
The World of Literature

Literature was a phenomenon of central importance in Dutch Golden Age society. Although much less well known today than the works of painting, architecture, and music that can be appreciated without knowledge of the language, the literary production of the Dutch Republic was in fact remarkable, in both quality and quantity, and played a significant part in the lives of most urban dwellers in the country. Authors such as Roemer Visscher, Gerbrand Adriaensz Bredero, Pieter Cornelisz Hooft, Jacob Cats, and Joost van den Vondel gained fame during their lifetime. They developed a rich vernacular language, and their work contributed to the shaping of Dutch religious, political, and civic identities.

The public function of literature was taken for granted. Poets and playwrights saw it as their primary task to instruct and delight audiences for the greater good of the community. This social dimension was visible in the propagation of civic and religious morals, in overt or oblique interventions in public debates, and in the glorification of the local, regional, or indeed national heritage. Nor was literature restricted to the elite. Scandals and public controversies drew raucous satires, just as natural disasters and military victories were commemorated in topical verse and song. Special occasions in a burgher's life, such as marriages and births, were celebrated with the recitation of poetry, and men, women, and even children exchanged poems to offer consolation, convey thanks, or send New Year's wishes. In all these ways literature helped create and maintain social bonds within the steadily expanding urban communities of the Dutch Republic.

The social roles that literature played are reflected in the variety of media in which it was disseminated. While most literary works

appeared in the form of printed books and broadsheets, the circulation of manuscripts still flourished, as is illustrated, for example, by the rhymes in the *alba amicorum* (lit. ‘books of friends’, the forerunners to autograph books) that were fashionable among the wealthier burghers, male and female alike. Oral transmission, too, remained important. Singing and reciting poetry, both in private homes and in public, were common occurrences, depicted in numerous paintings and drawings. Even in material culture literature left its imprint. Epigrams might be carved or engraved on public buildings, tombstones, goblets, and even humble utensils to honour the owner or the object, praise God, or admonish the beholder.

The social and political functions of literature have received much attention in recent Anglophone scholarship. As for Dutch literature, readers unfamiliar with the Dutch language will find it hard to gain access to both the primary and many of the secondary sources of the literary history of the Dutch Republic. For this reason, the present chapter restricts itself to charting developments with reference to the more canonical works of prose, poetry, and drama. Using a necessarily broad brush it describes how, at the end of the sixteenth century, the centre of literary production in the Low Countries shifted from Antwerp to Amsterdam, and how, in the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic created a vernacular literature of extraordinary diversity and vitality.

1560–1590: War and Metrics

In August 1561 a remarkable event took place in Antwerp, then the largest and most cosmopolitan city in the Low Countries and their cultural and economic centre. The occasion was a drama competition organized by one of the city’s literary associations or Chambers of Rhetoric. A late medieval phenomenon with origins in northern France and Burgundy, Chambers of Rhetoric dominated literary production in the Low Countries throughout the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth. They specialized in allegorical plays and formally sophisticated verse. Virtually every town, and many villages, especially in the southern part of the Low Countries, had at least one Chamber. Closely tied to local power structures, the Chambers shaped civic culture and gave verbal and visual expression to the communal self-image. Although the forms of literary production changed significantly in the

seventeenth century, the social function of literature remained constant. Verse as well as drama was meant to yield more than just aesthetic pleasure.

Nowhere was this public role more in evidence than at the event held in Antwerp in August 1561. As the participating Chambers entered the city in festive fashion, the locals gaped at some 1,300 men on horseback and thousands more on foot, all in colourful attire, with more than 200 floats carrying elaborate allegorical representations. The main contest lasted for two weeks, with plays being performed several times a day in the city's main square; a further series of performances of minor plays stretched into September. The whole competition was an extraordinary display of wealth, power, and self-confidence. The message was not lost on the Englishman Richard Clough, Sir Thomas Gresham's agent in Antwerp, who in a letter home urged his compatriots to take note 'and so provyde for the tyme to come', because, he concluded, 'they that can do thys, can do more'.¹

The time to come, however, did not favour Antwerp, although the calamities did not set in right away. By the end of the 1560s the city could boast a new town hall in magnificent Renaissance style, and Christopher Plantin, by now the largest printer-publisher in Europe, had begun producing the eight sumptuous volumes of his polyglot *Biblia Regia* (1568–72). But the storm clouds had been gathering even in 1561. In previous decades the Chambers of Rhetoric had already come under suspicion of being too welcoming to the ideas of the Reformation. For all its festive pomp, the authorities closely monitored the 1561 competition. Before the decade was out, the widespread discontent with Habsburg rule in the Low Countries spilled over into armed conflict and, eventually, full-scale revolt, repression, and war. For Antwerp the first blow came in 1576 when mutinous Spanish-Habsburg troops sacked the city, burned the new town hall to a shell and forced Plantin to pay repeated ransoms to save his printing presses.

Around 1580 the major cities in the southern Low Countries – Antwerp, Ghent, Brussels – were all in rebel hands, as were large parts of Zeeland and Holland, Amsterdam having joined the Revolt in 1578. Within a few years, however, the Habsburg army, under its brilliant general Alexander Farnese, had retaken the southern bastions one by one. Antwerp was the last to fall, in 1585. In the years immediately following, its population was reduced by half, as thousands of Protestants left the city and journeyed north. In the next century the

southern provinces of the Low Countries would see every aspect of their cultural life determined by the Counter-Reformation. The ideological divide between the Catholic Spanish-Habsburg Netherlands in the south and the Calvinist-dominated Dutch Republic in the north proved permanent. Within decades Amsterdam had replaced Antwerp as the new commercial and cultural centre of gravity, a publishing hub, and the place where Dutch theatre, in particular, flourished.

As the war raged, the rebels found succour and comfort in pamphlets and songs. The most famous of these songs, reprinted in many editions of the *Beggars' Song Book* (*Geuzenliedboek*) from c. 1577 onwards, was the 'Wilhelmus', in which the leader of the Revolt, William of Nassau (or William of Orange), speaks in the first person to justify his opposition to the Spanish tyranny. Combining the first letter of each of the song's fifteen stanzas spells William's name in an acrostic – a reminder of the clever formal games typical of the Chambers of Rhetoric. The 'Wilhelmus' was adopted as the Dutch national anthem in 1936; its authorship has remained uncertain. A very different product of the conflict was the *Beehive of the Holy Romish Church* which appeared pseudonymously in 1569 but was authored by Philips of Marnix, who would become William's right-hand man. The book, written in exuberant Rabelaisian prose, is a brutal satire on the Catholic Church. Literature of this kind, the direct outcome of violent conflict, was instrumental in shaping political debate.²

The latter half of the sixteenth century was also a period of incipient literary change. Metrical verse and new poetic forms such as sonnets and emblems reached the Low Countries via France. The Antwerp patrician Jan van der Noot wrote metrical poems with remarkable ease. In Leiden it was the town secretary, Jan van Hout, who championed the new style of writing verse. Recent scholarship has stressed the role of social networks in the dissemination of literary ideas and practices, and documented Van Hout's wide circle of friends and acquaintances both in Leiden, with its newly established university (1575), and in Amsterdam. It has also highlighted two rather different conceptions of poetry which both gained purchase at the time. Whereas Van Hout viewed poets in neo-Platonic terms as divinely inspired exponents of the creative imagination, others, such as Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert, saw poetry, and literature in general, as a rhetorically refined instrument of moral persuasion.

Coornhert has come to be appreciated as the towering figure of his generation. A fiercely independent thinker and prolific writer, he produced songs, translations, plays, polemical dialogues and essays, and a supreme work of prose, *Ethics, or the Art of Living Well* (*Zedekunst, dat is wellevenskunste*, 1586). The first *Ethics* to be printed in a European vernacular, the book's lucid, vivid, and rhythmical language made it a perfect vehicle for Coornhert's unconventional ideas about the innate goodness of man, who goes astray only if he declines to learn how to distinguish between good and evil. Insight and judgement could be attained by reasoning, in the firm knowledge of God's benevolence. At a time of growing ideological entrenchment on both Catholic and Calvinist sides, Coornhert's outspoken aversion to dogma was not welcomed by everyone.

1590–1620: Immigrants and Innovators

In a lecture of 1964 the literary historian W. A. P. Smit charted a new course for the study of early modern Dutch drama, recommending a poetological approach that would trace the formal features and evolution of traditional and modernizing plays of the period.³ Smit's lecture inspired a generation of researchers to map theatrical genres and practices. The current scholarly consensus about the formal development of early modern Dutch drama is a direct result of Smit's programme. Subsequent generations, however, struck out in other directions. They turned their attention to popular literature, in both prose and verse.⁴ This type of research brought the audience into view, as book-buyers, theatre-goers, or, more generally, consumers of cultural goods. The interaction between cultural producers, recipients, and institutions has produced some of the most insightful research of recent decades. One offshoot of this type of work has been the investigation of social and artistic networks that carried the traffic in cultural meaning among both elite and broader communities. The way in which the numerous southern immigrants, displaced by the upheavals of war, gradually integrated into the social fabric of Holland's towns in the decades around 1600 provides a good example.

Although Karel van Mander (1548–1606) and Daniel Heinsius (1580–1655) belonged to different generations, both had southern origins. Van Mander, who had trained as an artist and gone on a grand tour

to Italy, left his native Flanders for Haarlem in 1583, the same year that Heinsius' parents departed Ghent and took their three-year-old son to Zeeland. Van Mander became the leading light in a network of artists and poets in and around Haarlem, and gained fame as the author of *The Book of Painters* (*Het Schilder-Boeck*, 1604), written in imitation of Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Italian Painters*. Its opening section offers an extended reflection, in verse, on the nature, techniques, and moral purpose of the art of painting. The most valuable part, even for today's art historians, is that devoted to biographies of Netherlandish painters, primarily of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, every account enlivened with anecdote and detail.

Daniel Heinsius would prove at least equally influential, but as a scholar and poet. Primarily known as a neo-Latin writer who taught for decades at Leiden University, it was precisely his standing in the humanist world of letters that proved inspirational when he turned his hand to Dutch-language verse. His early collection of love emblems *You Ask What Love Is?* (*Quaeris quid sit amor?*, 1601) and its sequel, *Cupid's Craft* (*Het ambacht van Cupido*, 1613), featured both Dutch and Latin verse (the later collection added French as well), excelled in witty and paradoxical treatments of the subject, and went through a series of reprints. His *Dutch Poems* (*Nederduytsche poemata*, 1616) collected his major poems in the vernacular. The book's dedication, written by Petrus Scriverius, recalled Ronsard and Du Bartas, and celebrated the fact that now in Holland, too, a poet steeped in the classics honoured his native tongue by writing verse in it. The vindication of Dutch as a language of learned literature was put to the test in the long hymn 'In Praise of Bacchus' ('Lofsanck van Bacchus', first published separately in 1614), to which Scriverius penned extensive annotations to explain Heinsius' erudite classical allusions.

Heinsius also left his mark on drama. His theoretical treatise *On Plot in Tragedy* (*De tragoediae constitutione*, 1611) set out the Aristotelian principles of tragedy in an accessible fashion and would be studied by playwrights across Europe. His own Latin play, *William of Orange, or Wounded Liberty* (*Auriacus, sive libertas saucia*, 1602), written ten years earlier, followed Seneca rather than Aristotle in depicting the murder of the Father of the Fatherland in 1584, but it was the first in a long line of plays, by a variety of authors, on a patriotic theme; the fact that its epilogue explicitly looked forward from the anxious time of the murder to the

present day of the spectators made it doubly topical – and reassuring for those who had witnessed the rapid consolidation of the new state during the 1590s.

Among its earliest imitations in Dutch was *The Murderous Crime of Balthasar Gerards* (*Het moordadich stuck van Balthasar Gerards*, 1606) by Jacob Duym (1547–before 1624), another southern immigrant, who knew both Van Mander and Heinsius but had more of an axe to grind: he had been imprisoned by the Spanish under such harsh conditions that for the rest of his life he walked with a limp. In political terms he was, not surprisingly, a hard-liner; his play, named after William of Orange's murderer, advocated a continuation of the war with Spain at a time when the prospect of peace negotiations was being mooted – the Twelve Years' Truce would be signed in 1609.

Both plays show the close connection between literature and public discourse. Whereas Duym sought to influence policy-making by stirring up public opinion, Heinsius helped to create a public narrative in which the fledgling state – the Dutch Republic was a state before it was a nation – could reflect on its own emergence. The staged portrayal of a recognizable figure from the recent past, and the mixture of trepidation and hope which both plays projected, lent that narrative unusual force. Other narratives would soon follow.

The presence of so many immigrants in the towns of Holland and Zeeland could not fail to stir resentment among the native population. No other play satirized these tensions better than *The Spanish Brabanter* (*Spaanschen Brabander*, 1617) by Gerbrand Adriaensz Bredero. Bredero was born and bred in Amsterdam, and although he had had no classical training he entertained close contacts with the leading literary circles in his home city. He died young, at the age of thirty-three, but still produced a large number of – posthumously collected – lyrical, narrative, and meditative poems, as well as a string of comedies, tragicomedies, and shorter farces, several of them derived from Spanish romances, which he read in French or Dutch translations. *The Spanish Brabanter* takes its cue from the Spanish picaresque novel *Lazarillo de Tormes*, but the scene is set in Amsterdam. The long, sprawling play was nominally made up of five acts, although it might be better described as a series of vignettes showing the interactions between the Spanish Brabanter Jerolimo, newly arrived in Amsterdam from Antwerp, his Amsterdam-born servant Robbeknol, and a variety of colourful local characters. Jerolimo's Antwerp accent, grand manner, and flashy clothes suggest

a man of wealth ('Is Amsterdam for sale?', he wonders), and he dupes most of the locals most of the time. The humour in the play springs from the clash of dialects, the sheer bizarreness of some of the characters, and their down-to-earth speech. Robbeknol offers pithy comments on the goings-on throughout, but when in the end Jerolimo turns out to be as penniless as he himself is, he sides with his master. There are no heroes in *The Spanish Brabanter*.

Among Bredero's contacts in Amsterdam were the patrician Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft, the son a mayor of the city, and Samuel Coster, a doctor. Their generation marked a new beginning in Dutch literature, symbolized in the establishment of the ambitious but short-lived Dutch Academy (Nederduytsche Academie) in 1617. Their circle also included the two most famous literary women of the period, the sisters Anna Roemers Visscher and Maria Tesselschade Visscher. It was their father, Roemer Visscher, and his friend Hendrik Laurenszoon Spiegel who, a generation earlier, had helped prepare the ground for the new developments.

Both Roemer Visscher and Spiegel were well-to-do merchants, with an aversion to the religious disputes of the day and a philosophical interest in a Christianized form of stoicism as a practical way of life. Spiegel, for many years the key figure in the Amsterdam Chamber of Rhetoric, the Eglantine, was also the principal author of the first grammar of Dutch to appear in print, the *Dialogue on Dutch Grammar* (*Twe-spraak vande Nederduitsche letterkunst*, 1584). The book was published under the Chamber's name, with a preface by Dirck Coornhert in which he extolled the virtues of Dutch and expressed his support for Spiegel's linguistic purism. The codification of the vernacular formed part of a wider programme of conscious cultivation of the language, regarded as a cornerstone in the construction of a national identity. It saw a number of writers deliberately avoiding foreign loanwords and choosing to use Dutch for subjects such as botany and political theory for which hitherto Latin had been the standard vehicle. The 1584 grammar was followed by shorter works on rhetoric and dialectics; together, the three disciplines – grammar, rhetoric, and dialectics – constituted the *trivium*, the basis of all further study. Spiegel recommended the use of Dutch even at Leiden University but, while that suggestion fell on deaf ears, in 1600 the mathematician Simon Stevin, another linguistic purist, set up a training institute for engineers

and navigators in Leiden which taught applied sciences exclusively in Dutch.

Spiegel's main literary work was the posthumously published *Mirror of the Heart* (*Hert-spiegel*, 1614; the title puns on the writer's own name), a long meditative poem expounding ethical principles akin to those held by Coornhert: virtue is its own reward, and knowledge of one's self and of the world will yield a true apprehension of moral duty. Linguistically *Mirror of the Heart* has proved one of the most challenging poems in Dutch, due to its compact diction and the numerous freshly minted compounds that came with Spiegel's insistent purism. His short play *Numa, or Refusing Office* (*Numa ofte amptsweygerinhe*), which employed a more accessible idiom but remained unpublished at the time, took its story-line from a French translation of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* to depict the Sabine Numa weighing stoic self-sufficiency against public duty before finally agreeing to become king of both Sabines and Romans. Doing good for others trumps self-improvement.

While Visscher shared Spiegel's philosophical and linguistic preferences, he excelled in shorter genres such as epigrams, sonnets, and emblems. His sense of irony showed when he titled his collected verse *Jabberings* (*Brabbeling*, 1614) and invented a curious new Dutch word to designate his book of emblems as *Sinnepoppen* (1614), a coinage he explained in the preface as 'pictures pregnant with meaning'. The pictures in this latter book were often strikingly homely, showing sluices, haystacks, millstones, ploughs, fishing vessels, men skating, and women churning milk to butter. If the images conjured up familiar scenes of everyday life, Visscher took care also to ensure the verbal commentary had immediate appeal: headings in Latin or French were glossed in Dutch, and the short prose commentaries praised the entrepreneurial values of Holland's merchant class. The recognizable, everyday quality of Visscher's emblems found echoes later in the century in a poetics that favoured personal experience over grand ideas or pathos.

Visscher's house in Amsterdam became a meeting place for artists, writers, and scholars. Among his children, the gifted Anna and Maria Tesselschade gained fame both as poets in their own right and as translators from French and Italian. Most of their work, however, remained tucked away in private correspondence or appeared in the form of contributions to fellow writers' collections. No independent publications appeared under their own names during their lifetime.

Among those who frequented Visscher's house was Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft. As early as 1600, as a young man on a three-year grand tour, he had addressed a letter in verse, sent from Florence, to his fellow members of the Amsterdam Chamber, the *Eglantine*. In it he contrasted Italy's wondrous achievements in the arts with Holland's mere promise, but he ended his missive by celebrating the inspirational role Spiegel and Visscher were playing in the city's literary life. After his return to Amsterdam Hooft himself grew into a major author, known for his elegant poetic diction. His fifty-odd sonnets, most of them on Petrarchan motifs, combined grace, wit, and linguistic ingenuity. His pastoral play *Granida* (1605) introduced a new genre, after Italian models. Its love intrigue appealed to younger audiences, a new and lucrative market for which in subsequent decades a large number of amorous songbooks would be published all over the country.

Hooft's tragedy *Gerard van Velsen* (*Geeraerd van Velsen*, 1613) was of a different calibre. It took its theme from national history, addressed the political issues of the day, and contributed to the literary invention of the Dutch Republic as an independent state. In formal and structural terms, too, it proved innovative: it was the first Dutch play to refer to the – loosely interpreted – Aristotelian unities, evidence that Hooft was aware of Daniel Heinsius' theoretical work. Its popularity can be gauged from several sequels produced by other writers, and from regular stage performances throughout the century.

The play is set not far from Amsterdam, in Muyden Castle, which happened to be Hooft's official residence at the time. The story, based on events that took place in Holland in 1296, revolves around the rash actions of some nobles who, led by Gerard van Velsen, conspire against their tyrannical count, take him prisoner, and then start deliberating what to do next. Before they reach a conclusion they are surprised by loyal supporters of the count; they flee, and Van Velsen kills his prisoner. The voice of reason in the play is that of one of the nobles, Gysbert van Aemstel, who has been lured into the conspiracy and advocates a constitutional solution to the question of how to depose the tyrant. His arguments rehearse those of the rebels in the early decades of the Revolt, as most audiences and readers would have recognized. The play thus helped to legitimize the emergence of the new Dutch state, even as it painted the dire consequences of Van Velsen's personal vindictiveness. The play ends much as Heinsius' *Auriacus* had, with a long monologue that looked forward from the discord and turmoil caused by Van

Velsen's actions to the glorious present – but with a warning that moderation and prudence were required if another debacle was to be forestalled. In 1613, well into the Twelve Years' Truce, as doctrinaire tensions between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants were beginning to escalate, that message was unmistakable.

Hooft's other major play, *Baeto* (1616), tapped into another patriotic vein but was overtaken by events as soon as the ink was dry. The protagonist's name in the title refers to the so-called Batavian myth, the nationalist piece of propaganda, fed by Hugo Grotius' treatise *On the Antiquity of the Batavian Republic* published in both Latin and Dutch in 1610, which held that the Dutch descended from the Batavi, a Germanic tribe that in pre-Roman times had migrated from the Germanic heartland to – roughly – contemporary Holland. Grotius had also argued, anachronistically, that the Batavi possessed constitutional arrangements similar to those of the Dutch Republic. Hooft's tragedy took its cue from a brief passage in Tacitus' *Germania* and showed the virtuous Baeto, a Germanic crown prince, being grievously wronged but refusing to resort to violence even in self-defence, choosing instead to leave his homeland and move west with his followers, giving his name to the new nation of the Batavi. The play thus enacted a foundation myth on a national scale, but it also spoke to the here and now, and not only in counselling non-violence. A crucial scene towards the end of the play has the chief priestess ceding first place to Baeto as the leader of the new nation: the secular power stood above the clergy; the head of state united the whole nation. When in July 1617 Stadholder Maurice of Nassau openly sided with the Counter-Remonstrants, that lofty message fell by the wayside. Less than a year later Maurice was in Amsterdam, where scenes from *Gerard van Velsen* were staged in his honour; *Baeto* was wisely kept out of view. The play was not printed or performed until 1626, after Maurice's death.

The performances in Maurice's honour in May 1618 were organized in part by a new body, the Dutch Academy. It had broken away from the traditionally minded Chamber of Rhetoric, the Eglantine, a year earlier at the instigation of Bredero, Hooft, and Samuel Coster to pursue a culturally more progressive line. The aim was to run courses, in Dutch, in a range of subjects and to perform modern plays, in a new, specially designed building, and for money. Whereas traditionally plays had been performed in the open air and for free, now theatre moved indoors and charged an entrance fee. The commercialization of the

stage became more pronounced as the century wore on. But the Academy closed its doors after little more than a year. Coster's play *Iphigenia* (1617), although set at a safe distance, among the Greek army readying itself for the Trojan War, was such a transparent attack on the Calvinist clergy that it could not be performed in public for years. The Counter-Remonstrant victory in 1618–19 sealed the Academy's fate. Coster fell silent, and Hooft turned to historiography.

1620–1640: Public Appeal and Intervention

Jacob Cats hailed from Zeeland and trained as a lawyer, but as pensionary of Dordrecht and then grand pensionary he spent much of his time in The Hague. He was an ineffectual politician but far and away the most successful Dutch author of the period, and his books sold in the tens of thousands. His *Marriage* (*Houwelick*, 1625), an 800-page tome, was reported to have sold 50,000 copies in a little more than twenty-five years. Most of his other books did equally well. He collected his own *Complete Works* (*Alle de wercken*) in 1655 and was widely translated and imitated in Germany and England. His reputation remained high until the middle of the nineteenth century but then dipped, only to recover somewhat in recent decades, as his work began to be read through the lens of the history of ideas.

Cats' eminently accessible verse, with its regular iambic beat and its patterns of repetition and variation, articulated the prevailing moral precepts of the age, especially the proprieties governing love and married life. He wore his erudition lightly and displayed tireless ingenuity in devising cautionary tales and extracting moral lessons from everyday scenes. He excelled in expository and narrative verse, but made his reputation with a book of emblems that, for the first time, fully exploited the genre's potential. In this, his most famous collection, first published in 1618 but known as *Images of Allegory and Love* (*Sinnen minnebeelden*) after its revised edition of 1627, each image was followed by interpretation in three languages (Dutch, Latin, and French; the 1627 edition added English) aimed at three age groups: a light-hearted amorous reading for the young, an ethical reading addressing the business of everyday life for the middle-aged, and a contemplative or religious reading for those with one foot in the grave. The formula had commercial advantages – an important consideration for what was evidently an

expensive book, although many later editions were printed in smaller formats and on cheap paper.

Also in 1618 Cats brought out another emblem book, *Maidens' Duty* (*Maechden-plicht*), now bilingual Latin and Dutch, in the form of a dialogue between two women. More works on relations between the sexes followed. *Marriage* (*Houwelick*, 1625), divided into six sections tracing a woman's progression through life from girlhood via motherhood to widowhood, presented the married state, with its stereotypical division of responsibilities between husband and wife, as the basis of a Christian society. *Wedding Ring* (*Trou-ringh*, 1637), a series of verse narratives about various kinds of preludes to conjugal bliss, was dedicated to the polyglot (but unmarried) Anna Maria van Schurman, one of the intellectual marvels of the age.

Apart from poetry, drama remained a key instrument to work on public opinion while providing entertainment. As the Chambers of Rhetoric declined, theatrical life found a new focus in Amsterdam with the construction of the Amsterdam Theatre, a splendid edifice in classical style which opened its doors in 1638. This was the first purpose-built, professional theatre in the Low Countries, with twice-weekly performances, paid actors, and a capacity of close to a thousand spectators. Since the proceeds went to charity, the local authority had a vested interest in the theatre's commercial success, despite opposition to all forms of theatre voiced by hard-line Calvinist preachers. The Amsterdam Theatre provided a significant stimulus to drama production, both original works and translations. The first play to be put on, early in January 1638, was *Gysbreght van Aemstel* by Joost van den Vondel.

Canonized as the national poet at an early stage, Vondel was nevertheless something of an outsider. He grew up in Mennonite circles and later converted to Catholicism. He was the leading playwright of his age with thirty-three plays to his name, although almost half remained unperformed during his lifetime. Known for his high classicizing style, he belonged to the middle class and ran a shop. Uneasy in the company of social grandees such as Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft and Constantijn Huygens, he taught himself Latin in his mid twenties and learned Greek when he was in his fifties.

Vondel was intensely interested in the country's political and economic life, and he did not hide his opinions. The major poem of his early career, 'In Praise of Navigation' ('Het lof der Zee-vaert'),

first appeared in 1623 as a liminary piece in a cartographic atlas, *Mirror of the Sea* (*Zeespiegel*), published by Willem Jansz Blaeu, who specialized in reference works for seafarers. The poem's almost five hundred alexandrines describe a ship setting out on a voyage to the Indies and safely returning home after a successful trading mission. Vondel's theme was the ethical foundation of this trade as fair and peaceful commerce – a clear political statement at a time when in the Indies the governor of the East India Company (VOC), Jan Pieterszoon Coen, was using brutal methods to subdue local populations and head off competitors. In his play *Palamedes* (1625), published soon after Prince Maurice's death, Vondel took aim at the Counter-Remonstrants he held responsible for the execution of Oldenbarnevelt in 1619, although, like Coster before him, he set the scene in ancient Greece. He incurred a fine, and the play was banned but, due to ineffective censorship laws in a decentralized country, was reprinted several times. Vondel kept up his attacks on hard-line Calvinist preachers and magistrates in vicious satires such as *Curry-Comb* (*Roskam*, 1626) and *Harpoon* (*Harpoen*, 1630).

By the mid 1630s Vondel had written three original plays and translated several more from the Latin of Seneca and Hugo Grotius. Among the many plays that followed, three stand out: *Gysbreght van Aemstel* (1637), his most popular; *Lucifer* (1654), his most ambitious; and *Jeptha* (1659), his model tragedy. *Gysbreght van Aemstel* continued the story line of Hooft's *Gerard van Velsen* and showed Van Aemstel, now returned from exile, being besieged in his city of Amsterdam by an army still hostile to him. The city falls due to a ruse modelled on the Trojan horse and is destroyed, forcing Van Aemstel and his family to flee again. If the play's language and theatricals were remarkable, so were the intertextual references and the symbolism Vondel wove into his verse. The Trojan horse and Van Aemstel's flight (at the behest of the angel Raphael) echoed Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Vondel elaborated the parallel in some detail. To this epic grandeur he added Christmas and Innocents' Day, as Amsterdam's tragedy takes place on Christmas Eve, and indeed the play would have been first performed on Boxing Day 1637 had its alleged Catholic tenor not led to the premiere being postponed. The combination of classical and Christian imitation, the promise of greatness to come, and the power of Vondel's poetry made *Gysbreght van Aemstel* the most successful play of the period, a celebration of Amsterdam on the city's own stage.

1640–1670: Popular and Elite Literature

Around or shortly after the time he wrote *Gysbreght van Aemstel*, Vondel learned ancient Greek, translated Sophocles, and re-oriented his conception of drama away from Seneca and towards Aristotle. The most spectacular result of this re-orientation was *Lucifer*, a play about the first mishap in the history of the universe, set among the angels in heaven, and dedicated to the emperor Ferdinand III, in whom Vondel saw the leader of the entire Christian world against an existential Ottoman threat. The play's action concerned God's decision to alter the existing order of things, Lucifer's wavering between loyal service and hurt pride as he sees his privileged position undermined, and his fateful rebellion, which ends in inevitable defeat and his transformation into a monstrous devil. The theological and political complexities of Lucifer's revolt against an apparently absolutist God have been the subject of critical debate to this day. On the Amsterdam stage *Lucifer* ran into problems after just two performances, as the church council objected to the heavenly setting. The play was banned but, true to form, went through five print runs within a year.

The reception of *Jeptha* five years later suggested that Vondel's classicism could produce great plays but left audiences cold. The story was that of the biblical Jeptha who vowed to God, in return for victory in battle, to sacrifice the first thing he encountered on his way home, only to find his daughter coming out to meet him. Representations of the episode in painting invariably showed the tragic moment when a dumbstruck Jeptha sees his daughter and realizes what he has done. It was a measure of Vondel's boldness as a dramatist that, in order to comply with both the biblical Word and the Aristotelian unities, he dispensed with this shock of recognition, moved the scene forward in time until two months after the fateful encounter, and focused on Jeptha's anguish and desperate self-justification in the hours leading up to the actual sacrifice, as he refuses to translate his private – and ultimately illusory – bond with God into a socially acceptable form.

In its printed edition, *Jeptha* was preceded by a lengthy theoretical exposition. On the Amsterdam stage it lost out to the visually more exciting work of playwrights like Jan Vos, who made ample use of the elaborate stage equipment available in the new Theatre. Many of these plays were drawn from contemporary French and Spanish sources, and they featured complicated intrigues, sensational turns of events, and

large amounts of blood and gore. Their popular success made Vondel's classicism look like a lonely position, and they dominated the repertoire to such an extent that in 1664 the Theatre was rebuilt to accommodate the stage machinery necessary to mount even the most spectacular scenes. Towards the end of the 1660s, playwrights working in this vein also began to furnish theoretical defences of their practice.

The cloak-and-dagger plays on the Amsterdam stage had their counterpart in popular narrative prose. From around the middle of the century a good number of novels began to appear, most of them translated from French, treating colourful adventures or amorous intrigues. A special but commercially successful category of prose consisted of travel narratives, in particular those relating naval voyages to exotic lands. They had been appearing since the end of the previous century. Gerrit de Veer's account of three successive but fruitless expeditions to find a north-east passage to China, the last one ending in the famous winter spent on Nova Zembla (Novaya Zemlya), had first come out in 1598 and had sold extremely well. None gained a wider readership than the *Journal* of Willem Ysbrandtszoon Bontekoe. The book appeared in 1646, twenty years after Bontekoe had returned from his journeys around the East Indies and along the southern coast of China, and it had been thoroughly rewritten by the publisher to portray the VOC skipper as a resourceful Christian hero.

If the average reader might hope to identify with the persona projected in Bontekoe's journal, the poetry of the aristocratic Constantijn Huygens, private secretary to successive princes of Orange for more than half a century, stood at the opposite end of the scale. Multi-talented, multi-lingual, and with a fondness for dense language games, Huygens had been writing verse from a young age. This was poetry for elite readers. One long poem, 'Daily Business' ('Dagh-werck'), left unfinished in 1638, proved so dense he supplied a prose commentary to it. The first major collection, *Otia* ('Leisure Hours', 1625), featured poems in Latin, French, Italian, and Dutch. Despite the volume's cosmopolitanism, some of the Dutch verses were mildly satirical observations on Huygens' immediate surroundings in The Hague, while others celebrated Dutch localities and trades. It was not until the 1640s that more work began to appear in print, first the Latin poetry collected in *Momenta desultoria* (*Desultory Moments*, 1644), then two shorter works in Dutch; the Dutch poems would eventually be collected in *Cornflowers* (*Korenbloemen*, 1658). If these titles suggested that for Huygens literature

was little more than a distraction from his official duties as a diplomat and civil servant, they were also evidence of his consummate self-fashioning.

While Huygens possessed expertise in diverse fields and maintained a vast international correspondence, much of his poetry was concerned with private matters. The small collection *Holy Days* (*Heilighe daghen*, 1645), for instance, just nine sonnets, all of them written around New Year 1645, spoke of the poet's intense religious faith. Every poem stacked up paradoxes and articulated complex emotions of vulnerability and Calvinist guilt in poignant, punning language. If Jacob Cats rehearsed common values in repetitive verse, Huygens packed the highly personal in the fewest possible words.

The preference for direct and sometimes ironic observation of day-to-day scenes and private pursuits was also typical of Jan Six van Chandelier, a learned merchant. The seemingly unpretentious but carefully contrived realism of his poems, collected simply as *Poetry* (*Poezy*, 1657), could also be seen as contrasting with Vondel's highly strung pathos. Six appears to have moved outside the literary networks of the time, and his work went largely unnoticed until the late twentieth century. Even more down-to-earth was Willem Godschalck van Focquenbroch, whose talent lay in parody and burlesque; his first collection, *Thalia* (1665), named after the muse of comedy, was dedicated to a monkey. His nihilistic humour was appreciated mostly by younger audiences at the time, dismissed as coarse in the eighteenth century, and rediscovered only after the Second World War. More conventional perhaps, but also concerned with everyday topics, were the poetic exchanges between Catharina Questiers and Cornelia van der Veer. Their collection *Laurel Contest* (*Lauwer-stryt*, 1665) contained contributions by various authors from their social circle, but at its heart was a series of interconnected poems and responses in which each woman insisted the other accept the laurel crown. Typically, most of the other verses by these two women appeared dispersed over collective volumes.

1670–1700: The Neo-Classical Moment

Shortly after the publication of *Laurel Contest*, Catharina Questiers married and gave up writing. Ten years earlier she had put to rhyme prose versions of two Spanish plays, which were staged in the Amsterdam

Theatre. Cornelia van der Veer later exchanged poems with another woman author, Katharina Lescaijje, who translated and adapted at least seven plays from French. The strong presence of adaptations of foreign, mostly Spanish and French plays indicated not only translation as a fit occupation for women with literary ambitions, it also characterized dramatic production in the latter part of the century.

Vondel's classicism had already been criticized by Jan Vos. Another critic was Thomas Asselijn, who, like Vos, declared himself unwilling to bow to theoretical rules and instead championed the unadorned portrayal of raw reality. His *Rise and Fall of Masaniello* (*Op- en ondergang van Mas Anjello*, 1668), about the popular revolt in Naples in 1647, was a play full of extreme rage and bloodshed.

But there were other changes afoot, which further – but from a very different angle – undermined the authority of the ancients who meant so much to Vondel. Lodewijk Meyer, who entertained a strong interest in language issues and rational philosophy, and who had read Descartes and befriended Spinoza, was aware of the re-interpretation of Aristotle which Pierre Corneille had published in Paris in his famous three discourses of 1660, and he wrote imitations of several of Corneille's plays. In 1669 Meyer became one of the founders of a select society that adopted as its motto 'Nil Volentibus Arduum' ('Nothing is hard for those with a will'). The society aimed to improve the quality of Dutch theatre by applying the principles of Corneille's French neo-classicism, which stressed orderliness, clarity, decorum, and verisimilitude. They regarded Vondel's classicism as a thing of the past and treated the sensationalism of writers such as Vos and Asselijn with contempt. Their preferred instruments were criticism and polemic.

The result was an extraordinary series of virulent exchanges in which the society discredited the work brought out by other playwrights by swiftly producing their own competing versions, accompanied by sneering introductions explaining in detail the changes that had been necessary to meet the required neo-classical standard. Translations made by others likewise led to counter-translations by the society. They shored up their own position in weekly meetings where individual members discoursed on theoretical aspects of drama; some forty of these treatises were later published (but not until 1765), the most extensive poetics of the period. By 1677, when the Amsterdam Theatre was re-opened after six years' closure, Nil Volentibus Arduum had won the day. They gained control of the Amsterdam Theatre, and their leading figure, Andries

Pels, issued two theoretical works in which he set out the principles of a drama that wanted to be decorous, edifying, and uncontroversial. They heralded a new aesthetic. Neo-classicism dominated the Amsterdam stage until well into the eighteenth century.

Notes

1. R. Ryckaert, *De Antwerpse spelen van 1561 naar de editie Silvius (Antwerpen 1562) uitgegeven met inleiding, annotaties en registers*, 2 vols., Ghent, 2011, vol. I, 39.
2. See also Chapter 7 of this book.
3. W. A. P. Smit, 'Het Nederlandse Renaissance-toneel als probleem en taak voor de literatuurhistorie', *Mededeelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandsche Akademie van Wetenschappen Afdeling Letterkunde* 27 (1964), 167–210.
4. E. K. Grootes, 'De bestudering van populaire literatuur uit de zeventiende eeuw', *Spektator* 12 (1982–3), 3–24.