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A PORTRAIT OF POWER:
THE IMPORTANNCE OF MARGUERITE DE VALOIS IN SIXTEEN CENTURY
FRECH ROYAL POLITIC

by

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Chapter 1

Religion and Politics

Sixteenth-century France was a place of great turmoil and uncertainty. Years of warring with Italy and Spain had depleted the royal treasury. The Reformation had left religious feelings tense and the country was on the brink of an all-out civil war between the Catholics and Huguenots. In the midst of all of these problems, the Valois, the dynastic royal family, seemed threatened with extinction. The popular King Henri II (1547-1559), had been killed in a bizarre jousting accident, leaving the country to face the official rule of the young and weak Francis II (1559-1560) and the beginning of the unofficial rule of the Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici. (Dunn 1959, 23; and Tracy 1999, 146)

Catherine de Medici (1520-1589) was ruthless in her attempts to preserve the throne for her children. Through marriage and intimidation, Catherine attempted to use her children to solve the dynastic, political, and religious problems that beset the Valois monarchy. With the thriftiness bred into her by generations of merchant blood, Catherine kept one daughter, Marguerite (1552-1615), unmarried.¹ Catherine's actions proved far-sighted when religious tensions began to pose the most serious threat to the crown. In an attempt to appease the Huguenots and bring peace to the kingdom, Catherine was finally forced to part with her last unmarried child and agreed to the marriage of Marguerite to Henri de Bourbon, King of Navarre in 1572.

Marguerite's marriage and later actions played an important role in the Valois struggle to preserve its foundering dynasty and the later rise of Henri IV. This study will examine the part that Marguerite played in the attempts of the royal family to preserve its

¹. Commonly called Margot

power in the midst of a series of political and religious crises in the late sixteenth century. My research will show that despite the presence of a strong patriarchy, Marguerite was able to carve out a significant amount of power and influence for herself by displaying impressive political and diplomatic skills, both within and outside her family.

Oddly enough, the importance of Marguerite's role in French affairs has been largely ignored by historians. There is a scarcity of reliable information about her. Instead, there is a sort of myth that surrounds her and passes for fact. This myth was given fresh life with Alexandre Dumas' fictionalized account, La Reine Margot written in 1845, which portrayed Marguerite as cunning and sexually deviant. These charges were leveled at her during her own lifetime, but she herself always denied them and there is little historical evidence to support the myth. Instead, what reliable information does exist creates an intriguing portrait of how early modern royal women exercised power. In fact, Marguerite de Valois played an important role in the transition from Valois to Bourbon power that finally laid the foundations for a strong centralized monarchy and peace in France.

To understand the significance of Marguerite de Valois, it is important to grasp the religious and political background of the time. Marguerite's birth in 1552 occurred during a period of great social changes and tensions in France. The Reformation and northern humanism were transforming northern Europe culturally, socially, and religiously, and both played important roles in shaping Marguerite's life.

Northern Renaissance humanism, which began in the early sixteenth century, was personified by Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536). Erasmus and other northern humanists stressed classical education as a way to instill piety. (Rummel 1985, 3-4 and Tracy 1999,

45-46) As it took root in France, northern humanism helped to create a French culture that prized the literacy and learning displayed by many of the nobles of the time, including Marguerite de Valois.

In France, as in the rest of Europe, the Reformation was in part a response to the corruption and ineffectiveness of the Catholic Church. The profitable system of selling benefices or church offices, led to pluralism. Pluralism, or the holding of many benefices by one person, contributed to the ignorance and absenteeism of the clergy. Martin Luther's Protestant teachings offered frustrated European Christians an alternative. His emphasis on personal piety and an individual relationship with God was strongly attractive to disillusioned believers and his criticisms of ecclesiastical corruption gained him many adherents. (Tracy 1999, 47-55)

Yet, while Martin Luther was responsible for a great deal of the Reformation, he was not overly successful in France. (Neale 1959, 12-13) However, about ten years after Lutheranism exploded in Germany, a Frenchman named John Calvin (1509-1564) began to develop his own Protestant teachings. Calvin was a natural leader for French Protestants, as he was French himself. Although forced to flee from France to Switzerland in 1534, Calvin was able to gather enormous influence using his excellent communication and organizational skills. (Neale 1959, 16) By 1562, the Calvinists, called Huguenots in France, were about 7% of France's population. However, nearly half of the French nobility, including the King and Queen of Navarre, had converted to Calvinism, thereby causing a significant threat to the Catholic Valois monarchy. (Dunn 1959, 24; and Tracy 1999, 109-110)

The religious and political tensions were too strong to stay simmering beneath the surface. Eventually, these tensions erupted and a series of religious wars began. The first religious war raged from 1562-1563 when Marguerite was ten years old. This war was so devastating for both sides that Catherine de Medici was able to negotiate an uneasy peace. The second religious war (1567-1568) and third (1569-1570) saw defeats for the Huguenot rebels. After this, the Huguenots and Catholics contented themselves with various small-scale skirmishes and vicious massacres. Finally, Catherine grew tired of the constant tensions and decided to put an end to the Huguenots once and for all. After drawing thousands of Huguenots to Paris for the wedding of her daughter Marguerite and Henri de Bourbon in the late summer of 1572, Catherine convinced the king, Charles IX, to order the massacre of every Huguenot in the city. On August 24, 1572, the famous St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre was carried out, thus starting the fourth war of religion. This war consisted of a mostly perfunctory uprising by the Huguenots, as a good number of their military leaders had been slain in the massacre and the only two remaining, Henri de Navarre and his cousin, the Prince de Conde, were prisoners of the Valois. (Dunn 1959, 26)

More religious wars would be fought in France from 1585 to 1598. However, none of them accomplished much, with the exception of the last (1588-89). This final religious war is commonly called the "War of the Three Henris" after the three main protagonists; the Valois king Henri III, Henri de Navarre, and Henri de Lorraine, Duc de Guise. The War of Three Henris finally ended three decades of civil strife with the ascension of Henri de Navarre as Henri IV in 1589. (*History of the House of Valois* 2002, 141-151; and Dunn 1959, 27-29) In total, the French religious wars lasted for

thirty-six years, literally defining the lives of those, including Marguerite de Valois, unfortunate enough to experience them.

While religious wars were tearing the country apart, political rivalries continued to eat away at French peace as well. Upon the death of Henri II in 1559, François II was fifteen, which was old enough not to require an official regency. However, it was obvious to almost everyone at the time that François would be unable to rule by himself. Therefore, the coronation of a young king presented a ripe opportunity for ambitious noble families.

At that time there were three families that vied for influence over the young king; the Guise, Bourbon, and Montmorency. Although it was the Bourbons' right as first princes of the blood to be appointed to an official regency, they were out of favor in 1559 because of their connections to the Huguenots and the fact that they had a weak leader, Antoine de Bourbon, the King of Navarre. The Montmorency held power over the French military through their leader, Anne, Duc de Montmorency, the Constable and chief military officer of France.² The Montmorency's lands ran through a large part of central France and their political attitudes also tended to run to the center. They were a strongly Catholic family; therefore, they frowned upon the Bourbon Huguenots. They were also known as a family absolutely loyal to the Crown and, as such, they hated the Guise.

The Guise were one of the most ambitious families ever to live in France. The Guise lands ran along the eastern side of France and included the Duchy of Lorraine. By the time of François II, they were insufferably arrogant, often belittling the Bourbons, despite their technically inferior status, making them enemies of the Bourbons as well as

² Anne was the male head of the Montmorency. The Montmorency continued to maintain their moderate political views throughout the reigns of the last Valois Kings. The moderate "Politiques" that eventually gained the support of Henri IV were largely led by the Montmorency family.

the Montmorency. However, the Guise could occasionally afford to antagonize the other two powerful families. Although of lower birth than either the Bourbons or Montmorency, the Guise had tied themselves to the French monarchy through marriage. Mary of Guise, the sister of the Cardinal of Lorraine and François, the Duc de Guise, was the Queen-Mother and Regent of Scotland. Her young daughter Mary, Queen of Scots, was the wife of François II and the reigning Queen of France. (Neale 1959, 42-45)

Another element that contributed to France's unrest was the interference of foreign governments in French affairs. France was surrounded by powerful governments and, as France was essentially in the middle of all of these competing powers, the country was constantly being used or threatened by its neighbors. There was Spain, ruled by the Hapsburgs, to the south. Spanish influence was also felt to the north, as Spain controlled the areas of modern Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg as well. To its northwest, only the channel separated France from Tudor England, while to its east lie the Hapsburg Holy Roman Empire. In addition to France's naturally precarious geographic position, the mid-sixteenth century also saw the rise of many strong and long-lasting rulers who continually sought to keep the others in check. A few of these, such as Philip II of Spain and Elizabeth I of England, played direct roles in aiding or antagonizing France.

Other foreign powers, such as the papacy, also contrived to interfere with the vulnerable monarchy of France. For example, in the 1560s Catherine de Medici's original response as regent to growing religious tensions was one of moderation. However, that response was considered absolutely unacceptable by the papacy of Julius III. The Gallican Church, which was effectively headed by the French monarchy, gave Catherine de Medici plenty of financial and political reasons to retain good relationships

with Rome. However, as Julius III seemed to be taking an unhurried approach to assisting the Valois in creating a more effective policy, Catherine de Medici and the Cardinal of Lorraine contrived to create a national council to determine a permanent course of action with regard to the Huguenots. The Pope responded with great anger and fear, as the possibility of a schism seemed imminent, and he issued a bull announcing a continuation of the old Council of Trent, thereby preventing the monarchy from coming to any sort of useful decisions regarding the religious problems itself. (Neale 1959, 54-55)

However, French instability in the late sixteenth century cannot be entirely blamed on the Catholics and Huguenots. France faced other problems that contributed to its political and social tensions as well. One constant source of vexation to both the country and the crown was the lack of funds. As J.E. Neale puts it, “Financial stability is of course one of the main sources of strength of a state; and here was the French State about to enter a critical period in its history [the 1560s] with its credit ruined and colossal debts. The debt at the death of Henry II was over 40 million *livres*; the royal income then, much of which never reached the Treasury, was approximately twelve million.”

(35) The crown’s lack of resources and the continuing costs of the Valois-Hapsburg wars caused François II, under the advice of his mother, to push for even greater taxes than had already been levied. At one point, these taxes grew so burdensome that peasants began fleeing their lands to avoid paying them. (Neale 1959, 36; and Dunn 1959, 22)

Although the high rate of taxes certainly angered the lower classes of French society who were paying them, it did not help matters that the country was being ruled by the daughter of one of the wealthiest families in Italy, who was not accustomed to

denying herself material pleasures. Catherine de Medici drew on her private fortune to indulge herself in luxurious goods and extravagant building projects. These outward displays of wastefulness did not endear her to the French people, who were not particularly fond of the “foreigner” as it was. (Neale 1959, 41) Catherine, as the duchesse de Guise succinctly put it, “came from a family of tradesmen who are not fit to call themselves our servants.” (Hale 1977, 166) In fact, Catherine de Medici was generally considered a financial disaster for France from the day of her marriage to Henri II in 1533. As part of Catherine’s dowry, her uncle, Pope Clement VII, had promised the Valois control of several lucrative Italian cities. However, the death of the pope had prevented the transfer of those cities and that control had never materialized. Therefore, Henri and Catherine’s marriage did little to alleviate the royal treasury’s troubles.

Because she was a member of the ruling house of Valois, the condition of France’s monarchy played a direct role in shaping Marguerite de Valois’ life. The crisis that enveloped the dynasty quickly caught Marguerite in its web and thrust the young princess onto the center stage of French politics. As mentioned before, the monarchy was crippled by debt and weakened by long years of religious and political unrest. Therefore, the death of Henri II in 1559 that left the fifteen-year-old François on the throne could only spell disaster for the troubled monarchy. The Guise, who had exercised a great deal of influence in the government of Henri II, saw this as the opportunity they had been waiting for and immediately stepped in to fill the power vacuum. What ensued was a power struggle between the Queen Mother, Catherine, and the powerful Guise family. Working through their niece, the young Queen Mary, the Guise convinced her husband, the grieving king to leave Paris alone with them, thereby infuriating Catherine de Medici.

Catherine, although officially in mourning for her husband, flew after the Guises and her son. (Waldman 1936, 16)

It was at this point that Catherine's desire for domination over her children began to translate into the desire for political control as well. Catherine feared that the weakness of François II could ultimately bring down the Valois monarchy. Therefore, she became convinced that both François and France needed her guidance. With a little luck and a lot of cunning, Catherine de Medici was able to preserve peace in the kingdom by assuring the Bourbons and Montmorency that she retained control of her son. François II reigned for only a year before dying of a cold, and the weakened monarchy faced a new threat. François was succeeded by his brother, Charles IX (1560-1574), who was only ten years old at the time.

Having learned from her mistake with François II, Catherine de Medici immediately claimed the Regency for herself. Although tradition gave that right to the King of Navarre, Antoine de Bourbon, he was too weak to oppose her and the Regency was made official. Charles would rule for fourteen years, but in reality he was never able to fully shake off the firm hand of his mother, who rationalized her calculating manipulations of her children by working to preserve their crown, which required keeping a fine balance between the Guise and Bourbons. These events, which defined and guided Marguerite's childhood, would continue to haunt and guide her in adulthood.

Chapter 2

The Valois Family

The greatest influence on the life of Marguerite de Valois was her family.

Marguerite was the last of two great familial lines, the Valois and the Medici. Both the Valois and Medici seemed posed for extinction by 1533, when Henri and Catherine were married. As Milton Waldman puts it, “Syphilis, the Black Pest of the early sixteenth century, had ravaged, and an obscure phthical [*sic*] debility (perhaps derived from it) wasted away the unresisting bodies of grandfathers, uncles, and cousins on both sides; not a Medici of Catherine’s generation nor a Valois of Henry’s, they two excepted, had lived to see thirty.” (77)

The Valois had assumed the throne in the fourteenth century when Charles IV, the last of the Capetians, died without a male heir in 1328. However, by the time that Marguerite’s father, Henri II, took the throne in 1547, the Valois had reached a precarious lack of “heir spares.” Marguerite’s great-grandfather, Louis XII (1498-1515), had assumed the throne when his cousin, Charles VIII (1483-1498) had died without heirs or brothers. Louis XII himself was an only child and fathered only two children who lived to adulthood. They were Marguerite’s grandfather, François I (1515-1545), and his sister Marguerite de Navarre. Therefore, Henri II and his brother Charles, Duc d’Orleans, were the only Valois heirs remaining at the time of his marriage to Catherine de Medici. (*History of the House of Valois* 2002, 135-136)

Catherine de Medici was also the last of an old and illustrious family. The Medici were one of the wealthiest and most powerful merchant families in Renaissance Italy. They effectively ruled Florence from 1389 until around 1740. However, Catherine’s

father, Lorenzo, died in 1519 without any male heirs and the Dukedom passed to a junior line of Medici. (Waldman 1936, 15)

Continuing the line of French succession must have weighed heavily on the minds of both Henri II and Catherine de Medici. Unfortunately, the couple had to wait seven years for any children at all, and then those born, ten in all, were sickly and weak and only seven lived past childhood.¹ However, the Valois succession seemed secure as four of those seven were male. Perhaps it was because she had despaired of ever having children or perhaps it was simply her personality, but whatever the reasons, Catherine sought total control over her children. She preferred to have them in sight whenever possible and laid down very strict rules of behavior for them to follow. However, Catherine desired the love of her children as much as she desired their obedience. The Queen Mother was, in Marguerite's own words, "...a mother who doted on her children, and was always ready to sacrifice her own repose, nay, even her life, for their happiness." (Valois [1626] 2002, 6)

Catherine's own childhood is important, as it explains many of her actions and attitudes towards governing and her children. Her mother, Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, a Frenchwoman, died in 1520, just fifteen days after Catherine's birth. Her father, Lorenzo, the Duke of Urbino, died just five days after his wife. Orphaned, Catherine was taken in by her uncle, Giulio (later Pope Clement VII), and his wife, Clarice Strozzi. Raised in constantly shifting locations between Rome and Florence, Catherine had to learn self-reliance and develop inner strength. Catherine often found herself a sort of political prisoner of the enemies of the Medici and an instrument of the Medici's dynastic ambitions. Therefore, she had little reason to love her Medici

¹. The three Valois children that died in infancy were Louis (1549), and the female twins Victoire and Jeanne (1556) (www.thepeerage.com)

relations, but she did learn from them. From the ruthless Medici, Catherine learned the importance of using her children as pawns for dynastic and political gain and she learned it well. Many historians attribute Catherine's style of ruling to the fact that she was Florentine. However, Catherine only spent a few years in Florence and has been described by other historians as an "anti-Florentine." Although Machiavelli had dedicated his masterpiece, The Prince, to her father, Catherine was not one of his followers. Above all, Catherine was loyal to her children and the Valois dynasty, as well as to France, her homeland for fifty-five of her sixty-nine years. (Hale 1977, 170-171)

Marguerite was undoubtedly influenced greatly by her mother. Since her father had died when she was only about seven-years-old, Marguerite was raised almost entirely by her mother. From Catherine, Marguerite inherited deep inner-strength, self-reliance, and great political skill. She also received her mother's love of culture and learning. Included in the great fortune that Catherine had brought with her from Florence was a fabulous library of Renaissance books and learning, as well as a significant collection of art. Marguerite was well educated, probably on the orders of her mother. It can also be assumed from her royal upbringing and the fact that one parent was French and the other Italian, that Marguerite was at least familiar with, if not fluent in, several languages, including Latin. (Valois 2002, iii)

Marguerite was also greatly influenced by her relationships with her siblings. François II was eight years older than Marguerite and died only a year after her father. In her memoirs, she does not even mention him. Therefore, it can be assumed that she had few memories of him and his impact on her life is negligible. However, her next oldest brother, Charles IX (1560-1574), ruled as king over his sister for fourteen years. Charles

was physically small and rumored to have an explosive and unpredictable temper, made more unpredictable by his jealousy of his mother's favorite, his younger brother Henri. (Waldman 1936, 80-81) Charles spent the greater part of his life firmly under the control of his mother, Catherine. However, he was also the first of the Valois children to attempt to defy her. With the confidence of adolescence, Charles made some attempts to choose his own path whether his mother approved or not. Although Charles did not always act in Marguerite's best interest, in her memoirs she seems to hold no bitterness towards him. She often refers to him as "magnanimous" and "a prince of great prudence." (Valois [1626] 2002, 6, 19) If she did indeed remember Charles fondly, it would be a credit to the charity of her personality.

Historians disagree over whether or not Marguerite strongly resisted her marriage to Henri de Bourbon. In her *Memoirs*, Marguerite claims that she did not strongly oppose the match, but was displeased with marrying someone from outside her religion. Marguerite does not comment on the particulars of her wedding and historical accounts differ. Although Marguerite may have held some ill will towards her brother, Charles, for his selection of her husband, that decision could hardly have been worse for her than when he authorized the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, which he did shortly thereafter. Later actions of Charles would continue to drive a wedge between Marguerite and her husband, Henri de Navarre. Therefore, Marguerite's protestations of fondness for Charles are somewhat remarkable. The fact that Marguerite wrote her *Memoirs* several years after Charles IX's death could explain her affectionate remembrances. Marguerite's life after his death was full of challenges and danger and she probably looked back fondly on her younger days under his reign.

Marguerite's relationship with her next oldest brother, Henri, Duc d'Anjou, (later known as Henri III) sparked great interest and speculation in her own time and also for later historians. Marguerite and Henri were accused by their enemies of having an incestuous relationship. The charges seemed to affect these two Valois in particular because they both had reputations for sexual deviance. As with most scandalous rumors, it is impossible to prove or disprove either way. However, given the stormy relations between the two, one is hard pressed to accept the rumors as true.²

In the early years of her life, Marguerite and Henri were generally thought of as each other's favorites because they were considered to be very alike in their temperaments and interests. Milton Waldman suggests that the two were a perfect pair. "If Margot and Henry felt moved to an encounter of wits, the whole court would fall into silence listening – 'for whether in seriousness or gaiety nothing was more entrancing than to hear those two talk when they wished.'" (83) However, there is a significant amount of evidence to show that what Waldman saw as evidence of their affection was in fact evidence of their mutual antipathy.

When Marguerite was around age fourteen, she and Henri had a great falling out and Marguerite was still enraged over it when she wrote her memoirs some twenty years later. Henri, having convinced Catherine to take Marguerite into her confidence about matters of state and court, decided that it did not suit him to have his sister continue in such a prestigious position. As Henri was generally acknowledged to be Catherine's favorite child, his advice fell favorably on his mother's ears and she began to withdraw her confidences from Marguerite. While the unfairness of Henri's manipulation doubtless rankled, there was another reason that Marguerite had for being furious at

² Dumas, Waldman, and the seventeenth century satirical pamphlet known as "Le Divorce Satyrique" all present this rumor as fact and it has been mistakenly repeated by many historians.

Henri. Knowledge was a source of power for the young Marguerite at court, and Henri had effectively stripped her of that power.

Marguerite had more reasons to suspect and dislike her brother. According to her *Memoirs*, Henri was solely responsible for beginning the rumor linking herself romantically to Henri de Guise, the future Duc de Guise, which would follow her for the rest of her life and contribute to greatly to the rumors of her sexual promiscuity. She wrote,

I came to Angers from St. Jean d'Angely, sick in body, but more sick in mind. Here, to my misfortune, M. de Guise and his uncles had arrived before me. This was a circumstance which gave my good brother great pleasure, as it afforded a colourable appearance to his story. I soon discovered the advantage my brother would make of it to increase my already too great mortification; ...[he] constantly brought M. de Guise into my chamber with him...M. de Guise had been paying his addresses to the Princesse de Porcian; but the slow progress made in bringing this match to a conclusion was said to be owing to his designs upon me.
(Memoirs 13)

Henri's rumor did more than harm Marguerite's sexual reputation. The Duc de Guise was the mortal enemy of her future husband, Henri de Navarre. Therefore, Henri III, like Charles IX, helped to doom her marriage before it even began, as Henri de Navarre was unlikely to give his whole trust to the supposed lover of his enemy.

Finally, around 1583 Henri expelled Marguerite from court. His official reasoning was her affair with Jacques de Harlay, lord of Champvallou.³ However, Marguerite claimed in later letters that she was actually sent away because of her continued support for her younger brother, François, Duc d'Alençon. In retaliation Marguerite, displaying some of the political power she had acquired by that time, openly rebelled against her brother, the king. She led an army of the Catholic League to successfully capture the city of Agen and claim it for herself, although her success was

³ This is the only affair of Marguerite that was ever credibly documented.

short-lived. Henri III imprisoned her in his castle at Usson in 1586, where she remained for nearly twenty years. (Waldman 1936, 225) Therefore, it can be seen that Marguerite and her brother Henri generally had a tempestuous relationship at best.

Although raised apart, Marguerite and her youngest brother, Hercules, later called François, Duc d'Alençon (1554-1584) had a positive relationship. François, as a fourth son, and Marguerite often attempted to combine their individual powers in order to create circumstances more favorable to themselves. At the Valois court d'Alençon also allied himself politically, if not religiously, with Henri de Navarre as early as Charles IX's reign. While Charles IX had generally looked upon Marguerite with ambivalence, he was suspicious of his ambitious younger brothers and treated them with some reserve. Henri III, however, was openly belligerent towards all of his siblings. As Marguerite later remarked, "When I lost King Charles, I lost everything." (Valois [1626] 2002, 25)

With the ascension of Henri III to the throne, Marguerite, Henri de Navarre, and d'Alençon all quickly fell out of favor at court. Therefore, the three were forced to combine forces to prevent being crushed under Henri III's suspicious watch. What began as mutual dependence and fondness was later cemented by necessity. Henri III's distrust of the alliance of François and Henri de Navarre was so great that the two were forced to flee court many times over the duration of his rule to avoid punishments for whatever Henri's advisors had accused them of. During this time, Henri III often held Marguerite as his prisoner and collateral for the return of her brother and husband and Marguerite implied in her *Memoirs* that this persecution created a deep bond between François and herself.

Historians have often ignored the female Valois, but they too had an effect on Marguerite's personality and actions. Marguerite had two sisters that lived to adulthood, Elizabeth and Claude. Elizabeth (1545-1568) was married to Phillip II of Spain in 1559 by her father, Henri II, and ruled as Queen of Spain until her death in 1568. Oddly, Marguerite left no personal comments on her relationships with her sisters, yet some things can be implied. Elizabeth was a great beauty and her marriage had been advantageous in securing a tenuous truce between Spain and France. While Marguerite and Elizabeth's personal relationship is unknown, Elizabeth was undoubtedly held up as an example of what Marguerite should strive to be. Obedient, beautiful, and successful in marriage, Elizabeth was the quintessential royal daughter in early modern Europe. (Waldman 1936, 10) Elizabeth died in childbirth when Marguerite was only sixteen years old and this first attempt to bind the Valois and Spanish Hapsburg dynasties together was lost.

Less is known about Marguerite's other sister, Claude. Claude (1547-1575) was born with a twisted leg and walked with a limp for her entire life. As such, she had far fewer opportunities to marry well than her sisters. However, the Queen Mother Catherine was not one to waste a potentially valuable pawn and was eventually able to arrange a marriage between Claude and the Duc de Lorraine in 1559. While not a spectacular marriage for a Valois princess, it did prove a useful alliance for the monarchy. Of all the children of Henri II, only Claude provided a male heir. Unfortunately for the Valois line, he would remain the Duc de Lorraine, and not become king of France.

Marguerite's relationship with Claude must be inferred, as Marguerite left no particular reflections on their relationship. However, it is safe to assume that they were on generally good terms and cared for each other. One particularly telling episode from Marguerite's *Memoirs* supports this. On the night of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, it was to Claude's chambers that Marguerite finally fled for safety and it was with her sister that Marguerite sought comfort after witnessing the murders of many Huguenots in the halls of the Louvre. (21)

Another reason that Marguerite's relationship with Claude should be examined is that they often acted as allies. For example, in her difficulties dealing with the rumors linking herself to Henri de Guise, Marguerite turned to Claude for help. As Marguerite's *Memoirs* state, "I resolved to write to my sister, Madame de Lorraine, ... begging her to use her endeavors to withdraw M. de Guise from Court, ... She readily... delivered me from the aspersions cast on my character, and convinced the Queen my mother that what I had told her was the real truth." (13-14)

Marguerite should not be viewed solely in the light of her relationships and relatives. She was fascinating in and of herself, even to the people of her own time. Of everything written about Marguerite, no one ever fails to mention her great beauty.⁴ Some feminist historians argue that the physical attributes of historical women should not be emphasized as it makes these women seem less significant. However, in Marguerite's case, her beauty was important because it was a source of power. Sixteenth century aristocratic women had few resources as useful as personal beauty. It attracted - and distracted - powerful men, gained the envy of other women, and made the woman a valuable commodity on the marriage market.

⁴. See Appendix B for pictures of Marguerite de Valois

However, even in her own time, few people made the mistake of assuming that Marguerite was nothing but a pretty face. She was highly skilled in creating music, art, and literature. She was also highly literate and well read. As the French historian, Éliane Viennot, points out, Marguerite was an author, poet, and woman of letters whose work is considered among the best of the French Renaissance.⁵ (14) Alas, as is the fate of many early female scholars, Marguerite's enemies and later biographers used her writings and poems as examples of her sexual depravity. However, Viennot also points out that Marguerite's writings need to be understood within the cultural and linguistic systems of sixteenth century France and the revival of neo-Platonic notions of love. Regarded in this light, they show her intuitive understanding of the power of emotions and her ability to express herself through her writings. (Viennot 1993, 61,88-89, 122; and Sluhovsky 2000, 207)

No two biographers explain Marguerite's personality the same way. Many of those who offer arguments supporting the "myth" speak of her as sexually deviant, untruthful, and manipulative. Many writers, even those who state that they are writing a feminist version of her life, accuse Marguerite of being "hysterical" in the misogynistic sense of the word. (Sluhovsky 2000, 206 and Marvick 1996, 964)

However, Marguerite's *Memoirs* tend to show a different picture than that depicted by the "myth." Marguerite wrote her *Memoirs* in the 1590s during her years under house arrest at Usson and they were published shortly after her death, in 1626. She chose to write in the epistolary form and began them as a series of letters to her childhood friend, M. Pierre de Bourdeille, the Seigneur de Brantôme. Her letters allow modern readers to gain some impression of the princess's personality. Above all things,

⁵ Unfortunately, the majority of Marguerite's works have not yet been translated into English. However, her work gained new recognition in the late twentieth century and there are currently several translations underway.

Marguerite was loyal to the Valois family. Despite the many wrongs done to her by her brothers, the kings, Marguerite never once allowed any real criticism of them to show in her writings.

Marguerite was also loyal to her husband, despite their somewhat lukewarm feelings for each other. Marguerite proved her faithfulness to Henri de Navarre many times over; however, she relates one particularly important example in her *Memoirs*. Speaking of the night of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, Marguerite states, "M. de Mioflano, first gentleman to the King my husband, and Armagnac, his first valet de chamber, ...both came to beg me to save their lives. I went and threw myself on my knees before the King and Queen my mother, and obtained the lives of both of them."

(21) Marguerite had no reason to save the lives of these two men other than the fact that they were part of her husband's retinue and saving them would have been advantageous for her husband.

Another important aspect of Marguerite's personality is her charitable nature. Some of this can be seen in her willingness to plead for the lives of complete strangers during the massacre (there were others besides M. de Mioflano and Armagnac.) In the later years of her life, both at Usson and her final years in Paris, Marguerite became well known for her patronage of the arts and charitable works. In fact, Marguerite founded an academy in Auvergne to study poetry and philosophy and another in Paris. (Sealy 1994, 184)

One last important aspect of Marguerite's personality that should not be overlooked is her sexuality. There is no doubt that Marguerite did indeed have numerous affairs. However, as mentioned before, there is no evidence supporting the more

outlandish claims of incest and orgies. Marguerite instead seems to have had a few long-lasting and emotional affairs which were openly tolerated by her husband, who was involved in numerous affairs of his own. (Sluhovsky 2000, 207) These affairs can hardly be condemned as confirmation of her sexual promiscuity and deviance. In fact, Marguerite made many attempts to leave the Valois court to join her husband in Navarre, but was constantly delayed or prevented from joining him. Thus, it is no wonder that she turned to extramarital affairs for sexual companionship.

Another reason that Marguerite's extramarital affairs should not be viewed as signs of an insatiable sexual appetite and deviance is that it was not at all unusual among male members of the Valois and other noble families to keep lovers or mistresses. Mistresses were often kept openly at court, such as Henri II's companion, Diane de Poitiers. Most aristocratic wives simply accepted them as a fact of life and ignored them. By engaging in behavior that was seen as perfectly normal for the males of her class, Marguerite was also expressing her ability to carve out a sphere of liberty and freedom for herself within the tightly controlled court of her mother and brothers. To accuse her of being promiscuous in light of the behavior of the male members of her own class is simply to apply a double standard to her actions.

Marguerite's early life was similar to that of other royal children. She spent the great part of her time in the care of nurses, apart from the world of the adults. Like most children, her important early interactions were with other children. There were, of course, her siblings to play with, the children of members of the court, and, in particular, her cousin, Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. Although Marguerite does not mention Mary in her *Memoirs*, many of Mary's biographies include Marguerite. Such was the reputation

of Marguerite that by the time Mary had returned to Scotland, their shared upbringing was used as ammunition by Mary's persecutors there.⁶ In reality, the two were probably not overly close, as their ages and different stations meant that they would not have seemed a natural pair. However, they were very similar in their literacy, intelligence, and generally energetic approaches to life.

Mary Stuart, like Elizabeth de Valois, undoubtedly served as an important role model for what Marguerite was to be as a daughter in a royal household. Mary's marriage to François II was arranged to strengthen both the Stuart and Valois dynasties. Mary performed her royal duties obediently and, during her short reign as Queen of France would have provided many opportunities for Marguerite to observe how young royal women should act to enhance the power, prestige, and security of their families.

⁶ See Lynch, Michael (Ed.). (1988). Mary Stewart. Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell. among others.

Chapter 3

Power in the Valois Court

Marguerite spent a great deal of time trying to gain the affection of her mother. While a natural action of any child, Marguerite's actions were also an early political strategy, as Catherine de Medici held a great deal of control over the powers that each of her children could exercise. Catherine was Marguerite's most reliable source of funding until, and sometimes after, her marriage to Henri de Navarre. Money was one of Catherine's greatest sources of power, as she controlled a large personal fortune. However, Catherine also exercised power over her family and France in many other ways as well.

One way that Marguerite sought to curry favor with her mother was by acquiescing to whatever marriage scheme Catherine was pursuing for her at the moment. After the death of Henri II in 1559, Catherine desperately needed ways to strengthen international alliances and the Valois monarchy. Arranging marriages between her children and other royal families inside and outside of France was one of the easiest ways that Catherine could accomplish this.

Marguerite's great beauty and generally good reputation (still intact in her teenage years) made her a valuable commodity for marriage. Therefore, Catherine was determined to make a good match for Marguerite. One of the first suitors deemed acceptable by Catherine was the King of Portugal, Don Carlos. Although Catherine believed rumors insinuating that Marguerite would refuse the match because she was desperately in love with Henri, the future Duc de Guise, Marguerite gained favor with her mother by begging for the match with Don Carlos to go forward. While the marriage was

ultimately prevented by King Philip II of Spain, it had proved a crucial test for Marguerite's loyalty to her family and had showed her willingness to assist in the preservation of the Valois dynasty. (Valois [1626] 2002, 13-14)

Catherine attempted a second notable match for her youngest daughter. Never one to let sensitivity get in the way of rationality, Catherine used the death of her daughter, Elizabeth, Queen of Spain, as an opportunity to pursue another match for Marguerite. Shortly after Elizabeth's death in 1568, Catherine entered into negotiations with Philip II to propose a match between him and Marguerite. Making a good match for Marguerite was not the only incentive Catherine had for trying to bring a Spanish crown back into the Valois fold. Spain was a very powerful country and the alliance between Hapsburg Spain and France was an important safeguard for keeping the Valois on the French throne. When Elizabeth was Queen of Spain, Spanish support for the Valois was guaranteed. Without her, nothing was certain. However, despite Catherine's attempts the match fell through, and she had to look elsewhere for a suitable alliance. (Waldman 1936, 70)

It would be two years before Catherine found another useful marriage opportunity for her youngest daughter. With the religious tensions weighing heavily on the country, Catherine was able to convince a reluctant Jeanne d'Albret (1528-1572), Queen of the small kingdom of Navarre, to enter into marriage negotiations for her son, Prince Henri de Navarre. Although the Queen of Navarre was not particularly predisposed towards the match, as she and her son were devout Huguenots, the arrangement was finally agreed upon. However, before the wedding could take place, the

Queen of Navarre unexpectedly died. Therefore, Henri de Navarre came to his wedding as the King of Navarre.

The marriage of Marguerite to Henri de Navarre was carefully calculated by Catherine de Medici to help ease the religious tensions between the Catholics and the Huguenots in France and to protect the Valois dynasty from a civil war that would likely end in its destruction. However in this, Catherine failed. Not only did the marriage fail to ease the religious conflicts, it actually made them worse. Although the marriage of Marguerite to the king of a small country that, in reality, was little more than a province of France was a weaker match than Catherine had originally wished for her youngest daughter, Catherine had hoped to gain important access and influence over the leader of the Huguenot movement. Catherine obviously believed that she could use Henri de Navarre to forge a compromise between the Huguenots and the Valois monarchy which would end the violent religious rebellions and unify the country behind the Valois kings. While Henri de Navarre did eventually get the country's factions to declare peace, it did not occur until his own reign as King of France, after the Valois were already destroyed.

The match was also somewhat weak for Henri de Navarre. As a first prince of the blood, Henri was already poised to inherit the French crown should the three remaining Valois men fail to produce heirs. Another problem was that while Marguerite brought a dowry to the marriage, her family's financial difficulties often interfered with her ability to collect upon it. Therefore, Henri gained little more than entrance to the Valois court, which was his right by birth anyway. In view of all this, Henri's willingness to proceed with the marriage is important, as it showed a certain flexibility and willingness to

compromise on his part for the good of France and its people that would characterize his later reign as King of France.

The wedding of Henri and Marguerite on August 18, 1572 was done in the full splendor worthy of a Valois princess and the King of Navarre. A large platform was erected in front of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame and most of Paris turned out to see the wedding. (Weber and Rocher 2004, 9) Although Henri refused to actually participate in the Catholic ceremony, the marriage was solemnized.

While Catherine had hoped to gain a little peace, Henri and Marguerite's marriage only served to further incense the religious factions to violence. The Catholics felt that Catherine and Charles IX had gone too far in appeasing the Huguenots. For their part, the Huguenots felt that the Catholic Marguerite would lure Henri de Navarre into converting to Catholicism. Enemies of both the Valois and Bourbons quietly stirred up trouble wherever they could. The people of heavily Catholic Paris bristled at the invasion of thousands of Huguenot wedding guests. Even the weather seemed to be conspiring against peace. A terrible heat wave settled on Paris, fanning flammable emotions and shortening tempers. All of which contributed to the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre on August 24, 1572, only six days after the wedding. (Waldman 1936, 119)

Prompted by Catherine, Charles IX ordered that the Huguenots be broken once and for all and authorized the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, one of the bloodiest days in French history. Catholics attacked even the highest of nobles. No Huguenot was safe, not even Marguerite's new husband, or for that matter, herself. As Marguerite writes in her *Memoirs*,

M. de Teian ran in, and threw himself immediately upon my bed. He...was then pursued by four archers, who followed him into the bedchamber. Perceiving

these last, I jumped out of bed, and the poor gentleman after me, holding me fast by the waist. I did not then know him; neither was I sure that he came to do me no harm, or whether the archers were in pursuit of him or me. In this situation I screamed aloud, and he cried out likewise, for our fright was mutual. (21)

Although Henri de Navarre was on the proscribed list of those to be killed, he was taken prisoner instead of being killed immediately. On St. Bartholomew's day in 1572, Henri converted to Catholicism in exchange for his life. Marguerite was largely credited with convincing Henri to convert, which made her an immediate target for disgruntled Huguenots. The Huguenots would continue to despise and antagonize Marguerite for the rest of her life, although Henri recanted shortly after and returned to Protestantism until after his ascension to the French throne.

Marguerite saved her husband with more than advice. Five or six days after the massacre, Catherine de Medici tried to convince Marguerite to divorce Henri de Navarre. However, Marguerite declared that she was content to remain as she was. Marguerite's actions not only showed loyalty towards her marriage, but perhaps also showed her concern for her husband. As long as Marguerite was Henri's wife, no overt plot against his life could be carried out. The confusion of the Massacre could have provided enough cover for would-be murderers to get away with the assassination of the King of Navarre and the husband of a Princess of France, but the calmness after the event would have meant certain retribution for the assassins. Marguerite recognized this threat. She could have agreed to the divorce then and left Henri to his fate in exchange for her freedom, but she refused and, in doing so, almost certainly saved his life. (Valois [1626] 2002, 21-22)

Marguerite's steadfastness in this marriage and her support of her Protestant husband are crucial to understanding that, in the early days of her marriage, she was learning to use Valois dynastic power for her own benefit. Upon her marriage,

Marguerite became a queen instead of a princess and gained a significant amount of social standing and power within the Valois court. She was still adjusting to this change at the time her mother offered to obtain a divorce. Marguerite's refusal to follow her mother's wishes and divorce Henri de Navarre show that, by that point, she had begun to discover and develop her new powers within the Valois family and court. Marguerite was able to save Henri de Navarre's life simply by keeping him by her side. In doing so, she discovered a powerful source of influence over her new husband, other members of the court, such as Henri de Guise, and her family. Therefore, Henri de Navarre had provided Marguerite with enough reasons to secure her devotion to him.

The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre would have far-reaching and long-lasting effects, not only on Marguerite, but also on all of France. Over 3,000 people were murdered in one night and the murders continued throughout the country for several days afterward. Those few Huguenots who survived the onslaught were forced to convert or face later retribution. Many of those killed had no ties to the Huguenots. In fact, the Massacre provided a convenient excuse for many people to exact revenge on their enemies. St. Bartholomew's also signaled the end of the Valois dynasty, although it is unlikely that anyone realized it at the time.

While the blood-letting is believed by most historians to have been a rash and unplanned event, many Huguenots at the time believed that Catherine de Medici had arranged the marriage of Henri de Navarre and Marguerite de Valois for the precise reason of luring the Huguenots to their deaths. Never again would the masses of France trust any edicts of moderation or tolerance that originated from this Valois monarchy. In pressing for the massacre to take place, Catherine made the gravest error of her career.

The massacre became a rallying cry for Huguenots and sympathetic Catholics. The vision of Parisian streets and rivers literally running red with blood served to harden Huguenots in their resolve to obtain religious freedoms, while making them increasingly less willing to compromise with the Valois kings. (Tracy 1999, 149; and Dunn 1970, 27)

The massacre also proved a turning point in the lives of Henri de Navarre and Marguerite. Although Henri had converted to Catholicism, no one at court was foolish enough to believe that he was sincere. Charles IX effectively placed Henri under house arrest, limiting his movements within the Louvre and forbidding him to leave the palace grounds. Marguerite's aid to her husband and other Huguenots on the night of St. Bartholomew's had not gone unnoticed. Henri, Duc de Anjou and the Duc de Guise were particularly upset with Marguerite. For the Guise in particular, the death of the Bourbon first prince of the blood, Henri de Navarre, was considered essential for their continued rise in power. Henri de Navarre and the Prince de Conde were at the top of their list of who had to die in the massacre and they probably would have been murdered if not for Marguerite's intervention. By allying herself with her husband, Marguerite had forced her family to realize that they no longer had her complete allegiance. As punishment for siding with her husband, Marguerite received the same sentence as he and was also confined to the Louvre. However, Marguerite was very skilled in cultivating and maintaining friendly relationships with the palace guards and was never restricted as tightly as was her husband.

One result of Henri de Navarre's captivity that proved detrimental to his enemies was the growing alliance that developed between himself and François, Duc d'Alençon, the youngest brother of the king. D'Alençon had allied himself with the Huguenots

militarily because they promised to support his desire to invade and conquer Flanders, a move which Charles IX had originally proposed. However, with Charles' failing health the invasion had been put off, but d'Alençon wanted to revive it, viewing the expedition as his opportunity to make a name and fortune for himself. Henri de Navarre and d'Alençon thus conceived a plot for escape, as d'Alençon was also under house arrest after St. Bartholomew's because of his known predilection for the Huguenot leaders. Marguerite discovered the scheme and wisely thwarted it, as their attempted escape would likely be construed as treason. (Valois [1626] 2002, 23-24) However, their plot was important in that it showed how much trust Henri de Navarre and François d'Alençon held for each other. It also showed how diligent Marguerite had to be to protect herself as well as her allies.

The house arrest of Henri de Navarre and Marguerite also proved to be a serious tactical error on the part of Charles IX and his advisors. Despite the fact that they were not actively living together as man and wife, Henri and Marguerite both realized that they needed each other to survive. While Henri and Marguerite were never particularly fond of each other, their shared captivity served to strengthen the bonds of alliance and loyalty that had begun shortly before the massacre. There is no doubt that Marguerite chafed at being treated as a criminal by the very people who had forced her into her marriage in the first place and then punished her for showing loyalty towards her husband. Marguerite would never again be blindly obedient to her brothers or mother. Although outright disobedience was not her style, Marguerite began to engage in small acts of rebellion against her captivity and her family. As time went on and the captivity continued,

Marguerite and Henri de Navarre became partners in their mutual defense against their enemies.

For example, although Marguerite had been able to thwart the first attempted flight of Navarre and d'Alençon, the plan became known and the advisors of Charles IX saw it as a new opportunity to fulfill their aborted mission of St. Bartholomew's. The attempted escape was twisted and used by these advisors to convince the ailing king that his brother and brother-in-law were plotting to overthrow the king and claim the monarchy for themselves. The story became so inflated and exaggerated that it led to the house-arrest of the Marechaux de Montmorency and de Cosse, neither of whom had any real part in the plot, but who were political enemies of the Guise. It also led to the execution of Henri de Navarre's gentlemen, La Mole and the Comte de Donas, and the trial of Henri de Navarre and d'Alençon for treason.

During this perilous period, Henri de Navarre did not turn to his advisors or court lawyers for assistance. Rather, it was to Marguerite that he looked. As she states in her *Memoirs*, "My husband, having no counsellor to assist him, desired me to draw up his defense in such a manner that he might not implicate any person, and, at the same time, clear my brother and himself from any criminality of conduct. With God's help I accomplished this task to his great satisfaction, and to the surprise of the commissioners, who did not expect to find them so well prepared to justify themselves." (25)

Marguerite's defense was, in fact, a brilliant legal strategy that stunned the Parisian court and secured her place as one of the foremost intellectuals of France at that time. Both her brother and husband were acquitted of all charges. However, any joy that Marguerite,

Navarre, and d'Alençon felt at their success was cut short by the death of Charles IX shortly thereafter.

The animosity that the new king, Henri III, held for Marguerite, Navarre, and d'Alençon has already been discussed. However, it is with the rise of Henri III that Marguerite was forced to confront her mortal enemy, the new king's advisor, Le Guast. (d.1575) According to Marguerite's *Memoirs*, Le Guast was the primary source of most of the early rumors that eventually destroyed her reputation. (30) Marguerite and Le Guast battled throughout the rest of his life. There is no historical record explaining this rivalry between Le Guast and Marguerite de Valois. She herself does not mention any particular incidences that clearly would have earned her his enmity. What stories she does portray, however, suggest that Le Guast attacked Marguerite for political, not personal, reasons and, on that front, he was very successful.

With Marguerite busy defending herself against Le Guast, Henri de Navarre and François d'Alençon began to search for a new way to escape the Louvre, where they had again been placed under house-arrest, despite their victorious trial. However, under Henri III, the two conspirators had a more pressing reason for leaving than mere indignation at being held against their wills. They were, in fact, in very real danger as long as they remained under the supervision of Henri III and his close friend Henri de Guise. Henri de Navarre and d'Alençon now needed more protection than Marguerite could provide, and sought help from their powerful Huguenot allies. However, the Huguenots could not assist them while they were trapped in the Louvre. Therefore, they created a new plan to escape which Marguerite, realizing the danger her husband and brother faced, finally supported. D'Alençon was the first to get away, and Henri de

Navarre followed very closely afterwards. Both relied upon Marguerite's aid and her silence. Although Marguerite was far too shrewd of a politician not to know what her fate would be if her involvement became known, she assisted them anyway and both men successfully escaped to Navarre.

Henri III was furious that Navarre and d'Alençon had managed to escape and believed, correctly, that this could not have been accomplished without Marguerite's aid or at the least, without her knowledge. Marguerite recorded her brother's reaction in her *Memoirs*, "The King, supposing that I was a principal instrument in aiding the Princes in their desertion, was greatly incensed against me, and his rage became at length so violent that, had not the Queen my mother moderated it, I am inclined to think my life had been in danger." (43) Having been denied the fulfillment of his first impulse for Marguerite's punishment, Henri III ordered that she be imprisoned in her rooms at the Louvre and denied access to anyone outside so that she could not advise or aid her husband and brother. Marguerite's position in the court of Henri III was damaged almost beyond repair. As she later remarked, "Thus it is ever in Courts. Adversity is solitary, while prosperity dwells in a crowd; the object of persecution being sure to be shunned by his nearest friends and dearest connections. The brave Grillon was the only one who ventured to visit me, at the hazard of incurring disgrace." (Valois [1626] 2002, 46)

Although Catherine de Medici had interfered with Henri III's punishment of Marguerite enough to spare her life, she went no further in attempting to soften the restrictions placed on Marguerite. Furious at Marguerite's actions, which threatened the stability of the dynasty, Catherine agreed that the imprisonment was just. Instead, it was d'Alençon and Henri de Navarre that sought to repay Marguerite's assistance by coming

to her aid. Returning to Navarre, Henri resumed command of a strong Huguenot army waiting there and d'Alençon also managed to gather an army behind him in Champagne. Finally realizing the dangerous situation that he had gotten himself into, Henri III was forced to respond to the pressure of these two armies. After finding that none of the princes or great lords of France would take up arms against d'Alençon for fear of the civil war that would almost certainly follow, Henri III was forced to relent and agreed to listen to Navarre's and d'Alençon's demands.

D'Alençon refused to guarantee any sort of peace until Marguerite was released from her imprisonment. Catherine de Medici, always anxious to preserve harmony among her children for the safety of the dynasty and the country, convinced Henri III to allow her to escort Marguerite to Champagne so that d'Alençon would be satisfied and the peace assured. Showing the pragmatism and political skill for which she became well-known, Marguerite acquiesced to the plan of Catherine and Henri III. Upon being told that she would be freed, Marguerite "replied that I was willing to sacrifice everything for the good of my brothers and the State; that I wished for nothing so much as peace...I uttered these words...[that] I might show him I harboured no ill-will for the injuries I had received." However, Marguerite revealed her true feelings when she added, "I was induced to such behaviour rather out of contempt, and because it was good policy to let the King go away satisfied with me." (Valois [1626] 2002, 48)

Le Guast died around 1575 and Marguerite's fortunes improved at that time. She was once again able to move freely around the Louvre without fear that her every action could be used against her. However, she was still forbidden to join her husband in Navarre. Religious discontent was again stirring, and Catherine de Medici's long-desired

Catholic League was finally created by Henri III in 1576. He named his close friend, Henri de Guise as the head. The formation of the League made another religious war all but inevitable. (Dunn 1959, 27) Marguerite found herself in a tenuous political situation once again. No matter whether she chose Paris or Navarre, she would make herself an enemy of a king. Therefore, she resolved to stay out of the conflict altogether and was able to convince her mother and Henri III to let her leave the court.

Marguerite's actions allowed her to remain above the fray, which was vital to preserving her political connections with the French king and her husband. This neutrality also allowed her to continue her support for d'Alençon, which solidified their alliance and power as well. Marguerite's travels took her to Flanders, which d'Alençon hoped to wrest from Spanish control. Taking on a diplomatic role, Marguerite sought to gauge what support d'Alençon could expect from the Flemish nobles, and she worked to garner additional support wherever she could. In this she was fairly successful. Marguerite returned to Paris with numerous promises of support for her brother to use to convince the king to allow his expedition into Flanders to go forward. However, Henri III was still wary of letting d'Alençon have charge of an army and kept him at court, ostensibly to prepare for the expedition. D'Alençon continued to be attacked and harassed by Henri III's advisors and friends, causing Henri III to abandon all pretences of reconciliation and place his brother under house arrest yet again.

Finally, in complete exasperation, Marguerite successfully assisted d'Alençon in escaping once more from the Louvre. Although Henri III was again enraged by his brother's flight, a letter from d'Alençon and the assurances of both Catherine de Medici and Marguerite de Valois convinced the king that d'Alençon had no intention of

challenging the king outright for the throne. Having completed her mission of helping d'Alençon begin his expedition to Flanders, Marguerite finally received permission to go to her kingdom in Navarre and rejoin her husband in 1578.

Chapter 4

Rebellion and Imprisonment

Marguerite remained in Navarre with Henri de Bourbon for about four years from 1578-1582. Although they were generally comfortable with each other, Marguerite and Henri never fully solidified their marriage. Henri continued with his many mistresses while Marguerite pretended not to notice. Although they were finally living as a married couple, Marguerite remained childless. While their marriage was proving sterile, Henri and Marguerite's political partnership flourished. Throughout Marguerite's time in Navarre, she acted as an advisor to Henri and a diplomat between him and her brother the king of France, having already proven herself in this capacity. As such, the outbreak of another religious war meant that Marguerite's powerful skills of persuasion and diplomacy were once again needed to restore peace between her husband and brother, Henri III of France. Marguerite was induced to return to Paris by promises from her mother and Henri III that they would consider her visit an act of trust and peace, leading to reconciliation. Marguerite agreed to the trip in 1582, but in this her political savvy failed her. After only a year, Henri expelled her from court and she returned to Navarre in 1583. Out of favor in the Parisian court, her diplomatic power was greatly diminished in the eyes of her husband.

Marguerite's ill fortunes continued to grow. In 1584, her brother François d'Alençon died. With his death, Marguerite lost a powerful ally. Nobles at court were careful not to offend d'Alençon so long as he was Henri III's heir. That respect had been extended to Marguerite, as she could strongly influence whom d'Alençon would favor or disfavor. At the time of d'Alençon's death, Henri III still remained childless. Therefore,

Henri de Navarre now took the place as the heir presumptive to the throne. As it became increasingly clear that the Valois line was ending, Catherine de Medici and Henri III were forced to treat Navarre with new respect and friendship. Oddly enough, they no longer felt that they needed Marguerite to act as a diplomat between the two kings. Marguerite soon found herself ignored and isolated in Navarre. Although Henri de Navarre had treated Marguerite with respect and kindness for most of their marriage, his attentions also cooled once he no longer needed her political power. Furious at her husband and her reduced circumstances, Marguerite left the court of Navarre to create her own. It was at this point that Marguerite shook off the last layer of her neutral position and defied both the Valois and her husband. Marguerite's actions seemed to represent the budding actions of France as a whole.

The rise of Henri de Navarre had finally created the political opening for which the Guise had been waiting a century. The majority of the country was opposed to the thought of a 'heretic' on the French throne. Henri, Duc de Guise and head of the Catholic League, had a strong and well-trained army behind him. Therefore, he began to agitate against the alliance of Henri III and Henri de Navarre. Although technically treasonous, Guise and the League were too powerful to stop. The foundation for the War of the Three Henris (1588-89) was laid. Furious at both brother and husband, Marguerite found a way to prove to both that she was not so easily cast aside. Joining the third rising power, the radical Catholic League, Marguerite regained a place of power and importance in French dynastic politics. All pretenses of a happy marriage disposed of; Marguerite began working openly with the Catholic League against the ascension of Henri de Navarre to the French throne.

Marguerite's actions in the late 1580s are both seemingly out of character for her and, at the same time, important for understanding her. Marguerite, who for most of her life had been loyal to the Valois, now chafed at being shunned and bereft of power. Logically, Marguerite had no reason to work against Henri de Navarre's nomination as the heir to the French throne. If he became king after Henri III, Marguerite would become the Queen of France. Therefore, her actions against him, on the surface anyway, made no sense. Her actions were also somewhat strange because Marguerite, whose loyalty to both family and husband had been tested and maintained so many times, suddenly broke faith with both.

However, when looking more closely at Marguerite's personality and history, the logic behind her actions appears. One important factor to remember is that Marguerite was always a very devout Catholic. The French king was the head of the Catholic Church in France. Therefore, it was not unreasonable for Marguerite to fear that Henri de Navarre, if made King of France, would seize Catholic properties and declare the religion of France to be Calvinist, much as Henry VIII had done in England in the 1530s. Therefore, Marguerite's decision to support the Catholic League was not necessarily a sign that she had forsaken all of her loyalties. Instead, it revealed that she may have had one loyalty above all others, and that was to her religion.

Many of Marguerite's contemporaries attributed Marguerite's defection to the League to another reason altogether, although my research largely discredits their assertions. Some stories have long lives and the rumors linking Marguerite to Henri de Guise had continued to circulate throughout the 1580s. Instead of seeing Marguerite's actions as the desperate attempts to regain power that they were, her contemporaries and

many later historians attributed Marguerite's alliance with the Catholic League to her all-consuming passion for the Duc de Guise. In joining with the League Marguerite proved that she was pragmatic, ruthless, smart, and conniving. While these were all considered traits of good male rulers, Marguerite's enemies were unwilling to admit that a female was capable of such strong and calculating behavior on her own. Therefore, they encouraged the old rumor to spread and declared that she had been in bed - literally and figuratively - with Henri de Guise all along. These stories contributed greatly to the "myth" of Marguerite's life and, for the past four centuries, rumor has masqueraded as fact.

However, a more plausible explanation for Marguerite's behavior at this time is that she was quite simply furious and resentful at being callously thrown aside after her many years of loyalty and service. Having spent years subtly building power for herself, Marguerite may have finally decided that she no longer wanted, or needed, to be the pawn of husband and brother. This theory would help explain her militant actions, such as the seizing of the city of Agen in the name of the Catholic League around 1584.

Marguerite successfully held the city for eighteen months. However, the citizens of the city rose up and forced her to flee to Carlat, another city in Auvergne. (Sealy 1994, 3) While Marguerite had lost Agen, she still retained her army and began to rebuild a power-base in Carlat. Henri de Guise worked to assist her by soliciting funds from Spain's Philip II on her behalf. Henri III, fully exasperated with Marguerite's militant actions, saw this period of rebuilding as his last chance to bring Marguerite under rein. Henri III placed the order for his sister's arrest and, on October 21, 1586, the Marquis de Canillac successfully captured Marguerite and dispersed her forces. (Sealy

1994, 45) Therefore, Marguerite's militant rebellion was effectively ended and she found herself once again under the direct control of her brother the king.

Although Marguerite had committed treasonous acts against the king, her life was spared and she was sentenced to imprisonment in the Chateau of Usson in Auvergne. Even so, Marguerite, knowing the wrath of her brother and the political usefulness of her death, feared for her life. As the Marquis de Canillac, who acted as her jailer wrote to Catherine de Medici, "[She] has fallen into despair, convinced of her death, which no consolation that I was able to afford can dispel. For three days now, she has done nothing but weep and torture herself, eating and drinking nothing. And this is continuing today... I beg you to let me be responsible neither for the death of your daughter nor for any part in so final an act." (Sealy 1994, 51) Marguerite feared that she would be poisoned, which was not unreasonable, seeing as her jailer expected to be given just such an order.

The Marquis de Canillac grew increasingly uneasy throughout the end of 1586. Widespread rumors detailing Henri III's plans to remarry Henri de Navarre after the death of Marguerite continued to reach Auvergne. In addition, the control of the Catholic League in that region was almost complete and Canillac's loyalty to the French king had begun to waver. Therefore, in February of 1587, the Marquis de Canillac turned over control of Usson to Marguerite and left his position as jailer, effectively releasing his prisoner. (Sealy 1994, 79-81)

Although technically free, Marguerite still faced considerable hardships. The religious battles were intense in Auvergne and Marguerite feared retribution from the forces of both husband and brother if she dared leave Usson. Therefore, she decided to

remain in the fortified chateau of Usson. The improvements that had originally been designed to keep her in now served to keep others out. As part of Marguerite's punishment, the vast majority of her assets had been seized by Henri III to pay for her imprisonment and, although free, she quickly found herself in dire economic straits.

At the time of her imprisonment, Marguerite was the Queen of Navarre, Duchess of Valois and Etampes, Countess of Senlis, Condomois, Agenais, Rouergue, Quercy, and Marle, Dame de La Fère and of the *jugieries* of Rieux, Rivière, Verdun, and Albigeois. (Sealy 1994, 113) She had received a considerable income resulting from all aspects of controlling these properties. When Henri III seized the income from these properties, he forced her to seek funds elsewhere. Marguerite worked to improve her financial situation through the sale of some jewels, loans, appeals to Philip II of Spain, and a gift from the Marquis de Canillac. However, despite all of these actions, her financial situation remained grim until late 1588.

Marguerite's financial problems would likely have forced her to eventually surrender to Henri III. However, she was able to retain her independence through the grace and assistance of her sister-in-law, Elizabeth of Austria, the Dowager Queen of France and widow of Marguerite's brother, Charles IX. Elizabeth shared half of her revenues with Marguerite, thereby saving the Queen of Navarre from certain economic ruin. (Sealy 1994, 135)

Aided by Elizabeth until her income was restored, Marguerite elected to remain at Usson for most of the remainder of her life.¹ Although her imprisonment and exile marked the end of her days in power, Marguerite refused to ever give Henri III any indication that he had broken her spirit. Instead, she immersed herself in reading,

¹. Realistically, she had few other choices, as any attempt on her part to leave would probably have led to her death.

writing, and doing charitable acts, and she put on every appearance of being perfectly happy at Usson. Perhaps she was happy. After spending an entire lifetime of having to protect herself from court intrigues, politics, family rivalries, and an indifferent husband, she may have welcomed the relative safety and calmness of her rural prison.

Chapter 5

Marguerite de Valois' Later Years

Largely removed from the turbulent political world of late sixteenth century France, Marguerite watched the close of the century from her distant window. While she read her books and wrote her memoirs and poetry, the War of Three Henris continued to rage across France. In 1588, Henri de Guise, who had made an ally of Spain's Phillip II, entered Paris and captured Henri III. This move served to keep France from interfering with the Spanish armada's attack on England and placed Henri de Guise effectively in control of the throne. Although Henri III had been able to escape Paris with his life, Catherine de Medici's greatest fear had been realized. The Guise had dethroned the Valois. Luckily for Henri III, the English fleet destroyed Philip II's armada, which prevented him from continuing to support Henri de Guise.

Henri III and Catherine de Medici arranged for the successful assassination of Henri de Guise on December 23, 1588. However, Guise's death did not destroy the threat of the Catholic League to the newly restored Valois king. Therefore, Henri III was forced to join once again with his current enemy and sometime ally, Henri de Navarre. Naming Navarre as his official heir in return for Huguenot military backing, Henri III worked to crush the remaining members of the Catholic League. However, before the war could be completely finished, Henri III was assassinated by the fanatical monk, Jacques Clement, on August 1 of 1589. (Dunn 1959, 29; and Sealy 1994, 169)

Henri de Navarre assumed the throne as Henri IV in 1589, but he would not gain full control of the country until nearly a decade later. The Catholic League fought fiercely against the Huguenot king. Siding with the moderate Montmorency "Politiques,"

who had the support of the majority of people in the war-sick country, Henri IV was able to finally bring the members of the Catholic League under submission. It required another symbolic conversion to Catholicism before Henri IV would be able to enter Paris and fully claim his throne. (Dunn 1959, 29) As Henri IV said, “Paris is well worth a mass.”

With Henri IV firmly sitting on the throne, Marguerite, the new Queen of France, began pressing him to ease the conditions of Henri III’s sentence. She asked that the revenues from her lands be returned to her and that he reinstate a bequest that Catherine de Medici had illegally willed to Marguerite’s nephew, Charles IX’s illegitimate son. Henri IV did ultimately return to Marguerite the control of many of her lands and also provided justice to her after a disgruntled member of her retinue attempted to assassinate her. (Sealy 1994, 21) However, these actions should not be construed as signs of reconciliation. Instead, they should be seen as signs of Henri IV’s recognition of her new status as Queen of France and, more importantly, his acceptance that she no longer posed a threat to him. Henri IV ordered Marguerite to remain at Usson, making it clear that she would not be welcome in his court.

Either seeking to regain favor with the new king or, perhaps seeing what was best for Henri IV and for France, Marguerite sought and received an annulment of her marriage to Henri IV in 1599. While Marguerite probably could have forced her way into Henri’s court, she recognized the importance of Henri IV having heirs. Having spent the last decade fighting over who would finally take the throne, France was ill prepared to face it all again in another ten or twenty years. At age 47, Marguerite knew that she could not provide those heirs. Additionally, it is unlikely that Marguerite was eager to

return to the world of political intrigue and royal scandals that she had left over ten years earlier. Marguerite, therefore, gracefully stepped aside, leaving Henri IV open to marry Marie de Medici, a distant cousin of Catherine de Medici in 1600. (Other Women's Voices 2003, 2)

Marguerite's actions assured Henri IV that she held no ill-will towards him and consequently he began soliciting her advice on how to administer his new kingdom. Although Marguerite had been absent from the political scene for twenty years, the rules of governing court, maintaining balance between powerful factions, and using the bureaucracy remained the same and she had been observing these rules from her birth. Therefore, in 1605, Marguerite triumphantly returned to Paris for the first time since her imprisonment. Once at court, Marguerite, who was still addressed as Queen Marguerite despite the annulment, became friendly with Marie de Medici and continued to advise Henri IV on many matters. In this way, she was able to renew some of her old sources of power. Marguerite came to respect Henri IV's leadership and their late-life relationship was much as their earlier relationship had been; friendly and respectful. Her letters from this period to Henri IV all began, "Roy mon seigneur et frere" (My king and brother), signifying their new relationship. (Other Women's Voices 2003, 2)

The politician and diplomat in Marguerite almost certainly respected the moderate way that Henri IV finally ended the period of religious wars. In issuing the Edict of Nantes in 1598, which granted a large degree of religious freedom in France, Henri risked the wrath of England's Elizabeth I, who had backed him during the War of Three Henris. However, Henri IV stood his ground and his solution to the religious question that had evaded Catherine de Medici finally brought about a period of stability in France. Henri

IV became one of the best-loved kings that France ever had. His governing style, which emphasized the good of the country over the narrower good of the dynasty, was in sharp contrast to the selfishness of the last Valois kings.

Marguerite lived the rest of her life in Paris and her *salon* became one of the foremost literary gatherings in Europe. When Henri IV was assassinated in 1610, Marguerite continued in her advisory role, assisting the new regent, Marie de Medici, who acted as regent for her young son, Louis XIII. Marguerite even made Louis XIII her heir. Nearing the end of her life and finding herself edged out by Marie de Medici's favorites, the Florentine Marshal d'Ancre and his wife Leonora (who were both eventually executed), Marguerite retired to her *salon*. She spent the rest of her days attempting to help the young Louis XIII mitigate his mother's heavy-handed policies and happily engaging in charity and literary circles.

Conclusion

Marguerite de Valois played a remarkable role in the dynastic politics of sixteenth century France. Despite the confines of a strong patriarchal system and the domination of Catherine de Medici, Marguerite was crucial in both Valois attempts to preserve its influence and power and the later rise of Henri IV. With enough intelligence to awe an entire court and enough courage to lead an army against her brother and husband, Marguerite constantly proved that she was a force to be reckoned with. Although raised to be obedient and demure, she rebelled against total domination and, in doing so, helped shape the history of an entire nation.

Recognition of Marguerite de Valois' importance in the events of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries has faded. Shrouded by time and the myth that

her enemies and Alexandre Dumas helped create, the commonly found story of Marguerite's life has become little more than a cloudy misrepresentation of the truth. Worse, there are a steadily dwindling number of people throughout the world who know she even existed. While modern feminist historians have attempted to bring new attention and meaning to powerful historic females, most have curiously ignored Marguerite de Valois. Truly extraordinary in her own time, Marguerite would be perfectly comfortable in a boardroom today and is an ideal feminist role model because of the ease with which modern women could relate to her. The paucity of accurate information about Marguerite de Valois is probably the main factor in this oversight, but it does not have to be a terminal problem. The true story of Marguerite's life exists, hidden in the thousands of letters and documents that still remain from the sixteenth and seventeenth century. That story is infinitely more interesting than the sensationalized myth and deserves to be told.

Appendix A

The French Monarchy

Capetian
Valois
and
Bourbon

Family Trees

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