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The role of dynastic households at early modern courts

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Dries Raeymaekers, *One foot in the palace. The Habsburg court of Brussels and the politics of access in the reign of Albert and Isabella, 1598-1621* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013, xviii + 366 p., ill., index); Nadine Akkerman and Birgit Houben, eds, *The politics of female households. Ladies-in-waiting across early modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2013, xx + 421 p., index)

In early modern Europe, monarchs governed their realms through the use of patronage and personal relationships, acting as *paters familias* over their elites, rather than relying entirely upon rationally organized institutions. In this way, monarchs expanded their network of loyal followers and strengthened their power base. The dynastic court played a crucial and active role in this process, providing the political space in which these relationships could coalesce and evolve.

According to the classic definition, the early modern court comprised three parts: the dynastic or princely households, the administrative councils, and the courtiers. The two books under review here focus mainly on the dynastic household, and add notably to our knowledge of the political culture of European early modern monarchies, inscribing themselves within the field of Court Studies. The last twenty years have witnessed an unprecedented increase of scholarly works analysing the medieval and early modern eras from the perspective of Court Studies. This approach is a reaction to the structuralism of the previously dominant Marxist and Annales schools, and it has revolutionized political history, as well as cultural and social history.

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Both books share a common root: an FWO (Research Foundation Flanders) research project directed by René Vermeir (Ghent) and Luc Duerloo (Antwerp) from 2005 to 2009. Concerning itself with the courts of the governors-general of the Habsburg Netherlands during the first half of the seventeenth century, this project reflects the increasing interest in the courts of the Habsburg Netherlands over the past decade. Part of the project was a round-table conference held in Brussels in 2006 on the constellation of the Habsburg courts in Europe, the results of which have appeared recently as René Vermeir, Dries Raeymaekers and José Eloy Hortal Muñoz, ed., *A constellation of courts. The courts and households of Habsburg Europe 1555-1665* (Leuven, 2014). But, what is more important, the project culminated in two PhD theses in 2009: one by Dries Raeymaekers regarding the sovereignty of the Archdukes (1598-1621), published as *One foot in the palace* and reviewed here, and another by Birgit Houben, which focuses on the governorships of Isabella Clara Eugenia (1621-1633) and Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand (1634-1641). Houben is also the co-editor of the second book under review, *The politics of female households*.

Although the two books sprang from a common background, they treat different topics. The main focus of Raeymaekers' work is on a single dynastic household, that of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella. But, no doubt, his work marks a decisive advance, not only for our understanding of the archducal period in the Habsburg Netherlands, but also regarding the practices and norms of other courts and monarchies in this period. In this study, Raeymaekers combines different approaches which reflect the different stages of his academic career: the study of factional struggles by the Instituto Universitario 'La Corte en Europa' (IULCE) at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, and the Anglo-Saxon approach to princely courts, with a strong emphasis on high politics and the politics of intimacy.

After an interesting introduction in which he tackles methodological questions about the service of the Archdukes, the role of early modern dynastic households and the sources, the first part of the book concentrates on the archducal household proper. In the first chapter, the author analyses the different court departments and their evolution (the *Capilla*, the *Casa*, the two *Cámaras* of Albert and Isabella, the *Caballeriza* and the *Guarda*), as well as the courtiers and the ceremonial that regulated this distribution of departments. In the second chapter, he treats financial matters, while in the third he situates the archducal household within the dynastic sphere, a topic that always has been of particular interest to him and his academic mentor, Luc Duerloo.

In the second part, Raeymaekers analyses the political role of the courtiers, dedicating special attention to the ceremonial, and mainly focusing on the archducal Chamber. This fourth chapter is clearly related to the second book reviewed here, because we have to take into account that this department also included the ladies-in-waiting. Particularly important in this chapter are the politics of access (as appears in the title of the book) at the palace of Coudenberg and at the rest of the archducal residences. As the author points out, there are numerous studies that have demonstrated that there was no separation between public and private spheres at early modern courts, and the informal and formal foyers of power did not function separately from one another but flowed over into each other. So, the study of access at the different aulic spaces, including etiquette, ceremonies, norms and practices, shows us the real exercise of power and the functioning of early modern court society. Whereas, the



The Archdukes Albert and Isabella with a number of prominent court members during a ball at the Court of Brussels. In the centre foreground, Philip William, Prince of Orange, dances with his spouse Eleonora of Bourbon (panel, Frans Francken de Jonge and Paul Vredeman de Vries, c. 1610; Mauritshuis, The Hague)

fifth chapter treats the diplomatic aspects and the relevance of the different nations in the archducal household. All this is completed with a short appendix related to economic aspects (substantially reduced as compared to the one in the original PhD thesis), together with the bibliography (including archival sources), index and a gallery of images.

In sum, the study provides a detailed and all-encompassing picture of the political circumstances at an extraordinary court that will enrich the debates on the struggle for power in early modern Europe. The Court of Brussels has not yet been as thoroughly researched as its European counterparts in Paris, Madrid, Vienna, etc., mainly because it is considered less important. Nevertheless, it is evident that Brussels was at the centre of several key developments, especially during the seventeenth century, because it was the only place in Europe where a new household was created, the so-called *Maison royale de Bruxelles*, being its nearest antecedent the household of the Archdukes. So, the seventeenth-century court of Brussels constitutes an excellent case to understand power formations, and Raeymaekers' book applies an excellent approach to this topic.

Equally relevant is the volume edited by Birgit Houben and Nadine Akkerman, which deals with female households in early modern Europe, focussing on the ‘women above stairs’, and, especially, on the ladies-in-waiting. The aim of this collection of essays is as follows: ‘This multi-disciplinary collection of essays is the first cohesive attempt to integrate ladies-in-waiting into the master narrative of court studies, pulling together cutting-edge research from leading and up-and-coming scholars in the field’ (1). So, right from the start, we have the parameters according to which the thirteen essays have been selected: Court Studies, multidisciplinary, and ladies-in-waiting at different European courts.

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In the same introduction of the volume, we find an interesting description of the evolution of the historiography of Court Studies and Gender Studies. Although they had a parallel development, the two disciplines have rarely been combined. Fortunately, this is changing. For example, recently, a collection of essays, edited by Anne J. Cruz and Maria Galli Stampino, appeared titled *Early modern Habsburg women. Transnational contexts, cultural conflicts, dynastic continuities* (2013). No doubt, Habsburg ruling women (even in the Spanish Monarchy and in the Empire) are the best studied during these last years as a variety of publications have appeared, sometimes because of their political role, but more often because of their role as artistical maecenas. Well-known examples are the studies about Mary of Hungary, the empress Mary, Philip II sister, or the different ‘nuns’ that were at the monastery of las *Descalzas Reales* in Madrid.

The part of the volume devoted to the studies of female households is of particular interest. Anne Somerset’s *Ladies-in-waiting. From the Tudors to the present day* (1984) was the first publication focusing on female household officers, and few have appeared thereafter. Although there are some new studies, of which the editors provide a brief overview (10-12), including ongoing and unpublished dissertations, it is still necessary to reassess the role of the female household. Finally, the introduction discusses the role of informal power, as well as the courtly guides for ladies-in-waiting, which indicate their role within different

spheres, such as etiquette, education, marriage, representational functions, changes of regime and limitations to power.

The volume is further divided in chapters on different early modern courts, starting with Tudor England. Helen Graham-Matheson examines the political role of the women at the Privy Chamber, focusing on the times of Elizabeth I, and Hannah Leah Crummé studies the career of Jane Dormer, who was married with the Count of Feria and served in London and Madrid. These are relevant contributions, because the first covers the political importance of female courtiers in sixteenth-century England, while the second provides an extraordinary case to compare the female political uses of two important courts, London and Madrid.

As for the Habsburg women, the first part focuses on Vienna. Katrin Keller gives a survey of the ladies-in-waiting from 1550 to 1700, and sketches certain models of structures, responsibilities and career patterns. On the other hand, Vanessa de Cruz Medina traces the career of one Aragonese family, the Cardona, through the study of one lady-in-waiting, Margarita de Cardona, who was linked to the courts of Vienna and Madrid. The relations of this family with the dynastic households of different empresses of the Habsburg Empire allowed them to increase their political significance. After the study of the imperial court in Vienna, we find contributions on the court at the Spanish Netherlands, with an essay by Houben and Raeymaekers, studying the *Camareras Mayores* of the Infanta Isabella from 1598 to 1633, and the one of Janet Ravenscroft about dwarfs and *locas* at the Spanish Habsburg Courts. Unfortunately, we find virtually nothing in the volume about the households of the queens and infantas at the Spanish court in Madrid or at the different viceregal courts of Habsburg Italy, which have been studied by Mia J. Rodríguez-Salgado, María Victoria López-Cordón Cortezo, Félix Labrador Arroyo or Manuel Rivero Rodríguez, among others.

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After the Habsburgs, we cross over to the French Court, with three essays focusing on three different queens. There should have been four essays but, unluckily, Sharon Kettering passed away before completing her contribution to the volume, which is dedicated *in memoriam* to her. Firstly, we find Una McIlvenna, who studies the *escadron volant* of Catherine de Medici; secondly, Rosalind K. Marshall, who carries out a prosopographical analysis of the female household of Mary, Queen of Scots; lastly, Oliver Mallick studies the ladies-in-waiting of Anne of Austria. These examples offer us the possibility to compare how entourages of 'foreign' queens were accepted in France during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While Catherine de Medici and Mary, Queen of Scots, were able to maintain several members of their 'nationalities' at their entourages, Anne of Austria practically lost her Spanish entourage a few months after arriving at Paris. No doubt, increasing power during the seventeenth century allowed the French king to take this measure, which had been impossible just few years ago.

We continue with the Stuart Courts and three other essays of Cynthia Fry about the ladies-in-waiting of Anne of Denmark and their diplomatic role; of Nadine Akkerman who, as a specialist in literary studies, analyzes one spectacle, *The vision of the twelve goddesses* (1604), to trace the structure of the Queen's household and the position of the Countess of Bedford therein; lastly, Sara J. Wolfson describes the female bedchamber of Queen Henrietta Maria and the political role and family networks of the women in it, especially the destiny of two ladies-in-waiting of the queen, the Countess of Carlisle and Madame Vantelet. In the

final essay of the volume, Fabian Persson traces the evolution of the role of the women at the Swedish court of the Vasa since 1523, through the study of their integration within the dynastic households. This contribution enriches the volume as Nordic monarchal courts, less developed in some ways than other European ones in the sixteenth century, were not properly studied until a few years ago, when some scholars, especially Fabian Persson, started to pay attention to them.

Jeroen Duindam, as editor of the series *Rules & elites. Comparative studies in governance*, in which this volume is published, completes the volume with an epilogue, summarising the most relevant conclusions. Among them, he draws attention to the three levels for women at court: high-ranking female office holders, young noblewomen temporarily staying at court for their education, and servants. Apart from that, he states that the practically non-existing border between 'formal' and 'informal' power meant that women were almost as powerful as men, except at the Royal Councils where women were generally excluded. Thus he concludes, in line with Dries Raeymakers, that the distinction between public and private spheres does not add to our understanding of early modern politics.

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Both books are excellent. Their emphasis on Court Studies in general and the study of the dynastic households in particular, make us realize that our knowledge of the early modern period is still incomplete. Historians (and researchers in other humanities disciplines) have still a long path to explore, because of the necessity to reinterpret the history of the early modern monarchies through the analysis of the court and the dynastic households. To be sure, these approaches are currently showing their validity, evidenced by the interest of practically all prestigious academic publishers in publishing books on these topics, as we can see in these two reviewed books and other examples mentioned in this review.



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