

Introduction

The six texts presented in the collection of which this is Volume One, in the original Dutch and in a modern English translation, are a sample of a very large number of Rhetoricians plays, as many as six hundred, which survive from the vigorous theatrical culture of the Low Countries in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Our principal aim is to make them more widely accessible to scholars working in the field of medieval drama, especially as the corpus is virtually unknown to more than a small group of specialists. It is hoped that they will also attract the attention of directors and performers who wish to explore the theatricality of these plays by stimulating the response of live audiences today.

The plays have been chosen to represent a variety of topics, though they have many features in common in terms of presentation as well as dramatic characteristics and conception. *Mars and Venus* and the two versions of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, one from a Haarlem and one from an Antwerp collection, have their origins in the classical heritage which was mediated partly through medieval and partly through Renaissance channels. The other three plays, presented in this volume, have origins in Scripture: the story of *Susanna* comes from the Apocrypha, *The Temptation of Our Lord* is part of the narrative of Christ's Ministry in the New Testament, and the play of *The Five Wise and Five Foolish Virgins* is a parable from his teaching. But these subjects from traditional sources, appearing as they do in many different guises in the drama of medieval Europe, also have applications to aspects of cultural and social importance in the period when they were written. It is therefore important to note that the Rhetoricians' drama, for all its vivid and resourceful theatricality, was as much a political and religious weapon as it was a form of entertainment. Of the six plays included here, *The Temptation* is the most politically alert in that it vilifies the persecution of heretics and the demagogical involvement of Franciscan preaching. The strength of feeling is so marked that it induces the playwright into a long excursus which in fact has very little connection with the traditional biblical narrative and the Sinnekens' schemes against Satan (lines 149–295).

SIX RHETORICIANS PLAYS

Within the Rhetoricians' Chambers there was a culture of performance, itself closely related to and sustained by competitions held frequently in many towns and cities over many years, and this may account for conventions which are discernible in the way these plays were written and performed. Such competitions formulated a theme to which the plays were to be related, and their success was judged by their understanding and application of it. No doubt these circumstances encouraged virtuosity in language and in theatrical skills, and there are moments in the plays where elaboration of language, or the application of ideas are presented in such a way as to attract approval and admiration, and establish superiority over rivals. In other words there is an element of self-display here. The prizes awarded recognised achievements in many such technical aspects of the productions.

The plays were created over a long period containing many social and political changes: it was, after all, a time which saw the development of Protestant beliefs as well the Catholic reaction to them. In the Low Countries this was accompanied by great social pressures which led writers to use the plays as a means of dissent, as well as engendering a measure of repression of what might be considered politically dangerous or heretical. The polarisation of such views led to hostilities from 1520 onwards. Thus the playwrights, working in a fragmented political situation and often having regard to particular local circumstances in changing times, had to be circumspect. But even so, the drama, with the many indirect techniques at its disposal and its inherent potential for ambivalence, was an effective, and, to many, an attractive way of commenting upon contemporary circumstances and of bringing pressure to bear.

Of the six plays we have chosen, the three of classical origin (published in Volume Two) have legendary human or divine characters. Of the Biblical plays in this volume, in *Susanna* the cast consists entirely of human characters. In *The Temptation* the participants are supernatural: Christ and Satan. The play of *The Five Wise and Five Foolish Virgins*, however, contains abstract characters, and as each of the ten Virgins is given the name of a vice or virtue, the mode of this play is allegorical, and it makes use of a very large cast. However, in all the other plays included here, and indeed in a high proportion of the larger corpus of Rhetoricians plays, the action is commented upon and often inspired by the Sinnekens, destructive allegorical beings whose existence and functions are determined by the evil characteristics that they embody. Much about them is malignant and negative, and a good deal of the stage time is taken up by

their not entirely cordial exchanges between themselves (there are usually two in each play) or with the characters they are seeking to undermine. Much ingenuity is expended by the playwrights in making the evil aspects of the Sinnekens appropriate to the action of the plays, and in drawing specific attention to this application. Thus the two in *Mars and Venus*, a play devoted to the perpetration of adultery, are called Love's Thoughts and Eyes' Delight, and they participate vigorously in the growth of love, or lust, between the two protagonists and they make much of its unfortunate, even ridiculous consequences. Their interest in ridicule is also found in the mockery of the incompetent Satan in *The Temptation*, and in the pitiless exposure and execution of Sedechias and Achas, the wicked and lustful elders in *Susanna*. They are not necessarily on stage all the time, but there are long periods when they do observe the action from hiding places, before emerging to make destructive comment. They are often used to explain or intensify the action on the stage, as in the Antwerp *Pyramus and Thisbe*, where they describe how the lion appears and tears the mantle of Thisbe. In *Mars and Venus* they carry out a remarkable *coup de théâtre* in their running commentary upon the lovemaking, which the audience cannot see. In short their existence may be predicated upon the conceptual requirements of allegory or of interpretative strategies, but their presence and functions are essentially theatrical.

In spite of their serious religious and moral subject-matter these plays are often comic, partly through the operations of the Sinnekens, but also because the folly of the characters is to be made apparent. Thus the Foolish Virgins have a social occasion for eating waffles where over elaborate 'good' manners are brought into question. The emerging lust of the elders in *Susanna* as they gradually admit their feelings to one another could be a further example. In the Antwerp *Pyramus and Thisbe* the Sinnekens are frightened by the lioness, and sometimes they quarrel among themselves as in *The Temptation*.

But in contrast, there are moments when the emotional tension is high, especially where Susanna finds herself more and more isolated as even her husband rejects her, and she finds herself imprisoned. Her only recourse is an eloquent plea for God's help. A great deal of dramatic tension is engendered when the young Daniel is able to expose the guilt of the wicked elders by isolating them and forcing them to reveal their guilt by the inconsistency of their accounts of Susanna's alleged lechery. This highly theatrical moment is derived from the source-material in the account in the Apocrypha. The climax of *The Five Wise and Five Foolish*

SIX RHETORICIANS PLAYS

Virgins is enhanced by liturgical music and a somewhat ritualistic mode of presentation, which is none the less spectacular and argues a rich theatrical imagination. The two plays of *Pyramus and Thisbe* bring out the emotional suffering of the lovers, especially in the Antwerp version, where we see the lonely predicament of Thisbe, denied contact with Pyramus on the instructions of her mother and watched by the Maid. In this play there is a notable attempt to bring out psychological tension, not only in the lovers, but also in their parents. One particular feature of the two versions of *Pyramus and Thisbe* deserves special comment. Though it is rather more limited in the Haarlem version, they both offer an allegorical interpretation of a type which was widespread in the middle ages. The Antwerp version identifies Pyramus as the Son of God and Thisbe as a devout soul, separated by the wall, which stands for the sin of Adam. In an explicit passage in the dialogue by the parents of the lovers, the death of Pyramus under the mulberry tree is identified as the Crucifixion, and the death of Thisbe is interpreted as her being pierced by Christ's Passion. The Haarlem play introduces a character called Poetic Spirit who develops a similar allegory centring on Christ's love for mankind. In this case Thisbe's shawl stained with blood is made to represent the stained human soul. Such interpretations, as well as many other scriptural references in the plays, remind us of the importance of religion in the functioning of the Rhetoricians' Chambers.

These passages give rise to emotional language and to formal aspects of the verse which were undoubtedly part of the skills embodied in Rhetoricians plays. The plays we have chosen show considerable prosodic variation, often in relation to changing moods or actions, especially in *Mars and Venus* where we have had some editorial difficulty in establishing the structure of the stanzas because of the close interlinking of the rhyme patterns. One particular feature is the rondeaux, usually in eight-line units, as in the first lines by the Sinnekens on the subject of burgeoning spring, at the beginning of the Haarlem *Pyramus and Thisbe*. They are often used at moments of high tension to create and emphasise by repetition and patterned expression the intense feelings of the characters. They are also used to underline moments of success by the Sinnekens. Another recurring feature is the use of *Pauses* which are marked in the text and which it may be supposed were musical moments marking a change of mood or direction in the action. This feature is not unique to the Rhetoricians plays: it is a prominent feature of the French Passions.

The method of staging must have varied considerably in such a large corpus. The sixteenth-century works of Breughel, for example, show how small booth stages with a raised platform and backed by a curtain with a withdrawal space behind, were used at fairs. Usually the audience would stand in clusters in front of the stage. Though it is not apparent that it was necessarily the regular form for productions by Rhetoricians, there is some evidence that a multi-centred stage was used on certain occasions (see the cover illustration, based on a set created for the 1561 Antwerp Landjuweel). The audience would see before them a series of small curtained areas which could be brought in to play by drawing back their individual curtains. Sometimes there was also an upper curtained area over the centre of these. In front and across them was a broader area which could be used for movement across the whole acting space. This arrangement had the advantage of controlling the way the audience would attend to different parts of the spectacle before them.

Given such a layout, a number of theatrical facilities are apparent. The upper stage offers a vertical dimension where supernatural incidents could be shown, as for example the discussion by the goddesses who begin *Mars and Venus*. The love scene, as presented in the production by Femke Kramer in Groningen in 1991, could take place behind one of the closed curtains on the lower level, the Sinnekens being able to see it and report its progress from above or from the side. Individual episodes in the plays could be confined to one of the lower sections, as for the imprisonment of Susanna, or for the council house to which her husband retires to sit in court. It would seem that Daniel's manipulation of Sedechias and Ahas could also have made use of the individual spaces to isolate them as required by the text. They also have individual 'houses', and they are taken to a place of execution: Susanna has a bower, and her husband goes into a courthouse. In *The Temptation Satan*, following the plot in Scripture, approaches Christ three times, and before and after these he consults with the Sinnekens, who are acting as his mentors, and indeed tormentors. Though we cannot be certain, it would seem that this could be accommodated by having Christ in one section, and the Sinnekens in a separate space some distance away so that Satan can be seen moving to and fro in various states of anxiety. In this play there is also the temptation upon the mountain, which might well have been staged by having Satan conduct Christ to the higher space noticed above. In *The Five Wise and Five Foolish Virgins* there is a prolonged attempt at spectacular use of staging effects, as can be seen by the complex stage

SIX RHETORICIANS PLAYS

direction after line 502. Here it is clear that the Bridegroom goes to heaven, accompanied by angels, and the Wise Maidens are brought before him to receive their rings. At the end the heaven is to be closed and hell is opened up to show Lucifer's counterplot. Then the Foolish Virgins come out and knock at the gate of heaven, and when that is unsuccessful they are welcomed into hell by Lucifer. These brief indications about staging suggest that the plays embody a rich and varied theatricality and that they were written with conscious attention to staging. Though the moral, religious and political issues in them are salient, the audiences and those who promoted the competitions obviously expected a high level of entertainment.

Editorial Procedure

We have taken a conservative approach to the texts in Dutch, and have kept close to the established modern editions which we have chosen as copy texts. However, the punctuation has been revised, and the layout has been standardised. In accordance with this, lists of characters have been added for all the plays. The incidence of stage directions varies in the individual texts. We have preserved all those in the early editions and added some in square brackets where they seemed essential. However, the action of the plays is continuous and we have sought to sustain this.

We have changed the line numbering in *Mars and Venus*, *The Temptation*, and *Susanna*, chiefly because we have re-interpreted the prosody. In the case of the former we have adopted a different scheme for divisions between the stanzas as the originals do not make this entirely consistent.