

# Belgica, Personification of the Low Countries in Prints during the Eighty Years' War<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Introduction

It is well known that many pamphlets and broadsides were put out in the age of Reformation. Catholics and Protestants used the image as a weapon. These became the propaganda of both sides. One of the most commonly used images was that of the monsters from the Apocalypse, for example, the seven-headed dragon. The seven-headed Pope-monster with the text by Hans Sachs was brought out against the famous seven-headed Luther (fig.1, 2). The Eighty Years' War or Dutch Revolt began about a half century after the Reformation. Although, in fact, many more pamphlets and broadsides were published during the Eighty Years' War, only few are generally known.<sup>2</sup> Belgica, personification of the Low Countries, on whom I will focus in this paper, is one of the most significant symbols from this time. She was portrayed sometimes half-naked, surrounded by soldiers, and lamenting over the misery of the war, sometimes rescued by the hero. My purpose in this paper is to analyze various representations of Belgica in prints and drawings and to examine the meaning of this personification from a gender perspective.<sup>3</sup>

First of all, I will explain the term Belgica, which is not to be confused with present-day Belgium. Each of the words, Belgica, Belgic, Belgium means the whole of the Low Countries in the usage of the 16th and 17th centuries. After the divisions of the Low Countries, this usage persisted,

while also other names were used.<sup>4</sup>

Belgica belongs to the traditional geographical personification of territories or lands from the Roman Empire. The crown in the form of a town wall, with which Belgica is often crowned, alludes to her origin. Why is the personification of territories or lands female? For now, I will not argue about this problem, I shall return to it later. This Latin name was already found in Caesar's "Gallic Wars"; Romans called people in the northern region 'Belgae'. From the end of the 14th century, the Low Countries were for a long time a part of Burgundy, and at the end of the 15th century, became a Hapsburg territory. Charles V established the seventeen provinces, and under his relatively tolerant policy, a consciousness of regional unity developed. When Phillip II, son of Charles V, succeeded to the throne of Spain, he tried to abolish all Protestantism and charged new taxes, because Spain was in economic difficulties. Portions of the Netherlands rebelled against the tyranny of the Duke of Alva, sent by Phillip II. The personification Belgica appeared at that time. People needed probably a symbolic figure of national unity.

The female personification was portrayed not only alone, but also as a group of seventeen maidens representing seventeen provinces, or as one definite province such as Brabant. Although the personification of the Low Countries is somewhat complicated, here I will consider all kinds of female personification under the name of Belgica.

## II. Five Types of Belgica

Through my analysis, I tried to divide the various images of Belgica into five types. The first is 'Belgica in suffering', the second, 'Belgica in Glory', the third, 'Rescue of Belgica', the fourth, 'Religious or moral interpretation', and the fifth, 'Allegory of love or marriage'. I will describe each type with some examples.

I begin with a typical example of anti-Catholic or anti-Spanish propaganda, the 'Emblematic Contrast of Orange and Alva' (fig.3). Contrasting the images of 'Good' and 'Evil' is one of the most frequently used means in propaganda pamphlets and broadsides. 'Good' is represented as a desirable state, and 'Evil' as undesirable. This anonymous print has a very clear composition. Here, the two main opponents in the first decade of the Eighty Year's War, Willem I, Prince of Orange, and the Duke of Alva, are depicted accompanied by allegorical figures on either side of the print. The allegorical figures characterize their rule in the Netherlands. It is not difficult to decode, as each allegorical figure bears a name inscription. The Duke of Alva is crowned by the double-faced Falsehood (*Fallacia*), carrying a torch and a bucket of water as symbol of her deceptive nature, and the old woman Envy (*Invidia*). Next to Alva, we find the naked chained Belgica with a city-crown. Alva shears away her richness with a pair of shears in his hand. On the ground, the People (*Plebs*) is in poverty and begging. On the contrary Willem is surrounded by Wealth (*Divitiae*), Wise Counsel (*Prud.Cons.*) and Honor, crowning the laurel wreath on the Prince. Above them, the female figure with two trumpets heralds the Fame (*Fama*) of Willem and, at the same time, the infamous reputation (*Infama*) of Alva. In the background, we can see

Spanish plunderers in the city of Antwerp. Under the image, there are inscriptions in Dutch and French. This indicates that the print was addressed also to French readers. Print was a means to convey the situation to foreign countries. Next to the inscriptions, there are two small images from the Exodus. On Willem's side, we can see the supper of Passover, and on Alva's side, the troops of the Pharaoh in the sea. Willem is compared to Moses who rescues the Israelites (representing the Netherlands under the tyranny of Spain), Alva to Pharaoh, who was punished by God. These episodes from the Old Testament make the upper image more universal.

The Belgica in this print I call the 'Belgica in suffering'. The Female personification is naked, chained and in captivity. The next example, 'Lament over the Desolation of the Netherlands', shows a more miserable Belgica, although she is not chained (fig.4). Belgica is being raped, robbed and pulled by her hair by four Spanish soldiers. She is calling for help. On both sides of her there are two allegorical female figures, one, richly dressed Ambition (*Ambitio*), and the other, old woman Greed (*Avaritia*), hunting for money. They support the Spanish soldiers. At the top of the image, Loyalty (*Fiducia*) preserves the unity of the nation, represented by the shields of the seventeen provinces, not to be broken by Distrust (*Diffidentia*) and Envy (*Invidia*). By some allegorical elements and the fact that Belgica has had her heart stolen by soldiers, we recognize the image as an allegory. Nevertheless, it looks like nothing other than the female victim in war.

In contrast to this tragic Belgica, 'Belgica in Glory' is wealthy, dressed, and sits on a throne (*Belgica florens – Belgica destructa*). Her crown is not a city-crown, but a normal one. In a drawing

by Maarten de Vos of 1585, Belgica is represented twice, above and below, within the architectural setting (fig.5).<sup>5</sup> Lower Belgica in the architecture is ‘Belgica in suffering’, surrounded by Spanish soldiers. She is half-naked and lamenting over this situation. Higher Belgica on the architecture is richly dressed and majestic. On both sides of her, scenes of prosperity through commerce on land and sea are portrayed. ‘Belgica in Glory’ may represent former prosperity or desirable glory in the future.

Although Belgica is suffering under Spanish rule, she hopes to be rescued. She never does anything by herself, but is rescued by someone. The composition of ‘Rescue of Belgica’ is often borrowed from traditional Christian or mythological iconography. The ‘Good’ or hero fights the ‘Evil’ or dragon to rescue the princess. Using a well-known image makes the subject matter more recognizable and universal. Hero, in this case, is none other than Willem of Orange. ‘The Shield of Wisdom’ of 1577-1598 attributed to Hieronimus Wierix reminds us of ‘Perseus and Andromeda’ (fig.6). As Andromeda, a female personification is chained to the tree, and she is identified as Brabant by her shield. The sixteen other provinces are seated on the ground, each with its own shield. Willem, as Perseus, is armed with the shield of Wisdom and attacks the huge sea monster with the coat of arms of Phillip II on the back, and the shield of the Duke of Alva on the breast. His actions are blessed by the hand of God above the prince. This image would be the reflection of a “tableau vivant” performed in the festivities accompanying Willem’s triumphal entrance into Brussels in 1577, which portrayed Willem as Perseus, the liberator of the Netherlands.

Another example is ‘Saint George and the Dragon’. Saint George is one of the most famous Christian knights, fighting against the dragon,

representing the anti-Christ. In ‘Willem as St. George’ by Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder, Willem as Saint George slays the dragon and rescues the princess with her city-crown (fig.7).

As ‘Religious or moral interpretation’, I will first consider the double image of Belgica and the personification of patience (Patientia). The theme of Patience was favored by Netherlands artists.<sup>6</sup> Pieter Bruegel the Elder is its prominent forerunner, who executed ‘Patientia’ in much the same way as his series of prints of the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Virtues. Bruegel’s Prints of 1557 had much impact on later artists (fig.8). In Gilis Mostaert’s drawing, evil monsters surrounding ‘Patientia’ in Bruegel turned into real Spanish soldiers (fig.9).<sup>7</sup>

The next example is somewhat exceptional: it is a case of the Spanish tyranny depicted as the wrath of God. ‘The Globe with Netherlands Allegories’, by an anonymous artist, is a series of four prints, depicting images in a globe with motto and verse, mainly from the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> It looks like an emblem book. The first print portrays the rise of the country to wealth and power (fig.10). The female personification is surrounded by her cities and provinces as boys with city-crowns, engaging in various trades. The map on her lap indicates the city of Antwerp (the river Scheldt is seen). An angelical figure of Fortune brings her the profits.

The second print depicts the misuse of her richness and worldly pleasure (fig.11). Belgica is seated on her throne with a peacock. Next to her a young man takes her money and scatters coins on the ground, which are gathered by two women, one clothed and the other naked. Three boys with city-crowns argue over biblical interpretation. A fool looks at their arguments.

The third print, entitled ‘Evil World’, represents the punishment of God (fig.12). God has

sent the Rod of His anger as shown in verse. The Rod of God roots from Isaiah (10:5-6). The Rod is here an armed warrior, whose helmet ends, in fact, as the rod in the hand of God. Belgica herself lies blindfolded, naked and bound on the ground. She is trod upon by the Rod and the female personification of Violence, who hands the sword to the Rod. The Rod can be surely identified as Alva. In some cases, the same allusion was used in this time.

The fourth print portrays the resulting conversion and deliverance (fig.13). Belgica has returned to God through prayer. God's hand with the crown is visible in the clouds above her. God casts the Rod into Hell.

This series, representing religious interpretations of historical events, was executed probably by Catholics. Because of her sin, the unawareness that the prosperity of the Netherlands was dependent upon God, Belgica was punished by God. The richly dressed Belgica suggests, in this case, the state of sin. Finally, she is saved, but still naked and bound.

I call the representation of Belgica with a male partner in the context of love, 'Allegory of love or marriage'. Joachim Wtewael's series of 13 drawings, including copies, portrays a heroine who meets various men, by whom her life is changed. According to Elisabeth McGrath, the story corresponds to the history of the Netherlands.<sup>9</sup> A man looking like a bridegroom, nestling close to her, is probably Phillip II. The one who treads on Belgica is Alva, while Willem offers a helping hand. The next leader of Belgica is Maurice, son of Willem, who was assassinated in 1584. At the end, she is seated on her throne, receiving gifts from Indians. Her destiny depends on her partners.

A somewhat ridiculous example is a scene from Joris Hoefnagel's 'Patientia' manuscript

emblem book of 1569.<sup>10</sup> 'The Patient Lover' depicts Belgica as the beloved, saying 'I do not believe you' and resisting the advance of the lover. His name 'señor don calf van Lire' is a word play and an elision of the name of Duc alfa. The servant says 'O how painful it is for the smitten one to love and not to be loved'. She escapes cleverly from the dangerous man (fig.14).

### III. Representation of the Self

I suppose that 'Belgica in suffering' is the most intensive representation of all five types. In this type, sometimes, physical pain is emphasized. It is an effective message. The symbolic figure seems to have a real body. Interestingly, this 'real body of a symbolic figure' is recognized also in the representation of the Lion, another symbol of the Low Countries (Leo Belgica). When the Lion is in glory or fighting bravely, it is portrayed in the typical pose of a coat of arms. We find the symbolic lion with a sword and a Phrygian cap in Jan Saenredam's print, celebrating Maurice's victory against Spain in Nieuwpoort in 1600 (fig.17,18). When the Lion is in suffering or has no power, it is represented as a mere animal. 'The Plight of the Netherlands' Lion' portrays the lion crushed in a wine press by Alva, Margaretha of Parma and others (fig.16).<sup>11</sup>

As I have already mentioned, Belgica belongs to the class of personifications of territories or lands from the Roman Empire. The Roman portrayed their territories as a naked woman, conquered, chained and mourning. This tradition was used as the representation of the conquered new continent during colonial periods. In this case, the conquered continent is the anti-Self or the Other, contrasting with the civilized Self. But Belgica is the representation of Self. How should we interpret this image of Self? In war propaganda in the 20th

Century, it is sometimes seen to represent oneself as a victim, with the enemy as a brutal assailant. But the representation of Belgica should not be confused with the modern propaganda imagery. We remember the contrast between the desirable and undesirable states in the first example, 'Emblematic Contrast of Orange and Alva'. 'Belgica in suffering' is the undesirable anti-Self, always entertaining the hope of becoming 'Belgica in Glory' as the desirable Self. It may be called 'the divided Self'.

Belgica's passive character also probably reflects the historical background. At the beginning of the Eighty Years' War, the Netherlands did not rebel against Phillip II, but the Duke of Alva. It was not a religious war in a precise sense, Protestants and Catholics both sought to hold their own rights. It is interesting that, in the letter to Phillip II in 1571, Willem accused Alva of acting as if he were the king, and emphasized the fight against the tyrant to maintain the honor of the king Phillip.<sup>12</sup> After the Union of Utrecht (1579) the State abjured Phillip II and asked the Duke of Anjou to be its new lord, but its expectation was betrayed.<sup>13</sup> It continued to seek another lord, but did not succeed.<sup>14</sup> Finally, it chose the road to independence. Before its decision, the relationship of Rulers to Subjects as Males to Females, or of gendered Nations could rather be emphasized. I suppose that the Netherlands representing themselves as a weak, powerless female figure would reflect of the power politics of that period.

On the frontispiece of a book about the history of the Netherlands by Emanuel van Meteren, Belgica is represented twice with other historical scenes. In the Latin edition of ca.1600 (Fig.19)<sup>15</sup> and the German edition of 1604<sup>16</sup>, 'Belgica in Glory' is depicted on the top and 'Belgica in suffering' beneath, as in the drawing of Maarten de Vos (fig.5). But in another book by the same author

of 1608<sup>17</sup>, each Belgica is dressed and enthroned, although the composition of the frontispiece is almost the same (fig.20). Two Belgica with city-crowns are like twins. Since each scene has a number, we find that the story begins from the top. Behind Belgica on the top, we can see the soldiers or the evil closing upon her. She is unharmed, looking somewhat embarrassed (fig.21). The second Belgica represented beneath is surrounded by the people celebrating peace and liberty (fig.22). In the year following 1608, a twelve years' truce was established between the United Provinces and Spain. Perhaps the tragic representation of 'Belgica in suffering' had served her purpose and disappeared.

#### **IV. Conclusion – Could Belgica become independent?**

Lastly, I will show a print by Chrispijn de Passe the Younger, representing the political situation of the road to the Treaty of Münster through the allegory of marriage. This belongs to the type of 'Allegory of love and marriage' (fig.15). In the middle, the bride Hollandia<sup>18</sup> is seated. Two suitors, Spain on the right and France on the left, bring her many presents. Who does she choose? The verse under the image tells us that she accepts neither courtship and chooses the Netherlands behind her. It is interesting to use the allegory of marriage to represent the independence of the United Provinces. The bride needs a bridegroom. The one who protects her is a man. I suppose that, during the Eighty Years' War, Belgica, after all, could not act by herself and escape her original character of personification of territories or lands which belong to someone.

## Notes

- 1 This paper is a revised version of my lecture on 14 March 2007 at University College Ghent, Faculty of Fine Arts. I am grateful to University College Ghent, Faculty of Fine Arts and Kanazawa College of Art for the exchange program and especially to Prof. Wim De Temmerman, Prof. Peter Desmet and Mr. Jan De Jonckheere for organizing the lecture. I am grateful also to Prof. Jean-Christophe Terrillon and Mr. Mark G. Elwell, from the Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, for help in correcting my English text. The paper was first prepared for the Symposium 'War and Memory' held under the auspices of Image & Gender and Meijigakuin University on 18 October 2003, and published in Japanese on 30 March 2004.
- 2 The following catalogue is very useful to study prints during the 80 Years' War. Tanis, James/ Hosrt, Daniel, *Images of Discord*, cat. exh. Byn Mawr College Library, 1993. See also Harms, Wolfgang(ed.), *Deutsche illustrierte Flugblätter des 16.und 17. Jahrhunderts*, 4vols., Tübingen, 1985; Busmann, Klaus/ Schilling, Heinz, *1648 War and Peace*, cat.exh. and articles, 3vols., Münster/ Osnabruck, 1998. For Dutch Revolt generally, see Paker, Geoffrey, *The Dutch Revolt*, London, (1977)1990; Gelderen, Martin van, *The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt 1555-1590*, Cambridge, (1992)2002.
- 3 An important study on the iconography of Belgica is that of McGrath, Elisabeth, A Netherlandish History by Joachim Wtewael, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 38, 1975, pp.182-217. I was greatly inspired by her article.
- 4 For the north 'Belgica foederata', 'Belgica libera', 'Batavia' and 'Hollandia', for the south 'Belgica Catholica', 'Belgica Hispanica' and 'Belgica Archducibus subdica'. McGrath, *ibid.*, p185, note 18.
- 5 This drawing was executed probably for print. Maarten de Vos was registered as a Lutheran in 1585.
- 6 For the iconography of Patientia in the Netherlands, see Boon Karel G., Patientia dans les gravures de la Réforme aux Pays-Bas, *Revue de l'Art* 56, 1982, pp.7-24.
- 7 Gilis Mostaert (1534-1598) was a Catholic and anti-Spanish.
- 8 Such images in a globe are often seen in prints from this time. It is a device to make historical scenes more universal. Texts in prints are as follows; 1) Wisdom of Solomon(1:7); 2) Ephesians (4:9); 3) 2 Esdras(6:9); 4) Isaiah(14:11)
- 9 McGrath, *op.cit.* Joachim Wtewael was a Calvinist and anti-Spanish. McGrath dated these drawings just after the 1609 Truce.
- 10 Joris Hoefnagel executed this manuscript during his exile in England.
- 11 It would be no coincidence that this image reminds us of the iconography of 'Christ in the Wine Press'.
- 12 Tanis/Horst, *op.cit.*, p.30.
- 13 The Netherlands had no intention to give political power to Catholic Anjou. But the French Duke did not understand it. The Betrayal of Anjou caused the 'French Fury' in 1583.
- 14 They tried to ask King Henry III of France and then Queen Elizabeth of England, but both refused the proposal. The Earl of Leicester, one of Queen Elizabeth's confidants, became Governor-General 1586, but he returned to England the following year.
- 15 Emanuel van Meteren, *Historia Belgica Nostri...*, Antwerp, 1600(?).
- 16 Emanuel van Meteren, *Historia, Oder eigentliche und warhaffte Beschreibung...*, Arnhem, 1604.
- 17 Emanuel van Meteren, *Commentarien ofte Memorien van den Nederlandischen Staet, Handel, Oozlogen...*, Amsterdam, 1608.
- 18 See note 4.

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Fig.1, Anon., The seven-headed Pope-monster, Woodcut, 1530



Fig.2, Hans Brosamer, The seven-headed Luther, Woodcut, 1529



Fig.3, Anon. (Theodoor de Bry?), Emblematic Contrast of Orange and Alva, Engraving, ca.1570-72



Fig.4, Hans Colleart I after Ambrosius Francken, Lament over the Desolation of Netherlands, Engraving, ca.1570-80



Fig.5, Maarten de Vos, Allegory on the Decline and Prosperity of Antwerp, Drawing, 1585, Muesum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam



Fig.6, Hieronymus Wierix (attr.) after Maarten de Vos(?), The Shield of Wisdom, Engraving, 1577-1580



Fig.7, Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder, Willem as St. George, Etching, ca.1576



Fig.8, Pieter van der Heyden after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Patientia, Engraving, 1557



Fig.9, Gillis Mostaert, Patientia, Drawing, 1585, Museum Plantin-Moretus/Prentenkabinet, Antwerpen - UNESCO World Heritage



Fig.10, Anon., The Globe with Netherlandish Allegories, the first print, Etching, ca.1570-72



Fig.11, Anon., The Globe with Netherlandish Allegories, the second print, Etching, ca.1570-72



Fig.12, Anon., The Globe with Netherlandish Allegories, the third print, Etching, ca.1570-72



Fig.13, Anon., The Globe with Netherlandish Allegories, the fourth print, Etching, ca.1570-72





Fig.19, Frontispiece of Emanuel van Meteren, *Historia Belgica Nostr...*, 1600



Fig.20, Frontispiece of Emanuel van Meteren, *Commentarien ofte Memorien ...*, 1608



Fig.21, Detail of fig.20



Fig.22, Detail of fig.20

## Photo Acknowledgements

Fig.1, 2: Bott, Gerhard (ed.), *Martin Luther und die Reformation in Deutschland*, exh.cat., Germanischen National Museum, Nuremburg, 1983, p.234

Fig.3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 16: Tanis, James/Hosrt, Daniel, *Images of Discord*, cat. exh. Byn Mawr College Library, 1993, p.76, 107, 110, 33, 15, 96, 98, 100, 54 and 59

Fig.5: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

Fig.9: Museum Plantin-Moretus / Prentenkabinet, Antwerpen - UNESCO World Heritage

Fig.15: Harms, Wofgang (ed.), *Deutsche illustrierte Flugblätter des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts IV*, Tübingen, 1985, P.333

Fig.17,18: Strauss, Walter L., (ed.), *The Illustrated Bartsch 4*, 1980, p.318

Fig.19, 20, 21 and 22: British Library, London