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The lure of the dark ages : writing the Middle Ages and political rhetoric in humanist historiography from the low countries

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Epilogue: Pulling the Threads Together

The main part of this book has been devoted to four case studies, in which I have tried to find out whether, and if so, how the way in which humanist historians from the Low Countries described the medieval past of their country was determined by the political message they wished to convey. In some cases, historians used what we call the Middle Ages to legitimize the existing political order, in others to voice a critique, but the authors that have been investigated in these book have in common that they all, in their own manner, appropriate a selection from past events and transform it into a story that has a bearing on contemporary politics.

In the *Historia Hollandie* (ca. 1516/1517) by Reynier Snoy from Gouda, the first full-flown humanist narrative history in the Low Countries, the theme of liberty is highlighted: first of all in the Batavian past, but also in such episodes as the revolt against Dirk I and Charles the Bald and the resistance of Gijsbrecht of Aemstel and the Kennemers against Floris V. Snoy defined liberty as freedom from violence and restraints, but especially from financial obligations. His use of the term relies on its powerful connotations in the classical tradition, while his definition of it is in fact rather limited. Moreover, in describing the reign of William II, Snoy endorses the moral framework in which kings are responsible for the safety of their subjects. Finally, Snoy suggests that his own time witnesses a crisis in liberty, since he hardly uses the word to describe contemporary events, and in the rare cases that the word occurs, it often receives a different interpretation. Taken together, these points are very salient in the context of the wars between Holland and Guelders: they constitute a plea towards Charles of Habsburg, the new count of Holland and king of Spain, to take upon him the defence of Holland without shifting the financial burdens onto its

inhabitants. This was fully in line with the policies of the Gouda government, which often laboured for its defence and tax minimization.

The compendious *Cronica Brabantiae ducum* (1526) by Hadrianus Barlandus, a professor in Louvain, features a different attitude towards Charles, who had by that time become King of the Romans. In Barlandus' laudative and exemplary account of the past, the Brabantine dukes are presented as ideal princes characterized by clemency, humaneness, and piety. By means of quotations from Vergil, a connection is established between Brabant and Rome, Charles and Augustus. As a result of his abstinence from critique, his emphasis on clemency, and his sensitivity with regard to ducal majesty, Barlandus seems to back up the autocratic ideology of the Habsburg dukes. He does so in a particularly monological fashion: characters are hardly ever allowed to speak, and if they do, they either support the narrator's view or they are harshly rebuked by the narrator. Furthermore, Barlandus pays extensive and approving attention to the Edict of Worms and the Battle of Pavia. Barlandus' work is thus easily read as a legitimation of Charles' regime, even if he does not seem to support the war propaganda and ideas about universal monarchy of Charles' chancellor Mercurino Gattinara. In addition, Barlandus positions himself carefully and diplomatically in the academic situation at Louvain, where scholastic and humanist scholars were engaged in fierce debates. Although he clearly profiles himself as a humanist, he tries not to annoy the scholastics by explicitly recognizing the merits of scholastic philosophy and distancing himself from Lutheranism. The brevity, monologous nature of the narrative, its moralizing tone, and the conformist political message make sense especially if the hypothesis is accepted that Barlandus' work was intended first of all for educational situations.

Some forty years later, when Petrus Divaeus wrote his historical works, the atmosphere in Brabant had heavily changed. During the final years before the outbreak of the Dutch Revolt, the relations between the individual provinces and Charles V's son, king Philip II of Spain, had become rather strained. In this context, Divaeus wrote a chorography of Brabant, in which he analyzed Brabant as a shifting territory which throughout the centuries obeyed various lords. However, it had finally grown into a more or less autonomous entity, the sovereignty of which was supposed to rest with the Estates. He described a society in which the patriciate played a leading role. As such, Divaeus' work can therefore be regarded as a political analysis of the Brabantine past and a declaration of the Estates' supremacy. In his annalistic account of the period from antiquity up to the year 1406, the *Commentarii seu annales*, he focused on political controversy, with special attention for the way the cities negotiated for political control, showing various aspects of it, such as counselling,

debate, negotiation, mediation, arbitration, warfare, alliances, revolt, punishment, ransoming, and change of regime. This approach seems informed in particular by the wisdom of the city patriciate and recalls the challenge to royal authority and the pursuit of financial control by the Estates around 1560. His attention for the role of legal means, such as criminal law, privileges, and constitutions, is particularly telling, and shows the kind of constitutionalism that we also encounter in the resistance against Philip II. Given his interest in and knowledge of such issues, it is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that after the outbreak of the Dutch Revolt Divaeus was closely engaged in the legitimation of the Revolt on the basis of positive law.

The legitimation of the Dutch Revolt also plays a key role in the historical works of Janus Dousa Sr. In the poetic *Annales*, Dousa presents the institution of the county of Holland in 913 and especially the expulsion of the Normans by the first count as a foundation myth for Holland. The reasoning and terminology used in this account of the past are clearly informed by contemporary pleas in favour of armed resistance against tyrants such as Philip II based on natural law. In order to pave the way for this argument, Dousa deconstructs earlier interpretations of the past by means of technical scholarly techniques such as philology, chronology, and etymology. In addition, Dousa positions the origin of the county and its dynasty in the kingdom of the Western Franks. In combination with an epigram for the French ambassador Paul Choart de Buzanval, this line of thought seems to back up the diplomatic attempts to gain the support of the French after the Peace of Vervins. In the prose counterpart to this work, Dousa supplements this strategy of praising the early counts as liberators with a cynical critique of tyranny, especially as regards the Norman raids of the early Middle Ages. Here too, the argument is accompanied by heavy polemic against earlier historians and minute source criticism. Another parallel to the verse work is the tendency to frame the past in the highly topical vocabulary of freedom and servitude. Dousa Jr's account of the Batavian past is detached from the representation of the medieval developments by leaving aside references to the ideology of liberty and by demonstrating a discontinuity between both periods. Possibly, the rebelliousness or barbarity of the ancient Batavians was all too uncomfortable at the end of the sixteenth century.

The techniques that these historians used to achieve their rhetorical aims differ widely, however. Most of these differences can be explained precisely by these diverse political messages that had to be conveyed. This is true first of all of the chronological frameworks that are used to divide the past in periods. Despite the negative commonplaces about the Middle Ages that were circulating widely in the sixteenth century, these four authors conceive of the period as a grand era of outstanding deeds

by their brave forefathers. Most of them seem to regard the reign of Charles the Bold (1467-1477) as the turning point between this period and their own time. For Snoy and Barlandus, the ‘medieval’ period stands in some contrast to their own time of which they emphasize the shortcomings. For the former, this can be explained by the warning he is conveying to Charles of Habsburg; for the latter, it has to do with the presentation of humanism as the saviour of culture. Dousa, on the other hand, perceives a glorious parallel to the events of the Dutch Revolt in the struggle for freedom that was fought out by the early counts of Holland.

Another feature of the texts that is evidently connected to their rhetorical function is the political thought and terminology they contain. Snoy, Divaeus, and Dousa were all connected to the administrations of their cities and the Estates of their provinces; from this perspective it is easy to understand why they preach the message of regional autonomy, by taking recourse either to natural law or to the privileges, while Barlandus, who was more detached from these circles, seems more inclined to support the centralization policy of the Habsburg government. The choice of such frames seems relatively free from distinctions between medieval and humanist ideas: Batavian liberty and Erasmian pacifism are found side by side with medieval coronation symbolics and feudal law.

The dominant presence of politics also extends to the choice of genre, which is an important factor in effective communication, since it consists of a number of conventions that govern the processes of both composition and reception. Snoy and Barlandus, on the one hand, wrote history in a form that might be called *gesta*: they describe the past as a continuous series of rulers (*devolutio dominorum*). This form is particularly suitable for sanctioning monarchy as a form of government and for legitimizing the position of the current dynasty, even though it must be admitted that Snoy’s support for the dynasty is not entirely undiluted by criticism on other narrative levels. On the other hand, Divaeus’ history and Dousa’s prose *Annales* share an annalistic setup in which the territory highlighted, in which the succession of – often unrelated – rulers is of subordinate importance (*surrogatio in dominio*), and which therefore allows for a more distanced attitude towards the dynasty. In Divaeus’ case, using this setup meant recasting documents in the form of an annalistic discourse. This approach is particularly suitable for a constitutionalist history, as the work of Jacobus Meyerus had taught him. As a matter of fact, though, it should be emphasized that in fact the origins of both the *gesta* and the chronicle stretch back into the Middle Ages. By adopting these formats, therefore, humanist historians did not only pursue their political aims, but also extended their medievalism to the level of literary form.

Of course, this does not at all mean that classical examples cannot be recognized. In various ways that depend on the author's individual needs, they contribute to quite a large extent to the conceptualization of the relationship between historian, historiography, and patron. In any case, the precise use of classical models was mediated by the selection of elements the authors deemed serviceable for their purposes. Snoy relies on the ideas of Cato the Elder and Sallust, who argued that history was a valuable way to spend your time, since it kept from oblivion the great deeds that had been performed. Both Snoy and Dousa Jr relied on the model of Livy's *Ab urbe condita* as a laudative account of the 'national' past. In the case of Snoy, the presence of Livy should perhaps also evoke the famous anecdote that Livy praised Pompey so highly that Augustus called him a Pompeian, without their friendship being affected, thus already anticipating the critical aspects of his work.¹ Dousa Sr, on the other hand, presented himself as an *Ovidius redivivus* writing new *Fasti*, probably because he regarded this work primarily as a Roman foundation myth and the gift of a talented and loyal poet to his patron Germanicus. In the prose *Annales*, however, he was more inclined to take the cynical pose of Tacitus and Sallust, which was more fitting for a critique of foreign tyranny to complement to laudative story of the counts.

The second main factor that explains differences in political rhetoric between the authors that have been studied here is constituted by the developments in historical theory (*ars historica*) that took place in the course of the sixteenth century. After all, historians often wish to render account of the past, in Huizinga's words, by the standards of his civilization. These standards were certainly changed as the scepticism about the extent to which historians had succeeded in retrieving the truth about the past and also about the very possibility to do so increased steadily, and many historians created the impression that they were looking for ways to grapple with the critique of men like Vives and Agrippa. When Snoy wrote his history in the second decade of the sixteenth century, he did not yet seem very much aware of the problem, and he accordingly wrote the type of narrative full of invented speeches that would later become subject to the pyrrhonist critique. Neither did Barlandus bother about writing historiography with a heavy encomiastic tenor.

In the second half of the century, however, Divaeus and Dousa seemed to perceive the urgency of the problem more acutely. Divaeus avoids all techniques that involved fictitious elements, uses documentary and especially legal material to support his views, and heavily relies on geography and chronology. This methodology is clearly reminiscent of the theoretical ideal of *historia integra* coined by François

¹ For the story about Livy, see Tacitus, *Annales* 4.34.

Baudouin in 1561. Likewise, in Dousa's prose history, the mode of presentation is dominated by argumentation and documentation and Dousa draws on various kinds of technical scholarship. Both authors therefore switch from a narrative mode of presentation to a type of discourse that is discontinuous and more argumentative. Their choice of historiographical format seems also related to these decisions: Divaeus' chorography and chronicle reflect his reliance on geography and chronology, while Dousa's use of the *quaestio* and his references to Seneca's philosophical work seem closely connected to his mode of discourse. Dousa's poetic *Annales* could also be regarded as a response to pyrrhonism, since many humanists conceded to poetry an amount of invention, which meant that he could be freer in his use of narrative techniques, including speech and apostrophe, without incurring the risk of rejection; on the other hand, the learned subtext of the *Fasti* also presented the verse *Annales* as a well-informed and technical piece of work.

Views on how historiography should be written also had important consequences for the attitude historians assumed towards the canon of historiography and, as a result, for their self-presentation. Snoy, for instance, only recognized his classical predecessors. References played a subordinate role in his narrative rhetoric and he wished to present himself as an innovator. To some extent, this is also true of Barlandus. Dousa, on the other hand, does mention medieval sources frequently in order to back his argument. However, he distances himself from these authors in terms of style and presentation and laments their partial transmission in order to create a niche for his own work. Divaeus, finally, also refers to medieval sources by name, but unlike Dousa he does not attempt to construe discontinuity, and his use of historiographical genre is easily qualified as medievalist. Generally, however, the humanist historians of the sixteenth century seem to have endorsed the commonplace that the style of medieval Latin writings was inferior.

However, when paying attention to the differences between the authors studied in this book, one should not lose sight of the numerous characteristics they have in common. In most cases, such similarities are in the first place due to the fact that many aspects of humanist poetics remained unchanged throughout the sixteenth century. Divaeus is the only one to diverge from this pattern in many respects; even though his humanist *Bildung* appears clearly from the dedication of his work with its classical phraseology, his work as a whole testifies to a penchant for the medieval historiographical tradition, probably because sober models of presentation such as annals and chronicles offered good possibilities to counter the critical objections of the pyrrhonists.

The most important element that humanist works of history have in common is their focus on classical literature as the standard of excellence. In the chapter about Snoy, I have argued that this shows through first of all in their intellectual orientation towards the themes that were discussed in classical literature. In addition, the classicism of humanist historiography can be recognized by its adherence to specific stylistic ideals and their espousal of particular historiographical formats. In fact, this exclusive respect for the classical tradition went so far that many humanist historians seemed to deny all vernacular authority, since they systematically refused to mention vernacular sources by name. But classical literature also constituted the most important store of intertextual references and exemplary stories. Thanks to its wide availability and central position in the curriculum, the classical heritage could function as the central point of reference for humanist historiography. The relationship between early modern historiography and classical literature is an important component in the historians' political rhetoric, since in many respects it governs the interpretation of the narrative.

The availability of such a shared archive of knowledge is very relevant in view of the fact that humanist works of history often advocate ways of reading by analogy. History was often thought of as a collection of *exempla* that may help to guide one's life. This way of reading is often facilitated by the historians themselves, who turn specific historical episodes into archetypical stories with a message that can be transferred to other situations. In the same vein, historical characters are often connected to exemplary persons from the classical past. The past is thus turned into a chain of events that recur in some way or other (*similitudo temporum*). In Snoy's *Historia Hollandie*, this effect is particularly well visible, and characters like Julius Civilis or king William II become benchmarks of excellent behaviour that can be used to evaluate other historical persons, including contemporary princes. In a speech by Gijsbrecht of Aemstel, it is actually demonstrated how such interpretation of events should be developed. A similar strategy can be seen in Dousa's work, in which count Dirk I is related to Marius and Agricola as an ideal ruler and a liberator by means of intertextual references, while William of Orange is in turn described as a good match for Dirk. It should be noted, however, that such procedures of historical representation are hard to reconcile with what has been called the 'Renaissance sense of the past'. This concept presupposes that early modern people developed a new way of relating to the past, in which the past was not regarded as a cyclical series of returning situations anymore, but rather as a linear development, the stages of which

were unique.² The results of my case studies do not support the idea that such a change actually took place in sixteenth-century historiography in the Low Countries, but rather the opposite: different phases of history were still very much regarded in each other's light.

Another striking characteristic of humanist historical discourse is its strong author-function. In his role of narrator, the author of a work is often emphatically present in the text and his *ῆθος* is one of the main factors that constitute the situation of narrative transmission. In historiographical theory, the author is expected to be a man of political or military experience. Consequently, historians often make sure that their readers become aware of the relevant biographical details. Thus, Snoy points out explicitly that he had participated in an embassy to king James IV of Scotland. Moreover, historians often resort to the device of *ἀποψία* to strengthen the credibility of their narrative. At the end of the histories by Snoy and Barlandus, eyewitness accounts are rather frequent, although it must be admitted that in Barlandus' case, the rest of the history stands out by the absence of references to the narrator's person. Another way to develop their authority are implicit intertextual connections – especially in the various paratexts – between their own work and that of the classical historians. Finally, historians position themselves explicitly in the political scene by dedicating their works to mighty patrons. Divaeus and Dousa both inserted a letter of dedication to the Estates of their province at the beginning of their works.

Many of these hallmarks of humanist historiography stand in marked contrast to the procedures of vernacular historiography, especially at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Without denying political relevance to vernacular historiography, it is precisely these characteristics of humanist historical discourse that make it so very suitable as a means to intervene in contemporary political debates. The Latin political vocabulary carried all the connotations of Roman power, classical literature acted as a substantial archive of highly recognizable political *exempla* that could easily be invoked by means of intertextual references, the author-function allowed for a clear definition of one's relation to the political institutions, and the Latin language created the possibility of a wide reception in the international *respublica litterarum*. Bearing these factors in mind, it can be understood in what particular ways the medievalist historiography of men like Snoy, Barlandus, Divaeus, and Dousa became so deeply intertwined with contemporary political discussions and made history serve life by rediscovering in the past the desire for financial control, the rulers' majestic power,

² Burke 1969a.

the legal right to govern oneself, or the resistance against tyrannical oppression that had always been present in their communities.

