Review

Freya Sierhuis, *The Literature of the Arminian Controversy: Religion, Politics, and the Stage in the Dutch Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

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Erudite, authoritative and lucid, Freya Sierhuis's first book is a notable contribution to both the literary history of and historical scholarship on the Netherlands in the tumultuous first half of the seventeenth century. Providing a fresh perspective on the divisive Arminian controversy that tore apart the fledgling Dutch Republic between 1609 and 1619, it also lays down an important marker regarding the relationship between theology and imaginative writing, Latinate literature and vernacular pamphleteering, and ecclesiastical politics and libellous popular poetry and drama. On the face of it, the violent polemical disputes initiated by Jacobus Arminius's challenge to Calvinist orthodoxy are hardly a promising environment within which to find evidence of literary experimentation and innovation. But this is precisely what Freya Sierhuis's book offers fresh insight into. Her careful investigation of a wide range of products of the press breaks down conventional generic categories and underlines 'the flexible and capacious interface' (6) between media that are too frequently supposed to operate in tension with and segregation from each other. Reflecting a powerful grasp of the intricacies of Reformed theology and contemporary political thinking, her book also builds upon the work of A. T. van Deursen in challenging the instinctive and settled assumption that high-flown debates about divine grace and human will were of little interest and left no imprint on society at large. By contrast, she shows how significantly literary culture was shaped by the polemical conflicts of the era and how extensive the theological and political literacy of the populace was. In turn, she is attentive to how central rhetoric, trope, metaphor and performance were to the dynamics of the controversies that so nearly brought the new nation to the point of civil war.

In refusing to privilege genres such as Senecan drama, Aristotelian tragedy and epic over more 'demotic' forms such as fable, invective and farce, Sierhuis takes inspiration from Peter Lake's work on the nexus between the worlds of the theatre and religious controversy in post-Reformation England in *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat*.[1] Her book self-consciously presents itself as a contribution to writing what Lake has called 'a new cultural history with the politics put back in' for the early modern Netherlands (8). Rejecting inherited polarities between the establishment and the underworld, the academy and the alehouse, she highlights intersections between the discourses of policy makers and semi-professional writers that have not hitherto been sufficiently recognised.

[1] Peter Lake with Michael Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

Sierhuis's analysis centres on the activities of the poets, playwrights and pamphleteers active in the cities of Amsterdam, Leiden and The Hague between ca. 1610 and 1630 who helped to disseminate the acrimonious debates about doctrine that were fracturing the Dutch church to a wider audience. She focuses especially on those associated with the Nederduytsche Academy, the first civic theatre established in Amsterdam by Dr. Samuel Coster, whose literary output is placed under the spotlight, together with the work of P.C. Hooft and Reinider Telle. The work of these neglected writers is placed on a continuum and discussed in dialogue with that of more canonical figures including the Mennonite dramatist Joost van den Vondel. She also reads their plays, poems and satires in juxtaposition with celebrated interventions in public debate about predestination, liberty of conscience and toleration, natural law and tyrannicide by such individuals as Dirck Vockertz Coornhert and Hugo Grotius, deftly situating them against the backdrop of the deliberations of the Synod of Dort and the indictment, trial and execution of the leading statesman Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, who aligned himself with the Arminian cause.

Chapter 1 sets the scene by sketching the emergence of the controversy with the Dutch Reformed church and exploring its theological and philosophical foundations. In chapter 2, Sierhuis turns to examine how the Grotian idea that peace within the church might be preserved by allowing for a latitudinarian toleration of opinions not essential to salvation was taken up and played out in the sphere of poetry and pamphleteering. She illuminates the struggle to define the legacy of Erasmus and to harness it to current debates, showing how Sebastian Castellio's famous tract against the persecution of heretics was deployed as ammunition against the Contra-Remonstrants. One striking theme to emerge from the discussion in this chapter is that the paradox that claims to moderation and appeals to consensus and fraternal love frequently functioned to increase tension, exacerbate conflict, and promote polarisation: here fruitful points of comparison might have been drawn with Ethan Shagan's suggestive recent discussion of this topic in the English context.[2] Another is the capacity of these writers to preach concord, peace and charity at the same time as engaging in vitriolic invective. The unlikely alliance between irenicism and satire Sierhuis describes is further testimony to the contradictory energies that the Arminian controversy served to stimulate in Dutch society.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the foundation of Coster's Academy as a powerhouse of Remonstrant protest and his anti-Calvinist classical tragedy, *Iphigenia,* a play that epitomises the malleable and porous boundaries between theological controversy, Menippean satire, and popular ballads and broadsides. Turning on the motif of child sacrifice as a metaphor for the hideous effects of the doctrine of predestination, it forges an inflammatory association between Calvinism, pagan superstition and blood rituals. But, as Sierhuis shows, it is also an intervention in urban politics and in contemporary debates about religious tolerance: the central character of Agamemnon defends his role as the sovereign arbiter of religious matters in his kingdom.

Chapter 4 explores the literary reactions to the death of Oldenbarnevelt, a figure who proved more popular in death than he had been in life, and the discourses of vengeance and tyrannicide which this event served to incite, especially as manifested in the pamphlets of Hendrik Slatius, which called for the assassination of the Prince of Orange. Illustrating the

[2] Ethan S. Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

'relative ease with which conventional tropes and figures of resistance theory could be incorporated into a language of militant patriotism' (189), Slatius's work was underpinned by a neo-Roman concept of political liberty.

Chapter 5 centres on Vondel's topical allegory *Palamedes or Innocence Murdered* (1625), which has long been recognised as critical to the evolving myth of Oldenbarnevelt as the martyred father of the nation. Setting it here within the context of a wider body of literature, Sierhuis persuasively presents it as a text that oscillates between tragedy and blood libel and that has more subversive elements than have often been appreciated. The final chapter turns to the early years of Frederik Hendrik's stadtholderate to trace the gradual decline of the literary group at the centre of the book, the transformation of political rhetoric in the wake of the official defeat of the Remonstrants, the reconfiguration of the idea of liberty of conscience, and the fusing of a republican view of Holland's constitution with support for a hereditary military leader.

This is a deeply researched and sophisticated book. Its allusiveness and density will perhaps deter some non-specialist readers, which is a pity because its wider methodological and conceptual implications are significant ones. Consistently incisive in its analysis, it raises important questions about how we conceptualise the relationship between literature and politics. For Sierhuis, a model in which the former reflects or mirrors the latter inadequately captures the critical dynamic that intertwines the form and content and the medium and the message of political and theological discourse. Instead, she delineates a culture in which clear lines of demarcation between systematic theology and the 'white noise' of polemic cannot easily be drawn and in which the libellous politics of ephemeral literature cannot neatly be separated from the products of rarefied intellectual debate on apparently abstruse doctrinal topics. Perhaps the central category of 'polemic' might have been critically interrogated, together with contemporary assumptions about its role in resolving religious difference and changing opinion. But *The Literature of the Arminian Controversy* is nevertheless a distinguished debut. It simultaneously fills a significant lacuna in our understanding of Dutch literary culture and enhances our understanding of political communication and culture in the early Republic and in early modern Europe as a whole.