

**WOMEN AT THE BURGUNDIAN COURT: PRESENCE
AND INFLUENCE**
**FEMMES À LA COUR DE BOURGOGNE : PRÉSENCE
ET INFLUENCE**

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BREPOLS

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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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

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The theme of the *femme seule*, or a single woman in power, is also addressed by Jacqueline Kerkhoff, who investigates the structure of Mary of Hungary's household and her female train. When she established herself in the Netherlands, the widowed sister of Emperor Charles was obliged to follow the Burgundian model. While her entourage grew in size compared to that of Margaret of Austria, the composition of her household remained within the established guidelines and adhered to the traditional distribution of men and women in a variety of court offices.

Monique Sommé's contribution is based on a close reading of Isabella of Portugal's written correspondence and presents a telling example of a highly educated noblewoman who was given the opportunity to share the responsibilities of her husband, Duke Philip the Good. Isabella contributed to the decision-making in administrative, diplomatic, financial, religious as well as in family matters. After Philip's death in 1477, she continued to advise her son, Duke Charles the Bold.

A different aspect of public life is addressed in the contributions of Wim Hüsken and Anne-Marie Legaré. Festive entries and theatrical performances were a popular forum for expressing public views on the future role of the sovereign's consort as spouse, mother or co-regent. By representing a selection of biblical, literary, mythological and historical themes on scaffolds and stages, a civic community could alert a foreign princess such as Margaret of York (1468) or Joanna of Castile (1496) to female role models favoured in the Burgundian Netherlands at the time. Anne-Marie Legaré shows that Joanna's entry into the city of Brussels was exceptional in so far as it is the most elaborate and best documented entry of its kind.

While the *blijde inkomst* or *joyeuse entrée* can be described as an idealized vision of how a princess should fulfil her public role, the article by Mario Damen investigates the reality of being a duchess in the late fifteenth-century Northern Netherlands. In his analysis of Margaret of York's economic negotiations, religious foundations and charitable acts on the isle of Voorne, Damen highlights her active involvement in her dower lands and shows how she constructed a public image of herself as a pious widow by donating stained glass windows in local churches.

Questions of self-fashioning are also addressed in Marie-Françoise Poirer's article on the program of stained glass windows at the monastery of Brou, a religious foundation entirely constructed and sponsored by Margaret of Austria. Poirer's close analysis of the unique Susanna window demonstrates how a politically astute woman could present her views on governance, justice and personal fate by shaping an Old Testament subject in a personalised manner.

Margaret of Austria's interest in expressing herself extended well beyond the visual arts and also applied to literature and music. In a new reading of her autobiographic text, called *Complainte de Marguerite d'Autriche*, Catherine Müller shows how another facet of Margaret's personality - her most private emotions - were communicated to the inner court circle by employing allegorical figures in rhymes and images. The marginal decorations of the manuscript in question leave no doubt that the central male character is her high-ranking courtier and confidant, Antoine de Lalaing, Count of Hoogstraten.

Henri Installé's text concentrates on Margaret of Austria's dual role as a woman at court and as regent of the Burgundian Netherlands by looking closely at the two different texts that were both written by the humanist scholar Agrippa of Nettesheim. The earlier text, *De Nobilitate et Praecellentia Foeminaei* (Dôle, 1509/ Geneva, 1529), is juxtaposed with Agrippa's funerary speech that was commissioned by Emperor Charles V shortly after his aunt's death on 1 December 1530. The funerary speech (1530/ Lyon, 1550) is an important document for assessing how Margaret of Austria's personality and life achievements were perceived by her contemporaries.

Dagmar Eichberger's paper investigates one of the most startling objects in the 2005 exhibition, the highly ornate backgammon board of Ferdinand I and Anna of Bohemia and Hungary. The two outer panels of the game board feature a rich dynastic and heraldic program in which Ferdinand holds a central position. The male sphere is complemented by a set of figurative roundels and game pieces that constitute a complementary program of decoration. Based on a variety of literary sources, these miniature scenes show the different roles that women could play by unfolding a wide variety of positive and negative examples.

The editors would like to thank a number of colleagues, collaborators and friends who either contributed to the conference or who helped to make the publication of this volume possible.

The conference was initiated and supported by Heidi De Nijn, head of the department for cultural affairs in the city of Mechelen. Wim Hüsken and Bart Stroobants, both curators at the civic museums of Mechelen, were the local organisers of the conference that took place in the former residence of Margaret of Austria, now the Court of Justice, and the former residence of Margaret of York, now the *Schouwburg*, or the municipal theatre. Thanks to their initiative, a formidable reception was held in the medieval Aldermen's house, now the *Stedelijk Museum Schepenhuis*. The city of Mechelen also provided a generous grant for the publication of the proceedings.

Werner Paravicini, a highly respected doyen of Burgundian studies, attended the conference and provided an initial *résumé* of the oral presentations and the debates that followed. The exhibition curator, Joris Capenberghs, introduced the audience to an important theme of the exhibition, the role of *exotica* at the Mechelen court.

We are grateful to Jennifer Spinks, Paul Memmi and Ross Weber for their help in editing the English and French texts. Laura Sobez and Johann Schulz worked relentlessly on putting together the corpus of colour plates. Jean-Marie Cauchies, series editor of *Burgundica*, and Chris VandenBorre, publishing manager, were enthusiastic about our project from the start and never lost faith in us despite a prolonged gestation period.

Dagmar Eichberger and Anne-Marie Legaré
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