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The enduring political influence of a Netherlandish princess

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Margreet Brandsma, *Tussen twee dynastieën. Margaretha van Bourgondië (1374-1441), gravin van Henegouwen, Holland en Zeeland*, Middeleeuwse Studies en Bronnen, 181 (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2022, 304 pp.)

Margaret of Burgundy took an important part in the power games of the late medieval Low Countries, the kingdom of France and the Burgundian State. She was the daughter of Philip the Bold, duke of Burgundy, and Margaret of Male, countess of Flanders, and as such the grand-daughter of a French king and the sister of John the Fearless, the next duke of Burgundy. Chapters 1 to 6 deal with the life of Margaret in chronological order. Then, special attention is dedicated to the financial aspects of Margaret's life (Chapters 7 to 9, and Appendices 2 to 11). Finally, her court and household (Chapters 10 and 11), and her religious and literary patronage (Chapters 12 and 13) come to the fore. The book includes an English summary (p. 255-261), genealogies (p. 23-25), maps, tables and texts in the form of appendices (p. 262-281), a comprehensive list of primary sources and literature (p. 282-296), an index (p. 297-304), and several plates.

Born in 1374, Margaret got married in 1385, aged ten years old, to the heir apparent of the three counties of Hainault, Holland and Zeeland, young William of Bavaria (son to the regent, later count, Albrecht/*Aubert* of Bavaria). But in 1417 William died and Margaret became a widow and a countess dowager, aged 42. She then stood by the new reigning princess, her daughter Jacqueline, until Jacqueline's loss of effective power in 1427-1428 and abdication in 1433. She also claimed for herself the succession to the Duchy of Brabant in 1430, but was ousted by her Burgundian nephew Philip the Good. During that time, she remained an important and influential member of the three Estates of Hainault.

As Brandsma observes, Margaret appears in many paragraphs and footnotes of scholarly works dealing with other characters or issues, but has never received the full attention of a biographer. This book is the result of the author's doctoral dissertation at the university of Leiden (actually, her second dissertation, as Margreet Brandsma was already a doctor and a researcher in biology, before turning to medieval history). This is not only a biographical study, but above all a fine piece of gender history, with a focus on political and cultural issues, and a sound transnational approach, combining French, Belgian and Dutch historiographical traditions. The possibilities and limitations of a medieval noble woman in a position of power are at the core of an inquiry that aims at understanding structures, much more than collecting peculiar events. Comparisons are, very sensibly, focused on women in the Low Countries, among others Isabel of Portugal and Margaret of York, duchesses of Burgundy. Unlike others, Brandsma does not abuse the rhetoric of novelty. On the contrary: she pays tribute to other scholars; she does not claim to discover a new overwhelming interpretative framework, but she aims to contribute critically to a collective endeavour. This quality needs to be underlined, as it is in my view a true example of good scholarly practice and scientific maturity.

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A significant part of Dr Brandsma's study is dedicated to the financial means allowing Margaret to hold her status and play her social and political role. Her dowry of 100.000 francs was not paid, as it was an offsetting transaction, with the same amount going the other way to her sister-in-law (p. 33-34 and p. 146). She received a monthly income for her expenses. As her daughter Jacqueline was married as a child to John of Touraine, and as the young couple was staying at court under Margaret's supervision, her income rose to 13.000 pounds, with an exceptional 40.000 pounds in 1416 and an additional yearly 7.000 pounds from that year on. Her dower consisted of a combination of yearly incomes on the one hand, and on the other hand revenues from manorial dues and justice and local lordship in several towns and villages, or even in entire districts (*prévôtés, châtelainies*) from Hainault (about a third of the princely domain) and Holland (about 10 per cent). Brandsma estimates that about 40 per cent of the accumulated domain incomes from the three counties was subtracted from the prince's revenues as the domanial part of Margaret's dower. Even if the ruling count or countess had other extraordinary sources of income (such as the subsidies negotiated with the Estates representing the subjects), such a dower was structurally an important charge to the state's finances.

As Brandsma points out, this helps us to understand how Margaret could exercise an enduring political influence, through a large network and a household of about 160 members, that was up to the standards of her status. Margaret's household was larger than those of earlier princesses in the Low Countries, but consistent in size with those of duchesses of Burgundy, namely Margaret of Male, Isabel of Portugal, and Margaret of York (p. 207-208). But, while 'Burgundian' in size, this court was 'Bavarian' in its composition, with members from Hainault and Holland (p. 211-216).

Brandsma does not hesitate to point out what she sees as failures or bad judgments on the part of Margaret. Being a dowager and one of the main negotiators of her daughter's marriage in 1417, Margaret fostered a marriage with the very young Duke John of Brabant,

confident that she could exert her influence on his government. But in doing so she underestimated the possibility of an opposing party to overrule her influence and to take the reins of power in hand, writes Brandsma (p. 73: ‘een cruciale inschattingsfout’). In 1425, Margaret seems to have overestimated the willingness of the Hainaulters, and especially the citizens of Mons, to fight for her daughter’s cause (p. 98-99). There are other limitations: on two occasions, it seems that Margaret’s ability as a negotiator fell short and that, foreseeing the unfavourable outcome, she preferred to step out of the negotiations, namely before the Peace of Woudrichem in 1419 and before the Treaty of Douai in 1425 (p. 75-77 and 98).

On the other hand, and unlike Antheun Janse (2009), Brandsma credits Margaret’s daughter Jacqueline with some agency. The narrative often shows mother and daughter acting together, without trying to deny all insight or initiative on the part of Jacqueline, but rather seeing the daughter’s will and the mother’s council and influence as complementary, as were their interests (e.g. p. 70-72, 78, 83-87, 89-90, 96-97, 99, 100-102, 166, 174, 184). More than that, from a certain point on (1425), Brandsma gives the impression that Margaret is fighting for her daughter’s interests whatever the cost might be to herself. Brandsma clearly casts doubt on Janse’s theory that from 1417 to 1428 Margaret was *the* party leader of the ‘Hooks’ (*Hoeken*) in the enduring factional conflict known as the Hook and Cod wars (p. 74, 249).

As is to be expected, piety, devotion, and religious patronage played an important role in Margaret’s public and private life, though with no special interest to the Modern Devotion or religious reform (see p. 230 and 234). Pilgrimages and donations seem to have been eclectic, traditional, and oriented to the commemoration of the donor and her Bavarian family. Brandsma’s analysis is rich in details. Here are three examples. As well as a lady of the Garter since 1405 (p. 54), Margaret was a member of the more localized knightly brotherhood of Saint-Anthony-in-Barbefosse near Mons (p. 232-233, 238 and facsimile p. 195), which implied devotion as well as ties to the Hainault nobility. By offering a stained-glass window with herself and count William as donors to a parish church in Mons, capital of Hainault, in 1422 (p. 233), she certainly favoured the *memoria* of her late husband as well as her own status as a princely widow.

That said, the only notable foundation of Margaret was the funeral chapel in the parish church of Le Quesnoy (a few hundred meters from the countess’ castle), the building process of which she personally supervised in 1440-41, as documents show, and was achieved shortly after her death. The chapel had four or five windows and a bell-tower, and opened directly to the choir of the church. Brandsma notes that one of the stained-glass windows featured Jacqueline and her first husband, the dauphin John of Touraine, perhaps as a personal memory of what would have been Margaret’s ‘most glorious and maybe also most happy times in her life’ (p. 125). It was there that Margaret was buried, and not in Valenciennes next to her husband, nor in The Hague next to her daughter, father-in-law, and mother-in-law. The chapel in Le Quesnoy no longer exists.

In the last chapter, Brandsma brings together the scarce data relating to Margaret’s artistic and literary patronage or activity for the first time. Margaret possessed a copy of the *City of the Ladies* by Christine de Pizan (1405), a work in which she is praised by the author for her patronage. Pizan’s work was achieved shortly after Margaret’s husband’s accession as

count and shortly before the French marriage of their young daughter Jacqueline. As Brandsma notes, these two events will have fostered Margaret's need to appear as a literary patron, and they explain her possession of a copy of Pisan's anti-misogynistic treaty (p. 217-218 and 240-242). Margaret had a Franciscan confessor, Jacques de Guise, whom she shared with her husband, and later a Dominican confessor, Guillaume de Dour. Both men were from Hainault (p. 229-230). The former also wrote the *Annales Hannoniae*. It is not clear from Brandsma's account what part Margaret herself may have played in the design of this ambitious chronicle of the counts and county of Hainault from their Trojan origins to the present (though the work was left unfinished and reached only to the thirteenth century.). The anonymous *Dict de Marguerite de Bourgogne* dating from the 1430's (ed. by L. Paris, 1891) praises Margaret's prowess and boldness in the defence of her land, as well as her wise, prudent and devout character as a pious princess of French royal descent. Her father and elder brother are also commemorated in this text, which in turn makes no mention of her Bavarian husband and daughter; there is no further clue as to its author and circumstances of production (p. 28, 124, 193 and 242-244). Interesting is Brandsma's hypothesis that with the text's references to Penthesilea, Dido and Medea, three fighting women who had lost their male companion (Hector, Aeneas and Jason), Margaret could mirror her own widowhood and the necessity to fight for the three counties without her chivalric husband at her side (p. 246-247).

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There are also mentions of performances by poets and minstrels, unfortunately with few hints as to their content. A New Year's song, for example, possibly by Gilles Binchois, might refer to Margaret (p. 242). She loaned four books from the Hainault treasury in 1431. These were standard works such as the hunting treaty *Le Livre du roi Modus*, the book *Des clères et nobles femmes*, translated into French from Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (in a manuscript that might have been bought in Paris twenty years earlier for herself and her husband), the *Encyclopedia* of Bartholomeus Anglicus, also in its French translation, and a choir-book with polyphony (p. 244-245). In 1439, she bought a part of Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum historiale*, again in French translation. Regarding the visual arts, she protected the painter Robert Campin in 1432 and absolved him of a sentence of banishment (p. 238). Brandsma also offers an interesting discussion of a recent attribution by D. Vanwijnsberghe (2020) and A. Van Egmond (2020) of the famous Eyckian miniatures in the Turin-Milan Book of Hours to Margaret's patronage, an attribution that cannot be proven but does not seem out of the bounds of possibility either (p. 239-240). All in all, these scarce data nevertheless allow us to figure out more consistently Margaret's activities as a reader and patron. Her reading pattern seems more secular than religious, with a focus on didactic and historiographical works, which is fitting for a politically active princess (p. 247).

One of the book's virtues is to allow further discussion on some interesting points. Some are of minor importance, though of relevance to scholarship. Contrary to what Brandsma implies, for instance, the charter mentioned on p. 94 (n. 30) does not certify that Jacqueline relieved the county of Ostrevant (a small western part of the county of Hainaut, held in fief from France and not from the Holy Roman Empire) from the king of France when she succeeded her father, as it is a grant to postpone that very relief by a year. Also, the burning of the castle of Quiévrain in the presence of Margaret (p. 106 and n. 33) seems to have taken



Margaret of Burgundy.
Pen drawing by Anthonia
de Succa, after a statuette
on the funerary
monument of her
grandparents, Louis of
Male and Margaret of
Brabant, drawn in Lille,
1602 (KBR, Brussel, Ms II
1862/4, f. 57r)

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place before the surrender of June 1425, and not during the later phase of Jacqueline's rebellion (1425-1428) as the reader might infer from the mention.

The book is well-written, with a strong sense of synthesis but without neglecting the necessary attention to significant details. A chronology of the main events would have helped the reader. The full title for *ECRG* is missing in the list of abbreviations (p. 282), but can be found on p. 287. There are very few misprints (on p. 187, read 1425 and not 1424 for the siege of Mons). All in all, this is an important contribution to our understanding of the agency of late medieval women of power, next to the biographies of Isabel of Portugal (Sommé), Margaret of France (Santamaria) and others: a study of the life and action of a countess who had prominent role models right before her eyes, such as her mother Margaret of Male, heiress of Flanders, and her great-aunt Joan of Brabant (p. 38, 59). By contrast, the main unknown character of the story is now her husband, count William.