



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

Melinda J. Gough

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Dancing Queen: Marie de Médicis' Ballets at the Court of Henri IV. By Melinda J. Gough. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. ISBN 978-1-4875-0366-6. xvi + 378 pp. \$85.00.

Historians are well aware of the political significance of entertainment and ritual in the early modern court. In recent years, these cultural activities have become a fruitful line of inquiry for those interested in bringing the lens of gender to the analysis of the political machinations of the Valois and Bourbon courts. While past scholars downplayed the political sway of queens and other women at the French court—or, as in the case of regents such as Catherine de Médicis, viewed that influence as destructive—recent feminist research expanding the range of the “political” has made that position untenable.

Melinda J. Gough's book is an important addition to the literature. In *Dancing Queen*, she examines the crucial role of Marie de Médicis, wife of Henri IV, in consolidating her husband's power in the wake of decades of religious wars that preceded his coronation and dominated the early years of his reign. Marie's carefully curated court ballets, in Gough's words, “advertised and enacted the queen consort's role in rebuilding a strong French monarchy capable of uniting the kingdom while simultaneously authorizing her social and political agency within a larger international geopolitical nexus.” These ballets, danced between 1602-1609, “took shape as part of a larger defence of Bourbon legitimacy,” and were also an assertion of Marie's own position (4).

Gough's work follows in the footsteps of earlier studies in some important ways. Recent analyses of queenship and power (for example, those in the Palgrave Macmillan series of that name) have expanded our understanding of the manifold ways in which queens and consorts sought to wield power in the context of patriarchal societies. Ballet, a favorite source of entertainment at the early modern French court, has also been the subject of numerous studies, including seminal works such as Margaret M. McGowan's *L'art du Ballet de Cour en France, 1581–1643* (1963; 1978) and Marie-Françoise Christout's *Le Ballet de Cour de Louis XIV, 1643–1672, Mises en scène* (1967). Gough's work, however, is unique in focusing on these ballets as a political tool in the hands of the Queen, who helped to foster a revival of the arts at the court of Henri IV. Like the best of new scholarship, Gough's book is ambitiously interdisciplinary, drawing on “literary studies, social and political history, theatre and art history, sociology, anthropology, musicology, dance studies, festival studies, and women's and gender studies” (3).

Ballets de cour were a composite theater performance, including music, scripting, costumes, and stage design in addition to dance, performed by the

men and women of the court, often drawn from some of the kingdom's most powerful families, as well as professional performers. In her effort to examine the ballets that Marie helped to organize and danced in, Gough had to overcome the paucity of information available on some of them. Few *livrets* (brochures with collected verses) are extant for entertainments that took place at the early Bourbon court, so Gough instead looked at a wide variety of sources for details on these ballets, including some printed newsletters, verse texts in various print and manuscript sources, records by royal historiographers, and ambassadorial correspondence. The evidence she has pieced together, Gough argues, demonstrates "the importance of Marie's shaping influence, even prior to her regency, in a series of sustained cultural interventions on the French court ballet stage designed to affirm not only her own contested political authority but also that of the new Bourbon dynasty as a whole" (10). The Queen's productions contributed significantly to French monarchical self-representation, and underlines women's contributions to the creation of an "absolutist" state that was never contested. Further, she argues that Marie de Médicis's productions did not always support the crown in an uncritical fashion; Gough's analysis finds nuance, suggesting the occasional (veiled) critique of crown policies.

Marie de Médicis's ballets played a key role in domestic politics, as the Bourbon monarchy sought legitimacy. This effort was necessary not only for Henri IV, but also for Marie herself, as Henri's mistress Henriette d'Entragues, mother of Henri's child born six weeks after the future Louis XIII, actively hoped to become queen even after Henri's marriage to Marie. Gough interprets Marie's decision to grant Henriette a role in her first ballet as a generous gift that repaid a service Henriette had done for her and also placed her in Marie's debt. The ballets of both 1602 and 1605 "actively showcased Marie's role, alongside Henri IV, in the work of building unity within the kingdom" and foregrounded Marie's efforts to assert her own primacy (91). Diplomatic affairs became enmeshed with politics in other ballets; in particular, complicated relations with England and Spain played out against the backdrop of Marie's ballets staged in 1609.

The breadth and meticulous nature of Gough's research is impressive, as is her familiarity with the wide range of disciplines she draws on in her analysis. The work is firmly embedded in extensive primary source research from Italian, French, and English collections, both manuscript and printed, literary and historical; she is also well-versed in the broad array of secondary literature required for her analysis. This great strength of the book occasionally detracts from its clarity; the historian, for example, can sometimes get bogged down in detailed analyses of verse and dances that may delight musicologists or literary scholars. The transition from textual analysis

to historical context is not always as smooth as it could be, and is sometimes confusing to follow. And it bears noting that in many cases, analyses of literature and representation are necessarily speculative, and sometimes more suggestive than dispositive. Scholars from different disciplines will undoubtedly read this book for what interests them; those concerned with theatrical studies will especially appreciate the verse texts, along with their translations, from several of the ballets in which Marie performed, here attached to the text as appendices.

Gough's deeply learned book is an important addition to the literature that highlights the political agency of queens and the ways in which they demonstrated that agency. The book helps flesh out a point that scholars of gender at the early modern court are increasingly finding to be true: that the center of court power was far from "unipolar," which "not only gave the French government greater opportunities for (dissimulative) manoeuvre in its navigations of foreign policy but also opened new spaces for women's (semi-official) political influence" (210). Her conclusion suggests avenues for future research and new ways to consider the links between ritual, representation, and power, and creative ways for other scholars to think about the ways in which women contributed to shaping an absolutist polity in early modern France.

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