

Jan Bloemendal and Frans-Willem Korsten, eds. *Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679): Dutch Playwright in the Golden Age.*

Drama and Theatre in Early Modern Europe 1. Leiden: Brill, 2012. xi + 652 pp. \$229. ISBN: 978-90-04-21753-9.

The life of Joost van den Vondel coincided with the era when the Dutch Republic was a player on the world stage. He was born during the decisive period when, following the murder of William of Orange in 1584, the States-General effectively established the new state as a confederacy of seven autonomous provinces dominated by Holland; he died within a decade of the trauma of 1672, when war with an alliance of European powers brought the republic to the brink of extinction. Celebrated as the foremost national writer of his time, the “Prince among Poets,” Vondel was of relatively humble stock. He grew up in Mennonite circles and converted to Catholicism in a predominantly Calvinist country. He did not shun controversy; he wrote biting satires in verse and on several occasions the authorities imposed heavy fines or banned performances of plays.

Vondel produced an immense oeuvre, in Dutch. It includes long and short poems of all kinds, translations into prose and verse, and more than thirty plays. His most successful play, *Gysbreght van Aemstel*, written for the opening of the new municipal theater in Amsterdam in 1637, would be performed almost every New Year for more than three centuries. Some of his lines became proverbial in the language, his work part and parcel of the Dutch literary canon. Translations of his work into other languages, however, remained few and far between. As a result, Vondel is hardly known internationally.

Scholarly studies of his poetry and drama, too, have been overwhelmingly written in Dutch. Until recently these studies, conducted in the best traditions of philology and literary history, sought to understand the author in his own terms, against the backdrop of contemporary ideas and norms. The crowning achievement in this line of research was the three-volume study of Vondel’s drama by W. A. P. Smit (*Van Pascha tot Noah* [1956–62]). Subsequent work essentially continued in the same vein.

It was Frans W. Korsten who, some years back, put the cat among the pigeons. In a series of articles and two books (*Vondel belicht* [2006], and, in English, *Sovereignty as Inviolability* [2009]) he developed deliberately anachronistic readings of Vondel’s plays, going well beyond the playwright’s presumed intentions and drawing instead on Mieke Bal, Gilles Deleuze, and a host of other modern thinkers. Korsten’s readings drew sharp criticism from more traditional scholars, and the debate goes on.

This debate is echoed in the present book, of which Korsten is a coeditor and in which his work acts as a point of reference rivaling Smit's work. The book thus serves a dual purpose. It is the first comprehensive discussion of Vondel's drama in English, and it offers a sampling of both more traditional and novel approaches. The different approaches coexist, at times uneasily. Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen's chapter ends on an explicit note of disagreement with Korsten, whose chapter begins on the next page.

With its twenty-six chapters by a total of twenty-one authors, this is a very substantial tome. Apart from three introductory chapters it consists of two main parts. The first part, in seven chapters, deals with general aspects of Vondel's life and dramatic oeuvre. In the second part fifteen chapters address individual plays or groups of closely related plays. A concluding chapter presents a very full bibliography of Vondel's plays, listing editions, translations, and studies from 1850 onwards.

The bulk of the book, then, is devoted to readings of individual plays, paying allegiance to New Historicism, historical formalism, cultural analysis, gender studies, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and other guiding concepts or schools of thought. While the analyses are invariably interesting, they do not always convince. Jürgen Pieters's New Historicist reading of *Hierusalem Verwoest* suggests tentative connections with contemporary debates that enable the text to "participate" in its context and to produce an otherwise unspecified "gain in meaning." Nina Geerdink's exploration of potential references in *Palamedes* seems a little too eager to treat them as common knowledge.

Many of the interpretations, however, are fascinating precisely because they pursue an unexpected angle of vision that leads them to uncover unsuspected layers of meaning. An intertextual reading of the final act of *Gysbreght van Aemstel*, in which the protagonist's wife Badeloch refuses to obey her husband, takes Marco Prandoni to the dispute between Andromache and Ulysses in Seneca's *Trojan Women* and to the conclusion that the play vindicates the wife's disobedience. Stefan van der Lecq's deconstructive handling of *Leeuwendalers* highlights violence and rape in a pastoral play ostensibly celebrating peace. In her equally persuasive, gender-based discussion of *Jeptha* Kristina Steenbergh argues that the two women in the play, Jeptha's wife Filopaie and their daughter Ifis, both normally relegated to second rank in comparison with the protagonist, contribute more to the play's cathartic effect than Jeptha himself, because both give full expression to their emotions (although in Ifis's case this is not shown on stage) whereas Jeptha represses his feelings until the end. Yasco Horsman invokes Lyotard, Benjamin, and psychoanalytical theory in his reading of *Samson* as a play about the violent annihilation of the law as the foundation of a new dispensation. There are more gems of this kind, some of more import than others, but all making Vondel into a thoroughly intriguing writer whose work repays close reading.

It is inevitable in a book of this size and composition that there should be some inconsistencies and the occasional slip. Vondel did not criticize George Buchanan's *Jephtes* because the play failed to adhere to the Aristotelian unity of time but because

Buchanan ignored the two-month interval between vow and execution that is explicitly mentioned in the Bible. There are some inconsistencies in the English translations of titles; *Den gulden winckel*, for instance, is rendered variously as *The Gold Emporium* and *The Golden Shop*. The play *Joseph n Dothan* is said to be inspired by a painting by Jan Simonsz Pynas, which is reproduced in the book; the chapter makes much of two paintings of the Joseph story by Rembrandt, which are not reproduced. Some more historical context would have been welcome early in the book. However, these are trifling imperfections in a volume that brings Vondel's large theatrical output to the attention of Anglophone readers, but does much more than that: by letting the light of theory shine on these plays, the book demonstrates just how rich, fresh, and valuable a writer Vondel remains.

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