CHAPTER SIX

VONDEL AND AMSTERDAM

Eddy Grootes

Many of Vondel's poems demonstrate that he felt deeply involved with the changing fortunes of Amsterdam, his home for more than eighty years. He was proud of the city. He wrote in celebration of practically every important event in its history, its economic well-being and municipal building activities, the successful policies of the city council, and its cultural revival. He was a fierce opponent of all those he regarded as a threat to the prosperity and freedom the city had achieved. Yet Vondel was not a native to Amsterdam. His parents were among the large number of immigrants who had fled the Southern Netherlands for religious, political or economic reasons to create a new life for themselves elsewhere. They came from Antwerp, where they had been part of a small Mennonite community that found itself subjected to severe oppression, especially in the ten years after the arrival in the Low Countries of the Duke of Alva, who acted as governor from 1567 onwards on behalf of the devoutly Catholic king of Spain, Philip II. Almost a hundred Mennonites and Anabaptists were executed in Antwerp under his rule.¹

It was probably in the early 1580s that milliner Joost van den Vondel left Antwerp and moved to Cologne, where his son and namesake, the future poet, was born in 1587.² In 1595 the Mennonites of Cologne received notification from the municipal authorities that they must leave the city within fourteen days. The Vondel family was set adrift, staying in Frankfurt, Bremen, Emden and Utrecht before finally deciding to settle in Amsterdam. The city was experiencing a spectacular economic renaissance, its population growing from around 30,000 to

¹ Marnef, *Antwerp in the Age of Reformation*, p. 159.

² The key facts about Vondel go back to the first biography, published in 1682: Brandt, *Het leven van Joost van den Vondel*. Modern biographies include Barnouw, *Vondel* (in English) and Calis, *Vondel: het verhaal van zijn leven* (which includes an extensive bibliography). An excellent overview of his life and work can be found in Smits-Veldt and Spies, 'Inleiding'. For facts about Vondel I rely mainly on Calis.

105,000 in just twenty years. The choice of Amsterdam became final when Joost senior, after swearing the burgher oath and paying eight guilders to the treasury, acquired Amsterdam citizenship on 27 March 1597. This gave him the right to set up in business. He opted for the silk trade and opened a shop in the Warmoesstraat, which was then one of the city's principal streets. The trade in silk fabrics and stockings would eventually be taken over by his son.

The successful integration into Amsterdam life of Vondel senior and later his son is no doubt attributable in part to the social networks they were able to draw upon for support, most importantly that of their fellow Mennonites. The fact that even in Amsterdam this religious minority was barely tolerated reinforced its mutual solidarity, especially among those of shared extraction. Nor was Joost senior the only textile trader whose origins lay in the Southern Netherlands. He chose marriage partners for his children accordingly. Both young Joost and his sister married into families of Mennonite cloth merchants who like them lived in the Warmoesstraat. The presence of a familiar circle of their own people must have given them a footing in a mercantile city that was increasingly cosmopolitan.³

Among those of Amsterdam's newcomers who were foreign immigrants, people from Antwerp probably formed the largest contingent. Their accents must have been heard all over the city. Natives of Amsterdam loved to make fun of linguistic eccentricities specific to the Southern Netherlands. They themselves, in most cases at least, spoke a North Holland dialect. In his popular comedies and farces the Amsterdam poet Gerbrand Bredero (1585–1618) used this form of speech brilliantly to bring the common people to life. But by the late Middle Ages, alongside the various Dutch dialects, a literary language had developed. It was coloured slightly differently depending on the writer's regional origins, but it could nevertheless be regarded as common to the leading authors of North and South. From around 1550 there were regular pleas for the purification and further development of the Dutch language, and objections were raised against the affected French borrowings popular in the poetry of the time, with loan words chosen primarily for the way they sounded. From his earliest poetic endeavours the young Vondel, who probably spoke the dialects of

³ On integration, networks, and the choice of marriage partners: Kuijpers and Prak, 'Gevestigden en buitenstaanders', pp. 205–12.

Antwerp and Cologne until he turned ten, endorsed the ideal of pure Dutch. His oldest known work dates from 1605, a wedding verse written for a neighbour.⁴ Loan words from French and Latin are conspicuous by their absence. Even at this stage Vondel was approaching the ideal of linguistic purity advocated by (for example) the influential older poet Hendrik Laurenszoon Spiegel. In the mid-seventeenth century Vondel noted that a correct form of Dutch had developed in the intervening decades, spoken in cities like Amsterdam and The Hague by 'people of good upbringing'. It was clearly distinguishable from the traditional vernaculars of Amsterdam and Antwerp.⁵ He himself strove all his life to use pure, clear, smoothly flowing language.

From the age of ten Vondel would have been trained in correct Dutch and perhaps in the writing of poetry at one of the Amsterdam schools, probably the establishment close to his parental home that was run by Willem Bartjens, author of a much-used arithmetic book, whose name has remained proverbial to this day in the context of flawless calculation. Vondel must have learned good French as well, to judge by the long French dedicatory verse that accompanies his play *Het Pascha* (*Passover*) of 1612. Sons of the mercantile middle class were not usually sent to the Latin school; their school careers were limited to what was known as the French school. Vondel did not master Latin until later, under his own tuition.

Willem Bartjens may also have been a bridge to a form of education of a different kind, provided by the chambers of rhetoric. In the Netherlands from the fifteenth century onwards, especially in towns and cities in Flanders, Brabant, Zeeland, and Holland, the chambers of rhetoric had developed into urban societies in which people studied and composed poetry together, wrote and performed plays, and contributed to the festival culture of the municipalities, with its processions and tableaux vivants. In doing so they could usually rely on assistance from the authorities. Rivalry between towns was channelled into contests in which rhetoricians could win prizes for various aspects of their performances.⁶ The culture of the chambers of rhetoric flourished in Antwerp. Although generally speaking the Mennonites

⁴ All the Vondel texts named below can be found in the standard edition (in ten volumes with an alphabetical index in a separate volume): Vondel, *De werken* (1927–1940).

⁵ Vondel, *Aenleidinge ter Nederduitsche dichtkunste* (1650).

⁶ On the rhetoricians in general see Van Dixhoorn, *Lustige geesten* and Van Dixhoorn, *The Reach of the Republic of Letters*.

disapproved of worldly entertainment of any kind, including theatrical events, by no means all of their number distanced themselves from the activities of the chambers, in which, incidentally, there was a strong emphasis on religious and ethical teaching. Vondel's grandfather on his mother's side, who died before he was born, had been a member of a chamber of rhetoric in Antwerp, so it is no surprise to come across the youthful Vondel (who, according to his seventeenth-century biographer, took to writing verse at a very early age) in this environment. The chambers of rhetoric offered an opportunity to rehearse the various poetic genres systematically, with the help of reciprocal criticism. The most important genre was the 'ballade', a stanzaic poem, usually with copious rhymes, in which the 'Prince' of the chamber was addressed in the final stanza. Vondel's early wedding poem takes this form, although its ponderous formulations demonstrate that the seventeen-year-old poet was not yet in full command of his craft.

Amsterdam had had a chamber of rhetoric of its own since the late fifteenth century, the *Eglentier* (Eglantine).⁷ From 1561 to 1578 its activities were suspended, but at the end of that period, when the city changed sides to join the Revolt against Spanish rule, the chamber was revived. In the late sixteenth century its members were a rather select group and the entrance fee was steep. It may have been this, along with a desire to perpetuate in Amsterdam the flourishing rhetorical tradition of their own native region, that encouraged immigrants from the Southern Netherlands to found their own chamber. In 1598 the 'Brabant chamber' was established, under the name 't Wit Lavendel' (The White Lavender).⁸ We know that Vondel was a member by 1606, if not before, since it was then that he took part in an allegorical procession staged by the Brabant chamber to mark the start of a major rhetoricians' contest in Haarlem. At the end of that same year he wrote a New Year song addressed to the Haarlem rhetoricians. To the overlapping social spheres in which the young silk merchant and poet moved – natives of Antwerp, family members, neighbours, his religious community, his school, fellow textile merchants – a society of lovers of literature and the stage had now been added.

The fact that Vondel's early development as a dramatist took place within the framework of the chambers of rhetoric was of crucial importance. After all, until the 1630s these amateur associations were the

⁷ Spies, 'The Amsterdam Chamber De Eglentier'.

⁸ Smits-Veldt, 'Het Brabantse gezicht'.

only platform available for the performance of plays, and their prevailing conventions and configurations, in particular the possibilities and limitations presented by the specific layout of the stage, determined the form a dramatist could choose for his work. By closely analysing the few facts available about the Brabant chamber, W.M.H. Hummelen has been able to shed some light on this matter.⁹

In early 1610 the municipal authorities in Amsterdam made the attic of a former monastic church available to 't Wit Lavendel'. This enabled it to compete on an equal footing with the *Eglentier*, whose performances were held in the attic of the nearby Meat Hall. In contrast to earlier plays performed in the open air, an entrance fee could now be charged. This made it possible to pay more attention to costumes and stage sets. The frontispieces to several published play scripts give an impression of what these were like. A permanent decor was probably used for a diverse range of plays. In theory the openings to the various acting spaces had a neutral character and could change function within a single play, and the stage was 'polytopic', meaning that several sets were visible at the same time. At the centre of the rear wall was a relatively large opening, which gave access to a 'compartment' known as the rear stage that could be closed and then opened to reveal a *tableau vivant*, for example, or to represent an inner room.¹⁰ In his first theatrical work, *Het Pascha*, Vondel made use of this device by directly following a scene in the Pharaoh's throne room with a discussion between the Israelites who had been chased out of it. *Het Pascha*, printed in 1612, was probably performed in this attic theatre.

For several years beginning in 1616, the Brabant chamber was housed in the attic space of one of the city gatehouses and thereafter at a location that has not been identified. In 1617 the Amsterdam physician and playwright Samuel Coster arranged for a wooden theatre to be built for a new company, the *Nederduytsche Academie* or Dutch Academy. Developments in political and religious relations in the city that worked to the disadvantage of Coster and his associates were no doubt among the reasons why this theatre was sold in 1622. It was bought by the municipal orphanage, which would henceforth profit from its income, and the Brabant chamber became its resident acting company. The stage at the Dutch Academy (the name was retained)

⁹ Hummelen, 'Types and methods' and Hummelen, *Amsterdams toneel*.

¹⁰ Hummelen, 'Het tableau vivant'.

offered slightly more space, especially in its broader central compartment, but its potential applications were essentially the same. It is unclear whether or not Vondel was actively involved in the theatrical life of Amsterdam in this period. He translated several dramas by Seneca and in 1625 he published *Palamedes*, a drama à clef about the execution of Oldenbarnevelt (for several decades the most powerful politician in the Republic), any performance of which was unthinkable given its explosive political tenor. *Hippolytus*, a translation of Seneca's *Phaedra*, was alone in being staged ten times in 1629.¹¹ The following year Vondel seems to have been involved with the leadership of the Brabant chamber, which had now developed into something akin to a professional company of players, with a varied repertoire and performances several times a week.

Vondel's position in Amsterdam theatrical life changed markedly in 1637, when the Academy theatre underwent thoroughgoing alterations to become the 'First Amsterdam Schouwburg'. From then on Amsterdam had a well-equipped professional theatre that occupied an important place in the cultural life of the city, under the leadership of directors appointed by the municipal authorities. Vondel developed into an influential playwright in the field of tragedy modelled on classical drama. His *Gysbreght van Aemstel* was staged to mark the festive opening of the new Schouwburg on 3 January 1638.¹² Among Vondel's dramas it is alone in being set in Amsterdam. Vondel chose as his theme for this occasion an episode from Amsterdam's early history. The tragic demise of the thirteenth-century precursor of the city he knew is mitigated by the fact that the play closes with the prophecy that it will flourish in the seventeenth. In his foreword to the printed edition Vondel calls his own time 'most fortunate' and praises the wisdom of the Amsterdam burgomasters, who have placed the general good above self-interest and are actively striving for peace. A remarkable future on the Amsterdam stage awaited *Gysbreght van Aemstel*. Until the late 1960s it was performed annually in the Amsterdam Schouwburg, almost without exception, to usher in the New Year.

Its success is attributable in large part to a couple of spectacular scenes. Towards the end the archangel Raphael, equipped with the wings of a swan, descends from heaven to announce his prophecy of

¹¹ Oey-de Vita and Geesink, *Academie en Schouwburg*, p. 47.

¹² Smits-Veldt, '3 januari 1638: Opening van de Amsterdamse Schouwburg'.

seventeenth-century prosperity. This was accomplished using a machine installed above the central compartment at the back of the stage.¹³ And although Vondel adhered to classical precepts in having the murder of the nuns in their convent described by a servant, the audience got its money's worth when the curtain across the central compartment was drawn back to reveal a 'living painting' portraying the scene. In most respects the stage at the Schouwburg was essentially the same as that of the Dutch Academy. With its broad platform it might be described as 'democratic', since it offered the entire auditorium a good view without greatly advantaging the elite seated in the middle, in contrast to the perspectival stage of Italian-style court theatre. The interior of the Schouwburg is familiar from contemporary engravings of the stage, auditorium and floor plan.¹⁴ The relatively inflexible character of the stage layout demanded creative solutions from the poet if the plots of his dramas were to be acted out in a convincing fashion.¹⁵

In 1665 the Schouwburg was rebuilt as a 'modern' theatre with wings, but by then Vondel's heyday as a playwright had passed and variety and spectacle were more popular than his classical plays on biblical themes. The majority of his later works were rarely if ever performed. Of Vondel's original and translated dramas, thirty-three in total, barely half were staged at the Amsterdam Schouwburg during his lifetime. *Gysbreght van Aemstel* is the notable exception, with 110 performances between 1638 and 1665, but apart from the three popular *Joseph* dramas (with 27, 17, and 41 separate performances respectively and 23 of the trilogy as a whole), only *Elektra*, *Gebroeders*, and *Salomon* were performed more than thirty times in the same period. Other plays got no further than a short run at most, within a single year.¹⁶

Handwritten notes by Vondel in a copy of the first edition of *Gebroeders* (*Brothers*, 1640) show that the author was involved with decisions about how his plays were to be staged. He made suggestions concerning the costumes of Old Testament characters and some of

¹³ Hummelen, '1637: Jacob van Campen bouwt de Amsterdamse Schouwburg', p. 198; Smits-Veldt, '3 januari 1638: Opening van de Amsterdamse Schouwburg', pp. 205, 207.

¹⁴ Brandt and Hogendoorn, *German and Dutch Theatre*, pp. 357–61; Hummelen, '1637: Jacob van Campen bouwt de Amsterdamse Schouwburg'.

¹⁵ Smits-Veldt, 'Vondel en de Schouwburg van Jacob van Campen'.

¹⁶ Oey-de Vita and Geesink, *Academie en Schouwburg*.

the props.¹⁷ He also set himself up as a defender of the stage, arguing against the Calvinist clergy who were opposed to theatrical performances of any kind and who regularly urged the municipal authorities to ban them.

Gysbreght van Aemstel is by no means the only work in which Vondel extols the flourishing Amsterdam of his day. He had already depicted the city in many poems, long and short, most of them full of praise and admiration, although where he saw matters and developments of which he disapproved he did not hesitate to express criticism. He took very seriously the task of defender of the common interest and instructor in public morals that Humanism attributed to the poetic life in its ideal form. This can be explained as one result of Vondel's reversal of orientation in the 1620s. Whereas previously he had moved mainly in the more inward-looking Mennonite milieu and his poetry had been above all religious and contemplative in nature, from about 1623 there is clearly a greater engagement with events in the wider world. As a poet this took him beyond his own religious community, drawing him above all towards the circles surrounding P.C. Hooft, undoubtedly the most prominent Dutch literary figure of the time, which inclined towards Humanism.¹⁸

The most important expression of Vondel's new orientation is his great poem *Het lof der zee-vaert* (*In Praise of Seafaring*, 1623).¹⁹ Hugely erudite, it celebrates overseas trade, the basis of Amsterdam's prosperity. In Vondel's view such trade is a highly commendable activity, as long as it is pursued through peaceful cooperation with other peoples. Here the poet was taking sides against those who proposed engaging in military action to establish a trading monopoly in the East Indies. With even greater fervour he became involved in the conflict between orthodox Calvinists and the more liberal Arminians, another issue that dominated the politics of the time. A long series of virtuoso satirical poems and songs, distributed on loose sheets, testifies to his views. We have already touched upon his drama *Palamedes*, published in Amsterdam after the death of Stadholder²⁰ Maurits of Nassau, the adversary of the executed Grand Pensionary Johan van Oldenbarnevelt,

¹⁷ Brandt and Hogendoorn, *German and Dutch Theatre*, p. 375; Porteman, '28 april 1641: In de Amsterdamse Schouwburg'.

¹⁸ Spies, 'Mennonites and literature'.

¹⁹ Vondel, *Twee zeevaart-gedichten*.

²⁰ For the function of the Stadholder in the Netherlands, see the excellent entry at <http://en.wikipedia.org>.

in which the execution of Oldenbarnevelt is presented, in classical guise, as a political murder. This created problems for Vondel. He was charged and brought before the High Court of Holland, but he benefited from the reluctance of the Amsterdam municipal authorities to extradite its own residents and got away with a lenient (though still considerable) fine. It seems that at this juncture he could rely on just enough support among members of the city council.²¹

In the years 1627–1628 a change took place in the balance of power in the Amsterdam municipal government. In elections for the burgomasters and aldermen in 1627 the strict Reformed lost their majority. The church council, despite fierce protests on its part, would in future have less influence with the magistrate while its opponents would be given greater scope.²² Whereas in previous years Vondel had expressed his unreserved appreciation only of tolerant ex-burgomaster Hooft (father of the poet P.C. Hooft), who had been sidelined, from this point on he could applaud the politics of the municipal authorities without hesitation. One example is his 1628 poem of welcome to Prince Frederick Henry, who had succeeded his brother Maurits in 1625 as Stadholder of Holland. At the request of the burgomasters, Frederick Henry came to Amsterdam that April to mediate in the conflict with the church council. In the poem, distributed in broadsheet, a female personification of the city welcomes Frederick Henry as the man who will silence the Reformed agitators. Vondel commends the wisdom of the burgomasters, identifying them by name. In future the poet would quite frequently act as a mouthpiece for the views of Amsterdam city council, whether or not at its own request. In the 1630s he wholeheartedly supported Amsterdam's peacemaking policy.

Vondel did not always bow down in the face of authority. This is clear from a fiercely satirical poem called *Roskam* (*Currycomb*), which denounces the hypocrisy of patricians, who are quick to speak of religion yet are governed by self-interest and avarice, abuse their power, and live in luxury at the expense of the common man. The 178-line poem was distributed anonymously and without a printing address; there has been some debate as to its date, with arguments for 1626, 1628 and 1630, of which the latter seems to have the best credentials.²³

²¹ Beekman and Grüttemeier, *De wet van de letter*, pp. 15–19.

²² Brugmans, *Geschiedenis van Amsterdam*, pp. 40–44; Hell, 'De Oude Geuzen en de Opstand', pp. 264–69.

²³ Smits-Veldt and Spies in their 'Inleiding', p. xx, opt for 1626; Bot, 'Het historische kader', offers arguments in favour of 1630.

It was in that year that Vondel was taken to task by the municipal authorities for publishing a poem on behalf of the Dutch Academy in which all Dutch versifiers are invited to answer leading questions about the danger posed to freedom by fanatical preachers. The prize on offer was a silver goblet. Some fifty entries were received. These poetic responses, and the counter-responses to them, created such unrest that the Amsterdam authorities banned them from publication in any form. The city government had no interest at all in allowing a fierce polemicist like Vondel to stoke the fire of a conflict of this kind. It continued to advocate a policy of toleration, however, as demonstrated when, in establishing an institution for university-level education, the Athenaeum Illustre, it took on two professors who had run into problems in Leiden because of their Arminian sympathies, Gerard Vossius and Caspar Barlaeus. Vondel became good friends with both men. Vossius, generally regarded as one of the greatest humanist scholars of his time and the owner of an impressive library, was to fulfil a particularly important function as Vondel's walking encyclopaedia in his studies of the classical and biblical sources for his dramas. The festive opening of the Athenaeum in 1632 was celebrated by Vondel with an elegant panegyric, the *Inwyding der doorluchtige schoole t'Amsterdam* (*Inauguration of the Illustrious School in Amsterdam*), dedicated to a member of the city council.

When in 1661 he presented his translation of Virgil to burgomaster Cornelis de Graeff, Vondel, now 74, looked back in all humility at what he had meant to his city. He readily admitted that none of the short works he had produced were in the same league as the great epic by the classical poet. However, he does believe himself to have contributed to the dissemination of the glory of Amsterdam. Here he is alluding to the lengthy poem he had written for the inauguration of the new Town Hall, to poems of welcome for royal personages such as Frederick Henry and Maria de Medici, to his plays and lyrics for lovers of song (who are always eager to hear something new), and to his hundreds of occasional poems: epigrams about important city buildings, laudatory poems, epitaphs and wedding verses. The Amsterdam elite knew they could always turn to him.

A highpoint is indeed his *Inwijdinge van 't Stadhuis t'Amsterdam* (*Inauguration of the Amsterdam Town Hall*, 1655).²⁴ In almost fourteen

²⁴ Vondel, *Inwijdinge van 't Stadhuis t'Amsterdam*. For Vondel and painting see also Bakker, 'Een goddelijk schilderij'; Weststeijn, *The Visible World*, pp. 256–57.

hundred lines of verse Vondel not only praises the splendour of the impressive (but still far from finished) building but also constructs a closely reasoned argument for the importance of such a prestigious seat for the municipal government. At the close Vondel extols the quality and wisdom of the city's burgomasters and aldermen. They offer leadership with a gentle hand, defend freedom, maintain order and peace, welcome strangers, support the needy, foster the arts and sciences, and strive for economic success in a peaceful manner without disadvantaging anyone. This idealised depiction was rewarded by the burgomasters, although in a modest fashion. They presented the poet with a silver cup or bowl. It is unclear whether or not they had commissioned the poem. If so, then the fact that in 1640 Vondel had converted to Catholicism, a denomination tolerated only in the sense that a blind eye was turned, had been without effect. However, his conversion had led to fierce attacks from the ranks of the Reformed, for example in response to his tragedy *Maria Stuart, of Gemartelde Majesteit* (*Mary Stuart, or Martyred Majesty*, 1646). For this publication, purportedly printed in Cologne, the city magistrates imposed a fine on Vondel, which was paid by his Amsterdam publisher.

There has been some discussion in scholarly art-historical publications as to whether Vondel was involved with the design of the interior of the city hall. He wrote the legends for a number of the paintings, but it is unlikely that his influence extended any further than that.²⁵ The question first arose in the context of research into the relationship between Rembrandt and Vondel. Rembrandt had been commissioned to deliver a painting depicting the oath of Claudius Civilis, an episode from the freedom struggle of the Batavians, who were regarded as the ancestors of the people of Holland. In the end the canvas was never hung in the city hall. It was cut into pieces; the only surviving fragment is now in Stockholm. It has been claimed that Vondel, with his preference for an idealising style of painting from which Rembrandt's later work clearly departs, had a hand in the rejection of Rembrandt's painting, but there is no basis for this belief. Questions about the relationship between Rembrandt and Vondel were not raised on a regular basis until some two centuries after the fact, when Rembrandt's reputation was at its absolute height. It had become hard for people to imagine that the greatest poet and the greatest painter of the Dutch Golden

²⁵ Van de Waal, 'Holland's Earliest History', notes 2 and 20.

Age could have lived so close to each other and yet have had little contact.

Vondel certainly was extremely interested in the fine arts. In the prefaces to several of his tragedies he reflects upon the relationship between the stage and historical painting,²⁶ and we know of more than two hundred 'image poems' written by Vondel in which he responds to paintings, especially portraits. These most commonly concern works by Govert Flinck and Joachim van Sandrart, but he was also a great admirer of Rubens. In the dedication of his *Gebroeders* to Vossius, Vondel imagines how Rubens, 'the glory of the brushes of our century', might have illustrated a dramatic moment in the play with a large historical painting.²⁷ There is no evidence, however, of any particular appreciation for his fellow resident of Amsterdam Rembrandt, however natural it may seem to us given their shared fascination for stories from the Old Testament. The poet produced no more than a few epigrams to portraits by Rembrandt. In the case of one, which refers to Rembrandt's portrait of the clergyman Anslo, various scholars have interpreted Vondel's response as unfavourable. The discussion on this point has been going on for more than a century. One problem is that Vondel's statement that the true quality of this particular clergyman lies not in his appearance but in what he has to say – something the painter cannot depict – could be regarded simply as a rather tired commonplace within the genre of the portrait epigram. Recently, however, there have once again been claims that the structure of the epigram, in which Rembrandt is addressed directly, and the fact that the painter altered his original composition of the work, indicate that Vondel did intend his comment as criticism and that Rembrandt interpreted it as such.²⁸

No less interesting is the fact that a number of sketches have survived in which Rembrandt portrays characters from Vondel's *Gysbreght van Aemstel*.²⁹ However, these demonstrate merely that the painter was interested in the actors as picturesque characters. It tells us nothing about what he thought of Vondel's play. The hypothesis put forward by Wytze Hellinga, that Rembrandt's *Night Watch* was inspired by the

²⁶ Konst, 'Een levende schoon-verwighe schilderije'; Porteman, 'Vondel schildert een Rubens'.

²⁷ Porteman, 'Vondel schildert een Rubens'.

²⁸ Schuss, 'De relatie tussen Vondel en Rembrandt'.

²⁹ Van de Waal, 'Rembrandt at Vondel's tragedy *Gijsbreght van Aemstel*'; Smits-Veldt, '3 januari 1638: Opening van de Amsterdamse Schouwburg'.

opening scene of *Gysbreght van Aemstel*, is intriguing, but unfortunately the evidence is far from conclusive.³⁰

Nonetheless, there are clear signs of great admiration for Vondel on the part of other Amsterdam painters. In 1653, on the feast of St Luke, patron saint of artists, in a building belonging to the Amsterdam civic guard, a hundred painters, poets, and lovers of the arts gathered. They paid tribute to Vondel. A publication was produced to mark the occasion, two folio sheets called *Op de Vereenighingh van Apelles en Apollo, of 't Iaar-gety van S Lucas. Geviert, door Schilders, Poëten en Liefhebbers der zelfder Konsten, op S Joris Doelen, den XX. October, 1653* (*To the Fellowship of Apelles and Apollo, or the Feast of St Luke. Celebrated by Painters, Poets, and Lovers of Those Same Arts, on St Joris Doelen, 20 October, 1653*). It describes the festive gathering. Vondel, then sixty-five years old, was greeted in song as 'the chief of poets'. Nine girls, representing the muses, placed a laurel wreath on his head and Apollo conferred 'immortal praise' on 'the great poet'. He was addressed in a sonnet as the 'great light' and 'our country's phoenix'.³¹ A year later, at the next festival of St Luke, Vondel marked the founding of a 'Brotherhood of Painting' with a short poem that crowns the art of painting as the tenth muse. There are various reasons to assume that Rembrandt was present on that occasion.³²

The 1650s can be regarded as the zenith of Vondel's success as the poet of Amsterdam. In 1650 he self-published his collected poems, a substantial volume of over six hundred pages. In the certainty of his by then generally acknowledged mastery of the art, he introduced the volume with a concise exposition of the demands that should be made of a good poet. His *Lucifer*, later at least regarded as the highpoint of his dramatic work, dates from 1654. In the genre of the civic ode, his *Inwijdinge van 't stadthuis* (1655) can be seen as another highpoint. Only in the *Zeemagazijn* (*Admiralty Arsenal*, 1658) did he ever approach the same elevated tone again. For this imposing naval depot at the Amsterdam docks Vondel once again pulls out all the stops, using the superlatives he loved to apply to the city he so admired. His status as a playwright reached a turning point in these years. Although several of his existing dramas continued to be staged, as we have seen

³⁰ Hellinga, *Rembrandt fecit* 1642.

³¹ Postma and Blok, 'Duidelijkheid over de Amsterdamse St. Lukasfeesten in 1653'; Grootes, '20 oktober 1653: De Amsterdamse schilders eren Vondel'.

³² Postma, 'Rembrandt en de Broederschap der Schilderkunst'.

the same cannot be said of his later plays. After *Lucifer* he produced a further thirteen dramatic works. They testify to an unflagging creative power, but they met with no success at all among theatre audiences. Nor did his personal life bring him much joy. His most important contemporaries had fallen away: Hooft, with whom his relationship had in fact cooled long before, was dead by 1647, Barlaeus committed suicide in 1648, and Vossius died a year later. Partly as a result of mismanagement by his son, Vondel's once flourishing silk business went bankrupt. He was in danger of falling into hopeless poverty. Acquaintances well-disposed towards him stepped in without his knowledge and negotiated with the municipal authorities, who gave the poet, now seventy, a post as bookkeeper with the municipal pawnbroking bank. He would serve in that capacity for another ten years. In 1668 he was dismissed at his own request. The city council continued to pay his salary until he died in 1679. After his burial in the New Church, on the main square of his beloved Amsterdam, each of the pallbearers was given a memorial coin showing the poet on one side and on the other the inscription 's *Landts oudste en grootste poëet*: the country's oldest and greatest poet.³³

³³ Calis, *Vondel*, p. 364.