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Dworetzky, Ally, "Poets and Their Princesses: Encomiastic Poetry of the Sixteenth Century" (2018). *Spring 2018*. 34.

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POETS AND THEIR PRINCESSES: ENCOMIASTIC POETRY OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Ally Dworetzky

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For court poets of the sixteenth century, encomiastic (eulogistic) poetry provided a means of subsistence and of setting oneself apart from the competition. By examining some of the encomiastic poetry from this era, this thesis explores the role played by several powerful women as patrons of the arts. Through a study of the ways in which female patrons were represented and described in Renaissance poetry, this two-part thesis examines the relationships between the two most celebrated poets of the time and the royal women who supported them. In the first chapter, I explore the relationship between Pierre de Ronsard and Catherine de Medici, regent of France amidst a series of tumultuous civil wars. The second chapter concerns the relationship between Joachim du Bellay and princess Marguerite de France, protectress of poetry and humanist values. In their poetry, Ronsard and Du Bellay highlight the role of women in society and attribute a particular importance to the “feminine space” — the literary and cultural circles to which these women belonged. The images inspired by the relationships between poet and princess give us the impression that these poets were truly “nourished” by their relationships with their female patrons: Du Bellay as a child nourished by his mother, and Ronsard as an ambitious writer taking advantage of France’s unstable political state. They portray the female patron and female power in a favorable light, and even go so far as to praise the idea of a “gynocracy.” Over four centuries later, their poetry remains in the collective literary memory, due largely to these two female patrons who have given it the gift of immortality.