

# Staging Conscience: Johannes Nomsz's Morality Play *Iemant en Niemant* (1768) and the Enlightened *Zinnespel* in the Eighteenth Century

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## Abstract

Through an in-depth analysis of Johannes Nomsz's play *Iemant en Niemant* (1768), this article explores how the seemingly anachronistic genre of *zinnespel* (morality play) could serve to negotiate key issues of eighteenth-century aesthetical discourse. The combination of abstract ideas and sensual images ingrained into this genre made it an ideal vehicle with which to approach one of the primary problems of the period, namely the mediation between reason and the senses. Nomsz's play deals with this rationalist/empiricist divide concerning the moral philosophical question of whether reason or feelings guide human ethical behaviour. Through empathy with the allegorical character of Nobody, Nomsz draws his audience into the teeth of a moral dilemma through emotion rather than teaching them a moral lesson. At the same time, he connects moral sentiments to a rational procedure of moral self-judgement by staging conscience as an inner court. I call this way of applying the late medieval genre of morality play to the key questions of eighteenth-century aesthetics and philosophy

'Enlightened *zinnespel*'. Turning to the *zinnespel* with its special capacity to merge mind and senses indicates that at this time, the role of art changed. Art was no longer seen as a medium of knowledge transference, but as a medium that could generate knowledge in a unique way because of its ability to combine cognitive, affective, and sensual dimensions.

*Keywords:* zinnespel, morality play, Johannes Nomsz, Nobody, empathy, moral sentimentalism

## Staging Conscience: Johannes Nomsz's Morality Play *Iemant en Niemant* (1768) and the Enlightened *Zinnespel* in the Eighteenth Century

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In 1768 the Dutch playwright Johannes Nomsz adapted a play that was more than a hundred years old and which his contemporaries condemned as vulgar and morally insufficient.<sup>1</sup> To make things worse, the play titled *Iemant en niemant* was a *zinnespel* (morality play), a genre that seemed outdated in the eighteenth century. Once considered the 'highest form of dramatic art and the most difficult to write', the *zinnespel* was, by the eighteenth century, seen as a folkloristic genre of low status.<sup>2</sup> In this article I explore why Nomsz deemed this genre worth readapting at this special point of literary history, when the rationalist classicist paradigm faded and empiricist aesthetics promoting the stimulation of feelings and sensational experiences gained ground. By adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, I relate Nomsz's drama not only to contemporary aesthetical concepts concerning the function of drama, but also to philosophical discourses about ethics.

The main formal device employed by morality plays is the onstage representation of abstract concepts through the use of personified allegories. I start from the assumption that this combination of ideas and sensuous images made the *zinnespel* an appropriate vehicle for the mediation between the rationalist and empiricist positions that were in conflict throughout the eighteenth century. The *zinnespel* could turn abstract philosophical debates into flesh and blood on stage, thus allowing it to help deal with one of the main problems of the period. The problem to be solved was the question of how the gap between independent reason on the one hand, and subjective, context-bound experience on the other hand could be closed. Analysing why and how Nomsz adapted the late medieval art form of *zinnespel* not only shows how philosophical discourses resonated in literature, but also offers deeper insight in the way that the concept of art fundamentally changed in the second half of the eighteenth century. From a medium with which a writer could *transfer* knowledge it became established as a space where knowledge could actually be *generated* in a unique way, because of its capacity of appealing to its audience not only on a cognitive, but also on an affective and sensual level.

1 Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, iv.

2 Ramakers, 'Embodied Wits', 85.

While Nomsz's play is an especially interesting case, there were more attempts to re-establish this late medieval form of drama and connect it to key questions of eighteenth-century aesthetics and (moral) philosophy, which I call 'Enlightened *zinnespelen*'. I define 'Enlightened *zinnespelen*' as morality plays explicitly labelled as such that were written during the long eighteenth century – not as occasional plays for festive occasions, but as regular plays for the official theatre repertoire. These contextual aspects already indicate that Enlightened *zinnespelen* were considered as a serious genre that suited the aesthetic requirements of the time. More importantly, this also comes to the fore in the plays themselves: they merge the form and content of the genre with contemporary aesthetics and use the *zinnespel* to negotiate important questions of the late eighteenth century.

This essay begins with an overview of the evolution of the *zinnespel* in the eighteenth century, including a short reading of Sybrand Feitama's *De triomfeerende poëzy en schilderkunst* (1724), which serves as an example of an Enlightened *zinnespel* of the classicist period. Against this background, I analyse Johannes Nomsz's *zinnespel Iemant en Niemant* (1768) as an example of Enlightened *zinnespel* in the period of empiricist aesthetics. Nomsz's play is of special significance because it updates the *zinnespel* with regard to its original core issue of making ethical decisions. Its main character Nobody was invented at the beginning of the sixteenth century to stimulate ethically correct behaviour outside of any specific religious authority. Nomsz's *zinnespel* connects this early secular approach to ethical decision-making with a key question with which the moral philosophy of his time was concerned: ought ethical behaviour be based on reason or on emotion? I explore how *Iemant en Niemant* uses allegorical characters to stage this question, and in doing so tries to reconcile rationalist and sentimentalist approaches to moral philosophy. For a short assessment of the situation of *zinnespel* towards the end of the century, the article finishes with a brief glimpse at the most prominent Enlightened *zinnespel*, *Het eeuwfeest bij de aanvang der negentiende eeuw* (1801) by Johannes Kinker, who adapted the genre to idealist aesthetics.

### *The Zinnespel in the Eighteenth Century*

The *zinnespel* was often perceived as a popular though folkloristic and anachronistic genre in the eighteenth century. It is unusual that *zinnespelen* were performed in theatres at all. They were mostly occasional pieces written for fairs and festive occasions, which indicates their low status.<sup>3</sup> In the 'classicist universe' of Dutch theatre the genre of *zinnespel* was – just like the pastoral play (*herdersspel*) or rural play (*landspel*) – a second-rate genre that did not rank highly in a hierarchy of drama that valued tragedy (*treurspel*) above all other forms.<sup>4</sup> The *zinnespel* was a genre originating in the late Middle Ages that had slipped through the tightly woven net of rules that directed classicist drama. Originally, it was an

3 Worp, *Geschiedenis van het drama*, II, 186-190. Of the 524 titles listed in Anna S. de Haas's repertoire of plays performed at the Hollandse Schouwburg between 1700 and 1772, only 11 were labelled as *zinnespel*: De Haas, *Het repertoire*.

4 De Haas, *De wetten van het treurspel*, 2.

educative dramatic form concerning ethical questions that took an argumentative structure, exploring abstract ideas through the use of allegorical characters.<sup>5</sup> The allegorical action often displayed mental processes within a religious context, offering different or even opposing views on how to find salvation. The most common form of rhetoricians' (*rederijkers*) *zinnespel* of the sixteenth century was an allegorical play whose main character represented humanity, which, in finding grace through repentance, liberated itself from a state of sin. Good or bad allegorical characters either helped or hindered this process, according to their nature.<sup>6</sup> In the eighteenth century, when standards for dramatic art were no longer set in the Chambers of Rhetoric but at theatres, this did certainly not comply with *verisimilitude* as the most important rule of the *doctrine classique*. The 'lifeless' characters of the *zinnespel* completely failed to be the real human characters that this rule implied and the allegorical action on stage could not pretend to present something that might really have happened.<sup>7</sup>

As much as this meant a degradation of the once respectable genre of *zinnespel*, it was precisely its inferior status which turned it into a peripheral genre within which authors could seek refuge from the strict classicist rules. Criteria for a *zinnespel* were not as standardized as for the classicist genres. Authors could include features that were not acceptable for classicist drama such as ancient gods, as Enoch Krook did in his allegoric 'peace play' (*vredespel*) *Staatkunde* (1713). This *zinnespel* is at the same time an example of plays in an allegorical mode that picked up recent political topics which were also forbidden in classicist theatre, like in this case the Peace of Utrecht. In the *zinnespel* one could also turn to Christian religion, which had to be avoided in classicist drama, like Sybrand Feitama did in his *De christelijke wacht* (1730, only published in 1772). Whereas in 1721 the last tragedy *à machine* (involving special effects such as music, dance, and stage techniques like flying actors) was staged, *zinnespelen* with special effects continued to be performed throughout the century. A typical example was Fredrik Duim's *De kwynende vryheit hertstelt, in het eiland Vrykeur* (1749).<sup>8</sup> As a result, the *zinnespel* became a diverse genre that could take many different forms. In its pluriformity the *zinnespel* can be considered part of a universe that existed apart from, but parallel to, the classicist one.

Even so, throughout the eighteenth century there were attempts to elevate the genre of *zinnespel* from its marginal position and into the theatres. One early example is a *zinnespel* written by Sybrand Feitama. Feitama wrote original plays, but was also an esteemed and influential translator of French classicist dramas that were popular because of his much-lauded Dutch translations.<sup>9</sup> Whereas two of his three *zinnespelen* were either occasional pieces or meant to be read rather than staged because of their religious character, his Enlightened *zinnespel* *De triomfeerende poëzy en schilderkunst* (1724, republished in 1734) was performed at the Amsterdam theatre.<sup>10</sup> As an expert in putting classicist plays

5 Ramakers, 'Dutch Allegorical Theatre', 132.

6 Ramakers, 'Dutch Allegorical Theatre', 134-137.

7 Ramakers, 'Dutch Allegorical Theatre', 130.

8 De Haas, *De wetten van het treurspel*, 35.

9 Witsen Geysbeek, *Biographisch, anthologisch en critisch woordenboek*, II, 293-305.

10 De Haas, *De wetten van het treurspel*, 209-219.

into Dutch verse, Feitama presented a *zinnespel* divided into five acts and written in alexandrines, thus accommodating the genre to the formal standards of his time. The play confirms Bart Ramaker's observation that 'over time the genre evolved from a manner of predominantly religious inquiry leading to salvific truth, to a method of exploration into various intellectual fields, with the purpose of acquiring knowledge *per se*'.<sup>11</sup> Feitama chose this genre to explore an aesthetic concept. The *zinnespel* provided him with the means to stage the question of whether art can only be true and virtuous if it is free from political or commercial influence. This is a first indication that playwrights were exploring alternative ways of mediating knowledge through drama.

Feitama's *zinnespel* displays Poetry and her silent sister Art as main characters who are threatened with death by Midas and Mars (who represented political power and war respectively) and misused by Mercury (the art trade). Luckily, in the end the sisters are rescued by Apollo (the ruler in the world of art), Venus (beauty), Pallas (wisdom), and Hercules (virtue). Through the allegorical representation of Art and Poetry being attacked by Midas, Mars, and Mercury, the concept of independent art is figured as a question of life and death. As such, Feitama uses what he calls the 'pleasure of artful and educative allegories' for educative purposes.<sup>12</sup> While the audience is entertained by the allegorical characters and the suspense of the action, they acquire knowledge of aesthetic questions. To a certain extent this is in line with the classicist notion of *prodesse et delectare*, which sees appealing to the audience's feelings as a method of education. In this case, however, mediating philosophical knowledge through stimulating the senses becomes the drama's central function.

### Johannes Nomsz's *Iemant en Niemant*

Johannes Nomsz (1738-1803) was a playwright, theatre critic, and translator of dramas who also wrote prose, poetry, and non-fiction. He is known as an established author of great productivity, though the quality of his work is a matter of some debate.<sup>13</sup> In any case, he was versatile, open to new influences, and quickly adapted to new topics and genres. While Nomsz wrote many tragedies and farces, both adapted and original, *Iemant en Niemant* was his only *zinnespel*. Among his original works, many turned Dutch history into a tragic plot, like *Anthonius van Hambroek of de belegering van Formoza* (1775) and *Oldenbarnevelt* (1787). As an Enlightened writer, Nomsz was interested in how ethics might be established within a secular context. In some of his works like *Zoroaster* (1768, the same year as *Iemant en Niemant*) or *Mohammed* (1780), he explored what Oriental wisdom had to offer for the formation of a new ethics that was no longer based on religion, but on virtue and reason.<sup>14</sup> As I will elaborate below, it is the ethical dimension of *Iemant en Niemant* that made him decide to adapt it.

11 Ramakers, 'Embodied Wits', 92-93.

12 Feitama, *De triomfeerende poëzy en schilderkunst*, sig. \*2v: 'het vermaak der kunstige en leerzaame zinnebeelden'. All translations are the author's.

13 Johannes and Leemans, *Worm en Donder*, 304-308.

14 Rietbergen, 'De profeten van Jan Nomsz'.

Nomsz published *Iemant en niemant* at the beginning of his career, which coincided with a change in the aesthetic standards demanded of drama. Feitama's *zinnespel* was written in the first half of the century, when classicism was clearly the leading paradigm. In the second half of the eighteenth century, when Nomsz wrote his *zinnespel*, the dominant position of neoclassical drama began to fade. Playwrights experimented with new forms of drama, which allowed for new opportunities to explore the genre of *zinnespel*. As writer, but also as a celebrated translator of French plays, Feitama represents a time when foreign, especially French, predominance was accepted. The 1760s saw an increase of criticism of the adaptation of foreign drama, leading to an increase in the production of 'original' Dutch plays.<sup>15</sup> It might be due to this emerging patriotism that the regents of the Amsterdam Schouwburg suggested Nomsz adapt Isaac Vos's 1645 play *Iemant en Niemant*. Both Nomsz and the regents considered *Iemant en Niemant* to be of Dutch origin, though this was a misunderstanding of the play's multi-layered international history and its main character Nobody, which started at the beginning of the sixteenth century.<sup>16</sup> The regents not only challenged Nomsz to adapt an older Dutch play instead of a contemporary French one, but also to stage the anachronistic genre of *zinnespel* in the Amsterdam Schouwburg. As it derived from the Rhetoricians' tradition, the *zinnespel* could be considered a genuinely Dutch genre, which served as another patriotic reason to revisit this play.

The play's perceived Dutch origin was not Nomsz's main motivation in rewriting it, however. This becomes clear in the play's foreword. Surprisingly, he denies that the chaotic structure of Vos's play, which must have been painful to the classicist eye, had been a motivating factor in his revision (though he sets it right in his adaptation). This signifies that the poetic norms for drama were shifting. Nomsz excuses 'the major flaw of vos's piece [...], the little coherence of the main parts', because, as Nomsz puts it, 'poetry charms people because of its beautiful peculiarities, disregarding the most elaborate artistic rules'.<sup>17</sup> Here a new way of looking at dramatic art, one involving not sticking to the rules and allowing more artistic freedom, comes to the fore. It is the artistic freedom that also encourages experimenting with different genres such as the *zinnespel*.

According to Nomsz, Vos's 'vulgar language', language that conflicts with the classicist notion of decorum, is not to be censured either.<sup>18</sup> It needs to be measured not according to classicist standards but understood in the context of its time: 'To judge writers, one must take into account the taste of the time in which they flourished, because everything here on earth is subject to change.'<sup>19</sup> So apart from not exclusively defining art as trying to follow the rules as perfectly as possible, this shows that Nomsz's concept of art is based on the notion of historical consciousness, an idea which became influential in his century.

<sup>15</sup> De Haas, *De wetten van het treurspel*, xi-xii.

<sup>16</sup> Vos adapted a German version of the original English play *Nobody and Somebody* (1606). For an overview of the international history of the play, see Bolte, 'Niemand und Jemand'; Bosman, 'Renaissance Intertheater'.

<sup>17</sup> Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, iv: 'het groote gebrek van het stuk van vos [...], de weinige samenhang der voorname deelen'; 'Poëzy [bekoort] om haar schoone byzonderheden de menschen [...], tot schande der meeste uitgedachte kunstregelen.'

<sup>18</sup> Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, iv: 'ruwe taal'.

<sup>19</sup> Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, v: 'Om over de schryvers te oordeelen moet men den smaak van den tyd waarin zy bloeiden in aanmerking nemen, naardien alles hier op aarde verandering onderhevig is.'

The classicist-rationalist idea of timeless artistic standards had changed into a more context-bound conception that depended on specific historical contexts. This more relativistic conceptualisation of art betrays the growing influence of empiricism. Empiricists stressed that instead of being entities that depended on nothing but reason, human ideas are based on experience and thus depend on different (also historical) contexts.

It is this historical consciousness with regard to the ethical impact of Vos's play that is Nomsz's main motivation to adapt it. The awareness that even peoples' customs and morals are possessed of historicity was Nomsz's reason to rework Vos's play. In contrast to what his contemporaries thought, the aim was not to improve the play, but to adapt it to a new historical context. As Nomsz observes: 'After the course of a century, a people are sometimes not the same anymore. Look at the fashion depicted in our old paintings and compare it to what we wear today. You will notice a great difference. It is the same with our morals: they change just like the fashion.'<sup>20</sup> In other words, the moral issue of the play needs to be adapted to the customs of different times: 'The subject of vos is such that it will be dealt with again and again in all centuries: [...] the subject will thus always remain the same, and can be brought to life again in no other way than through new adaptations. vos chose the subject; I have arranged it according to our customs.'<sup>21</sup> Here a dualism between a timeless subject and the need to adapt it to different contexts evolves, one which mediates between the rationalist notion of independent ideas and the empiricist notion of everything being dependent on its context.

In adapting Vos's play Nomsz hoped to counteract the 'decline of moral standards' that he diagnosed for his own time.<sup>22</sup> Here a central problem of the period comes to the fore, which was the fear that building society based on secular norms might not succeed due to a possible instability of these norms, resulting in a situation of general relativism and decline.<sup>23</sup> Nomsz had already dealt with the topic of declining morals in his tragedy *Zoroaster*, which first appeared in the same year as *Iemant en Niemant*. The play showed how the ruler Nimrod is corrupted by false prophets and thus prevented from accepting Zoroaster's teaching of virtue as the leading principle in society.<sup>24</sup> Whereas *Zoroaster* considered moral standards on a collective level, exploring the manner in which an entire people ought to be governed, *Iemant en Niemant* concerned itself with the way people can control their ethics on an individual level without relying on religious authority.

Nomsz structured Vos's play more consistently. He divided it into three acts and metered it into alexandrines. This brought the play's ethical dimension to the fore, though the comical aspects that nearly turn Vos's play into a farce were still present in Nomsz's

20 Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, v: 'Een volk gelykt somtyds na verloop van ééne eeuw het zelfde volk niet; men bezie de kleding in onze oude schilderyën tegen onze hedendaagsche; men zal een merkelyk verschil vinden: het is met de zeden even zo, zy veranderen gelyk de kleding.'

21 Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, vi: 'Het onderwerp van vos lyd dat men het in alle eeuwen op nieuw behandelde: [...] het onderwerp blyft dus eeuwig het zelfde, en kan in alle eeuwen geen nieuwen glans ontfangen dan van de behandeling. vos heeft het onderwerp verkoren; ik heb het zelve naar onze zeden behandeld.'

22 Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, v: 'het verval der zeden'.

23 Löwe, 'Epochenbegriff und Problemgeschichte', 54-59.

24 Rietbergen, 'De profeten van Jan Nomsz'.



play, albeit to a lesser degree. The play's main topic is introduced in the protagonist Nobody's opening speech at the play's beginning:

Who suffers more than I in all parts of the world?  
When a wicked thief steals from someone,  
When a slanderer scandalously jeers his fellow men,  
In short, when a wife makes her husband ridiculous,  
Or whatever misdeed is conducted by Somebody,  
Nobody is always blamed.<sup>25</sup>

Nobody addresses the problem that, rather than acknowledging their mistakes, people tend to deny them and try to blame Nobody.<sup>26</sup> The key literary device of the drama is that through the allegorical character of Nobody the repressed guilt is physically present on stage, confronting wrongdoers with their incorrect behaviour and denial. The character of Somebody in turn tries to convince everyone to use Nobody as a scapegoat and thus becomes his antagonist. Giving 'nobody' an allegorical body undermines the very meaning of the word, which is based on *no* body and non-existence, thus reflecting the stylistic device of allegory on a meta-level: allegories embody something that is actually not really there.

In his endeavour to adapt the play to his own times, Nomsz combined the original allegorical characters of Nobody and Somebody with characters from all levels of contemporary Amsterdam society. The plot consists of crimes committed by a variety of characters in the first and second act, for which they are punished in a trial which takes place in the third act. Nobody and Somebody (and his assistant, the boy Jantje) are present in all acts, with characters added depending on the different subplots. Vos exploits the comical confusions around Nobody extensively.<sup>27</sup> He dwells on the adulterous affair between Lodewyck and Iuffrouw Diewertje and alternates the storylines quite chaotically, whereas Nomsz neatly distributes a few exemplary cases over the first and second acts of the play. The first act revolves around the bad playwright Volkert, who is reviled in an anonymous diatribe attributed to Nobody. Here Nomsz alludes to a common practice among theatre critics of his time, vilifying those who tried to avoid responsibility by being published anonymously. In addition, there are entanglements involving the murderer Jasper and the thief and swindler Gerard, both of whom deny responsibility for their crimes and blame Nobody instead.

The second act concerns the affair of Julia, who cheats on her much older husband Jeronimus with 'nobody'. Significantly, in another plotline Nomsz changes Vos's 'High German nobleman' (*hoogduytsse Ioncker*) into the Francophile gambler Narcissus, who prefers speaking French to Dutch in Amsterdam. As only representant of nobility in the play he presents a very negative and affected image of noblemen. This refusal to speak

<sup>25</sup> Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, 1: 'Wie lyd 'er meer dan ik in alle warelddeelen?/ Wanneer een snoode dief een ander gaat bestelen,/ Wanneer een lasteraar zyn' naasten schandlyk hoont,/ In't kort, het zy een vrouw haar egaës voorhoofd kroont/ Of welk een euveldaad door Iemant word bedreven,/ Aan Niemant word altyd daarvan de schuld gegeven.'

<sup>26</sup> Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Vos, *Iemant en Niemant*.

Dutch is a clear hint to the critical problem that was the French dominance of Dutch theatre and culture. In the third act only one new character, the *schout* (sheriff and judge), is introduced. Through the trial that he presides over, justice and truth can be redeemed. Nobody's innocence is proven and the persons responsible for all crimes committed are identified. Somebody is sentenced to death because he advised all culprits to blame Nobody for their deeds. The decorum of the eighteenth century ensured the removal of Somebody's execution from the play.

### *The Character of Nobody in the Context of Empiricist Aesthetics*

Nomsz's play not only represents members of Amsterdam bourgeois society such as the playwright Volkert, but was written at a time when a new bourgeois form of drama began to develop. The bourgeois drama that established itself in the second half of the eighteenth century can be seen as part of a general trend to rethink the role of senses and emotions in art and literature and to give them a more prominent position. This aesthetical shift suggests that empiricist aesthetics were gaining ground, allowing art to appeal directly to sense and sentiment without this sensuality necessarily being a means to support rational insights.<sup>28</sup> One of the most prominent representatives of empiricist aesthetics in the Dutch Republic was Cornelius van Engelen.<sup>29</sup> He developed a Dutch version of bourgeois drama that clearly displayed empiricist views in the sense that it considered feelings and sensitivity as preconditions for mental capacities such as reasonability and moral judgement.<sup>30</sup> According to Van Engelen, it was by intensifying the audience's sensibility (*ontbolstering*) rather than by offering them moral lessons, that they would begin to act and think in a more reasonable way. Within this context the notion of empathy – or to use the contemporary eighteenth-century term: 'sympathy' (*medelyden*) – became important, because it was seen as a passion that did not direct humans to act in their own interest, but helped them to refine their way of thinking and acting by directing it towards others.<sup>31</sup> Through writing plays that stimulate 'good' passions like empathy, an author could elevate his audience.

At first sight, Nomsz's play does not seem to have much to do with a new concept of theatre more interested in psychology, emotions, and sensibility. In contrast to the bourgeois tragedy which became popular in the decade after Nomsz's play, the characters of Nomsz's drama on the whole remain quite flat. Here the genre of *zinnespel* comes into play, in which characters without psychological depth on the one hand and the interest in inner processes of the mind on the other hand go together. Those opposing elements can only be united in an allegorical reading of the play which interprets the dramatic structure as a whole as a model of inner processes of the mind. In his foreword Nomsz compares Vos's play to a beautiful gallery, behind which one expects a magnificent hall, but will find

<sup>28</sup> For a concise overview of the aesthetical debate, see Townsend, 'Eighteenth-century aesthetics'.

<sup>29</sup> Oosterholt, *De ware dichter*, 17-37.

<sup>30</sup> Johannes and Leemans, *Worm en Donder*, 341-350.

<sup>31</sup> Engelen, 'Eene wysgeerige verhandeling', 48.

only ruins.<sup>32</sup> This picture of Vos's play hints at the distracting plot concealing its allegorical dimension. By reducing Vos's chaotic structure of episodes into his efficient three-act structure, Nomsz makes it easier to focus on its 'main aspect' (*hoofdoogmerk*), the allegorical meaning behind the seemingly realist plot.

If Nomsz's play is read not in a realistic mode, but in the allegorical mode that is inherent to the morality play, Somebody represents all the culprits denying their mistakes. Nobody becomes the allegory of their (wilful) ignorance created by the attempt to 'unknow' their mistake and erase it by blaming Nobody. In addition, the original allegory of Nobody was designed to draw recipients into the moral dilemma of denying responsibility by empathy. Isaac Vos did not invent the character of Nobody as scapegoat for other people's misdeeds in 1645. Nobody first appeared on a German broadsheet by Joerg Schan at the beginning of the sixteenth century that establishes empathy as a key function of Nobody (fig. 1).<sup>33</sup> The broadsheet shows Nobody as a beggar-like figure with a padlock in his mouth, wading through broken household equipment. Combined with the sentence on the banderol, 'Nobody I am called, for what everybody does, I am blamed', his central function is established as being a scapegoat for people who do not take responsibility for their wrongdoings. Problematically, however, in blaming Nobody people do not succeed in eliminating their misdeeds. Just like the broken household equipment piling up in the picture implies that someone must have broken it, the figure of Nobody at the centre of the picture shows even more obviously that the denied guilt is still there.

Yet the figure of Nobody does not only symbolize the notion of repressed guilt. Through his spectacles and feathered head, Nobody is marked as a 'wise fool', who willingly plays the role of scapegoat.<sup>34</sup> This willingness to suffer for the sins of others turns Nobody into a Christlike figure. He becomes a 'secular saint', which has aesthetic implications for the way audiences are supposed to respond to the image.<sup>35</sup> In its resemblance with contemporary depictions of Christ, the Nobody in Schan's picture is designed to trigger a contradictory reaction by evoking the recipients' empathy:

With our natural sympathies aroused by the injustice of his impossible culpability, we take his side against his false accusers. When we proclaim Nobody to be perfectly innocent, however, having now said it ourselves, we are backed into an inescapable self-recrimination. The beholder who insists that Nobody is blameless looks into a mirror, and must in turn blame himself.<sup>36</sup>

Feeling empathy for Nobody should alter the audience's self-image without the need for religious authority, because they start to see themselves through Nobody's eyes, which stimulates critical self-reflection.

Though Nomsz's updated *zinnespel* is certainly no bourgeois tragedy, it is through the character of Nobody that empathy becomes an important means of involving the audience

<sup>32</sup> Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, iv.

<sup>33</sup> For a history of the character Nobody, see Calmann, 'The Picture of Nobody'; Fricke, *Niemand in der Literatur*.

<sup>34</sup> Calmann, 'The Picture of Nobody', 66-71.

<sup>35</sup> Merback, 'Nobody Dares', 1064.

<sup>36</sup> Merback, 'Nobody Dares', 1064.



**Menger redt vom mir**

Vnd geschick mich doch nie  
 Es besich mich recht yez stand ich hie  
 Ich bin der/den man Niemanns nennet  
 Das hussgündt mich wol erkennet  
 Wann mir mit beschertent sy sich  
 Was sy rind/das zucht man mich  
 Tün zuch ich vmb in alle stert  
 Daman vnwarheit verberret heer  
 Da wol ich ye nun mein wnung han  
 Das hussgündt will mich hie nie lan  
 Ich main die lungen vnd die alren  
 Wie sy schis/la/daller/häfen/ker/spalten  
 Sy zerbrechen bläbalg/vnd brüg  
 Vnd schweren das/das Niemants eidge  
 Quetz wahren spindeboh/vnd scheren  
 Wan imschwand vñ mid hezen wezen fläsch  
 So wider sy flachy/spindelr/gingeln/ waz  
 Gantwund/haßel/bedürft man in nie fischen  
 Sy zerbrechen saltzfaß/kantzen vnd fläsch  
 Es gar nie vsz iren büdeln oder dälchen  
 Ob schon das muß züm haßen verbinnet  
 Wann man doch an den lor nicht zeyrennet  
 So achtet sy sein ganz verichte  
 Ob schon aller huffratz gar zerbriche  
 Meßer, liechtföckel lößel/ vnd abbrechen  
 Vnd mainent man soll in nüz dar für rechen  
 Es io man finde es an dem wez ligen  
 Dngunthälb wer wogez ich her geschwigen  
 Fenster offen tibel/ nie ist frey  
 Ich fürche das lechren oucz sy dar bey  
 Vnd sunst vil ding das sy begun  
 Wan in hüfen in wickeln kon  
 Ouch wein in wasseret/öl benetzen sy auff  
 Sy maintent man dab kein eich dar auff  
 Vnd was des naches yber bleibet  
 Die moget stupp es alles vertribet  
 Bömp/dann die beschluff dar zü  
 So wiffen sy nie wie war oder wo  
 Sy die Post bin versteinet  
 Vnd weiffent sy in ain eggen  
 Den wäschent sy den mund vnd gand dar von  
 Vnd wile ie kainz han getan  
 Sol die mager schiften waschen in tuerer faß

Vnd das wasser in kessel ze haß ist  
 Das sy sich ain wenig zehart verdient  
 So wiffte sy die schiften vmb die wend  
 Vil böter wor sy dar zü spriche  
 Vnd achret nie das die schiffel zerbriche  
 Sy gedencet bey/was sol es dann sein  
 Sy ist doch on das nie dein  
 Wann sy gem bald von dem für wer  
 So nempt sy ain schmützige daller  
 Damit sy gering machet ain flammen  
 Die pfann/den dryßß/wuffte sy zü samten  
 Wie wol sy nie buiche enway  
 In dem bndt lege man ain ay  
 Sol der knecht ain glasz schwencken  
 So hart er sunst als vil zü gedencen  
 Das er es zü klamen stüeten zerbriche  
 Wan denn sein hegeschafft etwas damon spriche  
 So will er ganz nüz wiffen dar von  
 Dann sy hat ichs annet Niemanns getar  
 Der fischen legene sy mir gar vil zü  
 Der ich sicher kainz ni  
 Wa etwas geschichte das vtrechte ist  
 Da gedencet man mein zü aller zeit  
 Vnd geben mich darin/in allen sachen  
 Damit sy hader vnd ungluck machen  
 Wenn sy sich ain ganz nachet syllene vnd zeren  
 Vnd fläsch/vnd bröten/ vnd kantzen liren  
 Vnd doch vnd keller zü haben getragen  
 So schweren sy das ire kainz dar von wiff  
 Reag man sy was gefert sy haben genachte  
 Sy spreche Niemanns sy ain gult vnd gang by  
 Sy spreche die herschafft vil laffer es nie (mache  
 Es der Niemanns pant den Jyze  
 Das er lag wone in meinem huss  
 Mir wer gleich als mer/er blyb dar vs  
 Vnd ließ irz mein gesind zü siben blyben  
 Er mache das sy ligen vnd leckery triben  
 Aber dem gesind tüt es erwen noc  
 Inm hüfen da man beschlufft wein vnd brot  
 Vnd in durch die rouffen zü essen geyt  
 Halb gnüg vnd günt es inen nit  
 Wenn sy denn künnen sberlich verschlachen  
 Das nie gan will, das sollen sy tragen  
 Es sy Post/fläsch/ wein oder brot,  
 Das haß mit geleckert/es tüt in got

Vnd sollen vber ain huffen tragen  
 Wenn sy hungert das sy nie dürffen fragen  
 So wirt denn als vil ver rüdt vnd verlore  
 Samliche künbtäre wer besser enborn  
 Wann man in sinlichen zü essen gyt  
 So verrotten sy das vblig nit  
 Wann mir mein mund nit wer beschloffen  
 So heet es mich offte vnd dick veröffnen  
 Das menger so stark vnd dapffer löger  
 Aber ain beschloffen mund der schwiger  
 Vnd verantwret es nie ain funde  
 Wann es doch an den tag kumpet  
 Er bestünd log ainer durch ain aichen breet  
 Er bestünd log wann er es yezund teet  
 Es ist nur ain nüzwert siet  
 Ain siben schähig müt hilffent  
 Gälche sind iree künst sy sey  
 Sy legene buch der muren drey  
 Da geben sy mir all die schuld  
 Das lyd ich dann mit geduld  
 Syd ich ye müß schuldig sein  
 So hab ich mich ganz gefert daren  
 Das ich es wer aller schern will wesen  
 Legete dapffer vor mit mügen ir wol genesen  
 Vnd tünd es doch mir beschaidenheit  
 Vnd machent den mund nie zebait  
 Das man nit siche das es ist elrogen  
 So handt ir sy dann redlich bezogen  
 On meiner klag wer vil züschriben  
 Aber yezune will ich es lauffen beklyben  
 Vnd bite etich sind some vometzen  
 Wegen dem der die hat didge vnd geschmitzen  
 Wann er vor mit gediechtere hand  
 Darumb ist es wol ain soret  
 Das ich mich linnliche nyem an  
 Mein man der haß. Jög schan  
 Ain scherz zü Straßburg gefessen  
 Ich hab mich gegen dem gelind vermessen  
 Vnd großen hader vnd krieg zü han  
 Wann yezune sy hat nie yedeman  
 Geen/das manum die waheit sey  
 Got geb uns die ewigen freud vnd slüat  
 In siben wunsch ist niemant vßgenomen  
 Ich hofft mit den leben da von zekomen  
 Albrecht büschwetter zü Nunningen

Atmet Regenssee

Bibl. Reg. Monac.

Fig. 1 Joerg Schan, Niemanns hais ich was ieder man tut das zücht man mich ('Nobody I am called, for what everybody does, I am blamed') (Albrecht Kunne: Memmingen ca. 1510), hand-coloured woodcut, 36,5 x 27,5 cm, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

in a moral dilemma. Nomsz's play does not only appeal to the audience's emotions to present a serious topic in a pleasant manner. Instead, in the context of an eighteenth-century empiricist dramatic theory interested in evoking empathy, this anachronistic genre becomes a way of not only teaching a moral lesson, but of letting the audience experience the underlying moral dilemma. From the beginning, the audience is drawn into the conflict between the two main protagonists Nobody and Somebody, because they do not know with whom they should empathise. The ambiguous empathy with the figure of Nobody that this character has been designed to evoke from the start is the main reason for this conflict. His opening speech cited above does not only introduce the main ethical topic on a cognitive level, but through the use of rhetorical questions ('Who suffers more than I in all the parts of the world?'), it also asserts that the audience ought to feel 'with' Nobody in the way Schan suggests in his picture.

Though the play begins by presenting Nobody's perspective to the audience, as the play progresses it becomes clear that the audience is actually expected to identify with Somebody, who represents humanity. In another address to the audience at the end of the play, Nobody reminds the audience that they are 'brothers of somebody'.<sup>37</sup> As the argumentative drama that the *zinnespel* is originally intended to be, Nomsz's play confronts the audience with opposing views, as they constantly see the same crimes from the perspective of Somebody, that is, encouraging characters to hide them, and through the eyes of Nobody, that is, becoming the victim.<sup>38</sup> This results in the audience seeing themselves as brothers of Somebody through the eyes of their victim Nobody.

The action in Nomsz's play consists of an accumulation of crimes and accusations piling up just like the broken household equipment in Schan's image. Together with the constant conflict of the opposing views of Nobody and Somebody, this leads to an increasing tension. The injustice of the way Nobody is treated by Somebody and his brothers can result in a feeling that, in terms of contemporary bourgeois drama theory, could be called *toorn*, a word which denotes an indignation '[born] not from self-love, but from sympathy' and can thus be categorized as one of the 'good' passions (*hartstochten*) that drama is meant to induce.<sup>39</sup> Importantly, this indignation is seen as an original, first-hand emotion that can be the precondition of generating real insight.

### Staging Conscience

Although empathy plays an important role in Nomsz's play with regard to the character of Nobody, stimulating the audience's sensibility (instead of moralizing) is not its only aim. In line with the original design of the *zinnespel* and the allegorical character of Nobody, it also appeals to the audience on a higher level in order to make them realize their own inner processes and learn how to deal with them. Making people acquainted with their

<sup>37</sup> Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemand*, 54.

<sup>38</sup> Ramakers, 'Dutch Allegorical Theatre', 137.

<sup>39</sup> Engelen, 'Eene wysgeerige verhandeling', 48.

own mental processes especially with regard to taking ethical decisions was an essential aim of the original *zinnespel*:

The discursivity of [...] morality plays [...] consisted [...] in the clarification of the states of mind and circumstances giving rise to [certain] behaviour. They sought to familiarize their viewers and spectators with the internal (mental) and external (situational) factors and forces involved in moral decision-making, including this decision-making process itself, helping them to create an ingrained disposition or habitus for thinking and acting in a morally responsible way.<sup>40</sup>

The late medieval genre of the morality play provided knowledge about how ethical thinking worked and how it could be applied. As such, it could also satisfy the endeavour to understand the workings of the human mind in the eighteenth century, especially with regard to the relation of reflection and emotions in ethical decision-making. As I will elaborate below, in an allegorical reading of Nomsz's play the trial of the third act comes to represent conscience as a higher court, demonstrating to the audience their mental capacity to judge their own behaviour on a level that transcends mere emotional response. The play underlined the idea that feelings and reason went together in moral decisions. In this sense, it involved viewers into the ongoing discussion concerning the role of rationality and emotion in ethical decision-making.

To get a more nuanced picture of how elements of the play interacted with contemporary eighteenth-century discourse, it is important to note that the rationalist/empiricist divide played an important role in moral philosophy, just as it did in the arts. The rationalist view that humans could revert to innate reason to make correct ethical decisions (with Kant's categorical imperative as most famous example) was challenged by the empiricist position according to which feelings, called 'moral sentiments', guided human ethical behaviour.<sup>41</sup> Moral sentimentalists assumed a moral sense through which humans feel whether an action is right or wrong. Doing right was expected to excite positive feelings like pleasure, which could not be accounted for in a mere rationalist view. Explaining ethical behaviour through sense and feelings resulted in the problem of subjectivism that made it impossible to generate universal moral rules (like the categorical imperative). This is why moral sentimentalists tried to find ways to connect moral sentiments as sensory input to some capacity of mental oversight that, as a rational higher-level function, could be activated to classify moral sentiments caused by experience.

In this context, just like in dramatic theory, empathy became an influential notion. Considered as one of the most important moral sentiments, empathy – defined as the capacity of sharing what someone feels – offered possibilities to combine feelings with more rational mental operations. In his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith stressed that empathy is a complex mental operation, not a kind of spontaneous reaction.<sup>42</sup> According to Smith, empathy not only demanded feeling *with* someone, but also the mental operation of transcending one's own point of view to put oneself into the shoes of someone else. Seen against the background of the rationalist/empiricist line of

<sup>40</sup> Ramakers, 'Embodied Wits', 90.

<sup>41</sup> For a short overview, see Kauppinen, 'Moral Sentimentalism'.

<sup>42</sup> Smith, *Adam Smith*, 43-44.

conflict in moral philosophy, Smith tried to show that sentimentalist concepts of ethical decision-making also included a 'rational' dimension of taking a critical distance, though rationality was still secondary to experience.

Strikingly, to illustrate this process of critical self-examination through empathy, Smith used the image of a court with a judge and a defendant:

When I endeavour to examine my own conduct, when I endeavour to pass sentence upon it, and either to approve or condemn it [...], I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of. The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me, when seen from that particular point of view. The second is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself, and of whose conduct, under the character of a spectator, I was endeavouring to form some opinion. The first is the judge; the second the person judged of.<sup>43</sup>

To judge one's own behaviour in a mental operation, therefore, one had to split oneself into two persons, judge and judged. The judge represented what we imagine other people would think of our behaviour. This viewing oneself through the eyes of others required the ability to feel with other people (empathy) and at the same time to remain at a certain distance (reflection). Through this image Smith tried to explain how conscience as moral judgment of oneself worked. The concept of conscience as an inner court became influential in eighteenth-century moral philosophy.<sup>44</sup>

It is this transition of moral feelings into moral judgement that *Iemant en Niemant* displays in an allegorical reading. With the overarching question of how to deal with the knowledge of one's own wrongdoings, it explores the possibility of repressing it in the first two acts. Through feeling with Nobody as victim, but identifying with Somebody as culprit, the audience becomes conflicted. The tension felt by the audience also concerns the characters in the play. Somebody grows particularly uncomfortable and wants to get rid of Nobody, because he is afraid that Nobody might reveal who is really responsible for the crimes: 'I will make sure that Nobody [...] ends up on the scaffold.'<sup>45</sup> Importantly, the play emphasizes that judgement should not be achieved in an act of street justice where feelings overrule reflection: 'Sir, I pray you to calm down. Consider that we are on the street, where everyone can see us.'<sup>46</sup> Instead, the accusations should be dealt with in the rational procedure of a trial: 'Command your vengeance to the Sheriff, don't be your own judge.'<sup>47</sup>

The trial of the third act gains additional significance in an allegorical reading with regard to the moral philosophy of the time and to concepts of conscience such as Adam Smith's. It is depicted in the only etching made for the play by Simon Fokke (fig. 2). Nobody, dressed in a harlequin's costume, is standing in the left bottom corner, Somebody figures prominently in the middle of the picture, and between them the judge is sitting at a table with the boy Jantje at his feet. The etching also shows some of the Amsterdam

<sup>43</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 282-283.

<sup>44</sup> Ishikawa, 'Das Gerichtshof-Modell des Gewissens'.

<sup>45</sup> Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, 16: 'Ik zal wel maken/ Dat Niemant [...] zal op 't schavot geraken.'

<sup>46</sup> Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, 34: 'Heer, ik bid u te bedaren. Denk wy zyn hier op straat, waar ieder een ons ziet.'

<sup>47</sup> Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, 34: 'Beveel den Schout uw wraak, wees zelf uw rechter niet.'



Fig. 2 Simon Fokke, Frontispiece to Johannes Nomsz's *Iemant en Niemant*, Amsterdam, 1768, Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum.



characters, like the playwright Volkert (front right with rolls of paper), as well as Julia and Jeronimus in a picture on the wall at the back.

Fokke's etching displays the crucial scene of the play during the trial when Jantje, Somebody's assistant, can no longer bare denying his involvement into the crimes. It is the point at which, in an allegorical reading, one becomes aware of the self-deception of trying to deny responsibility for one's mistakes. The beginning of the third act indicates that the trial denotes an inner mental process. The only stage direction of the play explicitly locates the action inside: 'The stage shows a room in the city sheriff's house.'<sup>48</sup> In an allegorical reading this introduces a mode of introspection and self-investigation. During this introspection all mischiefs from outside are only represented indirectly in the form of written pieces.<sup>49</sup> This is a sign that a distance has been created which will allow for reflection and critical examination. The trial thus demonstrates that the problem should be solved not through seeking self-justice by attacking Nobody on the street, but by bringing the accusations to court, where an independent judge can examine the circumstances, as the sheriff himself emphasizes: 'But I am a judge, and in this capacity, I am bound, as you know, to strict neutrality. I cannot give a verdict so immediately, at random. A fact must be examined, it must first be clearly proven.'<sup>50</sup> He exhorts himself and others: 'Let's not be quick-tempered.'<sup>51</sup> Instead of giving in to his instincts, the procedures at court force Somebody to fit his accusations into a systematic process of investigation through a rational higher-level authority. The figure of the judge conscientiously examining all evidence represents the independent 'spectator' as a precondition of self-awareness. The audience can actually see a mental process at work on stage. The genre of *zinnespel* allows for the claim that drama is the place where one can experience how knowledge is generated.

Feeling with someone gets transformed into judging oneself through somebody else's eyes. While during the first two acts the audience is emotionally torn between Nobody and Somebody, during the trial they see Somebody (whom they are supposed to identify with) through the eyes of the judge, who analyses the case from a distance. Just like in Smith's model of conscience they divide themselves into judge and judged, which demonstrates the mental procedure necessary to judge one's own behaviour. Significantly, Nobody falls silent during the trial and is not able to defend himself, thus reflecting Schan's original padlock in Nobody's mouth: 'I cannot speak; I am as voiceless as the crows.'<sup>52</sup> That way, he hands over his function of signifying that something is wrong to the judge. In the transition from judge to Nobody, feeling with someone merges with rationally judging one's own behaviour from the point of view of someone else.

Nobody takes up a special role during the process. The costume of a harlequin splits him into two halves, signalling his state of being torn between presence and absence,

48 Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, 38: 'Het Tooneel verbeeld een vertrek in het huis van den Schout.'

49 The judge is presented with a list of crimes (p. 42), letters, and the diatribe (p. 39-52).

50 Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, 39: 'Maar ik ben rechter, en in deze qualiteit/ Voegt my, gelyk gy weet, een stipte onzydigheid./ Ik kan niet zo terstond, in't wilde, een vonnis stryken./ Een feit dient onderzocht, het moet eerst duidlyk blyken.'

51 Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, 44: 'Laat ons niet driftig zijn.'

52 Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, 45: 'Ik kan niet spreken;' k ben zo stom gelyk de kraaijen.'

guilt and innocence, serious and comical, realist and allegory. The costume also underlines his metafictional status that establishes his function as character who is part of the action, but can at the same time communicate to the audience on a higher level. When Nobody falls silent during the trial, he can still deliver metacommentary to the audience. Nobody's double role as character in the play and as meta-character always hints at the double dimension of the play and its allegorical dimension of presenting inner processes of the mind. In a final address to the audience, Nobody explicitly reminds the viewers that they should examine their behaviour in a way that would pass the examination of their own inner court: 'If you want to be happy, don't pin your deeds on me, for which, if necessary, you cannot face yourself.'<sup>53</sup> Nobody functions as a mediator between the literal and the allegorical dimension of the play. Importantly, his speaking on a 'higher level' never pretends any transcendent dimension. His being a harlequin alludes to his status as a Christlike wise fool, which he explicitly states during the trial: 'See here how willingly I suffer for Somebody's sins.'<sup>54</sup> But he remains a strictly secular saint who never disguises that he actually represents 'no-body', someone who is not there. Nevertheless, Nobody is the key feature of Nomsz's drama, designed to convey knowledge not only on a cognitive, but also on an affective level. Nobody lets the audience know that individual failure has consequences on the communal level, but at the same time makes them feel this conflict in a way that mirrors the religious concept of transferring guilt to a higher level.

### *The Zinnespel at the Turn of the Century*

Nomsz thus adapted a *zinnespel* in the context of empiricist aesthetics, using it to engage his audience by empathy and giving them a model of how rationally to deal with their moral feelings. His adaptation remains a singular, but significant, case of reviving this old genre in the eighteenth century.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, as a genre combining abstract ideas and concrete sensuality, the *zinnespel* remained an intriguing genre at a time when playwrights were looking for a balance between reason and senses.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the most prominent Enlightened *zinnespel* was written at the turn of the century by Johannes Kinker. In his allegorical play (*zinnebeeldige voorstelling*) *Het eeuwfeest bij de aanvang der negentiende eeuw* (1801), Kinker left behind all classicist restraints and turned his *zinnespel* into a spectacle to express his Enlightened vision of humanity's progress in history. At its climax it stages an actual centennial (*eeuwfeest*), an exuberant celebration of eighteen centuries personified as allegorical characters. The eighteenth century rides in a chariot and shakes hands with the nineteenth century at the end of the play, which is possible only after

53 Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, 54: 'Wilt gy gelukkig zyn, smeert nooit my daden aan/ Waar voor, indien 't moët zyn, gyzelf niet bloot durft staan.'

54 Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant*, 46: 'Zie hier hoe willig ik voor Iemants zonden ly.'

55 In Mattheij's detailed study of the reception of Nomsz, *Iemant en Niemant* is one of the plays that did not attract a lot of visitors: Mattheij, *Waardering en kritiek*, 30.

56 For a full account of the sensuality of the original *zinnespel*-performances, see Ramakers, 'Walk, Talk, Sit, Quit?.'

humanity has resolved its struggle between vice and virtue, which are secularized into uncontrolled impulses (*driften*) and Reason that allows humanity to transcend egoism, hedonism, and fickleness.<sup>57</sup>

Kinker explicitly promoted the *zinnespel* as a state-of-the-art form of drama. Its allegories as ‘source of beauties’ were perfectly suited for contemporary aesthetics and should not have been neglected as popular entertainment on festive occasions.<sup>58</sup> He adapted the *zinnespel* to idealist aesthetics.<sup>59</sup> Instead of looking for ways to make the audience more sensible, Kinker saw the genre as a perfect means to channel the original ideas of the author, because through the ‘sensualisation of ideas’ (*verzinnelyking van denkbeelden*) it reached its audience in a unique combination of the cognitive, the affective, and the sensual. He was convinced that if further adjusted to contemporary aesthetics, the *zinnespel* could be turned into a respectable literary art form. Expressing the wish that his play might inspire others, Kinker had high expectations for the genre of *zinnespel* in the nineteenth century.<sup>60</sup> Sadly, these high-flying hopes were dashed. During the nineteenth century the *zinnespel* was marginalized once more, finding new appreciation not according to Kinker’s high aesthetic standards, but only from a patriotic point of view as popular genre of the Dutch-speaking people which had stimulated its own language and culture, especially in Flanders.<sup>61</sup> While his *zinnespel* was intended to signal a glorious beginning, it actually figured as climax and closing ceremony for a genre that could not gain ground in the nineteenth century when the rationalist/empiricist divide lost significance.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed Johannes Nomsz’s play *Iemant en Niemant* (1768) as an example of ‘Enlightened *zinnespel*’. I defined ‘Enlightened *zinnespelen*’ as morality plays labelled as such that were performed in theatres throughout the eighteenth century and connected this late medieval genre to contemporary aesthetics and philosophical discourses. The *zinnespel* was not just an outdated genre, suitable for festive occasions only. The combination of ideas and sensations ingrained in this genre, through the representation of abstract entities by allegories, turned out to be especially productive with regard to the epochal problem of reconciling reason and senses. In Johannes Nomsz’s play *Iemant en Niemant*, this rationalist/empiricist divide came to the fore with regard to the moral philosophical question of whether reason or emotions guide human ethical behaviour. By turning to the *zinnespel* in the context of moral philosophy, Nomsz fell back on the original function of *zinnespel* that was designed to guide ethical decision-making in a religious context. Nomsz adapted this function to a secular context according to empiricist aesthetics. Empathy with the allegorical character of Nobody drew the audience emotionally into the moral dilemma

57 Kinker, *Eeuwfeest by den aanvang der negentiende eeuw*, 8.

58 Kinker, *Eeuwfeest by den aanvang der negentiende eeuw*, v.

59 For an overview of Kinker and his idealist poetics, see Oosterholt, *De ware dichter*, 84-96.

60 Kinker, *Eeuwfeest by den aanvang der negentiende eeuw*, vi.

61 Ramakers, ‘Het eeuwige leven van de rederijkerij’, 280.

of the play that deals with the topic of taking responsibility for one's wrongdoings without relying on a religious authority.

Importantly, in this *zinnespel*, the moral sentimentalist notion of ethical behaviour being guided by the feeling of empathy was connected to a rational approach stressing the importance of reason for ethical decision-making. This rational dimension comes to the fore in a trial at the end of the play that in the allegorical mode of *zinnespel* becomes a model of human conscience as moral self-judgement. Here Nomsz's play reactivated another original function of the *zinnespel*, which acquainted the audience with the inner mental processes guiding their moral behaviour. Nomsz's updating of the genre of *zinnespel* was preceded by other serious adaptations, like Sybrand Feitama's secular play *De triomfeerende poëzy en schilderkunst*. Feitama used the *zinnespel* to stage an aesthetic question and involve his audience emotionally into this theoretical topic. Another Enlightened *zinnespel* written three decades after Nomsz at the turn of the century, Johannes Kinker's *Het eeuwfeest bij de aanvang der negentiende eeuw*, adjusted the *zinnespel* to suit idealist aesthetics, allowing it to serve as a way to express the author's original ideas through a unique way of conveying knowledge involving intellect and senses.

These three cases not only demonstrate that in Enlightened *zinnespelen* the combination of ideas and images typical of the morality play enabled authors to make the rather abstract aesthetic and (moral) philosophical debates of the eighteenth century accessible through exploring them in their multidimensionality on stage. Turning to a late medieval drama form because of its capacity to mediate between head and body, between mind and senses, demonstrated that a new concept of art emerged that could partly rely on functions of art in the premodern period. The *zinnespel* represents a genre that in a religious context was designed to provide knowledge in its multidimensionality, combining cognitive, affective, and sensual dimensions. When authors like Nomsz tried to establish ethics in a secular context, they were looking for this quality of art that appealed to its audience on multiple levels. This signifies that the concept of art was leaving a rational paradigm in which art was a way to transfer knowledge which was generated in other domains. Instead, art itself became an indispensable way to generate knowledge because of its unique capacity to stimulate mind, emotions, and senses at the same time.

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