—Vondel is not of the Devil's party without knowing it—nor are his engagements with Grotius or contemporary political events uncritical. In fact, *Samson* probes the limits of the Grotian *ius gentium* as well as of international law and polity in the post-Westphalian world. Vondel gives voice to Dagon to great effect, offering audiences and readers a more complex and persuasive vision of compromise and peace, not without its attendant evils and sacrifices. In short, I argue that Vondel employs jurisprudential languages of *imperium* and *vindicatio* culled from Grotius's treatment of Samson to test the limits of the Grotian *ius gentium*. His strategy is innovative as he uses a sympathetic Dagon to frame these Grotian conceits; Dagon speaks like Grotius and argues keenly and convincingly for the rights of the Philistines and the obligations of the Jews. Nevertheless, Vondel is not as willing as Grotius is to bracket God. Vondel is at once faithful to Grotius, in his preoccupation with peace and unity, but critical of Grotius's willingness to reframe matters of faith in political terms, to dispense with Scriptural precedent and true religion. *Samson, of Heilige Wraeck* is a tragedy insofar as it illustrates the irreconcilable difference between the peace assured by Grotius's *ius gentium* and God's providential design for an irrational and chaotic Samson.

Vondel and Grotius

Among his comrades in the Dutch Republic, Grotius counted such luminaries as humanist Latin authors Caspar Barlaeus (1584–1648), Isaac Casaubon (1559–1614), Gerardus Johannes Vossius (1577–1649), and the Dutch historian, poet

13 While *De imperio summarum potestatum circa sacra* was printed posthumously, modern editor Harm-Jan van Dam establishes that it was conceived as early as 1614. Hugo Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis libri tres*, editio nova (Amsterdam: Johann Blauw, 1646); and Hugo Grotius, *De imperio summarum potestatum circa sacra*, ed. and transl. Harm-Jan van Dam, 2 vols (Leiden, Boston and Köln: Brill, 2001), p. 1.

and playwright P.C. Hooft (1581–1647), but his work bore greatest influence on Vondel, with whom he corresponded about ancient poetry and poetics. Grotius's poems and plays as well as his scholarship on faith, law, politics, and Batavian antiquity shaped Vondel's commitments from an early age.¹⁴ Vondel adapted and translated several of Grotius's Latin works into Dutch—for instance, his *Adamus exul* (1601, Vondel's adaptation 1664), *Sophompaneas* (1635, Vondel's translation also 1635), and his translations of Euripides—and dedicated his own *Gysbreght van Aemstel* (1637) to Grotius, driven (like the eponymous character of the tragedy) from Amsterdam (and the Dutch Republic at large) after the rout of the Oldenbarnevelt government in 1618 and his subsequent escape from imprisonment in 1621.¹⁵ Vondel's approach to religion was forged in the crucible of the 1610s and 20s, in the controversies over Arminianism and political authority that precipitated the Synod of Dordt and its aftermath.¹⁶ Like Grotius, Vondel fiercely opposed Contra-Remonstrant attempts to limit toleration; moreover, he shared Grotius's irenic vision of a broad, encompassing church based on minimal criteria for orthodoxy.¹⁷ Vondel maintained this Grotian comportment to religion across his career, from his early Mennonite period to and through his storied conversion to Roman Catholicism in the late 1630s.¹⁸

Grotius's writing on *imperium* and *ius gentium* guides Vondel's late work, from his *Samson* to his 1667 tragedies *Zungchin, of Ondergang der Sineesche Heerschappije* and *Noah, of Ondergang der eerste weerelt. Jephtha, of Offerbelofte*

14 Arthur Eyffinger, 'Hugo Grotius, poet and man of letters', in id., *The World of Hugo Grotius (1583–1645): Proceedings of the International Colloquium Organized by the Grotius Committee of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, Rotterdam 6–9 April 1983* (Amsterdam and Maarssen: APA-Holland University Press, 1984), p. 93. Grotius's influence on Vondel is well established: see, for instance, Jeanne Gaakeer, 'Law and Literature: *Batavische Gebroeders* (1663)', in Bloemendal and Korsten, *Joost van den Vondel*, pp. 459–487; Freya Sierhuis, 'Controversy and Reconciliation: Vondel, Grotius, and the Debate on Religious Peace in the Dutch Republic', in Isabel Karremann, Cornel Zwielerlein, and Inga Mai Groot (eds.), *Forgetting Faith?: Negotiating Confessional Conflict in Early Modern Europe* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 139–162.

15 Joost van den Vondel, *Gysbreght van Aemstel*, WB III, pp. 520–522.

16 On Vondel's development in this period see Nina Geerdink, 'Politics and Aesthetics—Decoding Allegory in *Palamedes* (1625)', in Bloemendal and Korsten, *Joost van den Vondel*, pp. 225–248. For a rich account of politics and literary culture during this crucial period see Freya Sierhuis, *The Literature of the Arminian Controversy: Religion, Politics and the Stage in the Dutch Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

17 Sierhuis, 'Controversy and Reconciliation', pp. 143, 147–148, 152–158.

18 Smits-Veldt and Spies, 'Vondel's Life', pp. 70–71. Judith Pollmann, 'Vondels Religion', in Bloemendal and Korsten, *Joost van den Vondel*, pp. 85–100.

(1659) marks Vondel's definitive turn to Aristotelian poetics, under the influence of Daniel Heinsius, Grotius, and Vossius. *Samson* marks a similar definitive turn to politics across nations and confessions. Vondel adapted several classical tragedies—*Koning Edipus* (1660), *Ifigenie in Tauren* (1666), *Feniciaensche* (1668), and *Herkules in Trachin* (1668)—and composed myriad tragedies on matters of state: *Koning David herstelt* (1660), *Koning David in ballingschap* (1660), *Adonias, of Rampzalige Kroonzucht* (1661), *Batavische gebroeders, of Onderdruckte Vryheit* (1663), *Faëton, of Reuckeloze Stoutheit* (1663), *Adam in Ballingschap, of Aller treurspelen treurspel* (1664), all of which revisit the political themes of his earlier work with an eye to the foundations and vicissitudes of the *ius gentium*. In *Maria Stuart, of Gemartelde Majesteit* (1646), for instance, Vondel depicted the tragic encounter between two legitimate sovereigns—Mary Stuart and Elizabeth I—the former, a pious martyr queen subject to the depraved political machinations of the latter's counselors. James A. Parente, Jan Bloemendal, and Kristine Steenbergh adroitly locate *Maria Stuart* in a humanist tradition as well as in relation to morality plays where Mary is consistently identified with Christ and his mother (her namesake).¹⁹ Her sovereignty and righteousness alike are inviolable. Legitimacy, piety, and *imperium* are not nearly as uncomplicated in the 1660 plays as Vondel re-imagines fundamental Scriptural expressions of conflict and sovereignty as well as their early modern afterlives across communities and confessions. The 1646 *Maria Stuart* belongs to a tradition of humanist *dramata sacra*, whereas in the 1660 King David plays and *Samson* Vondel emphasizes the competing (often incommensurable) visions of *Realpolitik* and providence.

During this late period Grotius's influence is patent. As Jeanne Gaakeer makes clear, the *Batavische Gebroeders* is a Grotian play, Vondel's chief reference being Grotius's *Liber de antiquitate reipublicae Batavae* (*Book on the Antiquity of the Batavian Republic*, 1610).²⁰ Moreover, as Frans-Willem Korsten explores, the Grotian vision of a global *societas gentium* is at stake in the *Jeptha*, even as Vondel points to its limits and challenges.²¹ Vondel read Grotius with

19 James A. Parente, Jr. and Jan Bloemendal, 'The Humanist Tradition—*Maria Stuart* (1646),' in Bloemendal and Korsten, *Joost van den Vondel*, pp. 341–358; and Kristine Steenbergh, 'Compassion and the Creation of an Affective Community in the Theatre: Vondel's *Mary Stuart, or Martyred Majesty* (1646)', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen voor de Geschiedenis van Nederland / Low Countries Historical Review* 129 (2014), 90–112.

20 P.C. Hooft's tragedy *Baeto* (1617) is also an important source of inspiration. See Gaakeer, 'Law and Literature', pp. 462–471.

21 Frans-Willem Korsten, *Sovereignty as Inviolability: Vondel's Theatrical Explorations in the Dutch Republic* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2009), Ch. 3, esp. pp. 76–77.

great interest and admiration, but without adhering slavishly to his claims; indeed, even when Vondel translated sections of Grotius's *Rivetiani Apologetici discussio* (1645), which he published anonymously in Dutch as *Grotius' Testament of hoofdpunten getrokken uit zijn jongste antwoord aan D. Rivet* (1645), he redacted the work and repurposed its irenicism explicitly for Roman Catholicism.²² And his engagements with the works that would prove most influential during this late period—Grotius's *De iure belli ac pacis* and *De imperio*—are dynamic and often critical. As I explain below, Vondel does not merely apply Grotius's ideas to poetic *fabulae*, he tests his claims, explores their limits, and seeks new poetic solutions to theoretical problems articulated by Grotius in a jurisprudential language.

Grotius's Samson and Revenge in the *Ius Gentium*

As Dagon enumerates Samson's offenses against the Philistines at the outset of the *treurspel*, Vondel frames *Samson* in Grotian terms drawn from *De iure belli ac pacis*. Indeed, Samson is integral to Grotius's rich account of revenge and punishment. It is 'by this natural right' to revenge that 'Samson, defending himself against the Philistines, publicly declares that he will be innocent, if he in turn causes harm to the Philistines who had caused harm to him.'²³ Grotius silently cites both Judges 15:3 and 15:11, giving readers leave to weigh Samson's justification: we learn that, 'after having executed vengeance upon them, [Samson] protects himself from further damage with the same reason, saying "as they themselves had initially done to me, the same is done to them."²⁴ Grotius

22 Joost van den Vondel, 'Grotius' Testament of Hoofdpunten Getrokken uit Zijn Jongste Antwoord aan D. Rivet,' *WB IV: 1640–1645*, p. 623.

23 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. 320: 'Hoc naturali jure defendens se Samson adversus Palaestinos insontem se testatur fore si Palaestinos qui se malo affecerant malo vicissim afficeret.'

24 Samson's father-in-law has reclaimed his daughter from Samson, offering him another younger daughter in return, an act that offends the judge. Samson in turn declares 'Now I am more blameless than the Philistines: therefore will I do them displeasure' ('Ick ben ditmael onschuldich vande Philistijnen, wanneer ick aen hen quaet doe', Judges 15:3) before setting the Philistine crops ablaze. The 1560 Geneva gloss is instructive: 'For through his father in laws occasion, he was moved againe to take vengeance of [the] Philistines.' See p. 115'. In Grotius's account Samson justifies his revenge with a Latin paraphrase of Judges 15:11: as the 1637 *Statenbijbel* reads 'Gelijck als sy my gedaen hebben, alsoo heb ick haerlieden gedaen'—in the 1560 Geneva translation, 'As they did unto me, so have I done unto them'—Grotius's Samson opts for the chiasmic 'se ipsi fecisse quod ipsi sibi fecissent

follows Scripture and is careful not to pass explicit judgment on Samson, either to condemn him or affirm his innocence. But it is important to note that he does not offer his own explanation of Samson's actions; rather, Grotius illustrates how Samson, 'defending himself against the Philistines' ('defendens se Samson adversus Palaestinos'), justified himself.²⁵ It is the reader's task to weigh Samson's testimony.

De iure belli ac pacis provides the reader with ample resources for this task, as Grotius establishes a law ('ius') that 'intercedes among many peoples or between the leaders of peoples, whether originating in nature, constituted by divine laws, or introduced by habit or tacit agreement', a *ius gentium* that Grotius proposes to treat 'universally and with certain method.'²⁶ In order to foster an enduring 'care for society, agreeable to the human intellect,' which is the very 'fountain of this law,' Grotius determines terms and procedures to mediate conflicts between nations, communities, and confessions—namely, he proposes 'abstinence from another's things; and, if we might have that which is another's, and profit thereby, we must make restitution; the obligation to fulfill promises; and the merit of punishment among men.'²⁷ These are terms and conditions that would hold even if 'there is no God' ('non esse Deum').²⁸ Grotius certainly does not argue that there is no God. In fact, he says the opposite, that 'reason, in part, and perpetual tradition, in part,' confirm God's existence.²⁹ His aim, rather, is to bracket God and faith, to develop laws and

priores.' Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. 320: 'Et post peractam ultionem eadem se tuetur ratione, dicens se ipsiis fecisse quod ipsi sibi fecissent priores.'

25 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. 320.

26 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. *4^r: 'inter populos plures aut populorum rectores intercedit, sive ab ipsa natura profectum, aut divinis constitutum legibus, sive moribus & pacto tacito introductum attigerunt pauci, universim ac certo ordine tractavit hactenus nemo.'

27 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. *4^v: 'societatis custodia, humano intellectui conveniens, fons est ejus juris, quod proprie tali nomine appellatur: quo pertinent alieni abstinentia, & si quid alieni habeamus, aut lucre inde fecerimus restitutio, promissorum implendorum obligatio, damni culpa dati reparatio, & poenae inter homines meritum.'

28 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. *5^r. Grotius follows Alberico Gentili here, in concept and method. See Noel Malcolm, 'Alberico Gentili and the Ottomans', in Benedict Kingsbury and Benjamin Straumann (eds.), *The Roman Foundations of the Law of Nations: Alberico Gentili and the Justice of Empire* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 127–145.

29 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. *5^r. On Grotius and natural law see Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law 1150–1625* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1997), pp. 316–342; Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press,

conditions poised to unite diverse populations, regardless of belief, that do not depend on faith for their effects. The *ius gentium* that takes shape in *De iure belli ac pacis* is founded on principles that God communicated to humans in nature, that are evident to all; here ‘the Mother of natural law is human nature itself’ (*‘naturalis juris mater est ipsa humana natura’*).³⁰ Natural law, together with its derivative *ius gentium*, enables us to ‘consider the benefit not of discrete groups but of that great universal body’ (*‘utilitatem respicerent non coetuum singulorum, sed magnae illius universitatis’*), a global assembly of ‘all or most states (*‘civitates’*)’ governed by right ‘*ius*’ and justice (*‘iustitia’*), not benefit (*‘utilitas’*) alone.³¹ Grotius urges his readers to imagine a global jurisdiction founded on reason and nature with advantages that far exceed the benefits and interests of individual states. In this sense he undermines easy assumptions about Samson’s sanctity, particularly the idea that Samson’s vengeance is mandated and justified by God.

Indeed, Samson’s justification appears increasingly precarious as readers weigh his duties and obligations in Grotius’s *ius gentium*. Grotius foregrounds the authority of sovereign powers over the sacred and secular alike, establishing a functional public unity in matters of religion, effectively relegating otherwise divisive conflicts to the conscience. Grotius promotes ‘tolerance’ to the extent that faith or other matters of religion remain internal, a point that he shores up again in *De iure belli ac pacis* 11.xx, where ‘purely internal acts cannot be punished by men, even if (for instance) they are revealed to others in the event of a later confession.’³² This ‘tolerance’ does *not* hold, however, for manifest, external actions that challenge the authority of the sovereign or magistrate—

1979), Ch. 3; and Ernst Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity* [1961], transl. Dennis J. Schmidt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 45–60.

30 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. *5^v.

31 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, pp. *5^v–*6^r. See G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes, ‘Hugo Grotius as an Irenicist’, in *The World of Hugo Grotius*, pp. 43–63.

32 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. 328: ‘actus mere interni, etiamsi casu aliquo, puta per confessionem subsecutam, ad notitiam aliorum perveniant, puniri ab hominibus non possunt.’ In *De imperio*, moreover, Grotius intended to institute legal parameters to prevent (Reformed) ministers in the United Provinces from ‘inciting the rabble’ to intolerance and unrest during the 1610s; if the States of Holland were recognized as sovereign in matters of religion, there could be no legal recourse for a minority party determined to disturb the peace by way of religious dissent. For a compelling account of the literary cultures and theological stakes of the Arminian Controversy see Freya Sierhuis, ‘The Rhetoric of Religious Dissent: Anti-Calvinism, Satire and the Arminian Controversy in the Dutch Republic’, *Reformation and Renaissance Review*, 12 (2010), 307–327.

the kinds of actions that Samson perpetrates against the Philistines in extreme measure. In *De imperio* Grotius categorically denies the ‘right’ or obligation to resist the sovereign power, emphasizing instead how ‘The supreme power is said by the Apostle Paul to be the “servant of God to execute his wrath (‘vindex ad iram’) on the wrongdoer”’—a direct reference to Romans 13:1–4, where the ‘higher powers’ (‘den Machten’) are ‘ordeined of God ... to take vengeance on him that doeth evil’ (‘van Godt geordineert ... tot straffe den genen die quaedt doet’).³³ Both the 1560 Geneva Bible and the 1637 *Statenvertaling* underscore God’s vengeance exercised by the appropriate secular authority, a ‘minister’ or (more explicit) ‘een wreeckster’. Grotius employs the Latin *vindex*, related to the verb *vindico* and the noun *vindicatio*, all of which imply protection, defense, and the assertion of legal claims as well as vengeance. The highest power in a given polity or territory maintains unity over religion, *despite* religious differences between and among citizens, serving as the *vindex* which claims a monopoly over legitimate violence. Put simply, Grotius cites Paul’s treatment of sovereignty and resistance in order to establish God’s vengeance as a civil function, executed by a sovereign or magistrate, rather than a sacred task.

Grotius extends this discussion in *De iure belli ac pacis*, where he defines revenge in relation to punishment. Samson figures prominently here as well, in Grotius’s account of punishment (‘De Poenis’), as he investigates the circumstances under which ‘revenge is permitted by the law of nations’ (‘de ultione licita jure Gentium’).³⁴ First he names three punitive measures by which a wronged party might avoid further injury: (first) by putting the injurer to death, (second) by removing the means by which the injurer can do further damage, or (third) by carrying out a severe ‘public and visible’ (‘aperta atque conspicua’) punishment to deter the injurer from further action, thereby setting an example. Revenge (in Latin, Grotius uses both *ultio* and *vindicatio*) is only licit if it is directed to these ends. Even then, however, Grotius adds additional conditions, asserting that revenge must be ‘confined within the bounds of equity’ and only holds in cases pertaining to private individuals (‘privata’), not nations or corporate entities; in this sense revenge belongs to ‘the bare law of nature—that is, abstracted from divine and human laws and those circumstances that are not

33 Grotius, *De imperio*, pp. 156–159.

34 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, pp. 309, 313. Samson also figures prominently in Grotius’s treatment of the right of burial (‘De jure sepulturae’), as many authorities aver that Samson deserved burial despite his suicide as he only killed himself once ‘he saw the true religion to be derided in his own body’ (‘in suo corpore veram religionem videbat esse derisui’).

essential to the affair.’³⁵ Only then is revenge ‘not unlawful.’³⁶ In other words, revenge is allowed by the law of nations only in cases where there is no operative law of nations—that is, in the absence of an abiding *ius gentium*, as is the case (ca. 1646) at sea or among bands of nomads in remote deserts.³⁷ When there is no effective jurisdiction, no divine or human laws, revenge is the only option, and it matters less

whether [revenge] is taken by the injured person himself or by another, as it is natural for one man to assist another man. And to this point Cicero’s judgment may be admitted, when he declared that innate sense, not opinion, conveys the law of nature to us—our innate sense, among the examples of which Cicero locates revenge, which he sets against gratitude. And, so no one might hesitate about what he intended to have been understood by this term, Cicero defines ‘revenge’ as that ‘by which we ward off violence and abuse from ourselves and from ours, who should be beloved to us, whether by means of defending or avenging, and by which we punish offences.’³⁸

Punishment and revenge are only synonymous in private cases, where there can be no appeal to any higher law or community. It is only in this sense that revenge, that ‘ancient natural freedom’ (*‘vetus naturalis libertas’*) common to all men, is licit.³⁹

But revenge is a freedom that we forfeit once we enter any jurisdiction. It belongs only to ‘the bare law of nature’ and not to any community or society

35 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. 320: ‘Ad hos ergo fines, intra aequi terminos si dirigatur vindicatio, etiam privata, si jus nudum naturae, id est abductum a legibus divinis humanisque & ab his quae non necessario rei accidunt, respicimus, non est illicita.’ See also Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, ed. Richard Tuck and Jean Barbeyrac, 3 vols (Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Fund, 2005), pp. 966–967. I alter the translation significantly.

36 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. 320.

37 Ibid., p. 321.

38 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. 320: ‘sive fiat ab ipso qui laesus est, sive ab alio, quando hominem ab homine adjuvari naturae est consentaneum. Atque hoc sensu admitti potest quod Cicero cum jus naturae esse dixisset id quod nobis non opinio sed innata vis affert, inter ejus exempla collocat vindicationem quam gratiae opponit: ac ne quis ambigeret quantum eo nomine vellet intelligi, vindicationem definit, per quam vim ac contumeliam defendendo aut ulciscendo propulsamus a nobis ac nostris qui nobis cari esse debent, & per quam peccata punimus.’ He quotes Cicero’s definition from *De inventione* 11. See also Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, pp. 966–967. I alter the translation significantly.

39 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. 321.

governed by divine or human laws. Even in nature, however, Grotius emphasizes that the passions at work in revenge are irrational and overwhelming. At the very least, revenge and its attendant passions are difficult to moderate, placing the injured party at further risk. Moreover, it is 'against nature for a man to be satisfied in afflicting another man with sorrow'; to find another's pain fulfilling or pleasurable is comparable to enjoying one's own pain, a possibility that Grotius is unwilling to entertain.⁴⁰ Punishment is natural and rational, restitution is natural and rational, but the desire to inflict harm on others (or oneself) is irrational, even unnatural. Reason's dictates are 'themselves of a reasonable and social nature,' he claims, and

reason dictates to man nothing which is to be done that might cause harm to another man, unless it might have some good purpose. But nothing good abides in the suffering of enemies alone, beheld in such a stark manner, only things fraudulent and imaginary, as in excessive wealth and many other things of that sort. And in this sense not only the Christian doctors but also the philosophers condemned revenge among men.⁴¹

Because revenge is irrational, Grotius is eager to demonstrate how mankind attempted to mitigate the bare laws of nature and to protect humans from our own overwhelming passions. 'Because we are corrupted in our affairs and by our emotions,' Grotius claims, 'as soon as many families convened in one place, judges were appointed, and having surrendered the power of avenging injuries to these judges alone, the liberty which nature had granted to all others was taken away.'⁴² Once private people are able to take recourse to judges, appealing to a higher authority for punishment and retribution, revenge ceases to be

40 Ibid., p. 318: 'Pugnat ergo cum natura hominis in hominem agentis alieno dolore qua dolor est satiari.'

41 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. 318: 'dictatum naturae rationalis ac socialis qua talis est. dictat autem ratio homini nihil agendum quo noceatur homini alteri, nisi id bonum aliquod habeat propositum. In solo autem inimici dolore, ita nude spectato, nullum est bonum nisi falsum & imaginarium: ut in divitiis supervacuis multisque aliis rebus ejusmodi. Atque hoc sensu ultionem improbant in hominibus non Christiani modo doctores, sed & Philosophi.'

42 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. 321: 'Sed quia in rebus nostris & nostrorum affectu corumpimur, ideo simul multae familiae in unum locum convenerunt, iudices constituti, & his solis data potestas vindicandi laesos, adempta caeteris quam natura indulserat libertate.'

a viable or licit enterprise. Private people are relieved of an ‘ancient natural freedom’ that we experience, on both a practical and an affective level, as a burden.

Grotius adds another ethical dimension to his account of revenge when he turns his attention to the evangelical law (*‘lex Evangelica’*). Revenge is contrary to the reconciliatory spirit of the Gospel as well as to natural law ‘to the extent that it merely satisfies a victim’s desire’ (*‘quatenus duntaxat animum dolentis exsatiat’*) without any benefit to a larger community.⁴³ But Grotius does not cast Judaism as a religion of revenge against a gracious Christianity, demonstrating instead that the Scriptural *lex talionis* was rarely in use among the Hebrews, only appropriate in exceptional circumstances; in general, even the Hebrew Law indicates that injured parties were obliged to turn to a judge, as ‘moderation is undoubtedly more difficult where one’s own pain is added.’⁴⁴ Among Greeks and Hebrews alike, the ‘custom of privately avenging murder’ (*‘morem privatim vindicandae caedis’*) was practiced only ‘among those who do not have common judges.’⁴⁵ As Grotius introduces further arguments against revenge culled from the Gospel and the Church Fathers, he emphasizes penitence and the fact that would-be revengers deny their injurers opportunities for repentance when they execute them. Magistrates are endowed with the ‘use of the sword’ (*‘usum gladii’*) in the ‘exercise of divine vengeance’ (*‘exercitium divinae ultionis’*).⁴⁶ But Christian doctrine suggests that magistrates should also seek to realize charity and grace, to maintain opportunities for repentance, to (after the example of the pious Egyptian Sabacon) ‘change capital punishments to the obligation to work’ (*‘capitales poenas in damnationem ad opus mutatas’*).⁴⁷ Private people are able to justify revenge only in rare circumstances. For Christians, revenge is prohibited—even punishment is a precarious matter for private Christians, even when it is for the public good, even when it is permitted by the *ius gentium*.⁴⁸

Can Samson justify his revenge, then, under the conditions Grotius establishes in *De iure belli ac pacis*? Grotius does not condemn Samson explicitly, but he also presents his case in stark terms, without deliberately pious or typological interpretations of Judges that condone or even celebrate Sam-

43 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. 323.

44 Ibid., pp. 325, 321: ‘pro se, ut puta in vulnere, non nisi per iudicem, quia scilicet difficilior est moderatio ubi proprius dolor accedit.’

45 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, pp. 321–322.

46 Ibid., pp. 326–327.

47 Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, p. 327.

48 Ibid.

son's vengeance. Significantly, Samson is not named as a judge in the work (as he is in Scripture), and Grotius ultimately eschews a discussion of *imperium* in Judges—that is, the degree to which the Jews or the Philistines can claim authority over their neighbors. Samson's revenge is licit if one assumes there is no law (divine or human) in effect among the Philistines and Jews, in which case Samson exercises a natural right to punish his enemies. Samson's revenge is also licit if one assumes that he is exceptional, that he expresses the will of God in a manner that exceeds the *ius gentium* and the order of nature. But Grotius derives the *ius gentium* from nature, including human nature, in the interest of peace and unity, an international law appropriate to all humanity regardless of religion. In this sense, Grotius subtly suggests that Samson is an irrational 'revenger' who visits unimaginable suffering upon a nation, against the guiding light of natural law.

Samson's *Imperium*: Vondel's Challenge to Grotius

Vondel seems to proceed in Grotian fashion in *Samson, of Heilige Wraeck*, as Dagon presents a compelling case against Samson, citing the vast extent of the injuries wrought upon an entire region. Dagon quickly dispenses with attempts to calculate the damages or to find parity. While the Jews might have endured forty years of slavery they are now free, and the Philistines (and the region at large) have in turn 'suffered' in the twenty years since their emancipation. The damages wrought upon both Philistine and Jew are too substantial to itemize, and Dagon's grammar reflects this: the very subject of the verb *bezuurt* in line 32 is deliberately ambiguous, as Vondel himself blurs the line separating the suffering Jews from the suffering Philistines. It is difficult to determine who, exactly, has paid for or suffered for Jewish slavery in Dagon's account, just as it is increasingly difficult to recognize the difference between revenge and restitution. This is after all an account of 'holy vengeance', *Heilige Wraeck*, not justice, and Dagon (like Grotius) dispenses with geometrical proportion, with expletive or attributive justice.⁴⁹ Moreover, Samson's deeds, whether or not he acts as Judge on behalf of Israel, recall the excessive logic of revenge tragedy more than any Scriptural principle of retribution (for instance, the *lex talionis* outlined in Leviticus 24:20: 'Breache for breache, eie for eie, tothe for tothe:

49 Grotius discusses attributive ('iustitia attributrice') and expletive justice ('iustitia expletice') in *De iure belli ac pacis libri tres* I.i.8 and II.ii.1, neither of which are necessarily relevant to punishment. See Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis*, pp. 11, 315.

suche a blemish as he hathe made in anie, suche shalbe repaied to him').⁵⁰ It is as if Dagon is presenting a case to the audience in these opening lines, drawing upon forensic rhetorical resources to detail Samson's impulsive and dangerous behavior.

Dagon's narrative of the fires is particularly moving, delivered in an affective idiom at odds with audience expectations for stage devils and Senecan phantoms. The extent of the damage Samson caused is incalculable, as Dagon describes a 'sea of fire' engulfing the whole region, leaving 'many thousands of Dagon's subjects ... in tears,' presumably starving, without sustenance, an entire regional economy devastated at multiple levels. A student of Quintilian, Dagon eschews the attempt to give voice to his suffering subjects, opting instead for a more effective *prosopopoeia*: it is the *vineyard* that lost its grapes, the *olive tree* its fruit, the *cornflower* its prize, the *seacoast* that 'moaned and sighed, from Gaza to Gath.'⁵¹ Samson is a bandit, seizing *vrybuit* under shameful circumstances, with no respect for law or order. When the Philistines attempt to rectify the wrong done to Samson according to their custom, he is overcome by *wraeklust*, an irrational lust for vengeance, and wages a brutal campaign against them. Dagon emphasizes here that Samson's own Jewish subjects who 'testified to their innocence' ('*zich onschuldighden*') are so 'moved to do justice' ('*tot recht bewogen*') that they apprehend their Judge and deliver him directly to their *dootvyants*—their mortal enemies. Dagon establishes reasonable grounds for the Philistines' fear of Samson, driven as he is by 'the spirit of our ancient enemies' (ll. 79–80). Indeed, he implies that Philistines and Israelites alike are '*gestoort | Met reden*' (ll. 60–61), 'reasonably and justifiably angry.'

As Dagon speaks at the outset of the play, Samson is 'imprisoned in Gaza,' kept in captivity 'to mock Jerusalem' as Dagon's own 'power waxes and grows exponentially' (ll. 75–77). Dagon suggests further action as well, beyond Samson's humiliation:

Wy gaen de Joden stooren,
Brantschatten, om de scha te boeten van ons koren.
Het hof van Dagon is met reden voor den geest
Van onze erfvyanden, het Jodendom, bevreest,
Dat met de Godtsdraght en zijn kistspel, heet op wreecken,

50 See also Deuteronomy 19:20–21: 'And the rest shal heare this, and feare, and shal hence-forthe commit no more any such wickednes among you. Therefore thine eie shal have no compassion, but life for life, eie for eie, tothe for tothe, hand for hand, fote for fote.'

51 See Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, ed. and transl. Donald A. Russell, 5 vols (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 4, pp. 50–55 [1x.ii].

Ons godtheit noch eens dreight met kracht den hals te breecken,
 Te bonzen van 't altaer, waerom ick, schalck en stil,
 Als in slaghorde, my hier tegens kanten wil.
 Gy allen zult van daegh, vermomt, vernist met glimpen,
 En schijn van heiligheit, het Jodendom beschimpen
 In Samson, die zoo lang mijn heirkraft onder hiel,
 Het voorhuitloos gebroet, dat in ons erfdeel viel,
 Zoo veel geweldenaers, die goôn en menschen plaegen,
 En onder schijn van recht en godtsdienst, moorden, jaegen,
 Beeltstormen, branden, en schoffeeren, zullen zien
 Dat Dagon's maght, en kracht den stercksten kan gebiën

ll. 77–92

(We will go to assail the Jews, to extract a levy under threat of fire, so that they pay a penalty for our corn. The court of Dagon is justifiably afraid of the spirit of our hereditary enemies, the Jews, who carry along God and his Ark, yearning for vengeance, and threaten to break the neck of our godhead once more, to batter him from the altar—which is why I, slyly and silently, as in a battle formation, will resist this plan. Thou all, in disguise, varnished with appearances will sanctimoniously taunt the Jews through Samson, who held down the strength of my army for so long—the Jews, that foreskinless rabble that fell upon our inheritance, a multitude of oppressors who plague both gods and men and, under the appearance of right and piety, murder, badger, desecrate our idols, set fires, and show contempt, shall see that Dagon's might and power can rule over even the strongest.)

Again, Dagon's Philistine subjects are 'met reden ... bevreest'—justifiably afraid—of Samson as well as the spirit ('geest') of their 'hereditary enemies' ('erfvyanden'). This caveat 'with reason' ('met reden') is crucial, not only to Dagon's depiction at the beginning of the *treurspel* but in later scenes as well. Vondel introduces a Philistine Prince who meets the chorus of Jewish Women late in Act II. Upon seeing them in distress he asks,

Hebreeische joffers, wat is d'oirzaeck dat gy schreit?
 Verkorte u iemant? Hier is 't hof, dat elck verdaedight,
 En hanthaeft by zijn recht, weldoenders begenadight,
 De boozen straft. Dit hof ziet geen personen aen

ll. 468–471

(Hebrew ladies, what is the cause for which you weep? Did anyone harm you? Here is the court that defends and preserves every person by its justice, that blesses those that do good and punishes the depraved. This court sees no persons.)

The Prince, the authority who holds *imperium* within the region, does not appear in Vondel's play as a tyrant. In fact, his 'Dit hof ziet geen personen aen' directly echoes Romans 2:11, where Paul reveals that 'there is no respect of persones with God,' or 'daer en is geen aenneminghe des persoons by Godt.' The Prince establishes an impartial justice that holds for Jew and Philistine alike, one that the chorus of Hebrew women promptly endorses: 'Most merciful Prince, that is just' ('Genadightste, dat's recht', l. 472). They do not challenge or deny the Prince's jurisdiction over Samson but, rather, ask for mercy on behalf of their Judge—a man 'fallen too sorrowfully in your hate, alas, from high and low, and *by no means without reason*' ('te droef vervallen in dien haet, | Helaes, by hoogh en laegh, en geensins zonder reden', ll. 480–481, my emphasis). The women concede that the Philistines are 'with reason' offended. Echoing Dagon, they recognize that the 'damage, suffered everywhere within the Philistine cities, is irreparable' ('De schade, alom geleên by Filistijnsche steden, | Is onvergoebeer') after Samson 'wounded five capital cities to their core' ('quetst vijf hooftsteên in haer ziel'); they beseech the Prince, in turn, to 'mix (although it is late, we beg you) but a drop of mercy with thy justice' ('Meng ten minste (al is het spe | Nu wy u smeecken,) noch een' drupel van gena | met uw rechtvaardigheid'), to 'Let thy vengeance abate, and earn the reputation that you can yet spare your enemy' ('Laet uwe wraeck bedaeren | Zoo volght u d'eer dat gy uw' vyant noch kunt spaeren', ll. 482–483, 491–494). But the Prince, in the interest of justice, cannot commute Samson's sentence: 'Samson himself cannot reasonably complain, as he who plagues others deserves to be plagued' ('Zoo kan dan Samson met geen reden zich belaecken. | Wie andren plaegen wil, verdient de zelve plaegen,' ll. 509–510).⁵² He has been made an example: 'He serves time as a warning to the wicked' ('Hy slijte dus den tijt, den bozen tot een baeck'), 'condemned to prison forever' ('eeuwigh ter gevangenis veroordeelt,' ll. 518–519).

52 Technically, the Women do not even ask the Prince to commute Samson's sentence, but rather to 'give him the opportunity to escape' ('geef hem lucht om uit te breecken')—that is, they ask the Prince to flout justice, as 'One can, by dissembling, turn a blind eye' ('Men kan ontveinzende, wel door de vingers zien', ll. 522, 524). I translate the idiom to preserve its sense, foregoing the literal 'look through the fingers' ('door de vingers zien') for 'turn a blind eye'.

The Prince underscores all of Dagon's most salient points with an eye to punishment in Grotian terms. Samson is made a perpetual prisoner, carrying out a severe 'public and visible' ('aperta atque conspicua') punishment, one that is meant to prevent him from further violence and to discourage others from similar acts. The Prince notes this intended effect upon the Chorus, who appear 'confounded and afraid' ('versuft, en bloo'); their heads hang low, defeated, 'sunk' ('ontzoncken'), as 'Courage has forsaken them' ('De moedt is haer vergaen' ll. 460–461). Samson is rendered exemplary both in his punishment and in his scheduled performance at the Philistine celebration, where he will represent himself as Strength ('Sterckheit') in an allegorical play ('een spel van zinnen') based on his life and defeat by Pleasure ('Wellust', ll. 824–825). Both Dagon and the Dagonists seem to respect the evangelical imperative outlined in *De iure belli ac pacis*, to give the offender the opportunity to repent—in other words, Samson is allowed to live. The Prince also guarantees the Chorus that Samson will receive a proper burial, befitting his office. The punishment, moreover, appears equitable insofar as both the Prince and Dagon only capture Samson; his Jewish subjects are left free to roam the city. And although Dagon ultimately seeks restitution, he does not threaten to visit symmetrical devastation on the Hebrew people. The Prince reiterates Dagon's plan, to collect due compensation and back payments:

Gy zult den nadruk eerst gevoelen van ons kusten.
 Wy laeten 't by de straf van Samson niet berusten.
 Het is besloten dat men 't gansche Jodenlant
 Zal overtrecken, en tot aen den waterkant
 Der stroomende Jordaen brantschatten alle stammen,
 Of zetten voor de vuist al 't lant in bloet en vlammen.
 Wy willen boven dat hereischen achterstel
 Van schattingen, ons hof door Samsons trots bevel
 En sterckheit, twintigh jaer, te wreveligh onthouwen

ll. 529–537

(Thou shall soon feel the pressure of our coasts. We will not let it rest with Samson's punishment. It is determined that we will conquer the entire Jewish land, to the bank of the flowing Jordan, to exact a levy from all of the tribes or else to openly set the land to blood and fire. We desire above all to recover those overdue tax payments that were spitefully withheld from our court for twenty years by Samson's strength and proud command.)

It is only if the Jews refuse that the Prince proposes a much more severe course of action. The Prince is not *vengeful*, strictly speaking; there is nothing in his speech to suggest that he takes inordinate and irrational pleasure even in Samson's suffering, or that he seeks to exercise some 'ancient natural freedom' of revenge over the Judge or his Hebrew subjects. Vondel points here to contemporary political matters. The Philistine Prince balances retribution with mercy in a manner that looks enquiringly to the recent Restoration of the Stuart King in England, an event that made no little impact in Dutch political contexts.⁵³ Vondel seems to ask, in 1660: how will Charles II establish peace and prosperity after such a divisive Interregnum, and how will his enemies fare, who are now under his authority, subject to his power? Is the Restoration cause for celebration? Dagon and his fellow spirits do indeed revel in their triumph over Samson, and Dagon certainly asserts that 'Here our servants make merry while that plague of our land sighs and groans' ('Hier groeien | Ons dienaers by, terwijl die lantplaegh zucht, en steent', ll. 26–27). But Dagon's pleasure is tempered by his disarming forensic depiction of Samson's offenses, and the rather measured response against his people at large. Even the allegorical playing and the kinetic performances at the celebration of victory over Samson serve a deliberately pedagogical agenda, far from an irrational revelry in the defeat of an enemy.⁵⁴ Will England share the fortune of the Philistines, and their fate?

But here Vondel also makes a broad point about revenge. Dagon, the Prince, and the chorus of Hebrew women all seem to agree that Samson has acted impulsively without justification and that his punishment is just. The Gro-

53 See Herbert H. Rowen, *John de Witt: Statesman of the 'True Freedom'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 90–112. *Samson* follows Vondel's two King David plays—*Koning David in Ballingschap* (*King David in Exile*) and *Koning David Herstelt* (*King David Restored*)—both of which treat the circumstances of the English Interregnum and Restoration directly. Without explicitly exploring the political contours of the play, W.A.P. Smit suggested that *Samson* is best understood as the story of 'Prins Samson Herstelt'—of Samson's own triumphant Restoration. See Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 111, p. 140. Helmer J. Helmers adroitly presents Vondel's *Samson* as a Restoration play. See Helmer J. Helmers, *The Royalist Republic: Literature, Politics, and Religion in the Anglo-Dutch Public Sphere, 1639–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 233–258.

54 The Prince advocates for drama and revelry, asserting that 'Stage performance edifies a state, excuses no blasphemy or stain among the holy or unholy. Each person's deficiency is pointed out without injury to anyone's name. Stage performance is only disdained by the rude multitude who follow neither right nor reason' (ll. 685–689) ('Tooneelspel sticht een' staet, verschoont geen lastervleck, | En smet in heiligh, noch onheiligh. Elx gebreck | Wort, zonder iemants name te quetsen, aangewezen. | Tooneelspel wort alleen van dommekracht misprezen, | Die recht noch reden volght').

tian import of the *treurspel* is apparent as Vondel establishes an effective *ius gentium* that governs life among discrete nations and religions in the region. No less a figure than Dagon testifies to this, and Vondel's innovative strategy, to use Dagon to frame the events of the *fabula*, unsettles easy assumptions about justice and revenge. Dagon seems to appeal to a *ius gentium* that tempers the Philistines' revenge over Samson and the Jews and ultimately transforms said vengeance into justice. The Prince is the Pauline *vindex* charged (unconsciously) with exercising God's wrath.

There is, however, an insoluble conflict at stake over the Jews' 'inheritance' ('erfdeel')—namely, over the degree to which the 'faithful' ('getrouwen', l. 538) are independent from the Philistine cities governed by the Prince. Samson, after all, is a Judge, even during this period of 'moste horrible oblivion of Gods graces,' where the Israelites 'so provoked his vengeance (as much as in them stode) to their utter destruction.'⁵⁵ It is as if the events of the *fabula* are the effects of God's own sacred vengeance or *heilige wraak*. Immediately prior to the annunciation of Samson's birth we are told, in Judges 13:1, that 'the children of Israel continued to commit wickenes in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistims fortie yere' ('Ende de kinderen Israëls voeren voort te doen, dat quaet was in de ooghen des Heeren: so gafse de Heere in de hant der Philistijnen veertich jaer'). Dagon, the Prince, and the chorus all seem to testify to this fact that, in Grotian terms, would assure the Prince *imperium* over Jews. Samson's title, albeit granted by God and affirmed by the angel, is forfeit in the abiding *ius gentium*. Indeed, none of the speakers seem to recognize Samson's sovereignty. Even the chorus, when they ask about their 'inheritance,' are more interested in property and territory than in authority, their *erfdeel* being 'Canaan [which] has long been possessed by Abraham, for eight hundred years' ('Kanaän is lang van Abraham, | Achthondert jaer geleën, bezeten'), 'the tribe that, by God's blessing, increased in Egypt' ('de stam | Van Godt gezegent, in Egypten aengewassen', ll. 539–541). And the Prince echoes Dagon again in his response, calling the Jews

een heiloos moortgespan,
 Erfvyanden van Goôn, en kercken, en altaeren,
 Beeltstormers, die noch koor noch heilighdommen spaeren.
 Gy quaemt van buiten in, verhongert, en verwoet,
 En stiet gewettighden, erfvorsten uit hun goet,
 En overout bezit, en, van dien geest bezeten,

55 'The Argument' preceding Judges in the 1560 *Geneva Bible*, 108^r.

Voert nieuwe wetten in, en pijnicht het geweeten.
 Men loop' niet wijdt: uw prins, voor wien gy spreekt en pleit,
 Heeft gruwzaemer dan oit al 't lant in d'asch geleit.

ll. 552–560

(A sinful murderous herd; the hereditary enemies of gods and churches and altars; iconoclasts, who spare neither choirs nor sanctuaries! Thou came in from outside, starving and rabid, and forced legitimate hereditary princes from their estate and ancient property and, blown by that spirit, introduced new laws and torment conscience. One need not walk far to see this: your prince, for whom thou speak and plead, has laid the entire land in ashes, more dreadful than ever.)

This is the Prince's judgment of Samson and his people, a judgment that reiterates Dagon's prologue and which reflects the core principles of *De imperio*. If Samson is indeed representative of the Jews, his actions have brought immeasurable suffering to the region. Thus the Jews are, in the eyes of the Dagonist Philistine authorities, less a discrete religion than a force of chaos.⁵⁶ Samson defies the rational *ius gentium* on behalf of which both the Prince and Dagon seem to speak.

Here, however, Vondel defies Grotius, offering a challenge to the operative *ius gentium* that would relegate revenge to an irrational pre-political impulse. Vondel reminds readers and spectators that Samson is a Judge appointed by God, not by any natural law or by way of human institutions, national or international. In an odd moment (also peculiar to Vondel's *Samson*) Samson actually admits that he has always known the outcome of the *fabula*, declaring that God will appear 'miraculously and will topple the crown of that cursed temple with thunder' ('door een wonder, | En klonck 't gevloeckt gebou de kruin in met den donder') before conceding 'I will not say all that my birth angel and guardian foretold of this celebration' ('Ick zegh het nu niet al wat mijn geboortegeest | En wachter my te nacht voorspelde van dit feest', ll. 405–408). Samson is not a revenger himself but an instrument of God's vengeance,

56 For instance, when Dagon's High Priest reminds the Soothsayer that 'Men must associate daily with the Jews' ('Men moet wel dagelijx verkeerren met de Joden') she retorts, 'The holy writ forbids us their company ... They uproot churches. They hew away the church groves. They burn images and the gods who protect the land and, reveling, dare to warm themselves by the coals' ('In 't heilige wort hun gemeenschap ons verboden | ... | Zy roeien kercken uit. Zy houwen 't kerckwoudt af. | Zy branden beelden, en de Goôn, die 't lant beschermen, | En durven juichende by de koolen wermen', ll. 1315–1320).

as the Angel Fadaël affirms, at the end of the *treurspel*: ‘Now the hero has firmly executed God’s revenge out of zeal for God’s cause’ (‘Nu heeft de helt Godts wraeck | Stantvastigh uitgevoerd, uit yver voor Godts zaeck’, ll. 1666–1667). This is a revenge that is indeed abstracted, as Grotius says, from human and divine laws—so much so that Vondel traces it back to an ineffable God who frustrates any attempts to domesticate religion within the boundaries of reason or statecraft. Vondel will not cede, as Grotius seems to do, *imperium* to any human authority, however noble or well intentioned that authority. Neither the Prince nor Dagon can serve as a *vindex*, just as Samson, however violent and depraved, cannot surrender a sovereignty that is maintained by God.

Vondel makes a similar critical point in his earlier translation of Grotius’s *Rivetiani Apologetici discussio*, there by way of subtle redaction. In the *Discussio* Grotius presents an ecumenical Protestant alternative to his interlocutor André Rivet’s strict Calvinism.⁵⁷ Grotius, committed to irenicism and eager to exonerate himself of charges of Socinianism, nevertheless argued in the *Discussio* that double predestination was depraved and that Rivet’s Calvinism was simply ‘a new religion, self-created, and its spiritual leaders lacked sufficiently priestly ordination, but were marked by the schismatic tendency that typified all secessions from the mother Church,’ particularly ‘intolerance and political turbulence.’⁵⁸ Against Calvinism and other schismatic confessions and political forces, Grotius maintained, first, that charity and unity comprised the core of Christian doctrine and, second, that true Christians should strive for reconciliation and unity above any factious confessional interests. Grotius did not endorse Roman Catholicism or the papacy, necessarily, but he argued nonetheless that the papacy was poised to realize political and theological unity, not only in Europe but across the world. A skilled diplomat, humanist intellectual, and theologian, Grotius was well aware of—and admired—Roman Catholic intellectual and political achievements, particularly those of the Jesuits, who in his own lifetime could boast of an efficient global missionary network that spread from China and Japan to Mexico and Brazil.⁵⁹ Mining Protestant and Catholic sources alike, Grotius denied the persistent identification of the pope with Antichrist, showing instead that ‘the primacy of the pope was conducive

57 Henk Nellen, *Hugo Grotius: A Lifelong Struggle for Peace in Church and State, 1583–1645*, transl. J.C. Grayson (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 699–710.

58 See Nellen, *Hugo Grotius*, p. 707, also Chapters 15 and 16.

59 See Luke Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 136–161.

to unity.⁶⁰ Without endorsing the papacy or converting to Catholicism Grotius affirmed the scope and resources of the Catholic Church.

In his anonymous translation of the *Discussio* (identified only in the preface of the second volume *Vondels Poesy* printed in 1647), Vondel seems to approve Grotius's points against Rivet, but repurposes Grotius's irenic defense of Roman Catholicism as an endorsement of the papacy. For Grotius, the issue is not the truth or error of Catholicism but rather its political resources, the degree to which it might function across regional and national boundaries as an authority. Its claims to *imperium* are more useful and practical than they are righteous or pious. Grotius sees a *Realpolitik* in Roman Catholicism, one that Protestants have too long and unfairly equated with tyranny and depravity. Vondel, however, reframes excerpts of the treatise to emphasize how 'God certainly allowed morals to become corrupted in Rome and elsewhere, but by God's providence doctrine has never been corrupted there, a doctrine which is itself contrary to these evils' ('God liet wel toe dat te Rome en elders de zeden bedorven wierden: maar door Godts bestieringe werd daar nooit de lere bedorven, die tegen deze kwade zeden zelfs strijdig is'), and that 'The Protestants cannot bear to come together, unless they unite themselves together against those who adhere to the Roman Chair' ('De Protestanten kunnen onderling niet verdragen, tenzij ze zich tegelijk verenigen met hun die den Rooms en Stoel aanhangen').⁶¹ Indeed, Grotius is critical of the Protestant consensus against Rome, but Vondel truncates this critique (over 250 pages) to emphasize the Roman provenance of the true Church. Vondel hints at Grotius's conversion to Catholicism (which never happened) as he subtly appropriates Grotius's treatment of *imperium* for Rome—emphasizing, in a Grotian spirit, the historical and theoretical importance of peace and unity, realized by way of an effective *ius gentium*, but offering Catholicism as a solution sanctioned by God.

Vondel makes a similar corrective point in *Samson*, albeit from a different perspective. Roman Catholicism stands poised to realize a global unity. Samson, however, is powerless, captive, and debauched, held in contempt—with reason!—by the *vindex* and his deity Dagon. Vondel's are difficult theatrical and political questions as he investigates the hazards of accepting Dagon's account

60 Henk Nellen, 'A Flaming Row in the Republic of Letters: Claude Saumaise on Hugo Grotius's Crusade for Church Unity', in Jeanine de Landtsheer and Henk Nellen (eds.), *Between Scylla and Charybdis: Learned Letter Writers Navigating the Reefs of Religious and Political Controversy in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, 192, p. 512.

61 Joost van den Vondel, 'Grotius' Testament of Hoofdpunten Getrokken uit Zijn Jongste Antwoord aan D. Rivet', WB IV, p. 628.

of the *fabula*, the risks of surrendering *imperium* to the Philistines. Precarious peace and unity are achieved, but only by the grace of God—an indispensable element of political theology and law, human and divine. Grotius, it seems, is willing to dispense with God, or at least to bracket truth and faith, to relegate these to the closet of conscience. Vondel, however, affirms God's terrible power, so much that 'All of Palestine will remember the Jewish Tragedy' ('Het Joodsche treurspel zal gansch Palestijne heugen', ll. 1276, 1292). Vondel's Samson bears witness as much as he acts; the Messenger's announcement is telling insofar as Samson 'Now he has brought his own revenge upon himself' ('Nu heeft hy in zijn wraeck zich zelve ingebroekt', l. 1503). Vondel uses the past participle 'ingebroekt' (from the verb 'inbrengen': 'to bring to') which sounds conspicuously like 'gebroken'—as if the Philistine Messenger suggests that Samson has brought revenge on the Philistines and himself, having broken himself at Dagon's Temple. The Messenger reports that 'I saw an act of vengeance of which the entire world will speak' ('Ick zaghe een wraeck, daer al de weerelt van gewaeght', l. 1507). The degree to which this is Samson's vengeance is questionable.

The radical point of Vondel's *treurspel* is the *peripeteia* effected by God without justification and against even the most natural, moral human institutions. One might even accurately say that *Samson, of Heilige Wraeck* is a Philistine tragedy—a *treurspel* in which a guilty Samson, with precious little to say in his captivity, already knows the outcome; a *treurspel* introduced by a sympathetic Dagon and punctuated by a cooperative Hebrew chorus; a *treurspel* composed of discrete arguments among the Philistines over the meaning and function of Philistine institutions, institutions that break down in the interest of equity and mercy (as Samson is granted burial and allowed to perform at the celebration in exchange for his freedom (l. 947) despite the Soothsayer's authoritative prophecy). In his drama Vondel locates Grotius among the Philistines, even recounting Grotian claims in Dagon's voice. This is not to demonize Grotius but rather to humanize Dagon, to give voice to the sympathetic Philistines and Jews alike, to express the legitimate claims of a people struggling to mitigate a divine force at odds with a rational *ius gentium*. God refuses to recognize Dagon's *imperium* or to surrender faith and doctrine to human institutions. The tragedy of *Samson* lies in the best intentions of these institutions, in the effective exercise of *ius gentium* by a Philistine Prince, proceeding as they do with no reference to God's providence, Scripture, or doctrine.

Further Reading

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