
H-France Review Vol. 20 (January 2020), No. 6

Susan Broomhall, ed., *Women and Power at the French Court, 1483-1563*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018. 384 pp. Figures, notes, bibliographies, and index. 129.00€. (cl). ISBN 978-94-6298-3427.

Review by Sheila ffoillott, George Mason University.

This collection of thirteen essays, enhanced by a substantial introduction, deftly assembled and edited by Susan Broomhall, investigates aspects of female power within the context of the French Renaissance court. One of the editor's stated goals is to consider historiography, now that this line of inquiry comprises a considerable body of work. Her point of departure is more recent, but a return to *Rewriting the Renaissance*, which included essays stemming mainly from *Renaissance Man/Renaissance Woman*, a 1982 Yale conference that sought to foreground women, might serve as an earlier historiographic jumping off point, although women's power per se was not central to all essays.[1] Drawing primarily from new methodologies emerging in the 1970s, most of the contributors to *Rewriting the Renaissance*, whose work was based in literature, sought the presence of women chiefly within canonical male-authored texts, some scholars displaying the practice Stephen Greenblatt had just dubbed "New Historicism." In addition to the literary chapters, historians treated working women in Germany and Italy, respectively. Two art historians also contributed: one discussing what women's beauty signified in Italian portraiture; another surveyed an attempt to empower Queen Mother Catherine de' Medici through a series of narrative scenes in text and illustration featuring a famous ancient queen as prototype. Two further chapters considered the poetry of Louise Labé and another examined the hermaphrodite in Rabelais. Publications emerging over the ensuing decades have focused more directly on women, addressing their roles as rulers and creators, as well as patrons and consumers of material culture. Scholars have also sought to establish women's agency in influencing how others imaged them. These questions, of course, pertain to the elites, but researchers have also enlightened us on working- and middle-class women.

Much of the scholarship on women asserting themselves seeks to reveal and problematize their power throughout the early modern world. The challenge of commanding the necessary linguistic, archival, and cultural historical expertise produces specialized scholars. Most studies, therefore, focus on an individual, e.g. Catherine de' Medici or Elizabeth I; a position, e.g. female ruler, mistress, lady-in-waiting, nun, writer or artist, patron or collector; or on a specific nation, city, religious community, or court. A decade after *Rewriting*, a collection of essays on France, resulting from a 1995 conference at Blois, appeared: *Royaume de fémynie*, edited by Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier and Eliane Viennot, containing contributions on a range of topics by an international and multidisciplinary array of scholars.[2] Wilson-Chevalier then co-edited

Patronnes et mécènes en France à la Renaissance, in which a chapter by Broomhall appears, and she has contributed to Broomhall's new collection. [3] As editors, Wilson-Chevalier, and now Broomhall, have striven to include international representation and differing approaches, which greatly enrich their products.

Titling her introduction, "In the Orbit of the King," Broomhall aptly emphasizes how the women examined worked "under the rule of a male sovereign...principally within the French court, in order to advance individual, familial, and factional agendas" (p. 12). Some of the figures studied here are well-known—Anne de France, Marguerite de Navarre, Diane de Poitiers—with important new aspects introduced; others are less familiar (at least to me): the writers Hélisenne de Crenne and Anne de Graville, whose contributions relative to power are skillfully woven into larger contexts. Individuals appear in more than one essay, producing some repetition but generating cohesion within the collection as a whole. Chapters, arranged into three thematic sections, each start with an abstract and end with a bibliography of works cited. This review will attempt to draw out some of the overarching themes and their interrelations, among them: female political discourse, authorial power, networking, imaging, performance, and the spaces offered by ambiguity.

Broomhall employs the phrase "interacted with power" to describe how these women operated within the specific situations that authors consider (p. 12). But what is meant by power? Jonathan Reid, whose chapter concerns the multi-talented Marguerite de Navarre, notes significantly how she regarded power as ultimately stemming from God rather than being its own thing, as understood today, following a genealogy that leads from Machiavelli to Foucault. Legal claims based on feudal holdings or positions as regents supported some women's authority. Others exerted unofficial power, or rather influence, through expressive culture, with emotion a key component. An official position was no guarantee, so most contributors expound upon women's power strategies. Several treat the instability of the regent's position. Aubrée David-Chapy, in her chapter on Anne de France and Louise de Savoie, concentrates on their use of such strategies, as neither was queen. Regents tried a number of approaches including commissioning texts about their predecessors' achievements. In another chapter, Laure Fagnart and Mary Beth Winn point in particular to Louise de Savoie's *Gestes de Blanche de Castile*. As blood ties mattered greatly, genealogies, in text and image, proved useful. Invoking prototypes helped both men and women assert power: linguistic gender, whereby abstract qualities are embodied as female, more easily facilitated slippage between personifications and actual women, and several contributors refer to the politically charged allegorical writings of Christine de Pizan.

Marguerite de Navarre was, *inter alia*, a writer praised in her own time, as now, and thus the authorial voice, which Broomhall terms "writing power," is an obvious choice for an analysis (p. 351). An illumination by Etienne Colaud, illustrating the writer Anne de Graville presenting her book to her patron, Queen Claude, graces this book's cover. Mawry Bouchard analyzes the *oeuvre* of this lady-in-waiting to Queen Claude, whom, she argues, speaks both to and for the Queen. Graville rewrites and translates earlier courtly mainstays by Alain Chartier and Giovanni Boccaccio, changing both form and content to insert a female position. Traditionally in such male-authored texts, women's power was expressed within love relationships and Graville shifted the ground of their speech to a larger arena. Controlling the narrative, however, was difficult, she acknowledges, in a climate in which gossip—particularly harmful when directed against women—fueled the shifting sands of loyalties and factionalism.

Pollie Bromilow analyzes the texts of the writer known as H elisenne de Crenne who, being non-elite, differed from the others studied here. Although residing in the provinces, she inserted herself into the court by dedicating her partial *Aeneid* translation, with additions intended to flatter the King, to Francis I himself. Bromilow traces the publication history of her works in different genres, points out her familiarity with Humanist concerns, and considers her self-empowerment through writing, including a woodcut frontispiece illustrating her as author presenting her book to its dedicatee, resembling the cover of Graville's manuscript for Claude.

In one work, Crenne adopted an epistolary form, but many scholars have mined actual letters to gauge women's attempts to assert authority. In this collection, two authors treat correspondence as performance. Denis Crouzet examines Catherine de' Medici's letters from before her regencies to demonstrate how she positions herself politically, using a rhetoric of prudence, benevolence, and harmony, sufficiently flexible to advance the Valois. He also notes passages that illustrate Catherine's lifelong insistence on not allowing religion to interfere with monarchical authority. He sees, moreover, the ambiguity in the mediator role adopted by Catherine and others as something women could use to their advantage. Characterizing letters more openly as performance, Susan Broomhall analyzes the gendered strategies Diane de Poitiers employed through her little-studied correspondence, illustrating how she used this medium to position herself relative to important players in the court of her lover, Henri II.

Two chapters treat particular difficulties facing foreign queens consort. Erin Sadlack argues that the political philosophy of fourteenth-century Christine de Pizan, whether absorbed via mentors, directly through reading, or viewing her ideas illustrated in tapestries, prepared Mary Tudor for her role as Louis XII's consort. She cites the challenge that the mantle of peacemaker often put onto the backs of foreign royal brides when their unions resulted from treaties, applying the phrase "Ambassador-Queen" to what Mary Tudor tried to accomplish vis- a-vis her brother, Henry VIII. It is a concept worth considering more broadly. Consorts whose husbands lived longer than Louis generally found that attempts to help foreign kings did not go well. The problem of attachment to natal family also looms large in Lisa Mansfield's chapter on Louis's successor, Fran ois I's second wife, Eleanor of Austria. As both Mary and Eleanor came from rival European houses currently ruled by their brothers, each had to deal with the built-in conflict over loyalty that dynastic marriage practice perpetuated. Mansfield highlights the distinctive manner of Habsburg women, who overtly proclaimed their loyalty to their all-powerful birth family, particularly when Charles V was Emperor. For Eleanor, her appearance in costume or portrait provided the means to assert that identity when it suited. Mansfield also asserts, significantly, that Francis's enmity against the Habsburgs was so acute that he did not wish to beget children with her, as it might have complicated the Valois succession.

Claude de France, daughter of Louis XII and the formidable Anne de Bretagne, was not a foreign bride. Rather she embodied the all-important continuing link to the French ruling house. Her husband Fran ois I, came from a collateral Valois line. Sources have tended to focus on the new king's series of mistresses and his assertive mother, Louise de Savoie, rather than on Claude. Drawing from extensive perusal of a different set of texts and images, Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier reveals how the Queen was truly esteemed in her time. She also identifies the "spaces of agency" that Claude exploited, fostering a strong literary circle, including Anne de Graville, who, as we have seen, dedicated her works to the Queen (p. 139). Claude took advantage of the practice of piety, an approved arena for women's energies that also offered the possibility to assert power through patronage. Commissioning and presenting prayer books occupies Cynthia Brown in

her chapter tracing manuscripts circulated among Valois and Bourbon women. She outlines a pattern in books that Anne de Bretagne had prepared for her daughter Claude; what Claude in turn had prepared for her sister Renée; and prayer books that Louise de Savoie gave to her daughter, Marguerite. A related text is Anne de France's important *Enseignements à ma fille* written for her daughter, Suzanne. Brown demonstrates clearly this female kin group's concern for their contributions' afterlife with Marguerite's daughter Jeanne d'Albret acting as her mother's literary executor. A highly valuable contribution is Brown's assertion of the importance of the gifts and bequests of books (something confirmed, I might add, by similar practice among the female Habsburgs).

Although both sexes made gifts to build and reinforce their networks through expected reciprocity, the essays here examine its feminine usage. Crouzet addressed the significance of reciprocity to Catherine de' Medici and Tracy Adams investigates specifically how Anne de France used gift-giving to secure her power base, especially when regent for her brother. She argued for a specifically female practice, including the potential for the mobilisation of a coterie of ladies to extend her lobbying and enlarge the network. For Adams, the gift-giving encompasses not just goods, but also extends to reversing judgments and arranging marriages, all strategies to cement loyalty. Another aspect of networking speaks directly to Broomhall's argument about the singularity of the French court: it fostered women's intergenerational training. As several authors demonstrate, queens positioned young relatives, future brides, and noble ladies in their entourages. Anne de Bretagne had Margaret of Austria and Anne de France at her court. Anne de France had her niece, Louise de Savoie, and Diane de Poitiers at hers. The fourteen-year-old Catherine de' Medici learned about her father-in-law's court by observing the powerful women that populated it. Anne Boleyn was placed at Margaret of Austria's court at Mechelen, but moved to France at the time of Mary Tudor's marriage to Louis XII. She stayed on for Queen Claude. Of course, she eventually returned to England to marry Henry VIII, while Mary Queen of Scots, when widowed, returned home. Both provide examples of how lessons learned in France radiated out to other courts. Another important conclusion drawn from several authors' contributions here indicates that power relations among women could be just as contested as those among men.

David Potter's essay on Anne de Pisselieu, mistress of Francis I, engages with many of the issues raised by other contributors. He concentrates on her life after the king's death, a period not often examined by scholars of mistresses, the assumption being that without the king, they lacked access to power. Potter demonstrates, however, how Mme D'Etampes, deeply aware of the tenuousness of her position, used various strategies, such as gift-giving, networking, and associating with Reform, to reinvent herself.

While Broomhall began her introduction with Catherine de' Medici advising her young son Charles IX to follow the examples of his male predecessors, this collection amply demonstrates that women, although often unacknowledged, were there in force, creating the culture of the French court.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Susan Broomhall, "In the Orbit of the King. Women, Power, and Authority at the French Court, 1483–1563"

Aubrée David-Chapy, “The Political, Symbolic, and Courtly Power of Anne de France and Louise de Savoie. From the Genesis to the Glory of Female Regency”

Tracy Adams, “Anne de France and Gift-Giving. The Exercise of Female Power”

Laure Fagnart and Mary Beth Winn, “Louise de Savoie. The King’s Mother, Alter Rex”

Erin A. Sadlack, “Literary Lessons in Queenship and Power. Mary Tudor Brandon and the Authority of the Ambassador-Queen”

Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier, “Claude de France and the Spaces of Agency of a Marginalized Queen”

Lisa Mansfield, “Portraits of Eleanor of Austria. From Invisible to Inimitable French Queen Consort”

Cynthia J. Brown, “Family Female Networking in Early Sixteenth-Century France. The Power of Text and Image”

Mawy Bouchard, “The Power of Reputation and Skills according to Anne de Graille. The Rondeaux and the Denunciation of Slander”

Jonathan A. Reid, “Imagination and Influence. The Creative Powers of Marguerite de Navarre at Work at Court and in the World”

Pollie Bromilow, “Power through Print. The Works of Hélienne de Crenne”

David Potter, “The Life and After-Life of a Royal Mistress. Anne de Pisseleu, Duchess of Étampes”

Susan Broomhall, “The King and I. Rhetorics of Power in the Letters of Diane de Poitiers”

Denis Crouzet, “Catherine de Médicis Tested by the Virtue of Charity (1533–1559). Discourse and Metadiscourse”

NOTES

[1] Margaret Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy Vickers, eds., *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[2] Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier and Eliane Viennot, eds., *Royaume de femynie: Pouvoirs, contraintes, espaces de liberté des femmes, de la Renaissance à la Fronde* (Paris, Honoré Champion, 1999).

[3] Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier with Eugénie Pascal, eds., *Patronnes et mécènes en France à la Renaissance* (Saint-Étienne: Université de Saint-Étienne, 2007).

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ISSN 1553-9172