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Kendall B. Tarte, *Writing Places: Sixteenth-Century City Culture and the Des Roches Salon*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007. 269 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$56.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-87413-965-5.

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If there is a “spatial turn” in current literary criticism, then Kendall Tarte’s new book, *Writing Places: Sixteenth-Century City Culture and the Des Roches Salon*, fits well within a growing body of work that considers place as an important subject of, and influence on, literary productions of the French Renaissance.^[1] Just as historians of cities have begun to examine how city-dwellers imagined and used urban space and how the particular social, political, and religious topographies of cities influenced behavior,^[2] literary scholars have turned to consider the role that cities and the urban environment played in the understanding of the self, the community, and a national sentiment based in history and monarchy.^[3] Whereas most literary studies tend to focus on the concept of “the city” in general or on Paris as the capital of the kingdom, Tarte turns her attention to a specific French provincial city and its literary community: Poitiers. In the 1570s and 1580s, Poitiers housed an important early literary salon conducted by Madeleine Neveu and Catherine Fradonnet, dames des Roches, and thus constituted the setting for the varied literary productions of this mother and daughter pair and their male associates. In adopting the title of *Writing Places*, Tarte explicitly argues for an approach to literary communities that simultaneously considers the influence of local events and traditions on their writing and the ways in which their works comment on the particular place in which they were produced. The result is an “attentive visit” (p. 25) to both the real and imagined literary communities in which the dames des Roches played a leading role and the episodes in Poitiers’ history that inspired a topographical consideration of the city in both literary and historical texts. Tarte is quite successful in using literary evidence to present the des Roches salon as a lively place of exchange and in arguing for both Neveu and Fradonnet as female poets concerned with the kind of political and historical commentary usually associated with men. She is less successful, however, in showing how Poitiers emerges as a particular locale with specific attributes from these writings.

Much of Tarte’s attention in *Writing Places* is in fact focused on the ways in which the dames des Roches helped to create actual and imagined literary communities. The first two chapters of the book are devoted to the well-known volume entitled *La Puce de Madame des-Roches* published in Paris in 1582, in which the Parisian lawyers and magistrates who had assembled in Poitiers for the Grands Jours of 1579 traded poems with Catherine Fradonnet on the subject of a flea that Estienne Pasquier reputedly spied on her breast during a visit to her house during the court sessions. Tarte argues that although many of the poems objectify Fradonnet’s anatomy and make the female body a field of conquest, the structure of the work itself offers a more equal vision of the authorial voices of Fradonnet and her male visitors and provides important evidence for understanding the salon environment itself within which these poems were conceived. Thus, although describing the path of the flea gives the male writers the opportunity to imagine their own tours of the female body, the call and response structure of the volume, in which Fradonnet repeatedly responds to the men’s efforts in a modest yet independent voice, models the kind of give-and-take that readers should imagine as occurring within the setting of the actual salon at Poitiers. The preliminary texts, which describe the initial encounter between Pasquier

and Fradonnet and which present the contents of the volume as the subject of conversation at yet another mixed social gathering in Poitou, further define the salon's attributes and establish it as an exciting yet respectable object for readers.

Tarte is to be commended for the extent to which she examines the legal context of the court sessions to interpret many of the references in the *Puce* poetry. Her careful reading of published court decisions particularly helps her to analyze a series of playful poems that present a lover's protestations as a judicial complaint. Yet she might have exercised a little more caution, I believe, in taking the volume of poetry as a clear reflection of the actual salon experience. As the editor of the work explains, the body of poetry was not transferred straight from the salon to the publisher, but was rather the product of later collection, as the poems were circulated in Poitiers and Paris, collected by the editor and others, and even added to over time by the participants. Thus, the volume may say as much about the erudite group of legal scholars and judges and their perceptions and memories of the salon as about the actual gathering itself. Indeed, when one examines the *Puce* volume, the weight of the neo-Latin poetry is impressive, and many of these writers were certainly no neophytes to poetry in Latin and French.[4] Some attention to their previous writings would therefore have put Tarte in a position to comment on how they particularly shaped their representations of Catherine Fradonnet as a learned yet desirable woman and how they distinctly framed the salon environment to which they were contributing.

In line with her interest in how the dames des Roches both commented on and were influenced by a sense of community and place, Tarte also devotes two chapters to an analysis of their discussions of the course of the religious wars in Poitiers and of how women could participate in the political community through writing. *Writing Places* argues that these women had strong political views which they expressed through their poetry and that they saw their commentaries as creating a role for women as historical writers. Indeed, Madeleine Neveu commented extensively on the religious and political situation in her city through her poetry, and it is striking how her viewpoint reflected the concerns of the powerful ultra-Catholic group in Poitiers, a strongly Catholic city that would later declare for the Catholic League. Thus, Neveu criticizes the Protestants as "monstres vivans de rapine" (p. 181), extols Henri, duc de Guise as a Hercules who will come to the aid of the Catholic church, mourns the deaths of the Catholic captains who died in the famous siege of Poitiers in 1569, and even puts the city's desires for a parlement to verse.[5] Further, she makes a clear reference to a miracle story in active circulation in Poitiers, in which the city's patron saints—the Virgin, Ste. Radegonde, and St. Hilaire—saved Poitiers from foreign attack, and thus paints the duc de Guise as a virtually sainted savior, although this is not a reference that Tarte picks up on.[6] For her part, Catherine Fradonnet directly addressed Henri III as king and, despite some expressions of modesty due to her sex, promised a future celebration of his valorous acts. Tarte is correct to argue that the dames des Roches, through these writings, were directly asserting a place for women as witnesses of the events of the religious wars and commentators of history. In addition, she describes how Madeleine Neveu worked to construct a female literary community through methods strikingly similar to those used by Christine de Pisan: the description of a series of female mythological figures known for their accomplishments as mothers, in war, in the building of cities, or in the law, and the image of a learned group of women, possessed of great virtues and reputation, who will "replac[e] ignorance by building a learned community in the city" (p. 216).

Whether Neveu had access to a manuscript version of Pisan's *City of Ladies* is hardly important; what is striking is that the dames des Roches sought to create a female literary community that would be composed of city women and that they saw themselves as well-qualified to comment publicly on political events. Their confidence, moreover, was seemingly well-placed, since they were able to offer their views to the public in four separate published volumes of verse and letters. Historians, however, might wish for a little more detailed attention to the ways that these views reacted to or reflected the chronology of events during the wars of religion. Praise of the duc de Guise as the defender of Poitiers during the Protestant siege of 1569 did not mean the same thing as identifying him as the possible savior of the Catholic Church and recounting his august genealogy in the 1580s. It is also interesting to see such

vocal Catholics welcoming Pasquier, Antoine Loisel, and Scévole de Sainte-Marthe, men who would become important *politiques* of the League period, into their home in 1579, not to mention their Protestant friend, Joseph Scaliger. It is true that none of the poems in the works of the dames des Roches are dated, yet it would be helpful to have some consideration of how the women's views may have evolved with the series of events that took place in Poitiers from 1569 to the mid-1580s and how much they could be said either to set or to follow public opinion.

Central to Tarte's approach to "writing places" is to see Poitiers not only as the context, but also as the object, of the writings she is discussing. In analyzing the poems in the *Puce* volume, Tarte argues that the male authors, in presenting the female body as a landscape for the flea to enjoy or conquer, elide anatomy and urban topography to create an association between the person of Catherine Fradonnet and the city of Poitiers. Such a connection, she shows, was possible to make, since the authors repeatedly made word-plays on the name of their hosts ("of the rocks"), identified them as the Poitevin Muses, made reference to the two prominences of Mount Parnassus, and then associated these rocky outcrops with Catherine's breast. The fact that Poitiers in no way can be said to have two prominences noticeably weakens the series of associations, but it is true that in one poem of the volume, Claude Binet does directly associate Fradonnet with a rocky, fortified Poitiers that is to be protected from Love's siege by the erudite poets. Tarte further contextualizes this conflation between anatomy and topography by demonstrating the parallels between the anatomical *blason* and chorography, both concentrating on the part rather than the whole. She also shows how landscapes could be envisioned as bodies and how concerns with mapping led to the representation of geographical entities as human figures.

From general associations between the body and the land to a particular consideration of the ways that Poitiers itself was depicted in verse and historical writing is a rather large jump, but Tarte takes it without hesitation. First reviewing how the texts and images in cosmographical works saw the city (the emphasis here is more on authorial voice and ways of describing the city than on particular content), Tarte then turns to focus on the large group of works that relate the siege of Poitiers by Gaspard de Coligny and his forces in 1569, during which the duc de Guise entered the city and helped to protect it from the Protestant army. Here, Tarte focuses on how alterations in authorial voice between the first and third person singular are used to emphasize the author's particular participation in the event or point of view concerning the roles of the main actors in the conflict. She also shows how the authors describe the topographical aspects of the city under attack, sometimes presenting the city as a static map, sometimes conducting a more dynamic tour of its walls and other geographical attributes. Indeed, through such considerations, Tarte demonstrates how common the rhetorical strategy of "metalepsis of the author" was to these kinds of texts, in which the narrative mimics the course of events described and can thus be seen metaphorically to create it. Curiously absent from her analysis, however, is any discussion of how these texts present Poitiers as a community, either united under siege or torn by tensions over its defense. In fact, *Writing Places* concentrates on the place of Poitiers only partially: although there is much good material on how authors depicted cities and wrote about religious war, the actual city of Poitiers, as well as its experiences from 1569 to the mid-1580s, remains out of focus. Instead, Tarte uses the wide variety of texts that she analyzes more as extensive context for the writings of Madeleine Neveu and Catherine Fradonnet. If this were not the case, then one would expect more attention toward other important events that occurred in Poitiers during the time under discussion: the *Malcontent* revolt of 1574-1575, the entry of Henri III into the city in 1577, and the stay of the French court in Poitiers, each of which events produced interesting commentaries but does not seem to be explicitly mentioned in the published volumes of the dames des Roches.[7]

Despite these caveats, *Writing Places* remains an interesting and useful work for historians, particularly those who focus on the urban environment and women's agency in early modern society. It is clearly written, draws on a large variety of sources, and does an excellent job of situating the social and political writings of the dames des Roches in an urban context. Indeed, the work should convince historians of civic culture that they ignore literary productions at their peril. Tarte more than succeeds in showing

that such works offer important insight into the formulation and expression of political and religious opinion in discreet urban communities.

NOTES

[1] For the term, “spatial turn,” see Elisabeth D. Hodges, *Urban Poetics in Renaissance France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 3, citing David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[2] For example, see Natalie Z. Davis, “The Sacred and the Body Social in Sixteenth-Century Lyon,” *Past & Present* 90 (February 1981): 40-69; Hilary Ballon, *The Paris of Henri IV: Architecture and Urbanism* (New York and Cambridge: The Architectural History Foundation and The MIT Press, 1991); Penny Roberts, “Religious Conflict and the Urban Setting: Troyes during the French Wars of Religion,” *French History* 6 (1992): 259-78; Daniel Lord Smail, *Imaginary Cartographies: Possession and Identity in Late Medieval Marseille* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000).

[3] Chantal Liaroutzous, *Le pays et la mémoire. Pratiques et représentations de l'espace français chez Gilles Corrozet et Charles Estienne* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998); Cynthia Skenazi, *Le poète architecte en France. Constructions d'un imaginaire monarchique* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003); Elisabeth Hodges, “Representing Place in Corrozet’s *Antiquitez de Paris*,” *French Studies* 62, n. 2 (2008): 135-49; Hodges, *Urban Poetics*.

[4] There is no modern edition of the *Puce de Mesdames des Roches*, but the 1582 edition is easily available from the Gordon Collection of the University of Virginia at <http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/rmds/portfolio/gordon/literary/desroches/puce.html>.

[5] For Poitiers’ ultra-Catholic stance during the wars of religion, see my *Between Crown and Community: Politics and Civic Culture in Sixteenth-Century Poitiers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); for Guise, see pp. 241-4 and for the desire for a parlement, see p. 170.

[6] Neveu writes:

Par deux Vierges Roines guidée,
Tu [Poitiers] te sauvas divinement
Et ores tu es saintement
Par le grand Guisien gardée. (cited in Tarte, *Writing Places*, 187).

The reference here is to the “Miracle of the Keys.” See *Between Crown and Community*, pp. 164-85.

[7] Pierre Brisson, “Chronique des guerres civiles en Poitou, Aunis, Xaintonge, et Angoumois, de 1574 à 1576,” in *Chroniques fontenaisiennes...*, ed. A. D. de la Fontenelle de Vaudoré (Fontenay-le-Comte: Gaudin, 1841); Archives communales de Poitiers, Registre 42, 647-51; Belisaire Ledain, ed., “Journaux de Jean de Brillhac conseiller en la sénéchaussée de Poitou de 1545 à 1564 et de René de Brillhac conseiller au présidial de Poitiers de 1573 à 1622,” *Archives historiques du Poitou* 15 (1885):1-48.

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