In November 1650 the young stadholder William II died unexpectedly of smallpox. The year had been marked by increasing tension between the stadholder and the States of Holland culminating in William’s attempt in July to seize the city of Amsterdam. A disagreement about the decommissioning of troops in the pay of the province of Holland reflected deeper underlying issues. Members of the States of Holland alleged that the stadholder was seeking to acquire the powers and privileges of a monarch while supporters of William retorted that the province was emphasising its own sovereignty at the expense of the Union of Utrecht. It was in this strained situation that the stadholder’s posthumous son, also to be named William, was born, eight days after his father’s death. The States of Holland took advantage of these fortuitous circumstances to declare that they would no longer have a stadholder in their province and their example was followed by the majority of the other provinces.

The House of Orange was faced with an unprecedented situation, the death of a stadholder without a successor of mature years. For twenty-two years, from 1650 to 1672, there was to be no Orange stadholder in the majority of the Dutch provinces. For the supporters of the House of Orange theirs was a multifold task. Firstly, they had to convince the political classes that the institution of the stadholderate was essential to the running of the Republic, an argument that would be couched in theoretical as well as practical terms. Secondly, they sought to emphasise that only the infant son of William II could fulfil this role. Viewed through the lens of political reality, their viewpoint appears contradictory. If the role of a stadholder was vital to the effective government of the Republic, then it would appear essential that the position be held by an adult. Yet not withstanding debate in the early 1650s concerning a lord lieutenanship, to be held by either the Frisian stadholder William Frederick or John Maurice of Nassau-Siegen, Orangist propaganda throughout the years until 1672 always emphasised that the key role of
stadholder could only be held by the young William III. Their weapon was the Orangist myth.

I would like to examine key elements of the Orangist myth as deployed by supporters of the House of Orange during the years 1650–1672. I will be drawing on the language of political rhetoric as evidenced in the Knuttel pamphlet collection of the Royal Library at The Hague, but my paper will not be confined to this area. Much Orangist propaganda in the form of political polemic tended to concentrate on the theoretical merits of the stadholderate. The stadholderate was described as the essential ‘monarchical’ component in a mixed constitution and the authority of the Prince of Orange essential to counterbalance the dominant province of Holland. Elements of this debate have been discussed in 1971 by Pieter Geyl and more recently and in depth by van de Klashorst.\(^1\) However alongside this theoretical debate was the “language” of an Orangist myth which could be found in drama poetry and visual imagery as well as in the rhetoric of political pamphlets and this has attracted less attention from scholars.

The crux of the Orangist “myth” from 1650 was the contention that the Dutch Republic depended for its harmony and prosperity on the presence of a stadholder Prince of Orange to whose ancestors it owed an immense debt of gratitude. As we will see, the myth could be presented by means of symbols and images which captivated sections of the public who were immune to theoretical discussion.\(^2\) Moreover, rather than merely fulfilling a conservative role, the myth framed the future and for the Orangists this meant the appointment of William III to the stadholderate.\(^3\) The Orangist myth existed before 1650 but in the years that followed it was to be structured to meet the unique circumstances of the time.

A timely clue to the nature of the Orangist myth comes in a pamphlet of 1650 Amsterdams Buer-Praetje which was written after the death of the stadholder William II. Two fictional Amsterdammers debate whether the death of the young stadholder was a greater loss to the Dutch than the assassination of William I. Opinions differ but one

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3 Flood, Political Myth, 48.