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Jonathan Spangler, *Monsieur: Second Sons in the Monarchy of France, 1550-1800*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2022. 354 pp. 14 B/W illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$48.95 U.S. (pb); ISBN 9780367761943; \$34.26 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781003165897; \$170.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780367761936.

Review by Christophe Gillain, University of Cambridge.

It is no coincidence that the recent tribulations—and, on occasion, actual trials—of the Windsors have revolved around the second sons of successive monarchs. If Prince Harry and his uncle Andrew illustrate a wider point, it is that a sufficiently disgruntled or disreputable “spare” can badly tarnish the crown that his older sibling stands to inherit. But the vexed position of younger brothers of heirs to the throne, and their potential to cause trouble, is nothing new. As Jonathan Spangler reminds us in this fascinating book, while monarchy literally means “rule by one,” in practice, it has always been “a family affair” (p. 4). His object of study is the second son in the early modern monarchy of France, who traditionally bore the unofficial title of “Monsieur” and was the “first gentleman of the kingdom,” ranking only below the sovereign (p. 5). Spangler’s great innovation is to adopt a comparative perspective that, for the first time, brings together the four *Monsieurs* who have most preoccupied historians of Valois and Bourbon France: François, duke of Alençon (1555-1584); Gaston, duke of Orléans (1608-1660); Philippe, duke of Orléans (1640-1701); and Louis-Stanislas, count of Provence (1755-1824).<sup>[1]</sup> The author argues that a comparative approach allows us to trace a shift in the role of second sons as they adapted from a sixteenth-century “corporate” monarchy, in which the royal family was seen as the king’s natural source of counsel, to a more centralized, absolutist structure by the eighteenth century.

Occupying the position of the spare in early modern France was no easy task. Under the Salic law that governed royal succession, the younger son stood first in line to the throne as long as his brother remained without male heirs. Alençon and Gaston spent much of their lives in anticipation of becoming king, while Provence was eventually crowned as Louis XVIII. Monsieur therefore faced a “conundrum”: “he must always be ready to assume power, but he must never take it or even express a desire for it while his older brother is alive” (p. 68). Second sons had to maintain a delicate balance between their personal reputation and submission to the king, appearing “strong, but not too strong; glorious, but not too glorious” (p. 8). As a credible alternative to the ruling monarch, Monsieur was uniquely placed to threaten the regime’s stability. Gaston and Philippe both attracted failed plots by courtiers seeking to replace their brothers, Louis XIII and Louis XIV. Raised to lead in politics and war, younger royal brothers struggled to find other outlets for their ambitions. Upon hearing of the birth of the future Louis XIV, Gaston was said to have lamented that “there is no more opportunity in the world for me”

(p. 197). The book's main thesis is that as the rise of absolutism left Monsieur with an increasingly limited role in statecraft, his "princely identity" became more bound up in the building of palaces, collections, and patronage networks whose reflected magnificence strengthened the monarchy as a whole (p. 229).

Spangler's volume is divided into five chapters. The first is a brief, though informative, overview of fraternal relations in the context of the sacralization of the royal body. By virtue of their blood ties with the king, second sons shared in a status that elevated them above the rest of the nobility and could only be upheld through the acquisition of vast wealth and property. The system known as *apanage* provided these princes with "a territory over which to exercise autonomous authority, and estates from which to derive a princely income" (p. 30). But because the *apanage* remained property of the dynasty, it functioned (at least in theory) to keep semi-independent younger brothers within the royal fold, preventing them from overshadowing the king. The next chapter scrutinizes more closely family relations in the households in which the four Monsieurs were raised. In childhood, each experienced the death of his father, and so they "looked to their older brothers as a surrogate father figure for much of their lives" (pp. 44, 68-70). Although Spangler wisely avoids any attempt at psychoanalysis, he shows how spares were equally shaped by the influence of their mothers, in both their education (especially religious instruction) and political matters. Catherine de' Medici, her cousin Marie de' Medici, and Anne of Austria all served as regents for their eldest sons, but they could also gain leverage at court by favoring the king's younger brother.

Like their mothers, Monsieurs, in particular Alençon and Gaston, became focal points of resistance to royal policies. The third chapter demonstrates how one of the most important functions of the spare was to guarantee the survival of the dynasty by producing more spares in case the main line of succession became defunct. Marrying off second sons and their children also served a crucial purpose in securing international allies for France, as was true of Philippe's marriage to Henrietta Anne, sister of Charles II of England, and Provence's union with Maria Giuseppina, granddaughter of the king of Sardinia. Alençon engaged in protracted though ultimately fruitless negotiations for a match with Elizabeth I that would have made him king of England. At the same time, the capacity of second sons to gain an "independent place in European affairs" (p. 101) through marriage alliances, and to father heirs to the throne, posed a threat to the reigning monarch, especially if he was without male children of his own. The opposition of Louis XIII and his chief minister Richelieu to Gaston's preferred candidates for remarriage after the death of his first wife in 1627 became a flashpoint in the noble revolts led by the king's brother. Gaston's initial choice, Marie de Gonzague-Nevers, and his eventual second wife, Marguerite de Lorraine, were both seen as dangerous to France's interests because of their dynastic links to the strategically important states of Mantua and Lorraine. If Monsieur was a central player on the European stage, so too was Madame.

To my mind, it is this focus on the international—or transnational—scope of French court politics that makes the fourth chapter the richest section of the book (it is also the longest, at nearly 100 pages). Spangler has elsewhere superbly analyzed the transnational character of important noble families such as the Lorraine-Guise, overturning traditional assumptions that they should be considered French on the basis of their status as *princes étrangers* at the Valois and Bourbon courts. [2] Here, he shifts his attention to the ways in which the increasing exclusion of second sons from royal government drove these frustrated princes to express their authority through rebellion and the exercise of power outside the kingdom. The chapter contrasts the

fortunes of Alençon and Gaston, who both experienced a “cycle of acrimony and harmony” in relations with their older brothers (p. 172). Alençon, in Mack Holt’s phrase, was “a prince in search of a crown,” and gained his biggest opportunity when the leaders of the Dutch Revolt invited him to become sovereign prince of the Low Countries, in return for military aid.[3] While Alençon’s “Dutch Adventure” was cut short by his premature death, the next Monsieur also had ambitions that spilled over the borders of the French kingdom. Spangler rightly emphasizes “the international dimension of Gaston’s rebellion,” which was sustained by his flight into exile in Lorraine and the Spanish Netherlands when he broke with Louis XIII in 1629 and 1630 (p. 182). Seeking military aid from Spain and the Empire, Gaston found himself at the centre of a Habsburg effort to build a coalition against France involving his brothers-in-law in Lorraine, Savoy, and England.

Spangler is well-versed in the more than half-century of scholarship that has tempered the Enlightenment view of Gaston as a fickle and self-serving prince struggling pointlessly against the inexorable rise of the centralized nation state (pp. 174-175). It comes as something of a surprise, then, to see the book still conclude that his rebellions were futile (p. 298). For Spangler, Gaston’s political successes “were often in support of royal absolutism, in contradiction to his expressed ideals” (p. 197). But as Arlette Jouanna and others have shown, revolt and service to the crown were two sides of the same coin when it came to efforts by members of the royal family to dislodge Richelieu and his successor Mazarin from their ministerial monopoly on power.[4] Gaston obtained significant advantages from the settlements he negotiated in the wake of insurrection, just as he later would by refashioning himself as a faithful supporter of Anne of Austria’s regency.[5] If there is a drawback to studying Monsieur over the span of 250 years, it is that princely rebellion can look ineffective, because for those who held the title after 1661, it was a much less feasible—and less necessary—strategy. Yet, as Spangler also discusses, the idea that second royal sons ought to share in the governance of the kingdom persisted into the eighteenth century, to be taken up again by Provence during the crisis that led to the French Revolution. For the most part, however, Philippe and Provence were side-lined from high politics and war (despite the former’s surpassing martial ability). It thus became vital to find different avenues for projecting their authority.

The final chapter proposes that Monsieur “continued to play an important role in the supposed one-man show” of absolutism, not as a thorn in the monarch’s side but as a Maecenas (p. 247). By employing scholars, architects, playwrights, painters, and musicians, second sons could craft an image of royal prestige that sustained their position in the social hierarchy without encroaching on the political power of the sovereign (p. 246). Collecting precious objects, books, and a retinue of nobles was a further enhancement to princely glory. Spangler persuasively argues that even the client networks and residences constructed by Alençon and Gaston more often held up a mirror to the majesty of the king than challenged it directly. After his return to France in 1634, Gaston showed his commitment to life away from court politics by overseeing work on a new wing of his château at Blois. His nephew Philippe took this display of splendor to new heights, renovating the Palais-Royal and his palace at St Cloud, and amassing a glittering collection of artworks and artists (including Molière, who had first been sponsored by Gaston). The creation of what Spangler calls a “model for loyal support of absolutism” paved the way for Philippe’s—and later Provence’s—financial independence from the crown, and hugely increased the availability of patronage in the arts and for the nobility (pp. 197, 264, 282). By the late eighteenth century, France was the only European monarchy in which the second son could boast a household whose grandeur nearly rivaled that of the sovereign.

Chief among the considerable merits of this study is its restoration of Monsieur to his rightful place at the heart of early modern French cultural and political life. Historians and popularizers have tended to see royal brothers as colorful secondary characters, of interest more for their picaresque exploits than for their lasting contribution to the development of the Valois and Bourbon monarchies (pp. 5, 14). In this way, *Monsieur* is part of a salutary trend of histories that are beginning to take seriously the role played by courtly and dynastic politics in the formation of the state.<sup>[6]</sup> The book is also packed with a wealth of arresting detail about the temperaments, wives, children, mistresses, and favorites of the second sons it examines. For instance, we get a glimpse of the complexities of princely masculinity when Spangler dispels a myth that the cross-dressing Philippe was deliberately feminized in infancy to prevent him from emulating his fractious uncle Gaston (though there was perhaps a missed opportunity here for a more extended analysis of the masculine persona of “Monsieur”). Much of the material covered in this volume will be familiar to specialists of early modern France. Nonetheless, it is an impressive work of synthesis, expertly marshalling the historical literature and primary sources across three centuries. Monsieur is not only contextualized through his predecessors and successors in France, but with examples drawn widely from the monarchies of the medieval and early modern worlds. This book should be warmly welcomed by any scholar interested in the French court, dynastic culture, and monarchy in general. As Spangler has observed, second sons in modern royal families might also wish to take note of the fate of “spares with personalities that were more vivacious yet more unpredictable than their older brothers.”<sup>[7]</sup>

#### NOTES

[1] Although François assumed the title of duke of Anjou in 1574 when his older brother Henri acceded to the throne, Spangler refers to this Monsieur as “Alençon” throughout the book to avoid confusion with Henri, the previous duke of Anjou. I have followed the same practice in my review.

[2] Jonathan Spangler, *The Society of Princes: The Lorraine-Guise and the Conservation of Power and Wealth in Seventeenth-Century France* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

[3] Mack Holt, *The Duke of Anjou and the Politique Struggle during the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1.

[4] Arlette Jouanna, *Le devoir de révolte: la noblesse française et la gestation de l'État moderne (1559-1661)* (Paris: Fayard, 1989). See also Jean-Marie Constant, *La folle liberté des baroques, 1600-1661* (Paris: Perrin, 2007); David Parrott, *1652: The Cardinal, the Prince, and the Crisis of the Fronde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); and Charles Gregory, “The End of Richelieu: Noble conspiracy and Spanish treason in Louis XIII’s France, 1636-1642,” Oxford University DPhil Thesis (Oxford, 2012).

[5] For the generous terms of Gaston’s settlements in 1630, 1634, and 1637, see Armand-Jean du Plessis, cardinal de Richelieu, *Les Papiers de Richelieu. Section politique intérieure. Correspondance et papiers d'état*, Pierre Grillon, ed. (6 vols, Paris, 1975-1985), vol. V: 663-664, “Accord de Monsieur avec le Roy après la boutade de la Reyne”; Claude de Bourdeille, comte de Montrésor, *Mémoires*, J. Sambix, ed. (2 vols, Cologne, 1723), vol. II: 126-31, “Articles de l’accommodement,” October 1634; “Concessions de Louis XIII à son frère, signées à Orléans le 1er février 1637,”

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*Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de France* (1834) vol. I, 2<sup>nd</sup> part: 135-136; and Georges Dethan, *La vie de Gaston d'Orléans* (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 1992), 123-34.

[6] See for example, Liesbeth Geervers and Harald Gustafsson, eds., *Dynasties and State Formation in Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), which also contains a chapter by Spangler entitled, "The Frustrations of Being the Spare: Second Sons in the French Monarchy and their Increasingly Limited Roles in Politics and Society, 1560s–1780s" (pp. 217-249).

[7] Jonathan Spangler, "Heirs and Spares," *History Today*, 72, 3 (February 2023). <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/feature/heirs-and-spares> (accessed 5 June 2023).

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