CHAPTER SEVEN

BODIN IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Much like the constitution of the Holy Roman Empire, discussed in the chapter by Robert von Friedeburg, the political system of the Republic of the Seven United Provinces did not readily conform to the demands of Bodinian political theory. Historians, most notably Martin van Gelderen, have stressed the distinctive character of Dutch political thought. Bodin’s concept of indivisible sovereignty was a foreign idea, propagated in the Republic only, or so it seems, by foreigners.1 Neither a democracy, an aristocracy, nor a monarchy, the Republic was the quintessence of the “mixed” form of governance that Bodinian political thought disallowed. This chapter will not chart the long-term reception of Bodin’s ideas in the Low Countries, where they did not in the long run find fertile ground. Rather, it will examine evidence of Bodin’s influence on two political pamphlets of the late 1570s. It will also explore Bodin’s reception of the Revolt, as an eye witness at its most crucial stage when the rebels gave up on the idea that a new sovereign could be found.

* Earlier versions of this paper have been presented at the Low Countries History Seminar in London in 2009 and, of course, the ‘Reception of Bodin’ Workshop in Hull in 2011. I am grateful for the constructive criticism of all those present. Thanks are also due to Monica Stensland who provided me with her list of loyalist pamphlets that in part set me on this trail, to Malcolm Walsby of the French Vernacular Book Project for helping me locate copies of the pamphlets involved, and to Robin Briggs and Noel Malcolm who commented on drafts of this chapter. I owe a special debt to Howell Lloyd for his comments on successive drafts of both the original paper and the present text.

1 In Martin van Gelderen’s classic study, the influence of Jean Bodin is limited to figures around the Duke of Anjou and the Earl of Leicester: Martin van Gelderen, The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt, 1555–1590 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 180, 203. Following Quentin Skinner, Van Gelderen argues that the distinction between the political theories of Bodin (and others) and the political thought implicit in Dutch pamphlets is a false one: Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt, 3–4. For the same point, but with a very useful distinction between political thought in theory and practice: M. E. H. N. Mout, “Van arm vaderland tot eendrachtige republiek: De rol van politieke theoriën in de Nederlandse Opstand”, Bijdragen en mededelingen tot de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden 101 (1986): 345–65, especially 348 and her conclusion on 365 that the speed of events meant theorists (such as Justus Lipsius) were always one step behind.
Crucially, however, these events were not on the horizon when, in the summer of 1576, the privilege for the publication of Bodin’s *Les Six livres de la république* was granted.² Although Bodin was certainly not blind to the events that unfolded across the border from Laon where he had just married and would in due course reside, few would have dreamt of or foreseen the rejection of a king that was gradually to take place there—at least, few outside the two rebel provinces of Holland and Zeeland.³ Yet, by November, the fifteen loyalist provinces had made common cause with the rebels against mutinous Spanish soldiers. Unity proved short-lived; among the many called upon to help preserve it was Bodin’s patron, the Duke of Anjou. Anjou’s first attempt during the second half of 1578, as “Defender of the Liberty of the Netherlands”, proved a miserable and short-lived failure.⁴ His second attempt in 1582–83 saw him elected Duke of Brabant and Count of Flanders. This stay was more durable but memorable only for the wrong reasons.⁵

It was as a member of Anjou’s entourage during this second period that Bodin met William of Orange and Philip Marnix, Orange’s councillor and propagandist. With Orange, Bodin discussed the recent attack on the Prince’s life and pondered explanations of the latter’s survival, in his forty-ninth year, as well as the recent death of the Prince’s wife, in her thirty-sixth year, in terms of number mysticism.⁶ He observed that the attack had deprived Orange of his sense of taste.⁷ When Anjou made his Joyous Entry into Ghent in August 1582, Bodin discussed with the people their ill-fated 1539 rebellion against Charles V: “the Emperor’s judgment [of the

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² Jean Bodin, *Les Six livres de la république* (Paris, 1576), sig. āvo. The privilege was granted on 12 August 1576. All future references, unless otherwise indicated, are to the 1576 edition.
³ Amongst Bodin’s contacts were one “marchant d’Anvers” and a “chevalier Espaignol”: Bodin, *République* (1576), 632, 130.
⁶ Jean Bodin, *De republica libri sex* (Lyon, 1586), 421. Unless otherwise indicated, all future references to the Latin text are to this version. Bodin attributes, rather doubtfully, the origins of this number mysticism (7 × 7 = 49; 6 × 6 = 36) to the Prince of Orange himself: “quod scribendum non putarem nisi ab principe Aurasio id accepissem cum Antverpiae Francisco duci a consiliis essem”. Charlotte de Bourbon died on 5 May 1582.
⁷ Ann Blair, *The Theater of Nature: Jean Bodin and Renaissance Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 102–3 (citing a passage from Bodin’s *Universae naturae theatrum*); I would suggest that both anecdotes derive from the same meeting.