

A New Look at Rembrandt's 'The Ship of Fortune'*

by Roelof van Straten

In the *Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis* of 2016, Åse van de Grind presents an overview of the existing explanations of Rembrandt's etching 'The Ship of Fortune' and puts forward a new interpretation of the depiction.¹ The etching, which is signed and dated 1633, is an illustration to the beginning of the third book of *Der zee-vaert lof* of 1634 by Elias Herckmans.² As her point of departure Van de Grind sees "a thorough reading of the third book illustrated by Rembrandt (...) and an analysis of the possible symbolic meaning of components of Rembrandt's etching."³ Obviously the illustrated text must be read with care for a better understanding of the depiction, but it is at least as important first to take a good look at the depiction. What do we actually see? Only once we have taken a precise inventory of what is depicted, and after reading the text, can we finally arrive at the correct explanation of the depiction. Following Van de Grind's outstanding description of what all has been claimed in the past about 'The Ship,' her boat also loses its bearings because of an imprecise analysis of the depiction.

The Print Examined

What we actually see is the following. The main figure sits on a horse which kneels on the ground. The horse has certainly not fallen, since it would then lie on its side. Nor has it thrown its rider, because he apparently stands with both legs on the ground. The man, who wears a toga and has a laurel wreath on his head, is undeniably a Roman emperor. He looks in the direction of a small boat on the right side of the depiction. He has let go of the reins of his horse and has his arms extended to the sides. One arm has the palm of the hand facing down while the other has the palm facing upward. His commander's staff lies next to him on the ground.

* Translated from the Dutch by Hendrik J. Horn. Thanks are due to Michiel Roscam Abbing for his critical comments on a first draft of this paper.

¹ Å. van de Grind, "Rembrandts ets *Het scheepje van Fortuin* voor *Der zee-vaert lof* van Elias Herckmans," in: *Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis 2016*, pp. 40-49.

² B. 111; New Hollstein Dutch (Rembrandt), no. 123. Size of the plate 11,3 x 16,5 cm.

³ Van de Grind, p. 40: "een grondige lezing van het door Rembrandt geïllustreerde boek drie (...) en een analyse van de mogelijke symbolische betekenis van onderdelen van Rembrandts ets."

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Behind the emperor we see some kind of broad column with two heads on it that are joined at the back: the god Janus. This Janus column stands in front of a building, possibly a temple, at the left of the depiction. Four men are busy with the great entry doors of the building. In front of the entry stand a few figures seen from behind. One of them turns around to a man who apparently kneels on the ground. On the right side of the building, below its windows, stands a figure in a wide cloak, holding a staff.

To the left of the rider on horseback we see a scene which Amy Golhany has described as: “The soldiers to the left disarm, and one figure plays a flute, a peacetime activity.”⁴ That, however, is not at all what is depicted! If we look carefully we see the following. At the left edge of the image stands a soldier, probably an officer, wearing a helmet and holding a sword, whom we see from the side. He extends his right arm forward. Directly in front of him kneels a man with his back turned towards us, and opposite him sits a man on the ground who has folded his hands in a beseeching gesture. Behind this man we see a soldier wearing a helmet. He appears to have given the sitting man a blow with the fist. To the left of the sitting man stands a man who looks at the officer and makes a gesture in the direction of the beseeching man. To the right of the soldier who looks as if he has struck a blow with his fist, a third man sits on the ground.

At the right of the print a small sailing ship is moored. On it stands a nude woman seen from behind. She holds up the sail with her left hand, as does her right, extended arm. Four men sit in the front of the boat. The one furthest to the right drinks from a jug and another holds a glass in the hand. At the rudder sits a man, seen partly from behind, with fairly long hair and a full beard. His left arm is slightly raised and holds up something that is usually called a trident in the literature. He is therefore often identified as Neptune, the god of the sea. But as far as I can see that is not correct, because what the man holds is not remotely a sturdy trident. In addition Neptune is almost invariably depicted as a naked figure, or at least with an exposed upper body. More probably the man is simply a skipper.

To the left of the nude woman holding the sail sits still another figure, one who could be leaning against the mast. And to the right of the man at the rudder we see an old man with both arms extended in a desperate beseeching gesture in the direction of the emperor. This man who, as far as I could ascertain, has never been mentioned in the literature, is in my opinion a key figure in the analysis of the depiction. Behind this beseeching man appears a kind of shepherd’s crook.

In the left foreground we further see a tree trunk and a few plants, probably thistles of some kind. We often encounter such shrubbery with Rembrandt. In the background, in the right half of the etching, a number of ships are clearly engaged in a sea battle.

Reading the Text

⁴ A. Golhany, *Rembrandt’s Reading*, Amsterdam 2003, p. 37. Obviously Van de Grind did not verify this erroneous description and quotes it without any comment.

Now that we have determined what is to be seen in Rembrandt's illustration, it is time to read the text with care. And, which elements of the text do we reencounter in the print? The text on page 97 van Herckmans' book begins with a passage on Bellona, "the sister of Mars (...) and the goddess of war." Van de Grind opines that the figure below the windows of the temple, which is hardly recognizable as a woman, is Bellona. This identification is not at all convincing. Instead of a woman in a suit of armour, as Herckmans also describes her, we see a woman in a wide cloak and holding a staff. That Van de Grind suddenly turns the goddess of war into a kind of priestess "who has traded her lance for a priest's staff"⁵ is altogether too arbitrary. In my opinion, Bellona has no place in the print.⁶

In the following text Herckmans tells that peace reigns:

Weshalven dat den vorst August' de heyl'ge tempel
Des achtersienden Gods doet sluyten, aen den drempel
De beyde deuren toe, diens vredige portael
van 's tempels bow tot nu klemd voor de derde mael.⁷

In translation:

That is why the ruler Augustus has the holy temple
of the rearward looking god closed at the threshold
Both doors closed, that peaceful portal
of the temple building is closed for the third time up to now.

In a note Herckmans explains whom he intends with 'Augustus': "Octavius Caesar Augustus, monarch and Roman emperor." Another note explains who is the 'rearward looking god': "The rearward looking god was Janus." With the text quoted above Herckmans alludes to the fact that emperor Augustus, for the third time since her construction, has the doors of the temple of Janus closed because peace reigned throughout the entire empire. This was in 29 BC, a year that Van de Grind nowhere mentions.⁸ This peace ruled specifically because Augustus was able to defeat his rival Mark Antony (together with Cleopatra) in the sea battle at Actium (31 BC), so that he could then annex Egypt to the Roman Empire.

⁵ Van de Grind, p. 42: "die haar lans heeft ingeruild voor een priesterstaf."

⁶ On p. 48 of her paper Van de Grind makes a peculiar remark on Bellona: "Also her daughter is mentioned [in Herckmans' text]." Whom or what Van de Grind means here is a complete mystery. Bellona does not have any offspring!

⁷ Herckmans, pp. 97-98.

⁸ Van de Grind, on p. 42, apparently thinks that with the year "Aetat. Rome 723" mentioned by Herckmans, the year 27 BC is meant. How she arrives at this year is not clear. Traditionally, the founding of Rome is dated to 753 BC, which means that Herckmans writes about the year 30 BC, and not about 27 BC!

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In this instance we can draw a clear connection between text and illustration. Indeed we see at the left that the doors of the temple are being closed, while the priests stand outside. And the identity of the emperor is now also established: he must be Augustus. The sea battle in the background is without any doubt the battle of Actium. That the commander's staff of Augustus lies on the ground may be explained by the fact that it is peace, so that he does not need it. But we also know from classical literature that upon his return to Rome, Augustus seriously considered relinquishing his power.⁹ That fact could well be alluded to here.

Herckmans' account now continues with a short stretch of peace, which is then quickly broken. As a consequence Augustus is for many years involved in numerous campaigns far from Rome, until he hears that things are going badly back in Rome. Herckmans writes: "at the same time Augustus learned of the treason that Romans had stirred up against him by the quarrels of the nobles."¹⁰ Herckmans explains in a note what this treason entailed: "This treason originated with one Egnatius Ruffus who, in the absence of Augustus, wished to insinuate himself into the position of burgomaster; but since that met with resistance and did not proceed, he joined M. Genacius and Plautius Ruffus in a plot to kill Augustus."¹¹ As soon as Augustus returned to Rome the three conspirators were arrested and put to death. That was in 19 BC.

Is there anything of this story of conspiracy to be found in the print? That can't be established with complete certainty, but the scene at the left with the officer and the three kneeling men, one of whom clearly makes a beseeching gesture, could well be a reference to the seizure of the conspirators.

That is all with respect to Herckmans' text concerning Augustus. Beyond that nothing in the entire book has any connection to Rembrandt's illustration. Nowhere does the author mention a boat with Neptune (or better: a skipper) at the rudder, with a nude lady holding the sail.

Van de Grind's Conclusion

Van de Grind's hypothesis is that "Rembrandt wished to combine the entire contents of book three in one etching ..."¹² She further maintains:

In his etching he depicted the newly established peace at the beginning of the Roman Empire in 27 BC by showing the closing of the doors of the

⁹ For the life of Augustus see for example: *Lemprière's Classical dictionary of proper names mentioned in ancient authors*, London 1978 (first edition 1788), s.v. Augustus, Caius Julius Caesar Octavianus.

¹⁰ Herckmans, p. 99.

¹¹ The conspirators were Marcus Egnatius Rufus, Marcus Genacius and Plautius Rufus.

¹² Van de Grind, p. 49: "Rembrandt de gehele inhoud van boek drie in één ets wilde samenbrengen ..."

temple of Janus. In addition the fall of the Roman Empire in 1453 is personified by the rider with a laurel wreath on his head, who falls off his horse. Finally, the third scene depicts Fortune and Neptune as symbols of peace and prosperity.¹³

And a little earlier in Van de Grind's text we read: "Fortune leaves the Roman Empire and embarks with Dutch seamen."¹⁴

Many objections may be raised with respect to Van de Grind's conclusion. First, the doors of the temple were closed in 29 BC and not in 27 BC. Secondly, the emperor does not at all fall from his horse, and therefore can hardly personify the fall of the Roman Empire in 1453. Incidentally, he has not lost hold of the reins; he has apparently let go of them to make a gesture. Furthermore, Fortune and Neptune (who in point of fact is not Neptune) are not at all "symbols of peace and prosperity". And the Dutch seamen? That too is questionable.¹⁵ In my opinion they are not sailors but just ordinary passengers who are chatting and drinking. In short, Van de Grind's conclusion is fraught with problems.

A New Analysis

Let us return to the emperor. What is he really looking at, and why does he make this gesture? If we look carefully we see that the emperor is not looking at the fetching posterior of the nude lady, who must indeed be identified as Fortune, but at the older man, next to the man at the rudder, who extends his beseeching arms towards him. It is evident that this man does not at all want to embark, but that he has to! It is a likely assumption that the scene must show an event from the life of Augustus. And indeed, it is not difficult to find such an event, namely the banishment of the poet Ovid. The older man (Ovid was about 50 years old when he was banished) begs the emperor to be allowed to remain in Rome. The gesture of the emperor appears to mean: too bad, but you have brought it on yourself! In addition his gesture, with one palm of the hand facing up and the other facing down, could mean that he, the emperor, decides who gets to prosper and who does not.

¹³ Van de Grind, p. 49: "In zijn ets verbeeldde hij de ingetreden vrede aan het begin van het Romeinse keizerrijk in 27 v. Chr. door het sluiten van de deuren van de tempel van Janus te tonen, en verder de val van het Romeinse rijk in 1453, gepersonifieerd door de ruiter met lauwerkrans op zijn hoofd die van zijn paard valt. De derde scène tenslotte stelt Fortuna en Neptunus voor als symbolen van vrede en vooruitgang."

¹⁴ "Fortuna verlaat het Romeinse rijk en vaart uit met Hollandse zeelieden."

¹⁵ There is no reason whatsoever to make a connection between the subject of the print and the actuality of Rembrandt's time, as for example Gary Schwartz, following Cornelissen, conjectures. See Van de Grind, p. 47.

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Ovid (ca. 43 BC to AD 17) was for decades a protégé of Augustus, who raised him to great fame and fortune.¹⁶ Then, in AD 8, he suddenly fell out of favour. The emperor banished him, and he had to sail from Rome. Fortune, Ovid laments in several poems that he writes while in exile, no longer favoured him, quasi having turned her back on him. That, quite literally, is what we see in the print!

As reasons for his banishment Ovid names “duo crimina,” two accusations, “Carmina et Error,” a poem and a mistake. With the poem he may have meant his erotic bundle *Ars Amatoria*. Right around the time this bundle appeared, Augustus was presenting himself as a kind of virtuous knight in contrast to the decadence and immorality of life in Rome. A protégé who publishes erotic poems could no longer be countenanced. As for Ovid’s error, a social indiscretion or something of the kind, the poet makes many allusions in his elegies without really telling what was involved. He would have been betrayed before the emperor by personnel and family. It has been surmised that Ovid had an affair with Julia, Augustus’ lascivious daughter, who was later exiled as well. Ovid was banished to Tomis, on the coast of the Black Sea near the current city of Constantza in Rumania. Back then Tomis was a remote corner of the empire, where no one spoke a word of Latin. While exiled, Ovid continually wrote about his misfortune.¹⁷ By the way, the staff that we see behind Ovid has also found an explanation. It is one of the attributes of the personification of Banishment (Esilio) in Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*.

If my analysis is correct, Rembrandt depicted four events that are all related to the life of Augustus: the battle of Actium in 31 BC, the closing of the doors of the temple of Janus in 29 BC, the arrest of the conspirators in 19 BC, and the banishment of Ovid in AD 8.¹⁸ Three of these events occur in the text by Herckmans. The banishment of Ovid does not, but Herckmans, as connoisseur of classical literature, certainly knew that story.¹⁹

¹⁶ For the life of Ovid see for example: *Lemprière’s Classical dictionary of proper names mentioned in ancient authors*, London 1978 (first edition 1788), s.v. Ovidius Naso (P.).

¹⁷ Particularly in his book *Tristia*, in which he writes about his departure from Rome by ship, his travel to Tomis, and his stay there. For an online English translation see for example: www.poetryintranslation.com/klineasovidexile.htm.

¹⁸ A possible fifth event is the story about Augustus’ relinquishment of power, maybe in 30 BC, the dating given by Herckmans.

¹⁹ Herckmans may easily have known the story of Ovid’s banishment from the three-volume edition of the *Publii Ovidii Nasonis Opera* by Daniel Heinsius, that was published in 1629 in Leiden and in 1630 in Amsterdam. The front matter of volume one comprises a “Vita” of Ovid.