

The Kite of State

The Political Iconography of Kiting in the Dutch Republic 1600-1800

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Abstract

This article analyses the iconography of kiting in the Dutch Republic and the role kites played in the conceptualization of political order and conflict. We argue that the introduction of the kite in Europe around 1600 provided authors and artists with a new, multi-layered and dynamic symbol to help understand and imagine the new political reality of the Dutch Republic. Although the kite in Europe was mainly perceived as a children's game, leaving behind its more adult and sometimes violent Asian background, it acquired a serious and powerful set of meanings in texts and images. In competition with the traditional iconography of bubbles, Icarus, the Ship of State and the Body Politic, the kite provided new opportunities for cultural imagery. It facilitated the analysis and visualisation of complex phenomena such as the state system of the Dutch Republic, the interplay between Stadtholder and Land's Advocate, the ambition of statesmen, and the international balance of power. The kite, a new technological device, helped to narrate the story of a proud Republic, based on technological accomplishments and moral superiority, and admired by other nations for its high flight.

Keywords: history of kiting, visual culture, Dutch Republic, political imagery, iconography, global exchange

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‘Look there, upon that paper kite / That almost touches the heavens on high’.¹ Thus the Dutch poet Jacob Cats (1577-1660) admonishes the reader in his *Kinder-spel* (Children’s Games). The poem is included in Cats’s erudite emblem book *Silenus Alcibiadis sive Proteus* that appeared in 1618 with the Middelburg publisher Hans van der Hellen.² The accompanying engraving, designed by Adriaen van de Venne, depicts the square in front of the Court of Zeeland (a former abbey) in Middelburg, the capital of the province of Zeeland and Cats’s residence at the time (fig. 1). Everywhere, there are groups of children at play. In the poem, Cats mentions fourteen different children’s games and Van de Venne depicts them: playing marbles, spinning a top, playing with a hoop, et cetera. Kiting is among these games; a little boy runs across the square flying a kite. The paper bird flies at a decent altitude (although not quite ‘to the heavens on high’). Nothing unusual, one would say. And yet, the poem ‘Children’s Games’ and the accompanying print are special, even unique.

For instance, this print is used in a number of publications that devote attention to the history of the kite, not just in the Netherlands, but also internationally.³ As far as we know (and when it comes to the history of kiting, knowledge is remarkably scant), this is the first illustration containing a type of kite we still know – a diamond-shaped flat surface on a string – flying in European skies (fig. 2). A similar kind of kite could also have rounded sides, in the shape of a pear, and sometimes have a ‘nose’ attached on top. But the basic shape was the diamond, or ‘lozenge’. From before this time, descriptions of

1 ‘Let op de vliegher van papier, / Gheresen tot den hemel schier’. We would like to thank Johan Koppenol, Hans Luijten, Marianne Eekhout and Jules Mansveld for their valuable suggestions, and the University Library of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam for providing illustrations.

2 Cats, *Silenus Alcibiadis*. The poem ‘Kinder-spel gheduyt tot sinne-beelden, ende leere der zeden’ is printed on pp. 106-111, as the final item in part II. The accompanying print on p. 111 carries, apart from the title, a subtitle ‘Ex nugis seria’. The present-day standard edition, Cats, *Sinne- en minnebeelden*, III, 291-328, contains an extensive bibliography on Cats, his engravers, book- and art historical details, and interpretations of his work. The text of the *Sinne- en minnebeelden* is based on the strongly altered edition of 1627, but stipulates the differences with the 1618 edition. See also Luijten, ‘Belachelijcke dingen’. About the role of children’s games, see Schama, *The Embarrassment*, 497-516. For an analysis of editions, interpretation of the poem and its place in Cats’s oeuvre, see Kozikowska, ‘Ex nugis seria’. Many thanks for the opportunity of reading this as yet unpublished article.

3 E.g. Hart, *Kites* (1982 ed.), 83; Pelham, *Kites*, 23; Dietrich, ‘Flying a Kite’, 12.



Fig. 1 Print by Adriaen van de Venne to Jacob Cats, *Kinder-spel* (Children's Games), in: *Silenus Alcibiadis, sive Proteus* (Middelburg 1618), *2-*3. The image is situated on the square in front of the Court of Zeeland in Middelburg. Amsterdam, University Library Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, XH.00091:1.

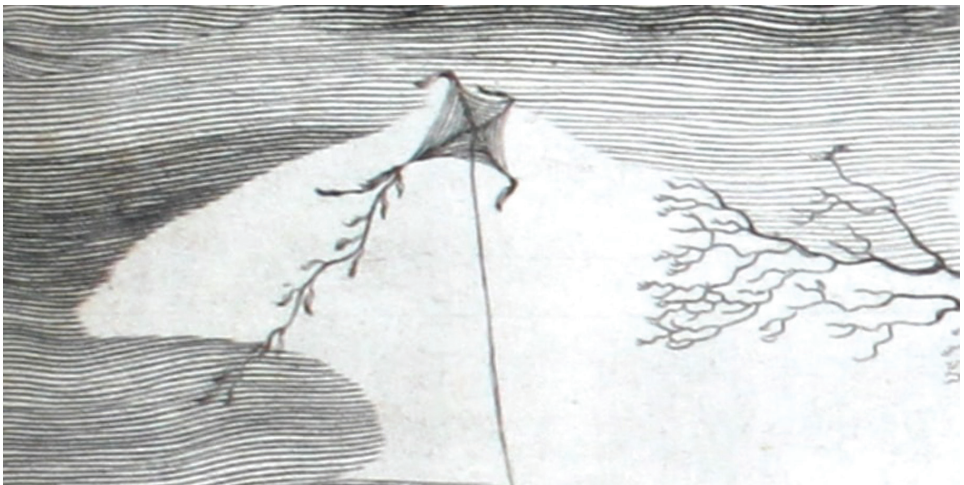


Fig. 2 Fragment of figure 1. Amsterdam, University Library Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, XH.00091:1.

such diamond-shaped kites in Europe are extant, but no images.⁴ Thus, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's well-known painting from 1560, which represents some eighty children's games, does not yet contain children flying a kite.⁵ Kites such as the one in the illustration of 'Children's Games' are made of paper or of cloth, they mostly have a cross of sticks for structure, and they are usually equipped with a tail – often decorated with tassels – for stability. The fact that a kite does not have to be diamond or pear-shaped to fly appears from a type of kite that was invented in Korea around the beginning of our era, and that became quite popular in Japan later on: a square or a rectangle with a hole in the middle. This type of kite was never popular in Europe and is therefore seldom depicted.⁶

The flat kite on a string originated in the Far East, most probably in China.⁷ Already in the centuries before our era, the first kites are supposed to have conquered the eastern skies. It is therefore natural to assume that the kite was introduced in the Netherlands via the trade routes to East India.⁸ Its appearance in a Middelburg print of 1618 might therefore not be completely coincidental. Fifteen years earlier, in 1603, the Dutch had started the colonisation of East India, with the founding of the Dutch East India Company. And after Amsterdam, Middelburg was the largest and most active participant in this Company.

Games and Seriousness

The Middelburg kite of 1618 became what we would now consider the archetypical kite. Furthermore, the Middelburg scene reminds us that the kite was introduced in Europe as an innocent children's game. This too is far from obvious. In the East, the kite has not always been considered a suitable toy for children. In Asia, its applications were primarily utilitarian (civil as well as military) or ceremonial.⁹ And suspending people from a flying kite, as described by among others Marco Polo, is not a thing one would inflict upon small children.¹⁰ In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Western world was in thrall of Benjamin Franklin's research into electrical charges, for which he flew kites to attract lightning – not exactly child's play either. In his *Introductio ad Philosophiam Naturalem* (1762), the Dutch physicist Petrus van Musschenbroek discusses experiments which he, inspired by Franklin, executed on the beach:

4 The first depiction of a kite in England seems to be the one in Fludd, *Tomus secundus*, 139. According to Hart (*Kites*, 1982 ed., 86-87), a second example appeared only much later, in John Bate's *The Mysteries of Nature and Art* (1634). The earliest German example seems to be the one provided by Hart, *Kites* (1967 ed.), ill. 24, dating from 1632.

5 On Bruegel's painting and the different interpretations of children's games as either symbolic or realistic: Snow, "'Meaning' in Children's Games' and Hindman, 'Pieter Brueghel's Children's Games'.

6 An illustration in Hart, *Kites* (1982 ed.), 35, fig. 6; Pelham, *Kites*, 15.

7 Hart, *Kites* (1982 ed.), chapter 1-4 and especially pp. 24-25 on 'the uncertain boundaries between kites and other flying machines'; Several kinds of windbags on a string and banners attached to a stick were also called 'kite'.

8 Dietrich, 'Flying a Kite', 15.

9 Hart, *Kites* (1982 ed.), 17-18 and 50-51, and especially Dietrich, 'Flying a Kite', on fishing in the East Indies by means of kites made of leaves; an account of the first Dutch visit to the Moluccas in the summer of 1599, published in 1600, already contained a description and a picture of this method of fishing.

10 Dietrich, 'Flying a Kite', 26-29.

On the twentieth of July 1757, at 7 p.m., heavy thunder and lightning caused fierce, explosive flashes on the steel line of the kite high in the air. Mostly, these occurred simultaneously with the lightning flashes and faded when the thunder came. They followed each other closely and gave a crackling noise that could be heard from a great distance. When I held the string close to the head of a dog, of a goat and of a young bull, these animals received such shocks that they instantly ran away and refused to be touched any more. When we formed a circle holding each other's hands, we all received a shock when one of us touched the line.¹¹

Also in more recent times, the kite has performed all sorts of scientific and military functions: gathering meteorological data in the higher atmosphere, dropping explosives, et cetera. Present-day popular applications comprise making jumps suspended from a kite by way of strength sport, kite surfing on the waves, racing the beach in a kite-propelled buggy, or sailing an equivalent boat called a kitetender. The strong kites needed for these activities, designed by means of modern aerodynamics and made with cutting-edge materials, have come within reach of large groups of kite aficionados. The same knowledge and materials, combined with the search for sustainable energy, have induced a revival of the old idea to propel ships by means of kites. In this way, kites have already been used on freighters, albeit more as a fuel-saving device-assist than as a proper engine replacement. Research groups such as the one founded at Delft University by the late Wubbo Ockels, the first Dutch astronaut, are currently experimenting with kites for the generation of electricity.¹²

But Cats's Middelburg kite is what it would primarily remain for centuries: an easily built children's toy. A moralist such as Cats should of course be expected to furnish this toy with symbolic significance. That is why the print accompanying 'Children's Games' carries the caption *Ex nugis seria*: trifles can yield serious meaning. And Cats employs the then recent phenomenon of the kite to give a life lesson. In doing so, he ensures that the Middelburg kite, apart from being the first European diamond kite ever pictured, is also the first kite endowed with a symbolic or metaphoric function expressed in words. At innumerable occasions over the following centuries, the kite would continue to perform such a 'literary' function.¹³ In Dutch, the common expression *Die vlieger gaat niet op* (That kite won't fly) for ambitious or overly clever plans that are bound to fail, is a simple example from daily usage. In this connection, it is worth pointing out that, after Cats, the kite would surface in the works of hundreds of Dutch authors. Multatuli is known to have been an avid kite flyer, but he is far from the only one.¹⁴ In Dutch literature, we see kites from Jan Luyken to Maarten 't Hart and from Louis Couperus to Gerard Reve.¹⁵ Cats's kite marks the beginning of a long history of representation. In this article, we focus on the ways that the kite, its various parts and the practices of kiting, have been used in the

¹¹ Van Musschenbroek, *Introductio*, 295-296. On 'electrical kites', see Hart, *Kites* (1982 ed.), 94-103; Suay and Teira, 'Kites', 4-12; Van Riet, *The Kite*, 31-43.

¹² Ahrens et al. (eds.), *Airborne Wind Energy*, x-xi. For the role of kites in the development of science, see Suay and Teira, 'Kites'.

¹³ An interesting survey of symbolic functions of the kite in nineteenth-century literature is provided by Van Riet, *The Kite*.

¹⁴ E.g. Multatuli, *Volledige Werken*, xvi, 532-535.

¹⁵ Luyken: *Des menschen begin*, 74-75; 't Hart: *De vlieger*; Couperus: *Het zwevende schaakbord*, 54; Reve: *De laatste jaren*, 12-13.

symbolic or metaphoric representation and interpretation of political issues. In the course of the centuries, the kite has proved to be a remarkably adequate and versatile metaphor for changing ideas and notions concerning government, statesmanship, citizenship and political power, and has helped to establish the Dutch self-image.

From Children's Game to Political Metaphor

In 'Children's Games', Cats devotes ten lines to the kite. The text runs as follows:

Look there, upon that paper kite
That almost touches the heavens on high.
And while the boy pays out the line
Steadily upward it will climb
Like one who, cursèd with ambition,
However high is his position,
Will always yearn for greater height.
His heart is never satisfied.
The windy head turns, twists up there
Until it drifts, I know not where.¹⁶

As long as the boy lets out the string, the poet tells us, the kite will rise. And likewise will an ambitious man. He who is taken up by ambition, will always want more and knows no boundaries. It is a rather obvious moral lesson, short but forceful. As appears from research by Joanna Kozikowska, this lesson belonged to the most reprinted of Cats's texts. In the period until 1627 alone, *Silenus Alcibiadis sive Proteus* went through eight editions. In that year, a revised edition of the book appeared, now titled *Proteus ofte minne-beelden verandert in sinne-beelden* (Proteus or Images of Love Metamorphosised into Symbols).¹⁷ In that, and in later reprints, 'Children's Games' no longer featured, but the poem kept resurfacing in pirated editions based on the earliest editions of *Silenus Alcibiadis*.¹⁸ Moreover, from 1625 on, the poem was included in Cats's famous *Houwelyck* (Marriage), which in the Republic rivalled the Bible as a bestseller.¹⁹

The version of 'Children's Games' in *Houwelyck* contains some remarkable changes from the earlier editions of *Silenus Alcibiadis sive Proteus*. The first thing that strikes us is that the new title print accompanying 'Children's Games', again done by Adriaen van de Venne, no longer depicts the Court of Middelburg, but the Lange Voorhout in The Hague (fig. 3). We will get back to this. Another difference is that the fourteen children's

¹⁶ 'Let op de vliegheer van papier, / Gheresen tot den hemel schier, / Die, soo den ionghen lost de coordt, / Noch gaet ghederich voort en voort. / Een die met eer-sucht is besmet, / Hoe hooch dat hy oock wert gheset, / Hy wil noch altyt verder gaen, / Syn hert wert noyt ghenoech ghedaen; / Het windrich hooft climt, draeyt, en went, / Tot dattet, 'k weet niet waer, belent.'

¹⁷ Cats, *Proteus*.

¹⁸ Kozikowska, 'Ex nugis seria', 5 found ten pirated prints up to 1700 that still included the poem. See also Cats, *Sinne- en minnebeelden*.

¹⁹ Cats, *Houwelyck*. The poem [pp. I (*) iij - I (**) iij] now no longer has a title, but the accompanying print again features the heading 'Ex Nugis Seria'.



Fig. 3 The second print (21,9×17,2 cm) by Adriaen van de Venne for 'Children's Games', in: Jacob Cats, *Houwelyck* (Middelburg, Wed. Jan Pietersz. van de Venne, 1625), 1^o iij. The children are playing in The Hague, in the Lange Voorhout, with on the left Oldenbarnevelt's house on the Kneuterdijk. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-1937-312.

games in the print and the text have now been expanded to nineteen, and that the passages devoted to the individual children's games are often much longer. Moreover, the meaning originally attributed to some of the games has been changed or extended significantly.



Fig. 4 Fragment of figure 3. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-1937-312.

The lines on kiting show both kinds of changes. The fragment now has two stanzas of fourteen and twelve lines. The first stanza goes as follows:

Look there upon that paper kite
 That almost touches the heavens on high
 And while the boy pays out the line
 Steadily upward it will climb
 And finally floats up so high,
 that in the end, it's lost from sight.
 But when by accident the string
 On which the kite at first takes wing
 Breaks, oh, that which once stood tall
 Now suddenly has a great fall;
 And there it lies, its vain delight

Now cruelly mocked with youthful spite,
 What seemed a glorious, wondrous beast
 Leaves dirty paper on the street.²⁰

In all their simplicity, the additional lines refer to an important aerodynamic principle: the kite string is not only the power that pulls the kite up against the wind, it is also the power that ensures that it *remains* in the air. When the string breaks, the kite floats down and changes from ‘wondrous beast’ into nothing but ‘dirty paper’. So far, the general moral is clear: he who strives for vanities, loses the connection to the essential moral principles and is bound for disaster. But then, we see a striking turn. The second stanza, which half consists of new lines, elaborates on this rather obvious, generic moral in a way that in our opinion does not refer to human life in general, but to the contemporary political situation.

In the second stanza, Cats makes it abundantly clear why he has introduced the theme of the string as the support, and the dramatic fall. He uses them to include a reference to recent events in the young Republic – the dramatic fall of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, who fell from grace with Stadtholder Maurice, Prince of Orange, and was beheaded in 1619. But Cats does not mention the Land’s Advocate by name:

Like one who, cursèd with ambition,
 However high is his position,
 Will always yearn for greater height.
 And never will be satisfied.
 He feeds desires, both foul and fair,
 Until he floats, I know not where;
 But if the vaulting string would break,
 The prop supporting his high state,
 That is the favour of the prince,
 Alas, his head so full of idle wind,
 Once worshipped like a deity
 Will be held up for mockery.²¹

Here, the ambitious, vain man is given a specific face: someone who failed to realise that the prop or pillar of his position does not consist of his own ambition, but of the favour of the prince. It is very well possible that Cats here refers to Joost van den Vondel’s *Palamedes oft Vermoorde onnooselheyd* (Palamedes or Innocence Slain), a theatre play also written in 1625, which repeatedly discusses the forces supporting the statesman. For instance, Palamedes, the innocence to be slain in the play, states in his opening soliloquy: ‘I know my spotless conscience’s my support / that knows no evil’.²² Later on, Vondel would immortalise the

20 ‘Let op den vlieger van papier / Geresen tot den hemel schier, / Die, soo de Jongen lost de koordt, / Gaet efter noch geduerigh voort, / En sweeft ten lesten wonder hoogh, / En sweeft ten lesten uytet oogh. / Maer breeckter dan een dunne snoer, / Waer door hy inder hoochte voer, / Siet! dat wel eer soo wonder scheen, / Dat sijght in haest dan weder heen; / Daer leyt dan al die losse vreught / Ten spotte van de schamper jeught, / Het scheen wel eer een selsaem dier, / En nu en ist maer vuyl papier.’

21 ‘Een die met eersucht is besmet, / Al wort hy bijster hooch geset, / Hy wil noch efter verder gaen, / En noyt is hem enough gedaen, / Hy voedt begeerten sonder endt, / Tot hy ’ken weet niet waer belent; / En breeckter dan maer eens een draet, / Het steunsel van sijn gansche staet, / Dat is de gunste van de prins, / Eylas! het hoofd vol schrale wints / Wel eer geducht gelijk een godt, / En is terstont maer enckel spot.’

22 ‘Ick weet waer op ick steun, mijn ongekreeckt geweten / En is niet quaeds bewust’, Vondel, *Palamedes*.

prop metaphor in his popular poem on the walking stick supporting Van Oldenbarnevelt on his way to the scaffold: 'Het Stockske van Joan van Oldenbarnevelt, Vader des Vaderlants' (The Walking Stick of Joan van Oldenbarnevelt, Father of the Fatherland, 1657).²³

Cats offers a completely opposite interpretation: not Oldenbarnevelt, his walking stick and his conscience are the props of the state, but the Prince of Orange and the favour he bestows on the statesman and his ambitious desire. The kite's 'high state' is dependent on the direction from the ground; when the prince no longer lends his support, the kite, yesterday's deity, becomes an object of scorn. Van de Venne has nicely reflected this dramatic political turn in his print in the *Houwelyck* version of 'Children's Games' by depicting not one but two kites: one rises triumphantly in the skies, the other plummets down (fig. 4).

Incidentally, when we look at the picture, it now strikes us that a not unimportant aspect of the kite has gone unmentioned in the poem: the tail. With his depiction of the falling kite the artist achieves a very special effect. The fact that the dynamics and the delay of the kite's line and tail are different from those of the kite itself, enables Van de Venne to solve a fundamental problem of the pictorial arts. As pointed out by Lessing in his famous *Laocoon* essay, art differs from poetry in that the former has no obvious means at its disposal to represent the passing of time. In this picture, however, the twirling of the kite's line and tail fulfil precisely this function. A modern cartoonist would indicate the fluttering down of a leaf or a piece of paper with exactly the same kind of twirling lines – but such cartoonist's solutions are artifices, detrimental to the realistic character of the scene, while Van de Venne's depiction is not.

A political reading of the two competing kites can also help us understand why in *Houwelyck* the setting of the children's games was relocated from Middelburg to The Hague. In so doing, Van de Venne places the children's games in the middle of the political centre of the United Provinces.²⁴ This change is further emphasised by the choice of the square in which the children are playing: the Lange Voorhout, with on the left Oldenbarnevelt's house on the Kneuterdijk.

Other parts of 'Children's Games' also acquire a political significance in *Houwelyck*. Through a child who lets a tame sparrow fly, Cats thematises the idea of the Dutch Republic as a free territory. It is better to furnish oneself with the necessary goods 'in the field' than to forfeit one's freedom for a few grains and always return to one's master – with the risk of the leash and slavery.²⁵ A contemporary reader will have remembered the political debates about secret alliances with foreign powers such as France. The closing lines of this

23 See for recent interpretations of the politics of Vondel's work: Bloemendal and Korsten (eds.), *Joost van den Vondel*; Korsten, *Vondel belicht*; and on the Anglo-Dutch political discourses: Helmers, *The Royalist Republic*.

24 As Schama, *The Embarrassment*, 499, points out, depictions of children's games are mostly situated, 'not in some imaginary vacuum of time and space, but in topographically meaningful – and sometimes recognizable – settings, nearly always with some public building, a town hall or guildhall in view'. Cats and Van de Venne seem to have been a good match, both as regards prolificness and religious and political ideology. Not only did Adriaen van de Venne design dozens of engravings for Cats's moralistic literature, and painted the famous 'Fishing for souls' (1614) allegorical synthesis of the young Dutch Republic governed by unassailable religious principles, he also composed large paintings of members of the house of Orange, which according to Westermann 'coined visual definitions of an ideal polity'. Westermann, 'Fray en Leelijck', 224. For Van de Venne, see Bol, *Adriaen Pietersz. van de Venne*.

25 'Het ware beter in het velt / Sich klouck en neerstigh aengestelt, / En daer te soucken eenich graen, / Om soo den noot te wederstaen, / Als staegh te vreesen voor de lijn, / En eeuwich slaef te moeten sijn.'



Fig. 5 Playing children. View of the Stadtholder's court in The Hague, with the buildings of the Binnenhof and the houses near the Kortte Vijverberg. Engraving (20,3 × 59 cm) published by Reinier and Josua Ottens (c. 1726-1750), a revised version of an engraving from c. 1634, probably published by Broer Jansz. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-AO-12-11.

stanza are clearly meant to put the reader on the track of such a double meaning: 'Should this need an explanation? / This is enough elucidation.'²⁶

Another child in the print has a sparrow on a string, and as Cats tells us, reigns the bird back in each time it wants to escape and fly away. Yet another message is indicated here:

Each man should know his limits well,
And if the string comes to its end
In vain you have your efforts spend.
Blessed man, whatever jump you pick,
Take care not to outreach your stick.²⁷

Is it too far-fetched to think, at the mention of that 'stick', of the walking stick of the 'blessed' Oldenbarnevelt, to which Vondel devoted his famous poem in 1657, but which already gained an iconic status soon after Oldenbarnevelt's death in 1619?²⁸

The story does not stop there: around 1634, a somewhat mysterious print appears which once more transposes the setting of the children's games, this time to the area in front of the Binnenhof – away from Oldenbarnevelt and even closer to the political centre of the Dutch Republic; the Binnenhof still houses the Dutch Parliament today (fig. 5).²⁹ In this print, only one kite is left, which is launched into the air by a running boy. The Oldenbarnevelt

²⁶ 'Wat dient dit naerder uyt-geleyt? / My dunckt daer is genouch geseyt.'

²⁷ 'Een yeder is sijn pael gestelt, / En als u lijntjen is ten endt, / Dan isset al om niet gerent. / Ey springt noyt verder, saligh man, / Als daer u stockje reycken kan.'

²⁸ Grijzenhout, *Feesten*, 20-21, states that the iconography surrounding Oldenbarnevelt soon approached to hagiography. Cf. Janssen, *Het stokje*. About the sparrow on the string as image of love, see De Jongh, *Zinne- en minnebeelden*, 44.

²⁹ The print history of this engraving is shady. According to the Rijksmuseum catalogue, the first version was published by Broer Jansz as a separate pamphlet with a text page. The Museum van Gijn in Dordrecht owns an original print from 1634, but without the text page. The fact that this text page is indeed Cats's 'Children's Games', appears from a digital image featured on www.bridgeman.com ('Children's games in the 18th century', TAD1747737), on which we see that beneath the engraving, there is, in Gothic lettering: 'Kinder-spel Gheduyt tot Sinne Beelden / ende Leere der Seden' (Children's Games, Made into Symbols / For Correction in Morals).

drama has been removed from view. Ironically, Jacob Cats would soon himself take up the office of the Land's Advocate; in 1636, he entered the Binnenhof in that capacity.

The return to one single kite in front of the Binnenhof, as a symbol for the ideal polity of the Dutch Republic, highlights yet another aspect of the kite: the fact that when it has climbed up high in the sky, the kite causes wonder and awe. Thus, the kite could reflect the 'miracle' of the Dutch Republic, the impossible state that grew out to be, in the words of Sir William Temple, 'the fear of some, the envy of others, and the wonder of all their neighbours'. Here, it is significant to realize that, in early modern Dutch language, a kite often was said to 'stand in the sky', which stipulates a kind of fixity, contrary to the kite's delicate and dynamic nature. Although fragile in nature, the kite of State, when firmly set in the sky, can be the object of wonder and fascination for all those looking up to it. For a young state, first perceived as a political anomaly, but admired for, amongst other things, its technological achievements, the choice of the technology of kiting as a symbol of a strong state seems well-chosen.³⁰

In conclusion, there are a number of elements that invite a political interpretation of kiting: the relocation of the playing children from Middelburg to The Hague, the political centre of the Republic; the addition of a plummeting kite, next to the kite triumphantly in the skies; the added lines about the prince as the support of the state; and finally the new, politically interpretable presentation of some of the other children's games. It is therefore remarkable that, as far as we know, no-one has ever indicated these opportunities for political interpretation. This might be due to the reception of Cats's *Houwelyck*, which sometimes has very effectively obscured the possibility of political interpretation. For instance, in the recent, reworded version of *Houwelyck* in the popular 'Griffioen' series, the last six lines of 'Children's game' were left out, thus removing the above-mentioned references to the breaking of the string and the prince's favour.³¹

The symbolic interpretation of the kite as an illustration of ambition and inevitable fall, as undertaken by Cats, was continued. For instance, Adriaen Poirters, the 'Cats of the Southern Netherlands' who was also popular in the Northern Netherlands, uses the kite in his *Het masker van de wereldt afgetrocken* (The Mask of the World Removed, 1644) to expose persons who act as if they are of nobler stock than they actually are. If you lie about your origins and pretend to be of high birth, people will eventually unravel the mystery of your descent:

as people do with a kite or a paper bird; it flies high in the sky, it seems to be something magical as it waves its long tail; but when one winds up the string or the cord, one sees that it is only paper, or cloth that was flying there above its master. In the same way, many a man plays the lord today, but when one starts to investigate his family, when one would haul in the string of his origins, then one would happen upon paper or cloth, that is to say, on parents from humble origins.³²

Sadly, it is unclear where the original of the print is. Possibly, it was part of an edition of Cats. It is also possible that print and poem were published separately.

³⁰ The famous quote by Sir William Temple forms the opening sentence of Davids and Lucassen, *A Miracle Mirrored*, which offers a comparative study of Dutch political and economic history.

³¹ Cats, *Huwelyck*. For unclear reasons, this translation is based on the version in an edition of Cats's *Complete Works* from 1712.

³² '[...] ghelijck men doet met de vlieghers, oft de papieren voghels: Het vlieght boven in de locht, het schijnt wat wonders te wesen, het swiert daer met sijnen langhen steert; maer als men den draet oft het koordeken eens

Here, Cats's lines 'What seemed a glorious, wondrous beast / Leaves dirty paper on the street' resonate. But the string on which the kite flies has now become the line of descent, which, once hauled in, shows that the miracle was only paper and that this seemingly eminent person is in fact a nobody.

The tail is here no more than a symbol for the frisky dash of the ambitious man in general. Poirters does not refer to any political issues. In the Northern Netherlands, after the Truce Troubles and the Westphalia Treaty in 1648, the kite also seems to enter a quieter time. During the First Stadtholderless Period (1650-1672), kites in prints, poems and emblems are predominantly flown by innocent children. The kite is largely reduced to the domain of the child: 'How happy one can be, in younger years / When one, without a wife to follow, / does not yet spend one's day in sorrow. / One plays with marbles and with hoops [...] / One sends a kite up to the sky [...]'; in the words of IJsbrand Vincent in 1669.³³

International Politics: The French Kite Astray

The crisis of the *Rampjaar* (Disaster Year) 1672, however, apparently raised a new need for political kites. In the veritable deluge of pamphlets on the crisis and its aftermath a pamphlet was published, containing a long song titled *De Fransche vlieger hor* ('The French Kite Astray, 1674').³⁴ The tune stipulated already betrays its political intentions: 'Tune: Orange'.³⁵ The poem is a satire on the *annus horribilis* 1672 and the eventually failed invasion of the Dutch Republic by France, England, Münster and Cologne:

Listen, my friends, and gather round,
This is what we in the new year found
About a kite which four great powers
Have launched into this land of ours.

This kite was of French paper made
and à la mode dash 't betrayed;
The yellow lilies used in decoration
Looked like some kind of defecation.³⁶

op-wijnt, dan siet-men dat het maer papier en is, oft lijnwaet dat daer boven den meester soo scheen te maken. Van gelijcken domineerter hedensdaeghs menigh mensch, ende ginghmen de linie van sijne afkomste ondersoecken, wou men den draet van sijn geslachte eens in halen, 't soud' op papier, oft lijnwaet uyt komen, dat is, op Ouders die in den winkel geseten hebben.' Poirters, *Het masker*, 234-235.

33 'Och! wat 's men in zen jonge jaren / Eerst lukkig, als men zonder wijf, / En zorgh niet zoekt als tijdt-verdrijf. / Men speelt met knikkers, men gaat hoepen [...] / Men zendt de vlieger na de lucht [...].' Vincent, *Pefroen*, 17.

34 See for short reviews of the poem Haks, *Vaderland en vrede*, 79-80; Claydon and Levillain (eds), *Louis XIV*, 173-174. Cf. Reinders, *Printed Pandemonium* and Dingemanse, *Rap van tong*, 180-257, on the pamphlets about the crisis of 1672 and their role in mobilising public opinion.

35 A number of later versions gives the tune as 'Psalm 9'.

36 'Aenhoort doch vrienden al te gaer, / Wat Mooy's, wat nieus, in 't nieuwe Jaer, / Al van een Vlieger door vier Grooten, / In 't Vrye Neêrlandt opgeschooten. // Dees Vlieger was van Fransch Papier, / En hadt een a la Mode swier, / Om dat hy over al beplackt was, / Met geele Lely, of 't bekakt was.' Knuttel 11173.

Here, the kite represents the common project of the four invading allies. The paper is from France and the decoration is typically French: it is fitted with arrogant French yellow lilies, and the nose is made of 'Fool's Gold'. The ambition of this French kite, to become the radiant centre of the operation, is hampered by its tail and its string, which are both 'rented'. The string is from Cologne and Westphalia, while the tail is supplied by James II of England. 'Tail' was a well-known stereotype for the English. The English were supposed to be fallen angels, and thus men with tails, devils or bulldogs.³⁷

Built with French dash and furnished with rented materials, this kite is obviously unstable. Its flight is handicapped by what Cats would have called its 'windy' twisting. This vacant and unpredictable behaviour is here the paragon of French vanity and fashionable twisting:

Now, many people seemed to care
Whether the kite could stay in the air,
Because already it was turning,
Was swooning, started churning.³⁸

That is the very reason why this kite will come to an inglorious end. From various corners, allied whirlwinds rise. The Prince of Orange is able to mobilise Spain, Prussia and the Roman Empire. The kite starts to flounder and to turn and eventually goes astray, it comes loose, and starts drifting. The string is broken and the tail drops from its bottom. The author ends sarcastically:

And so, Monsieur Gold Bug, I say
Goodbye. Your Kite has gone astray;
If you prepare another caper
Then make the tail out of French paper
And, unless you want to rescind,
Set it to some fairer wind.³⁹

In this way, the song, employing the relatively new literary motif of the kite, can play with existing stereotypes of the frivolous, ambitious Frenchmen and the English tails. It builds up a layered, symbolic representation, a representation of an instable international alliance shattered by a strong headwind.

On reading the Dutch title of 'The French Kite Astray', 'De Fransche vlieger hor', the seventeenth-century Dutchman will not immediately have thought of kiting, but rather of acrobatics. The Dutch word for 'kite', 'vlieger', was primarily a name given to creatures that can fly ('vliegen') or move very fast. Birds could be called 'vliegers', Icarus and Cupid

37 Enklaar, 'De gestaarte Engelsman', 22-64.

38 'Veel lieden waren seer begaen, / Of dese Vlieger lang zou staen, / Om dat hy al begon te swayen, / Te suizebollen, en te drayen.'

39 'Oorlof Monsieur de Gouwe Tor, / Nou is jouw mooye Vlieger hor; / Begeer j'er weer een toe te stellen, / Soo maeckt de staert van Franse vellen / En schiet hem op daer jy de wint / Wat beter voor jouw Vlieger vint.' As the French word for kite, 'cerf-volant' (flying deer) is also the name of a species of bugs, the sobriquet 'Gouwe Tor' (Gold bug) might very well have been intended to evoke this double association.

were 'vliegers', and some types of fast ships were called 'vliegers' as well.⁴⁰ In the early modern era, the meaning of 'he who flies' also referred to (mostly French) trapeze artists. For instance, Willem Schellink's *Olipodrigo van de Amsterdamze kermis* (Miscellaneous songs on the Amsterdam Fair, 1654) to the tune of 'A Paris la grande ville' sings of all kinds of acts one can find at a fair. Among many other things:

A tall girl athlete
From eleven feet,
The French Flyer,
A crocodile,
Lynx, Armadill,
Snake, Dragon, Tiger.⁴¹

No doubt, the connotation of the French trapeze artists played a part in 'The French Kite', in which Louis XIV becomes tangled in his mercenary strings.

The song 'The French Kite Astray' became very popular from 1674 on. We can confidently state that for a considerable period, it had a stable place in the Dutch cultural memory. After the first publication in pamphlet form, several contrafacta appeared to the tune of 'The French Kite Astray',⁴² and the song itself was repeatedly included in song collections. So, for instance, in *Het prince liet-boeck, of trompet des oorlogs* (The Prince's Song Book, or the Trumpet of War, 1675), a collection of poetry on land and sea battles between 1672 and 1675.⁴³ Jacobus Bouman included it in the sixteenth edition of *Het oudt Haarlems liedt-boeck* (The Old Haarlem Song Book, 1680) and the readers of *De vermakelijcke buys-man ofte koddige Boots-geselletje* (The Amusing Fisherman or the Comical Sailor, 1694) could also join in singing it.⁴⁴ In 1684, it was for the first time revealed who wrote the song: Andries Pels. That is to say, the song was included in his posthumous collection *Minne-liederen en Mengelzangen* (Love

⁴⁰ Apart from that, a 'vlieger' was also a wide, ladies' cape, or someone who hunts with birds of prey, or a specific type of coin, but these meanings are less relevant here. See *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* on *De Geintegreerde Taalbank* (<http://gtb.inl.nl/?owner=WNT>). In the course of the seventeenth century, the general meaning of 'vlieger' as 'one who flies' became superseded by that of a 'vlieger' as a kite in the sense of a children's toy, but it returned at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the first decades after the introduction of the airplane, pilots were called 'vliegers', which led to confusion. This became an interesting linguistic issue, much discussed by both scholars and laymen. See e.g. Hubrecht, 'Een vluchtig bezoek', 104, note 1: 'I think this term ['vlieger'] deserves greater currency in the Dutch language, although the paper 'vlieger' is then synonym. Cf. [Anonymous], 'Taal- en luchtvaart': 'No proper Dutch word has been found for the conductor of the airplane. We ourselves mostly write 'vlieger', because the intense usage demands a short reference, but we feel that the older meaning of the word remains an obstacle.'

⁴¹ 'Een lange Meit, ô bloet! / Van elf Voet, / De Franze Vlieger, / Een Cocodril, / Lynx, Armadill, / Slang, Draak, en Tiger.' Schellinks, 'Olipodigro', 11.

⁴² Sweets, 'Innerlyke ziel-tochten', 159 (opening line: 'Wat baat het of ik schraap en raap, / En my de winzucht wiegt in slaap'), and 273 ('Zie daar de kaars verdunt sijn licht, / En scheemert maar voor mijn gezicht'), as well as 291 ('De lust tot zingen my nu quelt, / Al had ik heden brood noch gelt'); Willink, *Lusthof*, 164 ('Zang eer men tot het Gebed gaat'); Van Westerhoven, *Zeedelycke en Natuurlycke Gezangen*, 127 ('O d' overwinningh altijt praaft, / Als 't volck haar in hun lant inhaalt'). In the *Nederlandse Liederenbank* (<http://www.liederenbank.nl>) there are more examples of contrafacta on 'The French Kite', up until the 1740s.

⁴³ *Het prince liet-boeck*, 27-28.

⁴⁴ *Het oudt Haarlems liedt-boeck*, 46 ff.; *De vermakelijcke buys-man*, 49 ff.

A. PÉLS *Méngelzangen.* 91

De verzierde Vlieger.

Toon: Oranje.

I.

Aanhoort tóch, Vrienden altegaar,
 Wat mooys, wat nieuws in 't Nieuwe Jaar,
 Al van een Vlieger, door vier Grooten
 In 't vrye Néerland opgeschooten.

Fig. 6 Andries Pels, *Minne-liederen en mengelzangen* (1684), 91-93. Amsterdam, University Library Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, XH.05696.

Songs and Miscellaneous Poems).⁴⁵ This second edition also supplied the music, so that everyone could sing it (fig. 6).

In 1695, the widow Gijsbert de Groot, a notoriously indiscriminate pirate printer, gave a new turn to the song. In one of her countless song collections, she included the kite, but in a new version: *De Fransche Vlieger, opgeschooten door den Francen Koningh, Cardinael van Furstenburgh, Jacobus Stuwaert, en den groten Turck* (The French Kite, Launched by the French King, Cardinal Fürstenberg, James Stuart and the Great Turk).⁴⁶ The text was completely adapted to the most recent political crisis: the Nine Years' War (1688-1697). But this adaptation of "The French Kite" was no improvement. The song is an overlong piece of doggerel, that provides a chronicle of the events of the Nine Years' War. Once again, a French kite is used to represent Louis XIV, but this time, it is fitted with a nose in the shape of a Turkish moon. The song largely rehashes the well-known motifs: a French haughty, frisky kite with an English tail and a Turkish nose,

⁴⁵ Pels, *Minne-liederen*, 91-93.

⁴⁶ 'De Fransche Vlieger, opgeschooten door den Francen Koningh, Cardinael van Furstenburgh, Jacobus Stuwaert, en den groten Turck; door den Koningh van Engeland, de Hertog van lotteringen, de Ceurvorsten van brandenburg saxen en Beyeren, en de Hollanders, &c. aen stucken gescheurt', in: *Nieuw vermeerdert konincklijck lied-boeck*, 74-77. This version was reprinted in *De nieuwe vermaakelyke gaare-keuken*, 44.

out of balance and in disarray. This demonstrates that by the end of the seventeenth century the symbolic interpretations supplied by Cats and Pels had become fixed and recognisable layers of meaning.

All the same, this version of the song does add one new component. It offers more detail and more technical terms, especially as regards the launching of the kite. When the kite 'was ree' (was ready), the song tells us, it was 'opgeschoten' (launched) by Bourbon, and 'ingeschoten' (directed) to Cologne by Fürstenberg, the ambitious Strasbourg bishop. The kite then shot up into the air, more than twenty miles in the wind. This is a clear reference to Fürstenberg's unbounded ambition. He had coveted the episcopate of Cologne, and when the Pope denied him this, he had tried to win it by force, with Louis XIV's military assistance. But, as the song puts it, Fürstenberg was unable to hold on to the string and the kite was taken from him. A second French kite was launched by James II and then transferred to Czar Peter:

[...]
And now he turned to Father Peter
And kindly handed him the tether.

There was no slack upon the string,
So high it sailed upon the wind
And sailed beyond the human eye
Up to the very sun on high.

And Father Peter was so pleased
He could pay out the string with ease.
But in the end, to his dismay,
He saw the kite had run away.⁴⁷

This fresh French kite song effectively summons the kiting memories of the reading public. From their childhood, the adults of the year 1695 could probably remember the tension of launching a kite – an insightful image for the tension of political or personal ambition, military conflict or the search for a balance of power. From their own experience, the kiting choices of the protagonists must have seemed comical, and their dismay over the loss of a 'kite astray' quite understandable. In this way, the children's game had become the stake in adult conflicts.⁴⁸

For that very reason, the kite could continue to surface as a metaphor. Another instance is the financial crisis of 1720. While in England, the metaphor of the bubble ('South Sea Bubble') was chosen, in the Dutch Republic, the crisis was interpreted from the perspective of the wind. This naturally evoked the kite as symbolic commentary on the 'windhandel' or 'windnegotie' (wind trade, wind commerce). Various pamphlets depicted kites, in combination with wind mills, bellows, balloons, storms and other references to the wind.

47 '[...] En laet vaer Peters seer getrouwe, / Het touw in sijne handen houwen. / Dit touw dat had by na geen bogt, / So vloog de vlieger in de logt, / En klom tot buyten 's menschen ogen, / Ja is tot aen de Son gevlogen. / Vaer Peters was geheel verblijd, / Dat 't Touw so door sijn handen glijd: / Maer op het lest was hy bedrogen, / Want hem de Vlieger is ontvlogen.'

48 Also in the nineteenth century, the memory of the French kite is kept alive, but now as a part of national popular culture. Curiously, the song is also included in the many editions of a nineteenth-century songbook for girls, *De Lustige Jager* (The Eager Hunter, 1863).

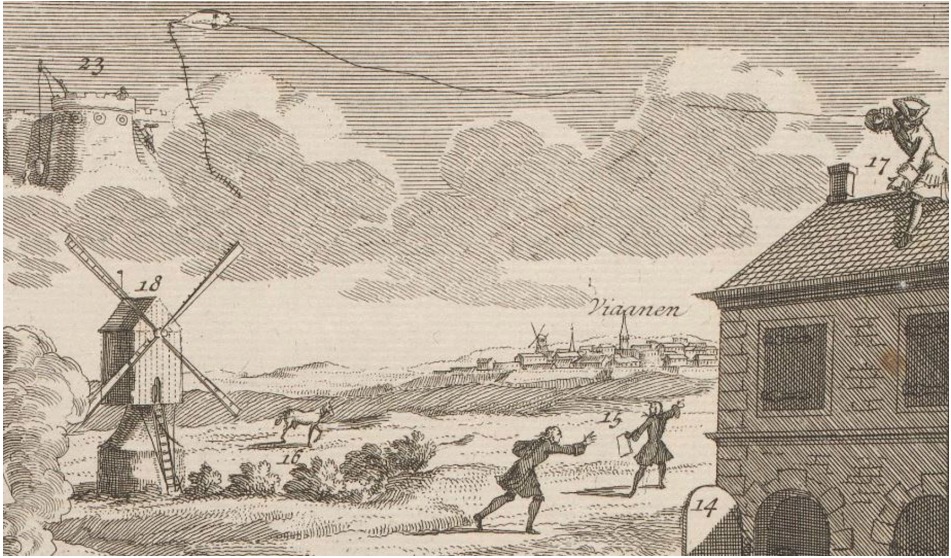


Fig. 7 Fragment of [Anonymous], 'Uitslag van de Windnegotie', collected in series: *Het groote tafereel der dwaasheid*, 1720, etching, 28,5 × 39 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-OB-83.517.

Even when, in these pamphlets, artificial air movement is summoned, the kites of the wind trade still go 'astray'. In the cartoon *Uitslag van de windnegotie* (Consequence of the Wind Trade, 1720), the string breaks and the kite is blown away on the strong winds (fig. 7). In *De verslagen actionist in de rinkelstoel* (The Defeated Stock Trader in the Feeding Chair with Bells, 1720), the kite loses its tail, laden with stocks (fig. 8).

In *Wind-Zang, op de commerlyke commercie, of Wild-Zang van 't jaar 1720* (Wind Song, on the Woeful Commerce, or Wild Bird Song of the Year 1720), a variation on the 'French Kite', a stock trader is mocked as a windbag, a 'Gold Bug' who hopes to buy himself a golden future with the trade in hot air. That kite won't fly. The frantic wind trade of this 'pompous rooster' yields a loss. And the anonymous poet has the last laugh:

And so, Monsieur Gold Bug, I say
 Goodbye. Your Kite has gone astray
 And if you aim for a better station
 You should abstain from speculation.⁴⁹

In this way, the mocking of the Bourbon braggart with his French political ambition is transposed onto the unbridled lust for profit of the stock trader. Many pamphlets typify this lust for profit as typically French: the Netherlands are assumed to have been affected by a virus originating from France, through the magical financial system of John Law.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ 'Oorlof Monsjeur de Gouwe Tor, / Nu is jou mooye Vlieger hor; / En wil je het nu eens beter rooyen, / Zoo moetje nooyt weer Quincampoyen.' *Wind-Zang*.

⁵⁰ The fact that the poems about the French kite made the terms 'Gouwe Tor' (Gold Bug) and 'Vlieger hor' (Kite astray) into a standard rhyme, appears from an anonymous slanderous pamphlet, aimed at the quarrelmonger-author

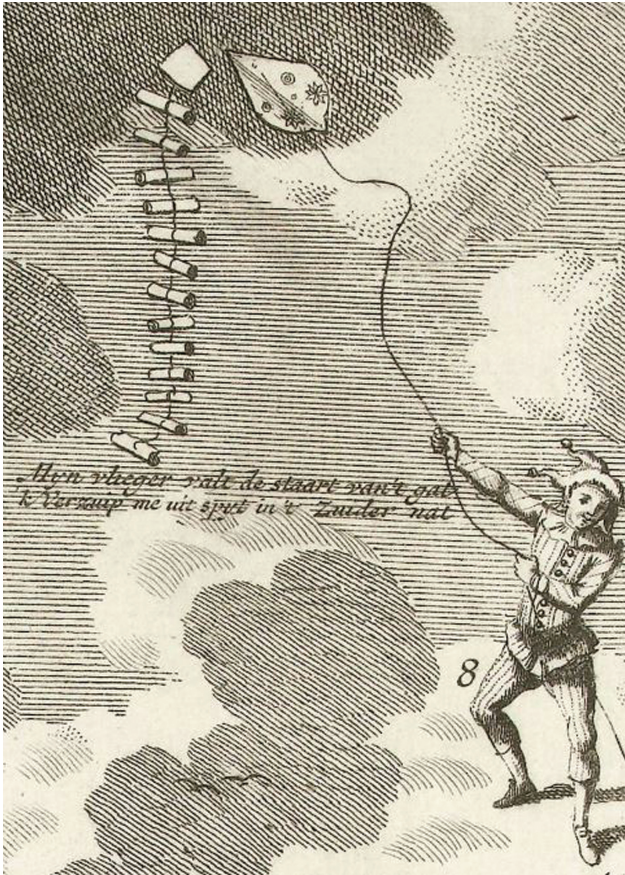


Fig. 8 Fragment of [Anonymous], 'De verslagen actionist in de rinkelstoel', collected in series: *Het groote tafereel der dwaasheid*, 1720, etching, 32×40 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-OB-83.527.

A New Kite of Orange

With French kites and treacherous Gold Bugs, we have drifted away from the original Catsian tension between Land's Advocate and Stadtholder. But an identification of the kite with the House of Orange returns in the 1740s. In that period, the position of Willem Karel Hendrik Friso a.k.a. William IV, the first hereditary Stadtholder, was very much contested. In a beautiful painting that was for sale at Christie's a few years back, we see a boy from a prosperous family (fig. 9). Via the ornaments he is cutting out for his kite, he professes his support to 'WKHF'. On the table, the ornament 'Vivat Oranie' lies ready. We do not know who the boy is; possibly, the initials on the kite, N.M., are his. In any case, it is clear

Jacob Campo Weyerman. In *De slapende filosoof. In 't Harnas gejaagt door den Goliath* J.C. Weyerman (1732?), the author tries to calm the panicking Weyerman with the words: 'Be quiet, Weyerman! who, / by the Gold Bug betrayed, / Cannot but moan, 'Behold, 'My kite has gone astray!' ('Bedaar O Weyerman! die door een goude Tor / Bedrogen aars niet roept, als daar 's de vlieger hor,'). Transcript derived from Hanou, 'De slapende filosoof'.



Fig. 9 Dutch School, A boy making a kite, 18th century, oil on canvas, 23,8×17,1 cm, London, Christie's.

that through these ornaments, the pear-shaped kite becomes a declaration of support to the House of Orange.

From the perspective of this painting the apparently innocent kite scene by Justus van Gelder (fig. 10), almost a century earlier, might well have had a political meaning too.⁵¹ Do those two kites in the air carry the Prince's Flag (blue/black – white – orange)? And should we interpret this as a declaration of allegiance in the struggle about what was to be the preferred flag for the Republic, at the beginning of the 1650s? During the First Stadtholderless Period, the Prince's Flag was forbidden in Holland, and in 1653, the official flag of the navy was adapted from Orange-white-blue to Red-white-blue. It is conceivable that in this carefree children's game, a position is taken in favour of the Stadtholder. The boy in the foreground, with his orange bow-tie and the orange ribbons on his sleeves, is launching

⁵¹ Godfried Schalken and Nicolaas Maes are also mentioned as possible authors of the painting.



Fig. 10 Justus de Gelder (or Godfried Schalcken, or Nicolaas Maes), *Boys Flying Kites*, c. 1660-1662, oil on oak panel, 44,4×34,3 cm, Warwickshire, Upton House. © National Trust Images/Angelo Hornak.

the Prince's kite, while the kite of the State (colourless) stands quietly in the sky. In the background, another Prince's kite is floating; it is unclear by whom it is kept in the air. And now, we also notice the yellow lilies in the foreground. For the *fleur de lis* is the flower of the French Royal House. In this way, the painting seems to employ the kite in a complicated semaphore message. However, the precise meaning of this message remains unclear.

Apparently, the connection between the kite and the House of Orange was consistent. In the politically turbulent times of the 1780s, Orange kites were launched, but now as the object of mockery. In 1784, a cartoon was published in which Rotterdam Orangists, all donned with donkey's ears, make an effort to launch a 'princely kite' (fig. 11). Prominent among them are several women. In the accompanying poem three of them are identified: fishwife Kaat Mossel (Kate Mussel, here also called 'Schulpsteef' – 'The Bivalve Bitch'); Ruige Keet, de lange juffer ('Wild Cathy the Tall Lady'), and the 'Hoofsche troetelpop' ('Courtly darling doll', probably Wilhelmina of Prussia, of whom we only see a hand in the opening of the gate). According to the accompanying poem, the kite is fitted 'with Yoke and Hat, the trampled symbol of Freedom'. Indeed, we can see a yoke tied to the kite, and on it is depicted a freedom hat trampled underfoot (fig. 12).



Fig. 11 Joannes Hulstkamp, Cartoon about the Orangists in Rotterdam, 1784, etching, engraving and print, 28,3 cm×21,9 cm (paper), Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-OB-85,336.

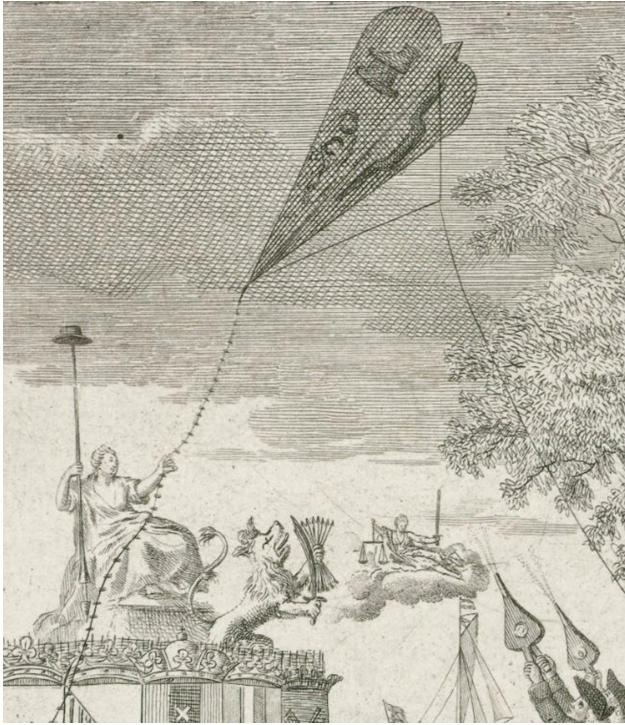


Fig. 12 Fragment of figure 11, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-OB-85.336.

The fact that the kite is being launched by women already indicates that here, we have landed in a topsy-turvy world. Kiting was supposed to be a boys' game. In early modern pictures or kite descriptions, girls feature only as spectators or admirers of boys playing with kites. Women flying kites trespass the same gender boundary as women who try to meddle in politics. Hence, the kiting project is doomed from the start, notwithstanding the frantic endeavours of the group of Orangists.

An interesting detail are the bellows, which a group of men use to blow the Kite of State upwards, a clear reference to the wind-trade kites of 1720:

Two Bellowers of the Court, Wind traders of the state
Further the glorious work, with rallying cry and weapon.⁵²

And thus, two symbolic fields of meaning are joined: that of the wind trade and that of the political kite. The Orangist 'wind trade of the state' is eventually stopped by the Dutch Freedom Maiden and the Dutch Lion, seated in a Dutch garden and fitted with the coats of arms of Zeeland, Utrecht, Amsterdam, Delft and Leiden. She, 'with vigilant hand', keeps 'the windy contraption' down.

⁵² 'Twee Blazers van het Hof, Windhandelaers van Staet, / Bevorderen 't groote werk, elk met zyn leuze en wapen.'

't Would spell disaster, Dutchman, if it could go up
 With to its tail the yoke of slavery tightly bound,
 't Would keep the light from you, of freedom's sun,
 't Would cut new lashes in your freshly healèd wounds.⁵³

Where Cats distributed the themes of political hubris and slavery over three children's games (kiting, the sparrow on a string and the tamed sparrow), they are here assembled in the kite. The kite's tail, left unmentioned by Cats, supplies the maker with the means: the yoke of slavery, bound to the tail of the kite, would, according to the cartoon of 1784, throw a shadow between the Dutchman and the sun of his freedom.

During the Patriot and Batavian Revolutions in the last decades of the eighteenth century, political interpretations of the kite shifted towards a more general nationalist ideology. The kite was called upon to reinforce attempts to transform the inhabitants of the decentralised, federalist Republic into a group of strong and unified 'burgers' (citizens) of a strong and unified nation. In books such as the *Vaderlandsch A-B boek voor de Nederlandsche jeugd* (Patriot Abecedarium for the Dutch Youth, 1781) by the Dutch patriot J.H. Swildens and *De man in de vier tijdperken zijns levens* (The Man in the Four Seasons of his Life, 1809) by Adriaan Loosjes, kiting is depicted as a healthy exercise for the Dutch youth. Boys playing with kites are employed as symbols of the development of strong states. Kites and other children's games are envisioned as instrumental in the constitution of healthy bodies, with sharp vision and navigating skills.⁵⁴ This nationalist interpretation of the kite would even grow in popularity during the nineteenth century.

The Iconographic Guises of the Kite, 1600-1800

In retrospect, we can establish that the early depiction of kiting in a book by Cats, from 1618 – possibly the first time that a diamond or lozenge-shaped kite was depicted in Europe – constituted a trendsetting moment. The importance of this representation of a kite lies not only in the fact that in 'Children's Games', kiting is both visually depicted (in a print that would gain international fame and imitation) and described in words, but also in Jacob Cats's use of the opportunity to give the kite different layers of meaning.

The first layer is the practice in daily life. The kite is shown as childish fun and catalogued under children's games. This will become the most current form of depiction. Especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, series of popular prints, children's books, photos, tiles, cups and T-shirts will depict kiting fun as an essentially harmless and pleasant (albeit sometimes adventurous and even dangerous) children's game. In the second place, in Cats, the kite acquires an emblematic, universally moral significance as a symbol of ambition. On a more general level, the launching of kites signifies the execution of a plan, the endeavour to reach some higher goal – a layer of significance still resonating in the Dutch expression 'that kite won't fly'. In the third place, the image of the kite, in the 'Children's games' version

53 'Rampzalig waert ge, o Belg! indien het opwaerds vlog, / Daer 't juk der slavernye, aen zynen staert gebonden, / U weder aen den glans der vryheidzonne ontoog, / En nieuwe striemen drukte in pasgeheelde wonden.'

54 Gelderblom, 'Hollandse jongens'.

of 1625, is also applied as a commentary on current political developments, in this case the struggle between Van Oldenbarnevelt and prince Maurice of Orange.

What made the kite so attractive as a signifier? We would like to argue that the kite offered new opportunities in comparison with the well-known emblematic images – such as sunlight, wind, mirrors, skulls, birds and soap bells – because the kite is a complex construction, consisting of distinguishable parts. These parts can, each on their own but also in their mutual dependency, be contemplated and symbolically employed. This is a difference between the kite and most natural phenomena, animals and utensils to which a more unequivocal significance was attributed in emblem literature.⁵⁵ The paradoxical nature of the kite also offered interesting opportunities for symbolic interpretation. For the kite is both free and bound; the string that pulls it upwards is also the force that binds it to the earth. Another paradoxical characteristic can be found in the tension between the kite's majestic position in the skies, and its accompanying fragility and hazardous flight, which puts the 'wondrous beast' in constant danger of being reduced to 'dirty paper', as Cats puts it.

We see that the many opportunities the kite offers have indeed been employed in the course of the two centuries covered here. While Cats, in 1618, uses the kite in his 'Children's Games' as a symbol of the ambitious man who wants to rise ever higher, in the version of 1625, he combines this with the awareness that the kite string can break or come loose, thus precipitating its fall. He also uses the phenomenon that the kite, different from for instance a soap bubble, has at least some remains. This strengthens the comparison between kite and man: man also leaves some paltry mortal remains.

Adriaen Poirters takes the opportunity to compare the string of the kite to the genealogy of ambitious or vain men who are of simple origins. He also uses the symbolic potential of the kite's tail, which here emphasises the impression of vain swagger. Here, fields of significance come together that earlier would have been distributed over several different symbols: the skull or the soap bubbles to stress the vanity of the temporary, the virgin with her mirror for personal vanity, Icarus for hubris and other images that could signify ambition, fame and vainglory.⁵⁶

The poems about the French kite add new elements, by paying attention to the different parts of the kite. For instance, they point to the ornaments that are used to beautify the kite. The 'windy' or vain character of the ambitious man gets a new dimension here, one that elaborates on existing clichés about French mentality. The paper, the nose, the string, the tail – all of these elements are attributed with specific significance. The poets also use the opportunity to compare the connection between all of these parts to the international alliances under Louis XIV. They offer political interpretations of technical kite terms such as 'launch the kite' and 'the kite is astray'.

Understandably, the wind trade poems of 1720 give centre stage to the wind that blows the kite upwards. In doing so, they stress the technical and possibly even artificial side of kiting; sometimes, the kite will not go up spontaneously, but will only rise when it is blown

⁵⁵ With this statement, we obviously do not wish to say that simple symbolic meanings were completely constant and fixed. Symbolic meanings could differ per genre or period. Also natural phenomena such as wind 'transformed their meaning over time' (Nova, *The Book*, 7).

⁵⁶ Ripa, *Iconologia*; De Jongh, *Tot lering*.

upon, whether or not by means of bellows. Such acrobatics are obviously not sustainable. For instance, the images emphasise the association with 'windiness', which was always obvious in kite poems, but which can now be elaborated upon in various ways.⁵⁷

Of the poems and cartoons about the Orange kite, the 'Kaat Mossel print' from 1784 is especially interesting: it demands attention for the silent assumption about the identity of the kite flyer, not earlier mentioned in previous iconography of the kite. The fact that kite-flying women are here represented as the objects of mockery, reminds us of the fact that kiting was assumed to be an activity unsuitable for girls.

One of the hypotheses we wish to put forward in this article is that the kite as a political image not only offered the opportunity for topical, sometimes satirical commentary, but that the kite was also a means to understand the functioning of 'the state' or of politics in general. The kite was obviously not unique in this respect. Just as in other European countries, in the Republic, political theory was in part represented in powerful images with a centuries-old tradition, such as the classic 'Ship of State', the 'National Household', the confined 'Dutch Garden' or the 'Body Politic'.⁵⁸ Sadly, we do not have a study on the use of this kind of metaphors and imagery in political theory, which renders a sound comparison between the kite and other images difficult.⁵⁹

Still, we want to stress here that the kite was so avidly deployed in political representation in early modern times because of the new opportunities this object offered to interlink and consolidate political ideas and interpretations. The rise of the kite, with its manifold and complex possibilities of symbolic interpretation, coincides with the rise of the manifold and complex process of state formation in Europe, and specifically with the challenge the young Dutch Republic faced. The Dutch Republic, as the stranger in the land, had to establish its own self-image.⁶⁰ Simon Schama has already described how the United Netherlands built its own republican iconology, separate from the heraldic bestiaries of the various kingdoms.⁶¹

The humble kite offered new opportunities for symbolic visualisation of the state and the process of state formation, because both the construction and the fragility of this technical object are so obvious. For instance, the cross, the paper, the tail, the nose and the string could all be symbolically identified as different parts, either of international power blocks (France, England, Münster and Bremen), or of the most important government positions in the Dutch Republic (Land's Advocate, Stadtholder). Hence, the kite invited an analysis of the constitution of the state, and of the interaction of its various parts – while it could also represent the vulnerability of the state construction.

57 For a discussion of the iconography of wind: Nova, *The Book*.

58 Gelderblom, *Mannen en maagden*. Cf. Grijzenhout, *Feesten*, who discusses political cartoons of 1780-1800 and states that the cartoonists could build on a long tradition of political iconography, e.g. in depicting the Dutch Garden. Cf. Reinders, *Printed Pandemonium*. For an in-depth analysis of the concept of the Ship of State and other political metaphors, see Ankersmit, 'Metaphor'.

59 According to Brock, *Greek Political Imagery*, 53, the ship motif was very popular in the Netherlands: 'Holland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries abounded in images of the Ship of State, and other communal images of seafaring, particularly the related image of the Ship of the Church.' Brock here refers to Knipping, *Iconography*, vol II, 355-359, dealing with the Ship of the Church.

60 Weststeijn, *Commercial Republicanism*.

61 Schama, *The Embarrassment*, 71.



Fig. 13 François Schillemans, after Adriaen van de Venne, *The Ship of State*, 1620 or 1691, engraving, 58 × 62,2 cm (paper), Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-OB-81.221.

Some of these aspects of meaning were already available in the traditional images of the Garden of Holland, the Body Politic and the Ship of State. The Dutch Garden was meant to represent the vitality of the new state, secure within its borders, but at the same time it summoned the image of vulnerability, also present in the attractive Cities' Maiden who had to be protected by a fence and a lion. In turbulent times, the Ship of State was liable to run aground. Moreover, the Ship of State offered the opportunity to depict the various political factions. Take for instance the famous print of the Ship of State by Adriaen van de Venne, which was marketed after the Synod of Dort (fig. 13). The Ship of State is shown here as a communal project, with skilful helmsmen and a purposeful captain (in this case Maurice of Orange, together with the leaders of the States and the admirals), who need to collaborate closely to keep the virgins of the seven provinces on course.⁶² Hence, a ship

⁶² See for a description of the print Goudriaan and Van Lieburg, *Revisiting the Synod*, 341-343; Westermann, 'Fray en Leelijck', 225-226. Ankersmit also argues that the metaphor of the Ship of State invites us to see the State as an entity with a certain unity that can and ought to be steered in the right direction by a competent and responsible statesman. The ship thus highlights a shared goal, a set course, the challenge of overcoming distances, and the importance of unity, under guidance of a skilled captain (Ankersmit, 'Metaphor', 159).

sails a different course from a kite: most ships of state can weather storms. Attention to construction and fragility of the ship was less plausible here.

The fragile kite offered more opportunities to represent the inherently precarious nature of the Republic's state formation. The construction indicated that anyone can actually 'build' a state, but that the balance of the parts is of the essence, as are the balance between kite and kite flyer, between pull and push powers, between flexibility and stiffness of the parts that constitute the frame and the surface.⁶³

Moreover, the kite was able to broach a topical phenomenon for the young Republic: political ambition. There would seem to be no obvious symbolism to represent the combination of three connected elements: civic humanism, the effort for social advancement and the adherent vainglory. The kite, however, offered a beautiful instrument of representation, illustrating to the nation that unchecked ambition causes instability. The image of the kite focused the attention on the discrepancy between high political ambitions and a possibly dramatic fall. In the end, it is only a heap of paper, string and wood.

In the field of international politics, the kite was useful to make the idea of alliances and the transfer of power palpable: foreign powers hand the kite string over to each other. From the depictions of the Orange kites, we do not gain a clear understanding of the operation of the various parts, but the kite persuades us through its size and splendour. In the Patriot Era, this was converted into a negative symbol; the Prince's kite now symbolised the state as a tyrant bringing oppression. By reaching back to the images of the financial crisis of 1720, the Orangist politics could now be represented as 'wind trade of the state'.

The fact that, in the Patriot Era, the kite's tail could be the carrier of a heavy yoke, while during the wind trade of 1720, the tail could not even handle a few shares, seems contradictory. But a technological innovation had come about. Scientists such as Franklin and Van Musschenbroek used kites for experiments with electricity, others investigated the possibility of deploying kites for the transportation of lines to for instance endangered ships at sea. By the end of the eighteenth century, the kite had become, from a children's toy, a respected and serious, powerful instrument.

One could say that practice now approached representation. While initially, Europe did not adopt the serious, violent aspects of Asiatic kiting and used the kite primarily as a children's toy, in representation, kiting was from the very start interpreted as a mature game, full of conflict, power and potential violence. Hence, the kite supplied the young Dutch Republic with an opportunity for 'deep play': a meaningful story it could tell about itself. It was a story of a proud republic, based on technological accomplishments and moral superiority, a republic admired by other nations for its high flight.

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⁶³ In this respect, the kite resembles the image of the Body Politic, in which the various body parts should be in balance, or subservient to the head, to be able to work properly. Brock, *Greek Political Imagery*, 69-75.

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