



*Aspiration, Representation and  
Memory: The Guise in Europe,  
1506–1688,*

Jessica Munns, Penny Richards  
& Jonathan Spangler (eds.),  
(Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

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**D**eliberately and rightly avoiding dwelling on the careers of the most notorious members of the sixteenth-century house of Guise, this volume identifies the Guise family's consistent aim since the medieval period to be seen as "not merely noble, but as royal" (25). As the editors are careful to underline, there have been excellent recent discussions of the marital and dynastic strategies of infamous family members such as François, second Duke of Guise and Mary, Queen of Scots. This volume skilfully explores the family's roots and their actions and ambitions beyond France over a longer period, to show they were in fact pretenders and contenders for many trans-regional thrones – England, Scotland, France, Naples, and even Jerusalem. The contributors demonstrably prove these ambitions by underlining how "the use of representations (visual and literary)" (7) were employed to achieve "royal (rather than merely princely) power" (7), as well as identifying a secondary theme of an inherited crusading destiny. Representation is understood as both how the Guise represented themselves, but also in turn how others responded to and represented them. Interdisciplinary chapters discuss the chateau of Joinville, commissions of chronicles, Guise marital policy, and the family's material consumption, patronage, and military adventures. The reader is given the impression that from family strongholds such as Joinville or Eu, dreams became plans whereby the Guise family's careers as high court nobles in France were almost incidental to a transnational politico-religious vision of these *princes étrangers*.

Identifying a gap in the family's biography, the volume concentrates on the career of Henri II, fifth Duke of Guise, who ended "his career as a popular ornament" at the court of Louis XIV (21). Chapters by Michele Benaiteau, David A.H.B. Taylor, Silvana D'Alessio, Jonathan Spangler and Charles Gregory show that the fifth duke was an adventurer, arguably as much for his own personal glory as for that of the Guise cause. Whilst this detail of the fifth duke's career is a significant bonus to Guise scholarship, one wonders if the dynasty felt he was much of an asset. This vainglorious and light-headed popinjay traversed Western Europe, collecting wives at seeming whim, sitting for Van Dyck in order to mimic the patronage of English military nobles, courting his favourites in yellow-stockings, and delaying the start of state-funded expeditions in order to indulge himself with the good wives of Provence. Brave, if not noticeably intelligent, he was nonetheless able to manipulate ideas about his own military ability and the Guise claim to the Angevin inheritance, both to entice

Mazarin to sponsor two expeditions to Naples, as well as to elicit support amongst reputable, and very shady members of the Neapolitan political world. Intriguingly, when he encountered problems he turned to his mother, the dowager Duchess of Guise, to resolve his financial problems. This behaviour, as Spangler shows in his chapter “Mother knows best”, was perfectly fitting for a princeling with international ambitions as Guise was merely following the precedent of Louis XIII and Maria de’ Medici.

The volume does not lose sight of the family’s activities in France. A particularly enjoyable dissection of the Guise’s material consumption by Marjorie Meiss-Even illustrates how the Guise derived status at court from their Italian connections, and just as much as the noble veterans of the Italian Wars, popularised Italian fashions, architecture and delicate foodstuffs. For instance, networks and contacts in Italy provided the Guise with the best salami, and newly fashionable melons, as well as with valuable political intelligence for consumption. The final chapters by Penny Richards and Jessica Munns provide a lively and short conclusion to the volume, asking us to consider how later ages, historians and dramatists, have in turn fashioned our interpretation of the Guise, themselves influenced by contemporary politics to the time of writing, and later performances. Munns’s chapter on the Guise in British drama works particularly well as a mirror to the Palais de Luxembourg’s 2015 Tudors exhibition catalogue, where French perceptions of the Tudor family were explored through the theatre.

Having demonstrated to the reader that successive generations of Guise shared trans-regional royal ambitions, the volume also creates a beguiling idea of a Guise mental map of Europe and the Holy Land. Here, the acquisition of realms became a support to the expression of their fierce Catholicism, and conquest was akin to a religious ritual. This manifested itself in Guise propaganda in the symbiosis between the activities of the League and the Crusades, their control of ritual space in Paris, the language of their claim to Naples, as well as their own domestic patronage, as is shown in chapters by Robert S. Sturges, Meiss-Even, Taylor and D’Alessio. Particularly intriguing is Sturges’s exploration of ceremonial space at Joinville as a mirror to these ambitions.

Sincere and gushing praise aside, the volume does appear a little unequal. Certain chapters repeat earlier material, touching on the same dramatic sources. Others appear overlong in comparison to snappier short chapters, or appear to have far too much material in the footnotes, which could have been purposefully incorporated into the main text. For an Ashgate publication, this is a comparably lavishly produced book. However, there is a desperate need for a map of Naples and its surroundings to accompany discussion of the fifth duke’s campaigns.

Equally, one has to wonder whether members of the family other than

the fifth duke deserve greater attention. Spangler reminds us of the resentment that Guise felt for the continued influence of his family on the freedom of his actions. Thus, there was a tension between an inherited “family mission” and that of personal glory which may well apply to earlier Guise careers, both amongst warrior dukes and princes of the Church. Equally, it is a little irksome to imply (12) that significant French contact and interchange with Italian culture only began in the reign of François I: the work of French and Italian historians such as Arcangeli, Meschini and Le Fur has established the importance of cultural interchange before 1515 and ought to be acknowledged.

Overall, the volume’s originality outshines these niggles. It is invaluable as an example of interdisciplinary scholarship in the growing field of French princely families with international ambitions. The history and ambitions of the Guise can stand alongside that of families such as the Foix and Albret. In this way, this study provides a welcome counter-example to overly insistent theories of early-modern French centralisation.

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