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Nicolas Schapira, *Maîtres et secrétaires (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles). L'exercice du pouvoir dans la France d'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2020. Preface by Roger Chartier. 332 pp. Bibliography, index, and notes. (pb). €24.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-226-453051.

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At the midpoint of the period when humanist secretaries began to monopolize the spotlights of Renaissance cultures of governance and when those same secretaries found themselves challenged by up-and-coming bureaucrats (c.1500-1630), such professional men of letters sought ways to protect their fame and reputation based on an “*usage mercenaire de la plume*” (p. 90). In *Maîtres et secrétaires*, Nicolas Schapira reflects on the many factors that led to this “*usage*” and proposes a sophisticated history of this group beyond linear narratives of conversion through which early modern counselors became modern administrators. Schapira organizes his book around a “mercenary moment,” a lens that is currently at the core of new research dedicated to the early modern history of politics and cultures of knowledge. This “mercenary moment” is crucial to understanding the information revolution that took place during the mid-seventeenth century global crisis as well as the socio-political continuities that made the information revolution dependent on interpersonal relations. Schapira expands on these new research developments without falling back on a clear-cut sociology of a group whose members had little in common except for their shared experiences mastering the art of writing for others and for themselves. Schapira instead invites his readers into a nuanced historical sociology, offering an analysis of a wide array of early modern French secretaries. His novel approach studies them through the lens of the relations of domesticity that conditioned how such figures strategized about the arts of writing and informing.

Relations of domesticity among secretaries and masters were defined by a pact of mutual trust that Schapira describes and nuances throughout his book. Secretaries were, after all, writing on behalf of someone else and often were keepers of the latter’s secrets. Despite this intimacy, it was not necessarily a long-term position. Being a secretary often only represented a step in one’s career, through which one participated in and learned about how to organize the exercise of power around a domestic model of personal relations (p. 58). The functions of secretaries also depended on the spaces to which they found themselves connected. Secretaries were often placed at the core of their patron’s household and acted as communicative filters within and outside that household. These professional relations of domesticity transcended the logics of the secretary’s own family and the social networks across an imagined secretarial class, integrating them into multiple modes of corresponding that strengthened their domestic relations with their patrons

while, at the same time, providing them with the contacts necessary to switch from one relation of dependence to another.

Secretaries were not the only men of letters to become more mercenary or to be “mercenaryized” by their adversaries at this time. In a period marked by an information revolution that bolstered the commodification of knowledge and its redistribution by a wide range of agents, Schapira’s work expands on the collective research of the GRIHL at the EHESS in Paris when approaching writing practices as a set of micro-political acts. In *Maîtres et secrétaires*, Schapira explains that secretaries were more than just informants or even go-betweens: They literally embodied dynamic power at play through interpersonal relations, relations that were themselves being redefined on a constant basis (p. 145). One of the merits of the book is to show how secretaries working from different locales (e. g. aristocratic households, regional *parlements*) and court systems fostered community and contributed to stabilizing interpersonal relations amid the epistemological and political uncertainties of the century.

Maîtres et secrétaires delivers a sequence of ten well researched chapters offering broad-ranging reflections on what it meant to perform as a secretary in early modern France. Such broad reflections are then used to bring into focus what secretaries did in practice through the lens of well-chosen case studies. The result is a collective portrait of individuals who belonged to a broad social spectrum and who exercised, either temporarily or regularly, an office or a function that depended on relations of domesticity. By questioning the traditional early modern disjunction between office and function, Schapira leaves enough space in his collective portrait to offer a clear view on the specifics of being a secretary. Secretaries did not hold a monopoly over writing practices and products, even when serving their masters. Their tasks and skills merged and complemented those of interpreters, translators, and copyists who often worked for the same masters. Secretaries were complementary to other officials who belonged to household administrations, although they often operated as the keystone of these households. They held prestigious table privileges, seated near their masters, and worked as the core of domestic ensembles whether those ensembles corresponded to small regional aristocratic, municipal, or ecclesiastical units or to larger scale governmental units, including the royal court and regional *parlements*.

In addition to delivering a general overview of what it meant to be a secretary in this period, Schapira considers the complex and often diverse intentions and ambitions among this group. Many of these men aimed to improve their social status without renouncing their desire to preserve their autonomy as writers. This autonomy, and, more importantly, their expendability, is what in fact made them appealing from the perspective of their patrons (chapter 4) for whom secretaries represented a source of power. That power was held in reserve to be deployed at any time through their “*usages mercenaires de la plume*” (p. 90). In practice, they administered and articulated an ecology of correspondences surrounding their master, yet they were autonomous in representing through writing his interests based on the idea or ideal that they possessed an overall vision of their master’s affairs. They metaphorically made their masters speak according to their own status and personality, embodying the power of the information contained in the personal and secret papers of their masters (see chapter nine).

To paint this collective portrait, Schapira avoids tedious discussions of manuscript and/or printed treatises dedicated to the ideal Renaissance secretary. He uses such literature instead to shed light on the varied habitats of secretaries, such as, for example, in the French region of the

Forez, which was located at the junction of the French monarchy and the northern territories of the Italian Peninsula. In addition to intense diplomatic activities and literary exchanges, the Forez was at the nexus of commercial and information exchanges, yielding special demands on secretarial practices (see chapter two). Converging with research such as that conducted by Hilary Bernstein, this chapter will be of great interest for historians interested in analyzing how the history of writing and historical writing conditioned and was conditioned by diverse regional political cultures and urban environments across the French monarchy.[1]

In addition to revealing the diversity of French secretarial cultures and contexts, Schapira's book also connects those secretaries to broader questions about early modern knowledge cultures. For example, he sheds light on the proliferation of the title of secretary among early modern authors, especially historiographers. Indeed, it is striking to realize that hundreds of individuals who published histories during the early modern period associated their names, in print and manuscripts, with a title of secretary (royal secretaries in particular). While it is well known that such titles were often sold by the monarchy, their use did not correspond to their holder having to carry out a specific charge or function at court. Among some of the most sought-after benefits that came out of these titles, one could after twenty years seek elevation to noble titles, and many received regular payments or punctual honoraria in the interim. Building on these examples, Schapira explains the deep relations that secretaries maintained with historical writing practices and the writing of what he defines as "immediate history" (chapter ten). Secretaries gathered sources and built archives to perform historiographical operations that helped them mediate their relationships with their masters. They got to know, from the inside, the archives of their masters, and became, by default, their historiographers. They often wrote about the lives of their masters, among other kinds of histories. Schapira's book opens new horizons and establishes bridges with a broader history of archives, information, and a history of how bureaucrats in early modern cities, republics, empires, and monarchies merged the administrative with the literary side of historiography to vindicate their own status and cultivate a collective memory at the core of the diverse administrations they embodied.

The French-centered case studies of this book complement other research that has been carried out on similar topics across different early modern geographies (see for example the cases related to the famous Spanish playwright and secretary, Lope de Vega y Carpio, 1562-1635 and his letters recently published by Antonio Carreño, and the case of King Philip II of Spain's royal secretary, Antonio Pérez, 1534-1611, who served a wide array of foreign ministers and rulers after being forced onto the roads of exile).[2] In addition, the work of historians such as Guillaume Gaudin on the *commis (infra-letrados)* of the colonial administration of the Iberian empire in Latin America provides elements for a comparative and connected history of early modern writing and communication professionals.[3] In chapter nine, Schapira alludes to an affair that involved Nicolas L'Hoste, the nephew of the famous French state minister and royal favorite, Nicolas de Neufville, seigneur de Villeroy (1543-1617), who was passing information about French intelligence to Spain. Schapira's take on this affair makes one wonder how secretaries and their relations of domesticity played out beyond regional borders during this same period, especially when considering that masters were in regular correspondence with siblings and friends beyond what might appear to us today as national frontiers. More research pointing toward the transregional horizons of the relations of domesticity carried out by secretaries could come in handy when exploring the role of other similar figures like the secretaries of embassies. This broader framing would incorporate intellectuals known for reasons other than their practice as secretaries, who were also able to familiarize themselves with

different techniques of historical writing and thrive as public figures (see for example Filippo de Vivo's research on Thomas Hobbes and his relations with the English embassy in Venice and its secretaries).^[4]

As a contribution to an international and social history of secretaries in the early modern period, Schapira's book opens new avenues for research into the role of secretaries who worked on behalf of ecclesiastical authorities and religious orders. The study of their profiles would complement Schapira's take on the regional and transnational circulation of writing practices across the early modern world. Expanding emphasis on the transnational dimension of the relations of domesticity described in *Maîtres et secrétaires* could draw attention to Schapira's secretaries as central figures of a mercenary moment during which they collaborated and often competed with other men of letters who also claimed to be able to achieve secretarial tasks without having to do the actual work nor to think of themselves as secretaries.

Schapira's book is a welcome addition to our understanding of early modern writing cultures and the experiences of men and women who, in a period of social and political disarray, secured political communication and information exchanges notwithstanding faltering institutional support. Nevertheless, such figures fostered a form of public diplomacy tied to a political world which was still very much conditioned by relations of domesticity.

NOTES

[1] Hilary Bernstein, *Historical Communities: Cities, Erudition, and National Identity in Early Modern France* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

[2] Lope de Vega, *Cartas (1604-1633)*, Antonio Carreño, ed. (Madrid: Catedra, 2018).

[3] Guillaume Gaudin, *Penser et gouverner le nouveau monde au XVIIe siècle. L'empire de papier de Juan Diez de la Calle, commis du Conseil des Indes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013).

[4] Filippo de Vivo and Noel Malcolm, eds. *Clarendon Edition of the Works of Hobbes* (Forthcoming)

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