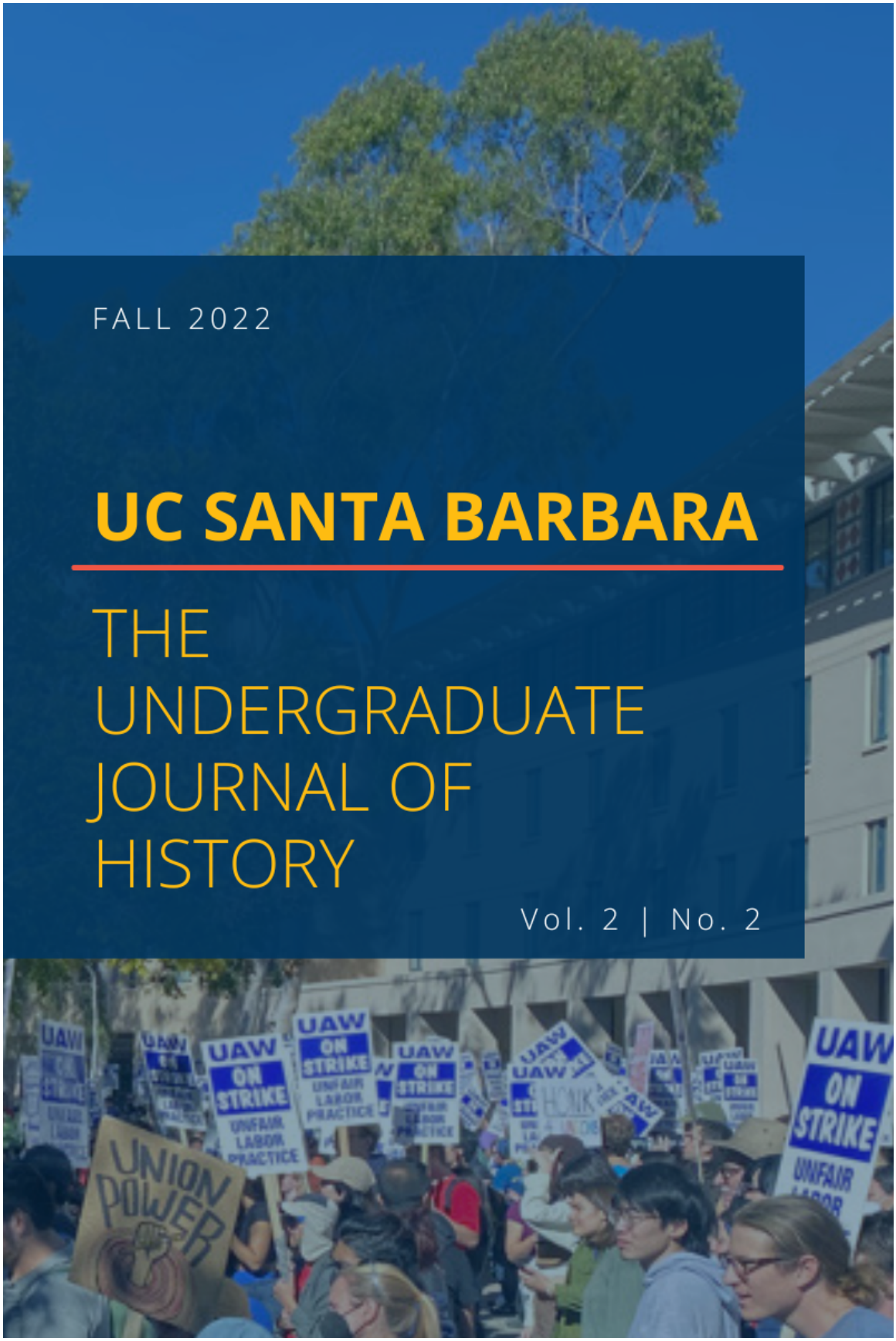

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UAW Strike, West Campus Picket, day one, UC Santa Barbara.
Credit: Jarett Henderson

Catherine de' Medici: Unfurling a Legacy

Claire Cinnamon[1]

In 1561, two Venetian ambassadors to the French court wrote opinionated letters regarding the state of France and its rulers, where religious tensions were extremely high. Despite their diplomatic purpose, similar time frame, and shared audience of the Venetian Doge and Senate,[2] the two letters portrayed their protagonist, Catherine de' Medici, in an almost paradoxical fashion. Catherine de' Medici, queen regent for her son Charles IX at the time, played perhaps the most significant political role in the French court. Gaining an understanding of her character and intentions was of the utmost importance. The first ambassador, Giovanni Michiel, took a highly admiring view of Catherine. He portrayed Catherine as courageous, reconciling, and clever. Michiel claimed she could handle state affairs and credited her Medici background for her political intelligence. He frequently compared Catherine and her absolute power to that of a king. Michiel stated of Catherine, "she knows how to treat everyone, and particularly the nobility, by whom she has always been loved and revered."[3]

Conversely, Ambassador Michele Suriano wrote that Catherine was cowardly and lacked authority. Suriano also cited Catherine's Medici ancestry, but in this case, as a fatal flaw, leaving her unworthy of the French kingdom. He claimed Catherine lacked administrative experience, was highly suspicious, and needed good counselors. Suriano described Catherine as "timid and irresolute; and not well practiced in governing."[4] Suriano even brought up the scandalous reputations of some of Catherine's ladies.[5] The cause of this disparity is suggested within each letter. Phrases such as "everyone knows" and "he told a few (who then told me)" depict Catherine's notoriety and hint at how gossip circulated. It seems likely that they may have influenced each ambassador's assessment.[6]

Both in her own time, and today, portrayals of Catherine are fiercely polarized. In these two intensely contradictory depictions, coming from men of the same background in the same year, Catherine becomes an enigma. Much of this controversy regarding her character stemmed from the unprecedented power she was allotted as a foreign woman during one of the most turbulent periods

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[2] Leah L. Chang, Katherine Kong, and Catherine de Médicis, *Portraits of the Queen Mother: Polemics, Panegyrics, Letters,* trans. Leah L. Chang and Katherine Kong (Toronto: Iter Inc., 2014), p. 36.

[3] Michiel, "Letter from Venetian Ambassador to France, after Returning from His Legation in 1561," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, pp. 113-118.

[4] Suriano, "Letter from Ambassador in 1561," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, p. 123.

[5] Suriano, "Letter from Ambassador in 1561," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, pp. 118-124.

[6] Michiel, "Letter from Venetian Ambassador to France, after Returning from His Legation in 1561," and Suriano, "Letter from Ambassador in 1561," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, pp. 114-122.

of French history. Catherine was therefore villainized due to her reversal of gender norms, her Italian ancestry, and her ambition. As she gained increasing political power, the attacks became more frequent and vicious. Although much of what she was accused of was untrue, the condemnation of Catherine was effective. The systemic spread of rumors from the French courts to the public was powerful, turning libel into a potent political weapon. These charges were primarily launched by elite men who hoped to depose women in power while raising their status simultaneously.[7] As a woman in sixteenth-century France, Catherine's political ambitions undoubtedly sparked controversy, while Italian stereotypes portrayed her as an untrustworthy outsider. Additionally, in her position of power, she was forced to make difficult decisions that did not always result in the desired outcome. However, given France's intense religious factions and wars, Catherine did all she could to keep her children and France safe. Despite evidence of her attempts to create a moderate and peaceful rule, Catherine de' Medici's motherhood and ambition led to a reputation that became increasingly villainized as she gained more political power. With accusations rooted in xenophobia and misogyny and the systemic spread of libel and gossip, Catherine was left with the legacy of the "Serpent Queen."

The tumult and tragedy surrounding her life may have lent its hand in formulating such vastly different opinions about Catherine de' Medici. Born in Florence in 1519 to the powerful Medici banking family, her parents Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino, and the French Madeleine de La Tour d'Auvergne died soon after her birth.[8] Catherine, under the watch of her uncle, Pope Clement VII, was left to be used as a pawn for the Medicis. Amongst the many suitors vying for her hand in marriage, Henry, duke of Orléans, the second son of King Francis I, was chosen as the most diplomatically beneficial arrangement.[9] Catherine lived at the French court and married Henry at fourteen, and when Henry became next in line to the throne, she acted dutifully as his queen.[10] After the unexpected death of King Henry II in a joust, Catherine was thrust into a central political role. Throughout the reign of her sons, three of whom inherited the throne during her lifetime, Catherine acted intermittently as queen mother and queen regent. The rise of religious tensions within Catholic France coincided with Catherine's increasing political power. Despite her attempts to keep the peace and to keep her children safe, the Reformation was tearing France in two, pitting Catholics against Protestants. During Catherine's rule, the violence of the French Wars of Religion culminated in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, a tragedy that was ultimately blamed on Catherine herself. Despite her intense and important political role, Salic Law prevented Catherine from officially acting as queen. Salic Law was a fundamental cultural law in France that barred women from inheriting the throne.[11] In addition, it aimed at preventing women from gaining political power by creating a distinction between acting as a guardian for kings in their minority (*tutelle*) which was for the mother

[7] Una McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation at the Court of Catherine de Medici*; (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 22.
[8] Jean Héritier, *Catherine de Medici,* trans. Charlotte Haldane (New York: St Martin's Press, 1963), p. 15.
[9] R.J. Knecht, *Catherine de' Medici* (London: Longman, 1998), pp. 12-13.
[10] Chang and Kong, *Portraits of the Queen Mother, p.*5.
[11] Katherine Crawford, "Catherine de Medicis and the Performance of Political Motherhood," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 3 (2000): p. 645.

and taking on administrative powers (*curatelle*), which was for male relatives.[12] There was a history of fear of women in power, stemming from worries over possible foreign control to suspicions of female manipulation.[13]

Due to her intriguing story, and her central role during a critical time in French history, Catherine de' Medici has a rich and fascinating historiography. Some historians have taken an extremely praiseworthy approach to Catherine, especially recently.[14] On the other hand, historians have depicted Catherine as a Machiavellian queen, willing to do anything to gain power.[15] As seen in the Venetian ambassador's reports, the turbulent fluctuations in Catherine's portrayal began contemporarily with her rule. However, for most of history and in popular culture, Catherine's legacy as a malicious schemer has persevered over her depiction as honorable and courageous.

This legacy did not persist on its own; instead, it was propagated through baseless depictions of Catherine by historians. Indeed, the more compelling narrative is one of scandal and malevolence. It was not until relatively recently, historically speaking that scholars began to take a new approach to Catherine's legacy. In his book on the French Wars of Religion, Mack Holt cited N.M. Sutherland, who wrote much of her work in the 1970s, and was the "first historian to try to rescue the Queen Mother's reputation."[16] Coinciding with this shift in thought were new ideas on gender roles. It was not until around Sutherland's time that society would begin to encourage women to take on powerful political roles, something Catherine's alternate legacy would inspire. As Sutherland pointed out in her article on Catherine de' Medici, "there are still few historians who have not been influenced by the legend of the wicked Italian queen."[17] Sutherland claimed that the propagation of her Machiavellian legacy was passed through generations of historians through emotional force. Only recently have historians attempted to analyze her character and politics in their proper context.[18] Catherine's "Serpent Queen" legacy was perpetuated for hundreds of years, and even amongst modern scholarship, there remains some controversy regarding her character. Although what historians have discovered more recently attempts to negate much of her villainous reputation, popular culture has not followed suit. Through the analysis of historical and public perceptions of Catherine, the power of a reputation becomes all the more evident.

After the death of her husband, Henry II, Catherine began to take on political roles that were beyond her gender and therefore put her under intense scrutiny. However, in their proper

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[12] Katherine Crawford, *Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 20.

[13] Crawford, "Performance of Political Motherhood," p. 647.

[14] Knecht, *Catherine De' Medici*; Crawford, "Perilous Performances,"; McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation*.

[15] Edith Helen Sitchel, *The Later Years of Catherine de' Medici*, (London: A. Constable & Co., Ltd., 1908); Philippe Erlanger, *St. Bartholomew's Night: The Massacre of Saint Bartholomew,* trans. Patrick O'Brian, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962); Ralph Roeder, *Catherine de' Medici and the Lost Revolution*, (New York: Garden City Publishing, 1937).

[16] Mack P Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 83.

[17] N.M. Sutherland, "Catherine de Medici: The Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 9, no. 2 (1978): p. 45. https://doi.org/10.2307/2539662.

[18] Sutherland, "Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen," pp. 45-49.

historical context, Catherine's efforts to maintain peace should be commended rather than condemned. Even before she gained any serious power, Catherine attempted to maintain harmony within the French court. Henry II made his preference for his mistress Diane de Poitiers over Catherine, who was not known for her beauty, quite evident. Although Catherine famously wrote, "never did a wife who loves her husband love his whore,"[19] she did not let this humiliation affect her courtly actions. Despite his lack of reciprocation, she remained loyal and loving to the king and continued to place the country's needs over her own emotions.

Catherine was described as an obedient wife and a doting mother during this time. In her daughter Marguerite de Valois's memoirs, she said her mother "doted on all her children and was always ready to sacrifice her own repose, nay, even her life, for their happiness."[20] Her dedication to her children is also evident in her continual correspondence with Jean d'Humières, governor of the royal children, to check on their well-being.[21] In 1546 she wrote to d'Humières, asking him "to continue to send me news of them frequently, for you could do nothing else that would please monsieur and me more."[22]

Catherine also attempted to keep her household free from scandal to keep peace at her court. She was highly involved in the upbringing and welfare of the ladies in her household and proactively tried to safeguard their reputations.[23] In doing so, she was forced to make difficult decisions about which of her ladies it would be beneficial to defend. Catherine managed to control and manipulate the spread of information to protect the women of her court and their collective reputation.[24] Her ability to assess an issue, make a decision that best benefited France, and successfully amass a response was evidence of her political intelligence. However, the negotiating and scheming required to protect the women of her court propelled her stigma as a conniving Medici. Although Catherine's decisions of who she chose to protect and how she did so could seem ruthless at times, it also showed the prudence of a shrewd political leader. Catherine was forced to walk a delicate line between keeping the peace at her court and saving its collective reputation without damaging her own.

Catherine never expected to be queen in the first place, as Henry was the second son of Francis I. However, after the unexpected death of Henry's older brother, Francis, she found herself married to the heir apparent, and eventually, she became the new queen of France.[25] While in this position, she was appointed as regent on two separate occasions while Henry was away. Although

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[19] Quoted in Kathleen Anne Wellman, "Catherine de' Medici," in *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 232.

[20] Marguerite de Valois, "Letter II," in *Memoirs of Marguerite de Valois, Queen of France, Wife of Henri IV; of Madame de Pompadour of the Court of Louis XV; and of Catherine de Medici, Queen of France, Wife of Henri II; with a Special Introduction,* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1910), p. 22.

[21] Chang and Kong, *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*p. 64.

[22] Medici, "Letter of December 21, 1546," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, p. 64.

[23] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 24.

[24] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 104.

[25] Wellman, "Catherine de' Medici," in *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France,*p. 231.

she was not afforded any real power during these times, she took her role seriously.[26] As she acquired more significant administrative roles, Catherine had to expand from keeping the peace within her court to keeping the peace in France. Her contemporary, Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantôme, detailed this experience in his biography of Catherine, *The Memoirs of Catherine De Medici.* He was known for his biographies and used his first-hand experiences while living at Catherine's court to write hers. Although his narrative histories are often said to be subject to bias, they are of great value and insight nonetheless.[27] Brantôme wrote that "there was no disturbance, change, nor alternation in the State because of the King's absence; but, on the contrary, the Queen so carefully saw to affairs that she was able to assist the King."[28] Catherine masterfully fulfilled her maternal and wifely duties despite being primarily disregarded by her husband, both as a wife and political partner.

When King Henry was forty years old, he died unexpectedly during celebratory festivities in honor of the marriage of his daughter Elizabeth de Valois to King Philip II of Spain. As he faced the Comte de Montgomery in a joust, the lances broke, sending a splinter through the king's helmet. Within a few days, the king died.[29] In the wake of tragedy, Catherine courageously and without hesitation took on the responsibilities required to keep France from falling apart. Her son, Francis II, married to Mary Stuart, would rule for a brief period before his devastating death at a young age from an ear infection.[30] On the eve of Francis's death, Catherine wrote a letter in anticipation of the chaos that would ensue from the loss of the king. She wrote, "for the sake of the kingdom, I will take in hand the necessary duty that must be given to the administration."[31] Through a series of unfortunate deaths in her family, Catherine found herself fated for a more prominent role in France's administration than ever expected of her. Charles IX was only ten then, still well in his minority and needing a regent.[32] She insisted that she would heed the advice of her council and that she would pass along the guidance she had received to her son.[33]

With religious tensions rising, Catherine felt she had to maintain authority both to provide a sense of stability for France and to protect the interests of her children, allowing for the propagation of the Valois dynasty. Historically, France had been a Catholic country, but Protestantism began to take root with the Reformation sweeping through Europe. Religious factions destabilized France, stirring anxieties and leading to outbreaks of violence. Marguerite de Valois described her mother as a devout Catholic but acknowledged that even within the French court were lords and ladies attempting to convert her and her siblings to Protestants.[34] The Guises, who were Catholic, and the Bourbons, who were Protestant, were two rival families vying for power and authority during this tumultuous time. The *curatelle* was almost passed to the Prince of the Blood (a royal male with a

[26] Knecht, *Catherine De' Medici,* p. 44.
[27] Brantôme, "The Memoirs of Catherine De Medici," in *Memoirs,* pp. 315-316.
[28] Brantôme, "The Memoirs of Catherine De Medici," in *Memoirs,* p. 333.
[29] Knecht, *Catherine De' Medici,* pp. 57-58.
[30] Héritier, *Catherine de Medici,* p. 141.
[31] Medici, "Letter of December 4, 1560," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 69.
[32] Knecht, *Catherine De' Medici,* p. 72.
[33] Medici, "Letter of December 6, 1560," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 70.
[34] Marguerite de Valois, "Letter I," in *Memoirs,* pp. 16-17.

claim to the throne), the Protestant King of Navarre, Antoine de Bourbon.[35] To ensure that Navarre ceded authority, Catherine offered him the position of lieutenant general.[36] Had Navarre been chosen as regent, the delicate religious situation in France might have fractured prematurely, and Catherine's children might have lost their chance at the throne.

Ultimately, Catherine wanted to restore peace to France, which religious divisions increasingly threatened. Catherine took a middle-ground approach to achieve this goal, hoping to compromise with and appease the factions. She immediately took administrative action after being appointed governor of the kingdom and gaining political authority, presiding over domestic and foreign policy.[37] Given the political climate, this was no easy feat, yet Catherine persevered to the best of her abilities. She was intensely involved in developing negotiations, edicts, and treaties for peace. She repeatedly attempted to create harmony between the Guises and Navarres, though her efforts were unsuccessful.[38] In 1560, during Francis's brief reign, Catherine issued the Edict of Amboise and the subsequent Edict of Romorantin, which allotted restricted tolerance to Protestants, appeasing the repressed Huguenots (French Protestants) who were being provoked by the Guises.[39] Despite attempts at reconciliation, France was on the brink of a religious war. In a final attempt at compromise, the Colloquy at Poissy was called in 1561. To Catherine's disappointment, the Colloquy failed due to disagreements over the sacrament of the Eucharist.[40] Protestantism continued to spread, and violent attacks between Catholics and Protestants became more frequent. The pressure was put on Catherine to take action. She then enforced the Edict of January in 1562, which allowed Huguenot worship in the countryside, angering Catholics.[41] The public was in such an outroar that Catherine was powerless to prevent the escalation of violence.[42] Despite her valiant efforts to induce harmony, the French Wars of Religion were inevitable and began quickly afterward with the Massacre at Vassy in 1562.

Even toward the end of her life, after the tragedy of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, Catherine continued to take on the role of peacemaker. In a letter written in 1572, Catherine asserted that "if anyone transgresses these orders, punish them by law."[43] Catherine continued to boldly confront those who opposed her authority, determined to do what was necessary to maintain order. Further evidence of her devotion to the kingdom of France and its well-being is evident in her travels to Nérac between 1578-9. Despite her old age, and her son Henry III's reign (who ruled following Charles IX's death in 1574), Catherine still traveled to negotiate with Henry of Navarre

[35] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 47.
[36] Medici, "Letter of December 27, 1561," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 78.
[37] Knecht, *Catherine De' Medici,* p. 73.
[38] Crawford, "Performance of Political Motherhood," p. 666.
[39] Wellman, "Catherine de' Medici," in *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France,* pp. *238-9*.
[40] Wellman, "Catherine de' Medici," in *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France,* p. 242.
[41] Knecht, *Catherine De' Medici,* p. 85.
[42] Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629,* p. 52.
[43] Medici, "Letter of August 27, 1572," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 91.

and the Huguenots.[44] In a letter written to her son, the king, Catherine wrote, "without regard for my age or the length of the journey…but simply because of my great desire to be a mother to all your subjects, I came to this part of the country to execute the edict."[45] Catherine extended her motherhood to include all of France and put herself at risk to continue her contributions to the kingdom and help her son bring peace. She dedicated her life to ensuring the prosperity of France and her children. At the time of this letter, Catherine had already witnessed the death of two sons on the throne and the devastating destruction the religious wars brought to France. All the while, due to the restrictions of Salic Law, "she bore the responsibilities of the crown without enjoying its authority."[46]

Although both Catholics and Protestants criticized Catherine's conciliatory attitude at the time, looking back, one can see Catherine's prioritization of politics over religion as a modern approach. In the wake of the Reformation, this was the administrative trend in Europe and one that continues today. However, religious passions were too fervent at the time to appreciate this ideology. Both sides wound up disappointed in and suspicious of the beleaguered Catherine. However, this does not diminish Catherine's efforts to maintain peace through moderate rule. The Venetian ambassador to France in 1569, Giovanni Correro, addressed Catherine's impossible position. "I will say that I know of no prince, however wise and valiant he may be, who would not have lost the fight if he found himself in the middle of such a war without the ability to discern friend from foe," he wrote.[47] Through analyzing her actions within their proper context, Catherine can be credited with an admirable rule, equivalent, or perhaps superior, to what any trained king would have been capable of achieving.

Although Catherine de' Medici was overall well-liked and conforming in her early years at the French court, kernels of distrust were planted that would flourish wildly throughout her life. Soon after Catherine arrived in France to marry Henry, her uncle, Pope Clement VII, died.[48] His death made the marriage arrangement a futile deal for France diplomatically, as the Pope would no longer be able to fulfill any of his promises. King Francis remarked: "The girl has been given to me stark naked."[49] Now that her Medici connections were no longer of use, Catherine was in a precarious position. She was a foreign woman of non-royal blood in a new country with seemingly nothing to offer. Considering her husband's preference for his mistress, Diane de Poitiers, and Catherine's inability to get pregnant, it appeared that Catherine was disposable. She was possibly at risk of being divorced and sent back to Florence in favor of a new, more fruitful wife for Henry. It was said that being aware of her situation, Catherine offered to step aside, allowing Henry to remarry. Her selfless gesture so moved King Francis that he assured her she would not be forced to

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[44] Medici, "Letters of May 30, 1574 and May 31, 1574," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 70; Chang and Kong, *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*pp. 93-99.

[45] Medici, "Letter of February 8 and 9, 1579," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, p. 104.

[46] Sutherland, "Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen," p. 46.

[47] Correro, "Letter from Ambassador to France in 1569," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 131.

[48] Wellman, "Catherine de' Medici," In *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France,*p. 230.

[49] Quoted in Knecht, *Catherine De' Medici,* p. 28.

leave.[50] Despite the mésalliance, Catherine was there to stay. This first hiccup in Catherine's political life in France foreshadowed a life of struggles as she took on more prominent leadership roles. For Catherine, gaining political power would parallel the development of an increasingly villainous reputation. Giovanni Michiel summarized this evolution succinctly in 1575: "In the beginning, as a foreigner and of Italian blood, she was hardly loved; at present, to tell the truth, she is hated."[51]

Catherine de' Medici's troubles with pregnancy had profound implications; if she and Henry could not have children, the future of the Valois dynasty was at risk. Henry had successfully impregnated one of his mistresses, Filippa Duci, four years into the marriage.[52] Therefore, the attention and blame were placed on Catherine, who tried everything she could to increase her fertility. She refused to ride on a mule since they were sterile, used diviners and magicians, and even drank mule urine.[53] Her dedication indicates the intense humiliation she must have felt, in addition to personal loneliness and outside pressures from the court. Furthering her shame, Diane de Poitiers had to urge Henry to take Catherine to bed.[54] This emphasized her lack of physical beauty and her futility as a wife. A court physician finally discovered Henry had a deformity. After adjusting accordingly, Catherine had ten children in twelve years, seven of whom survived.[55] Catherine's long-lasting barren years were over, but her initial difficulties with pregnancy, and the lengths she went to get pregnant, were later used against her. For Catherine, motherhood would become the source of her power and security in France; however, it would also play a hand in its eventual destruction.

Catherine was not simply allotted power in the wake of Henry II's death. Law and custom alike prevented Catherine from gaining authority. The queen mother was forced to rely upon her established role as a self-sacrificing wife and mother to justify her political ambitions and legitimize her sovereignty.[56] In the aftermath of Henry's death, while Francis II was king, Catherine underwent an intense mourning period. She dramatically exceeded the mourning expectations of a widow, frequently seen crying over her lost love and even fainting.[57] For the rest of her life, Catherine was solely depicted wearing black, looking solemn in her widowhood.[58] Brantôme noted this in contrast to how "she dressed very richly and superbly"[59] while the king was alive. Catherine's iconography consistently associated her with motherly sacrifices and royal authority through remembrance of

[50] Crawford, "Performance of Political Motherhood," p. 643.

[51] Michiel, "Letter from Venetian Ambassador to France in 1575," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 133.

[52] Wellman, "Catherine de' Medici," in *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France,*p. 230.

[53] Héritier, *Catherine de Medici,* p. 43; Wellman, "Catherine de' Medici," in *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France,* p. 231.

[54] Héritier, *Catherine de Medici,* p. 46.

[55] Héritier, *Catherine de Medici,* p. 48.

[56] Crawford, "Performance of Political Motherhood," p. 644.

[57] Crawford, "Performance of Political Motherhood," p. 656.

[58] Clouet François, *Catherine de Medici*, Images, n.d, https://jstor.org/stable/community.15678549.

[59] Brantôme, "The Memoirs of Catherine De Medici," in *Memoirs,* p. 361.

King Henry II. Her devotion to her children and her recently deceased husband was inextricably interwoven with her devotion to France.

Sixteenth-century France was a patriarchal society where women were dependent on and subject to men throughout each stage of their lives. Women were confined mainly to the private sphere, where they were expected to act as dutiful wives and mothers. Since men maintained authority in public and private spheres, a popular argument for male monarchy was that the state was analogous to the household, where women were subordinate.[60] Women who chose to step outside their gender roles were therefore seen as threatening to the social order.[61] While married to Henry, Catherine acted within the expectations of her gender role, building up a person as a docile and obedient wife. However, when she fought to extend her role as queen mother to include the administrative aspect of regency, she began to receive backlash.

In contrast to her feminine displays of mourning and motherhood, Catherine acted promptly and fiercely to attain political dominance during the minority of her son, Charles IX. Shortly after the death of Francis II, Catherine wrote of her despair to her daughter Elizabeth de Valois: "And god took him from me… and left me with three little children, and in a completely divided kingdom"[62] Catherine's fear, distress, and loneliness emanated from her words to her daughter, who was living in Spain at the time with her husband, Philip II. However, Catherine did not succumb to her grief. Instead, she used her only remaining prerogative to protect Charles: her position as queen mother. After negotiations with the King of Navarre, some of which could be viewed as manipulations, Catherine claimed he had "completely put himself in my hands and stripped himself of power and authority under my good pleasure."[63] Catherine stressed that although the King of Navarre should have attained control of the regency, he undoubtedly handed that power over to her. Her seemingly excessive declarations of authority become logical in light of the intensifying resistance to Catherine's sovereignty. Fearing challenges from the nobility and the Estates General, Catherine wrote to her cousin, Monsieur d'Estampes, in 1561, claiming they needed to work "for the establishment of my authority and to prevent the conspiracies and machinations that would move to hinder it."[64] A few weeks later, she wrote to Limoges, her ambassador to Spain, about the fools trying to depose her and her suspicions that the plot may have been instigated by the King of Navarre himself. After telling Limoges of her negotiations, she divulged her ultimate success; she was to maintain absolute power in matters of the kingdom.[65]

Throughout her power struggles, Catherine's ambition became clear. In her letter to d'Estampes, Catherine wrote of the Estates General, "they dispossess me of the government, leaving me the simple charge of feeding my children."[66] She was evidently bitter at the thought of solely

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[60] Merry E Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed, (Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 292.

[61] Wiesner, *Women and Gender,* p. 306.

[62] Medici, "Letter of December 7, 1560," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 72.

[63] Medici, "Letter of December 19, 1560," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 74.

[64] Medici, "Letter of March 11, 1561," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 76.

[65] Medici, "Letter of March 27, 1561," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, pp. 78-9.

[66] Medici, "Letter of March 11, 1561," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 76.

attaining *tutelle*. Mere motherhood was no longer enough for her and not enough to protect her children either. Catherine understood she was not undertaking an easy task; however, it was a responsibility she both desired and felt she deserved. She claimed she "would prefer them to take away my life along with my honor rather than make me beg."[67] Catherine's bold reactions against those who attempted to overthrow her were backed by her assertion that she was qualified for full regency through her political experience and her duty to her children. Although ambition is not inherently evil, it was seen as such when used by Catherine to transgress gender boundaries.

As religious wars broke out across France, Catherine de' Medici's political role became increasingly important and was thus increasingly scrutinized. Her reputation became the subject of many attacks, mainly targeting her Italian heritage and gender. Italophobia was highly prevalent in sixteenth-century France, mainly due to France's increased reliance on Italy for money and an expanding Italian presence at court.[68] The xenophobic narrative regarding Italians became a unifying agent amongst different groups in France, including both Protestants and Catholics. Anti-Italianism, therefore, became a political tool aggressively wielded toward Catherine de' Medici, particularly in the wake of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, when Italophobia reached its zenith.[69] Italians were stereotyped as wicked and conniving, characteristics placed on Catherine. This was in spite of Catherine being only half Italian; her mother, Madeleine de La Tour d'Auvergne, was French.[70]

This racism combined with the misogyny that already plagued Catherine's reign. In addition to Salic Law and strict gender roles in France, discourses explicitly targeting women in power were popularly spread. One such polemic against women was *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, written by the famous Scottish reformer John Knox in 1558. Knox declared it "a thing most repugnant to nature, that women rule and govern over men," claiming women were "made to serve and obey man, not rule and command him."[71] Knox's polemic was written as a reaction against an abnormal wave of simultaneous female rulers in the sixteenth century. Women such as Queen Mary I and Queen Elizabeth I in England and Queen Mary I in Scotland ruled in their own right contemporaneously with Catherine de' Medici in France.[72] This belief that it was inherently abominable for women to be in power and that women were by nature incapable of governing was widely held. However, it should be noted that other European countries, like England and Scotland, did not prevent women from taking the throne as Salic Law did in France. Consequently, though objections to female rule were widespread, the intense objections to Catherine's rule in France were justified by law.

Assaults on Catherine's credibility, based on her gender and ancestry, began almost immediately following her official acquisition of power as regent for Charles IX. In Suriano's 1561 letter, he asserted, "it would be enough to say she is a woman: but I would like to add that she is also

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[67] Medici, "Letter of March 11, 1561," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 77.

[68] Henry Heller, *Anti-Italianism in Sixteenth-Century France,* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 93.

[69] Heller, *Anti-Italianism in Sixteenth-Century France*, p. 230.

[70] Héritier, *Catherine de Medici,* p. 15.

[71] John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women,* ed. Edward Arber, (Southgate, London: University College, London, 1878), pp. 3-4.

[72] Wiesner, *Women and Gender*, p. 291.

a foreigner; and what is more, that she is Florentine."[73] These xenophobic, highly gendered stereotypes could be used to defame Catherine without needing further evidence to support their connotations. Women were feeble and unintelligent, while Italians were manipulative and cruel schemers. Additionally, women were seen as physically weak and inclined to duplicity and were therefore highly associated with using poison as a means of killing. Catherine was no exception, and there was even a popular rumor that Catherine was the one who first introduced poison to France from Italy.[74] Throughout her life, Catherine would be repeatedly accused of poisoning her enemies largely because she was an Italian woman, leading to her nickname, "Madame la Serpente."[75] Basic, unalterable facets of Catherine's life were typecast and misconstrued until, to the public, Catherine's very being was villainized. Catherine's reputation was being used as a weapon by men who repeatedly attempted to depose her, fearing she might set a precedent for female rule in France.

The ladies of Catherine's court were also the target of unyielding libel that spread throughout France to discredit Catherine's ability to rule effectively; if Catherine could not control her court, how could she control France? Scandalous tropes, such as cuckoldry, poisoning, illegitimate births, and incest, were recurring in France and were thus well-known to the public.[76] Out of applying such rumors and accusations to Catherine's ladies, the legend of the "Flying Squadron'" was born. This was Catherine's supposed network of beautiful spies who would seduce men to achieve their goals.[77] In pamphlets circulating at the time, often written in verse, Catherine was charged with instigating many of the scandals of which her ladies were accused, further intertwining her reputation with that of her court. One such verse was regarding Madame de Sauve, who supposedly seduced Henry of Navarre, the husband of Catherine's daughter Marguerite and Marguerite's brother.[78] The verse claimed that Sauve was used to manipulate the two men for political means: "For the peace she was fucked. Catin led her totally naked to the king of Navarre, and with that made the war go away… Catin, you are fortunate to have a stable of whores."[79] Catherine's portrayal as a relentlessly ruthless schemer was further developing. In a similar situation, one of Catherine's ladies, Isabelle de Limeuil, gave birth to an illegitimate child, supposedly fathered by the prince of Condé.[80] Once again, the news spread, placing blame on Catherine in rhyming couplets in 1564: "This noble maiden who was so lovely committed adultery and created a child, but they say the queen mother in this played Lucina and permitted this to profit from the prince."[81] Despite evidence that Catherine genuinely supported and cared for her ladies and attempted to prevent the dissemination of scandal about her court, the legend of the "Flying Squadron" persisted, as did the reputation of Catherine as a master manipulator.

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[73] Suriano, "Letter from Ambassador in 1561," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, p. 122.
[74] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 114.
[75] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 114.
[76] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 3.
[77] Knecht, *Catherine De' Medici,* p. 235.
[78] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 15.
[79] Quoted in McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 17.
[80] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 66.
[81] Quoted in McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 66.

Although motherhood was Catherine's gateway to govern, her relationship with her children was a frequent topic of gossip. As was the pattern with her life, narratives regarding Catherine's style of motherhood were highly paradoxical. These conflicting portrayals were highlighted in her daughter Marguerite de Valois's memoirs. Although Marguerite described her mother as devoted to her children and a prudent and wise political leader, she did not hesitate to expose her manipulations and schemes. In sharp contrast to her claims of her mother's love, she also stated that if her mother "chanced to turn her eyes towards me I trembled, for fear that I had done something to displease her."[82] Marguerite also fell victim to her mother's political schemes, being set up in a marriage to Henry of Navarre in an attempt to bring peace between religious factions. Marguerite claimed, "I had no will but her own."[83] While she lacked agency, she seemed to want to please her mother. Whether this obedience was out of respect, fear, or for the good of France is unclear. Catherine's political machinations may have maligned her at times, even with her children, but they were the unfortunate inevitabilities of being a prudent ruler in the sixteenth century.

From an objective standpoint, Catherine appeared to have protected her children while realistically preparing them for life as royals. In a letter to Limoges in 1561, Catherine discussed her children's merit, hoping to gain the favor of the King of Spain. She claimed, in addition to her daughter Elizabeth who married Philip II, "I also have other children who would follow in the footsteps of this same devotion, and who are the proper instruments."[84] Additionally, she asked Limoges to "communicate all of this to the queen my daughter, and instruct her well and warn her about what she needs to do for her part."[85] Had this message been conveyed by a king, it would not have been out of the ordinary; however, the political maneuvering of children was not considered motherly. Alternatively, Catherine seemed to have faith in her children, including her daughters and allotted them political responsibilities. Nevertheless, criticisms of Catherine's parenting persisted in a varied fashion. The prince of Condé, for example, wrote two pamphlets in 1562 that alleged Catherine had failed to protect her children.[86] Stories of Catherine controlling and manipulating her children also publicly circulated, likely stemming from Charles IX's decree upon reaching his majority that he should be considered an adult in every regard except "toward the queen his mother, to whom he reserves the power to command."[87] Catherine was depicted as cunning and ruthless, a portrayal that would only advance after the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre.

The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre is a notorious example of the atrocities that can occur due to religious fanaticism. The massacre resulted in the gruesome death of thousands of unarmed Protestants in Paris and beyond by Catholics during the French Wars of Religion. Although ending in tragedy, the buildup to the massacre was rooted in an attempt at peace by Catherine de' Medici. Hoping to reconcile the relentless religious tensions and violence, Catherine decided to marry her

[82] Marguerite de Valois, "Letter II," in *Memoirs,* p. 25.
[83] Marguerite de Valois, "Letter IV," in *Memoirs,* p. 33.
[84] Suriano, "Letter from April 21, 1561," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, p. 83.
[85] Suriano, "Letter from April 21, 1561," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, p. 83.
[86] Crawford, "Perilous Performances, p. 52.
[87] Quoted in Crawford, "Perilous Performances, p. 54.

daughter, Marguerite, to the Protestant Henry of Navarre.[88] Protestants gathered in Paris for the wedding ceremony on August 18, 1572, much to the dismay of Parisian Catholics.[89] Just four days later, the massacre was spurred into motion when an assassination attempt was made on the Huguenot leader, Admiral Coligny, after leaving a meeting with Charles IX.[90] Although Coligny solely sustained injuries to his arm and hand, Huguenot leaders blamed the Guises for the attempt on Coligny's life. False rumors spread that the Huguenots were amassing an uprising, and in retaliation, the Guises went back to finish the job on the Admiral in a public and violent manner.[91] Soon, in a mob-like frenzy, Catholic citizens began slaughtering Protestants. One first-hand account of the massacre described how "the streets were covered with dead bodies, the river tinted with blood."[92] Friends and neighbors killed one another in a hysterical manner, beginning in Paris and eventually spreading to other provinces as well. In addition to being a black mark on the history of religion and politics in France, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre was also a significant turning point in the development of Catherine de' Medici's reputation.

Much of the propaganda that spread in the wake of the massacre used Catherine as a scapegoat, accusing her of orchestrating the entire event. Even those who blamed King Charles IX were blaming Catherine, as they believed Charles to be under Catherine's thumb. Protestant accounts of the atrocity that attested Catherine had planned the massacre were rapidly translated to include Latin, French, English, and German.[93] This allowed the rumors to spread amongst a vast audience. Michiel's 1572 report went a step further, claiming that the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre was premeditated and that it was Catherine who "conceived it, plotted it, and put it into execution, with no help from anyone but her son."[94] This implied that the marriage itself was a guise, merely a part of Catherine's larger scheme to get Protestant leaders to Paris to have them killed. Although it can be argued that Catherine largely miscalculated and underestimated the situation leading up to the massacre, there is no evidence that she acted alone or preemptively.[95] The notion that Catherine was solely responsible for a plot that resulted in the death of thousands immutably changed her reputation. According to Michiel, this cruel political method was foreign; "they blame this on the queen, saying that she is an Italian from Florence, and Medici at that, and therefore she has tyrant's

[88] Wellman, "Catherine de' Medici," in *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France,*p. 249.

[89] Wellman, "Catherine de' Medici," in *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France,*p. 250.

[90] Barbara B. Diefendorf, *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre: A Brief History with Documents,* (Boston, Mass: Bedford, St. Martin's, 2009), p. 19.

[91] Diefendorf, *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre,* p. 20.

[92] De La Fosse, "Reactions in Paris to the Peace of Saint-Germain, 1570-1571," in *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre,* ed. Diefendorf, p. 102.

[93] Hotman, "A True and Plain Report of the Furious Outrages of France, 1573," in *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre,* ed. Diefendorf, pp. 82-87.

[94] Michiel, "Report to the Venetian Senate on the Wounding of the Admiral, 1572," in *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre,* ed. Diefendorf, p. 92.

[95] Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629,*p. 84.

blood in her veins."[96] Xenophobia was once again used as justification for accusations charged against Catherine. With the broad dissemination of reports depicting gruesome violence on account of Catherine's manipulations by Protestants and Catholics alike, the queen mother was in a highly vulnerable position.

With her villainous reputation firmly established, targeted attacks on Catherine became increasingly widespread and profoundly dramatic. One of the most famous polemics against Catherine was the *Marvelous Discourse on the Life, Actions, and Deportment of Catherine de Médicis, Queen Mother*, written in 1576. Although the work was anonymous, it is primarily attributed to the French Protestant Henri Estienne.[97] The work had at least ten versions within a year of publication and was translated into multiple languages, suggesting a planned publishing strategy.[98] The author hoped to rally moderate Catholics and Protestants together under the unifying themes of xenophobia and misogyny.[99] Like other contemporary polemics about Catherine, the *Marvelous Discourse* focused on the queen mother's Florentine origins and gender; however, it also launched wild, unfounded allegations that portrayed Catherine as a malicious monster. Immediately, the discourse made a point to depict Catherine as a foreign "other" who was inherently corrupt due to her low stock and Medici origins.[100] It proclaimed: "that the country, race, and actions of the closest relatives of our queen force us to anticipate terrible things from her…. it was said that the stars clearly threatened the place where she would live."[101] Catherine's birth, due to astrology and her heritage, doomed her from the start.

The *Marvelous Discourse* also accused Catherine of countless poisonings, likening her to a witch. Amongst many others, the poisonings included Henry's older brother, as a means to get closer to the throne, and the Queen of Navarre, so she would not stop Catherine from carrying out the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre.[102] It also charged Catherine with being an atheist, spending excessively, having inappropriate sexual relationships, and corrupting her children.[103] Ultimately, the *Marvelous Discourse* argued Catherine was bringing ruin to France. As regent, Catherine had to constantly face doubts about the legitimacy and adequacy of her rule due to her gender. This discourse played upon the widespread misogyny in France and compared Catherine to Brunhilda, a notorious queen who ruled over the Franks in the seventh century.[104] Their similarities were discussed, as they were both foreign and accused of poisonings, manipulations, and ultimately failing

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[96] Michiel, "Report to the Venetian Senate on the Wounding of the Admiral, 1572," in *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre,* ed. Diefendorf, p. 96.

[97] Chang and Kong, *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*p. 43.

[98] Robert M Kingdon, *Myths About the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacres, 1572-1576* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 201.

[99] Heller, *Anti-Italianism in Sixteenth-Century France*, p. 121.

[100] "Marvelous Discourse on the Life, Actions, and Deportment of Catherine de Médicis, Queen Mother (1576)," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, p. 143.

[101] "Marvelous Discourse" in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, p. 149.

[102] "Marvelous Discourse" in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, pp. 161, 173.

[103] "Marvelous Discourse" in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, pp. 153, 159, 172.

[104] Chang and Kong, *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*p. 48.

France.[105] The author provided historical evidence of the horrors and ruin that would fall upon the kingdom under the rule of a woman, particularly one of Medici origin. In a final, grand flourish, the paper depicted Brunhilda's deserving death: she was dragged through the streets on the end of a horse and torn to pieces. Since Catherine was determined to have been worse than Brunhilda throughout the discourse, the audience was urged to consider what a proper punishment for Catherine would be, and nobles were called to defy her dominance.[106]

One of the main adjectives ascribed to Catherine, both presently and throughout history, is "Machiavellian." The *Marvelous Discourse,* for example, attributed Catherine's unscrupulous tactics and her uncontrollable lust for power to "her Machiavelli."[107] Today, the term means cunning and ruthless, particularly regarding politics. Given the reputation Catherine had established, this characterization makes sense; however, "Machiavellian" did not always have such a negative connotation. In fact, before the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, particularly in France, Niccolò Machiavelli and his works were revered.[108] It was not until Innocent Gentillet wrote his *Discours contre Machiavel* in 1576 that Machiavelli began to take on his modern interpretation.[109] Machiavelli's reputation, therefore, declined in conjunction with Catherine's, exemplified by the fact that *The Prince* was dedicated to Catherine's father, Lorenzo.[110] The Medicis, particularly Catherine, became inherently seen as Machiavellian. Rumors were circulating that Catherine de' Medici, like other Italians, was using the blood of slaughtered children.[111] This was most likely due to her likening to a witch in discourses and her history of using magic and diviners to get pregnant.[112] The use of universally acknowledged stereotypes regarding gender and xenophobia allowed the seemingly outrageous charges against Catherine to become more believable. Those who spread libel about Catherine knew how to effectively target her reputation until her name became synonymous with the wicked Machiavellian legacy.

However, to firmly establish Catherine's Machiavellian reputation, these accusations needed to spread and reach the appropriate audiences. Originating from elite men who hoped to dispossess Catherine, libel was disseminated systematically throughout Paris and beyond, irrevocably damaging her reputation. Much of the disseminating scandal and rumors stemmed from parlementaires, who were the most literate group in society and at the hub of information and news in Paris.[113] These men wrote verses in Latin, often sacrificing facts to make their prose more lyrical and impressive to others.[114] Parlementaires spread scandalous libel against Catherine and other women of her court to ease male gender anxieties, which arose when women diverged from their typical gender roles. When

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[105] "Marvelous Discourse" in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, pp. 172-3.
[106] "Marvelous Discourse" in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, p. 179.
[107] "Marvelous Discourse" in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, p. 168.
[108] Heller, *Anti-Italianism in Sixteenth-Century France*, p. 130.
[109] Heller, *Anti-Italianism in Sixteenth-Century France*, p. 130.
[110] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1995), p. 5.
[111] Heller, *Anti-Italianism in Sixteenth-Century France*, p. 81.
[112] Medici, "Letter of February 8 and 9, 1579," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, p. 104.
[113] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 75.
[114] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 65.

a woman's power or actions became uncomfortable for men, they could simply target their reputation without evidence. Michiel wrote that Catherine conducted herself "not as a woman, but rather as a most courageous man."[115] Catherine was taking on a man's role; according to some, she was doing so rather well. It was not her failures but rather her controversial rise to power that prompted attacks on Catherine's reputation.

In sixteenth-century France, scandalous information took on a variety of formats, easing its propagation and appealing to wider audiences. Although the dissemination of scandal had a long history and was not isolated to Catherine and her ladies, Brantôme acknowledged that "during his [Charles IX's] reign, the great libellers began however to come into fashion."[116] This libel took on two main modes: text in prose, such as the *Marvelous Discourse,* and satirical works often written in verse, known as pasquils or pasquins.[117] The parlementaires wrote in Latin, a language not accessible to most of the population.[118] Therefore, to adequately disseminate the rumors, these restrictive works were translated into more accessible forms, such as graffiti, songs, woodcuts, cheap translated printouts, public postings, theater, and mere oral gossip.[119] Aiding in the production and distribution of satirical works was Pierre de L'Estoile, a contemporary Parisian diarist who would collect, copy, memorize, and spread scandalous political writings.[120] All of this was done in an almost orchestrated, circulating pattern through Paris, effectively spreading libel in entertaining and obtainable manners from the courts to the public.[121] Paris was a crowded city with an oral culture accustomed to scandal; therefore, whether factual or not, rumors quickly spread. Despite the gossip's malevolent origins, in the end, Catherine's reputation propagated mainly for entertainment purposes.

Catherine de' Medici passed away on January 5, 1589,[122] after a lifetime of fighting for her family, France, and herself. Catherine ceaselessly faced the tumultuous adversity that seemed to follow in her very shadow until the day she died. After the death of Charles IX, Catherine wrote to her son Henry, who was acting as the king of Poland at the time, to ask him to return as the king of France. She spoke of her despair at having lost so many children and told Henry, "for if it had been you whom I had just lost, I would have myself buried alive with you."[123] Perhaps, then, it was for the best that Catherine passed when she did. Her son Henry III would be assassinated within a year,[124]

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[115] Michiel, "Letter from Venetian Ambassador to France, after Returning from His Legation in 1561," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, p. 115.

[116] Quoted in McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 81.

[117] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 62.

[118] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 61.

[119] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation.*

[120] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 70.

[121] McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation,* p. 74.

[122] Mocenigo, "Venetian Ambassador in France, Letter of January 6, 1589," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 137.

[123] Medici, "Letter of March 31, 1574," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,*ed. Chang and Kong, p. 95.

[124] William B. Robison, "Bad Girl, Bad Mother, Bad Queen: Catherine de' Medici in Contemporary Fiction, Film, and History" in *Bad Girls and Transgressive Women in Popular Television, Fiction, and Film,* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 165.

ending the Valois dynasty and, with it, all that for which Catherine worked so hard. The successor to the throne was then Henry of Navarre, becoming Henry IV. Although he and Catherine did not see eye to eye, Henry IV came to Catherine's defense after her death:

> But I ask you, what could the poor woman do…Wasn't it necessary that she play many roles to fool both while protecting her children, who reigned one after the other, thanks to the guidance of such a shrewd woman? I am surprised that she never did worse![125]

Henry IV pointed out Catherine's impossible position. Despite her constant opposition, she did her best to keep the peace: an impossible task for any ruler, as seen through the religious wars that enveloped most of Europe at the time. Correro noted that "all the resolutions of peace or war that did not satisfy the nation are blamed on the queen."[126] As a result of France's inability to embrace foreign female rule, Catherine became a scapegoat for any troubles the kingdom faced.

Despite the unimaginable level of authority she maintained as a female ruler and her valiant efforts, as Catherine said, at "governing myself in such a way that God and the world will have occasion to be content with me,"[127] France embraced her villainization. Ultimately, Catherine died misjudged and lonely, and her body was treated accordingly. She was temporarily buried in Blois, but due to improper embalming, had to be buried in an unmarked grave for twenty-one years.[128] In his 1963 biography of Catherine, Héritier described the tragedy: "Madame Catherine had slept for twenty-one years, almost forgotten, in the soil of France; that soil which she had so dearly loved, served, and defended; that soil which she had saved."[129] In tirelessly taking on the role of protector for her children and France, Catherine was left without anybody to defend her. In 1569, Giovanni Correro wrote, "Nevertheless, she is loved by nobody, or if she is, it is only from fear."[130] In addition to being devastating for Catherine, the loss of so many of her loved ones may have also played a role in the development of her reputation, as nobody was left to fight for her honor. It seemed as if the very same kingdom she had dedicated her life to had turned against her.

Towards the end of one of his letters written in 1575, Michiel said of Catherine: "it is as if she believes she will never die,"[131] and this rhetorical remark came to fruition in many ways. Catherine's legacy, as unfairly inaccurate as it may be, stands formidable. Unfounded rumors surrounding Catherine de' Medici weaseled their way through time and implanted themselves as historical fact. The myths encapsulating Catherine were initially hinged on undermining her dominance, though at present, her reputation in popular culture has been reduced to the villainous

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[125] Quoted in Wellman, "Catherine de' Medici," In *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France,* p. 273.

[126] Correro, "Letter from Ambassador to France in 1569," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 131.

[127] Medici, "Letter of December 7, 1560," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 71.

[128] Knecht, *Catherine De' Medici,* p. 269.

[129] Héritier, *Catherine de Medici,* p. 469.

[130] Correro, "Letter from Ambassador to France in 1569," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 131.

[131] Lippomano, "Venetian Ambassador in France in 1577," in *Portraits of the Queen Mother,* ed. Chang and Kong, p. 136.

character of the "Serpent Queen." Her legend has become increasingly morphed and ignorant, disintegrating any remaining kernels of truth regarding her successes as a political leader and a mother. The "Black Legend" has been perpetuated through fiction and nonfiction for five centuries,[132] reaching a broad audience as the libel once did during its initial dissemination in Paris. Like her early years as a pawn for the Medici family, Catherine's fate lies in the hands of others. Contemporaries and historians alike rewrote her history, turning Catherine into a wicked monster while ignoring her true identity.

Catherine's paradoxical legacy is summarized well in verses reminiscent of an epitaph written by L'Estoile:

> The queen who lies here was a devil and an angel,
> Full of blame and full of praise…
> …She bore three kings and five civil wars,
> Had chateaux built and towns destroyed,
> Made many good laws and bad edicts.
> Salute her passing, heaven and hell.[133]

Even amongst her critics, the disparity is evidence of the lack of credibility behind the myths. Catherine was charged with being too feminine and weak while also said to have the ambition of a king. She was timid and cowardly, yet a Machiavellian mastermind. Ultimately, Catherine's truth became muddled by her array of conflicting characterizations. Basing their hatred on misogyny and anti-Italianism, libel spread, turning Catherine's reputation into a weapon. The persistence of Catherine's legacy can be attributed to present-day society's similarities. The tragic power an unfounded remark can have on a woman's reputation and, on the other hand, the lack of belief in a woman's word and her capabilities, as well as looking upon foreigners as evil, are pretty familiar narratives. By looking at the development of Catherine's reputation, one can comprehend the sad reality that it is not uncommon for past lies to become today's history. Catherine should be revered for her sacrifices, motherhood, and attempts for peace; those who continue to propagate her false legacy as a "Serpent Queen" perpetuate the stigmas we should instead be dismantling.

[132] Robison, "Bad Girl, Bad Mother, Bad Queen," p. 159.

[133] Quoted in Wellman, "Catherine de' Medici," in *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France,* p. 225.