CHAPTER NINE

PUBLIC DEBATE AND EARLY MODERN DRAMA: INTENDED OR UNINTENDED TOPICALITY IN LUMMENAEUS À MARCA’S CARCER BABYLONIUS (1610)¹

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Early Modern Latin Drama and the Public Domain

Whether written by schoolmasters, ecclesiastics or university professors, transferring values was one of the most important aspects of early modern Latin drama. These values covered virtually every area for which educational or moral reminders were deemed appropriate or necessary by the author. Every aspect of life – be it moral, political, economic, social, legal, ideological or communicative – was touched upon in these specula vitae quotidianae, mirrors of everyday life. But once the plays had been released by their authors, in performance or in print, the portrayal of those dramatic values unquestionably engaged the audience in a stimulating debate, inspiring, confronting or soothing them. The author was forced to step back and watch his drama play its part within the public domain.

For us, the modern readers or audience, these mirrors of everyday life are not always as clear as they might have been in early modern times, not least because of our incapacity to view historical works of art, or even history itself, without the obstruction of our own, possibly conflicting, modern values. But more important is the fact that there was – and still is – no such thing as the (reading) audience or audiences, even though I too use the word for the sake of convenience; an audience or reading public consisted of different people, each with his (or her) own religious or political

¹ This paper has been written as part of a PhD research project on the dramas of Jacobus Cornelius Lumenæus à Marca (c. 1580 – c. 1628), within the scope of the project ‘Latin and Vernacular Cultures. Theatre and Public Opinion in the Netherlands (c. 1510–1625)’, supported by a Vidi grant awarded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). I sincerely thank Juliette Groenland and Jeroen Jansen for their valuable comments on a previous version of this paper.
stance, age, or social and economic position. Furthermore, a play written in, for example, 1600 could have been viewed from a totally different perspective a decade later, if circumstances and audiences had changed. As such, the perception of values would have changed accordingly.

Trying to reconstruct (the perception of) these values can nonetheless constitute a very fruitful activity, since the guiding principle of such a study is the text and the methods employed therein. Only after having thoroughly charted the text’s main structure can a scholar’s focus shift from text to context. Let us, then, review a possible course of action. In my view, one would first have to establish as accurately as possible both the values brought forward within a play and the ways in which they were communicated. This should be attempted not only by acquiring insight into statements of single personae or of the chorus, but also by weighing up those statements within and between scenes and acts, and within the play as a whole. In my opinion, singling out statements or sententiae, even though quite popular in early modern times, might in this case prove problematic, since those statements might have been perceived both within the play as a whole as well as in relation to specific characters. The results should then be combined with a contextual analysis to provide insight into the workings of theatre in the public domain, or even in a public debate. As such, the analysis of values could thus serve as an instrument for enabling a contextual interpretation. This contextual approach, however, might encompass virtually any area even remotely related to the play’s contents, be it political, social, confessional, etc., and should therefore continually be defined as precisely as possible, to avoid confusion.

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2 As has also been noted by Korsten, Vondel belicht, p. 21.
3 For a thorough consideration of dialogue/stichomythia as conveying the main perspectives of values, see Meier, ‘Wertkonflikt als Wortstreit’. One should not, however, lose sight of a dialogue’s as well as a character’s functionality within a play as a whole.
4 Especially with regard to works from classical antiquity. Cf. (for example) Erasmus’s famous collection of Adagia. Thus sententiae could still be put to good (i.e. Christian) use, even while their original setting (the pagan classics, for instance) would otherwise have complicated such use.
5 Authors have not always seemed, however, to have taken into consideration the connection between moral sententiae and the characters that expressed them. As such, even morally bad characters could communicate valuable moral lessons. Cf. Bloemendal, ‘Willem van Oranje’, p. 160; Schenkeveld-van der Dussen, ‘[Review of] S. Coster, Polyxena’, pp. 316–17; Smits-Veldt, Samuel Coster, pp. 56–58. Such a paradoxical characteristic has also been noted with regard to other Dutch vernacular plays of the seventeenth century. Cf. Schenkeveld-van der Dussen, ‘Moraal en karakter’.