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**Queens in Reception: Catherine de' Medici and
Mary Stuart**

Has-been Queens? Reception and (Re)figuration of Catherine de' Medici and Mary Stuart in Translation

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Introduction

Published anonymously in Paris in 1575, *Discours merueilleux de la vie, actions & deportemens de Catherine de Medicis Royne mere* [...] is the anonymous translation of a Latin pamphlet against Catherine de' Medici, attributed to Henri Estienne, but also to Théodore de Bèze, Jean de Serres and Pierre Pithou. It was the focal point of a fierce controversy around the Queen Mother. One year later, the French text was translated into English and published in Edinburgh, linking it clearly with the debate about another controversial queen, Mary Stuart. Both in power at a time of political and religious change, the French and Scottish queens have left an enduring mark in memory and history. Their public image has been deeply influenced by the circulation of polemical texts that have contributed to turn them into emblematic figures. Similarly to other works published about Mary Stuart, this text and its translations attempt to orientate the reception of the queen's actions according to their own political agenda.

In this paper, I will more specifically focus on the ways in which translation leaves open space for fiction and how this interacts with a rhetoric of truth-telling. For that purpose, I will next put this pamphlet in contrast with John Leslie's *Defence of the Honour*, which was first published anonymously in Rheims by Jean Foigny in 1569.

The *Defence of the Honour* represents an interesting challenge to modern-day readers in terms of analysing how rhetoric, law and poetic discourse interact to build up a powerful apology and claim of the Queen of Scots' rights to the English throne. An even more challenging task is to examine how these notions are modified by/ and evolve within the successive versions of Leslie's treatise, which was published again in 1571, and then translated into Latin in 1584, and into French and Spanish in 1587.

Concerning the *Discours merueilleux de la vie, actions & deportemens de Catherine de Medicis Royne mere*, there were three editions of the English translation of this polemical tract: one allegedly published in Paris, whose real origin remains unknown today¹; one apparently printed in Heidelberg, but actually issuing from London presses², and one saying to have been printed in Cracow, but that was in fact produced in Edinburg³.

1. Catherine de Medici in Polemics

When this inflammatory pamphlet was published in 1575, barely three years had passed since the infamous Bartholomew Day, where more than 3000 Protestants were massacred in Paris, and 10,000 in all France. It is not surprising then to find a rather ill-boding subtitle following this title full of irony. It is announced to the reader that “sont recitez les moyens qu’elle a tenu pour usurper le gouvernement du Royaume de France, & ruiner l’estat d’iceluy”. The typographical distinction, visibly highlighting the two types of discourse on the page (irony and reality) is abolished on the English title page of the translation of this book, reuniting these two registers in a single, strong accusation.

Although printed and published at three different locations (London, Edinburgh and a third unknown place), the English editions of the text were all made by the same translator, as the three texts feature exactly the same phrases, expressions and use of words. Only the Edinburgh edition displays a different spelling of its words, as the text is an Anglo-Scots version of English. Distinctively Scots, the spelling speaks for itself as to the identification of the actual place of printing of the book (i.e., Edinburgh), in spite of the clear imprint of Paris on the title page.

The author begins with an outspoken declaration of his intentions. He vows to be writing “unwillingly,” as he “supposis to be wished, that the memorials of such personis as do delite or tak (sic) paines in doing of mischief, or committing of evill, shuld be

¹ [Henri ESTIENNE?], *Ane Mervellous discourse upon the lyfe, deides, and behaviours of Katherine de Medicis (...)*. (Paris [s.n.], 1576).

² [Henri ESTIENNE?], *Ane Mervellous discourse upon the lyfe, deides, and behaviours of Katherine de Medicis (...)* At Heydelberge [i.e. London: Printed by H. Middleton?], 1575.

³ [Henri ESTIENNE?], *Ane Mervellous discourse upon the lyfe, deides, and behaviours of Katherine de Medicis (...)* Printed at Cracov [i.e. Edinburg: Printed by J. Ross], 1576.

buried in perpetuall oblivion [...]”, and to have “so long refrained from publishing the detestable doings of Katherine de Medicis,” fearing to “soile my handes in such villannous and fylthie matter [...]”⁴. However, the ensuing 192 pages rather question this claim, as they set out to expose in painstaking detail the deeds of a queen who is accused of having “bewitched and transformed [the French people] into the shapes and conditions of brute beastes”, by means of “her enforcement drinkes”⁵. In the French source text, the author complains that “Catherine, sous pretexte d’un titre audacieusement usurpé, nous veut regenter, & continue à nous fouetter & bourreller cruellement sans presque qu’aucun de nous face semblant de le sentir [...]”⁶.

2. Re-figuration of Queens

Interestingly, the author resorts to similar arguments that are found in the various versions of George Buchanan’s *De Maria Scotorum Regina*, aiming at discovering the heinous deeds of Mary, Queen of Scots⁷. In order to demonstrate her tyranny, and justify her deposition – and execution –, Buchanan accuses Mary of having poisoned the late King (Lord Henry Darnley, her second husband) and of ruling the kingdom, or rather being ruled, by her passions. Here, the author also asserts that Catherine “ruleth all things according unto those passions which do governe her selfe [...]”⁸.

Moreover, Catherine de Medici is described as a woman full of dissimulation, a master at using all sorts of disguises to achieve her ends:

⁴ [Henri ESTIENNE?], *Ane Meroellous discourse*, sig. A iiir.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Anon., *Discours merueilleux de la vie, actions & deportemens de Catherine de Medicis Royne mere [...]* (Paris, 1575), sig. A iiir.

⁷ [George BUCHANAN], *De Maria Scotorum Regina, totamque eius contra Regem coniuratione, foedo cum Bothuelio adulterio, nefaria in maritum crudelitate & rabie, horrendo insuper & deterrimo eiusdem parricidio: plena, & tragica plane Historia... Actio contra Mariam Scotorum Reginam in qua ream & consciam esse eam huius parridij, neccesarijs argumentiseuincitur [...]* (London: John Day, 1571).

⁸ [Henri ESTIENNE?], *Ane Meroellous discourse*, sig. Aiiir.

In most fylthie and beastly whoredomes and lechery they do excel: Depe dissimulation is naturally ruted in them: and in the execution of all kynde of treasons they be moste ready⁹.

The plural pronoun “they” stands for the Medici family as a whole, which is described as the bed of Catherine’s inherent wickedness.

Likewise, Mary Stuart was depicted by Buchanan as naturally bound to dissimulation, especially after her second husband, Lord Henry Darnley’s suspicious death. A key argument in Buchanan’s treatise was the impropriety of Mary’s mourning, which lasted very little time in the eyes of Mary’s opponents. Buchanan’s description of this episode spares no detail, blending the vocabulary of dramaturgy with rhetorical craft to throw a sharp ironical light on the scene:

Quhen these doynge were knawin abrode, [...] she beganne to set hir face, and with counterfaying of mournyng she labored to appease the hartes of the grudgyng pepill. [...] But the myrth of heart far passing the fayned sorrow, she shut the dores in dede but she set open the windowes, [...]. For quhen Henry Killegree, was come from the quene of England to comfort her, [...] yet he came in sa unseasonably ere the stage wer prepared and furnished, that he found the windowes open, the candeles nat yet lighted, and all the provision for the play out of order.¹⁰

The *Mervellous discourse* also lays blame on Catherine de Medici for inappropriate mourning, as it is stated that “she did not long bewaile” her husband, King Henry.

Besides similar lines of arguments that are used to re-figure major queens like Catherine de Medici and Mary, Queen of Scots, Buchanan’s treatise and *Ane Mervellous discourse* recourse to documentary proof to nail down their point. Although the use of references to letters written by the queen herself is not developed on as an impressive scale as in the *Detectio*, a passage of the text refers to Catherine de Medici’s compromising letters:

⁹ *Ibid.*, sig. A iiiv. « [...] de paillardises brutales, & principalement de d'une tres profonde dissimulation, propre à exécuter toutes sortes de trahisons. » (Anon., *Discours merueilleux de la vie*, sig. A iiiv.)

¹⁰ George BUCHANAN, *Ane Detectioun of the duinges of Marie Quene of Scottes, touchand the murder of hir husband, and hir conspiracie, adulterie, and pretended mariage with the Erle Bothwell.*[...] (trans. Thomas Wilson and George Buchanan ([Edinburgh ?] London: John Day, 1571), sig. E iiv-E iiir.

The Quene is convict by hir owen letters, & by those letters which she caused the King hir Sonne to direct unto the Lieutenentis and Governoures of Provinces, and uthher officers of this kingdome, [...] in the which [...] she greatly lamented this chance, happens to the Admirall [Coligny's death] and his partakers, against the willis both of the King and of himself, [...]: Of the treuth of the contentis of these letters, I reporte me to all that then wer Embassadoures. Them selves shall confesse, whither thay wer ashamed when as, sone after that thay had certified those Princes, where thay wer resident, that all these thingis wer done by the Lordes of Guise, for credite whereof, thay had aslo shewed the Kingis letters, now sodenly thay wer recharged to give furth to understand, that the King him self was the Author heirof, in punishment of a certaine conspiracie, detected against thair Maiesties: [...]. Let us as it wer, penetrate into the pernicious counsallis of this woman, and marcke whereunto this ruting out, either of the Protestantis only, either of all the mighty men of this kingdome, without respect of Religioun, do tend¹¹.

This long excerpt highlights the period's general growing distrust for the written medium, and especially manuscript letters. Catherine, like Mary Stuart, is on the whole accused of lying, of dissimulation, of failing to not being true to one's word. Truth is what is really at stake in the eyes of the authors of these pamphlets, written as attacks or defence of these leading queenly figures. At some point further down his text the author finally articulates more clearly his deep fear for women in power. As he states:

To be briefe, she laboured so fore, that notwithstanding the exceptions of diversof the deputies of the estates, founded upon the

¹¹ [Henri ESTIENNE?], *Ane Mervellous discourse*, sig. E iiiiv. «La Royne est convaincue par ses propres lettres, & celles qu'elle fit escrire au Roy son fils aux gouverneurs des provinces & places de ce Roiaume, & à ses ambassadeurs, pour en faire recit aux Princes ses voisins, esquelles elle dit expressement, qu'elle estoit bien marrie du cas advenu en la personne de l'Amiral & des siens, contre la volonté du Roy & d'elle [...]. Je les en ay fait tous tesmoins. Les ambassadeurs mesmes me confesseront qu'ils rougissoient de honte, quand quelques jours apres dit aux Princes, vers lesquels ils estoient, que messieurs de Guise l'avoient fait, & en avoient monstré lettres du Roy, les mandemens changez, on les chargea de donner à entendre, que le Roy mesmes l'avoit fait faire, pour cause d'une conspiration descouverte contre leurs maiestez. [...] Je vous prie, examinons ce fait avec jugement, penetrons le pernicious conseil de ceste femme, voyons s'elle tend à l'extermination des Huguenots seulement, ou de tous les grans de de Roiaume sans esgard de religion.» (Anon., *Discours merueilleux de la vie*, sig. F iir).

aucturity of the Salicque law and the evill successeof the regiment of women in this Kingdome, yet she through... the whole government was deferred unto the Quene [...].¹²

These words betray the author's strong disapproval of any system that allows women to rule. By contrast, John Leslie took up arms to defend women rule in his famous treatise, *A Defence of the Honour of the Right Highe, Mightye and Noble Princesse Marie Quene of Scotlande*, where a full book was dedicated to demonstrate that "conformable bothe to the lawe of God, and the lawe of nature"¹³.

3. Fiction into Truth-telling discourse

In 1569, Mary Stuart had been kept in custody in England for one year. In the aftermath of the York and Westminster conferences, where her guilt in the murder of Lord Darnley, her second husband and late king consort of Scotland, had been under intense scrutiny, her reputation was seriously damaged by the exposition of the "Casket Letters" scandal. As Leslie mentions in his preface, he wants to restore Mary's honour by answering to recent tracts, which he unequivocally terms "poysoned pestiferous pamphlett[s]"¹⁴.

One of the most visible sites of modification between various editions of a text, the preface often provides valuable clues to authors' and translators' projects, intentions and ideological positions. In his 1569 preface, Leslie misleadingly defines himself as "an Englishe man"¹⁵, a posture certainly meant to give him more credit in the eyes of the English readers.

From the onset, Leslie ties up his legal dispute with historical and even legendary elements, as he compiles a long list of famous kings of the Antiquity and of British history who all released their enemies from prison, in a rhetorical attempt at convincing the Queen of England to let go of Mary Stuart. By alluding in particular to the story of "Cordell" and her "father driven from hence by hys two other unkinde and unnaturall dowghthers"¹⁶, the Bishop also

¹² *Ibid.*, sig. B iiiiv.

¹³ John LESLIE, *A Defence of the Honour*, sig. † iiijr.

¹⁴ John LESLIE, *A Defence of the Honour of the Right Highe, Mightye and Noble Princesse Marie Quene of Scotlande and Dowager of France, with a Declaration Aswell of Her Right, Title and Intereste to the Succession of the Crowne of Englande, as That the Regimente of Women Ys Comfortable to the Lawe of God and Nature* (London? i.e. Rheims: Jean Foigny, 1569), sig. † iiv.

¹⁵ John LESLIE, *A Defence of the Honour*, sig. † ijr.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, sig. † iiiiv.

associates Mary's misadventures in crown inheritance with the legend of King Lear, one of the darkest episodes of British lore, about to become the national literary staple of failure in both family and state succession relationships.

In 1571, a second edition was published with the false imprint of Liège (Belgium) under the pseudonym of Morgan Philippes, without address neither from the printer nor from the author¹⁷. The book was in fact printed in Louvain by John Fowler. Again issuing from Continental presses, this new edition was this time more openly aimed at an English readership, as an essential strategic weapon in the Ridolfi plot in which Leslie was actively involved. The plot consisted in a marriage between Mary Stuart and the duke of Norfolk and eventually, of replacing Elizabeth by Mary on the throne of England. However, the whole affair was a failure after the discovery of Leslie's text. The duke of Norfolk was executed and Leslie sent to the Tower before being sent into exile.

Almost a decade unfolded before a new edition of the Bishop of Ross's tireless *Defence* saw light. In 1580, he chose Rheims again to print a Latin edition of his work, which is in fact a rewriting of the second and third book of the original *Defence*. This new form of his treatise was then translated back into English in 1584 and published in Rouen by Georges l'Oyselet. This back-and-forth linguistic movement from vernacular to vernacular via (the medium of) Latin is revelatory of Leslie's will to both circulate his work among a carefully-chosen audience, and to refine the words of his text to perfection. The prefatory material reflects the changes that took place in the political and diplomatic context on the British Isles. By dedicating his book to James I, Leslie re-focuses his authorial attention on the next generation in line for the throne. A poem concludes Leslie's preface, authored by a "T. V. Englishman." The lines gradually sweep along into an upward movement, from celebrating the "gloriously Rases of [England's] so riche a soyle" at the beginning, to eventually rejoicing England's "Quene to heavens resigned", thus performing a hierarchical and spiritual ascension:

[...]

¹⁷ [Morgan PHILIPPES] John Leslie, (*A Treatise*) concerning the Defence of the Honour of the right high, mightie and noble princesse, Marie Queene of Scotland, and Douager of France, with a Declaration, as Wel of her Right, Title, and Interest, to the Succession of the Crowne of England: as that the Regiment of women is conformable to the lawe of God and Nature. (Liège: Gualterum Morberium, 1571).

You Britaines therefore, with attentive heede,
 Drawe neer, and reape the croppe of this his seede.
 Esteme his worke, and weighe his warninges wyse,
 That telles the truthe, still one in woorde and mynde:
 Regarde the right of her, who once may ryse
 And rule in state: your Quene to heavens resigned¹⁸.

This last stanza consists of a miniature version of the whole poem, duplicating its upward spiral movement. After being invited once more to “drawe neer”, initiated by a literal reading of Leslie’s work that picks up “the croppe of this his seede”, the British reader gains access to a treatise that claims to “tell[es] the truthe”, until he or she finally takes part in the celebration of a queen sent to heaven. The equation of the biblical queen of heaven with the Queen of Scots herself is a particularly daring gesture, creating a powerful image whose effect on the reader should not be underestimated. By making another Mary finally accessing the crown of a far mightier supremacy than earthly rule, Leslie’s evocation is highly subversive, as one of its implications is that James, Mary’s son, becomes a Christ-like figure whose reign-to-come on earth (Britain) is the last hope of the faithful. Clearly Catholic, this conclusion on the figure of the Virgin reigning in Heaven is a deft and determinate declaration of Leslie’s stand in the Marian controversy and strengthens his formal appeal to King James to (re)turn to Catholicism.

In 1587, the year of Mary Stuart’s execution, Leslie’s treatise was finally translated into French and published in Rouen under the title “*Du Droict et Tiltre de la Sérenissime Princesse Marie Reoyne d’Escosse, & de tres-illustre prince Iaques VI. Roy d’Escosse son fils, à la succession du Royaume d’Angleterre*”¹⁹. With a similar emphasis on James’ succession to the crown, this title makes clear that the source text of this version is the 1584 English new version of Leslie’s treatise.

¹⁸ John LESLIE, *A Defence of the Honour*, sig. † iijv.

¹⁹ John LESLIE, *Du Droict et Tiltre de la Sérenissime Princesse Marie Reoyne d’Escosse, & de tres-illustre prince Iaques VI. Roy d’Escosse son fils, à la succession du Royaume d’Angleterre. Avec la genealogie des Roys d’Angleterre ayans regné depuis cinq cens ans. Premièrement composé en Latin & Anglois, par R. P. en Dieu M. Iean de Lesselie Evesque de Rosse, Escossois, lorsqu’il estoit Ambassadeur en Angleterre pour sa Majesté, & nouvellement mis en François par le mesme Auteurs. A Rouen De l’Imprimerie de George l’Oyselet. (Rouen, Georges l’Oyselet, 1587).*

4. Truth plays with Fiction

The actual legal part of Leslie's treatise is developed at its fullest in book two, where the Bishop presents a very elaborate argumentation and vindication of Mary Stuart's right to the crown of England. The more we dig into Leslie's text, the deeper the intertwining between claims of truth-telling and recourse to fiction becomes. First, a deep distrust for documents and seals springs out from the page, as Leslie heavily criticises his contemporaries' blind reliance on written proofs and testimonies in legal matters. In the section of the second book where the legal implications of King Henry VIII's testament undergo intense scrutiny, Leslie goes so far as asserting that "[a] kingdome ys to heavie to be so easilie carried away by suche scrowls and copies [...]"²⁰ which is rendered in the French text as "[...] le poix du royaume est trop grand & trop pesant pour pouvoir estre transferé par copies & exemplaires"²¹. This sentence sets the concreteness of a kingdom, made heavy by its size and all the lives it contains, in stark contrast with the mutability of mere pieces of paper, which termed as "copies" are already denied any claim at authenticity. Leslie comes promptly to the conclusion that King Henry VIII's will is void, because the list of limitations to the will does not exist on any copy at hand²². It was on this basis that Mary Stuart's adversaries claimed that she had to be dismissed from the succession. Taking advantage of a growing general distrust for the written media, too easily forged, copied, and smuggled, Leslie declares that the only reliable force is truth alone:

Or rather leit us withoute any perchance saye, the iustice and equitie of her cause, and the invincible force of trewth to be suche, that neither the stampe nor the kynges owne hande can beare and beate yt downe²³.

In Leslie's words, truth is presented as an unequivocal force, a virtue coming from God that is undeniably stronger than the King himself and *a fortiori*, (than the) external signs of his power. In the French version of the treatise, the same pride of place is given to invisible, rather than material or visible means of authentication:

²⁰ John LESLIE, *A Defence of the Honour*, sig. N iiiir.

²¹ John LESLIE, *Du Droict et Tiltre de la Sérenissime Princesse Marie Reoyne d'Escosse* [...], sig. I iir.

²² John LESLIE, *A Defence of the Honour*, sig. M iiiir.

²³ *Ibid.*, sig. N iiiiv.

Voire il faut que nous disions pour vérité, que la iustice de sa cause est telle & si bonne, & la force de la vérité si invincible, qu'elle ne peut estre abbatue ou expugnee par le seau du Roy, ny par son propre seing²⁴.

This conception of royal power is in keeping with Leslie's definition of the crown succession developed in the first part of his treatise. Rather than a mere inherent quality, kingship has to be considered a corporation that survives the person of the king:

[...] ye muste consider, that the kinge cometh to the crowne not onlie by discente, but also and cheifelie by succession, as unto a corporation: [...], and the crowne holden of no earthlie lorde, but of God almightie onlie²⁵.

Asserting that inheriting a crown cannot be solely determined by blood nor lineage allows Leslie to bypass the difficulties linked to Mary Stuart's rather indirect genealogical claim to the throne. The terminology used in the French translation highlights even better the conceptual significance of regarding the crown as a corporative institution that plays a transitional role, as the phrase "corps politique" is chosen to translate "corporation":

D'avantage ils doivent considerer que le Roy ne vient pas seulement au Royaume, par droit de ligne, descendant de ces ancestres: mais aussi il y est appelé par succession comme à quelque corps politique²⁶.

Furthermore, the Bishop of Ross invites fiction right into his legal argumentation by using a rhetorical device that has deep consequences on the perception of truth, and of the role this notion plays in his text. As he says, "[...] [S]o lett us frelie and liberallie grante the adversaries that which ys not trewe [...]"²⁷, starting so a detailed exploration of his adversaries' arguments – or probable arguments – in order to empty out any possibility of counterattack in the future. The French translation similarly conveys the Bishop's particularly paradoxical rhetorical strategy: "Accordons encore aux

²⁴ John LESLIE, *Du Droict et Tiltre de la Sérenissime Princesse Marie Reoyne d'Escosse*, sig. I iiiir.

²⁵ John LESLIE, *A Defence of the Honour*, sig. H iiiiv.

²⁶ John LESLIE, *Du Droict et Tiltre de la Sérenissime Princesse Marie Reoyne d'Escosse*, sig. E iir.

²⁷ John LESLIE, *A Defence of the Honour*, sig. P iir.

adversaires comme nous leur avons des-ia libéralement accordé ce qui toutesfois n'est pas véritable [...]»²⁸.

All along, Leslie vindicates recourse to customary law in order to solve the succession crisis, rather than showing willingness to adopt new and revolutionary principles, as Buchanan did. What is particularly interesting to study is the full range of implications of the translation of such a text. Will the argumentation either hold or be lost in translation, when its premises [e] are undermined by the passage to another linguistic, and hence, judicial and cultural sphere? Whether Leslie's rhetorical strategy was more efficient to defend Mary Stuart's rights to the throne is not readily proven, but his reasoning, that proclaims truth's invincible force in the face of all opposition demonstrates his remarkable oratory abilities. His invitation of fiction into the legal argument should not pass for inconsequential, because it highlights the fragility of truth and its permeability to fiction.

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²⁸ John Leslie, *Du Droict et Tiltre de la Sérenissime Princesse Marie Reoyne d'Escosse*, sig. K iiiiv.