

Helmer J. Helmers, *The Royalist Republic: Literature, Politics and Religion in the Anglo-Dutch Public Sphere, 1639-1660* (PhD Leiden University 2011; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 325 pp., ISBN 978 1 107 08761 3).

The execution of King Charles I of England outside the palace of Whitehall was one the most shocking events of the seventeenth century. For the first time in modern European history, a king had been tried and executed by his own subjects. The novelty of the proceedings in England caused an outrage across Europe and put many a printing press into action. As such, the execution of Charles I was also the media event of the age, leading to a host of publications that almost unilaterally condemned the act as illegal, unconstitutional and sacrilegious.

The outcry about Charles I's execution was no less mute in the Dutch Republic. As Helmer Helmers demonstrates in his fine and well-researched book, many people in the Dutch Republic lamented the demise of the late king and embraced the royalist cause to put the House of Stuart back on the throne of England. The question 'why they did so?' stands at the heart of Helmers' study. After all, is it not strange that a country full of Calvinists, former rebels, and republicans sympathises with a fallen monarch and the fate of his offspring?

As Helmers explains, to correctly comprehend the support for the Stuart cause in the Dutch Republic it must be understood as being part of a wider, international debate – an 'Anglo-Scoto-Dutch discourse'. This discursive community had developed during the British civil wars that had preceded Charles I's execution. During these wars, both Charles I and his opponents in Parliament actively sought the support of the Dutch people and the Dutch public authorities. To win over their audiences, royalists and parliamentarians set up networks – or used existing ones – to flood the Dutch news market with pamphlets advocating their cause. According to Helmers, this allowed for a fusion of 'public spheres' – the English, Scottish, and Dutch ones – into one Anglo-Dutch public sphere that lasted at least until the restoration of Charles II in 1660.

It was within that Anglo-Dutch sphere that publicists on both sides of the North Sea created their works and communicated with each other in a shared language of rhetorical and visual attributes. In that sphere, the royalist

cause immensely benefited from the huge success of the *Eikon Basilike* (*The Portrait of the King*), a work allegedly written by Charles I himself. This work allowed royalists to portray Charles I as a martyr king, whose blood cried out for vengeance. Helmers nicely demonstrates how Dutch poets, play-writers and publicists used this imagery of Charles I to bolster the Stuart cause. It is here when Helmers is at his best; analysing the works of men like Constantijn Huygens, Joost van den Vondel and John Milton, and unearthing the relations that existed between both Dutch and British authors, publishers and politicians. He thereby draws from a range of sources – pamphlets, paintings, poems, engravings, plays and songs – adding deep layers to his findings and our understanding of Anglo-Dutch relationships and culture in the mid-seventeenth century.

With his work Helmers follows in the footsteps of scholars such as Jason Peacey and Steven Pincus. Like them Helmers takes issue with the Anglophone or British perspective, which still many Anglo-Saxon scholars have on English and British history. After reading Helmers' book such an insular approach becomes a bit more untenable. Time and again, British politicians and authors addressed and sought to convince Dutch audiences, if only because they thought their cause needed Dutch support. Milton's *First Defence* – published and translated into Dutch around the time of the Great Assembly of the States-General in 1651 – is a clear example of that. The fact that Helmers' work got published by Cambridge University Press, is not only a signal of the author's merits in explaining his subject and defending his cause, but can also be interpreted as a victory for this international approach – and rightfully so.

At the same time, Helmers unintentionally exposes the limits of his international approach. Helmers, for example, depicts the Utrecht professor of theology Gisbert Voetius as an important member of an 'Anglo-Scoto-Dutch Puritan movement'. But Voetius' network was not limited to the British Isles, and his view and concerns spanned the whole of Europe (74). And the same can be said of Voetius' fellow Puritan brothers across the sea, as Tony Claydon has demonstrated and Helmers himself acknowledges (72, 84). The question can therefore legitimately be asked whether Voetius or anyone of his Puritan brothers would ever have considered himself a member of a movement that only touched upon certain fringes of the North Sea.

This question brings us to the very complex and murky world of 'national' identities in the early modern period. Where does one identity end and the other begins? Do identities have a beginning or an end, and if so, where can we draw the line?

The problem of fluidity also haunts the two key concepts in Helmers' study; the public sphere and royalism. Helmers uses a Hausserian version of the public sphere, which focuses on discourse, rhetoric, and targeted audiences. This allows him to speak of multiple spheres existing alongside or overlapping each other. His use of the concept, however, is confusing. In

the first three chapters that cover the British civil wars until the execution of Charles I, Helmers speaks of an 'Anglo-Scoto-Dutch sphere'. In subsequent chapters that deal with the period after Charles I's execution, the focus has shifted to an 'Anglo-Dutch sphere'. Why this shift of attention? What is the precise difference between these two international spheres? Surely not the diminishing importance of Scotland, the country whose fortunes played an important background role in Andrew Marvell's *Upon Appleton House* (169-170).

Helmers' application of the term royalism is equally problematic. As Helmers himself admits the term 'was inherently multifarious and dynamic' (8). Translated from the British context to the Dutch, it also became part of a 'hybrid discourse' (263). Within that hybrid discourse, it was possible for Dutch republicans – as adherents of the Aristotelian concept of mixed government – to give support to the king, thereby effectively becoming royalists. This begs the questions what the exact difference between these two groups is. Since many royalists also adhered to a concept of mixed government it appears there is none. Thus, like with Patrick Collinson's 'monarchical republicanism' we seem to end up with concepts that enclose so many opposite things that meaningful distinctions can no longer be made. How to solve this problem will be one of the main challenges for the future.

Like any good study Helmers' insightful book raises many questions. While he settles some, most remain unanswered. One thing is clear, however; the strong relationship between British and Dutch literary culture during the seventeenth century can no longer be denied. We have Helmer Helmers to thank for that.

Jaap Nieuwstraten, Haarlem