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The anti-hero of the youth: Johannes Torrentius

Benjamin Roberts

Introduction

Today *Stilleven met kan, glas, kruik en breidel* [Still life with flagon, glass jug and bridle] (1614) in the Rijksmuseum is the only known surviving painting by Johannes Torrentius (1589-1644) and is described as an exceptional and sophisticated composition of early Dutch seventeenth century art. Portrayed in the painting under a flagon is a moral message written on a piece of music paper with the inscription: *Wat buten maat bestaat, int onmaats q[w]aat vergaat* ['Immoderate behaviour will be immoderately punished'].¹ The text is a warning to young and old not to give into human desires, but primarily these messages were directed towards young men who had not mastered moderation in relation to excesses in drinking, smoking, and behaviour in general. The painting is an allegory on moderation, yet the message Torrentius conveyed to viewers became, ironically, the failing that may have cost him a twenty year sentence in the Haarlem's correctional house. Before the trial there was little known about the painter who was born Johannes Symonzoon van der Beeck on January 20 (or sometime before), 1589 in Amsterdam. In 1627 Haarlem's town council starting combing the Dutch countryside to find damaging evidence about the eccentric and unconventional painter. One of the witnesses of Torrentius' bad behaviour declared that he had heard from a 21-year old student in Delft, Jacobus van der Aa who had drank with Torrentius five years earlier in the tavern the Regenbooch in Leiden, that Torrentius had philosophized about the existence of heaven and hell. Another young man testified that Torrentius had claimed to have slept with every whore between Leiden and The Hague, and another testified to having heard Torrentius toast to the devil's health. After all the damaging testimony was gathered, Haarlem's town council charged Torrentius for blasphemy and immoral behaviour.² According to *Beschrijving der stad Haerlem* [Description of the city of Haarlem]

¹ Christopher Brown, 'The Strange Case of Jan Torrentius: Art, Sex, and Heresy in Seventeenth-Century Haarlem' in: R. Fleischer & S. Clare Scott ed., *Rembrandt, Rubens and the Art of their Time: Recent Perspectives* (University Park, Pennsylvania 1997) 224-233.

² A. Bredius, *Johannes Torrentius: Schilder, 1589-1644* (The Hague 1909) 38-39.

(1648), its author, Theodorus Schrevelius, described Torrentius as an extravagant dresser, a copious eater and drinker, a heretic, a seducer of the burgher, a charlatan of the people, and plague for the youth.³

After the Reformation the Republic in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century found itself without good role models. Before the Reformation the pedestals of the churches were adorned with martyrs and saints who represented good morals and portrayed exemplary worldly lives. However, after the iconoclastic fury that started in 1566, young people were left with little to look up to as role models. Post-Reformation society in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century sought new examples that would depict the values of the new Republic. In the search for new heroes and a national identity that would help mould the union, the eccentric Torrentius did not fit the bill. In fact, he fulfilled the un-heroic duty of an anti-hero, which is just as important, because the negative qualities of the anti-hero make the positive traits of the hero more distinctive. Besides being labelled a bad example for the youth of the city, Torrentius' paintings were claimed to be pornographic and burned, and he was sentenced to twenty years of hard labour in Haarlem's workhouse. What did Torrentius do to deserve this sentence and to been branded with a bad reputation, and consequently the anti-hero of Haarlem's youth? This essay will investigate Torrentius' behaviour, and attempt to define the parameters of the anti-hero and bad example for Holland's youth in the 1620s.

New role models in the Republic

There are not many primary sources that can help us answer this question, therefore this essay will apply speculation where needed. Perhaps it is better to first ask who was a role model for the youth in the Republic if the talented painter Torrentius was not. According to the cultural historian Willem Frijhoff understanding the mechanism of a hero or role model is

³ 'Dese Torrentius hielde sich heel statelich, als hy op de strate quam, was altydt gelaerste en gespoort en in Phellep gekleet... Hij swoor bij de naem van de Epicurius onder 't drincken en swelgen, hadde geen geloof in Hel of Hemel, dit ginck hem na, somma was een gevaerlijc mensch een verleyder van den burger, een bedrieger van 't volck, een pest voor de jeucht...' Th. Schrevelius, *Beschrijving der stad Haerlem. Harlemias, ofte, om beter te seggen, de eerste stichtinghe der stadt Haerlem*. (Haarlem 1648) 385.

problematic because it is entirely subject to the person who chooses them, and therefore the beholder attributes distinctive (positive) character traits to that person, or an individual can have a whole series of role models that have contrasting attributes. This tradition of individuals selecting role models to look up to is firmly embedded in Western culture, and throughout Judeo-Christian history, stories of Biblical figures, saints, and martyrs have served as important role models in educating young people. The role model has an important educational purpose, it is guiding young people in everyday life. On the one hand, a role model usually is a person who has made an extraordinary achievement which elevates his stature beyond the ordinary, which makes him into a non-mortal. On the other hand, a role model needs to be a person of flesh and blood - someone the observer can relate to, has similar circumstances, and or has overcome a great struggle. If we translate the workings of this phenomenon in modern terms, male youths today for example are likely to have sports and professional athletes as role models, as sports fulfils a major social and cultural position in modern society. Men that excel in a field of sports or have mastered an athletic feat, personify the characteristics that young men might wish to possess. In Great Britain for example if an athlete from a poor economic and social background should through remarkable athletic talents and determination become successful, this would most likely elevate him to the status of role model for young people from his social and economic class. This type primarily fulfils a general role model of masculinity which is also propagated by societal norms of manhood.⁴ However, there are gradations of role models or heroes who are attributed specific virtues, talents, or skills that young men seek or pursue.

In this essay I postulate that the same role model mechanism holds true for early modern society, a society where religion and war dominated the social and cultural life. The workings of the role model and hero mechanism were equally active in early modern society in educating and influencing young people. For example, role models within each religious denomination emerged and replaced the pedestals of the Roman Catholic

⁴ Larry Miller, "The Role Model Behind a Role Model: Young, Black, and Famous, Formula 1 Racer Lewis Hamilton May Be Someone To Look Up To – Or Is He?" *CBS News* (October 22, 2007).
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/06/22/london/main2965832.shtml>

Church.⁵ Lutherans automatically sought a role model in Martin Luther, Mennonites looked to Menno Simons. In the Dutch Reformed faith, a wide range of examples and genres developed. These examples came in all shapes and sizes, and aimed at differing objectives, audiences, and varied in popularity. For example, the martyr type was a role model that was persecuted and died because of his faith. His loyalty to his belief and ultimate death was especially useful as confessional propaganda. Early modern deathbed accounts (testimonies recorded at someone's deathbed) on the other hand, did not fit in the realm of confessional rhetoric, but did console mourners, and boosted their faith. Within the Protestant tradition of examples, John Exalto identified ten distinctive sacred genres that acted as role models for young and old. The most prominent was the biblical role model, followed by the witness of the truth, the martyr, the precursor to the Reformation, the reformer, the prophet of the God of Man, the preacher, the king, ruler or stadtholder, the pious child, and the pious mother or the mother in Israel. With the exception of the pious mother, who represented raising devout children, male role models dominated these examples.⁶

Secular role models

However, because of the diversity of denominations within the Dutch Republic not all segments of the population could identify with the religious role models of the Dutch Reformed Church. The religious heterogeneity of the Republic is a prime example of the population's mosaic character. At the time only 40 percent were member of this denomination. The rest were a mélange of Roman Catholics, Mennonites, Lutherans, and a small population of Jews. Moreover, during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century the nation was a newly founded republic that claimed independence and was at war with Spain. The young nation was a loose confederation of provinces that – besides its fight against a common enemy

⁵ Willem Frijhoff, 'Witnesses to the Other: Incarnate Longings- Saints and Heroes, Idols and Models' *Studia Liturgica* 34 (2004) 1-25. See also: Willem Frijhoff, *Heiligen, idolen iconen* (Nijmegen 1998). For the pedagogical effect role models have on a collective and individual level see: Joris van Eijnatten, Fred van Lieburg, & Hans de Waardt ed., *Heiligen of helden. Opstellen voor Willem Frijhoff* (Amsterdam 2007).

⁶ John Exalto, *Gereformeerde heiligen. De religieuze exemplen-traditie in vroegmodern Nederland* (Nijmegen 2005) 273-275.

– did not have a shared identity or culture. In order to maintain unity, the Republic needed a political strongman whose religious background crossed all boundaries.⁷ The first and foremost role model that comes to mind, are military and political men from the secular domain. The father of the nation, William the Silent, who was born and raised a Roman Catholic, had converted to Lutheranism, and later to Calvinism, managed to forge a union among the seven United Provinces against Spain. His heroic role in moulding the union was honoured in a grave monument designed by one of the country's most acclaimed architects Hendrik de Keyser and erected in the centre of Delft's *Nieuwe Kerk*, in the period 1614-1622. The monument, which was accessible for the general public to admire, was oddly enough built 38 years after Willem's death.⁸ This was probably no coincidence. In the period 1609-1621 the Republic enjoyed a temporary truce with Spain. However, during this era of peace and absence of an external enemy, an internal conflict in the Dutch Reformed Church erupted between the more liberal orientated Remonstrants and the Counter Remonstrants who favoured a more orthodox interpretation of the Bible. A dispute that began as a simple theological disagreement, became an issue of discussion in all layers of civil life, and ultimately polarized society. By 1618 the Republic was on the verge of a civil war with Johan van Oldenbarnevelt as leader of the Remonstrants and the Counter Remonstrants rallying behind the stadtholder, Prince Maurits. Ultimately, the Prince managed to use the opportunity to reaffirm his power. Oldenbarnevelt was accused of treason and executed in 1619. Consequently, Remonstrant sympathizers were purged from municipal councils and replaced by Counter Remonstrant supporters. Despite the Counter Remonstrant faction being firmly placed in the political saddle, it did not mean that Remonstrant sentiment had been completely cleansed from society. In Haarlem for example, Counter Remonstrant political leaders held an uneasy suspicion of potential Remonstrant sympathies – as well as other denominations such as the Roman Catholics - that existed in society throughout the 1620s.⁹ This social and political circumstance was the backdrop of Torrentius' prosecution.

⁷ Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806* (Oxford 1995) 361-398.

⁸ Gijs van der Ham, 'Zonder verering geen held' in: Gijs van der Ham ed., *Held* (Amsterdam 2007) 17.

⁹ Gabriëlle Dorren, *Eenheid en verscheidenheid. De burgers van Haarlem in de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam 2001) 140-144; A.Th. van Deursen, *Bavianen en slijkgeuzen. Kerk en*

Prior to the 1620s, Maurits had made effective use of modern media techniques that were developed in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century to propagate his image as an national hero. Printed-matter such as broad sheets, news prints, and pictorial reports which depicted battle scenes and detailed accounts of military skirmishes fed the news-hungry public about the progress of the war. Important publishers, such as the firm of Frans Hogenberg, which was based in Cologne, produced numerous pictorial reports of military attacks, battles, and triumphal entries of armies into captured cities. The prints usually contained an illustration on top, and on the bottom there was an explanatory text. While the new media profited enormously from the war, the popularity of Prince Maurits (commander of the Dutch army) also flourished as he was presented as a national hero.¹⁰ The positive imagery of the stadtholders not only manifested itself in prints. Large scale paintings portraying them as role models and leaders of the sovereign state were also commissioned by local town councils, which later decorated city halls throughout the Republic. Haarlem's city council commissioned Hendrik Pot in 1620 to honour the House of Orange with an allegorical painting that displayed leading members of the Orange dynasty and glorified their Christian and political virtues and military skills.¹¹ The positive imagery that the media machinery was producing stood in shrill contrast to how civilians experienced the war. In Brabant which was a generality area and on the periphery of the Republic, civilians paid the heavy price of burned villages and famine as a result of Maurits' scorched earth military tactics.¹² In his private life, Maurits did not fit the bill of a saint either. The bachelor sired eight children with six mistresses. However, a

kerkvolk ten tijde van Maurits en Oldenbarnevelt (2^e druk; Franeker 1998) 359-371; Joke Spaans, 'Violent dreams, peaceful coexistence', *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 18 (2002) 149-166.

¹⁰ Christi M. Klinkert, *Nassau in het Nieuws. Nieuwsprenten van Maurits van Nassaus militaire ondernemingen uit de periode 1590-1600* (Zutphen 2005) 57-67.

¹¹ Jonathan. I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 460; W. Kloek, 'Prins Maurits en de beeldende kunst' in: K. Zandvliet ed., *Maurits Prins van Oranje* (Zwolle 2000) 139-159.

¹² Leo Andriaenssen, *Staatsvormend geweld. Overleven aan de Frontlinies in de meierij van Den Bosch 1574-1629* (Forthcoming 2007).

positive representation of him did help the greater cause of Dutch identity and unity.¹³

Besides the stadtholders, there were other potential heroes among secular men in the first decades of the seventeenth century such as naval and military men. In figurative terms, Admiral Jacob van Heemskerk, would have been the poster-image that hung in every teenage boy's bedroom in the early seventeenth century. Van Heemskerk personified courage and was without a doubt a role model in the minds of adolescent boys and young men. In 1607, the acclaimed admiral was killed during the Battle of Gibraltar and instantly became a national hero. Upon the navy's return to the country, the States-General gave Van Heemskerk a state funeral, the first since the death of William the Silent in 1584. The Republic honoured Van Heemskerk by burying him in the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam and commemorating him with a mausoleum designed by the same acclaimed architect, Hendrick de Keyser. The inscriptions on Van Heemskerk's tomb emphasized his courage, skills, and leadership.¹⁴

In 1628, Van Heemskerk's glory was overshadowed by a new national hero. In that year, Piet Hein effortlessly captured the Spanish fleet in Mantanzas Bay (Cuba). The booty included 177,000 pounds of silver, 37,375 skins, 36 boxes of sugar and 3,000 bags of indigo and cochineal dyes, and a large amount of gold and jewellery. After nearly erupting into a civil war over the Remonstrant and Counter Remonstrant issue, Hein's victory caused an enormous outburst of national pride in the Republic. After Hein and the Silver Fleet's return to the Republic in January 1629, he and his second in command, Hendrick Lonck visited several cities in the Republic where they were received as heroes. Hein emerged as one of the most important celebrities that united the country. The States General honoured him with a gold medal and chain (worth 1,500 guilders). Prince Frederik Hendrik also decorated him with a golden medal and chain, and he was

¹³ W. Klock, 'Prins Maurits en de beeldende kunst' 139-159; G.E. Harline, *Pamphlets, Printing, and Political Culture in the Early Dutch Republic* (Dordrecht 1987). A similar development occurred in the republics of Renaissance Italy. R. Starn, 'Reinventing Heroes in Renaissance Italy' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17 (1986) 67-84.

¹⁴ C. Lawrence, 'Hendrick de Keyser's Heemskerk monument: the origins of the cult and iconography of Dutch naval heroes', *Simiolus* 21 (1993) 265-295; O. Ranum ed., *National Consciousness, History, and Political Culture in Early-Modern Europe* (Baltimore 1975) 1-19.

praised with odes and poems. Due to the lack of military success in the late 1620s, Hein's capture of the Silver Fleet is exactly what the country needed. Consequently, Hein became the greatest naval hero without ever having fought a battle.¹⁵

We have to imagine that male youths looked up to these commemorated military heroes as masculine role models. Young men in general, were impressed with military men such as soldiers because they carried a sword or wore a gun. Armed and fighting men represented a type of raw masculinity that was known in the Middle Ages and romanticized in stories about knights in shining armour and damsels in distress. For the average youth living in the Dutch Republic, the next best thing would have been a soldier and or civil guard, especially in the cities along the eastern borders that were continuously attacked. Soldiers that were esteemed for their courage in fighting against Spanish tyranny did not go unnoticed. Some were required to quarter them in their homes, but for the general public, soldiers were visible in the streets, markets, shops, and taverns which were the same places where young men passed their time.

Men who wielded power and authority by being armed were not only to be found among the national military heroes or soldiers that defended the borders. Each Dutch city had its own defence system. If the city came under siege, the *schutterij* or municipal guard was responsible for fending off foe until the army arrived. Masculine male traits were often attested to this group of guards. This imagery that the guard presented to the public was also a reinforced self-image. The guard commissioned painters to capture these masculine traits, and these large scale paintings were used to decorate the meeting halls of the *schutterij*. To civilian audiences the militia also radiated heraldry. However, in times of peace their tasks were not always so heroic. The municipal guard was also in charge of less laudable tasks such as implementing new tax laws and maintaining municipal law and order. Generally, this was not a difficult feat during the day, but at night after the city gates had been closed, the duties of the civil guard could be difficult.¹⁶

¹⁵ Peter Sigmond & Wouter Kloek, *Sea Battles and Naval Heroes in the 17th Century Dutch Republic* (Amsterdam 2007) 48-51.

¹⁶ A. Jensen Adams, 'Civic Guard Portraits: Private Interests and the Public Sphere.' in: R. Falkenberg, J. de Jong, H. Roodenburg, and F. Scholtens ed., *Beeld en zelfbeeld in de Nederlandse kunst, 1550-1750* (Zwolle 1995) 169-197; C. Tümpel, 'De invloed van de Nederlandse Opstand op de iconografie van de Amsterdamse schuttersstukken', *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 10 (1994) 133-140.

Before municipal street-lighting, early modern cities often changed into dangerous places after dark. While respectable citizens were at home sleeping, the night often became the domain of thieves, prostitutes, social undesirables, and the young.¹⁷ At night young men in particular drank and sometimes disturbed the peace. In some university towns, there were cases that the city guard became the prey of night-time aggression from students who had usually mustered up too much confidence and bravado from too much drinking. As the tension climaxed, students would attack guardsmen by hurling stones and bricks at them. Under these circumstances, early modern university town could occasionally turn into battlefields after dusk with students and guardsmen firing weapons at each other.¹⁸ If the young agitators were arrested, penalties could be stiff. In 1627, for example, Anselmus van Deurwerden, a student at the University of Leiden, lost all his privileges at the university and had to pay a 100 guilder fine after he was found guilty of assaulting the head of the civil guard.¹⁹ Displaying and exerting aggression were an important part of early modern male youth culture. These outlets of violence were not acts of loath but merely ritualistic venting of manhood in which young men could publicly display their masculinity. Nevertheless, violence and aggression displayed by young people in the early modern period were forces to be reckoned with.²⁰ Rural society was quite aware of the fact that rebellious behaviour born from youth aggression could easily erupt into complete social uprisings when other social groups joined forces. According to the German historian, Norbert Schindler, in early modern rural society

young men represented a constant source of unrest and insecurity
for the established adult world, if only because the latter still

¹⁷ A. Roger Ekirch, *At Day's Close. Night in Times Past* (New York 2005) 61-89; Riitt Laitinen, 'Nighttime Street fighting and the Meaning of Place. A Homicide in a Seventeenth-Century Swedish Provincial Town', *Journal of Urban History* 33 (2007) 602-619.

¹⁸ W.J.A. Jonckbloet, *Gedenckboek der Hoogeschool te Groningen ter gelegenheid van haar vijfde halve eeuwefeest* (Groningen 1864) 363-370.

¹⁹ Nationaal Archief, Vierschaar der universiteit Leiden, nr. 33: Repertoria op de criminele klacht en civiele dingboeken 1594-1686, nr. 33, 13 December 1627.

²⁰ Julius R. Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe 1500-1800* (Cambridge 2001) 161-183.

followed the principle of not intervening overmuch in their affairs, but rather permitting youths to settle them among themselves.²¹

In urban surroundings, the same principle applied especially after dark when young men had consumed too much alcohol.²²

In the realm of the *schutterij* serving as role models, there were two contradictory forces at hand. Firstly, municipal guards were generally looked up to by young men, primarily because they were immediate representations of manhood (i.e. they carried weapons such as rapiers and swords which young men also liked). These were popular armaments among students. Youths from the lower strata who could not afford rapiers and swords had to make due with knives. Especially in the later part of the seventeenth century, groups of young men in Amsterdam for example tested their fighting skills by ritual knife fights to demarcate their social boundaries. In many aspects the knife fight resembled duels that could be sparked by a disagreement or an insult.²³ Secondly, the municipal guards represented the adult world, authority, and consequently suppressed the freedom of young men roaming the streets at night. Fighting with municipal guards can be perceived as the challenge of recognition from the adult world of the guard. In this realm the public acts of physical violence by young men served an important purpose for adolescent boys to become adult men.²⁴

Torrentius – the anti-hero of the 1620s

In the early modern period men who displayed a great religious faith or exhibited great courage on the battlefield or during naval battles were obvious heroes and role models for Holland's youth. However, there were other forms of role models and heroes that were less prominent in the

²¹ Norbert Schindler, *Rebellion, Community and Custom in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge 2002) 208.

²² Benjamin Roberts, 'Drinking Like a Man: The Paradox of Excessive Drinking for Seventeenth-Century Dutch Youths', *Journal of Family History* 29 (2004) 237-253.

²³ P. Spierenburg, 'Knife fighting and Popular Codes of Honor in Early Modern Amsterdam' in: P. Spierenburg eds., *Men and Violence. Gender, Honor, and Rituals in Early Modern Europe and America* (Columbus 1998) 103-127; Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford 2003) 127-139.

²⁴ Schindler, *Rebellion, Community and Custom*, 201-225.

public eye but through their talent and skill served as such for young people. Youths living in cities and who sought an education through apprenticeship would have looked up to artisans, men who were either profound or at least very good at their trade. These men, whose occupation ranged from shoemaker, tailor, baker, painter to merchant banker, were often portrayed in paintings or engravings, and depicted with the skills and attributes of their profession. Besides the talents of their craft, references to the virtues of diligence and industriousness were made.²⁵ The occupation of painter for example, was foremost considered a craftsman, and not an artist. Painters such as Rembrandt were master craftsmen and earned fame which contributed to the attraction of talented apprentices like Nicolaes Maes and Gerard Dou who must have looked up to Rembrandt as a role model for their profession. The statesmen, Constantijn Huygens, admired the young Rembrandt when he met him in the 1620s. But Huygens also had a great admiration for the talents of Johannes Torrentius. In Huygens' eyes, Torrentius was a remarkably talented-painter – a *wondermench* [miraculous person] who could capture the innate world to the canvas.²⁶

In theory, the talented Torrentius with his modest background had the potential of becoming a role model for young men. He, like Rembrandt, could have amassed a talented group of young apprentices to his studio. However, that was not the case. Instead, Torrentius was labelled a bad example for the city's youth. If a hero or role model transcends the ordinary, then an anti-hero fulfils the purpose of succumbing to the weakness of mortality. Anti-heroes and bad role models need to be of the same calibre as heroes and good role models. Except for being raised a Roman Catholic, little is known about the youth of Torrentius.²⁷ It is unknown if Johannes attended a Latin school, but like many young men of his generation who did, he changed his last name from the Germanic 'Van der Beeck' to the Latin 'Torrentius'.²⁸ This custom was fashionable among educated young men who had literary and artistic aspirations, and joined

²⁵ A. de Vries, *Ingelijst werk. De verbeelding van arbeid en beroep in de vroegmoderne Nederlanden* (Zwolle 2005) 45-51.

²⁶ Bredius, *Johannes Torrentius*, 4.

²⁷ G.H.S. Snoek, *De Rozenkruisers in Nederland. Voornamelijk in de eerste helft van de 17^{de} eeuw. Een inventaris* (Utrecht 1997) 59.

²⁸ Bredius, *Johannes Torrentius*, 1-2.

poetry groups such as the Chambers of Rhetoric.²⁹ Possibly, Torrentius might have changed his name to disassociate himself from the dishonourable reputation his father, Symon Janszoon, had earned as being one of the first inmates of Amsterdam's correctional house founded in 1595. His father later moved to Cologne where he worked as a fur processor, and as a child Torrentius was primarily raised by his mother, Symontgen Lucasdochter. When and from whom Torrentius learned to paint is also unknown. However, sometime before 1612, Torrentius lived in Spain where he painted. After returning to Amsterdam, Torrentius married Neelgen van Camp in 1612. The marriage was not a happy one and the couple separated three years later. Before or during his short marriage, Torrentius renounced his Roman Catholic faith but did not join the Dutch Reform church or any other religion. In this period he lived in the Sint Antoniebreestraat nr. 4 (near the Waag) in Amsterdam.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, the Sint Antoniebreestraat and its extension – the Jodenbreestraat – was an area where many Remonstrant painters such as Pieter Lastman, Jeronimus Sweerts, and Jaques and Roelant Saverij lived. Before the founding of the painters guild, the St. Lucas, in 1619, Torrentius probably met with other artists in Amsterdam in the tavern *De Drie Coningshoofden* [Three Kings Heads], which was located in the Heintje Hoeksteeg.³⁰ In the years prior to the founding of the St Lucas, Torrentius was probably closely associated with and influenced by these painters. During this period, he furthered his education by visiting the fencing school of Girard Thibault. Thibault who was an acclaimed fencing master, had opened a fencing club in Amsterdam after being trained in Spain where he had developed new fencing techniques. Girard, who had also Italianized his name to 'Girardo' had developed a new method in which fencers manoeuvred within the parameters of a mystical circle divided by middle lines, cords, and home lines that mathematically stipulated the boundaries of opponents. The method became especially popular among the elite. In the 1620s Thibault was asked to run a fencing school in Leiden for university students, and gave demonstrates of his technique to Prince Maurits and Frederik Hendrik, who were impressed with his methods and skills. When Thibault was still in

²⁹ Arjan van Dixhoorn & Benjamin B. Roberts, 'Edifying Youths. The Chambers of Rhetoric in Seventeenth-Century Holland' *Paedagogica Historica* 39 (2003) 326-337.

³⁰ S.A.C. Dudok van Heel, *De jonge Rembrandt onder tijdgenoten. Godsdienst en schilderkunst in Leiden en Amsterdam* (Nijmegen 2006) 56-75, 145.

Amsterdam during the early 1610s, his school was not only a venue where young men learned to fence, but was also a meeting place where they played music and discussed philosophy.³¹ The well-known poet Bredero was a common visitor at Thibault's fencing school. According to Thibault's 'Album Amoricum', his circle of friends included a wide range of the Republic's celebrities ranging from intellectuals such as Anna Roemers Visscher, Anna Maria van Schuurman, and Bredero to the echelons of the younger generation of Holland's wealthy merchant families (i.e. Isaac and Joseph Coymans, Balthasar de Moucheron, Carlo Hellemans, Petrus Panhuysen and Jan Ysbrandt Kieft³² – a cousin of Willem Kieft who was later governor of the New Netherland colony.³³) Thibault was also connected with the social and economic elite through his brother-in-law, Guilielmo Bartolotti. Bartolotti, who, at the time, was considered to be one of the wealthiest bankers in the Republic.³⁴ For Thibault, he was his entrée to the upper stratum of Dutch society, and for the talented and social climber Torrentius, Thibault must have been an entry to the Republic's higher echelons.³⁵

In the past hundred years Torrentius and his trial have captured the imagination of the art historians Abraham Bredius, A.J. Rehorst, and Christopher Brown. Govert Snoek, who conducted the most extensive biographical probing into 'Torrentius' past, believes that he was registered as a student in Leuven in December 1621. Torrentius supposedly did not study at the university for a degree but only registered so he could study mathematics.³⁶ It is also probable that Torrentius developed an interest in mathematic and geometrical forms through the fencing techniques of Thibault. According to Rehorst, 'Torrentius' Rijksmuseum painting from

³¹ Snoek, *De Rozenkruisers in Nederland*, 59.

³² H. de la Fontaine Verwey, *Uit de Wereld van het Boek. In en om de 'Vergulde Sonnewyser'* (Amsterdam 1979) 129-164.

³³ Willem Frijhoff has been so generous to share his genealogical research on the Kieft Family.

³⁴ His son, Guillelmo Bartolotti (1602-1658) is believed to be the fifth wealthiest in the Dutch Golden Age. His personal wealth was estimated at 1,200,000 guilders. Kees Zandvliet, *De 250 rijksten van de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam 2006) 15-17.

³⁵ De la Fontaine Verwey, *Uit de Wereld van het Boek*, 129-164.

³⁶ Snoek is not completely certain whether the Torrentius who registered in Leuven is the same Torrentius of Amsterdam because the date of birth and city of origin are not registered. Snoek, *De Rozenkruisers in Nederland*, 60.

1614 is an early example of Torrentius' experimentation with mathematical compositions.³⁷

Sometime during the early 1620s Torrentius returned to Amsterdam. In this period he was a frequent visitor to Haarlem where he became suspected by municipal authorities for his Rosicrucian activities. In January 1624 the Court of Holland forewarned Haarlem's town council about Rosicrucian followers being active within the town. The Court had become concerned about the Rosicrucian order in Paris and believed that the society had spread to the Republic and was active in Haarlem.³⁸ In Paris during the summer of the previous year, posters had been mysteriously hung on street corners and on church doors throughout the city. The placards claimed that the order had miraculous powers and wished to save their fellow man from illness. While leaders of the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches regarded the order with the utmost suspicion, the general uneducated public was frightened. However, among scholars and intellectuals, the Rosicrucian order had grown in popularity especially in the 1610s, after the grave of its founder, Christian Rosencreutz (1378-1459) had been discovered.³⁹ The grave which was found almost 150 years after Rosencreutz's death included manuscripts and other esoteric writings. The discovery encouraged the publication of three important books that promoted public interest in the Rosicrucian order. The most influential were *Fama Fraternitatis, mit der Entdeckung der Brüderschafft der löblichen Orders des Rosencreutzes* (1614), *Confessio Fraternitatis* (1615), and *Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosencreutzes, Anno 1459* (1616). The first book, *Fama Fraternitatis*, which was also published in Dutch by Jan Berner in Frankfurt in 1615, portrayed the life of Christian Rosencreutz. The many stories of Rosencreutz's thirst for knowledge must have made him a role model for scholars. *Fama Fraternitatis* describes Rosencreutz's life journey starting as a 16-year old boy growing up in a monastery in Germany and leaving home to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy land. In Damascus Rosencreutz became interested in the knowledge of Arabic scholars, and decided not to go to Jerusalem but to Damcar (Yemen) instead where he was educated in physics, mathematics, and Arabic. After three years Rosencreutz left for Egypt where he studied plants and animals.

³⁷ A.J. Rehorst, *Torrentius* (Rotterdam 1939) 73-80.

³⁸ Snock, *De Rozenkruisers in Nederland*, 61.

³⁹ Didier Kahn, 'The Rosicrucian Hoax in France (1623-1624)' in: William R. Newman & Anthony Grafton ed., *Secrets of Nature. Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge 2001) 235-344.

Thereafter he travelled to Fez (Morocco), which at the time was an intellectual centre where astrology and other mathematical sciences flourished. Rosencreutz then returned to Germany, where he tried to teach his newly found knowledge and bring about reform. His ideas were however not well received, and he decided to set up a brotherhood of like-minded. They established their own 'mystical' language in word and speech, founded their own secretive philosophy, and decided to spread their word in the world.⁴⁰

Whether Torrentius was a leader of the Rosicrucian order in Haarlem remains unknown. Based on the available sources, we can only speculate that Torrentius could have been their leader. His personality traits, as far as we can deduce, could support this notion. In the Torrentius scholarship, Bredius has examined in depth the testimonies and confessions gathered by Haarlem's municipal council. Bredius concludes that the painter was innocent of blasphemy. However, Rehorst's argues that Torrentius was associated with the Rosicrucian order. According to him, the circular painting *Stilleven met kan, glas, kruik en breidel* which survived the flames unlike all his other paintings, is a geometric composition with each object harmoniously placed in relation to each other.⁴¹ Perhaps the geometric composition was a form of Rosicrucian symbolism that artists like Torrentius might have used to communicate with other Rosicrucians.⁴² Or maybe Torrentius was just drawn to the mystery of the order and inspired by its quest for knowledge and use of symbolism. Unfortunately, we are forced to speculate because the Rosicrucians left us no records of their rituals, names of their members or details about their symbols. Throughout his torture, Torrentius never confessed to any of the charges that were brought against him. If he had confessed to being a Rosicrucian, he would have had to reveal dates of meetings, rituals, and name other members of the order. Essentially he could have unveiled the names of an entire network of scholars and members of the elite who ruled the towns of the Republic. But he did not. That leads to two possible speculations. One, he

⁴⁰ *Fama Fraternitatis, mit der Entdeckung der Brüderschafft der löblichen Orders des Rosencreutzs. Beneben der Confession oder Befandtnuss derselben Fraterniteit an alle Gelehrte under haupter om Europa* (Kassel 1616); G.H.S. Snoek, *De Rozenkruisers in Nederland*, 15-20.

⁴¹ A.J. Rehorst, *Torrentius*. 73-80.

⁴² Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (New York 2003 [orig. 1928]) 467-479.

was not a member and thus not associated with the order. Two, he was a member and withstood his vows of secrecy even under torture. In this case, Torrentius was a real hero to the Rosicrucian movement.

There are more reasons to believe the latter was true. In the post-Remonstrant and Counter Remonstrant era of the 1620s, when the political situation was quite fragile, any revelation of this calibre might have caused political mayhem in the Republic. According to the historian of the church and Reformation, Joke Spaans, Haarlem's municipal council was suspicious of any denomination, but even more apprehensive of 'gheen religie verbonden' or those who do not belong to any formal religion. The smaller denominations with their churches, schools, poorhouses, and homes for the elderly were at least noticeable – and controllable for municipal authorities. Non-believers were not. Similar to the fifth column in the Spanish Civil War, non-believers in the early modern period were an invisible force that could not be kept under control and only manifested themselves in social unrest. In this realm, the non-conventional ideas of Torrentius were a great menace to Haarlem's social and political stability.⁴³ In 1628 Torrentius was given a sentence of twenty years of hard labour. Appeals by Prince Frederik Hendrik to lighten his sentence were not honoured by the town council, until two years later when the English king Charles I intervened and requested Torrentius release. The municipal council discharged Torrentius from Haarlem's workhouse on the grounds that he would be turned over to the custody of the king and be exiled from Holland for the rest of his life.

In the realm of producing national heroes and role models, the controversy surrounding Torrentius' personality were the ideal grounds for creating the image of an anti-hero, which is equally essential because the anti-hero adds relief to the character traits of the hero. The slandering and downfall of Torrentius' reputation fulfilled a far greater purpose for Haarlem's town council. By turning Torrentius into an anti-hero, the municipal council created a common enemy which Haarlem's religiously and socially diverse population could rally against. Just like the hero, the anti-hero could also instil social cohesion. In the aftermath of 1619, when a civil war almost erupted, social tensions in Haarlem between its numerous groups of immigrants and religious fractions had not yet subsided. It is probably no

⁴³ Joke Spaans, *Haarlem na de Reformatie. Stedelijke cultuur en kerkelijk leven 1577-1620* (The Hague 1989) 106-107.

coincidence that Torrentius was portrayed as a heretic and as a bad example of Haarlem's youth. Torrentius who challenged conventional ideas about religion and philosophy, was a threat to Haarlem's municipal authorities because he, indeed, might have been a role model and potential hero to rebelling young people. And for those in control, that was not the type of role model the Republic in the early seventeenth century needed.