

Rick HONINGS (Leiden University)

The Melodramatic Era. Theatre in Leiden in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

Abstract

The nineteenth century can be described as the Melodramatic Era. In the Dutch theatres the public delighted in watching foreign melodramatic plays, usually in translation, like those by the German writers August von Kotzebue and August Wilhelm Iffland, and the French playwright Victor Ducange. This article focuses on the Leiden theatre during the years 1813–1860. What was the repertoire like? How did religious factions perceive theatre? During this time, Leiden was — partly due to the presence of the university — an important cultural centre in the Netherlands. Literary societies debated the necessity of creating a stronger national theatre tradition which was expected to fulfil a significant social function. I would like to reconstruct this debate and demonstrate that there remained a gap between institutional and public literary tastes.

Preface

‘On Mondays, students go to the *theatre*,’ Johannes Kneppelhout (1814–1885) — better known as Klikspaan, the Leiden chronicler of nineteenth-century university life — wrote in his book *Studentenleven* (1844).¹ In the nineteenth-century city of Leiden various kinds of public entertainment existed, such as the funfair.² But the city also provided another form of popular amusement: the so-called freak show.

Thus, in 1829 the inhabitants of Leiden could take a glance at a Parisian woman with ‘Beard, Sideburns and Moustache’. At another location they could shudder at the sight of a Dutch girl who had been born with a ‘shark skin’: her feet were covered with beautiful tortoise-shell and from her hands sprouted branches.³ At the Leiden funfair the public could watch plays put on by (mostly Dutch)

¹ Klikspaan 2002/1, p. 499.

² On the nineteenth-century funfair: Keyser 1976.

³ *Leydse courant*, 1-6-1829.



The Leiden Theatre in 1861, in: L.H.J. Lamberts Hurrelbrinck, *Beknopt overzicht der geschiedenis van het Leidsch tooneel*

travelling troupes. A contemporary observer said one should try to avoid these plays:

Ginder doet, op 't weidsch tooneel,
Schreeuwend met een heesche keel,
Een hansworst, gedost met veren
En in kakelbonte kleeren,
't Volkje schaatren om een klucht,
Waar de wijze vaak om zucht.⁴

A more institutionalized source of entertainment was provided by the Leiden theatre at the Oude Vest, founded in 1705 by Jacob van Rijndorp, across from the Lakenhal (Textile Workers Hall).⁵ In the seventeenth century this factory had been the centre of the Leiden textile industry, but in the nineteenth century the trade languished. In a 1817 English travel guide the author remarked that Holland had scarcely any theatrical amusement. Leiden did have a theatre, he wrote,

⁴ Translation: 'over there, on the stage, a buffoon — dressed in gaudy clothes with feathers and screaming in a hoarse voice — is making the public laugh with a farce that makes the wise sigh.' *Vaderlandsche Letter-oefeningen* 1821/2, p. 771. This is quoted from the poem 'De kermis' by A.N. van Pellecom, published in: A.N. van Pellecom, *Gedichten* 2. Breda: Van Bergen, 1821–1823, pp. 102–109.

⁵ On the Leyden theatre: Bordewijk [e.a.] 2005; Lamberts Hurrelbrinck 1890.

'but it only has showings every now and then'.⁶ The English author John Bowring (1792–1872) — who wrote two studies about Dutch literary history: *Batavian anthology; or, Specimens of the Dutch poets, With remarks on the poetical literature and language of the Netherlands, to the end of the seventeenth century* (1824) and *Sketch of the language and literature of Holland, Being a sequel to his Batavian anthology* (1829) — also adopted a critical attitude towards the Dutch theatre: 'The theatre cannot be counted as a form of public entertainment of the Dutch'.⁷ Nevertheless, the shows generally attracted large audiences, including a lot of students. These enjoyed all kinds of privileges, but did not always behave well and sometimes caused trouble.⁸ In 1837, theology student Nicolaas Beets (1814–1903) — otherwise known as Hildebrand, the author of *Camera Obscura* (1839) — was a member of the student theatrical committee. The students had got into an argument with the theatre management because it had abolished the time-honoured privilege of the 'Student seats'. All students were called upon to join a complete (but finally only temporary) boycott. The 1839 students' almanac read: 'the Students consider the Leiden Theatre as nonexistent'.⁹

Klikspaan described the daily routine in the Leiden theatre in great detail. During the 1830s, the Golden Age of the Leiden Romantic Movement,¹⁰ it saw many student writers. In the 1840s, however, students only visited the theatre to kill time, to get drunk and to cause trouble. Most did not even know which plays were being performed. The narrator, Klikspaan, on the other hand, was well-informed. The auditorium was beautifully restored, he wrote, but the majority of the plays was of poor quality.¹¹ He agitated against the German and French melodramas, which he called 'trash of the worst kind' as favoured by sailors and housemaids and which belonged on the boulevard stages of Paris. He expressed his disgust at the tasteless 'upper classes', who stood by as helplessly as 'blind owls' and did not protest against the poor literary taste of the theatre audience. The public enjoyed watching foreign plays with their foreign customs and corrupted language. Instead of plays by national authors like Willem Bilderdijk and Rhijnvis Feith, the public only wanted to watch the productions of 'bunglers': 'Laughing loudly and yelling to court the favours of the gods [...] is the height of their powers.' The badly translated plays led to an increase in the corruption of the Dutch language, Klikspaan wrote.¹² Was he right? This article focuses on the theatrical repertoire in Leiden between 1813 and 1860 and asks which authors and plays were popular, how religious factions viewed the theatre, and what part literary societies played.

⁶ Campbell 1817, p. xxvi.

⁷ Bowring 1829–1830, p. 224.

⁸ Otterspeer 1992, pp. 515–516; Le Clercq & Korving 1983, p. 203.

⁹ Bordewijk [e.a.] 2005, p. 155; Lamberts Hurrelbrinck 1890, p. 36.

¹⁰ On the Leiden Romantic Movement: Van Zonneveld 1993.

¹¹ Klikspaan 2002/1, pp. 499–500.

¹² Klikspaan 2002/1, p. 505.

1813–1833: Kotzebue and Iffland

Shows took place on Monday and Thursday evenings, except during the summer months.¹³ The actors from the The Hague theatre company of Ward Bingley (1757–1818) played the most pieces. When skimming through the *Leydse courant* one discovers that Bingley often was both manager and leading actor. Mostly, a serious play was performed first, followed by a farce or ‘vaudeville’: a comedy with a choir.



WARD BINGLEY,
in het Character van den
RITMEESTER,
in het Bijspel
DE SINGERS EN ZIJN ZOO.

Schmidt/Sallieth, Portrait of van Ward Bingley
(1757–1818), 1791. DBNL

Melodramas translated from the German, by August von Kotzebue (1761–1819) and August Wilhelm Iffland (1759–1814), were especially popular. Performances of their plays were well-attended. In the literary journal *Argus* (1828–1829) it was said that the audience was time and again overloaded with the same plays by the German authors.¹⁴ Between 1813 and 1833, a piece by Kotzebue was performed in Leiden more than a hundred times, one by Iffland about forty times. Nicolaas Beets visited performances of both dramatists in Leiden in 1834,

¹³ Le Clercq & Korving 1983, p. 202.

¹⁴ *Argus* 12, 9-11-1828, p. 90.

he wrote in his diary.¹⁵ To compare: between 1813 and 1833 a work by Schiller was played only five times while none by Goethe was played.

Kotzebue's play *De kruisvaarders, tooneelspel, in vijf bedrijven* (1803) was a particularly great success. It was performed thirteen times between 1810 and 1865.¹⁶ His work *Menschenhaat en berouw* (1792) was likewise a success.



Title page of August van Kotzebue, *Menschenhaat en berouw. Tooneelspel, in vijf bedrijven* (second print). Amsterdam 1792. UB Leiden, 1095 F 52

It tells the story of Eulalia, who leaves her family for love, but finally sees the error of her ways. The ending of the piece was a tear-jerker. Eulalia and her deceived husband take leave of each other forever. Eulalia is remorseful, but she has forfeited his love. She says: 'Once I will have suffered enough; when we meet again in a better world...' He answers: 'Then there will be no prejudice; then you will be mine again.' Both look at each other for the last time and mumble a final 'farewell'. At the moment they separate, Eulalia notices her children, who beg for their father and mother. The piece ends with a reconciliation. The father speaks to his wife, to close the play:

¹⁵ Beets 1983, pp. 45, 77.

¹⁶ Bordewijk [e.a.] 2005, pp. 113–119.

Ik vergeeve u: wij zullen nimmer scheiden.

(De graavin en de major heffen de kinderen omhoog, die zich aan hunne ouders vasthouden, en: lieve vader! lieve moeder! roepen, waarna terstond het gordijn valt.)¹⁷

Menschenhaat en berouw was performed six times in Leiden during this period. Other works by Kotzebue such as *De onechte zoon* (1793) and *Armoede en grootheid* (1795) also featured regularly on the programme. On March 23, 1819, Kotzebue was assassinated in Mannheim by a radical German student, Karl Ludwig Sand (1795–1820) — an event that made a deep impression, not only in Germany but also in the Netherlands.¹⁸ After his death his work remained popular in the Dutch theatre. During the months following his death six of his pieces were played in Leiden.

Comical operas were also performed frequently in the Leiden playhouse. At some times acrobatics were performed, at other times ballet, pantomime or lyrical drama performances were given like, for instance, *Klein Duimpje en de reus Faijer* on September 26, 1814.¹⁹ The ballets were heavily criticized because of their supposedly immoral character. A critic of the *Vaderlandsche letter-oefeningen* (the most prominent literary journal) believed the risqué clothes of the dancers would awaken improper desires. In his opinion, men would make their way to the ‘House of Shame’ after a visit to the theatre. Such men would develop uncleanness, which would lead to their destruction. Moreover, he was convinced that the ballets encouraged marital infidelity.²⁰ Another author expressed his dissatisfaction in a poem:

Gij, wulpsche Nimfenstoet,
Die wellust wekt en voedt!
Waartoe toch dat doorzigtig gaas?
Een vijgeblad is meer onschuldig, dan dit waas!²¹

Pieces of national origin were only staged occasionally. Then they were mostly classics like Vondel’s *Gijsbrecht van Aemstel* (1637), Johannes Nomsz’ *Maria van Lalain, of de verovering van Doornik* (1778) or Michiel Adriaansz. *de Ruiter* (1780). Sometimes plays written by Cornelis van der Vijver were performed, like *Het turfschip van Breda, historisch tooneelspel* (1812) and *Kenau Simons Hasselaer, of een blijk van Haarlemsch heldenhart, historisch tooneelspel* (1814). Dutch occasional pieces were only played in response to important political events. For

¹⁷ Translation: ‘I will forgive you: we will never separate. The countess and the major lift the children up into the air, as they clutch their parents and call: dear father! dear mother! after which immediately curtain.’ Kotzebue 1792, pp. 177–178.

¹⁸ On the murder of Kotzebue: Van Zanten 2003.

¹⁹ Bordewijk [e.a.] 2005, dvd.

²⁰ *Vaderlandsche Letter-oefeningen* 1823/2, p. 35.

²¹ Translation: ‘Thou, voluptuous nymph parade, / that awakens and feeds lust! / Why wear that transparent gauze? / A fig leaf is more innocent, than this haze!’ *Vaderlandsche Letter-oefeningen* 1824/2, p. 48.

example, on November 21, 1814, one year after the departure of the French occupying forces, an allegorical play was staged: *De jaren 1813 en 1814, of De verlossing en constitutie van Nederland* (1814) by Hendrik van Overvest Kup. This piece featured such symbolic figures as the Guardian Ghost of Europe, Minerva, Holland and Tyranny. The piece was enlivened with choral singing, which contained texts like: 'Our father punished Spain, / Let us punish every tyrant, / But let Harmony and Orange / remain in the Netherlands'.²² This illustrates the close connection between the theatre and national topical political events.

Works by prominent authors were only played every now and then. A play written by Willem Bilderdijk, who was considered to be the greatest living poet,²³ was not played once. There was a wide gap between the works of institutionalized writers and the theatrical taste of the general public. The Amsterdam writer/merchant Willem de Clercq (1795–1844) was, as were many other authors, rather negative about the Kotzebue pieces that were performed over and over again. He characterized them in 1814 as 'Dreadful Moffrican pieces of trash' that should never be staged.²⁴ Samuel Iperusz Wiselius (1769–1845) spoke of the Germans' 'misshapen and tasteless historical pieces and ridiculous melodramas' and worried about Kotzebue's desecration of the language of the Bible.²⁵ Matthijs Siegenbeek (1774–1854), having worked as a professor of Dutch language and literature at Leiden University since 1797, was also greatly disturbed about the 'rapidly increasing corruption of the aesthetic taste'.²⁶ This attitude was typical. In these years a debate was taking place in the context of the literary societies about the necessity to bring about a national theatre. But this did not change the general audience's theatrical preference for the translated popular melodramas that were recurrently played and were immensely popular.

Religious Criticism

Criticism levelled at the theatre came, for one, from the side of the orthodox Calvinists, in particular from the 'Reveil': an orthodox Protestant group that resisted the nineteenth-century Enlightenment.²⁷ Isaac da Costa (1798–1860) published his controversial *Bezwaren tegen den geest der eeuw* in 1823. The work, in which he renounced the achievements of the Enlightenment, provoked a storm of criticism. From Da Costa's point of view, nineteenth-century religion was wicked. It was a thorn in his side that humanity dethroned God. He blamed his contem-

²² Kup 1814, p. 15.

²³ On Bilderdijk's position: Honings 2010 and Honings 2011.

²⁴ Online diary of Willem de Clercq 1811–1830, 4 (1814), p. 19.

²⁵ Wiselius 1826, pp. li, 33.

²⁶ Siegenbeek 1828, p. 85.

²⁷ On the Reveil: Kagchelland & Kagchelland 2009.

poraries who abolished slavery; negroes were created to serve whites. He also rejected the constitution. Further, he published a brief for the abolition of freedom of press and vaccination programmes. Illnesses and poverty were God's will; humans should not resist them. He considered the theatre to be a dangerous, pernicious institute. In earlier times churches were built to praise the Lord, but now these were replaced by 'Opera houses and Theatres'.²⁸ With his Bible lectures, Da Costa managed to recruit some supporters for his fight against the Spirit of the Age. One evening the young Jan van Golverdinge (1813–1866) was among his audience. He had seemed destined for the theatre, but smallpox was to ruin his voice. As a result, he had worked as a bookseller's assistant since he was fifteen. In 1833 he opened a Christian bookshop in The Hague, with Da Costa's help.

In 1834, Van Golverdinge published a pamphlet about *De onzedelijke en onchristelijke strekking van het schouwtooneel* in which he described the theatre as 'the place of vanity, the doll house of life; — the school of wickedness; — the vortex of sensuality; — the strong castle of the God of the Age; — the gate of hell'. He disagreed with the notion that theatre could fulfil a valuable function. After all, the theatre audience was not stimulated to find God and to praise Him. Every play was a blasphemy against the Ten Commandments; theatre was the 'nursery of impurity, the trailblazer for different atrocities'. It was no coincidence that Napoleon was accompanied by actors during his campaign against Russia. The theatre kept people from reading devout books, according to Van Golverdinge.²⁹ Nicolaas Beets too was convinced that the theatre could have an immoral influence. In his diary he approvingly quoted the French poet Auguste Barbier, who wrote in his *Iambes* (1831) about women who after seeing 'impure scenes' went home with 'fiery eyes and hard breasts', dreaming of adultery.³⁰

Criticism also came from the side of the Roman Catholics. In 1819, a brochure (translated from the French) entitled *De beginselen van den redelijken mensch over de schouwburgen* was published. The author of this anonymous work tried to prove the immorality of the theatre. Plato, Cicero, Seneca and Tacitus had already considered the theatre the 'most appropriate entertainment to provoke desires and to offend common decency'. Even the pernicious Rousseau had expressed his unfavourable opinion of the theatre. The anonymous author enumerated five objections against the theatre. First, the Gospel called on the believer to fight his desires, while the theatre rouses one's urges. Second, the theatre tries to destroy the religious foundation by propagating earthly love, pride and ambition. In the third place, he argued that no Christian visits the playhouse to praise the Lord. Fourth, the Christian life of prayer and repentance was contrary to earthly theatre amusement. To conclude, the anonymous writer criticised the lifestyle of the actors who

²⁸ Da Costa 1823, p. 34.

²⁹ [Van Golverdinge] 1834, pp. 5, 7–9.

³⁰ Beets 1983, pp. 134–135.

he believed led a free and easy life. That was the reason why the Church refused to administer the holy sacraments to them. Anyone visiting the theatre was an accessory to keeping actors in a permanent state of sin.³¹

A Plea for National Theatre

Others were less orthodox in their opinion. In an article about the prejudices against the theatre, a certain 'J. Ph.S.' wrote that Church and theatre did not have to be at odds: 'Let us never reject the Church for the Theatre, neither the latter for the Church'. The church was the place to give praise to God, the theatre, on the other hand, was meant for enjoying an 'entertaining but also advantageous' recreation. The writer thought the theatre could have a profitable, even a religious influence. The public were to visit plays suited to 'lighting the holy fire for virtue' in their heart. This could be accomplished by putting on national works. Instead of blushing at obscene plays, the public should watch patriotic plays that breathed virtue and religion. If this happened, the author wrote, one could declare with Cornelis Loots: 'It was religion at that moment, it wasn't theatre anymore!'.³²

Others made a plea for national theatre as well. In 1831 the famous orator Abraham des Amorie van der Hoeven (1798–1855) spoke at the Amsterdam department of the *Hollandsche Maatschappij van Fraaije Kunsten en Wetenschappen*, an influential literary society, about the moral effect of the theatre. He explained that theatre in itself could not be immoral, but some plays could:

De zozeer toegejuichte Tooneelstukken van KOTZEBUE houde ik, even als de gretig verslonden Romans van LAFONTAINE, met geringe uitzonderingen, voor een sluipend vergif, dat niet het ligchaam maar de ziel doodt, door de zinnelijkheid te prikkelen, het karakter te verweeken en een bekoorlijken sluijer over de misdaad te werpen.³³

He considered Schiller's *Die Räuber* (1781) and plays written by Goethe immoral. A visit to the playhouse should contribute to the moral improvement of the public. The theatre was suited to restraining the lower classes. Also, it fulfilled the function of nation-building: it was the 'breeding ground for real national feelings and faiths' and of use for 'leading the national spirit, creating patriotism and maintaining a real sense of nationality'. Van der Hoeven created an idealised picture. He expressed the hope that one day the 'unwholesome spirit of the strange' would disappear and be replaced by an important national theatre.³⁴

³¹ *De beginselen van den redelijken mensch over de schouwburgen* 1819, pp. 5, 12–13, 52.

³² *Mengelwerk over het vooroordeel tegen den Schouwburg* [ca. 1831], pp. 187, 191–192.

³³ *Translation*: 'The often cheered plays of KOTZEBUE I consider, like the eagerly devoured novels of LAFONTAINE, with few exceptions, a slow poison, that doesn't kill the human body but the human soul, by stimulating sensuality, softening the character and throwing a veil over crime.'

³⁴ Amorie van der Hoeven 1845, pp. 159–160, 170, 178.

In the 1823 students' almanac the theatre was also the subject of discussion. To this end, a passage by the Leiden poet and naturalist Johannes le Francq van Berkhey (1729–1812) was dug up. In the third part of his poignant ten-volume book, *Natuurlyke historie van Holland* (1769–1811), Berkhey expressed his opinion about the theatre. In his view, the theatre could influence the 'heart of the Nation'. He argued that national customs were deformed as a result of the foreign plays. Yet the Dutch did not lack authors capable of writing national plays. If Hooft and Vondel looked at the theatre, they would only see a 'mass of foreign trash' at the Dutch Pindus.³⁵ That the students reprinted Berkhey's text may mean it possessed topical value.

The journal *De Tooneelkijker* expressed the same opinion. A connection was made between the decline of the national theatre and the works played. The national works, which were played in earlier times, had been replaced by German sentimental dramas. And so it came to pass that Kotzebue's work *De onrechte zoon* was given preference over a play like Johannes Nomsz' *Maria van Lalain*. This development could not but accelerate the decline of the theatre, the anonymous author wrote.³⁶

During the nineteenth century Leiden was — partly due to the presence of the university — an important cultural centre in the Netherlands. There was a favourable literary life. Especially the literary societies, like the *Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde*, put their stamp on ideas about literature. The debate about the theatre also took place in the literary societies. On March 19, 1830, Hendrik baron Collot d'Escury, Lord of Heinenoord, spoke about the value of the Dutch theatre and the necessity to make it prosper.³⁷ In 1828, Siegenbeek published an article 'About the means to create a national Dutch theatre' in which he underlined the urgent need to reform national theatrical life. Dutch plays had made way for 'monstrous miscarriages in prose' from Germany. He considered the theatre a political instrument that could be deployed to civilise national tastes. The theatre could be used to create a national identity. There were several ways of doing this: by showing plays by Dutch authors and by performing works about the national history and customs. Such plays were, according to Siegenbeek, suited to 'stimulating the feelings of real patriotism, to saving the authentic national character, and to protecting the national traditions from infection and degeneration'.³⁸

According to Siegenbeek, a very prominent figure in the Leiden literary life, a council of wise, erudite men should prescribe the theatre programme, not the taste of the general audience. This council could cast the parts and draw up a list with suitable plays, to banish all works that could be harmful to artistic tastes. To stimulate the growth of the national theatre Siegenbeek argued strongly in favour of setting up an annual prize of five hundred guilders for the author

³⁵ *Studenten-almanak* 1823, pp. 106–107.

³⁶ *De tooneelkijker* 1816–1819/1, p. 25.

³⁷ *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde* 1830, p. 38.

³⁸ Siegenbeek 1828, p. 82–83.

of the best tragedy about a national historical subject or a comedy about national customs. Finally he pleaded for the foundation of an Academy of Drama, a theatrical journal and a drama handbook. These means could contribute to the improvement of the Dutch theatre system and clear a path for real national theatre.

The *Hollandsche Maatschappij van Fraaije Kunsten en Wetenschappen*, which had a local department in Leiden, also played a part in bringing about a national theatre. During the annual general meeting in 1818 a competition was held around the question whether the Dutch possessed a national theatre with regard to drama, and — if not — how it could be stimulated.³⁹ Four years later only one entry had been submitted, to be awarded a gold medal. The winning author was Petrus van Limburg Brouwer (1795–1847), a deputy headmaster at the Rotterdam Gymnasium Erasmianum. In 1825 he was appointed professor extraordinary in literature in Liège, and in Groningen in 1831. In 1847 he published his well-known novel *Het leesgezelschap te Diepenbeek*, in which he ridiculed the Réveil.

His dissertation probably held little appeal for the majority of the literary men. In this time, in which a plea was made for national theatre, Van Limburg Brouwer argued, this could not exist. One could designate theatre as national if it arose without imitating other schools. In the Netherlands this was not the case. Even during the seventeenth century, which was considered the Golden Age of Dutch literature, Vondel fashioned his plays after Greek examples. After that, the success of the Dutch theatre went downhill. Authors did not imitate the Greeks, but the French. According to Van Limburg Brouwer, even playwrights like Lucretia Wilhelmina van Merken and Joannes Nomsz wrote plays in a French vein. He answered the question whether the Dutch owned a national theatre in the negative; moreover, he could not name possibilities for creating it, either. For that reason he pleaded for Dutch plays after the Greek example.⁴⁰ That proved Van Limburg Brouwer to be a 'full-blooded classic',⁴¹ and made him — given the nationalistic mood after 1813 — a stranger within the literary life.

1833–1860: Foreign 'Family Plays'

When taking a look at the repertoire of the Leiden theatre during the 1833–1860 period we see that, compared to earlier years, only small changes took place. There remained a gap between the taste of the general public and the institutional preference. In these years only one play by the great Bilderdijk was performed; on 13 March 1845, a troupe of the Amsterdam Theatre played his tragedy *Floris de Vijfde* (1808). Plays written by Rhijnvis Feith were not very popular either;

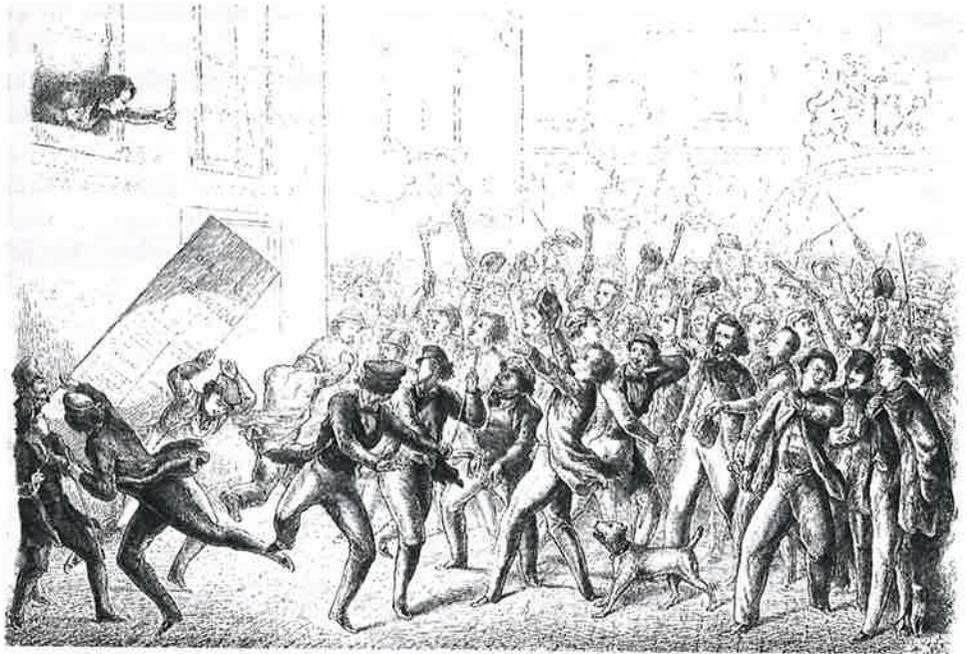
³⁹ *Algemeene konst- en letter-bode* 1818/2, pp. 219–220.

⁴⁰ Van Limburg Brouwer 1823, pp. 9, 93.

⁴¹ According to Van den Berg 1973, p. 251.

only his tragedy *Ines de Castro* (1793) was staged twice. Works of classical national authors were also seldom performed. Vondel's *Gijsbrecht van Aemstel* was played about five times, Pieter Langendijk's comedy *Don Quichot op de bruiloft van Kamacho* (1712), on the other hand, only twice. Contemporary Dutch writers in general did not appear on the theatre programme. National pieces were staged very rarely, like *Johanna Shore* (1834) by Adriaan van der Hoop, which was put on once in 1837 and once in 1839, and the play *De neven* (1837) by P.Th. Helvetius van den Bergh, which was performed four times.⁴²

Often, concerts and events were organized in the Leiden theatre to collect money for the poor. A major event was the visit of Weimar-based composer Franz Liszt (1811–1866) — the first pop star in music history — who gave a concert at the Leiden playhouse.



Alexander Ver Huell, Liszt in Leiden in 184*. UB Leiden, 12256 F 8

Alexander Ver Huell (1822–1897), the illustrator of Klikspaans *Studententypen* (1841), described his show:

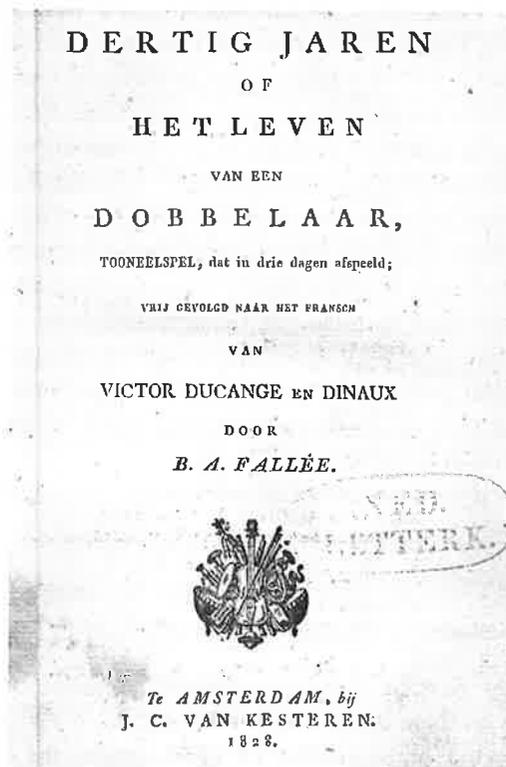
Het uitgelezen publiek, dat géén plaats onbezet had gelaten, hief op verzoek van Liszt het *Io vivat* aan. Nooit heb ik het krachtiger en beter hooren zingen, en nooit heeft wellicht de pianovirtuoos met meer vuur geïmproviseerd, dan toen hij door alle tonen heen het studentenhymnus varieerde.⁴³

⁴² Bordewijk [e.a.] 2005, dvd.

⁴³ Translation: 'The exquisite audience, which didn't leave a seat vacant, at Liszt's request struck up the *Io vivat*. I have never heard it sound better and more powerful, and probably never has

At the students' clubhouse the composer was honoured and afterwards accompanied with torches to his guesthouse at the Leiden White Gate.⁴⁴

As in earlier years the theatre programme was dominated by foreign 'family plays', like Iffland and Kotzebue's.⁴⁵ The latter was played in Leiden more than forty times in this period.⁴⁶ French melodramas were also popular, especially in comparison with the previous era, when there was a great loathing for everything French. A big name on the repertoire lists is that of the French writer Victor Henri Brahain Ducange (1783–1833), who was born in The Hague. His play *Dertig jaren, of het leven van een dobbelaar* (1828) took fourth place in the top six of plays performed, in terms of number of showings. Between 1833 and 1860 it was staged twelve times.⁴⁷



Title page of Victor Ducange & Dinaux, *Dertig jaren, of Het leven van een dobbelaar. Tooneelspel, dat in drie dagen afspeelt*. Amsterdam 1828

a piano virtuoso improvised with more fire, than when he varied straight through all notes, the students' hymn.'

⁴⁴ Ver Huell [1900], 'Franz Liszt te Leiden in 1843'.

⁴⁵ Klikspan 2002/1, p. 500.

⁴⁶ Bordewijk [e.a.] 2005, dvd.

⁴⁷ Bordewijk [e.a.] 2005, p. 115, dvd.

The play tells the story of the gambler Georges de Germany and takes place in three days, spread over thirty years. Georges intends to marry the virtuous Amelie. Because of his gambling addiction, he encounters problems. Time after time he allows himself to be persuaded by the lying fortune-hunter Warner. To gratify his father's wish — buying a jewel for his bride — Georges commits a theft. Dermont, Amelie's uncle, discovers the fraud, but arrives too late to prevent the marriage. Georges' father, who is on his deathbed, curses his son. The second part of the play takes place fifteen years later. Amelie is leading an unhappy life. Her husband is still addicted to gambling. We find out they have a son, Albert, for whose future Amelie fears. Finally Georges persuades her to hand over her inheritance to him, which he gambles away. After many intrigues it is revealed that Georges has forged bank notes, which makes him a wanted man. There is no alternative but to flee, together with Amelie. Their son will be raised by Amelie's uncle. The third part of the play takes place in Bavaria, Germany. The spouses, together with their little daughter Georgette, are reduced to poverty. Georges has become a criminal. He commits murders to get money for gambling. In the end Albert, who has grown up and received his uncle's inheritance, turns up to help his family. Georges, who does not recognize his son, almost gives in to the temptation (suggested by Warner) to kill the 'stranger'. When he refuses, Warner decides to do it himself by starting a fire in Albert's room. The end is melodramatic: while Amelie and some soldiers enter the hut, Georges discovers his son to be in danger. He saves him from the burning room and takes revenge on Warner. At this moment the roof of the burning hut comes down and both men are trapped under the rubble. In the end, soldiers manage to save them from the ruins. Georges kneels before his wife and children:

GEORGES.

Ongelukkigen, wier ongeluk ik veroorzaakt heb,... Ach! beklagt mij niet.... ik heb deze verschrikkelijke straf verdiend... Mijn zoon heb een afschuw van het spel... gij ziet er de razernij en misdaden van!... Dierbare echtgenoot! vergiffenis, vergiffenis!... Ik sterf... Dat uwe deugden... haar loon verwerven... en genade voor den schuldigen.⁴⁸

Ducange's play *Zestien jaren geleden, of, Moederliefde en kindertrouw* (1836) was also put on stage many times. The original, *Il y a seize ans* (1835), was performed in Leiden too, on November 15, 1833. Among the public of the 'French Theatre' — as it was called when a French work was played — was Nicolaas Beets, who had been studying in Leiden since September. He was not very impressed, he wrote in his diary: 'A bad play, without any dramatic unities, without

⁴⁸ *Translation*: 'Poor unfortunate, whose misfortune I have brought about,... Oh! Do not pity me... I have deserved this terrible punishment... My son, abhor the game of gambling...you see the madness and crimes of it!... Dear wife!Forgiveness, forgiveness!... I die... That your virtues... receive their reward... and mercy for the guilty.' Ducange & Dinaux 1828, p. 176.

order, on the basis of an incident of rape.⁴⁹ The play was improbably melodramatic. The protagonist, called Amelie as in the former work, marries the baron of St-Val. During the wedding she is revealed to have a sixteen-year-old son, Felix. Amelie tells her story. When Paris was occupied by 'three united armies', her father had lodged her with a leaseholder in a nearby village. Not on his best behaviour, this man dishonoured her. The story takes an unexpected (and implausible) twist when it turns out the baron has something to confess: 'Sixteen years ago, a crime made you my wife.' This points to him being the rapist and Felix's father. Before the curtain falls, Amelie (who has first passed out) exclaims: 'I am the happiest woman on earth!' A rather bizarre 'all's well that ends well'.



Alexander Ver Huell, caricature of the melodramatic plays in the Leiden theatre, 1848. Regionaal Archief Leiden, PV65036

Literary circles had a strong aversion to such plays with a plethora of suggestive full stops and exclamation marks.

The actor-writer Frederik Hendrik Greb wrote:

Mélodrama's, Opera's en Vaudeville's, meestal uit *Frankrijk* tot ons overgewaaid, zijn aan de orde van den dag. Waren het nog Drama's van CASIMIR DE LA VIGNE of VICTOR HUGO, wij zouden er vrede mede hebben; maar het zijn de stukken van eenen VICTOR DU-

⁴⁹ Beets 1983, p. 28.

CANGE en *Consorten*, stukken als *zestien jaren geleden* en anderen, die men met genoegen aanschouwt en met uitbundige toejuiching begroet.⁵⁰

J.W. IJntema (1779–1858), editor of the *Vaderlandsche letter-oefeningen*, wrote a satire 'Op het verschrikkelijke Fransche drama: Dertig jaren, of Het leven van een 'dobbelaar':

Wie zoo de speelzucht maalt, bewerkt wat hij wil stuiten.
 Geen speler, hoe befaamd, vindt hier zijn beeldtenis.
 Een pharizesche waan sluit zijn bekeering buiten.
 'God dank, dat ik niet ben als deze booswicht is!
 Dus roept hij zelfvoldaan, verlaat de school der zeden,
 En smooit de stem der rede in 't redeloos gewoel.
 'Ik ben die man niet, neen!' herhaalt hij, trots de beden
 Van gade en kroost, verstikt zijn zedelijk gevoel,
 En dompelt dieper nog zich in den zondepoel.⁵¹

Pieces by German playwright Charlotte Birch-Pfeiffer (1800–1868) and French Eugene Scribe (1791–1861) were also performed with clockwork regularity. The latter, the librettist of the revolutionary play *La muette de Portici*, also wrote the libretto for the opera *La Juive* (1835), translated as *De Jodin, groot melodrama in vijf bedrijven* (1838). In the *Vaderlandsche letter-oefeningen* a reviewer criticised the depraved taste of the general public:

Thans kwam de Heer SCRIBE op het schrikkelijk denkbeeld, *om het leven eener schoone Jodin, op het tooneel, in een' ketel met kokende olie te doen eindigen*; [...] Het allerschrikkelijkste moet bij hem [de Fransman] aan elegante en behagelijke vormen verbonden zijn; en, alvorens het offer der boosheid in den ziedenden ketel verstikt en jammerlijk sterft, moet men *door zang en dans*, ja door wat niet al, *den luister van het spektakel verhoogen*; opdat duizenden elkander mogen afvragen: "Hebt gij de nieuwe Opera — hebt gij *la Juive* al gezien? O! zij is *brillant*!"⁵²

⁵⁰ Translation: 'Melodramas, operas and vaudevilles, mostly from France, are omnipresent. If they were plays by CASIMIR DE LA VIGNE or VICTOR HUGO, we would be delighted; but they are plays by VICTOR DUCANGE and his confederates, plays such as *zestien jaren geleden* and others, which are watched by the public with pleasure and exuberant applause.' Greb 1836, 170–171.

⁵¹ Translation: 'Who depicts gambling thus brings about what he wants to end. No gambler, however famous, will find his image here. A Pharisaic delusion precludes his conversion. 'Thank God, I am not like this villain!' Thus he exclaims smugly, leaves the school of moral values, and smothers the voice of reason in the unreasoning bustle. 'I am not that man, no!' he repeats despite the pleas from wife and children, he suffocates his moral sense, and plunges even deeper into the moral cess-pool.' *Vaderlandsche Letter-oefeningen* 1845/2, p. 260.

⁵² Translation: 'Now Mister SCRIBE has the terrific idea of ending the life of a beautiful Jewess on stage in a kettle with boiling oil; [...] greatest horror must, for him [the Frenchman], be connected with elegant and pleasant forms; and, before the woman suffocates and miserably dies in the boiling kettle, it is necessary to give added lustre to the spectacle with singing and dancing; so that thousands could ask each other: 'Have you seen the new Opera — have you seen *la Juive* yet? Oh! she is brilliant!'" *Vaderlandsche Letter-oefeningen* 1837/2, p. 306.

Another critic listed the ever-recurring subjects of the melodramas: 'Arson, incest, adultery, sacrilege, parenticide, filicide, fratricide, manslaughter and dissolution'. He considered 'Ethics, Nature and Religion' violated and mistreated.⁵³

Klikspaan felt the literary societies took too little action against the penchant for foreign melodramas: 'They assemble in societies where weekly, the adoration for well-turned sentences goes down on its knees for a lectern idol, where the decline of the national theatre is discussed with a great deal of lamenting in eloquent readings, but where no action is taken.' When would the literary men occupy themselves with the 'practice and theory of an art so recklessly and maliciously neglected'?⁵⁴

A Plea for National Theatre (2)

As in the years before, a plea for national theatre could be heard. As far as we know, the two literary societies — the Maatschappij and the Hollandsche Maatschappij — did not entertain any notions about national theatre. New in this period was the foundation of special literary societies, the nineteenth-century chambers of rhetoric, to prevent theatrical decay. In Leiden two chambers were active: 'Vondel' and 'Tollens', founded in 1851 and 1857 respectively. Particularly the Leiden journal *De rederijker* (1855–1860) was concerned about the general public's great enthusiasm for melodramas and spectacles, 'while the theatre is visited only when a play is performed which delights the art-loving heart'.⁵⁵ The chambers of rhetoric wanted to put an end to the bad state of the Dutch theatre. While the public amused themselves with translations of foreign melodramas, the rhetoricians tried to stage national plays. However, there was one problem. In spite of their noble mission, the rhetoricians performed pieces that were not suited to that particular time. Vondel's plays, for example, were too difficult for the general public and had to be simplified. The rhetoricians thus wanted to promote the national theatre, but in practice the audience was not used to such plays.

The rhetorician F.F.C. Steinmetz from Kampen — 'Oh Bard of Kampen! favoured child of the Muses', as Piet Paaltjens (Francois Haverschmidt) called him⁵⁶ — published an essay 'About the recovery of the national theatre'. He underlined that the theatre had flowered during the seventeenth century, the Golden Age, just as poetry then had. Vondel, 'our national SHEKSPEARE', was con-

⁵³ *Vaderlandsche Letter-oefeningen* 1836/2, pp. 244–245.

⁵⁴ 'Zij verzamelen zich tot maatschappijen, waar wekelijks de volzinnenvereering voor een cathederafgod op de knieën ligt, waar mogelijk over het verval van het vaderlandsch tooneel met schepels ach en wee in welsprekende godspraken verhandeld wordt; doch gehandeld?' Klikspaan 2002/1, p. 508.

⁵⁵ *De rederijker* 5 (1858), p. 32.

⁵⁶ Quoted after Paaltjens 1979, p. 56.

sidered the most important Dutch playwright. In the 18th century people had shown respect for his work until the French and their revolution of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity put a stop to this. That is why (according to Steinmetz) Dutch originality was broken and 'infected by the Gallic spirit'. After the French Period, from 1813, people were too busy with non-literary affairs: 'Lost gold had to be regained, forgotten businesses had to be established, laws had to be changed, institutions had to be reformed'. As a result, people did not take action against the 'French customs that were gaining ground'. The national theatre was replaced by 'flea pits, where French customs were put on stage, which made the Netherlands indecent'. Dazzled, the public had a great time watching 'monstrous performances, full of mindless stage pleasantries' and did not attend plays by Vondel, Van Merken, Bilderdijk and Feith. Fortunately, the chambers of rhetoric devoted themselves for some time to staging national plays from earlier centuries, 'in their truth and simplicity'.⁵⁷ At the end Steinmetz presented his idealistic theatrical opinion, which contained nothing but the famous phrase from Horace: the 'utile dulci':

dan zal men doordrongen worden van de zedelijke kracht des tooneels, die altijd leidend moet zijn voor het beter deel der menschen, en men zal een' afkeer doen geboren worden voor al dien tooneel-arbeid van uitheemschen grond op vaderlandschen bodem overgeplant, waarin de zeden van het natuurlijke menschenhart valsch, en de misdaad als verheven wordt voorgesteld. Men leere door voorbeeld en strekking het laffe blij- en kluchtspel der 19de eeuw plaats maken voor die tooneelspelen, waarin de geest ontspannen wordt, maar tevens onderwijs ontvangt.⁵⁸

Conclusion

The chambers of rhetoric thus wanted to compensate for the depraved 'bad taste of our century'. In their view the moral aspect had been lost track of; the public mainly visited the theatre to 'admire decorations, music, dresses'. The rhetoricians set themselves the target of promoting Vondel's plays, 'the poet of the most powerful period of our nation, — the seventeenth century, when our Republic forced proud Spain to pronounce it independent'. From an institutional viewpoint, Vondel was considered a 'genius' with a 'luxuriant imagination, a lively feeling, a refined and richly equipped spirit'. He was an artistic genius, but at the same time he never lost sight in his work of the moral aspect.⁵⁹ In spite of the many pleas,

⁵⁷ Steinmetz 1855, pp. 47, 49, 51, 53.

⁵⁸ *Translation*: 'Then they will be convinced of the moral power of theatre, which should always be instructive, and they will have an aversion to all foreign plays, adopted onto native soil, in which the customs of the human heart are given a false representation, and crime is idealised. That one may, through example and purport replace the feeble farce of the nineteenth century with plays in which the mind is relaxed and instructed.' Steinmetz 1855, p. 53.

⁵⁹ *De rederijker* 3 (1856), pp. 188–189.

particularly from the chambers of rhetoric in this period, it was hard or even impossible to get nineteenth-century theatre audiences to warm up to national plays.

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