



***Im Schatten der Macht:
Subalterne Körper an
frühneuzeitlichen Fürstenhöfen***

**Edited by Nadine Amsler
and Nadir Weber**

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It is a pleasure to read this collection of nine essays on the lives of people who have too often been left in the ‘shadows’ of court history. Wet nurses, falconers, doctors, bodyguards, dwarfs, people of colour, musicians, animals and their handlers, attendants at meals, and last but very far from least, royal and aristocratic mistresses, all figure here in well-written studies based on extensive archival research. The historical period covered by this volume runs from 1600 to the mid eighteenth-century. Geographically, it sweeps from Dresden (Augustus the Strong and his wife Christiane Eberhardine), to the French court of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to the Hapsburg court in Vienna, to that of the Bavarian Elector in Munich. The Introduction by the editors, Nadine Amsler and Nadir Weber, draws together many threads from the papers presented here, and provides a useful bibliography of recent work in the field.

The Introduction discusses recent developments in the historical study of the court. It remains focused on the papers in the volume, rather than taking the opportunity to place them in wider contexts. Aligning the papers with modern historiography, the editors display little interest in the foundations of the field, which opened up in some surprising ways after the (re)publication of Norbert Elias’ *Die höfische Gesellschaft*, in 1969. This book, first inauspiciously published in 1933 from a *Habilitation* thesis by a Jewish author, had to wait fifty years until it attracted the attention of English-speaking historians after its translation as *The Court Society* in 1983. It is probably the most remarkable example of delayed impact in the whole of historiography. In spite of the criticisms that have been levelled at Elias, most trenchantly by Jeroen Duindam in his *Myths of Power* (1995), it is a pity that the editors do not ask more explicitly what has been gained and what lost by the adoption of more recent approaches.

Paradoxically, studies such as these have made a more nuanced picture possible which undermines the current idea that proximity equaled power. Court wet nurses could hardly have been physically closer to their royal charges, for example, but as Nadine Amsler shows, were unlikely to achieve social ascension from their role. The same goes for the court musicians discussed by Elisabeth Natour, and the court doctors by Elena Taddei. An exception here must be the court dwarves interestingly described by Eva Seemann, who

could be rewarded for wit, humour and perspicacity, as well as their exceptional stature, with patents of nobility. The essays in this volume provide the detail and nuance with which to challenge the current orthodoxy about proximity.

This collection of papers does not claim to examine every minor court position. Hunting, given the amount of time and energy it consumed at many courts, gets relatively little representation apart from the interesting paper by Nadir Weber, which focusses on falconry and the unique ascent of the Duc de Luynes. The court preacher, important because much of court life, in Catholic and Protestant courts alike, was dictated by the liturgical calendar, does not appear here. The court preachers, as even Louis XIV discovered, sometimes did not mince words on the failings of the sovereign. Truth was a valuable commodity in short supply at court. No wonder Frederick I, King in Prussia, mourned the death of his fool, calling him the only person who had never spared him the uncomfortable truth, as I note in my *Four Fools in the Age of Reason: Cruelty, Laughter and Power in Early Modern Germany* (2019).

These papers thus go some way to modify the tendency in current historiography to analyse court positions largely in terms of their possibility of being leveraged into social ascent and political power. It should also be remarked that the court positions described here were 'in the shadows of power,' to very different degrees. The royal mistresses at one end of the spectrum and the staff who waited at table at the other, (Mathieu Da Vinha) or the soldiers of the guard, (Kevin Klein) were very different orders of people. The essay on court doctors by Elena Taddei gives valuable insights, but concludes that they too, in spite of their necessary physical proximity to the ruler, were unlikely to rise by royal favour. Neither this paper, nor the Introduction, mentions the notorious exception to this rule, that of the ascension of the Danish court doctor, Johann Friedrich Struensee, (1737–1772) to the position of de facto ruler.

The essay on mistresses in this collection by Pascal Firges goes beyond the usual studies of openly maintained royal mistresses, to treat other adulterous relationships at court, some open and well-known, others the subject of rumour or surmise by the sharp observers who made it their business to harvest gossip and notice every nuance of expression. It is highly interesting that the known male lovers of court ladies were not always greeted with violence and hostility by their husbands. Quite the contrary: they could be taken into the husband's clientele. This throws a new light on the all-important subject of patronage in this period. This paper also asks good questions about status, in relating the tale of the minor noble, the Marquis de Valfons, who in the 1740s entangled

himself with two great ladies, one of them the wife of his patron, the Comte d'Argenson, the Minister of War. Not surprisingly, Valfons found interesting ways to trade off his privilege as a male against their privilege as far more powerful and more wealthy aristocrats whose patronage he sought.

Fundamental questions about the involvement of the German lands in the slave trade are raised by Rebekka von Mallinckrodt's paper on people of colour at the Saxon courts. Well-chosen illustrations help to make the point that in spite of the German states like Saxony neither possessing colonies or owning plantations, slavery was abundantly present in the society and the courts of central Europe. Dark-skinned people at the court could rise to positions of privilege but always remained dependents.

This collection of papers has great virtues. It is a pity that neither its Introduction nor its contributions broaden their context by taking us into the upheavals in court life, characteristic of the period after 1763. We gain little insight into the sudden clustering of male 'favourites,' such as Acton, Godoy and Potemkin, and the equally sudden emergence of their opposite, the wholesome courts with reduced etiquette, without royal mistresses, luxury or excessive ceremony, of George III, Charles III, Louis XVI, Frederick William I, Frederick II, and even Joseph II, courts which approved the depiction of rulers as farmers with their hands on the plough, or saw them blamelessly amusing themselves by playing with their children, carpentry, watch-making, reading groups, and chamber music. But from neither the Introduction nor the papers in this volume could we deduce that the world of the court was on the brink of change. What in the old made possible the new? It is a merit of this collection, that we want to know.

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