CHAPTER ONE

VONDEL’S DRAMAS: A CHRONOLOGICAL SURVEY¹

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Vondel’s dramatic work is marked by a series of paradoxes. He produced a remarkably extensive theatrical oeuvre of thirty-three plays² – many original, others translated from Latin or Greek – even though he only really started writing his major works for the theatre when he was around fifty. He was without doubt the most important Dutch playwright of the seventeenth century, deeply respected and with well-considered ideas on the theatre, but only just over half his plays were performed during his lifetime. He was a great propagandist for Latin and later also classical Greek drama, but he used their formal structures almost exclusively for the purpose of conveying content that was biblical and Christian. To later generations he was the preeminent writer of the fatherland and in his own time he served as Amsterdam’s unofficial city poet, yet he was not actually born in the Low Countries but in Cologne. His parents had been forced to flee Antwerp because of their Mennonite faith. In about 1597 the Vondel family settled in Holland.

As an immigrant from the Southern Netherlands living in Amsterdam, the young Vondel joined the Brabant chamber of rhetoric ‘Het Wit Lavendel’ (‘The White Lavender’), and it was for this theatrical company that he wrote his first play, *Het Pascha (Passover*, first printed in 1612). This drama about the exodus from Egypt features an epilogue comparing the liberation of the Dutch Republic from Spain with the liberation of the Jews from Egypt. Eight years would pass before his second play was completed, *Hierusalem verwoest (Jerusalem Destroyed*, 1620), a tragedy about the destruction of Jerusalem. Meanwhile he had taught himself Latin, and formal aspects of the play are strongly influenced by Seneca’s *Troades*. In the 1620s, as part of the process of

¹ Parts of this chapter have been published previously in Hermans, *A Literary History of the Low Countries*, pp. 212–20. For an earlier survey of Vondel’s dramas see Meijer, *Literature of the Low Countries*, pp. 127–42.
² Including the fragment of *Rozemont*, but excluding the unpublished *Messalina*. 
improving his Latin, he translated *Troades* as *De Amsteldamsche Hecuba* (1626) and Seneca’s *Phaedra*, also known as *Hippolytus*, as *Hippolytus* (1628). Another translation, this time of a Neo-Latin play by Hugo Grotius, *Sophompanaes*, on the biblical theme of the reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers, and on just government, was published in 1635.

Vondel had by this point developed into an ardent polemicist, and an advocate of the Arminian position in the religious and political conflicts of that time. His *Palamedes* (1625) treats the political process of the Grand Pensionary Oldenbarnevelt, disguised as the classical story of Palamedes and Ulysses. Vondel was heavily fined as a result, but *Palamedes* went through seven editions of the 1625 imprint.

*Gysbreght van Aemstel* (1637), his most frequently performed play right up to the present day, was written for a special occasion. It was intended to have its premiere in 1637, at Christmas, on the occasion of the opening of the new municipal theater, the Amsterdam Schouwburg, which was built by Jacob van Campen. In a typically paradoxical twist, Vondel chose to write a play for this festive occasion that describes the downfall of Amsterdam – although a prophecy by the angel Raphael right at the end does hold out the prospect of a radiant future. The planned festive performance was not to be. It became known that Vondel had included a celebration of the Catholic Mass in his play. This made perfect sense in the context of the time in which the play was set, the late thirteenth century, but it was unthinkable to show a Mass on stage in the current religious and political climate, especially on an official occasion. The Republic was a tolerant place, but this was going too far for the Protestant magistrate of Amsterdam. An expurgated version had its premiere on 3 January 1638. The play’s success lasted for well over three centuries. It was traditionally performed around New Year’s Day, right up until 1969 when the children of the revolutionary sixties abandoned the centuries-old custom. In recent times, however, directors have responded to the challenge of finding new forms for the play, some discovering ways to give it direct contemporary relevance, others looking back to the manner in which it was originally staged.

A translation of Sophocles’s *Elektra* (1639) marked the start of a new period. Vondel used Latin translations, but sought advice from learned friends as well. It indicates his growing fascination with Greek tragedy, which would acquire prominence in his later work. About the same time he converted to Catholicism and one result was his tragedy