
H-France Review Vol. 15 (September 2015), No. 128

Giora Sternberg, *Status Interaction during the Reign of Louis XIV*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xiv + 209 pp. Illustrations, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$73.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0199640348.

Review by Matthew Vester, West Virginia University.

Giora Sternberg's new book, based on a 2009 Oxford PhD thesis, is conversant with scholarship in a number of intersecting fields: ceremonial practices, everyday ritual, dynasticism, and courtly symbolic power. The author defines "status interaction" as the "symbolic expression of social position" (p. 1) that was important throughout early modern European history at various levels of society. The court of Louis XIV offers Sternberg the material to study this problem. The expression "status interaction" so cogently summarizes a crucial element of social and cultural reality that it will undoubtedly enter into the historiography, marking the success of this well-documented and richly suggestive study. In order to study hierarchy in the early modern world—a messy and constantly changing phenomenon—the author employs a microanalytic approach. Unsurprisingly, his close analysis of the system in question prompts a reassessment of schematic assumptions, in this case regarding the French court "as a reflection of the monarchy's designs and interests" (p. 4). Despite decades of revisionist study of Louis XIV's reign, this view has prevailed. One of Sternberg's key contributions is to shift attention away from the king to high-level courtiers who had their own agendas and played an active role in shaping court dynamics, creating "facts on the ground" that forced the ruler to react. He finds that "status interaction concerned multiple actors who cultivated their own stakes even in the midst of the most monarchical state ceremony or the most heliocentric of Versailles's rituals" (p. 10). Sternberg's careful, detailed examination of symbols that mattered greatly to these actors leaves the reader with an appreciation of the causal complexity governing status. These "micro-level orderings" underpinned "the social hierarchy at large" (p. 7), and operated according to codes that were not absolutely controlled by the monarch.

Sternberg's introduction is followed by six chapters and a conclusion. The introduction outlines several historiographical frameworks into which the book fits. In the realm of court studies, Sternberg notes that Norbert Elias had portrayed Louis XIV "as master manipulator of the system" while "relegat[ing] courtiers to an essentially passive role" (p. 5). He distinguishes himself from the "American Neo-Ceremonialist School" of Ralph Giesey and his students by moving beyond a single constitutionalist framework for ceremonial. Claiming that Roland Mousnier had adhered to "pre-conceived theoretical moulds" (p. 6), he praises the work of Jeroen Duindam, but sees him as more interested in rulership and court organization "than in the agendas and practices of courtiers or in status interaction per se" (p. 6).^[1] Recent work on ceremonial by Frédérique Lefèrme-Falguières and Fanny Cosandey is acknowledged and gently critiqued for being too general or insufficiently attentive to symbolic codes.^[2] For Sternberg, contemporaries used codes relating to "aspects of a ceremony, a dress item, a gesture, or a letter" that could be deciphered to reveal "underlying regularities—and irregularities—in what had previously seemed like an undifferentiated sea of detail" (p. 7).

This brings the author to the problem of sources. The kinds of codes that he describes are typically not openly explicated, but taken for granted. Prescriptive literature is limited since it did not always reflect

actual practice. Most studies of Louis XIV's court have relied on well-known accounts by Dangeau, Souches, and St. Simon. In addition to these, Sternberg uses accounts in the *Gazette* and the *Mercure*, the papers and official accounts of court officials appointed to oversee ceremonial matters (the Grand Master of Ceremonies and the Master of Ceremonies and his supporting staff), courtiers' correspondence about status disputes, drawings, and objects (the chairs that were at issue in seating controversies). Sternberg's key insight here is that written accounts of status interactions were themselves objects of controversy among contending parties who wanted their version of the event to be registered for posterity.

A final theme raised in the introduction relates to the specific groups on which Sternberg's account focuses: the princes of the blood (the Bourbon-Condé), the grandchildren of France, and the legitimated princes (the natural children of Louis XIV). Given the contingent, unstable nature of hierarchy, historical circumstances during the second half of the reign meant that individuals who identified with these groups found themselves in sharp competition for precedence following the king, the dauphin, and the children of France. The cases examined by Sternberg all involve these groups and their members.

Sternberg begins with a study of status disputes during the 1679 wedding of the king's niece Marie-Louise of Orléans and Charles II of Spain. This episode highlights a number of key themes: marriage ceremonies as rites of passage (in which the bride changes status), differences in status regimes between one country and another, and struggles over the event as precedent. A set of letters between Louis II (the Grand Condé) and his agent at court, Gourville, serve Sternberg as a "real-time exchange" (p. 29) documenting the negotiation of status interactions. Condé found out prior to the wedding that he would not be included among those to whom the pen would be handed to sign the marriage contract. Rather than suffer the indignity of having to pick up the pen himself, he and his family stayed away from court and instructed Gourville to work with the king to settle the dispute. The problem was that the grandchildren of the king (a new group that came into being through the junior line of the house of Orléans) won the right to have the pen handed to them by a secretary of state.

Here Sternberg stresses the relative nature of status interaction: the problem for the Condé was not the absolute importance of having the pen handed to them, but their position relative to that of the grandchildren (and, indirectly, relative to the secretaries of state, who did not have to hand the pen to the princes). The author notes, deadpan, that "the pen drew a line between the Grandchildren of France and the Princes of the Blood" (p. 37). He also analyzes the importance of spatial position with respect to the king on a raised platform with different kinds of seating arrangements. Also at issue in this wedding was the language used to designate various persons mentioned in the marriage contract and clothing worn by the participants, especially the mantle of Marie-Louise (Sternberg returns to the mantle problem in subsequent chapters). The Condé-Gourville correspondence also reveals discussions between the latter and two people linked to the creation of the historical record of the event, the Master of Ceremonies Nicolas Saintot and the abbé Dangeau, brother of the author of the *Gazette* report. "By tampering with the virtual event on the ceremonial record, the Princes of the Blood could temper their actual drawbacks on the ceremonial battlefield" (p. 46).

In chapter two, Sternberg explores the seating controversy following the 1679 wedding. The duty to pay visits to the newlyweds raised the problem of seating hierarchy: French royalty used chairs with armrests, while visitors of lower ranks used back-chairs or stools. Seating privileges varied according to gender and also from country to country. Gourville continued his discussions about these matters. The king, however, insisted that while the Condé were not to use armchairs, the granddaughters of France could do so. In order to defend his position, Condé instructed Gourville to represent his concern from within a framework of international prestige. Since cardinals and foreign princes were reportedly going to sit in arm-chairs as well, Gourville was to convince the king that the royal interest was to ensure that the French princes of the blood not be placed in a position inferior to that of foreign princes with respect to the new queen of Spain. This line of argument failed when the cardinals accepted back-chairs. When

faced with a loss such as this, Condé's only remaining move was to avoid the situation. The princes of the blood received some meager consolation when Sainctot chose not to report on this matter in his official account, perhaps in order to compensate for his record of the pen-handling episode.

The next two chapters examine the significance of mantles worn in ceremonies and in courtesy visits. The key status markers for mantles were train length and the status of the mantle bearers. Sternberg focuses his study of this problem around the funeral of *Monsieur* in 1701. The princes of the blood successfully denied the efforts of the grandchildren to elongate their trains. Having one's train carried was a mark of prestige, and this was augmented when the bearer was a person of high status rather than just a male domestic. In turn, it was an honor to bear the train of an exalted person, but also a clear signal of inferiority, prompting some to refuse to perform this service. Funerary mantles were different from those worn during courtesy visits. Such visits were made by a mantled inferior to a superior on the occasion of the death of a member of one of the two parties. In 1701 the countess of Armagnac died, but her relatives refused to visit the princes of the blood until the king made them do it. Sternberg points out that such a royal command "would detract from the cause [the king] supported, because it would imply that the outcome was not self-evident" (p. 104). Nevertheless, in this arena the princes of the blood were able to assert their status via "their right to mantled visits in all scenarios" (p. 108).

Chapter five considers shirt-handling, an honorable service outside of the control of the Master of Ceremonies. In this practice, the princes of the blood, when present, took precedence over court officers. The king sought to give these roles to his natural children in order to equate them with the princes of the blood. A letter from the king to Colbert in 1675 instructing him about this matter "strikingly ... reveals a monarch acting like a common courtier, trying to introduce a controversial novelty by stealth" (p. 125). The following chapter shows how status interactions expressed themselves through letter writing. Several elements in letters expressed status: forms of address, the formulae ending the text, the use of other key phrases and grammatical markers, and features like spatial intervals and paper material. "Monseigneur" was a form of address that most clearly indicated the inferiority of the sender with respect to the recipient. In order to avoid having to assume an inferior position when writing, the "billet style" of letters, stripped of courtesy forms, emerged. Otherwise, marks of deference included page layout, margins, and intervals that "were supposed to be proportionate to deference, physical distance thus mirroring social distance" (p. 148). "Giving the line" by beginning a letter on the line following the salutation rather than on the same line, was a mark of respect. Sternberg observes that it was easier to put up with more indignities in the private realm of letter-writing than in the public world of the court.

In the conclusion the author points out that actors generally considered it more important to win small advantages over near equals than to make large gains over marked inferiors. He reiterates the argument that the system of hierarchy was constantly evolving, unstable, and disorderly: "the ceremonial court was far less well-ordered and codified than its myth would have us believe" (p. 164). Since "the micro-politics of personal relations and private interest" mattered more to men and women at early modern courts than did "the macro-politics of grand strategy" (p. 171), historians should take status interactions seriously and study them on their own terms. Sternberg closes by suggesting the possibility of a comparative global study of this topic, a tantalizing possibility.

This book not only achieves its goals effectively, but also opens questions about how the topic of status interactions relate to other fields of historical inquiry. One such area is the history of kinship, which is implicit in much of the discussion but never directly addressed. In a way the book is about specifically defined kin groups and their relation to each other: collateral lines of a ruling house, grandchildren of a patriarch, and bastards. On one level these groups became distinct and antagonistic because of the vagaries of Bourbon reproductive fortune between 1650 and 1750. On another level, these developments correspond to a chronology established by historians of early modern kinship, who have found that over the course of the early modern period, there was a slow shift away from kin systems that "maintained

the honor and prestige of all the branches of a dynasty” toward a “new one aimed at preserving the integrity of state-like entities.”[3]

Ruling dynasties had always been marked by both cooperation and competition among their various branches; the house of Savoy provides several examples.[4] In a way Sternberg is documenting a particular intra-dynastic agonistic form that emerged within court society at the end of the *grand siècle*. All sides in this contest were running marathons, not sprints. When Louis issued his first attempt to codify rank and precedence in 1710, the great-grandchildren were not recompensed. This showed the ultimate success of Bourbon-Condé efforts to limit the position of the grandchildren in the previous generation. On the other hand, the sudden decision to make legitimated princes equal to the princes of the blood in 1714 as a response to a dynastic emergency would not have been possible without the repeated augmentations of status achieved by these princes over the preceding fifty years. Dynasties and their various sub-groups acted not just in the immediate interests of individual members, but also for long-term collective benefits, although the importance of the latter might have been weakening.

Another compelling set of problems is raised by the question of how status codes were understood and interpreted. On one level, the ways in which protagonists asserted status claims and interpreted status codes seemed so punctilious and creative that they remind one of juridical or diplomatic argumentation, which in a sense they were. They also resemble at times a form of casuistry. It would be interesting to investigate whether any overlap existed between personalities involved in these various endeavors and those involved in status interaction disputes at the French court. At any rate, the interpretation of status interactions could probably form a chapter in the history of early modern hermeneutics.

On another level, one of the most interesting suggestions of this book, that there were symbolic codes governing status interactions, independent of royal prescriptions, is occasionally called into question, or at least rendered more complicated, by three pieces of evidence offered in the book itself. First, in the aftermath of the 1679 wedding, Gourville engaged in a discussion with the king over the distinction between “house” and “family,” claiming that while the Condé were a different family, they were still members of the same house as the king. The fact that the king saw matters differently suggests that understandings of symbolic codes, or at least of the ways in which they applied, diverged. Second, when Louis’ natural son the duke of Maine was confronted with the problem of post-funerary visitations in 1709, there was some confusion about what to do. His sister (who had married the duke of Bourbon-Condé) “thought that one should either receive no visits on this occasion, or receive them in mantles. Maine therefore decided to refrain from seeing anyone until his brother-in-law arrived in Versailles, ‘for fear of making some mistake which might have consequences’” (p. 102). Maine and his sister were confused about the codes, which raises the question of how much people knew about them, how widespread they were, or even in what sense they could be said to have existed. Finally, Sternberg notes that when Nicolas Catinat became Marshal of the French armies in 1693, he encountered some conflict with military colleagues because of his uncertainty about the formalities of letter writing. Others may have known the codes, but he did not. Perhaps “symbolic codes” were simply general agreements that certain gestures, practices, or objects had significance in terms of status, rather than specific rules of behavior. Sternberg seems to take them more as constituting a kind of *habitus*, in Bourdieu’s sense, and to suggest that that they were operative at other levels of society as well. If so, then microanalysis would seem to be the way to go about uncovering them elsewhere also, with an eye toward comparative analysis.

This brief, readable book would be very useful for teaching about social interactions at court. It has helpful appendices (including lists of the courtiers described and genealogical charts) and useful illustrations and diagrams.

NOTES

[1] Ralph E. Giesey, *The Royal Funeral Ceremony in Renaissance France* (Geneva: Droz, 1960); Roland Mousnier, *Les hiérarchies sociales de 1450 à nos jours* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969); Jeroen Duindam, *Myths of Power: Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European Court* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995); id., *Vienna and Versailles: The Courts of Europe's Dynastic Rivals, 1550-1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[2] Frédérique Leferme-Falguières, "Le monde des courtisans: la haute noblesse et le cérémonial royal aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles" (PhD thesis, University of Paris I, 2004); id., *Les courtisans: une société de spectacle sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007); Fanny Cosandey, "Classement ou ordonnancement? Les querelles de préséances en France sous l'Ancien Régime," in *Classement, Déclassement, Réclassement de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, ed. Gilles Chabaud (Limoges: Presses Universitaires de Limoges et du Limousin, 2011).

[3] David Sabeau and Simon Teuscher, "Kinship in Europe: A New Approach to Long-Term Development," in *Kinship in Europe: Approaches to Long-Term Development (1300-1900)*, ed. David Sabeau, Simon Teuscher, and Jon Mathieu (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), p. 9.

[4] Matthew Vester, *Renaissance Dynasticism and Apanage Politics: Jacques de Savoie-Nemours 1531-1585* (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2012).

Matthew Vester
West Virginia University
matt.vester@mail.wvu.edu

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for non-profit 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 edistribution/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