CHAPTER THREE
EARLY EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
POLITICAL LANGUAGES

1. The Neglect of the Early Eighteenth Century

In the historiography of early modern Dutch political thought, the so-called Second Stadholderless Era (1702–1747) is perhaps the most neglected period. It is easy to see why this should be so. These decades lack the obvious appeal of the Dutch Revolt, the philosophical excitement of the first years of “true liberty” (1651–1672) and the drive for political renewal of the late eighteenth-century revolutions. Yet this era was by no means as intellectually barren as has frequently been supposed. It will be the aim of this chapter to demonstrate that early eighteenth-century Dutch political discourse was both lively and sophisticated and is therefore well worth studying. Given the lack of previous research on the political thought of the period, a single and significant episode has been chosen as a case study.

During the years between 1736 and 1739 an intense polemic developed between what contemporaries referred to as republicans and Orangists (Prinsgezinden). The most important work to come out of this polemic was the republican Treatise on Liberty in Civil Society, written by the Zeeland regent Lieven Ferdinand de Beaufort and posthumously published in 1737. The cause of the stadholder was taken up by two distinguished Frisians, Wybrandus van Itsma and Epo Sjuk van Burmania, in a number of so-called “barge- and yacht-talks”. De Beaufort was defended in the Candid Reflections on Liberty and the Supplement to the Candid Reflections on Liberty, both attributed on dubious grounds to the eminent legal scholar Cornelis van Bynkershoek. The immediate cause for this heated exchange of printed opinions was the position of William Charles Henry Friso, later to become stadholder William IV. Over the years, William had gradually been building up his political position. Since he had come of age in 1729, he had held the stadholderate in a number of provinces. During the 1730s, disputes occurred over his potential role as a military commander and as a member of the
Council of State. Two other matters caused an even greater stir. First of all, there was the highly complicated issue—which came to a head in 1732—of whether or not William was entitled to the marquisate of Veere and Flushing. Secondly, there was William’s controversial and politically sensitive marriage to George II’s daughter Anna in 1734. All these practical political issues were treated at considerable length in the polemic here under discussion. In the end, however, the dispute did not primarily revolve around practical politics, but around different conceptualizations of the political world. Contemporaries and later eighteenth-century generations were fully aware of the importance of this debate, yet it has not received full or adequate treatment in modern historiography.

Both this modern neglect and the few things that have been said about this polemic in later historiography throw a revealing light on the way the political thought of the first half of the eighteenth-century has hitherto been approached by historians. It is, first of all, not unusual to find moral condemnation of an author whose personal behavior seems to be in conflict with the message of his writings substituted for a sustained analysis of his thought. Lieven the Beaufort, who participated in ruling practices we would nowadays not hesitate to describe as oligarchic, has been a frequent victim of such overly simplistic moralism. Pieter Geyl blamed him for “shameless hypocrisy” and more recently the Treatise on Liberty in Civil Society has, on the same grounds, been called “less than edifying”. If dismissing an author’s work were this easy, the canon of Western political thought would be very short indeed.

More serious and therefore more important is the tendency in recent, often prosopographically inspired research dealing with the “high politics” of this period simply to deny the relevance of political discourse. Thus the author of a study about the elite of Gouda during the eighteenth century announces that he has paid no attention to the ideological and religious views of the group he has studied. He continues by confidently asserting that the study of such views is irrelevant when it comes to answering the question as to how the elite succeeded in main-

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2 On De Beaufort’s political role see Broersma en Fruin, “Correspondentiën in steden van Zeeland”.
3 Geyl, Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Stam, II, 315; De Jongste, “Een bewind op zijn smalst”, 49.