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Fanny Cosandey, *Le rang. Préséances et hierarchies dans la France d'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Gallimard, 2016. 491 pp. Bibliography. €28.00 (pb). ISBN 9782070105564.

Review Essay by Jonathan Spangler, Manchester Metropolitan University

For several decades, the histories of the French court in the last centuries of the ancien régime have either focused on theory and structural analysis or on the descriptive memoirs and letters left behind by those who frequented the court. Rarely have the two been analyzed together, in an effort to synthesize a desired order with a chaotic reality. This book does not do this either. Instead, it returns to the oft-cited theoretical world of Norbert Elias, and to the well-worn but extremely useful structural analysis of Roland Mousnier, whose important work, curiously, is neither cited in the footnotes nor listed in the bibliography.[1] In the introduction to this highly focused study on rank and precedence, Cosandey acknowledges the dangers of following the overly-theoretical approach of Elias, and the importance of supporting theories with empirical research, citing the seminal work of Jeroen Duindam.[2] But this book does not adopt his later, even more well-known approach of blending the structural and legal with the narrative and observational.[3] This book therefore seems at times one-sided, an image of how the monarchy wished to be seen, or how several of its most prominent courtiers and servants argued it should be, rather than a balanced portrayal reconstructed through a use of evidence from a mixture of ambassadors' reports, courtiers' diaries and letters, though of course these too have biases of their own. Nevertheless, by carefully scrutinizing dozens of manuscripts and printed sources from libraries and archives in France, Cosandey is able to assemble in one place an impressive array of administrative paperwork produced by the French monarchy (its officials or its theorists) or by its chief subjects on the topic of rank: edicts, regulations, legal dossiers, formal protests. The thesis is clear: that to increase and safeguard its autonomy and authority, the monarchy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made use of its control over rank and precedence as best it could. And although the main objective was to engender a sense that these things were unchanging and stable, they were in fact ever evolving and adapting to new scenarios. One of the central achievements of the late Valois and Bourbon branches of the House of France was to elevate all of their members, sons, daughters, cousins, to a position in the social hierarchy that was superior to all others, no matter what their lineage, achievements or office. By extension, this privilege was then extended to other groups, particularly the foreign princes and the dukes and peers. But by elevating the *sang* of the royal house beyond the reach of any others in the court society, now sitting at the very top of the hierarchy by right of birth rather than by right of service or achievement, the French monarchs also removed their ability to control the embedded power of these often very powerful princes and the magnates directly beneath them in rank, by whom they often felt surrounded and trapped by the end of the ancien régime. Cosandey is not the first to observe that the "gilded cage" image of the Versailles of Louis XIV was, by the late eighteenth century, in fact more of a cage for the monarchs themselves, but she has adeptly shown the process by which this occurred. Ultimately, ceremonial was a trap.

As pointed out by Cosandey in her introduction (p. 12), "quarrels" over rank and precedence help us understand every aspect of this process: disorder illuminates order. Therefore, quarrels, debates and conflicts feature heavily in each of the four major parts of this book. The first part

examines the history of rank, from its “pre-history” to the Valois and Bourbon regimes. This section is useful in bringing to light sources on the rules of etiquette and protocol as they emerged in the later medieval period. The second part looks at the laying down of rules and the disputes that questioned these regulations (the theory); while the third looks at specific questions of royal authority and sovereignty (the politics). The fourth part provides the most useful analysis of all of these elements, as it examines how these regulations, debates and quarrels affected courtiers and officials in their lives (the social history), looking at wealth, family strategies and gender. It is this fourth part, however, where the book’s heavy reliance on the official, the legal, the theoretical, is strongest, ignoring much of the heavily empirical research that has been done by historians in the past two decades on the actual functionality, the successes and failures, of prominent court families.[4] Footnotes in this section are instead, almost exclusively, references to primary sources. This is the chief strength of this book, in looking afresh at this material, but it is also arguably its key weakness. It is important to say that battling for premier place in the court hierarchy brings any magnate family more than simply honor; it was crucial for economic security and financial gain. But how is this quantified? When memoirs are used to flesh out the details, the author turns predictably to the overused duc de Saint-Simon, ignoring the wealth of detailed minutia on the functioning of rank and precedence at the court of Louis XIV provided by some of his most senior courtiers (and trusted men, unlike le petit duc): the marquis de Sourches or the marquis de Dangeau.[5]

Part one of *Le rang* amply demonstrates the overall thesis that the advancement of the royal house as something special, above all other ranks, began in earnest in the sixteenth century, in contrast to early medieval ideals of monarchy projecting an image of equality: the Round Table, Charlemagne’s peers. Cosandey is clear that although the idea of rank was not new to the early modern period, the manipulation of it as an affirmation of royal power was (p. 31). This section closely scrutinizes documents from across the period, starting with Aliénor de Poitiers in the fifteenth century and moving on to Jean Du Tillet and Théodore Godefroy in the sixteenth and seventeenth. These are familiar sources to court historians, but there are interesting, unfamiliar documents in this section as well, including a letter written by Catherine de’ Medici instructing her son, Charles IX, on how to keep his house in order (p. 62), or documents prepared for Henry IV concerning the baptism of his son in 1606 (pp. 91-92). What is especially well-documented is the idea that, whereas Henry III was concerned with creating enduring regulations for rank based on ancient precedent, his successor, Henry IV, was quite willing to modify the system to suit the economic and security needs of the present. He was also willing to make exceptions for friends rather than remain, godlike, above the fray of personal quarrels. This was then more or less reversed by his more structurally oriented successors, Louis XIII and Louis XIV. Louis XIII, however, sometimes thought etiquette excessive, chiding his brother Gaston for insisting those in his carriage ride with their heads uncovered, despite harsh weather (“il faut laisser ces sottises là à mon frère”) (quoted p. 108). And while Henry IV was trying to bring about peace and reconciliation through regulation of his court, his grandson, Louis XIV, wanted to impose his rules as the only rules and to increase the grandeur of those who served him. In this latter effort, Cosandey rightly examines the ceremonies promoting new members to the Order of the St-Esprit in 1688, which attempted to finally regulate the position of the legitimated princes and foreign princes with the dukes and peers (p. 114). But here is a good example of where adhering strictly to the published documents (the regulation, Bibliothèque nationale, Ms Fr. 20822, fol. 34) leads the analysis astray. While on paper the king had brought order to disorder and imposed an impersonal regulation that did not accommodate particular needs or personal preferences, in looking at reports of the actual events of the promotion of 1688, we see that many members of the Order stayed away from the ceremony in protest of their new positions, and that, in fact, the new order of precedence very much reflected the king’s personal

preferences, since the House of Lorraine (headed by his intimate friend, the comte d'Armagnac) was honored well beyond the limits of the new regulations. This discrepancy between royal desire and reality is reported by nearly every major commentator of the period.[6]

In part two, Cosandey examines documents maintained by royal officials of ceremonial. Their job was to hide quarrels, but it is these conflicts that reveal to historians at once the symptoms, products and factors of change (p. 124). This section provides four case studies, to which the author returns throughout the rest of the work: these involve the claims of the duc de Nevers to a higher rank at the royal marriage of 1570; a dispute between an officer of the crown and a duke and peer at a Council meeting of 1618; the complexities of the line-up for the royal entrée of 1660; and royal princesses competing over rank by birth versus rank by marriage in 1710. All four of these examples are useful in this context as they have an abundance of archival sources, more than what is normally available. In the absence of an official handbook on rank authored by the monarchy, chapter five, "The Grammar of Rank," tries to synthesize dozens of administrative notes and memoirs to fully delineate the system. This section would have been aided by some charts or lists, to demonstrate points more clearly with quantitative data, as is done effectively in a similar work—cited here briefly—by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie.[7] This includes material such as lists of precedence, numbers of peerages or officers of the crown, tables of ranks indicating which ladies could sit before the queen, and so on. But even without these, this chapter ably reveals the confusion, the contradictions, that overflow in a study of ranks and hierarchies. Sometimes *ancienneté* gives a title a higher rank, sometimes not. The author seems certain that princes always precede dukes (p. 168), but a perusal of genealogical works from the period reveals that in fact some ancient families with no ducal titles bore (at least unofficially) the title of prince, for example the Talleyrand princes of Chalais.[8] Of course, these are rarities and exceptions; more common are the princely titles borne by the eldest sons of dukes: Marsillac for La Rochefoucauld, Poix for Créquy, Tingry for Montmorency, and so on.[9] The chapter further explores spatial arrangements: it is better to be above than below, before than after (except in an ecclesiastical procession, and then it is reversed), and on the right, not the left. Kings and their jurists tried to show that ritual and rank never changed and were ultimately based on "natural" or "fundamental" laws, but of course they changed these as needs arose. A favorite phrase of men like Du Tillet and Godefroy was that a certain thing had been done from "immémoriale observance" (p. 186).

Part three takes this analysis further in demonstrating how the monarchy used the law and legal precedent to settle disputes as a means of displaying its own sovereignty. As Cosandey puts it, rank itself is a representation of monarchy, so must be regulated (p. 243). The law courts were there to resolve disputes of this nature, but ultimately—and this is the crux of this entire study—rank was based on whatever the king said it was. Louis XIII, irritated by the procedures of the parlement, declared: "Je veux que vous sachiez que je suis Grand Masitre des ceremonies et que personne ne peut prendre de Rang que celui que je veux" (quoted on pp. 267-268). But at the same time, "la volonté du Roy n'est autre que ce que la justice dira" (p. 277). Classic ancien régime contradictions. Many of the cases investigated in this section involve either the foreign princes (members of sovereign foreign houses) or legitimated princes (descendants of royal bastards), notably the dukes of Longueville, who were both, once they acquired the principality of Neuchâtel. Here an international dimension is added, since the Longuevilles claimed to be able to use their princely status to access the treaty negotiations at Münster in the 1640s (p. 302). This issue potentially could lead to a much broader discussion of the recognition of ranks in the diplomatic world, which Cosandey acknowledges in the conclusion. Other cases examined in this part of the book involve women, notably grand-daughters of sovereigns who

had to struggle to have their special rank acknowledged. This connects to part four, in which the concrete elements of rank and precedence are explored, examining how these impacted family strategies and the methods employed by elite families to translate rank into profit. The threshold of proximity to the monarch was always key, as has been well-studied by court historians.[10] Courtiers learned how to work together as families or clusters of allied families, and how to use the law to their advantage, as well as their rights to personal proximity and favor of the sovereign. The final section examines more particularly the position of women in these efforts, notably in looking at women's rights to transfer their ranks to lower born husbands (such as Marguerite de Rohan-Chabot and Louise-Hyppolite Grimaldi, Princess of Monaco), or even, in the absence of a male, for a woman to be able to stand alone in courtly and legal hierarchies (such as Mademoiselle de Guise, the last of her family). It is certainly worth noting in today's academic climate of ever-increasing visibility of women in pre-modern societies that studies like these (indeed of these very same women) are appearing with increasing frequency.[11] This analysis of their legal efforts points to a final over-arching point made in this study, that women, not men, were quite often the engines driving the machine of rank and hierarchy in courtly society (p. 450).

It is perhaps being greedy to ask an author for more things than she had intended to provide, and certainly so in a book of already nearly 500 pages. But I did wonder about the book's chronological coverage, saying that it examines the last centuries of the ancien régime, but rarely reaching beyond 1715, territory that genuinely does require closer academic scrutiny. Aside from the study of the court of Louis XV by Bernard Hours—referred to here only on the very last page—this is still a mostly un-researched area.[12] Tantalizingly, Cosandey produces numerous erudite publications from this later period that demonstrate that these quarrels were indeed still on-going as late as the 1770s. Works she cites by Henri Griffet, Joseph Balthasar Gibert and Jean-François Georgel (p. 290) are mostly unknown in French court studies and themselves would make a fascinating and informative study of the context in which they were written. It would also be useful for this book to have an index, particularly as it goes back and forth across several examples of judicial quarrels across several hundred pages. Nevertheless, this very systematic and broad-ranging analysis of documents produced by and for the monarchy from the late fifteenth century all the way up to the eighteenth century is a welcome addition to the growing body of research on the evolution and development of the relationships between the crown and its leading subjects.

NOTES

[1] Roland Mousnier, *Les institutions de la France sous la monarchie absolue, 1598-1789*, 2 volumes (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974-1980).

[2] Jeroen Duindam, *Myths of Power: Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European Court* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995).

[3] Jeroen Duindam, *Vienna and Versailles: The Courts of Europe's Major Dynastic Rivals, 1550-1780* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[4] There are several good examples, notably Sara E. Chapman, *Private Ambition and Political Alliances: The Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain Family and Louis XIV's Government, 1650-1715* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2004); Ariane Boltanski, *Les ducs de Nevers et l'Etat royal: genèse d'un compromis (ca 1550-ca 1600)* (Geneva: Droz, 2006); Katia Béguin, *Les princes de Condé: rebelles, courtisans et mécènes dans la France du Grand Siècle*

(Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1999); and my own monograph, Jonathan Spangler, *The Society of Princes: The Lorraine-Guise and the Conservation of Power and Wealth in Seventeenth-Century France* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

[5] Louis-François du Bouchet, marquis de Sourches, *Mémoires sur le règne de Louis XIV*, ed. Gabriel-Jules, comte de Cosnac, and Arthur Bertrand, 13 v. (Paris: Hachette, 1882); Philippe de Courcillon, marquis de Dangeau, *Journal*, ed. Eudoxe Soulié, Louis Dussieux, *et al.*, 19 v. (Paris: Firmin Didot frères, 1854-60).

[6] See for example Dangeau, vol. II, 220, 240-42, 285; and Sourches, vol. III, p. 112. Further references to these precedence disputes, by Saint-Simon, Mme de Sévigné, Baron Spanheim, and Mme de Lafayette can be found in Spangler, *Society of Princes*, p. 104.

[7] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Jean-François Fitou, *Saint-Simon ou Le système de la Cour* (Paris: Fayard, 1997).

[8] François-Alexandre Aubert de La Chesnaye-Des Bois, *Dictionnaire généalogique, héraldique, chronologique et historique* (Paris, 1761), vol. VI, pp. 427-28.

[9] I have explored these unusual circumstances in a recent article, “*Les Princes étrangers: Truly Princes? Truly Foreign? Typologies of Princely Status, Trans-Nationalism and Identity in Early Modern France*,” in *Adel und Nation in der Neuzeit: Hierarchie, Egalität und Loyalität 16.-20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Martin Wrede and Laurent Bourquin (Ostfildern: Thorbecke Verlag, 2017), pp. 117-141.

[10] See for example, the essays in the volume edited by Dries Raeymaekers and Sebastiaan Derks, *The Key to Power? The Culture of Access in Princely Courts, 1400-1750* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

[11] Marguerite de Rohan’s case is examined in detail in Jonathan Dewald, *Status, Power, and Identity in Early Modern France: The Rohan Family, 1550-1715* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015); while Marguerite, Louise-Hyppolite Grimaldi and Mademoiselle de Guise are all studied in my own “Points of Transferral: Mademoiselle de Guise’s Will and the Transferability of Dynastic Identity,” in *Dynastic Identity in Early Modern Europe: Rulers, Aristocrats and the Formation of Identities*, ed. Liesbeth Geever and Mirella Marini (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 131-150.

[12] Bernard Hours, *Louis XV et sa cour. Le roi, l’étiquette et le courtesan* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002).

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