

PART I
VONDEL'S LIFE, WORKS AND TIMES

CHAPTER FOUR

VONDEL'S LIFE

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Vondel between Religion and the World

Joost van den Vondel was born in Cologne in 1587, where his parents, who had fled Antwerp on religious grounds, or perhaps for financial reasons, had found temporary refuge.¹ In the 1590s Cologne became too dangerous and the family moved on, first to Utrecht and then to Amsterdam, the city that was doing its utmost to overtake Antwerp as the commercial heart of the Low Countries.

For the rest of his life, Vondel lived and worked in Amsterdam. He went to school there, possibly attending lessons from Willem Bartjens to whom he would later write an ode.² Finally, at the age of ninety-one, he was carried to his grave in the city's 'Nieuwe Kerk' ('New Church') by fourteen poets and lovers of poetry. During those years Amsterdam developed to become the wealthiest city of the Republic of the United Netherlands, and Vondel, the greatest poet of that Golden Age, was the Dutch poet who came closest to embodying Amsterdam. His work continually testifies to his commitment to the welfare of the city and to his involvement in the politics of the city council, be it in the form of criticism or, as was increasingly the case, propaganda.

'Liefde verwinnet al' ('love conquers all') were the words with which Vondel signed his earliest poems in 1605–07. Mottos of this kind were customary at the time. As a believing Mennonite he was no doubt

¹ Translated by Liz Waters. The translation of this chapter was made possible in part by a financial contribution from the Vertaalfonds KNAW/Stichting Reprorecht.

² Non-Dutch readers, and indeed most younger Dutch readers, will not have heard of Willem Bartjens, who would be familiar to older Dutch natives from the expression '*volgens Bartjens*' ('according to Bartjens'), meaning that a conclusion had been reached in a manner that was reliable and accurate. Bartjens' method, expounded in his book *Cijfferinghe (Arithmetic)*, formed the basis for arithmetic in Dutch primary schools for two centuries. For the ode, see WB 1, p. 136.

referring to the love of and for Christ, of which he writes in his *Nieuwjaars lied* ('New Year's Song') of 1607: "The Child [i.e. the Christ Child] holds dear the Love that conquers evil / Every kind affliction: choose my simple being."³ When he wrote these lines he was twenty years old and lived with his parents in a house called 'The Righteous Faith' on the Warmoesstraat in Amsterdam, where his father had a silk business. After his father's death the following year, he would be brought in as a partner in the business by his mother. A year earlier, in 1606, he had been baptised and confirmed as a member of the Waterland Mennonite community. Presumably he led the life of a typical Mennonite, with emphasis placed on fulfilment of faith within daily life and on rejection of too great an attachment to earthly pleasures. Until the early 1620s this 'imitation of Christ' is central to his work, and increasingly so.

Yet the first three poems he published, *Dedicatie aan de jonkvrouwen* (*Dedication to the Maidens*), *De jacht van Cupido* (*Cupid's Hunt*) and *Oorlof-lied* (*Valedictory Song*), all three of which appeared in the anthology *Den nieuwen verbeterden lust-hof* (*The New Improved Pleasure Garden*, 1607),⁴ are full of classical mythology and mild eroticism in line with the latest literary trend. Both the *Oorlof-lied* and the *Dedicatie* are clearly influenced by Karel van Mander, a poet and painter and a fellow Mennonite, who in 1604 had included an 'Explanation of Ovid's Metamorphoses' in his *Schilderboek* (*The Book of Painters*). It is also possible to discern in the *Dedicatie*, and even more so in *De jacht van Cupido*, the tone of the playful Cupid emblems of the young Leiden professor Daniël Heinsius, whose 1601 collection *Quaeris quid sit amor?* (*You Ask What Love Is?*) was reissued by the same publisher as *Den nieuwen verbeterden lust-hof*, and in the same year, under the title *Emblemata amatoria* (*Emblems of Love*).

These three poems also mark the commencement of years of cooperation between Vondel and publisher Dirck Pietersz. Pers, who was launching a career of his own in publishing with new editions of the anthologies *Emblemata amatoria* and *Den nieuwen verbeterden lust-hof*. The texts and illustrations had been purchased from the list of works owned by the widow of publisher Hans Mathysz., who had died young. But as the title suggests, *Den nieuwen verbeterden lust-hof* was a thoroughly revised version. The anthology, which initially comprised

³ Vondel, WB 1, p. 134: "Het Kind bemint de Liefd', die 't kwaad verwint, Elk noodt minoot: kiest mijn eenvuldig wezen."

⁴ Vondel, WB 1, pp. 140–49.

works by second-rate rhetorician poets, had been expanded by Pers to include twelve songs by major writers including Pieter Cornelisz. Hooft and Karel van Mander, as well as the three aforementioned poems by Vondel.

At any rate there is no reason to see these works as reflecting personal details of the poet's life. That would not be consistent with the purpose of the volume in which they were included – a songbook, intended for use in social intercourse. Nor would it be consistent with the purpose people ascribed to poetry in those days, namely to express in a congenial manner *general* ideas and maxims, in any field. In a wedding poem for a local Mennonite girl the ideas expressed would be those of Christian conjugal ethics, and a songbook for young people fond of singing would include eroticism dressed up as mythology. As a poet Vondel did this as well as possible, on a par with the finest and most modern poets of his time, with a Karel van Mander, a Daniël Heinsius. A young poet with no more than a general secondary education, he conformed to the example set by those in command of greater literary erudition.

From 1609, for over a decade, much of Vondel's work is characterized by a religious and moralistic tenor far removed from this kind of Renaissance-style playfulness. During this period Vondel was a member of 'Het Wit Lavendel' ('The White Lavender'), the *rederijkerskamer* (chamber of rhetoric) for immigrants to Amsterdam from the Southern Netherlands set up in 1598. His first play, *Het Pascha* (Passover), performed by this chamber in about 1610, attests to a biblically inspired poetic craftsmanship of the kind advocated in such circles. The history of Moses's liberation of the Jews from their Egyptian bondage is presented in *Het Pascha* as a 'prefiguration', or prophecy, of Christ's delivery of humankind from the slavery of sin. It is an interpretation of the Bible that was particularly popular with – but not exclusive to – the Mennonites in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Vondel even came up with a third parallel, in a poem appended to the published version of the play, a *Verghelijkinghe vande verlossinghe der kinderen Israels met de vrijwordinghe der Verenichde Nederlandtsche Provincien* (*Comparison of the Delivery of the Children of Israel With the Liberation of the United Provinces of the Netherlands*), in which he asserts that the Prince of Orange, as a second Moses, is a kind of second Christ, the liberator of the fatherland and champion of evangelism.⁵ The idea

⁵ Vondel, WB 1, pp. 261–64. The play itself on pp. 159–260

behind such parallels was to show the universal validity of God's plan of salvation, as well as (especially when applied to the Dutch Revolt) divine endorsement of the war against Spain. It goes without saying that the exhortation to be a good, God-fearing Christian was part of the message. Current events, placed in a religious perspective, were Vondel's main concern in this period.

Vondel's religious faith was characterized by Mennonite penance and a sense of sinfulness, from which stems a spiritual rebirth, occasioned by faith, into a life of love for God and one's neighbour. He was far from otherworldly. In his *Hymnus over de scheeps-vaert* (*Hymn about Shipping*) he wrote with obvious pride about Dutch maritime achievements in war and peace, but ultimately his concern lay with the proper Christian attitude to life, which entails an obligation to use any riches one might earn to help the poor and so be assured of a place in heaven.⁶

Nonetheless, equally obvious throughout this early period of Vondel's literary life is a commercial tendency. Around 1610 at the request of Pers he edited the texts for a publication called *Den gulden winckel* (*The Gold Emporium*), a kind of mythological-historical illustrated collection of anecdotes with a moral purport.⁷ Pers had managed to get hold of the plates of the engravings used in the collection, which had originally been published in Antwerp in 1579 under the title *Microkosmos: Parvus mundus*, with Latin texts by Laurentius Haectanus. Pers had already produced an edition of the Dutch translation by Jan Moerman – originally published in 1584 – in 1608, and evidently he now deemed the time ripe for a modernized version. Vondel turned it into something more of a collection of emblems, a genre in which an image is, in symbolic fashion, interpreted morally, creating a double meaning, and in which instruction (as it were) lies concealed behind pleasure. Biblical quotations reinforced the correct interpretation. Here too we have a similar parallel-effect to the one highlighted above in response to *Het Pascha*. It is a technique we will come across frequently in Vondel's later work.

Even though this was a matter of editing a pre-existing collection and the editing was commissioned by the publisher, it remains Vondel's work. His own contribution is considerable and of a quality superior to

⁶ Vondel, WB 1, pp. 427–45.

⁷ Vondel, WB 1, pp. 265–426.

that of his predecessors. The scholarship it expresses is rather less specifically Mennonite than in some of Vondel's other works, but the explicit ethic of simplicity, humility, obedience and active practice of virtue it exudes is certainly a Mennonite ethic too. The same can be said of the next collection, comprising animal fables, that he edited for Pers, the *Vorsteliicke warande der dieren* (*Regal Hunting Grounds of the Animals*), published in 1617.⁸

Thoroughly religious once more are the final three great works of Vondel's Mennonite period: the play *Hierusalem verwoest* (*Jerusalem Destroyed*); an epic poem by Du Bartas, which he translated from the French as *De heerlyckheyd van Salomon* (*The Glory of Solomon*); and *De helden Godes des Ouwden Verbonds* (*God's Heroes of the Ancient Covenant*),⁹ a collection of descriptive characterizations of figures from the Old Testament, again using existing images. All three were published by Dirck Pietersz. Pers in the early months of 1620. Even his most minor works from the years after 1616 are entirely religious in nature. This is far from surprising. In 1616 Vondel had become deacon of the Waterland Mennonite community, and without wishing to assert that such a step would necessarily entail a more intense religious life, this does seem to have been the case with him. Even the change in his motto supports this conclusion. In place of 'Liefde verwinnet al' ('Love conquers all'), or, as between 1609 and 1616, a mere signature with his name or initials, from 1616 onwards he used the slogan 'Door Een is 't nu voldae'n' ('By One all is now fulfilled'), which alludes to a sense of being secure in God's mercy, to a 'rebirth' occasioned by faith, as it was perceived in Mennonite circles.

As far as his general education was concerned Vondel had to rely on translations and on whatever more-or-less scholarly works were published in the vernacular. Thus in his *Hymnus over de scheeps-vaert* of 1613 he drew upon the 1610 Dutch translation of the *Naturalis Historia* by Roman writer Pliny the Elder. He also made use of the *Politica* by Leiden professor Justus Lipsius (who later moved to Leuven), a Dutch translation of which had been published in 1590, as well as the Dutch translation (also from 1610) of a short work by Hugo Grotius about Holland in the time of the Batavians. Finally, he used Emanuel van Meteren's Dutch-language work on recent national history in the

⁸ Vondel, WB 1, pp. 498–767.

⁹ Vondel, WB 2, pp. 74–215, 223–98 and 300–91 resp. On *Hierusalem verwoest*, see also the chapter by Jürgen Pieters in this volume.

editions from 1608 and 1609. For literature as such he looked primarily to the modern French Protestant writers and their Dutch imitators. This is true above all of the work of Du Bartas, particularly in regard to his epic portrayal of the story of Creation and the early history of mankind in *Les semaines* (*The Weeks*).¹⁰ *Het Pascha* alone was teeming with elements reminiscent of this poet, and Vondel's 1620 play *Hierusalem verwoest* was clearly influenced by the biblical plays of French Protestant poet Robert Garnier. In *Hierusalem verwoest*, besides French influence, we see for the first time the influence of classical literature.

In this regard, if Vondel was to avoid getting stuck at the level of second-hand scholarship he would need a good reading knowledge of Latin, particularly in view of the didactic and erudite poetry he aspired to produce. In the years between 1613 and 1620 he was tutored by a teacher from the Latin school, the city's grammar school, and by 1620 he had mastered the language to such an extent that he was able to read the most important of Latin writers, particularly Virgil and Seneca, the forefather of early-Renaissance drama. The structure of *Hierusalem verwoest* resembles that of Seneca's *Troades* (*The Trojan Women*), a play Hugo Grotius regarded as the 'queen of tragedies'.¹¹ But at the same time, owing to its biblical content, it strives to provide a Christian (which in those days meant 'better') alternative to the Latin play. Where Seneca uses the fall of Troy to evoke the transient nature of all earthly greatness, Vondel presents the destruction of Jerusalem as God's punishment for mankind's malevolence. Against the classical notion of fate he set the Christian – perhaps we may even say Mennonite – sense of sinfulness.

It would be one of the last times that this resounded with such clarity in his work, one of the last times too that he would use the motto 'Door Een is 't nu voldaan' ('By One all is now fulfilled'). Between 1623 and 1629 he underwent a profound ideological reorientation, at the same time making new acquaintances beyond the milieu of fellow Mennonites and members of 'Het Wit Lavendel', amongst whom he had blossomed up to this point.

¹⁰ Vondel must have come into contact with Du Bartas through Karel van Mander, who at various points shows that he knew the Frenchman's work, borrowing a number of passages from him, for example, in his poem *Olijffberg, ofte Poema van den laesten dagh* of 1609, which is imbued with Mennonite convictions. See *Twee Zeevaartgedichten*, ed. Spies.

¹¹ Vondel, *De Amsteldamsche Hebuca*, Dedication to Mr. Anthonis de Hubert, WB 2, p. 533.

Years of Reorientation

Shortly after 1620 Vondel made the acquaintance of the poet Pieter Cornelisz. Hooft. In 1622 and 1623, along with several other writers, they regularly discussed matters literary at the residence of the poet Roemer Visscher (who had died in 1620), where his daughters Anna and Maria Tesselschade still lived at that time. It was also in 1623 that Vondel published, for the first time since 1620, a work of considerable length: the 478-verse poem *Het lof der zee-vaert* (*The Praise of Seafaring*).¹² Not a word here about an awareness of sin, about disengagement, or about giving riches away to the needy poor. The philosophy now propagated by Vondel advocates a peaceful world based on reason, in which everyone will benefit as long as the principles of justice are upheld and not violated. This was certainly the outlook on life held by Hooft and the people around him, with whom Vondel had been associating for some time.

What had happened? Around 1620, his seventeenth-century biographer Geeraardt Brandt tells us, Vondel suffered 'a long, languishing sickness, which greatly weakened him, exhausting his spirits and making him long for death'. In October of that year he resigned as deacon of the Mennonite community, since he 'complained of great awkwardness in serving further because of his melancholia'. We must assume that Vondel was suffering from 'melancholy', a disease caused, according to the medical beliefs of the time, by a failure of the spleen adequately to control levels of what was known as 'black bile', one of the four humours in the human body. The psychological consequences were listlessness and feelings of anxiety and suspicion, culminating in weariness of life. It was generally believed that scholars and artists were most susceptible to this affliction. The melancholic was sombre and studious by nature, and Brandt says this was true of Vondel too. Exactly what afflicted him in terms of today's pathology is unclear. In any case he seems to have recovered with time. In 1626 he experienced another attack, but after that we hear no more of it.

Aside from an excess of black bile, however, there were more external factors in both 1620 and 1626 that may help to explain Vondel's depression. For a start there were political developments. In 1618 long-standing tensions erupted between the two extreme wings of the

¹² Vondel, WB 2, pp. 431–55; Vondel, *Twee zeevaart-gedichten*, ed. Spies.

Reformed Church, the relatively liberal Remonstrants and the far stricter Counter-Remonstrants. As is common in such disputes, other issues were bound up with the religious differences. Conflicts had developed between advocates and opponents of a lasting peace with Spain, between Holland and Zeeland, between those who approved of the trade monopoly held by the Dutch East India Company and those who wanted to end it, and so on. All this resulted in greater polarisation. In 1618 the stadtholder, Maurits of Nassau, travelled to the most important Dutch cities on behalf of the States General to remove opponents of the Calvinist Counter-Remonstrant faction from the municipal councils. Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, Grand Pensionary of Holland – the highest ranking state official after the stadtholder – now over eighty, was arrested. In 1619, after a long trial for high treason and abuse of power, he was sentenced to death and executed. A number of his supporters who were arrested with him, among them the municipal pensionary of Rotterdam Hugo Grotius, were sentenced to life in prison. Until well into the 1620s the Republic as a whole and the various cities of its most important province, Holland, were ruled by the Calvinists. Between 1611 and 1625 their leader Reynier Pauw was alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, active as burgomaster of Amsterdam and leader of the representatives of the province of Holland in the States General.

Vondel increasingly opposed what he regarded as a Calvinist dictatorship. At first his response to these events was rather detached. As a Mennonite he had little concern for the doctrinal quarrel between two theology professors from Leiden, the Remonstrant Arminius and the Counter-Remonstrant Gomarus, and their followers. In any case, Mennonites generally declined to interfere with affairs of state on principle. In 1620, however, the year in which he suffered his depression, he gradually became more engaged with the issue. Although his fierce *Geuze-vesper* (*Beggar's Vespers*), which hits out at Van Oldenbarnevelt's judges, was not written in 1620 but in the 1630s,¹³ it was at this stage that he wrote the poem *Op den burgher-krijgh der Roomeren* (*On the Civil War of the Romans*), as an introductory verse to the Dutch translation by Hendrik Storm of Lucanus's *Pharsalia*, which was printed that same year. The allusion to the national political situation in a poem about the seizure of power by Julius Caesar is veiled but unmistakable.¹⁴

¹³ Vondel, WB 3, pp. 339–40.

¹⁴ Vondel, WB 2, p. 396.

There is something else too. Together with three other introductory poems, written by Hooft, Samuel Coster and Nicolaas van Wassenaar, Vondel's poem is on a quarter sheet of paper that was added only at the last moment, after the rest had been printed. It is these poems that turn the publication into a freedom manifesto directed against the stadtholder, Maurits of Nassau or, in the case of Hooft's contribution, against the Calvinists. Everything suggests this was a pre-planned campaign by this group of poets and as such it is the first indication that Vondel was in contact with people who belonged to the top ranks of the bourgeoisie and had chosen to side with Van Oldenbarnevelt.

As far as the religious issue went, Vondel made it increasingly clear where his loyalties lay. In 1622 he wrote poems about Erasmus,¹⁵ a statue of whom was erected in Rotterdam that year, something that was not well received by the Calvinists. In the same year he offered shelter to the banished successor to Arminius, Coenraad Vorstius, for several days, and when Vorstius died in October he wrote an elegy for him. When his melancholy finally lifted he took a clear and completely un-Mennonite turn towards the world, the first sign of which was the poem *Het lof der zee-vaert* (*The Praise of Seafaring*), dedicated to Laurens Reael and published in the major new nautical pilot book *Zeespiegel* (*Sea Level*), by Willem Jansz. Blaeu. It ends with a direct reference to meetings at the house of Roemer Visscher:

*Wiens vloer betreden word, wiens dorpel is gesleten
Van Schilders, kunstenaers, van Sangers, en Poëten.*¹⁶

Whose floor is trod, whose threshold is worn down
By Painters, Artists, Singers, and Poets of renown.

In these circles the period from 1620 to 1623, as well as being a time of crisis and reorientation, was also a time of study, of an appropriation of classical culture and humanist learning. From this point on Vondel was able to find his way around the works of the most important authors of Ancient Rome – Ovid, Virgil, Horace – as well as the culture and literary scholarship of his day, including moral philosophy and logic. Even the latter was studied in order, as Brandt puts it, that he would 'have more means of assistance in progressing at art, which he threw himself into more and more as time went on'.¹⁷

¹⁵ Vondel, WB 2, p. 419 and pp. 414–17.

¹⁶ 'Het lof der zee-vaert', ll. 477–78; Vondel, WB 1, p. 19; WB 2, p. 455.

¹⁷ Brandt, 'Het leven van Joost van den Vondel', p. 25: 'om meer behulpmiddelen te hebben tot vordering in de kunst, daar hy hoe langs hoe meer op verslingerde'.

For *Het lof der zee-vaert* Vondel did not draw upon Dutch translations of contemporary and ancient learning as he had for the *Hymnus* but upon Latin studies such as *De re nautica libellus* by the Italian Giraldus and similar works by the German Jesuit Pontanus and the Protestant professor Bartholomäus Keckermann of Danzig, to name but a few.¹⁸ New friends helped Vondel to catch up on the schooling he lacked. In collaboration with Hooft and Reael he translated Seneca's *Troades* around 1625. It was published under the title *De Amsteldamsche Hecuba* (*The Amsterdam Hecuba*) in 1626.¹⁹ In that same period, probably with the help of Professor Johannes Meursius of Leiden, he worked on *Palamedes*, the play in which he addressed the Van Oldenbarnevelt controversy through a story from Ancient Greece. This work too continually testifies to the influence of Seneca, through several plays in addition to *Troades*.²⁰

Along with the classics, the poems of Hooft and the other literati associated with him had a rejuvenating effect on Vondel's poetry. Hooft, Heinsius and other modern poets not only wrote works of a more serious nature but also primarily composed lyric poetry of a light, mildly erotic character. The roots of this mode are to be found in Petrarch, whose poems for Laura had influenced Western European love lyrics for some hundred and fifty years, along with classical lyrical poets like Catullus, Propertius, and Theocritus, the last of whom had been the inspiration for Heinsius's Cupid poems. It can also be traced back to the pastoral verse of Virgil. All these movements had combined to create a new literary culture of song which, from its beginnings in Italy and France, poured out across Europe from the early seventeenth century onwards. Dutch poets joined in. Suddenly Vondel was writing songs again as he had not done since the publication of *Den nieuwen verbeterden lust-hof* in 1607.

These songs were a kind of social poetry, written as a gift for the children of a highly esteemed acquaintance. All his life Vondel created poems and songs of this kind, to mark weddings, births or deaths, to celebrate a portrait or a publication, or simply for their own sake. In later years especially, they were often meant for official personages or institutions and probably quite often written in the hope of some kind of reward, but in the years between 1623 and 1626 they were above all

¹⁸ See Vondel, *Twee zeevaart-gedichten*, ed. Spies, *passim*.

¹⁹ Vondel, WB 2, pp. 529–612.

²⁰ Vondel, WB 2, pp. 615–753. See also the contribution by Nina Geerdink.

intended to help maintain his new personal contacts. It seems his new literary network took on a social role for him that was previously fulfilled by publishers like Pers and De Koning.

Socially Engaged Poet, Court Poet, or City Poet?

The changes of the years 1620–1623 are unlikely to have meant that Vondel immediately turned his back on the Waterland Mennonite community. In 1624 he issued the playful poem *Stryd of Kamp Tusschen Kuyscheyd En Geylheyd* (*Fight or Struggle between Chastity and Lewdness*) as a separate book for the daughters of Laurens Baeck.²¹ It was published by Jacob Aertsz. Calom, a fellow Mennonite who had joined the Waterland community in 1622. Calom remained his publisher for the next two years, Dirck Pietersz. Pers not having published anything by Vondel since 1622. Calom produced *Palamedes* in 1625, followed in 1626 by *De Amsteldamsche Hecuba* (*The Amsterdam Hecuba*). Further evidence that Vondel still had ties not only with Calom but also with the Waterland community is provided by the long poem *Antidotum. Tegen het vergift der Geest-dryvers* (*Antidote to the Poison of the Zealots*), published in 1626,²² in which Vondel takes sides in a fierce argument among Mennonites in these years on whether the Bible was the only basis for faith, a debate in which Calom was actively involved. Thereafter, apart from a few occasional poems written for Mennonite acquaintances in later years, there is no further sign of Vondel's involvement with the Mennonite community. Perhaps his aversion to such quarrels was the deciding factor. Vondel's peace-loving nature has been emphasised repeatedly since Brandt's biography, but the peace-loving Vondel nevertheless managed to attract conflict time and again.

At around the same time as the argument within the Waterland community, the row regarding *Palamedes* was erupting at the level of municipal politics. Vondel had disguised his views on the arrest and conviction of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt as a story taken from classical antiquity, but this did not stop the Calvinist clergy feeling that the play was addressed to them. It had barely been printed before charges were brought against the playwright. Afraid he would be arrested and transferred to The Hague, where the Calvinists were still in full command of

²¹ Vondel, WB 2, pp. 486–94.

²² Vondel, WB 2, pp. 808–12.

the national government, Vondel took refuge with the Baeck family. The Amsterdam city council refused to extradite him, satisfying itself with a substantial fine and a ban on the play. For the printer the ban was actually beneficial. Public interest was aroused and one print run after another sold out rapidly. Vondel had little to gain by this; authorial copyright did not yet exist. Nevertheless, its success seems to have persuaded him to throw off any remaining hesitancy about presenting himself as a socially engaged poet. To be sure, the *Palamedes* controversy was followed by another bout of melancholy, but in the years that followed he published one poem after another about public affairs.

To this end, political developments were not unfavourable now. The tendency that had first emerged in Amsterdam developed at national level too. Maurits of Nassau died in 1625. His half-brother and successor Frederick Henry was expected to act so as to reconcile differences. Unified under the House of Orange, the Dutch could now resolutely resume the war against Spain, which had not gone well for them since the truce ended in 1621. Vondel was among those who made his thoughts known in this regard, but ultimately he seems to say more about his own ideals and (to some extent) those of the Amsterdam magistrates than those of the new stadtholder; the Dutch were right to pursue the war, but only in order to bring peace so that trade could flourish again. These were not so much the political opinions of Frederick Henry as the views of the Amsterdam regents whose mouth-piece Vondel would increasingly become in the years that followed.

In 1626 this faction did not yet form a majority in the municipal government. When in that year or thereabouts Vondel denounced the selfishness and greed of the regents in his *Roskam (Curry Comb)*, he undoubtedly had his eye on the opposing party,²³ but the shifting balance of power was already evident from the uninhibited way in which he dared to assert his voice. He even refers directly to the execution of Van Oldenbarnevelt.

Illustrative of Vondel's definitive break with his Mennonite past and his identification with the liberal milieu of the Amsterdam *haute bourgeoisie* – and perhaps to an even greater degree of the status he sought to achieve with his work – was his choice of publisher. In 1626 he began to publish with Willem Jansz. Blaeu, continuing to do so until 1638, when Blaeu died. Blaeu had developed his business into the most

²³ Vondel, WB 3, pp. 300–06.

important publishing house in Amsterdam, not only for works on seafaring and for navigational charts and maps but also for literary publications. He had at his disposal the technical means needed to present Vondel's work in an appropriately attractive material form, publishing it in substantial volumes on high-quality paper in a clear, modern typeface.

In the laudatory and epinicial poems that Vondel wrote for Frederick Henry and his family between 1626 and 1632 he developed a style that could justifiably be called lofty. It is narrative, rich in imagery, packed with mythology and extended comparisons, buoyed by figures of speech and sound effects, and carried along by the majestic rhythm of his alexandrines. Such a style, derived from both classical Latin and Neo-Latin poetry, was regarded at the time as a supreme literary achievement. It was an expression of the lofty social significance people attributed to this kind of poetry: trumpet of princes, mouthpiece for governments. At that time, no one besides Vondel possessed such a mastery of versification of this sort. His poem celebrating the first great victory by Frederick Henry, who did indeed bring about a political breakthrough as people had hoped, the *Verovering van Groenlo* (*Conquest of Groenlo*) of 1627, has the character of a minor epic.²⁴ Alongside the airy tone he gave to his songs, the elevated style of his heroic poems was his great literary achievement of the 1620s. A third achievement would shortly announce itself in the brutal ferocity of his satirical verse.

The relative leniency with which the city council had treated Vondel in the case of *Palamedes*, and the fact that publisher Calom had been given a chance to put so many illegal copies of the controversial play on the market, were early signs of a change in Amsterdam's political climate. The elections of February 1627, which had placed the party of the 'moderates' in a majority position, facilitated a definitive change of course; the regime of Reynier Pauw was over, and the liberals had won.

The extent to which Vondel could identify with this new policy as a result of his aversion to religious fanaticism and his desire for a rational, harmonious society became clear in 1628, when he first acted as official spokesman for the city and its government in his poem *Amsteldams wellekomst* (*Amsterdam's Welcome*), written for Frederick Henry's visit.²⁵ Besides praising the new stadtholder, from whom the magistrates expected mediation in their problems with the clerics, Vondel

²⁴ Vondel, WB 3, pp. 124–52.

²⁵ Vondel, WB 3, pp. 182–86.

dedicated laudatory verses to burgomasters Pieter de Vlaming and Jacob de Graeff through the mouth of Amsterdam's *stedenmaagd* ('city maiden'). In Vondel's view they were now the godlike rulers of the 'widely renowned mercantile city of Amsterdam' ('wijdberoemde koopstad Amstelredam'). Henceforth he would support the policy of these men, who would surely place the crown of Europe on the head of this flourishing commercial city, through poetry.

The new municipal government openly joined battle against the Calvinist preachers and all ex-politicians who wanted to regain their hold on the rudder of the civic ship. Vondel's satirical pen now became a formidable weapon in that struggle. The Calvinist preachers were the target of a number of satirical verses by Vondel, some of which could be sung to popular tunes. He denounced their far-reaching intolerance of dissent, especially their hostility towards the Remonstrants, to whose clandestine religious services the city council was now turning a blind eye. However, the time when preachers were said to have one foot in the pulpit and the other in the Town Hall, concerning themselves with both ecclesiastical and secular matters, was over. Another reason for Vondel to rejoice was the inauguration of the first Remonstrant church building in Amsterdam, in September 1630. His poem on the occasion of this *Inwyng van den Christen tempel t'Amsterdam* (*Consecration of the Christian Temple of Amsterdam*) included praise for 'Amstel's wise Council' ('Amstels wijzen Raad'), which had granted the oppressed Remonstrants their new freedom of worship.²⁶

Almost all these poems were distributed on loose sheets, without the name of either the author or the printer, but Vondel had become a public figure to such a degree that he was easily recognisable to his opponents. In this period he held an important official literary position, namely that of dean – perhaps even head or 'prince' – of 'Het Wit Lavendel'. Since 1628 an important change of course had occurred within the policy of this Brabant-based chamber of rhetoric. It once more tended towards a politically-engaged position, which found expression in (for example) a sensational poetry competition in which Vondel asked for poetic answers to a series of provocative questions directly inspired by the politico-religious situation of the moment. It prompted so many bitter reactions in verse, some of them aimed at

²⁶ Vondel, WB 3, pp. 322–28.

Vondel personally, that the magistrates decided the chamber had overstepped the mark.

After 1631 Vondel no longer had reason to sharpen his satirical pen in opposition to the situation in Amsterdam. Both a merchant and a poet, he was a resident of a rapidly growing mercantile city. Along the new canals to the west of the city centre, mansions were being built that testified to the wealth and élan of a great economic power. In a city where freedom of conscience was recognised as an inalienable right, there was now room for academic freedom too. Despite strong opposition from the university in Leiden, Amsterdam established its own institution for higher education, the Athenaeum Illustre, in January 1632. The famous scholars Gerard Vossius and Caspar Barlaeus, both allied to the Remonstrant cause, became its first professors, and eager audiences were able to attend public lectures in history and philosophy, although they would need to understand Latin. Both professors also taught students at their homes. Vondel would remain in close contact with both men, especially with Vossius. He would translate several poems by the Neo-Latin poet Barlaeus into Dutch, while Vossius's erudition and extensive private library would provide him with an inexhaustible wealth of knowledge, which he would draw upon when writing his later tragedies.

Faced with the burgeoning return of freedom and harmony, Amsterdam also had urgent need of a general peace, i.e. an end to the war with Spain that was still dragging on. It had been important to conquer 's-Hertogenbosch to secure the 'garden of Holland' ('Hollands tuin'), but once this was achieved the city's merchants had a direct interest in peace or in a truce based on the status quo. Pursuing the conflict would mean continuing to have to bear the crippling financial burden of warfare and above all it would entail risks: the territory of the Republic might be extended to include Brabant and Flanders which would lead to the reopening of the port of Antwerp, a potential rival to Amsterdam. Amsterdam's municipal authorities did not listen to the protests of the Calvinists who bore a fierce grudge against Catholic Spain but pursued a resolute policy aimed at achieving the longed-for peace in meetings of the States General from 1631 onwards.

Vondel identified with this peacemaking policy. As ever he followed the conduct of the war on the borders of the Republic closely, but at the end of Frederick Henry's campaign along the River Maas, with the seizure of Maastricht in August 1632, he no longer saw reason to compose a victory ode such as he had written after the victory at

's-Hertogenbosch. He did still regard the stadtholder as the promised avenger and redeemer, as is clear from his *Stedekroon van Frederick Henrick* (*City Crown of Frederick Henry*), but now he called upon him to close 'the gate of the abominable war' ('de poort van 't gruwlijk oorlog').²⁷ It would be the last poem Vondel ever dedicated to the Prince of Orange, whom he had once applauded so vehemently. After the failure of the formal peace negotiations between North and South, begun in the spring of 1633, Frederick Henry once again went into battle, and from that moment on his war strategy alienated him permanently from both Amsterdam and Vondel.

Theatre of Life

In these years, 1632 and 1633, Vondel had to prove that with his poetry he was able to sublimate his own personal suffering through stoical acceptance of an inescapable fate that ultimately strikes us all. In his simple, 'childlike' verse *Kinder-lyck* (meaning both Child-like [sic] and Child's corpse – cf. the obsolete English word 'lych'), he expressed his resignation in the face of the death of his newborn son Constantijn.²⁸ The death of the baby boy, who becomes an angel in heaven, is part of a universal, divine policy: 'Eeuwigh gaat voor oogenblick', or 'eternity takes precedence over the moment.' There was no room for such comfort in Vondel's bitter lament at the death of his eight-year-old daughter Sara not long afterwards, under the title *Uitvaert van mijn Dochterken* (*Funeral of my Little Daughter*).²⁹ Just over a month later he was able to write a consolatory poem for his new friend Vossius, whose gifted son Dionys had died of smallpox at the age of twenty-one.³⁰ Two years later, however, he would suffer another deeply personal blow with the death of his wife Maaïke, after whose loss he had to mobilise all his poetic gifts to lend form to his melancholy.

In his poem for Maaïke, Vondel portrays his late spouse as another Creusa, wife of the Trojan Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's epic. He describes how Maaïke urged him in a dream not to cease his 'heroic

²⁷ Vondel, WB 3, pp. 384–86.

²⁸ Vondel, WB 3, p. 388.

²⁹ Vondel, WB 3, pp. 396–97.

³⁰ *Vertroostingje aan Geeraerd Vossivs* (*Consolation to Geeraerd Vossius*) Vondel, WB 3, pp. 400–01.

work' on any account.³¹ He was referring to the major poem on which he had been labouring for several years, an epic about the first Christian Roman emperor, Constantine the Great, after whom he had named his son. With this *Constantinade* Vondel aimed to accomplish an unprecedented feat. It was to be a Christian-classical epic in emulation of the classical poet Virgil and the Christian poet Tasso. His meeting with Hugo Grotius – who, in the hope of rehabilitation, returned from exile in France to his native country in late 1631 – had a decisive influence on his decision. Grotius's religious ideal was the restoration of Christian unity by means of a return to the situation of the early church in the first few centuries AD. Vondel was now at last able to hold personal conversations with the scholar he so admired, and Grotius must have indicated to him that Constantine would be a worthy hero for a Christian epic. Grotius's arguments for a general reconciliation between Christians, based on law and ecclesiastical history, will also have given additional substance to Vondel's pleas for peace.

After Grotius was forced to leave the country again, he continued to encourage Vondel's literary work with useful advice sent in letters. Five cantos had been completed when Vondel's wife died. The poet left off his great work at that point, possibly for lack of creative energy as a result of his loss, but Grotius continued to provide advice for new work, and with the help of old friends Vondel set about translating Grotius's recently published Latin tragedy *Sofompaneas*, the Dutch version of which would become famous under the title *Jozef in 't hof* (*Joseph at Court*). Blaeu brought out the translation, dedicated to Vossius, not long after Maaïke's death.³² Vondel's principal goal was to make Grotius's poem widely known. It must have been clear to him that Grotius had seen a parallel with his own fate in this biblical episode in which the initially humbled Joseph becomes chief advisor to the Egyptian pharaoh. After all, following fourteen long years in Paris as a jobless citizen dependent on others, Grotius would now be accepting an honourable appointment as Swedish ambassador at the French court. Thus Grotius portrayed Joseph as the wise and just ruler of a nation, a stranger to all forms of tyranny, carrying out his responsible task as a holy duty. This was how Grotius saw himself and how Vondel saw him – as an example

³¹ *Lyckklaght aan het Vrouwekoor, Over het verlies van mijn Ega* (*Dirge to the Chorus of Women, On the Loss of my Spouse*), Vondel, WB 3, pp. 421–22.

³² Vondel, WB 3, pp. 431–82. See also the chapter by Mieke Bal, Maaïke Bleeker, Bennett Carpenter and Frans-Willem Korsten on the Joseph plays.

to the humanist Christian regents of his day. It was therefore to Grotius that Vondel dedicated his *Gysbreght van Aemstel* in 1637, written for the opening of the new Amsterdam Schouwburg (Amsterdam's municipal theatre) on the Keizersgracht.³³ This play would establish his reputation as a tragedian for centuries to come, not so much because it was his most successful piece of work in a dramatic sense as because he had given the people of Amsterdam their own national drama. In the play, Gijsbreght and his wife end their lives as exiles, but as predicted by the archangel Raphael the devastated city will rise again, greater and more prosperous than before. Exiled Grotius, who was never able to see a performance of the play, regarded this 'beautifully embellished history' as an immortal work.

Had it been left to the clergy, however, *Gysbreght* would never have seen the light of day. Before the first performance of the play, which is set in the Catholic Middle Ages, on Boxing Day 1637, members of the church council became extremely agitated by rumours that it included scenes showing 'papist superstitions, such as Masses and other ceremonies'.³⁴ A delegation sent to the Town Hall to protest against the depiction of Roman Catholic degeneracy was successful to the extent that the director of the play was forced to omit one or more of the tableaux vivants that – as was customary in those days – had been interspersed throughout the text.

When, despite these disputes, *Gysbreght van Aemstel* was staged on 3 January 1638, it was not simply an opening performance. Richly costumed, it inaugurated a unique Amsterdam building, the Schouwburg designed by the classicist architect Jacob van Campen. The prestigious project had been financed by the city's two charitable institutions, the Municipal Orphanage and the Home for Elderly Men and Women, which would continue to receive a substantial share of the proceeds from performances. Incidentally, the fact that a great deal of money had been invested in the preparation and decor for this grand opening performance was one practical reason to ensure it went ahead. The magistrates were also well aware that the Schouwburg gave them an excellent means of guiding public opinion and that it formed a counterweight to the pulpit. Just how closely bound up with municipal

³³ Vondel, WB 3, pp. 514–600. In this volume, the play is discussed by Marco Prandoni and Peter Eversmann.

³⁴ See Vondel, WB 3, p. 515: '... superstition vande paperye, als misse ende andere ceremoniën.'

politics the theatre's policy was is clear from the way in which its top managers, whose responsibilities included the choice of repertoire, were selected by the burgomasters, having been nominated by the governors of the charitable institutions involved, who were themselves appointed by the burgomasters too. Vondel never became head of the Schouwburg, but over the next thirty years he was a central figure in the theatrical life of Amsterdam, as a poet for the stage. After *Gysbreght* he would write another twenty-two original plays and translate five Greek tragedies by Sophocles and Euripides. From 1639 onwards he was in fact permanently present in spirit, since the interior of the theatre was decorated with lines he had written, including the famous:

*De weerd is een speeltooneel,
Elck speelt zijn rol en krijght zijn deel.*

The world's a stage for playful art,
Each plays his role and has his part.

Classical Tragedies and the Turn towards Catholicism

In the period between 1637 and 1641 Vondel completely 'reverted to tragedies', as he wrote to Grotius.³⁵ The new theatre, with which he felt Van Campen had imitated 'great Rome in miniature', must in his view have required as illustrious a repertoire as the classical tragedians had provided for their audiences in ancient times – illustrious in the Christian sense of representing the most essential religious values. It was no longer the epic but the tragedy that Vondel now deemed the most important classical genre, and he wanted to pursue it in the footsteps of the writers of antiquity. Through his humanist friends he became acquainted with the Greek tragedies, which in their opinion surpassed those of Seneca. An initial challenge to make the spirit of these tragedies his own was a translation of the masterpiece by the author most admired by scholar of Greek Daniël Heinsius, Sophocles's *Elektra*. Since Vondel's knowledge of Greek was scant, he would continue to depend on Latin translations, and in translating *Elektra* he was assisted by a younger brother of the late Dionys Vossius, the equally gifted Isaac. His *Elektra* was printed in 1639 by Abraham de Wees, who

³⁵ See Vondel, WB 3, p. 889: 'Ick ben aen de treurspelen vervallen.'

became Vondel's regular publisher after Blaeu's death. Through Sophocles, Vondel's attention was drawn not only to the power of a tight, soundly composed tragedy but to the emotional effect of the 'churning' of different passions in the protagonist's inner self. In translating *Elektra* – more so than in writing *Gysbreght* – he obtained a view of human history in its own right, with characters placed in atrocious situations and called upon to act. As a Christian poet, however, he would also continue to express the meaningfulness of God's rule in his dramas of this period. In the same year as *Elektra* (1639), Vondel's martyrdom tragedy *Maeghden (Maidens)* was published, in which he dramatised the story of St. Ursula, a tale closely bound up with Cologne, the city of his birth.³⁶ In this tragedy, Ursula and her virginal handmaids die as martyrs, meeting a gruesome end, killed by an aggressor's sword, but from the outset Ursula adopts an exemplary attitude towards the situation in which she finds herself, guided by her faith in the incomprehensible will of God. Vondel's *Maeghden* was certainly no crowd-puller. It was not performed until 1650 and after being staged four times it disappeared from the repertoire for good.

With *Gebroeders (Brothers)*, 1640), dedicated to Vossius, a new period in Vondel's work as a dramatist began.³⁷ It was the first of his tragedies to be written entirely after the Greek model and a play that was a success with both scholars and the general public. Based on his assessment of *Gysbreght*, Grotius had already predicted immortality for Vondel, and now Vossius concurred by answering Vondel's dedication of the work to him with the pronouncement 'Scribis aeternitati', 'You are writing for eternity'.³⁸ Men of letters must have especially admired the successful Christian imitation of Sophocles. Vondel depicts David's internal conflict, torn between human empathy and obedience to God, when he is ordered by the high priest to have Saul's seven sons put to death. In contrast to Elektra's experience, justice manifests itself to David in an incomprehensible, unacceptable form. When he finally resigns himself to God's decision, he, like Ursula, demonstrates unconditional faith in the meaningfulness of divine rule, the demand that Vondel believed was made of every Christian.

Although Vondel had demonstrated an 'inclination' towards Catholicism even as early as *Gysbreght van Aemstel* and certainly in

³⁶ Vondel, WB 3, pp. 708–80.

³⁷ Vondel, WB 3, pp. 797–876.

³⁸ Vondel, WB 5, p. 108; Brandt, 'Het leven van Joost van den Vondel', p. 46.

Maeghden, it was 1641 before he officially converted to the Catholic faith. In those years many Amsterdam intellectuals were returning to the bosom of the mother church, prompted in part by the powerful propaganda of Father Marius of the Begijnhof (Beguinage). In Vondel's case, however, the influence of Grotius's thinking certainly played its part too.³⁹ Furthermore, Vondel had seen in Mennonite circles the degree to which the conviction that only the Bible can be a source of faith led to differences in interpretation and therefore to religious strife. He was now joining a united community of believers for whom ecclesiastical authority was binding. Many distinguished figures still belonged to this community, which the magistrates just about tolerated (contravening the express wishes of the States of Holland in doing so), including members of what had once been regent families with important connections in government circles. Around 1650, Catholics made up at least eight per cent of Amsterdam's population. Their numbers would increase markedly in the course of the century.

Vondel's need to assert his Catholic conviction found expression in various literary genres in this period. In the year of his conversion he once again wrote a tragedy, this time setting it in the era of the early Christians. Nonetheless, the play, *Peter en Pauwels*, which took as its subject the martyrdom of God's explicitly appointed representative, the Apostle Peter, and that of St. Paul, was never performed.⁴⁰ With *Brieven der Heilige Maeghden, Martelaressen* (*Letters of the Holy Maidens, Martyrs*), he also deployed the genre of the literary epistle, so popular during the Renaissance, in the service of his religious convictions.⁴¹ This was actually an attempt to provide a religious counterpart to Ovid's famous *Heroides* which, as a kind of rehearsal, he first translated under the title *Heldinnebrieven* (*Heroines' Letters*).

In his next tragedy, *Maria Stuart*, in which he drew upon recent history for the first time, Vondel's Catholicism was given a political dimension.⁴² By presenting Mary Stuart, the Catholic Queen of Scots, as the innocent victim of bloodthirsty aggression by Protestant Queen Elizabeth I, he was in some sense passing judgement on the current political situation in England. *Maria Stuart* met with fierce

³⁹ On Vondel's conversion to Roman Catholicism, see also the contribution to this book by Judith Pollmann.

⁴⁰ Vondel, WB 4, pp. 219–94.

⁴¹ Vondel, WB 4, pp. 428–522.

⁴² Vondel, WB 5, pp. 162–238. See also the chapter by James Parente and Jan Bloemendal in this volume.

reactions in the form of pamphlets produced by the Calvinists (Counter-Remonstrants as well as Remonstrants), who abhorred its glorification of Catholicism, as well as from those who did not wish to equate Cromwell, seen as a rebel, with Elizabeth, their one-time ally in the war against Spain.

Controversy and Success: The Struggle with Authority

It seems Vondel had manoeuvred himself into a rather isolated position by openly switching religious allegiance. On the one hand he was generally acknowledged as the greatest of poets. This was underscored once more in 1644 with the publication of his uncollected poems at the instigation of a number of admirers, under the title *Verscheide gedichten* (*Various Poems*), in which he had not wanted his satirical verse to be included. On the other hand it was probably precisely because of the widespread recognition of his artistic prowess that young Remonstrant poets such as Geeraardt Brandt resented the fact that he had placed his talent at the service of his religious zeal. Possibly a degree of professional jealousy may have played its part in the case of another poet and dramatist, Jan Zoet, who had established a powerful reputation at the Amsterdam Schouwburg in 1640–1641.

It was in this period that Vondel published a fairly literal although not entirely accurate prose translation of the three great works of Virgil – the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid* – which he dedicated to his fellow poet Constantijn Huygens. He sent a copy to P.C. Hooft as well. These gestures were also clear attempts to restore contacts that had been broken off partly because of his conversion. Hooft's reaction was extremely cool. Huygens' response to the translations of Virgil is unknown, but we do know what Barlaeus thought of them: he found this Virgil 'bloodless, without marrow, and with broken limbs'.⁴³

In 1647 Brandt and the Hague poet Jacob Westerbaen launched an attack, partly out of bitterness at Vondel's annexation of Grotius as a crypto-Catholic. They confronted the public with this other Vondel, whom the poet would have preferred to abandon to obscurity. In a so-called 'part two' of *Verscheide gedichten* they published almost all his 'green and unripe verses' – as Vondel had called them in a letter to

⁴³ WB 5, p. 7: "Gij hebt Vondels Virgilius gelezen, [...], of ten minsten gezien, maar zonder leven, zonder mergh, en de lenden gebrooken?"

Grotius – that had been excluded from the original collection of 1644 together with a couple of anti-Catholic poems that were not by Vondel at all. In an ironic preface they denounced his change of faith. As quickly as possible, in 1650, Vondel arranged for a new edition of his non-dramatic poetry, *Poëzy of verscheide gedichten* (*Poetry or Various Poems*) in which he presented himself with the full weight of his poetic authority. The special introduction he added to this collection is one of the few extant seventeenth-century Dutch texts on theoretical aspects of literature. Like Horace – who gave practical advice to emerging poets in his famous letter to the Piso brothers, known to us as *Ars poetica* – Vondel offered aspiring Dutch poets a smoothly integrated series of recommendations as to how they could become proficient in their craft in his *Aenleidinge ter Nederduitsche dichtkunste* (*Introduction to the Dutch Art of Poetry*).⁴⁴ ‘Nature gives birth to the poet, art nurtures him’ (‘Natuur baert den Dichter, de Kunst voedt hem op’) was Vondel’s basic principle. Like Horace he emphasised that, although talent was the prerequisite for artistry, without knowledge of the rules and systematic practice of poetic skills, talent alone would not suffice to make a person a good poet. And just as Vondel had trained himself by studying the work of classical and contemporary predecessors he admired, so too would his poetry have to be able to stand as an example to future generations, as he was probably aware. In 1653, aged sixty-five, he was crowned with a laurel wreath at the festival of St. Lucas by Amsterdam poets and painters, to signify their recognition of his uncontested mastery of the art of poetry.

By 1647 the peace with Spain longed for by the residents of Amsterdam for so many years had almost become a reality. The death of Frederick Henry in May of that year drew no reaction from Vondel, but the real prospect of the peace fought for so diligently certainly reinforced his sense of commitment to the well-being of his city and to the felicitous policy of its rulers. In August 1647 he paid homage to the burgomasters in a song of praise, *De getemde Mars* (*Mars Tamed*), calling them ‘fathers of peace, fathers of the fatherland’ (‘Vredevaders, Vaders des Vaderlands’) for having helped, in their wisdom, to curb the violence of the god of war ‘to whose heart no desire for peace could adhere’ (‘op wiens hart geen vredewensch kon hechten’).⁴⁵ The official

⁴⁴ Vondel, WB 5, pp. 484–91; Vondel, *Aenleidinge ter Nederduitsche dichtkunste*, ed. Utrechtse werkgroep.

⁴⁵ Vondel, WB 5, pp. 250–57.

peace treaty, due to be signed in Munster on 30 January 1648, would naturally have to be celebrated in the Amsterdam Schouwburg, like all other momentous events of the time. Guarini's pastoral tragicomedy *Il pastor fido*, which was extremely popular in the Dutch Republic as elsewhere, inspired Vondel to write *Leeuwendalers*, a 'landspel' (pastoral play) structured according to the latest theoretical insights as formulated in Vossius's recently published *Institutiones poeticae* (*Institutes of Poetics*).⁴⁶ The pastoral, which – in contrast to Guarini – Vossius took to be a play set not among shepherds but among farmers tilling the land, was exceedingly well suited to Vondel's purposes. With a tragedy, which Vossius felt should always have historical subject matter, he would once more have run the risk of being accused of making references – pro-Catholic and therefore possibly pro-Spanish – to current affairs. With a play set in a dream world that danger could be avoided. At the same time, as a tragedy with a happy ending the pastoral was a sufficiently dignified genre for a momentous event of this kind.

In his dedication of the work to Michiel le Blon (the Queen of Sweden's envoy to England) Vondel also demonstrated for the first time his deepened knowledge of the structure of Greek tragedy by explicitly mentioning his use of 'recognition' and 'peripety' ('herkennisse' and 'overgang'). He was referring to two central concepts in Aristotle's *Poetics* – *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* – upon which the action turns. The former refers to the protagonist's overcoming of initial ignorance and attaining to an understanding of the situation that he or she faces (in this case insight into the true parentage of the orphan Hageroos); the latter refers to a reversal of circumstances (in this case from misfortune to happiness but usually the opposite way around). In his dedication for *Maria Stuart* Vondel had touched upon another Aristotelian requirement, which by his own admission he had violated, namely the prerequisite that, if the action was to arouse 'terror and empathy', the protagonist should be neither entirely good nor entirely bad. Clearly when writing *Gebroeders* and the tragedies that followed he was not yet aware of these demands; conversations with Vossius during the writing of the latter's *Poeticae institutiones* must have opened his eyes to them.⁴⁷ From this point on, then, Vondel would follow

⁴⁶ Vondel, WB 5, pp. 261–353. See also the contribution by Stefan van der Lecq.

⁴⁷ See also Vossius, *Poeticae institutiones*, ed. Bloemendal, pp. 40–42.

the path shown him by Vossius. So in the biblical tragedy *Salomon*, which immediately followed *Leeuwendalers*, the main character was no longer an innocent hero set against wickedness as a shining example of virtue (as in the Joseph plays) but a weak character caught between the representatives of good and evil, who each in turn try to win him to their side.⁴⁸ The old King Solomon eventually allows himself to be dragged down by his heathen wives, abandoning himself to idolatry.

When *Salomon* was added to the Schouwburg repertoire in February 1650 it was a popular success, as Vondel's early works for the stage had been. It ran until 1659, and it was the first play since *Gysbreght* to have a performance graced by the official attendance of the burgomasters. In the years that followed, Vondel would once more show himself to be a public poet, placing his ripe and animated talent at the service of the city of Amsterdam and its distinguished representatives. In 1649 the death of Vossius, the supreme representative of the classical scholarship that had now also blossomed in Amsterdam partly as a result of his efforts, had already inspired Vondel to write a beautiful elegy. Many occasional poems would follow, mostly commissioned by prominent individuals, including birth poems, wedding poems, elegies, and poems to paintings.

Two years after the Peace of Munster in 1648, the Amsterdam burgomasters proved in Vondel's view that their divine duty had rightly been conferred upon them. Some years later Vondel would continue to recall in verse that eventful night of 29 July 1650 when the youthful stadtholder William II attempted to storm the walls of Amsterdam with his armies, to force the city to support his policy of a renewed war against Spain. The attack failed because of a combination of circumstances, but the two leaders of Amsterdam's resistance to the stadtholder's authority were forced to withdraw from public office. They were quickly restored to their former governmental positions, however, when William's sudden death in November of that same year changed the political situation in Holland radically.

Vondel's glorification of the authority of the burgomasters reached its peak in the most beautiful ode to Amsterdam ever written: *Inwydinge van 't stadhuis t'Amsterdam* (*Inauguration of the Amsterdam*

⁴⁸ Vondel, WB 5, pp. 373–449. The play is discussed in this volume by Yasco Horsman.

Town Hall).⁴⁹ The construction of the majestic Town Hall on Dam Square designed by architect Jacob van Campen, celebrated at its opening on 29 July 1655, had not been without its problems. Neither had there been any shortage of critical diatribes, with the authorities being accused of profane conceit for the construction of such an extravagant prestige object, which ultimately would cost eight million guilders. Vondel described the erection of the vast, expensive building as a glittering triumph of the economic power of Amsterdam, which saw itself as the centre of the world and therefore as the successor to ancient republican Rome. Except that whereas Rome's power had been founded on military violence, Amsterdam, in his view, was enjoying a reign of peace based on its flourishing trade. Just as sculptors, painters and poets had testified to Rome's greatness, so too in Amsterdam artists of all kinds glorified the honour of the municipal authorities that had given their city its prestige. Architects built a temple to house impressive displays of justice and civilian government, visual artists gave meaningful expression to the eminent responsibility of the government by means of mythological, allegorical and historical works, while poets such as Vondel sang the praises of this eighth wonder of the world.

Vondel's *Inwydinge* was not only a panegyric, it was primarily a defence of a breathtaking status symbol. By showing that the Town Hall being a worthy seat of authority was the result of a carefully considered decision by the municipal council, in line with the needs of its citizens, he rebutted all criticism and was able to end his poem with the image of a city adored by all regions, ruled in peace by Wisdom itself.

In 1654, a year before *Inwydinge*, Vondel had emphasised the inviolability of the Christian authorities, as direct representatives of the highest King, in the dedication to his tragedy *Lucifer*: 'The worldly Power, which creates its light out of God and represents Divinity.'⁵⁰ The rebellion and fall of the 'power-hungry' ('staetzuchtigh') archangel Lucifer, God's representative, who had the audacity to oppose God's decision to place man above the angels, was to him the celestial exemplar of all arrogant creatures who dared to rebel against the powers set above them by God. *Lucifer* is regarded as Vondel's masterpiece, both for its expressive depiction of exalted, superhuman characters in a developing primal conflict and the rising tensions that result, as well as

⁴⁹ Vondel, WB 5, pp. 856–904; see also Spies, *Vondel en Amsterdam*.

⁵⁰ The play in Vondel, WB 5, pp. 601–96; the quotation on p. 604: 'de weereltsche Mogentheit, die haer licht uit Godt scheidt, en de Godtheit afbeelt.'

for its linguistic power, expressing the most elevated thoughts with controlled simplicity.

In Vondel's time the performance of *Lucifer* must have had a dazzling impact, not only because it presented a heavenly subject but also because of the impressive staging. To this end, costly scenery depicting heaven with clouds and stars had been painted. There was also elaborate stage machinery about which audiences were increasingly fanatical, which could be used in all kinds of ways. Vondel had wanted to conclude with a dance by the lamenting angels, but Schouwburg governor Jan Vos instead developed a fantastical pantomime with allegorical figures who came dancing onto the stage, by turns joyful and sorrowful, accompanied by appropriate music. In February 1654, however, after two performances to a packed theatre, *Lucifer* unexpectedly had to be removed from the repertoire. Protestant preachers had railed so vehemently from the pulpit against what they saw as a sacrilegious play that the remaining performances had to be cancelled and, by order of the burgomasters, the printed text would be impounded. This time, then, the magistrates did listen to the views of the church, although only with one ear. That same year the play went through seven reprints.

In Defence of the Theatre: Creativity in Old Age, and Death

Vondel hastened to make amends for the financial damage the Schouwburg had suffered. He did so by the only means available to him: he wrote a new tragedy, which could be performed using the same decor as *Lucifer*. *Salmeoneus*, about a mythological prince who insults the gods, was not performed until 1657, however, and it was less than successful.⁵¹ From this time onwards Vondel would lose the rapport he had reestablished with the Schouwburg audience, even when he used biblical subject matter, which had always met with approval before. Only *Gysbreght van Aemstel* and the Joseph dramas would continue to be staged. Of the series of biblical tragedies he went on to write, several were not performed at all.

Even the tragedy *Jeptha*, in which he dramatised the Old Testament story of Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter, was performed only a handful of times, in 1659.⁵² Yet Vondel himself, in his 'Berecht aen de

⁵¹ Vondel, WB 5, pp. 708–90.

⁵² Vondel, WB 8, pp. 769–850; the 'Berecht' on pp. 773–79.

begunstelingen der toneelkunste' ('Foreword to the Beneficiaries of the Dramatic Arts'), commended the play as a model tragedy in which he had complied with all the requirements of Aristotelian theory. Furthermore, he proudly declared that in a technical dramatic sense he had succeeded in outstripping the famous work on which it was based, the Neo-Latin tragedy *Jephtes* by the learned Franco-Scottish writer George Buchanan. Unlike Buchanan, he pointed out, he had managed to comply with two demands that were difficult to reconcile in this case: the theoretical requirement of the 'unities' (here specifically the unity of time) and the Christian-inspired requirement that a biblical tragedy should never depart from its sacred subject matter.

This Aristotelian tragedy, which he had come to know through interpretations by Heinsius, Grotius and especially Vossius, was an example of *aemulatio* (the surpassing of a work recognised as a masterpiece), something theoreticians believed should be seen as the greatest of poetic achievements. The Schouwburg audience, however, wanted to be enthralled by visual effects. Vondel's plays, which now concentrated on a single central act, scarcely met the growing demand for fast-moving, spectacular plays with changes of scene and astonishing technical tricks aimed at producing an entertaining spectacle. The outward theatrical effect of the action he depicted now relied – as in *Lucifer* – almost entirely on impressive acting, attractive staging, the costumes worn by the characters and their entourages, and on the addition of special displays. Brandt writes that in these later years Vondel complained about the fact that roles in his plays were given to inexperienced actors, decked out in 'old, threadbare and inappropriate clothing' ('oude versleete en wanschikkelyke kleederen').⁵³ This complaint is probably authentic. Most of Vondel's subsequent tragedies existed purely in written form.

We can be certain that Vondel deplored the lack of response from Schouwburg audiences. It leaves a slightly bitter taste to know that it was precisely in this period that he felt forced to set himself up as a champion of the stage, arguing resoundingly in its favour in response to attacks from the clergy. He did so for the first time in his 'Berecht aen alle Kunstgenooten, en Begunstigers der Tooneelspelen' ('Foreword to all Companions in Art, and Supporters of Stage Plays'), which was printed at the front of editions of *Lucifer*.⁵⁴ In it he defended the

⁵³ Brandt, 'Het leven van Joost van den Vondel', p. 68.

⁵⁴ Vondel, WB 5, pp. 607–14.

usefulness of 'elevating and entertaining plays', especially those with biblical subject matter. Vondel evidently understood even before its performance that *Lucifer* would offend the clergy. When this assumption was borne out, he issued another apology for the stage, this time in a 'Berecht aen alle kunstgenooten en voorstanders van den Schouburgh' ('Foreword to all Companions in Art and Advocates of the Schouwburg') published in the edition of *Salmoneus*.⁵⁵ In this he added new arguments to his defence of dramatised Bible stories, and once again formulated what he believed the essence and goal of a tragedy to be in terms derived from Aristotle and Horace. Like painting, drama imitated human action, uniting instruction and delight. A tragedy deals with the fate of eminent persons and its purpose is to move and to portray passions. Even more insistently than Vossius, Vondel emphasises the didactic purpose of the tragedy, which, he writes:

teaches, according to circumstances, to tighten or let loose the reins of the State, and take warning by the misfortune of others. It offers a lively portrayal of wisdom, comprising dignified (i.e. estimable) examples taken from history, for in histories one unceasingly sees the wheel of fortune turning, and how people here treat one another.⁵⁶

Immediately after the banning of *Lucifer*, Vondel had rounded on the preaching of Petrus Wittewrongel, ridiculing him a number of times in verse. The orthodox Calvinist preacher regarded anything that had to do with the Schouwburg as born of Evil, especially, of course, Vondel's *Lucifer*. In 1661 Wittewrongel hit back with a powerful attack in book form, *Oeconomia Christiana ofte Christelijke Huishoudinge* (*Oeconomia Christiana or Christian Housekeeping*), in which he advanced a gamut of dogmatic objections to the stage and to Vondel's play set in heaven. The poet returned fire immediately. In the same year he published *Tooneelschildt oft Pleitrede voor het toneelrecht* (*Shield of the Stage or Defence of the Rights of Theatre*), which he ended by expressing his belief in the city's rulers' wisdom and their love of art and freedom; they would never allow the Schouwburg to be closed the way the Puritans in England had closed the theatres.⁵⁷ Yet that is exactly what

⁵⁵ Vondel, WB 5, pp. 710–18.

⁵⁶ Vondel, WB 5, p. 715: '[...] leert naer voorvallende gelegenheit de toom des Staets vieren of aenhaelen, en elck zich zacht aen een anders ongeluck spiegelen. Zy beelt levendigh de wysheit uit, die in deftige voorbeelden, uit de historien getrocken, bestaet; want in de historien ziet men geduurigh het radt van avontuure draejen, en hoe de menschen hier met elckanderen omspringen.'

⁵⁷ Vondel, WB 9, pp. 380–90.

happened in 1672, for a period of five years, though in part due to the pressure of political circumstances.

Meanwhile, great changes had occurred in Vondel's private life. Until 1652 he had lived and worked continuously in 'De rechtvaardige trouw' ('The Righteous Faith'), the business that bought and sold luxury stockings and other silk goods, begun by his father. In 1652 he transferred both the business and the family home to his son. Not long afterwards he went to live with his daughter Anna in a rented dwelling on the Prinsengracht, close to the Berenstraat. Even at this point the business was probably not all that healthy. The First English War (1652–54), which caused great poverty in Amsterdam, was undoubtedly detrimental to the trade in luxury articles such as silk stockings. Within a few years Joost, who seems to have been a prodigal, went bankrupt and his father had to take over his debts.

A nephew interceded for him with the wife of one of the burgomasters and in January 1658 Vondel, now seventy, was given a job as bookkeeper at the municipal pawnbroking bank. He earned a fairly decent salary, more than most clergy of the time, but it was no sinecure. As time went on he seems increasingly to have neglected his duties, which consisted of recording details of the pawned goods. Finally, when he turned eighty, Brandt writes, 'the Gentlemen Burgomasters, knowing how little service the bank was obtaining from him, dismissed him from his duties, with the retention of his salary'.⁵⁸ Joost Jr. had been dead for eight years by then. In late 1659 his father had asked the burgomasters to force him to leave for the East Indies, the customary 'solution' for wayward sons. He had died at sea.

Looking at the amount Vondel wrote in these later years, his creative industry is impressive: ten original tragedies and three major religious works (two didactic poems and a biblical epic). He also wrote a large number of occasional poems in this period, mainly for the burgomasters and their relatives, sometimes on behalf of the municipal authorities to mark all kinds of official events, as on the occasion of the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. In 1660 his verse translation of the complete works of Virgil was published, in 1671 those of Ovid, and meanwhile he published no fewer than four translations of Greek tragedies.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Brandt, 'Het leven van Joost van den Vondel', p. 64: 'Toen hebben de Heeren Burgermeesters, weetende hoe weinig dienst de bank van hem trok, hem van zyne bedieninge ontslaagen, mits behoudende zyn wedde.'

⁵⁹ Vondel, WB 7 and 10.

Even more impressive than the quantity of his output is its creative elasticity, which is particularly in evidence in his original work. In his tragedies he continued to tap into new themes. In the three plays of 1660 – *Koning David in ballingschap* (*King David Exiled*) *Koning David herstelt* (*King David Restored*) and *Samson* – the central subject is that of a 'change of state' ('staetveranderinghe'), the reversal of fortune from happiness to unhappiness that had dominated *Jeptha*, for instance, although from *Adonias* onwards the theme of justice and injustice comes to the fore as well.

It has often been claimed that practically all Vondel's plays of the early 1660s are connected to his sorrow over his son. Indeed it seems inconceivable that such emotions could fail to have influenced his in-depth exploration of the countless father-son relationships he portrays in them. Yet his concentration on the father-son issue in this period does not detract from the fact that here too Vondel elevates matters above the level of the personal and the incidental, both in a purely literary sense – as in the David plays and *Samson*, where he experiments with the structural possibilities of the tragic 'change of state' – and in terms of content. In *Adonias*, and particularly in *Batavische gebroeders* (*Batavian Brothers*) of 1663 and *Faëton* (*Phaeton*) of the same year, he successively explored various aspects of the basic themes of guilt and punishment, and of justice as their ultimate foundation.⁶⁰

In this same period Vondel also produced a far more important literary novelty, namely the first original biblical epic in Dutch literature, *Joannes de Boetgezant* (*John the Baptist*), published in 1662.⁶¹ More than any other genre, the epic in its traditional form has been forgotten, and nothing is so remote from contemporary taste as its then customary mythological phraseology, its extended comparisons, and its relentless, thumping alexandrines. In the seventeenth century, however, it was regarded, along with the tragedy, as the highest form of literature. As we have seen, the great exemplars were Virgil's *Aeneid* and, among contemporary works, *Gerusalemme liberata* by Torquato Tasso (1575). In France Du Bartas had written an epic about the creation of the world and in England Milton's topic was the battle between heaven and hell, to name but two. Yet in the Dutch Republic the genre barely existed as yet. Vondel had already used the technique and style of the epic in his *Verovering van Grol* (*Conquest of Groenlo*) of 1627, in order

⁶⁰ Vondel, WB 9, pp. 898–971 and WB 10, pp. 31–93.

⁶¹ Vondel, WB 9, pp. 673–794.

to lend his subject the necessary appeal and universal depth, something he would continue to do in many of his more official occasional poems, but in the late 1630s he had abandoned his true epic work, *Constantinade*.

With *Joannes de Boetgezant* Vondel produced both the first successful and the first biblical epic of the Dutch Republic. It would become the model for a long series of such heroic poems in the eighteenth century. He gave the epic a new form that was entirely his own, one that departed from the usual Virgilian-Tassonian model in its strong didactic bias. It is less narrative, more aimed at convincing and teaching, and as such it is more in keeping with his great religious didactic poems, with one of which, *De Heerlyckheit der Kercke* (*The Glory of the Church*) of a year later, it is also connected in terms of its content.

Christ's baptism by John, the climax of the first half of the epic, marks the true beginning of the Christian Church, although in *De Heerlyckheit der Kercke* it is referred to as such only in passing. John's story is linked with that of Jesus in the second half of the epic too. His death is placed in the context of Satan's battle with Christ and interpreted as a foreshadowing of the crucifixion. Vondel lends form to this interpretation not only in his story of John's life but also by repeatedly framing John's biography with metaphysical events, as was customary in an epic. Since this was a biblical epic, those events were not mythological in nature but Christian. A 'council of heaven' is set against a 'council of hell', the former being convened by God.

Taken as a whole, *Joannes de Boetgezant* can be seen as a portrayal of the age-old duality between good and evil, a motif characteristic of the epic ever since Tasso, and one that had already been used by Vondel in his epic poem *Verovering van Grol*. In the years that followed he went on to make this duality the central theme of his final three tragedies, *Adam in ballingschap* (*Adam Exiled*) of 1664, and *Zungchin* and *Noach*, both published in 1667.⁶² In doing so he returned to what he had done in earlier works, although he now managed to harmonise his theme with that of the 'change of state', achieving a synthesis of everything that had inspired his work in previous years. The reversal of fortune from happiness to unhappiness sits comfortably with the battle between

⁶² Vondel, WB 10, pp. 94–170, 323–90, and 391–454 resp. See also the contributions by Jan Bloemendal (on *Adam in Ballingschap*) and Wiep van Bunge (on *Noach*).

good and evil, with the universal solace that good will ultimately prevail. This is the 'lesson' of *Noach*, Vondel's final play.

After his honourable dismissal from the pawnbroking bank Vondel's life gradually ebbed away. He no longer wrote long poems, although he did produce dozens of shorter occasional poems, mainly for relatives and acquaintances. Among the longest is a poem of forty-eight verses about *De slapende Venus van Filips de Koning* (*Philips de Koninck's Sleeping Venus*), published on a loose sheet in 1670 by 'the widow of Abraham de Wees, bookseller on the Middeldam', his publisher to the last. As Vondel wrote a relatively large number of poems inspired by paintings, it may be regarded as one of the kinder twists of fate that there are several drawings of him in his final years by Philips de Koninck, who was among his closest friends. They are moving in their depiction of his slow drift towards death. 'His age was his sickness', writes Brandt, one of those who still visited him regularly. 'The wick of life lacked oil; the lamp was extinguished for want of nourishment.'⁶³

⁶³ Brandt, 'Het leven van Joost van den Vondel', p. 73: 'Zyn ouderdom was zyn ziekte. Het pit des levens ontbrak oly: de lamp most uitgaan by mangel van voedzel.'