



Freya Sierhuis, *The Literature of the Arminian Controversy: Religion, Politics and the Stage in the Dutch Republic* (Dissertation European University Institute 2009; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 320 pp., ISBN 978 0 198 74973 8).

The Arminian controversy was without doubt one of the most important debates that raged throughout the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century. What started out as an academic debate about predestination got entangled in a number of other hotly contested issues – the locus of sovereignty, the course of foreign policy, the extent of religious toleration, the relationship between church and magistrate –, creating a potent mixture of violent passions that would bring the country to the brink of civil war. The debates and outcome of what has come to be known in Dutch historiography as the Truce Controversies would leave an enduring imprint on future generations. Well into the nineteenth century, Dutch men and women would return to these debates and their related events in search of arguments to support their views on the proper political and religious make-up of the nation – or to oppose those of their opponents.

This long-lasting legacy of the Truce Controversies has ensured that the Arminian controversy has always attracted a good deal of scholarly attention. But not enough, according to Freya Sierhuis in her fine study *The Literature of the Arminian Controversy: Religion, Politics and the Stage in the Dutch Republic*. Sierhuis contends that too much focus has been placed on the political and social-economic sides of the Truce Controversies, but not enough on the religious and ideological ones. This lack of attention has led to a misreading of the nature and development of seventeenth-century Dutch literature and of some of its most fundamental authors and texts. By researching the literary culture of the Arminian controversy, Sierhuis is trying to correct this attention deficit and our view of Dutch literary culture during the seventeenth century.

In six chapters Sierhuis takes her readers more or less chronologically from the beginning of the Dutch Revolt and the foundation of the Dutch Reformed Church to the early 1630s, when – as a consequence of the Truce Controversies – the Dutch Reformed community had split up into two branches: Gomarists or Contra-Remonstrants and Arminians or Remonstrants. As Sierhuis correctly points out, the Arminian controversy is best understood as ‘a phase in the process of the long Reformation’ (16). The dispute about predestination between Jacob Arminius and Francis Gomarus at Leiden University in 1604 had deep roots in the debates about predestination, free will and religious toleration that had fragmented the Protestant movement into a plethora of different churches and sects in the

sixteenth century. These sixteenth-century debates had often been fierce and given birth to a fair number of polemical writings, like Dirk Coornhert's *Synodus van der Conscientien Vryheydt* (Synod on the Liberty of Conscience, 1582) (32). The Arminian controversy can be seen as continuation of these earlier debates, with both Remonstrants and Contra-Remonstrants making ample use of the writings and ideas of their predecessors.

While Sierhuis presents the ideas of both parties involved, most attention goes out to the group of Remonstrants and Remonstrant sympathizers around the *Nederduytsche Academie* in Amsterdam. Prime among them were Samuel Coster, the founder of the *Academie*, and the young Joost van den Vondel. With great in-depth analyses of Coster's *Iphigenia* (chapter 3) and Vondel's *Palamedes* (chapter 5), Sierhuis demonstrates that Coster and Vondel tapped into a variety of sources and discursive languages, ranging from the scholarly works of Hugo Grotius to the inflammatory pamphlets of Hendrik Slatius. She pays particular attention to the rhetorical devices Coster and Vondel used and appropriated for their own goals. This 'linguistic' approach Sierhuis shares with Martin van Gelderen (*The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt 1555–1590*, 1992) and Arthur Weststeijn (*Commercial Republicanism in the Dutch Golden Age*, 2011), her former colleagues at the European University Institute in Florence. In addition, like Jill Stern (*Orangism in the Dutch Republic in Word and Image, 1650–1675*, 2010) and Helmer J. Helmers (*The Royalist Republic*, 2015), Sierhuis also looks at the imagery connected to the texts under investigation. This all makes for very stimulating reading.

The range of different sources and discourses Coster and Vondel made use of, clearly illustrates the interaction that existed between the ivory tower and Grub street; between theological treatises and academic writings on politics and history, on the one hand, and pamphlets, poems, plays, satire and libels, on the other. This interaction was not only intellectual. Sierhuis also unearths many personal connections that existed between members of the *Academie* and their more radical sympathisers, and the political and academic elite of the Dutch Republic.

By placing the literature of the Arminian controversy in the larger framework of the long Reformation and by focusing on the polemical nature of religious controversy, Sierhuis manages to portray a picture of seventeenth-century Dutch culture that is characterised more by conflict and dispute than harmony and consensus. Thus, in the debate about the nature of seventeenth-century Dutch society, she – either knowingly or not – takes sides with Rudolf Dekker (*Meer verleden dan toekomst*, 2008) against the likes of Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van Zanden (*Nederland en het poldermodel*, 2013).

Throughout the book, Sierhuis gives some strong evidence in support for her claims. However, several questions and problems remain unsolved. Sierhuis demonstrates that supporters of the Remonstrant cause fused a number of arguments and discursive languages to plead their case before a broad audience. But she does not adequately explain why this appeal failed

to harness enough support. Besides the fact that Remonstrants constituted a minority within a minority, the language that supporters of the Remonstrant cause used also helps to make sense of this failure. Coster and Vondel, for example, shared a language with academic writers such as Petrus Cunaeus in which a disdain for the common people and a fear for the ‘mob’ is clearly noticeable. Thus, Vondel’s adversaries had a point when they accused him of ‘pecking at the common folk’ (122–125, 231–235, 249–251). Needless to say, such an approach and use of rhetoric was unlikely to win many hearts.

While rhetoric can help explain why certain events did or did not happen, the relationship between rhetoric and events can also work the other way around. Sierhuis for example notes that after 1619 Remonstrants changed their defence of religious tolerance. They no longer supported the idea of toleration within the Reformed church. Instead, they began to claim that ‘freedom of worship forms an integral part of liberty of conscience’ (237). Sierhuis fails to point out, however, that the Remonstrants had to make this change for the very simple reason that after the execution of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt and the Synod of Dort, toleration within one church was no longer a viable option. Here, we clearly see that political events had rhetorical influences.

Finally, it has to be said that Sierhuis’s study unfortunately also contains quite a number of mistakes – wrong dates, words missing or double-printed, wrong or misspelled titles – that suggest that either the editing process was a rush job or that perhaps the wrong manuscript got published. These comments should not detract, however, from the value of what probably is the best account of the Arminian controversy in the English language to date. For that feat, Sierhuis should be congratulated.

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