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Robert J. Knecht, *Hero or Tyrant? Henry III, King of France, 1574-89*. Farnham and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2014. xiii + 356 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, glossary, and index. ISBN 978-4724-2930-8.

Review by Mark Konnert, University of Calgary.

Henry III (1574-89) is without a doubt the most maligned French ruler of the early modern period and may also be the most misunderstood. That is certainly the message of Robert Knecht's new biography of the king. As the author points out, the last English language biography of the last Valois monarch was published in 1858. There have been several French biographies in the twentieth century, including that of Pierre Chevallier in 1985, as well as more specialized studies of various aspects of the reign by Mark Potter, Monique Chatenet, Nicolas le Roux, Keith Cameron, and others.[1] The avowed aim of Professor Knecht's book, therefore, is to present to English-speaking readers a new biography of this fascinating ruler, taking into account the more specialized research that has shaped historians' understanding of the period and the man.

Like no other king of the early modern period, the historical reputation of Henry III has suffered from the contempt of many of his subjects and the political agenda of his successors. Vilified during his life as an effeminate fop and homosexual, a devil-worshipper, a heretic, and a murderer, he was the first king of France to be assassinated since Merovingian times. His successor was Henry IV (1589-1610), the first king of the Bourbon dynasty, and he and his successors saw no advantage in burnishing Henry III's legacy. Indeed, just the opposite was the case. In works published in the several centuries after his death, Henry III was frequently used as a foil to extol the virtues of the Bourbons.

This is the picture that this biography seeks to correct, and there can indeed be few as qualified to undertake the task as Professor Knecht, one of the leading English-language historians of sixteenth-century France, most relevantly in his fine biography of Francis I, Henry III's grandfather.[2] The Henry III that emerges from these pages is an intelligent, conscientious, and dutiful ruler, although these qualities were more than counterbalanced by his flaws. He "lacked tact and vision" (p. 315) and was "moody, introspective, proud, vindictive, and stubborn" (p. 119). Most importantly, he was prone to catastrophic political blunders. The most notable of these, and the one which led to his death, was his decision to have murdered his two chief opponents, the duc de Guise and his brother the cardinal de Guise, in 1588.

Throughout the book, the more lurid of his opponents' criticisms are soundly refuted. Henry was an impeccably devout Catholic, who as a young man had earned a reputation on the battlefield as a Catholic hero. As king he both sponsored and took part in penitential processions and founded a Hieronymite confraternity at Vincennes. Although he had to swear to observe Protestant liberties as the elected king of Poland, as king of France, he had no dearer wish than to restore religious unity to the kingdom. Despite his historical reputation, he was clearly not homosexual (p. 136), and in fact had a number of affairs (with women) and enjoyed the complete devotion of his queen, Louise de Vaudémont. Far from the pleasure-loving sybarite often portrayed by his enemies, he was "a serious-minded and painstaking monarch" (p. 315) who "loved deskwork" (p. 129). He was, or would like to have been, a reforming monarch. The Ordinances of Blois (1579) were a landmark of legal and political reform, even if their

provisions were only haphazardly carried out. He sent teams of commissioners into the provinces to report on conditions and summoned an Assembly of Notables to consider reforms.

As with so much during his reign, however, the civil wars worked against his reform agenda. His chief political legacy lay in altering the nature of the royal court, and thus of the relations between the monarch and his subjects. He installed a more elaborate ceremonial and protocol, one that was “more consistent with his exalted view of monarchy” (p. 192) than the openness and relatively free access that had previously been the practice. During his reign, the court became more static, spending more time in and around Paris than it had under his more peripatetic predecessors. This both reduced the number of subjects who had personally seen their king in an age that still valued the personal aspects of monarchy and at the same time exposed the king and his court to the critical eyes of opinion makers in Paris much more consistently than before.

And yet, numerous obstacles—some of which can be laid at his feet, some not—frustrated his designs. It was his misfortune to rule a kingdom riven by fratricidal civil war and bitter noble factionalism. As Pierre de L’Estoile, the prolific Parisian memoirist put it, “he would have been a very good prince if only he had encountered a good century” (p. 318). The lack of an heir was also significant, perhaps even more significant that Professor Knecht allows. It cast his meddling and feckless younger brother François, duc d’Anjou into the spotlight and constrained Henry’s freedom of action. When Anjou died in 1584, the prospect of the Huguenot Henri de Navarre ascending the throne set France on the path to a dynastic and political crisis that perhaps no amount of political skill could have averted.

These were certainly trying times to rule France. Yet, Henry managed to make his task even more difficult through his own conduct. This fact is sometimes underplayed by Professor Knecht, perhaps in the desire to rescue the king from his voluble and numerous detractors. He may not have been homosexual, but his effusive and excessive devotion to an inner circle of male confidants, the *mignons*, certainly caused suspicion, as did his showering them with titles and wealth at the expense of a treasury that could hardly afford it. His love of fashion and elaborate clothing (even Professor Knecht admits he was a fop [p. 132]) as well as of “theatre, dancing, and other courtly pleasures” (p. 133) sat uneasily alongside his increasingly flamboyant religious devotion.

All of this may not have mattered, however, without his almost complete lack of political savvy, again sometimes discounted by Professor Knecht. The murder of the Guise brothers was only the most egregious and portentous of his blunders. He had on a number of occasions demonstrated to zealous Catholics that his promises could not be trusted. Faced with a Catholic League that threatened his authority, he first tried to coopt it, then capitulated to its demands in the Treaty of Nemours of 1585, which he then quickly showed that he had no intention of observing. Faced with the revolt in Paris of the Day of Barricades of May 1588, he once again knuckled under in the Edict of Union the following month but soon looked for ways to circumvent its restrictions.

Henry was often accused of being Machiavellian, in the more common sense of the term, and he was certainly familiar with that author’s works (p. 129). Yet it seems that he failed to observe the Florentine’s most important advice to princes: While it is certainly desirable to be loved by one’s subjects, it is more important to be feared, but above all a ruler must avoid his subjects’ contempt, a lesson that Henry seemingly never learned. In addition, the successful prince must adapt his conduct to the times. This was the essence of the *virtù* required to counteract the volatility of *fortuna*. Henry certainly ruled in circumstances that were difficult, if not impossible, but they were rendered even more trying by his own tone-deafness when it came to the art of politics and managing public perceptions.

This is a political biography in the classic style. It is organized chronologically for the most part, with more thematic chapters devoted to “Henry III, the Man” (chapter eight) and “The Court of Henry III” (chapter ten). We are taken from his birth and youth as the third son of Henry II and Catherine de

Medici (and thus unlikely ever to become king) through his battlefield exploits and his complicity in the St. Bartholomew Massacres, to his fleeting presence in Poland as elected king, and then his accession to the French throne with the death of his elder brother Charles IX in 1574. Approximately two thirds of the book is occupied with Henry's reign of fifteen years, culminating of course in his assassination in 1589 and the accession of Henry IV. There are no new revelations or stunning insights, but it would be unfair to expect them in a book whose avowed aim is to provide English-speaking readers with an up-to-date biography of a pivotal figure. It would be equally illogical to seek vast quantities of archival sources, since most of the relevant sources have long been published. These include not only collections of letters written by the major figures involved, including Henry himself, Catherine de Medici and Marguerite de Valois (respectively Henry's mother and sister), but the observations of contemporaries contained in diaries (Pierre de l'Estoile and Etienne Pasquier to name but two) and reports of foreign ambassadors. Although no archival sources are listed in the bibliography, some do show up in the footnotes. There are throughout the book lengthy and at times tedious accounts of receptions, festivities, and ceremonies, replete with detailed descriptions of clothes and decorations. There are also several minor errors of fact. Mary Tudor was not Philip II's first wife (p. 6), nor were Ptolemy's works "recently published" in the mid-sixteenth century (p. 127).

Despite the dichotomous title, the Henry III revealed by Professor Knecht was neither a hero nor a villain. He was human, with his own particular blend of virtues and faults, just like the rest of us. It was his misfortune, and that of his kingdom and subjects, that the time in which he lived and the circumstances in which he reigned served to obscure his virtues and magnify his flaws.

NOTE

[1] Pierre Chevallier, *Henri III, roi shakespearien* (Paris: Fayard, 1985). See David Potter, "Kingship in the Wars of Religion: The Reputation of Henri III of France," *European History Quarterly*, 25 (1995), 485-528; Monique Chatenet, "Henri III et le cérémonial de la cour," in Pierre-Gilles Girault and Mathieu Mercier, eds., *Fêtes et crimes à la Renaissance: la cour d'Henri III* (Paris: Somogy, 2010), 44-51; Nicolas Le Roux, *La faveur du roi: mignons et courtisans au temps des derniers Valois* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2001); Keith Cameron, *Henri III: A Maligned or Malignant King? Aspects of the Satirical Iconography, of Henri de Valois* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1978); and Robert Sauzet (ed.), *Henri III et son temps* (Paris: Vrin, 1992).

[2] Robert Knecht, *Renaissance Warrior and Patron: the Reign of Francis I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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