

ambassadors and secretaries at the time, which were mostly concerned with informative and stylistic goals. Against these two stances, which respectively shift away from and filter the narrator's presence, Contarini casts his unfettered voice and bodily presence as the material testimony of his travails. While he is aware of the value of his firsthand strategic knowledge about regions unfamiliar to the Venetians, Contarini's embodied gaze accounts for an experience that is above all a perspective of anthropological and environmental significance. Uninterested in literary artifice—a feature condemned by future readers—the ambassador's writing, as Vuillemin notes, is nonetheless the result of a considered reformulation free from daily contingencies and questioning. This becomes apparent in light of the unusual choice Contarini made to print his account, once he ascertained that no sensitive information would be divulged to the large public.

According to Vuillemin, the motive of the rewriting and publication of a text originally intended for the archives lies in the unexpected turn of events that transformed the itinerary in an *itinérance* and invested Contarini with a higher mission: that of using his prophetic voice to facilitate the triumph of Christianity over current religious divisions. In support of his subtle reading, the historian persuasively unearths an underlying textual pattern of providential signs, messianic declarations, and symbolic episodes, which he illuminates through an investigation of the devotional practices and millenarian discourses Contarini would have been exposed to. In his conclusion, Vuillemin wonders whether an “optical illusion” (114) has caused previous scholars to miss all these references, or whether, on the contrary, it may have misguided his own interpretation, which some readers may think was pushed a bit far. Whichever may be true, Vuillemin's translation and commentary of Contarini's travels succeed in their goal of revamping an exceptional though unjustly neglected travelogue, while providing an admirable and grounded piece of cultural history.

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Katharina von Medici: Frankreichs verkannte Königin. Klaus Malettke.
Paderborn: Brill, 2020. viii + 404 pp. €77.57.

Catherine of Medici (1519–89), queen of France, is certainly one of the most famous, yet controversial, women of the Renaissance. Her faith is linked with one of the darkest chapters in the history of France: the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. Even today, not all the facts that led to this massacre have been clarified, which adds to the ambiguity of Catherine's role in the events leading up to this mass murder and has given rise to “black and hagiographic legends” (1), as Malettke puts it, which have overshadowed her biography to date. This complex and unsatisfactory situation stands at the beginning of this

biography, which Malettke presents as one of his later works and thus as a synopsis of his long-term research.

Malettke defines his approach in differentiation from other recent biographies on Catherine: Thierry Wanegffelen (2005) focused on her female way of wielding power; Denis Crouzet (2005) depicted her as a typical exponent of the Renaissance and a singular personality at the same time; Raphaël Dargent (2011) called her an “iron queen”; Henri Pigaillem (2018) even spoke of her “diabolic” traits. Sabine Appel’s 2018 biography counts as a profound contribution to rehabilitate Catherine, but Malettke misses the latest insights there into the historical and political framework.

Beginning with a chapter on the hagiographic legends around Catherine, Malettke arranges the book in a primarily chronological and biographic approach to Catherine’s life, which he studies in eight chapters along decisive stages. Malettke points out, correctly, that Catherine learned many lessons for her future life in her turbulent childhood, when she was confronted with life-threatening situations and the need to disguise her real emotions. This strategic use of emotions is of course nothing specific to Catherine, as even her contemporaries noted, who compared her to Machiavelli’s prince. In particular, her duplicity, contrived with her son Henry III, is comparable to similar strategies adopted by other Renaissance couples (e.g., Isabella d’Este and Francesco II Gonzaga), a strategy that allowed them to side with different political parties while most probably collaborating with each other.

Malettke sees Catherine’s greatest political mission in her efforts to achieve harmony, *concordia*, and to keep communication open between conflicting parties. While he sees this attitude rooted in her Renaissance culture, it is at the same time one of the most outstanding political roles of women, who, from the Middle Ages, were ambassadors and mediators par excellence in political culture. In her personal life, Catherine shared many of the challenges of her peers: arriving as a stranger at a new court at the young age of fourteen; enduring the presence of her husband’s mistress and the pressure to bear an heir, overshadowed by her very long childlessness. What makes her situation certainly more singular is the contingent fact that she served as a regent for her husband and for three of her sons, a historical circumstance which added to her immense political influence.

The book is inspired by a dual perspective: first of all, it is in many aspects an apology of Catherine’s political actions; second, it contributes to a better understanding of French history in the second half of the sixteenth century. While the book displays a profound political approach, inspired also by a keen eye for the cultural history of politics, it refrains from adopting a gender-historical view. However, in looking at Catherine’s personal biography and integrating her individual experiences with the structural parameters of her time, Malettke offers many insights which are revealing for gender-historical questions. While choosing a chronological approach may meet expectations centered on the genre of a biography, this structure creates some chapter lengths that make for cumbersome reading at times. The author’s sympathy is certainly

with Catherine, yet he strives to present and discuss concurring views and above all relies on what is known from the sources. Refraining from speculations and from craving for sensation, ascriptions which are all too easily attributed to women of power, Malettke offers a very balanced and nuanced biography, which convincingly considers Catherine as a woman and an individual of her time.

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The Politics of Print during the French Wars of Religion: Literature and History in an Age of "Nothing Said Too Soon." Gregory P. Haake.

Faux Titre 443. Leiden: Brill, 2021. x + 352 pp. €127.

This book is built upon a central premise: that there was a semiotic crisis in sixteenth-century France caused by "the whipsaw of wars and peace treaties" during the religious wars, and that this "back and forth" between bloodshed and calm deceived the French people into uncertainty (15). No one's word could be taken with certainty, not even the word of the king and queen mother. Haake's main argument is that authors "were emboldened by an awareness of print culture and undertook several rhetorical techniques and critical strategies in order to neutralize the crisis and therefore render literary discourse more effective in a tumultuous political context" (17–18). Haake's familiarity with so much recent work by academic historians on the history of print and the French Wars of Religion suggest the book is aimed at historians as well as literary scholars.

One problem for historians is that Haake makes very clear that he is not concerned with whether the texts he analyzes were widely read or whether they were even persuasive. His focus is thus exclusively on authors rather than readers. How can he persuade us that the authors and texts he discusses succeeded in neutralizing the crisis and rendered literary discourse more effective if he is not concerned with the reception of these texts? A second issue for historians is Haake's choice of texts. He excludes most of the historical texts that historians study: personal correspondence, diplomatic communiqués, virtually all discourses and texts emanating from the court or other political institutions, the writings of political theorists such as Jean Bodin, and the many well-known contemporary works of history in the period. Haake simply notes that "these represent discursive activity that is different from literature" (25). He makes an exception for the monarchomach writings of the 1570s, but largely because they better display the authorial strategies of his more literary authors.

Despite all that, Haake does have some interesting things to say about the texts he analyzes. Chapter 1 sets out to define the semiotic crisis and its origins in some detail. Haake explores texts as diverse as Ronsard, Du Bellay, and Calvin, among others, to illustrate the crisis. Chapter 2 explores the rhetoric of extremes in a diverse set of