Status, Power, and Identity in Early Modern France: The Rohan Family, 1550–1715. Jonathan Dewald.
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Jonathan Dewald's new monograph throws a multifaceted light on one of the leading grandee families of early modern France. Within the sizeable nobility of the ancien régime (which made up about 1 percent of the French population), very few nobles could present a lineage like that of the Rohan. Both real and mythical kings were included in a carefully cultivated family tree, which helped this aristocratic Breton clan to survive and thrive through turbulent events in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. According to Dewald, comprehending the inner workings of a prominent family like the Rohan provides a key to understanding the way early modern society functioned. Dewald's book offers a valuable contribution to the growing historiography of early modern French noble families, which includes Stuart Carroll's work on the Guise, Malcolm Walsby's study of the Laval, and Ariane Boltanski's monograph on the Gonzague-Nevers.

In addition to highlighting their extraordinary wealth and influence, Dewald underscores the inherent weaknesses of the family. Far from omnipotent, the Rohan relied on patronage from the monarchy and on the goodwill of other social classes, which provided necessary services such as manpower in battle and financial assistance. Dewald emphasizes that individual ambitions trumped overarching family strategy, often resulting in strife between relatives. The family's history includes numerous scandals, such as Françoise de Rohan's ill-fated affair with the duc de Nemours, which took place under the nose of Catherine de' Medici and was revealed only when Rohan was eight months pregnant and unsuccessfully tried to convince her peers and lawyers that the

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child was the fruit of a secret but legitimate marriage with Nemours. Another Rohan woman, Catherine de Parthenay (who married René de Rohan in 1575), was involved in a similarly intricate litigation against her doubly ill-fated first husband, Charles de Quelennec, whom she accused of impotence before he was conveniently murdered in the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Notwithstanding their occasional notoriety, the erudite Rohan women exercised real power and were involved in political negotiations, managing properties, and making business decisions for their families, while the men were traveling, fighting, or engaged in public service.

Dewald's book highlights a number of colorful characters within the family, none more than Catherine de Parthenay's famous son Duc Henri de Rohan. In the inner core of the most prominent French nobility, traditionally better known for their mastery of power, intrigues, and military affairs than for cultural contributions, Henri de Rohan stands out. Numerous contemporary and posthumously printed treatises were attributed to this enigmatic and opportunistic character. His deep learning and systematic travels across the Continent made him a unique eyewitness to events within and beyond France, and an eloquent and outspoken defender of his own class and privileges. After successful trips to England and Scotland, Rohan was dumbfounded to discover that the British nobility were not exempt from taxes, which was seen as a God-given right for French nobles. Rohan's ambitions often went beyond those of a grandee, content to circulate within the limited court of his peers. He instead sought to elevate himself to royal status and, through his close family ties to Henry IV, to present himself as rightful heir to the throne of Navarre. Any claim to the French throne was prevented by Salic law, and Rohan's comparatively more legitimate claim on Navarre was finally thwarted in 1620, when Louis XIII incorporated the small kingdom into his expanding state. Further attempts to approach royal status appeared in a failed 1602 marriage to a Swedish princess, but the royal ancestry of the Rohans was repeatedly emphasized in family-sponsored accounts of the dynasty, which linked them directly to the mythical king of Brittany, Conan Mériadec, or to even more distant Trojan heroes.

The family was furthermore seen as one of the sternest defenders of Huguenot privileges, and when these were increasingly threatened in the 1620s, Henry de Rohan put himself in charge of a rebellion against the monarchy. Rohan had a rare talent for setting the class of commoners (whom he openly denigrated in his own writings) against his enemies with inflammatory speeches and often-brutal deeds. When peace was made, Rohan ironically managed to obtain a prestigious post in another Catholic state as leader of the Venetian armies. It was during his years in Venice and Padua that his most famous writings came to light, arguably, with help from Benjamin Priolo, his physician and confidant. For his part, Priolo fiercely denied his modest ancestry, which class-conscious Rohan seemingly ignored. Dewald's important study establishes with clarity and erudition how the egos of high-ranking nobles helped to shape early modern France and Europe, and shows how their grandiose actions would prompt their overthrow in the wake of the revolution.

Joanna Milstein, *The Medici Archive Project*

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