

*Letters from Johan Oldenbarnevelt to his family before his execution, 1619*

Introduction: Johan Oldenbarnevelt's appeal to Maurice of Nassau failed to change the Prince's mind. A special court of the States General was created to try Oldenbarnevelt and the other political leaders who opposed the Prince and the Contra-Remonstrants for treason, Oldenbarnevelt refused to recognize the jurisdiction of this court of the States General, insisting that if he was to be tried, it should be either by his native province, Utrecht, or by the States of Holland. Until the end he held that the provinces of the republic were sovereign under the constitution of the Republic and only these had jurisdiction over him. Oldenbarnevelt and his supporters believed that his execution amounted to judicial murder. He refused to ask a pardon from Maurice and Maurice refused to grant him a pardon unless asked by Oldenbarnevelt. His execution at the age of 71 made him, with William the Silent, a martyr of the Dutch Republic. The letters were published by A. J. Veenendaal, ed., *Oldenbarnevelt: Bescheiden*, Vol. III, (The Hague, 1962), pp. 485-486, and translated from the Dutch by Herbert H. Rowen, ed., *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 125-26.

Very beloved wife, children, sons-in-law and grandchildren.

I send most affectionate greetings to you, all together. At this hour I have received the very hard and sorrowful news that I, an old man, for all my good and faithful services to the fatherland during so many years, who has performed with sincere affection all possible good offices and humble services to His Excellency, the Prince, to the limit permitted by my offices, duties, and instructions, and who has given my friendship to many persons of all sorts and has done injustice to none so far as I know, must prepare myself to die tomorrow.

I console myself in God the Lord, who knows all hearts and will judge all men. I beg you, all of you, to do the same. I have honestly, piously, and faithfully served My Lords, the States of Holland and West Friesland and their nobles and cities. I have also given honest and faithful counsel to their Lords, the States of Utrecht, as the sovereigns of my own fatherland, at their request, in order to spare them from the tumults of the populace and the bloodshed with which they had long been threatened. These were the same aims I sought for the States of Holland, so that everyone would be safe and no one come to harm.

Live together in love and peace. Pray for me to God the Almighty Lord, who will graciously hold us in his holy protection.

From my chamber of sorrow, May 12, 1619.

Very dear wife and children,

My end is near. I am very tranquil, with God's grace. I hope that you are no less so and that you may help each other to overcome all things, by mutual love, unity, and peace, for which I make my last prayer to the All-Highest. Jan Vrancken has served me well and faithfully for many years, even during these afflictions, and will stay with me until the end. He deserves a recommendation to you to help find him a good job with you or with others. I ask that you do the same.

I have sent a request to His Excellency, the Prince, to keep you, my sons, and children, in his good favor, to which he has graciously replied that this will be done so long as you behave well. I urge this upon you in the best form and give you all into God's holy keeping. Kiss each other and all my grandchildren for the last time in my name, and farewell.

From my chamber of sorrow, May 13, 1619.