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H-France Review Vol. 19 (June 2019), No. 89

Una McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation at the Court of Catherine de Medici*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. x+224 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$140.25 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4724-2821-9; \$28.98 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-3156-0767-2

Review By Katherine Crawford, Vanderbilt University.

Una McIlvenna takes up one of those truisms that crop up about historical figures and uses her questions about it to alter our understanding of a crucial period of French history. The truism is that Catherine de' Medici deployed her *escadron volant* of beautiful ladies to seduce, manipulate, and sometimes poison men at the royal court. Picking up on how Catherine's abysmal reputation has been significantly redressed by several historians, McIlvenna explains how Catherine negotiated the complications of reputation and scandal around the ladies at court.[1] Situating the management of reputation in terms of the rise of public, printed criticism of the king and the royal court, McIlvenna's careful and textured excavations of scandalous episodes reveal much about how gender and power functioned in the tumultuous years of the Wars of Religion.

Much libelous printed material expressed and emanated from gender conflict. The visibility of Catherine and her (female) household threatened notions of gender propriety that rested on women being "less public and more domestic" (p. 37). The prominence of women in diplomatic contexts and in the religious conflicts between Protestant and Catholic factions combined with the participation of court women in networks of literary and artistic creation to unsettle these expectations. McIlvenna argues that legal professionals were the main culprits in the production of scandal literature and the men most threatened by prominent, powerful women.

McIlvenna argues her case by examining how Catherine, as a powerful woman, both succeeded and failed in managing matters of female reputation at court. Building on prosopographical studies of Catherine's household, McIlvenna reveals that the size, composition, and understanding of the management of the women at court has been misunderstood.[2] Catherine's household changed along with her status, growing when she became dauphine and queen, shrinking when Henry II died and she became queen dowager, and growing again when she became regent for Charles IX. The excessive numbers routinely reported about the *escadron volant* were exaggerated, and positions were determined by traditional patterns of royal patronage, rather than by physical attributes as the scandal literature suggested. Older women educated and disciplined younger ones in duties, comportment, and expectations. Catherine supervised, offering protection, but also criticism when her women stepped out of line. Catherine's management mostly worked, but not entirely. Some critics, especially Protestants

after 1572, blasted Catherine's women as sexual political pawns (p. 48). The prominence of female members of Catherine's household in court entertainments such as mock tournaments and lavish banquets made them vulnerable to charges of immorality and frivolity. Little imagination was required from legal professionals (suspicious of women in public) or Protestants (suspicious of the alleged architect of the St. Bartholomew's Day massacres) to turn routine government business into the stuff of scandal.

Detouring away from Catherine in Chapter 3, McIlvenna outlines the mechanisms and forms of the rising tide of scandalous literature. She notes the wide variety of forms (from long verses to crude anagrams), emphasizing that verses were easily memorized and adapted. Latin verses were likely the product of jurists interested at least in part in impressing colleagues with their wit and erudition. McIlvenna highlights an unusual form, the imaginary library, which was essentially a list of books that mocked the ostensible library owner. These lists revealed a core of themes around sexual debauchery, adultery, and misogyny, and their simple form could be updated with new scandalous claims. Sometimes objects of praise but more often subject to vilification, women were the focus of much of the agonistic competition between and among men in this literature.

In a particularly striking discussion, McIlvenna captures the chaotic vibrancy of dissemination in the streets of Paris. In addition to print and manuscript circulation, woodcuts, murals, and graffiti in coal brought scabrous themes to the masses. Ambulant vendors announced their products by singing aloud, while street theater entertained with ribald tales. McIlvenna argues that dissemination followed the paths of the town criers and emanated largely from the Palais de Justice. The literacy of legal professionals and the identification of a few jurists as authors support this assertion. McIlvenna allows that some scandalous literature might have had origins within the royal court, but her argument sees the fusion of hostility toward the court and corrosive misogyny primarily among legal professionals.

Chapter four shifts to the granular level of events at court and how they played out in public—or crucially in the case of Isabelle de Limeuil, how they did not play out in public. The unmarried Limeuil gave birth rather spectacularly after falling ill at a solemn audience in 1564. The purported father of her child was the Protestant Prince de Condé, whom Limeuil, observers believed at the time, had been deployed by Catherine to seduce. Limeuil's story, McIlvenna argues, was much more complicated. Imprisoned in a convent ostensibly for sexual misbehavior, Limeuil was also accused of attempting to poison the prince de la Roche-sur-Yon. Although much was made of Limeuil's sexual behavior, McIlvenna points out that the poisoning charge was kept under wraps. Catherine seems to have controlled this piece of information, protecting Limeuil so that when the scandal died down, Limeuil could marry respectably. While acknowledging Catherine's subtle management for Limeuil, McIlvenna reveals that Catherine herself took a hit. Many already worried that Catherine utilized women for their feminine wiles, and criticisms of Limeuil's seemingly harsh treatment opened Catherine up to charges of political malfeasance. As this case analysis indicates, McIlvenna avoids the trap of viewing Catherine from an excessively positive perspective, allowing the complications of the moment and the difficulties inherent in reputation management to come to the fore.

The second case study focuses on Françoise de Rohan, who had a child with Jacques de Savoie, duc de Nemours. When Nemours married Anne d'Este instead of honoring the marriage

promises he made to Rohan, witnesses backed her up but Catherine sided with Nemours. McIlvenna argues that Catherine's dismay over Rohan's scandalous behavior was paramount, although Nemours was also closely associated with the Guise family, a political reality that left Catherine with little room to maneuver. Rohan, supported by her family and leading Protestant princes, called herself the "dame de Nemours," acted in public documents as the duke's legal wife, and considered her son to be Nemours' heir. Twenty-one years of legal conflict only ended when Anne d'Este brokered an agreement whereby Nemours acknowledged Rohan had been his wife, but that the couple were now divorced because of his infidelity. Nemours also recognized his son by Rohan. Refuting the long-standing view that Rohan was a gold-digger, McIlvenna reveals how the hothouse confines of the court and the necessities of politics limited Catherine and distorted Rohan's attempts to secure the marriage she felt was her due.

Anne d'Este reappears as McIlvenna's final case study, and her long experience in the public eye offers a final set of lessons. During her first marriage to François, duc de Guise, scurrilous pamphlets intimated that Anne was in an incestuous relationship with her brother-in-law, the cardinal de Lorraine. After her first husband died, Anne's remarriage to Nemours prompted claims that she was a scheming adulteress rather than a grieving widow. These instances aside, Anne demonstrated her skill and ability to utilize gender expectations in a positive way. McIlvenna traces Anne's demonstrations of appropriate behavior as a widow and mother, bringing out how these performances garnered positive comments in public contexts.[3] McIlvenna contrasts Anne's actions with the gender transgressive behavior of Catherine-Marie, duchesse de Montpensier, Anne's widowed and childless daughter. Through the contrast between mother and daughter, McIlvenna reminds us that women were always vulnerable to charges that they were contravening social norms, but that they could also utilize those norms in support of their reputations.

McIlvenna's case studies confirm how scandal literature shaped individual reputation, but more broadly, how it provided the contours for derogatory understandings of whole groups of people. Women at the Valois court were rarely seen in a positive light. This is the sting in the tail: Catherine de' Medici may have done all she could, but her women, the women of the court, and women more generally were nonetheless routinely demonized, disrespected, and dismissed in print and in the public eye. Historians, McIlvenna reminds us, don't have to buy the scurrilous version of the story, but seeing through it does not make it go away.

## NOTES

[1] See for instance Nicola Sutherland, "Catherine de Medici: The Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 9/2 (1978): 45-56; Robert J. Knecht, "Catherine de' Medici: Saint or Sinner?" in Martyn Cornick and Ceri Crossley, eds., *Problems in French History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 1-16.

[2] The foundational prosopographical study is Caroline Zum Kolk, "Catherine de Médicis et sa maison. La fonction politique de l'hôtel de la reine au XVIe siècle," (Doctoral thesis, Université de Paris, 2006).

[3] On gender performance at the Valois court, see Katherine Crawford, "Catherine de Médicis and the Performance of Political Motherhood," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31/3 (2000): 643-673.

Katherine Crawford  
Vanderbilt University  
[katherine.b.crawford@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:katherine.b.crawford@vanderbilt.edu)

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ISSN 1553-9172