CHAPTER EIGHT

JUSTUS LIPSIUS BETWEEN WAR AND PEACE.
HIS PUBLIC LETTER ON SPANISH FOREIGN POLICY
AND THE RESPECTIVE MERITS OF WAR,
PEACE OR TRUCE (1595)*

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The state and its rulers called forth a great deal of discussion among humanists. They endlessly and eloquently wrote about a surprisingly unvarying series of topics: the nature of kingship and political power, the relationship between the ruler and the law, the ruler’s duty to his subjects, the relationship between the ruler and his counsellors and/or the country’s representative institutions, and the education of princes. In humanist political discourse political wisdom (‘prudentia’) was singled out among the virtues and usually contrasted with damaging irrational behaviour springing from sheer lust for power. In sixteenth-century humanist circles north of the Alps, moral philosophy and political advice often went hand in hand, producing such works as Erasmus’s *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1516) and Jean Bodin’s *Six livres de la république* (1576). However, humanists disseminated their ideas not just in books, but in a variety of ways, of which personal communication by letter was one. Political issues appeared frequently in their letters, albeit often in the guise of news items or short political statements only, and political advice was sometimes given in the form of a public letter. During the 1350s, for instance, Petrarch wrote a number of public letters to Emperor Charles IV, urging him to come to Rome for his imperial coronation, in the hope that the emperor would use the opportunity to put the affairs of Italy in order.¹ Such public letters on topical subjects came close to the genre of political orations, in which the speaker

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dealt with comparable subject matters. Political orations as well as public letters on political topics, especially when they were uncalled for by the ruler, were not without their dangers, as they exposed the speaker’s or writer’s views, which might be judged improper by the ruler. During the turbulent sixteenth century, therefore, most humanists would take great care not to offend the authorities by giving a boldly controversial public speech or writing a public letter that might give them offence. It is only too true that by the end of the sixteenth century ‘for the most part humanism had been tamed into conformity to the needs of absolute monarchies and established churches’.

Why, then, would an illustrious scholar such as Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) want to meddle in politics? Why, in the beginning of the year 1595, did he write a long letter on Spanish foreign policy? By that time Lipsius was firmly ensconced in academic life. His position as professor of History and Latin at Louvain University was unassailable. He was basking in his well-deserved fame as a philologist, philosopher, and historian. Although his letter was sent as a private missive to Francisco de San Victores de la Portilla, a Spanish nobleman and captain in the service of the Brussels government who had married into an Antwerp family, its contents were very soon divulged and even translated from the original Latin into French. At first Lipsius denied being its author, stating that he would only have written in Latin. To the influential Dutch politician Cornelis Aerssens he conceded that he had written the letter in Latin, but said that he addressed it only to one person, and had kept no copies. The latter point was untrue because he was able to tell the Leiden printer Franciscus Raphelengius Jr. that the French translation of the letter was not correct. In fact Lipsius had encouraged the addressee San Victores to share the contents of the letter with others as he saw fit. No wonder, then, that the letter lived on in the form of manuscript copies as well as printed pamphlets in several languages.

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3 Ch.G. Nauert, Jr., Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe (Cambridge, 1995), 195.