

Speech Acts and Political Communication in the Estates General of Valois and Habsburg Burgundy c. 1370–1530

Towards a Shared Political Language

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Histories of the Burgundian composite dynastic state now take fuller account than they once did of the importance of representative assemblies under the Valois dukes (1363–1477) and their Habsburg successors of the sixteenth century.¹ Seen in a European context, the depth and diversity of the tradition of representative assemblies in the Low Countries is striking. Some of the earliest and most active of these bodies were to be found at the regional level, notably the Four Members of Flanders (which met on average 34 times per year in the Valois period), the Estates of Brabant (16 meetings on average per annum) or Holland (19 meetings on average per annum).² Several of the regional Estates

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- 1 For Richard Vaughan, whose work is still the most widely used general history, the role of the Estates was simply “administrative and financial, rather than political”: Vaughan, *Philip the Good. The Apogee of Burgundy*, 2nd ed. (Woodbridge, 2002), p. 197. Reflecting their original research as historians of the Estates, Walter Prevenier and Wim Blockmans placed greater weight on the Estates in their joint history, *The Promised Lands. The Low Countries under Burgundian Rule, 1369–1530* (Pennsylvania, 1999). The Estates figure most prominently, however, in Robert Stein, *De hertog en zijn Staten. De eenwording van de Bourgondische Nederlanden, ca. 1380–ca. 1480* (Hilversum, 2014).
- 2 Stein, *De hertog*, pp. 153–54. The main histories are Joseph Billioud, *Les états de Bourgogne aux XIVe et XVe siècles* (Dijon, 1922); André Uyttebrouck, *Le gouvernement du duché de Brabant au bas Moyen Âge (1355–1430)* (Brussels, 1975); Wim Blockmans, *De volksvertegenwoordiging in Vlaanderen in de overgang van middeleeuwen naar nieuwe tijden (1384–1506)* (Brussels, 1978); Charles Hirschauer, *Les états d’Artois de leurs origines à l’occupation française*, 2 vols. (Paris-Brussels, 1923); Frederik Lemmink, *Het ontstaan van de staten van Zeeland en hun geschiedenis tot het jaar 1555* (Roosendaal, 1951); Walter Prevenier, *De leden en de staten van Vlaanderen (1384–1506)* (Brussels, 1961); Maria Van Eeckenrode, *Les états de Hainaut sous le règne de Philippe le Bon (1427–67)* (Heule, 2011).

played a key role in the formation of the Valois Burgundian union, as the procedural forum for the acceptance of ducal rule (notably in Namur, Hainaut and Brabant 1420–30). Occasional amalgams of regional assemblies occurred even before the Valois period, within the framework of lesser political unions such as that of Holland and Hainaut (1289–1389) under the houses of Avesnes and Bavaria.³ Composite assemblies (that is to say, meetings in which delegates of several regional Estates occasionally joined) evolved in the course of the fifteenth century into the Estates General.⁴ This body, much like its regional counterparts, played a central role in times of crisis, such as the tensions arising from Philip the Good's governance arrangements while preparing his crusade (1464), the death without male heir of his son Charles the Bold (1477), or the imprisonment of Maximilian I of Habsburg by Bruges rebels (1488).⁵ Underpinning these various layers of representation was a culture of assembly, consultation and deliberation which extended as far back as the communal movement of the twelfth century in the most urbanized regions of Flanders or Brabant, and developed thereafter in the cities, towns and castellanies of the region through bodies such as guild assemblies (from the fourteenth century onwards) and wider town council gatherings (like the Ghent *Collatie* or the *Grote Raad* of Bruges).⁶ This region has as much claim on the description "cradle of parliaments"⁷ as any other part of Europe.

3 André Uyttendaele, "Phénomènes de centralisation dans les Pays-Bas avant Philippe le Bon", *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 69 (1991), pp. 872–904, especially p. 901.

4 There is some debate as to when the "Estates General" first emerged, but this debate is easily settled if one sees this body as an "incremental institutional development" of earlier composite assemblies. The term itself first appeared in 1477–78: Wim Blockmans, "Breaking the Ruler: The Emergence of the States-General in the Low Countries in the 15th and 16th Centuries", in *Zelebrieren und Verhandeln. Zur Praxis ständischer Institutionen im frühneuzeitlichen Europa*, ed. Tim Neu et al. (Münster, 2009), pp. 185–94, at p. 186.

5 See most recently Helmut Koenigsberger, *Monarchies, States Generals and Parliaments: The Netherlands in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 2002). The main general history is still Robert Wellens, *Les états-généraux des Pays-Bas des origines à la fin du règne de Philippe le Beau (1464–1506)* (Heule, 1974).

6 Jan Dhondt, *Estates or Powers: Essays in the Parliamentary History of the Southern Netherlands from the XIth to the XVIIIth Century* (Kortrijk, 1977); Marc Boone, "In den beginne was het woord! De vroege groei van 'parlementen' in de middeleeuwse vorstendommen der Nederlanden", *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 120 (2005), pp. 338–61; Jan Dumolyn, "Guild Politics and Political Guilds in Fourteenth-Century Flanders", in *The voices of the People in Late Medieval Europe: Communication and Popular Politics*, Studies in European Urban History 33, ed. Jelle Haemers et al. (Turnhout, 2014), pp. 15–48; Bea Augustyn and Walter Prevenier, eds., *De gewestelijke en lokale overheidsinstellingen in Vlaanderen tot 1795* (Brussels, 1997).

7 Wim Blockmans, "A Typology of Representative Institutions in Late Medieval Europe", *Journal of Medieval History* 4 (1978), pp. 189–215.