VONDEL'S *JEPHTHA*: A CLASSIC REVISITED

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IN HER BOOK *TEXTS OF TERROR*, PHYLLIS TRIBLE memorializes four Old Testament women whose lives came to an end by the violence of men, and whose voices have gone unheard. These women are Hagar, Tamar, the unnamed concubine of Judges 19, and the daughter of Jephtha. With respect to Jephtha's daughter, Prof. Trible challenges the patriarchal hermeneutics which has made Jephtha the hero of the episode involving his rash vow, while neglecting the victim, Jephtha's daughter, who dies prematurely, violently and heirless. Prof. Trible corrects this oversight, forcing us to dwell on the courageous daughter, "an inhuman sacrifice" of a foolish father. She closes her discourse by adapting the lament of David for Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1: 19-27) to fit the case of this maiden; the changes required for this lament are minimal, and the results are surprisingly apt (108-109).

The Dutch poet Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679) was sufficiently moved by this story to make it the subject of one of his plays. It was, we are told, his favourite. It may be productive to examine how a playwright treats this Biblical material, requiring judgments about both father and daughter, in the context of Renaissance religious faith and dramatic conventions. Regrettably, the play was not accessible to Prof. Trible; had it been, she would have been pleased to learn that she is not the first to give voice to Jephtha's daughter: Vondel gives her 236 lines, or 12% of the play, exclusive of the Chorus. Nor is she the first to question whether Jephtha, despite his military prowess in behalf of his nation, deserves the unqualified regard which designates him as a national hero.

Though this essay — basically an introduction to the play and an appreciation for Vondel's achievement — possesses its own organization, it may be useful for the reader to bear in mind Vondel's remarkable anticipation of Prof. Trible's appraisal of these two characters in the discussion which follows.

Vondel offers us a splendid example of a European playwright, a Renaissance man who appropriated the aesthetic conventions and the deep wisdom of the classical tragedians, but who in important ways went beyond them. He immersed himself in classical culture and translated a number of Greek tragedies himself, as well as Virgil's *Aeneid*. In his own works he acknowledged as veritable laws of nature the aesthetic principles which he found in Aristotle's *Poetics* and which he saw as operating in the plays of the Greeks and in the writings of such literary theorists as Horace and the neo-classicist Scaliger. Living within the pale of the gospel and benefitting from early religious training and the example of devout parents, Vondel embraced the Christian faith in both its simplicity and profundity. But he learned his dramatic principles from the classicists. It is legitimate to infer from the many passages and situations which he adapted from Greek plays his belief that classical wisdom adumbrates Biblical wisdom and Christian truth. It is important to point out, however, that he did not simply borrow: he advertised his Greek

sources, enhancing them by skillfully weaving key motifs into his own work, all the while reaching for wisdom beyond the reach of even the most profound tragedians,

The basic narrative of Jephtha is found in the Book of Judges, Chapters eleven and twelve. It may be helpful, however, to have Vondel's arrangement in mind prior to an examination of the play. As the play begins, the sun is rising in all its splendour, arousing prospects for a most gratifying day. Everything is teeming with activity. The Israelite community is exuberant, for Jephtha has conquered the Ammonites and the Ephraimites, and the land is on the verge of an era of peace and prosperity. This is also the day Jephtha's daughter, Ifis, is to return with her companions from the hills, where they have been on a retreat to mourn the fate about to befall her. Philopaie, Jephtha's wife, is so excited at the prospect of seeing her daughter again that the major domo ("Hofmeester") must warn her that those who cannot curb their happiness risk disappointment. He also warns Philopaie that her description of her daughter as a beautiful budding flower is dangerous, for the beauty of a flower is only transitory.[1] Philopaie does not know fully what awaits her daughter when she does return. Jephtha's men, carefully coached, tell Philopaie of her husband's wish that she go to Shiloh to offer thanksgiving for the nation's victory. Reluctantly, and not without some suspicion, she consents, and so she is out of the way for what needs to be done.

When Ifis arrives, with her singing companions, and is told that her mother has gone to Shiloh, she becomes suspicious and threatens to return to the hills. But the major domo persuades her to stay. Though her mother is not there, her father will be along shortly. Jephtha, a broken man because of his oath that he would sacrifice to God the first creature that came through the portal as he approached his house, tries to explain to whoever will listen why he made the vow, and why he must now follow through with his "onbeschaefden eedt" (line 1404). There follows a series of extensive dialogues between Jephtha, the major domo, the high priest, and the doctors of law, who dispute with him his resolve to sacrifice his daughter. An offering is one thing, child murder is another, and has been expressly forbidden. "Uw yveren was loflijck, maer gemengt/ Met overstant" (Your intention was laudable, but mixed with foolishness). Jephtha displays his tragic flaw: he is arrogant, full of hubris: he places himself above those charged with interpreting the law: "Mijn heilige eedt is my een wet geworden" (My holy oath has become my law). And though the doctor of law commands him, "Gy zult niet doon," and shows Jephtha the proper way to fulfill his pledge, Jephtha insists that God will have nothing less than his daughter in satisfaction of his reckless pledge. It is an unwarranted scrupulosity, an excessive zeal that drives him to this fanaticism. We as spectators watch with horror and a sense of sickening inevitability as we witness the encroaching disaster. Ifis is sterling. Her expressions of love and loyalty are heart-wrenching; she accepts her fate willingly. It is, after all, a requirement that the sacrificial victim, even an animal, must go to its death voluntarily, must not be forced: "Laet rollen 't Hooft," she says, "de ziel blijft onverdorven (Let the head roll, the soul remains unbesmirched).

After the deed is done — reported, not shown — Jephtha reverses himself completely. He is as broken now as he was arrogant before. His wailings of remorse pierce the sky. He is sent to Shiloh to learn what might be God's will in these circumstances.

Philopaie returns, but too late to see her daughter alive. In a highly operatic scene, she calls for armed resistance against her husband and threatens revenge.[2] The officers calm her down, and she positions herself for an all-night vigil at the coffin of her daughter. The High Priest offers the slight comfort that, though God could have chosen to stay Jephtha's hand, as he did Abraham's, he chose not to do so, so that all people might learn to be on guard against reckless promises. Though much remains to be resolved, we get at least the promise of a new beginning; and the tradition of an annual mourning for Ifis is established. The concluding lines of the play read: "Jaer in, jaer uit, vier dagen lang met druck, / Zoo groot een troost verzachte uw ongeluck" (Year in, year out, four days of ceremonies / So may great solace mitigate your [Philopaie's] disaster.

So far the narrative structure; but the action transpires in a rich medium of extensive and penetrating discourse about man's lot, about his obligations, about mutability — the great Renaissance anxiety. The play is replete, too, with lovely passages, heart-breaking lamentations, and set descriptive passages, especially the accounts of battles against the "onbesnedenen," the uncircumcised Ammonites, which lend the play epic grandeur and scope.

Northrop Frye's ideas about context can guide us as we try to achieve a broader view of the play than the above summary provides. No work, Frye reminds us, exists in a vacuum, but is part of a network of other literatures. Literature for Frye is a series of variations on archetypal themes, movements along a line of basic narrative structure. The topics discussed below constitute at least a part of the complex of aesthetic decisions Vondel had to make.

First, let us look at textual critics and scholars of the Old Testament to place the Book of Judges in the scriptural canon. Where does the Book of Judges fit into that canon and in Old Testament history? And how does Jephtha fit into the group of leaders described in that book? Is he a judge or a deliverer, or both? A second problem deals with his inclusion in the roster of heroes of faith catalogued in Hebrews 11 — a point not lost on Prof. Trible. A third problem, a major one, relates to the issue of Jephtha's intent in making the vow. What does the Biblical narrator intend to say in his ambiguous phrasing "And Jephtha did unto her according to his vow"? Did he intend to say that Jephtha actually lifted his daughter to the sacrificial altar and, as protocol called for, first beheaded her at the neck, then slit her throat to catch the blood? One finds two camps here, the sacrificialists and the non-sacrificialists. In this matter David Marcus provides able assistance. After summarizing the arguments for both sides, he concludes that Jephtha meant all the time to consecrate a person, rather than an animal, to the Lord, and that the regrettable occurrence is that the wrong person came out of the door — his daughter rather than a slave or maybe a captive, whom he would then have placed in God's service in a direct way. Vondel belongs to the sacrificialists. He did not have the benefit of later Rabbinical wisdom and the alternative opinion that the daughter's sacrifice was her destiny to live celibate, to live and die a virgin and, therefore, childless.

The fourth preliminary issue is the very contemporary one with which this essay began: a feminist reading of the Biblical narrative. As already indicated, Prof. Trible treats the women she discusses, including Jephtha's daughter, as examples of shameless

exploitation by males, and analyzes the stories aggressively from a woman's point of view. In the same spirit, Eric Segal, in his latest novel, *Acts of Faith*, has a character observe that Hebrew wives traditionally have identified themselves with Jephtha's daughter: she is nameless, and is not heard from again in all of the Scripture.

A fourth possible topic. What would a deconstructionist make of Vondel's dramatic structure and glowing lines? What would this school of interpretation do, in its search for that "ceaseless motion of positing and effacing" to which it is committed? In my judgment Vondel has anticipated a deconstructionist analysis by having his own characters debate the issues at stake; positions are advanced, confuted, amplified, contradicted and reasserted. We need no help from Derrida to appropriate the richness and deep meaning of the work.

Let us return now to the play, and my thesis that Vondel, having learned all that Aristotle and the Greek dramatists had to teach him, raised the discourse to a new level by placing it in the context of Biblical redemptive history.

What did Vondel learn from the Greeks, both by precept and example? From Aristotle's *Poetics*, often repeated in Horace, he concurred in such strategies as the importance of the plot, the proper arrangement of beginning, middle and end, a sequence of events organically related to each other in a cause-and-effect relationship. Disturbances are introduced into the status quo which must be resolved during the course of the play. Again, the play observes the unities — Aristotle's prescription that the play transpires within one revolution of the sun, and that the action must be single, not multiple. He also adopted the neo-classical extension that the play should have a single setting: unity of place. By adhering to these, Vondel derived the compression and tension which one achieves by yielding to such restrictions. His decision here, of course, requires a great deal of flashback, including his having to have Jephtha report his first dramatic confrontation with his daughter, instead of exhibiting it first-hand. Did he pay too high a price for his conformity to the unity of time? Vondel criticized Buchanan for working with a two-month timespan, and set out to yield to Aristotle's prescription. Jephtha's recital of that experience nevertheless remains powerful and dramatic.

Again, Aristotle calls for strong characterization, though the characters should be typical, representative rather than strongly individualistic. Vondel masterfully rounds out the Biblical data in his portrayal of especially Philopaie, Jephtha, and his daughter, though the High Priest and the doctors of law are well drawn also. And Jephtha perfectly fits the definition of a tragic hero. Aristotle had defined such a person very carefully: he must be neither a paragon of virtue nor a brute, but a man somewhere in between, a man basically good but prone to do harm if certain conditions occur. The tragic flaw I have already described — the undue scrupulosity about keeping the letter of the law without having understood its spirit. Aristotle also calls for a catharsis, purging of emotions, however one may wish to construe this, through excitation of pity and fear. Poetry there is in abundance, not Vondel's earlier alexandrines, nor the classical hexameter line suitable for the Greek language, but the 10- and 11-syllable pentameter lines, cast in rhymed couplets. Vondel also employs the definition of virtue as the Golden Mean, a pattern of conduct defined as flowing between two extremes. This motif emerges especially in the major domo's

tempering Philopaie's exuberance and unrestrained joy. Vondel might nevertheless have difficulty relating this concept of the *via media* to Biblical wisdom on the subject of virtue.

But those prescriptions of Aristotle, important as they are, represent only the beginning of what Vondel learned from the Greeks. From the dramatists themselves he observed and practised numerous other aesthetic conventions. They almost always enhance the play. Dramatic irony is there in abundance, notably in what the rising sun promises and what in fact transpires during the day. Again, Vondel relies heavily on the Chorus, Ifis' maidenly companions, wise beyond their years and providing some of the deepest insights into the situation. One of their songs, for example, raises Ifis to a point superior to Isaac (always in the background of the play), because Ifis, unlike Isaac, chose death over life by volunteering to be a sacrifice. For his Chorus Vondel uses the antiphonal structure, the "Zang" or strophe, and "Tegenzang" or antistrophe. We also encounter the prescribed tensions between necessity or fate, and free will; each is given its due, though the debate seems also to take on the colouring of theological discussions current in Vondel's time. The formula that wisdom comes through suffering, so powerfully exhibited in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, is richly acknowledged. Consider also the need for a prophet, to contend with the protagonist. The "Hofpriester" (High Priest) and the "Wetgeleerde" (Doctor of Law) serve this purpose admirably. Again, Greek drama is almost always concerned, even in family tragedies, with the *polis*, the larger national community. Similarly, Vondel does not let us forget for very long that in the seething action and the passionate discourses the community's well-being is at stake. And as in Greek drama, the violent actions are reported, not enacted on stage, a tribute to decorum and the power of restraint.

As in many Greek dramas, the suppression of women and the various forms of oppression imposed on them, lead to explosive situations. Creon, in *Antigone*, says "While I live, no woman shall rule me." *Iphigenia in Aulus* and *Antigone* by Sophocles, *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, and *Elektra* by Euripides — the most important plays Vondel had open before him — similarly describe incendiary situations resulting from the high-handed way in which men treat women. Ifis puts the matter thus: "Ick hoor zijn spraeck, gelijck een engels stem. / Als vader spreeckt, wat heeft een kint te zeggen?" (I hear his voice as if it were that of an angel. When a father speaks, what is there for a child to reply?" (lines 502-3). And Philopaie complains that though she has had a part in bringing Ifis into the world, her husband determines her daughter's fate.

The Greek masters would have been pleased at the aptness of their seventeenth-century pupil Vondel. But their wisdom did not ultimately suffice for this poet, who felt that Nature needs the addition of Grace. Thus, he supplemented, supplanted and transformed the classical vision with the Biblical ethos, so that the final impression differs substantially from that of the Greek works. Though he moved from Protestantism to Catholicism, and for understandable reasons, Vondel never deviated from his subjection to the Scriptures which he had been taught from youth on. He also had ready access, as part of his milieu, to the medieval dramatic tradition — the liturgical, mystery and morality plays which taught medieval people the Biblical plan of redemption.

In Vondel's hands, the episode related in *Jephtha* does not come off as an isolated incident of ancient history. To be sure, Greek dramas usually showed a continuity between

generations, families, dynasties as well a deities from one to the other. But Vondel set his play in the context of Old Testament history, with the deep meaning Christianity has given it, for world history. Vondel alludes widely to Old Testament figures, citing Israel's great leaders such as Moses, Aaron, Joseph and Joshua, together with references to the tragedy of Cain and Abel. He quotes directly from Psalm 42 (line 1423, spoken by Ifis) and finds useful Luther's "Ein' feste Burg" (line 1138, spoken by Jephtha). He also inserts a moving comparison between two mothers, the mother of Moses as she entrusted her son to the river in a reed box, and Philopaie. Thus the Biblical ethos is finally the determining one.

There is a striking parallel Between Vondel's play and Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. The latter play, too, adopts structures from Aeschylus and Sophocles; *Prometheus Bound* looms large in that work. But Milton redesigns the interior, radically transforms the vision of that work. Both *Jephtha* and *Samson Agonistes*, though tragedies, call at the end for a response of joy, muted but joy nevertheless, and display a strong sense of new beginnings. John Dryden, a late contemporary of Milton, summed up that master's life and career by acknowledging, "This man — Milton — cuts us all out, and the ancients, too." Had Dryden known about Vondel, and had he had access to his plays and his language, he might well have said as much about the lesser known Dutch poet and dramatist.

NOTES

[1] Flowers constitute one of the image clusters in the play; ashes is another.
[2] Vondel employs a delightful anachronism in having her call for muskets!

REFERENCES

Vondel, Joost van den. *Jephtha, of Offerbelofte: Treurspel*. Groningen: Wolters, 1933.