Pensionary of Rotterdam (1613–16)

The Pensionary’s Office as a Turning Point

The term ‘pensionary’ can be defined as salaried adviser. A pensionary was an official in the service of his city, but after 1550 the emphasis in his role tended to shift from juridical to political duties. While the magistrates changed every year, his appointment was permanent, so that he could always exert a strong influence for continuity on policy.\(^1\) In his informative article on Grotius’ term of office as Pensionary of Rotterdam J.G. Smit argued that its unfortunate outcome only proved that Grotius was unfitted for his great task. He would have done better to confine himself to his activities as an ‘intellectual opinion former, expert adviser and man of letters’.\(^2\) It is beyond dispute that the end of the Rotterdam period was the nadir of Grotius’ life, and it is more than likely that his fall was caused by his activities as a publicist and political adviser. His statesmanship can be debated, but it is certain that the Pensionary had his own radical ideas for solutions to the problems that confronted the young Republic, drawn from his wide knowledge of law and history. He was always willing to wield his sharp and fluent pen to advance his views, and prepared to make enemies in putting them into effect. Pensionary Grotius acted like a shepherd who tries to hurry all his flock into the fold, for he was convinced that unity was urgently necessary if the war with Spain was resumed. From this moment his life was lived at a hectic pace that took all his efforts to keep up with. In the turbulent years of the Truce he was seen as the shrewd and energetic theoretician of Oldenbarnevelt’s faction, who did not shrink from testing his ideas against reality. For his enemies he was a young and audacious radical, whose character combined noble traits with pettiness.\(^3\) In the end Grotius plunged so deeply into the political turmoil that there was no time left for study and relaxation.

\(^3\) D. Carleton, Letters from and to Sir Dudley Carleton, p. 216, D. Carleton to James I, 8 December 1617. Grotius is referred to in this letter as ‘a young petulant brain’. See also Report on the manuscripts of the right honourable Viscount de l’Isle v, p. 237, J. Throckmorton to Viscount Lisle (Robert Sidney, first Earl of Leicester), 10 September 1614, where he remarks of Grotius: ‘If you have read that work of his [Ordinum pietas, 1613], you may judge that he is a personage bothe fyne and false . . .’. 
ILLUSTRATION 38  Grotius.