THE SELF-PERCEPTION OF
EARLY MODERN CAPITALISTS

Margaret C. Jacob and Catherine Secretan
Chapter 4

Merchants on the Defensive

National Self-Images in the Dutch Republic of the Late Eighteenth Century

Dorothee Strukenboom, Roosevelt Academy
Middelburg, Utrecht University*

During most of their famous seventeenth century, the merchants of the Dutch Republic had every reason to be proud of themselves. After all, at the same time that the United Provinces of the Netherlands fought their war of liberation with Spain (1568–1648) they also rapidly developed into the leading commercial economy in the world that for a short period outstripped all its neighboring countries in economic, maritime, and military power. The ambitions and activities of the Dutch merchant class had played no small part in this development. It was difficult for anyone at the time not to be aware of that.¹

This chapter, however, does not deal with the Golden Age of the Republic when its merchants were “in charge” of their firms, their republic, and the oceans.² It focuses on a later stage in history when Dutch merchants were losing their leading position in international commerce and the Dutch Republic was perceived to be spiraling toward a state of cultural decline and economic ruin. Although

* This chapter has its origins in a joined writing project with Henk Reitsma, my former roommate at VU University Amsterdam. I wish to express my thanks for the different ways in which he contributed to my knowledge on this subject over the years.
economic historians tend to disagree about the actual degree of that decline (because of the flourishing of other economic sectors such as financing and traditional crafts), contemporaries who witnessed the growing army of unemployed paupers were convinced that there was “something rotten” in the state of the Dutch Republic. The last decades of the eighteenth century consequently saw the birth of a radical political movement that, partly inspired by progressive Enlightenment ideas of reform and partly by conservative ideas of restoring the golden past, sought to redress the balance in economic, political, and cultural respect—both internally and internationally. The reformists called themselves “Patriots.” If their plans to restore the Republic to its former grandeur were to succeed, they needed the support of people with capital. What had thus been an individual and moral dilemma for merchants in the seventeenth century—that is, the question of how to invest or spend their accumulating fortunes—had now become a national and political issue with relevance for all Dutchmen and—women.

This chapter therefore employs a different angle on the theme of early capitalists' self-perceptions than most of the other contributions to this book. In lieu of approaching the subject on the level of personal self-esteem, individual ethics, or professional rationality, it tackles the subject of self-perception on the level of the nation by asking: How did a wealthy nation of capitalists perceive itself when confronted with a succession of crises that threatened to put it out of business? I will argue that on this national level, economic self-perceptions are as much the product of interaction with others as they are negotiated on an individual level. Whether capitalist or not, the way in which nations picture themselves is in large measure the upshot of a subtle play of challenge and response between outsiders and insiders who form their images neither autonomously nor in complete dependence of each other. In this chapter I intend to highlight two elements in this dynamic and imaginative process. First, the role of gender as a crucial signifier in the assessment of economic acts, and second, the common strategy of transferring disagreeable parts of one's (economic) reputation to others.

**Economic Spectacles**

Let me start my argument with a case study of the * Toneelspel in twee afdeelingen* (Play in Two Acts), a peculiar Dutch pamphlet of forty-eight pages written by a nameless author who mysteriously identified himself as “a Friend of the Fatherland.” Fortunately, we do have the name of the Amsterdam publisher, Dirk Schuurman, who published the text in 1780 on the eve of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–84). Although title and form presented the text as a theater play, it was probably never performed onstage. We may even question whether it was ever intended to be performed as it has all the characteristics of similar Dutch “drama pamphlets.” These were written in those politically turbulent years as sociopolitical critiques and only styled as plays to make them more appealing to the reader. The *Toneelspel*, moreover, was explicitly presented as a further explanation of two graphic prints that had been brought on the market earlier that year. They were part of a steady stream of political prints that likewise commented upon the unstable political and economic situation of the Dutch Republic. The two prints were published without a title, but each featured a Dutch “capitalist,” and they were fitted with the epithet “economic” in the national print collection in which they survived. Since both the anonymous pamphleteer and his publisher Schuurman believed there was a market for the *Toneelspel*, we may deduce that the economic prints were a commercial success.

The prints have been reproduced several times since 1780. As a result, they are no strangers in Dutch historiography. Due to the disciplinary borders between historical specializations, however, the fictitious *Toneelspel* has hitherto gone unnoticed in Dutch historical research. Yet the text offers the opportunity for a deeper and more

---

*Figure 4.1* First economic print. Atlas van Stolk, *Engelse kranno etc.*, no. 4318, Stichting Atlas van Stolk, Rotterdam.
detailed understanding of the two prints. Studied together, they provide us with a fascinating historical narrative about the lures of foreign commodities and the schemes of needy foreign financiers who were after the honest and hard-earned money of Dutch capitalists. When the prints were first published in 1780, they were printed with elaborate legends that already helped to explicate several details of the pictures. The extensive title of the Toneelspel claimed nevertheless that this was a work “highly necessary to arrive at a true understanding of the plates mentioned and of the Dutch interests.” Although the claim may have been a sales stunt, the pamphleteer lived up to his words. He offered an extended moral analysis of his country’s economic and social problems by the words of one of his characters, Petrus, a Dutch retail trader and obviously the alter ego of the author.¹²

We see Petrus at the right corner of the first economic print (Figure 4.1) in front of his stall with solid Dutch goods that he offers to a young Dutchman, seated on a richly filled money chest that is in the process of being pulled away from Petrus. The young man, called Klaas in the play—a name often used for fools in Dutch¹³—is rejecting Petrus’s products. He prefers to lend his money to an English banker. The banker, ominously called Master John Always Short, can hardly

wait to take the money out of the chest. He poses as a friend to the Dutchman, promising a steady interest for the loan without the risks that come with investments in commercial or industrious undertakings and without the hard work that such investments entail. Klaas, who did not earn the money himself but inherited it from his father, a virtuous Dutch merchant of the old school, is obviously rather taken with the prospect of not having to work and nevertheless receiving a guaranteed income. As are his three female companions to the left, who expect to share in this income if they succeed in persuading Klaas to plunge himself into an easy life full of Luxury, Lechery, and Lust for Liquor—the vices the women personify.

This would be the life that we see depicted at the left side of the print (Figure 4.2), the life of what is called “The World of the Great” in the play and the legend of the print. It is the life that aristocratic elites are understood to lead, full of superficial temptations (banquets, cards, duels, adultery) that attract people who lack a strong moral compass to tell them what is right and what is wrong. Charles Always Something Foolish is making inviting gestures already, but before Klaas can pass the broad archway and make a successful entry to this world, he has to take off his simple Dutch merchant’s suit and learn

Figure 4.2 The World of the Great. Detail from Atlas van Stolk, Engelsche kramer etc., no. 4318, Stichting Atlas van Stolk, Rotterdam.

Figure 4.3 Klaas as would-be gentleman. Detail from Atlas van Stolk, Engelsche kramer etc., no. 4318, Stichting Atlas van Stolk, Rotterdam.
how to dress himself as a true gentleman, a Man of Birth, the scene in the middle of the print (Figure 4.3). Here Jean Poli and other Frenchmen enter the picture. Better than anyone else they know how to “dress for success”—at least that is the impression they succeed in transmitting to the naïve Klaas. Hence the various “Modes de Paris,” the French fashions that Klaas has to make himself familiar with if he wishes to pass for an important man—and Haughtiness and Foolishness, the two male, yet not very masculine, figures who are pulling his chest in the direction of the archway, are certainly in the midst of leading him to that goal (Figure 4.1).

It is up to Petrus to talk sense into Klaas, an undertaking in which he sadly fails. In the play he tries to draw Klaas’s attention to the smirking Fool’s mask, to the monkey with the French feathered hat, to Mr. Grub and his flourishing stall of earthenware and other English products that drive the Dutch out of the market thanks to Klaas’s ill-considered financial decisions, and finally to the English privateers who attack Dutch ships in the Channel, proving that the English cannot be trusted. Recall it is 1780, at the end of which year the English would declare war on the Dutch, their former allies, for supporting the Americans in their War of Independence. In spite of all these bad omens, Klaas refuses to listen. He cannot be bothered with the ramshackle state of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, represented by the seven pillared temple at the right of the

print. The construction, badly maintained by Carelessness, is under attack. The Dutch Virgin has fled to its roof. Klaas, however, expects that the building will last. He flatly refuses to show any interest in the products from Petrus’s stall. Because he intends to pose as a gentleman, he foolishly gets himself involved in a fatal duel and loses his life at the end of the first act. Petrus has no choice but to admit his defeat and start considering the liquidation of his business.

However, in the second act of the play and in the second economic print (Figure 4.4), the mise en scène has drastically changed. Again we find ourselves at the Dutch “free” seaside, a longtime symbol for Dutch liberty. But this time the central character is not a foolish young man who lends his ears too easily to foreigners, but a mature and honorable citizen who has heard of Petrus’s adversities and realizes his country is at risk. This Burgerhart—the name literally means “Citizen’s Heart”—is aware of the dishonesty of the foreigners who try to win his friendship whereas in reality they are only interested in his money. Next to Master John Always Short, who tries to sell him English bonds, we see a bowing Frenchman (Jean Poli), an eager Spaniard (Don Sebastian), and a subservient German (Hans). They all have spectacular new plans for investments and promise the highest profits to the Dutchman if he is willing to buy their stocks.

Burgerhart, however, bluntly rejects all of them. He makes clear that he prefers to invest his capital in the various industrial, agricultural, and reclamation projects with which three of his industrious Dutch fellow citizens, in the middle of the picture, plan to reanimate the Dutch economy—though, of course, only after he has scrutinized
the solidity of their business plans. While Burgerhart does not invest directly in Dutch commerce, the vast merchant fleet at sea shows the beneficiary effects that his wise policy is believed to bring to all branches of Dutch economy. As Petrus comments in the play, it will be thanks to this citizen’s example, demonstrating the bold decisions, patriotism, and spirit of enterprise asked for, that the flock of lost compatriots will come to its senses and commit itself to the common good of the Dutch Republic again. Reason, the female figure at the head of the procession, armed with the attributes of the goddess Athens, will lead them back to the Republic and the process of renovation. The Dutch lion will successfully chase off the English dog, as the dog has already enough trouble to fight off the French cock, let alone the much more awe-inspiring lion—or so Petrus confidently claims. And if other well-to-do Dutchmen are still not persuaded by this heartwarming and promising spectacle and led to invest their money in Dutch projects, then they are in need of an aid to clarify their vision: hence the box at the left with a great many “economic spectacles,” free to test for any capitalist who needs them.

Dutch Reformist Societies and Economic Patriotism

While the two economic prints and companion drama pamphlet were unique in their artistic arrangements, they were far from unique in the ideas and feelings they conveyed. The same sentiments were expressed in other reformist responses to the economic and political crisis that the Republic was experiencing in those years, at least in the perception of its inhabitants. The viewpoints taken by Petrus and Burgerhart were therefore precisely what could be expected from the reformist milieu where the anonymous drawings and Toneelspel appear to have originated. The official dedication in the legends of the prints, and the title and contents of the pamphlet, indicate that both the graphic artist and the pamphleteer—assuming they were not the same person—had a strong affinity to the objectives of the “Vaderlandsche Maatschappij van Redery en Koophandel” (National Society of Shipping and Commerce) and the “Oeconomische Taak der Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen” (Economic Branch of the Holland Society of Sciences), two reformist societies established at Hoorn and Haarlem, respectively.

Haarlem was an industrial town near Amsterdam that had suffered greatly from the national decline in trade and industry, and the same was true for Hoorn, a more northerly seaport, also in the province of Holland. The appeal of both societies, however, surpassed the location of their foundation. Thanks to their economic and patriotic ideals, they attracted participating members from all over the country and from all walks of life. Soon after its formation, the Economic Branch had nearly 3,000 members and local departments in more than fifty Dutch towns and villages. The National Society of Shipping and Commerce, set up by Cornelis Ris, a Mennonite clergyman, followed another formula: members became stockholders and were obliged to invest at least 100 Dutch guilders. Five days after its inaugural meeting the society had 268 registered participants.16

The National Society of Shipping and Commerce and the Economic Branch were both founded in 1777 by reform-minded citizens actively involved in designing economic plans intended to put the Republic back on a firm footing. Participating members included well-to-do city councilors, wholesale merchants, and shipowners, as well as intellectuals, clergymen, retail merchants, and educated craftsmen. Their analyses and solutions for the economic situation in the Republic differed according to their background, but what all members shared was the profound conviction that the Dutch Republic was in great trouble and action was required. Although we cannot rule out the possibility that several of these economic patriots had personal investments in foreign stocks, the overall conviction in this milieu was that having Dutch capital channeled abroad, and therefore not invested in its own economy, was an important part of the Republic’s problem. The discussions furthermore zeroed in on the question of whether the Dutch nation should try to regain its leading position in international commerce, and if so, how to realize that end. The issue entailed a reorientation toward industrial development and agricultural production in order to combat the omnipresent pauperism. In the years around 1780 it was not a foregone conclusion that Dutch international trade would never regain its former supremacy.17

Social and political discussions about the different paths to a flourishing economy were not reserved to the Dutch at the time. In Great Britain and all over continental Europe, people were debating—from different viewpoints—the elements that constituted the wealth of nations.18 Concerned citizens tried to identify the causes that were hampering the further growth of trade, industry, and agriculture in their own countries. Mercantilists, industrialists, physiocrats, and Kameradists pursued the same goals, even if they did not opt for the same strategies. Rather than going into that broader international
the government should, on the one hand, offer the greatest possible liberty to Dutch transit trade and, on the other hand, protect the Dutch industry. Even more important, he argued for the encouragement of patriotic fervor among his fellow countrymen. He therefore proposed to transform the Holland Society of Sciences into a patriotic society, aiming first and foremost to stimulate the applied sciences and economic practices that would benefit the whole nation. This was one step too far for the (elite) directors of the Holland Society, who tended toward a more elevated and conservative approach of scientific matters at the time.\textsuperscript{32} They did consent, however, to the formation of a separate branch that would concentrate on the new goal. From its start, members of the Economic Branch disagreed about the relative importance of the various economic sectors in their country. In time, its main initiator, Van de Heuvel, would distance himself from the belief, popular with the ruling commercial elites, that trade could play a key role in the resurrection of the Dutch economy. He increasingly emphasized the need for investments in agriculture and industry. The reclamation of heath lands, the resuscitation of porcelain and textile factories, and the impoldering of the Haarlemmermeer (a huge lake situated between Amsterdam, Haarlem, and Leiden)—all projects favored by Burgerhart in the Toneelspel—became part and parcel of a new ideology that appealed in particular to the middle-class members of the Economic Branch.\textsuperscript{33}

The Economic Branch and the National Society of Shipping and Commerce were not the only Dutch reformist societies formed in those years, but together they represent the winds of change blowing through the Republic. Typically, the Dutch adjectives in the name of the two societies (“economisch” and “vaderlandsch”) were virtually interchangeable at the time and almost identical to the adjectives used for the pairs of spectacles, offered to the myopic countrymen in the second economic print. While the inscription on the chest named them economische brillen (economic spectacles), the legend spoke of inlandse brillen (native or national spectacles). This overlapping terminology is characteristic of the interaction of meanings found in the semantic field of the Dutch word economisch at the time: the word not only referred to economic matters in the strict sense of the word, but it was also used for other phenomena of a national, native, or domestic nature that were all seen as intricately related.\textsuperscript{34} This brief excursion into Dutch conceptual history confirms that, by 1780, economic decisions about financial fortunes were no longer considered a private matter. Instead, they had become a matter of national discussion and interest.
THE TWO-SIDED AND GENDERED FACE OF THE DUTCH CAPITALIST

Small wonder, then, that the allocation of the accumulated “national” capital, symbolized by the money chest in both prints, was seen as a source of conflict between different parties, brilliantly represented by the cast of characters surrounding the chest in the prints and play. In the perception of concerned Dutchmen for whom Petrus acted as spokesman, Klaas and Burgerhart represented two different kinds of men or kapitalisten. On the one hand, Klaas embodied the short-sighted, careless egoist who put his money in foreign (government) bonds with a fixed interest, which he subsequently spent on luxury items imported from abroad. On the other hand, Burgerhart exemplified the visionary and yet prudent patriotic entrepreneur who reinvested all his capital in various Dutch ventures. Whether these stereotypes carried any relation with economic reality of the time is not the issue here. Rather, the issue is what kind of role these contrasting images played in national self-representations of the Dutch. This particular case indicates that at the end of the eighteenth century, the Dutch capitalist carried a Janus face in Dutch national self-perceptions. A further analysis of this two-sided face from a gender perspective may help us to a deeper understanding of how patriotic Dutchmen perceived and represented the effects of capitalism in their country.

The second scene is dominated by the figure of Burgerhart, explicitly characterized as “honorable” in both the pamphlet and the legend of the print, standing his ground to foreign bankers and financiers. His pose is mirrored by the brave lion, a natural leader, defending his country. The lion, all skin and bones, has apparently gone through a rough time but is back in form and on top again. Similarly, the patriotic Burgerhart is in full control of the situation. He is setting the example to his fellow men, courageously investing his capital in native projects that reinforce Dutch economy. The central character in the first scene, on the other hand, is a far cry from a man in control. Klaas has no command over the course of his money chest, nor of his life, for that matter. Of middle-class birth he may be, but he prefers to imitate the polished and idle lifestyle of the French or fenchified aristocracy, including its conspicuous consumption, often dubbed effeminate in Dutch moral discourse at the time. His mimicry, vanity, and inertia are mirrored by the sitting monkey of indefinite sex, holding a fashionable French feathered hat. Jean Poli and John Always Short encounter no difficulties in taking advantage of his youthful naiveté. At the same time Klaas also displays a youthful recklessness in sharp contrast to the manful maturity of Burgerhart. Klaas’s refusal to behave in a responsible way is demonstrated in many details, but most revealingly in the duel that he—as a would-be gentleman—gets caught up in at the end of the first act.

This duel is a telling detail. The practice of dueling had been losing ground in Dutch culture for some time by then, as had the corresponding notion of honor, which equated male honor with readiness to defend one’s name with the sword and keeping up outward appearances. Both prints and pamphlet delivered a satirical commentary on the love that some men had for swords, and notably, hardly the manliest of the men present. In this they followed earlier Dutch theater plays from about 1720 that had juxtaposed the unreliability of swaggering wind-traders with their twisted sense of honor, symbolized in an ostensible fondness for the duel, which, naturally, the wind-traders always backed out of in the end. Thus, the Toneelspel’s mocking of this particular notion of honor confirms a development that was already present on different fronts. The satire also served to emphasize the more prudent character of Burgerhart, whose manners were taken to be more reflective of Dutch bourgeois standards. Burgerhart’s honorability clearly represented a different notion of male honor, that of the merchant whose honor was defined by reason, integrity, and financial dependability—as the Dutch said: een man een man, een woord een woord (“an honest man’s word is as good as his bond”).

The contrasting financial decisions of Klaas and Burgerhart were thus displayed in a gendered frame of reference, in which two different models of masculinity competed: the aristocratic model of the polite gentleman reminiscent of the noble knight, and the bourgeois model of the dependable merchant. The figures of the rentier and entrepreneur have been grafted onto this existing pair of opposing characters. In the visual rhetoric of the prints and the textual dramatization in the pamphlet, the first got disqualified as superficial whereas the second was idealized as the good guy. Stereotypical ideas about gender, age, class, and national differences were used, furthermore, to present the entrepreneur as the true Dutchman and to reject the rentier as a degenerate.

Meanwhile, by wishfully emphasizing the honorability, courage, and patriotism of Burgerhart, the actores intellectuales of print and pamphlet responded not only to a national economic crisis but also to internationally held unfavorable opinions of the commercial character of the Dutch. In early modern political and ethnographic discourse we can observe a strong current that depicted commercial societies as solely driven by a passion for profit that overtook all other passions,
including the passions for honor, valor, or the fatherland. To be sure, this perception was especially strong in the Atlantic tradition of civic republicanism and contested by other authors.\textsuperscript{53} But the notion that commerce threatened to make men immoral, weak, even effeminate, had existed since antiquity and was still very influential in anthropological works published around 1780.\textsuperscript{53}

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, elements of this ancient thinking had permeated travel accounts, letters, and histories voicing the opinion that Dutchmen have “little sense of honor, governing themselves more by the rules of profit and advantage, than of generosity and decorum,” to quote, for instance, Sir Francis Barnham writing in the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{54} The Dutch were also said to lack in courage, preferring peace to war.\textsuperscript{55} When in war, they left it to their allies and mercenary troops to defend them.\textsuperscript{56} Dutchmen did not attach much value to military glory or national honor; divided among themselves, they seemed afraid of everything, concluded a disappointed John Adams when visiting the Republic in search of support for the American Revolutionary War.\textsuperscript{57} And according to Johann Gottfried Herder, the behavior of the Dutch illustrated “how the spirit of commerce . . . neutralizes or diminishes the spirit of valor.”\textsuperscript{58}

In Caesar’s De Bello Gallico (50 BCE) and in Tacitus’s De origine et situ Germanorum (ca. 100 CE) the ancient inhabitants of the Low Countries had still been courageous fighters, but their descendants had lost this strength of character.\textsuperscript{59} As Sir William Temple had written in his Observations upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands in 1673: “not only the long disuse of arms among the native Hollander (especially at land), and making use of other nations chiefly in their milice [military], but the arts of trade, as well as peace, and their great parsimony in diet . . . may have helpt to desible much the ancient valour of the nation.”\textsuperscript{59,60}

Obviously, according to the background of the authors and the moment of their writing, opinions would differ. As longtime neighbors, “disowned” allies, and rivals at sea, the English were not the only critics of the Dutch, though they certainly were the fiercest. In the seventeenth century they coined expressions such as “Dutch defense” for a treacherous surrender and “Dutch courage” for the pot-valor of a drunk. This was typically the only valor one could occasionally observe among the Dutch, the English would claim.\textsuperscript{41} Authors of other nations often expressed more favorable views, at least as far as Dutch militarism was concerned.\textsuperscript{42} Dutch greed was another matter.\textsuperscript{43}

Thus Dutch Responses

There are striking similarities between this characterizing of the Dutch and the portrait of Klaas or, in the same category, the character of the egoistic and spineless rentier omnipresent in other Dutch writings. By contrast, the portrait of Burgerhart or, similarly, the overall image of the enterprising merchant in Dutch discourse had nothing in common with this unflattering portrait of the Dutch character. Quite the contrary. Burgerhart and his fellow entrepreneurs, whether mercantile or industrial, were generally presented as genuine Dutchmen who were true to the original Dutch character that was asserted to be essentially honorable, bold, and patriotic. Clearly, Dutch authors, wishing to restore the strength and self-confidence of their nation, were not impervious to the accusations of national dishonor, weakness, and pusillanimity. Let us listen to a few more Dutch voices from the period.

Take, as an example, Simon Stijl, son of a Frisian fur shipper and author of a historical work about the Dutch Republic published in 1774. He acknowledged that the Dutch had not always acted as manfully as they could have. To say that they generally lacked courage, however, seemed disproportionate to him. Obviously, a trading republic had to seek a balance between peaceful coexistence and the readiness to fight when needed. Stijl conceded that perhaps on land the militancy required had sometimes been insufficient, but at sea the Dutch had amply proved their courage. Dutch history had also shown how commercial power and war power could mutually reinforce each other. If matters had changed lately, Stijl argued, it was because affluence had introduced haughtiness, splendor, and luxury to the Republic. Misled by the international standard of (false) politeness, the Dutch had started to develop desppicable preferences. A change in educational goals should provide the remedy to this imitation of alien manners.\textsuperscript{44}

Another Dutchman, Engelbertus Engelberts, believed that the international animadversions were inspired by jealousy. In 1763, this reformed clergyman at Hoorn, member of the prestigious Holland Society of Sciences, had published a laudatory pamphlet on the Dutch character defending it against what he considered unjust British criticism during the Seven Years’ War when the Republic had remained uncommitted.\textsuperscript{45} Engelberts claimed that the British were inconsistent, illogical, and historically unjust in their accusations. As the clergyman contended, the British might wish that they could boast the bravery the Dutch had demonstrated in their history. Indeed, it was part of
the Dutch system to avoid war if it would damage their commerce and prosperity. But the Republic deserved praise and not scorn for the fact that it did not immediately take up arms at every trifle.46

When Engelberts published a second edition in 1776, however, he added an extensive epilogue in which he expressed more ambivalent words about the Dutch character. If he had neglected the weaknesses of the Dutch too much in the first edition, he explained, he had done so for didactic reasons. Better to emphasize virtues than to expand on vices that might give the youth the wrong ideas. Engelberts would not deny that in some respects the Dutch were not in the same league as the British, the Germans, the French, or the Italians. Especially politeness was not one of their strengths, even if his countrymen and women had become more polite and soft over the course of time, a consequence of the sustained freedom, peace, commerce, affluence, and interaction with other nations, particularly with the French who were masters of politeness. But, the clergyman asked rhetorically, were they a better kind of people for that? Better than the genuine Dutchman, who “coupled his imagined coarseness to an honest nature, pure morals, dignified behavior . . . a noble longing for liberty, bold actions, unfailing loyalty, prudent consideration of receipts and expenses, generous hospitality, and a caring charity to the needy”? In his opinion politeness should not be confused with true virtue, and therefore the lack of it could not be considered a Dutch shortcoming. Rather, Engelberts thought that luxury and the recent adoption of foreign manners and ideas were at the heart of the present problems of the Dutch Republic.47

And then there was the publisher and book trader Elie Luzac, who in the years 1780–83 wrote and published the four-volume Hollands rijkdom, an adaptation of La richesse de la Hollande written by Jacques Acrias de Séronne and published by Luzac in 1778. In this work Luzac defended commercial society in general, and the Dutch in particular, against classical republican criticisms. Influenced by Montesquieu’s idea of le doux commerce, he stated that merchants were men of multiple skills whose competition and activities led to prosperity, sociable people, and peaceful relations between nations. However, as the merchant was driven by his desire for profit, Luzac argued, one could not expect him to act from benevolence, patriotism, or any other moral principle. As much as the manufacturer, the scholar, and the soldier, the merchant had to be looked upon as a specialist. Specialization had narrowed the merchant’s personality, made him less courageous and less charitable, Luzac was ready to acknowledge. Still, as long as the merchant’s income provided the means to keep up a standing army and a strong navy, his country was not necessarily at risk. It was the task of the government to organize a commercial state’s defense and to promote its general interest. As a defender of the political institution of the stadholderate and genuine believer in the blessings of luxury, Luzac differed in opinion from his Dutch patriotic fellow countrymen in more than one respect. But he shared their belief that contemporary Dutch values had changed, and not for the better. According to Luzac, the true spirit of commerce was threatened by ubiquitous desire for social status, which expressed itself among the sons of merchants in contempt for hard and honest work, in conspicuous consumption, and in imitation of French morals and manners.48

The writings of Stijl, Engelberts, and Luzac make clear that the portrait of the young merchant’s son Klaas that we came across in the economic prints and pamphlet was constructed from fixed elements, easy to recognize for contemporaries who were familiar with the debate on Dutch decline. This debate had been going on for at least half a century by that time, chiefly taking place in the Dutch “spectator press,” which was made up of dozens of moral weeklies in the tradition of the famous Spectator (1711–12), written by Steele and Addison.

The Dutch moral weeklies consistently blamed the economic and political decline on a national decay of morals. The decay was believed to have started at the end of the seventeenth century when wealthy Dutchmen and women had started to give in to the temptations of luxury. While most Dutch intellectuals expressed the belief that luxury caused moral weakness and decline, they did not see luxury as the inevitable side effect of successful commerce. They did not make the connection between commerce and the corruption of morals that was made elsewhere. After all, notwithstanding their wealth, their seventeenth-century ancestors had been more famous for making of money than spending it.49 Neither did Dutch spectator authors perceive the Dutch merchants as solely driven by a passion for money that overtook all other passions, including the passions for honor, valor, or the fatherland. Rather, they glorified the Dutch merchant as one of the main pillars of the Republic, with well-developed sentiments of human and civic responsibility. Unfortunately, in the course of the eighteenth century those virtuous merchants had become rarer and rarer in the Republic. Copying foreign customs and manners, the spectator authors contended, the Dutch too had started to develop a propensity for aristocratic, arrogant, artificial behavior.50
CONCLUSION

This intellectual environment, complemented by the reformist societies, produced the economic prints and companion pamphlets, and they artistically expressed the patriotic economic ideas that were in vogue at the moment. Concurrently, they struck back at other European countries that were felt to be sneering at the plain style and commercial mind of the Dutch and still wanting to take advantage of the Republic's accumulated riches. If lately the younger Dutch generations, personified by Klaas, had stopped following traditional national standards, pictures and text suggested, it was because of the greediness of foreign bankers and investors who were after the Dutch money, the cheap products of British manufacturers who ruined the market for trade in Dutch top-quality products, and the misleading manners of the effeminate French who posed as the cultural masters of the universe. The anonymous maker(s) of the economic prints and drama pamphlets, nevertheless, wishfully claimed that there were still wealthy Dutchmen who could and would make the difference—men such as Burgerhart who paired patriotism and honor with a strong Dutch spirit of enterprise, boldly and yet prudently investing in Dutch ventures, giving the national economy the financial injection that it needed. If trade was perhaps not the best route to economic success anymore, the former merchants could transform themselves into industrial and agricultural entrepreneurs.

Thus, Dutch patriotic economic discourse was not only idealizing the glorious commercial past of the Republic, and still identifying the genuine Dutch character with the character of the Dutch merchant, but it was also blaming foreigners for Dutch moral and economic weaknesses, and transferring disreputable economic behavior to other groups of economic agents such as bankers and rentiers. In the past decades modern economic historians have, of course, produced more factual and sophisticated analyses of the Republic's economic problems. More interesting in relation to the self-perceptions of early modern capitalists, however, is the conclusion that economic acts were presented in a gendered frame of reference with two competing, class-biased standards of male honor. The classical and aristocratic idea, popular abroad, that commercial states were crowded with dishonorable men who shunned confrontation, was countered by the bourgeois invention of the Dutch merchant/entrepreneur as a deeply honorable, bold, and socially responsible capitalist. The problem of the two conflicting self-perceptions of Dutch capitalism was dealt with by simply eliminating the most troubling one, the rentier, as a native capitalist model.

NOTES


2. See the contribution of Clé Lesger to this book.


6. I am very much indebted to Henk Gras and Klaartje Groot who checked the archival sources in Rotterdam and Amsterdam (1774–1811) for me. The play is also not recorded in the playing list in Paul Borowicz, ed., Wat geeft de Comedie toch een bemoetiging! de Leidse schouwburg 1705–2005 (Amsterdam: Boom, 2005), nor in Henny Ruitenbeek, Kijkjevers: de Amsterdamse schouwburg 1814–1841 (Hilversum: Verloren, 2002).


10. Another indication of their popularity is the fact that these two prints were among the fifteen selected prints that were redrawn and collectively reproduced in one large assembled engraving, the “Algemeene
de Haan, O economische Takt, 28, 31, 50. On the actual size of the capital drain at the time, see De Vries and Van der Woude, First Modern Economy, chap. 4.3 and 4.4.


21. See J. de Brujin, Inventaris van de Prijsvragen uitgeschreven door de Hollandse Maatschappij der Wetenschappen, 1753–1917 (Groningen: Tjeenk Willink, 1977), 44.

22. De Brujin, Inventaris, passim. See also Jacob, Scientific Culture, 147.


25. The word kapitalist (or “capitalist” in ancient Dutch spelling) was used as early as 1673 in the Dutch periodical De Hollandse Mercurius (1651–91) to denote in a neutral sense a man of great fortune. See Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1882–1998), entry “kapitalist.” An early example of the word as a term of abuse for a rentier in Dutch can be found in the legend of the political print “De tyd geeft veranderings,” dated 1780, from the collection Atlas van Stolk, Rotterdam, no. 4319.

26. This juxtaposition has a forerunner in late medieval economic thought that opposed the social inutility or sinfulness of uninvested wealth to the social or civic utility of circulating money. See Giacomo Todeschini, I mercanti e il tempio. La società cristiana e il circolo virtuoso della ricchezza fra Medioevo ed Età Moderna (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), 311ff., and Odd Langholl, Economics in Medieval Schools: Wealth, Exchange, Values, Money, and Usury According to the Paris Theological Tradition, 1200–1350 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), passim.


31. See, for the same juxtaposition in other contexts and from more socially informed perspectives, the papers of John Small and Leos Müller in this book.


35. See, for example, Barnham, quoted in Ray, Travels, 46; John Reresby, The Memoirs and Travels of John Reresby (London: Jeffery and Rodwell, 1813), 159. Owen Felltham, however, maintained that the Dutch were war-minded, but in their hearts cowards; see his A Brief Character of the Low Countries under the States (London: Henry Seile, 1652), Graeme Watson, ed., Dutch Crossings 27 (2003): 89–141, esp. pp. 118, 120.


39. See, for example, Christian Kirchner, Holland oder Beschreibung der Sieben Vereinigten Niederländischen Provinzen (Leipzig: Kirchner 1672), 3, 6.


49. See Irma Thoen, Strategic Affection: Gift Exchange in Seventeenth-Century Holland (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 17.


51. Some Dutch authors were fair enough to recognize that in the past, Dutch commerce had greatly benefited from the flow of immigrants into the Republic. Even Engelberts acknowledged this fact, although it would not change his opinion in the end. See his Verdediging, 55, 88–89. See furthermore J. Le France van Berkhey, Natuurlijke historie van Holland (Amsterdam: Yntema and Tieboel, 1769–1778), 3:422–28.