

**Simona Brunetti**

**Marco Prandoni**

*Ingeleid door Els Stronks*

*The Herla project in Flanders<sup>1</sup>*

*Hoe kunnen de grenzen van de neerlandistiek verder opengezet worden voor internationale en interdisciplinaire samenwerking? Els Stronks, senior onderzoeker bij de afdeling Vroegmoderne Letterkunde van de Universiteit Utrecht, beschrijft in haar inleiding bij dit tweeluik hoe de internationaal georiënteerde Italiaanse onderzoekers Marco Prandoni (neerlandicus) en Simona Brunetti (theaterwetenschapper) met hun werk aan het Herla-project volop gebruik maken van internationale en interdisciplinaire netwerken. In het eerste artikel van het tweeluik licht Brunetti toe wat het Herla-project nu precies is en hoe de omvangrijke database van dit project is vormgegeven. Prandoni illustreert vervolgens de mogelijkheden van de Herla-database met een specifieke casus: de reizen die de Italiaanse hertog Vincenzo Gonzaga naar de Nederlanden maakte.*

### **Inleiding: wegwijzers uit Italië**

Het onderstaande tweeluik over het Herla-project, van Simona Brunetti en Marco Prandoni, biedt een interessante blik op de nieuwste ontwikkelingen die het vakgebied van de neerlandistiek doormaakt. Centraal staan de reizen van de Italiaanse hertog Vincenzo Gonzaga naar Zuid- en Noord-Nederland in 1599 en 1608. Gonzaga maakte deel uit van de familie die de Noord-Italiaanse stad Mantua tussen 1585 en 1630 tot het centrum van de *Commedia dell'Arte* maakte. Hij had van huis uit interesse voor kunst en cultuur, maar ook voor politieke verwickelingen en legertactieken. Tijdens zijn tweede reis naar de Noordelijke Nederlanden wilde hij de opstandige Nederlanders uithoren, onder meer over de moderne visie op oorlogsvoering van Simon Stevin.

Waarom verdient het onderzoek naar deze reizen de aandacht van neerlandici? Het tweede artikel uit dit tweeluik laat zien welke literair-historische kennis we uit dit materiaal op kunnen doen. De Italiaanse hertog werd overal waar hij kwam in Europa - hij reisde zeker niet alleen naar de Nederlanden - met alle eerblijven ontvangen, en dat hield naar de toenmalige gebruiken in dat er toneel- en spektakelstukken voor hem werden opgevoerd door de bevolking van de steden die hij aandeed. Gonzaga deed op zijn beurt zijn best de culturele hoogtepunten van zijn eigen stad te reproduceren in de landen die hij bezocht. Een met hem meegereisd gezelschap van toneelspelers en muzikanten verzorgde opvoeringen die hij als geschenk aan zijn gastheren aanbood. Italiaanse voorstellingen van artiesten geschoold in traditie van de *Commedia dell'Arte* werden zo geplaatst naast het soort ceremoniële voorstellingen dat rederijkers gewend waren te geven. Dat kan niet anders dan een botsing van culturen geweest zijn,

<sup>1</sup> With special thanks to our friend Paola Degli Esposti.

waarvan we de sporen terug kunnen vinden in brieven en dagboeken, en in archiefstukken waarin de teksten en enceneringen vastgelegd zijn.

Het eerste artikel dat aan de schets van deze culturele ontmoetingen voorafgaat, biedt een reflectie op de manier waarop dat onderzoek tot stand is gebracht. Aan tal van voorwaarden moet worden voldaan: er moeten stukken uit archieven worden opgedoken, die moeten worden ontcijferd en vervolgens gerubriceerd, en die archiefstukken moeten worden aangevuld met zoveel mogelijk andere bronnen.

Dergelijk onderzoek vraagt om het opzetten van een database. Daaraan is door velen te werken, en onderzoekers kunnen de inhoud vervolgens op internet raadplegen. Het ontwerpen van zo'n database vergt inzicht in het materiaal, alsook in het soort onderzoeksvragen dat onderzoekers willen stellen. In dit geval gaat het ook nog eens om materiaal dat in twee opzichten speciaal is: documenten over politieke zaken, maar ook over theatervoorstellingen; brieven over oorlogsvoeringstechnieken, maar ook over theologische kwesties. Het zoeken van dat materiaal, en het juist interpreteren en ontsluiten ervan, vergt veel deskundigheid. Daar komt bij dat de reizen die Gonzaga maakte de onderzoekers van het ene Europese land naar het andere voeren. Kennis van zeer uiteenlopende Europese talen (in hun historische verschijningsvormen) is dus ook een vereiste, net zoals inzicht in de staat waarin de archivering van dit materiaal verkeert in de diverse landen.

In die laatste dimensie ligt voor neerlandici een aantrekkelijk en interessant aspect van het Herla-project verscholen. Wie niet zozeer focust op het soort materiaal dat hier digitaal wordt ontsloten of op het soort vraagstellingen dat hier aan de orde is, ziet in deze twee artikelen een casus beschreven die de neerlandistiek een fascinerende nieuwe invulling biedt. Het onderzoek naar het specifieke Nederlandse deel van de database is ingebed in een breed internationaal netwerk van soortgelijk onderzoek. Wat er op Gonzaga's reis naar de Republiek in 1608 gebeurde, kan via aanvullend onderzoek in de database vergeleken worden met andere Europese casussen. Het eigen karakter van de Noord-Nederlandse ervaringen van Gonzaga kan op die manier gerelativeerd dan wel bevestigd worden, en zo wordt onderzoek binnen de neerlandistiek belangwekkend voor veel grotere groepen onderzoekers. Daarbij is de manier waarop het Herla-project is opgezet voorbeeldig. Dat geldt niet alleen voor de doordachte manier waarop de database is ingericht, maar vooral voor de manier waarop de database door mensenhanden gevuld wordt. Overal waar medewerkers van het Herla-project neerstrijken, zoeken zij 'lokale specialisten': onderzoekers die bekend zijn met het materiaal dat op die specifieke plek in de database ingevoerd dient te worden.

Dat zo'n 'lokale specialist' in het geval van Gonzaga's Noord-Nederlandse reis niet uit Nederland maar uit Italië komt, geeft het project eens te meer een exemplarisch karakter. Als internationaal georiënteerde neerlandicus fungeert Marco Prandoni, samen met Simona Brunetti, als wegwijzer uit Italië. Prandoni en Brunetti maken in Nederland geschoolde neerlandici duidelijk hoe productief en innovatief het is om de grenzen van het vak open te zetten voor digitalisering, internationalisering en samenwerking.

## **The Herla project in Flanders - Part I**

### **Inventorying Gonzaga's documentation on performance**

**(Simona Brunetti)**

Located in the north of Italy, in a crucial position in the travel routes of the period, the town of Mantua played a key role in the context of Renaissance art and culture. Since the fourteenth century, its ruling house - the Gonzaga family - created a network of connections with other courts all over Europe, becoming an extraordinary patron of music, theatre, dance and figurative arts. By the end of the fifteenth century the Mantuan court had turned into a cornerstone institution for the arts. (Burattelli 1999) Besides figurative artists and musicians, many companies of comedians served under the Gonzaga patronage throughout Europe: from 1585 to 1630 the city became the capital of the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

Since 1999 the *Mantova Capitale Europea dello Spettacolo* Foundation has been operating within the municipal and provincial cultural projects of Mantua. The Herla archive is the most important project of the Mantuan Foundation and is carried out by a team of experts, once co-ordinated by Umberto Artioli.<sup>2</sup> This Mantuan project derives its name from the story of 'Herla King', one of several versions of a Nordic saga of the 'wild hunt'. Leading a 'hellish band of souls', King Herla is condemned to pursue howling wild beasts during stormy nights. This legend is also related to the origins of the mask of *Arlecchino*, a mask which has been invented by the Mantuan actor Tristano Martinelli (1557-1630). (Ferrone 2006) In fact, the lumps that once were on his black mask (remains of devilish horns) are nowadays interpreted as being connected to the Herla King legend. (Gambelli 1993)

The Herla archive does not include any pre-existing collection. It is the result of document research - which is still in progress - carried out in various geographical areas and on documents written in several languages. The aim of the Herla project is to collect all sorts of documents related to the spectacular events supported by the Gonzaga family at the height of their splendour (1480-1630), and to describe and record these documents in a comprehensive electronic database, available online at [www.capitalespettacolo.it](http://www.capitalespettacolo.it).<sup>3</sup>

With 'spectacular events' we mean not only theatre in the narrow sense (court theatre, *Commedia dell'Arte*, opera, Jewish theatre), but also all sorts of events which required a stage setting - such as sumptuous nuptial banquets (in which actors, dancers and musicians took part), triumphal entries, funeral celebrations, carnival masquerades

2 Umberto Artioli was professor of *History of theatre and performance* at the University of Padua. After his tragic death in 2004, the Foundation was renamed after him to pay homage to the relevance of his studies. At present the following group of researchers and archivists has been given the task of selecting and filing documents: Cristina Grazioli (University of Padua), Simona Brunetti (University of Verona), Licia Mari (Catholic University of Brescia and vice-director of the *Archivio storico Diocesano* in Mantua), Barbara Volponi, Roberta Benedusi, and Vittoria Asioli.

3 The online Herla database is updated three times a year (last update 15<sup>th</sup> July 2010 with 9338 records).

and tournaments. The great variety of spectacular typologies implies that a remarkable diversification of documentary sources needs to be examined: printed volumes of acted dramas, chronicles from other courts, payments to craftsmen who made the sceneries, legal deeds which can prove useful to reconstruct artists' biographies, and correspondences between, amongst others, the Mantua court and comedians. Names which are apparently unimportant, such as those of the intermediaries between the Gonzaga family and some actors or musicians, turn out to be important links to reconstruct artists' spectacular activity. This material, however, is scattered all over Europe: Paris, London, Madrid, Vienna, Munich, Innsbruck, Lion, Lisbon, all the Italian cities related to the Mantuan court at that time, and the Netherlands.

### Setting out the database

Three years after the beginning of the project, the Foundation started calling in researchers to collaborate in the project and collect materials outside of Mantua.<sup>4</sup> Finding good co-workers was (and still is) not easy, as they should have a basic knowledge of archival research, be able to read manuscripts and be familiar with the history of the theatre of that period.

Setting out the database and establishing criteria for filing were essential parts of our preliminary methodological concerns. To begin with, in order to establish basic practical and operational rules, a preliminary exploration was made at Mantua State Archive: about a hundred document samples representing a useful variety of typologies, or contemplating as wide a range of 'spectacular cases' as possible, were collected. These efforts were fundamental in creating an ideal cataloguing template, consisting of essential variables as well as the document as a whole.

In the Herla database, each document is recorded in Italian with a strictly archival description, a brief abstract and five keyword fields: *parole chiave* (keywords), *comici* (comedians), *persone notevoli* (noteworthy persons), *luoghi* (quoted places), *opere citate* (literary, musical and dramatic works quoted, but also tournaments subjects and scenarios). If the recorded document has any related item, the *documento padre* (father) and *documenti allegati* (attachments) fields are also filled in. Some criteria should be mentioned here: only the part of the document dealing with the history of performance is catalogued, names are not indexed (because of the high number of minor or unknown figures recorded), and the field *comici* includes only professional players (especially jesters and *Commedia dell'Arte* comedians) whereas all the other interpreters (musicians, singers, occasionally actors, et cetera) are entered in the *persone notevoli* field.

Besides the traditional fields, each record is supplied with a special definition called *struttura* (structure), and some *categorie* (categories). The *struttura* explains in detail which kind of document is recorded. This item is strictly linked with the call number of the record - the so-called *segnatura definitiva* (final call-number): a letter (varying ac-

4 In the past few years the Foundation cooperated with the following scholars: Raffaele Tamalio (the Spanish area); Otto Schindler (Wien and the Austrian area); Angela Ghinato, (the Estensi court); Marzia Maino, (Vicenza and the *Accademia Olimpica*); Federica Veratelli and Marco Prandoni (The Netherlands).

ording to the typology of the document)<sup>5</sup> and a progressive number. The categories describe the original document through a grid of terms specifically conceived for this project, in order to let the researcher compare data which are not available through traditional searching tools. All the categories conceived link fragments of evidence in a thematic route - fragments which at first sight often do not seem related.

The Herla database provides two separate search opportunities as well: a multiple field search and a search by categories. With the first option each field of the database is searchable, whereas with the second the researcher can choose one item or more from the complete list of categories. As a result of each search option, the Herla database produces a list of reports in which the entered data are shown in a particular order.

## The record report

In a dispatch sent on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October 1599 by Vincenzo Gonzaga to his ambassador Nicolò Bellone in Milan, the duke of Mantua reports about his safe return back home from his journey to Flanders. (*Herla* C4643)<sup>6</sup> The report of the record elaborated from this letter (shown in the picture) provides a closer look at the Herla archive cataloguing system and hints at a new phase of the project about the Low Countries, which will be examined in the following paragraph.

The report consists of eight different parts. The first three sections present a heading (which in this particular case is made of the beginning words of the letter, preceded by the names of the sender and the receiver) and the archival description of the recorded document. The archival fields are *luogo* (place which the document comes from), *data di inizio* and *data di fine* (precise date of the document or a likely period of time), *segnatura definitiva* (final call number), *definizione* (typology of document), *supporto* (material on which the item is written), *consistenza* (amount of papers), *formato* (size), *stato di conservazione* (state of preservation), *lingua* (language), *città di provenienza* and *segnatura originaria* (city and archive holding the original document; collection and original call number).

The report also offers a summary of the content of the document and possible notes. This summary points out that the duke of Mantua was generously hosted in Brussels by the archdukes Albert of Austria and Infanta Isabel of Spain, who familiarly dined with him during the entire period of his stay. Moreover, the new rulers of the Habsburg Low Countries organized a tournament in their palace to pay homage to their Italian guest. What is worth noticing here is that in this letter Vincenzo recalls being awarded one of the *barriera* prizes directly from the Infanta's hands.

The sixth section of the report is dedicated to the already mentioned five keyword fields. In the *parole chiave* field the researcher in general will find important

5 A (acts, legal deeds, decrees and similar); C (correspondence); I (iconography); L (literary materials such as plays or chronicles); P (payments); S (printed books).

6 In order to avoid giving too long archival references, unnecessary for the purposes of this essay (the document original call-number can be easily obtained on the Herla project on-line database), we have decided to quote only the Herla database final call-number.

references to spectacular events. In this case, the word *premio* (prize) is strictly related to a speci-

fic tournament (the *barriera*). As there are no comedians or literary works quoted in Vincenzo Gonzaga's dispatch, the field *comici* and *opere citate* are left empty, whereas in the *persone notevoli* and *luoghi* fields we find the names or titles of the people involved in the event (including sender and receiver of the letter) and all the relevant places mentioned. The seventh section is empty because there are no related items to this letter.

Finally, in the eighth section the categories associated to this particular record are shown. Among almost a hundred descriptions (subdivided into fifteen typological groups)<sup>7</sup> only two definitions can correctly identify the duke's letter: *5.1 Ingressi e visite* (Entrances and visits) and *6.8.1 Barriera* (Barrier). The first category belongs to the *Apparati cerimoniali* (Ceremonial sceneries) group and refers in particular to the honours the duke received by the sovereigns of the Low Countries. The second category belongs to the *Tipologie spettacolari* (Performance typologies) and *Armeggerie* (Arms competitions and performances) and indicates the specific kind of chivalric game which was performed.

Il Duca di Mantova a Nicolò Bellone: «Ritornassimo di Fiandra venerdì prossimo...»

<b>Luogo</b>	Mantova	<b>Data</b>	21/10/1599	
<b>Struttura</b>	1.2 Firmata dal Gonzaga	<b>Segn. Definitiva</b>	C4643	
<b>Definizione</b>	Lettera	<b>Supporto</b>	Cartaceo	
<b>Consistenza</b>	2 carte	<b>Formato</b>	A4	
<b>Stato Conserv.</b>	Buono	<b>Lingua</b>	Italiano	
<b>Città Prov.</b>	Mantova, Archivio di Stato - Archivio Gonzaga			
<b>Segn. Orig.</b>	b. 2156, cc. 521-522			
<b>Abstract</b>	Il Duca di Mantova riferisce di essere tornato dalle Fiandre il venerdì precedente in ottima salute e di essere stato trattenuto a Bruxelles per alcuni giorni dall'Arciduca Alberto e dall'Infanta Isabella. Dopo averlo ospitato nel loro Palazzo e aver sempre inagionato insieme familiarmente, i Reggenti hanno insistito perché il Duca di Mantova intervenisse in una barriera, di cui ha poi ricevuto il premio dalle mani dell'Infanta. Al momento della partenza è stato anche accompagnato mezza lega fuori città nello stesso modo in cui era successo a Colonia con l'Elettore.			
<b>Note</b>				
<b>Parole Chiave</b>	<b>Comici</b>	<b>Persone Notevoli</b>	<b>Luoghi</b>	<b>Opere Citate</b>
premio		Duca di Mantova, Nicolò Bellone, Arciduca Alberto d'Asburgo, Infanta Isabella Clara d'Asburgo, Elettore di Colonia	Bruxelles (Palazzo Reale), Colonia	
<b>Padre</b>	<b>Documenti Collegati</b>			
<b>Categorie</b>	5.1 Ingressi e visite			
	6.8.1 Barriera			

Een voorbeeld van een Herla 'record report': Herla C4643

7 1. *Attori* (Players); 2. *Itinerari attori* (Players' itineraries); 3. *Relazioni degli attori* (Players' relationships); 4. *Allestimenti di spettacoli* (Performance stagings); 5. *Apparati cerimoniali* (Ceremonial sceneries); 6. *Tipologie spettacolari* (Performance typologies) 7. *Musica* (Music); 8. *Danza* (Dance); 9. *Spettatori e cronache* (Spectators and chronicles); 10. *Drammaturgia e altro materiale letterario* (Dramas and other literary materials); 11. *Editoria* (Printed materials); 12. *Teatro ebraico* (Jewish theatre); 13. *Accademie* (Academies); 14. *Ruoli teatrali* (Theatrical lines of business); 15. *Iconografia spettacolare* (Performing iconography).

## **A new phase of the project: Vincenzo Gonzaga's first journey to Flanders**

The first stage of the project was devoted to exploring the relationships of the Gonzaga family with the German areas of the Holy Roman Empire. (Artioli en Grazioli 2005) Later we made a survey of the relationships the Mantuan rulers entertained with Flanders. The boundaries of this region were not rigidly defined: the area was conceived in its historical sense, the historical Low Countries. In the Renaissance, Dutch arts and civilization had a great influence throughout Europe. In the documents we can read how often artists made journeys to Flanders, following well-settled commercial routes or accompanying rulers. Relying on intensive teamwork between scholars of performing arts, literature, modern history, and art history, we decided to dedicate this new phase of the Herla project to 'travelling spectacles'. In order to track down any possible presence of *Commedia dell'Arte* players in the Low Countries, we started following the steps of duke Vincenzo Gonzaga in his journeys to Flanders of 1599 and 1608.

The journey from June to October 1599, leading Vincenzo Gonzaga from Mantua to Spa and afterwards to Brussels and Antwerp, was the first one to be examined specifically. The expedition is described in an interesting collection of Italian letters, which inform us about the main stages of this tour and the many public celebrations and private festivities organized by sovereigns or municipalities to pay homage to the duke. (Brunetti 2009) Though the journey was made essentially for health reasons - Vincenzo was suffering from gout and had decided to go to Spa because of the benefits of the water - it offers unexpected relevant insight into the history of performance. Combining heterogeneous information (letters, ambassadors reports, and orders for payment), it is possible to outline the movements of artists and theatrical craftsmen between the European courts.

In these kinds of journeys, the duke was not only accompanied by many courtesans, but also by significant artists, like musicians and actors. At the beginning of June 1599 Vincenzo Gonzaga set off for Spa, obliging two important musicians, Francesco Rasi and the Jewish Isacchino Massarano, to come along. (*Herla* C3315, C2014) In spite of his efforts, however, he could not be joined by the comedians at his service, because they were already engaged in a series of performances in Bologna. (*Herla* C2019)

The duke of Mantua walked through Ala di Trento, Vipiteno and arrived in Innsbruck in the middle of June. Then he went through Kempten, Lindau, Costanza and Basilea, where he was given several presents by the city municipalities. Following a more formalized ceremony, in the outskirts of Nancy and Spa, Vincenzo was received by soldiers, gentlemen and noblemen. Upon his arrival in Spa, the duke started taking the prescribed cures. For nearly a month, he drank the sulphurous water and organized the second part of his journey. In August we find him in Antwerp, at Francesco Martini's, where this Italian merchant organized a private clavichord concert to pay homage to him. (*Herla* A442)

On the fifth of September 1599 the archdukes Albert of Austria and Infanta Isabel of Spain made their Joyous Entry in Brussels. (Boch 1602; Faing 1882) To celebrate them, many triumphal arches had been prepared with singers and players hidden inside. However, as reported in the letters sent by some courtesans to the court of Mantua, the arches were partly ruined by wind and rain. (*Herla* C2143) The duke



Vincenzo Gonzaga walked in a procession behind the sovereigns and then was given  
a really

warm welcome at the royal palace. (Schricks 1973; *Herla* C4643)

Before starting his journey back, on the nineteenth of September the duke of Mantua took part in the already mentioned *barriera* and by fifteenth of October he was already back in Mantua. The organization of the tournament is certainly the most important homage that the rulers of the Low Countries paid to Vincenzo Gonzaga, but the main part of the contemporary accounts discuss the event only in a couple of lines:

Paucisque post diebus ludi apparatissimi, provocatore Duce Mantuae, sunt editi. Certamen fuit pedestre in magna palatii aula celebratum.<sup>8</sup> (Boch 1602: 135)

They talk of Barriers & tilting th'one first th'other after. The Duke of Mantua wilbe one at the Barriers. (J.B. Petit to P. Halyns, Brussels 8-09-1599. In: Schricks 1973: 317)

Gilles du Faing is the only one, in his chronicle, to recall the coats lively colors and to name the prizes which the competitors were awarded. (Faing 1882: 523) But only thanks to the dispatch sent to Nicolò Bellone the connection to Vincenzo Gonzaga can be made. Comparing and combining items, once recorded in *Herla*, makes it possible to shed light on this particular moment of the duke's journey, as well as to trace another possible future research topic.

In the same way, combining different and scattered documents, we also found the first indications of Vincenzo Gonzaga's second visit to the Low Countries in September 1608 - the first visit to the 'rebel' United Provinces. Thus, new material to examine from a spectacular point of view. Before venturing on this quest, though, a preliminary contextualization of Vincenzo's journey was needed. Since we are well aware that a broad, international and interdisciplinary platform is necessary to interpret and contextualize the documents we collect, we keep relying on specialists from contiguous fields - historical literature, history, art history, music studies - for external support to *Herla*. In the case of Vincenzo's journey to the Low Countries in 1608, Marco Prandoni investigated political and diplomatic aspects.

## **The Herla project in Flanders - Part II**

### **Subtle diplomat or listless tourist? Vincenzo Gonzaga's visit to the United Provinces in 1608 (Marco Prandoni)**

Vincenzo strove for liberty with a kind of frenzy which fused the old struggle against the constrictions of his youth, his new struggle against the constrictions of the age and another, more deep and more obscure, which was the struggle of his spirit which, although led to find its solutions in sensuality, was unable to find there complete satisfaction. And like all men whom the immediate business of life dis-

8 'Some days afterwards, at the prompting of the duke of Mantua, sumptuous games were realized. A pedestrian competition was organized in a wide room of the palace.'

tracts from a knowledge of themselves to the point they can no longer recognize the origin of their own unease, he had found a way of distracting his obsession - a way which was becoming widely diffused at his period. He travelled, he changed country, horizon and company.  
(Bellonci 1947)

Maria Bellonci was an amateur historian and archive-hunter. She disclosed private documents about Renaissance noblemen and women. But Bellonci surpassed the domain of historiography, in a sophisticated balance between fidelity to the sources and fiction. An empathic way to question history in the narrative form: how it could have been, how it must have felt. Most congenial to her were strong female characters like Isabella d'Este or Lucrezia Borgia. But one of her first books was *I segreti dei Gonzaga*, in which she tried to decipher Vincenzo Gonzaga's elusive figure: born under the stars of the Contra-Reformation, raised by a strict, physically handicapped father, and as a reaction to this, eager to enjoy a free lifestyle, suitable to the child of a Habsburg mother. Hence Vincenzo's unbridled ambition, in a life full of short-lived military adventures, of art patronage (Claudio Monteverdi, Peter Paul Rubens), and of shattered dreams, which Bellonci interpreted in the light of the exhausted colors of the dying Renaissance culture in Italy.

The second visit Gonzaga paid to the Low Countries in 1608 somehow confirms this picture and seems a *mise en abîme* of the crucial role Italian princes thought they played and the small role they actually played at the time.

### **Vincenzo Gonzaga's traces in historical documents**

Vincenzo wanted to pay a visit to the 'rebel Provinces' in 1599, but in Brussels he was kindly advised not to do this, as a war was being fought. However, he let ambassadors exchange gifts and promises with Maurits near the borders. (Van Meteren 1754: 230; more extensively Bor 1601) In 1602, a new trip was undertaken, but almost immediately interrupted. (*Herla* L735) Six years later, coming from the *thermae* of Spa to Brussels, he managed to fulfil his wish. Why all this interest in the United Provinces? Vincenzo must have been attracted by Maurits' military fame: his 'modern' art of war, based on the mathematical principles learnt from Stevin, was widely known (while Alessandro Farnese, conqueror of Antwerp and Vincenzo's former father-in-law, was a symbol of traditional warfare). War prisoners told marvellous stories about Maurits' achievements and chivalry. (Van Meteren 1754: 230) And Vincenzo? He considered himself a great warrior too. He had participated in three 'crusades' against the Turks in Hungary. Those expeditions had turned out unsuccessful, and were mainly remembered for their artistic extravagance, but Vincenzo surely was no average mercenary: he had paid for everything himself, with unrivaled generosity, in the spirit of the old *noblesse d'épée*. From his military expeditions he hoped to gain prestige as a Christian prince.

Unlike the situation in 1599, the war between Spain and the United Provinces was not an obstacle: hostilities had stopped in May 1607 by a ceasefire, and since January 1608 serious negotiations in The Hague had started. The Provinces had had to endure

many defeats and deceptions in the last years, like the failed upheaval of Antwerp  
in

1605. War stagnated, and since Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603, direct support from England had ceased. Moreover, after Nieuwpoort, Maurits was not seeing eye to eye with Van Oldenbarneveldt. The Spanish delegations comprehended important figures like Richardot and Spinola.

Which route did Vincenzo follow? In archived documents - letters to Mantua from his secretary Annibale Iberti on five and thirteen September - we read that he would be joyfully welcomed in Breda and then travel to Amsterdam and Enkhuizen. (*Herla* C2155-2157) On his way back, he would visit the archdukes in Brussels, then travel forth to Paris. If we now turn to Dutch historiography, Van Meteren stops the narrative of the negotiations to insert a new paragraph about Vincenzo's visit. (Van Meteren 1763: 86-87) Even in the lay-out we are confronted with the incidental character of this visit, at least it was perceived this way. After Breda, Vincenzo proceeded, accompanied by Frederik-Hendrik, to Dordrecht, Rotterdam, Delft, Leiden (where he visited the university), Amsterdam (where he admired the ships and stayed for two days), Haarlem (where he drank heavily with the city magistrate), The Hague. Eventually, he went back to Breda, and from there to the Southern Netherlands.

Was this a planned visit? Probably not. The resolutions of the Staten-Generaal for 1608 report under the promising title *External Policy - Mantua* only that Maurits read the missive of the governor of Herenthals, announcing Vincenzo's wish to visit Amsterdam; not all of the food and wine were used. (Rijperman 1970: 507) That is all. However, the fact that it probably was a sudden decision of the duke does not mean that he was not following any political agenda, or that his visit was not used in the Provinces for any political purposes.

To start with the latter, in the Herla-documents we read that Vincenzo was welcomed by knights all along the way to Breda and by artillery shots and festivities in the city: the House of Orange certainly wanted to put emphasis on rituals which were widespread among ruling houses. (Bellina 2005) This way they could stress their quasi-monarchal pretensions in front of a representative of the Habsburg nobility and uphold the juridical claim of the United Provinces to be a sovereign state, at the moment when precisely this was at stake.

As for Vincenzo's motives and attitude to this visit, two remarks in Van Meteren's short report seem worth noticing: first of all, even though the duke had been pushed to insist on the Truce, he said he would not interfere with the negotiations. Secondly, he travelled hastily throughout the land, not paying much attention to anything he was shown. Van Meteren finds this visit difficult to interpret. And indeed: why so much hurry if he did not have anything to do? Was he really just a tourist, even if quite a listless one?

### **Looking behind the scenes: a French diplomat**

To find an answer to these questions, we must consider the political situation of Italy in those days. The Italian peninsula was fragmented in a mosaic of states, that mostly fell under Habsburg control after the Treatise of Cateau-Cambrésis (1559). Mantua needed the protection of Habsburg against Savoy and France, and the Habsburgs needed access to the two Mantuan 'doors to Italy': Monferrato and Mantua, from

which the Spanish troops had to pass on their way to the Netherlands, since English and Dutch

pirates had made the sea-route too dangerous. Moreover, Mantua was a crucial connection between the Austrian and Spanish branches of the Habsburgs. (Artioli en Grazioli 2005) However, the importance of the Habsburg element in Italy must not be exaggerated. Since the nineties, France raised its head again, under the rule of the freshly converted Henri IV - Hooft's Hendrik de Groot - after decades of weakness due to religious wars and dynastic instability. Many Italian states understood that the *Pax Hispanica*, however prosperous, was also suffocating. The revival of another superpower encouraged them to display a subtle diplomatic policy (Sella 1997) - this was what the Venetian Republic, the Pope, and Tuscany did, and Mantua was no exception. Vincenzo showed a growing pro-French attitude, while trying to keep good relations with the Habsburgs. He felt his dynasty was stable enough, with no impending danger of extinction in the male line. (Bertazzoli 2002: 137) Time would prove how tragically wrong he was. Clear evidence of this is the marriage of his first son Francesco to a princess of Savoy, Margherita - Savoy, under French influence, had always been an arch-enemy of the Gonzaga's - in the same year 1608.

We should not forget where Vincenzo was heading to after Brussels: Paris. The suspicion that he might have served French interests was confirmed by the letters of the French ambassador, Pierre Jeannin, to The Hague. The publication of those letters in Amsterdam in 1695 is not surprising: Jeannin was celebrated as one of the main authors of the Truce and therefore of a first international recognition of the Republic, in close cooperation with Van Oldenbarneveldt. His letters to King Henry IV are masterpieces of diplomacy. He endeavored for peace, against the stubbornness of the Spanish king Philip III, which seemed to give free play to the party of war, captained by Maurits, Zeeland and, unlike in 1648, also by a majority in Amsterdam.<sup>9</sup> Precisely the day before Vincenzo's arrival in The Hague, on September eleventh, the Staten-Generaal would decide whether to give the Spanish delegation more time or to stop the negotiations. Jeannin had found the only practicable solution to overcoming the impasse: it would be 'as if' the United Provinces were sovereign, *de facto* if not *de jure*, during the years of the Truce. That day, all international delegations gathered; Maurits was furious, and warned against the hypocrisy of the Catholics, pressing to restart the war as soon as possible. In this dramatic situation ('étant les uns et les autres pleins de colère', Jeannin 1695: 457), the decision was postponed to the day after and, because of Vincenzo's visit, eventually to the thirteenth. Luckily, Jeannin informs us about what Vincenzo did the night of his arrival. The duke saw Maurits and Spinola as well as the Staten-Generaal. He saw William the Silent's wife Louise de Coligny twice, then was visited by the English and the French delegations. Jeannin was assured of Vincenzo's unshaken devotion to the king and France and gave him the 'instruction' to do whatever he could for peace. Later the same month, Vincenzo would speak to king Henry in person, in Paris.

9 On the negotiations and the role Henry IV played in them, see at least Van Houtte 1952 and Van Deursen 2000.

## Illusions and reality

Vincenzo was thus following his own political agenda (for example with the City Magistrates of Holland), coming to The Hague at a crucial moment for the negotiations, and not just touring the Netherlands. He hoped to please the French king, without displeasing the Habsburgs, since they both wanted peace. He certainly thought he played an important diplomatic role, for which he expected to be rewarded. Vincenzo's ambition was unlimited: in these very years the Mantuan diplomacy was operating, together with Paris, to pose his candidature for *Rex Romanorum*, suggesting him as the designated successor of the mentally ill, childless emperor Rudolph. Proud of their pedigree but almost excluded from the political games at a European level, Italian rulers still cherished very ambitious dreams indeed.

To conclude, how was Vincenzo Gonzaga perceived in the Provinces? Positively, according to Van Meteren and Jeannin, who record that he was welcomed warmly. Van Meteren adds that he did not look like an Italian, he could have been Dutch (Van Meteren 1763: 87). Jeannin writes to his king that Vincenzo is a wise prince, committed to a superior interest, that of Christianity against the Infidels. (Jeannin 1695: 459) This is what Vincenzo must have done, during his short visit: preach for the unity of Christianity beyond confessional divisions, in order to profile himself as the best candidate for the imperial crown. The Habsburg dominions in central Europe were highly divided along confessional lines, a situation which would escalate during the Thirty-Year War. The diplomats were fond of this extravagant duke, who seemed to have sprouted from a glorious gone-by past, and genuinely admired him. The day after, they probably forgot about him. But this is moving into Maria Bellonci's domain: historic speculation.

Further research within the framework of the Herla project, moving beyond the political-diplomatic domain, might bring to light which performances were organized to welcome the duke during his journey, as well as map the activities of the artists accompanying him. Another promising research field could be the role of the chambers of rhetoric ('rederijkerskamers') in the main cities of the Low Countries in organizing spectacular celebrations and their possible collaboration with Italian artists. The routes of the travelling artists can be revisited, hopefully by an international, multidisciplinary company.

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