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Virginia Scott and Sara Strum-Maddox, *Performance, Poetry and Politics on the Queen's Day: Catherine de Médicis and Pierre de Ronsard at Fontainebleau*.* Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007. ix + 267 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$99.95 US (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-5839-9

[*Readers should note that "Fontainebleau" is spelled correctly throughout the text of the book, but is misspelled on both the dust jacket and title page.]

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The Queen's Day Fontainebleau festivals of Sunday, 13 February 1564, produced by the Queen Mother Catherine de Médicis and in part created by Pierre de Ronsard, have not been memorialized as a major moment in the history of sixteenth-century France. However, this series of essays by Professors Virginia Scott, a theatre historian, and Sara Strum-Maddox, a specialist in medieval and Renaissance French and Italian literature, makes a case for their being an *événement matrice* in the larger history of the period (to use Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's words). For the full understanding of one day's performances, the authors apply their specializations to explore several centuries of literary and dramatic development and a shorter period of French political history. Thus, they move beyond the compartmentalization of early modern French studies, in their words, "across national, linguistic, and disciplinary boundaries.... to questions of political, cultural, literary, and theatrical history as we construct a fuller, 'thicker,' more nuanced and more integrated account of the Queen's Day and its context than either of us could have achieved working alone" (p. 4). The essays explicate the significance of two dramatic works, the *Bergerie* of Pierre de Ronsard and an adaptation of the story of the Scottish Princess Ginevra from Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*.

First, among the many issues in reconstructing performances at the royal court on this day is whether or not the *Bergerie* was actually performed. The erudite arguments in favor of its production and appropriateness to the occasion would engage anyone interested in sixteenth-century French court culture. Like other playbooks of the time, the earliest printed text of 1565, dedicated to Mary Queen of Scotland, had the typographical form of a play "that had been or was to be performed" (p. 91). Scott and Strum-Maddox consistently and frequently note that--while probable--their reconstruction of an actual performance is speculative, which creates a problem for any reviewer. However, an actual performance of Ronsard's pastoral play at the Queen's Day festivities is critical to the authors' linking Catherine and Ronsard in a project to transcend the immediate political and historical events "into the higher sphere of poetic vision."^[1] Each essay offers a variety of political and aesthetic insights into the impulses not only for staging the extravagant productions on 13 February 1564, but also for understanding both the creation of a Renaissance royal aesthetic and the ambitions of the greatest of French poets to transform both political practices and the nobility's conduct through art and poetry.

The Queen's Day festivals took place on the Sunday before Mardi Gras, traditionally a time of festivities at court. Readers not familiar with the catastrophic political and religious history of the years immediately after King Henry II's death in a joust in July 1559 will patiently have to follow chapter one, "Setting the Scene." This chapter ably chronicles the events and major actors when a coup d'état by the powerful noble family of the Guise, who controlled the young

King Francis II, transformed the influence and roles of traditional governing institutions and other powerful families. Discontent among the nobility and the newly assertive Huguenots saw in turn an unsuccessful conspiracy to kidnap the king and ruthless executions of its noble Protestant perpetrators. Then, with the death of Francis II, the Guise ceded authority to Catherine de' Médicis as regent for her young son Charles IX. There followed attempts at religious toleration, Guise-initiated attacks on Huguenot congregations, civil war, and the assassination of the Duke of Guise in February 1563. Another troublesome political actor, Antoine de Bourbon, King of Navarre and in the line of succession to the crown, had died in 1562. Thus, by early 1563, these deaths and the succession of Charles IX had created an opportunity for peace that resulted in the Edict of Amboise (March 1563) and a rallying of the great nobility around the new king and Catherine.

Ronsard and Catherine, as well as the very gifted Chancellor Michel de L'Hôpital, sought to erase the memory of the recent "histoire monstrueuse" (as Ronsard called it in his *Discours des Miseres de ce temp*) by promoting a "new golden age" of peace, union, and fidelity to the monarchy (p. 54). The authors regularly note the necessity of comprehending the "nuance" through which poetry, polemics, performances, and political order were unified. They cite with approval and throughout their essays reiterate Timothy Hampton's position that "it was Ronsard who made the literary construction of French identity his life work." [2] In establishing the nuance between the poet's creations and the political realities conditioning his audiences' responses, the authors provide a creative, informative and fascinating study of a complex time when, as Donald Kelley writes, "French society seemed to be passing through a kind of identity crisis both in politics and in learning" in which a new generation of historians sought "to find the national bearings by throwing new light upon the French past. [3] Ronsard's oeuvre enters this project as well, including his work on the *Franciade* as part of a life long project to "endow the French nation with an illustrious mythic history" (p. 40). The festivals of 13 February 1564 can not be understood in isolation, but--as the authors make clear--were deeply embedded in the crisis of the time.

Major components of the Queen's Day pageants established the arguments and models of deportment for peace among the nobility and harmony and loyalty within the nation. Moreover, the Fontainebleau festivals were held as a prelude to a carefully conceived royal tour of the kingdom, which would take eighteen months and entail formal entries or festivals in many French towns. In following the king from Fontainebleau through much of France, the nobility would appear to the French public as fully reconciled to the rule of a just and loving king. The actors in the probable production of the *Bergerie* made this ideal propitious, since they were the princely and noble children of France. The setting of a bucolic pastoral world contrasted with the magnificence of Fontainebleau sought to restore a mythical but simpler and innocent France and to erase the memory of recent events, particularly the conflicts over religion. The child actors presided over a land happily governed by a "Bergere d'honneur" and a Carlin, "le maistre des Pasteurs"--that is, Catherine and Charles IX. In their chansons, the courtier audience partook of " 'a system of double reading,' in which the depiction of the pastoral world disguises a tableau of contemporary *moeurs*" (p. 66).

The shepherd-actors were the king's two brothers and sister (the twelve-year-old Henry duc d'Orléans, the younger Francis duc d'Anjou, and Princess Margot), the ten-year-old Henry of Navarre, and the thirteen-year-old Henry of Guise. Each shepherd offered a chanson with a gift as the authors write "Ronsard invests the discourse of his mock shepherds with an ideological and social content which promises them a brighter future: whereas their fathers and uncles had been the principal players in the recent discord, the children participate now in concord from which they may confidently expect the return of the Golden Age and its 'ancient peace'" (p 72). In the play's conclusion, two wandering shepherds--who were perhaps played by Louis

Bourbon, Prince de Condé, (a repentant rebel to royal authority) and the Constable Montmorency—give advice on proper princely conduct. The known identity of some of the young actors and speculations on the others add to the importance of the coded political discourse for the intimate audience of courtiers. The authors' cite Guy Spielmann's view of the escalating complexity of such political spectacle from the aesthetic, the allegorical, and the hermetic which "affirm the messianic value of a reign."^[4]

The poetic and aesthetic form and imagery in Ronsard's uses of the pastoral setting, of encomiastic and Virgilian modes, and of Italian, humanist and French conventions of courtier and princely conduct literature are given full attention. The authors find Ronsard advancing the topos of great renown and deeds being lost without a poet to immortalize them as well as turning to the role of rhetoric and persuasion as the best source of good government. Ronsard even exalted the role of the poet in supplying words for the Renaissance ideal of the orator-king and concluded the play with a chorus of shepherds who reminded the audience "it is great Princes, not Shepherds, who speak" (p. 87). Indeed, actor-princes were praising the present major spectators, King Charles and Queen-Mother Catherine. In a twist revealing the multiple applications of such festive, poetic and political discourse, the authors reflect on how the *Bergerie* in its 1565 printed text served the objectives of first a Valois and Scottish and then an English dynastic marriage.

While there is much that depends upon educated speculation in reconstructing the *Bergerie*, even less is known about the second Queen's Day play, or as the authors write (after completing nearly two chapters on the possible performance): "Finally, nothing is certain about the performance of "la Belle Genièvre" at Fontainebleau" (p. 178). The text of the play has not survived, but Ronsard's two "*trophées*" and a spoken epilogue have, as well as four interludes. Speculations on the play, its venue, its content, and actors serve as a net for pulling together what is and is not known about French court drama in the period, and they are engaging in showing what can be known. The actresses were probably "the most virtuous and beautiful princesses and ladies of Catherine's court" (p. 152). This probability elicits reviews of the role of noble women in court productions and the likely influence of Italian, particularly Florentine, practices. This dramatized and translated selection from Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, with a medieval Scottish setting, played to the French nobility's fondness for chivalric and Arthurian imagery. The topic—a princess, who on false rumors of adultery, was condemned to be stoned to death (according to ancient Scottish custom) was saved and proven innocent by her true love—would be sufficiently dramatic, but also with its happy ending would have satisfied Catherine's rule that only comedies be played at court. Ronsard's *trophées*, "probably performed by singers" (p. 178), appear to be influenced by Petrarch's *Trionfi* and, perhaps, were represented on triumphal chariots. The Scottish setting also may reflect Ronsard's affection for Mary Queen of Scotland and had relevance to French diplomacy in either seeking a new royal marriage with Mary or in strengthening the Franco-Scottish alliance. From the authors' discussion of this play, one learns much about costuming, staging, political theatre, court forms, and cultural transmissions in the mid-sixteenth century. However, as interesting as such knowledge is, it cannot bear the weight to make Ronsard a full partner in Catherine's festive planning. This is not to say that it lessens the importance of Ronsard as both poet and patriot.

As a cultural historian, I am in no position to question the praise given to the poetry of the *Bergerie* or the *trophées*, whose merits the authors find much above the status of ephemeral political propaganda and flattery of a patron. In a period of increased French aristocratic cultural sophistication and attention to extravagant conceits and allegories in public ceremonies and festivals, the authors offer carefully considered interpretations of sources, performances, audience responses, and circulation of ideas and images. Overall, the festivals' hyperbole and forms were not new—concord, peace, loyalty, and justice had been motifs represented in

monarchical festivals for centuries—but the concentrated use of the themes by princely actors, their special audience, and their new form of staging in a highly organized, long-term program aimed at transforming political culture merit this detailed consideration of the Queen’s Day productions. Although not as innovative as they are made to appear, Ronsard’s contributions continued and refined a cultural revolution well underway by 1563. The Queen’s Day festivals represent transformations in aesthetics and political ideas that made it possible for contemporaries to believe that elite French sensibilities and conduct could be changed by art, beauty, and persuasion. The authors do not use the word *mentalité* in their essays, but—for readers interested in sixteenth-century France—their discussions reveal the mid-century seismic shift in ways of presenting and thinking about the world among the elite. Disguising, masking, and performing were staples of the court. In having young royals and nobles acting well-rehearsed parts, the play fitted well with Renaissance notions of education for public roles and for imprinting proper moral sentiments within an actor’s conscience and conduct.

Historians have noted that from the early decades of the sixteenth century an ongoing debate about the “precise nature of the French monarchy” had polarized between a “broadly humanistic” view of kings willing to accept curbs on their power by the estates of religion, justice, and *police* (as best represented in Claude de Seyssel’s *La monarchie de France*, 1519) and the royal juristic position that king’s were above all laws and men because they were “perfect in prudence and nobility” (as was represented by Guillaume Bude’s *L’institution du prince*, 1519). [5] The 1564 festivities had been anticipated in other festivals that were moving toward staging programs that accommodated the hyperbole of poets and orators who celebrated the French monarchy and the Valois dynasty. For example, in images and sonnets, Nicolas Houel, a Parisian apothecary and artistic adviser to Catherine, programmed a reception for Francis II at Chenonceau early in 1561. Houel engaged Antoine Caron (and perhaps other artists) to produce illustrations for a work entitled *L’Histoire Françoise de nostre temps* and most likely produced as designs for a tapestry program. [6] Catherine’s experimenting with imagery and the poeticizing of her status continued in Houel and Caron’s *L’Histoire de la Royne Arthémise*, which Sheila Ffolliot has shown as invented imagery suitable for Catherine’s position. [7] These projects follow in a gendered key the classical, mythological themes and magnificence fully evident in entry programs of the late 1540s of Henry II. Neither was the turn to the pastoral theme at court in 1564 novel in urban or courtly festive art, but for an audience of nobles it fortified the theme of the nobility’s important role in preserving France. Like Ronsard’s, the turn to mythology and allegory proclaimed the uniqueness of the French monarchy and culture. The *Franciade* built on the Trojan myth of French antiquity and nobility while legal humanist were creating a “critical examination of French history.” Poets and historians—the later seen as “*erudite du roi*”—formed a scholarly Pléiade of prosaic and weighty learning that, as Kelley writes, “overlapped” with Ronsard’s poetic circle: “the principle concern of both groups was the ‘defense and illustration’ of French civilization.” [8]

Ronsard specialists alone can establish how much more than a unique patron-client relationship was involved in the poet’s closeness to Catherine. This reviewer does not pretend to be able to judge poetry. Certainly it is established that Ronsard’s engagement in the unique circumstance of his lifetime greatly shaped his poetic accomplishments. These essays give pleasure in their rich texturing of the argument for his central role in the project to preserve the monarchy and establish an identity for France and the Valois dynasty. While the authors convince me of Ronsard’s sincerity and passion for bringing unity and peace to France, I still remain in doubt about his greater importance than many other talented people whom Catherine brought together in experimenting with various myths of the destiny of France and the Valois dynasty. Ronsard’s creations appear at the divide between advancing a crown-centered rather than a nation-at-large patriotism. The Religious Wars nearly destroyed the latter conception, and the Bourbon King Henry IV proved able to make the former one the anchor for the “true” history of

France.[9] Although in its title this book appears to be only one day in that project of defining the French monarchy, its authors' erudition and reconstruction of the Queen's Day festivals provide an enlightened addition to our knowledge of the many parts that mid-sixteenth-century poetry, drama and court culture played in establishing the identity of France.

NOTES

[1] Francis M. Higman, "Ronsard's Political and Polemical Poetry," in *Ronsard The Poet*, ed. Terrence Cave (London: Methuen, 1973), p. 281, as cited by the authors on p. 131.

[2] Timothy Hampton, "Representing France at Mid-Century: Du Bellay and the Lyric Invention of National Character," in *Literature and the Nation in the Sixteenth Century: Inventing Renaissance France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 2000) p. 191, as cited by the authors on p. 40.

[3] Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship: Language, Law, and History in the French Renaissance* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970) p. 242-243."

[4] Guy Spielmann, "Le Mythe de l'Arcadie dans le texte du pouvoir royal: sémiotique et esotérisme" in *Et in Arcadia Ego* ed. Antoine Soare, *Biblio 17*, 100 (Paris, Seattle, Tübingen: 1997) p.259, as cited by the authors on p. 117.

[5] Robert J. Knecht, *The French Civil Wars*, (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000) p 26.

[6] Jules Guiffrey, *Les Dessins de L'Histoire des Rois de France par Nicolas Houel* (Paris : Edouard Champion, 1920). Images of the original are found on the internet on <http://arts-graphiques.louvre.fr> under numéro d'inventaire RF 29752.8 through RF 29752.19.

[7] Sheila Ffolliott, "Catherine de' Medici as Artemisia: Figuring the Powerful Widow in Early Modern Europe," in Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (eds.), *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[8] Kelley, p. 242.

[9] The shift is briefly but effectively covered by William F. Church in "France" in *National Consciousness, History, and Political Culture in Early-Modern Europe*, edited by Orest Ranum (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 48-50.

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