

MARGARET “of Burgundy” as REGENT of LOW COUNTRIES

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The political career of Margaret, dowager duchess of Savoy and the first female *gouvernante* of the Habsburg Low Countries, seems totally unprecedented in two ways. First, she was neither the wife nor the mother of the official sovereign; and second, she must have been unusually successful in this position because she became the only regent in European history, male or female, to serve two different sovereigns.

Moreover, although it has not been perceived as a problem by historians and is usually glossed over by her biographersⁱ, Margaret’s path to becoming *gouvernante* of the remnants of her mother’s Burgundian inheritance seems even more remarkable. When the Estates-General of the Low Countries met in October 1506 after their ruler’s sudden death in Spain, they opened his will and discovered that it never mentioned a possible regency for his young son. Some deputies from Flanders and Artois wanted to avoid Maximilian and timidly suggested Philip’s widow. Both Henry VII of England and Louis XII of France apparently expected Guillaume de Croÿ-Chievres to be named guardian of the young princeⁱⁱ. However, no one in western Europe mentioned the late prince’s only sibling, his 26-year-old childless and widowed sister, who had openly desired this post as soon as she heard of her brother’s Spanish inheritance.

Nevertheless, after learning of her brother’s death, Margaret quickly positioned herself as his successor. In autumn 1506, she traveled north from her Savoyard dower lands in Bresse to the neighboring Free County of Burgundy and spent all of November there. At month’s end, the head of her privy council, the Piedmontese lawyer Mercurino Gattinara, presided over a meeting of the provincial Estates, at which “Margaret of Burgundy” (the archbishop’s chapter calls her *Domina Margarita Burgundie*) was present in person. The assembly elected her as *Gubernatrix* – something for which I know of no parallel in European history. Pending formal approval from her father the Emperor, she humbly accepted her possession of “a poor province which had suffered so much for her *mother*.” Here *Domina Margarita Burgundie* offers an unexpectedly matrilineal version of Burgundian history since 1477 that exactly reverses her sister-in-law’s remarks to the Castilian *Cortes* a few months earlier. In this version, Margaret, as the only

surviving child of its sovereign duchess, became its true heir – and an all-male representative assembly accepted it. But Margaret’s father, whose approval as Emperor was necessary, emphatically rejected it. When Franche-Comté’s emissaries reached Maximilian in Germany, he ignored their resolution, haughtily informing them that he would appoint some commissioners to ratify his possession in his grandson’s nameⁱⁱⁱ.

Published sources remain tantalizingly thin for the next several months^{iv}. We do know that when Margaret and Gattinara met Maximilian in Alsace and Swabia in January and February 1507, they persuaded her egotistical and marcurial father -- then obsessed by his chimeric scheme to make himself Pope -- to make Margaret his legal representative (“*procureur général, especial et irrévocable*”) on behalf of his ward and grandson. Accompanied by several high-ranking dignitaries named by her father, she reached Brabant in March 1507 and promptly staged a series of official ‘joyous entries’ with her young ward. But as Cauchiès has stressed, “*procuracion n’est pas régence!*” and her autonomy remained constricted even after Gattinara had wrung further concessions from her father; in October 1508, she still referred to the regency council as Maximilian’s.^v Margaret’s ill-defined political authority would not officially increase until after she had taken a prominent role in arranging the League of Cambrai at the end of 1508. Three months later, Maximilian rewarded her handsomely, naming her as personal ruler of both Franche-Comté and the county of Charolais in central France as well as greatly increasing her authority in the Low Countries. In April 1509, Gattinara arranged Margaret’s proclamation as *souveraine* in both places. She apparently never had coins bearing her name struck at Franche-Comté’s mint, but legal sources confirm that Margaret remained sovereign of “my poor county of Burgundy” until her death in 1530^{vi}.

However, at the end of 1514 her father, without informing her, proclaimed his grandson of age, thereby ending her service as governor. By summer 1515, Margaret offered a dignified defense of her administration to her nephew and his council., which went a long way towards restoring her political legacy.^{vii}

MARGARET's justification to CHARLES (Brussels, 20/8/1515):

SOURCE: L. Ph. C. van den Bergh (ed.), *Correspondance de Marguerite d'Autriche, gouvernante des Pays-Bas, avec ses amis, sur les affaires des Pays-Bas de 1506-1528*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1845-47), II, 117-27 (#226)

SIGNIFICANCE: *In 1507, Margaret of Austria, dowager duchess of Savoy, became the first woman regent in European history who was neither the mother nor the wife of the local sovereign. In December 1514, without informing her, Margaret's father, Emperor Maximilian, legally emancipated his grandson, her 14-year-old nephew. Having lost her position as gouvernante, Margaret began a successful political comeback eight months later by justifying her actions during her seven-year stewardship in the Netherlands at a dramatic face-to-face meeting with her teenage nephew and his council.*

Note on back: "This *billet*, along with other things, was proposed by Madame and read by the *Audiencier* on 20 August 1515 in the presence of *Monsieur* [Charles], the Palatine count [? Duke Frederick of Bavaria, Maximilian's deputy], Ravenstein [Philip of Cleves], the prince of Chimay [Charles de Croÿ], and Messrs Chièvres [William II de Croÿ, his "Grant Chambellan"], "St.-Fy" [probably a misspelling of "Sempy": Michel de Croÿ, Chimay's uncle, +1516], the chancellor [Jean le Sauvage], count of Montrevel [Guy de la Baume], governor of Bresse [Laurent Gorrevod], and the deputies of Louvain and Cambrai."

See J. Haemers, H. Wijsman, C. Van Hoorebeeck (eds.), *Entre la ville, la noblesse et l'Etat: Philippe de Clèves (1456-1528), homme politique et bibliophile* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007).

"Sire, I have evidently learned, despite much patience, that people are trying, through various means and exhortations, to make you suspicious of me, your humble aunt, and withdraw me from your trust and confidence, which seems a very ill reward for the services I have done for you. I am required first to excuse myself from the charges resulting from Loys Maraton's trip to Spain and from having procured your trip to Germany, to which I believe I have given you a full and ample verbal answer and demonstrated my innocence.

I am also constrained, since I have begun to give a full discharge of these particular events, to give a full and complete discharge of all my responsibilities and manner of government during your minority; which, Sire, after hearing and digesting it, you will see that I have evidently conducted myself well and loyally in this government, according to the exigencies of situations that have happened to me during your minority and scorning any private profit, as someone serving from the heart and not in order to enrich myself from your property. Although my President has already explained much to the Estates-General, I also desire, Sire, that these matters be better understood through the gentlemen present here, because assertions could be contradicted if they are not truthful. I beg that whoever hears anything that is not true, if they wish to say so in your presence, I will answer, because I much prefer that people talk to my face and not behind my back.

To begin the matter and give a concise account of the doings [*demené*] of [my] government, Sire, fairly soon after the very sorrowful trespass of your father, my good lord and brother, whom God absolve, by his command the Emperor my lord and father summoned me to him, by whom it was ordered that I must come to these parts for the government and administration of your person and your lands, because he would be absent from them. And because of my desire to be of service to you as the person towards whom, next to my lord and father, I have the most duty and nearest blood kinship, I willingly accepted these responsibilities, leaving aside my private affairs, somewhat perplexed by this sudden departure from my dowry lands.¹

Sire, while I was on my way here, being still in Germany, news reached me of the incursions and pillages done by Charles of Guelders against your lands and subjects, even taking by surprise the towns of Grol and Lochem, which he did improperly and against the terms of treaties. In trying to remedy this, as I was then advised by your own councillors and subjects, and even trying to prevent the said Charles from proceeding further in his malevolence, I sent down a number of soldiers to resist Charles and show a face to prevent him from undertaking some greater enterprise against you and your lands, which soldiers did the best they could, as we may presuppose.

Learning this, the king of France, who has never wished the prosperity and augmentation of your house, suddenly sent 300 lancers to help the said Guelders. Because of this assistance it was necessary to reinforce our own army so it would be sufficiently powerful to resist Charles and his allies. These are things, Sire, which cannot be guided or led without expense, and which did not redound to my profit, as everyone knows. But if this had not been done and provided, it is to be feared that you and your subjects would have fared worse; moreover, here and in other places I did nothing without the wishes and orders of the emperor, whom as reason admits I was bound to obey.

The king of France, realizing that Charles of Guelders was not sufficiently powerful to do as much damage to you and your lands as he would have wished, soon afterwards sent even greater power to Guelders, through which he surprised the city of Tirlmont in your county of Brabant, ransoming and burning many of your subjects. We labored to resist this as best we could and succeeded in preventing anything worse from happening at that time.

In order to better resist your public and secret enemies afterwards, by command of the emperor and with the advice of your nobility and other councillors, it was decided to negotiate a marriage alliance between you, Sire, and madame Mary of England; which was done by the lord of Fiennes, de Berghes, the chancellor and *audiencier*, for the purpose that with the support, favor and assistance of the English, the French would not be able to damage you so easily.

¹ The Savoyard province of Bresse (part of France since 1601). [Margaret left Bresse in October 1506, immediately after learning of her brother's death in Spain, and never returned].

By means of this treaty, the treaty of Cambrai followed shortly afterwards.² which did [us] no harm as long as it lasted, and it was not possible to bring it to conclusion without much trouble and labor.

Soon after this treaty of Cambrai, duke Charles of Guelders, in his accustomed manner, and despite his oath to observe the treaty of Cambrai, began infringing it by making several raids and pillages against you and your subjects. Because of these events, certain meetings were held at Liège and elsewhere to avoid a war, but no fruit came from them through the fault of Charles, who alone desired war.

In a further effort to avoid war and live in peace with him, certain communications were made to negotiate friendship and alliance; but nothing had any effect – as you, my lord chancellor, know – and nevertheless I did everything loyally possible, even sending my secretary Marnix directly to the emperor. And further wars soon followed for the same reason, after I had sent my lords Nassau, Chièvres, Berghes, and Tamise as ambassadors to my lord and father in order to resolve this matter, which was as much as I could possibly do; and these lords know the answer they brought back with them.

While these ambassadors were traveling, the surprises of the aforesaid Guelders made the situation even worse; nevertheless, in order to live in peace with him, M. de Hesdin was sent to him with instructions such that you can easily see whether or not I am telling the truth; these, Sire, I offer you, and M. the chancellor can say what he told me then about this business, which I well remember, and you can know by this that I was not the cause that war resumed after the treaty of Cambrai, which is one of the major charges brought against me, incorrectly and without cause.

In order to thwart the perverse will of Charles of Guelders, it was then necessary to drag the English, who were then our allies, into it, and ask help and assistance from them (which they had already refused to do two or three times). This would have been the best way to dispose of lord Charles; nonetheless, so many faults were made, **which as a woman I could not remedy**,³ that no profit came from it, which is the hasard of war. At least, it cannot be said that this English assistance cost us a great deal, because up to the present it has cost [us] nothing, nor will it in future if matters are handled correctly.

After these things happened, the English made their enterprise against France that we all know,⁴ in which I have willingly helped and assisted them, because of the great good that would follow for you, Sire, and your house if these things had been pursued. Moreover, your lands would have lost nothing, because by this they were enriched by a million in gold and there was

² December 10, 1508.

³ My emphasis.

⁴ This conflict ended in July 1514 when Margaret disbanded English troops because there was no money to pay them: see Van den Berghe, II, 102-03 (#216).

no more apparent way for you to recover your duchy of Burgundy, together with the honor and title of your **maternal lineage**.⁵

Afterwards, the English made the arrangement that we know about,⁶ which displeased me and by means of which the rupture occurred. And afterwards, Sire, you have made other treaties with the French, which I pray God may give you good success and happiness.

Meanwhile, Sire, without my knowledge, your emancipation was negotiated secretly,⁷ which I would not have opposed, no matter what anyone says. Indeed, I am very happy and content because of it, as reason requires; and if I have had some regret, it is because they gave me the shame of concealing it from me, because if I had been forewarned, I would have been of better heart than the others and better able than anyone else to handle this transition, in hopes that I would then have assurances on your part that I would have reason to be fully satisfied. By doing so, Sire, you would have gained only honor.

However, Sire, I have noticed that ever since your proclamation I have been rather shabbily treated, both in respect to my pension and my credit and trustworthiness. I have been shunned in your secret affairs, which I regret, and this could not have happened unless you had been persuaded of several things that are entirely untrue – as I expect to make you understand soon, and openly -- and that you never had or will have better and more loyal service than from your own flesh and blood.

Sire, I have served you well and faithfully throughout your minority, risking both my person and my property. I have never profited in any way from your government, as such guardians customarily do. I am satisfied to offer as my witnesses those of the Order [of the Golden Fleece], the treasurers and councillors; they know that I have never made a penny because of this government or otherwise, except whatever the Estates have given me through their liberality, which I am desirous of making known. Namely: the sum of 60,000 florins from the Estates-General after the treaty of Cambrai, on condition that I pay ten thousand to the Bishop of Gurk⁸ plus something to Dr. Pflug and Pflinger (which I did); and I spread more of it around elsewhere, so that after deducting everything I actually got about 36,000 florins. And the estates of Flanders once gave me 20,000 *écus*, which, after deducting the usual largesses, actually netted me about 10,500 *livres*. The estates of Brabant also gave me 10,000 *livres*; those of Holland, on two occasions, about 9,000 *livres*; those of Zeeland, 3,000 *livres*; those of Hainault, 3,000 *livres* (which have yet to be collected); and the emperor gave me 7,000 *livres* for the voyage to Cambrai. In case I have gotten anything further, I am content to be reproached -- not counting my pension of 20,000 *livres* per year, which only began to be paid in 1512. Before that, Sire, starting in the year 1507 when I came here, I have served you at my own expense, disbursing

⁵ Lost to the French in 1477 and justified by the Salic law because a woman (Margaret's mother Marie of Burgundy) could not inherit a French royal fief – thus the unusual phrase 'maternal lineage.'

⁶ Despite an emergency embassy to England, Henry VIII made peace with France and married his sister Mary to the French king, breaking her engagement to Margaret's nephew.

⁷ Principally by Chièvres, who attended this meeting.

⁸ Matthias Lang, Maximilian's chief negotiator at Cambrai.

without any salary more than 80,000 *livres* from my marriage dowry. Beyond the aforementioned pension and other gifts, you will find that I have disbursed more than 300,000 florins of my income in your service. Your treasury experts who have seen my accounts know well that it cannot be said, Sire, that I have enriched myself at your expense; it is very much the other way around.

Moreover, it has been suitable for me to make various gifts because of this government: tableware, silk cloth, gold, silver, precious stones, jewelry -- all of which you will find listed here and more fully in my accounts. On behalf of your business, I have also had to borrow various sums in excess of 50,000 *livres*, which have yet to be repaid or credited.

Back in 1507, the emperor gave me an order for 10,000 gold *écus* to be drawn on your general treasurer. As you will see, I have never made use of it; and I offer it to you as a gift, by which you can see, Sire, that I have not served you from avarice.

If you have been told and inferred, Sire, that you are in debt because of my government, it is no wonder, Sire, and should not be imputed to me. It comes from various things that have occurred during these years, and we have met these expenses to the best of our ability. But it has neither been because of my fault nor for my particular profit. As you can see, I have put in a great deal of my own money and, thanks be to God, you can see that nothing has been sold or alienated from your domain; rather, on the contrary, a few things have been recovered as occasions permitted.

Moreover, I leave it to the gentlemen who have handled your financial affairs to acknowledge that it was not really possible for me to control your finances, because the emperor named them and supervised them.

Thus, Sire, you may wish to conclude that in no way have I been responsible for those things for which I am blamed and accused, nor is there any reason to withhold my pension for so long when every other lord collects his promptly. If mine is larger, I also happen to be your only aunt and I have no child or heir other than you; I know no one whom your honor touches more than me.⁹ You may be assured, Sire, that when it pleases you to make use of me and hold me in the esteem which the situation merits, I will serve you well and loyally, risking my person and my property as I have done heretofore. But if it pleases you to believe hastily what you have been told about me and treat me as you are beginning to do, I would rather occupy myself with my minor affairs and retire gracefully, as I have also requested my secretary Marnix to have the emperor do when he saw him recently. I beg you, Sire, to declare your intentions to me about all this.”

The note on the back of the document concludes: “and it was answered by the chancellor on behalf of *Monseieur* that Madame was considered fully discharged of everything, with other great and good words and promises.”

⁹ Margaret overlooks Charles’s mother – who was then his grandfather’s prisoner in Spain.

In early 1517, after meeting Charles in person, Maximilian advised his grandson to name her to his new regency council. However, Margaret regained her full official authority as regent only another major political *coup* on the scale of the Cambrai league – this time, successfully bribing German electors to vote for Charles as Emperor in 1519.^{viii} During her final eleven years in power, she again compiled an enviable political record, including conducting some crucial diplomatic negotiations with her nephew's greatest political enemy, France. One day before her death, she composed a letter to Charles V boasting that she left his *pays de par deça* “greatly augmented” since his departure.

ⁱ A good starting point for studying Margaret's political career is J.-M. Cauchiès, “Marguerite d'Autriche, gouvernante et diplomate,” in Agosto Paravicini Baglioni et. al. (eds.), *L'itinérance des seigneurs (XIVe-XVIe siècle)* (Lausanne, 2003), 353-76. See also the study by his student, Gilles Docquier, “Une dame de ‘picques’ parmi les valets? Une gouvernante générale parmi les grands officiers des Pays-Bas burgundo-hansbourgeois: le cas de Marguerite d'Autriche,” in B. Federinov and G. Docquier, eds., *Marie de Hongrie: Politique et culture sous la Renaissance aux Pays-Bas* (Mariemont, 2008), 39-51.

ⁱⁱ Robert Wellens, “Les Etats généraux et la succession de Philippe le Beau dans les Pays-Bas,” in *Anciens Pays et Assemblées d'Etas*, 56 (1972), 123-159; Cauchiès, *Philippe le Beau* (supra, n. 3), 209. In a sense the French and English kings were correct, since Chièvres would emerge as the principal *consigliere* to young prince Charles – but more than eight years later.

ⁱⁱⁱ The best account of this little-known event remains Edouard Clerc, *Histoire des états généraux et des libertés publiques en Franche-Comté*,² vols. (Lons-le-Saunier, 1876-81), I, 237-38, esp. 237 n. 6. (my italics). In 1509 Margaret also acquired sovereignty over another fragment of her mother's Burgundian inheritance, the small county of Charolais, an enclave in France: see Hubert Elie, *Le Charolais dans l'histoire européenne* (Lyon, 1956), 44-72.

^{iv} M. Bruchet and E. Lancien, *L'Itinéraire de Marguerite d'Autriche* (Lille, 1934), 20, locates her at Ensisheim in Alsace in early January 1507, then at Ulm and Rottenburg in Swabia on February 7. Ten days later she went hunting with her father at Urach and left soon afterwards for

the Low Countries, reaching Maestricht by March 26. More information may exist among Gattinara's abundant correspondence in the Archives Departementales du Nord at Lille.

^v Cauchiès (supra, n. 6), 356-58; on Margaret's "joyous entries," see Jean Lemaire de Belges, *Chronique de 1507*, ed. A. Schoysman (Brussels, 2001).

^{vi} On numismatics in Franche-Comté, see L. Plantet and L. Joannez, *Essai sur les monnaies du Comté de Bourgogne depuis l'époque gauloise jusqu'à la réunion de la Franche-Comté à la France sous Louis XIV* (Lons-le-Saunier, 1855); quote from Clerc [supra, n. 8], I, 247.

^{vii} Printed in L. Ph. C. Van den Bergh, ed., *Correspondence de Marguerite d'Autriche avec ses amis, sur les affaires des Pays-Bas de 1506-1528*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1845-47), II, 117-27 [#226].

^{viii} Cauchiès (supra, n. 6), 368-69.