Ritual and Civic Identity in Philip II’s 1549 Antwerp Blijde Incompst

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Of all the spectacles staged in 1549 to honor and welcome Philip II (fig. 1) as the heir apparent to his ailing father, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, that put on by Antwerp was by far the most extravagant, employing as it did thousands of the city’s laborers, militiamen, artisans and artists, and costing an estimated 260,000 florins.1 The Antwerp Blijde incompst, or joyous entry, was designed, constructed and financed by the city itself, and served as the opportunity for Antwerp to present its identity, its interests and its concerns to Philip. What I shall argue in this essay is that we must examine this entry neither as simple propaganda, nor as a purely theatrical festivity, but as a site for negotiating the terms of the relationship between city and ruler, that is, for negotiating power. Thus, we should understand it as an efficacious ritual meant to produce an abiding, affective relationship between the Prince and his subjects.

Primarily, I wish to examine how Antwerp – as the collective author of this event – structured Philip’s entry to achieve the desired results. In particular, I would like to consider the role of place in this entry in two ways: first, to consider the manner in which a particular form of rhetorical argument — argumentatio ad exemplum — is structured by the Serlian architecture which frames it; we are thus to understand that architecture as a materially manifest form of locus, as a place of invention.2 And second, I will discuss the manner in which the route of the entry inscribes meaning within the space of Antwerp; here I will be writing more generally of the significance of the road chosen for the approach to Antwerp, the careful choice of the processional route and of the emplacement of certain arches or other ephemera at key locations through the city, all as a means of fashioning communal identity for Antwerp.

The Emperor and his Son

In 1548, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V set in motion a series of events that were to have profound effects on his son and heir, Philip II of Spain. Near the end of his long, military career, and having already committed himself to the virtually unprecedented act of abdication in favor of Philip, Charles decided to ensure the smooth transition of power to his son. The empire — encompassing as it did the Burgundian territories, the German

1 Philip II, 1546, from Dit is die afloemste, woodcut.
and Austrian lands, Spain, much of Italy, Bohemia, and other regions — was unwieldy and anything but unified. Clearing the path for his son was a task that, as Charles clearly recognized, required both the fashioning of his son’s public persona and his introduction to his future subjects, especially those of the Low Countries. The Burgundian territories were of particular importance due to their financial centrality to the Spanish Habsburg territories (Charles was to ensure their administrative independence from the Empire through the Augsburg Negotiation of June 1548 and the ensuing Pragmatic Sanction of November 1549) and Charles’ affective relationship with his native lands.³

For these reasons, Charles sent one of his most trusted generals, the Duke of Alba, to Spain. Alba carried with him orders for the institution of Burgundian court ritual in Spain, part of the so-called Augsburg Instructiones, which presumably served two functions.⁴ One was to begin to indoctrinate Philip into the courtly culture of his northern heritage, and the other was to strengthen the formalization and centralization of the Spanish court. Alba also brought with him an invitation, actually a summons, for Philip to journey from Spain to Brussels, where he was to meet his father.⁵ The route took him first from Valladolid to Barcelona, and then by sea, in a flotilla commanded by Admiral Andrea Doria, to Genoa. From there he travelled through dozens of communities in Italy, Austria, Germany and the Low Countries before finally reaching Brussels on April 1, 1549, where he greeted the father who he had not seen in some six years. Brussels chose the paternal-filial meeting for the theme of its ceremonial greeting to Philip, placing scene after scene of emotionally-stirring, biblical encounters of fathers and sons along the processional way. Thus, Charles and Philip would have seen their own reunion exemplified with Abraham and Isaac reconciled after the near-sacrifice; Joseph conferring his blessing upon Jacob; Tobias returning to cure his father’s blindness; and David crowning his son Solomon as king of Israel.⁶

Philip remained in Brussels with his father for three months before continuing on his tour of the Low Countries themselves. As was his wont, we can imagine the politically fastidious Charles instructing his son in local customs, in regional diplomacy and in the art of governance prior to countenancing Philip’s formal introduction to his future Netherlandish subjects.⁷

Thus it was not until July 4, 1549 that the Netherlandish tour proper began with Philip’s official entry into the Duchy of Brabant. Although he had long been within Brabant’s territory — during his stay in Brussels — Philip was to be introduced to his Brabant subjects in his role as their future overlord only when he made his Joyous Entry into the nearby city of Leuven. That city, although neither the site of the Regent’s court, nor the seat of government for Brabant, both of which were in Brussels, was where new rulers assumed office by swearing to uphold the blijde inkomst.⁸ This practice began in 1356 with the entry of Johanna and Wenceslas and continued with each Duke of Brabant through the reign of Charles V. Philip, too, swore at Leuven to honor the terms of the blijde inkomst and personally signed the document.⁹ In return, he received the collective oath of loyalty from the combined representatives of state, church and