

*H-France Forum*

Volume 13 (2018), Issue 2, #2

Fanny Cosandey, *Le rang. Préséances et hiérarchies dans la France d'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Gallimard, 2016. 491 pp. Bibliography. €28.00 (pb) . ISBN 9782070105564.

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Majestic ceremonies at the palais du Louvre, the château de Blois, and the château de Versailles structured the social life of the royal court in early modern France. The Valois and Bourbon dynasties organized grandiose celebrations to mark royal majorities, coronations, marriages, funerals, civic entries, religious processions, festivals, pageants, and *Te Deums*. Ceremonial life ordered monarchical time and space for the princes, courtiers, and royal officials who assembled for each grand ritualized event.

Fanny Cosandey's new book, *Le rang. Préséances et hiérarchies dans la France d'Ancien Régime*, presents a fascinating history of royal ceremonial practices, which serve as a lens to examine French nobles' quarrels over precedence and rank. Ralph E. Giesey, Monique Chatenet, and other historians have portrayed royal ceremonies as symbolic representations of royal power and absolute monarchy.[1] In contrast, Cosandey finds that ceremonies produced tension, disorder, and chaos. Ceremonies became sites of political contestation in the absence of written law to fix ceremonial rules. She observes: "Objet de la politique et instrument du politique, le cérémonial est le lieu par excellence de la représentation du pouvoir, donnant à y voir, à travers un appareil compliqué de préséances, de symboles et d'insignes, la distribution des fonctions et, au-delà, la puissance souveraine qui préside à l'ensemble" (p. 247).

The author's main sources are the voluminous manuscript *mémoires, requêtes, plaintes, preuves*, and treatises in the collections of royal ministers and *érudits* such as Clairambault, Colbert, Dupuy, Godefroy, and Hozier that are conserved at the Bibliothèque de l'Institut and the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Cosandey sometimes refers to these works as a discrete body of sources, "les archives du cérémonial" (p. 355). She contextualizes these manuscript sources with the classic printed sources on court society and royal ceremonial (by Christine de Pizan, Aliénor de Poitiers, Baldassare Castiglione, Jean du Tillet, Bernard du Haillan, Charles Loyseau, Théodore Godefroy, and Augustin Anselme de Sainte-Marie) that circulated among ministers, courtiers, and scholars during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Cosandey develops an ethnographic reading of these sources, seeking to discern a "grammar of ranks" (p. 18). The book employs a range of anthropological methodologies, but Pierre Bourdieu's work on habitus, distinction, and representation particularly shapes the analysis (pp. 253-264). This approach emphasizes finding rules, norms, and everyday conflicts from evidence on ritual and ceremonial activity. Cosandey explains that "parmi ces innombrables conflits, un échantillon susceptible de donner la mesure des engagements, leur déroulement, et l'argumentation qui les justifie permet de présenter la socle à partir duquel il est possible de comprendre la grammaire du rang" (pp. 126-127). Royal ceremonies can only partially be reconstructed through fragmentary

sources, however, leaving perplexing gaps in our understanding of ceremonial practices. Many of the sources on royal ceremonial were written in a nostalgic mode, as authors lamented the decline of ritual from a presumed ancient pure form (pp. 31-38). In a 1578 *règlement*, Henri III expressed his desire to “remettre ce royaume en son ancienne forme dignité et splendeur” (p. 71).

Cosandey provocatively argues that the royal court was neither a particular place nor a bounded society, effectively undermining Norbert Elias’s influential notion of the coherence of court society (pp. 15-16).[2] This definition displaces the royal court from the site of the royal palace. “Ni exactement un lieu ni précisément une culture, cette cour-là est un théâtre du pouvoir sans être seulement un instrument de gouvernement,” she explains (p. 16). Louis XIV built the château de Versailles as a fixed seat of royal government, promoting the notion of a court society that was “hierarchisée, policée, domestiquée, entièrement tournée vers la personne du roi” (p. 17). Yet, Cosandey finds that this vision was simply a fiction promoted by royal propaganda that attempted to erase any traces of disorder in society.

Spatiality and proximity to the monarch structured ceremonial practices and shaped noble culture. Cosandey emphasizes that “la focalisation autour de la personne royale entendue comme source d’honneur, de dignité et d’autorité n’entraîne pas de concentration des querelles de rang” (p. 119). Royal officials policed privileges and distinctions involving bodily positioning and material culture (clothing, insignia, implements, carriages). The royal family attempted to control the spaces associated with regal majesty by regulating entry to the Louvre and other palaces. Within palaces and châteaux, officials further restricted access to the monarch during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through the arrangement of royal apartments. Surprisingly, the book does not employ recent architectural histories of palaces, châteaux, and *hôtels particuliers* (urban residences), which reveal changes in the organization of domestic spaces during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.[3]

Royal ceremonies clearly represented privileged sites of social activity, but the book also hints that ceremonial culture may have formed a distinct public sphere. Cosandey refers to “l’univers du cérémonial” as if ceremonial life were separated from other aspects of political culture and noble society (p. 382). Elsewhere, the author indicates: “La souveraineté inscrite dans une sphère publique qu’elle contribue à définir dépossède le roi du caractère patrimonial consubstantiel à sa maison” (pp. 116-117). Cosandey signals that these ceremonial moments could *faire corps*, effectively constructing early modern French society and exposing its corporate nature (p. 346). The historiographical concepts of composite monarchies and corporate bodies in early modern Europe could extend the analysis here.[4]

General rules of precedence ordered society by seniority, title, and gender—but the application of any of these rules was situational and political. The king was always central to any ceremony, and precedence order was established spatially around him, with rank defined according to the nature of the particular ceremony and assumptions about the most honorable positions in relation to the monarch. As Cosandey remarks, “[I]a raison de cette incertitude des rangs tient à leur distribution selon les circonstances” (171). As a result, every individual ceremony represented a unique event that required a new arrangement of the individuals participating in it. “Cette ambiguïté du discours

tenu sur le cérémonial conduit à dégager des règles contradictoires qui ne sont pas sans provoquer confusions et interrogations,” the author notes (p. 176).

Each ceremony had the potential to provoke intense conflicts over rank and precedence, since individuals and groups were ordered in relationship to each other and in proximity to the king. The contested nature of rank and precedence meant that social ordering was always provisional and changeable. The granting of each favor, privilege, or honor altered preexisting precedents, often disrupting long-standing social and political rankings. Cosandey directly challenges Elias’s conception of the royal court’s role in civilizing manners: “les mœurs ne cessent d’être violentes” (p. 370). Nobles could be quite aggressive in defending their rank and privileges, threatening opponents, and prompting duels. Cosandey explains that “la défense des places se fait volontiers offensive, en un changement de tonalité dans les revendications” (p. 383). She highlights the anxiety that many nobles expressed over the confusion of ranks and the risk of social disorder, leading her to employ a psychoanalytic reading of *mémoires* (pp. 274-278).

The book adopts a periodization stretching from Henri II’s coronation to Louis XIV’s funeral, but the focus is clearly on the second half of the seventeenth century. Cosandey indicates that “[l]e règne de Henri II peut, à bien des égards, être considéré comme un tournant dans l’organisation de la vie de cour et la structuration du cérémonial” (p. 57). Following Henri II’s tragic death in a tournament, Catherine de Médicis orchestrated royal ceremonies for her sons François II and Charles IX as France descended into religious warfare. The book depicts Henri III as a reformer and his court as the “cœur du politique” in the 1580s, yet it curiously ignores Mark Greengrass’s detailed study of political theory at the court of Henri III (pp. 79-88).<sup>[5]</sup> The ascension of Henri IV altered princely rankings and promoted a Bourbon dynastic identity within the institutions of the monarchy, yet royal ceremonials were not greatly transformed. Marie de Médicis attempted to manage royal ceremonies after Henri IV’s assassination in 1610, but rivalries among illegitimate princes and the *grands* troubled her regency. Louis XIII is depicted as a “roi sensible à l’étiquette et aux préséances,” who was especially concerned with the status of the dukes and peers (p. 107). Cosandey does not see Louis XIV as an innovator, but as a king who followed the “stratégie de promotion du sang royal” that the Bourbon dynasty had already established (p. 111). Royal ceremonial seems to have gradually become ossified by the end of the seventeenth century: “La formalisation du rituel, dont l’étiquette devient le mode ordinaire d’expression pour tous ceux qui gravitent dans l’orbite royale, ratifie une transformation de l’espace curial qui finit par paralyser le monarque lui-même” (p. 114).

The book examines four case studies of precedence quarrels across this narrative arc: a precedence dispute at the marriage of Charles IX and Élisabeth d’Autriche (1570), a disagreement between Guillaume Du Vair and the duc d’Épernon over their prerogatives in the *conseil du roi* (1618), a precedence dispute among nobles participating in Louis XIV’s entry to Paris (1660), and a quarrel between the duc d’Orléans and the prince de Condé (1710s). Each of these cases can be considered as a “procès du rang,” in which nobles and their advocates engaged in disputes through their legalistic writings (p. 131). Cosandey explains that “le désordre des rangs devient celui des familles” (pp. 160-161). Precedence disputes forced noble families to articulate and defend their collective identities and interests (p. 402).

Nobles expected the king to act as *maître des rangs* and arbiter of their precedence disputes, since only royal authority could effectively adjudicate precedence disputes. Political theorists such as Charles Loyseau discussed the notion of orders and hierarchies through idealized concepts, based on the three orders of the society of angels in heaven (pp. 183-185). Yet, French monarchs proved unable to fix noble ranks or establish social order in their kingdom (pp. 264-282). The king could certainly punish individuals or corporate bodies that pushed too hard for precedence or distinction, but royal favors were temporary and specific judgements only provided arbitration for unique occasions. As a result, royal authority and “absolutism” proved to be a “fiction” (p. 281).

*Le rang* treats masters of ceremony and their colleagues as significant historical actors in the perpetual political competition among princes and the *grands*. Antiquarians, *érudits*, and genealogists deployed their expertise in precedence disputes, composing *mémoires* asserting nobles’ rank and defending their privileges. Cosandey explores the research practices and manuscript writings of erudite scholars such as Théodore Godefroy and Pierre Clairambault, following a methodological approach pioneered by Anthony Grafton.[6] The *érudits* engaged in systematic collection and compilation of information from diverse libraries and archives, forming their own archives of *mémoires*. Cosandey usefully refers to the scholars’ workshops as “l’atelier des mémoires,” inviting parallels with contemporary cabinets of wonders that assembled collections of specimens and objects from the natural world (pp. 204-239).[7] These conclusions fit well with the findings of recent works on early modern archival practices and the history of information management.[8]

One of the most innovative parts of the book explores the information management techniques of these *érudits* through the Manuscrits Godefroy, conserved at the Bibliothèque de l’Institut. Cosandey studies the marginalia and classificatory schemes in manuscript *mémoires* to reveal the activity of the erudite scholars and their clerks (pp. 218-223), echoing Ann Blair’s work on early modern scholars’ information management techniques.[9] “Répertoriant, sous forme de listes numérotées, ici les ‘règles et maximes en fait de préséances’, là les ‘règles des rangs et cérémonies’, ailleurs encore quelques traits essentiels d’ordonnement, ces érudits tentent de dégager les logiques internes, non sans effort à en croire les multiples ratures et reprises qui parcourent ces archives” (p. 165). Antiquarians and *érudits* frequently shared information, but also were capable of withholding precious information and manufacturing evidence. The *érudits* challenged their rivals’ sources, refuting legal proofs and questioning the legitimacy of copied *mémoires* as erroneous—especially when the originals could not be produced (pp. 227-239). The partisan and polemical work of these scholars in copying and compiling manuscripts radically extends our understanding of “fiction in the archives”—revealing the complex history of document collection and archival formation.[10]

Nobles were litigious and tenacious in defending their rank, often referring to “la conservation de leurs rangs et leurs droits” (p. 199). These precedence quarrels often took the form of “procès de rangs” (pp. 248-253). Precedence quarrels among princes and the *grands* could become major legal disputes in which scholars and lawyers invoked constitutional law and sought royal justice before the Parlement of Paris or the *conseil du roi*. Kings often relied on legal precedents and customary law to decide complicated cases involving noble titles, seigneurial rights, privileges, and landholding. As a seventeenth-century writer explained, “les rangs doivent estre réglés selon les loix et les coutumes de l’estat” (quoted, p. 252).

The book refers to the legal processes of waging precedence quarrels through the terms, “querelle de papier” (p. 131), “guerre de factums” (p. 153), or “guerre de papier” (pp. 211, 239). Yet, precedence quarrels included oral, manuscript, and printed communication, as well as legal maneuvers (lodging complaints, instigating lawsuits), political activities (grievances, official actions, appointments, dismissals, rumor campaigns, ostracism, alliances, *parti* formation), and violent deeds (duels, military mobilizations, raids, and civil combats). Quarrels between powerful nobles simply could not be contained on paper.

Cosandey builds on her previous work on the queens of France and their entourages to examine gendered aspects of rank and precedence.[11] This gendered approach exposes contradictions in theories of sovereignty, revealing the anomalous positions of the princes of the blood, princely daughters, illegitimate children, and foreign princes. The book explores the ambiguous status of the duc de Longueville, the duc de Vendôme, and the duc de Maine through an analysis of royal strategies of legitimizing illegitimate children and assimilating them into the royal family. A gendered reading of the Salic Law reveals the contradictions in barring women from rule while relying on them to produce legitimated princes, a situation that confused princely ranks and corrupted the notion of the royal bloodline (pp. 297-311). Cosandey argues that the creation of new princes through the admission of illegitimate children into the royal family ultimately destabilized the monarchy (pp. 318-319).

Disputes over rank could not be contained, as nobles asserted privileges that were associated with their titles, offices, dignities, and seigneuries. Each ceremonial event had the potential to reorder precedence and establish new legal precedents for rank distinctions—thus a noble’s defense of rank necessarily implicated his claims to honor (pp. 415-418). Most of the *grands* held multiple titles and offices, and some also embodied sovereignty as foreign princes (pp. 180-183). The book could have expanded its exploration of the anomalous situation of foreign princes, such as members of the Savoie and Lorraine dynasties.[12]

Competitions over precedence extended far beyond royal ceremonies, proliferating throughout French political culture, as numerous studies of early modern French nobles have demonstrated.[13] My own research on noble culture and civil conflict in Languedoc and Guyenne shows that provincial nobles constantly defended their precedence and rank through performances of honor in diverse situational contexts. The concept of “precedence honor” can describe this inherently competitive facet of honor culture, in which nobles maintained precedence by forcing others to display deference to them.[14]

The royal ambition to impose rank and to order society was almost completely frustrated by the continuous precedence quarrels, which exposed the failure of monarchs to dictate hierarchy even among the princes and the *grands*. Although royal officials theorized arbitration in a *procès des rangs* as a royal verdict by the king as *maître des rangs*, royal arbitration often failed utterly to settle precedence disputes (pp. 251, 264-282). Cosandey admits that it is difficult even now to sort out all the arguments from the competing documents in any precedence dispute in order to determine which noble had a better claim to rank in a given situation (p. 273). Precedence quarrels routinely escalated into insults, provocations, fights, duels, raids, combats, and “private” wars during the frequent civil conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[15] Even disgrace,

exile, or demotion could never fully negate princes' and nobles' precedence claims or determine their rank positions.

Cosandey's analysis of disputes is normally decontextualized and divorced from the broader political and social contexts. Noble disputes were often closely connected with civil conflict in early modern France, yet the French Wars of Religion (1562-1629), Fronde Civil War (1648-1653), and other civil wars barely enter the analysis. Military service could shape precedence disputes in other ways, since every military campaign and combat involved assigning commands and ordering troops. The book might have examined precedence disputes among French nobles who served as military officers in foreign wars, including the Dutch Revolt (1572-1648), Thirty Years War (1618-1648), Franco-Spanish War (1635-1659), and Louis XIV's many wars.[16] Noble correspondence, military memoirs, and family records were filled with disputes relating to competition for command, prestige, credit, and precedence in military contexts.

Despite this lack of contextualization, *Le rang* makes a significant contribution to the history of court society and political culture in early modern France. Court society fueled deep underlying tensions among the nobles who participated in royal ceremonies (p. 123). Fanny Cosandey's close readings of individual ceremonies and precedence quarrels provide "une exposition des conflits, dans leur matérialité, dans leur déroulement, dans les actes, donc et jusque dans les enjeux qui sous-tendent la lutte" (p. 131). Cosandey takes precedence quarrels seriously, arguing that "[l]a constance des conflits, l'ampleur des mobilisations, la vigilance de tous les instants pour maintenir son rang trahissent l'importance d'enjeux qui ne peuvent se réduire à des caprices égoïstes" (p. 126). *Le rang* successfully refocuses our gaze on the social tensions and political conflicts that defined court society through constant competition over ranks and precedence.

## NOTES

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[2] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

[3] For example, Sara Galletti, *Le palais du Luxembourg de Marie de Médicis, (1611-1631)* (Paris: Picard, 2012).

[4] J.H. Elliott, "A Europe of Composite Monarchies," *Past and Present* 137, 1 (1992): 48-71.

[5] Mark Greengrass, *Governing Passions: Peace and Reform in the French Kingdom, 1576-1585* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[6] Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[7] Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen, *Merchants & Marvels: Commerce, Science and Art in Early Modern Europe* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).

[8] Jacob Soll, *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014); John C. Rule and Ben S. Trotter, *A World of Paper: Louis XIV, Colbert De Torcy, and the Rise of the Information State* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014); Randolph C. Head, "Documents, Archives, and Proof around 1700," *The Historical Journal* 56, 4 (2013): 909–30; Filippo de Vivo, *Wars of Words: Politics and Communication in Early Modern Venice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[9] Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before the Modern Age* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011).

[10] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[11] Fanny Cosandey, *La Reine de France. Symbole et pouvoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

[12] Jonathan Spangler, *The Society of Princes: The Lorraine-Guise and the Conservation of Power and Wealth in Seventeenth-Century France* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

[13] Jay M. Smith, *The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600-1789* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Kristen B. Neuschel, *Word of Honor: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Robert D. Harding, *Anatomy of a Power Elite: The Provincial Governors of Early Modern France* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1978).

[14] Brian Sandberg, *Warrior Pursuits: Noble Culture and Civil Conflict in Early Modern France* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

[15] Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Pascal Briost, Hervé Drévilion, and Pierre Serna, *Croiser le fer. Violence et culture de l'épée dans la France moderne (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2002).

[16] David Parrott, *Richelieu's Army War, Government and Society in France, 1624-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); John A. Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle: The French Army, 1610-1715* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

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Volume 13 (2018), Issue 2, #2