# RECORD-KEEPING AND STATUS PERFORMANCE IN THE EARLY MODERN LOW COUNTRIES*

From the tenth and eleventh centuries onwards, a network of cities flowered in the Low Countries that derived their existence largely from trade and industry. The practical exigencies that came with the large-scale production and commercialization of goods made sure that in this part of Western Europe the traditional monopoly of the clergy on literacy was broken early on by the precocious rise of a class of merchants and craftsmen who committed to the written word, if only for bookkeeping and business correspondence.[1] In the wake of the urbanization process, written records had become an important constituent of the social fabric.

Familiar as they were with charters, tax registers, books of account, recipes, order lists, payment receipts, storage inventories, prayer books, poems, pamphlets and so on, the inhabitants of the Low Countries understood that records were replete with social meaning. As literacy and numeracy demanded investment in education, the mastery of those skills mirrored socio-economic inequalities. Also, the exact use of those skills differed from group to group, ranging from clergymen writing sermons and theological treatises to merchants and innkeepers tallying stock, profit or loss, to lawyers and judges producing pleas, legal notes, witness lists and sentences. For that reason, contemporaries must have grasped that the records they produced, used or kept, reflected their social positions. A charter attesting to the lease or sale of a plot of land or a house in a town or a shire not only bears witness to a transaction, but also to the belonging — however limited or transient — of the parties involved to landed society of a given region. Written records are the stuff of identity because they encapsulate the bonds that tie both individuals and groups to broader societal frameworks.[2] As Stephen

* The authors wish to thank the Arickx family for permission to study the manuscript discussed in this essay, and Tjamke Snijders and Susie Sutch for helpful criticism of earlier drafts of this essay.

[1] Hilde De Ridder-Symoens, 'Education and Literacy in the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands', *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies,* xvi (1995).

[2] The durability of written records is the only advantage over oral communication that is commonly accepted among scholars: see the seminal work of Brian Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, 1984).

 © The Past and Present Society

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

Greenblatt put it as early as 1980, identity is not self-referential, but 'the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society'.[3] In the later Middle Ages, the importance of written records as enduring testimonies to identity as a sense of continuity over time became even stronger with the introduction of paper. In contrast to texts written on parchment, texts on paper were not easily erased or modified, so that they effectively entombed information on the identity of a given individual or group, whose sense of self often continued to evolve after the moment of the text's production.[4]

In this contribution, we claim that while written records inevitably reflected aspects of identity as a social process, the inverse is also true: status performances shaped the ways in which records were used as social markers. As contemporaries were aware of the social qualities of the documents that filled their living spaces, work spaces and archives, they learned to exploit this social function. In this process, social groups developed distinct cultural norms that dictated how extant records could be used and interpreted as testimonies of status. As records often included references to property rights and entitlements, as well as to the ways in which such rights were transferred from one generation to the next, they were useful to those who wanted to craft a narrative about their social position. We will explore such a culture of record-keeping for a specific status group, namely the nobility of Flanders. This case study is unusually relevant for social historians, because in the most populous principality of the Low Countries, the social composition of the nobility was influenced by urbanization and commercialization rather than by state formation. Being or becoming noble largely revolved around the ownership of a seigneurie, that is, a property right that endowed its owner with public authority over a local community. This contrasts with neighbouring polities, where elite status was more closely monitored by the state. In England, for example, gentry status was regulated through sumptuary legislation, while in France, noble status was confirmed or conferred by princely patents or fiscal exemptions. As state intervention in Flanders remained limited in this respect before the seventeenth century, its nobility was largely shaped by the trends in a specific property market, namely that of seigneurial

[3] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980), 256.

[4] For the definition of identity and the importance of paper, see Valentin Groebner, *Who Are You? Identification, Deception and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 2007), respectively 25, 258–9 and 90, 158–9.

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

estates.[5] The predominance of town and market made Flemish society a stormy sea to navigate, as long-established power elites had to realign their interests with the growing number of city dwellers who had the means to acquire lordship by purchase, or by marriage and inheritance. One anchor of identity, we argue, was a culture of record-keeping that was distinctive to noble status groups. Records that testified to the durable ownership of lordship were used as the fulcrum of narratives about one's own position as a nobleman, knight or courtier.

The second claim of this essay concerns the metahistory of record-keeping. Experiments with the use of records for social purposes may have been common in the early modern era, but they appear to be shielded from view by assumptions that are deeply rooted in the modern historical profession. As contemporaries understood the social potential of extant records, they did not hesitate to use texts with administrative or legal formats when they composed narratives about self and status. This practice does not sit well with the distinction between 'administrative' and 'narrative' sources that was central to nineteenth-century historicism (also known by the misnomer 'positivism').[6] In the wake of historicism, the inclusion of records in personal texts is often understood as an early form of empiricist learning, but we will argue that this mixing of records and self-authored personal writings often proceeded from very different assumptions than those of nineteenth-century historians and their successors.

## I
## A LORD AND HIS MANUSCRIPT

As the social history of record-keeping in the Low Countries is still in its infancy, this essay adopts the methodological approach of micro-history.[7] We study the culture of noble record-keeping through a manuscript authored by one John, lord of Dadizele, a village lordship situated between the Flemish towns of Ypres and Courtrai. Around 1480, this scion of the lesser nobility worked on a manuscript of approximately 240 paper folios in which he

[5] Discussed in full in Frederik Buylaert, 'Lordship, Urbanization and Social Change in Late Medieval Flanders', *Past and Present*, no. 227 (May, 2015).

[6] For the confusion between historicism and positivism as two distinct historiographical traditions, see Georg G. Iggers, Q. Edward Wang, and Supriya Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow, 2008), 119–25, which also provides a discussion of historicist source typologies.

[7] For a discussion of the trend to use microhistory as a label for case studies that illustrate well-studied historical processes, rather than as a methodology to reveal such a process, see John-Paul Ghobrial, 'The Secret Life of Elias of Babylon and the Uses of Global Microhistory', *Past and Present,* no. 222 (Feb. 2014).

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

presented the reader with a detailed description of his own life. Two elements make this manuscript relevant to our line of enquiry. Firstly, it is a narrative that is constructed as a patchwork of new texts and copies of extant records. Only a limited part of the manuscript is self-authored. In addition to an autobiography and a genealogy, the forty-two chapters largely consist of a diverse range of administrative documents that all pertained to the author's activities as a noble lord and landowner, as a military leader and as a princely officer and courtier. Secondly, it is possible to reconstruct the target audience of the manuscript. As we will argue below, it was intended to circulate among a select group of family and friends — most of them noble or at least on a par with nobles — that had the village lordship of Dadizele as its core. Strikingly, the lord of Dadizele assumed that his readers shared with him a familiarity with archival records that would allow them to decode his manuscript. There are no clues in the manuscript as to how it should be read, so the author expected that its contents would have been intelligible to his audience, even if that content was largely generated through the combination of pre-existing texts rather than through explicit, self-authored statements. A coherent interpretation of the manuscript can thus reveal the cultural matrix in which the combination of extant records created new content for a nobleman and his peers.

The manuscript under discussion has by and large escaped critical scrutiny to this day. Traditionally kept in the castle of Dadizele by the descendants of the author, it had been lost since 1904, only to resurface recently.[8] In the past century, an edition from 1850 was available to scholars, but in the absence of the original text, it was impossible to judge its quality. For that reason, historians limited themselves to mining the edition for data on the political crisis that rocked the late fifteenth-century Low Countries.[9] John of Dadizele was a key figure in these events, and if nothing else, it is clear that this prominence prompted him to start the manuscript's composition in May 1480. At that point in his life, his career had flourished beyond all reasonable expectations for a nobleman of limited stature. Born in 1432, John had assumed various political and military duties between the 1450s and 1470s under the patronage of the families De Lalaing and Clèves, two of the leading noble dynasties of the Low Countries. He gradually became an important figure in his own right

[8] The authenticity of the manuscript is confirmed by watermark analysis: they correspond with those of paper circulating in the Low Countries around 1480. See Charles-Moïse Briquet, *Les filigranes: dictionnaire historique des marques du papier dès leur apparition vers 1282 jusqu'en 1600* (Amsterdam, 1968), series 1736–61.

[9] For this crisis, see Jelle Haemers, *For the Common Good: State Power and Urban Revolts in the Reign of Mary of Burgundy, 1477–1482* (Turnhout, 2009).

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

following the unexpected death, in 1477, of Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy and ruler over the Low Countries. Dominion over the Low Countries now fell to Charles' daughter, Mary, who would soon marry the future Emperor Maximilian I of Habsburg. This dynastic succession provoked the king of France into an attempt to conquer the Low Countries, and this provided the lord of Dadizele with a chance to shine. Thanks to the influence of his patrons, he was appointed to the office of bailiff of Ghent, the largest city of Flanders, and as the captain of a Flemish army of urban and rural levees, he distinguished himself in the defence of the Low Countries against France. In recognition of his military leadership, John was knighted and he received important positions at the Burgundian-Habsburg court, as well as the promise to be appointed as one of the four *maîtres d'hôtel* (chief stewards of the household) of Maximilian of Habsburg. Little wonder that he wanted to commit his story to paper. As a corollary of this meteoric rise to power, however, the lord of Dadizele became embroiled in court intrigues and the increasingly tense relations between Maximilian of Habsburg and the large Flemish cities. As this culminated in his murder in October 1481, the manuscript was never completed: it contains many texts with blank passages where John intended to fill in details — usually dates or numbers — at a later occasion. Because John was remembered in his village as a war hero for centuries to come, the manuscript was carefully preserved by his descendants who refrained from completing the text.[10]

While unfinished, the manuscript is clearly a meticulously planned project. In that respect, it is different from most family chronicles, as they often came into being as a corollary of practical forms of literacy. This is best documented by the Italian *ricordanze* and the French *livres de raison*, where the practical information of an account book gradually became interspersed with household tips, genealogical and biographical notes or historiographical texts up to a point in which those additions came to constitute the bulk of the memorandum. A similar organic process is noted for commonplace books and travel accounts.[11] The Dadizele manuscript was a much more premeditated affair. Firstly, the posed handwriting and absence of any deletions make clear that this is no draft copy and it does not include many practical records that must have been available to John of Dadizele, such as accounts with the revenues and expenses of his household and his landed estates, storage

[10] The last dated entry in the manuscript refers to 3 September 1481.

[11] For an introduction, see Peter Burke, 'Representations of the Self from Petrarch to Descartes', in Roy Porter (ed.), *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London and New York, 1997), 21–2; and Adam Smyth, *Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010), 1–2, 8–9, 13–14.

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

inventories, revenues from properties and rights, and so on. Secondly, only a few texts in the manuscript might have served an administrative purpose, and there is no indication that they were ever used to that effect. Thirdly, the pages of the entire book were numbered beforehand by the author and many pages were carefully left blank to receive texts with the further development of the author's career. Lastly, the texts of the 42 chapters are connected through an extensive web of cross-references and preceded by a table of contents.[12]

Apart from being planned from the outset, the manuscript was highly selective, up to the point that it cannot have served as a cartulary. Elite families often kept cartularies that registered all documents, issued or received, that were relevant to the family's patrimony and status as a safeguard against loss of the original documents, just like ecclesiastical, urban or princely administrations. The Dadizele manuscript clearly served a different purpose. Not only are a wide range of common administrative records such as household accounts left out, the manuscript also excludes more formal documents of considerable importance to the lord and his family. In 1464, for example, Duke Philip the Good issued a sentence in a fierce conflict between John, lord of Dadizele, and his brother-in-law, the nobleman Baldwin van de Woestijne. John had raided Baldwin's castle with an armed force to bring his sister Anne and all her properties back to Dadizele.[13] The manuscript does not contain a single reference to this affair, let alone a reproduction of relevant records. Other important documents that did not cast a bad light on the lord of Dadizele and his family were excluded as well. In the 1460s, for example, John established a religious foundation in memory of the late baroness of Eine, whose vast inheritance was at least partially claimed by the family of John's wife, Catherine Breydel. The relevant charter and its hefty financial stipulations are not included or mentioned in his manuscript.[14] The lord of Dadizele also refrained from the use of private correspondence. Judging from preserved collections of letters of other fifteenth-century noble families, he must have had at his disposal many letters to family, friends and patrons with emotional content, but barring one exception that was relevant to his political exploits, he limited himself to reproducing official correspondence with the

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

[12] A full transcription of the table of contents is available at the Academia.edu account of the authors, <https://ugent.academia.edu/FrederikBuylaert> and <https://kuleuven.academia.edu/JelleHaemers>.

[13] Rijksarchief Gent, Fonds Piers de Raveschoot: nr. 1577.

[14] Discussed in René De Keyser, 'Het jaargetijde van Jan van Dadizele te Oostkerke', in *Album Joseph Delbaere* (Rumbeke, 1968), 89–93; and René De Keyser, 'Bijdrage tot de kennis van de eerste en van de laatste leden van de familie "Van Oostkerke"', *Rond de Poldertorens*, xvi (1972), 112–15.

Burgundian-Habsburg state or the towns.[15] This rigorous selection shows that the lord of Dadizele had trawled through what must have been extensive and diverse archives, retaining only those records that he found relevant to the story of his life as he wanted to convey it to others. He carefully and selectively used records as an exercise in self-representation.

The target audience must have been fairly regional and limited in numbers. Firstly, it is likely that very few copies of the manuscript circulated. Making a manuscript copy of such a bulky text demanded much time and resources, and the lord of Dadizele would not have expected to see his work in press. Printing was booming in the Low Countries from 1473 onwards, but before the second half of the sixteenth century, such a highly personal text was not attractive to risk-averse printers who mainly focused on almanacs, prayer books, fiction and classical texts.[16] Secondly, John's memoirs and other self-authored segments of the manuscript are all written in Middle Dutch. This is striking because this language was foreign to many at the French-speaking court of Maximilian and Mary.[17] This must have been a conscious decision, as the lord of Dadizele had the education to conform to the French literary practices of the court in which he had come to enjoy a position of prominence. He was schooled for six years in the French-speaking towns of Lille and Arras by Jean Pochon, one of the masters of the Collegiate Church of St Pierre in Lille, whose school was attended by several children of the Duke of Burgundy and of highborn courtiers.[18] All this suggests that the manuscript of John of Dadizele was intended to circulate in the closely knit world of his family and the Dutch-speaking elite families of his home shire of Courtrai, with whom he was connected through marriage and friendship and whom he must have received frequently at his manor in Dadizele.[19] As the distinction

[15] Useful points of comparison are the famous collection of letters left by the English Paston family or the letters edited and discussed in *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters: Noblewomen in Fifteenth-Century Bohemia*, ed. John M. Klassen, Eva Doležalová, and Lynn Szabo (Cambridge, 2001).

[16] An overview in Yuval N. Harari, *Renaissance Military Memoirs: War, History and Identity, 1450–1600* (Woodbridge, 2004), Appendix B.

[17] See Hanno Wijsman, *Luxury Bound: Illustrated Manuscript Production and Noble and Princely Book Ownership in the Burgundian Netherlands* (1400–1550) (Turnhout, 2010), 96–100.

[18] For Jean Pochon: Hugo van der Velden, 'A Reply to Volker Herzner and a Note on the Putative Author of the Ghent Quatrain', *Simiolus*, xxxv (2011), 139–40.

[19] Between *c.*1350 and *c.*1500, the family of the author concluded eleven marriages, eight of which were with nobles. The three other marriage partners were recruited from the urban elites of Bruges and Courtrai: Frederik Buylaert, *Eeuwen van ambitie: De adel in laatmiddeleeuws Vlaanderen* (Brussels, 2010), 127–30.

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

between the public and the private was blurred in noble households, a manuscript kept in the author's library, muniments room, or living quarters would have been accessible to his social networks.[20] As has been noted for the English gentry by Daniel Woolf, Flemish rural and urban elites must have circulated chronicles, genealogies, heraldic treatises and other commodities of honour.[21] It can be argued that the manuscript fits this pattern. This group must have had an active interest in the career of the increasingly famous lord of Dadizele and it was sufficiently literate to cope with the intellectual demands of the manuscript (see Plate 1).[22]

## II

## TRUTH AS THE SOURCE OF HONOUR: ARCHIVES AND EVIDENTIARY LEARNING

The lord of Dadizele was not the first to see the possibilities of extant records for autobiographical purposes. Already in the thirteenth century, a noble Franciscan friar had larded his life story with excerpts of documents.[23] What is new, at least to our knowledge, is the inversion of the balance in the Dadizele manuscript: rather than including some copies of records in his memoirs, the author embedded a limited number of self-authored texts in a wide array of records. On their own, none of the selected records and new texts are exceptional — even the memoirs adhere to the conventions of a genre that was well established by the late fifteenth century[24] — but brought together in the manuscript, they reveal that a fifteenth-century nobleman had no difficulty in thinking of extant records in complex ways, not only seeing the practical purpose they served, but also how they could be redeployed to form a multifaceted representation of his public persona. The aggregate of charters, letters of commissions, genealogies, memoirs and so on, presented the reader with types of documents that must have been familiar to social elites. As they all pertained to different aspects of the public position of John, lord of Dadizele, they fused the author's different roles — as a lord, the head of

[20] For a discussion, see Kristen B. Neuschel, 'Noble Households in the Sixteenth Century: Material Settings and Human Communities', *French Historical Studies*, xv (1988), 618–21.

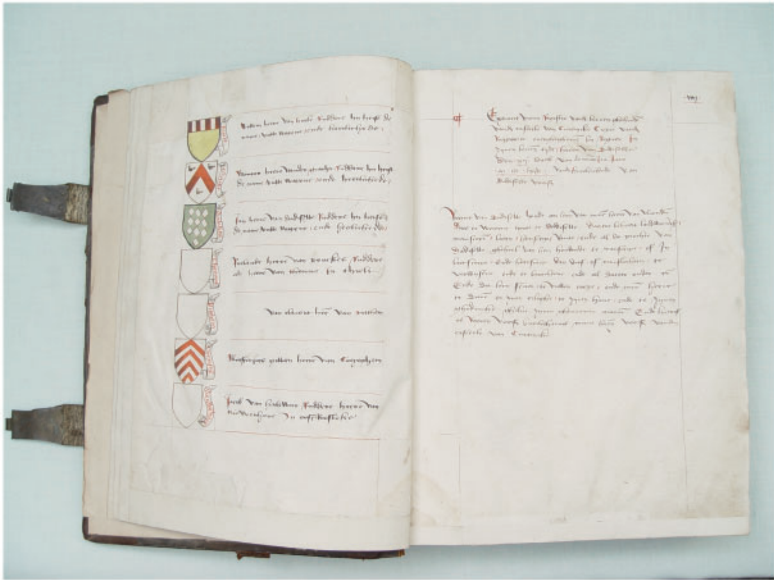
[21] Daniel Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture, 1500–1730* (Oxford, 2003), 75–6, 80–4; and Harari, *Renaissance Military Memoirs*, 89, 97–8, 103, 113–14, 179.

[22] For the education of the nobility, see Hilde De Ridder-Symoens, 'Adel en universiteiten: humanistisch ideaal of bittere noodzaak?', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, xciii (1980).

[23] Discussed in Adnan A. Husain, 'Writing Identity as Remembered History: Person, Place and Time in Friar Salimbene's Autobiographical Prose Map', *Viator*, xxxvi (2005), 266–7, 279–80.

[24] Harari, *Renaissance Military Memoirs*, 4–5, 8–9, 21 and Appendix A.

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016



**1.** Fos. $3^{v}$–$4^{r}$ of the Dadizele Manuscript. This chapter provides a survey of the twelve seigneuries of the shire of Courtrai and their owners. The coat of arms and lordship of Dadizele are listed third on the left hand page. Reproduced by kind permission of the Arickx family.

the noble lineage, a courtier and so on — into one image. To borrow Hayden White's felicitous phrase, content was created by combining pre-existing forms.[25]

As to the crucial question of how this creative process worked exactly and to what purpose, a first line of enquiry is provided by Joseph Kervyn de Lettenhove, who in 1850 published an edition of the Dadizele manuscript.[26] Comparison with the rediscovered manuscript confirms that the edition provides a meticulous transcription of the original text, but it also shows that the edition was an oblique attempt at scholarly interpretation. Trained at the Sorbonne, amongst others by Jules Michelet, France's first historicist scholar, Kervyn de Lettenhove refrained from an extensive study. Rather, he cemented his own historicist interpretation of the manuscript by rearranging the constituent texts in his edition. In the manuscript, the autobiography

[25] Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), esp. 1–25.

[26] *Mémoires de Jean de Dadizeele*, ed. Joseph Kervyn de Lettenhove (Bruges, 1850).

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

constitutes the eleventh of the 42 chapters, but in the edition, it is presented as the opening chapter. This focus on the memoirs is also entrenched in the title of the edition ('*Mémoires de Jean de Dadizeele*'), whereas in the original heading of the manuscript (fo. $1^r$), it is only one element among many:

> Register, started in the year 1480, concerning John, lord of Dadizele, knight, namely a part of his life, the seigneuries, fiefs and other properties belonging to him with all their appendants, either in a feudal or allodial manner; his kinship relations; copies of the letters of commission of the offices he fulfilled as well as many other texts concerning many diverse topics.

As the lord of Dadizele resorted to a description rather than a title, he clearly felt that the form of his manuscript did not conform to any established genre, be it annals, chronicles, or *memoriaelen* and *memorieboecken* — the Dutch-language equivalent of the *livres de raison* and *ricordanze* discussed above.[27] For Kervyn de Lettenhove, however, the manuscript clearly belonged to the genre of historiography, and critical historiography at that. In this view, the many records included in the manuscript are no autonomous texts; rather, they constituted a source appendix to the claims made in the memoirs (pp. 1–26). He also changed the original sequence of the records, listing first all documents issued by various institutions (pp. 27–132) and concluding with all the documents that were written by the lord of Dadizele himself and thus less reliable according to the dictums of historicism (pp. 133–94).[28] In this way, Kervyn de Lettenhove imposed the classic distinction between narrative sources and administrative sources and in the brief introduction he understands the latter to be '*pièces justificatives*' to the autobiography. The cross-references in the manuscript then supposedly function as the equivalent of the modern footnote as an instrument to substantiate claims about the past with archival sources that are listed and reproduced as a complement to the text. In this view, the lord of Dadizele thus committed to evidentiary learning, albeit out of social aspirations rather than

[27] Memory books proliferated in Flanders from the fourteenth century. See a discussion in Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, 'L'écriture de la mémoire urbaine en Flandre et en Brabant (XIV$^e$–XVI$^e$ siècle)', in Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan and Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin (eds.), *Villes de Flandre et d'Italie (XIII$^e$–XVI$^e$ siècle): les enseignements d'une comparaison* (Turnhout, 2008).

[28] For an incisive introduction to historicism, see Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown, CT, 2005), 23–35.

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

academic ones. The rigorous documentation of his life story made it convincing to the reader, and thus a source of honour.

With the advantage of hindsight, it is easy to see that the editor's understanding of the manuscript reflects the ideals of historicism that spread rapidly in mid nineteenth-century Europe. Yet, *zeitbedingt* as it is, this interpretation is anything but dead. In current scholarship, the inclusion of charters and the like in narrative texts is still understood as an attempt to substantiate a claim to truth-telling.[29] Historians are aware that claims to noble status were not just accepted by contemporaries, but critically scrutinized: nobility was a social role that had to be performed well to be effective, and making convincing claims to ownership of lordship, ancestry and prowess was certainly part of that.[30] It is easy to imagine that the circulation of written evidence was used to give steel to such claims. Many of the records copied in the manuscript had after all come into being as documentary proof of entitlement to properties, rights and offices in case those entitlements were called into question. Yet, caution is in order, as Anthony Grafton has pointed out that while a critical approach in historiography can be retraced to Antiquity, it was only in the seventeenth century that a 'self-consciously documentary approach to writing' became the norm. In the preceding centuries, the use of footnotes and source annexes did not sit well with a conceptualization of historiography as a literary genre that was shaped by rhetorical considerations rather than by empirical concerns.[31] Indeed, whatever the validity for other case studies to understand records included as '*Preuves*', for the manuscript it raises awkward questions.

This becomes clear if we contrast the sequence of texts in the manuscript with the rearranged edition. The opening chapter of the manuscript was not the memoirs, but a list of the twelve seigneuries of the shire of Courtrai and their owners, with Dadizele listed eighth. Strikingly, the author referred to himself as 'John, lord of Dadizele, knight. He has the name, full coat of arms and the seigneurie' (*Jan, heere van Dadiselle, ruddere. Hij heift de name, vulle wapene ende heerlichede*). This is an unusual claim. Except for England, where the replacement of the Anglo-Saxon elite with a Norman one in the Conquest of 1066 had reset the social history of power, nobles could in theory trace their

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

[29] For historiography authored by late medieval nobles, see Chris Given-Wilson, 'Chronicles of the Mortimer Family, *c.*1250–1450', in Richard G. Eales and Shaun Tyas (eds.), *Family and Dynasty in Late Medieval England: Proceedings of the 1997 Harlaxton Symposium* (Donington, 2003), 85.

[30] David M. Posner, *The Performance of Nobility in Early Modern European Literature* (Cambridge, 2004), 3–4.

[31] Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

status as lords back to the mists of time.[32] This was a source of prestige, as over time, the frequent lack of male heirs ensured that the ownership of seigneuries was constantly reshuffled among families. Including the lord of Dadizele himself, only three of the twelve seigneuries were still in the hands of the original family that derived its name from that estate. By stating that he had 'the full name and the seigneurie', John, lord of Dadizele, claimed that through him, Dadizele was still ruled by the original lineage and that he thus belonged to the family that derived its name from the seigneurie. John constantly reiterated the claim that his patrilineal descent was unbroken by referring to himself as 'John, lord of Dadizele'. This is an unusual ellipsis in a principality where the family name of noblemen was usually spelled out in written documents (for example, the fifth name on the list: 'John van Stavele, knight, lord of Izegem'). This suggests to the reader that the author's full name was 'John van Dadizele, lord of Dadizele'.

Surprisingly, only eleven folios later, the lord of Dadizele provides the reader with evidence that his claim was, in fact, open to debate. In the fourth chapter, he provides a list of all his predecessors which makes clear that the line of the lords of Dadizele had been broken in the early fourteenth century:

> Lambert, lord of Dadizele.
> William, lord of Dadizele, knight . . .
> Lady Adelise, heiress of Dadizele, who died in June 1332 . . . her epitaph is used as the altar in the south chapel of the Church of Dadizele.
> John, lord of Dadizele.
> Roger, lord of Dadizele, who married Lady Elisabeth van der Meersch in Vorselaar.

The list continues up to and including the succession to the lordship of Dadizele by the author in 1440 and makes clear that he was the direct descendant of the man who stepped in after the heiress Adelise. To any reader familiar with local customs this list would raise questions, because in Flanders, feudal seigneuries such as Dadizele did not revert to the prince when there was no male heir. Instead, they fell to a daughter and her husband, or to a cousin, even if he did not belong to that lineage.[33] As the lord of Dadizele offered no proof whatsoever that the man who succeeded Adelise in 1332 was a member of the original lineage of Dadizele, the list suggests the

[32] Woolf, *Social Circulation of the Past*, 122–5.

[33] For the feudal customary rules that applied to Dadizele, see Rik Opsommer, '*Omme dat leengoed es thoochste dinc van der weerelt*': *Het leenrecht in Vlaanderen in de 14$^{de}$ en 15$^{de}$ eeuw* (Brussels, 1995).

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

possibility of a scenario in which the seigneurie fell into the hands of outsiders by marriage or purchase. Thanks to surviving evidence other than the manuscript, it is clear that the man who became lord of Dadizele in 1332 — the author's ancestor — was indeed not a member of the original lineage, but a scion of the commoner family Van Veerdegem. Contemporaries of John, lord of Dadizele, must have been aware of this. This is revealed by the epitaphs that are preserved, one in original and one in copy, for two of the author's aunts, both of whom died some years after the murder of their nephew:

> Tombstone of Sir Charles van Vlaanderen, lord of St Gruterssaele, son of Sir Robert van Vlaanderen, deceased on 15 September 1491; Tombstone of Lady Catherine, daughter to John *van Veerdegem*, lord of Dadisele, wife to Sir Charles van Vlaanderen, deceased on 2 March 1484.[34]
>
> Here rests the respected nun and noble lady Gille, daughter to the late John *van Veerdegem*, esquire, lord of Dadizele, nun in the Church of Marquette and its abbess for 22 and a half years, who died on 23 August 1506. Recommend her soul to God in your prayers.[35] (Translation and italics by the authors.)

Up to the thirteenth century, the names of lineages were not cut-and-dried family names, and it was common then for a family to adopt the name of a newly acquired seigneurie as a new nickname. In the course of the fourteenth century, however, names became fixed, and the epitaphs show that this was also true for the Lords of Dadizele.[36] As the manuscript was aimed at the circuit of family, friends and admirers, the reader would have known that the author's full name was actually 'John van Veerdegem, lord of Dadizele' and that his claim to 'the name, full coat of arms and the seigneurie' was untenable. The carefully crafted manuscript thus included information that enabled the reader perhaps not to see through the façade but at least to note the cracks. This casts doubt on the historicist assumption that records were included as evidence for self-authored narratives. Instead, the author

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

[34] Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België, Brussels, Fonds Merghelynck, nr. 26.

[35] Benoît Chauvin and Guillaume Delepierre, 'Autour de la pierre tombale de Gille de Dadizeele, abesse de Marquette (1480–1503)', *Annales du comité flamand de France*, lxii (2004).

[36] For this evolution, see the primary sources listed in Frederik Buylaert, *Repertorium van de Vlaamse adel (c.1350 – c.1500)* (Ghent, 2011).

was preaching to the choir, expecting his audience to join him in what was an unusually favourable interpretation of the history of his house (see Plate 2).[37]

## III

## HONOUR AS THE SOURCE OF TRUTH: ARCHIVES AND STATUS GROUPS

The Dadizele manuscript was not unique in expecting goodwill from its reader. Earlier research suggests that this was typical for the literary exploits of the nobility. Understanding the incentives for a writer to lie or to remain silent on certain elements when narrating events in which the author himself had been involved, noblemen insisted that the reliability of any account hinged on the willingness of an author to tell the truth. As nobility revolved around a claim to honour, and honour implied that one would not deign to lie, nobles expected to be believed not because they provided proof, but because they were sincere. For that reason, noblemen who wrote memoirs only rarely, if ever, rooted their claims in their position as an eyewitness or in the discussion of supposedly reliable records. The self-definition of the nobility as a community of honour also explains the strong bias in the literary culture of the nobility towards tangible events that bestowed honour, while ignoring the forces that shaped those events or how those events impinged on the author as an individual. As Yuval Harari has put it in his discussion of military memoirs:

> Every nobleman worthy of the name had been socialized since infancy to believe that there are in this world certain deeds that should be remembered simply because they should be remembered, irrespective of their illuminating, inspirational, instructive or causal roles. Certain deeds that, if all goes well, will be remembered till the end of time. And a nobleman's vocation in life was to perform such deeds. This was a crucial credo of the cult of honour, and the basis of the noble view of history. History for them was commemorative — not illuminating, or inspiring, or instructive. This is the most ancient, most basic and most powerful view of what history and memory are — not a means, but an aim in itself. According to this view, history is the universal hall of fame and honour.[38]

[37] His family was willing to indulge John's aspirations: the epitaph of his tombstone that survives to this day in the church of Dadizele refers to 'John, lord of Dadizele' rather than 'John van Veerdegem, lord of Dadizele'.

[38] Harari, *Renaissance Military Memoirs*, 40–2, 111–15 (quote), 120, 136; see also Peter F. Ainsworth, *Jean Froissart and the Fabric of History: Truth, Myth, and Fiction in the Chroniques* (Oxford, 1990), 70–3.

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

**2.** The tombstone of John, lord of Dadizele, and his wife, Catharina Breydel, currently preserved in the crypt of the Basiliek van Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van Dadizele. Photograph by Jelle Haemers.

The literary project of the lord of Dadizele conforms to this memorial function of writing, as his own career was clearly measured in terms of honour. The memoirs, for example, focus on what was relevant to the noble hierarchy, such as a list of all seventeen Flemings known to him who were knighted — including himself — at the battle of Guinegatte (July 1479), or the lists of all villagers of Dadizele who fought under his command and their stigmata of seigneurial service ('Joos Baert, wounded leg; Joos de Pourc, captured' and so on). This propensity to tabulate honour and the assumption that his credibility stemmed from that honour are thus typical for the social milieu of the lord of Dadizele.

This is not to say that the literary project was devoid of political meaning. After the French invasion of the Low Countries had been brought to a halt in the summer of 1479, tensions increased between the Flemish cities and the Burgundian-Habsburg government. The Habsburg prince wanted to go on the offensive against Louis XI of France, whereas many of his powerful subjects pushed for a peace settlement that would reduce tax pressures. Eventually, this tension erupted into civil war after the death of Mary of

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

Burgundy in March 1482, when the Flemish towns refused to accept Maximilian as the regent of his son Philip the Fair, the heir to the Low Countries. This suggests that the position of John, lord of Dadizele, became increasingly awkward when he composed the manuscript from May 1480 onwards. As John had led the Flemish urban militias to victories against the French, he had strong ties to the opposition against Maximilian, but at the same time, he had also accepted honours and offices that brought him into the orbit of the Burgundian-Habsburg court. As John was murdered in October 1481 for reasons that had probably more to do with noble rivalries over lucrative offices than with politics, he was never forced to take a stance.[39] Yet, in this context of increasingly bitter confrontations between Habsburg authority and Flemish elites, it was certainly politic to stress in manuscript his good services as a noble lord to both town and dynasty and to avoid references to politically charged letters he received from the towns. Given that it was written in Dutch, the manuscript was certainly not intended to serve as a pamphlet, but it may have been part of a careful attempt to keep John's options open with the Flemish elites who had an active interest in exploiting his political capital as a war hero.

The primary purpose of the manuscript was to function as a literary monument to the noble honour of the author. This was a key theme of the memoirs, and although the principle behind his unusual decision to embed those memoirs in a wide array of extant records was atypical, it also fits into a culture of noble commemoration.[40] The 'social logic' of this text as a combination of texts is that the manuscript not only tabulates honour, but also recalls its source.[41] Unlike most other polities, where one could be a nobleman or a gentleman by the state's say-so, in Flanders nobility still stemmed from seigneurial lordship, and this is exactly the point of departure for John, lord of Dadizele.[42] After the opening chapter, in which Dadizele is listed as one of the twelve seigneuries of the author's home region, two chapters present records that provide a detailed description of Dadizele and the seigneurial rights it

[39] This is discussed in full in Jelle Haemers, 'Le meurtre de Jean de Dadizeele (1481): L'ordonnance de cour de Maximilien d'Autriche et les tensions politiques en Flandre', *Publication du centre européen d'études bourguignonnes (XIVe –XVIe s.)*, xlviii (2008).

[40] Historiography as an instrument of collective memory is discussed in Woolf, *Social Circulation of the Past*, 271–4, 298–9.

[41] See the seminal Gabrielle M. Spiegel, 'History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum*, lxv (1990), 77–8, 83–6.

[42] Frederik Buylaert, Wim De Clercq and Jan Dumolyn, 'Sumptuary Legislation, Material Culture and the Semiotics of ''Vivre Noblement'' in the County of Flanders (14th–16th Centuries)', *Social History*, xxxvi (2011).

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

entailed. The first three chapters thus present John as a seigneurial lord, as it was his seigneury that made him a nobleman. The following six chapters present the reader with the social context of lordship. A series of records show how the lordship of Dadizele was harnessed within a distinct lineage from time immemorial to the accession of John, lord of Dadizele, and how that lineage was defined and reproduced through marital alliances. Other records provide information on lordship as a social practice by listing all villagers who helped to effectuate the lord's rights over the village, ranging from the parish clergy over the lord's bench of aldermen and feudal court to the levees that followed their lord in battle. It is only after this sketch of the legal and social basis of noble lordship that the memoirs follow (chapters 11–12), in which the actions of the author are often presented to the reader as those of a lord. Because of his good lordship, the prince rewards John, lord of Dadizele, with a series of privileges that expands his lordship (chapters 13–15), and with princely commissions and offices (chapters 16–30). This sequence reflects an idea that is constantly reiterated in contemporary treatises on nobility — a staple genre in the literary culture of fifteenth-century courts — namely that a nobleman was better prepared for public service as a princely officer than a commoner because of his experience with the public power he wielded as a lord.[43] In the last twelve chapters, the lord of Dadizele lists all his seigneuries with rights that were much more restricted than that of Dadizele and thus not so important for his status, as well as all other properties that provided income, but not power. The records copied thus form a narrative in the sense that the order imposed on those records lends an overarching shape and hierarchy to the information encapsulated in each record.

The set-up of the Dadizele manuscript is unusual in the sense that most self-centred writings left by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century noblemen were apodictic in nature, describing only the honourable use of violence in continuous prose without discussing what entitled those noblemen to the right to arms in the first place. Yet, the audience of the lord of Dadizele, consisting of nobles or powerful bourgeois allied to nobles, would not have found the manuscript unintelligible. Familiar as they were with the social basis of nobility in Flanders, they must have recognized that this collage of records carried them from seigneurial lordship as the source of the nobility's claim to independent authority to the lifestyle in which that authority was put into

[43] For the Low Countries, see Arjo J. Vanderjagt, *'Qui sa vertu anoblist': The Concepts of Noblesse and Chose Publique in Burgundian Political Thought* (Groningen, 1981), 35–7, 49–56, 60–4; and Bernhard Sterchi, *Uber den Umgang mit Lob und Tadel: Normative Adelsliteratur und politische Kommunikation im burgundischen Hofadel, 1430–1506* (Turnhout, 2005).

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

practice and transferred to the next generation. The table of contents and the cross-references between the texts allowed them to jump between different sections of the narrative, and thus to explore at leisure how the author's performance of the role of nobleman, knight and courtier was based on lordship, family and office.[44] This concept is far removed from the evidentiary interpretation proposed by historicist scholarship. More importantly, it is also different from the textual practices from which the lord of Dadizele drew his subject matter. The original records had usually come into being as evidence, but the copies of those records were supposed to function as illustrations. As it was clear from the opening chapters that the author of the manuscript was a lord, and therefore had a legitimate claim to noble honour, his readers would not have perused the records included with a critical eye. Instead of weighing the records' evidentiary value, they were expected to take the lord of Dadizele on his word of honour.

## IV
## CONCLUSION

The manuscript discussed shows that the many uses of records in pre-modern European societies can be shielded from critical scrutiny because of deep-rooted historicist assumptions. Firstly, the classic distinction between narrative and administrative texts is more of a hindrance than a help, since the lord of Dadizele and his audience clearly had little difficulty in thinking of administrative records as fiction.[45] Secondly, the contrast between the recently resurfaced manuscript and the nineteenth-century edition makes clear that we must be careful not to be blinded by the history of our own profession as we usually imagine it. The use of records in the historical account of the lord of Dadizele is not so much a precursor of our own empiricist aspirations, footnotes and all, but shaped by a distinct culture of record-keeping and historiography that was very different from our own.

If the Dadizele manuscript was not part and parcel of the rise of modern historiography, it is perhaps relevant to the emergence of another genre,

[44] For a theoretical introduction, see Peter Burke, 'Performing History: The Importance of Occasions', *Rethinking History*, ix (2005). For the use of written texts for status performances, see Giora Sternberg, 'Epistolary Ceremonial: Corresponding Status at the Time of Louis XIV', *Past and Present*, no. 204 (Aug. 2009).

[45] The classic critique is Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987), esp. 2–3, 17–18. For the distortive impact of the historicist distinction between fictional and non-fictional texts in the study of historiography, see especially Félice Lifschitz, 'Beyond Positivism and Genre: "Hagiographical" Texts as Historical Narratives', *Viator*, xxv (1994), 108–13.

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

namely the coffee-table book. As far as we know, no scholarly discussion of the history of the coffee-table book is available, but this genre was perhaps first hinted at in the 1570s, when the French nobleman and humanist Michel de Montaigne complained 'that my Essays only serve the ladies for a common movable, a book to lay in the parlour window'.[46] From his grumblings, it is clear that Montaigne himself had imagined a somewhat different use for his work. Writing a full century earlier, however, John, lord of Dadizele, may have aspired to precisely what Montaigne complained about: a text that circulated in the confines of his residence that offered himself, his kith and kin a panorama dedicated to a single topic — the status and honour of the author and, by extension, that of his audience. The manuscript's function was quite similar to that of the objects that lie around on the coffee-tables of the modern household in that it aspired to illustration, rather than to proof. The reader was not expected to measure whether the records included provided sufficient proof for the claims of the author. Those claims were supposed to be accepted a priori, and records only helped to shed light on the social and material basis of status. Both the manuscript and the coffee-table book are not designed to prove a point, and both proceed from pre-established assumptions shared by the author and his audience.

Containing records rather than images, the manuscript provides some salient points to the history of record-keeping in the early modern era. Above all, it shows that the history of record-keeping is *social* history. Contemporaries had a complex and multifaceted understanding of written records, using and preserving them not only for their original function, but also to serve new and very different purposes. This case study shows that the way in which those records were put to new uses proceeded from axioms that were distinctly social in nature, in this case the ideology of the nobility as a community of honour. To compose a manuscript such as the one discussed in this essay, it was necessary for the author to be noble, because without noble honour, the reader would not invest the necessary trust to appreciate the aggregate of texts as the author intended, or, in other words, not to engage in critical scrutiny of those aspects that perhaps did not bear such scrutiny. It is unlikely that noblemen would extend the same courtesy to those who did not belong to their milieu. The reader too, had to be noble, or at least a bourgeois allied to nobles. To appreciate the manuscript's metatext, one had to accept the claim that nobility stemmed from lordship, and that lordship predisposed a nobleman to serve the prince and the Common Good in ways a commoner could not. Among commoners, those ideas were also

[46] 'Je m'ennuye que mes Essais servent les dames de meuble commun seulement, et de meuble de sale': Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, bk III, ch. 5 (first published in 1580).

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016

known, but not always readily accepted. A commoner hostile to the nobility may have refused to subscribe to the logic that gave the manuscript coherence.[47] If a monument of records such as the Dadizele manuscript was to function properly, it had to circulate within the confines of a status group.

*Ghent University* *Frederik Buylaert*
*University of Leuven (KU Leuven)* *Jelle Haemers*

[47] Commoners often had vested interests that stimulated such critical attitudes, as discussed in Gadi Algazi, 'Ein gelehrter Blick ins lebendige Archiv: Umgangsweisen mit der Vergangenheit im fünfzehnten Jahrhundert', *Historische Zeitschrift*, cclxvi (1998). For the nobility's constant need to legitimize its existence, see also Klaus Schreiner, 'Religiöse, historische und rechtliche Legitimation spätmittelalterlicher Adelsherrschaft', in Otto Gerhard Oexle and Werner Paravicini (eds.), *Nobilitas: Funktion und Repräsentation des Adels in Alteuropa* (Göttingen, 1997).

Downloaded from http://past.oxfordjournals.org/ at Rijksuniversiteit Gent on November 17, 2016