The Politics of Female Households

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The Politics of Female Households

Ladies-in-Waiting across Early Modern Europe

Edited by

Nadine Akkerman and Birgit Houben

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Cover illustration: The painting by female artist Lavinia Fontana, *The Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon*, represents a crypto-portrait of the parents of Empress Eleonora Gonzaga. Her father Vincenzo Gonzaga as King Solomon receives his wife Eleonora de Medici as Queen of Sheba. The Princess is accompanied by her ladies-in-waiting, a dwarf and a 'moor' as servants.

NGI.76, *The Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon*
Artist: Lavinia Fontana
Italian, 16th century, *c.*1600
Oil on canvas 256 × 325 cm
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CONTENTS

‘A STABLE OF WHORES’? THE ‘FLYING SQUADRON’ OF CATHERINE DE MEDICI

Una McIlvenna

Until recently, the rule of Catherine de Medici (1519–89), Queen Mother and regent of France, has been depicted as dependent on her inherently ‘Italian’ and ‘female’ skills of manipulation and deception, culminating in the legend of the ‘wicked Italian queen’.[1] Xenophobic stereotypes of corruption and sexual deviance were extended to describe her domineering exploitation of her ladies-in-waiting, known colloquially by later historians as her *escadron volant* (flying squadron). She allegedly ordered these women to seduce and spy on influential noblemen, and their collective reputation has been used to discredit Catherine’s abilities as both a negotiator and a leader. For example, a 1584 satirical verse described her entourage with the lines, “Catin, you are fortunate/To have a stable of whores!”.[2] The metaphor of Catherine’s entourage as a stable (*haras* translates directly as ‘stud farm’) of women from whom she could choose the most suitable to seduce unsuspecting men was developed and exaggerated until by the late twentieth century a literary scholar could describe the court thus:

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[1] Nicola Sutherland, “Catherine de Medici: The Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 9, no. 2 (1978): 45–56. See also Elaine Kruse, “The Blood-Stained Hands of Catherine de Medici,” in *Political Rhetoric, Power and Renaissance Women*, eds. Carole Levin and Patricia A. Sullivan (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 139–55. There is an enormous literature on Catherine, but little is balanced and scholarly; the best recent studies are in French: Denis Crouzet, *Le haut coeur de Catherine de Medici: Une raison politique aux temps de la Saint-Barthélemy* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005); Thierry Wanegffelen, *Catherine de Médicis. Le pouvoir au féminin* (Paris: Payot, 2005); Janine Garrisson, *Catherine de Médicis: l’impossible harmonie* (Paris: Payot, 2002).

[2] Pierre de L’Estoile, *Registre-Journal du règne de Henri III*, 6 vols., eds. Madeleine Lazard and Gilbert Schrenk (Genève: Droz, 1992), 5: 139–40:

> [“Catin, vous estes fortuneé
> D’avoir un haras de putains!”]

The word ‘catin’ translates in modern French as ‘whore’, and such a definition can be traced back to this period. For a discussion of the word as used to describe Catherine de Medici, see Stephen Murphy, “Catherine, Cybele, & Ronsard’s Witnesses,” in *High Anxiety: Masculinity in Crisis in Early Modern France*, ed. Kathleen Long (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2002), 55–70, in particular 60. All translations are my own.

> Perhaps we need to recognize just how hypnotic this team of sexual Machiavels seemed to contemporaries. They were supposedly quite without prudery or inhibitions: after crises like the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre they distracted Catherine by dancing before her naked, and to celebrate the royal victory at La Charité, they served a sumptuous meal naked but for a wisp of material around their hips, while the king himself reports that the 'Maîtresses d'hôtel' for the dinner, the irresistible madame de Sauves and the duchesse de Retz, wore nothing at all.[3]

Historians continue to perpetuate this myth. Robert Knecht, in his 1998 biography of Catherine, did not question the legendary role of Catherine's female household, repeating the idea that they "were allegedly used by her to seduce courtiers for political ends".[4] As late as 2003, Jean-François Solnon would state with similar confidence:

> The flying squadron is not a myth. The queen did not disdain the collaboration of the ladies of her household in order to accelerate or complete political negotiations. She placed several beautiful girls in the path of her son François d'Anjou—who had fled the Louvre in September 1575—and of his entourage, so much did the alliance of the Huguenots with the Malcontents, of which he was the leader, threaten the kingdom.[5]

Although historians such as Denis Crouzet have recently begun to rehabilitate Catherine's reputation, it is important that we understand how the myth of the 'flying squadron' came to exist and persist in the popular imagination.[6] This chapter examines the construction of the myth through the literature of the sixteenth century, in particular, the defamatory pamphlets and verse libels that portrayed the queen's household as a site of debauchery and prostitution. Revealing the authors of this satirical literature and their motives, it then traces how their satirical repre-

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[3] Hugh Richmond, *Puritans and Libertines: Anglo-French Literary Relations in the Reformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967). No source is provided for any of Richmond's fantastical claims.

[4] Robert J. Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici* (London: Longman, 1998), 235.

[5] ["L' 'escadron volant' n'est pas un mythe. Catherine n'a pas dédaigné la collaboration de dames de sa Maison pour accélérer ou parfaire des négociations politiques. Elle plaça ainsi quelques belles filles sur le chemin de son fils François d'Anjou—enfui du Louvre en septembre 1575—et de son entourage, tant l'alliance des huguenots avec les malcontents dont il était le chef était une menace pour le royaume"]. Jean-François Solnon, *Catherine de Médicis* (Paris: Perrin, 2003), 327–8. Solnon gives no evidence or reference for this claim.

[6] Crouzet, *Le haut coeur*. See also Crouzet, "Catherine de Médicis actrice d'une mutation dans l'imaginaire politique (1578–1579)," in "La coexistence confessionnelle à l'épreuve. Etudes sur les relations entre protestants et catholiques dans la France moderne," eds. Didier Boisson and Yves Krumenacker, special issue, *Chrétiens et sociétés. Documents et mémoires* 9 (2009): 17–50.

sentations came to be treated as genuine descriptions of life at court by later historians; in other words, how satirical literature became historical 'fact'. I compare this negative representation of the court to the realities of life in the queen's entourage, revealing that—in contrast to her alleged 'Italian' predisposition to manipulation—Catherine's appointments to her household fell within distinctly French traditions.[7] Rather than Catherine's presiding over the 'stable of whores' for which satirical writers and historians gave her credit, this chapter shows that she took steps to ensure a household of experienced, respected and politically moderate members. The 'flying squadron' is revealed to be a reductive, misogynist fantasy that developed in response to the increasingly prominent role of women at the early modern French court.

The origins of the flying squadron myth can be found in the memoirs of the courtier Pierre de Bourdeille, abbé de Brantôme, who describes the court of Catherine de Medici as a "true paradise on earth" where "over three hundred women were normally present", although when compiling his list of notable women he can remember only 86 individuals.[8] While Brantôme testifies to the strict moral discipline that Catherine enforced at court, his claims are undercut by his inclusion in the same work of erotic stories of lascivious courtly ladies cuckolding their husbands and engaging in lesbianism.[9] Juxtaposed with his entry on Catherine's household, Brantôme's section on "cuckolding wives" creates the impression that Catherine's household was populated primarily by sexually voracious, immoral women. The literary construct of a large, harem-like group of scandalous, promiscuous women under the command of a Machiavellian

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[7] To put Catherine's appointments into the context of French traditions, see Caroline zum Kolk, "The Household of the Queen of France in the Sixteenth Century," *The Court Historian* 14, no. 1 (2009): 3–22.

[8] Pierre de Bourdeille, abbé de Brantôme, *Recueil des dames, poésies et tombeaux*, ed. Etienne Vaucheret (Paris: Gallimard, 1991). Brantôme's oeuvre circulated in manuscript from his death in 1614, and was published in 1666. For an overview of his career and publications, see Dora E. Polachek, "A la recherche du spirituel: l'Italie et les *Dames galantes* de Brantôme," *Romanic Review* 94, nos. 1–2 (2003): 227–43. The earliest use of the term *escadron volant* to describe Catherine's entourage appears over a hundred years after her death, in *Les amours de Henri IV: Roy de France, avec ses lettres galantes & les réponses de ses Maîtresses* (Cologne, 1695), 20.

[9] David LaGuardia has situated Brantôme's work within an early modern version of masculinity that participated in "the intertextual practice of telling stories, expressing opinions, and transcribing examples concerning adultery, cuckoldry, and 'women's wiles,' which men are called upon to share with one another". See his *Intertextual Masculinity in French Renaissance Literature: Rabelais, Brantôme, and the Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 8.

mistress has thus been allied to the legend of the wicked Italian queen to construct a gendered representation of Catherine's—and indeed, all female—rule as inherently sexual, manipulative and corrupt.

The best source for contemporary satire of Catherine's ladies is the journals of Pierre de L'Estoile, an *audiencier* at the Chancellerie, one of the courts serving the Parlement of Paris, the country's highest sovereign law court. L'Estoile collected, memorised and copied out in his journals the manuscript verse, pamphlets and other libellous material produced largely by his colleagues within the *Palais de Justice*.[10] Although much of the material satirising Catherine's court is understandably anonymous, a significant portion of it can be traced to this university-educated *parlementaire* fraternity.[11] As the sixteenth century progressed, these men were responsible for limiting the personal freedoms of women through new laws around marriage, birth and inheritance.[12] Simultaneously, they also produced literature that denigrated those women whom they felt to be transgressing the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour.[13] As Tatiana Debaggi Baranova has shown, "it [was] in these juridical and clerical microsocieties that political and religious satire [took] root".[14] The literary

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[10] On L'Estoile and his milieu, collecting habits and influence, see Florence Greffe and José Lothe, *La vie, les livres et les lectures de Pierre de l'Estoile: nouvelles recherches* (Paris: H. Champion, 2004); Fanny Marin, "La Fortune éditoriale des *Registres journaux des règnes de Henri III et Henri IV* de Pierre de L'Estoile," *Nouvelle Revue du Seizième Siècle* 20, no. 2 (2002): 87–108; Gilbert Schrenck, "Jeu et théorie du pamphlet dans le *Journal de règne de Henri III* (1574–1589) de Pierre de L'Estoile," in *Traditions Polémiques*, ed. Nicole Cazauran (Paris: Cahiers V.L. Saunier, 1984), 69–79; Gilbert Schrenck and Chiara Lastraïoli, "L'Estoile, Pierre de, 1546–1611," in *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises: Le XVI^e siècle*, ed. Michel Simonin (Paris: Fayard & *Librairie Générale Française*, 2001), 739–41; Antónia Szabari, *Less Rightly Said: Scandals and Readers in Sixteenth-century France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 185–214.

[11] On the Parlement of Paris and the intellectual environment it fostered, see Marc Fumaroli, *L'Age de l'éloquence: rhétorique et "res literaria", de la Renaissance au seuil de l'époque classique* (Genève: Droz, 1980); J.H. Shennan, *The Parlement of Paris* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1968). Parallels can be drawn between the literary, intellectual and social environment of the French Parlements and the English Inns of Court in the same period: see Jayne Elisabeth Archer, Elizabeth Goldring and Sarah Knight, eds., *The Intellectual and Cultural World of the Early Modern Inns of Court* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

[12] Sarah Hanley, "Engendering the State: Family Formation and State Building in Early Modern France," *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 1 (1989): 4–27.

[13] For the traditions of satire, farce and bawdy humour among the Basoche, the association of law clerks who worked at the Parlement (and who frequently went on to become the lawyers and solicitors of the Parlement) see Sara Beam, *Laughing Matters: Farce and the Making of Absolutism in France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[14] ["C'est dans ces microsociétés juridiques et cléricales que la satire politique et religieuse prend racine"]. Tatiana Debbagi Baranova, "Poésie officielle, poésie partisane

production of this all-male intellectual elite reflected their appreciation of classical sources, both in their legal-rhetorical argument and in their erotic and satirical literature. For example, Brantôme's list of courtly women emulates the ancient literary tradition of the catalogue of women, often listed along with their vices, found in Juvenal's *Satire 6* or in Semonides of Amorgos's poem *On Women*.[15] These misogynist writings found their early modern equivalent in *La bibliothèque de madame de Montpensier* [*The Library of Madame de Montpensier*], an imaginary list of books alleged to be in the library of Catherine de Lorraine, Duchesse de Montpensier, the Catholic League's most vociferous supporter.[16] The Catholic League, formed in order to prevent the Protestant Henri of Navarre from acceding to the throne, received support from prominent courtly women whose involvement incurred the disapproval of the *parlementaire* community: in *La bibliothèque de madame de Montpensier*, the women of the court, including Catherine and Montpensier, are satirised with imaginary book titles that portray them all as sexually promiscuous, deviant and corrupt. Montpensier, like almost all the women in the library, is mocked in sexual terms with the title: *The Method of Working with a Limp/Getting One's Leg Over with All Comers, by Madame de Montpensier* [*Le Moien de besongner à clochepied à tous venans, par Madame de Montpensier*]. Not satisfied with simply mocking the limp that formed her physical disability, the term *besogner*, meaning 'to work' also had connotations of a sexual nature and the title thus portrays her as sexually voracious.[17]

Such satirical material created a destructive reputation of the women of the Valois court that, until recently, few historians were concerned to question. As Nicolas LeRoux states in his study of Henri III's coterie of

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pendant les guerres de Religion," *Terrain* 41 (2003): 26. For a more in-depth discussion of libellous verse and pamphlet production during the Wars of Religion see Debbagi Baranova, *À coups de libelles: une culture politique au temps des guerres de religion (1562–1598)* (Genève: Droz, 2012).

[15] Juvenal, *The Sixteen Satires*, trans. Peter Green (London: Penguin, 1998); Semonides of Amorgos, "Women," trans. Diane Arnson Svarlien, http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/sem_7.shtml, accessed 15 May 2013.

[16] Modelled on the imaginary library of the abbey of Saint-Victoire in Rabelais's *Pantagruel*, three versions of the *Library* exist, each one containing duplicate titles to the other versions as well as newly invented titles, hinting at a tradition of manuscript circulation in which the libel was reworked: L'Estoile, *Registre-Journal*, 5: 349–57; in another edition, Pierre de L'Estoile, *Journal de Henri III, Roy de France et de Pologne: ou, Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France*, ed. Lenglet du Fresnoy (Paris: La Haye, 1744), 2: 45–86; in manuscript version, BnF, MS Fr 15592, fos. 117–19 (see Figure 6).

[17] In my translation I have chosen the term 'getting one's leg over', a British expression that I think combines both elements.

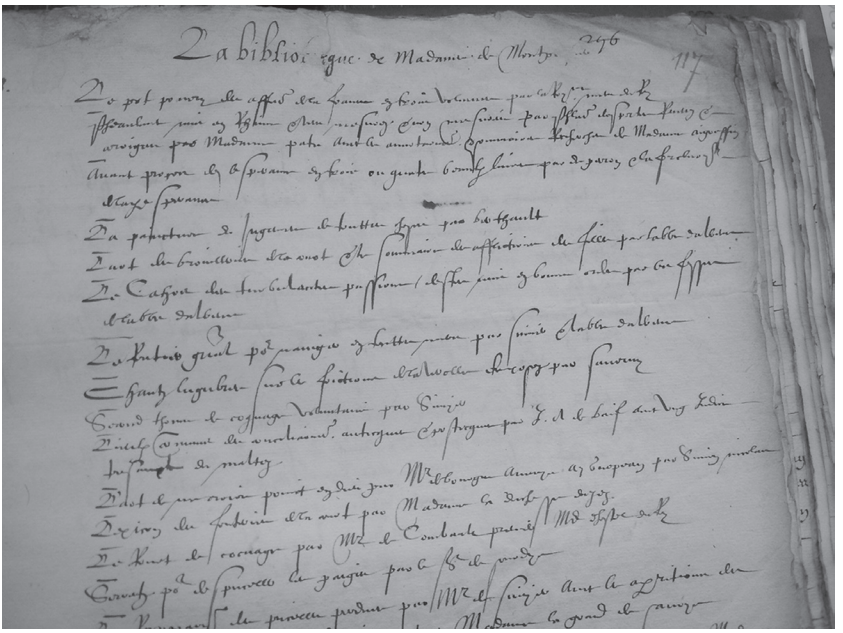

Fig. 6. Manuscript version of an imaginary library, *La bibliothèque de madame de Montpensier* [*The Library of Madame de Montpensier*]
BnF, MS Fr 15592, fos. 117–19.
© BnF

favoured courtiers, known as his *mignons*; "the new Bourbon dynasty in effect drew much of its symbolic legitimacy from the demonisation of the last Valois and their entourage."[18] The origins of the rise in the late sixteenth century in literature ridiculing the women of the court can be traced to two causes. First, Catherine de Medici's nearly 30 years of political prominence resulted in an increasingly public role of women, a prominence that legists found inappropriate and, in L'Estoile's words, "*impudente*".[19] As Michel de Waele notes, "the disorders that emerged during the second half of the sixteenth century had the distinction that they placed women, for the first time, completely centre stage, and therefore at

[18] ["La nouvelle dynastie des Bourbon a en effet puisé une grande partie de sa légitimité sybolique dans la diabolisation des derniers Valois et de leur entourage"]. Nicolas Le Roux, *La faveur du roi: mignons et courtisans au temps des derniers Valois (vers 1547–vers 1589)* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2000), 9.

[19] L'Estoile, *Registre-Journal*, 6: 504.

the forefront of political discourse".[20] Second, the rise in criticism of Henri III's *mignons* encouraged a virulent libel culture in which the women of the court found themselves portrayed as the female counterparts to the despised *mignons*.[21] It did not take long for the criticism of Henri III's court to gather momentum: in 1577, three years after Henri's coronation, his chief adviser René de Villequier stabbed to death his pregnant wife Françoise de La Marck, a lady-in-waiting to Catherine de Medici. The response to the murder and the pardon which Villequier received from the king on the basis of his wife's alleged adultery was an explosion of verse libels depicting the court as a hotbed of depravity, where adulterous women cuckolded their husbands and male courtiers trafficked in women, acting as pimps in order to gain credit with other courtiers. This verse, in the voice of La Marck, implies that the king himself was a key player in this widespread perversity:

> Blame my murderer, who made me so,
> Who, having no virtue with which to climb in favour,
> Abandoned me, firstly, to the pleasures of his master,
> Trafficking his credit at the price of my honour.[22]

By 1579 the verse libel *Pasquil Courtizan* could devote over two hundred lines to the mockery of lascivious courtly behaviour.[23] Another libel, the *Pasquil Courtizan* of 1581, opens with a criticism of the excessive amounts spent on the recent wedding of the king's favourite, the Duc de Joyeuse,

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[20] ["les désordres qui émergent durant la seconde moitié du seizième siècle eurent ceci de particulier qu'ils placèrent les femmes, pour la première fois, complètement à l'avant-plan de la scène, et donc du discours politique"]. Michel de Waele, "La fin des guerres de Religion et l'exclusion des femmes de la vie politique française," *French Historical Studies* 29, no. 2 (2006): 209–10.

[21] The literature on the satirical treatment of Henri III and his mignons is vast. See, for example, Le Roux, *La faveur du roi*; Gary Ferguson, *Queer (Re)Readings in the French Renaissance: Homosexuality, Gender, Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Katherine B. Crawford, "Love, Sodomy, and Scandal: Controlling the Sexual Reputation of Henry III," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 4 (2003): 513–42; Jacqueline Boucher, *La cour de Henri III* (Rennes: Ouest-France, 1986); Keith Cameron, *Henri III: A Maligned or Malignant King? (Aspects of the Satirical Iconography of Henri de Valois)* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1978).

[22] L'Estoile, *Registre-Journal*, 2: 127–35
["Blasmés en mon meurtrier, qui telle me feit estre,
Qui, n'aiant de Vertu pour monter en Faveur,
M'abandonna, premier, aux plaisirs de son Maistre,
Trafiquant son credit au prix de mon honneur."].
L'Estoile includes twelve verses on the La Marck murder, written in various voices and thereby demonstrating a wide diversity of opinion on the morals of the protagonists.

[23] L'Estoile, *Registre-Journal*, 3: 56–62.

but eventually evolves into a long litany of the adulterous escapades of the women of the court:

> Madame de Châteauvillain
> Having left there her knave
> Chases Monsieur de Guise, with great might;
> Madame de Sauve tries very hard
> To content all of her valets [. . .]
> As for madame de Nemours
> Pibrac turns her round the wrong way
> While his good wife
> Goes off to sing her wares somewhere else.[24]

This poem runs to over 200 lines, almost all of which mock the sexual exploits of notable courtly women.[25] The libel depicts Antoinette, Comtesse de Châteauvillain, conducting an affair with a peasant and then chasing the Duc de Guise; as a result his erstwhile companion Charlotte de Beaune, Dame de Sauve, accordingly becomes the voracious seducer of all of her servants; Anne d'Este, Duchesse de Nemours, conducts an adulterous, sodomitical affair with Pibrac, whose wife meanwhile seeks sexual partners elsewhere. Written in octosyllabic couplets, a highly memorable and popular form in the late sixteenth century and one associated with farce, the long verse succeeds in satirising scores of courtiers, and its themes of cross-class promiscuity, cuckoldry and sodomy are omnipresent themes in the late sixteenth-century satires of court ladies.[26]

Such depictions understandably led to a perception that Catherine chose to fill her household with seductive ladies, transforming the court

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[24] L'Estoile, *Registre-Journal*, 3: 170–85.
["Madame de Chasteauvillain
Aiant là laissé son vilain
Court Monsieur de Guise, à force;
Madame de Sauve s'efforce
A contenter tous ses vallets. [. . .]
Quant à madame de Nemours
Pibrac la renverse à rebours
Cependant que sa bonne femme
Va chanter autre part sa gamme."].

[25] Compare this libel of courtly women with the 1636 libel "A health to my Lady Duchess" which sexually slanders the women of Charles I's court: "Early Stuart Libels: An Edition of Poetry from Manuscript Sources," eds. Alastair Bellany and Andrew McRae, *Early Modern Literary Studies Text Series I* (2005), http://www.earlystuartlibels.net/htdocs/misc_section/R6.html, accessed 15 May 2013.

[26] Madeleine Lazard, *Le théâtre en France au XVI^e siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980), 69.

into a den of iniquity where 'Italian' vices such as sodomy and poisoning undermined the crown's authority. But how much of this perception is based on truth? What was the nature of Catherine de Medici's court and who were her courtiers? Oliver Mallick's essay in the present volume describes the official structure of the French queen's household; however a contemporary insight into the everyday attendance (and absence) of courtiers can be found in the account by Richard Cook, an Englishman who visited the French court in the 1580s. Cook distinguished three groups of noblewomen there: "princesses, ladies affectioned to live in Court, ordinarie maides of honour." Of these, princesses (by which he meant women related to the royal family) "be not compelled to be in Court nor to attend one the Queene, but at great solempnities & ceremonies". The women in Catherine's service, "because there charge is allwaies to accompanye the Quene, & have therefore & for theire paynes their table in Court & twentie pounde a yere pention, they be constrayned to be allwaies there". However, the other group, "ladies affectioned to the Court," would attend "when theire owne desires & fances move them".[27] Therefore one could find at court women who were not directly employed by the queen. This helps to explain Brantôme's list of 86 women who he claimed frequented the court, many of whom do not appear in the queen's household accounts (*états de maison de la reine*), and can also explain his claims of over three hundred women at court at any one time. Brantôme's memoirs and the misogynist satirical literature have been misconstrued by historians, leading to a portrayal of her retinue as consisting of an excessive number of young, beautiful women whose sexual allure Catherine exploited for political ends. The reality is that when she was finally able to exercise real political power as regent upon the accession of her under-age son Charles IX in 1560, Catherine took steps to ensure the existence of a household of experienced, respected and politically moderate members, both male and female.

The Evolution of Catherine's Status and Her Household Appointments

Catherine did not enjoy complete autonomy at first, however. Upon her husband Henri's accession to the throne on 31 March 1547, Catherine, as

[27] David Potter and P.R. Roberts, "An Englishman's View of the Court of Henri III, 1584–1585: Richard Cook's 'Description of the Court of France,'" *French History* 2, no. 3 (1988): 342–3.

the new Queen of France, found herself with a household of 353 staff, of whom 40 were women: one *dame d'honneur*, 22 *dames*, and 15 *demoiselles* supervised by two *gouvernantes*.[28] A closer look at the wages of the women in her employment reveals that control over the appointments to the queen's household was in the hands of the king, her husband. Four women received double the salary of the other ladies: Diane de Poitiers; her daughter Louise de Brézé; Madeleine de Savoie, the wife of the constable Anne de Montmorency; and Marguerite de Lustrac, wife of Jacques d'Albon de Saint-André. The first two ladies were the king's mistress and her daughter, and the latter two were the spouses of the king's favourites. Furthermore, the chief position among the women of the household was the *dame d'honneur*, a post that received 1200 *livres* in wages. This lady's role was to supervise the ladies and be constantly by the queen's side, assisting her on all occasions, and was held by Diane's other daughter, Françoise de Brézé.[29] While these appointments favouring the king's mistress may have been interpreted as damaging to Catherine's reputation as royal consort, the possible ignominy of the loss of patronage could have been mitigated by Henri's increasing recognition of Catherine's political abilities: he would appoint her regent on three separate occasions, in 1548, 1552 and 1553, while fighting in the Italian campaigns against Emperor Charles V.

The training would stand her in good stead when Henri II was killed in a jousting accident on 10 July 1559, leaving her as the widowed Queen Mother of the new King François II. His fifteen-year-old bride Marie [Mary] Stuart, otherwise known as Mary, Queen of Scots, was now Queen of France. It was the right of the leading noblewomen of the kingdom to serve the reigning queen, and so many women transferred from Catherine's household to the household of the new queen.[30] Although this transfer was purely a matter of etiquette and prestige, it does seem that this arrangement would nonetheless have given Catherine significant knowledge of Mary's household and perhaps thereby the political

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[28] Caroline Zum Kolk, "Catherine de Médicis et sa maison: La fonction politique de l'hôtel de la reine au XVI^{e} siècle" (PhD diss., Université Paris VIII, 2006), 173. The *états de maison de la reine* are found in *Lettres de Catherine de Médicis*, eds. Hector de la Ferrière and Gustave Baguenault de la Puchesse, 11 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1880–1909), 10: 504–38.

[29] Zum Kolk, "Catherine de Médicis," 176–7.

[30] Rosalind K. Marshall, *Queen Mary's Women: Female Relatives, Servants, Friends and Enemies of Mary, Queen of Scots* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2006), 60. See also Marshall's chapter in this present volume.

machinations of Mary's uncles, the powerful Guise brothers.[31] Certainly, Catherine's somewhat diminished public profile did not affect her continuing political involvement. The sickly François died 16 months later, in December 1560, and his successor, Charles IX, was a ten-year-old boy. During François's illness Catherine had already moved to secure herself the regency for her underage son, bringing with it huge political power.[32] She managed it by obtaining the consent of the first Prince of the Blood (the traditional candidate for the role of regent), Antoine de Bourbon, King of Navarre.[33] Although neither the Parlement nor the Estates General that met in December 1560 voiced any opposition to Catherine's assumption of the regency, claims of manipulation were put forward in the vitriolic 1574 Huguenot pamphlet *Discours merveilleux de la vie, actions et déportements de Catherine de Médicis, royne-mère*. Written in response to the recent St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in which several thousand Protestants had been slaughtered, the pamphlet was determined to blame Catherine not only for the massacre but for all the ills of the kingdom by rewriting past events. It thus even alleged that Antoine's relinquishing of his claim to the regency was directly due to Catherine's manipulation of one of her ladies-in-waiting, Louise de La Beraudière, known as *'la belle Rouet'*, with whom Antoine had been having an affair:

> She commanded her [La Beraudière] thus to seduce him and to please him in any way she could, so that, forgetting his own affairs he upset many people [...] Indeed, she did it so well that notwithstanding the oppositions of some of the deputies of the Estates based on the authority of our Salic Law, and the bad fortunes of the government of women in this kingdom, the King of Navarre agreed to it out of carelessness.[34]

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[31] See the chapters by Sara J. Wolfson and Oliver Mallick in this present volume for the political motivations behind the appointments by Marie de Medici to the households of both her daughter, Henrietta Maria, and daughter-in-law, Anne of Austria, and then by Anne to her son Louis XIV's household.

[32] For Catherine's delicate political manoeuvres in this period see Katherine Crawford, "Catherine de Médicis and the Performance of Political Motherhood," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 3 (2000): 660–4.

[33] Navarre was offered the lieutenancy-general of the realm.

[34] ["elle luy commande donc de l'entretenir et luy complaire en ce qu'elle pourroit, afin qu'oubliant les affaires de soy-mesme il mecontentast un chacun, comme de fait elle en vint à bout par ce moyen. En somme elle fait si bien que nonobstant les oppositions d'aucuns des deputez des estats fondees sur l'authorité de nostre loy Salique, et les mauvais succez des gouvernemens des femmes en ce roiaume, le Roy de Navarre y condescent par nonchalance"]. Nicole Cazauran, ed., *Discours merveilleux de la vie, actions et déportements de Catherine de Médicis, royne-mère* (Genève: Droz, 1995), 154. On the creation of this pamphlet see Mireille Huchon, "*Vie de Sainte Catherine* ou *Discours merveilleux*: les

Although this pamphlet appeared 14 years after the events it describes, it is clear that the motif of Catherine's exploitation of her ladies' sexual allure as a political tool was current during her time in power.

Even in 1563, when Charles IX reached fourteen, the age of majority for a king, Catherine's political status did not wane: at a formal ceremony Charles made her *gouvernante* of France.[35] Now that she was in full control of the kingdom, she was also in control of appointments to her household. However, what becomes clear from study of the *états de maison* for this period is a sense of exceptional stability when it came to the personnel of the queen's household. Many of the officers who had served Mary Stuart while she was queen simply transferred back into Catherine's employment on the death of François II. As Caroline Zum Kolk remarks, "the queen's household seems to have become a stable institution that was transmitted from one reign to the next".[36] Perhaps even more remarkable is that one of the women who transferred from Mary Stuart's household was Françoise de Brézé, Diane de Poitier's daughter and Catherine's former *dame d'honneur*.[37] She had lost her status as *dame d'honneur* on the death of Henri II, but Catherine invited her to return to her household on the death of François II, along with several of her close relatives, a testament to the enduring friendship that was shared between the two women, and a challenge to writers who have attempted to portray Catherine's relationship with her late husband's mistress as motivated by bitterness and jealousy.[38] Françoise de Brézé would remain in Catherine's household until four years before her death, aged fifty-two, in 1570.

Rather than construct a household chosen for its youth and beauty, Catherine's new appointments would reflect the experience and stability she intended to implement throughout her reign: her new *dame d'honneur*

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avatars d'un pamphlet," in *Traditions Polémiques*, ed. Nicole Cazauran (Paris: ENS Jeunes Filles, 1985), 55–67.

35 Crawford, "Political Motherhood," 669. The title *gouvernante* (often translated as 'governess' which is inappropriate here given its other connotations in English) was a term meaning 'female governor', rarely used given the belief in Salic Law, which forbade a woman to reign as monarch of France.

36 Zum Kolk, "Catherine de Médicis," 197.

37 Ibid., 176.

38 Virtually all writers until Zum Kolk have characterised the relationship between Catherine and Diane as a rivalry; see Ivan Cloulas, *Diane de Poitiers* (Paris: Fayard, 1997). A more nuanced version of the relationship is found in Kathleen Wellman, *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 208–14. For the relationship from an art-historical perspective see Sheila Ffolliott, "Casting a Rival into the Shade: Catherine de' Medici and Diane de Poitiers," *Art Journal* 48, no. 2 (1989): 138–43.

was Jacqueline de Longwy, Duchesse de Montpensier, one of her oldest friends.[39] Aged at least thirty-six, Longwy had been at court since 1533, and had been instrumental in the negotiations to encourage Antoine de Bourbon to relinquish his claims to the regency. Although she would die prematurely in August 1561, Longwy's replacement was another old friend: Philippe de Montespedon, Princesse de La Roche-sur-Yon.[40] Her role as overseer of discipline among the female household was related by the English ambassador who noted in April 1565, that

> Orders are also taken in the Court that no gentleman shall talk with the Queen's maids, except it is in the Queen's presence, or in that of Madame la Princess de Roche-sur-Yon, except he be married; and if they sit upon a form or stool he may sit by her, and if she sits on the ground he may kneel by her, but not lie long, as the fashion was in this Court.[41]

However, by 1587 such discipline was being openly mocked in the anonymously-penned libel *Le manifeste des dames de la court* [*The Manifesto of the Ladies of the Court*], an imaginary group confession by leading women of the court of their various sins and debaucheries.[42] Among them, Christine of Lorraine, about to become Grand Duchess of Tuscany, begs for forgiveness for her affair with the Duc de Joyeuse, blaming it on the "liberal upbringing of [her] grandmother [Catherine de Medici] and governess" as well as her "ancient" bloodlines which are "subject to wanton love".[43] The implication that the Grand Duke of Tuscany was about to marry a woman whose sexual liaisons were public knowledge was a highly provocative slur. Such allegations were explicitly directed at Catherine, whose alleged inability to control the ladies of her household was indicative of her inability to run the kingdom. Claiming that she was actively training her young ladies in whoredom, the libel implied that Catherine's Machiavellian exploitation of her entourage had backfired, resulting in a royal household rife with sleaze.

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39 Zum Kolk, "Catherine de Médicis," 191.

40 Ibid.

41 *CSP Foreign Elizabeth*, 7: no. 1091 (11 April 1565, "Occurrences in France").

42 L'Estoile, *Registre-Journal*, 5: 344–9, "Le Manifeste des dames de la Court".

43 ["Hé! mon Dieu! puisque je suis de race antique, subjecte à l'amour impudique, excuse l'horoscope de ma nativité, et libre nourriture de ma grand'mere et de ma gouvernante"]. Ibid.

Joining the Household

But if Catherine did not consciously select attractive women as part of an alleged sexual master-plan, how did women join the royal household? As we have seen, large numbers of women transferred from one royal household to another upon the death of the monarch, often serving a succession of queens. For example, Madeleine de Savoie (along with 18 other women) left Catherine's household on the death of Henri II in 1559 to serve in the house of the new queen, Mary Stuart, only to return on the death of the young King François II a year later.[44] The elite families of the kingdom could and did expect patronage at the royal level for many of their members, and would often move from the household of one royal family member to another.[45] Service to a royal would also usually result in rewards for one's family members.[46] Thus, Catherine's first major change to her household after assuming the regency was the appointment as *chevalier d'honneur* of Antoine de Crussol, husband of her closest friend and lady-in-waiting since 1547, Louise de Clermont-Tonnerre, Duchesse d'Uzès.[47] Yet even the experience and stability of the Queen Mother's household could be material for satire: the death of the Duchesse d'Uzès in 1596, at approximately ninety-four years of age after most of her life spent in the queen's service, was satirised in one version of *La bibliothèque de madame de Montpensier* with the imaginary title *Lexicon of Telling Death to Fuck Off, by Madame the Duchess of Uzès* [*Lexicon de fouterie de la mort par Madame la duchesse duzez*].[48]

Like Uzès's husband, women could also find a position in Catherine's household as a reward for service by their spouses. When the king's ambassador in Spain, the Baron de Fourquevaux, asked for a place for his wife at court in 1571, Catherine honoured him by giving his wife a position as *dame* in her own household.[49] In addition, Catherine participated in the tradition of French aristocratic culture that involved placing young nobles in the households of other noble families, to train them in the expecta-

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[44] Zum Kolk, "Catherine de Médicis," 197.

[45] Sharon Kettering, "The Household Service of Early Modern French Noblewomen," *French Historical Studies* 20, no. 1 (1997): 55–85.

[46] Ruth Kleinman, "Social Dynamics at the French Court: The Household of Anne of Austria," *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 3 (1990): 517–35.

[47] Zum Kolk, "Catherine de Médicis," 187.

[48] BnF, MS Fr 15592, fos. 117–19 (see Figure 6).

[49] Catherine de Medici to M. de Fourquevaux, 8 January 1571, in Catherine de Medici, *Lettres*, 4: 25.

tions of aristocratic society.[50] Accordingly, a letter to Louis de Bourbon, Prince of Condé, shortly after the death of his wife in 1564, mentions the case of Anne du Chastel, heiress to her parents' estate in Brittany, whose parents had placed her under the care of his late wife. Catherine felt that "while my said cousin lived I did not want that she was removed from there, but since she has left this world and since she [du Chastel] is from a good enough place to be raised close to me, I ask you to send her to me".[51] Like any responsible noble matriarch, Catherine kept herself abreast of the status of noblewomen around the country, and fulfilled her traditional duties as the head of what was the kingdom's leading noble house.

The timing of this request is intriguing, however: Condé was simultaneously being publicly teased about his relationship with another of Catherine's ladies, Isabelle de Limeuil, who had scandalously given birth at court to a baby whom Condé believed he had fathered. A contemporary Latin verse libel painted Catherine as the instigator of the relationship as part of her plan to keep Condé, the leader of the French Protestants, on her side politically:

> This noble maiden
> Who was so lovely
> Committed adultery
> And recently created a son.
> But they say that the Queen Mother
> In this was Lucina
> And permitted this
> To profit from the prince[52]

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[50] Kristen Neuschel, *Word of Honor: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[51] ["pendant que madicte cousine a vescu je n'ay poinct voulu qu'elle en fust ostée; mais puisqu'elle est allée de vie à trespas et qu'elle est d'assez bon lieu pour estre nourrie auprès de moy, je vous prie me l'envoyer"]. Catherine de Medici to Louis de Bourbon, Prince de Condé, 16–30 November 1564, in Catherine de Medici, *Lettres*, 2: 234.

[52] Michel de Castelnau, *Les mémoires de messire Michel de Castelnau, seigneur de Mauvissiere; illustrez et augmentez de plusieurs commentaires & manuscrits* [. . .], ed. J. Le Laboureur (Paris: Pierre Lamy, 1659), 2: 371.

["Puella illa nobilis,
Quæ erat tam amabilis,
Commisit adulterium
Et nuper fecit filium.
Sed dicunt matrem reginam
Illi fuisse Lucinam;
Et quod hoc patiebatur
Ut principem lucraretur."]

Depicting Catherine as Lucina, the Roman goddess of childbirth, the author credits her with overseeing the whole affair for her own ends, but then claims that she imprisoned Limeuil when negotiations with Condé failed. Limeuil's scandalous story would become one of the most cited examples of the 'flying squadron' in action, with Catherine regularly depicted as willing to sacrifice the honour and reputation of her ladies in order to fulfil her political ambitions, as with the case of Louise de La Beraudière mentioned above. But as I have argued elsewhere, Catherine's treatment of Limeuil and her efforts to control gossip about the scandal rather demonstrate her savvy manipulation of information that could be damaging to the reputation of her household and of the young women for whom she was responsible.[53] Unfortunately, Catherine's suppression of intelligence regarding the Limeuil case was so effective that many scholars are still unaware of her efforts, and her treatment of Limeuil is still depicted as hypocritical and draconian.

However, rather than viewing them as exploitable, Catherine employed a *gouvernante des filles* to oversee the good behaviour and education of the younger women of her entourage, known as *demoiselles*. In 1547, she employed not only two *gouvernantes* but also *sous-gouvernantes*.[54] The Venetian ambassador also noted in 1550 that she allowed three of her youngest *demoiselles* to eat at her table, the eleven-year-old Diane de France, bastard child of her husband, along with Jeanne de Savoie, sister of the Duc de Nemours and Françoise de Rohan, both fifteen years old.[55] While this would have been seen as a great honour, it is noteworthy that the women chosen would have been among the youngest in her entourage. The Queen Mother had a responsibility to oversee the upbringing of her younger ladies, ensuring that they were prepared for the demands that would be placed on them as married noblewomen: diplomacy, the running of estates, and the management of their own households. Her

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[53] Una McIlvenna, "Poison, Pregnancy and Protestants: Gossip and Rumour at the Early Modern French Court," in *Fama and Her Sisters: Gossip and Rumour in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Claire Walker and Heather Kerr (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming 2014). In this essay, I argue that Catherine silenced damaging gossip about an accusation of poisoning against Limeuil, allowing gossip to circulate that Limeuil had been imprisoned simply for an illegitimate pregnancy, a less damaging accusation.

[54] Zum Kolk, "Catherine de Médicis," 124.

[55] ["Elle fait très grand honneur à sa table où mange presque toujours la fille bâtarde du roi qui s'appelle Diane et est âgée de 11 ans; y mangent aussi la soeur du duc de Murs [Nemours—Jeanne de Savoie] et Mlle de Rohan, toutes deux mangeant loin de S.M. au bout de la table"]. Monique Chatenet, *La cour de France au XVI^e siècle: vie sociale et architecture* (Paris: Picard, 2002), 189.

status as *gouvernante* of France increased the scope of her activity in this sphere, as the significance of marriage alliances to the aristocratic society meant that negotiations were often overseen and approved by the monarch.

Marriages

This task of arranging and/or assisting with the marriages of her ladies was undertaken by Catherine in negotiation with their own relations, such as the marriage in 1564 of Henriette de Clèves, Duchesse de Nevers, to Louis de Gonzaga, the brother of the Duke of Mantua. In her letter to the duke, Catherine speaks of Henriette as being "raised by my own hand", an indication of how closely involved she felt herself to be in the upbringing of the young women of her household.[56] Accordingly, those who arranged marriages with her ladies without her knowledge were reprimanded. Imbert de la Platière, lieutenant general in Piedmont, who married her lady-in-waiting Françoise de Birague in 1561 (without consulting Catherine first) was told,

> I would have desired that, before you had done it, that you had written me a little letter, because loving you as I do, I would have taken great pleasure in counselling you and in having been able to help arrange the marriage.[57]

In a comparable study of Elizabeth I's court, Johanna Rickman argues that in order to assert her authority as an unmarried female sovereign, Elizabeth needed to be able to control the sexual activity of the members of her court.[58] Her well-documented rage at the clandestine weddings of her ladies (often accompanied by a punishment of imprisonment) was typical of the response that the couple could have expected from their own parents.[59]

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[56] ["nourrie de ma main"]. Catherine de Medici to the Duke of Mantua, 17 August 1564, in Catherine de Medici, *Lettres*, 2: 214.

[57] Catherine de Medici to M. de Bourdillon, 20 May 1561, in Catherine de Medici, *Lettres*, 1: 196.

[58] Johanna Rickman, *Love, Lust, and License in Early Modern England: Illicit Sex and the Nobility* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 27–68.

[59] Furthermore, Sandra Logan argues that the traditional depiction of Elizabeth's responses as motivated by 'sexual jealousy' ignores the risks she faced in her unique status as unmarried monarch: "There can not have been much room from the queen's viewpoint for personal or familial ambition that would shift the allegiances of her waiting women from monarch to husband, or from one family to another, and that could readily render these women as tools for political manipulations, or through them provide access to

Similarly, Catherine's interest in overseeing the details of aristocratic marriages and preventing unauthorised ones was explained by the ramifications of unsuitable clandestine marriages, such as the scandal caused by the alleged secret marriage agreement between her *demoiselle* Françoise de Rohan and the Duc de Nemours, Jacques de Savoie. Nemours's decision, in 1566, to marry Catherine's lady-in-waiting and close friend Anne d'Este, compelled his former lover Rohan to instigate what would become a protracted legal case, claiming that she and Nemours had already exchanged marital vows and that he had fathered her child. While a contemporary verse libel criticised Nemours and Este for seeking to marry under such scandalous circumstances, the libel also attacked Catherine's involvement in securing the legal verdict needed for the wedding to go ahead:

> A cloak encourages and presides/is matron of honour over this wedding.
> An unclean, extravagant and grasping cloak, a chasm and abyss,
> This kingdom formerly of substance and widely vigorous,
> Moreover threatens to lie fallen in complete destruction and rot.[60]

The verse attacks the secret, underhand nature of the proceedings, the 'unclean cloak' that encourages and veils these wicked deeds. The use of *hortatrix*, meaning 'she who encourages', along with *pronuba*, meaning 'matron of honour', is an allusion to Catherine de Medici's role in enabling the marriage of her close friend to take place. The writer portrays these covert machinations as a direct cause of widespread corruption throughout the kingdom. As I have discussed elsewhere, Catherine gave damning testimony against Rohan in her lawsuit because of the adverse effect Rohan's case would have on the reputation of her household.[61] The case not only exposed Catherine's inability to police effectively the intimate lives of her ladies, but also revealed how she was prepared to sacrifice the career of one lady in order to protect the collective reputation of the group.

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secrets and views not available through other means." Logan, *Texts/Events in Early Modern England: Poetics of History* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 166, n. 28.

60 "In nuptias Ducis de Nemours", TNA, SP 70/84, fo. 356.
["Huius coniugii hortatrix et pronuba laena est.
Laena impura, profusa, rapax, barathrũ atq' vorago,
Regni huius quondã ſtantis latéq' viventis,
At mine funditus cuersi putrisq' iacentis."]

61 Una McIlvenna, "Word versus Honor: the Case of Françoise de Rohan vs. Jacques de Savoie," in "Speech and Oral Culture in Early Modern Europe and Beyond," ed. Elizabeth Horodowick, special issue, *Journal of Early Modern History* 16, nos. 4–5, (2012): 315–34.

Political Involvement

The depositions given by household servants in the Rohan-Nemours case are extremely informative about daily life at court, and reveal a diversity of expectations of behaviour for various members of the queen's household: younger, unmarried women were closely supervised (even if shrewd noblemen like Nemours found a way around this supervision). The case was very different, however, for the women within her household who had already found marriage partners. Due to their status, they usually found themselves as heads of their own large estates, with households and female entourages of their own. They would be absent from court for numerous reasons: to oversee the management of their estates, especially when their husbands were absent because of war, or for political reasons, such as, in the case of Anne d'Este, the large gatherings of the Guise clan at Joinville in the 1560s. The political power and influence exercised by these senior ladies-in-waiting is slowly being investigated. Caroline Zum Kolk's thesis on Catherine's household explores the political function of her entourage, and quickly dispenses with the "caricatural image of the flying squadron" as an invention of pamphleteers and those hostile to the later Valois dynasty.[62] Rather, an example of both the access to valuable intelligence and the intermediary, negotiating role that ladies-in-waiting enjoyed can be found in a letter by one of Catherine's *dames*, Claude-Catherine de Clermont, Maréchale de Retz. She wrote to the Duc de Nevers in 1578 with potentially invaluable information and an offer: "I've been told that the Maréchal Damville is to retire to Saluzzo and that it's said that his governorship will be given to Monsieur du Maine [...]. If it's agreeable to you I can speak to their Majesties on your behalf."[63] Retz was willing to exploit both her access to intelligence and her close relationship with Catherine to secure lucrative appointments for her clients and friends. Ladies often exploited their marital status for diplomatic ends as well: in times of political controversy, the women of her household acted as intermediaries between Catherine and their own male relatives, such as Catherine's request to Madeleine de Savoie to act as appeaser in 1560 when her husband, the Constable Montmorency, was stripped of his posi-

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62 Zum Kolk, "Catherine de Médicis," 270.

63 Claude-Catherine de Clermont to Duc de Nevers: "l'om m'ha dit que le mareschale d'anville se retire en salusse et que l'om parlle que son gouvernemant sera donné a mon sr du maine et cellui de bourgongne a monsieur de mercure [...] si annes agreable que i'em parllasse a leurs maiestes pour vous", BnF, MS Fr. 3320, fo. 109.

tion as *grand-maître* in favour of the Guises.[64] The women from Protestant families also acted as intermediaries during the Wars of Religion, such as Eléonore de Roye, who arranged negotiations between Catherine and her husband, Louis, Prince de Condé. As demonstrated in the chapters by Helen Graham-Matheson, Sara J. Wolfson, Oliver Mallick and Birgit Houben and Dries Raeymaekers in this volume, direct, personal access to the queen gave female office holders unrivalled political influence, even more so for those who served Catherine who, as regent and then *gouvernante*, exercised genuine political power.

Of these office holders, it is the women of the Guise clan who have received the most attention from scholars in recent years.[65] Christiane Coester's biography of Anne d'Este reveals her growing political influence which reached its climax during the 1590 siege of Paris, when she became the *de facto* head of the Catholic League in Paris, effectively replacing her recently deceased friend Catherine de Medici as the most powerful woman in the kingdom.[66] Meanwhile Este's daughter, the Duchesse de Montpensier, drew severe criticism from the *parlementaire* fraternity who perceived her high public profile and anti-monarchical stance as 'impudent' in a woman. They responded by portraying her in satirical literature as sexually deviant and insane, such as Montpensier's mock 'confession' in *Le manifeste des dames de la court*:

> My body has been given over to nothing but lechery and madness, and my spirit only to diabolical plots and all quarrels.[67]

Despite support for her actions among the Parisian populace, Montpensier's pro-active role as chief propagandist for the League resulted in the

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[64] Catherine de Medici to Madeleine de Savoie, 15 August 1560, in Catherine de Medici, *Lettres*, 1: 144.

[65] Christiane Coester, *Schön wie Venus, mutig wie Mars: Anna d'Este, Herzogin von Guise und von Nemours, 1531–1607* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2007); Eliane Viennot, "Des 'femmes d'Etat' au XVI^{e} siècle: les princesses de la Ligue et l'écriture de l'histoire," in *Femmes et pouvoirs sous l'ancien régime*, eds. Danielle Haase-Dubosc and Eliane Viennot (Paris: Rivages, 1991), 77–97; Penny Richards, "The Guise Women: Politics, War and Peace," in *Gender, Power and Privilege in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Jessica Munns and Penny Richards (Harlow: Pearson, 2003), 159–70; Nicolas Le Roux, "'Justice, justice, justice, au nom de Jésus-Christ': Les princesses de la Ligue, le devoir de vengeance et l'honneur de la maison de Guise," in *Femmes de pouvoir et pouvoir des femmes dans l'Occident médiéval et moderne*, eds. Armel Nayt-Dubois and Emmanuelle Santinelli-Foltz (Valenciennes: Pressses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 2009), 439–57.

[66] Coester, *Schön wie Venus*, 267–71.

[67] ["Mon corps ne s'est jamais adonné qu'à lubricité et à folie, et mon esprit qu'à menées diaboliques et toutes brouilleries"]. L'Estoile, *Registre-Journal*, 5: 346–7.

pamphlet's depiction of her in hyperbolic terms of sexual voracity, boundless depravity and devilish scheming.[68]

The Risks of Artistic Patronage

Politics was not the only arena in which Catherine's ladies flourished and for which they were criticised; they were also highly educated and culturally influential, qualities that were often perceived as transgressive in females. Since 1570, Claude-Catherine de Clermont, Maréchale de Retz, had been hosting a salon in her hôtel in the faubourg Saint-Honoré in winter, and at her château of Noisy-le-Roi in the summer.[69] Long before her great-niece, the Marquise de Rambouillet, would begin her celebrated salon in 1607, Retz and her female friends were at the centre of a network of literary and artistic creation. The learned maréchale, familiar with classical languages (she was chosen as Latin interpreter for the visit by the Polish ambassadors in 1573) as well as Italian and Spanish, was an expert player of the lute, and kept an album full of encomiastic works written in her honour by renowned poets and writers, addressed to her literary name of Dictynne.[70] The 'cabinet vert' of the rue Saint-Honoré became celebrated as a Parnassus, inspiring writers such as Estienne Pasquier, Agrippa d'Aubigné, Philippe Desportes and Nicolas Rapin, but also welcoming women of the court who, like the maréchale herself, would write anonymously. In the opinion of the bibliographer La Croix du Maine, the maréchale deserved

> to be placed in the ranks of the most learned and most well versed, as much in poetry and oratory art as in philosophy, mathematics, history and other

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[68] Dora E. Polachek, "Le mécénat meurtrier, l'iconoclasme et les limites de l'acceptable: Anne d'Este, Catherine-Marie de Lorraine et l'anéantissement d'Henri III," in *Patronnes et mécènes en France à la Renaissance*, eds. Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier with Eugénie Pascal (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2007), 433–54.

[69] Julie Campbell, *Literary Circles and Gender in Early Modern Europe: A Cross-Cultural Approach* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 73–96. Campbell's study reveals the enormous influence Retz and her salon had on both English and Italian salon society. Her otherwise excellent study of Retz's literary and artistic contributions, however, crucially misconstrues *La bibliothèque de madame de Montpensier* as a genuine catalogue of books, rather than as a satirical libel. For an example of a later English salon where French influences were notable, see Julie Sanders, "Caroline Salon Culture and Female Agency: The Countess of Carlisle, Henrietta Maria, and Public Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 4 (2000): 449–64.

[70] Catherine de Clermont, Maréchale de Retz, *Album de poésies* (*Manuscrit français 24255 de la BnF*), eds. Colette H. Winn and François Rouget (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004).

> sciences, from which she knows well how to profit [from] those whom she feels worthy of these learned discourses. She has still not brought to light any of her works or compositions.[71]

D'Aubigné claimed that "the Maréchale de Retz [...] has given me a great work in her own hand which I would very much like to bring forth from secrecy into the public domain".[72] The poet Jean Dorat also sang her praises in a Latin epigram in which he compared Retz to Virgil's warlike heroine Camilla for her strength in intellectual debate.[73]

This direct participation by women in literary inspiration, creation and debate resulted in their being celebrated for their literary attributes. But it had other, less welcome, consequences. The presence of writers such as Pasquier, Rapin and d'Aubigné in the homes of noblewomen such as Retz gave them first-hand knowledge of the private, domestic lives of courtiers, which provided material for satire. Thus the anonymous writer of *Le manifeste des dames de la court* would eventually paint the maréchale as an adulterous wife, waiting for her husband to die so she could marry her lover Charles de Balsac, Baron de Dunes, also known as *'le bel Entraguet'*:

> Madame de Rets, speaking to Mons[r] de Lyon.
> I know, Sir, that if the compromise that I have made with Antraguet, to marry him after the death of my base husband, does not excuse me before you, that I will have to admit that I am a dishonest and infamous woman even though the good man is not unaware of my scam. But, Sir, Long Live the League![74]

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71 ["elle mérite d'être mise au rang des plus doctes et mieux versées, tant en la poésie et art oratoire qu'en philosophie, mathématiques, histoire et autres sciences, desquelles elle sait bien faire son profit entre tous ceux qu'elle sent dignes de ces doctes discours. Elle n'a encore rien mis en lumière de ses oeuvres et compositions"]. François Grudé, sieur de La Croix du Maine, *Les Bibliothèques françoises* (Paris: Saillant & Nyon, 1773), 1: 99.

72 ["m'a communicqué un grand oeuvre de sa façon que je voudrois bien arracher du secret au public"]. Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné, *Oeuvres complètes*, 6 vols., eds. Eugène Réaume and François de Caussade, (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1873–92), 1: 447.

73 Jean Dorat, "Ad bonarum artium studiosissimam Heroïnam Camillam Comitissam de Retz," as cited in Castelnau, *Les mémoires*, 2: 104:

> ["Virgilio meruit celebrari Vate Camilla
> Bellatrix, & opus Virgo imitata virûm.
> Te plus laudaret Vates si viveret idem,
> Quae certas doctis femina docta viris."]

74 ["Madame de Rets, parlant à Monsr de Lyon. Je sçai, Monsieur, que si le compromis que j'ai fait avec Antraguet, de l'espouser apres la mort de mon vilain mari, ne m'excuse devant vous, qu'il faut que je m'accuse comme femme peu honneste et infâme; encores que le bon homme n'ignore pas ma brigue. Mais, Monsieur, Vive la Ligue!"]. L'Estoile, *Registre-Journal*, 5: 347.

Retz's personal life—in particular her alleged love for Henri III's *mignon* Entraguet—was the regular subject of satirical libels in the 1580s which pictured the intellectually dominant (and thus trangressive) Retz as cuckolding her husband, Albert de Gondi-Retz, Maréchal de France. While this chapter does not suggest that the women of the court were paragons of virtue and chastity, their depiction in satirical literature relied on hyperbolic tropes of sexual voracity and rampant cuckoldry that are so ubiquitous as to be suspicious. Whether or not Retz was conducting an extramarital affair, it should not overshadow historical interest in her literary, cultural and social influence.

Indeed, the theme of cuckoldry was an ever-present motif in the satirisation of politically or intellectually active women: women who transgressed gender boundaries in this way could not be trusted, their unnatural public roles betraying an uncontrollable sexuality. This suggests that artistic patronage could be problematic for courtly women: writers who depended on their favour in order to make a living would sing their praises but could live a literary 'double life,' simultaneously penning anonymous polemical literature according to their confessional beliefs or attacking what they saw as an increasingly debauched court.[75] For example, in *Les Tragiques*, under the section "Les Princes", d'Aubigné describes courtly women as filthy whores, cuckolding their husbands with their servants:

> One counts the loves of our dirty princesses,
> Whores of their valets, sometimes their mistresses.[76]

D'Aubigné's ability to concurrently praise and blame courtly women could be seen as an example of an *argumentum in utramque partem*, or argument on both sides of a question, a rhetorical exercise that Lyndan Warner argues is characteristic of much of the *Querelle des femmes* literature, which argued for both the positive and negative qualities of the female. As she says: "The *Querelle* writers needed attacks on women in order to

[75] The same phenomenon can be witnessed in contemporary Venetian writers' accounts of courtesans. See Courtney Quaintance, "Defaming the Courtesan: Satire and Invective in Sixteenth-Century Italy," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 199–208.

[76] Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné, *Les Tragiques*, Textes de la Renaissance 6 (Paris: H. Champion, 1995), 109,

> ["L'un conte les amours de nos salles princesses,
> Garces de leurs valets, autrefois leurs maistresses."]

come to their defence."[77] Unfortunately, until recently it has only been the negative portion of this literature about Catherine de Medici's household that has attracted the attention of historians.

Spectacle and Prestige

The women of her household also functioned as a marker of prestige for the Queen Mother. In keeping with tradition, Catherine's household as Queen Mother was larger than those of the reigning queens, her sons' consorts, Elizabeth of Austria, wife of Charles IX, and Louise de Lorraine, wife of Henri III. As well as in sheer numbers of women, one of the ways in which Catherine displayed this prestige was in her holding royal festivals, pageants and ballets. Her celebrated pageants at Fontainebleau in 1564, in Bayonne in 1565, and the reception for the Polish ambassadors in 1573, featured either mock tournaments or ballets where the women had leading roles.[78] Catherine viewed these pageants as a pragmatic French tradition: in a letter to Charles IX on his majority in which she repeatedly evoked the examples set by Louis XII and François I, Catherine outlined her views on the need to offer activities that would distract the restless nobility from aggressive behaviour. She reminded him that

> in times gone by, the garrisons of soldiers would be stationed in the provinces, where all the nobility of the area would exercise in running at the ring, or any other honest exercise, and other than when they served the security of the country, they restrained their desire to make trouble.[79]

Denis Crouzet has interpreted these pageants as part of Catherine's attempts to create a neo-Platonic harmony in a kingdom divided by the Wars of Religion.[80] Catherine, he argues, employed her entourage to

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[77] Lyndan Warner, *The Ideas of Man and Woman in Renaissance France: Print, Rhetoric, and Law* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 80.

[78] For studies of Catherine's pageants and spectacles see Kate van Orden, *Music, Discipline, and Arms in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Margaret M. McGowan, *Dance in the Renaissance: European Fashion, French Obsession* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), in particular 151–82; Frances Yates, *The Valois Tapestries* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975).

[79] ["au temps passé, les garnisons de gens d'armes étoient par les provinces, où toute la noblesse d'allentour s'exerçoit à courre la bague, ou tout autre exercice honneste; et outre que ils servoient pour la seureté du pays, ils contenoient leurs esprits de pis faire"]. Catherine de Medici to 'Au Roy Monsieur mon fils', 18 September 1563, in Catherine de Medici, *Lettres*, 2: 90–5.

[80] Crouzet, *Le haut coeur*.

represent the ideal state, and the spectacles and pageants that she devised operated simultaneously as political programme and spiritual education. While for the Queen Mother these functions served to present a vision of the kingdom as united, others were quick to denounce them as examples of reckless expenditure and depraved morality. Thus the Queen Mother's banquet at Chenonceaux on 15 May 1577, in celebration of her son the Duc d'Anjou's victory at the siege of Plessis-les-Tours, was sarcastically described by Pierre de L'Estoile as an occasion for debauchery: "At this lovely banquet, the most beautiful and charming women of the court were employed as serving-ladies, being half naked with their hair down loose like brides."[81] Although L'Estoile was not present at the function, and his description of the women as "half-naked" is vague enough to be ambiguous, this episode has been regularly recounted, with the noblewomen in her entourage specified as topless, to discredit Catherine's efforts at peacemaking as lewd excesses.[82] However, in her study of masquing at the English Jacobean court, Clare McManus discusses the tradition and courtly ideal of exposed (or only partially covered) female breasts within the performance as part of a discourse of eroticism that was intelligible only to a courtly audience:

> Defined by both gender and class, courtly women were required to conform to the demands of female chastity, while simultaneously displaying their bodies in a manner which would have brought condemnation upon the non-courtly.[83]

L'Estoile's criticism of the women's actions as debauchery therefore expose him as a non-elite, ignorant of what McManus calls the "shared European discourse of courtly dance" of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.[84]

It was during this later period of Catherine's life that criticisms of her household became most vociferous, thanks in large part to Henri III's courtly reforms. At the time of his accession, Henri III found himself with a household filled primarily with servants loyal to his mother.

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[81] ["En ce beau banquet, les dames les plus belles et honnêtes de la cour, étant à moitié nues et ayant leurs cheveux épars comme épousées, furent employées à faire le service"]. L'Estoile, *Registre-Journal*, 2: 112–13.

[82] See, for example, Ivan Cloulas, *Catherine de Médicis* (Paris: Fayard, 1979), 353–4.

[83] Clare McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage: Anna of Denmark and Female Masquing in the Stuart Court (1590–1619)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 127–31; 130.

[84] Ibid., 22.

While Catherine, anxious to create a politically moderate court, had formed a religiously heterogeneous household in which many of the established families of the aristocracy were represented, Henri had different ideas about patronage. He preferred what Nicolas Le Roux calls "a selective policy of grace as opposed to the generalised liberality of the Queen Mother".[85] This would lead to rewards of office being bestowed on a small number of his companions to the detriment of many of the leading families of the kingdom. His simultaneous introduction of formal measures designed to prevent access to the person of the monarch also provoked great resentment among leading nobles, many of whom left the court in protest. Much of the resentment expressed itself in attacks on Henri's *mignons*, whose increasingly flamboyant appearance was read as a sign of their effeminacy and/or homosexuality. L'Estoile's journal abounds with verses denouncing or ridiculing the *mignons*, especially their sexual activities, and many of the longer verses combine criticism of the men of his household with attacks on the women of Catherine's, such as the *Pasquil Courtizan* of December 1581 mentioned above.

Henri III's rejection of the itinerant traditions of the French court also had ramifications for his mother's household. The onus of travelling for the purposes of negotiation now fell to her, even in her advanced years. Even here, when she put herself at risk to travel long distances into hostile enemy territory to negotiate successfully with enemies of the crown, later historians denigrated Catherine's political skills. In his 1979 biography, Ivan Cloulas describes Catherine's negotiations for the 1576 Peace of Monsieur, a peace treaty that would bring to an end the fifth War of Religion in France:

> Tireless, the Queen Mother travelled to Sens to negotiate with the confederates. Faced with their army of twenty thousand men, Catherine manoeuvred by lining up the charms of a bevy of attractive ladies: Mme de Sauve; Mlles d'Estrées, de Brétèche; Mme de Kernevenoy, the mistress of Fervaques; Mme de Villequier, whose jealous husband would stab her the following year; Mme de Montpensier, the future Leaguer; and, Queen of Beauty, the gallant Queen of Navarre. Truly this was the flying squadron in its entirety. With these beautiful ladies, who served as a screen to severe negotiators, the Queen Mother's men of confidence, like Pomponne de Bellièvre, Catherine moved from abbey to château. With Alençon, Condé and Navarre

[85] Le Roux, *La faveur du roi*, 123.

> were exchanged councillors' precise memorandi at the same time as amorous glances.[86]

In Cloulas's version of this fraught but ultimately successful diplomacy, Catherine does not do any of the negotiating herself; that is left to the "severe [...] men of confidence". Rather, when faced with the physical might of twenty thousand men, her means of attack is a 'flying squadron' of beautiful ladies-in-waiting who act as a sexual distraction to the male enemies with whom she is dealing. Cloulas cites specific women along with evidence of other sexual scandal with which they were involved (Mme de Kernevenoy is listed as "the mistress of Fervaques"; Mme de Villequier, otherwise known as Françoise de La Marck, was the victim of the honour killing mentioned at the beginning of this chapter). It is true that Catherine regularly chose some of these women to accompany her on longer trips, but this was standard behaviour—for a royal to appear unaccompanied by his or her entourage would have been an unimaginable breach of protocol. These negotiations were also the perfect opportunity for Catherine to give her officers experience in the demands of political negotiation and the appropriate decorum in antagonistic conditions. Indeed, the 'gallant Queen of Navarre' was Catherine's own daughter, Marguerite de Valois and, as we have seen, 'Mme de Montpensier' was also known as '*La Boiteuse*' ('The Limper'). These were women chosen not for youth or beauty but because of their rank or personal relationship with the Queen Mother.

We can therefore see a development of the scandalous reputation of Catherine's ladies as her own political role and household evolved. As Catherine's political power increased, numbers of officers within her household grew, in keeping with traditions already set by former queens of France. The makeup of her retinue was varied in age, rank and experience, although she was keen to award more influential positions to experienced, moderate servants who were loyal to the crown. As her role towards her

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[86] ["Infatigable, la reine-mère se rendit à Sens pour négocier avec les confédérés. Face aux 20 000 hommes de leur armée, Catherine manoeuvra en alignant les grâces d'un parterre de dames attirantes, Mme de Sauve, Mlles d'Estrées, de Brétèche, Mme de Kernevenoy, la maîtresse de Fervaques, Mme de Villequier que son mari jaloux poignardera l'année suivante, Mme de Montpensier la future ligueuse et, reine de Beauté, la galante reine de Navarre. C'était bien cette fois l'escadron volant au complet. Avec ces belles dames, qui servent de paravent à des négociateurs sévères, hommes de confiance de la reine, comme Pomponne de Bellièvre, Catherine se déplace d'abbayes en châteaux. On échange avec Alençon, Condé et Navarre, les mémoires précis des conseillers en même temps que les oeillades amoureuses"]. Cloulas, *Catherine de Médicis*, 389.

ladies adapted depending on their age and status, so they served various functions for Catherine: some as political intermediaries and informers, some as companions, but all as a marker of prestige in her roles as Queen, Queen Mother or *gouvernante*. However, this female prominence was not entirely welcome: while Protestant polemical authors accused Catherine of exploiting her ladies to serve her own political ends, *parlementaires* frowned upon the increasingly visible role of the women supporting Catherine's ever-growing political status, and attacked them directly for having loose morals. Both strands of criticism were developed by later historians, who portrayed the women in her service as one of Catherine's arsenal of manipulative tools to sexually distract men who stood in the way of her overweening ambition. Contemporary satirical verses and libels that employed classical rhetorical traditions of misogyny to discredit powerful women were misinterpreted by later historians as literal descriptions of life at court.[87] While such depictions have provided enjoyably salacious fodder for historical novels and films, it is time to recognise them as literary fantasy and thus begin the rehabilitation of the collective reputation of the women of Catherine de Medici's court.

[87] Compare this sexualised depiction of female office holders with the portrayal of the women of Charles II's court; see Catharine MacLeod and Julia Marciari Alexander, eds., *Politics, Transgression, and Representation at the Court of Charles II* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2007).