The conversion of the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–19) was repeatedly dramatised in the sixteenth century. During the reformation, the metamorphosis of Saul, the fanatical persecutor of Christians, into Paul, the strong champion of Christ, became a model for the transformation that every Christian should undergo: from supporting the old faith to preaching the new.1 In addition, his conversion was quite spectacular and literally spoke to the imagination. Paul was, after all, blinded by the light that had suddenly surrounded him and his companions on the road to Damascus.

This article focuses on a dramatisation of this conversion story, called The Conversion of Paul (De Bekeeringe Pauli). The play was written by an anonymous rhetorician from Brabant, possibly originating from Vilvoorde, and is dated at roughly the middle of the sixteenth century.2 The term ‘rhetoricians’ is meant to indicate poets and playwrights who dominated the vernacular literary practice in the Netherlands from the fifteenth to the early seventeenth century. They were organised in chambers of rhetoric, literary societies, of which every

1 Paul himself refers to the Damascus experience sporadically in his epistles. See Fredriksen P., “Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self”, Journal of Theological Studies 37 (1986) 3–34, esp. 4, note 3. The interpretation of the change he underwent as a convert heavily depends on the description in Acts and on Augustine’s modeling of his own conversion after that of Paul’s, or vice versa (Fredriksen, “Paul and Augustine” 5, 15–17, 23–24, 26–27). For Luther’s interpretation, see Fredriksen, “Paul and Augustine” 16, note 39. In what follows, the name Paul will be used, even though his name before his conversion was Saul and this change of name marks his inner transformation. On his two names, see Rapske B., The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody, The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting 3 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: 1994) 85–86.

city in Brabant, Flanders, Zeeland and Holland had one or more.\(^3\) The aim of this article is to show how Paul functions as a model of conversion in this play. The way in which his conversion is given shape, both verbally and visually, is examined. This requires a kind of reading in which the play is, as it were, staged mentally and the dialogue and stage directions are synthesised into a concrete course of action through knowledge of the dramaturgy and the performance practice of rhetoricians’ drama.\(^4\)

This reconstruction will show the nature of the conversion that the playwright has Paul undergo and the model that he attempted to offer to the audience. The first point this article makes, is that his conversion comes down to an inner change resulting from a process of sight and insight, first physically, then spiritually. The assumption is that one is converted only when one has seen. The Christian context of the story is about the seeing of God, in his form as the Father, the Son (Christ) or as the Holy Trinity (with the Holy Ghost). The climax of the play comes down to divine vision (\textit{visio Dei}), the ultimate goal of late medieval mystical ascension.

The second point this article makes, is that this play did not have the intention of converting an audience to the Protestant faith, or to strengthen such a belief. Rather, it seeks to bring its audience to an expression of the individual believer’s personal relationship with God, which was experienced inwardly, in the heart, and which transcended contemporary religious disputes. In this way it runs counter to a purely textual approach by which rhetoricians’ plays are examined primarily in the search for controversial stances \textit{in theologicis}.\(^5\) According to that


\(^5\) This approach has been tried and tested by the famous collection of plays that were staged during the rhetoricians contest held in Ghent in 1539. For a survey of research, see Ramakers B., “In utramque partem vel in plures. Meinungs- und Deutungsdivergenzen im Genter Bühnenwettkampf von 1539”, in Stollberg-Rilinger B. – Weller Th. (eds.), \textit{Wertekonflikte – Deutungskonflikte. Internationales Kolloquium des Sonderforschungsbereichs 496 an der Westfälische Wilhelmsuniversität Münster, 19. – 20. Mai 2005, Symbolische Kommunikation und gesellschaftliche Wertesysteme,