Dynastic marriages 1612/1615. A celebration of the Habsburg and Bourbon unions

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BOOK REVIEW


During the last couple of years historians studying the court in the seventeenth century could rejoice for at least two reasons. In 2012, they could take up their pens in celebration of the double Bourbon–Habsburg marriage of 1612, followed the year after by the anniversary of the Stuart–Palatine wedding of 1613. These conjoined anniversaries sparked attention across disciplinary fields as they relate to distinct yet connected contexts: the Catholic Bourbon–Habsburg marriages concluded in 1615 between Louis XIII of Bourbon and the Spanish Infanta Anna and between crown prince Philip of Habsburg and Louis’ sister Elisabeth, and the Palatine wedding involving the Protestant union between the Elector Palatine Friedrich V and Elizabeth Stuart, daughter of King James VI/I. Beyond their dynastic and religious significance, these high-status royal weddings gave ample cause for splendour and spectacle. Four centuries later, it is exactly this combination of dynastic policy, religious significance and spectacular celebration that provides the topic of two volumes of conference proceedings published in 2013. On the one hand, Margaret M. McGowan edited Dynastic Marriages 1612/1615. A Celebration of the Habsburg and Bourbon Unions, which is the first title in Ashgate’s new series European Festival Studies. On the other hand, Sara Smart and Mara R. Wade compiled the conference volume The Palatine Wedding of 1613: Protestant Alliance and Court Festival in the series Wolfenbütteler Abhandlungen zur Renaissanceforschung.

McGowan’s volume clearly focuses more on the festive aspects of the Bourbon–Habsburg weddings but also gives ample attention to their function as political, religious and dynastic statements. In the opening articles John H. Elliott and Nicolas Le Roux start by describing the political context of the unions, with the former analysing Spanish and European power relations and the latter the French internal troubles. From this introduction onwards, the interplay between the dynastic motives of the weddings and their colourful demonstrations in art and ceremony remains a recurring theme. David Sánchez Cano investigates why the celebrations in Spain were rather modest compared to the lavish French festivals, whilst Maria Inès Aliverti analyses which Italian courts combined the right conditions to hold massive spectacles on the occasion of these (and other) weddings. Further on in the volume, Marie-Claude Canova-Green also discusses the different political aspirations that surrounded the wedding celebrations in Bordeaux. Chantal Grell and J.R. Mulryne conclude the volume with reflections on historiography and historical context.

Besides providing a nuanced account of the dynastic and political tensions involved, the volume is best praised for the wide range of cultural elements it takes on board. Marie
Baudière discusses the absence of a French illustrated festival book of the 1612 carrousel in Paris (which Monique Chatenet subsequently reconstructs and brilliantly evokes); Patrice Franchet d’Espérey argues for Antoine de Pluvinel’s importance for equestrian ballet in the early seventeenth century; Iain Fenlon and Paulette Choné elucidate the celebrations, fireworks and chivalric devices; and finally the editor Margaret McGowan examines the importance of the weddings for literary history. Given its attention to both dynastic and cultural importance, it must be said that Dynastic Marriages 1612/1615 sets a high standard for the future titles of the European Festival Studies series. McGowan’s volume skilfully drafts connections between the various arts, finding a careful balance between their associated strands of research. The reader is guided along some firm lines of argument that at no point become stretched.

The same conclusions apply to Smart and Wade’s edition, which focuses more on religion than McGowan’s book. In the first part of The Palatine Wedding, Jaroslav Miller, Matthew L. O’Brien and Christof Ginzel examine the theme of “Confessional Context and Response,” with Miller and Ginzel especially drawing on the confessional propaganda about the wedding. Further on a second set of articles brings Maureen M. Meikle, Nadine Akkerman, Sara Smart, Hanns Hubach and Rebecca Calcagno to reveal the confessional and political identities that were being tailored for Friedrich and Elizabeth, including in particular the discussion of the crucial matter of precedence between the spouses.

Although politics and religion remain an important feature throughout, in the following parts of the book the festivities, ceremonies and spectacles again take the upper hand. Unravelling the celebrations in London are Iain McClure, Anne Daye, Jerzy Limon, Agnieszka Zukowska and Ann Kronbergs. Conversely, Molly Taylor-Poleskey, Marika Kebelusek, Margret Lemberg and Marco Neumaier take the Heidelbergian perspective on the wedding. Not coincidentally, the reader of Dynastic Marriages 1612/1615 will also notice here the returning names of Marie-Claude Canova-Green and Margaret McGowan. Fittingly, the last group of articles brings the Anglo-German interactions to a head in discussing the theme of cultural exchange. Klaus Winkler and Arne Spohr contribute accounts of the exchange in court music, Wolfgang Metzger takes a walk through the Hortus Palatinus and Mara R. Wade reveals the Danish connections of the wedding. The last contribution in this well-illustrated volume is Doris Gerstl’s new look at the Montacute House bed, which for a long time was falsely believed to be commissioned for the wedding.

Both The Palatine Wedding and Dynastic Marriages 1612/1615 thus provide a skilful reappraisal of the Bourbon–Habsburg and the Stuart–Palatine unions. Dynastic weddings were multifaceted events, and it is therefore praiseworthy that the two volumes reflect this variety in their rich sets of contributions. Given that the connection between the weddings as the continuance of a dynastic and religious war is once again emphasized, the inclusion of cross-religious and cross-dynastic interpretations would have added an interesting perspective to the separate collections. Hence, one should above all hope that the combination of both volumes will lead to further comparative and transregional research.

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