Finding Women in the University Archives: Women's Scholarships and Their Impact on the Early Modern University

Claire Morrison

Claire Morrison is a PhD Researcher at KU Leuven's early modern history department. Her current FWO project 'Women in Academia?' re-examines the role of women in the early modern university cities of Leuven and Leiden. With a focus on official and unofficial access to higher education, the project aims to contribute a more inclusive conception of the history of the university.

Abstract

This article explores the overlooked involvement of women in supporting the University of Leuven during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Despite gendered regulations against the presence of women in early modern universities, archival evidence reveals their significant roles in providing scholarships to students. Through detailed analysis of testamentary records, the study uncovers women's deep engagement with the university's activities. Spanning various social backgrounds, these women demonstrated a profound understanding of the university's operations and influenced its development through financial support and by designing instructions for student conduct and academic focus. Despite often being sidelined in historical narratives, their contributions challenge traditional views of male-dominated academia and underscore the diverse roles women played in shaping early modern universities.

Keywords: history of knowledge, universities, knowledge agents, University of Leuven, patronage

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It is late November 1592 when Oda Mangelaers calls upon her notary to visit her in Mechelen. Bedridden and in poor health, she feels her time has come and asks him to note down her last wishes. While her body protests after a life of dedicated hard work, her mind is still sharp and clear. She carefully devises a plan for how her worldly possessions should be divided after her death. She donates twelve guilders to the Keizersberg monastery in Leuven, commissioning a requiem mass to pray for her soul's purification in purgatory. Another six guilders were set up for her two nieces, Marijke and Anneke. Donations of this kind were commonly found in wills in the Catholic Southern Netherlands. Oda also makes a more unusual addition to her will, however. The majority of her inheritance – earned working as a maid – she donates to the University of Leuven. She chooses a specific college, the Pope's College, and endows fifty-one guilders to set up a scholarship in her name. The interest yielded from these assets made it possible for young students from low-income families to study theology at the university.[1]

Oda was not the only woman setting up a scholarship at the university; she was one of the 129 female benefactors of the Old University of Leuven between 1425 and 1797. Who were these women setting up donations at the university? What were their intentions? How did they impact early modern academia? This case study explores the many different women involved with the university to showcase the opportunities they had to shape their environments.

Women and Early Modern Academia

Since women's history as a sub-discipline was established, many spaces of learning previously believed to have been exclusively male have been successfully re-examined.[2]

1 Leuven, Rijksarchief te Leuven (hereafter RAL), Oude Universiteit Leuven (hereafter OUL) 2757, Testament of Oda Mangelaers, 1592.

2 Bernardi, 'Domestic Astronomy'; Schiebinger, 'Women of Natural Knowledge'; Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy*; Erculiani, *Letters on Natural Philosophy*; Egmond, *The world of Carolus Clusius*; Kinukawa, *Art Competes with Nature*; Pal, *Republic of Women*; Carlyle, 'Collecting the World in Her Boudoir'. For a historiographical overview of this development in the field, see Outram, 'The Most Difficult Career'.

One fortress of male dominance remains to be structurally reviewed: the early modern university. Studies of individual cases, such as Anna Maria van Schurman in the Low Countries, have demonstrated that women could attain even the highest positions within the early modern university.[3] However, the portrayal of these women as highly exceptional indirectly underlines the conception that early modern universities and academia were exclusively male domains. Despite statutes banning women from working at the colleges, an analysis of the institutional archives of the universities of Leuven reveals that women could be found throughout the entire university.[4] Working women traversed college corridors, cleaning linen, selling wares, and repairing curtains. In doing so, they gained official titles such as maid, porter, concierge, or head of kitchen, while other women worked as academic printers or as head of the physics laboratory.[5] The ivory tower did not succeed in keeping women away from the university.

Despite the evidence of their presence, these women remain left out of the history of the university because of a biased focus on official access to higher education, neglecting the possibility that there were other ways for women to act within the university's walls. This case study of the University of Leuven reassesses these presumably closed-off spaces by paying close attention to action instead of official access. The female benefactors in this study demonstrate the ways in which women shaped the future of the early modern university.

Women's Donations to the University of Leuven

After the University of Leuven was founded by papal bull in 1425, it soon established itself as a thriving institution. Across the entire period of the Old University, women comprised 13 percent of all the donors: a significant amount. Throughout the centuries, from the initial foundation of the university in the fifteenth century to its closure at the end of the eighteenth century, women were actively involved with academic education at one of Europe's influential university cities. Not a decade passed without women setting up donations. There was a steep rise in contributions made by women in the sixteenth

3 Larsen, *Anna Maria van Schurman*. Other exceptions include Elena Piscopia (1646-1684), the first woman to receive a doctorate of philosophy at the University of Padua in 1678 and Laura Bassi (1711-1778), the first female professor in natural philosophy in Bologna: Kalnická, 'The First Woman Philosopher'; Cifarelli and Simili (eds.), *Laura Bassi*.

4 I have manually counted ninety-six women in the enrolment registers of the University of Leuven between 1425 and 1675: RAL, OUL 22-29, Enrollment registers of the University of Leuven, 1453-1794, reprinted in Reusens, *Matricule de l'Université de Louvain*. A census conducted in 1597-1598 reveals fifteen women were working as maids in the different colleges in Leuven that year: Boonen, *Geschiedenis van Leuven*, 319-392.

5 In 1801, the unnamed widow of Frans Pasteur carried the official title of overseer of the physics laboratory of the University of Leiden. In the same year, another unidentified woman, the widow of Van Noodt, became an official porter of the university. Eva van Alphen held the title of academic printer for the same university for twenty years between 1661 and 1681. Six women were appointed head of the kitchen of the Statencollege at the University of Leiden: Adriaentgen Jansdr. Van Sluytenburgh in 1635, followed by Eva Bekerts van Thienen (1712-1722), Agatha van Rouveroij (1722-1725), Glaudina van de Velde (1738-1749), Maria Catharina Prevost (1751-1779), and lastly, Suzanna Schut (1779-1801). See Sluijter, 'Tot ciraet', 112-114, 116.

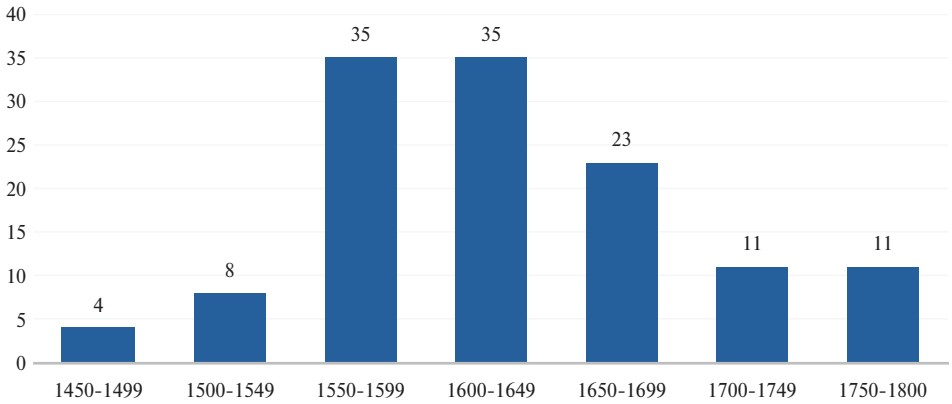

Fig. 1 Female benefactors of the old University of Leuven, 1426-1797.
Source: RAL, OUL 962-4651, Donations made by women to the University of Leuven, 1426-1797.

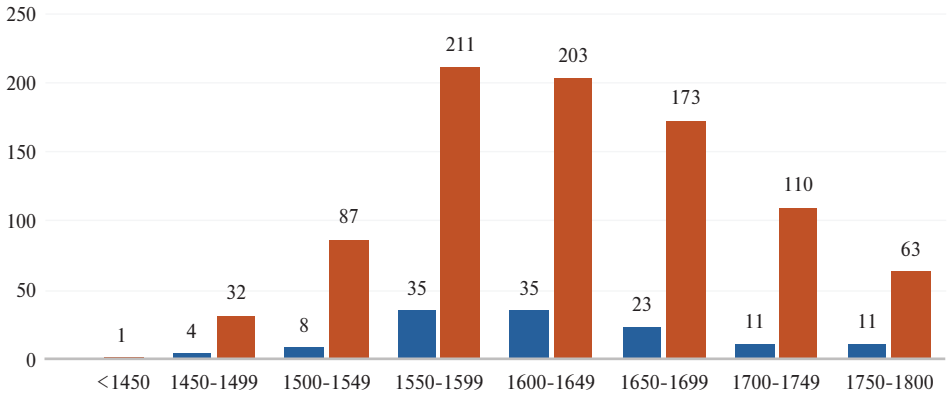

Fig. 2 Male and female benefactors of the old University of Leuven, 1426-1797.
Source: RAL, OUL 779-4661, Donations made by men and women to the University of Leuven, 1426-1797.

century, and a decline later in the eighteenth century. When comparing the female donations (fig. 1) with the overall donations made at the university (fig. 2), a strikingly similar trend can be observed. The number of scholarships set up by women reflects the ups and downs seen in the overall number of donations set up at the university. When it came to setting up scholarships, female benefactors thus played a straightforward role, not specifically distinct from that of men.

The impact of women did, however, intensify at certain moments. The number of female donors increased during the pivotal years towards the end of the sixteenth century, when women set up 19 percent of all new scholarships. In the 1670s and 1680s the involvement of women even topped 20 percent of the total number of donations. This means that during the years in which the university faced hardship – war, looting, and economic crises – one in five of all donations were made by women.

The donation made by Barbara Moerkens in 1578 offers a good illustration of how women played a vital role in the university's survival at the most crucial moments of its history.[6] Moerkens had wished to set up a donation at the Augustinian College. Yet, after her death, the payments from her endowment were temporarily suspended. In a letter written by the college president, the famous theology professor Michael Baius described the hardship he and his students were facing at the time: 'The poverty is so great here that we must consider how we will obtain the bread necessary for our sustenance. For six years, besieged on all sides, we have received nothing. Everything is horribly expensive.'[7] During the time in which Leuven was besieged by Habsburg soldiers, the living situation for the students and professors at the Augustinian college was grim. After all his efforts to consolidate Moerkens's endowment, Baius would never see the day the donation was finally enacted. In 1589, six years after Baius's letter, the new college president Jacobus Jansenius finally received Moerkens's donation, which made it possible to rescue the worn-out college. Two controversial theologians with a struggling college, and it was a donation of a woman who finally saved it from succumbing to the depredations of war.

Like Barbara Moerkens, most donors, both men and women, left an endowment in the form of a scholarship at a specific college. Colleges were founded specifically with the goal of accommodating young students from less fortunate backgrounds at university.[8] The first college in Leuven was set up by Judoca van Putte and her husband, Lodewijk de Rijke in 1445.[9] A college typically consisted of a large building with sleeping quarters, a dining room, and a kitchen (fig. 3).[10] Most colleges also gave access to a garden where the kitchen staff grew crops and the students could unwind. Some colleges had a small chapel for the residents to pray in. Setting up a college thus first required a building. But a college offered more than just a room and daily meal. Besides a place to sleep and eat, every college had its own library and a live-in president, often a professor who would provide extra lessons and

6 RAL, OUL 2748, Testament and notary documents of Barbara Moerkens, 1556-1690.

7 Michel de Bay to Mathias Lambrecht, Leuven, 7 September 1583, in Reusens, *Documents*, 141: 'La pauvreté est si grande ici, qu'il nous faut songer comment nous pourrons nous procurer le pain nécessaire à notre entretien. Depuis six ans, assiégés de toutes parts, nous n'avons rien reçu. Tout est horriblement cher.'

8 De Maesschalck, *Leuven en zijn colleges*.

9 RAL, OUL 1466 and 1647, Charters and testament of Judoca van Putte, 1447.

10 RAL, OUL 1466 and 1647, Charters and testament of Judoca van Putte, 1447.

Fig. 3 Jan Wouters, Leuven University, *coloured drawing, 1650, in Jan Wouters,* Logica, *1648-1650, M Leuven.*

lead debates at the college. Fixed rules and regulations governed the hallways of the college, and the opening of the daily meal was an important task for the presiding professor. This was thus a place of study, fully incorporated within the university. Because of these added benefits many wealthy families also chose to send their young sons to a college, a choice for which they had to pay admission. Nonetheless, the college system was, at its core, an institution offering less privileged students access to the university.

Students who could not afford to pay for their admission could apply for a scholarship in order to gain access to one of the numerous colleges in Leuven.[11] Many scholarships

11 In total, sixty-eight different colleges existed in Leuven during the entire period of the Old University: De Maesschalck, *Leuven en zijn colleges*, 328-329.

included instructions on how only the most diligent or studious could apply for their grant. To ensure this, a notice about the scholarships would be sent to local priests and school headmasters. These men selected specific students and encouraged them to apply for the grant. The students would then send a short letter of motivation to the college announcing their candidacy. Once selected, they would receive all-inclusive access into higher education.

With the advent of the earliest version of the newspaper, it became common to print recruitment notices of the available scholarships, thus spreading the call for applicants as widely as possible. Demonstrating the long effect a scholarship could have, one listing in the official bulletin of the Belgian state from 1947 shows a scholarship set up by Barbara Moerkens in 1577.[12] The investment of her initial donation was still yielding profits in the mid-twentieth century. Four hundred years after setting it up, students could still apply to her scholarship to gain free access to university.

More than Money: Women Shaping the Scholars of the Future

What do these scholarships tell us about the role of women in early modern academia? The testament of Elisabeth de Borghgraeff demonstrates the level of involvement female donors showed towards the academic pursuits of the students applying to their scholarships.[13] In her testament written in 1615, Elisabeth instructs that priority should be given to her relatives, as was common for early modern scholarships. De Borghgraeff was part of the Frisian nobility, in the northern part of the Low Countries. When her husband passed away in 1601, she was left with a considerable inheritance, as the couple had remained childless. They had moved from Frisia to the Southern Netherlands at the end of the sixteenth century because the Dutch Revolt had made it impossible for them to live their lives according to their Catholic faith. Despite being in exile for the rest of her life, de Borghgraeff remained loyal to the region of her birth. She had, for instance, ordered a gravestone erected for herself and her husband in Terkaple in Frisia, even though she would be buried (following Catholic rites) in Mechelen.[14] Her loyalty is furthermore indicated in her scholarship, as students from Frisia would be specifically considered for the grant. If family members from other regions applied, they would still, however, gain preference. Blood ties thus trumped geographical ones.

Along with her testament, the university archives have kept numerous small letters written by students applying for de Borggraeff's scholarship. Many of these letters were written before her death, suggesting that she might have been involved in the selection process of the students. This process was also detailed in her testament, as the selected students were to live in accordance with the statutes of the pedagogy of Het Varken, the

12 *Belgisch staatsblad* 180-181 (Brussels 1947) 6381.

13 RAL, OUL 1116, Testament of Elisabeth de Borghgraeff, 1615.

14 The following text is engraved on her gravestone in the church of Terkape: 'Hier leet begraven vrauwe Elisabeth de Borgherfelt (sic) weduwe wijlen heer Dominicus de Roorda ghecomen synde uijt Vrieslant dor liefde van de catolijcke ende roomsche religie, goet, vrienden, en aldaer verlaten hebbende, is alhier binnen Mechelen gestorven den 6en April 1615'.

college where de Borggraeff had set up her scholarship. She continues by stating that the scholarship should only be used by students following courses in logic and rhetoric or for their promotion in theology.[15] This shows that de Borggraeff wanted to make sure these students applied themselves to specific academic, political, and religious pursuits.

The testament proves de Borggraeff had knowledge of the college statutes and what they proclaimed. She must also have had particular ties to this college that led to her selecting it from the numerous other colleges active at that time in Leuven.[16] From specific household objects to guidelines as to how to live a proper life, de Borggraeff had pinpointed exactly how she wanted her scholarship to be set up and which type of students she wanted to support. Her level of engagement is further exemplified in the testament, which notes that she reserved the right to inspect the college and see if the bursary students were living up to their promises. De Borggraeff lived in Mechelen, so she must have made the short journey to Leuven to check up on her pupils, again showing her significant and continued involvement with these young students. She cared for them and wished them to have a comfortable place to live, but more than this, she felt responsible for their academic pursuits. To cement her lasting mark on this college, she directed her name be inscribed on a plaque and hung above the door of the college house. This way, de Borggraeff reminded the students walking the halls of one of the largest colleges of Leuven that she was the one who had made it all possible for them.

Becoming a Patroness: Diverse Backgrounds and Intentions

The scholarship left by Elisabeth de Borggraeff was not exceptional; her donation is exemplary for the hundreds of funds set up by women at the University of Leuven during the early modern period. These women, who hailed from all walks of life, interacted closely with the university's activities and directly shaped its future. Over a hundred women had set up funds at the University of Leuven by the eighteenth century. This number includes many affluent women and women of nobility such as Empress Maria Theresia, Marchioness Maria van Hamale, and Countess Margareta de Croÿ.[17] Besides their multiple and generous endowments to the university, these women included many other institutions in their testament, as was expected of women from this social class. Yet, women from different social positions also feature in the university archives.

A substantial group of women were from those who had chosen a distinguishingly modest and pious lifestyle. They lived, for instance, in one of the many Beguinages of the Low Countries. While most were mentioned simply as *begijn* (Beguine) in their testaments, two

15 RAL, OUL 1116, Testament of Elisabeth de Borghgraeff, fols. 3v-4r.

16 Elisabeth also set up a similar scholarship at the St. Romboutscollege, the college specifically for students coming from Mechelen, where she was living: RAL, OUL 3981, Testament of Elisabeth de Borghgraeff, 1615.

17 Maria van Hamale established multiple scholarships at different colleges of the University of Leuven: RAL, OUL 779, 1940, 2076, and 2735, Testament and notary documents of Maria van Hamale's donations, 1530-1559. Margareta de Croÿ had set up a fund for the Winckelius college: RAL, OUL 2430, Testament and notary documents of Margareta de Croÿ, 1614. Maria Theresia, had founded the Veteranen college in 1778: RAL, OUL 4347, Testament and notary documents of Maria Theresia, 1778. See also Van Der Biest, 'Women as Gracious Benefactors?'.

were furthermore described as being headmistress of a Beguinage.[18] To become a headmistress one needed to enjoy a certain level of social prestige; it is surprising, therefore, that only two headmistresses feature in the list of female benefactors to the university. Many women lived in a Beguinage in Leuven, but other Beguines who donated to the university lived in Mechelen, Brussels, Diest, or even farther afield in Utrecht.

Their devoted way of life might offer us clues as to their intentions in setting up a scholarship at a notable Catholic university. Yet, much is left unsaid about, for instance, Johanna-Theresia and Lucia Barbara Peeters, two sisters living in the Beguinage in Leuven in the eighteenth century, who set up a scholarship at the Breugel College.[19] The Beguinages offered women a social position distinct from that of cloistered women, as women living in Beguinages were still able to participate in many worldly dealings within wider society (fig. 4). In their testament the sisters indicated their funds were derived through their beer-brewing business. Beguinages offered women a competitive position in the local market. Their pious way of life banned them from making a profit, which is why they often sold their wares under the standard market price, much to the dismay of the other tradespeople. Despite religious disdain for amassing personal riches, it was not uncommon for women living in Beguinages to become successful businesswomen, largely because they offered exceptionally low prices. Johanna-Theresia and Lucia still left a significant endowment at the end of their lives, possibly also motivated by a desire to donate their dubious worldly possessions to a worthy cause. However, their motivations for setting up a scholarship at a specific college for medical students remain unclear.

The motivations behind the funding of a scholarship by Oda Mangelaers, the maid we saw at the beginning of this chapter, leave more to the imagination than the several other maids, who left donations for the college at which they had formally worked. Johanna Hans, for instance, established a scholarship at her former workplace, the St. Ivo College.[20] For these women, it is easier to understand why they would want to set up a donation at the university.

Only a quarter of the women who made donations were married when they set up their testament.[21] Most of the married women set up their donation together with their husbands, while 23 percent did so without the signature of any male counterpart. These donations demonstrate – once again – that married women in the early modern Low Countries were able to set up contracts and dispose of their personal wealth in any way they deemed fit, without their husband's approval.[22] Furthermore, roughly a quarter of these female donors were

18 Barbara Moerkens, who had set up her donation at the struggling Augustinian college, was headmistress of the small Beguinage in Leuven, and Antonetta Winters was the headmistress of the Beguinage in Utrecht: RAL, OUL 2748, Testament and notary documents of Barbara Moerkens, 1556-1690; RAL, OUL 2769, Testament and notary documents of Antonetta Winters, 1608.

19 RAL, OUL 1990, Shared testament of Johanna-Theresia and Lucia Barbara Peeters, 1760.

20 RAL, OUL 1951, Testament of Johanna Hans, 1642.

21 In total, 73 percent of all married women setting up donations at the University of Leuven did so with a joint testament set up with their husband. One married woman set up a donation co-signed by her brother; the rest (23 percent) set up a donation as a married woman, without the approval or involvement of a male counterpart.

22 Despite legal frameworks stating that married women were completely dependent on their husbands, notary records from this period show many married women disposing of property in any manner they saw fit, independent from any male involvement.

Fig. 4 Women from the Mechelen Beguinage and their activities, which included beer brewing, which had made it possible for the sisters Johanna-Theresia and Lucia to set up a scholarship at the University of Leuven. Anonymous, Werkzaamheden van de Mechelse begijnen, *oil on canvas, 114 × 158 cm, Mechelen, Museum Hof van Busleyden.*

widows, all of whom set up their donations on their own, without a male relative to co-sign the contract. The biggest group of women, however, comprised single women. Most of them set up their donations alone, while a few did so together with a sibling, like the beer-brewing sisters at the Beguinage. Together, the female benefactors of the university reflect the wide range of lifestyles open to women in early modern society. Despite differences in social background, the largest group of women who decided to set up a donation were those who did so on their own (70 percent of all women). Why did they decide to do so?

The fact that most of these women remained childless throughout their lives might have had a big impact on their decision. This trend is also seen in the donations made by couples, as well as by men donating on their own to the university. Furthermore, donating to charitable organisations was prevalent among all social classes in early modern society.[23] One study on early modern Amsterdam has found that women left more money for philanthropic purposes than did men.[24] As another historian has argued, 'generosity may well have been the major characteristic by which women could distinguish themselves in a

23 Charitable giving was common in the Low Countries, because a lack of centralised funding meant the care for the less privileged was taken up through public donations: Teeuwen, *Financing poor relief*.

24 Van Leeuwen, 'Giving in Early Modern History', 310.

positive way and express their own personality'.[25] It is thus possible that the women donating to the university did so as a distinguishing act of self-representation.

For now, we are left speculating on how these women became involved with the well-being of young college students at the University of Leuven. Their engagement does, however, showcase just how porous the walls of the early modern university could be, while demonstrating the ways women traversed spaces ones believed to be exclusively male. Through their testaments, these women offer us insights into the many facets of early modern womanhood, and show how they all had their own different ambitions and intentions.

Conclusion

The role of women setting up donations at the university was more straightforward than first believed. As knowledge agents, they supported students through their education, and thereby shaped the future direction of the university. They gave priority to specific subjects, often according to their political and religious aims. Moreover, these scholarships show that the university had a significant place in the lived experience of early modern women. These women possessed not only an intricate understanding of the university's inner workings and well-considered visions and strategies for shaping its future, but they were also personally invested in its existence. Despite statutes ordering the ban of women working in colleges, it did not keep them from taking at least partial ownership of the institution. These women considered the university as a part of the world for which they felt personally responsible, to such an extent that they utilised it in shaping their own sense of self. Women were thereby thoroughly engaged with early modern academia. Instead of continuing the silencing of women in the university archives because of a lack of official access, focusing on the actions of women in the early modern period has the potential to enrich our understanding of the multifaceted ways in which women from a multitude of different backgrounds, created, negotiated, transformed, and disrupted fixed ideas about the place of women in early modern universities.

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25 Van Deursen, *Een dorp in de polder*, 184.

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