

WOMEN AT THE BURGUNDIAN COURT

Presence and Influence

FEMMES À LA COUR DE BOURGOGNE

Présence et Influence



Edited by
Dagmar Eichberger, Anne-Marie Legaré
& Wim Hüskén

BREPOLS

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AND INFLUENCE**

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Collection

BURGUNDICA

Peu de périodes, de tranches d'histoire ont suscité et continuent à susciter auprès d'un large public autant d'intérêt voire d'engouement que le "siècle de Bourgogne". Il est vrai qu'à la charnière de ce que l'on dénomme aussi vaguement que commodément "bas moyen âge" et "Renaissance", les douze décennies qui séparent l'avènement de Philippe le Hardi en Flandre (1384) de la mort de Philippe le Beau (1506) forment un réceptacle d'idées et de pratiques contrastées. Et ce constat s'applique à toutes les facettes de la société.

La collection "Burgundica" se donne pour objectif de présenter toutes ces facettes, de les reconstruire – nous n'oserions écrire, ce serait utopique, de les ressusciter – à travers un choix d'études de haut niveau scientifique mais dont tout "honnête homme" pourra faire son miel. Elle mettra mieux ainsi en lumière les jalons que le temps des ducs Valois de Bourgogne et de leurs successeurs immédiats, Maximilien et Philippe de Habsbourg, fournit à l'historien dans la découverte d'une Europe moderne alors en pleine croissance.

Cover illustration: Master of Guillebert of Lannoy: Nicolas Finet, *Benois seront les misericordieux* (Beati Misericordes), fol. 1r: 'Margaret of York performs the seven Works of Mercy', between 1468–1477 © Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, ms. 9296.

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WOMEN AT THE BURGUNDIAN COURT

BURGUNDICA

XVII

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FOREWORD

Mechelen is probably the only Flemish city, or - speaking more precisely in 16th century terms - the only Netherlandish city to experience at first hand the great benefits of a political environment in which women actively governed the lives of its inhabitants. Margaret of York, spouse and widow of the ambitious Burgundian duke Charles the Bold, and Margaret of Austria, her step-granddaughter, both established their courts and principal residences in the township of Mechelen, a decision that resulted in years of prosperity, refined culture and political activity. Both women can be described as active players and as crucial game pieces on the chess board of European politics.

In autumn 2005, Mechelen was temporarily declared “A City in Women’s Hands”, an experience from which the town benefited in many different ways. Let us be honest: who would not like to be caressed and cared for by a woman? This is a desire that a lover might fulfil, but alternatively also a mother: we can all imagine the tenderness and protectiveness of maternal love. Margaret of York and Margaret of Austria took up the role of surrogate mothers in support of their nephews and nieces and for the following generation of Habsburg children. In addition, Margaret of Austria, regent and governess of the Burgundian Netherlands, saw herself as “mother of the country” and chose to be depicted as *Caritas* or Charity, a mother surrounded by small children.

The exhibition *Women of Distinction* introduced us to two noblewomen with great minds who - owing to their social status as widows - were able to gain a substantial amount of power and therefore also exert considerable influence. Their story as high-ranking women was successfully brought to life by the international exhibition committee, and set in a timeless and universal framework. The exhibition appealed to people of all age groups and attracted a huge number of visitors.

Leading scholars Dagmar Eichberger and Anne-Marie Legaré, chairperson and distinguished member of the exhibition’s scientific committee respectively, initiated and organised an international conference which was a highlight of the rich programme of cultural activities accompanying the exhibition. Jointly with Wim Hüskens, curator at the *Stedelijke Musea Mechelen*, they brought together a host of internationally renowned scholars in the former palace of Margaret of Austria. During a two-day conference, the conference delegates exchanged views on the roles played by high-ranking women, on Mechelen’s position in the world, and on Burgundian and Habsburg culture in the history of the Low Countries. For Mechelen, this conference provided a unique opportunity to welcome a range of fine scholars to the city. The former residence of Margaret of York and the old ‘Court of Savoy’, a heritage site that was named after Margaret of Austria’s third and last husband, formed an entirely suitable backdrop. This fruitful mixture of people and locations shaped the stimulating and enlightening

sessions that followed. The ideas presented during these two days, both in scholarly papers and in lively discussions, are now available in a fine publication.

Similar to the exhibition catalogue – which was a comprehensive accompaniment to the exhibition, with a wide range of scholarly contributions - this new collection of essays will form an enduring and useful testimony to the major cultural event that took place in 2005. Thanks to the exhibition and the conference the overall theme of the event still reverberates in the minds of the citizens of Mechelen. The city of Mechelen itself remains a worthy subject for further innovative research including the role of powerful women, their influence on their immediate surroundings, and on Western Europe more broadly.

As head of the Department of Cultural Affairs in the city of Mechelen I would like to thank the organisers of the conference for their sustained effort to bring this volume to the public, and hope that their productive work will inspire young researchers, policy makers, and local citizens alike, as well as inspiring more visitors to come to Mechelen. *A City in Women's Hands* was a demanding project but a town priding itself on a prestigious past and envisioning a challenging future cannot be anything but ambitious.

Heidi De Nijn
Head of the Department of Cultural Affairs

WOORD VOORAF

Mechelen is wellicht de enige Vlaamse stad, of om in 16^e -eeuwse termen te spreken, de enige stad uit de Lage Landen, die de heilzame gevolgen mocht ondervinden van een bestuur in vrouwenhanden. Margareta van York, echtgenote en weduwe van de ambitieuze Bourgondische hertog Karel de Stoute, en haar stiefkleindochter Margareta van Oostenrijk kozen ervoor om hun hof en residentie in deze stad uit te bouwen. Het betekende jaren van voorspoed, van hoogcultuur en van politieke bedrijvigheid. Beide dames kunnen immers beschouwd worden als actieve spelers en essentiële stukken op het schaakbord van de Europese geschiedenis.

In het najaar van 2005 was Mechelen voor enkele maanden opnieuw een *Stad in vrouwenhanden*. Het heeft de stad veel deugd gedaan. Want eerlijk: wie wil er niet gedragen en gekoesterd worden door vrouwenhanden? Als het al niet door een geliefde is, dan willen we toch zeker een leven lang door onze moeders verwend en bevestigd worden... En hoewel ze beiden uiteindelijk kinderloos bleven, namen zowel Margareta van York als Margareta van Oostenrijk tijdens hun leven de rol op zich van moeder voor een volgende generatie van kinderen. Margareta van Oostenrijk, regentes en bestuurder van de Bourgondische Nederlanden, zag zichzelf als 'moeder van het land' en verkoos om geportretteerd te worden als *Caritas* of de verpersoonlijking van liefdadigheid: een moederfiguur omringd door kleine kinderen.

In de succesvolle tentoonstelling *Dames met Klasse* leerden we de twee vorstelijke vrouwen kennen als universele geesten die vooral dankzij hun positie als weduwe behoorlijk wat macht naar zich toe wisten te trekken. Hun verhaal, geplaatst in een tijdloze en universele context en door het tentoonstellingscomité op subtiele en sublieme wijze tot leven gebracht, sprak jong en oud aan en lokte een ongewoon hoog aantal bezoekers.

Toonaangevende wetenschappers als Dagmar Eichberger en Anne-Marie Legaré, respectievelijk voorzitter en lid van het wetenschappelijk comité van de tentoonstelling, waren de initiatiefneemsters van het internationaal congres in de schoot van dit cultureel stadsevenement. Samen met conservator Wim Hüskens verzamelden zij in het voormalige paleis van Margareta van Oostenrijk een schare van prominente onderzoekers om in een tweedaags colloquium meningen en resultaten uit te wisselen over de rol van beide vorstelijke dames, de rol van Mechelen en de Bourgondische en Habsburgse cultuur in het verloop van de geschiedenis der Lage Landen. Voor de stad was het een buitenkans om zoveel geleerdheid binnen haar muren te hebben met de historische site van het oude 'Hof van Savoyen', genoemd naar de laatste echtgenoot van Margareta van Oostenrijk, als passend decor. Het werden bijzonder vruchtbare en leerrijke dagen en gelukkig hebben de lezingen en gesprekken nu een bestendige neerslag gekregen in deze kwaliteitsvolle publicatie.

Naast de uitgebreide tentoonstellingscatalogus, die in verscheidene wetenschappelijke bijdragen een brede stand van zaken geeft van het historisch onderzoek, biedt dit boek een blijvende, hoogstaande getuige van het bijzondere cultuurevenement. Niet alleen zindert het project vandaag nog altijd na bij de stadsbewoners, dankzij onder meer het colloquium blijft Mechelen het voorwerp van vernieuwd onderzoek naar de rol van gezaghebbende vrouwen en hun invloed op hun omgeving en de geschiedenis van West-Europa.

Als departementshoofd cultuur van de stad Mechelen wil ik de organisatoren van dit congres van harte danken voor hun volgehouden inspanningen en de hoop uitdrukken dat hun werk inspirerend mag zijn voor jonge onderzoekers, beleidsmakers, bewoners en bezoekers. Met *Stad in Vrouwenhanden* is de lat duidelijk hoog gelegd, maar een stad met zo'n prestigieus verleden en zo'n uitdagende toekomst kan niet anders dan ambitieus zijn.

Heidi De Nijn
Departementshoofd cultuur van de stad Mechelen

PREFACE

This volume represents the results of an academic colloquium that was held in conjunction with the exhibition entitled 'Women of Distinction. Margaret of York and Margaret of Austria' (Mechelen, 2005).¹ While the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue aimed at introducing the general public to the historic context and the cultural background of the theme, the two-day conference was organized with a scholarly audience in mind. The objective of the conference was to investigate the actual presence and influence of women at the Burgundian court. This question was addressed by an interdisciplinary group of scholars who specialize on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century culture. The organisers' invitation to debate these issues was met by a lively and responsive audience, eager to push the discussion beyond the initially proposed topic by mapping the gender-specific role of women in the context of the Burgundian court. The authors also benefited from the results of three earlier symposia dedicated to related questions: *Autour de Marguerite d'Écosse. Reines, princesses et dames du XV^e siècle* (1999), *Das Frauenzimmer* (2000) and *Livres et lectures de femmes en Europe entre Moyen Âge et Renaissance* (2007).

As there was no written code of behaviour for women at the court, the surviving documents, such as written correspondence, contracts, ordinances, household records, inventories, chronicles, travel reports, diplomatic accounts, funerary speeches, literary texts and visual material have to be evaluated and interpreted accordingly.

As Bertrand Schnerb lays out in his introductory essay, we are now in a position to draw on a large number of monographic studies on individual women from the leading nobility that provide ample evidence of the political, cultural and social activities of women in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These fragmentary documents allow us to gauge the relative influence and power of high-ranking women at court. It proves, however, much more difficult to assess the influence of female members of the household who held a lower rank, even though their presence contributed equally to the functioning of the court.

Thérèse de Hemptinne investigates critically the margins within which noblewomen could exert their influence, questioning some of the earlier hypotheses published on this subject. She proposes to make a clear distinction between single women, such as Margaret of York and Margaret of Austria, and women who operate within a well-functioning male-female partnership, such as Isabella of Portugal. Her essay sheds new light on the situation that arose in Mechelen at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and describes it as a 'laboratory of gender' in which established notions of masculinity and femininity could be renegotiated and redefined.

1 See the conference review by Ariane Mensger:
www.arthist.net/download/conf/2005/051220Mensger.pdf