



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Book review of Jill Stern, *Orangism in the Dutch Republic in Word and Image, 1650-1675*

Steen, J.A. van der

Citation

Steen, J. A. van der. (2010). Book review of Jill Stern, *Orangism in the Dutch Republic in Word and Image, 1650-1675*. *Seventeenth Century*, 25, 385-386. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17703>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17703>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Jill Stern, *Orangism in the Dutch Republic in Word and Image, 1650–1675*, Manchester & New York, Manchester University Press, 2010, pp. 227, hb. £60.00, ISBN: 978-0-7190-8116-3

With her new study of the rhetoric deployed by supporters of the Prince of Orange during the First Stadholderless Period (1650–1672) Jill Stern makes an original contribution to the political historiography of the United Provinces and of the rhetoric of factional struggle in early modern Europe in general. Stern's book stems from her doctoral dissertation at University College London. It covers the period from 1650, when stadholder William II of Orange died unexpectedly from smallpox, to 1675, the year that William III, by then restored as stadholder and captain-general of the Republic, declined the offer of the ducal dignity of Gelderland.

A few days after William II's death, his son William III was born. The merchant regents of Holland, wary of the old stadholder's ambition for power, seized their chance and left the office of stadholder vacant for an indefinite period. Orangists opposed this measure as they saw the descendents of William I of Orange, hailed by some as the *pater patriae* of the fledgling republic, as figureheads of the United Provinces. The States Party on the other hand, consisting mainly of Holland's merchant elite, desired autonomy and disapproved of the Princes of Orange having a say in decision-making.

Tensions between the Orangists and the States Party rose during the First Stadholderless Period. Stern deals summarily with past (and mainly Dutch) historiography of the struggle between these factions. Previous historians have argued that the rhetoric used on the Orangist side was mere window-dressing, only used as a cover for a variety of other factional concerns and aiming to reach as large an audience as possible. According to this view, the States Party's republican rhetoric, being aimed at an elite, was more profound, coherent and intellectually stimulating. Since historians have already long rejected this idea that Orangist rhetoric is superficial and therefore virtually meaningless, Stern's contribution lies not in her making this observation

once more but rather in her exploration of what she calls the 'language' of Orangism.

Stern uses 'language' in a Pocockian sense, referring to it as 'a set of fundamental assumptions about human nature and society in which information is presented selectively in the context of the conduct and character of contemporary political life' (p. 3). With such a definition, the examination of the language of Orangism is not an easy task, especially because the Orangist message is fraught with ambiguity. Most ambiguous was the Orangist reaction to concerns that the Princes of Orange pursued sovereignty over the United Provinces. It needed to devise a rhetorical strategy reassuring those who feared that the stadholderate might succumb to monarchy whilst justifying the privileged position in which the Princes of Orange should be placed. Jill Stern's subtle analysis of Orangist rhetoric reveals how the language of the supporters of the Prince of Orange reflected the ambivalence between the allure of sovereignty and the necessity of avoiding suspicions of monarchy. She points out convincingly that although the rhetoric of Orangism might come across as ambiguous, it offered a coherent and identifiable representation of the desire for restoring William III to the offices his forefathers had once occupied. In some instances the Orangist language does sound a bit contrived but this is not so strange considering that the lobby for the restoration of the stadholderate was not entirely compatible with the republican nature of the Dutch polity.

A good example of Orangist ambiguity is the concept of sovereignty, which they were hesitant to define precisely because it touched upon the complex constitutional position of the Prince as would-be stadholder. In order to remedy this issue, Orangists turned to the idea of the mixed constitution of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy to buttress their argument that the stadholderate was necessary for a balanced and stable Union. The stadholderate stood for the monarchical element that safeguarded the polity against lapsing into either oligarchy or ochlocracy. However, this was problematic because at the same time Orangists wanted to avoid suspicions that they favoured monarchical government. Hence, 'the mixed constitution did not play a central role in Orangist polemic' (p. 26). Instead, Orangists used it in a very pragmatic way, taking whatever views on the mixed constitution existed that best suited their point that the stadholderate should be reinstated (p. 202). The pragmatism of Orangist rhetoric shows that it did not function as an ideology. 'Experience not reason is the lodestone of Orangism', Stern writes (p. 202). Indeed, intellectual coherence is not its greatest strength. But it did cater for the need of a large group of people by providing 'at key moments in the history of the Republic a mode of interpreting the experience of the nation and speaking to the nation's aspirations' (p. 207).

In her analysis of the language of Orangism, Stern draws on the rich Knuttel collection of pamphlets at the Royal Library in the Hague, which is her main source. What Stern has done with the Knuttel collection is no small feat. She has taken several angles from which to approach her subject through a skilful examination of the Republic's political history, the use of literary motifs in Orangist rhetoric and the way in which public memories of the past were deployed – demonstrating for example how even a national hero such as William I could become the object of contested memories (p. 157). What could have made Stern's study even more appealing for students of Orangism in the seventeenth century is a more elaborate embedding in the existing secondary literature on the topic.