

Bernard Allorent, La fortune de la Grande Mademoiselle. Anne Marie Louise d'Orléans, duchesse de Montpensier (1627–1693). Un enjeu politique au XVIIe siècle, Paris (Honoré Champion) 2019, 414 p., 8 ill. (histoire et archives. Hors-série 18), ISBN 978-2-7453-5004-6, EUR 60,00.

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One of the most colourful personalities of the seventeenth century is Anne-Marie-Louise d'Orléans, Duchesse de Montpensier, better known as »La Grande Mademoiselle«. She has had numerous biographies written about her – in fact one of the only French women from the early modern period with more than one biography in English – and is known for her own writings as well, notably her witty and opinionated memoirs. She was a conundrum even in her own time: her wealth and status seemingly opened any door to her on the dynastic stage of the Society of Princes, yet at the same time prevented her from marrying and taking what she saw as her proper place amongst the sovereigns of Europe. As the heiress of an enormous fortune, a marriage to a French subject would bring that man inordinate political influence potentially threatening to the monarchy, while any marriage to a foreign prince would mean the loss of a sizeable income outside the Kingdom, not to mention the potentiality of a foreign power controlling a significant collection of real estate in the very heart of France. And so the Duchesse de Montpensier remained unmarried, and although she was first cousin to the King (Louis XIV), she remained in many ways an outsider at court, never completely fitting in to the patriarchal and family-oriented Bourbon monarchy.

The extent of La Grande Mademoiselle's vast fortune has never been a great secret. The financial accounts for her domains are known and general figures are readily available to researchers, as summarised, for example, in the best English-language biography, by Vincent Pitts, from 2000 (p. 263–268): she enjoyed annual revenues of about 500 000 livres per year, and a total estate valued at between 10 and 12 million livres. Her great treasures in terms of revenue, but also prestige, were the County of Eu (in Normandy) and the Sovereign Principality of Dombes (north of Lyon), but she also prized her estate at the Duchy of Saint-Fargeau (east of Orléans), where she exercised her muscles as a builder and a hostess, mistress of her own affairs, making the best of a bad situation as she tried to atone for her political activities during the Frondes of 1648–1652. Her memoirs allow us to trace her thought processes in this period, as she writes about being unmarried, and about her later passion for the courtier the Marquis de Lauzun, and her subsequent horror in having to bail him out of prison by giving up her cherished possessions (both Eu and Dombes) to the illegitimate child (her distaste for illegitimacy is clear) of Louis XIV, the duc du Maine.



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Bernard Allorent does not significantly add to our knowledge or understanding of these well-known details. What he does do is show us how it all functioned in terms of finance. He is himself a professional financier, and brings his specialist knowledge to the study of La Grande Mademoiselle's monetary history, with extremely focused scrutiny, making use of fairly well trodden sources (the Orléans papers in the Archives privées of the Archives nationales in Paris), but also the extremely detailed (but notoriously difficult to read) Minutier Central (also in the Archives nationales), the notarial records for financial and legal transactions for the Ancien Régime. Allorent works his way property by property through the Montpensier fortune, piecing together not simply its composition, but how it was managed, and attempting to see how the Princess and her advisors did or did not make the estate profitable. The results are then compared with recent researches on aristocratic financial management for the seventeenth century more generally, to conclude that, although she did not suffer horrible losses and crippling debt as some other great aristocratic houses did, neither did she escape the illiquidity (i. e., lack of available cash) that encumbered most noble fortunes in this period.

Allorent concludes that she may have come closer than most, and, against the general trend of economic stagnation or decline, some of her estates did rise in profits, but she also spent quite a great deal, notably in renovating her residences at Saint-Fargeau, Eu and later Choisy, and lost quite a heavy source of revenue through the forced donation of Eu and Dombes to the duc du Maine in 1681.

In the introduction to his book, the author makes an interesting point, that this fortune is the result of three centuries of building, surviving and reconstructing, as the heritage of the medieval dynasties of Berry and Bourbon, and the later additions of the 16th-century Montpensiers. This book takes as a starting point the fairly thorough document generated at the end of La Grande Mademoiselle's minority in the 1650s by the agents of her father, Gaston, duc d'Orléans, and then focuses on the latter half of her life, when she managed her own affairs, and in particular the period of rising debts from the 1660s.

He then looks at the period when large parts of her estate were detached and given to Lauzun or to Maine. Along the way, different chapters cover her continued financial dealings with the family of her grandmother's second marriage (the Guise), and her monetary activities as a sovereign in the Principality of Dombes. Chapter 4 looks more closely at her financial management team – a useful prosopographical exercise – usually men with close ties to either Eu or Dombes, but also, as expected, the wealthy *parlementaire* families of Paris. Interestingly, but unsurprisingly, these were all quite tightly inter-related: family and finance and politics are difficult to separate in the early modern period.

The next chapters look separately at each of the major domains, those in Normandy, in the centre of France (Auvergne, Berry and Orléanais), and fiscal holdings, notably in the crown revenues derived from salt (worth a hefty 40 000 livres a year). The chapters that follow focus on her disputes and settlements with Crown



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agents, her Guise relations, the heirs of Richelieu, and others. Then the core of the book settles on the close assessment of the fiscal management of all that has so far been surveyed, with a chapter on the active revenues from her estates; a chapter on her liquid assets (or lack of – despite her fortune, she had very little ready cash, so continually went into debt, first to fund her political activities in the 1650s and later her building projects); and finally three chapters on debt, re-financing the debt, and how much of this debt was pushed around from creditor to creditor without really achieving much in terms of financial relief. These chapters are supported by over one-hundred pages of annexes, with family trees, transcriptions of leases for individual properties, and useful charts of revenues, debts and creditors.

In his conclusion, Bernard Allorent first makes use of the new estimations established in the previous chapters to provide revised figures for the total sums left to individuals or charities in her will which impacted on the total amount received by her primary heir, Philippe, duc d'Orléans (and explains why he felt cheated since although he received a larger share than the estates given to the King's son, Maine, he also had to fund her legacies and received all of the debt, while Maine's donations were debt free – yet another example of a younger royal brother feeling cheated by the machinations of his older brother the king!). From here, Allorent concludes by asserting that in order to fully understand the management of an early modern aristocratic fortune, the entirety – in as much as is possible – should be examined in three aspects: daily management, diversification and innovation. Looking at La Grande Mademoiselle's fortune in this way, he concludes that »her fortune had been well managed, but without any particular strategic genius« (p. 278).

He sees that while she did make good use of her elevated status to command loyalty from her officers and to enable large-scale financial deals, and some of her properties enjoyed a higher valuation because of it, she did not abuse her status to avoid payment of debts. And although she was never overwhelmed by debt as many aristocratic fortunes were, nor did she do much to alleviate the problem. In the end he returns to the question with which this review began (p. 280–282): did La Grande Mademoiselle's fortune restrain her freedoms? Certainly it did impact her marital choices, but she herself saw her fortunes as a refuge into which she could retreat, a means of maintaining her independence, which to her, was worth it.



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