

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### POLITICS AND AESTHETICS – DECODING ALLEGORY IN *PALAMEDES* (1625)<sup>1</sup>

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#### *Allegory, Politics and Aesthetics*

Many of Vondel's plays were part of the politico-religious controversies of his days. *Palamedes* (1625) was part of these controversies in a remarkable manner. The play is about the betrayal of the Greek army commander Palamedes, but was immediately recognised as an allegory of the execution of the former Advocate of Holland Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547–1619) in 1619. As is evident from several handwritten keys, throughout the seventeenth century it was in vogue to decode the play as a narration of the real-life drama of Oldenbarnevelt. In historiography too, *Palamedes* has been regarded as an allegory. The focus, however, has been specifically on the allegorical meaning of the play and the attempt to conceal this meaning. Such an approach does not consider the complex function of allegory. By means of a historical formalist analysis of the play, I hope to show how the allegorical layer is more than a thinly veiled political statement. Allegory functions within the renaissance culture of coding and decoding on both a political and an aesthetic level, and *Palamedes* is a good case in point.

The history of *Palamedes*' reception shows how literary historians have felt the urge to choose between politics and aesthetics. They wanted to decide whether *Palamedes* was foremost a tragedy, or a political pamphlet. Contemporary reactions show how the first readers of the play seem to have opted for the latter. However, the implied dichotomy between politics and aesthetics did not exist. Contemporary

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readers did not choose to read the play as a political pamphlet, they choose to read the play *allegorically*, and that was a political and an aesthetic choice at the same time.

In literary studies, up until postmodernism that is, allegory has long been regarded as a simple and therefore not that interesting literary form. The suggestion was that an author simply wrote one thing, but meant another. Nonetheless, as early as 1928 Walter Benjamin highlighted the complex and typically baroque function of allegory,<sup>2</sup> and in recent decades (literary) historians have made up for the neglect that befell allegory in earlier years. Several studies show how there is a meaningful relationship between the two layers of allegory, which form part of a literary game that predominated in both political and literary cultures in earlier times. Moreover, allegory is no longer regarded as only a formal mode of writing, but also a historical way of thinking.<sup>3</sup> Both for medieval and for early modern times, scholars have shown how the culture of these times strongly emphasised decoding literature.<sup>4</sup> In his study on reading culture in seventeenth-century England, for example, Steven N. Zwicker has argued how the people's way of reading the bible became dominant in their way of living. 'Decoding' was thus a natural part of their reading.<sup>5</sup> The aesthetics of literature in the early modern period were partly determined by this game of decoding, just as politics were determined by it.<sup>6</sup> *Palamedes* was part of a culture in which the game of decoding predominated in both politics and aesthetics.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin*, pp. 159–235.

<sup>3</sup> Tambling, *Allegory*, pp. 1–6, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Astell, *Political Allegory* about the Middle Ages and among others Zwicker, *Lines of Authority*; Potter, *Secret Rites*; and Van Stipriaan, *Leugens en vermaak* for the early modern period. In a more philosophical way, Benjamin shows in *The Origin* how the allegorical reading of baroque German tragedy is part of the culture of the time.

<sup>5</sup> Zwicker, *Lines of Authority*, pp. 3–4. See also Zwicker, 'Reading the Margins', pp. 102–04. In both studies, Zwicker emphasises how the political situation of crisis in England in the second half of the seventeenth century increased the importance of decoding literature. The situation in the Dutch Republic in the first quarter of the seventeenth century may be paralleled to this period of crisis in England. Moreover, the importance of emblem books in Dutch culture can be considered as an argument providing grounds to suppose that emblematic thinking was important in everyday life of the Dutch, too; cf. Smit, 'The emblematic aspect', p. 554.

<sup>6</sup> Potter, *Secret Rites*, shows how political and aesthetic principles turn out time and again to be the same. See, for example, Potter, *Secret Rites*, pp. 75–82. On the interaction between literary form and politics see also Sharpe and Zwicker, *Refiguring Revolution*. In *Art of the Modern Age*, Schaeffer provides a philosophical account both of unique characteristics of aesthetics in differing periods and of the importance of society in early modern aesthetics.

The suggestion that by writing an allegory Vondel aimed to disguise the topical relevance of the play in order to prevent himself being punished for it is therefore untenable.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, a real cover-up could have protected him from accusations and measures of censorship, but it would also have prevented the play from being read and understood by the intended readers.<sup>8</sup> By writing an allegory, Vondel set out to write a topical play that was both highly intelligible and highly unintelligible. This tension between two layers of meaning, which is one of the main characteristics of allegory, has both aesthetical and political consequences.<sup>9</sup> Vondel pleased his readers with the game and subject of decoding, a literary game, and at the same time underlined the political message of the play with this game. Because of the decoding, the political point could be made more effectively.<sup>10</sup> In the words of Benjamin: ‘the authority of a statement depends so little on its comprehensibility that it can actually be increased by obscurity’.<sup>11</sup> One of the contemporary reactions, by the unknown author ‘Q.D.C.V.’,<sup>12</sup> supports this argument, since it praises Vondel for the smart invention (‘kloecke Vond’) of the surface level narrative, which allowed him to underline a political point. This argument thus contains praise for both its political message and its aesthetic quality.

I will return to this and other contemporary reactions to *Palamedes* in the next section. Together with the whereabouts of *Palamedes*’ coming into being and the historiographical debate about the play, they preface my analysis.

### *The Genesis and Reception of Palamedes*

The execution of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt in 1619 is one of the major events in Dutch history. It was the result of a complex set of

<sup>7</sup> Smit, for example, believed this was the reason for Vondel to write an allegory; cf. Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, p. 121. Recently, Sierhuis has also argued that this position is untenable in Sierhuis, ‘A Babel Full of Confusion’, chapter 5.

<sup>8</sup> For this argument see, for example, Potter, *Secret Rites*, pp. 209–10.

<sup>9</sup> Wijngaards also highlighted the tension between the literal and the allegorical layer in *Palamedes*, referring to Fletcher, *Allegory (Palamedes)*, ed. Wijngaards, pp. 23–24).

<sup>10</sup> Tambling, *Allegory*, p. 29, shows how this function of allegory was already acknowledged by St. Paul and, later, Boccaccio. See also Potter, *Secret Rites*, p. 51; and Benjamin, *The Origin*, pp. 206–07.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin*, p. 207.

<sup>12</sup> Sierhuis, ‘A Babel Full of Confusion’, p. 265 identifies Q.D.C.V. as Geeraardt Brandt (1626–1685) (though the argument for this identification is not explicit).

politico-religious controversies in the Dutch Republic, dominated by divisions between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants in the Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>13</sup> What had begun as an academic debate about predestination between the theologians Jacobus Arminius (1559–1609) and Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641) had by the second decade of the seventeenth century become a heated argument about religious toleration and the relationship between Church and state. The Remonstrants, followers of Arminius, were tolerant. The orthodox Calvinist Counter-Remonstrants, followers of Gomarus, were more strict. Oldenbarnevelt and the Stadtholder, Prince Maurits, tried to remain impartial for a long time, but when civilian riots and political unrest eventually became the order of the day, the situation became untenable. In 1617 Maurits publically declared his support for the Counter-Remonstrants. Public and political support for Oldenbarnevelt, who was sympathetic to the Remonstrants, decreased. In the end, Maurits settled the dispute by prosecuting Oldenbarnevelt, which led to his execution. The situation was to Maurits's advantage, since he had shown his resolve and was able to control the organs of the states and the cities without considerable political opposition subsequent to the execution.

Oldenbarnevelt was arrested on 28 August 1618. After a lengthy trial he was condemned to death on 12 May 1619.<sup>14</sup> He was prosecuted by a team of twenty-four judges, appointed specifically for the occasion and representing the seven provinces of the Republic. The accusations were manifold. Among the most important were treason against the state and high treason. The charge of treason against the state was issued because Oldenbarnevelt was said to have initiated and supported peace negotiations with Spain; the charge of high treason was brought because allegedly he would have exacerbated the dispute between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants with his politics of tolerance in spite of the risk of civil war. None of the accusations could be proven, however. This and Oldenbarnevelt's persistent denial of the

<sup>13</sup> For the details of these disputes, see Tracy, *Europe's Reformations*, pp. 173–78. Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, pp. 421–60, deals with the friction between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants within the larger framework of the politico-religious crisis in the Dutch Republic in the 1610s.

<sup>14</sup> The trial and execution of Oldenbarnevelt are described in the most recent biography of Oldenbarnevelt: Knapen, *De man en zijn staat*, pp. 307–27. They can also be found in the older but more detailed Den Tex, *Oldenbarnevelt*, 3, pp. 627–747.

accusations made the trial long and difficult; it continued for almost nine months. After the conviction, however, everything proceeded quickly. The former Advocate of Holland, aged seventy-one, was beheaded on 13 May 1619, only a day after the verdict. The beheading was carried out at the Binnenhof, the Dutch political centre in The Hague. Oldenbarnevelt was executed before the eyes of a large crowd, including the twenty-four judges. Pamphlets spread the rumour that even Maurits was present, although he was said to have hidden behind a little window in the tower of the Binnenhof.<sup>15</sup>

The execution of the Advocate of Holland evoked many (written) reactions in the Republic, as every other event regarding the conflicts between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants and between Oldenbarnevelt and Maurits had done in the preceding years. In 1619, numerous publications appeared that either celebrated the death of the Advocate of Holland and criticised his Remonstrant ideas, or were critical of the trial and the presumed bias of the judges.<sup>16</sup> There was a certain danger, however, in voicing criticism of the events of 1618–1619 in the Dutch Republic, and this remained the case long after the execution of Oldenbarnevelt. Vondel's reactions illustrate this.

Immediately following the execution, Vondel kept quiet – or so it seems<sup>17</sup> – although he had in fact engaged with the dispute earlier. In 1618 Vondel had anonymously published a critical poem in which he condemned the struggle between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants: *Op de jongste Hollantsche transformatie (To the Latest Transformation of Holland)*.<sup>18</sup> His preference for the Remonstrants and Oldenbarnevelt was evident. But this preference only becomes truly dominant in the publications of his more polemical reactions, which are all related to the execution of Oldenbarnevelt but were only published after the death of Maurits in 1625. These polemical reactions were very critical of the Stadtholder and of the Counter-Remonstrants and their intolerance.<sup>19</sup> They also criticised the trial, which Vondel regarded as illegal. The most famous poem Vondel

<sup>15</sup> Cf., for example, Knapen, *De man en zijn staat*, p. 326.

<sup>16</sup> See Meijer Drees, 'Vondels *Palamedes*', p. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Wijngaards presumes that Vondel must have expressed some criticism of Maurits, but that it did not survive. See Wijngaards' edition of *Palamedes*, p. 13. Den Tex, *Oldenbarnevelt*, 3, p. 751 claims Vondel did write some of the poems published after the death of Maurits in 1625 as early as 1619, immediately after the execution.

<sup>18</sup> See WB, 1, pp. 789–91.

<sup>19</sup> Vondel himself was, at that time, a Mennonite.

wrote about the execution, *Het stockske van Oldenbarneveltdt* (*The Cane of Oldenbarnevelt*, referring to the cane with which Oldenbarnevelt was said to have walked to the scaffold) was not written until 1657.<sup>20</sup>

The fact that the execution of Oldenbarnevelt was still a relevant issue in 1657 shows how great its impact was. The same is true of the fact that the execution did not go unnoticed outside of the Republic. In England, for example, several pamphlets were written and translated – most of them rebuking Oldenbarnevelt and praising Maurits, who was regarded a hero by the Calvinist Brits. The majority of both public sentiment and the government favoured Maurits's side in the conflict.<sup>21</sup> A play about Oldenbarnevelt was staged in London only a couple of months after his execution, on 27 August 1619: *The Tragedy of Sir John van Olden Barnavalt*. It was written by Philip Massinger and John Fletcher.

The play by Massinger and Fletcher portrayed, remarkably, both Maurits and Oldenbarnevelt as leading figures with serious shortcomings. The play was therefore suspected of criticising the monarchy of James I. *The Tragedy* thus offers an interesting analogy with *Palamedes*, although the narrative of the execution of Oldenbarnevelt occupies surface level in this English play, whereas in *Palamedes*, it is situated on the allegorical level. It seems the English topicality of *The Tragedy* was, although controversial, not considered too dangerous, since Massinger and Fletcher were able to perform the play. Although the first staging of the play was postponed, the staging of a revised version was allowed.<sup>22</sup> Vondel, in contrast, was not able to see *Palamedes* performed until 1663. *Palamedes* was one of the first of Vondel's publications that responded to the execution of Oldenbarnevelt, and the only reaction in the form of a play, but it could not be performed because of its political criticism and the censorship this elicited.<sup>23</sup>

According to Vondel's first biographer Geeraardt Brandt (1626–1685), the Amsterdam city regent Albert Burgh (1593–1647) had

<sup>20</sup> See WB, 8, pp. 625–26.

<sup>21</sup> Kamps, *Historiography*, pp. 141–42.

<sup>22</sup> Kamps, *Historiography*, p. 144. On *The Tragedy*, see also Frijlinck, *The Tragedy*.

<sup>23</sup> It is possible, for that matter, that Vondel did not aim at performance for *Palamedes* immediately after its publication. If this was the case, however, this decision must have been influenced by the dangers of censorship.

encouraged Vondel to write a play about the execution of Oldenbarnevelt in the spring of 1625. Vondel initially considered it too dangerous, but Burgh did not give up, and is said to have given Vondel the idea of dealing with the subject allegorically. Vondel chose the ‘cover’ of the mythological narrative of Palamedes, a Greek army commander betrayed and executed during the Trojan War. Brandt does not explain why Burgh wanted Vondel to write a play. He only mentions Burgh’s love of poetry (‘Poëzye’). Vondel started writing with the idea of not publishing the play until times were less dangerous. When Maurits died while Vondel was writing the play, he supposedly finished it quickly.<sup>24</sup> The tragedy, of which the full title was *Palamedes oft Vermoorde Onnooselheyd (Palamedes or Murdered Innocence)*, was published in October 1625, little more than a month after Maurits’s funeral.

The thin veil of classical tragedy could not prevent *Palamedes* from being censored. Since Vondel’s name was on the title page, charges were brought against him. The author went underground in fear of the sanctions of the severe Court of Holland in The Hague but resurfaced after it became clear that the Amsterdam city government had refused to hand him over to The Hague. Instead, they prosecuted him themselves. Some of the Amsterdam city regents were kindly disposed to Vondel, which probably explains the light sentence; he only had to pay a penalty of three hundred guilders. The fact that *Palamedes* took the form of a play was used as an argument by some of the judges to regard it as open to manifold interpretation, rendering it not obviously intended as a political statement.<sup>25</sup>

Other contemporaries, however, seem to have particularly appreciated that political statement. While the first performance only took place in 1663, *Palamedes* sold out quickly after its prohibition had been lifted and was reprinted clandestinely many times. Immediately people began decoding the narrative of Palamedes, making keys for the references to the events of 1619. Decoding *Palamedes* remained in vogue during the whole of the seventeenth century. This appears from notes in handwriting in the margins of several prints of *Palamedes*.<sup>26</sup> Vondel himself is said to have written down some clues for his sister, but to

<sup>24</sup> Brandt, *Het leven van Vondel*, ed. Leendertz, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Beekman and Grüttemeier, *De wet van de letter*, pp. 15–19.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Kemperink, ‘Een bijzonder exemplaar’.

have burnt this manuscript out of fear for sanctions.<sup>27</sup> Brandt collected some of the keys from contemporaries in his 1705 publication of Vondel's satires. They must have circulated before in handwriting.<sup>28</sup>

In his biography of Vondel, Brandt tells us how some people 'praised the purity of the language, and its grandiloquent smoothness' ('preezen de zuiverheit der taale, en hoogdravende vloeijentheit') after its publication in 1625, but the primary reaction to the play was surprise at the political content and the fact that Vondel had dared to put his name on the title page.<sup>29</sup> In the supporting pamphlet by the above mentioned 'Q.D.C.V.', the author criticises the play being regarded as a 'pasquil' (pamphlet).<sup>30</sup> Q.D.C.V. himself considers the play to be more than that, but nonetheless focusses his attention on its political value rather than on its literary merit. The author praises Vondel for the clever and brave way in which he tells the truth in *Palamedes*. Vondel is encouraged to ignore the critical reactions to his play and keep up the good work, mostly because of the useful purpose it serves.

The political content of the play dominated critical reactions even more. In a pamphlet by 'Den Gereformeerden Momus' ('The Reformed Momus'), for example, Vondel is rebuked for criticising the Counter-Remonstrants and Maurits. The 'play with Palamedes' is regarded as a failed attempt to conceal the political content. Moreover, the author of the pamphlet blamed Vondel for instigating once more the religious and political debate, which had lost its vigour after the execution of Oldenbarnevelt in 1619.<sup>31</sup> This argument was one that even Remonstrants – who of course appreciated the allegorical meaning of the play – expressed in their reactions. They were critical of Vondel's play because it could spark new arguments between them and the Counter-Remonstrants.<sup>32</sup>

The reception of *Palamedes* in later periods continued to focus on the play's political content. Time and again the play was used in recurring controversies about the role of the Dutch stadtholders.<sup>33</sup> It is no

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Brandt, *Het leven van Vondel*, p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> See Smits-Veldt, *Samuel Coster*, pp. 344–45; and Kemperink, 'Een bijzonder exemplaar'.

<sup>29</sup> Brandt, *Het leven van Vondel*, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Q.D.C.V., *Aan (...) Ioost vanden Vondelen*.

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous, 'Den gereformeerden Momus'.

<sup>32</sup> Unger, *Vondeliana*, pp. 52–54.

<sup>33</sup> Meijer Drees, 'Vondels *Palamedes*', p. 86. Helmers, 'Cry of the Royal Blood' shows how it was also used in controversies about the English regicide.

coincidence that the first performance of *Palamedes* in Rotterdam took place in 1663, around the time when republicans felt a threat of Willem III claiming the position of stadtholder. Vondel himself promoted the reuse of his play in this way several times, for example by referring extensively to *Palamedes* in his 1663 play *Batavische gebroeders*.<sup>34</sup> The handwritten key to the political references in *Palamedes* that Geeraardt Brandt had created some years after its publication was published in the so-called ‘Amersfoortse uitgaven’ (‘Amersfoort editions’) along with Vondel’s satires during the second period without a stadtholder (1702–1747), in 1705, 1707 and 1735.

In twentieth-century literary studies, the general view is that *Palamedes* is a play that stands on its own within the collection of Vondel’s plays. In his study of the dramatic oeuvre of Vondel, Smit regards *Palamedes* as an ‘intermezzo’. He regards the political allegory in *Palamedes* as more important than the literary conventions of tragedy.<sup>35</sup> He even proposes not to call *Palamedes* a tragedy since the piece was:

so unconventional that we must ask ourselves if he [Vondel] actually wanted to indicate that this play should not in fact be seen as a tragedy. Even though generally speaking it has the shape of tragedy, it should not be regarded as such, because for a large part, non-dramatic factors determined its structure.<sup>36</sup>

The opposite, however, has also been claimed. Bomhoff, for example, defends *Palamedes* as a tragedy, focussing on its aesthetic value, which in his view should be regarded as separate from the allegorical references.<sup>37</sup> This brings me back to the political-aesthetical entanglement that this play, in my reading, embodies, and of which I will explore the formal, textual embodiment. I will do so in a historical formalist analysis.

<sup>34</sup> Duits, *Van Bartholomeusnacht tot Bataafse opstand*, pp. 262–63. See also Meijer Drees, ‘Vondels *Palamedes*’, p. 86. On *Batavische gebroeders*, see the contribution by Gaakeer in this volume.

<sup>35</sup> Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 2, pp. 99–131.

<sup>36</sup> Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 2, p. 119: ‘[*Palamedes*] is zelfs zó ongewoon dat wij ons moeten afvragen of hij [Vondel] daarmee niet te kennen heeft willen geven, dat dit spel, al had het in het algemeen de vorm van een tragedie, toch niet als zodanig moest worden beschouwd, omdat andere dan dramatische factoren voor een belangrijk deel de structuur hadden bepaald.’

<sup>37</sup> Bomhoff, *Bijdrage tot de waardering van Vondels drama*, pp. 34–35, 143–45. Another example of an aesthetic reading of the play is in Jorissen, *Palamedes*, pp. 1–56.

In recent decades, attention to form in literary texts has diminished in Anglo-American literary studies. This is not to say that literary studies has not performed any formal analyses, but form has not been regarded as an aspect of major importance; it appeared to be something that spoke for itself, and that could, consequently, be overlooked. In reaction to this so-called 'anti-formalism', there has been some explicit attention to form recently. It concerns a form of research that has been defined as 'New Formalism'.<sup>38</sup> My analysis can be connected to an important point of interest within this movement, also called 'Historical Formalism'.<sup>39</sup> Herein, form is connected to history, culture and politics.<sup>40</sup> Literature is regarded as one of many media in which discourses on culture and politics are represented, but still as a medium with specific formal characteristics. These formal characteristics, however, are not regarded as static, but as dynamically interrelated with the discourses on culture and politics.

The work of Heather Dubrow has been of great importance within Historical Formalism, and particularly helpful in my analysis of *Palamedes*.<sup>41</sup> Dubrow, focussing on literary genres, proceeds from the assumption that an author's choices in literary conventions are meaningful – whether they follow the conventions or deviate from them. Form and ideology are thus regarded as interactive.<sup>42</sup> In the following analysis of *Palamedes*, then, I will focus on genres and discourses to which the play can be connected and on the use of the conventions that are part of these genres and discourses. I will show how Vondel follows conventions, ignores them or emphasises them,

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<sup>38</sup> This may be too grand a name for a movement without much coherence and which is still developing into a 'theoretically self-conscious movement' (Rasmussen, *Renaissance Literature*, p. 3). See Levinson, 'What is New Formalism?', for reflections on the plurality of ideas, theories and methods within 'New Formalism'. Among recent publications most explicitly arguing for form are Wolfson, *Reading for Form* and Rasmussen, *Renaissance Literature*.

<sup>39</sup> For the most straightforward example, see Cohen, *Shakespeare and Historical Formalism*.

<sup>40</sup> Which, most interestingly, is also the focus of recent studies by historians such as Sharpe and Zwicker (see, for example, the above-mentioned publications). Both these historians and the literary historians of 'Historical Formalism' present their work as a continuation of New Historicism, with comparable questions, yet with more attention to the interaction between formal elements and politics.

<sup>41</sup> Esp. Dubrow, 'The Politics of Aesthetics' (which is a revision of Dubrow, 'Guess Who is Coming to Dinner?') and Dubrow, *A Happier Eden*.

<sup>42</sup> See also Cohen, 'Between Form and Culture', p. 32; and Cohen, *Shakespeare and Historical Formalism*.

and I will try to explain how these choices may have motivated readers to recognise the allegorical game of decoding in the play. Firstly, I will show how readers must have been urged to decode even before they had actually started reading the play. In two subsequent sections, I will focus on formal stimuli to decode within the play itself and in the final section, I will present the framework of references to the game of coding and decoding that is at work within both the play and its preface. It will become clear how in *Palamedes* both form and subject matter motivated the contemporaneous reader to lift the veil that for so long has been regarded as a necessary protective measure.

### *Decoding Extra-Textual Stimuli: Orchestrating Expectations*

Even without reading the play, the public's attention would have been directed to the possibilities of decoding. In the first place, this was the case because of the simple fact that Vondel was the author. Vondel was known as someone actively engaged in politics, within his plays too.<sup>43</sup> Readers would have expected a political debate of some kind to be present in a new play by Vondel. This expectation was further supported by the fact that the play was published shortly after Maurits's death, with Vondel's antipathy for the stadtholder being known. Furthermore, the universal moral in the subtitle, 'Vermoorde Onnooselheyd' ('Murdered Innocence') was an incitement for reading the play as a code, since it did not refer to the specific case of Palamedes. Benjamin has shown that titles of allegorical plays are often characterised by having a main title that refers to the surface layer, and a more general subtitle, referring to the allegorical content of the play.<sup>44</sup>

The main title of Vondel's play, *Palamedes*, does indeed refer to the surface layer. Yet it may even have been a stronger incitement to read the play as a code than the subtitle. The narrative of the mythological figure Palamedes has its own tradition, with which many of the future readers must have been familiar. Reading or hearing the title of the play, the tradition of the mythological figure probably resounded and functioned as an incentive to read it allegorically. Palamedes was one of the characters in the stories about the Trojan War, but he was not mentioned in Homer's famous epic. Only in later works was Palamedes

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, the contributions by Grootes, and Smits-Veldt and Spies.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin*, p. 195.

introduced as a Greek commander-in-chief of the army, who acted in close conjunction with Agamemnon. Accused of treason by Ulysses, he was killed by his fellow warriors. After playing a leading role in tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, Palamedes became a symbol of those unjustly condemned to death. Although few of those plays had survived, Vondel and his contemporaries knew the story of Palamedes had been used by Euripides in an allegorical play on the death of Socrates. Moreover, prior to the publication of Vondel's play, the character Palamedes made his first appearance on the Dutch stage in the allegorical play *Iphigenia* (1617) by Vondel's colleague Samuel Coster (1579–1665). Palamedes is only a supporting character in *Iphigenia*, but the fact that Vondel's main character had recently turned up in an allegorical play, along with his earlier allegorical appearances, was undoubtedly important in the *Palamedes* of 1625. It was indeed, next to *Iphigenia*, the second play in the Dutch Republic in which a classical-historical narrative was used to represent contemporary events. Moreover, the political arguments in *Iphigenia* resemble those of *Palamedes*.<sup>45</sup> The title *Palamedes* thus contained several connotations to older plays with topical content, which may have warned future readers to expect something similar.

In some of the early editions of *Palamedes*, there was also a visual incentive to decode. A drawing by the Amsterdam engraver and art publisher Salomon Saverij (1587–1679) depicted a man being crowned with a laurel while he is threatened by all kinds of dangerous animals.<sup>46</sup> The man is far too old to represent the young hero Palamedes and even resembles Oldenbarnevelt to some extent, as depicted by other contemporary pictures. The contrast between Palamedes and the depicted figure as well as its resemblances to pictures of Oldenbarnevelt may have motivated readers to start reading *Palamedes* as an allegory about the execution of the latter.

<sup>45</sup> *Iphigenia* could be read as a satire about the politico-religious situation in Amsterdam in the years 1616–1617, pleading against the strict Counter-Remonstrant preachers. In 1621, the play was discussed in the Church Council and performances were forbidden, but the real controversy about the political meaning of *Iphigenia* only broke out in 1630, when some politically delicate issues had been added. *Iphigenia* and *Palamedes* have often been criticised together as being one of a kind. Cf. Smits-Veldt, *Samuel Coster*, pp. 305–455, and Smits-Veldt, *Het Nederlandse Renaissancetoneel*, p. 85.

<sup>46</sup> The depicted scene is described in the play in ll. 2023–41.

*Decoding Textual Stimuli: The Realities of Staging*

In the play itself too, references are made to the old age of the main character, which makes him incompatible with the image of Palamedes as passed down from the classical period.<sup>47</sup> The Palamedes of antiquity was a young and vital warrior, whereas Oldenbarnevelt was an old, resigned statesman. The character Palamedes introduces himself in a long monologue in Act One. He feels uncomfortable in the Greek army, since he is regarded as insincere and has been accused of several crimes by his fellow warriors. In his monologue, he refutes every single accusation and is thus presented as a just man. In the following acts, however, Ulysses and his companion Diomedes plot to ‘prove’ some of the accusations. They kill an imprisoned Trojan slave and plant a letter among his clothes which is addressed to Palamedes and has supposedly been signed by the Trojan king Priam. The letter implies that Palamedes is a traitor, and Agamemnon is of course willing to believe this about someone he regards as a competitor. He decides Palamedes will be judged by three of his greatest adversaries and this, unsurprisingly, results in Palamedes’ execution. Friends and family of Palamedes try to prevent the conviction but are overruled by the power of Agamemnon and the cunning of Ulysses and the priest Calchas. In Act Five, the desperate brother of Palamedes, Oeax, calls upon their ancestor Neptune and asks him for revenge. Neptune predicts how Palamedes will be honoured in the end, whereas the future of the other Greeks is not that bright at all. Neptune describes in detail the future sufferings of Agamemnon and Ulysses. After this preview we are presented with a short look at the Trojan leaders Priam and Hecuba, who are celebrating the death of Palamedes.

For all of the figures in Vondel’s play, readers could find contemporary counterparts. They saw Palamedes as Oldenbarnevelt and Agamemnon as the stadtholder Maurits. To them the Greeks represented the Dutch and the Trojans the Spaniards. Vondel’s appropriation of the figure of Palamedes invited the reader to decode allegorical meanings like these. First of all, there are the significant differences between the Palamedes of classical mythology and Vondel’s Palamedes. As we saw earlier, the most important of these differences is their age. Secondly, Palamedes clearly uses words ascribed to Oldenbarnevelt.

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, p. 117.

He does so, for example, when he addresses the crowd immediately before his death (ll. 1882–1885). The words are appropriate to Oldenbarnevelt's position – not to Palamedes's – and contemporaries must have recognised them, as they had been reproduced several times in pamphlets and other media. Several other characters, for that matter, use words that were said to be expressed by their Dutch counterparts in the real-life drama of the execution of Oldenbarnevelt *verbatim*. In pamphlets circulating after the execution, the so-called words of the protagonists of the drama had been repeated time and again.<sup>48</sup> These references would thus have been recognised immediately by contemporary readers and they could – and did – proceed, as the reception of the play proves, to decode more detailed or less familiar references.

Let me offer two examples of how this might work. Agamemnon and Ulysses are both more rational and less emotional figures than the other characters in the play, but they do not use many stoic maxims. Accordingly, their style and language reflect their characters' rationality. They use few passionate words or stylistic devices, such as exclamations or hyperboles. Both, however, sometimes use expressions that nevertheless exceed the theatrical confines of their characters. A good example of this is when Agamemnon calls Palamedes a 'scoundrel' ('hondsvot', l. 1659) after hearing him and predicting his execution. Maurits was said to have used this word to refer to Oldenbarnevelt while he was looking at the execution out of his window.<sup>49</sup> The word's dissonance with Agamemnon's otherwise well-balanced use of language urges the reader to recognise it as belonging to the historical Maurits.

Another example can be found in a monologue in Act Two, in which Ulysses speaks about his plan to lead Palamedes into a trap:

The more he defends himself, and tries to prove his innocence,  
 The more the insults grow. He remains suspect.  
 The military are divided: some praise him like a father,  
 Some spit at him and call him a traitor.  
 In addition to this trouble, the spokesman of God  
 Cultivates and nourishes the lies of slander among the people.

<sup>48</sup> See for example Den Tex's sources for his description of the execution Den Tex, *Oldenbarnevelt*, 3, pp. 718–47.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Den Tex, *Oldenbarnevelt*, 3, p. 746.

My vindictiveness will strip him of his pride forthwith,  
And make old wounds and ills fester and ooze pus.<sup>50</sup>

The last two verses of the quote were ascribed to count Willem Lodewijk (relative of Maurits) in the seventeenth-century keys to *Palamedes*. They deviate from Ulysses's typical use of language in the play, which is more rational. The Willem Lodewijk citation is less balanced and more vehement and brutal. Moreover, the use of the first person in combination with 'vindictiveness' ('wraecklust', l. 431) is remarkable. In the preceding and following verses, Ulysses describes the necessity of Palamedes's downfall in terms of fate. He sketches a situation in which Palamedes will be ruined in any event – whether Ulysses can trick him or not. Except for one expression, 'my enemy' ('Mijn vyand', l. 422), Ulysses's personal feelings towards Palamedes are not apparent. In referring to his own vindictiveness, however, he shows his own particular emotional motivation. The obvious deviations in the last two verses of the passage could serve to make the reader aware of its topicality.

The striking differences between the character Palamedes as created by Vondel and his literary classical forebear, combined with the citations – theatrical and real – form the most obvious reference to the layer of contemporary politics in the play. Yet there are many more of these references. They can be traced, for example, by taking a closer look at the way the play associates itself with the Senecan tradition of playwriting.

### *Decoding Textual Stimuli: The Conventions of Senecan Tragedy*

During the years preceding the publication of *Palamedes*, Vondel gained in-depth knowledge of the Senecan tradition of playwriting. He studied Latin by translating Seneca's *Troades*<sup>51</sup> with the help of the learned writers Hooft and Reaal, and he probably read Heinsius's

<sup>50</sup> Vondel, *Palamedes* ll. 425–32: 'Te meer hy sich verweert, en na sijne onschuld tracht, / Te meer het lastren groeyt. hy is, en blijft verdacht. / Het krijsvolck is gedeelt: d'een looft hem als een' vader, / En d'ander hem verspuwt, en scheld voor landverrader. / By dese swarigheyt koomt, dat der Goden tolck / De lasterlogen queeckt, en koestert onder 't volck. / Mijn wraecklust sal eer lang hem sijnen trots verleen, / En d'oude lemten gants tot etter wt doen sweeren.'

<sup>51</sup> This resulted in the publication of the Dutch play *De Amsteldamsche Hecuba* (1626).

annotated edition of Seneca's plays (1611). It may even have been in the commentaries in this edition that Vondel found his model for the allegory of the execution of Oldenbarnevelt, since Heinsius mentioned Euripides's play about Socrates as a fitting example of allegory. Be that as it may, the Senecan tradition, with its stoic philosophy, horrifying scenes and a good share of maxims, was well-known and popular among Dutch dramatists in the first decades of the seventeenth century. Obviously it was very apt in articulating the emotions and viewpoints of political debate, since both subjectivity (*pathos*) and rationality (in the dialogues and *sententiae*) are present in the genre. Readers had been used to searching for ethical meaning in Senecan tragedy since antiquity.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, one could carefully characterise the early Dutch Senecan tradition as a Remonstrant or pro-Oldenbarnevelt tradition, since its most important preachers, Hooft and particularly Coster, articulated Remonstrant and pro-Oldenbarnevelt views in their Senecan tragedies. In his study of English Royalist literature from the second half of the seventeenth century, Lois Potter has shown how genre and political colour could become entangled.<sup>53</sup>

Vondel's play meaningfully fits in with the Dutch Senecan tradition of the first quarter of the seventeenth century. *Palamedes* uses most of the Senecan conventions,<sup>54</sup> which in many cases are highly suited to emphasising the immediate relevance of the play. The most striking example is the role of Palamedes as a somewhat resigned character. Rather than being a tragic hero, he serves as a classic example of moral rectitude, uncompromising in his sincerity – in Seneca's theatrical characters, one characteristic was often emphasised. The character of Palamedes in the play fitted the heroic position Oldenbarnevelt was to obtain as a consequence of the publication of *Palamedes*.<sup>55</sup> The horrifying passage at the start of Act Two, where the fury Megaera brings Ulysses's uncle Sisyphus from the underworld to earth to advise the sleeping Ulysses on how to deal with Palamedes (ll. 287–406), can also be seen as typical of Senecan tragedy. The fury, thoroughly bad of course, was recognised as the Amsterdam burgomaster Reynier Pauw,

<sup>52</sup> Smits-Veldt, *Samuel Coster*, p. 67.

<sup>53</sup> Potter, *Secret Rites*, pp. 72–112.

<sup>54</sup> There are also some passages that are reminiscent of the plays of Seneca in *Palamedes*, especially of *Hercules furens*. See Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 2, pp. 123–24.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. also Vondel, *Palamedes*, ed. Wijngaards, p. 28.

one of Oldenbarnevelt's judges. The conventions of the Senecan character of the Fury thus enabled Vondel to defame Pauw as thoroughly bad.

Even more significant than the use of Senecan conventions, however, are the deviations from traditional Senecan tragedy. In this respect, the final act of the tragedy is the most striking. In the first of its three parts, the desperate Oeax asks Neptune for revenge (ll. 1863–2278). The second part is a short dialogue between the Trojan Priam and Hecuba (ll. 2279–93) and the third part is a choir of Trojan girls, celebrating the death of Palamedes (ll. 2293–2380). The dialogue between Priam and Hecuba ignores the required unities of place and action and the choir of Trojan girls violates the convention that a (Senecan) tragedy should not end with a chorus.<sup>56</sup> These deviations may have functioned as stimuli for informed readers to read the act allegorically.

In the first scene of Act Five, Neptune had predicted the terrors that would face Agamemnon, Ulysses and the other agitators of Palamedes after his death. His prediction, a narrative well-known to the reader of classical texts, contains only few parallels to the topical layer of *Palamedes*. The betrayal by the Greek housewives, the destruction of Greek kingdoms, Ulysses's roaming – all of these familiar themes were at that point in opposition to the consequences of the execution of Oldenbarnevelt in the Dutch Republic. Only the death of Agamemnon perhaps motivated an allegorical reading. The death of Maurits may have been interpreted as a fulfilment of Neptune's prophecy in the play. Although Maurits was not killed by his wife, like Agamemnon, their resemblances were underlined by the tempest they both encountered: Agamemnon on his way home, Maurits during the attack on Antwerp.

The subsequent scenes of Act Five, breaking with Senecan conventions, are more obviously topical and may have forced readers also to interpret the first scene as such. Priam and Hecuba were recognised as the Spanish rulers of the Southern Netherlands, Albrecht and Isabella of Austria. As such, their dialogue is very topical in its references to Dutch history. It urges the reader to remember, above all, that the play has a topical meaning. The closing chorus serves to reinforce this reading. The happiness of the Trojan girls in the chorus represents that of the Spanish and Southern Netherlanders following the division

<sup>56</sup> On these deviations, see Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 2, pp. 118–19.

within the Republic and thus points to the plot against Oldenbarnevelt and its enormous consequences.

Another difference between *Palamedes* and Seneca's tragedies is found in its style and language. Unlike Seneca's tragedies, the play offers relatively few stoic maxims or excessive ornamentation.<sup>57</sup> The absence of these Senecan conventions may have reduced the distance between readers and the events described, thus making it easier to identify the allegorical narrative. This is not to say, however, that the whole play employs the language of common parlance. There are significant differences in the use of style and language by the characters in the tragedy. Palamedes himself is the only one who speaks almost entirely in poetic language and employs the occasional Senecan stoic maxim. He is indeed the stoic hero of the play. His style and language reinforce the image of Palamedes as a quiet and wise old man – an image that is in opposition to the classical figure of Palamedes but conforms to the image Vondel wanted to create of Oldenbarnevelt.

The use of style and language is more striking in the choruses, however, which also deviate from common Senecan choruses in other respects. In the Senecan tradition, the chorus was a lyrical passage propagating universal moralism whilst often presenting a story independent of the plot, for variety's sake. In *Palamedes* only the third and fourth chorus can be interpreted in this way. An apt example of a deviating chorus is the one at the end of Act One. After the monologue of Palamedes, the antiphonal singing of the Euboeans (Palamedes's people) and the Ithacans (Ulysses's people) depicts their argument about the accusations against Palamedes and his refutations thereof. Their language is more passionate than that of Palamedes in the preceding monologue and is free of stoic maxims. Whereas Palamedes describes Ulysses's campaign against him as a fact he has to endure, without really blaming him, the Euboeans speak of Ulysses as the man 'whose tongue is sweet-sounding, but who carries poison inside' ('wiens tong van Nectar dout, / En draeght vergift inwendig', ll. 197–98). The contrast between the monologue and the chorus and the way the chorus deviates from common Senecan choruses, underscores a topical interpretation. It can be interpreted as a representation of the dispute between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants, which was also

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<sup>57</sup> See also Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 2, pp. 123–24; and Vondel, *Palamedes*, ed. Wijngaards, pp. 28–29.

reciprocal and more passionate than rational. Style and language again support a topical reading.

Another departure from traditional Senecan tragedy provides the framework of satirical elements, in which the use of style and language again plays an important role. The play is simultaneously a tragedy and a satirical drama.<sup>58</sup> Satire in the lofty genre of tragedy was uncommon and is therefore dissonant in *Palamedes*. An example of a clearly satirical passage is the entreaty of priest Calchas in Act Three (ll. 947–86). I cite the passage in which he describes the power of the priests:

We are bound to the Gods by an unbreakable pact.  
 Those who contradict us, contradict God's word.  
 We are copies of God, ambassadors of immortality.  
 We are honoured, anointed Jupiter's attendants,  
 And we wear his livery, form his retinue,  
 And through our saintliness, one speaks to God.  
 A worldly power that dares audaciously to counteract  
 Will lose his seat and stand on tottering feet,  
 Our signs are lightning bolts, our words crashing thunder.  
 We are a wall around the state, the keys of the city gate,  
 The torches that set a country easily alight.  
 Being provoked, we give free rein to the vomit  
 And curses of hell: no Monarch is able to mobilise his army  
 As quickly as we are able to mobilise the fierce people.<sup>59</sup>

The image sketched here of priesthood by a priest himself is replete with hyperboles.<sup>60</sup> Calchas represents himself as a proud person, hungry for power. He cannot be taken seriously as a sincere spokesman of God. The satirical layer of the passage interacts with references to the Counter-Remonstrants, who as a consequence lose their credibility

<sup>58</sup> For an interpretation of *Palamedes* as a satirical drama see for example Wijngaards' edition of *Palamedes*, pp. 33–34.

<sup>59</sup> Vondel, *Palamedes* ll. 973–86: 'Wy staen met Goden in onbrekelijk verbond. / Al wie ons wederspreekt, die wederspreekt Gods mond. / Wy zyn afdrucksels Gods, onsterflijckheyds gesanten. / Wy zyn gehult, gesalft tot Iupiters trawanten, / En voeren syn levrey, en maken sijnen stoet, / En door onse hayligheyd men Godheyd spreken moet. / Wat wereldlijcke maght ons stout derf tegenwroeten, / Diens setel sijght, en staet op waggelende voeten, / Ons wencken blixems zyn, en donders yeder woord. / Wy zyn een muur om 't rijck, de sleutels van stads poort, / De fackels om een land in lichten brand te stellen. / Gezart wy geven aen d'wtbraecxelen der Hellen, / En vloecken vryen toom: en geen Monarch soo gauw / Syn heyr brengt op de been, als wy het woeste graeu.'

<sup>60</sup> Sierhuis has shown how the image of Counter-Remonstrant 'fanaticism, ambition and hypocrisy' in *Palamedes* is derived in large part from pamphlet literature from the 1618–1619 controversy: Sierhuis, 'A Babel Full of Confusion', pp. 275–281.

together with Calchas. Satirical passages of this nature can be found throughout the tragedy, which emphasises the strong satirical connotations of the play as a whole and thus encourages allegorical reading.

*The World as a Stage: A Framework of References to Allegory*

The web of references to contemporary politics motivated by the use of formal conventions is supported by a framework of references that is both formal and thematic. These references do not point to contemporary political events as such, but subtly refer to the possibility of allegory in literature as well as reality. That is to say, the theme of *theatrum mundi* is present in *Palamedes*, even in its preface. The larger part of that preface describes what is known about Palamedes from earlier literature and historiography, particularly from the classical period. The description places considerable emphasis on the comparison between Palamedes and Socrates, based on the allegorical tragedy by Euripides.<sup>61</sup> It posits the plays by Euripides and Vondel as representative of the important function of drama in eulogising fallen leaders.

In general, the contradictions between the named sources lead Vondel to take a sceptical approach to history and literature in the preface. More than once, the sources are said not to have been faithful to the truth. When that concerns a literary source, it is justified by referring to poetic licence. The 'poetic freedom' ('poëtische vryheid') is specifically mentioned in l. 207, when Vondel gives his motivation for the location he chose for the execution in *Palamedes*, which is an aberration of some of the sources. Poetic freedom is identified elsewhere too, for example in ll. 165–68, when Homer is explicitly called a poet, in order to explain why he had ignored Palamedes.

In the end, however, literature and reality do not appear that dissimilar. Several references can be found to an idea of universal theatricality: acting is regarded as not uncommon in either literature or reality. An example of such a reference can be found in the description of the misuse of religion at the beginning of the preface, where Vondel argues that good leaders will always be deceived in the end. The heathens claiming to be Christian are said to perform their 'role' ('personagie') very well.<sup>62</sup> Later, the deceit which led to the execution of Palamedes is

<sup>61</sup> The tragedy is mentioned in ll. 67–72, but Vondel refers to the comparison between Palamedes and Socrates two more times, in ll. 43–53 and 97–102.

<sup>62</sup> l. 17.

referred to, in Vondel's translation of Ovid, as 'the versified prank' (l. 130, 't Gedichte schellemstuck'). In the following lines, this prank is regarded as being appropriate for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, because it led to a 'transformation'.<sup>63</sup> The boundaries between literature and reality are diminishing as a consequence of this argumentation. The preface thus points to the entanglement of the world of literature and reality and the intrinsic possibilities of theatricality in both worlds.

In an article on the *theatrum mundi* metaphor in Dutch plays, René van Stipriaan has shown how the use of words with theatrical connotations is part of a larger framework within the text of Vondel's *Palamedes* itself.<sup>64</sup> For example, he draws attention to the description of the location of Palamedes's death as a 'stage' (ll. 1896, 'schouwtoneel') and the execution itself as a 'tragedy' (l. 1929, 'treurspel'). I would include the use of words like 'play' (ll. 13, 49 and 108, 'stuck'), 'versified' (ll. 392 and 1957, 'erdight') and 'role' (l. 433, 'rolle'). Time and again the use of words like these urges the reader to be aware of the theatricality of everything, not only in the theatre, but also in the rest of the world. The word 'stuck' for example refers in *Palamedes* respectively to: proof or evidence (l. 13), which can also be false, as becomes clear later in the play; to a plan (l. 49), in this case the plan to offer the daughter of Agamemnon, Iphigenia, as a sacrifice, which Palamedes regards as an unjust plan; and finally to a story (l. 1866), specifically the story of Palamedes's downfall.

The level of the theatrical characters also contains several markers of the overt presence of theatre and betrayal. This is not just because the characters represent both a 'real' person involved in the execution of Oldenbarnevelt and a fictional character in the play. It rather concerns the fact that the characters occasionally become interchangeable with the people they represent as well as with other people too.

Some characters represent more than one person. Ajax, for example, friend of Palamedes, was recognised as both Van Matenes and Schagen, two friends of Oldenbarnevelt. And Ulysses, who was only recognised as one enemy of Oldenbarnevelt, viz. François van Aarssen, nevertheless appears able to act like someone else when he uses the words of count Willem Lodewijk, who in the rest of the play is represented by Ulysses's companion Diomedes.<sup>65</sup> The way in which the two roles of

<sup>63</sup> ll. 132–34.

<sup>64</sup> Van Stipriaan, 'Het theatrum mundi als ludiek labyrint.'

<sup>65</sup> In ll. 431–32, see the above quotation: p. 239.





Drawing by Salomon Saverij, in: Joost van den Vondel, *Palamedes oft vermoorde onnooselhejd: treur-spel*. Amsterdam: Jacob Aertsz. Colom, 1625. University Library VU University Amsterdam.

Something similar happens in the fourth chorus, which seems to function only on the surface level of the play at first sight. In this chorus, Palamedes is compared to Hercules and the two become interchangeable. It has always been argued that this chorus is one of the few parts

<sup>67</sup> Cf., for example, Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 2, pp. 125–26.

of the play in which the allegorical layer is absent,<sup>67</sup> but when interpreted as part of the discourse on theatricality, it does have relevance to the allegorical interpretation of the play. It is abundantly clear that in this chorus, Palamedes is a young, vital warrior and not the Oldenbarnevelt-like wise old man, but in fact another allegory is at work here: Palamedes represents Hercules. This allegory within the allegory of *Palamedes* shows the possibilities of the genre and the universality of theatre and betrayal. As such, it supports the larger framework of references to allegory in both preface and the play itself.

For that matter, the same thing applies to the description of the threatening of Palamedes by all kinds of animals in ll. 2023–41. The animals represent the enemies of Palamedes in the play, and at the same time readers were motivated to recognise in them the enemies of Oldenbarnevelt, particularly in editions that contained the picture of Saverij on which an Oldenbarnevelt-like man was surrounded by the animals described. Using allegories within the allegory could incite readers to search for more allegorical meanings than they had already found.

The discourse on theatricality in the preface and in the play itself emphasises what *Palamedes* is able to do, namely to give a coded account of reality. My formalist reading of the play aimed to clarify how the allegorical narrative of *Palamedes* simultaneously hides and displays the topical meaning of the play with extra-textual and textual stimuli. This seemingly paradoxical movement can be regarded as stemming both from the culture of coding and decoding and the allegorical genre itself as well as from the heated political debate in the Dutch Republic during the 1620s. In that context, allegory is both more than rhetoric or a literary game and more than a thin veil to cover a political statement. The interaction between politics and aesthetics is pivotal to *Palamedes*.