Poison, Pregnancy, and Protestants: Gossip and Scandal at the Early Modern French Court

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Bruit: m. a rumour, common tale, publike voice, fame, reputation, report, the talke of people, the speech abroad (Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues*, 1611)

On 15 March 1565, the Italian informer Gaspar Barchino wrote to the Spanish ambassador to France relaying information about Huguenot proposals. The French Protestants wished to end the relationship that their leader, the Prince of Condé, was conducting with his mistress, Isabelle de Limeuil, a lady-in-waiting to the French Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici. If negotiations encouraging Condé to end the affair failed, claimed Barchino, the Huguenots felt 'che la Limolia si dovesse scomunicare, anatematizare et dare in potere di Satanasso' (that Limeuil ought to be excommunicated, cursed, and rendered to Satan's power).[1] This dramatic ultimatum, revealing both Huguenot des-

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[1] *Archivo Documental Español*, VII, *Negociaciones con Francia*, p. 186, Gaspar Barchino to Frances de Alava, 15 March 1565. The letter is also cited, with French translation, in Aumale, *Histoire des princes de Condé*, p. 553. The proposal is ambiguously worded, although were it to be taken literally it would imply a surprising amount of complicity between Huguenot leaders and the Papacy who, one assumes, would be responsible for excommunicating the Catholic Limeuil.

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peration and the international significance of the affair, forms only part of one of the most notorious scandals of sixteenth-century Europe. Two years previously, Limeuil had begun a relationship with the married Louis de Bourbon, first prince of Condé and leader of the French Protestant movement. The affair was tolerated at court until, in May 1564, Limeuil collapsed during a solemn audience in Dijon and shortly thereafter gave birth to a son. She was immediately taken from the court and imprisoned in the Franciscan convent at Auxonne. While contemporary observers criticized the severity of her punishment, they were unaware that Limeuil had been imprisoned because she had been accused not simply of sexual offences but also of attempting to poison the Prince de la Roche-sur-Yon. Her alleged motive was revenge: the elderly prince had delighted in informing Condé that the child Limeuil carried was probably not his, but more likely had been fathered by one of Catherine's secretaries of state, Florimond Robertet, seigneur de Fresnes. Yet, despite the widespread doubts about his paternity, Condé pursued Limeuil during her imprisonment and eventually helped her escape in the early months of 1565. The possibility that he might then relinquish his Protestant beliefs in order to marry the Catholic Limeuil was the stuff of gossip at courts across Europe, and was the catalyst for the Huguenot ultimatum quoted above.[2]

This is a particularly 'early modern' story: while adultery and illegitimate birth are still concerns for us today, cuckoldry, heresy, and poisoning would seem out of place in a modern-day scandal. Given the multiplicity of scandalous factors in this case, and the historical contingency of many of those factors, the story of Isabelle de Limeuil provides an illuminating study of how gossip and rumour could be expressed and controlled at the early modern court. Gossip is inherent to scandal, and particularly to accusations such as poisoning and cuckoldry which often rely on rumour rather than material evidence and are thus harder to refute.[3] This paper explores how nobles responded to such damaging allegations; it reveals the strategies they employed to defend their reputations against slander based on events both real, such as an illegitimate birth, and imagined, such as poi-

[2] The documents concerning Limeuil's story can be found in Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil'. The story is situated within its historical context in La Ferrière, *Trois amoureuses*. The case and its historiography is also discussed in Bayle, *The Dictionary*, III, 832–35: s.v. 'Limeuil'.

[3] For studies of gossip see Gluckman, 'Gossip and Scandal'; Horodowich, 'The Gossiping Tongue'; Wickham, 'Gossip and Resistance among the Medieval Peasantry'. A study that argues for the term 'talk' rather than the pejorative term 'gossip' is Fenster and Smail, eds, *Fama*. For studies of slander and seditious speech see Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*; Cressy, *Dangerous Talk*. For studies of rumour see Fine, Campion-Vincent, and Heath, eds, *Rumor Mills*; Neubauer, *The Rumour*.

soning. Controlling information is always key to managing a scandal. This essay demonstrates how Catherine de Medici's apparent management of information about the affair was effective at both the local and international level, preventing the revelation of the most shocking aspect of the case, and thereby permitting the rehabilitation of her lady-in-waiting after such a notorious scandal.

This might seem surprising, given Catherine's subsequent reputation as the 'wicked Italian queen' who was said to order her most beautiful ladies — known to later historians as her '*escadron volant*' (flying squadron) — to seduce politically significant noblemen for her own Machiavellian ends.[4] The scandal of Isabelle de Limeuil was a clear example, claimed Catherine's critics, of the 'flying squadron' in action, and the scandal has been portrayed until now as the inevitable result of a 'female' style of rule, in which sexual allure and duplicity are exploited for political gain. Catherine's superlative negotiating abilities, testified to by her contemporaries, would be depicted by later historians in this reductive way. She succeeded in March 1563, for example, in convincing Condé to sign the Peace of Amboise, thereby ending the first War of Religion. It was during these negotiations that the prince, brother of Antoine de Bourbon, King of Navarre, fell in love with the Catholic Limeuil, and quickly began to neglect both his wife, Eléonore de Roye, and his Protestant faith. The Huguenot poet and historian, Agrippa d'Aubigné, would later attribute Condé's lack of concern for the atrocities being visited on his Protestant countrymen directly to his affection for Limeuil: 'Si telles plaintes alloyent jusques au prince de Condé, les caresses de la roine et les amours de Limeuil employoyent tout son esprit'. (If such complaints managed to reach the prince of Condé, the queen's caresses and Limeuil's affections took up all his spirit.)[5]

Although the act of taking a mistress was not only acceptable but expected of noblemen in early modern France, the new reformed religion celebrated marital fidelity.[6] Rumours of Condé's behaviour travelled all the way to Geneva, attracting the attention of Calvin himself, who, along with Théodore de Bèze, his French counterpart, wrote Condé a letter in September 1563 urging the young prince to

[4] For a historiography of Catherine's negative reputation see Sutherland, 'Catherine de Medici'. For a historiography of the myth of the 'flying squadron' see McIlvenna, 'A Stable of Whores?'. There are few balanced studies of Catherine in English; recent scholarly French biographies include Garrisson, *Catherine de Médicis: l'impossible harmonie*; Crouzet, *Le Haut Coeur de Catherine de Médicis*; Wanegffelen, *Catherine de Médicis: le pouvoir au féminin*.

[5] Aubigné, *Histoire universelle*, II, 205. Aubigné, who was seven at the time of the events, wrote the *Histoire* in 1616–18, over fifty years later.

[6] Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France*, p. 237.

remember his role as moral example, and underlining the damage his conduct could cause to his reputation:

> Vous ne doubtez pas, Monseigneur, que nous n'aimions vostre honneur, comme nous désirons vostre salut. Or nous serions traistres en vous dissimulant les bruits qui courent. Nous n'estimons pas qu'il y ait du mal où Dieu soit directement offensé, mais quand on nous a dict que vous faites l'amour aux dames, cela est pour déroger beaucoup à vostre authorité et réputation. Les bonnes gens en seront offenséz, les malins en feront leur risée. Il y a la distraction qui vous empesche et retarde à vaquer à vostre devoir.
>
> (You do not doubt, my lord, that we esteem not your honour as much as we desire your salvation. Yet we would be traitors if we were to hide from you the rumours that are circulating. We do not believe that evil is being committed that would directly offend God, but when we are told that you are making love to women, such a claim will seriously damage your authority and reputation. Good people will be offended by it, the wicked will make you a laughing stock. There is distraction which impedes you and prevents you from attending to your duty.)[7]

Calvin was aware that *bruit*, or rumour, could be just as dangerous to the cause of reform as confirmed fact, and the court represented many of the material, earthly delights shunned by the new religion. Protestants were eager to depict the ladies of the French court as a debauched and dangerous group of sexually aggressive women, ready to relinquish their moral values at the behest of their ambitious female queen. Jeanne d'Albret, the Calvinist Queen of Navarre, would describe the French court in 1572 as a place where 'ce ne sont pas les hommes ici qui prient les femmes, ce sont les femmes qui prient les hommes' (it is not the men who invite the women here but the women who invite the men).[8] Limeuil's affair with Condé is thus usually described as part of Catherine's master plan to seduce the Protestant leader away from his political and religious leanings and closer to her own political goals. The vitriolic 1575 pamphlet *Discours merveilleux de la vie, actions et deportements de Catherine de Médicis, royne-mère* claimed that

> le Prince de Condé estoit dès lors amoureux de la damoiselle Limeuil, une de ses filles, qu'elle luy avoit baillée pour le debaucher, comme elle se servoit tousjours de fort honnestes moyens pour parvenir à ses desseins.

[7] *Lettres de Jean Calvin*, ed. by Bonnet, pp. 537–39, Jean Calvin and Théodore de Bèze to Louis de Bourbon, 17 September 1563.

[8] Castelnau, *Les Mémoires de Messire Michel de Castelnau*, ed. by Le Laboureur, I, 859, Jeanne d'Albret to Henri de Navarre.

> (the Prince of Condé was then in love with the young lady Limeuil, one of her girls, whom she had sent to debauch him, as she always would use very 'honest' means to succeed in her plots.)[9]

Eventually, Catholic writers would also begin to perpetuate the rumours that Catherine ordered her lady-in-waiting to begin a sexual relationship with Condé as a means of retaining him at court. In 1606, for example, the historian de Thou (approximately ten years old at the time of the events) wrote in his memoirs:

> Car la Reine s'étant apperçûë qu'il jettoit souvent les yeux sur une de ses filles d'honneur, qui étoit sa parente, elle conseilla à cette fille, pour pénétrer dans ses secrets, & pour l'enchaîner à la Cour, de répondre à son amour, & de ne rien omettre pour augmenter de plus en plus son ardente passion.
>
> (For the Queen having perceived that his gaze often fell on one of her maids of honour, who was her relative, she counselled this girl, in order to penetrate his secrets and to enchain him at Court, to respond to his love-making, and to omit nothing that could increase his ardent passion.)[10]

If Limeuil's behaviour was already viewed as controversial, it would reach a scandalous climax during the tour of France by Charles IX in 1564. Catherine de Medici decided that when her son reached fourteen, the age of maturity for a king, he should make a grand tour of his kingdom in order to greet his subjects first-hand. So for twenty-seven months, from 1564 to 1566, the entire court travelled across France.[11] Fresnes, Catherine's secretary of state, was assiduous at the court of his queen, and would nostalgically refer to this tour in his later letters to Limeuil:

> Il me souviendra, cependant, du malheureux lieu de Danetal et Fescamp, de Can et de la Chambrolle, lors de la pouvre dame qui n'en sçavoit rien: et diray bien heureux celuy qui en tous ses lieulx a receu tant de contentement.
>
> (I am reminded, however, of the unfortunate places of Danestal and Fescamps, of Caen and la Chambrolle, then of the poor lady who knew nothing about it: and I would call him very fortunate who in all those places received so much happiness.)[12]

[9] *Discours merveilleux de la vie*, ed. by Cazauran, p. 166.

[10] de Thou, *Histoire universelle*, ed. by le Mascrier, IV, 537.

[11] Boutier, Dewerpe, and Nordman, *Un tour de France royal*; Graham and Johnson, *The Royal Tour of France*.

[12] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', p. 63.

The places he refers to are the towns where the court stayed during its voyage through Normandy and Picardy in July and August 1563. The source of the 'happiness' Fresnes experienced in those places would become obvious when, nine months later, during the visit to Dijon in late May 1564, at 'une audience solennelle' (a solemn gathering) Limeuil became ill and was taken into the Queen's wardrobe, where she gave birth to a son.[13] She was shortly thereafter (between 22 and 29 May) taken from the court and imprisoned in the Franciscan convent in Auxonne, a few miles east of the court's location. The news of the scandalous circumstances of the birth in Dijon was disseminated on 9 July via a 'doctor of the Sorbonne' to his friend in Paris in the form of 'nouvelles en rime Prosaïques' (news in prosaic rhyme). The news, written entirely in octosyllabic Latin rhyming couplets, cast doubt on Catherine's ignorance of the affair and criticized the severity of her treatment:

Contra hoc tamen regina
Se ostendit tantum plena
Cholera, ac si nescisset
Hoc quod puella fecisset,
Et dedit illi custodes
Superbos nimis et rudes,
Mittens in monasterium
Quærere refrigerium.
Sed certe pro tam levi re
Sic non debebat tractare,
At excusare modicum
Tempus, personam et locum.
Aliis non sit taliter
Quæ faciunt similiter.

(Yet, faced with this, the Queen
Reveals herself to be so full
Of anger, and whether ignorant or not
Of that which the maid had done
She gives her to the guards
Too proud and rough;
She is thrown into a monastery
And seeks for consolation.
But surely for such a trivial affair,
She does not deserve such treatment

[13] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', p. 7.

Whereas it can be somewhat explained by
Time, personality and rank.
No one exists
Who would have acted differently.)[14]

Significantly, this gossip about scandalous events was transmitted via the means of verse, a genre that would necessitate the sacrifice of factual accuracy for the sake of metre and rhyme. It is important to note that both the writer and recipient of the verses were university-educated males, fluent in Latin, and that their status as intellectual elites in no way prevented them from trading in gossip and hearsay. While much of the verse related actual events — the birth and subsequent imprisonment in a convent — the writer was unaware of crucial details, and hence painted Catherine's punishment as draconian.

The Scandal of Illegitimate Births

But was this a 'trivial affair'? How damaging to one's reputation was an illegitimate birth at court? The memoirist Brantôme claimed that the commandment was clear for the ladies of Catherine's household: she demanded that 'elles eussent de la sagesse et de l'habileté et sçavoir, pour engarder l'enflure du ventre' (they had the wisdom, ability, and knowledge to prevent a swelling of the stomach).[15] If a lady-in-waiting was unlucky enough to become pregnant, all possible measures were to be undertaken to cover up the scandal. Catherine's daughter, Marguerite de Valois, Queen of Navarre, recounted the efforts to which she and other women of the court went in 1581 to disguise the illegitimate birth of a child to her own husband's mistress, Françoise de Montmorency-Fosseux, known as 'la belle Fosseuse':

> Je la feis promptement oster de la chambre des filles et la mis en une chambre escartée, avec mon medecin et des femmes pour la servir, et la feis tres-bien secourir...Estant delivrée, on la porta en la chambre des filles, où, bien que l'on apportast toute la discretion que l'on pouvoit, on ne peust empescher que ce bruict ne fust semé par tout le chasteau. Le Roy mon mary, estant revenu de la chasse, la va voir comme il avoit accoustumé. Elle le prie de faire que je l'allasse voir, comme j'avois accoustumé d'aller voir toutes mes filles, quand elles estoient malades, pensant par ce moyen oster le bruict qui couroit.

[14] Castelnau, *Les Mémoires de Messire Michel de Castelnau*, ed. by Le Laboureur, II, 371.

[15] Brantôme, *Recueil des dames*, ed. by Vaucheret, p. 64. Brantôme's comments, however, must always be considered in the context of his intended male-only audience; see LaGuardia, *Intertextual Masculinity*, pp. 181–85.

> (I had her promptly taken from the girls' bedroom and put in a separate room, with my doctor and some women to serve her, and had her very well taken care of [...] Once she had been delivered, she was taken into the girls' room where, although it had been carried out with all the discretion possible, it was unavoidable that the news would spread throughout the château. The King my husband, having returned from hunting, went to see her as was his custom. She beseeched him to make me go to see her, as I was accustomed to doing whenever any of my girls were sick, hoping by this method to put an end to the gossip that was circulating.)[16]

Marguerite's comments make it clear how many people would have had access to information about this birth, including servants and medical professionals. News travelled within the royal household but could be modified by the behaviour of the most senior (in this case) female member. If the Queen acted in such a way as to suggest illness rather than pregnancy, there would be few who would contradict this interpretation to her face. Thus, it is not surprising to find that when, in 1557, Catherine's lady-in-waiting Françoise de Rohan was discovered to be in the late stages of pregnancy with the Duke of Nemours's child, Catherine immediately returned her to her family home in Brittany to give birth.[17] Like Limeuil, however, some women chose to hide the pregnancy and carry on as if nothing had happened. La Ferrière claims that 'pareil malheur était arrivé à mademoiselle de Vitry; mais, accouchée le matin, elle avait eu la force et le courage de se traîner au bal donné au Louvre' (the same misfortune had occurred to Mademoiselle de Vitry, but having given birth in the morning, she had had the strength and the courage to drag herself to the ball being given in the Louvre).[18] In all these cases, it would appear that decorum was the most significant aspect; preventing the gossip of others by creating a façade — however transparent — of seemly behaviour was more important than the reality of an illegitimate conception. Limeuil's very public delivery shattered the secrecy of her pregnancy and with it, her reputation.

Moreover, she found herself imprisoned within days of giving birth. At the time courtiers were critical of Limeuil's treatment on the grounds of what they perceived as Catherine's hypocrisy. The 1564 Latin verse quoted above reveals that public rumour ('*dicunt*') painted Catherine as the instigator of the relationship as part of her plan to keep Condé on her side:

[16] *Mémoires et lettres de Marguerite de Valois*, ed. by Guessard, pp. 177–79.

[17] McIlvenna, 'Word versus Honor'.

[18] La Ferrière, *Trois amoureuses au XVI^e siècle*, p. 86. Louise de l'Hospital, damoiselle de Vitry, a *dame d'honneur* to Catherine de Medici, and wife of Jean de Symier, master of the wardrobe for the duc d'Anjou.

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.

(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.)[19]

Depicting Catherine as Lucina, the Roman goddess of childbirth, the author credits her with overseeing the whole affair for her own ends. Brantôme related how Limeuil was 'renvoyée hors de la troupe par sa maistresse, qu'on disoit pourtant que sadite maistresse luy avoyt commandé d'obéir aux volluntez dudit prince; car ell'avoit affaire de luy et le gaigner' (sent away from the troop by her mistress who, it was said however, had commanded her to obey the will of the said prince, because she had some business with him and needed to win him over).[20] In Brantôme's description of events we again see how rumour ('it was said') was crucial to the development of the myth of the 'flying squadron': Limeuil was portrayed as a sexual pawn in the service of her queen, sacrificed by her mistress when she contravened the 'rules'.

The Scandal of Poisoning

But those who criticized her imprisonment were remarkably ignorant of the true circumstances. Not only had Limeuil allowed herself to become pregnant, but an accusation had also been levelled at her that she had threatened to poison Charles de Bourbon, Prince de la Roche-sur-Yon, an elderly Prince of the Blood.[21]

[19] Castelnau, *Les Mémoires de Messire Michel de Castenau*, ed. by Le Laboureur, II, 371.

[20] Brantôme, *Recueil des dames*, ed. by Vaucheret, p. 468.

[21] A short biography of la Roche-sur-Yon is given in Brantôme, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Lalanne, V, 26–29.

Her accuser was Charles-Robert de La Marck, comte de Maulevrier. In the presence of two leading bishops, Maulevrier gave two depositions, the first on 25 May 1564.[22] He claimed that Limeuil had, on several occasions, offered to help him poison la Roche-sur-Yon, against whom he had a longstanding grudge.[23] Limeuil had attempted to ally with him against la Roche-sur-Yon, he alleged, because of her own ill-treatment by the prince. The prince's wife, Philippes de Montespedon, was Catherine's close friend and *dame d'honneur*, a role which required her to oversee discipline within the royal household. La Roche-sur-Yon was evidently pressuring his wife to control the younger ladies at court. In her deposition, Limeuil admitted to feeling singled out for criticism from the couple:

> La dite princess, à la sussitation dudit sieur prince son mari, oultre les peines quelle donnoit à toutes les filles de la Royne, sembloit en vouloir à elle plus particulièrement et recherchoit de vérifier quelle fut grosse, la faisant souvent tourmenter par la Royne sur ce faict et aultres.
>
> (The said princess, at the behest of the said prince her husband, aside from the pains that she gave to all the maids of the Queen, seemed to have a particular animosity towards her [Limeuil] and tried to verify whether she was pregnant, often tormenting her in front of the Queen on this matter and others.)[24]

In the same deposition Limeuil claimed the Prince had boasted to her lover of his efforts at discipline. She claimed he had

> entreprins faire tout le pis qu'il pourroit aux filles de la Royne, comme il l'a bien dict luy mesme à monsieur le prince de Condé, et qu'il vouloit poursuivre la refformation: luy demandant sy en foy, en conscience, il vouldroit que l'on vesquist en sa maison de la sorte qu'on faysoit chez la Royne?
>
> (undertaken to do the worst that he could to the Queen's maids, as he said himself to monsieur the Prince of Condé, saying that he wanted to pursue a reformation; asking him whether in faith and conscience he wished that one lived in his house in the manner one did in the Queen's household?)[25]

[22] This preliminary investigation of both parties, conducted in secret, was known as an *apprise*. Since no further legal action was taken against Limeuil, it can be assumed that the bishops and/or Catherine deemed the accusations baseless. See Akehurst, 'Good Name, Reputation and Notoriety', pp. 83, 87.

[23] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', p. 11.

[24] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', p. 34.

[25] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', pp. 34–35.

One can only speculate as to how accurate was the Prince's depiction of the court, but Limeuil's deposition reveals that it was certainly a site of conflict over morality, and of acrimonious rivalry among courtiers. Maulevrier felt it was acrimonious enough to incite Limeuil to thoughts of murder. In his deposition, he quoted her as saying 'il ne luy failloyt qu'ung bon repas' (all he [the Prince] needs is one good meal)[26] and said that she 'prist en sa bourse certaine pouldre blanche, laquelle estoyt dedans ung papier, et luy en bailla une partye dedans ung petit morceau de papier' (took from her purse a certain white powder, which was inside some paper, and gave him part of it in a little piece of paper).[27] He then claimed that Limeuil threatened him that 'il se trouvast mort en quelque coing de rue' (he would be found dead on a street corner) if he were to divulge any of the plot.[28]

In her dissertation on poisoning in early modern France, Silje Normand reveals the ubiquity of accusations of poisoning in the period, calling it a 'poison epidemic' that reached a frenzy in the Affaire des Poisons (1679–82) which saw forty-four people executed, 218 people imprisoned for life, and Louis XIV's mistress, Mme de Montespan, accused along with many other aristocratic women.[29] Poisoning is a crime that has longstanding associations with women, for reasons both physical and social.[30] Its secretive nature, goes the theory, suits women, who are not only naturally duplicitous but furthermore cannot rely on physical strength to overcome others, such as in armed conflict. Moreover, women's traditional domestic status enables such secrecy: with access to the food her loved ones eat, and the medicines they take, a woman is seen to be in the perfect position to carry out such a crime. In his 1584 study of witchcraft, Reginald Scot claimed that 'women were the first inventors and the greatest practisers of poisoning and more naturallie addicted and given thereunto than men'.[31] Such a belief in the 'natural' disposition of women to the use of poisoning has encouraged the literary trope of woman as poisoner, from Circe and Medea onwards; moreover, poison histories, Normand reminds us, abound with examples of notorious female poisoners, including the French queens, Frédégonde and Brunehaut.[32] Cosmetics in the early modern period, already a site of anxiety around a woman's duplicitous ability to transform or mask herself with 'false' col-

[26] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', p. 14.

[27] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', p. 18.

[28] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', pp. 14–15.

[29] Normand, 'Perceptions of Poison', p. 7. Mollenauer, *Strange Revelations*.

[30] Hallissy, *Venomous Woman*.

[31] Scot, *The discoverie of witchcraft*, I, chap. 3, p. 67.

[32] Normand, 'Perceptions of Poison', p. 139.

ours, were themselves often made of potentially poisonous materials.[33] Even menstruation was believed to make women venomous, causing noxious fumes to emanate from their eyes and mouths.[34] In much the same way that Cynthia Herrup has recognized 'the social utility of sodomy as an accusation' against men in this period, because of its potency as an 'organizing principle for other fears', so poisoning can be said to operate as a means of distilling fears about women into one single felony.[35]

If being a woman in the early modern period meant that one was more likely to be accused of poisoning, being foreign meant that the suspicion was doubled. The countless treatises on poisoning in the period regularly depicted venoms as bodily invaders that encroached upon a territory that was not their own.[36] This same language was also used in early modern France towards foreigners and, in particular, towards Italians. Rampant xenophobia in France in the sixteenth century vilified Italian immigrants as sly and cowardly, stopping at nothing to usurp power from its rightful owner.[37] Limeuil's mistress, Catherine de Medici, was female, Italian, and regent, and therefore alleged to be usurping male power via her immature sons, with poisoning as her preferred method of despatching enemies. 'According to popular rumour', Normand tells us, 'poison first made its way to France through Catherine de Medici's Italian entourage, which contained perfumers thoroughly versed in the art of poisoning, and courtiers more than willing to use it'.[38] Eventually, Catherine's name would become synonymous with poison. She was given the nickname 'Madame la Serpente' and vicious libels circulated linking her family name with venomous qualities.[39]

Although much of Catherine's negative reputation was developed much later by Huguenot polemicists, it is true that several of her ladies suffered unsubstantiated accusations of poisoning.[40] That Maulevrier provided no material evidence, nor an actual victim of poisoning, was unimportant: the accusation had weight because it was directed at one whose reputation (due to her illegitimate pregnancy) was already vulnerable. In his cultural history of rumour, Hans-Joachim Neubauer

[33] Philippy, *Painting Women*.

[34] Normand, 'Perceptions of Poison', pp. 142–45.

[35] Herrup, *A House in Gross Disorder*, p. 37.

[36] For a discussion of early modern French poison treatises, see Normand, 'Venomous Words'.

[37] Dubost, *La France italienne*; Heller, *Anti-Italianism in Sixteenth-Century France*.

[38] Normand, 'Venomous Words', p. 123.

[39] L'Estoile, *Registre-Journal*, ed. by Lazard and Schrenk, IV, 71.

[40] For the accusations against Françoise de La Marck and Charlotte-Catherine de La Trémoille see McIlvenna, 'Considering the "Cabal of Cuckoldry"', pp. 9, 113–14.

reminds us that 'rumours are not lies; in fact they are stirred up when knowledge and conditions combine'.[41] The rumours about Limeuil's potentially damaged honour would make the allegation of her secretive plotting more believable. In addition to its debilitating effects on the reputation of the accused, the poisoning accusation also had a practical use. 'The early modern poison metaphor', says Normand, 'much like modern metaphors of pollution and disease, was used as a means of branding and exclusion'.[42] Limeuil's refusal to conform to the moral code, by conducting a relationship with a controversial political figure, becoming pregnant, and then giving birth in such a public manner, created anxiety at court, where the appearance of decorum was of paramount importance. Limeuil was identified as a disorderly subject, and an accusation of poisoning — with its suspiciously coincidental timing — was an effective means of removing her from the household.

Intelligence and Information

At Auxonne, Limeuil was placed in the Franciscan convent under the guard of Claude de Saulx, seigneur de Ventoux et de Torpes, the King's lieutenant and local governor. Despite her distressed emotional state, as testified to by de Saulx, Limeuil was energetic in her own defence. While she admitted in her interrogation to animosity between herself and the Prince de la Roche-sur-Yon, she strongly denied any involvement in a plot to poison him. She claimed 'n'avoir jamais eu ni veu telles drogues, et souvent avoir désiré veoir du sublimé ou du blanc d'Espaigne, parce qu'elle oyoit dire qu'il y en avoit qui s'en fardoient' (never to have had nor seen such drugs, and often had desired to see some *sublimé* or Spanish white, because she had heard that there were those who used it for make-up), demonstrating her knowledge of the links between early modern cosmetics and poison.[43] After establishing her own innocence, Limeuil then went on the offensive, turning the focus of the deposition onto the Count's reputation. Had she wanted to poison someone, she said, the Count would have been the last person she would have confided in, since he 'estoit notoirement tenu d'un chascun pour un fol et un yvroigne' (was notoriously thought of by everyone as a madman and a drunk).[44] Whether she was aware of it or not, Limeuil's response accorded with the legal doctrines of '*fama*' and '*infamia*': she initially established

[41] Neubauer, *The Rumour*, trans. by Braun, p. 4.

[42] Normand, 'Perceptions of Poison', p. 21.

[43] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', p. 37.

[44] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', p. 47.

her own honour, reputation and trustworthiness, and then attacked those of her detractor.[45] Both in Roman law and in customary law (both of which operated in sixteenth-century France), individuals marked with the condition of '*infamia*', due to their behaviour and reputation, were prevented from testifying in court.[46] Limeuil's attack on Maulevrier's mental capacity and fondness for alcohol — in particular her use of the term '*notoirement*', meaning well-known or notorious — referred to the public knowledge, or *fama*, of Maulevrier's behaviour and was a shrewd means of rendering his testimony redundant and inadmissible.[47]

Meanwhile, Limeuil appears to have been aware that the most effective means of combating scurrilous rumours was to proactively disseminate verifiable intelligence. Indeed, her letters and those of her guardian, de Saulx, reveal a remarkable amount of agency on her part even when imprisoned and excluded from court. De Saulx's letters to the Queen Mother show that he was obeying her order to make copies of all letters both written and received by Limeuil. Nevertheless, de Saulx felt that Limeuil was capable of bypassing these measures by exploiting the sympathies of allies on both sides of the confessional divide:

> Je ne crains que une chose quest que, en la religion où elle est, les murailles y sont en d'aulcungs endroits fort basses, et qu'ayant gaigné toutes les Cordelières, ce quelle a faict, elle ne jecte des lettres pardessus ladite muraille ou que l'on luy en jette; [...] Ou bien que l'on luy donne la nuict quelqu'eschelle pour eschapper pardessus lesdites murailles, et après la receller en quelque maison de huguenot en ceste ville: je ne le dis pas sans cause, parce que j'en ay esté adverty par de mes soldars, que ledit basque a parlé à deux ou trois des plus apparans huguenots de ceste dite ville.
>
> (I fear only one thing which is, given her religion, the walls are here in several places very low, and having won over all the Franciscans, as she has done, she will just throw the letters over the said wall or that they will be thrown over to her; [...] Or even that one night someone will throw her some kind of ladder to escape over the said walls, and afterwards hide her in the house of some Huguenot of this town: I do not say this without cause, because I was warned about it by my soldiers, that

[45] Edgerton, *Pictures and Punishment*, p. 60.

[46] Bowman, 'Infamy and Proof in Medieval Spain', p. 96; Akehurst, 'Good Name, Reputation and Notoriety', pp. 76–77, 83–85; Greenidge, *Infamia*, pp. 18–40. For a discussion of the complex legal systems operating concurrently in sixteenth-century France see Baumgartner, *France in the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 83–96.

[47] For a discussion of the nuanced differences of the term '*notoire*' in Roman, canon, and customary law in France see Akehurst, 'Good Name, Reputation and Notoriety', p. 85.

> the said basque [Condé's servant] spoke to two or three of the most prominent Huguenots of this said town.)[48]

Limeuil had, through force of personality, provoked sympathy among the Catholic nuns who were, ironically, allowing her to exploit the poor defences of the convent to communicate with Condé's Huguenot allies. Her intelligencing activities did not stop there: even as Limeuil was moved around from Auxonne to Mâcon, Lyon, and Vienne — all towns situated along the Rhône — as the court moved around the south-east on its tour of the country, she kept Condé informed with crucial details that would help him to find her and help her escape:

> Je vous escrips séte létre estant sur le chemin de Mâcon: mès delà je ne say où l'on me mennera. Mon conducteur est un valet de chambre de la Reyne nommé Gentil; vous le congnoysés byen.
>
> (I am writing this letter to you while en route to Mâcon: but from there I do not know where they will take me. My driver is a valet of the Queen's chamber called Gentil; you know him well.)[49]

She also regularly petitioned Condé to mobilize influential nobility on her behalf, asking him to write not only to the Queen Mother, but also to the Maréchal de Bourdillon, Imbert de la Platière, and the Duchess of Savoy, Marguerite de France, who had come to Lyon to visit her nephew, the King.[50] Limeuil's actions demonstrate both a remarkable knowledge of the visitors to court — information probably gleaned from the bearers of the numerous letters — and initiative in exploiting her ties to such prestigious members of the nobility who could plead her case with the Queen Mother.

Gossip and Cuckoldry

Limeuil's ability to send and receive factual and reliable intelligence even while imprisoned stands in contrast to Condé's regular complaints to her of his ignorance of her whereabouts and of his suffering due to slanderous gossip. Back at court, Fresnes was evidently exploiting his privileged position as secretary of state to taunt Condé with his access to sensitive information:

[48] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', p. 78.

[49] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', p. 92.

[50] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', pp. 92, 94–95.

> Monsieur du Fresne me mande prou souvant que luy etcryvés de voz nouvelles, mès moy je n'an puys savoir où vous estes menée. Je m'étonne fort, puys cavés le moien d'écryre à quelque ungs, que ne puys resevoyr de mesme de vos lestre, car vous savés quy n'y a home au monde quy tant sait faché de vos pènes que moy.
>
> (Monsieur du Fresne tells me very often that you write to him of your news, but I am unable to find out where you have been sent. I find it very surprising, since you have the means to write to certain people, that I am unable to receive your letters also, for you know that there is not a man in the world who is as aggrieved at your pains as I.)[51]

Condé's letters to Limeuil reveal his jealousy of Fresnes's relationship with her, particularly because it threatened him with the abhorrent label of cuckold, the most shaming of labels for a man in the early modern period. His resentment of Fresnes was a longstanding one; Brantôme related an anecdote in which Fresnes, in the presence of Condé, mocked a courtier for only having had sexual intercourse five times on his wedding night: 'Par Dieu! j'en ay pris une douzaine en vingt-quatre heures sur la plus belle motte qui soit icy à l'entour, ny qui soit possible en France'. (My God! I had a dozen rides in twenty-four hours on the most beautiful mount that could be found here, or anywhere else in France.) The lord (Condé) was dismayed, claimed Brantôme,

> car par là il apprit ce dont il se doutoit il y avoit longtemps; et d'autant qu'il estoit fort amoureux de cette princesse, fut fort mary de ce qu'il avoit si longuement chassé en cet endroit et n'avoit jamais rien pris, et l'autre avoit esté si heureux en rencontre et en sa prise.
>
> (because with that he learned what he had feared for a long time; and given how much in love he was with this princess, he was really angry for what he had chased for such a long time in this way without ever taking anything, and the other had been so happy in his hunt and in his taking.)[52]

That Fresnes's claims of sexual performance seem hyperbolic and, therefore, doubtful did not appear to be an issue for either Brantôme or Condé. Male reputation in the early modern period was based on claims of virility, however much those claims were falsified. David LaGuardia argues that early modern men 'seem to have been obligated to recount, to give an account of, or simply to *count*

[51] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', pp. 65–66.

[52] Brantôme, *Recueil des dames*, ed. by Vaucheret, p. 643.

the myriad faces and facets of their (often phantasmic) relations with women'.[53] Cuckoldry anxiety, ubiquitous in the period, was a fear rooted in the homosocial male activity of boasting of one's sexual exploits, whether factual or fantastical.[54] As an activity that relied entirely on hearsay (at least on sexual matters), male-only gossip was thus competitive and damaging by its very nature, deliberately attempting to create jealousy in the listener.

Condé did not hide his fear of having been deceived from Limeuil: 'Car je vous asurre, mon ceur, quy m'annuyrés bien grandemant que l'on pût prendre seur voz acsions seuget de dire: "A quy èt sait enfant?" Come, sy deux y avèt passé'. (For I assure you, my love, that it annoys me greatly that one can find in your actions to say: 'To whom belongs this child?', as if two persons had been there).[55] Condé (perhaps disingenuously) claimed ignorance of a matter that was clearly common knowledge at court. The Prince de la Roche-sur-Yon's earlier comments, that Condé 'estoit bien trompé s'il pensoit que si elle estoit grosse, ce fust de luy, et qu'aucunls n'y eussent part' (was well fooled if he thought that if she were pregnant it was by him, and that no one else had had a part in it) would have added to Condé's fear of being reputed as a cuckold.[56] The public nature of the birth, however, would catapult those rumours from within the palace walls to the wider public arena. Condé's cuckolded state was also alluded to in the Latin news verses sent to Paris, which punned on the word '*secretis*' to refer to Fresnes's position as secretary of state:

> At multi dicunt quod pater
> Non est princeps, sed est alter
> Qui regis est à secretis,
> Omnibus est notus satis.
>
> (But many say that the father
> Is not the prince, but is another
> Who to the King is secret;
> All is sufficiently known.)[57]

[53] LaGuardia, *Intertextual Masculinity in French Renaissance Literature*, p. 184.

[54] For discussions of early modern cuckoldry anxiety see LaGuardia, *Intertextual Masculinity in French Renaissance Literature*; Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England*; Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*; Kahn, *Man's Estate*, in particular her chapter '"The Savage Yoke"'.

[55] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', pp. 69–70.

[56] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil', p. 32.

[57] Castlenau, *Les Mémoires de Messire Michel de Castelnau*, ed. by Le Laboureur, II, 371.

Here the use of 'many say' alludes to the very public knowledge of Condé's cuckolding by a man of lower rank, and the verse's author appears to delight in this public shaming of such a high-profile figure.

International Scandal

The scandal would continue to grow on an international scale; in a despatch on 11 April 1565 from France to the English court, it was claimed that 'The Prince of Condé has by a certain gentleman stolen Mademoiselle de Lymoel from Tournon, where she was kept, and has her with him'.[58] Similarly, Gaspar Barchino's dispatch of 15 March 1565 to the Spanish ambassador Alava, quoted at the beginning of this essay, related how Condé had recently received a letter which ended with the words 'La demoiselle est arrivée' (the lady has arrived) and how he ordered that she be brought to him.[59] If these two dispatches are to be believed, Limeuil escaped from prison at some point around March 1565, ten months after her arrest. The 'Limeuil affair' was a considerable matter on the European political scene; the leader of the Huguenots was seen to be wavering in his devotion to his faith because of his love for her, putting the entire cause of the French Reformation in jeopardy. When Calvin wrote to Condé back in September 1563 to warn him of 'distractions', Condé was still married to the staunchly Protestant Eléonore de Roye, but after her death in July 1564 he was free to marry a woman from either religion. Barchino was clearly delighted at the prospect of Condé's defection to Catholicism and discussed how the Spanish could capitalize on what he saw as Condé's 'weakness' for women by offering him 'una moglie bella, ricca et honorata, come la sorella di Monsr. di Ghisa' (a beautiful, rich and honoured woman like Monsieur de Guise's sister [Catherine-Marie de Lorraine]).[60] Intriguingly, the letter reveals that although Catholics felt that providing Condé with a suitable woman was key to retaining his religious loyalty, the Catholic Limeuil was explicitly not a candidate. Meanwhile, as we have seen, the Huguenots were prepared to have her portrayed as under 'Satan's power'. The letter demonstrates just how far her reputation had fallen in less than a year. Barchino then discussed Catherine's role in the matter:

[58] *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign Series*, ed. by Stevenson and others, VII, 331, 11 April 1565.

[59] *Archivo Documental Español*, VII, *Negociaciones con Francia*, p. 186.

[60] *Archivo Documental Español*, VII, *Negociaciones con Francia*, p. 189.

> I catolici dicono che, per impedire il matrimonio di Condé con la nepote del cardinale di Lorena, si serve del mezo de la Limolia. Gl'ugonoti dicono che per il costei mezo vuole inescare Condé et farlo tornare papista, come fu fatto di Vandomo impazzito per li amori di Roet; jo non m'accordo col parere di questi, ne di quelli, anzi penso, se pur ha parte nel negotio de la Limolia, che sia per volere fare tutto suo Condé, et che non dipenda d'alcun altro che da lei.
>
> (The Catholics say that she uses Limeuil to impede Condé's marriage to the niece of the Cardinal of Lorraine. The Protestants say that by the same means she wants to tempt Condé and turn him into a papist, like was done to Vendôme [Condé's brother, Antoine de Navarre] stricken with love for la Rouet [Louise de La Beraudière, who had his child]. I am not of the opinion either of the one or the other, but I think that, if however she has a part in the Limeuil affair, it is to attract Condé to her own party and so that he depends on no one but her.)[61]

Barchino's comments once again reveal that communication between elite men, in this case ambassadorial intelligence, could be nothing more than scurrilous rumour and unsubstantiated claims. The comments make it clear that contemporaries on both sides of the religious divide believed that Catherine was prepared to sacrifice the honour and reputation of her ladies-in-waiting to further her own political goals. As it was, Condé would crush Catholic hopes and cement his status as Huguenot leader by his marriage to Françoise d'Orléans, Duchesse de Longueville, daughter of the staunchly Protestant Rohan-Orléans family, on 8 November 1565. Thus Limeuil found herself without a partner, exiled from court, and with her reputation tarnished by an illegitimate birth and a stay in prison.

Management of Rumour

Limeuil's scandalous story of cuckoldry, illegitimate birth, and imprisonment would go on to be recounted in almost every history of the Valois court; however, no historian mentioned the poisoning accusation until 1863, when a dossier belonging to L'Aubespine, one of the interrogating bishops, was transcribed and published.[62] According to that dossier, the final meeting with the bishops was a confrontation between Limeuil and Maulevrier on 18 July 1564, in which both parties stood by their original assertions. No further action was taken against either party; however, Limeuil remained in prison for a further eight months, all

[61] *Archivo Documental Español*, VII, *Negociaciones con Francia*, p. 189.

[62] Aumale, 'Information contre Isabelle de Limeuil'. This obscure publication, in a journal for nineteenth-century bibliophiles, has remained unknown to many historians of the Valois court.

the while being moved to locations close to the itinerant court where de Saulx's letters show that Catherine was keeping her under observation. It would appear that Catherine suppressed the information within the dossier, thereby keeping the accusation of poisoning a secret. Even Fresnes, in his privileged position as Catherine's secretary, seems to have been unaware of the poisoning accusation against Limeuil, never mentioning it in his letters to her. Such behaviour would indicate that an accusation of poisoning was potentially more damaging to one's reputation than an illegitimate birth. Catherine's decision to keep Limeuil imprisoned appears to show that, rather than — or as well as — punishing her, Catherine was trying to safeguard Limeuil's reputation by removing her from the gossip-fuelled environment of the court, while allowing her contemporaries to assume that the red herring of illegitimate birth, rather than poison, was the cause of her disgrace.

That the case against Limeuil was not taken any further seems to indicate that Catherine believed the accusations of poisoning to be without substance, but was aware of the links, both metaphorical and literal, between rumour and poison in early modern France. In the same way that venom was thought to invisibly attack a healthy body, causing it to rot from inside, slanderous rumours and gossip were often portrayed as poisons that infiltrated society to critically injure a person's reputation. In his 1690 *Dictionnaire universel*, Antoine Furetière defined '*venom*' in its figurative sense as 'des discours de medisance, des haines qu'on garde dans le coeur, qui sont causes qu'on fait à son ennemy tout le mal qu'on luy peut faire' (speeches of slander, of the hatred one keeps in one's heart, which would cause one to hurt one's enemy as much as possible).[63] When it comes to the term '*bruit*', the illustrative example given by Furetière speaks volumes about the supposed links between gossip and poison: 'La Chambre establie contre les empoisonneurs a fait grand bruit, grand éclat dans la France' (The Chamber established to try the poisoners [the *Chambre Ardente* of the Affaire des Poisons] was much talked about, made a big impact in France).[64] Aware of the destructive power of the poison accusation, Catherine successfully suppressed the venomous denunciation of her lady-in-waiting and let the *bruit* of the scandalous pregnancy circulate instead.

'Poison', as Normand reminds us, 'was associated with displacement — its perpetrators were often those who simply did not belong'.[65] If the accusation of poisoning had been an attempt to exclude Limeuil because of the threat her behav-

[63] Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, s.v. 'venim'.

[64] Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, s.v. 'bruit'.

[65] Normand, 'Perceptions of Poison', pp. 167–68.

iour presented to the status quo, it was Catherine's responsibility as her guardian to limit the damage to the reputation of her *fille damoiselle* by removing her until the controversial relationship with Condé had run its course. Having achieved that, she invited Limeuil to return to court two years later, paving the way for her wedding, on 20 January 1569, less than four years after she was released from prison, to the wealthy Italian financier Scipion Sardini, with whom she would go on to have five children. The widely held theory, therefore, that Catherine manipulated Limeuil for her own political ends and then cruelly abandoned her because of her failure to keep Condé on the side of the crown is unfounded. Instead, the evidence shows her to have been concerned about the reputation of her household; she was discreet when scandal broke, and proactive when it came to rehabilitating someone's honour. What has been described for centuries as an abuse of monarchical power can be interpreted instead as effective housekeeping.

Early modern stereotypes of women as frail, irrational, and prone to gossip are belied by the examination of Limeuil's case, in which the men involved appear to favour rumour and gossip over the transmission of factual and reliable information. While the men in this case sent each other verse that only told half the story, and boasted to each other of fictitious sexual exploits, Limeuil befriended information-bearers from both religions, who relayed vital intelligence both to and from her cell. Meanwhile, Catherine controlled the flow of information about Limeuil, concealing it from even her most trusted secretaries in order to protect her lady's reputation. If we can argue in this case for a 'gendering' of information management, we also witness a gendering of accusations; while poisoning was seen as a particularly 'female' crime, the shaming epithet of 'cuckold' was a damaging attack on a man's reputation. That both could be based purely on scurrilous rumour highlights the arbitrary and fraught nature of creating and defending personal honour and reputation in the early modern period. But not only personal honour was at stake in this case. If Condé had abandoned the Protestant cause to wed the Catholic Limeuil, the ramifications for French Protestantism — and European history — would have been enormous. One can only speculate about whether the taunting of Condé about cuckoldry was a significant factor in his decision to relinquish Limeuil, but were it so, it would demonstrate the power of gossip and rumour on a long-term, international scale. The traditional view of gossip as petty and trivial, concerned 'only' with details of interpersonal relationships, therefore needs re-evaluation, especially when those relationships are between politically influential actors.

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