1987

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Catherine des Roches (1542–1587): Humanism and the Learned Woman*

by

Anne R. Larsen
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Catherine des Roches has long been familiar to Renaissance social historians for the incongruous flea that alighted one day on her bosom as she was conversing with the humanist lawyer Estienne Pasquier. Pasquier, who was beginning to run out of *propos*, as he tells his correspondent Pierre Pithou, nimbly seized upon this unexpected diversion, suggesting that he and des Roches immortalize the event in a contest of versified wit. The habitués of the *salon* of the Dames des Roches soon joined this gallant exchange and produced a collection of ninety-three folios entitled *La Puce de Madame des Roches* (1582).

Less familiar, however, are the three volumes of collected works that Catherine des Roches and her mother, Madeleine, co-authored and published between 1578 and 1586. Entitled *Les Oeuvres* (1578, 1579), *Les Secondes Oeuvres* (1583), and *Les Missives* (1586), the latter being the first lengthy epistolary collection published by women in France, they include a wide range of poetic genres, dialogues, a tragicomedy, letters, and two first translations of Latin works by Catherine. An excellent Latinist, versed in Italian and possibly Greek, Catherine’s learning was renowned both in Poitiers and in humanist circles in Paris where she and her mother published their first work. Both Dames des Roches were frequently praised by contemporary humanist poets, lawyers and historians such as Pasquier, Guersens, Le Poulchre, Scévole de Sainte-Marthe, Scaliger, Pelletier du Mans, D’Aubigné, Marie de Romieu, and Lois le Grand.

Even though she was lauded as a “second Pallas,” Catherine’s life-style was called into question by none other than Pasquier. In his second letter to Pithou on the life-style of the Dames, he cannot understand why she does not abide by the norms of her sex. He writes:
Il n'y a qu'une chose qui me déplaise en ceste maison, qu'estant la fille belle en perfection, tant de corps que d'esprit, riche de biens, comme celle qui doit estre unique héritière de sa mere, requise en mariage par une infinité de personnages d'honneur, toutefois elle met toutes ces requiestes sous pieds: résolue de vivre et mourir avec sa mere. Ne considérant pas qu'elle, par un privilège de son age, doit demeurer derniere, et cela advenant, elle se trouvera tout seul.

(pp. 20-21)

There is but one thing that displeases me in this household, which is that the daughter, beautiful to behold in body and in spirit, a wealthy heiress since she is her mother's sole inheritor, requested in marriage by a great number of men of honor, nevertheless disdains all such solicitations: she is resolved to live and to die with her mother. She does not consider the fact that, on account of her age, she is the last [of her clan] and will some day find herself all alone.

While he admires the quickness of her mind, the breadth of her knowledge, and the boldness of her writing, he looks askance at her persistent refusal to marry and finds her deep devotion to her mother highly perplexing. He is concerned that she will remain childless. His "displeasure" reflects the patriarchal strictures governing women's lives.

Ian Maclean states in _The Renaissance Notion of Woman_ that marriage was the single most pervasive institution preventing any fundamental change in the definition of woman. In the words of an English legisl on whom he cites: "All women are understood either married, or to be married." The seeming exceptions to this rule were widows, who themselves were frequently urged to remarry, and nuns, who had escaped the social laws of circulation but had "wedded" themselves to a divine "Spouse." The majority of women writers during the French Renaissance were also married. But those who managed to publish were of the ruling class (Marguerite de Navarre 1492-1549, her daughter Jeanne d'Albret 1528-1572, and Marguerite de Valois 1553-1615), court attendants (Anne de Graville ca.1480-1540), or members of a humanist elite (Louise Labé ca.1525-1565, Pernette du Guillet ca.1520-2, Nicole Estienne ca.1542-1596). Some, like Gabrielle de Coignard (?-1594) and Madeleine des Roches (1520-1587), published only when they became widows—that is, when they were no longer "burdened," as Madeleine writes,
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by childbearing and household duties (ode 1, *Les Oeuvres*). Only a few did not marry. According to a biographer, Georgette de Montenay (1540–1581), a lady in waiting to Jeanne d’Albret and the first to publish a book of Christian emblems, was “prevented from marrying, it is said, by the severity of her morals and her love for poetry.” Another celebrated case was Marie de Gournay (1565–1645), Montaigne’s covenant daughter. Thus, Catherine des Roches’s determined resolve not to marry so as to “live and die” with her mother appeared all the more anomalous. It was cited in *elogia* after her death, with her mother, of an epidemic of the plague.

A literary image which captures the social unease and ambivalence toward the anomalous erudite woman—doubly anomalous in des Roches’s case since she was erudite and unmarried—is that of the virile or armed maiden. This image, which was first analyzed by Margaret L. King in her study of the lives of early Italian scholarly women, combines the figure of Pallas Athena, the virgin goddess of war and wisdom, and the Amazons, mythical female warriors hostile to patriarchal structures. King found that the image served primarily to attenuate male fears by inducing learned women to consider themselves as “honorable men,” divorced from the realms of female sexuality and the maternal. So long as they remained virginal, they could aspire to the privileges of a traditional Latin education. Some like Cassandra Fedele, Costanza Varano, and Olympia Morata gave celebrated public orations in Latin. Most, however, were isolated, locked up in book-lined cells, and living a life of pious asceticism hardly different from that of their convent sisters. The price they paid for being known as “exceptional” and “far beyond their sex” was alienation from womankind, while at the same time they were not fully accepted by their male counterparts. Once married, the majority abandoned their scholarly aspirations. In France, the image is reflected in compliments wherein male humanists lauded a learned woman’s “virile” mind. Christine de Pizan was called “virillis illa femina” (that virile woman) and “illa virago” (that Amazon) by Jean Gerson; Marguerite de Navarre was praised for possessing a manly heart in a woman’s frail body; and Camille de Morel, the child prodigy of humanists Jean de Morel and Antoinette de Loynes, was thought to have “the grace of a young girl but the mind of a man.” The image continues to denote the exceptional “manly” nature of such women, and thus distances them metaphorically from the maternal body. In literature, it is frequently connected with the figure of the Amazon.

I begin by defining the scope of this androgynous image in literary works that either directly influenced Catherine des Roches, as for instance Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*, or were part of the intellectual matrix of her times. My concern is to show in what ways her representation of Amazon/heroines in her poems *L’Agnodice, Pour une masquarade d’Amazones* (For a Masquerade of Amazons), and *Chanson des Amazones* (Song of the
Amazons) (Les Oeuvres, 1579) intersects with and confronts humanist depictions of Amazons directed at women who, like her, assumed an anomalous public role in society, either as published authors or as rulers. In reflecting on her identity as a learned woman, des Roches emerges as an early feminist thinker deeply aware of the pressure on female scholars to assimilate to a masculine mode of self-perception. That she could reflect on such an issue is due in part to her highly unusual social situation. Educated and inspired primarily by her learned mother in an age when a limited number of daughters of the upper bourgeoisie were tutored by male pedagogues, engaged in a cooperative scholarly venture and in hosting a famous salon with her mother, she found the necessary psychic freedom to remain critical of androcentric claims on her identity. She anticipates the problem of reconciling, in Elizabeth Berg's words, "the claim for equal rights and the claim for acknowledgement of sexual difference," or, otherwise stated, "participation in masculine activity [while refusing] to be assimilated to a masculine mode." For des Roches, this would have meant the opportunity to accede to the rights normally reserved for men as a consequence of a humanist education while consciously maintaining her identity as a woman writer.

I. AMAZONS, PALLAS ATHENA, AND THE RENAISSANCE CONCEPT OF THE LEARNED WOMAN

Three metaphorical perceptions of woman as Amazon emerged in Renaissance literature. I shall call them the "useful Amazon," the "ambitious Amazon," and the "lustful Amazon." The "useful Amazon," a legacy from Roman antiquity, was transmitted to the Middle Ages through Virgil's Aeneid and twelfth-century romances such as the Roman de Troie, the Roman d'Eneas, and the Roman d'Alexandre. In these works, the Amazon fares well. The most celebrated is Penthesilea, who sought to avenge the fall of Troy and the death of Hector. She came to represent female dedication to family and country. In the late fourteenth century, she figured as one of the Neuf Preuses, or Nine Worthies, corresponding to one of the nine traditional male heroes, and she was viewed as the prototype for the maiden warrior "Jehanne la pucelle," Joan of Arc. The "useful Amazon" was further embodied in Renaissance epic heroines such as Ariosto's and Boiardo's Bradamante and Marfisa, Tasso's Clorinda, and Spenser's Britomart. For all their virile exploits, these warring maidens never deny feminine roles. Of heightened significance are moments when, like Penthesilea, they reveal from beneath their helmet their long blond hair. According to Simon Shepherd, "the hair revelation is the moment above all which reflects and celebrates the re-defined status of the warrior woman" and "beauty and morality, knighthood and womanhood, are all brought together in [this] one image." We
shall see how des Roches's heroine Agnodice is also re-defined in a similar transformation scene. These virtuous viragos, then, epitomize the ideal feminine. They serve as models of female courage and devotion as they use their prowess to support, rather than to fight, existing social structures. Significantly, Bradamante, Clorinda, and Britomart are all protagonists in a love match. As Marina Warner points out, "Their chastity no longer expresses an inexorable renunciation of men." The "ambitious Amazon" is connected primarily with the late sixteenth-century controversy over the Salic Law that engaged both sides of the ongoing *querelle des femmes* in a debate over the capacity—and right—of women to govern. The Salic Law, according to which, in an old feudal formula, "women do not succeed to a fief, much less to a kingdom," was considerably disputed by supporters and opponents of Catherine de Medicis's regency. François Hotman, an influential Protestant political theorist, states in his *Francogallia* (1573), that women should not only be debarred from inheriting a throne but from acting as regents. If forced by circumstance to rule, their power is accidental, exceptional, and a great misfortune for the state. He thus abides by John Calvin's view that women as a group are unsuited to rule and that only the few who have received a divine dispensation can do so. Catholic legists as well defended the Salic Law. Estienne Pasquier, one of the luminaries of the salon of the Dames des Roches, argues forcefully in its favor in his *Recherches de France*. The Dames des Roches's political ideas were as staunchly monarchical as those of their colleagues. Madeleine criticizes once, in a liminary epistle, the political power men arrogate to themselves:

> Pour mon pays, je n'ay point de puissance,  
> Les hommes ont toute l'autorité,  
> contre raison et contre l'équité.  
> ("Epistre a ma fille," 1579)

As to [duty to] my country, I lack all power,  
Men have full authority,  
Contrary to reason and to justice.

Nevertheless, her poems in honor of Henri III underscore his divine right to rule. Significantly, Catherine's single extensive poem to Catherine de Medicis ("Imitation de la mere de Salomon, à la royne mere du roy," 1579) celebrates her motherhood rather than her ability to rule.

The notion that the female ruler is exceptional, and therefore an anomaly to her sex, was heralded by Boccaccio in his seminal 1355 compendium *De claris mulieribus* (Concerning Famous Women), a work most likely familiar to the Dames des Roches. Boccaccio either deflects attention from
the woman ruler's ability to govern by focusing instead on the traditional attributes of her sex (her chastity and devotion to kin), or, at the other extreme, heaps praise on her for her "manly" virtues. His attitude, in both cases, is ambivalent. Typical of the first instance are his incongruous conclusive remarks to his portrait of Camilla, the virago celebrated by Virgil. Her brilliantly courageous example should impel "the girls of our time not to listen to shameful words, to keep silent, to veil their eyes with seriousness, be well-mannered, act with modesty, and avoid idleness, feasting, elegance, dancing, and the company of young men."\(^{17}\) Even though Camilla is a martial maid, she does not trespass, according to Boccaccio, the moral norms of her sex, hence her exemplary nature. In the second instance, he thinks Queen Artemisia's feats so extraordinary that "while we admire [her] deeds, what can we think except that it was an error of Nature to give female sex to a body which had been endowed by God with a magnificent and virile spirit?" (p. 127). Boccaccio perceives this warring woman ruler, and others like her, as a threat to the natural and social order. She is a monstrous prodigy, neither quite female nor quite male.

In a recent study on feminism and the humanists, Constance Jordan remarks that regardless of the paradoxical shortcoming in Boccaccio's method—that is, his exemplary women prove the worth of their sex by in effect denying it—his citation of such female rulers validates his intent to depict them as political equals of men.\(^{18}\) Jordan overlooks the fact that for Boccaccio, as for many humanists, only some women are political equals of men and this by virtue of denying their sex. For this reason, in the late sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, women scholars such as Marie de Gournay and Anna Maria Van Schurman were careful to dissociate their views on gynecocracy and on learned women from the notion of the exceptional virile woman. In her _Égalité des hommes et des femmes_ (1622), Gournay attacks the Salic Law for its pretensions of proving the incapacity of women to govern. She then names a number of valiant women rulers whose courage and heroism, she argues, are not peculiar to a few but "advantages et dons du sexe" (advantages and gifts of the female sex).\(^{19}\) Schurman objects at length to the Calvinist belief that "il suffit qu'il y ait quelques filles qui par une grace spéciale du ciel, s'eslèvent de temps en temps au dessus de leur sexe par le moyen des bonnes lettres" (it is enough that a few women, by a special grace from heaven, elevate themselves from time to time above their sex through letters).\(^{20}\) Catherine des Roches's thought on gynecocracy, while nowhere explicitly stated in her works, emerges under analysis from her depiction of Amazon queens. Whether she defended rule by women is uncertain. That she critiqued the notion of the virile woman "above her sex" can be ascertained from a comparative study of her Amazons with her heroine Agnodice.

Lastly, the "lustful Amazon" was especially popular in the literature of
the Elizabethan era. She constituted a dangerous antithesis to the useful and patriotic woman. In Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* chaste Britomart, whose mission is to save Britain from the Pagans (that is, the Catholics) and to protect social order epitomized in marriage and the family, is at war with Radigund, a cruel and lustful Amazon. In Book V, Radigund, who had conquered the hero Artegaill and had forced him to dress in women’s clothes and spin, is deposed by Britomart. Britomart then places a male ruler over the kingdom of women: “She them restoring / To men’s subjection, did true Justice deale” (V,vii,42). As Pamela Joseph Benson points out, Britomart’s disestablishment of female rule indicates Spenser’s disapproval of gynecocracy unless, as he adds, “the heavens them [virtuous women] lift to lawfull sovereauintie” (V.v.25), which was clearly the case with his sovereign, Elizabeth I.21

Lust was attributed to the Amazon largely in anti-feminist polemic. The views of several early Renaissance humanists toward the legendary “lustful” Queen Semiramis are worth noting. While ancient historians wrote mainly of her achievements as warrior, architect, and empress, Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Petrarch underscored chiefly her feminine wiles and incestual lubricity.22 Christine de Pizan, however, deliberately expurgated the legend of its misogyny in her *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405). Semiramis becomes ironically, on account of her martial prowess and wise governance, the first “great and large stone” of the city’s foundation.23 Louise Labé, whose works were well known to the Dames des Roches,24 has yet another version of Semiramis in her first elegy. Her queen, once a powerful “virile” woman, has through love become “estranged” from her true self, and as François Rigolot points out, has ceased paradoxically to be a woman to the extent that she has become feminized.25

In summary, only the first of these three paradigms of warrior women would have been found acceptable by Renaissance moralists. The “useful Amazon” would have been praised for her active commitment to state, family, and religion, and for taming her lower nature. In contrast, Amazons who gave in to ambition and lust, remarks Natalie Zemon Davis, were mocked as shrews in comic plays or made to suffer ignominious defeat in moral treatises.26

The connection between warrior and learned women rests on two characteristics thought essential and common to both: virility and virginity. The Amazon traditionally embodied both, particularly in late medieval and Renaissance versions of the myth. Similarly, the learned woman was considered both virile, for having entered a male preserve, and virginal, since rationality was believed to be dependent on sexual continence. Vern Bullough sums up aptly the Patristic and medieval medical notion of the interdependence of chastity and learning: “Progress meant giving up the female gender, that is, the passive corporeal and sense perception, for the male gender, that is, the active incorporeal and rational thought. The easiest
way for a woman to approach the male level of rationality was by remaining a virgin." The mythological figure who exemplified this commonality of arms and letters, of virility and virginity, is Pallas Athena. A masculinized deity, born fully armed from Jupiter's brow, she is the protector of social structures. Her inventive powers serve the state. Renaissance mythographers never tired of depicting her useful contributions to the arts and sciences. In her role as "male-identified feminine subject," she is like the "useful Amazon" since she devotes herself to preserving the status quo, and yet unlike the Amazon of Renaissance epics since she has renounced men.

For this latter reason, on account of her radical freedom from male authority, two conflicting views emerged concerning Athena's virginity. In a Christian framework, her virginity/chastity became the hallmark of the Christian woman. Pallas Athena was often depicted as a model for female self-denial in sixteenth-century emblem books. The emblem writer Gilles Corrozet, for instance, following Alciati (Emblema XXII), shows the goddess successfully warding off the assaults of Cupid. The adjoining poem commands all women to follow suit: "Soubz son guidon, veuillez doncq assister, / Contre la chair gagnerez la bataille" ("Beneath her banner, join her then, / You shall win the battle against the flesh"). For the Ancients, however, Athena's virginity symbolized her autonomy and had little or no moral connotation. It signified not so much sexual inexperience as independence of mind and conduct. In this sense the concept of a virgin goddess of learning made Italian Renaissance moralists uneasy. Their reactions to her virginity, as well as to that of scholarly women in general, ranged from slanderous discreditation to the urging of marriage. Christine Reno notes perceptively that in his De claris mulieribus Boccaccio slyly undermined the commonplace of Athena's virginity. Likewise, Margaret King reports that the unmarried Veronese scholar Isotta Nogarola (1418-1466) was accused of promiscuity and even incest. An anonymous libeler wrote: "This saying of many wise men I hold to be true: that an eloquent woman is never chaste; and the behavior of many learned women also confirms this truth." More common, though, was the injunction that the learned woman trade in her literary aspirations for matrimony. In sixteenth-century France, a middle-class scholarly woman would also have been forced to give up partially, if not abandon, her studies upon marriage. Catherine des Roches likely knew this only too well.

Thus, ambivalence, marked at times by hostility, faced the learned virgin. Morally speaking, she was judged acceptable. Since marriage and scholarship were thought incompatible for at least middle-class women, she had rejected marriage for an existence in which chastity was the sine qua non of an independent life of study. But, politically and intellectually, she had entered an occupation whose values were antithetical to those of her sex. She had assumed, in anthropologist Sherry Ortner's words, an "ambiguous middle
position" between Nature, to which her sex had direct affinity, and Culture, the product of male invention. This ambiguity explains why, for Ortner, "in specific cultural ideologies and symbolizations, woman can occasionally be aligned with culture, [but] is often assigned polarized and contradictory meanings within a single symbolic system." Such polarization occurs in the myth of Athena who is associated both with male rationality and with the quintessentially feminine activities of spinning and weaving. Similarly, the more Renaissance educators encouraged women to engage in the new learning, the more they imposed ideological restrictions on its content and purpose. Most educational treatises abounded in admonitions that middle-class educated women confine their views and roles to domestic realities. As Juan Luis Vives writes in his *Instruction of the Christian Woman* (1524): "We do not want the girl learned but good."  

**II. CATHERINE DES ROCHES’S ARMED MAIDEN**

Catherine des Roches’s response to her contemporaries’ perceptions of female scholars and rulers is dramatized in *L’Agnodice, Pour une mascarade d’Amazones,* and *Chanson des Amazones (Les Oeuvres, 1579).* In these poems, she creates an antithesis between Agnodice and the Amazons. The poems’ placement within the collection suggests such a contrast. The “Mascarade” and “Chanson,” in which the Amazons declare their freedom from love and women’s work, which is typified by the distaff, are immediately preceded by a sonnet cycle in which Charite and her suitor Sincero write of their love for each other; they are followed by the sonnet “A ma quenouille” (To My Distaff) in which des Roches praises her spindle! Such an encadrement suggests a neutralization of the Amazons’ views. *L’Agnodice,* on the other hand, is preceded by “La Fmme forte descrite par Salomon,” a paraphrase of the “ideal” patriarchal wife and mother of Proverbs 31, which Catherine dedicates to her mother, stating: “vous offrant cest excellent pourtraict, / C’est vous offrir aussi le pourtraict de vous mesme” (in offering you this excellent portrait, I am offering you as well your very own [p. 147]). Thus, Agnodice’s juxtaposition to the wife from Proverbs—none other than her beloved mother—seems to indicate, at first glance, a greater sympathy for the female trajectory she sets forth. If so, the problem still remains as to what ideal Agnodice represents in des Roches’s mythology. As a learned woman, how does she negotiate (and does she fully) the conflict between nurture and culture, the realm of the Mother and identification with the Father? *L’Agnodice* is addressed to critics of learned women who, embodying allegorical Envy, are depicted in the tale as tyrannical husbands forbidding their erudite wives to do any more reading. As a direct result of this prohibition, the women begin to suffer a number of ailments. They are also forced into isolation and solitary spinning. Agnodice, identified simply as
a “dame gentille” (noble woman), takes compassion on her suffering sisters. To aid them, she disguises herself as a male student and goes off to medical school. When she returns, she offers the wives her services, but she is spurned for “elles craignoient ses mains comme des mains lassives” (they feared her hands had a lascivious intent [p. 155]). Only when she discloses her true sexual identity, when she shows them her blond tresses and her bosom, do they eagerly welcome her. Envy, meanwhile, induces the men to seek the “doctor’s” death on grounds that s/he is seducing their wives. Agnodice then reveals to them who she is, and, invoking the right of all women to learn, she engages her awe-struck male listeners to grant her their total support. But her victory in winning their approval is tempered at the conclusion of the poem:

L’Envie congoissant ses efforts abbatus
Par les faits d’Agnodice et ses rares vertus,
A poursuivy depuit d’une haine immortelle,
Les Dames qui estoient vertueuses comme elle.

(p. 157)

Envy, knowing the battle was lost
Through the deed and rare virtues of Agnodice,
Has pursued ever since with an immortal hate
Ladies as virtuous as she.

Agnodice’s struggle is that of scholarly women of each new generation.

The message of L’Agnodice lies in its endorsement of women’s quest for learning but in such a way that this quest does not overtly undercut the norms of social accord. The tale begins by assailing the destructive nature of the vice of envy. Des Roches cites the story of Phocion who, Plutarch reports, was denied a decent burial by his envious enemies until his wife came to bury him at her hearth by night. Des Roches imagines a sequel in which Envy punishes the maternal solicitude of the wife—in Catherine’s tale a “dame estrangere,” foreign lady—by swearing s/he will disparage all learned wives like her. Karen Horney, in “The Dread of Woman” (1932), attributes male disparagement of women to man’s dread of woman’s power to deny “the superiority of the masculine principle.” Donna Stanton pursues this analysis in an illuminating study of the myth of the précieuse and the fear of women when she states that such disparagement serves to “punish woman for breaking the essential rule, and reaffirms the triumph of the phallic order.” The phallic order is partially reaffirmed at the end of L’Agnodice when, upon the threat of death, Agnodice throws off her disguise and shows herself a harmless, beautiful maid, unjustly accused, and in need of the husbands’ protection. She stresses that she has been working all along
for their common good. Thus, harmony is reinstated and the wives are living once again in accord with their husbands.

The tale contains additionally, however, a veiled or, to use Elaine Showalter’s concept, a “muted message” located principally in the passage where Agnodice reveals to the wives her sexual identity. This episode is highlighted through details not found in its original source. Des Roches used a myth of Hyginus in which Agnodice’s medical skill convinces the Athenians to change the law forbidding women from studying obstetrics. Hyginus simply has his heroine remove her garment to show that she is a woman. In des Roches’s version, the episode takes the form of a *blason* in which Agnodice’s physical perfections are enumerated and worshipped by her patients:

Agnodice, voyant leur grande chasteté,
Les estima beaucoup pour ceste honnesteté,
Lors, descouvrant du sein les blanches pommes rondes,
Et de son chef doré les belles tresses blondes,
Monstre qu'elle estoit fille, et que son gentil cueur,
Les voulloit deliverer de leur triste langueur.
Les Dames admirant ceste bonte naive,
Et de son teint douillet la blanche couleur vive,
Et de son sein poupin le petit mont jumeau,
Et de son chef sacré l'or crepelu tant beau,
Et de ses yeux divins les flammes ravissantes,
Et de ses doux propos les graces attirantes
Baisèrent mille fois et sa bouche et son sein,
Recevant le secours de son heureuse main.
On voit en peu de temps les femmes et pucelles
Reprendre leurs teins frais et devenir plus belle.

(p. 155)

Agnodice, upon seeing their great chastity,
Esteemed them all the more for their integrity.
Revealing then the white round apples of her bosom,
The beauteous blond tresses of her golden head,
She shows them that she was a maid, and that her noble heart
Desired their deliverance from their sad languour.
The ladies, admiring her simple goodness,
The beauteous blond tresses of her golden head,
She shows them that she is a maid, and that her noble heart
Desired their deliverance from their sad languor.
The ladies, admiring her simple goodness,
And the sparkling whiteness of her soft complexion,
The small twin mounds of her downy breast,
The golden curls of her sacred head,
The ravishing flames of her divine gaze,
And the engaging grace of her soft-spoken words,
Kissed a thousand times her lips and bosom,
And received succor from her blessed hand.
Soon one saw the wives and daughters
Recover their fresh looks and become more beautiful.

There is more here than a group of women roused to an ecstatic transport of thanks for their deliverance. Their perception of Agnodice's body is startling for two reasons. First, it adopts the same lexicon a male poet would have used were he to describe the beauty of his mistress. Second, it centers on women as readers of another woman's text. Agnodice's body becomes a text engaging them to recover their lost status as readers. In a study of heroines whose reading is interrupted to attend to a more appropriate female task, Marcell Thiebaux points out that the process of rupture, redirection, and incorporation occurs. She writes:

In the figure Woman/Book, a rupture must be effected between Woman and Book: a woman reading a book shall be compelled to put it aside. A woman reading does not continue to read; she has a temporary look. Either she is interrupted by the author, the circumstances, the fictional observer, or she interrupts herself to take up a more "natural" female activity. This is the second element of the discourse, the redirection of her energies, their rechanneling into sexual conduits. The discourse then incorporates the woman reading into the destiny of a book like the one she has been reading, some other book,
the observer’s or patriarchal author’s further discourse about her, and so on. In this third phase, woman loses her autonomy as reader, as agent, and becomes read about.

(p. 53)

In des Roches’s poem, a rupture is effected between the wives and their books. They are then redirected to more conforming tasks, and incorporated or subordinated into a text in which they have lost their one-time status as reader. They recover that status metaphorically through the mediation of another woman who, empowered by her “stolen” role, reveals that they too can defy patriarchal prohibition. Significantly, the fullness of Agnodice’s self-disclosure is solely for their benefit. In contrast, the men are accorded merely a view of her bosom chastely described as “aggreable sejour / Des Muses, des Vertues, des Graces, de l’amour” (graceful abode / Of the Muses, the Virtues, the Graces, and Love [p. 156]). The men remain mere onlookers pacified by Agnodice’s seeming compliant discourse. The narrative of Agnodice’s self-revelation to the women is, thus, doubly ironic. It consecrates a Madonna who is not simply the fetishized silent Muse of blazon poetry; her body becomes a reinterpreted maternal source of healing, a locus for feminine solidarity and closeness. And the conventional male poetic lover has been replaced by female personae who pay homage to a female savior. Des Roches’s violation of poetic convention is a means of emphasis, of underscoring the fact that her learned woman is much more than a “useful Amazon” functioning essentially in a man’s world. Her heroine works not merely for the good of the state; she works for the good of Feminie. The subversive elements in Agnodice’s sexual inversion do not disappear at the end; they are muted.

Des Roches’s two poems on the Amazons, however, provide a contrasting image to L’Agnodice. These warrior women do not resort to subterfuge. They aggressively invoke the same values of glory, fame, and absolute dominion that the male rulers do. In this sense, they approximate the type of the “ambitious Amazon” discussed above. In Pour une mascarade d’Amazones, the Amazon Orithya is singled out from among the nine traditional Amazon queens on account of her perpetual virginity and her identification with her mother Martesia. Did Catherine des Roches transpose herself imaginatively in this triumphant virgin warrior whose mother founded the earliest and most famous of matriarchal societies? Possibly so. Her entire work is dedicated to the praise of her mother, whom she invokes throughout either in name or anonymously. Furthermore, the poem is noteworthy for its hymn to sexual independence. Orithya derives her invulnerability precisely on account of her martial resistance to the entrapment of love, as is evident in the last two stanzas:
Un cœur que n’ouvre point aux voluptez la porte,
Un penser généreux, une puissance forte,
Nous préserve toujours de l’Amour et de Mars:
Aussi en toutes parts la femme ne résonne
Que du pouvoir hautain de la Roine Amazone
Qui fait marcher les Dieux dessous ses estendars.

Son nom est Otréra, fille de Martésie,
Qui tient pour la servir cette troupe choisie,
Voulant par sa prouesse éterniser son nom:
Elle retient du tout le souverain Empire
De la grande Cité nommée Themyscire
Enceinte par les bras du fameux Thermidon.

May a heart that refuses sensual pleasure,
And nobility of mind as well as mighty power
Preserve us always from Love and Mars:
Hence everywhere woman sings
Of the proud rule of the Queen of the Amazons
Who orders the very Gods beneath her standards.

Her name is Orithya, daughter of Martesia,
Who commands this select army to serve her,
For she wants through her prowess to immortalize
her name:
She holds complete sovereignty
Over the great city of Themyscira
Encircled by the famous river Thermidon.

Similarly, in Chanson d’Amazones, the guérrillères sing their sexual inviolability which enables them to exchange customary female practices, such as spinning, for waging of war. Inspired by the Orlando furioso (XIX, 72) on the topos of the woman-on-top, these warriors declare in the last stanza:

Nous tenons les hommes,
Des lieux ou nous sommes,
Tous empêchés à filer:
Leur lasche courage
D’un plus bel ouvrage
N’est digne de se mesler:
Si quelcun de vous
S'en fache contre nous,
Qu'il vienne quereller.

(pp. 121–22)

We hold men prisoners,
In the places where we rule,
And force them to spin:
Their cowardly spirit
Of a greater endeavor [war]
Is unworthy to assume:
If any among you
Wish to quarrel with us
Let him come forward.

This poem is specifically directed to critics of female rule. In the imaginary encounter between the guérillères and their querelleurs, the victorious party is left in no doubt!

The reader is faced at this point with several related questions: Which of the above contrasting reactions to male authority might Catherine des Roches have advocated? Are there elements in each which would have caused her to hesitate in singling out one response alone? How does her representation of these virile learned women connect with her own anomalous situation? A comparison of Agnodice and the Amazons suggests the following. The Amazons predicate their autonomy on total separation from the patriarchy. Their enmity with man as a sexual/political being is translated into war-making and the establishment of a gynecocracy. Their mundus inversus is emblemized in the Omphale-Hercules topos: they subject their male prisoners to feminine practices which, as warrior women, they perceive as degrading. Ironically, however, they live a paradox: hostile to man, they have nevertheless identified with the values of the realm of the Father.

Agnodice’s equally autonomous conduct, on the other hand, reinscribes norms acceptable to the patriarchy. She reinstates harmony between the sexes. Most significantly, she veils her defiance of the prohibitions imposed on her sex with signs of womanly modesty. When she discloses her identity to her male judges, for instance, she appropriately lowers her eyes and blushes: “Elle baissa le yeux pleins d’honneur et de honte / Une vierge rougeur en la face luy monte” (She lowered her gaze filled with honor and shame / A virginal blush covered her face). Could des Roches have recalled here the tradition which held that the celebrated scholar Cassandra Fedele (1465–1558)—whom she lauds twice in her works—blushed during her Latin oration before the Venetian Doge Agostino Barbarigo? A woman’s blush signified her modesty which along with her chastity constituted the two fundamental character traits held up to women in Renaissance
conduct-books. Agnodice's reinscription within the norms of the dominant culture presents her official side, so to speak. Her defiance constitutes a muted text whose recipients are solely the erudite women to whom she has dedicated her studies and for whom she has risked her life. Even her virginity, the source of her power, since, like that of Pallas Athena it protects her independence, is muted and rendered acceptable to male authority. This double entendre is especially evident when the husbands kneel in awe before "la pucelle" (maiden or virgin; this is significantly the only time that this term is applied to Agnodice). Her ensuing pleasure underscores her triumph:

Elle qui ressentit un plaisir singulier,
Les supplia bien fort de faire estudier
Les Dames du pays, sans envier la gloire
Que l'on a pour servir les filles de Memoire.

(p. 157)

Experiencing a singular pleasure
[Agnodice] Pledged ardently that [the men] allow
The ladies of the land to study, and that they not
envy the glory
Which comes from serving the daughters of
Memory.

Agnodice projects a nuanced and politically conservative understanding of the problem of the learned woman in Catherine des Roches's work. Critics contemporary to des Roches underscored the latter's dual devotion to the pen and the spindle, to male and female spheres alike. Pasquier lauded the mother and her daughter as excellent "mesnagères," a compliment echoed some time later by Guillaume Colletet and Melle de Scudéry.60 Agnodice represents then a political compromise in Catherine's mythology. Yet her duality—outwardly conforming, inwardly defiant—does not end in a peaceful resolution. Envy still wars with learned women like her. Nor are the Amazons entirely negative in des Roches's work. The strong mother-daughter bond between Orithya and Martesia, the solidarity among the warrior women, their ability to ward off love are constant themes throughout her works. Catherine's emphasis on the power women can derive from uniting with each other seems also the focal point of similarity between L'Agnodice and the Amazon poems. Linda Woodbridge in Women and the English Renaissance states that the notion of female solidarity was unusual in the Renaissance: "Women may not have dreamed of seeking power through uniting with other women because whenever women were considered as a group, as a sex, they were seen to be feeble."61 However, even though some of the Amazons's ideals are attractive to Catherine, their
utopian society represents just that, an imaginary world whose seriousness is ultimately undercut by the poetic genre in which it is cast (the "chanson" and the "mascarade," the latter being a popular entertainment at the frivolous court of Henri III) and by the mock-heroic nature of the episode in the Orlando furioso which served as its source.

III. CONCLUSION

Why might Catherine des Roches have rejected the humanist notion of the scholarly woman as superior to her sex? There are, I believe, several answers. At a time when polemicists in the querelle des femmes were recalling the myth of the Amazons to defend a few women's historic rights to power, des Roches draws attention to its generally overlooked danger for women as a group; it perpetuates the concept of the extraordinary woman who has felicitously overcome the limitations of her sex. Even though, according to the late historian Joan Kelly, feminists in the controversy recalled the myth originally "to keep alive a fading image of independent women" as well as "a notion of women's governing powers," des Roches perceived that in its application to defending the rights of contemporary queens, it was politically detrimental to the majority of educated women. Like Christine de Pizan before her, she rejected Boccaccio's ambiguous heritage of praising the "manly" and "exceptional" woman while denigrating her sex.

Second, des Roches is concerned that learned women not be alienated from a feminine sphere. Her deep devotion to her mother, whom she saw as mentor, the many erudite women with whom she frequently corresponded, the pride both she and her mother took in their ménage bespeak her commitment to the sex humanists were wont to denigrate. Her heroine Agnodice demonstrates that the learned woman should ally the nurturing and mediatory roles of the private sphere with her achieved status as cultural arbiter and author in the public order. Agnodice thus stresses, to use Lawrence Lipking's terms, a dual poetic of "affiliation" and "authority." Her virginity, rather than isolating her into a defensive stance, is a means both to her acquiring a strong sense of identity and to her bridging the gap between female and male cultures. Ultimately, she fulfills her creator's drive to enter the order of the Symbolic while refusing assimilation.

NOTES

*This article is based on a paper prepared for the Sixteenth-Century Studies Conference, St. Louis, October 1984. I am grateful to Donald Gilman and Shari Benstock for their comments on an earlier version, and to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a summer stipend that funded research on this and other related work.
1. “Lettre à Pierre Pithou” (Grands Jours de Poitiers, 1579), in Choix de lettres sur la littérature, la langue, et la traduction, ed. Dorothy Thickett (Geneva: Droz, 1966), Book VI, Letter 7, p. 12. Thickett includes two letters by Pasquier to Pithou on the Dames des Roches, both written the same year. The first was written during the “Grands Jours,” when Pasquier and other Parisian lawyers were sent to Poitiers to relieve the congested courts. The second describes the salon of the Poitevine ladies.

2. Les Oeuvres and Les Missives were published in Paris by Abel l’Angelier, and Les Secondes Oeuvres in Poitiers by Nicolas Courtoys. All translations are mine. The collection of La Puce (Paris: Abel l’Angelier, 1582, 1583; partial edition by D. Jouaust, Paris, 1868) contains poems by the Dames des Roches. These poems are also found in Les Secondes Oeuvres. Luce Guillerm included several excerpts from their works in his La Femme dans le littérature française et les traductions en français au XVIIe siècle (Publications de L’Université de Lille III, 1971) and reprinted these in his recent Le Miroir des femmes, vol. II (Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1984). The dedicatory epistle to Les Oeuvres of 1579 has been reprinted and translated in my “Catherine des Roches’s ‘Epistre à Sa Mère,’” Allegorica 7 (1982): 58–64.

3. Pythagoras’ Symbola translated as Les Enigmes de Pythagore (Les Secondes Oeuvres, 1583, 14v-18v), and Claudian’s De raptu Proserpinæ translated as Le Ravissement de Proserpine (Les Missives, 1586, 41–46).


9. Eric Hicks, Le Débat sur le Roman de la rose (Paris: Champion, 1977), 168; Charles de Sainte-Marthe, Oraison funèbre de Marguerite de Navarre, cited by L. Richardson,


13. Shepherd, Amazons and Warrior Women, 9. On such moments of epic heroines' self-disclosure, see Ariosto, Orlando furioso, XIX, 108; Tasso, Gerusalemme liberata, III, 21; and Spenser, Faerie Queene, IV, vi, 20.


19. De Gournay, Egalité des hommes et des femmes (1622) in Mario Schiff, La Fille d'alliance de Montaigne, Marie de Gournay (Geneva: Slatkine, rpt. 1978), 74.


24. Madeleine published her first poems in 1578 in a volume, now lost, that also contained Labé's Débat de Folie et d'Amour (1555).


34. Vives, Instruction of the Christian Woman (London, 1524), cited by J. McCarthy, Humanistic Emphases in the Educational Thought of Vincent of Beauvais (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 57. Even as “liberal” an advocate as Richard Hyrede, a member of Thomas More’s entourage, felt compelled to justify women’s learning as primarily a means for them to escape day-dreaming and “other fantasies” (see Vives and the Renascence Education of Women, ed. Foster Watson [New York: Longmans, 1912], 166).


43. *Les seconds Oeuvres* contains the majority of des Roches's poems in honor of learned women. Poems 10 and 11 are addressed to her cousin Madeleine Chemeraud, lauded also by La Croix du Maine in *La Bibliothèque* (Paris: Abel L'Angelier, 1584), 497. Another poem is dedicated to the abbess Madame de Sainte Croix. The rest praise erudite women (poems 4, 21, 29, 34, 42).