Between despair and hope: raising emotions with Dutch Seventeenth-Century marine paintings and prints

Bussels, S.P.M.; Oostveldt, B. van; Enenkel, K.; Melion, W.

CHAPTER 18

Between Despair and Hope: Raising Emotions with Dutch Seventeenth-Century Marine Paintings and Prints

Stijn Bussels and Bram Van Oostveldt

Abstract

Many Dutch seventeenth-century paintings and prints depict tempests with shipwrecks. Till today these images are often interpreted by reference to metaphorical readings. This essay explores the ways in which a metaphorical reading work in tandem with the arousal of mixed emotions. We go from sea to shore, so to speak, looking beyond the precarious situation of the sailors adrift in the turbulent water. Art historians have largely ignored the marine painters' frequent inclusion of spectators perched on the rocky coast and of sailors whose tenacity and resilience have brought them safely to shore. These figures can be seen to function as epitomes of mixed emotion, conveyors not only of despair but also of hope, the emotional poles between which the viewer is placed. Moreover, by studying the diverse ways in which spectators are represented *in* these images, we can learn more about the intended responses of the beholders *of* the images. Through the shoreside figures, the artists explore a range of possible responses to viewing natural disaster, inviting analogies between the viewers both in the image and before it.

Keywords

marine painting and print – seventeenth century – Dutch Republic – tempests – despair and hope

In a painting of 1655, now in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, the Leiden painter Hendrick Staets (active in the period 1626–1659) manages to aptly depict how sailors are facing death and destruction due to a fierce tempest [Fig. 18.1]. Nature is shown at its most threatening by the violent waves that push a ship off the rocks close to an intimidating rock arch. The anthropomorphic, monstrous features of these rocks increase their aggressive appearance. The painter has put everything at stake to portray the reactions

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FIGURE 18.1 Hendrick Staets, *Ships Wrecked on a Rocky Shore,* 1655. Oil on panel, 50,8 × 68,6 cm. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

of those affected by the threat. The sailors still on board of the sinking ship are trying to save what is left to save, but it looks like their efforts will soon prove to be fruitless and most of them will meet a certain death. Others have already jumped off the ship or are swung away by the raging wind or water. In their urge to survive, they have clung to the ship's debris; a few are grasping a torn-off mast that floats on the wild water [Fig. 18.2]. Another ship has become the plaything of the waves too, but it looks like this ship can still be saved. Its sails are lowered, but the pressure on the cable of the anchor accentuates the life-threatening challenges the crew must deal with. Staets, however, presents optimism in all this predicament. Whereas above the sinking ship an ominous lightning strikes, the anchored ship is accompanied by the brightness of the sun appearing through the dark clouds. If the courageous sailors manage to hold out for a while longer, the storm might subside, and salvation could be at hand. Thus, the painter plays despair and hope against each other.

Staets does not only try to evoke the contrasting emotions of despair and hope by depicting the different conditions of the two ships and the changing

FIGURE 18.2 Detail from Hendrick Staets, *Ships Wrecked on a Rocky Shore*

weather. He also shows different reactions in the two small figures ashore depicted in the left corner below. With their bodily gestures the painter emphasises how these witnesses of the disaster are confronted with strong, but divergent emotions. One of the two has slipped to his knees in pure dismay, his back turned on the tempest. His placement at the utmost front of the painting makes him stand out. His red attire reinforces this focal point and corresponds to the red dress of a man in the water clinging to the mast. Repulsed by the fierceness with which nature shows itself, the figure ashore fails to face the calamities. The other spectator is also overwhelmed by what is brought right before his eyes, but in contrast with the first one, he holds tight to a rock, mesmerized by what is happening, his eyes fixed on the misfortunes of the drowning men clinging to the floating mast. As they are closest in his field of vision, the effect the tempest has on him seems to be defined by the uncertain state these men are in. This spectator can only hope for the sailors' rescue but must also face the fact that this will be a particularly difficult task because of the violent waves that threaten to smash the men against the rocks.

Staets's oeuvre reveals his preference for these depictions of sea storms,[1] and he was not the first, nor the last to express this preference. Many Dutch

1 "Hendrick Staets," RKD artists, https://rkd.nl/explore/artists/74550 (accessed 23 June 2022).

seventeenth-century paintings have tempests with shipwrecks watched by spectators on a rocky coast as their subject.[2] Early precursors can be found in the sixteenth century in the oeuvre or milieu of Herri met de Bles (*c.*1510–after 1556) and the Bruegel dynasty.[3] These works already emphasise the changing weather conditions in contrasting colours and put spectators in the foreground to demonstrate despair and hope about the fate of the sailors. From the 1630s onwards, thanks to Dutch painters as Jan Porcellis (1584–1632), Simon de Vlieger (1600/1601–1653), and Adam Willaerts (1577–1664) the tempest scenes developed to their full potential and increased in popularity. The subject peaks in the mid-seventeenth century but remains important until the end of the century and even afterwards, as the work of Ludolf Bakhuizen (1630–1708) illustrates.

One of the many other examples was painted in the 1660s by the Rotterdam painter Jacob Bellevois (1621–1676) and is in the collection of the National Maritime Museum as well [Fig. 18.3]. It is three times as large as Staets's painting and uses a richer range of colours, but it relies on the same conventions; Once again, we see a ship on the verge of being entirely wrecked perishing with all hands on deck. Next to the sinking ship, there is a fishing boat at risk too, but not definitely lost yet. As in Staets's painting, clearing skies and dark clouds alternate. Further, we can see again the eyewitnesses in the foreground expressing to be mesmerised or repulsed. However, if we concentrate on the figure that has turned his back on the sea in Bellevois's painting, a variation in this convention turns up [Fig. 18.4]. This figure does not seem to be merely a

2 Beer, G. de – Veen, J. van der – Ossing, F. – Dumas, C. (eds.), *The Golden Age of Dutch Marine Painting. The Inder Rieden Collection* (Leiden: 2019), Bol L.J., *Die holländische Marinemalerei des 17. Jahrhundrets* (Braunschweig: 1973) and Giltaij J. – Kelch J., *Praise of Ships and the Sea: The Dutch Marine Painters of the 17th Century* (Seattle: 1996).

3 See Vézilier-Dussart S. – Laffon C., *La Flandre et la mer: De Pieter Bruegel l'Ancien à Jan Breughel de Velours* (Kassel: 2015). E.g. Bol mentions an anonymous Flemish painting in the collection of the Alte Pinakothek, Munich (http://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/en/artwork/8eGVnvoGWQ, accessed 23 June 2022) and Lawrence Goedde discusses a work by a follower of Herri met de Bles in the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples in his *Tempest and Shipwreck in Dutch and Flemish Art: Convention, Rhetoric, and Interpretation* (University Park, PA – London: 1989) 51 (https://www.bridgemanimages.com/en-US/noartistknown/landscape-with-stormy-sea-by-herri-met-de-bles-ca-1510-died-after-1550-oil-on-panel-29-5x43-cm-16th/nomedium/asset/1086823, accessed 23 June 2022). Both works are situated in the mid 16th century, but there is also an impressive sea storm painting that Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625) made about 1595–6, now on loan in the National Gallery London from a private collection (https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-brueghel-the-elder-a-sea-storm, accessed 23 June 2022).

FIGURE 18.3 Jacob Bellevois, *A Fishing Boat off a Rocky Coast in a Storm with a Wreck*, *c.*1665. Oil on canvas, 82,5 × 121,9 cm. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

person who happens to be ashore, but a sailor who has just managed to bring himself into safety. The painter follows a popular tradition by contrasting his rescue with the hopeless situation for the crew of the ship that will run into ominous cliffs soon. The steepness of these cliffs contrasts with the low rocks in the foreground of the painting. The high cliffs cannot offer any relief for those seeking salvage. These cliffs are crowned with a tower and few houses that do not seem to be endangered by the storm. Thus, the safety of the land is contrasted with the risks at sea.

Till today the Dutch images of sea storms are often interpreted via metaphorical readings. For instance, at its webpage devoted to Staets's painting the National Maritime Museum proposes the following interpretation:

> In Dutch marine painting, prominently featured rocks in a stormy sea could be understood to stand as symbols of constancy in virtue and political principles. Although they could imply man's steadfast endurance, where rocks were shown in association with cliffs they implied a deadly

FIGURE 18.4 Detail from Jacob Bellevois, *A Fishing Boat off a Rocky Coast in a Storm with a Wreck*

> danger to man. Rocks could be interpreted as an allegory, either warning of the power of the storm to undermine and destroy the seemingly immovable, or be emblematic of God's supreme power. There is ambivalence in the depiction of the rocks here since although they constitute a danger-made clear by the ship which has already gone aground on the treacherous coast, the presence of land could also represent salvation for the men on board, and thus stand as a symbol of hope.[4]

In this quote, despair and hope are not merely seen as emotions, but are part of a deeper reading. As in many other modern analyses of Dutch marine paintings, the different elements are believed to present meaning on two levels, the literal level of the sea storm and a deeper level that provides generalizations about human existence. Already in 1989, however, the American art historian Lawrence Goedde pointed in his seminal book *Tempest and Shipwreck in Dutch and Flemish Art* at the limitations of considering the different elements in depictions of sea storms as metaphors and has brought empathy to the fore as intended response. In other words, Goedde does not merely focus on the reader interpreting an image as a set of metaphors, but that of a person who gets concerned for the misfortunes of the sailors depicted.[5]

4 "Ships Wrecked on a Rocky Shore," Royal Museums Greenwich, https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-12273 (accessed 23 June 2022).

5 Goedde, *Tempest and Shipwreck*.

We want to add to this discussion and explore the extent to which a metaphorical reading and the arousal of mixed emotions could reinforce each other. Therefore, we will go beyond the focus on the precarious situation in which the sailors in the turbulent water find themselves. Although popular in Dutch depictions of sea storms, art historians have largely ignored the representation of the spectators on the rocky coast, as well as the sailors who have just overcome nature's challenges reaching the safe shores. By looking at these figures, we do not only consider the expression of despair in the storm scenes, but also hope. Moreover, by studying the diverse ways in which spectators were represented *in* these images, we can learn more about the intended responses of the viewers *of* the images. With the figures on the shore, the Dutch artists could express their ideas about possible responses to viewing natural disaster and their audience had to face these possibilities. The artist invites his audience to reflect whether they assume a similar position as one of the spectators in the image.

Before focusing on Dutch visual culture of the seventeenth century, we can briefly take a look at Dutch literature where we find the shipwreck with spectator repeatedly. The German philosopher Hans Blumenberg made it clear that eyewitnessing life-threatening sea storms from a safe position ashore had been used since antiquity as a metaphor to discuss the possibilities of finding peace in life.[6] Among others, Lucretius (*c*.99–*c*.55 BC) used the metaphor in his *De rerum natura* to name the joy that we feel when we escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday life by following Epicurus's teachings. The Dutch Latinist Piet Schrijvers has shown how in the Dutch Republic the ancient metaphor was picked up by Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679) and Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687), among several other authors, but placed in a religious framework.[7] For them, it is primarily God who provides man with order in chaos. This religious interpretation of Lucretius's philosophical ideas is connected with the seventeenth-century Dutch and, more broadly, European reception of biblical passages on ships in danger or shipwrecked, such as Paul's shipwreck or the storm on the Lake of Galilee in the New Testament, and in the Old Testament especially in Corinthians and Ezekiel.[8]

6 Blumenberg H., *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. S. Rendall (Cambridge, MA: 1997).

7 Schrijvers P., "Schildknaap en tolk van Epicurus. Lucretius in Nederland," in Lucretius, *De natuur van de dingen*, trans. and ed. Schrijvers P. (Groningen: 2008).

8 Goedde, *Tempest and Shipwreck*, chapter 2.

Thus, the early modern literary use of the shipwreck with spectator is closely linked to divine providence.

Text and Image

We can begin our exploration of Dutch visual culture by looking at some of the many prints which depict spectators of shipwrecks in the foreground. In contrast with painting, the prints are often accompanied by texts. Therefore, they also give an insight into contemporary interpretations of the images, or at least they offer us an insight into the views of printmakers and publishers. In his popular emblem book *Sinnepoppen* of 1614, the Amsterdam merchant Roemer Visscher (1547–1620) uses an image of a sea storm to point out that we should beware of making the same mistakes twice [Fig. 18.5].[9] Next to the engraving it reads:

> He is foolish who knocks him to the stone over which he once fell, that is: That each one should be careful not to sail badly twice, as they say: *Frustra Neptunum accusat, qui Iterum naufragium facit*. Meaning: *In vain he laments Neptune or the adventure of the Sea, who makes the second lost voyage*.[10]

Roemer Visscher plays on the Dutch expression 'er kwalijk bij varen' (literally 'sailing badly') by showing who sailors are shipwrecked, but also by using it in its figural sense of 'turning out badly'. Further on, he uses a widespread proverb, originally from Publius Syrus's *Sententiae*, to relate the shipwreck even more to the idea of making a mistake. Thus, he discourages embarking on a sea voyage when the risks are too high. In the light of the general tenor of *Sinnepoppen* where divine providence is presented as central objective for mankind, we can argue that Roemer Visscher condemns an overly strong penchant for exploring the world because it would disregard God's will; By getting absorbed in

9 https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/viss004sinn01_01/viss004sinn01_01_0111.php (accessed 23 June 2022).

10 'Hy is dwaes die hem aen de steen stoot daer hy eens over ghevallen heeft, dat is: Dat elck moet wachten voor de tweede mael te doen, daer hy eens qualijck by ghevaren heeft, gelijckmen seyt: *Frustra* Neptunum *accusat, qui Iterum naufragium facit*. Dat is te segghen: *Te vergheefs beklaeght hy* Neptunum *of het avontuur van de Zee, die de tweede verloren reijs doet*'. Visscher Roemer, *Sinnepoppen* (Amsterdam, Willem Jansz. Blaeu, 1614), vol. 2, emblem 47.

FIGURE 18.5 Claes Jansz. Visscher (printmaker), *Frustra qui iterum, emblem XLVII*, in Visscher Roemer, *Sinnepoppen* (Amsterdam, Willem Jansz. Blaeu, 1614), Rijksmuseum

adventures, we show hubris.[11] God warns us against it, but he does not do that endlessly. In the engraving for this emblem, however, we can again see that despair is juxtaposed with hope. The Amsterdam engraver of the image accompanying Roemer Visscher's text, Claes Jansz. Visscher (*c*.1587–1652, not related to Roemer), renders light in a similar way as we saw in the paintings by Staets and Bellevois. The sun falls on the drowning men trying to pull themselves to safety. They seem to gain control over the life-threatening situation, thus Claes Jansz. Visscher visualises they are rescued.

This engraving again shows that Dutch artists often foreground figures outside the life-threatening danger of sea storms and, with their choice of light, draw extra attention to these figures. In turn, the text makes it clear that Roemer Visscher finds sailors careless, even reckless. Here, then, we encounter the complexity of emblems. The relationship between the image and the

11 Porteman K., "Het embleem als 'genus iocosum'. Theorie en praktijk bij Cats en Roemer Visscher", *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 11 (1995) 184–196.

text makes an unambiguous interpretation not evident. Although we cannot speak of an explicit contradiction, the text emphasises the stupidity of seeking adventure at sea and the engraving the rescue from such adventure. The two sides of the coin that the emblem presents exposes a tension in Dutch society around seafaring. More concretely, it poses an identity question for the young Republic: In a nation that relies largely on the sea for its economic prosperity, such an emblem deals with the problem of putting limits to exploring the world.

But in how far can we extrapolate our analysis of this emblem to other prints and paintings? This move has been a hot topic for Netherlandish art historians for decades already.[12] Ever since Eddy de Jongh's plea for the use of emblem books in iconographic analyses of paintings, including in his *Zinne-en minnebeelden in de schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw* of 1967, the question has lingered whether we can fruitfully transfer the layered meanings that emblems indicate to painting to which concrete texts can rarely be attached.[13] We do not want to further explore this discussion on its general level, but will preserve our focus on the figures shown out of danger of death at the front of storm scenes. In doing so, we aim to make it clear that in seventeenth-century visual culture, these figures were a popular means of prompting the Dutch to reflect on what was becoming increasingly essential to their identity formation. Just as we saw that the emblem from *Sinnepoppen* showed a tension between despair and hope regarding the adventures/dangers of the sea, we want to clarify that in other images similar tensions are put to the fore. Just as the emblem, these images encourage the viewer to think about their own position, but the images rarely nail down a particular position themselves.

Thanks to an engraving by Pieter Nolpe (1613–1652), we can take an intermediate step between emblem and painting. In fact, the Amsterdam artist excelled in creating engravings inspired by paintings, adding text. Thus, in one of his series, he connects the months, seasons and elements and comments on human doings. For example, the month of January links Nolpe to the element of air, and in the caption he encourages his audience to put on their skates to have fun on the frozen water in the fresh air. His engraving therefore plays on all the snow and ice fun celebrated in print and painting since Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525–1530–1569). But in another print in this series, the engraver also

12 Harbison C., "Iconography and Iconology", in Veen Henk van – Ridderbos Bernard (eds.), *Early Netherlandish Paintings: Rediscovery, Reception and Research* (Amsterdam: 2004), 378–406.

13 Jongh Eddy de, *Zinne- en minnebeelden in de schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: 1967).

FIGURE 18.6 Pieter Nolpe, *Shipwreck: The Month March and the Element water*, 1640s or early 1650s. Engraving, 405 × 519 mm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

plays on the popularity of tempest scenes in the Low Countries. Nolpe attributes the month of March to sea storms and shipwrecks and evidently links it to the element of water [Fig. 18.6].

The Dutch historian Charles Dozy as well as the German print specialist Friedrich Hollstein present Nolpe's *Shipwreck* as being made after a painting of Jan Beerstraten (1622–1666), now in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich.[14] However, the least we can say is that Nolpe handled his model freely.[15] Actually, if he took that painting as his model, the engraver only took over its composition and

14 Dozy C.M., "Pieter Nolpe", *Oud Holland* 15 (1897), 151, cat.nr. 173: https://brill.com/view/journals/oh/15/1/article-p94_7.xml?language=en (accessed 23 June 2022) and Hollstein F.W.H., *Hollstein's Dutch and Felmish etchings, engravings and woodcuts*, vol. 14 (Amsterdam: 1956) 151, cat. nr. 173.

15 https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/en/artwork/QrLWePD4NO/jan-abrahamsz-beerstraaten/seesturm (accessed 23 June 2022).

FIGURE 18.7 Detail from Pieter Nolpe, *Shipwreck: The Month March and the Element water*

some of its common places. For example, the safe and steadfast castle on high cliffs takes a prominent role in the engraving, just as in the painting. Besides this topos, Nolpe follows convention in, among others, the changing weather conditions, the spectators watching the disaster mesmerised from the safe shores, and the sailors coming ashore [Fig. 18.7]. There is, however, variation as well, since we see an exceptional large number of sailors who manage to reach the mainland in one piece. Moreover, while the two ships are in danger, these will not necessarily be wrecked, as in the paintings by Staets, Bellevois and Beerstraten. So, in the image hope prevails over despair.

To come to a better understanding of these variations, we need to take into consideration that Nolpe's engraving responds to a tradition showing the order of the world. In early modern Europe, the months, seasons, and elements are often presented as prominent examples of God creating structure out of chaos.[16] From this, the viewer of the image could have interpreted Nolpe's

16 For a discussion of this expression in Netherlandish painting, see Bakker B., "Order or Variety? Pieter Bruegel and the Aesthetics of Landscape", in Enenkel K.A.E. – Melion W. (eds.), *Landscape and the Visual Hermeneutics of Place, 1500–1700*, Intersections 75 (Leiden: 2021) 158–94 with the latest bibliography.

emphasis on the large number of sailors finding solid grounds, the lack of a real shipwreck, and the emphasis on the safe castle as an expression of the belief in God's good intentions. However, the texts under the engraving do not predominantly connect the image to such a religious metaphorical reading. The French caption ignores divine benevolence and encourages its readers to go on a sea voyage by saying that it is the best way to show one's ability and boldness precisely because the tempest is at first sight the summum of disorder:

> It is easy to boast with art and courage,
> By a fire, with a drink in hand, far from perils and water.
> Art and bravery are seen atop a ship,
> In the midst of chaos, near a shipwreck.[17]

So, in this quote, the importance of God's providence is not the underlying thought as it is in the Dutch appropriation of ancient texts or in emblem books as the *Sinnepoppen*, but a belief in human heroism taking up a fight against the natural forces is put to the fore. There is also a Dutch caption which similarly points at the fact that on a safe place it is hard to show bravery. However, it diverts from the French caption by focusing on the life-threatening dangers of the sea that cause emotions to run high. In contrast with the French text, the Dutch text does not encourage to go on a sea voyage to express oneself as a hero:

> Out of harm's way, it is easy to be a warrior
> And a steersman while chattering away,
> But [it is hard to be that] in hate, sorrow and pain.
> As everything perishes in the water.[18]

The combination of the central image with its spectators and many saved sailors ashore, the title, and the French and Dutch texts shows a complexity that must have urged seventeenth-century viewers to reflect on their own position. The variations from the conventional tempest depictions point them at the safety of the mainland and diminished the dangers of the sea. Mentioning the month March and the element water could have been taken to interpret this

17 "A l'aise on peut venter son art & son courage, / Dos au feu, verre en main, loin des coups & de l'eau, / L'Art & le coeur se voit sur le haut du vaisseau, / Au fort de la meslée, & deux doits du naufrage".

18 'Tis buyten Schoots, goed kryghsman sijn. / En stierman met de snater / Maer, inde Haet, Verdriet en Pijn. / Daar 't al vergaet int Water'.

accentuation of safety religiously, but the captions focus on the human capabilities and limitations. Thus, Nolpe's engraving skippers between several textual and visual traditions and conventions encouraging the viewers eventually to make up their minds. The figure in the front centre of the engraving has firmly clung to a rock to view the sea storm. His efforts to find a solid foundation to cope with the forces of nature may have been exemplary for the onlookers to get a grip on the unpredictability of life themselves from the image, face the facts as confronting as these might be, and choose positions between devotion, heroism and restraint.

Providence in Painting

The texts accompanying Nolpe's engraving make it possible to map the complexities in coming to an understanding of how the depiction of the figures on the rocky shores watching a sea storm in despair and hope can be connected with the viewers of the image. But even without explicit text and image relations, we can study these complexities by taking the artists' interactions with traditions and conventions further into consideration. Therefore, we can analyse a painting attributed to Hans Savery the Elder (1564–1622) that is dated circa 1630, once again preserved in the National Maritime Museum [Fig. 18.8]. It has an impressive size, being seven times larger than Staets's painting, but once again shows the same common places. We see a three-master about to capsize dramatically. The white waves besiege the prow like a multitude of monstrous claws. On the stern there is the coat of arms of the city of Amsterdam. Whereas those aboard this ship can still hope for salvation, for the sailors on the neighbouring ship, all hope is futile. The stern of the latter ship shows that it would be under the protection of the Virgin Mary, but the certainty of a shipwreck renders this supernatural protection meaningless. Indeed, the ship is about to disappear completely under the raging water.

The catalogue of the exhibition *Turmoil and Tranquility* of the National Maritime Museum takes a metaphorical reading into consideration by stating that the painting 'may be read as a parable of the precariousness of human life', but it mainly focusses on the contrast between the two ships to interpret the work as a metaphorical rendition of a historical situation.[19] The painting might allude to the Eighty Years' War, so that the ship with the Virgin Mary being wrecked stands for the Spanish and therefore Catholic defeat. The first

19 Gaske (ed.), *Turmoil and Tranquility* 70, cat. nr. 2.

FIGURE 18.8 Hans Savery the Elder (attr.), *The Wreck of the* Amsterdam, ca. 1630. Oil on canvas, 125,7 × 177,8 cm. National Maritime Museum, London

ship could represent the policy of Amsterdam, as it was one of the last cities in the Netherlands to align itself with the Dutch Protestant revolt against Spain. This ship is in great danger, but the sailors can still save it. So, in the painting the tension might resonate of a city that doubted for a painfully long time to choose the right side. Nevertheless, the catalogue has to conclude: 'Lack of documentary information relating to the picture has meant that the intended subject, as well as the identity of the artist, remain elusive'.

Besides this politico-metaphorical reading, we can pay attention to the people on the rocky shores to come to a religious interpretation [Fig. 18.9]. Catholic faith already seems to be renounced by the sinking of a ship prominently carrying an image of the Virgin Mary, but the figures on the high cliffs further clarify that a gradation can be made in how to believe in God, as they react differently to the threads of the tempest. Through his rendering of sunlight, the painter has put a spotlight on them. The lowest figure is climbing the rocks trying to escape the violent waves, and two other figures seem to have just preceded him. They follow a fourth figure that has started climbing even

FIGURE 18.9 Detail from Hans Savery the Elder (attr.), *The Wreck of the* Amsterdam

higher rocks. Desperately, they seem to want to move as far away from the sea as possible and escape from all the risks it contains. An alternative is expressed in the two figures who are situated on the same platform as the foursome. They have knelt down and folded their hands together in prayer. Are they addressing a prayer of thanks to God for their own rescue from the raging waters or are they expressing the hope that others still can be saved through prayer? A last figure is praying as well. We find him behind the high rock, he is a hermit kneeling and holding his head up to heaven. Because he is furthest away from the sea storm, he does not need to ask God to be saved and can concentrate fully on the heavenly realms.

Thus, different reactions to the perils of the sea are presented side by side to the viewer. These reactions are far from the call in the French caption of Nolde's engraving for fearless behaviour. The figures express a relation to God that range from pure panic of being abandoned by him over fervent hope praying for his coming to rescue to an expression of solid faith in him and an acceptance of the unfathomability of his plans. So, instead of heroism, the artist shows despair and hope in the face of divine providence. Whereas in the engraving we had to infer divine intervention from the title, here we get a clearer presentation of the different ways people can react to terrible disasters. The viewers see following options: They can try to avoid the fate God

has in store for them, they can beg for his mercy, or they can put their fate in his hands. The artist helps the viewers in making up their mind as due to the placement of the figures closer or further from the tempest a hierarchy is shown between those who flee, those who pray for instant relief, and finally those who correctly anticipate his will.

Conclusion

By laying the works of Staets, Bellevois, Nolpe and Savery side by side, a difference in style becomes apparent. The first three artists seem to pursue naturalism, even if their use of colour, as well as brushwork, differ markedly. The latter painter, by contrast, emphasises the drama of the event, transcending a naturalistic effect. This led to the painting being labelled as Dutch because of the subject matter, but at the same time also appearing Flemish because of the flamboyant colours and the extreme positioning of the central ship in the water. In addition, the figure of the hermit is taken into consideration, which seems to have been plucked from a sixteenth-century Flemish landscape painting. Savery who came from Kortrijk, but made a career in Amsterdam, so incorporating both the Dutch and the Flemish tradition, seems a designated candidate, but a watertight attribution is impossible to give. However, the strangeness in style prompts us to think further and see to what extent style played a role in the reading of the depictions of shipwrecks with spectators on rocky shores. As divergent as the style, as well as the measures and media of the images might be, the artists encouraged their audience to reflect on the existential challenges everyone faces. Whatever style, size or medium is eventually taken, the thought process is paramount where the viewer is challenged by the artist. The viewer is given elements to reflect on how natural disasters relate to divine providence and human self-control and to choose between despair and hope.

The figures ashore watching the sea storms that are depicted in many Dutch seascapes may have encouraged the viewers of these images to read the images metaphorically. This metaphorical reading, however, did not exclude a straightforward engagement with the emotions and actions depicted. Viewers of the Dutch marines might have felt the urge to identify with the characters, or at least interrelate with their reactions. The deadly risks faced by the sailors in the water would have received much attention. Many viewers will have been absorbed in the thrill of the spectacle in which man is reduced to a plaything of nature. However, the figures on the shore in the foreground of the prints and paintings must also have been into consideration. Here, the viewers of

the print or painting are linked to eyewitnesses of the disaster. The attention with which the images depict diverse ways in which the latter relate to the natural disaster and the plight of their fellow human beings in distress will have caused reflection among the former. The figures on the foreground invited the viewers of the prints and paintings to ask themselves what they would do if faced with a sea storm, another natural disaster, or any other kind of harsh, life-threatening challenge. The options were presented in divergent ways, but often it came down to the following choice: they could remain paralyzed by the overwhelming choice between feeling despair or hope; they could pray to God to be spared of all the perils and even come to a full acceptance of his unfathomability, or they could accept the possibility of the dangers and go aboard to heroically start a voyage at sea.

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