The “Simple Burgher” of D. V. Coornhert (1522–1590): A Dutch Freethinker Opens the Door to a New Age

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Introducing the Man—Setting the Scene

Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert (1522–1590) was a Dutch philosopher, poet, playwright, and polemicist who has held the fascination of many historians. Although he lived in the sixteenth century, he expressed extraordinarily modern ideas, while making his living as an etcher and engraver and later in life as a town secretary and notary.1 With his arguments for religious toleration and individual human rights and his perception of human nature as essentially good and rational, not to forget his early call for a reform of criminal justice, Coornhert seemed decades, if not centuries, ahead of his time.2 Outspoken and almost permanently at odds with the authorities of his time,3 one could even be tempted to say Coornhert would have fitted well in the circles of the more radical Enlightenment thinkers who would later begin to shape the modern world.4 Such outspoken admiration for a historical person usually spawns a counter reaction, and, indeed, a more recent study suggests that the modernity and originality credited to Coornhert stands “in direct proportion to the ignorance of his [modern] interpreters.”5 An informed reader would have to recognize that Coornhert was very much a man of the sixteenth century: a humanist whose ideas were deeply influenced by classical learning, mystical thinkers, and the social issues and religious upheavals of his time. As often happens in this kind of historical debate, both sides have valid arguments but tend...
to overemphasize their point. In this chapter we will get to know Dirck Coornhert as both a stubbornly unconventional thinker and a man who had learned a lot from others—characteristics, indeed, that do not exclude each other.

Despite his many admirers in the Netherlands, Coornhert is not well known outside his homeland. Undoubtedly, the fact that he preferred to publish in Dutch rather than in Latin, another distinctly modern trait of his, did not help to spread his fame outside the Dutch-speaking world—even though some of his publications were translated into Latin during his life, most notably by his Reformed Protestant adversaries who thought his work so dangerous that their leader Calvin and Calvin’s successor Beza should be informed of its content.6

Born in a well-to-do Amsterdam Catholic merchant family, Coornhert had enjoyed a broad private education—including a vocational journey to Spain and Portugal at the age of 16—but he learned Latin only when he was in his thirties.7 Still, this was not the reason he did not write in Latin, which he later mastered well enough to publish Dutch translations of Cicero, Seneca, and other classical authors.8 Coornhert actually preferred the simplicity of vernacular words, the direct appeal of Dutch songs, and the power of images printed in large numbers because they enabled him to reach a broader public.9 Thus he wrote not only learned treatises but also pamphlets, poetry, dialogues, and morality plays in Dutch, engraved numerous moral scenes, and took the initiative for a printer’s shop in Haarlem, his adopted city near Amsterdam where he lived most of his life after his early marriage at the age of 17.10 Choosing this marriage against his parents’ wish, with a woman from a lesser social background and 12 years his senior—fully aware that he would be disinherited as a consequence—was one of the earliest recorded expressions of Coornhert’s inclination toward nonconformity.11 As one of his fellow humanists Arnoldus Buchelius would later write in his diary, Coornhert was “a brilliant man, but with an unruly and restless mind, born to contradict.”12

It is into this background—a turbulent age calling for reform and an acute mind leaning toward independency, and yes, even rebellion—that we must place Coornhert’s ideas about what he called the “unlearned people,” the “humble simple burgher,” and the “lesser common sorts.” Coornhert was one of the few philosophers of the time to address the issue of the common, or ordinary, people, which makes him such a significant figure for this book. This chapter approaches the topic from two different angles: first, the manner in which Coornhert used his work to speak directly to common men and women, and, second, the way he gave voice to those men (if less so to women) in his work. What concerns me in this context is not so much the moot point of the modernity of his ideas, but rather the