EPILOGUE

THE POLITICS OF FEMALE HOUSEHOLDS:
AFTERTHOUGHTS

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The first generations of academic historians worked in an environment where the personal servants of the monarch, particularly in North-Western Europe, had become politically marginalised. This experience, often strengthened by liberal persuasions, predisposed them to view the early modern court in a similar perspective. They concentrated their scholarship on actors and institutions they recognised as pointing towards modernity: ministers, councils, representative assemblies. The social setting of dynastic government, the household, was almost entirely left aside. In source editions, many of them still indispensable for their remarkable scholarship, passages pertaining to the household, to daily life at court, or to ceremonies, were abridged or cut out. Although the glamorous world of kings and queens could still appeal to a relatively wide readership, works catering for this audience, peddling saucy and dramatic stories of royalty, rarely met the standards of academic scholarship.

Gradually, from the 1970s onwards, a more balanced view of the world of the court developed. Undeniably, Norbert Elias’ *Die höfische Gesellschaft* deserves pride of place as the main impulse leading towards a new research agenda. However, Elias also prolonged and reinforced many of the anachronisms of earlier historiography: for him, too, the nobles catering for the daily life of the ruler lived in isolation from decision-making. The key social function of the court, in Elias’ influential narrative, was its containment and gradual undermining of noble power. The intricacies of court life allowed the ruler, assisted by his bourgeois servants, to lay the groundwork for the modern state. While losing power, the nobility acquired a new courtly pattern of behaviour, characterised by the ‘restraint of affects’ that henceforth would serve as the dominant social

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model. The gilded cage of court life, in Elias’ depiction, remained isolated from power and decision-making.

Somewhat later, and largely independent from scholarship based on Elias, David Starkey pioneered an understanding of power that would add another key element to the emerging world of court studies: the notion that access to the figure at the heart of power cannot but convey the chance to obtain a share in power.\(^2\) In one stroke this plausible notion undermined the artificial separation of the spheres of government and household. From the later Middle Ages into the nineteenth century, a process of institutional and personal differentiation of services around the ruler can be observed; yet the numerous overlappings and interactions between these services define the early modern court and by extension early modern ‘politics’.

This more balanced view of courts, reinstating the relevance of domestic office at the heart of the early modern state, should at the same time have alerted researchers to the need to include women at court in their studies. However, apart from biographical and often largely descriptive work, such inclusion remained the exception. In fact, only gradually did it become clear that ‘the’ court as a rule included a series of households, for spouses, dowagers, princes and princesses. While women formed a tiny majority in the main households of kings and Emperors—for instance acting as washerwomen or the odd musician in the chapel—they played a far more important role in the households of dynastic women. These households, sometimes functioning independently as mirror-images of the male household, sometimes organised as ‘rump’ households containing mostly services for the Chamber, always included a hierarchy of women in various offices. Viennese court ordinances reach from the Obersthofmeisterin or camarera mayor, via the noble domain of the doñas or dueñas de honor and the Hoffreylen or Hofdamen, to the less-elevated world of Kammerdienerinnen, the Kammerzwergin, and finally the Kammerweiber.\(^3\) All courts consisted of at least three hierarchically separated levels of women: high-

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