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Tracy Adams. *The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria*. Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. xxxvi + 338 pp. Map, appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8018-9625-5.

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With the exception of books about the Hundred Years War, English-language historians have largely ceded the study of late medieval France to literary scholars. In many cases, this poses a challenge for reviewers trained in history. Fortunately, Tracy Adams largely avoids most of the potential pitfalls of cross-disciplinary scholarship and has produced an important and provocative book about the oft-maligned Isabeau of Bavaria, queen consort of France from 1385-1422.

The book is not a biography, but part of a series entitled “Rethinking Theory.” Adams’ specialty is Christine de Pizan and the concept of love in medieval French romances. She states at the outset that biography is not her goal. Instead she “seeks to draw attention to aspects of the queen’s life that could be developed in further studies” (p. xxv). She sets out the key events in the queen’s life that attracted attention and comment from her contemporaries and those in the centuries that followed. Throughout the book, she delves extensively into the sources to challenge “common knowledge” both about Isabeau and other historical figures. This is unusually important for the men and women of early fifteenth-century France for several reasons: the disparities in the accounts of English, Burgundian, and “French”/Armagnac partisans; marital and dynastic relationships with overlapping allegiances that can confuse and challenge the most meticulous modern interpreters; and the purposeful and increasingly swift dissemination of myths about significant figures, including not only Isabeau, but also Joan of Arc and Charles VII.<sup>[1]</sup> One of Adams’ most significant theses is that Isabeau’s political activity can only be understood within the context of a feuding society (p. 1).

The first chapter provides an overview of Isabeau’s life, in which the queen of the frequently insane Charles VI comes across, not as the evil queen of legend, but as a respected and active politician who carefully negotiated her role in a society of feuding males. Charles’ madness left a void at the top, yet his occasional return to his senses complicated rather than diminished the struggles for power. Adams disentangles Isabeau from later legends by demonstrating not only the positive views expressed by many sources during her lifetime but also the political acumen she displayed in her effort to contain the hostilities between the king’s brother, Louis of Orléans, and Philip the Bold and his successor as Duke of Burgundy, John the Fearless. It is only within this delicate nexus that it becomes possible to appreciate Isabeau’s talent and at the same time understand the attitudes of different factions that contributed to the later growth and spread of belief in her supposed disrepute. When the family feud broke out in earnest in 1403, Isabeau was appointed to preside over the king’s council “during his absences.” The central theme of this book is stated early: “Isabeau’s best strategy was to maintain the conflict at a low enough level to avoid letting either faction establish *tutelle* over the king... To carry out her strategy, she formed alliances with whichever side posed the lesser threat to her, was less likely to remove the dauphin from her influence, and was more able to prevent the other side from doing so at any given moment” (p. 21). This explains a great deal about Isabeau’s choices, even her “fickleness” according to some observers. Yet her mediation succeeded to a large degree until the death of the dauphin, Louis of Guyenne, in 1415, which coincided with Henry V of England’s major victories. The political situation

deteriorated between 1417 with the English advance, the accession of the future Charles VII to the position as dauphin under the influence of Bernard of Armagnac, and the Armagnac assassination of John the Fearless in 1419. Under these circumstances, Adams considers Isabeau more unlucky than unsuccessful.

In chapter two, Adams explores the genesis of the black legend of Isabeau's promiscuity, cupidity and frivolity that emerged in the 1420s and flowered in succeeding centuries. She utilizes Pierre Nora's concept of genuine collective memory (*milieux de mémoire*) against constructed memories (*lieux de mémoire*) to contrast the largely positive view many expressed of Isabeau during her lifetime with the later over-use of two overtly hostile sources, Michel Pintoin and Jacques LeGrand. In *lieux de mémoire*, Adams contends that the queen became the foil "against which to construct French identity" (p. 39). Beginning with the Treaty of Troyes in 1420 and ending with Joan of Arc's victories and the coronation of the fiercely Armagnac Charles VII in 1429, Isabeau began to be transformed into "an antitype for the virtues associated with 'Frenchness'" (p. 40). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, historians, mostly relying on Pintoin, began to paint Isabeau as responsible for the ruin of France. The concept seemed particularly apt during the Wars of Religion, when François Hotman penned *Francogallia*, one section of which discussed whether kings had the right to alienate parts of their kingdom without the consent of their subjects. The Treaty of Troyes, signed by Isabeau, seemed to do just that. While following Monstrelet for most of his critique, Hotman could not contain his misogynistic impulses in attributing characteristics to Isabeau ("a wild beast") that he certainly meant for Catherine de Medici. By the eighteenth century, all attempts at objectivity had been abandoned, as propagandistic authors such as Louise de Keralio conflated Isabeau with Marie Antoinette. Keralio asserts that were it not for the latter, Isabeau's marriage to Charles VI "would be regarded as the most horrifying moment in the annals of our history" (p. 60). The model of *lieux de mémoire* now came full circle at the same moment that Joan of Arc (the anti-Isabeau) was coming to be seen as a symbol of the nation.

In the third chapter, Adams argues convincingly that Isabeau was quite effective in her role as a "mediator queen," as the king certainly intended in making her President of the Council. Sources portray Isabeau as intervening on behalf of the suffering people and keeping warring factions at bay. Connections with the role of the Virgin Mary as mediatrix are explicit. While Adams compares Isabeau with other queens such as Blanche of Castile, an important lacuna is any discussion of the role of Yolande of Aragon, who served as surrogate mother to the dauphin Charles after his engagement to her daughter Marie. Yolande exerted enormous power, often behind the scenes, through her large network of alliances and informants. She also served as mediator between Charles VII and his counselors, especially in the promotion of Joan of Arc's mission. Why is there no discussion at all of this powerful "other queen" who played such a critical role in the life of Isabeau's youngest son? Such a comparison could both have bolstered Adams' arguments about queens as mediators and also raised some important issues not addressed. In view of Yolande's political activities and mediatorial role between court and outside factions, why did no evil legend attach itself to her? Adams goes on to discuss the importance of behind-the-scenes activity by powerful women, another area in which Isabeau and Yolande could be compared and contrasted. As Susan Zaeske argues, the Biblical heroine Esther provided the role model.[2] Esther "teaches [women] that direct, resistant rhetoric is ineffective, even dangerous, while clever, indirect, nonconfrontational methods will succeed in gaining the desired end—power" (p. 78).

Another model for Isabeau was provided by the poet Christine de Pizan, who not only celebrated the deeds of Joan of Arc in her *Ditié* but also argued that women could assume roles usually reserved for men when the latter could not or would not do so. Arguing that women were by nature peacemakers, Christine carved out a unique role for the mediator queen. Adams puts to rest Alfred Coville's suggestion that Isabeau could have ended the conflict (really?) between Armagnacs and Burgundians had she been a more skilled mediator. Any study of this period demonstrates the complexity of allegiances involving most of the royalty and aristocracy, so to suggest that any queen or king, however talented, could have better ended such a conflict is simplistic at best. The first half of the fifteenth

century in France is an example of webs of allegiance and loyalty that led to friends becoming enemies. My own study of Joan of Arc shows how even those who appeared to share her vision of a united France quickly gave up their incipient patriotism—if it can be called that—once she was gone. The Bastard of Orléans, later Count of Dunois, arrested Joan's favored companion, the Duke of Alençon and his own colleague in 1456. The arrest occurred immediately after both testified at Joan's nullification proceeding, at which point Alençon was charged with *lèse-majesté*, the result of numerous rebellions against Charles VII. This one example illustrates the problematic relationships that every king—let alone queen—of the time experienced. Most chroniclers who mention Isabeau during the active period of her queenship praise her efforts at peacemaking, even hostile observers who mention her intervention (during pregnancy) after several counselors had been struck by lightning. Whether the event happened or not is unimportant; that it was used in the construction of *mémoire* is what matters, even though the viewpoint of Isabeau as peacemaker disappeared once Charles VII became king.

Chapters four and five are problematic for historians. The material Adams discusses is largely literary. These chapters could have been condensed and added to chapter one. However, since Adams is writing as a literary specialist, her choice is understandable. Still, it constitutes a break in the narrative historians expect. Both chapters deal with Isabeau's reputation during her lifetime (partially covered in chapter one, but here in greater depth). Adams effectively undermines Pintoin's legitimacy as a commentator as well as the sermons of Jacques LeGrand. When she examines the *Songe véritable*, an anonymous text, Adams argues that what has often been taken to be a demonstration of Isabeau's ill repute is actually the reverse. This may be sound literary theory, but is not propounded in a way that will convince historians. Likewise, in chapter five, on Isabeau's role in the *Cour amoureuse*, an institution both attributed to her, a source of charges against her, and a source that has been used to advance ideas of her frivolity, there is little that feels compelling to a historian. However, Adams does argue that the idea of the *Cour amoureuse* demonstrated the queen's moral authority as someone who could properly judge a cause and in the process bring about peace.

Chapter six concerns the "kidnapping" of the dauphin, Louis de Guyenne, by John the Fearless in 1405, during one of Charles VI's bouts of madness. Adams argues for Isabeau's strategic calculation to wait, often missed or misconstrued by chroniclers as well as modern scholars. Although she was ironically accused of tardiness in her response, Isabeau wisely chose not to engage between the factions until she felt she could succeed. Christine de Pizan's epistle to the queen, asking her to act, occupies a substantial portion of the chapter. In this context, Adams discusses the public nature and intent of such 'letters,' suggesting that Christine's epistle, which has often been interpreted as a criticism of the queen, was in fact intended to support her position as a liminal figure trying to parlay her position as guardian of France's well-being: "Bavarian and French, positioned inside and outside of the monarchy, she could be a successful mediator" (p. 187).

Adams devotes chapter seven to the Treaty of Troyes, arguably the most important decision Isabeau took as queen consort. By its clauses, she married her daughter Catherine to Henry V and disinherited her son Charles in favor of the heirs of the English king. As a historian, I consider this chapter to be the most problematic and least convincing, for at times Adams seems to demonize both the Armagnacs (who are represented as a single-minded entity, which they were not) and Charles. There is little to no examination of Isabeau's relationship (or non-relationship) with her youngest son, especially after his betrothal to Marie of Anjou. Admittedly, Charles may not have been the most inspiring of figures at the time, especially after his rash actions at the bridge at Montereau in 1419 caused the situation with Burgundy to deteriorate further. Still, a full examination of the mother-son relationship is essential. Adams admits that Isabeau may have been plied with misinformation about her son, suggesting that "it may have been relatively simple for a messenger of Henry V to convince the queen of her son's treacherous intents regarding her" (p. 212). Biographers of Charles VII could say the same of Isabeau. Still, it would be hard to argue that, without foreknowledge of Henry V's sudden death in 1422, Isabeau made the only practical decision in view of the Anglo-Burgundian threat. Both chapters seven and eight,

in which Adams argues for the queen's devotion to her husband, children and friends, seem at times a bit forced. This is certainly true for the relationship with Charles, but also her daughter Marie, who challenged her mother's will.

From a stylistic standpoint, the book might have trouble reaching a wider or even an undergraduate audience. Either Adams or the publisher chose to juxtapose long French passages with their English translations throughout the text, something that, for better or worse, historians abandoned some time ago in favor of readability. But since Adams' mastery of the French language is first-rate, the French would have been better placed in the endnotes or left out except in cases where the meaning is ambiguous. Oddly, there is also a lack of consistency, where words whose meanings might not be known to non-French speakers (e.g., *repoussoir*, foil, p. 39) are not translated. Also, the frequent intrusions of the authorial "I" are disconcerting, especially when Adams talks about how she will proceed throughout the book.

Despite these qualifications, especially about the absence of serious discussion of the future Charles VII, this is a remarkable book that warrants a long and detailed review. Throughout the book, the author demonstrates that, contrary to legend, Isabeau was politically knowledgeable and strategic in her intercessory role as mediator. Considering the factions she had to deal with, Isabeau showed herself both astute and adaptable in using the models available for female (co-) rulers. Adams lays to rest completely the stereotypes of Isabeau's promiscuity, frivolity and greed. Moreover, she illuminates the murky and tangled relationships between the court, Louis of Orléans and the Burgundians--no small achievement. Finally, she fully succeeds in her initial goal of drawing attention to an understudied subject and time period in French history.

## NOTES

[1] See the important new work by Daniel Hobbins, *Authorship and Publicity Before Print: Jean Gerson and the Transformation of Late Medieval Learning* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

[2] Susan Zaeske, "Unveiling Esther as a Pragmatic Radical Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 33:3 (2000), p. 202.

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