

Robert J. Knecht. *Catherine de' Medici*. London & New York: Longman, 1998. xiv + 340 pp. \$18.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-582-08241-0.



Reviewed by Anja Victorine Hartmann

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After kings and queens like Gustavus Adolphus, Peter the Great, Elizabeth I, and Catherine the Great, and statesmen like Richelieu and Disraeli, the latest volume of the series "Profiles in Power" features a biography of Catherine de' Medici (1519-1589), wife of Henry II, mother of Francis II, Charles IX and Henry III. As its author, Robert J. Knecht, rightly points out in his preface, Catherine was never queen in her own right, but still "for forty years she helped to shape France's destiny either as queen consort or as regent or as queen-mother" (p. xi).

Catherine's historical reputation derives mainly from one event, namely the Massacre of St. Bartholomew in August 1572. In adopting different interpretations of this incident, historians have either condemned or exonerated Catherine, and they have interpreted forty years of her politics on the basis of these judgements. Taking into account the twisted history of her reputation, Knecht promises to approach Catherine "with an open mind" (p. xiii) and sets about to answer the following question: "As a woman, unable ever to command more authority than that of regent,

Catherine may have done her best, but was that good enough in the circumstances?" (p. xiv).

In his chronological account of Catherine's life, divided into eleven chapters according to the phases of her biography ("Daughter of Florence", "Dauphine", "Queen of France" etc.), Knecht stops at the important turning points to review their historical implications and the controversies around them. The Conspiracy of Amboise (March 1560), the *Surprise de Meaux* (27 September 1567) and--of course--the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's day (24 August 1572) are, among others, carefully examined in the light of different sources and different historiographical traditions, for example, the writings of Jean-Louis Bourgeon, Denis Crouzet, Janine Garrisson, and Nicola Sutherland. Knecht, however, cautiously refrains from polemic conclusions in favour of any of the cited authors, but judiciously weighs the pros and cons of their arguments. His own prudent judgement at the end of the book is that "We are unlikely ever to know for certain whether or not she connived at the attempted assassination of [l'amiral de] Coligny or at the massacre that followed. How-

ever, there are grounds for thinking that her policy was less consistently pacific than her defenders have claimed" (p. 274).

Knecht's biography is much more than the meticulous description of Catherine's decisions in religious politics, her shifting attitudes towards the Huguenots, the changing interpretations of historians, and the progress of the "Black Legend". It is at the same time a brilliant history of court and government in France in the sixteenth century. To mention just two aspects: Knecht points out that the court of Francis I was still "peripatetic" (p. 23), a tradition Catherine herself kept up when she toured the kingdom together with Charles IX in the years 1564 to 1566. The descriptions of the formal entries into towns during this journey, as well as the descriptions and interpretations of iconographical programs on other festive occasions, offer valuable insights into the ceremonious enactment of royal power developed by Catherine and her sons. Nonetheless, political reality was less glorious, particularly in the period of Catherine's regency. The difficult position of the monarchy, challenged as it was not only by the Huguenots, but also by the catholic faction led by the Guise, and involved in complex international struggles between Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, the Empire, and Great Britain, allowed no inadvertence. Knecht analyses the intricate relations between the French oppositional groups and the foreign powers, as well as the French government's reactions, their successes, and their failures.

It is in relation to the *Grand Tour* and to her attempt to mingle with foreign politics that Catherine committed what Knecht calls "the first of a long series of major political blunders" (p. 272). Catherine's encounter with Duke Alba in Bayonne in 1565 was meant to arrange two marriages between the houses of Valois and Habsburg in order to improve the difficult relationship between France and Spain. In Knecht's opinion, this was responsible for the growing suspicion among

the Huguenots and consequently for the *Surprise de Meaux*, an Huguenot strike which forced the court to return to Paris, and its aftermath. Sceptical in general of any coherent set of principles which might have been a common denominator to explain Catherine's political activities, Knecht concludes that "the only consistent principle to which she adhered was a touching faith in the matrimonial solution to all political problems" (p. 275).

The image of Catherine de' Medici as a more or less successful match-maker, trying to arrange the most splendid marriages for her children is omnipresent in Knecht's work. Still, the *political* value attached to these activities is sometimes unclear, and occasionally it seems as if Knecht judges Catherine's marriage policies to be less effective than other diplomatic means --a judgement which would certainly be misleading in Early Modern Europe where dynastic networks were among the most powerful and the most flexible instruments of foreign (and domestic) politics. Still, it is undoubtedly important to point out, as Knecht does, that the "matrimonial solution" remained accessible to Catherine at every stage of her life, independent of the changes in her political role from queen consort to regent to queen-mother. The exercise of power through (and in favour of) her children was one of the few lasting opportunities which secured Catherine's constant influence on French affairs of state.

Catherine as a person is not only present when organizing marriages for her children, but also through a vast number of dazzling citations from her letters, showing political understanding, personal distress, and a thorough sense of humour. Among the most interesting citations given by Knecht is Catherine's letter to her son Henry [Henri III] who returned from Poland to succeed his brother Charles IX in the summer of 1574. "I beg you," she said, "not to give anything until you are here, for only then will you know who has served you well or not ... I will keep all benefices

and offices that will fall vacant. We shall tax them as there is not an *ecu* left to do all the things you need to do to maintain your kingdom. Your late brother has entrusted me with that task, and I will not let you down: I will do my best to hand it over to you entire and at peace so that you should not have to work for your greatness... since you left I have only had worry on top of worry: thus I believe that your return will bring me joy and contentment on top of contentment ..." (p. 173). Catherine's deep concern for the glory and strength of the king and the kingdom of France is obvious in these lines and it is conspicuous—as Knecht repeatedly points out—that she tried hard to achieve the best for her adopted (!) country. Nevertheless, she frequently failed, and many of her motives and actions were at least ambiguous if not outright harmful to her aims.

Finally, Knecht emphasizes Catherine's schemes for shaping her own public image through the arts and architecture, but above all through the adoption of the story of Artemisia, devoted widow of the ancient king Mausolus. By defining herself as "the New Artemisia" (p. 220), Catherine was able to assume all the qualities needed by a woman politician in her position and to justify her role through the memory of her late husband. The importance of ceremony, iconography and symbolism in Catherine's life and politics as in Early Modern Europe in general remains an open field for further investigation that is of particular significance in relation to women regents and queens.

Knecht's scholarly work will be equally attractive to those interested in Catherine de' Medici and to readers interested in sixteenth century France in general. In addition, it offers annexes containing a bibliographical essay, genealogical tables, maps, lists, and a comprehensive index.

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