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Multifaceted and malleable

Dynastic identities in the early modern era

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Liesbeth Geevers and Mirella Marina, eds, *Dynastic identities in early modern Europe. Rulers, aristocrats and the formation of identities* (Farnham: Taylor&Francis/Ashgate, 2016, 310 p., ill.)

The last decades have witnessed a proliferation of the term ‘identity’, a concept which is quickly invoked in public debates and often loosely applied to large array of topics. Identity has become part of academic parlance too, and scholars have fruitfully employed this concept in order to study the plural nature of communities and individuals in past and present. Historians have examined the way in which identities were created, reshaped, instilled and expressed in past societies, borrowing theories from other disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology. The volume *Dynastic identities in early modern Europe* revolves around the premise that the nobility was heterogeneous and the idea that each noble dynasty developed its dynastic identity, ‘its own sense of self’ (1). Focusing on dynasties rather than the nobility as a whole or individual nobles, the editors contend that the concept of dynastic identity is yet another way to protrude the heterogeneous character of the early modern nobility, as each noble dynasty tried to distinguish itself from other (rivalling) dynasties.

Besides an introduction by the editors and a conclusion by Hamish Scott, the volume consists of nine chapters, all papers presented at the similarly-titled conference held in Amsterdam (2011), which address the ways in which dynastic identities were constructed, transformed, and transferred. As Hamish Scott remarks in the conclusion, the malleability of dynastic identities is one of the four broader themes which run through these book. Several chapters carefully document the ways in which identities were crafted, often in response to the aims of a particular dynasty. Sebastiaan Derks, for example, studies how the Farnese fam-

ily was represented in the *Liber relationum*, written by Paolo Rinaldi. According to Derks, Rinaldi's work was part of a 'diplomatic campaign waged by Ranuccio', the oldest son of the general Alexander Farnese. Ranuccio realized that he needed to restore the tarnished reputation of his father in order to achieve particular dynastic aims, such as the reduction of the crippling debts which burdened the family (177). Derks convincingly shows how the image of the dynasty, and Alexander Farnese in particular, as portrayed in the *Liber relationum*, was a direct response to the politico-economic situation the dynasty found itself in. Liesbeth Geevers examines various printed genealogies relating to the Nassaus, the ruling dynasty in the Dutch Republic. Like the *Liber relationum*, these genealogies, argues Geevers, were by no means neutral accounts of a dynasty, but served particular aims. Mattheus Smallegange's genealogy (published in 1675), for example, overlooked Philip William, the eldest son of William the Silent, in order to 'enhance the authority of his younger brother Maurice' (198). Indeed, in two of the three seventeenth-century printed genealogies of this family, particular members of the Nassau dynasty were portrayed as the heroes of the Dutch Revolt, thus bolstering their authority. Moreover, these genealogies contributed to changing connotation of the title 'prince of Orange': whereas formally this denoted the sovereign authority over the principality of Orange, it came to be 'a symbolic title worn by the leader of the Dutch Revolt' (214).

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While Derks and Geevers each show the importance of media campaigns in the construction and communication of dynastic identities, Fabian Persson's chapter studies other physical expressions of the dynastic identities of Swedish nobles, most notably the construction of towns, churches, and tombs. Often the various outlets through which dynastic identities were expressed worked in tandem and created what Persson calls 'dynastic memory', the way in which a dynasty saw and represented itself (179-180). This dynastic memory did not necessarily consist of 'true' facts, but rather should be seen as a dynasty's claims. Indeed, as Hamish Scott rightfully remarks in the conclusion, dynastic identity itself 'was a manufactured commodity and not a neutral, positivistic category' (236).

Another important topic is the transferral of dynastic identity, most directly addressed by the three chapters in the second part of the volume, titled 'Identity formation and family relations'. In her case study on Anne of Croy, Mirella Marini charts the way in which dynastic names and titles were transferred to descendants and makes clear how at times complex judicial arrangements were necessary to ensure the continuation of a dynastic name (for example, sometimes a younger son was tasked to revive the dynasty). The marriage of Anne of Croy to Charles of Arenberg united two dynasties, both of which had to be continued separately by their eldest sons. As a result, even though Anne tried to merge the Croy – Arenberg identities, a different dynastic identity was instilled in each of the two eldest sons. Tensions between dynastic identities could also arise due to geographical factors, as Violet Soen argues in her chapter on the House of Croÿ. As its members and possessions were spread across political borders, this dynasty developed a strong 'dynastic transregional identity'. Although it was fairly normal for noble houses to have possessions in various political entities, this made them vulnerable to accusations of treason. In the case of the House of Croÿ, a fight broke out between members of this family about an inheritance and eventually this dynasty became divided in a French and Habsburg branch, which were formally still part of larger dynasty. Equally complicated were the ways in which Mademoiselle de Guise tried to trans-

fer her dynastic name to a family member. Jonathan Spangler's detailed reconstruction of her various donations and wills (drawn up in the years 1686-88) shows which key aspects of the dynastic identity, namely princely status and semi-sovereignty, and adherence to the Catholic faith, were important to the Mlle de Guise and how this informed her choice of inheritors.

The three essays which make up the first part of the volume are more concerned with another theme: the (dynastic) identities of kings and the aristocracy and the relationship between the two. According to Ronald Asch, kings Henry IV of France and James VI of Scotland were able to transform and re-invent themselves, albeit in different ways: the former had to re-invent himself as king, whereas the latter was already king, but had to self-fashion himself as the king of another country (England instead of Scotland). Jane Ohlmeyer studies the formation of aristocratic identity in seventeenth-century Ireland and emphasises the importance of honour and loyalty to the English crown, which even 'overrode senses of national or ethnic identity' (35). As other chapters in this volume have shown, identities were not constructed in a vacuum, but were influenced by a large set of factors including political and economic circumstances, and cultural values (for example, noble ethos). Whereas most of the other chapters are based on a case-study which focuses on a single dynasty, Jeroen Duindam's perspective is global as he compares the aristocratic elites and in early modern Europa (mostly France) and China. Although important differences can be noted, such as the importance of primogeniture and the existence of hereditary rights to status and offices in Europe, there were similarities as well, including the significance of patrilineal descent and kinship and the gradual increase of the control the state enjoyed over its elites. Even though Duindam concedes that his remarks are tentative, one can see the rewards of such a comparative approach.

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The chapters in this book thus offer a wide variety of case-studies of the ways in which dynastic identities were manufactured, shaped and reshaped, and expressed. The focus on dynastic identities yield some interesting results, such as the wide variety of means by which identities were reshaped and expressed, and the (ingenuous) ways in which these identities were transferred. One wonders though, how a dynastic identity was experienced by the various lineages, individual families, and individuals of which dynasties consisted. In other words, how did a dynastic identity operate at the different levels within a dynasty? Such questions could further accentuate the relationships between the different identities that were at work (as addressed in the introduction, 16-18), a topic which could have been developed more fully. One of the strengths of the volume is that the primary sources, often judicial in nature, are used in creative ways, showing the wider dimensions and implications of the precepts included in these complex documents. At the same time, the (juridical) language of these documents is reflected in the chapters, several of which are densely packed with names of family members and their possessions, as well as the intricate legislation related to inheritance. The provision of this information is often necessary to get an argument across, but as a result the chapters can be a challenging read, especially for non-expert readers. Aside from these minor criticisms, though, this volume offers a welcome addition to an already impressive field of scholarship on early modern noble elites, and succeeds in further drawing out their heterogeneous nature.

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