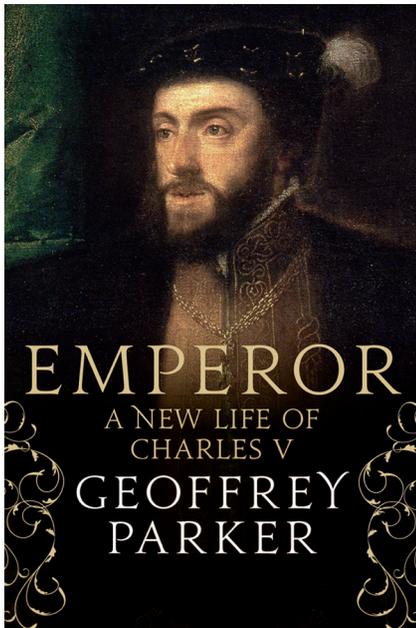


Review

Geoffrey Parker, *Emperor. A new life of Charles V*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2019, 737 pp. ISBN 9780300196528.

Femke Deen, *Anna van Saksen. Verstoten bruid van Willem van Oranje*, Amsterdam and Antwerp, Atlas Contact, 2018, 416 pp. ISBN 9789045024721.



The study of dynastic politics and dynastic identities is a major research topic within the study of early modern political history. Aristocratic, ruling dynasties are considered to be of key importance to the development of society and the ways it was administered. Yet there is still considerable debate on how dominant the role of the family was vis-à-vis the importance and independence of individuals within those families. The two biographies under review here provide interesting sixteenth-century case studies to answer this question. Both studies demonstrate the importance of dynastic interests, politics, and honour for their subjects, and elucidate the different degrees of importance and independence they had as individuals.

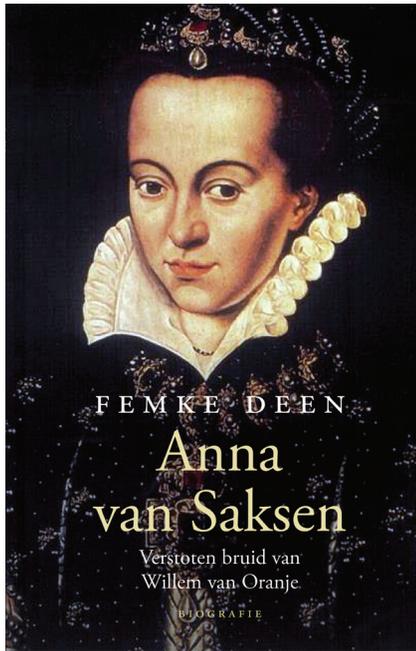
Geoffrey Parker, an eminent historian of early modern Spain and the Low Countries, has dealt extensively with King Philip II, but has now written an impressive biography of his father Emperor Charles V (1500-1558). The number of extant sources on Charles V is massive, which has led some historians to suggest that surveying the whole is impossible. Parker attempts to prove them wrong. A useful note on the sources in the appendices provides an overview of what still exists and what is missing. Parker's story is framed around three key questions: 1) How did Charles V take decisions?; 2) Did policy failures result from structural or personal shortcomings?; and 3) What was it like to be Charles?

Parker is trying to understand why Charles did what he did, and then explain his actions. He is well aware that in doing so, his approach emphasises agency and contingency over structure and continuity. Parker nonetheless recognises that despite the need to improvise, innovate, and compromise, Charles's repertoire included what he calls a pre-set formula consisting of four core elements: dynasty, chivalry, reputation, and the Catholic faith.

The Habsburg empire of which Charles V was the primary architect was an impossible empire, according to Parker. Charles mastered it very much through his charismatic authority, which, unfortunately, was not hereditary. As early as 1548-1549, Philip II alienated many allies and subjects of his father. In Parker's view, Philip was unsuitable for ruling a global empire; already in 1539, Charles recognised the risk of a revolt in the Low Countries if his son inherited these dominions in combination with Spain. The serious problem in ruling both territories, in Charles's view, was that the ruler constantly had to travel back and forth. Parker shows that by the 1550s, Spain had replaced the Netherlands and Burgundy as the central domain in the Habsburg empire. Until 1548 Charles V was generally successful in his undertakings, but after 1550 this was no longer the case. The imperial religious peace of 1555 had nothing to do with Charles; for him it was testament to his failure to defeat heresy in the Empire. The Peace of Augsburg was an accomplishment of his brother Ferdinand, who would succeed him as emperor.

The second work under review here is Femke Deen's biography of Anna of Saxony (1544-1577), second wife of Prince William of Orange. Repudiated by Orange for her alleged adultery with Jan Rubens, father of the painter Peter Paul Rubens, and ending her days in anguish and isolation, Anna was a tragic figure, who has been unjustly ignored by historians. The controversy surrounding her affair has in the past resulted in a tendency – among her critics as well as her supporters – to create a caricature of Anna. Deen thus aims to bring Anna's story closer to reality than hitherto has been the case. To do so, she has unearthed more than a thousand documents and letters relating to Anna. Deen's central tenet is that she tried to maintain control over her own life while sandwiched between the interests of her husband and her powerful Saxon and Hessian uncles. A secondary aim is to shed light on the position of women in the sixteenth-century European nobility. Deen sees three elements that underpinned and steered the actions and thoughts of her protagonists: money, religion, and dynastic pride. These compare well with the core elements in Charles V's repertoire posited by Parker. The exception is chivalry, which was non-existent in Anna's life, other than perhaps at the time when Orange was trying to win her hand or in the books she read. Money was very much a preoccupation for Charles as well, of course, although one might argue that it was the necessary means to maintain dynasty, reputation, and faith.

Anna's marriage to Orange in 1561 involved great dynastic and religious interests. It linked the Nassau family with the Elector of Saxony and, through Anna's mother, the Landgrave of Hessen. For the Nassaus, the marriage sealed an alliance with two of the most powerful Lutheran princes in the Empire, whereas for Saxony and Hessen it provided access to Orange's network among the Spanish Habsburgs. The relationship between Anna and her husband soon saw frictions and tension arise. Anna displayed great pride and was prone to impulsive and uncontrolled behaviour. Very proud of her Saxon ancestry, she was well aware that she had married down and was extremely sensitive to any perceived



slight. Anna also objected to Orange's philandering. When the couple fled to the Empire in 1567 to escape the suppression of the Dutch Revolt by the Duke of Alba, their relationship quickly deteriorated. Justifiably, Anna's decline and fall in the years after 1567 fills nearly two thirds of Deen's story.

As Orange spent all his attention and money on retrieving his position and possessions in the Netherlands, Anna continued to fight for what she believed *she* was entitled to. Sixteenth-century noblewomen had many possibilities to assert themselves and exert influence, but there were limits they should respect, certainly in public, yet Anna openly flouted these conventions. Deen posits that adversity caused Anna to gradually lose grip on herself. She concludes that the adultery probably took place, but that the Nassaus were certainly not innocent. Since Anna's relatives declined to provide Orange with the support he desired for his actions in the Low Coun-

tries, the marriage served no further purpose. The adultery allowed the prince to get rid of Anna and look for strategic allies in France and among the Huguenots, resulting in the marriage to Charlotte de Bourbon in 1575.

After Rubens' arrest in March 1571 and facing accusations of adultery, Anna behaved increasingly irrational. Her behaviour alienated people and undermined her own credibility, something which she failed to understand herself. In the following years Anna became more and more isolated, both figuratively and literally. Her relations finally decided to bring her back to Saxony. On the journey to Dresden in 1575-1576 Anna's mental condition rapidly deteriorated to the point of insanity. She was locked away in a three-room apartment in the castle where she had grown up and died within a year.

Surveying both biographies with an eye on the role of the family as compared to the importance and independence of individuals within it, Charles was obviously the more important and independent individual. This was partly due to his role within the family and his family's position in relation to other dynasties: Charles V became the head of the most powerful and influential family in Christian Europe. He lied, dissimulated, and in 1541 covered up the murder of two French diplomats. Anna was a lesser member of a family that exercised power and influence in a German and Imperial context, but played a limited role otherwise. Gender was another important factor. As a man and head of his family, Charles got away with extramarital affairs that produced four illegitimate children. Yet extramarital affairs by noblewomen were seen as unacceptable and a threat to the lineage. Anna's affair and resulting daughter effectively made her a social outcast, a source of shame best hidden from the world: her child was taken away at the age of two. Almost

until her death, her next of kin framed Anna's behaviour as sinful; the proposed remedy was prayer and reading the Bible. There was no pity for Anna until after her death – her grave even remained unmarked until 2017.

Personality was another factor that determined the freedom an individual might have. Parker makes it clear that Charles V's personality allowed him to achieve much. On the one hand Charles was beloved and charming, using flattery to get his way. On the other hand, if this could not or would not work, he would bully people to achieve his goals. Rubbing up Charles the wrong way was dangerous: he never forgot nor forgave a grievance. The emperor showed little affection for other members of his family, although it seems he did love his wife Isabella. He treated his unstable mother Joanna very badly: she was locked away and deceived until her death in 1555, so that Charles could rule her territories. He even stole from her personal possessions. Although Charles V struggled with problems of time and space in ruling his vast domains, on the whole he was a successful head of the dynasty, at least until 1548. Another important factor contributing to his success was his willingness to delegate local decisions to his brother Ferdinand in the Empire, to his aunt Margaret in the Netherlands, or to his generals. Anna of Saxony's personality, on the other hand, clashed with what was expected of a noblewoman. Before her marriage she had already been dubbed stubborn and headstrong. Once her marriage had fallen apart, Anna was incapable of using what little room she had as a woman to obtain a more agreeable outcome for herself. By openly crossing the line of what was deemed acceptable behaviour, she sealed her fate.

Yet the approach both authors have taken in analysing their subjects must also be taken into consideration when judging the independence of Charles V and Anna as individuals. As mentioned earlier, Parker readily acknowledges that his approach emphasises agency and contingency over structure and continuity. As a result, the knightly-dynastic culture that shaped Charles V's behaviour and decisions – especially matters of honour and prestige – is not a structural thread in Parker's story. His focus on Charles's actions also means that he sketches the structure of rule, but the interaction between the parts within the structure is less clear. For Deen, the social framework and *mores* of the nobility and their servants are an important part of her analysis; the interaction between the various protagonists is key to understanding what happened to Anna and why. Let me conclude by saying that both books are extremely well-written. They should be the new benchmark for their respective subjects.

Erik Swart, Universität Gießen