

THE HISTORICIZATION OF DESIRE:

Sophonisba in Early Modern Dutch Drama



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In the Low Countries of the 1620s, the Sophonisba story was dramatized by the Haarlem poet Govert van der Eembd and the Antwerp painter and poet Guilliam van Nieuwelandt. Each of these rhetoricians made his own contribution to the theme, by treating the story of Sophonisba, Syphax and Masinissa as either a romance or as an historical drama about the establishment of Roman power in Africa. Drawing on Greco-Roman sources as well as early modern dramas and prose narratives, both writers used the material in varying degrees to explore sexual desire, political behaviour, and the ethos of empire. This article also assesses the place of these two Dutch plays in the literary history of early modern Europe.

In the early seventeenth century, the Carthaginian princess Sophonisba arrived on the Dutch stage. During the 1620s, two tragedies devoted to the unhappy love affair between the gifted Numidian warrior Masinissa and the hapless Sophonisba were written, the first by the Haarlem scholar and playwright Govert van der Eembd, active during the 1610s and 1620s, and the second, a more expansive historical adaptation, by the *émigré* Antwerp artist and poet, Guilliam van Nieuwelandt (1584-c.1635). Van der Eembd's play was printed in 1620, following a performance in the Old Chamber in Amsterdam, *D'Eglentier* (The Eglantine), the pioneering rhetoricians' association for the composition and performance of works on classical subjects.¹ Van Nieuwelandt's drama, which was written for the Antwerp rhetorician chamber *De Violieren* (The Gillyflowers), was composed sometime in the mid-1620s, and most probably was performed before its first printing in Antwerp, now lost, in 1626. The tragedy was subsequently reprinted twice a

¹ Van der Eembd 1621.

decade later in Amsterdam, in 1635 and 1639, after van Nieuwelandt had permanently settled there.² Both plays have been neglected in modern scholarship – in contrast to the other plays from Italy and France we discuss – and are now cast for the first time in a broader literary-historical context.³

Livy's account of the final days of the Carthaginian Sophonisba⁴ had been a popular subject in sixteenth-century Italian and French theatre since the appearance of Gian Giorgio Trissino's *La Sofonisba* (1524; composed 1514), one of the earliest examples of the Italian humanists' enthusiastic imitation of the structure and language of ancient Greek tragedy.⁵ French translations of Trissino's work followed in 1556 (Mellin de Saint-Gelais, primarily in prose), and in the 1580s in verse (Claude Mermet); the Italian play also shaped the structure, characterizations and rhetorical style of Antoine de Montchrestien's *La Carthaginoise ou la liberté* (1596).⁶ A few years later the prolific dramatist and novelist Nicholas de Montreux published a markedly different version of the Sophonisba material, drawing less from Livy than from the Greek sources that recounted her story, chiefly Plutarch and Appian.⁷ Prose versions of Sophonisba's last days, originally composed by

² Van Nieuwelandt 1635 and 1639.

³ Despite their emphasis on several historical and political tragedies, Noak 2002 and Konst 2003 do not mention van der Eemdb and van Nieuwelandt, let alone their Sophonisba plays. Smits-Veldt and Porteman 2016, 265, 280 do mention them, but only briefly.

⁴ Livy, *Ab Vrbe condita*, Book XXX.

⁵ Trissino 1990 and 1975. On Trissino, see *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 2019 (Valentina Gallo), and Morsolin 1878. *Giangiorgio Trissino o Monografia di un letterato nel secolo XVI* (Vicenza: Burato, 1878 [Florence, 1894²]). See also Corrigan 1971. The text can be found on the DraCor site: <https://dracor.org/ita/trissino-sofonisba> (accessed 10 January 2023). For a discussion on the various intertexts informing the construction of Trissino's tragedy, see Phillips-Court 2010.

⁶ For the Sophonisbe theme in France, see Andrae 1890. See also Axelrad 1956, 18-27. An edition of de Saint-Gelais' translation can be found on <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/29279> (accessed 10 January 2023); on Mellin de Saint-Gelais, see, e.g., Becker 1924; Grente and Simonin (eds) 2001, 1058-59 (Marie-Virginie Cambiels and Michel Simonin); Stone 1983, and Balmas & Dassonville (eds.) 1989², 237-50 (Luigia Zilli). The text was edited in Blanchemain (ed.) 1873, 159-241, published online <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/29279/pg29279-images.html> (accessed 24 November 2022). Mermet 1584; on him, see Grente and Simonin (eds.) 2001, 834 (Catherine Magnien). Montchrestien 1596. On him, see, e.g., Dandrey (ed.) 1996, 897-900 (Robert Lenoble and Jean-Pierre Chauvaux). *La Carthaginoise* is edited in Petit de Julleville (ed.) 1891, 113-156, and in Fries (ed.) 1889. On Montchrestien's drama, see Griffiths 1970. The text of *La Carthaginoise* can be found on the DraCor website: <https://dracor.org/fre/montchretien-carthaginoise#text> and http://www.theatre-classique.fr/pages/programmes/edition.php?t=../documents/MONTCHRETIEN_CARTHAGINOISE.xml

⁷ Olenix du Mont-Sacré [i.e. Nicolas de Montreux] 1976. Montreux himself writes that Appian from Alexandria (*Libyca* 110-121; *Historia Romana* VI, 37.) and Plutarch's *Life of Scipio Africanus* (ch. 28-29), trans. Charles de L'Écluse, published in Plutarque 1802, 477-79 were his sources. For Plutarch's text, see Montreux 1976, 27-29. See also below, n. 39. A

Giovanni Boccaccio in his *De mulieribus claris* (1361-1375), and then retold at greater length by Matteo Bandello in the first part of his *Novelle* (1554) provided additional inspiration from which playwrights could draw.⁸ In addition, Bandello had relied heavily on Petrarch's retelling of the Sophonisba-Masinissa love affair in Book V of his unfinished epic poem *Africa*, a celebration of the heroic exploits of Publius Cornelius Scipio ('Africanus'), and many passages are literal translations of Petrarch's original Latin hexameters into Italian prose.⁹ Bandello's version in turn spread northwards through the extensive adaptation of his tales into French by Francois de Belleforest between 1559 and 1582.¹⁰ His collection subsequently started to appear in Dutch in 1596, but the Dutch translation of the Sophonisba story did not appear until 1646. If van der Eem and van Nieuwelandt were familiar with Bandello's treatment, they most likely knew his version through Belleforest's translation, or in the case of van Nieuwelandt, through the original Italian which he may have acquired during his artistic apprenticeship in Italy with the Antwerp landscape artist Paulus Brill between 1601 and 1604.¹¹

Sophonisba's appearance in the Dutch theatrical repertoire of the 1620s was likely due to several factors. As in the case of earlier dramatic treatments, the story itself as recounted by Livy and supplemented by accounts from later Greek historians commingled political intrigue with libidinous passion and betrayal, and the deadly consequences of imprudence and uncontrolled desire. Near the end of the Second Punic War in 203 BCE during the Roman campaign against Carthage and its allies in northern Africa, Sophonisba, daughter of the Carthaginian general Hasdrubal Gisco, had been promised to the eastern Numidian king Masinissa, who in alliance with the Carthaginians fought against the Romans. However, the Carthaginian Senate forbade the marriage and forced her to marry Syphax, chieftain of the western Massylians, who was allied with Rome. Sophonisba persuaded her husband Syphax, whose insatiable desire for his new wife distracted him from his political responsibilities, to break his alliance with Rome and support her father in his war against the Romans. Masinissa in turn broke his alliance with

detailed summary of Montreux' play is given by Axelrad 1956, 28-36. For a discussion of Livy and Appian as sources of the Sophonisba story, see also Axelrad 1956, 15-17. On Montreux's representation of the vanquished Sophonisba as a martyr to politics and history, see Ladefoged-Larn 2023, 31-44.

⁸ Giovanni Boccaccio, *De claris mulieribus*, 70; 1st printed ed. 1473. Matteo Bandello, *Novelle* I, 35 (1st ed. Lucca, 1554).

⁹ See, e.g., Petrarca 2007, 244-319.

¹⁰ Boaistuau 1559 and 1977. Belleforest 1559 and 1566-1583; on the bibliography of Belleforest's *Histoires tragiques*, see Stone 1972.

¹¹ See, e.g., Sluijter 2015; Schatborn a.o. 2001, 38-43. See also below, 14.

Carthage and collaborated with the Romans and their general Scipio Africanus. After Syphax had been defeated and taken captive at the battle for the Massylian city Cirta, Masinissa succumbed to Sophonisba's beauty and her pleas for protection from Rome. He hastily married her, reasoning falsely that as his wife he would be able to spare her from the humiliation of Roman captivity. Upon learning of Masinissa's hastily arranged marriage, Scipio, fearful of losing yet another Numidian ally, declared the union illegal and demanded that Sophonisba be taken to Rome in a triumphal procession. After much lamentation, Masinissa reluctantly agreed to this demand, and true to his promise to preserve her from an ignominious captivity, he had poison delivered to her which she gratefully accepted and courageously and unhesitatingly swallowed.

The narrative richness of the story of Sophonisba's two marriages, the first to Syphax, and the second brief union with Masinissa provided many opportunities for imparting political and moral-philosophical instruction to audiences currently experiencing the hardships of near perpetual war in the sixteenth century. The political complexities of forging lasting and trustworthy alliances with foreign powers, especially between smaller principalities and larger centralized states such as Spain and France, were amply revealed through the attempts of Rome to manipulate the personal and political rivalries of late third-century BCE Numidia. The narrative also represented the all-too-frequent occurrence of cities under siege, the chaos ensuing upon their fall and occupation, the slaughter of innocent inhabitants, especially women and children, the capture and enslavement of the defeated, and the fair and legally sanctioned distribution of booty among the victors. Beyond questions of political allegiances, the Sophonisba story portrayed the dangers of unbridled lust and the ability of women to use their beauty and helplessness in the face of danger to effect a politically and morally questionable decision by their otherwise martially gifted spouses. Secondary debates about women as victims or agents of war, the legitimacy of resistance against unjust political decisions, the acceptability of suicide in the face of insurmountable misfortune, and the need for forbearance and self-discipline against the temptations of the flesh—debates familiar from the moralistic collections of *sententiae* that Renaissance dramatists scattered throughout their works—were well represented throughout the Sophonisba narrative. Moreover, the similarities between her unhappy end as a Carthaginian queen because of Roman infidelity recalled Dido's abandonment by Aeneas as well as the suicide of Cleopatra after Octavian's defeat of her armies and ensuing preparations to transport her as a captive to Rome. For dramatists seeking opportunities to explore the emotions of both the conquerors and the defeated resulting from the Roman invasion and eventual subjugation of north African

kingdoms, the stories of Dido, Sophonisba, and Cleopatra provided an opportunity to cast such imperialistic ventures in the language of heroic but flawed female rulership and the misguided commingling of political ambition with sexual desire.

Beyond the inherent complexities of the Sophonisba story, van der Eemdb and van Nieuwelandt were most likely aware of the increasing prominence of historical topics from biblical and secular sources, especially from classical, medieval, and near-contemporary history, that were inspiring playwrights writing in the vernacular and Neo-Latin within the Low Countries and abroad. The execution of Mary Stuart, the assassinations of William the Silent and Henri IV of France, and the martyrdom of Catholics and Protestants alike reappeared in tragedies from the 1580s to the 1620s.¹² Debates on the legitimacy of tyrannicide and revolution, on rivalries between the Catholic Church and secular rulers, or among religious dissenters themselves shaped the composition of several historical dramas. Because of this turn to historical drama, it is not surprising that van der Eemdb and van Nieuwelandt would embrace Sophonisba as a novel topic to include in the Dutch-language repertoire. Both men were equally passionate about history: Van der Eemdb published a play on the devastating 1572-73 siege of his native Haarlem in 1619, modelled on earlier siege tragedies such as Seneca's *Troades* and Robert Garnier's *Les Juifves*.¹³ Van Nieuwelandt likewise devoted most of his theatrical energies to historical topics from the Bible and Roman history: Between 1617 and 1635, he composed dramas on Saul (1617), Solomon (1628), and Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem (1635); in addition to his *Sophonisba Africana*, he also produced secular tragedies on Nero (1628) and on Mark Antony and Cleopatra (1624).¹⁴

In embracing Sophonisba as a dramatic subject, van der Eemdb and van Nieuwelandt were likely aware of the various Greco-Roman sources for her story as well as of earlier dramatic treatments of the subject. As in the case of many Renaissance dramatists, the Dutch playwrights did not acknowledge all their historical sources, and an even greater silence surrounded their indebtedness to earlier sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century writers. Similarities in the Greco-Roman historical record often meant that Sophonisba dramatists composed scenes built on specific moments in the prose sources, chiefly Livy, such as Sophonisba's first encounter with Masinissa or Scipio's upbraiding of Masinissa for succumbing to

¹² See, e.g., Zevecotius 1973; Heinsius 2020 and its Dutch adaptations by Jacob Duym (1606) (cf. Duym 1977) and Gijsbrecht van Hogendorp (1617) (cf. Kossmann 1932); Vernulaeus 1610.

¹³ Van der Eemdb 1619.

¹⁴ See Keersmaekers 1957, esp. 79-96 for a discussion of these plays.

Sophonisba's charms. But in the course of the sixteenth century, following a pattern established by Trissino in his 1524 tragedy, additional scenes became an integral part of the dramatic tradition. Amplifying the classical sources, dramatists frequently included monologues in which Sophonisba laments the prospect of imminent enslavement after the fall of Cirta, Syphax bemoans the loss of his kingdom, Masinissa debates with himself about his conflicted obligations to Rome and Sophonisba, and in the final act, Sophonisba prepares for her inevitable suicide. The French translators of Trissino, Mellin de Saint-Gelais and Claude Mermet established this pattern of set-scenes in France where they were adapted first by Antoine de Montchrestien, and to a lesser extent by Nicholas de Montreux.

Writing within this tradition, van der Eembd and van Nieuwelandt used some of these same scenarios, but each of their works deviated sharply from their Italian and French predecessors to emphasize new aspects of the story. Van der Eembd begins his tragedy at what is essentially the fourth act in earlier plays, namely, the crisis afflicting Masinissa as he debates his own and Sophonisba's future. In contrast, van Nieuwelandt's work commences long before the action in the sixteenth-century Sophonisba plays with the Roman campaign against Carthage in Spain; Sophonisba herself is not even introduced until the third act. Moreover, van der Eembd approached Sophonisba through Renaissance rather than ancient sources, adapting Book V of Petrarch's *Africa* and Bandello's retelling of the Petrarchan epic as an occasion to develop Dutch as a literary language. Besides creating a rhetorically richer and psychologically sophisticated representation of sexual desire. Van der Eembd intensified the ethnic differences between European and African society through his representation of Rome and its enemies from the perspective of his own time when there was increased economic and cultural contact between the two continents. In contrast, van Nieuwelandt sought to improve upon van der Eembd's limited focus on facile comparisons between Africa and Europe and Masinissa's libidinous indecision by repositioning the story within the larger historical content of Carthaginian-Roman relations in the final years of the Second Punic War. Drawing on classical and Renaissance sources little used or not consulted by earlier playwrights, van der Eembd and van Nieuwelandt each made a unique contribution to Sophonisba as a dramatic subject, deepening the romantic discourse between Sophonisba and her lovers, and adapting the tradition to reflect the political and social landscape of the early seventeenth century as the Dutch Republic was establishing itself as a new Empire in the footsteps of Rome.

Govert van der Eembd, *Sophonisba* (1621)

Little is known about the life of Govert van der Eembd in the early seventeenth century, and what information we have about his career as a playwright, a translator of Battista Guarini's *Il pastor fido* and of Pierre D'Avity's encyclopaedic compendium *Les estats, empires, et principautez du monde*,¹⁵ and as a compiler and commentator on selected Senecan *sententiae*, can be gleaned from the paratextual material that accompanied the publications of his works. Van der Eembd was trained as a lawyer, but he was also a prominent member of the rhetorician (*Rederijker*) chamber in his native Haarlem, the *Wijngaerd-ranken* (*Tendrils of the Vineyard*), for whom he wrote his Guarini translation and the two surviving plays. His first dramatic work, a tragicomedy known only from its title *Lievenden Frederick*, was written before 1618, as attested in the dedicatory letter to his Guarini translation, which was published the following year in Haarlem. In 1619, he served as the *factor* or artistic director and manager of the chamber, one of three chambers in Haarlem at the time, where his first historical drama, *Haerlemse Belegeringhs treur-bly-eynde-spel*, a 'tragedy-with-a-happy-ending' on the 1572-73 siege of Haarlem was performed by his fellow members on 26 July 1619. A year later, his tragedy *Sophonisba* was presented in a more illustrious chamber, *D'Eglentier* in Amsterdam, according to the title page staged on 21 September 1620, and subsequently published in The Hague in 1621.

Van der Eembd's interest in history derived from his admiration for his native city's steadfast participation in the revolt against Spain. His drama on their heroic but unsuccessful defence of the city, written during the Twelve Years Truce (1609-1621), created a commemorative space for historical pride, a sentiment voiced again in 1623, after hostilities resumed, in van der Eembd's panegyric of the Haarlem militia marching off to Hasselt. In his dedicatory letter to the administrative leaders and city council of Haarlem, van der Eembd makes plain his affection for ancient and contemporary French historians (such as Pierre d'Avity) for their preservation of notable deeds for later generations, but he reserves his greatest praise for Homer, and especially for his account of the Trojan war: not only did Homer celebrate the valiant warriors among the Greeks and the Trojans, but he also praised the nobility of the besieged fighting courageously for their city's freedom. In

¹⁵ Pierre D'Avity, *Les estats, empires, et principautez du monde: Representez par la description des pays, mœurs des habitans, richesses des prouinces, les forces, le gouvernement, la religion, & les princes qui ont gouverné chacun estat. avec l'origine de toutes les religions, & de tous les chevaliers & ordres militaires* (Paris: Nicolas Du Fossé, 1613). For van der Eembd as a translator of *Il pastor fido*, see also Verkuyl 1971, esp. 227-51.

addition to linking the siege and fall of Haarlem to the Trojan war, van der Eemdb interwove textual passages from P.C. Hooft's historical tragedy *Geeraerd van Velsen* (1613), on the murder of Count Floris V of Holland in 1296, in which the chorus joyfully proclaims the legitimacy of inevitably bloody revolts against tyranny. He unabashedly confessed his lingering hatred of Spain—indeed he can feel little else other than their barbarity against his native city—and he reminds the young citizens of Haarlem, the children of the generation who suffered through famine, hardship, and slaughter perpetrated by the Spanish soldiers, that they must remain forever vigilant against this omnipresent threat.

The fundamental structure of a siege play—the lamentable plight of the besieged and the cruelty or magnanimity of the victor—underlies the Sophonisba story, and it is not surprising therefore that a year after the successful performance of *Haerlemse Belegeringh*, van der Eemdb once again turned to relatively similar material for his *Sophonisba*. But this tragedy has a markedly different structure than the earlier play where van der Eemdb incorporated traditional *Rederijker* personifications and *tableaux vivants* with detailed historical scenes representing the monthly progress of the fateful siege.¹⁶ *Sophonisba* was written in the neoclassical mode of sixteenth-century French tragedy with careful attention paid to maintaining the three unities of time, place, and action restricting the number of characters within a given scene, and a concluding chorus to each of the five acts. The sole allegorical figure 't *Gerucht* (Rumour) functions as the prologue to introduce the historical prehistory to the events about to unfold on stage, but, in contrast to its steady presence and various manifestations as 'good and bad news' in *Haerlemse Belegeringh*, Rumour withdraws completely here after opening the play.

Such changes are not surprising. Van der Eemdb wrote his *Sophonisba* for the Eglantine Chamber in Amsterdam which championed the new neoclassical style of French Renaissance drama with occasional local touches, such as the appearance of personified cities and rivers and even of the hellish Furies. But van der Eemdb's poetic ambitions extended well beyond structural imitation; he also pursued an innovative approach to his historical sources and his likely French models. Like most Renaissance playwrights, he is silent about the classical historians he followed in recounting Sophonisba's final days, and no mention is made of earlier Renaissance treatments of the same material. In his prefatory apologia to potential critics ('tot de vroege Berispers ende late Beteraers'), he asks their indulgence for his free adaptation of the ancient sources and especially for

¹⁶ On such *tableaux vivants*, see Hummelen 1992, 193-222.

his inventive introduction of Sophonisba's ghost in the final act, but he does not elaborate further. It is clear in the prologue that van der Eemdb has been following Livy's account to the story, and many key events, including the siege and fall of Cirta, Sophonisba's capital city, are quickly summarized so that the play itself can focus on the last twenty-four hours of the Masinissa-Sophonisba relationship.

This creative approach to the lovers' romance is indebted to, and at the same time, distinct from sixteenth-century treatments of the subject. Van der Eemdb's familiarity with earlier Renaissance versions was most likely acquired through his knowledge of French. He was not competent in Italian, and his earlier Dutch translation of Guarini had been mediated through preceding French versions. Of the possible French plays he may have known, the translations of Trissino and the Sophonisba dramas of Montchrestien and Montreux, his own play seems most indebted to Montchrestien. The latter had drawn on Trissino's sympathetic representation of the beleaguered queen and greatly amplified her role as well as that of Masinissa with several rhetorically elaborate and introspective monologues, often culminating in *tirades* for the emotionally distraught lovers. Montchrestien's casting of the star-crossed romance as the workings of the vengeful Fury Megere against Masinissa (Act III), and his expansion of the lamentations of the overly sexed Masinissa as first described by Petrarch in his *Africa* and vividly retold by Bandello, formed the foundation of van der Eemdb's play. Despite the title of his work, Montchrestien's *La Carthaginoise* focuses on Masinissa and his decision to choose Rome over Sophonisba. As in Trissino's tragedy Sophonisba appears prominently at three key moments: her opening lamentation about the impending fall of Cirta and the capture of her husband Syphax, her pleading with Masinissa that she not be sent to Rome, and her final moments as she welcomes death by poison. The remainder of Montchrestien's exposition consists of debates between Masinissa and the Romans, first with his fellow commander Laelius, and later with the forgiving but resolute Scipio Africanus. In his approach to the play, however, van der Eemdb sought to maintain a balance between scenes devoted to the contrastive mental states of Masinissa and Sophonisba, an expansion of Montchrestien's representation, which he realizes by limiting the scenes in which both lovers are on stage, delaying their last fateful encounter until the end, and even extending it beyond Sophonisba's suicide by introducing her ghost.

Van der Eemdb likely had multiple reasons for his creative adaptation of Montchrestien and his unique representation of the material. Beyond his own poetic ambitions, recounting the siege of Cirta and its effect on Sophonisba and Syphax may have seemed too similar to his earlier Haarlem siege play. By shifting the emphasis from these political and military events, familiar

already from the sources, he was able to transform the play into a domestic tragedy between a weak and ultimately faithless lover/husband and his unjustly treated spouse. Moreover, van der Eemdb takes pains to characterize Sophonisba as an innocent victim of Masinissa's unbridled lust rather than as the manipulative, politically astute seductress of Petrarch, Bandello, and Montchrestien. By commencing his play at a later stage in the Masinissa-Sophonisba relationship, van der Eemdb is able to avoid the ambiguity of the pivotal moment when she seeks out Masinissa among the chaos of the fall of Cirta and intentionally uses her beauty and sexual charms to convert her conqueror into a besmitten lover. In van der Eemdb, whatever seduction has happened occurred much earlier, especially since Masinissa, because of his Numidian blood as Livy first underscored, is especially prone to uncontrolled libidinous desire.

Having invoked Livy's reference to the 'African' propensity for sex, a quality all too frequently noted by narrators of the Sophonisba story, van der Eemdb uses that ethnic distinction to cast Masinissa as a Black man, a Moor from Mauritania in contrast to a whiter, and hence purer and more innocent, Sophonisba. Livy was the first surviving classical source to connect lust with an African temperament when Sophonisba first persuaded Masinissa to help her,¹⁷ but he had already hinted at it earlier when recalling Syphax's abandonment of the alliance with Scipio because of his insatiable desire for his wife.¹⁸ For Livy, frequently Numidians are synonymous with Africans, but although there may be ethnic and geographic distinctions, he does not indicate any racial differences. Numidians and Carthaginians were ethnically Berbers as dark-skinned as many peoples on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean, but not the Blacks of sub-Saharan Africa. In Petrarch and Bandello, as well as Trissino and his French imitators, Sophonisba is unmistakably white with golden hair, an attribute that heightens the lust of her already inflamed Numidian lovers, but no mention is made of their race.¹⁹ By designating Masinissa a 'Moor', van der Eemdb aligns his characterization with contemporary connotations of Moors as dark-brown or Black peoples from Mauritania, who in the moralistically inflected spectrum of the early seventeenth century were easily linked with devils.²⁰ This is certainly van der Eemdb's intention in this final act, when Masinissa's race

¹⁷ Livy, *Ab Vrbe condita* XXX, 12, 18.

¹⁸ Livy, *Ab Vrbe condita* XXX, 3, 4 and 7, 9.

¹⁹ See, e.g. Petrarca, *Africa* V, 23-29; Bandello 1992, 384.

²⁰ See *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*, s.v. "moor" A 1: "helsche mooren" (hellish moors).

is first mentioned, for it serves as a prelude to his mad, nightmarish descent into hell in retribution for his faithlessness to Sophonisba.²¹

Given these significant deviations from the previous Renaissance representations of Sophonisba, it is not surprising that van der Eemdb would be especially defensive about his innovative approach. He feared that learned readers of his play may quibble about the introduction of Sophonisba's ghost, or about the compression of the Sophonisba-Syphax relationship into a few lines in the prologue. As a pre-emptive measure, van der Eemdb, following Horace, reminded his readers that poetic works may be more inventive than historical narratives, and more importantly, that fictional accounts have as much intellectual value as other texts.²² Perhaps to impress well-schooled Eglantine members, he adduces a reference from Plutarch in which the Greek historian and philosopher quotes the rhetorician Gorgias on the value of tragedy as 'a deception, in which the one who deceives is more just than the one who does not deceive, and the one who is deceived is more intelligent than the one who is not deceived'.²³ Van der Eemdb leaves this artfully fashioned, paradoxical, reference without any explanation, and one wonders what his contemporaries made of it. But if they knew the Plutarchian context, they would have understood the deceiver as the poet who makes the imaginary real through his elegant language to the delight and instruction (the increased wisdom) of his audience.

Van der Eemdb's inclusion of fictive characters within his historical tragedy was intended to provide additional space for the deeper exploration of a particular emotion or a set of emotions in conflict. He greatly expands the small role accorded Masinissa's lieutenant in Montchrestien's play, here called Amystas, who underscores the inhumanity of Masinissa's demands by refusing to carry them out. With Sophonisbe's ghost, moreover, he probed the extent of Masinissa's remorse and his belated recognition of unchecked lust. In his highly original final act, van der Eemdb sought to improve upon the inconclusive and even contradictory endings that previous dramatists had attempted. Earlier playwrights had wrestled with the best way to balance Masinissa's decision to send Sophonisba the poison with her subsequent suicide as a courageous and noble action, worthy of contemplation and imitation. Masinissa's resolution to follow Scipio's advice about taming his unchecked sexual desires—a useful practical lesson in both the ancient and Christian world—followed by his ascent to the kingship once held by the now vanquished Syphax is most certainly a triumphant moment. But this valuable

²¹ See, e.g., Waite 2013, and on the Moor on the Dutch stage, Smith 2020.

²² van der Eemdb 1639, fol. *2r-*3v.

²³ Plutarch, *De gloria Atheniensium* 25 (*Moralia* 348C); *De audiendis poetis* 2 (*Moralia* 15D).

moral lesson makes light of his earlier promise to Sophonisba to protect her and denigrates her into a self-serving seductress deserving of her misfortune. Even if Masinissa is overcome with remorse, the kingship still awaits him after Sophonisba's death, and his ability to reach the tough decision to follow Rome and reject her underscores his readiness for assuming the heavy responsibilities of the throne.

All of the earlier sixteenth-century versions—Trissino and the original French tragedies—devote considerable space to Masinissa's lamentations before and after his fateful decision; Trissino, in fact, incurred the disapproval of later writers by allowing a weeping Masinissa to barge onto the scene after Sophonisba's inspiring and courageous suicide, disrupting the sublimity of this innocent woman's undeserved death. Montchrestien's Masinissa casts himself as a victim of the harshness of Roman law that demands Sophonisba as war booty, and following Petrarch/ Bandello, even imagines joining her in death so they could enjoy eternity with other lovers in the Elysian Fields. He does not of course kill himself—in contrast to the Masinissa of Jean Mairet's 1635 play—but he numbers himself already among the 'walking dead' for there is no pleasure without her 'whose name and memory will never be erased from his heart.'²⁴ Montreux has his Masinissa adopt an even more self-deprecating stance: he may have made the right decision in accordance with Roman law, but he is ashamed of his disloyalty to her, and his earlier disloyalty to Scipio—weaknesses that undermine his qualifications for kingship—and proclaims Sophonisba herself superior and even worthy of divinity because of her constancy and courage. He imagines her body lying in a state of permanent and uncorrupted beauty in the tomb where it will flourish embalmed with flowers.²⁵ Moreover, Scipio himself, upon learning of her suicide, praises her virtuous behaviour, declaring himself—and Rome—overcome by such noble behaviour.²⁶ Montreux also has Scipio and Masinissa discuss the legitimacy of Roman rule, and praises Sophonisba for not enduring slavery.²⁷

In all of these earlier representations, Sophonisba though saddened by Masinissa's decision, does not blame him for her unhappy fate, nor does she call for vengeance to punish him for his infidelity; her anger is directed, rather, at Rome. Van der Eemdb interprets Masinissa's actions much more

²⁴ "Meurs donques pour reuiure à iamais immortelle; | Je viurai pour mourir en douleur
eternelle:|...Ni l'espace du temps, ni la longue distance, | Ni l'accident mortel, ni toute autre
rigueur | N'effacera ton nom graué dedans mon coeur." Montchrestien, *La Carthaginoise*,
ed. Petit de Julleville (ed.) 1891, 152. Cf. Mairet 1969, 113-15 (Act V, 8).

²⁵ Montreux 1976, 133-36 (Act V, ll. 2289-2400).

²⁶ Montreux 1976, 147-48 (Act V, ll. 2721-2760).

²⁷ Montreux 1976, 12-13.

critically, and in intensifying Sophonisba's innocence and the injustice of her undeserved fate, he condemns the Moor to death. His race is now coupled with culpability: he has sinned against his loyal wife whose only weakness, though certainly not a flaw, had been to trust him too readily. In the play's final moments, lapsing into madness induced by visions of Sophonisba's ghost as an avenging Fury, he imagines himself being slowly gnawed to death by a 'Kanker-worm' whom he implores to torment him more sharply to hasten his inevitable demise.²⁸ With this final scene, van der Eemdb has returned to the vengeful world of the *Haerlemse Belegeringh* in which victims repeatedly call for divine justice to punish their persecutors. There are no loose ends in van der Eemdb tragedy: Masinissa's disloyalty to Sophonisba is not a temporary state from which he will later recover as the king of a restored Numidia. Rather, despite his generous offer to protect Sophonisba, he has been revealed to be little else than a vile seducer, bent on satiating his irrepressible sexual desire as many Black Africans allegedly do, akin to devils inciting pandemonium throughout the world. In abandoning Sophonisba, Masinissa has not triumphed over sexual desire but remains enslaved to it and worthy of eternal damnation for his participation in the slaughter of an innocent victim. For the first time in a Sophonisba play, divine justice has prevailed and restored order to a chaotic world that Rome itself with its harsh, inflexible practices is revealed to be unworthy to govern.

Guilliam van Nieuwelandt, *Sophonisba Africana* (1625)

Alongside the publication of *Sophonisba* in 1621, van der Eemdb also saw through the press his Dutch adaptation of Pierre d'Avity's massive compendium of global history and geography, *Wereld Spiegel*.²⁹ In his dedicatory preface to the Stadtholder Maurice, van der Eemdb made plain the value of historical texts as manifestations of divine justice through their vivid portraits ('schilderye') of bygone exemplars of wise as well as tyrannous behaviour.³⁰ This providential view of history was likewise apparent in van der Eemdb's critical reading of the encounter between Black Masinissa and Rome, and of the legitimacy of his horrendous death. Despite its pagan setting, Christian morality still informed van der Eemdb's shaping of the plot, and more importantly, his concept of history and historical change. In contrast to this simplification of the complex relationship between Sophonisba and her lovers by limiting the tragedy to the final hours of the fateful romance, van Nieuwelandt recreated the larger geopolitical circumstances in which the

²⁸ Van der Eemdb 1621, fol. Fv.

²⁹ Pierre d'Avity, trans. Govert van der Eemdb 1621. In 1628 Johann Ludwig Gottfried published a Latin translation: d'Avity 1628.

³⁰ Van der Eemdb 1621, fol. a3v.

plot unfolds to delight his historically minded patron and to escape from the Manichean understanding of history that shaped van der Eembd's play.

Van Nieuwelandt was born in Antwerp in 1583 or 1584 where he lived during the first years of his life.³¹ In 1589, when he was five years old, his Protestant family fled the re-catholicized city in the Southern Netherlands and went to Amsterdam in the more Protestant northern part. There van Nieuwelandt was apprenticed to the painter Jacob Maertensz Savery (ca. 1565-1603), who was born in the Southern Netherlands, had settled in Haarlem and started his workshop in Amsterdam in 1589.³² After three years van Nieuwelandt made a 'grand tour' to become one of the many Flemish-Dutch painters in Rome.³³ There, he spent some years (1601-1604) in the workshop of his uncle Guiliam van Nieuwelandt I (1560-1626) and in 1604 with the painter Paulus Bril;³⁴ he then returned to Amsterdam, where he settled for three years (1604-1606) and married Anna Hustaert in February 1606. From 1606 to 1629 he lived in Antwerp, where he was a member of the St. Luke's Guild, a corporation of artists and art dealers. After May 1629 he went back to Amsterdam, where he died in 1635.

In 1615, during his Antwerp years (1606-1629), the painter van Nieuwelandt who was also highly interested in poetry became a member of the re-established rhetoricians' chamber *De Olyftak* (Olivebranch). One of the regular activities of such societies was the writing of dramas, and van Nieuwelandt also wrote theatre plays. In November and December 1615 his history plays *Saul* and *Livia* were performed; both tragedies were published in 1617. Another historical tragedy *Nero* was published in 1618. However, in 1619-1620, the relationship between van Nieuwelandt and the *Olyftak* cooled down.³⁵ In the years 1620-1621, he left the chamber and associated with members of the competitive chamber *De Violieren*. This chamber performed his *Spel van Cleopatra* (1624), that was printed as *Aegyptica ofte Aegyptische Tragoedie van M. Anthonius en Cleopatra*. In 1625 he wrote his *Sophonisba Aphricana*, which was performed four times at the *Violieren* in February 1626;³⁶ an edition of the play was presumably issued in the same year, but this version has been lost.³⁷ After van Nieuwelandt returned to Amsterdam,

³¹ A sketch of his life is given by Van den Brande 1875 and Keersmaekers 1957, 27-50. See also Sluijter 2015.

³² On him, see Bauer 2012.

³³ See, e.g., Jansen & Luijten (eds.) 1988; Levine a.o. (eds.) 1991; Allart & N Dacos 1995.

³⁴ See also Schatborn a.o. 2001, 38-43, and Sluijter 2015. On Van Nieuwelandt I, see Hoogewerff 1961 and van Hille 1965; on Paulus Bril, see te Slaa 2014.

³⁵ It is not known why this happened. Keersmaekers 1957, 40, gives some speculations.

³⁶ Keersmaekers 1957, 42-43.

³⁷ Sweertius 1628, 315 wrote: "Guilielmus Nieulantius, Antuerpiensis Pictor et Poeta Belgicus inter primos, mihi familiarissimus, edidit et publice exhibuit coram Senatu

two new editions were issued, both by Amsterdam printers: one by Anthony Jacobsz in 1635, probably after a performance in the city, and a second by Broer Jansz in 1639.³⁸ In Antwerp, he wrote two other tragedies, *Salomon* (1628), printed in Antwerp, and *Ierusalems verwoestingh, door Nabuchodonosor*, printed in 1635 in Amsterdam. It is unlikely that van Nieuwelandt was active in the rhetoricians' life in Amsterdam. All three of the plays he published there were dedicated to Antwerp contacts, i.e., *Salomon* to the Antwerp secretary ('griffier') Gillis Fabri; *Ierusalems verwoestingh* to the merchant Gaspar Duarte; and *Sophonisba Aphricana* to Ioan Baptista van Lemens – all members and patrons of *De Violieren*.³⁹

The first edition of *Treur-Spel van Sophonisba Aphricana* (*Sophonisba*) is lost; we base ourselves, however, on the third edition of 1639, the last printed seventeenth-century edition.⁴⁰ The title of the work is striking: no previous Sophonisba play had referred to her as an African. Van Nieuwelandt—or his publisher—may have added this geographical designation to promote the sales of the work; his previous play was entitled *Aegyptica ofte Aegyptische tragoedie van M. Anthonius en Cleopatra*, so such designations were not unusual. But the application of 'African' to Sophonisba may have also been a reference to Montchrestien's earlier *La Carthaginoise*, to which van Nieuwelandt is partially indebted (see below), but it also recalls the epithet usually accorded the victorious Scipio during the Second Punic War, Scipio Africanus, a foreshadowing of the unusually large role accorded him in this play.

Van Nieuwelandt explains in his dedicatory letter to the Antwerp merchant Ioan (Johannes) Baptista van Lemens, that he has taken special pains to follow the historical accounts of Livy and Plutarch in composing his drama.⁴¹

Antuerpiae maximo applausu Tragoedias VI. Saul, Neronem, Liuiam, Cleopatram, Sophonisbam et Salomonem, in gratiam sodalium Collegii Oliuiferi rami ... et pictorum Antuerpiae 1617 et 1624, 1626 typis Guilielmi van Tongeren." See also Keersmaekers 1957, 43 and n. 78.

³⁸ Van Nieuwelandt 1635 and 1639. On Van Nieuwelandt as a poet in Amsterdam, see Hummelen 1982, 235.

³⁹ On Duarte or De Weert, see Ramakers 2014, esp. 299 and 333; on his gift to the chamber of a dress for the Sophonisba character, see 299-301; van Lemens sponsored the costume for Syphax: van Straelen 1854, 70.

⁴⁰ This is available on the internet: https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/nieu001soph03_01/index.php. On the first edition, see Keersmaekers 1957, 284. The second edition is available at <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/v1ZJLhHfLMOXJVVEkAkJ25iU>. On this play, see Keersmaekers 1957, 110-113; Meeus 1983, 124, nr. 171; Schönle 1968, 100-105 and 111-120.

⁴¹ For Livy as a source for the Sophonisba story, see above, p. 74 and n. 3; The Plutarch source is from his *Life of Scipio Africanus*, already lost in Antiquity; the reference is to the Latin *Life of Scipio* written by Donato Acciaiuoli in 1567/1468, which was regularly printed with the Latin *Lives* of Plutarch. A French translation of this Latin reconstruction by Charles

Van Lemens was an ardent supporter of *De Violieren* and especially of their lavish theatrical productions; he funded the elaborate costume for the hapless Numidian king Syphax, a major role in van Nieuwelandt's play, for the Antwerp performances in the 1620s.⁴² But besides rehearsing the usual apologia for drama attributed to Simonides and Plutarch concerning theatrical productions as 'speaking pictures', a commonplace in rhetorician drama, van Nieuwelandt betrays his affection for Scipio. The Roman general, he recalls, was especially fond of reading history during his contemplative moments, for he drew on the actions of past exemplars to shape his own decisions about pending military and political matters.⁴³

It is not surprising then that Scipio is accorded the leading role in the play. The work in fact handily divides into two halves, the first devoted to Scipio as a political leader and his relationship with the Numidians Masinissa and Syphax as well as with the Carthaginian leader Hasdrubal, and the second devoted primarily to Masinissa's love affair with Sophonisba, and the former's victory over his lustful desires thanks to Scipio's intervention. Van Nieuwelandt draws heavily on Livy's account of Scipio's campaign in Spain against Hasdrubal, his ensuing debate before the Senate in Rome about invading Carthage to lure Hannibal away from southern Italy and back to his homeland, and his adroit appeals to Syphax and Masinissa to remain allied with Rome against Hasdrubal. Scipio is portrayed as a wise, realistic politician who, though victorious on the battlefield, attempts to resolve territorial and political conflict through negotiation. His reputation as a paragon of virtue induces Masinissa to seek him out as an ally, and his leniency to those who sincerely regret their rebelliousness towards Rome garners him even more accolades. Only Hasdrubal remains sceptical of Scipio's peace overtures regarding them as a devious way for Rome to expand its influence across the Mediterranean without bloodshed.

This unusual conjoining of episodes from the earlier career of Scipio with the Sophonisba story no doubt pleased the historically minded Van Lemens.

de L'Ecluse was included in Amyot's edition of a French translation of the *Lives*, see above, n. 6. In the third Amyot edition of 1567, where this *Life* first appears, the *Life of Scipio* has no separate paratexts – although it has a separate pagination – but later editions (e.g. Geneva 1594, 696 indicate that it is a translation from the Latin by Acciaiuoli, see Pade 2007, I, 37 (Antiquity) and 337-338 (Italy/France/England) (with many thanks to Johann Ramminger). Fragments of the lost life are collected in Plutarch, *Moralia* 15, ed. F.H. Sandbach, Cambridge MA, 1969 *Loeb Classical Library* 429, 76-79 ('Fragments from lost *Lives*').

⁴² See van Nieuwelandt's dedication in *Sophonisba Aphricana*, van Nieuwelandt 1639, fol. A2r-A3r. Van Lemens donated the "cloak of king Syphax" (het cleet vanden coninck Sifaex), see Donnet 1907, 163 (see also above, n. 37); on van Lemens, see *ibidem*, 165.

⁴³ Van Nieuwelandt 1639, fol. A2r-v: "Simonides, Plutarchus, ende eenige andere noemen de Gedichten sprekende Schilderijen, ende de Schilderijen, stomme Gedichten" (A2v).

Narratives of Scipio's exemplary virtue were popular in the Renaissance, especially the famous episode recounted by Livy concerning Scipio's magnanimous restoration of a beautiful Spanish female captive to her family.⁴⁴ Instead of enjoying her as 'war booty' for his successful suppression of the revolt, Scipio insisted that the wedding with her fiancé, a conspirator against Rome, proceed, and he offered the monetary gift he received from her family in gratitude to the newly married couple. This episode, the so-called 'Continence (or Generosity) of Scipio' was represented in several early modern paintings, most notably that of Peter Paul Rubens which had been recently created in Antwerp in the 1610s.⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly, van Nieuwelandt includes several references to this episode in his work to help Masinissa, who admired Scipio even more deeply than he desired Sophonisba, to discipline his own desires and prove himself worthy of Scipio's affection. Not only did Masinissa triumph on the battlefield against Syphax, who, spurred on by his wife's beauty, foolishly challenged Rome, but prodded by Scipio, he learned to conquer himself and demonstrate his worthiness of the kingship Scipio awarded him.

Beyond this expanded representation of Scipio, van Nieuwelandt inserted several small nuggets of historical detail that in the printed version of the play at least would have pleased van Lemens' fondness for history, and perhaps even tested his knowledge of the past. In addition to lesser known passages from Livy, van Nieuwelandt drew on writers such as Herodotus, Sallust, Valerius Maximus, and Justinus, whom he does not openly acknowledge, to amplify the historical background to the events on stage. Several characters refer to historical events that antedate the present moment thereby broadening the historical spectrum concerning their reactions to the vicissitudes of fortune. Sophonisba's nurse reminds her mistress that Scipio's generosity and mercy are legendary: just as he forgave the recalcitrant Iberian rebels Indibilis and Mandonius after conquering them,⁴⁶ so too will he not subject Sophonisba to Roman captivity. Scipio opens the fourth act with a reference to the many false accusations he had to endure because of his alleged sympathy for the local Roman commander Pleminius who had wrongly seized the property of the Locrians.⁴⁷ Later when reprimanding Masinissa, Scipio likens the captive queen to the women who prostitute themselves in

⁴⁴ Livy, *Ab Vrbe condita* XXIX, 10, 10.

⁴⁵ Pieter Paul Rubens, *The Continence of Scipio* (ca. 1618-1620), private collection (see <https://rkd.nl/en/explore/images/17841>); Anthony van Dyck, *The Continence of Scipio* (1621), University of Oxford, Christ Church (<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-continence-of-scipio-229224>). On the popularity of the theme of the Continence or Clemency of Scipio, especially in Dutch art, see Kunzle 2002.

⁴⁶ Livy, *Ab Vrbe condita* XXIX, 3, 4.

⁴⁷ Livy, *Ab Vrbe condita* XXIX, 18-22.

the temple of Venus at Sicca, a Numidian border town, to acquire funds for their dowries.⁴⁸ And the Act IV chorus refers to Tellus the Athenian, whom Solon had considered the happiest of men, in likening the virtues of Scipio and Masinissa to this exemplary Greek warrior.⁴⁹

The most significant historical amplification occurs at the climax of the passionate encounter between Sophonisba and Masinissa, when she clarifies her relationship to the historical Dido who had built Carthage after fleeing from her home in Phoenicia. Earlier Sophonisba texts had drawn parallels between her and Vergil's Dido, for she, like Dido before her, would be abandoned by her lover for the sake of Rome and kill herself. In the midst of their love-making in Act IV, Sophonisba reminds Masinissa that she is responding to his desire not out of fear or disloyalty to Syphax but because of her love for her homeland. She likens her patriotic ardour to that of the Carthaginian brothers Philaeni who allowed themselves to be buried alive so that the boundaries of their new homeland could be established.⁵⁰ She further tells Masinissa that the Vergilian account of Aeneas' abandonment of Dido was a Roman fabrication and misappropriation of the heroic actions of the historical Dido as the loyal widow of her deceased spouse. Vergil had denigrated the historical Dido to a desperate abandoned lover to glorify Aeneas's triumph over his lust, but the historical Dido remained true to her Phoenician spouse and refused the advances of the Mauritanian king Iarbas who threatened to declare war unless she marry him. She chose, however, to remain faithful to her late husband rather than accede to Iarbas' demand; in killing herself, she removed the threat of war, and the Carthaginians later deified her for her loyalty to them.⁵¹ As she lays dying in the final act, Sophonisba imagines Dido coming to greet her, but this is not the Vergilian Dido of despair but the historical Dido celebrating her liberation from a lustful male suitor. Framing these scenes around material derived from Sallust and Justinus, van Nieuwelandt moves beyond Livy and both enriches and augments the complexity of Sophonisba's actions. Like most rhetorician dramas, the play was written to represent a moral lesson, in this case, self-control – shown in the play by Masinissa –, as markedly expressed on the title page:

Wie dat hem self verwint/bethoont veel grooter kracht/
Dan die van Steden groot/de Mueren breekt met macht.

⁴⁸ Valerius Maximus, *Facta et dicta memorabilia* II, 6, 15.

⁴⁹ Herodotus, *Historiae*, I, 30.

⁵⁰ Sallust, *Bellum Iugurthinum*, 79; Valerius Maximus, *Facta et dicta memorabilia*, V, 6 ext. 4.

⁵¹ Justinus/Pompeius Trogus, *Historiae*, XVIII, 5, 1-8.

Whoever controls himself shows a much greater power
than he who forcefully breaks the walls of big cities.

(Trans. JB and JP)⁵²

In the manner of rhetoricians' plays and like van der Eembd's *Haerlemse belegeringh*, it also contains *tableaux vivants* ("verthooningen"). For instance, after the first scene of Act III, (1) offerings to the gods by Scipio are shown, then (2) – in contrast – Syphax' misery, and (3) a third *tableau* represents the battle between Scipio and Masinissa on one side and Syphax and Hasdrubal on the other. At the end of the play, three *tableaux* are likewise portrayed: (1) Love and Death triumphing over Syphax and Sophonisba, Scipio crowning Masinissa ruler of Numidia, and Virtue, Honour, Fame, Glory, Rome, and Victory embracing one another; (2) Fame hand-in-hand with Immortality triumphing over death, and Victory embracing Scipio and Masinissa; (3) Themis, the goddess of justice, grants Scipio immortality, and Virtue, Honour, Fame and Glory lead Masinissa since he has conquered death and love. Likewise, a company of Fear, Despair, Grief, Prison, Misery, Hunger, Unsteadiness and Deceit dance before Sophonisba's eyes, thus representing a vision that appears to her just after she drank the poison in V, 2.⁵³

Van Nieuwelandt emphasized Scipio's prudent and pious leadership, Sophonisba's deep love for Syphax, and her infidelity in entreating Masinissa to protect her and her people. Recurrently he underscored the opposition between Roman courage and the inconstancy of Carthaginians and Numidians.⁵⁴

Sophonisba, however, is not only a rhetoricians' play; it also has traits of a Senecan drama with five acts and the exploration of intense emotions. One of the scenes may well be a creative imitation of the *Octavia*, ascribed to the Roman philosopher: In both scenes, a wet-nurse-confidante tries to convince the protagonist to return the love of their unwanted husbands, viz. Masinissa in *Sophonisba*, and the emperor Nero in *Octavia*.⁵⁵

Its structure is quite exceptional. In the first three acts, van Nieuwelandt explores at length the historical circumstances of the Sophonisba story, i.e. the political and military developments of the time as told by Livy, to such an extent that readers who do not have Livy's history at hand, may find it

⁵² Cf. Proverbs 16, 32b: 'one whose temper is controlled [is better] than one who captures a city' (NRSVA). The lines return in the tragedy itself, in IV, 1 and (with slight variation) in V, 3, both times said by Scipio, to Syphax and Masinissa respectively.

⁵³ Van Nieuwelandt, *Sophonisba Africana* V, 2, Van Nieuwelandt 1639, fol. G4v.

⁵⁴ See also Golahny 2006, esp. 176.

⁵⁵ Keersmaekers 1957, 112; the scenes at stake are Sophonisba IV.2 and *Octavia* ll. 72-272. On the Senecan character of van der Eembd's and van Nieuwelandt's Sophonisba dramas, see also Worp 1892:, 144-148 (van der Eembd) and 150-151 (van Nieuwelandt).

difficult to understand the situation. Many passages can be compared with Livy's *Ab Vrbe condita*, books XXVIII-XXX.⁵⁶ Van Nieuwelandt also mentioned Appian as his source, but his biographer Keersmakers could not find any traces of the Greek historian's treatment.⁵⁷

However, the play is also transnational in the way that it draws on earlier Renaissance literary traditions. Some passages were adapted from Robert Garnier's French tragedy *Les Juifves* (1582), the Dutch history play *Geeraert van Velsen* (1613) by P.C. Hooft, and van der Eembd's *Sophonisba* (1621).⁵⁸ Following Montchrestien and van der Eembd, van Nieuwelandt also uses Petrarchistic language to describe the beauty of the queen and the passion of Syphax and Masinissa for her.⁵⁹ Syphax expresses his love for Sophonisba first, but does so in 'ordinary' language, although still unabashedly frank. He wishes that Juno will unite them heart and soul, and that the god of marriage, Hymenaeus, will unite their bodies.⁶⁰ After the fall of Cirta, Sophonisba expresses her grief over the capture of Syphax to her

⁵⁶ Keersmaekers 1957, 112-113 gives a detailed overview of passages of Livy's history that inspired lines by van Nieuwelandt. See also above, p. 2.

⁵⁷ Keersmaekers 1957, 111; for the places in Appian, see above, n. 6.

⁵⁸ Cf. *Sophonisba* IV, 1, van Nieuwelandt 1639, fol. E3v, ll. 1275-1320), where Syphax begs for mercy from Scipio with Garnier, *Les Juifves* IV, 2, ll. 1318-1328 and 1413-1416; cf. *Sophonisba* I, 2, fol. B3v, l. 259: "Noyt sorght den Prins genoegh, die sorght voor sijnen staet" with Hooft, *Geeraert van Velsen* l. 772: "Nooit zorgd' hij ver genoeg, die zorgde voor een staat", and V, 2, fol. H1r, l. 2174: "O! Schepper, ick ontschep, om 't geen dat ick verwacht" with Hooft, *Geeraert van Velsen*, l. 1315: "O Schepper, ik ontschep, ontsluit mij Uw genade"; cf. *Sophonisba* V, 1 (fol. F4r), ll. 1703-10: "Ghy hebt het oock verdient door Ridderlijke daden, | Door my trou by te staen, en wijselijck te raden: | Maer hoe ghy grooter zijt van deughden en gemoet, | Hoe dat ick meerder my van u verwond'ren moet. | Dat ghy door dwase Min u selven hebt vergeten' with van der Eembd's *Sophonisba* III, 1 (fol. C2r): 'Doch hier in kan ick my naeuwlijcks genoegh verwond'ren, | Dat gy, die zijt in deught van Princen uyt te zond'ren, | En oyt standvastigh waert van hert en van gemoed, | In voorneem niet te wulps, maer redelijck en vroed, | Gedweegh, verduldigh, langsaem, niet te wispeltuyrigh | Van sinnen, matigh en beleeft; niet ongeduyrigh; | Niet geyl, niet wulfs, noch weyts, noch weyfligh in u doen: | Maer trouw oprecht, en vroom, lief-taligh met de goe'n; | Ja die noyt hebt geweest van eer noch lof te scheyden, | U nu hebt laten van een teng're Vrouw verleyden", the letter Masinissa writes to Sophonisba, *Sophonisba* V, 1, fol. G1v-G2r, ll. 1842-1882, with van der Eembd's *Sophonisba* II, 1, fol. B3v; cf. *Sophonisba*, ll. 1271-1316 with Garnier, *Les Juifves*, 1413-1456; Garnier's *Les Juifves* also inspired van Nieuwelandt to write his *Ieruselems Verwoestingh*, see Keersmaekers 1957, 116-121. On the reception of Garnier in the Low Countries, see also van Moerkerken 1894, 193-208.

⁵⁹ On European Petrarchism, Forster 1969 is still fundamental for Petrarchism as an international literary phenomenon. See also, e.g., Kennedy 2003, who connects Petrarchism to nationalism as exemplified by Petrarch, Du Bellay and Sidney, respectively. See also Hempfer & Regn (eds.) 199; Bernsen & Huss (eds.) 2009, and especially Hus 2009. For Petrarchism in Dutch literature, see Ypes 1934.

⁶⁰ *Sophonisba* II, 2, fol. D2v, ll. 858-859: "Dat Iuno dan vereent ons hart en ziel te samen, | Dat Hymeneus dan vereenigh ons lichamen."

nurse Edissa (another name for the Biblical figure of Esther), and her continuing love for him. She does so in restrained Petrarchistic expressions, declaring that her soul remains with the absent Syphax, for whom she still longs, and will continue to do so even until death.⁶¹

The strongest Petrarchistic language is used by her second lover. In III, 4, the armed Massinissa tells Sophonisba that he has to go to war, and she in return articulates her grief. The general then expresses his love for her. He does so in highly Petrarchistic language. He starts his praise of Sophonisba thus:

Ha! Conincklijke Vrou, laet mijne lippen raecken
 't Corael van uwen mondt waer in de liefde woont.

Ah! Royal woman, let my lips touch the coral of your mouth in which
 love lives.⁶²

She is a ‘mistress of his heart’, his heart is wounded by her face, and the flame of her fire burns his soul.⁶³ Nor is the Petrarchistic paradox absent when he speaks about her as his goddess who caused bitter-sweet wounds.⁶⁴ Similar praise can be found later when Masinissa in the manner of Petrarchan poetry enumerates his beloved Sophonisba’s physical attributes that have bewitched him, chiefly her hair and her eyes (“two suns”, twee Sonnen).⁶⁵

This Petrarchistic language originated, unsurprisingly, in Book V of Petrarch’s *Africa*, in which the Sophonisba story is recounted. There Sophonisba’s beauty, which resembles the loveliness of Petrarch’s beloved Laura, is described as surpassing the heavenly stars, and her brow, hair, and eyes are all exceptionally enticing.⁶⁶ It is, however, not only the narrator who

⁶¹ *Sophonisba* III, 2, fol. D3v-D4v, esp. D4r, ll. 982-83: “Mijn ziel voert hy met hem, met hem ben ick gevangen, | In hem was mijnen wensch, in hem was mijn verlangen. | Hy voert mijn ziele mee, waer dat hy wort geleyt, | Ick ben tot in mijn doot te volgen hem bereyt.”

⁶² *Sophonisba* III, 4, fol. E2v, ll. 1195-96.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, ll. 1199: “Verheerster van mijn hert’ and 1204: ‘Mijn hert voel ick gewont door u gesicht te zijn’; ‘De vlam van uwen brant, doet mijne ziel verbranden.’

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, ll. 1221-1222: “ach ghy zijt mijn Goddin, | Die my veroorsaect hebt dees bitter soete wonden.”

⁶⁵ *Sophonisba* IV, 2, fol. F1r-F2v. See, e.g., F1r, ll. 1422-1427: “Ha! Triumphante Vrouw’, ghy bindt mijn ziel voorwaer, | Door dese vlechten blond’, en los gekronckelt haeyr. | Ha! Princelijke vrouw’, dees’ oogen sijn twee Sonnen, | Die schieten straelen uyt, die hebben my verwonnen. | Wie dat dees’ oogen siet, die als twee Sonnen staen, | Mach seggen dat den dagh tot rust is wegh genaen.”

⁶⁶ Petrarca, *Africa* V, 18 sqq.: “... tamen omnia longe | Regia preradians uincebat lumina coniunx. | 20 Ille nec ethereis unquam superandus ab astris | Nec Phebea foret ueritus certamina uultus | Iudice sub iusto. Stabat candore niuali | Frons alto miranda Ioui, multumque sorori | Zelotipe metuenda magis quam pellicis ulla | 25 Forma uiro dilecta uago. Fulgentior auro | Quolibet, et solis radiis factura pudorem, | Cesaries spargenda leui pendebat ab aura | Colla super, recto que sensim lactea tractu | Surgebant, humerosque agiles affusa

describes Sophonisba's beauty. Masinissa likewise expresses his love for Sophonisba in Petrarchistic terms.⁶⁷ He even wishes to die and be buried with her so they can be conjoined forever like Paolo and Francesca da Rimini from Dante's *Inferno*.⁶⁸

It is worth noting that neither Livy nor any of the other Greco-Roman sources of the Sophonisba story provided any description of her physical features but only mentioned her beauty without further detail.⁶⁹ Renaissance

tegebat | 30 Tunc, olim substricta auro certamine blando | Et placidis implexa modis: sic candida dulcis | Cum croceis iungebat honos, mixtoque colori | Aurea condensi cessissent uascula lactis, | Nixque iugis radio solis conspecta sereni. | 35 Lumina quid referam preclare subdita fronti | Inuidiam motura deis?" (...) (But his wife outshone everything by far and captivated the king's eyes. [20] Her face was never surpassed by the stars of heaven, and it need not have feared a contest with Phoebus before a just judge. Snow-white rose her brow, which must have elicited admiration even from the great Jupiter, and must inspire fear in his jealous sister far more than the beauty of any playmate whom her unsteady husband loved. Her hair, brighter than all gold and shameful to the rays of the sun, spread out in a light breeze and fell on her neck, which, white as milk, stretched gently up in a straight line, and at that moment it snuggled against her slender shoulders and covered them. [30] It had once been tied up with gold and plaited in light nooses, to which it resisted in a lovely way. Thus bright white and the colour of saffron were combined in sweet adornment, and before this colour combination golden vessels full of creamy milk had to take a backseat, as did the snow on the crests of the mountains, which is illuminated by the bright sun's rays. [35] How should I describe the eyes beneath her glorious forehead, desiring to arouse the envy of the gods? Trans. JB & JP). An analysis of the physical attributes of Sophonisba can be found in the contribution by Agbamu in this volume.

⁶⁷ See, e.g., Petrarca, *Africa* V, 534 sqq.: "Cara michi nimium, uita michi dulcior omni, | 535 Sophonisba, uale: non te, mea cura, uidebo | Leniter ethereos posthac componere uultus, | Effusosque auro religantem ex more capillos; | Dulcia non celum mulcentia uerba deosque | Oris odorati secretaque murmura carpam" (...) (Sophonisba! You are all so much loved by me and sweeter to me than all life! [535] Farewell! My darling, from now on I will see you no more, how gently you wear a heavenly expression and how you tie your spread hair with gold as you are used to! No more will I pluck sweet words that enchant heaven and gods, and secret whispers from your fragrant mouth! Trans. JB & JP).

⁶⁸ Petrarca, *Africa*, V, 540-45: "Solus ero, gelidoque insternam membra cubili. | Atque utinam socio componar, amica, sepulcro, | Et simul hic uetitos illic concorditer annos | Contingat duxisse michi! sors optima busti, | Si cinis amborum commixtis morte medullis | Van Nieuwelandtus erit ..." ([540] Alone will I be, stretching out my limbs on a freezing bed. Oh, if only I could be laid with you, beloved!, in a common grave and spend there with you in harmony the years that we are denied here! No fate is better than the pyre, when the ashes of both of us join our bodies in death [545] and become one! Trans. JB & JP).

⁶⁹ See Livy, *Ab Vrbe condita* XXX, 12, 17: "forma erat insignis et florentissima aetas" (she had a wonderful beauty and a flourishing age). Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, XVII, 51 (Dio Cassius 1914, 222-223): "Ὅτι τῆς Σοφωνίδος ἰσχυρῶς ἦρα Μασινίσσας, ἣ τό τε κάλλος ἐπιφανὲς εἶχε, καὶ γὰρ τῆ ... (Masinissa became deeply enamoured of Sophonisba, who not only possessed conspicuous beauty), and a fragment of Dio Cassius' history in Zonaras, IX, 11 (Dio Cassius 1914, 222-225): ἡ δὲ τό τε κάλλος ἐπιφανῆς ἦν καὶ συμμετρία τοῦ σώματος καὶ τῷ ἄνθει τῆς ὄρας ἠκμαζεν (She was conspicuous for beauty, had received that symmetry of body and bloom of youth).

descriptions of her stupefying beauty began with Petrarch's *Africa* and were disseminated to later writers either through Petrarch directly, or even more likely through Bandello's prose account in the French adaptation by Belleforest.⁷⁰ Thanks to Petrarch, Sophonisba is portrayed with golden-blond hair, an attribute subsequently underscored by many later writers along with her exquisitely radiant eyes. Whereas Petrarch referred to the golden fillets that bound Sophonisba's tresses, by the time of Montchrestien's *La Carthaginoise* (1601), the golden fillets have been transformed into golden locks, and from Montchrestien, the hair and eyes enter into the later Dutch versions.

From these few physical features, Montchrestien and van Nieuwelandt construct an elaborate discourse of inflamed sexual desire before, during, and after its consummation, expanding its use even beyond the lovers themselves. In Montchrestien's *La Carthaginoise* (1601), Lélie (Laelius), a Roman commander under Scipio, describes Sophonisba's beauty when he disapprovingly observes Masinissa's infatuation (Act III), just after a Furie (Fury) has threatened to disturb his and Sophonisba's happiness:⁷¹

Mais vraiment plus que toi l'on doit fuir encor,
Ces cheveux frisottés, ces tresses de fin or,
Ces sourcils ébenins, et ce beau front d'ivoire,
Ces doux yeux où l'Amour a son trône de gloire,
Cette bouche vermeille, et ces charmes coulants,
Ces agréables traits, et ses attraits brûlants :
Car ce sont les engins, qui notre forteresse,
Font rendre malgré nous au gré d'une maîtresse.

(Montchrestien, *La Carthaginoise* 951-958)

But really even more than you we must flee this curly hair, these tresses of fine gold, those ebony eyebrows, and that beautiful ivory forehead, those sweet eyes where Love has his throne of glory, this vermilion mouth, and these flowing charms, these pleasing features, and her burning attractions: for these are the engines, which make our fortress yield, despite ourselves, to please a mistress. (Trans. JB and JP)

Masinissa responds with equal fervour:

Cet oeil aussi, Lélie, en flammes nonpareil,
Combattait de clarté les rayons du Soleil:
Amour qui fait dedans l'Arsenal de ses Armes,

⁷⁰ Petrarch's *Africa* appeared in the *editio princeps* of his Latin writings: Petrarca 1501 and again in the 1503 Venetian edition. His works were even more widely distributed, especially in northern Europe, with the publication of his *Opera quae extant omnia*, Petrarca [1554]. Book V of *Africa* appears in the Basel printing on pp. 1293-99.

⁷¹ Montchrestien, *La Carthaginoise*, ll. 831-82 (Furie) and ll. 833-976 (Lélie).

Y forgeait tous les traits, et les trempait de larmes.

(De Montchrestien, *La Carthaginoise* 1003-1006)

This eye too, Lélie, in unparalleled flames, fought the rays of the Sun
with its brightness: Love which makes inside the Arsenal of its Arms,
forged there all the features, and soaked them with tears.

(Trans. JB and JP)

Van Nieuwelandt's *Sophonisba Aphricana*, then, deviates from earlier plays by greatly expanding the historical context in which the Masinissa-Sophonisba love affair unfolds, but at the same time representing the lovers' sexual desire in the erotic discourse of Petrarch.

Final Remarks

In keeping with the glorification of Scipio in the *Africa*, French Renaissance playwrights along with van der Eemdb and van Nieuwelandt present him as the conqueror of passion, a formidable paragon of near-inimitable virtue, wisdom, generosity, and military prowess. Scipio's character and reputation remain unsullied while the undisciplined Masinissa succumbs to despair and even death. But amidst this glorification of Rome, there are lingering undertones of discontent: In both Dutch plays, Sophonisba curses the Roman Empire—here again following Petrarch—for Rome's consolidation of its power has led to the enslavement of smaller, vulnerable kingdoms such as Numidia for the sake of world domination. Rome may be a philosophical and cultural model, but its militaristic ethos deprives weaker states and their citizens of liberty. In the young Dutch Republic still embroiled in a conflict with imperial Spain, sympathy for the imprisoned Syphax and especially his noble queen would have resonated among a populace all-too-familiar with the vicissitudes of near-constant warfare. During the 1620s when there was a debate in the Dutch Republic about negotiating a peace with the Spanish Habsburgs or continuing the war, van der Eemdb and van Nieuwelandt implicitly presented their audiences with reasons to prolong the conflict and liberate their people from the imperial yoke.⁷² As in the plays of Montchrestien and Montreux in which characters debate the qualities of kingship and prudent political behaviour, van der Eemdb and van Nieuwelandt reflect on the legitimacy of Roman – and implicitly, Spanish – rule. The ambiguous representation of Rome, inherent in the Sophonisba story itself, hints at the growing divide between an increasingly centralized polity and smaller

⁷² On this political aspect of early seventeenth-century drama in the Low Countries, see Eyffinger 1987 and Noak 2002, where van der Eemdb and van Nieuwelandt are not mentioned. On political aspects of drama, see also Bloemendal & Smith 2016 and Parente 1996.

independent regions ruled by ancestral customs and local dynasties. The recently conjoined provinces of the Dutch Republic were especially sensitive to, and proud of, their loosely federated structure.

The tension between Rome and its expansive incorporation of other states under its rule was especially pronounced in the *Sophonisbe* tragedy of the Silesian German playwright Daniel Casper van Lohenstein.⁷³ The German writer, who had visited Leiden in 1655, may well have discovered van Nieuwelandt's plays there, or through copies sold in the German states, for he composed tragedies on Sophonisba, Cleopatra and Mark Antony, and on Nero and his mother Agrippina, all of whom had appeared in the Flemish writer's works. Besides his *Sophonisbe* (written 1665; performed privately in 1665 and publicly in 1666; published in 1680⁷⁴), Lohenstein used the subject matter of van Nieuwelandt's *Aegyptica* in his *Cleopatra* (written 1655-60, published 1661), and of *Claudius Domitius Nero* in his *Agrippina* (1665).⁷⁵ But as a proud Silesian politically active in Breslau, a confessionally mixed community, Lohenstein was also particularly aware of the harshness of the Habsburg re-catholicization plan for his homeland. Since the Habsburgs imagined themselves as the heirs to the Roman empire, it is not surprising that Lohenstein would be attracted to works that question the desirability and legitimacy of Roman rule. As Breslau's representative to the imperial court in Vienna in the 1670s, he worked diplomatically to negotiate a rapprochement between the Habsburgs' overly zealous ambitions and local interests, in much the same way as van Nieuwelandt's Scipio had first sought a balance between Rome, Numidia, and Carthage.

Building on multiple linguistic traditions from antiquity to the Renaissance, then, van der Eemdb and van Nieuwelandt used the love affair between Sophonisba and Masinissa not only to impart valuable moral instruction, but through the historicization of that relationship, to explore the workings of Divine Providence and human agency in shaping political behaviour amidst the unrelenting turmoil of war.⁷⁶

⁷³ For a discussion of Lohenstein's complex representation of Sophonisba and Rome, see, e.g., Newman 2000, esp. 58-69 and Loos 2000.

⁷⁴ See Schönle 1968, 112-120, who lists some parallels between Lohenstein's and Van Nieuwelandt's tragedies. See also Axelrad 1956, 59-65; Skrine 1966, and Vangshardt 2023.

⁷⁵ See Schönle 1968, 111-113.

⁷⁶ This article has been written within the scope of the project *TransLatin: The Transnational Impact of Latin Theatre from the Early Modern Netherlands*, funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) and led by Jan Bloemendal (<https://translatin.nl>).

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SOPHONISBA IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

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NJRS 20 • 2023 • www.njrs.dk

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