



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Vondel's dramas: a chronological survey

Grootes, E.; Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen, R.

Publication date

2012

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679): Dutch playwright in the Golden Age

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Grootes, E., & Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen, R. (2012). Vondel's dramas: a chronological survey. In J. Bloemendal, & F-W. Korsten (Eds.), *Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679): Dutch playwright in the Golden Age* (pp. 1-6). (Drama and theatre in early modern Europe; No. 1). Brill. <http://www.oapen.org/search?identifier=402001>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679)

Dutch Playwright in the Golden Age

Edited by

Jan Bloemendal
Frans-Willem Korsten



BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2012

CHAPTER ONE

VONDEL'S DRAMAS: A CHRONOLOGICAL SURVEY¹

Eddy Grootes and Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen

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, *Sophompaneas*, 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

Maeghden (*Maidens*, 1639), dramatizing the legend of Saint Ursula and her eleven thousand virgins. In this period Vondel was using innocent victims as protagonists. In his play *Maria Stuart* (1646), for instance, Vondel presented Mary Queen of Scots, whom he regarded as a Catholic martyr, as the innocent victim of a heretical and vengeful Elizabeth I. This was simply unacceptable, even in tolerant Amsterdam. The Dutch government had no wish to become involved, even in such an indirect manner, in the ongoing power struggle between Charles I and Cromwell. The poet was brought before the courts and ordered to pay a substantial fine of one hundred and eighty guilders.

The play also presented a theoretical problem. In this period Vondel was engaged in a deeper examination of the practice and theory of Greek drama, which brought him new insights into the essence of tragedy, such as an awareness of the Aristotelian injunction that a hero should be somewhere between good and evil, that he should not be entirely blameless but rather brought down by his own shortcomings. The most brilliant result of this new insight was his *Lucifer* (1654).

Already in his *Gebroeders* (*Brothers*), published in 1640 and performed almost annually from 1641 to 1659, Vondel had been inspired by the example of Sophocles. The play, based on the story of 2 Samuel 21, portrays the moral struggle of King David who is forced by God's command to execute seven descendants of Saul. In the same year, 1640, Vondel wrote two plays about Joseph: *Joseph in Dothan* and *Joseph in Egypten*. Moulded into a trilogy with his earlier *Sofompaneas* (a translation of Grotius' tragedy), they were staged throughout the second half of the century. With his *Gysbreght* and these plays from the 1640s Vondel attained the peak of his success in the Amsterdam Schouwburg. His next play, however, was never performed. *Peter en Pauwels* (1641) is a rather static Roman Catholic drama about the martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul in Rome. Reason enough to assume that Amsterdam audiences would not have liked it.

In 1647, when the negotiations to end the Eighty Years' War with Spain were expected to produce the desired result very soon, Vondel wrote an occasional play to glorify the peace. *Leeuwendalers* has a rural setting in which peasants and hunters from North and South finally end their longstanding conflict. It constitutes an exception in Vondel's predominantly tragic dramatic oeuvre. The play was staged five times in 1648, the year of the Peace of Westphalia. That same year *Salomon* was published, the next play in Vondel's series of biblical tragedies.

It shows King Solomon as a weakling. Carried away by sensuality, he causes his own downfall. Passionate arguments between two opposing groups of courtiers make good theatre. With more than thirty performances between 1650 and 1659, *Salomon* became one of Vondel's more successful productions.

Given its outstanding qualities, a modern reader would think that *Lucifer* (1654), regarded by many as Vondel's masterpiece, should have met with even greater success. But the subject – the Fall of the Angels and the Fall of Man – and the setting 'in Heaven', made staging the play unacceptable to influential circles in Amsterdam, especially the Reformed consistory. *Lucifer* was banned from the stage after two performances and the publisher's stock was confiscated. This did not prevent the rapid publication of seven new editions, but the financial damage was considerable, the theatre having invested a great deal of money in the heavenly scenery. Vondel wrote a new play with a mythological subject, *Salomoneus*, for which the same decor could be used, but it was not printed and performed until 1657. In Greek mythology, as well as in the play, Salomoneus is king of the Greek island of Elis who aspires to be worshipped as if he were Zeus.

There is every reason to think that with his *Lucifer* Vondel was not only exploring the heavenly matters of Fall and Redemption but staking out his ground in the political arena on earth. He believed the authority of the monarch to be divinely ordained and inviolable, and it is in these terms that he composed his dedication of the play to the highest authority on earth, Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand III. Even the Dutch Revolt against Spain comes in for criticism on matters of principle, although of course this did not mean Vondel would ever be disloyal to the Republic as it now stood. Many of his Catholic contemporaries, and indeed later generations of Catholics, adopted the same stance.

In 1659 one of his most important and interesting tragedies appeared: *Jeptha*. Vondel presents it as a model tragedy or, as he put it in his introductory essay, as a 'theatrical compass'. The introduction demonstrates his vast knowledge of classical drama theory and its interpretation by contemporary Dutch scholars like Hugo Grotius, Daniel Heinsius and Gerardus Johannes Vossius. The story of the play is from chapter 11 of the Book of Judges. After a military victory Jepthah promises to sacrifice to God the first thing he lays eyes on when he arrives home. To his horror the first thing he sees is his daughter, whom Vondel calls Ifis. The play has everything an Aristotelian drama requires: a noble and

courageous protagonist who brings down suffering upon himself through a fatal mistake (*hamartia*), thereby evoking fear and empathy; a sudden *peripeteia* from joy at victory to pain at Ifis's death; and the accompanying *anagnorisis* or insight into the situation. In his introduction Vondel expounds upon these and other theatrical matters in detail, pointing out with some pride that he has managed to achieve a double sequence of reversal and insight, in both Jephtha and his wife Filopaie. *Jephtha* represents a pinnacle of Vondel's dramatic art, but it did not fulfil its intended purpose as a model for other playwrights to follow. Only a limited number of performances took place. It was not at all what the Schouwburg audience was looking for, and the literary elite, especially the younger adherents of the French classicist theories, based their critical assessments on quite different criteria.

Even so, in the eight years between 1659 and 1667 Vondel published no fewer than ten tragedies, aside from complete verse translations after Sophocles (*Koning Edipus*, 1660) and Euripides (*Ifigenie in Tauren*, 1666). 1660 also saw the publication of *Koning David in ballingschap* (*King David Exiled*), *Koning David herstelt* (*King David Restored*) and *Samson*. The David plays deal with the conflict between King David and his son Absalom (2 Samuel 15 ff.), while *Samson* is based on the well-known story of Samson's humiliation and revenge. Inspired by the use of *peripeteia* in *Oedipus Rex*, Vondel chose characters from the Old Testament who go through a drastic reversal of fortune. The same applies to his *Adonias* of the following year, which tells of the failed attempt by Adonijah to depose his younger brother Solomon. In 1663 Vondel interrupted this long series of biblical plays with a tragedy on a secular subject, using an episode from the revolt of the Batavians against Rome as told by Tacitus. In *Batavische gebroeders* (*Batavian Brothers*) Claudius Civilis and his brother, regarded as heroic ancestors of the Hollanders, are portrayed as victims of Roman tyranny. The mythological content of his next play, *Faëton* (also from 1663), looks like another digression from Vondel's normal practice, but as W.A.P. Smit has argued, it corresponds with *Adonias* and *Batavische gebroeders* in its concentration on the complex relationship between guilt, justice and punishment.³

In the fifth act of *Lucifer*, the Archangel Gabriel reports the fall of Adam and Eve. Ten years later, in 1664, Vondel devoted a complete

³ Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 3, p. 319.

tragedy to this subject, *Adam in ballingschap* (*Adam Exiled*), nowadays valued as a literary highpoint of Vondel's oeuvre, although it was not staged in Holland until 1910. A free adaptation by Jan Frans Cammaert, however, was rather popular in Flanders between 1756 and 1796. Along with *Lucifer* and *Noah* (his last biblical tragedy), it belongs to a trilogy of sorts about the fall and punishment of man and the prospect of salvation. Vondel was eighty years old when the last of his dramas were published. The subject matter of *Noah, of Ondergang der eerste weerelt* (*Noah, or Downfall of the First World*, 1667) fits the pattern of his earlier works, but *Zungchin, of Ondergang der Sineesche heerschappye* (*Chongzhen, or the Downfall of the Chinese Dominion*), probably conceived before *Noah* but published in the same year, comes as a surprise with its exotic subject: the end of the Ming dynasty in 1644, when the defeated emperor Zungchin (Chongzhen) took his own life. The Jesuit missionary Adam Schall plays an important part in Vondel's plot, and this offers some explanation as to how a Catholic like Vondel could be fascinated by such a story. Moreover, by the mid-seventeenth century a lively interest in Chinese matters existed in Holland, demonstrated by important publications such as Johan Nieuhoff's report on his embassy to China (1665), which was quickly translated into English, French and German. And, of course, the downfall of this emperor and his realm offered Vondel another opportunity to construct a moving *peripeteia*.

Two translations, one of Euripides's *Phoenissae* and the other of Sophocles's *Trachinian Women*, conclude an impressive career of more than fifty years as a dramatist. Vondel's versions, *Feniciaensche* and *Herkules in Trachin*, both came into print in 1668 and can be seen as a final tribute to his great classical precursors, both admired by Vondel for specific qualities of their own.