

COURT STUDIES SPOTLIGHT

The Court Studies Spotlight is a new feature of the Society's newsletter. Each Q&A-style spotlight will feature current scholars and/or research projects relevant to the field of court studies. The aim is to connect scholars working on similar research and stimulate collaborations to enrich court studies.

Spotlight participant

Dr Bram van Leuveren (he/they) is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at [Leiden University](#).

Can you tell us a bit about yourself/project?

My [research project](#) entitled 'Public Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe: Theatrical Entertainments for the State Journeys of English and French Royals into the Low Countries, 1577-1642' (2021-2023) is sponsored by the European Union. It studies the royal itineraries of the English and French monarchies into the Netherlands through the lens of transnational diplomacy and the performing arts, ranging from ballets, banquets, and masquerades to tournaments, processions, and firework dramas. Since September 2020, I am delighted to call myself a board member of the [European Branch of the Society for Court Studies](#), an exciting team of scholars who are passionate about promoting court studies to a broad and international audience.

In this capacity, I also compile the list of events, calls, and conferences for "The Court Dispatch" and manage the exhibition and



(Bram van Leuveren at the Special Collections of Leiden University Library. Photo by Leiden University Library)

report sections of *The Court Historian*. I like to call myself a cultural historian of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. I find the term 'cultural historian' suitably inclusive and yet specific enough to label my transnational and interdisciplinary research. My work focuses on transnational arts and cultures of early modern diplomacy, especially in England, France, and the Low Countries (present-day Belgium, the Netherlands, and French Flanders). My source material includes written and printed records on court and diplomatic events, such as diaries, chronicles, financial statements, and ambassadorial correspondences, as well as engravings, paintings, commemorative medals, and the original props and sceneries that have survived in city archives and museums across Europe.

I have been trained in both historical and contemporary research on arts, cultures, and media at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, and entered the field of early modern scholarship through my practical interest in dance and theatre (I even toyed with the idea of becoming a choreographer!). My doctoral thesis, which I completed at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, in June 2019 focused on the diplomatic reception of court and civic festivals under the late Valois and early Bourbon rulers of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century France. Rather than studying those festivals as exclusively 'French' phenomena, my thesis examined theatrical entertainments, such as acrobatics, balls, and masquerades, as well as state ceremonies, including investitures, coronations, and court audiences, from the point of view of the European ambassadors and diplomatic stakeholders who attended and participated in them. My first monograph, based on my doctoral thesis, is forthcoming with Brill as *Early Modern Diplomacy and French Festival Culture, 1572-1615*.

What is your current research/project about?

Shifting the geographical focus from France to the Low Countries, I examine the sixty-five-year period between 1577 and 1642 that witnessed a marked increase in the number of royal visits from England and France into the Southern and – from 1585 – exclusively Northern Netherlands (by then known as the Dutch Republic).

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(Bram unfolds Salomon Savery's engraving of Marie de Medicis's procession into Amsterdam on 31 August 1638 at the Special Collections of Leiden University Library, [12568 D.1](#))

These visits were part of a longer tour of the rebellious provinces by prominent members and associated nobles of the French and English royal families to further their diplomatic collaboration with the Netherlandish authorities. Such collaboration was indispensable from the late sixteenth century onwards. The aggressive expansionism of Habsburg Spain threatened not only the Low Countries, but also England and France who feared that a complete reconquest of the Netherlands would also entail the annexation of their territories. During their tours of the Low Countries, the French and English delegates were received with abundant pageantry by the local city councils, which broadcasted the need for diplomatic collaboration between England, France, and the Netherlandish authorities to an international audience of diplomats, citizens, and political leaders.

My project focuses on the international reception of the royal itineraries and the diplomatic programmes advertised in the theatrical entertainments staged for the foreign guests of the Netherlandish city councils. I examine a wide range of written, printed, and visual sources on the voyages, scattered across Europe in various archives, libraries, and museums. These sources were commissioned or produced by multiple diplomatic stakeholders who were either present during one of more stages of the journeys or had received word about them in retrospect. The relevance of my project for court studies consists in the unique perspective it provides on the diplomatic and cultural exchanges, as well as clashes, that

occurred between diplomatic stakeholders from different court and urban traditions, both during and after the royal tours. Rather than privileging the perspective of a single organisation or participant in the journeys, I discuss the conflicting evaluations and interpretations of the Netherlandish pageants and rituals by representatives and supporters of the English and French monarchies and its nobles, as well as of the Stadtholder's court, the States-General, and the various city councils of the Low Countries.

What are some of the challenges/problems in your research/project?

One of the biggest challenges in my current research is writing a coherent narrative on the basis of an enormous amount of historical material, from various European institutions, that frequently offer conflicting views of the royal tours and their theatrical entertainments. How does one study ephemeral events that have been so heavily mediated in a wide range of written, printed, and visual sources? The aim is to write a balanced academic narrative that takes on board the complicated reception condition of the journeys, without losing track of their wider diplomatic and political context.

How can the members of the Society for Court Studies help you with your research/project?

I hope that members of the Society will be able to help me out with three relevant questions below. Please feel free to contact me (info at the end).

(1) *How do we understand 'diplomacy' when performed by a member or associated noble of the English or French royal family, someone who is not formally accredited as diplomat? My research focuses on the tours of Marguerite de Valois, representative of her brother Hercule-François, Duke of Alençon and Anjou, the French heir presumptive (1577); Hercule-François, in his capacity as overlord of the Low Countries (1582); Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, favourite of Queen Elizabeth of England, in his position as Governor-General of the Northern Netherlands (1585-86); Elizabeth Stuart, daughter of King James VI/I of Scotland and England (1613); Marie de Médicis, the exiled Queen Mother of France (1638); and, finally, Henrietta Maria, Queen Consort of England, Scotland, and Ireland (1642).*

(2) *To what extent did gender determine the diplomatic agency and reception of my travelling delegates?*

(3) *What archival, library, or museum collections do you recommend on the topic of my research?*

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What other topics within court studies are of interest to you?

I am very interested in scholarship on the significance of race, gender, and sexual identity among early modern European court societies. These topics have until recently not been part of the academic mainstream, while they offer a fascinating insight into the colonial and patriarchal dominance of courts in Europe and the exclusionary, and often violent, effect they had on subaltern and other marginalised individuals, both at home and overseas. I am co-editing a book volume on a related topic with Alexander Robinson and Marc W. S. Jaffré that will appear as *Marginalized Voices and Figures in French Festival Culture, 1500-1800* with Brepols in 2023.

If you could live a day at a historical court, which court and what ceremony would you like to be part of?

I would probably like to spend a day as a European (maybe Dutch or French?) ambassador at the Mughal court of the Muslim Emperor Akbar I (r. 1556-1605). Akbar's court was one of the most welcoming and inclusive in the world, respectful as it was of individuals from various religious backgrounds. I hope to be able to attend one of Akbar's religious disputes in his Ibādat Khāna or 'House of Worship' at Fatehpur Sikri, India, which was open to Muslims, Hindus, Zoroastrians, and Christians alike.

What publication(s) would you recommend to members of the Society for Court Studies?

One recent book that I warmly recommend is Olivette Otele's *African Europeans: An Untold History* (London: Hurst & Company, 2020). Otele demonstrates that (court) life in Europe was far more ethnically diverse, and maintained more diplomatic contacts with the African continent, than previously assumed. Another recent monograph that I would like to recommend is Nadine Akkerman's *Elizabeth Stuart: Queen of Hearts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). Akkerman studies the remarkable (court) life of the Stuart princess, one of the protagonists of my current research, while also pointing out how she has often been written out of (male-dominated) historiography.

You can get in touch with Dr Van Leuven via email (b.van.leuven@hum.leidenuniv.nl) or Twitter/Instagram ([@bramvanleuven](https://www.instagram.com/bramvanleuven)).

Want to take part in or want to recommend an individual or collaborative project for the Court Studies Spotlight? To register your interest/recommendation or for more information, send an email to europe@courtstudies.org.



(The joyous entry of Hercule-François, Duke of Alençon and Anjou, into Antwerp on 19 February 1582 (Monogrammist MHVH, 1582-1600). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-4867.)