Careers at the courts: Noblewomen in the service of Swedish and Russian royals, c. 1750–1850

Johanna Ilmakunna

University of Helsinki, Finland

In early modern and modern Europe, many noblewomen were occupied with various tasks in royal households. The key concepts for understanding the early modern European nobility are the ideas of duty and service. Serving the sovereign was an obligation, a responsibility which was not to be avoided. For a noblewoman, the most obvious way to gain dutiful aristocratic agency was to act as a lady-in-waiting at the royal or imperial court. For some women a career at court was a heavy duty, whereas for others it was a pleasure. Courts formed an important political and social arena throughout Europe; women were an essential part of this sociability and the power structures of royal and imperial courts.

At court, an ambitious noblewoman could engage in political or cultural activities and act in her own right on an institutional level despite her gender. Moreover, an office at court could also offer noblewomen the possibility of a career with their own income and prospects for advancement. Several ladies-in-waiting kept their occupation for decades, and their careers survived changes of rulers, successions and coup d’états. Ladies-in-waiting increased the power and magnificence of the sovereign; they represented the royal lineage through their service and their social connections within and outside the royal court.

Noblewomen in service at Swedish royal and Russian imperial court

This article aims to discuss ladies-in-waiting and other noblewomen in the service of the Swedish royal court and Russian imperial court in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, c. 1750–1850.¹ The focus is on the hundred-year period before industrialisation and on how an emerging bourgeois society created new employment for upper-class women. Until the late nineteenth century, noblewomen had limited possibilities to act in public and work for their living. Societal change was not the same in every country and Russia for one followed behind other countries in regard to changes affecting the lives of noblewomen. In late nineteenth-century Sweden, a career at court was no longer the only professional opening for noblewomen, but in Russia it was necessary to pursue a career of aristocratic women until the 1917 revolution.²

In the societies of ancien régime, the world of the court, ‘ce pays-ci’,³ was not only a professional arena for nobles, both men and women, but also a fundamental part of the culture, ideology and worldview of the nobility. Hence many noblewomen did not even consider professions other than a career at court, unless they married and concentrated on the role of wife and mother. Rapid social changes during the nineteenth century, including the evolving separation of home, work and leisure was not an issue for noblewomen appointed as maids of honour or ladies-in-waiting in the same way as for women at other levels of society.⁴ High position at court and wealth offered noblewomen possibilities to act in public, for instance through philanthropy. For example, the Russian maid of honour and personal friend of the empress Alexandra Fyodorovna, the immensely rich Aurora Karamzina (née Stjernwall), used her social rank and fortune explicitly for philanthropic work in nineteenth-century Russia and especially in her native home of Finland.⁵

There have been many studies of philanthropic work in early modern and modern Europe, of women’s professionalisation during the nineteenth century, and of upper-class women’s opportunities in the late nineteenth-century labour market.⁶ Less has been written about noblewomen’s occupations in the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century. The important role of aristocratic women and their actual cultural and political possibilities at royal and imperial courts during the period c.1750–1850 is widely acknowledged,⁷ yet their occupations at court have seldom been studied as careers and work.⁸

Examples of noblewomen whose attitude to their career at court could be characterised as professional are drawn here from Swedish and Russian courts. Most of the women who made a career at court came from the highest aristocracy in both countries. However, the royal court in Stockholm and the imperial court in St. Petersburg also offered possibilities to daughters of the provincial nobility. Aristocratic women considered court offices as their privilege, especially those of lady-in-waiting or mistress of the robes, which only married women could hold. The highest-ranking offices were reserved for aristocratic women but short-term offices, such as the prolific role of maid of honour, could be held by those from less grand families, thereby opening the palace door to less privileged young women.

Noblewomen in the structure of the courts in Sweden and Russia

Until the early eighteenth century, the Swedish royal court was organised after the German pattern, which meant that the court was relatively small in size and less hierarchical than the seventeenth-century French or Spanish courts.⁹ From the 1740s, the court followed French court ideals, especially in regard of cultural activities, but the economy, size and structure of court offices continued to follow the German system. The new Crown Prince of Sweden, Adolph Fredrick of Holstein-Gottorp, and Crown Princess Louisa Ulrika of Prussia, chose as the marshal of the court Count Carl Gustaf Tessin, former Swedish ambassador in Paris and acquainted with French royalties, aristocracy and court life.¹⁰ In Russia, the westernisation
of the nobility and the court during the eighteenth century led the way to court etiquette, hierarchy, clothing and practices taken likewise from the French court. Peter the Great's sartorial revolution in Russia, and changes in court life made by Catherine II, born a German princess, opened Russia to European, francophile, cosmopolitan court culture.\textsuperscript{11} During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, language, lifestyle and other practices of the nobility and royal or imperial courts were French-influenced throughout continental Europe, a phenomenon which made the social life of the aristocrats and nobles accessible to their peers everywhere.

In the eighteenth century, the political and military power of Russia strengthened in Europe, and after the Napoleonic wars its status as a power state was indisputable. The power of Russia was manifested both to the foreign powers and its own subjects, especially through the Russian nobility - who, during previous centuries, had been important in the many shifts of power and coups d'\'état typical of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Russia.\textsuperscript{12} The political power of the Swedish sovereign, however, was relatively weak during the period called by contemporaries the Age of Liberty (1719-1772).\textsuperscript{13} The absolutist reigns of King Gustav III and King Gustav IV Adolf (1772-1809) were characterised by the growing importance of the ceremonial role of the court.\textsuperscript{14} Hence political intrigues were constant between the royals, the court and the ruling classes when sovereigns with loyal courtiers tried to aggrandise the political power of the ruler. In Sweden, the splendour of royal manifestations of power as well as the privileges of the nobility diminished throughout the nineteenth century alongside the growth of the bourgeoisie. It has been argued that the Swedish royal family became more bourgeois during the nineteenth century because of the increasing societal valuing of domesticity and family life over ceremonial public life.\textsuperscript{15}

In Russia, however, the political role and thus magnificent representation of the imperial court was strong until the end of the nineteenth century when Emperor Nicholas II withdrew from official life to St. Petersburg.

A career at the royal court, though much sought after, was an option only for a small group of noblewomen. Compared to other European courts in Versailles, Vienna and Berlin, the Swedish royal court and Russian imperial court were relatively small during the eighteenth century, and could thus offer careers only to a small number of noblewomen. For instance, in the late-eighteenth century, at the court of Queen Sofia Magdalena of Sweden, a chief mistress of the robes, a mistress of the robes, and nine ladies-in-waiting were appointed, but no maids of honour.\textsuperscript{16}

The offices were mostly for life, which emphasises the exclusive nature of a court career. In Russia, the number of courtiers increased substantially during the reign of Catherine II,\textsuperscript{17} to be increased again in the course of the nineteenth century when the Russian imperial court had approximately 1,500 noble officeholders.\textsuperscript{18} A large number of the maids of honour at the imperial court (in the early nineteenth century about 150) were maids of honour 'in town' (demoiselles d’honneur de la ville) whose position was mostly ceremonial and given as an honour to the father, whereas the number of the maids of honour 'in entourage' varied from one to five depending on whether the dowager empress was alive.\textsuperscript{19} Also a number of ladies-in-waiting (dame d’honneur) without duties were nominated as a reward and honour for women based on their merits. The number of ladies-in-waiting varied in the eighteenth century, but in the early nineteenth century Emperor Nicholas I decreed their number to be thirty-six.\textsuperscript{20}

The ladies-in-waiting did not change when the new ruler was crowned. If the dowager queen or dowager empress lived, she kept her own court and her courtiers. After the death of the dowager queen or the dowager empress, the ladies-in-waiting either retired or continued in the service of the new queen or empress. They transmitted knowledge of the royal family, ceremonies and traditions to new consorts who often came from abroad and had to leave their personal courtiers behind when marrying into a foreign royal or imperial family.

Qualities of a maid of honour, a future lady-in-waiting

In order to achieve the inner and outer appearance of a maid of honour or lady-in-waiting – indeed, the appearance of a lady – nobility educated their daughters with great care. In Sweden, until the early nineteenth century, most of the aristocratic families educated their daughters at home.\textsuperscript{21} During the nineteenth century it became more usual for the nobility to send their daughters to boarding schools.\textsuperscript{22} In Russia, education of the daughters of high-ranking noble families became a responsibility of the state when Catherine II established Russia’s first school for noble girls, Smolny Institute, in 1764. Her goal was to take society’s westernisation further in educating girls well.\textsuperscript{23} Girls were future mothers, who were in their turn responsible for the upbringing of the next generation of Russian nobles for State service at court, for the army, or for employment in state bureaucracy.

In aristocratic culture, the role of the mother was undeniably essential in passing the knowledge of the world of the court from generation to generation. The transmitting of social knowledge and skills in high society were mothers’ and other female relatives’ responsibility, whereas fathers were responsible for the formal education of children – both boys and girls. Young girls learned at an early age how to behave, please and act in various social events, such as visits, balls, assemblies, masquerades or in spa resorts and at country houses. In aristocratic circles, girls’ education in conversation (mostly in French), in dancing, drawing or sewing, as well as their moral and ethical education, aimed for the gracious, modest, tasteful behaviour and aristocratic sociability essential at court.\textsuperscript{24}

It was not unusual that the daughters of aristocratic families became familiar with the royal court from their childhood. An appointment, especially an appointment that continued for several years, was most often available for young girls whose parents or relatives had close connections to the royal or imperial court. Young noble girls were appointed as maids of honour more often in honour of their parents or other relatives than because of their own qualities. However, personal qualities of the maids of honour should not be underestimated. In a world
where birth, politeness, sensibility, wit, grace and beauty were highly valued, personal qualities of these young girls helped them in one or other of the two possible paths for aristocratic women in this period: finding a suitable match in marriage, or combining such a match with a career at court. While some of the noblewomen who made a career at court never married, most of them did, for marriage aided them in ascending the court hierarchy.

In the lives of young noblewomen, presentation at court became a ritual transition from the world of home to the world of court. After presentation at court, young ladies had entered high society and left childhood and adolescence behind them. Some of them soon married and moved to the estates of their spouses, while some of them were appointed as maids of honour for a longer period. Connections and social status as well as personal qualities were required before a young lady could be appointed at court. However, in some cases young ladies from families with lower status and position were appointed as a supreme favour to the girl’s family.

Work and duty

Genteel women’s occupations at royal courts varied according to which household (king’s, queen’s, emperor’s, empress’s or other members of royal and imperial families) they belonged; to the season; in which of the royal palaces the court was sojourning; to the number of ceremonies (for instance coronations, victory celebrations, balls, banquets, marriages, funerals or christenings); and to the personality of the sovereign as well as to the personal qualities or skills of female courtiers. It can be argued that in the history of royal courts the most important task of the courtiers was consolidating and manifesting the power of the sovereign through sumptuous ceremonies and lavish everyday court life. However, women’s tasks and duties at court can and should be characterised as work because they were very much seen as such by their contemporaries. Ladies-in-waiting had generally more tasks than maids of honour and their duties had more the character of work than maids of honours’ duties.

Ladies-in-waiting had many duties, of which accumulating and manifesting the splendour of the court and sovereign was perhaps the most visible. In addition, the everyday duties of the ladies-in-waiting varied from helping with correspondence, engaging in conversation, reading to the royals, playing cards with them or accompanying them on promenades, to the care of and choosing of jewellery for various occasions, or organising queens’ or empresses’ philanthropic work.

Ladies-in-waiting dealt with everyday practical issues and served as companions to the female royals but they were also important figures in the daily life at court. The life at court offered courtiers ceremonies and festivities, sociability and culture, intrigues and quiet days as well as a lot of travelling between different royal residences. Court was a stage on which both married and unmarried noble ladies could act for various purposes. At the eighteenth-century Russian court, for instance, the intrigues around the sovereign and the succession played an important part for the aristocratic families who had their own favourites among the members of the imperial family. Ladies-in-waiting who came from aristocratic families competed with each other for status, favours, political power and offices for their husbands, brothers and other relatives.

At court both in Russia and in Sweden, courtiers wore court dresses that distinguished their rank and social position. In Russia, the sartorial ranking was more nuanced and more visible than in Sweden, where all ladies-in-waiting and maids of honour wore similar gowns. At the Russian imperial court, the colours, cut and embroidery of the court dresses distinguished the rank of the ladies. In Sweden, ladies-in-waiting were regarded as the highest-ranking women in the country. They had admission to the queen’s apartment at all times and all of them were present at public audiences and at ambassadors’ audiences, which can be seen as a direct mark of their rank. The chief mistress of the robes and the mistress of the robes, the highest-ranking women at court, had the power to introduce anyone to the queen who wished to meet her. They also took care of the train or mantle in
ceremonies, although one of the queen’s chamberlains carried it. The ladies-in-waiting on duty followed the queen wherever she went, saw to her needs and her accessories, and informed male courtiers like the lord chamberlain as to when the queen needed them. Ladies-in-waiting arranged balls or suppers for the queen, they organised illuminations, music and dances. Compared to male courtiers, ladies-in-waiting and maids of honour were fewer in number at the Swedish court. They numbered only eleven, of which the chief mistress of the robes and the mistress of the robes and three ladies-in-waiting were on duty at the same time. The queen had also between ten and twelve male courtiers at her court, whereas the court of the king was distinctly larger.26

In Russia, young women who were selected to serve the empress as maids of honour ‘in entourage’ were chosen with care. One of the most important qualities was discretion, because nothing about the imperial family was to be discussed outside the palaces. The maids of honour ‘in entourage’ served the empress from morning to night and were on duty every other day. They participated in the daily life of the court, receptions, banquets, opera and theatre performances. On the emperor’s and empress’s various visits in Russia and to other countries, at least one maid of honour followed the empress everywhere and helped her in all possible ways. Two important tasks entrusted to maids of honour were the empress’s wide correspondence and taking care of the empress’s jewellery.27 However, during the nineteenth century, dozens of maids of honour did not have any official role at the Russian court. The maids of honour appointed from the noble families based in the Grand Duchy of Finland were obligated to serve only when the imperial family was sojourning in Finland.28 This made the imperial appointment even more clearly a position of honour.

The hierarchy at court gave women substantial power. As mentioned, at the Swedish court the chief mistress of the robes, and in her absence the mistress of the robes, could choose who was presented to the queen and when. The chief mistress and mistress of the robes were on duty at all times, whereas nine ladies-in-waiting served three at a time on a three months rota. The ladies-in-waiting were allowed to organise their time of service themselves.29 This gave them possibilities to better arrange family life or duties towards their husband’s estate outside the court.

Bonds of friendship were frequently tied between royals and mistresses of the robes or ladies-in-waiting. Most likely these female friendships offered support and solace in the court’s hierarchical world where both courtiers and royals were rarely alone and most of the time were controlled by strict etiquette – notably strict at the Russian imperial court in the nineteenth century. Friendship between Countess Sophie Piper (née von Fersen) and Duchess Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotta (later Queen Charlotta), from the 1770s until Sophie Piper’s death in 1816, is an example of this kind of mutual intellectual bond.30 Countess Piper already knew the duchess in 1774, when the countess participated in the entourage, led by her mother Countess von Fersen, that escorted the young Holsteinian princess to Sweden to be married to Prince Carl (later King Karl XIII), King Gustav III’s brother. Sophie Piper was appointed as maid of honour at the duchess’s court before her marriage in 1777. Later, Countess Piper acted as chief mistress of the robes at the duchess’s court.31

Salary and remuneration

The courtiers in most European courts received lodging, generous presents, a salary and other benefits in compensation for their services. Through emblems and luxurious presents, the maids of honour and ladies-in-waiting made their status at court visible to all. At the same time, these objects can be seen as part of the monarch’s use of symbolic power.

In Sweden, maids of honour were entitled to a salary, apartment or other lodging in the royal palace, candles, firewood, food and a clothing allowance. All of this gave them independence from parents and family. Furthermore, the prestige and economic independence, even if relative, gave young noblewomen genuine possibilities to consider a career at court as an option for a lifetime.

In mid-eighteenth-century Sweden, maids of honour had a yearly salary of 400 silver dalers, while ladies of the bedchamber had 600. The salary was relatively high, and can be compared to the salaries of noblemen serving at court: masters of the hunt had 1,000 silver dalers a year and pages had 140. Comparison with the pages – young noblemen often from families with limited social and economic resources – reveals the high position of the maids of honour in the hierarchy of the courts and royal households. The mistresses of the robes and ladies-in-waiting had a high salary, equivalent to the highest male courtiers: 900 silver dalers for a mistress of the robes.32 The ladies-in-waiting also had an apartment or rooms in the royal palace, meals and carriages.33

At the eighteenth-century Russian court, the situation was quite the opposite, for ladies-in-waiting did not get any monetary compensation for their service. Maids of honour got a salary of 600 rubles a year and ladies of the bedchamber got 1,000. Minor maids of honour got an annual salary of 200 rubles, while the pages’ salary was between 110 and 140.34 In the nineteenth century, noblewomen appointed to the imperial court had, however, a relatively high salary even though the imperial family sought not to reveal salaries to aristocratic circles in which the costs and benefits of a court appointment were constantly calculated.35

By the early nineteenth century, nomination to maid of honour at the Russian imperial court had become part of the diverse hierarchical rewarding system of imperial Russia.36 In the 1830s, Aurora Stjernvall, a young Finnish noblewoman, was appointed as a maid of honour to the empress at the imperial Russian court. Again, the appointment of a young lady was in honour of her late father, who had been the governor of the Vyborg Province, and her stepfather, Senator Carl Johan Wallence. However, Aurora Stjernvall’s personal qualities also played a key role in her appointment. Later she became a life-long personal friend of the Empress Alexandra Fyodorovna and was rewarded with some of the highest homages of imperial Russia. In 1835 and 1836, Aurora Stjernvall served as maid of honour

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'in entourage'. In 1836, she married the fantastically rich Prince Paul Demidov, mainly because the empress strongly advised her to accept the proposal.37

At the nineteenth-century Russian court, the majority of maids of honour were so-called maids of honour 'in town'. They did not have a salary and lived at home, attending the court ceremonies when called upon. The maids of honour who served the empress twenty-four hours a day were called 'in entourage'. They lived at imperial palaces and were entitled to a salary but the salary was not sufficient for the aristocratic lifestyle they required.38

An appointment at court gave noblewomen possibilities to have their own income and own space, even though sometimes they had to wait for their salaries for years and the apartments in royal residences were cramped. Other ways of rewarding noblewomen's service at court were possibly even more significant. Expensive jewels, elegant boxes, fans or a bigger apartment were remunerations that made the status and royal grace of a lady-in-waiting visible to everybody at court. Furthermore, personal friendships with rulers and members of royal and imperial households can also be considered a reward in the world of courtiers, even though the friendship probably seldom blossomed through deliberate calculation.

Admission to a court career and the length of the career

In Sweden, Baroness Charlotte Sparre entered her career at court in 1744. She was in the Swedish delegation that travelled to Berlin in order to accompany Princess Louise, the future crown princess of Sweden, to her new homeland. Count Carl Gustaf Tessin, former ambassador in Paris, and close relative to Charlotte Sparre, led the delegation. Princess Louise had to give up her Prussian maids of honour after her arrival in Sweden because of their connections to the Prussian court. She chose new ones amongst the Swedish aristocracy. Charlotte Sparre was nominated as a maid of honour in honour of Carl Gustaf Tessin, whom Lovisa Ulrika (as was her name in Swedish) regarded highly. Moreover, Charlotte Sparre's personal qualities played a key role in the nomination. She had spent a few years in Paris, where she and her younger brother lived with the Swedish ambassador Tessin and his wife (née Sparre). In Paris, the Tessins and Charlotte Sparre were acquainted with the royal court and Parisian society, where she was much admired for her esprit and grace. Charlotte Sparre also had high birth and polished manners, much valued in French-speaking cosmopolitan aristocratic culture. For her, nomination as a maid of honour was the beginning of a long career at court.39

Maids of honour were generally between seventeen and twenty years of age and were appointed until they married (marriage being a usual occurrence). Because of the marriages, the turnover of the maids of honour was noticeable, while the ladies-in-waiting were generally appointed for their lifetime. This led to a situation in which new opportunities for ladies-in-waiting opened rarely. In Sweden, during the 1740s and 1750s at the royal household of the Swedish Crown Princess Lovisa Ulrika, and from the 1770s to 1790s at the royal households of Princess Sofia Albertina and Duchess Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotte (later Queen Charlotte), several maids of honour as well as ladies-in-waiting were in employment. From the 1770s to the 1790s, Queen Sofia Magdalena had at her household only married ladies-in-waiting and one lady of the bedchamber.40 Female royals had in their households both female and male courtiers, whereas male royals had only male courtiers.

A possible career at court could nonetheless be occasionally destroyed if royal favourites turned from grace to disgrace. For instance, in the autumn of 1752, the maid of honour Countess Ulrika Strömfelt left her position because she was not content with Queen Lovisa Ulrika's and maid of honour Countess Ulrika Eleonora von Dübên's behaviour towards her.41 Presumably she resigned for political reasons since the queen's and Countess von Dübên's political ambitions differed from hers. Countess Strömfelt, unlike Countess von Dübên, did not support the politically ambitious queen in her desire to increase the power of the sovereign.

The sense of duty, service and obligation were explicit for the courtiers and had an impact on the choices noblewomen made concerning their appointments or careers at court. In the mid-nineteenth century, Countess Mina Bonde was asked to accept the appointment of chief mistress of the robes in Queen Lovisa's household. She was at the time running the family estate and wanted personally to dedicate herself to this and to family life. However, her sense of duty was even stronger and she accepted the queen's request. The nature of Mina Bonde's appointment can be seen as exceptional because she could herself decide when to work at court and when to dedicate herself to her family. When not at court, she delegated her duties to the ladies-in-waiting.42 Normally, the chief mistress and mistress of the robes were on duty at all times. Noblewomen who made a career at court in the second half of the eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth century were all married. There were, however, a few maids of honour who never married but because of their personal relations to royals stayed on in their court careers throughout their lives. As married women, most of the ladies at court had children. In many cases, the husbands of ladies-in-waiting also held an office at court. When on duty, ladies-in-waiting inhabited royal palaces where they had own apartments, whereas their children and husband, if not courtiers on duty at court, resided elsewhere.43

At royal and imperial courts, an ambitious lady could work for issues she was interested in or found of importance: whether political, social or cultural ambitions; a sense of duty to the sovereign and royals; helping family members to get good positions at court, in civil administration, or in the army; or, most important of all, to make good marriage matches for her sons and daughters. In Sweden in the second half of the eighteenth century, ladies-in-waiting such as sisters Countess von Höpken and Countess Löwenhielm (née von Fersen), performed at court in opera, theatre and concert productions and were, according to contemporaries, skilled actors and singers.44 In nineteenth-century Russia and Finland, dame d'honneur Aurora Karamzina used the immeasurable
fortune she inherited from her first husband Paul Demidov, one of the richest aristocrats in Russia, to give to charity. She founded schools, hospitals, orphanages and nursing homes. She also founded the Deaconess Institution in Helsinki.45

Neither at the Swedish nor at the Russian court was the appointment of courtiers hereditary. Still, most of the female courtiers had relatives at court at some point in time. In the eighteenth century, one out of five maids of honour or ladies-in-waiting at the Russian imperial court was married to a courtier, two out of five had a sister at court, and one out of ten had another relative at court. Thus, two out of three of the Russian female courtiers had a relative at court.46 At the early-nineteenth-century Swedish court, a lady-in-waiting, Baroness Hedvig Amalia Charlotta Möllersvärd (née Klinckowström) was a daughter of a marshal of the court and a lady-in-waiting. Her uncle and his wife, as well as three of their daughters, held an office at court. In addition, her aunt Sophie Piper had been mistress of the robes at the court of the Duchess Hedvig Elisabet Charlotta, later Queen Charlotta.47 When keeping in mind that at the Swedish court there were nine ladies-in-waiting, of which only three were on duty at the same time, the careers at court were held in an exclusive circle which only occasionally admitted new members in the form of maids of honour, from which the future ladies-in-waiting were selected.

In the late-eighteenth-century Swedish court, deceased ladies-in-waiting were buried either with pompous ceremonies dictated by the rigid court etiquette or quietly in the presence of only the nearest family of the deceased lady, depending on the wishes of her family.48 Chief mistress of the robes in Queen Sofia Magdalena’s household, Countess Ulrika Eleonora Sparre (née Strömfelt), died in April 1780. Born in 1724, she had spent her whole life in court society. Her mother had also been chief mistress of the robes. She was herself twelve years old when she was appointed as maid of honour in the household of Queen Ulrika Eleonora. Later on, at the court of Queen Lovisa Ulrika, she became a lady of the bedchamber and finally, in 1777, she was appointed, at the age of 53, to the position of chief mistress of the robes in the household of Queen Sofia Magdalena. The countess had thus served three queens over a period of 44 years.49 Countess Sparre’s funeral was stately and sumptuous. It was designed by King Gustav III, who had great talent in making ceremonies and theatre for all kinds of occasions, felicitous or lugubrious – as Count Axel von Fersen noted dryly in his memoirs.50 Despite the magnificent funeral ceremony, the countess was already forgotten by the next day when the king appointed a new chief mistress of the robes, Countess von Fersen (née Sparre), and a new mistress of the robes, Countess Piper (née Ekeblad).

Similar careers can be found at the Russian imperial court where politically unstable times, palace revolutions and coups d’état might have shaken even the position of the courtiers. However, this was not the case, and the eighteenth-century courtiers formed a relatively stable group in the middle of the political disturbances. Princess Marie Yurievna Cherkasskaya, Countess Avdotiya Ivanovna Chernysheva, Countess Praskoviya Yurievna Saltykova and Countess Anna Alekseevna Tatischeva were ladies-in-waiting both at the court of Empress Anna Ivanovna in the 1730s and at the court of Empress Elizabeth in the 1740s and 1750s.51

Significance of the court career for noblewomen, c. 1750–1850

The royal court was central to the lives of European nobles and aristocrats in many ways. The court career of a noblewoman could begin in adolescence and continue until old age if death did not intervene. Some of the maids of honour were appointed as ladies-in-waiting directly after wedding ceremonies organised and paid for by the court, while some ladies interrupted their career at court for a few years after getting married and having children, only to continue it when family duties could be put aside. Generally, for female courtiers in the late eighteenth century, a career at court came before obligations to family life, whereas the growing importance of the private sphere and family in the nineteenth century had an impact on such careers. This led to the growing importance of maids of honour for aristocratic families, particularly visible at the Russian imperial court. The daughters of aristocratic families could serve a relatively short period, sometimes no more than six months, as maids of honour at court, then achieve enormous social and cultural capital in the form of a suitable marriage, connections and personal reverence.

Especially for women belonging to the highest aristocracy, the court offered a public or half-public sphere where they had an official position and prospects to use their social capital in various different ways chosen by themselves. Some of the ladies-in-waiting were engaged in political and social life, some in intellectual or artistic interests. For instance, in Russia, Princess Yekaterina Dashkova (née Vorontsova), lady-in-waiting to Empress Catherine II, was one of her era’s most prominent femmes de lettres, esteemed by Voltaire, Diderot, Benjamin Franklin and David Garrick. She was appointed as the director of the Imperial Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1782 and as the first president of the Russian Academy in 1783.52

From maid of honour, to the chief mistress of the robes, a noblewoman’s career at court could continue for decades and terminate in the last manifestation of both royal and noble status and female agency at court: a grand funeral. Whilst many of the ladies-in-waiting who made a long career at court resigned before they were too old to maintain their duties, many of them were ageing at court together with the royals to whose households they had been appointed as young girls. Obviously, some of the ladies-in-waiting died young and unexpectedly.

The Swedish royal court and the Russian imperial court were hierarchical, traditional and public spheres of power, favouritism, etiquette and strict social order. During a century of rapid social and political change, revolutions and wars, the court society persisted in which aristocratic ladies-in-waiting deliberately maintained the exclusive air of the court, held offices for decades and passed them on to the next generation. The turmoil of the early twentieth century changed everything: peacefully and gradually in Sweden; brutally and dramatically in Russia.

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Notes

1. In this article, the concept of ‘royal’ is used to refer to both royal and imperial courts. Likewise the concepts of ‘king’ and ‘queen’ include their equivalent Russian concepts ‘emperor’ and ‘empress’ or ‘tsar’ and ‘tzarina’ if not otherwise stated.


3. William R. Newton, La petite cour: Servites et serviteurs à la Cour de Versailles au XVIIIe siècle (Paris, Fayard, 2006), 12. Newton criticises very rightly the concept of the ‘court society’ as being too inflexible to describe an institution that was more a world than a society; see also Norbert Elias, The Society of (Stockholm, Basil Blackwell, 1983).


8. Excellent accounts on this are Newton, La petite cour and Reynolds, Aristocratic Women, 188-219; see also Duindam, Vienna and Versailles. Even though Duindam examines who attended court, offices they held and courtiers’ daily activities, he sees the courtiers more as an entity of royal or imperial household than as individuals who made a career at court as office holders.


10. On the new, more French, court see Olof Jägeskiiöld, Lovisa Ulrika (Stockholm, Wahlström & Widstrand, 1945), 75-84.


12. de Madariaga, ‘The Russian Nobility’, passim; Wortman, Scenarios of Power, passim.


14. Mikael Alm, Kungsrödt i elfte timmen: Språk och självbild i det gustavianska envåldets legitimitetskamp 1772-1809 (Stockholm, Atlantis, 2002); Henrika Tandefelt, Konsten att härskas: Gustaf III inför sina undersåtar (Helsingfors and Stockholm, Svenska litteraturäskapet in Finland and Atlanta, 2008).


and Espoo, Otava and Espoo City Museum, 2006).


23. Engel, Women, the family and public life, 307.


29. Överkammaren berjens journal 1778-1826, 428.


34. Boltonova, ‘The Russian Imperial Court in the 18th century’.


36. Ulla Tillander-Godenhielm, The Russian Imperial Award System during the Reign of Nicholas II, 1894-1917 (Helsinki, Suomen muinaismuistoyhdistys, 2005).


41. Axel von Fersen, Riksrådet och fältmarsealken m. m. Grefvwe Axel von Fersens Historiska Skrifter, 2 (Stockholm, Nordsted, 1868), 48.

42. Rundquist, Blått blod och livjevita händer, 154-8.


46. Boltonova, ‘The Russian Imperial Court in the 18th century’.


50. Axel von Fersen, Riksrådet och fältmarsealken m. m. Grefvwe Axel von Fersens Historiska Skrifter, 4 (Stockholm, Nordsted, 1869), 220.

51. Boltonova, ‘The Russian Imperial Court in the 18th century’: Long careers were typical also at other European courts. For instance, in the early Victorian court in Britain, the average appointment of ladies-in-waiting lasted for twenty years. Some ladies had forty-year careers and retired in their seventies and eighties or died in office, as often was the case also in Sweden. See Reynolds, Aristocratic Women and Political Society, 193-5.