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## English Travel Writers' Representations of Freedom in the United Provinces, c. 1670–1795

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### Abstract

From the Second Anglo-Dutch War to the fall of the United Provinces (c. 1670–1795), dozens of English writers published accounts of their travels across the North Sea. The English and the Dutch were bound by centuries of intellectual, political, and cultural interaction. Factors like a shared confession and similar economic structures meant that Anglo-Dutch relations were uniquely intimate, and this close relationship allowed a nuanced and complex exploration of political ideas. This article recreates one of those ideas that was repeated so often in English travel writing: that the Dutch Republic was free. This freedom was presented as a Faustian pact. In practice, the Dutch state guaranteed many freedoms that the English lauded, such as the right to property, to government accountability, and to efficient justice. However, English writers disdained the theories that underpinned these freedoms, which were viewed as egalitarian and republican. It was argued that these suspect doctrines led the United Provinces down the path to licentiousness, luxury, and decline. Paradoxically, therefore, the nature of Dutch freedom determined both the country's rise and its fall.

On arriving in the United Provinces, Andrew Becket asked: 'Am I Not Still in a Land of Liberty'?<sup>1</sup> In crossing the North Sea, travellers like Becket traversed a geographical, legal, and cultural border. But Becket did not depict the country he arrived in as a completely alien land, such as France or Italy.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he had moved within a community bound by a shared political aspiration: liberty. His representation of the United Provinces as a semi-fraternal, freedom-loving country had been a commonplace since Sir William Temple wrote about the Dutch 'obstinate Love of their Liberties' over a hundred years earlier.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Becket, *A trip to Holland. Containing sketches of characters: together with cursory observations on the manners and customs of the Dutch* (2 vols., London, 1786), I, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> John Lough, *France observed in the seventeenth century by British travellers* (Stocksfield, 1985); Jeremy Black, *Italy and the Grand Tour* (New Haven, CT, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> William Temple, *Observations upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands* (7th edn, London, 1705), p. 45.

Although Temple's sympathetic analysis of the United Provinces' rise was contemporarily controversial,<sup>4</sup> his book went on to become the go-to piece to cite, adapt, and plagiarize, up to the French Revolution.<sup>5</sup>

It will strike many as surprising that travel writers' representations of the United Provinces remained virtually unchanged from the decade after the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1670s) to the United Provinces' dissolution (1795), given the many material changes that occurred over the century, not least how the role of Great Power dramatically shifted across the North Sea.<sup>6</sup> Although this article is supplemented by a wide range of printed works that represented the United Provinces, it focuses on published travel writing precisely because of the genre's repetitive nature. These texts were found using title and text searches on Historical Texts Online, using the keywords 'Holland', 'Dutch', 'Low Countries', and 'United Provinces'. The supplementary material used in this article was also gathered from these searches. Although this is a qualitative analysis, its findings are based on reading every piece of travel writing on the United Provinces published c. 1670–1795.

Published travel writing is defined here as works authored by someone going abroad and, either as a travelogue or a travel guide, purporting to reveal truths about that subject to their domestic audience.<sup>7</sup> Texts tended to have formulaic titles, conventions, and structures. They were also bound by pressures that resulted in the repetition of images that, in their potency and constancy, played a major role in the development of British political culture.<sup>8</sup> As

<sup>4</sup> Steve Pincus, 'From butterboxes to wooden shoes: the shift in English popular sentiment from anti-Dutch to anti-French in the late 1670s', *Historical Journal*, 38 (2000), pp. 336–61.

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert Burnet, a contemporary of Temple's who shared his attitudes to the United Provinces, cites him in Gilbert Burnet, *A collection of speeches, prefaces, letters, &c. with a description of Geneva and Holland* (London, 1713), p. 9. For three examples of Temple being cited as an authority later in the eighteenth century, see Becket, *Trip to Holland*, II, p. 145; Joseph Marshall, *Travels through Holland, Flanders, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Lapland, Russia, the Ukraine, and Poland, in the years 1768, 1769, and 1770* (3 vols., London, 1772), I, p. 349; Henry Peckham, *A tour through Holland, Dutch Brabant, the Austrian Netherlands, and part of France* (London, 1793), pp. 79–80. Furthermore, there are innumerable examples of sections of Temple's words being either copied or adapted. Elements of Temple's description of the United Provinces' constitution in Temple, *Observations upon the United Provinces*, pp. 91–144, are in most travel guides' sections on the subject: for example, see R. Denson, *A new travellers companion through de Netherlands containing A brief account of all what is worth to be taken notice on by a stranger* (The Hague, 1754), pp. 19–42. Also, compare William Temple's description of the five Dutch social classes in *Observations*, pp. 158–66, with Thomas Nugent, *The Grand Tour; or, a journey through the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and France* (5 vols., London, 1778), I, pp. 41–2; and John Williams, *The rise, progress, and present state of the northern governments; viz. the United Provinces, Denmark, Sweden, Russia, and Poland* (2 vols., London, 1777), I, pp. 73–8.

<sup>6</sup> An account given classically in Paul Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the Great Powers* (London, 2017), pp. 94–182.

<sup>7</sup> Conceptual definitions of the genre can be found in Jean Viviès, *English travel narratives in the eighteenth century* (London, 2002); Joan-Pau Rubies, 'Travel writing as a genre: facts, fictions and the invention of a scientific discourse in early modern Europe', in *Travellers and cosmographers: studies in the history of early modern travel and ethnology* (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 5–35; B. Dolan, *Exploring European frontiers: British travellers in the age of Enlightenment* (Basingstoke, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> For an anthology of dozens of English Grand Tour manuscript accounts, see Kees van Strien, *Touring the Low Countries: accounts of British travellers, 1660–1720* (Amsterdam, 1998). See also Hugh

imagologists have argued, representations of foreigners were stickier than even the most traumatic geopolitical changes, suffusing every European state, and producing centuries-enduring stereotypes.<sup>9</sup> These images influenced the production of travel writers' texts in two major ways: first, their itineraries, experiences, and perceptions were shaped by them; second, not reproducing these tropes was tantamount to disagreeing with a centuries-long pedigree of thought on their subject's identity, and, by extension, what it meant to be British.<sup>10</sup>

Travel writers' representations of the United Provinces were shaped by the dense web of interconnections that were spun from generations of Anglo-Dutch cultural exchange. Several factors spurred this intimacy. A non-exhaustive list includes: the changeability and complexity of the Dutch political system, which English people commented on and studied;<sup>11</sup> the number of English people who went to the United Provinces;<sup>12</sup> the frequency and extent of Anglo-Dutch trade;<sup>13</sup> the closeness of English- and Dutch-based news networks;<sup>14</sup> the number

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Dunthorne, 'British travellers in eighteenth-century Holland: tourism and the appreciation of Dutch culture', *Journal of Eighteenth Century Studies*, 5 (1982), pp. 77–84; and Esther van Raamsdonk and Alan Moss, 'Across the narrow sea: a transnational approach to Anglo-Dutch travelogues', *The Seventeenth Century*, 35 (2020), pp. 105–24.

<sup>9</sup> Manfred Beller, 'Perception, image, imagology', in Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen, eds., *Imagology: the cultural construction and literary representation of national characteristics* (Rodopi, 2007), pp. 3–16; I am adapting a quote on p. 11. See also Joep Leerssen, 'Imagology: history and method', pp. 17–32, in the same volume.

<sup>10</sup> Beller, 'Perception', p. 7; Leerssen, 'Imagology', p. 26. Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, CT, 1992). Colley's classic book has since contributed to a ballooning area of scholarship that traces how discourses were informed by interactions with the foreign Other, the most influential of which are Tony Claydon, *Europe and the making of England, 1660–1760* (Cambridge, 2007); Stephen Conway, *Britain, Ireland, and continental Europe in the eighteenth century: similarities, connections, identities* (Oxford, 2011); and Steven Pincus, *1688: the first modern revolution* (New Haven, CT, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Books on the United Provinces invariably had a chapter on its political system. For a comprehensive example, see William Aglionby, *The present state of the United Provinces of the Low-Countries as to the government, laws, forces, riches, manners, customes, revenue, and territory of the Dutch* (London, 1671), pp. 60–202. But a more typical example is *A new description of Holland, and the rest of the United Provinces in general* (London, 1701), pp. 13–39. These descriptions found their ways into travel guides, like Nugent, *Grand Tour*, I, pp. 17–32.

<sup>12</sup> The United Provinces was widely seen as part of the Grand Tour; see Richard Lassels, *The voyage of Italy: or compleat journey through Italy; in two parts: with the characters of the people, and the description of the chief townes, churches, monasteries, tombes, libraries, pallaces, villas, gardens, pictures, statues, antiquities: and also of interest, government, riches, forces, &c. of all the princes* (Paris, 1670), preface; Nugent, *Grand Tour*, I, p. vii.

<sup>13</sup> One contemporary view: Onslow Burrish, *Batavia illustrata: or, a view of the policy and commerce of the United Provinces* (2nd edn, London, 1742), p. 322. A number of handbooks for English merchants in Holland were published, such as William Banson, *The complete exchanger, containing tables of exchange for the ready and exact computing of any sum of money remitted from Great Britain to Holland, and from Holland, to Great Britain, France, Spain, Italy, &c.* (London, 1717). A discussion of the impact of trading exchanges on economic thought is in Seiichiro Ito, *English economic thought in the seventeenth century: rejecting the Dutch model* (New York, NY, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Pettegree, *The Dutch Republic and the birth of modern advertising* (Brill, 2020); and Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen, *The bookshop of the world: making and trading books*

of Dutch expatriates in England;<sup>15</sup> alliances that bound the two states;<sup>16</sup> their shared maritime status;<sup>17</sup> and their religious communality.<sup>18</sup> Of all these commonalities, the claim that the two countries existed in a state of ‘freedom’ was one of the most repeated. These shared characteristics meant that representations of the United Provinces served paradoxically both as hetero- and auto-images: as both ‘them’ and ‘us’.<sup>19</sup>

This unique liminality meant that travel writers’ commentaries on the United Provinces were not simply academic depictions of a curiously foreign land: they were pressingly relevant for discussions of what Great Britain was, or could become, given changes in its circumstances.<sup>20</sup> Specifically, because the two states were so similar, when travel writers discussed Dutch freedom, they were also engaged in a discussion of what freedom meant in Great Britain. This discussion is especially helpful to historians of British

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in *the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven, CT, 2020); Jack Avery, ‘Prerogatives and perorations: reading news about parliament in the United Provinces, 1672–1674’, in Sjoerd Levelt, Esther van Raamsdonk, and Michael D. Rose, eds., *Anglo-Dutch connections in the early modern world* (New York, NY, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Joby, *The Dutch language in Britain (1550–1702): a social history of the use of Dutch in early modern Britain* (Leiden, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Many texts were published during William III’s reign celebrating the fusing of the two countries under one monarch, for example: R. W. *Happy union of England and Holland: or, the advantageous consequences of the alliance of the crown of Great Britain with the States General of the United Provinces* (London, 1689). The extent and consequences of Anglo-Dutch exchange in William III’s reign has been discussed in Jonathan Israel, ed., *The Anglo-Dutch moment: essays on the Glorious Revolution and its world impact* (Cambridge, 1991); and Dale Hoak and Mordechai Feingold, eds., *The world of William and Mary: Anglo-Dutch perspectives on the Revolution of 1688–1689* (Stanford, CA, 1996). Later, the Barrier Treaties (1709, 1713, 1715) effectively made the Dutch and English mutual guarantors of one another’s security, a point famously lambasted in Jonathan Swift, *The conduct of the Allies, and of the late ministry. In beginning and carrying on the present war* (4th edn, London, 1712); see John Oldmixon, *The Dutch barrier our’s: or the interest of England and Holland inseparable* (London, 1712) for the alternative view. The closeness of the two states was a point laboured by English writers haranguing the Dutch to enter into closer alignment with the English: for two examples see *The present state of British influence in Holland* (London, 1742), and, later, John Andrews, *Letters to His Excellency the Count De Welderen, on the present situation of affairs between Great Britain and the United Provinces* (London, 1781).

<sup>17</sup> Gijs Rommelse, ‘Dutch naval decline and British sea-power in the eighteenth century’, *The Mariner’s Mirror*, 106 (2020), pp. 146–61; Alison Games, *Inventing the English massacre: Amboyna in history and memory* (Oxford, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Williams, *Rise, progress, and present*, I, p. 2; Walter Harris, *A new history of the life and reign of William-Henry prince of Orange and Nassau; king of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, &c.* (4 vols., Dublin, 1747), I, p. 71. The extent to which there existed a ‘pan-Protestant’ identity is contentious; see Andrew C. Thompson, *Britain, Hanover and the Protestant interest* (London, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Leerssen, ‘Imagology’, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> For recent work that explores Anglo-Dutch liminality, see Lisa Jardine, *Going Dutch: how England plundered Holland’s glory* (London, 2008); Margorie Rubright, *Doppelgänger dilemmas: Anglo-Dutch relations in early modern English literature and culture* (Philadelphia, PA, 2014); Hugh Dunthorne, *Britain and the Dutch Revolt, 1560–1700* (Cambridge, 2013); Helmer J. Helmers, *The Royalist Republic: literature, politics, and religion in the Anglo-Dutch public sphere, 1639–1660* (Cambridge, 2015); Sjoerd Levelt and Ad Putter, eds., *North Sea crossings: the literary heritage of Anglo-Dutch relations, 1066–1688* (Oxford, 2021).

political culture because travel writing was so widely disseminated and popularly consumed. Although women and non-elite men wrote travel accounts, many of the authors identified themselves and their imagined readers as men of leisure.<sup>21</sup> However, notwithstanding the elite makeup of the genre's authorship, we know these texts were well read because of the sheer number of editions that many of them went through, so much so that we can identify the genre with the general trend in the growth of popular reading, which occurred alongside the expansion of libraries, newspapers, cheap prints, and other cultural and logistical factors that scholars associate with the rise of literacy.<sup>22</sup> In being an important genre in the rising tide of popular literacy, travel writing served as an important means of representing political ideas to wider groups of British people.

Although travel writers sometimes dedicated paragraphs to a discussion of freedom, it was more often the case that freedom was woven into anecdotes and descriptions of cities and buildings. This freedom was therefore presented as an animator of observable changes, rather than as a theoretical abstraction. Because of the rough-and-ready way in which freedom was invoked, the term itself was used promiscuously: the same word that William Temple used to describe the philosophical system that underpinned Dutch prosperity<sup>23</sup> was used by Henry Peckham to explain the motivation of those who disembowelled and cannibalized the brothers de Witt.<sup>24</sup> It served as a political, social, and confessional label. Sometimes, the use of this label approached contradiction, even within the same text. This looseness indicated both the assumed explanatory power of the term, and the authors' apparent relaxedness about using it. The reconstruction of the term's core meanings within this imprecision is a useful way of examining what (many) British people thought liberty meant when applied in an observable context like the United Provinces.

This article is divided into a discussion of the two aspects of how published travel accounts framed Dutch freedom. The first half discusses how the demand that the only legitimate limit on life should be laws that they freely made enriched the Dutch state. This was a state that was 'opprest with the most cruel Hardship and Variety of Taxes, that was ever known under any Government'.<sup>25</sup> Yet, because the Dutch had oversight over what these taxes were, how they were collected, and how they were used, they acted as a

<sup>21</sup> Authors' prefaces regularly cited their intention to educate the upper classes and their children: Robert Poole, *A journey from London, to France and Holland: or, the traveller's useful Vade Mecum* (2 vols., London, 1744), II, p. i; Lassels, *Voyage of Italy*, preface.

<sup>22</sup> For three recent general studies on the intersection of political ideas, practices, and cultures in Britain, see Mark Knights, *Representation and misrepresentation in later Stuart Britain: partisanship and political culture* (Oxford, 2005); Max Skjönsberg, *The persistence of party: ideas of harmonious discord in eighteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, 2021); Ross Carroll, *Uncivil mirth: ridicule in Enlightenment Britain* (Princeton, NJ, 2021). For an overview on literacy, see Paul Langford, *A polite and commercial people: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 90–9. Specifically on literacy and travel guides, see Paul Stock, *Europe and the British geographical imagination* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 18–28.

<sup>23</sup> Temple, *Observations upon the United Provinces*, p. 208.

<sup>24</sup> Peckham, *Tour through Holland*, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Temple, *Observations upon the United Provinces*, p. 130.

dynamo that empowered the sovereign state that guaranteed peoples' safety. This protection left people free to prosper under a government that was accountable to them.

The second half explores the writers' claim that the Dutch insistence on freedom from moral boundaries inevitably corroded the Republic.<sup>26</sup> 'Saucy booms' and indulgent elites; Frenchified men, and women entrepreneurs; busy bourses and brothels, empty churches: the lowering of restrictions and the disrespect of rank encouraged a self-serving ethos that weakened the Dutch body politic. Because the short-term strengthening of the state was caused by the demand that led to its long-term weakening, the travel writers overall took a dim view of liberty in the United Provinces. Their analysis was therefore partly a political intervention in debates as to the extent to which the British state ought to allow this free spirit that provided so many obvious boons that, while bringing immediate modernization and urbanization, acted as seductions away from the limiting moral values that prevented Great Britain from descending into anarchy.

These published travel accounts of the United Provinces conveyed powerful representations of freedom that persisted, virtually unchanged, throughout the long eighteenth century. These depictions did not serve simply to distract and entertain curious readers who wanted to vicariously explore a strange land through their books. Instead, the emphasis that both the British and the Dutch were 'free peoples' meant that these texts served as commentaries that helped readers navigate their political understanding of freedom in their developing state.

Travel writers were shocked by the size and power of the Dutch state. In contrast to the apparently amateurish organs of the British state, the Dutch state was everywhere, shaping urban landscapes, terraforming the North Sea, regulating markets, enforcing laws, providing poor relief, equipping a large army and navy, and maintaining and expanding a global empire. These various state functions amounted to the United Provinces more perfectly achieving freedom because they fulfilled a contract between the Dutch state and people. This contract meant that the state imposed a significant number of taxes and regulated many aspects of Dutch life. In return, the state was controlled by the great majority of Dutch people. With echoes of Louis XIV's apocryphal claim that he was the state, William Carr was one of many who reported 'the meanest' Dutchman saying 'what is the *Vaderlands* is ours'.<sup>27</sup>

Travel writers readily seconded this assessment. They claimed that right down to the most local level – guilds, cities, waterways – the United Provinces was self-governing, with a federal government that had very limited ability to intervene in the great majority of day-to-day political decision-

<sup>26</sup> Claydon, *Europe*, pp. 132–52, discusses this in relation to English war propaganda.

<sup>27</sup> William Carr, *An accurate description of the United Netherlands, and of the most considerable parts of Germany, Sweden, & Denmark* (London, 1691), p. 50.

making.<sup>28</sup> Each layer was often reported in detail, giving a semi-alien quality in comparison to the lack of political participation in Great Britain. However, it was common after this depiction to highlight that even the most local collective could not invade somebody's 'person or property', the security of which was considered a precondition of true liberty.<sup>29</sup> Pieter de la Court, who was a propagandist for the United Provinces, argued that 'this free Government' set the rules that it and others invariably followed, giving people an incentive to 'gain Riches for their Posterity, by Frugality and good Husbandry', rather than wasting their wealth on transient pleasures before their property was arbitrarily expropriated by an unscrupulous monarch.<sup>30</sup> The incentive to save made the country wealthier and, therefore, increased what could be taxed.

Travel writers narrated that this wealth explained how the Dutch could afford to pay taxes levied to finance the Eighty Years' War, commercial and imperial expansion, state building, and climatic reclamation: these taxes were far higher than those in 'arbitrary' states like France.<sup>31</sup> William Carr listed some of the taxes that had to be paid by a typical eighteenth-century Amsterdam resident: stamp duty on buying a property, a tax for the mill that drained the land, a tax for water banks, a tax for the military fortifications that protected the land (on top of extraordinary war taxes that were imposed during a conflict); a tax for the night watch; a poll tax; a coach tax; soap tax; salt tax; wine tax; butter tax; bean tax; light tax; wood tax; meat tax; bread tax; tax on most traded goods, that had to be weighed publicly; paper tax; cow tax; fruit tax; gate and bridge tolls. Carr also went through how many things were double-taxed (milk was taxed as milk, then again as butter), and required the deep involvement of state agents in peoples' private lives: 'no Man may bake his own Bread, or grind his own Corn, or brew his Beer, nor dare...keep in his House a Hand-Mill', and he listed examples of Dutch people 'ruined' for doing these acts, because these activities were tantamount to tax avoidance.<sup>32</sup> Also, many activities were taxed: Thomas Nugent reported that theatres' profits were taxed at 50 per cent, and every street entertainer's income was taxed at a third.<sup>33</sup> These oft-repeated tax itineraries were a major superficial separator between the Dutch and the British state: the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* quipped that 'the only thing that has escaped taxation [in the United Provinces] is the air they breathe'.<sup>34</sup> And given the repeated stereotype

<sup>28</sup> Burrish, *Baravia illustrata*, p. 123.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, *Rise, progress, and present*, I, p. 109.

<sup>30</sup> Pieter de la Court, *The true interest and political maxims of the republick of Holland and West-Friesland. Said to be written by John de Witt and other great men in Holland. Published by the authority of the state* (London, 1702), p. 36.

<sup>31</sup> Marshall, *Travels through Holland*, I, p. 288.

<sup>32</sup> Carr, *Accurate description*, pp. 45–9.

<sup>33</sup> Nugent, *Grand Tour*, I, p. 90.

<sup>34</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica; or, a dictionary of arts, sciences, &c. on a plan entirely new: by which, the different sciences and arts are digested into the form of distinct treatises or systems, comprehending the history, theory, and practice of each, according to the latest discoveries and improvements* (2nd edn, 10 vols., Edinburgh, 1778), X, p. 8752.

that the Dutch had the worst air in Europe, this exemption would hardly have been understood as magnanimous.

If the extent of the taxation distinguished the Dutch from the British, the underlying purpose of this tax collection squarely put them within the shared Anglo-Dutch camp. Taxes could not be raised without being viewed as legitimate by the great majority of those who paid them. This legitimacy was a major demarcating line between the 'free states' of Europe, including Great Britain and the United Provinces, and the absolutist ones (principally France). Travel writers agreed that the amount of taxation did not determine whether a state was free: John Marshall argued that the high taxation in a free state never exceeded the limitless 'value of liberty'.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, the illegitimacy of the high tax-raising of the absolutist Spanish Habsburgs was viewed as one of the main causes of the Dutch Rebellion.<sup>36</sup> The belief that the taxes were not being misappropriated undergirded the high trust that the Dutch were said to have in their civil institutions. As one writer put it, the Dutch were 'assured' that the taxes did not go towards 'the Covetousness, Pride, or Luxury' of their leaders, 'but to defray the charges, the State is necessarily exposed to'.<sup>37</sup> Joseph Shaw, a barrister who travelled the United Provinces, compared this republican virtue with England, in letters to his patron, Anthony Ashley-Cooper. Whereas in the United Provinces money was spent appropriately, in England the money was spent and wasted on court-buying and corruption.<sup>38</sup> As opposed to the opulence of English courtiers, Dutch leaders lived modestly. William Temple reported that his contemporaneous Dutch leaders (the brothers de Witt) wore common clothes, had few servants, and lived in a normal sized house.<sup>39</sup> The modesty of their leaders' private lives contrasted favourably with the beauty and wealth of the amenities erected for the public (the statehouse, the bridges, the roads), which William Temple thought made Amsterdam incomparable in the world in its 'Strength, Beauty, and Convenience'.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, descriptions of Amsterdam in general were not short of superlatives in English travel writing, being 'the country of chimes',<sup>41</sup> 'that modern Tyre',<sup>42</sup> and 'the Wonder of the World'.<sup>43</sup> These depictions of Amsterdam as a modern, large city, continued long after London superseded the Dutch city in size and grandeur, thus showing the potency of the seventeenth-century impression on the eighteenth-century imagination.

<sup>35</sup> Marshall, *Travels through Holland*, I, pp. 190–1.

<sup>36</sup> *The history of the republick of Holland, from its first foundation to the death of King William* (2 vols., London, 1705), II, p. 87.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Shaw, *Letters to a nobleman from a gentleman travelling thro' Holland, Flanders and France* (London, 1709), pp. vi–vii.

<sup>39</sup> Temple, *Observations upon the United Provinces*, pp. 128–9.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Burney, *The present state of music in Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Provinces* (2nd edn, 2 vols., London, 1775), II, p. 286.

<sup>42</sup> Charles-Lewis de Pollnitz, *The memoirs of Charles-Lewis, baron de Pollnitz* (2nd edn, 2 vols., London, 1739), II, p. 371.

<sup>43</sup> Burrish, *Baravia illustrata*, p. 284.



Public buildings were major standard-bearers of this modernity and acted as exemplars of the sovereignty of a free, Dutch people.

As well as guaranteeing public amenities, the Dutch state also had a judicial system that guaranteed order, which in turn was seen as a bedrock guarantor of freedom. Walter Harris, an Irish historian, used 'liberty' and 'security' interchangeably: whereas a contemporary Londoner worried about going 'ten miles out of London with Money in his Pocket', a foreigner could travel throughout the United Provinces 'by Day and by Night' and feel safe.<sup>44</sup> Ann Radcliffe, a traveller and novelist, was typical in reporting her confidence that her luggage would not be stolen when disembarking in Rotterdam.<sup>45</sup> As one travel guide put it, 'no Country at this time in the World that enjoys a Liberty equal to that of *Holland*', because 'every thing is so well regulated'.<sup>46</sup> Such regulation came from the power of the state to impose the collective's will efficiently: 'To protect the Good, 'tis necessary that [the Magistrate] punish the Evil.'<sup>47</sup> If security and liberty were interchangeable, then the British had much to learn from the Dutch law enforcement apparatus. The police were especially commented on. Amsterdam was widely regarded as the most policed city in Europe. The city was illuminated by 3,000 street lamps, and if a crime was committed, the authorities closed all the gates and 'every one passing through was subjected to a search'.<sup>48</sup> Because the Amsterdam police were 'superior' to anywhere else, the city's citizens lived 'in perfect safety', and were therefore free.<sup>49</sup> One Grand Tourist, Henry Peckham, thought that many of Amsterdam's policing tactics should be replicated elsewhere, especially the policy of doubling up when on patrol.<sup>50</sup> Begging was so uncommon in the United Provinces that Samuel Ireland regarded with 'astonishment' the people who were allowed, 'under the severity of Dutch police', to beg during an annual fair in Rotterdam.<sup>51</sup> William Montague was particularly impressed by the lack of crime in Amsterdam, considering the famous frivolities that were indulged in at 'Night-time', like the 'continual Fiddling' and 'Gaming'.<sup>52</sup> To travellers apparently used to not being free to travel their own country at any time of day without fear of vagabondage, the state's efficiency in deterring and catching beggars and criminals was a major part of how the efficient Dutch state

<sup>44</sup> Harris, *New history*, p. 60.

<sup>45</sup> Ann Radcliffe, *A journey made in the summer of 1794, through Holland and the western frontier of Germany* (London, 1795), p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> *History of the republick*, p. 164.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>48</sup> *An hasty sketch of a tour through part of the Austrian Netherlands, and great part of Holland, made in the year 1785* (London, 1787), pp. 228–9.

<sup>49</sup> Becket, *Trip to Holland*, II, p. 142.

<sup>50</sup> Peckham, *Tour through Holland*, p. 80.

<sup>51</sup> Samuel Ireland, *A picturesque tour through Holland, Brabant, and part of France, made in the autumn of 1789* (2nd edn, London, 1796), p. 25.

<sup>52</sup> William Montague, *The delights of Holland: or, a three months travel about that and the other provinces. With observations and reflections on their trade, wealth, strength, beauty, policy, &c. together with a catalogue of the rarities in the Anatomical School at Leyden* (London, 1696), p. 138.

freed Dutch people. This moral was keenly relevant to an ever-urbanizing Great Britain.

The relationship between liberty and order was particularly acute in representations of the Dutch state's uniquely comprehensive provisions for the poor and ill. In seeking to entice English tourists away from Italy and towards the United Provinces, one writer contrasted 'Italy's *Amphitheatres and Circus's, for the cruel Sport of destroying the human species*', with '*Works of real use and emolument to the Publick...Dutch Dykes and Sluices are seen as stupendious Works of no less Art and Grandeur, for the safety and preservation of the People.*'<sup>53</sup> The writer was contrasting the old, decorative, useless civilizational institutions of ancient Rome with the new, urbane values that suited contemporary states like the United Provinces and, implicitly, Great Britain. This infrastructure was both physically and architecturally present: it was regularly written that at any one time the city of Amsterdam had 20,000 people in its institutions for the poor.<sup>54</sup> These houses were so large and comfortable that they were often described as 'palaces'.<sup>55</sup> Thomas Nugent described the plentiful diet and permanent lodgings given to those who were unable to look after themselves, which were 'kept extremely clean and neat, and richly adorned with pictures'. He also described the many social and legal institutions erected to keep these hospitals well funded: the donation boxes that littered the city, the twice-weekly procession with bells, and the expectation to donate after the conclusion of a significant deal.<sup>56</sup> William Carr thought the 'one main Reason why [the Dutch poor] so willingly pay their Taxes' was their knowledge that 'if it please God to visit them with Poverty', they will be looked after by the state.<sup>57</sup> The state's legitimacy was not just because of actual participation in its inputs, but also in the potential receipt of its outputs.

If social welfare institutions were one guarantor of freedom, another was the country's penal institutions, which writers repeatedly connected with the poor's orderly behaviour. Joseph Shaw was typical in claiming that the United Provinces 'deservedly glories in' its methods of putting 'the lazy and able Beggars' to work, and which took in the 'Weak' to stop them 'rotting in their Streets'. Shaw described an orphanage with 1,346 orphans, who were working and singing psalms 'in wonderful Order', which moved him so deeply that he turned to his guide and said these orphans were 'the Sinews of their State'.<sup>58</sup> He also saw how 'the lazy wandering Beggars' were taken to a 'Rasp-house...where a most severe Labour...makes them prefer Death to Life'; he wished the practice 'might be imitated at London', given how significantly it reduced begging and instilled values in the former beggars that improved social order.<sup>59</sup> The most clichéd and repeated institution of Dutch justice

<sup>53</sup> *The present state of Holland, or a description of the United Provinces* (3rd edn, The Hague, Rotterdam, and Leiden, 1749), pp. vi–vii.

<sup>54</sup> *A new description*, p. 74.

<sup>55</sup> Montague, *Delights of Holland*, pp. 169–70.

<sup>56</sup> Nugent, *Grand Tour*, I, p. 79.

<sup>57</sup> Carr, *Accurate description*, p. 50.

<sup>58</sup> Shaw, *Letters to a nobleman*, pp. 38–9.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

was the houses of correction, which featured cellars for the particularly lazy. These places allowed the public to gawk as the cellars filled with water within fifteen minutes unless the inmates pumped 'incessantly'.<sup>60</sup> If drowning did not incentivize good behaviour, inmates at these correction houses were also publicly whipped.<sup>61</sup> The purpose of these public punishments was 'to intimidate and deter'.<sup>62</sup> However, these houses of correction also made people 'useful to the public', in that they forced people to make things for the state and the empire.<sup>63</sup> These practices were mostly depicted distastefully, but their animating spirit – to protect peoples' liberties by deterring crime, and moulding criminals into becoming orderly citizens after their institutionalization – was generally considered worthy of emulation in Great Britain.

Although these descriptions remained fixed throughout the period discussed here, writers communicated the dynamic nature of the forces that formed the bedrock of Dutch freedom. Institutions like the non-arbitrary government acted as shining advertisements for likeminded, talented people to come and work in the Republic. As Temple put it, the reputation of being a country that safeguarded peoples' wealth created a virtuous cycle, with the state attracting likeminded foreigners who brought their industriousness with them and therefore contributed to the common wealth.<sup>64</sup> John Williams, who travelled throughout northern Europe, put this point at length, arguing that the immigrants to the United Provinces sought 'asylum from oppression and tyranny', and were 'animated by the love of liberty'. These immigrants worked doubly hard so that they could regain the wealth that they had sacrificed when they fled from the persecution they suffered in absolutist countries.<sup>65</sup> The immigration of likeminded people buttressed liberal institutions, which buttressed more immigration; such an analysis informed debates on who and how many immigrants should be allowed into Great Britain.<sup>66</sup>

Overall, the travel writers represented the Dutch state as a major guarantor of peoples' liberties in general, but particularly the liberties of people who had wealth and who sought the social order to enjoy that wealth in peace. It was true that to pay for the state's apparatus, Dutch people paid heavy taxes on many things. However, these taxes were gathered in such a way as to underpin, rather than undermine, the freedom that the travel writers hoped to have in Great Britain. Taxes went towards public utilities, rather than corrupt courtiers, and they provided an apparatus that lowered crime, giving the social order that the writers enjoyed so much. The large Leviathan that the

<sup>60</sup> Nugent, *Grand Tour*, I, p. 81.

<sup>61</sup> Maximilian Misson, *A new voyage to Italy* (5th edn, 2 vols., London, 1739), I, p. 29.

<sup>62</sup> Ireland, *A picturesque tour*, p. 136.

<sup>63</sup> Peckham, *Tour through Holland*, p. 63.

<sup>64</sup> Temple, *Observations upon the United Provinces*, pp. 219–21.

<sup>65</sup> Williams, *Rise, progress, and present*, I, p. 105.

<sup>66</sup> William O'Reilly, 'The Naturalization Act of 1709 and the settlement of Germans in Britain, Ireland and the colonies', in Randolph Vigne and Charles Littleton, eds., *From strangers to citizens: the integration of immigrant communities in Britain, Ireland and colonial America, 1550–1750* (London, 2001), pp. 492–502.

English encountered across the sea was a guarantor of a type of liberty that writers admired so immensely and sought, in various ways, to use as a signpost in discussions relevant to the development of the British state.

## II

However much travel writers admired Dutch institutions, it was commonly held that very impulse that secured this kind of state also led to its decline. Commentaries on Dutch decline were as present in the seventeenth century as they were in the eighteenth, when it was far from evident that the Dutch state would in fact decline to the extent that it did. This was because the literal, economic decline of the United Provinces was depicted, right from the Republic's highpoint, as a moral decline triggered by two impulses: disruptive egalitarianism, and a worship of money that displaced true religion. The consequence of these impulses was not just a jealous citizenry ensuring their government did not impoverish them, but more broadly the upending of proper society. Thus, the freedom worn so clearly on Dutch peoples' sleeves spread and caused its own downfall, in its tendency to degenerate into corruption, anarchy, and licentiousness. This moral narrative was important to the many travel writers who linked Great Britain's future with the trajectory of its earlier-developed neighbour. Great Britain would follow the anarchic Dutch path if it did not moderate its 'free' impulses and defer to the moral institutions that the Dutch had forgotten.

One clear egalitarian impulse stemmed from the United Provinces being a republic. Generally, writers and their assumed readers did not understand the details of Dutch politics. One English tourist quipped that a foreigner could not hope to understand the Dutch system of government, 'when the natives themselves hold two opinions'.<sup>67</sup> It was true that constitutional questions periodically divided and upended the United Provinces.<sup>68</sup> And yet, however much the Dutch system was contested, it was always in some sense a republic, and could therefore be stigmatized for having the faults that were held to characterize all republics. Writers who wrote explicitly from the perspective of being British subjects were consistently pro-stadtholder in their commentaries on Dutch history. This was partly for realpolitik reasons: the stadtholder was historically more engaged in funding land forces to fight France, whereas republican burghers tended to favour funding an anti-English navy.<sup>69</sup> However, pro-stadtholder writing also revealed fears of republicanism. For

<sup>67</sup> *A tour sentimental and descriptive, through the United Provinces, Austrian Netherlands, and France* (2 vols., London, 1788), I, p. 87.

<sup>68</sup> The best general introduction is Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: its rise, greatness, and fall, 1477–1806* (New York, NY, 1995); Orangism was analysed in Charles-Edward Levillain, 'William III's military and political career in neo-Roman context, 1672–1702', *Historical Journal*, 48 (2005), pp. 321–50.

<sup>69</sup> For a general view on how Dutch politics was split between the pro-English Stadtholder party and the pro-French republican party, see Radcliffe, *A journey made*, pp. 41–2. For a late seventeenth-century perspective, see *A true account of a late horrid conspiracy to betray Holland to the French* (London, 1690). As an example of Dutch and English contemporaries seeing the extent to which

one, it was argued that the stadtholder was the closest that the Dutch had to a limiting influence on the inevitable levelling violence that accompanies republican government.<sup>70</sup> As one writer put it, Dutch history showed that republican government was ‘the pill of anarchy...disguised under the flattering name of Liberty’.<sup>71</sup> A stadtholder, like any strong executive leader, put a break on the anarchic tendency often found in republics to divide into factions and weakness: writers often represented Dutch division to peak during the country’s stadtholderless periods (1650–72; 1702–47).<sup>72</sup>

The anarchic tendencies of Dutch liberalism were tied deeply to the egalitarianism that ran through Dutch society. It was common to remark how little regard the Dutch appeared to have for social rank. Indeed, a Dutch writer argued that ‘a Kind of Equality’ was ‘natural’ to all ‘Republicks’, meaning that, ‘if in this Land of Liberty the greatest Lord strikes his Servant with a Cane’, the state sided with the servant. Given the cultural antipathy to lords hurting their inferiors, the author had never known the law to be needed.<sup>73</sup> Another pro-Dutch piece argued that ‘All the Hollanders...love Liberty’, which partially meant that Dutch people across the social spectrum ‘hate nothing more than Pride and Arrogance’, and expected social superiors to ‘drink freely’ with those below them.<sup>74</sup> A hostile observer agreed, commenting that, ‘the liberty so much boasted here’ mainly allowed ‘a Boor to presume to be saucy to a Burgher, to despise the Nobility, to censure his Masters with Impunity’.<sup>75</sup> However praised this social egalitarianism was by Dutch authors hoping to attract their English audience, most English writers took a dim view, presenting this levelling tendency as regrettable and dangerous. Richard Lassels, one of the earliest and most influential English travel writers, was afraid that such behaviour could prove contagious. He warned young travellers against mimicking ‘*their rude exacting upon Noblemen strangers in their Inns*’, and their general ‘*clownish hatred of Nobility*’.<sup>76</sup> The bias against the wealthy also meant a few travel guides advised English travellers to dress down. For example, Walter Harris advised readers that if they did not dress as ‘a *Man of Quality*’, and kept ‘prudent’ and ‘peaceable’, they would receive ‘fair dealing’.<sup>77</sup> The legal and social freedoms of the poor created a resentful animus that had practical consequences for English travellers.

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the English sided with the Stadtholder during the Patriot Revolt, see Thomas Bowdler, *Letters written in Holland, in the months of September and October, 1787* (London, 1788), pp. 133–89.

<sup>70</sup> *Historical remarques upon the late revolutions in the United Provinces; drawn from their own papers, and evincing the necessity of a Stadtholder to that government, as now re-establish’d in His Highness, the present prince of Orange* (London, 1675), pp. 11–15.

<sup>71</sup> Preface author unknown, Abbé Raynal, *The history of the office of Stadtholder, from its origin to the present times* (London, 1787), p. iii.

<sup>72</sup> John Andrews, *A defence of the Stadtholdership; wherein the necessity of that office in the United Provinces is demonstrated* (London, 1787), p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> *Present state of Holland*, pp. 112–13.

<sup>74</sup> *History of the republick*, pp. 70–2.

<sup>75</sup> De Pollnitz, *Memoirs*, II, pp. 381–2.

<sup>76</sup> Lassels, *Voyage of Italy*, preface.

<sup>77</sup> Harris, *New history*, pp. 59–60.

Another worrying causal factor in shaping the Dutch state, again common to all republics, was the pursuit of money by trade. Samuel Pufendorf, whose influential book on European states was reprinted and read throughout the eighteenth century, argued that ‘the great Liberty’ held by the Dutch was the bulwark of their political economy.<sup>78</sup> This liberty to trade animated the wealth that underpinned Dutch freedom and drove an anti-noble, egalitarian, democratic impulse. The seventeenth-century polemicist, Owen Felltham, argued that the Dutch monomaniacal pursuit of ‘Money and Liberty’ was conjoined.<sup>79</sup> As de Pollnitz put it, the main religion of the United Provinces was ‘the acquiring of Riches’, which was more important than ‘Birth, Wit and Merit’. In practice, this meant that the Dutch tortured themselves to ensure they ‘have the Pleasure of dying rich’.<sup>80</sup> While people busied themselves making money, the churches were so empty that going into one would cause a cold.<sup>81</sup> Amsterdam’s business districts were perennially full: it was the ‘Beehive of Cities’, where ‘Before the shrine of *Gain* all knees bow!’<sup>82</sup> One author was ‘sorry to inform my reader’ that it was essential to agree the price of everything beforehand in the United Provinces, because the Dutch ‘are the most imposing people in the world’.<sup>83</sup> This valorization of practical, money-making matters over spiritual, moral matters was a warning for a country like Great Britain, which was undergoing its own financial, commercial, and urban revolutions. The United Provinces showed what could happen when this growing trade became valorized over other factors.

Dutch freedom, therefore, was intrinsically related to the freedom of the poor to rail against their natural superiors, and to pursue money above all else. This type of liberty congenitally degenerated into licentiousness, luxury, and decline, which all eighteenth-century states – Great Britain included – could be exposed to. Travel writers had prima facie evidence of this theory, given the decline of the United Provinces that was so apparent to observers throughout the long eighteenth century. However, even in the seventeenth century, when one Dutchman called the United Provinces ‘the most Powerful Republick’ in the world,<sup>84</sup> and an English statesman called the state ‘the Bulwark of Christendom’,<sup>85</sup> William Temple forecasted that the United Provinces had ‘past its Meridian’ and entered perennial decline.<sup>86</sup> It was a commonplace in travel writing to depict Dutch decline.<sup>87</sup> For example, Grand Tourists passing

<sup>78</sup> Samuel von Pufendorf, *An introduction to the history of the principal kingdoms and states of Europe*, trans. J. Crull (6th edn, London, 1706), p. 241.

<sup>79</sup> Owen Felltham, *A trip to Holland, being a description of the country, people and manners: as also some selection observations on Amsterdam* (1699), pp. 7–8.

<sup>80</sup> De Pollnitz, *Memoirs*, II, pp. 381–2.

<sup>81</sup> Felltham, *Trip to Holland*, p. 11.

<sup>82</sup> *Tour sentimental and descriptive*, I, p. 114.

<sup>83</sup> Sacheverell Stevens, *Miscellaneous remarks made on the spot, in a late seven years tour through France, Italy, Germany and Holland* (London, 1756), p. 388.

<sup>84</sup> De la Court, *True interest*, p. xxvii.

<sup>85</sup> Burnet, *Collection of speeches*, p. 12.

<sup>86</sup> Temple, *Observations upon the United Provinces*, p. 238.

<sup>87</sup> For example, Marshall, *Travels through Holland*, I, pp. 151–6.

through Leiden rarely failed to point out how the city had gone from a scholarly and manufacturing hub to an impoverished backwater.<sup>88</sup> In 1777, John Williams gave the consensus view that the United Provinces had ‘fallen into such insignificance’, in its economic and geopolitical importance.<sup>89</sup>

Given the obviousness of Dutch decline, a cottage industry explaining that decline grew. These decline narratives were part of a larger fixation, perhaps most associated with Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and fall of the Roman empire*, of tying luxury, commerce, and decline together.<sup>90</sup> The impact of Bernard Mandeville’s benign interpretation of luxury and commerce on the history of political thought is undoubted, and was perhaps rooted in his positive experiences in the United Provinces and England.<sup>91</sup> However, the vast majority of travel writers remained unimpressed with the Mandevillian logic that attached greater freedom to pursue pleasure with prosperity. Particularly, the travel writers’ major and repeated explanation of Dutch decline was rooted in its political economy, with its emphasis on commercial freedom. The link between commerce, luxury, and decline was ironclad: Joseph Shaw thought that ‘of all the Arts their Enemies use to destroy them, none can have so... fatal Success, as the Introduction of Luxury and Debauchery’.<sup>92</sup> Another drew a direct line between the ‘avarice and selfishness’ taught in the United Provinces as moral values from ‘infancy’, which made the Dutch such a commercial success, and how that commerce ‘tends to soften the manners of mankind...open[ing] the door to all kinds of luxury, fraud, chicanery, and deceit’.<sup>93</sup> A generally positive Dutch guide conceded that their state was writhe with ‘Luxury [which] is a fatal Disease in the Vitals of a State’. They noted with alarm the growing number of ‘Assemblies, Gaming, Dancing, and fine Clothes...Feasting, Dressing, Balls, &c.’ that were lowering peoples’ ‘Tempers’ and making them ‘grow too soft and delicate’ to live how ‘Divine Providence seems to have designed them’.<sup>94</sup> This moral decline was partially considered a geographically universal phenomenon, and many writers regarded the Dutch as still being more frugal than their French and English neighbours.<sup>95</sup>

The apparent corruption of the Dutch elite – seduced by the devil-may-care freedom to make money, irrespective of social responsibility – was proof that the Dutch political economy caused its own decline. Joseph Marshall

<sup>88</sup> Some examples: Ireland, *A picturesque tour*, p. 89; Becket, *Trip to Holland*, I, pp. 153–4; Peckham, *Tour through Holland*, p. 55; Isaiah Thomas, *A tour in Holland* (Worcester, MA, 1790), p. 105.

<sup>89</sup> Williams, *Rise, progress, and present*, I, p. 134.

<sup>90</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman empire* (6 vols., London, 1776–89); J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and religion* (6 vols., Cambridge, 1999–2015).

<sup>91</sup> Bernard Mandeville, *The fable of the bees: or, private vices, public benefits* (London, 1714); Bernard Mandeville, *The fable of the bees, part II. By the author of the first* (London, 1730). See further E. J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment’s fable: Bernard Mandeville and the discovery of society* (New York, NY, 1994).

<sup>92</sup> Shaw, *Letters to a nobleman*, p. 49.

<sup>93</sup> Williams, *Rise, progress, and present*, I, pp. 80–5.

<sup>94</sup> *Present state of Holland*, pp. 90–100.

<sup>95</sup> Marshall, *Travels through Holland*, I, p. 338; Williams, *Rise, progress, and present*, I, p. 74; Nugent, *Grand Tour*, I, p. 44.

contrasted the English poor, who loved to ‘squander and drink away’, with the ‘very frugal’ Dutch poor.<sup>96</sup> Given that the Dutch poor had stayed true to their industrious roots, one of Marshall’s interlocutors put the blame for Dutch decline on ‘our merchants’, who had changed their ‘dress, equipage, table, and all family expences’, and had thereby sucked money out of productive investments and into their own vanity.<sup>97</sup> John Williams noted how it used to be ‘generally observed, that those who were corrupted by their riches, were afterwards much more so by their poverty’. The United Provinces saw ‘a torrent of luxury and extravagance’, where Dutch ladies lost their families’ estates in one night at cards.<sup>98</sup> Thomas Nugent used the incursion of French manners and customs as a proxy to show the extent to which Dutch elites had been corrupted.<sup>99</sup> In these practices, Dutch elites were shown to abuse the freedom that was intrinsic to being a commercial republic: their openness to the cosmopolitan pull of France (in contrast to the poor, who remained rooted in national frugality) encouraged the extravagant lifestyle that was an inevitable consequence of the monomania for money. Ironically, this consumption was causing the decline of that capacity to make money.

As well as showing how the poor felt empowered to attack the rich, the freedom of Dutch women was also seen as a potent example of how Dutch liberty was leading to degeneracy in the state. Dutch women were more engaged in trade than women of other nationalities,<sup>100</sup> and tourists often noticed. Married Dutch women were often presented in a morally positive light.<sup>101</sup> However, the topsy-turvy structure of the Dutch household, which allowed women freedom to leave their domestic space and even make financial decisions, alarmed English writers. One piece wrote mockingly of how Dutch women were the ‘Head of the Husband’.<sup>102</sup> William Montague highlighted the role reversal of the sexes from their supposedly natural places, in that ‘Women are found in the Shops and Business’ with ‘the Conduct of the Purse and Commerce’, while ‘The Men take all the Pleasure.’ Specifically, while the men gambled and drank, ‘the good Wife’ earned the money for him to spend.<sup>103</sup> Montague was typical when he praised the women on a personal level for keeping their husbands afloat, but condemned the family and economic structure that allowed them to be praiseworthy: far better was it to have the concrete gender roles that were so attacked by the social and political changes engendered by the Dutch state’s liberality.

<sup>96</sup> Marshall, *Travels through Holland*, I, pp. 19–20.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 186.

<sup>98</sup> Williams, *Rise, progress, and present*, I, p. 78.

<sup>99</sup> Nugent, *Grand Tour*, I, p. 42.

<sup>100</sup> Danielle van der Heuvel, *Women and entrepreneurship: female traders in the northern Netherlands c. 1580–1815* (Utrecht, 2007); Martha Moffitt Peacock, *Heroines, harpies, and housewives: imagining women of consequence in the Dutch Golden Age* (Leiden, 2020).

<sup>101</sup> Shaw, *Letters to a nobleman*, pp. 44–7.

<sup>102</sup> *The comical pilgrim; or, travels of a cynick philosopher, thro’ the most wicked parts of the world* (London, 1722), p. 101.

<sup>103</sup> Montague, *Delights of Holland*, pp. 183–4.



Nowhere was Dutch liberty shown to degenerate into licentiousness more than in the country's many licensed brothels, which most Grand Tourists found the time to visit. These trips filled a familiar pattern: the tourist entered the brothel, was repulsed, then lamented that the Dutch state allowed such sexual freedom. William Montague reported that the Dutch magistrates justified places like the 'filthy' 'nasty common Bawdy-House' he visited because they were said to 'prevent worse Things, Violations, Rapes, &c.', especially given how many visitors were 'Strangers, Travellers, and Mariners, long absent from Women'.<sup>104</sup> He was not convinced. The moral absolute – that sexual encounters could not be economic transactions – was at the heart of his and others' repulsion. Isaiah Thomas visited a state-licensed brothel and claimed he could not 'endure the sight five minutes', drinking wine that tasted like vinegar and looking at the 'forty or fifty' 'devoted wretches seated round the room', who looked like 'painted dolls'. He compared the place to 'a butcher's slaughter house'.<sup>105</sup> This analogy cemented the image of something that was supposed to be sacred being turned into a commercial exchange. Henry Peckham simply commented that 'It is as morally evil to license fornication, as it is politically so to shut up for life women' who were being denied the chance to become 'fruitful members of society'.<sup>106</sup> Money corrupted even those responsible for rehousing and rehabilitating prostitutes. Thomas Nugent claimed he saw men pay to encounter Dutch prostitutes under the care of the state, thus showing how 'a trifle of money' was the 'Dutch god'.<sup>107</sup> Nugent pithily drew the English travel writers' critique of Dutch freedom full circle: the levelling logic of Dutch freedom, which allowed no moral barrier other than what could be spent, had produced the degeneration of the Dutch people to such an extent that the state was prostituting women in its care.

The licensed brothel was a synecdoche of the excesses of Dutch liberty. Without social rank, religion, and clear boundaries, the United Provinces had become an amoral state that pursued luxury and money above all else. A state that levied taxes and imposed obligations on everyone, whether rich or poor, was efficient, but it could only exist in a republican society.<sup>108</sup> A Dutch history warned how quickly liberty of speech and conscience could descend into 'Licentiousness', but argued that the United Provinces was not yet at that point.<sup>109</sup> Travel writers repeatedly begged to differ. Dutch freedoms that empowered the state derived from social forces that caused chaos, immorality, and decline. To many writers, this depiction of freedom was alarmingly relevant to Great Britain because the United Provinces' supposed spiritual and economic ailments were caused by a kind of political economy that Great Britain at least in part shared. Both economies were increasingly commercial, maritime, and urban; both had parliamentary governments, and both allowed

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 218–19.

<sup>105</sup> Thomas, *Tour in Holland*, p. 132.

<sup>106</sup> Peckham, *Tour through Holland*, pp. 70–1.

<sup>107</sup> Nugent, *Grand Tour*, I, p. 81.

<sup>108</sup> De Pollnitz, *Memoirs*, p. 381.

<sup>109</sup> *History of the republick*, pp. 166–7.

a degree of religious heterogeneity. The main difference was that the United Provinces was depicted as further along these paths than Great Britain. The moral was clear: if the British continued on the trajectory of their Dutch neighbours, they too would inevitably suffer these maladies.

### III

There were limits to the extent to which the Dutch and English could be depicted as close analogies. Travel guides generally began with a climatically deterministic account of how their subject's society and politics came about,<sup>110</sup> and travel writing on the Dutch was no different.<sup>111</sup> One guide wrote that 'the vapours' and the 'low, moist, and boggy' earth altered 'the minds of the inhabitants'.<sup>112</sup> The breathing of so much bad air – Owen Felltham polemically called the United Provinces 'the Great Bog of Europe'<sup>113</sup> – turned the Dutch into 'amphibious Creature[s]'.<sup>114</sup> It was this suffusion with wet, cold air that differentiated a Dutch person from anybody else, and therefore limited the universal applicability of their politics.

However, this Otherness only went so far. The earnest establishing of boundaries belied the subversiveness of the authors' subject-matter: to plausibly present their analysis as a comfortable hetero-image, as something to contrast with Great Britain. But behind the climatic descriptions and guffawing at different cultural practices, there was the clear supposition that there were deep commonalities between the Dutch and the English. These commonalities were informed by centuries of transnational exchange and interaction, and put the two states in such close proximity that the boundaries between 'Us' and 'Them' became porous enough to allow travel writing to lapse into social and political commentaries that were applicable to states on both sides of the North Sea.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is a good example of how a well-trodden traveller, who often clearly demarcated foreigners as an Other, would treat the United Provinces with sympathy and nuance. In Montagu's telling, the United Provinces was to be admired and emulated as a practical comparison with England. When she framed Rotterdam in almost utopian terms,<sup>115</sup> she wrote of 'a new scene of pleasure', made up of well-paved streets, beautiful houses, and well-stocked shops.<sup>116</sup> These were legitimate aspirations in any 'free country'. Other English tourists marvelled at the availability of exotic

<sup>110</sup> The interplay between these climate and other factors is explored in Justin E. H. Smith, *Nature, human nature, and human difference: race in early modern philosophy* (Princeton, NJ, 2015).

<sup>111</sup> Two examples: Radcliffe, *A journey made*, p. 34; Shaw, *Letters to a nobleman*, p. xvi.

<sup>112</sup> Marshall, *Travels through Holland*, I, p. 44.

<sup>113</sup> Felltham, *Trip to Holland*, p. 3.

<sup>114</sup> Misson, *A new voyage*, I, pp. 4–5.

<sup>115</sup> Isobel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: comet of the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2001).

<sup>116</sup> Mary Wortley Montagu, *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M---y W---y M---e; written, during her travels in Europe, Asia and Africa, to persons of distinction, men of letters, &c. in different parts of Europe, which contain, among other curious relations, accounts of the policy and manners of the Turks; drawn from sources that have been inaccessible to other travellers* (4 vols., London, 1763), I, pp. 2–5.

fruit,<sup>117</sup> and the punctuality of the boat transit system,<sup>118</sup> but always from the perspective of commonality: this was not a description of a fantasy land, of no consequence to their readers' domestic political world, but of a peer country that was undergoing similar social and political changes to those encountered in Great Britain.

These guides described a country on a similar path to Great Britain's. Of course, it was not the case that every writer repeated an identical mantra on every issue that arose when travelling United Provinces. Writers took differing views on issues like religious toleration (although most used their experiences as evidence for more toleration of Protestant dissenters),<sup>119</sup> and they wrote for different niches and purposes. For example, Charles Burney travelled to study Dutch music, Cornelius Cayley to show Dutch 'sentiments', Thomas Bowdler to represent Dutch politics, and William Carr sought to bring anything forward that might 'contribute to the common Good of Human Society and Civil Life'.<sup>120</sup> However, as has been shown, these distinctions are dwarfed by the extent to which they borrowed stories, tropes, and whole paragraphs on their subjects. Travel writers' strong tendencies to repeat tropes meant that the ideas they produced – such as how the Dutch were free – were remarkably durable and cohesive, amounting to centuries-strong images that survived the hurly-burly of eighteenth-century geopolitics. In so doing, these texts formed a powerful current of comparative socio-politics and transcended in both scope and scale our understanding of both British identity formation as something implacably against an Other, and of traditional English articulations of liberty as Whiggish advocacies of the ancient constitution and contract theory. When the United Provinces collapsed in 1795, so too did a leitmotif that was so useful to one of the most important questions facing contemporary Britons: what it meant to be free.

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<sup>117</sup> *Tour sentimental and descriptive*, I, p. 117.

<sup>118</sup> De Pollnitz, *Memoirs*, II, p. 370.

<sup>119</sup> In favour of religious liberty: Temple, *Observations upon the United Provinces*, pp. 199–200; Burchish, *Batavia illustrata*, p. 144; Aglionby, *Present state*, pp. 177–8. Against: Montague, *Delights of Holland*, pp. 142–3.

<sup>120</sup> Burney, *Present state*; Cornelius Cayley, *A tour through Holland, Flanders, and part of France* (2nd edn, Leeds, 1777), p. iii; Bowdler, *Letters written in Holland*, p. 3; Carr, *Accurate description*, p. 2.

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