CHAPTER ONE

DRAMATIZING THE DUTCH REVOLT.
ROMANTIC HISTORY AND ITS
SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ANTECEDENTS

Hugh Dunthorne

‘The nineteenth century’, it has been said, ‘was the great age of
sixteenth-century studies, both in Holland and Belgium.’ It was then,
following the establishment of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in
1813 and the Belgian Revolution of 1830 that Dutch and Belgian
scholars went back to the Revolt of the Netherlands in order to
rewrite its history from a new, national perspective.¹ It was then,
too, that the great printed collections of correspondence and other
sources, on which today’s students of the Revolt still rely, were tran-
scribed from the archives and published. But the Revolt was not
only studied and interpreted afresh by professional historians and
archivists. It was also popularized and romanticized – recreated and
brought back to life in the theatre, in the visual arts, in historical
novels as well as histories. This popularizing process was by no means
confined to the Low Countries.² Across Europe and North America
the Revolt came to be seen as a crucial episode in world history,
‘one of the cardinal chapters in the development of modern liberty’.³
Moreover, the modern process of popularization began not with a
Belgian or Dutch writer but with two German dramatists: with
Schiller, whose Don Carlos was first performed at Hamburg in 1787,

¹ J.W. Smit, ‘The Present Position of Studies regarding the Revolt of the
² Nor, of course, was it confined to the history of the Dutch Revolt. For the
and with Goethe whose tragedy *Egmont* was premiered two years later in Mainz. Twin pillars of German classicism yet also profoundly influential on the wider romantic movement, Goethe and Schiller inspired composers like Beethoven and Verdi to add music to their dramatic theme. Like Sir Walter Scott, who revered their writing and was among the first to translate it into English, they inspired painters and novelists to look to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century history for their subject-matter. And they inspired historians – none more than the Boston Unitarian, John Lothrop Motley, whose *Rise of the Dutch Republic*, first published in London in 1855, was one of the great international best-sellers of the age.

The historical evocations of the Dutch Revolt which began to appear in various forms from the later eighteenth century onwards were not, of course, the first to be devoted to this subject. During the period of the Revolt itself and from quite an early date in its progress, observers of events and those directly caught up in the troubles had written accounts of what was happening. Some were composed in Latin for a more or less learned readership. But a surprising number were written in, or translated into, one or other of the vernacular languages of western Europe and were thus aimed at what for the time could be considered a popular audience. Like all contemporary histories, these early narratives were generally far from impartial. Most were produced in order to bolster the efforts of one or other side in the conflict, to justify their actions in taking up arms and to trumpet their successes. And to begin with the Netherlanders and their sympathizers in neighbouring countries had the field largely to themselves. The earliest accounts came from outside the Low Countries – from Basel, where both Adam Henricpetri, a Swiss jurist, and the Huguenot Richard Dinoth published their accounts of the ‘Belgic civil wars’ in 1575 and 1586 respectively; and from Cologne where the Austrian Michael von Aitzing’s chronicle, *De leone Belgico*, was printed and reprinted during the 1580s, its sober narrative enlivened by the vivid and strongly pro-Netherlands engravings of Frans Hogenberg. During the next decade the initiative passed to

---

4 Adam Henricpetri, *Niderlendischer erster Kriegen* (Basel, 1575; 2nd ed. 1577); Richard Dinoth, *De bello civili Belgico libri VI* (Basel, 1586); Michael von Aitzing, *De leone Belgico* (Cologne, 1583; later eds. 1585, 1588). Henricpetri’s account was subsequently translated and published in Dutch (1579), French (1582) and English (1583), Aitzing’s in German (1584).