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 Pauch (Peach), 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 Gebróeders (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 Portman 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 Doebau, 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. 1600-1667). 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, Guelfs and Van Amstel, Volck, Born, Karel en Rassendeck, Verscheinde Laucen, Stinus en Arna, De verzoende Vingrants, Generaal van Velzen en Elkelra, the ten dramas most often staged in the Amsterdam theaters 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 Granada by Pieter Cornelisz. Hooft (1587-1647) – which belong to the category of the pastoral – and the singular case of a scene from Lucretia by Gerbrand Adriaensz. Bredener (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 (1534-1648) wrote enthusiastically that within two months after the first performance he had seen this play no less than seven times! Even if several paintings 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 1861, and that many other art historians have repeated since. It addresses the notion that stauververanderingen (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 stauververanderingen, 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
of Belshazzar, the blinding of Samson, Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, and
the rapes of Proserpina, Europa and Ganymede.

However, a drastic and sudden occurrence in a narrative – which, by
its very nature, causes a reversal of mood – is confused here with the
Vondelian notion of *naastverandering*, a concept that has much more
complex implications, as we will see. That Rembrandt would have been
aware of this concept in the 1630s is, moreover, impossible, since Vondel
began to employ it in his dramas only as of the 1640s (he was the first, and
for some time, the only, playwright to do so), and Vondel explains the
concept as late as 1659 in the introduction to the tragedy *Dido*.
I will return to this. First, I will demonstrate what, in my view, were
the connections between significant elements in the portrayal of passions in
Rembrandt’s paintings of the late 1620s and 1630s and those in the
tragedies of the same period.

**Senecan-Scaligerian passions, oogenblikke beweeging and
Rembrandt’s history paintings in the 1630s**

The rendering of the passions of the soul in drama in the first half of the
century was determined by the example of the tragedies of Seneca (c. 3
B.C.–65 A.D.) and the poetical concepts of Horace (65 B.C.–8 B.C.) and
the humanist Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540–1629). Characteristic of
Seneca’s rhetorical-dramatic practice is the alternation of violent passions
through disjunctive reversals of fate that are meant to hit the audience with
force. In the Senecan-Scaligerian tragedies that were so popular between
1610 and 1650, there is no gradual plot development that carries the
viewer away. Within the separate building blocks of the drama, it was the
rendering – the ‘depiction’, as it was often called – of the fierce and
intense passions themselves that had to move the beholder. And this had
to be done along strictly rhetorical lines. A gripping visualization of such
passions was of great importance – ‘seeing comes before saying’ was Jan
Vos’s motto – and horror, as in Seneca’s tragedies, was not shunned. On
the contrary, it was warmly recommended by Scaliger. In his enumeration
of suitable, mostly violent, themes that would move the beholder, there
are many that easily recall subjects of Rembrandt’s paintings of the late
1620s and 1630s. Scaliger lists, for example: terror (*Belshazzar’s feast*, fig.
2), rage (*Christ driving the moneylenders from the Temple*, fig. 3, *Baal
and the ass*), intimidation (*Samson threatens the father of Delilah*), murder
(*The stoning of St. Stephen*, fig. 4), despair (*The repenant Judas*), fear
(*Andromeda chained to the rock* (fig. 5), *Saulm and the elders*, fig. 6), rape
(*The rape of Europa*, *The rape of Proserpina*, *The rape of Ganymede*),
betrayal (*Samson and Delilah*), the killing of family members (*Abraham’s
A rendering of the passions according to the rhetorical techniques of persuasion, in which the spectator of the tragedy is moved not through plot development but through the unmistakable and convincing visual representation of violent passions, corresponds entirely with the instructions given to painters by Rembrandt’s pupil, Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678). Van Hoogstraten’s advice seems to be an articulation of what must have been considered important principles for dramatic history paintings in the studios of painters, such as Pieter Lastman (1583-1633) and Rembrandt, between c. 1660 and 1640. As Thijs Weststeijn has demonstrated, Van Hoogstraten’s instructions neatly follow rhetorical principles. When Van Hoogstraten discusses the relationship between an episode in a story and the corresponding passions, he writes that ‘one should only depict an oogenblikke beweeging (an instantaneous motion and emotion that takes place at one single moment) that expresses the particular action of the history’. He continues to say, quoting Horace, that the particular action and passion have to be ‘enkel en eenwezig’, simple and unambiguous, ‘so that the depicted scene unequivocally [eenstemmich, literally ‘with one voice’] involves the viewer as if he were one of the bystanders, and will make him frightened when showing a brutal deed, or pleased when seeing something cheerful, or moved with compassion when seeing that someone suffers harm, or gratified by some fair deed’.

Such instructions, in accordance with rhetorical rules, must have been discussed in the circles of playwrights as well as of painters like Lastman and Rembrandt. As Thijs Weststeijn has demonstrated, eenstemmig and eenwezig parallel the rhetorical concepts of evidentia and perspicuus. However, the term oogenblikke beweeging, which beautifully articulates the visual rendering of a sudden, instantaneous and unambiguous motion and emotion, seems to originate in painters’ conversations in studios such as those of Lastman and Rembrandt. It is...
Undoubtedly related to Rembrandt’s use of ‘die meeste ende die naertuereste beweechelickhijt’ (the strongest and most natural motion and emotion), by which the artist articulated his goals when delivering the last two paintings of the Passion series. One of them, The Resurrection, portrays a moment that is so sudden and elicits such violent reactions that in the spectacular flash of light emanating from the angel, which causes the vehement commotion among the guards, we see a soldier falling head over heels as a sword hangs dangerously in mid-air (fig. 10). Christ grasps the edge of the grave, like a ghost who slowly awakens, which reminds us of the fondness for ghosts and apparitions in Senecan-Scaligerian drama. This scene seems to embody the ideal of every playwright working in the tradition of Senecan drama at that time.

Rembrandt’s exceptional interest in this most theatrical-rhetorical type of painting may have been stimulated by his early education at the Latin school, where Latin dramas were performed by the pupils, as Svetlana Alpers has pointed out. In rhetorical handbooks of the time, which were based on the Roman rhetoric of Quintilian (c. 35-100) and Cicero (106-43 B.C.), the eliciting of strong emotions, especially compassion, was extensively discussed. One had to make the audience empathize by representing as clearly and recognizably as possible the misery and distress of a suffering victim. Cicero maintained that the suffering of an innocent and defenseless victim moves the audience more powerfully than any other form of human suffering. One immediately thinks of Rembrandt’s Andromeda (fig. 1) and Susanna (fig. 6), paintings in which the artist, more than any other painter before him, did everything to emphasize the vulnerability of these innocent and defenseless women. Rembrandt’s ambitious choice of subject for his earliest dated painting, The Stoning of St. Stephen (1625, fig. 4) - a perfect demonstration of the Senecan-Stoic contrast between worldly violence and the sufferings of the steadfast - as well as for many of his later paintings, including Abraham’s Sacrifice of Isaac (1635, fig. 8), the scenes of rape, and the series of The Passion of Christ, all seem to be partly determined by the challenge to grip the viewer through intense empathy and compassion.

Apart from these, there are quite a number of works from this period (mentioned above) with sudden, violent actions and reactions, beginning with Balaam and the Ass and Christ chasing the moneylenders from the temple (fig. 3), both dated 1625, and culminating in Belshazzar’s Feast (c. 1635, fig. 2) and The Blinding of Samson (1635, fig. 9). It accords perfectly with Senecan-Stoic notions for Rembrandt to choose for his most gruesome and violent painting - arguably even the most violent painting of the seventeenth century - to represent a hero who perishes because of his moral weakness, having succumbed to uncontrolled desires. This moral recurs in many tragedies, among them Simon (1618) by Abraham de Koninck (1588-1619). Being shocked by gruesome deeds should lead to the insight that one has to remain steadfast under all circumstances. That Scaliger mentioned specifically the stabbing of eyes in his enumeration of topics suitable for a tragedy might have inspired Rembrandt to depict this exceptional moment from the Samson story - something no other painter ever did.
Vondel’s staetveranderinge

The highly popular plays of Jan Vos would continue the Senecan–Scaligerian mode throughout the 1640s, ’50s and ’60s, albeit without the strong moral undertone of the Senecan dramas from the earlier decades, and many other playwrights would also adhere to it during the later period. As of the early 1640s, however, Vondel’s tragedies would become increasingly inspired by Greek drama, in which the emotional reactions of the spectator are manipulated in an entirely different way. Although Daniel Heinsius (1580–1655) had recorded the theoretical formulation, based entirely on Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), of the function of peripetia and anagnorisis in Greek drama as early as 1611, it had no repercussions in the tragedies of that period until Vondel, encouraged by Gerard Vossius (1580–1655), began to work with it. His first step in this new direction was his translation, with the help of Vossius’s son Isaac, of the Elektra of Sophocles (ca. 497–407 B.C.) in 1639. In this work, fear and compassion were incited by way of a continuous unfurling of the plot, in which inner conflicts, verwarring (literally: turbulences, agitations), as Vondel calls them, play an important role. He writes in the dedication: ‘In this tragedy multiform emotions all tumble about [wonder] violently, like wrath, recklessness, fear, compassion, hate and love, faithfulness and unfaithfulness, sorrow and joy’. It was such verwarring that had to evoke emotions in the audience, not the spectacle of horror, nor the listening to gripping and gruesome stories. The development of inner conflict gradually leads to the climax, the peripetia, translated by Vondel as staetveranderinge, the reversal of the protagonist’s fate. This should be accompanied by herkenning, recognition, the Aristotelian anagnorisis. In Vondel’s point of view (and in this he follows his humanist friend Vossius and not Aristotle), this means not just a situation of recognition, but a realization of and insight into the true state of affairs: the inescapable situation in which the protagonist finds him or herself. After this follows the catharsis.

In 1641, Jan Vos would state in the dedication of Aran en Tina that nature has to be depicted in all its aspects. With this, he challenges Vondel, who had published Elektra shortly before. In his preface, Vondel had used terms from painting in his description of the tragedy, writing ‘that all the parts of this noble and royal maiden are well measured and flawless, just as the colors of Greek eloquence are awfully scrambled. Here one does not see anything missklopt, and all the components, from the minor to the major parts, cohere and flow together effortlessly’. In the dedication of his play, Jan Vos places against the idealizing perfection of Elektra the ‘defectivity’ of his hero, writing that the greatest minds in particular (such as the humanist Caspar Barlaeus, whom he addresses in this dedication), ‘often have the most inquisitive eyes, and now and then like to gaze at creatures whom nature has refused pleasing proportions and the right highlights and shadows of their shapes’. We notice how Vos responds vitrially to Vondel’s pictorial metaphors: instead of well-measured proportions, scrambled transitions and flowing, coherent compositions, he shows unpleasing proportions and strong contrasts in highlights and shadows. Thus, contrasting views had developed during the 1640s among the two leading playwrights in Amsterdam in precisely the same period that Rembrandt was searching for new ways to depict the emotional content of his history paintings. One reason for the drastic change that would follow might have been that, in his endeavor to depict die natuurlijke bewegelijkheid, Rembrandt must have realized that the depiction of a strong and instantaneous movement and emotion, an oogemblikkige beweging, could never look truly natural because a painted figure is always ‘still’.

The passions in Rembrandt’s late history paintings

In contrast to the normative approach that took shape in the works and theoretical ideas of Vondel, Rembrandt would never renounce his basic principle that life should be followed without idealization in order to bring the things represented as close as possible to the world of experience of the viewer. In this respect he remained closer to the ideas of Vos who, even as late as 1667, passionately defended the need for an unretouched representation of nature and human experience, even in all their disorderliness and ugliness. However, Rembrandt would completely revise his manner of rendering the passions and engage the emotional
response of the viewer in an entirely different way. We have seen that in the works of the 1620s and '30s the motifs that emphasize immediate and clearly recognizable emotions and movements were pushed to their extreme. This is evident when comparing them to paintings and prints depicting the same subjects, in particular those he may have known and to which he may have responded. We see the absolute opposite in his history paintings from the 1650s and 1660s. Now Rembrandt depicts motionless and mute situations: not a sudden reversal of vehement passions but the suggestion that we are present at a situation where a reversal of mood gradually takes place. We observe protagonists who seem to recognize and realize their tragic circumstances, and we feel that we are witnessing the voetingen which trouble the protagonists’ minds.

On the stage, inner conflicts and agonies could be represented by long laments and soul-searching monologues. This was indeed the case in Vondel’s Jeptha, in which Jeptha is torn between his love for his daughter and his obligation to keep his promise to sacrifice her. This inner conflict finally changes into the horrible insight – and here the voetingen takes place through herkenau – that he made the wrong decision and not only committed a gruesome crime by killing his daughter but even sinned against God by doing so. To accomplish something comparable in a
painting the artist would have to visualize what, in fact, cannot be visualized: the inner thoughts, conflicts and ponderings of the protagonist – things the viewer cannot see. Rembrandt solved this brilliantly by compelling the viewer to think about what is going on in the mind of the person depicted and by giving the viewer the opportunity to project thoughts and conflicting emotions onto this person. In sharp contrast to his earlier work, Rembrandt thus banished all action and reaction and avoided any indication of dialogue, so that the viewer is forced to concentrate on a motionless protagonist of whom it is suggested that he or she is plunged in deep thought. This is the only element the viewer can go by; the beholder is left to his or her own devices to interpret those thoughts because so little information is given. The viewer is free to contemplate and empathize with the inner conflicts and agonies of the protagonist and to project his own feelings and emotions.

For example, Rembrandt emphasized Bathsheba’s expression of being lost in thought (fig. 11). Simultaneously, by depicting the letter with the message of King David at the center of the image – a combination no other painter had depicted before – Rembrandt indicates to the informed viewer that she is aware of the distressing situation in which she finds herself. She knows that she is being watched and that her beauty has elicited the sinful desires of a male voyeur. This combination focuses the viewer’s attention on that which cannot be visualized, that is, Bathsheba’s thoughts provoked by David’s request. This is not a Bathsheba at the centre of a narrative action, spied upon, talked to, or handed a message or reading a letter. By banishing all this, Rembrandt
forces the viewer to think about her inner agonies and the harrowing choice she has to make, knowing that she realizes the terrible moral dilemma that faces her: either she chooses to lose her honor and commit the terrible sin of adultery, or she chooses to disobey the mightiest of kings (and her destiny to be the mother of Solomons). In *Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph* (fig. 12) we do not see a Joseph who reacts with surprise to his father’s supposed mistake of blessing the younger son with his right hand instead of the elder one. Instead, we see a Joseph and Asenath of whom we want to know what they are thinking and who seem to realize the far-reaching meaning of Jacob’s decision and of the words this frail old man has just spoken. We do not see a furious Ahasuerus blowing up at Haman in *Haman and Ahasuerus at the feast of Esther* (1665), Moscow, Pushkin Museum) but an Ahasuerus, Esther and Haman who all seem to be in deep contemplation and recognize the fateful implications of Esther’s words. *The disgrace of Haman* (fig. 13) shows three men, probably Haman, Ahasuerus and Mordechai, whose thoughts and emotions we try to divine; we assume that Haman reflects on the drastic change of his situation and realizes his downfall. All conventional motifs have been avoided to emphasize a man’s acknowledgment of his terrible fate. In *The return of the prodigal son* (fig. 14), we do not observe a prodigal son falling on his knees while his father
Renders the portrayal of the passions and Vondel's "naarverandering".

Notes
This article is based on a paper presented at the conference of the Renaissance Society of America in Los Angeles on March 10, 2009. I am grateful to Stephanie Dickey, who encouraged me to turn the paper into an article. The text incorporates ideas on what put forward in a more expansive form in my book Rembrandt and the Female Nude of 2006 (101-109, 118 and 364). It should, therefore, be considered a first step in a wider inquiry in which reflections between history painting and drama in 17th-century Amsterdam are studied. This study is part of the project funded by NWO titled "Artistic and Economic Competition in the Amsterdam Art Market, c. 1650-1660. History Painting in Rembrandt's Time".


4 Ibid., 291: ‘ … een teken op de fundamentaal geacht overeenkomst tussen de twee speeltjes en de op dit punt nog effectievere historische schilderkunst om via de visuele representatie te ontwikkelen (somservaantjes)’. Vondel WB, op. cit. (n. 32), 107-110.

5 Also in his theoretical treatise Tanschijf (Apology for drama, 1666), Vondel underlines emphatically that ‘… de tragedie heeft door tirte tot scenies aangepast van historisch schilderij’.


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Vondel WB, op. cit. (n. 2), 107-110. J. Koss has argued convincingly that only Vondel discussed this paradigmatism in a coherent way. Both art had mimetic intentions and wished to present a convincing representation of reality, which means that they both depended on classical rhetoric, not only on the sense of decorum, decollation and montery, with an emphasis on the latter, but also in the tradi of imitatio, dispositio and elocutio. Koss, 1999, op. cit. (n. 1), 108-110 and 105-107. See also Mieke Smits-Veldt for the interesting cases in which the legendary painting the Sacrifice of Iphigenia by Titian was discussed in this context, specifically in poems by Hendrick Roelands celebrating a play by Jan Colyn and by Beduus on a tragedy by Abraham de Koning (M.B. Smits-Veldt, ‘Beduus en Titania’s, Spinoza. Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse studie 14 (1986/87), 288-394. Also see Koss, 1999, op. cit. (n. 2), 110-112.

8 In his poem for the inauguration of the schoorburg, Vos writes: ‘This pen of the poet is like a lively brush’ (‘De pen, die dichtes is een levendig pensel’) and ‘A play is … a speaking painting’ (‘Een spel [………………… een spokende schilderij’). Vondel underlines in his apology for the theatre, Tanschijf (1666), that Simoni’s famous dictum that poetry is speaking painting and painting must poetry is especially applicable to the theatrical piece: see Vondel, op. cit. (n. 6), 291.

9 The only painting known to me is a rather primitive, anonymous painting of a scene from Iphigenia at Aulis, identified by G.M. Mohrbacher in his ‘Clytiaioi op Doornenburg’, Vondelboeken (1992), 174-178, and also reproduced in the book mentioned hereafter (ill. 29). For the plays that were performed in the Melktheater Academicus and the Amsterdam schoorburg during the period under discussion, see E. Oey de Veei and M. Ceen, ‘Geschiedenissen van de linksomvende! Letteren tegenover schilderkunst in de Gouden Eeuw’., in: M. Spies (ed.), Kwartsierverkaster. Faunaten van schilderijen. Groningen 1984, 91-97.

10 After the 1690s, Vondel is almost the only playwright who still based dramas on biblical subjects. Mieke Smits-Veldt courts only in biblical dramas out of a total of 203 various plays between 1659 and 1666, apart from the eleven written by Vondel in that period (M.B. Smits-Veldt, ‘De Bible eet het theater aan de Paasboe’, in: J.R. Amorens (ed.), De grote schaal en de bijbels, Paris 1998, 495-503). With most biblical dramas, it is more difficult to assess a relation to painting because the material they treat was already conventional in painting, as in the case with the Joseph dramas. We also find, both in paintings and tragedies, scenes from the stories of, amongst others, Jeptha, Achab, Hagur, Judith, Samson, Solomon, Nebukadnezar, as well as, Aristide, Iphigenia, Polyeuctes, Sophonisba, but in most cases it is hard to tell if there are direct relations between the two.

We know a remarkably large number of paintings of 1640s and 1650s based on scenes in Hooft’s play, of which the earliest paintings are the well-known works by Dirck van Balsaen of 1653 and Gerard van Honthorst of 1655. However, these relate to the project for a pastoral woman. See the catalogue entries by Peter van den Brink in P. van den Brink (ed.), Het geheime land. Pastoorlijke schilderijen van de Gouden Eeuw, cat. exh. Utrecht (Centraal Museum), Zwolle and Utrecht 1999, 97-99 and 172-176, with further references. For the small group of paintings depicting scenes from Lastrili (Gerbrand Adriaensz. Breitner), the Van den Brink catalogues by Jan Marqu en Molenaar, see: D.P. Wellers, Jant Meesters: paartier van de Dutch Golden Age, cat. exh. Râkjaer (North Carolina Museum of Art), New York/
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