

**Keyman Program in Turkish Studies
Working Paper Series**

**“Faithful to the King to the Point of Beggary”:
Treasonous Elites and the Dutch Revolt**

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Working Paper No. 11-001
May 2011



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The Roberta Buffett Center for
International and Comparative Studies
Northwestern University

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Abstract:

This paper explores the importance of the Low Countries to Habsburg Spain in the sixteenth century and the outbreak of the Dutch Revolt. It examines the upper tiers of the Low Country nobility, the grands seigneurs and the gentilshommes, and the tensions over religious practice and political rights that developed between these regional and local elites and Habsburg central authority by the mid 1560s. I argue that the rift between Madrid and Brussels was neither binary nor complete, but was nevertheless remarkable because of the success with which the previously autarkic Low Country nobility had been patronized by the fifteenth-century Burgundian rulers. The Dutch Revolt was shot through with fissures among the nobility and urban elites, divided over loyalty to Philip II and confessional commitments. Many grandees were disgruntled but remained loyal, even as the Spanish court increasingly became a Castilian preserve. Other senior noblemen--William of Orange above all--began to cultivate separate client networks, especially in the German territories. The Revolt, propelled by a loose coalition of dissenting noblemen, radical Calvinists, and disaffected townspeople, fostered a patriotic lore of republican civic virtue that gave political definition to a set of territories that had been without geographical or cultural unity. While the Spanish monarchy ultimately regained the historical importance southern territories and reconciled with the southern nobility, the United Provinces gained de facto independence, and by doing so, launched with astonishing rapidity a maritime empire that would hector the Spanish overseas and establish a global commercial footprint.

Author’s Bio

Peter Arnade is a specialist in late medieval and early modern Europe. His published work concerns urban ritual, state power, public space, social life and political conflict in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, with a focus on the Low Countries and Burgundian and Habsburg era more generally, and includes [Beggars, Iconoclasts and Civic Patriots: The Political Culture of the Dutch Revolt \(1555-1585\)](#) (Cornell University Press, 2008) and [Realms of Ritual: Burgundian Ceremony and Civic Life in Late-Medieval Ghent](#) (Cornell University Press, 1996). He has also served as guest co-editor for special issues of the [Journal of Interdisciplinary History](#) (on urban public space) and [The Journal of Early Modern History](#) (on the Dutch Revolt and its political culture), and is co-editor with Michael Roche of [Power, Gender, and Ritual in Europe and the Americas. Essays in Memory of Richard C. Trexler](#) (Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, Texts and Essays, The University of Toronto, 2008). He is currently cowriting a book on the social world of Burgundian pardon letters and has new research interests in comparative urban history as well as the early modern colonial world. He has been a recipient of grants from the Fulbright-Hayes Exchange, The Belgian American Educational Foundation, the American Philosophical Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Getty Research Foundation, and the Institute for Advanced Study, School of Historical Studies, and the Renaissance Society of America.

In the annals of character assassination, William of Orange's *Apology* still bristles more than four centuries after it appeared in 1581. Written by Orange's court preacher, Pierre Loyseleur de Villiers, with the Prince's consultation, and read before the States General of the Netherlands in December 1580, it is a cocktail of *ad hominem* slurs of Philip II.¹ Prepared in defense of Orange against the charges of treason and call for his assassination detailed in the king's Edict of Proscription that was issued March 15, 1580, the *Apology* sketched a history of the Revolt as a set piece of Spanish tyranny. It accused the Spanish king of the murder of his third wife, Elizabeth of Valois, and of his troubled son, Don Carlos, deviant behavior explained by his own descent from a bastard, Henry of Castile. The morally bankrupt king had subjected the people of the Low Countries to a "wretched bondage" of an order only imposed against the poor Indians in the Americas. Such royal tyranny, Orange confidently reasoned, had no traction in the Low Countries. He married personal invective with a legal repudiation of the Spanish king's sovereignty. However many and exalted Philip II's regal titles, the *Apology* declared:

I counter by saying that I do not recognize the name of 'King' ... I recognize him as a Duke and a Count, whose power is limited according to our privileges, which he swore to observe at his state entry.²

On July 26, 1581, the Estates General of the Netherland formally abjured Philip II's authority over their territories. But in 1584 the Edict of Proscription's call to eliminate Orange found success. The French Catholic Balthasar Gérard, having insinuated himself into Orange's court at Delft by posing as a Huguenot refugee, shot the Prince with a pistol. Thus, Orange was consecrated as a martyr to the Dutch republican cause, as the beloved Father of the Fatherland, and as a civic patriot who had given his life in the fight for liberty.³

¹ Alastair Duke, ed., "William of Orange's *Apology*," annotated and with an introduction in "William of Orange's *Apology*," *Dutch Crossing* no 1 (Summer, 1998): 3-96. On Villiers, see C. Boer, *Hofpredikers van Prins Willem van Oranje: Jean Taffin en Pierre Loyseleur de Villiers* (The Hague, 1952).

² Duke, ed., "Orange's *Apology*," 30.

³ For a critical edition of the Abjuration, see M. E. H. N. Mout, *Plakkaat van Verlatinge, 1581* (The Hague, 1979); On Orange's death, see J. J. Frederiks, ed., *Oorspronkelijke*

Orange's stature derived from his position as the richest, most powerful and best known of the Netherland's some four thousand noblemen.⁴ No one, however, could have predicted his meteoric rise to leadership of the Dutch Revolt. Its violent tangle of events consumed Spanish attention for eighty years and resulted in the establishment of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, a commonwealth nestled among the absolutist monarchies of the seventeenth century. The Low Countries were the northern anchor to the sprawling territories of the Spanish empire. While geographically compact with an estimated population of three million and while remote from the administrative center of Castile, they mattered. Their cities, their commercial wealth, their vital ties to Spanish economic concerns, and their centers of banking and trade like Antwerp, whose financial houses were essential creditors to the Spanish monarchy, gave them an importance disproportionate to their size.⁵ Even as these provinces had a history marked by regional autonomy, parliamentary authority, and urban rights, they also had a nobility historically loyal to state interests of which Orange himself was a good example.

Threading through the Low Countries was northern Europe's greatest urban density: cities like Douai, Valenciennes, Brussels, Antwerp, and Ghent, where political coalitions of guild deans and urban patricians managed civic life. Paramount was the nobility's role in public life and government, with the great lineages monopolizing the highest and most lucrative offices. Between 1503 and 1572, half of the Low Country's provincial governorships were held by seven great families: Croy, Nassau-Orange, Egmont, Lalaing, Berghes, Lannoy, and

verhalen en gelijktijdige berichten van den moord gepleegd op Willem van Oranje (The Hague, 1884), R. Fruin, "De oude verhalen van den moord op prins Willem I," in idem, Verspreide Geschriften 10 vols. (The Hague, 1900-05), 3: 65-117.

⁴ A. Th. van Deursen, Willem van Oranje: een biografisch portret (Amsterdam, 1995); K. W. Swart, William of Orange and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1572-84, trans. J. C. Grayson (Aldershot, 2003); P. J. Blok, Willem de Eerste, prins van Oranje 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1919-1920); Felix Rachfahl, Wilhelm von Oranien und der niederländische Aufstand 3 vols. (The Hague, 1906-24).

⁵ On the early modern Low Countries, Herbert Rowen, ed., The Low Countries in Early Modern Times (New York, 1972).

Montmorency.⁶ These lineages were the top echelon of a small set of *grands seigneurs* whose ties to provincial governorships, military commissions, pensions, land grants, and membership in the elite Order of the Golden Fleece were forged a century earlier when the Burgundian dukes, a cadet branch of the French monarchy, cobbled together their diverse territories in northwestern Europe into a functional state.⁷ The senior nobility were distinct from their second tier peers, the *gentilshommes*. The latter's prestige and power likewise derived from property holdings and governmental offices but of the sort usually restricted to the local and municipal level, like the office of sheriff or bailiff. As elsewhere in Europe, the *grands seigneurs* and the *gentilshommes* were not worlds apart: intermarriage and ties of clientage and patronage helped forge filiations and shared interests, none more important than a fidelity to Burgundian and Habsburg concerns. The *grands seigneurs* and *gentilshommes*' loyalty to state interests had been stable. This was true during some of the worst periods of political upheaval and warfare, including the urban revolts and dynastic crisis after Charles the Bold's unexpected death in 1477, and then again during the all consuming Habsburg and Valois wars of the first half of the sixteenth century. That fidelity in a conglomeration of territories that was without geographical fixity---no standard nomenclature for describing the Low Countries existed in the sixteenth century---and a stubborn adherence to urban particularism, regional autonomy, and autarkic political impulses was a remarkable achievement on the part of the original Burgundian rulers. Over the course of the fifteenth century, they had drawn the various Low Country nobility into their cultural and political orbit, showering them with court offices. In the process, they immersed them in a Burgundian ethos centered on a shared military and chivalric culture: commanderships of the military *bandes d'ordinances*, membership in the Order of

⁶ Henk van Nierop "The Nobility and the Revolt of the Netherlands: Between Church and King, and Protestantism and Privileges," in P. Benedict, et al, eds., Reformation, Revolt and Civil War: 83-98. On Holland itself, see Henk van Nierop, The Nobility of Holland: From Knights to Regents, 1500-1650, trans. Maarten Ultee (Cambridge, 1984

⁷ Wim Blockmans and Walter Prevenier, The Promised Lands: The Low Countries Under Burgundian Rule, 1369-1530 (Philadelphia, 1999).

the Golden Fleece, and access to the court culture of tournaments and masquerades and its Francophone world of *belles lettres* and sociability.

William of Orange personified the Burgundianization of the Low Country nobility. This was true to such an extent that he was considered a particular favorite of Charles V, the Burgundian ruler, Spanish king, and Holy Roman Emperor. William of Orange, a German born in the German territory of Nassau, became the unexpected heir of the Nassau-Breda line and its extensive properties across Brabant, Holland, Luxembourg, Holland, and Burgundy when his uncle René of Chalon died in the siege of Dezier in 1544. Orange was brought at age eleven to Brabant, and raised at the Burgundian Court in Mechelen as a loyal state servant and Catholic. Favored by Charles V, Orange quickly attained prominence, gaining military appointments and close access to senior Habsburg officials, including the future Cardinal Granvelle, Antoine Perrenot, whose father had been one of Charles V's principal advisors. That it was Orange whose shoulder the gout-ridden Charles V chose to lean upon during his storied abdication ceremony in Brussels in 1555 spoke volumes about the young prince's status. This was further enhanced by Orange's selection to utter the liturgical proclamation at the emperor's funeral on December 28, 1558, at the church of Saint Gedeule also in Brussels, proclaiming that Philip II was a worthy, indeed greater, successor to Charles.⁸ Not surprisingly, the new Spanish king and Habsburg lord of the Low Countries continued to favor Orange, appointing him the next year as stadholder of Zeeland, Holland and Utrecht and as knight of the Order of the Golden Fleece.

How the darling of the Brussels court became the treasonous nemesis of Philip II is not merely a biographical narrative of political transformation but also a larger story of noble dissatisfaction between Brussels and the Habsburg king, and of internecine strife and disaccord among the great and smaller nobility across the Low Countries themselves. The Low Countries had never been easy to govern although this had less to do with the landed nobility than with the

⁸ Peter Arnade, Beggars, Iconoclasts and Civic Patriots: the Political Culture of the Dutch Revolt (Ithaca, 2008), 48-51.

territories' regional autonomy and lack of a unified government before the Burgundian era. Even in the fifteenth century, the Valois dukes inhabited a tinderbox of political troubles, largely driven by urban regimes intent on rebuffing top-down state mandates, and cities rife with factionalism between oligarchic magistrates and guild-driven agitation over economic and political policy. A common feature of the Low Countries since the twelfth century, urban revolts occurred with increasing regularity during the Burgundian period. In the leading Flemish city of Ghent alone, rebellions occurred in 1401, 1404, 1406, 1411, 1414, 1423, 1437, 1440, and 1449-53, the last expanding to a full-scale war with duke Philip the Good. Bruges, a court city and a commercial center, was engulfed in rebellion in 1411 and 1436-38.⁹ Such turmoil reflected diverse antagonisms: internal strife pitting guildsmen against merchant and patrician elites as well as more vertical tussles between city regimes and Burgundian officials who were squeezing them for revenues and resources.

The regional estates, and the States General itself (established in 1427), were an essential component of political life in the Low Countries, serving as venues for advocating the political and economic interests of civic regimes and aristocratic prerogatives, though in some, like Flanders' Four Members, there was no noble representation. In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, these parliamentary bodies possessed stronger rights than the Castilian Cortes, and they were quick to assert their authority to decide requests for extraordinary revenues and jealously guard the legal privileges of the provinces. They also met more frequently than any other parliament in Europe, with town magistrates especially prominent as delegates, cherishing their right to refer back to their home cities before assenting to a vote on a specific matter. While the Burgundian dukes had some luck in pushing back this cumbersome deliberative process, in 1477 the

⁹ Wim P. Blockmans, "Alternatives to Monarchical Centralisation: The Great Tradition of Revolt in Flanders and Brabant," in H. Koenigsberger, ed., Republiken und Republikanismus im Europa der frühen Neuzeit (Munich, 1988): 145–154, and on the internal urban divisions that provoked rebellions, see Marc Boone and Maarten Prak, "Rulers, Patricians and Burghers: The Great and Little Traditions of Urban Revolt in the Low Countries," in Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen, eds., A Miracle Mirrored: The Dutch Republic in European Perspective (Cambridge, 1995): 99–134.

States General wrested a “Great Privilege” from the young Mary of Burgundy in the chaos after her father’s death which reinstated all their traditional prerogatives. What is more, individual provinces like Brabant, Flanders, and Holland—the most important in the Low Countries---reiterated the right of a single city to veto a majority vote on a tax subsidy, making unanimity the prerequisite of political support for a financial request.¹⁰

For all the trickiness of political life in the Burgundian Netherlands, the *grands seigneurs* remained mostly loyal in the transition from Burgundian to Habsburg rule. This was true even during the warfare that roiled the provinces between 1477 and 1492, when cities in Flanders and elsewhere revolted against the centralizing ambitions of the new Habsburg overlords. During Charles V’s reign in 1548, the Low Countries became administratively detached from the imperial domains; though the emperor, a native of Ghent, maintained a strategic presence, he was a peripatetic ruler, consumed by his military campaigns and his new court center in Valladolid. Charles pushed hard on the regional Estates and States General to obtain extraordinary aids to fund his incessant wars, with his greatest adversaries not the nobility but instead the urban magistrates who regularly opposed this tax burden. When the city of Ghent blocked an allocation to Charles from the Four Members of Flanders in 1537, stubbornly refusing to concede and triggering a serious rebellion, Charles personally settled the revolt, making the long journey north to preside over the dissenting city’s punishment in 1540.¹¹

A series of regents governed the Low Countries successfully during the emperor’s many absences, including his aunt Margaret of Austria from 1507 to 1530 and his sister Mary of Hungary from 1531 to 1555. Despite the emperor’s pursuits elsewhere, he maintained close ties to Brussels. His circle of advisors included many senior nobility from the Low Countries such as Guillaume de Croy, lord of Chièvres—so much so that it these outsiders’ role as Charles’s

¹⁰Koenigsberger, *Monarchies, States Generals and Parliaments*, 42-72.

¹¹ Peter Arnade, “Privileges and the Political Imagination in the Ghent Revolt of 1539,” in Marc Boone and Marysa Demoor, eds, *Charles V in Context: the Making of a European Identity* (Brussels, 2003): 103-24.

principals in Castile that were among the grievances of leaders of the Comuneros Revolt.¹² What is more, Charles was born in Ghent, and shared the cultural makeup and orientation of those steeped in Burgundian court life. The Low Countries mattered to him, not only culturally, but also economically, as its three core provinces, Flanders, Brabant, and Holland, constantly funded his war effort, making up nearly two thirds of the subsidy income he received from the entire seventeen provinces. While Castile, as James Tracy has argued, was the source of Charles' greatest revenue, in part because of the added resource of New World revenues, the Low Countries remained vitally important.¹³

Although Protestantism's strong toehold in the Low Countries complicated the emperor's governance of these territories, it neither blunted nor destabilized his collaboration with the regional aristocracy. Lutheranism and Anabaptism arrived early in these territories, and the government's response was organized. In 1522 a Netherlands inquisition was established to complement the Episcopal one already in place and the next year the first Protestants in Europe were burned at the stake in Brussels. Executions of Protestants in the Low Countries---about 1,300 between 1523 and 1566---were the highest in Europe. The majority of the victims were the controversial Anabaptists of poor to modest social standing, despised by Catholics and Lutherans alike. By the mid-sixteenth century, and especially after the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis in 1558 made the border zones between France and the Netherlands safe again, Calvinism surged in the Low Countries. This proved more troublesome to Habsburg authorities, for not only did the Reformed religion gain strong bastions of adherence in such Walloon cities like Valenciennes and Tournai, and in the rural textile centers of Flanders' West Quarter, it also found a home among urban populations and in the ranks of the aristocracy, especially among the *gentilshommes*, the more numerous lesser nobility.¹⁴

¹² Joseph Perez, La revolución de las comunidades de Castilla (1520-1521) (Madrid, 1978; orig., 1970).

¹³ James Tracy, Emperor Charles V: Impresario of War (Cambridge, 2002).

¹⁴ Alastair Duke Reformation and Revolt in the Low Countries (London, 1990), J. G. de Hoop Scheffer, Geschiedenis der kerkhervorming in Nederland van haar onstaan tot 1531

Charles V had governed the Low Countries largely from Valladolid or while on campaign. He had scaled back urban particularism; he had increased the tax burden, especially on cities; he had clamped down hard on Protestantism, making the Low Countries a bulwark in the defense of Catholicism; and he had warned his son Philip in 1539 that these provinces were populated with “unappreciative and unruly people.”¹⁵ Yet at his abdication ceremony on October 25, 1555, at the Coudenberg palace in Brussels before the States General of the Netherlands and visiting dignitaries, emotions ran high, and if witnesses are to be believed, tears were shed.¹⁶

Neither the Burgundian dukes nor the early Habsburg rulers found the Low Countries easy to govern. As Charles V himself complained in 1531, “Everyone in the Low Countries demand privileges that are contrary to my sovereignty, as if I were their companion and not their lord.”¹⁷ William of Orange, in his *Apology*, explained why this was so: lordship in the Netherlands was not indivisibly located in a single title of rulership. Instead, since the fifteenth century, the princes of the Low Countries governed in the plural, their authority localized by province through titles of dukeship or countship. In the political and cultural realm, this created a central tension between Burgundian and Habsburg rulers, local elites, and regional power interests. Since the mid-fifteenth century, the Burgundian dukes had sought monarchical authority, even royal titles. That dream hit pay-dirt with their Habsburg heirs, especially in the person of Charles V. His campaign led by his chancellor Gattinara to burnish his image as world monarch was matched only by his Ottoman rival Suleiman I, who took to calling himself “Distributor of the Crowns to the Monarchs of the World,” and

2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1873), and Johan Decavele, *De Dageraad van de Reformatie in Vlaanderen* 2 vols. (Brussels, 1975).

¹⁵ Charles’s letter to Philip dated November 5, 1539 in Manuel Fernández Álvarez, ed., *Corpus Documental de Carlos V*, 5 vols. (Salamanca, 1973-1981), 2: 36

¹⁶ L.P. Gachard, ed., *Retraite et mort de Charles-Quint au monastère de Yuste*, 3 vols. (Brussels, 1854). For a summary of the abdication ceremony, *ibid.*, 1:80-105.

¹⁷ Tracy, *Emperor Charles V*, 53.

presented himself as heir to Alexander the Great.¹⁸ And yet, no matter how exalted the political title nor deep the imperial conceit, Charles V, like his son Philip II, ruled the Low Countries as dukes and counts of individual provinces. Because of his familial, cultural, and ethnic ties to Flanders, Charles V successfully managed this core tension between his imperial stature and his actual political authority in the Low Countries, continuing the Burgundian policy of patronage of both the *grands seigneurs* and the *gentilshommes*. While there were clear tensions over the emperor's hard line on the persecution of Protestantism, these did not paralyze the ability of his regents to govern the Netherlands territories effectively.

The political calculus shifted under Philip II after his accession to rulership over the northern provinces. A decade after Charles's abdication, Brussels had sunk into a morass of political turmoil and intrigue threatening to weaken Habsburg authority there. A well organized campaign by the nobility against the regent Margaret of Parma had been launched in 1563; by 1566 relations between local elites and governing authorities were parlous, if not entirely poisonous. The government, indeed civil order itself, was on the verge of collapse, with Calvinists taking to the streets and countryside in massive gatherings and with lesser and senior nobility determined to change the political order. Why this dramatic, rapid shift in political winds, and why the fraying of the allegiance to the Spanish Habsburgs by the historically loyal Low Country aristocracy, from the southern Walloon territories to the northern provinces? First, the tensions between royal and imperial models of rulership and an aristocracy and urban elite that favored a constitutional and contractual model of governance had long bedeviled politics in the Low Countries. These tensions only worsened with the early success of Protestantism in these territories. While Charles V managed both challenges, he did not eliminate their sources. Philip II acceded to the rulership over the Low Countries in 1555 just as Calvinism began to spike heavily, adding a new and even more pressing confessional challenge.

¹⁸ Geoffrey Parker, "The Political World of Charles V," in Hugo Soly, ed., Charles V, 1500-1558 (Antwerp, 199), 161.

Not only did some of the nobility take to the Reformed religion, they also intensified ties, both familial and political, to German territories in the empire. There had been several alliances struck in particular with the Lutheran nobility in the Rhineland area, including by the Count of Hoogstraten, Hendrik van Brederode, the Count of Hornes, and Karel van Bronkhorst and Batenburg, among others. Orange, of German descent, possessed the firmest ties to the evangelical princes in the empire, especially after his marriage to Anne of Saxony in 1561, niece of the powerful Lutheran Elector, Augustus of Saxony. As Liesbeth Geevers has recently explored, Orange slowly built an important—and independent—client network outside Philip II’s grasp, almost transforming him into a separate *reichsfürst*.¹⁹

The timing of this interlacing of parts of the Netherlands and German nobility is relevant. The Habsburg family itself had bifurcated into two main lines after Charles failed to secure the imperial crown for Philip: the Spanish Caroline branch and the Austrian Fernandine one, each moving into different political orbits. Just as the Netherlands nobility began to strengthen its ties to the empire, where evangelical princes had political and religious latitude, rulership over them fell to Philip II, whose Castilian commitments and outlook were decidedly different. True, Philip knew the Low Countries fairly well, having made his *grand tour* there in 1549 in a highly orchestrated effort to immerse him in the Burgundian-Habsburg world of court life and aristocratic camaraderie. But Philip was not Charles. Nor did he command French or know even the slightest Dutch, as was made painfully clear when the future Cardinal Granvelle had to speak on his behalf at Charles’s abdication ceremony in Brussels. He had none of Charles’s Burgundian cultural leanings, instead having been raised with a Castilian model of rulership encouraging princely *gravitas*.²⁰ Philip left Brussels for Spain in 1559, much as Charles V had left in 1517. But Philip departed never to return, and without the coterie of Low Country advisors his father had taken with him,

¹⁹ Liesbeth Geeves, “Family matters: William of Orange and the Habsburgs after the abdication of Charles V (1555),” *Renaissance Quarterly* 63 (2010): 459-490.

²⁰ José Luis Gonzalo Sánchez-Molero, *El aprendizaje cortesano de Felipe II (1527-1546): La formación de un príncipe del Renacimiento* (Madrid, 1999).

concentrating on building Madrid as a new court capital and pursuing his pressing commitments in Spain and the Mediterranean world. Philip's court was Castilian, with only his *guarda flamenca* a pool of Netherlanders, led by its captain Philip Montmorency, the Count of Hornes.²¹ Yet despite Hornes' access to the king, he never achieved the privileged insider status he desired nor the *ayuda de costa* he had sought; frustrated, he returned to Brussels in 1561. If Philip's father Charles had been an absent ruler over the Low Countries, he had nevertheless maintained a robust Burgundian ceremonial presence in its cities, from processions in his honor to his ritual presentation in artwork. Philip's failure to nourish this ceremonial agenda only compounded the political weakness his absence stirred. In his place, the king chose his half-sister Margaret of Parma as regent, advised by the bishop of Arras, Antoine Perrenot, the consummate Habsburg insider, and the ministers of the Council of State, the Council of Finance, and the Privy Council. The regent was capable but hobbled by the fact that most of her previous experience had been in Italy. Unlike her powerful equivalent in France, Catherine de Medici, she lacked political clout and a strong public presence, only adding to a sense of lordly absence at the center of Low Country political life.

In 1563, the senior nobility in the Netherlands organized a league whose aim was to oust the regent's senior advisor, Granvelle. He had been elevated to cardinal following the ecclesiastical reorganization of the Netherlands in 1555. The League boasted William of Orange's leadership, but also that of Lamoral, count of Egmont and hero of the battle of Saint Quentin, and the count of Hornes, whose deep experience in Spain gave him an exceptional understanding of Philip II and the Castilian *Consejo de Estado*. Their grievances were threefold: that the effort to reform the bishoprics of the Low Countries was in fact intended to insinuate a greater role for the inquisition to root out Protestantism, that Granvelle

²¹ Violet Soen, "Sent to Court to Serve the King: Flemish Nobles on Mission at the Spanish Court during the Dutch Revolt (1565-1576)" in A. Esteban Estríngana and J. I. Pulido Serrano, eds., *Élites de servicio - Servicio de élites. Medios, fines y logros del servicio al soberano en la Monarquía de los Austrias (siglos XVI y XVII)* (Madrid, forthcoming).

had become all too powerful and secretive, and that their voices had been diminished in the main governmental organs, especially the Council of State. Apart from the despised ecclesiastical reorganization, none of these issues was new; indeed, tensions over Dutch political constitutionalism and Habsburg centralizing tendencies as well as the problem of religious coexistence had confronted Charles V's government. Nevertheless, these differences had widened, with the powerful troika of senior nobility, for the first time, alienated from the corridors of government in Brussels.

All three of these men resented the perceived downgrading of their political standing and all three vehemently opposed the new bishopric scheme. While each had married into German imperial families, none had converted to Protestantism, though later Orange did, famously embracing Calvinism. The League they formed coalesced into a party affiliation, with livery and other symbols of association, and in 1565 they scored a sizable victory in the recall of Granvelle from Brussels. Demonized by these Dutch *grandees*, Granvelle was hardly the ministerial yes-man he was made out to be. He had opposed the controversial stationing of a *tercio* of Spanish troops on the southern border of France in 1559, as did the States General, and he had not flinched from opposing certain aspects of royal policy towards Brussels.²² But he became the sinister symbol of the *grandees*' exclusion from the inner circles of royal access, and his growing power, linked to the heightened tensions over the heresy placards and Calvinism's surge, became the tipping point that set the senior nobility in explicit opposition to royal policy in the Netherlands.

In Spain, Egmont and Orange had a sympathetic ear with the *ebolistas*, a court faction centered around Ruy Gómez whose federalist model of imperial administration was naturally attractive to their political interests.²³ When Philip

²² Mía J. Rodríguez-Salgado, "King, Bishop, Pawn? Philip II and Granvelle in the 1550s and 1560s," in Krista De Jonge, Gustaaf Janssens, eds., Les Granvelle et les anciens Pays-Bas (2000), esp. 119-20.

²³ James M. Boyden, The Courtier and the King: Ruy Gómez de Silva, Philip II, and the Court of Spain (Berkeley, 1995); David Lagomarsino, "Court Factions and the

had left Brussels in 1559, he brought two Netherlanders with him: Josse de Courtewille, a first secretary, and Charles de Tisnacq, keeper of the seals. Among myriad duties these men handled correspondence with the Council of State in Brussels, conducted in French, through two monthly deliveries of mail by the Tassis family, the couriers for Habsburg monarchy. While Orange and Egmont communicated their political advice through this channel, they also had separate access to Madrid, especially to Granvelle's court enemy Francisco de Eraso, thanks to the courier bag of the Spanish *contador* in the Netherlands, Cristóbal de Castellanos, who had granted them the right to send letters in it.²⁴ This access to the court, and the successful campaign to oust Granvelle, emboldened Orange and Egmont, and encouraged the greater cadre of lesser nobility. After Granvelle's departure, they pressed their political interests harder, even sending Egmont to Spain in spring 1565 to negotiate with the king on a range of issues, the foremost of which concerned the harshness of the heresy placards.

Political and religious tensions came to a head in 1566, the *wonderjaar*. Inspired by the success of the League, a subset of the *gentilshommes* pressed for a suspension of the hated heresy placards, encouraged by Egmont's overly optimistic report that he had gained verbal concessions from Philip II.²⁵ The lesser nobility gathered *en masse* in a remarkably well coordinated event in Brussels on April 5 at the Coudenberg palace in Brussels, where more than two hundred marched in procession to petition the Regent to suspend the heresy placards and support their earlier call, signed by four hundred *gentilshommes*, to respect provincial and municipal rights and privileges. Reportedly dismissed as nothing more than beggars, they rallied around this insult and made it the basis of their party affiliation, donning Mendicant clothes, forging medals and insignia

Formulation of Spanish Policy towards the Netherlands (1559-67)," (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1973).

²⁴ Liesbeth Geevers, Gevallen vazallen: de integratie van Oranje, Egmont en Horn in de Spaans-Habsburgse monarchie (Amsterdam University Press 2008).

²⁵ A. Goosens, Le Comte Lamoral d'Egmond (1522-1568): les aléas du pouvoir de la haute noblesse à l'aube de la Révolte des Pays-Bas (Brussels, 2003); A. Goosens, "La fortune du comte Lamoral d'Egmond vers 1567-1568," Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire 70 (1992): 357-380.

with beggars' bowls, and rallying around the satiric motto, "Faithful to the King to the Point of Beggary." Boxed in, the Regent temporarily relaxed the strict heresy placards. In the aftermath, Calvinists everywhere held assemblies in open air and in cities. In August the first of a series of devastating iconoclasm riots swept over the entire Netherlands, starting among the artisans and textile worker in Flanders' West Quarter.²⁶

The radicalization of the Beggars was as swift as the iconoclasm riots were violent. Habsburg authority in Brussels had been traduced, and religious turmoil, followed by a Calvinist military insurgency, shattered the political landscape. These tremors shifted the dynamic among the elite though without altering the fundamental distinction between the senior nobility who had formed the League and the lesser nobility who had formed the Beggars. During the most heated and violent days of the iconoclasm riots, Orange and Egmont professed their fidelity to the Spanish king. They had opposed Habsburg policy and encouraged a softening of the heresy placards. Both, however, grounded their positions on pragmatic concerns and both considered themselves loyal vassals who were proffering critical yet respectful advice. Nonetheless, there were clear differences between these two grandees. Egmont was the more forthrightly loyalist and more obviously Catholic. Already, Orange, German by birth and with a clientage network in the empire, had become an outspoken advocate for "freedom of conscience" on religious matters, having spoken out on December 31, 1564, at the Council of State against princes who violated this principle.²⁷ Neither men openly embraced the Beggars movement. Indeed, while both enacted concessions to Calvinists after the heresy placards had been suspended, both persecuted iconoclasts after the shocking fall riots.

Nevertheless, from afar and certainly from the perspective of Philip II, the League and the Beggars were homogenous: men close to him like Hornes, Egmont, and Orange were guilty of the worst species of treason. True, they were a far cry from Hendrik van Brederode, lord of Vianen, the Calvinist leader of the

²⁶ Arnade, Beggars, Iconoclasts and Civic Patriots.

²⁷ Swart, William of Orange, 17.

Beggars, who prided himself on his anti-Catholic antics, including dressing in mock mendicant garb, raising beer-laden toasts to the Beggars' cause in public, and brazenly feeding Eucharist wafers to his pet parrot! But to the king, whatever distinctions among the dissenting Dutch nobility might exist were secondary to the fact that the Low Countries had been strafed by religious riots and a Calvinist insurgency. What is more, there were royalist grandees whose fidelity to Philip II was unshakable during the worst of the political and religious turmoil of 1566. Among the most prominent were the nobleman Charles, Count of Berlaymont, and Philip of Sainte-Aldegonde, Baron of Noircarmes, who were savvy clients of Habsburg patronage. Berlyamont, from a Catholic Hainault family, became a close advisor of the regent, and Noircarmes gained the governorship of Hainault and Cambrai, even though he had been a member of the League against Granvelle. In March 1567 Noircarmes proved his credentials to Philip II when he besieged and routed the Calvinist insurgents in Valenciennes.²⁸ But by far the greatest rival to Orange was Philip de Croy, Duke of Aerschot, from the powerful Hainault family that had long served the dukes of Burgundy. He was a critic of the Spanish Habsburgs, though he had opposed Granvelle's dismissal. He supported the constitutional demands of the dissenting noblemen, but was a strong Catholic, and as the Dutch Revolt radicalized, he grew more fixed in the king's orbit, though Philip II mistrusted him. Aerschot was poised as a powerful counterweight to Orange, with whom he alternately negotiated and spared.

The violence of iconoclasm shook the political terrain in Brussels, and set the Dutch Revolt in full motion. Following the chaos of the fall riots, a short-lived Calvinist military uprising and attempts to accommodate to Calvinist public worship, Philip II dispatched Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, the duke of Alba, to Brussels.²⁹ Alba's arrival on August 22, 1567 began a counter-offensive with a harsh military and religious crackdown. It included the impaneling of the Council

²⁸ Violet Soen, "Collaborators and Parvenus? Berlaymont and Noircarmes, Loyal Noblemen in the Dutch Revolt," *Dutch Crossing* 35 (2011): 20-38.

²⁹ William S. Maltby, *Alba: A Biography of Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, Third Duke of Alba, 1507-1582* (Berkeley, 1983); Henry Kamen: *The Duke of Alba* (New Haven, 2004).

of Troubles, the garrisoning of troops in several cities, and indictments of treason and heresy against countless dissenters, from ordinary iconoclasts to the senior grandees. Hornes and Egmont were caught in Alba's dragnet, and died on the scaffold professing their Catholicism and fidelity to the king.³⁰ Orange, who had the good sense to flee in advance of Alba's arrival, established his base in Dillenberg. With his clientage networks built up over a decade among German evangelical princes, Orange prepared to wage war against Alba's forces. The majority of the elites in the Low Countries, from the grandees to the urban patricians, were still Catholics, with many, if not most, not ready to break with Habsburg authority, so much so that recent scholarship has emphasized the incipient Dutch Revolt as a civil war.³¹

That the Revolt gained momentum after the iconoclasm riots and Alba's brutal assertion of his commandership is both remarkable and surprising. The Beggars' movement had been tainted by the excesses of religious violence, its charismatic leader Brederode had unexpectedly died of natural causes, its other sympathizers had fled or been apprehended by Alba. Orange, the richest grandee, was in exile in Dillenberg, his military campaign of 1568 no match for Alba's superior forces and organization. What is more, as noted above, the majority of citizens remained good Catholics. While critical of an absentee king and zealous about their legal rights and privileges, they were hardly ready to wage war. Alba's Council of Troubles was devastatingly effective, with almost nine thousand tried for treason or heresy. Most fled, but 1,083 less lucky were executed.

Alba's regime was a military occupation, and among moderates the violence of the garrisoned Army of Flanders' soldiers against ordinary townspeople, the ruthlessness of the Council of Troubles' punishment, the highly unpopular execution of Egmont and Hornes, and the trampling upon urban and provincial

³⁰ G. Janssens, De graven Egmond en Horn: slachtoffers van de politieke repressie in de Spaanse Nederlanden (Brussels, 2003).

³¹ Henk van Nierop, Treason in the North Quarter: War, Terror and the Rule of Law in the Dutch Revolt, trans. J. C. Grayson (Princeton, 2009); Judith Polleman, "Countering the Reformation in France and the Netherlands: Clerical Leadership and Catholic Violence, 1560-1585," Past & Present, no. 190 February 2006: 83-120.

legal rights stirred antagonism. What is more, unlike France during its religious wars, Alba never organized the equivalent of a Catholic League as a party organization, nor did he mobilize the clergy as a political and religious resource. Instead, he governed as a polarizing and authoritarian figure, and the sizable moderate block that might have been effectively cultivated to build support in the aftermath of the Calvinist excesses of 1566 instead grew weary, if not downright hostile, to Alba's rule.³² One only need read the absorbing diary pages of the Catholic merchant and man of letters, Marcus van Vaernewijck, in Ghent during its military occupation to track the building anger among middle of the road Catholics.³³ Van Vaernewijck was a rich burgher, municipal officer holder, and local humanist who was appalled by the Calvinist iconoclasts whom he denounced as dangerous rabble. He welcomed the king's Army of Flanders in 1567. But after a year during which the garrison in Ghent had run roughshod over its citizens with verbal and physical violence he railed that the city had become a "slaughterhouse," and that Ghentenars had been subjected to an "Egyptian bondage."³⁴

If Spanish authority now took the form of a military occupation, the Low Countries was caught up in the Sea Beggars movement, the Orangist and largely Calvinist forces who swept through Zeeland and Holland in 1572 seizing control of towns—Amsterdam excepted until 1578--- and shifting municipal government into the hands of their allies. While the majority of Holland and Zeeland's inhabitants remained Catholic, the Beggars party made these two provinces the nerve center of the Revolt.³⁵ For the next five years, the Low Countries was engulfed in warfare, and Alba and his successors' brutal sack of cities, coupled with several mutinies of underpaid Army of Flanders' soldiers, provoked a steady

³² On the moderates, see Juliaan Woltjer, "Political Moderates and Religious Moderates in the Revolt of the Netherlands," in Philippe Benedict, et al., Reformation, Revolt and Civil War in France and the Netherlands 1555-1585 (Amsterdam, 1999): 185-200.

³³ Marcus van Vaernewijck, Van die beroerlicke tijden in die Nederlanden en voornamelijk in Ghendt, 1566-68, ed., Ferd. Vanderhaeghen, 5 vols. (Ghent, 1872)

³⁴ Van Vaernewijck, Van die beroerlicke tijden, 4, 130-33, 281.

³⁵ Judith Pollman, Catholic Identity and Religious Change in the Habsburg Netherlands, 1530-1635 (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press).

stream of political rhetoric against the Spanish that shifted from the defense of aristocratic prerogatives and the religious call for freedom of conscience to a populist and broader-based defense of civic republicanism, perhaps the most potent of all political idioms in the urban-rich Low Countries.³⁶ Orange brilliantly joined the aristocratic imagery of a good Burgundian prince with a political vocabulary of civic rights, touting himself as both Father of the Fatherland and *bon patriot*, and throwing his energy behind uniting southern and northern territories, Catholics and Protestants, who opposed Spanish Habsburg rule. Orange played to a middle ground and to a political model that united dissenting elites around a mythical Burgundian past and a polity of multi-confessionalism and regional pluralism. But he encountered two intractable stumbling blocks: the increasing separatism of Holland and Zeeland and uncompromising Calvinists, both in north and south, determined to disallow Catholic practice. In 1577, after Holland and Zeeland had increasingly gone their own way, radical Calvinists seized power in the Brabant and Flanders in Ghent, Brussels, and Antwerp, the most important cities.³⁷ With their rule came a renewed wave of iconoclasm and anti-Catholic rhetoric, despite Orange's efforts to the contrary and despite the fact that he himself had embraced Calvinism in 1573. This violence was a step too far for many of the south's grandees, especially the party of the *malcontents*. They had sought a moderate solution to the political turmoil, favoring the assertion of traditional aristocratic rights in the governance of the state and a peaceful solution to religious divisions. Appalled by the new wave of Calvinist violence, in 1577 they signed the Treaty of Arras, accepting Alessandro Farnese, the duke of Parma, as the rightful governor general of the Netherlands, and reconciling with the king. Farnese regained the south for the Spanish king, but not Holland, Zeeland, and its smaller allied territories, whose separatism and abjuration of the king would not finally be formally settled until 1648. By this time, the United Provinces had

³⁶ Arnade, Beggars, Iconoclasts and Civic Patriots

³⁷ G. Marnef, "Brabants Calvinisme in opmars: de weg naar de Calvinistische Republieken te Antwerpen, Brussel en Mechelen, 1577-1580," Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis 70 (1987): 7-21.

established their own sprawling maritime empire, hectoring the Spanish overseas as they had done on their own turf.

In the crucible of the wonder year of 1566, the jurist and Council of State officer Christoffel Assonleville had written to Cardinal Granvelle that the incipient Beggars movement was split between “Gueux de religion et des Gueux d’etat,” that is, between Beggars motivated by the religious question and those animated by politics.³⁸ Assonleville thought the distinction was false, a mere political ploy to use religion as a surrogate for a political agenda. He was partially right, in the sense that all the elite dissenters and rebels in the Low Countries were keen to defend a fundamental sense of *amour propre*---the honor and political access they thought should be theirs by birthright. Grandees like Orange, Egmont, Hornes and Aerschot had in common a desire to restore their influence in the central organs of state authority. None liked their demoted status, nor the prerogative of Madrid over Brussels.

But religion was not the mask that Assonleville considered it, and ultimately, the hard line position of Zeeland and Holland’s Beggars against multiconfessionalism, even as they allowed freedom of conscience, and the radicalism of the Calvinist republics that sprang up in 1577 in Brabant and Flanders cleaved the *grands seigneurs* and the *gentilshommes*. After Farnese’s reconquest of remaining pockets of the rebellious south in 1585, his generous peace terms went a long way in easing political reconciliation. But, ultimately, as Henk van Nierop has observed, the great nobility of both the Spanish Netherlands of the south and the United Provinces of the north would decline in political status, if for different reasons.³⁹ In Flanders, Brabant, and the Walloon territories, they played second fiddle in the seventeenth century to a nobility of the robe whose titles came from patents granted by the governors general. In the United Provinces, urban patricians

³⁸ Letter of June 30, 1566 in Edmond M. Pouillet, ed., Correspondence du Cardinal de Granvelle, 1565-86, Vol. 1 (Brussels. 1877), 339.

³⁹ Van Nierop, “The Nobility and the Revolt of the Netherlands,” 98.

dominated political life, as they had in the past, since the *grands seigneurs* had never been as prominent there. Religion would continue to be a fundamental wedge dividing a firmly Catholic Spanish Netherlands from a Calvinist-identified United Provinces. But here, too, divisions were not as fixed as they might seem. A large Catholic population flourished in the north, contact and trade between north and south remained robust, and merchant families like the Van der Meulens of Holland and the della Failles of Brabant intermarried, maintaining kin and trade networks across confessional and political borders.⁴⁰ As the patriotic lore of the Dutch Revolt took shape in the seventeenth century in the United Provinces, helping to cement the *Leyenda Negra* of Spain, a more complicated reality of religious pluralism, economic exchange, and international contacts in the broader Habsburg world flourished.

⁴⁰ Gisela Jongbloet-Van Houtte, ed., Brieven en andere Bescheiden Betreffende Daniel van der Meulen, 1584-1600 (The Hague, 1986); Wilfrid Bruelez, De Firma Della Faille en de internationale handel van Vlaamse firma's in de 16e eeuw (Brussel, 1959).