

Devotion, Influence, and Loyalty: Reevaluating Queen Louise de Lorraine-Vaudémont's Political and Diplomatic Role in Early Modern France

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Being a queen consort in late sixteenth-century France meant living in the shadow of the powerful and authoritative dowager queen, Catherine de Medici, whom Natalie Zemon Davis considers “the best example” of a woman exercising power in early modern France.¹ Three of Catherine’s sons became king of France following the death of their father, Henry II, in 1559: Francis II (1559–1560), Charles IX (1560–1574), and Henry III (1574–1589). Francis’s wife, Mary, has received significant scholarly attention, albeit primarily because she was queen of Scotland in her own right. By contrast, Elisabeth d’Austria, consort to Charles IX, and Louise de Lorraine-Vaudémont, consort to Henry III, remain largely obscure denizens of the French sixteenth-century court.²

Born on 30 April 1553, Louise was the daughter of Nicholas de Lorraine, Count de Vaudémont and later Duke de Mercoeur, and Marguerite d’Egmont, who died when Louise was just eleven months old. Her paternal grandfather, Antoine de Lorraine, was the brother of Claude de Lorraine, Duke de Guise, who was Marie

¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, “La Femme ‘au politique,’” in *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, vol. 3, *XVIe–XVIIIe siècle*, ed. Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge, 2nd ed. (Paris: Perrin, 2002), 218.

² Simon Bertièrre, *Les Reines de France au temps des Valois: Les années sanglantes* (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 1994), 14–15.

de Guise's and Francis de Guise's father. This close affiliation with the powerful house of Guise concerned Catherine de Medici when her son Henry III announced his intention to marry Louise in 1575, as the dowager queen clearly remembered the family's influence over her first son, Francis II, during his brief reign.³ However, Louise would go on to prove her unflinching loyalty to the Valois dynasty, and the two women eventually established a strong bond.

In the last few decades, historians and scholars such as Caroline zum Kolk, Nicolas Le Roux, and Fanny Cosandey have examined the political complexity of the French court and its impact on its queens.⁴ In early modern France, the role of the queen at court could be a very difficult one. As Fanny Cosandey ironically asks, "Does the queen of France exist?"⁵ Mostly due to the influence of the Salic Law on French dynastic politics, early modern French queens, unless they were powerful mothers of kings, have attracted less attention.

Despite Louise's elite family background and central role as queen consort to a monarch who ruled France during one of the most turbulent periods in the nation's history, she remains a largely forgotten figure.⁶ Very few historians have shown any

³ Jacqueline Boucher, *Deux Épouses et reines à la fin du XVI^e siècle* (Saint Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 1995), 33–34.

⁴ See Caroline zum Kolk, "Les femmes à la cour de France au XVI^e siècle. La fonction politique de la maison de Catherine de Medici (1533–1574)," in *Femmes de pouvoir et pouvoir des femmes dans l'Occident médiéval et moderne*, ed. Armel Nayt-Dubois and Emmanuelle Santinelli-Foltz (Les Valenciennes: Presses universitaires de Valenciennes, 2009), 237–58; Nicolas Le Roux, *Un régicide au nom de Dieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006); Nicolas Le Roux and Caroline zum Kolk, "L'historiographie de la cour en France," in *The Court in Europe*, ed. Marcello Fantoni (Rome: Bulzoni, 2012), 89–106; Fanny Cosandey, "Les femmes en politique, transgression ou alternative? Les rapports de pouvoir à la cour de France (XVI^e–XVIII^e siècles)," in *Féminité et masculinité altérées: Transgressions et inversion des genres au Moyen-Age*, Micrologus' Library 78, ed. Fanny Abbott and Eva Pibri (Florence: Sismel Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2017), 301–22; Aubré David-Chapy, *Anne de France, Louise de Savoie, inventions d'un pouvoir au féminin* (Paris: Garnier Classiques, 2016); Kathleen Chevalier-Wilson, "Madeline de Savoie and Anne de Montmorency, Portraiture as Agency in Paris Region Sacred Spaces," in *Das Porträt als kulturelle Praxis*, ed. Eva-Betina Krems and Sigrid Ruby (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2016), 177–91.

⁵ Fanny Cosandey, "Le droit, la politique et la monarchie française: De lance en quenouille, la place de la reine dans l'Etat moderne (14^e–17^e siècles)," *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 52, no. 4 (July–Aug. 1997): 799–820, at 799: "La reine de France existe-t-elle?" Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁶ For further examples of forgotten queens, see Valerie Schutte and Estelle Paranque, eds., *Forgotten Queens in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Political Agency, Myth-Making, and Patronage* (London: Routledge, 2018). For more on queens consort and their important political roles, see Anne J. Cruz and Mihoko Suzuki, eds., *The Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe* (Urbana:

interest in her, let alone attempted to assess her political agency within its historical context. For instance, the nineteenth-century chroniclers Edouard Meaume and Charles de Baillon merely characterize her as a discreet queen consort.⁷ While their works provide some useful biographical information and sources, they tend to overlook the full extent of Louise's role at the French court both during her husband's reign and after his death. She was far more than merely "a positive aspect of the court," as she had her own agenda and political interests, including maintaining close relations with her Lorraine-Guise relatives and defending her husband's reputation following his assassination in 1589.⁸

Unsurprisingly, Louise de Lorraine is closely associated with—and all too often overshadowed by—her husband's reign and perceived failures. Above all, the royal couple failed to produce heirs to the French throne, which meant the end of the Valois dynasty. Gossip about sterility and speculation about fertility blighted Henry and Louise's reign from the outset, with rumors of a pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage circulating around the court in the winter of 1575.⁹ Providing an heir was considered the first duty of every medieval queen, and indeed every early modern one, and Louise's inability to perform this essential task cast a shadow over her.¹⁰ Moreover, it has led generations of historians to view her as irrelevant. In his recent 350-page biography of Henry III, Robert Knecht pays scant attention to the queen consort.¹¹

Another biographer, Jacqueline Boucher, has contrasted Louise with Marguerite de Valois, Henry III's sister, comparing their religiosity, their marriages, and their legacies. However, while her research helps to clarify the complex dynamic at the heart of the Valois court, some of her claims, especially regarding the rivalry between the two women, are less convincing as they had different political roles

University of Illinois Press, 2009); Clarissa Campbell Orr, ed., *Queenship in Europe, 1660–1815: The Role of the Consort* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and *Queenship in Britain, 1660–1837: Royal Patronage, Court Culture, and Dynastic Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly and Adam Morton, eds., *Queens Consort, Cultural Transfer and European Politics, c. 1500–1800* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁷ Edouard Meaume, *Étude historique sur Louise de Lorraine, Reine de France* (Paris: Leon Techener, 1882); Charles de Baillon, *Histoire de la reine Louise de Lorraine* (Paris: Leon Techener, 1884).

⁸ De Baillon, *Histoire*, 5.

⁹ Jacqueline Boucher, *La Cour de Henri III* (Rennes: Ouest France, 1986), 16–17.

¹⁰ Boucher, *Cour*, 17–18.

¹¹ Robert Knecht, *Hero or Tyrant? Henry III of France, 1574–1589* (London: Ashgate, 2014).

to play at court and beyond.¹² Boucher certainly sheds new light on Louise's self-representation and her roles as queen consort and dowager queen. While she discusses Louise's political significance, this article goes further and explores Louise's influence in the Valois and Bourbon courts.¹³ Similarly, while Ghislain Tranié begins to analyze Louise's political role, she mostly focuses on Louise's education and reputation and is not primarily concerned with her political activities and her involvement in diplomacy.¹⁴ Other scholars have highlighted Louise's importance at the French court as an invaluable patron. In her chapter on Nicholas Houel, Susan Broomhall does reveal Louise's influential assistance to this French apothecary.¹⁵ Furthermore, Louise's link to the Jesuits during Henry's reign shows "her own spiritual interests, as well as with the preferred religious expressions of her husband and the political interests of her natal relatives who promoted the ultra-Catholic cause."¹⁶ Both works suggest that Louise had and exercised a measure of political independence.

Hence, this article returns to Louise with a new set of questions in mind concerning her political and diplomatic role at the French court. Her political views and influence can be gleaned from the many letters she sent to the Guise matriarch Anne d'Este, her husband's counselors, foreign monarchs, and, after her husband's death, the new king, Henry IV. In this way, Louise acted as a crucial mediator between the French crown and the Guises; she performed a significant advisory and diplomatic role at the French court; and, finally, she deployed her political agency as a dowager queen after Henry III's death. Throughout this time, her loyalty to Valois interests, and especially to her husband, never wavered.

While Berti re insists that historians have overlooked Louise de Lorraine because "she barely played a role in history, [as she had] neither the desire nor the talent for it," this article demonstrates that she was actually an influential figure at the

¹² Boucher, *Deux  pouses*.

¹³ Although Boucher touches briefly on Louise's political agency, she does not explain how this made the queen an important figure at the French court. See Boucher, *Deux  pouses*, 202–12.

¹⁴ Ghislain Trani , "Louise de Lorraine (1553–1601): L'esprit et la lettre d'une reine de France" (MA thesis, IRCOM / Centre Roland Mousnier, Universit  de Paris–Sorbonne, 1999–2000), accessed 24 Feb. 2019, <http://cour-de-france.fr/article1582.html>.

¹⁵ Susan Broomhall, "Hearts on Fire: Compassion and Love in Nicolas Houel's *Traitt  de la Charit  chrestienne*," in *Ordering Emotions in Europe, 1100–1800*, ed. Susan Broomhall (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 125–26.

¹⁶ Susan Broomhall, "Devoted Politics: Jesuits and Elite Catholic Women at the Later Sixteenth-Century Valois Court," *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 2 (2015): 586–605, at 605.

French court throughout the final quarter of the sixteenth century.¹⁷ Her behavior and strategies were certainly discreet, but her pervasive influence demands scrutiny.

Mediation between the French Crown and the Lorraine, Guise, and Nemours Families

Louise's father was a Lorraine and first cousin, once removed to Francis I, Duke de Guise, husband of Anne d'Este. Anne was the daughter of Ercole II, Duke de Ferrara—a son of Lucrezia Borgia and grandson of Pope Alexander VI—and Renée de France, the daughter of King Louis XII. In other words, she was one of the best-connected noblewomen in Europe.¹⁸ With such an impressive lineage and royal blood, her marriage to Francis made the Guises an even stronger European noble family, and the couple played a major role at the French court after their arrival there in 1548.¹⁹ Francis died in 1563, but three years later Anne married another high-ranking aristocrat—Jacques de Savoy, Duke de Nemours. She was also the mother of Henry I de Guise, Louis, cardinal de Guise, and Charles, Duke de Mayenne, as well as being a close friend of Catherine de Medici.²⁰ Her two marital unions, impeccable connections, and formidable children ensured that Anne enjoyed significant political power both at court and in wider society. At her death on 17 May 1607, she received two effusive eulogies worthy of a queen.²¹ During her lifetime,

¹⁷ Bertière, *Reines de France*, 285.

¹⁸ On the Guise women's political power, see Penny Richards, "The Guise Women: Politics, War and Peace," in *Gender, Power and Privilege in Early Modern Europe: 1500–1700*, ed. Jessica Muns and Penny Richards (Harlow: Pearson, 2003), 159–70; Una McLivenna, "'A Stable of Whores': The 'Flying Squadron' of Catherine de Medici," in *The Politics of Female Households: Ladies-In-Waiting across Early Modern Europe*, ed. Nadine Akkerman and Birgit Houben (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 200.

¹⁹ Holt Parker, "Morata, Fulvia Olympia," in *Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance: Italy, France, and England*, ed. Diana Robin, Anne R. Larsen, and Carole Levin (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC CLIO, 2015), 269. On the Guises' role in European politics, see Jonathan Spangler, *The Society of Princes: The Lorraine-Guise and the Conservation of Power and Wealth in Seventeenth-Century France* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

²⁰ See Eliane Viennot, "Veuves de mère en fille au XVI^e siècle: Le cas du clan Guise," in *Veufs, veuves et veuvage dans la France d'Ancien Régime*, ed. Nicole Pellegrin and Colette Winn (Paris: H. Champion, 2003), 187–98.

²¹ Severin Bertrand, *Oraison funebre sur le trespas de tres-haulte, tres-illustre et tres-vertueuse Princesse Anne d'Est, Duchesse de Chartres, de Guyse, Nemours, Genevois* (Paris, 1607); *Le sieur de*

as we shall see, she had displayed exceptional political skill and positioned herself as the undisputed matriarch of her family.²² Such marital alliances invariably created strong political bonds between families, so, although Louise was not Catherine de Medici's first choice for her son Henry, she ended up being the perfect match because of her close personal ties to the Guises and the Nemours.²³ She understood her dual role as both a Lorraine and a Valois and cultivated cordial relations with her Guise and Nemours cousins, including Anne, whom she addressed as "my aunt."²⁴

Letter writing was a key activity for everyone at court. As James Daybell explains, "Letters worked to oil the wheels of kinship and patronage networks," and Louise certainly used her correspondence to maintain good relations between her blood relatives and the Valois dynasty.²⁵ According to Jennifer Summit, "Unlike oratory, writing could take shapes that actually upheld the demands of female modesty, privacy, and chastity," but expressing emotion in letters also had a practical function.²⁶ This was because taking the time to choose precisely the right words could help to secure positive responses to formal—and often political—requests. As Erin Sadlack explains, "Letters therefore reject a dichotomous gendering of public (masculine) and private (feminine) spheres."²⁷ Indeed, these two spheres merged into one, allowing queens and noblewomen to wield considerable political power in a male-dominated world.²⁸ Through the shrewd use of rhetorical devices such as

La Palud, *Discours funebre sur la mort de tres-illustre Princesse Anne d'Est Duchesse de Genevois, Nemours, Chartres* (Chambéry, 1609).

²² Hilarion de Coste, "Anne d'Est ou de Ferarre, Duchesse de Guyse et de Nemours," in *Les Éloges et vies de reynes, princesses, dames et damoiselles illustres* (Paris, 1630), 32–37, esp. 36.

²³ In 1571, Catherine had tried to marry her son to Elizabeth I, queen of England, but the age gap and the couple's religious differences scuttled the negotiations. She then suggested Anne Jagiellon, queen of Poland, daughter of King Sigismund and Bona Sforza, but Henry refused. See Boucher, *Deux Épouses*, 30–31, 33–34.

²⁴ Louise to Anne d'Este, Aug. 1576, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (hereafter BNF) MS Fr 3238, fol. 54.

²⁵ James Daybell, *Women Letters-Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1. On royal women's struggles to forge and preserve dynastic loyalty, see Caroline Dunn and Elizabeth Carney, eds., *Royal Women and Dynastic Loyalty* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

²⁶ Jennifer Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History, 1380–1589* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 168.

²⁷ Erin Sadlack, *The French Queen's Letters: Mary Tudor Brandon and the Politics of Marriage in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7.

²⁸ See Susan Broomhall, "Ruling Emotions: Affective and Emotional Strategies of Power and Authority among Early Modern European Monarchies," in *The Routledge History of Monarchy*,

proclamations of affection, Louise used her letters to Anne d'Este to position herself as the principal mediator between two of France's most powerful houses.

At first sight, the two women's correspondence seems to focus almost exclusively on personal matters. For instance, in August 1576, Louise lamented to Anne: "It is said that I am pregnant, but I am very sad to reveal that it is not the case, it will happen when it pleases God."²⁹ This and many other declarations of deep, personal emotion are interspersed with countless expressions of undiluted affection, such as "I kiss your hands, my aunt,"³⁰ "I kiss your hands a thousand times,"³¹ "my aunt, consider me always as the most affectionate kin you have,"³² and "you will never have someone who loves you more than I do."³³ Interestingly, Catherine de Medici was similarly fond of the phrase "I kiss your hands," especially when writing to her son—and Louise's husband—Henry.³⁴ It is likely safe to assume that Anne reciprocated Louise's terms of endearment, although her letters have not survived—at least to the best of my knowledge. As Louise wrote after more than a decade of intimate correspondence, "Your letters always please me greatly."³⁵

While it is always difficult to assess the level of sincerity in correspondence exchanged between important political figures, Louise's letters certainly seem to

ed. Elena Woodacre, Lucinda H. S. Dean, Chris Jones, Russell E. Martin, and Zita Eva Rohr (London: Routledge, 2019), 668–85. Other works have focused on the importance of women's letters, such as Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450–1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb, eds., *Women's Letters across Europe, 1400–1700: Form and Persuasion* (London: Routledge, 2005).

²⁹ Louise to Anne d'Este, Aug. 1576, BNF MS Fr 3238, fol. 54: "quant au bruit que l'ont faict que je suis grosse, je suis fort marie qu'il net vray; se serat quant il plairat a Dieu."

³⁰ Louise to Anne d'Este, Sept. 1580, BNF MS Fr 3238, fol. 56: "je vous bayse les mains, ma tante."

³¹ Louise to Anne d'Este, Oct. 1580, BNF MS Fr 3238, fol. 50: "je vous bayse les mains un milliers de foi."

³² Louise to Anne d'Este, Oct. 1580: "ma tante, consideres moy tousjours comme vostre plus proche parente."

³³ Louise to Anne d'Este, 18 June 1585, BNF MS Fr 3238, fol. 40: "vous naures jaymai personne quy vous ayme plus que moy."

³⁴ See, e.g., Catherine de Medici to Henry III, 17 Feb. 1587, in *Lettres de Catherine de Médicis*, vol. 9, 1586–1588, ed. M. Le Cte Baguenault de Puchesse (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1905), 176.

³⁵ Louise to Anne d'Este, June 1585, BNF MS Fr 3238, fol. 48: "vos laitrrre me seront tousjours fort agreable."

be characterized by openness and candor.³⁶ She never requested personal favors, nor attempted to position herself as a major player in political affairs. However, there is no doubt that she utilized the close personal relationship she forged with Anne in order to mediate between the French royal family and the Guise-Lorraine clan.³⁷ This role of mediator is exemplified in a letter of September 1580, during which Louise eulogized her “handsome and good husband” and informed her aunt that she was “the happiest woman on earth . . . wanting to live only for him . . . I beg you to remember him through me as I am only him but in a different body.”³⁸ The notion that Louise was a physical extension of her husband strongly suggests that she had a voice in political matters, and especially marital alliances. It also indicates that she embraced monarchical authority, albeit to a limited extent, through the person of her husband. This is just one of many implicit references to Louise’s active participation in affairs of state in her correspondence with Anne.

In 1584, Catherine de Medici and Henry III were determined to negotiate a marriage between Catalina Micaela—Catherine’s granddaughter and the second daughter of Philip II of Spain—and Charles-Emmanuel I, Duke de Savoy. That September, Catherine professed her profound desire for this alliance in a letter to Anne d’Este and asked for the latter’s support.³⁹ Immediately thereafter, Louise subtly and shrewdly reinforced her mother-in-law’s endeavor when writing, “I think you [Anne] are well informed of the resolution of the marriage between Monsieur de Savoie and the second infanta of Spain.” She also expressed the hope that “you will send requests and will give us, please, some news” concerning the proposed match. Given that both queens sent letters at the same time, one can assume that the “us” is a clear reference to Catherine and Louise and demonstrates that the latter

³⁶ Tranié discusses Louise’s sincerity in his chapter “Une Correspondence assidue: Les lettres de Louise de Lorraine et d’Anne d’Este,” in “Louise de Lorraine” (accessed 25 July 2019).

³⁷ Jacqueline Boucher briefly addresses this subject but fails to analyze Louise’s political role. See Boucher, *Deux Épouses*, 202–12.

³⁸ Louise to Anne d’Este, Sept. 1580, BNF MS Fr 3238, fol. 22: “mon sy baux, bonn mary,” “estant la plus heureuse fame du monde,” “ne voullant vivre que pour luy,” “je vous supplie le faire souvenir toujours de moy qui ne suis que de corp elloinee de luy.”

³⁹ Catherine de Medici to Anne d’Este, 1 Sept. 1584, BNF MS Fr 10240, fol. 80. On Catherine and her relations with her Spanish granddaughters, see Estelle Paranque, “Catherine de Medici’s Grandmotherhood: The Building of Emotional and Political Intergenerational Relationships,” *Renaissance Studies* 34, no. 3 (2019): 412–29.

played an important role in the marriage negotiations.⁴⁰ Although Louise is typically polite and even flattering toward her aunt at first, the letter's conclusion is little short of an order to provide the writer with information, which once again hints that this was a queen consort who enjoyed and exercised considerable political authority. Moreover, it seems that she was a skillful negotiator, as the couple duly married in 1585.

It was not long before her talents were employed again, this time to help negotiate a marriage between another of Catherine's granddaughters, Christine de Lorraine, and Charles-Emmanuel de Nemours. Henry III himself informed Anne d'Este of his "desire to see this union for the good and contentment that we hope everyone will get from it."⁴¹ He also told the duchess to expect a letter on the matter from his mother. However, Catherine's letters to Anne from around this time include no mention of the union.⁴² Louise, however, did raise the subject with her aunt. In a letter dated 5 October 1585, she insisted that "the king and the queen are very pleased [about the marriage and] I believe Monsieur de Lorraine [Duke Charles III] will be too. . . . As for me, I am so pleased that all of my people are so close to one another."⁴³ Here, Louise clearly showed her true support to the cause and was eager to share this with the Lorraine, Nemours, and Guise clans. Unfortunately, on this occasion, mounting political tension between Charles-Emmanuel's father—Anne's husband, the Duke de Nemours—and Henry III meant her efforts were in vain.⁴⁴

Although Louise remained devoted to Anne d'Este—to whom she invariably signed her letters "your very good niece, Loyse"⁴⁵—relations between the Guise-Nemours and Valois families became increasingly fraught throughout the 1580s.

⁴⁰ Louise to Anne d'Este, Sept. 1584, BNF MS Fr 3238, fol. 52: "je croy que saves tres bien la resollution du mariage de M. de Savoie avec l'infante d'Espagne: vous anveres a cet faict et nous an manderés."

⁴¹ Henry III de France to Anne d'Este, 2 Oct. 1585, BNF MS Fr 3397, fol. 8: "desire de voyr ceste union pour le bien et le contentement qu'on espere toulz le monde an obtiendra."

⁴² Catherine to Anne d'Este, 2 Oct. 1585, BNF MS Fr 3364, fol. 18; Catherine to Anne d'Este, 15 Oct. 1585, BNF MS Fr 3364, fol. 20.

⁴³ Louise to Anne d'Este, 5 Oct. 1585, BNF MS Fr 3238, fol. 58: "le roy et la royne ont ce mariage tres agrable; je croy que Monsieur de Lorraine l'orat semblable. . . . De moy, ma tante, je me resjouis infiniment pour m'aitre de tout coté et des miens cy proche qu'il sont."

⁴⁴ See Catherine de Medici to Jacques, Duke de Nemours, Oct. 1585, BNF MS Fr 3364, fol. 1; Catherine de Medici to Jacques, Duke de Nemours, 2 Oct. 1585, BNF MS Fr 3364, fol. 16. Christine de Lorraine ultimately married another suitor, Ferdinando I, Grand Duke of Tuscany, in 1587.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Louise to Anne d'Este, before Sept. 1586, BNF MS Fr 3238, fol. 26; Louise to Anne d'Este, before Sept. 1586, BNF MS Fr 3238, fol. 34: "Vostre tres bonne nyece, Loyse."

By the end of 1588, the eighth religious civil war, also known as the War of the Three Henrys, had been ravaging France and rupturing political alliances for three years. In December, Henry III took the fateful step of ordering the assassination of two of Anne's sons—Henry, Duke de Guise, and Louis, cardinal de Guise.⁴⁶ Numerous pamphlets laid the blame for their murder squarely at the feet of the king, while Louise continued to express unconditional support for her husband.⁴⁷ Regardless of her affection for Anne and the rest of the Lorraine-Guise clan, her sole loyalty was now to the Valois dynasty.

Inevitably, the outraged Guises sought revenge, and in February 1589, Anne and her only surviving son from her first marriage, Charles, Duke de Mayenne, arrived in Paris. The crowd came out in support and chanted, "Long live the Duke de Mayenne! Long live the Catholic princes!"⁴⁸ Three months later, "the Duke de Mayenne took his troops from Tourraine and Vandosmois" to ambush the king's forces, who fled in panic.⁴⁹ That Anne d'Este provided support to her remaining son was hardly surprising as at the death of her first husband, Francis, Duke de Guise, she and her sons "craved revenge."⁵⁰ This time was no different—the Guises were once more vengeful. The Parisian mob was now referring to Anne as the "Queen Mother," and indeed she had become one of the most powerful political figures in the country as well as an intractable enemy of Henry III of France.⁵¹ In the summer of 1589, Louise wrote to Anne and urged her to "recognize . . . his [Henry III's] good nature."⁵² These words could be construed as decidedly tactless, given that

⁴⁶ For more on the eighth religious civil war and the fall of Henry III, see Knecht, *Hero or Tyrant?*, 251–94; and Le Roux, *Régicide*, 100–197.

⁴⁷ Denis Crouzet, *Les Guerres de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion, vers 1525–vers 1610* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1990), 186–98.

⁴⁸ "Première Partie du tome premier, registre-journal de Henri III, publié d'après le manuscrit autographe de L'Estoile," in *Nouvelles Collection des mémoires pour servir l'histoire de France, depuis le XIIIe siècle jusqu'à la fin du XVIII*, ed. Messieurs Michaud and Poujoulat (Paris: Imprimerie Edouard Proux, 1837), 284: "longue vie au duc de Mayenne! Longue vie aux princes catholiques!"

⁴⁹ "Première Partie du tome premier, registre-journal de Henri III," 293: "le duc de Mayenne a envoyé ses troupes en Tourraine et Vandosmois."

⁵⁰ Stuart Carroll, *Martyrs and Murderers: The Guise Family and the Making of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 168.

⁵¹ Una McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation at the Court of Catherine de Medici* (London: Routledge, 2016), 155.

⁵² Louise to Anne d'Este, before Aug. 1589, BNF MS Fr 3238, fol. 44: "reconnoistre . . . sa bonne nature."

everyone, including Anne, knew that Henry had ordered the assassination of her sons. The letter also demonstrated Louise's determination to fulfill her role as mediator between the two families and to persuade the Guises to accept and respect her husband's royal authority. In other words, she clearly positioned herself as a fervent defender of the Valois dynasty and particularly her husband. Unfortunately for Louise, and especially for Henry, her efforts proved futile, as the king himself fell victim to an assassin a few days later. Henry de Navarre succeeded him as king of France.

A Figure of Influence at the French Court

More than a mere mediator between the Lorraine-Guises and the Valois, which in the end was not enough to unite the two houses, Louise also had the skills for undertaking other political duties. In 1579, Sir Henry Cobham succeeded Sir Amyas Paulet as English ambassador in Paris. The following year, in one of his dispatches to Lord Burghley and Sir Francis Walsingham, Cobham reported that he had been invited to dine in the residence of Catherine de Medici, who was "meaning to make a private banquet to the king, not as King of France, but Henry her son and his wife."⁵³ This meeting would take place in the midst of the negotiations over a possible union between Queen Elizabeth of England and Francis of Anjou—the French king's younger brother and Catherine's youngest son. Cobham's reference to "her son and his wife" not only suggests that the French queen mother was the dominant figure in the family but hints that marriage alliances were a central preoccupation of the French court at the time.

Later in the same letter, Cobham described what happened after the banquet. He was received in the "upper 'hende' of the chamber, where he [Henry] and his Queen being placed in their chairs, he commanded me to sit on the right-hand side beside his person. The Pope's ambassador, and the ambassadors of Savoy and Ferrara, who had dined among certain ladies, were placed round about behind him."⁵⁴ This precise description of the seating arrangements was much more than an incidental detail: the fact that the royal couple positioned themselves in the middle of the ambassadorial contingent once again signaled the importance of royal marriages

⁵³ Cobham to the Secretaries, 21 Feb. 1580, State Papers (hereafter SP) 78/4A.

⁵⁴ Cobham to the Secretaries, 21 Feb. 1580.

and alliances to the Valois dynasty.⁵⁵ While one can argue that this anecdote was merely revealing the expected function of a queen consort in ritual and ceremonial protocols of the French court, the fact that he took the time to describe it in such detail shows that Louise played her diplomatic and political part as expected of French rulers. Furthermore, although this was ostensibly a social evening—Cobham reported that Henry danced with his queen, then “this dance being done, the king and queen after their measures returned to their places”—in reality it was a diplomatic and political opportunity for Louise to present herself as a central figure in the royal household.⁵⁶

Once this part of the evening was over, “their Majesties arose, and I waited on them into an adjoining chamber.”⁵⁷ Cobham and the Portuguese ambassador “were met as before at the gate, and so accompanied to the great chamber: at the upper end of which we found the young queen already set, with her lords and ladies about her. After obeisance done, she appointed me on her right hand between her and the Princess of Lorraine, and the Portugal ambassador on her left between her and the Princess Dowager of Condé. The Pope’s nuncio and the other ambassadors took their places behind the queen.”⁵⁸ Here, Cobham portrays Louise as a diplomatic figure during an audience with several important ambassadors. As he explains, she placed herself at the very center of the group, which allowed her to direct both the seating arrangements and the festivities. Again, the English ambassador was clearly a favored guest, which was hardly surprising given that the marriage negotiations between Francis of Anjou and Elizabeth were reaching a critical stage. Cobham reported that it had pleased Louise “very much to speak of her Majesty’s [Elizabeth’s] peaceable government, and of her own desire of once seeing her, and of her marriage with Monsieur [Francis]. From this she ‘entered’ to speak of her apparel, showing her gown. . . . It was of cloth of silver, figured with a damask branch of embossed

⁵⁵ Although Catherine was the instigator of the banquet, illness prevented her from attending. She would have probably occupied the central position during the postdinner entertainment had she been present. In her work, Fanny Cosandey explains the complexity behind the role of a queen in sixteenth-century France as “first lady of the realm”; Cosandey, “La maîtresse de nos bien’: Pouvoir féminin et puissance dynastique dans la monarchie française d’Ancien Régime,” *Réflexions Historiques* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 381–401, esp. 387–89. For Catherine de Medici’s authority at court during Henry III’s reign, see also Fanny Cosandey, “Puissance maternelle et pouvoir politique. La régence des reines mères,” *Clio. Femmes. Genre. Histoire* 21 (2005): 69–90, esp. 86.

⁵⁶ Cobham to the Secretaries, 21 Feb. 1580.

⁵⁷ Cobham to the Secretaries, 21 Feb. 1580.

⁵⁸ Cobham to the Secretaries, 21 Feb. 1580.

gold and coloured silk, powdered with H for the King's name, and W signifying Vive. She said further she heard that the queen [Elizabeth] delighted in the attire of France."⁵⁹ This exchange with Cobham sheds light on Louise's talent for diplomacy. She took care to praise Elizabeth first as an adept monarch who ruled over a peaceful realm and only then as a potential wife for Francis—an ordering of compliments that the English queen would have appreciated. Indeed, although the marriage was the principal preoccupation of the French court at the time, Louise mentioned it only briefly, almost casually, before moving on to other topics. Nonetheless Cobham still saw fit to report the French queen's comment to his mistress, so it had the desired effect of increasing the pressure on Elizabeth to reach the correct decision regarding Anjou. Later, equally adroitly, Louise shifted the conversation to fashion, a subject that was sure to appeal to Elizabeth, who was well known for her fascination with royal clothing. Again, this ensured that Cobham would report his conversation with the French queen with meticulous care. At the end of the evening, "the Queen rose and licensed the Ambassadors, so we returned to our lodgings."⁶⁰ In other words, it was Louise, rather than her husband, who dismissed the diplomats. In the absence of Catherine, who was suffering from a "rhume fallen into her throat,"⁶¹ the French queen consort had proven more than capable of overseeing an important diplomatic event at the French court.

It was not the first time that the English ambassador noticed Louise's presence and diplomatic role. In a joint letter written with Sir Amyas Paulet sent a year earlier, Cobham revealed that he "turned to the young Queen, whom I found standing hard by [the] Queen Mother, using to her some 'accomplements' and delivering your Majesty's letters, beseeching her to be the means to the King her husband for the better preservation and continuance of the amity, and so make you [Elizabeth] feel the singular goodness whereof she has great fame in this country and elsewhere."⁶² Louise was represented here as a conduit to the king himself. Of course, other queens consort had performed a similar role for their husbands. However, given the dynamic of the French royal family and the prominence of Catherine de Medici, this letter further demonstrates that Louise had a serious diplomatic and political role to play at this point. Cobham continued his letter stating that "the

⁵⁹ Cobham to the Secretaries, 21 Feb. 1580.

⁶⁰ Cobham to the Secretaries, 21 Feb. 1580.

⁶¹ Cobham to the Secretaries, 21 Feb. 1580.

⁶² Paulet and Cobham to Elizabeth I, 17 Nov. 1579, SP 78/3, fol. 45.

young Queen enquired, as she opened your letter, if your Highness had your health. I said, well, God be thanked. To my speeches she answered how she would not fail to entertain the amity of the Queen of England, which she found her husband held so dear. She wished you good health and happiness.”⁶³ While these can be seen as mere formalities, Louise was acting directly on behalf of Henry III. She was the one opening Elizabeth’s letter in front of the English ambassador and the queen mother of France. She displayed affection toward Elizabeth—as Henry would have done himself. In other words, in the eyes of the ambassador, Louise was no cipher.

Elizabeth herself reciprocated Louise’s display of affection and understood the French queen’s political importance. In September 1583, Elizabeth instructed her ambassador, Edward Stafford, “After your audience with the king, you shall, with Sir Henry, visit the King’s wife, delivering our letters with our hearty commendations, letting her understand our desire to hear of her well-doing, and praying her to continue the like good affection towards us, for the better entertaining of the amity between us and her husband, as we doubt not but she will.”⁶⁴ In other words, Louise played a role in Anglo-French relations that was valued by Elizabeth. The English queen only mentioned Catherine de Medici after she had instructed her ambassador to spend some time with the queen consort first. In addition, Cobham noticed that other ambassadors, such as Juan de Tassis, 1st Count of Villamediana, a Knight of the Military Order of Santiago and Spanish ambassador to the French court in 1581, were aware of Louise’s diplomatic importance. In an audience Tassis was given by Catherine de Medici, Cobham reported that Tassis handed over letters written by the Spanish infantas, Isabel Clara Eugenia and Catalina Micaela, to Louise instead of Catherine “using much more reverence to the young queen than to the Queen Mother.”⁶⁵

There were other ways, modes of performance almost, by which Louise could signal her political unity with her Valois husband. In January 1582, the English ambassador reported that “the young queen departed yesterday on her journey” toward the Chartres Cathedral, “intending to pass some part of it on foot, whereby her pilgrimage may be more meritorious.” He rapidly added, “it is moreover thought that the king will meet her at Chartres for the better accomplishment of their vows.”⁶⁶ One can safely assume that Louise’s public piety (which may, of course, have been

⁶³ Paulet and Cobham to Elizabeth I, 17 Nov. 1579.

⁶⁴ Instruction to Edward Stafford, Sept. 1583, SP 78/10, fol. 43.

⁶⁵ Cobham to the Secretaries, 28 Jan. 1581, SP 78/5, fol. 12.

⁶⁶ Cobham to Walsingham, 27 Jan. 1582, SP 78/7, fol. 16.

entirely genuine on her part) was calculated to reinforce Henry's own determination, which he manifested at various points, not to cede the Catholic mantle to others, notably the Guise family. This was particularly important when Henry was, in *politique* mode, trying to keep the peace and sustain some form of national unity—that is, in a period of seemingly endless civil and religious strife.⁶⁷

Despite Louise's inability to secure the Valois dynasty by providing an heir to the throne, Catherine was fond of her daughter-in-law, not least because of the steadfast devotion she had always displayed to the dowager queen and Henry.⁶⁸ In return, the queen mother supported Louise in any way she could and even upbraided her son when he was unfaithful to her. In 1585, the new English ambassador to Paris, Edward Stafford, reported, "There is no doubt but between *Queen Mother* and the *King* there is no good intelligence. . . . She was within these three days very melancholy with an advertisement that was given her very secretly that the King had gotten one of Madame d'Estres' daughters with child and meant to repudiate his wife and marry her presently, but I do not think he dareth do it."⁶⁹ This may have been no more than idle gossip, or the alleged mistress miscarried, as there is no evidence that Henry ever fathered an illegitimate child.⁷⁰ However, this did not prevent people at court trying to seduce the French king, as Christophe de Bassompierre in this case recalled: "She was daughter of Madame d'Estrées, this one being sixteen years old, beautiful and tall, offered it to the king (Henry III) through the intermediary of the Duke d'Epemon."⁷¹ Moreover, despite his numerous infidelities, Henry reciprocated Louise's devotion, remained profoundly attached to her until the end of his life, and certainly never seriously considered repudiating her.⁷² When he heard that his brother-in-law, Henry de Navarre, was considering divorcing his sister, Marguerite de Valois, the king informed his mother

⁶⁷ Other references to Louise's religiosity can be found in other ambassadorial letters, such as Cobham to Walsingham, 19 Mar. 1582, SP 78/7, fol. 40; and Cobham to Walsingham, 5 Jan. 1583, SP 78/9, fol. 6.

⁶⁸ Boucher, *Deux Épouses*, 129.

⁶⁹ Edward Stafford to Sir Francis Walsingham, 24 Jan. 1585/6, SP 78/15, fol. 20.

⁷⁰ It was rumored that Henry fathered an illegitimate daughter with Lady du Berry, and that both mother and daughter were prohibited from attending court to spare Louise's feelings. However, this has never been substantiated. See Boucher, *Cour*, 17.

⁷¹ M. de Lescure, *Les Amours de Henri IV* (Paris: Librairie de Achille Faure, 1864), 178: "Elle étoit fille de madame d'Estrée . . . Celle-ci étant à âge de seize ans, belle et de belle taille, l'offrit au roi (Henri III), par l'entremise du duc d'Epemon."

⁷² Boucher, *Cour*, 26–28, and *Deux Épouses*, 121–22.

that such a decision “would be against our religion” and promptly forbade it.⁷³ It was not only his strong Catholic faith and abiding affection for his wife that precluded the king from contemplating a divorce. He was well aware that Louise played a key role in many of Catherine’s diplomatic and political endeavors. Indeed, it may have been that the queen mother felt she could not afford to lose such a loyal and adept daughter-in-law, regardless of her inability to produce an heir. Catherine, Henry, and Louise all remained optimistic, and the royal couple continued to try every remedy—both medicinal and spiritual—in the hope of overcoming their misfortune.⁷⁴

In an account dated 16 December 1576, the latest English ambassador to the French court, John Smith, reported that Catherine de Medici had received him in “the Queen Mother’s chamber,” where she was accompanied by “other ladies, young and old, fair and foul, to the number of nine or ten,” including Louise, whom the ambassador “commended as very fair and of good presence” before continuing that she was “clear-skinned, but without colour, of stature convenient if she be not heightened with high ‘pantobulls,’ she stoops, and bears her head something forward, but has very womanly and modest countenance, and her face reasonably well formed, but for presence or majesty of a princess she has none.”⁷⁵

It is worth highlighting two points in Smith’s account. He begins by acknowledging Louise’s “good presence” and notes that she stood by Catherine’s side but also comments on her physical appearance. The ambassador implicitly acknowledges that Louise is a force to be reckoned with. However, he is then at pains to minimize her significance: “but for presence or majesty of a princess she has none.” It seems likely that Smith included this rather dismissive comment in the hope of reassuring his mistress that her French counterpart could not rival Elizabeth’s own splendor. His report concludes: “Her attire was all in black, as all the rest of the ladies were, but of no comeliness, and therefore not worthy to be described to your Majesty.”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, although he attempted to portray Louise as a minor player who lived in Catherine’s shadow, it should be remembered that the dowager queen had invited her daughter-in-law to attend the audience. This, in itself, suggests that Louise was a key member of Catherine’s diplomatic team, rather than the inconsequential figure whom the ambassador described. Furthermore, there is ample evidence that

⁷³ Henry III to Catherine de Medici, Jan. 1587, in *Lettres de Catherine de Médicis*, 9:437: “ce seroit chose contraire à nostre religion.”

⁷⁴ Boucher, *Deux Épouses*, 140–41.

⁷⁵ John Smith to Queen Elizabeth I of England, 16 Dec. 1576, SP 70/141, fol. 50.

⁷⁶ John Smith to Queen Elizabeth I of England, 16 Dec. 1576.

Louise was given, and fulfilled, specific diplomatic tasks. For instance, in June 1580, Henry III sent Jehan de Pilles, the abbot d'Orbais, on a special assignment to Rome. Pilles was a *secrétaire ordinaire* in the chamber of Louis, cardinal de Guise, and his mission was to persuade the pope to grant the cardinal the abbeys of Corbye and Ourscamp. This was an important undertaking, so it featured prominently in the letters of Henry, Catherine, and Louise over the next few months. Their comments on the subject illuminate the true nature of the power dynamic in France's royal family at the time.

On 24 June 1580, Henry outlined Pilles's mission to his ambassador in Rome, Louis Chasteigner, sieur d'Abain.⁷⁷ On the same day, in a letter to his secretary Nicholas de Neufville, seigneur de Villeroy, the king reported that his mother "is still feeling poorly" but "my wife will remain with her to serve her."⁷⁸ Therefore, we know that Catherine and Louise were in each other's company on 24 June. This is significant, because both women also wrote to d'Abain on that day in order to clarify the envoy's objectives.⁷⁹ The diplomatic language they used is very similar, which suggests that they wrote their letters in unison or at least conferred on the contents. For instance, each of them terms her missive "a little word."⁸⁰ Louise's letter then continues: "I beg you, as I do, with all my affection, to intercede with his Holiness that with his goodwill is granted to my said cousin the grace of the concession of the abbeys of Corbye and Ourscamp."⁸¹ Catherine's tone is slightly more formal, but the message is almost identical: "I beg you to intercede with his Holiness that with his goodwill is granted to the cardinal de Guise the said concessions."⁸² These letters demonstrate that the two queens had the necessary political power and authority to make requests alongside the king. This may come as no surprise with regard to Catherine, but it sheds new light on Louise's role.

⁷⁷ Henry III to Monsieur d'Abain, 24 June 1580, BNF MS Fr 23614, fol. 25.

⁷⁸ Henry III to Nicolas de Neufville, seigneur de Villeroy, 24 June 1580, BNF MS Fr 3585, fol. 59: "se sent touljours mal," "ma fame restera avecques pour la servyr."

⁷⁹ Catherine to Monsieur d'Abain, 24 June 1580, BNF Ms Fr 23614, fol. 149; Louise to Monsieur d'Abain, 24 June 1580, BNF MS Fr 23614, fol. 112.

⁸⁰ Catherine to Monsieur d'Abain, 24 June 1580; Louise to Monsieur d'Abain, 24 June 1580: "ung petit mot."

⁸¹ Louise to Monsieur d'Abain, 24 June 1580: "je vous pryé, comme je le fays, avecques toulte mon affection, d'intervenyr avecques sa Sainteté qu'avecques sa bonne volonté soy accordees a mon dict cousyn la grace des concessions des abbayes de Corbye et Ourscamp."

⁸² Catherine to Monsieur d'Abain, 24 June 1580: "je vous pryé d'intervenyr avecques sa Sainteté qu'avecques sa bonne volonté soy accordees aul Cardinal de Guyse les dictes concessions."

Henry and Catherine wrote several further letters to the French ambassador in Rome over the course of the following month, whereas Louise did not.⁸³ However, in early August, when Henry decided to send another special envoy to the pope, both he and his wife drafted letters to Monsieur d'Abain.⁸⁴ In this case, the envoy was Godefroi de Billy, son of Louis, seigneur de Prunay, governor of the city of Guise, and he carried letters from the king and queen that recommended him for the position of abbot of the abbey of Saint-Martin of Laon.⁸⁵ Again, Louise used typically emotional language when urging d'Abain to introduce de Billy to the pope: "I beg you for the love of myself to let him be present during the audience with the pope where you will present the letter I have written to Our Very Holy Father."⁸⁶ These letters from the summer of 1580 confirm that Louise was a significant diplomatic player at the French court, especially on issues relating to the Guise family. She was particularly proficient in the use of emotional language, which was an essential tool of medieval diplomacy, as Susan Broomhall has demonstrated.⁸⁷ Broomhall explains that "emotions operated as a form of power in early modern elite diplomatic relations."⁸⁸ For instance, Louise shrewdly deployed the phrase "for the love of myself" to remind d'Abain of his responsibilities toward her, his mistress. Furthermore, her repeated use of the language of affection in her letters allowed Louise to highlight her elite status as both a Lorraine and a Valois. Consequently, Henry and Catherine fully appreciated the importance of maintaining her allegiance as they pursued their political agendas.

⁸³ Henry III to Monsieur d'Abain, 2 July 1580, BNF MS Fr 23614, fol. 291; Catherine to Monsieur d'Abain, 7 July 1580, BNF MS Fr 23614, fol. 113; Henry III to Monsieur d'Abain, 20 July 1580, BNF MS Fr 16041, fol. 229; Catherine to Monsieur d'Abain, 20 July 1580, BNF MS Fr 16041, fol. 131.

⁸⁴ Henry III to Monsieur d'Abain, 4 Aug. 1580, BNF MS Fr 23614, fol. 53; Louise to Monsieur d'Abain, 4 Aug. 1580, BNF MS Fr 23614, fol. 188.

⁸⁵ For more on Godefroi de Billy, see Charles-Louis Richard, *Bibliothèque sacrée ou dictionnaire universel historique, dogmatique, canonique, géographique et chronologique des sciences ecclésiastiques* (Paris: Chez Méquignon-Havard, 1827).

⁸⁶ Louise to Monsieur d'Abain, 4 Aug. 1580: "Je vous en supplie pour l'amour de moi-même de lui permettre d'être présent lors de l'audience avec le pape où vous lui présenterai la lettre que j'ai écrit pour Sa Sainteté."

⁸⁷ See Susan Broomhall, "Ordering Distant Affections: Fostering Love and Loyalty in the Correspondence of Catherine de Medici to the Spanish Court, 1568–1572," in *Gender and Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Destroying Order, Structuring Disorder*, ed. Susan Broomhall (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015), 67–86; and Susan Broomhall, ed., *Early Modern Emotions* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁸⁸ Broomhall, "Ordering Distant Affections," 68.

The political divisions in France deepened after the death of Francis of Anjou on 10 June 1584.⁸⁹ The Catholic League, led by the three Guise brothers, voiced their discontent regarding the new heir presumptive to the French throne—Henry III's brother-in-law, Henry de Navarre, leader of the (Protestant) Huguenots. They also expressed their annoyance over the French crown's apparent reluctance to rescue their cousin, Mary Stuart, from captivity in England.⁹⁰ The previous year, George, 7th Lord Seton, had arrived in Paris to lobby the French court to liberate Mary. Henry de Guise declared his support for Seton's mission, which merely caused the English and French rulers to form a defiant united front against him. Elizabeth's principal secretary Sir Francis Walsingham instructed Edward Stafford, the English ambassador at the French court at the time, to keep a close eye on Seton.⁹¹

Two months later, in his report on Anjou's funeral, Stafford informed Walsingham that "The King the day before sent Gondi to tell me that, as I was ambassador from the Princess that he was sure loved his brother most, and as myself was the ambassador that had in his lifetime honoured and loved him most, so he (Henry) was desirous to see me afore any other."⁹² Seton then waited for Stafford to leave the room where "the King, Queen Regent and Queen-Mother, being all together in one chamber" received the commiserations of Europe's ambassadors. Stafford concluded his letter with the assertion that "the Queen of Scots, and Lord Seton here, and that party, have intelligence one from another."⁹³ In other words, the English ambassador was convinced that his Scottish counterpart was communicating directly with Mary, which posed a threat to the English crown. It is noteworthy that Stafford chose to list Louise before Catherine, as the queen mother was typically named first in reports of events at which both women were present. This suggests that Louise played a diplomatic role at this time of acute crisis in the French court.

Seton was sent back to Scotland after a series of fruitless audiences with the French king. Nevertheless, both Henry and Louise wrote directly to Mary's son,

⁸⁹ See Mark P. Holt, *The Duke of Anjou and the Politique Struggle during the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 184–214.

⁹⁰ Mary was also a former queen consort of France as she had been the wife of Henry III's eldest brother, King Francis II.

⁹¹ Edward Stafford to Sir Francis Walsingham, 2 Apr. 1584, SP 78/11, fol. 68.

⁹² Edward Stafford to Sir Francis Walsingham, 21 June 1584, in *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. the Marquis of Salisbury, Preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire*, vol. 3, 1583–1589, 39.

⁹³ Edward Stafford to Sir Francis Walsingham, 21 June 1584.

King James VI, to express their desire to maintain good relations between the two countries. Henry wished to “reassure my good brother the king of Scotland of my sincere friendship towards him” and let him know that he had chosen “the soft way [*la voie douce*] to free the queen of Scotland, your mother.”⁹⁴ In other words, Henry had no intention of liberating Mary by force; he preferred a diplomatic solution. By contrast, Louise did not mention Mary in her letter, but she left James in no doubt about her husband’s “desire . . . to continue and maintain the ancient amity, alliance and confederation, that exist between you [Henry and James], your realms, countries and subjects.”⁹⁵ Although, in itself, this letter may seem insignificant, it reveals that Louise was trusted to undertake even the most delicate diplomatic missions, especially when her mother-in-law was indisposed.⁹⁶

Dowager Queen and Loyal Supporter of the Crown

For a long time the reign of Henry III has been characterized as a failure. The king certainly proved incapable of securing the Valois dynasty because of his and Louise’s inability to produce an heir, and this led directly to the dynastic crisis that began in earnest with Anjou’s death in June 1584. The eighth religious civil war was almost inevitable as soon as the Protestant Henry de Navarre became France’s heir presumptive, and Henry III’s authority was increasingly undermined and contested from that moment until his death.⁹⁷ Indeed, both the king’s and his mother’s reputations have been indelibly tainted by the roles they played in the French wars of religion that ravaged the country from 1562 to 1598.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Henry III to James VI of Scotland, 27 June 1584, BNF MS Fr 3304, fol. 132: “assurer mon bon frere le roy d’Escosse de mon amytyé sincere envers luy . . . la voie douce affin de liberer la reyne d’Escosse, vostre mere.”

⁹⁵ Louise to James VI of Scotland, 28 June 1584, BNF MS Fr 3304, fol. 133: “desirez . . . de continuer et mainstenir l’anciennne amytye, alliance, et confederation quy existe entre vous, vos reualmes, pais et subjetz.”

⁹⁶ Catherine was ill when Seton was dispatched back to Scotland, which may explain why Louise assumed the task of reinforcing her husband’s message to James.

⁹⁷ See Le Roux, *Régicide*, 8–10.

⁹⁸ See Nicola Sutherland, “Catherine de Medici: The Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 9, no. 2 (1978): 45–56; Fanny Cosandey, *La Reine de France: Symbole et Pouvoir, XVe et XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000); Katherine Crawford, *Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). On the rehabilitation of the reputation of Henry III, see Boucher, *Cour*; Estelle Paranque, “Another Spare to the French Crown: Henry III of France’s Self-Representation, Reputation, and Royal

Louise lost both her mother-in-law and her husband in 1589: Catherine passed away from a lung infection in early January, while Jacques Clément, a fanatical friar and fervent supporter of the Catholic League, assassinated Henry on 2 August.⁹⁹ However, Louise did not seize this opportunity to slip into a peaceful retirement. Instead, over the final twelve years of her life, she became a defender of both the Valois legacy and Henry de Navarre's right to rule France as Henry IV.¹⁰⁰ This pitted her against most of her blood relatives—the Guises, the Lorraines, and the Nemours—all of whom supported the Catholic League in its ongoing fight against Henry IV.

As Pierre de Bourdeille, abbot de Brantôme, explained in his chronicle of France's noblewomen and queens, Louise "was suspected, during her husband's lifetime, to be more inclined toward the party of the League, because she was a good Christian Catholic, she loved the ones who defended and fought for her faith and religion; but she never loved them, after they had assassinated her husband, never asking for any revenge or punishment other than the one God will be pleased to inflict."¹⁰¹ In other words, after marrying Henry, Louise became a true Valois and felt that her duties as his wife and queen were more important than her responsibilities to her family—the Lorraine-Guise clan—who joined the Catholic League in direct opposition to her husband's rule.

Several months after Henry's death, Giovanni Mocenigo, the Venetian ambassador at the French court, reported that Louise was still "in mourning and in great pain."¹⁰² She was determined to harness that pain to avenge her husband's

Authority," in *Unexpected Heirs in Early Modern Europe: Potential Kings and Queens*, ed. Valerie Schutte (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 139–58, and "Catherine of Medici: Henry III's Inspiration to Be a Father to His People," in *Royal Mothers and Their Ruling Children: Wielding Political Authority from Antiquity to the Early Modern Era*, ed. Elena Woodacre and Carey Fleiner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 225–40.

⁹⁹ Abel Hugo, *Histoire générale de France depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Delloye, 1841), 614.

¹⁰⁰ Boucher, *Deux Épouses*, 307.

¹⁰¹ Pierre de Bourdeille, abbé de Brantôme, *Vies des dames illustres françaises et étrangères* (Paris: Louis Moland, 1868), 428: "on la soupçonnoit, durant la vie de son mary, qu'elle penchoit un peu du party de l'Union, à cause que toute bonne chrestienne et catholique qu'elle estoit, elle aimoit ceux qui debattoient et combattoient pour sa foy et religion: mais elle ne les a jamais aimés, ains du tout quittés après qu'ils eurent tué son mary, n'en reclamant autre vengeance ny punition que celle qu'il plairoit à Dieu d'envoyer."

¹⁰² Dispatch of Giovanni Mocenigo, Oct. 1589, BNF MS Italian 1738, fol. 55r: "en deuil et en tres grand payne."

death. Royal guards had killed the assassin himself almost as soon as he had stabbed Henry, but Louise knew that he had not acted alone: the Guises and their followers had orchestrated the king's murder. The Venetian ambassador continued, "It is said that the dowager queen has asked for the parliament of justice in Tours to demand justice against the houses of Lorraine-Guise who are suspected of plotting against her late husband."¹⁰³ The attorney general, Jacques de La Guesle, wrote personally to Louise to inform her that the parliament had acceded to her request.¹⁰⁴ The end result was the trial and execution of a certain Edme Francis Bourgoing, a Dominican priest who was accused of assisting Clément.¹⁰⁵

Thereafter, Louise turned her attention to securing a solemn funeral in Rome for her husband as the Most Christian King of France. However, shortly before the king's death, tensions had arisen between Henry and Pope Sixtus V. The pope had accused the king of supporting heresy and also demanded an explanation for the assassinations of the Duke de Guise and the cardinal de Guise in December 1588.¹⁰⁶ Henry had failed to respond immediately, and his untimely death meant that the issue was never resolved. Nevertheless, Louise continued to lobby the pope on her late husband's behalf.¹⁰⁷ On 1 October 1589, she sent a special envoy, Jacques de Montmorin, to Rome to demand a papal declaration denouncing "the horror of such an enormous crime" and "to forbid all priests, bishops, archbishops, especially those in Paris, to speak against the honor and memory of Henry III."¹⁰⁸ The pope acknowledged the royal couple's personal commitment to Catholicism and praised Louise's virtue but refused to issue the declaration.¹⁰⁹ He died ten months later. The next four popes were all similarly favorable to the League, which made Louise's mission virtually impossible. Clement VIII, who was elected pope on 2 February

¹⁰³ Dispatch of Giovanni Mocenigo, Oct. 1589, fol. 54r: "on dict que la reine douariere de France a. demande aulx parlement de la justyce de Tours d'exiger justyce a l'encontre des maisons de Lorraine-Guise quy sont sous suspicion pour complot a l'encontre de son feu mary."

¹⁰⁴ Jacques de La Guesle to Louise, 17 Jan. 1590, BNF MS Fr 3473, fol. 1.

¹⁰⁵ For more on his role regarding Henry III's assassination, see Boucher, *Deux Épouses*, 312.

¹⁰⁶ Boucher, *Deux Épouses*, 312–13.

¹⁰⁷ Henry III had been buried without a royal funeral in the abbey of Saint-Corneille de Compiègne. More than twenty years later, he was finally reinterred with his predecessors at the basilica of Saint-Denis.

¹⁰⁸ Louise to Monsieur Jacques de Montmorin, 1 Oct. 1589, BNF MS Fr 3473, fol. 116r: "Thorreur de cest enorme crime," "d'interdire toutz les pretres, eveques, archeveques, particulièrement ceulx de Paris, de parler a l'encontre de l'honneur et de la memoire d'Henry III."

¹⁰⁹ Report of Monsieur Jacques de Montmorin, 1589, BNF MS Fr 3473, fol. 201r.

1592, wrote to her on 20 June of that year, once again refusing her request and expressing the wish that “the past did not bother her so much.”¹¹⁰

Louise remained undaunted and launched a prolific correspondence with the French ambassador in Rome, Arnaud d'Ossat. Henry had appointed Ossat in 1584, so he was understandably loyal to the dowager queen. In his letters, he displayed genuine devotion to her cause and pursued every imaginable diplomatic channel in a bid to secure the solemn funeral she craved for her late husband. However, at every turn, he faced opposition from cardinals and archbishops with close ties to the Catholic League.¹¹¹ For instance, on 16 April 1591, although he expressed the hope that an unnamed cardinal would eventually agree that it was “a just cause,” he felt that simply “too many leaguers” were opposed to the endeavor for it ever to succeed.¹¹² Nevertheless, the ambassador and the dowager queen continued their campaign to restore Henry III's reputation. For Louise loyalty to her late husband's memory was inseparable from loyalty to the French crown, and she refused to abandon either.

Francis de Joyeuse, one of the late king's favorites, had become a cardinal on 12 December 1583. As a Commander of the Order of the Holy Spirit, he had arrived in Rome in 1587 and thereafter worked closely with Ossat in the service of Henry himself and, later, his widow.¹¹³ In August 1594, Louise informed Joyeuse of her “desire to continue the pursuit I have started in Rome for the memory of the late king my lord . . . I promised myself to have soon a positive resolution . . . I beg you very affectionately to continue and pursue on that subject thanks to the credit and favor that I know you have.”¹¹⁴ A month later, she wrote again: “I have great assurance that you remember my late king my lord and the affection you have to protect his memory and the honors which are his . . . that I do not need to express

¹¹⁰ Pope Clement VIII to Louise, 20 June 1592, BNF MS Fr 3473, fol. 33r: “que le passé ne la marryé pas tant.”

¹¹¹ Ossat to Louise, 22 Jan. 1591, BNF MS Fr 3473, fol. 3r; Ossat to Louise, 15 Feb. 1591, BNF MS Fr 3473, fol. 7r; Ossat to Louise, 15 Apr. 1591, BNF MS Fr 3473, fols. 16r–18v.

¹¹² Ossat to Louise, 16 Apr. 1591, BNF MS Fr 3473, fol. 20r: “ung juste cause,” “de trop nombreux ligueurs.”

¹¹³ Antoine Aubery, *Histoire du cardinal, duc de Joyeuse* (Paris: Robert Denain, 1654), 41.

¹¹⁴ Louise to Cardinal Joyeuse, 29 Aug. 1594, BNF Nouv. Acq. Fr 3102, fol. 38: “desirer vouloir porter a la poursuite que je faiz faire a Rome pour la memoire du feu Roy Monseigneur . . . je me prometz d'avoir bien tost une bonne yssue . . . je vous prie bien affectueusement d'employer et continuer sur ce subject la faveur et le credit que je sçay que vous y avez.”

more particular recommendations. But I think that I need to disclose something that could profit our cause, I have written again to the Cardinal Aldobrandini [nephew to Pope Clement VIII] and to the cardinal of Aragon [Ottavio Acquaviva, archbishop of Naples] as I was told they could do a lot and I have asked Ossat to solicit them and so should you.”¹¹⁵ These letters demonstrate Louise’s determination to enhance her late husband’s reputation. She was clearly willing to use all of her political and diplomatic connections in order to achieve her ultimate goal of a solemn funeral for Henry. However, she was destined to fail.

The following year, in another letter to Joyeuse, Louise expressed not only her discontent but her frustration at the pope’s intransigence: “I find the responses of his Holiness strange, as he is so pious and Christian and when it comes to the memory of such a great king and of such a great realm, he again wants to use delays and dilatory ruses to the point where it seems there are more maxims and considerations of state than of Catholics. Excuse the just passion that carries me.”¹¹⁶ Louise’s anger is palpable. She knew that the pope’s refusal to grant Henry the honor she desired had nothing to do with her late husband’s commitment to Catholicism; rather, it was, and always had been, dictated by politics and the growing power of the Catholic League. It seems that she had expected better from a pope who was supposed to appreciate the great Catholic realms of Europe and support them through their monarchs. Moreover, the letter’s exasperated tone suggests that she had finally reached the conclusion that her political and diplomatic networks—as impressive as they were—would never be sufficient to resolve the matter in her favor. Yet, she still refused to admit defeat. As late as 10 March 1599, Ossat informed her that he had “been appointed cardinal and [he would] pursue the requests that are so

¹¹⁵ Louise to Cardinal Joyeuse, 27 Sept. 1594, BNF Nouv. Acq. Fr 2750, fol. 1r: “j’ay tant d’assurance sur la souvenance que vous avez du feu Roy Monseigneur et a l’affection de faire rendre a sa memoire les honneurs qui luy sont deubz . . . il n’est pas besoing de vous en faire de plus particulieres recommandations. Mais par ce que je reconnois qu’il m’est besoing de n’y obmettre chose qui y puisse proffiter, j’en escriptz encor de nouveau au cardinal Aldobrandin et a celluy d’Arragon que l’ont m’a assuree y pouvoir beaucoup et ay donné charge au sieur d’Ossat de les en solliciter et vous pareillement.”

¹¹⁶ Louise to Cardinal Joyeuse, 1 Sept. 1595, BNF Nouv. Acq. Fr 2750, fol. 15v: “je trouve fort estranger les remises de Sa Sainteté, qui en chose si pieuse et chrestienne et a l’endroit de la memoire d’ung si grand roy et d’ung tel royaume, il vueille encor user de tant de remises et dilations, ou il semble qu’il y a plus de maxims et considerations d’estat que de catholicques. Excuez la passion qui me porte.”

dear to you concerning your late husband . . . with the support of the Duke de Joyeuse who is very affectionate to this cause."¹¹⁷

Louise's tireless efforts to defend her husband's honor reveal several key aspects of her personality. She had been a faithful and loyal servant to the Valois dynasty throughout her husband's reign, and she remained true to this cause even after his death. She pursued her goal with determination. Indeed, her quest to secure honor and justice for Henry III extended beyond Rome and into France itself. For instance, on 16 November 1595, she wrote to Henry, Duke de Montmorency and constable de France.¹¹⁸ Originally a fervent supporter of the Catholic League and Spain, he had switched allegiance to the camp of Henry III and Henry de Navarre, then continued to support the latter after his accession to the throne.¹¹⁹ Louise requested his "assistance for two most affectionate recommendations. . . . The first is justice for the death of the king my lord and the second concerns the burial of his body which has been for so long a duty from this state."¹²⁰ The dowager queen considered the lack of a royal funeral and Henry's interment in the abbey of Saint-Corneille de Compiègne, rather than Saint-Denis, as insults to her husband's memory, and she held Henry IV personally responsible for not doing his duty toward his predecessor.¹²¹ More importantly, it was rumored that the king was about to issue an edict that would pardon Charles de Lorraine, Duke de Mayenne—brother of the assassinated Duke de Guise and cardinal de Guise—whom Louise considered one of the chief architects of her husband's murder. Henry IV wrote directly to the dowager queen in a bid to placate her.¹²² He explained that he had decided to "take back in good grace my cousin the Duke de Mayenne, [because] I could

¹¹⁷ Ossat to Louise, 10 Mar. 1599, BNF MS Fr 3473, fol. 9r: "nommé Cardinal et je continueray les requeste que vous maves faicte quy sont si chere a vous concernant vostre feu mari . . . avec le soutien du Duc de Joyeuse quy est tres affectionnes de ceste cause."

¹¹⁸ Henry's father, Anne, had also been constable of France during the reigns of Francis I, Henry II, Francis II, and Charles IX.

¹¹⁹ Francis de Crue, *Le Parti des politiques au lendemain de la Saint-Barthélémy: La Molle et Coconat* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1892), 44–48.

¹²⁰ Louise to Henry, Duke de Montmorency, 16 Nov. 1595, BNF MS Fr 3597, fol. 1: "d'assistance de vous sur les deux plus affectionnees recommandation . . . la premiere et la jeustice de la mort du roy Monseigneur, l'autre l'anteremant de son cors quy de lontan atant ce devoir de cest esta."

¹²¹ Le Roux, *Régicide*, 339.

¹²² Henry IV to Louise, 24 Jan. 1596, in *Recueil des lettres missives d'Henri IV*, Supplément, 1566–1610, ed. Julien Guadet (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1872), 8:585.

not find any proofs that have been at my disposition that he is the author of, or consented to, the said assassination."¹²³

Regardless of whether the Duke de Mayenne had planned or consented to the plot, however, he had surely been aware of it, but he had done nothing to alert Henry III. In short, he had chosen the Catholic League over the crown, a crime that Louise viewed as unforgivable.¹²⁴ She tried to argue her case in a reply to the king's letter, but her sense of helplessness is manifest: "In my misfortune I am alone in bearing my request and particularly when it comes to annoy you further, without doubting your clemency and goodwill that have been demonstrated before . . . but I am reduced to this point to be continually importuned to have to ask for justice regarding the parricide and miserable assassination of the late king my lord."¹²⁵ Louise had pleaded for justice for her husband ever since 1589, and she clearly understood that she had become an irritation to the new king. Nevertheless, she refused to abandon her campaign, even when it entailed attacking members of her own family:

I tell you, my lord my brother, that I desire nothing more in this world than to see the good resolution of your affairs and peace in this realm, being constrained and forced to the peril of my own blood without being so happy to be able to serve my cause. Concerning Monsieur du Mayenne, I would love him and his kin to be innocent regarding my just pain, but nevertheless, from what needs to proceed, I am only asking for justice, humbly begging you to remember the promises you have made to me while holding my hand and the declarations made formally where I would not try to complain if this were put on the path of justice that I have been seeking and in which I cannot spare or excuse anyone.¹²⁶

¹²³ Henry IV to Louise, 24 Jan. 1596: "de reprendre en ma bonne grace mon cousin le duc de Mayenne, je ne m'y eusse peu resouldre si par aucunes preuves il m'eust appareu qu'il soit autheur ou consentant au dict assassinat." The king did indeed pardon the Duke de Mayenne in the Edict of Folembray, which he issued in January 1596.

¹²⁴ On this, see Le Roux, *Régicide*, 336–37.

¹²⁵ Louise to Henry IV, 7 Feb. 1596, BNF MS Fr 15910, fol. 372: "avoir en mon malheur ce bien que je puisse seulle le supporter et particulièrement pour ne vous ennuyer davantage, ne doutant point que vostre clemance et debonneretay asses experimantee ne vous en apporte du resantiment memes une compassion tres grande, mais puis que je suis reduite a ce point qu'il faudra que je soie continuellement importunee pour avoir reson du parricide et miserable assassinat commis en la personne du feu roy Monseigneur."

¹²⁶ Louise to Henry IV, 7 Feb. 1596: "je vous diré, monsieur mon frere, que je ne desire rien plus que de veoir un bon et heureux establissement en vos affaire et repos de ce reaume m'y resenant

Fearlessly, Louise showed no desire for reconciliation with her cousin the Duke de Mayenne. Instead, she bluntly asked the king to honor promises he had made that the duke would face trial for his role in the demise of her late husband and demonstrated her loyalty when explaining that she was simply demanding justice for everyone. She ended the letter with a concise elucidation of what she viewed as her responsibilities as a wife and dowager queen: "I would rather be closer to the end of my languishing life than see this affair unresolved[,] which would be to the prejudice of my duty."¹²⁷ The principles of justice, loyalty, and both regal and marital duty defined Louise's actions over the last twelve years of her life as she continued to fight for what was always likely to be a lost cause.

One of the dowager queen's final tactics was to seek help from Diane de France, Duchess d'Angoulême, the daughter of King Henry II of France and his mistress Filippa Duci, who had been legitimized in 1548. Diane had supported her half brother Henry III during the eighth religious civil war, and she was also close to Henry IV.¹²⁸ In March 1596, Louise wrote to Diane to bemoan the "declaration of this edict that concerns this awful parricide."¹²⁹ She also thanked Diane for her support and acknowledged "the assurance of your affection" before signing the letter "your very good sister, Loyse."¹³⁰ We do not have Diane's reply. However, we know that Louise's request was once more rejected. Louise's forlorn fight for justice demonstrated her loyalty to the French crown, her late husband, and the Valois dynasty. She may have been born a Lorraine, but she considered herself a Valois queen from the moment that she married Henry III. Although she was

telemant oblige que je vouderais au peril de mon propre sanc estre cy heureuse que de vous y pouvoir servir. Pour le regart de Monsieur du Mayne, je serés bien aise que luy et les siens se trouve innocent du suget de mes jeuste douleur et néanmoins, d'ou qu'il procede, je ne puis que je n'en demande justice, vous suppliant bien humblement avoir souvenance de vos promesses qu'il vous a plu me faire que vous m'y tiendres la main et que la declaration soyt faicte selon les forms ordinaires ou jaurais ocquasion de me plendre, si on me fermoyt le chemyn de la justyse que je en recherche et an laquelle je ne puis espargner ny exepeter personne."

¹²⁷ Louise to Henry IV, 7 Feb. 1596: "je voudrois aitre plus tot au dernier soupir de ma languissante vie que de voir passer en ceste affaire quelque chose au prejudice de mon devoir."

¹²⁸ Augustin Jal, *Dictionnaire critique et biographie et d'histoire: Errata et supplément pour tous les dictionnaires historiques* (Paris: Henri Plon, 1867), 52.

¹²⁹ Louise to Diane de France, 15 Mar. 1596, BNF MS Fr 2751, fol. 293: "de cet edict a ce qui concerne ce malheureux parricide."

¹³⁰ Louise to Diane de France, 15 Mar. 1596: "toute assurance de vostre affection . . . Vostre tres bonne soeur, Loyse."

unable to fulfill the principal queen consort role of producing an heir, she continued to defend Valois interests and rights even after the dynasty's demise.

Brantôme wrote that Louise was "a very beautiful and honest lady" who "only cried and prayed to God for his soul" after the death of her husband.¹³¹ However, as the historical record and especially her own correspondence demonstrate, Louise did far more than that. During her husband's reign, she played a key diplomatic role and engaged with ambassadors on a variety of delicate issues. This meant she was a queen consort with significant political influence—or what one could call "soft power," as her letter to James VI of Scotland exemplifies. More importantly, she was a highly influential mediator between the houses of Lorraine-Guise and Valois. This role entailed using her personal relations to advance Henry's and Catherine's agendas, many of which were in direct opposition to the interests of Louise's birth family. Therefore, there can be little doubt that she was well aware of her husband's and mother-in-law's political maneuvers and ambitions. Far from the mere "pious wife" that Brantôme describes, the queen was a significant player in the court politics of 1570s and 1580s France.¹³²

Reevaluating Louise's role at court during Henry III's and Henry IV's reigns makes us think again about the role of a queen consort in early modern Europe. This largely forgotten, seemingly marginal figure was actually one of the political players at the French court who, at times, used her voice to influence the politics and diplomatic issues of the era. In the end, she was not that discreet, almost invisible queen that most historians portray. Rather, she was fighting for her husband's cause, an astute diplomat who served the interests of her husband and mother-in-law, and one of the chief negotiators between the Lorraine-Guise clan and the Valois dynasty. Analyzing her role sheds new light on the interconnections among the numerous political networks in France. More importantly, it illuminates the power dynamics that prevailed in the court of the final Valois king. Catherine de Medici may have been queen mother, but Louise was queen consort and then dowager queen—two roles that demanded skill, dedication, and commitment. There is no denying that she possessed all three.

¹³¹ Brantôme, *Vies des dames*, 423 and 428: "une très belle et fort honneste demoiselle," and "employant ce temps à le pleurer et regretter, et à prier Dieu pour son âme."

¹³² Brantôme, *Vies des dames*, 424: "une femme pieuse."