CHAPTER 13

Rocking the Cradle and Ruling the World: Queens’ Households in Late Medieval and Early Modern Aragon and France

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Talking the Talk

Anne of France’s Enseignements à ma fille, addressed to her daughter Suzanne, hereditary duchess of Bourbon, represents the culmination and articulation of her female political experience, and the agency and experience of her maternal and paternal dynasties in Aragon and France.1 Anne penned her Enseignements for Suzanne on the eve of her betrothal to her cousin, Charles of Bourbon, count of Montpensier. Anne’s political and diplomatic activities emerged from what many in the past have dismissed as domestic spaces. However, this overlooks the fact that the late medieval and early modern domestic households of royal and elite women were intimately interconnected with monarchical politics.2 From within their domestic households, powerful women learned, deployed, and subverted the rules of their coeval political systems to shepherd their kingdoms, dynasties and subjects, often besting their male rivals.3

1 Anne de France, Les Enseignements d’Anne de France, duchesse de Bourbonnais et d’Auvergne, à sa fille Suzanne de Bourbon (Lyon, c.1521); Les enseignements d’Anne de France, duchesse de Bourbonnais et d’Auvergne, à sa fille Suzanne de Bourbon, ed. Martial-Alphone Chazaud (Moulins, 1878; Marseille, 1978); eds Tatania Clavier and Eliane Viennot, Anne de France: Enseignements à sa fille suivis de l’Histoire du siège de Brest (Saint-Etienne, 2006), henceforth, Enseignements; and Anne of France: Lessons for my Daughter, ed. and trans. Sharon L. Jansen (Woodbridge, 2004), henceforth Lessons.
By way of Anne’s distinctly female understanding of prudential politics, her *Enseignements* reveals the potential of female households to become domestic “republics” of power and influence. These republics stretched across finite and distinct borders, losing little and finding much in translation. They were spaces molded by location, circumstance, personality and ability, personal and institutional connections, networking, diplomacy, and exchange. Focusing upon the matrilineal dynasty of Anne of France provides us with a methodological template for research into the nature of elite female households in a wider geopolitical context. Conceptualizing these households as entities with their own histories will advance our understanding of how gendered power was attained and manipulated from a locus that has been dismissed historically as the merely domestic. This approach will produce the first major historical analysis of how a female-authored book of prudential understanding of politics anchored itself, consciously or unconsciously, to the lived political experience and the legacy of a cohort of stateswomen across six generations. Anne herself cautioned Suzanne to avoid foolish presumption and “never underestimate or discredit your ancestors, from whom you are descended, because that would be against [God], right and reason.”

Encouragingly, there has been a marked shift in early modern political history away from the study of formal institutions and officials and towards informal political spheres. Modern political systems have all been produced within an informal political arena alongside government. It has already been shown that women acted as conduits and bonds linking male-office bearers and rulers in the pre-modern era. My research argues that pre-modern elite and royal women were no mere horizontal conduits of support and influence for the benefit of their male relatives and spouses – they were political actors in their own right. Such women were concerned not with food, drink and untargeted hospitality, but rather with ideas, subtle diplomacy, and public action. A successful pre-modern elite female household was consciously curated by its “alpha” woman to enhance her reputation, her influence, and her political effectiveness. However, an elite woman’s reputation – at constant risk of rumor, gossip and innuendo – could be used against her. Notwithstanding

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4 *Enseignements*, p. 58. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.