Women and Political Agency in the Early Modern Low Countries

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Abstract

Politically active women in the early modern period have often been seen as exceptional figures, notable primarily for their ability to influence decision-making despite societal constraints on female authority. Historians have traditionally focused on examples of women from noble, princely, or royal backgrounds, given the prominence and status that enabled their influence. This article argues that expanding the scope of research to include a broader array of social contexts will allow a clearer understanding of early modern women's roles as legitimate political agents. We propose three approaches to achieve this, highlighting the potential of new digital tools and technologies. By adopting a more systematic analysis that inherently acknowledges women's political agency, we can gain deeper insights into the dynamics of power in early modern society.

Keywords: women and politics, political agents, elite women, digitisation, formal power, informal power

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In the summer of 1667, Margaretha Turnor (1613-1700) wrote to her husband, the diplomat Godard Adriaan van Reede (1621-1691), about the latest state of political affairs in the city of Utrecht. She informed him of the promises made to her by members of the Utrecht magistracy and gave her husband specific orders: he was to write a letter to a particular member of the magistracy in order to hold them to their word.[1] This letter, as well as many others that make up Turnor's correspondence, not only shows that she was well-informed about the decisions made in the meetings of the local political institutions, but also that she understood how these decisions came about and that she had the means and strategies to influence them. Indeed, to all intents and purposes, Turnor was a determined and competent political agent.

That being a woman in the early modern period was not incompatible with having political agency has been recognised by political historians for many years. Nevertheless, despite Els Kloek's observation in 1998 that 'strikingly little attention' had been paid to women's roles in seventeenth-century Dutch politics, a thorough revision of the political history of the early modern Low Countries – which includes women as legitimate political agents in their own right – has so far failed to materialise.[2] Women who were politically active are still considered anomalies in scholarship on early modern politics, in the sense that they tend to be seen as exceptional for their ability to influence the decision-making process *despite* being female. In other words, the extent of their political involvement is usually compared to that of their male counterparts who, unlike them, had formal access to membership of political institutions. It should be emphasised that this does not necessarily lead to incorrect conclusions. However, we argue that a more systematic analysis, in which early modern women are self-evidently regarded as having political agency, will contribute to a better comprehension of the mechanisms of power that were at play in early modern society. In what follows, we first discuss how women's political roles have been studied in the past and what form these studies typically take. Next, we propose three avenues for future research that we believe might help us to

1 Pezarro, *Mijn heer en liefste hartje*, 82.
2 Kloek, '"Een nieuw studieveld"', 219.

diversify and deepen our understanding of women's political agency in the early modern Low Countries.

Elite Women as Political Agents

Inasmuch as the political involvement of women in the early modern Low Countries has been studied, historians have tended to focus primarily on the role of elite women. This emphasis is understandable to some extent, given that traditional historiography typically defined politics narrowly, considering only formal institutions and high-ranking actors as relevant. As a result, the early modern women who have attracted the most historical attention were usually from noble, princely, or royal families, with their political influence tied to their high social status. Even within this elite group, however, the specific roles that afforded women political power varied considerably.

The most conspicuous role in which early modern women operated as political players in the Low Countries was that of ruler. In the Habsburg Netherlands, women had always been involved in the highest spheres of politics. They did so, however, not as rulers in their own names but as regents or governors – representatives appointed by the monarch who resided elsewhere in the vast Habsburg domains. An exception to this rule was the Spanish infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia (1566-1633), who was granted sovereignty over the Habsburg Netherlands as part of her dowry and shared it with her husband, Archduke Albert of Austria (1559-1621). Only after her husband died in 1621 did she assume the role of governor.[3] Including Isabella, no fewer than seven women fulfilled the role of *landvoogdes* between the early sixteenth century and the late eighteenth, and they did so either on their own account or, as in the case of Maria Christina of Austria-Lorraine (1742-1798), together with their husband. Many of these ruling women, especially those in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, have received due attention, albeit mostly in either a biographical or an art-historical context.[4]

The political constellation of the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Dutch Republic did not follow the dynastic logic that dominated politics in many of the Republic's monarchical counterparts. This did not necessarily mean that there was no room for political involvement by high-ranking women. Amongst such women, those with the highest status were the consorts of the Nassau stadtholders. As early as 1909, Titia J. Geest published a dissertation in which she argued that Amalia of Solms (1602-1675),

3 Wyhe (ed.), *Isabel Clara Eugenia*; Thomas and Duerloo (eds.), *Albert & Isabella*; Raeymaekers, *One Foot in the Palace*.

4 Examples include Pérez (ed.), *Mary of Hungary*; Steen, *Margaret of Parma*; Eichberger, Legaré, and Hüsken (eds.), *Women at the Burgundian Court*; Kerkhoff, *Maria van Hongarije*; Gorter-van Royen, *Maria van Hongarije*; Triest, *Macht, vrouwen en politiek*; Ylä-Anttila, *Habsburg Female Regents*. Recently, research projects have started that study the reign of Mary of Hungary from a specific perspective, exploring tensions between Mary's femininity and her successful authority. Jules Dejonckheere (Université Catholique de Louvain) investigates her role in military affairs, a domain that was traditionally associated with masculinity. Lison Vercammen (Université du Luxembourg) examines how Mary made strategic use of issues and discourses connected to health and illness, a traditionally feminine domain.

wife of Stadtholder Frederick Henry of Orange-Nassau (1584-1647), not only took the lead in forging marriage alliances with the greatest European dynasties but also took part in discussions and negotiations that led to the Peace of Münster.[5] It took nearly a century for historians to pick up on this argument and consider the activities of stadtholder consorts as more than family affairs on the margins of the Dutch political arena.[6] As the first Nassau court to rival the splendour of its foreign counterparts, the court of Amalia and Frederick Henry has received the most attention since the late 1990s, primarily from a cultural perspective.[7] More recently, historians Susan Broomhall and Jacqueline van Gent have stressed once more that the cultural projects in which Amalia took the lead were not mere embellishments or luxuries, but attempts to build a distinctive family brand that helped the Orange-Nassau family position itself in the network of high-ranking European dynasties.[8] As such, these studies are in line with the recognition of the political importance of cultural patronage in the thriving discipline of queenship studies.[9]

Because of the non-monarchical status of the stadtholderian families, the widows of the stadtholders could not act as female regents in the Dutch Republic during the minority of their children in any official capacity. However, research on the Frisian cadet branch of the Nassau family has shown that several stadtholderian widows combined the guardianship of their sons with considerable authority in the provinces of their deceased husbands' stadtholderate.[10] For example, in her 2022 biography of Albertine Agnes of Orange-Nassau (1634-1696), Sunny Jansen shows that Albertine concerned herself with military operations during the Disaster Year of 1672 and mediated in conflicts between the various Frisian political institutions.[11] Surprisingly, however, one of the most high-ranking eighteenth-century consorts who served as regent for several years, Anne of Hannover (1709-1759), has so far received little attention from political historians.[12]

High-ranking aristocratic women were not only active in politics in the Low Countries as rulers, regents, or consorts. Looking beyond the small group of women who were more or less directly involved in formal or institutional politics, it becomes clear that Netherlandish women – like men – were part of informal patronage networks that influenced decision-making at local, national, and international levels. For the Habsburg Netherlands, the household of Archdukes Albert and Isabella has been studied as a locus

5 Geest wrote her dissertation also in reply to a German book about Amalia of Solms, which, according to Geest, failed to give a thorough account of Amalia's life: Geest, *Amalia van Solms*; Kleinschmidt, *Amalia von Oranien*.

6 See for example Poelhekke, 'Amalia van Solms'. Recently, there has been renewed attention for the biographies of these women: Deen, *Anna van Saksen*; Deen and Huysman (eds.), *Moeders des vaderlands*.

7 Keblusek and Zijlmans (eds.), *Vorstelijk Vertoon*; Van der Ploeg and Vermeeren (eds.), *Vorstelijk Verzameld*; Treanor, *Amalia van Solms*; Beranek, *Power of the Portrait*; Akkerman, *Courtly Rivals*; Moerman and Schölvinck, *Amalia van Solms*.

8 Broomhall and Van Gent, *Gender, Power and Identity*; Broomhall and Van Gent, *Dynastic Colonialism*.

9 See for example Campbell Orr (ed.), *Queenship in Europe*; Watanabe-O'Kelly and Morton (eds.), *Queens Consort*; Woodacre (ed.), *A Companion to Global Queenship*; and the many volumes and monographs published in the *Queenship and Power* book series edited by Carole Levin and published by Palgrave Macmillan.

10 Bruggeman, *Nassau en de macht van Oranje*; Jagtenberg, *Marijke Meu*.

11 Jansen, *De vrouw die Friesland redde*.

12 An exception is Gabriëls, *De heren als dienaren*.

of female power, where women filled the roles of patron, broker, and client, and ladies-in-waiting used their direct access to the infanta strategically.[13] A context completely different from the archducal court, but also a focal point of patronage networks dominated by aristocratic women, was the eighteenth-century Abbey of Thorn. In his monograph on this secular convent, or *stift* in Dutch, Joost Welten has unravelled how high-ranking noblewomen were prepared for married life in the highest echelons of early modern society within this institution, and how Thorn functioned as both a female community and a small state ruled by European princesses.[14] Although these women did not interact regularly with formal political institutions such as the States-General or the provincial states, they governed a small principality and trained themselves in diplomatic behaviour, and secular abbeys like Thorn formed highly politicised spaces where ambitions of the European aristocracy converged.

The Low Countries were home to many noblewomen from both aristocratic families as well as the lower-ranking gentry, who, just like the abbesses of Thorn, were involved in decision-making and political negotiations or the building of patronage networks at a local or regional level. Two types of publications have shed light on the activities women deployed to protect and promote the interests of themselves, their families, or their local or regional communities. The first type consists of biographies of individual noblewomen. A recent example is Freeke de Meyer's biography of Marie Catherine Josephe de Merode (1743-1794), who, as a widow, took charge of a large estate consisting of domains she had inherited from her father, the Prince of Rubempré, and domains that were part of her first husband's inheritance.[15] Together with her second husband, she supported protests against the reforms of Emperor Joseph II in the context of the Brabantine Revolution to protect long-standing noble privileges. In the same fashion, the Guelders heiress Ursula Philippota van Raesfelt (1643-1721) developed into an autonomous manager of her estates at a time of revolutions and war.[16] The activities of her mother-in-law Margaretha Turnor, mentioned in the introduction, have also been studied in light of political unrest, albeit not in a biography, but as part of an analysis of her correspondence with her husband.[17]

A second type of publication on aristocratic women in politics consists of biographies of influential men that also pay attention to the role of their wives, sisters, and daughters. An interesting example is the biography of politician, diplomat, and short-lived Grand Pensionary of the Batavian Republic Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck (1761-1825) by Edwina Hagen, which is written from the perspective of Schimmelpenninck's relationship with his wife Catharina Nahuys (1770-1844).[18] By discussing Schimmelpenninck's and Nahuys's activities together, Hagen offers insight into informal politics during a time in which political roles and responsibilities were reshuffled and renegotiated. Just like high-ranking

13 Houben, *Wisselende gedaanten*; Houben and Raeymaekers, 'Women and the Politics of Access'; Raeymaekers, *One Foot in the Palace*.
14 Welten, *De vergeten prinsessen*.
15 De Meyer, *Hoog geboren*.
16 Manschot-Tijdink, *De eigenzinnige erfdochter*.
17 Panhuysen, *Rampjaar 1672*.
18 Hagen, *President van Nederland*.

dynastic couples in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, and presidential couples since the eighteenth century, Schimmelpenninck and Nahuys operated as a political working couple, dividing work based on norms of feminine and masculine behaviour.[19]

These studies discussing Netherlandish aristocratic women's political involvement indicate that women were particularly active in turbulent times. Did their political position benefit from war and crisis? Here, too, the answer might be found in the notion of the political working couple. Times of war and crisis required men, especially aristocrats or members of political institutions, to leave their homes and travel to the front or to attend assemblies in political centres such as Brussels or The Hague. As a result, a new division of labour was formed in which women took over political activities from their husbands, such as maintaining contacts with the local magistracy. However, it should be emphasised that most of the relevant sources we possess were produced during periods in which the husband was absent, potentially resulting in a distorted image. After all, it was only when one partner was away from home that spouses would correspond with each other, leaving more clues for historians looking for explicit references to women's involvement in politics.

This brief overview of the state of the research demonstrates that our current knowledge of the political role of women in the Low Countries is patchy in two ways. Firstly, our understanding of the political agency of high-ranking women is based primarily on the biographical study of individuals. Research has brought to light a considerable number of examples of elite Netherlandish women wielding both formal and informal authority, and harbouring political aspirations or diplomatic skills. What has not been thoroughly studied, however, is whether these women were exceptional or representative of a larger group of politically active women. Secondly, and more problematically, the involvement of lower-ranking women in early modern Netherlandish politics forms an almost complete terra incognita for political historians. The exception to the rule is scholarship on the activities of women in revolts and revolutions in the sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century Low Countries.[20] For example, in an article on female involvement in popular protest in Holland, Rudolf Dekker has argued that women were particularly capable of leading popular food protests and political riots, as the streets formed an acceptable arena within which they might make their voices heard.[21] The question of whether this was the only political arena in which lower-ranking Netherlandish women were active has not yet been answered.

What can be done to remedy the aforementioned gaps in our knowledge, and how do we proceed from here? An important first step towards addressing the current imbalances in research on women and politics in the early modern Low Countries is to broaden and diversify our conception of both politics itself and of the practices, discourses, and spaces typically associated with it. In recent decades, a narrow demarcation of 'politics' has

19 The idea of married couples operating as working couples was coined by the German historian Heide Wunder and has later been applied to dynastic couples, primarily in the Holy Roman Empire. For a brief history of the concept, see Wunder, 'Das Arbeits- und Ehepaar'.

20 See for example Dekker and Vega, 'Women and the Dutch Revolutions'; Te Brake, Dekker, and Van de Pol, 'Women and Political Culture'; Polasky, 'Women in Revolutionary Belgium'.

21 Dekker, 'Women in Revolt'.

increasingly given way to a more flexible interpretation that favours the term 'the political', encouraging political historians to transcend the accepted boundaries of their discipline and explore alternative dimensions of power and power relations previously left out of the picture.[22] As has become evident in recent research on early modern Britain, this conceptual diversification opens up multiple directions for studying women's ability to engage in political activities.[23] In the second part of this essay, we propose three avenues of research that might help us move towards a more systematic study of the mechanisms impelling the ways in which women from diverse stations in life either had or obtained access to formal and informal politics in the Low Countries. We also highlight the importance of new tools and technological developments in navigating these avenues.

Political Agency Redefined

The first avenue we propose is a movement away from the established male-dominated political institutions of the time and consciously turn to other social arenas in which women were able to exercise less visible (but not necessarily less effective) forms of political influence, following the gender-specific roles that were expected of them. As mentioned above, one such arena that has already been rediscovered by political historians was the princely household, where elite women often wielded considerable political power through lobbying and patronage. A noteworthy source of information concerns the correspondence of the consorts of the Dutch stadtholders, which has recently been digitised by the Huygens Institute in collaboration with the Bodleian Library. This large-scale project has made available thousands of letters written by and to eleven stadtholders' wives between the late sixteenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries, while plans for an extension into the late eighteenth century are underway. The resulting database, which is available via Oxford University's *Early Modern Letters Online* platform, enables researchers to systematically analyse the political responsibilities of these women and the influence they were able to exercise both within and beyond the United Provinces. Such an endeavour was recently undertaken by Lidewij Nissen, whose doctoral dissertation traces and compares the political and dynastic roles of no less than four stadtholderian consorts.[24]

Other arenas of political action, which took place on many more societal levels, remain to be explored. We might wonder, for example, to what extent and in what ways less prestigious households could become hotbeds of political activity, in the sense that the wives and female family members of regional or local administrators were usually well aware of – and sometimes deeply involved in – the political affairs of their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons. In what ways did these women contribute to or even determine their successful or, perhaps, unsuccessful outcome? It seems highly unlikely that, in the privacy

22 A particularly influential approach in this regard is that of the so-called Bielefeld school: Steinmetz and Haupt, 'The Political as Communicative Space in History'.

23 See for example Chalus, *Elite Women in English Political Life*; Lewis, *Sacred to Female Patriotism*.

24 Nissen, *Powerful Partners*.

of their own homes, it was always the men who set the agenda in this regard. Similarly, we might ask to what extent women who collaborated with their male relatives – or replaced their husbands or brothers when the latter were absent, became incapacitated, or died – were able to promote their businesses and advocate their rights through political action, for example by appealing to local government or guild administrations. Finally, what room for political manoeuvre did women have in arenas in which their involvement was considered more permissible, such as the organisation of charity, poor relief, or health care? In this regard, political historians can build on research carried out primarily by social historians on the survival strategies and authorities of women workers, single mothers, and widows.[25] By delving into these alternative arenas of political action and examining the varied ways in which women navigated and influenced them, we can gain a richer understanding of the multifaceted roles women played in shaping political decisions.

Secondly, a diversification of 'politics' presupposes that we also look at different types of political action, ranging from quiet resistance through public acts of protest to outright revolution. Such a recalibration opens up a range of previously underestimated or neglected historical events that might be examined in which women did play a prominent role. This realisation is slowly beginning to sink in among Dutch and Belgian scholars. For example, in a new large-scale research project funded by the Dutch Research Council, Maartje van Gelder is examining the political agency of common men and women by looking at food protests in Dutch, Italian, and Ottoman cities in the period 1500-1800.[26] As mentioned above, these manifestations were often led by women, and thus provide a unique opportunity to study the motivations of, and methods adopted by, early modern women aiming to improve their circumstances through political action. However, in thinking about the range of actions that may be considered as belonging to the political realm, we should be careful not to limit the scope to forms of resistance or protest only. Rather, we should acknowledge that women were sometimes expected and actively encouraged to partake in political activities, for instance by deploying certain competencies that were considered specific to the female sex. An example here concerns the gathering and distribution of political information and gossip through correspondence or networking, which was often a task relegated to women.[27] A rather extreme offshoot of this responsibility was espionage: as Nadine Akkerman has shown in her work on female spies in early modern Britain, women were often asked by those in power to carry out secret missions, gather intelligence, or pass on confidential information about political or religious dissenters, proving

25 See for example Schmidt, *Overleven na de dood*; Schmidt, 'Managing a Large Household'; Van der Heijden, Van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Schmidt, 'Terugkeer van het patriciaat?'; Van der Heijden and Schmidt, 'In dienst van de stad'; Vermeesch, 'The Legal Agency of Single Mothers'; Wyffels, *Women and Work*.

26 See for a brief project description: https://www.nwo.nl/en/researchprogrammes/nwo-talent-programme/projects-vici/vici-2023 (Accessed on 6 December 2024). In a second research project, Van Gelder will, together with Jelle Haemers, study other forms of female resistance in medieval and early modern cities in the Low Countries: https://www.nwo.nl/onderzoeksprogrammas/sgw-open-competitie/toekenningen (Accessed on 6 December 2024).

27 Examples may be found in the work of Elaine Chalus, such as Chalus, '"Ladies are often very good scaffoldings"', 161.

that espionage was a field of political action that historians have hitherto, and erroneously, associated exclusively with men.[28]

Finally, the diversification of politics also necessitates a shift away from the traditional sources of political history (such as laws and reports of parliamentary debates) to alternative source materials such as pamphlets, newspapers, and popular songs.[29] Recent research has demonstrated that these sources often contain valuable information to reconstruct the involvement of lower-ranking women in the political process. An interesting type of source in this regard concerns the petitions that were submitted to local, regional, or supra-regional governments. It has already been argued that petitioning was a political tool that was used relatively frequently by women in the Dutch Republic, allowing them to appeal directly to the States-General to raise certain issues, express their grievances, and otherwise voice their concerns.[30] Petitions are therefore ideally suited to enabling us to identify the issues that most concerned women, as well as specific gender-related political practices and discourses.

This widening of the scope also encourages us to pay attention to gender-specific political strategies. We might ask, for example, whether women were more successful in bringing about political change when they used modes of communication that were more expected of them than of men, for example by emphasising emotional distress or appealing to specific values or moral responsibilities. A valuable new resource for scholars examining this issue is the *Goetgevonden* database, developed by the Huygens Institute, which provides comprehensive access to the complete collection of handwritten and printed resolutions of the States-General between 1576 and 1795.[31] Although it is still in its early stages, the database is expected to revolutionise research in early modern Dutch political history and ought theoretically make it possible to search systematically for the involvement of both elite and non-elite women in the formal political process of the Dutch Republic. On the Belgian side, similar developments are taking place, albeit at a much slower pace. An important project that should be mentioned here is PARDONS, which aims to digitise thousands of pardon letters granted by the monarchs to perpetrators of crimes in the Burgundian and Habsburg Low Countries.[32] Although this project is not specifically aimed at researching political history, scholars should be able to use the pardon letters to look for examples of political tensions or disputes, and for women's involvement in them. As such, the source material offers an interesting avenue through which we might explore the political agency of women from below.

Conclusion

As this essay has demonstrated, there are many opportunities that can be further explored to rethink the relationship between women and politics in the early modern Low Countries.

28 Akkerman, *Invisible Agents*.

29 Vulto, 'Singing the Dutch'; Lamal, Cumby, and Helmers (eds.), *Print and Power*. See also Nina Lamal's essay on newspapers in this special issue.

30 Oddens, *Op veler verzoek*; Hendriks and Oddens, 'Bataafse vrouwen, politieke rechten'. The latter essay also offers a concise overview of the historiography on women in the Dutch revolutionary era.

31 *Goetgevonden. De resoluties van de Staten-Generaal*, https://goetgevonden.nl (Accessed on 6 December 2024).

32 For more information on this project, see https://pardons.eu (Accessed on 6 December 2024).

Following Elaine Chalus and other scholars who in recent years have done important work to make women's political agency in the early modern period more visible, we contend that using an all-too-narrow definition of politics – which, according to Chalus, tacitly 'assumes that the only real politics is high politics' – is tantamount to undervaluing the genuine and profound contribution of women to the political process.[33] Only by diversifying the concept and widening the scope of the research involved will a clear picture emerge that improves our understanding of women's roles as legitimate political agents in their own right. Facilitated by new digital tools and technologies, the avenues we propose in this contribution are meant to do just that. To broaden the bandwidth is to acknowledge that women's political influence extended far beyond formal political institutions and encompassed realms such as the household, professional and social networks, and religious organisations. By recognising and studying these and other diverse arenas of political agency, we can uncover the various ways in which women took part in the political process, thereby challenging traditional narratives and affirming the rightful place of women at the heart of research on early modern politics.

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33 Chalus, 'Elite Women', 673.

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