The previous papers, especially the one by Mary Beth Winn, amply demonstrate that Marguerite of Austria, daughter of Maximilian of Austria and Mary of Burgundy, was an extraordinary woman. She played a large role in the politics of the day, was a talented writer and artist, and commissioned a number of literary and artistic masterpieces.

When her third husband, Philibert of Savoie, died following a hunting accident, she carried out the wishes of her mother-in-law by commissioning the construction of an abbey which exists today, the Abbey of Brou in Bourg-en-Bresse (Aisne). The abbey is known for the lacy marble tombs of Marguerite of Austria, Philibert of Savoie and Philibert’s mother, Marguerite of Bourbon. Lesser known, but equally impressive, is the ensemble of 74 choir stalls, each with a misericord, that Marguerite commissioned but which she never saw. Before the work began, her father ordered her to Flanders to be tutor to her orphan nephew, soon to be Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire. Marguerite never returned to Brou. Records indicate, however, that she followed closely the progress on construction of the abbey and sent a Flemish master mason, Loys von Begham, who supervised the work of Bressan artisans and workmen.

The choir stalls were about the last item to be constructed. They were on the agenda in 1530, the year of Marguerite’s untimely death, and were completed in 1532. No records show if she selected the motifs or if she realized an underlying program for the stalls. The dorsal panels are clearly organized with Old Testament figures on one side and New Testament figures on the other. The misericord carvings are based on Gothic traditions in that forms are realistic while symbolism is dominant. However, the many nude figures
show the influence of Italian Renaissance putti, and the fabulous birds are similar to those in Italian engravings.

The selection of misericords from the Abbey of Brou, which you see on the next few pages, represent mainly vices: lust, gluttony, drunkenness, sloth and wrath. Others are enigmatic and quizzical and researchers have generally avoided attempts to analyze them.

The conference on Commanding Women might enlighten us on the meaning of some of these misericords. Did Marguerite’s reading of the works of Christine de Pizan influence her selection of motifs in any way? Do Marguerite’s writings enlighten us on the meanings of the carvings depicted below?

Comments and responses to these questions will appear in the next issue of The Profane Arts.
Nude with Jug on Knees

Drunk Runs with Dog

Nude and Dog
Hooded Figure Sleeps

Hooded Monk Kneels