Rembrandt’s portrayal of the passions and Vondel’s ‘staetveranderinge’

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In seventeenth-century Holland, the kinship between history painting and drama was frequently discussed, specifically when it concerned the representation of the passions. To move the beholder by means of the depiction of strong emotions came to be seen as a central task of both arts, and it was in this domain, in particular, that the affinity between the two arts was emphasized. Remarkably, playwrights were foremost in articulating this similarity; in the prefaces of tragedies, history painting was sometimes given an exemplary role. Already in the preface of his first drama, Het Pascha (Pascha), printed in 1612, Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679) described the theatre play as ‘a living, beautifully colored painting’.

Vondel was well-acquainted with ideas current in history painting, probably due to his friendship with Joachim von Sandrart (1606-1688), and he was quite fond of employing these in the introductions to his plays. In the dedication of his tragedy Gebroeders (Brothers; printed in 1640), for example, Vondel even ‘painted’ with words an imaginary painting by Rubens – an artist famous for his superb rendering of the passions. Through the description of this fictive painting Vondel was able to display the deeply moving qualities of his tragedy in a concise and clear image.

As Karel Porteman has pointed out, Vondel’s description ‘is based on what was deemed a fundamental similarity between tragedy and the in this respect even more effective history painting to move (movere) the beholder by way of visual representation’.

In the preface of Joseph in Dothan, Vondel states that this tragedy was inspired by the passions rendered in a painting by Jan Pynas (1581-1631), in which the blood-stained clothes of Joseph were shown to Jacob. Vondel adds that in the last scene of his play, ‘he has tried to follow with words the painter’s colors, drawing and rendering of the passions as closely as possible’.

The relation between tragedy and history painting is often mentioned in the writings of Vondel and Jan Vos (c. 1610-1667). The latter, the director of the Amsterdam schouwburg (theatre), wrote several times that a play is like a speaking painting. The kinship between the theatre and painting was apparently strongly felt, which is reason enough for us to ask what this bond meant in practice.

Contrary to what one would expect, the subjects of popular tragedies are rarely depicted in paintings. Strangely enough, it never seems to have occurred to painters, nor to their patrons, to portray or have portrayed a
scene from one of the dramas that were favored on the Amsterdam stage in the seventeenth century. We search in vain for renderings of episodes from *Aran en Titus*, *Gysbreght van Aemstel*, *Cid*, *Biron*, *Karel en Kassandra*, *Vervolchte Laura*, *Stitus en Ariane*, *De veinzende Torquatus*, *Geraerdt van Velzen* and *Elektra*, the ten dramas most often staged in the Amsterdam *schouwburg* between 1638 and 1665 in order of their popularity. The few subjects that we do encounter in plays as well as in paintings are mostly, as is the case with the rare biblical dramas, based on material already traditional in painting, such as Vondel’s dramas about Joseph. Exceptions are two scenes from *Granida* by Pieter Cornelisz. Hooft (1587-1647) – which belong to the category of the pastoral – and the singular case of a scene from *Lucelle* by Gerbrand Adriaenszn. Bredero (1587-1647). But why, for instance, did no client ask a painter to render a scene from Vos’s *Aran en Titus*, the box office hit of the seventeenth century? The learned Caspar Barlaeus (1584-1648) wrote enthusiastically that within two months after the first performance he had seen this play no less than seven times! Even if several printings of these plays, such as that of *Aran en Titus*, had an engraved illustration from the drama on the title page (fig. 1), this obviously did not inspire painters to depict similar scenes.

In subject matter both arts had, apparently, their own strong traditions. Thus, the kinship one felt was not located in the narratives themselves, but in the nature of the situations represented and the ways in which the corresponding passions were evoked. Therefore, the question raised here is whether, and if so, how, notions about the meaning and function of the rendering of the passions in tragedy have concrete relations with the aims of painters in history painting during the same period. I will limit myself to paintings by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669). This is a work in progress; in a subsequent stage, other artists must be examined, while the ideas of other playwrights, in addition to Vondel and Vos, should be considered as well.

My point of departure is an influential statement that Albert Blankert formulated for the first time in 1981, and that many other art historians have repeated since. It addresses the notion that *staetveranderinge* (literally ‘change of state’), a concept which plays a crucial role in Vondel’s tragedies beginning in the 1640s, also had an important place in history paintings by Rembrandt and his pupils. In his introductory essay in the catalogue of the groundbreaking exhibition *Gods, saints and heroes*, and shortly after in his monograph on Ferdinand Bol, Blankert rightly pointed out that Rembrandt and his pupils showed a preference for scenes in which a dramatic reversal of mood from one extreme to the other takes place. Their paintings depict the precise moment that this change occurs. He connected this with the Aristotelian concept of *peripeteia*. Vondel called this *staetveranderinge*, and it constituted the core of his late tragedies. Blankert argued that the concept must have been as important to Rembrandt as it was to Vondel. To demonstrate this, he cites examples such as scenes in which an angel unexpectedly appears, pictures with the appearance of Christ after the Resurrection, and other scenes with sudden occurrences, such as the feast.