

Portraits of the Queen Mother: Polemics, Panegyrics, Letters

CATHERINE DE MÉDICIS AND OTHERS



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Introduction

Catherine de Médicis and the Other Voice

In the course of an extraordinary career that spanned over fifty years, Catherine de Médicis was, by turns, queen consort of Henri II, advisor to her sons François II, Charles IX, and Henri III, and, during several extended periods, regent of France.¹ In her wake there followed a rich archive of texts by various writers who commented on her queenship, some enthusiastically adulatory, others condemnatory and pejorative. Catherine also left behind a complex, even paradoxical, legacy. On the one hand, she was and is still known as a generous patron, particularly of architecture and the visual arts. On the other, her notorious, Machiavellian reputation as the instigator of civil and religious strife is still firmly entrenched in the popular imagination; until relatively recently, this view of Catherine was also quite prevalent in the scholarly imagination. Catherine's own letters—of which she wrote thousands, both diplomatic and personal—provide a much more nuanced and sympathetic view of her queenship. These letters are the closest we have to an authentic “other voice” that can compete with the portrait of the ambitious and vindictive queen that has filtered down to us.

It would be wrong, however, to claim that Catherine's letters are unproblematically transparent or that they portray her in stark contradistinction to the darker legacy that surrounds her name. Highly mediated by secretaries or by diplomatic intermediaries, and heavily tailored to meet the anticipated desire of their recipients or to advance her own objectives, these letters reveal Catherine de Médicis to be a political creature, one whose deft diplomatic maneuverings and extraordinary power are compelling and remarkable in a kingdom that did not officially permit women to rule from the French throne. It was in response to this unprecedented female political agency that Catherine became the focus of myriad sixteenth-century texts, some laudatory and eulogistic, others deprecatory and polemical. If Catherine's letters represent an “other voice” that may be set against the defamatory rhetoric that has greatly defined her historical reputation, they represent only one in a multitude of textual voices that present readers with wildly different narratives of the queen mother. In this sense, it is perhaps reductive to invoke the notion of a singular “other voice” in the case of Catherine de Médicis, for the portrait of her that has come down to us is shaped by multiple voices, and by multiple competing narratives.

1. As she was queen consort and queen mother of France, we have elected to use the Gallicized “de Médicis” when referring to Catherine. Except for direct citations, all other references to members of the Medici family use the Anglicized “de Medici.”

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Portraits of the Queen Mother brings together selected texts contemporary to Catherine's queenship—including ambassadorial reports, polemical pamphlets, and panegyric biography, alongside Catherine's own letters—to show how the authority of this queen was carefully constructed and challenged through several important textual genres of the period. The objectives of these portraits differ greatly. If Catherine's admirers lauded her generous patronage of the arts, her attempts at conciliation between Protestants and Catholics, and her valiant efforts to preserve the throne for her sons in a time of intrigue and strife, detractors accused her of being a spendthrift, poisoner, and instigator of religious war, who ruthlessly sacrificed her subjects and even her children to further her own ambition. Rather than recuperate Catherine from a "black legend" that has had remarkable traction over the course of centuries, *Portraits of the Queen Mother* seeks to show how these various and often partisan texts contributed to the fashioning of a female political persona, often to dramatically different ends.

All of these texts craft a distinctly gendered political persona, frequently predicated on a particular conception of Catherine's maternity and its political function. Catherine herself carefully cultivated her maternity as an important foundation for her authoritative role, both visually through various media and spectacles, and rhetorically in her letters.² The texts gathered in this volume thus all explore to some degree not only female authority and power, but also royal maternity as a source of this authority.

The construction of Catherine's public persona as queen mother is particularly striking in an age that struggled with the authority of queens.³ By custom that took the force of law, women did not inherit the crown of France.⁴ Because

2. Catherine, for instance, famously wore only black after the death of Henri II, a visual symbol of her perpetually somber role as widow and mother to the king.

3. This was clearly a visible issue, as there were in fact other powerful queens in France and England in this period, such as Mary Tudor and Elizabeth I, and many powerful women, such as Anne de Bretagne, and Anne de France (also known as Anne de Beaujeu), to name just a few. For an examination of the many ruling queens in Europe from 1100–1600, of which France is the notable exception for having none, see Armin Wolf, "Reigning Queens in Medieval Europe: When, Where, and Why," in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi Parsons (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 169–88.

4. See our discussion of Salic law in this introduction. For an account of the "opening phase" of the debate over women's exclusion from rule in France, see Sarah Hanley, "Identity Politics and Rulership in France: Female Political Place and the Fraudulent Salic Law in Christine de Pizan and Jean de Montreuil," in *Changing Identities in Early Modern France*, ed. Michael Wolfe (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 78–94. There is a large and growing bibliography on women and specifically queens and political rule in the medieval West; for just a few studies, see Parsons, ed., *Medieval Queenship*; Peggy McCracken, "Introduction: Defining Queenship in Medieval Europe," in *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 1–24; Janet L. Nelson, "Medieval Queenship," in *Women in Medieval Western European Culture*, ed. Linda E. Mitchell (New York: Garland, 1999), 179–207; and Theresa Earenfight's *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

of this exclusion, the status of a French queen was necessarily relationally dependent upon her ties to her royal husband: in other words, a woman was queen of France with any attendant powers only insofar as she was queen consort to the king. Those attendant powers, nevertheless, could be quite expansive in the early modern period. A queen was not only, or even necessarily, a representative of the king's will, although it was certainly due to his authority that she was able to wield her own. Queens exercised their own distinct political power. One basis for this power was linked to the queen's childbearing role, especially for a woman like Catherine de Médicis who was expected to bear the heirs to the throne; the queen's ability to produce an heir secured her place and her own political capital. Yet this dynastic function did not exclude other possibilities for power and authority, and even queen consorts for whom the pressure to produce an heir was less urgent—for instance, queens who were married to kings after the death of a first wife who had already borne children to ensure the dynastic succession—enjoyed a certain authority on the basis of their proximity to the king.⁵ A queen could also be regent. Although regencies, especially female regencies, were often controversial because regency practices were largely conventional and not legally codified, it was possible for a French queen to govern in the event of the king's absence or incapacitation, or upon his death if her children were still minors.⁶

For Catherine de Médicis, events aligned to create possibilities for her to rule at numerous points in her life in various capacities, but it was especially in

5. Catherine's daughter, Elisabeth de Valois, for instance, was Philip II of Spain's third wife, and was likely under less pressure to bear an heir, as the inheritance was already secure in Philip's son Don Carlos. Nevertheless, as early mortality of heirs was always a possibility, any queen was implicitly expected to bear children. Despite playing a different role in the dynastic succession of Spain, Elisabeth nonetheless appears to have enjoyed a certain diplomatic authority vis-à-vis her husband, as Catherine's letters to her suggest.

6. "The vocation of regency was consolidated with the exclusion of women from the succession, and under the Valois the tasks at the heart of the dynasty became specialized: the king was to reign, the queen to second him and substitute for him if he was a minor, absent, or incapacitated; his relatives to assist, or to assume the government if need be. On the eve of the sixteenth century this institutional genesis was complete; Louise of Savoy, Catherine de Medici, and Anne of Austria would officiate with full legal rights over the fundamental laws of the monarchy, among which the regency now took its proper place." André Poulet, "Capetian Women and the Regency: The Genesis of a Vocation," in *Medieval Queenship*, 116.

Specific acts were issued to enable specific regencies, but these did not seem to hold precedence over later regencies. As Tracy Adams writes: "Despite a number of documents clearly intended to create precedents, regencies had always been formed anew as necessary to respond to the exigencies of the situation at hand." See her "Christine de Pizan, Isabeau of Bavaria, and Female Regency," *French Historical Studies* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2009), 5. As well, see our discussion later in this section of the so-called Salic law, which did provide some sort of legal precedent but was centuries-old, internally contradictory, and by no means widely observed in France after the Merovingian and Carolingian periods.

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her role as queen mother that she was able to exert her authority. While queen consort to Henri II, Catherine was twice regent in the king's absence, but it was most notably after Henri's death that she was regent, during the minority of her son, Charles IX. After Charles's death, she acted as regent again in the transition to the reign of her next son, Henri III, once more in her capacity as queen mother.⁷ Catherine was, quite remarkably, the first French queen to serve as regent without prior royal designation: she effectively made herself regent during the minority of Charles IX by insisting that her position as mother of the young king conferred upon her a natural authority and made her the appropriate choice for the regency.⁸ That Catherine successfully made herself regent, advisor to her sons, and a de facto power behind the throne during their reigns shows how the seemingly circumscribed role of queen mother could yield opportunities for considerable authority, and how Catherine herself paid careful attention to the cultivation of the sources and presentation of that authority.

The ways in which Catherine translated this cultivated authority into concrete royal policy is by no means transparent, and this lack of transparency appears to have infuriated many of her contemporaries, even as it continues to perplex scholars today. That Catherine could be portrayed so differently by her contemporaries over the course of her lifetime is due not only to the differing political and religious stances of these contemporaries, but also to the fact that Catherine herself appears to have changed her position and policies several times over. These shifts were likely in response to the volatile events of her lifetime; her career lasted more than twenty years, spanning what was arguably one of the most violent and contentious periods in French history. Crafting a coherent royal policy during the increasingly partisan French civil wars alongside a commanding personal, political, and cultural authority was a complex, multifaceted project at which Catherine both succeeded and failed: her influence was undeniable, but its limitations were also demonstrated by the virulent detractors she inspired. As both a source of royal policy and as a political persona, Catherine was a shifting subject for her contemporaries, and she has continued to be a moving target for scholars of her life and works centuries later.⁹

7. Her first son François II was of age when Henri II died. French kings were considered old enough to rule in their own right when they reached their fourteenth year; in other words, on their thirteenth birthday. François II ascended the throne in 1559, at the age of fifteen, and reigned until his death in 1560.

8. She "acted simply as mother of the young new king Charles IX and her regental prerogative was later confirmed by a meeting of the Estates General": Elizabeth McCartney, "The King's Mother and Royal Prerogative in Early Sixteenth-Century France," in *Medieval Queenship*, 117. By way of counter-example, Isabeau of Bavaria had been designated by her husband Charles VI to serve after his death as regent for her minor son, assisted by an advisory council. See Poulet, "Capetian Women and the Regency," 114–15, nn. 4 and 5, and *passim*, for other examples.

9. We would like to thank Mack Holt for insightfully pointing out that Catherine was a "moving target," whose policies and opinions were ever changing because of the complexity of the civil wars.

The texts in *Portraits of the Queen Mother* suggest several potential sources for Catherine's authority: her marriage and proximity to the king, her familial relations, and her status and responsibility as mother to the heirs of the throne. The very existence of that authority, moreover, and its translation into Catherine's concrete prerogative as a political actor behind the throne was debated and negotiated in a complex web of public perceptions and opinions. The organizing logic of this volume references this often vexed negotiation, bringing together a diversity of texts not usually read together, all of which participate in the fashioning—positive and negative—of the queen mother's persona. How did this network of sources interact? How could a queen like Catherine fashion her public persona and her own way of ruling, and what was the reception, borne out in texts responding to Catherine's queenship, of that fashioning? How do these texts define and circumscribe the extent and limits of her powers? More broadly, what do these multiple portraits suggest about the role of texts in the fashioning and practice of early modern political power, and more specifically, of Catherine's distinct mode of queenship?

Historical Context I: Becoming a French Queen

In several contemporary French accounts of her life, one of the most compelling details about Catherine de Médicis's identity was her Italian and specifically Florentine birth. Born in 1519 in Florence, she was orphaned within months, and cared for by family members and raised in convents for most of her childhood.¹⁰ She was married to Henri, duc d'Orléans, second son of François Ier and future King of France, in 1533 when she was fourteen, and spent the rest of her life in France.¹¹ Contemporary accounts point to her Italian and Florentine origins, emphasizing the Italian cultural values and customs she presumably retained.¹²

The developing portraiture of Catherine during the sixteenth century is necessarily in dialogue with those changes.

10. Catherine was born on April 13, 1519. Her mother, Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, died on April 28, 1519; her father, Lorenzo de Medici, died on May 4, 1519.

11. Henri II was baptized as Henry in honor of his godfather, Henry VIII of England, but is known more commonly by the Gallicized version of his name. We will use the Gallicized "Henri" from this point forward.

12. Sheila Ffolliott argues that "Medici" became a kind of positive byword for Catherine's patronage, suggesting that artists sought her out specifically because she was a Medici: "'La Florentine' or 'La bonne Française': Some Sixteenth-Century Commentators on Catherine de' Medici and her Patronage," in *Medici Women as Cultural Mediators*, ed. Christina Strunck (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2012), 17–33. On the other hand, R.J. Knecht argues that as Catherine left Florence at the age of thirteen, her tastes were ultimately more French than Italian: *Catherine de' Medici* (New York: Addison Wesley, 1998), 220. Knecht does note, however, that Catherine would have continued to be in touch with Italian contacts and that the court of François Ier was quite hospitable to Italian artists; it thus

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This Italianness was negatively portrayed when the political climate demanded it, placing Catherine in a lineage of preceding and successive foreign queens whose foreign birth was excoriated as a political expedience.¹³

Pamphlets and other texts that emphasize Catherine's Florentine birth tend to neglect her French origins. Her mother was Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, countess of Boulogne, from one of France's oldest families, whose nobility outranked that of her husband, Lorenzo de Medici.¹⁴ Their marriage, like many dynastic marriages of the era, was made in the interest of political alliance. In this case, the marriage was devised against a backdrop of political negotiations between France and Italy, to strengthen bonds and respective political interests: François Ier, distantly related to Madeleine, and Pope Clement VII, related to Catherine, anticipated mutual support for their respective goals.¹⁵ Specifically, François hoped to gain the support of the Medici popes for his efforts to regain Milan; Medici interest in the marriage was described as that of "parvenus" attracted to the prospect of alliance with the French crown.¹⁶ For both the Medici pope and France, the prospect of a Franco-Italian alliance was deemed expedient in the face of the increasing domination of Italy by Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor.¹⁷ Moreover, at the time of her marriage Catherine was a great heiress, endowed with the wealth of her Medici merchant family and considerable French estates, and the marriage was considered a boon to French interests politically, materially, and culturally.¹⁸

seems reasonable to imagine that contemporary "Italian" and "French" taste and patronage practices were not entirely distinct in her experience.

13. Tracy Adams's *The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) offers a compelling account of the eponymous medieval foreign queen's fate at the hands of chroniclers. Subsequent queens who have also been blamed for their foreign origins include Marie de Médicis and Anne d'Autriche in the seventeenth century, and, perhaps most famously, Marie Antoinette in the eighteenth century.

14. He was made Duke of Urbino by his uncle, thus making him lesser nobility. Machiavelli's *The Prince* is dedicated to Lorenzo, and Catherine was not spared this association. See the selections from the *Discours merveilleux* and from the *Tocsain, contre les massacreurs et auteurs des confusions en France*, in this volume.

15. Knecht describes Clement as her uncle, but Frederic Baumgartner counters in his review of Knecht's *The Valois: Kings of France, 1328–1589* (London: Hambledon, 2004) that they were "first cousins twice-removed": *English Historical Review* 122, no. 497 (June 2007), 813–14. As Clement was the son of her great-great uncle, it is perhaps best to consider them distant cousins.

16. Knecht, *The Valois*, 193, and *Catherine de' Medici*, 6, respectively.

17. Frederic Baumgartner, *France in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 44.

18. Her political capital plummeted, however, along with François Ier's dowry hopes, when Clement VII died almost a year after her wedding to Henri; Henri only became the dauphin on the death of his older brother, François, in 1536.

Indeed, Catherine's Italianness was not always considered a liability.¹⁹ Italy's cultural status in sixteenth-century France cannot be underestimated. French literature and poetry in particular were marked by Italian influence, and by the desire to produce in French a literature of equal value and stature; François Ier was also a great patron of Italian art.²⁰ In addition to her wealth, then, Catherine also brought to France a certain cultural cachet.²¹ Yet regardless of whether her Florentine origins were cast as an asset or as a shortcoming in contemporary accounts, the focus on the significance of her foreign birth raises an important question both for Catherine and for other early modern queens: how was her identity as a queen and queen mother—and by extension the identity of any French queen or queen mother—constituted?²² How did accusations of foreignness signify in the intermarrying dynastic landscape of pre-modern Europe? How did this foreignness and the queen's maternity interact when she was thrust into a position of unexpected authority? Catherine's reception at the hands of contemporary and later histories suggests that the aspects of her identity most vulnerable to attack were the ones that marked her difference as a ruler: her foreign birth, and her sex and gender.

The omission of Catherine's maternal heritage in certain accounts of her lineage is perhaps ironic since her own maternal role takes center stage as the *sine qua non* of her political authority: it is ultimately Catherine's maternity that brings her to the regency in the early 1560s, at the outset of one of France's most troubled

19. Italy enjoyed a very particular status in sixteenth-century France, especially in literary circles. The court was quite Italian under François Ier; see Heller and Balsamo below, as cited in note 147. Among the numerous studies addressing the role of Italy in the sixteenth-century French literature, see Cécile Alduy, *Politique des "Amours": poétique et genèse d'un genre français nouveau (1544–1560)* (Geneva: Droz, 2007); Dorothy Coleman, *The Gallo-Roman Muse: Aspects of Roman Literary Tradition in Sixteenth-Century French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); JoAnn DellaNeva, "Du Bellay: Reader of Scève, Reader of Petrarch," *Romanic Review* 79 (1988): 401–11, and "An Exploding Canon: Petrarch and the Petrarchists in Renaissance France," *Annali d'Italianistica* 22 (2004): 189–206; and Dora E. Polachek, "A la recherche du spirituel: L'Italie et les *Dames galantes* de Brantôme," *Romanic Review* 94 (2003): 227–43, here 232. As we shall discuss, the positive attributes associated with Catherine's Italianness changed markedly after the St. Bartholomew's Day massacres in 1572.

20. François's patronage of Leonardo da Vinci is perhaps the best known example of his support of Italian artists. Da Vinci spent the last years of his life in a comfortable house in Amboise at François's invitation.

21. Although see note 18 above regarding her dowry. Brantôme discusses in some detail the considerable French lands and goods included in her dowry; see our translation in this volume. Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantôme, *Recueil des Dames, poésies et tombeaux*, ed. Etienne Vaucheret (Paris: Gallimard, 1991). Brantôme's editor adds specifics about the Italian portion of her dowry, including money, jewels, and their value; see *Recueil des Dames*, p. 31, n. 6.

22. For example, contemporary accounts differ on her spoken French, with some praising its fluency and others deriding her heavy Italian accent; see our discussion below of Brantôme.

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and violent times, the period of the Wars of Religion.²³ That maternal role was in fact rather late in coming: Catherine and Henri were childless for the first ten years of their marriage, for which they were subjected to intense speculation and even medical examination.²⁴ That Henri had at least one recognized illegitimate child doubtless increased pressure on the princess, since it proved Henri's fertility and cast doubts on Catherine's own childbearing ability.²⁵ Henri's unexpected ascendancy to the status of dauphin upon his brother's death in 1536 made the issue of progeny all the more pressing; queenship in pre-modern France was first and foremost a "genealogical vocation."²⁶ When Catherine finally did bear children, she did so in profusion: over a span of twelve years, she gave birth to ten children, of whom she outlived eight (Fig.1).

Having produced viable heirs and secure in her role as queen, Catherine twice acted as regent in Henri's absence while he was away on military campaigns, but with minimal powers.²⁷ At the time of Henri's sudden death in 1559 due to complications from a wound to the eye sustained while jousting at his daughter's wedding festivities, their eldest son, François, was fifteen. Legally old enough to

23. According to Nicola Sutherland, the prestige of Catherine's French lineage is "conveniently forgotten" by later historians swayed by more nefarious aspects of her legend: see "Catherine de Medici: The Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 9, no. 2 (1978), 52.

24. This initial barrenness, coupled with her unpaid dowry, makes it all the more striking that she was not cast aside. For a brief but cogent overview of some of the concerns raised by a queen's barrenness, see John Carmi Parsons, "Family, Sex, and Power: The Rhythms of Medieval Queenship," in *Medieval Queenship*, 4–5. For a modern medical assessment of Catherine's and Henry's infertility, see Gordetsky, Rabinowitz, and O'Brien, "The 'Infertility' of Catherine de Medici and its Influence on Sixteenth-Century France," *Canadian Journal of Urology* 16, no. 2 (April 2009), 4584–88. A more historical view is presented in Helen King's *Midwifery, Obstetrics and the Rise of Gynaecology: The Uses of a Sixteenth-Century Compendium* (Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 36. The question was of scientific interest even in the eighteenth century. See J.A. Hazon, *Notice des hommes les plus célèbres de la faculté de médecine de l'Université de Paris* (Paris: Benoît Morin, 1778), 30–36. See also the reference to the question of her repudiation in one of the appended letters to the *Discours merveilleux* in our Appendix.

25. Fairly early in his marriage to Catherine, Henri fathered a daughter with Philippa Duc, whom he legitimized as Diane de France and whose marriage he arranged: Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici*, 29, and Frederic Baumgartner, "Henry II and the Papal Conclave of 1549," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 16, no. 3 (1985), 301–14, here 302. Henri later had at least two sons with women other than Catherine: Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici*, 30.

26. Poulet's description of queenship in "Capetian Women and the Regency," *Medieval Queenship*, 103.

27. Knecht gives the dates as April 1548 and February 1552 in *Catherine de' Medici*, 43: "She was dismayed to find, however, that she was expected to share the presidency of the council with Jean Bertrand, Keeper of the Seals, and that all decisions were to be taken by a majority of councilors." Zealous to maintain her authority, she refused to allow her regency commission to be published, citing Louise de Savoie's regency, which needed no such restrictions (44).

be king, he nevertheless needed guidance;²⁸ one source of such guidance came from the relatives of his wife, Mary Stuart, the Queen of Scotland and niece of the Guise family.²⁹ The duc de Guise and the cardinal de Lorraine exerted much influence on the young couple, trading on their status as the uncles of the new queen.³⁰

François II was king for only a year and a half. When he died in 1560, the heir to the throne was François's nine-year old brother, Charles, and Catherine was officially appointed *gouvernante de France* by the privy council and empowered to make administrative decisions in the young king's name.³¹ However, how she ultimately arrived at the position of *gouvernante* is somewhat unclear—historical sources, including several included in this volume, give slightly different versions of the same story. It seems both that circumstances aligned in Catherine's favor and that she actively capitalized on her role as queen mother. The death of the young François, with only his nine-year-old brother to take his place, left nothing short of a power vacuum. Catherine and other nobles did not wish to see the Guises grab power again as they had under the reign of François II. Antoine de Bourbon, King of Navarre and first prince of the blood—or, the next prince in line to the throne after the younger brothers of François II—was a weak and wavering alternative, an obvious but undesirable choice for regent in such circumstances.³² Under these fraught conditions, a significant percentage of nobles, the Estates General, and magistrates of the Parlement of Paris, were ultimately persuaded of what Catherine aggressively asserted: that, as the mother of the young king, she was clearly the best choice to govern in his stead. As Catherine's own letters and other texts attest, however, this was a regency she had to fight for—there was no official royal document legitimizing her claim, as had been the case with previous female regencies. And while there were many complex factors leading to Catherine's appointment, her own role in securing the position, even before the appointment was officially made, should not be underestimated. There had previ-

28. Katherine Crawford notes that for regency purposes, majorities were traditionally declared when the king turned thirteen, that is, when he entered his fourteenth year, but much later for other men—presumably, men not in the position of immediately inheriting the crown; see *Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1.

29. Knecht, *The Valois*, 195. Mary Stuart's mother was Marie de Guise, sister to François, duc de Guise; Charles, cardinal de Lorraine; and Louis Ier, cardinal de Guise, among others.

30. They are described as having “seized power” the day after Henri's death; Knecht, *Catherine de'Medici*, 59. Their avuncular efforts have been described as leading to a “tyrannie Guisienne”; see James Thompson, *The Wars of Religion in France, 1559–1576* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909), 22.

31. He likely died of an ear infection or abscess. On Catherine's appointment, see Knecht, *Catherine de'Medici*, 73.

32. Navarre was in a particularly vulnerable position in 1560 because he and especially his brother Louis, prince de Condé, were suspected of treason at the time; see our note 69 below. Catherine took advantage of this weakness to turn opinion in her favor.

ously been queen mothers in France—that is, widowed queens whose sons were heirs to the throne—yet the extent to which they exercised and were granted political powers during the reigns of their sons was controversial, and by no means consistent. In a variety of ways revealed by the texts in this volume, Catherine actively claimed her maternal status as a politically sound basis for defining and defending her regency.

She was not alone in this conceptualizing of maternity and regency. Two medieval queens, Isabeau de Bavière and Blanche de Castile, also grounded their justification to hold the regency in their maternity. These three queens made a similar claim: that the queen mother, by virtue of her maternity and proximity to the minor king, was best suited to serve as both guardian and mentor to her son, and to perform administrative duties for the realm in his place.³³ Regency by a queen mother had its political advantages. Her customary exclusion from the French throne, for instance, was a strong safeguard against conflict between her own ambitions and those of her son: while royal uncles or princes of the blood might have sought the crown for themselves, women by definition could not. Catherine's innovation can be seen in the emphasis on maternal affection not only as the justification for her position as regent, but also as an important basis for her authority as regent, an affection that she continued to trade on even after her first regency as queen mother, and which also became a rhetorical device particularly in her letters.³⁴

After Charles officially declared his majority in 1563 when he was thirteen years old, Catherine continued to play a dominant role in his government.³⁵ Charles's life, too, was short; he was only twenty-three when he died in 1574.³⁶ This prompted the return to France of Catherine's fourth son, Henri, the duc d'Anjou, who had been elected King of Poland the previous year.³⁷ Henri abdi-

33. Crawford describes how Catherine invoked both forms of regency, *tutelle* and *curatelle* (guardianship and education of the young king, and attending to administration and governance in his stead, respectively), and their relation to maternal affection in her political claims: *Perilous Performances*, 38, 40, 43. Tracy Adams elaborates on the importance of *tutelle*, traditionally a maternal responsibility: "At first glance, *tutelle* may seem far removed from politics. However, physical possession of the dauphin potentially represented a strong claim to power": *Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria*, 93. See also note 28 in our translation of Catherine's letters in this volume.

34. See Adams's discussion of Isabeau of Bavaria's regency as premised on maternal devotion and exclusion from the throne in Chapter 3, "Isabeau Mediatix: Defining the Mediator Queen," *Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria*, 73–112, and Elizabeth McCartney's examination of Louise de Savoie's deployment of maternal devotion in "The King's Mother and Royal Prerogative," 117–41.

35. It should be noted that Catherine herself organized the declaration of Charles's majority. The declaration thus should not be seen as an autonomous move on Charles's part to separate himself from his mother's authority, even though it was calculated to show publicly that Charles now reigned officially as an adult, and, in theory, under the direction of no other governing body.

36. Likely of tuberculosis. See Baumgartner, *France in the Sixteenth Century*, 217.

37. Catherine's second son, Louis, died in infancy.

cated the Polish throne in favor of the French one, and Catherine assumed the regency once again until he could return to France.³⁸ During his reign, Catherine continued to play a significant role.³⁹ Although Henri demonstrated a more developed sense of the direction of his own kingship than his brothers, Catherine's importance to Henri is clear from her role as his official deputy in negotiations with the Protestants beginning in 1578 in what would come to be known as the conference at Nérac. Her influence on the throne was felt as late as 1585, when at sixty-six and just a few years before her death in 1589 she was once again instrumental to Henri in negotiations at Nemours over difficulties with the Guises and the ultraconservative Catholic League.⁴⁰

Women's Right to Rule in Early Modern France

While the contestation of women's right to rule has a long history, women's actual rule has also been attested since ancient times. By custom, women did not inherit the throne in France.⁴¹ Over several centuries beginning in the Middle Ages, a complex series of events gave rise to an exclusionary inheritance practice whose basis was invoked as "Salic law." Technically referring to the body of legal ordinances governing the Salians, the Frankish ancestors of the Merovingians, and codified around the early sixth century, Salic law continued to exert influence in France for many centuries.⁴² Although it fell into disuse after Merovingian

38. Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici*, 172, and *The Valois*, 210. Several of Catherine's letters in this volume discuss and explain the regency.

39. As suggested by, among other things, the important letters she wrote during the negotiations at Nérac with Henri of Navarre. See Denis Crouzet, "A Strong Desire to be a Mother to all your Subjects': A Rhetorical Experiment by Catherine de Medici," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (Winter 2008), 103–18.

40. For example, two letters that Henri III sent to his mother in 1587 read like treatises on the principles of his kingship; *Lettres de Catherine de Médicis*, vol. 9, ed. Gustave Baguenault de Puchesse (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1905), 430–37. On the negotiations at Nemours, see Baumgartner, *France in the Sixteenth Century*, 223. Notably, during the Day of the Barricades in 1588, it was Catherine who negotiated with the duc de Guise, the head of the archconservative Catholic League, which had taken control of the capital against Henri III; Catherine had planned on advising Henri to leave the city, but the king had already fled to Chartres. Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici*, 261–63.

41. Women could and did, however, inherit titles and lands. Like William Monter's *The Rise of Female Kings in Europe, 1300–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), Armin Wolf's "Reigning Queens in Medieval Europe" (note 3 above) observes the conspicuous absence of French reigning queens in an age that, albeit spanning several centuries, saw more than twenty reigning female queens in the rest of Europe.

42. For a discussion of the origins, development, and influence of Salic law, see Craig Taylor's "The Salic Law, French Queenship, and the Defense of Women in the Late Middle Ages," *French Historical Studies* 29, no. 4 (Fall 2006), 543–64, and "The Salic Law and the Valois Succession to the French Crown," *French History* 15, no. 4 (December 2001), 358–77. See also Sarah Hanley's "The Salic Law,"

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and Carolingian expansion, Salic law was again invoked in the fifteenth century to claim ancient legal precedent for female exclusion from dynastic succession.⁴³ Scholars disagree whether this law was revived for overtly or more subtly misogynist purposes: while it was interpreted to bar female succession, Salic law's particular usefulness might have been due to its exclusion of women from the succession without directly claiming women's inferiority. In other words, Salic law sidestepped the question of women's *incapacity* to govern, which was contradicted historically by the fact of women regents and consorts who successfully wielded considerable power, as well as the more widespread circumstance of women who inherited and managed land, and oversaw households and the tutelage of children.⁴⁴ This might have made it a politically more palatable tool to support extant, exclusionary succession practices in the face of clear historical contradiction.

What is uncontested is that the sixth-century law is not the same as the version circulating in fifteenth-century France, when it was revived and discussed in texts by scholars associated with the French royal chancellery.⁴⁵ Despite its name, the original legal ordinance discussing women's inheritance dates not from the Salian period, but the Carolingian. A ninth-century redaction of the Salic law includes a section on property inheritance, which specifies that, "concerning Salic

in *Political and Historical Encyclopedia of Women*, ed. Christine Fauré (New York: Routledge, 2003) 2–18; "Identity Politics and Rulership in France," in *Changing Identities in Early Modern France*; and "Social Sites of Political Practice in France: Lawsuits, Civil Rights, and the Separation of Powers in Domestic and State Government, 1500–1800," *American Historical Review*, 102, no. 1 (1997): 27–52.

43. Taylor, "Salic Law, French Queenship," 543.

44. Taylor's "Salic Law, French Queenship" (564) discusses some of the reasons for preferring the authority of the Salic law "rather than the misogynist diatribe offered by ...fourteenth-century sources." Other reasons for which writers adopted the Salic law in the early fifteenth century are discussed in Taylor, "The Salic Law and the Valois Succession." Sarah Hanley takes an opposing position, describing the law's fifteenth-century forgery as decidedly misogynist, and part of a broader struggle over women's defamation and political exclusion; see "The Salic Law," esp. 4–5. For a summary of the debate, see Adams, "Christine de Pizan, Isabeau of Bavaria, and Female Regency." It is plausible that both Taylor and Hanley are right: in other words, while misogynist defenses might have been in part responsible for a renewed interest in the illegitimacy of female rule, the resuscitation of the so-called Salic law by a broader circle of writers might also have been viewed as advantageous for making the argument against female rulership while avoiding claims about female insufficiency that history had shown to be patently absurd. Ralph Giesey contends that Salic law was exploited for political gain—and specifically to advance English claims to the French throne in the fourteenth century—and not motivated by misogyny per se; in his reading, female exclusion was emphasized by jurists centuries later. See *Le Rôle méconnu de la loi salique: La succession royale, XIVe–XVIe siècles* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2007), and "The Juristic Basis of Dynastic Right to the French Throne," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s., 51, no. 5 (1961), 3–42.

45. Taylor, "Salic Law and the Valois Succession," 359.

land, no part of the inheritance may pass to a woman but all the inheritance of land passes to the virile sex.”⁴⁶

The ninth-century text bans female inheritance of “Salic land,” or ancestral farmland; but this ban is also contradicted in other sections, as is perhaps not surprising for a body of laws that was essentially a written record of practices that were observed and transmitted orally over centuries. In the early fifteenth century, French cleric Jean de Montreuil inserted the phrase “in regno” in his citation and transcription of this passage, extending the law to apply to inheritance of the French realm—that is, the crown.⁴⁷ His interpolation proved influential, and was reproduced in the sixteenth century, when Salic law saw a great renewal of interest as religious tensions highlighted both the need for a strong monarchy and the vulnerability of the royal succession.⁴⁸ By the sixteenth century, then, a forged textual fragment governing private inheritance of family land came to be cited as an authority on female inheritance and exclusion from the French throne.

Despite their exclusion from the throne in practice and theory, women could and did rule in various capacities.⁴⁹ One of the greatest positions of power from which a woman could rule was that of regent. A term from the Latin “re-gere”—to guide, conduct, direct, keep straight, lead properly⁵⁰—a regent was, quite simply, a ruler. The term is almost blissfully devoid of implications: making no claims for how the regent comes to power, it simply describes the fact of rule. Lexically related to “roi,” or king, regent is a gender-neutral term. The office of regent could be shared, and held by men or women, and it was an appointed, rather than marital or inherited, office. A regent was thus a provisional ruler neither

46. “De terra vero Salica nulla portio hereditatis mulieri veniat, sed ad viriliem sexum tota terrae hereditas perveniat . . .” Cited in Hanley, “The Salic Law,” 2–3.

47. Montreuil’s interpolation appears in his “polemical treatise supporting the Valois monarchy against the English,” *A toute la chevalerie*: Taylor, “Salic Law, French Queenship,” 543–44, and “Salic Law and the Valois Succession,” 359 and 364. Hanley cites and translates Montreuil’s interpolation: “Mulier vero *in regno* nullam habeat portionem (Indeed no part *in the realm* may pass to a woman), in “The Salic Law,” 5. Montreuil’s reasons for doing this are unclear; in Hanley’s account (“The Salic Law”), it was largely a response to Christine de Pizan’s anti-misogynist efforts in the *Livre de la cité des dames* (Book of the City of Ladies).

48. It was invoked in its new incarnation in a 1464 tract arguing against English claims to the French crown, *Pour ce que plusieurs*, also known as *La Loy Salique, première loy des François*, printed eleven times between 1488 and 1558; Taylor, “Salic Law, French Queenship,” 544. According to Taylor, this interest in women and the succession—and by extension the Salic Law—was due to the Wars of Religion drawing attention to the royal succession, increasing concerns over the authenticity of Salic law, and the possibility of a female monarch across the channel: “Salic Law, French Queenship,” 562.

49. For an examination of women’s influence in French politics and culture in general in this period, and specifically the influence of queens and royal mistresses, see Kathleen Wellman’s *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

50. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary: Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879; reprint, 2002).

invested with the same responsibilities nor fettered by the same relational obligations as an anointed monarch. The flexibility of the term “regent” parallels that of the office and its possibilities for power, which is perhaps why regencies were so contested and the practices of regencies largely works in progress.⁵¹ Although Catherine was technically named “gouvernante” of France, rather than “régente,” these terms were understood to mean the same thing. And while in theory she shared power with Antoine de Bourbon, first prince of the blood who was named lieutenant general of France, Catherine was undoubtedly the power behind the throne during Charles’s minority, a power that everyone recognized.

Catherine’s rise from consort to regent was not without historical precedent. France had seen women regents,⁵² but the ways in which Catherine came to govern as regent and to craft and perform her authority both during and after her regencies as queen mother were distinct for the extent of her influence, and for the ways in which she attended to the perception and exercise of power. Her regency under Charles IX is particularly noteworthy, not necessarily because the claims she made for it were unique, but rather because of the studied epistolographic and iconographic ways in which she made and performed these claims. The success of Catherine’s maneuvers to naturalize maternal affection in a political sphere and to wield it to political ends is brilliantly exposed in her letters, in which she aggressively performs maternal affection toward her children and even their spouses.⁵³ There is nothing soft about this affection; expressions of feeling in her letters carry a political weight and charge without compromising their emotion or sincerity.⁵⁴

Catherine’s considerable influence has endured in very tangible ways. She has long been celebrated as a patron of the arts, and for the ways in which her patronage has shaped the cultural landscape of France—from the visual arts to perfume production—even to the present day.⁵⁵ No schoolchild, for instance,

51. On the history of the regency in France, see François Olivier-Martin, *Les régences et la majorité des rois sous les Capétiens directs et les premiers Valois, 1060–1375* (Paris: Librairie du Recueil Sirey, 1931). The term “régente” is first used in 1315; see Elizabeth M. Hallam, *Capetian France, 987–1328* (London: Longman, 1980), 207, cited in McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery*, 169.

52. For example, Blanche de Castile, Isabeau de Bavière, Anne de France (Beaujeu), and Louise de Savoie. France, unlike Spain, Scotland, Sweden, and England, has no history of reigning queens. See Poulet, “Capetian Women and the Regency,” and Wolf, “Reigning Queens in Medieval Europe,” in *Medieval Queenship*, 93–116 and 169–88, respectively.

53. See, for instance, how she deploys maternal and affectionate rhetoric in her letters to Elisabeth de Valois and to the bishop of Limoges about Philip II of Spain.

54. See our detailed discussion of the letters below.

55. The critical archive on Catherine’s artistic influence is immense. For an overview of Catherine’s patronage in the various arts, see Jean-Pierre Babelon, “The Louvre: Royal Residence and Temple of the Arts,” in *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, vol. 3: *Symbols*, ed. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Edmond Bonnaffé, *Inventaire des meubles de Catherine de Médicis en 1589* (Paris: 1874); Margriet

can visit the Tuileries in Paris without coming face-to-face with her artistic and architectural influence.⁵⁶ This celebrated legacy, however, stands in stark contradiction to the toll wrought on Catherine's historical reputation by the conflicts of the French religious wars. Whether or not Catherine's political authority was compromised by the continuation of these wars, her public image certainly suffered from them, as is attested in the polemical pamphlets that proliferated in this period. Although Catherine's rise to power might have benefited from the flexibility of regency practices, it almost certainly fueled arguments against female rule, whether it was directly from the throne or beside it. Her regency and influence likely contributed at least in part to the pitch of the debate over female succession, particularly for a French public seeking a scapegoat for the violence and atrocities of the religious wars. Salic law was cited into the seventeenth century as an authority not to be contravened, and female regency specifically as a violation of its tenets.⁵⁷ In some ways, this negative opinion—of female rule and of Catherine's rule specifically—confirms the position Catherine had carved out for herself. She took advantage of a particular moment in French politics to wield considerable power, recognizing and deploying the tremendous potential of a multifaceted political portraiture to shape and perform her exceptional regency.

Historical Context II: The Wars of Religion and the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacres

The violence of the French civil wars, which first erupted in the early 1560s and arguably continued into the seventeenth century, has overshadowed much of Catherine's moderate stance during these conflicts, as well as the enormous contributions she made to the creative and artistic culture of France.⁵⁸ Although

Hoogvliet, "Princely Culture and Catherine de Médicis," in *Princes and Princely Culture, 1450–1650*, vol. 1, ed. Martin Gosman, Alasdair A. MacDonald, and Arjo J. Vanderjagt (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Roy Strong, *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals, 1450–1650* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); Nicola Sutherland, *Catherine de Medici and the Ancien Régime* (London: Historical Association, 1966); Frances Yates, *The Valois Tapestries* (1959; reprint, New York: Routledge, 1999); and Alexandra Zvereva, *Les Clouet de Catherine de Médicis: Chefs-d'oeuvre graphiques du Musée Condé* (Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, 2002).

56. Although the original gardens and palace that Catherine built were destroyed in the nineteenth century, the Tuileries remain an iconic Parisian landmark.

57. Taylor, "Salic Law, French Queenship," 562–63.

58. As Virginia Scott and Sara Sturm-Maddox have argued, "the horrors of the conflicts that followed [the declaration of Charles IX's majority], however... may not only have 'obscured the central theme of Catherine's life,' that of peace and reconciliation, but also 'cost her a place as a creative genius in the art of the festival.'" *Performance, Poetry and Politics on the Queen's Day: Catherine de Médicis and Pierre de Ronsard at Fontainebleau* (Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 1. Scott and Sturm-Maddox cite here Roy Strong, *Art and Power*, 99.

no summary can do justice to the complexity of these wars, any assessment of Catherine de Médicis's legacy must address their profound influence on the reception—from the sixteenth century onward—of her queenship. Indeed, the discontent and animosity resulting from the wars seemingly effaced her benefaction and even turned it against her: in contemporary texts, her artistic and cultural patronage was frequently touted as evidence of profligacy. Perhaps less tangibly, her efforts at conciliation might well have been unacceptable to a public deeply and increasingly violently divided, and might have contributed to the degree of invective leveled against her.

Although twentieth-century scholarship has frequently argued that religion was a cover for political or economic motives in the civil wars that rocked France in the second half of the sixteenth century, historians of the last few decades have convincingly shown that the conflicts known as the “Wars of Religion” were, in fact, very much about religion.⁵⁹ To be sure, economic and political triggers such as grain shortages or class biases likely played a crucial role in the timing and character of the wars and other episodes of violence, but scholars no longer see these factors as the chief cause of the violence.⁶⁰ Historians now generally agree that the French Wars of Religion were fueled by an inability in each party, Catholic and Protestant, to tolerate cultural and religious features of the other, characteristics that, for Catholic or Protestant, defined orthodox religious practice and the character of the body social. In other words, the French civil wars were fueled by a deeply entrenched—and seemingly insurmountable—confessional divide between Catholics and Protestants.

Patterns of alternating religious tolerance and coexistence, violence and oppression emerge well before the onset of the first declared War of Religion in 1562,

59. Although it is impossible to rule out the influence of any additional factors, historians have worked in recent years to bring religion “back” to the Wars of Religion. See, for example, Natalie Zemon Davis's seminal essay, “The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France,” *Past and Present* 59 (1973), 51–91; Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629* (especially Chapter 1, “Prologue: Gallicanism and Reform in the Sixteenth Century,” 1–49); Barbara Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Diefendorf, “Rites of Repair: Restoring Community in the French Religious Wars,” *Past and Present* 214, Suppl. 7 (2012), 30–51.

60. Older scholarship trended toward emphasizing the political nature of the civil wars, and to suggest that the religious auspices of the conflict were simply a cover for political motives; see, for example, the essays collected in J.H.M. Salmon, ed., *The French Wars of Religion: How Important were Religious Factors?* (Boston: Heath, 1967). Although historians now generally agree that questions of religion were the first and most important conflict triggers of the wars, this is not to say that political or economic issues did not play an instrumental role. For recent work that shows the ways in which religious, economic, and political factors were intertwined, see Mack P. Holt, “Wine, Community and Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Burgundy,” *Past and Present* 138, no. 1 (February 1993), 58–93, and Stuart Carroll, *Martyrs and Murderers: The Guise Family and the Making of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

at the beginning of the reign of Charles IX and during Catherine's first regency as queen mother.⁶¹ The first war was in many ways the final step in escalating episodes of violence between Catholics and Huguenots (as Protestants came to be called in France) during the 1550s and early 1560s.⁶² Tensions between the two groups had been present since the emergence of French evangelical and Protestant voices during the reign of Charles IX's grandfather, François Ier. Although François has sometimes been portrayed as quite sympathetic to the reformers—perhaps in part because his deep and sincere interest in the new learning made him receptive to evangelical thinkers, perhaps in part because his beloved sister, Marguerite de Navarre, was sympathetic to the movement—the historical record shows that, although at times moderate, the king aligned himself with the Catholic Church, and kept vigilant and restrictive watch over the movements of the reform.⁶³ Although he was willing to tolerate the presence in his kingdom of Protestant humanists such as Gérard Roussel and Guillaume Farel until he understood the full force of their radical positions, François Ier still embraced Catholic orthodoxy and pledged to stamp out heresy in France.⁶⁴

François's tolerance for the "new religion," fragile and wary at best, was destroyed after the "Affair of the Placards" in 1534. Both contemporary witnesses and modern historians have deemed the notorious "Affair" one of the most miscalculated steps in the development of French Protestantism as a social and religious movement. In a single night, hundreds of placards denouncing the rite of the Eucharist as exemplary of Catholic false doctrine were posted throughout Paris and beyond its walls, including on the door of the king's own bedroom at Blois.⁶⁵ It was a daring

61. Keith Luria examines patterns of coexistence between Catholics and Huguenots through the seventeenth century and argues convincingly that, although episodes of violence during the war have garnered much historical and scholarly attention, scholars also need to take account of the coexistence that occurred—often for extended periods of time—between confessional factions. See his *Sacred Boundaries: Religious Coexistence and Conflict in Early-Modern France* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

62. The origin of the name "Huguenot" is still unclear, but the term was not used until around 1560. See Nicola Sutherland, *The Huguenot Struggle for Recognition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 10, and Janet Gray, "The Origin of the Word Huguenot," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 14, no. 3 (1983), 349–59.

63. Sutherland, *Huguenot Struggle*, 12.

64. On François Ier's reign and the beginning of Protestant persecution in France, see Sutherland's first chapter in *Huguenot Struggle*, 10–39. Sutherland argues that François's "moderation" may have stemmed partly from his interest in the new learning, partly from his distraction by other political affairs, but that he showed a will to repress heresy in the kingdom as early as the 1520s. Diefendorf argues convincingly—against Sutherland's premise that the Huguenots were asking simply to be recognized—that the nature of the early evangelical and Protestant teachings was revolutionary: early Protestants sought to reform the church from within. See her "Rites of Repair," 35.

65. The author of the placards was Antoine Marcourt, a French-born Protestant pastor in Neuchâtel. The text of the placards in French is included in Gabrielle Berthoud, *Antoine Marcourt, réformateur*

move that appeared not only to attack Catholic doctrine in the most brazen fashion but also to suggest sedition in at least two ways. First, by hanging the placards at the royal palace, the perpetrators encroached upon the king's very person. Second, and more theoretically insidious to both the Gallican church and the French monarchy, the content of the placards denied the coexistence of the sacred and temporal in the object of the Eucharist. This same concomitance was the core of the French monarchy, in which the king's royal prerogative was seen as sacred rather than simply a temporal right.⁶⁶ The reformers' audacity proved too much for François to bear: he ordered an elaborate Catholic procession in Paris shortly after the Affair of the Placards that included the execution of several heretics, and thereafter his treatment of evangelicals and reformers became even more rigorous.

If François Ier was severe toward Protestants in later years, his son, Henri II, was categorically hostile toward the "new religion" or "new opinions." A far more conservative Catholic than his father had been, Henri endorsed ruthless punishments for reformers. Declarations of support for the Reformist cause were—as they had been under François Ier in the late 1530s and 1540s—judged to be not only heretical but also treasonous.⁶⁷ The early years of Henri's reign saw the institutionalization of what came to be known as the *chambre ardente*, or "burning chamber," a special tribunal in the Parlement of Paris devoted exclusively to the persecution of heresy.⁶⁸ Oppressive persecutions of Huguenots continued during the short reign of François II, under the influence of his ambitious uncles-in-law, the ultra-Catholic duc de Guise and his brother, the cardinal de Lorraine. Perhaps the most famous examples of these persecutions were the execution of the young, reform-sympathetic magistrate, Anne du Bourg, and the mass executions of Protestant collaborators involved in the notorious "Amboise conspiracy," a Huguenot-led plot to kidnap the young king François II and his mother, and overthrow the Guises.⁶⁹

et pamphlétaire: Du 'Livres des marchands' aux placards de 1534 (Geneva: Droz, 1973), 287–89. There is some scholarly dissension on whether François Ier was actually present at Blois when the placards were posted, or whether he was some miles away at Amboise; see Holt, *French Wars*, 18, and Sutherland, *Huguenot Struggle*, 28, for this point. The reformist Théodore de Bèze claimed that the king was at Blois, and lamented the affair as a misstep on the part of some overzealous radicals who did not listen to "wiser heads": Bèze, *Histoire ecclésiastique des églises réformées au royaume de France*, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1883), 28–29; cf. Holt, *French Wars*, 18.

66. The French coronation ceremony was called the *sacre*, a term meaning both "consecration" and "coronation." See Holt, *French Wars*, 7, 19.

67. Sutherland, *Huguenot Struggle*, 40–61.

68. For nuanced statistics on the rise in executions after the establishment of the *chambre ardente*, see William Monter, *Judging the French Reformation: Heresy Trials by Sixteenth-Century Parlements* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 135–37. On the *chambre*, see also Sutherland, *Huguenot Struggle*, 42–44.

69. Many of the pivotal events that marked watershed moments in the French religious conflicts were memorialized by Jean Perrissin and Jacques Tortorel, who published their wood and copper

Despite these severe measures—or perhaps, in part, because of them—the Reform continued to gain strength within certain regions of France and among certain populations. Paris and most of northern France remained strongly Catholic, but southern French cities and their surrounding regions saw a growing reformist population.⁷⁰ Protestantism became increasingly popular among educated bourgeois, mercantile, and artisan trade families. Peasants in many regions remained Catholic, but there were notable French regions and towns in which Protestantism dominated every class, from rural peasants to the aristocracy. In these regions, Catholics were a minority who in turn felt the heavy weight of Protestant restrictions on their own religious practice.

The question of religion also divided the French nobility, including those of the highest rank. Marguerite de Navarre, for instance, François Ier's sister, clearly showed evangelical leanings beginning in the 1520s, although she remained officially Catholic. Her spiritual advisor was Guillaume Briçonnet, the head of the famous "Circle of Meaux," which explored the new reformist teachings until the circle was dissolved in 1525, and its participants either fled France or, as in the case of Briçonnet, returned to the fold of the Catholic Church. After Marguerite's marriage to Henri d'Albret, King of Navarre, her court in the south of France became a refuge for many writers, theologians, and intellectuals fleeing religious persecution, including Guillaume Farel, Clément Marot, François Rabelais, and Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, among others.⁷¹ Marguerite's daughter, Jeanne d'Albret, openly declared her Protestantism as of 1560. While the religious inclinations of

engravings of these events as the *Quarante tableaux* in 1569–70. Philip Benedict argues that Perrissin and Tortorel sought to give an objective account of these crucial events in their engravings, and that the *Quarante tableaux* represent an important point in the historiography of the French religious wars. See Benedict, *Graphic History: The Wars, Massacres and Troubles of Tortorel and Perrissin* (Geneva: Droz, 2007). Both Antoine de Bourbon and his brother, Louis, prince de Condé, were implicated in the Amboise conspiracy; the prince de Condé was saved from execution only by the death of François II. For a succinct summary of the Amboise conspiracy, see Holt, *French Wars*, 44–45, and Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici*, 64–66.

70. Holt includes useful maps tracing the presence of French Protestant churches in *French Wars*, esp. 31.

71. Some of these writers and intellectuals were among the disbanded Meaux circle. On Marguerite's evangelism, see Jonathan A. Reid, *King's Sister—Queen of Dissent: Marguerite of Navarre (1492–1549) and her Evangelical Network*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill 2009); see also *A Companion to Marguerite de Navarre*, ed. Gary Ferguson and Mary B. McKinley (Leiden: Brill, 2013), especially the different approaches of Reid ("Marguerite de Navarre and Evangelical Reform") and Jean-Marie Le Gall ("Marguerite de Navarre: The Reasons for Remaining Catholic"). For a biographical and historical overview, see Patricia and Rouben Cholakian, *Marguerite de Navarre (1492–1549): Mother of the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). On the spiritual correspondence between Guillaume Briçonnet and Marguerite, see Katherine Kong, "The Pursuit of Spiritual Quietude in the Correspondence of Marguerite de Navarre and Guillaume Briçonnet," in *Lettering the Self in Medieval and Early Modern France* (Woodbridge, UK, and Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2010), 150–90.

Jeanne's husband, Antoine de Bourbon, were somewhat wavering, his younger brother Louis, the prince de Condé, was, like Jeanne, openly Protestant.⁷²

These aristocratic and familial divisions were politically critical. Antoine and Louis were the most preeminent princes of the blood. As first prince of the blood, moreover, Antoine—who had become king consort of Navarre after his marriage to Jeanne—was in a position to assume authority during Charles IX's minority. In the absence of royal uncles, many Protestants argued, he should rightly hold the regency of France outright, given his proximity to the throne. That Antoine agreed to assist and advise Catherine as lieutenant general in a customary capacity, alongside the privy council, is largely due to Catherine's own hard bargaining.⁷³

By the time Charles IX ascended the throne, both the ruling elite of France and French subjects were deeply divided along religious lines. It was clear that there was to be no easy solution to what many called "the troubles," and what Catherine herself referred to as "these confusions." On what side did Catherine fall in this religious divide? That she remained an avowed Catholic cannot be questioned. As for the negotiations that she conducted between Catholic and Huguenot parties, it is perhaps safest to claim that she was outwardly, at least according to her letters, guided by political moderation—and by an interest in keeping France and the nobility unified for the Valois line. This is not to say that she was not pious, as many contemporary pamphlets claimed.⁷⁴ But Catherine's repeated efforts to reconcile the two parties seem to have been motivated more by a policy of moderation—and perhaps one of political expediency for the sake of the monarchy—than by a personal religious conviction.⁷⁵

On Marguerite's evangelism and the circle of Meaux, see Henry Heller, "Marguerite of Navarre and the Reformers of Meaux," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 33, no. 2 (1972), 271–310.

72. Jeanne d'Albret declared her Protestantism formally in 1560, but there is evidence that she favored Protestantism much earlier. See Nancy L. Roelker, *Queen of Navarre: Jeanne d'Albret, 1528–1572* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 127–30.

73. Antoine de Bourbon proved more conciliatory toward Catherine when she showed herself to be sympathetic to his claims in Spanish Navarre, and when she offered to make him lieutenant general of the kingdom. As Crawford notes, the privy council, with Catherine in attendance, formulated the government such that the "king of Navarre as first prince of the blood [would] assist [Catherine] in accordance with the custom favoring male relatives as advisors." See Crawford, *Perilous Performances*, 39–40. Catherine's letters surrounding the formation of the regency show the extent to which the King of Navarre's role was a particularly vexed and critical topic for her; that he be relegated to "advisor" and not acknowledged officially as regent was a crucial distinction for her. See particularly her letters 12–15 in this volume.

74. See the *Discours merveilleux* and, in the Appendix, selections from other contemporary pamphlets in this volume.

75. Perhaps some of the best evidence that Catherine sought moderation is that she did not continue the aggressive persecutory policies of Henri II. Sutherland argues that the persecutions under François