Summary

This dissertation offers an analysis of representations in early modern Dutch sermons of the so-called stadholders, political leaders belonging to the House of Orange, and their spouses. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the power and authority of monarchs and princes depended on the strength of their armies and institutions as much as on their representations, including words, images and rituals. These representations displayed power as well as constituting it. The Dutch Republic (or United Provinces) was a federation of sovereign states ruled by privileged elites in which the stadholder played a quasi-monarchical role. The political elites, the regents, regarded themselves as the true sovereigns of the land. As a consequence, the princes of the House of Orange grounded their political authority in part in an image of themselves as ‘fathers of the fatherland’ and as brave warriors.

Historians studying representations of the Orange family have thus far focused mainly on representations in art and ritual. It is not often realized, however, that in affirming the power and authority of the Dutch stadholders, ministers of the Reformed Church, too, played a crucial part. The Dutch Reformed Church was an established church, but not a state church. It was bound through a complex network of formal and informal ties to the political administration, but did not encompass the whole population. As any other established clergy, ministers of the privileged public church were subject to political and ecclesiastical control. Because they had nearly unlimited access to the public sphere, early modern sermons were a highly significant means of communication, resembling that of the mass media of today. It would be mistaken to regard sermons related to the House of Orange as mere propaganda on behalf of the Dutch Reformed Church. More often than not, local authorities were involved in initiating, delivering and publishing these sermons. Preachers usually sustained the political and social order from the pulpit, supporting the stadholders (and the regents). These texts therefore give an excellent insight into the value system of the political and ecclesiastical elites.

This study is based on sermons published in pamphlet form and addressed to a wider audience than just the local congregation. The sermons were printed on various ‘national’ occasions connected with members of the Orange family, such as their births and deaths, marriages, birthdays, inaugurations and actions in times of war. The questions this study addresses are the following. What concepts, metaphors and images were used to portray the power and authority of the Orange family? How did gender differences figure in images of male and female authority? Which long term continuities and changes can be detected in sermons related to the House of Orange?

The custom of committing oranjepreken or ‘Orange sermons’ to print had its origins in the first half of the seventeenth century when stadholder Fredrick Henry (1584-1647) captured the cities of Den Bosch (1629), Maastricht (1632) and Breda (1637). Also the baptism of his son (1626) and his own death (1647) were commemorated with sermons brought to the printing press. In these sermons, Frederick Henry, and later also his son William II (1626-1650) and his grandson William III (1650-1702), were depicted by the Reformed clergy as defenders of the fundamental principles of the Dutch Republic. They were praised for helping preserve the Reformed religion and republican freedom. To support the confessional order of society, preachers pictured the princes of Orange as the defenders of ‘freedom and religion’. This idiom expressed the close relationship between Church and State in the confessional era. According to Reformed ministers, without these foundations the state would collapse and there would be no public interest to uphold any longer. The foundations of the state were laid by William the Silent (1533-1584). Due to their military achievements his successors had safeguarded the Dutch from Roman Catholicism and the absolutist aspirations of the Spanish and French monarchies. As a consequence, the Dutch stadholders were mainly portrayed as commanders-in-chief of the armed forces. They predominantly appeared in the sermons as warriors and heroes. The cult of heroism is in particular visible in sermons on the Dutch stadholder-king William III. William, like the Old Testament’s King David, fought the wars of the Lord and
was described as invincible on the battlefield. Preachers represented William as a God given, messianic hero who in 1672 saved the Dutch from French tyranny and in 1688 rescued the English and restored their liberties and religion. He was most often compared to biblical and classical heroes including David, Gideon, Samson, Hercules, Achilles and Julius Caesar.

Interestingly, in the seventeenth century the wives of the Dutch stadholders were not only depicted as virtuous women with female gender traits such as humility, piety, obedience, chastity, courtesy and beauty. In sermons they also appear as wise rulers and brave leaders. Mary Stuart II (1662-1694), for example, the wife of William III, is regarded as prudent, valiant, magnanimous and judicious. In the same way her husband is described as a vir virtutis – a man of virtue, who leads a public life and is a moral example to others – Mary is portrayed as a woman possessed of ‘manly virtues’, understanding of state affairs and courageous conduct. Both Mary and Amalia van Solms (1602-1675), the wife of Frederick Henry, can be seen as femmes fortes: women who in the early modern period were believed to possess the virtues of fortitude and constancy. Although Mary and Amalia are represented as women with masculine qualities, there is no evidence of ‘gender anxiety’ in Dutch sermons. There are no signs that Reformed clergy perceived the masculinity of these women to be housed in a body where it did not belong. On the contrary, their manly behaviour was seen as a positive development within a gender continuum. It is argued in this study that the concept of ‘female masculinity’, coined by Judith Halberstam, is useful in making sense of women like Amalia and Mary, who behaved in a manly way. When masculinity is regarded as a disembodied phenomenon, then traits ascribed to masculinity can be considered on their own terms. Although they are related, female masculinity should be seen as another type of masculinity, distinct from male masculinity. In this way we can better distinguish between, for example, the masculinity attributed to Mary Stuart and the masculinity attributed to William III. William’s masculinity was regarded as more active and vigorous than Mary’s.

Between 1702 and 1747, during the so-called Second Stadholderless Period, the pulpit was never used to defend the political ambitions of William IV (1711-1751), the hereditary stadholder of Friesland. Although his father John William Friso (1687-1711) had been appointed heir of William III at his death in 1702, both father and son were excluded from public office by the regents, who saw the stadholders as a threat to their sovereignty. But in 1747 there suddenly was a remarkable change in the fortunes of William IV. During the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), French troops invaded the Dutch Republic. This led to revolts in Zeeland, Holland and elsewhere. As a consequence, William IV was appointed Captain General of the Dutch States Army and stadholder in all of the seven provinces of the Republic. After 1747, Reformed ministers emerged as warm advocates of the House of Orange. They expected the newly appointed stadholder to drive back the French and proclaimed him a Protestant soldier-king, just as William III had been. But these expectations were too high. William IV did not prove to be a capable military leader and the Dutch had to accept the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748), a humiliating peace. Unlike his predecessors, the stadholder was not remembered as a warrior when he died in 1751. According to the Reformed ministers, his heroism was of another kind. William was portrayed as a ‘man of feeling’, who endured injustice patiently and was always ready to forgive and forget. The virtues ascribed to him included mildness, generosity, lenience, accessibility, modesty, gentleness and fluency. The representations of William IV reveal a masculinization of formerly feminine gender traits. Qualities earlier ascribed to Mary Stuart II were now considered appropriate for the stadholder himself, even as Captain General. But the prince of Orange was not only represented as a sensible, polite gentleman. He was also regarded as a reformer and a reformer. He was seen as an educated, enlightened ruler, an intellectual who used his knowledge of the sciences to give leadership to the United Provinces.

After William’s death, his wife Anne of Hanover (1709-1759), the second child of King George II of Britain, was appointed regent for her three-year-old son. To a certain extent, descriptions of the Princess Royal in Dutch sermons are similar to that of her husband. She too was seen as a warm, sensitive, well-educated and intelligent person. According to Reformed ministers, she spoke several languages fluently and had a passion for music and painting. But unlike her husband she never really was depicted as a true leader. Following enlightened opinions concerning exemplary female conduct, preachers portrayed Anne as a caring mother and loving wife. Likewise, in comparison with the images of Amalia van Solms and Mary
Stuart, Anne of Hanover was not so much represented as a strong and virtuous ruler. She was rather seen as a tender, sensible and delicate person, whose traits and qualities were in the first place suitable, not for politics, but for family life.

Something strange occurred during the rule of William V (1748-1806). In 1766 the Prince of Orange came of age and was inaugurated as stadholder in each of the seven Provinces. Reformed ministers expressed their thankfulness for having an enlightened, well-educated ruler who would maintain their liberties, religion and happiness. In the same way as William IV had been portrayed as a defender of ‘freedom and religion’, in 1766 preachers expected William V to support the privileged Dutch Reformed Church and defend republican freedom against all enemies, foreign and domestic. In sermons delivered between 1766 and 1780, the clergy conveyed their contentment with their political system, their (protestant) religion, their prosperity and their liberties. But all of a sudden this paradisiacal image changed dramatically. A large shadow hung over the United Provinces. The British government declared war on the Dutch Republic, accusing its former ally of trading with the American revolutionaries. At sea, the Dutch stood completely powerless against the all-powerful Royal Navy. The Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-1784) was a complete disaster, in particular for the Dutch stadholder and Captain General, William V. His authority waned and he was accused of collaborating with the English in order to gain power. An ‘anti-stadholder’ party arose, known as the ‘Patriots’, who combined the traditional republicanism of “True Freedom” – i.e. rule without a stadholder – with the egalitarian doctrines of the Enlightenment. Surprisingly enough, many of the Protestant clergy supported the Patriots. In fact, the overwhelming majority of sermons published during the period of political upheaval between 1780 and 1787 originated in the Dutch Reformed Church. These revolutionary preachers succeeded in monopolizing the public sphere. Adherents to the House of Orange were silenced. The message these revolutionary preachers broadcast was that the United Provinces were in decay. Due to luxury and moral laxity, corruption had set in. The prince of Orange was accused of high treason and corruption and was held accountable for the degeneration of Dutch society. In the end, he was even seen as a tyrant whose sole purpose was to overthrow the republican constitution of the United Provinces and reign as an absolute monarch. The medicine they prescribed was a passionate patriotism and arming citizens to protect their towns and villages. Only after the defeat of the Patriots in 1787 and the restoration of William V that year, did Orangist preachers raise their voices. In their sermons they praised the stadholder for his mildness, patience, forgiveness and his ability to endure so much hatred and injustice. Remarkably, William’s wife Wilhelmina of Prussia (1751-1820), who before the restoration had attempted to enter the Province of Holland without the permission of the States, was barely mentioned in these sermons. Her arrest at Goejanverwellesluis in 1787 had prompted her brother, the King of Prussia, to take military action. The propaganda of the court represented her as another Deborah who had saved her country from the Patriots. Dutch preachers, however, mostly portrayed her as a victim, not as a liberator.

In 1795 the Orangist regime was overthrown. The Batavian Republic was founded by an invading force of exiled Dutch Patriots and French soldiers. The United Provinces and the stadholderate were no more. This event inspired revolutionary preachers to condemn the Dutch stadholder more vehemently than they had ever done before. William V was depicted as a harsh and cruel leader who sought to constrain the liberties of the Dutch and who ruled despastically. In sermons they proclaimed a new order of society, based not on ‘freedom and religion’ protected by a stadholder, but on liberty, equality and fraternity.