

## **‘Liberty, Tyranny and Idolatry in Calvinist Political Thought’**

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Freya Sierhuis studied at the University of Amsterdam and the University of Cambridge and did her PhD at the European University Institute, with a thesis on the literary culture of the Arminian controversy in the Dutch Republic. She is currently working as a research fellow at the Department of English of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich with a project on the role of friendship in the political thought of Fulke Greville. She is interested in early modern literature and political culture, and in particular the relations between conceptions of the passions and political and religious ideas. She has written on the role of catharsis in Joost van den Vondel's biblical tragedies, on Stoicism in early modern English literature, and on Machiavellianism in Dutch revenge tragedy.

### Selected Publications:

*The Literature of the Arminian Controversy. Religion, Politics and the Stage* (under consideration with Oxford University Press).

‘The Idol of the Heart. Liberty, Tyranny and Idolatry in the Work of Fulke Greville’, *Modern Language Review*, 106 (2011).

‘Revenge, Resistance and the Problem of Machiavellianism. P.C. Hooft’s *Geeraerd van Velsen*’, *Dutch Crossing*, 34 (2010).

‘Therapeutic Tragedy: Remorse, Compassion and Reconciliation in Vondel’s Joseph Plays’, Special Issue: *The Passions in European Political Thought and Literature, 1600-1900*, *European Review of History*, 17 (2010).

### Introduction to the Paper:

This paper aims to investigate the theological roots of the Calvinist critique of absolute monarchy. Calvinism’s sacramental theology with its rigorous rejection of real presence in the Eucharist has often been seen to lie at heart of its attack on traditional notions of the body politic and of sacramental kingship. I propose that it is the notion of idolatry, as defined in chapters x-xiii of book I of Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, rather than its doctrine of the

Eucharist, which fuelled Calvinism's attack on transcendental monarchical power. I argue that already in the *Institutes*, but even more strongly in Calvin's biblical commentaries, an intimate connection is made between arbitrary power and idolatry, between spiritual and political tyranny, which endangers the very balance between political servitude and spiritual liberty which the *Institutes* is intent on maintaining. While Calvin's successors, as well as the Huguenot Monarchomach authors such as Hubert Languet and Philip du Plessis-Mornay take up this nexus of ideas, it is only in the next generation of Calvinist political thinkers that the connection between spiritual and political tyranny becomes subject of political argument, as well as philosophical speculation.

Focusing in particular on the work of the politician, poet and political philosopher Fulke Greville (1554-1628) and the Huguenot soldier, polemicist and poet Theodore Agrippa d'Aubigné (1552-1630), I will show how these authors analysed absolute monarchical power in terms of voluntary servitude, springing from the mind's ineradicable tendency to erect and enslave itself to its own idols. In treating the work of Greville and d'Aubigné in conjunction, the continuing intellectual and political connections between English Calvinism and Continental Protestantism are emphasized. In contrast to the dominant view which sees Calvinism's 'radical moment' as having passed by the late 1570s, I claim that in many ways, the most trenchant analyses of the nature of absolute power were in fact only to come into fruition in the early decades of the seventeenth century.

#### Bibliographical note:

There are some useful online resources:

<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/gfulke.htm> contains biographical information, as well as links to Fulke Greville's works. It might perhaps be a good idea for readers to look at *Caelica* 91, 'Rewards of the Earth, Nobility and Fame', and 39, 'The Pride of Flesh by Reach of Human Wit'.

<http://www.agrippadaubigne.org/> contains a biography of Agrippa d'Aubigné, and links to some of his works.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=TJlgntCrZawC> Agrippa d'Aubigné's *Les Tragiques* on Google Books.