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## The Travesty of Egoism: Same-Gender Passion and Homosocial Desire in a Dutch Seventeenth-Century Morality Play\*

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### Abstract:

In the seventeenth-century Netherlands, drama and politics were interwoven with one another. This was also the case with the controversial morality and allegorical play *Tieranny van Eigenbaat* (Tyranny of Egoism, 1679), which opposed the House of Orange, and especially William III, Stadtholder of the Netherlands and King of England (who was, according to the writers of the play, a true example of uncontrolled egoism). Although the main character *Eigenbaat* (Egoism) disguises himself as a warrior woman (an Amazon) to seize power, his cross-dressing has not been discussed in relation to rumors surrounding William’s alleged sexual preferences. By “reading against the grain,” this article discusses the so-called fault lines, where the characters display same-gender passions for each other. The article focusses on two examples of such relationships: Egoism, who seduces Lady Will, while in female disguise, and the intimate nature of Egoism’s relationship with his male servant and slave, Vice. As such, the article offers an elaboration on the thesis that *Tieranny van Eigenbaat* was used by the republican authorities of Amsterdam as a propaganda play to discredit William III for rule, as well as his offspring.

Keywords: Dutch seventeenth century, Spinozism, queer studies, homosocial desires,  
Stadtholder-King William III

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During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, cross-dressing was a well-known practice in Dutch comedies and burlesques. Especially the figure of the harlequin and other buffoons (like stock character Jan Klaassen) were famous for their transvestism on stage. By assuming another gender identity through changing clothes, they could easily mislead other characters. Cross-dressing was not merely very popular for its comic effects in Dutch comedies from the early seventeenth century onward. With Calvinism becoming dominant in the northern Netherlands, popular carnival practices of disguise and cross-dressing were removed from the streets but could survive in the public theater houses. G. A. Bredero's *Moortje* (1615), for instance, is a Shrove Tuesday play in which one of the male characters dresses up as a black housekeeper in order to enter an Amsterdam brothel and to rape the bawd's daughter. Such bizarre examples of travesty were intended to draw attention to the dangers of sexual lawlessness of young male characters, whereas Arlecchino-like characters had to exemplify more generally vices like deceit, pretence, and trickery, with, of course, clear comic overtones (Van Stipriaan 1996, 226–28).

From the 1660s onward, neo-classicism in Dutch theater introduced a more restricted and moralized relationship with theatrical practices of transvestism and cross-dressing. Influenced by French tragedy and comedy of the seventeenth century, the Amsterdam society of poets *Nil Volentibus Arduum*, whose members belonged to Spinoza's inner circle, translated and wrote plays in which cross-dressing is always related to moral questions, like the character's strive for self-maintenance in positively motivated acts of disguise, whereas in "immoral masquerades," disguised characters were led by their irrational immorality, exemplifying the negative effects of emotions like self-interest and lust. Furthermore, once women were allowed to perform in Amsterdam plays, with Ariana Nooseman being the first in 1655, this restricted and moralized relationship was possibly strengthened and influenced the perceptions of cross-dressing of the audience. Cross-dressing was no longer simply an act

in order to represent women on stage, but had a distinct meaning in the context of the play (Erenstein et al. 1996, 234–41). In comparison, similar developments can be noticed in English Restoration theater, for instance, from the 1660s onward (Quinsey 1996, 1–10; Rosenthal 1996, 201–18; Gill 2000, 199–208). Regarding the (im)moral examples of masquerade in these late seventeenth-century Dutch plays, Tanja Holzhey (2009) has come up with a clear typology of the different kinds of disguise in the decades of rationalism and Spinozism on the Dutch stage, differentiating between such moral and immoral masquerades. In her discussion of the masquerades on the Dutch stage after 1660, Holzhey explores the (im)morality of disguises. And yet, her argument does not involve the gender acts and matters of sexuality in these plays. However, gender and sex on the one hand, and cross-dressing in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theater and masquerades on the other have been discussed in relation to each other in early modern scholarship of the last decades (Shepherd 1981; Castle 1986; Garber 1992; Levine 1994; Greenblatt 1997; Wahrman 2004; Sinfield 2006).

One of the plays that Holzhey discusses in her contribution about masquerades on the Dutch stage is the morality play *Tieranny van Eigenbaat in het eiland van Vrije Keur* (“Tyranny of Egoism on the Island of Free Choice”), an allegory based on the plot of *La tirannide dell’interesse* (1662), a “tragedia politicamorale” accompanied by music and written by the Italian librettist Francesco Sbarra. Transvestism in this play is an instrument in the hands of the play’s main character to realise his selfish political ambitions to become a despot on the “Island of Free Choice,” a symbol for the Dutch Republic (Holzhey 2009, 71–72). From the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries onward, disguise was in general a popular ingredient of Dutch morality plays, especially in relationship to the so-called *zinnekens*, allegorical characters who concealed their real identity in order to manipulate the behavior of the play’s main characters (Hummelen 1958, 110–12). In *Tieranny van Eigenbaat*, however,

the masquerade is not limited to a temporal disguise of a minor character, but is instead crucial to the plot as such, as it is directly related to the criminal purpose of the main character and his “helpers,” who are his admirers. Elaborating on Holzhey’s argument, we argue that the main protagonist “Eigenbaat” (“Egoism”) has dressed himself up as a foreign princess in the costume of an Amazon to hide his real identity throughout the first half of the play. By doing so, he successfully seduces the female character “Wil” (Will) by means of love and sexual desire. She already falls in love with Egoism before this character has unmasked his male identity and, thus, we could easily speak of a character that is overpowered by same-sex passions. Egoism himself is a character surrounded by a group of male “helpers” and especially by the “hunchbacked slave” “Ondeugd” (Vice), whose admiration for Egoism seems to be at least sexually charged. Considering that Egoism and Vice have been respectively identified as Stadtholder-King William III and his confidant and childhood friend Hans Willem Bentinck, the relationship between Egoism and Vice gets, as such, an added subversive meaning, which potentially has major political implications.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, we explore the possibilities of reading this morality play about Egoism in the light of early modern questions of gender and sexuality as related to cross-dressing practices on the early modern Dutch stage. In order to unveil this highly abstract and layered political and philosophical allegory as a play about same-gender passion and homosocial desire, we will certainly have to read some passages “against the grain,” paying special attention to the play’s fault lines, that is, the conflicts and the contradictions related to the alternative stories, which the main story tries to exclude (Sinfield 2006, 10). At first sight, the plot deals with the question of how political ambition can flourish in a society dominated by egoism, vice, and the enjoyment of power, while depicting a world that depends on the dominance of male power. This alternative reading of *Tieranny van Eigenbaat*, however, will investigate to what extent the plot also produces homosocial desire and same-gender passions

throughout the play. First, we discuss how the play's gender acts reflect on contemporary debates about homosexuality in the Dutch Republic and on contemporary rumors surrounding the intimate nature of William III's and Bentinck's relationship in particular. Second, we focus on how crossdressing and gender identity are related to each other, while discussing the play's main character (Egoism), who is disguised as an Amazon. Then, we look into the masquerade of Egoism and his relationship with Will. Finally, we move on to the question how the character of Egoism relates to the male environment of his helpers/admirers and the homosocial desire of his slave Vice.

### **Rumours of Sodomy in the Dutch Republic**

*La tirannide dell'interesse* was translated into Dutch in the years after 1672 and was published in 1679. The question of how the state should deal with the "sodomy" was a very topical one in those years, as a law case against the Utrecht burgomaster Dirk de Goyer in 1676, accused of sodomy and sexual abuse, was the first official reference to what must have been a hidden subcultural phenomenon in many Dutch cities of the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> An open discussion about the tolerability of love relationships between men was, however, nonexistent and there is no indication to believe that sodomy was part of male sociability, as was the case in Italian cities, and especially in Florence (Van der Meer 1995, 221). Yet, among Spinoza's radical inner circle, homosexuality was certainly a topic that was discussed by some individuals at least, like the Utrecht-based and libertine writer Adriaan Beverland, who reflected on matters of sexuality and displayed his opinions in his private writings (Steenbakkers, Touber, and Van de Ven 2011, 225–365). And like today, rumors surrounded high-positioned people and especially William III of Orange. Beverland reflected on and contributed to these rumors, for instance, but such rumors circulated among the Dutch and English nobles, as well as throughout all the ranks of the Dutch Army (Crompton 2003, 406).

*Tieranny van Eigenbaat* was first performed in 1680, in an oppressive political context, eight years after the coup d'état by stadtholder William III, who replaced many of the republican regents in the city councils who were against the stadtholder. It was considered by the authorities as an Anti-Orangist play in favor of these dismissed republicans and was censored soon after its first staging (Van der Haven and Holzhey 2007, 245–67). It was not uncommon that allegorical plays represented and reflected on the political situation in the Dutch Republic.<sup>3</sup> After William III's death in 1702, the play was reprinted and many volumes were enriched with allegorical "keys," which disclose additional political meaning of the play on the basis of their authors' affiliations against or in favor of the stadtholder. The keys added to *Tieranny van Eigenbaat* often identify Egoism as William III and Vice as Hans Willem Bentinck, William's confidant and childhood friend. As such, the play has been called a weapon against the House of Orange; a pamphlet opposing the Orangist movement in the Republic.

Because of the mentioned keys, our reading of the sexual and romantic relationship between the characters of Egoism and Vice could also be applied to how the relationship shared by William III and Bentinck could fit the rumors about William III's alleged homosexuality, which were widespread during his reign of Great Britain and especially from the 1690s onward. Allegations of sodomy came from his political enemies, such as the Jacobites, who slandered the king for his apparent lack of interest in women and for having no more than one mistress. As such, they published a great number of pamphlets that declared William III unfit for rule. Despite the fact that he was a Protestant hero and had usurped the crown of England, one such pamphlet accused William of being Italian, a word with strong homosexual connotations. The Jacobite satirist in question was in awe of this apparent paradox:

For the case, Sir, is such, the people think much,  
That your love is Italian, your Government Dutch,  
Ah who could have thought, that a Low-Country stallion,  
And a Protestant Prince, should prove an Italian? (Cameron 1971, V, 38)

Since William also appointed his countrymen in the English government, another source for the rumors may have been the English courtiers who would have been jealous of William's Dutch friends who enjoyed the king's confidence, and who were richly rewarded. Among those friends was of course Bentinck, who was made the first Earl of Portland in 1689 (Cameron 1971, 38; Troost 1973, 421–24).

Among the Dutch population similar rumors existed. Rumors circulated in the Dutch army for instance, which had always been fanatically loyal to their commanders belonging to the House of Orange (Crompton 2003, 406). Moreover, the before mentioned Utrecht based Spinozist Adriaan Beverland, who kept a clandestine diary in the years 1678–1679, also writes about William's sexuality. He reports about the visit of William III to Utrecht, remarking that the despised prince had been surrounded by catamites (Steenbakkens, Touber, and Van de Ven 2011, 255). Although they comprise only a small number of examples, the Jacobite pamphlet and Beverland's notebook show that rumors around William's sexuality did exist and were written down. Consequently, they may indeed have resonated in the performances of *Tieranny van Eigenbaat* before and after it was censored in 1680, possibly leading to a similar reading of the text, which we will discuss below. As a result, it could easily have strengthened the opinion that William III (as well as his offspring) would be unsuitable as rulers of the Dutch Republic. The comparison at least between Vice and Bentinck hardly seems to be a coincidence, and the anti-Orangist message that is certainly present in the play would, therefore, have benefitted from a gay reading by the audience, who

were also among the people who spread rumors surrounding William's sexuality. Such a reading by the audience would only have strengthened those rumors at the same time.

### **Cross-Dressing and Sexual Freedom**

The political condemnation and legal repression of same-sex relationships in early modern society made any public experimentations with gender identity impossible, pushing it away to the cultural realm of cross-dressing practices, like during carnival, in masquerades, and in the theater. We should be careful, however, to attribute any emancipatory implications to such practices. Judith Butler rightly argues that “acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (Butler 1999, 173). According to Terry Castle, however, early modern masquerades and cross-dressing practices made room, at least, for experimentation with gender identities. Especially when gender is considered as a performative act, which functions as a decidedly public and social discourse and which internalizes our gender according to our context and society, it is possible to understand the liberating aspect of cross-dressing and the masquerade (Castle 1986, 2, 4, 33, 55, 72–74). Subsequently, fears generated by the masquerade are particularly related to the belief that the cross-dressing by women leads to female sexual freedom, and female emancipation in general (Castle 1986, 33; Garber 1992, 133–41). This anxiety is made predominantly present in the interaction between the characters Will and Reason of State in *Tieranny van Eigenbaat*, which we will discuss shortly.

Regarding sex and sexual freedom, cross-dressing was profoundly erotically charged. Practices of public disguise represented and promoted an unusual sense of freedom, which signified a certain physical detachment and consequently a moral detachment as well (Levine



1994, 3–9). Particularly transvestite costume was symbolically charged, and it evoked ambiguous sexual possibilities. The anonymity undoubtedly offered men and women who wanted to escape the heterosexual behavioral norms unusual opportunities for erotic experimentation and release. The masquerade became a paradoxical safe zone for those members of society, for whom sexual expression was problematic in daily life (Castle 1986, 33, 38–41). According to Butler, cross-dressing can, then, fully subvert the distinction between inner and outer psychic space to effectively mock both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity (Butler 1999, 174). We have to be careful in relating this directly to early modern conceptions of gender, but the fact that transvestism was not unsurprisingly linked to sodomy in early modern society certainly does point to the potentially subversive and negative character of transvestism in relation to dominant models of gender, which in the context of *Tieranny van Eigenbaat* generates significant meaning (Castle 1986, 46; Dekker and Van de Pol 1989, 76–78).

In regard to *Tieranny van Eigenbaat*, one example in particular piqued our interests: the Amazon. The Amazon as a theater character oversteps her gender boundaries, and as such, she celebrates the extraordinary and is often used as an example of sexual liberty. She is a female knight or warrior (a heroine) and she represents a fluid gender, whether the character is actually male or female (Wahrman 2004, 20–21, 36–37). According to Dror Wahrman, theater especially offered a safe space “to foreground experimentation and fluidity, where identities were self-consciously constructed and reconstructed, and liberties could be expected to be taken and stretched to their permissible limits” (Wahrman 2004, 48). The travesty of “Egoism” in *Tieranny van Eigenbaat* certainly is an example of theater allowing for gender experimentation, exploring the confines of gender identity. The explanation of the title print at the end of the play describes, as such, that “the Character has a dubious physiognomy, resembling both a woman and a man, while being dressed as an Amazon” (compare also

Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Her identity in between the sexes also seems to reflect her position between what was seen in Spinozist thinking as a positive moral quality (egoism) and when it became a dangerous characteristic when no longer in equilibrium with the power of reason, ruling over other (positive) passions (Van der Haven and Holzhey 2007, 256). With his innocent female disguise of “Reason of State,” “Egoism” makes himself acceptable to the political virtues who rule over the “Island of Free Will” and in doing so he could easily enter the island and eliminate his enemies (Miller 2001, 331–32). This is true both for the original Italian opera by Francesco Sbarra and the Dutch translation by Nil Volentibus Arduum, though it has been argued before that the “Spinozist” interpretation of Egoism is certainly less denouncing in the Dutch adaption than in the original play, written for the rulers of the Italian city-republic Lucca, who were in favor of a play grounded in a neo-stoic tradition with a clear anti-Machiavellian message (Van der Haven and Holzhey 2007, 249–51). <Figure 1>

Yet, the traditionally positive connotations, which the character of the Amazon enjoyed until the late eighteenth century (being noble, honorable, and heroic), still resonate in the character of Egoism and some of the symbolic meaning of the Amazon may apply as well to Egoism. Since his gender is presented as fluid, Egoism can represent the subversion of the “normal” order and the deconstruction of *decorum*—deemed highly important by Nil Volentibus Arduum (Jeroen Jansen 2001, 154, 182, 189, 198, 238). The transvestism of Egoism is of a complex nature: as his gender identity changes through cross-dressing, this new identity does not stabilize at all, but rather underlines his gender ambiguity. Egoism is a man pretending to be a woman but in the disguise of an Amazon, that is, a woman who exhibits characteristics typically perceived as masculine. Thus, his gender act provides a mirror image of his own cross-dressing strategy. In line with Greenblatt’s analysis of what he calls “traffics of mirror images” in the comedies of Shakespeare, Egoism’s cross-dressing strategy in *Tieranny van Eigenbaat* may partly support masculine self-differentiation as an

important step in male individuation (Greenblatt 1997, 92). Egoism realizes his power fantasies in the play through his mixed and insecure gender appearance as well as through his sexual appeal to both men and women. This fluid gender identity is, however, only visible to those characters who are knowledgeable about Reason of State's male identity. These characters include Egoism's servants who represent vice and his victim Will, after having succeeded in seducing her and revealing his "true" identity. In addition, the audience was likewise aware of this effect of subversion and its effects were even stronger, since a number of written and printed "keys" circulated around 1680, offering the audience the possibility to relate Egoism's transvestism to delicate social and political issues, as we have seen.

In Ripa's influential allegorical handbook *Iconologia* (1593, Dutch translation 1644), "Ragione di Stato" is represented as an armed woman with only indirect references to Amazon-iconography, whereas in the description of the title page for *TvE* her identity as an Amazon is explicitly stressed. The weapons of "Ragione di Stato" in *Iconologia* have to represent her political power, being able to "govern everything with violence or other means" (Ripa 1644, 436–37). Egoism's power and militancy in the play, thus, resonate with his mixed gender identity and his sexualized appearance as an Amazon, which traditionally functioned in Western iconography as a symbol of sexual freedom and sexual desire in one, as well as in theatrical representations (Shepherd 1981, 13–17). As we will see, the disguise of Egoism as a woman incites sexual desire in one of the female characters in the play, which enables Egoism to extend his power. This intriguing contrast between sexual liberty on the one hand, and tyrannical oppression on the other, is associated to and bound up in Egoism's transvestism. We will discuss this further below.

## Egoism and Will—Same-Gender Passions?

The story about the love affair between Egoism and Will unfolds in the second and third act of the play. As Egoism feigns his love for “Madam Will” because of his political ambitions, their relationship is unequal and based upon treason, though Will herself is truly in love with Egoism. As we have seen, Egoism entered the Island of Free Will in the disguise of the foreign princess “Rédenvanstaat” (Reason of State), which makes the love of Will for Egoism an example of lesbian love, an *amor impossibilis* for the early modern audience.<sup>5</sup> Egoism, however, cannot reveal his true (male) identity to Will, because this would threaten his position at court and undermine his political ambitions. Still, their shared gender identity does not withhold Will to express her intense feelings for her beloved princess:

The love, which I feel towards  
You within my soul, is so intense that at present she  
Should not be considered as newly born, but mature.<sup>6</sup>

Will’s answer to Egoism’s question of what has made her love so strong has to hide the true cause of her love. She gently refers to Egoism’s “verdiensten” (merits), but the audience may have wondered how likely that appreciation of his merits is. After all, the encounter between these characters in the second act is only the second one in the play as a whole, and Will can, at that point, only have learned about Egoism’s good reputation from second-hand information.<sup>7</sup> It clearly is Egoism’s physical appearance which attracts Will and which seems to activate her sexual lust through the *amor meretricius* (sensual love).

In the Spinozist tradition *amor meretricius* can be a positive force, but it can also have an obsessional character, when sexual lust leads to a certain state of madness, no longer

governed by the power of reason (Matheron 2009, 87–106). This is exactly the state of mind of Will, and it is Egoism who knows very well how to use the power of sensual love in order to eliminate her rationality. As soon as Egoism is in her visual field, Will is blinded by the power of her desire for the foreign princess, as it is activated by her senses. The way in which same-sex desire activates her sexual desire in a seventeenth-century play is striking. Egoism's transvestism enables him to represent his feigned female body as the main object of sexual desire, even though the loving body is a body of the same sex. It is, therefore, interesting that Egoism's body is de-sexualized as soon as his male identity is uncovered in the third act, even though it had been an object of sexual desire until then. Will's desire is immediately transformed into a love on a spiritual level, qualifying Egoism as her "zielzon" (spiritual sun), whereas Egoism sticks to sensual love, praising Will's beauty and appearance (Nil Volentibus Arduum 2008, 121–22). We could easily interpret this scene as what Greenblatt calls the "disciplining of singularity" (Greenblatt 1997, 90–91). If Egoism had not been such a power-hungry egoist, he and Will could hypothetically have had a romantic heterosexual relationship as soon as Egoism ended his playful, improvisational experiment with his gender identity. What follows on this fixation of sexual identity, however, is the final restoration of the political-sexual order based on masculine hierarchy in scene V, xii, subjugating Will's individuality by putting her in irons and enslaving her. Power replaces love and Will accuses Egoism of empty promises because of this sudden and brutal interpretation of the "marital bond" ("huuwlyksstrik") her loving soul was longing for (Nil Volentibus Arduum 2008, 188, ll. 1953–1955).

The character of Will is characterized in the list of *dramatis personae* of the play as a young Lady with "wild hair," clothes of diverse colors, wings on her head, together with a so-called "unrest," a moving cog of a clock (Nil Volentibus Arduum 2008, 74). All of these attributes refer to her restless nature and emotional instability. The senses have a strong

impact on Will's behavior and it is therefore important that this allegorical character is led by the "clear light and the splendour of reason," as Cesare Ripa puts it in his *Iconologia* (Pers 1644, 'Volonta: Wille'). Will is often depicted as a blind maiden, being unaware of who exactly is governing her senses. In *TvE*, it is the female appearance of Egoism, in his disguise as the highly regarded Reason of State which overwhelms Will's senses and stimulates her sexual desires. Outcries of passion in the second act already underline how strongly Will is led away by the powers of sexual desire: "O my pleasure!" to which Egoism responds with the superlative: "O my lust!" (Nil Volentibus Arduum 2008, 113, l. 642). Blinded by her passions for the foreign Amazon, Will tends to forget her beloved brother "Verstand" (Reason) until Egoism has her completely in his power.

The issue of same-sex desire is explicitly touched upon in the third act, just before Egoism reveals his true male identity. Egoism declares his love for Will, after which she qualifies their relationship and shared feelings of love as being an *amor impossibilis*:

WILL. What a strange love of two women for each other!

EGOISM. And one, which is so intense! What will be its goal?

WILL Nothing more,

Than to hold [each other] dear, and to be desperately consumed.<sup>8</sup>

The love between women is a "strange love" and though the idea of impossible love seems at first sight to be strengthened here, this possibility is questioned at the same time, as soon as Egoism addresses the "oogwit" (goal) of Will's love. What can ever be the aim of sensual love between women, a love which has become sexualized ('so intense!'), for it can never fulfil the highest possible ideal of love, like between men and women? Will's reply is very clear: the answer is love itself, since even a kind of love that is based on same-sex desire can

be experienced through mutual admiration. Though at the same time it can drive someone to distraction. Reading between the lines, Will's words seem to have much in common with Spinozist philosophy of *Nil Volentibus Arduum*. Sexual desire and love can be mutually reinforcing and sex is no longer perceived solely as a biological reproductive activity, which makes Spinoza's philosophy—according to scholars like Moira Gatens and David West—compatible with the equal value of homosexual and heterosexual love.<sup>9</sup>

The love and lust of Will for Egoism could also be read allegorically, since her desire for Egoism also refers to her radical self-love. Egoism's female disguise as Reason of State also mirrors the character of Lady Will as she *becomes* Egoism in her desire to be united and to coincide with this very character. The question what the objective of their impossible relationship should be, will only be answered in the last act of the play, when Will is chained as the slave of Egoism. As Will is a very weak character, instable and insecure about her own position, her love alliance with Egoism will sooner or later lead to her own ruin. Her sensual appearance on the title page (see Figure 2)—where she is carried away, stripped to the waist—reminds us, however, of what has been the course of her downfall: her savage looseness, sexual desire and self-love, no longer being restricted by the power of reason.

### **Egoism and Vice—Homosocial Desire?**

Unlike the relationship between the princesses Reason of State (Egoism) and Will, the formal relationship between Egoism and Vice is not one based on equality as they are master and slave: throughout the play we can witness Vice supporting Egoism's goals. Yet, their relationship exceeds the formal limits of that of master and slave. The explanation of Vice's character in the list of *dramatis personae* tells us that he is a "Slave of Egoist, a little hunchbacked Dwarf."<sup>10</sup> The latter part ("gebochheld Dwérgje"—little hunchbacked Dwarf)

indicates that, in fact, Vice is more than a mere slave. He is very small and physically disabled, which traditionally are the characteristics of fools and buffoons (Pleij1990, 19–20). As a fool, Vice holds a special status at court, representing a vacuum where the normal rules, codes, and rites do not apply. When Egoism interacts with Vice, he can choose to include himself in this vacuum, but whenever another character enters the stage, they return to formality.<sup>11</sup> Nobody else in Egoism’s court has this ability, which establishes an extraordinary and intimate relationship between him and Vice. The characters act in line with what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would call “homosocial desire,” which she relates to societies characterized with strong homophobia, in which men “draw back into the orbit of ‘desire,’ in order to realize some kind of continuum between homosocial and homosexual, which is prohibited to become visible in society.”<sup>12</sup> In effect, this continuum creates a situation where men support the goals of other men, but can also love other men. Yet, in the latter case we will not witness the relationship out in the open, since in patriarchal societies homosexuality is seen as disgusting and denied in order to maintain the power inequality between men from a different social standing and to be able to dominate women, that is, Will in *Tieranny van Eigenbaat* (Sedgwick 1985, 1–3). By reading “against the grain,” however, we can possibly reveal such same-gender passions.

On the one hand, Egoism loves nothing more than power and he mainly idolizes himself, which he makes explicit in his discussion with Vice in III, iv, saying about his love for Will:

EGOISM: In strong hands, the weakest reason becomes strong.

This is my mere love, this is my intention:

I love myself through her, her domains, her power, and her treasures;

There is no love more beautiful, which can paralyse a superior soul.<sup>13</sup>



On the other hand, Vice loves nothing more than to serve his master (*Nil Volentibus Arduum* 2008, 108, ll. 564–67). Both get exactly out of their relationship what they desire: to submit and to be submissive respectively. Yet in some cases, the relationship takes on a different nature. In II, vii, for example, Egoism acts highly altruistic to defend his servant. Egoism, of course, needs Vice to realize his plans, while he also needs to protect himself against *Réchtvaardigheid* (Justice) by defending Vice. And although he purely defends Vice for his own preservation and because of pure egoism, in doing so, Egoism appears to act contradictory to his nature: egoism ostensibly becomes altruism—which remains, however, a covered egoism—in defence of one who is seemingly unimportant as regards his status. When Vice has been unmasked and attacked by Justice, Egoism comes to his rescue and his words and actions are both revealing:

VICE: Help, help, I am about to be killed! Help, help me!

WILL:

What rumours

Disturb this Palace? Who screams there so loudly?

EGOISM: Is it you, my servant? How? Why do you [Justice] attack him? [...]

EGOISM [to Justice]: Wonderful

Indeed, that you decided to compete for my servant's body/life!<sup>14</sup>

The worried outcry of Egoism implies the intimate nature of their relationship, which makes him willing to defend his servant against Justice, one of the confidants of the king. However, if he fails to successfully defend Vice, Egoism puts the operation of dethroning Reason at risk and claiming the crown of Freedom for himself.

Although it is almost impossible for them to act on their feelings, Egoism and Vice take advantage of Vice's special status in order to escape heteronormativity. The relationship between Vice and Egoism even becomes sexually charged, since as a fool Vice is—arguably under the influence of the classical satyr—also associated with a natural impulsiveness, an unrefined nature, sex, and an endless desire for the flesh (Pleij 1990, 31). These character traits have been explicitly attributed to Vice by Justice in the above discussed scene, when Justice calls Vice a “Geilaard” (lecher) and a “fiel” (villain and impostor) (Nil Volentibus Arduum 2008, 109, ll. 569, 571). The character traits are stressed again on the title page of the play (see Figure 2), first published in the 1705 edition of the play. It clearly shows Vice's vicious and unrefined nature, when he mocks and vomits on Virtue's remains while cheering over her death and treading wantonly down on Good Nature's remains, abusing him even more. In addition, Vice's distinct horny nature is reflected in the figure by the disproportional large phallus, a symbol of male dominance discarding Virtue's female virtues.<sup>15</sup> <Figure 2>

In another reading, Vice's horny nature is emphasised in his interaction with the female character “Vleijery” (Flattery—another of Egoism's slaves), whom he calls his lover several times. Here, Vice displays clear heterosexual behavior. Yet in the one scene, which Vice and Flattery spend alone (II, iv), Vice never approaches Flattery sexually. While Flattery exclaims that Vice is her object of affection and the purpose of her life, Vice responds to her through platonic epithets: “myn' Gódin”—my Goddess, and “Myn' hoop!”—My hope! (Nil Volentibus Arduum 2008, 105, l. 501). It appears that Vice consciously creates distance between him and Flattery. And yet, he plays with his own gender and sexuality and takes on a gender role, which society can approve of, while he is prohibited to declare his feelings for his master by that same society. As such, he is forced to keep up appearances. What we as readers, however, can see is his unconditional loyalty to and admiration for Egoism.

Returning to the discussed scene, Vice's corporal lusts highlight a specific statement by Egoism while defending his servant from Justice. Egoism's assault on Justice in the cited verses above is linguistically interesting. "Dingen na" is a verb which both in modern and early modern Dutch means "to strive for" and depending on how we read the verb's object, the sentence can mean two things. Followed by the noun "lyf" in the meaning of "live," the sentence means "to have the desire to kill someone and act on it." The word "lyf" is, however, ambiguous, because it literally means "body," which means that the sentence could also be understood as "to have the desire to possess someone's body." In the latter case, the sentence refers to Egoism's corporal lusts for and his preoccupation with Vice's body, and the passage becomes suggestive and sexually charged as a result.

When we take a closer look at the list of *dramatis personae*, the representation of Egoism and Vice in the play is not only sexually charged, it also seems to refer to a marital relationship. Seven of the fifteen characters represent virtues, seven others are vices, while one character represents the subjects living on the island of "Free Choice." Almost all these virtues and vices are each other's opposites. The order in which the virtues are replaced by the vices in the play, indicates that king "Verstand" (Reason) is the opposite of "Egoism," "Goedaard" (Good Nature) of "Kwaadaard" (Evil Nature), "Gemeenebést" (Commonwealth) is mirrored in "Bedróg" (Deceit) and "Deugd" (Virtue) in "Ondeugd" (Vice), to name just four examples. Virtue is described as being the Queen, the wife of King Reason. When extending this analogy, the play suggests that Egoism and Vice share a relationship, which holds the same official status as the relationship between Reason and Virtue, extending the marital state to master and slave, or monarch and fool.

Husbands and wives generally tell each other their secrets. Egoism and Vice do the same thing. Vice knows everything about Egoism as his master, monarch and "husband." He is the only one to know exactly who Egoism is and Vice shares in all of Egoism's secrets and

deceptions. This is, for example, illustrated by the way Vice interacts with Egoism in II, i, and III, iv, scenes which we have discussed above. Vice is the only one who can speak his mind in the presence of Egoism. In turn, Egoism always replies patiently. Presumably, he does so due to Vice's privileged position with Egoism.

In other respects, however, their homosocial desire remains unspoken. There are many examples throughout the play of Vice promoting Egoism's interests, but their intimate relationship is only explicated in Egoism's and Vice's interaction in the above discussed examples. Butler describes how, in modern society, the taboo on homosexuality "produce[s] identity along the culturally intelligible grids of an idealized and compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 1990, 172). As such, Egoism's and Vice's desires are pushed into the obscure and remain there, unspoken. Simultaneously, Egoism cannot be open about his feelings for one who is of unequal social status, because he is completely full of his obsession with power. Love and lust serve Egoism's ambitions to take control and, therefore, he also needs Vice, whom he can dominate and control through their homosocial desire for each other. While Reason and Virtue are in a marriage of equals, Egoism can only act and love through his suppression of others. Vice has been a slave from the beginning of the play, and Will becomes one at the end. In Spinozist writings, "marriage offers the possibility of a loving relationship based on 'freedom of mind' rather than merely 'external appearance'" (West 2009, 118, 120). The submission of Will and Vice certainly provide for negative *exempla* in the play, as they do not correspond to this idea of freedom, being connected to their "unnatural" understanding of sexual desire, which enables and even legitimizes Egoism's abuse of power and sexual subjection. Egoism shows behavior that is the exact opposite of Spinozist philosophy, by using sex as a cunning tool to enslave and submit those around him.

## Conclusion

If we use the distinction applied by Holzhey (2009) to differentiate between “moral” and “immoral” masquerades in the plays by Nil Volentibus Arduum, the travesty of Egoism as a male Amazon certainly should be called immoral, as it is an instrument of that character to establish his tyrannical despotism on the Island of Free Will by killing his opponents (mostly representing virtues) and paving the way for Vice and his helpers. To gain a better understanding of how the “immorality” of Egoism’s disguise relates to the issue of same sex desire, we took a closer look at one of his first victims, namely Will (“Wil”). Will turns out to be a very unstable character, who is easily hoodwinked by Egoism in his disguise as a foreign princess. Lustful Will is simply too easy to manipulate, because of her unrestricted tendency to love and to long for love in return, which is clearly tied to her sexual desire. Their *amor impossibilis* is explicitly discussed in III, ii, and it seems to present a moral exemplum of what can be the negative effects of unrestricted (self)love. The reference in the text to the strangeness of the love between Will and Reason of State certainly should be read in the light of the unattainability of the object of their desire, which makes their love so “strange.” Will herself does refer to the nature of this desperate longing of two women loving each other. The play seems to suggest that unrequited love and sexual desire can be very dangerous, because it could easily enslave free individuals by holding on to desires, which they know to be unfulfillable, as the audience will experience later when Will is cast into irons and removed from the island as a slave of Egoism.

The love affair between Will and Egoism in his female disguise as Reason of State does not predominantly mock same sex relationships, but it primarily exemplifies the negative effects of an unrestricted desire for love and self-love in general. The same can be said of Egoism and Vice. In our reading of the play, their master-slave relationship is ridiculed

because of its inequality, but it enables both characters to fulfil their desires. The intimacy between both characters is, as such, remarkable, and seems to be related to how their characters are mirroring the relationship between Reason and Virtue as a married couple. Like in traditional marital conflicts, their relationship becomes problematic because of an abuse of power and sexual subjection. In that sense, the play is clearly informed by Spinozist thinking, with its preference for relationships between equals, based on the idea of ‘freedom of mind’ instead of external appearance and subjection. Vice and Will are, however, blinded by their physical lusts and the external attractiveness of Egoism. The political implications of this message are obvious, as the play clearly contains a critique on the courtly tendency of keeping up appearances. The nobility of the stadtholder’s physical appearance is criticized with a reference to his “sodomy” and his immorality as an egoist, abusing his closest friends as slaves and inferior creatures, who are entirely at his mercy and enslaved through their unfulfillable desires.

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<sup>1</sup> See on the allegorical identification of Eigenbaat and Ondeugd with William III and Bentinck, Van der Haven and Holzhey 2007, 245–67.

<sup>2</sup> See about the “origins of homosexuality” in the Dutch Republic of the late seventeenth century, Van der Meer 1995, 217–22.

<sup>3</sup> Such was also the case with Joost van den Vondel’s *Palamedes*, for instance (in which instance similar “keys” circulated), see Geerdink 2012, 230–32.

<sup>4</sup> “De Persoonadje [Eigenbaat] vertoont zich met een twyfelachtig gelaat, zweemende zo wél naar eene vrouwe, als naar eenen man, én is als eene Amazone gekleed.” Nil Volentibus Arduum 2008, 195.

<sup>5</sup> About *amor impossibilis*, see Traub 2002, 327–29.

<sup>6</sup> “De liefde, die ‘k tót u / In myne ziel voel, is zo hévig, dat ze nu / Niet eerst gebooren meer moet heeten, maar voldraagen.” Nil Volentibus Arduum 2008, 111, line 607–609.

<sup>7</sup> She is a silent bystander in I, iv, when Reason sings the praise of Reason of State. Nil Volentibus Arduum 2008, 82, line 109–112.

<sup>8</sup> “WIL. Wat vreemder liefde van twé vrouwen tót malkander! / EIGENBAAT. En die zo hévig! wat zal ’t oogwit zyn? / WIL. Geen ander, / Dan steeds te minnen, én wanhoopend te vergaan.” Nil Volentibus Arduum 2008, 120, lines 753–55.

<sup>9</sup> David West 2009, 120–21. Moreover, some freethinkers who knew Spinoza very well, like Adriaan Beverland, reflected in their private notes on homo-eroticism, both in relationship to their own fantasies, as to the supposed homosexuality of public persons like William III. Steenbakkers, Touber, and Van de Ven 2011, 251–57.

<sup>10</sup> “Slaaf van Eigenbaat, een gebochheld Dwérgje.” Nil Volentibus Arduum 2008, 76 (30).

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<sup>11</sup> This applies to two scenes in the play: in II, i, they discuss Will's love for Egoism without any reservations and more than a simple servant, Vice offers his opinion, which in itself is quite extraordinary, for he says: "What Lady, high and low, will not love Egoism to death at present?" Directly after this statement, Egoism says that "Arglistigheid" (Guile) enters stage, for which reason Vice should keep silent, as if no one may hear what Vice just said. In III, iv, Vice even dares to criticize his master, when Egoism plans on giving Will some priceless jewellery: "have you forgot your name due to love? / Your name is Egoism, do you remember?" Egoism patiently replies to his servant and sends him away to fetch his jewels, while "Kwaadaard" (Evil Nature) enters stage.

<sup>12</sup> See Kosofsky Sedgwick 1985, 1–2. See also Simons 1997, 29–51 for the conceptualization of "homosocial desire" in Renaissance art and literature.

<sup>13</sup> "In stérke handen wordt de zwakste réden stérk. / Dit is mijn' liefde alleen, dit is myn oogmerk: / 'k Bemin in haar my zélf, het ryk, haar' magt, en schatten, / Geen schooner liefde op een' verhéven' ziel kan vatten." Nil Volentibus Arduum 2008, 123, ll. 811–14.

<sup>14</sup> "ONDEUGD. Hélp, hélp, ik word vermoord. Hélp, hélp me! / WIL. Wat geruchten / Beroeren dit Paleis? wie schreeuwde daar zoo luid? / EIGENBAAT. Zyt gy 't myn dienaar? Hoe? op hém de dégen uit? . . . EIGENBAAT. Schoone dingen / Voorwaar, om na het lyf van mynen knécht te dingen!" Nil Volentibus Arduum 2008, 109–110 (574–76, 581–82).

<sup>15</sup> "Dus dood, word zy [Deugd] nóch bspót, én bespoogen van de ONDEUGD, eenen gebochelden én mischaapen dwérg, die over haare dood juicht én triomfeert . . . trappelende baldadig op het lyk van den mishandelden én vermoorden GOEDAARD." Nil Volentibus Arduum 1008, 199 (62–64, 67–68). See also Butler's critical discussion of phallic symbols in society and its implications for male and female sexuality and identity in Butler 1990, 56–60.



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