

Mistrusting the Historiography of Royal Mothers: Louise of Savoy and Catherine de Medici

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EXPLORING HISTORICAL figures against the grain of their prior historiography allows one both to reinterpret them and to reconsider their reputations.¹ But how often is an historical figure almost unrecognizable in his or, in this case, her historiography? The gap between the actions and influence of late medieval and early modern female figures and their historiographical reputations is often wide enough to be disconcerting, especially in the case of royal women whether queens, mistresses, queen-mothers, or regents. Controversial for their access to power or exercise of it, such women provoked highly gendered negative comments during their lives. Surprisingly, such comments are later echoed even more vociferously; canonical histories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most notably those of Jules Michelet, François Guizot, and Ernest Lavisse, condemned queens particularly harshly.² Our understanding of these powerful women is still profoundly influenced by these male historians, who used queens to both make polemical arguments about monarchy and to indict public, political roles for women, who were, appropriately in their view, excluded from such activities in the French Republic. This contribution to the

1. These comments were initially presented at the annual meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies, in Colorado Springs, CO, April 18, 2015 in “Prejudices, Misconceptions, and Blind Spots: A Round Table Discussion on the History of Women from the Twelfth through the Eighteenth Centuries,” organized by Christine Adams.

2. Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 19 vols. (Paris, 1876-1877); François Guizot and Mme. Guizot de Witt, *France*, 8 vols. (New York: Collier, 1902); Ernest Lavisse, *Histoire de France*, 9 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1900-1911).

forum among others, notably that of Tracy Adams, who looks at the consistently disparaged Queen Isabeau of Bavaria, and Christine Adams, who appraises the gendered qualities that gained historical appreciation for prominent mistresses of both the *ancien régime* and immediately after the Terror, encourages us to consider how much prior historiography still shapes or even constrains contemporary scholarship. My contribution discusses Louise of Savoy and Catherine de Medici as examples of the practice and presentation of maternal authority and the responses of their contemporaries and subsequent historians. Their maternal power and authority suggests a strikingly different model than that wielded by the childless queens discussed in this forum by Theresa Earenfight.

Louise of Savoy, mother of Francis I, and Catherine de Medici, mother of the last three reigning Valois kings—Francis II, Charles IX, and Henry III—were two sixteenth-century women whose maternity gave them access to power and provided the foundation for the legitimacy of its exercise. Both women were noteworthy for their obvious maternal devotion and expressions of love for their children.

Louise of Savoy's *Journal* records her intense preoccupation with her son's health and wellbeing.³ Left a widow at nineteen, she dedicated the next twenty years to raising, protecting, and educating her young son, who might possibly inherit the crown although her influence over him was contested by others.⁴ Catherine de Medici came to maternity late after ten years of childless marriage to Henry II. From the age twenty-five, she bore ten children, seven of whom survived early childhood. Her correspondence provides a vivid record of her concern for her children and her involvement in their lives throughout her own unusually long life.

3. Louise of Savoy, *Journal* (Clermont-Ferrand, France: Paleo, 2006). Louise's *Journal* notes important events, primarily in her son's life and was arranged initially by the date on which events took place, likely for astrological reasons. When first published at the end of Martin and Guillaume du Bellay's *Mémoires*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1908-19) it was reordered chronologically.

4. Louise of Savoy's control of her young son was challenged most notably by Louis of Orleans, who first stood between Charles VIII and Louise's young son Francis in the line of succession. As Louis XII, he sought to extend royal control over her family. For the disputed court proceedings, see René de Maulde La Clavière, ed., *Procédures politiques du règne de Louis XII* (Paris, 1885), 716-22.

Both Louise of Savoy and Catherine de Medici gained political power by virtue of maternity. Louise's case was unusual. Not a royal daughter or the wife or widow of a king, she had political power only as regent for her adult son, Francis I, who empowered her as his regent twice during his reign, and as valued advisor until her death. Unlike many royal sons who had to wrest power from their mothers to assert their own authority, Francis felt no need to curtail his mother's power. Mother and son both proclaimed her maternity a foundation for her political authority and its legitimacy. Louise of Savoy's efficacy in both domestic and foreign affairs made her arguably the most important figure of Francis I's reign.⁵

As queen and then queen-mother, Catherine de Medici's status as a maternal regent was somewhat more orthodox. She carved out a significant arena for political action as regent for her minor son and as the power behind the throne for her adult sons—Francis II, Charles IX, and Henry III. Relegated to a rather minor role during her husband Henry II's reign, largely because of the preeminence of his long-standing mistress, Diane de Poitiers, Catherine de Medici emerged as a significant political figure only late in her husband's reign. After his death in 1559, she was not the official regent but nonetheless important as the mother of the young king, Francis II, although her influence was contested by that of his wife's relatives, the powerful Guise family. In 1660, when her son, Charles IX, came to the throne, she became regent and certainly the power behind the throne, although even then a male regent would have been more conventional.

Catherine de Medici's regency was much more troubled than that of Louise of Savoy. Charles IX was very young, and France was wracked by religious wars; Catholics and Huguenots were suspicious of each other and of the queen. To present Charles IX as a viable ruler and herself as a credible regent, she used every available medium to portray them both as figures to inspire support for the monarchy. Catherine de Medici continued to have great authority throughout the reigns of her adult

5. For a much more extensive discussion of Louise of Savoy's regency, see, Kathleen Wellman, "Louise of Savoy: The Mixed Legacy of a Powerful Mother," in *Royal Mothers and their Ruling Children: Wielding Political Authority from Antiquity to the Early Modern Era*, ed. Elena Woodacre and Carey Fleiner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 175-203.

sons, Charles IX, even after he attained his majority, and Henry III after he came to the throne in 1574. She was indefatigable in her efforts to carve out a peace between Catholics and Huguenots, negotiating with all factions throughout her sons' reigns.

Both women functioned as their adult son's most trusted negotiators in foreign and domestic affairs.⁶ This highly unconventional maternal role required both the articulation of a persuasive rationale and the active support of their adult sons. Louise of Savoy and Catherine de Medici thus advanced new arguments and images to counter the implicit prohibition of Salic Law as well as conventional, misogynistic arguments about women's limited capabilities. They clearly had to change the conversation about women in power and deflect judgments of a royal woman based on other criteria—her looks, her fertility, and her perceived dependence on the men who gave them access to power. Both Louise of Savoy and Catherine de Medici made maternity a natural source of a regent's authority—the blood relationship between mother and son was fundamental, even if secondary, to the transmission of royal seed. They argued that as mothers they were the best possible regents to protect the interests of their sons and thus the state, and they used all available media to advance those claims.⁷

Before Francis I became king, Louise's iconography depicted her as teaching or caring for him or allegorically as Lady Prudence or Wisdom; afterward it underscored her maternal care for the kingdom. Images celebrating Francis's victory at Marignano explicitly invoked the relationship between Louis IX and his mother and regent, Blanche of Castile, as models for Francis and Louise's shared governance. Louise, like Blanche before her, also asserted her authority as regent on the basis of the blood relationship between mother and son.⁸ While Francis I was imprisoned

6. Louise of Savoy's role in international relations in Francis I's reign was especially significant. She negotiated the Peace of Cambrai, also called the Ladies' Peace, which produced peace with Charles V and The Treaty of Moore (1525) with Thomas Wolsey, which led to peace with England.

7. The uncles of Charles VII were especially unsavory examples of male regents.

8. In 1506, the anonymous manuscript, *Le Compas du Dauphin*, extolled Louise of Savoy's role as regent as explicitly grounded in maternity and proclaimed the significance of her role in educating a future king. After the Battle of Marignano,

by Charles V in Madrid after his defeat at Pavia, Louise was depicted as steering the ship of state and in meetings with Estates General.

To establish her political legitimacy, Catherine de Medici could not present herself, as Louis XII had, as “the father of his country.”⁹ Nor could she invoke the significant emerging political philosophy of thinkers, such as Jean Bodin and Claude de Seyssel, supporting increasing royal authority through the patriarchal analogy of father-king to his sons-citizens.¹⁰ Catherine instead defined her political legitimacy as that of the conscientious mother: Who could protect and nurture her young sons better than their mother? As she wrote to her daughter, “My principal aim is . . . to preserve my authority, not for myself, but for the conservation of this kingdom and for the good of all your brothers.” She intended to keep her son close to “help govern the state as a loving mother should.”¹¹ This privately expressed aim was the rhetorical theme of her regency, which presented her as a vigilant mother, protecting her son and, through him, the state. Wouldn’t a mother best protect her son’s interests and thus be the best guide for king and county and be more credible than other self-serving advisors and rivals to the king’s authority? “Natural affection” made her the best possible guardian of a son and the most appropriate, disinterested, and least threatening regent

she commissioned a manuscript, *Dominus Illuminatio Mea*, celebrating Francis’s success as a sign of God’s favor to France and illustrating her piety. The images present her duties as mother and regent as mutually reinforcing. See Elizabeth McCartney, “The King’s Mother and Royal Prerogative in Early-Sixteenth-Century France,” in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John C. Parsons (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 117-41, for a thorough discussion of the manuscripts, which made maternity the theoretical foundation for regency.

9. Louis XII’s chroniclers presented him as the father of his people. See Jean d’Auton, *Chroniques de Louis XII*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1889–1895); Claude de Seyssel, *Histoire singulière du roy Loys XI I* (Paris, 1558). Historians have emphasized the theme as well. See also Frederick Baumgartner, *Louis XII* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 135-47; Bernard Quilliet, *Louis XII: Père du peuple* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1986).

10. Most notably in Jean Bodin’s *Six Livres de la République* (Paris, 1576) and Claude de Seyssel, *La Monarchie de France* (Paris, 1516).

11. Catherine de Medici, *Lettres de Catherine de Médicis*, ed. Hector de la Ferrière, 11 vols. (Paris, 1880–1943), 1:568.

possible; she, unlike any male regent, could not disrupt the succession.¹² Indeed, it can certainly be argued that no one worked harder to preserve the French monarchy and to prevent the dissolution of the French state.

In both cases, adult sons recognized that their mothers, *because they were their mothers*, were appropriate or even ideal regents and royal advisors. Their adult sons' endorsement doubtless fostered their acceptance as women in unconventional and contested positions of power, but critics attacked both their gender and their maternity.

Some of Louise of Savoy's contemporaries took umbrage at her unconventional female exercise of power. Before her son was king, her efforts to control the rearing of her son were denounced as overbearing—those of the pushy mother. Her husbanding of her family's finances, they denounced as venality. Her maternal advocacy condemned her as unseemly and ambitious as she challenged conventional male control of young men. It not only provoked misogynist attacks but also cast her as particularly threatening. Her very effectiveness as an advocate raised fears that she would also exert a damaging, feminine influence on her son—a potential king of France.¹³

Louise of Savoy's strength was further demonstrated by her actions as regent. When she was challenged by Parlement, which proposed Charles of Bourbon as an alternative regent, she prevailed. When the Church demanded the vigorous repression of early Protestants, she resisted. The negotiations she conducted led to peace treaties with England and Spain and made France more secure. The chancellor was able to reassure the captive king, "Said lady has managed so well that the realm is on its accustomed footing."¹⁴

Despite these successes, historians chronicling the Bourbon dynasty appreciated Louise of Savoy even less than some of her contemporaries

12. For the most thorough discussion of gender and regency, see Katherine Crawford, *Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

13. "Dissentiment entre le Grand Conseil de la Régente et le Parlement de Paris," Aimé Louis Champollion-Figéac, *Captivité de roi François I*, Collection de documents inédits sur l'histoire de France, ser. 1 : Histoire politique (Paris, 1847), 307.

14. "Lettre du chancelier du Prat au Roi," Champollion-Figéac, *Captivité*, 377–78.

had. They made her a scapegoat for the failings of the Valois kings, who revealed their weakness as rulers by relying on women, especially as compared to the indisputably masculine Bourbons.¹⁵ These historians recognized that the role Louise of Savoy played in Francis's reign undercut the reigning ideology of the kingdom as a patriarchal family headed by a strong father. Later historians, who condemned Francis for increasing the monarchy's power, insisted that Louise of Savoy should have had no political role. Michelet charged that her bad mothering corrupted her son and gave him the character "of the swine and the ape."¹⁶ According to Guizot, "Louise of Savoy gave her son neither principles nor moral examples." She embodied the charges conventionally made against women in politics: she was subject to violent passions and venal; her influence over her son was malign, making Francis "volatile, reckless, and ever helpless against the passions of his mother," Guizot charged.¹⁷

Catherine de Medici's claims to maternal credibility were almost immediately turned against her in vehement attacks in the aftermath of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. According to Protestant polemicists, she was politically unscrupulous and morally reprehensible; she had masterminded the massacre, poisoned her enemies, taught her children Machiavellian principles, and corrupted their morals. They depicted her as power-mad in her own interest to the disadvantage of her sons. Catherine became the quintessential "bad mother"—accused of heinous crimes against motherhood, including incest with all of her sons.¹⁸ If her maternity had brought her to political power, by using the former in the service of the latter, she had warped both. Later works

15. Bourbon historians targeted Louise as part of their efforts to restore the reputation of Charles of Bourbon, blaming her for his treason. See Antoine de Laval, "Continuation d'Antoine de Laval (1612)," in Guillaume de Marillac, "Vie du Connétable de Bourbon, 1490-1512," ed. J. A Buchon, *Choix de chroniques et mémoires de l'histoire de France*, vol. 10 (Paris, 1836); François Mézeray, *Abrégé chronologiques de l'histoire de France* (Amsterdam, 1688) IV, ii, 505.

16. Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 10:11-13.

17. Guizot, *France*, 2:79.

18. In his *Discours contre Nicolas Machiavel* (1576), Innocent Gentillet accused Catherine de Medici of using the black arts to destroy the royal family. *Anti-Machiavel*, ed. C. Edward Rathé (Geneva: Droz, 1968).

reproduced uncritically many of the denunciations of sixteenth-century polemicists.¹⁹

Catherine de Medici's example so amply reinforced the misogyny directed against women in power that she was less specifically attacked as a mother in nineteenth- and twentieth-century histories. By condemning her political actions, they underscored the dissonance between the socially sanctioned roles for women, as wives and mothers restricted to the private sphere, and the insidious influence of women who transgressed gender roles. Guizot concluded "the great maladies and the great errors of nations require remedies more heroic than the adroitness of a woman." Catherine de Medici's feminine incompetence produced "violent and timorous, incoherent and stubborn" policies in the aftermath of the massacre.²⁰ Her feminine ineptitude explained the political failures of her sons' reigns.

If Catherine de Medici's failures in the political sphere argued for the exclusion of women, novelists—Madame de La Fayette, Honoré de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas, Prosper Mérimée—burnished her reputation as one of the most reprehensible mothers of all time.²¹ She was grossly immoral, pitting child against child, committing incest with her sons, encouraging their incestuous relations with her daughter, and poisoning one son to serve another. Evil, vindictive, and motivated by a quest

19. Voltaire used Louise of Savoy to attack her royal son and described Catherine de Medici's regency as a "bizarre tableau" of "gallantry and fury, voluptuousness and carnage "on which the contradictions of the human species were never [before] painted"—clearly the result of her feminine qualities. François Marie Arouet de Voltaire, "Essai sur les mœurs," in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 54 vols. (Paris, 1877-95), 12:503-11. Sully Prudhomme featured Louise as "this miserable prostitute, avaricious, false, cruel, and pleasure seeking," whose life was a rapacious quest for power and wealth at the expense of her son who was easily diverted by pleasure. Sully was the pseudonym of René-François-Armand Prudhomme, *Les Crimes des reines de France* (Paris, 1791), 226.

20. Guizot, *France*, 3:205.

21. Catherine's failings as a mother are a prominent theme in Alexandre Dumas, *La Reine Margot* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008) and *La Dame de Montsoreau* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008); Honoré de Balzac, *About Catherine de Médici* trans. Katherine Prescott Wormeley (Boston, 1864); and Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette, *The Princess de Clèves*, trans. Robin Buss (London: Penguin, 1962). Dumas's novels remain especially influential in shaping Catherine de Medici's subsequent reputation.

for personal power and vengeance, Catherine is a stunted figure. Even though she loved her son, Henry III, it was, Dumas contended, with a “withered heart.”²² For Balzac, Catherine was a heartless woman, who allowed her son, Francis II, to die so that she could declare: “I am regent *de facto*.”²³

Catherine de Medici’s failing as “bad mother” is enshrined in the popular imagination. In Princess Michael of Kent’s *The Serpent and the Moon*, a popular history of her ancestors Catherine de Medici and Diane de Poitiers, there is no question which woman is the serpent!²⁴ Verna Lisi epitomized the chilling, extremely depraved, maternal Catherine de Medici of darkest legend in Patrice Chéreau’s 1994 film *La Reine Margot*.

Historians writing under the Republic, which excluded women from politics, used powerful women to condemn the *ancien régime* even more thoroughly. Nineteenth-century sentimentalized notions of motherhood also made any positive associations between political power and maternity almost incomprehensible. Maternal regents violated both gender roles. They perverted politics with female characteristics and distorted motherhood by their “unnatural” activities. They were evil regents and bad mothers.

Reconsidering Maternal Political Power

Discussions of these politically active queens have consistently reignited debates about women’s roles. But why have modern historians generally accepted or left largely unexamined the critiques of the nineteenth century, especially since the claims that underlie them are: 1) that women were unsuited for political leadership and 2) that maternity made them more so? Gender stereotypes have certainly made the examples of these women especially useful in sharpening political positions. Some subsequent historians have simply incorporated these vivid but engaging denunciations with well-defined heroes and villains into standard narratives of modern progress. Elite women failed to capture the attention

22. Dumas, *La Reine Margot*, 122.

23. Balzac, *About Catherine de Medici*, 126.

24. Princess Michael of Kent, *The Serpent and the Moon: Two Rivals for the Love of a Renaissance King* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

of early feminists or those who wrote the earliest histories of women. They focused on the rediscovery of women or whole groups of women previously or entirely neglected by historians. More recent works treating these particular maternal regents most often focus on the artistic and literary works they commissioned or in which they were depicted, expanding our understanding of their roles and their context. Such studies have been especially important in documenting the maternal foundation of their political power.²⁵ Paradoxically, such studies relegate these women to realms of the arts and literature, arenas traditionally considered appropriate for women and in which they were non-threatening.

Other scholars, who have studied Catherine de Medici or Louise of Savoy specifically, have focused primarily on their political reputations. In other words, they have challenged the “bad queen” portion of the legacy.²⁶ In many cases, they praise them not in their terms, as maternal regents, but rather as exceptional women with the qualities of men, even calling them *hommes d'état* or *rois*.²⁷ Scholars and popularizers have

25. For examples of such work, see Mary Beth Winn, “Louise de Savoie, ses enfants et ses livres: Du pouvoir familial au pouvoir d'état,” in *Patronnes et mécènes en France à la Renaissance*, ed. Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier (Saint-Etienne, France: Presse Universitaire de Saint-Etienne, 2007), 251-83. See also in the same collection Elizabeth L'Estrange, “Le mécénat d'Anne de Bretagne,” 169-93, and Cynthia Brown, “Le mécénat d'Anne de Bretagne et la politique du livre,” 194-224; Myra Dickman Orth, “Louise de Savoie et le pouvoir du livre,” in *Royaume de féminie: Pouvoirs, contraintes, espaces de liberté des femmes, de la Renaissance à la Fronde*, ed. Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier and Eliane Viennot (Paris: Champion, 1999), 71-92.

26. About her legend, see Ivan Cloulas, *Catherine de Médicis* (Paris: Fayard, 1992); Nicola Sutherland, “Catherine de Medici: The Legend of the Wicked Italian Queen,” in *Princes, Politics, and Religion, 1547-1589* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984), 236-48; Thierry Wanegffelen, *Catherine de Médicis: le pouvoir au féminin* (Paris: Payot, 2005), 25-43. Katherine Crawford, “Constructing Evil Foreign Queens,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 2, (2007): 393-418, doi:10.1215/10829636-2007-006. According to Jean Solnon, Catherine was dedicated to civil peace and today would likely be a peace prize recipient, *Catherine de Médicis*, 14-15.

27. Paule Henry-Bordeaux, *Louise de Savoie: “Roi” de France* (Paris: Perrin, 1971). The first such usage may be when Francis I paid tribute to his mother in the epitaph found on her tomb: “O heart which feels nothing of a woman but the name,” cited in its entirety in Paris Paulin, *Etudes sur François Premier: Roi de France sur sa vie privée et son règne*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1885; repr., Geneva: Slatkine, 1970), 1:113-15. See

challenged the standard narrative so infrequently that one particularly effective way to do so is to separate a specific queen from the accretions of her myth in the emerging genre of “History and Myth.”²⁸ Even when interested in studying a queen or mistress with greater objectivity or sympathy, a scholar often rehabilitates one woman as heroic in contrast to the relatively unexamined villainy of another woman—Louise of Savoy versus Anne of Brittany or Catherine de Medici against Diane de Poitiers, for example. In this forum, Tracy Adams notes that many admirable figures—Joan of Arc, Christine de Pizan, Yolanda of Aragon—could be used to condemn Isabeau of Bavaria, another reputedly “bad mother.”

The claims maternal regents made for maternity as a credible basis for political legitimacy have had little impact on modern scholarly treatments of them. In the cases of Catherine de Medici and Louise of Savoy, modern histories sometimes even reiterate criticisms reflecting the view that maternity made them less politically capable, inappropriate guardians of future kings, and unqualified to assume important political and diplomatic roles. Ironically, the appeal to motherhood as a foundation of political authority is still taken less seriously by modern historians, many of them feminists, than by their contemporaries: The maternal regent merely made effective use of media to define a novel political status, whereas the patriarchal king defined a new political philosophy and made a legitimate, persuasive claim for monarchical power. As Theresa Earenfricht emphasizes in this forum, it is rare for women to be integrated into the history of political theory, which she characterizes as a “sturdy bastion of men writing about men.”

If historians considered the claims of maternal regents as seriously as those made for patriarchal power, we might ask different questions

Dorothy Mayer, *The Great Regent: Louise of Savoy, 1476-1531* (New York, NY: Funk & Wagnalls, 1966). John Freeman challenges the characterization of Louise as “*un homme d'état*” but applies the label of “maternal opportunism.” “Louise of Savoy: A Case of Maternal Opportunism,” *Sixteenth-Century Journal* 3, no. 2 (1972): 77-98, doi: 10.2307/2540106.

28. See for example, Tracy Adams, *The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Didier Le Fur, *Anne de Bretagne: Miroir d'une reine, historiographie d'un mythe* (Paris: Guénégaud, 2000).

or understand monarchy somewhat differently. We might consider a royal mother's concern for the health and well-being of her child as effective state policy, particularly in a monarchy where such attention could help to insure the continuity and stability of a dynasty. A maternal regent's guardianship might be reappraised for its beneficial rather than debilitating or emasculating effects on a son and the state. A mother's preoccupation with dynastic marriages for her children might also be reassessed as canny politics instead of as a distraction from her statecraft. For example, the critics of Catherine de Medici's negotiation for her children's marriages have suggested that they diverted her from the wars of religion, although they could also be understood as a strategy to balance Catholic and Protestant alliances and keep foreign powers out of the wars in France.²⁹

When modern feminist scholars have assessed powerful elite women positively, it has usually been for their exercise of political power rather than for their successes as mothers. Early canonical histories conventionally described a politically involved royal mother as doubly damned: she was a power-mad woman and an obsessive mother. To some degree, maternal devotion remains suspect as clouding a woman's judgment with emotion, making her less rational and less able to act effectively in the public sphere. In light of contemporary, more positive attitudes towards motherhood, it is rather surprising that the maternal devotion of Louise of Savoy and Catherine de Medici has neither humanized them nor enhanced their political credibility for modern historians. Even though there are many, modern models of women engaged in powerful or politically significant roles while rearing children, that model only infrequently informs scholarship about earlier elite women. If scholars focused more on royal motherhood, they would likely better appreciate women, such as Louise of Savoy and Catherine de Medici, whose combined political and maternal interests so frequently discredited them in the past.

The affection of mothers for their sons still seems suspect. More study of maternal regents might well challenge the view in canonical

29. Robert J. Knecht sees Catherine's pursuit of these marriages as a wasted an opportunity for peace. *Catherine de' Medici* (London: Longman, 1998), 272.

histories that maternal affection was likely to deform a son's character by exerting a dangerous, feminizing influence. Such studies might produce a counter narrative, perhaps confirming the arguments of maternal regents that their political engagement in their sons' interests proved crucial to the survival of their minor sons and to the successes of their adult sons. The traditional but largely unquestioned assumption of a woman's emotionalism or a mother's destructive influence warrants a more critical examination from a feminist perspective.

Ultimately, the examples of Louise of Savoy and Catherine de Medici raise questions about how much the scholarly treatment of these particular women and other elite women of the past is not simply defined by the weight of historiographical tradition but also reinforced by unexamined ambivalence about women, particularly mothers, in the political arena.

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