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Review of Tom Töle, *Heirs of Flesh and Paper: A European History of
Dynastic Knowledge around 1700*

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TOM TÖLLE, *Heirs of Flesh and Paper: A European History of Dynastic Knowledge around 1700*, Cultures and Practices of Knowledge in History, 11 (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022), xv + 322 pp. ISBN 978 3 110 74452 1. £63.50

This Ph.D. thesis, completed at Princeton University, aims to answer two major questions: ‘How did political embodiment work in practice and how did early modern subjects deal with unpredictable princely illness in an age of planning?’ (p. 235). The study focuses on the years 1699 to 1716, a period rife with dynastic crises in Europe due to serious succession problems within the great Houses of Habsburg, Stuart, and Bourbon – problems that were of far-reaching consequence and closely interwoven with the outbreak and course of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–13/14). Tölle has chosen this relatively brief period because, in his view, it represents an ‘extreme manifestation’ (p. 5) of what he calls the ‘old regime of princely corporeality’ (p. 4), with the term ‘corporeality’ construed here as ‘a concept defined by social practices, albeit with biological limitations’ (p. 3).

Sickness, physical weakness, frailty, a lack of heirs, and (premature) death were unquestionably among those features of the early modern dynastic political system that had considerable potential – precisely because of their unpredictability – to create destabilization and precipitate war. Researchers are in agreement on this point. Tölle’s aim, however, is to find new perspectives on this. He consciously moves away from the narratives and research objectives of older historiography and its oft-described fixation on the protagonists of events as actors within the power state (*Machtstaat*). His central research question is that of how early modern subjects dealt with a fundamental political uncertainty: the generally unpredictable physical health of rulers and their families. First, as he emphasizes in the introduction, he turns to the everyday practices of contemporaries. Second, he focuses on the media aspects of this topic, specifically, and with good reason, in the context of the rapid shift in the European media landscape around 1700. Third and last, he emphasizes that the aim of his study is to bring together questions and approaches from the history of knowledge ‘regarding

Trans. by Marielle Sutherland (GHIL).

political planning, temporality and probability' (p. 13) on the one hand, and (traditional) political history on the other.

The study is structured as follows: each of the five large chapters, which are based on in-depth case studies, foregrounds one particular practice: 'seeing, healing, writing, interacting, feeling' (p. 16). More precisely, the chapters focus on the observation of court life and politics (ch. 1), medical aspects (ch. 2), attempts to resolve dynastic crises through different forms of writing and court interaction (chs. 3 and 4), and how subjects dealt emotionally with existential questions such as birth, sickness, frailty, and death (ch. 5). This well thought out and clear structure does not, however, mean that the topics are presented as strictly distinct from one another. Rather, the various overlaps between the different practices and case studies are very apparent, and, taken together, they offer a more comprehensive panorama.

The study cites a satisfyingly broad range of qualitative and quantitative sources. This encompasses many different source types, including numerous print sources and unpublished archive material from five countries (Germany, the UK, France, Austria, and the USA). The bibliography meets the requirements of a Ph.D. thesis, despite the author not having incorporated a number of standard works one would expect to find here.¹

In any event, the structure, weighting, sources, and chosen case studies are certainly impressive. The thesis is a significant contribution to European history around 1700. Its particular merit is that, through the integrative combination of several historical subdisciplines, it finds new angles on a period which is already very well explored in terms of diplomatic and political history, and it enriches the existing research with new questions and fresh perspectives. The book focuses on discourses about the last Habsburg ruler on the Spanish throne, the physically and intellectually disabled Charles II (ch. 1); the succession problem in the House of Stuart under Queen Anne (ch. 2); the 1701 Act of Settlement (ch. 3); the epidemic-driven succession crisis in France in the late reign of Louis XIV (ch. 4); and the short life of Leopold Johann of Austria, the oldest child and only son of Emperor Charles VI, who

¹ No reference is made, for example, to Christopher Storrs' *The Resilience of the Spanish Monarchy 1665-1700* (Oxford, 2006), which is about the rule of Charles II of Spain.

died before his first birthday (ch. 5). In the process, all these far from unfamiliar themes are newly inflected as the author probes the interfaces between political history, the history of knowledge, the history of the body, the history of emotions, and the history of communication.

On the whole, Tölle sets out persuasively, and based closely on the sources, the serious problems experienced by the European powers around 1700 as a result of the unpredictable dynastic breakdowns he describes (namely lack of heirs, illnesses, premature deaths, and so on); how these events were perceived by contemporaries; and the impact of the practices under focus on political decision-making. However, his exposition and theories are not always convincing. For example, his argument, drawing on the history of emotions, that the Holy Roman Empire was a 'community of feeling' (p. 232) is too narrow; additional aspects should be taken into account, such as imperial patriotism and the impetus towards integration, which was the result of external threats.² The conclusion, too, leaves some questions unanswered: 'The dynastic body was not . . . an appendix of the modern state; superfluous and only noticeable when in crisis. It was itself one of the most important sites for changing the political' (p. 253). A more detailed explanation is needed here of what 'changing the political' means in concrete terms. In my opinion, Tölle's argumentation on this point is somewhat vague.

It is also regrettable that he does not include, by way of comparison, a few prominent early modern rulers whose lives and impact have already been analysed by researchers interested in similar questions. Possibilities here include Emperor Rudolf II (1552–1612), whose state of health was the subject of intense contemporary debate, or Dukes Wilhelm V (1516–92) and Johann Wilhelm of Jülich-Kleve-Berg (1562–1609), who have only recently returned as the focus of more in-depth studies on, for example, early modern medical teaching and the physical and mental health of rulers.³ Another criticism is that

² See in particular Martin Wrede, *Das Reich und seine Feinde: Politische Feindbilder in der reichspatriotischen Publizistik zwischen Westfälischem Frieden und Siebenjährigem Krieg* (Mainz, 2004).

³ See the contributions in the anthology Guido von Büren, Ralf-Peter Fuchs, and Georg Mölich (eds.), *Herrschaft, Hof und Humanismus: Wilhelm V. von Jülich-Kleve-Berg und seine Zeit* (Bielefeld, 2018).

there are some oversights in terms of form and content. One example of this is that Prussia only became a kingdom in 1701, so in 1700 there was as yet no 'king in Prussia' (see the footnotes on pp. 66, 84, 90, and 234). The study's inclusion of an index, in addition to a few useful appendices, is very welcome; however, spot checking has shown that the page numbers recorded in the index are often incorrect by exactly one page, which makes it somewhat difficult to use.

It should be noted, however, that none of these points of criticism are of a fundamental nature, and that Tom Tölle's study is therefore worth a read. It raises some interesting questions, provides food for thought, and ultimately demonstrates the potential of an integrative model that brings together different theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary approaches. At all events, the angle set out programmatically in the title of the introduction, 'Rethinking the Body Politic', proves to be a productive approach to a phase in European history in which the 'société des princes'⁴ was repeatedly shaken up by the uncertainties of human life and experience.

⁴ Lucien Bély, *La société des princes XVI^e-XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1999).

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