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Leah L. Chang and Katherine Kong, eds. and trans. *Portraits of the Queen Mother: Polemics, Panegyrics, Letters*. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series (Book 35). Illustrations, tables, notes, glossaries, bibliography, and index. 283 pp. \$31.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7727-2172-3.

Review by Kathleen Wellman, Southern Methodist University.

Portraits of the Queen Mother, a collection of documents accompanied by an extensive introduction by the editors (who are also the translators), is a welcome addition to the literature treating Catherine de' Medici. It is also a most fitting volume for the series "The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe," which, under the direction of Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr. has published a great many works by or about women in the early modern period. The documents included in *Portraits of the Queen Mother* allow readers to explore the most significant and divisive issues that have shaped how Catherine de' Medici has been understood since the sixteenth century. The volume includes a fifty-six page introduction, some 140 pages of documents, and then another forty pages of documents included in an appendix. This collection is especially useful in making English translations of many previously untranslated texts widely available.

The introduction by the editors and translators, Leah L. Chang and Katherine Kong, gives readers a clear and illuminating orientation to Catherine's biography with a particular emphasis on the issues and events which shaped both her self-presentation and subsequent reputation. Those central themes include her paternal Italian heritage as well as her more overlooked maternal French heritage, the contestation over female rule in France, and the history of the religious wars in France, especially the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre with its decisive impact on Catherine de' Medici's historical reputation. The introduction familiarizes readers with the state of current scholarship on these topics, while the documents themselves elucidate how both Catherine and her contemporaries articulated the initial, crucial positions on these issues. The editors are especially sensitive to the gendered dimensions of Catherine's self-presentation as well as to the animus she provoked. The second half of the introductory essay discusses the editors' rationale for including particular texts, how they address the image of the queen, and how they shaped our understanding of her.

The carefully-selected texts are heterogeneous but also well-organized to illuminate moments, key and controversial, in Catherine de' Medici's long period of political prominence, especially the events of St. Bartholomew's Day as well as her regencies for her sons. The editors deliberately chose documents that are particularly revealing about how Catherine presented herself as both queen and mother. They included a selection of letters from Catherine's voluminous correspondence drawn from the period 1530-1580, from her youth to near her death in 1588. The selected letters focus explicitly on the times of greatest conflict for the queen. In their introduction, the editors conscientiously specify the caveats with which readers should approach these letters. Those cautions include an acute sensitivity to both the specific complexity of the immediate political context of the letters as well as the more general conventions of letter writing in the period.

Particularly welcome inclusions in this collection are the chatty and insightful comments of Venetian ambassadors writing home to the *doge* and the Senate. These reports have never been available in

English. The editors again caution that the reports should not be taken at face value; they too are part performance and many layered. The ambassadors played roles in the drama of the French court and as well as in the Venetian court to which they also belonged and reported. Ambassadors did not simply observe and report; they shaped events as well, particularly diplomatic relations. Their reported conversations and the fulsome personal comments make their reports engaging and immediate. Especially noteworthy are the portraits these various ambassadors drew of the principal figures at the French court. In the case of Catherine de' Medici, ambassadors both comment on her and convey her representation of herself. But they also try to discern and report her character and her strategies for governing. They reflect the evolution over time from Catherine de' Medici being viewed with benign indifference, to being appreciated in her role as mother and as conciliator, and finally to being hated as religious division proved intractable to her efforts.

Another significant feature of this collection is the inclusion of some key polemical writings that decisively shaped views of Catherine, beginning with perhaps the most vociferous of them—the *Discours merveilleux*, written in the aftermath of the St. Bartholomew's massacre by a Protestant polemicist, likely part of a concerted effort to discredit Catherine. The editors explore the complex publication history of this pamphlet and discuss the several suspected authors but conclude that the author cannot be definitively determined. This widely translated and disseminated text proved to be particularly effective in defining the negative reputation of the queen. She became the epitome of Florentine deceitfulness, an egregious example of the dangers of female rule, and, ultimately, a monstrous examples of a ruler deformed by both her gender and her unscrupulous pursuit of power.

This volume also includes a portion of Pierre de Bourdeille, lord of Brantôme's portrait of Catherine de' Medici from his collection of *Dames illustres*. His depiction stands in marked contrast to the evil queen of his *Dames galantes*. Brantôme's use of the first person in expressions, such as "I saw" or "I was told," gave his account the greater authority of a biography. His positive portrayal did not have as great an impact as the relentlessly negative *Discours merveilleux*. Nonetheless, the two texts address, one positive and one negative, the central issues over which Catherine's reputation was most contested and on which commentators sharply differ.

All of the documents are amplified with thorough footnotes, making it possible for readers, both familiar and unfamiliar with the historical context, to understand the many references contained in the all of the texts. This is especially useful in reading letters full of remarks about less well-known figures and events.

An appendix of forty pages adds documents about Catherine de' Medici or from the same time period. It is unfortunate that, having introduced the specifics of each of the documents in the collection so thoroughly, the documents in the appendix are not discussed in the introduction, although they do have footnotes explaining references. Unfamiliar readers may find those documents somewhat less useful as a result.

This documentary collection is an excellent vehicle for teaching the early modern period or women's history. It allows students to explore an organized group of documents, presenting an intriguing variety of documents and perspectives on this powerful and controversial queen. The introduction gives an excellent foundation for understanding both the issues that inform the selection of particular documents as well as those they reveal. The editors' cautions about how to approach the study of sixteenth-century documents will serve students especially well.

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