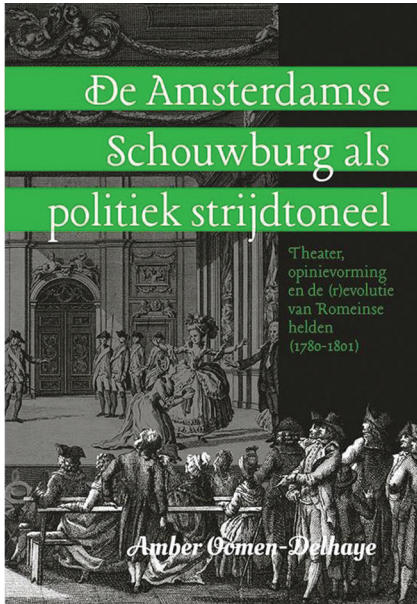


Review

Amber Oomen-Delhaye, *De Amsterdamse Schouwburg als politiek strijdtoneel. Theater, opinievorming en de (r)evolutie van Romeinse helden (1780-1801)*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2019, 336 pp. ISBN 9789087047702.



It is well-known that during what R.R. Palmer famously called ‘the age of the democratic revolution’ politics and the theatre were intimately connected. Since this was also the period in which neoclassicism reached its greatest flourishing, both politics and the theatre were particularly obsessed with the importance of Greek and Roman antiquity, which provided a rich arsenal of *exempla virtutis* and an equally abundant number of examples illustrating the mechanisms leading to the loss of liberty and the rise of tyranny. There are a great many fascinating episodes illustrating this fertile and fascinating mix of contemporary politics, the stage, and classical antiquity. At the end of the harsh American winter of 1777-1778, general George Washington was looking for a way to inspire his revolutionary army, which camped in dire and demoralising circumstances at Valley Forge, close to Philadelphia.

The solution he hit upon was entirely characteristic of his age. To provide his soldiers with a much-needed classical example of republican self-sacrifice, he decided to stage Joseph Addison’s tragedy *Cato* – originally published in 1713 and perhaps the most popular play of the eighteenth century – in the military encampment. The American Revolution abounded in such creative political uses of the stage and of the classics. In revolutionary Massachusetts, for instance, Joseph Warren gave incendiary speeches to his fellow citizens while theatrically dressed in a Ciceronian toga, and Mercy Warren Otis wrote numerous plays in which classical republican heroes such as Marcus Junius Brutus roamed the streets of late eighteenth-century Boston. Similar patterns emerged a number of years later in revolutionary France. The unprecedented political events in that country were preceded and accompanied by a huge new output of classically oriented books, plays and paintings,

yet without doubt one of the more memorable moments was the restaging of an older play, Voltaire's *Brutus* (first performed in 1730), in November of 1790. The play had been performed many times in the course of the eighteenth century, but it was only after the outbreak of the revolution that it became a true *pièce de combat*. The performance of 17 November 1790 turned into a shouting match between monarchists and revolutionaries in the audience and lasted twice as long as usual because of this constant interference of the public. When Brutus uttered the words *Dieux, donnez-nous la mort plutôt que l'esclavage*, the audience reached a state of near hysteria. The setting of the play was moreover creatively adapted in the course of the performances in 1790. First a bust of Voltaire, who had become a great hero of the revolutionaries, was displayed on stage, and later a *tableau vivant* of David's famous picture *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*, first exhibited in 1789, was added. This, in short, was the combination of Roman theatrical themes and contemporary politics and culture at its most spectacular.

Over the past decades, historical scholarship has demonstrated that the Dutch Republic (and its revolutionary successor, the Batavian Republic) played a prominent part in the revolutions of the late eighteenth century. It has also been established that the appeal to Greek and Roman antiquity was an important element both in Dutch political discussions of the time and in the arts, including the theatre. Yet very little attention has been paid to the interactions between the world of politics and the world of the stage during the Dutch revolutionary era. This is somewhat surprising, since more than a century ago J.A. Worp, in his classic history of the Dutch theatre, already observed that 'there has never been a time in which politics has tried so hard to dominate the stage as during the last twenty years of the eighteenth century'. There is thus every reason to rejoice in the fact that Amber Oomen-Delhaye has now written a book intended to address this highly important topic and to explore the interactions between classical republican themes in politics and the theatre during the revolutionary final two decades of the Dutch eighteenth century.

The author tackles her complex topic by focusing on the Amsterdam theatre. Since the Amsterdam *schouwburg* was without doubt the most important permanent theatre in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic and maintained that position during the revolutionary decades, when it even became the national theatre of the Batavian Republic for a short while, there is much to be said for this choice. Oomen analyses the ways in which the history of this venerable institution was connected to and interacted with the world of contemporary politics and political thought on at least three different levels. In the first place, she demonstrates in considerable detail how in the course of the eighteenth century many aspects of the institutional life of the Amsterdam theatre were gradually adapted to the perceived needs of an ever more critical and vocal 'public'. These adaptations ranged from the physical architecture of the theatre (it was rebuilt in a different location after the disastrous fire of 1772) to the increased attention which was paid to the demands and opinions of the audience, particularly during the revolutionary decades. Oomen's second line of approach is through the theatrical repertoire. Out of the literally hundreds and hundreds of plays performed in the Amsterdam theatre, she selects those (relatively few) plays which she refers to as 'Roman-republican tragedies' for analysis. By this she means modern classicist tragedies glorifying Roman republican heroes such as the two Brutuses and the two Catos, or vilifying Roman tyrants such as Nero. Most of these tragedies had

been written long before the revolutionary decades around which the book revolves, and very few of them were authored by Dutch playwrights. This, however, does not seem to bother Oomen, because what is apparently most important to her is a third level of analysis: that of the theatrical play as a 'performative act'. This somewhat ponderous term refers to the fact that a play is not merely a text, but, once it is performed on stage, has the potential to develop all sorts of often unexpected interactions with the public and even with the political world outside of the theatre. These interactions between the 'Roman-republican' theatre and the wider world of revolutionary Dutch politics during the final decades of the eighteenth century Oomen then proceeds to discuss in the final chapter of her book.

While there is much to be admired in Oomen's highly detailed and meticulous – although frequently repetitious – analysis of theatrical life in the Amsterdam *schouwburg* at the end of the eighteenth century, her approach to her chosen topic is nonetheless marred by several serious shortcomings. Perhaps the most important of these is her rather unsatisfactory and seemingly arbitrary selection of the plays to be included in her analysis. If one wishes to study the political transformation of the appeal to antiquity on the Dutch revolutionary stage, it simply makes no sense to exclude, as Oomen does, all Greek themes, to then exclude all plays sympathetic to Roman emperors (thereby effectively removing the Orangists from the scene), and above all to exclude almost all tragedies on Roman republican themes written and performed after the start of the revolutionary upheavals (64). As a result of these rather bizarre limitations imposed on the available theatrical material, some of the most important and exciting late eighteenth-century developments in the staging of classical political themes are lost from sight. One example should suffice to demonstrate this. On 12 September 1795, the second part of the season at the Amsterdam *schouwburg* opened with the first performance of the Roman-republican tragedy *C. Mucius Cordus or the Liberation of Rome* by the celebrated Patriot author Rheinvis Feith. While the play itself was of great political interest, the introduction to it written by Feith was even more so. For it was there that he expounded his theories on the relationship between forms of government and the stage, claiming among other things that it was only in popular republics that the people were allowed to appear on stage, as could be seen by the use of the choir in the ancient Greek theatre. Because of her self-imposed limitations, however, Oomen is forced to ignore Feith's play, which, although of crucial importance to her main theme, only gets a brief mention in a footnote.

A second and almost equally important area in which Oomen's book fails to deliver on its promises concerns the wider impact of the theatrical performances analysed. It is Oomen's claim that the Roman-republican tragedies she discusses not only *reflected* the rapidly changing political culture of the Dutch late eighteenth century, but also *contributed* to its transformation. Since she, as we have seen, excludes virtually all new political plays from her material and mainly analyses plays which had been authored well before the revolutionary decades and were performed with very little or no change in content during the revolutionary years, this purported contribution to the transformation of contemporary political culture has to be derived from their nature as 'performative acts', that is to say from their capacity to generate a new collective political response in the audience. Yet it is precisely here that the sources do not allow firm or wide-ranging conclusions. There certainly was some occasional booing of classical tyrants such as Nero and some

loud cheering for Roman republican heroic defenders of liberty, but on the whole the absence of hard evidence forces Oomen into highly speculative language in describing the public reactions to theatrical performances. When she discusses the increased presence of the people on the stage she concludes, without a shred of evidence, that 'this will have influenced the way the audience thought about its own role in the political process' (109). When Cajus Gracchus gives a speech on stage, Oomen confidently asserts, again without any substantial proof, that 'this will no doubt have made the audience think' about speeches in the National Assembly (113). Given this lack of evidence, Oomen's thesis about the contribution of the performances of Roman-republican plays to the transformation of political culture rests on very shaky ground indeed. Despite these and other flaws, however, Oomen's book is certainly worth reading. It deals with a significant and fascinating topic and presents the reader with rich material. Most importantly, it initiates a long overdue discussion about the relationship between political culture and the theatre in the Dutch late eighteenth-century – and that in itself is quite an achievement.

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