

Oracle: The History Journal of Boston College

Volume VI | Issue I

Article 3

God-Sanctioned Espionage in the Middle Ages: Female Spies in the Flemish Revolt

Skylar Stagaard
Boston College, stagaard@bc.edu

GOD-SANCTIONED ESPIONAGE IN THE MIDDLE AGES: FEMALE SPIES IN THE FLEMISH REVOLT

SKYLAR STAGAARD*

Abstract: The Flemish Revolt against Maximilian I was a series of uprisings that took place in the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century in Flanders, which was then part of the Holy Roman Empire. The revolt was sparked by a combination of factors, including economic grievances, religious tensions, and political disputes. The Flemish people were unhappy with Maximilian's rule, and they began to rise against him in various ways. The rebellion was led by a group of nobles, including Philip of Cleves and Henry of Nassau, who formed a confederacy to resist Maximilian's authority. They were joined by a large number of peasants, who were also unhappy with the emperor's policies. The rebellion continued for several years, with the rebels winning some battles and losing others. Ultimately, Maximilian was able to suppress the revolt and reassert his authority over Flanders. During a span of ten years from 1482 to 1492, female spies played an essential role in gathering information and transmitting it to the rebel leaders. Notable spies from that time include Kathelijne van Merode, Cornelia Lampsins, and Josine Hellebout. These women played crucial roles in the Flemish Revolt; they gathered information for the rebels, carried letters between cities and their militias, and were integral to rebel communication networks. These women broke the status quo for female involvement in medieval wars. There were opposing opinions publicly shared about women's ability to serve the peasant army. This paper analyzes how women's espionage roles were defended using religious imagery and stories. Previous authorship on this group of women is fairly limited, especially works considering the legitimizing force of the Virgin Mary employed by the militia to verify the women as tools of espionage.

Hebrews 11

³¹ By faith Rahab the whore received the spies with peace and perished not with unbelieving men.

James Chapter 2

²⁴ Ye see that a man is justified of works, and not of faith only.

¹ Skylar Stagaard is a senior in MCAS majoring in History and minoring in Art History. Skylar's academic interest involves constructing lost histories of women through historical research and art history analysis. She hopes to continue her research in a history graduate program after working in a nonprofit sphere. Outside of academics, Skylar is the Treasurer of the Film Society and volunteers at Women's Lunch Place in Boston.

25 In like manner, whether also Rahab, the whore, was not justified of works, and received the messengers, and sent them out by another way?

26 For as the body without spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

Passages from The Wycliffe Bible

Introduction

Medieval women's agency is a hotly debated subject among contemporary scholars. In the Low Countries, in particular, there are historical elements to women's identity that make it difficult to determine how limited or free women were. Accounts of women as spies in the Flemish Revolt from 1482 to 1492 indicate some sense of trust by political institutions in the capabilities of women. The areas in which these female spies were maneuvering were highly Catholicized by the French and Habsburg dynasties. Pilgrimages to Holy sites, biblical paintings, and books describing Saints' stories were widely available to people on all tiers of society. There is a distinct connection between stories of espionage and womanhood in the Bible and the authority given to medieval Flemish women between the most dangerous era of the revolt from 1488-1489.

The Flemish Revolt against Maximilian of Austria, later Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, was a series of uprisings that took place in the late fifteenth century in Flanders, which was then part of the Holy Roman Empire. The revolt was sparked by a combination of factors, primarily including economic grievances and political disputes. The Flemish people were unhappy with Maximilian's rule, and they began to revolt against him in various ways. The rebellion was led by a group of nobles, including Philip of Cleves and Henry of Nassau, who

formed a confederacy to resist Maximilian's authority.² They were joined by a large number of peasants, who were also unhappy with the emperor's policies.

This paper will argue that women were contracted by Flemish cities and the Habsburg armies as spies based on biblical precedent in combination with their relative invisibility in medieval military contexts. Analyzing the political and cultural contexts of Flanders and the Habsburg army in the late fifteenth century will allow me to explain how religion influenced the political actions of women during the Flemish revolt. The stories of these women parallel biblical stories, so drawing a comparison between the two within the analysis of their spy work will show how the Bible justified the otherwise immoral conduct of these women. The motivation between using women for espionage as well as the methods by which the spy work was carried out are both useful in examining this conflict.

The Flemish Revolt had a lasting impact on the region, as it highlighted the growing power of the nobility and the tensions between the rulers and the people. It also contributed to the rise of the modern state system in Europe, as rulers began to consolidate their power and centralize their authority in response to such challenges. Beyond the literal outcome of the civil war, the revolt has been used to showcase the work of medieval women as spies for both the rebelling and Habsburg armies. The religious culture in the Southern Netherlands and Flanders in the late fifteenth century was motivation for the use of women as spies in the Flemish Revolt.

Historiography

The history of the Habsburg Empire is a far-reaching academic pursuit with various intricacies addressed by hundreds of scholars. Narrowing this broad discourse to a niche focus on

² Jelle Haemers, "Opstand Adelt? De Rechtvaardiging van Het Politieke Verzet van de Adel in de Vlaamse Opstand (1482-1492)," *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 123, no. 4 (January 1, 2008): 586–87, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.6888>.

espionage within a specific time frame is useful in uncovering larger conclusions about this massive section of history. The amount of research conducted about women as active spies in the fifteenth century and the Flemish Revolt is limited. Commonly medieval women have been characterized as the complacent minority population who are responsible for spreading misogyny among each other and occasionally expressing anger towards their husband. Research on female espionage in the Middle Ages is growing, but there are still holes the coverage.

This paper will differ from the previous publications about espionage during the Flemish Revolt because of its reliance on Christianity as a consistent presence throughout the story of the conflict. Most other scholarship on the events between 1482 and 1492 focus on the political pressures of either Flanders or the Habsburg Empire. If political reasoning and consequences are not the primary subjects of the books and articles, the writings usually analyze various groups' involvements in the conflict. Similar to this paper, there are sources spotlighting women's roles in the Flemish Revolt. As stated earlier, with Jan Dumolyn, Jelle Haemers, and Lisa Demets have published and continue to publish didactic literature on the role of female spies in the Flemish Revolt. This paper will draw on their writings but will diverge by introducing the interplay of Catholicism and gender in legitimizing women as spies primarily from 1488 to 1489.

Historical Context

Frederick II (Frederick the Fat) was the elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1440 against his own wishes. After gaining the title of Holy Roman Emperor, he embraced the power of his seat and established an adage Habsburgs to follow similarly lived and ruled by, AEIOU: *Austria Est Imperare Orbi Universo* or *Alles Erdereich Ist Österreich Untertan* meaning Austria rules over

the rest of the world.³ Frederick had a genuine belief in the God-determined supremacy of Austrian Habsburgs that he instilled in generations to come. Frederick's son, Maximilian I of Habsburg, was the Duke of Austria until 1493 when the duke's father died, and Maximilian was named the Holy Roman Emperor. Frederick III and Maximilian were both crowned by the Pope in Rome as the Holy Roman Emperors, establishing an alliance between Catholicism and Habsburg rule, a medieval success for the empire. The Habsburg Empire was constantly caught between political and religious conflict, with the two overlapping at various points over the family's centuries-long rule of various European lands, and having the support of the Vatican was a religious power with political influence that could be useful for Habsburg interests.⁴ Habsburg power in the fifteenth century was deeply connected to the Catholic Church. Their emperors were crowned by the Pope in Rome, the Church had approval of Bishops in the Habsburg Lands, and the clergy were part of three curiae in Habsburg Estates.⁵ The clear connection between Catholics and Habsburgs meant challenges posed to the Habsburgs were directly correlated to a challenge of the Catholic Church.

The cities revolting against the Habsburg dynasty—Ghent, Bruges, and Ypres in Flanders—had a very pious Christian population who were also loyal to the Catholic Church. Much of the art from this pre-Reformation era is indicative of the standards for Christian worship among the elite classes as well as the peasantry. In the Middle Ages, illiteracy was fairly common. In the wake of the black death that spread across Europe in the fifteenth century, Flanders was struggling economically; once prosperous cities such as Ghent were losing traction

³ Benjamin W Curtis, *The Habsburgs: The History of a Dynasty*, Dynasties (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 49.

⁴ Christopher Hare, *Maximilian the Dreamer; Holy Roman Emperor, 1459-1519*, (London: S. Paul & co, 1913), 19.

⁵ Benjamin W Curtis, *The Habsburgs*, 33.

to incoming cities that were flourishing such as Antwerp.⁶ This struggle contributed to an increased amount of poor people who were illiterate—at this point in time, illiteracy was applied to those who could not understand Latin, Dutch, or both. In turn, to worship in a community that practiced in Latin, pictures were commissioned to tell the stories that were being spread visually.⁷ Flemish Art analyzed together with city records and other documents from the time show a newfound popularity in the Virgin Mary as a biblical subject for paintings and for worship by Christians in the low countries.⁸ Although the peasants in Flanders were technically doing better economically than before the plague, the increased taxes and redistribution of land from communal peasantry ownership to Lord’s ownership led to a consensus among the lower classes that they were unfairly deprived of the status that the previous generation once had. In the 1470s, wages fell, rents rose, and new taxes were being imposed and the message of the Virgin Mary was spreading through towns with the messages of spiritual hope and prosperity to carry them out of the dwindling economic state.⁹ Rumblings of dissatisfaction with local clergies and indulgences taken by the Church were spreading during the 1470s as a predecessor to the Reformation in the sixteenth century. In the time leading up to the uprising against Maximilian of Austria, Flemish people were already feeling the tensions against the nobility fueled by taxation and legitimized by belief that the Virgin Mary was in support of the peasantry.

Prior to serving as the King of Romans and Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I married the heiress of the Kingdom of Burgundy, which contained the county of Flanders. It was a political strategy to marry Mary of Burgundy and this strategy of marriage alliances was

⁶ Jan Dumolyn and Jelle Haemers, “Patterns of Urban Rebellion in Medieval Flanders,” *Journal of Medieval History* 31 (December 1, 2005): 369, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmedhist.2005.08.001>.

⁷ Lionel Rothkrug, “Religious Practices and Collective Perceptions: Hidden Homologies in the Renaissance and Reformation,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 7, no. 1 (1980): 133.

⁸ Emma Capron, *The Charterhouse of Bruges: Jan van Eyck, Petrus Christus, and Jan Vos*, First edition.. (New York : London: The Frick Collection ; D Giles Limited, 2018), 9.

⁹ Rothkrug, “Religious Practices and Collective Perceptions,” 123.

employed by Maximilian many other times over his reign for both himself, his children, and his grandchildren. The success in the first part of his royal career can be attributed entirely to his marriage and military skills. When Mary of Burgundy died, the rule of Burgundy was not turned over to Maximilian to rule, but his son, Phillip I of Castile (also known as Phillip the Fair or Phillip the Handsome). Phillip, being four years old at the time of his mother's death, was determined unfit to serve as the Duke of Burgundy by Maximilian who claimed the title as his own. The respect the subjects of Burgundy and Flanders, particularly, once had for Maximilian as Duke of Austria and heir to the Holy Roman throne was stripped from him as many of his subjects in Burgundy refused to recognize him as their ruler. Between the years of Maximilian claiming the Duchy of Burgundy and his coronation in Rome as the Holy Roman Emperor, Mary of Burgundy's death sparked a civil war in Burgundy.

Habsburg power was exerted at two levels: as emperors on the Holy Roman Empire (limited by the rights of the other princes) and as rulers of their different lands, including Austria wherein their power was shared with The Estates. The Estates generally had three curiae: clergy, lords and knights (nobility), princely towns and markets (independent towns). They met in a Diet convoked by the sovereign to cooperate with the Habsburgs. The two halves of the leadership had to agree on taxes, mobilization of troops, and finances. To finance the wars, the Habsburgs are heavily dependent on the Estates.¹⁰ The royal family primarily got their money from the Regalia, right of minting, ordinary taxes. Justice among the lands was regulated by Courts nominated by the estates and appointed by the sovereign. These Courts had jurisdiction over nobles. Town and markets had lower courts and the lords had jurisdiction over their subjects.

¹⁰ Justine Firmhaber-Baker editor of compilation and Dirk Schoenaers editor of compilation, *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt*, Routledge History Handbooks (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 214.

The Habsburg rulers and Estates swung between periods of cooperation and rivalry because of the power the Church held in the affairs and relationship between the two.

The lands within the Empire were still divided into kingdoms and duchies with their respective leaders. The lands also had their own alliances, causing factional divides. Before serving as emperor, Maximilian I participated in the factional divide of his family's lands. While the Estates in Burgundy wanted to act as regents until Phillip the Fair—who they recognized as their natural lord—came of age, Maximilian claimed the power as his own. At the end of the fifteenth century, the Habsburgs were engaged in a war against France for the control of Burgundy. After the death of Charles of Burgundy, Louis XI of France seized Artois, Flanders, and Picardy. Burgundy was divided: The Duchy of Burgundy went to France, and the County of Burgundy to Mary, wife to Maximilian.¹¹ Decades earlier, during the Hundred Years' War, Burgundy allied itself with England, France's enemy.

The animosity between the two lands was still present in the late fifteenth century. Estates who sought control of their lands did not want to prolong the war with France and in an attempt to force Austrian retreat from the war, Estates of Flanders and Brabant refused to pay taxes to finance Maximilian's personal ambitions to claim his wife's inheritance. Maximilian defended the inheritance of his wife and defeated Louis XI at the Battle of Guinegate in 1479. In 1482, Maximilian became regent of Burgundy, but Ghent and Bruges rose, sided with France, and seized Maximilian's children as leverage. The Flemish Revolt has been known mostly for the disastrous period between 1488 and 1489. The rebellion continued for several years, with the rebels winning some battles and losing others. Ultimately, however, Maximilian was able to suppress the revolt and reassert his authority over Flanders. During that time, female spies

¹¹ Jan Dumolyn, "Privileges and Novelties: The Political Discourse of the Flemish Cities and Rural Districts in Their Negotiations with the Dukes of Burgundy (1384–1506)," *Urban History* 35, no. 1 (2008): 7.

gathered information and transmitted it to the rebel or Habsburg leaders. These women played crucial roles in the Flemish Revolt; They were integral to rebel communication, Habsburg information, and general espionage networks.

The Flemish Revolt 1482-1492

The facts of the Flemish Revolt have mostly been constructed through city records of Ghent, Bruges, and Ypres, records from the Habsburg Empire under Maximilian of Austria, and contemporary chronicles. Although much of the documentation has been preserved, there are still contradictory remarks across modern scholarly volumes. For instance, the definition of the actual Flemish revolt is skepticized. While the Civil War between the people of Burgundy has been clearly defined as occurring between the years of 1482 and 1492, ending before Maximilian's ascension to the throne of the Holy Roman Empire, some sources refer to this time as the Flemish Revolt. Other sources strictly make the distinction between the Civil war that lasted the 10 years at the end of the fifteenth century, and the two years 1488-1489 that are some of the most precarious years of the conflict. Regardless of the true historical definition of this time, the conflict between Maximilian of Austria and the 'Three Members' of the county of Flanders (Ypres, Bruges, and Ghent) spanned the ten years after Mary of Burgundy's death.

Prior to Mary of Burgundy's death, there was unrest in the county of Flanders. In 1477 Duke Charles the Bold of Burgundy was killed in an uprising against his controlling and authoritarian policy that limited the freedoms of the nobility and cities.¹² This led to Mary of Burgundy's ascension to the ruling seat of the Duchy of Burgundy. As a means of self-preservation against the grievances from cities within her lands and nobility, the dynasty granted

¹² Jelle Haemers, "Opstand Adelt? De Rechtvaardiging van Het Politieke Verzet van de Adel in de Vlaamse Opstand (1482-1492)," *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 123, no. 4 (January 1, 2008): 588, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.6888>.

far-reaching privileges to her subjects in exchange for their military support in the case of an anticipated invasion by the French king. Noblemen were appointed by the Court as military leaders. The roles, in turn, made them the links between the Court and the Dynasty's dependent regions. A crisis ensued over who would succeed Mary of Burgundy at her death as the Three Members opposed the restrictive ruling method of Maximilian who wanted to limit local autonomy of cities to increase political power of his state apparatus.¹³ Permanent representatives for the Three Members and some sympathizing noblemen created a Regency Council to lead in the name of Maximilian's son instead of surrendering to the Habsburg ruler.

The Archduke of Austria did not revoke the Regency Council until November 1483, although it remained operational. The conflicts between the reigning council and Maximilian were diplomatic through meetings of the Catholic order of chivalry, the Knights in the Order of the Golden Fleece, that continually sided with the Regency Council.¹⁴ In the autumn of 1483, Maximilian attacked Flanders and failed to dismantle the Council. The Habsburg succeeded eventually in June 1485 and promptly imprisoned all nobility on the Regency Council after seizing all their goods. The only nobleman left unscathed was Adolf van Kleef because of his son's loyalty to Maximilian and presence in his court. There was a two-year interim where Maximilian claimed Phillip the Fair's regency over Burgundy until Ghent revolted in November 1487 with Bruges following in February 1488.¹⁵ This initiated the fiercest period of the Flemish-Habsburg conflict and the highest rate at which women were used by each opponent in espionage.

¹³ Senne Starckx, "Hoe Maximiliaan Bepied Werd Door Vlaamse Spionnes," *De Standaard*, December 1, 2019, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20221128_98063262.

¹⁴ Hare, *Maximilian the Dreamer; Holy Roman Emperor, 1459-1519*, 53.

¹⁵ Haemers, "Opstand Adelt?," 590.

Flemish Female Spy Work

Many modern understandings of gender in the Middle Ages apply contemporary gender roles and stereotypes that construct a narrative in which women had minimal agency and men were dominant in all spheres of life. Medieval women such as Joan of Arc or Jean Hachette are exemplified as ‘breaking the standard’ with their outstanding stories, but such labels enforce the stereotypical notion that women in the Middle Ages could not break the misogynist constraints placed upon them. Medieval literary tropes of the angry wife causing disturbances or protector of the home based on biological nature contribute to the understanding that women in the Middle Ages were seen as nothing but inherently different and inferior to men.¹⁶ The reality of Flemish women in the late 1400s was different than what has routinely been represented. Women were the managers of their household, but ‘management’ was not restricted to chores or tending to children. Middle-class women also maintained the finances for her household.¹⁷ They could be shopkeepers, preachers (Cathars), and merchants; Not all women did fulfill these roles however, because social rank, marital status, chronological and geographical location affected women’s agency.¹⁸ Middle-class Flemish women were primarily afforded the freedoms within the dominantly patriarchal systems in fifteenth century Burgundy.

Such positions for these women were available in the military as well. They marginally circulated around medieval armies as logistics suppliers, diplomatic messengers, and spies. Women also served as prostitutes for men serving in the military—there is little evidence to suggest the overlap between prostitution and female espionage in the Middle Ages although

¹⁶ Lisa Demets, “Spies, Instigators, and Troublemakers: Gendered Perceptions of Rebellious Women in Late Medieval Flemish Chronicles,” *Journal of Women’s History* 33, no. 2 (2021): 15, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2021.0013>.

¹⁷ James A. Welu et al., *Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World* (Yale University Press, 1993), 20.

¹⁸ Martha Howell, “The Problem of Women’s Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” in *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries*, ed. Sarah Joan Moran and Amanda Pipkin, vol. 217 (Brill, 2019), 22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctvrk3hp.7>.

many scholars speculate it was a common occurrence.¹⁹ Similarly, there are few sources on medieval spies and medieval female spies because their missions were carried out clandestinely. Most information about their positions is gleaned from urban chronicles, trials from convicted spies, few preserved secret notes, and documents cataloging the payment for the spies in employment. Spies were a fact of medieval life that chroniclers documented candidly. Although the concept that “the Ambassador should not behave like a spy” from the Italian humanist Ermolao Barbaro’s maxim in the 1430s was repeated in diplomatic discourses, it was not followed.²⁰ English espionage agents were placed in the Papal court at the same time women were spying on the Habsburg army in the 1480s.

Uniquely, there are enough surviving documents from the Flemish Rebellion to piece together a detailed story of the war and women’s places within it. The rebelling Three Members and the Habsburg army simultaneously employed women as key figures in urban espionage networks. These women circulated letters, carried out secret missions, and were recorded to have been recruited by commanders to observe the enemy’s troop movements.²¹ Men were completing espionage missions as well, but not to the extent that much research has illustrated with men being the sole actors in any medieval military operations. They were involved in the revolt in violent and nonviolent means. While some women such as Josine Hellebout went on over ten missions in various cities to deliver letters and obtain new information, some women were armed and protecting their cities.²² Weapons and duties were gendered between men and women, but women were still enlisted to secretly stand outside city gates in case of invasion from Habsburg

¹⁹ Lisa Demets and Jelle Haemers, “‘Omme maren te vernemene van den Duutschen’: Vrouwen als spionnen en boodschappers in de Vlaamse Opstand (1488-89),” *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 135, no. 1 (March 1, 2022): 23, <https://doi.org/10.5117/TvG2022.1.003.DEME>.

²⁰ Ian Arthurson, “Espionage and Intelligence from the Wars of the Roses to the Reformation.,” *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 35 (January 1991): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.NMS.3.197>.

²¹ Demets and Haemers, 24.

²² *Ibid.*, 11.

armies.²³ Female Flemish spies had the duty of collecting as much information as possible about their enemy and then coordinating their actions to outsmart and escape Imperial troops.²⁴ Women were not completing the spy work for their respective armies as replacements for men who were fighting but were deliberately chosen for strategic purposes.

Flemish cities systematically chose more than one hundred women to spy on the enemy Habsburg army. The means by which women were engaged and used in the Flemish revolt is distinct from the other sporadic accounts of female spies in the late Middle Ages of Europe because these women were not chosen in spite of their sex, but because of it. There was an awareness in Flemish culture of the wiles of women and their ability to disturb political order reflected in urban chronicles.²⁵ There was a dichotomy produced regarding medieval understandings of women: They were noticed to be capable of dangerous rebellion while synchronously invisible as political actors capable of infiltrating male spaces.²⁶ Women were considered as marginal within political organizations and military units and tended to receive less harsh punishments for the same offences to men. While they still were publicly humiliated, physically tortured, and often expelled from home cities women were not imprisoned, as harshly tortured, or sentenced to death like men. Women were entrusted with espionage for the duality of their visibility as disruptors and invisibility as actual threats.

Biblical Authority for Women to Spy

Religion in the Middle Ages was not merely a personal choice of faith—it dictated decision-making, law, and morality in the Low Countries at this point in time: To justify war and

²³ Demets, “Spies, Instigators, and Troublemakers,” 20–22.

²⁴ Starckx, “Hoe Maximiliaan Bespied Werd Door Vlaamse Spionnes.”

²⁵ Lisa Demets and Jan Dumolyn, “Urban Chronicle Writing in Late Medieval Flanders: The Case of Bruges during the Flemish Revolt of 1482–1490,” *Urban History* 43, no. 1 (2016): 28–46.

²⁶ Demets, “Spies, Instigators, and Troublemakers,” 20.

spying on an opponent, it is likely biblical stories were referenced. Mary Magdalene was closely tied to worship and morality in the Burgundian Duchy. This witness to Jesus' crucifixion was routinely used as a piece of political propaganda by the French Valois, Burgundian Courts of Charles the Bold and Mary of Burgundy, and Maximilian of Austria—each of these political actors used the reverence of Mary Magdalene in Burgundy to assert their claim over the Duchy. Miniatures, Prayer Books, and Books of Hours featuring Mary Magdalene were all commissioned throughout the fifteenth century by the political actors to disseminate the notion that they had the Godly authority over the Duchy. The stories in circulation show Mary Magdalene as the embodiment of Christian devotion and her duty to assert Holy claim over the lands of Burgundy.²⁷ Urban women in Flanders from the early 1470s through the beginning of the sixteenth century would have been familiar with the folios portraying Mary Magdalene as their protector—commissioned by city guilds and the Habsburg empire.²⁸ The imagery of Mary Magdalene as a fellow woman using her authority to protect Burgundy legitimized women as an option for espionage networks in the Flemish Revolt. Conversely, before these women were enlisted as spies, the figure of Mary Magdalene was an aspirational position for Flemish women to achieve. They could do this by acting as spies against the invading Habsburgs.

Women acting as spies is a continuation of a longer tradition with evidence in the Bible. As illustrated earlier, Christianity permeated Burgundian society. Flanders was a cultural hub for the production and showcasing of art that was drenched in Christian motifs, stories, and patrons. Religion was present in political, professional, social, and secular spaces. Catholicism had been

²⁷ Susan Haskins, "Mary Magdalene and the Burgundian Question," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 73 (2010): 108.

²⁸ Paul Srodecki editor, Norbert Kersken editor, and Rimvydas Petrauskas editor, *Unions and Divisions: New Forms of Rule in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, Themes in Medieval and Early Modern History (London ; New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 186.

embraced by the French and Austrian empires that held control over Burgundy in the fifteenth century. While different authors have proposed various reasons for why women were used as tools for espionage, none have used religious evidence to suggest the biblical predecessors to the female spies of the Flemish Revolt. Although lying is the foundational element of spying, it is prohibited by the Eighth Commandment. How can a Catholic Duchy embrace espionage executed by women—who may have an elevated status in Flanders, but are still expected to be the picture of morality—if the basic need for spy work is for the women to lie and act against one of the pillars of Catholicism? The Bible is not free of any stories of espionage. The first spies of the Bible are mentioned in Genesis 42:9 with their purpose being “to see the nakedness of the land” or expose what otherwise would not be seen, according to Joseph’s biblical Hebrew.²⁹ Another example of espionage at work in the Bible is from the Book of Numbers Chapter 13. Moses sends his people to gather information to help the Israelites prepare their campaign. This is a predecessor to the military espionage used by the Habsburgs and Three Members in the Flemish Revolt.

The Book of Joshua provides another story that justifies the use of women as spies during the Flemish Revolt: the story of Rahab. In Chapter 2, during an invasion, Joshua sent two spies to spy on Jericho. They left and stayed in a brothel where a prostitute, Rahab, protected them.

The passage from the Wycliffe Bible reads:

¹ Therefore Joshua, the son of Nun, sent from Shittim two men, spyers in huddles, and said to them, Go ye, and behold ye the land, and the city of Jericho. Which went, and entered into the house of a woman whore, Rahab by name, and rested at her.

² And it was told, and said to the king of Jericho, Lo! men of the sons of Israel have entered hither by night, to espy the land.

²⁹ Meir Shalev, *Beginnings: Reflections on the Bible’s Intriguing Firsts* (Harmony/Rodale, 2011), 113.

³ Therefore the king of Jericho sent to Rahab the whore, and said, Bring out the men, that came to thee, and that entered into thine house; for they be spyers, and they came to behold all the land.³⁰

Jericho was, in the end, conquered based on the information obtained by the spies protected by Rahab. This woman's story introduces elements of morality and gender into biblical espionage. Rahab's character as a prostitute engaged in espionage has a typical connotation that she would be a negative example of womanhood in the bible, however, her identity as a descendant of Jesus and her choice to preserve members of the Israelite conquest lead to the salvation of Rahab and her family. The story of Rahab situates Jesus and stories of the New Testament in a context that is central to pre-Christian, Judeo history of the Bible to make the larger argument that Christianity is a continuation of the fulfillment of the Judaic story from the Old Testament.³¹ Rahab's story justifies espionage and seduction, especially in the context of a woman performing these actions. After agreeing to associate with either the Habsburg army or Flemish rebellion, potentially encouraged by imagery of Mary Magdalene, women's spy work would have been a continuation of the story of Rahab. As followers of Christ, the women who were engaged in medieval espionage were uncovering information that would otherwise be secretive and were lying to do so, but they were acting to preserve their homeland.

Conclusion

The Flemish Revolt would not have been as long-lasting if women were not used as spies against the Habsburg army. The information the spies provided was crucial in the pivotal period of 1488-1489 when the Three —Ghent, Bruges, and Ypres—were fighting to regain regency of

³⁰ *The Wycliffe Bible: John Wycliffe's Translation of the Holy Scriptures from the Latin Vulgate* (Lamp Post Incorporated, 2011).

³¹ Shira Weiss, *Ethical Ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible: Philosophical Analysis of Scriptural Narrative* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 11.

Burgundy over Archduke Maximilian of Austria. The conflict ended with a peace agreement between the two factions granting Maximilian the power of Burgundy before his ascension to the throne of Holy Roman Emperor. Although the Flemish women's spy work did not lead to victory, it prolonged the confrontation between urban autonomy with state centralization and the struggle for power at the top of the state apparatus.

The question that has been debated by contemporary scholar is not the question of the women's importance to the revolt, but why they were used. Besides the relative difference in which women did not have the same visibility in men in a medieval military context, there are also deep religious connotations and precedents to female espionage. Flanders was part of the Catholic Burgundian Duchy, and its art is evidence of the Christian culture that dominated the area. Regardless of the different sides of the conflict, both the Habsburgs and Flemish rebels held Catholic beliefs. Stories from the Old and New Testament of the Bible legitimize women as protectors of the home (outside of a biological need to preserve their kin). The image of Mary Magdalene was prevalent in medieval Flemish art, folios, and culture to legitimize different claims to the Duchy as the Saint was the embodiment of Burgundy as a Holy land that she would protect. Rahab, a prostitute from the Old Testament book of Joshua, engages in espionage and has the gift of salvation because of it. Women in Flanders, whether they fought for the rebellion or imperial army, would have been familiar with these biblical stories. They would have been able to draw the connection between their own identities and potential to serve their respective causes just as the Christian women, sanctioned by God, would have. The Three Members cities and the Habsburg army would have also been well-acquainted with the biblical women and used the stories to recruit and use women for political espionage.

Bibliography

- Arthurson, Ian. "Espionage and Intelligence from the Wars of the Roses to the Reformation." *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 35 (January 1991): 134–54.
<https://doi.org/10.1484/J.NMS.3.197>.
<https://www.brepolonline.net/doi/10.1484/J.NMS.3.197>
- Benjamin W Curtis. *The Habsburgs: The History of a Dynasty*. Dynasties. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Demets, Lisa. "Spies, Instigators, and Troublemakers: Gendered Perceptions of Rebellious Women in Late Medieval Flemish Chronicles." *Journal of Women's History* 33, no. 2 (2021): 12–34. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2021.0013>.
<https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/794314>
- Demets, Lisa, and Jan Dumolyn. "Urban Chronicle Writing in Late Medieval Flanders: The Case of Bruges during the Flemish Revolt of 1482–1490." *Urban History* 43, no. 1 (2016): 28–46.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26398663>
- Demets, Lisa, and Jelle Haemers. "'Omme maren te vernemene van den Duitschen': Vrouwen als spionnen en boodschappers in de Vlaamse Opstand (1488-89)." *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 135, no. 1 (March 1, 2022): 22–42.
<https://doi.org/10.5117/TvG2022.1.003.DEME>.
<https://www.aup-online.com/content/journals/10.5117/TvG2022.1.003.DEME>
- Dumolyn, Jan. "Privileges and Novelties: The Political Discourse of the Flemish Cities and Rural Districts in Their Negotiations with the Dukes of Burgundy (1384–1506)." *Urban History* 35, no. 1 (2008): 5–23.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44613733>
- Dumolyn, Jan, and Jelle Haemers. "Patterns of Urban Rebellion in Medieval Flanders." *Journal of Medieval History* 31 (December 1, 2005): 369–93.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmedhist.2005.08.001>.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0304418105000321>
- Emma Capron. *The Charterhouse of Bruges: Jan van Eyck, Petrus Christus, and Jan Vos*. First edition.. New York : London: The Frick Collection ; D Giles Limited, 2018.
- Haemers, Jelle. "Opstand Adelt? De Rechtvaardiging van Het Politieke Verzet van de Adel in de Vlaamse Opstand (1482-1492)." *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 123, no. 4 (January 1, 2008): 586–608. <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.6888>.
<https://bmgn-lchr.nl/article/view/URN%3ANBN%3ANL%3AUI%3A10-1-107857>
- Hare, Christopher. *Maximilian the Dreamer; Holy Roman Emperor, 1459-1519*. London: S. Paul & co, 1913.

- Haskins, Susan. “Mary Magdalen and the Burgundian Question.” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 73 (2010): 99–135.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41418715>
- Howell, Martha. “The Problem of Women’s Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe.” In *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries*, edited by Sarah Joan Moran and Amanda Pipkin, 217:21–31. Brill, 2019.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctvrk3hp.7>
- Justine Firnhaber-Baker editor of compilation and Dirk Schoenaers editor of compilation. *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt*. Routledge History Handbooks. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2017.
- Paul Srodecki editor, Norbert Kersken editor, and Rimvydas Petrauskas editor. *Unions and Divisions: New Forms of Rule in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*. Themes in Medieval and Early Modern History. London ; New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2023.
- Rothkrug, Lionel. “Religious Practices and Collective Perceptions: Hidden Homologies in the Renaissance and Reformation.” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 7, no. 1 (1980): i–266.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41298734>
- Shalev, Meir. *Beginnings: Reflections on the Bible’s Intriguing Firsts*. Harmony/Rodale, 2011.
https://books.google.com/books?id=C8A3zgncTrcC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false
- Starckx, Senne. “Hoe Maximiliaan Bepied Werd Door Vlaamse Spionnes.” *De Standaard*, December 1, 2019. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20221128_98063262.
- The Wycliffe Bible: John Wycliffe’s Translation of the Holy Scriptures from the Latin Vulgate*. Lamp Post Incorporated, 2011. <https://books.google.com/books?id=aXYMqAAACAAJ>
- Weiss, Shira. *Ethical Ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible: Philosophical Analysis of Scriptural Narrative*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
<https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/12817162>
- Welu, James A., Ellen Broersen, P. Biesboer, Karin Groen, Worcester Art Museum, and Frans Halsmuseum. *Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World*. Yale University Press, 1993. <https://books.google.com/books?id=ozFhQgAACAAJ>