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Caroline zum Kolk and Kathleen Wilson, eds., *Femmes à la cour de France: Charges et fonctions (XVe - XIXe siècle)*. Lille: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2018. 406 pp. Illustrations. € 32.00 (pb). ISBN 9782757423615.

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During the last decades of the fifteenth century, the number of women at the French royal court began to increase, and female roles became more specialized and prestigious, with new opportunities for upward mobility. Entourages of richly appareled attendants came to form an essential component of the queen's, and, therefore, the king's, grandeur. The phenomena were not lost on contemporary observers, who expressed awe at the privileged positions and liberty of word and movement that female members of the court enjoyed.

As the editors of this volume note, a long and diverse historiography attests to a steady fascination for the queens, regents, and princesses who inhabited the great *cours des dames*, and a number of these familiar figures—Catherine de Médicis, Anne of Austria, Marie-Antoinette—make brief appearances here. However, they are not the main characters in the work under review. Instead, this study foregrounds the *dames* and *demoiselles d'honneur* (as several of the essays make clear, the names refer to very specific positions, so I leave them in the original), chambermaids, spouses of ministers, and relatives of the royal family who served them. In addition, rather than biographical narratives of these women, the essays offer analyses of their official tasks and duties, the better to understand how they fit into the larger court system. The volume therefore contributes to a still budding scholarship that takes the careers of female courtiers and the positions they occupied seriously, studies like Jan Hirschbiegel and Werner Paravicini's 2007 collection, *Das Frauenzimmer*, and Nadine Akkerman and Birgit Houben's *The Politics of the Female Households* from 2013.^[1] Moreover, as the editors also note, in contrast with their Anglo and German counterparts, French historians did not begin to produce court studies until the first decade of this century. The sixteen essays collected in this volume, focusing on female courtiers at the French royal court, fill a significant gap.

The study is arranged along five principal axes. The first section, "La présence féminine à la cour de France: Évolution et cadres," follows the expansion of the *cour des dames* in terms of size and function. Caroline zum Kolk's essay sets the stage with a concise and useful overview of the chief developments of female households, especially the queen's, from Merovingian times through the sixteenth century, with a few words dedicated to what happened after that period. The households of the queen and other women of the royal family took part in the establishment of the modern court, with their spectacular increases in workforce and creation of prestigious offices. And yet, traced over the centuries, female households developed at a pace that was neither

linear nor always in lockstep with the pattern of the court overall. The period of greatest expansion began under Anne of Brittany, with numbers swelling from 1496 until they reached their apogee in 1589, then tapering off after the death of Henri III in that year. Aubrée David-Chapy examines the *cour des dames* as a political space. Between 1483 and 1531, households led by Anne of France, Louise of Savoy, Anne of Brittany, and Claude of France, became places of discourse and power. In the last years of the fifteenth century, the political vocation of woman became more pronounced as the position of regent, first with Anne of France, then Louise, took hold. Louise in particular strove to install personnel at court in such a way as to reflect both the “kingly” and “queenly” aspects of her position, surrounding herself with women married to the most powerful territorial lords and great officers of the realm. Fanny Giraudier explores the unusual situation of the royal court when Henri IV took the throne in 1589. Sparsely populated, it also suffered from the lack of either a queen or dauphine, the king having separated from the queen, Marguerite of Valois. In addition to coaxing the nobility back to court, he summoned his sister Catherine of Bourbon from Navarre in 1591. The Protestant sister of a king who would become definitively Catholic arrived in Paris with her own entourage but soon welcomed Catholic women into her household, symbolically reinforcing the shaky peace. Charles-Éloi Vial takes us to the nineteenth century to explore the household of Empress Marie-Louise, eldest daughter of Franz I of Austria (HRE Franz II). Marie-Louise was initially not pleased about being married to Napoleon to seal the peace in 1810, but the highly educated polyglot learned much from the seasoned women of the household she was given and played an active role in politics even as the Empire foundered. When she moved to Parma after the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to rule on her own, she took with her a mostly French entourage.

The second section, “Travailler à la cour: Charges et fonctions,” examines some of the positions occupied by female courtiers and how they obtained them. As Oliver Mallick explains, relatives at court could be very useful in this regard. Catherine-Henriette Bellier, Madame de Beauvais, followed her grandmother and mother in serving the crown. But Madame de Beauvais’s story also reveals the extent to which a particular job could be parlayed into something much better through personal skill, competence, and loyalty. Mocked for her mediocre social status, she nonetheless made good use of her advantages and ended up very wealthy. Although she lost her position when Anne of Austria died in 1666, the king eventually bailed her out, and she lived in comfort until her death in 1689. Youri Carbonnier observes in his essay that ladies of quality, even royal, were generally taught to sing or play an instrument. Still, they rarely held official positions as court musicians before 1673. With the flourishing of opera, however, they were needed to sing in tragedies, because the French did not like to employ castrati. By the 1680s, some women participated in the masses, including Anne Rebel, who married into the Lalande family, and had two daughters whom Louis XIV loved to hear sing. The careers of wetnurses provide the focus for Pascale Mormiche’s intriguing essay. The position did not rank among the prestigious offices passed down from generation to generation but was filled rather through advertisement. At the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century royal court, applicants were screened by governesses of the royal children. Also, the position was limited in time by the need for a wetnurse. And yet a wetnurse often maintained warm relations with her charges and received a pension later in life. The pension itself is the subject of the final essay of this section. Benoît Carré considers the different ways in which pensions were distributed at Versailles under Louis XV and XVI. In principle, only the king could accord a pension from the treasury. The royal family, princes of the blood, and intimate favorites received large pensions; courtiers sometimes got lesser sums. Royal family members could, however, intervene with the king or use their own

funds to create pensions for their former servants, creating complicated networks of compensation that are sometimes not evident in records of official wages.

Allocations and meanings of court space are explored in the two essays that constitute the third section, “L’espace curial: Usages et significations.” Elisabeth Narkin examines how the households of royal children fit into the larger space of the court. Although these entities functioned and traveled separately, they were conceived as part of the court, with positions that were sought after because they put the holders in close proximity to the royal family and offered opportunities for advancement. In describing how spatial layouts mediated relationships, Narkin notes that Henri IV had his legitimate and illegitimate children raised together to create bonds that would be useful in the future. Pauline Ferrier-Viaud turns to the spouses of the ministers housed at Versailles under Louis XIV. During the sixteenth century, wives of important officers had been given a place in the household of the queen. The scenario changed under Louis XIV, when married couples were housed together in ministerial wings separate from the body of the chateau, the precise form and luxury of accommodation reflecting the couples’ place in courtly society. In the midst of court life, these apartments created smaller societies, reflecting traditional gendered space with entertaining left to “chez Madame.”

Each of the three essays of the fourth section, “Du centre à la périphérie: Dames et princesses en lien avec la cour,” considers how and to what extent a female courtier maintained relations with family and friends who lived primarily outside the court. Daniela Cereia compares the experiences of the two wives of Philippe, Count of Bresse, brother of Louise of Savoy: Marguerite de Bourbon, daughter of pair de France Duke Charles I of Bourbon, sister of Pierre of Bourbon; and Claude de Brosse, of less exalted lineage, daughter of Jean de Brosse, count of Penthhièvre and viscount of Bridiers. Marguerite could place her daughter, Louise of Savoy, at the royal court. Claude, bringing a much larger dowry, received advantages to her family, but she never had any direct contact with the royal court. Still, her marriage contract stipulated that her children with Philippe would have the same rights as those from his first marriage. Cereia also examines the women’s entourages, finding that the women of Marguerite’s court were mostly wives of Philippe’s Savoyard officers, and not, as one might expect, the nobility of the Bourbonnais, who frequented the royal court because of Pierre of Bourbon’s presence. The women of Claude’s court, by contrast, were nobles earlier in the service of the counts of Rohan, Châtillon, Blois, and Penthhièvre.

The political situation changed with the death of Louis XI and fights over the succession of Brittany. Female cultural activity often had a political motive, as Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier’s research has demonstrated in many ways. In this essay Wilson-Chevalier examines a manuscript commissioned by Jeanne of France, sister of Louis XI and wife of Jean II of Bourbon, who often joined her sister-in-law Charlotte of Savoy at court. A patron of the arts like Queen Charlotte, Jeanne, along with cardinal Charles de Bourbon, commissioned the work shortly before the death of the king. Mediator between Louis XI and her husband in the League of the Public Weal, Jeanne was a political player and hoped that the manuscript would effectively persuade her brother to install a Bourbon regency after he died. Brian Sandberg brings the complicated religious situation of the Montmorency family to life in his essay, building out from one central figure, Madeleine of Savoy, wife of the *connétable* under François I and Henri II, Anne de Montmorency. Studies of French noblewomen in the period leading up to and during the Religious Wars show that they played crucial roles as agents of news diffusion. The Montmorency family was divided: Madeleine and the *connétable* were staunch Catholics, while the *connétable*’s sister Louise was Protestant, the

mother of Admiral Gaspard II de Coligny and mother-in-law of Louis I prince of Condé. Madeleine divided her time between the court and her territories, which she oversaw, frequently hosting the royal family. Like Catherine de Médicis, with whom she seems to have been close, she was a great letter-writer and was able in this way to follow the Wars of Religion closely and spread news about them.

If female courtiers have too long been treated with insufficient seriousness, another category of female courtier, mistresses, has been even more so. The final section of the volume, “Des intégrations difficiles: Les maîtresses dans l’univers curial,” explores how these women fit into the court system. Pascal Firges poses the question of how a type of relationship that would seem to confer only shame upon a husband could actually increase a family’s honor. Certain ground rules governed by the logic of the promotion of the family, he argues, explain how this was so. The husband and wife kept up public and formal functions as normal, ignoring the wife’s affair. The husband pretended indifference toward his wife since the lover necessarily possessed a sufficient social status. When these requirements were met, affairs could be advantageous for forming new alliances. Firges also notes that violence seems to have declined in the first half of the seventeenth century, as a result of state monopolization of violence and increased use of *lettres de cachet* to stick adulterous wives in convents, but also due to changing attitudes toward adultery. In her fascinating essay on the evolution of the positions of Louis XIV’s mistresses from the moment they were selected to the apogee of their power, Flavie Leroux explains that although the role followed its own logic, it also had to conform to others. The positions of Mesdames de La Vallière, Montespan, and Fontanges developed slowly, in tiny steps. First, the king would begin to frequent the princess served by his new love interest. She would then be seated next to the king along with other ladies of the same household. Eventually, the ladies would disappear, while the favored one gradually became the lynchpin of her own household. Gifts and lodgings also signaled her favor. Some discretion remained, with the favorite’s apartments located close to those of her royal lover, but the number of rooms grew along with her favor.

The final essay, by Véronique Garrigues, describes the creation of the legends surrounding Françoise de Foix, Countess of Chateaubriand, the first significant favorite of François I. First *filie* and then *dame d’honneur* to her cousin Anne of Brittany, Françoise became the subject of a legend put in place in 1670 by Louis XIV’s historiographer Antoine Varillas. She was alleged to have used her charms to promote her brothers, arousing the jealousy of Louise of Savoy. Abandoned, she moved back to Brittany and was murdered by her husband who had her bled to death. Purporting to be a true biography, this “history” disguised its fictive status behind genealogies, timelines, and references to manuscripts, the vast majority of which have never been traced. Despite responses by outraged Breton historians and the complete discredit of Varillas as a historiographer, the legend remained tenacious. Françoise became an anecdote. Dreux de Radier, a reasonable historian for his time, tried to discredit the legend in the eighteenth century, but with little success, his own work on queens, regents, and mistresses relegated to the genre of the “*petit fait curieux*.”

Caroline zum Kolk observes in the volume’s conclusion that, beginning with the nineteenth-century flowering of institutional history, the court was regarded as part of the private sphere and therefore of limited interest to historians. Although the work of Norbert Elias succeeded in modifying this perspective to a large degree, stories about women continued to be confined to the realm of “*petite histoire*.” And yet, as this volume shows, from at least the fifteenth century on, the French court offered opportunities for women to wield real influence. Because the *cour des*

dames operated in parallel with the male components of court, men and women came to be perceived as suited to different but complementary functions, a perception that has enjoyed a long legacy, one extending into recent debates among the different varieties of French feminism.

As is inevitably the case with a collection of essays, one cannot help but wish that certain areas had received more coverage. Relatively little space is allotted to the mid to late eighteenth century, for example, even by the essays that extend that far. An essay that parallels the opening piece on the evolution of the *cour des dames*, picking up in the early seventeenth and continuing through the nineteenth century, would have been a useful addition. Also, it is hard to see the rationale for adding just one essay on nineteenth-century female households, although I would not have wanted that wonderful essay to be omitted. Editors are always dependent to some degree on the essays they receive, so these are not criticisms. My point is just to say that I was left wishing for more.

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NOTE

[1] Jan Hirschbiegel and Werner Paravicini, eds., *Das Frauenzimmer. Die Frau bei Hofe in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: Thorbecke, 2000); and Nadine Akkerman and Birgit Houben, eds., *The Politics of Female Household: Ladies-in-Waiting across Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

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