CHAPTER TWELVE

POLITICS AND AESTHETICS – DECODING ALLEGORY IN
PALAMEDES (1625)\(^1\)

Nina Geerdink

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 aesthetical 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

---

\(^1\) I would like to thank Helmer Helmers, Johan Koppenol and the editors of this volume for their comments on an earlier version of this chapter. Marijke Meijer Drees was kind enough to share literature with me as well as her ideas about Palamedes during an early stage of my work on this chapter.
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, 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. Both for medieval and for early modern times, scholars have shown how the culture of these times strongly emphasised decoding literature. 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. The aesthetics of literature in the early modern period were partly determined by this game of decoding, just as politics were determined by it. Palamedes was part of a culture in which the game of decoding predominated in both politics and aesthetics.

---

3 Tambling, Allegory, pp. 1–6, 18.
4 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.

5 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.

6 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.