

REVIEW ARTICLE

‘Andromeda Unbound’ Revisited

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Dynasty and Piety. Archduke Albert (1598–1621) and Habsburg Political Culture in the Age of Religious War. By LUC DUERLOO. Farnham: Ashgate. 2012; *Isabel Clara Eugenia. Female Sovereignty in the Courts of Madrid and Brussels.* Edited by CORDULA VAN WYHE. London: Paul Holberton Publishing in association with Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, Madrid. 2012.

In autumn 1998 the Royal Museums for Art and History in Brussels opened a major exhibition commemorating the 400th anniversary of the reign of Archdukes Albert and Isabella in the Southern Netherlands. The exhibition was accompanied by an impressive and beautifully illustrated catalogue.¹ Historians, art historians, and literary scholars examined the cosmopolitan court in Brussels and its impact on the flourishing arts and culture created by the Habsburg couple to echo the Burgundian splendour of the past and to mount a Counter-Reformation campaign on the frontlines of the confessional divide of the Low Countries. The introductory chapter by Werner Thomas, from which the title of the present review article is borrowed, reflects the high expectations in the Southern Netherlands expressed at the arrival of the Archducal couple in 1598. For a number of scholars involved in this project, the topic remained of lasting interest and has resulted in new research into a hitherto neglected field of study. This new interest in the politics and culture of the Southern Netherlands in the first half of the seventeenth century is enriched by the highly international outlook and expertise of these scholars and by their knowledge of the wider Habsburg world well beyond the confines of the seventeen provinces of the Low Countries. Two of them have now produced important volumes which separately present the two halves of the royal partnership in Koudenberg Palace. In his preface, Luc Duerloo sets out how, in the wake of the exhibition, he was encouraged to write a biography of Archduke Albert, which has now appeared as an impressive, meticulously researched monograph of no less than 592 pages. Cordula van Wyhe has again assembled a number of eminent scholars from Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the USA to provide a multi-faceted study of Archduchess Isabella Clara Eugenia. Both books extend the remit of the exhibition catalogue by shedding light on the couple’s respective childhoods and premarital lives, and — in the case of Isabella — her role as widowed governor-general of the Southern Netherlands after the death of her husband in 1621. Both books are adorned with a set of illustrations, mostly portraits of the protagonists during various phases of their lives. Van Wyhe’s edition is particularly rich with numerous colourful and excellently reproduced images which not only follow the lives of the royal household, but also show the career of such important men as Ambrogio Spinola, who appears in no less than three different portraits in the book. A number of those scholars assembled for the 1998 exhibition have stayed in contact and have continued to share their respective specialisms. Duerloo provides a chapter on ‘Marriage, power and politics’ to the collection, while van Wyhe’s publications are listed in his bibliography. Werner Thomas, co-editor of the 1998 collection, also contributes to van Wyhe’s

edition (with an article on the management of political factions during the transition of power after the death of the Archduke) and so do their (former) PhD students Dries Raeymaekers (on access to the court in Brussels) and Birgit Houben (on the ladies-in-waiting and their role during Isabella's widowhood). Apart from filling a gap in our knowledge of these two rulers and the political culture of the first half of the seventeenth century, both books set out to address particular lacunae in the historiography of early modern courts and political elites. Duerloo is particularly interested in the often-neglected role of so-called middling states in the international politics of the time, while van Wyhe addresses questions of female agency within dynastic families.

Archduke Albert — the younger son of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II and his wife Maria, daughter of Emperor Charles V — as the husband of the eldest daughter of Philip II — brother of two Holy Roman Emperors and, therefore, deeply involved in the dynastic policies of the Habsburg Empire — thus far has been much overlooked as an eminently important player in the power politics of the turbulent 'confessional age'. The historiography of the politics of the Spanish Netherlands for a long time has been dominated by historians of Spain, while scholars working on the Holy Roman Empire were and still are mainly interested in politicians and events within the Empire. Duerloo's meticulous narrative of Albert's reign focuses on the Archduke's foreign policy between the poles of Madrid and Vienna. Based on impressive international archival research and an excellent knowledge of the secondary literature, Duerloo reconstructs the complicated logic underlying Albert's policy, based on the organizing principle of service to and support of the House of Habsburg. Following two streams, Duerloo first argues that the relationship between the Spanish and the Brussels courts is best described as symbiotic, with both centres in need of each other. Albert was dependent on Spain's (not always forthcoming) financial support for his war effort in the Low Countries, and Philip III needed a loyal representative in the north with an understanding of politics 'on the ground'. Within this symbiosis, according to Duerloo, Albert had more room for manoeuvre than Spanish-centred historiography so far has conceded. While much of the first part of the book is concerned with this relationship leading up to the Twelve Years' Truce, the second part of the study focuses on Albert's involvement in the politics of the Austrian Habsburgs on the eve of the Thirty Years' War — the *Bruderzwist* of the House of Habsburg, the *Jülich-Kleve* Succession Crisis, and the Oñate Treaty of 1617. Here, Albert emerges as a mediator between the different claims of the archdukes jockeying for positions. Particularly in the later years of his life, when it had become apparent that he would not have an heir to succeed to his position, he acted as a strong advocate for the integrity and unity of the dynastic family. There cannot be one narrative of events leading up to the Battle of the White Mountain. Major and middling dynastic powers were connected through a complicated web of hereditary and marital relations, and political and confessional alliances. This is laid out in great detail, which sometimes loses sight of the subject under investigation. Chapter headings remain a bit enigmatic and make it difficult for the reader to navigate the chronology and geography of events. The central argument of Albert's main policy aim, namely the support of the Habsburg's dynastic policy, somewhat blurs the approach of treating the Spanish Netherlands as a 'middling power', which is set out in the introduction. These reservations aside, however, Duerloo's monograph reintroduces a much-overlooked political player into the picture of dynastic policies and international relations in the first decades of the seventeenth century.

Duerloo's portrayal is very much a men's world of politicians and diplomats, generals and courtiers. In this light, Cordula van Wyhe's collection provides a welcome complement. She addresses questions of female agency in elite families — a topic which has received much scholarly attention in recent years. It thus adds to an emerging set of recent works on Habsburg women, such as Katrin Keller's 'Hofdamen' — a study of ladies-in-waiting at the Habsburg court at Vienna in the seventeenth century — and her more recent study of Archduchess Maria of Inner Austria.² The reader is introduced to the early life of the infanta, eldest and favourite daughter of Philip II, who, until her departure to the Southern Netherlands, as a number of the authors argue, played an important role as a confidante of the king, who

introduced her to the intricacies of international politics at an early age. A substantial number of articles is concerned with Isabella's childhood and premarital life, which inevitably leads to some repetition, for instance about her special position in the dynastic hierarchy of the Spanish Habsburgs and, consequently, in the European dynastic marriage market. Before her younger brother, the later Philip III, emerged from the dangers of early childhood, despite the reservations against her sex, Isabella was the closest aspirant to the Spanish crown, and therefore, a very high prize in the dynastic politics of the time. She remained unmarried until well into her thirties, partly because the number of acceptable marriage partners was limited, partly because the chosen candidate, Emperor Rudolph II, remained indecisive before eventually withdrawing, and partly because Philip II found it increasingly difficult to part with his daughter, who apparently had a talent for listening and discussing politics with him. Her late marriage remains a recurrent theme in the collection, but, these reservations aside, the chapters by Santiago Martínez Hernández, Almudela Pérez de Tudela, Cordula van Wyhe, and Elisa García Prieto outline important facets of the royal household in Madrid and the role of the infantas represented through portraiture and the courtly practices of collecting and gift-giving. Several essays then address the arrangements at the courts in the Spanish Netherlands, first under the two rulers, then during Isabella's widowhood. Relations between the several members of the wider Habsburg family in Brussels and Madrid, and with the elites in their service, are effectively used to highlight the room for manoeuvre open to a well-educated and politically experienced woman such as Isabella, whose political sensitivities allowed her to style herself as a passionate and much-loved advocate of the Southern Netherlands, admired as a devout, motherly figure, deeply caring for her subjects. Given the emphasis on image and representation, which were important aspects of the political culture of the time, the ending of the book is a bit disappointing. While Cordula van Wyhe starts her very elegant introduction with references to the Archduchess's afterlife in the memories of the people of the Low Countries, this point is not further developed. It would have been useful to learn more about the role that Isabella's memory played in the politics of her successors. With the advancing age of the couple and the declining hope of a legitimate heir, it became clear that the Southern Netherlands would revert to the direct rule of the Spanish crown, a fact that was legally confirmed after the death of Archduke Albert. However, the strong presence of Isabella, who was given the title of governor-general, provided a period of continuity which could be used to soften the return to government from Madrid. Given the omnipresence of her image, for instance in the convent of the Discalced Carmelites in Antwerp, the reader is left wondering for how long the references to a second golden age of the Southern Netherlands associated with the rule of the Archdukes survived after the end of an era.

Notes

¹ *Albert & Isabella, 1598–1621*, ed. by Werner Thomas and Luc Duerloo (Brepols, 1998).

² Katrin Keller, *Hofdamen: Amtsträgerinnen im Wiener Hofstaat des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Vienna, Cologne, & Weimar: Böhlau, 2005); Katrin Keller,

Erzherzogin Maria von Innerösterreich (1551–1608). Zwischen Habsburg und Wittelsbach (Vienna, Cologne, & Weimar: Böhlau, 2012); *Women at the Burgundian Court*, ed. by Dagmar Eichberger, Anne Marie Legaré, and Wim M. Hüsken (Brepols, 2010).

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