THE EPIC STORY OF THE LITTLE REPUBLIC THAT COULD: THE ROLE OF PATRIOTIC MYTHS IN THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE

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In the summer of 1632, the States General of the United Provinces commissioned a 2-folio broadside to be printed, in Dutch and French, that was entitled “Declaration of the High and Mighty Gentlemen of the States General of the United Provinces.”1 These were strong words from a weak central institution in a country whose independence had yet to be officially recognized by most of her European neighbours. In substance, the declaration was both a confirmation of the development of their collective political consciousness and an exultation of the political virtues the United Provinces had to offer, particularly to the southern provinces of the Low Countries, then under Spanish control. The intriguing aspect of the Declaration was the method by which they choose to convey their ideas. The authors of the declaration presented its readers with an epic myth, one replete with dramatic rises and falls, and breathless moments of suspense and resolution. The hero of the story is the Dutch Republic itself; a hero that suffers, that conquers, and that fulfills a timeless destiny. The Act of Abjuration of King Phillip II in 1581 was a moment of triumph, of tragedy, and of the creation of a quest. It was a triumph because they had cast off the tyranny of the Spanish, a tragedy because the historical seventeen provinces of the Low Countries found themselves split in two, and a quest to create what had been torn asunder. It was 'the little republic

1 All translations are my own. The original, full title is “Verklaringen vande hooghe ende Mog Heeren Staten Generael der Vereenighde Nederlanden aende Nederlandtsche Provintien ende Steden staende onder het ghebiedt vanden koningh van Spagnien vanden 22 Mey ende Elffen Septembris,” as it is found in Collection of Broadsides and Proclamations on Foreign Affairs, including Treaties, issued by the Staten Generaal of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, no editor, publisher, or date of publication given. Royal Library, Pfl. Knuttel 4206 & 4207, two printings. In the Short Title Catalogue, Netherlands there are reproductions of the title pages after the copies at the Vrije Universiteit.
that could.’ Why would they choose to depict their country’s history, and perhaps future, in terms that resembled children’s stories and ancient legends?

In *Mythologies*, theorist Roland Barthes suggested that modern citizens are not more immune to the comforting illusions of myths as were the ancient Greeks. Barthes was interested, thought, not just in their ubiquity but their purpose. It was his contention that behind every myth lurked a deliberate untruth, a deceptively appealing story that masked or promoted a particular image desired by those in power.² This certainly seems possible in the case of the Declaration. The Declaration declares itself to be a product of ‘high and mighty’ gentlemen in comfortable positions of political power and an official document issued by proclamation of a legitimate, if aristocratic, government. In 1632, however, political strife within the province of Holland was at an all-time high, approaching the fever pitch of the Remonstrant crisis of 1618–1619. That spring, stadholder Frederick Henry had issued a declaration allowing limited toleration for Catholics in the south, a move calculated to build support for a planned and possibly imminent takeover of the southern provinces and the removal of the Spanish presence in the Low Countries.³ The mythical story implied in the Declaration certainly served a pressing political need.

Mythical discourse is often presented as antithetical to truth and it is no wonder that Barthes saw conspiratorial manipulation as inherent in its use. That being said, other scholars, particularly those with literary or anthropological backgrounds, have found it appropriate to deal with myths and mythical constructions on their own terms. To Eleazar Meletinskii, for example myths are simply another form of discourse, one with no more or less claims to authenticity than others.⁴ In his well-known account of Dutch golden-age culture, Simon Schama draws upon this implication and suggests that many different mythologies were woven into the fabric of Dutch identity and everyday life, not foisted upon an unwitting and dependent population. He suggests that mythological conceptions of Dutch history and political life took the form of “Patriotic Scriptures” because of their reliance on moral foundations that were deeply rooted and familiar to the populace well before

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