

REVIEWS

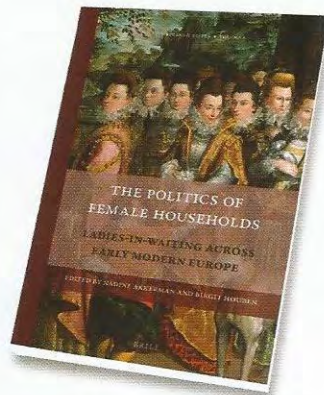
reader are seven distinctive sets of research questions, each section typically bringing together five or six separate essays offering a range of ideas, suggestions, interpretations and further bibliography. The essays, all specially commissioned, stand on their own, yet a reading across sections is richly rewarding, as the essays speak to each other in myriad ways.

The best way of getting a sense of the range of essays on offer is to see how the contents are organised. The editors' introduction maps out the intellectual framework, beginning with an initial section on 'Gendered Thinking', followed by a second section 'Looking Through the Law'. These initial 11 essays provide the essential framework, or to borrow a phrase from Roger Crum and John T. Paoletti, 'the physical and psychological spaces' (see their 2006 book, *Renaissance Florence*) within which the social, spiritual, material, legal, emotional lives of medieval women – and men – were lived. From the outset it becomes clear that this book represents a medieval Europe that is not an exclusively western or, indeed, Christian affair and this approach adds immeasurably to its strength and topicality. So, in the section on 'Gendered Thinking', the intellectual framework for approaches to gender takes account of Christian as well as Jewish and Muslim ideas, while the section on law again works through significant developments with regard to property rights, the legal emancipation of women and developments affecting bride prices and dowries. A third section, on 'Domestic Lives', contains some of the most exciting material in this volume, discussing objects, their consumption, issues surrounding public and private and access to spaces for women to express themselves. The next part necessarily turns to issues of 'Land, Labor (sic) and Economy', engaging head-on with issues of class, forced labour and demographic changes brought about by a shift in governmental structures.

Arguably much of the first part of this book is about establishing norms, of defining frameworks and explaining expectations, so a

necessary section on 'Bodies, Pleasures, Desires' deals with definitions of identity as transposed on bodies and the transgressions that might ensue. While it is difficult to single out one essay as especially deserving of mention, Helmut Puff's chapter on 'Same-Sex Possibilities' is a master class in how to make limited sources and conflicting evidence yield insights into how medieval attitudes towards sex were expressed within their social environment, beautifully setting the scene for the Burns' essay on 'Performing Courtliness'. Part VI of the book is given over to a sustained debate on aspects of religion, devotion and spirituality, revealing a much more complex and nuanced picture about personal expressions of faith than might be expected, before the final section offers up a historiographical and methodological feast for the reader, looking at 'Turning Points and Places'.

Gabriele Neher



The Politics of Female Households

Ladies-in-Waiting Across Early Modern Europe

Edited by Nadine Akkerman and Birgit Houben

Brill 421pp £127

THIS VOLUME covers the roles and influence of ladies-in-waiting in the Tudor and Stuart courts, France, the Habsburg courts, in Vienna and the Spanish Netherlands, and Sweden, with contributions covering several disciplines. This sort of study is useful to independent scholars like myself, who seek to bring the latest scholarly research to a

wider audience, although its hefty price tag and self-conscious academic air are less appealing. However, on its own terms, does the book succeed in making a genuine contribution to comparative studies and our broader understanding of the early modern period?

Inevitably, as with many collections, quality is variable. Those that stand out for me are Janet Ravenscroft's entertaining and informative study on dwarfs and the so-called 'madwoman', Magdalena Ruiz, of the Spanish Habsburg court, which shows how 'little people' and a servant who was probably outspoken rather than mad were cherished by the daughters of Philip II. But perhaps the most revealing aspect of Ravenscroft's work is the unexpected side it shows of a king often represented as a cold-hearted bigot. Philip's letters to his daughters demonstrate an affection and playfulness not often associated with the arch-enemy of Elizabethan England. Also impressive is Una McLivenna's convincing demolition of the centuries-old male view of Catherine de Medici's ladies as 'a stable of whores', a propaganda campaign against the unpopular Italian queen-regent, which was remorseless even during her lifetime. Then there is Rosalind Marshall's useful summation of her extensive work on the ladies who served Mary Queen of Scots.

The rest is rather patchy. More rigorous editing would have eliminated basic errors, such as the reference in one piece to Mary Queen of Scots as 'queen regent' of France and the puzzlingly contradictory conclusions in another about whether gender issues did or did not play an important part in the court of Louis XIII and Anne of Austria. Arguably herein is the nub of the problem. How much political influence did ladies-in-waiting actually have? The current vogue is to assume that intimacy equals influence, but the evidence to support this,

by the admission of several of the authors, is far from clear. Of course, a position at court was highly sought after, giving one access that could be used to promote the interests of family and friends and possibly personal involvement in diplomatic intrigue. However, while acknowledging that ambassadors often believed that a queen's ladies could be used to further their interests, no lady-in-waiting ever negotiated a treaty. The assertion is made that Anne of Austria 'bonded' with her ladies. Whatever reliance she placed on them, would Anne really have characterised such relationships in such a 21st-century way?

In her piece on the female bedchamber of Henrietta Maria, Sara J. Wolfson questions how far the ladies' actions were

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restricted by patriarchal considerations. This is an important point. It is right to drill down more deeply into the roles of these women, but this needs to be balanced by a more considered view of the overall climate of political power – and, in the case of several of these young academics who are just finishing doctorates, a better understanding of the wider historical context than is sometimes demonstrated in their writing. Perhaps future studies might more fruitfully show how ladies of the court functioned not in isolation but in conjunction with their husbands, fathers and brothers. Power politics in early modern Europe was frequently a family affair and undoubtedly the women played their part. We need now to integrate comparative and gender studies into what another historian has called 'joined-up' thinking.

Linda Porter