Patriotism in Dutch literature (c. 1650–c. 1750)

Marijke Meijer Drees

‘Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori’: to die for the fatherland is sweet and beautiful. This line comes from the second of Horace’s Roman odes, which is dedicated to the real happiness of the human being and the greatness of Rome under Augustus. The common patria was highly esteemed in those days; it coincided as it were with the res publica Romana, that is to say with the ethical, religious and political values which Rome embodied and symbolized.¹ This Rome has been the great inspiration to entire generations of later Western European poets who have sung of heroic self-sacrifices for their fatherlands.

Dutch literature offers an abundance of texts in which the patriotism of the past resounds. Reading them, we repeatedly encounter paraphrases of ‘Pro patria mori’ – the famous Horatian line – as well as quotations from in particular Virgil’s Aeneid,² and the dictum ‘Pugna pro patria’, which is attributed to Cato.

The subject of this chapter is patriotism in Dutch literature from approximately 1650 until 1750. I consider demonstrations of this patriotism illustrative of a specific aspect of the image-building in this period: the cultivation of a ‘national’ identity, a Dutch self-image.

In this chapter I focus on the concept of ‘fatherland’. My findings connect with those of a number of studies undertaken by historians. I will try to demonstrate that the broad outlines of this concept can be specified on the basis of literary sources. In doing so, I will focus on two symbols related to the concept of fatherland: the lion and the cow.

First, then, ‘fatherland’: Dutch historians nowadays discuss this concept in a broader political-historical frame of reference such as nation-building or ‘Dutch’ national consciousness.³ This approach makes
it possible to pay attention to matters like the variation in terms that referred to ‘fatherland’, the emotions this concept could evoke and the different images related to national consciousness. A second characteristic of these modern studies is that the authors no longer regard the fatherland as a unity. From around the 1960s, historians have ceased to accept the image of national unity as developed by their predecessors. That image has been shattered.

Let me summarize the views historians now hold of the period 1650–1750. First, leaving aside the eternal, divine fatherland and restricting the use of the concept to the earthly and temporal, the meanings of ‘fatherland’ vary depending on whether they are local (the city), regional (mostly Holland) or supra-regional (the entire Republic). Second, historians have argued that although patriotism could manifest itself in a great number of social and political variants and intensities, it still lacked profundity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And finally, it has become clear that nationalism cannot have developed evenly towards the Patriot period.

To what extent does all this apply to literature? The primary sources that I am examining consist mainly of anthologies, collected poetical works of individual authors and historical dramas about the sieges of the cities of Haarlem and Leiden. For the greater part, this literature was written in Holland, the province with by far the largest population and which formed the heart of the Union. It is important to establish this in advance, for it is common for the concept of ‘fatherland’ to be given a broader meaning than just ‘Hollands’, especially in texts where the war trumpet is blown with fanaticism. In these texts, it seems the patriotic emotions are felt rather more profoundly and intensely.

Now that we are armed with this knowledge, let us take a look at one example from our material, and investigate the allusions to the concept ‘fatherland.’ The example concerns the Olyf(-)krans der vre(e)de, an anthology that had two separate but very similar editions, which more or less mark the boundaries of the period under study. The first edition dates from 1649, the second from 1748. Both editions were published in Amsterdam and contain poems, speeches and other texts on the Peace of Münster and on Amsterdam city hall. The majority of contributions are poems, mainly by authors like Brandt, Vondel and Vos, living in Amsterdam.

To start with, I would like to draw your attention to a speech in both Olyfkransen, entitled ‘Trompet of lofrede over den eeuwigen Nederlantschen vrede’ (Trumpet or eulogy on the eternal Dutch peace). Unfortunately, we do not know who the author is, who, in addressing the
States of Holland and Westfriesland, jubilantly praises them in periphrases in italics, such as *grontleggers van den Eeuwige Vrede* and *Handhavers des Hollantschen Vrydoms* (‘founders of the Eternal Peace’, ‘upholders of Holland’s freedom’). Moreover, the rulers of Holland are accredited with the realization of the ‘Nederlandtschen vrede’ (Dutch peace). But the author makes yet more propaganda for Holland which finds expression in the three themes encountered elsewhere in the anthology: the history of the Batavian Rebellion of the Hollanders, the brave war against Spain and the worldwide fame of Amsterdam.

In the ‘Trompet’ we find two essential meanings of the concept of ‘fatherland’: the fatherland in the sense of native country and that of the country where one actually lives (and which, for instance to Southern immigrants, was no longer the same as their native country). This distinction is of classical origin. Thus, in *De legibus* Cicero similarly distinguishes between two *patriae*: ‘unam naturae, alteram civitatis’. In both the *Olyfkransen* it is the *patria* ‘civitatis’ or ‘communis’ which prevails, or, in other words, the fatherland as a community of citizens which takes precedence over all individual interest. The loyalty towards the common fatherland matches Cicero’s views exactly (I quote from an English translation): ‘But that fatherland must stand first in our affection in which the name of the republic signifies the common citizenship of all of us. For her it is our duty to die, to her to give ourselves entirely, to place on her altar, and, as it were, to dedicate to her service, all we possess.’ This Ciceronian concept of fatherland centralizes altruistic self-sacrifice, and so it is understandable that in the *Olyfkransen* we find so many retrospectives on the common past of revolts while honourably mentioning heroes who altruistically defended the fatherland. The common past covers both the Eighty Years War and the Batavian period.

If we are to know exactly what territory is covered by this common fatherland, there is no single answer. The two *Olyfkransen* mention one local fatherland, Amsterdam. That is where the primary loyalty appears to be. This is not in the least surprising, for most of the contributions are devoted to the foundation of the Amsterdam city hall and the poems about the Peace of Münster are not infrequently dedicated to Amsterdam burgomasters. But the common fatherland may also extend into the province of Holland (occasionally including Zeeland) and even cover the entire Republic – all this variation may occur within one and the same text. The largest fatherland is called ‘Neederlandt’, ‘de Nederlanden’, ‘de Verenigde Nederlanden’, etc. Occasionally collectivizing possessives have been added: ‘ons’/’onze’. Exceptional is the
phrase expressing collective affection ‘ons lieve Nederlandt’ (found in the ‘Oratie van de vrede’ by Van Boxhorn, a professor in Leiden).

The other texts I have studied here do not alter these findings. Poems with a mainly biblical frame of reference – the *Olyfkransen*, by the way, do not provide any examples – obviously accentuate the largest fatherland and the unanimous piety of this common fatherland, sometimes in an odd combination of biblical and profane metaphors. An example of this can be seen in a pamphlet by the Amsterdam poetess Cornelia van de Veer on a sea battle won by De Ruyter and Tromp in 1673:

*Vleght Kranssen voor uw BATAVIEREN Die onder Jesus strijd-Banieren, Elk streden als een Josua* \(^{18}\)

(Wreathe garlands for your BATAVIANS who, under Jesus’ banners each fought like a Joshua)

Pamphlets written in certain years of crisis, and occasionally included in an anthology, show us the common *patria* must chiefly have been an ideal. The *Bloemkrans van verscheiden gedichten* (1659) includes an Amsterdam pamphlet poem from 1650, one of the many from the year in which stadholder William II clashed seriously with the city of Amsterdam. In ‘Aan de makers van de Bikkerse beroerte en oogen-zalve’ \(^{19}\) an anonymous poet denounces the ‘Facti-geest’ (faction-spirit) that is abroad in Holland, urging that it be replaced by a unanimous spirit of freedom. \(^{20}\)

*Maar ijder Hollands hart, en hoofden aldermeest Staan voor de Vrijheid nu gemoedigd vast als Leeuwen.*

Hollanders who, like lions, stand firm for their freedom – this simile brings us to one of the patriotic symbols I want to discuss briefly: the lion.

Lion symbolism is of heraldic origin. In the early part of the Eighty Years War the heraldic lion with sword and arrows is represented, for example, on coins and prints that are part of the princely propaganda. \(^{21}\) Literature depicts the lion in a similar way. But as Marijke Spies showed in her article ‘Verbeeldingen van vrijheid’ (see n. 21), in literature a new lion metaphor arose. We find this in the world of Leiden University, in the wake of a student from the circle around Janus Dousa: in 1586, Georgius Benedicti Wertelo published a small epic in two volumes on William of Orange (*De rebus gestis illustrissimi principis Guilielmii, comitis Nassoui etc. libri II*). The end of this work, before inciting a continuation of the fight, gives a description of the
general sadness at the death of the prince of Orange (who had been assassinated in 1584). Inhabitants from Holland and Zeeland stand around the bier weeping, and, as Benedicti tells us (I quote the Dutch translation):\textsuperscript{22}

opdat niet hun buurman, de zee, minder bedroefd was dan de Nederlanders heeft, naar men zegt, de stromende Nereus zoveel tranen vergoten, dat de Nederlandse Leeuw middenin de golven van de zee stond, met in zijn rechterklauw een zwaard en een schild in zijn linker, jou, Parma, en de Spaanse tiran met de dood bedreigend.

(lest their neighbour, the sea, be less sad than the Netherlands, the flowing Nereus shed so many tears, that the Lion of the Netherlands stood in the midst of the sea’s waves, carrying in his right claw a sword and a shield in his left, threatening you, Parma, and the Spanish tyrant with death.)

The warlike lion representing the militant fatherland and its heroic inhabitants becomes an extremely fruitful literary symbol. It is used particularly during the Peace of Münster and the various sea wars. All this battle literature teems with lions, sea lions, water lions and war lions, sometimes with additions like ‘Bataafs’, ‘Hollands’ or ‘Nederlands’. Thus, in one of the many poems on his death (in 1676), Michiel de Ruyter is called ‘de Fenix der Bataafsche Waterleeuwen’ (phoenix of the Batavian water lions) providing a nice rhyme with ‘De grote RUITER, eer en wel- lust van de Zeeuwen’ (the great RUITER, honour and pride of the inhabitants of Zeeland).\textsuperscript{23} It is mainly the inhabitants of Holland and Zeeland (and occasionally Friesland) who are involved in the lion symbolism.

The festivities in Amsterdam on the occasion of the Peace of Münster featured a cow – not as the main character from the well-known farce by Bredero, but as a patriotic symbol. The two Olyfkransen contain the following description of a \textit{tableau vivant} by Samuel Coster. Spectators saw:\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Argus} met hondert oogen, daer mede bedienende de Heeren Staten van Holland, die haer [= die ogen], door het lieflijk pijpen van eenen loozen Mercurius (hy kome waer van daen hy kome) nimmermeer in ’t slaap laten speien, maer de Koe (dat is haar elk aenge-name Vaderland) als wakende sorg-dragers wel sullen bewaren.\textsuperscript{25}

(Hundred-eyed Argus thus served the Gentlemen of the States of Holland, who, by means of the sweet piping of a cunning Mercury (I know not whence he came) never let them [i.e. the eyes]
be played to sleep, but will as watchful carers guard the Cow (that is their Fatherland loved by each one.)

The fatherland, Holland, is represented here by a cow, a dairy cow, guarded by the States of Holland with Argus’ eyes. There was a striking similarity between this presentation by Coster and a relief placed over the entrance to the burgomaster’s room in Amsterdam city hall, inaugurated in 1655. In this relief the guarded cow represents the prosperous city of Amsterdam, the aldermen of the town are the Arguses.

What was the origin of this concept of the (dairy) cow as a metaphor for Holland or the metropolis of Amsterdam and what did it appeal to? What follows is based partly on considerations of paintings with cows, collected in the catalogue *Meesterlijk vee* from 1988.

Traditionally, the cow lends herself as a representation of the prosperous fatherland that is exploited by some political power or other and in consequence loses its prosperity. In political prints and *Geuzenliederen* (Beggars’ songs) from the Eighty Years War we see the Netherlands (or just Holland) represented as a cow being milked dry. Almost a hundred years later, looking back over the second sea war with Britain, the poet Antonides van der Goes writes in his *Bellone aen bant, of vrede tusschen Brittanje en de Verenigde Nederlanden* (1667): ‘de melkkoe moest om hals, men had haer dood gezwooren’ (the dairy cow had to die, they had sworn her death). In this type of presentation the cow from the Netherlands or Holland is always associated with prosperity, which may originate from the association of the cow with ‘Terra’ (earth), one of the four elements. Carel van Mander mentions the cow as one of Terra’s attributes in his *Van de Uitbeeldinghen der Figueren*, a section of his *Schilder-boeck* (1604). He tells us of the shepherd Argus who guards the cow Io, Argus with his hundred eyes representing heaven and its stars and the cow representing earth. Of course, Van Mander and other authors knew the relation of the cow to earthly abundance and prosperity from the bible: in Genesis 41:17–30, Joseph gives the familiar explanation of pharaoh’s dream about the seven thin and the seven fat cows. Also because of their number, the fat cows were eventually to be used as metaphors for the seven provinces which were united in defence against external enemies.

But there is more. The cow was also fitted into the historical conception of ancient Holland as a traditionally prosperous country with simple and brave inhabitants (farmers and fishermen). It was an image that arose from the rediscovered previous history of Holland as a ‘Batavian Arcadia’, a region abounding in water and lush meadows. From the second part of the sixteenth century, this rustic Holland concept was confirmed more
or less by reality: cattle-breeding in Holland had grown into what may well have been the most important trade in Europe. Cattle-breeding was considered extremely profitable, and was also a result of improvements in the reclamation and impoldering of land. From Holland, cows were exported to the whole of Europe and herds from other countries were grazed, fattened and sold there. Between 1550 and 1650 Holland became the biggest exporter of cream and butter.33

Literary figures recognized this; thus Ystroom (1671) by Antonides van der Goes mentions ‘ossen’ (oxen) from Denmark that ‘zich zelf herscheppen’ (transform themselves) in the ‘vette weien’ (lush meadows) of Holland, while elsewhere in the poem we find an impression of the scenery of the polders in North Holland, where rich dairy produce, fat cows, lush meadows and brave inhabitants are to be found.34

But it was primarily Vondel who managed to evoke the typical scenery of Holland, with cattle, dairy produce in abundance and ‘Melckers’ (milkers) from the farms. Thus for example in his Vredezang (Olyf-)krans 1649, 1748): ‘Mael het Haerlemsch meir tot lant . . . Melcker valt aen ’t hotter karmen’ (Drain the Harlemmermeer . . . Milker set to work creaming the butter)35 and at the end of the play Leeuwendaalers the chorus sings:

De koeien geven melck en room. Het is al boter tot den boom.
Men zingt al PAIS en VRE.
(The cows yield milk and cream. There is butter everywhere.
Peace and Harmony are hymned.)

Leeuwendaalers is called a ‘Lantspel’ and even though it is richly adorned with Vergilian literary motifs, we can still recognize the world of the farmer in Holland. Vondel intended this, as we can see also from his motivation of the god Pan’s appearance: ‘de veerijckheit der Nederlanden’ (the abundance of cattle of the Netherlands) requires ‘een Veegodheid’ (cattle god), Vondel writes in the dedication to his play. In that same dedication he links the Hollandic character of Leeuwendaalers to the profession, recreational activities and disposition of the figure he is addressing.36 For example he praises his Dutch righteousness (‘rechtschapen Neerlanders aert’) and frankness (‘goetrontheid’), and these are not casually chosen characteristics. To a high degree they correspond to characteristics traditionally considered typical of the Batavian Hollanders.37

The final point I want to make concerns the transmission of this image beyond Holland. This rural concept of Holland must also have been known in England; witness for example the mention in Haley's
study\textsuperscript{38} of the negative epithet ‘butter-boxes’ which the English applied to Hollanders. An anti-Holland pamphlet from 1664 (one year before the second sea war) mentioned by Haley shows a similar tendency: it is entitled ‘The Dutch Boar [= Boer] Dissected, or a Description of HOGGLAND [= Holland]’ and contains the phrase: ‘A Dutchman is a lusty, fat, two legged Cheesworm: or a Creature that is so addicted to eating butter, drinking fat drink, and sliding [‘skating’ as paraphrased by Haley] that all the World knows him for a slippery Fellow.’\textsuperscript{39} The slipperiness this ‘cheesworm’ is blamed for can be traced back to a winter entertainment well known in Holland: skating – think of the winter scenes painted by Avercamp (literary ice-sport is offered in Six van Chandelier’s poem ‘s Amsterdammers winter\textsuperscript{40}). But of course ‘sliding’ is also the opposite of righteousness and frankness.

In conclusion, the literary sources I have examined thus far partly confirm the views of Dutch historians in my view. Indeed there was no single common concept of ‘fatherland’, and one certainly can speculate about the profundity of patriotism in the period concerned. On the other hand, the literature of the period would have us believe in unanimous patriotism, and writers considered it useful to propagate this ideal, using symbols like the cow or the lion. The cow had to be defended against foreign enemies; the lion had to fight against them.