Gift-Giving and the Political Agency of Mary of Hungary during her Governorship in the Low Countries (1531 – 1555)

Maxim HOFFMAN

Abstract
This article examines the political, cultural, and emotional dimensions of gift-giving during the governorship of Mary of Hungary, governor-general of the Low Countries from 1531 to 1555, focusing in particular on her exchanges with her sister Eleanor of Austria, queen of France. Gifts constituted a crucial instrument of dynastic governance within the Habsburg polity. Far from being merely ceremonial or affectionate tokens, these objects operated as subtle yet powerful tools of communication, negotiation, and political positioning. Through an analysis of correspondence between the sisters, financial accounts, and ambassadorial reports, this study shows how Mary deployed a wide range of gifts to influence diplomatic relations between the Habsburg and Valois courts. Gift-giving offered a channel of interaction that was less suspect than formal diplomatic missions, particularly in times of war. It enabled Mary to soothe Eleanor's precarious position at the French court while also allowing her to articulate political statements independently of her brother, Emperor Charles V. Special attention is devoted to gifts associated with the hunt, through which Mary projected authority and engaged in a symbolic duel with the king of France, Francis I. Moreover, by contextualizing these numerous exchanges within a broader network linking Habsburg family members across Europe, Mary's central role as an intermediary and information broker within the dynasty is highlighted. Ultimately, this article substantiates earlier research showing that early modern gift culture was not a peripheral courtly display but an essential mechanism of female political agency and dynastic statecraft in sixteenth-century Europe.

Keywords: gift-giving, governance, agency, court culture, Low Countries, Netherlands, France, Habsburg, Valois, Mary of Hungary, Eleanor of Austria

Introduction

In the winter of 1539 – 1540, King Francis I invited Emperor Charles V to travel with him through France. The French king knew that the emperor wished to go from Spain to Ghent in the Low Countries in order to suppress the revolt that had broken out in that city.[1] Although the French and Habsburg rulers had only recently laid down their arms, both now recognized the mutual advantages of staging such a joint journey.[2] For the emperor, it offered an opportunity to cultivate the image of a virtuous prince—one who was celebrated in the realm of his former archenemy with ceremonial

[1] KNECHT, R. J.: Charles V's Journey through France, 1539 – 1540. In: *Court Festivals of the European Renaissance: Art, Politics and Performance*. Eds.: MULRYNE, J. R. – GOLDRING, E. London 2017, pp. 153 – 170; KNECHT, R. J.: 'Haulse (Paris), haulse bien hault ta porte.' The Entry of the Emperor Charles V into Paris, 1540. In: *Renaissance Reflections: Essays in Memory of C.A. Mayer*. Eds.: SMITH, P. M. – PEACH, T. Paris 2002, pp. 85 – 105.

[2] LE PERSON, X.: A Moment of 'Resverie': Charles V and Francis I's Encounter at Aigues-Mortes (July 1538). In: *French History*, Vol. 19, 2005, No 1, pp. 1 – 27.

entries as if he were the king himself. For Francis, the event served as a charm offensive, intended to persuade the emperor to renounce his rights to the Duchy of Milan. The occasion thus quickly turned into a major propaganda spectacle for both crowns. Within a matter of weeks, a variety of pamphlets were printed across Europe to commemorate the ceremonial entries in cities such as Poitiers, Orléans, and Paris, while the diplomatic community looked on in astonishment at this remarkable display of amity.

Francis's participation in the journey, however, had appeared most uncertain, as he had been seriously ill only a few weeks before the emperor's arrival in France. Had it not been for the intervention of the king's wife, Eleanor of Austria, and her sister Mary of Hungary, governor-general of the Low Countries, the journey might have unfolded very differently and been perceived quite differently across Europe. In October 1539, Eleanor worriedly wrote to Mary that her husband "is unable to ride on horseback and avoids the litter because he cannot have company in it." She therefore appealed to Mary to "obtain the carriage of the late Lord of Nassau, which is said to be remarkably suitable," adding that she hoped it would arrive "before the emperor's coming, so that the king, if he is able to, may make use of it."[3] In late November 1539, a "shining coach," drawn by four black Hungarian horses "of the finest quality," arrived at the French court, just in time for the journey that lay ahead.[4]

The Habsburg sisters' determination to ensure the success of the emperor's journey is scarcely surprising. As governor, Mary had weathered severe difficulties during the recent war with France and the revolt in Ghent, while Eleanor, as a Habsburg consort at the French court, had endured close scrutiny in the recent war and had been obliged to dismiss part of her household. Mary responded promptly to her sister's request. She took particular care with the Hungarian horses, equipping each one with new saddles, and she supervised the refurbishment of the coach that had belonged to the late Henry III of Nassau, prince of Orange. The woodwork was repaired where necessary, the exterior and interior were reupholstered in black velvet, and the cushions were renewed.[5] A heavily revised draft letter in Mary's own hand further indicates that the coach could be heated—a pleasant feature, given that the imperial journey was to take place in winter:

> "And since, Madam, I have learned that you had heard there was some sort of stove within this coach, I wish to inform you of what the prince of Orange used to keep himself warm. When it was cold, he would have a good quantity of sand thoroughly heated and put into a sack, and after closing the coach, he would have the heated sack placed inside, which gave warmth as though it had been a stove. And when traveling across the fields, he would always send someone ahead to heat another sack of sand, to replace it when the first had turned cold."[6]

Mary thus devoted considerable attention to every detail of the highly symbolic gift of a carriage, which had belonged to an imperial general who once fought against the French Crown. Two points are particularly interesting to consider in this case, illustrating how Mary sought to influence the political agenda despite not being present during the journey itself. First, she wished the emperor to reach the Low Countries promptly in order to assist her in

---

[3] "*Et pour se que pour quelque tans yl ne pora aller a cheval et que la lytyere luy fache pour se quy ny peult avoyr compaygnye, j'anvoye se se present porteur pour me fayre recouvrer le charyot de feu monsieur de Nasou ce que l'on ma dyt qu'yl etet merivylyeuzement ayze [...] et afyn quy set yssy pour le tans de la venue de l'ampereur pour sy d'avanture le roy seret an dyspozycyon pour s'an servyr*". – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, October 1539 (Haus, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Vienna, LA Belgien PA (hereafter PA) 47/2, f. 222).

[4] Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, November 1539 (PA 47/2, f. 224); Archives départementales du Nord, Lille, série B (hereafter ADN, B) 2410, f. 425v – 426r.

[5] ADN, B 2410, f. 423v-425r.

[6] "*Et pour autant, madame, que ay entendu du desusdit que avois entendu qu'il y eult quelle pale dedens, vous veult bien avertir de quoy il usoit pour estre chaudement. Cant il faissoit froit, il faissoit tres bien chauffer de bonne cantité de sablon et le mestre dedens ung sac et, apres bien avoir bouclé le cheriot, le faisoit mestre bien chauffé la dedans quy donoit la chaleur come sy se fut ung palle et en allant par les champs envoiant tousjours devant pour rechauffer ung aultre sac de sablon pour resanger cant celuy se refroidisoit*". – Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, Brussels, 3 November 1539 (PA 47/1, f. 42 – 43).



Fig. 1: Marguerite de Navarre: The Coach, or the Debate of Love, f. 42v, 1541, manuscript, parchment, 20 × 15 cm. Bibliothèque et archives du château, Chantilly, Inv. No. 522. Photo: CNRS-IRHT photograph © Bibliothèque du musée Condé, Château de Chantilly

suppressing the revolt in Ghent. The French king's illness could considerably delay the entire journey, as the emperor, following the rules of courtesy, would adapt his pace to that of the king. By sending the carriage, she ensured that the French king could not use his indisposition as a pretext to prolong the journey, and consequently, made certain her brother's swift arrival. Second, if the longstanding rivalry between Charles V and Francis I were ever to be resolved, such a reconciliation would have to depend upon personal rapport and a sense of mutual obligation. What better opportunity to cultivate this than time spent together by the two rulers in the convivial setting of a shining coach, gathered around the warmth of a stove?

So, while at first glance it may seem surprising that, amid the many pressures of her governorship in the Low Countries, Mary would have devoted so much care to the preparation of gifts, such objects must be understood as an essential element of the political latitude available to dowager queens such as herself. These gifts offer a prime example of the central role she occupied within the Habsburg dynasty. In this particular case, Mary could hardly refuse Eleanor's request to send the coach to the French court. One might even be tempted to suggest that this display of Habsburg sisterly friendship and affection inspired Marguerite de Navarre when she composed *La Coche*. This secular poem recounts a debate between three unnamed ladies and Marguerite herself in a carriage over who suffers most in love, engaging with themes of courtly love while presenting an ideal of female friendship.[7] It is possible that the illuminator of the manuscript of *La Coche* drew

[7] LEUSHUIS, R.: Marguerite de Navarre's Rewriting of the Courtly Dialogue: Speaking of Love in *La Coche*. In: *French Forum*, Vol. 42, 2017, No. 3, pp. 453 – 469.

inspiration from Mary and Eleanor's gift, which must have been widely visible to the public during the imperial visit in 1539 – 1540, when he depicted a black upholstered coach drawn by four black horses.

The practice of gift-giving itself has attracted sustained scholarly attention in the past several decades. Historians such as Natalie Zemon Davis have interrogated the nature and purpose of the gift, the expectations of reciprocity it entailed, and the symbolic language and economy through which gifts articulated authority, secured loyalty, and displayed magnificence.[8] The study of material culture has proved essential to understand the political agency of queen consorts and dowagers, whether through portrait iconography, the possession and display of art, or sartorial self-fashioning.[9] Mary of Hungary's patronage of painters, for instance, has been relatively well studied. In the 1530s, she commissioned family portraits from artists such as Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen (c. 1503 – 1559) and Bernard van Orley (c. 1487/91– 1541); in the 1540s and 1550s, she mostly turned to Titian (c. 1488/90 – 1576) and Anthonis Mor (c. 1517–1577), ultimately establishing her renowned portrait gallery in the Coudenberg Palace in Brussels. In so doing, she followed in the footsteps of her aunt, Margaret of Austria, at whose court in Mechelen she had been raised.[10] Beyond questions of iconography and self-representation, however, gifts were also crucial instruments through which royal women shaped reputations, structured patron–client relationships, and commented upon or influenced policies. Through gifts, queens played an indispensable role in maintaining amicable relations between rulers.[11] Such direct political objectives are clearly tangible in the example of the coach gift in November 1539.

The gifts procured and distributed by Mary of Hungary during her governorship in the Low Countries from 1531 to 1555 served multiple, overlapping purposes. First, she cultivated an established practice of exchange with the French court, particularly in relation to the hunt, through which she asserted her expertise in this quintessentially noble male pursuit. Second, the numerous gifts connected to other aspects of courtly life reveal her role as a key broker within the Habsburg monarchy—not merely as an informational conduit linking the territories of a composite empire with its ruling dynasty, but also as a guardian of familial bonds, attentive to the welfare of her relatives. Third, the reputation she fashioned through these exchanges enabled her to intervene in the political sphere more directly than has hitherto been acknowledged, influencing the direction of policy under an emperor who was frequently absent from the Low Countries. As Felicity Heal concluded in her book on early modern gift exchange, "competition and communication with other sovereigns was mediated through gift-giving when conflict could be avoided."[12] This observation also holds true for the period and region under discussion. The case of Mary of Hungary strongly suggests that her carefully calibrated gift strategies functioned as a powerful means of countering and subtly challenging her principal political rivals.

A comprehensive monograph on the full extent of Mary's gift and patronage networks remains to be written. The examples discussed here are drawn primarily from the largely unstudied correspondence

[8] ZEMON DAVIS, N.: *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France*. Oxford 2000. Also see MAUSS, M.: *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Trans. CUNNISON I. New York 1967; LIEBERSOHN, H.: *The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea*. Cambridge 2012.

[9] *Queens Consort, Cultural Transfer, and European Politics, c. 1500 – 1800*. Eds.: WATANABE-O'KELLY, H. & MORTON, A. London 2017; *The Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe*. Eds.: CRUZ, A. J. – SUZUKI, M. Urbana 2009; *Women at the Burgundian Court: Presence and Influence*. Eds.: EICHBERGER, D. – HÜSKEN, W. N. – LEGARÉ, A. M. Turnhout 2010.

[10] CAUCHIES, J. M. – DOCQUIER, G.: *Marie de Hongrie. Art et pouvoir à la Renaissance*. Mariemont 2025; *Mary of Hungary. Renaissance Patron and Collector. Gender, Art and Culture*. Ed.: GARCÍA PÉREZ, N. Turnhout 2020; EICHBERGER, D. – BEAVEN, L.: Family Members and Political Allies: The Portrait Collection of Margaret of Austria. In: *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 77, 1995, pp. 225 – 248.

[11] SOWERBY, T.: Early Modern Queens Consort and Dowager and Diplomatic Gifts. In: *Women's History Review*, Vol. 30, 2021, No. 5, pp. 723 – 737.

[12] HEAL, F.: *The Power of Gifts. Gift-Exchange in Early Modern England*. Oxford 2014, p. 216.

with her sister, Eleanor of Austria, for whom gifts functioned par excellence as a means of maintaining contact with her family during her time as queen-consort in France. This sisterly correspondence reveals Mary's meticulous attention to the personal dimensions of gift exchange and her direct involvement in its organization. Their letters thereby offer a valuable perspective on the scope of Mary's political agency beyond the formal arenas of her exchanges with the emperor.[13]

Gifts for Hunting and Hunting for Gifts

In historiography, Mary of Hungary is often described as a "masculine huntress." Contemporaries praised her stamina in the saddle and her prowess as an equestrienne, while ambassadors repeatedly reported on her passionate and highly skilled engagement in the hunt. She inherited a rich Habsburg-Burgundian hunting tradition. Several of her forebears were accomplished hunters, including her aunt Margaret of Austria, while her grandmother, Mary of Burgundy, died as the result of a hunting accident in 1482. Already during her years in Austria and Hungary, Mary herself was constantly concerned with the management of game stocks. After her appointment as governor of the Low Countries, her correspondence with the emperor regularly referred to the hours she spent pursuing quarry, and she did not conceal her displeasure when she failed to deliver the final blow herself. Her reputation as a huntress is also reflected in contemporary iconography. Scholars have (quite convincingly) suggested that she was involved in commissioning the tapestry series *The Hunts of Maximilian*, designed by Bernard van Orley and Jan Tons. This twelve-piece cycle, representing the months of the year and completed between 1530 and 1533, may include her likeness: in the month of April, a female figure shown from behind with a falcon on her wrist has been identified as Mary; likewise, the unusually masculine depiction of a mounted female figure in the month of July has also been interpreted as representing her.[14]

It is therefore not surprising that many gifts connected with hunting were exchanged. Hunting was, above all, a social event at court; it was never practiced alone. It involved not only the immediate court but also the wider aristocracy, functioning as a form of elite sociability. Exchanges of hunting birds with nobles such as Adrien de Croÿ were common in the Low Countries. Leading noble figures with whom Mary regularly hunted were given prestigious offices related to the hunt. Antoine de Croÿ, lord of Sempy, was given the title "Grand Veneur" of Flanders and "Chevalier d'honneur" to Mary of Hungary, while Henry III of Nassau was "Grand Veneur" of Brabant.[15] Mary also acquired an international reputation for the expertise of her hunting staff and the quality of her techniques. Her knowledge was widely sought and highly valued as a diplomatic gift. This applied to the two principal forms of sixteenth-century hunting: *chasse au vol* (falconry), conducted with birds of prey, and *chasse à courre* (venery), conducted with hounds.

In particular, Mary developed considerable expertise in falconry. Her birds of prey were acquired in several ways. Many came through connections with German territories. The Duke of Prussia, for example, sent large numbers of falcons throughout Europe; during her governorship in the Low Countries, Mary received 191 peregrine falcons in twenty-three separate consignments.[16] Family members also regularly sent birds, as recorded in accounts and correspondence. In 1539, her broth-

[13] Where possible, the gifts exchanged between the sisters have been corroborated with information from the financial accounts of the emperor's general-receiver and of Mary's treasurer, as well as from correspondence of the imperial ambassadors in France.

[14] NIEDERMANN, C.: Marie de Hongrie et la chasse. In: *Marie de Hongrie. Politique et culture sous la Renaissance aux Pays-Bas*. Eds.: FEDERINOV, B. – DOCQUIER, G.; Mariemont 2008, pp. 115 – 123; GORTER-VAN ROYEN, L.: *Maria van Hongarije, regentes der Nederlanden*. Hilversum 1995, pp. 287 – 304; SCHNEEBALG-PERELMAN, S.: *Les chasses de Maximilien*. Brussels 1982, pp. 41 – 43.

[15] Adrien de Croÿ to Mary of Hungary, Roeulx, 25 October [undated] (Archives générales du Royaume, Audience 119, f. 152 – 153).

[16] KNABE, G.: Beizjagd und politische Falkengeschenke in vier Jahrhunderten beim Deutschen Ritterorden in Preussen und dem späteren Herzogtum Preussen (1226 – Anfang 17. Jahrhundert). In: *Deutscher Falkenorden*, 1962, pp. 22 – 27.

er Ferdinand sent Mary twelve birds described as "blancbois," probably white gyrfalcons, considered the finest among falcons.[17] Mary also collected birds herself in two ways: Falcons were captured during migration as they passed through Brabant and the Low Countries, while her falconers were dispatched as far as Scandinavia to procure them; some of her men resided there almost permanently.[18] Her experience in training falcons was widely acknowledged. Several princes sent their own falconers to the Low Countries to exchange expertise at her court on the taming and handling of birds. Brabant falconers, in particular, enjoyed a strong reputation.

Most notably, Mary established an active exchange of birds with the French court. Between 1531 and 1548, evidence from the accounts of Emperor Charles's general receiver, from the treasurer of Mary's household, and from the correspondence among Mary, her sister Eleanor of Austria, and Francis I, indicates that such exchanges took place every year, and often several times annually. The presence of Eleanor must have intensified this interaction; after her departure from France in 1548 (a year after Francis died), their exchanges declined markedly. Letters from almost every year have survived in which Eleanor thanked Mary for birds sent either to her or to the king. In 1533, she wrote: "I have presented to the king the birds which it pleased you to send me. He has been most pleased with them and found them entirely to his satisfaction. He told me that he is wholly at your command and bears you such affection that, in all matters that may concern you personally, you will always find him your true good brother and friend."[19] In November 1538, shortly after Mary's visit to the French court at Compiègne, Eleanor informed her sister that "the king found the ten birds greatly to his satisfaction, and he and I were no less sorry than you were that you were no longer in our company." Dozens of similar letters testify to the diplomatic value of these gifts in affirming bonds of friendship.[20] Moreover, Mary's emotional attachment to her birds is evident from the official instructions she sent in 1534 to the imperial ambassador in France, requesting that the king's falconers and French noblemen be informed of the loss of one of her young gyrfalcons, which had possibly flown across the border. The ambassador replied that every effort would be made to recover it, adding that it would be helpful to know whether it was a wild bird and what it looked like, so that, should anyone attempt to conceal it and remove the jesses, it might still be recognized.[21]

The accounts further record regular payments to the emperor's grand falconer, Adolf van der Aa, and other falconers for their journeys to France. In 1535, Van der Aa transported twenty birds of prey that the queen sent as a gift in the emperor's name. In 1537, he again carried twenty birds brought from Norway (seven gyrfalcons, five male gyrfalcons, and eight sakers), while in 1539, further expenditures were recorded for nine gyrfalcons, five white gyrfalcons, four male gyrfalcons, a heron falcon, and ten sakers.[22] When Van der Aa arrived at the French court in December 1537, Eleanor informed Mary that she had delivered the birds to the king and immediately dispatched Van der Aa back to report on developments at court: "It will give you no less contentment that it gives me to know the good news, and on this

[17] ADN, B 3362, f. 123v.

[18] ADN, B 2404, f. 403r.

[19] "*J'ay presanté, madame, les auzyaulx au roy qu'yl vous a pleu m'anvoyer desquelx yl l'a esté trays contant et les a trouvé fort a son contentement. Yl m'a dyt qu'yll et tant a votre commandement et qu'yl vous porte ungne telle amytyé que de ce qu'yl vous touchera partyculyerement vous le trouverés tousjours votre vray bon frere et amy*". – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, second half 1533 (PA 47/2, f. 115).

[20] Eleanor to Mary of Hungary: April 1537 (PA 47/2, f. 168); Spring 1539 (PA 47/2, f. 200, 203); c. 1540 (PA 47/2, f. 134); December 1541 (PA 47/2, f. 240); Folambrey, 2 December 1545 (PA 47/2, f. 155); 17 November 1546 (PA 47/2, f. 283). Some mentions by the imperial ambassadors for instance: Jean Hannart to Charles V, Vendôme, 7 December 1534 (Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Vienna, Frankreich, Diplomatische Korrespondenz (hence FDK) 7, f. 97 – 104); François Bonvalot to Mary of Hungary, Blois, 14 March 1541 (FDK 9, f. 1r).

[21] Jean Hannart to Mary of Hungary, Rouen, 28 April 1535 (FDK 8, f. 42 – 43).

[22] ADN, B 2398, f. 396v, f. 450r; ADN, B 2410, f. 423r, f. 379r & 425r; ADN, B 2418, f. 266v; ADN, B 2404, f. 365v.



Fig. 2: Jakob Seisenegger: Portrait of Emperor Charles V with a hunting dog, 1532, oil on canvas, 231 x 149 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna, Inv. No. GG A114. Photo: KHM-Museumsverband

occasion I have immediately dispatched the present bearer Van der Aa to inform you."[23]

Such exchanges also enabled Mary to renew her own stock. In 1543, Eleanor wrote that the king had declared Mary's birds to be "the finest he had ever seen" and had sent others in return through his own falconer, Louis Prévost de Sansac.[24] French accounts show that Sansac was actually sent to the Low Countries on several occasions: in 1531 to conduct falcons and greyhounds, and again in 1533 and 1538, sometimes also bringing hunting equipment such as nets.[25] Mary also took a keen interest in French hunting practices and sent her own hunters to observe techniques such as net hunting, in which driven game was caught in suspended nets. The following year, she received hunting nets from the French king as a gift.[26] In 1539, Francis I also presented her with crossbows, hand bows, and bolts for the hunt.[27]

Perhaps the gifts Mary most eagerly sought in return were French hunting dogs. In 1534, she dispatched to Francis her first squire, Blois, along with ten gyrfalcons and other falcons. The king was so pleased with these birds that "he resolved, in return, to send her some of his own hunting dogs, properly trained and without the need to exchange a huntsman to demonstrate their discipline and behavior."[28] That Mary devoted considerable attention to dog breeding from the moment of her arrival in the Low Countries is clear from several autograph letters to Charles, in which she reported in detail on the condition and training of two Scottish greyhounds she had had brought from England in 1532.[29] Across the Low Countries, she maintained kennels for breeding

[23] "*Je ne doulte poynt que se ne vous sera moyns de contantement que a moy de savoyr les bonnes nouvelles et a sette ocazyon, j'ey fayt partyr yncontynent se present porteur Vandegrat*". – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, December 1537 (PA 47/2, f. 182).

[24] Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, Paris, 16 November 1543 (PA 47/2, f. 142).

[25] For instance: Francis I to Mary of Hungary, c. 21/08/1538 & end November 1538, edited in POTTER, D. L.: *Inventaire des lettres missives de François Ier, roi de France (1515 – 1547)*. Paris 2025, Cour-de-France, https://cour-de-france.fr/article7051.html; MARICHAL, P.: *Catalogue des actes de François Ier*. Paris 1887 – 1908, II, p. 550, 6442; CAF VII, p. 643, 29372 & p. 701, 28463; CAF, VIII, p. 290, 32010. Sansac also received a golden chain of the queen for his efforts in 1538. – ADN, B 3361, f. 163v.

[26] FINOT, J.: *Inventaire sommaire des archives départementales antérieures à 1790. Archives civiles série B. Chambre des comptes de Lille*. Lille 1865 – 1895, VII, pp. 302 – 309.

[27] ADN, B 2410, f. 399v.

[28] " […] *pour revenge luy envoyer des syens de chasse qui seront saiges sans faire le change avec ung veneur pour monstrer la conduite*". – Jean Hannart to Charles V, Vendôme, 7 December 1534 (FDK 7, f. 97 – 104).

[29] *Correspondance de Marie de Hongrie avec Charles Quint et Nicolas de Granvelle*. Eds.: GORTER-VAN ROYEN, L. – HOYOIS J.-P. Turnhout 2009, see letters from 14 April 1532, 21 April 1532 & 16 May 1532.

and training. In mid-sixteenth-century Flanders, for example, the venery in Flandres at Eeklo (called La Maison) kept ten pairs of hounds in 1550 – 1551, which were carefully tended; Mary herself even stayed there on several occasions.[30] In Brabant, the venery of Brabant at Boitsfort in the Sonian Forest employed, according to an ordinance of 1544, twenty-three staff and maintained a pack of seventy-six dogs. As with falconry, Mary thus tried to acquire expertise in the breeding and training of hounds. This was again much admired by her contemporaries. In April 1539, Eleanor wrote with evident pride, "I shall be no less pleased to hear that you are satisfied with the pastime your dogs provide. The king is very pleased that you have trained them so well and wishes to see them hunt in your company."[31]

Mary's interest in dogs extended beyond their use in the chase to the careful breeding of new and desirable strains. Great attention was therefore paid to mating, overseen by kennel servants under her close supervision, with due regard to lineage.[32] In 1538, Mary expressed a particular desire for French white dogs, and Eleanor reported that she had done her utmost to obtain the animals Mary wanted for breeding purposes.[33] Evidently, Mary had made her preferences known more than once, for several letters record Mary thanking her sister for dogs sent from the French court or expressing anticipation of testing the newly arrived animals in suitable hunting terrain.[34] That the exchange was far from indiscriminate is clear from an episode that provoked Francis I's anger toward his kennel servants. In March 1541, the king had personally selected four large and handsome female dogs to send to Mary, together with a sizable pack. However, to his great annoyance, as he wrote, "he was unable to dispatch the female dogs after all, as the chosen animals for you had already been mated."[35]

Even more than in the case of hunting birds, the exchange of dogs revealed a personal bond between Mary and her sister. In February 1544, Mary wrote that, knowing her sister's fondness for small dogs, she was sending her "a pair of little spaniels," having heard that Eleanor's own dog had died. Notably, in the draft of her letter, Mary initially wrote not the neutral phrase that her sister's dog "had died," but emotionally that it "had gone to the paradise of dogs."[36] Shortly thereafter, there arrived at the French court "beautiful little dogs," accompanied by "some little birds that sing most beautifully in the world without opening their beaks."[37] Such affectionate and intimate gestures demonstrate that activities associated with the hunt carried genuine sentimental value. For two sisters long separated by political circumstance, the exchange of animals, whether little spaniels, falcons, or even songbirds, served not only leisurely ends but also sustained a deeply personal connection.

Gifts and Family Communication

The annual (and often even more frequent) exchange of hunting birds and dogs between Mary of Hungary and her sister Eleanor formed only one part of a much broader culture of gift-giving that sustained their relationship. These repeated contacts established an intense and continuous line of communication between the courts of the Low Countries

[30] NIEDERMANN 2008 (see in note 14), pp. 118 – 119.

[31] "*Et je ne serey moyns ayze a m'anparer que vous estes du pasetans que voz chyens vous donnent, le roy est byen ayze que vous les aves sy byen dresses et se souhede pour les voyr chaser an votre compaygnye*". – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, End of April 1539 (PA 47/2, f. 217).

[32] GORTER-VAN ROYEN 1995 (see in note 14), p. 296.

[33] Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, Amboise, 8 April 1545 (PA 47/2, f. 259).

[34] Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, Valenciennes, 24 January 1540 (PA 47/1, f. 46); Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, c. June 1540 (PA 47/1, f. 54); Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, early 1539 (PA 47/2, f. 214).

[35] François Bonvalot to Mary of Hungary, Blois, 14 March 1541 (FDK 9, f. 1r); "*Yl ne vous a paynt anvoyé les lyses pource que sette qu'yl avet choazyes pour vous ont esté semee.*"– Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, March 1541 (PA 47/2, f. 134).

[36] "*J'ay veu les petis oseaulx et petis chiens vous sont plus agreable que les grans, a ceste ocasion je vous envoie une paire de petit espaniont aiant entendu que la vostre, quy tint icy la chouche de son petit chien, [rayé: est allé au paradis des chiens] c'en est lesser morir*". – Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, Ghent, February 1544 (PA 47/1, f. 70).

[37] " […] *de petys ozyaulx quy chantent le plus jolyeman du monde sens le doyt.*" – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, Spring 1544 (PA 47/2, f. 144).

and France. On multiple occasions, important nobles and ministers acted as intermediaries. In 1539, for instance, the Lord of Corbaron, a high-ranking councillor in the Low Countries, was sent to the French queen with "un beau coffre doré" (a beautiful gilded chest).[38] In 1535, Mary instructed her secretary, Rombout Loets, to purchase six Bibles in Antwerp for her sister.[39] These have been identified as the 1534 edition of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples' French translation of the Scriptures, a version that had been censored by the Parlement of Paris a decade earlier. This gift reflected Eleanor's and her siblings' known interest in vernacular devotional reading.[40] More often, however, it was courtiers at various levels of both households who facilitated the regular circulation of presents.

Many animals were exchanged that had nothing to do with hunting. In March 1539, for example, an unnamed courtier was paid for supplying "forty herrings and other fish" to feed two sea lions transported by carriage from Brussels to the French court.[41] In the spring of 1542, Mary wrote that, having learned that the king and Eleanor had enjoyed the sea lions she had previously sent, she was dispatching new ones to each of them.[42] The gift was evidently well received, for the French king wished to train his animal personally.[43] Horses, too, were frequently exchanged, and in 1538, Francis I notably presented Mary with a giraffe.[44]

Food and drink formed another important category of gifts. Courtiers travelled back and forth bearing regional delicacies. Mary regularly sent Hungarian wine, while wine from Languedoc was often sent in return.[45] On one occasion, Eleanor thanked her sister for the Brussels beer she had received, explaining that it was particularly welcome "for a rheum I have that has forced me to leave the wine; and if I can obtain some white wine of good quality from this place, I will send it to you."[46] Especially during Lent, Mary dispatched provisions to her relatives. An account from 1545 records that her brother Ferdinand received in Vienna cartloads of tuna, salmon, eel, cod, stockfish, sprats, herring, capers, figs from Rhodes, raisins from Tarsus, nutmeg, olives, olive oil, and butter.[47] In the same year, Eleanor warmly thanked her sister for the "Lenten meat," remarking that it could not have arrived at a better time and assuring her that, following her advice, she would not eat too much of it.[48]

Clearly, Mary took a keen interest in her sister's health by giving such dietary advice. It is well known that Eleanor had fragile health. The French queen had epilepsy and was frequently afflicted by other ailments. When she endured particularly severe pains in 1545, Mary sought out possible remedies and obtained a secret recipe for a medicinal powder said to alleviate her complaints.[49] She sent it by special envoy, the Lord of Noirtour, with precise instructions regarding dosage, duration, and whether it should be

[38] ADN, B 3361, f. 185v.

[39] ADN, B 3358, f. 262v.

[40] WILSON-CHEVALIER, K.: Art Patronage and Women (Including Habsburg) in the Orbit of King Francis I. In: *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 16, 2002, No. 4, p. 520.

[41] ADN, B 2415; Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, Spring 1539 (PA 47/2, f. 204).

[42] "[…] *aiant connu que le roy et vous avons eu pour agreable quelque chien de mer que vous ay envoié par cy devant, vous en envoie par ce present porteur a chacun ung.*" – Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, Spring 1542 (PA 47/1, f. 62).

[43] "[…] *a vollu abylyer le syen luy mesmes.*" – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, Spring 1542 (PA 47/2, f. 130)

[44] ADN, B 3360, f. 166r.

[45] ADN, B 2415.

[46] "[…] *de la byere quy vous a pleu m'anvoyer laquelle je treuve fort bonne et elle n'eu seu venyr an mylyeure sayson pour ung rume que j'ey quy m'a fayt layser le vyn, et sy je puys recouvrer an se lyeu du blanc quy set bon, je vous an anvoyerey.*" – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, c. 1539 (PA 47/2, f. 128); ADN B 2410, f. 302v.

[47] ADN, B 3358, f. 252r.

[48] "[…] *byen fort de vyande de caresme quy vous a pleu m'anvoyer les quelles je trouve tan bonnes qu'yl n'est posyble de plus sy esse que croyant votre consayl je n'en manjerey poynt tant quy me sensent fayre.*" – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, Chambord, 13 March 1545 (PA 47/2, f. 258); ADN, B 2448, f. 358r.

[49] Instructions for a medicinal powder, 1545 (PA 47/2, f. 272 – 275).



Fig. 3: Bernard van Orley and Jan Tons (weaver, Willem Dermoyen): The Hunts of Maximilian. April – Bird Hunt, c. 1530 – 1533, tapestry, 455 × 587.5 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, Inv. No. OA7315. Photo: GrandPalaisRmn (Musée du Louvre)/Daniel Arnaudet

taken before or after meals.[50] Eleanor expressed complete confidence in the remedy, writing, "I desire no other recipe than that which comes from your hand, being assured that it can do me nothing but good."[51] Later letters from Mary, however, suggest that Eleanor did not always follow the prescribed regimen. Mary urged her to heed the physicians' advice and to take the necessary medicines, gently reproaching her for neglecting her health. She implored her sister to do so at least "for the love of us and of Madame l'Infante your daughter, and to relieve us of this anxiety," and even wondered whether Eleanor was still taking the powder she sent the previous year, or whether it had proved of little benefit.[52]

[50] Mary of Hungary to Noirtour, c. September 1545 (PA 47/1, f. 109); Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, Utrecht, 27 January 1546 (PA 47/1, f. 87).

[51] "[…] *ne veulx poynt aultre resepte que venyr de votre mayn estant aseuree qu'elle ne me saret fayre que byaucoup de byen.*" – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, 1 October 1545 (PA 47/2, f. 148).

[52] "[…] *veullés croire le conseil des medesin et user des preservatifs requis que cant estes en iceluy en quoy j'ay assés entendu par ceulx que par sy devant vous ay envoié visiter y faites quelque faulte; pour l'amour de nous et de madame l'infante vostre fille, et pour nous oster de ceste peinne.*" – Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, 13 December 1546 (PA 47/1, f. 91).



Fig. 4: Bernard van Orley and Jan Tons (weaver, Willem Dermoyen): The Hunts of Maximilian. July – Deer Hunt, with the Red Cloister Abbey in the Background, c. 1530 – 1533 tapestry, 438 × 588.5 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, Inv. No. OA7318. Photo: GrandPalaisRmn (Musée du Louvre)/Daniel Arnaudet

Textiles also circulated between the two courts. In 1537, having heard that Eleanor wished to "avoir quelques belles toilettes," Mary sent several fine cloths so that her sister might indicate her preferences; she promised to supply as many more as she desired.[53] In subsequent years, Eleanor appears to have placed further orders. In 1543, Mary delivered to Eleanor's treasurer "six pieces from Holland, six from Nivelles and six from Cambrai," which she described as "the most beautiful you can see."[54]

Connections were equally strong among the music chapels of the Habsburg sisters. Notably, Camilla Cavicchi has stressed the musical patronage of Queen Mary and the extent of her musical library and collections of instruments.[55] From a young age, both Mary and Eleanor had received thorough mu-

[53] Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, 17 May 1537 (PA 47/1, f. 11 – 12).

[54] Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, Mons, 15 October 1543 (PA 47/1, f. 67); "[…] *les plus belles que l'on sarét voyr*." – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, Fontainebleau, 17 December 1543 (PA 47/2, f. 251).

[55] CAVICCHI, C.: Mary of Hungary, Patron of Music. In: *Mary of Hungary. Renaissance Patron and Collector. Gender, Art and Culture*. Ed.: GARCÍA PÉREZ, N. Turnhout 2020, pp. 155 – 184.

sical instruction from Henri Bredemers, organist in the service of Philip the Fair. Both were proficient on several instruments, including the harpsichord and the lute.[56] In a letter written when she was about fourteen, Eleanor recommended to her aunt Margaret of Austria a certain Gillequin de Cuper, "who teaches my sisters and me to play the lute and gives us much pleasure."[57] Several such interesting gifts were exchanged that relate to music. In the accounts of 1539 by Mary's treasurer, we find that Roger Pathie, an organist from Cambrai, traveled to Paris; expenses were recorded for the transport of "a small keyboard instrument used daily in the queen's chamber."[58] Pathie had been active at the French court since 1529, together with his brother Jean, and from 1531 served Queen Eleanor. In 1535, however, he entered Mary's service as organist and later became a prominent maître d'hôtel, accompanying her to Spain in 1556.[59] His career illustrates the close musical ties between the sisters' households, including having musicians like Pathie who must have traveled regularly between the courts to perform or exchange instruments. A letter from 1534 by the imperial ambassador Jean Hannart further demonstrates that musical compositions were also exchanged. Queen Eleanor instructed the ambassador to write to Mary that whenever she possessed in her chapel "some motet or other piece that is exquisite and remarkable in music, that she may send it to her, and she will do the same for her." Hannart added a specific request: Eleanor wished Mary to send her "a Requiem Mass composed by Jossequin,"[60] almost certainly referring to *Nymphes des bois* by Josquin des Prez, written in 1497 to commemorate the death of Johannes Ockeghem.[61]

A similarly lively reciprocity characterized all matters relating to horticulture. Numerous letters and household accounts record the arrival of courtiers bearing flowers, which Eleanor admired so greatly that she declared she "wished to begin having a tapestry made" after their designs.[62] Gardens were thus not merely ornamental spaces but sources of artistic inspiration and shared aesthetic interest. This mutual engagement became particularly evident in the ambitious horticultural program that Mary developed for Binche Palace in Hainaut. The gardens formed a central element in the conception of this Renaissance residence, the construction of which began in 1545: three distinct gardens were planned, each integral to the overall architectural vision. Mary even sent Eleanor a wooden model of Binche Palace, presenting it as a worthy rival to Fontainebleau and signaling the launch of her extensive building campaign. The galleries and sculptural program deliberately evoked a Roman villa and drew inspiration from the Italian Renaissance. Mary even sought to acquire molds that Primaticcio had made for Francis I. Sculptor Leone Leoni was dispatched to Paris to negotiate their transfer; he appealed directly to Primaticcio, and eventually, Francis's son, Henry II, presented the molds to Mary as a gift. Among the works reproduced was a figure of Cleopatra, often interpreted as an image of a powerful female ruler, an appropriate model for a queen like Mary.[63]

It was logical that the gardens at Binche Palace drew inspiration from the Mediterranean-inflected program at Fontainebleau. It was an ambitious project, which envisaged transforming two of the principal gardens into refined botanical collections

---

[56] CAZAUX, C.: *La musique à la cour de François Ier*. Paris 2002, pp. 59.

[57] "[…] *quy aprent mes seurs et moy a juer du leu et nous fait du passetams beaucoup*." – Eleanor of Austria to Margaret of Austria, c. 1512 (ADN, B 18916, No. 35340).

[58] ADN, B 3361, f. 290v.

[59] CAZAUX 2002, pp. 105, 141. Futher reading: KELLMAN, H. (ed.): *The Treasury of Petrus Alamire: Music and Art in Flemish Court Manuscripts 1500 – 1535*. Ghent 1999.

[60] "[…] *quant aurez quelque mottet ou autre piece en vostre chapelle qui soit exquiz et singulier en musicque que luy veulliez envoyer et elle vous fera le semblable* [...]. *Elle desire aussi que luy veulliez envoyer une messe de requiem composee par Jossequin*." – Jean Hannart to Mary of Hungary, Loches, 4 November 1534 (FDK 7, f. 74 – 75).

[61] HUND, M.: Josquin's Nymphes des Bois, Unveiling the Hidden Layers. In: *Tijdschrift van de Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis*, Vol. 74, 2024, pp. 93 – 139.

[62] "[…] *an veulx conmancer pour an fayre ungne tapycerye*." – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, 1541 (PA 47/2, f. 24 5); ADN, B 3356, f. 231v.

[63] WILSON-CHEVALIER 2002 (see in note 40), p. 524.

featuring Mediterranean species, while a third, larger enclosure was designed as a fruit garden (*verger*).[64] Eleanor assured her sister that she would gladly "send plants from the vineyards of the cru of Fontainebleau." Yet when King Francis learned of Mary's intention, he specified that the vines from his estate were not to be planted on flat ground but only on slopes, where they could receive sufficient midday sun.[65] Mary, however, was confident that the site at Binche would accommodate such requirements. The palace gardens included sheltered positions protected from winter winds, and heated structures capable of sustaining delicate plants during colder months. In February 1547, she therefore requested no fewer than two thousand vines, specifying that they were to be "white and clairet," and adding playfully that she hoped her sister would soon be able to visit so that, "in my hermitage, at the season of its perfection, I will let you be the judge of it, madam."[66] Eleanor could hardly contain her excitement. Her marshal of the lodgings had informed her that the palace at Binche was "among the finest and best arranged that one could see," and the queen continued to praise her sister "because a good spirit like yours will always ensure that everything is done well."[67] Eleanor soon confirmed that the king had ordered the requested quantity of vines from Fontainebleau to be dispatched. In addition, the French queen sent vines from the more northerly royal estate of Coucy, "which are the best of this region and most suitable for the land where you wish to plant them," as well as additional white and clairet varieties from around Paris.[68] In this sense, the appearance and botanical character of the gardens at Binche were also shaped to a considerable degree by Eleanor's contributions.

It is somewhat regrettable that the surviving correspondence between the Habsburg sisters, despite the rich array of gifts described above, contains almost no references to paintings. Only in a letter of February 1543 does Mary thank Eleanor for "the canvas that has pleased you to send me, which I found very well made."[69] The artist is not identified, but the work may well have originated from among the painters active under the patronage of the French court and Eleanor herself, perhaps Corneille de Lyon or Antoine Trouvéon.[70] Given the intensity of exchange in music and horticulture, it is tempting to assume that artistic contacts were likewise more substantial than what can be reconstructed based on the surviving documentation.

Taken together, these many examples, ranging across gardens, music, books, animals, textiles, food, and medicine, demonstrate that gifts functioned as a principal medium of communication. Written correspondence between sisters residing at politically opposed courts could easily arouse suspicion. Gifts,

---

[64] CUPPERI, W.: Sculptures et jardins dans le palais 'à l'Antique' de Binche: un programme iconographique précis? In: *Marie de Hongrie. Politique et culture sous la Renaissance aux Pays-Bas*. Eds.: FEDERINOV, B. – DOCQUIER, B. Mariemont, 2008, pp. 180 – 183.

[65] "[…] *de vous anvoyer des plantes des vyngnyes du creu de Fontaygnyeblyau, ayant seu le roy que j'an vouleye recouvrer, yl m'a dyt quy vous les veult an voyr et que je sache la quantyté qu'yl vous an fault ousy vous fayre antandre que les vyngnyes de son creu ne veult poynt estre plantees an plat peys mes la ou yll y a coutyaulx et que le mydy hy donne*." – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, Saint-Germain, 5 February 1547 (PA 47/2, f. 287 – 288).

[66] "[…] *en mon ermitage en saison de leur perfecsion je vous en face, madame, le juge*. – Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, 22 February 1547 (PA Belgien 47/1, f. 93 – 94).

[67] "[…] *qu'yl et des plus hyaulx et myeulx ordonnés que l'on saret voyr ung bon esperyt conment le votre fera tousjours toute chouzes byen faytes*." – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, Saint-Germain, 5 February 1547 (PA 47/2, f. 287 – 288).

[68] "[…] *quy sont de mylyeurs de se peys et plus a propos pour la terre ou vous les voules planter pour la conformyté du peys de pardela.* [...] *de au tour de Parys blans et cleres des mylyeurs quy hy sont*." – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, February-March 1547 (PA 47/2, f. 289 – 290).

[69] "[…] *du canevas qu'il vous a pleu m'envoyer, lequel j'ay trouvé bien a propoz*." – Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, Brussels, 24/02/1543 (PA 47/1, f. 66).

[70] WILSON-CHEVALIER, K. – JORDAN-GSCHWEND, A.: L'Épreuve du mécénat: Alienor d'Austriche, une reine de France effacée? In: *Les femmes et les arts à la Renaissance. Patronages et mécènes d'Anne de France à Catherine de Médicis*. Ed.: WILSON-CHEVALIER, K. Paris 2007, pp. 341 – 380; JORDAN-GSCHWEND, A.: Antoine Trouvéon, Un portraitiste de Leonor d'Autriche récemment découvert. In: *Revue de l'Art*, Vol. 159, 2008, No. 1, pp. 11 – 20; JORDAN-GSWHEND, A.: Ma Meilleure Soeur. Eleanor of Autria, Queen of Portugal and France. In: *Los inventarios de Carlos V, la familia imperial*. Ed.: CHECA CREMADES, F. Madrid 2010, pp. 2545 – 2598.

by contrast, offered a regular and tangible means of sustaining contact. Through these objects and living tokens, Mary and Eleanor maintained what must have been at least monthly (often deeply) personal exchanges, weaving sisterly affection across the diplomatic divides of European politics.

Politicizing Gifts

The intense contact maintained through hunting and the exchange of gifts was far from incidental. Scholars have, for example, long observed that falconers frequently served not only as huntsmen but also as messengers and informal diplomats. This was an established practice at European courts.[71] On the one hand, gifts were sent regularly with the explicit aim of fostering an "accroissement des amitiés" (an increase in friendship).[72] In many of the letters and accounts cited above, the intention to strengthen amity is stated quite openly. Yet Mary of Hungary also deliberately used gifts with a more targeted political purpose, particularly to alleviate the often delicate position of her sister Eleanor at an intrinsically hostile French court. In November 1532, the imperial ambassador Jean Hannart reported that, after receiving birds from Mary, Francis I remarked how much he would welcome her presence at his court to visit her sister, "because she loves hunting and falconry so much, as he himself does." Hannart continued that "as soon as the birds were presented to the king in the morning at his rising, he took the gyrfalcon in his fist and immediately went to show it to the queen, who was still in bed, making a great display of it before her."[73] Such gestures reveal how gifts could serve directly to signal goodwill and to reinforce Eleanor's standing. Throughout the years



Fig. 5: Joos van Cleve: Portrait of Eleanor of Austria, 1531, oil on panel, 35,5 × 29,5 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna, Inv. No. GG 6079. Photo: KHM-Museumsverband

1531 – 1535, their correspondence also repeatedly mentioned the possibility of a personal meeting between the sisters.[74] The emperor was generally reluctant to approve such an encounter. Nevertheless, during his long absence leading the Tunis campaign in 1535, when communication was delayed for months between Francis and his queen, Mary seized the initiative and arranged a meeting with Eleanor at Cambrai in August.[75]

[71] Van den ABEELE, B.: *La fauconnerie dans les lettres françaises du XIIe au XIVe siècle*. Louvain-la-Neuve 1990, pp. 74 – 91.

[72] Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, Mons, 23 November 1532 (PA 47/1, f. 1 – 2)

[73] "[…] *pource qu'elle ayme tant la chasse et la volerie, ainsi qu'il fait luy mesmes; si tost que iceulx oyseaulx luy furent presentez du matin a son lever, il print le gerfault sur le poing et l'ala souldain monstrer a la royne sa compaigne estant encoires au lit, luy en faisant grosse feste*." – Jean Hannart to Charles V, Compiègne, 21 November 1532 (FDK 4, f. 363 – 366).

[74] For instance: Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, Brussels, 17 January 1533; Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, Mons, 30 December 1533; Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, 1 July 1535 (PA 47/1, f. 3, f. 4, f. 7).

[75] HOYOIS, J.-P.: Les fantômes de la Paix des Dames. Les retrouvailles de Marie de Hongrie et d'Éléonore d'Autriche (Cambrai, Août 1535). In: *La Paix des Dames*. Eds.: DUMONT, J. – FAGNART, L. – GIRAULT, P.-G. – LE ROUX, N. Tours 2021, pp. 349 – 363; GORTER-VAN ROYEN – HOYOIS 2009 (see in note 29), passim.

Although some gifts (very often the hunting birds) were formally presented in the emperor's name, there is no evidence that Mary sought explicit permission for some of these highly symbolic exchanges. She frequently acted on her own initiative, without Charles's direct involvement. The magnificent coach presented in 1539, on the occasion of the emperor's visit to France, would almost certainly not have met with his approval. His letters at the time make clear that he desired a swift and uncomplicated passage through the territory of his former enemy, avoiding prolonged talks or negotiations—which the gift arranged by Mary and Eleanor facilitated. In this sense, gifts allowed Mary to shape circumstances conducive to political maneuvering, even if not all such initiatives bore tangible fruit.

Gift exchange was also political in another sense: it provided a discreet channel for the transmission of information and the negotiation of favors. Letters between Mary and Eleanor frequently combined personal gifts with updates on wider affairs such as the status of the Ottoman threat, developments within the Holy Roman Empire, or sensitive dynastic negotiations.[76] In 1539, Eleanor requested that her marriage treaty from her first union with King Manuel I of Portugal, to whom she had been married between 1518 and 1521, be copied. She apparently lacked a copy in France and required it for negotiations concerning a potential marriage for her daughter from that union, the Infanta Maria (1521 – 1577). Writing to Mary, she explained that she had informed both the emperor and the King of Portugal, João III, of her intentions, and that their brother, Ferdinand, also wished to see a copy of the treaty.[77] She therefore begged Mary to have the original in her possession transcribed and forwarded appropriately.[78] Mary complied promptly, having the treaty copied five times.[79] In doing so, she acted unmistakably as Eleanor's political agent and intermediary, even though Charles would later obstruct the proposed marriage, fearing damage to his relations with Portugal. Similarly, Mary regularly granted safe-conducts and other favors at Eleanor's request, sometimes in matters of high political sensitivity. In the autumn of 1537, during the war in Picardy, Claude d'Annebault was captured at the front; and Eleanor repeatedly appealed to Mary to use her influence to help her intercede for his ransom and release.[80] Such interventions were integral to the broader culture of political gift-giving.

At the same time, the envoys traveling between the courts of the Habsburg sisters often carried vital (and often highly secret) intelligence under the guise of gift exchange.[81] The timing of certain presents strongly suggests that more than material generosity was at stake. Even during periods of open war between the Habsburgs and the Valois, Mary continued to send gifts despite tightened controls. In December 1536, at the height of hostilities, the Lord of Noirtour traveled to the French queen "on imperial business of which her majesty wishes no fuller explanation to be given."[82] Accompanying him were falconers bearing eighteen birds of prey intended for Eleanor. Likewise, in November 1543, scarcely had Charles V lifted the siege of Landrecies than Mary dispatched hunting birds to France.[83] These gestures amounted to political statements: as governor-general of the Low Countries, she consistently sought to shield her provinces from the devastating consequences of renewed war with France.

[76] Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, Brussels, 13 November 1538 (PA 47/1, f. 24 – 25).

[77] Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, Mechelen, 10 September 1539 (PA 47/1, f. 38).

[78] Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, 1539 (PA 47/2, f. 123).

[79] ADN, B 2410, f. 421r.

[80] Mary of Hungary to Eleanor of Austria, Brussels, 7 October 1537 (PA 47/1, f. 16 – 17).

[81] HOFFMAN, M.: A Secret Life of Queen Eleanor of Austria: Correspondence, Courtiers and Covert Agents. In: *French History*, Vol. 39, 2025, No. 2, pp. 95 – 110; HOFFMAN, M.: Espionnage et diplomatie informelle dans les cours de Marie de Hongrie et Éléonore d'Autriche au XVIe siècle. In: *Publications du Centre européen d'Études bourguignonnes*, Vol. 65, 2025, pp. 353 – 369.

[82] "[…] *pour aucuns affaires de l'empereur dont sa majesté ne voulloit plus ample déclaration estre faicte.*" – ADN, B 2398, f. 361r.

[83] Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, Paris, 16 November 1543 (PA 47/2, f. 142).



Fig. 6: Jan van Nieulandt: The six children of Philip the Handsome and Joana of Castile, representing from left to right Ferdinand, Charles V, Isabella, Eleanor, Catherine and Mary on horseback, c. 1521 – 1526, wood engraving, 26.6 × 37.8 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Inv. No. RP-1928-138. Photo: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The political dimension of hunting gifts is sharpened further when one considers Mary's personal reputation. Her renown in the chase was so great that the French court poet Clément Marot compared her to "a chaste Diana, enemy of idleness and devoted to honorable pursuits."[84] Eleanor herself once wrote that, since Mary loved hunting and falconry as much as the French king did, she would gladly witness them together "so as to judge who performs their task best."[85] In 1538, she had occasion to do just that. The Venetian ambassador Marino Cavalli, in one report, praised Mary's political acumen and tireless governance of the Low Countries, but he also recorded a striking incident during her visit to the French court at Compiègne in November 1538, only months after Francis I and Charles V had been reconciled. He recounted:

> "One day, she gave a demonstration to King Francis, which astonished him, for while they were riding together, the king wished to place the queen on his right-hand side, but she moved toward a nearby ditch, so that there was no way for her to pass except over it. Seeing this, the queen spurred the young

[84] MAROT, C.: Cantique VI. Clement Marot à la royne de Hongrie venue en France. In: *Clément Marot, oeuvres lyriques*. Ed.: MAYOR, C. A. London 1964, p. 295.

[85] "[…] *puys que aymés au tant ses passetans de la chasse et volerye comme yl fayt, je voleroye avoyr se playsyr que de vous y voyr tout deulx pour estre juge de quy y feret myeulx son* devoyr." – Eleanor of Austria to Mary of Hungary, Paris, 25 December 1533 (PA 47/2, f. 120).

horse upon which she was riding to leap across the wide ditch, and so, riding across the fields, the king came to be on her right-hand side; but the king, not wishing to cause the queen such inconvenience, courteously allowed himself to be overtaken."[86]

Hunting parties were traditionally intended to foster collective bonds among the ruling elite, offering an informal setting in which hierarchy could be reaffirmed. Yet they also contained an inherent element of competition. Here, in this remarkable episode, Mary appears almost to have entered into a symbolic duel with Francis I. Whereas Charles V and Francis had repeatedly challenged one another to single combat to resolve their eternal conflicts, Mary enacted her rivalry through the medium she knew best: the hunt. In this light, her hunting gifts, along with her other exchanges in the arts and horticulture (as seen in her project at Binche), and the prowess these gifts advertised, may be read not merely as gestures of courtesy but as instruments in a subtle and distinctly personal political contest.

Conclusion

This article has shown the remarkable diversity of gifts ordered and procured by Mary of Hungary during her governorship of the Low Countries, with particular attention to her exchanges with her sister Eleanor of Austria, queen of France. Gifts functioned as the instrument par excellence through which Mary maintained close contact with siblings from whom she was physically separated. They enabled her to preserve familial bonds, nurture emotional connections, remain informed about personal well-being, and exchange information concerning general political affairs.

At the same time, gifts served more overtly strategic purposes. Especially during periods of war, these exchanges created opportunities to ease tensions and to improve Eleanor's position within what was, at heart, a hostile French court. The circulation of presents was far less suspect than the dispatch of official envoys or diplomats, and thus offered a discreet yet effective channel of communication. The examples discussed above also reveal Mary's extraordinary attention to detail. She concerned herself with matters as specific as the heating system of a ceremonial coach, which she considered essential to fostering rapprochement between the emperor and the French king. Her passion for and expertise in hunting were expressed in the many carefully selected breeds of dogs and birds of prey that she sent to France. These gifts did more than advertise aristocratic refinement: they projected authority and personal prowess. In this light, the symbolic contest with Francis I during the hunt at Compiègne in 1538 may be read as the culmination of a rivalry long enacted through such gift exchanges, a political statement of her own personal duel with a political rival. This was articulated independently of her brother, whose policies often caused her frustration during her tenure as governor of the Low Countries.

Mary's intense communication with Eleanor has frequently been overlooked in the scholarship about Mary. Yet it can scarcely be coincidental that in 1556 the two sisters traveled together to Spain. Their surviving correspondence reveals a close bond that was maintained over many years. Moreover, the rich material culture of their exchanges clearly underlines Mary's central position within the Habsburg family system. While the emperor was often absent in distant regions of his vast empire and negligent of familial business, Mary operated as a pivotal node in a network of information and gifts linking Habsburg family members across Europe. The numerous gifts identified here in her exchanges with Eleanor invite further comparative research. Similar patterns may well emerge in Mary's contacts with her nieces Christine of Denmark, Duchess of Lorraine, and Dorothea of Denmark, electress Palatine, as well as with her sister Catherine of Portugal or her brother Ferdinand, who became emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1556. Whether these exchanges were equally intense and richly layered remains to be determined. The substantial body of Mary's unstudied

[86] GACHARD, L. P.: Les monuments de la diplomatie vénitienne, considerés sous le point de vue de l'histoire moderne en général et de l'histoire de la Belgique en particulier. In: *Mémoires de l'Académie royale de Belgique*, Vol. 27, 1853, p. 104; GORTER-VAN ROYEN 1995 (see in note 14), p. 298.

autograph letters preserved in the archives at least suggests that there is still much to discover about the political, cultural, and emotional dimensions of her gift-giving practices.

This work was supported by SNF Sinergia Grant No. 10000049.

Gift-Giving and the Political Agency of Mary of Hungary during her Governorship in the Low Countries (1531 – 1555)

Summary

This article examines the political, cultural and emotional dimensions of gift-giving during the governorship of Mary of Hungary, governor-general of the Low Countries from 1531 to 1555. Far from being merely ceremonial or affectionate tokens, gifts functioned as subtle yet powerful tools of communication, negotiation and political positioning. Focusing in particular on Mary's exchanges with her sister Eleanor of Austria, Queen of France, it argues that gifts constituted a crucial instrument of dynastic governance within the Habsburg polity. Through an analysis of correspondence between the sisters, financial accounts and ambassadorial reports, the study shows how Mary deployed a wide range of gifts to intervene in diplomatic relations between the Habsburg and Valois courts.

Special attention is devoted to gifts associated with the hunt. The sending and receiving of falcons, hunting dogs and equipment formed a major part of Mary's exchanges with the French court. These exchanges helped to reinforce elite sociability and diplomatic goodwill, while also showcasing her expertise in breeding. As an accomplished hunter, Mary used these gifts to project authority in a traditionally masculine domain and to engage in a personal symbolic duel with Francis I, since she could not herself lead on the battlefield.

Beyond hunting, a wide range of items circulated between the Habsburg sisters, including food, wine, textiles, books, musical instruments and compositions, various animals such as sea lions, medicinal remedies, and plants for the Renaissance palace complex built by Mary at Binche in the 1540s. These gifts sustained a dense network of communication between the sisters that blended personal care with political concerns. For example, Mary sent medicinal treatments and dietary advice to Eleanor, reflecting concern for her health, while at the same time facilitating political requests such as copying treaties or granting favours to courtiers. In this way, Mary acted as both a familial caretaker and a political intermediary.

Gift-giving offered a channel of interaction that was less suspect than formal diplomatic missions, and enabled the discreet transmission of information and the negotiation of sensitive matters. Envoys carrying gifts often doubled as messengers or informal diplomats, sometimes conveying secret intelligence. Even during periods of conflict, Mary continued to send gifts to France, signalling a desire to mitigate tensions and protect the Low Countries from war. Importantly, Mary frequently acted independently of Emperor Charles V, using gifts to pursue her own political strategies. Through these practices, she cultivated a reputation that enhanced her influence over governance and diplomacy. A key example is the luxurious carriage Mary sent in 1539 at Eleanor's request to assist the ailing French king, Francis I, during Charles V's journey through France. This gift was not simply practical; it was designed to facilitate the emperor's timely arrival in the Low Countries and to encourage rapprochement between

rival rulers. Such gestures reveal Mary's ability to influence events indirectly, even when not physically present. Moreover, through such actions, Mary also sought to alleviate Eleanor's precarious position at the French court.

The article concludes that gift culture in the early modern period was not peripheral but fundamental to political life. In Mary of Hungary's case, it reveals how royal women exercised power through material culture and informal networks. It demonstrates Mary's central role as an intermediary and information broker within the dynasty, seeking to reinforce family cohesion and thereby subtly shape international relations. Ultimately, the article substantiates earlier research showing that early modern gift culture was not merely a peripheral courtly display, but an essential mechanism of female political agency and dynastic statecraft in sixteenth-century Europe.

Obdarovávanie a politická činnosť Márie Uhorskej počas jej miestodržiteľstva v Nizozemsku (1531 – 1555)

Resumé

Štúdia skúma politické, kultúrne a emocionálne dimenzie praktiky obdarovávania počas vlády Márie Uhorskej, regentky Nizozemska v rokoch 1531 – 1555. Tieto dary zďaleka neboli iba ceremoniálne akty či prejavy pozitívnych postojov, ale fungovali ako jemné, ale silné nástroje komunikácie, vyjednávania a politickej stratégie. Zameriavajúc sa najmä na výmenu darov medzi Máriou a jej sestrou Eleonórou Rakúskou, manželkou francúzskeho kráľa Františka I., štúdia predostiera názor, že dary predstavovali kľúčový nástroj habsburskej dynastickej správy. Prostredníctvom analýzy korešpondencie medzi sestrami, ako aj finančných účtov a správ veľvyslancov, predkladaná štúdia ukazuje, ako Mária využívala širokú škálu darov na zasahovanie do diplomatických vzťahov medzi habsburským dvorom a dvorom rodu Valois.

Zvláštna pozornosť je venovaná darom spojeným s lovom. Zasielanie a prijímanie sokolov, poľovníckych psov a výstroja s tým súvisiaceho tvorili hlavnú časť Máriinej výmeny s francúzskym dvorom. Tieto výmeny pomohli posilniť spoločný štatút elity, pozitívny diplomatický postoj a zároveň preukázali jej odborné znalosti v tejto oblasti. Ako skúsená poľovníčka Mária využívala tieto dary na premietanie svojej autority v tradične mužskej oblasti a na zapojenie sa do osobného symbolického súboja s Františkom I., ktorý sama – ako žena – nemohla viesť na bojisku.

Okrem lovu kolovala medzi sestrami široká škála predmetov vrátane rôznych jedál, vína, textílií, kníh, hudobných nástrojov a hudobných skladieb, ale aj rôznych zvierat, ako napríklad morských tuleňov, liečivých prostriedkov a rastlín pre renesančný palácový komplex, ktorý Mária postavila v Binche v 40. rokoch 16. storočia. Mária napríklad posielala Eleonóre liečebné procedúry a diétne rady, čo odrážalo jej záujem o sestrino zdravie, a zároveň sprostredkovala politické žiadosti, ako napríklad kopírovanie zmlúv alebo udeľovanie výhod jednotlivým dvoranom. Týmto spôsobom Mária pôsobila ako rodinná opatrovateľka, ale aj ako politická sprostredkovateľka.

Výmena darov vytvárala kanál vzájomnej interakcie, ktorý bol menej podozrivý ako formálne diplomatické misie a umožňoval diskrétny prenos informácií a rokovania o citlivých záležitostiach. Vyslanci, ktorí prinášali dary, často slúžili aj ako poslovia alebo neformálni diplomati a niekedy sprostredkúvali aj tajné informácie. Aj počas obdobia konfliktov medzi obidvoma stranami Mária naďalej posielala dary do Francúzska, čím signalizovala snahu zmierniť existujúce napätie a chrániť Nizozemsko pred vojnou. Dôležité je, že Mária často konala nezávisle

od cisára Karola V. a dary používala na presadzovanie vlastných politických zámerov. Prostredníctvom týchto praktík si postupne vybudovala reputáciu, ktorá posilnila nielen jej vplyv na riadenie krajiny, ale aj jej pozíciu na diplomatickom poli. Kľúčovým príkladom je luxusný koč, ktorý Mária poslala v roku 1539 na žiadosť Eleonóry a ktorý mal slúžiť chorľavejúcemu francúzskemu kráľovi Františkovi I. počas jeho cesty s Karolom V. cez Francúzsko. Tento dar nebol len praktický; mal uľahčiť včasný príchod cisára do Nizozemska, ale mal aj širší význam, keďže spoločná cesta mala podporiť zblíženie medzi súperiacimi vládcami. Takéto gestá odhaľujú Máriinu schopnosť nepriamo ovplyvňovať udalosti napriek jej fyzickej neprítomnosti. Navyše, prostredníctvom takýchto darov sa Mária snažila zmierniť Eleonórino neisté postavenie ako francúzskej kráľovnej z habsburského rodu na francúzskom dvore.

Autor štúdie prichádza k záveru, že kultúra darov v ranom novoveku nebola okrajovou záležitosťou, ale základom politickej komunikácie. V prípade Márie Uhorskej odhaľuje, ako ženy v štátnických pozíciách uplatňovali moc prostredníctvom materiálnej kultúry a neformálnych sietí. Demonštruje Máriinu ústrednú úlohu ako sprostredkovateľky a informačného makléra v rámci dynastie, posilňujúceho rodinnú súdržnosť a tým nenápadne spoluformujúceho medzinárodné vzťahy. Štúdia v konečnom dôsledku potvrdzuje výsledky staršieho výskumu, ktorý ukazuje, že kultúra darov v ranom novoveku bola základným mechanizmom ženskej politickej aktivity v Európe šestnásteho storočia.

Maxim Hoffman
The University of Neuchâtel & Ghent University
e-mail: maxim.hoffman2@hotmail.com