Performing the Medieval Past: Vondel's *Gysbreght van Aemstel* (1637)*

Freya Sierhuis

On the afternoon of the 11th of January 1645, a raging fire destroyed most of the Nieuwe Kerk (New Church) on Amsterdam's Dam Square. In his 'Klaghte over het verongelucken der Kercke van Sinte Katharine, t'Amsterdam' ('Lamentation on the fall of the Church of St. Catherine in Amsterdam'), Joost van den Vondel gave voice to the shock and horror of the inhabitants at the sudden devastation of the city's principal church.¹ The poem performs an extensive meditation on the destruction of the Church that gives life and voice to the building, animating its sacred objects and artworks. The vivid descriptions of the roof collapsing, of tombstones cracking with heat so fierce it sears the remains of the deceased are framed within a larger conceit of the church as a despoiled virgin, a royal bride with torn robes and headdress. Yet something happens in the process of visualization: the building re-imagined appears in fact to be the pre-Reformation St. Catherine's church. There is mention of a statue of an Apostle, and of a crucifix.² Like an elaborate *mise en abîme*, one *prosopopoeia* nestles within another: the emperor Maximilian, kneeling before Mary and St. Catherine on a stained glass window, is heard imploring Virgin and patron saint to save their church (ll. 50–61).

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- 1 Joost van den Vondel, 'Klaghte over het verongelucken der Kercke van Sinte Katharine, t'Amsterdam', in J.F.M. Sterck a.o. (eds.), *De Werken van Joost van den Vondel: Volledige en geïllustreerde tekstuitgave*, 10 vols., (Amsterdam: Maatschappij voor goede en goedkope literatuur, 1927–1940) (henceforth: WB), IV, pp. 612–614.
- 2 The interpretation of ll. 44–45 is contested: while J.F.M. Sterck argues that the poem speaks of a real statue and crucifix (Sterck, *Oorkonden over Vondel en zijn kring* (Bussum: N.v. Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1918) pp. 108–109), Van Lennep maintains that the poem refers to images of Christ and the Apostles depicted on a stained glass window depicted in l. 46, a window which had survived the Reformation, WB, IV, p. 613. The ambiguity was quite possibly intended by Vondel.

While the confessional agenda of this poem may be controversial, it can hardly be denied that the dramatic staging of the pre-Reformation past is, in itself, striking and highly unusual. Vondel's 'Lamentation on the fall of the Church of St. Catherine', I will argue in this chapter, offers a way of approaching Vondel's tragedy *Gysbreght van Aemstel*, a play whose complex historicity and ambiguous confessional stance has long perplexed critics.³ In a similar manner as 'Lament on the fall of the Church of St. Catherine', *Gysbreght van Aemstel* performs the medieval, pre-Reformation past in as an absent presence, re-inscribing it into the present while at the same time registering its irrecoverable loss. The cultural 'work' the play performs, this chapter argues, can best be understood as *Trauerarbeit*, a form of commemoration and mourning which re-inscribes the past into the present and thereby actualizes, re-activates its traumas in every performance. This dramatic enactment of trauma as absent presence is highlighted in the play's evocation and elision of Catholic rituals and rites. Set on the eve and night before Christmas, the play shows the citizenry of Amsterdam preparing to attend Christmas mass, the solemn re-investiture of a bishop by a congregation of nuns, the performance of a hymn standing in for the 'Nunc Dimittis' as well as many acts of sacrilege and iconoclasm. The most horrific of these is an attack on the bishop and nuns, culminating in the rape and murder of Abbess Klaeris van Velsen that references the language of Eucharistic substitution, invoking and frustrating the tropes of martyr drama. In the *Gysbreght*, the numinous repeatedly intrudes upon the world of the play. A ghost, seemingly released from purgatory, appears to warn of an impending catastrophe, a mysterious light and voice guide Gijsbreght through the burning

3 The question of the play's Catholicism was first debated in the polemical exchange between Sterck and Maximilianus. See P. Maximilianus, 'Over den oorsprongkelijken Gysbreght', *Tijdschrift voor taal en letterkunde* 20 (1932), pp. 5–12, and 'Over de H. Mis in den Gysbreght', *Tijdschrift voor taal- en letterkunde* 21 (1933), 36–41, and J.F.M. Sterck, 'De "Verthooining vande superstitien vande paperye als misse en andere ceremonien" in Vondels *Gijsbrecht van Aemstel*', and the section 'De oorspronkelijke Gijsbrecht', in id., *Oud en nieuw over Joost van den Vondel: Verspreide opstellen* (Amsterdam: De Spieghel; Mechelen: Het Kompas, 1932), pp. 23–37 and 31–37. More recently the debate was revisited by Johan Koppenol, 'Nodeloze onrust: Het "Roomsche" karakter van Vondel's *Gysbreght van Aemstel*', *Nederlandse Letterkunde* 4 (1999), 313–329. Koppenol's analysis, however, is based on a questionable, psychologizing view of the role played by clerical figures such as abbot Willebrord, dean Peter and bishop Gozewijn. The fact that Gijsbreght's brother Willem dies while trying to save a relic of the True Cross is for example presented as proof that Catholicism is a religion based on external display (Koppenol, 'Nodeloze onrust', p. 316). Koppenol also takes no account of contextual evidence regarding Vondel's conversion, or of the Catholic sensibility pervading poems such as the 'Hymn of St. Agnes' and 'Kruisbergh'.

streets of Amsterdam. The resolution of the play revolves around a moment of efficacious prayer and angelic intercession. But the workings of these interventions remain opaque and inaccessible, a fact dramatized in the play's repeated staging of failed performatives. Performatives abound in *Gysbreght van Aemstel* and include speech acts such as warning, beseeching, praising, pardoning, prophesying and leave-taking. An overwhelming number of these take the form of apotropaic invocations, pleas for divine or saintly aid or intercession; supplications that, to terrifying effect, the play allows to go unanswered.

While it is known that the play's performance of scenes involving Catholic ritual aroused controversy (I will be returning to this issue in the following), these scenes also appeared to have exercised a powerful emotional and imaginative hold over audiences.⁴ Interestingly, several sketches by Rembrandt van Rijn produced during the rehearsals of the play, focus explicitly on the performance of sacred rites: Gijsbreght kneeling in front of Gozewijn; Klaeris and the nuns dressing the bishop in his Episcopal regalia. Early in the eighteenth century, a French visitor noted how the audience wept profusely while listening to the messenger's report of the murder and rape of Klaeris and the nuns.⁵ Such ambivalence shows, I argue, that the play raises uncomfortable questions about the relation between historic trauma, religion and national identity.

Written for the festive opening of Amsterdam's new city theater, *Gysbreght van Aemstel*'s complex nature as a civic-foundational play is indicated by its somewhat refractory subject matter: the sack of Amsterdam and the near-extermination of its ruling family, the lords of Amstel, in 1304.⁶ Set in Holland's

4 Ben Albach, *Langs kermessen en hoven: Ontstaan en kroniek van een Nederlands toneelgezelschap in de zeventiende eeuw* (Utrecht: Walburg Pers, 1977), pp. 11–12; id., *Drie eeuwen 'Gijsbreght van Aemstel': Kroniek van de jaarlijkse opvoeringen* (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1937).

5 Albach, *Drie eeuwen "Gijsbreght van Aemstel"*.

6 Critical opinion on the *Gysbreght* is divided between those like Koppenol and Parente who view the tragedy as a *memento mori* to the inhabitants of Amsterdam and those, like Konst and Maljaars, who view the play as a providential tragedy. See Johan Koppenol, 'Nodeloze onrust'; James A. Parente, *The Theatricality of History in the Dutch Golden Age* (London: Centre for Low Countries Studies, 1993); Jan W.H. Konst, *Fortuna, Fatum en Providentia Dei* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2003); A. Maljaars, "'Niet min Godvruchtelijk als dapper': Gijsbreght van Amstel verdedigd tegen zijn critici", *De zeventiende eeuw* 17 (2001), 138–161. Both interpretations have been challenged by Frans Willem Korsten, who has offered a political reading of the play focused on the idea of sovereignty and its alternatives (Frans-Willem Korsten, *Sovereignty as Inviolability: Vondel's Theatrical Explorations in the Dutch Republic* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2009), pp. 150–167) My analysis differs from previous accounts of the play in that it looks primarily at the cultural work the play performs through its staging of Catholic ritual.

medieval past, it continues where an earlier history play, P.C. Hooft's *Geeraerdt van Velsen* (1613) had left off. Hooft's *Geeraerdt van Velsen* told the history the murder of Count Floris v of Holland by a group of malcontent nobles in revenge for the rape of Machteld van Velsen; material well known from chronicles, histories and ballads.⁷ Vondel's play recounts the final act of this story of revenge and retribution, as the followers of the murdered count prepare to exact heavy vengeance on the last remaining conspirator, Gijsbreght van Aemstel, who, although not guilty of the murder, will have to pay for his role in the plot. A baroque *Treurspel* modelled closely on book 11 of Vergil's *Aeneid*, the destruction of Troy, the play focuses on the last day and night of the city. 'Ancient Troy is reborn', Vondel wrote in the dedicatory poem, 'and goes to ruin in smoldering Amsterdam' ('t Aeloude Troje word herboren, En gaet te gronde in 't gloeiende Amsterdam). As Marco Prandoni has shown, this Vergilian intertextuality shapes the dramatic plot to a considerable extent.⁸ Like the Trojans, the people of Amsterdam are lulled into false security by the enemy's seeming departure, and bring their doom over their own heads by taking into the city walls an enemy 'gift'; here not a wooden horse, but a ship laden with turf hiding soldiers in its hulk. There is a spy, Vosmeer, comparable to Vergil's Sinon, and a Haemstede for Pyrrhus, a Bishop named Gozewijn for old king Priamus. Significantly, however, the ghost which appears to warn of the town's impending doom, appears not to Gijsbreght (as to Aeneas), but to his wife, Badeloch. In a dream the ghost of Machteld van Velsen appears to her, like Creusa to Aeneas, foretelling the imminent destruction of the city. 'God's saints', Machteld warns, 'have long abandoned Church and altars' ('Gods heiligen hebben kerck en outers lang verlaeten', 111, l. 802). She implores Badeloch to save what remains of the family, and to rescue her daughter, Klaeris, abbess of the nunnery of the Poor Clares. Significantly, Gijsbreght refuses to believe the dream may be true.

Almost as if to underline the play's contrarian stance, Vondel dedicated the tragedy to his hero, the natural law theorist Hugo Grotius. Vondel had supported the Remonstrants during the Arminian controversy, and continued to champion the cause of Grotius, who was living in exile in Paris after his escape

7 On the murder of Floris v in the chronicles, see Jan Willem Verkaik, *De moord op graaf Floris v* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1996), on the politics of the play, see Bettina Noak, *Politische Auffassungen im niederländischen Drama des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Munich and Münster: Waxmann, 2002) ch. 3; cf. Freya Sierhuis, 'Revenge, Resistance and the Problem of Machiavellianism: P.C. Hooft's *Geeraerdt van Velsen* (1613)', *Dutch Crossing* 34 (2010), 115–137.

8 Marco Prandoni, *Een mozaïek van stemmen: Verbeeldend lezen in Vondel's *Gijsbreght van Aemstel** (Utrecht: Verloren, 2007).

from Loevestijn in 1621.⁹ In 1630, when Grotius secretly returned to the Republic, the two men struck up a lasting friendship. Grotius took a keen interest in Vondel's plans to write an epic on the life of Constantine, the emperor whose role in convening the Council of Nicea and ending schism in the Church made him a hero to all Erastian irenicists, and answered his friend's queries about matters relating to the history of the early Church. Reacting to the dedication of the *Gysbreght* Grotius admitted to their mutual friend, the humanist Gerardus Vossius, that he owed Vondel gratitude, 'for keeping my name alive among you'.¹⁰ Vondel's poetry in these years aligns with the development of Remonstrant political thought in moving away from a plea for limited toleration within the Dutch Reformed Church, to full religious toleration for all denominations, including Catholics. The city of Amsterdam had always been important to Vondel's reflections on religious toleration. A child of Mennonite refugees from the Southern Netherlands, he acknowledged the town's historic role in offering a safe-haven to those fleeing religious persecution.¹¹ This identification intensified during the late 1620s when Amsterdam, in defiance of the Counter-Remonstrant majority in the States of Holland, relaxed repressive measures against the Arminians, a process culminating in the opening of the

9 On Vondel's support for Grotius and the Remonstrants, see my *The Literature of the Arminian Controversy: Religion, Politics and the Stage in the Dutch Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

10 J.F.M. Sterck (ed.), *Vondelbrieven uit de zeventiende eeuw van en over de dichter* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1935) p. 89: 'Vondel heeft my vriendschap gedaan dat by een treurspel van treffelyken inhoudt, voeghelyke schikkinge, en overvloedige welsprekenheit aan my, als eenigen smaak hebbende in zulke dingen, heeft toege-eigent. Ook verheugh ik my dat myn naam, op wat wyze het ook zy, by U luiden wordt levendig gehouden.'

11 *Hierusalem verwoest*, in WB, II, pp. 74–215. In the dedication of the play to the Remonstrant C.P. Hooft, ex-burgomaster of the city and Oldenbarnvelt's main pillar of support within the city, Vondel explained: 'De weerdighste vrucht van deze arbeyd is dat vele duyzend verjaeghde menschen in den schoot en het gebied der doorluchtige Heeren Staten gastvry zijn geherberghet en lieflijck gekoestert, en die in veylige schaduwe gezeten niet meer hoeven te vreezen de grimmigheyd van die uyt het voorborgh der Hellen opgedonderde Spaensche Alecto, die drymael haer geslangde perryck geschud hebbende, met haer fackel het vuyr stack inde mutsaerden en rijbsossen die de palen en staecken bekleeden waeraen dagelijcx vele vrome Christenen wierden vast gemaect, die midden inde vlammen Iesus Christus lof toezingende, hem lijf en ziele opofferden tot eenen zoeten en Godbehaegelijcken reuck. Indien wy ernsthaftigh overwegen de als in het hemde ontvolden wreedheyd, en wederom de genoten ruste en veyligheyd: gewisselijck wy moeten geperst zijnde van een danckbaer gemoed met de aen strand opgeworpen Æneas uytbarsten en roepen: (...); ibid., p. 78, ll. 15–28.

first Remonstrant Church in 1630. Following the toleration treatises of Paschier de Fyne and Simon Episcopius, Vondel's poetry came to define toleration as civic right, and, in a move that appears to adumbrate the political thought of the brothers De la Court, as the foundation of the Republic's prosperity and stability. Amsterdam, again, embodied this vision of good governance:

Het Y en d'Aemstel voên de hoofstadt van Europe,
 Gekroont tot Keizerin; des nabuurs steun, en hope;
 Amstelredam, die 't hooft verheft aan 's hemels as,
 En schiet, op Plutoos borst, haar wortels door 't moerasch.
 Wat watren worden niet beschaduwt van haar zeilen?
 Op welke marckten gaat zy niet haar waren veilen?
 Wat volcken zietse niet beschijnen van de maan;
 Zy die zelf wetten stelt den ganschen Oceaan?
 Zy breit haar vleugels uit, door aanwas veler zielen,
 En sleept de weerelt in, met overlade kielen.
 De welvaart stut haar Staat, zoo lang d'aanzienlijkheit
 Des Raats gewetensdwanck zijn boozen wil ontzeit

(Y and Amstel feed the capital of Europe
 Crowned empress, her neighbors' hope and support;
 Amsterdam, who raises her head to Heaven's axis
 And plants her roots, on Pluto's breast, into the swamp
 Which waters are there, not shadowed from her sails?
 Which markets are there, where she does not trade her ware?
 Which peoples does she not see under the light of the moon?
 She, who herself gives laws to the ocean
 She spreads her wings, through the influx of so many souls
 Ad carries back the world, in heavy-loaded keels
 Prosperity supports her state, as long as the authority
 Of the magistrate bars conscience-constraint's evil design.)¹²

Vondel never abandoned this fundamental commitment to toleration, and yet the years before the publication of the *Gysbreght* witnessed a process of reorientation that put his previous allegiances under increasing strain, and alienated many of his former friends and supporters. In 1634 he abandoned work on the *Constantiniad* to return to tragedy. These are the years that his poetry

¹² Vondel, 'Op Amstelredam', WB, III, p. 354.

begins to show the signs of an attraction to Catholicism, to which he would convert in 1641.¹³ Hints of a Catholic sensibility can be detected long before: as early as 1622 he had written a hymn in praise of St. Agnes for the Catholic poet and priest Johannes Stalpaert van der Wiele.¹⁴ More polemical was the poem 'Kruisberg' ('Golgotha', 1637/38), latinized by Vondel's Catholic friend Plemp, and put to music by the composer Cornelis Thymansz. Padbrue, another Catholic, which describes the sacrament of the Eucharist in language suffused with imagery of *realis praesentia*.¹⁵ In the immediate aftermath of the *Gysbreght*, Vondel would write two explicitly confessional plays: *Maeghden* (*Virgins*, 1639) a martyr drama on St. Ursula and her virgins, and *Peter en Pauwels* (*Peter and Paul*, 1641), dedicated to Maria Tesselschade, who had preceded him on the way to the Catholic Church.

Vondel's attraction to the old faith seems to have stemmed at least in part from a growing desire for peace. Unease about Protestantism's fissiparous tendencies, experienced up close in his native Mennonite community, and witnessed, more traumatically, in the conflict that split the Dutch Reformed Church and lost Oldenbarnevelt his head, would certainly have added luster to the ideals of unity and universality advocated by the post-Tridentine Catholic Church. Looking on in horror as war engulfed his native Germany (Vondel had been born in Cologne, where the poet's family had lived several years before moving to Amsterdam) his attention came to lie with the question of reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics. On a personal level, Vondel remained deeply attached to his hero, Grotius. Yet in an important sense, his priorities had shifted. Vondel's later work never returns to the Erastian insistence on the subordination of the clergy to the civil magistrate which plays like *Palamedes* (1625) and satirical poems like the 'Roskam' ('Currycomb', 1630) had still presented as the only alternative to religious strife and division. In 1645, a few months after Grotius's death, Vondel translated his *Rivetiani Apologetici*

13 On Vondel's religion, see Gerard Brom, *Vondel's geloof* (Amsterdam: De Spieghel, 1935); for a concise introduction, see Judith Pollmann, 'Vondel's religion', in Jan Bloemendal and Frans-Willem Korsten (eds.), *Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679): Dutch Playwright in the Golden Age* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 85–100.

14 Sterck, *Oud en nieuw over Joost van den Vondel*, p. 87.

15 'De Krvisbergh. Aen Magdalene Baeck', WB III, pp. 601–604; Vondel and his daughter Anna maintained close ties with Plemp (1612–1697), a lawyer and doctor *utriusque iuris*. Anna's testament, dated 1675, named Plemp as her executor, charging him with the care for her elderly father and his grandchildren. For Plemp's life, see P.J. Blok and P.C. Molhuizen, *Nieuw Nederlands Biografisch Woordenboek*, 10 vols (Leiden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1911–1937), 6, pp. 1135–1136.

discussio (1645), published anonymously as *Grotius' Testament of hoofdpunten getrokken uit zijn jongste antwoord aan D. Rivet*, a work in which he, to the anger of his former allies among the Arminians, attempted to subsume, through selective additions and omissions, Grotius's Protestant irenicism within his own pro-Catholic apologetics.¹⁶

Yet even though Vondel had left the ideas of his former mentor behind, in one important aspect did his poetic praxis continue in many ways to bear the influence of Grotian irenicism. Grotius envisaged a role for tragedy in the irenicist endeavor of bringing about reconciliation by emphasizing consensus in the fundamentals of the faith and moderation in matters of doctrine. Thus, the dedication of *Christus patiens* (1608) to the French diplomat Pierre Jeanin argued for the importance of Christ's passion as a topic for tragedy, as it was one of the few fundamentals of the faith about which Christians of different denominations were still in agreement.¹⁷ Many years later, from his exile in Paris, Grotius wrote *Sophompaneas*, about the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers; or, as he put it in a letter: 'I have written a tragedy in which Joseph, the son of Jacob, is recognized by his brothers' ('scripsi ... tragoediam qua Josephus, Jacobi filius, a fratrīs recognoscitur').¹⁸ The verb 'recognoscitur' is particularly resonant here, identifying the moment of the brothers' recognition of Joseph, and their realization of their manifest guilt, with the Aristotelian *anagnorisis*. *Metanoia* and *catharsis* here converge on contrition and conversion. Vondel translated Grotius's play into Dutch and furnished it with two prequels, *Joseph in Egypt* (1640) and *Joseph in Dothan* (1640). In the preface to *Joseph in Dothan*, he seized the opportunity to drive home the topical and typological moral of Joseph's story:

Iosephs historie is t'allen tyden, zoo in 't klein als in 't groot, herspeelt onder allerhande geslachten en volcken: gelijk noch hedensdaeghs on-

16 On this text, see the contribution of Russ Leo to this volume. For the text of Grotius's testament, see WB, IV, pp. 623–632. On Hooft's reaction see Mieke Smits-Veldt, 'Hooft en De Groot', in Jeroen Jansen (ed.), *Omnibus Idem: Opstellen over P.C. Hooft ter gelegenheid van zijn driehonderdvijftigste sterfdag* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1997) pp. 51–68, pp. 67–68.

17 Henk Nellen, *Hugo de Groot: Een leven in strijd om de vrede 1583–1645* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2007), pp. 487–488 [= id., *Hugo Grotius: A Lifelong Struggle for Peace in Church and State 1583–1645* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), pp. 602–603]; Hugo Grotius, *Meletius sive de iis quae inter Christianos conveniunt Epistola*, ed. Guillaume H.M. Posthumus Meyjes (Leiden: Brill, 1988); Posthumus Meyjes, 'Introduction', p. 51.

18 Grotius to J. Slupecki de Konary, d.d. 2 August 1635, cited in Nellen, *Hugo de Groot*, p. 393; *Hugo Grotius*, p. 483.

der de Christenen, die, gebroeders en leden eens lichaems zijnde, en zich luttel aen Iosephs verdriet keerende, den onnoozelen dagelix van-gen verkoopen en leveren aen hunne allerbitterste en gezwore ervvyanden; wanneerze, d'een den anderen verradende envernielende, liever de poorten van Christenrijck voor den Ismaëlleren open zetten, dan malkanderen toegeven en ondergaen.

Dedication to Joachim de Wickevort, ll. 42–49

(Throughout history, Joseph's story has been re-enacted, both on a small and a great scale, among every race and every people; as even to this day among Christians who, being brothers and members of one body, caring little for Joseph's sorrow, every day again sell the innocent and deliver him to his most bitter, sworn enemies; when they, each betraying and destroying the other, prefer to open the gates of Christianity to the Ishmaelites, than to give in and tolerate each other.)

It is the hatred among Christians of different denominations which has brought war and destruction on Europe, and has laid her open to Turkish invasion. Indeed, 'if Joseph would be heard more loudly, what misery would not be prevented?' Assuredly, Vondel argues, those brothers who are now waging war against each other, would take up arms against the common enemy.¹⁹

Themes like the need for unity among Christians in the face of the Ottoman threat in the poetry and drama of the period provide some evidence that, even at the height of the confessional age, irenicist ideas had not become superseded, and enjoyed currency that stretched beyond the work of a handful Protestant scholars like Grotius and Drury. In England irenicism came to be associated with James's I (highly unpopular) policy of religious and political appeasement. A number of plays written against the background of the Spanish match, and the gradual ascendancy of Arminianism at court in the late 1620's, such as Massinger's *The Renegado* (1624), *The Roman Actor* (1626), *The Great*

19 Vondel, *Joseph in Dothan*, 'Dedication to Joachim de Wicfort', WB IV, p. 75, ll. 73–81: 'Liet Ioseph sich wat luider hooren, in stede dat men onverzoenelijck met styve kaecken de moortrompetten blaest, wat zoud'er menighmael al onheils verhoedt worden. Hoe haest zouden de broeders, die nu aen alle kanten, te water en te lande, in 't blancke harnas, tegens een gekant staen, dien vervloecten degen afleggen, en malkanderen omhelzende, liever, als Gots eere onze wapens vorderde, dien algemeenen ervvyant zijnen onrechtvaerdigen roof doen slaecken, dan hem, en hunne plaegen noch verder inroepende, Gots rechtvaerdige zaeck in 't uiterste gevaer stellen.'

Duke of Florence (1631), *The Emperor of the East* (1631) and *Believe as you List* (1631) argue the need for rulers to foster peace through the exercise of tolerance and moderation.

Closer to the actual theater of war, in Germany and the Dutch Republic, dramatists exploited the resources of the *Trauerspiel* to warn of the threat posed by the forces of the Islamic Antichrist. Vondel's martyr tragedy *Maeghden* (*Virgins*) centers around the confrontation between Ursula and her virgins and the Muslim army of Attila's Huns. It is not impossible that Gryphius who, as Joel Lande argues elsewhere in this volume, might have encountered Vondel's plays during his student days in Leiden (1638–1644), and who would later translated Vondel's *Gebroeders* (1640), took some elements from Vondel's Jesuit-inspired martyr drama.²⁰ Gryphius's play consciously elides the historical and confessional complexities of the story of a Greek orthodox princess being held prisoner by a Persian Shah, Abbas I, who, as a Shi'ite was in fact an ally of the European powers against the Sunni Ottomans, in favor of a narrative of an all-out clash between Islam and Christianity, rhetorically figured, just as in Vondel's Ursula play, on the chastity of the female protagonist.²¹

These tragedies do therefore not simply reflect upon, or engage with contemporary experiences of war and religious division, but rather integrate these into their dramatic poetics, making them central to the public work of tragedy. This observation challenges the assumptions underlying some recent discussions in early modern studies which view the stage as the space where the remnants of pre-Reformation religious culture are imaginatively reconfigured.²² There is a powerful attraction to the idea of a lingering spectral presence of pre-Reformation ideas in the plays of Shakespeare, or of those plays stepping into a void left by the demise of medieval sacramental theology. In *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, Sarah Beckwith argues:

20 Volker Meid, *Die Deutsche Literatur im Zeitalter des Barock: Vom Späthumanismus zur Frühaufklärung 1570–1740*, (München: C.H. Beck, 2009), p. 411.

21 On the play's refusal to treat the theme of confessional conflict within the Islamic and Christian worlds it describes, see Bethany Wiggen's 'Staging Shi'ites in Silesia: Andreas Gryphius' *Catharina von Georgien*', *The German Quarterly* 83, 3 (2010), 1–18.

22 Prominent examples of this approach are Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), and 'Remnants of the Sacred in Early Modern England', in Margareta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (eds.), *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 337–345, and Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011).

When authority is no longer assumed in the speech acts of a sacramental priesthood, it must be found, refound, in the claims, calls, judgements of every person who must single themselves and others out in these calls, and grant them the authority in each particular instance. So Shakespeare's theatre is a search for community, a community neither given nor possessed but in constant formation and deformation. This puts him in powerful continuity, of course, with a theatre he is often thought to have entirely superseded and overturned.²³

Yet the lure of the metaphors of revenants and remains is perhaps better resisted, as it presupposes a view of the relationship between the theater and Catholic religious past as a past perfect that is difficult to sustain. For the reason why *Gysbreght van Aemstel* so particularly offended Amsterdam's Calvinist church council was exactly because the play derived part of its emotional efficacy through ritual representation of community. The idea that the vestigial remains of Catholic practices became something of an altogether different order through their translation into fiction is equally problematic. This assumes an intellectual separation between the culture of the stage, and the turbulent and messy world of politico-religious controversy; a separation between the spheres of literature and religion, which, for many of the plays of the period, is impossible to sustain.

Rather than the literary being autonomous from religious, these plays show the complex ways in which the literary is involved in religion and vice versa. Situating Vondel's *Gysbreght van Aemstel* against the background of the history of the Dutch Revolt, and, more recently, that of the Thirty Years' War, and viewing it as, on some level, as an imaginative reworking of the story of the Sack of Magdeburg, will allow us to understand the complexity of the play's meditation on the nature of history, the conflicting demands of peace, reconciliation and religious identity, and its critical examination of the ethics of self-sacrifice.

For most contemporaries, the Sack of Magdeburg on 20 May 1631 came as a culmination of the horrors of the Thirty Years' War. When the imperial troops under the command of Tilly and Pappenheim had succeeded in breaching the city's walls, the soldiers ran havoc, plundering and murdering the inhabitants. When carnage had died down, Magdeburg's population of 30,000 had been reduced to a mere 5,000.²⁴ So complete, in fact, was the destruction

23 Beckwith, *Shakespeare*, p. 5.

24 In the words of the imperial field marshal, Count Pappenheim: 'I believe that over twenty thousand souls were lost. It is certain that no more terrible work and divine punishment

that 'to Magdeburgise' became a byword for to annihilate, to destroy. Vondel's response came in the form of a lament: 'Magdeburg's Funeral Sacrifice' ('Maeghdeburgh's Liickoffer'), dedicated to King Gustavus Adolphus after his victory over Tilly's forces at the Battle of Leipzig; an event viewed by Protestants all over Europe as revenge for 'Magdeburg'.²⁵ The poem begins as a meditation on the fickleness of Fortune—Tilly, who so long seemed invincible now defeated, while Gustavus Adolphus triumphs—before settling on an extensive meditation on the horrors of Magdeburg, in particular the mass rape of its female inhabitants. While the *topos* of conquest as rape is conventional, it was particularly resonant for a city whose heraldic sign carried a crowned virgin, and which prided itself on having defended the purity of Evangelical faith, withstanding an earlier siege by the troops of Charles V during the wars of the Schmalkaldic League. Because Magdeburg owed its virginal status to the fact that it had never been conquered, Catholic narratives transformed the sack into a *Bluthochzeit*, thus presenting the rape as a punishment for the virgin's pride and idolatry, symbolic retribution for the city's desecration of the cult of the Virgin.²⁶ Yet competing narratives existed which rejected providential accounts of the fall of the city as divine punishment, foregrounding questions of human agency and responsibility. In his diary, the Calvinist Prince Christian II of Anhalt compared the fall of the city to that of towns like Tyrus, Sidon and Babel. He saw the citizens of Magdeburg as at least in part responsible for their city's fate: they had stubbornly refused to surrender, and had in a desperate attempt to ward off the enemy soldiers lighted the fire that had reduced the city to rubble.²⁷

In *Gysbreght van Aemstel*, Vondel appears to have held these two explanatory models conjointly in his mind, appealing both to an inscrutable providence, while insisting on the role of individual agency that involved a critique of the heroics of self-sacrifice. In his poetic response to the sack of Magdeburg, Vondel employed the trope of the sack as a rape; indeed, there is a direct imagistic link between Vondel's representation of the sack of Magdeburg and the account of the rape and murder of Klaeris and the nuns in act V of the *Gysbreght*.²⁸

has been seen since the destruction of Jerusalem', quoted in Hans Medick and Pamela Selwyn, 'Historical Event and Contemporary Experience: The Capture and Destruction of Magdeburg in 1631', *History Workshop Journal* 52 (Autumn 2001), pp. 23–48, esp. p. 35.

25 'Maeghdeburgh's Liickoffer', WB, IV, pp. 357–366.

26 Medick and Selwyn, 'Historical Event and Contemporary Experience', p. 37.

27 Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) pp. 149–150.

28 'Maeghdeburgh's Liickoffer' ll. 85–92: 'Wat gruwel trapt, met Christen hoofds banieren,

The poem, in fact, predicts the creation of the tragedy, as Vondel explains how Magdeburg 'inspired my Muse to commemorate that fatal day with a tragedy'.²⁹ Like 'Magdeburgh's Funeral Sacrifice', *Gysbreght van Aemstel* employs rape as synecdoche for the suffering of the city. We get a first premonition of what is to follow at the close of Act I. The chorus of Amsterdam Virgins, believing the enemy to have departed, voice their relief that the city has escaped the wrath of its enemies. They sing:

Nu stelt het quick van zoete keelen,
Om daar gezangen op te speelen,
Tot lof van God, die op zijn' troon
Gezeten is, zoo hoogh en heerlijk;
Van waer hy zien kon, hoe begeerlijk
Het Sparen stack na Aemstels kroon.
Hoe wraeck met zwaerden en met speeren
De torenkroon van 't hoofd wou scheeren
Der schoone en wijd vermaerde stad,
En rucken door geweld van benden
Der vesten gordel van haer lenden,
En plondren haer kleenood en schat;
En schenden d'edele en getrouwe,
Gelijck de schender Velzens vrouwe.

I. ll. 415–428³⁰

(Now place the main of lovely voices
To perform songs here
In honor of God, who on his throne
Is sat, so high and majestic;

| Op maeghdepalm, tot schennis van laurieren! | En schaeckt'er weeu en wees haer' roosekrans: | Op 't versche lyck van vaders en van mans! | Die tyranny past Turcken en Maraenen. | Ah hemel! strem, op 't aenschyn, dese traenen | En kuyschen dau, tot parlen altemael: | Dit suyver bloed, dees' sprengklen tot korael.'

29 'Maeghdeburgh's Liickoffer' ll. 93–96: 'Ons' Sangheldin heeft lust, met die juweelen | Ver-ciert, voor moordautaer, op treurtoonneelen, | Te vieren dien beschreyelycken dagh: | Die God nocht heyligh kerckenrecht ontsagh.' Although the connection between *Gysbreght* and 'Magdeburg's Liickoffer' was noticed by Vondel's editor J.F.M. Sterck, later critics have not given the connections between the two works any further attention.

30 On the structural function of rape in the play, see Korsten, *Sovereignty as Inviolability*, pp. 159–163.

From where he could see how eagerly
 Haarlem envied Amstel's crown.
 How, with swords and with spears, vengeance
 Would shear the tower-crown from the head
 Of the fine and widely renowned city,
 And by the violence of the troops
 Tear the citadel's girdle from her loins
 And plunder her beauties and treasure
 And violate the noble and faithful
 Like the rapist of Velsen's lady.)

This is a highly problematic moment in the play, where the idea of divine spectatorship appears to challenge any facile appeal to providential justice—a challenge which seems reinforced by the dramatic irony that makes the virgins unwittingly prophesize the city's fate.

The connection between the poem and the play extends moreover to the way in which both employ dramatic visualization, *prosopopoeia* and emblematic imagery otherwise associated with the devotional poetry of poems such as 'Kruisbergh'. The poem exploits language and imagery associated with martyrdom, adopting the floral symbolism of flowers traditionally linked to the cult of saints and martyrs, such as roses and creeping myrtle (a plant called *maagdenpalm*, or virgins' palm, in Dutch) but nevertheless appears to resist the emblematic readings of fall of Magdeburg as a rape that characterizes so much of the literature on the city's fate. There is no personified Virgin here, just mothers, widows and daughters. The poem evokes the tropes of martyrdom, but goes on to frustrate our expectations by insisting on the historicity of the event, and the unredeemed evil of the victims' suffering.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the play was bound to generate controversy. According to Brandt, Vondel's sympathetic depiction of Catholicism gave rise to rumours that the poet's faith was 'wavering'.³¹ Yet when Vondel's old enemies, the Calvinist ministers, raised the alarm about the planned performance of the *Gysbreght* on December 26, 1637, the accusation was in fact more specific. The notes of a meeting of the church council held on the 17th of

31 Geeraerd Brandt, *Het leven van Joost van den Vondel*, ed. P.J. Leendertz. (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1932), p. 35: 'Maar hoe pryswaardig het treurspel der Maagden was ten opzicht van de kunst, men vondt 'er evenwel zaaken in die veelen bedroefden: des Dichters zucht tot de stellingen en gewoonten der Roomsche kerke, en zyne afwyking tot haare dwaalingen die hy wel haast in andere zyne dichtwerken ten wyle ten vollen openbaarde. Men hieldt dat hy, Gysbrecht van Aamstels treurspel dichtende, toen alreede aan 't waggelen was.'

December under presidency of D. Petrus Wachtendorf mention a performance 'in the chamber of Rhetoric', containing a representation of 'the superstition of popery such as the mass and other ceremonies', and charging D. Laurentius and Claas Jansz. Visscher to remonstrate with the regents of the city orphanage (the administrators of the city theater) and the burgomasters.³² A week later, the notes record the efforts of Laurentius and Visscher, and the burgomasters' somewhat ambiguous reply, that care would be taken that neither church nor state would be traduced, and the play would more likely lead to 'the mockery of popery than to the dishonor of the Christian religion'.³³ The following week, matters took a new turn: according to the records of the meeting held on the 31st of December, the burgomasters, who had apparently been persuaded to ban the play, had been convinced by several people 'hostile to the Church' to allow the performance after all.³⁴ On the 7th of January, one reads how in the following week Wachtendorf and Visscher, apparently unaware of the fact that the *Gysbreght* had already been performed on the 3rd of January, renewed their efforts, urging the suppression of the play 'even though it is said that the most offensive matters have been removed from it'.³⁵ After yet another attempt the following week, to suppress 'the popish tragedy' the notes of the meeting of 28 January record the council's decision to let the matter rest 'until the time that there will be remonstrated with the burgomasters about popery and the insolences of the papists'.³⁶

Yet while the church council fretted and chafed, *Gysbreght* proved a resounding success with the audience. The first performance on January 3 1638 inaugurated a tradition of performing the play during the first days of the new year; a tradition that was in fact only broken as a result of the anti-traditionalist iconoclasm of the 1960s. Part of the play's fascination undoubtedly derived from its compelling evocation of the city's medieval setting. The play's extensive use of chorography draws out the contours of its medieval townscape, which still overlapped substantially with that of the seventeenth century city, and shared many of its iconic landmarks: the harbor of the IJ, the Dam, the Nieuwe Kerk, the Haarlemmerpoort and the Schreijerstoren. At the same time, this was a city radically different, foreign, almost; cut off from the present from something more divisive than the passing of time.

32 The texts of the notes are reproduced in Sterck, *Oud en nieuw over Joost van den Vondel*, pp. 35–37.

33 Sterck, *Oud en nieuw over Joost van den Vondel*, p. 36.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., p. 37.

36 Ibid.

In the year of *Gysbreght's* first performance, it is well remembered, the Dutch Republic had existed for little more than half a century. Its recent past was characterized by a double rupture: a Reformation, and a revolt against Habsburg rule. The remarkable military, economic and cultural achievements of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century did nothing to mask the new Republic's novelty, its conspicuous lack of origins, or its anomalous status as a republic in a Europe dominated by monarchies; if anything, they highlighted it. Andrew Escobedo's observation that nationalism in early modern England did not merely compensate for historical loss, but also helped to create it, as it depended on the gap between past and present as the condition for its success, likewise holds true for the seventeenth century Dutch Republic.³⁷ Vondel's play positions itself within this field of conflicting forces, as it foregrounds the originary violence that foundational narratives as the Batavian myth attempt to transform and transcend. The representation of the past in *Gysbreght van Aemstel* presents an interesting analogy to Catholic practices of cultural and religious resistance and commemoration. For the Catholic inhabitants of the Dutch Republic, the recent national past was loaded with a fundamental ambiguity. While many Catholics had supported the rebellion against Spanish authority, the course of the Revolt had left them politically increasingly marginalized. For Dutch Catholics, the Revolt meant a historical rupture which had torn up the fabric of its religious life, destroying its ecclesiastical hierarchy and organization, confiscating or destroying churches, monasteries and abbeys, effacing the markers of its hallowed geography of pilgrimage sites, chapels, shrines and holy wells.³⁸ Against Protestant tales of resistance, persecution and providential delivery, Catholics created their own counter-narratives and martyrologies, such as Petrus Opmeer's *Historia martyrum Batavicornum* (1595), commemorating stories such as that of the martyrs of Gorcum; nineteen clerics, tortured and executed by the Beggars, the troops of William de la Marck, the infamous Count of Lumey, or that of Cornelius Musius, prior of the St. Agatha monastery in Delft and another of Lumey's victims.³⁹

37 Andrew Escobedo, *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England: Foxe, Dee, Spenser, Milton* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 20. See also Margaret Aston, 'English Ruins and English History: The Dissolution and the Sense of the Past', in id., *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: The Habledon Press, 1984), pp. 313–337.

38 For the position of Catholics in the Republic see most recently Judith Pollmann, *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

39 Petrus Opmeer (1526–1595) was a polymath, historiographer and writer and translator of Catholic apologetics. He translated Vincentius Lirinensis, *Een seer schoon boecksken voor*

Against the background of the culture of commemoration that began to emerge around the turn of the century, as the danger of Spanish victory was beginning to ebb away, such narratives proved jarring fragments in a nascent tradition of the Revolt as a national war for liberty and religion; painful reminders of past scarred by civil war.⁴⁰ Yet there is another side to this story as well. As Judith Pollmann has argued, Dutch Catholics continued to challenge the status-quo, resisting the confiscation of their churches and the destruction of monasteries and holy places. There are numerous accounts of Catholics travelling to worship at the ruined remains of churches or pilgrimage sites, kneeling at the site where an altar, chapel or shrine had once stood.⁴¹ The chapel of Our Lady of Succor at Heiloo in Noord Holland which had been destroyed during the siege of Alkmaar in 1573, continued to draw pilgrims even when, in 1637, the States of Holland ordered the leveling of the ruins. Pilgrimage to Heiloo continued to flourish, increasing in popularity after the discovery of a miraculous well not far from the sanctuary, in 1713.⁴² Such phenomena are, as the work of Alexandra Walsham has shown, not to be viewed as the 'survival' of pre-Reformation practices, but a concerted effort to re-appropriate space and re-sacralise the landscape.⁴³

In one aspect did the situation of Catholics in the Republic differ markedly from their English co-religionists. As the Republic's public church, the Dutch Reformed Church it was obliged to baptize all children, irrespective of the confessional background of their parents, to perform marriages and to bury the dead. Although some Catholics refused to bury their dead in churches they regarded as polluted by Calvinist worship, preferring cemeteries on consecrated ground, where they did not have to follow Protestant strictures on funeral rites, many continued to use the churches where earlier generations had been laid to rest. In Dutch Protestant churches it was not an uncommon sight to see Catholics praying by the grave stones of family members.

die outheyt ende waerheyt des gemeene christen gheloofs teghens die godloose nieuwicheyden alder ketterryen (Haarlem 1561). His *Officium missae* was dedicated to the Duke of Alba.

40 Judith Pollmann, 'Burying the Dead, Reliving the Past: Ritual, Resentment and Sacred Space in the Dutch Republic', in Benjamin Kaplan, Henk van Nierop, Judith Pollmann (eds.), *Catholic Communities in Protestant States: Britain and the Netherlands c. 1570–1720* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 84–102, esp. pp. 86–88.

41 Pollmann, 'Ritual, Resentment and Sacred Space', pp. 85–86.

42 Ibid., pp. 87–88.

43 Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

'As long as they buried their dead [In Protestant Churches]' Pollmann argues, 'they retained an important physical and spiritual stake in the churches, which meant that resentment at their dispossession could not abate'.⁴⁴

Praying on the gravestones of family or forebears thus carries with it a strong symbolic performativity, as well as serving more strictly devotional ends; highlighting both the dispossession of Catholic churches and the continued Catholic presence in the Dutch Republic. Analogously, the staged performance of Catholic rites in the *Gysbreght*, like the evocation of sacred objects in the 'Lament on the Fall of the Church of St. Catherine', offers an ambiguous gesture, signifying both continuity and rupture, commemoration and loss. This view, which sees the play as *actively recollecting* rather than merely *reflecting upon* outlawed religious practices, rituals and rites presents an alternative to narratives about the 'spectral' presence of the Catholic past; narratives which reify the break between past and present, and effectively curtail the real power of these representations of the sacred on stage. Such a view ignores how in pre-modern society memory, both in terms individual faculty and as wider socio-cultural practice, always entails as a dynamic process, a making present of what has been neglected, repressed or forced from view, but not, thereby, lost.⁴⁵ The representation of history in *Gysbreght van Aemstel* offers a powerful example of the role of memory in creating, at least for the duration of the performance, an affective community of mourning that unites Catholics and Protestants, and that, in making visible a continued Catholic presence, challenges hegemonic Protestant accounts of the recent national past.

Upon closer scrutiny, the play's Vergilian intertext appears to operate within a wider web of historical references, borrowings, echoes and illusions.⁴⁶ The

44 Pollmann, 'Ritual, Resentment and Sacred Space', p. 96.

45 See Philip Schwyzer, *Literature, Nationalism and Memory in Early Modern England and Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), esp. ch. 2, 'Bale's Books and Aske's Abbey's: Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Nationhood', pp. 49–75, and Andrew Hiscock, *Reading Memory in Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010); also Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

46 On the historical references in the *Gysbreght*, see Parente, *The Theatricality of History* and Marco Prandoni, 'Staging the History of Amsterdam in Vondel's "Gysbreght van Aemstel": A Non-Confessional Dramatic Contribution to the Narrative of the Dutch Revolt', in Jan Bloemendal, Peter Eversmann and Elsa Strietman (eds.), *Drama, Performance and Debate: Theatre and Public Opinion in the Early Modern Period* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), pp. 297–310. Although my analysis has many points in common with Prandoni's article, I disagree with him on the function of the performance of Catholic ritual in the play, and with his insistence on the play's confessional neutrality.

turf ship mirrors the Trojan horse, but alludes more directly to events in the recent past; to the year 1577, to be precise, when the States of Holland had tried to gain access to then still Catholic Amsterdam by a similar ruse—and failed. In 1590, an identical stratagem had enabled Maurits, the Prince of Orange to capture Breda, a moment that entered the collective memory of the Revolt as a great triumph. It is on this episode that the passage is most directly modelled, including all the well-known details: how the ship had suddenly begun to take in water, leaving the men over their knees in freezing water and how the soldiers, through their coughing had nearly betrayed themselves (ll. 625–632, 653–659).

The attacks on monasteries and churches similarly refer to events in the recent past. The confrontation between Abbot Willebrord and Diederik van Haarlem, and the seizure of the Carthusian monastery in act II alludes to the attacks by Beggar troops on the Carthusian monastery St. Andrew, Sint Andries ter zaliger haven, just outside the old city walls, plundered during the iconoclastic fury of 1566, set on fire by Lumey in 1572, and finally destroyed by the soldiers of the Beggar leader Diederik Sonoy in 1577.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the setting of the play, on Christmas eve, calls to mind the capture of the town of Mende in Southern France by the troops of the Huguenot captain Matthieu Merle, in 1579, when the assailants, just as the troops in the play, attacked the city during Christmas mass, ending a two-year long siege.⁴⁸ These are highly ambiguous moments in the play. Staged, the distant, medieval past casts a highly unfavourable light over the recent, heroic, national past. For there is no doubt that the audience, as well as having its emotional sympathy aligned with the people of Amsterdam, victims, after all, also sees these scenes depicted not just as acts of war, but as sacrilege. Listen how Gijsbreght's brother, Arend reports the sack of the city's main church:

... wy vliegen onversaeght
 Door vier en zwaerden heen, om 't al voor God te waegen:
 Maer vinden voor ons komst de kerckdeur opgeslaegen,
 En hooren eenen galm, die uitbarst over straet,
 En over al de stad, en God voor 't voorhoofd slaet,
 In zijnen hoogen troon, als eer de kerck der Ioden.

47 <http://www.theopas.nl/index.php/amsterdam/7-kloosters-in-amsterdam?start=2>.

48 Ben Albach, "De Kersnacht lagh in stucken": *Gijsbreght van Aemstel*, vs. 1175; *Spektator* 21 (1992), 304–307; id., 'De vertoningen van de kloostermoorden in *Gijsbrecht van Aemstel*', *Literatuur* 4 (1987), 328–335.

D'Autieren en het koor zijn opgehoopt met dooden
 Wat bleef' er ongeschent! wat kreegh'er niet een' krack!
 't Gevlughte volleck zit op trans, gewelf, en dack,
 En bied noch tegenweer, en quetst ons zelfs met steenen
 En hout, uit misverstand. men hoort de vrouwen weenen
 En kindren, die vol schrick krioelen hier en daer,
 De binnetranssen langs. De kaerssen op 't autier
 Zijn zommigen gebluscht, en zommigen die blaecken.
 De kerreckschenners woën, en passen wat te raecken,
 En vechten om den buit, en plondren 't al, oock zelf
 Het Marianum, dat te pronck hing van 't gewelf,
 Word afgeruckt: men zet in 't glibbrigh bloed zijn stappen.
 Men torst'er kelcken uit, kassuiffelen en kappen,
 Die stijf staen van gesteent, van parlen en rood goud,
 Om 't heerelijckst, als 't plagh, wanneermen hooghtijd houd,
 En koor en outerkleen.
 de Kersnacht lagh in stucken.

IV, ll. 1154–1175

(... Fearlessly we speed
 Through swords and fire to wager everything for God
 Yet find as we arrive the door battered open
 And hear an echo, resounding through the street
 and throughout the town, that strikes God in the face
 On his high throne, as when before the Jewish temple
 The choirs and altars are piled high with corpses.
 Is anything held sacred? What was not destroyed?
 The refugees crowd the rafters, the roofs, the vaults
 They still fight back; we too are pelted by mistake,
 With planks and bricks. You can hear women weeping;
 Children, frightened to death are swarming everywhere
 Around the galleries. Some candles on the altar
 Have been extinguished, while some others are burning brightly.
 The desecrators rage, and damage what they can,
 They fight for loot, steal even the Marianum,
 gloriously suspended from the vaulted roof.
 That, too, is ripped apart.
 They wade in slippery blood.
 They drag out every chalice, every cassock, copes—
 Embroidered stiff with stones and pearls and reddish gold

Most splendid all, and most fitting for holy days—
Choir and altar cloths. Christmas night became a hell.)

The English translation of the last line gives only one meaning of the Dutch original, 'De kerstnacht lach aan stukken', which literally translates as 'Christmas night fell to pieces', which can with some liberty be rendered as 'Christmas night became a hell', but which means, in a more literal sense, the falling to pieces of the actual *Kerstnacht*, one of the Nieuwe Kerk's most precious treasures, lost during the Reformation, its memory kept in the records of Catholic antiquarians such as Cornelis Gijsbertsz. Plemp, one of Vondel's closest friends.⁴⁹ In a more general way, this episode resonates with the rhetoric of ruins employed in Catholic narratives of Protestant iconoclasm, such as Richard Verstegan's *Theatrum crudelitatum hereticorum nostri temporis* (1587), where acts of real and symbolic violence, the destruction or degradation of buildings, paintings, grave monuments and statues merge seamlessly with acts of humiliation, torture and murder of Catholic clergy.⁵⁰

The destruction of the Nieuwe Kerk thus creates, as it were, an echo-chamber of destruction by fusing the Fall of Troy with the sack of Amsterdam in the early fourteenth century and the iconoclastic fury of the recent past, while drawing an explicit parallel to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. The idea of history we are presented with is one that is essentially theatrical as well as invariably repetitive. *Gysbreght van Aemstel* answers to Walter Benjamin's observations on the *Trauerspiel*'s obsession with repetition and recurrence: the past is a stage on which the same bloody tragedies are enacted time after time and again: Jerusalem, Troy, Rome, Mende, Magdeburg, Amsterdam.⁵¹ Yet repetition also functions structurally in the dramatic denouement of the play. Every act of violence not only resonates with countless similar acts in the past, it also gestures towards new crimes, each one more brutal than the previous. Thus, the occupation of the Carthusian monastery

49 The Marianum was a large, double-sided statue of the Virgin surrounded by a nimbus, suspended from the vault of the choir. According to Sterck, Vondel based his description of the Marianum on Plemp's poem 'De patria', Sterck, *Oorkonden over Vondel en zijn kring*, p. 117. On the 'Kerstnacht', see Albach, "De Kersnacht lagh in stucken".

50 On Verstegan, see Paul Arblaster, *Antwerp and the World: Richard Verstegan and the International Culture of the Catholic Reformation* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004); Anne Dillen, *The Construction of Martyrdom in the English Catholic Community, 1535–1603* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

51 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (New York: Verso publishing, 2009), pp. 81–83.

signals towards the sack of the Nieuwe Kerk, just as the attack on Kristijn, Gijsbreght's sister, who is dragged out of the church by her hair and carried off by the soldiers, anticipates the rape and murder of Klaeris and the nuns. Thus, the third act ends with the chorus singing a hymn on the Slaughter of the Innocents. The fourth act opens with a debate between Bishop Gozewijn and Klaris in which Gozewijn tries to convince her to leave him behind and to save herself. Klaris refuses to abandon him; she regards Gozewijn as her father in spirit and flesh. The nuns are equally resolute. Gozewijn asks them to dress him with the episcopal regalia, miter, ring and staff. Together they sing Simeon's Cantic. At that moment, Gijsbreght storms in, appalled to see the women making no preparations to save themselves. He implores them to flee and pulls out all the stops trying to persuade them of the seriousness of the situation. Accurately, as it will turn out, he predicts how their enemies will slay Gozewijn and rape the nuns. He tells how Machteld appeared to Badeloch, and how a mysterious disembodied voice spurred him on 'save my uncle, save my child'. He challenges their martyr-stance, calling their behavior suicidal, implores them, on his knees, by the blood and the wounds of Christ (1v, ll. 1029–1055). Gozewijn nevertheless remains convinced to die a martyr. As the enemy draws near and Gijsbreght rushes off to try to defend the gate, the scene switches to the hall of Gijsbreght's castle, where Badeloch anxiously awaits news about her husband. Instead, Arend enters, bringing the news of the lost battle, the sack of the Nieuwe Kerk, the murder of Gijsbreght's brother Willem, slain before the altar while attempting to protect a relic of the True Cross, and the abduction of Kristijn. We no longer harbour any illusions about what fate holds in store for Klaeris and Gozewijn. The account of the massacre of the nuns is then brought with an element of delay, coming only in the fifth act, through the report of a messenger.⁵² The messenger describes how Witte van Haemstede, Floris's bastard son fought his way into the convent, finding the nuns and Gozewijn at prayer. He grabs the bishop by the beard with a hand which is said to be 'stained still with Kristijn's blood'. To his surprise the nuns rise to the defense of their bishop, surrounding his body like a human shield. Haemstede hesitates for a moment, astonished, but when he sees the face of Klaeris in the crowd, he thinks back on her father, Van Velsen, the murder, and revenge takes possession of him. He stabs the nuns one by one until he reaches his victims. Gozewijn lashes out at him for shedding women's blood. Haemstede replies like a Protestant church vandal:

⁵² Ben Albach, 'De vertoningen van de kloostermoorden'.

Ghy zult die eedle Reien
 Als basterdbisschop dan gaen volgen en geleien.
 Hardneckige, legh nu den valschen mijter neer.
 Zoo sprack de basterdzoon, en ruckte hem om veer
 Met stoel met al in 't bloed: de mijter viel 'er mede

v, ll. 1453–1457

(You shall guide and follow that noble chorus
 as a bastard bishop, stubborn fool
 And now off, with that bogus miter.
 Thus speaks the bastard son, pushes him, overturns
 His chair into the pool of blood; the miter falls.)

Haemstede runs him through with his sword. Klaeris, who falls with him places the miter back on her uncle's head, kisses him, catches his last breath and swoons. Haemstede throws her down on the body of Gozewijn, rapes her and kicks her to death. After that he destroys the treasures of the convent, and vandalizes the sepulcher of a martyr-saint. Undeterred by the sweet smell that arises from the remains, he breaks the tomb, scatters the ashes and bones, wrecks the altar, and sets the convent alight (v, ll. 1493–1506).

What exactly are we made to witness here, this communion of suffering? Is it martyrdom? The hymn on the slaughter of the Innocents sung by the chorus of Poor Clares at the end of act III, indeed, appears to prepare the audience for it. The Post-Tridentine Church promoted the cult of the Holy Innocents, regarded as the first martyrs, dying as it were, in the place of Christ, and hence connected to both the Passion and the Eucharist.⁵³ Even the stage time of the massacre of the nuns, midnight on Christmas Eve, orients our expectations towards it. The question, however, is complicated by the way in which the play here appears to call attention to the erasure of religious ritual from the staged performance. According to Sterck, who first reviewed the evidence, it is likely that this scene in the *Gysbreght* originally included a performance of a Christmas mass, which was censured following pressure from the Church council. In the week between the play's intended premiere and its eventual performance on the 3rd of January, Vondel probably rewrote parts of the fourth act, replacing the mass with the scene of Gozewijn's investiture.⁵⁴ Both the

53 Dillen, *The Construction of Martyrdom*, p. 137. According to Koppenol, however, the parallel serves to make the nuns a negative example; like Joseph and Mary, they ought to have fled. See Koppenol, 'Nodeloze onrust', pp. 319–320.

54 Sterck, 'De "Verthooninge vande superstition vande paperye"'.

records of the Church council and the correspondence between Vossius and Grotius, it will be remembered, allude to play's the representation of the mass.⁵⁵ Sterck moreover noted how Vondel's play consistently removes any reference to the sacrament of the Eucharist, but that it does so with such vigour that, like the crossed-out passage in a censored book, it actually draws attention to the process of erasure. When Klaeris has made clear her decision to stay with him, Gozewijn praises her by comparing her courage to that of St. Clara, who, armed only with faith and prayers, forced the Saracen army to flee (IV, ll. 981–988).⁵⁶ Few people would have been unaware of the fact, however, that Clara did not meet the Saracen army unarmed, but carrying a monstrance with the consecrated host.⁵⁷ The comparison here serves to draw attention to what is absent, ironically foreshadowing the gulf between the miracle of St. Clare and the murder of Klaeris. Neither Gozewijn nor Klaeris and her nuns die for Christ or for their faith; they fall victim to a blood feud directed at their family, not at their beliefs, their clerical office or state. Gozewijn's motives for sacrifice even sound somewhat worldly. Ever since Gijsbreght's enemies deprived him of his Bishopric, he claims that he has been weary of life. Gijsbreght's accusation that Gozewijn and the nuns make themselves guilty of self-slaughter makes the possibility of false martyrdom explicit. While it is true that he messenger's report adopts the rhetoric of martyrdom in its account of the massacre, yet the imagery it employs on closer inspection turns out to be ambivalent. The nuns are compared to little stars, surrounding the sun and the moon, Gozewijn and Klaeris, to a wreath of red and white roses, to Love, Hope and Charity personified. Yet when Haemstede slays Gozewijn, the bishop is likened to a sacrificial bull; a symbol, perhaps, of pagan, not Christian, sacrifice (V, ll. 1974–

55 In the letter to Vossius, Grotius writes: 'Twaaren onverstandige menschen, die in een treurspel, handelende van een geschiedenis, al driehondert jaaren geleden, het vertoonen van de gewoontens dier tyden niet wilden toelaten: eveneens als die van Genève, die in den Franschen druk van Cominaeus overal daar verhaalt wordt dat de Koning van Vrankryk ter misse ging, het woordt avondtmaal in de plaats van misse stelden. Ook hebben zich Aeschylus noch Euripides niet geschaamt den aanschouweren de Barbarische godtsdiensten te vertoonen: d'eerste in zyn treurspel van de Persen d'ander in zyn Iphigenia in Tauren. Doch daar uit kan men zien hoe weinig zy zyn, die van zulke dingen wel kunnen oordeelen.' Quoted from Sterck, *Vondel-brieven uit de XVIIde eeuw aan en over den dichter* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1935), p. 89.

56 'Doen 't Sarazijnsche heir vermeersterde al de stad, | Daer sinte Klaere was, wat deedze doch? zy trad | Grootmoedigh in de poort van 't klooster, daerze woonde, | En zag den vyand wegh, zoo ras hy zich vertoonde: | Haer moed, haer sterck geloof, en yverigh gebed | Verstreckte haer een zwaerd, en harnas, en helmet.'

57 Compare Vondel's 'Lof-zank van Sinte Klara' (1654) WB, V, pp. 836–838.

1975).⁵⁸ When Haemstede turns his vengeance onto Klaeris, the play abandons emblematics for a naturalistic image that conveys swiftness and merciless force; a bird of prey crushing a dove in its claws (v, ll. 1480–1482)⁵⁹

The challenge of representing the massacre appears to arise from the dissonance of attempting to map a subtext of religious violence onto a historic narrative. Ultimately, the construction of a martyr-narrative collapses under the violence of what is being described. When Klaeris comes to and realizes what is happening to her she cries out:

Z'Ontwaecht in 't ende, en word van 't schellemstuck bewust,
En roept: mijn bruidegom, zie neder hoe ick lije,
En hoemen my schoffeert. o zuivre maeghd Marije!
O Klaere, aenschouwtghe dit? vrouw Machtelt, zie uw kind.

v, ll. 1476–1479

(She awakes at last, and realizes the evil crime
And cries: My Spouse, look down, and see my suffering,
And how I'm being abused. Oh pure Virgin Mary!
Oh Clara, do you see? Machteld, behold your child!)

These lines form a rhetorical figure known as *anti-climax*, in which the downwards movement of Christ—Virgin—Saint—mother—marks a rejection of transcendence which focuses on the systematic degradation to which Haemstede's violence subjects Klaeris, which reduces the young woman to a helpless girl crying out in vain for a mother to protect her.⁶⁰ Historically overdetermined, these scenes of rape and sacrilege resist codification; the evocation of the language and tropes of martyrdom, sacrament and sacrifice only increases their jarring, discordant effect. Instead they re-inscribe the past into the present, commemorating, re-enacting its traumas, right at the centre of Amsterdam's civic culture.

58 Myra Scholz-Heersprink, 'Vondels Gijsbrecht van Aemstel as emblematic and figural drama', *Spektator* 4 (1974–1975), 570–581.

59 'De booswicht slaet heur klaght en woorden in den wind, | Gelijck een vogel grijp 't gepiep der simple duiven, | Wen hy 'er uit de vlught een vast krijght in zijn kluiven.' Compare 'Maeghdeburgh's Liickoffer', ll. 38–42: 'En d'Arend kluyft soo d'opgegreepde tortel. | Haer' pluym verstuyft, haer teer gebeente kraeckt, | En 't sieltje steent, eer 't aen syn' dood geraeckt. | Des kreunt sich niet, die Godheyd aller vogels: | Die 't Roomsche ryck beschaduwet, met haer' vlogels.'

60 On this passage see Korsten, *Sovereignty as Inviolability*, pp. 160–161.

And yet, there is a way in which Vondel's play breaks the *Trauerspiel's* vision of catastrophe, ruin and repetition. As the enemies are gaining control over more and more of the city and the defenders are beaten back to Gijsbreght's castle it becomes clear that surrender or death are the only options left open. Gijsbreght declines the offer of surrender by treaty with the possibility of a pardon and prepares to fight to the death. But Badeloch refuses his order to take the children and flee; preferring to die fighting at her husband's side. Badeloch's reasoning is perfectly coherent, yet this act of female noncompliance enrages Gijsbreght, and it is his fury, with the combined pressure of the other characters that finally bullies her into obedience. She asks the dean, brother Peter, to pray that an angel might appear to guide the refugees on their perilous path. As Peter leads the crowd in prayer, the archangel Raphael appears, urging Gijsbreght to listen to his wife. The town is lost and there is no use in further fighting; Gijsbreght now must put the lives of the survivors first. Raphael charges Gijsbreght to take to the sea, and lead the remnants of his people to safety. The archangel himself will cover the land with a thick shroud of mist, and appear as a light in the sky to guide the exiles on their way. Raphael offers a brief glimpse of a brighter future, when Holland will rise and Amsterdam will attain great glory. Yet this is not a Virgilian prophecy of imperial destiny, *imperium sine fine*. For from now on, the fates of the dynasty of Aemstel and that of the city of Amsterdam will take different, separate courses. Amsterdam, now defeated, will rise again, and will attain first prosperity, then power. In time to come, Holland will defeat the Spanish monarchy and reinstate its former liberties, and greatness will follow in freedom's trail. Then, the time will have come when, 'in the midst of the struggle', Amsterdam will 'lift its crown to heaven and through ice and fire will find another world'. Yet if this is a prophecy of future imperial greatness, it is a fraught one, indeed. For with the overthrow of Spanish tyranny will also come the overthrow of Catholicism, and, following that, 'wars without end' (v, ll. 1830–1842).⁶¹ Indeed, it is worth noting how the image of the intrepid merchant vessel, which occurred in 'On Amsterdam' as metaphor for the nexus of commercial prosperity, toleration and good governance, here sig-

61 'Zy zal met grooter glans uit asch en stof verrijzen: | Want d'opperste beleit zijn zaecken wonderbaer. | De Hollandsche gemeent zal, eer drie honderd jaer | Verloopen, zich met maght van bondgenooten stercken, | En schoppen 't Roomsche outaer met kracht uit alle kercken, | Verklaeren 't graeflijck hoofd vervallen van zijn Recht, | En heerschen staetsgewys; het welck een bits gevecht, | En endeloozen krijgh en onweer zal verwecken, | Dat zich gansch Christenrijck te bloedigh aen wil trecken. | In 't midden van den twist, en 't woeden nimmer moe, | Verheft uw stad haer kroon tot aen den hemel toe, | En gaet door vier en ys een andre weereld vinden, | En dondert met geschut op alle vier de winden.'

nals anxiety, rather than civic pride—the ship is literally at sea, exposed to the fighting elements, and, apparently, rudderless. Several years before he would take the final step of severing his ties to Protestantism, Vondel had come to view the legacy of Revolt and Reformation as an ambiguous one, leading, on the one hand, to the rise of the Republic as a great power, and on the other, to schism, division and war. A later edition of the play, printed in 1659, emphasizes this sense that the historical destiny of Amsterdam and its ruling dynasty are taking separate courses even more strongly, by having Raphael, in four lines following 1684 enjoin Gijsbreght and his family to remain loyal to ‘the old faith’:

Valt u 't verwoesten der godtsdienstigheid te lastigh,
 Volhardt by 't out geloof en Godts altaer stantvastigh,
 Op 't spoor der ouderen, u moedigh voorgetreên.
 Zoo draeft men recht naer Godt, door alle starren heen.

(Does the destruction of religion grieve you too sore,
 Persist in the old faith and God's altar constantly
 In the trail of the ancestors, who bravely preceded you.
 That's how one hastes to God, through all the stars.)

Gijsbreght, meanwhile, is charged to resettle the remnants of his people on the Baltic coast of North-Eastern Germany where his family shall meet peace and prosperity, but where they will have to forego any part or role in Amsterdam's future glory. The comforting presence of Raphael, whose appearance seems a response to Badeloch's despair as much Brother Peter's prayer, echoes that of Venus, Aeneas's mother in the *Aeneid*. But this scene also connects to earlier moments in the play in which the female perspective, consistently overruled or ignored by the male characters in the play is validated through a higher authority, and a woman's alleged flaws of weaknesses and emotionality turn out to make her more receptive to numinous insight, and more responsive to the divine will.⁶² Gijsbreght, for once, appears to have got the message when,

62 See Marco Prandoni, 'Intertextuality—*Gysbreght van Aemstel*', in Bloemendal and Korsten, *Joost van den Vondel*, pp. 271–284, esp. p. 283: 'The involvement of the supernatural, which bypasses the realm of human discourse, restores dignity to the woman's voice, and grants her a divine seal of approval. The voice that had been marginalized is restored to its central place'; Frans-Willem Korsten similarly insists that the play validates Badeloch's perspective, but he is, I believe, mistaken in identifying Badeloch with an alternative ethics that challenges a patriarchal order based on divine sovereignty. See Korsten, *Sovereignty as Inviolability*, pp. 164–167. Badeloch's position is not per se antithetical to Christianity,

in response to the angel's message he turns to his wife: 'Now I bow down for God, my love, my chosen one | And no longer refuse to heed your counsel and here lay down my armor. Resistance is of no avail.' (ll. 1872–1875).⁶³ Gijsbreght charges Brother Peter to take his family's crucifix, and take the lead, followed by the people, while he himself will guard the rear.

Yet this new insight, and the radical reversal of values it entails has come at tremendous cost, and the last moments of the play underline the pain of loss and separation as husband and wife say farewell to their native town, and Gijsbreght speaks the concluding words: 'Farewell, my town of Aemstel, expect a different Lord'. It is, however, this trauma, this historical rupture which opens up an alternative horizon, a space wedged in between the legendary past and the foretold future that offers neither repetition nor redemption, but release from history. The deep archaeology of the plot, with its different layers of historical allusion, creates an effect of dissonance, prohibiting a straightforwardly confessional reading of the play. Why have the city's saints left her churches and altars? The play confronts such questions of trauma, historic rupture and loss, with honesty and daring, yet such acknowledgment appears to have come at a great cost. The *Gysbreght* registers not one, but several areas of conflict and division within Dutch culture, and perhaps, within the poet's mind; the tension between a fierce civic pride, and an increasingly dim view of the country's recent past, between the conflicting demands of peace, and of religious toleration, and between an revulsion from the violence of religious strife, and the subterranean lure of the martyr-narratives on which he had been reared. In a poem written several years after the publication of the *Gysbreght*, Vondel would revisit these questions and remarkably, seemingly attempted to undo the work of the play. Interestingly, it is a celebration of the third centenary of the 'Miracle of Amsterdam', a Eucharistic miracle through which, during the late Middle Ages, Amsterdam had risen to European fame as a site of pilgrimage. The poem, which so offended former friends like Hooft, was dedicated to the 'old citizenry

but can be viewed in a tradition of late medieval and early devotion which values female models of affective spirituality and identifies Jesus with the figure of the nurturing mother. See on this topic for instance Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); on female models of affective spirituality, see Debora Kuller Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, Subjectivity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994) ch. 5: 'Saints and Lovers: Mary Magdalen and the Ovidian Angel', pp. 167–191.

63 'Nu buigh ick my voor God, mijn lief, mijn uitverkoren: | Nu weiger ick geensins na uwen raed te hooren, | En legh hier 't harnas af. Hier baet gheen tegenweer.'

of Amsterdam', identified as those who have 'sprung from Gijsbreght's patrimony', and 'who have stayed true to the lawful Church'.⁶⁴ Like the *Gysbreght*, the poem evokes the burning of Troy, yet here, rather, to praise that special providence which twice spared the miraculous host from the all-consuming flames. The descendants of Gijsbreght, whom the play had so emphatically placed outside history, are in a remarkable reversal, re-instated as the city's true heirs, now to the exclusion of their Protestant fellow citizens.

Further Reading

- Bloemendal, Jan, and Frans Willem Korsten (eds.), *Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679): Dutch Playwright in the Golden Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2012). Drama and Theatre in Early Modern Europe, 1.
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- Walsham, Alexandra, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

64 Vondel, 'Eeuwgety der Heilige Stede t'Amsterdam. Aen d'oude Burgery', WB, v, pp. 133–137: 'O BURGERY, uit Gysbrechts erf gesproten, | En noit veraert van uwen ouden struick, in 't wetting kerkgebruik'. Hooft compared the poem stance to the way in which a champion fighter might stick a knife in a wall as a public challenge: Hooft to Barlaeus, 20 april 1645, in Sterck, *Vondel-brieven*, p. 113.