RESEARCH PROJECT:
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ENGLISHMEN ADRIFT. THE ENGLISH PRESENCE IN THE SOUTHERN NETHERLANDS, 1603-1660

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The focus of this interdisciplinary research project is on the English, who in the period from the accession of James I in 1603 until the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, for religious or political reasons, fled their country and found shelter in the archducal / Spanish (or Southern) Netherlands.

The massive presence of English exiles in the Southern Netherlands led to the establishment of an extensive network of convents, colleges and schools and other places of residence which became a home of sorts to these English expatriates. This network was the operating base for the religious and political activities of those who, with the assistance of the Spanish, wished to see the claims of the Catholic community in England restored or who aimed at political rehabilitation in their native country. The most obvious case in point is that of Charles II himself, who in his attempts to regain the throne at the time of his stay in the Spanish Netherlands both drew on the resources of this network (including financial ones) and relied on the assistance extended to him by Philip IV.

The first aim of the present project is to map out this English presence in the Southern Netherlands between 1603 and 1660. Several generations of monastics and students, many of them scions of distinguished English families, spent time or were educated at one of the many English monasteries, convents, or educational institutions operating at the time (for instance, in St.-Omers, Douai, Louvain, Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, and Bruges, to mention the major ones). Little information is available about the size and the intellectual impact of the English colleges and their relationship with scholarly circles on the continent. Equally unstudied is the importance of the countless opponents of the government in London, who came and
went in crisscross move-ments depending on the political constellation of the moment, finding in the Southern Netherlands a temporary safe haven. This part of the project aims at shedding light on such issues. It is hoped that conclusions drawn from a detailed investigation will provide the groundwork for further research (Supervision : Prof. H. Symoens.)

The second aim is to analyze these refugees' political objectives and actions. What were their aims, how did they propose to realize their ambitions, and what kind of support did they expect to get from the Archdukes and the Spanish king? And vice versa, how did Philip III, the Archdukes, and Philip IV intend to capitalize on the asylum so willingly extended to English dissidents, and at what cost did they do so, both financially and politically? Interesting cases are the attitude of the government in Brussels and Madrid in the wake of the famous Gunpowder Plot (1605), Charles the First's wavering between Spain and the Republic after 1630 and the attitude of the exiled English in reaction to this, and the part played by these exiles in the restoration of Charles II. Equally important is the matter of how the authorities in London viewed the "continental" opposition supported (or at least, tolerated) by Spain. The answers to such questions should allow us to gain insight into the political role played by the exiles and to formulate a number of hypotheses concerning the significance of the Southern Netherlands as a haven for those seeking asylum there (Supervision : Dr. R. Vermeir.)

The third and final aim is to assess the cultural importance of the presence of these refugees in the Spanish Netherlands. What was, broadly speaking, the artistic (including, literary) impact in this region of English scholars, churchmen, publishers, printers, booksellers and men of letters, and what were their contacts with the homeland? What was the role taken up by Charles II's court during the future monarch's stay in the Southern Provinces between 1656 and 1659? Who belonged to this court-in-exile, how did it manifest itself as a cultural force (for instance, as regards Charles's patronage of individuals and institutions), what were the consequences for cultural life, generally speaking, both on the continent and in England? Was there any form of cross-fertilization? The mutual influences between mid-century English literature, on the one hand, and literary developments and practices in the Southern Netherlands, on the other, have never been the object of detailed study. The focus has been on the history of the companies of travelling actors between 1600 and 1660 or, at best, on the French and Spanish influences on the drama of the Restoration. Mariika Keblusek's remark with respect to the existence of a royalist network in the Dutch Republic between 1643 and 1660 applies with even greater force to the Southern Netherlands: "We know very little indeed about the ways in which political, religious, and literary ideas circulated within this community." (Keblusek 1995, p.155)