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Dichter bij de waarheid: Parrhesia en dramatisering in het werk van Joost van den Vondel
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Summary

Poetics of Truth

Parrhesia and Dramatisation in the Work of Joost van den Vondel

Parrhesia

In this study the concept of *parrhesia* by Michel Foucault (1926-1984) functions as a heuristic instrument, a 'lens' through which the texts of the Amsterdam poet and playwright Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679) appear as 'frank' or 'bold' speech'. In the reading process this lens is itself being polished as well.

The Greek word *parrhesia* is traced back etymologically to 'all' (*pan*) 'that which is said' (*rhema*). A *parrhesiast* (*parrhesiastes*) says exactly what he thinks: he speaks frankly and he puts something on the line by doing so. Foucault took this classical concept as a starting point for his last series of lectures at the Collège de France, where he describes *parrhesia* as the courageous expression of an inconvenient truth. By using *parrhesia* the speaker expresses his ethical relation with the truth that forces him to reveal the truth when it is being repressed. *Parrhesia* implies a connection between ethics and politics: on the one hand the *parrhesiast* gains access to the truth because he is leading a 'good life' (*eu zen*), on the other hand this truth involves what is good, healthy and useful to the *polis*. According to Foucault, *parrhesia* opens up an ethical space within political discourse, where political processes become visible and open to examination. He points out that the increased concern with *parrhesia* in Athens from the end of the fifth and fourth century B.C. indicates that political discourse was going through a 'crisis of truth', in which it is unclear who has the right to speak the truth. Eventually, this political stalemate would be broken by the irruption of a second, ethical discourse that violated political laws in order to maintain the very existence of political discourse. Similarly, Vondel's fascination for the phenomenon of *parrhesia* reveals a crisis of truth in the political discourse of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands (henceforth, the Republic).

In Vondel's texts parrhesia operates in two different manners, which I refer to as 'polyphony' and 'dramatisation'. For polyphony I refer to the concept by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) that provides a method of inferring the repressed from the more dominant voices in a text. When Vondel's texts are analysed following this method, it becomes clear that they contain different worldviews, which were present in his immediate environment. I relate this polyphony – in Vondel's work and Dutch society – to the decentralised political structure of the Republic and to the freedom of conscience prescribed in the Union of Utrecht (1579). These conditions led to a relatively high degree of tolerance that attracted dissidents and freethinkers from across Europe. Even if they were officially not allowed to express their worldviews in public, their ideas had a strong presence in the collective imagination. Bakhtin's concept of polyphony makes Vondel's texts appear to be as if they were platforms for discussions that could not take place in public. By creating an ethical space where the foundations of politics were called into question, these texts reveal that the truth of those in power was not the only worldview existent in the Republic.

The second concept, 'dramatisation', derives from the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), who used it to indicate an epistemological method for confronting processes of representation in our thinking that presuppose transcendence and hierarchy. Regarding Vondel, I consider dramatisation a confrontation of 'theatricality', both in the theatre and in society. Theatrical performances derive their meaning from the representation of a different reality, which thus *transcends* theatrical reality. Theatrical reality is a false or illusory reality that the spectators in the 'real' world can never literally participate in. They can only relate to it in terms of perspective, creating a sharp distinction between the two realities. Dramatising forms of theatre aim at escaping this theatrical process by confronting the prevailing image of 'reality' – or truth – with imaginary realities. In this case meaning is not generated in terms of perspective, but through the immanent dynamics of the imagination. I call dramatisation precisely this process of imagination in which a new 'virtual' reality is actualised, which is something radically different

from the theatrical representation of an existing reality. From the perspective of parrhesia, dramatisation indicates a crisis of *the* truth. It does not only reveal the coexistence of multiple truths in society, but also confronts the truth in such manner that society cannot remain unaffected.

Clearly, theatricality and dramatisation are both crucial elements in any stage performance. In Vondel's tragedies no less, processes of theatricality and dramatisation are manifested by turns. What makes Vondel's work special is that it reflects upon these processes and relates them to two conflicting worldviews. While polyphony involves processes of representation and theatricality, dramatisation is precisely a confrontation of these processes. Therefore I consider parrhesia a 'hinge' which joins these two modalities in Vondel's work.

In response to Vondel's work, the concept of parrhesia must itself be modified, as well. A recurring problem during my analysis of Vondel's texts was that Foucault had failed to explain how parrhesia operates in a work of art, despite basing the concept on several plays, literary texts and visual artworks. The question is how parrhesia, performed in an imaginary reality, can constitute a serious confrontation with the truth in the 'real' world. This applies *a fortiori* to the early modern context, where the division between reality and imagination corresponded to the division between truth and illusion. Vondel's texts offer a concrete example of this process, as they thematise parrhesia and fulfil a parrhesiastic function in society. How can this phenomenon be conceptualised theoretically? Using Deleuze's concept of dramatisation I show how Vondel's texts challenged the spectators' and readers' worldview in their imagination. By describing 'theatre play' as a game with the imagination in which virtual realities may be actualised, dramatisation neutralises the hierarchy between reality and imagination. In this process truth becomes visible as a mode of thought that involves the endless unveiling of boundaries as thresholds, which Foucault calls 'thinking of the other' and Deleuze calls 'thinking difference'.

The case studies

Joost van den Vondel proves an extraordinary case for an analysis of parrhesia, because frank speech runs like a thread through his oeuvre. Although Vondel never uses the word ‘parrhesia’, his texts testify of his fascination with the phenomenon of frank speech. Moreover, he repeatedly represents himself as a parrhesiast. Ultimately, what makes Vondel’s case most relevant to parrhesia are the period and the environment he lived in. According to Foucault the Baroque period forms the meeting point of two *epistemes* (the bodies of ideas that set the bounds of what is accepted as true knowledge in a given period): the Renaissance and the classical period. I relate the crisis of the truth detected in Vondel’s work to this major shift in the understanding of truth. In the seventeenth-century Republic, where scholars gathered from all over Europe, this shift was quite apparent. Vondel’s oeuvre, spanning over sixty years, is an exceptional attestation of this shift, as it gives expression to different modalities of truth-telling. In the five case studies (of my thesis) different aspects of parrhesia are treated, on the basis of different texts or text collections by Vondel. Chapters 1 to 3 focus on the phenomenon of polyphony, while Chapters 5 and 6 on that of dramatisation. Chapter 4 involves a theoretical discussion on the (possible) synthesis of parrhesia and dramatisation.

Chapter 1 investigates *Palamedes* (1625), a tragedy through which Vondel responded to the execution of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, the Land’s Advocate of Holland, in 1619. The classical allegory reveals his conviction to be the result of a show trial and a violation of the privileges granted to the free cities in the Union of Utrecht (1579). In the paratext (all authorised texts related to the publication of *Palamedes*) Vondel represents himself as a parrhesiast, while an analysis of Vondel’s social network reveals that *Palamedes* does not so much express *his* personal truth, as the views of his patrons, powerful Remonstrants and moderates (as opposed to orthodox Calvinists), who preferred to remain out of sight. Vondel’s representation as a parrhesiast can thus be regarded as a rhetorical ploy to divert the attention away from

his patrons. This does not imply however, that the motif of parrhesia in the publication history of *Palamedes* is not indicative of a crisis in political discourse.

The unveiling of Oldenbarnevelt's lawsuit as a 'kangaroo court' in *Palamedes* leads to the insight that the political system of the Republic was intrinsically inequitable. Due to the decentralised political structure, deadlocks formed a recurring problem. Time and time again the successive stadholders of Holland, who enjoyed considerable political freedom, broke the deadlock by brutal seizures of power.² *Palamedes* makes stadholder Maurice of Orange's violation of the Union in 1619 visible as the functioning of another, ethical discourse that bypassed political discourse when politics failed. The allegorical structure of *Palamedes* involves a game of coding and decoding, indicating a dynamics of deadlocks and breakthroughs in the Republic.

In Chapter 2 I discuss six panegyrics in praise of stadholder and Prince of Orange Frederick Henry, written by Vondel in the years 1625-1632: *Begroetenis* (1625), *Geboortklock* (1626), *Verovering van Grol* (1627), *Amsteldams Wellekomst* (1628), *Zegesang* (1629) and *Stedekroon* (1632). In each of these lengthy poems Vondel defends the interests of the Amsterdam magistrate in the war against Spain. During this period the Amsterdam magistrate was predominantly populated with Remonstrant and moderate mayors, who sought the abolition of the anti-Remonstrant edicts, a peace treaty with Spain and a greater say in foreign policy in general. As the contents of the poems closely relate to fluctuating political discourse, I have subdivided their analyses into three periods.

In the panegyrics of 1625-1626 – *Begroetenis* (*Salutation*) and *Geboortklock* (*Birthday Bells*) – parrhesia takes shape as Vondel's uninvited advice to stadholder Frederick Henry of Orange. Using parrhesia, Vondel aimed to exert influence on the political realm via Frederick Henry's princely ethos. According to sixteenth-century theories of sovereignty the ethos of a sovereign ruler connected his natural body to

² Here I refer to Frederick Henry's abandoning of the Amsterdam magistrate in favour of the king of France in 1633 (see Chapter 2, 157) and the attack of Amsterdam in 1650 by William II.

his political body, corresponding to the abstract 'body' of the state. However, even though Frederick Henry was a prince, he was not sovereign in the Dutch Republic (but in the French principality of Orange). This meant that Vondel had to evoke Frederick Henry's princely ethos himself, in his poems, as a necessary condition of parrhesia.

In the period of 1627-1630 Frederick Henry offered the Remonstrant cities, including Amsterdam, military support in exchange for war funds. This collaboration was a great incentive for the war against Spain and led to the conquests of Grol (1627), Den Bosch (1629) and Wesel (1629). The panegyrics *Verovering van Grol* (*Conquest of Grol*), *Amsteldams Wellekomst* (*Amsterdam Welcome*) and *Zegesang* (*Victory Hymn*) reflect a growing self-awareness among the Amsterdam magistrates, as Vondel represents them, together with Frederick Henry, as joint leaders of the war. At the same time he presses the stadholder into abolishing the edicts. The fact that Vondel did not receive any response to his poems suggests that his representation of politics clashed with Frederick Henry's views, which were purely opportunistic.

Finally, in 1632, Frederick Henry abruptly turned away from Amsterdam by breaking off the peace negotiations with Spain and taking his chance with the king of France. In Amsterdam, this decision was considered treason. Vondel responds with *Stedekroon* (*City Crown*), which breaks with the imaginary reality of the former odes and presents a less favourable image of war. Vondel's poem 'Vredewensch' (1633; 'Peace wish') to Constantijn Huygens, Frederick Henry's secretary, is considered the final chord of his ode to the Prince. It portrays the Prince as a force of nature without a conscience, forcing his way through Dutch politics. Vondel challenges the Prince to show his ethos and refute this image, but Frederick Henry does not answer. The parrhesiastic game is over.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the functioning of parrhesia in a Christian context. The tragedy *Peter en Pauwels* (1641; *Peter and Paul*), about the martyrdom of the two apostles, was received by Vondel's contemporaries as a defence of his choice for the Roman Catholic Church, which is represented in the play as the ecumenical mother

church with the Pope as its infallible arbiter. The martyrdom of Peter, the first pope, is like a 'rock' supporting the Church to overcome any schism – even the Reformation.

Peter en Pauwels is a particularly polyphonic text, voicing both Catholic and Protestant views. The Protestant voices depict the Catholic Church as a divided institution, in which faith is being smothered by political interests. This conflict between faith and power is personified in the play by Peter, as the Catholic ideal of the pope, and Nero, as the Protestant spectre of the pope as the 'Antichrist'. The third protagonist, Pauwels, bridges the gap between them by an inversion of faith and power. He introduces the idea that the 'power of faith' may be defeated on earth, but will prevail in the Celestial Empire. From this viewpoint the martyrs' suffering on earth will increase their triumph in heaven. Martyrdom reflects this inversion as a victorious defeat. The character of Nero illustrates how this inversion has been misused by Christian leaders to make Christians submit to the power of the Church. The parrhesiastic revelation in *Peter en Pauwels* is that the seeds for the schism in Christianity were present from the very outset, in the martyrdom of Peter himself.

In addition, *Peter en Pauwels* offers an example of Biblical history adapted for the genre of classical tragedy. A problem that always arises in this case is that New Testament heroes are not 'imperfect', as tragic heroes should be. Peter and Paul are martyrs and therefore their death is not a catastrophe, but a triumph. For Vondel this confrontation between the Christian content and the classical form resulted in fundamental theological questions. His search for a tragic motif in *Peter en Pauwels* led him to depict martyrdom as an unnatural inversion of the human desire and right for self-preservation, and the martyrs as misguided in their intentions.

In Chapter 4 I relate how parrhesia and dramatisation can be joined theoretically. Foucault did not account for the processes by which parrhesia operates in art. Deleuze's concept of dramatisation, which neutralises the hierarchy of reality and imagination, offers an explanation for these processes. He starts from the idea that the imagination is the preliminary stage of rational knowledge and therefore contains both true and false ideas. Theatre can stimulate the formation of ideas in our

imagination and thus provide the impetus for rational knowledge, particularly in the area of self-knowledge. In Vondel's late tragedies, from about 1660 onwards, this relationship between the imagination and knowledge is central. Here, Vondel interprets parrhesia as the revelation of an illusion, a lack of knowledge. This change in the perception of parrhesia can be related to the emerging discourse of the new ethical sciences in the second half of the seventeenth century in Amsterdam, which came to define truth in terms of knowledge.

Vondel's late tragedies provide an excellent illustration of how Foucault's parrhesia and Deleuze's dramatisation, concepts originating from two quite different thinkers, can reinforce each other. Foucault describes parrhesia as the manifestation of an 'etho-poetic' way of life, the poetic element suggesting that this life is designed and moulded like a work of art. While *poiesis* bridges the gap between the life and speech of the parrhesiast, it does not cross the boundary between reality and imagination, which separates art from the world. Deleuze does not support this division, as his concept of reality contains both actual and virtual ideas. According to him, the thoughts to be indicated as 'true' are decided by power processes. Art involves a mode of thinking that allows us to move from one reality to the other. The ideas generated by a work of art can be of such eloquence or 'power' (*potentia*) that they are no less affective than 'true' ideas. Deleuze describes the manner in which art so resonates as an 'ethics of affect', which he partly derives from Benedictus de Spinoza. This explains the parrhesiastic effect of Vondel's plays. Coming from, respectively, a limited and an unlimited way of thinking, Foucault and Deleuze meet in their 'thinking of art'. They both envision art as a continuous practise in which the boundaries between reality and the imagination are revealed, time and time again, as thresholds or dramatisations of virtual realities. From this viewpoint 'thinking difference' for Deleuze and the 'thinking of the other' for Foucault suddenly appear to be closer. In addition, Foucault's notion of the artwork as an 'irruption of the elementary' can be related to dramatisation, as a primal Dionysian force breaking through the Apollonian shell of civilization.

In Chapters 5 and 6 I demonstrate how dramatisation is manifested in two texts by Vondel as the confrontation of a Renaissance and theatrical worldview with the worldview that is developed by the new ethical sciences. The perspective of parrhesia makes this confrontation visible as a crisis of the truth in late seventeenth-century Dutch culture. Chapter 5 discusses Vondel's last tragedy *Herkules in Trachin* (1668; *Hercules in Trachis*), a free translation of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*. The play was not performed during Vondel's life, but following its publication, the book was at the centre of a heated debate about the performance of the passions. The discussion was fuelled by the new ethical sciences, which defined the passions as the affections of natural forces on our body. I demonstrate that not only the Enlightened theatre company *Nil volentibus arduum* (1669-1681) based its poetics on Cartesian and Spinozist philosophy, but that Vondel was influenced by the new sciences as well. The analysis of *Herkules in Trachin* shows that it involves three major discourses on the passions: an Aristotelian discourse, a Baroque discourse on sovereignty and a Spinozist discourse. In Aristotelian tragedy the experience of the passions is pivotal for a spiritual process, in which the spectators are purged of excessive passions. In Baroque tragedy, as conceived by Walter Benjamin (1925), the hero stands for the sovereign prince. In this case Herkules' passionate behaviour is caused by the rupture between the divine and human identity of the sovereign. Finally, the rationalist Spinozist discourse makes Herkules' passions visible as a lack of understanding. Until the *anagnorisis* (the moment the hero recognises his fate), Herkules envisions Jupiter as a just father figure. Only when he realises that God is an utterly inhuman force of nature, he manages to control his passions, after which he resigns to his fate. In Vondel's translation however, the *anagnorisis* is reversed; after a brief moment of insight Herkules relapses into his state of ignorance, clinging to the father image. This leads him to accuse Jupiter of indifference about his suffering, and to die in agony. In Nil's rationalist poetics knowledge is a moral imperative. From this point of view the death of Herkules can be considered as an example of the principle of poetic justice, as Hercules fails to restrain his passions.

The analysis of Herkules' allegations against Jupiter on the basis of Spinoza's theologico-political theory, as expounded in *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670), gives a different picture. In this political frame Herkules becomes visible as a parrhesiast. According to Spinoza, an inadequate image of God, like Herkules', does not come into being by itself, but is often encouraged by political and religious leaders whose power depends upon this inadequate image. They manipulate the people's imagination in such manner that they will voluntarily abandon their rational capacities. When this insight is combined with Spinoza's ethics of affect Herkules' allegations appear as a confrontation with his own imagination. Similarly, *Herkules in Trachin* confronted the seventeenth-century audience with the question of how the highest power on earth could be founded on a God who is indifferent to human suffering. Vondel does not reject the Christian image of God, but confronts it from within, in the imagination.

In Chapter 6 the relationship between dramatisation and parrhesia is elaborated on the basis of *Tooneelschilt of Pleitrede voor het tooneelrecht* (1661; *Shield of the Stage or Defence of the Right for Theatre*). In this rhetorical and poetical text Vondel's view on theatre is characterised by a 'crisis of representation': a confrontation of theatricality in the theatre and society. The publication responded to *Oeconomia Christiana ofte Christelicke huys-houdinghe* (1661; *Christian Household*), in which the Amsterdam minister Peter Wittewrongel (1609-1662) had called for a closure of the city theatre, as it would arouse the wrath of God. In *Tooneelschilt* Vondel argues that man has a natural right for theatre, because all people are actors on the world stage, in terms of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor. Moreover, Vondel regards imitation, play and imagination crucial for acquiring knowledge. The framework for Vondel's defence is established by the theatrical tradition, but he describes processes of dramatisation that confront this theatrical tradition from within. This confrontation I analyse with regard to the nature, function, working and the space of theatre.

The 'nature' of dramatising theatre is characterised by the immanent dynamics that generate knowledge in the imagination. Unlike theatrical theatre it does not offer

representations of reality, but evokes new ideas. Vondel considers representation and theatricality as intrinsic to human thought, but emphasises that representations can be corrupted, which is called 'sham'. He calls the Calvinist ministers shams, because they pretend to proclaim God's will, while they are actually imposing their own: the closure of the city theatre. The function of dramatising theatre is to increase knowledge and reveal illusions, caused by the sham of Calvinist ministers. Theatre educates the people to increase their resistance against their manipulations of the imagination. The working of dramatising theatre is best explained in terms of Spinoza's ethics of affect. The passions aroused by a play do not merely affect us physically, but also through the imagination. Similar to the method of Nil member Lodewijk Meijer, Vondel integrates Spinozist theory with the Aristotelian concept of catharsis: theatre arouses both passions and rational thoughts *about* these passions. In this manner it encourages the exploration of our own imagination, whereby the audience – whether they are spectators or readers – learns how vulnerable the imagination is to affections, like sham and superstition. Being an institution of representation and disguise, the theatre is the appropriate place for the critical examination of theatrical processes in society. Finally, the space of dramatising theatre is an 'affective space', which unfolds in the imagination, by means of the affective forces emanated by the play. The affective space of Vondel's late tragedies I characterise as a flat and open space, where one is called to confront the boundaries between imagination and truth, art and society. In contrast to the 'scenic space' of the Amsterdam theatre building, where truth and illusion are effectively separated by the architecture of the building, it enables the actualisation of virtual realities (dramatisation). Since rulers cannot exercise power over virtual realities, the affective space evoked by dramatising theatre can be considered a potentially critical space within political discourse.

Wittewrongel can try to deprive the Amsterdammers of their city theatre, but that will not change anything about their natural disposition to 'act' and 'play'. The processes of dramatisation in the imagination are unstoppable. Thereby the ministers are overstepping their bounds, according to Vondel, when they intervene in the

political debate about the public space of the city theatre. Vondel makes it very clear that the church is a 'house' (*oikos*), which has to limit its power to its own personal property and which is not entitled to make political decisions. Nor do the ministers have any business in the personal realm of the people's imagination. Vondel considers their sham as a violation of the freedom of conscience.

Conclusion

The insights into the work of Joost van den Vondel gained from this study can be summarised in five points. Firstly, Vondel's texts contain at least two modalities of truth-telling that are in constant conflict: prophecy and parrhesia. They point to, respectively, a transcendent and an immanent notion of truth. Secondly, the prominent motive of parrhesia in Vondel's work points to a crisis of truth in Dutch political discourse. I consider the repeated seizures of power by the stadholders of Holland to be the effect of an ethical discourse that irrupts into political discourse to end such crises. The parrhesia in Vondel's texts is representative of this clash of discourses in the Republic. Thirdly, parrhesia provides an explanation for Vondel's preference for the tragic genre since the early 1640's. When it turned out that his seven-year stream of odes to Frederick Henry failed to make an ethical difference in the political realm, he shifted his focus to a different audience and a corresponding genre. With his tragedies Vondel reached a large and influential audience of citizens. Via the collective ethos of this crowd Vondel succeeded in making an ethical difference in political discourse. In the fourth place, the perspective of parrhesia elucidates that Vondel's view of Christianity is characterised by a distinction between the personal faith of Christians and the power of the Church, which restricts religious practice. Therefore, the choice for a particular church should be personal and voluntary, and the interference of the Church in political debate must be ruled out. Finally, the perspective of parrhesia reveals that Vondel's work from 1660 onwards, exhibits the impact of the new ethical sciences, Spinozism in particular. Spinoza's reservations about the theological foundation of politics concur with Vondel's lifelong

‘research’ on the relationship between religion and politics. Spinoza’s ethics of affect thereby offer a model for the manner in which parrhesia operates in Vondel’s tragedies. This manner of operation, I refer to as dramatisation.

The yield of this study with regard to Foucault’s concept of parrhesia is twofold. Firstly, the analysis of parrhesia in Vondel’s work offers insight into the functioning of the humanistic tradition of frank or bold speech in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. I have argued that the vitality of this tradition relates to the political structure of the Republic and to the thinking of the Dutch baroque, being the meeting point of two epistemes. Secondly, I have demonstrated that parrhesia serves as an analytical instrument for text analysis. In order to equip parrhesia for the analysis of artworks, I undertook to integrate it with Deleuze’s concept of dramatisation. In addition, my investigation of the possibilities for integrating parrhesia and dramatisation points out that the ‘limited thinking’ of Foucault and ‘unlimited thinking’ of Deleuze approach each other closely in the ‘thinking of art’.