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Pauline Ferrier-Viaud, *Épouses de ministres. Une histoire sociale du pouvoir féminin au temps de Louis XIV*. Paris. Champ Vallon. 2022. €25.00. (pb). ISBN 9791026710356.

Review by Katherine Crawford, Vanderbilt University.

In her well-researched monograph, Pauline Ferrier-Viaud situates the twenty-seven women who married the ministers in charge of the main departments of Louis XIV's monarchy (Affaires étrangères, Guerre, Maison du roi, Marine, Religion Prétendue Réformée, Finances, Chancellerie) from 1661 to 1715 as much more than the wives of important men. Ferrier-Viaud reconstructs the many ways that these women were integral to the careers of their husbands, as well as significant members of court culture and society. Throughout, Ferrier-Viaud acknowledges the legal and cultural constraints that limited women's independence and prospects, but she argues for various forms of agency within those constraints. While much of what she unearths about these women as wives, mothers, and women at court is not surprising, her analysis of how ministerial wives operated suggests that a broader view of gender, marriage, and family strategies may revise and deepen our understanding of Louis XIV's reign.

Ferrier-Viaud allows that her task is not an easy one. These women are not very well known, and the archival remains of their lives are sparse and scattered. Reconstruction of their roles as wives, mothers, women of the court, managers of the family interests, and patrons is difficult. Letters clearly flowed between couples, but typically, only the husband's correspondence was preserved. For instance, of the extensive correspondence between Jérôme Phélypeaux and his wife, Éléonore-Christine de Rochefoucauld-Roye, only two of her letters survive (pp. 29-30). Because Jérôme follows up on matters they have been discussing, it is possible to reconstruct some of what she wrote, but the reconstruction is always partial. Ferrier-Viaud warns that it is all too easy to get an impression of feminine passivity and invisibility within marriage because the correspondence tends to consist of only the husband's letters. On the other hand, the prominence of their husbands meant that these women were noticed and noted by memorialists and diarists for hosting events at court and handling financial matters when their husbands were away. These paper trails attest to the extent to which wives were actively engaged in managing and furthering (marital) family interests.

Given the length of Louis XIV's reign, Ferrier-Viaud notes, the composition of the group who married his ministers shifted over time. Earlier, most of the wives came from similar social origins as their husbands. Their families were recently ennobled, often with origins in the *noblesse de robe* and ties to finance functions. These wives tended to bring dowries tilted toward *rentes*, while later in the reign, dowries included more in land, and the women came from older noble

families and families with high military rank. Because social origins mattered a great deal at the highly stratified royal court, Ferrier-Viaud sets up the distinction to explicate the range of ways that wives found to negotiate social status on behalf of their marital families.

Although these were obviously instrumental marriages (as many or most elite marriages were, at least initially), Ferrier-Viaud's first main chapter considers how wives provided marital companionship. In general, wives offered support in their letters, including space for their husbands to discuss the difficulties of their work. Other kinds of support were more proactive. Marie-Madeleine de Castille, the wife of disgraced *surintendant des finances* Nicolas Fouquet, served as her husband's agent in several transactions and his advocate by complaining to the king about her husband's trial and imprisonment (pp. 37, 44-46). More conventionally, Charlotte Trudaine, wife of Daniel-François Voysin, helped her husband by establishing a connection with the marquise de Maintenon when the king went to the siege of Namur in 1692. Voysin was intendant of the province, and Charlotte's social efforts won Maintenon's favor, which in turn furthered Voysin's career (p. 49). As Ferrier-Viaud notes, the emotional aspects of these relationships are less clear than the practical ones, but sentiments of concern about health do crop up, as do expressions of missing absent spouses.

But much more visible is their active management of family financial concerns, as demonstrated in chapter two. Although married women were legally in tutorship (*tutelle*), they nonetheless were signatories on all sorts of documents, including leases, land purchases, and the sale and purchase of *rentes*. In some cases, as with Marie-Madeleine de Castille, management was direct because her responsibility was to preserve and conserve the family resources during her husband's imprisonment. In other cases, wives utilized acts of procuration, which effectively relieved them of marital tutelage while preserving the presumption of patriarchal power. These moves were often to protect the assets of the couple. When Pierre Séguier was forced into exile during the Fronde, for example, he registered a procuration for his wife, Madeleine Fabry, who went on to sign several documents liquidating assets and managing *rentes* to support the family. Élisabeth Turpin also regularly signed financial documents, with at least fifteen on record during her marriage, and more after she was widowed (pp. 94-100). Wives also managed the household finances on a daily basis, though the records are sparse during their marriages. Records are more abundant during widowhood, and Ferrier-Viaud uses them to demonstrate female expertise in domestic administration.

The most obvious contribution of wives was to provide heirs, and chapter three considers how these women were responsible not just for giving birth, but for the education, social development, and financial launching of their children. The pressures toward maternity were clearly tremendous. Catherine-Félicité Arnauld de Pomponne, wife of Jean-Baptiste Colbert de Torcy, had six miscarriages (pp. 112-13). Éléonore-Christine de Rochefoucauld-Roye had five children in eight years, which contributed to her physical debility and likely her early death at age twenty-seven (pp. 116-19). Once children were born, wives supervised education and training in faith, despite their supposed intellectual inferiority as women. This is not really news, nor are the occasional expressions of maternal solicitude in letters between mothers and their children. More interesting is the recurrent advice from mothers to their sons about how to do their jobs. Marie de Maupeou (wife of Louis de Ponchartrain) and Françoise Doujat (wife of Omer Talon) wrote such advice, and Paule Payen (wife of Hugues de Lionne) seems to have defended her adult son when he was publicly attacked by the Jesuits (pp. 129-31).

Beyond providing heirs, the wives had a crucial role as women at court, an area where Ferrier-Viaud's contribution becomes fully apparent. In chapter four, the author lays out how ministerial wives mediated between and among the ranks at court. The king's councilors were situated above other robe nobles, but below the higher nobility and princes. Because of their importance in the government, ministers received housing at Versailles, and Ferrier-Viaud explains how ministerial apartments were organized, decorated, and spatially gendered to facilitate the wives' networking activities. While the wife's rank followed her husband, honors she acquired redounded on him as well. For instance, when Madeleine Fabry, the wife of Pierre Séguier, was the first ministerial wife to obtain a seat before the queen (a privilege denied to ministers' wives generally), the logic was that her husband was the chancellor (pp. 154-56). But the privilege reflected positively on Séguier and served as the basis for later efforts by wives to obtain similar privileges. Ferrier-Viaud demonstrates how the honors and patronage ties cultivated by their wives helped the husbands achieve social integration, which was crucial to the advancement of their careers.

That said, social integration was both limited and precarious. In chapter five, Ferrier-Viaud elaborates on the ways that wives mediated between the ministers and the old elites. Invitations to Marly, participation in games at court, and personal ties to Madame de Maintenon were among the activities wives utilized to advance and signal advancement. Wives also organized balls at court on several occasions, with guest lists that mixed members of the royal family, old noble families, and the minister's family and clients. On two occasions, ministers' wives (Marie Charron, wife of Jean-Baptiste Colbert in 1680 and Élisabeth-Thérèse Le Rebours, wife of Michel Chamillart in 1704) were chosen to oversee the layette of the royal children (pp. 191-202). Here, the honor was in being charged with providing such a service to the king. As Ferrier-Viaud emphasizes, by playing a part in the competition for royal favor, wives provided points of contact across the rigid rank structure of the court.

Away from court, wives engaged in the typical pious and charitable giving by women of their class and status. Chapter six notes that charitable efforts tended to be aimed at abandoned infants, the sick, and clergy (especially nuns) who had taken vows of poverty. While some were conspicuously religious—Pierre Séguier and his wife Madeleine Fabry, for instance, were from the *dévo*t milieu—others regarded charity as a social obligation (p. 212). Wives organized the distribution of food, provided clothes, heating oil, and medicinal remedies on family estates. Others went further, setting up foundling hospitals, endowing convents, and supporting educational projects. Whether pious giving was an element of family strategy or a matter of personal faith or most likely a mix of motives, charitable activities expressed maternal solicitude and feminine conformity to gendered domestic norms.

Ferrier-Viaud's engagement with a wide range of sources does not just reveal an obscure population, but also demonstrates both how such a history can be done and what it can tell us about the dynamics of gender, social cohesion, and court politics. The outlines of what women were expected to do are not surprising, but how ministerial wives actually functioned as wives, mothers, and social mediators is given texture and depth in Ferrier-Viaud's account. By recuperating, even from sources largely written by men and rarely focused on the women in question, the spaces and possibilities of "agentivité féminine," Ferrier-Viaud opens a broadened vista to show how women mattered to family, service, and honor at the court of Louis XIV.

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