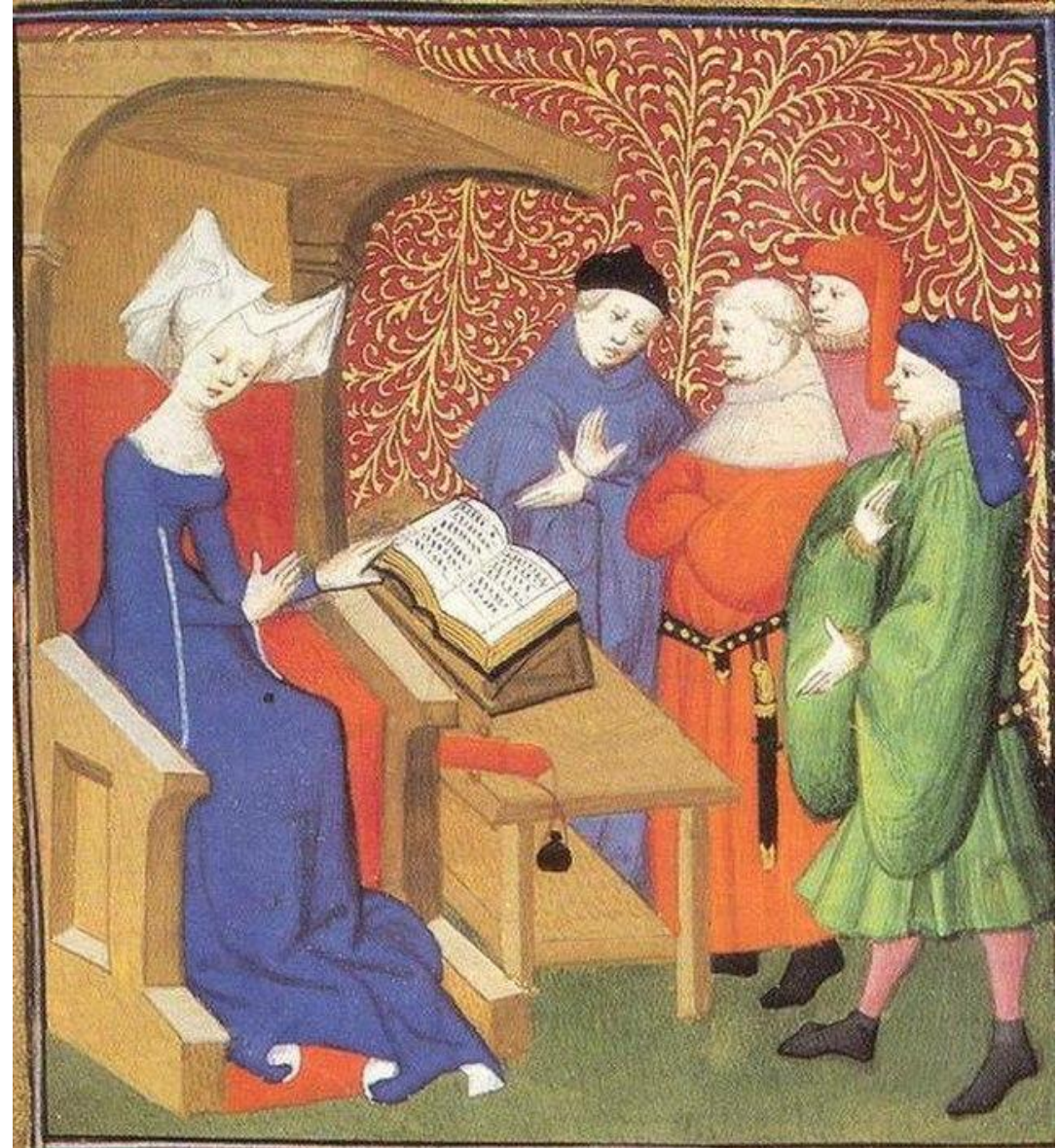


GEC1049: Powerful Court Women from Qing China and Other Cultures

Week 5: Connections—Europe
(September 11, 2025)



Previously, in Week 4....

- “Harem” as a term has been commonly associated with images of the Orient, specifically with the Ottoman Empire which fascinated generations of European writers and readers
- Rather than being idle, sensual, and powerless, “enslaved” concubines in the Ottoman harem could aspire to higher status, gaining favor with the sultan and/or queen mother with their skills, beauty, and obeisance
- Backdrop: Ottoman Empire from expansionist to what historians call a bureaucratic, sedentary phase—less martial sultan in New Palace with most court women in Old Palace
- Queen mother (valide sultan) was super powerful, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when she could influence policy and diplomacy through her networks and proxies



Questions

- In Europe, who got to be king or queen? Why were women often excluded?
- Key theme: Salic Law was invented to resolve a political crisis (i.e., English claim to the French throne)
- How was the queen's role shaped differently in France vs. England and Scotland?
- Key ideas: Agnatic succession (only men could inherit); patrimonialism (mixing family power with government jobs and money); diarchy (joint rule between two groups)



France: Salic Law

- Arose in late fifth century, revived in mid-fourteenth century by monks (noble birth, sons of knights or landowners; Latin and law; presided baptism and coronation; advisers, friends, scholars, study buddies, etc.)
- French Catholics and Protestants
- Royal marriages: Uncles, aunties, nephews, nieces of Europe
- Salic Law: Agnatic (male) over cognatic (both male and female) succession
- Misogynistic writings: Women as cunning, immoral, deceitful, lacked capacity for faith, courage, wisdom, etc.
- Christine de Pizan (1364-1430; *The Book of the City of Ladies*) on Jean de Meun's (1240-1305) *The Romance of the Rose*







All Within the Family

- Hundred Years' War (1337-1453; fall of Constantinople in 1453)
- Major impetus to Salic Law: English claimants to French throne
- Edward III of England (r. 1327-1377), mother: Isabella, sister of Charles IV of France (r. 1322-1328)
- Philip VI of France (r. 1328-1350); the House of Valois
- Diplomatic documents, historical precedents, Biblical stories, etc.
- French efforts to clarify constitutional position of their queens
- The monk Richard Lescot invoked Salic Law in 1358
- Distinction between private inheritance and public office: French Crown as hereditary public office passed by special rules (or laws) rather than by normal laws of inheritance

Joan of Arc Saved France



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Why women should not hold public office

- Queens lacked sacral abilities of kings
- Limits of sacral qualities and religious explanations: Pope
- More common rhetoric: Misogynistic arguments that women were naturally inferior to men, who were more stable and virtuous to govern (i.e., as priests, judges, teachers, etc.)
- Contradictions: Queens in other kingdoms, *The City of Ladies*, maternal bond making queen the natural choice as guardian and regent (Pizan)
- Queen: Right to pardon criminals, received scepter, rod, ring (to be just and combat hearsay)—extension of kingly dignity
- Consensus: Women could not inherit the throne as private property because it was a public office, but they could administer the kingdom as regents because of their domestic relationship with their husbands or children
- Salic Law: Office and property rather than royal succession



Female Regency in France

- Female regency was reintegrated into French political life; between 1483 and 1652 women governed the realm as regents on six occasions
- Customs and historical precedents conferred authority and legitimacy (in lieu of a constitution)
- Salic Law obviated the need for detailed arguments about women's moral qualities or physical and intellectual capabilities
- Salic Law regulated succession and inheritance but could not hinder a woman's responsibilities to her family, which were sanctioned by divine law, or hamper the queen's exercise of other privileges and honors that were part of her husband's prerogatives of office
- Salic Law as a unique component of French public law that did not indicate any moral or biological inferiority of women
- French queens vs. English and Scottish gynarchies (Mary, Elizabeth, Anne)
- Regency: Council of blood princes rather than queen ruling for son or husband



Another Invention of Tradition, in England

- Queen Victoria (r. 1837-1901)
- Royal pageantry and spectacle: Public ceremonies, royal jubilees
- Purpose of “royal ritualism”: Political legitimacy, counterweight to popular democracy?
- Planners: Cabinet, civil service, Church
- Funds: Public, from government, i.e., taxpayers
- Challenges: Budget constraints, will of House of Lords and House of Commons, etc.
- Jubilee: To assert superiority, as matriarch of European princes (1887) vs. enthusiastic government wanting to invite crowned heads (and colonial premiers) (1897)
- Unexpected popularity of monarchy as demonstrated in the Golden Jubilee
- The idea and importance of precedents

Interlocking Patrimonialisms

- Manchus: Brothers and bondservants to check bureaucrats and vice versa
- Bureaucracy and centralization of power to manage taxation and resources of former Ming Empire
- Patrimonial strategies, other than fiscal and military methods, to curb bureaucratic power and hostility
- (Pre-Qing: Household slaves/servants in China were not property possessed and freely disposed of by masters; could make money and buy their freedom; had their own surnames registered in local government; protected and punished by state law)





Steppe Politics

- Both brothers and sons, sometimes even nephews, were eligible for khanship; charisma and bellicosity were key criteria
- Fractious configuration: Tribal assemblies and rivalries
- Manchu Qing: Originally no clear, exclusive rule of succession
- Sons, brothers, nephews commanded the banners
- Slave bondservants: Personal retinues of tribal nobles, household servants of enfeoffed princes—top ones served the emperor, evolved into the Imperial Household Department with jade, salt, and ginseng monopolies; trade in silk and textiles; minting and purchasing copper; power huge but dependent on the emperor

Ming vs. Manchu



- Patrimonialism: A set of familial practices and forms of conduct that amalgamate private property and public office (think tax-farming in early modern Europe; private vs. public)
- Royal monopoly on economic pursuits to the individual and his heirs, who managed the endowed office as private and lineage property (aristocracy vs. meritocracy)
- “One-third of the examination gentry was fresh blood—people whose immediate ancestors had never held a degree”
- Patrimonial discourse: Filial piety → Loyalty to emperor; women’s chastity cult, observed mostly by the upper class
- Lean bureaucracy through the dynasties; non-official clerks, runners, secretaries recruited on site/on the spot



Bureaucratizing Power

- From raid to aid: Subjugated Chinese to form free households
- Chancellery and Six Boards; diarchy (joint rule by Han and Manchu ministers); Grand Council; revenue collection from Imperial Household Department to provincial governors
- Qing politics: Patrimonial power (“arbitrary” inner court) vs. state bureaucracy (outer court)
- Benefits: Avoided princely partition and bureaucratic constraint
- Top strategy: Intermarriages; family as double-edged sword—binding and severing familial ties as perennial task and concern for Europe and Qing Empire
- Similarities defy easy categorization of China as an old empire vis-à-vis “new” early modern European polities

Paradoxes to ponder

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- If queens were unfit, why were French women allowed to rule as regents?
 - Why did England end up with famous queens while France banned them?
 - Why did Qing emperors (and Ottoman sultans) trust slaves more than officials?

