

The Flemish Connection:  
Socio-cultural news from London in the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* (1667-1723)

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To have *no Newes* is *good Newes*, it is a symptom of a *placid* and *quiet* state of affairs. The subject of *Newes* which is most enquired for, is for the most part of *Wars*, *Commotions*, and *Troubles*, or the *Composing* of them.<sup>1</sup>

From its founding in 1667 onwards, the Ghent newspaper the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* regularly reported on political, military and economic affairs in London. It is in the context of this news flow that we examine the occasional inclusion of news items of a socio-cultural nature. Focusing on two sets of items published around the watershed Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, we argue that these seemingly trivial descriptions of theatre and opera performances, musical concerts, balls, assemblies at Court and other nobles houses as well as the exchange of gifts had a distinct news value for the readers of the Ghent newspaper. At the same time, we hope to introduce the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* as a valuable source for studying the reception of British culture in the Low Countries in its own right.

The *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* was first published in January 1667 by Maximiliaen Graet, an experienced printer and bookseller who had his office, a house he identified in his publications as “den Enghel” [the Angel] in the centre of Ghent, near the Jan Breydelstraat. Initially, it was a four-page two-column quarto crammed with small newsprint and published twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays. The top of the title page was adorned with three woodcuts: a winged Mercury figure flanked by two heraldic emblems of Ghent – on the left the city’s coat of arms, the Flemish lion, and on the right the Virgin of Ghent, with lion and wooden fence. Copies were sold for one *stuiver*, the equivalent of one penny. After Graet’s death in 1676, ownership passed first to his widow, then to other members of the Graet family, until the brothers Frans and Domien van der Ween took over in 1721.<sup>2</sup> In 1723, the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* was restyled the *Gazette van Ghendt*. The newspaper continued to appear until 1940, spanning an impressive three centuries.

When Graet applied for a royal license to publish his newspaper in the summer of 1666, he explained in a letter addressed to the Spanish King Charles II, a member of the Habsburg dynasty that had been ruling the Southern Netherlands for over a century, that he was acting on behalf of the “noble merchants” [notabele cooplieden] of Ghent, who wanted to know “what was going on in the kingdoms and republics of Europe” [het gone in de Coninckrycken ende Republieken van Europe is passerende].<sup>3</sup> The letter was forwarded to the Council of Flanders and to the Aldermen of the Keure in Ghent in August, and a license was issued on 16 November 1666. Like the recently established *London Gazette*, the new Ghent newspaper aimed at the city’s growing class of tradesmen whose business depended on knowing if and where foreign conflicts threatened the security of their trade routes and the goods passing along them. London, however, was at the centre of its own rapidly expanding universe, dominating British domestic trade as well as contributing almost exclusively to Britain’s position as an economic world power, whereas Ghent was part of a region in which the power relationships were of old much more diffuse and less stable. As the application letter reveals, Graet was not so much following the examples of London, Paris or Amsterdam as addressing a concern closer to home. Brussels, Antwerp and Bruges, he explains, had all been given a royal license recently to print their own newspapers. It was only fair that Ghent be treated on equal terms.<sup>4</sup> Issues of the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* consisted of dated news reports sent in by correspondents from various parts of Europe, including Germany, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain,

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<sup>1</sup> *Briefve Relation of Some Affaires and Transactions*, no. 2, 9 October 1649. All quotations from English newspapers are taken from the *17th-18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers*, British Library, London, available online through Gale’s Digital Collections.

<sup>2</sup> Vander Haeghen, vol. 3, 90.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 6, 108.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Denmark, Switzerland and Poland, often followed by “Waerschouwinghe” [notices] of local sales of houses and goods. Political, diplomatic, military and economic news dominated, but occasionally news of a more ephemeral nature was inserted. On 7 January 1675<sup>5</sup>, the *Post-tydingen* reported that the young nobility of London had decided to entertain the King and Queen on Twelfth Night with “a comedy of excellent machines” [eene Comedie van Uytmutende Machinen]; on 16 July 1699 it referred to “a lovely concert of music in the King’s Gardens” [een lieffelijcke concert van Musieck in des Coninx Lust-Hof]; and on 2 March 1711, it mentioned a “pleasing vocal and instrumental concert” [aenghenaem Concert van Stemmelijck en Speeltuighelijck Musieck] in honour of the Queen’s birthday.<sup>6</sup> While reports – gossip even – on the pastimes and diversions of royalty and the *beau monde* would become a regular feature of newspapers in the second half of the eighteenth century, this essay shows that this interest in socio-cultural affairs originates in the necessity of the heavily censored press to encode important information on shifting dynastic power balances, ongoing negotiations, political intentions and military strategies. As Paul Arblaster has pointed out, the informed contemporary reader could glean more valuable information from a detailed account of an assembly at Court or an ambassador’s dining arrangements than would appear at first sight.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Prince Eugene’s State Visit to Queen Anne, January-March 1712***

A first set of items recovered from *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* documents the state visit of Prince Eugene of Savoy to the Court of Queen Anne in the early days of 1712, at the close of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714).<sup>8</sup> The Prince, though a French aristocrat by birth and a courtier in the entourage of Louis XIV, had transferred his loyalties to the House of Habsburg early in life<sup>9</sup>, and came to the English Court on 16 January 1712 as an emissary for the then Austrian Emperor, Charles VI. Rumours of the Prince’s impending visit to Queen Anne seep into the *Post-tydingen*’s news coverage with a large measure of continuity<sup>10</sup> from 31 December 1711<sup>11</sup> onwards. Prince Eugene, it is announced in *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* of 4 January 1712, travelled to the English Court with the express purpose “aen de Coninginne van weghens den Keyser seer voordeeligh aenbiedinghen ... te doen, om Haere Majesteyt van den Vrede af te wenden, ende te bewegen den Oorlogh met Kracht voort te setten” [of making the Queen such highly advantageous offers on behalf of the emperor, that she desist from peace negotiations and continue the war par force]. The very next issue of the *Post-tydingen*, published on 7 January 1712, already contains a detailed stipulation of said “highly advantageous offers” that the Prince, by order of the Emperor, would present to Queen Anne and which would hopefully dissuade the English Court and Parliament from entering into separate peace negotiations with Louis XIV – an act that would effectively break up the Grand Alliance – as long as that monarch refused to “make sufficient Recompence to each Party, for the vast Charge they had been at, in carrying on the War against him.”<sup>12</sup>

Given the purpose of the Prince of Savoy’s state visit to Queen Anne, it is not unreasonable to assume that his every movement in London would have elicited great interest among diplomatic

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<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise indicated all dates are given in New Style.

<sup>6</sup> All quotations from the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* are taken from the issues kept in the Ghent University Library, Belgium. The long *s* has been modernized.

<sup>7</sup> Arblaster, 28-29.

<sup>8</sup> The House of Bourbon and the House of Habsburg both had a legitimate claim to the Spanish throne, since both Louis XIV and the Emperor Leopold I were liaised by marriage to the late King of Spain, the childless Charles II. Philippe of Anjou, second grandson of Louis XIV, was the rightful heir to the throne by will, and even though this made the French claim the stronger, the Emperor refused to relinquish his claim (Frey, p. xiii)

<sup>9</sup> Frey, 155.

<sup>10</sup> See the issues of *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* of 31 December 1711; 4, 7 and 21 January 1712; 8, 18 and 25 February 1712; and 3 March 1712.

<sup>11</sup> *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* (31 December 1711): “Men seght dat de Coninginne [sic] den Prins Eugenins [sic] van Savoyen die hier in het kort wordt verwacht, 2. Carossen te ghemoet heeft ghesonden, ende bevolen Somersethouse voor den selven te Meubeleren, hoe wel men meent dat Sijne Hoogheyt by den Hertogh van Marlborough sijnen inkeer sal nemen” (dated Londen den 22. December).

<sup>12</sup> Gibson, 42.

circles on the continent, not in the least in the Low Countries, and Ghent in particular, since that city had for some time now been at the heart of the military tug-of-war between the French and the Allied Forces. It is thus especially in his capacity of military strategist and diplomatic envoy that the Prince's comings and goings in London would have been of specific interest to the Ghent readers, not in the least because of the crucial part he played in a campaign that (temporarily) liberated the city of Ghent from French rule in 1708<sup>13</sup>. And yet, despite the great diplomatic import of the Prince's errand, the entries in *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* devote at least as much attention to his participating in London's high society as they do to the political and diplomatic intrigues, if not more. In its issue of Monday 8 February 1712, the *Post-tydingen* speaks of the constant flow of "Visites ende Contravisites ghegheven ende ontfanghen" [visits and return visits paid and received] by the Prince since his arrival in London. The item continues with a detailed account of the Prince's movements on 20 January 1712, at which time he "was... te eten by den Grave Massey, ginck 's avondts in het Italiaanse Opera, ende namp het avondtmael met den Hertogh van Grafton, ende eenighe andere Persoonen van den eersten Rangh" [had lunch with the Earl of Massey, attended the Italian opera, and took supper with the Duke of Grafton and several other people of rank]. This piece of information is confirmed by an item in the *British Mercury* of 9 January 1712 OS<sup>14</sup>, as well as an entry in *The London Stage Calendar*.<sup>15</sup>

In February 1712, several items in consecutive issues of the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* devote special attention to the festivities that are scheduled to take place in honour of Queen Anne's upcoming birthday<sup>16</sup> on 6 February 1665 OS, announcing the attendance of "groote Heeren, Dames ende Uytheemsche Ministers" [noble men and women, and foreign ministers], amongst whom the Prince of Savoy. Interestingly, one of these social gatherings documented in the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* is not recorded in *The London Stage Calendar*: in its issue of 3 March 1712, the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* gives notice of an opera performed at St. James's Palace on the Queen's birthday, followed by a ball, to both of which the Queen was escorted by the Prince of Savoy.

#### Londen den 19. Februarius

Woensdagh wiert den Gheboorten-dagh van de Coninginne gheviert; het Hof was soo groot en Magnifieek als by Menschen ghedencken is ghesien: men luyde des middaeghs Klocken: Haere Majesteyt ontfingh de Complimenten van de Prins Eugenius, de Ministers van Staet den Adel en de vremde Ministers; ook ginck den Hertogh van Marlborough het selve doen, maer was seer kort by Haere Maejesteyt, die met Haere eyghen Handen aen de Prins Eugenius vereerde eenen Deghen omset met Diamanten om 't Ghevest, op welcjers Appel Haere Maejesteyt Portraict stont, en gheschat op 7. à 8000. Ponden Sterlinx: des avondts was'er een Opera waer in alle de Dames verscheenen; ter selver tijdt was de Stadt vol Vierwercken, en Illumination &c.

[The Queen's birthday was celebrated Wednesday last; the Court never being more splendidly and magnificently [decorated]: at noon, the bells were sounded: Her Majesty received compliments from Prince Eugene, and from all the Ministers of State, the nobility and the foreign ministers; the Duke of Marlborough also appeared at Court, though he stayed with Her Majesty only a short while. Her Majesty honoured Prince Eugene by presenting him with a sword, the hilt of which was diamond-studded and which was engraved with Her portrait. The sword is worth about 7000 or 8000 l.: at night, an opera was performed, in which all the ladies

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *The Life and Military Actions*, 225, 243: "The burghers of Ghent, who had conspired with the French to deliver the city to them with the least possible resistance a few months earlier, capitulated to the English on 31 December 1708. The Allies granted the town a general amnesty, including a new confirmation of all its former privileges. For although "the Burghers did not deserve so good Usage ... it was thought fit to try how far gentle Treatment could prevail on them, and overcome their Perverseneses."

<sup>14</sup> "[The Prince] was nobly entertain'd by Count Massey, the Envoy of Savoy; after which, he was present at the Opera call'd Antiochus; and at Night he was magnificently treated by the Duke of Grafton, at his House in Bond-street." (*British Mercury* 9-11 January 1712).

<sup>15</sup> Van Leppen, 267: "Wednesday was the Opera [at Queen's] and there he [Prince Eugene] brought a great crowd, so much that the Operas are to be perform'd thrice a week whilst he stays here." Letter by Peter Wentworth, 11 January 1712 (Wentworth Papers, 246).

<sup>16</sup> There is a factual error in the item in *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* announcing Queen Anne's birthday. The Queen was born in 1665, not 1664. Cf. *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen*. 25 February 1712 (dated Londen, den 16. Februarius 1712).

[of the Court] appeared; at the same time the city was illuminated with fireworks and illuminations &c.]

Without entering into much detail, several London newspapers report of the festivities held on the occasion of the Queen's birthday, attended by "a great Concourse of Persons of Quality at Court, and amongst them Prince Eugene and other Foreigners of Distinction [and t]he Day was observ'd with the usual Solemnity, and the Evening concluded with Bonfires, Illuminations, &c."<sup>17</sup> No mention is made of an opera performed at St. James's "in which all the ladies of the Court appeared."<sup>18</sup> Neither does *The London Stage Calendar* record such an opera; and although it does mention the performance of three plays on 6 February 1712 OS, none of those are listed as dedicated to, or commissioned by the Queen. In addition, *The Calendar* lists a concert held at the Two Golden Balls, "vocal and instrumental in Italian, French, and English organized for the entertainment of Prince Eugene"<sup>19</sup> having taken place on 4 February 1712 OS. Were it not for a brief mention in *The Life and Military Actions of his Royal Highness Prince Eugene of Savoy* (1739) that "[the Queen] made [the Prince of Savoy] a Present of a Sword set with Diamonds, worth about 5000 l. which he wore on her Birth-Day, and had the Honour at Night to lead her to and from the Opera performed on this Occasion [the Queen's birthday] at Court"<sup>20</sup> it might be presumed that the correspondent for the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* simply got his facts wrong, confusing the entertainments in honour of Prince Eugene with the festivities for the royal birthday, and contracting elements of separate events into one. Besides endorsing that the opera at St. James's actually did take place, however, the excerpt above also confirms Queen Anne's gift to Prince Eugene of a diamond-studded sword, a fact that is in turn corroborated in *The British Mercury* of 8 February 1712 OS<sup>21</sup> as well as in the *Evening Post* of 9 February 1712 OS.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, neither the item in the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* nor the excerpt from *The Life and Military Actions* afford any hints as to the identification of this celebratory opera at St. James's.<sup>23</sup>

It is worth noting that, as much as the Prince's visit was heralded by couranteers on both sides of the Channel, and his comings and goings profusely documented, his presence soon became a thorn in the flesh of certain parties within the English ruling class. The outward courtesy, hospitality and on occasion even ostentatiousness with which the Prince was received stands in stark contrast with the political reticence he had to contend with. Although in all appearance, he was treated with great civility by Queen Anne and her courtiers, who "seem'd to express a more than ordinary Regard for him"<sup>24</sup>, the Prince's proposals failed to gain the approval of the English government, and "as to his Affair, he had only some dark and ambiguous Answers"<sup>25</sup> Having lost all interest in the war, the Court party was determined to end the conflict even if that meant abandoning the allies, and continuing the separate line of (secret) negotiations with France.<sup>26</sup> Echoes of this adverse attitude find their way into the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen*, too, frequently referring to the English wish to see the Prince gone,

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<sup>17</sup> *Evening Post* (5-7 February 1712). See also the *British Mercury* (6-8 February 1712) and the *London Gazette* (7-10 February 1712).

<sup>18</sup> *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen*, 3 March 1712 (dated Londen, den 19. Februarius), authors' translation.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Van Leppen, 269: *The Taming of a Shrew* and *The Walking Statue*, both performed at the Drury Lane Theatre, and *Timon of Athens* at the Clerkenwell Charity School.

<sup>20</sup> *The Life and Military Actions*, 254

<sup>21</sup> "'Tis said the Queen has made a Present of a Sword to Prince Eugene, enrich'd with Diamonds." *British Mercury* (8-11 February 1712).

<sup>22</sup> "Her Masesty has presented Prince Eugene of Savoy with a Sword enrich'd with Diamonds, of a great Value." *Evening Post* (7-9 February 1712).

<sup>23</sup> A perusal of *The London Stage Calendar* from Queen Anne's accession to the throne in 1702 onwards yields little indication as to there being an established tradition of plays or operas performed on the occasion of the Royal birthday. No celebratory plays or operas are recorded for the years 1703, 1708, 1710 and 1711. The opera *Camilla* is performed at court twice, on 6 February 1707 and on 5 February 1709, of which only the 1707 performance is explicitly dedicated to the Queen. On 6 February 1705, the opera *Arsinoe, Queen of Cyprus* was performed at St. James's, and in 1706 there is singing, dancing, and a play (*The Anatomist*) at Court.

<sup>24</sup> Gibson, 136

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Frey, xiii-xiv

describing among other things the numerous parting gifts that were lavished upon him<sup>27</sup>, and the yacht that was being prepared for him that would take him back to Holland:

Londen, den 23. Februarius [1712]

Men seyde dat den Hoogh ghemelden Prins door de Coninginne noch met een afbeeltsel van Haere Majesteyt met Diamanten omset, is vereert; en dat hy in't kort sal vertrecken met het Jacht de Peregrine, welckers Volck ordre heeft om sich tot Zeylen ghereet te houden. [It is said that the high-esteemed Prince was honoured by the Queen with a diamond-studded portrait of Her Majesty; and that he shall leave shortly on the yacht *Peregrine*, the crew of which has received order to hoist the sails.]<sup>28</sup>

Londen, den 26. Februarius [1712]

Ontrent de verrichtinghe van den Prins Eugenius van Savoyen, die Dijnsdagh twee Expressens uyt Hollandt ontfingh, wordt noch niet vernomen wat eyghentlijck den uytslaghe daer van sal zijn; men seght dat ghemelden Prins haest weder naer Hollandt sal keeren. [No decisive answer has yet been given concerning the transactions of Prince Eugene of Savoy, who received two express letters from Holland last Tuesday. Rumour has it that said Prince will soon return to Holland.]<sup>29</sup>

Prince Eugene eventually took his “Audience of Leave” on 13 March/24 March 1712 and set out to Flanders four days later (17 March/28 March 1712), “the Business he came about ... postponed ... so long [by the House of Commons], that he was forced to return home without any Answer”<sup>30</sup> The seemingly trivial “human interest stories” that find their way into *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen*, reporting of the sumptuousness and regal splendour with which Prince Eugene of Savoy was met upon his coming to England hide between the lines a rich source of information on the current political-diplomatic, and dynastic intrigues.

### ***The Duke d’Aumont’s Diplomatic Mission in London, January-November 1713***

The covert political tendencies of socio-cultural news from London in the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* stand perhaps most clearly revealed when coverage of certain events is sparse or absent while others are discussed in great detail, raising important questions about the selection of news by the newspaper’s correspondents and editors. The second set of items discussed in this essay deals with a prolonged visit to London by the French ambassador extraordinary, Louis d’Aumont de Rochebaron, Duc d’Aumont, from January to November 1713. When the Treaty of Utrecht put an end to the war of the Spanish Succession in April, d’Aumont was commissioned by Louis XIV to stay in London to re-establish the ties with England. Although the hostilities, which had involved most of Europe, were officially over, England and France had yet to negotiate a treaty of commerce that would open up trade between the two countries, who had been restricting the import of each other’s goods since the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>31</sup> D’Aumont arrived in early January, but his public entry was delayed until July by various circumstances, including a fire that completely destroyed the house he occupied in Ormond Street. On 1 July OS, the *London Gazette* reported:

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<sup>27</sup> *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen*, 3 March 1712 (dated Londen den 19. Februarius): “Men versekert, dat de Stadt Londen den Prins Eugenius voor sijn vertreck, dat noch niet vastghestelt is, sal Tracteren, en hem een Present van een Silver Servies met een Goude Lampet, en een Lampet-kan sal doen.” [We are assured that the City of London shall honour Prince Eugene of Savoy on the occasion of his leave-taking – which has not been settled upon, and make him a present of a silver service with a golden wash basin and a water jug.]

<sup>28</sup> *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen*, 3 March 1712.

<sup>29</sup> *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen*, 7 March 1712 .

<sup>30</sup> *The Life and Military Actions*, 254 and Gibson, 136.

<sup>31</sup> Schaeper, 3-4.

[The Duke] was received at Greenwich by the Earl of Scarsdale, and Sir Clement Cotterell, Master of the Ceremonies, accompanied by six Gentlemen of the Privy Chamber. From thence he was brought by Water, with all his Train, in her Majesty's Barges, to the Tower. At his Landing he was met and complimented by the Earl of Northampton, Constable of the Tower, and the Guard being drawn out upon the Wharf, saluted his Excellency as he passed by. ... From thence he proceeded to Somerset-house, in the following manner.

The rest of the paragraph offers a description of the long procession of nobility in coaches and on horseback accompanying the Duke, appropriately seated in the Queen's state coach, to his residence at Somerset House. On 4 July OS, the *Gazette* informed its readers that d'Aumont had been granted a public audience at St James's.

His Excellency was receiv'd at the Palace-Gate by Sir Philip Meadows, Knight Marshal. Her Majesty's Foot-Guards were drawn up in the Court, and the Officers saluted his Excellency with Pike and Colours, and afterwards with their Hats as he pass'd by, the Drums beating a Call. He was receiv'd at the Door of the Guard-Chamber by the Lord Paget, Captain of the Yeomen of the Guard, and conducted by him to the end of his Command: After which he was receiv'd by the Duke of Beaufort, Captain of the Band of Gentlemen Pensioners, who were rang'd on each side of the room, and conducted by him in the fame manner to the Door of the Room of Audience, where he was met by Mr. Vice-Chamberlain, in the absence of the Lord Chamberlain of Her Majesty's Houshold.

The mission failed, and the Duke returned home empty-handed in November. It was not until the Eden Treaty of 1786, when England and France reached a mutual, albeit short-lived, agreement on tariff reductions, that commercial relations improved significantly.

The *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* too dwelled at length on the pomp and ceremony with which d'Aumont was treated by the English nobility, offering in its 27 July issue an account of his reception at St James's that is almost identical to the one in the *London Gazette*. Three days later, however, the Ghent newspaper took a different course when it described the Duke's own display of courtesy and magnificence.

Des anderendaeghs gaf den Hertogh van Aumont, extraordinairen Ambassadeur van Vrankrijck een magnifiecke Maeltijdt aen den Meester der Ceremonien ende aen de Officiers die van weghens de Coninginne geassisteert hadden in sijne publiecke Audientie: dese Maeltijdt wiert ghevolght van een seer schoon Concert van Musieck, het welcke geschiede in den Hof van het Paleys van Sommerset.

[The next day, the Duke d'Aumont, ambassador extraordinary of France, offered a sumptuous banquet to the Master of the Ceremonies and the officers who had assisted on behalf of the Queen in his public audience: this banquet was followed by a very beautiful concert of music, which took place in the garden of Somerset Palace.]

The *Post-tydingen* also referred to "een groote Collatie met een Bal" [a large dinner and ball] hosted by d'Aumont "aen meer dan 600. Persoonen van Qualiteit van beyde Sexen" [for more than 600 persons of rank of both sexes], and on 28 September, it reported that the Duke had given "een seer magnifieck Concert in 't Musieck op de Themsche" [a very magnificent concert of music on the Thames]. On 16 May, the newspaper had already described the preparations and festivities leading up to his public entry:

Den Hertogh van Aumont Extraordinairen Ambassadeur van Vrankrijck, heeft seer kostelijke Liveryen doen maecken om binnen weynighe daghen synen opentlijcken Intrede te doen, ende Sijne Excellentie blijft op sijn Landthuys by het Collegie van Chelsey, de Grooten van beyde de Gheslachten nooden, prachtigh onthaelen, ende met Musieck als anders verluchtighen.

[The Duke d'Aumont, ambassador extraordinary of France, has had expensive liveries made for his public entry in a few days, and his Excellency is staying at his residence near Chelsey

College, inviting the great of both sexes, entertaining them splendidly, and diverting them with music as usual.]

None of the London newspapers reported in such detail on these events, if they mentioned them at all. The *London Gazette* remained silent about them, and the *British Mercury* and the *Post Boy* only briefly mentioned a “most noble Entertainment to above 100 of the Nobility” and a “Masquerade” at Somerset House on 13 and 21 May respectively. What the London press did advertise were the many entertainments organized by the English in the Duke’s honour: “an Extraordinary Consort of Vocal and Instrumental Musick” at the Great Room in St. Alban’s Street, and three comedies, Shadwell’s *Libertine Destroy’d*, Fletcher’s *Humorous Lieutenant*, and Susanna Centlivre’s *Busie-Body*, performed at Drury Lane in June, August and September respectively.<sup>32</sup>

That the readers of the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* were informed of the concerts and balls hosted by the French Duke but not of the plays staged by the English at the Theatre Royal may suggest how much was at stake in d’Aumont’s mission for the Southern provinces of the Low Countries. The Treaty of Utrecht had officially redrawn Europe’s political borders only a few months earlier, bringing the Southern Netherlands under Austrian rule, but the full economic consequences of this reorganization of power relations had yet to become apparent. After d’Aumont in his public address to Queen Anne had expressed the hope of “a Firm and Lasting Union” between the two countries, in whose hands lay “the Ballance of all the Powers of *Europe*,”<sup>33</sup> the floor was given to Monsieur Tugghe, the Deputy of the Magistrates of Dunkirk. Scorned by the English for his perseverance, Tugghe had come to London to beg for the annulment of a stipulation in the Treaty of Utrecht which bound the French to the demolition of the port and fortifications of Dunkirk. In a long memorial to the Queen, Tugghe listed the damages and losses the British economy might suffer from the execution of the clause. Dunkirk, he argued, was essential for trade with the continent, and its destruction would clear the way for the Dutch “to assume to themselves alone all the Commerce of the *Austrian* Low Countries, and of all *Germany*,”

Being apprehensive that other Nations might share those two branches of Trade with them, in Case the Harbour of that Town were preserv’d, because it is the only Harbour on the Coast from *Ostend* West ward, by which Commodities from foreign Countries may be brought into those Provinces, which they design to surround, as it were, with a Wall of Brass, in order to secure for themselves all the Trade thereof by the *Scheld* the *Lys*, and the *Rhine*. And as it highly concerns *Great Britain* not to be excluded from those two Branches of Trade, so it very much concerns *Great Britain* to preserve the Harbour of *Dunkirk*, by which Means alone *Great Britain* can maintain its Commerce in the said Provinces.<sup>34</sup>

Obviously, the outcome of the negotiations between England and France would also be of considerable importance to the Austrian Netherlands, and to Ghent in particular. Situated at the confluence of the Scheldt and Lys, Ghent long enjoyed a strategic position as a hub of commerce, connecting major trade arteries from the north of France, England, the Rhineland and beyond. The *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* offers valuable glimpse of the wide range of goods that were being traded in the city in the early eighteenth century: staple food products like corn, but also more luxurious items such as “Bourgondische ende Champagne Wijnen” [Burgundy and Champagne wines], “oprecht Italiaensch Blom cool saet” [genuine Italian cauliflower seed], “Spaenschen Chocolaat ende Spaenschen Kappers” [Spanish chocolate and Spanish capers], “Siviliaenschen ende Barcelonischen snuyf” [snuff tobacco from Seville and Barcelona], “Appel-China” [oranges], “Jesuminen van Peru,” [Peruvian jasmine] and “Grenaden” [pomegranates].<sup>35</sup> To keep its looms busy, the city of old depended on the import of English wool, and more recently also on the import of wool from Spain. From the second half of the seventeenth century onwards, however, the industry was in decline following the closing of the Scheldt in 1648 and the establishment of protectionist custom duties by

<sup>32</sup> See *Spectator* (11 February 1712), *Daily Courant* (2 June 1713), *Guardian* (5 August 1713), *Daily Courant* (23 September 1713).

<sup>33</sup> Boyer, 37.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>35</sup> See the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* for 16 January, 27 March and 26 June 1713.

the surrounding nations.<sup>36</sup> The Treaty of Utrecht, moreover, threatened the trade ties with the Iberian peninsula, which “with its links to the Atlantic islands and Spanish America” had been considered “the major partner in international trade for Flanders and Brabant” for over a century.<sup>37</sup>

Ghent would recover in the course of the eighteenth century, becoming “a pivot for the international linen trade and (later) ... the region’s cotton center,”<sup>38</sup> but in 1713 this was by no means a clear prospect for the mercantile reading public of the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* who were following the news trickling in from across the Channel. Reports published in the aftermath of the Treaty were vague about its economic implications, and many of them required considerable decoding. As Theo Luyckx has pointed out, licensed newspapers such as the *Post-tydingen* were under control of the government, which meticulously scanned their contents and did not tolerate reports on international political issues in which it was directly involved. Between 12 November and 3 December 1681, publication of the *Post-tydingen* was suspended because the newspaper had divulged England’s plan to send troops to the Spanish Netherlands to prevent parts of the country being claimed by France. Attempts to curb French expansion were later formalized in the Treaty of Utrecht, a Dutch translation of which was offered by the heirs of Maximiliaen Graet to the Ghent reading public in or shortly after April 1713 and which stipulated that the Spanish Netherlands should come under Austrian rule and could under no circumstance ever be transferred to the French crown. If the foreign correspondent and the printers of the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen* were hoping that d’Aumont’s mission, if successful, would also benefit the Ghent trade, they could not openly say so in the newspaper.

What they could do was report extensively on the Duke’s lavish reception in London and the elaborate ceremony surrounding his audience with the Queen. In addition, they focused on the sumptuous entertainments organized by d’Aumont: balls, banquets, dinners, concerts. In politically as well as economically turbulent times, descriptions of these socio-cultural events served as barometers of the relations between the two negotiating parties and in particular of the French ambassador’s strength of purpose. Readers of the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen*, who were well experienced in interpreting this type of news contents, were indirectly told that France was sparing no trouble or expense to defend its economic interests against the demands and constraints put forward by the English. Only at the end of the Duke’s visit, when he was making the final preparations for his return to Paris, did the newspaper make mention of the English court’s financial exertions to please d’Aumont. On 5 October, it noted that the French ambassador had received a parting gift from the Queen: “het Afbeeldsel van haere Majesteyt, met een Croon daer boven en met Diamanten omset, 10000 Ponden Sterlincks waerdigh” [a portrait of Her Majesty, topped by a crown and circled with diamonds, worth 10000 pounds sterling].

Judging from these items, reporting diplomatic missions of great international import, while at the same time describing at length and in great detail the social lives of dignitaries such as the Prince of Savoy and the Duke d’Aumont, we must observe a great interest on the part of the Ghent readership on developments both on the macrolevel (i.e. national and international politics) as well as on the microlevel (i.e. socio-cultural news). In this essay on the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen*, we have argued that reports from London on socio-cultural display often functioned as indicators of political agency. As such they offer us valuable information on the sympathies and allegiances of particular groups of people in the Low Countries and what they considered the desired outcome of recent events and developments in international affairs. We also believe, however, that news items such as the ones on Prince Eugene’s and the Duke d’Aumont’s visits to London document the nascent interest of the Low Countries in London’s vibrant cultural life at Court, in the noble houses and in the theatres. What the *Ghendtsche Post-tydingen*, in reporting extensively on cultural events organized by and in honour of high-ranking visitors from abroad, demonstrates perhaps more clearly than the London newspapers is that London itself served as an entrepôt of cultural influence and exchange. The Ghent newspaper press, in turn, constitutes a useful repository for further research into the reception of eighteenth-century British culture on the opposite side of the Channel.

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<sup>36</sup> Hartwell, 320; Bruneel, 258.

<sup>37</sup> Parmentier, 74.

<sup>38</sup> Bruneel, 243.



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