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In the city and the world

Appreciations of late-medieval Burgundian courtly culture

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Werner Paravicini, Torsten Hiltmann and Frank Viltart, eds, *La cour de Bourgogne et l'Europe. Le rayonnement et les limites d'un model culturel. Actes du colloque international tenu à Paris les 9, 10 et 11 octobre 2007* (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 796 p., ill.); Wim Blockmans, Till-Holger Borchert, Nele Gabriëls, Johan Oosterman and Anne van Oosterwijk, eds, *Staging the court of burgundy. Proceedings of the conference 'The Splendour of Burgundy'* (London-Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2013, 394 p., ill., index)

The impressive range of disciplines and national backgrounds presented by these two voluminous collections suggests that after more than five hundred years Burgundian court culture has scarcely lost its radiance or international appeal. Published in 2013, the edited volumes bring together the output of two conferences. The first was held at the Parisian Deutsches Historisches Institut – Institut Historique Allemand in October 2007 in honour of Werner Paravicini, eminent scholar of – amongst other subjects – late-medieval European aristocratic courts. Its main objective was to reconsider the resonance of Burgundian court culture within a broader European context. The second symposium, associated with the exhibition 'Charles the Bold (1433-1477). The Splendour of Burgundy', was organised in Bruges, in May 2009. Notwithstanding that these volumes inevitably cover common ground in their broad lines, they each do so in their own voice and with their own emphases, rendering them highly complementary.

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In his preface to *La cour de Bourgogne*, Werner Paravicini intimates that the court of Burgundy may not have been the radiating model for European aristocracy, it has traditionally been assumed to be (12), but, more generally, may have reflected Western (courtly) culture. Even more provokingly, Paravicini concludes that we probably should prepare to bury this myth of Burgundian excellence (17). Seemingly by contrast, the introduction to *Staging the court of Burgundy* by Till-Holger Borchert and Anne van Oosterwijk explicitly emphasises the sumptuous display of wealth and power facilitated by the presence of highly-skilled craftsmen in the territories under Burgundian control. The editors of this second volume ‘invite the reader to understand Burgundian Court Culture as an entirety that – often simultaneously – engaged various artistic media, genres and disciplines, and that served, at the same time, a wide range of political, dynastical and ceremonial purposes’ (11). Paravicini clearly proposes to (partially) debunk the myth of sumptuous Burgundian court culture as a superior exemplar for foreign aristocracy. The essays in *Staging the court* consider this cultural environment as naturally interwoven in the social, artistic, and most importantly specifically urban fabric of the Low Countries, in order to attain a better grasp of the machinations of court culture and the constant interaction of the various aspects and actors involved. Consequently, the outward look of *La cour de Bourgogne*, especially in its third and final part, counterbalances the intentional local focus of the Bruges collection with a wider, comparative perspective. It is needless to say that each of these approaches is meritorious in its own right. Indeed, the returning motif of the shared artistic contributions of the individual Burgundian principalities to supra-regional court culture in *Staging the court* and its interactions with civic culture, admittedly also addressed in *La cour de Bourgogne*, is by no means less enticing than the European take offered by Paravicini et al.

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The size of these volumes prohibits an extensive discussion of all contributions in both collections. Nevertheless, given the broad range of subjects covered in them, a general orientation into their structure and contents seems desirable. Three main clusters gradually build up to the comparative viewpoint of *La cour de Bourgogne et l'Europe*. These main sections are further organised in ‘panels’ of three to five thematically or geographically related essays, each preceded by the concise reflection of a ‘chairperson’, briefly interpreting the expositions that follow.

A first group of contributions, ‘De belles archives, de grandes richesses, une historiographie hors pair?’, problematize the degree to which one can draw on contemporary written evidence in order to gauge the prestige and influence of the Burgundian court. Indeed, as is argued by the various authors, one can easily be blinded by the nature, organization, accessibility and conservation of the extant sources or the state of the art as compared to other European princely courts. A first panel succinctly introduces the archival materials related to the ducal courts (introduced by J. Richard, with essays by B. Schnerb, S. Hamel and P. Cockshaw). The second discusses the Dukes’ relative wealth as reflected by the princely finances and extant (narrative) sources. Interestingly, this discussion is not only limited to the ‘engaged’ and laudatory official historiography by Burgundian officers, but also takes into account less biased, but nonetheless favourable, accounts of incidental passers-by (introduction by B. Schnerb, with contributions by J.F. Lassalmonie, J. Devaux and L. Vones).

The three panels in the second cluster ‘Y-a-t-il un style bourguignon’ explore whether it is afforded to refer to an individual Burgundian style, determined by its own characteristics, and – if this question should be answered to the positive – whether the origins of these specifics should be located at the ducal courts or elsewhere (for example, in the cities). A first group of four essays, introduced by J.-M. Cauchies, addresses this question in an administrative and diplomatic context (C. Ewert, M. Boone, F. Viltart, A.-B. Spitzbarth), concluding that the Burgundian order of things was inspiring (for example, in the field of diplomacy) at least as much as it was inspired (for example, by the classics or by structures pre-existing in the various Burgundian territories). A second section (introduction by J. Paviot) considers Burgundian power politics and ideology in relation to the integrative, but also correctional function of the Order of the Golden Fleece, the heraldic office and chivalric representation in tournament culture (G. Melville, K. Oschema, T. Hiltmann). E. Lecuppre-Desjardin brings into focus the court’s dynamic reciprocal relationship with the urban environment. Arguing that Burgundian cultural and ideological influence scarcely extended beyond the aristocratic and administrative elites, she provokingly concludes that the process of Burgundianisation, a term we have become so accustomed to, in reality never took place. The conclusions of the third and final panel (introduction A.-M. Legaré), which assesses the possibility of a Burgundian style in the arts are equally surprising. Each in their own fields, the essays by K. Nys (sculpture), K.A. Wilson (tapestry), T. van Hemelryck (literature) and H. Wijsman (illuminated manuscripts) call into question the possibility of defining a specific Burgundian style, whether it is on the grounds of geographical or temporal demarcation, foreign or urban origins and clientele or the mobility of individual artisans. As it seems, it is only in the field of music that ducal patronage resulted in a specifically Burgundian style resonating throughout Europe (essay by D. Fiala).

The third, and most extensive cluster, which takes up near half the volume, is entitled ‘Présences, transferts, croisements: l’Europe et la cour de Bourgogne’ and critically evaluates the hypothetical reverberation of Burgundian culture at the European courts. Notwithstanding that the four panels in this cluster offer an impressive near pan-European view, some understandable blind spots, or rather opportunities for further investigation, remain (for example, one wonders about the Scandinavian countries). A group of essays centred around France (O. Mattéoni), England (M. Vale) and Scotland (G. Small), introduced by P. Contamine, is followed by a sequence of five contributions each focusing on an Italian region (Florence, Milan, Padua, Mantua and Naples, introduction: R. Fubini, essays by: L. Tanzini, G. Chittolini, G. Guerzoni, I. Lazzarini, G. Toscano). The third panel (introduction: A. Rucquoi) discusses the Burgundian relations with the Iberian peninsula, gathering contributions on the Trastámara court of Castille (A. Fernández de Córdoba Miralles), Portugal (R. Costa Gomes) and the Burgundian influence in Navarre (M. Narbona Cárceles). The final section of this cluster, introduced by H. Müller, unites essays on the Holy Roman Empire (C. Sieber Lehmann), Switzerland (U.M. Zahnd), the Habsburg empire (H. Noflatscher, J. Martínez Millán) and Poland (R. Skowron). Given that the dynamics of the interaction with Burgundy differs from one region to the next, the expositions in this section should be evaluated case by case. In relation to Spain and Portugal, Rucquoi suggests that in spite of political, commercial and artistic mobility, ‘il paraît difficile de parler de la cour de Bourgogne



Assembly of the Order of the Golden Fleece presided over by Philip the Good (*Statutes and Armorial of the Order of the Golden Fleece, Bruges, between 1481 and 1486; British Library, Ms Harley 6199, fol. 7r.*)

comme d'un "modèle culturel" pour les royaumes occidentaux de la Péninsule Ibérique' (587), primarily because of the ducal (as opposed to royal) status of the Burgundian court. By contrast, references to the 'preuve d'audace' of the positioning of the Burgundian court in its rivalry with France (Mattéoni, 437) and Vale's assertion that any 'attempt to illustrate that a "common culture" was shared by the courts of England and Burgundy would be otiose' (455) clearly demonstrate that in some areas Burgundian influence or dominance was natural. In other cases, for example Scotland, the outcome of the investigation seems less clear.

The editors of *Staging the court of Burgundy* have structured their material around six thematic strands, each of which explores one particular aspect of or area specifically associated with Burgundian court culture. It stands without doubt that the two sections dedicated to underlying political motivations of pageantry (section four, 'Power and representation') and the urban environment (section five, 'The city, the urban elite and the Burgundians') form the true core of this collection. A. Hamilton and E. Helfenstein discuss the importance of embroidery and precious vessels in displaying the magnificence of the Burgundian princes.

Interestingly, both scholars draw attention to difficulties in approximating the contemporary appreciation of these commodities for a modern audience. This is obviously also true for other (late-)medieval objects, for example portrait painting (compare T.-H. Borchert in section five) and illuminated manuscripts. Indeed, too often we are ill-informed as to original appearances and conditions of use. Interconnections of power-play and the urban environment also occur in the field of devotion. A. Campbell illustrates the import of gift-exchange and religious patronage in image-building and the construction of social networks (compare also the contribution of J. Lucas in section one and J. Koldewey in section five; for a similar function of the *Pas d'armes*, see the contribution of E. Bousmar). E. Snow's essay on the liturgy of the Seven Sorrows exemplifies the deft way in which the dukes employed civic ritual for political propaganda. The comparative investigation of municipal architecture in Flanders and Brabant by S. Köhl evokes the close co-operation of duke and magistrate in the construction of town halls, the architecture of which simultaneously expressed the authority of the prince and the particularity of the region. The suggestion that the architectural fixtures of the ducal Coudenberg complex in Brussels were relatively restrained as a result of the mobile splendour of itinerant courts, ties in with the absence of luxury noted by B. Hillewaert in relation to the Prinsenhof in Bruges.

Political prowess and the urban context further feature as lead motives in many of the essays in the remaining four sections. W. Blockmans' general exploration of the expenditure and importance awarded to artistic expressions of wealth and power, the first essay in 'Arts at the Burgundian court' concludes that 'in comparison with other political instruments, cultural products could have a deep emotional impact for a relatively modest price' (23). In the same section, H. Brinkman associates formal innovation in the Dutch-language compositions of urban-based rhetoricians with the political propaganda of Maximilian of Habsburg. Similarly, as is argued by E.J. Moodey in the final section of this collection, the figure of Charlemagne was revamped by David Aubert in order to serve Philip the Good's crusading purposes. Most authors in section three, 'The ceremonial court', agree that ritual and ceremony were situated at the cross-section of ducal and civic aspirations, bearing witness to the negotiation of urban identities based on strategies rooted in courtly culture on the one hand, and the princely politics of unification on the other, whether these were associated with tournaments (M. Damen), marriage celebrations (J. Goossenaerts), inaugural ceremonies (J. Hurlbut), princely funerals (A. Brown) or the allegorical representations of mysteries (W. Brückle) and table fountains (K. Oschema).

Many of the essays in *Staging the court* emphasise the performative and explicitly multimedial nature of ceremony and other modes of representation (for example, B. Haggh in section two on the 'Order of the Golden Fleece'). The notion of performance is perhaps evoked most exemplary and programmatically in the introductory essay by J.J. Bloom, discussing tapestry, automata and *tableaux vivants*. The three concluding essays of section five, all discuss the *Excellente cronike*, one of the most important witnesses in the vernacular historiographic tradition of Flanders. Focusing on different aspects of the chronicle, taken together they address the performance of the text and the manuscripts in which it is contained. J. Oosterman does not only show that different accounts can frame the same event in various ways, he also demonstrates that these accounts remain malleable in the process of



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The month of March: departure for the hunt. In the background a view of Brussels, with a tournament being held in the front of the Coudenberg palace (drawing by Barend van Orley (1487/1491-1541); Leiden University Library, PK-T-2047)

dissemination. S. Mareel re-associates the verse portions interpolated into the prose chronicle with the contexts in which they were originally performed. Finally, O. Vassilieva-Codognet discusses the dynastic visual programs of prints and manuscripts of the text. In these, she recognises the innovative turn towards realistic depiction in manuscript illumination which is also underlined by H. 't Jong, E. König and K.M. Rudy. The expert investigations in the two latter essays lead both scholars to propose a revaluation of the traditional chronology of miniature painting in some of its most pioneering features, *in casu* realism and the use of liturgy and altarpieces as sources of inspiration. The final essay by S. Lindquist interprets the presence of novel, potentially subversive, renderings of the naked body in manuscripts owned by Louis de Bruges 'as a strategy to appeal to their patron and involve him in the contents of the book', thus furthering our understanding of the complex relation between *libraire*, artist, exemplar and patron in the development of the illustrative programmes of medieval manuscripts.

The foregoing will no doubt have made apparent that most of the essays in *Staging the court* can (or perhaps should?) be enjoyably read next to their counterparts in *La cour de Bourgogne*. This is also true for some essays that have not yet been mentioned. The case against John of Nevers, who was accused of the use of magic, explored by A. Berlin, surely

embodies the 'dark side' of the Order of the Golden Fleece referred to by G. Melville. The events related to the accession of Maximilian of Austria (essay by S. Dünnebeil) may serve to underline the importance of the Order's integrative role. Other potential 'tandems' include J. Spicer on representations of the White Rose of York in the Low Countries and M. Vale's essay on the relations of Burgundy with England and H. Callewier's biographies of the singers of St. Donatian and D. Fiala on Burgundian music.

The European resonance of Burgundian splendour has been (partially) deconstructed and in the Low Countries it was firmly rooted in civic circumstance. Burgundianisation never took place. Formulated this dramatically, these conclusions may sound (too?) programmatic. Nonetheless, both collections are commendable for their deliberate structure and thematic coherence. I would like to conclude with some remarks in the margin, which are no doubt more related to my personal research interests, than that they identify major shortcomings in these collections. Notwithstanding that some essays casually refer to the sociolinguistic context of the Burgundian Low Countries, I missed one or two contributions explicitly addressing multilingualism and translation. Indeed, in some way or another, polyglossia is always present in the backdrop of the political history of the medieval Low Countries. Moreover, during the Burgundian period even more than before, translation between the local vernaculars became an important means of political negotiation and cultural brokering. For instance, an analysis from the viewpoint of translation studies, taking into account Dutch translations of French historiographic texts associated with the Valois dukes and the literary production of their court, would have exposed a form of Burgundian influence on Dutch literature that does not become apparent from Brinkman's formal interpretation. I suppose that this only elucidates the methodological problems of stylistically defining Burgundian literature (here: influence) as raised by Van Hemelryck.

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But what is next? In his conclusion of *La cour de Bourgogne*, Blockmans underlines the importance of regional particularism, struggling with the centralising tendencies promoted by the duke and his administration. Some of the essays in *Staging the court* show a glimpse of a possible way forward. The contribution by S. Jolivet and H. Wijsman on fashion – exemplary in its interdisciplinarity – tells us that Philip the Good used regional styles of clothing to his own advantage. Köhl's discussion of civic architecture in Flanders and Brabant shows the virtue of confronting the power politics of the various territories under Burgundian control with each other. An explicitly comparative approach to the way in which the 'seventeen provinces' engaged (artistic) expressions of particularism in their negotiations with their prince, and how these were subsequently appropriated by the duke and his entourage, would provide a welcome addition to the discussed presentations of Burgundy in relation to the city and the world.



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