

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 11 (March 2011), No. 67

Sonja Kmec, *Across the Channel: Noblewomen in Seventeenth-Century France and England: A Study of the Lives of Marie de La Tour, 'Queen of the Huguenots', and Charlotte de la Trémoille, Countess of Derby*. Trier, Kliomedia, 2010. 336 pp. Figures, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. 36€ (pb) ISBN 978-3-89890-138-3.

Review by Susan Broomhall, The University of Western Australia.

A study that analyses these two French noblewomen together is an important one. Marie de La Tour and Charlotte de La Trémoille were cousins, each a daughter of France's most powerful Huguenot families. Marie married into the La Trémoille and Charlotte less prestigiously became the Countess of Derby. Each has been reputed a leading figure in their respective countries, Marie as the "Queen of the Huguenots" and Charlotte as the much maligned or praised duchess who held strong at the siege of Lathom House during the English Civil War. Not only do their lives run parallel, albeit in markedly different political and religious contexts, but they maintained correspondence with each other throughout their lifetime.

Kmec's study adds to the increasing research on dynastic families' practices to preserve actual and symbolic power. She argues that French nobles with Protestant sympathies are an understudied category, and laments the dearth of research on Nassau-Orange networks in particular, but a number of the most recent studies of the family, including its women, are missing from consideration in the text (not least the excellent work on Louise de Coligny by Jane Couchman which could shed light on the longevity of strategies used by these later women).

One of the important points that Kmec sets up at the beginning of the text is the La Trémoille's understanding of themselves as a princely family (through their claims to the kingdom of Naples after inheriting the title of prince de Tarente in 1605.) The importance of this status is critical, she argues, to understanding much of their actions and strategy. It may have been largely symbolic but it was fundamental to the matrimonial choices and the political alignments that the family would make.

In the first part of the text, Kmec examines Marie de La Tour, daughter of Elisabeth de Nassau and Henri de La Tour d'Auvergne. These are not biographical studies; what interests Kmec are Marie's actions once she became the duchess of La Trémoille. In the first chapter, Kmec lays out clearly and convincingly the case for the distinctions between the social ambitions and precarious financial position--diminishing landed income, lack of prestigious royal posts, and heavy debt--of the La Trémoille family into which La Tour married. The next chapter examines Marie's household management but Kmec's opening statement that married noblewomen have been ignored, "still often seen as mere pawns in matrimonial negotiations and self-effacing childbearers,"(p. 71) and her theorisation of female self-consciousness based on Beauvoir and Hegel do not put her in touch with the more recent scholarship on early modern women's identities. Certainly Kmec's analysis of Marie's activities demonstrate an active manager, but the conclusion that Marie did more than the prescriptive literature of the period allowed does not help us to understand whether Marie's activities were extraordinary or commonplace. Nonetheless, Kmec develops important data on household employment patterns that speaks to family and female patronage networks and her exploration of Marie's rich *Mémoire* justifying her actions as an

estate manager highlights a significant document that can expand our knowledge of such women on their own terms.

Chapter three shows the La Trémoille's careful balancing of symbolic prestige as a princely family with their severe financial constraints. Kmec argues that a show of conspicuous consumption was vital, despite their debts, and examines the couple's staggered residential patterns, the renovation of their castles in their family territories as well as their new acquisitions in the political heart at Paris. Kmec details Marie's extensive role in the architectural and artistic building programs that were constantly hindered and suspended by lack of money. In chapter four Court Calvinism is explored through analysis of female educational philosophies, and ideas and practices surrounding mortality and death. Marie's role in the creation and circulation of a *récit des dernières heures* of her twelve-year-old daughter Elisabeth is yet another fascinating document that Kmec uses to articulate the family's wider networks, both Catholic and Protestant. Some comparison with other examples by women in similar genres might have given this analysis more depth and wider meaning. Certainly a more overt consideration of the work of scholars of women's writings and *mémoires* could have enriched these findings, as well as perhaps insights into Marie's identity as a mother.

Religious politics form the focus of the following chapter in which Marie's role in reconciling different aspects of French Calvinism is examined. Kmec argues that Marie attempted to promote a middle way through the varied factions of the contemporary Church but her actions must also be understood as an attempt to resist conversion (after that of her husband) whilst not damaging the family's position at court. Kmec argues that while Marie was generally a moderate figure in internal Huguenot disputes, when she wanted to impose her own views in the local consistory or national synod it was the nobility's favoured method—patronage—rather than theological persuasion which was most effective.

Marie's political involvement is then analysed from the springboard of contemporary chroniclers and memorialists who generally positioned her as the driving force behind the family's political manoeuvres at this period. Ultimately Kmec concludes that the family's actions during the Fronde and their wavering support for the crown can be seen through the lens of their personal interests and perception as a princely family. Kmec's assessment that the "political involvement of Marie de La Tour and Charlotte de La Trémoille demonstrates that, within the confines of a patriarchal society, women of high social standing could wield considerable influence" (p. 184) will not startle many. What would be useful to know is what this sort of patriarchal society looks like, or how Marie's specific strategies can be contextualised in the substantial recent research that has investigated the nature of female political involvement such as through letters, gossip, unofficial channels, and positions at court in the early modern period.

In the final chapter concerning Marie, Kmec looks at courtly honours and salon prestige, focussing on how the family sought proximity to the king through a range of symbolic rewards at court. When royal favour eluded them, Kmec argues that the La Trémoille looked for social prestige in other places—in an international political setting but also, for Marie specifically, in leadership over Huguenots in France, and in social settings such as the literary salons and textual communities in which she participated. Here, the "autoportraits" produced by Marie, her daughter and her grand-daughter that Kmec analyses are another example of the rich documentation she brings to the fore in this book.

Part II turns to Marie's cousin and sister-in-law, Charlotte de La Trémoille who married James Stanley. The first chapter in this section examines Charlotte's financial situation as a wife and widow. Kmec outlines the struggle to obtain her dowry, one of the largest ever for a bride in England, although not out of step with those in her natal family. Kmec suggests here that the language barrier may have contributed to keeping Charlotte from playing as close a role in the financial transactions of the Stanleys as Marie enjoyed in her marital family, although she notes that in later life Charlotte used her widow portion to secure Stanley family interests. Kmec then turns to an analysis of Charlotte's role in artistic

and architectural display. Since the Civil War encouraged the construction of military fortifications, this was mainly expressed through artistic commissions in which Kmec notes presentations emphasised her Orange dynastic heritage, and linked her to the continental artistic world of her natal kin. In mourning, after the Restoration, Kmec suggests that Charlotte explicitly connected her husband's death to the martyrdom of the king in an effort to advance the political position of the Stanleys.

Chapter three explores Charlotte's access to religious influence in England, which Kmec argues was not as strong as that of Marie in France. Partly she had less access to the networks in which theological arguments were being made, but Kmec suggests that she also saw the politicised nature of English religious discussions as highly destructive to the social order. Here, Kmec is aided by Charlotte's letters to Marie in which she tried to dissuade the latter from developing allegiances with English Protestants. In the end, French Protestant moderates would reject these English models, preferring to retain allegiance to their king.

In chapter four, Kmec explores the events for which Charlotte is perhaps best known today. She details the historiographical traditions of Charlotte as a great Royalist heroine, highlighting the significance of Walter Scott's reimagining of her for later interpretations and analyses how Charlotte's nineteenth-century historians have influenced modern perceptions. However, Kmec argues rightly that Charlotte's political role is more complex than these traditions suggest, as she moved across her kin networks as a lobbyist, drawing, for example, upon both her Dutch heritage and the Stanleys' relationship with Scotland. This complements Kmec's analysis in an earlier chapter, which indicates that Charlotte was required to pay an unusually high amount as compound for return of her properties, evidence of her perceived importance as a Royalist political figure. As with the La Trémoille, Kmec concludes that neither Charlotte nor the Stanleys in general were staunch and unflinching Royalists, but manoeuvred in relation to the family's personal and religious priorities.

In chapter five Kmec explores Charlotte's rather unsuccessful attempts to gain courtly honours, and concludes that her participation in a courtly masque presented less a sign of Charlotte's influence as an opportunity for the king and queen to convey their own ideas of governance to their courtiers. It was a model however that the Stanleys would later apply in masques of their own on the Isle of Man. In the Restoration court, Charlotte would obtain the position of governess to the royal children but as Charles II had no legitimate heirs, this too was less powerful than in other times.

Kmec argues in her conclusion that her aim is not to perform comparisons between these two women, their contexts being too different, but rather to examine "cross-influences" between them, a term that could have been usefully developed at the outset. And although comparative work is largely an implied rather than integrated part of the analysis, the book's structure makes it hard to avoid. Whether due to interest or simply the availability of source material, the book feels rather uneven. There is far less on Charlotte, although there is a great deal of scholarly work regarding English women during the Civil War in which her experiences might be contextualised. The perspective feels very much French looking across the channel. Maintaining the same over-arching themes for both women renders the analysis of Charlotte at times a study of negatives. While this could be valuable in signaling the constraints on women in the English environment, or simply those of foreigners, it does not perhaps allow a full picture of Charlotte to emerge in her own right.

Kmec's work provides a thorough and detailed example of noblewomen's religious, political and familial interactions as wives and widows. It therefore provides us with a case study that can contribute answers to Nancy Roelker's questions about the roles of French Huguenot women in the seventeenth century and in its non-military contexts. It has real value for scholars for the varied female-authored sources that are revealed in it. Kmec is strongest in her analysis of the financial, symbolic and religious practices of the Protestant nobility in France, where this study could form a useful counterpoint to existing work by such scholars as Greengrass, Mentzer, and most recently Walsby (on the closely related Laval family), offering deeper knowledge of women's particular activities in such families and

Huguenot communities. However, whether such connections will be made is very much in the hands of readers, as Kmec does little to theorise female participation or integrate her findings into this wider research. The theme of transnational studies into which she locates the study in the introduction is never explicitly pursued through the text nor the notion of transnationalism and its relationship to transculturalisms conceptually advanced here.

Kmec certainly takes women seriously as participants in the aristocratic politics of their era, but makes little mention of the gender analyses that might have provided a conceptual structure for teasing out the specificities of female experiences in such manoeuvres. The book argues in the conclusion that it has presented the women as married women but the particular ways in which their status as married women shaped their activities is not made clear, nor how it might compare to roles as daughters, sisters, widows or mothers. Moreover, it would be helpful to have on occasions a slightly wider historical context to see how these women's actions, strategies and their motivations are like those of men of their era, or those of other noblewomen. Were they typical women of their class and faith or exceptional? It seems unfair to ask so much of an author, but by not defining her contributions within these wider traditions of scholarship more directly, there is a risk that the careful and important research which underpins this work may not find itself integrated in the history of its period and of early modern women in the way that it deserves.

Susan Broomhall  
The University of Western Australia  
susan.broomhall@uwa.edu.au

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172