THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF THE DUTCH REVOLT
INTRODUCTION

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The seventeen provinces that made up the sixteenth-century Habsburg Netherlands were a loosely jointed mosaic of territories, stitched together over a century and a half through hardball dynastic politics. Rich in cities and strategically placed in northwestern Europe, they were also a cornerstone of that period’s greatest monarchy. But as Alastair Duke has recently shown, there was no standard nomenclature at the time for describing these territories. The Low Countries were referred to by a range of terms, including Gallia Belgica, Germania inferior, and Nederland.1 This lack of a conceptual unity did not, however, stop the governor of Veere in Zeeland, Johan Junius de Jonghe, a member of William of Orange’s inner circle, from arguing in a 1574 defense of the political rights of the States General that the Netherlands had a shared culture, exemplified by the urban chambers of rhetoric and shooting guilds, two popular and unique civic sodalities in the Low Countries that made a large imprint on lay public life.

For who does not know that the provinces of these Netherlands have always derived the greatest advantage from being united with each other? Had this union not been the origin of the old custom they have always observed, of assembling towns and provinces for the meeting of the archers and crossbowmen and bearers of other old-fashioned arms, which they call the landjuweel? Why else have the towns and provinces always met for public repasts and plays by order of the authorities unless it were to demonstrate the great unity of these provinces, as Greece showed her unity in the meeting of the Olympic Games?2

Although Holland and Zeeland were at war with the other provinces and future cooperation among the core regions in revolt was anything but assured, De Jonghe remained optimistic about the possibility of

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2 An English translation of the text is in E. H. Kossmann and A. F. Mellink, eds., Texts concerning the Revolt of the Netherlands (Cambridge, 1974), 123. For a consideration of the original, see Martin van Gelderen, The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt, 1555-1590 (Cambridge, 1992), 130-33.
political unity. His advocacy on behalf of Holland’s and Zeeland’s cause drew strength from its appeal to political culture, to a civic, public heritage shared by the cities of these provinces. The five papers in this volume take this political culture as their point of departure, exploring neither the mechanics of the Dutch Revolt nor its causes and consequences, but instead its political idioms, grammars, and rites, and the ways these were communicated to an urban public. They are the result of a two-day conference held October 7-8, 2005 on the political culture of the Revolt of the Netherlands at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library and sponsored by UCLA’s Center for Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Studies and the Amsterdam Center for the Study of the Golden Age. They represent the first fruits of the collective effort of the conference’s participants to appraise the popular politics and cultural media through which the Revolt was made. The papers thus capture a new direction in the historiography of the Revolt, an attempt to look at some of the major crossroads in the history of the Revolt through a different lens. They share an attention to the ways the Revolt was fought in the public realms and the discursive and symbolic vocabulary its participants forged as they created factional alliances and confessional commitments. Each of the authors taps into the rich vein of literary and

3 For their sponsorship of this conference, we would like to thank Peter Riehl, director of the Center for Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Studies at UCLA, and Margaret Jacob of UCLA’s history department.

4 From its outset, the turmoil in the Netherlands inspired the attention of chroniclers and historians, and in the nineteenth century, the great canonical accounts were awash in nationalist sentiment. This vast, varied literature is best appraised by three separate historiographical assessments. In 1960, J. W. Smit reviewed the nineteenth century masterworks, and bemoaned the falling off of attention to the Revolt in the mid twentieth-century: J. W. Smit, “The Present Position of Studies Regarding the Revolt of the Netherlands,” reprinted in P.A. M. Geurts and A. E. M. Janssen, eds., Geschiedschrijving in Nederland: Studies over de historiographie van de Nieuwe Tijd 2 vols. (The Hague, 1981), 2: 42-54. Two decades later, S. Groenveld accounted for the harvest of social and economic history, especially the enormous attention given to the wonderjaar of 1566, and discussed the Revolt within a pan-European context of the Spanish empire: S. Groenveld, “Beeldvorming en realiteit: Geschiedschrijving en achtergronden van de Nederlanden Opstand tegen Filips II,” in Geurts and Janssen, eds., Geschiedschrijving in Nederland, 2: 55-84. His stress on dethronement of the old master narratives, and the splintering of any easy consensus about motifs and causes of the upheavals, is reinforced and deepened by Henk van Nierop’s more recent “De troon van Alva: Over de interpretatie van de Nederlandse Opstand,” Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden 110, no. 2 (1995): 205-23, also published, though with shortened references, as “Alva’s Throne: Making Sense of the Revolt of the Netherlands,” in Graham Darby, ed., The Origins and Development of the Dutch Revolt (London, 2001): 29-47. Van Nierop not only stresses the plural causes of the Revolt—and the varied interests of its protagonists—he also pursues the point that the Revolt was more than anything else, a civil war.