

THESIS ABSTRACTS

“BOUNDARIES TRANSCENDED.
SISTERS OF RELIGIOUS CONFRATERNITIES IN A SMALL EARLY
MODERN TOWN IN THE SOUTHERN NETHERLANDS.”

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PH.D. THESIS, UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP, 2014.
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As one of the six examining ‘jurors’ who assessed this thesis and judged it a very worthy contribution to confraternity studies, I would like to draw attention to it at once. It is concerned with confraternities in the small town of Aalst, mainly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as partly dictated by the surviving archival evidence. Studies of confraternities for this geographical area are rare, especially in English. The thesis was well written in English, and the public defence conducted mostly in English, with direct questions and answers in that language. Explanatory addresses were made by Ellen Decraene, by the chairman, and by one of her supervisors in Dutch to the public audience of 50–60. The two external jurors, Deborah Simonton (noted for studies of women in the early modern period) and I (an Italianist) are not Dutch speakers and only very marginal readers of the language. It was noted that Italy dominates confraternity studies in the early modern period and so this becomes a touch-stone for many contributions in other areas. I was the most cited secondary author! I have some familiarity with a few writings on Netherlandish confraternities and similar organisations, and especially with the work of Paul Trio and Anne-Laure Van Bruaene (well-known to confraternity historians) and Laura Crombie (with a thesis on guilds of Archers that I examined in Glasgow), though all of them deal mostly with an earlier period than what this thesis deals with. Their work is used here, as is that of Maarten Van Dijck, who has included contributions in English in his studies of Brabant confraternities and who was another juror.

From my mainly external viewpoint, this thesis is a study that deserves to be welcomed by the wide community of confraternity scholars and by early modernists more broadly, and not just specialists of the southern Netherlands. It is a major study of the presence and roles of women in confraternities and the largest women-focused study I have encountered. It is a rare study of confraternity funding, provided primarily by collections and private contributions (some coming from major identified women donors). It should also attract interest from those considering rural-urban migration patterns in the later eighteenth century. Ellen Decraene engages with current debates on the meaning of, and impact of “Social Capital” and

related socio-economic developments using strong statistical evidence to undermine several theories about social impact and benefits. She argues (admitting to her surprise, given her original research starting-point) that confraternity membership and activity contributed little in terms of social capital. Arguing instead for the major importance of religious motivations, she stresses that some well-known views, such as those of Michel Vovelle, about the decline of religious pre-occupations and the growth of secularisation in the later eighteenth century need qualification, at least in the case of women. Her comparative analyses include a good range of studies on English and French developments, as well as Italian (when written in English).

One fascinating and surprising aspect of this study is that Aalst, with a population ranging from 5000 to 8000 persons by the late eighteenth century, had only one parish church, St Martin's. Two outside villages were also part of the parish. In Decraene's period the town was home to ten religious brotherhoods, thirteen craft guilds, two Chambers of Rhetoric, and two Shooting Guilds. They were allocated 23 chapels and altars, with some having to share altars. Most religious brotherhoods were post-Tridentine creations. Very little is known of pre-Tridentine confraternities. The parish priest was on the executive board of all the confraternities, but it is unclear how much support he received from secular priests or members of religious orders (though Jesuits and Dominicans had promoted some confraternities). Given space problems, questions arise, as admitted, as to how many confraternity members were actively attending masses and how many passive members engaged in private devotions. Given the archival materials that survive, Decraene concentrated on seven confraternities, those of Saint Catherine (founded 1503), of the Holy Rosary (1610), of Saint Barbara (1632), of the Holy Trinity (1664), of the Faithful Souls (1699), of the Holy Death Struggle (1720), and of the Holy Altar (1742). Her approaches are dictated by the types of sources available, especially by the lists of members joining, wills, house taxes, inventories, accounts, population censuses, a few books of resolutions, and statutes. What one misses are records of board meetings, personal testimonies, and information from outside sources such as by the archbishop of Malines or by the Jesuits (though an occasional intervention is found). Many graphs and tables are included in the thesis on membership, funding, expenditure, the relative wealth of members, and so forth.

Confraternities were very popular and some could have thousands of members. Most town dwellers must have been members of at least one confraternity. In the wake of population changes in the later eighteenth century immigrants were allowed to join, though seemingly not immediately, as a way of helping them to integrate into urban society (as seen in some Italian cities). Most of the time the majority of members were women, except in the confraternities of the Holy Altar and of Saint Catherine. The Confraternity of the Faithful Souls, which had the highest percentage of

female members, was among the smallest and seemed to require the most time for collective devotions. Although women were often the majority, they were not, as one would expect, board members (though they could vote for members, and a widow might briefly continue a husband's work in the confraternity). No female officers for a female sub-section existed, as was instead the case in some Italian confraternities. Many women were single, widowed or never-married when they joined, and some were classified as 'religious' (presumably members of a Third Order). When it came to gift-giving, single women tended to help other un-married women. Women are shown choosing confraternities different from those where their husbands and other relatives were enrolled, apparently in an effort to exercise their own devotional freedom. Processions that included both sexes were fairly common, sometimes occasioning conflicts over precedence, as one would expect. St Barbara's annual city procession seems to have been the most impressive. In Aalst confraternities seem not to have been involved in the teaching of Christian Doctrine or in regular poor relief. The Confraternity of the Holy Trinity assisted enslaved Christians. Some evidence points to the presence of lending and borrowing between confraternity members, especially from richer board members to less wealthy ones. The numbers of Masses recited in confraternities were very variable. For some confraternities records allow a detailed study of sources of income, for example, of income from regular and irregular collections, gifts, entrance fees. To my surprise little came from investments, whether in urban or land property, until the late eighteenth century.

This is clearly a wide-ranging and important thesis that provides advance notice of what will become an influential book. All jurors were enthusiastic about the thesis, though inevitably we all had suggestions on what might be added, if only more primary materials could be located! We all provided a few pointers and encouraged the student to turn the thesis quickly into a public book. The thesis included many good illustrations. It was printed in a very limited number of copies. One such copy is accessible in the University of Antwerp library.

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