

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Helmers, Helmer J. The Royalist Republic: Literature, Politics, and Religion in the Anglo-Dutch Public Sphere, 1639–1660

Elizabeth Sauer

Volume 38, Number 4, Fall 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087359ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i4.26389>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Sauer, E. (2015). Review of [Helmers, Helmer J. The Royalist Republic: Literature, Politics, and Religion in the Anglo-Dutch Public Sphere, 1639–1660]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 38(4), 193–195. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i4.26389>

Helmerts, Helmer J.

The Royalist Republic: Literature, Politics, and Religion in the Anglo-Dutch Public Sphere, 1639–1660.

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xv, 325 + 14 ill., 1 table. ISBN 978-1-107-08761-3 (hardcover) \$103.95.

The war of words over the nomenclature of England's mid-seventeenth-century political upheaval heats up on various fronts in this new book, in which the designations "English Civil Wars" and "British Revolution" are proven to be too narrow, if not directly misleading. Drawing expertly on a wide range of Anglo-Scoto-Dutch literary and cultural evidence, Helmers interrogates the insularity of England's political history and its literary culture, here situated in dynamic exchanges with the Dutch intellectual and public spheres. Cultural critics and historians have long argued that the "Wars of the Three Kingdoms" were played out not only on the battlefield but also in press, but what is especially valuable in *The Royalist Republic* is the internationalization of those "British" wars in early modern literature. Under investigation is the impact of Britain's political history on foreign public opinion, notably and surprisingly in the Dutch Republic, where authors, artists, preachers, exiles, diplomats, and audiences generated a hybrid political discourse and, more often than not, pro-royalist sentiment.

The Royalist Republic renegotiates many definitions and boundaries—geographical, national, ideological, political, and religious, as well as linguistic and disciplinary. Helmers's transnational cross-disciplinary approach deprivileges Anglocentric interpretations of the civil wars and of Anglo-Dutch relations, and his book in turn offers new lenses and mediums for researching British-Dutch historiographical narratives. As he moves beyond nationalist or archipelagic approaches (applied by historians and critics from J. G. A. Pocock to John Kerrigan, who also undertook research on the Anglo-Scoto-Dutch triangle), Helmers introduces to Dutch literary history the study of political history, which contemporary Dutch scholars—unlike their Anglo-American counterparts—had been less inclined to pursue. As for choosing the Netherlands as Britain's key early modern interlocutor, Helmers explains that the historical paper trail had already been paved: whereas the number of translations from German and French remained stable during the mid-seventeenth century, translations from English into Dutch increased substantially, as revealed in a survey of the

previously unstudied pamphlet literature in the Dutch Royal Library pamphlet collection. Far from being intended for or restricted to Anglo-Scoto audiences, British propaganda—referring to political polemic and political propaganda proper—was translated into the Dutch vernacular for a public that consequently experienced competing domestic and English loyalties.

The book consists of two parts, each comprised of multi-sectioned chapters. Part 1 deals with the Anglo-Scoto-Dutch public sphere to which various discursive communities contributed. The notion of the public sphere itself is indebted here not to the monolithic Habermasian model but rather to that of communication scholar Gerard Hauser, who posited the production of multiple public spheres with fluid boundaries that mutate in relation to changing historical, cultural, and discursive contexts. The explosion of popular print in Britain contributed to a flurry of Anglo-Dutch translation activities, making English sources available for Dutch audiences and also forging connections between British and Dutch vernacular public spheres. Between 1639 and 1645, Dutch Contra-Remonstrants, Scottish Covenanters, and English Presbyterians waged propaganda campaigns in the Dutch Republic in order to designate the First English Civil War as a battle against Arminians intent on sabotaging the advancement of the Reformation. From across the English Channel, Dutch Remonstrants, such as Gerardus Vossius and Hugo Grotius, defended the Established Church and its episcopacy.

The loudest rallying cry in the war—and the war of words—was over the martyrdom of King Charles I, which Remonstrants and Contra-Remonstrants alike decried. Charles I's execution on the tragic stage represents the climactic and pivotal event discussed in *The Royalist Republic*, the second part of which—broadly titled “maps of meaning”—features case studies of texts and key genres produced in the royalist-dominated Anglo-Scoto-Dutch discursive sphere. The 1649 regicide was a game-changer insofar as support in the Dutch Republic for the English Parliament died and was replaced by the “cult” of the martyred monarch propagated by English royalist communities in exile. Chapters 5–7 of the book examine an impressive array of literary genres produced in the Dutch pro-royalist Republic, including estate poetry featuring the major Dutch estate poem of the time, Huygens's *Hofwyck* (a synecdoche for the Province of Holland). Arguing that, far from being associated with passivity, royalist political discourse conveyed a desire for vengeance and was also deliberately provocative in inciting sympathy for the dead king, chapter 7 convincingly illustrates

how anti-English Dutch polemics, satires, prophecies, and other publications on the First Anglo-Dutch War served as a major stimulus for Dutch royalism. The final chapter focuses on politics, providence, and theatricality in the alternative dramatic productions of the major English poet of the age, John Milton, and the most famous Dutch poet of the time, Joost van den Vondel—a Catholic convert and royalist. Their mutual engagement with transnational royalist discourses is accurately shown to yield radically different results.

Helmers's analyses of poems, plays, translations, paintings, histories, and pamphlets—including bilingual ones, written by writers like John Lilburne—are as astute as his readings of the relevant scholarly literature (in the vernacular) by contemporary British and Dutch critics and historians. He weighs evidence cautiously and carefully, and will call out those scholars who force alignments and influences between English and Dutch literature that can't be substantiated (169). In the end, the primary contribution of *The Royalist Republic* is not that it renders incomplete those studies of the literary and political culture of the War of the Three Kingdoms that fail to consider the Anglo-Dutch public spheres (which it does successfully), but rather that it promotes an international historicism, which, unlike a comparative historicist approach, discovers and explores shared spaces and discourses that interrogate national paradigms and traverse linguistic boundaries.

ELIZABETH SAUER

Brock University

Jackson, Ken.

Shakespeare and Abraham.

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015. Pp. xii, 172. ISBN 978-0-268-03271-5 (paperback) \$27.

William Hazlitt once wrote, “the love of liberty is the love of others,” a statement very much in the spirit of the Abrahamic as described in Ken Jackson's *Shakespeare and Abraham*. Shakespeare, in Jackson's formulation, repeatedly tries to show us that devotion to almost any transcendent principle of the good is fundamentally a devotion to others, as in other people or a common humanity. In Genesis 22, Abraham offers his son Isaac as a sacrifice at God's