On 15 July 1634, Hugo Grotius presents his esteemed and loyal friend Gerard Vossius with a play by his hand entitled *Sophompaneas*. As he explains in his dedicatory letter, the piece has three points to commend it. First of all, it is a tragedy and thus belongs to the ‘royal’ genre that was not disdained by prominent men such as Sophocles, or the emperor Augustus. Secondly, although the plot conforms to the Aristotelian ideal it is drawn not from the misfortunes of Troy or Thebes – matter that has been tainted by the story-telling Greeks! – but from biblical history, which is free from falsehood. Finally, the play offers a portrait of an exemplary ruler, and in this respect it complements the examples of the first three Patriarchs, on whose lives, according to Philo Judaeus, Moses the lawgiver intended us to model our own.¹

The exemplary regent in question is Joseph, son of Jacob and Rachel, whose history we find recorded in Genesis 37–50. More specifically, Grotius’s play centres on the episode in which Joseph, having been exalted to the position of governor of Egypt, confronts and forgives his brothers, who had sold him into slavery in his youth. As a humanist, Grotius presents his protagonist in the light of those qualities that mark him out as a universal example, and the play may thus be classified as a

¹ Grotius, *Sophompaneas*, pp. 126–33. Unless stated otherwise, all references to Grotius’s play, including the translations, are from the edition by Arthur Eyffinger. Daniel Heinsius, a Dutch humanist and former friend of Grotius, had singled out the popular theme of Joseph in Egypt as the only one in the Bible to answer Aristotle’s preference for a complex plot where the moment of recognition (agnitio) coincides with a reversal of fortune or peripeteia (Eyffinger, *Sophompaneas*, pp. 3–4). In his dedicatory letter, Grotius forestalls any possible criticism concerning the exitus felix of his tragedy by mentioning a number of classical tragedies that likewise lack a sad ending, including Euripides’ *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, a play he had recently translated into Latin himself.
mirror for magistrates. However, various readers and critics have pointed out that the author must have been aware of certain striking similarities between Joseph's story and his own vicissitudes.²

A brilliant and internationally acclaimed jurist, theologian, classicist, and historian, Grotius had been intended for a career in politics. After a promising start, however, he got caught up in the politico-religious controversies of his day and was sentenced to life imprisonment in the Dutch castle of Loevestein (1618), from which, helped by his wife, he managed to escape in a book chest three years later. His subsequent years were spent in exile, first in Paris and later, after a failed attempt to return to Holland, near Hamburg. Moved by feelings of bitter resentment towards his home country he had long been looking around for new prospects. At last, in 1634, an opening presented itself as the Swedish chancellor Axel Oxenstierna offered him the post of ambassador to the Swedish crown in Paris.

This appointment, as Grotius may have perceived it, would enable him to further European-Christian unity and promote his ideas for a universal system of natural law set forth in his treatise *De iure belli ac pacis* (*On the Law of War and Peace*, 1625). It would thus afford him an opportunity to prove his statesmanship, in circumstances which may well have put him in mind of Joseph's foreign career. Like Joseph, Grotius had been forced into exile; like his protagonist, he may have sensed the hand of God in the reversal of fortune that was once more to call him to public office. His conciliatory letters to the States of Holland and the Dutch stadtholder, Frederick Henry, suggest his intention to follow Joseph's example in repaying evil with good,³ while the play itself contains several possible allusions to the parallel, notably Grotius's confusion, in the original draft, between his own term of exile and that of Joseph.⁴

One early reader on whom this parallel was certainly not lost was Vondel, who, like Grotius's son Pieter, produced a Dutch translation of the play in the year of its first appearance. The personal relationship between Vondel and Grotius dates back to 1631, when Vondel came to visit his countryman in the latter's temporary hiding place in

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³ Eyffinger, *Sophompanecas*, p. 66.
⁴ *Sophompanecas*, pp. 999–1000. This slip, among other possible clues, was first noted by Van Vollenhoven, whose interpretation of the play's genesis I am following here (*Verspreide Geschriften* I, pp. 238–39).