RHETORIC, POLITICS AND PROPAGANDA

GUILLAUME FILLASTRE’S SPEECHES

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‘So the bishop of Tournai sang the high mass. Afterwards, he pronounced a little sermon to the greatest praise of the deceased lord and with the intention to urge everybody to pray for his soul, so that God, by his holy mercy, would receive it in his holy paradise’. 1 With these words, Jean de Wavrin summarised the funeral oration which Guillaume Fillastre, bishop of Tournai, had pronounced at the obsequies of Philip the Good in June 1467. Another witness, Jacques Du Clercq, also mentioned this speech, calling it ‘a very remarkable sermon’. 2 An official report judged that ‘the bishop of Tournai held a speech in a very remarkable way and to the highest praise of the deceased lord’. 3

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3 Et ... monseigneur de Tournay feit la collacion bien notablement a la tresgrande louenge dudit seigneur trespassé et pour enhorter le peuple de prier dieu pour lui. Archives départementales de la Côte d’Or, B 310 (fol. 6v); printed: E.-L. Lory, ed., ‘Les obsèques de Philippe-le-Bon, duc de Bourgogne, mort à Bruges en 1467', in:
Evidently, Fillastre’s funeral sermon was an important part of the late duke’s obsequies, and the mourning audience highly esteemed the preacher’s words. On many other occasions speeches were pronounced at the fifteenth-century Burgundian court and by Burgundian diplomats in foreign countries, too. But while literature and historiography, tournaments and wedding celebrations, tapestries and illuminated manuscripts at the courts of Philip the Good and Charles the Bold have long attracted the attention of the historians, speeches aroused very little interest. To traditionally minded political historians, orations seemed to be just words, and did not exercise an influence on the course of events. Hence they were believed to have no impact on history. Even worse, many speeches were clearly meant to convince the audience of the orator’s opinion, and hence described facts from a very partial point-of-view. Some speeches even deliberately spread lies. Thus, most orations were not deemed reliable sources, and could therefore be of no use to political history.

In the last years, however, some speeches have attracted the attention of a few historians who are concerned with intellectual or literary history. Arjo Vanderjagt and Wim Blockmans, for example, examined speeches made by Charles the Bold and Guillaume Hugonet, thereby clearly demonstrating the enormous impact of humanistic political philosophy on Burgundian political ideas in the 1460s and 1470s. Evcncio Beltrà was attracted by a couple of Burgundian pre-humanists, who, as he claims, helped French humanism to survive during the difficult period between its first blossoming at the beginning of the fifteenth century and before its final breakthrough in the years around 1500. In her fascinating biography of Jean Jouffroy, one of the most famous orators at the Burgundian court, Claudia Märtl also examined Jouffroy’s orations.

I would like to approach the speeches pronounced at the Burgundian court and by Burgundian diplomats in the third quarter of the fifteenth century in a different manner. I shall not concentrate on new, humanistic elements in orations, neither with regard to their contents, nor according to

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*Mémoires de la Commission des antiquaires de la Côte-d’Or* 7 (1869), pp. 215-246, here p. 244.

