

Intervention in the conclusive round-table

The international conference Mary of Burgundy. The Reign, the 'Persona' and the Legacy of an European princess was held on 4th to 7th March 2015 in Brussels (University of Birmingham Brussels Office) and Bruges (Groeningemuseum). The conference was ended by a conclusive roundtable untitled "Mary 600 Years On: Where Next?". The five intervenants were Dr Adrian Armstrong, Queen Mary, University of London, Dr Ann Roberts, Lake Forest College, Prof. Jelle Haemers, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Prof. W. Prevenier, Universiteit Gent, and myself. The text below is that of my intervention to this conclusive roundtable.

First of all, let me thank the organizers for the invitation to join this conclusive roundtable. To this personal thanks, I wish to add collective thanks as well. Organizing this conference, and moreover to have organized it in the way they did it, was a truly good idea and a real opportunity for research.

In this brief intervention, I would like to stress **5 strong points** of the conference.

To hold an **interdisciplinary** conference is always something of a challenge. I strongly believe in this way of going to work. Even if we are sometimes confronted with different schools of thought, or research traditions, we all pursue the same aim and we need to talk to each other, and to learn from each other.

The second point is the **international** character of the conference. This may nowadays seem obvious, but it is not. There seems to be a relative gap, at least such is my feeling, between a French and French-speaking research tradition on the Burgundian court, on the one hand, and an English-speaking and German-speaking tradition on the other hand. (Flemish and Dutch scholars holding a kind of in-between or even go-between position). You can see this gap in publications and quotations, or in the way people still don't know each other, or don't invite each other to join collaborative projects or initiatives. None of that here, I hope. The fact that the conference was a joint initiative of an English, a Flemish and two French-speaking scholars (one of the two being half-Flemish, by the way) is not a mere coincidence. Might this conference be a strong step towards a better integration of our respective traditions, which I believe it is. Therefore, congratulations to the organizers.

The third point is of course to **set of new data's** we have gathered. To name but a few, the identification of the 21 close political collaborators of the reigning duchess and her husband, the presence of the writer and poet Olivier de La Marche among them — a man who depicted Mary in full armour in her allegorical joust against Accident, in the *Chevalier délibéré*, one year after her death —, the reorganisation of the army, a better view on the production of works of arts and literary pieces, and on the socio-economic situation. We had discussions about the meaning of inaugural entries vs. urban revolts, and the complex interrelations between the Estates, the court, its networks, and urban factions, in the management of the crisis following Nancy. Even Mary's Vienna book of hour, produced by urban artists, may be seen as a tool expressing moral and governmental preoccupations.

Let's turn to my fourth point. A very good thing, and in my view a necessary one, is the inclusion of **Mary's afterlife** is the scope of our conference. A very rich afterlife, indeed. Already after her death, her figure has been used by Maximilian. Even if we assume a part of sincerity in his posture as Mary's courtly lover and loving husband, we should not underestimate the political issues at stake. So Maximilian reduced Mary's agency to nihil and promoted himself as the effective ruler and savior of the lands. Later on, Mary proved to be a prolific source of inspiration for writers and artists, especially in the romantic era. The focus is on the sentimental, and not on the politic. The story is that of a victim: victim of her

inexperience, of her femininity, and obviously of her horse. This is a tragic story too, because the fate of the princess had an impact on her people. This interpretation passed on in historiographical works, and still formed the interpretative key used by such a great medieval scholar as Henri Pirenne. This shows how much our analysis may depend on a multiseular sedimentation of ideas.

My fifth point deals with **the subtext** of all this. What can we say about Mary's female agency as a ruler ? was she a non-entity, as some would say (would have said), or had she a real influence on events, as others would argue (myself included) ? This was, I think, what everyone had in mind during the conference.

Let's take one theme, as an example of possible discussion. Virginity was used in two different ways in the ducal propaganda. There is the idea of the *Pucelle*, the courtly Maid, aggressed by a tyranic king, crying for help and rescue, addressing to her subjects and nobility, and then truly rescued, saved and married by her knight servant Maximilian. We heard many examples of this, in French, Dutch/Flemish and German/Austrian literature for instance. This image is present in the first months of 1477 and later, and will be used over and over by Maximilian in his self-fashioning writings. Some of us here will tend to see in this rhetoric a propaganda theme in favour of Mary, aiming at creating an male emulation among the ducal subjects: so your obligation to serve is not only as a vassal or as a subject, but simply as a man (if you have guts and honor enough to fight for the Maid). This would have been a very intelligent subversion of the expected patterns of femininity: pretend you are weak, to gather forces. This is in my view more effective than playing the virago. Others would claim this is a reflection of the real feelings of the orphaned and essentially feeble Mary. Some data's, at least in my view, seem to confirm the first hypothesis: virginity is also associated with strongness, at least in two occurrences we have heard during the conference, first when virginity is assimilated to strongness (in the metaphor of the walls of the city that do not fall and do not even open her gates to the enemy), secondly when Mary is presented the Amazon Queen Penthesilea as a model during her inaugural entry in Bruges. Other facts should be considered: the coin types mentioned only Mary, and not her husband (but is it a result of Mary's agency or a wish of the Estates to minimize Maximilian's presence, or a conjunction of both?). The numismatic sources even provide us with the phrase "Mary, duke of Burgundy" (and not duchess), and she takes her inaugural oath in Ghent *als een goed heer pleeght te doen* (as a good lord has to do). During her funerals, the body was accompanied by the ducal hat, a masculine attribute as it seems (but does it refer to the Burgundian ducal lineage she comes from or to the Austrian archducal dignity of her widower?).

This illustrates the interpretative difficulties we are confronted with. Had Mary an influence on the events, had she a share in the decision-making process before her marriage, had she an influence on it after Maximilian became her legal guardian ? The solution we give to this problem greatly depends upon the interpretative frame we choose. A gender analysis is the obvious thing to do for many of us here, but this paradigm is still not shared by everyone. In fact, this is a good opportunity for discussion, for we too often tend to adopt radical interpretations in these kind of matters, and the truth might really be in between.

I thank you for your kind attention.