

CHAPTER SEVEN

VONDEL AS A DRAMATIST: THE REPRESENTATION OF LANGUAGE AND BODY

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Introduction

In early modern culture, drama and power formed a structural alliance, as they do in Vondel's plays.¹ This might result in self-fashioning or alternatively, where the effect is subversive, self-destruction.² The nature and effects of this alliance are the main focus of this chapter, in which Joost van den Vondel's dramatic oeuvre is examined against the background of two concepts: performativity and theatricality. Both terms are employed in the sense in which they occur in New Historicism (Greenblatt) or in the approach to drama seen in cultural studies (Fischer-Lichte).³ An important starting point is the idea that the complex treatments of power and power structures found on the early modern stage indicate, among other things, the performative character of power displays. A reinforcement of the status quo might result from this association, since splendour and propaganda can be made to serve political ends, but at the same time, laying bare the mechanisms of power could have a subversive effect by unmasking its deceptive character. The latter aspect, as we shall see, was of great importance in the dramatic work of Vondel.

The recipients of early modern drama were provided with an important form of knowledge that cannot be acquired from books but

¹ See Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*; Pieters, *Moments of Negotiation*; Korsten, *Vondel belicht; Sovereignty as Inviolability*; Schößler, *Literaturwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft*, pp. 79–100. On the relationship between power, religion and politics in literature see also Marotti and Bristol, *Print, Manuscript & Performance*; Tennenhouse, *Power on Display*.

² On the concept of 'self-fashioning' see Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. On New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, see, for instance, Healy, *New Latitudes*.

³ 'Performativity' is understood here as the representation of speech acts in early modern theatre and 'theatricality' as the representation and observation of physicality.

emerges from a process of interaction between characters on the stage and spectators in the audience. The theatricality of this kind of knowledge transfer lies in the fact that specific ideas are conveyed to readers or spectators not by language alone but by characters who act both linguistically and physically.⁴ The reciprocity between the two was recognized by Vondel, who used it as an argument with which to defend the theatre as a medium. Language and body become inextricably linked. Speech acts have far-reaching physical consequences, just as the deployment, injury, or usurpation of bodies can have profound implications for the power of the characters, for their positions in the power structure, and, as a result, for their linguistic capacities.

After a general introduction to the dramatic works of Vondel, I will elaborate upon this idea as it relates to three points. The first has to do with Vondel's theoretical writings and the importance he attributes to the theatre as a medium for the acquisition of knowledge. The second relates to the performative function of bodies on the stage, as well as to the language of power and its potentially self-destructive consequences, aspects exemplified in particular by the utterances of rulers. The third point concerns the relationship between language and body against the background of political action, conceived as a permanent act of sacrifice.

Vondel as a Dramatist

Joost van den Vondel created a dramatic oeuvre that makes him the most important seventeenth-century author for the stage working in the Dutch language and at the same time a dramatist of European stature.⁵ Between 1612 and 1668 he published a total of thirty-two tragedies, of which twenty-four were original dramas and eight were translations, mainly of classical works.⁶ The high point of his activity as a dramatist came in the 1650s and 1660s, when more than half his tragedies were completed. Generally speaking it is possible to identify three special qualities in Vondel's works for the stage. First of all, he goes his own way in his choice of familiar themes, since he draws on biblical

⁴ For the theoretical background see Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*; *idem*, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*.

⁵ In sum, see Konst and Noak, 'Belust op Bybelstof'.

⁶ I consider *Adam in ballingschap* a creative imitation, not a translation.

material for the majority of his works. Secondly, he emerges as a theoretician of the stage.⁷ Several of his tragedies are preceded by long forewords (*berechten*) in which he expands upon his views on poetry or discusses problems concerning the historical and theological embedding of his choice of subject-matter. Finally, he was one of the few authors anywhere in Europe to be powerfully influenced by Greek drama and by Aristotle's writings on drama from as early as the 1640s, as evidenced by his translations of three tragedies by Sophocles, *Electra* (*Elektra*, 1639), *Oedipus Rex* (*Koning Edipus*, 1660), and *Trachiniae* (*Herkules in Trachin*, 1668), and two by Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris* (*Ifigenie in Tauren*, 1666) and *Phoenissae* (*Feniciaensche of Gebroeders van Thebe*, 1668).⁸

Vondel scholarship has shown that the playwright's attention to Greek drama increased from about 1640. By contrast, his earlier plays – like those of most of his Dutch fellow poets – were strongly influenced by Seneca.⁹ Vondel translated two plays by the Roman author, *Troades* (*De Amsteldamsche Hecuba*, 1626) and *Phaedra* (*Hippolytus of Rampsalige kuyscheyd*, 1629). In about 1640 a new tone can clearly be detected in Vondel's work, coinciding with his in-depth study of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The Amsterdam poet did not receive any education in the classics as a child but mastered Latin and Greek as an autodidact, so for his studies of Aristotle he relied on the help of a friend, Gerardus Joannes Vossius (1577–1649), a polyhistorian and professor of classical philology at the Atheneum Illustre in Amsterdam.¹⁰ In the drama *Gebroeders* (*Brothers*, 1640), which he dedicated to Vossius, Vondel put on stage for the first time a protagonist wracked by doubts about how

⁷ See Vondel, *Poëtologisch proza*.

⁸ One of Vondel's forerunners in displaying an interest in Greek tragedy was George Buchanan (1506–1582). He too translated works by Euripides, into Latin. With his tragedy *Jeptha*, Vondel strove to emulate Buchanan's neo-Latin drama *Jepthes sive votum* (1554). See Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 2, pp. 240–306.

⁹ The literature on Vondel's dramatic oeuvre is of course extensive and here I name only a few studies containing the most recent research: Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*; Witstein and Grootes (eds.), *Visies op Vondel na 300 jaar*; Spies, 'Vondel in veelvoud'; Korsten, *Vondel belicht; Sovereignty as Inviolability*; Porteman and Smits-Veldt, *Een nieuw vaderland voor de muzen*, pp. 379–86, 530–45. Quotations from the plays are taken from the WB edition: Joost van den Vondel, *De werken: Volledige en geïllustreerde tekstuitgave*. The volumes of this edition are available from the 'digitale bibliotheek van de Nederlandse letteren' at www.dbnl.nl.

¹⁰ For Vossius see Rademaker, *Life and Work of Gerardus Joannes Vossius*. His works on poetics have recently been published by Jan Bloemendal. In his *Poeticae institutiones* (1, 4, 33) Vossius states that he and Vondel discussed matters of poetics.

to make the right choice between alternative ways of acting. King David, the hero of the story, finds himself in a bitter moral dilemma that he resolves only with great difficulty. Here Vondel undeniably created an Aristotelian figure, but almost another twenty years would pass before the poet felt able to publish a true ‘model tragedy’ in the spirit of Aristotelian poetics.

In his foreword to *Jeptha of offerbelofte* (*Jeptha or the Sacrificial Vow*, 1659) Vondel explains to future poet-dramatists the characteristics of a well-composed tragedy, introducing important concepts from Aristotelian teachings on drama.¹¹ He believed these teachings demanded that particular attention be paid to characterization. Jephthah, the protagonist, ‘appears here neither as extremely pious nor as impious but as between the two’.¹² Here the author is referring to *hamartia*, the requirement that a play’s protagonist, despite committing serious errors, must not entirely lose the audience’s sympathy.

The foreword also addresses two important elements of the structure of the action, namely the *peripeteia* or sudden reversal and the *anagnorisis*, the denouement or recognition scene. These ensure that the audience as well as the characters in the play experience the ‘churning, tumbling and blazing’¹³ of the passions.¹⁴ Lastly, the Amsterdam poet writes that the aim of a tragedy is to bring about a *katharsis*, or purification. By evoking empathy and fear in its audience, a tragedy purifies and modifies the emotions. The tragedy, Vondel writes, must be capable of

evoking sympathy and terror if it is to achieve its aim and purpose, which is to moderate and curb both these passions in the feelings of the people, to purge members of the audience of shortcomings, and to teach them to endure the disasters of the world more good-naturedly and placidly.¹⁵

¹¹ On the Aristotelian character of Jephthah in particular see also Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 2, pp. 240–379. On the ‘*berecht*’, see Grootes, ‘Het Berecht voor Jephtha en de Prolegomena van Grotius’ *Phoenissae-vertaling*’.

¹² WB, 8, p. 775: ‘verschijnt hier nocte heel vroom, nocte onvroom, maer tusschen beide’.

¹³ WB, 8, p. 777: ‘het woelen, tuimelen en barnen’.

¹⁴ Vondel, *Jeptha*, WB, 8, p. 775: ‘De beide hoofcieraden, hier by een gevoeght, by de Latijnen peripetia, en agnitio, of staetveranderinge, en herkenninge genoemt, gaen in arbeit, om hunne kracht met eene maghtige beweeghenisse te baeren’.

¹⁵ *Jeptha*, WB, 8, p. 777: ‘medoogen en schrick uit te wercken op dat het treurspel zijn einde en oogherck moght treffen, het welck is deze beide hartstoghten in het gemoedt der menschen maetigen, en manieren, d’aenschouwers van gebreken zuiveren, en leeren de rampen der weerelt zachtzinniger en gelijckmoediger verduuren’.

Two important motifs in Vondel's work are mankind's lack of certainty and freedom of the will.¹⁶ In the three King David plays, *Gebroeders* (*Brothers*), *Koning David in ballingschap* (*King David Exiled*, 1660) and *Koning David herstelt* (*King David Restored*, 1660), as well as in *Lucifer* (1654), *Faëton* (*Phaeton*, 1663) and *Adam in ballingschap* (*Adam Exiled*, 1664), to name but a few, his concern consistently lies with doubt as a deeply felt moral dilemma. Many of his characters are tormented by the need to take a difficult personal decision of a far-reaching nature or, as Vondel puts it, to choose 'the lesser of two evils'.¹⁷ This strong emphasis on the motif of doubt and uncertainty in Vondel's Aristotelian period is partly responsible for the internal division seen in his most important characters and their position in between worldly and heavenly history. In fact they possess two bodies, one mortal, subject to all human passions, and one immortal, which allows them to take part in the story of God's deliverance of humanity.¹⁸ This dichotomous way of thinking can be seen as a characteristic of the early modern period, an attitude in evidence in Vondel's plays as it is elsewhere. In the analysis that follows, it will emerge as of great importance in several of his dramas.

Although doubt is a symptom of man's earth-bound nature, Vondel nevertheless gives his characters – and with them his audience and his readers – a means of overcoming their uncertainty and therefore of participating in the salvation that God has in store for man. The poet, who converted to Catholicism in about 1640, repeatedly emphasizes God's mercy and His gift to humanity of reason and free will:

You blended your bright radiance
 Into our soul, a majesty
 Of free will, immortality
 And reason, never clouded nor obscure.¹⁹

Vondel regarded drama above all as a means of promoting reasonable behaviour and of presenting to his readers or audiences the articles of

¹⁶ On doubt in Vondel see Noak, "Wanneer de hemel spreekt moet alle reden wijcken".

¹⁷ WB, 3, p. 848.

¹⁸ Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*.

¹⁹ Vondel, *Adam in ballingschap*, WB, 10, p. 113: 'Gy dommelde uwen heldren luister / In onze ziele, een majesteit / Van vryen wille, onsterflickheit, / En reden, noit bewolckct noch duister.'

faith to which he so deeply subscribed.²⁰ He was keen to make use of the special opportunities afforded by the theatre in this regard.

The Stage as a Medium for Conveying Knowledge

Despite all the developments in Vondel's dramatic work over time, his oeuvre exhibits a great deal of consistency. If we look at the forewords to his plays one by one, it immediately becomes clear that the author believed the stage had an important function in conveying knowledge.²¹ Throughout his life the Amsterdam poet was consciously engaged in competitive rivalry with the sermon, that other powerful medium used primarily for didactical purposes.²² This explains why many of his theoretical essays include a defence of the theatre against opposition from the pulpit. The decisive argument in Vondel's view was that the main concern of the theatre was not entertainment but the increasing of competence, and in this respect the stage had enormous advantages, since it did not achieve its purpose by means of 'vapid addresses, cast to the winds for hours, and more distressing than instructive',²³ as the author believed was often the case in church, but instead through the bodily expression of knowledge on the stage. An interplay of words and actions developed in the theatre, and those watching were touched by it. The process of conveying knowledge became a sensory affair and its recipients were given something that changed them more profoundly than any preacher's rhetoric.

In the foreword to his very first play, *Het Pascha* (Passover, 1612), the poet, then still Mennonite, writes:

The old wise heathens, contemplating the nature and depravity of human beings and seeing how slow almost all of them were to climb the steps of virtue, and to rise high in all those things that among them could be called creditable and virtuous, as being a mountain all too steep; so they have in all ways tried by certain means to bring all to a good, chaste, and

²⁰ On free will in Vondel see Konst, *Determinatie en vrije wil in de Nederlandse tragedie van de zeventiende eeuw*; Konst, "Het goet of quaet te kiezen".

²¹ There are extensive references in the research to the mediating function of literature in the process of knowledge transfer in the early modern period. For a summary see Klausnitzer, *Literatur und Wissen*.

²² On Vondel's conflict with the clergy see for example Bostoën, 'Vondel contra Smout'.

²³ WB V, p. 614: 'laffe redenen, uren lang in den wint gestroit, en eer verdrietigh dan leerzaem'.

natural civic life, whether through various poetic fables and poems about invented happenings, or through effective rules and laws. Then among other things they have well realized ways of reviving old stories or forgotten histories and of putting them on the stage for the whole world, and in this way, through certain ingeniously constructed depictions and characters, expressing and imitating in a lively form that which time and antiquity had well-nigh wiped from remembrance through many past centuries and harvested years, in a manner as if they had first happened in the present, such that they show how in the end all good things lead to their own rewards and all evils their punishment, and as a consequence even coarse, rough, and unlearned people, who exhibit a willed deafness and a willed blindness, are able, without spectacles, to have their failings indicated to them as if by a pointing finger, and through the expressive teachings of symbolic characters are civilized and made virtuous.²⁴

One striking thing here is the important function Vondel attributes to the representation of the chosen material as a means of transferring knowledge. Through representation ('expressing and imitating in a lively manner'), in the form of images and action on stage, a process of generating knowledge is set in train among the spectators even if they are uneducated or have no access to the usual educational curriculum ('coarse, rough, and unlearned people'). The stage becomes a medium of cultural reciprocity. The material, which comes from a different cultural environment with its own system of norms ('which time and antiquity had well-nigh wiped from remembrance') is transformed by its representation into a matter of contemporary concern ('as if they

²⁴ Vondel, *Het Pascha*, WB, 1, p. 163: 'D'oude wijse Heydenen aenmerckende den aert ende verdorventheyt des menschen, ende ziende hoe traegh vast een yeder was om langhs de trappen der deughden op te klimmen, ende om hoogh te stijghen in al het ghene wat loflijk ende eerlijck by hun mochte ghenaemt worden, als zijnde eenen al te steylen bergh; zoo hebben sy in alle manieren ghetracht door zekere middelen een yeder te brenghen tot een goet, zedigh, ende natuerlijck borgherlijck leven; tzij door eenighe Poëtische Fabulen, ende verzierde ghedichten, oft door andere bequame Regulen ende Wetten: dan onder andere hebben sy voor goet inghezien de maniere van eenighe oude Historien ofte vergheten Gheschiedenissen wederom te ververschen, ende voor al de Werelt op't Toneel te stellen: om alzo door zekere aerdighe toeghemaecte Beelden ende Personagien, levendich wt te drucken ende na te bootsen tghene tijt ende outheyt met veel verloopen eeuwen ende aghemaeyde jaren bykans wt tghedacht ghewischt hadde, in voeghen als oft die eerst teghenwoordich gheschiedden: waer inne sy betoonden hoe int eynde alle goet syn belooninghe, ende alle quaet syne eyghen straffe veroorzaect, op dat zelfs plumpe, rouwe ende ongheleerde menschen, die al hoorende doof, ende al ziende blindt waren, zonder bril mochten hun feylen als met den vingher aenghewesen, ende door sprekende Letteren van ghecierde Figuren ghetemt ende ghezedight werden.'

had first happened in the present') and can therefore be understood by the audience.

In later forewords Vondel again emphasizes the importance of theatricality in transferring knowledge. He even regards the 'deceptive character' of the stage as a decisive advantage of the medium, quoting Plutarch with approval:

The tragedy is the same kind of deception, such that he who had deceived another and he who was deceived could become wiser than the undeceived, for the tragedy deceives or makes wiser in as much as it treats of an invention, but it deceives with such wit that the invented seems entirely authentic; yet he who by deceiving people or making them wiser brings them something that is of use appears to deal the more correctly; and he is wiser who, through invented fables, comes to know what is regarded as scandalous or honourable.²⁵

By visiting the Schouwburg, citizens who were interested in the stage acquired a certain form of competence, and this was something Vondel contemplated at length in his forewords from the very beginning of his career as a dramatist. His ideas on the subject developed over time. In his early theoretical writings, still under the influence of Seneca, language and its rhetorical power to influence its recipients by reasoned argument are uppermost. The representation of characters in the theatre is important in conveying certain ideas to the audience in a digestible form, but the audience itself does not undergo any profound change of heart. This view was altered by Vondel's encounter with Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which the emphasis lies on the consequences for the audience's psyche of linguistic and bodily interaction on stage. The effect of the theatre now penetrates a good deal further, triggering a psychological process that changes and purifies the emotions, not only – by means of the *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* – in the characters on stage but in the spectators. In one of his forewords Vondel writes, for example:

The aim and purpose of tragedies following the tragic rules is to mollify people through terror, and empathy. Scholars and budding youths are

²⁵ Vondel, *Salmoeneus*, WB, 5, p. 715: 'Het treurspel is eenerhande slag van bedrogh, waer door hy, die een ander bedrogen hadde, en de geen, die bedrogen was, wijzer kon worden dan een die onbedrogen is: want het treurspel bedrieght of verkloect, naerdien het een verziensel verhandelt: maer het bedrieght zoo geestigh, dat het verziende geheel waerachtigh schijnt: doch hy schijnt rechtvaardiger te handelen, die de menschen bedriegende of verkloeckende, hun eenigh nut aenbrengh: en hy is wijzer, die door gedichte fabelen leert kennen wat schandelijck of eerlijck luit.'

exercised in languages, oratory, wisdom, discipline, and good morals and manners by plays, and this creates in their tender emotions and senses a habit of decency and appropriate behaviour, which will remain with them and cling to them into old age. Yes it sometimes happens that the exceptionally gifted, who cannot be either swayed or diverted by the usual means, are touched by pithy utterances and grandiloquent theatricality and are drawn in without realizing it. Just as a noble lute string gives a sound, and answers, when its equal, of the same nature and character and with the same tone although stretched on a different lute, is plucked by a skilful hand, which, as it plays, can drive the evil temper out of a possessed and unrelenting Saul.²⁶

In the theatre, therefore, not only are the intellectual powers of the audience stimulated, their feelings in particular are affected. By such means, plays are even able to influence people who have resisted a normal education because of their high estimation of their own intellectual powers, the 'exceptionally gifted, who cannot be either swayed or diverted by the usual means'. They are persuaded 'without realizing it' during the interactive process set in train by the performance on the stage. So the theatre achieves its aim precisely at the moment when there no longer seems to be any prospect of the successful intellectual appropriation of knowledge.

The content of the knowledge conveyed in the theatre is of great social relevance. The Amsterdam poet claims that in drama there are three types of information, namely 'knowledge of history, nature, and morality'.²⁷ By 'nature' he means 'natural philosophy' or what we would now call physics. The knowledge that Vondel wishes to cultivate in his readers therefore covers a very broad field and can be described as historical, social, moral, and scientific. An important aspect here is the exposure of the power structures that existed in early modern society.

²⁶ Vondel, *Lucifer*, WB, 5, p. 613: 'Het wit en oogherck der wettige Treurspelen is de menschen te vermorwen door schrick, en medoogen. Scholieren, en opluickende jongkheit worden door spelen, in talen, welsprekentheit, wijsheit, tucht, en goede zeden, en manieren, geoeffent, en dit zet in de teere gemoeden en zinnen, een ploy van voeghelyckheit en geschicktheit, die hun, tot in den ouderdom toe, byblyven, en aenhangen: ja het gebeurt by wylen dat overvliegende vernuften, by geene gemeine middelen te buigen, noch te verzetten, door spitsvondigheden en hooghdravenden tooneelstyl geraeck't, en, buiten hun eigen vermoeden, getrocken worden: gelyck een edele luitsnaer geluit geeft, en antwoord, zoo dra heur weërgade, van de zelve nature en aert, en op eenen gelycken toon, en andere luit gespannen, getokkelt wort van een geestige hant, die, al speelende, den tuimelgeest uit eenen bezeten en verstockten Saul dryven kan.'

²⁷ WB, 10, p. 34.

Power can take two forms. It can be exercised legitimately (*potestas*) or illegitimately (*violentia*). In what follows we will look more closely at each of these two dimensions.²⁸ Of central concern are the *violentia* experienced by the female characters in Vondel's plays and the *potestas* that the male characters aim to exhibit. In both cases, self-destruction as a phenomenon accompanying the exercise of power is of decisive significance.

The Body as a Symbol

The interaction between linguistic and bodily performance is clearly an important concept in Vondel's theoretical essays and in the aesthetics he presents to the reader. We will now examine the relationship between verbal and physical action in a number of his plays. This draws our attention to a gender perspective. The text of Vondel's tragedies shows that the female body can be regarded, among other things, as a 'script', in which actions undertaken by men are 'inscribed'. While a man who acts politically has two bodies, earthly and heavenly, and therefore the potential both for earthly freedom of action and for the attainment of heavenly immortality, a woman has to rely on the non-earthly aspect of physicality – only in the heavenly spheres will she find autonomy. Her role model is the martyr.²⁹ Later we will see how this apparent male supremacy carries the germ of self-destruction within it.

Gysbreght van Aemstel (1637) provides an exemplary demonstration of the role of the female body as a 'script' of male dealings.³⁰ The play was written for the inauguration of the new Amsterdam Schouwburg in January 1638 and it is characterized by the dichotomy in Vondel's thought touched upon above. On the one hand it depicts the downfall of medieval Amsterdam in a truly brutal manner, while on the other it predicts – against the background of the Nativity – the future salvation and resurrection of the city in Vondel's own time. Vondel was also concerned to 'light the beautiful fire of Troy in Amsterdam, in the sight of

²⁸ On these aspects see also Noak, 'Taal en geweld in enkele bijbelse treurspelen van Joost van den Vondel'.

²⁹ On the relationship between body, politics, and gender in the seventeenth century see Alt, *Von der Schönheit zerbrechender Ordnungen*.

³⁰ On *Gysbreght* see the summary by Prandoni, *Een mozaïek van stemmen*, which presents an overview of recent secondary literature on the play.

its inhabitants³¹ and he therefore detected in his ancient subject matter a further example of downfall and resurrection.

In the seventeenth century everyone knew the story on which *Gysbreght* was based. It had been put on stage in 1613 by the poet P.C. Hooft (1581–1647).³² Geeraerd van Velsen, hero of Hooft's tragedy of that name and a member of the nobility of the Province of Holland, gravely insults his prince, Count Floris, by refusing to marry the count's mistress. Velsen's blunt reaction to the proposal – 'your worn-out shoe will not fit my foot'³³ – sets in train a sequence of events that have fateful consequences for the characters involved. When Count Floris rapes Velsen's wife Machtelt in revenge, he is imprisoned by Velsen's friends, including Gijsbreght van Aemstel. Floris is eventually killed by Velsen, which leads to a civil war in Holland, drawing in Gijsbreght, a moderate by nature. His city of Amsterdam is besieged by the count's followers. It is here that the action of Vondel's drama begins.

The events live on in the memories of the supporters and opponents of the count and of Gijsbreght van Aemstel, and they are written in the bodies of the women who appear in the story. Their bodies become chronicles of the violent acts of the men. Geeraerd van Velsen has sparked this series of events not only by impugning the honour of Floris's mistress – and in so doing that of the count himself – but by in some sense violating the integrity of her body with his description of her as a 'worn-out shoe'. Her body is clearly sullied and worthless in his view. With this performative utterance he not only metaphorically wounds the body of the woman Floris loves but directly affects her status and her position of power at court at the same time, so Floris too is damaged. The count takes revenge by raping Machtelt van Velsen, thereby putting the stamp of 'worn-out shoe' on her body as well. These traumatic events from the source material for *Gysbreght van Aemstel* return to Gijsbreght's wife Badeloch in a dream.³⁴ Dressed for church on Christmas night she sees her cousin Machtelt van Velsen, her body disfigured as a result of her rape by Count Floris. Machtelt somberly calls out to Badeloch: 'No resistance nor any struggle will avail

³¹ WB III: 521: 'den schoonen brand van Troje t' Amsterdam, in het gezicht zijner ingezetenen, stichten'

³² The extract from Hooft is quoted here after the edition by De Witte (see also www.dbnl.nl). On *Geeraerd van Velsen* see Noak, *Politische Auffassungen*, pp. 101–27.

³³ Hooft, *Geeraerd van Velsen*, l. 292: 'uw slete schoen myn voet niet passen.'

³⁴ On the handling of trauma in Renaissance drama see Assmann, *Einführung in die Kulturwissenschaft*, pp. 190–92.

you / God's saints have long since abandoned church and altars.³⁵ The violence inflicted on these female bodies in the past makes all members of the Velsen and Aemstel families sinful; the women's experiences can never be expunged. Only at the end of the story, with the flight of the family to a rural region where the memory of these events has no currency can a new historic start be made.

In the further development of *Gysbreght*, history once more plays itself out as a violent infringement of the female body. The well-known early modern concept of the 'city maiden', conquered and raped by the hostile besieger, was undoubtedly of relevance here. It is a motif that emerges in several of Vondel's occasional poems.³⁶ Illustrative of the situation of the women in the play is the scene in the church where the citizens of Amsterdam have gathered to celebrate Christmas night. Calamity overtakes the Nativity when the enemy storms the church. The frenzied tearing down of the Marianum by the count's soldiers is merely the start of a general assault on women, and Krijstijn, sister to Gijsbreght van Aemstel, is among its innocent victims. The epitome of this orgy of violence is the rape and murder of Klaeris van Velsen, daughter of Machtelt and abbess of the Clarissen convent, by Count Floris's bastard son Witte van Haemstee. With this act the trauma is passed down to the next generation.

The powerlessness of women in the face of male *violentia* can nonetheless be overcome if they assume the role of martyr, as demonstrated in Vondel's play *Maeghden* (*Maidens*, 1639). This drama tells the story of the martyrdom of St. Ursula, whom Vondel calls Ursul, and her eleven thousand followers in Cologne. The city is besieged by Attila the Hun, who has taken Ursul and her handmaidens prisoner. To the dismay of his advisors, Attila falls in love with Ursul and postpones the violation of the women in order to win her affection. This causes great discontent in the Hun army. The superior strength of the heathen soldiers and the physical threat to the innocent maidens are enthrallingly portrayed. The eleven thousand are encircled by a cordon of male violence:

The enemy has made a fortress of scythe-wheeled chariots
Facing the city like a rampart, assailing her breast.

³⁵ WB, 3, p. 561: 'Geen tegenworstelen noch strijden magh u baeten. / Gods heilgen hebben kerck en outers lang verlaeten.'

³⁶ On this subject see Gelderblom, *Mannen en maagden in Hollands tuin*, pp. 78–93.

The foot soldiers on both sides, like an iron crust,
Cover her flanks. The horseman, on their heels
From behind, encloses the backs of these doomed souls.³⁷

The soldiers' intentions are clear. One of Attila's lieutenant-colonels urges the king to concentrate on the requirements of the army and no longer to take any account of Ursul:

Necessity forbids it you. The soldiery stands, aflame
At this beguiling host. The soldiery rages, furious
That the King's eyes keep turning to Ursul's eyes,
And they pluck no love fruit from the war's harvest.
If the laws of war depart, this army, tired of waiting,
Roused by sexual desire, will soon simply help itself.³⁸

Unlike the women in *Gysbreght van Aemstel*, however, Ursul and her maidens keep control of the story, even though they are killed and mutilated in the end. Holy martyrdom transforms all earthly power relationships, and the apparently weak women are ultimately triumphant. A large proportion of the action consists of debates between the saint and her male opponents, Attila the Hun and his priest and advisor Beremond.³⁹ It is precisely in these discussions that Ursul is able to demonstrate her superiority to her heathen enemy, as was traditional in martyr plays. A future martyr, she is not in such a weak position as it seems. Since her martyrdom will bring victory over tyrannical violence, Ursul actually has no interest in self-preservation – something her followers, including the Archbishop of Cologne, cannot comprehend. It could almost be said that her striving for martyrdom in some sense amounts to a form of violence against Attila and his men, since he can only lose.⁴⁰ Against this background, Ursul's speech acts can be explained. Nowhere does she show weakness. She challenges Attila and Beremond, partly by insulting them, until the heathen prince explodes

³⁷ Vondel, *Maeghden*, ll. 882–86, WB, 3, p. 748: 'De vyand heeft een zeissenwagenburgh geslaegen / Naer Stad toe, als een wal, die stoot haer voor de borst. / Het voetvolck van weerzy, gelijk een ysre korst, / Bedeckt de lendenen. de ruiter, op de hielen / Van achter, kleed den rug van dees gedoemde zielen.'

³⁸ Vondel, *Maeghden*, ll. 951–56, WB, 3, p. 751: 'De nood verbied het u. het krijghsvolck staet en vlamt / Op dit bekoorlijck slaggh. het krijghsvolck raest, vergramt / Dat 's Konings oogen vast naer Ursuls oogen draeien, / En zy van 's oorlooghs oeghst geen minnevruchten maeien. / Indienghe 't Recht vertreckt, dit heir van wachten moe, / Van geilheid aengeport, tast lichtlijck daedlijck toe.'

³⁹ See also Konst, 'Wat de toeschouwers niet te zien krijgen.'

⁴⁰ On violence in the legends of the saints see Koch, 'Formen und Bedingungen von Sprahgewalt in Katharinenlegende und -spiel'; Lützelshwab, 'Vom Blut der Märtyrer.'

with rage and kills her with his dart. Ursul hereby achieves her goal. Without realizing it, Attila has lost sovereignty over both his speech and his acts. By killing Ursul he turns her body into a symbol with great performative power, since on seeing the dead and mutilated corpses of her eleven thousand handmaidens, the Huns flee the battlefield, bringing deliverance at last to besieged Cologne. A body violated by physical assault is able to exercise power over its assailants.

The Language of Power

The example of *Maeghden* demonstrates that the sovereignty of male rulers can in some sense be regarded as an illusion. There are consequences for the function of language as an instrument of power; every linguistic expression of power carries a potential for self-destruction within it.⁴¹ This applies not just to power exercised illegitimately, as in the case of Attila and some of the male characters in *Gysbreght van Aemstel*, but no less so in the case of *potestas*, the legitimate form of violence. By demonstrating this, Vondel reveals a fundamental weakness of power structures.

In *King David* and *Jephtah*, Vondel puts rulers on stage who can be regarded not as despots but as righteous holders of power in Israel. It is important to note that he portrays these leaders not as strong and sovereign figures but in a state of weakness and of dependency on earlier linguistic utterances. As the source story of *Gysbreght* demonstrates, the person who carries out a particular action is but one link in a long chain of performative acts by other persons or forerunners and is therefore constructed in part out of what has been said in the past.

This is particularly true of King David in Vondel's *Gebroeders*, whose acts are determined and restricted by two oaths sworn many years before. Joshua, one of David's forebears, once offered protection to the Gibeonites (whom Vondel calls the Gabaonniers), sealing his promise with a vow.⁴² King Saul, however, broke this oath, bringing about a massacre among the Gibeonites. David is told by his high priest Abiathar that the drought that prevails in Israel at the start of the play

⁴¹ On language and power see the classic studies by Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* and Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*.

⁴² On the play see Konst, *Fortuna, Fatum en Providentia Dei in de Nederlandse tragedie*, pp. 184–91; Korsten, 'Legitimatie, allianties, natievorming en mannenliefde'; Noak, "Wanneer de hemel spreekt moet alle reden wijken".

and the hunger it is suffering now are a result of the violation of Joshua's oath. The Israelites' blood-guilt, Abiathar says, can be absolved only if they make a peace offering to be decided upon by the vengeful Gibeonites – who demand the deaths of the late Saul's descendants (the brothers of the title). Now David comes under pressure because of another oath he once swore to his bosom friend Jonathan, namely to protect the descendants of the house of Saul. David is unable to resolve this conflict, which we have already seen described in this study of Vondel as the Old Testament king's moral dilemma. In a debate with representatives of the house of Saul and two women who speak up for the brothers, Risper and Michol (Saul's widow and David's former wife respectively), he proves no match for arguments that appeal to his humanity. With the words 'my spirit is now sick unto death on account of your sorrow; you can surely see the tears run down my cheeks; I promise you, here is my hand, I shall not break my vow',⁴³ he promises the women that he will continue to protect the brothers. This promise too, although no doubt sincerely meant, remains an empty speech act, since David does not have the power to carry it out to the full. He cannot act against the will of his advisors, especially Abiathar, who makes a connection between the bloody demand of the Gibeonites and the will of God and reasons of state. They furnish David with a dubious solution. He must deliver seven instead of nine brothers to the Gibeonites. This enables him to keep his promise to the women. The scope of David's words is therefore very limited; he has no power over language but is subjected to the violence of the speech of others (Joshua, Abiathar, the Gibeonites, and Risper and Michol). The order to deliver the seven brothers whom he does eventually have to relinquish causes him great pain and damages his personal integrity. Here the weakness of his legitimate power is clearly demonstrated.

This painful experience of his own linguistic impotence seems to have lasting effects. In Vondel's two subsequent plays about King David – *Koning David in ballingschap* and *Koning David herstelt* (both of 1660) – we see an Old Testament king who at a certain point ceases to give orders at all.⁴⁴ A ruler, as he ought to have learned, is in an

⁴³ WB, 3, p. 848: 'mijn geest is nu ter dood bedroeft, om uw verdriet, ghy ziet de tranen vast langs bey mijn wangen leken, 'k beloof u, dat 's mijn hand, ick zal mijn' eed niet breecken'.

⁴⁴ On the tragedies see Konst, "Geen kinderhaet verruckt u tot dees daet"; Konst, *Fortuna, Fatum en Providentia Dei in de Nederlandse tragedie*, pp. 223–31.

extremely dependent position. The exercise of power is coupled with suffering; his pronouncements, as demonstrated by Joshua's vow, will have consequences for entire generations. David is clearly trying to avoid such suffering by falling silent. Again he finds himself in a perilous position, his favourite son Absalom having risen in revolt against him. *Koning David in ballingschap* describes his flight from Jerusalem, and in *Koning David herstelt* his army is ready to defeat Absalom's troops. Paralyzed by anxiety about his favourite child, David is no longer able to speak. He refuses to condemn Absalom and thereby deliver him up to state-sanctioned violent revenge. Ironically, his silence in itself makes him guilty once again, since it weakens his position to such a degree that his final demand, that Absalom should not be killed in the battle, goes unheard. His advisors, acting on his behalf, kill his son. So even a ruler's silence can have violent consequences. David's power has reached its nadir. In this tragedy David's silence corresponds with the silence of God, whose will remains hidden from the king. David the man is thrown back upon his own resources.

Jephthah too, the hero of the model tragedy of that name of 1659, experiences the insecurity of a ruler's position. This judge and military leader in Israel likewise finds himself in the clutches of a fatal vow, this time one for which he is himself responsible. To help secure victory in a battle against the Ammonites, he promises God that he will sacrifice whatever he sees first when he returns home. To his profound distress, he is greeted immediately on arrival by his own daughter. The tragedy centres on the issue of whether Jephthah is obliged to carry out the promised act. Although his advisors point out to him the sinfulness of human sacrifice, he stubbornly holds to his intention and recognizes too late, after his daughter's death, that by doing so he has not performed a service for God but has acted out of a 'reckless enthusiasm for sacrifice'.⁴⁵

Judge Jephthah, nowadays a controversial figure in Vondel studies, illustrates particularly strikingly how violent words can turn against their speaker.⁴⁶ With his oath he has assumed a power to which he does not measure up. The patriarchal power over the life and death of 'the first in his house', to which he lays claim through his promise, rebounds

⁴⁵ WB, 8, p. 775.

⁴⁶ See the debate on the character of Jephthah in Konst, 'De motivatie van het offer van Ifis'; Korsten, 'Wartoe hij zijn dochter slachtte'; and recently Van Gemert, 'Schuld en boete bij Vondel en De Koning'.

against the ruler, inflicting a fatal wound on his soul. All is lost for Jephthah long before he actually sacrifices his daughter:

I am finished. Fortune was a long time turning
 When, with the land in danger, that high-altar promise
 Slipped of necessity from my sorrowful soul,
 Not knowing that, to repair everyone's suffering,
 This word would first sever my heart's artery,
 Then a daughter's throat. Oh word, a sword, forged
 From Ammon's revenge! Oh unrepeatable vow!
 How my heart leapt when Ifis was born!
 This bounty and treasure is now being lost
 Through the shipwreck of one single word.⁴⁷

Because of the 'shipwreck of one single word', Jephthah has lost everything. He feels obliged to bring about the downfall of his house, which was not at all the intention of his original promise. His oath as a perlocutionary speech act has brought disaster and he too is now at the receiving end of its violence. His aim in making his promise was not merely to bring about communication with God but to force Him to act according to an extremely worldly concept of vassalage: loyalty will be rewarded. Here Jephthah seems to be referring to the old oriental image of God, which describes the relationship between mankind and the gods by drawing upon political concepts, taking no account of God as a heavenly ruler who demands personal devotion rather than bloody human sacrifice. Only the chastened Jephthah at the end of the tragedy, who has laid aside the sword as a symbol of his power and is no longer a political leader but merely a penitent sinner, attains this insight.

Power and Sacrifice

The connection between the body as a symbol and language as a perlocutionary act leading to violence is demonstrated particularly clearly in the act of sacrifice. The body of the creature to be sacrificed – a specific animal, or, in the case of the dramas discussed here, one or more human

⁴⁷ Vondel, *Jeptha*, ll. 560–69, WB, 8, pp. 800–01: 't Is uit met my. de kans was lang aen 't keeren, / Toen, in 't gevaer des lants, mijn droeve ziel / Die hooge altaerbelofte uit noot ontviel, / Onkundigh dat, tot boete van elcks lijden, / Dit woort my eerst de hartaer af zou snijden, / Dan 's dochters hals. och woort, een zwaert, gesmeet / Van Ammons wraeck! ô onherhaelbaere eedt! / Hoe sprong mijn hart, toen Ifis wiert geboren! / Dees overwinste en schat wort nu verloren / Door schipbreuck van een eenigh enckel woort.'

beings – is to the sacrificing community an important symbolic token, and the words spoken during the sacrificial ritual lead directly to the violation of its bodily integrity. According to theories propounded by René Girard, the offering, the scapegoat, serves to restore harmony in a society. The aggressive sentiments of members of the community towards one another are neutralized by the sacrifice of a specific person who holds an exceptional position, someone excluded from the whole, onto whom violent tendencies are projected in a collective trance. The ritual, once completed, is sanctified. Religion is used to mask the violent origins of every form of power and the means of sustaining it.⁴⁸ The consequences of this mechanism can be seen in several of Vondel's tragedies.

In *Gebroeders* the high priest Abiathar demands the sacrifice of Saul's seven sons to purify the land from the guilt that originates with Saul. Representing the community, King David cannot escape his duty to order this sacrifice. For the ruler himself, as we have seen, this is a traumatic experience, but his attempts in *Koning David herstelt* to prevent the sacrifice of his favourite son Absalom by remaining silent are without result, since others take over the task and kill Absalom, who has caused civil war in Israel, as a scapegoat. In Vondel's model tragedy *Jeptha*, Ifis presents herself as a sacrificial lamb. By shedding her blood she will strengthen her father's state. Determined to depart this life as a martyr for God and her father, she urges him to carry out the sacrifice – which only adds to the trauma experienced by the ruler Jephthah.

In other tragedies by Vondel, the act of sacrifice returns as an important motif. The Amsterdam poet appears to go to great lengths in his attempts to reveal the underlying blood mysticism of worldly power. This was of great relevance, incidentally, to his political experiences in his own era. In early modern times executions were staged like theatrical performances, intended to focus attention on the criminal as a scapegoat.⁴⁹ Vondel wrote two dramas that rely on such early modern experiences: *Palamedes* (1625) and *Maria Stuart* (1646).

His tragedy *Palamedes* turns on the unjust conviction and execution of one of the Greek nobles facing Troy, a man called Palamedes, at the instigation of supreme commander Agamemnon. It is a clear case of *violentia*. Vondel was alluding to a political event of his own time, the

⁴⁸ See Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*.

⁴⁹ See Van Dülmen, *Theater des Schreckens*.

execution of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, land's advocate of Holland (as the Grand Pensionary of Holland was then called), a sentence he regarded as no less unjust. Oldenbarnevelt, who had lost the struggle for power against the other political leader of the Dutch Republic, Stadtholder Maurits of Nassau, was falsely accused of treason and beheaded in May 1619.⁵⁰ The poet was among those who remained loyal to Oldenbarnevelt and he made this clear in several of his writings. The execution of the land's advocate resolved a conflict that in a sense had an archaic root, the conflict between two characters who are at the same level and therefore have a kind of 'mirror relationship' (Girard), the one wanting what the other has: power. This can be resolved only by the sacrifice of one of them.⁵¹ As Palamedes' mortal enemy Ulysses admits: 'The world in no way tolerates two shining suns: / So no dominion permits rule by two heads in a state.'⁵²

The play begins with a long monologue by Palamedes, who will later be sacrificed. He discusses one after another the false accusations made against him by his enemies and dismisses the allegations with reasoned arguments. The melancholy atmosphere of this early monologue makes clear that sagacity and personal integrity are no match for the system of power and its defences. As soon as Palamedes has finished, Vondel introduces Megeer (the fury Megaera) and Sisyphus, who explain that tyranny and a craving for blood are the driving forces behind human political acts. Here, in mythical attire, the irrational forces of the political contest are revealed. Palamedes' *ratio*, as the speeches of Ulysses in the next act make clear, cannot save him from being sacrificed. Moreover, Ulysses reminds us that Palamedes tried to prevent a political act of sacrifice at the beginning of the expedition against Troy because of his humanist inclinations. Rulers came from all parts of Greece to unite against the city, to form as it were a political body, and then too, as ordained by the most prominent of Greek soothsayers, Calchas, a human sacrifice was required. Iphigenia, eldest daughter of Agamemnon, was sacrificed to atone for a past sin of her father's, so that the ships would be able to sail for Troy. This sacrifice made the political actions of the community possible, and Palamedes' rationalist

⁵⁰ On the play see the recent Meijer Drees, 'Hoe Vondels *Palamedes* geschiedenis heeft gemaakt'.

⁵¹ See also Schößler, *Literaturwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft*, p. 183.

⁵² WB, 2, p. 661: 'De wereld geensins lyd twee schitterende sonnen: / Soo duld geene heerschappy twee hoofden in een rijck'.

and human opposition to it, Ulysses says, placed him outside the community for good, so that he eventually became its scapegoat.

Vondel is known to have been fiercely critical of attempts to cloak the bloody consequences of political acts in religion. In this play, Ulysses, the Machiavellian advisor to King Agamemnon, utters a speech the aim of which is to reveal the true intentions of the religious leaders:

Although you have stained holiness with patricide;
Bared your sister's shame in the sight of your brother-in-law;
Yes, even crowned the carrier of the lightning-bolt a cuckold,
Raping his spouse and cupbearer Ganymede;
It is not even noticed; if only an altar cloth
Covers these horrific deeds, then they are not sins.⁵³

Finally, the political acts of the drama are portrayed by Vondel as a cannibalistic sacrificial meal.⁵⁴ Palamedes is literally torn apart at the end of the tragedy by a furious mob. Yet it is Agamemnon himself who, as instigator of the entire sequence of events, drinks Palamedes' blood 'greedily and so diabolically'.⁵⁵ The power of violent speech is broken only in the fifth act by the prophesy of the god Neptune, representing the principle of nemesis, who predicts the downfall of the tyrant Agamemnon and in so doing promises that righteousness will be restored in the future.

In his drama *Maria Stuart, of Gemartelde Majesteit* (*Mary Stuart, or Martyred Majesty*, 1646), Vondel once again ventured into dangerous territory.⁵⁶ He portrays Mary Queen of Scots as a fighter for the Catholic faith and turns his fury upon Protestant doctrine and its preachers, whom he had already shown in an extremely poor light in *Palamedes*. Like Palamedes, Mary goes to her death completely innocent. Both characters can be seen as martyrs for reasons of state, and in *Maria Stuart* Vondel attacks the Kingdom of England and its Protestant foundations. This was not well received. The play was

⁵³ Vondel, *Palamedes*, ll. 531–35, WB, 2, p. 662: 'Al hebtge 't hayligdom met vadermoord beveleckt: / V susters schaemt ontbloot, int aensicht van u swager: / Ia self den blixem drigh gekroont tot hoorendrager, / Verkraght syn eegemael, en schencker Ganimeed: / Ten word niet eens gemerckt, als maer een outerkleed / Die grouwelen bedeckt, ten strecken dan geen sonden.'

⁵⁴ Korsten, *Vondel belicht*, pp. 131–34 and *Sovereignty as Inviolability*, pp. 120–23 also points to the anthropophagy motif in *Palamedes*.

⁵⁵ WB, 2, p. 743.

⁵⁶ On the tragedy and its political implications see Noak, *Politische Auffassungen*, pp. 145–93.

published anonymously, but the poet did not remain incognito for long and he was fined 180 guilders, a sum paid on his behalf by his publisher. The dichotomy in Vondel's thinking is clearly present here as well, this time in the form of two sisters and rivals, one of whom, Mary Queen of Scots, is in Vondel's view the rightful and holy queen while the other, Elizabeth, Queen of England, is the 'leopardess' and 'Herodias' who has inherited the crown unlawfully, drinking Mary's blood to satisfy her lust for power: 'Elizabeth, now drink from this honest breast / Mary's blood, and quench that unquenched thirst.'⁵⁷

Queen Elizabeth represents *violentia*, ordering the death of her sister, with whom she has that same mirror relationship discussed above, in order to hold on to power. As in *Palamedes*, Vondel emphasizes the cannibalistic aspect of state power. Led to the scaffold like a sacrificial animal, Mary is killed and her head held up as a symbol of triumph by the victorious party, her blood flowing into silver goblets. Burgon, Mary's doctor, describes the scene:

The executioner grasps the head by the tresses,
That head, which cannot be attached to the body by any remorse
That bloody head of the already crowned heroine of Christ
And crying loudly: 'God save our Queen'; [...]
While everyone weeps with grief and heartfelt woe,
That cuts through many a heart more sharply than the axe.
Still the soul plays and lives in the diamonds
Of the eyes with their fire, and glitters on all sides.
The warm and steaming blood coagulates in silver beakers.
I hardly know what I am saying, so oppressed is my heart.⁵⁸

At the same time, Mary too is accorded the status of a martyr, as 'the crowned heroine of Christ'. The mysticism of kingship is therefore preserved by Vondel on another level, the level of the true *potestas*, the holy power, where kings and queens are reflections of Christ. Here the laws of earthly political violence, which devours mankind, no longer apply. Instead there is humility and salvation.

⁵⁷ WB, 5, p. 231: 'Elizabeth, nu drinck uit deze oprechte borst / Mariaes bloet, en lesch dien ongeleschten dorst.'

⁵⁸ Vondel, *Maria Stuart*, ll. 1644–55, WB, 5, pp. 231–32: 'De scherreprechtter grijpt het hoofd op by de vlechten, / Dat hoofd, door geen berouw aen 't levend lijf te hechten, / Dat bloedigh hoofd der ree gekroonde Kristheldin, / En roepende overluit: Godt hoede ons Koningin; [...] / Terwijl een jeder weent van rouw en hartewee, / Dat scherper dan de bijl zoo menigh hart doorsnee. / Noch speelt en leeft de ziel in bey de diamanten / Der ooggen met haer vier, en blinckt aen alle kanten. / Het laeuwe en roockend bloet in zilvre beckens stremt. / Ick weet naeu wat ick zegh, zoo wort mijn hart beklemt.'

Conclusion: Zungchin

The final play in which Vondel addressed the issue of worldly power was *Zungchin of Ondergang der Sineesche Heerschappye* (*Zungchin or the Downfall of Chinese Dominion*, 1667), in which the poet portrays the end of the Chinese Ming dynasty and the impending conquest of China by the Manchus, events that had taken place in the year 1644.⁵⁹

Beijing (or Peking) is besieged by the rebellious Lykungzus who has come to seize imperial power. He has supporters in the city and at court, so the situation faced by the last Ming ruler Zungchin is hopeless from the start. Hostile soldiers have already infiltrated the city and the cannon lined up along the heavily-manned walls are loaded only with gunpowder, engaging merely in mock battles with the besiegers. In nocturnal Beijing the collapse of imperial power proceeds like one great sacrificial ceremony. Zungchin, 'son of heaven', who appears on stage 'in the yellow ceremonial robe',⁶⁰ is the scapegoat at the centre of it all. For the first time, therefore, the play concerns not the victims of power exercised either justly or unjustly but the ruler himself, whose sacrifice is central to the play. The emperor tries in vain to find out what is going on in the city, who has betrayed him and which of his courtiers have remained loyal. The dark of night and the ominous silence of a pause in the fighting provide no answer. His faithful servants and his eldest son cannot help him. The play has rightly been described as a 'drama of fear', a fear that completely paralyzes the emperor and his followers.⁶¹

When the silence that 'foretold a hurricane in the state'⁶² is over and the night comes to an end, the enemy infiltrates not only the city but the imperial court. The opportunity to flee is denied the emperor; only his three sons are able to save themselves at the last moment. With sunrise Zungchin's *anagnorisis* sets in. He realizes that most of his courtiers have sacrificed him to the enemy. He pleads in vain first to his faithful vice-regent Koläus, asking him to plunge his dagger into his chest, then to the perjured court hangers-on, who likewise refuse to oblige him. So the emperor has no choice but to prepare himself for

⁵⁹ On the play see Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 3, pp. 449–506; Langvik-Johannessen, *Het treurspel spant de kroon*, pp. 251–81.

⁶⁰ WB, 10, pp. 340–41.

⁶¹ Langvik-Johannessen, *Het treurspel spant de kroon*, p. 281.

⁶² WB, 10, p. 362.

sacrifice. In a letter written in his own blood to the victorious Lykungzus, he orders that the traitors be punished after his death and appeals for mercy for his people. Then he presents his daughter with a choice between dying at his hands or as a result of the dishonouring violence of the enemy. Without hesitation she chooses the former. In the final act Lykungzus enters victorious and inquires after the emperor's fate. On the orders of Chancellor Us, the gate to the orchard is opened, and there everyone can see the corpses of the emperor and empress, who have hanged themselves from plum trees. A maid of honour then tells the blood-drenched story of yet another 'daughter killing', describing how Zungchin stabbed Princess Pao with a dagger and how the imperial robe grew red with the blood of his child. Lykungzus hesitantly takes his place on the imperial throne. Later, in triumph, as we learn from the play's dedication, he will have Zungchin's corpse cut 'into strips and thin slices'.⁶³ The transfer of power is complete.

In the past, comparisons were made between the Zungchin character and political leaders like Gijsbreght van Aemstel and Jephthah. The plays that tell their stories share motifs such as the downfall of a city and dominion, and the sacrifice of a daughter.⁶⁴ It is clear, however, that in *Zungchin* the eighty-year-old Vondel definitively rejects any positive motivation for the political acts that take place. The fall of the 'Chinese Troy' is not portrayed as a meaningful event in God's plan for mankind; there are no predictions here of power and wealth after the pattern of the closing scene of *Gysbreght*. In China the future will bring a series of more or less tyrannical rulers. Lykungzus too will soon meet a fateful end. Nor is Princess Pao's role that of a martyr. True, her body is once again a 'script' in which male violence writes its story, but in contrast to the self-conscious Ifis in *Jeptha*, or Ursul in *Maeghden*, her sacrifice serves no higher end. It is simply part of her father's self-sacrifice. In this tragedy the language of power is silenced permanently. There are no debates about alternative ways of acting, as was generally the case in previous plays. As manifest symbols, Zungchin can present only the bodies of his daughter and his wife, along with his own. The letter written in his blood, the robe spattered with the imperial daughter's blood, the corpses of the emperor and empress on the stage beyond the open palace gate – all are visible signs that the language of power has been

⁶³ WB, 10, p. 326.

⁶⁴ Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 3, pp. 449–506.

transformed into corporality and an irreversible process involving successive acts of sacrifice has set in, which will determine the future course of history.

We have already looked at the dichotomies that typify Vondel's thinking and they are again clearly present in this final tragedy. At the imperial court, along with the Chinese characters, is the famous Jesuit priest Adam Schall (Vondel calls him Schal), with his faithful followers, collectively referred to as a Chorus of Priests.⁶⁵ Their part in the action is extremely limited. As an advisor to the emperor and empress, Adam Schall provides Christian commentary on events but without becoming involved in political decision-making. Nonetheless, the Jesuits fulfil an important function, since they provide the *consolatio tragoediae*, the moment of consolation for readers or audiences.⁶⁶ After political violence – whether in the form of *potestas* or *violentia* – has been unmasked as a bloody sacrifice that offers his actors no respite, the Amsterdam poet presents a Christian stoic stance as a remedy against the world's vicissitudes. The spirit of Francis Xavier consoles the Jesuits at the end of the tragedy and shows them the route to acceptance of divine providence. They humbly follow his advice:

Though we see many dark clouds hanging above our heads
We give ourselves over to God's sustenance,
With unflagging patience, out of meekness and respect.
After the night the light appears much more beautiful.⁶⁷

Clearly as far as Vondel was concerned, only a radical step to another level of knowledge could liberate humanity from the cycle of guilt and suffering that characterized political acts. In opposition to human violence he sets divine mercy.

⁶⁵ On Adam Schall see Vāth, *Johann Adam Schall von Bell S.J.*

⁶⁶ The concept originates with Schings, 'Consolatio tragoediae.'

⁶⁷ Vondel, *Zungchin*, ll. 1611–14, WB, 10, p. 390: 'Al zienwe boven 't hoofd veel donkre wolken hangen; / Wy geven ons aen Godts voorzienigheid gevangen, / Met onvermoeit gedult, uit ootmoedt en ontzagh./ Het licht komt, na den nacht, veel schooner voor den dagh.'