



Charlie R. Steen, *Margaret of Parma: A Life* (Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Traditions 174; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2013, 321 pp., ISBN 978 90 04 25744 3).

The title of this book is somewhat misleading; it is more a study of Margaret of Parma's period as governess of the Netherlands than a full biography. Steen provides a brief sketch of her life before her return to the Netherlands in 1557, and allows a scant fifteen pages for her career after her departure in the last days of 1567. This concentration on just under eleven years of her life is understandable – and indeed almost inevitable given the importance of her role in the early years of the Revolt of the Netherlands – but perhaps represents a missed opportunity. Greater attention to her earlier career might have thrown more light on the extent to which the lessons she learned in the cut-throat politics of Italy affected her approach to the situation she faced on her arrival in Brussels in February 1557. After all, her concern for the interests of the Farnese family, or at least for the career of her son, Alexander, was an underlying theme throughout her period in the Netherlands, especially as far as her relationship with Philip II was concerned.

For this account of Margaret as governess of the Netherlands, Steen has chosen to work directly from the sources rather than mediated through the secondary literature. His major sources are her letters and, in particular, her correspondence with Philip II. Indeed, much of the text consists of close paraphrases of her letters to the Spanish king with a minimum of commentary. This often makes the text rather clumsy and repetitive, as in letter after letter Margaret makes more or less the same complaints and pleas for effective support, and for a greater understanding of the difficulties and complexity of the situations she was facing. A more serious drawback of this approach is that her letters to Philip are taken at face value as straightforward accounts of the state of affairs in the Netherlands as Margaret saw it. However, the Duchess was neither naïve nor unintelligent and these letters were attempts to influence the king's policies, not just to inform him, and so require a more searching analysis. Margaret may be criticised for misjudging Philip's character and aims, but she was certainly persistent in trying to change his mind about the best policies to pursue. The extent to which the letters are a reliable account of the situation in the Netherlands is also limited by the deficiencies of the information reaching Margaret at her palace in Brussels. Her informants often wildly overestimated the number of armed men available to the protestants and opposition nobles, and in general all too many of them seem to have panicked at critical moments –

or were more concerned to justify their own failures by exaggerating the seriousness of their problems than to present a sober account of the situation. Yet Steen too often seems to accept Margaret's statements in her letters at face value; for example, in May 1566 he paraphrases her as writing in a letter to the king that 'the Confederates gained new adherents, in the form of individuals and entire towns, each day' (150) without considering what she hoped to achieve with the king by representing the situation in such stark terms or, indeed, whether she really saw things as being quite as bad as this statement would suggest. (The passage quoted also illustrates how such close paraphrasing can lead to decidedly clumsy English.)

Where Steen does venture to comment on characters and events his judgements seem often to be trenchant but over-simplistic. The actions of the Netherlands' nobles are simply attributed to self-interest coloured by a general disdain for Margaret's illegitimate birth. Even in the case of William of Orange there is no suggestion that he may have had more complex, if not more elevated motives. It is not clear whether Steen is reflecting Margaret's disillusion with Orange in this case, or his own. Similarly, Philip is described as never even noticing criticism (71) which is an odd comment on a king who rarely forgave opposition to his views.

The proof-reading leaves something to be desired, and not just in the case of misprints or misspellings – on one page Margaret is said to have returned to the Netherlands after 26 years (47) and after 24 years on the next (48). Similarly, she (born in 1522) is said to be 36 in November 1556. Unimportant slips, but a touch worrying nevertheless in a scholarly work. The bibliography has a curiously limited list of secondary works, but a much longer list of printed sources, perhaps reflecting the author's priorities

This is a history of the times very much written from Margaret's point of view, and as such could be expected to provide a valuable contribution to the history of this troubled period. However, the author's failure to discuss with any consistency or rigour the extent to which her perception of what was happening was accurate makes it more not less difficult for the reader to understand Margaret's problems and place her failures – and not inconsiderable successes – in perspective. Certainly her letters over the years of the troubles depict a situation that was increasingly getting out of hand, but was her failure to keep the movements of discontent under control inevitable in the circumstances, or rather a consequence of her own political ineptitude? Her letters, to Philip especially, were intended to justify her actions and explain away her failures, as well as to squeeze more money out of the king. Here at least it is clear that she failed: she was unable to persuade Philip to take a less simplistic view of the problems in the Netherlands, or to give her the tools which might have enabled her to do her job. Perhaps she failed to grasp just how great the gulf was that separated her views from those of the king.