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**Ellen M. McClure**, *Sunspots and the Sun King: Sovereignty and Mediation in Seventeenth-Century France*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. ix + 316. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-252-03056-7.

Review by Michael P. Breen, Reed College.

Scholars of Old Regime France have long been aware of absolutism's profound tensions and seeming contradictions. In theory, the king was the sole source of public power and enjoyed the unfettered right of command, the ability to "give the law to subjects in general without their consent."<sup>[1]</sup> In reality, kings relied on a large number of officers, corporate bodies, and other subordinates to govern a vast and diverse kingdom. Many of these officers, moreover, literally owned their share of royal authority and the monarch's "absolute power" was theoretically hemmed in—or "bridled" in Claude de Seyssel's famous formulation—by a web of privileges, legal customs, and political traditions.<sup>[2]</sup> Behind Louis XIV's imposing facade and grandiose claims to power, a generation of revisionist historians has shown, was a political system based on a high degree of collaboration between the king and powerful nobles and provincial elites.<sup>[3]</sup>

One of the distinguishing traits of absolutist ideology was the king's ambiguous relationship to the law. As a result of the state's piecemeal evolution, French legal and political culture built upon a web of conflicting, and even contradictory, sources. On the one hand, the king enjoyed "absolute power" and the royal will had the force of law. On the other, the monarch was supposed to respect the realm's traditional political order, with its multitude of authorities, legal customs, and privileges. Regardless of their views, however, theorists were virtually unanimous in distinguishing the *pouvoir absolu* of France's kings from the tyrant's unregulated powers. The latter ruled to satisfy his personal interests and desires while the former governed in accordance with reason and the public good. The absolute monarch was thus at once above the law and restrained by reason, as well as divine and natural law (but not by other authorities or institutions). "Right down until the last decades of the seventeenth century," David Parker writes, "the ambiguities in French thought continued with its paradoxical emphasis on both an undivided supreme power and the important, indeed essential function, performed by a multiplicity of institutions. The notion of sovereignty as absolute, yet restrained, remained powerful...because such a view continued to make reasonable sense of the world in which Frenchmen lived."<sup>[4]</sup>

Ellen M. McClure's *Sunspots and the Sun King* examines how a variety of writers including Louis XIV's secretaries, diplomatic theorists, and playwrights confronted these paradoxes of royal power. In this thoughtful and erudite book, McClure analyzes their efforts to square the circle of an ideology that simultaneously depicted the king as an omnipotent, independent agent and as entirely subordinate to God's will. While these efforts were ultimately futile, she concludes, they nevertheless imparted dynamism to the monarchy, forestalled the impending collapse of royal authority, and figured prominently in seventeenth-century French letters and science.

McClure takes as her starting point the profound challenges to both traditional socio-political hierarchies and the relationship between the human and the divine posed by Protestantism and the new science during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Writers such as Jean Calvin and Philippe Duplessis-Mornay rejected the notion that the king could have a special relationship with God, while Galileo's discovery of the sunspots and Cartesian mechanics undermined belief in a stable,

hierarchical relationship between God and creation. In the face of these challenges, McClure writes, “the restoration of faith in an order grounded in permanence and transcendence was more urgent than ever before” (p. 1). Compounding the problem was Jean Bodin’s radically new and influential theory of sovereignty. The *République*, according to McClure, posited a “solid, discreet and independent” (p. 6) sovereignty whose power inhered in the person of the sovereign and was essentially free of external foundations or limits, as evidenced by Bodin’s “sudden” and anomalous introduction of divine sanction as a check on royal authority. Bodinian sovereignty, McClure continues, foundered on the shoals of legitimacy, since any sovereignty that was not tied to something outside of the monarch would inevitably slide towards tyranny.

Seventeenth-century writers, McClure argues, sought to reestablish the broken link among God, the monarch, and the French people while maintaining the king’s unique and singular place in the kingdom and the universe. “The *Vindicae’s* monarch,” she writes, “is merely one man among others, with no privileged access to God’s will, while Bodin’s monarch is so godlike in his independence of will that, paradoxically, any link to the divine is threatened.” Theorists of royal power therefore needed to reestablish the link between the kingly and the divine “in order to eliminate the possibility of government by popular election and to ground the elaborate hierarchy of French society in the transcendental and the permanent.” By establishing a privileged link between God and king, McClure concludes, French theorists sought to prove “the fundamental *difference* (author’s emphasis) between the monarch and his subjects, a difference that would establish a mystique surrounding the ruler that could not be easily questioned or penetrated” (pp. 36-37).

This was accomplished, according to McClure, through a theory of divine right monarchy that made the king a mediator between the divine and the terrestrial rather than the earthly representative of God’s authority. Mediation, she argues, enabled French theorists to define the king as the “instrument” of divine power and authority, thereby erasing all signs of human influence from the exercise of royal power. By making the king “the quasi-transparent instrument of a power that originated and ended well beyond [the royal] person,” (p. 6) divine right theorists re-anchored royal power in the transcendent while also moderating its scope, thereby reaffirming its legitimacy. The result was a Neoplatonic conception of monarchy that located the king at the intersection between the human and the divine, making him less the heart or head of the French state than its soul.

McClure lays out these problems provocatively in the first chapter of her book, focusing on the efforts of three theorists—Cardin Le Bret (1632), Jean-François Senault (1662), and Pierre Le Moyne (1665)—to reestablish the link between the king and the divine. Their works, she argues, typified French theorists’ repeated failures to reconcile contradictory ideas about sovereignty and legitimacy. Conceiving of the king as the state’s Neoplatonic soul forced theorists to either obscure the agency of individual monarchs or leave open the possibility of tyranny. The truly legitimate monarch dissolved into an invisible instrument of God, while the active, voluntarist ruler always courted the risk of illegitimacy and tyranny. As a result, critical analysis of royal power gave way to mystical ideas about the “mystery of state” that did not resolve these conundrums, but cloaked them from careful examination. By embodying these conflicting ideas of kingship in the figure of the Sun King, Louis XIV successfully held them in tension and saved the edifice of divine right monarchy from conceptual collapse, at least until the final years of his reign.

Chapter two examines the tensions between depictions of the monarch as an independent agent and a passive instrument of divine will in Louis XIV’s *Memoirs for the Instruction of the Dauphin*. In her astute analysis of both the *Memoirs* and the unique challenges facing the royal secretaries charged with converting Louis XIV’s notes into finished product, McClure makes a compelling argument that the *Memoirs* were “less the final word on Louis XIV’s vision of himself and his reign, as he intended, than a testament to the dynamism and struggle at the heart of ‘absolutism’” (p. 102). The secretaries’ struggles to adopt an appropriate tone when writing from the royal point of view, McClure demonstrates,

reflected the enduring difficulties in determining the precise nature of royal power even at the height of the Sun King's reign. These problems can be seen in the *Memoirs'* ambiguous use of the word *nous*, which confuses the location of royal voice, "oscillating between an individual located in a particular time and place and the embodiment of the truly transcendent and eternal spirit of the French monarchy" (p. 92). Louis' secretaries struggled not only to efface any implication that they, and not the king, were the true authors of the *Memoirs*, but more significantly, to find the king's elusive location on the continuum between absolute independence of action and complete submission to God's will. This struggle marks the content of the *Memoirs* as well. Louis XIV, she observes, positions himself as the author of all administrative actions, thereby reducing God to the guarantor of laws and the stability of the universe, a position that raised the specter of tyranny. At the same time, however, she argues, the *Memoirs'* emphasis on the king's need to work tirelessly to correct imperfections in both kingdom and monarchy reveals the king's ultimate inability to inhabit the kingdom's central place of power in spite of his constant efforts to do so.

The next two chapters turn to seventeenth-century treatises on international diplomacy, which, McClure argues, were crucial to divine right political discourses. The ambassador's complex, mysterious and highly mediated relationship to the king, she notes, closely paralleled the monarch's relationship with God.

In many ways, the difficulties involved in defining the diplomat, whose entire official identity is contextual and relational, parallels those encountered by French writers attempting to define royal power and legitimacy. Treatises on diplomacy shift between emphasizing the ambassador's role as stand-in for his absent prince (a function that implies a certain invisibility of the actual diplomat) and his role as someone instead possessing the judgment and actual point of view of his sovereign (a function that elevates the ambassador while obscuring, or, more dangerously, duplicating, the source of his authority) (p. 10).

Through a close examination of the writings of several theorists, including Alberico Gentili, Juan Antonio de Vera, and Abraham de Wicquefort, as well as a pair of controversies involving Louis XIV's ambassadors in the 1660s, McClure examines the unstable and shifting ways French theorists conceptualized the ambassador's connection to his sovereign, ranging from a passive spokesman, to an instrument of sovereign power, to an agent capable of acting in lieu of his sovereign based on his own insight, judgment, and talents.

For some theorists, the diplomat was best understood as an actor, as one who both followed a script yet could improvise by drawing upon his own talents. Such depictions of the ambassador, McClure claims, also called attention to the role of spectacle in sovereignty. For these reasons, the final chapter of *Sunspots and the Sun King* analyzes three plays that highlight concerns over mediation and sovereignty: Jean de Rotrou's *Le véritable Saint Genest* (1645), Racine's *Andromache* (1667), and Corneille's *Suréna* (1673). All three, McClure argues, "explore the nuances and contradictions that the 'fiction of representation' or the ideal of mediation tries to cover over" (p. 249). The work of Racine and Corneille in particular, she concludes, depicts mediation as "politically necessary but personally tragic...as long as the instruments of government are human," she observes, "mediation is doomed to failure" (pp. 248-49). *Sunspots and the Sun King* provides an interesting analysis of one of the most basic issues facing scholars of early modern French political theory: what enabled theorists to portray the monarch as simultaneously absolute and limited in his power? Absolutism, as Nannerl O. Keohane observed, required both the intense "personalization" of "pure authority in a single human being" and the "abstraction" of all human qualities from the ruler, "pure authority and public purpose without human frailty."<sup>[5]</sup> McClure's multifaceted approach offers a number of thoughtful and intriguing insights into these political paradoxes. Her analysis of Louis' *Memoirs* and the problematic nature of fixing and articulating the royal perspective in them are well done and convincing. The chapters on diplomatic theory and the similar conundrums faced by divine right theorists and writers attempting to explain the relationship between the ambassador and the sovereign are the richest in book, effectively tying discussion of monarchy in France to broader European debates and political developments. Despite my

initial doubts about McClure's claims in chapters three and four, I was ultimately persuaded by her arguments.

In a number of instances, however, I found myself less convinced by McClure's claims. The problems she says were posed by Bodinian sovereignty, for instance, seem overstated, especially in view of studies that stress the traditional nature of Bodin's ideas. David Parker for example, has noted that "Bodin, whose thought so clearly bears the imprint of the hierarchic and corporate milieu in which he lived, was unable to do little more than place his sovereign power in a highly traditional framework." [6] In spite of his sweeping statements about sovereignty, Bodin urged monarchs to preserve representative assemblies, legal tribunals, and other intermediate authorities. "The best kind of Commonweal," he wrote, "is that wherein the sovereign holdeth what concerneth his majesty, the Senate maintaineth the authority thereof, the magistrates execute their power, and justice hath her ordinary course." [7] Although above positive law, Bodin's sovereign was nevertheless bound by its contracts and those of its predecessors—a significant limitation on the royal will. And Bodin's appeal to divine and natural law, which McClure sees as something that should "give the reader pause" (p. 31) was, in fact, hardly surprising; on the contrary, it expressed commonplace juridical assumptions about royal power. As Kenneth Pennington has put it, "Bodin's conception of sovereignty that he expounded in Book I, chapter 8, of the *De republica* would not have offended the most constitutionally minded jurist of the Middle Ages." [8]

The relative absence of attention devoted to the sophisticated, highly-developed juridical culture from which works such as Bodin's and Le Bret's emanated poses additional problems for McClure's argument. The monarch's connection with the divine was but one element of royal authority, and arguably a minor one at that. France's kings enjoyed the plenitude of power whether or not they were anointed. For French jurists, the leading political thinkers of the age, royal legitimacy rested less on an ineffable connection to the divine than on a broad set of historical and legal foundations, including the Salic Law, Roman Law, and centuries of French history and custom. Even at the height of Catholic League, many Catholics willingly accepted Henri of Navarre's claim to the throne in spite of his heresy. Once Henri shrewdly converted to Catholicism and consolidated his position through military victories, clemency, and generous patronage, radical ideas such as those of Duplessis-Mornay were utterly marginalized. Even Cartesianism and the teachings of the new science could be, and were, reconciled with belief in absolute royal authority, as Keohane has shown. [9]

*Sunspots and the Sun King* also raises a number of issues, only to leave them unanswered or ambiguous. For instance, McClure locates the crisis of royal sovereignty and legitimacy at the turn of the seventeenth century. Yet she has relatively little to say about how French theorists prior to Louis XIV responded to this crisis. Similarly, McClure contends that scholars have wrongly applied Ernst Kantorowicz's "English, medieval model" of "the king's two bodies" to France (pp. 14, 77) and argues instead that the duality of the French monarchy was one of institutions and the continuity of kingship on the one hand and "the suddenness and amorality of the coup d'état" on the other (p. 2). Leaving aside questions about the merits of this critique (Kantorowicz made ample use of French examples, after all), McClure repeatedly reverts to language reminiscent of the "king's two bodies" in her own analysis. Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly given the book's title and McClure's allusion to Galileo's *Letters on Sunspots* in the opening paragraph, there is little discussion of how the ideas of seventeenth-century scientists influenced the development of French political thought or gave rise to the figure of the Sun King. Readers who come to this book expecting to learn more about the political consequences of Galileo's, Descartes', and other scientists' ideas will be no doubt be disappointed. They will, however, learn a good deal about diplomacy, theater, and the delicate problems Louis XIV and his secretaries faced in composing his memoirs from this interesting, challenging, and insightful book.

## NOTES

[1] Jean Bodin, *The Six Books of a Commonweale* (1576), ed. Kenneth Douglas McRae, trans. Richard Knolles (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), bk. 1, ch. 8.

[2] Claude de Seyssel, *The Monarchy of France* (1519), ed. Donald R. Kelley, trans. J. H. Hexter (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981).

[3] For a recent overview, see Fanny Cosandey and Robert Descimon, *L'absolutisme en France, histoire et historiographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), and William Beik, "The Absolutism of Louis XIV as Social Collaboration," *Past and Present* 188 (2005): 195-224.

[4] David Parker, "Law, Society, and the State in the Thought of Jean Bodin," *History of Political Thought* 2 (1981): 253-85, 283.

[5] Nannerl O. Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 17.

[6] Parker, p. 284.

[7] Bodin, bk. 4, ch. 6.

[8] Kenneth Pennington, *The Prince and the Law, 1200-1600: Sovereignty and Rights in the Western Legal Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 283.

[9] Keohane, pp. 202-12.

Michael P. Breen Reed College breenm@reed.edu

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