



Anke Hufschmidt. *Adelige Frauen im Weserraum zwischen 1570 und 1700: Status, Rollen, Lebenspraxis.* nster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2001. 583 pp. EUR 34.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-402-06798-7.



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It was not until the 1990s that gender studies became more interested in taking a closer look at women from the lower ranks of the nobility. In fact, until then noble women as a group seem to have been disregarded due to the interest the research area gained from the impetus of the women's movement's political demands in the 1970s and 1980s. In that atmosphere, noble women were viewed suspiciously, since they were closely linked to power and authority—both terms which did not fit into traditional patterns of understanding women's role in history, which was marked with terms like “victims” and “suppression.” But even when women's studies turned into gender studies and jettisoned some of these political burdens, noble women did not come into play. Research questions turned to asking about the roles women were playing in towns and cities; and due to the special position nobles had in early modern jurisdictions, they were not touched by these encounters. But nowadays we should note two important impulses—and Anke Hufschmidt's study about women from the lower ranks of nobility in the Weser region benefits a great deal from them. First, nobility became an interesting field of research in itself. Biographies of women from the higher ranks of the nobility were edited, the reformation's influence on their lives was studied, and social and economic aspects of noble life became much more important in research on the nobility. Second, the research on nobility

grew to show a great variety of different aspects of noble life. Lower ranks, for instance, have been studied in Austria or Saxony, and a remarkable number of biographies have been written.

Hufschmidt deserves credit for not just adding another perspective on regional developments, and not applying common research questions to yet another group of noble women. Instead, in her study on seventeen noble families, she provides several new insights. Coming from the perspective of gender studies, she strongly emphasizes that more significance has to be attached to social and economic developments and the juridical status of noble women. In bringing these approaches together, Hufschmidt attempts to write a social history of the lower nobility as well as connecting her results to research about the characteristics of estate society. In fact, the meaning of estate and its expression in early modern society is a very crucial issue in Hufschmidt's work. Here, it is her aim to question the relationship between gender and estate. By doing this, she regards gender as a central category for noble men and women throughout the early modern period. In concrete terms, she asks about the similarities and differences of noble men and women and their circumstances in order to illustrate how gender differences and hierarchies did have effect on the family's identity and vice versa.

This approach requires a closer look at the social practice and actions of noble men and women, instead of concentrating too much on normative discourses, which were supposed to shape practice. Therefore, “experiences” and “actions” of the nobility are two focal points, introduced by Hufschmidt, which help to analyze the lower nobility (p. 28). Here, Hufschmidt tries to apprehend the tension between the women’s self-understanding and different demands made upon them. Methodically, she picks three important fields as main characteristics of corporate self-understanding: education, lifestyle, and economic security. Hufschmidt’s study concentrates on the developments of noble families between 1570 and 1700. 1570 not only marks a higher density of testimonies of surviving ego-documents and funeral orations, which allow more insights into the attitudes of noble men and women, it also corresponds to the period of the *Weserrenaissance*, an economic and cultural climax in this region. Hufschmidt sets 1700 as a break to avoid the common but arbitrary date of 1648—which permits her to consider the effects of the Thirty Years’ War on the nobility in her study. Such effects include not only a new self-understanding on the part of noble men and women, but also ongoing confessionalization and its impact on the nobility.

After laying out these premises, Hufschmidt turns, in her first large chapter, to analyze the education of the lower ranks of nobility. Here, she concentrates on the women, and names their places of education, such as cloisters, homes of relatives, and parental homes. Furthermore, she takes a close look at the remarkably large book collections of noble women, which mostly contained educational writings. By analyzing the elementary education of, and the impact of Christian virtues and educational writings on noble women, she illustrates how the women were prepared to live a life as a noble *Hausmutter*. A number of the aspects she mentions in this context have already been demonstrated in research. This fact can be seen, for instance, when she is dealing with the *Hausväterliteratur* or other aspects of women’s education. Nevertheless, these insights have not been spelled out for the cases of noble women in the Weser area, so this still is a very valuable contribution to research. Here, Hufschmidt underlines that the choice of an educational institution was a highly deliberate one: if parents sent their daughters to the courts of relatives, they intended to improve their social and political contacts. Moreover, Hufschmidt discovers a change in the goal of education: during the seventeenth century the idea of a lady of the court being interested in world affairs

surfaced and seems to have replaced the model of the *Landedelfrau*, who led a withdrawn life. Consequently, education in the political field became more important as it was an aid to women in their tasks of representation. All in all, working at courts provided new perspectives in life, especially for the daughters of noble families.

The large second part of Hufschmidt’s work deals with the noble couple. Here, she studies marriage, dealing with the age of marriage, relationships established to secure social standing after marriage, and the contents of marriage contracts. Secondly, Hufschmidt illustrates how the couples actually lived: she takes a close look at women’s power in the role of *Hausmutter* after marriage, the role of piety in social practice, emotions between husband and wife, and conflicts concerning marriage. Again, she emphasizes that it was one of the main goals of marriage policy to guarantee the continuity of noble houses in order to drive back influences of middle and lower classes. Even marriages between higher and lower ranks of the nobility were not considered desirable. All in all, marriage highly depended on the social and financial interests of a family. Noble birth, economic capabilities, remarkable and helpful social and political networks of the relatives, health and good looks were the main reasons to choose a bride. Marriage contracts in particular reflect the political dimension of the parties’ relatives. But Hufschmidt also states, that a remarkable number of young men remained unmarried, since the distribution of the family’s property—as a consequence of many marriages—was not desired. In Catholic regions, male successors turned to clerical institutions instead, while Protestant families sent their sons to the military. Furthermore, Hufschmidt underlines that choices of mates against the family’s demands also took place. Interestingly, such connections usually went back to connections made while women lived in cloisters (p. 145). During marriage, it was the women’s task to maintain the household—and to make sure that the family’s noble self-understanding was passed on to children. Consequently, noble women provided a large number of hand-written books for their children, dealing with education, identity, the meaning of Christian virtues and confessional creeds, in order to encourage the self-awareness of the subsequent generation.

The third part of the book is the most impressive one: it asks about the economic circumstances in which noble women lived. Here, Hufschmidt shows the large variety of property that was brought into marriage, handed down to successors, or used to finance widowhood. But Hufschmidt not only names the very different forms

of property, she also goes into conflicts arising from women's rights to dispose goods during marriage by drawing up a will. The second part of the chapter deals with the transfer of property. Noble women earned their own money, and they acted as money-lenders or testators. Hufschmidt, then, emphasizes the importance of the *Gerade*, a special form of property common in Saxon jurisdiction. The *Gerade* had to be handed down matrilineally. Finally, she concludes, women's property was not only important to secure the economy of the newly married couple, it also illustrated the gender hierarchy among the nobility: While sisters received almost the same dowry from their parents, Hufschmidt shows that younger sons within the noble families of the Weser region received far more money as a compensation for not being the principal heir. Nevertheless, during the seventeenth century, this gap became smaller, which relates to the increasing contribution of women's dowry to the noble economy as such. It seems that women were quite conscious of their growing influence in monetary matters. Some noble wives even set up special contracts with their husbands in order to secure taxes gained from investing the dowry. The money could be inherited by the daughters only (p. 303).

In her thoughtful study of the economic situation of noble women, Hufschmidt suggests a large number of aspects that will require further consideration in comparative studies. For instance, she suggests the demon-

strative character of the dowry, a major issue for maintaining noble identity. Moreover, she discusses costs and motives involved in women's decision to enter a convent rather than marrying. Here, she reaches the conclusion that it seems to have been the women's choice to spend their lives in monasteries—which were not mainly or only holding tanks for unmarried daughters, as has often been suggested.

Hufschmidt's work concerns numerous central aspects of noble life in the early modern period. Because her study is restricted to the Weser region with its seventeen noble families, she is able to present multiple details in her very well-composed study. Although she sometimes underestimates the significance of conflicts and the juridical sources derived from them, the overall impression left by her study is overwhelmingly positive. All in all, she has left normative discourses on noble women behind and managed to take a closer look at their concrete actions in many different ways. Torn between the wish to defend their noble identity against upcoming middle classes and to keep up a certain living standard, gender hierarchies were questioned and negotiated; by doing this, women of the lower nobility show the ways in which gender and estate were inseparably linked. Further research on the development of nobility during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will not be able to ignore Hufschmidt's results.

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