CHAPTER 3

Strangers, Burghers, Patriots

Re-Imagining Southern Netherlandish Identity in the Exile Towns

While many refugees from the Southern Netherlands hoped to return once their hometowns were recaptured by the States Army, these hopes evaporated after the military stalemate and the ensuing Twelve Years’ Truce. Many realized that the exile towns in Holland, the Holy Roman Empire and England would now be their permanent homes. Their willingness to stay and participate in local life and politics was not always rewarded, however, and, due to the independent political orientation of the various Dutch provinces, southern immigrants were sometimes regarded as ‘foreigners’ and excluded from political participation. Refugees could also become targets of strong anti-immigrant sentiment and rhetoric. In the refugee towns outside the Low Countries, such reactions were even more common since the immigrants could not refer to a shared ‘national’ bond or a common past. Instead, refugees often pointed to the shared religious allegiance or the common political enemy, Spain, from which they had escaped. As Heinz Schilling has demonstrated, the religious factor was of crucial importance for the degree of acceptance granted to migrants from the Netherlands in their new host towns.  

Southern Netherlandish exiles often experienced hostility from their new neighbors in England, Germany and the Dutch Republic. This was especially the case during periods of political and religious conflict, such as the troubles that led to the dismissal of the Earl of Leicester as Governor General of the Netherlands in the 1580s, or the Twelve Years’ Truce (1609–1618). In both cases, immigrants from the Southern Netherlands were often associated with Calvinist radicalism and attacked in pamphlets, songs and other popular writings. In exile towns outside the Netherlands, migrants sometimes had to cope with xenophobic sentiments too, especially in England in the late sixteenth century. This chapter will explore the position of Southern Netherlandish refugees in their new homes and the role of memory both in conflicts between natives and immigrants and in processes of incorporation of migrants into local communities. The antagonism between local populations in Holland and migrants from Flanders and Brabant has become a topos not only in seventeenth-century

1 Schilling, Niederländische Exulanten, pp. 164–166.
pamphlets and popular print but also in modern historiography.\(^2\) However, on the basis of a close reading of these sources, I want to argue that pointing to migrants as the main agents behind social unrest was mainly a rhetorical tactic deployed sometimes by migrants themselves, rather than an expression of a deep and permanent gap between natives and aliens.

On the basis of stereotypes that were sometimes constructed in pamphlets and popular literature, modern scholars have often reproduced an assumed cultural contrast between a Netherlandish culture that divided Holland natives from Flemish and Brabant newcomers. As Jan Briels writes:

That in regard to their culture, the Northern Netherlanders had always been inferior to Brabant and Flanders, which overshadowed all other parts of the Netherlands before 1572, had left its traces in the minds of the Hollanders, who had to look up to the rich South for a long time without being able to bring a substantial change to this situation.\(^3\)

This rather essentialist view of the relationship between the inhabitants of the Northern and Southern Provinces has often been used to explain the growing political and cultural divergence between the two societies during the Dutch Revolt and the position of southern migrants in the North. This chapter will offer an alternative interpretation of anti-immigrant arguments that were used during times of conflict, such as the troubles between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants during the Twelve Years’ Truce. Instead of beginning with an examination of the principled difference between Southern and Northern Netherlandish cultures, it might be fruitful to take a closer look at the production of these assumed differences in popular discourse and the construction of images of southern identity. As a more thorough examination of these identity constructs shows, stereotypes about radical Calvinist Flemings and Brabanders, on one side, and native Hollanders with only lukewarm sympathies for Reformed confessionalism, on the other, did not so much reflect...
