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## 14. Geomancy in an early play by Theodore Rodenburgh

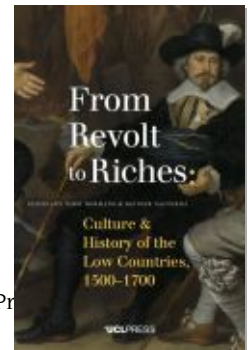
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## Geomancy in an early play by Theodore Rodenburgh

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Translated by J. G. Riewald

Theodore Rodenburgh is not unknown to those who are familiar with the relations between seventeenth-century Dutch literature and England. During his eventful life he stayed in London for more than four years, from December 1602 to March 1607, as a political representative of the town of Emden. It was in London that he possibly met Cyril Tourneur and became acquainted with *The Revenger's Tragedy*, which in 1618 he adapted as *Wraackgierigers Treurspel*. It is also quite likely that he came across Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique* there, which he may have translated in a first version. Finally, according to his own statement, it was in London that Rodenburgh was delivered of 'de meesten hoop des reghelkens' (the major part of these verses) of his adaptation of Guarini's *Pastor Fido*, which saw the light of day in 1617 under the title *Anna Rodenburghs Trouwen Batavier*. For, as he says, this birth took place 'ten tijde als uE. liefde [i. e. Anna] uw Rymert verzelden in *Albeonsche Islingtoun*' (when your beloved [Anna] accompanied your Poet in Islington in Albion), when the paragon Elizabeth held sway there and the Prince of Wales was already the crowned King James VI of Scotland.

All this sets part of the first version of the text of the *Trouwen Batavier* before Elizabeth's death (3 April 1603 N.S.<sup>1</sup>). From the Dedication, dated 1617, in which Rodenburgh refers to his work on *Trouwen Batavier* as a 'Zestien-jaren-geleden-tijd-verdrijf' (a pas-time of sixteen years ago), it follows that his sojourn in London had already begun in 1600 or 1601 – a year or two before the date generally accepted in the literature on the subject. However, it is not only in *Trouwen Batavier*, the play with which he made his debut, that

Rodenburgh refers to his stay in London. He also does so in the first part of his three-part tragedy *Keyser Otto den derden, en Galdrada*, perhaps his official debut, which appeared in print a year before the *Trouwen Batavier*. Though his *Bataviese Vryagie-spel* also appeared in 1616, we do not know anything about the order in which the two plays were published. If the *Vryagie-spel* came after *Keyser Otto*, the latter would be Rodenburgh's first play to appear in print, published, as was the *Vryagie-spel*, by Porcevant Morgan, a printer-publisher of English descent.

From the beginning of Rodenburgh studies it has been noted that in all three parts of this play, about the famous tenth-century Emperor, Otto the Third, it is not only the story of the love affair of Galdrada, a Florentine lady – a story derived from Matteo Bandello, via Belleforest – that is dramatised. The story of Rodenburgh's own life also plays a part: that is to say, the character of Tyter represents the author's *alter ego* in his romantic relationship with Maria de Vos in the first and second decades of the seventeenth century. At a certain point in the play the said Tyter reproachfully asks his master, the Duke of Tuscany:

... Waerom ghenoeghden gy u niet,  
Toscanen, dat ick willigh my ghebruycken liet  
In dienst, aende Albeonsche heerskerinne  
Elisabet. En liet my oock by Iacob vinnen (Pt. I, sc. 3 on D = A 3r)

(Why did you not content yourself,  
Tuscany, with my willingness to be used for service,  
under Elizabeth, the Albion ruler.  
And I was also there under James)

Most surprisingly, we find Tyter here as Rodenburgh, mixing in English court circles in the early seventeenth century! This passage is one of the few autobiographical references, drawing directly upon the author's wanderings about Europe and his stay in England.

In addition to the fact that, as mentioned above, Rodenburgh had become acquainted with certain 'new' literature in London, I take it that he was also introduced there to an ancient *ars*, of which he made a curious use in the first ambitious play of his own making.

Among the *dramatis personae* of Parts One and Two of *Keyser Otto* there occurs a certain Theophelos, described as a geomancer. Geomancy, in which he seems to be well versed in this drama – though this does not really become apparent until Part Two – is an ancient *ars* originating

in a long, contested tradition. It is one of the *artes magicae*, and has been recently rediscovered by literary scholars through the study of the medieval *Fachprosa*. Little is known about the practice of this forbidden art in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Holland. As far as I know, the subject has not been seriously researched. The relevant literature about medieval treatises on geomancy (most of them in Latin) merely records one text (among many); this was also translated into Dutch. It seems unlikely that this *ars* will have been very popular in the southern Netherlands, Rodenburgh's homeland (he was baptised at Antwerp on 29 January 1574), since treatises dealing with it appear on the *Index of Prohibited Books* of Pope Paul IV. Nor does it seem likely that the climate for the public practice of geomancy can have been favourable in the Calvinist-governed northern Netherlands, where Rodenburgh spent his youth, first in Amsterdam and afterwards in The Hague. However, in early seventeenth-century London the activities of at least one notorious geomancer have been recorded, those of Simon Forman.

The relevant information is found in the chapter on 'Cunning Men and Popular Magic' in Keith Thomas' *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971). Thomas uses the term geomancy once or twice and, following, as he says, the leading textbook on the subject, viz. the (translated) *The Geomancie of Maister Christopher Cattan* 1591, he equates geomancy with astrology. But of course Thomas also knows that the 'wizard'-geomancer practises the *ars geomantiae* through 'interpreting the meaning of the pattern of dots produced by [his] random doodlings ... in a state of semi-trance'.<sup>2</sup> The 'intellectual' geomancer distinguishes himself from such a wizard by applying the geomancy described in the treatises, while also making use of, among other things, astrological notions, houses and even diagrams. In this way geomancy – which originally made use of dots marked in the ground, or afterwards on paper, and may therefore be called the *art of puncturing* – was legitimised via astrology.

Simon Forman was such a geomancer. This doctor and ex-schoolmaster from Wiltshire, born in 1552, is mentioned as the author of a *De arte geomantia* in an (unpublished) manuscript dated 1589. By that time he had already been active in London as an astrologer for six years. He continued to practise until his death in 1611, and did not remain unnoticed: on several occasions he was imprisoned for short periods, and was persecuted by both the Church and the Royal College of Physicians. At the same time, however, Forman obtained a licence from the University of Cambridge to practise medicine

of an astrological kind, a procedure not unknown in those days. Forman's extensive and conspicuous activities may be illustrated by Thomas' statement that between 1597 and 1601 he cast an annual average of a hundred horoscopes and was consulted even more frequently.<sup>3</sup>

Is it possible that this man – now also remembered for his eyewitness account of a performance of *Macbeth* in April 1610 – and his *ars* can have remained unknown to Rodenburgh? After all, the writer lived in the same London during Forman's activities, and afterwards gave evidence of being familiar with that particular art of prognostication I think not.

Evidence to support my conjecture is found in Part Two of *Keyser Otto*. Here, I think, Rodenburgh plays with the technique, terms and content of the *ars geomantiae*, notably through the character of Theophelos. Tyter, Rodenburgh's *alter ego*, to whom I referred above, sojourns in Arcadia with an assignment of his lord, the Duke of Tuscany. There Rumour sends him word that his beloved Laura:

[...] heeft ghenieticht all de trouw'  
Die zy [hem] was verplicht en Flavio heeft verkoore  
(Act 3, scene 1)  
(has broken all her promises  
made to him and has preferred Flavio)

Tyter reacts with bitter complaint in a soliloquy which is interrupted by Theophelos, the *geomancien*, who has come near, with the words:

Mijn Heer, hoe dus? neemt moet. (see Fig. 14.1)  
(Sir, how now? Take courage)

Tyter already knows Theophelos in his capacity as geomancer. The latter, who was introduced as such in Part One and is therefore also known to the reader (or spectator), is asked by Tyter what the stars say. He thinks he knows:

Dat gh'in uw sterre-kunst de teecken en bevind  
Dat Laura my verlaet en Flavio bemind.  
(Act 3, scene 1)  
(that in your astrology you find the signs  
that Laura abandons me and loves Flavio)

Fortunately Theophelos is able to answer him:

Recht anders als ghy waent de sterren my voorzegghen.  
(Act 3, scene 1)  
(Just the opposite of what you think the stars are predicting to me)

The text then continues as follows:

Tyter, Waer is uw werck?  
Theophelos, Hier Heer.  
Tyter. Wilt my 'tgheheyme zegghen.  
(Act 3, scene 1)  
  
(Tyter: Where is your 'werck'?  
Theophelos: Here, Sir.  
Tyter: Be so kind as to tell me the secret.)

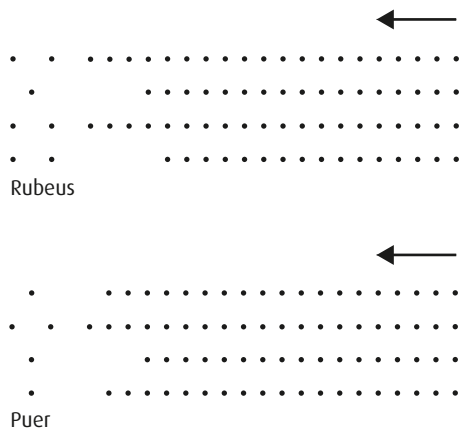
The reader of the play is then shown the *werck* on the adjacent page: a horoscope diagram with a *siglum of a sign of the zodiac* as well as a *geomantic symbol* in each of the twelve 'houses' (the little triangles) of the diagram (Fig. 14.1). Because literary scholars are not normally familiar with these two phenomena, a brief explanation would seem to be in order.

The path described by the sun across the firmament in the course of a year, the so-called ecliptic, is the central line of the zodiac – an imaginary belt of mostly conspicuous constellations such as Aries, Taurus etc. Every month the sun traverses a *sign*, the twelfth part of the zodiac, each sign of which is named after a constellation that was formerly (about AD 1) closest to it. In the astronomical and astrological literature these signs are each represented by a symbol. Thus there is a symbol for the Ram (Aries), for the Bull (Taurus), etc. These symbols are the *sigla* of the signs of the zodiac.

A *geomantic symbol* consists of four single or double points, arranged vertically. It is the result of placing an even or odd number (determined by chance) of (at least a dozen) points in sand or on a sheet of paper, in four parallel rows, from right to left. A row with an even number of points is represented by a double point in the symbol, and a row with an odd number of points by a single point. Each symbol has a name of its own (e.g., Rubeus, Puer) (Fig. 14.2). It has 'properties' connected with its so-called 'structure': its supposed relationship to the



Fig. 14.1 Pages D I version - D ii recto from *Keyser Otto den derden, en Goldrada* (...) Tweede Deel. Amsterdam 1617. Royal Library of the Netherlands, The Hague (KW 1350 B 128 4)



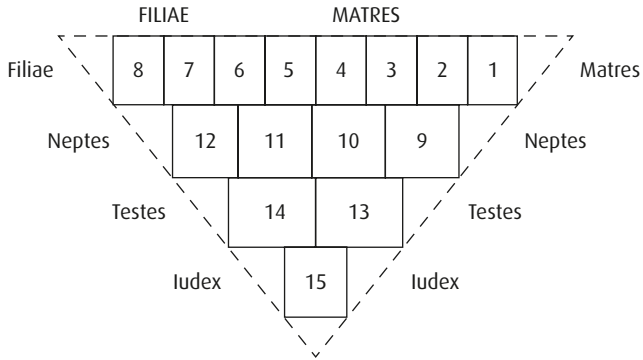
**Fig. 14.2** Formation of geomantic symbol

body fluids, the elements, the seasons, the points of the compass and astrological phenomena, as well as the signs of the zodiac.

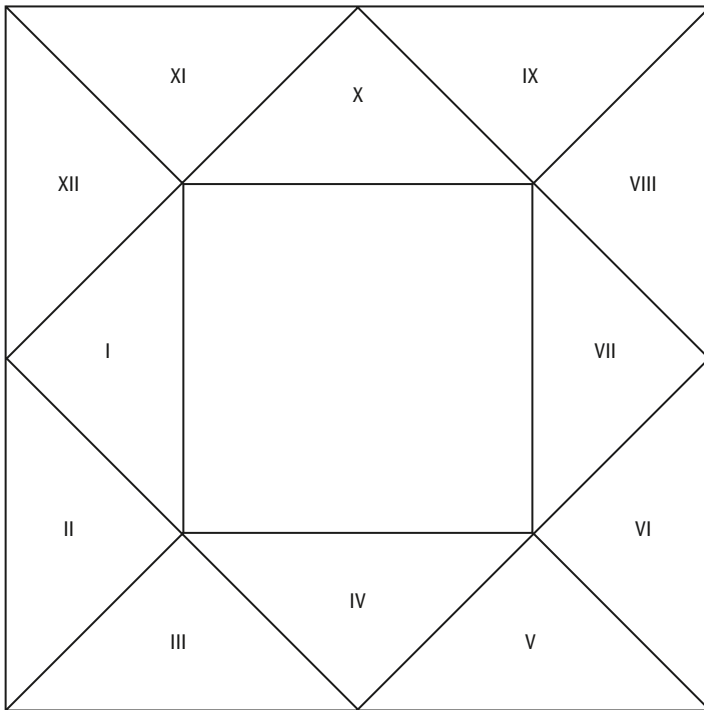
A *geomantic pattern* is made up of a system of fifteen geomantic symbols. Eleven of them depend on the four which were first designed in the way just described. These four are called *matres*. Issuing from the *matres*, the four *filiae*, the four *neptes*, the two *testes* and the *iudex* are generated in this order by the application of certain strict rules. The pattern is a triangle, with the *iudex* in the fifteenth so-called house at the top as its final product; the eight *matres* and *filiae* in their totality form the base of the triangle, while the four *neptes* and the *testes* occupy the space between base and apex. The triangle is drawn with its apex pointing downwards, while the houses are counted from right to left, beginning with those of the *matres* and ending with that of the *iudex* (Fig. 14.3).

In the course of the history of geomancy, or ‘the art of puncturing’, the first twelve of the geomantic ‘houses’ (the locations within the geomantic pattern in which the symbols are placed) became associated with the twelve *houses* used in *astrology* – celestial segments that together occupy the celestial sphere. These houses were, and still are, distinguished in the art of astrology, and occur in a horoscope diagram as small triangles (Fig. 14.4). Thus the *werck* that we are shown in Part Two of *Keyser Otto* is a combination of the astrological houses and the sigla of the signs of the zodiac (from *Aries* up to and including *Pisces*) with (twelve) geomantic symbols, on the square celestial chart (the horoscope diagram).





**Fig. 14.3** Geomantic pattern with fifteen symbols



**Fig. 14.4** Horoscope diagram containing twelve houses

Within such a diagram one counts anti-clockwise, beginning with the central house on the left. This is the first house, the *Horoscope* (ascendant). It thus appears that in the *werck* the first sign of the zodiac, indicated by the siglum *Aries*, is in the first house. *Taurus*'s siglum is in

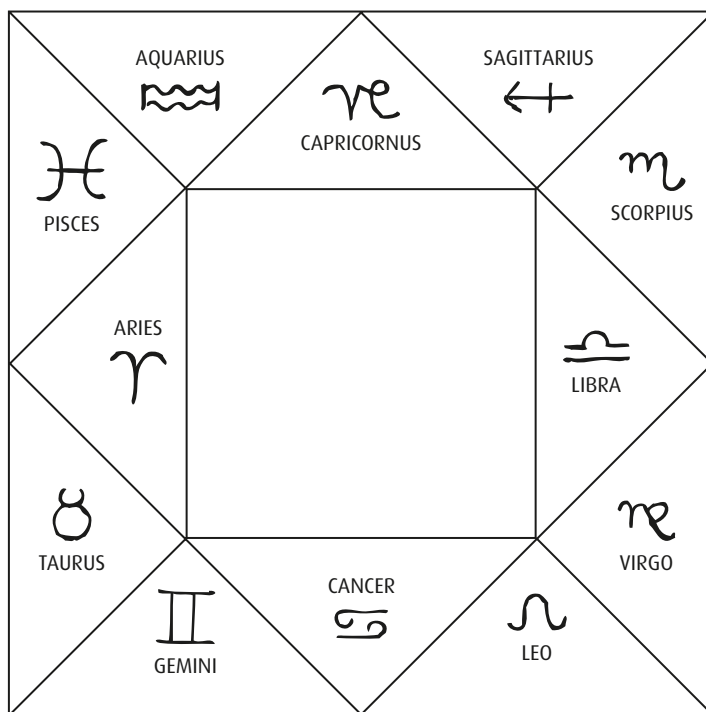


Fig. 14.5 Theophelos' werck: sigla/names of the signs of the zodiac

the second, etc. (Fig. 14.5) and so forth. Starting with the geomantic symbol accompanying *Aries* (in the first house) and enumerating them anti-clockwise, the series of these symbols opens with *Puella*, *Caput draconis* etc. (Fig. 14.6). As I hope to show, the use of this *werck* as the basis of a geomantic-astrological prediction, employed as such by Theophelos in answering Tyter's question about his future fortunes with Laura, deserves to be called curious, to say the least.

It needs no explaining that Rodenburgh's geomancer does not practise original geomancy, as he does not operate with the triangular pattern. Now there happens to exist a developed variant, the *geomantia astronomica*, which combines geomancy and astrology. The basis for this *ars* is a horoscope diagram in the houses of which a position of nine astronomical phenomena, such as *Sol*, *Luna*, the other planets and the so-called *Caput* and *Cauda draconis*, has been drawn. Placed in a certain order – beginning, as indicated, with *Sol* and *Luna*, and ending with the *Caput* and *Cauda draconis* – their positions are obtained by means of nine simple calculations, the result of which in each case is a numeral smaller than twelve. The nine numerals thus obtained indicate the

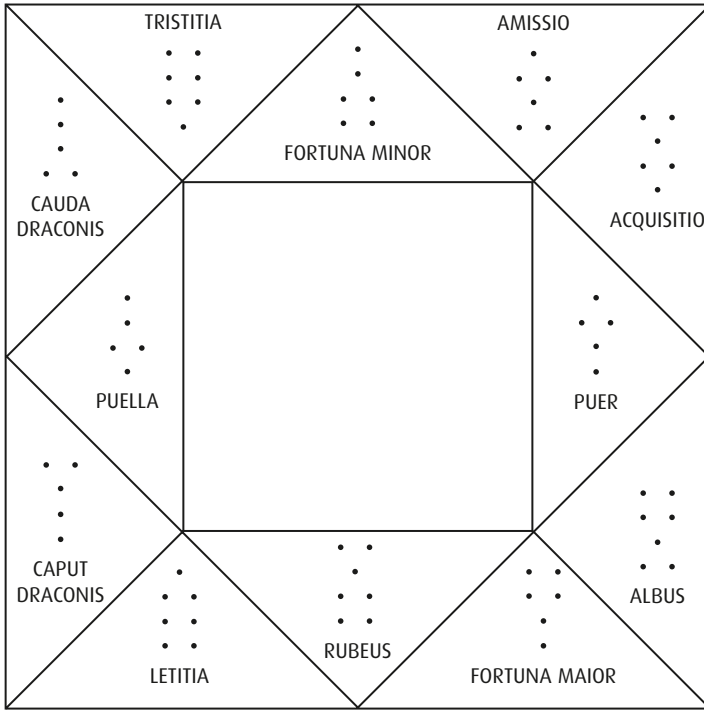


Fig. 14.6 Theophelos' *werck*: geomantic symbols/names

number of the astrological house in which each of the nine celestial phenomena must be placed respectively. The locations of the sigla of the signs of the zodiac follow from the first *mater*, which is designed as for a first geomantic house. The sign of the zodiac which is connected with the symbol that was to be the first *mater* is placed in the first astrological house. The remaining sigla are placed in the other houses, in the usual order, that of *Aries*, *Taurus*, etc. down to *Pisces*.

Now the curious thing about Theophelos' *werck* is that it lacks all astronomical phenomena. It cannot be said therefore that he practises normal astronomical geomancy, though he operates with an astrological diagram containing the signs of the zodiac and geomantic symbols. Looking at the *werck* and reading Theophelos' text, the conclusion must be that he is indeed a very curious sort of geomancer.

In lines 25–26 Theophelos refers to *Rubeus* (a geomantic symbol) as occupying 'het vijfde huys' (the fifth house), a position he calls inauspicious. In lines 31–32, however, he calls auspicious 'het seste huys, 'twelck in Geomancie / *Letitia* is ghenaeht' (the sixth house, which in Geomancy is named *Letitia*) (Fig. 14.7). Now the *werck* shows *Rubeus*

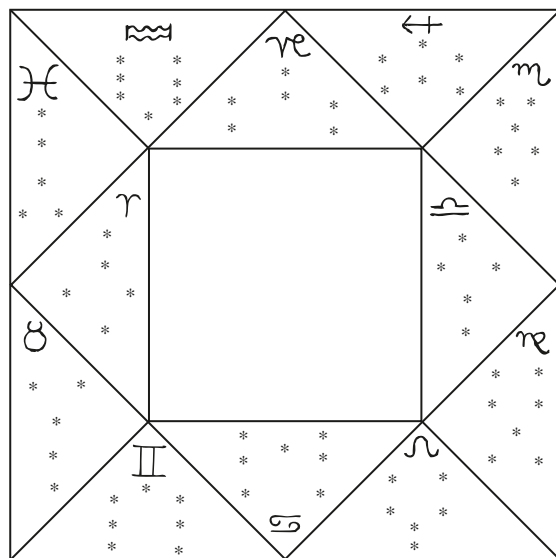
Keyser Otto den derden, en Galdrada (. . .) Tweede Deel (. . .) Amsterdam 1617  
Text on D 1 verso - D 2 verso

1 Theophelos Mijn Heer, hoe dus? neemt moet.  
Tyter Theophelos God gaef, de iaerste drop mijns bloed  
Dees aderen begaf. Wat zegghen u de sterren?  
Ick achte dat die zo onluckelijck verwerren

5 Dat gh'in uw sterre-kunst de teekenen bevind  
Dat Laura my verlaet en Flavio bemind.  
Theophelos Recht anders als ghy waent de sterren my voorzegghen.  
Tyter Waer is uw werck?  
Theophelos Hier Heer.  
Tyter Wilt my 'tgheheyme zegghen.  
Theophelos Int eerste huys de vraeg alleenlijck bestaet.  
Tyter Wat voorzegh vind ghy daer? is die goed?

10 Theophelos Neen, z'is quaet;  
Vermits zy in het top met sterren twee verscheene.  
En heure ghezellin maer een, dus zy vereenen  
Zeer qualijck, doch vermits de beelden beyd' zijn goedt  
in handeligh van field', zo oord'l ick, Heere, moet  
15 verkregghen zijn de wensch daer beyde ghy na hengheld,  
Doch zeecker zalder veel ghevaers me zijn ghemenghelt,  
Veel rasery; Want tusschen 'tster-huys is verscheel;  
Maer eynd'lijck zult ghy houden Laura voor uw deel,  
20 Om reden dat de beeldens twee hoofd-sterren rysen,  
Recht uyt de Draecken staert, en daer me wy bewysen.  
Hoe 't eerste beeld in 't opperst, met de tweede g'lijckt:  
En neyghen na het vuyr: Waer merckelijck door blijckt:  
Ja klaerder: Mits het beeld God Jupiter beheerden.  
25 In 't teekenen Aries: 'tgheen dat mijn Heer begeerden,  
Ghevallen zal. Doch mits dat Rubeus bezit  
het vijfde huys, dat's quaet.

Tyter Waerom?  
Theophelos Want dit  
Voorzeyd dat yemant zal na u af-lyving trachten,



30

Tyter

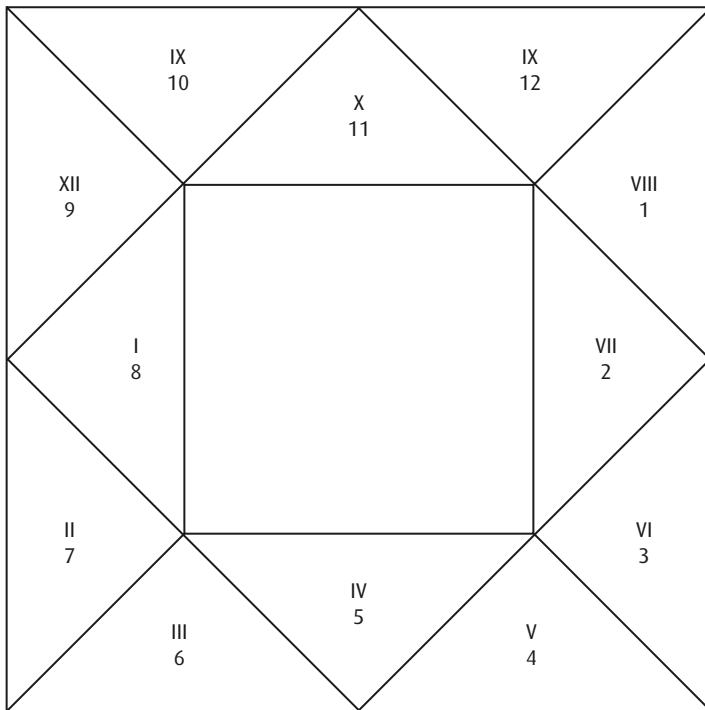
Wt jalouzy: die vaeck afgunsticheyden brachte:  
Of wenschen uwe dood, om gh'nieten Laura dan  
En zal gheschieden dor een hoofdich oorlochs-man.  
Letitia is ghenaeutr dats goed.

Met reden ick verblye,  
Ghy noch een Ster-huys vind 't welck 'tmynen voordel is?

Fig. 14.7 Pages D I version - D ii recto from Keyser Otto den derden, en Galdrada (. . .) Tweede Deel (in a modern edition)

in the fourth (not the fifth) house, and *Letitia* (a symbol, not a house) in the third (not the sixth) house (see Fig. 14.6). Apparently Theophelos' way of counting is different from normal. Indeed, it may be assumed to be clockwise. Neither does he begin to count with the first astrological house, as a genuine astronomical geomancer would do. The plausible conjecture that in this *werck* Theophelos counts what is normally the eighth house as the first house (Fig. 14.8; and cf. Fig. 14.4), appears to be correct when checked. Thanks to the strictly regulated derivation of the *filiae*, *neptes*, *testes* and *iudex* from the four *matres*, the check can be made by virtue of the interrelationship of the geomantic symbols referred to above (Fig. 14.8).

If Theophelos starts his count, clockwise fashion, with the eighth house, the *matres* are the symbols in houses VIII, VII, VI and V. The symbols in houses IV through I, and XII through IX, are then the *filiae* and *neptes* respectively. And these indeed depend on these *matres*, as required (Figs. 14.4 and 14.8).



**Fig. 14.8** Theophelos' *werck* interpreted.

Apart from this curious, unorthodox way of counting, with the relationship between the geomantic symbols remaining correct and the lack of astronomical phenomena in the astrological diagram, there is one more oddity, the third to be observed. In lines 19–20 Theophelos seems to speak about an astronomical phenomenon ('Draecken staert', i.e., *Cauda draconis*) not observable in the *werck*, as it appears in the printed text (Figs. 14.1 and 14.7). It would require too much space to treat this in detail here. For such and other details, the reader is referred to the expanded version of this paper.<sup>4</sup> These two lines 19–20 lead one to ask: did the *werck* which Theophelos presented to Tyter *on the stage* (and even to the audience?) show the said astronomical *Cauda draconis*? It is not impossible, though to me it seems improbable, because it would mean that Rodenburgh would have taken the situation on the stage completely seriously: Theophelos would have been employing a horoscope of geomantic-astrological confection of a very special type, worked out in detail. Such details would not be relevant and would in all likelihood be barely visible to the spectator.

The spectator can make do with what he sees depicted large and what he hears in detail. He sees from a distance what Tyter calls a *werck*, and hears what Theophelos says about it. The reader, on the other hand, is confronted with an illustration that obviously does not fully correspond with the text spoken by Theophelos. It is an unorthodox illustration, viz. an astrological-geomantic horoscope in which the counting is *abnormal*, whereas the signs of the zodiac are positioned in the *normally* counted houses, together with the geomantic symbols in their *required* interdependence – if, at least, one is to take the count seriously. The text partly corresponds with the illustration, but partly goes beyond what one sees.

To me all this seems to point to a juggling with well-known names and notions from geomancy and astrology with which the spectator-reader was supposed to be familiar. The author knows those names and notions; those among his audience who also know them, and the techniques in which they function, see the author playing with them through what Theophelos says. The latter addresses poor Tyter. However, Tyter does not ask for play, but for seriousness, for a predictive answer. To him what Theophelos says is more likely to be a palliative: a reassuring answer couched in terms that strongly vary in predictive value, either positively or negatively: *Letitia* next to *Rubeus*, the seventh next to the eleventh house. All this is given in rapid succession and is slightly, if not always transparently, systematised.

It may well be asked why in this situation – inquiring about an uncertain future course of love – the services of the far more normal astrology were not enlisted instead of this idiosyncratic type of geomancy. In my opinion the answer must be sought in the situation in which this matter is presented. If what the spectator-reader (hears and) sees is to produce the intended effect, the reality represented must have a high degree of probability. In the fragment under discussion, the reality represented has for its principal character Tyter. He is a lover with a telltale name: a variant, that is, of the name Apollo gave to Virgil as shepherd-poet. Thus Tyter is credibly the poet himself (in love), Theodore Rodenburgh. And this Tyter finds himself in Arcadia, the land of the shepherd-poets. In this land practitioners of the *simple ars*, an *ars*, that is, which can be practised without instruments or tables and which is called (astrological) geomancy, are more likely to be active than astrologers, with their *very learned art* of prognostication and who must operate with instruments and tables. In Arcadia a geomancer is a likely, credible, ‘natural’ figure.

There Tyter is the recognisable *alter ego* of Rodenburgh, and credible in this capacity. It is only natural that in his desperate love situation he should consult the geomancer with the significant name of Theophelos – a name, moreover, related to the author’s first name, viz. Theodore. This geomancer foretells him, Tyter-Theodore, in a likely and, in the pastoral land, natural, credible and soothing way, his future exactly where it concerns that love.

What Theophelos says and shows is experienced by the spectators who witness the play, and by the readers who read the text and look at the illustration, as Rodenburgh is juggling with his knowledge of an amalgam of astrology and geomancy. All this is provided, of course, that the public (spectators and readers) is somewhat familiar with the *ars geomantia* and its variant-in-disguise: *geomantia astronomica*. Such juggling dumbfounds the ignorant, while at the same time it entertains the expert.

Rodenburgh was able to obtain his secret knowledge during his stay in early seventeenth-century London, where it might have been more readily available than elsewhere in Europe. Forman worked in London and enjoyed a great contemporary reputation in that city. Treatises on geomancy like the one by Cattan existed in several languages. That our author knew something about the *ars* is certain. It is not clear where he had obtained that knowledge, but it may be conjectured that he learned about it during his stay in London.

The fun of watching the actors play with the author's knowledge of the *ars* is for the most part lost on us, because we are no experts in it. It may be asked whether the intended joke did come across to Rodenburgh's public of the day: the spectators, if *Keyser Otto* was ever performed, or the readers of the unique edition of the play. In the light of our present knowledge of the popularity of the 'forbidden art' in the Netherlands, this question must be left unanswered. Some time, perhaps, when we know more about 'the forbidden arts' in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, we may be able to answer it.