Status Interaction During the Reign of Louis XIV

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Author: Giora Sternberg

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Reviewer: Linda Kiernan

When one thinks of political negotiations that run through the night one thinks of tense situations, matters of war and peace and highly dedicated individuals committed to a higher purpose. On the night of 31 August 1679 courtiers of Louis XIV mediated a very sensitive matter, one that affected both courtiers, king and foreign dignitaries alike. It was part of several days of negotiating between the king, Louis II de Bourbon, prince of Condé, and Condé's agent Gourville. It had been brought to the king's attention on several occasions during the previous few days, and indeed had forced him to call upon myriad precedents in order to satisfy his subjects and bring peace to the court. Following the marriage of his niece to the king of Spain, it was important to ensure that relations between the two kingdoms were in as good a shape as ever, lest the marriage itself be wasted as an opportunity of international diplomacy. But Louis XIV had more than the in-laws to worry about, his own extended family were causing enough trouble. Louis XIV was experiencing a very modern problem when it comes to weddings: what to do about the seating arrangements?

The question of ceremonial, rank, etiquette and protocol with regards to the early modern court has been at the forefront of court studies since the publication in English of Norbert Elias' *Civilizing Process* in 1969. How courtiers, noble families and foreign dignitaries negotiated their status has informed our views of the court system, and how it operated on a multitude of levels. The court of Louis XIV has long been the natural home of such studies given the Sun King's reputation for control over his immediate subjects, and for the highly formalized nature of how he performed his own day. Various studies have built upon and challenged Elias's work, disarming any charges of antiquarianism with regards to such close readings of seemingly innocuous detail; from the importance of the bow to the design of an armchair. In recent years the works of Jeroen Duindam, Daniel Gordon, Nicolas Le Roux, Fanny Cosandey and Jonathan Dewald among others have explored the vagaries of noble life and rank (as well as challenging Elias' findings and methodology) leading to the enrichment of court studies in everything from high ceremonial to the nuances of daily interaction, from the medieval court up to the end of the *ancien régime*. In addition to these, studies by Jacques Levron, Jean-François Solnon and William R. Newton have fleshed out the structure and personnel of the court at Versailles. Where Sternberg's work lies in all of this is firmly at the court of Louis XIV but at the more informal, more difficult end of the scale, as he seeks to understand the everyday implementation, navigation and evolution of customary practices at the court and how they both shaped and were shaped by rank, ambition and favour.

Sternberg seeks to present a fuller understanding of the intricacies of court ceremonial and protocol in its most common form; that is, the daily interactions between the members of the court. This offers a multi-lateral view of the court moving away from the interactions between the king and his courtiers to the interactions between the courtiers themselves. This is a formidable undertaking given the sheer variety of rank, title and circumstance during this reign, but it is one that the author handles well. Across six chapters Sternberg examines the dynamics of status interaction through the prism of events, practices, and precedents. The first chapter looks at the status negotiations that occurred during the nuptial celebrations of the marriage of Louis XIV's niece to the king of Spain. Chapter two examines the politics of seating and the negotiations regarding the Condé's seating rights during 1679. The following two chapters deal with ceremony and dress, particularly the wearing of the mantle. The fifth chapter addresses functions like the handling of the chemise and the serviette within wider concepts of service, and the final chapter looks at the niceties of epistolary etiquette, a topic that Sternberg has published on previously. As such he has presented a rounded study that attempts to cover the most visible and widely utilized aspects of status construction. Status symbols at the court of Louis XIV were both signifiers of favour and usually favour itself, however Sternberg also reveals how appropriating the signifier of a higher rank (by various means) could eventually translate into rank itself.

One particular group under discussion here is the Legitimated Princes, the natural children of Louis XIV. Primarily the sons of Mme de Montespan, the duc du Maine and the comte de Toulouse, these men pursued their birthrights aggressively throughout their father's reign and gained significant rights in the final years of his life. Their unprecedented gains within the royal family culminated in their inclusion in the line of succession. Sternberg argues that the *de facto* gains made by these princes in the 1670s and 1680s turned into *de jure* rights by the end of Louis XIV's reign. He maintains that Maine in particular was able to pave the way within the royal family and make himself an equal alongside the Princes of the Blood. When the unfortunate events of 1711–14 unfolded, leaving the young great-grandson of Louis XIV to inherit the throne, the Duc du Maine and the comte de Toulouse were in position to take their places not only on the Regency Council but also in the line of succession. It is true that the Legitimated Princes made ground in the 1710s but after the death of Louis XIV they slid back down the ranks; while ceremonial meant they had gained entry to the upper ranks it did not mean they could stay. The powerful backlash of the regent and the princes of the blood served to highlight just how much the Legitimated Princes had been protected by both their father and Mme de Maintenon, but also how much ceremonial precedents had allowed them to gain.

The choice of source material is significant in any study and in this one it allows us to see ceremonial in a manner less easily observed. The author has been fortunate in uncovering correspondence between the Condé family and their agent at the court Gourville allowing us to see courtly social practices in motion.

This constitutes 22 pieces of correspondence between master and servant on the issue of seating. The majority of the letters were sent between 29 August 1679 and 2 September, presenting a micro-history of status interaction at the court. It is a rare highly-detailed example of status negotiation which unfolds in 'real time' in the sources and serves Sternberg's study very well by showing the intricacies of the system as well as the concerns of the courtiers (even high-ranking ones such as the Condés). The question of source material is touched upon a number of times throughout the work, and Sternberg is critical of Elias' choice of sources. Elias' reliance upon etiquette literature is criticised, as well as his use of, sometimes dubious, translations. Sternberg rightly points out that etiquette literature may be useful in determining theory but is much less illustrative of actual practices. This is certainly plausible but it would be interesting to examine whether courtesy texts influenced behaviour or whether writers of such manuals drew their advice from the latest practices at the court. As a vibrant genre of publishing, particularly during the first two decades of Louis XIV's personal reign, it would be useful to examine the interaction between theory and practice, especially given the wealth of detail gleaned from Sternberg's epistolary sources. Also the strength of the Gourville-Condé correspondence throws the wider source material into contrast. The author notes that while the *affaire des sièges* is the main topic of over sixty pages of correspondence it is not mentioned in any of the better-known source material such as Sévigné, Bussy-Rabutin or Saint-Simon. As such we are reminded of the challenges facing the historian of court culture; the vagaries of courtly interaction that appear remarkable to the modern observer were simply part of the everyday fabric of court life and thus rarely warranted explanation. It is the reason etiquette literature and almanac entries have been so heavily relied upon by previous scholars.

Where the usual problems of source material can be avoided is in the analysis of epistolary niceties. In Sternberg's final chapter he tackles the thorny issues of address and epistolary ceremonial. In what is the most forensic of the book's chapters the author explores everything from the issue of reciprocity to the quality of ink and paper (and parchment). The sheer variety of proper address and subscription, as well as content, of letters again points to a finely-tuned cultural language. Sternberg does particularly well in teasing out the evolutionary processes of epistolary practice, and in highlighting the minor differences which meant so much to contemporary correspondents. Even at the very top of the social scale whether Louis XIV signed off his letters to correspondents with 'God's holy and worthy protection' or simply 'God's holy protection' could mean so very much. (p. 143). The distinctions between Monsieur and Monseigneur, and between Madame and Mademoiselle, as well as many other epistolary practices are discussed presenting a fairly comprehensive overview of the etiquette of letter-writing during the reign of Louis XIV. The details and intricacies drawn out remind us once again that the content of a written source is just one aspect of its usefulness to the historian, and as such, this chapter in particular would be of enormous help to the student and scholar delving into French archival holdings of correspondence for the first time.

While this study is for the specialist reader it is a fascinating read offering new views and sources of what is already well-trodden ground. The depth of detail at times can slow the pace but overall the author balances wider observations with the minutiae of courtly life. There are little gems of detail revealing the nuances and quirks of the system as well as the attitude of those who lived by the rules; the image of Louis XIV smirking at the over-dressed 'wannabes' jumps out at the reader as a very telling moment of the king's personality so often hidden by the grandeur. So too are there other anecdotes revealing the lengths to which members of the royal family would go to in order to retain their place or indeed augment it. During a period of mourning at Marly in 1711 Madame la Princesse, widow of Henri-Jules de Condé, installed herself in her daughter's apartment which lay on the path mantled mourners had to take through the court thus ensuring that they had to pay their respects to her by default. Well-known issues such as the handling of the chemise are fleshed out as we see how disputes over who handled what at the court could bring the smooth running of a monarch's day to a standstill. In July 1717 when the status of the Legitimated Princes was clarified the testing-ground of their new rank was in the young king's bedchamber and at his table, and when disagreements arose it could stall the king's day. When the all-important question arose of who would hand over the serviette at the king's supper messengers were sent into the streets to find the regent to decide who took precedence between the duke de Mortemart and the duc du Maine's son the count of Eu (the latter won). Court

squabbles have always provided interesting anecdotes for the historian, but set within the context of Sternberg's rigorous discussion they are as illustrative as they are entertaining.

A question that looms large over the topic of court etiquette and protocol is what can it tell us of wider trends and issues of court dynamics? Certainly the author has made a strong case for the significance of status interaction at the court of Louis XIV, and that minute details in the most fleeting of exchanges can have far-reaching effects., however other factors also need to be borne in mind, not least the role of agency. Nonetheless the study is successful in deciphering the language of the court, and most importantly, by testing its effect on the ground, and charting the consequences of such exchanges. The chapters dealing with the wedding of Louis XIV's niece and the disputes arising in the Gourville-Condé correspondence are in many respects micro-histories within the wider study, and as such they illustrate how status interaction unfolded at specific events and in particular circumstances. What emerges is an enriched view of court dynamics, as we are guided through the ever-shifting and malleable social world of the early modern courtier. Sternberg has also presented an impressive reading of sources and a dissection of a number of key aspects of status symbolism (his discussion of mantles and train-bearing especially). This study therefore has attempted to pin down an incredibly elusive system which varied over time, across social classes, and according to the protagonists involved, and yet despite the immense complexity of some of the most mundane social exchanges Sternberg has extracted some very telling details of court life. The template this study provides for the other courts of Europe will be dependent on the sources, but it certainly presents historians of the court with a vigorous model to test.

The author thanks the reviewer and does not wish to comment further.

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