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Dancing Queen: Marie de Médicis' Ballets at the Court of Henri IV

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Gough, Melinda J.

Dancing Queen: Marie de Médicis' Ballets at the Court of Henri IV.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. Pp. xvi, 378 + 8 ill. ISBN 978-1-4875-0366-6 (hardcover) \$85.

This interesting book analyzes and “reads” the political and dynastic role of Marie de Médicis (1575–1642), queen of France from 1600 to 1610, through four ballets that the queen set up in Paris between 1602 and 1609. The volume also contains three appendices, in which the verses of *Ballet of the Sixteen Virtues* performed in 1602, *Ballet of Diana and her Nymphs*, and *Ballet de Madame* (both performed in 1609) are translated from French into English for the first time.

The book uses largely unknown primary sources for a truly interdisciplinary approach and allows us to understand how Marie, through an “innovative verbal and visual imagery” (4), an “adaptation of protocols, gestures and interactions of royal bodies” (4), and an accurate choice in “inviting international ambassadors” (4), was able to rebuild an image of the French monarchy fit to reunify the country after the difficult years of the wars of religion that ended with the Edict of Nantes (1598).

Marie married Henri IV in 1600, following the annulment of his marriage to Marguerite de Valois who had not provided him with an heir to the throne. Marie had to cope not only with the king’s mistresses, among them, in particular Henriette d’Entragues and the young Charlotte de Montmorency, but also with his illegitimate sons who could raise hereditary difficulties if there were not a legitimate heir to the Bourbon house.

The birth in 1601 of the future Louis XIII not only gave France a legitimate dauphin but also strengthened Marie’s political position. According to the Salic law, Marie herself had no dynastic rights, but that did not prevent her from being recognized as an active political subject who defended the rights and the honour of the rightful king, Henri, and the legitimate dauphin, Louis.

Marie brought to France, among other things, technologies of court spectacle that were already in use at the Medici court, and she skilfully used them in the ballets described in the book. In the 1602 *Ballet of the Sixteen Virtues*, Marie was depicted as Astraea, the pagan goddess who secured peace, plenty, and political stability. In the *Ballet of Diana and her Nymphs*, performed in January 1609, Marie addressed the king’s philandering by presenting herself

as the goddess of nature, Diana, who reflected the divine aura of the king, her husband.

Addressing a range of political topics through the ballets—for instance, in 1605 the “Turks,” and in 1609 during the *Ballet de la Reine*—Marie was sending a precise message to the nobility and to the entire country on the role of the king, on the presence of a legitimate dauphin, and on her ability to cleverly manage her dynastic position.

The volume provides, on this point, a particularly intriguing reading of the difficult years of 1603–09 when France supported the independence of the United Provinces against the Habsburg. In the wake of the ballets that Anne of Denmark, wife of James I and queen of England, organized in 1604 and the one organized in 1605 by Margaret of Austria, wife of Philip III of Spain, France risked being cut off from possible alliances, including marriages, that could strengthen peace in Europe. Learning from little mistakes previously made, Marie was able to restore the alliances between France, England, and Spain, using all her diplomatic strategies to get a result that aligned with French politics and purposes.

After the assassination of Henri IV, Marie’s involvement in foreign politics took the Bourbon monarchy on a different path, with a progressive and not-so-veiled rapprochement with the Spanish court and the Catholic religion, even if Marie never openly obstructed Protestantism, as she proved in her ballets (especially those performed in 1609) where she used different spatial and temporal expedients to neutralize a possible contrast between the two religious groups.

Gough’s book offers a new reading of the history of France at a time of enormous change. Thanks to the close reading and analysis of details that, at first, may seem to be not very significant, and thanks to a brilliant ability to connect details that may not, at first, seem linked together, *Dancing Queen* offers a much richer understanding of Marie’s role as queen, the difficulties she had to face, and the results she obtained through her creation of an “alternative center” (210) of power at court. Thanks to this volume, scholars will now be able to understand more clearly the social and political significance of the court ballets Marie sponsored, which will provide an additional and important source for our understanding of France in the early seventeenth century.

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