



## Review

### **Helmer J. Helmers, *The Royalist Republic: Literature, Politics, and Religion in the Anglo-Dutch Public Sphere, 1639-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)**

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This is a very good book, well worth reading, but quite depressing. It's about political opinions in seventeenth-century Netherlands and Britain, but is reminiscent of nothing so much as modern politics, with the media (read 'Twitter', these days, since all others feed from there) being manipulated by teams of paid hacks aiming at the lowest denominator, and the people shouting 'boo' and 'yea' when told.

Between the outbreak of the Civil War in Britain 1642 and the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, the rival parties commissioned writers, artists and publishers to print attacks and defences, over and back, of the various stances one might take vis-à-vis the events in Britain. Helmers shows quite skilfully that this was as true in the Netherlands as it was in Britain, maybe even more so in the Netherlands because, from the disastrous Battle of Naseby on, the British royalists were in exile, and what's more, this included royalist printers.

Helmers' book is an extremely useful addition to the literature for anyone studying almost any aspect of the Dutch Republic, from its politics, to its literature, to its iconography. In weight of numbers alone it paints a new picture of Dutch popular publishing as squarely behind the Stuart cause, pulling out all the stops to win support from the Dutch, throughout the period from the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642, and especially after the execution of Charles I in 1649 and the Protectorate, to the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. In showing the enormous success of that royalist effort, this book, though it scarcely mentions them, puts into sharp relief the works of the brothers De La Court and Spinoza, long well-known for their republican and democratic tendencies, or less well-known figures such as Schele or Velthuysen. A central thesis of the book is that Dutch political culture in the period is not very different from that of the kingdoms surrounding it and it goes a long way to tarnishing whatever remained of the image of the Dutch Republic as an exceptionally enlightened place. But also in fact this makes one all the more appreciative of the efforts of the few who stood above the flood of reactionary monarchism; for reactionary monarchism is largely the picture that emerges from Helmers' book.

The first half of the book does an excellent job of outlining the reasons for the English royalists' interest in the Netherlands as a source of support, and then, intriguingly, the reasons why that support was forthcoming from those whom one would have expected to support the Puritan Parliament. One would *expect* Orangists to support the Stuarts given the familial links and the attachment to monarchy *per se* (whether that monarchy be more or less absolute, and whether their ambitions be stated more or less openly), but Helmers quite rightly wants to

broaden this picture to ask why others supported the two Charleses, or the English monarchy in general. Here, Helmers divides the Dutch population in two: Remonstrants (with Vondel as Remonstrant-turned-Catholic) and Contra-Remonstrants, which, given the continuing bitterness and importance of these positions, is probably valid enough.

The Remonstrants supported the British royals not directly but because they feared a strong British Puritan Parliament, who would help their Dutch counterparts to win greater power in the Dutch States and oppress the less-strictly Puritan in the Netherlands. Moreover, the Remonstrants saw in Charles' execution a repeat of Oldenbarneveldt's execution in 1618. Their royalism was only a reaction to the Puritan nature of the British Parliament.

The Contra-Remonstrants are a more complicated case. They initially supported the Puritan Parliament through a sense of Anglo-Scoto-Dutch Puritan brotherhood, and their view of the Presbyterian and Covenanter struggle against the 'Arminian' Charles and his Archbishop, Laud, as a crucial part of the 'Further Reformation' in Europe. Helmers does a fine job outlining this. Then comes the break of the Dutch Presbyterians with the Parliamentary cause, and support from the Contra-Remonstrants for Charles. One might think that this was due to repulsion at the regicide, but Helmers (relying largely on previous work by Hans Blom) places the break in December 1648, when, in what is known as 'Pride's Purge', the Independents purged Parliament of its Presbyterian members. 'Instead of the "Arminian" king', as Helmers puts it, the Dutch Contra-Remonstrants 'now considered the Independents to be the main enemies of their Further Reformation' (104). In colouring it in these terms, with this starting point, it does seem that it is not religion, or even political ideas, that is behind Contra-Remonstrant support for Charles, but power for oneself and one's own group.

The hero (or villain, depending on one's viewpoint) of the piece in this development is not a theoretician of royalism, but (very oddly) the primary critic of Caroline Arminianism up to that time, William Prynne, who had previously been severely punished for his writings against the royals and their policies, but now sided with the king against the group who would remove him (Prynne) from power through their purge of Parliament. For Prynne's authority was important in effecting the distancing of the Dutch Contra-Remonstrant from the British Parliamentary cause. Helmers cites Prynne's 'Breife (sic) Memento to the Present Unparliamentary Junto', written in prison following the Purge, as so important in the attempt to get the anti-Independent royalist message across to the Dutch as to be twice translated in early 1649. The problem, and give-away as to the real reasons for the Contra-Remonstrant switch of allegiance, is that Prynne's 'Memento' with its claims of Jesuits in control of the army, makes no sense whatsoever; Milton was quite right to describe it in his 'The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates' as 'empty of ought else but the spleene of a frustrated Faction'.

In fact, Milton, though not at all its focal point, emerges in the book as one of the few reasonable voices, rejecting Salmasius' use of etymology as argument (212), recognising the wrongness of the conflation of regicide and parricide, used by Salmasius and then repeated by Vondel in what became an extremely popular short poem (162) ('our fathers begot us, but our kings did not', says Milton), or the 'silly rhetoric' of the falling skittles as falling monarchs, as used by Salmasius and then repeated by Constantijn Huygens in his long 'estate poem' 'Hofwyck', analysed here as part of a somewhat breathless study of the poems of Huygens, Westerbaen and Marvell. In this regard, I admit that I regret that Helmers' book, having laid out clearly and well the reasons why members of a certain group would hold a certain position, does not thereafter consider the *validity* of arguments made *from those positions*. The book is

concerned not to assess arguments, but rather to show the prevalence and influence of various *tropes*. But in fact, this also is an important (and again depressing) thesis of the book, that royalist discourse in the Netherlands, particularly after Charles' execution, went 'from debate to representation, from argument to image' (117). Unfortunately therefore, but perhaps true to the material being studied, once the first half of the book has done its task of tracing allegiances (or rather, for the most part, of tracing oppositions and the concomitant pragmatic alliances), the second half of the book becomes a study of more or less convincing or interesting *representations* of the royal person and the royal death, of the English (Independent-Puritan) 'devil', and of the royal regeneration.

This preponderance of image over idea is evident in the title of the book that probably did most to garner support for Charles, the *Eikon Basilike*, the apocryphally autographic account of the executed king's sufferings. For, as Helmers points out, it is 'a portrait of the king', not any form of reasoned defence, and it was its very ambiguity, and the inscrutability that allowed it to be so adaptable, that proved its strongest asset. For as we have seen, various groups were able to map their own positions onto the notion of 'royalism'.

In the discussion of the importance of *Eikon Basilike*, there is an interesting moment when the notion of 'divine right' prevalent within it must be squared by theorists in the Netherlands with support for the Dutch Republic, and which leads to a brief discussion of mixed government, the divine right of (aristocratic) regents, and even anti-monarchical republicanism. But aside from this, even though we are often alerted to the differences between the various types of Dutch 'royalism' – Orangist, Remonstrant, or Contra-Remonstrant – one gets the impression of the royalist authors not arguing a case, but merely allowing the genre do the work and carry the emotional and (if present) intellectual load: Senecan revenge tragedy, with its dripping blood and vengeful ghosts; or Virgilian pastoral, with its trope of dubious and threatened peace. Or we see royalist pamphleteers and engravers relying on notions of the power of the royal blood, depictions of Englishmen with tails, or Dutch puns on 'English/angel' and 'Oliver/oil-fire Cromwell/crooked-well'.

Helmers' insistence, particularly in his discussion of these devilish representations of the English during the First Anglo-Dutch War, on the early-modern-mind as beset by 'demonological' thinking and its starkly Manichean division of the world into good and bad (based on Stuart Clark's 1999 *Thinking with Demons*), seems to me only to lessen any chance of investigating underlying pragmatic causes for positions taken. It, moreover, keeps the discussion at the level of the simple-minded text or image for public consumption, and means that all we explore is the inscription into simplistic dichotomies of necessarily more complex questions.

Helmers expressly eschews archival material in favour of what is public (15), in order to see how the cultural shapes the political lives of contemporaries. And Helmers' interest is synchronic – the role of the text at a specific moment – hence paying as much or more attention to when a text was published as to when it was written. He is also strict in his limitation of his analysis to what was *in print* at the time. A problem is that much of these ephemera, though valuable in understanding the forces at play at a given moment, are of little intrinsic interest. The subtler interrogations, the more honest recognitions of the ambiguities of one's own and others' positions, especially (but not only) in a state where censorship was still very real, are often to be found in private correspondence or in other unpublished work. Helmers' aim to explore history through what was open to contemporaries does provide a valuable picture of the

determining features of the contemporary political and cultural world, but I think not always of what people really thought about that act of determination and what it wrought.

An interesting case of staying at the level of the popular image is that of the series of still lifes produced by Vincent van der Vinne in the mid-1650's. These depict a page showing an engraved image of Charles I, more specifically the image that adorned the cover of *Eikon Basilike* in its Dutch translation. Through analysis of the various accoutrements in the paintings – roses, lilies, a Dutch flag, a gourd etc. – Helmers finds here not so much reminders of the transience of power but of the rightfulness of Charles' cause and the future revival of the English monarchy (146). Yet, in highlighting that the image of Charles is not a direct one but an image of the famous engraving, Helmers uncovers a 'sublimation', an 'act of affirmation', 'emphasiz[ing] the king's elevation, intimating that time had shown his truthfulness. As a moral example, Charles I had become a "glass of truth" with which political debate could be reassessed' (147). I have difficulties understanding this. Rather than showing Charles' truthfulness, or any possibility of reassessing a political debate, Van de Vinne's paintings seem to me a glorification not of Charles but of a *notion* of Charles and of royalty that has been hawked about the Dutch Republic. What is valued in this case is the image, not the historical person.

The final chapter of Helmers' study offers a comparison of two texts by Vondel and Milton, both centred on the biblical destruction of the Philistine temple by Samson as well as on his death: *Samson, or Holy Revenge* and *Samson Agonistes*. Helmers skilfully shows the allegorical links between Vondel's play and Restoration royalism, though it makes Vondel's play seem more anti-English-puritanism than really royalist, with its 'English-devil' Dagon and its critique of hypocritical preacher-histrionics, and only a hollow oak as stage-prop in support of Charles II (a memento of his escape after the Battle of Worcester). More importantly, however, Vondel's play (rightly or wrongly) comes across as a series of heavy-handed allusions to topical debates. In the discussion of Milton's play, the recurring theme is confusion, complication, false cues, uncertainty. Even the titles of the two texts mark their difference in this respect. As Helmers rightly says, Milton 'foregrounds the liability of the human eye to be manipulated and deceived by human shows' (256). Chasing allusions in *Samson Agonistes* is to read it wrongly. Milton is not 'subvert[ing] the royalist representational mode exhibited by Vondel' (252); he is *refusing* it.

One of the main precursors in the 'new cultural history', which Helmers inscribes himself in, with its emphasis on public texts, is Kevin Sharpe, author of numerous studies on images and texts of the seventeenth century and whom Helmers cites as a model for his own work (14-17). In the discussion of Vondel and Samson, Helmers cites Sharpe to say 'both poets are engaged in an "image war", to use Kevin Sharpe's words, or a "war of truth", as Milton has it in *Areopagitica*' (252). But an image war and a war of truth are not the same thing. Milton's rebuttal of *Eikon Basilike* was not another *eikon*, but *Eikonoklastes*.