

The Society of Princes: the Lorraine-Guise and the Conservation of Power and Wealth in Seventeenth-Century France

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Author:

Jonathan Spangler

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Joan Davies

Jonathan Spangler's study of the Lorraine dynasty in France (and occasionally outside the kingdom) is an ambitious undertaking. Using the example of the Lorraine-Guise, he seeks to examine the phenomenon of the aristocrats related to sovereign rulers outside French borders who were the *princes étrangers*; to explore the mechanisms by which the dynasty developed their fortune and exercised power and influence; and to consider what their activities reveal about the nature of the absolute monarchy, especially under Louis XIV. His main focus is the period from 1630 to 1720, though in his first two chapters he glances briefly back to the 16th century, when the dynasty took such a central role in the tumultuous final years of Valois rule, and indeed earlier to the medieval history of the duchy of Lorraine. He then turns to an examination of the careers of various members of the family at the royal court, notably that of the comte d'Armagnac and his younger brother the chevalier de Lorraine, favourites of Louis XIV himself and his younger brother Philippe duc d'Orléans (Monsieur) respectively. The fourth chapter surveys the dynasty's marriage strategies and the next chapter picks up on the contractual aspects of marriage and expands into a wider survey of the Lorraines' exploitation of legal procedures and indeed fictions, and family settlements. A case study of Lorraine-Guise influence in the provinces follows, with a chapter examining various family members in connection with southern France, particularly in Vivarais and adjacent territories. A final substantive chapter highlights the international dimension of the dynasty, noting those members who left France to serve the Spanish King or the Holy Roman Emperor or to pursue their own private foreign adventures, as did Henri II duc de Guise in Naples both in 1647 and 1654. The book is topped and tailed with an introduction and conclusion and buttressed with four appendices of family trees; summaries of wealth estimates in 1688 (the year in which the order of the Saint-Esprit was conferred on no fewer than four members of the dynasty);

details of land-holdings in the later 17th century; and summaries of marriage contracts made between 1583 and 1721.

The history of the Guise family in 16th-century France has received fairly extensive attention in recent years from, *inter alia*, Jean-Marie Constant, Mark Konnert, and Stuart Carroll (whose most recent study appeared after the publication of this work). This period marked their arrival on the political scene and the zenith of their power as well as their near eclipse following the defeat of their challenge to the Valois-Bourbon succession. Rehabilitation followed swiftly as Henri IV bought off members of the dynasty in order to bring peace to his kingdom but they never regained the power they had possessed and certainly never returned to that point from which some members had apparently aspired of taking the succession for themselves. Dr Spangler does not exactly take up where these other historians have left off; he refers in passing to some of the political difficulties and conspiratorial activities of the family during the reign of Louis XIII, but largely assumes familiarity on the part of his readers with this chequered period in the Lorraine-Guise story. His real concern is with the recovery from this period rather than with the near debacle towards the close of the 16th century. These later generations of the Lorraine dynasty in France, in their multiple subdivisions of the several lineages which made up the family as a whole, have never received such detailed examination. Keeping track of the identities of individuals proves challenging especially given the dynasty's propensity in the 17th century to change titles from generation to generation. The author is fully aware of these problems and does his best to assist his readers with genealogical tables referenced in the index, but nonetheless more frequent reminders incorporated into the text itself would have offered welcome guidance.

Although the earlier history of the Lorraine-Guise in France is not the main focus of this study, Dr Spangler's references to the founding ancestors do not entirely inspire confidence. Claude duc de Guise can hardly have been sent to the court of François I in 1506 (p. 38), since Louis XII died only at the beginning of 1515 and his putative heir, the 14-year-old comte d'Angoulême, did not settle permanently at the royal court until 1508. Accounts of the impact of the 1588 murders at Blois of the duc and cardinal de Guise (pp. 1, 66) are somewhat confused. We are told that Catholic moderates in France joined the Holy League and openly rebelled and that Henri III himself was assassinated as consequences, yet we are also told that with the 17-year-old Charles succeeding his father Henri as duc de Guise in 1588 League resistance collapsed – whereas, as Spangler himself recounts, it took nearly ten years for last of the Lorraine-Guise princes to submit. And the assertion that the murders alienated Philip II from the *politique* cause of Henri III is impossible to sustain. If the Spanish king ever supported this cause, which seems extremely doubtful, then his alliance with Henri duc de Guise and other members of the family in the treaty of Joinville 31 December 1584 had already firmly repudiated any such moderate agenda.

One of the strengths of the 16th-century generations was their sense of family solidarity. As the dynasty expanded, this largely persisted even through potential threats such as disputed successions. Such mutual support, underpinned by a shared sense of quasi-sovereign status, was undoubtedly one of the factors that enabled successful conservation of wealth and power. In the absence of significant surviving quantities of personal correspondence, that might have expressed mutual sympathies and support, Spangler makes effective use of the available legal documentation. For example, he demonstrates how the youngest son of the comte d'Armagnac was confirmed as the focal point of dynastic ambition in the last years of Louis XIV through legacies, donations, *survivances* and, not least, a very wealthy marriage. The Lorraine-Guise were fortunate in securing marriages to heiresses whose wealth could go some way to extinguishing their debts or enabling the repudiation of excessively encumbered inheritances as in the case of the comte d'Armagnac, though his access to royal favour was perhaps as significant as his marriage to a Neufville de Villeroy in allowing him to pass the Harcourt succession to his younger siblings. In particular, the success of the Armagnac-Harcourt branch was sustained by their effectively hereditary possession of the post of Grand Ecuyer. Dr Spangler records the granting of *brevets de retenue* or *d'assurance* in July 1649 and in May 1717 but focuses only on the contribution this made to the family's material wealth. Surely it is worth considering too the political situation; both these grants were made by regency governments (he cites the earlier grant by Louis XIV without mentioning that the king was then only ten years old) facing challenges respectively in the shape of the Frondes and of the agitation surrounding the status of Louis XIV's *princes légitimés*. Was

the loyalty of this branch of the Lorraine dynasty being bought as much as favour being shown?

Spangler's discussion of the marital strategies of the dynasty in chapter four, which deals with 'the corporate merger', is thorough and illuminating, although one wonders why he decided that subjects had to have reached 20 to qualify for his analysis, since one element omitted from consideration is the age at marriage of both princes and princesses. From the predominantly princely marriages of the 16th century, there was a gradual widening of the acceptable pool to encompass wealthy and influential aristocrats but very rarely directly into the world of the robe or finance; however these links were made because the aristocrats whom the Lorraines married had themselves often already forged such connections. It should be noted, however, that he is in error when he adds the Aligre family to their Parisian robe connections (pp. 185–6) through the 1639 marriage of the comte d'Harcourt to Marie de Cambout de Coislin; the 'Aligre' duchesse de Coislin, also discussed on p. 220, did not come from the Parisian administrative dynasty which has been thoroughly studied by the late David Sturdy, but was a member of the old sword noble Alègre family from Auvergne. The wife of François duc de Guise came from the Ferrara not the Modena branch of the Este family (p. 137), and was incidentally a *petite-fille de France*. A topic emerging somewhat obliquely in this chapter and also in the discussion of Henri II duc de Guise's career in chapter seven, is that of unofficial or clandestine marriage; it is a pity that we are left in the dark about the nature of Guise's relationship with Anne de Gonzague, the first of three repudiated or unacknowledged wives, although the complexities of his contracts with his second and third 'wives' are explored. In this context, it seems strange that Spangler completely fails to engage with Sarah Hanley's arguments about the 'marital law compact' as an intrinsic element of the relationship between family formation and state building. Spangler has, however, identified an important and apparently novel phenomenon of independent female members of the dynasty who neither married nor entered religion. He signals his intention to undertake further study of a number of these women – and it would be welcome if he were to set them in context by exploring the possibility of such individuals emerging in non-princely aristocratic families in this period. Certainly he attends carefully to the role of women in the acquisition and preservation of wealth and power and his deployment of the concept of the 'matriclan' is innovative.

Chapters four and especially five shed helpful light on the legal opportunities or loopholes that could be exploited particularly at marriage and death. Here dynastic status was helpful because, like other aristocrats possessing *duché-pairies* or simply royal favour, they could exploit the competing jurisdictions of France's multiplicity of courts; their claims as *princes-étrangers* were do not seem to have been especially critical. The complexities of some of the financial strategies pursued, making it almost impossible to arrive at true valuations or even true ownership of assets, invite comparison with the collateralised debt obligations and credit default swaps that have so bedevilled our modern economy. Perhaps, as with these financial conjuring tricks, what mattered was perception rather than reality and arriving at a realistic balance sheet was largely unnecessary so long as credit, and indeed *credit*, was forthcoming. Thus success at court, as well as in the courts, was a vital part of the dynasty's wellbeing. The role of the dynasty in the French provinces is largely explored in chapter six through the example of the Harcourts who actually moved south to Vivarais and of the Guises who maintained a more distant relationship with their territories in the same area, although there is passing reference to the comte d'Armagnac's role as governor of Anjou in chapter three.

It has to be admitted that the origins of this study in a 2003 Oxford D.Phil thesis sometimes remain evident, for example in discussion of abandoned initial research plans (p. 12); and, on the same page, the author's aspiration to the elimination of bias through use of a wide range of sources, which suggests a perhaps unsophisticated methodological approach. Nonetheless it is certainly true that Dr Spangler has drawn together a huge body of evidence from a very substantial range of archival and printed materials; his bibliography lists materials from 13 archives départementales, besides the Archives Nationales and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the British Library and the Archives Générales du Royaume in Brussels, while a footnote on p. 69 cites the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv in Vienna as the location of a copy of Mlle de Guise's will, although it is not clear whether this version has been consulted. Perhaps inevitably the imposition of a thematic treatment upon this mass of information creates certain challenges for the reader in remembering and recognising individuals and their biographies. Dr Spangler's intended exploration of the

powerful single women in the dynasty will doubtless draw together some of the information on Mlle de Guise and on her disputed will which is scattered through the present study. But some stories remain only half told here: the sinister aside on p. 93 about the frightening proximity of the chevalier de Lorraine is never fully explained to readers unfamiliar with the detailed history of the court of Louis XIV; the princesse de Lillebonne is noted on p. 35 as ‘ambassadrice extraordinaire’ in 1698 but to whom or where is not signalled nor is this intriguing role further discussed in the section devoted to her and her sons (pp. 242–52). On the other hand, information is repeated, occasionally with different emphasis: for example, the chevalier de Lorraine’s benefice holding is explored pp. 83–4 and again pp. 111–2; Mlle de Guise’s request to the estates of Vivarais for the rather insignificant sum of 400 *livres* towards the cost of rebuilding the church at Joyeuse is discussed p. 215 and again nine pages later. Dr Spangler is sometimes in two minds about the significance of individuals: on p. 12 Marie de Rohan, duchesse de Chevreuse is declared to be a free agent rather than fully integrated into the family of her second husband, but on p. 117 she is identified as the ‘Lorraine duchesse de Chevreuse’.

In these and other respects, Dr Spangler has not been well served by his publishers who, as an academic press charging high prices for their books, should surely take rather more editorial responsibility than is apparent here. Points are sometimes awkwardly made. Discussing the family’s failure to secure major ecclesiastical posts after the mid 17th century (pp. 81–2), Dr Spangler argues that this deliberate crown policy ‘complies with Joe Bergin’s system’ when what he really means is that his evidence fits with Professor Bergin’s analysis of the reshaping of the French episcopate; and the ‘large gap’ left by this failure was surely in the family’s resources and patronage rather than, as Dr Spangler actually writes, in the French church which seems not to have suffered unduly from the absence of Guise bishops or cardinals. Infelicitous phrases such as ‘it is here where ...’ recur and language is used clumsily: ‘Lorraine cadets nearly succumbed [sic, for declined or possibly subsided?] to the level of “mere gentlemen”’ (p. 75); ‘the failed agglomeration [maybe assimilation is intended] of the Guisards as princes of the blood’ (p. 15); functions of provincial estates and other local authorities had been ‘relegated [transferred or perhaps delegated?] to the royal intendants’ (p. 208); and the curious description of Claude duc de Guise being ‘punctured’ at Marignano (p. 64) summons almost irresistibly an image of a Michelin duke deflating on the battlefield. Such clumsy or incorrect use of language unfortunately leads to the assumption that ‘tact’ for tack (p. 189) and ‘internment’ for interment (p. 223) are not simple typographical errors but outright blunders. And, throughout the book, alliances, relationships and positions are ‘solidified’, never confirmed, consolidated, strengthened or cemented. The density of some of the material with which the reader is presented does require a more fluent and persuasive style than is often evident here.

The book's draws attention to a group that has hitherto been relatively neglected and offers information not just about the dynasty which is its main focus but about the *princes-étrangers* more generally with some reference to others such as the La Tour d'Auvergne (although for this family Simon Hodson's 1999 unpublished D.Phil. thesis remains the main source), Rohan and Grimaldi. Unlike the Lorraine-Guise, these families' claims to sovereign status related to statelets or were otherwise highly theoretical; until the absorption of the duchy of Lorraine into the Habsburg empire in the early 18th century, there was a real possibility that one of the Lorraines in France could have been called to succeed a cousin in Nancy, just as the Gonzaga duc de Nevers succeeded to Mantua, or as the Savoie-Nemours could have filled a vacancy at Turin. Dr Spangler makes clear the advantages in terms of precedence and privileged access to the monarch that this princely status gave to the Lorraine-Guise but the members of the dynasty who achieved most success seem to have owed that to their own personalities. One wonders therefore what distinguished these princes from other great aristocrats. Dr Spangler cites their apparent immunity from capital punishment in comparison with the fate meted out to Henri II duc de Montmorency. This holds true for the 17th century, but the murders at Blois could possibly be argued to be extra-judicial executions and in 1560 a higher-ranking prince of the blood, Condé, escaped a death sentence only with the death of François II and the eclipse of his wife's uncles, the duc de Guise and the cardinal de Lorraine. Unacknowledged but implicit in his account of the chequered marital history of Henri II duc de Guise there appears to be a further privilege, of immunity to the rulings of Rome on the legitimacy of his second alleged marriage, whereas the Montmorencys in the 16th and early 17th century had to abide by the decisions of the papal court.

The Society of Princes contains material that is a useful addition to the growing body of literature on the French aristocracy, while not significantly altering recent assessments of its relationship with the crown during the personal rule of Louis XIV. It has value in its treatment of the acquisition and conservation of wealth, making effective use of wills, donations and marriage contracts in the absence of any significant surviving body of accounts or papers concerned with household administration. The attention paid to the role of women is noteworthy and Dr Spangler's plans for future publication on the role of independent single women are to be welcomed.

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