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Kathleen Wellman, *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013. xii + 433 pp. Notes and index. $45.00 (hb). ISBN 978-0-300-17885-2.

Review by Tracy Adams, University of Auckland, New Zealand.

Kathleen Wellman's history of French royal mistresses and queens between 1444 and 1599 is a terrific read, easily accessible for a well-educated general readership. While scholars who have worked on the women whose political careers are recounted here will find nothing new, those who have worked on, say, some of the women will find much of interest in the chapters on the others. The ideal audience, however, will be undergraduate students of French Renaissance history, who will see that women were politically active during these years.

Between the introduction and conclusion, chapters on two royal mistresses bookend the study: Agnès Sorel, representing the beginning of the Renaissance, and Gabrielle d'Estrées, the end. The other chapters are devoted to Anne of Brittany, the women of the court of Francis I, Diane de Poitiers, Catherine de' Medici, and Marguerite de Valois. Wellman proposes no narrative arc, explaining that "[o]ne cannot argue persuasively that queens or mistresses became stronger or that their positions evolved in a consistent direction" (p. 17). Still, as she demonstrates, the stories of these women are connected by their participation in the "broader culture of the Renaissance" (p. 17). Although excluded from succession to the crown by the Salic Law, they were at the center of politics. Their presence was always controversial, and earlier feminist scholars seemed reluctant to study them. Owing their positions to kings, either as wives or lovers, and often bearing reputations blackened by historical legend, they seemed on the whole not to offer useful examples for scholars interested in uncovering "mothers to think back through," to borrow Virginia Woolf's expression. But recent feminist scholarship has developed new ways of thinking about power, and Wellman's study, with its long perspective, is a welcome addition to this already considerable field.

Chapter one, "Agnès Sorel," examines the career of this first widely-known mistress of a French king within the context of King Charles VII's struggle, first, to consolidate power in his own kingdom and second, to oust the English from France. A long tradition arranges Charles VII's biography into a "before" (callow youth reluctant to act) and "after" (king leading the charge against the English), and an equally long tradition makes Agnès at least partly responsible for this transformation, although forensic evidence from 2005 proving that she would have been only a child at the time of the transformation has challenged that interpretation. Appearing in documents for the first time in 1444, Agnès seems to have been Charles VII's great love, more influential than either Joan of Arc or the king's mother-in-law, Yolande of Aragon. But information that would let us gage the nature of her power is lacking, even though contemporary chronicles acknowledged her importance at court, at least as far as the size of her entourage and her ability to help her friends were concerned. Chroniclers did not quite know what to make of her, but, on balance, a more positive than negative perception of her emerges from their writings. Her beneficial influence was short-lived, however. In early 1450 she traveled, pregnant, for unknown reasons, from the Loire Valley to join Charles VII, then reconquering Normandy. One contemporary chronicler claimed that she set out to warn the king of a plot against him. In any case, soon after her arrival, she died of a massive dose of mercury. Who was responsible for her death? Some suggested Charles VII's son, the dauphin Louis. Whatever the truth, Agnès has enjoyed a long afterlife, renowned as one of the most beautiful women of her time.

Chapter two, "Anne of Brittany," traces the life of the twice-crowned queen of France and duchess of Brittany who fought so hard to retain the independence of her duchy that many historians faulted her as a disloyal Frenchwoman. The adolescent duchess was married to Charles VIII (grandson of Charles VII) in late 1491 when Brittany became vulnerable following the death of her father, Duke Francis II. After Charles VIII's premature death in 1489, she married the next king, Louis XII. Although this marriage was visibly happier than her first, it produced only two daughters, not the son so urgently desired. Anne was a patron of the arts and greatly increased the number of females at the royal court. She was active in politics, although she could not realize her dearest wish, to marry her older daughter, Claude, to the son of the Holy Roman emperor Francis of Angoulême, later Francis I, thereby insuring that Brittany would not be absorbed into the crown.

"The Women of the Court of Francis I" are the subject of the third chapter. Although Anne of Brittany's daughter, Claude, became Francis I's queen, she has generally attracted less interest than the king's mother, Louise of Savoy, his sister Marguerite of Navarre, or his two most influential mistresses, the Countess of Chateaubriant and the Duchess of Estampes. The cultured and gentle Claude died at twenty-four after bearing seven children, and the role of her successor Eleanor of Austria, sister of Emperor Charles V, was also restrained. But Louise of Savoy was her son's most trusted advisor and twice served as regent, during the Italian wars and when Francis I was taken to Spain as prisoner by the Emperor after a disastrous defeat in Italy. Marguerite was similarly influential. Relatively little is known about the Countess of Chateaubriant, but the Duchess of Estampes, rumored to have been selected by Louise to replace the Countess as Francis's mistress on his return from captivity in Spain in 1526, was integrally involved in interior and exterior politics. She rose to prominence after Louise's death in 1531 and in the 1540s headed a faction that put her at odds with the dauphin Henry and his mistress Diane de Poitiers. When Francis I died in 1547, the Duchess was ejected from court.

Chapter four recounts the story of Diane de Poitiers, the most influential woman of Henry II's court, noting that his queen Catherine de' Medici achieved her greatest power only after the king's accidental death in 1559. Diane was twenty years older than Henry II, a wealthy widow prominent at the royal court. She is reputed to have transformed the young Henry from a timid youth (he was apparently marked by he years that he spent with his brother in captivity in Spain as ransom for his father the king) into a chivalric prince. The dynamic of her role as royal mistress was very different from that of her predecessors. If she was older and wiser than the king, however, she was also reputed to be preternaturally beautiful, her hold over him absolute. She too was a great patron of the arts, and, in this capacity, helped create and maintain images of herself that continue to fascinate: she is depicted most memorably as the huntress Diana and the moon. After Henry II's sudden death, she retired to her chateau of Anet, leaving court politics to the widowed queen Catherine de' Medici.

In chapter five, Wellman describes Catherine's life as the inverse of Diane's. Marginalized during the king's life, Catherine came to power with his death. Her childhood—she was orphaned just after birth—contrasted with that of the doted-upon Diane. Catherine was the pawn of her Florentine relatives, married into the French royal family by her uncle, the anti-Hapsburg Pope Clement VI. This was a coup for the Medici. Although her husband did not love her, Catherine cultivated King Francis I and studied with Marguerite of Navarre. She also strategically sought an alliance with Diane, which served her well. During the first ten years of her marriage, Catherine failed to produce an heir (although she made up for lost time by bearing ten in the second twelve years) but was supported by Diane when she was in danger of being sent home. Her political career began during Henry II's lifetime when she twice served as regent while he conducted wars. The growing conflict between Catholics and Protestants defined her regency after Henry II's accidental death on 1559. As queen mother she served as regent for their son Francis II, and, after his early death, for Charles IX. The position of regent was complicated, especially for a woman trying to navigate among the ultra-Catholic Guises, the moderate Catholics, and the Huguenots. She failed in her repeated attempts to appease the enemies despite her initial optimism. Her controversial role in the St. Bartholomew's Day massacres of 1572 has exerted a tenacious negative influence on her reputation, even though the exact nature of her involvement has never been clear. After the early death of Charles IX, Catherine put her hopes for peace in her son Henry III, but his reign too was marked by continuing religious struggles. Succession became a problem, because when her last son Francis died of

tuberculosis in 1584, the contested heir became Henry of Navarre, occasioning long-term fights between him and the Guises, or the League. When Catherine died in 1589, she was both praised and decried.

Chapter six is devoted to Catherine's daughter and King Henry of Navarre's first wife Margot, the most maligned woman in history, according to Wellman (p. 275). A supposed biography of the queen in the form of a scurrilous pamphlet of 1660 entitled "A Satiric Divorce" spawned a black legend built on promiscuity and incest that has endured to the present day. Yet, Montaigne dedicated the first edition of his essays to Margot (p. 276). Born in 1553, the seventh of the royal children, Margot was always interested in politics. Before her marriage, she had her eye on Henry of Guise, who would later form the League, but such a relationship would have been problematic, and she was disgraced when her interest came to light. A pawn in her mother's attempt to create peace, she became the bride of Henry of Navarre. In her memoir she claimed to have been horrified to learn that her marriage may have been a pretext to lure Protestants to Paris only to murder them. Although a devout Catholic, she initially supported her husband, making her family relationships, especially with her brother, Henry III, fraught. She broke with her husband and then attempted to make peace with him. But as Wellman explains, Henry was wildly adulterous, and the attempt brought nothing but unhappiness. Eventually, Margot went over to the Guises and began to plot against both Henry of Navarre and Henry III. She was eventually exiled to the fortress of Usson for twenty years. Childless, she agreed to an annulment of her marriage to Henry, by then King Henry IV, that was finalized in 1599. In 1605 she returned to Paris, enjoying for the rest of her days a reputation as an intellectual and *salonnière* with a special interest in Neo-Platonism.

The last chapter recounts the story of Gabrielle d'Estrées in whom the roles of royal mistress and queen nearly converged. Apple of Henry IV's eye for nine years, she bore the king three children (whom he legitimized), and he defined her position with letters patent. She was for all practical purposes queen. But she died during a particularly horrendous childbirth in 1599 before they could be married. Like most of the other women examined here, her career has been viewed diversely, but being associated with the popular Henry IV influenced her reputation positively. Still, her background was a bit dubious, especially for a potential queen. Her grandmother, Marie Gaudin, was one of Francis I's early mistresses, and her own mother, having left her husband to live with a much younger man on his estates, was murdered along with him by irate tenants. Yet, Gabrielle seems to have been cultivated and politically astute, a force behind Henry IV's final conversion to Catholicism. Wellman suggests that her early death was opportune in that it foreclosed what would have been a confrontation with the Pope and a reigniting of religious tensions.

Besides being entertaining this monograph serves the important purpose of offering a model for integrating the careers of women into already-established historical narratives. It is not a criticism to say that the study synthesizes vast amounts of scholarship into a readable story without offering any new research. That is what popular history does, and it is wonderful to reach out to a wider audience. Readers may regret the absence of any discussion of recent theories about female regencies in France, but, once again, this is a popular history.

I will note just two small issues. First, given that Wellman begins her Renaissance history with Agnès Sorel, it is disappointing that Anne of France, regent for her brother Charles VIII, receives no real attention. True, she was neither a mistress nor a queen, but she effectively reigned for eight years. The second is that Wellman sometimes transmits undocumented information for which one would like to know the source. Entire paragraphs, without citation, especially in the chapters on Diane de Poitiers and Catherine de' Medici (for example, pp. 197-98 and 230), recount events that leave the reader wondering "how does she know that?" Other examples include references, without citation, to Agnès Sorel as the "first officially designated French royal mistress" (p. 25 and continuing) (I can find no trace of the expression "maîtresse en titre" before Henry IV's usage) and the statement, without citation, that Charles VII publicly declared Agnès the "first official royal favorite" during an entry in 1444 (p. 37). It actually matters very much when the position of royal mistress began to be recognized officially, and one would need evidence to make the claim. Another example is that we are told, again without citation, that Diane de Poitiers was raised at the court of Anne of France. This assertion circulates widely, always without citation, and it would be good to

know where it comes from. In one case the source is misread. We are told that Contarini described Anne of Brittany as hunch-backed (p. 74); in fact he wrote that she "zoppa (limps) da un piede notabilmente." Another problem is the heavy reliance on Georges Toudouze's nearly completely citation-free biography for information on the Countess of Chateaubriant.[1] Wellman leaves the impression that we know a great deal about the Countess, but we do not, particularly when compared to what we know about the Duchess of Estampes. But these are small points. Wellman's work is a beautifully realized history of women associated with the court of Renaissance France.

NOTE

[1] Georges Toudouze, *Françoise de Châteaubriant et François Ier* (Paris: Fleury, 1948).

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