
May 2010

Book Review: Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History

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Recommended Citation

Landweber, Julia (2010). Book Review: Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11(4), 204-208.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol11/iss4/17>

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Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History. 2008. Anne Walthall (ed.). Berkeley: The University of California Press. 381 pp. (Includes illustrations, photographs, maps, tables, and index). \$60.00 (Hardback), \$24.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Julia Landweber¹

Servants of the Dynasty does something no other study has done before: the fifteen original essays commissioned for this project provide the first comparative examination of the lives of women in royal courts in a genuinely world-historical context. In doing so, editor Anne Walthall and her contributors offer important insights to two subjects of history often kept entirely separate: the history of monarchy, and the history of women. Recognizing that scholars from both camps may question the need for this study, Walthall pointedly asks in the introduction: “What can a study of palace women bring to our understanding of how different monarchies functioned?” and “What can a study of palace women bring to our understanding of what women did in the past?” (18, 20). These are good questions. Monarchies and royal courts have nearly always been configured around the maintenance of masculine power and authority (one fact this collection makes abundantly clear is that ruling queens, empresses, sultanas, begums, or any other title you can name are astonishingly uncommon historically all around the world). When royal women and other female palace inhabitants have received historians’ attention, they have most often been situated in a biographical context, and often as not with a romantic or salacious bent. This tendency is especially evident within the evergreen genre of biographies about the queens and royal mistresses of France and England.² Although readers anticipating another set of romantic or voyeuristic biographies will be coming to the wrong book, I doubt they will leave disappointed. This study is a compelling read of an entirely different sort: each chapter opens new vistas into the lived realities of palace women across the globe at all social levels, from the expected consorts, concubines, and royal mistresses, down to the lowest levels of relations and servants; there are even detours—some of them surprising—into female opportunities to become economic entrepreneurs and armed soldiers.

Servants of the Dynasty originated at two conferences on world historical studies concerned respectively with gender and palace women, hosted by the University of California campuses at Davis and Irvine. The resulting volume presents work by the some of the conference participants, framed by an opening essay from Walthall titled “Introducing Palace Women.” Here she usefully lays out the historical and scholarly issues surrounding the study of palace women. Yet unlike most introductions to a set of collected essays by multiple authors, Walthall does not provide a clear rationale for how to proceed intellectually through the rest of the book. The following fifteen chapters do not seem organized by any discernable logic: they are neither divided into topical “parts”, nor is there an obvious chronological or geographical progression. For example, a chapter

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² See the many books by Antonia Fraser, such as her recent *Love and Louis XIV: The Women in the Life of the Sun King* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006); see also Nancy Mitford’s classic, *Madame de Pompadour* (New York: NYRB Classics reprint edition, 2001); other recent entrants include Eleanor Herman, *Sex with Kings: 500 Years of Adultery, Power, Rivalry, and Revenge* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), and Kelly Hart, *The Mistresses of Henry VIII* (Stroud: History Press, 2009).

on twentieth-century Benin is followed by one on the Chinese Qing dynasty (1644-1911), which in turn is followed successively by a chapter on the sixteenth-century Russian ruling family of Ivan IV, and a chapter on the Shogun's palace in nineteenth-century Japan. Two chapters on the royal French household (the first pre-revolutionary, the second post-) are inexplicably separated by four chapters on Mexico, Nigeria, China, and Korea. Similarly, there are two chapters on Nigeria, but they address different ethno-linguistic groups (Benin and Hausa), and to add to the confusion, the chapter on modern Benin is *followed* (albeit six chapters later) by the chapter on early modern Hausaland.

This is not a book, therefore, for historical neophytes: other than the first chapter, one should look elsewhere for a clearer introduction to the history of women and monarchy. Indeed, the essays are not all necessarily based on historical scholarship; several are clearly more archeological and/or anthropological in methodology than strictly historical in the traditional sense of depending for evidence on written primary sources. The lack of organization also encourages random reading: one can more easily dip in and out of chapters according to the dictates of interest, than read the book straight through. In fact that may be the preferred way to approach such a diverse collection of essays: follow one's own interests, and see where one winds up. Happily, a curiosity is quickly instilled in the reader to compare different palace women's situations and life opportunities, which should eventually draw one through the whole set of essays. Regardless of reading method, much is to be gained from the wealth of ideas and material contained in this volume.

The possibility of women exercising masculine-style power and kingly authority has historically inspired cascades of criticism by social commentators, usually male, around the world. In their eyes, "women, it is assumed, do not know how to use power; they play favorites, corrupt officials if not the king, squander the state's financial resources, and lack the courage to resist enemies" (8-9). The problem stems in part from the palace environment itself: in a setting devoted to maintaining the ruler's masculine authority, women's reproductive powers were required in order to pass that authority on to the next generation. But in many parts of the world their *productive* powers were greatly feared as potentially corrupting if applied to much beyond the maternal realm, and many efforts were made to divorce women from access to political authority. Famously, many Asian palaces included distinctly separate quarters for women, naturally a subject of intense interest in the present volume (32-37, 84-90, 96-100, 172-178, 262-268). Where important women were not physically removed from access to men, they could be contained using other means. In France, one of the world cultures historically most frightened of female power, between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries queens were gradually divested of any duties other than providing the country with a male heir to the throne; eventually they were not even officially crowned (300). In response to all these precautions, Walthall wryly notes "there is much more to politics than making policy" (9). Questions of succession, ministerial appointments, and many other aspects of rule were open to influence by anyone close to the monarch. Who could be closer than his mother, wife, or bed-partner? This uncomfortable truth was itself the subject of repeated feminist critiques in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the myth of a dangerous backroom "empire of women" was frequently invoked by anti-women's-rights thinkers as reason to categorically deny women an open role in modern political voting

and office-holding.³ Contemporary scholars have come to terms with the fact that, historically, most palace women did indeed wield power in direct proportion to the quality of their personal and sometimes physical relationships with a male authority figure. This book offers a valuable addition to that sometimes uncomfortable fact: *female* authority figures also could and did create avenues to power for women who served beneath them.

The very notion of “palace women” is alluring in part because “the whole notion implies their remaining largely hidden from view” (4). It is always tempting to delve into the history of things both mysterious and forbidden. Palaces could literally hide royal women behind walls, or enclose them within inner courtyards and buildings, often along with the monarch and their respective male and female attendants; the various Forbidden Cities of the Emperors of China, or Topkapi, the Ottoman sultans’ palace in Istanbul, come immediately to mind. One of this book’s delights is that we are also introduced to lesser known examples which richly deserve to be rescued from obscurity. The royal dwelling of the Oba of Benin, an ancient kingdom still flourishing within modern Nigeria, is one such: the enclosed compound was formerly decorated with “monumental...articulated brass castings of sinuous snakes, whose heads with toothed jaws hung open above the entrances to main buildings” (118). Alternatively, palaces could have physically open architecture—like Versailles, with its large windows, countless doors, and outward orientation toward gardens and forests, and its literal openness to all appropriately-dressed comers—yet be located at a substantial physical remove from centers of population, such as Paris. But not all palaces nor all palace women were equally removed from the general population. Royal dwellings were just as likely to be centrally located within cities—like the royal dwellings of the ancient Maya, or the Austrian imperial residence in Vienna—and have a kind of permeability in which the female residents regularly made themselves visible to their subjects while still retaining a high level of domestic seclusion.

As described earlier, the book lacks a clear organizational structure. Yet it is possible to impose one on it through creative reading. The most interesting approach may be one that is hinted at by Walthall’s introduction, six pages of which are devoted to analyzing the relative power of women according to their categorization within palace society (11-17). The three female roles most often considered in histories of monarchy and palace life—married and unmarried sexual partners, and mothers of rulers—had predictable degrees of access to power. Royal wives seldom had much, but royal mothers who survived to see their son crowned often acquired great power and sometimes even legitimate political authority, as in the case of regents for minors or traveling rulers. The equally official role of concubines (always in the plural, and found virtually everywhere outside of Europe, where monogamous Christian monarchs were expected to content themselves sexually with a serial string of unofficial mistresses) varied from weak to strong depending upon the differing cultural expectations placed on them, their ability to

³ Examples include Nicolas Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, “Condorcet’s Plea for the Citizenship of Women” (orig. published in French, 1790), and Olympe de Gouges, “The Rights of Women” (orig. published in French, 1791); and also John Stuart Mill, “Speech before the House of Commons” (orig. published 1867); all three are reprinted in Susan G. Bell and Karen M. Offen, *Women the Family, and Freedom: Volume One, 1750-1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), pp. 101, 107, and 485, respectively.

produce children, and their ability to emotionally captivate the ruler and/or guide a son into position as the next heir to the throne.

There is also another category of palace women which, tellingly, is highlighted in the book's title: servants. On one level, all women (and all men other than the ruler) were "servants of the dynasty": everyone below the level of the monarch himself (with the possible exception of royal wives and the mothers of royal children) were technically there to serve the ruling system. More prosaically, every palace depended for its daily maintenance to a greater or lesser extent on a female workforce. All too often, these women have been overlooked by historians even though, as this volume's authors make clear, with some creative strategies historical records can be identified which detail their duties, their compensation, and even their personal lives. Although not every chapter is concerned with palace servants, they appear repeatedly in the book, and are the specific subject of some of the most compelling chapters. For example, one historian draws upon a preserved cache of personal letters to tell the life story of their author, Fujinami, a low-level female messenger employed in the Great Interior of the Japanese shogun's palace in the early nineteenth-century (172-190). Another essay profits from the comparative analysis of official and anecdotal accounts to uncover the histories of two female entertainers, Liu and Yang, who rose through their skills at political machination to become official consorts of the Song emperors of medieval China (261-279). Women who entered palaces as servants sometimes came willingly, sometimes unwillingly; often they entered with male assistance, but in some places women inside recruited other women (relatives or family friends, usually) from the outside. Once installed, as the two chapters just described indicate, these women handled a surprising range of duties well beyond the expected female drudgery of cleaning, cooking, and tending the royal family: they might instead serve as messengers or entertainers, but also were employed in work as diverse as textile-producers, bookkeepers, guards, and even armed soldiers. Palace employment could bring with it an education, social advancement, and financial enrichment, among other advantages over life on the outside.

Returning to the pair of questions which drive this book, let us consider again "what can a study of palace women bring to our understanding of how different monarchies functioned?" (18). Monarchies depended upon the women in their palaces to do far more than provide the next generation of rulers, or to be sexual partners for royal men. Women, like men, were used by rulers to forge royal identity and provide quantifiable evidence of power; too often the roles women played in the demonstration of kingly power have been ignored by historians of monarchy. Likewise, "what can a study of palace women bring to our understanding of what women did in the past?" (20). As in any complex household or society, women were woven throughout the social fabric of palace life. Women who entered palace society were not mere pawns of the monarch. They had their own ambitions, which sometimes played out with much less reference to the chief figure of power than one might expect; the example of the Japanese messenger Fujinami, mentioned above, is a perfect case study of such a woman. Walthall sums it up best: "Insofar as palace women participated in political integration not only by linking elite families but also by bringing a variety of social classes onto a common ground, they played a crucial if often overlooked role in the construction of the premodern polity.... Although royal courts were designed to project the authority of male rulers, they

maintained themselves through the reproductive and productive activities of women” (20).

In regard to the book’s utility in the classroom, it is probably best mined for individual essays to suit a given course, unless the course is devoted to a world-historical approach to the topic of women, power, and politics. By not clustering the chapters according to global region, the experience of female palace inhabitants in Europe and India, Mexico and Africa, the Near East and the Far East are truly positioned comparatively. Taken all together, the essays gathered in this collection offer a careful and wonderful global-historical approach to the topic of palace women.