CHAPTER TWENTY

GENDER STUDIES – EMOTIONS IN JEPHTHA (1659)

Kristine Steenbergh

Vondel’s play *Jeptha of Offerbeloofte* (*Jepthah or Promise of Sacrifice*, first published in 1659) has invited critical attention to the issues of its literary poetics as well as its representation of women. Vondel’s introduction to his biblical tragedy calls explicit attention to the role of emotions in the play’s Aristotelian poetics. Also, in adapting the story of the general who unwittingly promises to sacrifice his daughter, Vondel’s play gives the anonymous biblical daughter the name Ifis (‘strength’), and adds a mother named Filopaie.1 A central question in recent criticism that takes these two issues in its stride is concerned with the role of female emotions in *Jeptha*. Critics often view daughter Ifis as unmotional, whereas Filopaie’s display of emotions is seen as excessive or even hysterical, and contrasted with Jeptha’s role as the focus of the audience’s emotions.2 This chapter will analyse the representation of the emotions in the context of the play’s poetics from a gender perspective. I will argue that the play as a whole does not disapprove of Ifis’s or Filopaie’s emotions. Rather, an analysis of the play’s gendered representation of the emotions shows how Jeptha’s management of his emotions is explicitly contrasted with that of his daughter and wife to suggest that the rehearsal of strong passions in a theatrical context has a therapeutic effect. Vondel intuits that Aristotelian poetics can be harnessed as a means to achieve Catholic purification and salvation.

1 John Christopherson of Cambridge University was the first to introduce the figure of the mother to his unpublished Greek play Ιεφθας. The humanist dramatist George Buchanan wrote the neo-Latin *Jepthes sive votum* in 1544. He also included a mother, named Storgê (parental love) and calls the daughter Ifis. In the Netherlands, the first dramatisation of the biblical tale was by a Capuchin monk in Ghent, J. C. van Lummene van Marke (1607). Abraham de Koning was the first to write a tragedy on Jeptha in Dutch: *Jepthahs ende zijn Eenighe Dochters treur-spel* (1615). Vondel was familiar with his play, which does not contain a mother figure and names the daughter Mirja. For a comparison of these plays, see Wijngaards’ introduction to his edition of *Jeptha*, pp. 9–27.

2 English would be Jephthah, but I choose Jeptha, since this is how the character is called in the play.
Poetics and Gender

Whereas earlier Dutch playwrights were indebted to Seneca for their perception of emotions as disruptions that need to be eradicated, Vondel's drama stands out because of his exceptionally close adherence to Aristotelian poetics. In brief, this view of theatre aims to enable the audience of a tragedy to moderate their emotions precisely by letting them experience strong emotions in the theatre. In his analysis of the operations of Aristotelian poetics in Vondel’s *Jeptha*, Jan Konst stresses that the ‘coherent unity of the plot’ is of crucial importance in achieving this effect of catharsis on the audience. This unity, in his view, is achieved by a focus on the character of Jeptha, who demonstrates the didactic intent of the play. Jeptha’s intense doubts about his chosen course of action in the central acts of the play invite the audience to identify with him, so that their emotions ‘develop parallel to Jeptha’s psychological development’ and climax at the beginning of the fifth act, when the protagonist realises that he was wrong to sacrifice his daughter. Because the spectators, together with Jeptha, experience strong feelings of pity and fear at that point, they achieve catharsis: they are purged of their emotions.3

Although Vondel gave Jeptha’s daughter a name and introduced the character of Filopaie, who is absent in the Bible, Konst does not think the female characters fundamental to the tragedy’s poetics.4 Filopaie is irrelevant to the emotional effect of the play; she is merely a ‘secondary character.’5 Indeed, in his view the mother’s purpose in the play runs counter to the Aristotelian poetics of the play as a whole. Konst writes that Filopaie is portrayed more in accordance with Senecan-Scaligerean poetics, as a warning against the dangers of excessive emotion. Therefore, he writes, it is only when we look at the central character of Jeptha that we realise that Vondel’s didactic purpose points in a different direction, that of Aristotelian poetics.6

From a feminist perspective, Agnes Sneller has commented on this exclusive focus on the character of Jeptha in the play’s critical reception. She points out that when critics argue that the audience is able to identify with Jeptha and to share in his emotional development, the...

---

3 Konst, *Woedende wraakghierigheid*, pp. 193, 51, 199 respectively.
4 Konst, *Fortuna, Fatum en Providentia Dei*, p. 280.