

Regina Schleuning, Hof, Macht, Geschlecht. Handlungsspielräume adeliger Amtsträgerinnen am Hof Ludwigs XIV, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2016, 393 S. (Freunde – Gönner – Getreue. Studien zur Semantik und Praxis von Freundschaft und Patronage, 11), ISBN 978-3-8471-0529-9, EUR 55,00.

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Regine Maritz, Bern

Regina Schleuning's now published dissertation focuses on the noble women who held office at the court of France during the personal reign of Louis XIV (1616–1715). The study aims to tease out the spaces for action these women inhabited and to consider in how far they were determined and shaped by gender. The topic is approached through research into administrative court records detailing the particulars of the court staff, as well as the more personal primary sources left behind by such well known memoirists as the Duc de Saint-Simon and the Comtesse de Caylus. Combined with Schleuning's deep knowledge of the vast amount of secondary literature on the court of Louis XIV the source basis is entirely appropriate for the interests of this study.

In her introduction, Regina Schleuning provides an overview of previous research on women at court that will be useful for experts and new students of the topic alike, and she identifies a distinct lack of knowledge on female office-holders at the court of France besides the queen or the *maîtresse en titre*. Schleuning holds a relational view of the category of gender, which she wants to investigate in its constant dialogue with other relevant social categories at court, such as those of rank and favour.

The first two chapters of the book focus on the structural aspects of the French court in the time period chosen. Here we learn that the large number of courtiers in Louis XIV's reign was the result of a nearly tenfold increase since the approximately one thousand people that formed the court of Francis I (r. 1515–1547). A first important distinction from the Habsburg courts is also made evident when it is emphasised that women and men were not strictly segregated during their periods of service at the French court. Schleuning describes in detail the structure of the *maisons royales* and shows that in comparison to the *maison* of the king, those of the female members of the royal family, showed greater levels of fluctuation, since they were only called into existence when needed, rather than being a permanent feature of the court structure, which outlived its mistress. Nevertheless, these female-centred *maisons* could grow to impressive size, and Schleuning emphasises that, interestingly, the household of Maria Theresia was the second-largest of its time, although the memory of this queen, as gleaned from the secondary literature, fades besides the notoriety and splendour of her husband (p. 84).

The following chapter then dives deeply into the primary source material in order to determine the most central prerequisites women had to fulfil in order to be considered for court service, how they entered and left such service on a practical level, as well as to describe the



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positions that were open to them in the first place. Nobility was of course an essential requirement for any female office-holder at court, but Schleuning shows that the status of women was tied to the title of their husbands, rather than to their rank at birth. The highest court offices were usually given to married women of middling age, which stands in marked contrast to the ladies-in-waiting at the courts of the Holy Roman Empire, for whom youth and celibacy were an entry requirement for court service. This difference, as well as the broader range of court offices available to women at the French court, allowed women of the aristocracy to pursue lengthy careers in court service, if they proved themselves to have the right qualities, and if their *maison* happened to be a durable one due to dynastic hazard. According to Schleuning, women further benefitted from the same legal advantages and tax benefits as did their male colleagues in court offices, and since they were never absent to fulfil military or administrative duties away from court, their continuous presence at court allowed them to make full use of their specific spaces for action.

The final chapter of this study then focuses on how gender figured in the day-to-day life of women in courtly office. Schleuning argues that women were attributed a crucial role in the transformation of court life in the early modern period. Specifically she posits that the 17th-century ideal of the heroic *femme forte* came to be marginalised in favour of the *femme galante*, which was then equally superseded by the greater appreciation of the *honnête femme* towards the end of the reign of Louis XIV. Idealised prescriptions of women's roles and character then reflected the monarch's shifting priorities, as he became more pious with age. On the basis of this and other factors, Schleuning proposes that female office-holders could develop extensive networks and influence within the social networks of the court, which meant that allegiance with them was highly coveted, as their families and circles of friends – be they male or female – might benefit significantly.

Particularly in these latter two chapters the study makes a number of interesting observations, which raise further questions. For instance, Schleuning's discovery of a limited number of cases where women passed on their court office to daughters or step-daughters (p. 119–121), as well as her finding that, at times, married women could continue to profit from the high standing of their birth families (p. 282–282, 299), complicates what we have previously learned about the increasing marginalisation of women of court society from lines of inheritance in the early modern period¹. Schleuning's findings of solid and indeed increasingly numerous career options for women of appropriate rank and ability at the French court also inspires reflection on how this trajectory should be interpreted alongside the established view that specifically the queen's representative position came to be increasingly constrained in exactly the period of Schleuning's enquiry². In this sense, Schleuning's

¹ See for instance Sarah Hanley, *The Monarchic State in Early Modern France, Marital Regime Government and Male Right*, in: Adrianna E. Bakos (ed.), *Politics, Ideology and the Law in Early Modern Europe. Essays in Honor of J. H. M. Salmon*, Rochester 1994, p. 107–126.

² Fanny Cosandey, *La reine de France. Symbole et Pouvoir XVIe–XVIIIe siècle, Paris 2000 (Bibliothèque des histoires)*, here esp. p. 196–205; also see Abby E.



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carefully laid out empirical findings are certain to have an impact on the field of court history.

Finally, by way of critique it should be mentioned that whilst the text's frequent comparisons with the courts of Vienna and Munich, are useful in order to help the reader appreciate the specificity of the French case, one might also wish for an inclusion of the literature on the court of England, particularly since the ladies-in waiting there shared with their French counter-parts the opportunity of remaining in service at court even after they were married. Besides this, there appears to be a lack of clarity when it comes to the projected audience of this publication. Highly specialised terms and titles such as the *honneurs du Louvre* (see p. 158–159, this is an honorific distinction attributing to the bearer the right to a *tabouret* in the presence of the queen, besides other benefits), or references to the Duc de Bretagne and the Duc de Berry respectively (see p. 239, a grandson and a great-grandson of Louis XIV) are made without explanation of who or what is meant in the text.

Yet, readers who have an easy familiarity with such specialised knowledge, are unlikely to be in need of extensive reminders of how the current consensus of scholarship rejects the view that the nobility was controlled via the »gilded cage« of Versailles (p. 87–97), or of the importance of Louis XIV's extensive cultural programme (p. 225–228). These remarks should, however, not detract from the achievement of this dissertation, which attains its aim of providing new information on the lives and deeds of the women in office at the court of France, and of underlining the interest and importance of this subject of study.



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