The politics of visuality in Dutch Renaissance tragedy

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The Politics of Visuality in Dutch Renaissance Tragedy

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No writer, let alone a playwright, can do without visuality, but some are true champions of visual representation. The greatest painter with words of early modern Dutch literature is the seventeenth-century poet and playwright Joost van den Vondel (1589–1679). As visuality is never neutral, it comes as no surprise that Vondel, in his large oeuvre, uses it to convey visual, social and moral messages to his audience. Such visual tactics include singling out individuals from groups, contrasting opposing parties, and combining seeing with physical and emotional sensations. Vondel was not, however, the only playwright adept at this game. There was at least one other, his fellow Chamber of Rhetoric member Abraham de Koning (1588–1619). Using concepts from cultural and literary criticism such as gender, focalization, coherence and countercoherence, hyperbole, understatement and synesthesia, this article compares the scope of Vondel’s and de Koning’s visuality and explores the ideological patterns that underlie and nourish it.

Visibility and invisibility – Jephthah and his daughter

Our starting point is the literary circle surrounding the Amsterdam Chambers of Rhetoric, where Vondel and de Koning must have met in or shortly before 1610. Both were Protestant immigrants from the Southern Netherlands. De Koning had moved to Amsterdam directly from Antwerp, where Vondel’s family also had its roots. Vondel himself was born in Cologne. They both joined the Chamber of Rhetoric that welcomed immigrants, ’t Wit Lavendel (The White Lavender, also known as the Brabant Chamber). In 1610 Vondel’s first play *Het Pascha* (Pass-over) was shown there; between 1610 and 1618 de Koning wrote nine dramas, most of them for the White Lavender’s stage, as the directions in the texts indicate. Two of de Koning’s plays are of particular interest to us, because Vondel revisited their themes many years later and the texts are more or less interconected: the biblical tragedies about the judge Jephthah and his daughter (Judges 11), and about Samson and Delilah (Judges 13–16).

The Old Testament book of Judges is well known for its violence, as the Jews had to conquer many foes in the process of establishing their place as God’s chosen people. In these battles the judges played a decisive role; they were local leaders who in times of war became military commanders. They were under huge social pressure to prove the faithfulness of their people, and their own personal faithfulness became an important benchmark, both for their own group and
for their enemies. The judges Jephthah and Samson have become particularly well known, as the required faithfulness had far-reaching consequences. They represent the dilemma of having to choose between self-interest and the interest of one’s people – with tragic results: Jephthah loses his daughter, Samson dies himself. In both cases a woman is involved. Mieke Bal has drawn attention to the role women play in the ideological norms the book of Judges conveys. Combining literary criticism and feminist analysis, she demonstrates the importance of reconciling the entire gender spectrum instead of providing separate analyses of male and female elements. The political and social structures presented in the book of Judges are not constructed solely by the murders and battles that rage through it; the domestic lives and activities of the women play an equally important role in this process. In order to find out what happens and why, Bal studied the narratological focalization of the texts, i.e. the relation between events and those reporting them. I will employ this method to discover the relation between social power, moral power and visuality (especially visibility and invisibility) in the tragedies by de Koning and Vondel.

First, the case of Jephthah and his daughter (Judges 11). The Bible tells of the ‘judge’ Jephthah who is not fully accepted by his people because he is not of purely Jewish origin. Never fully secure in his position, he wants to excel at everything, and is particularly keen to distinguish himself in war. This eventually pushes him into the position of the tragic hero who makes a fatal decision. He swears to God that, if he defeats the enemy (in this case the Ammonites), he will sacrifice the first creature he meets on his return home. This proves to be his daughter and only child. Convinced that he cannot break his promise to God, he kills her.

This storyline, including the murder of the daughter, was worked out by de Koning and Vondel. In 1615 de Koning published *Iepthahs Ende zijn Eenighe Dochters Treur-spel* (The Tragedy of Jephthah and His Only Daughter), and in 1659 Vondel wrote *Jeptha ofte Offerbelofte* (Jeptha or Sacrifice Promised). De Koning’s play was staged in the old chapel of the convent of St Mary on Rokin – one of the many former Catholic buildings that the city council had lent out to clubs and societies after Amsterdam had joined the Protestant revolt against Spain in 1578. Wim Hummelen has reconstructed this stage from images featured on title pages of seventeenth-century editions of White Lavender plays.

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2. I will refer to the judge with ‘Jephthah’ except for the titles of the plays.
(Abb. 1). It is immediately obvious that it provided opportunities for exuberant visuality, with several spaces that could be used as a town wall, as separate houses or as a palace, and with a platform at the top level. Parallel scenes could be staged also and there were possibilities for foregrounding and back grounding.

Given the biblical story, the father predictably plays a leading role in these tragedies. It is his error of judgement that forces him to make the moral choice whether or not to act upon his oath, and this, in turn, makes him the ideal tragic hero. But a play is more than a story, even a biblical one, and as a first comparison of de Koning’s and Vondel’s plays will show, the scope for visual representation is huge. De Koning gives his audience nearly the whole story as told in Judges 11, showing all the important moments: Jephthah’s election as commander of the Jewish troops, his oath, the encounter between father and daughter, her retirement in the mountains, the killing, and his grief. Vondel, on the other hand, presents only the last day of the events, the day the daughter dies. Jephthah’s vow and his homecoming are not shown on stage, and neither are the emotional crisis of the daughter nor Jephthah’s killing of her. What Vondel does show are the effects of her death on both parents. The two dramas literally present two different strategies of visuality, and they do so because they are based on different dramatic models. De Koning worked within the Senecan-Scaligerian

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tradition of loosely composed, wide-ranging and highly rhetorical scenes portraying good and bad conduct (the principle known as copia et varietas). In this tradition, telling and showing horrible events was a popular method of conveying moral judgments. Vondel was an Aristotelian: he emphasized the causality of plot and adhered to the unities of place, time and events. In the Aristotelian model, the emotional impact of fear and sorrow and their cathartic effect on the public were important in getting a play’s moral message across. The ultimate goal of both traditions was to show – and thus to uphold – morality. We will now discuss how de Koning and Vondel went about achieving this goal.


This illustration of the title page of de Koning’s *Iehpthah* is an important building block in Hummelen’s reconstruction of the White Lavender’s stage (Abb. 1). The façade at the back serves as a palace, with a guard on the wall announcing the arrival of Jephthah and his warriors. Jephthah shrinks in dismay and tears his cloak as his daughter welcomes him. She is accompanied by a group of cheerful female friends. Father and daughter are leaders of their respective groups who now oppose each other. Who will prove the stronger?

First the underdog. The girl, who has no name in the Bible, is called Miria by de Koning. As one of the two central characters in this Senecan-Scaligerian play, she is given a large role. De Koning portrays her as a wise and virtuous young woman, who, with her mother dead and her father mostly away fighting, is left to
her own devices. Miria feels lonely and unhappy, her life has been dull since her mother died. She constantly worries about her father’s unbridled fierceness. She ponders her situation, alone and in conversations with her friends, but no matter how hard she tries to cheer up, she is weighed down by guilt. She wonders firstly, if she herself is to blame for her father’s hard-hearted ruthlessness and secondly, whether, if not she but he himself were responsible for his conduct, he might one day take too many risks. Meanwhile he does indeed put her life at stake, even though neither knows it yet. The father’s dark shadow hangs over the action of the first two of the play’s three acts. The scenes with Miria present a contrast between visibility and message, between what is seen and what is heard: the public ‘see’ Miria and her friends, but what they ‘hear’ involves the invisible but dominant father. In narratological terms: Miria focalizes and presents the public with her views, but the contents of the focalization directs their attention away from Miria and towards her father.Literal invisibility is negated by the spoken word: the visible Miria hides herself behind words, while her invisible father is revealed by these same words.

True to the Bible, Jephthah had allowed his daughter to retire to the mountains for two months to prepare herself for death. In this section of the play (the third and final act), de Koning devotes a great deal of attention to this part of the story in another sequence of monologues and dialogues featuring Miria. Alternately sad, afraid and rebellious, she is unsure whether her father or she herself is guilty of events. This is important because men’s general expectation of eternal life may be thwarted by personal guilt, and this frustrates her. She acknowledges that God has His own rules and that He demands our obedience, but the question of guilt keeps troubling her. In the middle of the night, when her friends are asleep and she is grieving over her fate, a wise shepherd passes. At his question whether God is worried about these kind of events and about people’s questions too, Miria suddenly realizes that everyone is responsible for their own actions and that it is up to God to decide whether or not to exercise mercy. So God could never be responsible for her actions or those of her father; all that concerns Him is whether or not to be merciful. This realization that another judgment will follow after her death, makes her decide to obey Jephthah. Ready to be sacrificed, she returns home.

In these scenes in the mountains the father’s shadow is less dominant than in the first two acts of the play. Miria remains the focalizer, yet the public’s attention is not drawn solely to the father but is divided among father and daughter. It is also important to note that she eventually reaches her own conclusions about the questions of people’s control over their own lives and their position in relation to God and that she acts upon them. Having gone beyond guilt, she now understands the human condition.

As expected, the father is highly visible, as he is on stage during much of the play. Like his daughter, we see him alone and with his peer group of fellow soldiers and counsellors. In the first two acts Jephthah mainly talks about himself, in dialogues about his strategies against the Ammonites and in monologues about his illegitimate birth. In narratological terms: the focalizer focalizes him-
self by reflecting upon himself. There is another element in the first two acts that puts the focus squarely on the father. In the scenes situated in the enemy (Ammonite) camp, the same technique of visualizing the invisible by means of focalization is used that we discussed in regard to Miria. The Ammonites talk a lot about the absent (and hence invisible) Jephthah.

At the end of the second act Jephthah makes his oath to God. When its consequences become apparent in the third act, Miria’s visibility increases at the expense of her father’s, and in addition to the scenes in the mountains, she gains presence in the scenes featuring Jephthah as well. Remarkably, he never doubts his guilt. He regards his oath as thoughtless, emotional and based on his fear of behaving in a way the Jewish people might damn as that of a bastard. But not keeping his oath would be an even greater sin. To Jephthah, the murder is the logical consequence of his oath, and it is only his oath that he asks forgiveness for, not the murder. But here, too, attention is diverted away from Jephthah in a manner not seen in the first two acts. The judge often mentions his daughter, uttering his grief about her impending death. His focalization makes her visible.

When we finally see father and daughter together again, the killing is at hand. Now the inevitable question arises who is the stronger of the two, especially in moral terms. The answer is ambiguous, because de Koning is ambiguous in his treatment of the father’s guilt. On the one hand, Miria is the clear moral winner. Visually, at least, she is a model of unbroken innocence, wearing a white dress to symbolize her virtue and virginity (l. 2282). Moreover, Jephthah shows himself a sad but determined killer, thus posing a dilemma for both the community on stage and the audience: should they approve of Jephthah or condemn him? The reactions that we have from seventeenth-century audiences are full of grief. The text indicates that the sacrifice should take place on stage, and we know that it was indeed shown, because Vondel and another Dutch poet, Gerbrand Bredero, wrote poems about it. The act was performed centre stage, at the back of the open chamber. A puppet was used, but it was done so realistically that the public cried – or at least the ladies did, according to Bredero. Vondel was equally struck with emotions: when Jephthah cut through the snow-white maiden throat and shed her blood like a river, all cried and died with her, and “the stones nearly burst” – to translate his Dutch literally. In the play’s focalization, too, the emphasis now shifts entirely to Miria. Without doubting the murder’s necessity, Jephthah discusses his sense of guilt solely in terms of its consequences for Mir-
ia, whose body he now has to kill: “That with my hands I must break this Image of God”. Miria encourages him to kill her and becomes the moral leader: she obeys her father and consciously takes the risk that he may be wrong. She knows that people are responsible for their own sins and that God will decide whether or not to forgive them. We can safely conclude that the dead, literally invisible Miria morally conquers the visible murderer and that the visible father gives away his leadership – that his visibility underlines the strength of her invisibility.

In order to make room for interpretations that take such largely neglected aspects of texts (e.g. the feminine) into account, Mieke Bal developed the concept of “countercoherence”. Such countercoherences do not provide a “correct” reading of the text, but instead offer alternative, often preferable, readings. 

De Koning, however, fails to draw the consequences of Miria’s moral victory. By withholding the social power that might enable her to survive, he creates a moral incoherence. At the end of the play he gives an ambiguous twist to the meaning of Jephthah’s actions: he absolves him of guilt by making his guilt invisible. In the closing chorus de Koning compares Jephthah with stadtholder William of Orange, the “father of the Fatherland” and famous leader of the Dutch revolt against Spain, who was killed in 1584. Like Jephthah, William was elected a war leader because the enemy’s actions (the Ammonites equal the Spanish troops) did not leave slavish Israel any choice but to fight. Not Jephthah but the Ammonites were thus unwise, an opinion that can be maintained because de Koning leaves Jephthah’s oath out of the comparison and thus renders it invisible. By glossing over Jephthah’s guilt, de Koning can retain his hero as a good leader, both morally and socially, in the mould of William of Orange. The daughter is left out of the comparison with the Dutch Revolt and is only held up as an example to young women, who owe obedience to their fathers. The play’s conclusion is silent about the daughter’s moral victory in order to enable the father to appear as the winner. His social power is stronger than her moral power. De Koning’s tragedy is incoherent and invites deconstruction, as do several others of his plays, particularly where he draws comparisons between his subject matter and the events of his day.

Nearly 45 years later, in 1659, Vondel took up the theme again in his Aristotelian drama Jeptha ofte Offerbeloofte (Jephthah or Sacrifice Promised). What light does focalization shed on his dealing with visuality and visibility?

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8 “Dat ick het Godlijck Beeld moet met mijn handen breken” (l. 2273).
Some references to de Koning’s text suggest that Vondel had not forgotten his friend’s play – he likely had a copy on his desk when he wrote his own version. His method of dramatic construction, however, was completely different. As we have said, Vondel followed the Aristotelian model, which was not interested in versatile rhetorical demonstrations of sin and virtue, but required the author to observe the dramatic unities by concentrating the play into a single plotline, a single day and a single place. Focusing on the father and how he handles his guilt, Vondel narrows the focalization almost exclusively to Jephthah. The daughter’s actions (as well as Jephthah’s illegitimacy) are buried much deeper into the text than in de Koning’s play, although they can be filtered out still.

Visually, the father is extremely dominant. Except in the first act, he is nearly always on stage. He mostly focalizes himself. Obviously, he occasionally mentions his daughter, but more important are his monologues and his discussions with others about the consequences of his oath for himself. Jephthah eventually decides that Ifis (as the daughter is named here) must die, a decision he condemns as soon as she is dead. Twice guilty, he leaves to do penance. Although the focus is primarily on visible Jephthah, the dead, and now invisible, daughter may again claim the moral victory, in the sense that she is not guilty of any crime and obeys God in meeting her father’s wish, while her father is disobedient to God in his self-willed fulfilling of the ill-considered oath.

The situation is similar to that in de Koning, and the few lines Vondel allots to Ifis reflect this similarity. Frans-Willem Korsten has shown that Ifis does not just cheerfully accept her father’s will. Vondel is brief but unambiguous about the subject: after a great deal of grief and lamentation (e.g. ll. 419-438, 468-473 and 1595), Ifis is ready, even eager, to die (l. 704). She longs for God’s peace (ll. 1423-1438) like the panting deer from Psalm 42 longs for water. Beyond fear of death now (l. 1491), she is pleased that she can help her father to fulfil his oath in God’s honour (e.g. ll. 405-418, 478, 696-704, 1557). She encourages him to follow Abraham, who obeyed God’s order to kill his son Isaac (ll. 1495-1498).
Only when it is too late does Jephthah realize that, as God never required him to make an oath, he never required him to keep it either.\textsuperscript{15}

It would seem that moral victory in Vondel’s \textit{Jeptha} goes against the focalization and is assigned by virtue of invisibility. Indeed, the father is the main subject of focalization, while the daughter, who is made almost invisible, is the moral winner and lives up to her name (Ifis means strength). But her strength would have to have been quite extraordinary to counterbalance the sheer size and weight of her father’s contribution. The invisible daughter is aided by her mother, whom the Bible had made invisible but who is made visible by Vondel. He gives her a speaking name, Filopaie (child’s friend), to show where her sympathies lie. She influences the choice of the moral winner in favour of her daughter. Filopaie appears in the first and last acts and, in addition to her own happiness (Act I) and grief (Act V), she focalizes both father and daughter. She is unaware of Jephthah’s oath and because Jephthah’s servant uses a ruse to send her away, she only discovers its consequences when it is too late. Finding her daughter reduced to a heap of cinders, she wants to murder the father (who has already left). After a furious tirade against her husband, she faints, and true to Aristotelian principles, she has sufficiently recovered her composure when she comes to that she can acquiesce in her daughter’s death and mourn for her.

Filopaie’s excessive behaviour is wrong in so far as she is a human being who (temporarily) loses her reason. That this irrationality does not detract from the moral message is because her husband’s conduct is even more reprehensible. Filopaie focalizes him and doubly condemns him. As in de Koning’s play, where the father’s guilt was glossed over in the comparison with William of Orange, there is a case of moral incoherence here: Filopaie is wrong, but her error serves to bring out the worse wrong committed by someone else. The moral incoherence in Vondel’s play is less glaring, because it is corrected within the play itself when Filopaie acknowledges her error.\textsuperscript{16} Vondel’s emphasis on Jephthah’s visibility and his narrowing of the focalization mean that the other characters are given smaller parts to play. This does not, however, affect the power of the invisible element par excellence – God’s will.

What does focalization tell us about the relation between visuality and moral and social power for these two tragedies? The first conclusion must be that focalization is used both to ‘visualize’ the social power of characters who are literally invisible, as de Koning does when he uses Miria to demonstrate her father’s

\textsuperscript{15} These situations are reminiscent of de Koning, but the common biblical framework and Vondel’s use of additional sources make any speculations about direct borrowings fruitless.

power, and to keep invisible characters invisible, as Vondel does by excluding virtually everyone but the highly visible Jephthah from the focalization and by limiting the role of the daughter. Yet visibility, or its opposite, does not in itself predict a character’s moral rightness or wrongness, because the balance between literal visibility and invisibility may shift (as between Miria and Jephthah), and because higher, non-human powers may transcend human characters’ physical presence or absence, as God does in these biblical tragedies. Both visible and invisible characters may invoke His power; the effect is strongest when dead, invisible, morally right characters do so, like Miria and Ifis. This power of the invisible God requires further exploration.

Seeing is feeling – Samson and Delilah

De Koning and Vondel each wrote a tragedy on the biblical judge Samson, in which God’s power is the central theme. In 1618 Koning finished his last play, Simsons Treur-spel (Samson’s Tragedy); Vondel published his Samson of Heilige Wraeck (Samson or Holy Revenge) in 1660, one year after Jeptha. An important element here is ‘sight’, both literal (as opposed to blindness) and psychological (insight and the lack of it). Wordplay is a useful tool for analysing such motifs, just as focalization proved a useful tool for analysing social power relations and moral norms. In our analysis, we will pay attention to various types of imagery: hyperbole (overstatement), understatement (weakening, mitigation), and synesthesia (i.e. the mixing of sensations; the response through several senses to the stimulation of one, for example as when sounds are perceived as being coloured).

The story of Samson (Judges 13-16) is well known: the Philistine woman Delilah manages to elicit from the Jewish judge Samson – her lover – the secret that his strength lies in his long hair. To enslave him, she orders a hairdresser to cut his curls. He is blinded and humiliated by the Philistines until God gives him back his strength, so that he may destroy the temple of the Philistines. The destruction kills 3,000 Philistines as well as the two former lovers.

Again, the story is interesting for its gender structure. Here there is no daughter or mother who, although morally right, fails to improve her own situation by standing up to the male order. Delilah is a free and independent adult woman who puts pressure on the entire social system and is forced to deal with the consequences of her claim to independence and freedom. Everybody hates

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and distrusts her, including her own people’s leaders and even her Jewish lover Samson. The Bible portrays Delilah as unsympathetic, and from a Christian point of view that is only to be expected. Not only was she an enemy of the Jews, she also deceived Samson in order to turn him away from God.

The plays repeat the focalization pattern familiar from the tragedies about Jephthah. De Koning has two main protagonists, who extensively discuss the conflicts their love affair gives rise to: loyalty and disloyalty to their lover, their country and their God(s). Samson and Delilah focalize both themselves and each other, as do the Philistine leaders, who discuss their own position and that of Samson and Delilah. Samson also keeps referring to divine power, something Delilah and the Philistines do to a lesser extent. But where Samson is full of confidence in his God, the others are much more doubtful. After Samson’s capture, about four fifths into the play, Delilah disappears from view entirely until the closing scene and the role of the Philistine leaders is also reduced. Samson’s role increases, and the focalization narrows to his sense of guilt and his relation to God. The closing scene shows the destruction of all when Samson pulls down the temple. This temple was probably some kind of tent constructed on the platform of The White Lavender’s stage (Abb. 1). The dying Samson asks God for forgiveness. The moral victor is no longer in any doubt: God.

Again, de Koning’s fullness of detail contrasts with Vondel’s concentration on the last 24 hours of Samson’s life. Delilah never appears on stage. Instead, Vondel has Samson briefly talking about her in a flashback. The only viewpoint the audience is presented with is his, and he portrays her as the incarnation of evil. Delilah is buried even deeper in the text than Ifis. As in Jeptha, Vondel uses the opportunity created by what the Bible leaves out to increase the female share of the action in the play: he comes up with two new Philistine women, who represent Philistine pride. But Samson has by far the biggest role. He hardly ever mentions Delilah herself, but emphasizes his failure to be the man of God he should have been. His reflections centre around his relation to God. This is also reflected in the scenes with the Philistines, who humiliate the blind Samson and mock God’s power. When Samson settles the score in the temple – not shown on stage in Vondel’s play but reported – there is, again, no doubt that God is the moral winner.

The moral conclusion of the two tragedies is similar but they differ in their treatment of visibility and invisibility. De Koning shows both sides of the conflict, whereas Vondel concentrates on the tragic hero. With Samson regaining his strength and destroying the temple, God’s moral power is much less invisible

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18 See also BAL, Death & Dissymmetry, e.g. p. 224–227; L. VAN GEMERT, Stand up for Your Right! Representations of Mothers and Daughters in Early Modern Dutch Literature, in: J. BLOEMENDAL/C. DAUVEN-KNIPPENBERG/R. GLITZ (eds.), Von Maria bis Madonna/From Mary to Madonna […]. In press.

19 By then the White Lavender had moved to Regulierspoort (HUMMELEN, Amsterdams toneel, p. 31–33), but the stage directions indicate that the stage set-up was unchanged.
than in the Jephthah plays. This sign is clearest in Vondel, as we will see. The plays’ effect is determined by literary imagery as much as focalization, and in this respect the two playwrights differ greatly as well. In my opinion, this is attributable to Vondel’s much greater psychological depth. His Samson undergoes a catharsis, a spiritual cleansing that his counterpart in de Koning never achieves.

A good example of the difference in language is the blinding of Samson, a moment that at last enables Philistine rage to be made tangible. The sheer horror of the scene makes it very hard to stage, and a single line from each of the two plays illustrates the difference between them. In de Koning’s play the blinding is shown on stage (with puppets) and the directions read as follows: “Spectacle scene: Samson, hands tied, is being blinded”. This is a straightforward description without reference to any emotional reactions from either Samson or the public. Vondel has Samson himself comment in a flashback that “the enemy did not forget to perforate my eyes” (l. 350). This severe understatement is characteristic of the imagery in Vondel’s play, as when the chorus of Jewish women adds to Samson’s flashback: “He suffered half of death when they perforated his eyes” (ll. 487–8). De Koning refers to the blinding only as a visual act and with regard to the power of seeing, which Vondel does not mention. Instead, he gives an instrumental view of the method used to blind Samson: perforation. Furthermore, the act of perforating is linked directly to the pain it causes, which is not mentioned directly but indirectly in the (again severe) understatement “suffer half of death”. Hearing becomes seeing becomes physical feeling here, and the senses and are synesthetically mixed. That process is immediately being followed by emotional feelings too.

This is also the reason the blinding has inspired so few paintings. The reactions to Rembrandt’s famous The Blinding of Samson (1636) clearly show that the spectators felt hurt. Rembrandt probably gave the painting to the writer and diplomat Constantijn Huygens. See G. SCHWARTZ, Rembrandt, zijn leven, zijn schilderijen, Maarssen 1984, p. 178, and G.J.M. WEBER, Rembrandt im Kontrast. Die Blendung Simsons und Der Segen Jakobs, Kassel/München 2005, p. 43-58.
A closer look at the treatment of violence and pain reveals many instances of Vondel’s more nuanced psychology. De Koning’s text is hyperbolic, with a great deal of physical violence that is always shown in extenso. All parties mention Samson’s acts of violence and his lack of mercy. The events referred to are described in the book of Judges: Samson’s killing of a lion and the riddle Samson devises about this killing, followed by the killing of the guests at Samson’s wedding. When his father-in-law then breaks off the marriage, Samson catches 300 foxes, puts torches on their tails then lets them loose to run all over the wheat fields of the Philistines. When the Philistines try to catch him, he kills 1,000 of them with the jawbone of an ass. When these acts are first reported on stage, they move the audience, but they are told many times over, and this repetition of endless violence results in numbness. At a certain point, the audience no longer feels the violence. The same is true of the violence involved in the Philistine attempts to capture Samson, which is not reported, but shown on stage. They must find a way to capture and hold him, and they prove as inventive as they are cruel. They tie him up with seven ropes made from young trees, but of course he breaks loose. Because of Samson’s strength and rage, Philistine cruelty is long only seen, but not felt by the public. That changes when Samson is victimized. The Philistine leaders then show the lengths they are prepared to go to. They debate Samson’s punishment: chop off his hands, skin him or blind him? At this point feeling cannot be avoided any longer, but it is evoked with the unsophisticated bluntness of the direct description: Samson, being blinded…

De Koning portrays the psychology of the violence as elaborately as its visual and audible aspects, and in an equally superficial manner. Here too, the appeal to the emotions is replaced by a numbness induced by repetition and hyperbolic exaggeration. “Vengeance eats my heart out”, Delilah says, and the same goes for Samson. They cannot bridge the chasm between their erotic feelings and the animosity existing between their peoples, nor can Samson square his feelings with his duties as a man of God. After he has been blinded, he is fully aware of his guilt towards God, but that does not change his feelings about the Philistines. He continues to hate them and seek revenge in the same way he did when he was still in power. Although the chorus compares him with Christ several times, he shows no trace of the ‘soft’ powers of love that will drive the Redeemer. Samson’s revenge is entirely driven by hatred.

In summary, there are three important factors in de Koning’s Simson. The first is the visible lonely man of God struggling against his cruel enemies. In this struggle, Delilah’s influence and her feelings are shown too, but her role is eventually subordinated to Samson’s. The second is the fact that visibility is constantly associated with a single invisible power, God, who in the end is the clear moral victor. The third is that, despite the unambiguous representation and the clear moral message about God’s truth, the play fails to move the public deeply, be-

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21 “De wraeck-lust knaechnt en mordt mijn hart” (l. 1012).
cause Samson acts out of hate. No synesthesia is produced, because De Koning’s hyperbolic language was always too blunt an instrument to connect hearing, seeing and feeling in a convincing manner.

Unlike de Koning’s hammer-like hyperbole, Vondel’s understatements cut deep. He makes effective use of mitigation, for example to allude to Samson’s atrocities against the Philistines and the suffering these have caused, or to the Philistines brutality towards the imprisoned Samson, whom they treat like a dog and beat black and blue. Vondel uses violence to achieve catharsis, but only for Samson: the Philistines never achieve this kind of self-knowledge. Samson develops from a raging bull into a psychologically mature man, a sinner who understands his guilt and knows he will have to suffer the endless physical and mental blows of the Philistines as a logical punishment for his past behaviour. Vondel focuses fully on the process of purification taking place inside Samson, but only the public know it. Samson complains to everyone – his guard, the Philistine queen and the chorus of Jewish women – that he is sick, that his flesh is rotting and that he longs to die, hoping it will be a ‘short’ death. He pretends to be a broken man in order to make everyone believe he is too weak to live much longer. Meanwhile an angel has told him that he has a mission to accomplish,

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23  The chorus of Jewish women states this explicitly, l. 1007–1012.
and the tension grows while he prepares himself to perform it. The public are constantly aware of the relation between the visible Samson, the things he has in his mind – which they ‘see’ (know) but the Philistines do not – and Samson’s trust in the power of the invisible God. One of the climaxes of visualisation is Samson’s prediction that he will put his thumbs in his empty eye sockets to awaken God’s revenge. The effect of this scene can be compared to the effect of looking at the blinding: it is the synesthetic connection of physical feelings (the pain from the wounds in the eye sockets) and moral feelings (guilt and holy victory). Seeing is feeling in a very pregnant way here.

So the public know that in spite of his horrible appearance Samson still has power, and his unbroken strength increasingly shows through. Unlike de Kon- ing’s Samson, Vondel’s seeks no revenge out of hatred but out of love, as this is what his purification means: a turn from hatred to love. It involves a complete change of values and is indicated by clear parallels between Samson and Christ. The public witness the transformation from a mere human person to a divinely inspired one when Samson – rehearsing for the play he must perform at the Philistine feast – comes out, dressed up like a prince. I translate literally from Vondel now:

“He foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth and roars. Eye sockets brooding on revenge and cruelty, his wrath blazes up. He shakes his head; he kicks and stamps and cannot speak. The lion tamer does not resemble himself.”

The last words refer to the killing of the lion described in the book of Judges and signify Samson’s transformation from lion tamer to lion – the lion that is going to die and provide sweetness to others, as the riddle in Judges predicted. Later, the messenger reporting the destruction of the temple also mentions the blind king who expressed the spirit of a god and resembled the proud, fiercely roaring lion (ll. 1575–1583). The strong lion (Christ) dies and provides sweetness (man’s redemption). After the messenger’s report, Samson’s birth angel Fadael confirms in so many words that Samson foreshadows Christ, who will conquer death for ever (ll. 1675–1679).

The guilt of Vondel’s Samson did not block other processes but opened him up to them: his knowledge and acceptance of his sins gave him insight into the true nature of things. His purification has turned his pain into a sweet pain and ensured that he did not die in hate but in love. That the public do not just see but feel this, is owing to Vondel’s effective use of understatement and synesthesia. And because the public feel this deeper insight, they can look deeper too and see the truth of God. Thanks to Samson’s transformation, God is no longer invisible.

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General developments in Dutch seventeenth-century society may help to explain the different levels of psychological nuance in de Koning and Vondel. In the Republic, as elsewhere in Renaissance Europe, interest in the human psyche grew, as is evident from for instance Descartes’ philosophical discourses and the medical treatises of Johan van Beverwijck. John Exalto has pointed out that the Samson depicted in Pieter Schut’s illustrated Bible of 1659 has no superhuman proportions (Abb. 3–5). In that light, I consider Schut’s etchings and Vondel’s characters as signs of the artists’ awareness that the ‘greatness’ of the persons they portrayed was the outcome of internal, psychological developments which could be shown by subtle visual and linguistic signs.


Conclusion

In this analysis of the politics of visuality in seventeenth-century Dutch drama I have employed a number of analytical tools, such as focalization, gender, and aspects of imagery like hyperbole, understatement and synesthesia. Focalization reveals a great deal about manipulation of both visibility and invisibility, and of the share of attention given to men and women as part of the gender pattern. Hyperbole, understatement and synesthesia are indicators of how the public may have perceived appeals to visuality.

The analysis has also brought to the fore some problems of coherence in social and moral power. Although Jephthah’s daughter gains moral power over her father, she does not win the social power that would give her a chance to survive. This problem is partly solved by the greater moral power of the invisible God, which exceeds all human power. Neither de Koning nor Vondel questions this power, they restrict themselves to manipulating human society here on earth. De Koning restores Jephthah’s authority by making his errors invisible; Vondel does place the moral guilt squarely on Jephthah’s shoulders, but absolves him by making him atone for his sins. The social power relations are a little more complex in the case of Samson and Delilah. Here, too, God is the moral victor, and Samson atones for his sins. But unlike Jephthah’s daughter, Delilah is never given the chance to gain the moral victory, even though she exposes Samson’s weakness. She is despised and distrusted by her own people and the Jews, because, as an independent woman, she can break out of the traditional social structures requiring women to obey and seize power unto herself. De Koning shows this threat and defuses it by explicitly staging the danger Delilah represents. Vondel achieves the same result by not making her appear at all and having her depicted as the very devil. God’s moral power is used to save the traditional structure of social power within the human community.